

The Fragility of the Self in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.*

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In perhaps the most poignant passage Freud ever wrote, he comments on the vulnerability of the ego, betrayed from within and without:

We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men. The suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other. We tend to regard it as a kind of gratuitous addition, although it cannot be any less fatefully inevitable than the suffering which comes from elsewhere.¹

Had Freud had even a trace of the oceanic feeling he claimed to know only by report, he might have added to his catalogue the anguish occasioned by God's disappearance; further, feminist critics would insist on acknowledgement of the particular hardships borne by their gender, so long endured they have come to seem nearly inevitable. But however one amends Freud's list, what does seem clear is that his general estimation of the almost hopelessly beleaguered self might stand as an epigraph over most twentieth century fiction – from Joyce's creation of Leopold Bloom who endures in a single day the buffets Ulysses underwent in a decade, to Kafka's Joseph K. arrested without apparent cause and ultimately executed "like a dog," to Handke's Tormann bewildered by even the simplest human intercourse. All this is to say, then, that the fragility of the self central in both Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* is not a theme unique to these authors, by any means.

What is strikingly similar, however, about the fictional worlds of Woolf and Wolf is, first of all, their almost dizzying fluidity. The external world, largely an alien place, is recorded as ongoing montage, incapable of lending any kind of steady orientation. And once such a Heraclitean reality is posited, the most essential question one can raise is why an individual should see the things in the particular way he does. Though the problem of knowledge is of importance for both authors, psychology is clearly more central than epistemology. What this means more specifically is that character takes shape primarily in

the ever shifting and unreliable memory of other characters. In both works the resurrection of the protagonists in memory takes place many years after the "actual" Christa T. and Mrs. Ramsay have died, just at the point, in fact, where they were about to sink into oblivion, and in both cases the resurrection, occurring in response to a deeply rooted need, works some profound change upon the rememberer. By coming to terms with these characters in memory alone, then, where they are subject to the desire of the living, both Lily and the narrator of *Nachdenken* create a form of alter ego. (Indeed, there are clues that perhaps there is no character Christa T. separate from the narrator, but that both represent dual aspects of one personality). Thus, more than a desire to understand the "other," this coming to terms with the dead is really just another way of getting to know a heretofore lost or buried aspect of the self. Both Christa T. and Mrs. Ramsay are conjured up because they are "needed" to overcome the stagnation caused by an emotional block too long ignored. They serve as catalysts for the *Trauerarbeit* to which Christa T.'s narrator and Lily must submit before repressed emotions can emerge and psychic harmony be reestablished.²

And not just Lily and the narrator of *Nachdenken*, but the authors themselves are submitting in these works to some kind of *Trauerarbeit*. Virginia Woolf made it quite plain in her diaries that *To the Lighthouse* was for her a way of dealing with the memories of her parents and early childhood,³ something she was compelled to write, while Christa Wolf made no secret of the highly autobiographical nature of *Nachdenken* and left little doubt that Christa T. represented, among other things, a long repressed aspect of herself.⁴ Yet, whereas Christa Wolf, the author, confronts in her character, Christa T., the dormant aspect of her own self directly and spares neither herself nor her narrator the fear and anguish associated with such soul-searching,⁵ Virginia Woolf avoids this direct confrontation by almost completely suppressing the narrative voice in her work. This avoidance of "sentimentality," as she calls it, allows her to distance herself from the emotional hazards of that enterprise by projecting her emotions onto Lily Briscoe, a character who in the first half of the novel plays almost too minor a role to be endowed later on with the important task of *Trauerarbeit*, giving Mark Spilka cause to speak of "Lily Briscoe's Borrowed Grief."⁶

Freud, in his burrowing through layers of psychic material, likened the work of the psychoanalyst to that of an archeologist, a student and excavator of the long forgotten, buried past, someone capable not only of restoring the past but of making it again viable for the present. Even if Christa Wolf had not acknowledged her indebtedness of Freud, especially to his theory of repression and the unconscious, her method of writing, or more precisely of "assembling" the character of Christa T. by using snippets of Christa T.'s writing to rekindle the narrator's memory of forgotten experiences and impressions, and by relying on the imagination to fill in memory gaps, can be seen to parallel in many ways the Freudian method of analysis and bears testimony to his influence.⁷ Nelly, a character in her novel *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), speculates what would happen "wenn wir den verschlossenen Räumen in unseren Gedächtnissen erlauben würden, sich zu öffnen und ihre Inhalte vor uns auszuschütten."⁸ This speculation so clearly articulated in this later work, was already put into effect in *Nachdenken*, where the narrator does just that, break open "die verkapselten

Höhlen...[im] Gedächtnis".⁹ not just her own caves, but also Christa T.'s to get at the essence of the self. Writing and remembering as a form of self-awareness in *Nachdenken* thus takes place on three levels, that of the author, that of the narrator and that of the character. Christa T., whereby it isn't at all clear which of the three constitutes the primary self, which the reflections.¹⁰

