

“An Affair on Uncertain Ground”: Sarah Kirsch’s
Poetry Volume *Erlking’s Daughter*
in the Context of her Prose after the *Wende*

Christine Cosentino
Rutgers University

Following the *Wende* (turn) of 1989, Sarah Kirsch, resident in the Federal Republic since 1977, published three volumes of prose: *Spreu* (*Chaff*, 1991), *Schwingrasen* (*Vibrating Turf*, 1991) and *Das simple Leben* (*The Simple Life*, 1994). Framed by these works, the poetry volume *Erlkönigs Tochter* (*Erlking’s Daughter*) appeared in 1992. The calculated ambiguity of the individual titles evokes the poet’s persistent theme: garbage/decay on shaky ground, viewed also as the uncanny, disguised as something simple and everyday in a hellishly gray and prosaic life world. The theme of brittleness, of collapses and upheavals, is inscribed above all in the subject-matter of dying nature, wherein up-to-the-minute public events and intimate concerns mirror each other in multiple refractions. It is hardly surprising that authors of the former GDR, both those who left earlier and those who stayed to the end, were inspired to process the political and existential confusions in a flood of essays, diaries, memoirs, protocols, speeches and other reflective-analytic prose-formats. To note just a few: The essay collection *Die Geschichte ist offen* (*History is Open*, 1990); Christa Wolf’s *Im Dialog* (*In Dialogue*, 1990) and *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou* (*The Way to Tabou*, 1994); Günter de Bruyn’s *Jubelschreie, Trauergesänge. Deutsche Befindlichkeiten* (*Cries of Rejoicing, Songs of Mourning. German States of Mind*, 1991); Heiner Müller’s *Krieg ohne Schlacht* (*War without Weapons*, 1992); Rolf Schneider’s *Frühling im Herbst. Notizen zum Untergang der DDR* (*Spring in the Autumn. Notes on the Collapse of the GDR*, 1992); or Helga Schubert’s *Die Andersdenkende* (*She who Thinks Otherwise*, 1994.) A critic sums

things up: "The years following 1989 will be defined in every literary history as a period of groping historical and political self-questioning" (Isenschmid 173).

Sarah Kirsch also, although known primarily as a lyric poet, was principally attracted in these years to prose genres, where she focuses on mundane matters like the politics of the day, global warming, and details of an author's life such as giving public readings. One could call this prose diary-like sketches, or one could state things differently, stressing its calculated "lack of structure": "The condition of Germany on the way to unification is evoked in this prose as a structured chaos via the compositional principle of leaving materials in the rough" (Frühwald). This statement refers to the volume *Chaff*. However differently critics reacted to Kirsch's diary-like prose volumes *Chaff*, *Vibrating Turf*, and *The Simple Life*, they were almost always in agreement in stressing their "unformed" quality. The unmistakable mingling of the most tender and intense images with brash jargon and archaic mannerism, in a word the famous polyphony of the "Sarah-sound," has lost some of its subtlety, this is true of the poetry as well as the prose. The reader of Kirsch's recent works asks herself whether and to what extent the poet has been, in the aftermath of 1989, trapped, shaken, or even crippled by her social-existential past. Does Kirsch's theme of global uprootedness on an exhausted "Krätzeplaneten" 'mangy planet' (E 6) seem overshadowed by the petty, provincial disputes of the new Germany? Do the controversies over literature, the violence against foreigners, and the "Stasi"-debates reopen the old wounds about the former "Ländchen" (i.e. the GDR), wounds long thought to be closed? When asked in a 1993 interview whether "peaceful social life in Germany was endangered," Kirsch expressed her horror: "Mölln, Solingen—those are monstrous events. It was inconceivable that something like that could be possible again so soon after World War II. It is a dreadful thing to realize that we can't learn from any past experience, indeed that no history book is of any use" (Kachelrieß). The effort it costs her to move beyond her shock and beyond the psychological injuries endured in the GDR is evident in Kirsch's works since the *Wende* and is suggestively mirrored in the abrupt enjambments and tense syntax of the poem "Flüchtig" ("Fleeting") from *Erlking's Daughter*: . . . ver- / Giß! Und mache dich / Hart. So kannst du / Von Erde berichten" ' . . . for- / get! And make yourself / hard. Then you can / report about earth' (E 17).

