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Angelica Michelis

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“To Learn to Live without Alternatives”

Forgetting as Remembering in Christa Wolf's

The City of Angels; or, The Overcoat of Dr. Freud

ANGELICA MICHELIS

If we take another class of things, it is easy to see that there, too, it is only this factor of involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable when otherwise we should have spoken only of “chance.” For instance, we naturally attach no importance to the event when we hand in an overcoat and get a cloakroom ticket with the number, let us say, 62. . . . But the impression is altered if two such events, each in itself indifferent, happen close together. . . . We do feel this to be uncanny.

—Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

Engaging with Christa Wolf's fictional, essayistic, and other works will always force readers to confront the past and its many literary and philosophical manifestations. Wolf's writing engages with the ways in which any sense of identity is refracted through the process of remembering as an amalgamation of both personal and cultural memory. In addition, it seems that for Wolf approaching the past and how it manifests itself as a sense of experiencing the present, as well as a possibility and opportunity of imagining the future, is always inextricably linked to her German identity. As this article will explore, Wolf's sense of national identity cannot be expressed in the singular and so part of her idiosyncratic and original approach to writing, remembering, and forgetting German his-

tory is expressed in her understanding of a German identity as one that can never be at one with itself. Furthermore, national identity in her work overall, and in her final book, *Stadt der Engel oder The overcoat of Dr. Freud*, in particular, features as an emblem and at the same time a creative source of literary and philosophical inspiration.¹ From a formal and narrative perspective, this can be read in the complex threefold relationship between the experience of historical reality, subjectivity, and the literary text, which Wolf herself referred to as “subjective authenticity.” In this case, as a literary mode, versions of subjective authenticity can be understood as a challenging political and aesthetic response to the more traditional understanding of socialist realism, the dominant form of artistic expression in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). As Anne Dwyer points out, subjective authenticity implies “that literature should not be understood as a list of final products, but instead must be a process in which the writer/subject engages with external reality and which fundamentally transforms both the subject and objective reality.”²

Wolf thus perceives her writing as a further development of the category of realism when she proposes that the task of the writer resembles a balancing act that borders on paradox: “to invent true to the truth as it is experienced by the individual.”³ In her work, Wolf pushes this concept of authenticity, which is defined by a complicated and often volatile experience of reality, to its limits when she experiments with formal and structural elements of narratives and elevates this version of subjective authenticity to a moral category. By taking literature as a site where historical fact is given the same validity as individual subjective experience, Wolf’s oeuvre from the 1970s onward questions the existence of strict and unmovable boundaries between literary genres and historical truths. It is also skeptical of a concept of realism that is unable to deal and engage with the contradictions underlying lived individuality in relation to specific political, social, and historical environments. Biography merges into fiction, essayistic reflections become part of documentaries, and individual identity, rather than being a given, emerges in Wolf’s writing as a changeable position that is defined by an ongoing processes of self-consciousness and as a recognition of the importance of personal and political responsibility. Marx’s “all that is solid dissolves into air” comes to mind when considering Wolf’s own attempt to explain what subjective authenticity refers to in relation to writing:

Things formerly taken as “given” start to dissolve, revealing the reified social relations they contain and no longer that hierarchically arranged cosmos in which the human particle travels along the paths preordained by sociology or ideology. . . . It becomes more and more difficult to say “I,” and yet at the same time often imperative to do so.⁴

Wolf’s ongoing experimentation with narrative persona and structure was often regarded as standing in opposition to the role of literature as understood by a more unrefined concept of socialist realism. Wolf always considered her writing as situated inside the categories of a realism that gives precedence to documenting the historical moment as an act of political responsibility. However, it is precisely her complex understanding of a triangular relationship between time, narrator/writer, and text that often made it impossible to configure the relationship with the past and indeed “writing the past” as a straightforward process that could exclude the dimension of the present. Significantly, the present always comes across as an “after-past,” as something that is rooted in its own history but at the same time attempts to position itself in relation to an imagined future. In an interview about her book *A Model Childhood*, Wolf alerts the reader to the “after-past” as a moral responsibility of remembering and the complex mode in which past and present are intertwined: “To see the present as only what happens today would be to assign the concept a very narrow meaning. The present is everything that today, for example, impels us to act or not act, determines how we act or choose not to.”⁵

