

Between Female Dialogics and Traces of Essentialism: Gender and Warfare in Christa Wolf's Major Writings

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Recent feminist scholarship has sought to alter our conceptions of subjectivity, gender, and what was recently referred to as the "technologies of sex," or the "technologies of gender," i.e., those mechanisms that determine who we are and what we do in this world (see Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 3, Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*). What was long believed to be valid for the process of both male and female individuation—namely that subjective identity was achieved by separating oneself from other selves and defining one's ego in opposition to other egos—is now being replaced by new feminist models that stress the formative moment of intersubjectivity and reciprocity deriving from our interaction with the world and other beings. According to feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, for example, we strive to achieve a balance of separateness and connectedness, thus trying to differentiate ourselves from others while simultaneously recognizing the presence of other voices in our psyche: "We argue that individuality is properly, ideally, a balance of separation and connectedness, of the capacities for agency and relatedness. We rely on infancy research that suggests that the self does not proceed from oneness to separateness, but evolves by simultaneously differentiating and recognizing the other, by alternating between 'being with' and being distinct. . . . We maintain that the vital issue is whether the mother herself is able to recognize the child's subjectivity, and later whether the child can recognize the mother. Thus, we dispute the necessity of the patriarchal mode of separation" (Benjamin 82). As opposed to the old Freudian model of ego-development, this new and more open form of (female) identity relies on the notion of mutual reciprocity, recognizing the fact that it is more important to enter into a dialogue than to stress emphatically the differences between subjects.

These ideas are based on Nancy Chodorow's groundbreaking research into the function of object relations for the female oedipal configuration. She claims that "the feminine oedipus complex is not simply a transfer of affection from mother to father and a giving up of mother. Rather, psychoanalytical research demonstrates the continued importance of a girl's external and internal relation to her mother, and the way her relation to her father is added to this. This process entails a

relational complexity in feminine self-definition and personality which is not characteristic of masculine self-definition or personality. Relational capacities that are curtailed in boys as a result of the masculine oedipus complex are sustained in girls. Because of their mothering by women, girls come to experience themselves as less separate than boys, as having more permeable ego boundaries" (Chodorow 92-93). Hence the psychoanalytical research consulted by Chodorow suggests that women have a greater tendency toward boundary confusion and feel a lack of separation from others and the world, with the result that "women, more than men, will be more open and preoccupied with those very relational issues that go into mothering—feelings of primary identification, lack of separateness or differentiation, ego and body-ego boundary issues and primary love not under the sway of the reality principle" (Chodorow 110). In contrast to the male identity principle, which relies on the affirmation of homogeneity and thus a fear of difference, "the woman's relational ego leads her to define identity in relation to others, or, in other words, in relation to what she is not. . . . Women's 'identity' is not really one, not really self-identical, but seeks fulfillment through the loss of an essential oneness" (Rabine 18-19). In addition to an emphasis on intersubjectivity and mutual reciprocity, recent feminist scholarship has pointed to an essential difference in make-up between male and female identity *maintenance*: women, who, according to this theory, display more flexible ego-boundaries than men, deal very differently and less violently with central operations of ego-maintenance, such as memory and writing (see Gardiner 182; Lauretis, "Introduction" 9).

The relationship between memory, writing, and the question of how we define ourselves as gendered subjects is at the center of Christa Wolf's work. Her literary production, starting in the late fifties with a rather naive and un-selfconscious love story, has undergone a dramatic shift. In her more recent texts, Wolf sets out to rewrite classical mythology to make us aware of those intersections in the history of Western civilization at which women were made economically and psychologically into objects. The present essay seeks to locate Christa Wolf's evolving conception of gender and warfare within the contemporary theoretical discussion of identity and the subject sketched briefly above. While of late there has been a wealth of studies into the construction of gender in particular works by Wolf, no scholarly contribution has yet addressed the range of answers regarding those questions in her overall oeuvre. I will argue that whereas Wolf's earlier works present a dialogic conception of gender, her later narratives more and more expound a notion of the essentially more peaceful female subject that is counterposed to the essentially

warloving male. In these works "female subjectivity is taken to be capable of articulating itself fully in its radical otherness outside of male discourse" (Lennox, "Trends in Literary Theory" 64), which seems to support ideas of an ontological essence of "woman" (see Ecker 15).

