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*Journal of European Studies* 1999; 29; 405
DOI: 10.1177/004724419902911603

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jes.sagepub.com
The difficulty of saying ‘I’

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Ambivalence in the former East Germany toward the West became a journalistic cliché in the German press in the early 1990s, but few people have managed to embody the problem more intimately than the novelist and essayist Christa Wolf. Before 1989, Wolf was the most famous living East German writer, the author of Der geteilte Himmel, Nachdenken über Christa T., Kindheitsmuster, and Kassandra. Her works were required reading in many western universities, and she was occasionally mentioned as a possible candidate for the Nobel Prize. Since the fall of the Wall, however, her reputation has suffered enormously. During the hectic months of 1989–1990, Wolf spoke out against Helmut Kohl’s plan for rapid unification, and she has since come under sustained and often withering attack from western critics and politicians for her refusal to condemn the former East German regime while it was still in power. Recently she answered her critics with a book of essays and a new novel, Medea.

The book of essays, Parting From Phantoms, shows that Wolf has lost none of her reservations about the course of events since 1989, but the book is much more than what journalists have started to call Ostalgie — a confused or pathetic longing for an irrecoverable eastern past.® Wolf makes clear that her regret is not a sentimental yearning for a lost history, but an intensely conflicted sense of failure. For her, the Wende (‘turning point’) in 1989 was above all a missed opportunity, a failure to create a viable alternative to the tawdry consumerism of contemporary mass culture in the west.

Wolf’s determined expression of ambivalence in these essays — about a unified Germany, about the market economy, and about her own identity as a German in late twentieth-century Europe — is made doubly compelling by the bitter controversy that has swirled around

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0047-2441/99/2904-0405 $5.00 © 1999 Richard Sadler Ltd
her person and her writings since 1989. In the late spring of 1990, several prominent critics publicly attacked Wolf after she published ‘What Remains’, a short story she had written in 1979 but kept to herself. ‘What Remains’ described a period in the 1970s when she and her husband were under surveillance by agents of the East German secret police. To her critics, publishing ‘What Remains’ in 1990 was an act of bad faith. Wolf had openly defended the East German state for many years, and could not now claim to have also been among its victims. In the newspaper Die Welt, Hans Noll accused Wolf and other respected East German writers such as Stefan Heym and Stephan Hermlin of having allowed their writings to stand as an ideological screen for an oppressive regime. In exchange for their co-operation, wrote Noll, the GDR gave Wolf and her colleagues privileges that allowed them to live as a protected clique, while ordinary East Germans endured the corruption and cruelty of Walter Ulbricht’s and Erich Honnecker’s one party state. In the same vein, Ulrich Greiner wrote in Die Zeit that publishing ‘What Remains’ in 1990 showed a lack of sensitivity to the real victims of the GDR’s Ministry of State Security. Wolf’s persecution was laughable compared to that suffered by others, argued Greiner, and drawing attention to her own experience in this way was self-serving at best, opportunist and hypocritical at worst. Frank Schirrmacher, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, called the story a product of ‘bad conscience’ and ‘lacking in credibility to the point of Kitsch’.

These attacks, serious as they were, paled in comparison to the media storm which broke in January 1993, when Wolf revealed that she had been an informal collaborator with the security police for a three-year period between 1959 and 1962. Using a cover-name (her middle name ‘Margarete’), Wolf met regularly with Stasi agents during these years to discuss people and events in the East German literary world. For a time she met them in a secret apartment in Berlin; later, after moving with her family to Halle, she met with a Stasi agent in her own home. On at least one occasion she provided the Stasi with a hand-written report. Wolf claimed in 1993 to have only the vaguest memories of these activities – she did not remember using a cover name, nor did she remember writing or submitting the report. Not until March 1992 was she reminded of her activities as an informant. That month, while reading the Stasi’s records of their surveillance of her and her husband during the 1960s and 1970s, Wolf came across references to earlier files concerning her co-operation with the Stasi as a Geheimer Informator, a secret informer.

