

WRITING IN A SURVEILLANCE STATE

Otherness in Christa Wolf's What Remains

SABRINA BLACK

THE AUTHOR ANALYZES THE POSITION OF THE WRITER IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (GDR) THROUGH AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTA WOLF'S NOVELLA *WHAT REMAINS*. THE EXTENSIVE SURVEILLANCE OF INTELLECTUALS IN EAST GERMANY PROVIDES A CONTEXT FOR WOLF'S WORK, WHICH DEMONSTRATES THE BURDEN WHICH THIS GOVERNMENTAL SCRUTINY PLACED ON THINKERS IN THE GDR. THE TENSION BETWEEN THE PERCEIVED MORAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF WRITERS AND THE PRESSURES TO CONFORM TO THE REGIME'S STANDARDS OF ACCEPTABILITY IS IN THE FOREGROUND OF *WHAT REMAINS*. THIS ESSAY EXAMINES HOW THE NARRATOR'S INABILITY TO RECONCILE THESE DEMANDS CAUSES HER TO UNDERGO A PROCESS OF "OTHERING" THAT LEAVES HER ALIENATED FROM THE GOVERNMENT, HER FELLOW CITIZENS, AND HERSELF.

When Christa Wolf's novella *What Remains* was published a decade after it was written, a wave of controversy surged around it. Some viewed her choice to delay the publication of her work as an act of cowardice. Her text explores the position of writers in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and elucidates the pressures that led to her decision. In *What Remains*, Wolf provides first-hand insight into the role of the intellectuals in the GDR, illuminating the effects of state surveillance on East German writers. These authors had felt a duty to serve as moral beacons for their readers but remained subject to the regime's standards of acceptability. Wolf's narrative reveals the consequences of authors' inability to reconcile these obligations. Through the motif of otherness, Wolf demonstrates the various forms of alienation writers faced as a result of these irresolvable tensions.

A number of scholars concur in asserting that the German intelligentsia has traditionally been tasked with parsing the complexities of life and serving as moral leaders. Literary scholar Robert von Hallberg observes that the works of GDR authors such as Wolf might have enabled contemporary readers to "[become aware of] contradictions of which they were not yet fully conscious in their own lives," to "feel consoled to read that others had similar difficulties," and to "expand the range of political discussion in the public sphere."¹ Similarly, historian Michael Geyer posits that "[i]n the German system of checks and balances, culture ascertained moral justice. The control of intellectuals over the sphere of culture guaranteed not just the reign of good taste but social betterment and *Bildung*."² Geyer identifies a tendency among Germans to entrust cultural authorities



THE AUTHOR CHRISTA WOLF DURING A BOOK READING IN BERLIN, 2007 (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

with the responsibility of helping them navigate the world. Scholars and GDR writers alike shared this understanding of literature as having both cultural and social significance. Wolf herself stated, "[p]eople needed me. [...] People needed something to give them strength."³ This presumption of importance, which was perhaps reasonable given the great anticipation and remarkable sales of their works,⁴ caused GDR writers to be acutely aware of their perceived duties to provide emotional support and moral direction to their public.

This authorial sense of duty manifests itself not only in the psyche of the GDR author, but also in his or her works, as evidenced in *What Remains* by a pattern of references to the narrator's role as a writer. The narrator states that "if there was one ethic I held to, it was the work ethic, not least because it seemed to be capable of balancing out inconsistencies in other ethical systems."⁵ The protagonist's conviction reveals Wolf's own assessment of her function in the GDR: that through her work she could ameliorate ethical shortcomings by providing moral guidance to her readers. Subsequently, upon seeing that the Berliner Ensemble was performing Galileo, the narrator reflects that "this was a play from the time when purified dialectics still counted for something, [...] when there was a reason for speaking the 'truth' and it was evil to suppress it; it was evil not to speak of the nasty lie which was harmful and gave the liar a bad conscience."⁶ The narrator hearkens back to a time of clearly-defined dichotomies, implicitly contrasting it with her current lack of clarity regarding right and wrong, true and false, good and evil. The diarist's moral muddle reflects Wolf's own position as an author who found herself unable to provide guidance to her readers with the simplicity with which she imagined her forebears, such as Brecht, performed this task. Wolf's consciousness of her perceived moral obligations manifests itself in this text, but circumstances that limit her ability to fulfill these obligations also appear.