The discourse of philosophy has seen a similar revision of key positions on subjectivity and gender in the past, especially in the context of the critical philosophy of Marxism and the older Frankfurt School. Critics like Louis Althusser, or, more recently, Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, Peter Dews, and John Smith all point to the need of rewriting our traditional philosophical conception of subjectivity. Idealist philosophers such as Kant and Hegel conceived of the subject as an agent that intervenes in the world and shapes it according to its own will. This idealist subject produced itself by way of endless reflection in the mirror of identity. The German philosopher Manfred Frank claims that it was "Schelling who first systematically raised this objection to Hegel's attempt at subsuming allegedly heteronomous 'Being' into the autonomous play of 'reflection.' . . . Schelling claimed that Hegel's attempt at founding self-consciousness as the result of a reflection does not have at its disposal any criterion for the *knowledge* (*Gewußtsein*) of the identity of the related elements; rather it simply presupposes this identity" (Frank 276). Recent critics of the Hegelian position have pointed to the need for a readjustment of this theory; in accord with the feminist psychoanalysts cited above, they demand that the subject no longer be conceived as reflective and self-conscious agent, but as a *network* of intersubjective relations that guarantee recognition of the self and, at the same time, respond to demands of others: "Communication is not simply a matter of the transferral of identical meanings from one consciousness to another, but involves the simultaneous maintenance of the distinct identities of—in other words: the non-identity between—the partners in communication. . . . Accordingly, only in the sustained non-identity of a successful communication can the individual construct a precarious ego-identity, and protect against the risks both of reification and of formlessness" (Dews 224). The subject is no longer the sole source of meaningful change, nor is it a pure effect of ideological processes, as some poststructuralist thinkers would have us believe (see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 209); it is rather a combination of both. It is passive insofar it is interpellated by ideology, but active in that it also serves as an agent in the formation of social processes. Via Althusser and Lacan, Smith defines subjectivity as "a complicated articulation of different moments or instances, . . . a kind of process of production in the symbolic order" (Smith 21). Subjectivity thus comes to be associated not only with identity and sameness, but also with contradiction; it is a site,

in other words, at which different positions are negotiated to form different individual resolutions and histories (see Wilke 28).

Christa Wolf has called her project an "aesthetics of resistance." We have yet to determine what exactly she means by this term and whether or not it is a useful concept (see Hilzinger, "Weibliches Schreiben als eine Ästhetik des Widerstands" 85; Kuhn, "Christa Wolfs *Kassandra*" 135; Cramer 121). For the moment, let me attempt a provisional sketch of its significance in Wolf's work and for the theoretical context established by the psychoanalytical and philosophical critiques of identity and subjectivity. In her treatment of her protagonists' struggles for identity, Wolf attempts to integrate—at least aesthetically—different moments of subjectivity into a truly heterogeneous model of female gender that displays a more flexible organization of identity on a psychological level and a new synthesis of identity and difference on a philosophical level. Her narratives seek to construct a space for female (de-oedipalized) desire as it was formulated by feminist psychoanalysis. Wolf's study of female relationships changes over the course of her writing, however, from the complex relational structure characterizing the relationship between narrator and protagonist in *The Quest for Christa T.*, to the portrayal of the dangers of unstable gender roles in "Self-Experiment" and *No Place on Earth*, and, finally to the propositions about the history of civilization and female mythology in *Cassandra* that inform many of her statements about gender and warfare in her later work.

The novel *The Quest for Christa T.* marks Wolf's literary and critical breakthrough, although it was met with severe criticism by some East German reviewers when it first appeared. Essentially drafted in 1965, Wolf read parts of it on East Berlin radio in 1966 and finished revising the manuscript in 1967. In 1968 excerpts of the newly revised manuscript appeared in print in various East German and West German journals and the novel itself was finally issued in a very small circulation. Not until 1973, in conjunction with the resolutions passed at the East German writers congress, was it possible to re-issue the work in greater numbers. One might ask, from today's perspective, why this novel did not conform with the official cultural-political dogma of the time. After all, it does not make statements about politics directly, but rather focuses on such seemingly nonpolitical themes as memory, subjectivity, and death. In fact, the book's motto is "This coming-to-onself—what is it?", and it tells the story of the narrator's (re)construction of the life of her deceased friend Christa T. from various sources and her own memories. It is this relationship between the narrator and her friend that is at the center of our attention (see Clausen 319). The narrator defines her position as the one

responsible for putting the material together and casts her observations in terms of a visual and cinematic trope: "But all the time I know that it's a film of shadows being run off the reel, a film that was once projected in the real light of cities, landscapes, living rooms" (*Quest* 4). Here we are witnessing an interesting process, as memory seems to lead not to the (re)creation of Christa T.'s real self, but to the construction of a visual effect that situates her as silent spectator rather than as speaker (see Love 31; Chicora 16; Herrmann, "The Transsexual as Anders" 51).

