

Poetic Reflections on Stunted Lives: Wulf Kirsten's Contribution to East German Autobiographical Writing

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Memory has been recognised as a central concern in Wulf Kirsten's writing, but the autobiographical dimension of his work has not hitherto attracted attention. This article examines the account of his childhood (1939-47), *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten*, passages in his speeches and essays on life in the GDR and the *Wende*, and autobiographical themes in his poetry. Kirsten's contribution to GDR life writing is shown to be distinctive in its regional and rural focus, its utopian heightening of childhood as a yardstick by which to measure the present both before and after the *Wende*, its foregrounding of landscape and place, and in its poetic language, imagery and echoing of literary tradition.

die stille tropft wie blut aus einer wunde.
ein engel sieht die dreifältige sonne.
der sechsfügelige seraph kündet vom tage,
vom heute gevesenen tage und schlingert
mit schlagseite über die bruchstellen
deiner und meiner gestutzten biografie.
Wulf Kirsten, 'lebensspuren'

The autobiographical dimension in Wulf Kirsten's writing has not hitherto attracted much attention. He is generally regarded as a regional landscape poet, whose detailed depiction of rural life in Saxony during the GDR years was grounded in local belonging and empathy with the people, and who came to indict the neglect and mismanagement they experienced as a result of the socialist collectivisation of farming, in forms ranging from wistful elegy to apocalyptic visions of destruction. Kirsten breathed new life into twentieth-century German nature poetry through a distinctive combination of thematic concerns

and formal elements from Theodor Kramer, Peter Huchel and Johannes Bobrowski, in irregular, unrhymed verses with frequent enjambment, structured by alliteration, internal rhyme and rhythmic patterns, employing chains of metaphors, resonating with echoes of passages from the Bible and literary tradition, and in a language characterised by laconic condensation in unexpected compounds, and use of unfamiliar dialect words and suggestive-sounding names.¹ In the last decade, however, a number of studies have explored the significance of memory in Kirsten's writing, and he has received honours and awards for a poetic and essayistic oeuvre increasingly perceived as a 'persistent work of remembering the historical caesurae of 1945 and 1989, enlightening contemporaries and reminding them of their responsibilities'.²

In the early poem 'satzanfang' Kirsten set out a poetic programme of acting as chronicler of local history, recording the biographies of the local people and witnessing to their achievements and the hardships and injustices they suffered:

ans licht bringen
die biografien aller sagbaren dinge
eines erdstrichs zwischenein.

inständig benennen: die leute vom dorf,
ihre ausdauer, ihre werktagsgeduld,
aus wortfiguren standbilder setzen
einer dynastie von feldbestellern
ohne resonanznamen³

Such statements have, however, masked an admittedly less prominent autobiographical concern, distracting attention from his asking, in prose writing and poems written throughout his life, but particularly in the second half of the nineteen-sixties and again in the late eighties and early nineties, who he himself is, and how he became what he is.

The end of the Second World War and the *Wende* are the two most important breaks, or rifts ('Bruchstellen') in Kirsten's 'stunted' biography – and indeed in the biographies of his GDR contemporaries, for much (but by no means all) of his personal experience is representative of his generation's.⁴ The term 'stunted'⁵ is taken from the poem 'lebensspuren' (traces of lives), written in 1981. In a bleak reflection on the political, economic and cultural stagnation of the time, Kirsten imagines the carved figures in a deserted village church

swinging groggily into life, whispering the past like the restless springs in Mörike's 'Um Mitternacht', but no longer possessed of the power to give meaning to contemporary reality through the promise of a better world to follow. He has returned time and again to 1945 and 1989 as turning points in German history, remembering and interpreting them in the light of subsequent experience, and to other historical developments which have left their mark on him personally.

Childhood plays a central role in Kirsten's writing. This is in part because revisiting the past has enabled him to take stock of his social and cultural heritage, and to establish his own identity and poetic voice. However, it is also because, in what has been an at times painfully personal process, he sought first to reconcile childhood experience and feelings with official understandings of historical events, and later to challenge and correct public perceptions of these events with refutations and counter-narratives or images. This has involved confronting the powerful tug of nostalgia for a lost childhood world which came to an abrupt end in 1945, and making it productive for his poetic project. It has necessitated recognising on the one hand the hardships and injustices which characterised that world in reality, and on the other the ambivalences of the historical changes which followed, and locating these and later changes in the broader context of processes of modernisation and the cultural, political and moral challenges they pose.