Kirsch's reactions to "deutschdeutsches Gewese" 'Germangerman brouhaha' (SL 35), expressed in numerous prose-pieces and poems, are not always aesthetically worked through. They are fragmentary and seem, in their "fleetingness," to be linked to the thematics of flight that is so central to the poet. They are "new": often aggressive, bitter, resigned, untypically "without character" in times that are still "unstructured and without character." A remark thrown out as if casually in *The Simple Life* functions like an artistic summation of both self and the times: "Traure meinem vorigen Heft etwas nach. Das hier ist neu und ohne Charakter." 'Feel a bit nostalgic for my previous book. This one is new and without character' (SL 5). One hears the voice of someone defining herself, whether openly or subliminally, consciously or unconsciously, "als einstmals geprägtes Kind zerspringenden Ostblocks," 'as a child shaped long ago by a disintegrating Eastern bloc' (SL 77). Exhaustion, shock, fear of creativity drying up, an artistic state of "no longer and not yet"—all this is mirrored in a double vision of the poet which, by association, also touches upon the compositional problems of both the three "unstructured" prose volumes and the poems of *Erlking's Daughter*. The images in those recent poems leave an impression of paleness, appear to be "re-structured" via intellectual control: "Was vor vier Stunden wie Poesie sich doch ausnahm es ist stinkender Prosa gewichen. Eu Gott! Ich aber führe mein Journal hier getreulich. Am liebsten sehr früh in der Frühe, im Nichtmehr und Nochnicht." 'What looked like poetry four hours ago has given way to lousy prose. Good God! At least I'm faithfully keeping my diary. I like to do it best in the very early morning, in the no longer and not yet' (*Schw* 9).

The associative richness of the imagery in Kirsch's work overall, ceaselessly generating, as if in a kaleidoscope, new and powerful constellations of political, personal, historical, and natural themes, had moved many a critic to praise the poet as the "greatest" (Kaiser) of contemporary lyricists, indeed as "Droste-Hülshoff's younger sister" (Reich-Ranicki). Yet what Sarah Kirsch offers us in her last book of poems, texts of journeying, experiencing, and observing nature, has been labeled by the critics as "more prosaic, more political than in previous collections" (Heimberger), as "feeling its way in close proximity to prose" (Schmidt). Is she now less successful at the lyrical transformation of drab reality? The cunningly chosen, suggestive, and probably ironic title, *Erlking's Daughter*, evokes that indissoluble mesh of

magic and demystification so characteristic of the poet's lyrical language. It reaches directly into Goethe's ballad about the feverish boy, in whose hallucinations sober facts, "old grey reeds," are transformed into demons, into "Erkling's daughters," who lull him to sleep with repetitive dirges. Actually the factual elements, the "grey reeds," seem, in several of Kirsch's poems, to detach themselves from the visionary context and to become autonomous. The unmistakable expressive gesture of sensuousness with a subtext, familiar to the reader from the poet's work as a whole, is frequently reduced to shorthand-like sketches (Krumbholz) that remind one of those narrative poems in Sarah Kirsch's early work for which Adolf Endler coined the phrase "diary-like letter-poems (tending toward reportage)" (154). Endler, who saw the danger of aesthetic restrictiveness in these enumerative "observation exercises" (155) and termed it a tendency to "journalese," found the mode characteristic primarily of Kirsch's first independent volume *Landaufenthalt (A Stay in the Country, 1967)*. Kirsch's best poems, in the 12 volumes of her lyrical output, are those that are stimulated by an "optical idea" (Kirsch, *Erklärung* 15), that extend the observational into the contemplative. So powerful is the intensity and range of these sensuously suggestive images that critics have spoken of an "ocular poetics" (Egyptien 348). And there are indeed texts of such high artistic quality in Kirsch's most recent volume, *Erkling's Daughter*. Yet in many of the poems the optical quality appears displaced by a burden of emotion or by the merely conceptual, becoming an artificial stage-set for sometimes embittered self-mirroring. A "Narrenlied" 'fool's song' suggests an artistic self-diagnosis: "Woher hab ichs gewußt? / Von einem Stein auf der / Brust. Hab ihn in den / Himmel gehoben" 'How did I know it? / from a stone on my / chest. I raised it into / the heavens' (E 67). Kirsch's mannerisms and metaphors of freezing often seem routine and stereotyped, giving an impression of artistic paralysis in the milieu of "Germangerman brouhaha" and global waste, against which poetry can no longer make any impact. The poet seems to hint at this when she subverts the maxim proclaimed by Rilke in the "Duino Elegies," that the poet's task is to celebrate the world: "Ein Strom von Wiederholungen. Und Grauen / Entspringt der zitternden Hand. Sie wandert // Bei Tag und Nacht elend übers Papier. / Zu preisen gibt es heut nicht mehr viel.// Und deshalb ist des Schreibens müde die Hand" 'A river of repetitions. And dread / flows from the trembling hand. It wanders / wretchedly, day and night, across the paper. / There's no longer much to celebrate today.