As an example for such a speculative relationship between these two women, we might look at the diary where nothing is neatly characterized and put into categories (see Herrmann, "I/She" 257). The narrator, for example, fills in a lot of blanks in Christa T.'s life by reading between the lines of her diary and ignoring her own (as she calls them) deceptive memories. As a matter of fact, the narrator makes a point of acknowledging her awareness of the potentially violent role of narrative procedures, a practice from which she is trying to abstain:

It's not against oblivion that she must be protected, but against being forgotten. For she, naturally, forgets; she has forgotten herself, us, heaven and earth, rain and snow. But I can still see her. Worse, *I can do what I like with her*. I can summon her up quite easily with a quotation, more than I could do for most living people. She moves, if I want her to. Effortlessly she walks before me, yes, that's her long stride, her shambling walk. (*Quest* 4; emphasis mine)

In order to avoid this inherent possibility for violence in the structure of the narrative, the narrator grounds her function in a moral pose of subjective authenticity which is supposed to guarantee her truthfulness, itself grounded in the dialogic nature of her relationship with Christa T. One expression of this subjective authenticity is their intimacy, which, to be sure, was not apparent when they first met in high school, but was established only at their later reunion as fellow students of German at the University of Leipzig. In an extensive passage in the third chapter, the narrator outlines their first day together in the lecture halls of Leipzig University, how they recognized each other, and what this "re-union" meant for both of them:

Vagueness? The word may seem strange. The years we'd have had to talk about had been precise and sharp enough. *But to make the precise and sharp cut-off separating "ourselves" from "the others," once and for all, that would save us*. And secretly to know: the cut-off very nearly never came, because we ourselves might well

have become otherwise. *But how does one cut oneself away from oneself?* We didn't speak of that. But she knew it, Christa T., when she walked beside me across the windy squares, or else we'd have had nothing to say. Her quick look, when we mentioned our teacher's death—a hard and distant death—proved one thing to me: she knew what it is, this innocence that comes from not being mature. (*Quest* 27, emphasis mine)

In this passage Wolf takes issue with the traditional psychoanalytical and philosophical models of individuation as separation from Otherness (see Nägele 248). It is precisely the two women's incapacity and unwillingness to separate themselves sharply from others in the process of individuation that is addressed in this passage: "the cut off very nearly never came, because we ourselves might well have become otherwise." Christa T. and the narrator, as a result, have preserved that presence of the other within themselves which makes them more open to a close and intimate relationship. Wolf here celebrates an understanding and caring relationship between two women and sharply juxtaposes it to Christa T.'s relationship with men. This text portrays men mostly in relation to violence and brutality, in what Wolf perceives as an essentially male logic of identity and difference.

The first example I would like to discuss is taken from a section entitled "Love in the Summertime," as Christa T. likes to refer to the summer she spent in the country before making the decision to leave for Leipzig and attend the university. Her male friend, on the other hand, has made his peace with living in a small village and playing the role of the village school teacher. In their last conversation, Christa T. notes that his favorite word is "completely." Here is the crucial exchange that occurs before they go their separate ways:

Show me your hands, she says.

He simply does so. Either you've had a very bad time, he says, or else it was nothing.

Very bad, she says. It was nothing. (*Quest* 40)

We are witnessing an exchange that operates on different levels. Christa T. is simply not prepared to agree with the exclusionary and binary logic of the either/or; she recognizes it as a false alternative. For her, these two possibilities need not be mutually exclusive. Wolf will elaborate on this in her lectures on the narrative *Cassandra*, where she makes the claim that the binary structure of male logic is forced upon the different operation

of the female brain (see Keller 151). Let me quote another passage in which this point is highlighted:

Blue! he shouts in despair. My old shirt! If I'd known, I'd have put a completely different . . .

Completely is your favorite word, isn't it? Christa T. asks.

You're the only person who asks questions like that, he says, quietly and bitterly. I've noticed it: you don't like things to be completely right and completely in order.

You're wrong there, she says gravely. I'd have liked it a lot if I'd ever found it anywhere. (*Quest* 38-39)

His straightforward way of constructing his life is opposed to Christa T.'s desire to try out various possibilities and lifestyles, never being satisfied with a situation as it is.