The one extended work of Kirsten's which is explicitly autobiographical is *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten*, first published in 2000.⁶ Subtitled 'Eine Dorfkindheit', this is an account of his childhood from the age of five to thirteen. The period covered is 1939 to 1947, and the place Klipphausen in Saxony, a village with a mere 350 inhabitants at the time, situated in a side valley of the river Elbe between Dresden and Meissen. Kirsten grew up as the oldest in a family of five children. His father was a cottager, a stone mason by training, but dependent for a living on the produce of a small family farm. The eighth chapter of the book, 'Die Nacht im Rübenkeller', which describes the arrival of the Russian army on 7 May 1945, and constitutes the focal point of the narrative, had already been published in *neue deutsche literatur* in 1985,⁷ fifteen years before the book was completed. Most of Kirsten's autobiography was therefore written when he was in his late fifties and sixties, at a time of life when it may be natural for thoughts to return to one's childhood. However, Kirsten

was undoubtedly encouraged by the political upheaval of the *Wende* to reflect on the earlier experience of traumatic disruption which had marked the end of his childhood, both in order to reassess the past in the light of present developments, and to distance himself from these developments through historical contextualisation. Passages in the book hinting at the challenges Kirsten faced in the early nineties include the following: ‘An die Stelle des gewohnten, langsam dahinfließenden Nebeneinander war ein wüstes, wildes Durcheinander getreten. Nein, nicht “getreten” – wie eine Lavamasse kam es herangequollen, jede Ritze füllend, nicht aufzuhalten. Ohne Anfang, ohne Ende, uferlos, unübersehbar, alles unter sich begrabend.’ (PK, 147-8)

Die Prinzessinnen is then one work in the spate of autobiographies which emerged in response to the sweeping away of social norms, realignment of cultural values and challenge to personal identities which resulted from the implosion of the East German communist party and the dissolution of the state. It is clearly an example of the emotional reflection on lost traditions and the rediscovery of long-suppressed cultural roots triggered by the collapse of communism. However, it differed from other products of such reflection in being essentially a continuation of Kirsten’s already existing poetic project. In his poems, he had already sought for more than two decades to challenge the hegemonic memory dictated by the state’s value system through a personal counter-remembering of the Third Reich, the Second World War, and life in the despised provinces. However, he now goes further than before in challenging the GDR’s antifascist myth of origin and describing the beginnings of the Republic in such a way as to explain problems which were to lead to its demise. For instance he describes the cowardly opportunism of a slightly older contemporary, his group leader in the Hitler Youth, who feigned injury in order to avoid being drafted in to defend the village against the advancing Russians in the last weeks of the war, and went on to become an officer and trainer in the GDR Volkspolizei (PK, 138). At the same time, Kirsten explains the support which he (and his generation) gave to the communist party in the GDR for so long, despite growing disillusionment with real existing socialism, as a consequence of the fear instilled in them by the draconian punishment meted out to contemporaries who stepped out of line politically:

Man war da nicht zimperlich. Gerade wenn es um Jugendliche ging. Nur weil ein vorwitziger Kleewunscher Junge einen die Ruhmestaten der Roten Armee glorifi-

zierenden Film mit den Worten kommentiert hatte: 'Genau wie bei den Nazis!', durfte er fünf Jahre im Speziallager Mühlberg verbringen. [...] Auf Erlebnisse dieser Art sollten sich generative Ängste gründen, die sich auch dann nicht mehr abbauen ließen, als man eine Lippe riskieren konnte, ohne Gefahr zu laufen, im Gelben Elend oder jenseits des Ural zu landen. Von jenen finsternen Zeiten her mag so manches Stillhalteabkommen mit Stiefvater Staat getroffen worden sein. Sicher, es führte dann allmählich in eine Bequemlichkeit hinaüber und hinein, die hinwiederum von Jüngeren leicht zu verspotten und zu verachten war. (PK, 227)

Kirsten depicts the daily grind of life for small farmers and artisans like his parents, refers repeatedly to the injustice and exploitation they suffered, and provides examples of poverty, homelessness, and social exclusion resulting from illegitimacy and mental illness. He describes the paramilitary training he reluctantly took part in as a member of the Hitler Youth, recounts the fate of boys only a few years older than himself who lost their lives after being called up, and writes of Polish prisoners of war and starving German refugees toward the end of the war. He mentions the bombing of Dresden, and requisitioning, rape, and suicides following the arrival of the Red army. However, these are all incursions of injustice, suffering and violence into what was up until 1945 essentially a secure and happy childhood, one spent playing in the farm's many outbuildings and ranging across the neighbourhood, without fear or restriction by adults:

In jeder Stallung war ich herumgekrochen. Was gab es nicht alles zu entdecken! Spreu- und Schirrkammern. Geheimnisvolle Bereiche in einem ewigen Halbdunkel, von deren stickiger Stille und verstaubter Dingfülle eine magische Anziehungskraft ausging. Jeder Winkel des Gehöfts war vertraut [...]. Das den Hof umgebende Gelände war nicht minder Teil des Auslaufs, in dem ich mich frei und sicher bewegte wie in einer zusätzlichen Haut, ohne daß mich jemand daran hinderte und dabei störte. (PK, 144-5)

Life in the rural community in which he grew up was, as described in the earlier chapters of Kirsten's autobiography, less determined by Nazi ideology than by the timeless rhythms of traditional farming, and quasi-feudal structures of land ownership and authority. He writes as chronicler of a lost way of life, describing tools and trades which have gone. For all the drudgery of the adults, then, the war years emerge as a timeless period of harmonious dwelling for the child, of intimate familiarity with the surrounding nature: 'Kein Flurstück blieb unentdeckt. Wir liefen uns die Heimat an den nackten Fußsohlen ab.' (PK, 12)⁸ It is, at least in the consciousness of the sixty-year-old recalling

the scene, a form of being at home in the world which he has never regained:

Der Wiesenhang zwischen dem Mühlgraben und unserem Gartenzaun war ein Ort, an dem es sich wunderbar ungestört spielen ließ. Aber auch einfach dazusitzen, zu beobachten, ins Tal und ins Dorf zu blicken, dem blanken Müßiggang zu obliegen, geriet, wenn ich es leibhaftig bin, den ich da in meiner Erinnerung sehe, zu intensiver Weltbetrachtung aus eigenem Anchauen, wo nichts im Husch vorüberflog, wo man vielmehr alles schön langsam in sich einziehen lassen konnte. (PK, 8)

Mindful of the tendency of memory to idealise the past, and of the danger of sentimental falsification of the childhood ‘Heimat’, Kirsten comments repeatedly on the factual unreliability of recall and the selective reconstruction of the past unavoidably present in the process of remembering: ‘Meine Erinnerung bildet sich ein, [...]’ (PK, 89), he writes, ‘Der Erinnerung kommt es so vor, als [...]’ (PK, 106), ‘wie ich zu rekonstruieren wage’ (PK, 135). However, the effect of such acknowledgement is precisely to permit him to bathe Klipphausen in the golden glow of a long-vanished idyllic era: at one point he refers to it as ‘eine versunkene, überrollte, zugeschüttete Wirklichkeit, der gar nichts anderes übrig bleibt, als zum Märchen zu mutieren’ (PK, 49–50). The book is characterised by a tension between critical realism and nostalgic idealisation. The earlier chapters in particular hint at a fairy-tale, pre-industrial epoch in which the child was free of the regimentation of later life. Even the labour of peasants and artisans is presented as essentially un-alienated. Here, as in Kirsten’s poems (see ‘welt unmittelbar’ and ‘textur’, elb, 74 and 280), we find utopian images of a way of life in immediate contact with reality, against which the present is measured and found wanting.

Kirsten’s autobiographical reflections in *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten* end in 1947. For the period after this, we have only scattered comments on his experience of life in the GDR and the *Wende* in the essays and speeches collected in the volume *Brückengang* (2009). As in the post-*Wende* writing of his contemporaries, mixed feelings are expressed here: scornful dismissal of the corruption and hypocritical betrayal of socialist principles under the SED, but equally regret over lost opportunities and disappointed hopes, and anger over false promises, injustices and negative developments in the new Germany.

Kirsten writes scathingly for instance of the reappearance of the opportunism he had witnessed in the years after the Second World War, when 'der Blockwart zum Sekretär der Einheitspartei avanciert war': '1989 konnte ich wieder erleben, wie rasch eine Farbe abzu-blättern vermag. Drei Kniebeugen und die Farbe Rot blätterte ab. Zum Vorschein kamen lauter heimliche Widerstandskämpfer und Verfechter der freien Marktwirtschaft.' (Bg, 127) In the essay 'Weimar von innen', Kirsten recalls how the building stock in the city's historical centre had been allowed to decay to a state almost beyond repair under 40 years of socialism. But he is equally critical of the wholesale post-*Wende* dismantling of the GDR's social provision of accommodation. The property speculation which accompanied the wave of renovation and modernisation after 1990 is 'mit einschneidenden sozialen Veränderungen und räumlichen Umschichtungen verbunden' (Bg, 268).

Elsewhere he comments ruefully on the dumping of a million unsold books published in the GDR by publishers and bookshops in 1991, including all 2500 copies of a reprint of his own *Die Schlacht bei Kesselsdorf* (Bg, 124). However, this is not the main thrust of his speeches and essays since the *Wende*. In a speech about the novelist Horst Bienek delivered in 1999, Kirsten describes the bullying, denunciation and crushing punishment meted out to writers in the 'stalinomane Praxis' of the GDR's early years, and argues that such experiences led to cowardly conformity and compliance in his generation. (Bg, 99-100) He recounts in a speech before the Schiller-gesellschaft in 2002 how he was approached by the Stasi and subjected to observation when he declined to assist them. But not to lay claim to particular courage, for he comments self-critically on the many small compromises he entered into over the years, in his writing and his career, before eventually overcoming his timidity:

Auf dem Wege zur Selbstfindung, einer mit Mühe verbundenen Wort- und Textierungsarbeit, mischte viel zu lange das Wechselspiel von Angst und Mut mit. Spielräume, die kampagneweise mal größer, mal kleiner gehalten wurden, galt es auszuloten, um sie tatsächlich nutzen zu können. In diesem Umfeld agierten Vorsicht, Rücksichtnahme wie diverse Spielarten von Mimikry. Ein Katalog von Beispielen für Selbstverleugnung, Zurücknahmen, Zurückhaltungen, Verzichten, Verstellungen wäre aufzulisten. Viel zu spät habe ich Ängste abgebaut. Dies beschleunigte sich erst, als ich die Erfahrung machte, wie rasch man auch als Mitläufer im Sumpf der Korruption versinkt, weil ein fauler Kompromiß unweigerlich den nächsten nach sich zieht. (BG, 108)