Before moving on to a discussion of *The City of Angels*; or, *The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, it is important to outline the various textual, aesthetic, and narrative frameworks in which Wolf developed her understanding of memory and remembering and how these are often directly linked to the ways in which she situates herself and her writing in relation to German history and national and personal identity. Of particular interest in this context are *Nachdenken ueber Christa T.* (published in German in 1968 and translated into English as *The Quest for Christa T.*), and *Kindheitsmuster* (published in German in 1976 and translated into English first under the title *A Model Childhood* but then more appropriately as *Patterns of Childhood*). Both works problematize and reflect upon the process of remembering in direct relation to Nazi Germany and the postwar Germany of the

GDR. As will be discussed later, *The City of Angels* provides a further memory layer by allowing the narrator of that later work to draw on these earlier titles as versions of textual archives and, by so doing, adds to the palimpsestic notion of German national identity after reunification (*Wende*) in 1989. Contextualizing her final novel in relation to earlier reflections on Germany's postwar history and its inevitable roots in its fascist past allows *The City of Angels* to be productively read as a collage of fictional, autobiographical, and essayistic elements that contribute to a contemplation of national identity as charted through the official, personal, and alternative histories of pre- and postwar West and East Germany. The text, I will suggest, pushes the limits of the epistemology of memory by exploring the moment of forgetting as the crucial blind spot of historical remembering.

While not the first piece of her literary work that engages with the process of remembering and forgetting, *The Quest for Christa T.* establishes an aesthetic and narrative pattern that will carve a space for later, similarly self-referential texts. Texts such as *A Model Childhood*, *Cassandra*, and *What Remains?* allow Wolf to rethink subjectivity as a site of negotiation between external political constraints and the complexities of personal experience and remembering. The German title of *The Quest for Christa T.*, literally meaning "thinking about Christa T." or "reflecting on Christa T.," pertains more clearly to the mode of questioning and contemplation of the novel without excluding the epic scope emphasized by the English translation. The book tells of the life journey of Christa T. as charted through the memory of the narrator and creates an inextricable link between what and who are remembered and who remembers, resulting in a narrative in which the practice of remembering as such is as much at the center of the book as the fictional documentation of life in the GDR of the 1960s is. The text introduces a dialogic structure and a wide range of intertextual references so that the narrative constantly interrupts and questions itself and therefore queries the concepts of history and personal life story as evolving in a progressive and forward-moving manner. In addition, the pattern of stagnation, realized in the brutal finality of the protagonist's untimely death from leukemia, also comments implicitly and critically on the more dominant and official versions of socialist realism that presented life in the GDR as historically progressive. This sense of inertia sets the tone for a novel in which the female protagonist, initially enthusiastic

about being involved in the creation and building of a new society and the “new human,” is unable to reconcile the demands of society with her own sense of intellectual questioning, doubt, and desire for individual self-development. Thus, one could argue, the novel parodies and experiments with the format of the (female) bildungsroman by forcing the protagonist to move against the grain of a sense of temporality that is imagined as progression and moving from past to present. If one understands the genre in its most basic meaning as a novel about self-development, Wolf’s text makes a point that this cannot be achieved: “*To become oneself with all one’s strength. Difficult. A bomb, a speech, a rifle shot—and the world can look a different place. And then where is this ‘self’?*”⁶ Since the novel is told retrospectively and from the point of view of the narrator, a close friend of Christa T.’s, temporal and narrative structure further emphasize the sense of the protagonist’s disappearance in more than one way: Christa T. comes into being as a collage of fragments of the narrator’s own (unreliable) memories of their time in school and at university and conversations she has with Christa T.’s friends after her death. Paradoxically it is Christa T.’s premature death that motivates the narrator to create her as a literary character, which means that Christa’s textual subjectivity is always precarious since it is based on the memories of a narrator figure who presents the process of remembering as inaccurate and unreliable.

