‘auf keiner gültigen Karte verzeichnet’: situating Ulrike Almut Sandig’s poetry

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Ulrike Almut Sandig’s poetic output engages with the traditions of Romanticism, but it is apparent from her performance techniques and the visual qualities of her work, as well as some of its central thematic concerns, that her relationship to this tradition is complex. This essay illuminates Sandig’s relationship to German literary history, and particularly to the work of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, by arguing that both Sandig and Droste negotiate between Romanticism and Realism – and, in doing so, emphasise the primacy of sensory engagement as a means of social engagement and resistance.

Keywords: poetry; Romanticism; Realism; Annette von Droste-Hülshoff; sense; Michel Serres; myth; experimental poetry; contemporary literature.

In 2009, Leonce-und-Lena prize jury described themselves as ‘geradezu verzaubert’ by Ulrike Almut Sandig’s poetry, and they are far from the only ones to have fallen under its spell: Andreas Wirthensohn wrote in a review of *Dickicht* (2011), Sandig’s third collection, that

Ihr Zauber beruht vielmehr auf einem sprechenden Ich, das sozusagen mit beiden Beinen in der Realität steht und gleichzeitig mit dem Kopf in die Sphären des Träumerischen, Imaginären, Fantastischen vorstößt...Ulrike Almut Sandigs Gedichte führen uns in geheimnisvolle Räume der Poesie und strahlen doch eine Geborgenheit aus, als seien wir, ihre Leser, hier schon immer daheim gewesen.¹

Other reviews have noted her interest in the ‘Unsagbares’, the disappeared and disappearing, the marginal and the submerged, combined with a geographical and conceptual ‘Bodenlosigkeit’ which is both intriguing and unsettling.² Her translator, Karen Leeder, has called her work ‘slippery [...] and playful’.³ This is evident in all four of her collections to date; again and again, we are taken to places and presented with images which are both precisely described and profoundly elusive. Perhaps it is adequate to respond to these qualities of her work in the way these reviewers do, to lose ourselves in Sandig’s poetry and simply conclude that her work is enigmatic and mysterious, ‘auf keiner gültigen Karte verzeichnet’, as the poem ‘so habe ich sagen gehört’ puts it.⁴ Kurt Drawert, commenting on *Streumen*, Sandig’s second volume of poetry, appears to be resigned, ‘Da die Bedeutungen

¹ Andreas Wirthenson, ‘Das Selbstverständlichste der Welt’, *taz*, 17 March 2011, p. 8.

² Kurt Drawert, ‘Erinnerungsarbeit’, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22 February 2008
<<https://www.nzz.ch/erinnerungsarbeit-1.676532>> [accessed 18 April 2018].

³ Karen Leeder, ‘Introduction’, in *Thick of It*, by Ulrike Almut Sandig, trans. by Karen Leeder (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull, 2018), p. xvii.

⁴ Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Dickicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling, 2011), p. 13. Further references to Sandig’s poetry will be given inline. See also Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Zunder: Gedichte* (Leipzig: Connewitzer Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2009); Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Streumen: Gedichte* (Leipzig: Connewitzer Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2007); Ulrike Almut Sandig, *ich bin ein Feld voller Raps verstecke die Rehe und leuchte wie dreizehn Ölgemälde übereinandergelegt* (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling, 2016). The latter is referred to in abbreviated form as *Raps* throughout this essay.

schwanken und *Streuen* polyvalent bleibt, wissen wir nie genau, was erlebt und was erdacht ist, wo die Wirklichkeit endet und die Einbildung beginnt'.⁵

We might use these assessments as a means of tracing a map to Sandig's poetry, of locating her work in relation to its historical and contemporary contexts – a project which enables us to understand the significance of her contribution to contemporary German literature. These critical assessments of her work strongly gesture towards her apparent inheritance of the traditions of Romantic poetry, especially its passion for myth and magic, as well as via intertextual engagements with Romantic texts such as the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. Reading Sandig as a neo-Romantic poet allows her work to be seen as part of a recent wave of renewed interest in Romanticism, in both poetry and prose, which explores the primacy of nature and self in the terms of direct experience over and against the consciously experimental tendencies of much modern and post-modern writing.

That a Romantic revival has taken place in recent Anglophone poetry is reflected in critical approaches such as Tom Bristow's analysis of the importance of 'affect' in contemporary Anglophone poetry.⁶ In German literature, Wolfram Weimer (reviewing Simon Strauß's 2017 novel *Sieben Nächte*) has hailed the revival of Romanticism, and the young novelist Leonhard Hieronymi has published a manifesto calling for what he terms 'ultraromanticism'.⁷ At the same time, critics have identified an apparent move in recent German prose towards what has been called 'neue Lesbarkeit' – a mode which sets out to mirror the alleged 'readability' of recent and contemporary American novels and rejects ponderousness, obfuscation and philosophising.⁸ Leeder notes Sandig's interest in 'taking poetry to the reader and, moreover, a reader that might never have engaged with poetry before'.⁹ Could it be that Sandig's poetry might helpfully be read as a relative to Anglophone neo-Romanticism, for example, and/or as the lyric manifestation of the 'neue Lesbarkeit', emphasising (as her earlier work ostensibly does) accessibility in its promotion of 'Gedichte für Freunde der Popmusik'?