/ Hence the hand grows tired of writing' ("Der Chronist," "The Chronicler" *E* 61).

About half the volume's 62 poems are travel-poems, referring to actual journeys but also invoking the themes of flight and restlessness, of the transitory and of subjective exile. The key to this thematics of alienation and flight may be found in "Mud Flats III." In this poem overshadowed by a sense of apocalypse, the speaker places herself ironically in the tradition of Goethe's ballad: "Drehender Nebelqualm . . . / [stellt] ne schöne / Verbindlichkeit her" 'Swirling mist . . . / produces a nice / friendly atmosphere' (*E* 50). However, the sloppily treated linguistic material and the industrial props demystify and alienate the familiar into the unfamiliar; on this "uncertain ground" one can no longer build:

Ich Erlkönigs Tochter hab eine
 Ernsthafte Verabredung mit zwei
 Apokalyptischen Reitern im Watt ein
 Techtelmechtel auf unsicherem Boden
 Jetzt ehe der Morgen sich rötet.
 [. . .]
 Auf Möwenkadaver Colabüchsen der
 Abgeblaßte Mond auf der Hurtigroute
 Zwischen kopulierenden Wolken bezeugt er
 Dem Albatros höchste Bewunderung wie der
 Von Süden herüberkömmt während Jupiter
 Über dem Kuhstall später der Bohrrinsel glänzt.
 Happy Neujahr! rufen die Seenotraketen
 Und der Jung aus Büsum wird niemals
 Gefunden es fallen die Krähen
 Schwarze Äpfel vom einzigen Baum.

I the Erlking's daughter have a
 serious assignation with two
 horsemen of the apocalypse in the mud flats
 an affair on uncertain ground
 now before the dawn's streaks appear.

[. . .]
 Cola cans on gulls' corpses the
 fading moon moving quickly
 between copulating clouds shows its
 highest admiration for the albatross

as it comes up from the south while Jupiter
 shines above the cowshed later on the drilling rig.
 Happy New Year! cry the distress rockets
 and the boy from BÜsum is never
 found the crows fall
 black apples from the single tree.

“Serious assignations” draining into mere affairs on shaky ground evoke thoughts of flight. In its multiple refractions the imagery connotes the creative process itself, the destruction of the planet, a sense of exile from the epoch and, last but not least, Kirsch’s traumatic move to the west together with her horror at a political past which the poet feels impelled to confront repeatedly. The thematics of journeying and flight is of course nothing new in Sarah Kirsch’s work. In her early writing it suggested a generally critical questioning of the GDR-state, to which the poet at the time professed a cool loyalty. These thematics also mirror an “intense, non-ideological concept of freedom” (Widmer 80); as the poet formulated them in a 1979 interview, they express a passionate “longing for the world, the longing to be at home everywhere. . . . I live by the discovering, the possessing of ever new landscapes” (Ester 108). This impulse is also manifested so pervasively in her works written in the West that critics have called her a “travel-artist”: “The clash between restlessness and the need for roots, between freedom and commitment, in however many guises it may appear, is essential for Kirsch as travel-poet.” (Figge 182). The urge to travel as it is formulated in her most recent work, however, leaves no doubt that it derives from disillusion and is to compensate for disillusion. A five-line text “Leicht” ‘Light’ (E 64) sounds like a laconic summary of a whole outlook:

Gab nichts das mich
 Aufhalten konnte kein Festland
 Hat mich lange beschäftigt. Immer
 Sprang ich auf das letzte
 Fahrende Schiff im September.

Nothing could
 hold me no mainland
 sustained my interest long. Always
 I leaped upon the last
 ship to leave in September.