Though Virginia Woolf's own Hogarth press published "all Dr. Freud" and she was acquainted with Alix Strachey and others who had submitted to analysis, she did not share Christa Wolf's obvious affinity for psychoanalytic theory.¹¹ Nevertheless, when she came to reflect years later how writing *To the Lighthouse* had freed her from the obsessive, haunting memories of her parents, she likened this creative process to a kind of psychoanalytic purging: "I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients."¹² Similar ambivalence about psychoanalysis reveals itself in her approach to writing. She rejects as ungentle the Joycean style "stream of consciousness" that supposedly paralleled closely the Freudian method of free association because it seemed to her "conscious and calculated."¹³ Instead she prefers her own method of feeling about "in a state of misery," allowing unconscious material to emerge gradually by waiting until "one touches the hidden spring."¹⁴ which suggests a somewhat more spontaneous excursion into the unconscious. Yet when we learn that her "tunneling" into the past is done in order to "dig out *beautiful caves*"¹⁵ [italics mine] behind her characters, the implicit censoring of unconscious material makes Woolf's criticism of Joyce more applicable to herself. This becomes especially apparent if we consider how hard she tries to keep her writing impersonal and free of anything that could be construed as "sentimental" when dealing with the very personal topic of *To the Lighthouse*. The result of this conscious check Woolf puts on the flow of unconscious processes is that only Lily is granted a glimpse of her libidinal impulses, while the deeper, more complex aspects of her other characters remain largely hidden, not just from themselves, but from the reader and, we suspect, the writer as well. Similar to Wolf, then, but for quite different reasons, Woolf's fictional selves too, can only be unearthed with extraordinary effort. But, in the end, when at last discovered, they, too reveal themselves to be radically intersubjective – "the caves ...connect."¹⁶

With all this as a means of establishing the basis for a comparative study of the two novelists, let us look more closely at, first, *To the Lighthouse*. In doing so we are immediately struck by the fact that there is a further, overarching metaphysical problem which militates against arriving at and maintaining a sense of self: Virginia Woolf's godless universe seems absolutely indifferent to human endeavours.

Did nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacency she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture. That dream, of sharing, completing, of finding in solitude on the beach an answer, was than but a reflection in a mirror, and the mirror itself was but the surface glassiness which forms in quiescence when the nobler powers sleep beneath?¹⁷

Although none of the characters ever describes the problem in these bald, Nietzschean

terms, almost all of them are vitally concerned with escaping the general flux of time, and hence oblivion, by creating something of permanence that will outlive them: Mr. Ramsay (as well as his young protégé Charles Tansley) would like to secure for himself a bit of eternity by attaining fame with his scholarly books; Lily Briscoe wishes that she might create the kind of art that would stand in the future as a testimony to the creative powers of her maligned gender; Mrs. Ramsay struggles constantly to stay the hand of time by creating small moments of peace, harmony and happiness that would endure in the memory of those she had taken under her wing; while Mr. Bankes fears he may have neglected investing in his own immortality by not having married or fathered by children. Often, however, the battle against time appears so one-sided that paralysis sets in. Mr. Bankes, in resignation, concedes "Who could tell what was going to last – in literature or anything else?" (161). Mr. Ramsay, typically pushing the point further, seeks refuge in the speculation that even the greatest of spirits will all ultimately be enfolded in silence, and he is driven to take a perverse delight in contemplating that an insignificant pebble would "outlast Shakespeare" (56). Mrs. Ramsay herself, the most resilient of the characters, is badly thrown off stride by the sudden notion that a friend whom she has not thought of for many years may similarly have forgotten her existence: "the thought was strange and distasteful" (132).

As a result of this inevitable erasure of characters' best efforts to leave behind their signature on the world, reality appears as strangely chiaroscuro, a kind of "lighthouse," where phases of darkness and illumination, self-assuredness and insecurity, emotional highs and lows are in constant, rapid pursuit of each other, making certainty ever elusive. Regardless, therefore, how secure and optimistic we might seem at any given moment, how harmoniously in tune with our environment, an awareness of nature's more sinister underside is almost certain to break through, shaking our confidence and reminding us, as it does Mrs. Ramsay in contemplating the monotonous ebb and flow of the waves on the beach, of the destruction, decay and death that constitutes the culmination of even the happiest and the most illustrious of lives (27, 8). In response, Woolf's characters maintain their precarious psychic balance only by falling from one emotional extreme into another. Thus Mrs. Ramsay who is angry with her husband for his insensitive remarks to James that seem to her "so horrible an outrage of human decency" (51), is immediately soothed by his show of humility, convinced that "there was nobody she revered more. She was not good enough to tie his shoe strings" (51). Yet, again, just before the big dinner, she "could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him" (125). And not just Mrs. Ramsay, but other characters, too, are caught up in similar vacillations. Mr. Bankes, for example, who on the lawn with Lily seemed nostalgic for family life and all aglow with love for Mrs. Ramsay, goes through a phase at dinner where he is suddenly convinced that "he did not care a straw for her" (135) and that "the truth was, he did not enjoy family life" either (134). Similarly, the socially unacceptable Charles Tansley feels so intimidated that he could blow the whole dinner table "sky high," but is miraculously soothed by a kind word from Lily (139). And perhaps the most remarkable case is Lily herself, who at one moment is extremely annoyed that Mr. Ramsay should demand pity from her, but at the next moment so "tormented with sympathy for him" that she is moved to tears (231).