Locating Sandig's poetic output at the confluence of these two contemporary trends – neo-Romanticism and 'neue Lesbarkeit' – offers one possible way of accounting for the presence of the magical and mythical alongside the ostensibly personal and non-fantastical aspects of her work. At the same time, though, some important features of her poetry render such a straightforward interpretation impossible. For one thing, her poems are, in many ways, relatively formally innovative, which diminishes their immediate 'accessibility' and set them apart from the formally-conservative tendencies of the 'neue Lesbarkeit'; for another, the use her poetry makes of the resources of Romanticism – in its imagery and in reworkings of foundational texts – regularly threatens to undermine and complicate meaning, rather than confirm the position of the poetic subject in the world, as one might expect a poetry which

⁵ Drawert, *ibid.*

⁶ See Tom Bristow, *The Anthropocene Lyric: An Affective Geography of Poetry, Person, Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁷ See Wolfram Weimer, 'Sieben Nächte im romantischen Aufbruch', *The European*, 29 September 2017 <<http://www.theeuropean.de/wolfram-weimer/12857-sieben-naechte-im-romantischen-aufbruch>> [accessed 18 April 2018]; Simon Strauß, *Sieben Nächte* (Berlin: Blumenbar, 2017); Leonhard Hieronymi, *Ultraromantik* (Berlin: Korbinian, 2017).

⁸ Stuart Parkes gives a concise account of the term's origins and implications. See Stuart Parkes, 'Drowning or Waving: German Literature Today', in *Recasting German Identity: Culture, Politics, and Literature in the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Frank Finlay (New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), pp. 251–66 (p. 262).

⁹ Leeder, p. xi.

inherits a pre-Modernist understanding of the lyric subject to do. Both of these tendencies suggest multiple alternative lineages and groupings against which her work might be read – in relation to twentieth-century performance poetry, on the one hand, and in the context of pre- and post-war *Sprachskepsis* on the other.

Her audio-visual performances, as well as her radio plays and collaborations with musicians, are a key part of Sandig's practice, and an area in which the playfulness and wit of her work is evident. Her live performance style ranges from expressive, dynamic readings without assistive technology – in the poem 'ich bin ein zweistimmig singender Vogel mit Menschengesicht' (*Raps* 14) the onomatopoetically avian potential of words like 'klirre', 'klicker', 'knische' and 'knarr' is always drawn out to maximum effect, the lines 'und die Mädchenträume meiner // Mutter trag ich auch mit mir herum' half-sung to the same melody – to complex, moderately technical musical performances which make use of audio loops and effects (in other performances of the same poem, loop techniques render the 'Zweistimmigkeit' literally). Other poems become still more complex in performance, such as the Grimm-inspired 'Muttergottesgläschen' (*Raps* 82) in which the key line 'ich bin müd und voll Durst' is looped, echoed and layered under a rhythmic reading of the rest of the text which renders it virtually unrecognizable in relation to its textual counterpart.¹⁰ She regularly collaborates on live performances and recordings with musicians and sound artists such as Sebastian Reuter and Grigory Semenchuk.

Film and visual effects also feature, both in terms of Sandig's own movement and also using projected video, such as the film 'it wasn't me und du warst es auch nicht', featuring the New Zealand poet Hinemoana Baker, which Sandig has used as a backdrop in live performances. Rebecca May Johnson's essay in this volume discusses her recent feature-length collaboration with Semenchuk (under the aegis of the 'poetry band' Landschaft) on a libretto for the 1927 Walter Ruttmann film 'Berlin: Die Symphonie der Großstadt', a collaboration in which the aural, visual and linguistic effects and rhythms are carefully balanced. In each case, the visual medium contributes – like the audio loops which characterise Sandig's live performances – fundamentally to the work, blurring the boundaries between language, sound and music and allowing these to interact with each other and with images in a non-linear, non-narrative manner.

Sandig has described this aspect of her performance style as a 'Tauschgeschäft' which offers something new to a live audience in order to compensate for the absences of a physical, printed text.¹¹ Where the performance offers various effects of sounds, layers, loops, melody, spoken intonation and visual accompaniments, a printed text has line and stanza breaks, page layout, font weight and choice and placement on the page and in relation to other poems. Indeed, Sandig's formal range in her printed publications is striking: while some poems are lineated in a relatively straightforward manner, or contain traditional stanzas (with two- or three-line groupings being a common pattern), there are also poems which deviate from this: several poems in the volume *Streumen* are printed in landscape format, perpendicular to the top of the page; poems are regularly set in pairs across a two-page spread, to be read either as two complementary texts, as in 'sonnenfinsternis' (*Streumen* 28-9) and 'du sagen'/'Sie sagen' (*Dickicht* 54-5); or as a single poem running across the central gutter, as in 'Schneemann, lass uns auch sowas bauen!' (*Raps*, 36-37). Another trademark technique is the use of bold or lightweight type to indicate a key phrase in a poem which functions as an intratextual title. Sections, poems and volumes are interspersed with mathematical symbols or letters from the

¹⁰ Live recordings of Sandig performing are available on <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de> and her YouTube channel.

¹¹ Sandig, in conversation with the author, March 11th 2018.

Greek alphabet, harking back to the typographical complexity of pre-modern poetry. Sandig also uses both the prose-poem form and the line-width justified-type effect which gives certain poems a column-like appearance, down the middle of the page or offset to one side or the other.

