CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Christa Wolf

Reflections on Christa T.

Nachdenken über Christa T.

Presented by: Renate Flagmeier

The book *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (*Reflections on Christa T.*) by German author Christa Wolf, first published in Halle (Saale) in the German Democratic Republic in 1968 and in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1971, critically examines the tension between individual self-realisation, utopian social ideals and coping with everyday life in the socialist part of Germany after the experience of fascism and the Second World War.

This early social novel by a writer who was recognised in both East and West and was a pillar of the GDR state has strong autobiographical elements. It is a portrait of a young woman – Christa T., a friend of the narrator since school days – who is described as an idiosyncratic, non-conformist personality who became a teacher after studying German language and literature and died young of leukaemia. The various phases of her life – school, university, career, marriage, motherhood, cancer and early death – are recounted retrospectively for the period from 1943 to 1962 with descriptions of remembered events and shared experiences, as well as biographical documents. The conflict between intellectual and material needs, between utopian ideals and everyday life, between existential questions and simple answers based on rational considerations, as portrayed in a female character, struck a raw nerve at the time of its publication: in East Germany, through the experience of an authoritarian state apparatus that used force to regulate all aspects of life and had little in common with the socialist ideal of an egalitarian and free society. But the book was also well received in West Germany, where it fitted in with a socially critical phase marked by the protest movements around 1968, following the period of the so-called ‘economic miracle’ and the focus on satisfying material needs, combined with silence about German crimes under Hitler.

The novel’s perhaps most political hallmark is its rejection of a hierarchy of primary and secondary contradictions: gender relations and the positions of women are just as important as, for example, the contradiction between labour and capital.

Furthermore, the novel tacitly polemicises with the normative paradigm of socialist realism insofar as it contains no positive characters and is written in a formalistic style. Through her connection to an editor, Wolf nevertheless managed to get it published.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: