

‘MICH SCHWINDELT VOR FARBE UND DUFT’: NATURE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN  
SARAH KIRSCH’S *LANDAUFENTHALT*

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Abstracts:

There appears to be a critical consensus that the poetry of Sarah Kirsch revealed from the outset a tension between the individual and society, between the poet’s private experiences and those of the socialist collective. This essay argues, however, that sustained critical focus on implicit political opposition to travel restrictions and the inequality of the sexes in a handful of Kirsch’s poems from the late-sixties, has resulted in a lack of attention to the main concern of her debut solo collection *Landaufenthalt*: the poet’s questioning and eventual abandoning of the dictates of socialist realism regarding the role of nature in poetry, and the pivotal role played by her personal interaction with nature in this process, as signalled in the title. The essay discusses the depiction of nature in allegedly dissident poems involving travel that are situated at the start of the collection before considering poems about features of the natural landscape that appear after the title poem. It outlines the evolution of Kirsch’s questioning of official cultural policy within the context of the lyric poetry debate in *Forum* in the sixties and her decisive departure from socialist realism in the final poem of the collection.

Es besteht ein allgemeines Einvernehmen darüber, dass Sarah Kirschs Lyrik von Anfang an durch die Spannung zwischen dem Individuum und der Gesellschaft oder genauer, zwischen den eigenen Erfahrungen und denen des sozialistischen Kollektivs geprägt war. Entgegen dieser Meinung wird im vorliegenden Beitrag behauptet, dass die andauernde Fokussierung auf implizite politische Opposition gegen Reisebeschränkungen und die Ungleichheit zwischen den Geschlechtern in einigen Gedichten Kirschs aus den späten 1960er Jahren das Hauptanliegen ihres Erstlingswerk *Landaufenthalt* übersieht: wie Kirsch den Sozialistischen Realismus in Frage stellt sowie die entscheidende Zwiesprache der Dichterin mit der Natur in diesem Prozess, wie bereits der Titel signalisiert. Der Beitrag erläutert die Darstellung der Natur in den vermeintlich regimekritischen und sich mit Reisen beschäftigenden Gedichten am Anfang des Gedichtbandes und die Beschäftigung der Dichterin mit der titelgebenden Naturlandschaft, die erst nach dem Titelgedicht folgt. Die Analyse verdeutlicht, wie Kirsch im Rahmen der Forum-Lyrikdebatte der sechziger Jahre die offizielle Kulturpolitik zur Verwendung von Naturphänomenen in lyrischen Versen in Frage stellt und sich in dem letzten Gedicht des Bandes vom sozialistischen Realismus entschieden abwendet.

In a 2003 article on Sarah Kirsch's relationship to the German Democratic Republic before and during her 'exile' in the Federal Republic, where she lived from 1977, Wolfgang Bunzel expresses what would appear to be a broad critical consensus. He argues that, from the outset, Kirsch's poetry revealed a tension between the individual and society, between the poet's private experiences and those of the socialist collective.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, he explains, Kirsch resembled a number of poets of her generation who were pushing the boundaries of the prevailing cultural policy of socialist realism, thematically as well as formally, from the mid-sixties onwards.<sup>2</sup> As evidence of Kirsch's emancipatory impulses at the start of her career, Bunzel, like Martin Kane before him, points to implicit criticism of state-imposed travel restrictions in poems describing real or imagined journeys in the poet's 1967 debut solo collection *Landaufenthalt*.<sup>3</sup> Both critics also refer to the official critique of Kirsch's slightly later poem 'Schwarze Bohnen', a poem which, in highly subjective fashion, suggested the continued existence of stereotypical roles for men and women in the socialist state.<sup>4</sup>

On the face of it, this argument seems convincing. However, sustained critical focus on implicit political opposition to travel restrictions and inequality of the sexes in a handful of Kirsch's poems at this defining stage in her career, indicative of a politically polarised view of the poet's work, combined with a lack of detailed analysis of the content and structure of *Landaufenthalt*,<sup>5</sup> has resulted in a lack of critical attention to the volume's main concern: the poet's questioning and eventual abandoning of the dictates of socialist realism regarding the role of nature in poetry, and the pivotal role played by Kirsch's personal interaction with nature in this process, during the stays in the countryside signalled in the collection's title. In this essay, I will discuss the depiction of nature in allegedly dissident poems involving travel that are situated at the beginning of the collection before considering, in turn, poems about and/or featuring lakes and trees that appear after the title poem ('Landaufenthalt', SG, 35), which is situated about a third of the way through.<sup>6</sup> My intention

is to illustrate, through a detailed analysis of the evolving depiction and function of natural phenomena in what are effectively two distinctive sections of the collection, how the poet's personal interaction with nature leads her to question and eventually break with official cultural policy on the function and deployment of nature in lyric verse, within the context of the *Forum* lyric debate of the 1960s.

