

Eastern Experience

Among contemporary writers, suggests Karin McPherson, the term 'European' applies to few with greater justification than to the East German author Christa Wolf whose latest novel *Accident* is to be published in English in May

Christa Wolf has played a major role in bringing the literary scene of the GDR to the attention of the West. Over the last decade, her work has continued to focus on many of the burning issues of our time. Celebrating her 60th birthday this year, she has written six major 'fictional' prose works (five of which are available in English translation in Virago), a number of shorter stories, many essays and autobiographical prose sketches. She has given a number of interviews which have recently been published in English translation under the title *The Fourth Dimension* (Verso £7.95 pbk).

Wolf has enjoyed the unusual privilege of frequent visits to West Germany and many other European countries. As a result, her works have been translated into more than 20 languages and are the subject of a large network of international literary conferences, critical studies and university syllabuses. Although her books are described by official critics in her own country as being complex and unyielding to easy reading, her reputation as a major writer is secured by her great popularity with the reading public.

During her only visit to Britain in May 1978, Christa Wolf presented herself as a socialist writer with a strongly developed moral conscience. Having read from her novel, *A Model Childhood*, she raised the issues of individual and collective responsibility for fascism which, she firmly believes, can never be 'overcome' by official policies, but remain part of the heritage of her generation.

Asked in an interview in 1982 conducted for the East German newspaper *Welt-*

woche if it could be said that it was her generation's unique universe of historical experience which had made her a writer, Christa Wolf replied: 'Perhaps no generation will ever be "put through the mill" as much as ours was: from the almost devastating experience of being turned into the object of history, to the often demanding and even over-demanding nature of the attempt, in the literary world too, to become its subject.' Here Wolf confirms that her position as a writer and as a person is unimaginable without a changing self-examination within the framework of socialism.

The theme of Wolf's major fictional prose work of the later 1960s, *The Quest For Christa T*, was a self-exploration through the medium of a literary figure whose individuality and untimely death from leukemia had prevented her from fitting into the young socialist society of the 1950s and early 60s in the GDR. This novel challenges the official normative style of socialist realism. Its subject matter and language have aroused controversy and heated debate among GDR critics.

In spite of the 'fictional' character of her major prose works, the characteristic feature of all Christa Wolf's prose is its openness towards her own autobiography. Living and writing are part of the same process to her, which may explain why all the central characters of her books are women. Yet, the author's horizon, her range of experience, has extended with every successive work: from the setting in the present of the early years in the GDR, in her first fictional works, *Moskauer Novelle* and *The Divided Heaven*, to

her own immediate past in *A Model Childhood*.

From the late 1970s onwards, Wolf extended her search further into the past, as far back as the early-19th century, to find the first generation of women caught in the conflict between social restrictions and artistic vocation. The novella *No Place On Earth* has unmistakable parallels with Christa Wolf's own situation: the protest by herself and a number of writers and artists against the expatriation of the political song writer Wolf Biermann in 1976, for example, led to her expulsion from the executive com-

mittee of the writers' union. In the early 1980s, the search for the social and historical co-ordinates of the mythological figure of Cassandra and her link with the present, signalled Wolf's entry into the debates about feminism and the peace movement in Europe. In four lectures on aesthetics and the story *Cassandra*, Wolf shared her discoveries of the Minoan (matriarchal) and the Greek (patriarchal) cultures on a journey to Greece and Crete in 1980. She outlined her reading of the feminist discourse, based on her experiences with the women's movement of the

West, while at the same time giving clear signals of her deep disquiet and pessimism about Europe's survival after the stationing of Pershing and SS 20s in both Germanies. *Accident* (Virago, £5.99 pbk), her most recent and most autobiographical fiction, is based on diary entries noted down on receiving newsflashes after the Chernobyl disaster in May 1986. Wolf links her fears for the future of mankind with the penetrating search for the 'blind spot', the subconscious and parapsychological dimensions of the human mind. In the process she



Christa Wolf: 'My main motive is one of self-exploration.'

questions the linguistic structures she has inherited and even begins to doubt whether she can continue writing at all given the dangers facing Europe, dangers which have been dramatically highlighted by the Chernobyl disaster. Wolf continues to combine such self-exploration with the analysis of major contemporary concerns. It is almost as though, by challenging barriers within herself, she challenges the barriers between different ideologies. In this way she addresses a question which is central to the survival of Europe. •