In her diaries, Christa T. furthermore relates what she refers to as "The Toad Story." In this recollection, she and her students are helping out in the farm fields of their village when suddenly one of the boys challenges the others to a bet; he is ready to bite off a toad's head in exchange for money: "Naturally it's nonsense," thinks Christa T., "he's only talking, he won't do it, but *all the boys have eager looks on their faces*" (*Quest* 108; emphasis mine). A second boy comes up and jacks up the price of the bids by offering to bite the toad's head off himself. Christa T. recounts his action in this horrible scene:

Christa T., the teacher, sees his healthy dazzling white teeth bite, once, and again. The toad's head is still firmly attached.

Then the black tomcat smashes against the stable wall, the magpie's eggs splinter against the rock, and again the snow is brushed away from the small rigid face. The teeth bite once more.

It doesn't stop.

Christa T. feels the chill rising up her spine, reaching her head. She turns her head, walks away. It isn't disgust she feels, but sorrow. Later, too, tears run down her face, she crouches by the pathway and weeps. (*Quest* 109)

Her tears are not directed at the poor toad, but rather at the inherent violence of the incident. And there can be no doubt as to the gendered nature of this violence. The scene evokes for her an incident from her childhood in which a farmer brutally "comes out with a tomcat, has

grabbed him, cursing and swearing, as he flings him against the stable wall. Now you know how it sounds when bones crack, when something alive a moment ago drops to the ground" (*Quest* 20). This incident must have left a strong impression on Wolf, since she repeats it again in her story "Blickwechsel" as well as in the autobiographical narrative *Patterns of Childhood*. However, in the literary treatment of the toad story, Christa T. transmutes this violence into a positive force and invents a happy ending by imagining the remorseful student lying in the hay and crying his eyes out afterwards.

Before looking at Wolf's treatment of gender and its relationship to violence and warfare in *No Place on Earth*, I would like to insert a discussion of a smaller narrative text which, I believe, functions as the junction for the negotiations between different models of gender. I am thinking of "Self-Experiment: Appendix to a Report," which first appeared in 1973. The narrator/scientist tells her own story of having agreed to a scientific experiment to transform herself into a man ("Anders," which means "Other") by a series of hormonal injections. At the beginning of the three-month trial period, she dutifully records her experiences and tests in an official report; but she ultimately decides to amend this document by adding subjective reflections about the nature of the experiment. What is documented in this appendix is her gradually rising awareness of what it means to be male and the differences in expectation that come with this new role. According to Anne Herrmann, "Wolf reverses the terms of sexual difference by locating the ideal not in the feminine, which arouses desire, but in the masculine, which seeks to suppress it" ("The Transsexual as Anders" 50). Her exposure to male patterns of thinking turns into a critique of their tendency to exactness, correctness, and one-dimensionality at the expense of sensitivity. In the end the scientist rejects all those values that the career woman in her had accepted unquestionably up to that point (see Chiarloni 239; Neumann 68).

The experiment itself, however, is quite successful from a scientific standpoint. Her/his test results are satisfactory; the data are correct. At one point, for example, Anders shows a remarkable loss of spontaneity on the occasion of a series of tests:

Loss of spontaneity was an adequate explanation for my longer reaction times: Ought I answer as a woman? as a man? And if as a man, then how, for heaven's sake? So that in the end I didn't say 'love' in response to 'red,' as I always had before, but 'rage.' ("Self-Experiment" 119)

This increase in violence that Anders experiences is parallel to a growing need for distance and the security of hard facts and statistics. Viewed with hindsight she feels that it had cost her “years of [her] life *learning to submit to that way of thinking* where the greatest virtues are non-involvement and impassivity. At present I’m having difficulty regaining access to all those buried regions inside me” (“Self-Experiment” 121-22; emphasis mine). There remains, however, the narrator’s memory of her “original” female identity which will eventually cause her to break off the experiment early and return to her former role. As Herrmann puts it: “A return to one’s original sex (the feminine) means not preserving sexual difference but preserving the possibility of a different relationship to language, meaning, and power” (“The Transsexual as Anders” 54).

