

"a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance": Technology and Subjectivity in Christa Wolf's *Störfall*

How curious that a-tom means the same in Greek as in-dividum in Latin: indivisible.

— Christa Wolf, *Störfall*

For as long as humanity has made things, it has been at odds with what it has made. From its very origins the classical opposition *teknè/physis* has marked the essence of technology: dominate nature and put it to the service of mankind. Technology is, by its very nature, de-naturing and, by extension, even de-humanizing. Yet the antagonism between technology and the human essence (or "culture") in which it is implicated has unfolded in a complex history. The antagonism, as it has manifested itself in the last two centuries, has been by no means simply synchronous with the development of modernity in general nor with the widespread social and technical reorganization of the Industrial Revolution. The latter presents a far more complex set of developments in the relationship of the individual to his or her environment. It marked among other things a widespread shift from the use of hand tools in production to the use of machines and power tools and inaugurated the "alienation" of the individual from the object of his or her production. In lieu of a more or less immediate relation to the objective world, the individual began to experience, on a wide scale, a mechanically extended relation to the world of objects. And yet a certain tradition has always regarded

technology as a vehicle for change, an instrument for the acceleration of social change, liberation, democracy and individualism. Benjamin's optimism with regard to the emancipatory potential of technology is well known, while Fuller and McLuhan have enthusiastically defended the technological utopia they saw lying in the future. As Helen Fehervary has noted, many of the progressive writers of the former German Democratic Republic (Günter Kunert, Volker Braun, Heiner Müller, Thomas Brasch, for example) have shown a largely skeptical attitude toward technology's ability to unify artistic production and revolt (97-98). In a complex way Christa Wolf must be counted among them. Her literary career has been marked by a continuous insistence upon the profound effects of material history on the individual subject, an insistence which begs a reconsideration of the mediation of that historicized subject and subjective reality by the evolution of technology in the late twentieth century. If the explosion of information technologies since the 1950s has, as many would claim, produced a largely different set of historical conditions, Wolf's untiring project of historicizing subjectivity, developed above all in the "historical quests" of *Quest for Christa T.* and *Patterns of Childhood* might be expected to develop significant conclusions. According to this view, an essential feature of the development of technology is the historical shift in its role as mediator of the objective world or, to use McLuhan's formula, the shift in the extensions of man. In Wolf's *Störfall*, the question of technology's capacity to better the welfare of society has nearly been surpassed and the question which imposes itself in its place is whether technology will indeed be the vehicle of humanity's own self-destruction.

The narrative is set in a small village in Mecklenburg on April 29, 1986. Three days earlier, on the morning of April 26, the number four reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, some 2000 kilometers to the east, overheated setting off a steam explosion which threw aside its 1000 ton reactor lid and spewed several tons of uranium dioxide fuel and burning graphite into the atmosphere. Over the next ten days, radioactive clouds drifted northwest from Chernobyl, then south, and finally east, depositing radioactive dust across all of central Europe and much of Scandinavia. Thirty-one people died outright or from complications of radiation poisoning and 24,000 inhabitants of the surrounding area of the Ukraine received serious doses of radiation (45 rem or above).

Estimates of cancer deaths resulting from the radioactive cloud range from 5,000 to 75,000. Thus the context of Wolf's narrative is deadly serious. The specter of the invisible cloud of dust which floats above the narrator's village profoundly alters her sense of self, reality, and history. Juxtaposed with the meditative fragments on the poisonous radioactive cloud is a second major narrative thread whose primary concern is a complex and dangerous brain surgery undergone by the narrator's brother on the very same day. The operation, we learn early on, will be ultimately successful. As a consequence of this juxtaposition, an immediate judgement on the benevolence or danger of technology in light of the Chernobyl incident is precluded. The success of the highly technical medical operation renders the technology/nature opposition ambivalent. The counter-position of these two threads, which are both poignantly addressed in the second person to the unconscious brother, gives a double dimension to the question of the mediation of reality by technological innovation. On the one hand, the utopian promise of inexhaustible energy is transformed into an ambiguous invisible threat. On the other, the surgical penetration into the deepest recesses of the brain puts into play the limits of the self and the individual. Thus the text does indeed present a "disruption" as its title suggests. But the disruption goes beyond any ordinary notion of interruption of the patterns of everyday life. It disturbs, rather, the very fabric of subjectivity in the course of history.