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In the late-sixties, East German cultural policy still dictated the use of simple forms, straightforward language, upbeat rhetoric and a thematic focus on industrial growth in the cities that were being reconstructed under socialism.<sup>7</sup> This did not mean, however, that nature was not a suitable subject. As Wolfgang Emmerich has outlined, while non-political nature poetry, 'ein Gespräch über Bäume', had been described by Brecht during his exile in the Third Reich as 'fast ein Verbrechen.../ Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt', a focus on nature and landscape was not only permitted in the Soviet zone but, in line with Soviet cultural policy, was in fact encouraged, provided the treatment of nature had a social dimension. Examples highlighted by Emmerich are Peter Huchel's landscape poems, which address a war-ravaged landscape in the context of land reform, and Johannes Bobrowski's insistence on the notion that human atrocities were inscribed in the landscape, which, for its part, was a reaction to the tendency in the immediate post-war period for nature to be idealised in the work of some of the poets returning from exile.<sup>8</sup>

Kirsch's title *Landaufenthalt*, of course, also immediately evokes the temporary residencies in the countryside required of the East German cultural elite at the time, and which, in Kirsch's case, were a prerequisite for securing a place at the Johannes R. Becher Literature Institute in Leipzig, which she attended from 1963 to 1965. As Hans Wagener outlines in his introduction to a monograph on the poet, greater attempts were being made in the sixties to integrate writing with the world of work, as encapsulated in the term

‘Bitterfelder Weg’ of 1959, and Kirsch herself toiled in a large-scale factory as well as on an LPG (Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft, i.e. a large, collectivised farm) ahead of declaring herself a free-lance writer.<sup>9</sup> A close reading of *Landaufenthalt*, however, reveals much more than this biographical detail regarding the poet’s programmatic contact with the countryside. Beyond this, as Bunzel mentions only in passing in his introduction, the title, combined with the use of the first-person singular rather than the then customary first-person plural pronoun throughout, signals a *personal* turning towards nature by the poet,<sup>10</sup> who, as Bushell notes, seems to speak to the reader in an ‘unmediated voice’ through a series of personae who appear to be synonymous with her.<sup>11</sup> Hans Wagener, moreover, postulates that the collection, whose title he believes refers to a holiday rather than a prescribed stay, contains what was to become one of Kirsch’s main themes: ‘eine genaue Betrachtung von Natur und Landschaft im Wechsel der Jahreszeiten’.<sup>12</sup>

*Landaufenthalt* features both kinds of stay in fact. In the opening section of the collection, however, Kirsch’s main concern, and her frequently stated preference, is a politicised urban landscape in which natural phenomena serve mostly as exemplars of, or points of contrast to, the political situation of post-war Germany in poetic recordings of real or imagined journeys through the nascent state. Indeed, as Bunzel points out, *Landaufenthalt* opens with two poems featuring travel.<sup>13</sup> The first, ‘Der Wels ist ein Fisch der am Grund lebt’ (SG, 9), describes the view from a fantastical ‘cat fish aeroplane’, while ‘Fahrt II’ (SG, 10), the poem that follows, recounts a train journey within the confines of the GDR. But although, as Bunzel and Kane both argue, merely featuring the theme of travel seems to imply criticism of the travel restrictions imposed on East German citizens at that time, Kirsch’s treatment of nature in these two poems, together with her views on city life and the fortified border, suggest that travel is not yet synonymous with ‘den Wunsch nach der Unabhängigkeit von der staatlichen Bevormundung’, which Bunzel identifies in reference to the poem ‘Schöner

See Wasseraug' (SG, 38).<sup>14</sup> The latter, in fact, appears after the title poem, when, as I will outline, the poet's attitude towards natural phenomena as opposed to travel begins to assume an unorthodox function, and signals her questioning of one of the main tenets of socialist realism, from which she departs decisively in the final poem, namely that the depiction of nature should have a social dimension. In other words, the placement of the poems in the collection is significant, a fact which has been neglected in previous criticism, and which reflects Kirsch's gradual, non-linear, but in the end also conclusive journey away from socialist realist orthodoxy.

The placement of poems in the collection is an issue I will address in more detail later in this essay. Here, however, it is worth highlighting that, in stark contrast to the final poem, the opening one, 'Der Wels ist ein Fisch der am Grund lebt', displays a fairly orthodox attitude towards nature, reflecting as it does Bobrowski's notion of the lost innocence of the land. Bobrowski had a strong influence on the generation of poets who came of age in East Germany, i.e. who began to publish after 1962, including Sarah Kirsch. Born between 1935 and 1940, these poets initially believed that nature, as an aspect of 'Heimat', had been tarnished by fascist ideology,<sup>15</sup> and many of them, in line with Soviet cultural policy, consequently went on to engage in what Emmerich has termed a 'Technikkult'.<sup>16</sup> Kirsch's opening poem, however, signals instead the biologist-poet's keen interest in the details of natural phenomena. The poem starts out with a factual description of the blunt-headed, arch-backed catfish of its title, whose flat belly conforms to the shape of the sand, which is shaped, in turn, by the waves. Then, from the vantage point of a catfish-shaped aeroplane, which the poet conjures up and then takes off in on an imaginary journey, woods and trees are noted dispassionately: '... Wälder, Nadel- und Laubgehölz/ Leicht unterscheidbar von hier/ Der Herbst ist sichtbar dumpfes Braun bei den/ Buchen Eichen und Lärchen, die Winterbäume/ Haben ihr Grünes zu zeigen...'. Kirsch, moreover, does not dwell on the natural landscape.

Her attention soon shifts from the trees to towns, the rivers reflecting them, and their streets, where she sees people demonstrating with white banners (evoking a blank canvas, a new start) against butchery, inequality, and stupidity. This urban landscape, she then states explicitly, has greater appeal for her than the countryside, which, like the shadow cast by her aeroplane, is no longer as innocent as it once was.