This level of linguistic and formal innovation is not indicative of a naïve return to Romantic lyricism, nor does it suggest 'Lesbarkeit' as an aesthetic priority. Rather, Sandig's performance and visual techniques inherit certain traditions of the pre- and post-war European avant-garde which are in many ways anti-Romantic. Whereas other popular contemporary performance poets (e.g. Julia Engelmann, Kate Tempest) to whom Sandig is sometimes linked draw on hip-hop and slam poetry with its roots in African-American oral traditions, which prizes fluent rhythmic constructions and overtly political content, Sandig's performance retains a DIY, quasi-punk aesthetic which seems to draw (albeit indirectly) on the East and West German punk-performance movements of the 1980s – Bert Papenfuß, Sascha Anderson, Thomas Kling – many of whom were in bands or musical collectives and whose performance style owed more to pre-war Dada, Bauhaus and avant-garde performance traditions than to forms of oral poetry which value communicability. Neither slam nor punk performance poetry is in any meaningful sense neo-Romantic. However, the discordant forms and sound effects, confrontational aesthetic and multi-layer textual references which prevail in punk performance poetry are very unlike traditional oral forms; whereas the first-person, ostensibly confessional lyric transparency of slam poetry is closer to the forms of orality – song, ballad and dramatic monologue – which characterise pre-Modernist poetry. Similarly, the formal strategies in her printed work draws on visually experimental poetry from pre- and post-war Modernist movements (especially concrete poetry) which are quite alien to both neo-Romanticism proper and the 'neue Lesbarkeit' in prose.

The formal complexity of Sandig's work reflects her interest in language itself, its possibilities and limitations. Foregrounding the materiality of written or spoken language enables her work to explore the situations in which it might be said to break down, become fragmentary or troubled. Her poetry is invested in exploring the potential of language to create places, situations or even worlds. This is immediately evident in *Streumen*, where the structuring motif of place serves a clear meta-poetic function:

Streumen – Ort auf der nördlichen Erdhalbkugel. [...] Streumen ist eng. In Streumen ist es wie überall. Streumen ist ein beweglicher Ort. Streumen ist eine unsichere Tätigkeit seiner Bewohner. Unsicher ist auch die Anzahl der Streumenden. Es handelt sich um uns. Wir streumen vor lauter Sehnsucht. Aber Streumen ist hier. (*Streumen* 10)

Streumen is neither a 'real' place nor a 'fictional' one. In fact, the trope highlights how unsuitable these categories are when it comes to Sandig's poetry. Although there is a tiny, one-street village in Saxony which shares its name, Sandig's text makes no reference to this 'real' place; instead, it creates a new place which is created in and exists through language, and into which we read ourselves as we experience Sandig's texts. It is 'hier' a very literally sense: within the words we are reading.

In fact, there are clear similarities between *Streumen*, *Dickicht* and *Raps* in this regard: all three volumes possess an overall design which suggests a created world or an over-arching project. Both *Streumen* and *Dickicht* consist of two long sections or sequences containing several poems, each followed by a single poem (in *Dickicht* there is also a programmatic opening text 'das hast du dir selber gedichtet' (7)). The structure of *Raps* reflects the book's long title – each section after the prologue, 'Anfangsland' contains one or more sequences which are named for the various phrases in the title. Sections I and II are named 'ich bin ein Feld voller Raps' and 'verstecke die Rehe und leuchte'; there is single poem called 'wie' in

the centre of the volume; and the next two sections, III and IV are named ‘dreizehn Ölgemälde’ and ‘übereinandergelegt’. Finally, an epilogue of sorts, ‘Niemandland’, mirrors the prologue to complete the pattern. That these intricate structures might be thought of as acts of world-creation is particularly clear in *Dickicht*, where the two main sections are entitled ‘Norden’ and ‘Süden’. In between, we find a section called ‘Mitte der Welt’, which contains only one poem, ‘in der Mitte des jeweils eigenen Körpers’ (41). Finally, the opening poem is entitled ‘das hast du dir selber gedichtet’ (7); and the closing section, titled with an infinity symbol, containing the single poem ‘von allen guten Geistern’ (75).

The opening poem helps to make sense of this structure:

unter dir die Erde, die sich immer dreht. über dir
 der Scherenschnitt der Bäume gegen die steil
 aufgerichtete Sonne. der Himmel ist sperrangelweit
 ein Mond dreht sich mit. hinter dir die mit Eis
 bedeckten, geräuschlosen Gipfel aus Stein. vor dir
 das Geschiebe der Wolken. drunter liegt dein
 Zuhause, das hast du dir selber gedichtet. in dir
 die Nadel, die zittert und immer hinzeigt
 auf Norden, obwohl du nicht weißt, was da liegt.
 (*Dickicht* 7)

The poem situates its reader with absolute precision. All compass points are covered, as the string of prepositions demonstrates: ‘unter’, ‘über’, ‘hinter’, ‘vor’, ‘drunter’ and finally ‘in’. Moreover, we are also situated within a cosmic system of the earth, sun and moon moving around one another. The poem gives us our precise co-ordinates, both in a natural landscape and cosmic space, and it is clear that this place serves a meta-poetic function – ‘dein Zuhause/das hast du dir selber gedichtet’. However, this precise and stable location is balanced against the desire for movement implied by the final lines. The pointing of our inner compass, we can assume, is what leads us on the journey through the rest of the volume: first to the north, across the middle of the world, then to the south, and finally, perhaps, returning to our starting point.

