

Complicity and Moral Memory
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Tentative titles, while shopping with H. Navel oranges still in the markets. Zeroing in on the unknown word seemingly hidden under a parchment-thin layer, but eluding the brain's antennae. Basic Patterns, Behavior Patterns, Childhood Patterns. A Model Childhood, H. said casually, in front of the pharmacy at the corner of Thälmannstrasse. That took care of that.

A model is used for demonstration. To demonstrate is derived from the Latin "monstrum," which originally meant "showpiece," or "model," which suits you perfectly. But "monstrum" can also become "monster" in today's sense of the word.¹

And so the reader is told how Christa Wolf hit upon a title for her book *Kindheitsmuster*, which was first given the English title *A Model Childhood* and later retitled *Patterns of Childhood*. The book is an account, no, better, a *model*, of the work of moral memory, whose focal point is the narrator's two-day trip to her hometown (formerly Landsberg, Germany, now Gorzów, Poland) with her husband, her brother, and her teenage daughter during the summer of 1971. From that focal point, the text shifts back in time, in "a crab's walk, a painful backward motion"² to Wolf's childhood, her growing-up as a shopkeeper's daughter in a "normal" Nazi family during the 1930s and 1940s. It also skips forward, recounting the agonies of remembering, the confrontation with the possibility self-deception, and the inevitable acceptance of these and other limitations in finding the courage to proceed in writing the book.

Patterns of Childhood is a good place to begin an engagement with the moral problem of complicity, particularly as it has emerged in European and American cultures since the Second World War. By drawing us into the author/narrator's attempt to grapple with her past as a child and adolescent in Nazi Germany, the book forces us to experience complicity as an existential problem which can neither be ignored nor easily identified and resolved. In the contemporary

¹Christa Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood* (formerly *A Model Childhood*) (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 2nd printing, 1984), 36.

²Ibid., 5.

era, the problem of complicity is often experienced as utterly overbearing, yet simultaneously lacking any definite form or shape. In other words, as the passage from the book with which I opened this essay suggests, complicity is frequently perceived to be a moral “monster” whose tentacles have become intertwined with the ordinary stuff of our daily lives, our “model” lives.

In my view, any attempt to produce a normative analysis of complicity adequate for contemporary needs must begin by facing this “monster” head-on, fully experiencing the way in which grappling with the problem of complicity presses to the breaking point our memories, our normal moral categories, and even our sense of our own personal identities. If moral theorists do not understand something of the reality of complicity, as experienced by those who have faced the problem on an existential level, any attempt to describe and evaluate various aspects of that reality will be perceived at best as inadequate, and at worst as trite.

Patterns of Childhood enfolds us in one woman’s existential struggle to come to terms with her own complicity, not simply by describing it in detached terms, but by recreating it in such a way that the reader participates in that struggle along with the author/narrator. My own engagement with the book will proceed as follows: In the first section of this essay, I will attempt to communicate some sense of how the author/narrator grapples with complicity and moral memory, not so much by summarizing the book’s contents as by reflecting upon some of its major images and themes. I hope that the style of my reflections will communicate, however imperfectly, something of the unusual shape of Wolf’s narrative. In the second section, I will attempt to uncover some of the moral presuppositions of the author/narrator’s attempts to come to terms with her identity as a woman who grew up in Germany under the Nazi regime. In the conclusion, I will suggest how the insights gleaned from *Patterns of Childhood* might shape a more theoretical and systematic exploration of the problem of complicity.

I. Memory, Truth, and Deception: The Quest for the White Ship

At first glance, *Patterns of Childhood* appears to be a memoir, a more-or-less straightforward autobiographical account of Christa Wolf’s childhood and adolescence growing

up in Nazi Germany. Yet, because its subject is moral memory, nothing at all is straightforward about this book. First, and most obviously, the author, Christa Wolf, both *is* and *is not* the narrator of the book, and both *is* and *is not* the young girl who is the object of the exercise of memory contained in it. In large part, this uncertain identity can be attributed to the nature of memory itself. More specifically, the book explicitly recognizes how, in the act of memory, the author/narrator splinters herself into various pieces; one piece remembering, the other being remembered, neither piece being her entire identity (since there is a third piece of herself observing the process). Taking account of this split, the author/narrator refers to her adult self as “you,” and to her childhood self as “Nelly.” She writes, for example, that “Nelly” is the “young girl ‘you’ once were, who is the elusive object of ‘your’ quest.”³

The phenomena of remembering is as much the topic of this book as are the events and people which the author/narrator attempts to recapture via memory. Wolf does not understand the work of memory to be pressing the “on” button to start a mental motion-picture projector, which will unfurl an image of the remembered object, frame-by-frame, undistorted, on a pristine “screen” in our minds. Instead, the phenomenon of memory and the remembered object are mutually influencing; the act of memory affects the shape of the remembered object, and the remembered object shapes, at least to some extent, the paths along which the act of memory will travel.