In what follows I will begin by returning once again to the interrogation of the utopian potential of technological progress by examining the way in which Wolf places herself in that discussion in her early writings as well as in the text of *Störfall*. Keeping close to what I would call Wolf's axiom—that every historical development always coincides with a development in subjectivity—I will try to suggest that, in this work, scientific and technological progress corresponds to a change in subjectivity which no longer permits the world to be seized or "written" in a way which is not ultimately destructive to the writing subject.

1. The Promise of Technology

In her 1968 essay "Reading and Writing," Wolf describes the setting in which writing takes place as something new and unresolved. In it, the present day prose writer has yet to come to terms in her craft with the relation between subject and world:

The need to write in a new way results, although with a delay, from a new way of being in the world. In time intervals which seem to become shorter, one hears, sees, smells, and tastes differently than before. A change in the perception of the world has taken place which touches even untouchable memory. We see "the world" once again; but what is the world? (181)

A radical questioning of reality, of the epistemological status of the objective world, is what foregrounds the subject and sets in motion its exploration of the limits of experience and of its capacity for grasping the objective world. The need to write in a new way is associated with the evolution of the subject, with the changing relation of the subject to the universe or the objective environment which it sets out to represent. Writing, as Benjamin suggests in "The Author as Producer" is a productive mediation of the objective world (228-30). A source of Benjamin's optimism for the emancipatory capacity of technology lies in the worker's ability to express himself through his own production. The development of technology, he argues, thus grounds and accelerates the emancipatory process. To a large degree Wolf agrees: "The attempt ... remains to posit oneself through production," but in an important departure from Benjamin, she adds the skeptical rejoinders, "But to whom? And why?" (182) To her agreement with Benjamin's notion that technological progress has led to new forms of reception, Wolf adds a questioning of the kind of subjective experience which takes place within this field of reception. In question is the relation of the subject as writer to the changing conditions of reality with which she is confronted. Nor is the confrontation passive. It is, rather, quite adversary: "This century's truth turns against the prose writer. It is more fantastic than any product of fantasy" (189).

As a result of the wonders of modern scientific discovery and the fantastic precision with which the objective world may now be observed and described, the objective world seems to exceed the capacity of prose to communicate it (205). Wolf's interest, however, is not simply the struggle to keep up with the acceleration of reality but rather to develop a configuration in which prose can be realigned with it. The immutable and irreducible challenge is that we are indeed subjects who live in objective relations (185). Such an examination of the discrepancy between subjective and objective worlds is hardly a novelty. What interests Wolf however is the effect of the discrepancy, the way in which the relative relation of subject to world conditions the subjective experience. Perhaps this century's most notable shift in that relation arose with the overturning of classical Newtonian physics by Einstein's theory of relativity. The constancy of reality ever since the "Newtonian Revolution" was grounded in the mechanics of the three-dimensional fixed coordinate system, with time and space as eternal constants. This revolutionary understanding of the world found itself reproduced in social relations:

Those who have long thought in the categories of Newtonian celestial mechanics will gradually find it natural that the social mechanism should function in the same way: solid objects move continuously in calculated paths and affect each other according to calculable laws. (200)

In the classical system, the technical laws of the universe are eternal, surviving even the subject:

The excessive optimism of this mechanics, unquestionable for the very one who is crushed by it, is obvious: I perish but it remains in motion. It had a function, summoned cognition and knowledge, stimulated proficiency and tore open contradictions without endangering substance, produced reality, in any case. (201)

Before the age of Einstein, reality, for practical purposes, lay passively awaiting unproblematic representation. The relation between the writing subject and objective reality bore no effect on its constancy. The theory of relativity delivered a radical blow to this conception of subject/object

relations. According to this theory, the relative speed, position, and mass of the observer significantly affect the physical character of the object. The subject, in other words, does more than alter the object world by the nature of its reception: the subject alters the reality of the world itself as a function of its relative characteristics with respect to it. The crisis unleashed by this new conception of reality was to touch all of humanity, yet it began first with the scientists themselves. They were forced once again to take up the question, what is the object of scientific investigation?