Sandig’s creation of spaces within language often depends on a sense of the paradoxical and unobtainable, the ‘Unsagbare’ outside of language. For example, in the poem ‘Süden’:

fest steht, du kannst hier nicht bleiben. fest
 steht auch, du kommst hier nicht raus. fest
 stehst du selber, du taugst nicht zum Reisen
 du taugst nicht zum Wegsein, einmal musst
 du weg sein, aber das ist noch so lange hin
 wie alles lang hin ist, was unsichtbar bleibt:

die alten, befreundeten Schmerzen im Kopf
 und dass sie nicht wieder weggehen werden
 zuhaus’ nicht und auch nicht im Süden, der
 ebenfalls unsichtbar bleibt, wie weit du ihm
 nachreist, ist ganz gleich, denn Süden steht
 immer im Süden. Süden im Festkleid. Süden

im Wind. am aufgerissenen Fenster. als Kind.
 (*Dickicht* 66)

The repetition and parallel clauses in the opening stanza of the poem express a longing for a fictional locus of unobtainable desire and homecoming, here termed ‘Süden’.¹² Here, as elsewhere, it is the possibility of language to create a new space or world which is brought to the fore. In doing so, the poem participates in a long line of *Sprachskeptische* poetry in German, and there are strong echoes here of the distinctive paradoxical logic of one classic example of the genre, Ingeborg Bachmann’s ‘Böhmen liegt am Meer’:¹³

Sind hierorts Häuser grün, tret ich noch in ein Haus.
Sind hier die Brücken heil, geh ich auf gutem Grund.
Ist Liebesmüh in alle Zeit verloren, verlier ich sie hier gern.

Bin ich’s nicht, ist es einer, der ist so gut wie ich.

Grenzt hier ein Wort an mich, so laß ich’s grenzen.
Liegt Böhmen noch am Meer, glaub ich den Meeren wieder.
Und glaub ich noch ans Meer, so hoffe ich auf Land.¹⁴

Bachmann’s poem enacts the search for such a space through its balanced, intricate syntax and deictic ambiguity. Here, the parataxis and careful balancing of clauses establish an inner logic which is paradoxical and puzzling: why should believing in the sea result in a hope for land? Bachmann’s ‘Böhmen’, named after the geographical aberration which constitutes the setting of Shakespeare’s ‘A Winter’s Tale’ (‘Bohemia, a desert country by the sea’), is a vision of post-war European atopia where the ‘Unverankerten’ find a space, an identity and a home in language. Sandig’s ‘Süden’ is as fluid and elusive as Bachmann and Shakespeare’s Bohemian coastline: wherever you travel, it is elsewhere. It is cast as a wilful child (who appears again, this time negated, in the opening poem of *Raps*), as a natural force as immaterial as wind, water, or – most appropriately – language. Both poems speak to unattainable places of longing: displaced or paradoxical utopias which are written into existence by poetry itself. Moreover, like her performance practice, Sandig’s apparent *Sprachskepsis*, with its echoes of Bachmann, is decidedly anti-Romantic and belongs to a distinct tradition in German-language literature which came to prominence in Viennese Modernism and post-war writing.

In other ways, however, Sandig sits quite easily alongside contemporary poets who are strongly influenced by Romanticism, including in their writing on nature, myth and language – including in non-German language contexts. Leeder, for example, compares Sandig and Alice Oswald’s ‘oblique otherworldliness’.¹⁵ In a 2012 ‘map’ of contemporary British poetry, Fiona Sampson defines a loose grouping of Anglophone poets she called ‘the Mythopoeists’:

In their hands the poem isn’t only concerned with a particular diction or mood, but opens up an entire conceptual and tonal world of its own. True, each uses a language that operates like a cleaned lens, avoiding any technical clutter. But however linear or

¹² The volume thus participates in German literature’s long tradition of mythologizing a southern European ‘Other’, often referred to as ‘Italiensehnsucht’. See Dieter Richter, *Der Süden: Geschichte einer Himmelsrichtung* (Wagenbach, 2009).

¹³ See Martina King, ‘Sprachkrise’, in *Handbuch Literatur und Philosophie*, ed. by Hans Feger (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012), pp. 159–77.

¹⁴ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Werke*, ed. by Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum, and Clemens Münster, 4 vols (Munich; Zürich: Piper, 1993), I, p. 167.

¹⁵ See Leeder, p. xvii.

fluently musical it may be, we don't engage with this verse *primarily* by following the phrasal line. Its resources work in predominately vertical, rather than horizontal, ways; through symbol, fable and image, rather than the 'and then... and then... and then' of anecdote, or even distinctive formal rhythm. Music remains, however.¹⁶

This definition of a modern mythopoesis, although conceived in relation to Anglophone neo-Romanticism, resonates with Sandig's work, allowing us to situate her poetry in a cross-cultural contemporary poetic movement. Sampson applies her term to the British poets Robin Robertson, David Harsent, Alice Oswald and Michael Simmons Roberts. All of these poets, like Sandig, adapt fables and myths to their own purposes and many of them are as humorous and playful as her. Several of them are interested, just as she is, in the materiality of the written word or in the power of spoken language – and all explore of the unsettling and mysterious, and exploit the slippage between 'real' and 'imaginary' in various ways.