One might simply say that memory “distorts” the realities of the past. But that claim is too simple; sometimes, those “distortions” are more revelatory of the truth than a literal, “motion-picture” account of the past could ever be. More specifically, a “motion-picture” account of what actually happened (even if it were possible for the mind to generate) is necessarily particular to the remembering agent at a particular point in time past, and therefore limited by his or her physical and intellectual horizons at that time past. Yet the true meaning of that event, as well as the appropriate context in which to interpret it, may only become apparent

³Ibid., 118.

to the remembering agent at a later point in time, with the benefit of a broader perspective on the event. Finding the true meaning of a remembered event, therefore, may involve a “distortion” imported by the work of memory.

The author/narrator’s perspective on her act of memory, on the one hand, and on the moral content of her memory, on the other, is evoked by her discussion of two abstract paintings, Salvador Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) and Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937). Furthermore, as I describe below, the manner in which memory can work “true” distortions can be seen in the author/narrator’s treatment of “the White Ship,” an image young Nelly associates with the pre-war years in Germany. In my view, these two paintings, taken together with the image of the “White Ship,” can rightly be viewed as the symbolic heart of the book. More specifically, I believe that the image of the “White Ship” encapsulates in one symbol the sense of complicity evoked in narrative form throughout *Patterns of Childhood*. The author/narrator’s attempt to deal with both the memory and moral implications of the image of the “White Ship” are found in the two paintings and the way they interact, implicitly or explicitly, with that image.

Of Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), the author/narrator writes:

It shows what one wouldn’t have thought possible: the landscape of memory. The clear, yet unreal colors. The islands rising from the sea. The direct, bright, yet eerie light whose source is not revealed. The continuous threat of darkness. Between the two, the unsharp boundary. . . . And above all the four watches: one of them, its lid snapped shut, has ants crawling disgustingly all over it. The three others, bluish, deformed, are hanging, lying clinging – as if they were wax, not metal – on the box, the tree, the sleeping eye, their three dials showing three slightly different times.⁴

This description of the painting also describes the *form* of the author/narrator’s project in *Patterns of Childhood*; its disjointed pieces of narrative, bathed in a clear, eerie, greenish, and ominous light (a light which in the midwestern United States presages a tornado), are the verbal equivalent of Dali’s *Persistence of Memory*.

The project’s *substance*, however, is encapsulated in her contextualization of the second

⁴Ibid., 258.

painting, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). In Chapter 7, the narrator/author reflects that the little girl "Nelly" would have associated the term "prewar" with an ambiguous mental image of the "white ship." The author/narrator observes that "the white ship is an eerie and frightening theme, but at the same time it's a shining, summery image in your fantasy-memory, which stores matters not really seen or experienced, but only imagined, craved, or feared."⁵

The author/narrator explores the theme of the White Ship in the course of giving an account of Nelly's outwardly idyllic holiday with her aunt, uncle, and little cousin on the Baltic Sea. She recounts how her archival work revealed that the family holiday took place soon after the newspaper to which her family subscribed, the *General-Anzeiger*, published a picture of the April 1937 launching of the ocean liner *Wilhelm Gustloff*. This ocean liner was, she surmises, the literal identity of the White Ship. It was a gleaming emblem of the pre-war Nazi party's program of "Strength through Joy," which designed to bolster support for the party's political and military agenda among the working class by offering them luxuries (such as cruises) that were previously available only to the wealthy. She suggests that young Nelly might very well have seen a picture of the ship when perusing the newspaper at home that spring.⁶

The author/narrator's archival work also revealed that during the same month, the *General-Anzeiger* was also running stories promulgating misinformation about German involvement in Guernica. These stories asserted that the town had not been bombed by the Germans, but had instead been burned out by the Bolsheviks. "No photo, of course."⁷ As she remembers, years later, after having seen Picasso's controversial masterpiece, the author/narrator can distinguish truth from lies. It was the Nazi Luftwaffe, not the Bolsheviks, who attacked Guernica. At the invitation of Franco, they treated the defenseless open city as target practice,

⁵Ibid., 143.