Reflecting Bobrowski's notion that recent history was inscribed in the rural landscape, and at the same time in line with East German cultural policy's predilection for the city, Kirsch is here prioritising urban centres as the sites of socio-political change and progress, of civilisation even. But for Kirsch, urban landscapes also have tales to tell. In the poem 'Der Schnee liegt schwarz in meiner Stadt' (SG, 24), for instance, which is also in the opening section of the collection, the poet is led by dogs to the Jewish cemetery and finds that the snow there is white rather than black, i.e. unmarred by footprints as in the rest of the town, since there are presumably no Jewish survivors to visit it. As Kane has noted, Kirsch's account of the Holocaust in this poem differs from the orthodox GDR reading of the destruction of the European Jews, which ascribed the Holocaust to capitalism, implying that the Federal Republic rather than the GDR bore responsibility for it. German rather than specifically West German responsibility for the Holocaust was a matter of immense personal importance to Kirsch, as she indicated when she changed her name from Ingrid to Sarah in 1960 in protest against the persecution and mass destruction of Jews during the Third Reich as well as in reaction to her father's anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup> In this opening section of *Landaufenthalt*, indeed, Kirsch emphasises the relevance of the Holocaust to her East German readers by addressing it explicitly in the poem 'Legende über Lilja' (SG, 32-34), notably the longest poem in the collection, which uses a matter-of-fact tone and sharply observed specifics to evoke the horror of the death camps. As with Bobrowski, whose poetry also addressed the Holocaust, her intention was to combat silence and forgetfulness.<sup>18</sup>

In 'Legende über Lilja', the only reference to nature is to 'Eine seltsame Allee geplünderter Bäume' (SG, 33), a metaphor for the rows of male prisoners ordered to stand in line so that Lilja has the opportunity to save herself by betraying one of them on her way to the gas chamber, which she resolutely refuses to do: 'Nun brauch deine Augen Lilja befiel / Den Muskeln dem Blut Sorglosigkeit hier bist du oft gegangen / Kennst jeden Stein jeden / Stein'. In contrast, the trees in the opening verse of 'Fahrt II', the second poem in the volume, which features a train journey through the nascent East German state, are simply 'kahl' on account of the winter. An immediately striking feature of this poem is its title, since it implies the existence of a preceding companion piece entitled 'Fahrt I', which one would expect to precede it. Indeed, a poem titled 'Fahrt I' (SG, 26) is present in this first part of the collection, but it appears long after 'Fahrt II', and presumably for a reason which the poet wished to highlight, or she would otherwise have simply switched the number of the generic titles around. Once again, the issue of placement of poems in the collection appears to be important, and I speculate on possible reasons for the ordering later in the essay, but first let us consider these two poems in the order in which they appear.

In 'Fahrt II' the countryside is viewed through the window of a diesel locomotive, which is moving so slowly that plants, exceptionally, can be identified. Deposits from the lime works are even visible on some of the leaves of some of the trees. But the speed of travel picks up considerably, and the broader landscape grows in significance, in the fourth and final stanza, as the train hurtles towards the border, where the poet encounters '... dem Meer... den Bergen oder', and, rather surprisingly for the reader who has grown accustomed to the leisurely landscape description of the first three stanzas, 'Nur ritzendem Draht der durch den Wald zieht...'. Behind the barbed wire, that notorious topographical feature of the post-war German political landscape, Kirsch then comments that people speak her language, know the Gryphius laments (on war) as well as she does, and are confronted with the same

images on TV. But the words they hear and read, she states, will be 'den meinen entgegen', and consequently, she cannot see how her 'schnaufenden Zug' could travel through the barrier.

The use of 'or' rather than 'and' at the end of the list of items encountered at the border might be intended to signal to the reader that this journey is taking place in the writer's imagination rather than in reality. In real life, in any event, though, as the writer and her contemporary readership would both have known, the diesel engine at the head of the train could not pull it through the barbed wire, even if this were desired. Additionally, as the adjective 'ritzend' suggests, the wire, while implicitly required on account of irreconcilable ideological differences between the two German states, is nevertheless a frightening and thus presumably also an unwelcome sight. The poem therefore ends, as Kane says, 'as sombre comment on the irreconcilable differences between the two German states'.<sup>19</sup> But Kirsch also expresses a sense of belonging to the GDR. The repetition of 'der meinen' with regard to the TV images as well as the train, imply that she has no intention of leaving 'mein kleines wärmendes Land', as the GDR is referred to in the opening lines. Like the landscape description that follows, the first-person pronoun conveys unequivocally on which side of the wire the poet's allegiance lies.

In 'Fahrt I', in contrast, the difficulties encountered by 'Schwertlilien' (irises, but literally 'sword lilies') as they slash their way through the war-weary soil in a signalman's garden serve as an allegory for undefined hardship encountered in the immediate post-war period, as implied in the closing line: 'Die ersten haben es am schwersten'. As in the partner poem 'Fahrt II', however, the militaristic vocabulary of 'Fahrt I' also suggests acceptance of the need for strong measures to ensure survival, which might include the erection of a barbed-wire barrier. However, since the difficulties referred to in the final line of 'Fahrt I' are not spelled out, the reference might well have been interpreted as criticism of the imposition of

the barbed wire, or any other restrictive measures, if 'Fahrt II' had not appeared earlier in the collection. In short, this nature poem, which has an implicit rather than an overt social dimension, requires its more overt companion piece to precede it in order for it to be received by GDR censors in an unambiguously positive light. But while this might explain the irregular positioning of the two poems, it does not explain why Kirsch retained the original titles, whose numbering suggests a different chronology in terms of their conception and/or an originally intended ordering within the collection.

