

**The evolving image of the German  
Democratic Republic as reflected in the  
works of Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf.**

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# ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this thesis is to demonstrate the direct relationship between history and literature, with particular reference to literature published in the German Democratic Republic. It explores the period of history from 1945 to 1990 describing the collapse of National Socialist Germany after World War Two; the formation of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East in 1949; the historical, political and cultural evolution of East Germany until the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and finally the absorption of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990.

Focusing on the literary aspects of the German Democratic Republic's cultural progression within this established historical framework, this thesis examines the distinctive evolution - in form and content - of literature produced in the German Democratic Republic taking direction from the model of 'literary phases' in the history of East German literature provided by Wolfgang Emmerich. By analysing eight selected texts from the body of literature of two of the German Democratic Republic's most prominent authors, Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf, this thesis illustrates the influence of political and historical events on fictional texts written in and about East Germany.

Extrapolating from historiographer Hayden White's theory which infers the irrefutable influence of *literary* conventions and developments on *historical*

discourse, this thesis espouses an inverse corollary: that *literary* texts are necessarily influenced by *historical* developments. Thus, to a significant degree, an image of the evolution of the German Democratic Republic can be formed through a detailed reading of the literature - produced within this historical context, examples of which are provided by the analysis of selected texts of Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf.

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# INTRODUCTION

## “The Incomplete Project of GDR Research”<sup>1</sup>

“The field of East German scholarship is still in virtual paralysis a decade after the collapse of socialism in 1989.” Anke Pinkert wrote this in 2001 (536) in a review of Julia Hell’s pivotal contribution to East German literary studies *Post-Fascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History and the Literature of East Germany*, and her statement is still applicable almost a full decade later. As Boetcher-Joeres (2000: 289), Constabile-Heming (2000: 220) and Bathrick (1999: 414) explain, traditional studies of the literature of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) have tended to “demonise GDR literature as retrograde and Stalinist.” (Bathrick 1999: 415) This reductionist, generalised representation of East German literature as purely political and realist – and therefore inferior to the modernist and post-modern Western literature – undervalues the contribution of GDR literature to a broader understanding of the life and history of the GDR, and to European history and literature as a whole. By viewing this literature as a source of information about the GDR, one can construct an image of life in the former East Germany.

Tate (2007: 7) echoes Pinkert’s sentiments in his study of East German autobiographical narratives: “it is abundantly clear that the literary “Aufarbeitung” of the GDR past would continue to preoccupy the authors who had lived through it long after the controversies regarding their relationship with the SED had died down.” While the heated *Literaturstreit* that ignited shortly after reunification when *Stasi* files were made public has dampened somewhat over the years, thousands of GDR citizens are still coming to terms with their involvement in the socialist

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<sup>1</sup> The title for this introduction is taken from Julia Hell’s 2004 article in *German Politics and Society* entitled “Loyal Dissidents and Stasi Poets: Sascha Anderson, Christa Wolf and the Incomplete Project of GDR Research.” (Vol. 20, pp. 1-9)

state, much like their parents before them came to terms with their own complicity in the Nationalist Socialist Germany.

In the first few years after reunification, Germany suffered an economic recession, economic uncertainty and high rates of unemployment partly as a result of global market forces and partly due to the added financial burden of reconstructing the former East to fit in with Western standards. (Hunt 2006: 1) During this time many GDR citizens, disenchanted with the commercialism and competitiveness in the West, began to “indulge in melancholic paralysis, and memories of a lost country”, which resulted in the development of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon. (Hell 1997: 1) This term refers to literary and cinematic portrayals of the former GDR in a humorous, nostalgic light, characterised by films like *Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Good bye, Lenin!* (2003). While these representations were extremely popular, they neglected the important and unresolved issues surrounding life in the GDR: the restrictiveness of the socialist state, the loss of individual identity to the collective ideal, the lack of resistance to, and participation in, state oppression. Moreover, because the histories of the GDR were significantly controlled and influenced by the state, GDR citizens turned to literature to help them come to terms with the state’s history and past events. For the first time since reunification Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) (winner of the 2007 Oscar for Best Foreign Film), finally addressed the ‘dark’ side of life in the GDR, marking a watershed in the study of the GDR past which is only now, almost two decades after the state’s collapse, beginning to deal with the real history of the GDR and what it was really like for people living in the socialist East.

This significant gap in literature and films depicting the ‘real’ GDR is now being addressed on a global scale: in September 2009 an international conference is due to take place at the University of Bath entitled *Twenty Years On: Remembering the GDR and Germany’s Reunification Process*. The call for papers places emphasis on autobiographical and historical accounts of the GDR.

The Edinburgh German Yearbook, an annual publication for German Studies, has chosen “GDR Constructions on Cultural Heritage” as the theme for its third volume to be published in 2010 in celebration of 20 years of unification. These are just two of the many journals, books and conferences whose focus - in the run-up to the 2009 anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall - is on the everyday life of the GDR citizen, accurately and historically represented, without the nostalgic colouring or socialist restrictions of past narratives. These publications are seeking to address what Hell (2004: 1) calls “the incomplete project of GDR research.”

It is not only the field of East German literature that is currently undergoing a large-scale revision, there is also “an honest and genuine desire among former historians in the GDR to debate and revise their positions before 1989.” (Berger 2003: 82) According to Berger (2003: 74), GDR historians have, in recent years, been motivated to critically re-assess their contribution to German historical discourse in the wake of an “anti-communist wholesale condemnation of GDR history.” Unfortunately only a very small percentage of former GDR historians are still active in historiographical institutions, with great deal of their work being discredited as “undeniably distorted [...] blatant political propaganda for the SED.” (Berger 2003: 68) Writing in 2003, Berger observed an increasing trend in historical discourse which called into question the *Wissenschaftlichkeit* of East German historiography, typically resulting in the reduction of a great deal of GDR historical discourse as merely another tool for the programming of socialism into East German society. (Berger 2003: 64) Thus, almost two decades after the reunification, the historical image of East Germany remains incomplete due to a perceived lack of reliable historiographies.

One can see that the canon of research on East German literature and history is far from complete, and as such, any study of significant GDR texts would be a welcome contribution to the body of literature aimed at developing a better understanding of life in the GDR. Moreover, with the current emphasis in GDR

scholarship on 'accurate', historical and autobiographical literature, a thesis that addresses the literary nature of past GDR histories – influenced as they were by socialist ideology – and the historical significance of literary texts written by two prominent GDR authors would exemplify the current trend in GDR research.

These global trends in East German research motivated the research topic for this thesis: the evolving image of the German Democratic Republic as reflected in the works of Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf.

**1. “There is now a need to abandon traditional assumptions on GDR literature and seek new perspectives.” (Constabile-Heming 2000: 220)**

What lies at the very core [of GDR research] is the relationship of literature to ideology as that site where stories about a collective history become entangled with the history of the subject. (Hell 1997: 2)

The intention of this thesis is to demonstrate how the history of the German Democratic Republic is reflected not only in the content of literature produced during the socialist Republic's history, but also in the style, structure and progression of literature itself, and therefore provide evidence of the immutable relationship between history and literature theorised by both Hayden White and Wolfgang Iser. This will be achieved by drawing close parallels between the historical development of the GDR and its literary development, while examining in-depth four texts by both Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf.

The theoretical framework used for this thesis is explained in Chapter One. A renowned and controversial theorist in the field of historiography, Hayden White builds upon the foundations of Aristotle, Giambattista Vico and Northrop Frye (*inter alia*) to develop his theory of “history as narrative” in which he determines that no historical discourse can exist without the use of literary conventions and figures of speech which enable historians to construct a recognisable and relatable narrative out of an otherwise abstract series of chronicled events.

White compartmentalises historical discourse into one of four established literary genres - Romance, Comedy, Tragedy and Satire – and explains that in addition to possessing the narrative characteristics of one of these genres, historiographies also employ one of four easily identifiable linguistic devices – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – in order to *create* an historical text. Thus the conception and formation of an historical text depends largely on existing *literary* principles. An aim of this thesis is to use White's theory (with specific reference to Emmerich's history of GDR literature) as a basis for advocating an inverse accompaniment, that is that the production of any *literary* text is inevitably influenced by the historical context within which it is written.

Chapter Two provides a brief description of this historical context, in this instance the evolution of the German Democratic Republic, outlining the period from 1945 to 1990. It describes the collapse of National Socialist Germany after World War Two and the occupation of a defeated Germany by the Allied and Soviet victors, resulting in the formation of the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East in 1949. Chapter Two also provides an overview of the historical, political and cultural evolution of the GDR until the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the absorption of the German Democratic Republic into the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990. A brief explanation of Socialist Realism and the phenomena of *verlorene Heimaten* and *Ostalgie*, important terminology to be used throughout the thesis, conclude this chapter.

Focusing on the literary aspect of the German Democratic Republic's cultural progression within this established historical framework, Chapter Three of this thesis examines the distinctive evolution - in form and content - of literature produced in the German Democratic Republic taking direction from the model of 'literary phases' in the history of East German literature as provided by Wolfgang Emmerich. By analysing eight selected texts from the body of literature of two of the German Democratic Republic's most prominent authors, Jurek Becker and

Christa Wolf, this thesis illustrates the influence of historical events on fictional texts written in and about East Germany.

Chapters Four and Five present in-depth analyses and discussions of selected texts by Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf – in chronological order of publication – in order to practically apply White and Emmerich's theoretical framework to specific literary texts. The texts under discussion in the analysis of Becker's literary development are *Jakob der Lügner* (1969), *Irreführung der Behörden* (1973), *Schlaflose Tage* (1978) and *Amanda herzlos* (1992). Regarding Wolf, this thesis will examine *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963), *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968), *Sommerstück* (1989) and *Was bleibt* (1990). Becker and Wolf have been chosen as exemplary GDR authors not only because of the popularity and prominence of their work, the development of which is symbolic of the both the literary and cultural development of the GDR itself, but also because the authors' *vitae* are representative of those of the people of the GDR, as the following brief biographies will show.

## **2. Jurek Becker 1937-1997**

Becker was born in Łódź, Poland, shortly before the outbreak of World War Two, and at the age of three his family was sent to the Łódź Ghetto. Three years later, in 1943, Becker's family was separated, his father was deported to Ravensbrück and later to Auschwitz, while Becker and his mother were transported to Sachsenhausen, where his mother died soon after their arrival. Of his family, only Becker and his father survived the war and were reunited in Berlin in 1945. (Riordan 1998: 7)

Becker integrated himself fully into German life despite having difficulty with the language transition from Polish to German: he graduated from high school in 1955, joined the *Nationale Volksarmee*, worked at a *Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft* and in 1957 began his studies at Humboldt

University in East Berlin where he joined the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei* (SED), fully embracing the ideals of the emerging socialist state. (Riordan 1998: 7) For Becker, like many Polish and German Jews living in East Germany, this was perhaps understandable considering his experiences of alienation and exclusion during his early years and immediately after World War Two. (Rock 2000: 99) People who had lost the connection with their homes and felt estranged in the new Germany identified with the new East German state which fostered a sense of belonging to the collective and the community. Moreover, Becker's father was freed from Auschwitz by Russian troops, and as a child growing up he was constantly reminded that the Soviets were "die Guten, die Heilsbringer". (Becker in Heidelberger-Leonard 1992: 106)

Despite Becker's sympathy for the principles of socialism he was put under observation by the Stasi in 1957, and in 1960 was expelled from Humboldt University for his public criticism of the manner in which the government implemented socialist ideas (Arnold 1993: 15). It was during this time that Becker began working as a freelance writer, initially producing film scripts for the *Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft* (DEFA) until his script for a film entitled *Jakob der Lügner* was rejected. (Rock 2000: 14) Becker subsequently adapted this script into prose, and in 1969 the novel *Jakob der Lügner* was published in East Germany, for which Becker was awarded the *Heinrich-Mann-Preis* by the East German Academy of Arts. (Riordan 1998: 8) In 1973 Becker's second novel, *Irreführung der Behörden*, was published in both East and West Germany, and Becker was elected to the committee of the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband*. In 1975 Becker was awarded one of the highest honours for socialist writers in the GDR, the *Nationalpreis der DDR*, and in 1976 his third novel, *Der Boxer*, achieved great success. (Riordan 1998: 8)

By 1976 Becker's popularity both in East Germany and abroad had been established, and he was regarded by the SED as an exemplary socialist author. (Rock 2000: 15) Until this time, Becker's protestations against the socialist

leadership had largely been tolerated, but this soon ended when he, along with several prominent actors, poets, musicians and authors signed a letter protesting the expatriation of Wolf Biermann. By the end of 1976, Becker's observation by the Stasi had been extended, earning him the code-name "Lügner", and in December Becker's SED membership was withdrawn. (Riordan 1998: 8)

The following year Becker resigned from the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband* and applied for permission to move to West Berlin after the publication of his fourth novel, *Schlaflose Tage*, was banned in East Germany by the SED. In 1978 *Schlaflose Tage* was published in the West by the Suhrkamp Verlag to critical acclaim, and this was followed in 1979 by the publication of a very controversial collection of short stories entitled *Nach der ersten Zukunft*<sup>2</sup>, which became the subject of a critical Stasi report for containing "so starke provokante Elemente [...] daß man es mit gutem Gewissen und politischer Verantwortung nicht annehmen könnte". (Rock 2000: 17) In 1982 Becker published *Aller Welt Freund* in the West, which, a year later, was his first novel to be released in East Germany since his move to the West. *Bronstein's Kinder*, (1986) was the final instalment in what became collectively known as Becker's Holocaust trilogy (*Jakob der Lügner*, *Der Boxer* and *Bronstein's Kinder*) which his biographer Sander Gilman considers the most important collection on post-war Jewish identity in the German Democratic Republic. (Gilman 2003: 165-167) From 1988 to 1990 Becker travelled extensively throughout Scandinavia, America and North Africa spending the final, pivotal years of the GDR's existence abroad. (Rock 2000:19)

In 1990 Becker published *Warnung vor dem Schriftsteller*, his contribution to the *Poetik-Vorlesungen* at Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität in Frankfurt, which was the first in a series of the post-GDR publications that took a critical view on the quality of literature produced under socialist censorship restrictions. This

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<sup>2</sup> In 1986 Becker published a second collection of short stories entitled *Erzählungen* in the GDR, which was effectively an amended version of the banned *Nach der ersten Zukunft*.

theme can also be seen in his penultimate publication in 1992, the novel *Amanda herzlos*. (Rock 2000:18) In 1996 Becker published his final collection of essays entitled *Ende des Größenwahns*. After a long battle with cancer Becker died in Berlin on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1997. (Riordan 1998: 10)

### 3. Christa Wolf 1929 – present

Christa Wolf was born in Landsberg an der Warthe, a Polish village which in 1929 lay within German territory, and is now located within the borders of Poland. (Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 655) At the end of the war in 1945, Wolf and her family were expelled from their home in Landsberg and settled in Mecklenburg in Soviet-occupied northeast Germany. After completing her *Abitur* in 1949, Wolf studied Literature at the Universities of Leipzig and Jena, and at the same time joined the SED. After her graduation in 1953 Wolf became a member of, and was employed by, the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband*. From 1959 to 1961 Wolf was recruited as an *inoffizieller Mitarbeiterin* for the Stasi, information she controversially only made public in the early 1990s. It was during this time that Wolf moved to Halle, where, guided by the principles of the *Bitterfelder Weg*, she worked in a carriage assembly factory. (Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 655)

In 1961 Wolf published her first collection of short stories, *Moskauer Novelle*, which despite being very well received in the GDR, was not published in the Federal Republic. Influenced by her tenure in the factory Wolf published *Der geteilte Himmel* in 1963 for which she was awarded the *Heinrich-Mann-Preis* and the *Nationalpreis der DDR*, and was later nominated as a candidate to the central committee of the SED. (Fulbrook 2002: 237, Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 655) In 1968 Wolf published her first politically contentious novel, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, initially banned in the GDR, and later only released in a limited quantity.

In 1976 Wolf published her third novel, *Kindheitsmuster*, which received mediocre success in the GDR. Like Becker, Wolf spoke out against the expatriation of Wolf Biermann, though she remained an active member of the SED and the *Deutscher Schriftstellerverband* despite her critical views. After the publication of *Kein Ort. Nirgends* in 1979 Wolf was awarded the *Büchnerpreis der Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*. *Kassandra* (1983), Wolf's fifth novel refers back to Greek mythology to contemporise feminist issues and the female experience of war, a theme to which Wolf returns with her 1996 publication of *Medea*.

In 1989 Wolf relinquished her SED membership after becoming disillusioned with the socialist situation in the GDR. Despite this Wolf remained optimistic that socialism as an ideal was still preferable and publicly opposed the reunification and absorption of the GDR into the capitalist Federal Republic, campaigning instead for an independent, socialist GDR under new leadership. She wrote her final pre-unification novel *Sommerstück* about the last summer a group of friends spend together, symbolic of the final days Wolf experienced in the GDR, a novel often viewed as "a late personal reckoning with a society bent on self destruction." (Tate 2007: 6) In 1990 Wolf's most famous and controversial novel *Was bleibt* (written, in part, in 1979) was published and the debate - the so-called *Literaturstreit* - surrounding *Staatsdichter* and other creative intellectuals who were sympathetic to the socialist regime, was revived with renewed vigour, fuelled particularly by the revelation that Wolf had worked as an informant for several years. (Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 656, Fulbrook 2002: 237)

In 2002 Wolf was awarded the first *Deutscher Bücherpreis* for lifetime achievement and her contribution to German and international literature. Wolf's most recent publication, *Ein Tag im Jahr: 1960-2000* (2003), in which she describes the events of a single day – September 27<sup>th</sup> - each year for forty years. If one considers Wolf's oeuvre to be reflective of almost forty years of East

German history, then this final publication serves as kind of condensed version of this contribution.

With an established historical context, an understanding of the literary evolution of the GDR and a systematic analysis of the eight texts under discussion as the foundation for this thesis, Chapter Five brings the threads of the research together, incorporating White and Emmerich's theoretical principles in a final chapter which aims to answer the question at the core of this thesis: can a comprehensive understanding of the historical evolution of East Germany be provided by the analysis of fictional texts produced within and about the GDR?

