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'To learn to live without alternatives. German conditions'. Forgetting as Remembering in Christa Wolf's *The City of Angels, or The Overcoat of Dr Freud*

**Abstract**

In her final book *The City of Angels, or The Overcoat of Dr Freud*, Christa Wolf reflects on the impossibility of a single Germany by engaging in depth with the process of remembering and the concept of national identity(ies). A theme throughout her entire fictional and essayistic writing, the process of personal and political remembering undergoes further critical scrutiny and probing when she filters it through loss and self-doubt and pairs it with the moment of forgetting. The latter is problematized in relation to space and time when in *the City of Angels* reflections on her own identity/ies as a German are interweaved with the history of emigrants from German fascism in Los Angeles and the aftermath of German reunification. The text which emerges as a collage of fictional, autobiographical and essayistic elements looks at the (im)possibilities of national identity as charted through official, personal and alternative histories of pre and post-war West and East Germany. The text proposes and pushes to the limits an epistemology of memory by exploring the moment of forgetting as the blind spot of remembering and, at the same time, as an alternative perspective that might allow us a glimpse at the past as part of a lived presence and the promise of a future.

'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.'<sup>1</sup>

Engaging with Christa Wolf's fictional, essayistic and other work will always force its readers to confront the past and its many literary and philosophical constructions. Her writing is defined by and at the same time struggles with the ways in which any sense of identity is refracted through the process of remembering as an amalgamation of personal and cultural memory. In addition, it seems that for Wolf personally, approaching the past and how it manifests itself as a sense of experiencing the present and a possibility and opportunity to imagine a future is always inextricably linked to her German identit(ies). As this article will explore, Wolf's sense of national identity cannot be expressed in the singular and part of her idiosyncratic and original approach to writing/remembering and forgetting German history is expressed in her understanding of a German identity as one that cannot 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* (published in German in 2010 and translated into English as *The City of Angels, or The Overcoat of Dr Freud*, 2013) in particular, often features as a predicament for and, at the same time a creative source of literary and philosophical inspiration. From a formal and narrative perspective this is manifested in the complex threefold relationship between the experience of historical reality, subjectivity and the text which Wolf herself referred to as 'subjective authenticity'. As a literary style, subjective authenticity can be understood as a political and aesthetic response and challenge to the more traditional understanding of Socialist Realism, the dominant form of artistic expression in the GDR. As Anne Dwyer points out, subjective authenticity insists

'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.'<sup>2</sup>

Wolf perceives her writing as a further developing of the category of realism when she proposes that the task of the writer resembles a balancing

act that borders onto the paradox: 'to invent true to the truth as it is experienced by the individual'<sup>3</sup> ('wahrheitsgetreu zu erfinden auf Grund eigener Erfahrung'<sup>4</sup>). In her work, Wolf pushes this concept of authenticity, which is defined by a complicated and volatile experience of reality, to its limits when she experiments not only with formal and structural elements of narratives but furthermore elevates subjective authenticity to a moral category. By perceiving literature as a site where historical fact is given the same validity as individual subjective experience, Wolf's oeuvre from the 1970s onwards questions the existence of strict and unmoveable boundaries between literary genres. Furthermore, it is also suspicious and doubtful 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 a given, emerges in Wolf's writing as a changeable position that is defined by ongoing processes of self-consciousness and as a recognition of the importance of personal/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.'<sup>5</sup>

Whilst her ongoing experimentation with narrative persona and structure was often regarded as in opposition to the role of literature as understood by a more unrefined concept of socialist realism, Wolf herself 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 the triangular relationship between time, narrator/writer and text that often made it impossible for her to configure the relationship to the past and indeed 'writing the past' as a straightforward process that could exclude the dimension of the present. Likewise, 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 this 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.'<sup>6</sup>

Before I move on to a discussion of *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/personal identity. Of particular interest in this context will be her texts *Nachdenken ueber Christa T.* (published in German in 1968 and translated into English as *The Quest for Christa T.*), and *Kindheitsmuster* (published in German first in 1976 and translated into English first under the title *A Model Childhood* but then more appropriately into *Patterns of Childhood*), since both problematise and reflect upon the process of remembering in direct relation to fascist Germany and post-war Germany of the GDR. As will be discussed later, *The City of Angels* will provide a further layer by allowing the narrator figure to draw on these earlier titles as textual archives and by doing so add to the palimpsestic notion of national identity the experience of identifying as German after the reunification (*Wende*) in 1989. By contextualising her final novel in relation to earlier reflections on Germany's post-war history and its inevitable roots in its fascist past, the debate will read *The City of Angels* as a collage of fictional, autobiographical and essayistic elements that are produced by and contribute to a contemplation on national identity as charted through official, personal and alternative histories of pre and post-war West and East Germany. The text, I will suggest, proposes and pushes to the limits an epistemology of memory by exploring the moment of forgetting as the blind spot of remembering and, at the same time, alludes to an alternative perspective that might allow us a glimpse at the past as part of a lived present and the possibility of a future.

