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## Part Two: A History of Reading Bachmann, 1983, Chapter 4. Christa Wolf with Ingeborg Bachmann, with essay titled, Reading Bachmann in 1983

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## 1983

By 1983, as a consequence of developments outside of and within the U.S. women's movement, the limitations of the cultural feminist analysis had emerged more clearly, and challenges to its founding premises were raised on a variety of fronts in feminist theory and practice. In June 1982 the Equal Rights Amendment went down to defeat because it had failed to achieve ratification by the requisite number of state legislatures. The "New Right," arrayed under the banner of the "Reagan revolution" and proclaiming a pro-family, "right-to-life" (i.e., antiabortion) politics, concentrated much of its energies on rolling back gains made by women in the 1970s. Women continued to earn only fifty-nine cents for every dollar earned by men, and they were so hard hit by the Reagan administration's cuts in social benefits that social commentators began to speak of the "feminization of poverty." In 1976 the Hyde Amendment denied poor women Medicaid funding for abortion, and many state legislatures followed suit. In the second half of the 1970s, the dispirited liberalism of Jimmy Carter had still allowed cultural feminists a certain free space in which to operate and other women to make moderate inroads into various male domains. But in the context of the vastly changed politics of the Reagan era, it began to seem ludicrous for white, middle-class women to assert that retreat into a separate female sphere was an adequate solution to all women's problems or to maintain that women would burst the bonds of a phallogocentric culture if they could only elaborate a specifically female voice. Feminists who had defined power as male and any struggle in the political arena as reformist now saw naked political and economic power exercised against themselves and, without an adequate theory or analysis to explain current developments, watched with horror as women's rights were eroded and ever more women sank into poverty.

In addition, the right-wing upsurge under Reagan brought with it a new heightening of Cold War tensions, as Reagan set about to demonize the "Evil Empire" of the Soviet Union and demanded new expenditures for weapons systems to protect an America that was once again "standing tall." The huge military build-up that the Reagan regime initiated included plans for tactical nuclear war and the deployment of cruise and Pershing II midrange missile systems, to be stationed in Western Europe and directed toward the Soviet Union. These initiatives spurred the resurgence of a post-Vietnam peace movement in the United States and Europe; half a million people demonstrated, for instance, in New York City on 12 June 1982. The dangers of nuclear war also encouraged

feminists to address issues of global and national politics and launched a feminist peace movement that turned the cultural forms elaborated in the 1970s to the cause of peace. In November 1980 and 1981 the Women's Pentagon Action developed an elaborate set of two-day rituals focusing on "Mourning, Rage, Empowerment, and Defiance" (they included encircling the Pentagon and weaving its doors shut with yarn) to express "their fear for the life of this planet, our Earth, and the life of the children who are our human future," as their Unity Statement put it. Modeling their action on the 1982 Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common in England, in 1983 at Seneca Falls, New York, feminists established a Women's Peace Encampment to protest the nuclear weapons stored at the Seneca Army Depot. Though it is unlikely that any of these actions had any practical political effect, they signaled the beginnings of a new feminist understanding of the necessity of public engagement with "male" political power.

Beginning in the late 1970s, protests by women of color speaking from within the women's movement itself also began to unsettle the dominant paradigms of U.S. feminism by challenging white feminists' assumption of female commonality across race, class, and culture and their blithe willingness to say "women" but describe only their own white selves. Many conferences of this period ended with shouting, bitterness, and tears, and by 1982 the National Women's Studies Association had decided to focus its entire national conference on the topic "Women Respond to Racism." In a widely read open letter to Mary Daly that illustrates the vehemence of these exchanges, black lesbian poet Audre Lorde attacked *Gyn/Ecology's* appropriation of the experiences of women of color merely to advance the argument of Daly's book: "Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women—the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and whole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that non-white women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of Black women, and how it devalues your own words. . . . Should the next step between us be war, or separation? Assimilation within a solely western-european herstory is not acceptable" (96). The early 1980s saw the publication of a series of important books by feminist women of color that addressed the specificity of their experience and its difference from that of white women: Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (1981); bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, editors, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982); Barbara Smith, editor, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). White feminists were thus compelled to recognize the implicit racism of an analysis that assumed that categories derived from the lives of white women could describe all women; that alleged

that gender oppression was the most primary and fundamental problem of all women; that called upon women of color to repudiate their connections to their brothers, forged in the struggle against racism, to bond with potentially racist white women; and that assumed that the same strategies of resistance were appropriate for all women in all cultures and contexts. For academic feminists, the challenges raised by U.S. and international women of color have been the factors most crucial to the elaboration of present-day academic feminist paradigms, “conflict over race” becoming, as Jane Gallop put it in *Around 1981*, “a decade later [i. e., 1991] the point of densest energy in academic feminism” (6).

The battle between radical/cultural feminists and others (including socialist feminists, somewhat revitalized in the 1980s) was also joined via debates over the relationship of feminism to sexuality. Cultural feminism had argued that pornography, butch/femme lesbian relationships, consensual sadomasochistic relations, perhaps even heterosexuality itself were expressions of patriarchal society’s violence against women and—should women also engage in, even enjoy, such forms of sexual behavior—evidence of their brainwashing by patriarchy. By the early 1980s that position (sometimes termed “anti-sex” by its opponents) had expressed itself in a quite powerful antipornography movement that sometimes made common cause with the New Right. At a contentious conference at New York’s Barnard College in 1982, that analysis was challenged by a group of mostly academic feminists who denounced cultural feminist positions as simplistic and dreary, insisted that fantasy and play should not be conflated with reality, and demanded their right to sexual agency and sexual pleasure. Debates surrounding the conference had consequences that extended far beyond its topic. Probably the conference was a signal of a more far-reaching discontent with cultural feminist analyses and led, like the race debates, to an emphasis on women’s difference from one another and on the possibilities of female agency as well as female victimhood. Even more important, conference organizers began, as Carol Vance formulated it in the conference’s “Concept Paper,” “from the premise that sex is a social construction which articulates at many points with the economic, social, and political structures of the material world” (39). This conception of sexuality demanded the elaboration of categories sufficient to understand it and pointed feminists in the direction of the creative combination of poststructuralist and post-Althusserian Marxist categories that would characterize feminist and other forms of cultural analysis in the 1990s. Like the race debates, then, the controversy over sex in the women’s movement marked at least the beginning of the end of cultural feminism’s hegemony over academic (and probably nonacademic) feminism.

The changed climate of early 1980s feminism did not translate immediately into new paradigms of literary analysis, however. Instead it produced confusion and incoherence, for some feminist literary scholars perceived at least dimly that the neat frameworks of American and French feminist analysis did not exactly correspond to altered circumstances, yet they were at a loss for an alternative

model. In 1982 in *Writing and Sexual Difference* (a volume of feminist essays, edited by Elizabeth Abel, that had appeared in *Critical Inquiry*), prestigious feminist scholars continued to speak of “the woman writer”—though women of color are represented by Mahasveta Devi’s “Draupadi,” translated and analyzed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose method is explicitly that of deconstruction. Whether indicating the “difference between the sexes” or “the difference within sex” (Gallop, “Critical” 285), the “sexual difference” of the book’s title refers to solely men and women, or masculinity and femininity, and many of the contributors to this volume are concerned with the relationship of femininity or the female body to writing—of sexuality to textuality—often with the help of French theory. Some essays explore the relationship of women’s to men’s writing, thus locating women’s cultural production in the context of cultural practices in general rather than in a separate female sphere, but only Carolyn Allen’s “Critical Response” objects to the lack of attention to “the contemporary plurality of cultures based on differences of race, class, sexual preference, age, religion, and geography, to name only some of the variables” (300).

Feminist journals of the period directed a self-critical gaze at academic feminism’s earlier omissions, a *Signs* editorial of autumn 1982 inquiring, for instance: “True, feminism challenges the disciplines with questions relating to women, but to what extent are those questions still bound by the values and viewpoints of the dominant cultural group? Are the questions those of a privileged, white, heterosexual middle class, and does their language, while reflecting some women’s experience and knowledge, leave others totally invisible?” (Gelpi 2). But the literary analyses in those journals often limp somewhat behind their historical and social-scientific studies. (It is worth noting, however, that in spring 1983 *Signs* published an article on women under National Socialism by Gisela Bock which is now regarded both as somewhat scandalous and as a prime example of the woman-as-victim paradigm within historical scholarship. There Bock maintained that German women, both “Aryan” and Jewish, were victims of Nazism because they were targets of Nazi eugenicism.) Janice Radway, now one of the influential figures of feminist cultural studies, published an early article on women reading romance novels in *Feminist Studies* in spring 1983, and Paul Lauter explored “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon” in the next issue. Nevertheless, in essays on mythmaking in American women’s poetry (Ostriker, “Thieves”), on representation in recent women’s fiction (Homans, “Her”), and on H.D. and Adrienne Rich (Friedman, “I go”), *Signs* remained firmly committed to various versions of the amalgam of the older American and French feminist model. The disaggregation of women had for the most part not yet taken place in literary criticism, and several more years would be required before feminist literary analysis could develop a methodology adequate to the challenges posed to feminism in the early 1980s.

