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*German as a foreign language*

## **Veränderte Landschaft: East German Nature Poetry Since Reunification**

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This paper asks what has become of the distinctive tradition of GDR landscape poetry since reunification. It examines the representation of the physical changes which have come over the East German landscape in the work of older and younger poets, and considers the extent to which they provide objective correlatives for the socio-political and cultural changes experienced since 1989. The role played by landscape poetry in identity construction is also discussed. The past, travel and *Heimat* are themes associated with a new critical regionalism in the new *Länder* founded on personal and collective, local and East German experience. The principal focus is on the poems of Volker Braun, Heinz Czechowski, Wulf Kirsten and Thomas Rosenlöcher, but reference is also made to texts by younger contemporaries such as Kurt Drawert, Durs Grünbein and Michael Wüstefeld.

### 1. The Landscape Poem as a genre articulating responses to social transformation

‘Veränderte Landschaft’ was the title of an anthology of GDR landscape poetry published by the Insel Verlag in 1979. Its editor, Wulf Kirsten, paid tribute to his former teacher at the Johannes R Becher Literature Institute in Leipzig, Georg Maurer, by opening the volume with Maurer’s poem ‘Veränderte Landschaft’, which expressed the feeling of a new beginning at the end of the Second World War, and adopting the phrase to denote a poetic programme celebrating the transformation of society in the GDR under socialism. This new ‘socialist nature poetry’ focused on the working and shaping of the natural environment; the landscape is witness to the process of human self-realisation through interaction with nature, in agriculture and industry. While not himself a particularly distinguished poet, Maurer was a perceptive essayist and an influential teacher, who grounded a generation of East German writers in poetic tradition. The ‘landscape poetry’ of what has become known as the ‘Sächsische Dichterschule’, a loose grouping whose members included Volker Braun, Heinz Czechowski, Sarah Kirsch, Wulf Kirsten, Kito Lorenc and other less well-known writers writing from the 1960s to the 1980s, built on the work of the earlier ‘social’ nature poets Theodor Kramer, Peter Huchel and Johannes Bobrowski, and the critical realism of prose writers on the provinces such as Oskar Maria Graf. At the same time, it engaged in a critical dialogue with Klopstock and Hölderlin, Schiller and Goethe, making it

clear that the encounter with nature and the farming landscape (*Kulturlandschaft*) continued to serve as a vehicle for the articulation of personal feelings and circumstances, and to prompt reflection on society and politics, however much their understanding of nature differed from that of their eighteenth and nineteenth-century predecessors.

The process through which this socialist nature poetry, a distinctive phenomenon without genuine equivalent in West Germany, Austria or Switzerland, developed into a medium of political dissidence has been described elsewhere (see Berendse 1990 and Emmerich 1990). In the course of the 1970s industrial pollution and the environmental damage resulting from open-cast mining and collectivised agriculture found their way into poems with increasing frequency. The disappearance of the familiar landscapes associated with traditional farming and forestry was lamented increasingly openly as damaging to the environment and detrimental to the lives of the people, but the real significance of the change lay in its metaphorical implications. Disillusionment with the Marxist-Leninist ideology of progress, a process in which social and political advances were seen to go automatically hand in hand with science, technology and economic growth, found expression initially in ambivalences and wistful phrases, and later in apocalyptic visions conveying a massive critique of contemporary society.

The lyric 'Abfallandschaften' (Heukenkamp 1981: 249) of the 1980s were realistic descriptions and simultaneously emblems of political stagnation and individual alienation. How far beyond the mere documentation of everyday socio-political reality they could go may be seen in the obscure, but suggestive poems published in the West under the title *abwesenheit* by the ex-coal miner Wolfgang Hilbig, which allude to the decaying industrial wasteland around his home in Meuselwitz, South of Leipzig (Hilbig 1979). Twenty years later, Lutz Seiler published similarly laconic and demanding, but equally fascinating, many-layered poems evoking personal traumas associated with the environmental damage and sense of political oppression in the final decade in the GDR (Seiler 2000). The title of his poetry volume, *pech und blende*, alluded, via 'pitchblende', to the notorious Thuringian uranium mines, while implying the ecological blindness and destruction involved in their operation. (The village he grew up in disappeared in their path.) Durs Grünbein, probably the best-known younger poet from East Germany today, also depicted the landscape of his childhood on the periphery of Dresden as a 'Grauzonenlandschaft' in the volumes

*Grauzone Morgens* (1988) and *Schädelbasislektion* (1991). In a poem written in the early 1990s he recalls how he gazed longingly at the aeroplanes passing overhead:

Gezeugt im verwunschenen Teil eines Landes  
 Mit Grenzen nach innen, war er Märchen gewöhnt,  
 Grausamkeit. [...]  
 Hinter den Hügeln, gespenstisch, zog den Schluß-  
 Strich kein Horizont, nur ein rostiger Sperrzaun.  
 Landeinwärts ... gehegte Leere. Sein Biotop, früh  
 War ein riesiger Müllberg, von Bulldozern  
 Aufgeworfen, am Stadtrand. Ein Manöverfeld,  
 Naßkalter Sand, übersät mit Autoreifen und Schrott,  
 Dazu ein schillernder Teich, eine Einflugschneise,  
 Ein dürres Wäldchen. (Grünbein 1994: 58, lines 1-3 and 7-14)

The citizens of the GDR are presented as living under an evil spell, at the mercy of political lies and cruelty. They are imprisoned in a habitat of decay and emptiness, surrounded by rubbish dumps, polluted ponds and crippled trees. The reference to a military exercise area reinforces the link between environmental degradation and the repression of individual self-realisation.

