

"Fantastic Precision": The Style of Christa Wolf's *An Illustration of Childhood*

Kurt J. Fickert, Wittenberg University

The German title of Christa Wolf's novel *Kindheitsmuster* indicates that it is the author's intent to tell an exemplary story, one that typifies many, without passing judgment on the circumstances it delineates.¹ In the novel itself, Wolf gives a clue to the title's significance. "Muster," she writes, "is derived from the Latin 'monstrum,' which originally meant 'sample' and can only be right for you [i.e., me, the author]." To create this prototypical tale, Wolf has chosen to adapt material from her own experience. This autobiographical frame of reference not only supports the fictional structure of the novel, but also provides the occasion for supplementing the main narrative with two others which are meant to lend credence to the story itself. In effect, the novel interweaves three narrative strands, each with its own vantage point, each with a particular relationship to the combination of autobiography and fiction which constitutes the basis of Wolf's tale. It is the nature of this arrangement which I wish to explore in order to analyze the goal of writing with "fantastic precision" (*phantastische Genauigkeit*) which Wolf has set for herself in composing *An Illustration of Childhood* (see p. 251 f.).

Wolf prefaces the story of a particular kind of childhood with an intimate look at the writer at work as she begins the process of writing this very novel. For Wolf this autobiographical, if essayistic, framework narrative must lay the foundations upon which the fiction itself will rest. It is her contention that storytelling, as a form of art, at least in contemporary literature, must clearly establish its validity. In *The Dimension of Authorship*, a collection of essays on authors, herself as one, and the craft of writing, she proposes that the writer's voice, directing the course of events in the fiction, must stay audible throughout the work. She maintains: "In modern prose the author is duty-bound to let the reader be a part of the creation of the fiction and not have him [or her] replace reality with the second reality of the fiction."² In this way the novel does not become an escape from the real world but an exercise in giving expression to it with notable precision. At the beginning of her story, Wolf faces the problem of establishing the vantage point from which the (in essence) autobiographical events she presents are to be regarded. Although the protagonist's experiences are those of the author, thereby implying the presence of an "I," they have been recreated, infused with the insights of and told in the sophisticated language of a mature Christa Wolf. She determines, as she goes about putting her story on paper, not to use "I," not even a fictitious "I." Instead, in the second framework story, she makes use of the device of addressing herself in the text (thus also maintaining the authority of the author in the fiction);

¹ Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1979). *A Model Childhood or Models of Childhood*, as the title has been translated, would appear to be faulty because "model" carries with it in current usage a strong implication of moral approbation. All references are to this edition; all translations are mine.

² Christa Wolf, *Die Dimension des Autors* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1979) 768; my translation.

Christa Wolf here becomes "you." In the core narrative she depicts her childhood self as a "she," whose name is Nelly.

The intermediary text, serving as a bridge between the introductory material concerning the author's approach to technical problems in writing fiction and the fiction itself, has aspects of both Christa Wolf's description of the writer at work and the invented narrative. Basically, the transitional material answers the questions of why and specifically when the author decided to write this particular story. Wolf reveals that a brief visit to her hometown, now situated in Poland, from which she had fled before the arrival of the Russian army, provided the occasion for undertaking to produce the novel. This venture into the realm of a confrontation between the past and the present, which actually constitutes the theme of *An Illustration of Childhood*, becomes a second framework tale, told at greater length than the exposition of the writer's artistic concerns. The aspect of this travel journal which associates it with the story of Nelly's exemplary childhood is Wolf's use of a straightforward narrative style and characters whose true identities, though not entirely hidden, are camouflaged. As has already been mentioned, Wolf avoids altogether the first-person singular pronoun in referring to the narrator and individual who is returning to the scenes of her youth. Instead, the otherwise unidentified storyteller occasionally addresses herself as "you" (see above). In another instance of distancing, Wolf gives her husband, who, together with their daughter and his wife's brother, is accompanying her on this excursion into the remains of the past, the label "H." This initial is, of course, alphabetically close to "G" for Gerhard, the name of Christa Wolf's husband, and probably indicates that the person in the story is not so much her husband as a (minor) character in it. For the same purpose Wolf has used the fictional name Lenka for their daughter (it should also be pointed out that in reality they have two daughters). The fictitious Lenka assumes the role of the unsentimental observer who checks the hold that the past would tend to have over the present on this occasion. In contrast, her uncle Lutz, the younger brother of the author, shares with his sister his recollections of their common childhood, reinforcing her own. But he, too, shies away from letting their reminiscences acquire the aura of a good life now "gone with the wind." Upon her return from one of Germany's lost provinces, the author determines that she must tell the story of Germany's Nazi past and its disastrous end from her very own and generally apolitical, but completely honest, point of view. Subsequently the account of Nelly's childhood becomes the novel's chief feature. Wolf, however, continues to weave the two other narrative strands into the fabric of the text.

