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## “Ewig ‘schön’”: Politics and Poetics in the Work and Correspondence of Sarah Kirsch and Helga Novak

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“Ewig ‘schön’”:

Politics and Poetics in the work and correspondence of Sarah Kirsch and Helga Novak

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## Introduction

This senior project traces the work and correspondence of two East German female poets, Sarah Kirsch and Helga Novak. They both lived from 1935 until 2013. Sarah Kirsch lived in East Germany for most of her life, whereas Novak's East German citizenship was revoked and she was forced to move to Iceland. The project analyzes a broad selection of their poetic works, focusing primarily on their writing in the 1970s and 1980s. They each wrote in various styles – from ballad to prose – and addressed a wide range of themes such as nature, industrialization, warfare, and everyday life.

Ultimately, their thinking centered around the same issues, though regarded them from different vantage points. They were concerned with the effects of politics on individual's lives, mechanisms of violence, the role of dissent, and how contemporary politics are influenced by history. They live through events that would become history, and were sensitive to the persistence of history in contemporary political debates. They lived through World War II, the Cold War, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

They take different approaches to representing politics in poetry. The tone of Novak's work on politics is far more direct and outraged than Kirsch's. Novak's work continually draws attention to the horizon of the persistence of history in politics by giving the stories of individuals backdrops of war, violence, or contemporary political debates. Her work is less abstract and metaphorical than Kirsch's work; it is narrative

and dialogical, whereas Kirsch's work draws attention to its figurative and symbolic mode of making meaning. The stories that Novak creates are almost theatrical, pulling the reader into a world of war, family, loneliness, violence, historical figures, and childhood innocence. Her words have an immediate impact, showing a strong allegiance to the under-privileged and a disgust at political wrongdoings. Novak's outrage at historical and political violence subtends her work, yet her real genius stems her subtlety as a poet. Her poems do not merely argue their point, but use figurative language to *show* what is unacceptable. For example, it is clear that she is angry about state violence enacted upon individuals, but the brilliance of, for example, her "Ballade vom Legionär," inheres in the way the poem separates the violence from the source, mirroring the pernicious way it is disseminated but cannot be traced in the actual political world. Novak, elsewhere, troubles easy distinctions between guilt and innocence, by juxtaposing scenes of violence with images of childhood purity.

The tone of Novak's voice is consistent throughout her years-long correspondence with Kirsch. Not only does she continue to be appalled and outraged at current political events, but she also deploys narrative and the perspective of the individual in the same ways that she uses them in her poetry, for example while recounting her Spanish colleague's experience as a political prisoner. The consistency of her voice throughout her published and personal writing confirms the unvarnished outrage her poems suggest. She writes about the things most important to her, the things she is passionate enough about to write in letters to her dear friend. The



correspondence gives readers a rare window into new forms and contexts of Novak and Kirsch's writing. The consistency of Novak's writing across both poetry and letter-writing suggests that a critical examination of both the afterlife of historical violence in politics and the politics of historical narratives were urgent concerns for the poet.

Kirsch's poetic project centers on politics and history with the same gravity as Novak's, yet takes a more indirect aesthetic path. In contrast to Novak's work, Kirsch's concentration on natural imagery evokes serenity and beauty. Novak's brilliance emerges with the subtleties embedded in her brash descriptions. The most salient moments in Kirsch's work, meanwhile, are the layers within her metaphors of natural phenomena. There are two aspects of nature that make it an important vehicle for Kirsch's investigation of politics and history. Firstly, nature is relatable. Not everyone understands the context of all the political-historical events that Novak references in her writing - Frederick the Great, the First World War, the East German Stasi - to name a few in the poetry discussed in this senior project. Novak's work assumes a level of understanding related to the German/Prussian territory, the culture, or the heritage of history that Germans grow up with. On the other hand, everyone - even non-German readers - can read in their own ways - characteristics and tropes in nature. Nature's relatability allows Kirsch's work to reach a wider audience than the hyper-politicized work of Novak. Kirsch's poetry is like a painting. One is stimulated aesthetically and also to think by the poetic image. Novak's work is theatrical: it requires a backdrop and stage for someone to understand it. Kirsch's poems turn to

the natural world as a kind of projection screen of the political world. In Kirsch, political phenomena often appear in the metaphorical guise of nature. Kirsch's poems see the political world reflected in nature. To the extent that images of the natural world are legible in a non-conceptual and intuitive way, political questions are recast as capable of being understood beyond history and argument, as it were. The poems' poetics of evidence draws on the image of nature to present their readings of politics and history. Although nature appears to be an obscure way to represent politics and history, the attributes of relatability and legitimization work to present, like Novak's work, the ways the weight of history is felt in contemporary politics and the ways that thinking about history involves implicit and explicit readings of history.

Along with their interest in politics and history, Kirsch and Novak explore how to incorporate the perspectives and opinions of others into their own thinking. They are interested in how, rather than varying viewpoints diluting their arguments, differing perspectives help to fully investigate the issues they care about to find the most nuanced way of understanding it. Their modes of thinking are pluralistic and their correspondence presents the search for this plurality. Themes of plurality run throughout all of their poems. Kirsch shows dualities and new ways of seeing natural landscapes in "Kunstwelt". Novak establishes a dialogue between violence and place in "Ballade vom Legionär." The *way* in which politics and history are reconsidered and evaluated is also a central question in Novak and Kirsch's work.

Also related to language and thinking, characters are established in their work to discuss the role of the poet. Related to their inquiries about thinking pluralistically, they are concerned with how the poet represents what they find to be the most urgent. Kirsch presents the poet as a bird who creates space for hope within its poem. Like the bird who can fly away from a certain spot on the ground, the poet creates the space for the reader's thoughts to ascend from. Novak inquires about the role of beauty in poetry, especially when poetry is concerned with trying to present human suffering and violence in East Germany, and modes of the latter's continuity with the Third Reich. The possibilities of poetry (to create hope and plurality) concern Novak and Kirsch as much as the ethical responsibility (the implications of representing suffering beautifully) of the (German) poet. Politics and history are the central concern of Kirsch and Novak, but equally urgent is the question of how one can or should write in this context.

The project culminates in an examination of their correspondence spanning 50 years. Their letters offer precious insights into their personal and professional lives, their voices, styles, and ethics. This is the first academic work to consider Kirsch and Novak's correspondence. For my senior project, I travelled to Marbach, Germany to pursue in-depth research of their unpublished letters, manuscripts, and personal libraries. I spent three weeks at the Marbach Literaturarchiv working with archivist Ülrich von Bülow to see the full range of Kirsch and Novak's literary estate left to the archive. I also had the opportunity to interview Rita Jorek in her home; Jorek is a

literary critic who knew both Kirsch and Novak. She published Novak's collection entitled "*solange noch Liebesbriefe eintreten*" and even had Novak live with her for a short time. The experience made the poets' lives and work more tangible for me. I felt more connected to them as I held the same paper they had held to write their letters or talked to one of their friends and interlocutors. I had always felt connected to them because of their passion for thinking and writing about politics, but distant from them because of the vastly different worlds that we had been born into. Travelling to the archive made me feel like I was, at least in my own small way, a part of the larger German literary tradition, and that I had an opportunity to present their letters to the world for the first time.

This senior project examines three works by Sarah Kirsch, "Kunstwelt," from her collection *Katzenleben* (1984), "der Meropsvogel I," from *Rückenwind* (1977), and "Fahrt II" from *Landaufenthalt* (1969). The chapter begins by illuminating the ways that she was politically active, such as changing her name or signing a petition against a singer-songwriter expatriation. Both were in protest of political events. In interviews, she wrote about how all of her poetry was intended to be public and political. One of the tools she used most frequently for political metaphor were images of nature.

The first poem, "Meropsvogel I," describes a small bird jumping from stone to stone. There are several ways that the bird creates space within the poem, both from its hopping on the stones to its flight patterns at the end of the poem. The reader

wonders: what is being created in this space? The concept of time is also explored in the poem by highlighting the role of seasons, days, and nostalgia.

The second poem in this chapter, “Kunstwelt,” uses mirroring and doubling as a trope to explore re-imagination. Images are inverted as they are reflected. Kirsch creates compound words such as *Wolkenpetersdom* that also function to create new meaning from two disparate parts. The crows evoke the Dutch paintings and prompt the reader to see movement within the stillness of the artwork. Art is always a mirror, representing something in a new way. We are solicited to ask whether the poem’s title refers to a world in which everything is art. In contrast, the alternative meaning of *Kunst* in German would imply that the poem describes a world in which everything is artificial.

The fourth section of “Fahrt II” describes a person riding through the countryside in a train. It shows the border of the country, marked with just a wire. The poem establishes how there is no difference in language or culture on either side of the border; they are just regarded from different vantage points. The border is represented as the edge, which could be a metaphor for the edge of understanding. The boundaries are not there for separation, but rather for refraction and new understanding of the other side and other experience.

This senior project focuses on a one of Novak’s poetry collections, which uses the form of the ballad entitled *Ballade von kurzen Prozeß*, published in 1975. The chapter about this collection begins by tracing the history of ballads in Europe.

Novak's ballads have many traditional elements of a ballad, such as focus on economic hardships of individuals and the way in which they mimic a dialogue. The project analyzes three poems from this collection of ballads.

The first poem is "Vom Deutschen und der Polizei." The poem shows an old friendship that represents innocence and tenderness. The poem turns sinister and we are able to trace elements that foreshadow that turn. The use of various tenses, metaphors for sweetness being tarnished, and both verb choice and placement all allude to a sinister turn. Violent police enter the poem and their presence is accentuated by connections drawn to previously oppressive state actors. The repression of individuals and their dissent is discussed by the characters in the poem. Finally, poetry is defended as a way to protect both the innocent and their ability to dissent.

In the second poem, "Ballade von Heinrich," the representation of history and progress is the organizing principle. Just as Adorno and Horkheimer, in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, radically interrogated the concept of "enlightenment," arguing that the scientific mastery of nature reverts to the violent mastery of fellow human beings, thereby troubling assumptions about history's supposedly linear progress, Novak's poem investigates German history as a series of cycles and regressions. Progress, Novak argues, as Adorno and Horkheimer also suggested, is not linear, but is rather a series of regressions and cycles. The poem is about Heinrich, who cannot accomplish what his parents accomplished. He does not contribute to the progress of his family

legacy. Images from Heinrich's life serve as metaphors for his inability to make progress, circling back to exactly where he started. He works at a circus, an emblem of the absurd and non-linear, even taking place within a circular venue. When he finally becomes a soldier, he fights a war right next to a place of healing. The progress of war and defeat of the enemy is confronted with the bitter irony of the juxtaposition of places of healing and with violent death in war. The poem has a pessimistic tone that is common to Novak's work.

The third poem is "Ballade vom Legionär." Typical of a ballad, the man in this poem becomes a legionary because of economic hardship. The character of the individual is developed throughout the poem, but the character of the regime or state is left opaque. Violence occurs in the poem, but the source of the abuse is absent. Grammatically, it appears as if the violence is simply happening without a particular actor generating it. The Legion, the source of the violence, is not connected to the violence at all. Instead, they offer to care for the legionary's wounds. What *is* connected to violence is location. Every new place the legionary travels to, he incurs a new injury. Violence is seen as more pernicious when the source of it is unclear.

The last section of the senior project is about the 40-year correspondence between Kirsch and Novak, lasting from 1966-2013. Correspondences between German writers show important aspects of a writers' style and perception of their audience. The tone of their letters is quite personal, and, surprisingly, they rarely discuss their own poetry or poetic process. Their voices are generally similar to their poetry,

Kirsch's is metaphorical and optimistic, Novak's brash, resolute, and pessimistic. Novak's confidence is especially apparent, for example, when she discusses her Spanish colleague whom she wants to educate about Spanish anarchism. Both poets highly value letter-writing, Novak going so far as to say that *the worst thing...would be to sit in prison where one cannot write letters*.

Novak writes about her interpretations of Russian actions injuring innocent civilians in 1983. An important theme for Novak is outrage that the lives of individuals are negatively affected by state actions, which is a thread that runs through this letter and through the *Legionär* ballad. It is also noteworthy that she internalizes a conversation she had with Kirsch about the Russians and war. She is very self-confident in her opinions, but she is also able to incorporate the insights of others in her thinking. Kirsch also develops her thinking through conversation with others, for example in a conversation with her son that she writes about in a letter to Novak.

The tone of Novak's discussion of politics in the Soviet Union is that of disbelief and horror. Novak finds everything about it wrong. Kirsch's discussions of political events tend to be more nuanced. She writes about the *history after the war* that she is *witnessing with her own eyes*. She finds it both *impressive* and *laughable*. Kirsch incorporate dualities and paradoxes into her thinking and analysis. Both of them are committed to and aware of seeing events of political and historical importance with their own eyes, and discuss moving to certain places to ensure being able to bear witness to political events as they unfold, with the awareness that this also means



thinking about contemporary politics from the perspective of, and as, history . They do not believe everything the censored press publishes, so they are committed to living the experience themselves.

Their letters from 1983 meditate on the question of the possibility of beauty in contemporary poetry. While Adorno had famously claimed that to write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric, Novak thinks through the idea of beauty in poetry as implying a discretion that does not transfigure suffering, but attempts to include the full range of private human experience. In her letter, Novak is inspired by the beauty (*ewig 'schön'*) in Kirsch's work. Novak questions the fact that most of her work is tragic. She herself has joyful moments of laughing, dancing, and falling in love, and wonders if that should be incorporated into her poetry. Questions of reinventing language after historical tragedy emerge. How much beauty is too much? Can one represent tragic events, beautifully? Poetic language must become more nuanced and more complex: it is a new frontier.

Tensions and duality are represented in two final poems, Kirsch's "Gärtners Weltbild" (from the collection *Katzenleben* (1984)) and Novak's "als würde es der Liebe" (from the collection *Märkische Feemorgana* (1989)). In a manner typical of Kirsch's optimism, the gardener has worked hard (as seen on his worn hands) but has grown something beautiful – a metaphor for the toiling of the poet at their craft. There is a trust in the poem, the soul is left alone to leave and return as it will. Novak's work is also about creation, about tiny stitches that work to hold two pieces of cloth together.

The stitches hold things together that are, however, much larger than the stitches themselves: for Novak, the poet's activity is akin to these stitches. Her tone is cautionary, warning that love itself will be damaged if such stitching together doesn't occur.

## Chapter One

## The Poetry of Sarah Kirsch



Sarah Kirsch was born Ingrid Bernstein on April 16, 1935 in Limlingerode in Prussian Saxony. She first studied biology in Halle and then literature in Leipzig. She is mainly known for her poetry, though she wrote some prose and translated some children's books into German. She is a revered post-war German poet, and won numerous prizes including the German international literary Petrarca-Preis in 1976, the Peter-Huchel Prize in 1993 and the Georg Büchner Prize in 1996. She was married to the lyricist Rainer Kirsch from 1960-1968 and co-authored a book of poems with him in 1965. Kirsch died in 2013.

The political import of Kirsch's poetry has always played the critical evaluation of this 20<sup>th</sup> century poet's work. Her continuous public proclamations of her political stances have drawn attention to Kirsch as a political poet. She changed her name from Ingrid to Sarah in protest of Nazis forcing German Jews to change their names on all official documents after 1938. Jewish men were forced to take the name of Israel, and Jewish women the name Sarah. Kirsch's life centered on words. As political protest, she altered one of the most defining words about herself, especially at that time, her name. She rooted herself firmly in the political moment of her youth, namely the Nazi regime and its implications for Germany. Images of the Holocaust are prominent in her poetry, such as in the poem "Legende über Lilja" in her book entitled *Landaufenthalt* (1977), in which one finds the line: "Der Schnee liegt schwarz in meiner Stadt".