This paper is not, however, concerned with poems recalling such scenes, but with poetic responses to a third major change to the East German landscape in the last half century, after socialist transformation and ruthless industrial exploitation: the consequences of the impact of unification in 1990. After a brief discussion of the environmental situation in the new *Länder* today, and the role played by writers in publicising environmental issues and constructing new, regional identities in East Germany, I examine a selection of post-*Wende* poems. My choice is guided by a preference for short poems, so they can be quoted in full, general accessibility and the aim to address three questions: firstly, how the new social and political order is characterised through depiction of the change in the rural and urban landscape, secondly, what function the individual's encounter with these landscapes serves in constructing a post-*Wende* identity, and finally, what particular contribution poetry has made to this process.

## 2. Recent changes in the East German landscape

What has become of the 'blühende Landschaften' famously promised to the people of East Germany by Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the winter of 1989? Positive developments in the new *Länder* have included the clean-up of polluted industrial sites and the regeneration of industry, agricultural reform and the revitalisation of backward rural areas (Zschiesche 2003). Borders and other physical barriers have been removed, military exclusion areas returned to normal civilian use, new national parks and nature reserves created for the enjoyment and benefit of all. But there have equally been less welcome aspects of change: urban sprawl and poorly planned development, a huge increase in the volume of traffic and associated pollution, insensitive standardisation, and the advent of advertising and other outward signs of commercialisation. In a recent rather gloomy article on the state of the environment and the environmental movement in East Germany, Michael Zschiesche notes the impressive success of the clean-up operation undertaken in the 1990s: between 1990 and 2000 sulphur dioxide and dust emissions were reduced by 94 and 99% respectively, and the condition of the East German forests has improved correspondingly. However, the change is largely a result of the closing down of dirty industries. The old, visible pollution has to a certain extent been replaced by new pollutants and forms of environmental damage (Zschiesche 2003: 37).

Reunification has imported the unsolved structural problems of the social market economy. East Germans, once models in recycling and the sparing use of resources, now produce more *per capita* waste than their neighbours in the West, and the shift from public transport to private cars has led to a dramatic increase in noise and the related forms of atmospheric pollution. At the same time, the relaxation of planning legislation to allow rapid commercial development has resulted in irreparable damage to towns and the countryside. Scandalous exceptions to building restrictions have been granted in nature reserves. Interest in the environment waned rapidly after 1990. The dynamism of the GDR environmental movement with its various official and unofficial home-grown organisations in the late 1980s did not survive the process of reorganisation into NGOs along West German and international lines. The country's considerable environmental problems were tackled largely 'from above', by West German experts, and any remaining concerns of the disempowered public were swiftly displaced by more urgent economic ones.

### 3. Writers, environmental activism, and identity construction in East Germany

In the years leading up to 1989, a sizeable number of GDR writers were involved in the 'Literatur um Welt' working group within the Writers' Union (see Goodbody 1994). Others, including such internationally known figures as Christa Wolf, Volker Braun and Heiner Müller, also participated in environmental debates, drawing attention to the wretched environmental situation in poetic elegies, dramatic scenarios and satirical or apocalyptic narratives. After the *Wende*, the social importance of their concern received a measure of official recognition in the Erwin Strittmatter Prize for Environmental Literature awarded annually by the Brandenburg State government (see Pietraß 2000), and environmental issues have featured prominently in the programme of the Academy of the Arts in Saxony. To what extent do post-*Wende* poems reveal a continuation of such concerns? Do recent poetic landscapes reflect the social consequences of political and economic change, e.g. unemployment and shifting ownership patterns? And what links are there between landscapes and the new, precarious economic position and social standing of the writer?

The second and third of these questions, which I will attempt to address with reference to relevant texts below, raise the issue of the use of landscape as a metaphor, and of the poem as a vehicle for the poet's self-definition through analogies between the landscape and the poet's individual situation – analogies which may of course be applicable to a wider public. This assumes particular importance for GDR citizens, who were plunged into an identity crisis by unification with the Federal Republic. As Gabrielle Zimmer, who succeeded Gregor Gysi as Leader of the PDS in 2000, expressed it in an interview:

Ich bin auf der Suche nach einer neuen Identität. Man kann Thüringerin, Europäerin, Weltbürgerin sein, wie man will – für mich gibt es darüber hinaus eine nationale Identität. [...] Ich [...] hatte eine durchaus positives Verhältnis zur DDR. Ich habe mich zu ihr als meinem Land bekannt. Jetzt, wo es sie nicht mehr gibt, bin ich ein bißchen auf der Suche nach einem Ersatz. (*Tageszeitung*, 28 October, 2000, p.3. Quoted in Thompson 2002: 125)

The loss of the State they had hitherto identified with was compounded by the demise of the Party which had provided a powerful ideological focus, leaving behind a vacuum and the need for new sources of self-identification, as Gisela Brinker-Gabler has argued in a thoughtful article on 'Writing (East) Postunification Identity in Germany' (Brinker-Gabler

1997).<sup>1</sup> The transition from GDR to German nationality left East Germans ‘displaced’ spiritually and mentally, and dislocated from their history and culture. The prevailing view in the West that their efforts to create a true socialist society were worthless, and the denial that they had a positive contribution to make to the new Germany, meant they were marginalised – especially those writers and intellectuals who had held fast to the ideas of a Third Way (socialism with a human face) in the autumn of 1989. Writers experienced mixed feelings, finding themselves in positions which can be located on a sliding scale between the extremes of the *immigrant* (i.e. enthusiastically embracing the new host culture) and the *exile* (suffering from rupture from the original culture).