Because of this tremendous volatility, it becomes difficult for us as well as the characters to say which aspect constitutes their "real" self. "Real" seems to be whatever one feels at any given moment, for consistent with the image of the lighthouse that can offer only a mere glimpse of the world at a time, but never the whole picture all at once, each character's perception of himself and the world is restricted to whatever phase he is in at the moment. It is therefore no contradiction that Mrs. Ramsay, who is constantly "searching" to "brighten" the lives of others, should identify her considerate and self-sacrificing "public" self with the bright beam, "the long, steady stroke" of the lighthouse, while associating at the same time her private self, hidden from public view, with the "wedgeshaped core of darkness" that constitutes the lighthouse's other phase(97).¹⁸ What is so striking and psychologically interesting about Virginia Woolf's treatment of her characters is that neither aspect is given clear predominance, leaving each character aware only of the phase he or she is in at a given moment, while the other phase becomes obscured, momentarily removed not just from consciousness, but also from the view of others, ready to resurface and become again conscious in an instant. As a result, it is impossible for the novel's characters to relate their emotional highs and lows or to gain genuine insight into the totality of their being. A true sense of wholeness, a strong sense of self can therefore never be attained. The best one seems to be able to do, if the inherent contradiction of one's existence, the constant vacillation, becomes too much to bear, is either to surround oneself with people whose disposition and temperament complements one's own, or to muster all one's creative energy by shifting, as does Mrs. Ramsay, the balance in favor of the bright side of life. For an artist, like Lily, there exists the third possibility of trying to capture that totality of being in a work of art.

Of these three ways a striving for wholeness, the achievement of what one might call "harmony through association" is perhaps the most common. All characters submit to this mode at least some of the time. Again, Mrs. Ramsay stands out as the prime example, capable as no other of being many things to many different people. Her male admirers, including her husband, see in her primarily an embodiment of all that which they themselves lack: a sense of healthy physicality, emotionality and yielding in the case of the mentally rigid and scholarly Mr. Ramsay; the warmth of motherhood and family life so desperately desired by the lonely, aging and nostalgic Mr. Bankes; and for the young and not yet fully formed Charles Tansely a kind of mother/lover, a transition figure combining all of the security of the former with the promise of all the excitement of the latter. In other words, though Mrs. Ramsay seems the antitheses of them, she really represents the other, complementary half of her masculine admirers, providing their fragmented selves with that healthy sense of wholeness they so desperately need for psychic harmony and balance, while, no doubt, emerging simiarily restored herself.¹⁹ Ultimately, however, the achievement of inner harmony by association cannot bring any lasting satisfaction to those who demand a higher degree of permanence, a more lasting escape from self-doubt.

Though committed to a very different medium and concerned with a very different result: in their desire to achieve some sense of permanence, perfection and beauty in a highly divisive, ephemeral world, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are kindred spirits, artists both.

Furthermore, Lily in her attempt to paint the portrait, is plagued by many of the same problems that beset Mrs. Ramsay. For the question confronting the conscientious hostess, how to reconcile abrasive guests and mend the social fabric, is really just another version of the one facing the artist, "how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left," and as such is a problem of composition (82f). Yet, where Mrs. Ramsay's *pièce de résistance*, her magnificent dinner, is an immediate triumph, Lily's painting of Mrs. Ramsay has to wait ten years for completion. Guided by the sensitivity and intuition that is a kind of hallmark of Virginia Woolf's women, Mrs. Ramsay succeeds because she can not only recognize the impediments to harmonious human interaction but can also muster the necessary skill and determination required to restore the disintegrating social fabric, if only for a moment. Undaunted by her own negative frame of mind she takes her cue from her reluctant guests, braces herself against the currents that are always against her: "Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her" (126). Her skill then as a great artist of life, her ability to rescue others from their phase of darkness, owes primarily to her ability to know and overcome her own negative side, to go against what would appear to be, for the moment at least, her "real" self.

In her initial attempt to paint the portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily is plagued by some of the same problems that beset Mrs. Ramsay in her role as social arbiter (82f). More than just the technical question of composition, however, the problem seems to inhere in the subject of Mrs. Ramsay herself, more specifically, in the complexity of Mrs. Ramsay's character as it manifests itself in her simultaneous roles of mother, lover, wife, friend, and of course, role model for Lily. By insisting that "a shadow here" required "a light there" (81), Lily seems to sense intuitively that a truthful rendition of a subject would have to be more than an accurate representation of its beautiful surface, would have to get to the essence of its inner being as well: "What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which...you would have known [her]" (76). In other words, an accurate rendition of Mrs. Ramsay would have to give an impression not just of her various public personae, but also of her private self. Yet, unlike Mrs. Ramsay whose chameleon-like ability to be many things to many people owes primarily to the fact that she can easily insinuate an aspect of her multifaceted self into whatever void she might perceive in others, (dispelling thereby the mystery that others present by understanding them as just another aspect of herself), Lily is not yet capable of such psychological feats. In fact, she is aware of only two somewhat irreconcilable aspects of her own personality, the single, sexually inexperienced woman and the artist, neither of which seem to be able to find resonance in Mrs. Ramsay. Furthermore, since Lily's fear of sexuality stands in the way of her exploration of her own inner being and the forces that lurk there, she remains virtually ignorant of the darker aspects of the human personality in general. As a result, not even her imaginary attempt to gain access to the "cave" that represents Mrs. Ramsay's private, sexual being by burying her head in the lap of the beloved object can bring any results. For the understanding of sexual love that Lily seeks, the knowledge that is "intimacy itself," (79) cannot be achieved through

non-sexual physical contact or mental projection into the beloved object, cannot be "shared" vicariously like Mr. Bankes' infectious rapture of a Madonna-like Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son (73, 4). One can only identify successfully with those aspects of another that one can recognize within oneself. Being quite aware of the darker side of her own nature, Mrs. Ramsay, for example, is quick to recognize it in others and responds intuitively by drawing them back into the light, even if it means she has to overcome a similarly negative mood within herself. Lily however, tends to dismiss out of hand whatever negative thoughts, especially about Mrs. Ramsay insinuate themselves into her consciousness (be it a suspicion of pity underlying her altruism (128), a recognition of her meddlesomeness (78), or acknowledgement of her fading beauty (127)).²⁰ Clinging to the image of Mrs. Ramsay's unworldly perfection, "that she was unquestionably the loveliest of people... the best perhaps" while ignoring the insistent little voice of doubt that completes her thought: "and different too from the perfect shape which one saw there" (76), Lily is no more capable of relinquishing the lopsided view of such an adored subject, than she is able to confront the hidden aspects of her own personality. Consequently, she will continue to regard her fine sensitivity and intuition as diabolic interference rather than as an asset to her art:

She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's light between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see: this is what I see," and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (32)

Were Lily able to trust her intuition, she would know that her depiction of Mrs. Ramsay as "a triangular purple shape" (81) comes much closer to capturing that "wedged-shaped core of darkness" that is her earthy essence than her idealized perception of her as the more perfect "shape of a dome" (80).

It is thus predictable that Lily cannot solve the riddle of her painting by the simple mechanical device of "moving the tree to the middle" (128). She would have to understand precisely what that would signify in terms of her own life. The problem is especially acute for Lily, since unlike the other characters who all at some point are convinced their separate minds "connect," are subsumed into a larger whole, and "move to the same profound rhythm,"²¹ she is essentially isolated, left without any external source of identification. Unable to locate a kindred soul whose darker side would allow her to acknowledge her own, it is not surprising that she has made no headway in her life or her art when she reappears ten years later. In fact, Lily now seems emotionally dead, not touched in the least by the death of Mrs. Ramsay and her two children.

The one advantage this older Lily does have, however, is that the physical absence of Mrs. Ramsay forces her to seek her in the recesses of memory where her "demons" wander more freely. But after ten years of emotional dormancy, the descent into the cavernous depth of the mind does not come easily. In fact, before Lily can face the ghost of Mrs. Ramsay even in the safety of her memory, the place where the dead are "at our mercy" (260), she needs to become emotionally resensitized, or "unstuck." Here it is Mr. Ramsay who provides the necessary thrust by forcing her into a Mrs. Ramsay-type role with his unspoken demand for sympathy, much as Mrs. Ramsay had forced her once before to speak the magic word that would soothe the outrage in Charles Tansley. Unlike that earlier time, however, Lily seems now unable to "fake it" and is furious with the absent Mrs. Ramsay whom she blames for this unbearable situation. Negative as it might seem, however, (and the consensus of interpretation is that this is something that presents an obstacle to Lily's coming to terms with Mrs. Ramsay) this is actually a healthy anger, for it is the first time that Lily dares express her repressed emotions and acknowledge them freely, without guilt. This in turn allows her to act spontaneously, to respond to Mr. Ramsay's need by praising his boots, a seemingly absurd gesture, but not if we remember that boots had always been one of Mr. Ramsay's favorite subjects. Immediately, this instinctive response has the effect of restoring Mr. Ramsay, while opening the floodgates of Lily's own repressed side. "Tormented" suddenly "with sympathy for him" (230), it is the first time in her life that she consciously experiences anything akin to passion and acquires thereby an important part of that knowledge she was seeking through identification with Mrs. Ramsay.

Having thus become "unstuck" and aware of her other, buried side, Lily feels "curiously divided, as if one part of her were drawn out there ... the other had fixed itself doggedly, solidly on the ground" (234). But as she turns to work on the portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, she finds herself losing "consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance" (238). Using her art now not as a surrogate for life, but a vehicle for self-discovery, she submits to the chaos of her mind that "kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues" (238). In the process fact and fiction, memory and invention become indistinguishable, but it doesn't seem to matter, for Lily realizes that: "this making up scenes about them is what we call 'knowing' people, 'thinking' of them, 'being fond' of them!" (258). Nevertheless, Lily discovers that not all the uncensored images which bubble up are positive, and yielding to this "truth," she takes a gleeful delight in Mrs. Ramsay's fading beauty and her failed match-making between Paul and Minta. Having thus finally had the courage to bring the image of her adored subject down to earth, Lily is similarly able to acknowledge what she had previously considered the flawed nature of her own physicality. A Dionysian vision of natives dancing around a bonfire reveals to her that her fear of sexuality conceals a passionate desire for the scorching love of Paul Rayley. It is only then, awakened to the reality of sexual desire, that she can see Mrs. Ramsay through the eyes of a man who loved her – Mr. Banks. She recalls that he once described Mrs. Ramsay as a stunning and as yet

unmarried beauty of nineteen wearing grey, and Lily, who has always, with her painterly eye, taken colour to represent essence, seizes on this greyness of Mrs. Ramsay (264). Gradually, it seems to dawn on her that a true sense of self might be attained not by trying to play off against one another disparate areas of light and dark, balancing a mass here with a mass there, but simply by union of the extremes. Having once acknowledged this, she records it artistically with a bold stroke in the center of her canvas, emblematic of her strenuously achieved sense of self.²² It is doubtful, however, that this small moment of triumph signals a new steady state of awareness, for it was the result of a "vision" that Lily puts behind her as soon as she lays down her brush.²³