## CHAPTER 4

# *Christa Wolf and Ingeborg Bachmann*

## DIFFICULTIES OF WRITING THE TRUTH

*Man can face the truth.*

—*Ingeborg Bachmann, Werke*

In the West German edition of Christa Wolf's essays, *Lesen und Schreiben* (1980; translated into English as *The Reader and the Writer*), the two oldest essays, dating from 1966, deal with the works of Bertolt Brecht and Ingeborg Bachmann. Along with the East German author Anna Seghers, Brecht and Bachmann count among authors whose writing Wolf respects most, and the presence of those essays in *The Reader and the Writer* provides a useful metaphor for understanding Wolf's own work: one might maintain that it exists in a tension between those two poles, Brecht and Bachmann. For all the differences between Wolf and Brecht, they evidently share certain convictions and concerns: Wolf too is a socialist, deeply committed to social change and to creating a literature that promotes it. Brecht's example encouraged Wolf to develop other literary forms appropriate to the problems of her own age, as she explained in 1966: "The possibility of applying Brecht's art and his theory of art lay not in simple imitation, . . . but in encouraging people to make their own discoveries" (*Reader* 58). Yet if in this sense Wolf's project continues Brecht's own, one can sometimes detect in Wolf's remarks on Brecht a hint of impatience, as if the model provided by this now classic GDR literary figure could also have a retarding effect on the literary discoveries Wolf wishes to undertake—might even, one suspects, share some complicity in the problems Wolf's work has increasingly sought to critique. Pursuing in detail Brecht's influence on Wolf and her growing distance from him would be a fascinating enterprise; however, it is one that

I explore here only indirectly, as I investigate instead Wolf's attraction toward that other pole, the writing of Ingeborg Bachmann.

The nature of Bachmann's influence on Wolf is less easy to grasp and, though Bachmann's name recurs again and again particularly in Wolf's writing of the 1970s and 1980s, scholars with some rare exceptions (e.g., Klemens Renolder) have not addressed the relationship of these two major women writers, no doubt in some part because Bachmann's own work has proved so difficult to comprehend. With the elaboration of feminist theory and a methodology for feminist literary scholarship, Bachmann's work has become more transparent for us, though it may be that we still do not possess a conceptual apparatus capable of understanding completely what connects Wolf to Bachmann. That is an investigation I would like to begin here. I want first to outline the qualities of Bachmann's work which Wolf identifies and admires in the 1966 essay, relating them to themes in Wolf's work from the mid-1960s onward. Then I want to trace some parallels between Wolf's work and Bachmann's which might be regarded as conscious allusions or even as homages to Bachmann on Wolf's part. Finally, I want to look closely at Wolf's most recent writing, examining her work on the women Romantics, her Büchner Prize acceptance speech, the Frankfurt lectures, and *Cassandra* to show that in the late 1970s, encouraged by Bachmann as well as by events of recent history, Wolf arrived at a standpoint very similar to Bachmann's in her last writing, the novels of the "Ways of Death" cycle. I maintain that the 1970s saw a movement in Wolf's writing away from Brecht and toward Bachmann, as Wolf increasingly challenged the received truths of Marxism and, from the perspective of a woman within European society, both insider and outsider, grappled with the difficulties of expressing another truth that would question some of the most basic assumptions on which European culture rests and on which Marxism itself also relies.

Certainly this critique was not fully elaborated in 1966, when Wolf wrote her Brecht and Bachmann essays; yet already the title of the Bachmann essay, "Truth That Can Be Faced [*Die zumutbare Wahrheit*]"—Ingeborg Bachmann's Prose" deriving from an essay of 1959 by Bachmann, "Man Can Face the Truth [*Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar*]," shows that Wolf had grasped something of Bachmann's philosophical project, her struggle to formulate a different epistemology, to articulate a different model for truth. More impressionistic than analytic, Wolf's early essay does not provide, probably could not have provided, handy categories for understanding Bachmann's prose. But two themes are striking. First, Wolf emphasizes that Bachmann aimed to provide her readers access to a truth they had not seen before: "To become seeing, to make people

see: a fundamental motif in the work of Ingeborg Bachmann" (*Reader* 85). Bachmann seemed to suggest that humans might not even successfully grasp the nature of their own suffering, might lack the categories enabling them to recognize it at all. "For it is time," Bachmann had written, "to understand the voice of man, the voice of a chained creature not quite able to say what it suffers from" (quoted in *Reader* 85). On the other hand, failing to challenge conventional truths might mean not only individual pain but complicity in the world's evils altogether: "the haunting temptation to join hands—through conformity, blindness, acceptance, habit, illusion or treachery—with the deadly dangers to which the world is exposed" (*Reader* 84). As Wolf viewed it, Bachmann's endeavor was to hold fast to the legitimacy of her own experience and to find a language that could accurately express it: "It is her cause to have the courage to create her experience anew in herself and to assert it in the face of the truly overwhelming mass and discouraging dominance of empty, meaningless, ineffectual phrases" (*Reader* 85). And this explained Bachmann's concern with a new language, which critics had too often understood as only aestheticism. Quoting Bachmann herself, Wolf emphasized what Bachmann sought in her quest: "To seek 'a new language,' 'a thinking that desires knowledge and wants to achieve with and through language. Let us call it, for the time being, reality'" (*Reader* 94).

As its second structuring theme, Wolf's essay insists—remarkably enough for a Bachmann study written at this time—that Bachmann intended her writing to be deeply and directly political. In the 1950s and 1960s, Bachmann's lyric poetry was generally thought to be the beautiful, if somewhat obscure, expression of the personal experiences of the poetess, timeless and generally applicable to the human condition, whereas her prose was regarded as unsuccessful, weak, and confused by some, although enthusiastically and positively received by others. But Wolf had read carefully Bachmann's essays, particularly her Frankfurt lectures of 1959–1960, observing there the centrality of Bachmann's insistence that literature should promote social change, and Wolf was able to use those essays to illuminate qualities of Bachmann's imaginative writing that other readers had not grasped. Epigraphs from Bachmann's essays begin each section of Wolf's own essay and document her emphasis on the connectedness of Bachmann's concern with language and consciousness to a society she wishes to transform. Thus, for instance, the third section of Wolf's essay begins with a quotation from the Frankfurt lectures: "But what in fact is possible is change. And the changing effect of new works educates us to new perception, new feeling, new awareness" (*Reader* 89). Wolf emphasizes, too, that Bachmann understood literature to derive from a particular historical period and to address his-



torically specific problems, as she had again maintained in her lectures: “Writing does not take place outside the historical situation” (quoted in *Reader* 89). If this is the case (as Wolf obviously believes it to be), Bachmann’s works need to be read both as written from the perspective of her own historically specific experiences and as addressed to quite specific, if far-reaching, problems of her society. The categories of perception she wants to encourage in her readers would be those enabling them both to understand and to change the world. Simultaneously, the insufficiencies and weaknesses of her works—as well as the difficulties of her own life—can be understood as having historical causes, too. For Christa Wolf, then as now, “the historical situation is such that the question of the possibility of man’s moral existence must be at the center of all writing. This approach is one of the main drives in [Bachmann’s] prose—often in curious disguises, not immediately recognizable, as a subjective reflex, as fear, doubt, a feeling of menace: ‘Hanging on to the high-voltage current of the present’” (*Reader* 89).

But if social change is the central emphasis of Bachmann’s prose, the literary strategies she chooses could scarcely be more different from those of Brecht, who exemplified the engaged, experimental writer: neither the arena she identifies as crucial for change nor the techniques she employs resemble Brecht’s at all. Instead, Wolf emphasizes, Bachmann’s stress is on the human subject, its “self-assertion,” even its “spreading” of itself [*Selbstaudehnung*] (*Reader* 85–86). For Bachmann, as later for Christa T., it is important to be able to say “I,” “without arrogance but with head high” (*Reader* 87). But this is a subject that also finds itself deeply imperiled, and its salvation might come through reasserting human power to comprehend the object world: “To regain a sovereignty lost through submission. To master it by designation” (*Reader* 86). “It may stimulate her,” writes Wolf, “to conquer banality in the course of writing” (*Reader* 89). “Banality,” a noun that could not be used carelessly after Hannah Arendt’s 1963 book on Adolf Eichmann, suggests even in this early essay some connection between the crisis of the subject and National Socialism, a theme that Wolf’s and Bachmann’s later works would pursue in great detail. For Wolf, most important in Bachmann’s work is her defense of that subject itself against the many forces that threaten it: “She defends no outlying regions but ‘regions of the heart.’ Man’s right [*Anspruch des Menschen*] to self-realization. His right to individuality and to unfold his own personality. His longing for freedom” (*Reader* 91). Defending those human capacities, Bachmann’s work begins to make it possible for new subjects to be created: “brave, deeply moving picture[s] of a new man” (*Reader* 95).

