

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Christa Wolf (1927-2011)

Introduction

The author of this text and the woman sought for in this text are both Christa. Is the author in search of herself, or is the T., added to Christa in the novel's title, a code for the difference of the author from the character she seeks?

A mystery cloaks this powerful book, and the mystery covers at least the suspicion that we are dealing, here, with a subtle form of autobiography. There seems little doubt that the eminent East German novelist, Christa Wolf, is in the present book looking for herself, and in the course of that looking constructing a vehicle for free discourse about herself and her society, a then closed East German Communist society in which criticism was dangerous; a state which she knew from the inside, having lived in it as an informer, and for decades as an informed on, citizen. Such, at least, is a plausible view of this autobiography, published in 1967 as the DDR was enforcing its strength and wary of its critics. Such is a plausible reason for this author's lifetime preoccupation—she was born into Nazi Germany, lived her adult life as a member of the Communist Party—with discovering who she is and what she believes in, in a world full of hotly and dangerously disputing view points.

Autobiography has been born from many motivations, throughout this syllabus. But isn't search for the self a consistent drive, as we rethink the motives for the texts read in this course? Isn't that what we find in the life writings of Herder, Goethe, Moritz, Bismarck? Answering yes will simplify our attempt at a unified shape for this course, but won't it be an empty simplification, to remain with the notion of the 'search for the self?' We have already discussed the fine line that distinguishes the self-presentation of the novelist from that of the autobiographer, and now we make our classification harder, by admitting a wide diversity of texts into the category of the autobiography. Well, let's see if *in fact* our autobiographers are seeking their selves. Herder is looking for an escape from the imprisoning teaching job he is locked into in Riga, shut off from the larger world—of nature, history, art—which is being parochially closed to him. Herder is a young man looking for the world, that is himself. Goethe, in *Werther*, may down deep have been working to purge from himself a suicidal inclination, from which the book's huge success effectively cleared him—leaving to other young men the burden of following in Werther's fatal footsteps. Bismarck wrote his *Reminiscences* as an aging and retired statesman, of worldwide renown but considerable inward dissatisfaction, and we have to guess at his 'motive.' He wanted to come to terms with his life, to be even with himself—and to share jocose reminiscences of what an engaging presence he was. Shall we say that the foregoing are all 'seeking themselves'? With some truth we *can* say that, if we take the 'seeking oneself' loosely, and contrast the autobiographer's effort at discovery with the other kind of discovery--native to the fiction writer or poet--for whom discovery is 'discovery in the imagination,' rather than discovery of the 'real world.'

Readings: Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*; trans. Christopher Middleton. (New York, 1968).

Questions:

1. Is Christa Wolf Christa T? Is the author in search of herself? Why the letter T, then?
2. Is this text a political one, at the same time that it tries to penetrate the mind and life of a single individual? If so, what is the viewpoint of the narrator toward the polity she lives in?
3. To what is due the gradual decline of Christa T? Does her illness have its roots in her own failures or in those of the society around her? What is the problem with that society?