Others have traced Kirsten's gradual development from the compromises and self-contradictions of the poems collected in the volume *satzanfang* (1970) through the open criticism of pollution in *der bleibaum* (1977), to the apocalyptic pessimism and angry protest with which he expressed his growing ideological disillusionment in *die erde bei Meißen* (1986). He stood by the poet Reiner Kunze when the latter was subject to Stasi observation and increasing harassment by the authorities for his political views in the first half of the 1970s, and protested in writing against Kunze's exclusion from the 'Schriftstellerverband' in 1976 (a response to the publication of Kunze's *Die wunderbaren Jahre* in West Germany). He also played an active role in the Weimar 'Bürgerbewegung' in the late 1980s (he has lived in Weimar since 1965). Pfarrer Christoph Victor's diary of events in the city from 1988 to 1990⁹ reveals how Kirsten joined the local group of *Demokratie Jetzt* in September 1989, and subsequently became a member of *Neues Forum*. As a speaker at public meetings in October and November, he was a vigorous advocate of political integrity, justice and democracy. Although he soon found himself in a rear-guard of intellectuals pleading for a reformed socialism with a public increasingly set on reunification, and withdrew from politics, stung by accusations of being a 'selbsternannter Bürgerbewegter', he continued to work with Pfarrer Erich Kranz, the principal leader of the local 'Bürgerbewegung.' When the Weimar Stasi headquarters was occupied by demonstrators in early December, Kirsten assisted Kranz in setting up a citizens' committee, which worked up to the autumn of 1992, exposing cases of political injustice and corruption.

But it is Kirsten's poetry rather than his prose writing or essays on which his literary reputation principally rests, and if a claim is to be made for a significant autobiographical dimension in his writing, then it must hold true for his poems. Though we do not find analytical reflection on his inner development, a good dozen poems are centrally concerned with his childhood, while others look back at experiences in the post-war years, and reflect on his situation after the *Wende*.

As already mentioned, it has been assumed that Kirsten is more concerned with speaking for the local people than with self-portraiture. This is certainly the main thrust of the programmatic statement 'Entwurf einer Landschaft' which he published at the end of the volume *satzanfang*, asserting: 'Ich möchte den Werktag einer lokalierten Agrarlandschaft, die für beliebig andere stehen mag, poeti-

sieren (nicht romantisieren!), in einer aufgerauhten, "körnigen" Sprache, die ich dem Thema angemessen finde'.¹⁰ Yet the 'Weltzugewandtheit' which he referred to as a principal aim included relating the self to the social and natural environment ('Sein Thema finden heißt zu sich selbst finden') and to historical developments ('ständige Auseinandersetzung zwischen dem lyrischen Ich und der Zeit').¹¹ Reticence concerning the autobiographical dimension of his work may have been dictated by the political requirements of the time. There is in any case a clear autobiographical subtext in many of the poems in the volume (including self-portraits and portraits of members of his family): they sought to probe his personal past as well as that of the community, and to construct a poetic persona.

As in *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten*, the freedom of the child from cares and responsibilities stands in the foreground, together with the child's unmediated contact with nature in idyllic natural surroundings, his wondering gaze, taking in colours, shapes and sensations, and his imagination, which turns every day into an adventure. The adult poet mourns the loss of the child's vivid ability to see, hear, smell, feel and taste things, and seeks to recapture his intimacy with the natural environment through poetic evocation:

über die weizenstoppel zu dritt
nachmittags, einst im september.
barfuß einer mit wegfarbner sohle:
'es distelt, lauft nicht so schnell!' (elb, 31)

These opening lines of 'über die weizenstoppel' are typical in recalling a moment which epitomises his childhood as a time of simple living, companionship (he refers to 'redsames nebeneinander'), and freedom to roam the surrounding wheat fields and explore areas of wilderness, helping themselves to cherries and other fruit from the trees in season. The sense of distance from contemporary reality and irreparable loss is present again at the beginning of the poem 'das vorwerk', in which the subject is depicted as spending the summer in hermit-like seclusion, 'landstraßenfern', on an outlying farm:

ehmals
saß ich im gespinst der öde,
da kroch mir das trugbild der zeit
wie tagedieb und tunichtgut
durch das einsiedelhaar (elb, 24)

However, as in *Die Prinzessinnen*, evocation of the childhood ‘Heimat’ (whose idyllic qualities are here already overshadowed by the terms ‘gespinst der öde’ and ‘trugbild der zeit’) and lament at its loss are juxtaposed with passages alluding to the daily toil, hardship and hunger of the adults, or references to harsh wartime realities. Three of the four sections of ‘das vorwerk’ are given over to the daily tasks of the farm labourers: ‘das tagwerk des gesindes/ blieb randvoll gefüllt,/ war nichts als schund und plack’ (elb, 25). Kirsten’s poems ‘über sieben raine’, a portrait of his grandmother, who walked for two hours daily to sell local farmers’ butter at the market in Dresden, and ‘grabschrift’, dedicated to his grandfather, a travelling journeyman who died of exposure sleeping rough on his way to Berlin in 1907, pay similar testimony to the tough lives of the poor.