Bachmann's concentration on the subject rather than on events in the external world is, for Wolf, not a quality to be understood only, or even primarily, negatively. From the perspective of Wolf's later work, clearly her description of Bachmann's prose is not really intended as criticism: "One will often seek in vain for concrete situations or for a realistic presentation of social processes. What we have here are stories of feelings" (*Reader* 89). Bachmann's prose reveals the movements of subjectivity: "taking up her own position, showing her own weaknesses, being hit, rising again, attacking the enemy at its center, constantly in danger at the very heart of life, . . . self-assertion as a process" (*Reader* 86). When Bachmann portrays the external world, it is a world made luminous and transparent by the subject's comprehension of it, a vision of its hopes and its dangers. Another frame of reference produces another reality: "This, subordinated to a surprising system of references, is the irrepressible and insatiable longing to penetrate into the natural and social environment with the help of human standards" (*Reader* 86). What "system of references"? "Unnamed," says Wolf, "probably not thought out. Literature as utopia" (*Reader* 95). The pursuit of that "system of references"—or "viewing lens," as Wolf termed it most recently in her own Frankfurt lectures—is what draws Wolf back repeatedly to Bachmann's work.

To be sure, Wolf's response to Bachmann in this essay is not solely positive. She perceives obscurities and inadequacies in Bachmann's writing, but those often derive from Bachmann's real situation: she felt she lacked an audience who could understand her and was deeply pained by that. And since she could not foresee any mediation between her fantastic visions and their realization in the world, the resolutions her stories achieve sometimes also seem abrupt and unmotivated:

If it accords with no social movement the radical claim to freedom becomes a ravaging longing for absolute, unlimited and unreal freedom, complete despair about what steps to take next turns into illusionary demands "to set up a new world" by "abolishing all that exists." And the departure from this radicality, a return to normal activities and attitudes to life is either regarded as capitulation or remains unmotivated and without foundation, as in "The Thirtieth Year": "I say to you: Stand up and walk! No bones are broken!" (*Reader* 92)

In 1966, Wolf seemed still able clearly to distinguish her position as a socialist writer in the GDR from Bachmann's. Bachmann stood for the furthest extreme of integrity and resolution one could reach in a capitalist society. Wolf wanted to hope that socialist writers, learning new lessons from Bachmann, could also

provide the setting to bring them to concretion. “Only then,” says Wolf, “on a new social foundation, can the ‘defence of poesy’ begin” (*Reader* 95).

Yet one of Wolf’s observations in the Bachmann essay points beyond her confidence in GDR socialism toward a position she herself would come close to assuming in the coming decades. The fourth section of her essay begins with a quotation from Bachmann’s story “The Thirtieth Year”: “But a few drank the cup of hemlock unconditionally” (*Reader* 94). Without access to a social movement radical enough to realize the social changes her works had envisioned, Bachmann is inclined to withdraw her characters from society altogether instead of making them pay the price necessary to survive in it. In this gesture, she joins others in the history of German literature: “Some refused to be bought, to be won over by temptation or forced by blackmail; they preferred death to self-surrender, in order to remain alive in their own time and to have an effect on the future. Ingeborg Bachmann appears to be trying to hold on to these, to their moral example” (*Reader* 94–95). In Bachmann’s prose of this period, the most striking example of nonconformity is Undine in the last story of *The Thirtieth Year*, “Undine Goes.” (Appropriately, Wolf’s essay from *The Reader and the Writer* was reprinted as the afterword to *Undine geht*, the East German edition of Bachmann’s stories published in 1973.) Wolf understands fully how radically Bachmann had rejected the achievements of an entire culture: “Weariness of civilization and doubts about progress are most strongly marked in ‘Undine Goes’: total alienation of man from himself and his like and romantic protest against it” (*Reader* 92). She grasps as well that this is a protest advanced against a male world from the standpoint of a female figure who stands outside it, “accusing a man’s world in the barely disguised voice of the author” (*Reader* 93). Given Wolf’s recognition of the extremity of the positions Bachmann assumes in this story, it is all the more startling to observe how closely Wolf’s description of Undine corresponds to figures in her own work, particularly Christa T. and Karoline von Günderode: she is “also romantic in attitude, the comparison of commonplace utility thinking with ‘a spirit that is destined to no use.’ . . . Since [Undine] sees no possible way to take up the struggle, she retreats before the unacceptable demands of society in the hope that she can thus preserve herself. But this retreat always ends in surrender of self, since separation from the practices of society also wears away the individual’s inner powers of resistance” (*Reader* 92–93). “The acceptable [*zumutbare*] truth” that the (woman) writer can provide, should she withstand “the unacceptable [*unzumutbare*] demands of society”—this dilemma threads its way through Wolf’s work to the present.

Although Wolf did not explicitly acknowledge Bachmann as a mentor until

the late 1970s, a careful reader of her work can clearly perceive her indebtedness to and acknowledgment of Bachmann much earlier. Wolf's literary-theoretical essay of 1968, "The Reader and the Writer," reveals great debts to Bachmann's writing in general and more specifically to the concerns in Bachmann's work on which Wolf had commented earlier. Remarkable in the 1968 essay is its attempt to pose its concerns in Brechtian terms while moving at least in some respects ever further from Brechtian literary models. Though Wolf, like Brecht, places her considerations "in the scientific age," the science she stresses is that of Einstein and Heisenberg, where scientific regularity and reliability have given way to relativity and imprecision. In the wake of these scientific changes and given the continuation of Brecht's project, she calls for a new "epic prose." But in contrast to epic theater, Wolf's epic prose is produced and consumed by single individuals; indeed, here she expressly criticizes Walter Benjamin's assertion that the individual author as producer was as inevitably fated to disappear as the individual entrepreneur, "crushed between the institutions producing on a mass scale" (*Reader* 207). Moreover, epic prose does not undertake to show its readers a world "changing and changeable" into which they—cool, critical, and dispassionate—can intervene; instead, it offers to address and transform those readers' very subjectivity itself: "Epic prose should be a genre which undertakes to penetrate along paths not yet traveled into the inner regions of this individual, the reader of prose. Into the very inmost part, where the nucleus of the personality develops and consolidates" (*Reader* 201). As Wolf had argued in her "Interview with Myself" published in the same year as "The Reader and the Writer," the achievement of the real basis for socialism in the GDR meant that socialist literature could, indeed should, now concern itself with human subjectivity, comprising emotions as well as reason (*Reader*). As a socialist writer, Wolf thus turns to the elaboration of precisely those dimensions of human experience virtually excluded in Brecht's work.

Wolf's shift reveals the influence not just of Bachmann but also of Ernst Bloch—the thinker whom Bachmann in the Frankfurt lectures had proposed, along with Wittgenstein, as a central impulse for contemporary writing. The last of Bachmann's Frankfurt lectures was titled "Literature as Utopia"; from "The Reader and the Writer" and *The Quest for Christa T.* onward, Wolf also places her own work (as Andreas Huyssen has shown) in the service of the Blochian principle of hope. Her writing, like Bachmann's, projects an unrealized vision and reveals the desires and disappointments beneath the surface of the present, employing epic prose to project, as she maintained in "The Reader and the Writer," "the future into the present" (*Reader* 201). Wolf argued eloquently

in that essay that formulating utopias should be the most important function of socialist prose, indispensable in a socialist society:

[Prose] can keep awake in us the memory of the future that we must not abandon on pain of destruction.

It helps mankind to become conscious subjects.

It is revolutionary and realistic; it entices and encourages people to achieve the impossible. (*Reader* 212)

In 1968, what still distinguished Wolf's utopias from Bachmann's was of course Wolf's ability to imagine a society in which they might be realized—a hope she long, against mounting evidence to the contrary, tried doggedly to maintain. One might suggest that Wolf's use of Bachmann is what Benjamin would have termed redemptive: rescuing the most radical elements in her work from misunderstanding and oblivion, making it accessible to the present, in order to bring about her visions in reality.