What was certain—space and time—became relative, the ether, wearily produced in their thoughts, dissolved into nothing, the brain, which seemed to have been created to grasp the world as three-dimensional and nothing else, no longer knew if it could trust itself. (206)

The corresponding crisis of language also touched first the scientific community. The discourse of classical physics was simply no longer appropriate for describing the new spatial and temporal relations which scientists became aware of, let alone to catalogue the continued discoveries that particle physics would bring about.

Thus an essential discrepancy arises between objective reality and the linguistic and conceptual mechanisms which attempt to represent it. The incapacity of the scientific community to effectively represent the material reality whose transformation they themselves have brought about is, in Wolf's view, reflected in society at large and essential to the prose writer. Scientists in the age of Einstein, says Wolf—after Heisenberg's famous remark—are obliged to express themselves as poets in order to verbalize the world which they see. In this respect it is perhaps significant to note that in Newton's age, the turn of the seventeenth century, the division of labor between science and philosophy, technology and art had not yet been fully accomplished. The technical world view was the philosophical world view and the representability of one in terms of the other was considered entirely valid. The crisis which confronts contemporary society and Wolf herself as she turns to the wonders and horrors of nuclear fusion and brain surgery is not only that the discrepancy between subjective understanding and material processes is irre-

concilable and may not ultimately lead to positive results, but that such a question itself may be inappropriate: "That science, the new God, may provide us with all the solutions for which we approach it? Is the question falsely posed?" (*Störfall* 37) Such a discrepancy between worlds is a conflict of what Foucault calls the *epistémè*: the epistemological field in which knowledge is referred to its most fundamental rational value, that is, the conditions of its possibility. As Foucault suggests in *The Order of Things* (345), the threshold of the modernity of our age is marked by a significant discontinuity in the *epistémè* near the turn of the eighteenth century corresponding in some measure to the mechanical extensions of the individual since the industrial age. A horizon presents itself on which inappropriately posed questions such as this one waver, that of a heterotopos: an incommensurable juxtaposition of epistemological conditions. I will return to this question shortly.

Störfall is vaguely haunted by the unseizable inevitability of the Chernobyl accident. The question remains whether the present technological situation is the result of some miscarriage in the evolution of humanity or simply its inevitable outcome, a one-way street consistent with the promising face of technology which has systematically raised the standard of living of the larger part of Western society. The fundamental backdrop for the development of technology has been humanity's historical confrontation with the forces of nature. Enlightenment thought, despite the counter-proposals of Romanticism, pits the rational being against Nature. In science and technology, the thinker finds the means of mastering Nature and further rationalizing human activity. Though works such as Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have demonstrated the inevitable blindness and regressiveness of such thinking, the role of technology as emancipatory promise in human evolution remains:

The intelligence becomes a decisive evolutionary factor. The intelligent person creates for herself the means for subjugating nature and her fellow. She seeks to breach, through the use of overt or hidden violence, the rules and norms which she had imposed upon herself, be it at the cost of her own self-destruction. (45)

Human evolution moves in quasi-dialectical cycles. Neither species themselves nor their characteristics spontaneously appear or vanish. New qualities or new organisms appear, rather, through the subsuming of the qualities of others:

... evolution, for example, in contrast to technology—does not destroy beings once created through selection but rather makes further use of them... (50)

Technology, on the other hand, brings about development in a non-dialectical fashion. What it cannot or does not make use of, it either discards or destroys. Its charter seems not to be the development of human capacities but rather their replacement:

... then we produce substitute satisfaction and cling to substitute life, substitute for living, the entire breathless expanding, monstrous, technical creation of a substitute for love. (32)

The harrowing one-way course of development and displacement of human activity and human feeling seems inevitable, inherent in the process itself. The question for the narrator of *Störfall* is whether a corresponding development should accelerate in kind with the changing face of reality, trying to match it in speed and energy. Could the writer stop writing, she asks herself, "can words wound, even destroy like projectiles?" (48) Such is the nightmare of the writer under conditions of runaway technology.