The German press excoriated Wolf after she made these facts public. The tabloid Bild Zeitung summed it up in loud block letters: ‘OUR MOST FAMOUS WRITER CHRISTA WOLF: I WAS AN IM
[Informal Collaborator], BUT I DIDN'T KNOW. Commentators criticized Wolf on the culture pages of the national dailies for having waited nine months before going public with her confession, and they repeated many of the same arguments that had appeared in 1990. Wolf's initial responses, arising from an obviously severe personal distress, were tentative. She had delayed revealing the discovery of her collaboration with the Stasi because she believed that the hunt for informants would hinder, rather than further the work of understanding 'the complex reality of the DDR'. Later, she recognized that this less than candid response was a mistake.

Parting from Phantoms is no ordinary book of essays, then. It is the first sustained response of a formerly well-regarded writer who has undergone a public shaming, in the general press, among her peers, and, as her extended reply to a letter from the poet Volker Braun makes clear, in her own mind. If a consistent argument could be distilled from these wide-ranging essays it would be this: the self cannot be reduced to a specific moment or action or place, but can only be pieced together with difficulty through the painful accumulation of lessons learned after the fact. Sometimes, self-knowledge comes so late that it is of no use to anyone except as reproach.

The pain of Wolf's self-scrutiny is sincere, but there is more here than contrition. The twenty-eight essays in Parting from Phantoms are divided into five sections, one for each of the years from 1990 to 1994. The essays include portraits and discussions of individuals and their work (Hans Mayer, Grace Paley, Paul Parin, Otl Aicher, Anna Seghers, Heinrich Böll, and Nuria Quevedo), correspondence (with Wolfgang Thierse, Jürgen Habermas, Günter Grass, and Volker and Anne Braun), and short, incisive pieces on topics as diverse as cancer, Berlin, history, the old East German Academy, censorship in the DDR, and of course, memory and the two Germanys. Not all of them address the particular circumstances of Wolf's own predicament after 1989.

The subject is never far from the surface, however. In 'Trial by Nail', Wolf dares the reader to read allegory as autobiography, while she compulsively dwells upon the sadistic cruelties of public martyrdom and private redemption through a virtuoso play of puns and word games on the rhetorical and literal use of nails, spikes, studs and tacks in literature and art to punish and purge the guilty for daring to hope. 'It's true, isn't it,' she writes, 'all our good deeds and desire to preserve our innocence are in vain? The dark wild hunt has come upon the land, perhaps in the form of our very own selves ... the hunt is already upon us with spears and stakes, and we hear the hue and cry, and hot breath beats on the backs of our necks, and
when we turn around and look into their faces, we are shocked to see
our own image, which we do not want to recognize, like the faithless
chambermaid in the fairy tale who did not realize that she was
passing sentence on herself.\textsuperscript{9}

Wolf seeks redemption not for herself, but for her literary work.
Since it is as a writer that she wishes to be judged we should pay
attention to the words she uses to describe her writing, and here her
book is at its most incisive. Her first essay, entitled ‘Self-Indictment’,
begins with what seems at first to be a provocation. ‘My ideal of
writing’, she writes, ‘would be a sort of collaboration.’\textsuperscript{10} The translator
captured the intentional whiff of complicity in the German original – ‘Eine Art Mit-Schrift wäre mein Schreibideal.’\textsuperscript{11} Given the context, and
the fact that Wolf’s most problematic act may have been her hand-
written communication to the Stasi in 1959, the phrase ‘Eine Art Mit-
Schrift’ carries echoes of ‘Mitarbeit’ (the German word for ‘collaboration’) and the Stasi’s word for informer, Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter. On the
surface here, Wolf is baiting the crudest of her critics, the tabloid
journalists who ridiculed her memory lapse, or the western
academics who scorned her claim that there was room under
socialism for artists and intellectuals to live and work freely. But
Wolf’s statement can also be read as an invitation, a request that her
readers examine their own ‘collaborations’, while abstaining from
facile expressions of outrage.