The poem 'Tamangur' (*Dickicht* 14) is a case in point: it adapts the familiar Romantic *Märchen* motif of the place where language is lost and takes the form of an encounter between male and female characters, here a brother and sister lost in the woods like Hänsel and Gretel. The poem conforms quite clearly not only to Sampson's general definition of a 'mythopoesis' which draws on symbols, fables and images, but – in line with her *ex-negativo* definition, it also eschews 'anecdote' or distinctive formal rhythm, opting instead for a justified-column form within which the rhythms are complex and shifting. Two aspects of Sandig's reworking of this myth are particularly remarkable: firstly, the wood comes to its subjects and not vice-versa: initially apparently situated in an internal domestic space ('drinnen halten wir still') the forest encroaches into the room 'um unser Zimmer herum wächst ein Wald!' Secondly, the survival of the written word, even as spoken language disappears, is a reflexive statement about the power of the material signifier in its own right. Both of these factors, and indeed the tone of the poem as a whole, point to a less than fatalistic interpretation of the lost-language topos which is commonly explored in Sandig's work: indeed, the distance from the modern everyday world of 'Airports [...] Luftverkehr, Ampeln' can even be read as a welcome respite rather than terrifying blankness. The forest of Tamangur (like the Romansh language it signifies in the 1923 poem by Pieder Linsel, which an author's note offers as a way of contextualising the poem) is apparently known for its durability, persistence and strength in the face of adverse conditions. In this way, Sandig both draws on and rejects *Sprachskepsis*: language is threatened but never recedes entirely, and is in fact shown to be a source – as Dawert puts it – of 'Geborgenheit'. Perhaps this offers some comfort regarding the ability of language to persist in defiance of a generalised *Sprachskepsis*.

Sandig belongs to a slightly later poetic generation than Sampson's mythopoeists, and her work is rather more formally experimental than theirs, particular due to its distinctive performative, musical and visual dimensions. Sandig may be a 'mythopoeist', but she is also more besides. Moreover, Oswald, Robertson, Harsnet and Simmons Roberts, can be seen as inheritors of the Anglophone Romantic traditions of Keats, Wordsworth and/or Shelley. Sandig, however, inherits comparatively more differentiated German Romantic tradition(s), including not only the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, as in 'Tamangur', but also, particularly in her most recent volume, the distinctive blend of Romantic and Realism one finds in the work of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff.

Indeed, Sandig's intertextual relationship to Droste is of signal importance for any attempt to situate her work in relation to its literary-historical context and also reveals much about the

¹⁶ Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (Random House, 2012), p. 139.

potential for sense, text and body to express certain forms of lyric subjectivity which are gendered and politicised. Droste is – like Sandig – in many respects a difficult poet to categorise; her relationship to earlier Romantic tendencies in German poetry is complex. Her varied literary output, encompassing realist prose, epic poetry and light verse, complicates the question still further. On the one hand, it is impossible to read Droste as a straightforwardly Romantic writer, given the conservative qualities of her work.¹⁷ John Guthrie, and, more recently, Susanna Silvia Navarre have both placed Droste between Romanticism and Realism; Navarre explores the role of the sublime as an aesthetic phenomenon in her work and that of Emily Dickinson, highlighting the intermediary position both poets occupy – between Romanticism and Realism and Modernism respectively – and suggesting that ‘[a]lthough it has been fashionable to situate Droste as, by turns, a conservative-Biedermeier and a realist writer [...] the usefulness of such categories breaks down in the face of her lyrical poetry, where Romantic borrowings are evident.’¹⁸

The Romantic influence on ‘Am Turme’, the poem which functions as Sandig’s key intertext in *Raps*, is indeed evident. One of Droste’s most discussed and anthologized poems, it features a lyric speaker atop a tower, leaning in to a storm and longing for transgressive, overtly masculine freedom – but ultimately settling for the minor subversion of loosening her hair and allowing it to blow in the wind.

Ich steh' auf hohem Balkone am Turm,
 Umstrichen vom schreienden Stare,
 Und lass' gleich einer Mänade den Sturm
 Mir wühlen im flatternden Haare;
 O wilder Geselle, o toller Fant,
 Ich möchte dich kräftig umschlingen,
 Und, Sehne an Sehne, zwei Schritte vom Rand
 Auf Tod und Leben dann ringen!
 [...]
 Wär' ich ein Jäger auf freier Flur,
 Ein Stück nur von einem Soldaten,
 Wär' ich ein Mann doch mindestens nur,
 So würde der Himmel mir raten;
 Nun muß ich sitzen so fein und klar,
 Gleich einem artigen Kinde,
 Und darf nur heimlich lösen mein Haar,
 Und lassen es flattern im Winde!¹⁹

Imagery, diction and form all demonstrate overtly Romantic qualities: the exploration of the natural sublime through the storm imagery; the ecstatic apostrophe to the storm itself; the muscular simplicity of the language and the galloping ballad metre consisting of alternating three and four-stress lines with masculine cross-rhyme are all demonstrably Romantic elements. Moreover, the speaker is (at the start of the poem, at least) demonstrably standing

¹⁷ John Guthrie, *Annette Von Droste-Hülshoff: A German Poet Between Romanticism and Realism* (Berg Publishers, 1989), p. 43

¹⁸ Susanne Navarre, “‘The Poetics of Everyday Life’: the Sublime as an Aesthetic Force in the Lyric Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Annette Von Droste-Hülshoff” (Rutgers University, 2010), pp. 142, 170.