Whereas in Virginia Woolf's world the sense of self requires daily renewal, and may take those who find themselves outside the mainstream, such as Lily, half a lifetime to achieve even momentarily, Christa Wolf's nonconformist, Christa T., appears, at first glance, to have nothing of this problem. When the narrator encounters Christa T. as a new pupil in her class, she is immediately impressed with her cool self-assurance, sublime indifference and quiet, preemptory manner. Her superiority is beyond question when it becomes apparent that she can control even the teacher and actually determined what the class was to talk about. The relaxed self-confidence of this outsider sets her apart from the others, while her moral incorruptibility throws generally accepted assumptions into question. Thus her mere presence opens the narrator's eyes to other possibilities: "Und ich mußte auf einmal denken, daß dieses Wasser da vielleicht doch nicht das Wasser des Lebens war und die Marienkirche nicht das erhebenste Bauwerk und unsere Stadt nicht die einzige Stadt der Welt."²⁴ We can readily accept the narrator's assertion that Christa T. is "kein Herrnkind" in the sense of being either of high birth or the vassal of some master, but really more like a "Sternkind," bright, solitary and also perhaps, as her fate reveals, endowed with destiny. Already as a ten year old child she derives a great deal of inner strength from her writing, using it not so much as a retreat from the world, but as a way of clarifying problems and coming to terms with the potentially overwhelming complexities of the external world: "*Daß ich nur schreibend über die Dinge komme!*" (40). At the same time she sees writing as a way of getting to know and understand her inner self and as such it will constitute an important part of her development.

Thus it would seem from the outset that Christa T.'s later difficulty in saying "ich" is not the result of a timid, uncomprehending ego beleaguered from within or made weak by intimidation from without. On the contrary, her original sense of self seems unshakable and not in the least dependent on others: "Die Wahrheit war: Sie brauchte uns nicht" (12). Yet, despite this psychic robustness that seems to be her birthright, Christa T. reveals herself exceptionally vulnerable and much less "lebensfähig" than even the most insecure of Virginia Woolf's characters. And it is to a great extent precisely her unfailing, uncompromising sense of self as ego-ideal, that is her undoing.

The certainty and sense of wholeness Christa T. demonstrated as a child is undermined first during her formative years under fascism and later again when she lives as a young woman under socialism. Having succumbed for a time to the Nazi ideology, Christa

T. begins to see through the inhumanity of the system as the war progresses and recognizes that it has little to do with the humanistic ideals inherent in Goethe's "Edel sei der Mensch" (112), that she has instinctively held since childhood. What sets her apart from the general population is her willingness to keep vivid in her mind the deeply troubling images of the past, to remember not only the atrocities committed by the state in the name of justice, but also the silent witness borne by the majority of the population that condoned them. She knows the simple truth that it is only by keeping the past alive in the present that we can hope to avoid those evils in the future. Recalling how as a young girl she inwardly recoiled from those who stood by idly while the gypsy boy's family was forced to leave town, thinking, "ICH, denkt des Kind, ICH bin anders" (27) she now reasserts her independence of mind by burning her books and pamphlets of Nazi propaganda, wary from that point on of all forms of "herd mentality." Convinced that there is no certainty in this world outside this firm moral sense which sustains her strong notion of integrity, she becomes suspicious of systems that offer all-too-ready solutions for complex social problems.

Nevertheless, finding that the ideals put forth under socialism during the founding years of the GDR coincide with her own humanistic views, she senses a possibility for the reconciliation of individual needs and societal demands. By drawing on the philosophy of Johannes R. Becher with its emphasis on human individuation, on "dieses Zu-sich-selber-Kommen des Menschen"²⁵ and Ernst Bloch's theory of the dialectically "mediated" subject-object relationship with its eventual synthesis in the utopian state, Christa T. and by extension, Christa Wolf, understand self-realization as essentially a social process and as such a necessary prerequisite for the development of humankind and the state.²⁶ Though Bloch's thought implies the possibility of the creation of a kind of paradise on earth, it is important to understand that his emphasis is on the *process*, rather than the *goal*. "Vollkommenheit," therefore, in Blochian terms is not that kind of sterile and static perfection, the desire for which Christa T.'s narrator calls "den gefährlichen Wunsch nach reiner, schrecklicher Vollkommenheit" (162), but rather a perpetual process, "ein unendlicher Entstehungsprozess," that through the dialectic between subject and object, individual and society, past and present reveals ever new possibilities for existence. A society committed to the principle of perpetual unfolding, or "andauernd entstehen" (187), has a particular appeal for the protagonist, who just barely escaped the Nazi's attempt to usurp and replace her progressive humanistic ideals with their own version of "schreckliche Vollkommenheit" (162). The hope that by simply "being," she could be useful, "könnte der Welt zu ihrer Vollkommenheit nötig sein" (6), rekindles Christa T.'s long dormant hope for self-actualization, giving new purpose to her life: "Nichts Geringers hat sie zum Leben gebraucht" (60).

It does not take long, however, for Christa T.'s deeply rooted fear of ideological entrapment, closed systems, and false certainties to resurface. Her suspicions at the university where she is preparing for a teaching career, that for every question there might already be a recorded answer is confirmed as it becomes apparent that the perpetuation of the system ("der absoluten Perfektion des Apparates" (64)) requires her participation "in name only" and thus nothing less than the elimination ("sich auslöschen" [54]) of the individual, that is,

the elimination of an individual as a growing, thinking and imaginative being and its "rebirth" as just another rigid, undifferentiated cog in the machine. Disillusioned once again because of yet another rift between reality and ideal, Christa T. nevertheless continues with her studies, trying to meet the demands of self and society through teaching. But this, too, proves disappointing when through the Essay Contest and the Toad Episode she is confronted with a new generation of insensitive, selfish and unimaginative pupils who insist on unquestioned social adaptation as the perfect vehicle for personal advancement: "Anpassung. Anpassung um jeden Preis" (124). Equally disappointing is a system that thinks nothing of the contradiction inherent in reducing the humanistic idealism of Marx to placard slogans, while promoting the most one-sided and callous of its citizens to the most influential positions.