# CHAPTER 1

## Historical Text as Literary Artefact

### 1. Hayden White: modes of emplotment in historical discourse

The historian [is], above all, a story teller. (White 1978: 83)

In his very controversial *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), Hayden White examined the narrative structure of 19<sup>th</sup> century historiography, the period during which, according to White, “history became identified as a process, a dimension of human existence.” (White 2006: 25) From this examination White developed a theory intimately relating historical discourse and literature. (Korhonen 2006: 11) Building upon classifications of narrative styles and literary techniques developed by Northrop Frye (1957), White described the presence of emplotment in all historical discourse through the use of one of four literary genres characterised by the writings of four principal 19<sup>th</sup> century historians: the Romance of Jules Michelet, the Comedy of Leopold von Ranke, the Tragedy found in Alexis de Tocqueville and the Satire of Jacob Christoph Burckhardt. (Korhonen 2006: 11) These classifications existed centuries before Frye, though White refers specifically to Frye’s application of these genres to contemporary prose: “Plato, Aristotle and other classical critics identified a number of genres [...] including the *epic* (Romance later displaced the *epic* form of narrative), *comedy*, *tragedy* and *satire*”. (Abrams 1993: 76)

According to Frye (1950: 585) the prose of the romance genre tended towards allegorical depictions of the hero’s pursuit of an ideal and battle against an enemy, usually presenting “some kind of historicised myth” set within the context of the historical past. The romantic mode of emplotment often leads to an optimistic view of history. Characters in the text were clearly presented as either

heroes or villains, with the heroic protagonist “relatively isolated from a social context”. (Abrams 1993: 132)

Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The romance is said to present life as we would have it be – more picturesque, fantastic, adventurous, or heroic than actuality. (Abrams 1993: 174)

Prose works of the Comedy genre typically depict the resolution of tension or discord “primarily in order to interest, involve, and amuse [the reader]”. (Abrams 1993: 28f.) Any apprehension or anxiety the reader may feel is diffused, “the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern” and the result is a renewed confidence and optimism that good will prevail.

Where the romantic and comedic adventures conclude with the triumph of good over an enemy or in the reconciliation of conflict, tragic protagonists face difficulties that cannot be overcome, though the reader is usually taught a moral lesson through the narration of the hero’s journey. “The intention [of tragic prose] is to incorporate incidents that arouse fear and tension which bring about catharsis and purging of emotions.” (Abrams 1993: 212) The protagonist of these narratives is usually a flawed character, or one whose error in judgement has tragic consequences. (Abrams 1993: 212)

Satire is described by Abrams (1993: 187) as “the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject”. This disdain or mockery is usually directed at contemporary political or philosophical principles by “evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation”. (Abrams 1993: 29) While satirical prose is often perceived in a humorous light, the intention is quite different to that of comedy: where comedy arouses laughter for the sake of enjoyment, satire “uses laughter as a weapon [...] against a class, an institution, a nation or even [...] the whole human race”. (Abrams 1993: 187)

## 2. Hayden White's "History as Narrative" and the Literary Characteristic of Historiography

Following R.G. Collingwood's hypothesis of the "constructive imagination", White explained that historians "make sense" of partial and fragmentary historical 'facts' by introducing elements of established literary genres – romance, comedy, tragedy and satire - that enable them to make abstract information more "recognisably human". (White 1978: 84) White theorised that while these historians were motivated by the desire to produce "realistic representations" of the past, they all used a specific *literary* genre to achieve the "explanatory effect". (Korhonen 2006: 11)

White's insistence on the concept that an entirely scientific, *neutral* way of writing history cannot exist, is based on four key postulations: that every historian has a theory (whether they intend one or not), that every historian has an intended audience in mind, that historical discourse is never created in a vacuum but rather in the context of a general view of the nature of history – what White calls "Metahistory" – and that no single historical account, regardless of the method of research or writing, is more "truthful" than another. (Hilliard 1999: online) White concludes that the *technique* of configuring a specific historical location or event, "the matching up [of] a specific plot structure with the set of historical events" in order to provide a meaning "is essentially a literary operation". (White 1978: 85)

According to White, in addition to necessarily possessing one of the four literary genres, historiographies also incorporated specific linguistic constructions that made the documentation and association of an apparent sequence of events more accessible to the readers. (White 1978: 83) In other words, a chronicle containing a recorded series of events needs to be shaped into something with an identifiable beginning, middle and end to become a story. This story only becomes "intelligible and meaningful as history [when] historians (consciously or

unconsciously) make it conform to their preferences or ideology". (Hilliard 1999: online)

The terms "irony", "synecdoche", "metaphor" and "metonymy" then, are applicable to the writing of any valid historian. Hayden White shows considerable ingenuity in having selected these four terms to characterise the rhetoric of history. (Cook 1988: 56)

Following the 18<sup>th</sup> century theorist Giambattista Vico, White described the use of specific linguistic devices or "tropes" in historiography as an evolutionary process, one that paralleled the development from trope to trope found in the field of philosophy and evidenced by the writings of Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche and Croce. (Korhonen 2006: 11) White's theory proposes that all philosophical and historical writing is "biased towards a certain way of making links between data", such that the historian will inevitably make use of an established and recognised literary device, namely one of four tropes: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony. (Hilliard 1999: online) "Thus, not only historical discourse was predetermined by *literary* styles, but historical consciousness in general was predetermined by certain *linguistic* styles." (Korhonen 2006: 11)

All fiction selects and combines elements from the real world, and the reader fills in all the gaps that exist in all literary texts according to his or her own experiences in real life. In the end, all literary fiction becomes meaningful only when we read it in relation to our own experiences in the world. They form the background of all fiction, and there is no fiction that cannot be interpreted as an allegory of this world. (Korhonen 2006: 17)

Korhonen's explanation of the *reader's* role in bringing meaning to a text is at the core of a "development of hermeneutics in Germany [...] known as 'reception aesthetics' or 'reception theory.'" (Eagleton 1996: 74) The primary concept of *Rezeptionsästhetik* places equal importance on the *reader* (and the context in which a text is read) as on the *writer* (and the context in which the text is written). The reader receives a text as a collection of information, and in order to develop meaning from it, the reader "makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences, [...] drawing on a tacit knowledge of the world in general and literary meaning". (Eagleton 1996: 76) This is a continuation of White's process of the interpretation of information that begins with the historian (or writer): the historiographer makes use of conventional narrative styles and literary genres

when constructing a written history, which in turn requires that the reader “bring to a reading of a text certain ‘pre-understandings’, a context of belief and expectations”. (Eagleton 1996: 77)

In other words, a reader will approach a text – an historical account, for example – with a specific frame of reference within which to interpret facts. This requires that the author has made use of identifiable literary techniques and conventions that the reader can relate to. The basic principle that author and reader require a shared knowledge base – reception theorist Wolfgang Iser’s “repertoires’ of familiar themes” (Iser in Eagleton 1996: 78) - in order to make a particular text understood could be extended to include the assumption that all literature (fictional or historical) is written for a specific audience. Building upon Jean-Paul Sartre’s comprehensive study of literary reception through history, *What is Literature?* (1948), Iser refers to this intended audience as the “implied reader”. (Iser in Eagleton 1996: 84)

Essentially, the methods a writer utilises in the creation of a literary text as described by Sartre, Eagleton and Iser (the conceptual patterning and organisation of events by means of recognisable literary conventions for an intended audience), are indistinguishable from the methods described by Frye, Collingwood and White of which a historiographer would take advantage when producing an historical document. White concludes: “the techniques or strategies that historians and imaginative writers use in composition of their discourse can be shown to be substantially the same.” (White 1978: 121)

### **3. “History is quasi-fiction; fiction is quasi-history.”<sup>3</sup>**

As Korhonen (2006: 17) explains, when Paul Ricoeur (1988) – to whom White often refers – engaged with the concept of the “pastness of the past”, he concluded that “history and fiction are necessarily intertwined: history is quasi-

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<sup>3</sup> (Korhonen 2006: 17)

fiction, fiction is quasi-history". Thus on this theoretical basis one can investigate the validity of an inverse relationship between history and literature; that is to say, if the *historical* is necessarily influenced by the *literary*, then is the *literary* necessarily influenced by the *historical*? White himself answers this question:

[L]iterature [...] has regarded history not so much as its other, rather, its complement in the work of identifying and mapping a shared object of interest, a real world which presents itself using [...] all of the resources of language. (White 2006: 25)

According to White, writers of 'fictional' texts were often as interested in depicting a 'real' world as any historian, though writers better comprehended the essential inclusion of language as an "element of the real world" rather than simply the means of describing it. (White 2006: 26) White firmly believed that "historical knowledge" could be "extracted" from literature in much the same way as from any historiography. (White 2006: 27) The capacity of literature to include the "human experience" in its narratives often resulted in "more revealing, and, in some ways more realistic images of our relation to the past than more professional historiograph[ies]" could provide. (Korhonen 2006: 14)

The "greatest historians" are those who present problematic or disturbing experiences in their own cultures – "revolutions, civil wars [and] large-scale process such as industrialisation and urbanisation" – that still have import and relevance for the contemporary reader. (White 1978: 87) These historians are ones that "familiarise the unfamiliar" by taking abstract events in history and constructing them in a chosen way that makes them more accessible to the intended reader. (White 1978: 87) This description of the archetypal historian could very easily be applied to the two GDR writers under discussion in this thesis: Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf.

The majority of Wolf and Becker's texts contain a significant amount of information about, and reference to, places, characters and situations that actually existed in the GDR and it is within this historical framework that their stories are told. Their texts often focus on or are described within the context of

traumatic past events experienced by themselves and their readers: the Holocaust, childhoods in fascist Germany, radical socialism, state intervention and restrictions on personal freedoms and *Stasi* surveillance, among others. Korhonen (2006: 18f.) explains the importance of texts written by authors like Wolf and Becker within the context of a highly censored socialist state: “Artistic imagination is an essential supplement to historical discourse when the intention is to give voice to those who are marginalised [...] or to those who are silenced forever.” The following quote testifies to the extent to which the entire cultural sphere, including historical discourse, was bound by the restrictions of the socialist policies.

The 1951 Official Party Resolution on Cultural Questions stated that the creative mind’s task consists of bringing forth a new democratic culture which, building upon the great German cultural heritage, seeks to convey, through all branches of art, the new social ideals of the GDR. (Frey 1953: 274)

## CHAPTER 2

# The Historical Evolution of the German Democratic Republic

### 1. Germany Divided: Occupation and Division 1945-1949

In practice, the developments following the defeat of Germany laid the foundations for the double transformation that subsequently occurred: the establishment of a divided nation, with a relatively conservative state in the West, and a hard-line communist state in the East. (Fulbrook 2002: 108)

There was significant disagreement between the Western Allies (the United States, Britain and France) and the Soviet Union about the fate of Germany after the collapse of the so-called Third Reich, though all agreed on one aspect of its transformation: Germany needed to be occupied. (Pollock 1944: 907) In 1944 a plan was put before the European Advisory Committee that advocated three zones of occupation, and this accepted plan established the East-West division, not only for Germany, but also for the whole of Europe until the end of the Cold War. (Fulbrook 2002: 110) After the Yalta Conference in February 1945, France was included as an occupation power, adding a fourth zone to the already divided, demilitarised, and supposedly democratised Germany. These zones were established to afford each occupying power with a roughly equal portion of the German population that resulted in the Soviets' claim over a larger section of the country, as the East consisted predominantly of far less densely populated agricultural land. (Pollock 1944: 907)

Disagreements over compensation by the defeated Germans ensued, the drawing of Allied boundaries continued during 1945 and it was eventually decided that the United States, France and Britain would not demand reparations, while the USSR would collect reparations from its own zone of occupation. (Harrison-Wagner 1980: 156) This was a significant contributing

factor to the East German economic instability and sluggish growth in comparison to its Western neighbour in later years. (Fulbrook 2002: 109) In the period from the defeat of Nazi Germany and the occupation of its former territories in 1945 to the division of Germany in 1949, the aims and practices of the Western occupying powers shifted dramatically while the Soviets instituted more distinctive and decisive policies in their zone, following the socialist policies of the Soviet Union itself. (Harrison-Wagner 1980: 156)

## **2. Founding socialist East Germany**

After almost half a century of warfare, political instability and national extremism, most German citizens were indifferent about the politics of their country, with an “overriding concern for sheer physical survival” foremost in their minds. (Fulbrook 2002: 111) While a small degree of Nazi sentiment still remained, the majority of nationalist Germans advocated a systematic handover to Allied powers in the hope of salvaging some semblance of a German nation. Others argued that the order and welfare offered by the socialist Soviets was the only way to rebuild a devastated Germany. (Fulbrook 2002: 112) After the political void resulting from the political policies of the National Socialist regime, where all official and unofficial political oppositions were silenced, renewed diverse political tendencies emerged, with varied hopes for the future of Germany. These too, however, were suppressed, subverted or transformed in accordance with the politics of the occupiers. (Harrison-Wagner 1980: 157) The increasingly heated conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was driven by the two nations’ polar-opposite ideologies. (Harrison-Wagner 1980: 158f.) The Allies and the Soviets sought to impose their own, differing initiatives for the reorganisation of German political life. (Fulbrook 2002: 112)

This comprehensive, large-scale political intervention was most notable in the Soviet zone. Under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, a communist activist, a group of Soviet-trained German communists returned to Germany to expand and

develop the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD)<sup>4</sup>, which had continued to exist as an underground movement during Nazi rule. This newly strengthened KPD “enjoyed the special support of the occupying power” and rapidly sought to control all key positions in the administration. (Sandford 2002: 352) Many members of the KPD were Germans who had weathered exile from Nazi Germany, or who had survived imprisonment during the war, and whose brand of “humanistic communism” often clashed with the Stalinist severity of the Soviet occupiers. (Fulbrook 2002: 113) Nevertheless, the KPD enjoyed a privileged position in the emerging political life of the Soviet zone, and in 1946 the party was integrated into the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD)<sup>5</sup> to form the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED), in which the KPD assumed the dominant role. (Barker in Sandford 2002: 559 and 612) While the socialist party gained much support and control in the Soviet zone, the Cold War and the so-called economic miracle deprived the socialist party of the working-class support it needed to thrive in the Western zones. (Sandford 2002: 352; Harrison-Wagner 1980: 156) Under Soviet occupation, the SED - by 1949 completely purged of its SPD influence – drove Soviet policies into the future German Democratic Republic. (Fulbrook 2002: 114)

### **3. Reconstructing the democratic West Germany**

The impact of the Western Allies on their zones of occupation was, in comparison to the USSR, relatively subtle, but as important in the foundation of West Germany’s future political life. “Democracy was institutionalised from the bottom up, with strict controls for all parties wishing to contribute to political reconstruction.” (Fulbrook 2002: 115) However, the American idea of democracy

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<sup>4</sup> The KPD was founded in 1919 and continued to exist in various forms in both East and West Germany after the 1949 division. However, the KPD was largely unsuccessful in the Federal Republic and in 1956 the party was “banned as unconstitutional”. (Sandford 2002: 352)

<sup>5</sup> The SPD is Germany’s oldest political party, and like the KPD, it survived after being banned by the Nazis, re-emerging in both East and West Germany after the Second World War. However, “in the Soviet zone the post-war SPD was short-lived”, and in 1946, together with the revitalised KPD, it formed the SED. The SPD remained the official opposition to the CDU in West Germany until the two parties formed a coalition in 1966. (Sandford 2002: 570)

was not without its flaws: through a legitimate democratic majority a former Nazi mayor was re-elected in a U.S. occupied town. (Fulbrook 2002: 115) A significant hurdle for the implementation of a working democracy in the Western zones was the German public's association of democracy and the Weimar Republic, which resulted in economic crisis, political instability, and eventually, the rise of Hitler to power. (Fulbrook 2002: 116) Despite considerable problems related to the institutionalisation of democracy, by 1946 most Western German towns had local governments and representatives who were elected by the people, and this led to the inter-zonal cooperation that catalysed the reconstruction of a stable, prosperous West Germany. (Sandford 2002: 169, 352, 399)

#### **4. Economic Divergence**

Differences in economic policy between the occupying powers both precipitated and symbolised their wider political dissimilarities; and differences in economic policy in the different zones set the pattern for long-term contrasts in the social and political structures of the two Germanies. (Fulbrook 2002: 123-124)

The economy was the key area driving the transformation of Germany into a divided state with contrasting societies. Immediately after the Second World War the German economy had collapsed and strict trade and industry restrictions applied by the victorious Western Allies and Soviets severely delayed reconstruction. (Kudlek in Sandford 2002: 521f.) In the Western zones the focus was on reconstruction under the guidance and contribution of the European Recovery Programme (ERP), the so-called Marshall Plan. Added to this financial incentive for democratic states, the increase in the perceived threat of the spread of communism from the East motivated the Western Allies to ensure that West Germany became a stable buffer zone protecting its trade networks in Western Europe and Britain. (Fulbrook 2002: 125) The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 led the United States to increase its presence (and consequently, its funding) in West Germany, and the need for industrialisation and the facilities for munitions manufacturing meant West Germany's reconstruction was extremely rapid and well-subsidized. (Allen 1990: 15)

In the East, 'Sovietisation' of the zone resulted in radically altered socio-economic structures, which in turn affected the social and cultural spheres. (Chamberlin 1965: 9) Immediately after the war and redistribution of German territories the Soviet zone had some initial economic advantages: it had a far smaller population to feed and house, it was less badly affected by war damage and bombing than the Western zones (with the notable exception of Dresden), and the northern region was a relatively fertile agricultural area. However, while it was "intrinsically a highly productive area", it was still reliant on trade networks in the west for certain raw materials. (Fulbrook 2002: 125) Furthermore, the demographic structure of the German population was unfavourable: as a direct result of war losses, the population predominantly consisted of the elderly, women and children. Aggravating widespread shortages within the Eastern zone was the mass of refugees returning to Germany from the former Nazi-occupied Eastern territories, with the underdeveloped infrastructure not yet able to realise the benefit of this increased labour force. (Hardach in Fulbrook 2002: 126)

The immense war reparations demanded by the Soviets worsened this economic situation. After 1949 Soviet re-organisation considerably diminished the productive capacity of the German Democratic Republic, which already suffered from an all-time low in productivity as a result of massive war damaged. "Up to 1953 about 25% of the zone's national product was spent on occupation costs and reparation payments, compared to around 11% in the West." (Fulbrook 2002: 127) Aside from attempts to secure compensation for the vast material and human losses caused by the German invasion, the Soviets also implemented economic policies aimed at creating a socio-economic environment that would permanently avoid a resurgence of National Socialist or capitalist militarism.