⁶Ibid., 145-146.

⁷Ibid., 145.

slaughtering over 1,700 of its 5,000 inhabitants in the process.⁸

Moral memory makes truth of lies and lies of truth: The narrator/author remembers how the little girl Nelly, vacationing by the seaside, is plagued by nightmarish associations. Nelly dreams of her mother, lying dead in a coffin. It was then that she also begins to attach ominous qualities to an image of a beautiful white ship. The narrator/author attributes these associations to the little girl's homesickness and confusion.⁹ An adult, the author/narrator attempts to sort things out for the child she once was, as well as to correct the child's mistaken impressions: She informs the reader that at the time in question, her mother was actually home, safe, as Nelly learned for herself upon her return from holiday.

What explains the ominous qualities Nelly associated with the White Ship? The author/narrator's archival work revealed that Nelly's vacation took place soon after the German newspaper proclaimed "Red Spanish Planes Bombard German Battleship." The author/narrator surmises that the little girl must have read the headline and equated the doomed German battleship with the white ship, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. From one point of view, that equation is nothing more than a factual mistake; at the time the German battleship was bombed, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was proudly and safely sailing the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean and North Seas.¹⁰

Yet from another point of view, Nelly's nightmares offer a true account of reality. Like Dali's clocks, however, their account of time and space is melted and deformed. The author/narrator recounts that the sinking of the German battleship, and the escalation of hostilities with Spain, led many of the vacationers at the Balkan seaside to fear that war was imminent. And they were right to do so. What was the name of the battleship sunk by the Red Spanish? The *Deutschland*. The author/narrator surmises that little Nelly confused the

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 146.

¹⁰See Jason Pipes, "A Memorial to the Wilhelm Gustloff" at <http://www.feldgrau.com/wilhelmgustloff.html>.

immediate fate of the ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* with the fate of the ship *Deutschland*, thereby mistakenly generating the ominous image of the White Ship.¹¹ Yet was it a mistake? Ultimately, both ships – and the *nation* Deutschland – shared the same fate.

In the mind of the reader, no doubt as in the author/narrator's mind, the beautiful image of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* fractures into the senseless brutality of Picasso's *Guernica* once one learns more about the history of the beautiful white ship.¹² As I noted above, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was a massive floating propaganda tool, designed to take working-class Germans and eager members of the Hitler Youth on sumptuous cruises, thereby demonstrating to them and to the entire world that even the lowliest followers of Hitler would enjoy unparalleled prosperity. Hitler himself ordered the ship to be built; he used the ship to commemorate the so-called "martyrdom" of Wilhelm Gustloff, who served as the leader of the German Nazis in Switzerland. Gustloff, who was responsible for the widespread distribution of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,¹³ was assassinated in 1936 by a young Yugoslavian Jew. His death became a catalyst for the rapid spread of particularly rabid anti-Semitism throughout Germany, which was ignited by an anti-Jewish diatribe given by Hitler at Gustloff's funeral. Thus the beautiful white ship had ignominious beginnings, marking an unmistakable early step on Germany's road to the horrors of Auschwitz.¹⁴

The death of the white ship was also horrifying, although in a quite different way than its birth. By the end of the war, the days of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* as a cruise ship were long behind her. She was now a refugee ship. On January 30, 1945 the *Wilhelm Gustloff* set sail westward from the bitterly cold Baltic port of Gotenhafen, in an attempt to flee the inexorable advance of

¹¹Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood*, 146.

¹²See "Wilhelm Gustloff Shipwreck Expedition May 2003," available online at http://deepimage.co.uk/wrecks/wilhelm-gustloff/gustloff_main.htm.

¹³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Gustloff.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, at http://deepimage.co.uk/wrecks/wilhelm-gustloff/wilhelm-gustloff_history.htm.