If they were to avoid idealising the past, looking back at the GDR nostalgically as a sphere of stability, and forgetting the price that had been paid for this in terms of individual liberty, writers were forced to adopt one of two strategies. While some made a radical break with the utopian socialism they had previously regarded it as the purpose of their writing to promote (Helga Königsdorf serves Brinker-Gabler as an example), others sought to make creative use of the interstitial space between the old East and the new unified State. (Brinker-Gabler’s example is Christa Wolf.)

One way forward for East Germans, Brinker-Gabler writes, has lain in the redefinition of identity by recollecting and rearticulating the past. For many, unification meant their past was taken from them, appropriated and devalued by the West, undermining their self-worth. Writing is a form of resistance against this: it remembers and constructs, through a blend of reality and imagination, recall and fictional narrative, a history which legitimises their experiences and those of their readers.<sup>2</sup>

A second theme related to identity construction is travel. Journeys, literal and metaphorical, for instance in the form of imaginary dialogues with an alternative community of

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Karoline von Oppen for drawing my attention to this publication.

<sup>2</sup> As Stuart Taberner notes in the introduction to a recent volume on the role of culture in ‘recasting German identity’ in the Berlin Republic, the idea of self-understanding as ‘a narrative consciously or unconsciously constructed from the intersections between different histories – military, national, local, class, ethnic, gender, biographical, etc.’ developed in the writings of Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, Jan and Aleida Assmann and others now constitutes a more or less universally accepted conception of identity (Taberner and Finlay 2002: 4).

geographically distant contemporaries and figures from the past, facilitate a process of self-questioning and provide orientation.

A third way forward has been the rediscovery of *Heimat*. Not, needless to say, through idealisation of happier times in the past and their commodification in nostalgic ‘*Heimat* discourse’, but rather through identification with a geographical area and community, and the development of a self-understanding of which these form a part. In post-*Wende* East Germany, Brinker-Gabler argues, identifications have more often been local and international than national. The new, unified German State did not constitute an entity with which East Germans identified emotionally. However, the demise of the GDR opened up possibilities of situated meaning and emotional belonging which had been suppressed in forty years of the socialist State. For many, the local area, city or region has become a focus for *Heimatgefühl*. As well as being associated on the one hand with personal memories and family origins, it harbours familiar historical legends, traditions and allegiances. Personal and collective memories come together in a feeling of homeland. Such feelings are not without their dangers: regional pride can manifest itself in parochialism and the exclusion of outsiders such as immigrants and ethnic minorities. However, Brinker-Gabler suggests, the emergence of a ‘critical regionalism’, conscious of the dangers of *Heimatgefühl*, can be observed in the new *Länder*.<sup>3</sup>

It will be useful to bear in mind the distinction between immigrant and exile in the following discussion of poems, and to ask whether private revisiting of the past, gaining an awareness of cultural alternatives and creating an alternative community through travel, and rediscovering *Heimat* in a critical regionalism, have possessed the importance for poets which Brinker-Gabler considers they have for prose writers.

From a vantage point in 2005, the perspectives and questions outlined by Brinker-Gabler require modification in one respect. It was not clear when she was writing in 1996-7 that

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<sup>3</sup> Taberner again concurs, in a résumé of Peter Thompson’s chapter ‘The PDS: “CSU des Ostens”?’ (Thompson 2002), that ‘generations raised in East Germany, or even post-1990 in the space of the former GDR, have fewer difficulties with the notion of *Heimat* than their Western counterparts’. Ideas of collectivism inherited from the GDR in the PDS’s programme of ‘regional identity’ should be seen as ‘a form of resistance to the enforced homogeneity of the Berlin Republic and to the rampant individualism that many people see as part of globalisation’. (Taberner and Finlay 2002: 9)



what she saw as mere *Ostalgie* would develop into the revival of East German identity we have seen over the past decade. Paul Cooke writes of a new ‘visceral’ sense of Easternness reflected and actively fostered by intellectuals and writers. There is nothing new in this: national feeling in 19<sup>th</sup>-Germany was already described by Friedrich Meinecke as a ‘by-product’ of the intellectual efforts of poets and thinkers. The concept of the *Kulturnation* not only preceded any realistic hope of political unification, it also survived as an ideal after the division of Germany in 1949, when writers maintained a dialogue with their counterparts in the other German State during the cold war years. Around the unification of Germany in 1990 this notion of a unified cultural nation was again evoked by the cultural and political elites, as a potential means of overcoming the obvious social and economic disunity, and writers were exhorted to do their bit for ‘inner unity’.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Cooke suggests, East German writers, and particularly the younger ones, have contributed and are contributing more to the constitution of an East German regional identity than to a German national one. (He does not consider the significance of more localised identities, for instance in Saxony.) They articulate a notion of East Germanness based on private examination of the collective past experience and a shared sense of dislocation within the unified German State. To what extent, we may then also ask, have post-*Wende* landscape poets articulated this new form of East German identity, and participated in its construction?