Although the poet frequently reiterates her sense of rootedness in the landscape of Schleswig-Holstein, in her prose and poetry since the *Wende* there accumulate thoughts of homelessness and the void, of a flight ending not in refuge but, inexorably, back at the point of departure, at ruthless self-questioning. Thus Kirsch's prose volumes, *Chaff*, *Vibrating Turf* and *The Simple Life*, are full of notes about journeys to give public readings—"Missionsreisen" ("Missionary Journeys") or "Alphabetisierungsreisen" ("Literacy Promotions" *S* 19, 30)—in both divided and reunited Germany, leaving no doubt that the poet confronts her eastern audience unsparingly and has never learned to love her public in the West. With her allergic reaction to the "Germangerman brouhaha" of political restructuring, the poet opts increasingly for "Ortsverschiebungen" 'transplantations' (*S* 53) to foreign places: "Sitze auf ner dänischen Insel, weil ich nichts Deutsches mehr hören kann." 'I sit on the Danish island because I can't endure to hear more about things German' (*S* 41). A network of metaphors involving flight, escape and a "swan's shape" (*Schw* 29, 31) invokes the past of the GDR and the trauma of her emigration in 1977 in the wake of the Biermann-events: "Das Ländchen es hat mich geknebelt und schikaniert. Ich kann alles bloß in die Entfernung rücken und mich immer wieder beglückwünschen daß ich mit Moses entkam." 'That little country muzzled and harassed me. All I can do is push these things away from me and congratulate myself over and over that I passed over with Moses' (*SL* 89). In the context of the *Wende*, then, her declaration "Mobilität ist mein Segen gewesen" 'mobility has saved me' (*Schw* 29) acquires a new actuality, one surely unanticipated by the poet. With the stridently implemented restructuring of Germany after 1989, and the distressing Stasi revelations, mobility on neutral foreign ground serves the purpose of a diversion, a hoped-for escape: "Man muß unterwegs sein um nicht zu viel über das zerbrechende ehemalige Ländchen zu sprechen [*SL* 16] . . . Bloß gut daß ich bald nach Portugal fliege." 'One must travel in order not to talk too much about the former little country as it collapses (*SL* 16) . . . A good thing I'm soon flying to Portugal' (*SL* 89). That the anaesthetic doesn't work, that the nomadically "traveling" poet only manages to encounter herself and demands a personal and political accounting from herself, becomes vividly clear in a quasi-cyclical series of travel poems in *Erlking's Daughter*; for long stretches these texts are directly conceptual rather than lyrically shaped. Similarly highly profiled,

at least in the form of a question, is the psychograph of a person socialized in the GDR who after 15 years of emigration still sees herself in a time of transition from Germany to Germany (“Das Jahr geht hin / Noch immer trage ich / Reisekleider” ‘The year ends / I’m still wearing / travel-clothes’ E 51). To what extent this frame of mind characterizes East German citizens of the new Federal Republic generally, their contradictory feelings of rejection and affirmation of formerly utopian ideological constructs, is a highly interesting question in the context of reunification.

Kirsch’s travels in *Erlking’s Daughter* begin in the very first poem—“Aus dem Haiku-Gebiet” (“From the haiku zone” E 5)—with a journey to Berlin, where she takes a look at her files in the former Stasi headquarters in the Normannenstrasse. The prose volume *The Simple Life* fastens upon these thematics. There the poet’s brash tone cannot conceal her horror:

Morgen um diese Zeit fahren wir schon nach Berlin. Wo ich meine Stasi Akten erhalte. Das Jahr der Einsicht begann. . . . War in mein früheres Leben glatt zurückversetzt. Weil noch jeder belanglose Anruf nachzulesen da war. Fühlte mich zwar achtzehn Jahre jünger achtzehn Jahre schöner aber ein gewisser Druck aufem Plexus solaris fand sich auch wieder ein. Ein Gefühl der Unfreiheit, des Ausgeliefertseins was mir shtets gegen den Schtrich ging. Meine rückgespulte Biographie war reine Menschenkunde. OV “Milan” von Freund Feind und IM “Verleger” verraten.

Tomorrow at this time we drive to Berlin. Where I’m to receive my Stasi files. The year of realization began. . . . I was thrust straight back into my earlier life. Because every insignificant phone call was listed there. Felt myself indeed 18 years younger and better looking but a certain pressure on the plexus solaris could not be ignored. A feeling of unfreedom, of being at the mercy of others, that always went against my grain. My re-run biography was a veritable science of human nature. The case name: “Kite” [Kirsch’s STASI code-name] betrayed by friend, foe and informer [code-named] “publisher.” (SL 88)

Depression and a feeling of hopelessness in the icy realms of a reality deformed by the state, but also globally, is expressed in an overflowing abundance of freezing metaphors that articulate in multiple variations the themes of paralysis and death. In the poetic

guise of a lyrical haiku the gesture of resignation appears as follows:

Wie der Schnee sie auch
Verklärt — meine Heimat
Sieht erbärmlich aus.