In Wolf's writing until the late 1970s, one can detect a series of parallels with and allusions to Bachmann's writing too obvious, particularly in the case of the names Wolf chooses, to be anything but deliberate. To readers familiar with Wolf's Bachmann essay, the words with which her narrator introduces the short story "June Afternoon," for instance, recall the description of Bachmann's prose. The last two clauses ("A vision perhaps, if you understand what I mean" [Herminghouse 113]) reveal the narrator's expectation that, as was the case with Bachmann's work, the vision that this difficult story comprises is not immediately evident. What the story reveals, beneath an exterior that could not be more banal—a family afternoon in a weekend garden plot outside Berlin—is the fantastic texture of subjectivity underlying it. On the one hand, the garden itself, not unlike other literary gardens, stands as a container for "the immoderate desires, always held in check" of the Bachmann essay. This very real garden, says the narrator, also contains within it the dream of its own perfectibility: "In all the time we have known it, . . . it has never had the opportunity to show what it is capable of. Now it turns out that it was the dream of being a green, rampant, wild, and lush garden, no more, no less. The archetype of a garden. Garden incarnate" (Herminghouse 113). Simultaneously, the banal everyday is filled with vague and ominous threats—"Husband's Corpse Found in Bed Cabinet" (Herminghouse 117) reported in the newspaper, the lost ropes needed to tie up the roses, the dismembered dead in a train wreck, the fear of death itself: "After all, who is to say that the hand which will pull one away from everything is already set to pounce?" (Herminghouse 129).

Although the story, drawing conventional conceptions of reality into question, never moves altogether into the realm of the fantastic or the surreal, it succeeds in undertaking nonetheless the epistemological experiment Wolf began to describe in “The Reader and the Writer,” questioning the immutability of a physical and a social world exterior to human subjects. Readers, recalling Wolf’s comments there on Newtonian “celestial mechanics” (as well as the imagery of her novel *Divided Heaven*), will apply them to the narrator’s remark in “June Afternoon”: “We were suddenly overcome by a sense of insecurity about the reliability of celestial landscapes” (Herminghouse 116). Instead, in this vision, reality is often constituted through the creative use of language; the family engages in spontaneous play with words that brings into being that which has never existed before: “wormghost and crookrain and nightjail and duckworm and jailluck and nightrain and duckcrook” (Herminghouse 121). But to their creativity is contrasted the attitude of their neighbor, the engineer, of whom the narrator remarks, “He goes by printed matter in general” (Herminghouse 119). The danger the engineer represents is his attractiveness for the thirteen-year-old daughter, who regards him as “modern,” “chic.” On this ordinary afternoon, two models for the future compete for the allegiance of the next GDR generation.

Such themes evidently continue into Wolf’s next creative work, *The Quest for Christa T.* Critics have remarked on some similarities between Christa T. and Bachmann, or at least Bachmann as Wolf describes her (Stephan 122). Christa T. too formulates fantastic visions, longs to be useful, and laments “that I can only cope with things by writing!” (*Quest* 34). For Christa T. also, “seeing” is a key term: “*Sehnsucht* comes from *sehen*, to see, and *Sucht*, craving. This craving to see, and this was her discovery, accorded with actual things in a simple but irrefutable way” (*Quest* 88). But the most striking concrete parallel between this work and Bachmann’s can be found in the single extended narrative written by Christa T. within Wolf’s novel, a narrative that bears the same title as Bachmann’s longest prose work—“Malina.” Assuming that even the deep affinities between these two writers could not have caused them to arrive independently at this same and unusual title for a prose work, I risk the assertion that Wolf meant the title as an acknowledgment of Bachmann’s work and her influence on *The Quest for Christa T.* (Alternatively, as I suggested in chapter 3, Bachmann may have intended the name “Malina” as an *hommage* to Wolf—or the two authors may of course indeed have arrived at the same title independently.) Christa T.’s “Malina” presents puzzles similar to those of Bachmann’s writings: an apparently realistic narrative whose purpose is unclear but which touches on

the themes of National Socialism; a mother who encourages her young daughter to accede to the assertions of a dominant order; a journey over a border to a destination simultaneously foreign and not foreign (recalling Bachmann's metaphorical use of the both real and Wittgensteinian language border from which she derived), and a text a female narrator fails for unknown reasons to conclude. "Now one ought to know why she stopped at this point," writes Wolf's narrator (*Quest* 90). But we can assume that Christa T.'s inability to continue, despite the vital importance to her of writing, is deeply connected to the larger dilemma of women (and particularly women writers) in this time, the dilemma that both this work and Bachmann's writing are devoted to exploring.

The complex eighth chapter of *Patterns of Childhood* then pursues explicitly the connection of the most important themes of Wolf's writing to Bachmann's work. In this novel again the somewhat unusual name, Jordan, had already revealed affinities between *Patterns of Childhood* and Bachmann's work: the family whom Wolf chooses to illustrate the functioning of "everyday fascism" shares its name with central figures of "The Barking" from *Three Paths to the Lake* and of the novel *The Book of Franza*, published first in 1978 but from which Bachmann had given readings in the late 1960s. Wolf's chapter eight, which, her narrator tells us, had long been intended to deal with the topic of war, becomes explicitly structured around references to Bachmann's work when the narrator learns through a radio broadcast on 19 October 1973 that Bachmann had died from burns. "With my burned hand I write about the nature of fire" (*Patterns* 163) is the epigraph from Bachmann that heads the chapter, and, like the "I" of *Malina*, the narrator broods over all-pervasive war; however, war here is not just metaphorical, as it sometimes seems in Bachmann, but real—in Poland, Vietnam, the Middle East, and in Chile, where in 1973 Allende had just been murdered. The connections to Bachmann's female "Ways of Death" are underlined also in the links the narrator establishes between Goebbels's declaration, "At last the Teutonic Empire of the German Nation has come into being," and young Nelly Jordan's mournful assertion to her mirror image: "Nobody loves me." "How can anyone be made to understand," the narrator asks of her character, "that these two completely unrelated sentences are, in your opinion, somehow connected?" (*Patterns* 164–165). In this dark chapter the despair that led Bachmann to her death is comprehensible, though staggering to the narrator:

The military junta in Chile has forbidden the use of the word *compañero*. There is, then, no reason to doubt the effectiveness of words. Even when someone on whose serious relationship to words you have counted for a long time can no longer make any use of them, who lets go of herself and records these days with the

sentence: With my burned hand I write about the nature of fire. Undine goes. Make with the hand—with the burned hand—the sign for finality. Go, Death, and stand still, Time. A solitude into which no one follows me. It is necessary, with the echo still in the mouth, to go on and to keep silent. Be prepared? For what, then? And not overcome by sadness? Explain nothing to me. I saw the salamander go through every fire. No fear threatens him, and he is pained by nothing. (Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* 233–234; passage omitted from English translation)

But the temperamental or historical differences between Wolf's narrator and Bachmann reassert themselves: "To regain oneself after a brief stumble, caused by the increased burden on one's shoulders. It is necessary to talk" (*Kindheitsmuster* 234; passage omitted from English translation). Bachmann's 1953 script for a radio broadcast on Wittgenstein, "*Sagbares und Unsagbares*" (The speakable and the unspeakable; *W* 4: 103–127) very early had maintained that it was altogether impossible to speak about that which was most important. For Wolf, however, this position is not at all sufficient, and her narrator responds to Bachmann's death by maintaining, "One must eventually break the silence about difficult things" (*Patterns* 178). And this narrator also recognizes the small concrete utopias of everyday life, as Bachmann sometimes recognized, too; consider, for example, the Bachmann quotation with which this dark chapter ends: "The most beautiful thing under the sun is being under the sun" (Wolf, *Patterns* 197).

Wolf's writing since *Patterns of Childhood* can be regarded as centrally concerned with the dilemma posed by Bachmann's death: whether the (woman) writer can have faith enough in the hope of remedying the evils she details, of realizing the visions she projects, to preserve her from despair. The eighth chapter of *Patterns of Childhood* had already described Nelly's mother as the figure with whom Wolf's more recent work is concerned, the prophet whose words are not heeded: "Always expecting the worst. Cassandra, behind the counter in her store; Cassandra aligning loaves of bread; Cassandra weighing potatoes" (*Patterns* 165). For instance, in an interview published in 1982, Wolf explained that this problem informed *No Place on Earth*—written after the East German songwriter Wolf Biermann's expulsion from the GDR: "I wrote *No Place on Earth* in 1977. That was a time when I found myself obliged to examine the preconditions for failure, the connection between social desperation and failure in literature. At the time, I was living with the intense feeling of standing with my back to the wall, unable to take a proper step. I had to get beyond a certain time when there seemed to be absolutely no possibility left for effective action" ("Culture" 89). In "The Shadow of a Dream," the foreword to her edition of Karoline von



Günderrode's writing, Wolf uses Bachmann's term to describe the generation of young Romantics to whom history offered no hope: "German life stories. German death styles" [*Todesarten* = ways of death] (*Author's Dimension* 135). The metaphor of the injured hand also threads its way through the story of Günderrode's ill-fated love for a married man not her equal.