Wolf’s explanation of what she means by this ‘collaboration’ is
both simple and elusive: ‘A pen would follow life’s traces as exactly
as possible; the hand holding it would be my hand and yet not mine
... A person would be shown without distortion but not stripped
bare, the gaze stricken yet unclouded by the residue of unclarified
resentments; not cold but uninvolved, as unsentimental as possible,
and thus meriting our unbiased attention.’\textsuperscript{12} Here the translator did
not capture the essence of the reflexive verb in the original German:
‘die Person würde sich unverstellt zeigen, ohne sich zu entblößen ...’\textsuperscript{13} A
more literal translation might be: ‘The person would show [himself]
undisguised but without stripping [himself] bare ...’ The grammatical
point is important here because the ‘person’ is in one sense Wolf
herself. She wants to reveal Herself, and yet not be accused of self-
interest in doing so. If one goes further, and takes this Schreibideal she
speaks of as also an ideal of reading – a reader confronting a
recognizable Self in a text written by and with others, we can
sympathize more clearly with Wolf’s dilemma. Confronting an
unrecognizable ‘Self’ in her own texts and those written by others is
of course what Christa Wolf has been doing repeatedly since the
media attacks began in 1990, and since she began revisiting her own
past through the files of the Stasi. Wolf’s call for writing-as-collaboration
can thus be read two ways. An unsympathetic reader might see this as a wishful attempt to absolve herself of responsibility for what she has said and written in the past. A more careful listener would hear in Wolf’s ‘self-indictment’ an invitation to share that responsibility with her by imagining the conflicts and contradictions that could bring a person to act as she has done.

Wolf largely succeeds in her attempt to elicit collaboration from her readers in these essays, but in the most personal of her writings she leaves the reader few handholds for any Mitarbeit. In her reply to a letter from the East German poet Volker Braun, she reveals a sense of isolation that is almost complete. Braun wrote to her ‘We have always known that the OTHER grows out of one’s own contradictory life.’ Wolf responded ‘Yes, Volker, but which OTHER and what does it mean to always know something.’ She goes on to cite a line from one of Braun’s poems, ‘Hope lay in our path like a trap,’ and continues for fourteen more pages, chronicling her anger and distress in a cacophonous barrage of fragments, clashing typefaces, disembodied voices and recounted dreams. Throughout, she returns again and again to her disappointment at her own failures, the hollowness of her excuses (though they will have to do, she seems to say), and her acute sense of having been betrayed, and having betrayed others in turn. Reading this piece, it was impossible to avoid the uncomfortable sense of peering over her shoulder as she wrote her innermost thoughts. Of course, Wolf wants to achieve precisely this effect, and in that sense, perhaps, her reply to Braun’s letter succeeds in its aim. To readers who are predisposed to judge, however, this essay will undoubtedly appear as nothing more than the self-indulgent ramblings of a clinically depressed writer, artfully coated with a hypocritical sincerity.

Self-indulgent? Perhaps, but so what? As Wolf has made clear in her previous writings, the ‘self’ is the most problematic concept of all. In her 1976 novel, Kindheitsmuster, Wolf demonstrated her view of the self: a fragile sense of personhood held together by a disordered sequence of capricious memories. Memory, she wrote, was ‘a crab’s walk, a painful backward motion, like falling into a time shaft, at the bottom of which the child sits on a stone step, in all her innocence, saying “I” to herself for the first time in her life’. Wolf’s fall into the time shaft of memory in Kindheitsmuster was not a gentle one. The novel leapt disjointedly between past and present, as an adult East German woman in the 1970s travelled back to the village of her childhood, now in Poland, in the company of her husband and daughter. Piecing together the motivations that lay behind her childhood allegiance to Hitler’s regime, the narrator found her sense of astonishment and wonder increasing rather than diminishing in
the face of her past selves. Not until the last page did she use the pronoun ‘I’, except in quotes.

Instead, the novel addressed both the child Nelly and the adult she eventually became as either ‘she’ or ‘you’. If the reader is in doubt as to the reason for Wolf’s ambivalent use of the first person, she made it clear in a song that the child Nelly sang with her Hitler Youth group. The song was entitled ‘From the Me to the We’, and the group sang it in order to ‘humiliate one of their number who had been caught stealing:

The me once seemed to be the central pole,
and all revolved around its woe and weal.
But growing humbleness helped to reveal
that you must aim your eyes upon the whole.

And now the me is part of the great We,
Becomes the great machine’s subservient wheel.
Not if it lives – but if it serves with zeal,
Decides the worth of its own destiny. 17

For Nelly the child, self-awareness came only through confronting the fractures that opened up between her own undeveloped moral instincts and her desire for recognition from family and friends, from teachers and the wider community. Because she came of age in Germany of the 1930s and 40s this meant accepting, internalizing, and ultimately admitting the unquestionable power of National Socialism, both in its attractions for the young girl that she had been and in the ultimate horror that it produced.