In a later act of political protest, she signed a petition against the expatriation of

Wolf Biermann, an East German singer-songwriter. She signed the petition with 11 other artists in 1976. Her actions were deliberate and public. She wrote that poems that were purely private should be thrown in the garbage. She lived her life in a public and engaged way not just in the poems she published, but in her personal actions. In fact, she wrote that she couldn't write verse without an interest in politics. On the dust jacket of her 1974 book entitled *Zaubersprüche*, she writes "Hätte ich keine politischen Interessen, könnte ich keinen Vers schreiben". But her poetry rarely uses directly political vocabulary. Often, she uses figurative language evoking the natural world to begin a dialogue about politics, as a result of which readers sometimes misguidedly understood her poems to be non-political.

In a 1993 article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, she is asked: „Wenn man viele ihrer Gedichte liest, bekommt man den Eindruck, daß Sie eine unpolitische Dichterin sind. Trotzdem haben Sie in der DDR Stellungen bezogen.“ And Kirsch answers: „Es kommt darauf an, was man unter politisch versteht. Wir leben in einer Gesellschaft, und wenn man politisch weit definiert, ist eben alles politisch geprägt. In einem Liebesgedicht steckt auch die Haltung der Menschen zu bestimmten Zeiten. Und so etwas würde ich schon als politisch sehen.“ Underneath her natural landscapes, the seemingly straight-forward winter scene or the bird explored in this chapter, lie more complex interpretations of the world.

Indeed, she wrote almost explicitly that her main objective was to write poetry that was meaningful for the public. In a 1977 interview for *Feuilleton*, Karin Huffzky

asks Kirsch: “Du schreibst sehr persönliche Gedichte, gehst dabei aber doch streng mit deiner Phantasie, deinen Gefühlen um, von beiden hast du viel. Wieviel Mut zum Privaten erlaubst du dir selber?“ Kirsch answers: „Wenn man schreibt, schreibt man erst mal für sich selber, darüber, was einen selber angeht. Danach setzt die eigentliche Arbeit ein: Man überprüft, ob das ein persönliches Gedicht ist. Das kann es ruhig sein; aber wenn es nur privat ist, sollte man es lieber in den Papierkorb werfen, denn gibt es für andere Leute mehr her.“ Kirsch explicitly indicates that if she were to write purely private poetry, she would want to throw it away. Her commitment to the openness and public nature of her poetry implies that poetry has to be of public interest for it to rise to the standard of art worth publishing. We can understand her writing as pieces that she has edited in order to stand as public pieces. Acting in a public way is inherently a political act. Her thoughtfulness about her poems as public works give them deeper political significance.

Her political action and writing focused almost exclusively on her concerns in Germany and her early literary education probably laid the groundwork for that. Her unique voice and tone for her times are perhaps reflections of her introduction to a wide range of literary traditions. After she studied biology in Halle, Kirsch studied at the *Institut für Literatur Johannes R. Becher* in Leipzig from 1963-65. The *Kindler Literatur Lexikon* (Arnold, 2009) stresses the political context of her life, suggesting the importance of it in understanding her work. Her contact with other young authors, *Kontakte zur Arbeitsgemeinschaft junger Autoren*, exposure to the *klassischen*

*Kanon der Weltliteratur*, and encounter with the *Literatur der europäischen und amerikanischen Moderne* through Enzenberger's Anthology *Museum der modernen Poesie* gave her a wide range of literary perspectives. Georg Mauerer at the Institut in Leipzig was especially influential in making her *mit dem klassischen Kanon der Weltliteratur vertraut, sie orientierte sich an Bobrowski, Brecht, Eich, Huchel*. These perspectives span history with differing political and cultural contexts and offer a solid literary education.

Kirsch is drawn to natural imagery both personally and poetically. In her correspondence with Helga Novak, she frequently begins or ends her letters with descriptions of nature. She writes about the landscape around her, her garden, or offers a commentary on their shared dream of retreating from society to live off the land.

*Weißt Du, es ist ja direkt zum Lachen: wir, Du und ich, sind doch ganz verschiedene Menschen, trotzdem haben wir drei Sachen vollkommen gemeinsam, das Interesse, Gedichte zu schreiben, sich aufs Land zurück zu ziehen und Garten zu machen.* (Novak an Kirsch 19.7.1983)

*Hier blühen viele Rosen, schwarze Malven und ein riesiges Beet voller Phlox, besonders hübsch aber der Porree vom vergangenen Jahr...Es ist aber schon etwas herbstlich so kommt es mir vor, diese zusammen gerotteten Vögel, die kriechenden Nebel.* (Kirsch an Novak, 17.8.1984)

*Ich schreibe bald wieder! Ich muß noch ein paar Stunden Pflanzen. Es gibt schon Nachtfrost!!* (Kirsch an Novak, 4.10.1988)

Kirsch and Novak routinely discuss their various plants and how the weather and seasons affect their gardens. Kirsch and Novak are creators, creators of poetry and gardens. Kirsch's dream and her broader interest in writing about nature have an innocent quality of awe for the world around her. It also shows a more violent tendency, one in which she rejects what is around her to live off the land and where she camouflages her political commentary by means of opaque metaphor. But her choice to use natural imagery in her poetry makes it accessible. Images of nature are suggestive and meaningful to almost any reader. The use of natural imagery in Kirsch's poetry stakes a claim, a kind of generalizability or universality: Kirsch's poetry strives to be understood by a large reading public, and understands itself as deploying familiar images in order to make visible political questions that may be unfamiliar or unsettling. Kirsch's use of images of the natural world creates meaning for a broad range of readers.

In "Meropsvogel" from her volume *Rückenwind*, written in 1977, Kirsch situates the bird in metaphorical conceptions of hope, time, and place by using rather simple natural imagery.

Der Meropsvogel

Der große

Sehr schöne Meropsvogel

Fliegt schon im Frühjahr kaum zeigt sich ein Blatt

Davon in den Süden wo Schatten



Höchst senkrecht fallen der Stein  
 Warm wie meine Augen-Blicke auf ihn

So hab ich gelernt: groß ist er stark schön wie  
 Ein Mensch und weiß man von ihm  
 Hört die Sehnsucht nicht auf. Er fliegt doch er sieht  
 Fliegend zurück, er entfernt sich, nähert sich trotzdem.  
 Über die Augen. Das Blut. Zum Herzen. O schöne Sage! Ein  
 Springen von Stein zu Stein; Hoffnung  
 Wo Raum und Zeit sich  
 Zwischen uns legen. Und kommt er wieder? Er kommt.  
 Herangesehnt zurückgewünscht erwartet erwartet  
 So blickt er fliegend zurück, mich nicht an.  
 Er naht er entfernt sich.

The poem establishes the bird as an important figure. It is *erwartet erwartet* (*awaited awaited*). The narrator takes the time to ask if it is coming: *Und kommt er wieder? Er kommt*. Indeed, the poem starts by stating how large and very beautiful the bird is: *Der große/ Sehr schöne Meropsvogel*. It is not only beautiful for a bird, but beautiful like a human: *groß ist er stark schön wie/ Ein Mensch*. It is even compared to a wise person: *O schöne Sage!* The bird is established as an important figure, one with wisdom, strength and beauty. Its importance is not only immediate, but again, meaningful enough to be awaited. Because the bird is understood as important, its actions and characteristics hold significant weight throughout the poem. Kirsch uses an animal as the central figure in her poem, which is typical of the way that she

centers most of her work around natural imagery. Tropes from the natural world are widely understood, so the use of such images to represent political phenomena allows Kirsch to reach a wide audience. In turn, using a natural image as a metaphor for a political event gives her analysis the legitimacy of being found in the natural world.

The *Meropsvogel* establishes space within the poem through its actions. *Ein/ Springen von Stein zu Stein; Hoffnung/ Wo Raum und Zeit sich/ Zwischen uns legen*. Its action of *Springen* are connected to hope because of the connection between the two phrases with a semi-colon and because the *Hoffnung* is on the same line as the *Springen*. The jumping creates a space between the two stones, in which something can exist. Since the bird is established as the central figure in the poem, it could represent the poet's voice that creates meaning and metaphor. Kirsch, like the *Meropsvogel*, creates a hopeful tone throughout her work. Furthermore, she is, like the bird, engaged in a back and forth, a correspondence, a dialogue, that helps her to develop her own thoughts and tone. The ways in which Kirsch is committed to dialogue and seeking plural definitions of truth is illuminated in the discussion of *Kunstwelt* in this chapter and in chapter 3 about her correspondence with Helga Novak.

The bird creates another representation of space with its flight patterns. It doesn't just fly, but *naht* and *entfernt sich*. This action is rendered particularly important due to the fact that it is mentioned twice in the poem, once in the middle and once as the final line: *Er fliegt doch er sieht/ Fliegend zurück, er entfernt sich, nähert*

*sich trotzdem* and later *Er naht er entfernt sich*. The motion calls attention to that which lies between what it distances itself from and what it approaches. Hope was what lay in the space the bird created by hopping. The space created as the bird approaches and distances itself is less clearly defined.

The poem establishes a complex meaning of time using straight-forward natural imagery, similar to how it established hope using the Merops bird. The *Meropsvogel fliegt schon im Frühjahr kaum zeigt sich ein Blatt*. We are already within a certain time of year, *Frühjahr*. We have a deeper sense of the season due to the lack of leaves on the trees. Strangely, the lack of leaves and the distinction of seasons places us within the Northern Hemisphere, even though Merops birds live primarily in Africa and Asia. Is Kirsch “migrating” these birds North, placing them within the proximity of her readers? In just one line we read not only two words that evoke season and the cyclical nature of time, but also two other words grounding us in the timely order of actions. The bird flies *schon* im Frühjahr, and *kaum zeigt sich ein Blatt*. The flying is *already* happening, as if early or unexpected, and we *hardly* see a leaf, reinforcing the conception of time within the context of the natural world. Time represented as natural seasons begs us to question what stays the same through the natural cycles and what differs. Kirsch’s imagery continually asks how our thinking changes and what must stay constant. *Und kommt er wieder? Er kommt* is a line nodding to the cyclical nature. *Hoffnung/ Wo Raum und Zeit sich/ Zwischen uns legen* where hope, place and time are all expansive concepts that imply newness.

The next section positions the reader beyond the season to the context of a day: *Wo Schatten/ Höchst senkrecht fallen der Stein/ Warm wie meine Augen-Blicke auf ihn*. The *Schatten* give us the context of a rising or setting sun, shining on objects at an angle and falling *senkrecht* on the stone. The *warm* stone also indicated the intensity of the sun, or the lengthy exposure to it. Since it's not summer but *Frühjahr*, and therefore a warm stone is probably due to a full day of shining sun, we can understand the poem in the context of a day ending while a year begins (again, *Frühjahr*). The contrast between beginning a larger thing and ending a smaller thing gives us a complex understanding of the poetic "moment," both its internal setting and the metaphorical connection to a simultaneous ending and beginning.

The poem addresses endings and beginnings in another context as well. The poem reads: *groß ist er stark schön wie/ein Mensch und weiß man von ihm/ Hört die Sehnsucht nicht auf*. *Sehnsucht* is a connection between what is past and what exists now. It is a present longing for past events. It signifies a pull and tension between the new and what has come before. The *Frühjahr* established endings and beginnings in terms of the natural world, whereas the *Sehnsucht* establishes the tension between the end of the old time and the beginning of the new time in an emotional space. These signifiers of pulls towards both progress and past rumination are important complexities within Kirsch's work.

We see further grappling with the creation of space and seeing in new ways represented in more of Kirsch's work:

## Kunstwelt

Die eilfertige Wintersonne  
 Hat dem Korn Schaden getan  
 Frost zerstörte die Wurzeln  
 Die Felder leblose Teiche  
 Ein Wolkenpetersdom spiegelt sich  
 Niederländische schwarze Krähen  
 Schlagen die Flügel

“Kunstwelt” creates mimetic relationships and moments of mirroring. The effect of mirroring – how it can invert, stretch, or blur an image – complicates the seemingly still landscape. The concept of the mirror also evokes questions about how the world of art (*Kunstwelt*) can distort to make us see anew. *Kunstwelt* could appear as a static poem, but the doubling of images creates complex questions about nature and art.

We see mirroring or *Spiegelung* three times within the poem. Firstly, the *Felder leblose Teiche* could be dark spots across the fields that look like ponds, but are actually the shadows cast by the clouds. The clouds are mirrored onto the earth in the form of shadows. The mirroring is not perfect, the shadows of clouds won’t look exactly like the original cloud. In fact, the way they are imperfectly reflected is important. That which is intriguing is not just the literal shadows on the earth, but the way Kirsch interprets them. The shadows become more than just shadows, they transform the fields into lifeless ponds. The grammar and vocabulary choice of the phrase also

presents a mirror effect. *Felder* and *Teiche* are the two subjects of the mirroring. The word *leblos* acts as the central fulcrum of the phrase, the mirror between the fields and ponds. That ‘the mirror’ is *lifeless* reinforces that it is an object to mirror, like a mirror is an object to mirror. Both objects, though lifeless, create a new life, a new world. Even in a perfect mirror, the world is inverted, it does not represent the exact image of the world but a slight variation. Shadows invert the world even more than a mirror. Shadows stretch and blur that which they represent. The lifeless object – the word in the poem or the mirror - has the power to shift how we see the world.

The line *Die Felder leblose Teiche* is also the middle line of the poem. Just like the *leblose* acted as an object in the center of the line, the line itself acts as a fulcrum within the poem as a whole. The line doesn’t have a verb, making it actionless or lifeless. Without action and presented with two sides, the reader has to fill in the space between those sides. That which is in between could be real, imagined, or figurative. The ambiguous center is important because it acts as the axis or balancer of the two separate sides, and opens interpretation to the reader.

The mimetic relationship between the fields and the ponds is unique, but the other images of the poem are also dualistic. The winter sun hurts the grain: *Die eilfertige Wintersonne/ Hat dem Korn Schaden getan*. The frost ruins the roots: *Frost zerstörte die Wurzeln*. The fields and ponds were the first dualistic relationship. The winter sun and grain were the second, the frost and roots were the third. The repetition of dualistic relationships suggests the importance of mirroring, relationality,

and alterations. Interestingly, there is a final relationship in the poem but it is no longer between two objects. Instead, it is between an object and an image of that same object: *Wolkenpetersdom spiegelt sich*. The relationships established in the poem prove important given their prevalence in such a short piece. The relationship between the clouds and their mirror image is a slight inversion of the established theme.

The mirroring throughout the poem establishes new images and understandings. The use of the compound *Wolkenpetersdom* – in other words, the grammatically correct combination of ‘clouds’ and ‘St. Peter’s Basilica’ to create a new concept – is also able to establish new meanings. A German compound is greater than the sum of its parts. The compound creates a third meaning by combining two words. It is not just clouds and St. Peter’s Basilica, but a St. Peter’s Basilica of clouds. The Basilica has to account for the meaning of clouds themselves, their translucent and shifting nature. The compound creates something that doesn’t normally exist in the world. A compound word is like art. An artist takes materials and concepts with their own individual meanings to create something larger. A compound word does the same thing by combining two words.

The clouds themselves are important because they are lucid and non-exact. In turn, any shape they assume is also non-exact, shifting, or transitory. The mirror images in *Kunstwelt* create inverted, slanting meanings. New ways of thinking that are not static or exact. The clouds take a concrete societal image – the central image of Christianity – and in their shifting nature ask us to question this seemingly rigid or

permanent image. The combination of clouds and St. Peter's Basilica is a poignant combination of Kirsch's themes of nature, art, and politics. The socio-political symbol of the Basilica is complicated, questioned, expanded by the natural world (the clouds) and by the way in which it is imagined in art (the poetic compound *Wolkenpetersdom*). The creation of the church is not limited to one representation, it *spiegelt sich*, it is mirrored and therefore open, expansive. Like the other mirrored images in *Kunstwelt*, the reader can imagine the recreated image themselves, open to new understandings.