Four explanations, which are partly connected, might account for this. First, the poet wished to underscore in her debut collection that she supported the drastic measure she believed the socialist state had been forced to undertake in order to ensure its survival, so she placed the poem condoning the presence of the barbed-wire barrier early in the collection. The reversed titles thus might be indicative of a personal journey of accepting state-imposed hardships, bringing a retrospective conversion narrative to the collection. Second, and at the same time, though, Kirsch possibly wished to retain and emphasise the importance of her artistic integrity, so kept the original titles and with them a record of the actual order in which the poems were composed. The unnatural ordering, thirdly, might also signal Kirsch's opposition to the requirement of socialist realism that a poem's message be openly stated rather than open to interpretation, as implied towards the end of the collection in the poem 'Bäume Lesen' (SG, 70-71). Finally, and as the previous point implies, Kirsch perhaps wished to underscore the need for the collection to be considered as a whole, since the poems speak to and amplify one another, as I will highlight in the second part of the discussion in relation to 'Bäume Lesen' and other poems about trees and lakes.

In the first section of *Landaufenthalt*, then, the image that emerges from poems describing realistic or highly imaginary journeys by poetic personae difficult to distinguish from the poet herself is that of an artist who enjoys and is also poetically stimulated by travel

and would presumably therefore be opposed to state-imposed restrictions on it, as others have surmised. But as the poet travels through the GDR, she is also demonstrably supportive of the socialist state, of the drastic measures that are apparently required to ensure its continued existence, and of the notion that the socio-political development occurring in cities is more important subject matter for poetry than the countryside. What is more, when Kirsch does turn her attention to the natural world in these poems, her treatment of it complies with cultural policy, i.e. it has a socio-political dimension. At the same time, however, as the open-ended nature of 'Fahrt I' and the unorthodox placement of 'Fahrt II' before it in the collection underscore, there is a sense that the poet, while compliant, does not fully accept restrictions being placed on her artistic license by the narrow dictates of socialist realism. Kane also senses a restlessness and lack of acceptance of cultural policy in the image of the poet as tiger, 'a bundle of anarchic energy rampaging through East Berlin finally to implode on its own sense of isolation and frustration', in the poem 'Trauriger Tag' (SG, 15),<sup>20</sup> which also features in the first part of the collection. Regarding the poet's engagement with nature and natural phenomena, furthermore, there are two other poems in this opening section in which the poet appears to deviate from the prevailing cultural dictate that the depiction of nature should have a social dimension. A willow becomes the conversational partner of a woman waiting in vain for a lover in 'Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen' (SG, 16), while snow is summoned to punish a cold lover in the rhyme-less sonnet 'Der Himmel schuppt sich' (SG, 18). Arguably, though, rather than simply express the frustration of an abandoned female, both of these wry poems thematise the issue of inequality of the sexes in the socialist state, as others have claimed. At the same time, however, when viewed retrospectively within the context of the poet's questioning of socialist realism, which occurs in the second part of the collection, they almost surely also presage the poet's deviation from socialist realism in terms of the deployment of natural imagery in the final poem in the collection.

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The title poem ‘Landaufenthalt’ (SG, 35), which appears about a third of the way into the collection, opens what I consider to be a separate section of the volume on account of the poetic shift in the treatment of nature that occurs in it. The subject of this poem is a dilapidated orchard, which is described in a matter-of-fact manner in the final lines of the opening stanza: ‘Hier wachsen Birnbäume in rostigen Öfen, Pfirsichbäume / Fallen ins Kraut, die Zäune haben sich lange ergeben, Eisen und Holz / Alles verfault und der Wald umarmt den Garten in einer Fliederhecke’. As the poem advances, however, the poet moves beyond objective description as she reacts to nature in a personal way. In the second stanza, standing barefoot among rain-drenched bushes, she claims that the colours and fragrances are making her dizzy: ‘Mich schwindelt vor Farbe und Duft’. Nature here is clearly impacting strongly on Kirsch, whose childhood interest in nature, which was nurtured by walks in the woods with her mother, led her to study forestry and biology and to work for one year as a biologist, before she turned to writing in her late-twenties.<sup>21</sup> In the next stanza, though, her attitude towards the natural environment is decidedly more negative. Here she states that she would like to relieve the apple trees of their burdens, but that the crowns are too high and sticky weed is grasping at her. Nature, it seems, is menacing in many ways, and there is a lot of it (‘so viel Natur’). Consequently, in the fourth and final stanza, with her bare feet turning green from the abundance of grass, conveyed through repetition (‘Gras Gras’), and threatened also by glass protruding from an old mattress that has been dumped on a garbage heap, she seeks refuge on an artificial cinder path, and is clearly glad that she will shortly be returning to her ‘Betonstadt’, and, implicitly, civilisation: ‘[...] ich rette mich / Auf den künstlichen Schlackeweg und werde wohl bald / In meine Betonstadt zurückgehen hier ist man nicht auf der Welt / Der Frühling in seiner maßlosen Gier macht nicht halt, verstopft / Augen und

Ohren mit Gras die Zeitungen sind leer / Eh sie hier ankommen der Wald hat all seine Blätter  
und weiß / Nichts vom Feuer?.

