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WHAT KIND OF ANTIQUARIAN IS CHRISTA WOLF?

EVER SINCE CHARLEMAGNE HAD HIMSELF CROWNED EMPEROR by the Roman Pope in 800 AD, visions of a unified Germanic world have relied on southern, ancient exemplar. Until the middle of the 18th century, this model was found primarily in the sun-kissed ruins of ancient Rome. But the point of reference gradually tracked east, coming to rest on the glistening white bones of Athens. Already considered by its neighbours to be a nation of thinkers, Germany (or, more specifically, German national identity) would be bolstered by a tightly constructed image of the Greeks as proto-Enlightenment patriarchs of rationality, secularism, and democracy. These iconic figures are, to be sure, not identical to the mysterious Greeks who had enchanted the Florentines of the Italian Renaissance. But as more and more Grand Tourists “came,” “saw,” and (mentally) “conquered” the Italian lands and their ruins, Rome’s image came to belong to Western Europe as a whole. As a result, perhaps, Germanic intellectuals found themselves grasping for a “new” antiquarianism to legitimate their cultural authority. They continued to root their historical imaginary in the Mediterranean world, whose entire coastal landscape of viable antiquities—including those of the Levant—were cast aside in favour of the Hellenes. Why?

Such questions of identity and legitimacy are precisely the themes of Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* (1983). This novella foregrounds a lone female voice—plaintive and dissenting—against the more powerful (and explicitly patriarchal) forces that dominate the events of *The Iliad*. In most editions published in English, the novella is accompanied by a series of travel essays that depict Wolf arriving in Athens by plane in 1980 to develop yet another image of the Greeks: living ones this time, who fall victim to her melancholic and all too wrathful scrutiny. If the 18th-century Grand Tourist tended to depict an Italy without Italians, then this Cold War tourist seemed to wish

for a Greece without Greeks. Instead of disenchantment, disappointment came to the fore as the prime mover of modern German culture. What antiquity, if any, was left for a righteous East German like Wolf?

She cast East Germany as a place still struggling with its cultural heritage, but in West Germany a new national idea emerged as something that legitimated American hegemony. Its liberal democracy seemed to represent the fulfillment of Enlightenment ideals or the infamous “end of history.” But this same capitalist Germany came to fruition in (eastern-born) Angela Merkel’s malediction of a layabout Greece in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. If we are asking what Greece meant to Wolf, then should we also ask what it meant to Merkel? In other words, what Greek patrimony was left for Germans, for the East German intelligentsia, and specifically for Wolf? This was especially important to Wolf, who sought to resist the Americanization of West Germany in the wake of the Marshall Plan but was also frustrated by the Soviet orientation of East Germany. In both cases, patriarchy worked against the values that might underwrite the matriarchal traditions that, in Wolf’s analysis, were superseded by the warrior cultures that overshadow narratives like *The Iliad*. Germans on both sides of the Berlin Wall were caught in the tension of history ending, with two heroic narratives striving to have the final word. Cassandra’s plaintive voice is, in Wolf’s novella, construed by its narrator as a paragon of dissent—a dissent that does not know which way is right, even though it knows which way is wrong. This dissent cannot be heard no matter how stirring its speech or how loud its voice. This dissent is still hard to hear today, as it becomes more and more evident that history has not, in fact, ended; rather, it only came to a short-lived truce, which required the silencing of many voices, and it might now be ending in another and more final way. Would our history be ending if Wolf’s dream of a prior matriarchal tradition—embodied in the figure of Cassandra—had somehow been renewed in Wolf’s Germany of the 1980s?

The novella centres Cassandra herself as a small figure amidst a more panoramic littoral landscape of war, history-making, and politicking. As much as this is a feminist retelling, the story is also clearly an allegory for Wolf as an intellectual caught up in a fateful moment of history and struggling to make sense, and perhaps make a difference, of her time. Her turn toward ancient Greece in a moment of reckoning is far from incidental. The appropriation of Mediterranean antiquity has been a constant of German identity since Charlemagne, who self-consciously took up the mantle of in-

heritor of the Western Roman Empire. But it was only in the mid-18th century that Greece came to the fore as a cornerstone of modern German culture. Greek philosophy became central to German Enlightenment thought in the same period when German archaeologists began to ferry fragments back to an array of newly opened museums in the German Empire. This came to a head in the late 19th century with the excavation and transportation of the Pergamon Altar, an entire monument lifted from a Hellenic acropolis in Turkey, that depicts the founding of the city. For modern Germans, Hellenic antiquity was foundational. The German Empire saw itself as the inheritor of a certain humanist idea of the Greek legacy: an intellectual culture of secular rationalism and ideal beauty conveyed in civic architecture.