The crows are symmetrical beings, with their wings appearing as a sort of mirror image of each other. Their symmetrical nature is that which allows them to fly. Flight is their avenue to the sky, towards that which is heavenly and good. Their wings' symmetry and mirroring represents this unique ability to fly and see the world from a new vantage point. The crows are also not simple crows, but *Niederländische schwarze Krähen*. The Dutch painting tradition -- such as landscapes by Pieter Bruegel -- evokes many winter scenes, often with black crows. The works frequently show gray landscapes with large and dramatic cloud formations. The winter sun of the paintings intensifies the clouds, helping to define their shapes. The role of the sun and the clouds clearly connects to the earlier themes of *Kunstwelt* and how the *Wolkenpetersdom spiegelt sich*. The crows *Schlagen die Flügel*. The poem could be suggesting a sense of motion apparent in Dutch paintings with crows. The poem could also be suggesting something impossible, that the crows are actually flapping their wings in the painting. A painting cannot move. However, a painting can make us



see in new ways. A painting allows for a re-creation of the world. Just like the shadows stretched and blurred the world, a painting creates the world anew for the observer to take in. The impossible movement of the birds within the Dutch painting tradition provides the space for a re-imagination of the scene. In fact, the only way to understand the paradoxical movement of painted birds is to re-imagine and see the world anew.

The grammatical structure in the poem also evokes themes of mirrors. The poem is constructed with two sentences, with the mirroring of the shadows on the fields as the middle axis. Duality is a central component of mirroring, and the two sentences create that in the poem. The poem is also made up of five distinct images, the winter sun and the grain, the frost and roots, the fields and the ponds, the cloud-St. Peters Basilica, and the crows. The first one created in the first two lines of the poem, the next three images each taking one line, and the last image taking again two lines. The poem establishes a pattern of how images are introduced, namely with two lines, then one line, one line again, one line again, and back to two lines. The images created using two lines are bookends to the three one-line descriptions. The grammatical structures are important because they reinforce the important role that mirrors play in this piece.

The figure of mirrors is important in art and politics. Art is always a mirror. A painting, for example, takes an image of the world and presents it again. It can be very realistic, like a perfect mirror, or more abstract, a sort of skewed mirroring. When the

world is mirrored in art, it presents a new way of seeing the world. Perhaps it is only slightly new, in more realistic works. Perhaps it creates a drastic change to an image of the world. Either way, art allows the world to be seen again, to be opened, reexamined, and understood differently. This relates to the title of the poem, *Kunstwelt*, or art-world. The world is created again within art. Art allows us a second, third, fourth way to see the things around us in a transformed way. Art can never be “natural,” it is always a remake of something else. In fact, *Kunst* has an alternative meaning in German as artificial. Perhaps that which is created is not just an artistic rendition, but artificial. The title *Kunstwelt* is also a contrast to the natural landscape, invoking connotations of a ‘fake’ world. Perhaps she is questioning mirrors, questioning new representations through art. If the meaning of art and representation itself is questioned, this is in fascinating contrast to the rest of the poem which is so centered on mirrors.

“Meropsvogel” and “Kunstwelt” focus on the ways in which images of nature solicit the reader to re-interpret the world; these images of nature become metaphors for new ways of seeing. “Fahrt II” deploys industrial imagery to metaphorically question the edges of our understanding — our political or cultural understanding. It represents an intriguing shift away from Kirsch’s natural imagery:

## Fahrt II'

4

Die Fahrt wird schneller dem Rand meines Lands zu  
 Ich komme dem Meer entgegen den Bergen oder  
 Nur ritzendem Draht der durch Wald zieht, dahinter  
 Sprechen die Menschen wohl meine Sprache, kennen  
 Die Klagen des Gryphius wie ich  
 Haben die gleichen Bilder im Fernsehgerät  
 Doch die Worte  
 Die sie hörn die sie lesen, die gleichen Bilder  
 Werden den meinen entgegen sein, ich weiß und seh  
 Keinen Weg der meinen schnaufenden Zug  
 Durch den Draht führt  
 Ganz vorn die blaue Diesellok

The *Draht* unambiguously shows the border between East and West Germany, which truly was a wire through the woods in some areas. The barrier, though thin, is not a simple separation of language or understanding. The border is less a marker of difference and more facilitates new ways of connecting to the Other. The narrator is familiar with the same literary history (knows the same Gryphius, for example), sees the same television, and yet understands the words and images differently from those around her. *Doch die Worte/ Die sie hörn die sie lesen, die gleichen Bilder/ Werden den meinen entgegen sein, ich weiß und seh/ Keinen Weg der meinen schnaufenden Zug/ Durch*

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<sup>1</sup> See *Addendum to Chapter 1* for full poem

*den Draht führt*. Her interpretations of the same things are different. The only difference between her words and the words of the Other is the border between them. The concrete experience (language, images, culture) is the same, the difference is in the understanding. The border does not separate two different worlds, but offers two different refractions of the same world. It doesn't offer a black and white -- one experience and one completely different experience -- but rather two variations based on the same elements. The border doesn't represent a clean break in our understanding, but rather the beginning of a pluralistic understanding.

Kirsch conceptualizes the border not just as the *Draht*, or wire, but as the *Rand*, or edge, of her country. The image of the edge is important because it complicates our understanding of the border. An edge is not just a separation of two things, like a wire is, but where something comes to an end. An edge can also refer conceptually to the non-mainstream. It is connected to the fringes of thought or experience. With this in mind, she is not just coming to the border of her country, but also to the outer boundaries of her way of thinking. The narrator is experiencing something different, even though her experiences are arguably the same: *Doch die Worte/ Die sie hörn die sie lesen, die gleichen Bilder /Werden den meinen entgegen sein*. She is literally approaching the edge of her country in the train. She is encountering the edge of a political understanding, the end point of the country she knows. And when she reaches this endpoint she also reaches the edge of her language and cultural understanding. The words and images she should understand are called into question. There is a space for

a reimagining, an inversion of what she thought she knew. There is no *one* way of seeing, but a plethora of possibilities given the words and images presented.

These three poems show the subtle ways Kirsch represents her way of thinking beyond borders and dichotomies towards complex and nuanced discussions on nature, art and politics. Three main images emerge as central to her pluralistic thinking. In “Kunstwelt,” the mirrors of the sky, shadows, and clouds expand our understanding to not one image, but many images of the natural and the artistic. In “Meropsvogel,” the bird comes near and then distances itself, a metaphorical representation of never reaching a final understanding of hope or freedom or poetics, but the beauty of approaching the questions over and over. In *Fahrt II*, the border reminds us not of the dichotomies between two seemingly divided places or peoples, but of the impossibility of truly dividing, of the continuous connections drawn even across boundaries. Kirsch’s poetic project encourages the reader to question again and again, and to open oneself to the space of re-imagination.

## Chapter Two

### The Poetry of Helga Novak



Photo: 19711026 Credit: Friedrich, Brigitte/SZ Photo/ai  
Helga M. Novak (Schriftstellerin) - 26.10.1971 | Helga M. Novak (writer) - 26/10/1971 !!! MINDESTHONORAR 45EURO !!! (gilt nicht bei ausschliesslicher Veroeffentlichung in Online Medien und auf TabletPCs)

Helga M. Novak was born 8 September 1935 in Berlin-Köpenick as Maria Karlsdottir. She was adopted two weeks after being born and raised by adopted parents to whom she was never close. Her adoptive mother was a teacher and her adoptive father was an architect and contractor. Of her biological father, she is recorded as saying “mein richtiger Vater hat sich erschossen.” Her adoptive parents disapproved when she decided to join the FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend [Free German Youth]) of the new socialist German Democratic Republic. At 15, Novak attended boarding school and then studied Journalism and Philosophy at the University of Leipzig. She held technical and assembly jobs during University. She began a career in journalism in 1954 but soon felt trapped there. The State Security Police (Stasi) of the GDR had approached her to become an informer about her classmates from University of Leipzig. She fled to Iceland in 1961 to with her Icelandic boyfriend and worked in fish factories.

In 1965, she returned to the GDR to attend the Johannes R. Becher Literature Institute in Leipzig. It was at the Institute that Kirsch and Novak first got to know one another, along with other soon-to-be notable writers of the time like Rainer Kirsch, Andreas Reimann, Kurt Bartsch, Dieter Mucke, Robert Havemann, Wolf Biermann, and others. Novak published her first collection of poetry in 1963 in Reykjavik, entitled *ostdeutsch*. By 1966 she was expatriated from the GDR. She lived a nomadic life around Europe. That same year, she was asked to join *Gruppe 47*, a group of prominent German writers whose goal was to bring about a renewal of German

literature after WWII. The group included Paul Celan (though Celan only attend once and would later distance himself from the group), Ingeborg Bachmann, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Ilse Aichinger, and Johannes Bobrowski, among others. In 1968 her mental health suffered and she tried to commit suicide by taking pills. She was admitted to a psychiatric facility in Zürich. She also struggled with alcoholism. Rita Jorek, her long-time friend and eventual editor, recorded an episode of alcohol poisoning in her home in 1995.

Novak's prose and poems were revered and frequently reviewed in West Germany, but her books were not published in the GDR. The only traces of her books in the GDR were in State Security Police files. She won many prizes throughout her life such as *Literaturpreis der Stadt Bremen (1968)*, *Roswitha Prize (1989)*, and the *Ida-Dehmel-Literaturpreis (2001)*. She died on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in Rüdersdorf.

### *Introduction to Ballads*

The ballad originates from Italy, and means in Italian: *to dance*. It is perhaps better known as a British form, especially used in colloquial music and theater. It has always had political undertones, used for folk songs and generally exploring themes of economic hardship or other political struggles of ordinary people. Novak evokes the historical connotations of ballads while redefining the genre to uniquely address politics and the role of the individual in Germany.



Elements of economic hardship are particularly common in ballads, so the political dimension of socioeconomic status is frequently evoked. The stories are generally classified as those of the working class struggle. Some examples of such ballads are “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency” in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, and “Der Sänger” by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Novak’s ballads follow a pattern of beginning with the traditional tale of economic struggle and then moving to the larger personal and political implications of that struggle. In Novak’s “Ballade vom Legionaer,” the son has to go to war because: *ich hab nichts zu essen fuer dich mein Sohn sagte die Mutter*. The poem describes the son’s time in the war, and the way his body is all but destroyed. Economic hardship influences his entire life, separating him from his family and mangling his entire body. Money is not just a determinant of a socio-political position, but impacts the entire scope of life for this family.

The stories in ballads are always told in narrative form. Interestingly, ballads are known for being part of the oral tradition. Novak chooses to write entire volumes in the form of the ballad. Perhaps this choice signifies a desire for the poems to be shared like an oral history would be shared. Novak incorporates the narrative form in a unique way. Her ballads depart from poetic abstraction or symbolism and present, rather, poetic narratives from the perspective of particular individuals. They mimic a dialogue. Many include the dialogical back-and-forth between characters. “Vom Deutschen und der Polizei” begins with a dialogue between friends, and then an interface between the friends and the police. Two levels of dialogue are built into the

poem. In “Ballade von Heinrich” there is dialogue-like interaction between Heini and the mother as well as Heini and the political forces that surface throughout the poem. “Ballade vom Legionär” depicts a tragic dialogue between mother and son, eventually so extreme that she doesn’t let him back into the house because he is so mangled from the war. Not only do mother and son dialogue in the poem, but the poem itself is structured like a dialogue. Each stanza is like a cause and effect. There is a clear and significant loss caused by each change of location. It functions as a dialogue between movement and injury. These dialogues create intimacy. The tensions created through dialogue present, in a ‘raw’ or seemingly ‘unmediated’ way, perceptions of the economic and political ramifications of the persistence of historical forms of oppression or violence.

### Vom Deutschen und der Polizei

zwei Freunde schwatzten die sich herkannten  
 von den Kinderschuhen saßen bei Beern und Sahne  
 gossen da Spott auf Polizei Gericht und Staat  
 ernst und grinsend verhöhnten sie die Knebel

riefen die Polizei: Schmerbacken Kinderträumespuk  
 Industriellenbüttel die haussuchen bei Dichtern  
 Telefon abhören Denunzianten und Spitzel

liebkosen

flüchtigen Zech-Brüdern und Nazis Blumen streuen

auch sagten die Freunde: die Gehirnfaltlosen

blühen bei Befehl zum Knüppeln Knuten wetzen

Gelenke knicken

Nachjagen Wehrdienstfeinden Atomwaffengegnern

Roten

mit Gas und Wasserstrahlen Menschenknoten

lichten

am nächsten Tag sieht der eine die Polizei den

anderen

grob in die grüne Minna stoßen und sagt deutlich:

irgend etwas wird der schon verbochen haben

umsonst

holen die keinen verschließe Fensterläden

und Flügel

The poem can be interpreted as being broken into three parts, a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis. The thesis is the first section, the antithesis the second, and the synthesis the third. The first section is about two friends observing the world around them. The second is about a representation of history and its continuation in front of the friends. The synthesis is a commentary on what happens to those who choose to comment about the world around them.

The thesis stanza shows an old friendship. They have known each other since childhood, they: *herkannten von den Kindershuhen*. Their relaxed intimacy is shown

through by their chatting: *zwei Freunde schwatzten*. The scene is easy, almost innocent. The tenderness and innocence of their friendship is deepened with the image of berries with cream. The sweetness of the treat underscores the purity evoked through this friendship.

The first inclinations of darkness in the poem are intertwined with the sweet images. The scene is set in the past: the friends *chatted*, they are not *chatting*. At first this could be seen as the normal retelling of a story, but the following context of the poem points towards this past tense as a foreshadowing. The story of the poem separates the two friends and spoils the initial sense of innocence. The red and white of the berries in cream evokes an image of tarnishing. Red is the color of violence, and the cream would act to spread the color. Children would also tend to play with their food, releasing the redness into the white cream. Taken in this light, the image of the innocent children is recast in a more morbid light.

The poem continues to turn away from the image of innocence, as the next line begins with a decisive shift. The friends start insulting the police, but the verb *giessen* is used, meaning to pour - they poured insults. The pouring is obviously associated with the berries and cream even when it is associated with the insults by keeping it on the same line with them and separating the pouring from the berries and cream. The association of the pouring with both the cream and the insults creates a connection between the innocent friendship and the rest of the poem. It acts as the turning point, the transition from innocence to darkness.

In the second part of the stanza, the friends are jeering and taunting authority. There is little resemblance to innocent children. In fact, there is little resemblance to two friends simply chatting, like they were before. The scene has been altered to something much more confrontational.

Once the tone of the poem has shifted, the imagery becomes sinister. The friends cannot give their insults from afar anymore. The police become invaders, attacking the personal freedom of those around them. They become traitors. They betray on all fronts. They work for the industrialists, who were traditionally against the Communists: *Industriellenbeuttel*. They breached the privacy of citizens by listening to their phone calls: *Telefon abhoeren Denunzianten*. They even terrorized writers by showing up to their houses: *haussuchen bei Dichtern*. The breach is so complete that they haunt children's dreams: *Schmerbacken Kindertraumspuk*. The poem deploys the figuration of childhood and innocence again as a poignant contrast to the police state and surveillance.

Then the poem shifts away from the particulars of the present regime. The current terrorism is aligned with the Nazi regime: *Nazis Blumen streuen*. To spread flowers for someone is almost a religious act, an act of remembrance and tribute. The police worship the historic terrorists, and incorporate them into their own routine of terrorism. This image aligns with the conception of a regressive trajectory of enlightenment. New regimes evoke past regimes to connect them to a sort of historical progression. Instead, it bolsters a barbaric repetition of the past. In Marx's "The

Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” conceptualizes this repetition in the context of French Revolutionaries living by the example of the Romans: “...*they conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.*” The police lay flowers for the Nazis as if they were honoring the grave of a close relative. They live in their honor, in their memory, performing the societal acts of mourning and remembrance. The unfolding of history is not purely new, the actors borrow from those of the past.

The entire stanza is written in the present, unlike the first stanza about the friends. The verbs remain in present tense whereas everything was conjugated in past perfect before. The horrors are described in the present, and the innocence, kindness, and connection is characterized only in the past.