Den Mond über der Havel
Hatte Schalck wohl
Zurückgelassen.

Heul, sag ich, heul! Der Hund
Hilft mir das Jahr
Zu Ende zu bringen

Normannenstraße: ich sehe
Den Leuten zu beim
Reinemachen fürs neue Jahr.

Das Jahr geht hin
Noch immer trage ich
Reisekleider.

However the snow
transfigures it — my homeland
looks wretched.

The moon over the Havel
was probably left behind
by Schalck.*

Howl, I say, howl! The dog
helps me bring
the year to an end.

Normannenstrasse: I watch
the people at work
cleaning for the new year.

The year ends
I'm still wearing
travel-clothes. (E 51)

*[Schalck: East German Party Official responsible for East-West trade]

Experiences that Kirsch shared with other authors include contemplating "preußische Akten," 'Prussian files' ("Langer Winter," "Long Winter" E 15) "im verkommenen Staat meiner Heimat," 'in the degraded state that ruled my homeland' ("Die andere Welt," "The other world" E 16), the resultant horror at the used up human feelings as well as the attempt at impotent retaliation: "Blieb nichts als / Schöne Augen zu / Machen hier geht es / Vorsätzlich Zahn um . . ." 'Nothing remained, but / to smile with one's eyes / here the standard is / tooth [for tooth] . . .' ("Seither," "Since Then" E 59). In her prose volume *The Simple Life* she goes into more detail about colleagues with a "betrayers' cv." (SL 89) and their victims (among them Jürgen Fuchs, Reiner Kunze, Günter Kunert and Hans Joachim Schädlich). In the context of the Stasi debates, the variously inflected reactions of these victims of denunciation have been thoroughly documented in the public media. Probably less known is the story by Hans Joachim Schädlich, "Die Sache mit B." ("The B. Affair"), in which the author, through coolly distanced language, attempts to gain mastery over his speechlessness in the face of his own brother's spying activities. In her prose volume *The Simple Life*, Kirsch frequently refers to Schädlich, a friend of hers ("Schott," SL 89 passim), and contributes poems to his documentary volume *Aktenkundig* (*Known through the Files*), among which a very early one, from the volume *Landaufenthalt* (*A Stay in the Country*), seems to anticipate betrayal: "Denk nach Bruder und zähle dein Geld / Kauf einen schillernden Hahn verrate mich. . . . / Sag Bruder daß du mein Bruder nicht bist" 'Reflect brother and pay your money / buy a dazzling rooster betray me. . . . / Say brother that you're not my brother' (L 24, written in 1965).

It is interesting to trace the Stasi theme in *Erlking's Daughter* as it infiltrates the thought of restless journeying or being forever between stopping places. As if inadvertently, it is sucked into a shifting network of images firmly established in the poet's work as a whole. The meanings of images point toward other meanings, merge with each other at the second or third reading, become interconnected. An example clarifies this process. Something apparently unambiguous, like the description of a wren in the volume *Chaff*, becomes ambivalent upon re-reading, points toward existential, indeed social rootlessness: "Sah den Zaunkönig in der Ligusterhecke rumspringen, seine mehrfachen Nester. Denn er kömmt mit einem nicht aus. Mal sitzt er in diesem, dann am liebsten

im anderen drin." . . . 'Saw the wren hopping about in the privet-hedge. Its multiple nests. For it's not satisfied with just one. Sometimes it sits in one, then it prefers another . . .' (S 49). It is not surprising that this motif also appears in one of the introductory poems of *Erlking's Daughter*, reflecting the "uncertain ground" of the chilly intra-German realities after the *Wende*:

Ich liege unter dem Eis ausgestreckt
[. . .] . . . ich fühle
Zaunkönigs spitze Gesänge. Länger
Herrscht schwarze polternde windige Nacht.
Dröhnen und Brechen von Eis. Schwer
Lastet das Meer auf mir und dem Land.

I lie stretched out beneath the ice
[. . .] . . . I feel
the wren's shrill songs. For a longer time
the black windy roaring night prevails.
The booming and breaking of ice. Heavy
the sea weighs upon me and the land.