Soviet forces, and the atrocities perceived to await all Germans who fell in their hands. The ship was carrying over 10,000 people (over five times her maximum capacity), most of whom were civilians, and many of whom were mothers with young children (like Nelly was at the time of her nightmare about her own mother's fate during her warm-weather Baltic vacation). The rest of the passengers were wounded soldiers. Less than a day after setting sail, the ship was attacked by a Soviet submarine, and sunk in about fifty minutes. It is estimated that over 9,000 lives were lost in the attack, making the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* the deadliest disaster in naval history.¹⁵

The author/narrator writes:

There were more intangibles connected with the white ship than could be passed on in a whisper, connections in whose center the white ship stood; "stood" is by no means the right word. The ship was sailing under a cloudless, blue sky in lightly agitated waters, also blue, with a white foaming wake; and it was very beautiful and meant war.¹⁶

Yes, and as *Guernica* reveals with brutal clarity, war means death and destruction, particularly for the most vulnerable, at the hands of unjust aggressors. The beauty and tranquility of the White Ship were deceptive; truth tells of the ugliness of its birth in anti-Semitism and the frenzy of its death amidst drowning refugees. Yet the workers taking a cruise on the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in its glory days may not have known the full truth, even if they suspected it. As they sailed the Atlantic, or the Mediterranean, their beautiful surroundings belied a noxious web of connections to the morally reprehensible acts of others, even as it enmeshed them in it. The White Ship is, in my mind, the symbol of the complicity of "ordinary" people in a web of social and political wrongdoing – the topic of the book.

¹⁵See the first-person account of the sinking given by a German naval officer at <http://www.cybercreek.com/cybercity/WWIIps/gust.html>. In comparison, about 1,500 lives were lost on the *Titanic*. There is dispute about the exact number; see <http://search.eb.com/titanic/researchersnote.html>.

¹⁶Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood*, p. 143.

II. *The Pervasiveness of Complicity*

The author/narrator of *Patterns of Childhood* gives us no reason to believe that Nelly and her family initiated or perpetrated any particular acts of horror themselves. Mostly, they were carried by the tide, too preoccupied with preserving their own well-being to pay much attention to the broader issues. Like the ordinary workers sailing the Mediterranean on the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in 1937, their lives were supported, were buoyed, by a nightmarish sea of wrongdoing, destruction, and suffering. They went along with things. Accordingly, the book maps the terrain of a pervasive, and seemingly unavoidable, complicity.

Chapter 14 of *Patterns of Childhood* begins with the following exegesis:

Verfallen—a German word.

A look into foreign-language dictionaries: nowhere else these four, five different meanings. German youth is addicted—*verfallen*—to its Führer. The bill drawn on the future is forfeited—*verfallen*. Their roofs are dilapidated—*verfallen*. But you must have known that she's a wreck—*verfallen*.

No other language knows *verfallen* in the sense of “irretrievably lost, because enslaved by one's own, deep-down consent.”¹⁷

Nelly's father seems to have joined the Nazi party not because he fervently supported its ideological platform, but because he was pressured to do so, as a condition of maintaining some standing in the community.¹⁸ At the same time, the family was extremely wary of the Gestapo, who interrogated Nelly's mother in 1944 upon hearing that she predicted the Germans would lose the war.¹⁹ Nelly's father was not an eager participant in Germany's struggle for world

¹⁷Ibid., 288.

¹⁸Ibid., 42-43: “Always assuming that this is not a grave case of misremembering, the overflowing happiness of the parents—overflowing onto Nelly—must have been composed of the following elements: relief (the unavoidable step has been taken without having had to be taken on one's own); a clear conscience (the membership in this comparatively harmless organization—the Navy storm troops—could not have been refused without consequences. What consequences? That's too precise a question); the bliss of conformity (it isn't everybody's thing to be an outsider, and when Bruno Jordan had to choose between a vague discomfort in the stomach and the multi-thousand-voice roar coming over the radio, he opted, as a social being, for the thousands and against himself.”

¹⁹Ibid., 165-66.

domination; he was drafted as an older man, and spent harrowing months as a prisoner of war. Later, when he was in charge of prisoners of war himself, he treated them humanely.²⁰ The author/narrator takes pains to note that because of Nelly's father's humane practices, one of his former French prisoners interceded on his behalf as he was about to be shot by the advancing Russians.²¹ Her mother, too, was described as a humane person, gathering materials to help save a baby born to a Ukrainian woman in a labor camp for foreign workers.²²

Nelly herself was a member of the girls' division of the Hitler Youth, which the narrator/author describes in a way that makes it seem like a more intense and much creepier version of the Girl Scouts. She joined in order to feel like she belonged to something important, to feel that she herself was important, and in order to impress her beloved teacher.²³ There is no doubt that Nelly and her family were anti-Semitic; the narrator/author conveys the impression, however, that their views were forged more as a response to social pressure than as a result of independent conviction.²⁴ They were uncomfortable with strong expressions of anti-Semitism,²⁵ just as they were uncomfortable with strong expressions of any sort of belief. Looking back, the author/narrator intimates that Nelly's married aunt was in love with her Jewish physician, who was likely father of her son, her much-loved only child.²⁶ At the same time, this connection did

²⁰Ibid., 278-79.