The army or nuclear arms are highly political terms closely associated with the state and national force. The references to enemies or adversaries draw attention to themselves as other politically charged terms. The use of the term *nachjagen*, to chase or pursue, is another term connected to confrontation or attack. Lastly, the inclusion of gas inevitably calls to mind the use of poisonous gas to murder millions in the extermination camps established and run by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The last stanza connected the police to the Nazis by saying they lay flowers for them. This stanza connects the police to the Nazis by incorporating their use of gas, something that will always be associated with the gas chambers of concentration

camps for the German memory. Novak's vocabulary broadens her poetic register, which pushes the reader into the realm of the political over and over again.

This third stanza completes the antithesis of the poem. The thesis was the innocence of the two friends, turned to spite and violence towards the police. The antithesis was the way the police interact with those they are trying to protect - with violence, invasions of privacy, and even terrorism. The synthesis of the poem is the last stanza. It posits what happens to people when they speak against the police.

The synthesis has separated the friends and taken one into the custody of the police themselves: *Am naechsten Tag sieht der eine die Polizei den /Andern/Grob in die gruene Minna stossen und sagt deutlich:*. The reason for taking the friend is unclear, the police assume that the person must have broken something, but don't actually know. The ignorant but consistent violence in the last stanza is striking. The violence is in some ways, passive. Those who took away the doors and window shutters are referred to in the abstract: *Umsonst/ Holen die keinen verschliesse Fensterlaeden/ Und Fluegel*. The people who knew what was broken and who carried out the house raid are unidentified, left as an abstract *die*. It is carried out without clear conviction or passion, merely as a force of habit. In fact, it is clear that this is routine since the policeman says what he says *deutlich*. The police is clear about what he is saying, clear that he doesn't know why he is doing what he is doing, by saying it *deutlich*. There is a disconnect between the police's conscience and his actions.

The voices of the friends, so clearly developed in the first sections of the poem, disappear in the synthesis. Everything is from the point of view of the police. The friends' conversation was nuanced and striking, with vivid images of both their childhood together (*herkannten/Von den Kinderschuhen sassen bei Beern und Sahne/Gossen*) and the ways in which they see the police (*Schmerbacken Kintertraeumspuk; Gehirnfaltlosen*). The synthesis erases their voices. It only highlights the rather mundane ruminations that the police make about what must have happened. The poem can be read as a message for those that dissent: that not only will your voices be diluted through separation from those around you, but they will be erased.

The window shutters (*Fensterlaeden*) and doors (*Fluegel*) are used as markers of when something has gone wrong, when something is broken. Windows and doors symbolize the connection between the public and the private realm. They are the openings between someone's private space and the outside arena. When the friendship has been pulled apart, the private and public separation has also been destroyed. The political realm invades the private realm, taking away the doors and shutters that provided privacy. The agency of free speech is ruined when one of the friends is kidnapped in response to their dissent. In the process, that which symbolizes their *entire* personal agency – the freedom of privacy and separation from the public realm – is also taken. The seemingly simple poem has a jarring thesis. Speak out and pay the price of your freedoms.



The universal implications of the thesis are already alluded to in the title of the poem. *Vom Deutschen und der Polizei* implies that there are two archetypes in the poem: Germans and police. The friends are never described as German in the poem, but we learn from the title that this poem is about these two characters. We can deduce that the friends are representative, in a certain way, of Germans in general. That these are such broad categories indicates that we can draw such a universal thesis from the poem. If Germans speak out against the police, expect serious consequences.

The poem is a commentary on itself. The police in the poem terrorize poets in their own houses: *die haussuchen bei Dichtern*. The poem speaks to the danger of writing and poetry more subtly as well. The German friends could be interpreted not as two individuals but as the way the German people communicate with themselves. Poets and writers are clear communicators with the German public. They are individuals from German culture whose mission is to communicate ideas effectively with their German audience. In this way, the captured friend could be the captured poet, the police trying to suppress the way they can communicate with and influence the German public.

The historical grounding of the poem indicates the long-lasting effects of the thesis. The legacy of the Nazis is worshipped by the police, and therefore is a part of their current regime. The reader must question whether this cycle will end, since

those who speak against it are persecuted and since it has been a pattern for many regimes.

The poem is also important for its resonance to other German thinkers' view of friendship and the importance of dialogue. Hannah Arendt was a political theorist and focused intently on the role of the public and private sphere in the political landscape. She had a particular view on the role of friendship as a means of political resistance:

The ability of friendship to hold thought is thus important for encouraging the return of thought to a social situation where thinking is oppressed – such as in Arendt's description of a totalitarian state where the private sphere is colonized by ideological concerns which inhibit self-dialogue. That is, if the private sphere has become colonized by ideological forces, then it might be possible within the private sphere to resist those forces. (Brennen, 2017 )

Novak's poem seems to be speaking directly to these ideas. It elucidates the rupture of a friendship and the disintegration of dialogue. Particularly interesting is her conception that friendship is able to *hold thought* when it is in other realms *oppressed*. Thought is presumably no longer *held* by the friendship by the end of the poem. Where thought is still held is in this poem. The thoughts themselves exist in the thesis of the poem. Understanding the thoughts within the context of the political world and public sphere exist in the antithesis of the poem. The long-term implications for discourse and thought are discussed in the synthesis. The poem acts to preserve the important elements of a thoughtful friendship. Therefore, we can read the poem as an instance of resistance. It captures the dialogues between friends, between the

friends and the police, and between the police themselves as a way to resist the *ideological forces*. Poetry can step into the political void to fill what is being taken away, and that is the lasting importance of Novak's examination of the political through her work.

### Ballade von Heinrich

1

der Janowski kam spät ausm ersten Krieg und sah  
aus als hätt ihn das große Loch mitten im feurigen  
Berg Hekla in Island ausgespuckt es war aber bloß  
sein Tanker in die Luft geflogen

2

und Heinrich der nie nichts verstand hat immer die  
Nase und die Ohrn an sein Vater gesucht aus dem  
Jung ist dann auch nichts geworn obwohl viel Un-  
kosten draufgelaufen sind ihm Lesen und Schrei-  
ben beizubiegen

3

dann hat er sich strikte geweigert was anzufassen  
wo schon der Vater kaputt war und die Mutter  
noch sechs Kegel kriegte und Waschfrau war in den  
nächsten Krieg hat Heinrich nicht gebracht und

die Urlauber sagten ab und an der weiß ich nicht watetis  
Krieg

4

der kannte nur eins aufm Markt wenn der Rummel war mitfahren und kassiern und da muß es doch geklappt haben sonst hättense ihn nicht jahrein- jahraus wieder genommen wenn der Zirkus kam hat er den Löwenkuk weggeschaufelt und den Elefanten Heu reingeschoben wenn sie welche beihatten

5

desbalb nannten ihn die Jörn Karusselheini aber seit vierundvierzig wo die Stadt abbrannte hat er überhaupt nicht mehr geredt nachdem die ausgebombten Weiber mit den Bettenbündeln einenachtlang aufm Marktplatz jaulten wie ausgesperrte Kater hat er auch den Markt nicht mehr betreten

6

die Karussells blieben danach sowieso weg und mit Heinrich wurde es letztlich ein faules Ei er saß den Sommer über in der Laube und machte aus Schnitzel und Schnipsel und Spielzeugkarussel dabei hat Er immer das Weibergejaul nachgeafft als das gar Keiner mehr hören wollte

7

fünfundvierzig als sich die zivile Reserve von dreizehn bis dreiundsiebzig den Endsieg vornahm haben sie ihn endlich zu den Soldaten geholt Heini ging gegen die Russen bis zum Kurpark der im Weichbild angepflanzt ist entlang der alten Heerstraße nach Küstrin die Straße die der alte Fritz der Große gemacht hat und die war vormals so wichtig wie die Reichsautobahn die besagter Hitler später gemacht hat

8

als Karusselheini im Krieg ankam wollte gerade einer türmen und Heini sollte ihn aufbaumeln weil sie ihn gekriegt hatten Heinrich der nie nichts verstand schon gar nicht watetis Krieg hatte kleine Lust dazu und scharrte bockbeinig im Kurparksand

9

indem sie noch so herumstanden der der türmen wollte der der den gefangen hatte und Karusselheini merkt es Heini hinten auf ihm platzte deutsch und deutlich was das dem allzulanggewachsenen Glück die Daumennägel abschnitt und es baumelten zwei

10

die Janowski holte ihren dann mit einem Hand-

karrn heim der Türmer war ganzwoandersher da  
 fing der Georg an was der jüngste war eine Pyra-  
 mide aus den russjen russtinkenden Backbausteinen  
 zu baun und war ganz Krauchen und Klauben  
 wenn ich dir einen Happen von mein Kommißbrot  
 abgeb leßtemichma rein da brach die Pyramide  
 zusamm

II

gesternnacht kam der Georg mit seinen sechs Jahren  
 bei uns in die Tür gefalln jetzt hat der Alte sich  
 vorn Zug gelegt bloß vorher hat er alle meine Kan-  
 dis aufgefressen und meine gesparten Stulln

12

dann sind die fünf größern flux von zu Hause weg  
 und haben den Kleinen mitgenommen wo der noch  
 gar nicht gewußt hat watetis Leben

*The Dialect of the Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944) famously claimed that a line of spiritual development connects the process of enlightenment with the camps and the atomic bomb. The knowledge that allows humankind to dominate nature eventually also dominates fellow human beings, leading to human self-destruction. The basic thesis is that progress goes hand in hand with regression. The supposed progress of enlightenment also involves the regression of mass violence, control of populations, and ecological ruin. In this way, the way that history plays out

is not linear. Novak's poetry takes a similar stance when representing history. The role of destruction in the ostensible 'evolution' of the German political project is omnipresent.

On the very first page of the book, the world is rendered as a complex mixture of both enlightenment and simultaneous disaster. The world is not completely enlightened without the presence of darkness: "...*the fully enlightened world radiates disaster triumphant.*" (3) The fullness of an enlightened world is one where destruction is felt and seen from Treblinka to Hiroshima. Progress, with all its pomp and circumstance, must, ironically, also boast of the regression that accompanies it.

"Ballade von Heinrich" addresses themes of non-linear or regressive history. The (non)evolution of the son in comparison to his parents, the callous representations in the circus and the circular movement of the carousel, and the battle in front of a location symbolic of healing are all examples the poem uses to describe the non-perfect evolution of history.

Heinrich's individual family history shows the first representation of regression in the face of the supposed progress achieved from one generation to another. In the first stanza, the father comes back from the war. Even in the face of the positivity of a return, he is mangled and looks like he was spit out by a volcano (*sah aus als hätt ihn das große Lock mitten im feurigen Berg Hekla in Island ausgespuckt*). The second stanza addresses his son, who, rather than being able to stand on the (metaphorical) shoulders of his father, seems to regress regardless of his parent's best efforts.

Heinrich does not understand in the way his parents want him to understand: *der nie nichts verstand hat*. He never understood and his non-understanding is absolute: it is characterized as *nichts*, that which is absent or missing. He doesn't register his father's disfiguration from the war, and continues to search for *die Nase und die Ohrn an sein Vater..* His inability to understand that which is not could also be related to the way that children do sometimes do not understand and pay attention to their parent's 'no.' That which is in front of him - the disfiguration of his father, the effect of a gruesome war - a devastation or nothingness that his parents try to present to him, he rejects. Perhaps the boy, even though seemingly unintelligent, has the wisdom to reject the regressive nature of contemporary history. He and his family serve as a metaphor of Adorno's conceptualization of the enlightenment - his family has acquired knowledge and yet it has led to devastation and destruction. Heinrich's lack of the conventional knowledge accumulation through *Lesen und Schreiben* allows him to reject the regression.

In his parent's minds, *he* represents the regression. The investment of Heinrich's parents in his education does not make a difference: (*ist dann auch nichts geworn obwohl viel Unkosten draufgelaufen sind ihm Lesen und Schreiben beizubiegen*). The difficulty in educating him is extenuated by the way the use of the verb *beizubiegen*. He is not just taught, but it is as if he is a metal that his teachers or parents are trying to bend into a certain shape. It takes extreme effort to try and shape him to be what they want him to be. He is not even needed in the next war, even when he tries to enter it



to support his struggling parents: *hat er sich strikte geweigert was anzufassen/ wo schon der Vater kaputt war und die Mutter/ noch sechs Kegel kriegte und Waschfrau war in den nächsten Krieg hat Heinrich nicht gebraucht...* The father's body has been destroyed by the war, and he has been described as broken (*kaputt*). Heinrich's attempt to support his parents is a repetition of his father's path, and yet he cannot even complete the repetition, he is not even wanted for the war. Instead, he starts working for the circus, shoveling lion and elephant excrement. His job is the same as his mother's. Both mother and son engage in cleaning the dirtiest of things, cleaning that no one else wants to do. His work is perhaps worse than his mother's, because he cleans up after animals while she cleans for humans. Heinrich has continued a cycle of such an occupation in his family, but has stooped even further. He has descended the downward spiral of historical trajectory.

His nickname connects him to the non-linear progression in his life: *nannten ihn die Jörn Karusselheini*. He is carousel-Heini, as if he goes around and around all day on a carousel. The life of the individual continues the history of their family, and Heinrich's intergenerational story is not an upward progression but a regression. Tragically, he lives a worse life than his parents. He is not able to create a better life than his parents, in fact he cannot even live in the same way that they lived. This regression from progress is a broader historical theme that runs through the poem.

Circus comes from the Latin word *circus* meaning circle and Greek *κίρκος* meaning ring or circle. The etymology and the fact that the physical space of a circus

is a ring point to a repetitive, cyclical, or non-linear quality. Similarly, the performance of a circus is usually a mixture of many different acts – clowns, acrobats, horses, exotic animals, magic etc. There may be a central theme, but unlike theater it does not represent a developing story-line. Each act is discrete and does not add to a collective narrative.

The carousel is also an important element of the circus. The carousel is a form of entertainment sought out *in addition* to the main circus performance. The patron watches the circular circus performance, whereas they *experience* the circular pattern when they ride the carousel. Heini, who regresses from his parent's progress, is connected to the image of the carousel. Both the circus and Heini represent a new age but little progress in comparison to their histories.

The circus is also a symbol of the frivolous and absurd. It involves colorful and exaggerated costuming, over-the-top performances, and extreme caricatures. A linear history would be logical. It would make sense if everyone learned from the past and humans only got better and better. Instead we circle back to the same problems, make the same mistakes, and follow the same patterns as our predecessors. The absurdity of the circus addresses the absurdity of history and human life. The way in which we repeat and relive that which is harmful logically makes no sense, and yet we do it over and over again.

The irony of historical progression is embodied in the battle Heinrich fights near the Kurpark. The Kurpark is a space of healing. It is a park with a spa in it.

Heinrich faces the impossible challenge of facing the Russian army, seemingly alone: *Heini ging gegen die Russen*. On an individual level, we see the destruction of a single person even when he is in such close proximity to a place meant to restore you. We also see the bleak picture Novak paints of modern warfare. That knowledge and technology has been developed only for a single soldier going up against an entire army to face utter annihilation. The irony of something so small facing something so gigantic and the regression of enlightenment towards barbarism are echoed here. We see a clear example in this passage of Novak's use of irony to represent a sense of outrage at modern political phenomena.

The vocabulary describing the location of the Kurpark has connotations of growth and progress, with a gruesome war in the background: *Heini ging gegen die Russen bis zum Kurpark der im Weichbild angepflanzt ist*. The word that Novak chose for 'located,' *angepflanzt*, has a double meaning in German. Firstly, it can mean to be located somewhere, as it is used in this context. Secondly, it is related to the word for plant, *Pflanze*, and can mean *to grow* or *to plant*. The connotation that the Kurpark has *grown* in in this area implies a positive progression. The Kurpark is like a plant, it has become something beautiful from a small seed. Seen in this way, the destruction of war that takes place there is an even greater contrast to the Kurpark than merely the connotations of it being a healing space.