#### 4. The Landscape Poem since 1990

Several generations of landscape poets have observed and commented on change in East German cities and the countryside since reunification. Among the better known are Volker Braun, Heinz Czechowski, Elke Erb and Wulf Kirsten, who were born in the 1930s, Richard Pietraß, Thomas Rosenlöcher and Andreas Reimann, born in the 1940s, Kurt Drawert, Uwe Kolbe and Michael Wüstefeld, born in the 1950s, and Lutz Seiler, Durs

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<sup>4</sup> See Cooke (2002: 152). See also the section ‘Das Problem der “inneren Einheit” in Gedichten, Essays, Autobiographien, Debatten und Stellungnahmen’, in Neuhaus (2002: 260-80).

Grünbein and Christian Lehnert, born in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> During and immediately after the *Wende*, many poems were written and collected in anthologies such as *Grenzfallgedichte* and *Von einem Land und vom andern* (Chiarloni and Pankoke 1991 and Conrady 1993). Elke Erb's 'Perspektive im Februar', written in 1990 in response to a questionnaire canvassing opinion on the *Wende*, adopts a cautiously optimistic stance:

Mir will nicht in den Kopf  
ein in der Zukunft wartendes Elend,  
und sei es das einer Minderheit.

Mir geht nicht aus dem Kopf  
die vergiftete Natur der Umwelt  
und die geschändete der menschlichen Produktivität.

Im Vordergrund meines Interesses taucht 'der Deutsche' auf,  
eine Begegnung, die mich freut;

er ist zu studieren:  
Wie richtet er Schaden an,  
wie gedeiht seine Güte,  
schmarotzt er? (Chiarloni and Pankoke 1991: 80)

Erb draws a parallel between environmental damage and exploitation of the people, and speculates on the characteristics of a new all-German identity. She asks herself whether Germans will now avoid living at the expense of nature and poorer nations. Neither local nor East German identity concern her at this point. Volker Braun's 'Der 9. November', a poem on the fall of the Berlin Wall, reflects a different response to the extraordinary events of the Winter of 1989-90:

Das Brackwasser stachellippig, aufgeschnittene Drähte  
Lautlos, wie im Traum, driften die Tellerminen  
Zurück in den Geschirrschrank. Ein surrealer Moment:  
Mit spitzem Fuß auf dem Weltriß, und kein Schuß fällt.  
Die gehetzte Vernunft, unendlich müde, greift  
Nach dem erstbesten Irrtum ... Der Dreckverband platzt.  
Leuchtschriften wandern okkupantenhaft bis Mitte. BERLIN  
NUN FREUE DICH, zu früh. Wehe, harter Nordost. (Braun 1993: 51f.)

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<sup>5</sup> My (admittedly limited) reading of post-*Wende* poetry has not, then, borne out Karen Leeder's assertion that 'poetry about the natural landscape', which she describes somewhat uncharitably as 'such an overworked part of the GDR tradition (from Aufbau to "Öko")', is practically absent from the writing of the generation born after the Second World War (see Leeder 1996: 264, note 55).

If Erb stands midway between the immigrant and the exile, Braun is clearly closer to the latter. Like many other members of the GDR intelligentsia, he experienced unification as a humiliating failure, putting an end to aspirations held for decades to create an alternative to Western capitalism, and a process of colonisation, in which East Germans were relegated to the status of second-class citizens in the new state. At first he expresses astonishment and ambivalent feelings at the non-violent collapse of the GDR military and political establishment. On the one hand, the term 'Brackwasser' suggests a society which has been stagnant: this critique is reinforced by the impact of its liberation from confinement behind barbed wire and land mines. On the other, the path taken towards rapid unification is presented as a mistaken, knee-jerk reaction laying the country wide open to Western advertising and capitalism. The euphoric words of the West Berlin mayor Walter Momper are cited in sarcastic capitals, and the poem closes with a warning of political storms to come. Braun foresees the replacement of the old landscape, which he describes in terms comparable to Grünbein's 'Grauzonenlandschaft', by a new, commercialised and commodified one. Both serve as images for social relations. Though the poem is not explicitly concerned with the construction of a new personal or collective identity, it anticipates the emergence of a sense of East Germanness within the new nation, based on the shared experiences of forty years of socialism, the upheavals of the *Wendezeit*, and distrust of and resistance to capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

The dismantling and abandoning of military installations mentioned in Braun's poem also features in post-*Wende* poems by Kirsten, Pietraß and Rosenlöcher. The pleasure they express in nature repossessing territory once used for purposes of oppression and destruction remains recognisable, but changes its significance in Lutz Seiler's more recent poem 'safari'. Here the military buildings have first been adapted to serve a commercial function:

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Grix has identified two principal factors germane to East German identity: on the one hand socialisation in the GDR (an authoritarian form of socialism, which left values centred on equality in society, acceptance that the State had a major role to play, solidarity and a self-perception of modesty), and on the other, the shared experience of the transformation process after 1989 – a transition from being a citizen of a State which guaranteed a job for life to living in a region experiencing mass unemployment and widespread restructuring of previous political, social and economic frames of reference (Grix and Cook 2002: 11).

ich sah die aufgegebenen flaggen von  
 citroën am alten panzerplattenweg; ein toter  
 xantia-handel. das  
 dach: durchstoßen [...]

vergessne, restlos  
 ausgestorbne arten kehren um, sind  
 gleichgestellt und kämpfen, wölfe  
 & insekten auf den alten routen [...]