²¹Ibid., 307.

²²Ibid., 67-69.

²³Ibid., 218.

²⁴“Nelly's hatred of Jews and Communists isn't quite as spontaneous as it should be – a defect that must be concealed.” Ibid., 128.

²⁵When Nelly's religion teacher suggested that Jesus Christ would be a follower of Hitler and would “hate” the Jews, her mother reacted with distinct discomfort. “Hate? Charlotte Jordan said. . . . In the evening she asks her husband: Don't you think it's pretty strong stuff he's dispensing to the children in religion? Just let him say what he wants. You can't stick your nose into everything.” Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 75-81. The physician in question, Dr. Leitner, is portrayed very sympathetically.

not prevent the family members from squelching any qualms they might have felt in complying with, or even taking advantage of, the anti-Semitic measures of the Nazi regime. They dutifully complied with the boycott of Jewish businesses, and Nelly's Uncle Emil purchased a candy factory from its Jewish owner at a drastically cut-rate price, claiming that the seller was grateful to him for the chance to get away.²⁷

Is there a way to come morally to grips with the sort of complicity *Patterns of Childhood* describes? The book offers a multi-layered response to this question, which becomes more problematic the deeper one probes. A superficial reading of the text suggests that despite its limitations, the agonies of remembering constitute a necessary and fruitful ongoing moral exercise. The author/narrator maintains that "memory is a repeated moral act." The painstaking detail with which she attempts to reconstruct Nelly's first house, her first memories, her first sense of herself as an "I," and the stuff of her childhood and adolescence initially gives rise to the sense that the effort to remember is itself a type of expiation; a type of confession that cleanses the soul and should elicit understanding, if not absolution, in response.

Yet at the same time, on a second level, the author/narrator repeatedly warns the reader of the limitations of memory. At times, she explicitly despairs of its usefulness. Today's practicalities will always press a more substantial claim than yesterday's ghosts. Remembering is inconvenient, because it demands some change of life on the part of the one who remembers. She recounts, for example, how gas chambers were first put in place for the euthanasia program, before being used in the Final Solution. So as to quell the fear of those entering them, they were deliberately designed to be "rooms of normal size and type adjacent to the other rooms of the institution." She wonders: "The thought that everybody in Germany should have had the urgent wish to empty out, to tear down his dwelling—rooms of normal size and type—to change its very

Is that how he was perceived in retrospect by the narrator/author or at the time by the young Nelly, or by both? The reader is not quite sure.

²⁷Wolf, *Patterns of Childhood*, 149-50.

foundations so as not to have it resemble a gas chamber is, of course unrealistic, and will cause resentment, because we'd rather open our hearts to murder than open our four comfortable walls to chaos."²⁸

At other times, she despairs of memory's reliability. "Nelly is nothing but the product of your hypocrisy. It stands to reason that anyone who attempts to change a person into an object in order to use that person for a confrontation with the self has to be hypocritical if he later complains that he can no longer expose himself to this object; that it's becoming more and more incomprehensible to him."²⁹ Nonetheless, the author/narrator proceeds as if this hurdle can be overcome by a resolute determination to be radically honest, by probing the complicity of memory itself in the horrors of Nazi Germany. By so indicting memory, here understood as selective forgetting, she assuages a second level of doubts that she raises about the shape of her own remembering.

The author/narrator asks, for example, what enabled people to live a more-or-less normal life, as shopkeepers, as family members, in Nazi Germany? She suggests that it was a type of carefully protected, if not cultivated, ignorance – protected and cultivated by a selective lack of memory. The ignorance, nourished by fear, was both a condition and a manifestation of their complicity.

Their ignorance allowed them to feel lukewarm. They were also lucky. No Jewish or Communist relatives or friends, no hereditary or mental diseases in the family (Aunt Dottie. . . will be mentioned later), no ties to any foreign country, practically no knowledge of any foreign language, absolutely no leanings toward subversive thought or, worse, toward decadent or any other form of art. Cast in ill-fitting roles, they were required only to remain nobodies. And that seems to come easily to us. Ignore, overlook, neglect, deny, unlearn, obliterate, forget.³⁰

What could they have done if they had known—if they had allowed themselves really to

²⁸Ibid., 199.

²⁹Ibid., 211.