The obstacle that impaired writers' ability to exercise moral authority was the hulking threat of state scrutiny. As evidenced both by Wolf's depiction of the Ministry for State Security (MfS or Stasi) in her text and by historical data, the shadow of surveillance loomed large over GDR writers. If anything, it was perhaps GDR authors' moral purview that made them especially obvious surveillance targets. Joseph Stalin referred to writers as "Ingenieur[e] der menschlichen Seele,"⁷ (engineers of the human soul) and leaders in the GDR shared his understanding of the potential power authors might wield. Therefore, as scholars Paul

Cooke and Andrew Plowman assert, “[f]rom the early days of the GDR, writers were seen as a crucial weapon in the state’s propaganda arsenal [...] who would help to educate the masses in the ways of socialism.”⁸

Cultivating cooperation with authors was critical to the SED regime for purposes of promoting socialist values, encouraging citizen contentment, and improving the GDR’s reputation abroad. Historian Mike Dennis explains that the Stasi’s tactics of *Zersetzung* (corrosion) as laid out in Ministerial guideline 1/76 directed that “‘hostile-negative forces’ were to be ‘paralysed, disorganized and isolated’ and their activities ‘prevented, significantly reduced or completely terminated.’”⁹ The Stasi employed a number of strategies to this end, including spreading injurious rumors about their targets, engineering setbacks for them, and intimidating them through phone calls and letters.¹⁰ They also employed comprehensive surveillance techniques, including tapping phones, searching residences, and reading correspondence,¹¹ all methods which appear in Wolf’s text.¹² This degree of extremely insidious surveillance, impeded the expression of subversive views.

Intellectuals were particularly restrained, as they were subject to especially close watch. Starting in 1969, an entire branch of the MfS (*Hauptabteilung XX*) was devoted to cultural surveillance, and there were a significant number of *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IMs) in this department.¹³ Wolf herself was subject to surveillance as the target of *Operativen Vorgang (OV)* (unofficial employee) “*Doppelzüngler*” (operation “Double tongue”) from 1969 on.¹⁴ The high degree of surveillance created an environment in which writers had to be constantly wary of their behavior to avoid trouble with the Stasi. A need to be on good terms with the regime, asserts scholar David Bathrick, prevented writers from

Calling for modes of reform that lay outside or at ideological variance with the normative discourse of socialist institutional life: for the abolition of censorship, for a multiparty system, for a genuinely representative parliament, for total freedom of speech.¹⁵

These and similar taboos severely inhibited authors’ ability to provide meaningful moral judgments in their writings for fear of invoking the wrath of the state.

The effects of Stasi presence in preventing intellectuals from realizing their moral authority are evident in the texts produced by writers living in fear of surveillance. Through-

out *What Remains*, surveillance is depicted as a counterforce to the narrator’s moral authority. Contemplating the difficulties of living under the Stasi, she muses, “we are all trapeze artists.”¹⁶ Writers in the GDR had to attempt a balancing act between upholding their moral obligations and avoiding trouble with the Stasi, knowing that they risked falling into either the rapacious jaws of the MfS or the pits of self-betrayal and public scorn. The protagonist imagines developing a new language, reflecting,

My other language [. . .] would stop describing objects by their appearance [. . .] and would increasingly allow their invisible essence to emerge. This language would be gripping, loving, and protective, that much I thought I could foresee. I would hurt no one but myself.¹⁷

The narrator dreams of being able to express herself fully and without endangering others, likely mirroring Wolf’s own desires in the face of oppression that prevented her from airing criticisms that might have resulted in negative consequence for herself and for her loved ones. Ultimately, the narrator, imagining her former friend Jürgen as the embodiment of the Stasi, concludes, “since his objects are made of flesh and blood and do not exist only on paper, like my own, *he* is the actual master, the real lord.”¹⁸ She finds that she must surrender her moral power because of the very real threat of persecution by the Stasi, demonstrating how the GDR writer became subservient to the forces of state surveillance.