## 5. Geopolitical Division

It was the British who first proposed the division of Germany into a Western and Eastern partial state amidst fears of Soviet expansionist intentions, deciding that a strong, united Western Germany would provide the ideal buffer against the spread of communism into the rest of Europe. (Hardach 1980: 94) In January 1947 the British and American zones united to form the Bizone. In March of the same year the Cold War began, following United States President Harry S. Truman's 'Truman Doctrine' claiming the containment of communism to be paramount to the Western powers. (Fulbrook 2002: 128f.) In June 1947 the Marshall Plan was instituted, prescribing a currency reform<sup>6</sup> that effectively excluded the Soviet Union from any economic discussions about the neighbouring Western occupation zones and essentially making their economies incompatible (Bullivant and Rice 1995: 212)

By mid-1948, with the currency reform and the Berlin Blockade<sup>7</sup> in full effect, the permanent division of Germany seemed fated. On May 8<sup>th</sup> 1949, leaders from the Western *Länder* instituted the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), which still made allowance for the possibility of a German reunification (Stein 1993: 34), and in "August 1949 the first democratic elections were held in the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland)". (Fulbrook 2002: 133)

In response to these developments in the West, the Soviet occupiers established the German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik), which also included the possibility of reunification in the near future. (Herhoffer in Sandford 2002: 112 and Stein 1993: 34) This constitution would undergo many changes over the course of the next forty years, but would never again be

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<sup>6</sup> On the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1948 the Reichsmark was removed from circulation and replaced by the *Deutsche Mark*. Each person in the Western Allied zones of occupation received forty of the new *Deutsche Mark* and, two months later, a further twenty. (Bullivant and Rice 1995: 212) This currency reform was instituted without consultation with the Soviet Union and impacted negatively on lingering reunification hopes.

<sup>7</sup> "The Berlin Blockade lasted from 24 June 1948 to 12 May 1949, when the road, rail and water routes to [West] Berlin were blockaded, and the Western powers flew supplies into [West] Berlin by air routes." (Fulbrook 2002: 129)

compatible with ideas of West Germany. The established socialist economic policies in the Soviet Zone were further entrenched by supplementary socialist political controls.

## 6. Solidifying the Divide and Ulbricht's East Germany 1949-1961

The period after the official division of Germany and the creation of two independent German states in 1949 to the erection of the ultimate symbol of division, the Berlin Wall, in 1961, entirely solidified the economic, political and social differences between the two states and shaped the next thirty years of German and European history.

Initially the GDR was to have a multi-party political system with a double level parliament consisting of the *Volkskammer*, including representatives of all permitted parties, and the *Länderkammer*. "Although in theory the *Volkskammer* was the supreme organ of state, power lay elsewhere, in the SED *Politbüro*." (Dennis in Sandford 2002: 630) While regular elections were held in East Germany, providing a semblance of democracy, all electable candidates were party-sanctioned SED representatives. As a result, East Germany was essentially a one-party state.

The constitutional similarities between the two systems disappeared as the realities of political, social and economic divergence developed over the decades after the founding of the two Republics. (Fulbrook 2002: 140)

In 1952 the five *Länder* of the GDR ceased to exist and were replaced with 15 *Bezirke*, "officially as a move towards greater 'democratisation'". (Sandford 2002: 55) These smaller regions aided the SED in its drive to centralise the political sphere, and these units were less likely to emerge as "strongholds of opposition". (Fulbrook 2002: 140) When, in 1960, East Germany's first president Wilhelm Pieck died, the office of president, despite being largely a figurehead position, was abolished. This position was replaced by the *Staatsrat*, a collective head of

state chaired by Walter Ulbricht, the then leader of the SED<sup>8</sup>. (Fulbrook 2002: 140)

## **7. Politics and the Population**

While the SED had effectively managed to gain full control of all political spheres by the early 1960s, the success of the party still relied on the compliance of the East German population. The party exerted a strong influence over media and education in a widespread attempt at ideological indoctrination; educators were forced to teach party politics at all levels, with severe consequences for insubordination. (Fulbrook 2002: 153) Any resistance to these changes was deemed “political opposition” and the resisting ones were labelled “class enemies”. (Fulbrook 2002: 154) The working class and peasantry were lauded for their sound political achievements, while those previously privileged members of the population faced open discrimination in the name of social equality.

1953 saw significant changes in the socialism of the Soviet Union, following the death of Stalin in the spring of that year. (Fulbrook 2002: 154) This in turn greatly affected the socialist leadership of the GDR, particularly the hierarchy of the SED. This instability within the political leadership trickled down to the people and “played a key role in the origins of a major uprising in the GDR’s history, that of June 1953”. (Fulbrook 2002: 155, and Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 155)

In line with the SED’s Five Year Plan for productivity, June 1953 saw new industrial production goals announced, which increased the load for industrial workers and worsened already poor living conditions. The ensuing workers’ strike in the country’s capital quickly spread throughout the GDR, forming an *en masse* political demonstration against the more general policies of the SED, which “had announced a programme of measures designed to transform the GDR into a

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<sup>8</sup> From 1950 to 1953 Ulbricht was the General Secretary, and from 1953 to 1971 the First Secretary of the SED. (Barker in Sandford 2002: 612)

socialist state on the Soviet model". (Barker in Sandford 2002: 329) The uprising was quickly suppressed with the arrival of Soviet tanks, resulting in the deaths of twenty-one people. (Fulbrook 2002: 155)

Instead of ousting Ulbricht, the uprising served to consolidate his power. (Fulbrook 2002: 155) All opposition was systematically purged from the SED, mass dissent had been suppressed and the subsequent building of the Berlin Wall was an imposing symbol of the changes in the GDR. This kind of methodical removal of resistance and use of terror tactics became the norm in the GDR for the next twenty-five years. (Fulbrook 2002: 156)

### **8. Reinforcing the GDR 1961-1989**

All spheres of GDR government were now ultimately under the control of the radical socialists of the SED, and after intense public discussions this was formally preserved in the constitution after the 1968 revision and remained so until the 1989 collapse. (Fulbrook 2002: 141) Greater emphasis was now placed on the notion of the GDR as a "socialist state of the German nation". (Herhoffer in Sandford 2002: 112) The political hegemony of the ruling party was established, as well as the main principles of socialist democracy: the right to work, democratic centralism, a planned economy and egalitarianism. (Herhoffer in Sandford 2002: 112) While the welfare benefits provided by the state were significant, this amended constitution also included the abolishment of the right to strike, and made it illegal to emigrate. Although freedom of speech officially remained a constitutional right, it was heavily restricted. (Herhoffer in Sandford 2002: 112)

## **9. *Ostpolitik* and East-West relations**

“*Ostpolitik*<sup>9</sup> had resulted finally in international recognition for the GDR.” (Fulbrook 2002: 174) Erich Honecker was elected Head of State in 1971, and in 1974 announced the East German constitution was once again to be amended in accordance with the GDR’s new international status and relations. (Herhoffer in Sandford 2002: 112) Hostile references to West Germany were removed from the old constitution and formal international relations between the two German states were developed. (Fulbrook 2002: 174) Ties with the Soviet Union were increased and the definition of the GDR changed from a German nation state to the “socialist state of workers and peasants under the leadership of the working class”. (Herhoffer in Sandford 2002: 112) The GDR would retain this status and constitution until 1989.

## **10. Cultural Policy in the GDR**

The SED considered culture as a fundamental component of the GDR’s socialist revolution, requiring – like politics and the economy – the party’s firm control. Cultural policy was built on the belief that the success of socialism in the GDR was dependent on the people changing their own social conditions. (Wallace 1992: 100) The central purpose of the SED’s cultural policy, therefore, was to develop a socialist awareness among the population.

The cultural policy of the SED usually referred to literature and the performing arts in general, which were perceived to have enormous political significance. The Writers’ Union was of particular interest for the SED and considered writers to be active contributors to the socialist society, informing the public of the sentiments and ideas appropriate for GDR citizens. The substantial emphasis the SED placed on the cultural sphere and its important role is evidenced by the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ostpolitik* is a term used primarily to refer to the steps taken by the Brandt government in West Germany in the early 1970s to improve and normalise relations between West Germany and the communist/ socialist countries of Eastern Europe, specifically the GDR, easing tensions between East and West during the Cold War. (Sandford 2002: 461)

considerable subsidisation writers and artists received. (Wallace 1992: 101) Books, theatre, cinema and concerts were deliberately kept extremely affordable so as to encourage public participation in all cultural events. However, not all writers and artists were satisfied with the manipulation of their cultural products as a means of propagating the party's ideology, and this led to a number of conflicts between creative intellectuals and the proponents of the GDR's cultural policies. (Wallace 1992: 101)

### **11. The Evolution of the Cultural Policy in the GDR 1945-1959**

Immediately after the end of World War Two, cultural policy in the Soviet zone of occupation emphasised the failures of the Nazi era and sought to involve intellectuals in the process of reconstruction while still ensuring communists occupied the key positions in the cultural sphere. (Wallace 1992: 101) Following the model of the Soviet Union, the SED took control of the cultural arena by setting up the *Amt für Literatur und Verlagswesen* and the *Staatliche Kommission für Kunstangelegenheiten* in 1951, and in 1952 the *Staatliche Kommission für Film und Radio*. (Wallace 1992: 101) The organisations were established to shape the cultural commodities of the GDR towards the goals of the Five Year Plans and promote the doctrine of socialist realism. The ideological emphasis on socialist content came at the expense of creative freedom, expression and form (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 154f.)

However, much like the growing resistance to political oppression, the cultural policy encountered its share of criticism and rebellion. Strong protest by both the working class and the intelligentsia led to the closing down of all of the State Committees by the mid 1950s. Like many of its Eastern Bloc neighbours, the GDR had experienced a "cultural thaw" following Stalin's death in 1953. (Wallace 1992: 103) In 1954 the Ministry of Culture was founded and took over the role of promoting the SED's cultural policy. There followed a brief period of relative relaxation of cultural controls, however this was short-lived, as restrictions were

later intensified and increased after the Hungarian Uprising in 1956. (Wallace 1992: 103)

## 12. The *Bitterfelder Weg* and Cultural Stagnation 1959-1971

In state and economy the working class of the GDR is already master. Now it must also storm the heights of culture and take possession of them. (Walter Ulbricht in Wallace 1992: 104)

In 1959 the *Bitterfelder Weg*<sup>10</sup> was instituted with the intention of giving workers a creative role in the development of socialist culture and in turn encouraging creative intellectuals to actively participate in manual work. (Fehervary 1982: 66) Underpinning these developments was the promotion and strengthening of ideological commitment. "Ulbricht, however, was less motivated by a desire to foster genuine working-class culture than by a wish to tighten the Party's control over literature and art." (Goodbody in Sandford 2002: 64) As a result a mass of literature produced during this period was "generally colourless and predictable", with workers being presented as heroes of industry. (Wallace 1992: 104) While this movement did promote an appreciation of literature among the working class, it yielded very little that was of true, creative, cultural innovation: "creative writing cannot simply be taught. [...] Prescribing artistic themes and forms is rarely successful." (Goodbody in Sandford 2002: 64, and Silberman 1987: 532)

Immediately after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, which served to stem the tide of East Germans emigrating to the West, there was a second period of cultural and political relaxation (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 167). Once again, this was a relatively short-lived respite, and in 1965 the Eleventh Plenum<sup>11</sup> was advanced by the SED with a renewed attempt at placing the role of culture

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<sup>10</sup> The *Bitterfelder Weg* was a state-led movement in literature and the arts in the GDR, which emphasised the importance of relating intellectual and practical work. This cultural initiative was determined at a conference held at Bitterfeld in East Germany in 1959. (Goodbody in Sandford 2002: 64f and Fulbrook 2002: 236f.)

<sup>11</sup> The Eleventh Plenum in 1965 was "the most spectacular instance of political intervention in art and intellectual debate in the history of the GDR." (Goodbody in Sandford 2002: 181). After the relative cultural relaxation that immediately followed the closing of state borders in 1961, the Party terminated the five-year period of liberalisation and reinstated its former Stalinist cultural policy. (Goodbody in Sandford 2002: 181)

firmly within the realms of politics, as a means of reinforcing the ideological message about the progress of socialism. (Wallace 1992: 104) This programme was accompanied by intense intimidation, with disastrous results. Hundreds of writers, artists, musicians, and members of the Writer's Union and the Ministry of Culture were accused of anti-party sentiments, and branded as class enemies. This led to yet another wave of intellectual emigration, this time accompanied by those citizens who were forced into exile and expatriated, the outcome of which was "a deep loss of faith in the party leadership and the cultural policies". (Wallace 1992: 105)

### **13. Opposition and Suppression 1971-1989**

If the starting point is the firm position of socialism, there can, in my opinion, be no taboos in the field of art and literature. This applies to questions both of content presentation and of style – in short: to the question of what is called artistic excellence. (Erich Honecker in Wallace 1992: 105)

In 1971 Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht as First Secretary of the SED, and as Head of State in the GDR. With him came a period of cultural enlightenment during which previously suppressed texts and controversial art exhibitions were made available to the public. (Wallace 1992: 106) Writers, artists and intellectuals took full advantage of this opportunity to experiment with style, form and content, and express sentiments that would previously have been seen as hostile, antagonistic and ultimately, anti-socialist. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 504f.) It was not long before the SED realised the potential threat of this cultural freedom of expression, and increased restrictions once again in 1976, culminating in the Wolf Biermann Affair. (Barker in Sandford 2002: 305)

In November 1976 the SED revoked the East German citizenship of songwriter, singer and poet Wolf Biermann while he was touring and performing in the Federal Republic, and despite protests by both Biermann and his supporters in the GDR, he was not allowed to return to his home until after the fall of the Berlin Wall. (Fulbrook 2002: 177) Leading writers, including Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf, signed a petition protesting the event. The writers were quickly removed

from the Writers' Union, those that were SED members were excluded from the party and all were placed under strict *Stasi* surveillance. The incident added to the growing dissent within the GDR's intellectual community and its opposition to the SED's leadership. (Fulbrook 2002: 177)

Cultural policy in the GDR became a key source of conflict between the party leadership and those intellectuals who remained in the GDR, though following the expatriation of Biermann, many intellectuals chose self-imposed exile as the alternative to writing under such restrictive conditions. (Rock 2000: 15) Jurek Becker was among those writers who moved to the West in 1977, openly declaring: "[W]riting in a state of fear is unacceptable." (Becker in Wallace 1992: 108) By the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s it was becoming more and more evident that the SED's cultural policy was failing. In the mid-1980s Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "new thinking" encouraged an increasingly open challenging of the party's control, especially concerning censorship of the media. (Wallace 1992: 108)

By 1989, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the SED's cultural policy had largely been abandoned: previously banned texts were made available, Western music and television was widely broadcast and cinemas held public showings of prohibited films. While the Unification Treaty of 1990 made special provision for the protection of the "cultural substance" of the GDR, the sudden lack of subsidisation and an exposure to market forces ensured that very little of that cultural substance would survive the collapse of the GDR intact. (Wallace 1992: 110)

## **CHAPTER 3**

# **The Literary Evolution of the German Democratic Republic**

### **1. The Literary Progression**

With a greater understanding of the historical development of the GDR providing a background for the analysis of Becker and Wolf's texts, it is also necessary to briefly describe the cultural and literary progression that occurred during this time before an in-depth discussion of the texts themselves can take place. This chapter will outline the different phases which occurred in literature produced in East Germany (following Wolfgang Emmerich's categorisation), providing examples from well-known German authors who are characteristic of each phase, and will offer a brief explanation of the most important literary theme, Socialist Realism.

### **2. Prose Fiction in the GDR**

It is necessary for any post-reunification re-examination of the development of literature in the GDR to recognise that there always existed a fundamental conflict between the goals of an ideologically determined cultural policy (Socialist Realism) and the intellectuals who sought to creatively and authentically express their experience of the GDR. The SED placed a great deal of emphasis on monitoring and controlling literature; it was viewed as the most effective means of reaching a wide audience, and therefore the ideal medium for propagating the socialist ideals. As a result the greatest cause of conflict in the GDR's cultural scene came from texts which failed to conform to the Party's expectations. (Goodbody in Sandford 2002: 380)

### 3. *Verlorene Heimaten*

*Heimat* and nation are contradictory terms, and it is the former that is the source of an authentic German identity. (Edgar Reitz in Geisler 1985: 50)

The term *Heimat*<sup>12</sup> dates back to the Romantic late nineteenth century, with the emergence of the *Heimatkunst* of the Wilhelmine period, relating the rural tale as a genre that strongly appealed to German realists. (Bance in Bartram 2004: 37) This early form of *Heimat* art and culture emphasised the ethnic dominance of the German nation and influenced the development of German national identities, an ideological notion later taken up by Nazis, known as *Blut und Boden*. (Bance in Bartram 2004: 37, and Boa in Bartram 2004: 133) Moreover, during the so-called Third Reich, the discourse of *Heimat*, with its fixation on the traditional, rural German people, also conveyed opposition to the modernisation process. During this period *Heimat* literature was written “in favour of morality and against decadent art and Jewish subversion”. (Boa in Bartram 2004: 132)

After World War Two the expression *verlorene Heimat* emerged as a term describing the all-encompassing loss victims of the war suffered. This term has been specifically applied to the many thousands of Polish citizens (especially Jews) who were repeatedly displaced during numerous border revisions and forced removals. (Wozniak 2007: 150) Many Germans who remained in Germany following the defeat of the Nazi regime also faced displacement, dislocation and alienation from their homeland as the German nation was divided amongst the Allied occupiers. For four years Germans found themselves living in one of the four zones of occupation while the victors worked hard to remove all notions of the previous German national identity. (Stein 1993: 32f.)