For Nelly the adult, on the other hand, final self-understanding could only be achieved by admitting that memory was insufficient to transcend the gap between who she had been then and who she was now. At the end of her reminiscences, Wolf has Nelly ask herself, if ‘the past, which can still split the first person into the second and the third’ will finally release her. ‘I don’t know’, she answered, saying ‘I’ for the first time in a novel of over 400 pages. ‘At night I shall see – whether waking, whether dreaming – the outline of a human being who will change, through whom other persons, adults, children, will pass without hindrance.’18 Wolf wrote these lines in the 1970s, little aware that she would be forced to confront that time as an equally distant and alienated past in the 1990s. Having already visited this territory with such sensitivity, her more recent ‘self-indulgence’ in Parting from Phantoms is worth paying attention to, for what it tells us about the care and protection of the ‘I’ in a world of bureaucrats, national loyalties and market-values.

Wolf’s essays in Parting from Phantoms succeed because they do not ask for forgiveness, but understanding. Her recent novel Medea, on
the other hand, stretches her notion of writing-as-collaboration to its limits by asking the reader to accept her rehabilitation of one of the literary canon’s most notorious and reviled female protagonists. In the ancient Greek drama, Medea was the daughter of the king of Colchis, who held the famous golden fleece. When Jason and his Argonauts arrived to take possession of the fleece, Medea elected to help him and returned with him to Corinth as his wife. Jason subsequently abandoned Medea to marry Glauce, daughter of King Creon, and Medea murdered her own children to punish Jason. In Wolf’s novel, on the other hand, Medea is a victim of a cruel conspiracy perpetrated against her by the Corinthian élite and is guilty of nothing more serious than an impetuous sense of her own moral righteousness amidst the corruption of those around her. It is tempting, therefore, to search the novel for simple correspondences between Wolf’s own circumstances and the machinations that result in Medea’s banishment at the story’s end.

These connections are not difficult to make. Wolf’s novel contrasts the strange and inward-looking people of Colchis, on the edge of civilization on the Black Sea, with the arrogant self-confidence of the Corinthians, who worship gold and think nothing of human sacrifice to appease the gods and preserve their way of life. Medea speaks openly of herself and her fellow Colchians as ‘refugees’ in Corinth. Those who accompanied her in her flight from her homeland live outside the Greek city’s walls in poverty, working as servants and domestics for their wealthier betters. Medea is impressed by the wealth of her hosts, and she is lectured by Akamas, King Creon’s First Astronomer, on the bureaucracy’s efficiency at ‘dividing the Corinthian people into different classes, which is the first means of making a country governable’.

Although Wolf clearly intends her allegory to be read more broadly than a simple evocation of the troubled relations between the former East and West Germany, it is still difficult to avoid hearing echoes of the author’s predicament in her protagonist’s voice. At times, Medea’s search for a moral compass sounds suspiciously like Wolf’s own. For example, in an early passage of the novel Wolf has Medea say ‘I’ve known one thing for a long time: there’s a role in the big machine even for someone who makes fun of it.’ Later, Medea confronted the fact she had not spoken up when she discovered that innocent children had been killed both in her homeland of Colchis and in Corinth to serve the needs of the powerful. She tried to explain why she had sought this knowledge, and subsequently kept it from others. ‘There are no more foundations that conscience can build on’, she says. ‘I learned that once as I was gathering up my little brother’s bones from the field, and then again when I touched
the girl's fragile skeleton in that cave of yours. The thought of making my discovery public never occurred to me. I just wanted to be clear in my own mind about what sort of place I was living in.'

The implication is all too clear for those who choose to see it – Wolf's decision to explore her own past through the Stasi files, and her initial unwillingness to go public with her discoveries were all a part of her very personal attempt to come to grips with the society she had lived in and defended since she was a young woman.