Whilst it is 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 similarly self-referential texts. Texts such as *A Model Childhood*, *Cassandra* and *What Remains?* will allow Wolf to re-think subjectivity as a site of negotiation between external, political constraints and the complexities of personal experience and remembering. The German title, 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 the life journey of Christa T. as charted through the memory of the narrator figure and by doing so, creates an inextricable link between what/who is remembered and who remembers, resulting in a narrative in which the process of remembering as such is as much at the centre of the book as the fictional documentation of life in the GDR of the 1960s. The text introduces a dialogic structure and a wide range of intertextual references with the effect that the narrative constantly interrupts and questions itself and therefore queries the concept of history and personal life-story as evolving in a progressive and forward-moving manner. In addition, the pattern of stagnation, realised in its brutal finality by the protagonist's untimely death from leukaemia, also comments implicitly and critically on the more dominant and official versions of socialist realism which preferred to present life in the GDR as a historical 'arriving'. This sense of inertia sets the tone for a novel where 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'?' 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 emphasise 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 the event of her premature death that sets into motion the creation of her as a literary character, a precarious subject position based on the narrator's memories of Christa T.'s suspicion of identity concepts fixed by society's expectations:

'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.'<sup>8</sup>

Since this is a text that always reflects and critically comments on the narrative process and the role of the narrator, the underlying ambiguity of the above passage also refers to the figure of the narrator and the creation and conditions of writing and literature at a given moment in history. This is further emphasized by the novel's time frame, the final years of the Third Reich up to the end of the 1960s, the latter a decade which official voices of the GDR would like to present as a period of consolidation and arrival in the new world of socialism. Pairing the newly emerging socialist state with the dying moments of a German regime from which the GDR wanted to distance itself politically and in its historical responsibility, 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 emphasised the supremacy of the collective over personal needs, in order to produce a coherent narrative of social identity, individuals and their versions of life and 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 for the complex relationship between individual and society. 'Because it seems that we need her'<sup>9</sup>, 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 worthy of public remembering. The moment of forgetting thus is not the opposite of the process of remembering for Wolf, but inhabits it 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 Fuehmann, an East German writer and intellectual who dedicated much of his writing to the two historical moments that bracketed his life - German fascism and socialism - also often focused on the process of remembering as impacted upon by the transitional nature of German identity

as part of 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 announces 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.'<sup>10</sup> Wolf agreed with Fuehmann that their generation indeed came to socialism via Auschwitz<sup>11</sup>, however this journey is not to be understood as a possibility to leave the past behind which would encourage the idea of the German socialist state beginning its existence from a point of *tabula rasa*. This critical attitude to the sanctioned version of post-fascist epistemology is also central to Wolf's novel *Kindheitsmuster*<sup>12</sup> with its complicated and often contradictory narrative structures and voices. The text's overtones of doubt and questioning<sup>13</sup> announce themselves already in the paraphrased quotation from Faulkner that functions as an opening statement and simultaneously as a deliberate delay and deferral of a beginning as such: 'What is past is not dead; it is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we pretend to be strangers.'<sup>14</sup> Like 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 as the natural arrival point of German history, Wolf insists adamantly that there can't be a 'clean break' with what went before. The quotation in its meaning and as a textual gesture refuses a sense of beginnings and endings, form a literary as well as from a political and philosophical perspective and thus sets the tone for a narrative that constantly doubles up on itself and by doing so refuses to 'move on'. This sense of non-linearity is further emphasized by the complicated narrative perspective, which similar to the one of *The Quest for Christa T.*, reflects on the difficulty of/in saying 'I'. The text develops on two narrative planes, one of which is from the point of view of Nelly who is always spoken of in the third person and a meta-narrator 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. Whilst the text (a novel? an autobiography? a biography?) can imagine the past only as detached and 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 and beginning. The constant clashes between 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 meta-narrative 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 to connect 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.'<sup>15</sup> Articulating a sense of self is thus linked inextricably to the process of remembering which itself is productive of patterns of subjectivity.