Kirsten often introduces an undertone of ironic detachment which draws attention to the discrepancy between his idealising memory and historical reality. In the poem ‘kindheit’, for example, he stylises himself as a Grimmelshausian Simplicissimus, spending autumn days guarding the cattle herd outside the village:

hinter dem dorf
saß ich,
eines bauern hütejunge,
auf herbstnem graskleid
im geruch der umwaldeten wiesen.
ich war der kuhfürst
sancta simplicitas
im brombeerverhau. (elb, 30)

A similar balance between emotion-laden recollections and ironic detachment is found in ‘das tal’ and ‘im häuslerwinkel’. In the latter the bombing of Dresden serves as a marker of the proximity of this timeless childhood world with wartime destruction (it performs a similar function in ‘schulweg’):

auf keiner karte verzeichnet,
nicht aufzufinden mehr
region einfältiger lehmkabachen,
die wäldische kindheit
im winkel der häusler,
schlicht wie ein kalkbrennerleben,
barfuß über distel und strunk.
die satzzeichen zur biografie
rochen nach lunte und
fielen vom himmel als brandfackeln
mit feuerschwänzen. (elb, 37)

Here, as in many of his other poems written in the sixties, Kirsten welcomes the arrival of socialism and the founding of the GDR ('in allen knechtkammern/ entsiegelt das geheimnis/ landläufiger demut'), and ends by expressing his intention to put the loss of his childhood behind him: 'ausgerollt habe ich den lebensfaden/ auf der lichtseite welt/ bei lebzeiten/ wie die waldrebe,/ zieh meiner straße,/ unmittelbar.' (elb, 37) However, the implication that state socialism has legitimately succeeded the destruction of a corrupt authoritarian regime suppresses memory of the pain and hardship of the postwar years, and the injustices incurred under the new repressive regime. These poems written in the sixties read as an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile personal experience with political expectations.

The comparatively few autobiographical references in the poems written between the early seventies and the late eighties, which were published in *der bleibaum* and *die erde bei Meißen*, are deeply pessimistic, and reflect Kirsten's political disillusionment. 'väterlicherseits, mütterlicherseits' (1980) lists the professions of Kirsten's grandparents and other relatives (who were smiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, vagabonds, peddlers, weavers and farmers), concluding they were all short-changed by history, and implying it is natural that he should share their fate: 'bleichgesichtige/ hungerleider sie alle auf lebenszeit,/ denen der brotkorb immer um eine etage/ zu hoch hing', 'ein geschlecht von handwerkern/ und kleinbauern, nie aus dem dunkel/ getreten seiner und meiner leibeigenen/ geschichte' (elb, 189).

Kirsten's next poetry collection, *stimmenschotter* (1993), which comprises poems written between 1987 and 1992, was the first published after the *Wende*. Although many poems allude to the changed political circumstances, they are interspersed with the other, pre-*Wende* texts in such a way as to obliterate any sense of a break in

1990. In ‘märchenhafte geschichte’ Kirsten describes a trip in October 1990, in the company of the West German poets Peter Hamm and Michael Buselmeier, seeking out places associated with Friedrich Nietzsche (engagement with whose work had not been encouraged in the GDR). Having found the (decaying) house in Naumburg where the philosopher lived with his sister after he had lost his sanity, they search for the village of Pobles (today part of Muschwitz), where he spent the summer holidays with his grandparents and discovered his passion for reading. Night has fallen by the time they locate ‘das sprachlose Pobles’, which is ‘grabenstill und gespenstisch zur nacht gebettet’. The village church stands in ruins, and the place, ‘in sich versunken, erdwärts/ zusammengerutscht in die schuttkegel/ aller irdischen vergänglichkeit’, is an image of the material disintegration and moral decay of the GDR.

The comment in a biography of Nietzsche, ‘hier hat er wirklich gelebt’, prompts Kirsten to ask: ‘wo haben wir wirklich gelebt?’ (elb, 227) This question, a central preoccupation of Kirsten’s after 1990, is addressed in his poetry by looking back to a better time. But not, as in the writing of some contemporaries, through selective recall of the GDR years in a spirit of ‘Ostalgie,’ but rather through revival of his longstanding evocation of a more authentic, slower-paced way of life in the Klipphausen of his childhood. In half a dozen poems he speaks openly of the hardship of a ‘kindheit auf rübenäckern/ und verdeckten feldern’ (elb, 205) and describes wartime deprivation, suffering and the tragic loss of many young lives. But this aspect of the past is outweighed, as before, by a fairy-tale quality, symbolised in *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten* by the mysterious walled kitchen garden of the local manor house, in which he imagines its two elderly princess owners walking slowly up and down, clad in black. Time stands still in this overgrown, secret garden, which tantalisingly recalls a lost age of security, order and plenitude, echoing the Rococo garden which appears in variations throughout Eichendorff’s poems, fiction and autobiographical writings, and which derives in part from Eichendorff’s memories of his childhood home in Lubowitz.