At the end of the poem, nature is thus dispatched. Kirsch, having been charmed and on the brink of being seduced by it, frees herself from its sticky grip by reminding herself of the significance of the city and the exciting and productive events occurring there, as reported in the Party's newspapers. Significantly, though, nature has had a strong and unsettling effect, which she had to struggle hard to resist.

A similar progression takes place in 'Im Baum' (SG, 36), which immediately follows. In the opening lines of this poem, Kirsch says she is swinging precariously in a tree, since the swing she is on can hold her weight but will not permit her to rise very high. As she hangs there maintaining her balance, though, a wave crashes on the shore and she imagines the lake to be an age-old animal that informs her that it sinks boats and is a playground for algae and fish. After the wave subsides, however, Kirsch states emphatically '[...] sein Tier / Hats nie gegeben,[...]', as she propels herself up into the leaves and then back down towards the ground. Imagination gives way to reality. Suspended in the tree, which is now specified as a lime, a tree closely associated with Germany, of course, she states that she is not merely hanging between two ropes but is seated on a firm plank of wood. From this vantage point, furthermore, she can discern two shores, '[...] meins und das andere', and, secure in the knowledge that there are houses at her back, she claims that she can leave both the tree and the rope behind.

In this poem a sense of belonging to a productive collective (the agricultural workers and fellow East Germans presumably living in the houses behind her) appears to provide a source of strength and orientation during a moment of insecurity and disorientation, which, although not explicitly stated, seems to relate to the harsh reality of Germany's political

division, as suggested in the reference to the two distinct sides of the lake. Here the lake in question is not named, but in 'Angeln' (SG, 44), the poem that immediately follows, Kirsch states that she is writing yet again about a lake she has written about a lot that year, and locates it in Brandenburg. If her country excursions were to Brandenburg, the lake she is swinging next to in 'Im Baum' is most likely the Glienicker See at Potsdam, which had the border between East Germany and West Berlin running through its centre, demarcated by buoys, and the Wall's fortifications on its western and southern shores, depriving East Germans of access to, or even sight of, the shore, unless perhaps they were elevated as on a swing. In 'Angeln', however, the poet has access to the lake in question, so it is clearly not the Glienicker See. In this poem, moreover, the sense of belonging to a productive collective, and the security derived from this, is also more explicit than in 'Im Baum'. Here Kirsch confesses that she has written about the physical attributes of the Brandenburg lake in question so often that she was thinking she ought to move on to another one. Joining fishermen at the edge of the lake, however, has given her a fresh, and at the same time, familiar perspective ( [...] da / Beginn ich eines Tages das Angeln und alles war neu // Und vertrauter [...]) and has rendered her 'Teil dieses Lands nicht nur / Gast, alles / Nützlich vom Augenblick als ich / Tätig war[...] / [...] der See / Wurde zur Produktion der Kahn Gebrauchsgegenstand, [...]'. Notably, Kirsch, as a writer in residence in the countryside, and as someone who has clearly fished sometime in the past, expresses a sense of being a productive member of socialist society not by writing about the fishermen's labour but by joining them in their work. In other words, Kirsch's fresh perspective, it seems, is not in relation to the lake per se, nor regarding the fishermen's instrumentalisation of it, but rather on the writers' role as worker-writer and educator-moralist in the countryside. She apparently feels much more useful fishing than writing at the lakeside because, while fishing itself is a useful activity, ruminating on it in poetry implicitly is not.

This point is made explicitly, in fact, in a subsequent poem, 'Zwischenlandung' (SG, 66), in which male poets returning home from trips to factories and farms are objects of derision. This satirical poem, like the wry male-female relationship poems mentioned earlier, is implicitly critical of the perpetuation of distinctive male and female roles under real existing socialism, a theme which would feature more prominently in Kirsch's second collection of poems, *Zaubersprüche* of 1973,<sup>22</sup> whose incantations are directed against inconsiderate males, and, even more overtly, in a collection of interviews that Kirsch conducted and recorded with five GDR women entitled *Pantherfrau*,<sup>23</sup> which appeared in the same year. Driven home by the cold, the male writers spend Christmas with their 'tüchtigen' wives and their offspring. Their 'Zwischenlandung', however, is short-lived. They soon tire of domestic bliss, pick a quarrel shortly after the New Year, and head out again in the gloves they found under the Christmas tree. But beyond this social critique, the poem also suggests that some of the fruits of prevailing cultural policy have been rather dubious. In the countryside, it is alleged, these writers, moral educators and authoritative interpreters of socialist reality, have been teaching potatoes how to behave like people and, in stark contrast to the poet's own hands-on experience of fishing depicted in 'Angeln', they have been meditating about abstract features of the practical activity, thus exacerbating the class struggle, i.e. the gap between culturally creative and manual work that the 'Bitterfelder Weg' was supposed to close: '[...] sie verschärften / den Klassenkampf meditierten / Über das Abstrakte beim Fischen [...]']'.