Wolf uses the trope 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 centre of the tale and thus emphasises the moment of the uncanny as part of this re-visiting 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.'<sup>16</sup> 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?'<sup>17</sup> This anxiety-ridden relationship between the generations refers to the idea of the self as riven by its own alterity and to 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 anti-fascism 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 as focussing on the future which meant the building of a new Germany in the form a socialist and therefore intrinsically anti-fascist state. Whilst 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/forgetting its ties to its own fascist past, the new socialist state's concept of remembering was volatile and defined by denial.<sup>18</sup>

The structural complications underlying Wolf's narrative discourse appear to strain against this view of a non-familial relationship between past (German fascism) and present (German socialism) since for her what is past is not and cannot be dead. Furthermore, not only is the estrangement between child and adult a central theme of the novel, the overarching meta-narrative 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 united to strictly conceal mutually shared embarrassing secrets.'<sup>19</sup> 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/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.'<sup>20</sup> For Wolf, rather than as an 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 centre 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.'<sup>21</sup> This excerpt from Hélène Cixous's 'Albums and Legends' approximates quite accurately the themes and aesthetic strategies underlying Wolf's final fictional text *The City of Angels or, the Overcoat of Dr Freud*. Published in German in 2010, the novel (biography? autobiography?) 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, the German Re-unification and the end and dissolution of East-Germany, the country which had been Wolf's home for most of her life and where she established her career as a writer and intellectual. Still

holding the blue passport of the GDR, the US immigration official looks at Wolf with suspicion when she gives East Germany as her home country. 'Are you sure that country exists?'<sup>22</sup> 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'.<sup>23</sup> Permeating so much of her previous work, it is once more the complicated relationship between past and present that informs not only context and content of the novel but also functions as its major structural and aesthetic framework. Moreover, it is yet again the inquiry into the process of memory itself that will become the predominant theme as the epigrammatic quote from Walter Benjamin's 'Excavation and Memory' hints at: '... 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.'<sup>24</sup> As already 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 searching 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 in 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?'<sup>25</sup> . The past according to Wolf, 'can split the first person into the second and the third',<sup>26</sup> thus defining subjectivity as deeply contingent on how and what we remember. And more so than ever it is the painful process of remembering, the question if remembering is possible at all, and what the attempt to remember does to identity, that takes centre stage in Wolf's text. But now these issues will be primarily approached 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: Interwoven with the reportage structure of the account of her time in Los Angeles, conversations with new acquaintances and her work on her research project, is a moment of trauma that affects Wolf 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 learnt that the socialist state to which she had always felt an albeit 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 answered their questions on some of her peers. Confronted with the physical presence of the file and her classification as 'informal collaborator', thirty years after the event, Wolf realises that she has no recollection whatsoever of these conversations and 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 narrator figure also take on a quasi- psychoanalytical intimacy and thus scrutinize the process of remembering as a private as well as a public/political discourse of repression. A further layer to this meta-narrative on remembering is added by the narrator's research project that has initially led her to Los Angeles: given to her by her late friend Emma<sup>27</sup> the narrator is in possession of an exchange of letters between Emma and L., the latter a friend who left fascist German and went into exile to the USA. The search for L. (a psychoanalyst) and the research of her life as a political emigrant introduces the issue of exile as the pre-history of the GDR and by doing so offers a further perspective to the complexity of identifying as German. Reading Thomas Mann's diaries of his time as a German emigrant and visiting the places where other political refugees such as Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, Lion Feuchtwanger and Theodor Adorno lived and worked during the 1930s/40s, allows the narrator to interconnect her painful self-examination with contemplations on the continuum of German national identity. Whilst many of her 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 new re-unified state. This new development leads to an even closer link between the public and the private, and 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.'<sup>28</sup> 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.'<sup>29</sup>

Life as estrangement and the need to re-situate oneself in the shifting parameters of one's own subjectivity emerge as the overarching themes of the current text in which the narrator is confronted with her own past and her life's work as an archival reference point that 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 on the brink of a nervous breakdown. These explorative forays into the meaning of remembering and its underlying mechanisms are embedded in 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 centre 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.'<sup>30</sup> Earlier in the novel, she

wondered: '... what in the world might be hidden in its inner lining, working its way out only bit by bit?'<sup>31</sup> In response Bob, the former owner of the coat, reflects on the possible reasons that led to 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?'

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The trope of Freud's overcoat creates and deepens the link to the concept of repression which is evidently of crucial significance for the discourse of remembering, in her previous work but even more so in the current text. The struggle of the narrator figure with her lapse of memory and the 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, and others such as traditional, religious and revolutionary songs. The singing literally takes over (she lists over 70 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.'

Having until then constantly castigated herself for her moment of forgetting, immersing herself in the continuum 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.'

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'; repression proper 'affects mental derivatives of the repressed representative, or such train of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with it', which means repression proper 'is actually an after-

pressure.'<sup>35</sup> 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 it, paradoxically, has to have *failed* as such. What the narrator realises in that night filled with songs that force themselves onto 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 life-long literary and personal preoccupation with the question of how we remember.