The conflict between state surveillance and the author’s moral jurisdiction is evident in Wolf’s treatment of otherness. Throughout the novella, the narrator refers to the Stasi and the SED regime in terms of “the other,” indicating the negative effects surveillance has had on her. At one point, she describes the agents who are watching her as “messengers of the other.”¹⁹ It is clear from her discourse of otherness, which casts herself in opposition to the Stasi and the GDR government, that the narrator views these agents as opponents rather than allies. The narrator subsequently reflects that “the measures taken by the others and our reactions to them meshed together like the teeth of a smoothly functioning zipper.”²⁰ Wolf’s language here conveys an atmosphere of ever-present hostility, in which she must constantly be on her guard in the face of state surveillance. In this way, the use of otherness in relation to the state reveals the dynamic of apprehension and unease that plagued GDR authors as a result of surveillance, impairing their exercise of moral authority.

“The use of otherness in relation to the state reveals the dynamic of apprehension and unease that plagued GDR authors as a result of surveillance, impairing their exercise of moral authority.”

The narrator also senses a specter of “otherness” haunting her relationship with fellow GDR citizens as a result of the surveillance to which she is subjected, which further isolates her. When the narrator sees Jürgen M. in the department store, he does not acknowledge her, and she admits that she is accustomed to “the curtain lowering before the eyes of the other.”²¹ The surveillance creates divisions between the narrator and those with whom she had previously been friends; awareness of the regime’s suspicion of her, she presumes, is responsible for Jürgen M.’s snub. The fact that she is being watched creates a rift between the narrator and her old friends, for whom the surveillance and the accompanying threat of association with a subversive renders it advantageous not to know her. She is cut off from both her friends and from the general public: while standing in line at the grocery store, she notes that “that strong, isolating feeling of otherness would not go away.”²² She believes that rumors of surveillance cause her to appear “other” to citizens. Thus, the surveillance that inhibits her moral authority also isolates her from the people whom she otherwise would have guided: an ironic effect of the socialist regime considering its collectivist values.

The narrator’s level of success, however, affects her position as a moral leader, casting her as other even from those with whom she would presumably be able to commiserate: fellow writers. This is demonstrated in the case of the young poet who seeks her advice regarding his work; although the narrator does not explicitly use the terminology of otherness in his case, she clearly senses such a division between them. She writes, “[t]he young gentlemen standing in front of my door would not hesitate to pass through his door. That was the difference between the two of us—a major difference. A moat.”²³ The narrator’s prominence as a popular writer renders her distinct from the young poet, because her eminence gives her some degree of power in relations with the Stasi: while she dare not openly defy the regime, the Stasi dare not persecute her in the same way they would an unknown subversive. While the Stasi agents might “hesitate” at her door, they are ultimately willing to

exert their authority over her, as demonstrated by the surveillance and intimidation tactics the protagonist describes. In this way, the very popularity that would have granted the narrator the ability to reach a large audience and effectively propagate a model of ethics contributes to the overwhelming isolation she feels even from other intellectuals. Her fame, however, is not so great a force as to make her immune to the risks of defying the state.

The divergent pressures of surveillance and morality render the narrator isolated from everyone in her society, and her inability to reconcile this tension creates a constant internal conflict that culminates in a process of self-othering and self-alienation. In one of her internal monologues, the narrator interrogates herself, writing,

I myself. Who was that? Which of the multiple beings from which ‘myself’ was composed? The one that wanted to know itself? The one that wanted to protect itself? Or that third one that was still tempted to dance to the same tune as the young gentlemen there outside my door?²⁴