This is all to say that the “tyranny of Greece over Germany” (as the title of E. M. Butler’s classic 1935 study has it) rests upon a visibly material basis and is relatively modern. While Rome and its images had been a part of upper-class culture in Germany since the 15th century, images of Greece became a trope of bourgeois visuality only in the 19th century—something that emerged via a nascent mass print culture. Architects in Germany also emphasized this link through the widespread mobilization of an explicitly Hellenic Neoclassicism. But during this emergence, Greece was actually part of the Ottoman Empire, which, despite its sophistication, was effectively viewed by Germans as the barbarians at the gates of the Habsburg Monarchy. Since the schism between the Western and Eastern Roman Empires, the Greek lands had effectively been part of the Orient. It was only in the 18th century that a tentative “Greek Enlightenment” and nationalist movement took root, which was based on valorizing the distinctiveness of ancient Hellenic material culture and eventually culminated in the Greek War of Independence in 1821-1832. This recuperation of secular roots in a region whose culture is defined by Orthodox Christianity allowed for Greece to be reintegrated into the idea of Europe. During the Cold War, the Eastern Bloc extended south to Greece’s borders; in this sense, Greece nearly belonged to the east at the time of Wolf’s visit, and its status as the limit of the west remains in place in the contemporary politics of the European Union, which came to a head in the antagonistic relationship that emerged between Germany and Greece in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The Germans might love Greek culture, with its efflorescence of sculpted ideal bodies, but perhaps not the living Greeks themselves.

In her disjunction between ideal and real, art and life, Wolf took up this

long history of Germans reckoning with Hellenic antiquity. Could Hellenic antiquity continue to mediate between the west and the east in 1980? To be sure, Wolf went to Greece as a tourist: she stepped off the plane in Athens, walked around the city, took busses to seaside villages, mingled with local people, and looked around. She did not stick out as being an East German; she walked the talk of a mass tourist, and maybe she was one. Indeed, as a modern European woman, she felt utterly alienated from the rhythms of everyday life there, writing:

It is far more difficult here than in Central Europe to see the villages as an escape and round-up point for civilization-weary townspeople. The deceptive family peace that arises from women's total attachment to the fate of men (or rather to the fate of being a woman), as well as from the indissoluble attachment of sons to their families, erupts again and again into bursts of barbaric behaviour.

But she was there for something different: to write a novella, sure, but Wolf made it clear that the novella was a pretext for *seeing* Greece, and she did not like what she saw. The rub is that Wolf's predisposition to dislike Greeks was not at all new, as it was part of the story of German modernity.

In terms of Germany's own antiquity, it may as well not exist, materially or textually. If you go to Germany, the nation's ruins are nowhere to be found: forest huts are the stuff not of history but of anthropology. Similarly, the German nation was found (before it was founded) in the earliest of all stand-alone ethnographic texts. Tacitus' short *Germania* depicts the many tribes occupying territory outside the Roman Empire to the north of the Alps and to the east of Roman Gaul. Although it depicts these groups as distinct, based on language and custom, it also considers them as an organic whole. Tacitus' reasoning was that no one would ever willingly migrate into the harsh climate and wild terrain of the Germanic lands, and therefore any current inhabitants must be indigenous to that territory. Given its emphasis on the Germans as fierce warriors, hardy agriculturalists, and clever thinkers, the *Germania* seems to have been an effort to discourage the Roman Empire from attempting an expansion into the Germanic lands. As the first written record of a "Germanic" world, however, it was an essential text for German nationalism since its rediscovery and subsequent republication in 16th-century Nuremberg. By the 18th century, however, the Germanic

world needed its antiquity to be white, both ethnically and aesthetically. By retrieving Greece from its historical position within the Ottoman and Byzantine worlds, German antiquarians recast Athens as the spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic origin of Rome and thereby of Western Europe. Tracking east along the Mediterranean, these antiquarians worked the Aegean into an archaeological imaginary in which Greece was the first layer of mineral accretion atop the geological (i.e. natural) record of unworked stone. Anything prior or elsewhere was somehow, ultimately, beside the point. This imaginary of the aesthetic origins of Western European art in a white, rational Greece is a key historiographic pillar that supports other, similarly myopic Enlightenment histories.

The insistence that identity and legitimacy are founded on impossible images is, really, the unacknowledged pillar of *Cassandra*, whose protagonist's very real claim to truth goes unheard precisely because those around her are under no obligation to hear her. She is landless as a consequence of her gender, and any bids for authority based on paternity are impossible. Like Cassandra, Wolf herself retained firm, if tentative, convictions. As Germany's relationship to Greece has demonstrated, if the coastal landscape itself cannot be claimed (or even visited) by Germans, then its memory can be recollected in the abstracted and precarious terms of the museum and the book. In this sense, German intellectuals since the 18th century have felt themselves to be the inheritors of Greek rationality and tragedy. But on what grounds? These grounds, always shaky, fell away completely under Wolf's feet, as they have for other German visitors to the Mediterranean. The coolness of antiquity is nowhere to be felt: the actual Greeks are often irrational, and the sun is often too hot. The image of an ideal history—cold, hard, and smooth—recedes into the distance. The Greece that Wolf saw did not live up to her preconceptions, and she didn't even seem to want it anymore. A scream from nowhere echoes through her text. It is, of course, Cassandra's scream: the scream of someone whose time and place have not yet come and might never arrive. It is the scream of unending history.