She didn’t trust these names, oh no. She didn’t trust herself. She was doubtful, amid our toxic swirl of new name-giving; what she doubted was the reality of names, though she had to deal with them; she certainly felt that naming is seldom accurate and that, even if it is accurate, name and thing coincide only for a short time.⁷

Since this is a text that always reflects and critically comments on the narrative process and the role of the narrator, the underlying ambiguities of the above passage also refer to the figure of the narrator and the creation and conditions of writing at a given moment in history. This is further emphasized by the novel’s time frame, the final years of the Third Reich to the end of the 1960s, the latter being a decade that the official voices of the GDR would prefer to present as a period of the consolidation and arrival of socialism. Pairing the newly emerging socialist state with the dying moments of a German regime from which the GDR officially wanted

to distance itself politically and ethically permits Wolf to question an understanding of history as progressive and as moving smoothly from past to present. Furthermore, because in the early decades of the GDR dominant political and cultural discourses emphasized the supremacy of the collective over strictly personal needs, in order to produce a coherent narrative of social identity, individuals and their versions of historical experience had to be pushed into the background and therefore actively “forgotten.” According to Wolf’s narrator, the underlying *raison d’être* for her project is her desire to “un-forget” her friend’s life because she wants to present it as a testament to the complex relationship between individual and society. “Because it seems that we need her,” she argues when writing about her friend, a need that is significant precisely because Christa T. did not fit in and therefore did not live a life deemed worthy of public remembering.⁸ The moment of forgetting is therefore not the opposite of the process of remembering for Wolf; it but inhabits the process of remembering as its own alterity in order to disrupt and query memory narratives that suggest a linear movement from past to present, from fascist Germany to a German socialist republic. Poignantly, this idea of forgetting as central to a concept of remembering will be revisited and reworked in Wolf’s literary work persistently, where it often functions as an archive to which future writing returns with new questions and doubts, as will become evident in the discussion of *A Model Childhood* and *The City of Angels*.

Franz Fühmann, an East German writer and intellectual who dedicated much of his writing to the two historical moments that bracketed his life—German fascism and GDR socialism—often focused on the process of remembering as it struggled with the transitional nature of German identity for his generation. Like Wolf, he often feels uneasy about the teleological trajectory of the new socialist state’s understanding of history, since for him, as Benjamin Robinson argues, “guilt over Auschwitz—even though he declares such guilt . . . as the primary motivation of his generation of ‘socialist’ writers—is no longer enough to mark a substantial transformation from old to new.”⁹ Wolf agreed with Fühmann that their generation indeed came to socialism via Auschwitz;¹⁰ however, this journey is not to be understood as the possibility of leaving the past behind, as this would encourage the idea that the GDR socialist state began its existence as a historical *tabula rasa*. This critical attitude to the sanc-

tioned version of postfascist cultural epistemology is also central to Wolf's novel *Kindheitsmuster*, with its complicated and often contradictory narrative structures and voices.¹¹ The text's overtones of doubt and questioning announce themselves in the paraphrased quotation from Faulkner that functions as an opening statement and simultaneously as a deliberate delay and deferral of a beginning: "What is past is not dead; it is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we pretend to be strangers."¹² Similarly, in response to Fuehmann's reluctance to approach the transition from one German identity (fascist) to the next (socialist) as a teleological and progressive movement that defines the new republic in German history, Wolf insists that there cannot be a "clean break" with what went before. The quotation in its meaning and as a textual gesture refuses a sense of beginnings and of endings—from both a literary and a political and philosophical perspective—and thus it sets the tone for a narrative that constantly doubles up on itself and by doing so refuses to "move on." This sense of nonlinearity is further emphasized by the complicated narrative perspective, which, similar to that of *The Quest for Christa T.*, reflects on the difficulty of saying "I." The text develops on two narrative levels, one of which is from the point of view of Nelly, who is always spoken of in the third person, and the other of a metanarrator who addresses herself in the second person. This strategy occludes the possibility of an "I" and at the same time imagines it as a site that is under continuous construction. While the text (a novel? an autobiography? a biography?) can imagine the past only as severed from the consciousness of the adult narrator's consciousness, the narrative's unconscious trajectory evolves at the same time as a feverish and compulsive search for a point of origin. The constant clashes between the conscious and unconscious levels of the text—the desire to produce a story of the past and the acknowledgement of the impossibility of such an enterprise—produce a metanarrative in which the complexities underlying the concept of narrator figures and of the process of remembering itself emerge as the book's main theme. The adult narrator is not only estranged from her own self and therefore unable to refer to herself in the first person; she is also incapable of connecting to her own past/Nelly: "Because it hurts to admit that the child—aged three, helpless, alone—is inaccessible to you. You're not separated from her by forty years; you are hampered by your unreliable memory."¹³ Articulating a sense of self is thus