But looking for one-to-one correspondences between Wolf and Medea reduces the complexity of the novel, in which the reader watches the story unfold from within the mind of each character in turn. Perhaps it was Wolf's Schreibideal of writing-as-collaboration that led her to structure the novel as a series of independent monologues, each told in the first person; in any case, the technique makes it difficult to extract a simple moral lesson from her retelling of the myth. The voices of each character carry the narrative forward in a curiously distant and disembodied fashion. Dialogue appears only as reported speech, key events are reported after the fact, and the motives of each actor emerge only through the perceptions of their interlocutors. Wolf's use of monologue means that the authorial echo of her own voice comes through the mouths of different persona, and it is not just Medea's thoughts that apply as easily to Wolf's Germany as they do to ancient Corinth. Medea's enemy and former pupil, the bitter and jealous Agadema, ruthlessly criticized the behaviour of her fellow Colchians for constructing a mythology of their homeland that has nothing to do with the reality of their past. They remember a Colchis that 'has never existed anywhere on this earth', and have 'jerry-built themselves a dreamworld out of pure grief and homesickness, and out of rage at the treatment they get from the Corinthians'.

As for herself, Agadema suffers from no such sentimentality. Instead, she has formed an alliance with Akamas, the most powerful religious official in Corinth, and she revels in the erotic attractions of power: 'No one else could give me a greater thrill than I feel while lying next to the shrewdest and most powerful man in this city.'

Wolf's narrative projects her authorial voice into the mouth of each character in turn, until the 'I' uttered by Medea is just as much Wolf's voice as the 'I' uttered by Agadema, or the faithless Jason, or the shrewd and cynical manipulator, Akamas.

The danger in Wolf's ideal of writing as collaboration, of course, is that one might lose sight of important political realities while striving to accurately represent the troubled nature of subjectivity, or the relation between language, memory and personal experience. In his 1990 review of Wolf's story 'What Remains', Ulrich Greiner argued that despite Wolf's posture as an engaged intellectual, the 'real
world' appeared in her works only as 'a distant idea', caught in a 'typically ambiguous relation ... with the poetic world of her text'. Greiner, who is from West Germany, accused Wolf of avoiding crucial issues under cover of 'that pleasant Christa-Wolf-Sound, that insipid irresponsible melody of an uncommonly formulated language'.

Greiner seemed to miss the point here, however. When Wolf chose to say 'the relentless advantage of the glance' ('der rücksichtslos Augenblicksvorteil') instead of 'police surveillance', or 'the metamorphosis of citizens' instead of 'the flight of East Germans to the West', she did so not because she wished to hide the brutal reality of an oppressive regime, but because she wanted to say something particular about the effects of that regime on one's fragile sense of self. On the surface Greiner's critique seems plausible – there is a disturbing gap in Wolf's writing between the hypnotic flow of her prose and the violent cruelties that underlay the society she describes. The shortcoming here is not with Wolf's language, however, but with the western liberal's narrow sense of what constitutes valid political commentary in such circumstances. Greiner's political sensibility has no room for Wolf's troubled subjectivity because his politics are based upon a self-confident notion of individual rights and entitlements that can easily be converted into indignant outrage. For Wolf, such a sense of entitlement is unimaginable, and the indignation that it breeds is therefore absent from her work. Instead, her language seeks to capture the sense of personal vulnerability that accompanies the self in a world where one's being is constituted as much from without as from within. Greiner, looking from the outside, angrily asks Wolf and her peers 'How could you live like that?' Wolf, on the inside, can only pause to reflect, asking 'Who am I that have lived this life?'

This 'Christa-Wolf-Sound' has found echoes in other writers, and it may even be a new kind of idiom for speaking about the relationship between memory, the self, and the state in the modern world. Timothy Garton Ash's recent book on his own experience with the East German past, *The File, A Personal History*, used much the same language that Wolf had used to describe the problem of police surveillance in the German Democratic Republic, though to very different effect. In *The File*, Garton Ash, a respected commentator on Eastern European affairs, described his own research into the records that the *Stasi* had kept on him since the moment he first arrived in East Germany as a doctoral student from Cambridge University in the late 1970s. Finding it relatively easy to deduce the identity of the former acquaintances who had spied on him for the *Stasi*, Garton Ash sought them out. He confronted them with their written reports and evaluations, and tried to understand what had brought them to
co-operate with the regime in this way. At the same time, Garton Ash rather self-consciously broached the question of his own identity and his own past, as he encountered scenes from his former life recounted in the bureaucratic prose of the secret police and their anxious informants. In a striking passage that played on themes similar to Wolf's _Kindheitsmuster_, Garton Ash's book appropriated the language of Wolf's ambiguous sense of self and its relation to memory.