The way in which history does not make logical progress has implications not just for how we act, but for how we understand history. Perhaps the realization that

history is circular makes it more difficult to discern differences and progression throughout history. The poem flattens history in this way. The *Heerstraße nach Küstrin* (military road towards Küstrin) is an example of this.

*...entlang der alten Heerstraße/nach Küstrin die Straße die der alte Fritz der Große gemacht hat und die war vormals so wichtig wie die Reichsautobahn die besagter Hitler später gemacht hat*

Friedrick the Great and Hitler are compared through their roads. No differentiation between the two figures is made. The Heerstraße is *so wichtig, just as important as* the Reichsautobahn. The poem flattens the differences between Friedrick the Great and Hitler, as if they can be accurately compared through the presence of a road. Both Friedrick the Great and Hitler made progress on infrastructure improvements throughout Germany, but can we really compare those improvements in the same way with the other implications of each regime? That history is more than all good or all bad makes it difficult to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions about its impact.

The way in which history functions is critical for understanding history. We saw in “Ballade vom Legionär” the way that politics and its violence functioned through the opacity of the violent perpetrator. The way we interpret and learn from history has similar implications, if our actions are based on our histories then we have to have a strong way of evaluating it accurately. In *Vom Deutschen und der Polizei* we understood the importance of dialogue and free dissent. This theme, too, is important for the evolution and understanding of history.

## Ballade vom Legionär

ich hab nichts zu essen für dich mein Sohn  
sagte die Mutter ich gehe ja schon  
sagte der Junge und ging zur Legion

zuerst haben sie ihn in Algerien eingesetzt  
das hat ihm beide Ohren zerfetzt

dann gings nach Korea für ein Jahr  
da ergraute sein Haar

in Madagaskar am grünen Strand  
vermißte er plötzlich seine linke Hand

am Tschad ist ihm ein Auge ausgelaufen  
die Legion wollte ihm noch ein Glasauge kaufen

da mußte er nach Algerien zurück  
das kostete ihn vom Unterkiefer ein Stück

in Tahiti im Urwald  
zerschossen sie ihm die Männlichkeit

schließlich verlor er in Dien Bien Phu  
einen guterhaltenen Fuß mitsamt dem Schuh

in Djibuti plagten ihn seine fehlenden Glieder  
in Wirklichkeit hatte er bloß Fieber

dann steckte er im Kongo noch was in Brand  
und bezahlte dafür mit der anderen Hand

mit achtundzwanzig kam er wieder nach Haus  
die Mutter sagte wie sehen Sie denn aus  
und warf ihn zur Tür hinaus

“Ballade vom Legionär” is the first poem in this collection, and it follows the normal characteristics of a ballad. It is a narrative and addresses political strife. More specifically, it touches on economic hardship by telling the story of an individual who had to join the legion due to lack of money. The focus on the individual couches the poem in a literary folk tradition typical of ballads. That this is the first poem in the collection gives the reader a strong sense of tone for these Novak poems. The poem is beautifully written, and pleasant to read with its rhyme scheme, but represents utter tragedy. The mother is not able to care for her son, so he joins the legion. In the legion his body is destroyed part by part to the point where his mother doesn’t allow him to come home due to how mangled he looks. Furthermore, he is trying to return home when he is twenty-eight. He has never been able to establish a civil life away from his childhood home, he is still seeking the shelter of his mother. The reader

could interpret this as yet another loss. He has not been able to develop himself into a man in this society, he was sent abroad as a legionary during the time that he would have developed that. He has lost his connection to family, his body, and his development into adulthood. There is no silver lining in this poem, simply the slow demise of an unassuming young man. It sets a stark tone for the rest of the collection.

The individual is developed throughout her poems, but the character of the regime or state is opaque. In *Ballade vom Legionar*, the young man is injured over and over by a mysteriously absent force. No one seems to be actively hurting him; rather, his body parts are simply destroyed without a specific agent committing the acts of violence: *vermisste er ploetzlich seine linke Hand, das costete ihn vom Unterkiefer ein Stueck*. The actor that makes his hand go missing is removed from the section. The reader only experiences how Heinrich's hand goes missing, not how it has actually happened. We only see the result of violence, and not the act itself. The focus on Heinrich and not the violence enacted on him is reinforced with the use of *ploetzlich* (suddenly). Saying that suddenly he was missing his left hand suggests an accident. It suggests that it was a surprise to onlookers, that the event of him losing his hand wasn't visible or obvious. The removal of a visible violence frames the individual struggle - characteristic of ballads - as self-generating. There is no violent actor whom one could blame for Heinrich's tragedy, yet it is subtly and perniciously impossible that there *isn't* a violent actor, given the way his entire body is mangled by the end of the poem.

We see the creation of the absent abuser in other Novak works. In the poem “Vom Deutschen und der Polizei,” the police capture one of the characters, separating them from their friend. They use a *gruene Minna* (caddy wagon) to transport him like a prisoner. But they don’t even know what he has done. The reader could think that they were arrested for speaking out against the police or state. However, by the end we realize that the police aren’t even sure why they are arresting this person: *irgend etwas wird der schon verbochen haben/umsonst/holen die keinen*. Their blind faith that there must be a reason they are told to arrest them leads to the violence of capture and separation from everything familiar, even a childhood friend. The assumption of the police that they wouldn’t capture someone without reason establishes a more powerful, yet absent, actor. Those *enacting* violence become different from those *deciding* on violence. The source and dissemination is therefore more opaque, decentralized, and difficult to scrutinize. Similarly, the violence performed on Heinrich is obvious and tragic, but the source is unclear, with many discrete possibilities. The persistence of violence is stronger without a single agent perpetuating it. It seems to blend into the poem, as if it’s meant to be there. Heinrich’s hand is *suddenly* gone, as if this were a normal occurrence. Hiding violent actors behind a veil of normality integrates violence smoothly into the poetry itself. Perhaps the way in which the violent actor in the poetry is obfuscated is similar to how violent political actors hide and obscure the creation of violence for political means. Political decisions to carry out violence are made by one set of people and the



violence itself is carried out by another set of people. The separation of violence from the intent and the physical enactment makes it more difficult for someone to deeply understand it or fight against it. Novak's poetry powerfully and subtly illustrates this. Poetry becomes a way to represent, re-define, and re-examine the political. To frame it in a new way with a slightly new flavor, so that the ways political acts are created and disseminated become clear.

The Legion would be the obvious perpetrator of violence in "Ballade vom Legionaer." They are the ones putting him in danger as a legionary, so it would follow that they are to blame. However, the Legion only plays a positive role: *die Legion wollte ihm noch ein Glasauge kaufen*. The poem erases the role of the Legion in Heinrich's injury and only shows the role of their compensation.

The connection between the *place* and the injury is much more established than the connection between the *legion* and the injury. The poem is constructed in two line stanzas, the first line stating a new place Heinrich is going to and the second line stating the injury he contracted there. The repetition of place and then injury works to associate the injury with the place. The place itself is inanimate, but the Legion is the one sending him to these places. The Legion is putting him in harm's way, presumably in war zones. The poem doesn't emphasise the Legion's role. By only describing the commendable actions of the Legion, and creating a subtle relationship between place and violence instead of Legion and violence, the poem works to almost completely remove the violence of joining the Legion from the Legion itself.

The two-line stanzas thread a dialogue through the whole poem. There is a continual back and forth between the young man and the world around him. As mentioned above, there is a clear relationship established between a new place and violence. We can extend this reading into his interactions within the private sphere. The poem begins with the circumstances of his home, the fact that his mother cannot feed him. We can read this as simply the trope of economic hardship common to ballads. Or we can read this as a fundamental rupture in his life, where the archetypal figure of caring has been ruptured. This rupture in the private sphere leads to the tragedy in the public sphere of the complete mangling of his body through war. In the last stanza we see the continuation of place and injury. He returns home, but he is rejected by his own mother because of his wounds. The rejection of the mother solidifies the broken relationship between mother and son. It is not only that she *cannot* provide for him with food, but she *will* not provide even shelter or protection or care when he needs to heal from his wounds.

The violence is passive and removed, only embodied in the creation of the individual's story. It echoes the way in which Heini from *Ballade von Heinrich*, walks along a highly significant road as a soldier: *Heini ging gegen die Russen bis zum Kurpark der im Weichbild angepflanzt ist entlang der alten Heerstasse nach Kuestrin die Strasse die der alte Fritz der Grosse gemacht hat und die war vormals so wichtig wie die Reichsautobahn die besagter Hitler spaeter gemacht hat*. The street, laced with the history of so many regimes, becomes merely the street on which these soldiers walk. Its history is

reduced to the way in which it serves a purpose for the new individual, a pawn in the new political struggle of the day. The role of Hitler and of Friedrich the Great are reduced to just one line of the poem, their significance only tied to the relevance of this road in the current struggle with the Russians. Without being able to clearly identify a violent political actor, the violent political acts will continue. This opacity works to support the continuation of violence. The focus on the individual seems like a revealing narrative that uncovers underlying political truths through personal experiences, but in fact it veils the systems that oppress individuals. It does not show larger trends or patterns that would identify the cruelty of the political. It keeps the political abstract. The story of the individual tragedy is too related to the private sphere - that the mother cannot feed him and later won't care for him - for the problematic political patterns to be identified and addressed. It is a fascinating choice for Novak to address the political in some ways so ostensibly, but keep it so opaque at the same time. Novak's dialogical and ruminating poems frankly confront the political legacy of histories of violence and oppression. In these poems, history's effects are at once pervasive and unavoidable.

### Chapter Three

#### The Correspondence of Sarah Kirsch and Helga Novak



back row: Helga Novak, Sarah Kirsch, unknown, unknown  
middle row: unknown, unknown, Rainer Kirsch (Sarah Kirsch's husband)  
front row: unknown, unknown

*Part One: Plurality of Thinking*

Correspondences play an important role in modern German literature. Almost all the great poets, writers, and philosophers were connected to one another and left a blueprint of that friendship with their letters. Professional relationships are illuminated in letters, like that of Djana Barnes and her translator, Wolfgang Hildesheimer. Teachers and students continue academic discussion through correspondences, such as Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers. Of course, love letters are also common, such as those between Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann. The letters between the East German women, Kirsch and Novak, inscribe themselves in a long and multi-faceted tradition of literary correspondence in Germany.

Correspondences are not part of a writer's oeuvre, yet their concerns and interests often illuminate sides of the published work that remain only latent or implied. Two aspects of written correspondence are especially important: the addressee and the writing style. An author's work is public and addressed to a large and unspecified audience. The point of professional writing is its openness and accessibility to anyone. Letters, by contrast, only have one addressee (or at most a small group), and suggest that every word the author writes was chosen in the context of this relationship. The change in audience and address from an author's general works to their private letters gives the reader an apt sense of their perception of audience. Of course, some writers knew their letters would become a part of their literary legacy, so the tone and style must be acknowledged as self-conscious. Assuming an innocuous level of self-consciousness, if the tone and style does not

change from general works to letters, the reader could categorize the author as having an intimate and personal relationship with those she imagines as her audience. If it changes significantly, the reader can deduce a more removed relationship.

The comparison of writing styles between the general works and the letter writing shows the personal proximity of a writer to her work. Does her writing style span all modes of her written communication? Does it change when she is speaking autobiographically in a letter? Does a poet's tone change when she uses prose in her letters? These questions illuminate how closely the personal voice of the poet is incorporated into her general works. The audience and the narrator of a poem is always essential to ask after, and the continuity or discontinuity of the poet's voice between her literary works and her letters is a good marker of the poetic voice in relation to the personal voice.

Another unique attribute of examining a writer's letters is their relationship with the materiality of writing. Writers can write by hand or (at the time of Kirsch and Novak) with a typewriter, they can draw or include images along with their writing, and they can choose the stationary they use. There is much more room for expression through the physical act of writing than the relatively uniform publishing process. In a letter to Novak on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1985 (see Figure 1) Kirsch writes:

“Du siehst, ich funktioniere sofort wenn Du irgendwo zwischen den Steinen sitzt und eine Künde brauchst mache ich mich aus Werk und wähle auch noch das passende Briefpapier.“

The stationary has a few stones along what appears to be a shoreline. Letter-writing illuminates the way in which Kirsch pairs what she writes about (*Du irgendwo zwischen den Steinen sitzt*) with a matching physical presence. She brings her writing to life through her choice of stationary in a way that the reader would never experience in a formal, published collection of poetry.

Kirsch and Novak were both East German female poets whose lives spanned multiple political realities in Germany. They were both active in the literary scene of their generation – East Germany having a vibrant literary culture despite itself. Their letter writing spanned more than four decades, from 1966-2013. The letters were personal, asking about each other’s families and experiences. They were also professional, asking about one another’s poetry and publications. Lastly, they were political. Both wrote about the political situation in Germany, both were critical but deeply loyal to Germany, especially East Germany. Both Novak and Kirsch continually question and examine politics within their poetic works. Their letters illuminate new facets of how they engage with and disentangle their political opinions and perceptions.

Novak writes about her opinion on the Russians and their war tactics. As in her poetry, she discusses political events directly. The tone of urgency and frustration in her poetry is apparent here. She is appalled by the Soviet Union’s actions and she describes them directly. Her letter shows the way in which her thinking has evolved through her conversations with Kirsch. Her opinion has changed over time as she has

thought about what Kirsch has said and incorporated it into her understanding. Seeing the evolution of her thinking would not be possible in her poems in the same way that it is apparent here:

“Ich habe mal zu Dir gesagt, „die Russen wollten keinen Krieg“. und Du hast geantwortet, „sei nicht so sicher, sie machen ihn ja überall. Siehe Afghanistan!“ oder jetzt im Tschad über Lybien oder in Angola mit kubanischen Söldnern . Ja, Sarah, Du hattest recht. Und ich finde es in dieser Raketen- Verhandlungs- Demonstrations- und Angstsituation nicht nur unverzeihlich, sondern verbrecherisch, ein Zivilflugzeug abzuschießen. Als würde die Technik nicht so weit entwickelt, daß man das ausmachen kann, ob in der Luft ein ziviles Flugzeug oder eine Atomrakete herumsausen. Sie haben also gewußt, was sie tun, Warum dann?“ (9.3.1983) (Novak an Kirsch)

This quotation ties back to Novak’s poem *Ballade vom Legionär*. In the poem the legionary is sent by an army all over the world, like she alludes to in the letter: *am Tschad ist ihm ein Auge ausgelaufen/die Legion wollte ihm noch ein Glasauge kaufen/da mußte er nach Algerien zurück...in Tahiti im Urwald*. The poem was published in 1975, 8 years before this letter was written. This letter is evidence that the question of an individual’s role in a war and how their life might be impacted by recruitment was consistently important to Novak.

The close relationship to her poem shows the continuity of her poetic and personal voice. The tone of her poetry and her correspondences is one of urgent outrage. She feels that what the Russians are doing is not just *unforgivable* (unverzeihlich) but also *criminal* (verbrecherlich). In this case she finds the crimes



against civilians unacceptable, not just for the acts themselves but because the Russians *haben also gewußt, was sie tun. Warum dann?* Similarly, in the poem about the legionary, the army subjects the legionary to repeated violence and demise, and knows exactly what it is doing. Symbolic of this is that the Legion wants to buy the legionary a glass eye when he loses his own in Chad. They understand the injury they are subjecting him to and, rather than put an end to it, they want to buy him a glass eye so that he can *continue* to be subjected to it. In both her letter and the poem Novak's rage against the crude violence of a regime against an individual comes to the fore.

Novak's political commitments resonate through all realms of her life. She internalized a conversation that she and Sarah had had about the Russians and whether they wanted war. She has strong opinions about politics: her writing revolves around her opinions about politics. But she is also able to absorb and respond to the thoughts and perceptions that someone else has about politics. Her personal relationships are, at least in part, built on thinking and rethinking politics. She is able to build on her political understanding by incorporating Kirsch's views: *Ja, Sarah, Du hattest recht.* Her understanding of events is plural, based on inputs from others. This is important because it shows that the thinking that animates her poetry and poetic voice is pluralistic. In a way, her whole life has forced her to have a plural understanding. She had to live under various political realities. She was also forced out of Germany, and made to reconsider her country from afar. This plurality makes

her voice more legitimate, because it has been established from many vantage points. Such a voice is more trustworthy than one coming from just one perspective.