The awareness of an authentic female relationship to language, meaning, and power which lies at the bottom of all levels of culture differentiates Christa Wolf’s theory of gender from that of Ingeborg Bachmann and many other contemporary writers (see Lennox, “Christa Wolf and Ingeborg Bachmann” 128; Weigel, “Vom Sehen zur Seherin” 169; Ozer 81). According to Wolf, there is this level of authenticity beneath all (male) projections of female gender and sexuality which, to be sure, has to be uncovered through distinct archaeological effort, but nevertheless exists and can be recalled as a last resort. In this story, for example, the narrator gains access to this authentic level of female identity via linguistic reflection on the origin and meaning of words: “the words *menschlich* and *männlich*, ‘humane’ and ‘manly,’ derived from the same root in our language, drifted irretrievably far apart from one another” (“Self-Experiment” 123). We have to assume, in other words, that there is this uncorrupted layer of language which, in patriarchal culture and civilization, becomes reified and turns into a self-destructive weapon. Women, however, as victims of a long process of suppression, have—in Wolf’s account—somehow preserved a hidden knowledge of this authenticity beneath all the ascribed roles. In contradistinction to Anne Herrmann’s analysis of this story in terms of gender construction, I do not believe that Wolf undoes the concept of gender as epistemological category, but that she reinscribes it as quasi-ontological structure of authenticity that occurs *prior to* the processes of cultural inscription (see Herrmann, “The Transsexual as Anders” 46). A similar reconstruction of an ontological essence of femaleness within German feminist writing is achieved by Verena Stefan in her narrative *Sheddings*, in which the protagonist gradually rids herself of outer layers of skin only to uncover an authentic level of identity underneath. Other writers such as Ingeborg Bachmann and Elfriede Jelinek, however, show in their texts that there really is nothing behind the mirror into which their female protagonists

look. Both the first person narrator in Bachmann's novel *Malina* as well as Erika Kohut in Jelinek's *The Piano Player* see nothing but refractions of the self in that mirror.

This theme of authentic female identity is further developed in Wolf's imagined (re)construction of a meeting between two Romantic poets, Heinrich von Kleist and Karoline von Günderrode, in *No Place on Earth* (1979). This text problematizes the construction of identity and gender insofar as it presents two people who unsuccessfully struggle with the culturally prescribed process of individuation as objectification (see Waldstein 181). Wolf's sympathy, however, seems to rest with one of the minor figures in the narrative, the very young and energetic Bettina Brentano who will later become Bettina von Arnim. In an essay published in the same year as this narrative, Wolf applauds Bettina's more radical refusal to accept the prescribed forms of female behavior and aesthetic expression, as opposed to Günderrode's tamer version of orienting herself and her writings around the male poetological standard (see Wolf "Nun ja!" 310; Lennox, "Nun ja!" 22). As in "Self-Experiment," Wolf formulates a critique of that type of woman who unquestionably accepts the standards of society, a society that excludes the female perspective.

The thematic of identity is addressed in one of the epigraphs taken from Günderrode's correspondence: "But for this reason I fancy that I am seeing myself lying in the coffin, and my two selves stare at each other in wonderment" (*No Place* 1). The question arises: What is the difference between her authentic self and projections of herself by the world around her, which she has also in part internalized? Günderrode elaborates on this very distinction later in the text:

How fortunate that our thoughts do not dance in visible letters above our heads! If they did, any contact between human beings, even a harmless social gathering such as this, could easily become a convocation of murderers. Or we might learn to rise above ourselves, to gaze without hatred into the distorting mirrors which other people represent to us. And without feeling any impulse to shatter the mirrors. But she knows that we are not made that way. (*No Place* 8)

This knowledge of her authentic self which is entirely different from societal projections, however, is firmly locked inside her and only finds release in her writings. The narrator comments on this through the voice of Bettina: "Bettina, fond as she is of her, will never for so much as a moment divine what pain, what renunciation her friend has resolutely locked inside her" (*No Place* 15). This build-up of pain will, in fact, eventually cause Günderrode to commit suicide.