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<sup>12</sup> “The Romantic School believed in *verlorene Heimat*, a lost home, a past condition of spiritual perfection where the ideal life one strived for was existent.” In this sense it is very strongly related to the ideology of nationalism and the ideal nation state. (Rocker 2007: online) There is no direct English equivalent to the entire concept of *verlorene Heimaten*, as *Heimat* can mean at once “the concept of home, birthplace, homeland, shelter, identity or even a sense of belonging”. (Geisler 1985: 26)

The *verlorene Heimaten* phenomenon experienced by both Germans and people from neighbouring countries after World War Two played a large contributing role in the historical context that influenced the characteristic literature of this period. The Exile or Resistance Literature of the late 1940s and early 1950s was developed as a direct response to the events of Hitler's Germany and the loss of an identifiable homeland and its associated identity. (Silberman 1987: 528)

#### **4. Resistance Literature and the Post-War Period 1945-1950**

The first novels to be published in the Soviet occupation zone were typically stories of opposition, resistance and survival during World War Two. Literature produced during this period (1944/5-1949) became known as Exile or Resistance Literature, written predominantly by authors returning from exile like Bertolt Brecht or Anna Seghers. These novels, short stories and plays invoked a shared feeling of estrangement and dislocation for all those who had survived the war, but felt displaced in the chaotic ruins of a devastated Germany. A good example of this phase is *Die Zeit der Gemeinsamkeit* (1949) by Stephan Hermlin, in which the author describes his experiences of the war in occupied France, specifically his feelings of complete alienation from his homeland. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 503) The function of this literature was to fill an historical gap and educate the German public about life outside the so-called Third Reich, and thus was of significant documentary value. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 152) "Literature as direct and truthful witness to contemporary events could not be published within the Third Reich", which was why the function this literature performed – that of bridging the historical gap – was so vital to the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and reconstruction of the Germany after the War. (Bartram 2004: 8)

Other typical examples of this were Anna Segher's *Transit* (1944) and *Das siebte Kreuz* (1945). *Transit* describes "[Segher's] experience of the frantic scramble among refugees for safe passage out of Vichy France", while *Das siebte Kreuz*

makes use of the “decadent, modernist technique of montage” to generate feelings of tension and anticipation while describing the protagonist’s escape from Nazi persecution. (Wallace in Sandford 2002: 561 and Tate in Sandford 2002: 503)

## 5. *Aufbauliteratur* and Socialist Realism 1950-1961

Darüber hinaus läuft die Literatur Gefahr, Propagandawerkzeug zu werden. Das gilt besonders für die fünfziger und sechziger Jahre, in denen die sich oft wandelnde politische Lage eine entweder liberalisierende oder erhärtende Modifizierung in der theoretischen Ausrichtung bewirkte, was in der Literaturentwicklung und Kulturpolitik unterschiedliche Phasen hervorgerufen hat. (Sevin 1988: 11)

By the early 1950s the post-war genre had run its course, and a new theme in literature was emerging in accordance with the socialist realist policies of the SED: *Aufbauliteratur*. These novels (*Aufbauromane*) were thematically connected to industry, “celebrating the pioneering economic achievements of the new GDR” and often included narratives of the worker as a social hero. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 503) “For many East Germans, the concept of an ideal socialist society was something to believe in during the formative years of the GDR.” (Munn 1996: online) Literature from this period is characterised by a positive outlook on the future.

Resentment of the “Coca-Cola Culture”<sup>13</sup> as an obstruction to the economic success of socialism was paralleled by optimistic portrayals of the socialist planned economy. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 153) Literature published during this period was propagated by the socialist leadership in the name of nation building and rejected bourgeois notions such as modernism, formalism and artistic experimentation, which were deemed ‘decadent’.

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<sup>13</sup> “Coca-Cola Culture” was a term coined by the Politbüro’s Alexander Abusch in reference to all things American, and therefore, capitalist. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 153)

## 6. Socialist Realism

The Soviet doctrine of Socialist Realism was imposed on all spheres of cultural life in the GDR from the 1950s. While previously a more elastic socialism<sup>14</sup> had been applied to art and literature post-1945, allowing for a small degree of creative liberty, the outbreak of the Cold War put pressure on the leadership of the GDR to adopt a more rigid, Stalinist approach to censoring cultural products. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 565) Socialist Realism encouraged 'realistic' portrayals of the proletariat struggle and the heroism of the worker, which, in time, became almost indistinguishable from pure socialist propaganda. (Frey 1953: 272)

In 1959 with the institution of the Bitterfelder Weg policies an authentic GDR culture based on the principles of socialist realism emerged. Christa Wolf's novel *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963) is the pivotal work that begins this "process of cultural emancipation from the straightjacket of socialist realist theory". (Tate in Sandford 2002: 565) It was an immensely popular text that earned Wolf much praise, and was even made into a state-funded film, but the goal of turning an ideological theory of socialism into a legitimate cultural phenomenon was ultimately unsuccessful. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 565)

In 1965 the Eleventh Plenum heralded a new wave of ideological intervention, and the growing realisation among the intellectual and creative community that "subjective authenticity"<sup>15</sup> was incompatible with the "narrow industrial focus of socialist realism". (Tate in Sandford 2002: 565) By 1970 the literature of the socialist realist era was increasingly recognised as being "neither socialist nor

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<sup>14</sup> Georg Lukács made attempts to "evolve a more flexible theory for a German socialist culture" which centred around the traditional German classics of Goethe and Schiller, but the international pressures of the Cold War and the need for greater cultural restrictions rendered him unsuccessful. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 565)

<sup>15</sup> "Subjective authenticity" is the term coined by Christa Wolf for her semi-autobiographical style of reflecting emotional and intellectual experiences through her texts, which brought her closer to understanding her own individuality. This advance towards self-knowledge accomplished through writing meant she could embrace realism and individuality otherwise denied by a system based on collective indoctrination. (Kammertons and Lebert 2005: online)

realistic”, and by the late 1980s the ideological literary theory of socialist realism was almost entirely meaningless. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 565)

The principles of the Socialist Realist theory that were applied to the cultural sphere in the GDR during the 1950s were based on those laid out at the 1934 Writer’s Congress in the Soviet Union. (Sevin 1988: 10) The primary focus and function of Socialist Realist literature was to increase political awareness among the masses. To achieve this goal, very specific guidelines were applied to all cultural productions, particularly with regard to content, and as such the ideologically motivated theory of Socialist Realism is in no way related to the traditional concept of artistic Realism. (Sevin 1988: 10)

Es handelt sich hier vielmehr um eine ideologisch festgelegte und begrenzte Literaturtheorie, die auf folgenden primären Grundsätzen beruht: ideologisch determinierter Ideengehalt, marxistisch-leninistische Parteilichkeit, Vorbildlichkeit, Optimismus, Volkstümlichkeit, Verständlichkeit und positiver Held. (Sevin 1988:10)

Through strict observation of these cultural principles, the function of literature could be fully realised. It would not only reflect the socialist conditions within East Germany, it would also be crucial to the development of a socialist consciousness and awareness for its readers (Neubert in Sevin 1988: 10). Naturally, this kind of literary repression restricted writers and literature produced during these early years lacked creativity, authenticity and public appeal, and as a consequence found very little success. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 154) This politically driven phase in literature culminated in the 1959 *Bitterfelder Konferenzen*. It was at this conference that SED leader Walter Ulbricht addressed the working class masses, encouraging them “die Höhen der Kultur zu erstürmen [...] Greif zur Feder, Kumpel! Die Sozialistische Nationalkultur braucht dich!” (Ulbricht in Sevin 1988: 11)

The previously mentioned cultural respite that followed Stalin’s death, which resulted in a relaxation of the SED’s enforced cultural polices, gave writers an opportunity to write about their own experiences, and many chose to address the

events of the Second World War once more. While the first stage of literature tended to produce romantic tales of resistance and survival, the mid-1950s brought a more sober and critical analysis of the German population's involvement in the Nazi regime.

The cultural 'Thaw' gave a new generation of prose writers a chance to switch their attentions to a subject they really knew something about, the experience of war, with the narrative emphasis shifting towards the psychological investigation of their susceptibility to Nazi propaganda. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 503)

Some authors drew dangerous parallels between Nazi propaganda and the preceding period of Socialist Realism. Uwe Johnson's *Mutmaßungen über Jakob* (1959) was banned and its author forced into exile because of the novel's "unacceptably critical focus on the repressive nature of the GDR society". (Tate in Sandford 2002: 503) This is evidence that despite a slightly less restrictive cultural policy during the early 1950s, writers were far from free to render their experiences into literature, and by the late 1950s cultural restrictions were becoming more and more severe.

In addition to the so-called *Heimatliteratur* of the late 1940s and early 1950s (Boa in Sandford 2002: 282), the concept of *Heimat* was also popularised in the mid-1950s film genre of *Heimatfilme* ("kitsch, nostalgic films which celebrated a German rural idyll"<sup>16</sup> (Palfreyman in Sandford 2002: 281)), aimed at providing a distraction from post-war industrial reconstruction. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, the concept was rejected in the GDR as "oppressive" as it propagated "repressive moral values". (Palfreyman in Sandford 2002: 281)

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<sup>16</sup> One of the possible reasons that the *Heimatfilme* were initially set in these "rural idylls" was that this territory was not ruined or scarred by bombs, and as such contained no negative reminders of the war. Also, many film studios were destroyed after the war, and it became necessary to use outdoor settings for filming.

## **7. The Berlin Wall and the Cultural Revolution 1961-1965**

Paradoxically, it was the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 that made a “modest cultural revolution” in East Germany possible: in an attempt to regain a measure of popularity and control the SED was forced to accept that the previous decade’s industrial literature had lost all credibility. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 503) One of the most successful novels to come out of this period of liberalisation was Johannes Bobrowski’s *Levins Mühle* (1964). In his novel Bobrowski “revives the tradition of oral storytelling” with his amusing narrative about life in a German-Polish-Jewish community, and provides a realistic account of life in the GDR that the majority of conservative, Socialist Realist novels failed to do. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 503)

Once again, though, the ruling party found that creative intellectuals used this period of relaxation as an opportunity to highlight some of the negative aspects of GDR life under socialism and by 1965 with the introduction of the Eleventh Plenum, the SED was yet again in firm control of the GDR’s literature, with renewed severity and censorship.

## **8. *Liberalisierung* and *die neuere DDR-Literatur* 1965-1975**

The optimism of the late 1960s and 1970s was occasionally countered by government crackdowns designed to silence opposition to and criticism of the state. Literature and the regime engaged in a mutually reactionary cycle; writers struggled to maintain positive outlooks regarding their government, despite the obvious constraints placed upon them. (Munn 1996:online)

After the most restrictive and censored period in the cultural history of the GDR (1965 to 1970), the promotion of Erich Honecker in 1971 to SED leader was accompanied by yet another period of cultural respite, a period in the literary progression known as *Liberalisierung*. During this period a veritable flood of literature was produced, though very little of it gained recognition: after almost two decades of “cultural retardation” writers lacked the structural techniques developed in the Western world, and even the more politically controversial

novels depended on traditional styles and forms. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 504) This reliance on established, classical writing techniques did inspire authors to question the contemporariness of some of the previously honoured texts of Goethe and Schiller and “draw attention to the vitality of techniques of prose-writing evolved by previously underrated authors such as Kleist, Hoffmann and Büchner”. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 504)

A truly innovative anti-fascist literature was also developed during this time with a wave of mainly autobiographical texts by authors who had grown up in Nazi Germany. These texts addressed the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and a separation from any National Socialist tendencies that still remained evident in the leadership of the GDR (such as the terror tactics used in the 1953 Uprising, censorship of the media and mass propaganda). (Silberman 1987: 533)

### **9. The Wolf Biermann Affair and the Cultural Repressions 1976-1980**

As shown in the previous chapter, the phase of liberalisation in the 1970s, accompanied by a renewed faith in the long-term potential of socialism in East Germany, was short-lived. Those authors who chose to remain in the GDR after the Biermann Affair in 1976 - like Wolf - were forced to submit to the authority of the SED, and were labelled *Staatsdichter*, intellectuals who were able to continue publishing within the constraints of the GDR's *Kulturpolitik*. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 148) Censorship of literature reached an all-time high as the socialist leadership attempted to repair the ‘damage’ inflicted by writers during liberalisation.

[Writers] soon came to realise that state socialism was degenerating into political, economic and cultural paralysis. With hindsight it seems no coincidence that this abandonment of political hope is articulated in prose. (Tate in Sandford 2002: 504)

From 1955 until her protest against the expulsion of Wolf Biermann in 1976, Wolf was a member of the executive committee of the Writers' Union of the GDR. She thematised the harassment and surveillance to which a writer who thus

challenged the state was subjected in the 1979 text *Was bleibt*, which was published, with some modifications, only later in 1990. The delay catalysed in heated public debate, the so-called *Literaturstreit*, about the writers who remained loyal to the state, a debate that was further fired by Wolf's belated admission in 1993 that she served as a Stasi informer for a brief period between 1959 and 1962.

### **10. Prenzlauer-Berg and the East German Underground 1980-1990**

One of the most important developments in the latter years of the East German Republic was the emergence and growth of an underground artistic movement known as the Prenzlauer-Berg-Connection, with its centre in Berlin and its influence extending across the state. (Leeder 2006: 7) Writers and artists in this movement were critical of the SED and its policies, particularly those that suppressed individual, creative expression in the arts. "Many considered the literature that was produced in this period to be among the best of the entire GDR [canon]." (Leeder 2006: 8)

### **11. *Ostalgie*<sup>17</sup> – Nostalgia for the East German Past 1990-2000**

Author emigration from the GDR can be divided into three phases: before 1976 when few GDR authors moved to the West, after the Biermann Affair, which caused an enormous exodus from East Germany; and the mass emigration during the late 1990s, when many members of the younger generation became disillusioned with GDR politics. (Munn 1996: online) The works of these authors, most of whom spent their entire childhoods in the East, still possess a uniquely East German identity, examples of which are Jana Hansel's *Zonenkinder* (2002), Michael Tetzlaff's *Ostblöcken* and Claudia Rusch's *Ein Kindheit in der Zone*

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<sup>17</sup> The term *Ostalgie* stems from the words 'nostalgia' and 'Ost'. It is used to describe the recent popularisation of East German goods and a general longing for the East German way of life. (Betts 2000: 733-734)

(2004). (Leeder 2006: 9) In many of these cases the literature evokes the feelings of nostalgia mirrored in the films produced during this time.

Over time the definition of *Heimat* was almost entirely reversed: from its initial association with traditionalism and nationalism in the nineteenth century, to its new application for the experiences of Germans in divided, twentieth century Germany which rejected nationalist ideologies. As Stein explains in her article "The Present is a Foreign Country: Germany after Unification" (1993), the importance of the *verlorene Heimat* in questions of national and regional identity cannot be underestimated. Forty years of political division have created two different German populations who see each other and their respective homes (East and West Germany) as inherently foreign. (Stein 1993: 30) This contributes to the internalisation of the symbolic division of the two states (the Berlin Wall), a phenomenon known as "*die Mauer im Kopf*" (Schneider 1983: 119) which, almost two decades after the fall of the Wall, still prevents a truly united Germany.

Reunification left many Germans reeling from the chaos resulting from the sudden merging of two long-time, diametrically opposed political systems. Like other GDR citizens, writers had the entire system in which their identities had been firmly seated taken away virtually overnight. The critical function of their writing came to a grinding halt. (Munn 1996: online)

The mid-1990s was a time of economic crisis in Eastern Germany, the capitalist ideal was losing its appeal and many former GDR citizens "started looking at what they had lost with the fall of the Wall". (McGuinness 2006: online) Nostalgia within Eastern Germany for objects of the previously resented material culture and for an idealised way of life that had not actually existed in the former GDR, flourished. (Bach 2002: 546) Films like *Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003) fuelled the *Ostalgie* by portraying the GDR as "this funny place with quirky characters". (Nickerson 2006: online) A decade after reunification the division between East and West was once again deepening in the minds of its people (Turner & Lemberg 2002: online), as increasingly fantastic representations of the GDR emerged. (Betts 2000: 736)

## 12. Twenty Years Later: Rewriting the Literary Canon 2000-2010

Finally, almost two decades after the dismantling of the GDR, there is evidence that Eastern Germans are prepared to take a more critical look at their socialist past. (McGuinness 2006: online) Realistic portrayals provided by Wolf's *Was bleibt* and Becker's *Amanda herzlos* are being re-assessed, and the 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* has "prompted open debate" (Nickerson 2006: online) about the future of a unified Germany.

The time is ripe for [previously repressed or ignored] authors to be heard. It took Germany well into the 1960s to even begin talking about Hitler's legacy. The same is true with East Germany. Such processed need time. (Biehl 2005: online)

Not only are well-known works being re-read and re-assessed in a new light, but previously unpublished GDR authors are being discovered and printed for a new audience. "In the GDR there was an official canon, but there was also another canon that operated underground" and there has, in recent years, been a trend towards reforming the official GDR canon to reflect this repressed part of history. (Biehl 2005: online). The result of this reformation and re-assessment is that after years of fighting and defending the significant contribution East German literature has made to German and European literature as a whole, GDR literature is now being recognised as "terrifically rich and multi-faceted." (Biehl 2005: online)

The theoretical principles and historical background which provide the foundation for this thesis have been described and discussed in this and the previous two chapters, and it is only now possible, within this established framework, to undertake an in-depth analysis of selected texts by Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf.

## CHAPTER 4

### Jurek Becker: An Analysis of Selected Texts

#### 1. *Jakob der Lügner* (1969)

Nach meiner Überzeugung ist der wichtigste Antrieb zum Schreiben von Literatur Unzufriedenheit, eine Art von Nichteinverständnis. Das war wohl in der DDR nicht anders als in aller Welt. (Becker in Arnold 1992: 8)

*Jakob der Lügner* tells the story of a Polish Jew, Jakob Heym, who, while interned in a Polish ghetto, accidentally and miraculously overhears a radio broadcast describing the advance of Soviet troops into Eastern Germany. Jakob uses this information to instil hope in a ghetto whose inhabitants' pessimism about their own survival and rescue has led to an increasing incidence of suicides. Jakob is forced to produce fictitious news reports to keep these hopes alive and he faces growing personal and moral conflicts about his lies and the good they seem to be doing.