Kirsch also incorporates the voices and opinions of others into her political understanding:

“Ich hab Wölfchen ein paar Sätze vorgelesen vom Preisausschreiben des Komponistenverbandes, aber selbst ihm fehlen wohl ein paar Dähte,<sup>2</sup> die Absurdität richtig zu würdigen. Wir haben eben Glück gehabt, daß wir nach dem Krieg zufällig in unserer Gegend aus den Löchen krochen und mit eigenen Augen sehen konnten wie sich Geschichte ereignet, imposant und lächerlich gleichzeitig...” (8.17.1983) (Kirsch an Novak)

Kirsch has an appreciation for the complexity and oddities of politics. She calls history both *impressive* and *laughable* at the same time. This duality of understanding shows a maturity in her thinking. History is not simple or one-dimensional, but rather strange and an analysis of just one aspect of it is insufficient. Kirsch does not only practice this plural way of thinking, but enjoys it. She writes that Wölfchen can't fully *appreciate* the *absurdity*. She says that she is *lucky* to live in a place where she can see the laughable but impressive history with her own eyes. The difficulty of seeing something in a multi-faceted way, the toll it takes to hold multiple viewpoints and truths about just one thing, is augmented by her enjoyment of the experience.

Like Novak, the continual energy and thought given to politics spans not only her professional life but her personal life as well. In her letter, she writes that she has

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<sup>2</sup> From the manuscript it is unclear what work Kirsch meant to write. It could refer to dates, but would be Kirsch's own word as opposed to the correct plural form *Daten*.

spoken to *Wölfchen* about a particular speech that she found important for demonstrating the absurdity of history. Novak's conversations with Kirsch had influenced her thinking and she discussed the evolution of her thoughts in her letter to Kirsch. Similarly, Kirsch's personal conversations about politics influenced her thinking and she reflects it back in her writing to Novak. The process of political thinking is not just a poetic exercise, but is influenced and augmented by every form of communication in Kirsch and Novak's lives.

Kirsch's *Kunstwelt* poem established a pattern of mirroring. The mirroring inverted, stretched, and blurred the natural imagery that Kirsch represented. Novak and Kirsch's pluralistic thinking is another mirroring. Kirsch and Novak represent their political views in conversation. Their views are mirrored by another person, causing them to be inverted, stretched, or blurred. Novak changed her mind on the Russians and whether they were going to war based on her conversation with Kirsch. Kirsch sees the absurdity of history anew when *Wölfchen* cannot quite see it the way she does. These are dualistic relationships, like the dualistic relationships established in the *Kunstwelt* poem. The correspondence between Novak and Kirsch is another dualistic relationship. They have described how their thinking has evolved through their mimetic relationships elsewhere, and we can assume that that will continue to happen in the mimetic engagement of a correspondence.

They even write about the value they see in letter-writing. Handwritten on the side of the letter from October 24<sup>th</sup>, 1983, Novak writes:

„politisch denke ich: das schlimmste wär für mich, in einem Gefängnis zu sitzen, wo man keine Briefe schreiben darf.“

Not only does Novak have a positive opinion about letter-writing, it represents freedom to her. Of all the things associated with sitting in prison, the inability to write is what she is the most concerned about. The act of writing letters is vital for her. Interestingly, she only mentions the writing of letters, not receiving others' letters. Perhaps the act of writing to a particular known addressee is something uniquely valuable. Her poetry has an audience, but a much more abstract addressee than a personal letter, and perhaps the personal address is important for her thinking to evolve. The omnipresence of the other is an important element of letter-writing that does not exist in other kinds of writing.

Novak and Kirsch's commitment to thinking and rethinking politics spans merely wanting to talk or write about politics, to wanting to experience politics first-hand. In an interview that Novak gave the *Berliner Zeitung* on December 29, 2005, she spoke about the places she lived in relation to politics:

*Die Länder, in denen Sie sich nach Ihrer Ausbürgerung gelebt haben, sind Jugoslawien, Polen, Portugal. Hatte das politische Gründe?*

Ach wo. Na gut, in Portugal war ich wegen dieser Nelkenrevolution, das wollte ich miterleben. Nach Jugoslawien bin ich gegangen, weil dem anderen Sozialismus dort versteckt, unter dieser Arbeitermitbestimmung in den Betrieben. Da lebte Tito noch. Ich war fast jedes Jahr in Jugoslawien, dann kam der Krieg. Jetzt bin ich in Polen, nicht immer, aber wenn ich meine Ruhe haben will, habe ich sie dort.

Novak moves certain places to find different experiences. She moved to Yugoslavia to see a version of socialism. She goes to Poland to find quiet. Where she lives, and the freedoms she is afforded is important to her. Her discussion of being in a prison and living in different places to experience politics show how her surroundings have an effect on her. We see in her discussion about the prison that her ability to write about her thoughts and feelings is of the utmost importance to her. In this newspaper article, she describes the importance of place for her political experience and understanding. Just as her discussions with others influenced the way she thought about and understood politics, in a way she has a dialogue with place as well. She is open to all that is around her, allowing the situations around her to influence her. Kirsch does the same thing. She writes about how lucky she was to have moved to the particular neighborhood that she moved to, to experience history there first-hand. Like the mimesis that recurs in Kirsch's poetry, there is a dialogue and interaction between Novak and her environment that leads to something unique. Otherwise she wouldn't write or speak about it so often.

The connection to place and interpreting events for themselves is also a product of the political in itself:

Ich kam ja aus einem Land, wo Presse so zensiert war, dass ich nichts glauben konnte, was ich nicht selbst gesehen hatte. (*Berliner Zeitung*, 29.12.2005, *Novak*)

Seeing something for themselves was not only a question of connecting deeply with the political world, but a quest for truth. They were sure of something when they saw it for themselves. Analysis was part of seeing something for themselves, and it was an important part of an event, but it had to come after being sure that they had correct facts first.

The letters illuminate the way in which Kirsch and Novak engage with political ideas, and how their ideas evolve over time. These are important documents for our understanding of how Kirsch and Novak conceive of, and continually update their understanding of the truth. The letters are also vital in showing that themes of politics were continually urgent for both poets. The natural imagery in Kirsch's poetry subtly addresses political themes, but could be interpreted in many ways. Her engagement with political ideas throughout her letters is important evidence for the political undertones of her poetry. We have explored the ways in which the letters were instruments for the poets to think and rethink their ideas. We will now engage with the ways that the letters illuminate their poetic voices and the way in which the letters evolve and change over time.

*Part Two: Voice in letters, voice in poems*

Novak's poetry comes close to a narrative prose style, particularly when she is writing about politics and when she is using the genre of the ballad. She also frequently focuses on the individual when trying to represent a political issue. She

repeats the same patterns in her letter-writing to Kirsch. She attends a writing program in Iowa in 1983 with writers from all around the world. She writes many letters to Kirsch during this period, more than any other period of their correspondence. She frequently writes about her colleagues there. She seems to grapple with questions of her own nationality and the ways in which politics has affected her colleagues before arriving together in Iowa:

“Wir haben hier einen spanischen Kollegen, Carlos Alvarez, der hat unter Franco irre lange im Gefängnis gesessen, Kommunist, konsequent jetzt nicht mehr in der Partei, weil die meisten es vermeiden, über Politik zu reden. Nun hat er behauptet, die Kommunisten hätten den intensivsten Kampf gegen Franco geführt. Ich mußte ihn leider verbessern und an die spanischen Anarchisten erinnern. Naja, er will sich nochmal mit mir darüber unterhalten. Er weiß ja nicht, daß der spanischen Anarchismus eine meiner Spezialitäten ist.“ (6.9.1983) (Novak an Kirsch)

This story echoes the story of the legionary in “Ballade vom Legionär.” The legionary’s life is interrupted due to the time he serves in the legion. He is no longer welcome back home to his mother, and instead of building a life for himself as a young man, comes back severely wounded and without a home.

In the letter, Novak takes account of the life of Carlos Alvarez, and his long prison sentence. She talks about his separation from the communist party because others *avoided speaking about politics*. She posits that he isn’t a communist because others didn’t like to talk about politics. There is a connection between the legionary in the poem and Carlos – the mother rejects his experience in the war by turning him

away at her door. Those whom Carlos knew rejected his experience as Franco's political prisoner by not discussing politics. Both men separate themselves from what had been close to them – their mother, their political party – in order to validate their own personal experience. Both stories illuminate the way in which politics negatively affects an individual, both directly (such as injury or time in prison) and indirectly as the individual navigates processing and healing from their experiences after the fact. The negative consequences make the reader appreciate the insidious ways that politics continually affects individuals.

That this story is told within a letter gives us a unique window into Novak's voice as a narrator. Her perspective is confident and bold in this story: *ich mußte ihn leider verbessern und an die spanischen Anarchisten erinnern. Naja, er will sich nochmal mit mir darüber unterhalten. Er weiß ja nicht, daß der spanischen Anarchismus eine meiner Spezialitäten ist.* She does not care that he is Spanish, she considers herself the expert and claims to know better than he does. In a review of *solange noch Liebesbriefe eintreffen*, a nearly complete collection of Novak's work by her colleague and friend Rita Jorek, Rita Terras (2000) remarks about her voice throughout:

...it is unmistakable the same voice from the first to the last page, as well as essentially the same persona: a strong, self-confident woman, convinced of her own righteousness, quite humorless.

Indeed, she takes her own voice and knowledge seriously, unwavering in her conviction even in the face of being challenged by someone who came from the country about which she is arguing. She says that Spanish Anarchy is one of her



specialties, asserting her position as an expert, perhaps a sort of scholar. This tone is similar to the narration of her ballads. They are morose and sharp, with an underlying question posed to the reader again and again of “can you believe that individuals endure this for the sake of the Political?”

Her poems lay out the facts clearly and without any frills. The legionary loses an eye in this stanza, a leg in the next. The friend in “Vom Deutschen und der Polizei” is taken by the police unjustly. It is like a report more than a poem, at times, which echoes back to the way Novak positions herself as a scholar in her letter to Kirsch.

In a review, Klaus Phillips (1981) writes:

Simultaneously tough and tender, Helga M. Novak has emerged as one of the most outspoken women writing in the German language today.

Phillips writes about her collection entitled *Palisaden: Erzählungen 1967-1975*. Her signature style is exemplified in all of her work and letters, and most literary critics comment upon it when analyzing her work. Especially poignant in Novak’s writings are the moments when she is *both* tough and tender simultaneously. When she criticizes political crimes, this is evident. The reader can see this in her criticism of the Soviet Union her letter to Kirsch:

„Und ich finde es in dieser Raketen- Verhandlungs- Demonstrations- und Angstsituation nicht nur unverzeihlich, sondern verbrecherisch, ein Zivillflugzeug abzuschießen. Als würde die Technik nicht so weit entwickelt, daß man das ausmachen kann, ob in der Luft ein ziviles Flugzeug oder eine

Atomrakete herumsausen. Sie haben also gewußt, was sie tun, Warum dann?“  
(9.3.1983) (Novak an Kirsch)

She rages against what the Soviets are doing, saying that its actions are unbelievable and *criminal*. She is exasperated, detailing how the Soviets absolutely have the technology to prevent shooting down a civilian plane. Her disbelief shows her toughness. She is angry and expresses herself directly and openly. Yet her toughness is based on ethical seriousness. She believes that war should not injure innocent civilians. She believes governments should never harm their own people if they have any say in it. Her toughness fights for her tender and caring beliefs.

One might wonder in this context whether the role of poetry is to lay out fact, or to have a tone implying a call to arms. Even if the reader didn't see an overt link between Novak's voice in her correspondence and the narration of her work, the examination of how the political affects individual lives is clear in both her letters and her poetry. Rita Terras (2000) finds Novak's approach to discussing politics ineffective:

When Novak turns to politics, social problems, and the recent history of Germany, her voice becomes shrill and the poetry vanishes from her verses. To be sure, she can be properly outraged, sarcastic, pained, and bitter when attacking her enemies and standing up for the underdog...When she turns moralistic...her voice goes flat.

Whether or not Novak lands the desired impact of her writing, her framing of political issues is bold and jarring. Given her outrage and pain, being jarred is important for an audience of any trying political moment. Perhaps there is a kind of poetry in the

“shrill” nature of her voice, perhaps it holds a merit that this critic cannot see. It echoes back to the way in which Novak is characterized as having both a *tough and tender* tone, an embodiment of opposites. The *recent history of Germany* has, in fact, been her life, and perhaps the shrillness comes from the deeply personal nature of writing about these subjects. Surely, it is straining to write about a place that has revoked your citizenship. There is a question of time and urgency when it comes to Novak’s political discussions. Political events have had a dramatic effect on her personal life. These subjects are deeply relevant for her. This particular critic, Terras, was more receptive to her nature poetry, especially her writing about the East German forests. Although beautiful and meaningful for Novak – indeed, she sought a reclusive and natural life and spoke about it often with Kirsch – the forest may not be quite as relevant, urgent, and disturbing to Kirsch as the political. Perhaps her poetic voice changes as her subject matter changes. Perhaps her “shrillness” exemplifies the dualistic toughness and tenderness with a new element – the element of time and the impact of urgency.

The urgency of her work is twofold, personal and nationalistic. Her work frequently touches on political issues, and her letters show that those issues occupy her personal life as well. Themes of her thinking – like oppression and underdogs – span both her personal and published writing. There is another kind of urgency, one that emerges from Novak’s deep loyalty to her country. Her writing is a kind of fierce

fight for just and good politics, for herself, but, perhaps more deeply, for a country she loves. In an essay about Novak by Gert Loschütz (2014), he writes:

Häufig ist es...nicht der Privatmensch, der spricht, sondern das soziale Wesen, der für das Ganze Verantwortung empfindende Gesellschaftsmensch, wobei ihm unerwartet bei diesem zum Widerspruch neigenden Temperament, die Rolle des Staats als Loyalität einfordernder Übervater so selbstverständlich ist, dass der Liebesentzug durch seine Hofschranzen zur persönlichen Tragödie wird.

Novak doesn't speak as merely the private citizen (Privatmensch), but for something larger, for a more urgent matter. Even after being exiled she is deeply loyal to her country, remaining invested in how Germany's history will unfold. The urgency and the "shrillness" of her voice that comes with it is perhaps a reflection of the way in which a national tragedy also becomes a personal tragedy for Novak. Even a national tragedy that wasn't in her own country, like the way in which Russia was harming its citizens, deeply disturbed and outraged Novak. Novak's voice becomes larger, like a *demanding father figure*. Perhaps this embodiment of larger national issues as her own is partly where her brash confidence stems from. She is resolute in her ideas because she is not only speaking for herself, but for the good of the country she is unconditionally loyal to.

### *Corresponding about poetry*

“Meine sehr liebe Helga! Ich wollte Dir gleich schreiben – nun sind doch schon 3 Monate um. Aber inzwischen habe ich auch Dein Buch bekommen, den

Aufenthalt in einem irren Haus. Mit der schönen story vom Lit.-Institut.  
 Clemens. Daß Du über meinen Band keine Kritik gemacht hast, kann ich völlig  
 verstehen.“ (3.1.1973)

Novak and Kirsch write to one another very infrequently about their own writing or career. Sometimes a poem is mentioned as ostensibly being mailed with the letter, but it is never with the letter collection. Kirsch's letter in '73 appears to address Novak's book that she sent, and to discuss work that she herself sent, but it actually has little meaningful content. She acknowledges that she got her new collection, *Aufenthalt in einem irren Haus*, but says nothing else about it besides that it includes a *schönen story* from a literature institute. Perhaps the lack of commentary is related to the fact that Novak did not comment on the collection that she sent. She says that she understands, but it is unclear if that is ironic or perhaps passive-aggressive. If she truly understands, it is evidence for how absent discussions of their own works are from their relationship. They can write pages and pages to each other but barely mention that which they have both deeply committed themselves to. The reader could question whether there was competition between them? Whether they didn't like each other's work? To top off the juxtaposition of such a close relationship that avoids what they most have in common is the first line of the letter: *Ich wollte Dir gleich schreiben*. She wanted to write right away but put it off for three months. This letter is what she so urgently wanted to write. And yet, this letter is almost meaningless with basically no real content.