2. Subjectivity and Materiality I

More than any other scientific development of this century, the wonder of nuclear energy has stimulated the imagination of our culture. This

virtually infinite energy source would, if brought to fruition, apparently alleviate one the major problems of material life: a reliable source of energy. The promise was and remains to some degree utopian: "enough energy for all and for all time" (*Störfall* 30). That since its discovery nuclear fusion has carried with it the dark specter of the hydrogen bomb does not seem to temper the zeal for its further development. For the narrator of *Störfall*, however, the destructive potential of nuclear energy is irremediably yoked to the insistent drive to enrich and improve life. The essential link between technology and its fruits is the scientific community and its desire to proceed at all costs in a no-holds-barred attitude toward the potential of atomic science, more or less ignoring the world which it inevitably creates. The manifest destructiveness of both the Chernobyl catastrophe and atomic weapons needs no rehearsal. But there is another sense to this "disturbance" which took place on a Spring day in 1986. No less than subjective experience itself has been disrupted. The ubiquitous cloud of nuclear poison which moved silently and unpredictably across Europe set in motion a change in reality itself.

Nuclear radiation is not simply one poison among others: it disrupts the very conventions of what we hold poison to be. It does not obey the material laws of either the diseases or the chemical poisons which we are accustomed to combatting. The mechanical extensions with which we shelter ourselves from conventional menaces are no longer appropriate. The poison does not dissipate but remains an acute danger well beyond any scale of human mortality. Its movement cannot be hindered by ordinary or conventional means of mechanical protection since it is constituted by processes which take place on an atomic—sub-mechanical—scale. Some forms of radiation, for example, penetrate walls and other mechanically "protective" measures. Nuclear processes simply take place on a scale which is incongruous with a mechanical-conceptual framework. Their effects also exceed a conventional conceptual scope. Nuclear poison enters the body through the skin, violating the conceptual boundary of the body. Moreover, its "infection" is the disruption of the organic mechanism of the individual cell. Thus when the narrator of *Störfall* thinks of precautions to be taken against contamination, she does so without knowing to what extent the degree of contamination is knowable—without knowing the limits of the poison. Thinking of her grandchildren, for example, she suggest to herself that after playing out-

side, in irradiated dust, they should shower; yet a shower would permit poisonous water to contaminate them.

Nuclear poison cannot be conceptually exteriorized. The laws which govern it are more fundamental with respect to matter itself than those which govern the human body: it disrupts the material sovereignty of the human body. No technological response to it can be adequate since it consists of a corruption of the basic building blocks of matter. As it happens, since the splitting of the atom—formerly considered the indivisible, most basic element of matter—physicists have subsequently discovered abundant varieties of sub-atomic particles further deconstructing the conceptual framework of the universal “building block.” An etymology of the expression “sub-atomic” (“more basic than what is indivisible”) provides the Foucauldian, conceptually self-contradicting, heterotopos par excellence: it simply dissolves the conceptual framework of the material world upon which “reality” rests. And in what sort of conceptual universe, it may be asked, can such a notion exist?