The effectiveness of this technique can best be demonstrated by analyzing a particular episode. Nelly's experiences in her hometown during the *Kristallnacht*, the prewar anti-Semitic debacle which foreshadowed the Holocaust, are recounted from several vantage points; that of the omniscient (and omnipresent) author begins the tale. "This chapter concludes with two fires," Wolf foretells, somewhat in the manner of Dickens. First, however, Wolf pauses to introduce the theme which underlies the circumstances she is about to describe. The framework narrative of the trip to Poland serves as the vehicle for the generalization which precedes the particulars. The travelers have occasion to look at and discuss a photograph in the newspaper. It depicts a soldier about to shoot an old Vietnamese woman in the midst of the conflict in that country. The picture conveys most precisely the insanity of war and its close

relative, genocide. Lenka, a representative of the post-Vietnam-war generation, is appalled at the thought that the photographer involved apparently made no move to cast his camera aside and stop the killing. Wolf, as the narrator of the travel journal, finds a similarity between the onlooker photographer, and the writer or artist as onlooker. She concludes, as Kafka once did when confronted with the problem of being someone who must tell about a difficult situation rather than do something about it: "One can either write or be happy" (149), that is, change one's nature. Having recognized that she cannot simply stop being an author, Wolf returns to the subject of preparing to write the story of her childhood. At this point, she considers that this project constitutes "playing a game with one's self for the sake of that self," a game which in this instance involves using the pronoun "you" (the present Christa Wolf) and "she" (the child she was) in such a way that they will be fused. The implication is that this union would ultimately legitimize the claim to be an "I."

For the time being, however, the third-person singular pronoun prevails. The narrator takes up Nelly's experiences during the night when anti-Semitism first ran riot in Nazi Germany. First the author documents the pillaging she is about to depict in her fictitious account: "The event thereafter called 'Kristallnacht' was carried out on the night between the eighth and ninth of November. One hundred seventy seven synagogues, 7500 Jewish stores were destroyed within the 'Reich'" (149). Nelly's participation in this catastrophe consists of watching the synagogue in her town burn down. She is astonished and horrified to see people—the Jews who had been inside—fleeing the flames. The writer Wolf intrudes on her narration of this calamity and interjects this very trenchant comment: "If it were not for [the presence of] these people—an inner picture, the authenticity of which is undeniable—you [Wolf] would not be able to assert with certainty that Nelly, a child with [a good] imagination, was in the vicinity of the synagogue that evening" (151). In this statement the process by which the fantastic precision Wolf demands of the writer comes to light. She does not rely on documentation, correlative evidence, or memory—autobiographical evidence—alone, but on an interplay between these and the writer's intuition, her (or his) creative commingling of perception and vision, to achieve a true representation of reality.

In *An Illustration of Childhood*, this objective of telling, through the medium of fiction, a story which is inherently true determines the structure of the novel, its tri-level narrative. Since Wolf, in recounting the course of events in Nelly's growing up in Germany before, during, and immediately after the Second World War, avoids establishing a solely fictitious world, her retelling of her childhood results in an apt illustration of what life was like, not only for her, but for many children and young adults at that time. It is a prototype raised to the level of art by the rigor with which Wolf maintains its and her own integrity. She has addressed the question of the kind of truth revealed in a literary work in *An Illustration of Childhood* itself, stating: "The conscience of the writer has to concern itself only with the truth, 'the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' However, since the communication [of the truth] belongs to the nature of truth, [the writer] produces, often in despair, an in many ways limited [form of the] truth: limited by its very nature, by the communicators, and the always restricted area of freedom, which he has carved out for himself; limited by the very one about whom he writes, and most surely by those for whom his communication is intended and whom one can only warn: Not sheer—but be-

clouded is the truth that reaches them, and they themselves will obscure it once again, by [passing] judgment and by [expressing] prejudice. [Even] in this way [the truth] may be of some use" (296). With this acceptance of the conditional nature of the veracity she has made her objective in writing this half-fictional, half-autobiographical novel, Wolf does not venture to assert simultaneously that she has created a seamless "I" by combining "you" and "she." This unified self comes about, Wolf avers, when "the structures of that which has been experienced coincide with the structures of that which has been written" (251). Her reluctance to use the first-person singular pronoun is tentatively overcome on the last pages of the book. Having admitted that truth in literature is only a desirable goal which she—and presumably others—must fall short of attaining, she refers to the technical aspiration which guides the course of the novel, the fusion of "you" and "she," and asks herself if Nelly is an "I." "I don't know," Wolf replies to Wolf (378). Has she committed herself to using "I" in this final statement or not? In its frame of reference, however, this candid remark can but be an expression of the fantastic precision with which Wolf has described her childhood and also the process of writing her novel.