“nun machen wir es doch lieber schriftlich, wenn ich Dir am Telophon was zu Deinen Gedichten sage, verrauscht es, oder ich bin zu zaghaft und über gehe die Hälfte weil ich mir denke, das weißt Du doch selbst. Aber ich weiß ja wie das ist mit den eigenen Werken da ist man erst mal ein halbes Jahr mit Blindheit geschlagen und wer anders sieht bei wem anders auf Anhieb.<sup>3</sup>“  
 (3.1.1985) (Kirsch an Novak)

This letter from Kirsch is almost exclusively about her critiques of Novak’s writing. But she gives no critique, only explains *how* she will give feedback and tries to make sure that Novak won’t be offended by it. Her tone stands in stark contrast to Novak’s narrative style. The brash, confident speaker throughout Novak’s work and letters is very different from Kirsch’s apologetic and timid voice here. Kirsch discounts her own poetic feedback, even though she is the more well-known poet, by saying that *what I think, you surely already know yourself*. She asks that Novak not *be annoyed at her*. Providing each other with feedback on the others’ work is ostensibly uncharted territory for the two friends. From the correspondence, we see ways in which two female poets articulate themselves in completely different ways. One is unsure and cautionary, one is resolute and unwavering. Not only do we understand two different

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<sup>3</sup> Kirsch kept on detailing exactly how she would give criticism, which I think is poignant, but not essential for the main text: “Ein paar Skrüpel hab ich trotzdem in Deine Blätter was reinzukrakeln, sei also nicht sauer auf mich. Was ich gut finde, hat so eine Krakel bekommen, das sieht zwar nach Leber aus, was ich wiederum vielmals zu entschuldigen bitte, aber irgendwie muß sich artikulieren. Was ich aber wunderbar fand, kriegte 3 Krakel. Was ich sonst noch gemurmelt habe, wirste entziffern, es ist natürlich immer nur was zum überlegen, man neigt ja stets dazu auszudrücken wie man selber etwas getan hätte oder unterlassen, das ist natürlich bei 2 so alten Hasen wie wirs sind gar nicht so einfach, dann mußt Du alles sehr milde betrachten. Ich wollte es aber gleich alles schicken damit Du Deinen Schwung nicht erst bremsen mußt.“

ways in which female writers existed, but perhaps they also influenced and inspired each other with their different approaches.

In the first section of this chapter, letters showed how both Kirsch and Novak are committed to a pluralistic way of thinking. Their correspondence and the discussions with others that they frequently write about show that they tried to think with continual plurality for decades. It appears that they do not use their own poetic craft as a way to deepen their plural thinking. They rarely mention each other's poetry, and usually it is just to acknowledge that they have received a poem or collection that the other has sent. Critique is almost non-existent; when it is present, it is accompanied by long explanations discounting the validity of the critique, as seen with Kirsch's letter in January 1985. Though we don't see a rich exchange regarding the craft of writing, we do witness how their poetry affects, respectively, the other:

„Zu Deinem ‚Schönen‘ Gedicht: schreib Du so oft schön, wie Du es schön findest. Wenns zu viel wird, merkst Du es selber. Ist ja nicht Deine Schuld, wenns andere im Leben nicht schön haben. Ich finds Leben schön und Dein Gedicht auch...Warum ist, was ich schreibe, immer so tragisch? Das bin ich doch gar nicht immer. Warum schreib ich nicht, was mich hochreißt statt runter? Nicht, daß ich mich Täuschungen über die allgemeine Lage hingebe, aber ich lache doch viel und tanze und lebe und verknalle mich dauernd. Ist das nichts? So genau kann ich es Dir nicht erklären, es hat was mit Deinem ewigen ‚schön‘ zu tun.“ 24.10.1983 (N an K)

The way in which Kirsch has addressed beauty as a major theme in her poetry has caused Novak to think. Novak's thinking is meaningful because it does not dismiss her own writing or posit that Kirsch's style is the ultimate way to write. In their other

letters, by contrast, each of them discounts their feedback for the other on her poetry, without engaging deeply with questions or musings that arise from reading. Their discussions on their own poetry are perhaps the driest aspect of all their correspondence. Even in this passage, Novak does not directly critique any of Kirsch's work, but rather says that Kirsch will know herself whether her focus on beauty becomes too much: *schreib Du so oft schön, wie Du es schön findest. Wenns zu viel wird, merkst Du es selber*. Novak dives into questions about poetic style and about whether her poetry reflects her own life. She is struck by the way that Kirsch portrays that which is schön in most of her work. She calls it her "ewigen 'schön'" as if Kirsch's work is eternally positive. She describes her own experience as much more oscillating. She always writes about that which is tragic, but she says that she *lach(t) doch viel und tanz(t) und leb(t) und verknall(t) mich dauernd*. Novak is showing that it is not just through discussion or engagement with others that she challenges herself to think in a plural way. In this letter, she is inspired by Kirsch's poetry. It prompts her to grapple with her own duality and with the plurality of perspective. She has both tragedy and joy in her life, she is struggling with how to balance the two. Kirsch's poetry allows Novak to push those questions and inquiries further. With this shift in thinking, we even see a shift in her writing style. Throughout her letters, rarely does she ask questions. Her voice is assertive and unwavering. In this passage, on the other hand, there are almost as many questions as descriptors. She even says: *so genau kann (sie) es...nicht erklären*. Even though their own poetry and poetic process are not a major part of their



friendship, here it is evident that their poetry has an impact on their respective understandings of the limits of their understanding. It works to further their own thinking so much so that it might even change the way that Novak chooses to express herself through writing.

Novak's comments on beauty in the letter circle around the aesthetic discretion involved in reflections on what it means to write ethically responsible poetry. Novak is concerned about when there will be "zu viel" beauty in Kirsch's poetry. There is a sense that Novak is concerned with poetry remaining austere, discrete, and that it paints a clear -- not beautified -- picture of reality.

Novak searches for the way a poem may be aesthetically accomplished, while avoiding kitsch or sentimentality. Adorno famously wrote in one of his essays: "Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frisst auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben." How can one represent history or historical oppression and violence without transfiguring suffering into beauty?

What is at stake? Why are questions of beauty and representation important in Germany after the Second World War? The war was not divorced from the German language, but incorporated it as part of the core of the project. Bleiker (1999) underscores the way that language was imbued into Nazism:

“Language was not just an innocent bystander to the horrors of Nazism. Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler did not just happen to speak German, Georg Steiner<sup>4</sup> points out. ‘Nazism found in the [German] language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery.’ How could a simple word like ‘spritzen’, Steiner illustrates, ‘ever recover a sane meaning after having signified for millions the “spurting” of Jewish blood from knife points?’”

In a way, the Nazis used language for their own ends. They employed language in a way that it permeated German life even after the regime fell. Nazis used language for evil, but, language of course also ideally serves a critical function. Bleiker (1999) argues that poetry can act as a means for political dissent:

In the domain of social science, poetry is often perceived as a mere ode to the beauty of life... It seeks to show how poetry, as a radical linguistic form of dissent, has the potential to engage important social issues and, as such, constitutes a political practice that must be examined seriously and systematically.

Poetry cannot solve the problem of domination. It merely highlights what is at stake in the interaction between language and politics. Because poetry is self-conscious about the usage of language, it is able to shed light on processes through which all practices of speaking and writing can engender a gradual transformation of societal values. Poetry demonstrates how it is possible to reveal the grey shades of domination and resistance, how social change can emerge from questioning linguistically entrenched ideas, assumptions and social practices that have been placed beyond scrutiny.

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<sup>4</sup> G. Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London, Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 121-1

Bleiker writes about Paul Celan, but he could easily be writing about Novak. Her assertive and resolute voice *question(s) linguistically entrenched ideas*, her work almost begs for *social change*. Poets illuminated the insidiousness of language as a political tool. And without examination, everyone remained talking heads for the regime. Everyone would still use the words and metaphors that had *been placed beyond scrutiny*, that were the only way to represent reality that they knew. It was essential for poets to reimagine and redefine language for a new reality.

Without being reinvented, poetry might have been barbaric. If poets had *stopped* writing, perhaps a different barbarism might have asserted itself. The old language would have been the only available tool for representing the horrors of the time.

Death had to be redefined after the Shoah and World War Two. The parameters and implications would never be the same again. Death had to encompass mass death and death under the most horrific and degrading circumstances. Conversely, beauty also had to be redefined. How could beauty be seen in the same ways after such tragedy? Celan uses beautiful repetitive cadence in his work *Todesfuge*, and beautiful images - the *goldenes Haar Margarete*. But that beauty does not exist without the *aschenes Haar Sulamith*. This combination of beauty and death ends his poem in a couplet. The duality of the images suggests a way that they complete each other, that one cannot exist without the other. At the end of the poem, a *Todesfuge*, a song that ostensibly ushers in death, there is a tension between beauty and

destruction. It suggests a finality of this theme, that it exists at the end of a poem, and a poem about the finality of life, death. In Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Eliezer must choose between what will preserve himself and what will help his father. One beautiful scene is a time when Eliezer gives his father his precious soup. Throughout the entire book he struggles with the tension between taking care of himself and honoring his love for his father. This tension between love and self-protection shows an example of something *placed beyond scrutiny*. There would be no question about obligations to a father before the war -- suddenly it becomes a major question. On the precipice of death, there is a tension between love and beauty and destruction. It mirrors the way that beauty and destruction existed at the end of the *Todesfuge* poem. The horrors of the early 20th century do not lead to a poetic barbarism or an (*Anfressen*) *die Erkenntniss*, instead it forces poets and thinkers towards new insights, an urgent necessity, however painful it might be.

Novak and Kirsch balance a similar tension in their work between political commentary and beauty. Novak's attention to the *Schön* is an attempt to balance it with enough reconsideration and reframing of language to exist after the Wars. It is a new frontier. She says to Kirsch that Kirsch 'will know' when there is too much beauty. There are no rules, there is no program for how to move forward, only the necessity of reflection as one moves. Novak reflects on the beauty in her own life: '*ich lache doch viel und tanze und lebe und verknalle mich dauernd.*' In response to the fact that she only writes about tragedy, she asks: *Ist das nichts?* She is referring to the laughing,

dancing, living and falling in love that she does. There is a void in language. Writers and philosophers see that it is difficult to represent historical violence, they question whether language can represent the plenitude of what needs to be said. Novak is entrenched in this project, always writing about politics and history in a direct manner. For her, it is beauty that is difficult to express in words. The confidence that spans her poetry and letters disappears and she confesses: *So genau kann ich es Dir nicht erklären*. She is unable to make the beauty of her life *clear* within her writing, to describe exactly the way that tragedy and joy can exist together within her life. The balance of the Political with the personal, the frivolous, and the joyful is what Novak struggles to pinpoint, where she questions whether in that space there is simply *nichts*.

#### Gärtners Weltbild

Die Erde ist flach ein Teller  
 Die Sonne wandert von Ost nach West  
 Winde fallen aus ihrer Richtung  
 Kälte bringen sie Dürre und makellos  
 Tiefgrüne Felder langwierige Plagen  
 Goldgebänderter Raupen ein Riese  
 Liegt der Garten im Garten  
 Das Rückgrat die Rippen die Wege  
 Wasseradern verzweigt unterm Pelz  
 Die wetterwendische Haut  
 Des Gärtners gleicht schon der Erde  
 Schöne Falten und Augenmuster Geduld  
 Und Hoffnung mit Löffeln gefressen platte  
 Landgängerfüße vom Gießkannentragen  
 Die leichte ausdauernde Seele Geht und  
 kommt wie sie will.

- Sarah Kirsch, *Katzenleben*, 1984

als würde es der Liebe  
 Abbruch tun  
 daß es kein weißes Nähgarn  
 gibt die Nähte reißen  
 auch bei schwarzem Faden

- Helga Novak, *Märkische Feemorgana*,  
 1989

The two poems address the duality of the world. And not a single duality, but the repetition of dualities. The earth is round but also flat like a plate: *Die Erde ist flach ein Teller*. The sun goes from East to West: *Die Sonne wandert von Ost nach West*. The human gardener is like the inanimate earth: *Das Rückgrat die Rippen die Wege/Wasseradern verzweigt unterm Pelz/Die wetterwendische Haut/Des Gärtners gleicht schon der Erde*. The duality from Novak's short poem is the contrast between the *weißes Nähgarn* and the *schwarzem Faden*. Even the black thread shows a duality, how the *Nähte reißen bei schwarzem Faden*. The black thread also causes something to rip apart, to be separated into two.

The dualities and tensions are exacerbated by the use of dividing lines within the poems. The *Nähte reißen*, there is *Wasseradern* and *schöne Falten*, and the *Rückgrat* separates the two halves of the body. Everything is separate yet interconnected, attached but pulling apart. The images in the poems are of a gardener and some cloth being pulled apart.

The gardener is a symbol of the poet, one who takes what exists on earth and makes something beautiful out of it. Kirsch's poem shows the passing of time in relation to the gardener's work. The sun comes and goes, East to West. There are periods of cold and drought. The gardener's skin changes with age, it is *wetterwendisch*. Through it all, the gardener stays with his craft. The simplest line of the poem is in the middle: *liegt der Garten im Garten*. The gardener endures the changes around him, all the while staying in the garden to garden. As time passes, *die*

*leichte ausdauernde Seele/ Geht und kommt wie sie will.* The garden and the gardening is constant while the soul's presence wanes and waxes. Is it the gardener's soul? The soul of the garden? In an extrapolation from the poem, we could say that the poet stays with her poetry in the garden of writing. The soul of poetry is questioned, it is asked if art can exist after tragedy, or if it is instead *barbaric*. Like the poet, the poet continues: *und Hoffnung mit Löffeln gefressen.* There is difficulty, *Landgängerfüße vom Gießkannentragen*, but she continues.

Novak's poem, too, is about creation. It is about bringing two pieces together even with something as small as a piece of thread. There is black and white thread. Letters on the page are also small, black and white pieces that hold things together, that make connections between concepts much larger than them.

The way that the seams rip is not an isolated event. Novak describes it as *if es der Liebe/Abbruch tun*. The soul wandered away and came back in Kirsch's poem, and in Novak's poem there is also a tension between the personal and intimate concept of love with its destruction. The craft of writing and of stitching things together is intertwined with holding on to the soul and to love. Kirsch's poem shows the waning and waxing of the soul's proximity as natural, as something to be expected. Novak's poem illustrates the destruction of love.

Kirsch and Novak ask, in their poems, and ask each other in their correspondence, not if, but *how* beautiful a poem can be. They also ask, in "Gärtners Weltbild" and "als würde es der Liebe," not just about the objective soul or love of a

poem, but how love or the soul can be transferred to the poem from the poet herself. This discretion and austerity registers their ethical awareness of the stakes of representing violence and hope after violence.

### Conclusion

This project explores Kirsch and Novak's examination of politics, history, plurality, and writing itself through their poetry and correspondence. The reader experiences their shared resolve to discuss and represent these themes as thoroughly and plurally as possible. They see poetry as full of possibility to carry out these discussions as well as holding great responsibility in the German cultural context. One of the most notable aspects of their work is the way their voices differ starkly, even though they address such similar issues. It is powerful to see how two voices can take such different, yet equally powerful, approaches to discussing politics and history.