[...] ich  
 sah die böden: schon entsiegelt. aus  
 dem grundriß der wachstube wuchs  
 wachsteppe. (Seiler 2003: 88, lines 1-4, 13-16 and 18-20)

Seiler seems to be envisioning the self-destruction of modern civilisation and nature's triumphal return. This motif also plays a central role in Andreas Reimann's provocatively pessimistic poetry volume *Zwischen den Untergängen* (Reimann 2004). In the poem 'Untergänge' (p. 117), Reimann comments with pleasure that nature is indifferent to man's judgement, and in 'Utopia' he foresees a post-nuclear, post-human landscape:

Wenn in die märkische wüste der leguan heimkehrt,  
 ein seltsamer sandfisch, und wir uns in dörrobt verwandeln,  
 da unserer selbst wir uns niemals erbarnten: wie klar  
 wird dann der frieden sein endlich!: aus allen verstecken  
 züngelt, zunächst nur sehr zögerlich, zierlich das gras,  
 ein schachtelhalmwald überwächst die bedrohlichen dome. (Reimann 2004: 115, lines 1-6)

More characteristic of East German poetry in the 1990s is, however, Richard Pietraß's melancholy account of the sale of the countryside to Westerner developers, in the poem 'Randlage':

Die letzte Saat  
 Des Felds ist aufgegangen.  
 Ellenbogen  
 Vermessen das Land.

Pflöcke stückeln  
 Roggenschläge.  
 Zins- und Pferdefuß  
 Gehen zur Hand.

Am Rapsrain  
 Trapst die Nachtigall.  
 Die Säge singt  
 Im Holunder.

Die Bauern motten  
Pflüge ein.  
Dem Schafstall  
Blüht ein Quellewunder.

Wohin ich Habnicht sehe  
Sieht mich das Ende an.  
Ich stehe und verstehe.  
Wende sich, wer kann. (Pietraß 2002: 29)

The fields in which crops of rye and rape once grew, and which are now marked out for commercial development, provide a striking image for the loss associated with the structural change which is sweeping over the country. Elder trees, associated in folklore with the nature spirits, are being felled, and the lambing shed is making way for the warehouse of a mail order firm. The end of agricultural production and the mothballing of ploughs can be understood as alluding by extension to the winding down of GDR industries by the *Treuhandanstalt*. Capitalism appears as a Darwinian struggle for survival, in which the simple East Germans are tricked out of their inheritance by clever entrepreneurs in dubious business deals. The dispossessed and disillusioned poet ends on a note of cynicism ('Wende sich, wer kann'), yet not necessarily one of resignation, for there is a subversive delight in his use of rhyme and alliteration, and his adaptation of sayings ('die Sache hat einen Pferdefuß', 'Nachtigall, ich hör dich trapsen') and metaphors ('Ellenbogen/Vermessen das Land'). Like Braun, Pietraß slyly constructs an East German community of resisters to capitalism. The theme of the sell-out of the country is in fact treated by Braun with a comparable mix of pathos and irony, in the poem 'Einsteins Wiese':

Der Makler führt mich auf den falben Hügel  
Einsteins Wiese im krummen Raum  
Der Geschäfte, Ginster mit Grundzins  
DAS EXIL IN BENZINFREIER LUFT zum Liebhaberpreis  
Böhmen am Meer wird eine Immobilie. (Braun 1996: 167)

'Bohemia on the coast' is reduced to a piece of real estate – the phrase, borrowed from Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, via Ingeborg Bachmann's poem 'Böhmen liegt am Meer', is one of a series of terms used by Braun for his vision of a socialist utopia, the potential GDR idyll (others are 'das innerste Afrika', 'Lustgarten Preußen' and 'Atlantis'). However, it is particularly apposite here: 'Einsteins Wiese' is the name of an unspoiled place on the Baltic

coast ('Hochland auf Hiddensee', see Braun 1996: 173). In the phrase 'krummer Raum' Braun has also smuggled in an allusion to the curved space-time in Albert Einstein's *Theory of General Relativity*.

Thomas Rosenlöcher's poem 'Das Immobilistenballett' similarly satirises a visit by West German financiers to the site of a proposed development:

Die Autos stehn schräg auf der Wiese. Die Herren  
 Treten drei Schritt vor und heben die Köpfe  
 Im Grölen der Vögel. Ist ja wirklich hier  
 Eine richtige Wildnis. Doch schwierig als Bauland.  
 Wie soll sich das rechnen? Rechnet sich das,  
 Kauft man sich gleich was, und wieder drei Schritt vor,  
 Wo man noch wirklich, und Brombeergerank  
 Umklammert die Hosen, zu leben versteht,  
 In der Toscana, der Kirschbaum muß weg,  
 Zwecks Tiefgarage - aufwehn die Schlipse,  
 Das Grölen der Vögel malt Bögen in ihre  
 Pragmatischen Hirne, und selbdritt drei Schritt  
 Stolpern die Herren, SOS tippt einer  
 In den Taschenrechner, o Wunder, in Richtung  
 Toscana. Totale Kirschblütenverschüttung. (Rosenlöcher 1996: 54)