"Wintergarten I" ("Winter Garden I" E 12)

For the reader familiar with Kirsch's work there is a clear association of the wren ("hedge-king" in German), and its implied state of disoriented hopping to and fro, with one of the poet's central motifs, the king. This image, with its complex disjunction between "king of the heart" and "head of state," speaks to the issue of power and impotence in both private and social realms. In *Erlking's Daughter* this motif occurs, in a politically retrospective "wall" –poem, in the form of "am Boden liegenden Königsmützen" ("The king's cap lying on the ground" E 7); and it constitutes the title of a poem "Königlich" ("Royal"), whose opening lines invoke the theme of flight: "Lief wie ein Mann auf der / Flucht mich näher zu bringen" 'Ran like a man in / flight to bring myself closer' (E 54). The link is clear to an early poem, from the "Wiepersdorf" cycle of the volume *Rückenwind (Tailwind, 1976)*, in which the motif of the king—without the poet's conscious intention—can be interpreted as a political omen or prophetic glimpse of Stasi psychic terror (Cosentino, 95-96):

Dieser Abend, Bettina, es ist
Alles beim alten. Immer

Sind wir allein, wenn wir den Königen schreiben
 Denen des Herzens und jenen
 Des Staats. Und noch
 Erschrickt unser Herz
 Wenn auf der anderen Seite des Hauses
 Ein Wagen zu hören ist.

This evening, Bettina, is
 as it's always been. Always
 we are alone, when we write to kings
 those of the heart and those
 of the state. And yet
 our heart is startled
 when on the other side of the house
 a car can be heard. (R 27)

Certainly the cause of the poet's foreign journeys after the *Wende* is not only to be found in her renewed experience of the persistence of anti-democratic power; rather it must be linked to a general artistic restlessness, to attempts at self-discovery, even, in one critic's view, to boredom "because the peaceful idyll of Schleswig-Holstein sometimes gets on her nerves" (Hartung). What is certain is that she becomes "flüchtig" 'flighty': "Ich ging vor mir / Auf und davon sprach / Auf mich ein: ver- / giß! Und mache dich / Hart." 'I fled from / myself and lectured / myself about it: for - / get! And make yourself / hard' (E 17); and she means to thrust this problem into the foreground. It is equally clear that she now journeys almost compulsively northward, to a cold and barren landscape, mirroring her own state of mind: "Vor Norwegens Winter zieh ich den / Hut, den eisbepackten den nackten Gipfeln. / . . . Ich kann / Solange ich hier bin nicht sagen / Daß ich den Sommer erwarte." 'To Norway's winter I take off / my hat, to its ice-packed naked peaks / . . . I cannot / as long as I am here / say that I am awaiting summer' (E 23). Monsters borrowed from Scandinavian mythology such as trolls, dragons, ghosts, and witches uttering curses, all of them eerily haunting the glacier world, reinforce the gesture of deathly paralysis.

In about half the *Erking* poems journeys to Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Wales, Scotland, and England are thematized. One poem deals with Portugal ("Café Majestic" E 8), another with a (remembered?) journey to America ("Nothelfer im

Gebirge" 'Mountain Rescuers,' E 37). In face of the nordic elements the wearying frustration about "Verrat und / Samtige Sprüche" 'Betrayal and / velvety saying' (E 31) fades, even though the poet had repeatedly reflected upon and lamented it:

Schottischen Whisky auf Snorri Sturluson diese
 Weißen Magnetgebirge flackernden
 Lichtbüschel Obsidiane Qualmvulkane
 [. . .]
 . . . da ließ ich meine
 Geknechtete Seele für immer frei zwischen
 Fuchsroten Flechten und Moosen dies
 Schluchzende Ding und nirgends ein Haus und
 Was man sieht wie unterm Glassturz ich war
 Vom Himmel gefallen und sagte zu meinem
 Erstaunten Kind jetzt müssen wir
 In T. alles verkaufen und bleiben gleich
 Hier.

Scotch whisky to Snorri Sturluson these
 White magnetic mountains flickering
 light-clusters glassy lava belching volcanoes
 [. . .]
 . . . there I released my
 oppressed soul forever between
 ginger lichen and moss that
 sobbing thing and nowhere a house and
 seeing as if through a glass lid I had
 fallen from heaven and said to my
 amazed child now we must
 sell everything in T. and stay right
 here.