Thematic and formal constraints of socialist realism are then also implicitly criticised towards the end of the collection in a number of poems featuring trees. The doctrine's historical origins are uncovered in the poem 'Bilder' (SG, 69), which, on the face of it, recounts a childhood memory of Kirsch being driven out of the 'vollen Bäumen' by her maternal grandfather. The phrase 'Ach der Vater meiner Mutter' conveys a mixture of anger

and regret at the individual who allegedly altered the poet's relationship to trees. In the final lines of the poem, however, it becomes clear that these feelings are generational rather than personal. After being driven from the trees, Kirsch states that she stands before the flower beds and tramples beneath her 'Nachkriegsschuhe' the 'späten Köpfe' of the 'kalten Asten', flowers associated in German folklore with hopes and wishes, but also, since they bloom in autumn, with respect for old age.<sup>24</sup>

The cultural reference inherent in the action of being driven out of the trees – and, by extension, nature – is most likely Brecht's famous exile poem 'An die Nachgeborenen', from which I quoted earlier. The trampling of the dying flower heads in the closing lines of 'Bilder' would thus appear to reflect the fact that the 'Nachgeborenen' writing in the GDR in the late-sixties, long after the war was over, were still required to stamp out nature, and by extension natural imagery, on account of the stipulation of socialist realism that the depiction of nature should have a social dimension, as exemplified in Brecht's Bukower Elegien of 1953, which also originated in the Brandenburg countryside.

Kirsch's difficulty with this as well as other thematic and concomitant formal constraints of socialist realism, furthermore, is even more overt in the poem 'Bäume lesen' (SG, 70 – 71), which immediately follows. While expressing support for communist ideology and evoking the banners featured in the opening poem ('[...]jetzt geht es vorwärts / Kampfansage nach oben, nieder / Mit Dummheit Ausbeutung Hunger,[...]'), this poem culminates in a declaration of cultural affinity with Mayakowski, the Russian Futurist poet and Leninist who was notoriously critical of state censorship and the doctrine of socialist realism: '[...] rot / Leuchtet mein Wort / Mit mir ein Wald! Majakowki / Bläst seiner Wirbelsäule die Flöte/ Ich lese: AURORA'. Kirsch is referring here to Mayakowski's 'Backbone Flute', a passionate love poem that was heavily censored in 1915, and to the battleship 'Aurora', whose crew famously revolted against the Russian Republic and joined

the Bolsheviks in 1917. ‘Aurora’, though, also means ‘dawn’, of course, and the word’s orthographic representation in capital letters at the end of the poem links it to the trees of the title, which, since they are being read, not only represent nature but, as the following statement makes clear, also the unambiguous writing style advocated by East German cultural policy, which Kirsch, like Mayakovski in the 1920s, appears to find restrictive and superficial: ‘[...] die Bäume sind Lettern, ich / Beweg mich wie auf Papier, überspringe / Mühsam den Zwischenraum, stolpre ein Zeichen nieder / Das hier ist Nadelwald/ Kein Unterholz alles durchschaubar / Von Zeile zu Zeile [...]’.

The penultimate poem ‘Winter’ (SG, 71-2) which immediately follows, and opens with the pronouncement ‘Ich lerne mich kennen, [...]’, then leaves no room for doubt that Kirsch is no longer in tune with the unquestioningly optimistic outlook required in socialist realist writing. On reading the newsprint from the Nazi era she uncovers beneath her wallpaper, she says that her heart stirs when she hears of ‘mutigen Leuten’, or if ‘einer was fragt’. In the final line, moreover, contrary to the upbeat, positive images of socialism advocated by cultural policy and reflected in the opening poems of the collection, she professes to love her ‘trauriges Gesicht’, a phrase which evokes the image of the frustrated and unhappy tiger of the poem ‘Trauriger Tag’.

Finally, and unsurprisingly it seems, in light of the emergent critique of prevailing cultural policy in the poems of the second part of the collection, Kirsch breaks radically and demonstrably with socialist realism in the final poem, a love poem which draws on natural tropes throughout. In ‘Ich bin sehr sanft’ (SG, 73), chamomile serves as a metaphor for Kirsch as a gentle lover, who describes herself as ‘Der Sommer der Herbst selbst der Winter [...]’, while pairs of fish and birds serve as analogies for her relationship with her lover, fellow poet and husband Rainer Kirsch perhaps, whom she invites to show her the countryside in springtime, moving from lake to lake, as she herself has just done in the

second half of the collection.<sup>25</sup> Natural imagery in this closing poem has an exclusively private as opposed to a social dimension. But within the politically charged confines of the GDR, and the context of the lyric poetry debate of the late-sixties, the private naturally had a political dimension.

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The lyric poetry debate that began in *Forum* in the summer of 1966 was initiated by perceived excessive individualism and subjectivity of previously unpublished poems by young writers that featured in the anthology *In diesem besseren Land* (1966). *Saison für Lyrik*, an anthology published in the following year, also met with disapproval.<sup>26</sup> Sarah Kirsch was one of the writers singled out for criticism, and, on close analysis, it seems that many of the poems collected in *Landaufenthalt* reflect her view and that of other poets of her generation that, with the establishment of real existing socialism in the wake of the building of the Wall, it was time for poetry to abandon objective representations of socialist reality and didacticism in favour of authentic self-expression, so that problems and inconsistencies encountered by individuals in the nascent state could be highlighted and addressed.<sup>27</sup> Lyric poetry was, of course, the most obvious vehicle for the expression of the individual's relationship to the state and its dictates, but the experiences of individuals in socialist society was also a major theme in novels of the late-sixties, most notably evinced in the 'subjective authenticity' of Christa Wolf's writing from 1967 and the modern narrative techniques required to explore it.<sup>28</sup>