¹⁹ Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, *Gedichte*, ed. by Elke Erb (Leipzig: Insel, 1989), p. ??

outside, exposed to the elements, rather than primly sitting indoors as a passive observer according to the conventions of Biedermeier femininity.²⁰

At the same time, both Navarre and Roland Schneider emphasise that, for all its Romantic qualities, Droste's work departs from the traditions of high Romanticism. For Navarre, this is due to its position within the limited, bourgeois confines of Biedermeier-Romanticism; for Schneider, the ascendant Realism which colours Droste's prose is also applicable to her lyric works: 'sie nehmen alle ihren Ausgangspunkt in einer konkreten und erlebten Situation, die dann zum konkreten Sinnbild einer persönlichen Erfahrung der Dichterin wird'.²¹ For both, the emphasis on sensory experience is crucial, albeit in quite different ways: Schneider sees Droste's 'sinnenhaften Realismus' as a form of 'Überwindung der Romantik', and the importance of sensory perception is also implied by Navarre's discussion of 'practice' in opposition to 'subjectivity'.²² Navarre's reading of the poem situates it within a Kantian mode of self-expansion which is linked, in her overall argument, to a concept of the feminist sublime in late Romantic poetry in which a gendered poetic *practice* (in the sense of De Certeau's 'practice of everyday life') supersedes a narrow dogma of the feminine (or feminist) literary *subject*. That is to say, according to Navarre, Droste does not give voice to a late Romantic female subjectivity in 'Am Turme' and other poems; she participates in a poetic practice which is characterised (in part) by the distinctive use it makes of the Romantic trope of the sublime as a means of expanding the boundaries of the feminine. The critical consensus, then, is that Droste's emphasis on the detail and vividness of sensory experience – even in the face of the limitations imposed upon her language and being by Biedermeier conservatism – makes her work distinctive. The precise focus, in her lyric work, on the minutiae of sensory experience allows her to slip the confines of both late Romanticism and Biedermeier conventionality, and blend Romanticism and Realism.

This argument is salient to discussion of Sandig's engagement with Droste's 'Am Turme', and it is here that one finds a key point of overlap between Sandig and Droste. Romantic elements are combined with an emphasis on the details of lived experience, and the ways in which poetry can capture or enable experience. The opening poem of the eponymous sequence in *Raps*, the second poem in the volume, draws extensively on 'Am Turme':

meine Freunde, versteht mich nicht falsch
wir kennen uns nicht. ich kenn mich doch selbst
nicht. ich steh morgens auf und weiß nicht: bin ich es
Almut? Ulrike? wer war dieses Kind unterm Rock
seiner Mutter? ich bin die Mutter, ich bin die Tochter
ich bin der Schatten zum sich drunter Verstecken
ich bin ein Feld voller Raps, verstecke die Rehe
und leuchte wie dreizehn Ölgemälde übereinander
gelegt. ich bin die Landschaft, ich bin die Jägerin
auf freier Flur, befinde mich auf dem Hochstand
am Waldrand und zähle die Rehe im Feld. Freunde
seht ihr mein kurz geschnittenes Haar? ich lass es
flattern im Winde. ich bin ein Text, der zum Ende hin
ausfranst, ein Stück nur von einem Soldaten

seine Brauen, die Wade oder sein Galgenhumor

²⁰ I am grateful to Dirk Göttsche for this observation.

²¹ Ronald Schneider, *Annette von Droste-Hülshoff* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977), p. 106.

²² Schneider, p. 16.

den er schließlich verlor, als er den Schießbefehl
 an eine klägliche Reihe zu junger Soldaten nicht
 erteilte, weil in der noch kläglicheren Reihe vor ihm
 eine Schwangere stand, ich bin die Schwangere
 ich bin die Reihe von dreizehn Gewehren, ich bin
 ein Kriegsverräterprozess. ich bin kein artiges Kind
 das darf nur heimlich lösen sein Haar und lassen
 es flattern im Wind! ich bin ein Fant, der spinnerte
 Wind, das himmlische Kind, und ich drehe mich
 um einen Turm mit hohem Balkone, auf dem
 eine Frau steht und still und heimlich ihr Haar löst
 aber nein, diese Frau bin ich nicht, bin ich doch

will ich nie wieder sein. meine Freunde, versteht
 (*Raps* 13)

Indeed, an early draft of this poem indicated that it is ‘nach Annette von Droste-Hülshoffs AM TURME’, making the connection clear.²³ Sandig reprises not only Droste’s symbolic hair-loosening gesture in modified form, but also the ‘Fant’ and stormy weather of ‘Am Turme’, the ‘artiges Kind’ to which Droste’s speaker compares herself (albeit here in negative form). To some extent, Sandig’s text also mirrors the rhapsodic rhythm, breathless mood and mode of apostrophe which characterise the earlier poem. As the poem enacts the shifts from one lyric speaker to another, through a sequence of inanimate and conceptual ‘voices’ such as that of the ‘Feld voller Raps’ of the sequence and volume title, it performs the move away from focus on a fixed (female) ‘subject’, which, as Navarre highlights, has been the focus of much explicitly feminist criticism, towards questions of subversive ‘practice’, especially as these are manifested in small gestures of everyday resistance.