... in that authority, which had from early on begun to carefully consider me out of a very distant future—a glance, nothing more—have I come to understand that from now on I would no longer feel connected to anything. Free to do and, above all, not to do, whatever I please. That goal is the very distant future toward which all lines had directed themselves, had been blown away, in concert with the fissionable material in a reactor building, it took part in a burning out. A rare case—. (4)

This final “a rare case” must however be ironically understood. The “disruption” of this day, the transformation of the sense of past and future happens, in effect, only once. Subsequently the conditions for knowing the world—the epistémè—are so changed that the “case” would take place again only in a different reality, in the world of a different epistémè. The events of this one are unrepeatable. The world can only be observed as a historical object. Today becomes an object of the future perfect: “... to carefully consider ... out of a very distant future...”

3. Subjectivity and Materiality II

Effortlessly it penetrates the thick defense of your unconsciousness searching for the glowing pulsating core (5)

Nuclear physics, frustrated and fascinated by its inability to isolate the basic building blocks of reality, finds an analogy in the quest for the indivisible kernel of subjectivity. Where the physical origins of personality traits, senses, or capacities of imagination are located in the material of the brain itself has been to a great extent solved by medical science. Certain parts of the memory and of one's experience can actually be isolated in the matter of the brain, stimulated or, with frightening ease and precision, annihilated.

Thus, as the narrator's brother undergoes major brain surgery, presumably to remove a tumor, there is a clear threat that particular elements of his subjective character might be inadvertently damaged:

Namely because, as the young nurse informed you, even personality change can result from damage to certain parts of the brain. Nice prospects, you said, and I asked bluntly if you were really that attached to your personality. A matter of habit, you said. (19)

This last comment, “a matter of habit,” functions in the same ironic fashion as the “rare case” above. It marks the site of a distinct incongruity brought on by the “disruption” of subjectivity. The subjective experience of one's own personality takes shape from inside that personality and thus the possibility of a change in personality can not be understood from any standpoint other than the “new” personality. No external measure is possible. That the circumstance of this heterotopos is created by the capacity of medical technology to “safely” enter the brain itself (as though the entry itself were not a kind of irreparable transgression) and correct other “unrelated” dysfunctions is the very “disruption” of *Störfall*.

The fragments of the narrative which deal with the brother's

surgery are remarkably graphic in their description of the operation. Holes are bored in the skull, a portion of the skullcap removed, certain lobes of the brain gently pushed aside—all this brings to a very effective peak the notion that processes which are entirely material, physical, even mechanical, have precise effects on the subject, making the boundary between the material and the subjective ever more precarious. As the brain's functions reveal themselves as progressively localizable, the frontier of subjectivity is again and again displaced, pressed into recession. The body can be exposed, exteriorized in the extreme, the personality geographically plotted, revealing the horizon of a kind of pure-instrumentality of the body (Kroker 21). Technology has reached a point where machinery can perform mechanical tasks with more precision and efficiency than humans. The ultimate advance in this direction would naturally be surgery by computer:

... specially developed for operations on the human brain, programmed for a precision of one hundredth of a millimeter, less fallible than the human hand, as it were. (10)

The precision of such a computer could naturally push further back the boundary between the subjective and the material, well beyond the point, it would seem, of human detection. Technology offers the means to an endless differentiation of the mind through the mechanical manipulation of the brain, giving rise to a regressive kind of division of labor, diversification instead of intensification. Wolf detected, already in "Reading and Writing," the tendency toward "surface" models of reality and called for a deepening of individual experience in lieu of moving from one surface experience to another:

Our brain is sufficiently differentiated to deepen almost endlessly the linear expansion of time—let's call it surface—through memory and looking ahead. Depth: if it's not a quality of the material world, it must be an experience, a capacity which in the social coexistence of people over long spaces of time was acquired and not only maintained itself because it was useful, developed. (185)

The fear that the information society works against depth of experience has been an issue since well before the inception of high-tech science and electronic media. It is clear that controlling and manipulating information was politically of the highest importance in the Chernobyl crisis. Both the explosion and the dissemination of information about it took place under the sign of some "greater" political expedience. It is to this particular character of experience in the information society to which I will now turn.