A close reading of *Landaufenthalt*, in sum, points to an emerging poet who, in the first part of the collection, expresses a strong sense of self and self-confidence, as well as some frustration at restrictions that have been placed on her poetic license. But she is clearly also committed to the socialist cause, and her allegiance, in fact, is particularly apparent in

poems involving travel, a theme which critics have regarded as one of the most implicitly political and critical of the collection. A preference for the city over the countryside, as the locus of socio-political development, is also expressed in the opening section. Beginning with the title poem, however, which is positioned about a third of the way through, Kirsch begins to show increased attention and intensified personal reactions to nature during a series of outings to the lakes of Brandenburg, although the lure of the natural world is strongly resisted in favour of the city as the locus of socio-political development. But following a couple of poems concerned with the roots as well as the dubious fruits of the 'Bitterfelder Weg' and a series of poems featuring trees, which suggest that the poet is no longer in tune with prevailing cultural policy, Kirsch breaks decisively with the dictates of socialist realism at the end of the collection by deploying natural imagery in a love poem. Thus, while Martin Kane's verdict that in *Landaufenthalt*, 'Kirsch manages to hold the balance between celebration of the natural world, exploration of feelings and emotions, and the call of history' is largely true, his claim that the love and nature poems contained within it 'are always made to yield social and historical perspectives' is not.<sup>29</sup>

The evolving function of natural imagery in *Landaufenthalt* consequently not only reveals a tension between collective and subjective concerns in Kirsch's poetry at this time, and thus the poet's complex relationship with the East German state; *Landaufenthalt* heralds the beginning of an emphasis on Kirsch's own subjectivity, which focused above all on themes of love and the natural world. These two interests, together with a desire for travel, were in fact already present in *Gespräch mit dem Saurier*, the volume Kirsch published jointly in 1965 with her then husband Rainer Kirsch, as Wagener points out.<sup>30</sup> After *Landaufenthalt*, though, these themes were often intertwined in Kirsch's poetry, not least in the incantations referred to in *Zaubersprüche*, which was published in 1973 in the wake of

Honecker's 'no taboos' policy of 1972 and contained the previously denounced poem 'Black Beans'.

Kirsch's handling of nature in this debut solo collection also points forward to other aspects of her subsequent work. The flying catfish of the opening poem, the talking willow in 'Bei den weißen Stiefmütterchen', Kirsch's soliciting of snow in 'Der Himmel schuppt sich', and the speaking lake in the poem 'Im Baum' presage the magical and fairytale elements that were to become more pronounced features not only of *Zaubersprüche* but most of her later collections. What is more, the coupling of some of these phenomena, first the willow, then snow, with the theme of love, and the fact that natural phenomena serve as objective correlatives for a pair of lovers in the final poem, presage an important aspect of the poet's use of natural imagery in future collections.<sup>31</sup>

More generally, commencing with *Landaufenthalt*, the persistent and central presence of the natural world in Kirsch's work (prose as well as poetry) underscores its physical and emotional importance to her as well as the appeal of nature and landscape to her poetic sensibility. Finding in the natural world analogies for her thoughts and emotions, which she expressed formally, and appropriately, in free verse, Kirsch eventually distanced herself from dictates of all sorts and went on to forge her own rich and authentic poetic and personal identity. Her life and work thus merit closer examination in the post-Cold War era, not least since, beginning with the programmatically titled collection *Erdreich*,<sup>32</sup> she concerned herself with threats to the natural environment.<sup>33</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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1. Wolfgang Bunzel, ‘... dankbar daß ich entkam’: Sarah Kirschs Autorenexistenz im Spannungsfeld von DDR-Bezug und ‘Exil’-Erfahrung’, *Germanistische Mitteilungen*, 57 (2003), 7-27 (7). Bunzel credits Barbara Mabee with highlighting this aspect of Kirsch’s work in 1989, albeit only in relation to the themes of Jewish persecution under National Socialism and the Holocaust, but he might have added that Anthony Bushell made the same point in 1997 with regard to Kirsch’s first three collections, which were published in both German states while the poet was in her thirties and still resident in the GDR: *Landaufenthalt*, East Berlin and Weimar 1967, Ebenhausen bei München 1969; *Zaubersprüche*, East Berlin and Weimar 1973, Ebenhausen bei München 1974; and *Rückenwind*, East Berlin and Weimar 1976, Ebenhausen bei München 1977. See Barbara Mabee, *Die Poetik von Sarah Kirsch. Erinnerungsarbeit und Geschichtsbewußtsein*, Amsterdam 1989, and Anthony Bushell, ‘The Problem of Structure and Themes in Sarah Kirsch’s Early Poetry: *Landaufenthalt*, *Zaubersprüche*, and *Rückenwind*’ in *Sarah Kirsch*, eds. Mererid Hopwood and David Basker, Cardiff 1997, pp. 34-45 (p.44).
2. See Bunzel, p.7. Many of these poets studied at or near the Johannes R. Becher Literature Institute in Leipzig. See Martin Kane, ‘“Aus der ersten Hälfte meines Lebens”: Sarah Kirsch in the GDR’, in *Sarah Kirsch*, pp. 13-33 (pp. 20-21), Gerrit-Jan Berendse, *Die ‘Sächsische Dichterschule’: Lyrik in der DDR in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, and Gerrit-Jan Berendse, ‘Die Überlebensfigur Sächsische Dichterschule’, *GLL*, 63/3 (2010), 280-94.
3. Sarah Kirsch, *Landaufenthalt* (note 1).
4. See Bunzel, pp. 8-12 and Kane, p. 16 and p. 22. ‘Schwarze Bohnen’, which first appeared in the anthology *Saison für Lyrik. Neue Gedichte von siebzehn Autoren*, East Berlin 1968, was singled out at the Sixth Writers’ Congress of 1969 as exemplary of writing that was overly individualistic and pessimistic. At the Seventh Writers’ Congress held four years later in the wake of Honecker’s ‘no taboos’ speech of 1972, however, the same poem was rolled out as an example of writing that addressed the complexities of socialist reality. It was thus included in Kirsch’s 1973 volume *Zaubersprüche*. Hans Wagener also addresses discusses the official critique of ‘Schwarze Bohnen’ in *Sarah Kirsch*, Berlin 1989, p.7.
5. *Landaufenthalt* was considered in East and West Germany alike to be Kirsch’s first work of distinction. See Kane, p.14. Kirsch’s first publication, however, was the poetry volume *Gespräch mit dem Saurier*, East Berlin 1965, which she co-authored with her then husband, the poet Rainer Kirsch. Kirsch, though, later distanced herself from this work and it was consequently not included in the *Sämtliche Gedichte*, Frankfurt 2005, which