linked inextricably to the process of remembering, which itself engenders patterns of subjectivity.

Wolf uses the emblem of the journey in a spatial and temporal sense in order to explore how identity is never really “there” but always in flux and defined by the matrices of time and space. The journey to the former homeland is structured as a quest in which the search itself is at the center of the tale and thus emphasizes the moment of the uncanny as part of this revisiting of the past, as Michael G. Levine points out:

The motif of homecoming as a leave-taking, as both a return to and a return of a certain foreignness in the place of the familiar, recurs in various forms in the novel. As might be expected, such uncanny recurrences are accompanied not only by a release of free-floating anxiety but also by a particular sense of anguish with regard to the act of writing.¹⁴

The aspect of the uncanny comes into being as the ambiguity underlying the relationship between familiar and secretive and is further accentuated by using the family as a trope to comment on the rift between past and present: “Since when is parental love so closely linked with anxiety? Did it start when each new generation felt compelled to refute the beliefs of its parents?”¹⁵ This anxiety-ridden relationship between the generations refers to the idea of the self as riven by its own alterity and the private family links as they are represented and problematized in the novel. However, it is also meaningful as a metaphor for the complicated link between fascist Germany and the first German socialist republic. The GDR saw itself as a bastion of antifascism and had always distanced itself from the Third Reich by refusing to accept any legal or moral responsibility for fascist atrocities. As expressed in the first two lines of the national anthem—“Auferstanden aus Ruinen / Und der Zukunft zugewandt” (Risen from ruins / And facing the future)—the new republic presented its inauguration as a separation from the past by cutting off its family links to the former fascist Germany. By envisaging its birth as a phoenix-like resurrection the GDR understood its historical responsibility to be focused on the future, which meant the building of a new Germany in the form a socialist and therefore nominally antifascist state. While the concept of “not-forgetting” was central to the political philosophy of the GDR in order to prevent a revival of fascism, by officially renouncing or forgetting the links

to its own fascist past, the new socialist state's concept of remembering was principally defined by denial.¹⁶

The structural complications underlying Wolf's narrative appear to strain against this view of a nonfamilial relationship between the past (German fascism) and the present (German socialism), since for her what is past is not dead. Furthermore, not only is the estrangement between child and adult a central theme of the novel, the overarching metanarrative also reflects on the conditions of the relationship between narrator-figure and Nelly. "A family," says H., the narrator's husband, "is an agglomeration of people of different ages and sexes combined to apparently conceal mutually shared and embarrassing secrets."¹⁷ The term "family," with its intrinsic uncanny ability to weave together the familiar with the secretive, refers here to the private sphere but also includes the generational web that connects the new republic with the past and the secrets it wants to forget. As the narrator points out, "Not everything we keep to ourselves is a secret. But how then does one tell if it's a secret? By the pressure it exerts upon you, you say. And as you say it, you're struck by the change secrets undergo from one generation to the next."¹⁸ For Wolf, rather than providing open access to and knowledge of the past, remembering works as a process that is activated by this tell-tale pressure exerted by what one wants to forget and to remain hidden. This is the case on a personal-private as well as on a public-political level and is particularly pertinent in relation to Wolf's scrutiny of what it means to be German, a subject that will take center stage in *The City of Angels*; or, *The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*.