4. Information and Global Politics

"According to what laws," asks the narrator of *Störfall*, "and how quickly, does radioactivity spread in the most favorable and unfavorable case?" (9) Radioactivity, as suggested above, is a very particular kind of "agent." It is invisible, its movement is undetectable except by highly technical means, it is indistinguishable from any element of the human organism to which it attaches itself. Moreover, its effects are less noticeable and far more longstanding than of other agents of sickness such as disease or infection: damage begins at the level of the cells and remains unnoticeable, in some cases, for many years. The circumstances of nuclear fallout thus result in a near total dependency on information, both technological and logistical. Thus nuclear poison manifests itself in the short run as information about the nature and movement of the fallout: conceptually speaking, the information is the poison.

Mysteries and gaps in information about what is happening set the tone of Wolf's narrative. It is haunted by questions which are insistently pertinent because they address the conditions of survival itself. The little information that is available is initially only based on hearsay: "On that morning ... I still knew nothing ... about the rumors that would circulate warning not to eat the fruit" (3). When news reports finally begin to be provided, details are sporadic and inconsistent. At one point word passes that the thyroid gland is "our most sensitive organ for the housing of

radioactive iodine" (15) causing a run on pharmacy iodine tablets and leading some to nearly poison themselves by drinking medicine cabinet iodine. Information during the Chernobyl disaster was in fact extremely slow in reaching those affected by it. It was only after Swedish officials inquired urgently about radioactivity levels a hundred times higher than normal in Scandinavia, that the Soviet Union responded with a terse statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency, a full two days after the accident, and that after Scandinavian officials had initially believed that the radiation had originated in Sweden (*New York Times*, April 29, 1986). Residents of the Ukraine itself were among the last to be informed, many hearing the news on Polish radio. The political use of information has seldom had higher stakes. First the Soviet Union, then East Bloc governments, and finally West European officials wielded and manipulated the information in order to best influence the agricultural complex, agencies of resource allocation, or simply mass emotions. Information in such a situation resembles more and more an instrument of political power and a suspicion becomes prevalent that government spokesmen and "experts" are to be as little trusted as the fresh vegetables which hide the menacing poison:

It also makes it difficult to hear the NEWS on my little Sanyo transistor radio, changed around and re-fashioned every hour into news. ... Depending on his affiliation with one of the factions into which the public has predictably divided, whether he was an optimist or pessimist, the expert would say: No. Under no circumstance will the core melt down. Or: But of course. Yes, yes. Even that eventuality cannot be excluded. (10)

The seemingly endless capacity to manipulate information, to disperse it for purposes largely unrelated to its content is a mark of the information age in which we seem to be entering. Global networks of information give rise to exchange systems based on "knowledge" as purely instrumental. Lyotard analyzes this phenomenon as a characteristic of the global networks of late capitalist society. He suggests that knowledge and power become two sides of the same question (9).

Observations concerning a shift in the nature of information exchange through advances in technology have become increasingly common in the U.S. and Western Europe. The question is to what degree, if at all, such a "computerization" of society was underway within the political, economic context of the East Bloc. It is, in any case, clear that the diplomatic "friction" in the original exchange between the Swedish and Soviet governments over the Chernobyl disaster immediately transformed information into political fodder. This transformation of information, of knowledge, does suggest that elements of what Lyotard calls the postmodern condition are indeed globally present. One is reminded that Daniel Bell, in his analysis of the character of what he calls "post-industrial society" attempts to shift the axis of the question from an East/West to an industrial/post-industrial configuration, a strategy which groups Western and Eastern Europe, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. together in the same post-industrial social and economic constellation. By any measure, neither the movement of information about the Chernobyl disaster nor its effects respected national boundaries and the structure of political demarcations; in *Störfall* both suffer a kind of conceptual distortion:

My problem, on the other hand, was the question of whether in case of an emergency like this one we must actually count ourselves with Northern Europe, what we otherwise do flippantly and with vanity, or if strictly speaking we don't still belong to Central Europe. (102)

In the information age, the globe itself assumes a scale which had not been previously conceivable. The seeming infinity of our living space meets at last a limitation whose seriousness is disturbing. Yet the wheels of progress march on more furiously than ever.