³⁰Ibid., 149.

see, really to know? The question is simply too frightening to be asked. Fear squelches compassion and compounds ignorance. The author/narrator describes how the girl Nelly secretly went to the Jewish quarter after Kristallnacht, and watched the men hurrying to rescue what they could from the burning ruins of the synagogue. She observes, “It wouldn’t have taken much for Nelly to have succumbed to an improper emotion: compassion. But healthy German common sense built a barrier against it: fear.”³¹

Discussing the forced euthanasia program, the author/narrator recounts how her mentally ill Aunt Dottie “suddenly and unexpectedly succumbed to pneumonia” after being transferred from one facility to another. Nelly sees the family descend into a suspicious silence after receiving news of Aunt Dottie’s death. They are familiar with the “unfit-for-life” concept; “everybody was familiar with it. One learned it in school, one read about it in the papers.”³² The pieces are in place to discern what actually happened to Aunt Dottie; she was a member of the (extended) family. Yet they did not talk about it. “What Nelly did know, or sensed—for in times like these there are many gradations between knowing and not knowing—was that there was more to Aunt Dottie’s death than met the eye.”³³ They are powerless, afraid, and therefore ignorant. They “forget.”

A second factor, in addition to fear, is the desire for “normalcy”—which is closely related to the desire to belong, to fit into a larger collective. Recall that the original title of the English translation is a “A Model Childhood”; a “model” is in some sense a “norm.” Nelly’s mother uses “normal” as a moral term; she worries that her daughter is not “normal” and presses her to be “normal.”³⁴ “A reasonable child gets kissed good night.”³⁵ When Nelly protests that it is

³¹Ibid., 160-161.

³²Ibid., 196.

³³Ibid., 197.

³⁴Ibid., 57.

³⁵Ibid., 91

ridiculous for her non-churchgoing family to insist upon her confirmation, her mother “thinks one shouldn’t feel above doing what everybody else does. Nobody has ever died of it yet.”³⁶ Well, in Nazi Germany, as both the narrator/translator and the reader well know, somebody has.

The author/narrator describes the pull of belonging to something greater than oneself in a way that is both powerful and disturbing. She asks her daughter, “And doesn’t it frighten you to find yourself thinking completely differently from the way they [most people] think?” When her daughter answers in the negative she responds, “But doesn’t it ever occur to you that they must be right, since they’re in the majority?”³⁷ The daughter’s answer to this question is also “no.”

In my view, this exchange between mother and daughter points to the third, and most deeply problematic, layer of the moral meaning of memory in *Patterns of Childhood*. We expect mothers and daughters to be similar in their outlook on life or, if they are not similar, for there to be a coherent explanation for their difference. Naturally enough, the reader wonders how this mother and daughter can appear to be so different in their assessment of their own responses to being out of step with the broader society. Is the difference deep and real, or merely superficial? It occurs to us that we don’t know, and that we can’t know, because the characters in the book are still strangers to us, in morally important ways.

Let me explain. The author/narrator observes that “It is the person who remembers—not memory.”³⁸ But *who* is this person whose memories are being subjected to public view? The reader is not sure. The first uncertainty arises at the moral level. Conspicuously missing from the book is an account of the author/narrator’s shift from being Nelly, an enthusiastic, if not brutal, member of the Hitler Youth, to her current identity as Nelly’s moral inquisitor. What accounts for the change in her moral compass, in her moral identity? Was there an event, a moment, a photo—perhaps a photo of the prisoners in Auschwitz? Was there a slow evolution, as

³⁶Ibid., 254.

³⁷Ibid., 244.

³⁸Ibid., 118.

she pondered the implications of her own normative commitments and finds them absolutely incompatible with Nazism? We are never told. Yet she gives us tacit permission to ask the question, significantly observing that memory's recall varies significantly between persons who have had the same experience. "If this were not so," the author/narrator reflects, "some people's assertions would be accurate: documents could not be surpassed, the narrator would therefore be superfluous."³⁹

So who is our author/narrator? We are forced to piece together her moral identity from snippets of reflection, of narrative, in the book. We wonder, for example, whether the author/narrator's moral identity would have changed, have evolved, if the Nazis had won the war. We wonder whether that question has occurred to her, whether that question troubles her. Precisely because no account is forthcoming, the reader is left with the nagging and unpleasant suspicion that perhaps it is the circumstances that have changed, not the author/narrator's moral identity, which is still tied to belonging, to being "normal." The author/narrator quotes a poem "From the Me to the We" by Heinrich Annacker, which Nelly recited in Hitler Youth meetings. The second verse reads as follows:

And now the me is part of the great We,
becomes the great machine's subservient wheel.
Not if it lives—but if it serves with zeal,
decides the worth of its own destiny.⁴⁰

Is it simply that the values of the "we" have been exchanged – that the values of fascist Nazi Germany have been replaced by the Communist values of the German Democratic Republic?⁴¹ If not, why not? A reader pursuing this line of questioning can quickly find herself at sea.