As referred to 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 it is a secret. Freud talks about something very similar when he defines repression proper as an after-pressure, as a tell-tale 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 as produced by a constant oscillatory movement between forgetting and knowing that one has forgotten/must forget. As Freud argued, 'Repression is a preliminary stage of condemnation, something between flight and condemnation'<sup>36</sup> and further on, '*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.*'<sup>37</sup> (italics in the original). However, keeping something at a distance from the conscious does not mean that it doesn't exist according to the paradigms of psychoanalytical theory. Wolf's moment of forgetting, I would argue has existed all the time as the inquisitive energy that fuelled 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 that made it so difficult for her to write in 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 everything, which in itself is possible, that defines a responsible attitude to history and the past, but it is the acknowledgment that everything we remember is founded on a conscious or unconscious forgetting, a process over which we only have a certain amount of control.

*The City of Angels* is a meditation on the mnemonic as 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.'<sup>38</sup> 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 towards a past that can be known, the process of remembering and the concept of archiving, gestures towards 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.'<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the novel, the narrator's demons of the past make way for contemplating on a possibility of a future that can grow out of a concept of remembering where forgetfulness is not erased but included as its pulsating drive and energy. It is predominately in the magic-realist dream sequences which feature her guardian angel Angelina, where Wolf's narrator is able to look back at her life and her work without occluding the idea of a future. As so often, 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?'<sup>40</sup> 'Here' denotes a concept of the present that is not purely a 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 the Death Valley. In the narrative, many parts 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 towards a sense of time and space that goes beyond a level of conscious knowledge. Like 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.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', "in, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund*

*Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), XVII, 237/38.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Dwyer, 'Runaway Texts: The Many Life Stories of Iurii Trifonov and Christa Wolf', *The Russian Review* 64 (October 2005); 605-27, p. 607

<sup>3</sup> My own (rather literal) translation

<sup>4</sup> Christa Wolf, *Werkausgabe in 12 Bänden*. Hrsg., kommentiert and mit Nachworten versehen von Sonja Hilzinger. (Muenchen: Lucheterhandhand Literaturverlag, 1999-2001); Bd. 4: *Essays, Gespraechе, Reden, Briefe, 1959-1974*, p. 258

<sup>5</sup> Christa Wolf, 'Subjective authenticity: a conversation with Hans Kaufmann', in *The Fourth Dimension: Interviews with Christa Wolf*, trans. Hilary Pilkington (London: Verso, 1988), p.28

<sup>6</sup> Christa Wolf, 'A Model of Experience. A Discussion on *A Model Childhood*.' in *The Fourth Dimension: Interviews with Christa Wolf*, trans. Hilary Pilkington (London: Verso, 1988), p. 40

<sup>7</sup> Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.*, Trans. Christoper Middleton (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970) p. 149

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 35

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Robinson, *The Skin of the System. On Germany's Socialist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 117

<sup>11</sup> See Holly Case, 'Blind Spot: On Christa Wolf. A postwar German novelist's complicated legacy', *The Nation*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012

<sup>12</sup> My references will refer to Virago Modern Classics English translation from 1983 which gave the title as *A model Childhood*. Other editions translated the title more accurately as *Patterns of Childhood*

<sup>13</sup> This is even further emphasized by using a quotation from Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions* as an epigram 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.

<sup>14</sup> Christa Wolf, *A Model Childhood*, trans. By Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 3

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.7

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- <sup>16</sup> Michael G. Levine, 'Christa Wolf's "Kindheitsmuster"', *Diacritics*, vol.27, No.2, Writing between the Lines (Censored), Summer, 1997) pp.106-123; p. 112
- <sup>17</sup> Christa Wolf, *A Model Childhood*, p. 125
- <sup>18</sup> West-Germany became the legal successor of the *Third Reich* und therefore legally responsible for the crimes committed during the Nazi regime.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* pp 78/79
- <sup>21</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Albums and legends', in: Eric Prenowitz (Translator), *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* (London:Routledge, 1997) p. 170-180.
- <sup>22</sup> Christa Wolf, *City of Angels or, The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, trans. By Damion Searls (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 3
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p3/4
- <sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, part 2 (1931-1934), "Ibizan Sequence"*, 1932, ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005) p. 576
- <sup>25</sup> Christa Wolf, *A Model Childhood* , p. 406
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>27</sup> Their relationship recalls the close and important friendship between Wolf and Anna Seghers
- <sup>28</sup> Christa Wolf, *City of Angels or, The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, trans. By Damion Searls (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 57
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.197
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188
- <sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Repression' in Sigmund Freud, *In Metapsychology* , The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 153
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 147
- <sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Repression' in Sigmund Freud, *In Metapsychology* , The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 145
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* pp 146-7
- <sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, Vol.25 No.2 Summer 1995, pp.9-63, p.9
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27
- <sup>40</sup> Christa Wolf, *City of Angels or, The Overcoat of Dr. Freud*, p. 255
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315

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