The poem ‘selbst’ (written 1991) describes a secret hide (possibly identical with the ‘gespinst der öde’ referred to in ‘das vorwerk’), in which the young Kirsten would lie daydreaming, ‘ein tagträumer, der ganze nachmittage lustvoll vertrödelte/ und begeistert den wolkenbildern nachsah,/ lag still für sich als fauler stauner in blutigen zeiten’

(elb, 199). Moments of similar fulfilment are evoked in ‘Mecklenburgischer sommer (1959)’, which is one of the few poems from this period looking back at experiences during the forty years of socialism. It refers to a historical turning point of almost equal importance for Kirsten with 1945 and 1989, namely the compulsory collectivisation of agriculture which was carried out in 1960. The poem implies that Kirsten rediscovered the world of his childhood during a summer spent working on a family farm in Mecklenburg. It laments the sweeping away of a way of life involving traditional, seasonally determined rhythms of work by what he calls ‘der große schlingschlang’ (elb, 208) of agricultural modernisation. What Kirsten regrets above all is the disappearance of a primarily corporeal relationship with time and space, one of physical contact, meditative observation and knowledge of things derived from direct seeing and understanding.

If one of the key questions in *stimmenschotter* is: ‘wo haben wir wirklich gelebt?’, another is asked in the poem ‘wie leb ich hier?’ (elb, 243-4), in which changes in the landscape around Weimar reflect the political and social development since the *Wende*. The land has been divided up and sold, properties have been fenced off, and unwanted possessions, like the compromising aspects of people’s past lives, have been swiftly disposed of:

die nackten tatsachen
über den zaun geworfen
ins herrenlose schwarzdorngestrüpp.
gartenplunder mit vorbedacht
entsorgt zum nulltarif.
das leben in die gleiche
gebracht.

Abandoned by the state, and excluded from places previously accessible to him, the poet no longer feels at home:

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? (elb, 243-4)

‘vor der haustür’ expresses his alienation in the new Germany more baldly: ‘manchmal morgens,/ wenn ich vor die haustür trete,/ den stadtrand noch stille anwandelt/ für einen atemzug,/ umfängt mich herbeklemmend die fremde. [...] ein fremdling bin ich/ mir selbst, landlos,/ dorfverloren, ausgesandt,/ das leben zu bestehn/ am hauseck, an das die hunde pissem.’ (elb, 247)

Kirsten’s preoccupation with Buchenwald, which begins around the time of the *Wende*,¹² is part of a concern with the gradual disappearance of traces of the past in the German landscape, and of memory of the past in the public sphere. In ‘september am Ettersberg’ he stands at the place where Russians desperately trying to escape were mown down by camp guards, and is prompted to think of the members of the Russian forces stationed in the GDR who are deserting before their units are withdrawn. He reflects on the responses of his companions to the change of circumstances after the *Wende*:

einer neben mir
weiß nichts mehr von sich, die erinnerungen sind ihm
davongelaufen. ein anderer schreibt
sein verflossenes leben um, bringt es nachträglich
in die passende form und fasson. einer hat den lieben gott
über die klinge springen lassen. einer trug den decknamen
Petrus und schrieb getreulich berichte. die boshafigkeit
seiner verleumdungen sucht ihresgleichen,
wird mir berichtet. mehr begehr ich nicht zu wissen
von diesem tag, in wolkenlose geschichte getaucht. (elb, 229)

‘feldwegs nach Orlamünde’ brings together the past and the present in a melancholy review of Kirsten’s own life and of socio-political developments. Gerhard Kaiser has shown in his detailed interpretation

of the poem how the largely sober, unemotional tone is interrupted at two points, when the landscape through which the poet is walking suddenly opens up to a cosmic richness.¹³ The sight of the ancient town in the evening sunshine and the song of the Oriole transport him back to his childhood, and it is momentarily ‘als wär die dreimal gewendete zeit/ neunmal stehengeblieben’ (elb, 250; the dates Kirsten is thinking of are probably 1933, 1945 and 1989). But Kirsten’s habitual melancholy returns at the end of the poem, where he refers to the town as ‘grown limp with rust and choked in mud’ (‘im rost verlummert/ und schlammstumm erstickt’, elb, 250).

In Kirsten’s most recent major volume, *wettersturz* (1999), the poem ‘zeitgenossen’ contains the formulation of Kirsten’s poetic programme since the *Wende* as: ‘auzuschreiben gegen das schäbige/ vergessen, das so viele leben einschließt,/ leben aus lauter vergangenheit’ (elb, 295). The conception of remembering the past as a moral and political imperative is developed in a speech thanking the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for the award of their literary prize in 2005. All his writing, he notes, has been ‘im Grunde Lebensbeschreibung’, or to be more precise, ‘ein Abwälzen von Lebensstoff, der sich im Gedächtnis sedimentär abgelagert hat’ (Bg, 111). Individual experiences are related to collective ones, and to historical causes and effects, in a process of literary work: ‘nahezu bohrend schmerhaft werden Erinnerungen abgefragt, reaktiviert, Vergessenes, Halbvergessenes durch Gedächtnistraining zurückzugewinnen gesucht’. In the face of the patent untruth of official versions of history in the GDR, it was the task of his generation of writers to engage in ‘eigene Geschichtsfundung’, and contribute to an unofficial counter-history of the GDR. Perhaps out of politeness to his CDU listeners, he does not expand on the ways in which he has continued this writing programme since reunification, addressing developments in East Germany as an inveterate ‘schwarzseher’ in times of ‘epidemischer gedächtnis-/ schwund’, in poems such as ‘zeitgenossen’, ‘gesinnungswechsel’ and ‘frohe botschaft’:

laß die propheten stein und bein schwören,
 glänzende zeiten herbeireden, dich
 mit beglückungsprojekten eindecken,
 was auch immer sie heißen mögen,
 flügelschlag der geschichte erdenthoben,
 schwarzseher will man nicht dulden (elb, 372)

But Kirsten's provocative remembering in response to the *Wende* is only one aspect of a body of poetry which has sought since the 1960s to halt a forgetting which facilitates opportunism and destructive modernisation, by naming things, restoring them to being, and training readers to see and hear things themselves. Terms such as the 'grinding-stone of history' (elb, 105, 109, 132) and the 'shredder of progress' (elb, 187) allude to the danger of what he has called 'Verneimandung' in the processes of economic, social and cultural modernisation. (The term is adapted from the Mexican essayist Octavio Paz's concept of *ninguneo*, or 'no-one-ness', in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, signifying a stripping away of identity.)

Kirsten's concern with the past must be understood in the context of the global boom in memory which began in the 1980s in response to the social and cultural changes associated with post- or late modernity. His preoccupation with his childhood corresponds to the revival of nostalgia identified by Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* as a potentially constructive response to developments in contemporary society. It is a manifestation of the longing for continuity in a fragmented world, a defence mechanism at a time of historical upheavals and general acceleration of the pace of life. 'Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters. Yet the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition,' Boym writes.¹⁴ Although it is commonly dismissed as sentimental abdication of personal responsibility, the wish for a guilt-free homecoming, and an ethical and aesthetic failure, nostalgia can nevertheless perform a valuable function, in drawing attention to unrealised possibilities. What the past might have been has a bearing on what the future might become: 'Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future'.¹⁵

Boym's distinctions between *melancholia*, which she defines as a matter of purely individual consciousness, and *nostalgia*, which links individual biographies with the fate of groups and nations, and be-

tween 'restorative' nostalgia (typically seeking to regain lost territory) and 'reflective' nostalgia, which recognises the ambivalence of human longing and the contradictions of modernity, show Kirsten firmly aligned with the latter in both cases. Poems such as 'diktum' (elb, 282), which characterises the ambivalent temptation to indulge in emotion-laden reflection on the past in the phrases 'der roggenseele altes trugbild' and 'erinnerungs-/ sucht, du grünes holz des lebens', can be seen as exemplifying the 'creative rethinking of nostalgia' which Boym calls for, and her 'self-conscious exploration of longing', not merely as an artistic device, but also as 'a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming'.¹⁶

Kirsten's contribution to GDR autobiography is then an unusual one in several respects. Firstly, it complements those depicted in other essays in this volume, most of which are concerned with authors based in Berlin, by being a regional (Saxon and Thuringian) remembering, and a rural as opposed to an urban one. Secondly, there is also an unusual class dimension to it, in that Kirsten describes himself as 'plebeian, not proletarian', and the community he speaks for is one of agricultural labourers rather than the workers and farmers forming the backbone of the socialist 'Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat'. Further distinctive features are that Kirsten's post-*Wende* yardstick is not 'Ostalgie' for the GDR, but his childhood, and the extent to which he draws attention to the fact that this is a utopian construction, a construction of the remembering subject rather than reality. It is also uncommon for landscape to stand in the foreground, as a sphere of both autobiographical and collective remembering: it is simultaneously a 'cultural landscape' generated by centuries of human dwelling and work and his personal home.

Finally, Kirsten's is a distinctly poetic remembering, one working with images of the past rather than reflecting discursively, and paying particular attention to language. It responds allergically to official pronouncements and the ready-made phrases of ideology, and turns away from abstract ideas in general to the sensual qualities of things, incorporating dialect words and place names, and deautomatising reading by condensing words into expressive compounds. Kirsten seeks to preserve the memory of disappearing ways of life by reviving linguistic repertoires associated with them, words discarded by history: 'wegrundworte, zu den gärten hinaus-/ geworfelt, dem distelpur-

pur eingeblassen, ausgestorbene/ wahrheiten, flurbereinigte flurnamen
die fülle,/ zugetragen vom auge der erinnerung' (elb, 284).