Ich habe einmal darüber nachgedacht, ob mein erstes Buch eine Reaktion auf Erfahrungen meiner Vergangenheit ist, oder nicht eher eine Reaktion auf die Bücher, die darüber geschrieben wurden und die ich für entsetzlich halte. (Becker in *Stern* 1988: 8)

While three of Becker's later novels, *Irreführung der Behörden* (1973), *Schlaflose Tage* (1978) and *Amanda herzlos* (1992) possess a perceptibly defiant undertone, and are, therefore, often included in the canon of literature that expressed overt dissatisfaction with the politics of the GDR, the mantle of 'opposition literature' seems to have eluded Becker's first novel, *Jakob der Lügner*. Becker himself once admitted that he wrote this story in reaction to the prevalence of resistance literature in the GDR which he considered a "[distortion] of historical truth" (Rock 2000: 23), and yet, Jakob's covertly raising hope amongst his fellow ghetto inmates and resisting the dictatorial regime could be seen as mirroring the times in which Becker wrote.

Official GDR proclamations define its socialist national literature as anti-fascist and anti-imperialist and consider as pre-requisites the thematic confrontation with the history of the Third Reich as well as the perspective based on proletarian internationalism. (Silberman 1987: 527)

In the early 1950s, historical discourse, as with all other spheres of GDR life, became increasingly restricted by socialist limitations, and many historians and their work came under intense scrutiny. Historiography in the GDR was seen as “a legitimacy science (*Legitimationswissenschaft*) for the communist regime”. (Fulbrook in Sandford 2002: 294) Mary Fulbrook (in Sandford 2002: 294) mentions the example of Alexander Abusch who published *Irrweg einer Nation* (1947) a “rather pessimistic view of GDR history”, a work that was officially banned by the SED. In 1951 the Party commissioned historians to write more positive histories of Germany, particularly concerning the founding ideology of the GDR and the history of class struggles. (Fulbrook in Sandford 2002: 294) “By the late 1950s, the East German historical profession was becoming more streamlined, more politically conformist and more constrained”. (Fulbrook in Sandford 2002: 294)

The socialist leadership in the GDR went to great lengths to ensure that historical discourse pertaining to the Second World War and National Socialism emphasised the important role of Communist resistance in the fight against fascism, and placed the blame for the rise of fascism on “imperialist monopoly capitalism”. (Fulbrook in Sandford 2002: 294) Viewed in this light, the German working class masses could be seen as innocent victims in the struggle against the oppression of the capitalist elite. One can already draw significant parallels with the production of these SED-decreed, “optimistic” historiographies and the trends in 1950s GDR fictional Resistance Literature, where the role of German people’s involvement in the war is considerably down-played, and the focus of the texts became the heroic resistance.

The major literary texts of this period reflect a fundamental continuity of exile writing – [...] narratives which took up the resistance struggle, the work of the Communist resistance and the responsibility and guilt of the Germans for Nazi atrocities. (Silberman 1987: 530)

Thus both the fictional literature and historical discourse produced in the 1950s GDR could be classified within the first phase in White's historiographical evolution, the romantic narratives describing the triumph of good against adversity. It was in reaction to these politically-skewed historical accounts and literary narratives that Becker wrote *Jakob der Lügner*, where he addressed not the heroic resistance encountered during the war, but rather the complete – and in a sense collaborative – inaction of many Germans while so many of their countrymen were being oppressed.

In fact, one of the major criticisms of Becker's text at the time of its publication was that it contained no clear opposition to the so-called Third Reich. This was the primary reason that Becker's original film script for *Jakob der Lügner* was rejected and was subsequently adapted into prose form: it focused on "ordinary, everyday Jews" rather than a heroic allegory of fascist resistance. (Rock 2000: 35)

However, as Rock (2000: 101) explains, in *Jakob der Lügner* themes of resistance and opposition are pivotal. The unidentified narrator of this novel laments that in his ghetto there was no overt resistance to Nazi enforcers:

Ich sage, mit Ehrfurcht habe ich inzwischen von Warschau und Buchenwald gelesen, eine andere Welt, doch vergleichbar. [...] Wahrscheinlich werde ich nie damit fertig, es hat dort, wo ich war, keinen Widerstand gegeben. (Becker 1976: 99)

This is a theme to which Becker returns again and again throughout his novels: the sense that East Germans, like the Polish Jews in Jakob's ghetto, were essentially very submissive to the policies of their government's leadership, and did not collectively resist physical and psychological oppression. "Und der Widerstand, wird man fragen, wo bleibt der Widerstand?" (Becker 1976: 98)

Moreover, West German literary critic Peter Hanenberg believed that the narrator himself showed resistance in his telling of the story when considered in the context of the GDR in the late 1960s "weil er zu erzählen versteht: [...] gegen die

Verdrängungsmechanismen zweier deutscher Gesellschaften, von denen die eine lieber nichts und die andere nur Heroisches aus jener Zeit zu hören bereit sein wollte". (Hanenberg in Beisbart and Abraham 1992: 143)

It is the close link between the mode of telling the story and the story itself that is part of the brilliance of *Jacob the Liar* as a novel. Its strength lies to no small degree in its extraordinary narrative framework. [...] The framework puts the very act of storytelling into question. (Gilman 2003: 67)

Though Becker himself acknowledged he had no interest in writing an historical, anti-fascist novel – he admitted as much in an interview with Jutta Voigt in the *Sonntag Kulturpolitische Wochenzeitung*: "Ich muss aber sagen, daß mich nie das Thema Faschismus für sich interessiert hat, nie die Ghetto-Geschichte pur" (Becker in Voigt 1975: n.p.) - the images of watchtowers, guarded barbed-wire fences and constant surveillance are strikingly symbolic of the Nazi regime and its oppression tactics, images that also "evoke uncomfortable similarities with the state-borders of East Germany". (Rock 2000: 101)

The wall surrounding the ghetto in *Jakob der Lügner* created an isolation that was fatal to its inhabitants. Jurek saw the wall as no longer surrounding West Berlin but the whole GDR. The GDR was a huge ghetto in which you had to listen to Western broadcasts in order to find out what was happening in your own neighbourhood. (Gilman 2003: 72)

Despite Becker's stated intentions in writing *Jakob der Lügner* in opposition to the quixotic novels of Resistance literature, it has many traits in common with these romantic novels: the life of Jakob in the ghetto provides a very detailed, personal example of what life would have been like for Jews living in exile or in concentration camps during the war, though this kind of historically accurate and comprehensive description of life from the point of view of the victims of war would have been neglected during the war, and avoided to a greater extent post-war in favour of more heroic allegories. Jakob actually finds himself in the role of reluctant hero - his actions inspire hope in the ghetto – in opposition to the 'villainous' Nazi officers.

In an interview with the American publication *Seminar* in 1983 Becker admitted that *Jakob der Lügner* was "a parable about the role of literature in our society",

with the connotation that the very act of writing and producing literature – of *storytelling* (own emphasis) – in a closed society such as the GDR was, in itself, a form of resistance (*Seminar* 1983: 290). The novel's protagonist, Jakob Heym, echoes this sentiment.

Und wenn ich versuche, die allerletzte Möglichkeit zu nutzen, die sie davon abhält, sich gleich hinzulegen und zu krepieren, mit Worten, verstehen Sie, mit Worten versuche ich das! Weil ich nämlich nichts anderes habe! Da kommen Sie mir und sagen, es ist verboten. (Becker 1976: 194)

In his own way Jakob “counters psychological oppression with psychological resistance” (Rock 2000: 102). His story-telling – much like literature in the GDR - is subversive and resistant, and yet this potent parallel between life in the ghetto and life in the strictly controlled socialist East was subtle enough not to attract the attention of the censoring authorities.

In addition to being a subtle commentary on the lack of resistance to restrictions in the GDR, *Jakob der Lügner*, the first in Becker's so-called Holocaust trilogy, is also considered to be one of the first novels to take a humorous approach on the events of the Holocaust. Becker wanted to produce a realistic portrayal of life in the ghetto that had resonance for citizens living under the oppressive restrictions of the GDR government without creating a character who was pitied by the readers, he wanted to write a narrative that “avoid[ed] sentimentality and pathos”. (Rock 2000: 36)

The ‘irreverence’ with which Becker approached this sensitive period in German history, still fresh in the minds of those who suffered, stirred debate about the ‘trivialisation’ of this horrific event, with some critics rejecting Becker's “spielerische[n] Umgang mit einer Wirklichkeit, die absolut nichts Spielerisches hat”. (Lüdke-Haertel and Lüdke 1988: 3) But as Becker himself explained, this carefully constructed juxtaposition of humour in a time of suffering and despair in fact served to emphasise the tragedy of the situation, and made the narrative more accessible and poignant.

Ich suche den einem Stoff unangemessenen Erzählstil. Wenn ich eine Geschichte erzählen möchte, die man, wenn man nichts anderes hört als die äußeren Umstände, also Tragödie empfindet, suche ich den komischen Weg, sie zu erzählen. [...] Ich habe selbst die Erfahrung gemacht, daß das, was mir als Leser auf gewisse Weise respektlos, übertrieben respektlos, oder pietätlos, Geschmacksregeln verletzend, unangemessen komisch daherkam, mir immer das Eindrücklichere gewesen ist. (Becker in Arnold 1992: 65-66)

The narrator in *Jakob der Lügner* – or the “Erzählprinzip” (Rock 2000: 36) as Becker himself describes it – is “nicht allwissend” (Becker 1976: 98). Like Jakob, he is a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust who has a story to tell:

Ich habe tausendmal versucht, diese verfluchte Geschichte loszuwerden, immer vergebens. Entweder es waren nicht die richtigen Leute, denen ich sie erzählen wollte, oder ich habe irgendwelche Fehler gemacht. Ich habe vieles durcheinandergebracht, ich habe Namen verwechselt, oder es waren, wie gesagt, nicht die richtigen Leute. Jedesmal, wenn ich ein paar Schnäpse getrunken habe, ist sie da, ich kann mich nicht dagegen wehren. (Becker 1976: 9)

The difficulty of storytelling is, once again, central to the figure of the narrator and the text itself: “the narrator is hampered by his storytelling by the necessary reinvention of his life after [the Holocaust].” (Gilman 2003: 68) The narrator frames the story in which “he is intrusively present from the very first sentence of the novel (‘Ich höre schon alle sagen, ein Baum, was ist das schon’) to the last (‘Denn ich sehe noch die Schatten von Bäumen, und schlafen kann ich nicht, wir fahren, wohin wir fahren’). (Rock 2002: 37)

The narrator represents the GDR. His voice is that of a survivor whose identity is defined by his experiences and who deals with this by telling stories about those experiences. (Gilman 2003: 69)

The most significant influence the narrator has on the account of Jakob Heym, is that he provides two alternative endings for the story. Gilman, providing personal insight into Becker’s writing process, explains that the first scenario is in fact the original conclusion Becker prepared for his rejected film script, and the one that was chosen for the screenplay when the novel was made into a film. In this ending Jakob dies – or commits suicide – shortly before the Russians invade and free the remaining inhabitants of the ghetto. In the second version the narrator is present in the story for the first and only time: he is on the train with Jakob and

Lina being transported to “Majdanek oder Auschwitz” (Becker 1976: 83). Rock believes Becker employed this tactic to make his readers more sensitive.

For instance, the sentimental first ending, whilst complementing the inner story of Jakob [that of hope, the central theme of the novel] also functions as a provocative illusion which the narrator dangles before his readers, and whilst he reminds us initially that it is only fiction, it is as if he is consciously playing with our expectations only to leave us with the final, hopeless journey to the death camp. (Rock 2002: 44)

“For even hope itself [...] is implicitly questioned at one point in terms of whether it is counter-productive [...], undermining the will to act, [...] deterring potential resistance” and by the late 1960s Becker himself had reached a point in his relationship with the GDR and its particular application of socialism where he began to question the future of the GDR, himself losing hope (Rock 2002: 44 and Gilman 2003: 73).

His role as a member of the opposition was beginning at the very moment his fame as a writer was about to be established. After 1968, the political authority in the GDR had lost much of its legitimacy in Jurek’s mind. (Gilman 2003: 73)

## **2. *Irreführung der Behörden* (1973)**

Any reader familiar with *Jakob der Lügner* will be aware of how story-telling in the sense of invention (and untruth) is an existential necessity; anyone who has read *Irreführung der Behörden* will be aware of how literature is an essentially subversive act. (Williams in Riordan 1998: 93)

Becker’s second novel, written 8 years after the successful reception of *Jakob der Lügner*, was published during the period of *Liberalisierung*, and took advantage of the relative freedom of the time to critically express his views on the GDR. “Contemporary readers in the GDR saw it as a commentary on Honecker’s GDR after the thaw. It was read as a novel that measured the response of intellectuals to greater ‘freedom’ under Honecker.” (Gilman 2003: 83)

Becker himself considered this novel as one of his most important contributions to the censorship debate. (Williams in Riordan 1998: 91) *Irreführung der Behörden* takes a somewhat derisive look at the GDR’s cultural sphere, still a risky topic even under the SED’s relatively more relaxed restrictions. “It dealt with

the possibilities of living, loving and functioning as a writer in the GDR,” and rejected all Socialist Realist conventions while critically – and controversially – expressing his views on the *real existierender Sozialismus* in the GDR. (Gilman 2003: 82) This lamentation of the loss of good values, which Becker expresses as increasing disillusionment in the socialist authorities, is characteristic of the tragic prose of White’s third historiographical phase.

Becker’s novel was highly criticised within the GDR for its deviations from reality, its abstract content - the production and publication of literature is in fact the crux of the novel itself - and its emphasis on aesthetics and innovation. (Rock 2000: 104) It is exactly for these reasons that Emmerich, in his history of literature in the GDR, proclaims that *Irreführung der Behörden* exemplifies “die neuere DDR-Literatur”. (Emmerich 1997: 239)

The novel rejects all conventions of the sanctioned Socialist Realist forms and content, and introduces new themes to the canon of East German literature. (Rock 2000: 103) The structure of *Irreführung der Behörden* also deliberately deviates from Socialist Realist norms: it consists of two sections: the first is “an account of Gregor’s [Gregor Bienek, the protagonist] life and his tales”, which follows Bienek’s ambition to become a writer. The second is “a schematic representation of the events of his life from 1960-1966” which chronicles the collapse of Bienek’s marriage and the relative failure of his writing. (Gilman 2003: 83)

The protagonist of Becker’s second novel is once again a storyteller of sorts. Gregor Bienek<sup>18</sup> is a capable, innovative young law student, determined to be a writer, who faces immense pressure to conform to Party regulations. The more Bienek continues to develop as a state-writer who accepts his role in the literary

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<sup>18</sup> Becker has never denied the autobiographical elements in his novels, and no characters come as close to Becker himself than Gregor Bienek. Becker’s full first name upon relocating to Berlin after the war was Georg Jurek Becker, thus the initials are the same as Becker’s. Furthermore, Bienek is a law student and writer, just as Becker was before he was excluded from Humboldt University. (Gilman 2003: 82)

propaganda process, the more his writing and creativity suffers, as his wife, Lola, points out to him:

Sie [das Publikum] erwarten von dir Aufrichtigkeit, und sie haben ein Recht darauf. [...] Aber was tust du? Du führst sie in die Irre und lieferst alte Hüte ab, die du in deiner Werkstatt mit ein bißchen Talent aufpolierst. (Becker 1975: 248)

The novel also deviates from Socialist Realist conventions with its emphasis on the subjective nature of the human condition and experiences. (Rock 2000: 104) When Bienek produces a story about how differently a single person can be remembered by several individuals, his editor rejects the novel on the basis that a single person leaves behind a single, immutable history.

Dabei stellte sich heraus, daß jeder von ihnen einen Anderen begraben hatte, denn jeder hatte ihn anders im Gedächtnis, und es ließ sich nicht mehr rekonstruieren, wessen Version die richtige war. (Becker 1975: 13)

Bienek's thinking is exactly Hayden White's argument: there will necessarily be several versions of history - there can be no single, irrefutable truth – as the remembering of a single person or event in time depends entirely on who is doing the recording and for whom this record is being written and kept. The editor here could be a representation of all conformist, socialist historians whose historiographies were tailored according to the will and intentions of the state authorities. One can see here a very clear parallel between the authentic creation of literature and the writing of history, and the difficulties both fields faced in the GDR.

In a personal letter written to David Rock in August 1993, Becker explains that three of Bienek's stories in the novel were in fact screenplays Becker had submitted that were subsequently rejected by the authorities, and as such one can draw parallels between Bienek's struggles to write and publish authentic, original literature with those of Becker writing within the GDR's publishing restrictions. (Rock 2000: 104)

According to White, the function of tragic literature is for the reader to feel sympathy for the unsuccessful hero, which results in a catharsis of emotions. The moral lessons are learned through the protagonist's journey, though he ultimately fails in his quest (unlike the heroes of the romantic stories). Tragic protagonists face difficulties that they cannot overcome, but the narration of the struggle and its failure fulfil a purgative function for the reader. Bienek is a well-intentioned character who strives towards creative success but ultimately fails because he is over-powered by the forces of the Socialist government. For many GDR readers, this abortive quest for autonomy and individual achievement would have been a story they could have intimately related to, and so would have aided in the catharsis of their own emotions.

As an author, Becker was finding it increasingly more difficult to come to terms with his own life and experiences through his writing, feeling stifled by the constraints of the Socialist Realist literary framework. He vented his frustrations through his writing once more with *Irreführung der Behörden*. Thus the process of writing this tragedy was cathartic for Becker himself. "His readers in the GDR long remembered the audacity and challenge this novel presented to the cultural establishment of the time". (Gilman 2003: 82)

By the mid-1970s Becker was one of the most prominent of a younger generation of GDR writers, and certainly one of the most well known internationally. (Rock 2000: 99f.)