However, unlike in Droste’s poem, where the power dynamics of female practices of resistance are staged in fairly explicit terms, as they contradict the masculine and engage with the sublime in spite of social convention, the dynamics of resistance in Sandig’s poem are much less clear. Who is resisting, and what forces are being resisted? The defiant slippage of the voice shifts from self to other to external to internal; laconically addresses its readers as ‘meine Freunde’ and invites us to understand, although understanding is elusive; first is, then isn’t, then is again, the woman in the tower; loosens hair, quoting Droste, and doesn’t; and has closely-cropped hair which can’t be loosened. At another level, the poem both is and isn’t ventriloquizing Droste; Sandig’s reading of ‘Am Turme’ is both empathetic and resistant. In this way, the poem does not permit us to identify the speaker with a marginalised female subject, nor indeed with marginalised perspectives *per se*. On the other hand, their significance is clearly socially-determined, and political: although their precise meaning is unstable, the references to war, violence and a ‘Kriegsverräterprozess’ invoke a critique of power structures, and the statement of identification with all concerned can be seen as a humane declaration of solidarity with multiple perspectives.

In this context, as well as via the intertextual reference to a pioneering female writer, Sandig’s poem must also be read in terms of its gender politics. One reading might suggest that the limitations imposed on Droste’s female speaker – which she so poignantly laments and rejects – have been so conclusively vanquished that even long, flowing hair as a marker

²³ In the published version of *Raps*, the intertextual reference is illuminated by a footnote. See *Raps* p. 92.

of femininity is now obsolete. However, the poem has more complexity than such a reading suggests. Although the strident tone seems to celebrate the female subject's victory over oppression in the context of the long history of feminist struggle, but the voice also rejects simplistic identification with the woman 'am Turme' ('diese Frau bin ich nicht, bin ich doch || will ich nie wieder sein'). Moreover, the lyric subject does not always seem to be a woman, sometimes occupying the perspective of a man, a child or an object. Again, we must return to the idea that the *practice* of writing (and of experiencing 'everyday life' from multiple perspectives) functions as a form of socially-engaged resistance, which is prioritised here above the status of the fixed female lyric subject. Rather than expressing the point of view of a fixed subject, the speaker is the 'Text, der zum Ende hin | ausfranst' – the process of linguistic identification and exploration which functions as a mode of resistance against and within the everyday. This flitting from perspective to perspective, from one form of being and set of sensory and intellectual experiences to another, becomes a mode of subversion in its own right, akin to the practices of resistance Navarre identifies in Droste and Dickinson.

Navarre's discussion of 'practices' of poetic resistance is rooted in De Certeau's theory of the subversive potential of our everyday actions, the 'practice of everyday life'. Yet a focus on senses, and on sensory experience, also allows us to think of Droste and Sandig's poems via the work of another thinker, Michel Serres. Serres, in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, contends that philosophy and culture have devalued direct experience and over-valued its (linguistic) representation:

Many philosophies refer to sight; few to hearing; fewer still place their trust in the tactile, or olfactory. Abstraction divides up the sentient body, eliminates taste, smell and touch, retains only sight and hearing, intuition and understanding. To abstract means to tear the body to pieces rather than merely to leave it behind: analysis.²⁴

He adds:

We have lost, without recourse, the memory of a heard, seen, perceived world, experienced by a body devoid of language. That forgotten, unknown man became man by speaking, and the word has moulded his flesh, not only his collective flesh of exchanges or perception, use or domination, but also and especially his corporeal flesh: thighs, feet, chest and neck vibrate, dense with the word.²⁵

Both Sandig and Droste's poems are structured around sensory experiences described in vivid language: the experience of feeling the wind in one's hair, or surrounding one's body, in the centre of a great storm.²⁶ Here, we find echoes of the physical joy which Serres recommends as an antidote to the morbid logocentrism of modernity:

²⁴ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 26.

²⁵ Serres, p. 340.

²⁶ There is a connection here to the idea of 'atmospherics', as described by Gernot Böhme and discussed elsewhere in this volume by Elizabeth Boa in relation to Sandig's prose writing. See Kate Rigby, 'Gernot Böhme's Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere', in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp. 139–54; Elizabeth Boa, 'Time and Space in Ulrike Almut Sandig's "Buch Gegen Das Verschwinden": An Ecological Reading', *Ulrike Almut Sandig: Prose, Poetry and Performance*, Oxford German Studies, 48.3.

[T]he body acquires bearing when it lays down its weight of knowledge and self-awareness and begins to dance, a compendium of all the primary pleasures – total elation. Joy inspires, quivers, dances.²⁷

Echoing Droste and Sandig's references to childhood, Serres implores us to 'become children again. Immediately happy in the sensible world'.²⁸ In both poems, the symbolic gesture of releasing one's hair to blow in the wind follows Serres' thinking about the value of direct sensory experience, in that it forges an immanent connection between body and world. Moreover, it also suggests an openness to experience which is both gendered and subversive. For Droste's poem, it reflects the limited potential for a female body to be engaged with the sublime which is thematised in her poem, given that the option of 'Jäger', 'Soldat' and 'Mann' are closed off. For Sandig, imagining the embodied experience of a child, a mother, a shadow, a field of oilseed rape, or an entire landscape offers the possibility of empathising (somatically; in the literal sense of *feeling into* or *inside of*) with all of these perspectives at once. Crucially, in both cases, it is the *text* and the nature of lyric subjectivity which enable these sensory experiences to be captured, presented and explored beyond what is accessible in the 'real world'. Droste's speaker's wish to be a 'Jäger auf freier Flur | Ein Stück nur von einem Soldaten' may not exactly be granted in the context of the poem, but the text nevertheless enables us to experience some of the intensity of sensation and emotion which was denied to the typical Biedermeier woman. Likewise, Sandig's text conveys intensity of sensation and experience via the textual medium; indeed, it is this 'radical empathy' and its liberating, politically-significant implications which are the poem's core concern.