Personal memory is such a slippery customer. Nietzsche catches it brilliantly in one of his epigrams: "'I did that', says my memory. 'I can't have done that', says my pride and remains adamant. In the end – memory gives way." The temptation to pick and choose your past, just as it is for nations: to remember Shakespeare and Churchill but forget Northern Ireland. But we must take it all or leave it all; and I must say 'I'.

The difference, of course, is that Garton Ash has never had any difficulty saying 'I'. He knows exactly who he is, and is so confident of his position as a proud inhabitant of the western tradition that when he encountered the Stasi's description of himself as a typical 'bourgeois liberal', he accepted it wholeheartedly.

There is nothing crude about Garton Ash's act of confession in _The File_. Throughout the book, he did not hide the fact that his robust sense of self came laden with the privileges of an upper-middle-class background. He paused in his reminiscences long enough to ponder his own place in the cold-war confrontation that pitted his nation and government against the governments of the Eastern bloc. Recalling his own youthful encounter with the British secret service, a discreet recruiting interview with an official from an unnamed bureau, Garton Ash reflected on the hundreds of thousands of files kept in offices by officials like this one, files on private citizens like himself, maintained by bureaucrats who were the products of the same education and background as his own. In the end, however, this careful self-scrutiny only reinforced Garton Ash's unabashed sense of moral righteousness, and he ended the work with language that is more redolent of Martin Luther than Christa Wolf. 'Domestic spies in a free country live this professional paradox', he wrote. 'They infringe our liberties in order to protect them. But we [writers] have another paradox, we support this system by questioning it. That's where I stand.'

Wolf's writing will not allow for such a posture, since she is uninterested in the heroic self of western liberalism. Her work takes the crude opposition between the individual and collective that has structured so much commentary on twentieth-century totalitarian regimes and reveals it to be as much a part of cold-war politics as
Ronald Reagan's speech on the Soviet 'evil empire'. In its place she substituted a much more cautious story of self-discovery in a hostile world. Unlike the confident and purposeful sense of self that came so easily to Garton Ash, the subject of Wolf's writings comes to self-awareness slowly and timidly, always vulnerable to the particular demands of family, place and time. With luck, she concludes, self-knowledge will arrive with maturity, but only at a price – the loss of any real sense of continuity with one’s past.

For Wolf, then, to know one's self means first, to break with what one has been. It was her misfortune to have lived in a time and place that demanded she do this not once but twice in her life. Garton Ash, who never faced such a task even once, may congratulate himself for having been on the right side in a serious struggle. Nevertheless, his sincere attempt to understand the pressures that brought East Germans to betray both themselves and the people closest to them falls short when he juxtaposes his own youthful decisions with the agonizing dilemmas faced by people on the other side of the wall. Even good bourgeois liberals have something to learn from Christa Wolf's writings, therefore, since presumably they would rather base their commitment to individualism on something other than the hazards of birth and background. They might learn something about the difficulty of saying 'I'.

ENDNOTES

1. The book of essays was originally published in Germany as Auf dem Weg nach Tabou (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994).
6. Stasi files come in two types, and both are now in the hands of the Gauck authority, a government office headed by the former Protestant pastor Joachim Gauck. The so-called Opferakten or 'victim files' record the results of police surveillance of ordinary citizens in the GDR. The IM files – for Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter or 'unofficial collaborator' – document the activities of unpaid informants among the general population. Anyone who believes they might be the subject of Opferakten can now ask to see them, and it was in reading her own 'victim files' in March 1992 that Christa Wolf discovered references to IM files with her name on them. Because of their extremely sensitive nature, the Gauck authority has been much more careful about allowing people to see the IM files, and when the scandal broke in 1993, Christa Wolf had still not been granted
access to those documenting her activities as a secret informer. Several media organizations, including the newsmagazine Der Spiegel, on the other hand, obtained copies and used them in their coverage of the story. Wolf’s IM files and the accompanying articles from the press have now been published by Hermann Vinke, along with related correspondence between Wolf and her associates and friends. See Hermann Vinke, ed., Akteneinsicht Christa Wolf. Zerrspiegel und Dialog (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1993).

14. Volker and Anne Braun’s letter to Wolf is reproduced in Parting from Phantoms, 215–16.
17. A Model Childhood, 191.
20. Medea, 12.
22. Medea, 55.
23. Medea, 63.