The narrative commences at an afternoon tea party at the country estate of the merchant Joseph Merten. Among those attending the party are, aside from Kleist and Günderröde, the poet Clemens Brentano with his sister Bettina and his young wife Sophie Mereau, the scientist Esenbeck with his wife, Kleist's doctor, Wedekind, Professor Savigny and his wife Gunda Brentano, among others. The first part consists of two interior monologues, Kleist's and Günderröde's, both of whom reflect on the party and its various guests, their own position within that context, their past lives and future writings. Kleist just recently recovered from a severe nervous breakdown after his decision to leave his military career and thus break with a long tradition upheld by his Prussian family. He had also just recently dissolved his engagement to his fiancée, as well as destroyed the manuscript of a drama about Napoleon, whom he hated passionately. His figure will serve as a study for Wolf's problematization of gender and warfare, which are the parameters in which she situates Kleist. In the figure of Kleist there prevails a strong tendency toward self-destruction, which shows more openly than in the case of Günderröde, who, as a woman, has acquired a number of different strategies for overcoming her limitation to a specified role. Kleist, who is haunted by these never-ending monologues inside his head, tries to suppress them "with iron discipline as he has trained himself to do" (*No Place* 10). Wedekind warns him about this, to his mind, dangerous proclivity for self-reflection. In a recurring nightmare, Kleist phantasizes about a shaggy beast which he tries to mount and subdue, but which he can never succeed in reaching (*No Place* 28). Wedekind gives him the choice "either to systematically annihilate in himself that consuming dissatisfaction which is the best thing in him, or to give free rein to it and be destroyed by his temporal misery" (*No Place* 29). That Kleist is always at the verge of collapse is indicated not only by his speech impediment, but also by outbursts of potentially uncontrollable laughter, which seem to punctuate and disrupt his discourse. He is incapable of accommodating himself to this existing order. Kleist criticizes the interrelationship of military organization which glorifies performance, efficiency, and results and a blind belief in economic performance and technological efficiency. In a discussion of the role of science in the modern world, Kleist cautions us about a one-dimensional development that privileges the intellect over the powers of imagination. It is at this point that Günderröde enters the conversation and introduces the subject of gender into the discussion: "Savigny, says Günderröde, Savigny sees everything in terms of Either-Or. You must know, Kleist, he has a masculine brain" (*No Place* 80). Either science or imagination—that is the (to Kleist's mind, false) alternative proposed by Savigny.

When Kleist and Günderrode take a walk outside, he tells her about his reading of Kant's philosophy and the ambivalence he feels toward the possibility of achieving truth. He confides in her about "that inner commandment which compels me to take action against myself" (*No Place* 97), and she responds with understanding and compassion. This difference expresses itself most clearly when the subject of their conversation turns toward their own work:

She dismembers herself, making herself into three people, one of them a man. Love, provided that it is unconditional, can fuse the three separate people into one. The man beside her does not have this prospect before him. His work is the only point at which he can become one with himself. (*No Place* 117)

In other words, Kleist, who has internalized all the destructive impulses of his military career, can only get rid of them by exteriorizing them in his work in the form of violent and tragic struggle. Günderrode, on the other hand, has learned to turn this self-destructive violence into a claim for absolute independence and unconditional love (Wolf "Culture is What You Experience" 89; see Fehervary 79). Günderrode, of course, suffers under the tyranny of rigid gender roles and finds herself struggling against them. According to her, the battle between the sexes has come to a point at which women simply have to turn to other women for support: "For things have reached such a pass that women—even women who are far removed from each other in many respects—must lend each other support, since men were no longer capable of doing so. We women are looking for a whole human being and we cannot find him" (*No Place* 93). Women turn to other women, but these moments of intimacy are, however, fragile, and the old feeling of separation may return at any moment.

Günderrode's drive for independence is seen from the outside as an "exaggerated inclination to autonomy" which is potentially threatening to patriarchal culture (*No Place* 58). Like Kleist, she is perceived as "undisciplined, unpredictable, inordinate, extreme" (*No Place* 58). Wolf has Günderrode read the philosophy of Joseph Schelling, presumably his lectures on the philosophy of art from 1804, where he proposes an alternative construction of identity and consciousness. As opposed to the traditional (Hegelian) philosophical model of consciousness as produced by a dialectical process of exteriorization, Schelling believes that consciousness is pre-relational. The subject, in other words, has to have some familiarity with its own structure in order to acquire consciousness and recognize itself in the mirror of reflection. Identity, for

Schelling, is absolute; it exists prior to the process of individuation and is not a product of this process. G nderrode's nightmare about the two selves staring at each other while she is lying in the coffin takes issue with that Hegelian tradition that construes female identity and consciousness as a product of relational activity. As a result of her uneasiness with these issues, G nderrode feels a certain groundlessness that leads her to observe that "the lives of women require more courage than those of men" (*No Place* 93)—the courage, for example, to question established gender roles and constructions and demand a whole human being, an absolute subject. Kleist, with all his self-destructive feelings and feminine longings, seems to meet his equal in G nderrode, who, in turn, has always striven for "the real wound to which you men expose yourselves" (*No Place* 112). Kleist's suppressed violence does not really translate into a communicative claim about society and the role of the eccentric poet. G nderrode's search for absolute subjectivity, however, sets in motion a series of reflections about why she is denied a happier life.