The countryside is here in the eyes of the developers an object to be exploited, so they can buy themselves villas in Tuscany. The 'total burying' of the cherry blossom to make way for an underground garage in the final line evokes a recurring motif in Rosenlöcher's poetry. Like his earlier poem 'Das Schreckensbild', in which he celebrated the ability of a cherry tree to flower amid a desolate industrial wasteland, it echoes Barthold Heinrich Brockes' vision of the deity in the much anthologised poem 'Kirschblüte bei der Nacht'. (See for instance Grimm 1995: 81f.) However, pathos is here, as above with Pietraß and Braun, qualified by humour: the developers move in comic, clumsy ballet steps, brambles catch in their trousers, the wind in their ties, and the birdsong interferes with the calculations of their pragmatic brains.

'Das Schreckensbild' was among 76 poems written by Rosenlöcher between 1976 and 1987, reflecting on life in the GDR and Saxon identity with self-critical irony, which he made minor changes to, rearranged and republished in 1998 (Rosenlöcher 1998: 64f.). Such re-collection and rearticulation of the past constitutes, as Brinker-Gabler has pointed out, like Volker Braun's intertextual dialogue with his earlier poetry, one way in which writers

sought to redefine identity after 1990. A second is in poems on travel. Many of the poets examined broadened their horizons by spending periods of time in the West (West Germany, Paris, Amsterdam or Tuscany), and some (Czechowski, Drawert and Kolbe) have left East Germany for good – though they have written about visits to the landscapes of their childhood. The unsettling impact of reunification is evident even in the poetry of writers who had left the GDR for the West more than a decade earlier, such as Günter Kunert and Sarah Kirsch. Although Kirsch had found a new home among the fields and dykes on the North Sea coast of Schleswig-Holstein, a visit to Berlin at the end of 1990 prompted her to write in the poem ‘Aus dem Haiku-Gebiet’ (an allusion to the GDR): ‘Das Jahr geht hin./ Noch immer trage ich/ Reisekleider.’ (Kirsch 1992: 5) She did not, however, return to live in Berlin. The feeling of many East German poets that they were no longer at home anywhere after 1990 is expressed in Heinz Czechowski’s ‘Die Stadt’, written after a bittersweet re-encounter with his birthplace, Dresden:

Die Stadt, Welt-  
 Meisterin in der Kunst des Vergessens.  
 Über den Fluß  
 Kommen die Wolken, ost-  
 Wärts dreht sich der Wind.  
 Die Brücken, kaum zerstört  
 Von des Krieges Angriff: hier  
 Stand ich mit Leising.  
 Oder der Freundin, vordem.

Jetzt, in Schöppingen, denk ich:  
 Wäre ich doch geblieben  
 Dort oder sonstwo, bloß nicht  
 Hier, wo ich mit Schnapses Hilfe  
 Hinübersegele,  
 Der Fliegende Deutsche,  
 Ins Nachbarland Holland. (Czechowski 2002: 22)

Czechowski decided to move permanently to the quiet Northrhine-Westphalian town of Schöppingen after spending a period there as writer in residence. The raw emotions, including self-pity which are evident here, as in so many of his poems in the 1990s, are qualified by humorous detachment in the second stanza, where he describes himself as a ‘Flying German’ living on the Dutch border. Despite the melancholy tone of the poem, he refuses to share in the common amnesia, and is recognisably engaged in the process of reviewing the past on which the construction of personal and collective identity is often

grounded. In the poem 'Aufenthalt', Czchowski describes an unfriendly encounter when passing through Weimar, a city which is, like much of East Germany in the 1990s, 'im Umbau begriffen' and 'bis zur Unkenntlichkeit entstellt'. 'Wärn Sie doch drüben geblieben!', the station master calls, when he complains that all the public lavatories are out of order, and he concludes wryly that a city he once loved is being 'whisked in steamed cement', in preparation for the anticipated invasion of tourists on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Goethe's birth:

Das Jahr Zweitausend naht, das achtundneunzigste endet.  
 Die Weltkulturhauptstadt bereitet sich rohen Tons  
 Auf die Ankunft der Dioskuren vor:  
 Was du einst geliebt, wird verquirlt  
 Im bedampften Zement. (Czechowski 2002: 63, lines 14-18)

But it is Dresden and Leipzig which form the main focus of his attention. Dresden, with its great cultural flowering in the Baroque, when the Electors of Saxony were also Kings of Poland, its terrible destruction by British incendiary bombs in February 1944, and its decades of neglect as a provincial backwater under the SED, has emerged as one of the principal sites of local identity for East German poets.<sup>7</sup> Exploring personal memories and the history of the city, they express a powerful sense of belonging, and are fiercely critical of the forgetting of awkward aspects of the past which has accompanied Dresden's reinvention of itself as a heritage site, and the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche, the castle and the Academy of the Arts. Kurt Drawert's poem 'Wo es war' expresses a double disappointment, with industrial development and pollution, and with forgetfulness, in this place where, like Auschwitz, the grass is growing over the scars of the past:

Hier kam ich als Kind her, verstört,  
 hier ging es uns gut [...]