Recognizing the impossibility of enhancing society's humanness by encouraging the unfolding of her students' potentials while instilling in them respect for the "halb realen, halb phantastischen Existenz des Menschen" (123), Christa T. abandons the public for the private realm, seeking fulfillment in love and writing instead. Though this move, which after one failed attempt at love results in marriage and parenthood, is clearly not to be understood as a flight into idyllic domesticity, it is also more than just a more circumspect attempt at self-actualization. For Christa T. it is one more way to help propel the world toward perfection: "Was fehlt der Welt zu ihrer Vollkommenheit? Zunächst und für eine ganze Weile dies: die vollkommene Liebe" (69). However, the attempts at entrapment and subtle corruption of her ideals in the public realm leave her disillusioned and wary even of private human relationships.

Having never been averse to a situation of dependency, provided it was she who was doing the choosing, ("sich in Abhängigkeit zu begeben" war ihr "niche ganz und gar zuwider ... wenn nur sie es sein konnte, die wählte" [181]). Christa T. gives the impression that, for her, love would have to be a conscious choice. And, indeed, the way she approaches the relationship with Kostja seems to support this: "Wir wollen nebeneinander hergehen" (69). However, she underestimates her own capacity for emotional involvement if she thinks she can avoid serious attachment and its potential pain by loving Kostja without actually falling in love with him or by pretending that she does not care about reciprocity: "Wenn ich dich liebe, was geht's dich an" (69). Because she is unable to apply the kind of critical ability that sets her apart in the social realm to her own erotic life, she allows herself to be swept away: "Hingabe, was immer daraus folgt, Mangel an Vorsicht und Zurückhaltung" (70). Thus, when this "Spiel ... mit hohem Einsatz" (70) turns to grim reality and Kostja prefers to take off with "blonde Inge," a well adapted character, as we know from Thomas Mann, Christa T., the nonconformist, is left to contemplate suicide. Clearly, then, the unchecked cultivation of the inner or "fantastic" self without the simultaneous acknowledgement of objective reality can have grave consequences. Kostja, beautiful and superficial with his passion for quoting and his derivative mind, who appealed only to her "fantastic" side, was patently not the ideal partner and Christa T. should have realized that. Furthermore, since the relationship almost cost her life, it was surely not the kind of "vollkommene Liebe" that would have helped speed the world toward a greater state of

perfection, although it may well have been the kind of love a romantic like Goethe's Werther would have died for without hesitation.

The more Christa T.'s options for meaningful participation in society are stifled, the more she resorts to the dangerous realm of the "fantastic" where an overwhelming sense of uselessness and self-doubt finally drive her to the brink of despair.

Mir steht alles fremd wie eine Mauer entgegen. Ich taste die Steine ab, keine Lücke. Was soll ich es mir länger verbergen: Keine Lücke für mich. An mir liegt es. Ich bin es, der die notwendige Konsequenz fehlt. Wie ist mir doch alles, als ich es zureist in Büchern las, so sehr leicht und natürlich vorgekommen. (80)

Yet it is her writing – the only way she had "über die Dinge zu kommen" – which in the form of the suicide letter to her sister that was never sent, saves her by holding out hope that she might yet be able to meet her needs for actualization in both the personal and public realm by having a child.

Redeemed through her writing, like the poet Theodor Storm, whom she admired for his ability to maintain psychic equilibrium by overcoming conflicts through creativity ("Er aber, der *letzter geistiger Konsequenz aus dem Wege geht*, bleibt vergleichsweise heil, *klagt aus, was sein empfindsames Gemut verletzt, ehe die Konflikte ihre volle Höhe und Scharfe gewinnen können*" [108]), Christa T. takes a long time before she commits herself to Justus. Righteous and "just" as his name implies and capable of always doing the right thing at the right moment, Justus would seem the perfect complement to Christa T.'s own impulsiveness and as such provide a stabilizing influence (128). Yet this relationship, too, is doomed, for it clearly lacks the passion, that "fantastic" element, that drew her to Kostja. Thus, with the "real" side of her personality now fixed in conventionality, the relationship with her as yet unbound "fantastic" side becomes problematic, thrusting her into the debilitating affair with the closed-minded Blasing: "Die unverbrauchten Gefühle fingen an, sie zu vergiften" (173). Her last attempt at self-actualization through the building of the house, for many critics a positive step in her personal development²⁷, can thus also be seen as a desperate effort to create some fortification against the tide of the inner pressures that threaten to overwhelm her ("Dämme bauen gegen unmässige Ansprüche, phantastische Wünsche, ausschweifende Träume" [135]) by seeking refuge in the thoroughly material world. Though Christa T. at this point still thinks she can, in this apparently creative way, unearth her buried half and restore wholeness to her being ("Ich grab mich aus"), it is quite clear to the narrator that she is really burying herself: "Und du wirst dich vergraben" (167). Thus, whereas Christa T. had hoped at one point to make the world "dicht" through her writing, to preserve "die schöne, helle, feste Welt, die ihr Teil sein sollte" (25), she now seeks to survive by sealing up ("dicht machen") her own inner self. Ignoring the narrator's advice to write, "Schreib doch Krischan. Warum schreibst du nicht?" (190), she gradually abandons the one activity, which, as she had learned from Storm, might have insured her survival, because it cannot, in its socially unmediated form become this kind of vehicle for self-discovery she intended it to be.²⁸ Dissipating, therefore, what little energy she has left

in meaningless activity, her sense of self deteriorates at a rapid rate:

Alle ihre Versuche, den toten Kreis zu verlassen, der sich um sie gebildet hatte, kamen in schrecklichem Gleichmut nur immer wieder zu ihr zurück. Sie spürte, wie ihr unaufhaltsam das Geheimnis verlorenging, das sie lebensfähig machte: das Bewußtsein dessen, wer sie in Wirklichkeit war. Sie sah sich in eine unendliche Menge von tödlich banalen Handlungen and Phrasen aufgelöst. (174)

Having cut herself off, prematurely, from the development of her hidden potential both in love and work ("die unendlichen Möglichkeiten," (184), "das Spiel mit Varianten hat aufgehört" [152]), results in an ever greater alienation from her ego-ideal and as such in the repression that is the cause of her increasing fatigue (*Lebensmüdigkeit*): "Niemals kann man durch das, was man tut, so müde werden wie durch das, was man nicht tut oder nicht tun kann" (154).²⁹ Trapped, she locks herself in and slowly suffocates, as her death by leukemia, the disease marked by impoverished, oxygen-starved blood would indicate.³⁰

This is not to say, however, that Christa T.'s life was without purpose or benefit. In fact, unlike the memory of Mrs. Ramsay which insinuates itself upon an unwitting Lily, Christa T.'s narrator sets out quite deliberately to rescue Christa T. from oblivion. Yet, even though she asserts that Christa T. is needed, "es scheint, wir brauchen sie" (9), she never really tells us why, leaving the reader to draw his own conclusion. Clearly her reminiscences about Christa T., her "nach-denken" not just in the sense of pursuing in thought, but pursuing Christa T.'s thoughts in an effort to capture the essence of her being is to facilitate the process of identification the narrator so clearly seeks. This blurring of the subject-object relationship allows the narrator both to reconcile herself to a figure she did not at one time wholly approve of, and enable her to resurrect in concrete terms an image of her own better self, or ego-ideal.³¹ In other words, by confronting Christa T. in memory, the narrator unearths something that, though lost for some time, had always been a part of her, while Lily Briscoe's encounter with the "ghost" of Mrs. Ramsay brings her face to face with an aspect of herself heretofore completely unknown. Yet, since both are restored or made more "whole" by the encounter it would seem that these two rememberers are the real protagonists of these novels. And indeed, it would be difficult to refute that Lily Briscoe, a secondary character in the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, is the undisputed heroine of the third and last part. In Christa Wolf's novel, however, the situation is more complicated, especially if we take seriously Wolf's remark that she regarded not Christa T. or the narrator, but rather the relationship between the two as the "Mittelpunkt" of the work.³² She thus seems to posit an "invisible protagonist" that emerged in the process of writing and that we should consider in the process of reading as well. Christa Wolf, then, not only dissolves those rigid divisions between narrator and narrated, subject and object that Virginia Woolf tried so hard to uphold by creating a largely absent narrator, but, as a natural progression of the dialectical process, extends the concept of protagonist to include author and reader as well. The self-actualization or "Zu-sich-selber-Kommen" that is denied Christa T. in her own time is thus realized in her narrator, and by extension, the author, who would, in her own life and work appear to be the

true heir to both. Furthermore, since Christa Wolf perceives her art as an ongoing dialectical process, it is quite likely that the liberating effect the book had on its author might well extend to its readers, leading them to the discovery of the uncharted territory locked deep within the recesses of their own being. "Ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns"³³ said Kafka, and it might, therefore, be hoped that Christa Wolf's insistence, "dab man um jeden Preis versuchen muß, den Kreis dessen, was wir über uns selbst wissen oder zu wissen glauben, zu durchbrechen und zu überschreiten"³⁴ would find resonance in the social realm. Moreover, through her depiction of the interdependence of the private and the social, Christa Wolf seems to emerge here as precisely the kind of author Christa T. would have been, had she lived in a more congenial time. For unlike Lily Briscoe's painting which brought only private pleasure and seemed destined for an attic, the work of Christa T.'s narrator and by extension Christa Wolf, is a good example of what is meant by a socially responsible literature of the self that one could envision becoming the powerful tool for social change Bloch meant it to be:³⁵ Thus, despite her resignation to the "Nichterfüllung" of her goal in her own time, Christa T.'s hope for the future seems justified, for as she had anticipated it, future time is, indeed, her own time.³⁶