There are many dimensions of Novak and Kirsch's writing that warrant further scholarship. I did not have time in this senior project to analyze any of Novak or Kirsch's works of prose, for example. Both had several pieces of prose, including an autobiography by Novak. These could show another interesting angle to their respective voices as writers. There are also many themes in their work that I was unable to address. I am interested in the role of the mother in Novak's work, for example, who appears in both "Ballade vom Legionär" and "Ballade von Heinrich." Many critics note the melancholy in Kirsch's poetry, which I was not able to address



either. The full range and nuance of their writing is incredible, and deserves further attention.

This was the first academic work to consider Novak and Kirsch's correspondence. Since it spanned almost 50 years, it was only possible to deeply examine a small selection of excerpts from the letters. There is ample material for further scholarship. One natural extension of this project is to examine the other current events that Novak and Kirsch wrote to one another about. Travel writing and love stories are two other poignant aspects of their letters yet to be examined.

Kirsch and Novak's poems ask us, today, to consider the weight of both history and politics, and what it means to represent them. Their letters are capsules of their own personal histories, with implications for their broader poetic voices. As we, the reader, consider our own personal legacies, their work can inspire us to consider how we engage with and think plurally about politics and history.

## Examples of Letters

*Copies from Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach*

Figure 1

21.12.1985 example of the materiality of letter-writing impacting writing itself

Kirsch to Novak



Figure II

Example of Kirsch letter

Tielentamme 4. November 1888

Liebe Heide,

Deine Post hat lange auf mich gewartet weil ich ja 1 Monat abwesend war - mußte mich in Mainz diesen Film machen, der mit der Stadt Deiner Stelle zusammenhängt. Und Mainz ist für mich immer Exil. Gänzlich finde ich es so. Aber der Film ist fast fertig, sogar schon gedruckt - aber wollen wir ihn lieber vergessen. Für Belohnung war ich schnell noch mal in Island - also 88 zweimal, dies ist 1 Ditz. Ich habe Larven aus dem Meer überbracht, ich hatte Skidell einzuführen versucht, man mußte das, und es war auch sehr schön. Staack und Manthey mit ihren Deibern waren auch noch mit von der Partie und ich habe dem blonden Fiskeliden auch gesehen, welches uns aber nicht sehen wollte und seine Augen halb verlor. Also liebe Heide, Deine Post ist wohlgeraten. Und wir haben auch schon im Hafen so viele kleine wiederholt Deine Briefe. So Du und hast jeden die Tümelte und Unruhe los. Könnte man leichtfertig sagen, was ich natürlich nicht tue, es wäre ja eine Plattheit Sonderfächer, nicht wahr? Ich glaube aber nicht, daß Du dich Deine Jelle abbreiten müßt. Ditzland wird ja wohl duieren und duieren werden aber das ist ja nur Neus für Ditz. So als ich alle die Jänner, das ist klar. Und

idgawerpi and gelben. Die Fotos aus Polen  
 etow, dies ist ja ne Landschaft wie im  
 Brandenburgiden, wunderbar, selb wun-  
 derbar, wölfden würde das auch selb  
 pfillen hat er gesaft. Deine polnische frei-  
 sinzale id also gesau. Stark diese Hilmw-  
 bitern und ein stürzenden Schuppen!  
 Aber noch mal zu dem Mišević, diese Führer-  
 natur FBI, dem geführd. Und manchmal  
 sind die Verhältnisse ja so stark das sie  
 solche Typen bis zumstochin tragen. fast tra-  
 gisch, und die Rolle der Volksmassen wie im-  
 mer jauch zweifelhaft. Halte dich an deinen  
 Heimvater, der scheint gute Menschen zu haben.  
 Die Menge Mensch ist wirklich nicht konfidi-  
 wagen die Spiess and mal so mal liegen.  
 Das ist aber auch ne Überlebensmöglichkeit, es  
 geht nie um Individuen, bloß wieder um  
 eine Art Mensch. was das auch immerhin iss.  
 take bitte fast in deiner Berichterstattung,  
 Du unser Mann im fernen Balkan! Eininter-  
 essiert alle hier in dieser Schule. Di sind  
 konfidi. Aber das bedeutet auch mir.  
 Liebe Helga sei vielmal von uns allen ge-  
 küßt! Mops ist gerade zu Hause, krankge-  
 schrieben für 14 Tage, was wirklich bedenklich.  
 Der Jürlchen ist selb selbheit. Ad Hebe  
 bald wieder! Müß noch ein paar Stauden  
 pflanzen. Es gibt schon Nachtfrost!! Deine  
 Paul

## Figure III

Example of Novak letter addresses questions of beauty in writing; quoted in the title of this senior project

Mayflower, den 24. Oktober 1983

Sarah - Ihr Lieben . 'Ich bin wieder auf Desk.

Nein, ich heirate Janek nicht wegen 'nem Haus. Wenn ich ihn heirate, dann tu ich das, damit er Papiere kriegt und aus diesem Status rauskommt, der bei uns 'Duldung' genannt wird. Mit dieser 'Duldung' erhält er nämlich nie 'ne Arbeitserlaubnis und nie 'ne Aufenthaltsgenehmigung. Das mit dem Haus auf dem Lande in Polen ist ein Traum, der schon zerplatzt, bevor ich aufwache. In der jetzigen politischen Situation also unwahrscheinlich, daß ich in Polen siedeln dürfte. Nun aber ist das ein Traum, den wir beide träumen. Und warum sollen wir nicht allem Ungemach unsere Träume entgegensetzen? Das erhält am Leben. Ich brauche solche Träume und Janek scheinbar auch, nochzu- mal er ja wirklich genug Land dort besitzt. Also, genug für uns zwei. Diese beiden Dinge haben mir überhaupt stets geholfen, - Träume und Geduld. Obwohl ich sehr ungeduldig bin, hab ich andererseits immer warten können. Das heißt, ich bin immer in Erwartung. Und jetzt erzähle ich Dir einen ganz anderen Fall, der mit Traum und Geduld zu tun hat.

In meinem Buch übers Internat, über meine Oberschule in Waldsiedersdorf (Da wirst Dich vielleicht erinnern) kommt immer wieder ein Geschichtslehrer vor, damals 28, also zehn Jahre älter als wir Schüler, von dem ich die Grundlagen in Philosophie und Geschichte gelernt habe. Er hat mich nachhaltig geprägt, und ich war sehr verliebt in ihn. In meinem Buch heißt er Paruch, in Wirklich- keit heißt er Rosliwek. Ich hab jedenfalls in Vogel federlos mein Bestes für ihn getan. Mit Gedichtvortrag und allem Drum und Dran. Er stammte aus Rumä- nien und soff, was das Zeug hielt.

Zurück nach Frankfurt. In den zwölf Jahren, die ich mit Horst zusammen war, habe ich so viel von Rosliwek erzählt, daß Horst und sein Bruder sich mal anlässlich meines Geburtstages hinsetzten und mir mit falscher Schrift einen Brief schickten, Absender: Rosliwek, Inhalt: 'ne hinreißende Liebeserklärung. Moment! Ich hab die Post gekriegt, und hab geglaubt.

Damals hat sich alles in Gelächter und Wohlgefallen aufgelöst, aber ich war durchaus nicht niedergeschlagen, sondern träumte weiter von Rosliwek.

Jetzt sitze ich hier in Iowa, habe mal wieder Geburtstag - acht Jahre später. Ich rufe Horst an, er sagt, "alles Gute, Schöne, Liebe zum Geburtstag, und: hier liegt ein Brief an Dich, von Rosliwek!" Klar, - ich war gewarnt; aber was passiert? Ich sitze so weit weg und hab geglaubt.

Sarah-Liebe, ich habe einen Brief von Rosliwek. Horst hat ihn mir nachgesehen-

Nachdem du das nicht: das Selbstverständnis war für mich, im einem Selbsterkenntnis zu stehen, das ich schon immer als

100 Jahre Feiertag

schickt, und diesmal ist er echt. Dies ist ganz einfach ein Brief, den ich erwartet habe. Das meine ich mit Geduld.

Rosliwek schreibt, daß er sich jetzt ganz und gar der Erforschung der Geschichte der Balkanvölker widmet. Ich hab ihm glatt geantwortet, ihn hätte der Himmel mir geschickt, und zwar zum zweiten Mal im Leben. Denn meine Lenken, hinter denen ich her bin, stammen aus der Walachei, was sein Rumänien ist. Du weißt, dieses Volk, über das ich neulich in Polen recherchiert habe. Rosliwek beherrscht nämlich allerlei abseitige Sprachen, und ich weiß, daß er mir helfen wird. Jetzt kann außer Tod nichts mehr dazwischenkommen. Zu Deinem Brief vom 9. Oktober, den ich eben erst bekommen hab, weil ich ja zwei Wochen weg war! Das Gedicht für Perlenghetti kam also zu spät, aber ich werde es ihm einfach schicken. Mit Gruß von Dir usw. Übrigens ist er gar nicht klein, sondern trotz seines Alters ein wirklich großer Mann, ich hatte ihn am ersten Tag mit Donleavy verwechselt, einem berühmten Iren. Na, sowas passiert. Seine Lesung war richtig gut, er lächelt so ironisch, aber lieb ironisch, nicht aggressiv. Deine Grüße an Hans Weber sende ich Dir hiermit ~~x~~ postwendend zurück. Entschuldige mein früheres Vertrauen zu ihm, aber es hat sich verflüchtigt. Du siehst das klarer, aber ich bild mir auch was drauf ein, kein Mißtrauen zu hegen, bevor ichs nicht besser weiß. Hans wohnt längst nicht mehr in Leipzig, sondern in Fredersdorf, Vorort von Berlin. Auch ist er Vorsitzender des Schriftstellerverbandes Frankfurt/Oder - hat Jochen mir erzählt. Zu Deinem 'Schönen' Gedicht: schreib Du so oft ~~schön~~, wie Du es schön findest. Wenns zu viel wird, merket Du es selber. Ist ja nicht Deine Schuld, wenns andere im Leben nicht schön haben. Ich finds Leben schön und Dein Gedicht auch.

Nochmal zurück nach Toronto, ich hatte ja dann ungebucht und bin bis zum Schluß geblieben, obwohl ich erst am Freitag abreisen wollte, um meine Iowa-Gruppe in Chicago zu treffen. Die Lesungen am Freitag und Sonnabend haben mich richtig umgeworfen. Ich bin in meinem Hotelzimmer rumgelaufen wie in Trance, so weit mußte ich also fahren, um zur Literatur und zu mir selber zurückzufinden. Eigentlich bezieht ~~sich~~ das auf den Beitrag von Ted Hughes. Er hat was ganz Einfaches vorgelesen, was auch in Deinen Briefen anklingt, nämlich: wie er mit den Schafen umgeht (er lebt auf dem Lande), und detailliert, was er zu tun hat, wenn sie Lämmer werfen. 'Tagebuch eines Geburtshelfers' könnte ich das nennen, aber so simpel ist es auch wieder nicht. Denn, was er vorgelesen hat, war große Literatur. Und das gehört eben dazu. Mit dem Thema alleine ist es ja nicht getan, das könnten unsere Bauern in Breitensee auch. Und doch hat mich genau das Thema so beeindruckt, der

'Inhalt' -

*wie man das früher nannte.*

00 wohl der Braune  
 Mystifaz  
 inuorischer  
 Kruu  
 Jeff  
 angezündet  
 hat?

So bin ich dann tagsüber in Klausur gegangen. Warum ist, was ich schreibe, immer so tragisch? Das bin ich doch gar nicht immer. Warum schreib ich nicht, was mich hochreißt statt runter? Nicht, daß ich mich Täuschungen über die allgemeine Lage hingebe, aber ich lache doch viel und tanze und lebe und verknalle mich dauernd. Ist das nichts? So genau kann ich es Dir nicht erklären, es hat was mit Deinem ewigen 'schön' zu tun.

Abends mußten wir dann alle wieder auf der Matte stehen. Stundenlange Lesungen, anschließend im Café bei Lightbeer mit dem Publikum reden, was bei mir aus einer einzigen Person bestand (erkläre ich sofort), darnach wieder als geschlossene Gruppe im Hotel bei Whyski und Wodka über Literatur und unsere beruflichen Bedingungen reden, daraufhin wartete noch mein sinköpfiges Publikum auf mich in der Lobby, um mir Toronto bei Nacht zu zeigen, also rein in den Jazzclub. Keine Nacht bin ich vor vier Uhr ins Bett gekommen, und keinmal war ich betrunken. SCHÖN!

Mein Publikum heißt Karol Orzelski und ist ein polnischer Autor, der seit vier Jahren in Toronto lebt; er hatte mich gleich am ersten Abend angesprochen und dazu verführt, daß ich alle anderen Interessenten an meiner Schriftstellerei abgeschmettert habe. Ich hab 'ne prima Methode, indem ich dernaßen stotternd darlege, nicht Englisch sprechen zu können, daß auch dem ernsthaftesten Interessenten die Haare ausfallen, seine Haut sich krüseln und salziges Wasser ihm in die Schuhe läuft. Ganz Hartgesottene erzähle ich was von Migräne und lasse das Wort 'Wechseljahre' fallen (ich kann nämlich Englisch, wenn ich will). Kurz und gut, Karol war mein Favorit und ständiger Begleiter. Und einen Stadtführer hatte ich auch, mußte nicht dauernd im Kollektiv herumlungern. Fällt mir nochwas ein, die Veranstalter in Toronto wollten nicht, daß wir mit der Bevölkerung unkontrolliert fraternisieren, (wie in China!), und einmal, als wir geschlossen vom Publikums-Café zurück ins Hotel gingen und Karol einfach mitkam, sagte einer unserer Leiter am Eingang zu ihm, er habe sich nun zu verabschieden, wir hätten unter uns nochwas zu besprechen. Karol meinte ganz trocken, ob er wohl ein Hotelpolitist sei oder von einer öffentlichen Zensurbehörde. Beides mußte jener verneinen, und Karol wartete in der Lobby auf mich wie immer. Frech sind ja die Polen! Zurück zu Ted Hughes: wie Du weißt ist er der Mann von Sylvia Plath, <sup>Hawes</sup> und die Zeitungen sind ständig voll davon, wie er sie in den Tod gejagt hat. Alle Emanzen stehen gegen ihn auf, wie EIN MANN. Also mich hat der Kerl aus aller Lethargie und Selbtespiegelung gerissen, hat mich ungekrempelt und mich neu gemacht, obgleich es nun auch nichts Neues war, was er vortrug. Und ich schreibe ja selber ziemlich lebhaft und durchaus nicht dem Leben abgewandt.

Das wars irgendwie für heute, ich denke an Ewald + möchte Ewald mal sehen! Alles Liebe von Helga

## Addendum to Chapter 1

## Fahrt II

1

Aber am liebsten fahre ich Eisenbahn  
 Durch mein kleines wärmendes Land  
 In allen Jahreszeiten: der Winter  
 Wirft Hasenspuren vergessene Kohlplantagen  
 Durchs Fenster, ich seh die Säume der kahlen Bäume  
 Zarte Linie ums Geäst sie fahren heran  
 Drehn sich verlassen mich wieder

2

Im Frühjahr schreitet der Fasan vorbei  
 Seine goldenen Löwenzahnfedern  
 Machen ihn kostbar ich fürchte für ihn  
 Schon ist er verschwunden, zerbrochne Erde  
 Liegt schamlos am Bahndamm aber  
 Beim Schrankenhäuschen wird sie geebnet  
 Von Stiefmütterchen Pfingstrosenbüschen und Veilchen  
 Ich seh schon den Sommer, da  
 Wird das geflügelte Rad rotgetrichen  
 Der Schrankenwärter legt aus Steinen  
 Den Reisenden gute Wünsche

3

Arme Erde rußschwarz und mehlig  
 Schöne Gegenfarbe von Schwertlilien, die blau  
 Und mit seidig geäderten Blüten  
 In letzter Sonne stehn, das geht vorbei  
 Neue Bilder drehn sich der Zug ist so langsam  
 Daß ich die Pflanzen benennen kann  
 Jetzt die Robinien Weißes und Grünes Duft  
 Oder liegt auf den Pfennigblättern  
 Geriesel vom Kalkwerk

4 (siehe Kapitel 1)



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