"Kapitulation II" ("Capitulation II" E 25)

In the cycle's most successful poems the optical idea again dominates, materiality observed with fascination and drenched in imagination: "und ich höre / Das Meer an die Küste schlagen. / Wer seid ihr brüchige Stimmen was geht ihr / Als Hirsche verkleidet umher wer oder was / Seid ihr ihr kennt keinen Tod" 'and I hear / the sea crash on the coast. / Who are you brittle voices why do you wander / around disguised as stags who or what / are you you know

not death' ("Stimmen," "Voices" *E* 27). A typically wide-ranging, shifting web of associations acquires a clear contour: within the foregrounded landscape one senses, in the background, the biographical stage with its somber legacy of disorientation, confusion, disillusion and betrayal/"disguise." Flight, escape lead inexorably back to the encounter with self and with past experience. The imaginary, for Sarah Kirsch, does not "unburden" her, as one critic asserts (Bondy); on the contrary it discloses the full dimensions of the burden. In another poem, "Eisland" ("Iceland" *E* 10) the reader is left to decide whether the text is a travel poem, a political poem on a biographical foil, a nature poem or a "fusion" (Cosentino 15-19) of the various lyrical types. The concrete, seemingly recognizable Icelandic landscape evokes simultaneously a mirror of the inner world—and also appears, as if inadvertently, to open into the frost zone of political events at home:

Eine weiße fädige Sonne erlischt
 Auf den Schneewehen krächzt der
 Dunkelheit Rune mit äußerstem Hohn.
 Die Luft singt im Sturm
 Grausige Lieder.

Unser Land ist vom Meer ganz um-
 Kerkert Herzensbekümmernis steigt
 Auf wenn das Licht drin versinkt.
 Elegien schreiben Landes Dichter o
 Sommer so kurz so betrunken und aus.

A white threadbare sun fades
 on the snowdrifts the rune of
 darkness croaks with extreme derision.
 The air resounds in the storm with
 horrifying songs.

Our land is entirely im-
 prisoned by the sea anxiety rises
 about when the light will sink into it.
 Elegies are composed by the country's poets o
 summer so short so drunken so finished.

Indeed the props evoking the cold in this poem remind one critic of Caspar David Friedrich's "Sea of Ice," the famous picture known also as "Lost Hope" that can be understood as "commentary on all

the disillusionments following the patriotic exuberance of the wars of liberation" (Schmitt).

Yet an expressive gesture reminiscent of philosophical poetry is repeatedly renewed. The sober investigation of the poet's own "zusammengestotterten Lebens" 'sputteringly produced life' ("Two Magpies" *E* 43), with its breaks and fresh starts, is coordinated, in this artistic mode, with a specific sensuous experience, yet the image appears de-poeticized. In "Malmöer Segen" ("Blessing at Malmö" *E* 31), for example, "Nachti-Gallen" ("Nightingales") function as a starting-point for reflection on the freedom-euphorias and urge to travel felt by Baltic poets. The poet manifests obvious elective affinities, but comes up with a "warning" (Reinke). The stumbling sequence in the enjambment of the linguistically catchy "nightin-gale" image leaves no doubt as to how fragile and unstructured the new principles of freedom still are:

In Malmö singen die Nachti-
Gallen die Seele sich aussem
Leib und die baltischen Dichter
Sind völlig besoffen vom
Freiheitsgefühl der Möglichkeit
Endlich zu reisen Eu Gott

Gib ihnen den Lohn für ihr halbes
Vergeudetes Leben eintausend
Baltische Elegien und diesz
Schöne türkisgrüne Meer
Das auch mir schon über die
Stiefelchen sprang soll sie

Gefeit machen gegen Verrat und
Samtige Sprüche.

In Malmö the nightin-
gales sing their souls from their
bodies and the Baltic poets
are totally drunk with the
feeling of freedom the option
to travel at last O God

give them their reward for their
half-wasted lives one thousand
Baltic elegies and this

lovely turquoise sea
 that also touched
 my boots, may it

inoculate them against betrayal and
 velvety sayings.