"All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story. They have always been there. I do not know them. I have never looked at them. I 'know' they are there. Their presence. Roots. Mine? My so strange roots."¹⁹ This excerpt from Hélène Cixous's "Albums and Legends" articulates quite accurately the themes and aesthetic strategies underlying Wolf's final text. Published in German in 2010, the novel is based on Wolf's time as a visiting scholar at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles between September 1992 and May 1993. The beginning of the last century's final decade had seen the fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification, and the end and dissolution of the GDR, the country that had been Wolf's home for most of her life and where she established her career as a writer and intellectual. Wolf still

holds the blue passport of the GDR, and the US immigration official looks at her with suspicion when she gives East Germany as her home country. “Are you sure that country exists?” she is asked, which leaves her to ponder “whether it was really worth it to travel to the United States with the still-valid passport of a no-longer-extant country.”²⁰ Just as it permeates so much of her previous work, it is once more the complicated relationship between past and present that not only informs context and content of the novel but also functions as its major structural and aesthetic framework. Moreover, it is again the inquiry into the process of memory itself that will become the predominant theme, as the epigraph, from Walter Benjamin’s “Excavation and Memory,” hints: “For authentic memories, it is far less important that the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them.”²¹ As discussed previously in relation to *The Quest for Christa T.* and *A Model Childhood*, the subject and object of remembering threads itself through Wolf’s writing as an all-encompassing preoccupation, resulting in a narrative structure that constantly interrupts itself as its own impediment. This hesitant and questioning approach also pertains to the narrator figure, whose narrative journeys into the past are always inextricably linked to a search for a position from which to speak, a quest consistently hampered by the difficulty of saying “I.” In *The City of Angels*, the narrative evolves from the perspective of a first-person narrator who recounts her time in Los Angeles between 1992 and 1993 and switches to the second person when the narrator reflects on her life in the GDR. Situating herself (her self) and the memories of her life in the GDR, this tension between past and present refers back to the narrative strategies and complications that pervade Wolf’s previous work, which, as will be discussed further below, gains a somewhat archival character for the current text.

In the final pages of *A Model Childhood*, the narrator adds a first-person perspective to the second and third employed in earlier parts of the novel and asks, “Has memory done its duty? Or has it proven—by the act of misleading—that it’s impossible to escape the moral sin of our time: the desire not to come to grips with oneself?”²² The past, according to Wolf, “can split the first person into the second and the third,” thus defining subjectivity as deeply contingent on how and what we remember.²³ And more so than ever it is the painful process of remembering, the question

of whether remembering is possible at all and what the attempt to remember does to identity, that takes center stage in Wolf's text. Now I will approach these issues primarily from the perspective of personal and historical amnesia, since *The City of Angels* is above all a novel about forgetting and about the inability to remember. On a textual level, this manifests itself in the ways in which Wolf interweaves reportage on her time in Los Angeles—an assemblage of conversations with new acquaintances and information on the progress of her research—with a moment of trauma that affects her as a person and as a writer.

Back in Berlin, when the archives of the East German secret police (Stasi) were opened to the public, Wolf had learned that the socialist state, to which she had always felt a complicated sense of loyalty, had over forty volumes of surveillance files on her. However, even more shocking, she also discovered a so-called perpetrator file, which documented that between 1959 and 1962 Wolf had been contacted by the secret police and had answered their questions about some of her peers. Confronted with the physical presence of the file and her classification as “informal collaborator,” thirty years after the event, Wolf realizes that she has no recollection whatsoever of these conversations or the fact that they happened at all. For an author whose work is synonymous with reflecting on the process of remembering and who was under surveillance for many years because of her critical stance toward the socialist regime, this discovery has wide-ranging consequences. “I have just recently learned a thing or two about memory and forgetting that I wouldn't have thought possible,” she confesses in a conversation with her new friend Peter Gutman. Acting as a sounding board for the narrator's thoughts on how to reconcile the recent historical and political developments with her own life story, the often late-night talks between Gutman and the narrator figure also take on a quasi-psychoanalytical intimacy and thus scrutinize the process of remembering as a private as well as a public and political discourse of repression. A further layer to this metanarrative on remembering is added by the narrator's research project that initially led her to Los Angeles: given to her by her late friend Emma, the narrator is in possession of an exchange of letters between Emma and L., another friend of the narrator who left fascist Germany and went into exile in the United States.²⁴ The search for L. (a psychoanalyst) and the research on her life as a political emigrant