³⁹Ibid., 69.

⁴⁰Ibid., 191.

⁴¹I realize that Christa Wolf is a controversial figure in Germany, in part because of her decision to serve as an informer for the government as citizen in the GDR. While I am not willing to dismiss out of hand all extra-textual questions of authorial integrity and moral probity, they are beyond the scope of this essay. I believe that my questions are prompted by the text itself.

Moreover, viewing the book in this ominous and cynical light can give rise to a different, although possibly related, worry: Is it possible that the excruciating self-examination engaged in by the author is simply or primarily an artistic device, a way of creating a character and shaping a narrative: “Where are the days when the murmuring conjurers of the past tense were able to persuade themselves and others that they were dispensers of justice? Woe to our own time, which forces the writer to exhibit the wound of his own crime before he is allowed to describe other people’s wounds.”⁴²

Thus far, apart from a small qualification at the beginning of the essay, I have spoken with an easy presumption of the “author/narrator.” But is my conjunction of the two roles justified? Is the author, Christa Wolf, the narrator? It is clear that the events in the book draw to some degree upon events in her own life, her own childhood. At the same time, however, *Patterns of Childhood* is described as “a novel,” not as “an autobiography.” An author’s preface to the book states:

All characters in this book are the invention of the narrator. None is identical with any person living or dead. Neither do any of the described episodes coincide with actual events.

Anyone believing that he detects a similarity between a character in the narrative and either himself or anyone else should consider the strange lack of individuality in the behavior of many contemporaries. Generally recognizable behavior patterns should be blamed on the circumstances.”

The narrator is also a character in the book; in fact, the narrator is the most important character in the book: “It is the person who remembers, not memory.”⁴³ But what if the person remembering is engaged in an artistic act, in a work of fiction? What is the line between remembering and fabricating? What should we make of a situation in which what is fabricated is the excruciating work of memory? Is Wolf’s project, like Picasso’s *Guernica*, an abstract evocation of the horrors of military destruction, which cannot be captured by a purely realistic

⁴²Ibid., 171.

⁴³Ibid., 118.

depiction? Perhaps – especially if the subject of the project is not merely complicity itself, but the horror of recognizing one’s own complicity.

Yet unlike the painting, the moral power of the novel comes precisely from the author/narrator’s connection to the events she depicts; its persuasiveness stems from the sense that the author/narrator is attempting to grapple with the events that actually took place, as she saw them, including the moral stance of her family members and herself toward the situations and events by which their lives were buoyed. Is that possible to do successfully and accurately? Perhaps not. If this is the case, one could argue that it would be even more deceptive for a work to classify itself as an “autobiography.” The author/narrator takes explicit note not only of the serpentine paths of memory, but also of the lure of deception, both of others and of ourselves. Early on in the book, she notes: “It is interesting that we either fictionalize or become tongue-tied when it comes to personal matters. We may have good reason to hide from ourselves (at least to hide certain aspects—which amounts to the same). But even if there is little hope of an eventual self-acquittal, it would be enough to withstand the lure of silence, of concealment.”⁴⁴

But the admitted possibility – no, the admitted likelihood – of both deliberate and unwitting fictionalization inexorably undermines the prospect of self-acquittal. The term “acquittal” is a legal term; it refers to a not-guilty verdict after a trial. A trial requires an indictment, which charges that the defendant committed a specific crime at a specific time and place. It also requires the giving of evidence (whose reliability is assessed by the fact-finder) substantiating or disproving the elements of the crime charged in the indictment. Without denying that people lie under oath, or that facts considered in isolation can be misleading, the very idea of “evidence” presupposes a belief that it is a worthwhile endeavor to try to get to the bottom of what *really* happened, and that it is possible, at least in most instances, to do so.