Später, an einer empfindlichen Stelle  
 der Biographie, brach, wie dem einen  
 die Stimme, dem andern

das Rückgrat [...]

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<sup>7</sup> The anthology *Zauberort. Dresden als Gedicht* (Stiebert 2004) contains texts by 17 living poets, including Wulf Kirsten, Heinz Czechoski, Volker Braun, Thomas Rosenlöcher, Michael Wüstefeld, Kurt Drawert, Durs Grünbein and Christian Lehnert.



Wo es war, hat das Gras schon zu wuchern  
 begonnen. Die kleine Senke im Boden,  
 in der ich von Liebe geträumt haben muß,  
 ist mit Schotter gefüllt, Lachen von Flußtang  
 und Öl, zerdrückte Aluminiumdosen,

ein Brandfleck. Auch diese Erde  
 hat ihre Geschichte verleugnet. (Drawert 1996: 80, lines 7-8, 10-13 and 16-22)

In a poem entitled '6.5.1996', Volker Braun revisits the city of his childhood, where his mother is now dying. He is caught in a traffic jam on the bridge opposite the castle, which, named after Georgi Dimitroff in 1945 (the Communist accused by the Nazis of burning down the *Reichstag* in February 1933, whose courageous defence gained him acquittal), was given back its old name, 'Augustusbrücke', in 1990. Forced to walk through the vast building site that the city centre had become, he is prompted by the excavations and the laying of new foundations to engage in painful reflection on his life and the mistakes of the GDR:

das Taxi

Steckte im Stau auf der ~~Dimitroff~~ der Augustusbrücke  
 Nichts ging mehr während meine Mutter starb  
 Ich ging zu Fuß umrundend eine Erdramme [...]

Die Stadt war aufgerissen wie nach dem Angriff  
 Barockschutt, man kann in den Fundamenten wandeln  
 Und den Irrtum suchen. (Braun 1999: 25)

Braun's poem exemplifies the use of the changing landscape as a signifier of the loss of a GDR identity associated with fairness, goodness and compassion, but more importantly, also as a trigger for critical self-examination and reflection on the past, reviewing hopes and illusions.

My final examples return to the poetry of the natural landscape, and illustrate the development over the decade of the 1990s. Observation of the countryside serves as a vehicle for identity construction in Wulf Kirsten's post-*Wende* poem 'Wie leb ich hier?':

die unschuld des ersten blicks  
 hat sich verloren,  
 das flurengefühl versteppt.  
 wo sich die stadt aufläßt und grün wird,  
 scheunengeniste – geometrische

figuren in schräglage,  
 gespeichertes nichts im halblight.  
 eine mauer aus scheitholz geschichtet.  
 am graspfad wegware,  
 blaue sonnenwirbel, die sich  
 selbstherrlich drehn.

flankierende maßnahmen  
 in gestalt von datschenparzellen.  
 die nackten tatsachen  
 über den zaun geworfen  
 ins herrenlose schwarzdornestrüpp.  
 gartenplunder mit vorbedacht  
 entsorgt zum nulltarif.  
 das leben in die gleiche  
 gebracht. die wirklichkeit  
 ein bodenloses faß, schön rostzerfressen.  
 stiefvater staat hat sich  
 aus dem staube gemacht,  
 aufgeflogen, flügellos.  
 wer hat das scheitholz  
 geschichtet? wem gehört das flurband  
 vor der stadt?  
 mittendrin mein weg  
 über die schaftrift,  
 auf den schlittenberg hinauf,  
 flirrende schattenzüge neben mir her,  
 felderwärts gleitendes licht.  
 wie leb ich hier? (Kirsten 1993: 61f.)

Writing two years after reunification, when initial hopes had subsided, the poet notes the sense of wellbeing ('Flurengefühl') in the countryside on the outskirts of Weimar has yielded to one of barrenness and monotony. The margins of the city are marked by ugly new development – he is forced to thread his way between barns which seem to 'store nothing', walls of precisely stacked firewood and fenced allotments. A critique of the clandestine disposal of unwelcome aspects of the past is implicit in his reference to the illicit dumping of garden waste. The reality is that the 'stepfather state' has absconded, leaving behind a 'rusting' economy which is a bottomless pit for subsidies. The injustice of property-owning is touched on, which has led to the sudden wealth of those who can sell out to developers, at the expense of others like himself. The uncertainty of the poet's personal position, summed up in his final question, 'Wie leb ich hier?' (perhaps less: How am I living here? than How *will I be able to live here?*), is reflected in the ambivalent lighting of the landscape.