Wolf's clearest response to the dilemmas posed by Bachmann's life and death, however, is found in her Büchner Prize acceptance speech, which circles the issues posed in Bachmann's last published poem, "No Delicacies" (*Storm* 187–188). In that poem, first published in the 1968 issue of *Kursbuch* that proclaimed the death of literature, Bachmann declares her unwillingness henceforth to seek beautiful words to adorn her writing at this time of grave social crisis. In yet more dire times, Wolf, too, expresses great doubts about the efficacy of writing, in which she continues to believe nonetheless. Bachmann's writing, even in its despair, gives precise expression to the extremity of a state of consciousness that we would not have known so well without her description of it, showing us more clearly what conditions unworthy of human beings we need to combat. In this time, Wolf explains, "all, nearly all products of our age must bear within them, or at least within their invented opposites, the seed of self-destruction. Art can not transcend itself as art, literature not as literature" ("Shall" 10). Bachmann had concluded "No Delicacies" by renouncing her vocation: "As for my part, let it vanish" (quoted in "Shall" 9). In the Büchner Prize acceptance speech, Wolf does not accept that resignation: "One who expresses herself completely does not cancel herself out: the wish for obliteration remains as a witness. Her part will not vanish" ("Shall" 10). In a 1982 interview as well, Wolf, herself unresigned, seemed to promise that she would not choose Bachmann's way out: "But many readers also see that by probing deeper and deeper into the wounds of our times, which are also my wounds, I don't intend to give up" ("Culture" 96).

It remains still to be asked what these wounds of our times are that occasion responses so dark from these writers and in what senses they, women writers in central Europe in the last third of the twentieth century, arrived at a corresponding understanding of themselves and their culture. Now, looking back on Bachmann's writing, we can see that she sought from the beginning, in her prose writing at least, to understand the causes of the troubles of her time. Although her explanations seem now too vague, too imprecise, or too restricted to the realm of ideas, those defects may derive from Bachmann's lack then of an appropriate theoretical vocabulary or framework—a lack that theory writing of the last twenty years, including that of feminism, has helped to address. Elsewhere I have argued that it is possible to observe in Bachmann's essays insights

into the structures of Western thought akin to those of contemporary French poststructuralism (see chapter 3): she discerns both the limitations of Western discourse and the connections between Western thought and Western history. In one essay on Wittgenstein, for instance, Bachmann emphasizes that Western thought is unable to speak, to formulate meaningful propositions, about precisely what is most important to human beings, which nonetheless is available to us as “the mystical,” about which nothing can be said. This “negative” dimension of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, as she terms it, interests Bachmann most and makes Wittgenstein represent for her the insoluble dilemmas at which Western thought, indeed Western culture altogether, has arrived. “These efforts may permit us to call Wittgenstein the great representative thinker of our time, since in him are expressed the two extreme tendencies of the intellectual trends of the West. He occupies the pinnacle of scientific thought of the age—that thought which accompanies and precedes the development of technology and the natural sciences; and yet it is precisely he who reminds us of the quotation by the nineteenth-century Austrian playwright Johann Nestoy: ‘The altogether unique aspect of progress is that it appears to be much greater than it really is’” (*W* 4: 116–117).

An Austrian writer in the late twentieth century, Bachmann obviously understood the danger of challenges posed to reason, particularly within a German context. But simultaneously, she insisted on the necessity of questioning a destructive form of reason that could not transcend the limitations of scientism and positivism. Moreover, even Bachmann’s early essays indicate her clear awareness that the problems she was addressing were not merely those of the realm of thought but were, on the contrary, expressions in thought of the real cul-de-sac at which our culture seemed to have arrived. Her radio essay on Simone Weil (*W* 4:128–155) pursues the deep connection in Weil’s work between structures of Western thought and the misery of the proletariat—a misery against which a Marxism that fails to repudiate its roots in the Western philosophies from which it derives is also powerless. In Bachmann’s essays on Robert Musil she also stresses that his *The Man without Qualities* addresses the same cultural problematic, showing, as Bachmann herself wants to maintain, that its logical outcome is war: “It is not the Kakanian [the term Musil used to refer to the Austro-Hungarian empire on the eve of World War I] situation alone that has shown that the thought-processes of rigid ideologies lead directly to war” (*W* 4: 27).

Read from this perspective, Bachmann’s creative writing and particularly her prose reveal themselves as concerned from the beginning, if sometimes somewhat obliquely, with the destructiveness at the heart of our culture, the

flaw at its core. Her story “The Thirtieth Year” attempts a far-reaching critique of all hitherto existing cultural structures: “The renunciation of every traditional view and every traditional condition, of states, churches, organizations, means of power, arms, education. The great strike, the instantaneous stoppage of the old world. The cessation of work and thinking for this old world. The dismissal of history, not for the sake of anarchy, but for the sake of a fresh start” (TY 56). “A Wildermuth,” recalling Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and Hofmannsthal’s “Lord Chandos Letter,” deals with the impossibility of talking about a truth that is more than facts (TY 139–176). As Wolf had recognized, the last story of the collection makes Bachmann’s point with the greatest clarity and finality: Undine goes, repudiating the monstrous male world that is incapable, for all its achievements, of grasping human happiness. As Bernd Witte has perceptively observed, Bachmann’s writing from the mid-1960s onward pursues the insights first expressed in “Undine Goes”: “Ingeborg Bachmann hints already in this anti-fairy-tale at the central motif of her later prose works by attempting to combine in thought the catastrophic course of world history and her own self-alienation as a woman. She locates their common cause—she blames the thoughts and actions of men” (Witte, “Ingeborg” 27).

In those late works Bachmann shows us her “ways of death” directly: women mentally or physically destroyed, often themselves unaware of how their condition is connected to a social order that makes a happy and autonomous female subjectivity impossible. In *Malina*, the female “I” disappears into a crack in the wall, leaving her male alter ego to tell her story; “It was murder,” says the narrator (225). In “Gier” (Greed), the central female figure is literally murdered by her husband; in *Requiem for Fanny Goldmann* (*Franza*), Fanny dies mysteriously after a man betrays her; and the women in the stories of *Three Paths to the Lake* suffer all manner of psychic and physical distress. Bachmann’s argument is made most decisively and completely in the unfinished novel *The Book of Franza*: here the causes for Franza’s madness are linked explicitly to both National Socialism and European imperialism; they aim to extend their totalitarian grasp over the entire world, colonizing minds they cannot control through physical violence. Like the other “Ways of Death” women, Franza is destroyed, but in this case she recognizes that she is a victim of the white culture to which she belongs, and she dies resisting, cursing the whites: “[The whites] should be damned” (*Franza* 142). Given these far-reaching and devastating recognitions, then, it must be no surprise that there is no way out for Bachmann’s characters. If white history culminates in fascism and imperialism, in murder and destruction, then how can a white woman, excluded from that history but part of no

other, find another place to stand? By the time of her death, Bachmann was thus left with an increasingly more radical and more clearly formulated analysis of the major failures of our culture—a critique so far-reaching that only that culture's abolition could have seemed adequate response to the abuses she detailed. But virtually nowhere in her work do we find expressed even the hope for her culture's transformation, scarcely even the hope that that to which she gives expression will be understood.

Wolf's Frankfurt lectures on poetics (*W* 4: 182–271) make it possible to maintain that the position toward which her writing of the 1970s moved increasingly resembles Bachmann's, both in the radicality of her cultural analysis and to some degree in its pessimism as well. As early as the stories in *Unter den Linden*, published in 1974, the critique of scientific positivism and instrumental rationality—to which GDR functionaries were only too clearly not immune—became a central theme of Wolf's work. Although she reveals the deep-reaching consequences of technocratic thought, however, a reading of her stories generous to the GDR might still understand them as attacking social abuses there, not the fundamental orientation of her country or even of Marxism altogether. But in Wolf's essays on the Romantics, written after the expulsion of Biermann as a thinly veiled examination of conditions in her own country, the varieties of ways in which she takes issue even with Marxism are scarcely concealed; Marxism continues rather than breaks with the structures of thought and action that had led civilization to its present pass.