### **3. *Schlaflose Tage* (1978)**

Becker's final text written in the GDR (though initially only published in the West) is also a pertinent example of the tragic - according to White's historiographical definition - literary texts prevalent throughout the 1970s and 1980s. *Schlaflose Tage* (1978) is a particularly intense criticism of the SED's all-encompassing intervention into the personal lives of GDR citizens, particularly with the Party's emphasis on conformity which stifled individual creative and intellectual

development and for the first time Becker publically admits his loss of faith in the future of the GDR. (Rock 2000: 106)

Ich will in diesem Land bleiben als jemand, der das veröffentlichen kann, was er schreibt; denn auf die Dauer ist das für einen Schriftsteller die einzige praktikable Methode, sich einzumischen. Wenn es allerdings darum geht, den Mund zu halten, dann halte ich den Mund lieber auf den Bahamas. (Becker in Rock 2000: 107)

In the late-1970s Becker's actively socialist position changed dramatically: he became associated with public criticism and opposition to the radical and uncompromising developments taking place in GDR cultural policy. (Rock 2000: 100) In 1976 Becker strongly objected to the expulsion of Reiner Kunze from the GDR Writers' Union<sup>19</sup>, and later that year signed a petition addressed to Erich Honecker condemning Wolf Biermann's expatriation. For the latter, Becker himself was excluded from the SED and the Writers' Union.

Becker's statements written after the demise of the GDR clearly indicated that over the years he had been moving slowly but surely towards the ultimately critical stance which he adopted *vis-à-vis* 'actually existing socialism' in the GDR. (Rock 2000: 100)

Despite the questions of party loyalty surrounding *Jakob der Lügner*, *Irreführung der Behörden*, and Becker's third text *Der Boxer* (1976)<sup>20</sup>, the texts were all published in the GDR. However, Becker's first novel subsequent to the events of 1976, *Schlaflose Tage* (1978), was refused publication in the East. Müller (2005: 18) claims the novel was refused GDR publication rights after a series of interviews conducted in West Berlin in which Becker criticised the GDR's cultural policies. However, Johnson (1988: 37), Riordan (1998: 8f.) and Rock (2000: 100) agree that Becker's depiction of a female protagonist who attempts to escape from East Germany through Hungary because she believes "dass sie [in Ungarn] nicht so leicht schießen" (Becker 1980: 112), was the main reason this novel was

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<sup>19</sup> Reine Kunze had published his novel *Die wunderbaren Jahre* (1976) in West Germany after his novel was refused publication in the GDR because of its strong criticism of the GDR (Constabile-Heming in Sandford 2002: 362)

<sup>20</sup> *Der Boxer* is considered the second book in Becker's Holocaust trilogy. (Rock 2000: 15) This text also breaks from Socialist Realist convention, focusing on the complications outsiders face when trying to integrate themselves into GDR society, emphasising the role of the individual in society, a taboo topic in socialist discourse.

rejected by GDR censors, even before Becker made his break from the GDR in December 1977 by emigrating to West Berlin. *Schlaflose Tage* was Becker's only novel not published in the GDR.

Danach sah ich in der DDR nur noch wenig Zukunft für mich – aber das ist nur die Viertelwahrheit. Ich sah für mich wenig Zukunft, weil ich dem Ganzen kaum mehr Zukunft beimaß. (Becker in Heidelberger-Leonard 1992: 112)

Over a period of two years from 1977, Becker wrote a collection of short stories in an anthology tellingly entitled *Nach der ersten Zukunft*, alluding to his loss of faith in his GDR future, and the idea that his move to the Federal Republic would mean a new, “second future” for him. (Rock 2000: 106) This break from the GDR is once again reflected in his literature: in *Schlaflose Tage* the protagonist, Karl Simrock, expresses a longing for a different future – “Lust auf Zukunft”. (Becker 1980: 27)

This is a desire to overcome habitual ways of thinking and mechanical behaviour, to break out of his rigid conformist shell and enter into a dynamic state of constant change through self-reflection and then decision making – implying, ultimately, a radical rejection of socialism as it actually exists in a society which the title suggests is ‘asleep’. (Rock 2000: 106)

It is not just the content of Becker's texts that at this time deviated significantly from socialist protocols; the style of writing itself was changing. This transition in the form and content of Becker's writing is in keeping with linguistic developments happening in historiographies during the same period as described by White in his tropic developments. Becker's readership and intention in writing was evolving, and with this came an adaptation in style and genre. Becker's later novels focus almost exclusively on the psychology of his protagonists, how they react to the conflicts of everyday life; and the reader is encouraged to experience an emotional connection with the characters, to share their fear, uncertainty and developments. The inner conflicts of the characters reflect the “constant pressure to conform” felt by all of those living in the GDR. (Rock 2000: 107)

Simrock, the novel's protagonist, experiences mild chest pains after his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday and this causes him to contemplate his own mortality. He decides to re-evaluate his life and comes to the realisation that he leads a very conformist, restricted life in which all the decisions are already made for him. Simrock discovers that the restrictions in his life are not only externally imposed, but also within himself, "wie eine Mauer im Landesinnern" (Becker 1980: 28), a clear reference to the constraints imposed in the GDR and reminiscent of the psychological oppression used by the Nazis, against which Jakob's stories fight. Becker is showing that such systems can ultimately be defeated, even if these ideologies have become internalised and fixed in the mentality of individuals.

Der besondere Eifer, mit dem die Stasi-Schikanen nun angeprangert und verfolgt werden, scheint mir für viele wie ein Versuch, die eigene Unterwürfigkeit ungeschehen zu machen. (Becker in Heidelberger-Leonard 1992: 77)

Becker also criticises the SED's interference into the private lives of all GDR citizens. After Becker's vocal opposition to the expatriation of Wolf Biermann, the Stasi increased their surveillance, and, as mentioned before, code-named Becker "Lügner". (Arnold 1993: 24) In his first novel after this event, Becker creates the archetypal Party fanatic in the form of Bungert, who believes that maintaining individual, private spheres is in direct opposition to socialist collective ideals. Simrock's lover, Antonia, on the other hand, longs for a life in which there are "genügend Inseln der Abgeschlossenheit". (Becker 1980: 74)

In the *Times Literary Supplement* (20/10/1978) Peter Graves reviewed *Schlaflose Tage* and includes Becker in group of authors, who, after the publication of Christa Wolfs' *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968), became disillusioned with the "dehumanising aspects of the GDR", while still fundamentally accepting the socialist ideology. In an interview with Wolfram Schütte in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* in September 1977 Becker declared himself "a convinced socialist who is dissatisfied with the form socialism has taken in the GDR". Like Simrock in the novel, Becker, despite criticisms of what his life had become under the GDR's socialism, still related to its ideologies.

Whilst welcoming the collapse of 'actually existing' socialist states, Becker lamented the demise of [...] socialism and its promise of a more humane form of society in the face of Western societies that [...] are driven only by consumerism. (Rock 2000: 125)

While Simrock expresses criticism of the way socialism has been implemented, and its consequences on his life, it is Antonia, his lover, who is the truly revolutionary and subversive character: she flees the GDR through Hungary after she loses faith in the socialism she once embraced. Antonia feels the need to express her individuality, which is stifled by the collectivist, conformist identity of the GDR. Simrock, like Becker himself, is representative of those GDR citizens who sincerely believed socialist ideologies could be successfully implemented. Antonia symbolises those who rejected not only the state, but also socialist ideology itself (Rock 2000: 115): "Ich bin nur ein gescheiter Mensch, denn man hat mich so erschreckt, dass mich die Sache nicht mehr interessiert." (Becker 1980: 74)

#### **4. *Amanda herzlos* (1992)**

The final phase in White's historiographical genre development is satire. Jill Twark, in her recent study, *Humor, Satire, and Identity. East German Literature in the 1990s* (2007), describes the prevalence of humorous and satirical works in post-reunification German literature as "a broad reaction not only to the end of the GDR, but also to post-wall Eastern German experiences". (Twark 2007: 1) The purposes of these satirical texts were to actively engage in past experiences and tragedies, and, through the device of humour, incite a reaction from the reader, whether it be laughter, anger, indignation or simply a different perspective and understanding of conditions. (Twark 2007: 2) Twark refers to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant with his assertion that "laughter is the result of a tense expectation that suddenly ends in nothing" to explain the use of satire in Eastern German literary texts dealing with the complicated transition from an oppressive socialist regime to a free-market democracy. (Twark 2007: 3)

An excellent example of a satirical text that throws a humorous light on life in the GDR is Becker's 1992 publication *Amanda herzlos*. This text follows the life of Amanda and her three successive companions, Ludwig, Fritz and Stanislaus, as they come to terms with their various functions as writers in a constantly politically, culturally and socially shifting GDR. The stereotypical behaviour of some of his characters – for example the description of Stanislaus testing his theory about the methods Berlin Wall border guards used to stop illegal emigration – are often quite humorous though one cannot ignore the underlying commentary about the social restrictions with which GDR citizens lived.

The response to *Amanda herzlos* was twofold. The public adored it. [...] The critics, with few exceptions, hated it. [...] Marcel Reich-Ranicki thought the very image of the GDR seemed repressed and softened. It was not grim enough to reflect the realities of life under communism. (Gilman 2003: 214)

This was a frequent criticism of *Amanda herzlos* and yet, as Gilman maintains, "none of the critics got the point" (Gilman 2003: 214). Becker's intention was to create a popular novel that appealed to a mass audience, describing events and characters to whom the reader could relate and still raise questions of morality in the GDR. "The tone he struck was intentionally ironic, comic, and entertaining." (Gilman 2003: 214) This kind of humorous perspective on life in the GDR was not unique to Becker, nor to literature as genre, and the late 1990s and early 2000s saw an increase in the frequency of films like *Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003) which addressed the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* and reflected on life in the GDR in a less serious light, as discussed above.

*Amanda herzlos* (1992) was Becker's last novel before his death in 1997. "It was intended to be, as most of his [Becker's] novels were, a novel in and of the GDR, now more than ever a [sic] historical setting." (Gilman 2003: 209) Sander Gilman, a close personal friend of Jurek Becker, explains in his biography *Jurek Becker. A Life in Five Worlds* (2003), that Becker was inspired to write this novel after Sabine Gölz, a student of Becker's previous works, had published a paper on the

absence of the character of “wife” in several of his novels and films.<sup>21</sup> Gölz sent a copy of the paper to Becker’s wife Christine – instead of Becker himself – and the debate which ensued between Christine<sup>22</sup> and her husband caused Becker to “rethink some of his basic premises” (Gilman 2003: 209) The result of this personal re-evaluation was *Amanda herzlos*, the only novel of Becker’s to be centred around a female protagonist, although Amanda herself only appears through the narratives of the three men.

The first companion, Ludwig, is a character that has a great deal in common with one of Becker’s previous leading men, Gregor Bienek (*Irreführung der Behörden*) who, as discussed above, reflects a few biographical traits of Becker himself: Ludwig is a writer<sup>23</sup> like Becker and so many of his protagonists, and an extremely dedicated socialist. Ludwig’s narrative – *Die Scheidung* – the first in the novel, is directed at his divorce lawyer, and is essentially a defence of his actions and a description of Amanda’s character and behaviour as he sees it in an attempt to justify the failure of the couple’s marriage. From Ludwig the reader discovers a great deal about Amanda’s personal life, about her family, her alleged childhood abuse and the main flaw in Amanda’s character – according to Ludwig – her intelligence:

Als junger Mann habe ich immer geglaubt, die Frau, die ich einmal heiraten würde, hätte zwei Bedingungen zu erfüllen: Sie müßte gut aussehen, und sie

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<sup>21</sup> For example, the absent wife in Becker’s short story *Parkverbot* – from the collection of short stories entitled *Nach der Ersten Zukunft* (1980), and the search for a wife in the film *Come with me to Montevideo* (1963). For a more detailed discussion of the phenomenon of the “missing wife” in Becker’s texts, see Sabine Gölz’s “Where did the Wife Go? Reading Jurek Becker’s ‘Parkverbot.’” *Germanic Review*, Vol. 62. (1987), pp. 10-19.

<sup>22</sup> Gilman’s very personal account of Becker’s life and writing includes useful biographical details about his family, particularly his first wife, Christine. Christine is described as an avid reader of German feminist theorist Alice Schwarzer and feminist linguistic studies by Luise Pusch, among others, and it is from this background that she questions the role of female characters in her husband’s texts. (Gilman 2003: 209)

<sup>23</sup> Many of Becker’s protagonists are writers or storytellers in one form or another. It is interesting here to note that Ludwig, a strict conformist to party politics, is a *sports* journalist. Sport played a significant role in the GDR, as the state believed that mass participation in physical activity was necessary for “the development of key characteristics of the socialist personality” and international success in sport was intended to “demonstrate the superiority of the socialist system.” (Dennis in Sandford 2002: 577)

müßte intelligent sein. [...] Inzwischen weiß ich, daß Intelligenz mehr Probleme schafft, als sie zu lösen imstande ist. (Becker 1994: 25)

Intelligence was a particularly dangerous thing in the GDR, especially when the person who possessed this quality was not as dedicated to the socialist cause as the *Stasi* would have liked. As a writer Amanda often poses confrontational questions in her interviews “of the kind that were unacceptable in the GDR”. (Gilman 2003: 212) While Amanda’s questions for the director of a textile factory may initially seem quite funny, her belligerent behaviour in the interview is really quite deliberate, resistant and very revealing about Amanda’s own concept of socialism in the GDR:

Für eine kleine Zeitschrift fuhr sie einmal in eine Textilfabrik, um den Direktor zu interviewen. Sie stellte ihm so provozierende Fragen, daß er nicht nur das Gespräch abbrach, sondern die Redaktion anrief und sich über Amanda beschwerte. [...] Als ich von Amanda wissen wollte, womit sie den Mann so aus der Fassung gebracht hatte, zeigte sie mir einen Zettel mit ihren Fragen: Was er, der Direktor, für wichtiger halte – die Wünsche der Bevölkerung oder den Plan. Ob er glaube, daß es dem Sozialismus schaden würde, wenn die Leute gutsitzende Hosen trügen. (Becker 1994: 23)

While divorce proceedings were still underway, Ludwig is informed by a co-worker – a *Stasi* officer – that Amanda had received payment from a publishing house in West Germany. (Becker 1994: 81) Ludwig’s almost blind loyalty to the socialist cause is completely incompatible with Amanda’s activities and after a violent disagreement Amanda leaves Ludwig for another writer, Fritz Hetmann.

*Die verlorene Geschichte* is Fritz’s narrative about his relationship with Amanda, related through the reconstruction of Fritz’s lost<sup>24</sup> novel *Der Feminist*<sup>25</sup>. Fritz is significantly older than Amanda and by the time the two meet, he is a relatively successful and well-established GDR writer. In yet another incident paralleling events in the life of Becker himself, Fritz’ membership of the *Deutscher*

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<sup>24</sup> *Der Feminist* was not simply “lost” as the title of this narrative section suggests. More importantly, Fritz suspects Amanda’s young son, Sebastian, of deliberately deleting the story: “Ich bin sicher, der kleine Dreckskerl Sebastian war es. Ich bin sicher, daß Sebastian, den ich liebe wie ein eigenes Kind, die Arbeit von vier Monate zunichte gemacht hat.” (Becker 1994: 111)

<sup>25</sup> Another intimate background detail provided by Gilman’s biography is that *Der Feminist* was also the working title for *Amanda herzlos*. (Gilman 2003: 210)

*Schriftstellerverband* is revoked after a manuscript he wrote is intercepted by SED authorities on its way to a West German publishing house in Munich. By this time Fritz has become disillusioned with writing within the proscribed Socialist Realist limitations, and his work is no longer accepted or published in the GDR: with the discovery of his manuscript, all his work is banned. (Becker 1994: 170-171)

It is necessary at this point to digress briefly from the methodical breakdown of the novel to provide some background on Becker's opinions about the role of the censor in GDR literature, a theme which is once again highlighted through the banned writing of Fritz Hetmann in *Amanda herzlos*.

In the summer of 1989, Jurek Becker was invited to present his contribution to the *Poetik-Vorlesungen* at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität in Frankfurt – entitled *Warnung vor dem Schriftsteller* – in which he compared the function of writers in East and West Germany and described what he felt was the continuously decreasing quality of literature published in both states. (Williams in Riordan 1998: 85 and Rock 2000: 126) Becker discussed the paradoxical role censorship played in the literature of the GDR, saying “[d]ie Bücher der Autoren, die sich mit dem Zensor anlegen, werden selbst von denen gelesen, die sonst nie ein Buch in die Hand nehmen würden”. (Becker 1989: 16)

While [Becker] accepts that certain oppositional literature in the GDR appears to achieve enormous reader response, he does not believe that this phenomenon indicates that either writing in the GDR is particularly resonant, or that GDR readers are especially sensitive. The reason is merely the existence of censorship. (Williams in Riordan 1998: 86)

In 1990 Becker published an essay in which he once again addressed the role of literature in the GDR, and the future of GDR authors in a reunified Germany. While Becker entitled his essay *Die Wiedervereinigung der deutschen Literatur*, it is very clear from his arguments that he believed no such reunification would

occur in literature, rather that the “Ersatzfunktion”<sup>26</sup> of GDR literature was no longer valid and in the reunified and open society of the new Federal Republic, GDR literature would become void. (Rock 2000: 126) “Ist am Ende, wie makaber das auch klingt, Trauer um die Zensur angebracht?” (Becker 1990: 363)

Such literature would no longer sell in the West since many GDR authors owed their fame and success to a combination of the censor and the existence of a second, hostile German state, where the West German public, like the East German one, was, as Becker put it, “auf das Dissidentische scharf”. (Rock 2000: 126)

Returning to the text, Ludwig Weniger, Amanda’s first partner, describes Fritz as “eine[n] der jener Schriftsteller, die aus ihrer Feindseligkeit gegenüber unserem Staat einen Beruf gemacht haben”. (Becker 1994: 98) Fritz himself comments on this phenomenon: “Nun lebten wir in einem bizarren Land, in dem alle verbotenen Autoren Berühmtheiten [sind] und auf ein lüsternes Interesse stießen.” (Becker 1994: 181f.) Later Fritz gives a particularly strong-worded interview in which he describes the difference between socialism and the actually existing socialism in the GDR as the same as the difference between “Firmengründung und Bankrott”. (Becker 1994: 323) Stanislaus believes the reason Fritz delivered this controversial statement was that “[er] bestimmt ein Buch in Vorbereitung [habe] und für Aufmerksamkeit sorgen [müsse]”. (Becker 1994: 323)

While Ludwig’s narrative was delivered in the form of a lengthy monologue, and Fritz’s story told through the characters and reconstruction of his own novel, Stanislaus’ offering, *Der Antrag*, is in the form of several diary entries. Revelling in his role as the dissident author, Fritz agrees to an interview with a Western reporter from Hamburg, on condition that he bring Amanda a blouse from the West: “the third man in Amanda’s life is thus introduced.” (Gilman 2003: 211)

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<sup>26</sup> The ‘substitutive function’ which literature performed, according to Becker, was that it provided a medium for political debate (however subtle or veiled) that was not publicly permitted in GDR society.