“Malmöer Segen” (“Blessing at Malmö” E 31)

If one surveys the poems that follow the travel poems, one gets the impression that, on her trip to the far north, the poet gained neither “angry liberation”—as one critic thinks (Radisch)—nor firm ground under the feet. The resignation and fundamental uncertainty, deriving from both social preoccupations and intimate concerns, persists—for example in the Stasi poem “Seither” (“Since then” E 59)—but fused with a larger perspective: the apocalyptic vision of a frozen, sick, depopulated earth whose global destruction is irreversible. If the antithesis in the title of Kirsch’s previous volume of poetry, *Schneewärme* (*Snow Warmth*, 1989), offered linking associations of cold with security—in *Erlking’s Daughter* deathly rigidity prevails. The dream of fleeing the devastation and finding safe niches is brusquely pushed ad absurdum through abrupt enjambements: “Ich sehe eine Erde die mir / Gar nicht gefällt Sommer/Vogellos Kühe/Milchlos Männer / Mutlos werde mich / Lieber! empfehlen.” ‘I see an earth that pleases / me not at all summer / birdless cows / milkless men / spiritless I will / my dear! take my leave’ (“Keltisch,” “Celtic” E 60). The poem’s skeletal frame reinforces the message of death. Or the garbage dominates the mud flats in whose “uncertain ground” the poetic self is caught and begins to sink, recording and lyricizing the destruction as it sinks. Hymns to nature are now only possible in the form of dirges at nature’s end:

Salzränder am Schuhwerk ich lief
 Unterm Leuchtfeuer hin der Flutsaum
 Setzt sich aus Meergras Möwenflügeln
 Plastikgerümpel grämlich zusammen
 [. . .]
 . . . die schmale Sichel
 Sich verpissenden Mondes ging
 Im zerfledderten Himmel ich konnte
 Die Füße nicht lösen und schlich
 Als hätte mich Caspar Davids

Schlechterer Vetter
 Mit Pech auf den Strand gemalt.
 Von den Halligen tönte
 Gänsegeschrei.

Salt edging my shoes I ran
 lit up by the flare the water's edge
 is pitifully composed of seaweed
 seagull wings plastic trash
 [. . .]
 . . . the narrow crescent
 of the moon slouching off
 in the worn-out sky I could
 not loosen my feet and crawled
 as if Caspar David's
 poor quality cousin had
 painted me onto the beach with tar.
 From the island resounded
 the cry of geese.

“Watt I” (“Mud flats I” E 48)

The theme of going under on shifting ground, of the impossibility of flight or liberation and of individual abandonment within a global chaos becomes concentrated, in *Erlking's Daughter*, into a single, constantly renewed gesture of death and departure: “Jetzt wo der Planete vergeht / Darf ich Abendstern sagen” ‘Now that the planet is dying / I may invoke the evening star’ (“*Wolken*,” “*Clouds*” E 46). The artist seems to feel herself at the limit of her powers and contemplates the world without her characteristic tone of resistant self-irony. As if buried alive the lyric persona lies “stretched beneath the ice,” as if paralyzed stumbles into the zone of the “angel” (E 57)—a horrifying experience of alienation against which Kirsch had defiantly struggled in the various “angel”-poems of her career. To the resistant gesture of the affirming Rilke—“Praise the World to the Angel” from the ninth *Duino Elegy*—Kirsch responds in her most recent volume of poetry with an attitude of total hopelessness that, on this “frozen earth,” can only be rendered into imagery of inexorable freezing: “Ich bin totenblaß wie / Gefallener Schnee” ‘I am deathly pale like / fallen snow’ (“*Engel*,” “*Angel*” E 57).

From this perspective of "Spalten im Eis und im Hirn" ("cracks in the ice and in the brain" *SL* 90) all the fuss about the "Germangerman brouhaha" in the subsequent prose volume *The Simple Life* (1994), dissolves similarly into the chaos of global unraveling. Relationships, structures, strivings of whatever kind seem here also marked by the suggestive sign of a meaningless, incoherent "affair on uncertain ground." The thought of formlessness, of the formal destructuring of prose and poetry, and of prose-poems also, is not so much implicit in this lyricizing prose as it is completely obvious; thus, whole poems from *Erlking's Daughter* and entire sentences from *Vibrating Turf* are repeated in the new volume, unhesitatingly and word for word. The poet knows it: "Gedichte Berichte Gesichte" 'Poems Reports Visions' (*SL* 90). The "vision" of a dissolving world, of an apocalyptic mixing of extreme heat and cold, is logically reached at the end of the book, against the empirical background of an earthquake: "Über Nacht hat es im Kölner Raum ein Erdbeben gegeben. Das ist der Rheingraben der geknirscht hat . . . Es ist schwül. Und über Nacht hat es noch gefroren. Der Ätna speit." 'Overnight there was an earthquake in the region of Cologne. It is the grinding of the plate beneath the Rhine (*SL* 98). . . . It is sultry. And it froze once again over night. Aetna is spewing lava' (*SL* 99).

Translated by James Rolleston

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