As early as 1980, Wolf begins referring incessantly to warfare as "the male machinery of production and destruction" ("B chner-Preisrede" 326). The central figure who challenges this configuration is, of course, Penthesilea. In an essay on Kleist's interpretation of this mythical figure, Wolf makes the connection between male gendered warfare and the poetical tradition of Greek tragedy under attack in her work on *Cassandra*. Greek tragedies are, to her mind, "summaries, i.e., preliminary final products of an incredible, age-old fight in which the moral of the victorious party is laid down but behind which there is lurking the older, the wilder, the threat of the older, the wilder, the uncontrollable" ("Kleist's Penthesilea" 664). Wolf reads the myth of the Amazons as an example of such an older layer of civilization which is neutralized in Greek tragedy and turned into a negative force. For her, Kleist's *Penthesilea* exhibits the traits of that which occurs when patriarchal culture operates on pre-patriarchal myths. By going back and reconsidering this myth, Wolf does not seek to return to a Romantic glorification of bygone days of peace and prosperity; rather she aims to further a new longing for a better and more livable kind of society in the spirit of Ernst Bloch's utopian philosophy.

In *Cassandra* Wolf eventually develops a clearly articulated position on the relationship between war and gender. Women are victimized by the destructive machinery of patriarchal warfare, whereas most men are drawn to it for reasons of psychological insecurity. Cassandra, the doomed seer whom no one believes, tells the story of Troy's destruction shortly before she herself is about to die as Agamemnon's booty. In my discussion of this text I would like to focus on the constitution of violence

and its connection to the construction of warfare and gender. At the very beginning of *Cassandra* we get our first clue as to how Wolf treats the theme of violence, namely, as a psychological, a cultural, and as a sexual issue. Trojan society is one in transformation; it is on the verge of becoming a patrilineally organized culture, yet the presence of pre-patriarchal forms of civilization can still be felt, although they gradually disappear from the citadel as the war progresses. Greek society, on the other hand, is organized according to the patriarchal model. Moreover, the Greeks are portrayed as violent and cold fighters. Agamemnon, for example, the leader of the Greek delegation, emerges at the center of Cassandra's archaeology of violent behavior. Behind his name, which means "Most Resolute," lurks a strong sense of insecurity. Agamemnon's insecurities stem from his impotence, his "unutterable secret": "Suddenly I understood his exquisite cruelty in battle" (*Cassandra* 10). Cassandra, however, finds it offensive that "the great and famous commander in chief of the Greek fleet was a weakling who lacked self-esteem" (*Cassandra* 52). His leadership role in the narrative is reduced to an act of compensation for sexual impotence and its resulting psychological insecurity.

The other example I would like to discuss here is Achilles, or as Cassandra—in the tradition of Robert Graves—refers to him, Achilles the brute. His violence in battle also stems from sexual impulses. Achilles the brute does not seem to be able to distinguish between physical destruction and sexual pleasure; or rather, he seems to gain sexual pleasure from sadistic acts (see Meyer-Gosau 44). The entire strategy of Greek warfare seems to rest on similar principles:

A formation of Greeks . . . stormed onto land like a single organism with a head and many limbs. While they set up a howl whose like had never been heard. Those on the outlying edges were quickly killed by the already exhausted Trojans as no doubt it had been intended that they should be. Those toward the center slew altogether too many of our men. The core reached shore as they were meant to, and with them the core's core: the Greek hero Achilles. (*Cassandra* 72)

Greek warfare, according to this description, is hierarchically organized in order to win the fight between the two cultures at any cost, even if individual lives have to be sacrificed in order to achieve this goal. Achilles is only after one thing: total destruction of the enemy and fulfillment of sexual pleasure: "Gripped his neck. Moved to the throat.

His plump, stubby-fingered, hairy hand on my brother's throat. . . . And

the gratification in Achilles' face. The *naked hideous male gratification*" (Cassandra 74; emphasis mine).

The Greek leaders we meet in *Cassandra* are unable to love or relate to other human beings except in battle. Women are victimized in this society, which is hierarchically stratified and inhabited by authoritarian personalities. During the war, Trojan society becomes ever more like its enemy and gradually loses the little warmth it had. As a counter-project, women begin to experiment with alternative lifestyles in a place where the citadel has no power. The women's society on the fringes of Troy, however, consists of heterogeneous elements. As opposed to the social stratification in Greece and Troy, it is not hierarchically organized and thus free of structural violence. The women who get together in the caves below Mount Ida practice life beyond the (false) alternative between killing and dying (see Vogelsang 67; Pickle 32). Learning, the exercise of reason, is brought together with sensuality and emotions:

It amazed me to see that different though we all were, the women by the Skamander felt without exception that we were testing something, and that it was not a question of how much time we had. Nor of whether we could convince the majority of Trojans, who of course remained in the dismal city. We did not see ourselves as an example. We were grateful that we were the ones granted the highest privilege there is, *to slip a narrow strip of future into the grim present*, which occupies all of time. (Cassandra 134; emphasis mine)

Male violence seems to derive from sexual frustration and the incapacity for love (see McDonald 267).