Stanislaus is portrayed as a West German citizen with a particularly detailed understanding of the conditions in the GDR as a result of his work as a journalist covering various aspects of life in the East. Unfortunately for Stanislaus, he is not particularly good at his job, and soon Amanda begins to write his articles for him. "Ihr Text ist weniger streitsüchtig als meiner und dennoch aggressiver, sie trifft die wunderen Punkte, sie findet die genaueren Worte. Vielleicht liegt das ganze Geheimnis darin, daß sie besser schreibt als ich." (Becker 1994: 131) For Stanislaus this is the beginning of the end – his work is increasingly substituted by Amanda's outspoken articles and the political climate in East and West Germany is beginning to change. Finally Stanislaus receives word that he will no longer be writing in the East: "In der Redaktion trifft mich ein Keulenschlag: Ich erfahre, daß mein Vertrag als Korrespondent nicht verlängert wird." (Becker 1992: 294)

Stanislaus decides that in order for him and Amanda to stay together, Amanda needs to escape the GDR illegally or marry him. "Eine dritte Möglichkeit sei mir gar nicht erst in den Sinn gekommen, und zwar die, im Osten zu bleiben, bei ihr." (Becker 1994: 304) The novel concludes with the newlyweds and Sebastian moving to the West, on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1989, with Amanda reassuring her child:

Nicht einmal die Sprache ist anders, die Wörter haben dieselbe Bedeutung. Natürlich ist es ein Jammer, daß du Leo und Martha nicht mitnehmen kannst, aber wir könnten wetten, daß es dort auch Leos und Marthas gibt. Und weißt du, daß es an jeder Ecke Bananen zu kaufen gibt? So ein Unglück ist das ja auch nicht. (Becker 1994: 383f.)

Stanislaus' final diary entry is full of dramatic irony because the reader (after 1992) knows that before the year is out, the Wall will have opened and the GDR will be on the brink of non-existence. Stanislaus represents the physical freedom (his ability to cross the border regularly), the luxury (the gifts he brings for Amanda) and the creative liberty (his journalism) that the exotic and extravagant West promises.

With her penultimate sentence Amanda mentions the accessibility of bananas. While this may seem like a comical, trivial addition to her description about life in the West, the symbol of the banana is one that German readers, both East and West alike, would be very familiar with: after the Second World War bananas were the first – and single biggest – mass import into the Western zones of occupation (later West Germany) from the US: “Bananas became a symbol of West Germany’s new economic power.” (Adam 2005: 114) Bananas (and other exotic fruits) were very rare in the GDR because of politically driven trade limitations. Special exceptions were made over Christmas and Easter, while most banana imports were channelled directly into schools and hospitals. (Adam 2005: 114) In a socialist nation that placed huge emphasis on equality and regarded any accumulations of personal wealth as a form of resistance to the good of the collective, bananas took on a currency-like significance, becoming a “symbol of economic well-being”. (Adam 2005: 114) In a 2005 study it was found that banana consumption in the former-East German territories was still nearly twice that of its West German counterparts, a full 15 years after reunification. (Adam 2005: 114)

Ludwig is a sports writer; Fritz a controversial novelist; Stanislaus a Western radio reporter and Amanda a writer whose talent for depicting the reality of life in the GDR develops throughout her three relationships. It is therefore very difficult to ignore the subject of the difficulty of writing and being a writer in both the GDR and the West – as Becker himself was – when reading *Amanda herzlos*: “At its heart, [...] the novel is about learning to write. [...] Jurek had to come to terms with his mission as a writer in the New Germany.” (Gilman 2003: 215) Becker does not only address the limitations of writing under the constraints of Socialist Realism and the watchful eye of the censor, it is also in this novel that he reflects on the pressures of writing in the West immediately after his immigration. Fritz creates a work of fiction in which his protagonist, Rudolf, is a thinly veiled alter ego of Fritz himself. In the story, Rudolf claims “dass Schriftsteller so schreiben sollten, wie sie und nicht andere es für richtig hielten” (Becker 1994: 205), a

statement which reflects the views of both the narrator (Fritz) and author (Becker). As a foil for Fritz himself, Rudolf expressed the convictions of his creator when considering the lack of liberties writers had in the GDR. The same can be said for Becker's depiction of Fritz: "Jurek consciously used autobiographical elements in the novel, like Hetmann, whose age and status is a parody of Jurek's own in the 1980s." (Gilman 2003: 214)

Nachdem auf eine Art und Weise mit mir verfahren wurde, die ich nicht mehr billigen kann, sehe ich weit und breit kein vernünftiges Motiv mehr, meine Ansichten zu verbergen, aufgrund der Tatsache, dass sie der heutigen Linie meiner ehemaligen Partei nicht entsprechen. (Becker in Rock 2000: 124)

In the above quote, taken from an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Becker justifies his move from the GDR, where he felt he could no longer write the kind of literature he wanted or believed he should be allowed to write. However, life in the West as a socialist, former East German citizen and writer was not wholly without expectations; Becker felt labelled as a Jewish writer - "was in [seinem] Leben in der DDR so gut wie keine Rolle gespielt hat" (Becker in Rock 2000: 124) - who was expected to write about his Holocaust experiences and how he overcame them.

Living in West Germany, Becker also felt an obligation to write literature that was critical of the GDR and its cultural policies, literature that was deliberately resistant. But Becker publicly and repeatedly expressed his intentions to avoid writing political commentaries about life in the former East: "I don't write books in order to throw tinder on glowing coals". (Becker in Gilman 2003: 214) In a sense, Becker experienced almost as many writing limitations in the liberal, democratic West as he had in the socialist East. (Rock 2000: 124) Becker was not alone in this feeling; he and his work are representative of the difficulties facing thousands of East German intellectuals who fled to the West in the hope of creating literature, theatre plays or music that was free from obligations, prejudices and expectations.

Diese Leute sind für ein Leben in freier Wildbahn verdorben. Sie sind es gewohnt, in Gehegen zu existieren, alles Unerwartete versetzt sie in Panik. Sie

haben etwas Kuhiges, sie malmen ihr Gras, glotzen den Horizont an und wollen pünktlich gemolken werden. (Becker 1994: 299)

In *Amanda herzlos* Becker returns to the theme of East Germans and their failure to actively resist increasing socialist oppression, “entweder aus vermeintlicher Loyalität oder aus Feigheit”. (Becker in Rock 2000: 125) This novel was published only two years after the official reunification of Germany, during a time when many former East German citizens were coming to terms with their roles in the socialist GDR. Becker saw the GDR of the 1980s as a collective construct, and those who remained silent and compliant were effectively complicit in the dominance of socialism. In an interview in *Die Zeit* in August 1990, Becker explained: “Der real existierende Sozialismus war ein Gemeinschaftswerk der Parteiführung, ihrer Handlanger und der vielen Gehorsamen”. (Becker in *Die Zeit*: 3.8. 1990)

Becker is in a unique position among East German writers as he is one of only a handful of recognised GDR authors who successfully made the transition to writing and publishing in the West, and later publishing in a reunified Germany. It is for this reason that Becker’s texts are a vital part of any analysis of the impact of the division and reunification of Germany in general and of the evolution of literature in the GDR specifically. As Oliver Sill, in Arnold’s article *Gespräch mit Jurek Becker* explains, the “notion of Jurek Becker as political commentator can only be appreciated when one understands it as a consequence of his conception of himself as a writer”. (Sill in Arnold 1992: 4)

Like Jakob in *Jakob der Lügner*, and Bienek in *Irreführung der Behörden*, certain characteristics of Amanda’s lovers are recognisably autobiographical. Not only do the three men – Ludwig, Fritz and Stanislaus – depict a development in the history of the GDR itself, from ardent socialism to periods of resentment and resistance, and finally to the adoration all things Western, they also reflect the changing attitude of Becker himself as a writer developing his prose in the GDR and, later, in the West. Initially Becker, as a member of the SED and the

*Schriftstellerverband*, was an idealistic and active proponent of socialism, much like the devoted Ludwig. Following the Prague Uprising and its devastating conclusion, which triggered Becker's first serious political doubts, the expatriation of Wolf Biermann and the rejection of his novel *Schlaflose Tage*, Becker began to openly question the *real existierenden Sozialismus* and its unnecessarily restrictive implementation in the GDR. (Gilman 2003: 71) Like Fritz, Becker too laments the inability of authors to write about whatever they want and to creatively express themselves without restrictions. While Becker, unlike Stanislaus, never fully embraced capitalism in the West, he did embrace the freedom of expression and publication he was afforded once he left the GDR.

Ludwig is the archetypal romantic hero of the socialist cause, Fritz is the well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful tragic figure, Stanislaus is the subject of derogation and ridicule and Amanda plays the villain to all three of her protagonists. Thus with his final novel<sup>27</sup>, Becker neatly represents the historical and literary development in the GDR in the behaviour and characteristics of his three male protagonists, while also revealing his own personal development as a socialist writer in the GDR and the Federal Republic.

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<sup>27</sup> Becker did publish another work after *Amanda herzlos* before his death in 1997, though *Ende des Größenwahns* was a collection of essays, and not a novel.

## CHAPTER 5

### Christa Wolf: An Analysis of Selected Texts

#### 1. *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963)

The *Aufbauliteratur* of the *Bitterfelder Weg* was intended to bridge the gap between the creative intellectual and the working class. Workers were encouraged to keep diaries detailing their contribution to the socialist cause, while authors gained the necessary practical knowledge that was required for them to write politically acceptable texts. One of the key texts to come out of the *Bitterfelder* phase of industrial literature was Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963). Although the content of the novel was considered slightly controversial – the socialist heroine, Rita, finds herself contemplating her life from a hospital bed after the Berlin Wall separates her from her fiancé, Manfred, who has emigrated to the West to escape professional restrictions – this text earned Wolf considerable praise in socialist circles including a promotion to candidate member of the SED's Central Committee, a position she held until 1967 after her public criticism of the negative effect the 1965 Eleventh Plenum restrictions had on literature. (Fulbrook 2002: 237 and Herminghouse 2004: 222)

While Manfred's actions in 'abandoning' the GDR are clearly condemned by the other characters in the novel, the text is controversial because the readers are persuaded to understand Manfred's actions in emigrating for personal ambition. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 168) Moreover, Herminghouse (2004: 222) believes that Rita's possible suicide attempt "hints that society may have failed the protagonist", but that the censor overlooked this aspect because of "Wolf's positive portrayal of her protagonist's relationship to her mentors in the factory and her clear sympathy with the young woman's decision to remain in the East".

Furthermore, the novel possesses a very “complex narrative style that enabled critics of the novel to condemn it on aesthetic grounds as ‘formalist’”. (Herminghouse 2004: 222)

Over the five-year period since 1963, when she achieved almost overwhelming popular success and political recognition with her novel *Der geteilte Himmel*, Wolf had become increasingly dissatisfied with the creative compromises this breakthrough involved and the complacency of the GDR’s ideological response to the range of constructive criticisms that she had integrated into her portrayal of GDR society before the building of the Berlin Wall. (Tate 2007: 19)

The moral and ideological conflict which the text develops – the choice between committing to the socialist collective in East Germany or travelling West in search of individual achievement – was one felt by many GDR citizens during this period of strict cultural controls. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 168) Wolf’s heroine suffers great personal loss at the expense of her loyalty to the collective society she was raised in, and indeed, deeply believes in. Goodbody, Tate and Wallace (1995: 168) suggest that Rita’s breakdown and lengthy recovery in the wake of this loss provide a perfect foil for “the difficult return to normality of the East German population”.

The novel was hailed by West German critics as “the first work of genuine literary merit to come out of the GDR”. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 168) While *Der geteilte Himmel* adhered, for the most part, to Socialist Realism conventions of form and structure, the retrospective narrative technique was a departure from traditional, linear Socialist Realist narratives which allowed Wolf to “acknowledge the profound impact of the building of the Wall” on the GDR population. (Tate 2007: 196) The text was translated into French and English, and in 1964 Konrad Wolf directed the film adaptation of the novel. Throughout her life Wolf maintained a firm, yet at times critical, commitment to the ideals of socialism, though she became progressively more outspoken against how this socialism was implemented in the GDR.

In terms of White’s categorisation, *Der geteilte Himmel* may be classified as a prose text of the romantic genre. The tendency may be to assume this is

because the male protagonist, Manfred, is the hero who escapes the enemy of socialist oppression for the triumph and freedom of the West. However, it is clear this interpretation was not Wolf's intention, as Wolf manipulates the reader into disliking Manfred even before his emigration on the grounds of his elitist and asocial traits and his "unverbesserlichen bürgerlichen Individualismus", anathema to any loyal, socialist GDR citizen. (Reso 1965: 161f.) Instead, it is Rita who is cast as the heroine (rather than hero), and Manfred, the typical *Klassenfeind* as the enemy. The deliberate depiction of a female champion rather than the typical hero is in and of itself a socialist convention, as socialism purportedly strived towards equality, not only amongst the classes, but also of the sexes. The pursuit of the ideal in this novel is the success of socialism.

## **2. *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968)**

*Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) moves decisively away from Wolf's earlier Socialist Realist work and is characteristic of the historical and literary transition into White's third historiographical mode of emplotment: tragedy. This phase in historical discourse laments the loss of good values (the ideal of socialism) and the irreconcilable elements of human affairs. With her semi-autobiographical prose text, Wolf expresses her disappointment with the lack of creativity in the cultural sphere as a consequence of enforced conformity.

The Eleventh Plenum was a traumatic experience for Christa Wolf which resulted in months of depression. The bitterness of her disillusionment regarding the possibility of reform is reflected in her novel, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 177)

The 1965 Eleventh Plenum set the course for new cultural restrictions in the GDR, an event that caused the initial rift between Christa Wolf and the SED. At the Plenum, faced with ever more rigid Socialist Realist paradigms, Wolf addressed the Central Committee: "We must not be allowed to lose the artistic freedom and aesthetic progress of the last few years." (Wolf in Agde 1991: 341) To her surprise and disappointment none of the members of the Central

Committee publicly agreed with her. Later, in an interview with Günter Gaus, Wolf explained this critical turning point in her life, and how her new style of writing developed “as a result of personal crises. [...] For example after the 11<sup>th</sup> Plenum in 1965 I was for a very long time in a state of depression. [...] I worked it out of my system with *Christa T*”. (Wolf in Vinke 1993: 257) This novel performed a similar purgative function for Wolf as *Irreführung der Behörden* did for Becker in later years.

Typical Socialist Realist novels established a simple, one-dimensional narrative pattern for their storytellers: an omniscient narrator would direct the reader through a series of consecutive events involving a positive, socialist protagonist to an often-predictable conclusion. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 154) Wolf abandoned this technique entirely with her portrayal of a heroine who is “uncertain and questioning, who wants to confront the disparity between rhetoric and reality”. (Herminghouse 2004: 223) Wolf rejects the structural confines of Socialist Realism, choosing instead to produce a deeply personal account of a woman coming to terms with the death of her friend. The development from the simple, formulaic, romantic style of *Der geteilte Himmel* to the more complex, emotional and tragic approach of this novel is the same as that described by White in the development of historiographic literature. “With its firm insistence on the validity of individual subjective experience and its assertion of the claims of repressed subjectivity, this novel marks a turning point in GDR literary history”. (Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 656)

*Nachdenken über Christa T.* is the story of the title character who has to come to terms with her own impending death as she suffers the physical ravages of leukaemia, and the psychological depredation in her attempt to write candidly and creatively in the politically stifled environment. This mirrors an event in Wolf’s own personal life, when late in 1963 a close friend and colleague, Christa Tabbert died of leukaemia, “a personal loss that [took] on increasing significance

as Wolf started to become disenchanted with the Central Committee". (Tate 2007: 194)

Wolf wrote *Nachdenken über Christa T.* as an exercise in autobiographical evaluation that sought to identify aspects of herself which had remained uninvestigated. This is echoed in the motto Wolf uses for *Christa T.*: – "Was ist das: Dieses Zu-sich-selber-Kommen des Menschen?" – and the opening sentence of the novel: "Nachdenken, ihr nach – denken. Dem *Versuch, man selbst zu sein.*" (Wolf 1968: 7) As Tate (2007: 204) explains, the main focus of the narrator's story is Christa T.'s personal development, particularly as she strives to find her own voice as a writer despite "die Schwierigkeit, 'ich' zu sagen". (Wolf 1968: 222)

The problem of saying 'I' is recognised by the narrator as a problem standing in the way of the self-development of her entire generation of committed GDR citizens and consequently makes it into the motifs of the text. (Tate 2007: 204)

This novel rejected the conventional, uncomplicated narrative structure of Socialist Realist novels in favour of "a montage depicting the process of remembering". (Tate 2007: 206). "*Christa T.* is a mixture of recollection, dream, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, quotations from letters and essayistic reflection". (Krauss 1996: 152) Tate (2007: 202) interprets this *erzählerische Netzwerk* into four narrative strands: the first being the "fictionalised biography" of Christa T. (which also provides the chronological structure for the text), the second "intertwined narrative of profound empathy" between the unidentified narrator and her subject, the third follows the process of self-realisation for Christa T., and the fourth and final strand is the narrative of the narrator herself, and the conclusion that her own process of self-realisation occurs almost a decade after her friend and contemporary has died.