As discussed above, understanding the primacy of sensory experience in Droste's work reveals that she occupies a space between Romanticism and Realism. Similarly, Serres' critique of sensory disengagement in modernity, in which the written text becomes a substitute for (as opposed, in the case of Droste and Sandig, as a means of accessing) embodied experience, also helps us to approach a more nuanced understanding of Sandig's position in the literary-historical contexts this essay has attempted to sketch, and of what locating her work Reading Sandig with and against the Drostian tradition of expanded, somatic sensuality allows us to understand the mystery and 'magic' of her work as partly an answer to a certain kind of Romanticism, which gestures towards the expansion of sensory and subjective experience; and partly as a departure from a certain kind of modernism. At the same time, she also inherits Droste's Realist qualities in her focus on detail and specificity. Thus she reprises the fierce emphasis on the sensual which, as Serres argues, has been absent in certain modernist traditions, and imbues it with vital political significance as a gesture of resistance against the fixed position of the feminine literary subject.

This also helps to make sense of the crucial role performance, sound, visual qualities and multi-media poetry play in Sandig's *oeuvre*, for it is here that the playfulness of sensory experience is most immediately obvious. The act of performing the various layers and levels of a poem, engaging the senses (visual, auditory) of both poet and audience, is not unlike the symbolic gesture of letting one's hair down which links Droste and Sandig's poem: a release from structure and limitation, which permits enjoyment of the text on an immediate, embodied level. Insofar as performance removes the poem from the page and brings it to a live audience, it is also – like the motif of the loosened hair, and in line with Serres' thinking – a political commitment to social and shared existence in the world.

²⁷ Serres, p. 320.

²⁸ *ibid.*

Although there are clear resemblances between Sandig's work and the Anglophone neo-Romantic 'mythopoeists' as categorised by Sampson, Sandig inherits Droste's Romantic-Realist hyper-attention to sensory phenomena, which transforms everyday experiences into manifestations of the sublime via close attention to sensory detail in the everyday. It is in this context that the Romantic tendencies of Sandig's work are best understood. In her retellings of the Grimms' *Märchen*, for example, the details of sensory experience (the fatigue and thirst of the speaker in 'muttergottesgläschen', for example, or the fluorescent algae in 'schneeweißchen') combine with unstable first-person perspectives to distil the classic children's fables to symbolic visual, auditory and other sensory experiences expressed in a simple, rhythmic diction. In 'Tamangur', the lost-language poem discussed above, the sound of the wind in the trees appears to trigger the transformation of external and internal space.

'Romanticism' in this case does not demand a heightened emotional sensibility constructed around a fixed lyric subject, a Wordsworthian commitment to the use of 'the language of the common man', or the implicit social critique in the style of Heine's nature poetry. This also sets Sandig apart from the latest wave of male prose writers in German, such as Simon Strauß, who 'revive' Romanticism as a quasi-libertarian, hyper-masculine movement in which the primacy of the self is asserted via a focus on personal emotion, intensity of feeling and social alienation. Indeed, her work offers a vital alternative to this rewriting of German literary history.

Certainly, Sandig's poetic language operates – as Sampson puts it – 'like a cleaned lens'. One way of seeing this linguistic and syntactic directness, and her vivid performance style, is as part of a move towards communicability, in keeping not only with the 'neue Lesbarkeit' in German prose but also with the transnational performance poetry revival, whereby projects such as the film libretto for *Symphonie der Großstadt* and Sandig's collaborations with musicians are attempts to broaden the audience for poetry beyond the rather limited constituency reached by printed collections and staid, traditional readings. This is contradicted, though, not only by Sandig's performance style, which adds complexity rather than necessarily rendering her work more accessible, but also by the emphasis her poems place on the difficulties and complexities of linguistic communication. Her work clearly responds to a distinctively German-language tradition of *Sprachskepsis*, in light of which its creation of 'an entire conceptual and tonal world' must be seen as a gesture of defiance which does not simply revive the Romantic fascination with myth and other realities, but rather locates its interest in language and the magical within the context of over a century's worth of challenge to the possibility of language to generate meaning.

Sandig's work occupies a complex position between Romanticism and Realism, which also nevertheless acknowledges and moves beyond a Modernist heritage. Reading her poetry through and against Droste's, one becomes aware of how both conceive of the relationship between text, body and subject; Sandig uses language not simply to describe but also to create sensory experience, and thus undermines the fixity of the lyric subject. What emerges is, as Navarre identifies in Droste, a construction of the lyric subject via practice rather than as a set position. This liberation the lyric subject (and, via performance techniques, also the lyric genre) is, ultimately, a form of resistance: language permits us to inhabit multiple perspectives, to share the embodied experience of performance, and to feel the loosening of our hair in the wind.

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