introduces the issue of exile as the prehistory of the GDR and by doing so offers a further perspective on the complexity of identifying as German. Reading Thomas Mann's diaries of his time as a German emigrant and visiting the places where political refugees such as Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Theodor Adorno lived and worked during the thirties and forties allows the narrator to interconnect her painful self-examination with contemplations on the continuum of German national cultural identity. While many of Wolf's previous narratives engaged with the question of German identity by bracketing the inquiry between the final years of the Nazi regime and the nascent and early years of socialist East Germany, *The City of Angels* introduces a new stratum to this aspect of subjectivity: being German in the newly reunified state. This new development leads to an even closer link between the public and the private; for the narrator the fate of Germany is something that has to be lived and experienced on a personal level in relation to questions of guilt and historical responsibility. In a conversation with the director of the Holocaust Museum of Los Angeles, discussing the riots against asylum seekers taking place in the early 1990s in Germany, the narrator sees her own German identity as it is perceived from the outside:

I thought I perceived in him too the belief that Germans were infected with an incurable sickness, a virus that in better times could pupate or hibernate so that Germany seemed normal like any other country, but which every crisis brought back to life so that it burst out and turned aggressive. The name of the virus was Contempt for Humanity.²⁵

The ambiguity underlying this passage—does the narrator include herself in this belief?—is further emphasized by the narrator's reluctance to accept the most current shift in the meaning of German national identity: "Being put on the spot and asked to stand in for and speak for all of Germany was new to me, and I felt how strongly I resisted it. Most of Germany was foreign to me, and not just in a geographical sense."²⁶

Life as constant estrangement and the need to resituate oneself in the shifting parameters of one's own subjectivity emerge as the overarching themes of *The City of Angels*, in which the narrator is confronted with her own past and her life's work as an archival reference point, which forces her to revisit the meaning of remembering in relation to forgetting. The

moment of amnesia as the blind spot of remembering preoccupies the novel-cum-memoir's narrative structure as well as the internal monologues of the narrator figure, whose meditations on how to approach one's personal as well as political past are developed as a ruthless self-examination that pushes her to the brink of a nervous breakdown. These explorative forays into the meaning of remembrance and its underlying mechanisms are entwined with the language and strategies of psychoanalysis, as hinted at by the second part of the book's title, *The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*. The eponymous coat features as an important metaphor in the novel and as a recurrent signifier of the power of forgetting and its impact on constructions of subjectivity. Owned and then lost by one of her new friends in the research center, the coat functions as a recurring anecdotal reference point and represents a figurative site where memory and forgetting clash. The narrator sees it as something "that keeps you warm but also hidden, that you have to turn inside out. To make the inside visible."²⁷ Earlier in the novel, she wonders, "What in the world might be hidden in its inner lining, working its way out only bit by bit?"²⁸ In response, Bob, the former owner of the coat, reflects on the possible reasons for the loss of the coat: "Did I somehow want to be free of it, so that it wouldn't hang on my door anymore and remind me every day of certain things I would rather forget?"²⁹

The trope of Freud's overcoat creates and deepens the link to the concept of repression, which is clearly of crucial significance for the discourse of remembering in Wolf's previous work but even more so in this text. The struggle of the narrator with her lapse of memory and her resultant feelings of guilt and shame culminate in a moment of near breakdown when she spends a whole night singing German songs, some of them remembered from her childhood in fascist Germany, as well as traditional, religious, and revolutionary songs. The singing literally takes over (she lists over seventy song titles) and the loss of agency becomes therapeutic, as indicated by the reference to Freud's coat:

I still remember the feeling I had that the *overcoat of Dr. Freud* was hovering above me: it had heralded that I would learn much about myself that night and, since that was dangerous, it would protect me. We would see if I really wanted to know, as I always claimed. It didn't surprise me that an overcoat was talking to me.³⁰

Having until then constantly castigated herself for her moment of forgetting, immersing herself in the apparent plenitude of German culture allows the narrator to gain an insight into the constructive and productive aspect of repression. As Freud argued in his essay on repression,

If a repression does not succeed in preventing feelings of unpleasure or anxiety from arising, we may say that it has failed, even though it may have achieved its purpose as far as the ideational portion is concerned. Repressions that have failed will of course have more claim on our interest than any that may have been successful; for the latter will for the most part escape our examination.³¹

Freud famously differentiated between “primal repression” and “repression proper”: the first “consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious,” while repression proper “affects mental derivations of the repressed representative, or such trains of thought, originating elsewhere, that have come into associative connection with it”; essentially this means that repression proper “is actually an after-pressure.”³² Repression (proper) thus always reacts to an existent matrix, which will have an impact on what can have access to the conscious and what is regarded as too dangerous to be allowed there. Thus, in order to be able to talk about a specific repression, paradoxically it has to have *failed* as such. What the narrator realizes in that night filled with songs that force themselves into her memory is that remembering the act of forgetting is not a sign of successful repression but, on the contrary, signifies its failure. Furthermore, it is that moment of failure that retrospectively can be understood as informing Wolf’s lifelong literary and personal preoccupation with the question of how we remember.

As mentioned earlier, in the final pages of *A Model Childhood* the second-person narrator makes a point that not everything one keeps to oneself is a secret and that it is by the pressure it exerts upon you that one can tell if it is truly a secret. Freud writes of something very similar when he defines repression proper as an after-pressure, as a telltale symptom of the return of the repressed, which for him is the only way in which one can know about the act of repression. The moment of remembering itself could therefore be understood to be produced by a constant oscillatory movement between forgetting and knowing that one has forgotten or

must forget. As Freud argued, “Repression is a preliminary stage of condemnation, something between flight and condemnation. . . . *The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.*”³³ However, according to the paradigms of psychoanalytical theory, keeping something at a distance from the conscious does not mean that it does not exist. Wolf’s moment of forgetting, it can therefore be argued, has existed all the time as the inquisitive energy that fueled her literary and essayistic work. It is part of her aesthetic concept of subjective authenticity as well as of the complex and complicated narrative structures and strategies she employed, which made it so difficult for her to write within the limitations of generic classifications and a singular narrative voice. Secrets and the moment of forgetting are the condition of the possibility of remembering and the narrative of memory, and the desire to archive memories has to be understood as defined by selective remembering and forgetting. Thus it is not the ability to remember something, which in itself is possible, that defines a responsible attitude to history and the past, but rather the acknowledgment that everything we remember is founded on a conscious or unconscious forgetting, a process over which we have only a certain amount of control.

The City of Angels is a meditation on the mnemonic inhabited by forgetting as its active force and as the unconscious archival drive of the text. As Jacques Derrida argues in “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” the archive itself is defined by a sense of beginning as historical ontology and at the same time as a place where social authority is exercised: “The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkhē*. But it also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it.”³⁴ The desire to remember, or the archive fever Derrida refers to, operates with a concept of forgetfulness that does not limit itself to repression, as Wolf’s narrator experiences in her night of mnemonic epiphany. Rather than pointing toward a past that can be known, the process of remembering and the concept of archiving gesture toward the future, as Derrida points out:

This is not the question of a concept dealing with the past which might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future

itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in the times to come, later on or perhaps never.³⁵