In the letters of Bettine Brentano and Karoline von Günderode, Wolf finds, for instance, an alternative to the instrumental reason about to conquer all of Europe—triumphant, Wolf clearly believes, to this day: “An alternative, yes. An alternative which was conceived and proposed at the very moment when the society switched irreversibly onto the track of the exploitation of nature, the twisting of ends into means, and the oppression of every ‘feminine’ element in the new civilization” (*Author's Dimension* 212). Contrasting Bettine's sympathy with and tenderness toward nature with Faust's attempt to subdue the Earth Spirit, Wolf shows herself willing to reverse an entire orthodox Marxist tradition of the appropriation of the cultural heritage within which Faust, unbounded in his energy and ambition, is a paradigmatic figure, a culture hero: “What a different scene from Faust's confrontation with the Earth Spirit! Not a declaration of war to the death, not the unconditional subjugation of nature; not the hubris of the Faustian man who, casting aside Faust's doubts, gains knowledge by putting nature on the rack, forcing confessions out of it with screws and irons. Hers is a different kind of progress. A different kind of magic from the diabolic

sort for which Faust sells his soul, and which destroys him, a man become a stranger to himself (*Author's Dimension* 213). Wolf obstinately rejects a model she also identifies as male, and Bettine joins Undine in the female opposition: "How different an adversary was created by God the Father when he made Mephisto to incite man to ambivalent creation than was bred by Mother Nature when she made her army of witches, nymphs, and sprites—those beings who now, in the Faustian age, were repressed, accursed, and labeled taboo, and whose ranks Bettine, their latter-day descendant, joined trembling with emotion" (*Author's Dimension* 213). Wolf's Büchner Prize acceptance speech only makes completely explicit and pursues to its final, most contemporary consequence what had been clear already in these essays: committed in East and West to its destructive course, a culture based on principles that alienate human beings from nature, each other, and themselves, now stands poised to destroy itself altogether.

What is not so clear in the essays on the Romantics, however, is the exact object of Wolf's attack; there it might still be possible to regard that attack as limited to residues of bourgeois thought—the Romantics, after all, produced their counterproposals at the moment when bourgeois industriousness and utilitarianism triumphed. Yet even in these essays there are indications that Wolf's analysis of the flaws of Western civilization might reach as far as Bachmann's imprecations against "the whites." In "The Shadow of a Dream," for instance, Wolf praises Bettine and Karoline for their discovery of models other than those of classical Greece, other than those of Europe: "Powers which derived from the mother's womb instead of from the father's brain, that is, the head of Zeus, like Pallas Athena: an alternative to the sources of classicism, a turn toward archaic, partially matriarchal models. They reread mythology—not just the Greek, which had dominated the study of myth in the past, but prehistoric myth and the teachings of India, Asia, the East. Eurocentrism had been breached, and, with it, the exclusive rule of the conscious mind" (*Author's Dimension* 155–156).

With the Büchner Prize acceptance speech Wolf aligns herself more clearly with the analysis of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tracing the destructive tendencies of the present back to the Greek beginnings of Western culture; and her recently published [1983] narrative, *Cassandra*, reveals in its fullness, often with virtually explicit allusions to Bachmann, the extent of her critique. Here Wolf returns to the roots of our culture to tell of its origins from the perspective of a woman who, like the figures of "Ways of Death," is simultaneously inside and outside that culture, destroyed because of her complicity in it. Surely, as in *The Book of Franza*, one must understand the real events of this story as internal to the female psyche, an illustration,

perhaps, of Freud's remark that Greek culture—that is, the oedipus complex—stood in the way of the analytic discovery of an earlier layer of civilization, the Minoan-Mycenean preoedipal phase so crucial for femininity (21: 26). For Cassandra, a “seer,” as for Bachmann, seeing is primary, and her own insights deepen as the narrative progresses, but, like Bachmann, she is fated not to be understood. Indeed, Cassandra laments, “They did not even understand the questions to which I was seeking an answer” (*Cassandra* 48), and she will perish as a consequence of what she recognizes—“to give birth to what slays me” (quoted in *Author's Dimension* 157), as Karoline von Günderrode had written. Cassandra, also, writing with her burned hand: “I was noted for my endurance of pain. For my ability to hold my hand over the flame longer than anyone else” (*Cassandra* 31).

What does Cassandra see, and how does that correspond to Bachmann's visions? Wolf explained the new position at which she had arrived and explicitly acknowledged her indebtedness to Bachmann in her Frankfurt lectures, held in May and June 1982 at the University of Frankfurt and titled *Voraussetzungen einer Erzählung: Cassandra* (Conditions of a narrative: translation published as *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*). Her lectures begin by explaining, with some irony, why she herself has no poetics of her own, a new poetics according to her *Classical Antiquity Lexicon* coming into being via an oedipal struggle with one's fatherly precursors: “‘Poetics’ (the definition reads): theory of the art of poetry, which at an advanced stage—Aristotle, Horace—takes on a systematic form, and whose norms have been accorded ‘wide validity’ in numerous countries since the age of humanism. New aesthetic positions are reached (the book says) via confrontation with these norms (in parentheses, Brecht)” (*Cassandra* 141). From that warlike patriarchal lineage that ends with Brecht, from that entire literary-theoretical tradition, Wolf here distances herself altogether: “I have never felt the raging desire for confrontation with the poetics, or the model, of a great writer (in parentheses, Brecht). This has only struck me in the last couple of years, and so it may be that, incidentally, these essays will also treat a question that I have not been asked: the question of why I do not have a poetics” (*Cassandra* 141). Advancing another model, “a fabric [that] . . . is an aesthetic structure, and . . . would lie at the center of my poetics if I had one” (*Cassandra* 142), Wolf attempts in the lectures to explicate the complicated and subjective process whereby she arrived at the Cassandra narrative. Her first and second lectures deal with her trip to Greece; her third, a “Work Diary,” records “the vise grip between life and subject matter”; the fourth explores, with explicit and detailed reference to Bachmann, the “historical reality of the Cassandra figure” and the “conditions for the woman

writer past and present” (*Cassandra* 142). The fifth lecture is the narrative *Cassandra* itself.

In the fourth lecture Wolf declares that the discoveries she has made in writing *Cassandra*—the epistemological changes forced upon her, still difficult even to describe—are comparable only to the transformation of her vision to which her discovery of Marx had compelled her thirty years before:

With the widening of my visual angle and the readjustment to my depth of focus, my viewing lens (through which I perceive our time, all of us, you, myself) has undergone a decisive change. It is comparable to that decisive change that occurred more than thirty years ago, when I first became acquainted with Marxist theory and attitudes; a liberating and illuminating experience which altered my thinking, my view, what I felt about and demanded of myself. When I try to realize what is happening, what has happened, I find that (to bring it down to the lowest common denominator) there has been an expansion of what for me is “real.” Moreover, the nature, the inner structure, the movement of this reality has also changed and continues to change almost daily. It is indescribable; my professional interest is wide-awake and aims precisely at description, but it must hold back, withdraw, and it has had to learn to want and to bring about its own defeat. (*Cassandra* 278)

The title of this lecture draws our attention to those epistemological concerns that had already served as the basis of Wolf’s original essay on Bachmann: “A Letter, about Unequivocal and Ambiguous Meaning, Definiteness and Indefiniteness; about Ancient Conditions and New View-Scopes; about Objectivity” (*Cassandra* 272). And the essay’s epigraph comes from Bachmann’s *The Book of Franza*: “For the facts that make up the world need the non-factual as a vantage point from which to be perceived” (*Cassandra* 272)—the same sort of vision, that is, that Wolf had detected in Bachmann’s early prose.

And indeed, insights learned from Bachmann, the epistemological changes forced upon her by her reading of Bachmann, form the structuring principle of this lecture. As Wolf began to think about *Cassandra*, she explains, as she began to pose to herself the question: “Who was *Cassandra* before anyone wrote about her?” (*Cassandra* 273), she began also to meditate upon the meaning of the Bachmann poem she had cited in the eighth chapter of *Patterns of Childhood*, “Tell Me, Love.” Wolf devotes several pages to explicating the poem, stressing the concern of the poem’s speaker with her status as thinker, which might preclude her from love. Says Wolf, “‘Must someone think’ may perhaps mean: must a man—or a woman—think like that? So—exclusively? In a way that excludes love, and what is lovely” (*Cassandra* 274). But the poem simultaneously offers another model of thought and feeling: “Reflecting on this, regret-

ting it, even lamenting it, the poem itself gives an example of the most precise indefiniteness, the clearest ambiguity. Things are this way and no other way, it says; and at the same time (this cannot be thought logically) things are that way, a different way. You are I, I am he, it cannot be explained. The grammar of manifold simultaneous relations" (*Cassandra* 276).