5. Conclusion: The Blind Spot

What then happened on this April day in 1986? It is no longer a matter of simply asking such a question and seeking out an answer based on some sort of ordinary experience of the world and truth claims about it. The thinking, writing subject in the course of technological development has reached a position where the incongruous heterotopos or conceptual spaces in which it functions seem irresolvable. Where does the sovereignty of the body end and the field of dangers from without begin? The question about what happened on this day makes less and less sense as the very conditions of a true response to it are outstripped by the actual world.

It is perhaps not even possible for me to formulate those questions which could lead to radical answers. The light of language has pushed into the dark entire regions of my inner world, which may have lain in twilight during pre-linguistic times. I don't remember. (90)

In this epistemological crisis it is *Wahrnehmung*—perception—which is disturbed: *Wahrnehmung*, however, in its literal sense, contains the seed of this disaster: "the seizing of truth." A discontinuity arises in *Störfall* between the perception that something has happened, that some sort of knowledge has been created above and beyond the disastrous material effects of the accident, and the capacity of the subject to seize it in its entirety.

This gap in perception is to the narrator a kind of blind spot in the human subjective capacity. In the blind spot of the human eye, a limited portion of information is blocked-out at the spot where the optic nerve leaves the retina, the very point of transmission of information. Yet human beings possess two eyes. The blind-spot of one eye is compensated for by the vision of the second, slightly apart from it. What one eye cannot perceive, the other adds to the overall perception. The writing subject, however, contains no such compensation mechanism and the gap which remains after the events of April 26 cannot be remedied:

But who can help us to close that gap in perception which through our special way of asserting ourselves in this world, we must inevitably incur. Where then is consolation to be found? (89)

In "Reading and Writing" Wolf spoke of a kind of gap in the capabilities of language which corresponds to the shift toward Einsteinian physical laws. It is a gap in which "the old language of physics no longer has anything applicable to declare" (206). The classical physicist, like the "classical" writer, relied on a different sense of reality. What becomes evident in *Störfall* is the incongruity between the "conditions of narrative," as Wolf has elsewhere called them ("Conditions") and the narrative apparatus which is available to her.

The revolutionary prose writer imagined by Benjamin seems in this case to have failed to find success. Yet not only does writing fail its emancipatory dream, it takes on a destructive character, causing a corruption or loss of meaning. In a poignant admonition to her brother who lies unconscious, kilometers away, the narrator expresses her doubts about her own craft, which is deeply grounded in emancipatory hope:

... so much has already been said and written, the cordon of word-disgust which I never would have considered possible, dear brother, for now I'll say it only to you, becoming older means: everything happens which you had never considered possible, and should I have foreseen those first words, then my words would have disgusted me... (99)

As the narrator finally retires to bed, she takes with her Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance" (46), reads Conrad's narrative of exploration and commercial exploitation in Central Africa. Marlow, the narrator, recounts the story of a penetration by boat deep into the African jungle on a mission to discover what has happened to Kurtz, the manager of the deepest outpost, who sometime earlier has disappeared in a cloak of mystery. It is a story of the mastery of nature for the purposes of progress and civilization. Like the journey which has led toward social and economic

progress in twentieth century society, the journey which Marlow recounts leads back to the very heart of humanity, to the human subject at the limits of material reality as we in "civilization" understand it, and to the contradictions, incongruities and nightmares which await there. To the teller, words are no consolation. The disingenuous "discoveries" by Nietzsche's dialectical philosopher—uncovered precisely where he has hidden them in his own self-made mysteries—no longer find a sublation and confirmation of truth. All questions seem to return to the question of the subject:

...now [the seeker] stands before the citadel, and in her darkest and most truthful hour she sees in it her own form, then out of fear, or horror, nothing more can be said, for if the wind is calm at the center of the cyclone, it is indeed silent (not quiet: silent, without noise) plus and minus poles cancel each other... (98-99)

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