The delay in the development of her own self-awareness in comparison to Christa T.'s is a great point of concern for the narrator. She believes that the violence and brutality Christa T. witnessed during her childhood in Nazi

Germany, compared with the relatively sheltered childhood the narrator experienced was a “factor that would have worked against the anxious conformism that marked the narrator’s upbringing”. (Tate 2007: 202) Christa T.’s ability to reject conformity while the narrator herself bowed to the pressure of collectivist, socialist ideology is “something the narrator has great difficulty coming to terms with”. (Tate 2007: 203) The narrator laments the necessity to conform to certain patterns and restrictions: “Ich [...] bekenne mich zur Freiheit und Pflicht des Erfindens” and longs for the liberty to write about *real* life, however rebellious that life is, rather than pretending to be the model female socialist towing the Party line. (Wolf 1968: 49)

In attempting to come as close as she possibly could to the elusive biographical truth about a friend who appeared to have enjoyed an exceptional degree of self-unity in her short life, Wolf, through her almost identical narrator *persona*, was also establishing a framework for the infinitely more difficult task of investigating the interplay of continuity and significant change in her own life. (Tate 2007: 205)

It can be noted, however, that while Wolf did create a complex novel that actively resisted the Socialist Realist guidelines of form and content, she did not reject the ideals of socialism itself. Like Becker asserts in his writing, it was not the *ideology* of socialism that they were rejecting, it was its *application* on the cultural sphere by SED policies, to the severe detriment of literature produced in the GDR that they were objecting to. (Herminghouse 2004: 224)

Wolf’s novel played a central role in furthering three important trends in GDR prose: greater realism in the presentation of society, increased subjectivity, and aesthetic modernism. (Goodbody, Tate and Wallace 1995: 177)

Aside from introducing her readers to a new narrative strategy, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* also provided a platform for Wolf to establish her narrative principle of ‘subjective authenticity’. (Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 656) This is the term coined by Wolf for her semi-autobiographical style of reflecting emotional and intellectual experiences through her text. Wolf believed this brought her closer to understanding her own individuality within the socialist collective. (Kammertons and Lebert 2005: interview with Christa Wolf). Wolf’s characters were becoming more complex and imperfect, more realistic and emotional. This is a theme to

which Wolf returns often in her later works, and she continues to bring as much 'reality' to her texts as her conditions allowed, as a comment made later in 1987 indicates:

Lassen wir Spiegel das Ihre tun: Spiegeln. Sie könnte nichts anderes. Literatur und Wirklichkeit stehen sich nicht gegenüber wie Spiegel und das, was gespiegelt wird. Sie sind ineinander verschmolzen im Bewußtsein des Autors. (Wolf 1987: 496)

A "landmark in the literary landscape of the GDR", *Nachdenken über Christa T.* was only published in a limited quantity in 1968, during the height of the Eleventh Plenum restrictions, though it was re-released in greater numbers in 1973 during the period of liberalisation ushered in by the new Head of State, Erich Honecker, in 1971.

### **3. *Kindheitsmuster* (1976) and *Sommerstück* (1989)**

This brief time of relative creative liberty in the early 1970s saw a re-visitation of the National Socialist past, distinguished by the writings of a younger generation of authors who began to reflect upon the omissions and shortcomings of the older generation. (Silberman 1987: 529)

The intentional caricatures of Nazis and their henchmen and the heroisation of the resistance fighters [became] a literary blind spot that [came] back to haunt writers in the 1970s. (Silberman 1987: 530)

Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), a novel relating to Wolf's own troubled childhood during the Second World War, returns to the 1950s official policy which promoted the causal connection between capitalism and the rise of fascism, and in her controversial text rejects this misconception. According to Silberman (1987: 534) *Kindheitsmuster* "counteract[s] the historical amnesia produced by human laziness and adaptability". In this text Wolf confronts her formative years under the Nazi regime and how this affected her personal development, specifically with regard to the formation of individual identity while living under conformist conditions. This is an issue to which several generations of GDR citizens would have related, whether they were children during the Second World War or during

the height of Stalinist Socialism, or even in the late 1970s after the infamous Biermann Affair and the further restrictions on personal freedoms that followed.

Certain authors perceived a continuity of authoritarian tendencies as a legacy of the Nazi era: Christa Wolf, for instance, suggested that the Nazi heritage for the psyche in East Germany needed to be brought to greater awareness. (Fulbrook 2002: 251)

It was during this difficult and critical time in the progression of GDR literature that Wolf published *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), with the same “autobiographical dimension” that originated with *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (Herminghouse in Sandford 2002: 656) Wolf is essentially trying to answer the questions: how have we become what we are today? How have we formed as individuals when we lived under conformist conditions in our childhood? Many readers would have felt this subject resonate with the lives they were leading in the GDR, especially in the late 1970s.

Perhaps one of the most poignant examples of a literary text that possesses the trademark pathos of tragedy is Wolf’s *Sommerstück* (1989), written shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Krauss’ description of the text as a “melancholy picture of the fading of hope” supports the notion that *Sommerstück* – like *Irreführung der Behörden* and *Schlaflose Tage* – is a fictional prose work that mirrors a phase in the complementary genre of historiography. (1996: 155)

That was at a time when I was forced to examine the conditions for failure, the connection between societal despair and literary failure. [...] I had to get over a time in which there appeared to be no possibility of making an impact. After the Biermann Affair I wrote books which I could not have written otherwise. (Wolf 1985: 376)

Just as the difficulties and disappointments of the Eleventh Plenum had a profound effect on Wolf’s writing, so too did the stripping of Wolf Biermann of his East German citizenship in 1976. While *Sommerstück* was only published in 1989, Wolf maintains it was the events of 1976 that enabled her to write her later novels *Was bleibt* (1979/1990) and *Sommerstück*. There is in this novel the sense of the impending end, the despair and the growing disillusionment Wolf felt in the final decade of the GDR.

*Sommerstück* appeared in what was a fateful year for the state, and it proved to be the last major work of East German literature published there. Eight months later Honecker had gone, the Wall was open, and the GDR itself was heading for extinction. Under these circumstances a text about crisis, disintegration, and endings seems, in retrospect, a wholly appropriate epitaph. (Graves 1992: 406)

“At the end of the 1970s a shift of emphasis took place in Christa Wolf’s writing.” (Graves 1992: 393) A similar shift was occurring in historiography at the same time, a movement known as the “linguistic turn”, which refers to the development in historical discourse from a scientific to a literary emphasis. (Knowlton 1998: abstract) Her works had previously concentrated on the development of the GDR, its success and failures, and most importantly, the role of the individual in the achievements of the socialist state. By the mid- to late 1980s her domestic focus had necessarily shifted as international events began to impact on the lives of East Germans, most importantly the increasing tension between ever-strengthening capitalist West and slowly collapsing socialist East. It is within this context that Wolf wrote her final novel before unification, *Sommerstück* (1989).

After a series of novels – *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (1979), *Kassandra* (1983) and *Störfall* (1987) – which were written within this more global framework, Wolf broke from this trend with *Sommerstück*, “an intensely private work with little topical reference”, which seems to be what Graves terms a “regression” in her writing, where she echoes a short story written in 1965 entitled *Juninachmittag*. (Graves 1992: 393)

Both the novel and the short story have similar locations: a peaceful garden landscape. The novel is set in a village in Mecklenburg where Wolf grew up after being displaced by the Second World War. *Sommerstück* is set in the 1970s, with almost identical characters to the short story, though seemingly all have aged about 10 years. (Graves 1992: 393f.) Neither of the two works follows a conventional storyline, instead the actions of the characters are described by the narrator as a montage of events that occur throughout the afternoon. This self-reflective narrative is similar to that found in *Nachdenken über Christa T.* in which

the “narrator participates in and simultaneously tells the story”, therefore necessitating a report from a subjective perspective. (Krauss 1996: 152)

In both narratives, disturbances fracture the tranquil setting from the outside – with aeroplane noises, bad news and reports of the illness of a friend – and from within, as the characters, initially gathered as “sie wollten zusammen sein” (Wolf 1989: 7), begin to disagree with each other. While the texts are similar in many ways, it is the *severity* of events in *Sommerstück* that makes it more remarkable: “the emotional pitch of the later work seems to have been consciously set higher”. (Graves 1992: 395)

The key to the text is this: “The idyll is subverted as negative influences impinge.” (Graves 1992: 394) This sentence alone can perhaps account for Wolf’s decision to revert back to this particular idea: the GDR of 1989 was on the brink of collapse, and the life Wolf had known and fought for, for forty years was coming to a particularly violent and absolute end. “Ein autobiographischer Impuls” has been the driving force behind many of Wolf’s texts, and *Sommerstück* is no exception. (Wolf 1987: 882)

Ein Gruppe von Autoren wurde sich darüber klar, daß ihre direkte Mitarbeit in dem Sinne, wie sie sie selbst verantworten konnte und für richtig hielt, nicht mehr gebraucht wurde. Wir waren ja Sozialisten, wir lebten als Sozialisten in der DDR, weil wir dort uns einmischen, dort mitarbeiten wollten. Das reine Zurückgeworfensein auf die Literatur brachte den einzelnen in eine Krise; eine Krise, die existenziell war. (Wolf 1987: 878)

The above quote is an extract from a discussion which Wolf had with colleagues about their role as intellectuals in the development of the GDR, and a sentence from *Sommerstück* echoes these feelings of impotence when “die Außenwelt jede Möglichkeit des Handelns blockiert”. (Wolf 1989: 191) Wolf was deeply affected by the events of the Wolf Biermann affair, particularly in coming to terms with the realisation of “den Zusammenhang von gesellschaftlicher Verzweiflung und Scheitern in der Literatur”. In *Sommerstück* Ellen, the character who most closely resembles Wolf herself, is a writer, who upon reflecting on her life spent

writing, comes to the conclusion that she had “in den letzten ein, zwei Jahrzehnten einen großen Teil ihrer Zeit falsch angewendet”. (Wolf 1989: 21)

As Christa Wolf’s own biography indicates, the disillusionment from which the principal characters seek refuge lies partly in the social conditions for the German Democratic Republic. Having once been committed to that state and its ideology, indeed having aspired to change the whole world, they had come to see their efforts more and more frustrated and themselves increasingly marginalised. (Graves 1992: 399)

#### **4. *Was bleibt* (1990)**

Wolf remained a critical but important figure in East Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, in some ways symbolising the development of GDR culture while making her own unique, and internationally recognised, contribution. Her uneasy role as partially supportive, partially critical intellectual became the subject matter of major controversy in the early 1990s, with the publication of her short novel *Was bleibt* and the revelation that she had herself briefly informed for the Stasi. (Fulbrook 2002: 237)

In the wake of the fall of the Wall and German reunification, there needed to be a revision of cultural values in both former states in order to reunify the literary and cultural spheres (as we have seen above, something Becker maintained was unattainable). Suddenly all East German literature was being revisited and strongly criticised, sparking what became known as the *Literaturstreit*. (Carr and Paul 1995: 338) Wolf’s *Was bleibt* has been widely accepted as the catalyst of this debate in which the integrity of East German autobiographical narratives was questioned. (Tate 2007: 6)

The “Literaturstreit” represented a fundamental challenge to the continuing legitimacy of the aesthetic of “subjective authenticity” that was nourished by several years of revelations regarding the lack of integrity of many of its exponents. (Tate 2007: 9)

*Was bleibt* describes a day in the life of a married mother living in East Berlin who becomes aware that she is being kept under constant *Stasi* observation. “The surveillance causes her to reflect on her writing, the role of self-censorship, and her desire for another language, one free of its official discourse.” (Hell 1997: 7) As the female protagonist is identifiable with Wolf herself – Emmerich (1981: 464) refers to the narration as a “kaum verfremdeter autobiographischer Text” – many of Wolf’s critics viewed the short novel as an attempt to portray herself as a

victim of the socialist surveillance state. (Hell 1997: 7) The rebuttal came in the form of Walter Jens, one of the leaders of the *Gruppe 47*, who denied Wolf's position as a *Staatsdichterin*, and countered her critics' arguments by claiming that they were merely trying to discredit all oppositional literature produced in the GDR. (Carr and Paul 1995: 339) The debate raged on, fuelled by Wolf's (among others) admission that, for a brief period while she was a student, she worked as a Stasi informer. (Hell 1997: 7)

Authors such as Wolf were reproached for not having been more politically engaged; on the other hand, they were accused of mixing politics and literature. (Hell 1997: 8)

One of the most interesting aspects of Wolf's text is that, despite being almost universally criticised, being credited with the eruption of the *Literaturstreit*, having its author accused of a lack of subjective integrity and casting herself as the victim of a political system from which she also benefited, and generally being identified as the prime target for a scathing post-reunification criticism of East German culture, there is actually relatively little academic research on the text itself. In-depth studies of the Christa Wolf's texts by prominent scholars of East German literature such as Dennis Tate, Elizabeth Boa, Julia Hell, Patricia Herminhouse, Helen Fehervary, Axel Goodbody and Ian Wallace (among others) tend to focus on the public *reaction* to the text rather than the text's complex narrative form, detailed and informative content, and contribution to the development of comprehensive image of what life was really like under the constant scrutiny of the socialist regime. If one reads *Was bleibt* was an essentially autobiographical text – and the majority of critics do – then this novel has a great deal to offer the reader who, after years of politically tainted, 'optimistic' histories of East Germany, is keen to develop a greater understanding of the history of the final years of the GDR.

# CONCLUSION

## Literary Text as Historical Artefact

It is evident from the studies on historiography of Korhonen and White, and literary examinations of Eagleton and Iser that the *techniques* required for producing meaningful historical discourse and accessible literary texts are practically identical. Contemporary discussions highlighting new ways of reading and interpreting historical and literary texts are of great significance to the field of East German literature, particularly in the light of the upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This momentous historical milestone has prompted scholars of East German literature to re-visit texts written in the former GDR – particularly those overlooked because of their socialist origins - with an emphasis on discovering the ‘real’ GDR from texts with historical markers or biographical content.

[These texts] showed insight into the problematic nature of individual memory processes, the way in which everyone (whether conscious or not) constructs a version of the past to fit their own needs at a given time, and pose a strong challenge to the conventional distinction between the “truth” of autobiography and the “inventions” of fiction. (Tate 2007: 2)

The aim of this thesis was to show how the actual, historical evolution of the German Democratic Republic, and the literary progression of texts produced in the GDR during its existence, are reflected in the evolution of texts produced by two of East Germany’s most prominent and successful authors, Jurek Becker and Christa Wolf. The premise of this thesis is the immutable relationship between history and literature theorised by White.

Hayden White’s theory described the movement in contemporary literary and historical discourse towards viewing historiographies in light of their literary attributes, and viewing literary texts as sources of historical information for the

reader. While White intended his modes of emplotment as classifications that applied to the field of historical discourse, the parallel development of these literary genres with the influence of history in the evolution of literature in the GDR is quite evident. As such the development of Wolf and Becker's texts provide ideal examples of the genres of historic Romance, Comedy, Tragedy and Satire.

The theoretical argument of this research was conducted against the historical background of the GDR from its original status as a post-war Soviet zone of occupation, through its ever changing cultural, social and political restrictions and relaxations, to its eventual collapse in 1989, and reunification with its Western counterpart in 1990. This in turn influenced the developments in the field of literature from the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* movement post-Second World War, to coming to terms with a divided Germany, through socialism's intensifications and attenuations in the cultural sphere, and finally through the difficulties of reunification.

This thesis briefly summarised and interpreted exemplary texts by Becker and Wolf to demonstrate that the texts of both authors – possessing almost identical qualities to conventional historiographies – do indeed reflect the evolution of the German Democratic Republic in a similar way in which a typical historiography of East Germany would, and that this was a driving motive for these authors in creating their texts, as Wolf herself admitted: “Wolf saw the writer's role as one that communicated the reality of the GDR to the public, what she called the ‘Prozeß der Wahrheitsfindung’.” (Tate 2007: 19)

Becker and Wolf's texts offer not only significant insight into the literary development of the GDR, they also provide a depth of historical knowledge that goes beyond simple dates, events and definitions and accesses the *reality* of what it was like to *live* – physically, emotionally and mentally – in the GDR. Their texts conform to the historiographical framework laid out by Hayden White and as

texts that were written in the past they are historical artefacts of the GDR itself. Thus one could conceivably invert White's most famous essay title – "Historical Text as Literary Artefact" (1978: 81) – to a notion that could conceivably be applied to the texts of Wolf and Becker: Literary Text as Historical Artefact.

### **Scope for further research**

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the body of research focusing on East German literature is still in its formative years. Not only are previously examined texts being re-visited in light of numerous innovations in the fields of historical and literary discourse analysis, but previously neglected or overlooked texts are being investigated and explored for the first time. In addition to this already growing trend, the fast approaching 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of the two former Germanys has sparked renewed interest in identifying a definable East German identity. This thesis examines only eight selected texts by two well-known GDR authors, though the theoretical framework identified in this thesis could certainly be applied to a myriad of similar texts produced in the former East Germany. As Tate (2007: 19) acknowledges: "there is a contemporary need among scholars [of East German literature] to reassess the historical contexts from which the central strands of a new culture have emerged."

Another gap in the literary discourse of the former GDR is the field of post-reunification literature published by East German authors living in the new Federal Republic. The result of the *Literaturstreit* of the early 1990s was that the focus of literary studies shifted from the merits of the texts themselves towards a criticism of the authors and their intentions in writing specific narratives. This has been the case for Christa Wolf and her highly controversial text *Was bleibt*.

Additionally, a great deal of literary criticism has focused on the retarding effect of Socialist Realism on the creative capacity of GDR writers, and on the resulting

'propagandist' literature produced as direct result of SED interference on the cultural sphere. More recently, literature and films depicting the GDR in a humorous light - products of the so-called *Ostalgie* phenomenon – have been criticised for trivialising the hardships experienced by GDR citizens living in the highly restrictive socialist state.

The new trend in East German research – most recently epitomised by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) – which is leaning towards a more realistic depiction of life in the GDR, bears testament to the fact that the study of East German history and literature is not simply on the rise, but is in fact on the verge of erupting.

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