Wolf had begun this lecture/letter by telling her friend A., the addressee of the letter, about the "mountain of books" she had taken to the country with her, listing almost half a page of works of mostly feminist scholarship from Western Europe and the United States. From feminism, from Euro-American women's conscious refusal to accede to the structures of men's reality, she begins to derive her explanation of that new model, as she had often hinted in earlier works and stated clearly in her third essay: "To what extent is there really such a thing as women's writing? To the extent that women, for historical and biological reasons, experience a different reality than men. Experience reality differently than men and express it. . . . To the extent that they stop wearing themselves out in trying to integrate themselves into the prevailing delusional systems" (*Cassandra* 259). In the fourth essay, Wolf pursues women's status in classical works, especially in Aristotle and Goethe, tracing women's loss of the authority they had possessed in European prehistory and linking it to the triumph of a mode of thought that was to culminate in the technological nightmare of the present. "To put it in simplified terms," Wolf tells us, "this one-track-minded route is the one that has been followed by Western thought: the route of segregation, of the renunciation of the manifoldness of phenomena, in favor of dualism and monism, in favor of closed systems and pictures of the world; of the renunciation of subjectivity in favor of a sealed 'objectivity'" (*Cassandra* 287).

But thinking men still need women to preserve them from the limitations of their own rarified thought: "They need cunning little devices to avoid dying of the cold. One of these devices is to develop women as a power resource. In other words, to fit them into their patterns of life and thought. To put it more simply, to exploit them" (*Cassandra* 294). Leaping unabashedly 2,500 years to show in what that thinking culminates, Wolf quotes a few sentences of dialogue from Marieluise Fleisser's "Tiefseefisch" (Deep sea fish). The setting is Berlin in the 1920s; the speakers are Wollank, a former bicycle racer, and Tütü, head of a literary clique, obviously modeled on B.B.—Brecht. Wollank maintains, "These women are dreadful, the way they swarm around you and each one dies to perform a different service." But Tütü asserts in reply, "I don't see why I shouldn't take what I can get. I have turned it into a system. Everything that is able to stimulate me is brought to me without my having to lift a finger.



... My energies," he continues, "are freed for what is essential" (*Cassandra* 295). How, asks Wolf, can this be an aesthetic that women writers could use to free us from the West's destructive thinking?

And the woman who starts to speak in her own voice, to say "I," faces enormous obstacles. "I claim," Wolf asserts, "that every woman in this century and in our cultural sphere who has ventured into male dominated institutions—'literature' and 'aesthetics' are such institutions—must have experienced the desire for self-destruction" (*Cassandra* 299). Her example is the unnamed female "I" of Bachmann's *Malina*. Bachmann, Wolf maintains, had succeeded in naming what had happened to women in the course of the development of Western civilization, their "ways of death," and had also consciously chosen an aesthetic different from that of "Goethe, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Fontane, Proust, and Joyce" to do so (*Cassandra* 300). But Bachmann found also that her experience as a woman scarcely allowed itself to be pressed into form at all: "Whichever direction you look, whichever page you open the book to, you see the cave-in of the alternatives which until now have held together and torn apart our world, as well as the theory of the beautiful and of art. A new kind of tension seems to be struggling for expression, in horror and fear and tottering consternation. There is not even the consolation that this is still capable of being given form; not in the traditional sense" (*Cassandra* 301).

What is the "this" of this sentence? Wolf asks, and she looks for an answer in *The Book of Franza*, where Franza's brother asks a similar question: "What could have destroyed her in this way?" (*Cassandra* 302). Concluding her lecture, Wolf offers a reading of that unfinished novel, quoting passage upon passage to underline her own argument that real women, like Franza, have been colonized by a culture culminating in National Socialism which destroys them and itself. Franza dies cursing the whites; Wolf's final words in this lecture come from *The Book of Franza*, and they are, she says, what Cassandra would say today,

mocked, of course, not heard, declared abnormal, ejected, turned over to Death. She says:

The whites are coming. The whites are landing. And if they are repulsed again, they will return again once more. No revolution and no resolution and no foreign currency statute will help; they will come in spirit if they can no longer come in any other way. And they will be resurrected in a brown and a black brain, it will still always be the whites, even then. They will continue to own the world in this roundabout way. (*Cassandra* 305)

The Cassandra metaphor is almost as bleak as those of Bachmann's novels, and one stands sobered and aghast before so devastating an assessment of our contemporary condition. In the third lecture Wolf had asked herself, "How can you teach younger people the technique of living without alternatives, and yet living?" (*Cassandra* 251). In the Cassandra image Wolf gives with one hand the possibility of Euro-American women's providing that alternative, only to take that hope back with the other hand—like Bachmann in that respect, whose late works offer almost only "ways of death." It might be, of course, as a male East German writer, Heiner Müller, suggested in a recent interview, that there is no answer for Euro-Americans because the proletariat on whom Marx and Brecht counted can no longer be relied upon to redeem the system that created it. If one has really grasped what Bachmann and Wolf have said in its materiality and historicity, it is hard not to come as close to despair as they. Quotations from Wolf, however, spring to mind. In *No Place On Earth* she had written, "If we cease to hope, then that which we fear will surely come" (117). Or her words on Bachmann in the Büchner Prize acceptance speech: in describing clearly the historical dilemma at which we have arrived, in advancing, at least as vision, an alternative, these women writers may, we can hope, help to forestall the worst. Or perhaps they may not. Wolf's third lecture began with that fear: "The literature of the West (I read) is the white man's reflection on himself. So should it be supplemented by the white woman's reflection on herself? And nothing more?" (*Cassandra* 225).

To these depressing notes let me add, however, a coda, drawing on a recent essay [1982] on Brecht and Bachmann by Gerhard Wolf, Christa Wolf's husband. Käthe Reichel, one of Brecht's female collaborators, had preserved a copy of *Die gestundete Zeit*, Bachmann's first poetry volume, that she had brought from West Germany to give to Brecht. (One recalls the comment Wolf quoted from Fleisser's dialogue: "Everything that can excite me is brought to me.") Reading the volume *an einem kleinen Nachmittag* (On a little afternoon)—the title of Gerhard Wolf's essay—Brecht had undertaken to make corrections in Bachmann's poems, so that they became linear, pointed, didactic, political, like his. "We"—Gerhard Wolf fails to specify to whom, apart from himself, that pronoun refers—travel to visit Reichel and record her impressions of that arrogant Brechtian undertaking, so illustrative of his aesthetic, political, and human failings. But Reichel's judgment of Brecht is more differentiated. His commitment to those ordering principles was, she maintains, also a way of managing his own pain at the world he saw around him, a poetry written with tightly pressed lips. Bachmann's advantage as a woman, though it brought her greater

pain, was to pursue that suffering to its depths, with open mouth. In this she joins another lineage, another tradition: “It will be written on a new page that here speaks a woman whom one regards today in a line of tradition: Else Lasker-Schüler—Nelly Sachs—Bachmann—Sarah Kirsch—the open mouth!” (Gerhard Wolf 180). Into which sisterhood of German women poets, Christa Wolf, though not herself a poet, may also be admitted, to write upon that new, unwritten page.

## READING BACHMANN IN 1983

This essay was written in spring 1983 for the volume titled *Responses to Christa Wolf: Critical Essays*, edited by the late Marilyn Sibley Fries (though not published until 1989). It displays some of the methodological heterogeneity of the early 1980s, as feminist literary scholarship hesitated between a cultural feminist paradigm and something to come that had not yet been elaborated. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I wrote it at almost exactly the moment that Christa Wolf herself emphatically declared her allegiance to the very feminist paradigm that U.S. feminists were beginning to draw into question. In May 1982, in connection with the lecture series on poetics hosted by the University of Frankfurt which Bachmann's own Frankfurt lectures had inaugurated in 1959–60, Wolf delivered four lectures titled "Conditions of a Narrative," intended to explain the political and literary considerations that led her to write her novel *Cassandra*. The fourth lecture had just been published in *Sinn und Form* when I began work on this essay, and *Cassandra* appeared as I was writing it.

It is in lecture four that Wolf lists the feminist works that brought about a "decisive change," as she terms it, in her "viewing lens," comparable only to her discovery of Marxist theory thirty years previously. Most of the texts she cites are by feminist writers who in the main can be consigned to the radical or cultural feminist camp: "*The First Sex. Mothers and Amazons. Goddesses. Patriarchy. Amazons, Warrior Women, and He-Women. Women—the Mad Sex? Women in Art. God-Symbols, Love-Magic, Satanic Cult. Male Fantasies. Female Utopias—Male Casualties. Women and Power. The Sex Which Is Not One. The Secret of the Oracle. Utopian Past. Outsiders. Cultural-Historical Traces of Repressed Womanhood. Mother Right. Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. Woman's Wild Harvest. The White Goddess. Woman as Image. A Room of One's Own. Womanhood in Letters*" (*Cassandra* 273). In her increasing concern since the mid-1970s with "the self-destructiveness of male dominated society" (Kuhn 178 quoting Rich, "When" 35), then manifesting itself in the superpowers' stationing of nuclear missiles in Central Europe, Wolf also seemed to align herself with cultural feminists' new concern in the early 1980s with issues of peace and ecology. In the *Cassandra* lectures Wolf read Bachmann through that lens, contrasting Bachmann's writing to the masculinist politics and poetics of Bertolt Brecht—and providing me with the framework for my own essay, Brecht versus Bachmann.