In contrast, then, to Virginia Woolf's characters, especially Lily, whose fragility is linked to weakened ego sense derived through deeply rooted insecurities and gender related intimidation, that is, from within as well as without ("women can't paint, women can't write"), Christa T.'s diminishing self-assuredness derives rather from exceptional ego-strength, more specifically, from a highly developed notion of ego-ideal. Critics who fault Christa T. for her apparently selfish inability to reconcile herself to the prevailing fail to understand that one cannot, even for appearance's sake, join that which one intends to change and maintain one's sense of moral integrity.³⁷ Fatigue and illness as the result of the refusal to do what would go against one's nature or the inability to act in accordance with one's better nature may thus be indicative of physical weakness, but, as the narrator insists, it is also the mark of spiritual fortitude: "Das war ihre Schwäche und ihre geheime Überlegenheit" (134). Christa T.'s inability to say "ich", "die Schwierigkeit, 'ich' zu sagen" (194), is thus a matter of uncompromising honesty, of the refusal to call "ich" that which she perceives to be only a part, but not the whole of her being. Furthermore, though one might be tempted to blame her personal demise on her inability to curtail her "fantastic" or emotional side, one ought not overlook the fact that it was the very society that first kindled her idealism that now betrayed it by making it impossible for her to find a niche in it. As Anna Kuhn so succinctly put it, "since her sense of self is achieved against the definition of the norm, she knows only what she is *not*."³⁸ The situation for Lily and Christa T. is thus quite the reverse: Lily, initially repressed, manages to unleash her libidinal power through the confrontation, in memory, with Mrs. Ramsay, giving expression to her newly found sense of self through art, while Christa T., psychologically "whole," becomes ill because she is forced to repress that part of her ego that represents her ideal self and is prevented from resolving the dilemma of her existence through art. One is restored by the integration into a society that had regarded her as an outsider, the other destroyed because she persisted in being one.

Notes

¹Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontent*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 24.

²"Tatsächlich wird aber das Ich nach der Vollendung der Trauerarbeit wieder frei und ungehemmt." Sigmund Freud, "Trauer und Melancholie," *Studienausgabe*, III (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982) p. 199.

³Contemplating the 96th anniversary of her deceased father's death, Virginia Woolf writes: "I used to think of him and mother daily; but writing the *Lighthouse* laid them in my mind... (I believe this to be true – that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthy; and writing of them was a necessary act.)" Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), p. 138. See also Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex: The University Press, 1976), pp. 80-81. For a detailed analysis of the psychological significance of *To the Lighthouse*, the relationship between fact and fiction, see Mark Spilka's excellent article: "On Lily Briscoe's Borrowed Grief: A Psycho-Literary Speculation," *Criticism*, 21 (1979), pp. 1-33.

⁴"Später merkte ich, daß das Objekt meiner Erzählung gar nicht so eindeutig sie, Christa T., war oder blieb. Ich stand auf einmal mir selbst gegenüber, das hatte ich nicht vorgesehen." Christa Wolf, "Selbstinterview," in *Die Dimension des Autors. Essays und Aufsätze, Reden und Gespräche 1959-1985*. (Darmstadt und Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1987), p. 32.

⁵Sylvia Schmitz-Burgard in her essay, "Psychoanalyse eines Mythos. Nachdenken über Christa T.," understands "die Angst um die eigene Person" as the driving force behind the remembrances of the narrator, *Monatshefte*, 79, No. 4 (1987), p. 465.

⁶Spilka, *Criticism*, p. 1.

⁷"Daher wird Literatur, wird jedenfalls für mich das Schreiben immer mehr ein Instrument zur Öffnung unbewobter Bereiche; der Weg zu dem Depot des Verbotenen, von früh an Ausgesonderten, nicht Zugelassenen, Verdrängten; zu den Quellen des Traums, der Imagination und der Subjectivität – was auch bedeutet, daß Schreiben für mich eine Dauer-Auseinandersetzung mit jenen Bindungen ist, die auch durch Wörter wie 'Staat', 'europäisch' und 'Literatur' gekennzeichnet sind. Die Spannung, die aus dieser Konfliktlage entsteht, ist, wie ich hoffe, nicht zerstörerisch, sondern ein kleiner Teil jener Energie, die in unserer Gegenwart auch, zum Glück, auf unserem alten Kontinent, daran gewendet wird, das Überleben durch ein neues Wertgefüge zu sichern." Christa Wolf, "Preisrede aus Anlaß der Verleihung des österreichischen Staatspreises für europäische Literatur," in: *Der Falter* 6, 1985, S. 25-26.

⁸Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (Berlin: Aufbauverlag 1976), p. 85.

⁹Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster*, p. 8.

¹⁰This ambiguity of identity is a distinguishing feature of Christa Wolf's work. For a further discussion of this topic see: Helen Fehervary, "Christa Wolf's Prose: A Landscape of Masks," *New German Critique*, 9 No. 27, (Fall 1982), pp 57-87.

¹¹See the letter to Molley MacCarthy, October 2nd, 1924 in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Johanna Trautmann (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1975-1980), vol. III, p. 134 f. Woolf seemed unimpressed, especially, by what she perceived to be the effects of psychoanalysis on some of her friends: "The last people I saw were James and Alix [Strachy], fresh from Freud-Alix grown gaunt and vigorous – James puny and languid-such is the effect of 10 months psycho-analysis" In: *The Letters*, v. II, p. 482. "Freud has certainly brought out the lines in Alix. Even physically, her bones are more prominent. Only her eyes are curiously vague." v. II, p. 135.

¹²Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 81. Rachel Bowby in her book *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) quotes this passage to support her view that "Woolf drew directly on psychoanalytic insights in her prose writing (especially *Three Guineas*), but she also made use of them in her fiction." (p. 65). This, however, seems to be somewhat of an overstatement, especially since Woolf's relationship to Freud is difficult to determine. In a letter to Harmon H. Goldstone, March 1932, she seems to deny any direct influence: "I have not studied Dr. Freud or any psychoanalyst – indeed I think I have never read any of their books: my knowledge is merely from superficial talk. Therefore any use of their methods must be instinctive." *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. III, ed. Nigel Nicolson & Johanna Trautmann (New York & London: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1975-1980), p. 36. Though writing *Lighthouse* might have freed her temporarily from the obsessive preoccupation with her deceased parents, the fact that after completing it she felt "nearer suicide, seriously,