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she considered her legacy. In this essay I will be referring to the *Sämtliche Gedichte*, which I have abbreviated to SG in the in-text references.

6. In *Sämtliche Gedichte*, 'Landaufenthalt' starts on p. 9 and ends on p.73. The title poem appears on p. 35.

7. See Ursula Heukenkamp, 'Der Abschied von der schönen Natur. Natur in der DDR-Lyrik und ihre Veränderung', in *Tendenzen und Beispiele. Zur DDR-Literatur in den siebziger Jahren*, ed. Hans Kaufmann, Leipzig 1981, pp.221 - 260 (p.244). For an account of the focus on industry and technology in the early years of the GDR, see also Wolfgang Emmerich, 'Von der "durchgearbeiteten Landschaft" zur nature morte. Alte und neue Landschaftslyrik von Volker Braun, Wulf Kirsten und anderen', *Literatur für Leser 2* (1990), 69-74.

8. See Emmerich, p. 69. And for a fuller account of the development of nature poetry in East Germany in the immediate post-war period, see Heukenkamp, pp. 221 – 243.

9. Wagener, p. 9.

10. Bunzel states that the title is in this respect 'durchaus programmatisch zu verstehen', p.7.

11. Bushell, p.36, states that '... the heavy use of the first person forms... saturates much of the poetry of these early volumes. The poetic personality has no sense of false modesty and there are very few devices inserted into the texts of the poetry to discourage the naïve belief on the part of the reader, a belief that would be misplaced in the context of many other modern poets, that the Ich [sic] of the poem is the unmediated voice of the herself.' I consequently refer to the 'ich' of the poems as the poet throughout.

12. Wagener, p. 20.

13. Bunzel, p.7.

14. Bunzel, p. 9.

15. See Heukenkamp, p. 242.

16. Emmerich, p. 71.

17. See Wagener, p. 6.

18. See Wolfgang Beutin et al., *A History of German Literature: From the Beginnings to the Present Day*, transl. by Clare Krojzl, London and New York 1993, p. 511.

19. Kane, p. 17.

20. Kane, p. 17.

21. See Wagener, p. 6.

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22. Sarah Kirsch, *Zaubersprüche*, East Berlin and Weimar 1973; Ebenhausen bei München 1974.
23. Sarah Kirsch, *Die Pantherfrau*, Weimar 1973. In the same year, Kirsch also published the prose volume *Die ungeheuren bergehohen Wellen auf See*, Weimar 1973.
24. This interpretation of meaning of the aster in German folklore was based on this source:  
<http://www.waldfee.net/lexikon-magische-pflanzen/items/aster.html> (accessed 17 August 2016)
25. Rainer Kunze's work was also criticised in the lyric debate, and his collection *Sensible Wege* of 1969 could only be published in West Germany. See Beutin et al., pp. 527-9.
26. Beutin et al., p. 527.
27. Beutin et al., p. 528.
28. Beutin et al., p. 520-22.
29. Kane, p. 17.
30. Wagener, p. 19.
31. Kane, p. 27, wonders if Kirsch learned of the use of objective correlatives for the portrayal of emotional states from Brecht. Kirsch, however, might equally well have learned this from Rafael Alberti, whose poetry she studied at the Literaturinstitut in Leipzig. Kirsch speaks of literary influences at the institute in 'Ein Gespräch mit Sarah Kirsch', interview conducted by Hans Ester and Dick van Stekelenburg on 3 May 1979, first published in the yearbook *Deutsche Bücher*, vol. IX (1979), pp. 102–13, and reprinted in Sarah Kirsch, *Hundert Gedichte*, (Ebenhausen bei München: Langewiesche-Brandt, 1985), pp. 123–34. For a discussion of the role of objective correlatives in Alberti's work, see Andrew A. Anderson, *Paysage d'âme* and Objective Correlative: Tradition and Innovation in Cernuda, Alberti, and García Lorca, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (January 2015), pp. 166-183.
32. München, 1982.
33. See Wagener, p. 26.