What about female violence? What forms does it take? How does Wolf play off Penthesilea against Cassandra, for example? The Amazon queen rules over her empire with great command. Feared by the Greeks for her alleged wild rituals, Penthesilea challenges Achilles in battle and is mutilated afterwards. This act triggers a violent response from the women in Troy. Some women become so ecstatic from pain that they lose control. In the end, they murder the first Greek man in sight. This violence, although brutal, is portrayed as a reaction to the denigrating treatment of women in Greek and Trojan societies. Furthermore, Wolf wants to prove a point about misguided responses to social injustice. Penthesilea, who, by the way, shares Wolf's theory of the origin of male violence in pleasure, wants to respond to this situation with violence herself. Penthesilea can only accept the alternative between killing, which is what she prefers, and dying, which is what the women in Troy are facing. Yet her response to male violence only perpetuates the vicious

circle of destruction. Cassandra, on the other hand, tries to impede this destructive logic, although she too is doomed to die.

This text demonstrates how a war between two different cultures over material needs and economic advantage turns into a war between the sexes. Gendered warfare becomes a war of gender:

New troops from outlying provinces had arrived in the citadel, you often saw black and brown faces in the streets now, troops of warriors squatted everywhere around campfires; all of a sudden it was no longer advisable for us women to be out alone. If you saw it properly—only no one ventured to do that—the *men of both sides seemed to have joined forces against our women*. (Cassandra 104; emphasis mine)

In Wolf's text, materialist models for explaining the Trojan war give way to a feminist concern with gender and the reifying effects of patriarchal society on women. She addresses this topic in her lectures on the narrative, held at the University of Frankfurt in 1983. It is her aim to correct the mistakes made in the Greek tradition—for example, by Aeschylus' rendition of the Cassandra myth in the *Oresteia*. And she approaches this goal by asking questions that stem from a contemporary framework: Wolf's project is to liberate the woman Cassandra from all the different interpretations attributed to her by the male tradition, and thus to rewrite the literary canon (see Kuhn, "Christa Wolfs *Cassandra*" 135; Gilpin 399). It is Wolf's contention that our tradition of Western literature starts with the glorification of war, i.e., with the Trojan war. "Was there, is there, an alternative to this barbarism?" is the question Wolf wants to pursue (*Cassandra* 159). To her mind, "story telling is humane and achieves humane effects, memory, sympathy, understanding" (*Cassandra* 173). Her project thus turns into an appeal for humanism and for discovering the so-called blind spot in our culture. To accomplish her ideal, Wolf uses an archaeological method of digging shafts into the thick layers of Western literary traditions: "To learn to read myth is a special kind of adventure" (*Cassandra* 196), one in which she realizes the many different layers of which our culture is made and how they interpenetrate each other so that earlier cults may even shine through the present. Her impulse, although achieved through an archaeological procedure, is, however, a utopian one: "The Troy I have in mind is not a description of bygone days but a model for a kind of utopia" (*Cassandra* 224). And the need for this utopian dimension emerges from Wolf's analysis, which uncovers the violence inherent in our founding myths and their canonical interpretations. Wolf refers to Thomas Mann's

difficult task of psychologizing mythology in his Joseph novels, where he sought "to take myth out of the hands of the Fascist obscurantists and to 'reconvert' it to a humane function" (*Cassandra* 248). And this more humane function of offering alternatives to a violent tradition, one which glorifies war and objectifies women, is achieved by retracing "the path out of the myth, into its (supposed) social and historical coordinates" (*Cassandra* 256). Wolf's utopia nevertheless is informed by enlightened values: according to her, "there is no way to bypass the need for personality development, for rational models for the solution of conflict, and thus also for confrontation and cooperation with people of dissident opinions and, it goes without saying, people of different sex" (*Cassandra* 260).

The female protagonists of Wolf's stories try to accomplish two things: they establish a network of relationships with other people, mostly other women, in which their identity is negotiated. But they also refer back to a supposed authentic layer of femaleness which is obscured by the historical and cultural process, but which can be accessed through the use of critical reflection on language. Wolf's project of an "aesthetics of resistance" is grounded in the interplay of these two moments in the construction of identity and gender.

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