In short, viewed at this level, two fundamental strands of the book radically undermine one another. On the one hand, the idea of “self-acquittal” (or even of self-judgment)

⁴⁴Ibid., 8.

presupposes the ability accurately to come to grips with one's responsibility, with one's actions, with one's situation, at some time in the past. The excruciating labors of memory gain their intelligibility with such an end in sight. On the other hand, the unreliability of memory, its omissions, and fabrications, conjoined with the uncertain moral identity of the narrator and the self-presentation of the work as a "novel," suggest that the project as an act of truth-telling about the past is misleading, if not misguided. At best, the genre of confession, of agonized memory, is a tool for the creation of the artistic identity of the author, which relegates her moral identity to the sidelines. Our attempt to make sense of her attempt to make sense of the past crumbles; we are not sure to what degree it is *her* past.

Conclusion: A Voyage on the Wilhelm Gustloff: The Contemporary Nightmare of Complicity

Patterns of Childhood offers us a vivid tour of the nightmarish territory of complicity in the contemporary era. The underlying systemic evil at stake, the Nazi regime, has of course acquired a grim paradigmatic status, embodying the worst of what human beings are capable of toward one another, not only as isolated individuals, but also as persons embedded within a social and political matrix that takes on a malign life of its own. Yet throughout the book, the author/narrator makes it clear that problems of complicity are not unique to that regime; noting that as she writes, the international news is filled with stories of the emerging Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, or the American enmeshment in the Vietnam War. Three decades later, examples of webs of wrongdoing continue to expand, here in the United States and around the globe.

Consequently, many of us increasingly sense that we are passing our time floating in comfort on a gleaming white ship, on our own version of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. Like Nelly, we may intuit its ominous nature, even while not perceiving its poisonous origins or its deadly ends. We are ignorant, sometimes deliberately so, and we are afraid – afraid how our discoveries of the truth may make a claim on us, a claim that we cannot meet or do not wish to meet. At other

times, we are not willing to dedicate ourselves to the investigation, let alone the archival work, required to expose the noxious connections and dependencies of our contentment. In some cases, we are not sure we are required to do so. When and how do morally noxious connections to the wrongdoing of others make a claim on us? Do past events ever fade entirely into the past?

Moreover, like Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, our own attempts to navigate the territory of our complicities have a nightmarish quality about them. Our normally reliable moral framework is pressed to the breaking point, and becomes substantially distorted as we struggle to make sense of our connection with the wrongful actions of others. What kind of a connection counts as noxious? Does it require that we contribute to evil-doing, or merely that we have benefitted from it? When and how is inactivity objectionable? When is ignorance culpable? Are our actions, or inactions, are our very lives to be considered in isolation, or aggregated with others to form a collective agent which could prevent the harm in question? Like the author/narrator in *Patterns of Childhood*, these questions are scattered in the moral landscape and lit by the strange green light of the nightmare. Our perspective is shifting and distorted as we grasp first one, then the other, as the key to identifying and grappling with our complicity.

In addition, like Picasso's *Guernica*, the intensity of the human suffering to which we bear a noxious connection threatens to overwhelm our quest to answer, or even to make sense of, the questions identified above. The quest itself becomes morally problematic. The tools with which we investigate and explore the landscape of complicity are unreliable; memory is selective, even fabricated. And the purpose of the quest itself is undermined: why do we want to undertake this investigation in the first place? Are we like the author/narrator of *Patterns of Childhood*, looking for self-acquittal? Are we looking for political amnesty? Are we looking for forgiveness from those who have suffered? Are we looking to make reparation? What sense do those concepts, which concern wrongs and harms done by one individual member of the community to another, make in this context, where we are concerned with a web of noxious

connections?⁴⁵

How do we make sense of this spate of questions? How do we take into account the fact of immense suffering caused by wrongdoing to which we may somehow be connected, either as contributors or as appropriators? For that matter, how do we understand what is the particular wrong constituted by complicity, which I have defined above as a morally noxious connection with the wrongdoing and wrongful practices of others? In my view, we need to spend some time pondering the fundamental issue the author/narrator of *Patterns of Childhood* leaves untouched. We need to give an account of our moral identity that takes into account the explicitly social aspects of who we are, not only of our physical lineage, but of our national heritage, our cultural heritage, and our moral selves. Furthermore, in order to begin sorting through how to respond to the morally noxious connections we discover, we need to recognize that our ordinary and often unequivocal concepts of “guilt,” “forgiveness,” and “reparation” apply only analogously in this context, if they apply at all. It is, in my view, the task of constructive moral thought to honor the experience of complicity evoked by *Patterns of Childhood*, even as it strives to move us beyond the paralysis that experience generates.

⁴⁵The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in various countries is an important source of how these concepts can fruitfully be expanded. See, e.g., Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices* (University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming, 2004).