Notes

¹ See for instance Bernhard Rübenach, ed., *Peter-Huchel-Preis. EinJahrbuch. 1987. Wulf Kirsten. Texte. Dokumente. Materialien*, Moos and Baden-Baden: Elster Verlag, 1987; Wolfgang Emmerich, 'Von der "durchgearbeiteten Landschaft" zur nature morte: Alte und neue Landschaftslyrik von Volker Braun, Wulf Kirsten und anderen', *literatur für leser*, 1990 (2), 69-83; Axel Goodbody, 'Veränderte Landschaft: East German Nature Poetry Since Reunification', *gfl-journal*, 2 (2005), at: www.gfl-journal.de/2-2005/goodbody.html (last accessed 27 July 2011).

² The honorary doctorate he received from the University of Jena in 2003 was awarded for 'sein herausragendes lyrisches, erzählerisches und essayistisches Werk', acknowledging his enrichment of the German language, his poetic appropriation of the landscape and culture of Saxony and Thuringia, and his interventions on behalf of suppressed and misunderstood literary traditions, but stressing in particular his 'den Zäsuren von 1945 und 1989 gewidmete hartnäckige Arbeit aufklärend-verpflichtender Erinnerung'. Gerhard R. Kaiser, ed., *Landschaft als literarischer Text. Der Dichter Wulf Kirsten. Festschrift anlässlich der Ehrenpromotion durch die Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, 27. Mai 2003*, Jena: Glaux, 2004, 6-7. See also Anke Degenkolb's monograph '*Anzuschreiben gegen das schäbige vergessen*'. *Erinnern und Gedächtnis in Wulf Kirstens Lyrik*, Berlin: Logos, 2004, and Manfred Osten's eulogy 'Erinnerte Gegenwart und lyrisches Gedächtnis bei Wulf Kirsten', in Günther Rüther, ed., *Verleihung des Literaturpreises der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. an Wulf Kirsten. Weimar, 22. Mai 2005. Dokumentation*, Sankt Augustin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2005, 12-17, at: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7788-544-1-30.pdf?051230110348 (last accessed 27 July 2011).

³ For convenience, Kirsten's poems are cited in the following from the comprehensive anthology *erdlebenbilder. gedichte aus 50 jahren. 1954-2004*, Zurich: Ammann, 2004 (here: p. 17), rather than from the individual volumes in which they originally appeared. References to this volume are given in parentheses as 'elb', followed by the relevant page numbers.

⁴ Kirsten has elsewhere described 20th-century German history as 'geschichts-befrachtete Wechselbäder', i.e. a succession of hot and cold baths into which his generation has been plunged, each leaving its historical legacy – *Brückengang. Essays und Reden*, Zurich: Ammann, 2009, 122-30. References to this volume are given in parentheses as 'Bg', followed by the relevant page numbers.

⁵ 'gestutzt' is literally translated as 'pruned', 'trimmed', 'cropped' or 'docked', but I have chosen 'stunted' because it seems close enough in meaning, and retains the concentration of plosive consonants underlining the violent curtailing of biographies.

⁶ Wulf Kirsten, *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten. Eine Dorfkindheit*, Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2003. References to this text are given in parentheses as 'PK', followed by the relevant page numbers.

⁷ Wulf Kirsten, 'Die Nacht im Rübenkeller', *neue deutsche literatur*, 33.4 (1985), 19-28.

⁸ *Die Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten* was preceded by two other prose works which relate obliquely to his childhood home and possess thematic parallels. The first is his affectionately ironic 'Portrait of a Provincial Town', *Kleewunsch* (*Kleewunsch* is a fictional entity combining aspects of the village Klipphausen and the nearby town Wilsdruff). The second, his 'Historical Report', *Die Schlacht bei Kesselsdorf*, describes the impact on the community of a previous bloody battle (Prussian troops inflicted a crushing defeat on the Saxon army in the Battle of Kesselsdorf in 1745). *Die Schlacht bei Kesselsdorf* and *Kleewunsch* were published in 1984 and reprinted in 1987, but they have been largely ignored by the reading public, whereas the more accessible *Prinzessinnen im Krautgarten* was warmly received in reviews in *Die Zeit*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *Spiegel*, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and was recommended to listeners on *Deutsche Welle*.

⁹ Christoph Victor, *Oktoberfrühling. Die Wende in Weimar 1989. Mit einer Betrachtung zwanzig Jahre danach 'Der Himmel über uns'* von Wulf Kirsten, 2nd edn, Weimar: Stadtmuseum Weimar, 2009.

¹⁰ Wulf Kirsten, *satzanfang. gedichte*, Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1970, pp. 94-5.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹² See for instance the poems 'der bärenhügel' (elb, 221), 'september am Ettersberg' (elb, 229) and 'rauher ort' (elb, 368-9); Holm Kirsten and Wulf Kirsten, eds, *Stimmen aus Buchenwald. Ein Lesebuch*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002; and Kirsten's text in Wulf Kirsten and Harald Wenzel-Orf, *Der Berg über der Stadt. Zwischen Goethe und Buchenwald*, Ammann: Zurich, 2003.

¹³ Gerhard R. Kaiser, 'Endzeit, Jahreszeit, Menschenzeit. Thüringer Landschaft in Wulf Kirstens Gedichten', in Kaiser, *Landschaft als literarischer Text*, pp. 137-53.

¹⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. xvi.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. xvii.