In 'kammlage', written six years later, this ambivalence has disappeared: the silent winter landscape has become an image for spiritual emptiness:

vom  
 winterhimmel drückt das nichtende nichts,  
 die überjährigen stengel, verholzt,  
 der landschaft hinterlassen, sehr dekorativ,  
 ein zuckerrübenfeld, ernteveressen, wenn  
 auch im schlamm trostlos vergessen, fault  
 vor sich hin, wie leicht man sich schwarz  
 ärgern kann, das erdreich zerwalkt,  
 ebenheit in ergebenheit, wie sie doch  
 stillhält, kein mucks keine bewegung,  
 erstarrtes zucken, eingelassen in  
 die weglosen wege, aber bald schon von  
 grund auf versiegelt, erdmassen zu halden  
 hochgewälzt, gehölzentblöbte quellflächen,  
 vom rechten winkel besiegt, flurbereinigten  
 blicks auf zu den bergen geschaut, ach  
 wie liegt so traut, der horizont  
 eine verschriftlichte abbreviatur. (Kirsten 1999: 61f., lines 4-21)

The poet is racked with frustration, he seems, like the landscape, to have been 'given a belting' ('zerwalkt'), and to be anticipating, like the springs now denuded of trees, his own concreting over ('Versiegelung'). The ruthless reduction of fields and rivers to administrative norms and their preparation for commercial development provide a metaphor for the process of globalisation impinging on the people of Thuringia. However, like the psalmist, he lifts his eyes up to the distant hills, and unlike the landscape, he is not mute.

The elegiac tone present in Kirsten's verse dominates the East German landscape poetry of the older generation in the 1990s. However, the younger writers tend to be more detached, and to adopt a more ironic and playful approach. The Dresden poet Michael Wüstefeld, for instance, cheekily calls on us to 'create more landscape'. Creation, the creator and all creatures may be exhausted, consumed, trampled on by jackboots, and abused, but the topic has been discussed to death. 'Schafft mehr Landschaft' is the first in a short cycle of texts entitled 'LandStrich', published in 2003:

Die Schöpfung ist erschöpft  
 vom Verbraucher verbraucht

Schafft mehr Landschaft

Der Schöpfer ist erschöpft  
von Schaftstiefeln geschafft

Schafft mehr Landschaft

Die Geschöpfe sind erschöpft  
vom Verbraucher mißbraucht

Schafft mehr Landschaft

Das Thema ist erschöpft  
von Apokalyptikern zu Tode geritten

Schafft mehr Landschaft

Die Vorräte sind erschöpft  
vom Verbraucher aufgebraucht

Schafft mehr Landschaft (Wüstefeld 2003)

## 5. Conclusion: The special contribution of poetry

With the demise of the 'Leseland' GDR, one might have expected poetry, a genre whose inherent structural ambiguity has deterred a wider readership at the best of times, to cease to be a significant medium for debate on public issues. However, though the conditions of literary production and the self-understanding of ex-GDR poets changed dramatically in 1990, they have, as Ruth Owen has pointed out, continued to write and to be published, and as many new voices have appeared in East Germany in the 1990s as in other parts of Germany (Owen 2001: 3f.). East Germans have on the whole blended into the general field of contemporary German poetry, but they continue to constitute an identifiable group.

Despite the fact that the environment was, in Michael Zschiesche's words, 'ein schnell verschwundenes Thema' in the new *Länder* (see the title of Zschiesche 2003), agricultural *Flurbereinigung* (the restructuring of the countryside to meet the requirements of agribusiness), the gentrification of city centres and most of all the commercial development of the urban periphery continue to prompt environmental concern in the above poems. However, it is seldom the principal focus of interest. The changing local environment is an

objective correlative for broader political and social change. At the same time, it can act as a vehicle for the expression of the poet's feelings.

Finally, the encounter with the landscape facilitates self-orientation and the orientation of readers, by triggering a process of critical stock-taking. The poems examined bear out Ruth Owen's description of the journey in search of identity as 'a crucial motif in post-unification poetry' (2001: 186f.). Writing is a regrounding of identity in the face of an all-consuming 'Fremdheit', trawling through personal and collective memories in order to construct one's own text. East German poets are distinguished by their probing of identity and their challenging of comfortable accommodation with injustices which are often ignored and accepted in the West. Particularly in the case of the Dresden poets, a rediscovery of *Heimat* and the critical regionalism Brinker-Gabler speaks of seems discernible.

At the same time, the distinctive quality of poetic language, which augments the everyday meanings of words with figurative and metaphorical levels of meaning, fusing the private with the public voice, has had a unique role to play in post-*Wende* writing. The special contribution of the texts examined lies not least in their concision, their ability to sum up complex relationships and evoke powerful feelings in images and aphoristic phrases, giving them a freshness, an intensity and a memorable quality prose normally lacks. Thirdly, their exploitation of linguistic ambivalences and their deconstruction of linguistic conventions have challenged assumptions and suggested alternative ways of seeing things. Through word play and irony, they have restored to readers a sense of poise and control in a situation where they felt marginalised, and they empowered their readers through subversive fantasy.

In a short text written in response to a newspaper survey of public opinion at the time of unification, like Elke Erb's poem above, Thomas Rosenlöcher provides a curiously appropriate image for the quest for a German identity rooted in the local, but embracing a wider horizon. All the issues discussed here resonate in 'Die deutsche Seele', in the space of a mere seven lines: the environment, the experience of post-reunification dispossession and disorientation, throwing the poet back on himself, reexamination of the personal and collective past, travel and the hint of *Heimat* in Rosenlöcher's former home, Kleinzsachwitz:

Wo die deutsche Seele ist?  
 Woher soll ich das wissen.  
 Am ehesten in Kleinzschachwitz.  
 Am ehesten in mir.  
 Aber auch ich bin zur Zeit unterwegs.  
 Endlos kreisend sucht sie sich  
 Selbst auf den Autobahnen. (Rosenlöcher 1997: 51)

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**Biodata**

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