The oppressive surveillance fractures the narrator into three different personas, leading her to be detached from her identity as a whole and conscious only of these existing pulls within her: to seek truth, to keep her head down, and to cooperate with the Stasi. Her self-alienation results from the conflicting desires she experiences living under surveillance and is embodied by her self-censor: she observes that “[t]here was hardly anything left to think or say without getting my censor upset at me.”²⁵ The voice of the censor expresses the narrator’s internal conflict that results from the self-fragmentation that occurs in life under surveillance, in which the cautious voice of self-preservation must silence the persistent voice of morality. This continuous state of conflict in which she resides alienates the protagonist from her own identity, reducing her to conflicting voices. The narrator observes at one point that “[i]t is a happy man who can place his enemy outside himself.”²⁶ Life in a surveillance state has caused the narrator

to become her own enemy, constantly engaging in a battle of wills with herself over whether to defy the Stasi or submit to them, whether to take a moral stand or protect herself and those she loves. Through this self-alienation, Wolf depicts the perpetual internal division produced by the competing pressures that beset GDR writers.

Wolf's use of otherness in *What Remains* spells out the conflict between moral duty and submission to the state experienced by authors in the GDR. The competing pressures felt by the narrator culminate in a condition of alienation from all people, including herself, which is representative of the condition of GDR authors at large. Based on an understanding of the author in the GDR as a moral guide, the SED regime's surveillance of intellectuals arguably resulted in much larger-scale oppression than affected only those who were under watch. The restrictions on authors resulted in a body of writing that tread softly around certain potential subversive topics, thereby undermining the consciences of all those who turned to literature for guidance.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert von Hallberg, introduction to *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State: Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR*, trans. Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 8.
2. Michael Geyer, introduction to *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1-2.
3. Quoted in Katie Hafner, "A Nation of Readers Dumps Its Writers," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/10/magazine/a-nation-of-readers-dumps-its-writers.html>, 2.
4. *Ibid.*, 1.
5. Christa Wolf, "What Remains," in *What Remains and Other Stories*, trans. Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993), 243.
6. *Ibid.*, 245.
7. Quoted in Paul Cooke and Andrew Plowman, introduction to *German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xv.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mike Dennis, "The East German Ministry of State Security and East German Society during the Honecker Era, 1971-1989," in *German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*, ed. Paul Cooke and Andrew Plowman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 6.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
12. See, for example, Wolf, *What Remains*, 242-43, 265.
13. Dennis, "The East German Ministry of State Security," 16-17.
14. Wolfgang Emerich, "Autobiographical Writing in Three Generations of a GDR Family: Christa Wolf — Annette Simon — Jana Simon," in *Twenty Years On: Competing Memories of the GDR in Postunification German Culture*, ed. Renate Rechten and Dennis Tate (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 145, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.bc.edu/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1x72d3.14>.
15. David Bathrick, "Language and Power," in *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, ed. Michael Geyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 154-55.
16. Wolf, *What Remains*, 264.
17. *Ibid.*, 236.
18. *Ibid.*, 259.
19. *Ibid.*, 239.
20. *Ibid.*, 244.
21. *Ibid.*, 251.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 261.
24. *Ibid.*, 262.
25. *Ibid.*, 267.
26. *Ibid.*, 237.

REFERENCES

Bathrick, David. "Language and Power." In *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, edited by Michael Geyer, 138-159. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Cooke, Paul and Andrew Plowman. *Introduction to German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 10.1057/9781403938756

Dennis, Mike. "The East German Ministry of State Security and East German Society during the Honecker Era, 1971-1989." In *German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*, edited by Paul Cooke and Andrew Plowman, 3-21. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 10.1057/9781403938756_1

Emmerich, Wolfgang. "Autobiographical Writing in Three Generations of a GDR Family: Christa Wolf — Annette Simon — Jana Simon." In *Twenty Years On: Competing Memories of the GDR in Postunification German Culture*, edited by Renate Rechtien and Dennis Tate, 141-57. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2011. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.bc.edu/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1x72d3.14>.

Geyer, Michael. *Introduction to The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Hafner, Katie. "A Nation of Readers Dumps Its Writers." *The New York Times*. January 10, 1993. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/10/magazine/a-nation-of-readers-dumps-its-writers.html?pagewanted=2>.

von Hallberg, Robert. *Introduction to Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State: Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR*. Translated by Kenneth J. Northcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Wolf, Christa. *What Remains*. In *What Remains and Other Stories*, translated by Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian, 231-295. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993.