Despite these avowed allegiances, Wolf was mainly not read as a cultural feminist by her U.S. feminist audience, probably consisting mainly of Germanists at least until the publication of *Cassandra*. Many Germanists of my generation, products of the student movement and trained by Marxist-influenced pro-

fessors (at *das rote Wisconsin* [red Wisconsin], among other places), had turned to GDR literature because focusing on the GDR made it possible for us to conjoin our professional careers and our commitment to socialism. To those of us who became feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the extraordinary texts of GDR women's writing that blossomed in that period (exactly as U.S. socialist feminism became enmired in ever more tortured [and boring] attempts to force women's experience into the categories of Marxist economics) allowed us to keep alive the hope of combining the most creative and visionary possibilities of Marxism and feminism in a society that would both provide for basic human needs and promote subjective self-realization ("This coming-to-oneself—what is it?" as Wolf put it in the motto to *The Quest for Christa T.* [*Quest 1*] which she had borrowed from Johannes R. Becher). Many socialist feminists of the 1970s had elaborated a position (somewhat indebted to Herbert Marcuse) that allowed us, while not relinquishing our commitment to a far-reaching transformation of the entire society, to repudiate an equal-rights feminism that sought only to give women men's prerogatives and to embrace cultural feminism's celebration of superior female qualities. Excluded from the instrumental world of work, women, we maintained, had preserved alternative, more humane modes of human interaction that could be embraced "after the revolution" by all of humankind—much the same argument Wolf makes in her short story "Self-Experiment." In Christa Wolf's writing I and others thus believed that we had found an example of the socialist feminist model we were seeking. In the years between Erich Honnecker's accession to power and Wolf Biermann's expulsion (1971–1976), it also appeared to us that the GDR offered the real possibility of bringing into existence a society based on such a model (in some contrast to the very abstract demands of the U.S. left or feminists for a revolution that seemed, as the 1970s progressed, increasingly improbable). Though our hopes were certainly much dimmed by the crackdown that followed Biermann's expulsion, Christa Wolf's work nonetheless encouraged socialist feminists within the discipline of German Studies to continue to assert a Marxist-influenced analysis through the 1970s and early 1980s that would then assume renewed relevance in the Reagan era.

Wolf's still very Marxist 1966 essay on Bachmann, published both as an afterword to a GDR edition of Bachmann's writing and in Wolf's own essay collection, *The Reader and the Writer*, suggested strongly that Wolf had derived from Bachmann the fundamentals of what we U.S. feminists read as her socialist feminism. Simultaneously, the 1966 essay asserted that Bachmann could neither realize her vision nor even articulate it very clearly because she lived and worked in a capitalist society where such far-reaching changes were almost literally inconceivable; that is, Wolf took the position that the situation of women (and, consequently, of women writers) was shaped by the specific social conditions of the society from which they derived, not just from a patriarchy that had oppressed women since the beginnings of human history (as many of the

texts in Wolf's feminist library seemed to maintain and as one might also reasonably conclude from *Cassandra*). From the beginning to the present, Wolf's 1966 essay has strongly influenced my appropriation of Bachmann. My reliance on it in this 1983 essay may be regarded as a somewhat tentative effort, born of my residual socialist feminism together with a growing discontent with cultural feminism, to wrest Bachmann not only from earlier male critics who had considered her writing a manifestation of timeless beauty but also from the kind of feminism that Wolf now espoused. As well, as the critique of white racism became increasingly central to U.S. feminism, I had been very moved to discover *The Book of Franza's* focus on the crimes "the whites" had committed against the other peoples of the world and was quite thrilled to discover that Wolf had also stressed this aspect of Bachmann's work in her fourth *Cassandra* lecture. As was the case with my earlier interest in the GDR, it now seemed to me that in focusing on these two writers, I could address a topic of importance within the field of *Germanistik* and simultaneously pursue what had increasingly become my central political priority: elaborating an antiracist feminism. (Indeed, while I was writing this essay I also presented a paper, "Towards an Anti-Racist Feminist Theory," at a conference on the intersection of Black Studies and Women's Studies.) The question of white women's support for racism almost inevitably directed the attention of U.S. feminist Germanists to the issue of German women's support for National Socialism, despite German feminists' vehement insistence that German women had only been Nazism's victims. (Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* [1987], which argued for the centrality of women's participation, within their own female sphere, in the success of National Socialism, settled this question to the satisfaction of U.S. feminists, but for some time its conclusions continued to be vigorously opposed by German feminists.) On this count, Wolf's courageous examination in *Patterns of Childhood* (1977) of her own quite enthusiastic involvement in National Socialist youth activities seemed to me to place her on the side of those feminists prepared to concede that women had not been *just* victims for all of human history.

Nonetheless, despite my enthusiasm for this topic because it seemed to point beyond some of the impasses at which the feminism of the early 1980s had arrived, I think my essay itself mainly rests on principles that do not deviate significantly from those of cultural feminism (in part, of course, because it was much shaped by the mostly cultural feminist perspective through which Wolf read Bachmann). I structured it around the notion of a fundamental difference between men and women: Brecht versus Bachmann. It is "gynocritical," focusing on two preeminent women writers and attempting to establish a countertradition of female literary production that would link them. Like cultural feminists, I consider the violence of the contemporary social order to be a consequence of its control by men (*tout court*), and I treat women (*tout court*) as the implacable foes of that order and as almost entirely excluded from it. If there is hope for

such a death-driven civilization at all, Wolf and I imply, it is to be found in the interventions of women, and literature is to be one of women's primary weapons, since it is in literature that women writers (*tout court*) can give expression to their alternative vision of human relations which derives from their (common) female experience, epistemology, and aesthetics. If contemporary society is to survive, this essay seems to suggest, it will be solely as a consequence of the contributions of women alone (an expression of cultural feminism's new interventionist stance of the early 1980s). Thus, though this is an essay of which I am quite fond and that does, I think, correctly represent the relationship of Wolf to Bachmann, it also very clearly displays, despite some superficial evidence to the contrary, its fundamental indebtedness to a feminist paradigm about which I and other scholars of the period had grown increasingly dubious, yet to which we had not yet found an alternative.

Much of this 1983 work, then, is founded on principles that do not significantly differ from those of the cultural feminism of the day, possibly inflected to some degree by ecofeminism. Beginning my essay with Brecht signaled not only my own (as well as Wolf's) allegiance to socialism but also my feminist distance from certain varieties of it, a question I had already pursued in a 1978 article on Brecht and women. There and in this 1983 essay I took the cultural/ecofeminist line (a position similar to Wolf's own and one I may have in part derived from her as well as from the Frankfurt School) that an increasingly hegemonic instrumental, project-oriented, productivist rationality was inimical both to feminist ends and to the welfare of the world altogether. Like Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I assumed that such a form of rationality could be traced back to what I then considered the origins of European history or the European tradition in Greece (a construction that now seems in need of interrogation), from which point it had progressively grown in intensity and in the increasing array of human activity under its sway. Marxism I considered to be of a piece with this tradition, not a rupture with it. (During this period a member of my women's group who had visited Cuba sent me back a postcard with a picture of a huge poster hung from a Havana high-rise bearing the words "Productividad! Productividad! Productividad!") I clung tenaciously to the claim (clearly authorized by Bachmann's and Wolf's texts) that it was men who were the agents of such forms of rationality and women its implacable foes. Characteristic of much literary and other scholarship of the early 1980s, I think, is my unwavering conviction that the culture of our era could be conceived of as a single, coherent, malevolent piece, a position I now believe to be a holdover from Cold War theories of totalitarianism, and the unremitting idealism (in its philosophical sense) of my (and Wolf's and Bachmann's) arguments: rather than assuming a reciprocal (not to say dialectical) relationship between thought and action, we postulated that it is structures of thought or ideologies that are responsible for how individuals and societies behave.

I suggested in chapter 2 that in the early 1980s Wolf's attention to Bachmann in her Büchner Prize speech and the *Cassandra* lectures helped to popularize the new feminist reading of Bachmann. My own essay, which for a range of reasons first appeared in English only in 1989 and was then reprinted in German in 1992 (in a collection originally intended to introduce U.S. feminist literary scholarship to the GDR, though history overtook its editor, Ute Brandes), acceded and lent authorization to that feminist reading long after I myself had ceased to advance it. It is thus a particularly good example both of the historical specificity of feminist readings and, a little paradoxically, of their nonsynchronicity. As in this case, the vagaries of publishing may be responsible for the simultaneous circulation of feminist analyses that derive from quite different historical moments and may potentially support positions long since abandoned in practical feminist politics.



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