At the end of *The City of Angels*, the narrator's demons of the past make way for contemplating the possibility of a future that can grow out of a concept of remembering, in which forgetfulness is not erased or denied but included as its pulsating drive and energy. It is predominantly in the magic realist dream sequences, which feature her guardian angel Angelina, that Wolf's narrator is able to look back at her life and her work without occluding the idea of a future. As so often occurs, it is the image of the overcoat that is employed metaphorically to express how the narrator feels: "*The overcoat of Dr. Freud* had gotten rotten and I wanted to find out what its lining was made of. I could do that anywhere, any place on earth, why not here?"³⁶ "Here" denotes a concept of the present that is not purely derivative of a consciously accessible past but is able to archive the question of a future and a responsibility for tomorrow. Furthermore, in the last chapter of the novel "here" also refers to the notion of space when the narrator travels to Hopi and Navajo reservations and Death Valley. In the narrative, many strands of which are again developed as dream sequences, these spaces are envisaged as defined by a matrix in which past and future exist on the same spatial and temporal level and thus gesture toward a sense of time and space that goes beyond a level of conscious knowledge. As with Benjamin's "Angel of History," propelled forward but still caught in the past, the narrator's guardian angel takes her on a journey to the unknown:

And the colors. Oh, Angelina, the colors! And this sky!
She seemed satisfied and flew on in silence, keeping me at her side.
Where are we going?
I don't know.³⁷

Notes

1. Christa Wolf, *Stadt der Engel oder The overcoat of Dr. Freud* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010); published in English as *The City of Angels; or, The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, trans. Damion Searls (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

2. Anne Dwyer, "Runaway Texts: The Many Life Stories of Iurii Trifonov and Christa Wolf," *Russian Review* 64 (October 2005): 607.
3. Christa Wolf, "Wahrheitsgetreu zu erfinden auf Grund eigener Erfahrung," in *Werkausgabe in 12 Bänden*, hrsg., kommentiert and mit Nachworten versehen von Sonja Hilzinger, bd. 4, *Essays, Gespraechе, Reden, Briefe, 1959–1974* (Muenchen: Lucheterhand Literaturverlag, 1999–2001), 258; my own (rather literal) translation.
4. Christa Wolf, "Subjective Authenticity: A Conversation with Hans Kaufmann," in *The Fourth Dimension: Interviews with Christa Wolf*, trans. Hilary Pilkington (London: Verso, 1988), 28.
5. Christa Wolf, "A Model of Experience: A Discussion on *A Model Childhood*," in *Fourth Dimension*, 40.
6. Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 149.
7. Wolf, *Quest for Christa T.*, 35.
8. Wolf, *Quest for Christa T.*, 5.
9. Benjamin Robinson, *The Skin of the System: On Germany's Socialist Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 117.
10. See Holly Case, "Blind Spot: On Christa Wolf: A Postwar German Novelist's Complicated Legacy," *Nation*, June 4, 2012.
11. My references will refer to Christa Wolf, *A Model Childhood*, trans. Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt (London: Virago Press, 1983).
12. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 3. The overtones of doubt and questioning are emphasized by using a quotation from Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions* as an epigraph to the novel, which formally and thematically questions the idea of a point of beginning set in the past, to which a remembering in the future can clearly refer.
13. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 7.
14. Michael G. Levine, "Writing Anxiety: Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*," *Diacritics* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 112.
15. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 125.
16. West Germany became the legal successor of the Third Reich and therefore legally responsible for the crimes committed under the Nazi regime.
17. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 78.
18. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 78–79.
19. Hélène Cixous, "Albums and Legends," in *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London: Routledge, 1997), 170–80.
20. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 3, 4.
21. Walter Benjamin, "Ibiza Sequence" (1932), in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 1931–1934, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 576.

22. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 406.
23. Wolf, *Model Childhood*, 406.
24. The relationship between the narrator and L. recalls the close and important friendship between Wolf and Anna Seghers.
25. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 57.
26. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 57.
27. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 197.
28. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 132.
29. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 132.
30. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 188.
31. Sigmund Freud, "Repression," in *In Metapsychology*, Penguin Freud Library (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1984), 11:153.
32. Freud, "Repression," 11:147.
33. Freud, "Repression," 11:145, 146–47; italics in original.
34. Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritic* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 9.
35. Derrida, "Archive Fever," 27.
36. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 255; italics in original.
37. Wolf, *City of Angels*, 315.