

‘I am a double-voiced [...] bird’: Identity and Voice in Ulrike Almut Sandig’s Poetry

Karen Leeder, New College, Oxford

With reference chiefly to Dickicht (2011) and ich bin ein Feld voller Raps, verstecke die Rehe und leuchte wie dreizehn Ölgemälde übereinandergelegt (2016) this paper will demonstrate that voice is a key concern of the poet and that the voices created in Sandig’s collections are deliberately constructed in various ways. Some contain literary quotations, some play with fairy tales and nursery rhymes. At issue for Sandig more than anything else is the ‘Hörbarkeit der Dichtung’: finding a voice for poetry, which also challenges conventional understandings of the link between voice and identity. What is more: many of the poems have a simultaneous life as songs, sound pieces, or in relation to films; others emerge in collaboration with artists, musicians or composers. This paper teases out Sandig’s project with reference to her collections, her multi-media work, recent commissions and ‘Lied aus dem Off’, her lecture on voice as part of her Poetikdozentur in Mainz (2017) in order to understand how the idea of voice relates to her other literary concerns.

Keywords: poetry, performance, contemporary literature, Ulrike Almut Sandig, voice, identity, lyric poetry, subjectivity, disappearance

Identity is a fraught category in Ulrike Almut Sandig’s work. It is embedded in, and shaped by, history, on the one hand; under threat of extinction from outside in the here and now, on the other, but it is also a realm that allows for playful creative manipulation as an answer to these pressures. One of the key ways it makes itself felt – in both its presence and absence – is through voice. From the beginning Sandig’s use of voice in her work and performance has been a staple of reviews. The poetry in her first volume *Zunder* (2009), for example, was likened to ‘ein Lied [das] beim Lesen durchs Ohr zieht’; of her most recent collection (2016) the *Wiener Zeitung* commented: ‘Fakt ist: Kaum jemand schreibt zur Zeit musikalischere, vielstimmigere Gedichte, die man unbedingt laut lesen sollte. [...] Sandigs Verse haben das, was Gottfried Benn einst einen *Sound* nannte’; and the judges’ statement for the prestigious ‘Text & Sprache Literaturpreis des Kulturpreises der deutschen Wirtschaft’ (2017) concluded: ‘Ulrike Almut Sandig ist eine Lyrikerin, die die deutsche Sprache zu klanglich

hochkomplexen Architekturen formt. [...] ein neues Hinhören und Sagen'.¹ This chapter will explore Sandig's relationship with voice in her work, and in performance, and especially the way it challenges or relativizes notions of identity, most particularly the use of the lyric subject. In this it also goes some way to challenging readers' assumptions about the role of the lyric subject in poetry, and especially its relation to the identity of the (female) author.

Sandig has always insisted that, while poetry belongs to the page, it also has an existence beyond it. This is a constant in her work that manifests in a variety of ways. Her early project 'augen::post' (2001–2008), for example, hinged on taking poetry out into the urban environment so that people, who never encountered it normally, would be exposed to its forces: 'Gedichte für alle auf Plakaten, Postkarten und Flyern', as she explains. Her similar 'ohren::post' project set out to bring performance of poetry onto the streets and into the city in a way that would reach new audiences.² The 2011 CD, *Märzwald* with Marlen Pelny, which arose out of it, is explicitly dubbed 'Dichtung für die Freunde der Popmusik'.³ Sandig's website lists not only a 'Bibliothek', but an 'Audiothek' with links to her many 'Sprechkonzerte', 'Hörspiele', 'Hörproben', her 'hörbare Dichtung', created together with 'Klangkosmonaut' sound artist Sebastian Reuter; and her most recent venture is an album due out with her publisher in Autumn 2018 and featuring poetry and music by her poetry-band LANDSCHAFT, comprising Sandig and Ukrainian musician and poet Grigory Semenchuk. Alongside these are numerous poetry films, many together with filmmaker Harald Opel, and

¹ On *Zunder* (Leipzig: Connewitzer Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2009) see <https://www.buchhandel.de/buch/Zunder-9783937799162>; Andreas Wirthensohn, 'Von der Waldschlucht der Sprache', https://www.wienerzeitung.at/meinungen/blogs/religion_im_blick/863686_In-der-Waldschlucht-der-Sprache.html; <https://www.kulturkreis.eu/kuenstlerfoerderung/literatur/text-sprache-2017>. All links accessed 4 July 2018.

² See <http://www.augenpost.de/>. See also the chapter in this volume by Rebecca M. Johnson.

³ Ulrike Almut Sandig and Marlen Pelny, *Märzwald. Dichtung für die Freunde der Popmusik*, Audio CD, Schöffling & Co. 2011.

a libretto ‘Gesänge des Funkturms’ to accompany Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 film *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, again with Semenchuk. In interview she speaks of the excitement of drawing people in to a poetry reading, who might never have intended to be there.⁴ And in discussions she insists on the dual existence of the optical form of the poem on the page but also its audible other, in the encounter with an audience as ‘hörbare Dichtung’.⁵ That this has a democratic as well as an aesthetic impetus is clear. It gains an added dimension when one takes into account Sandig’s collaborative work with sound artists, musicians, translators and filmmakers where many of her works, first conceived as written texts, acquire a new mode of being, a new identity, as collaborative performance pieces. Sandig has herself reflected on some of these things in her 2017 Mainz lecture ‘Lied aus dem Off’ which precisely examines the category of voice and its importance for her work.⁶

Sandig is not alone in this interest in voice. A number of contemporary poets in their different ways insists on the performative aspect of the poem, and its life beyond the page, most obviously those who are part of the spoken word or slam poetry scenes, but also those who write for the page but have also invested in this further dimension of their work. Voice has also, however, recently become an issue of note for poets who are not thought of as performance poets in any conventional sense. Jan Wagner, the first German poet to be invited to give the UK Poetry Society’s annual lecture, in February 2017, entitled his talk ‘The Shedding of Skins and Schemes: A Voice of one’s own and the Voices of others’, concentrating on the role of tradition in a poet’s voice; British poet Sinead Morrissey, who

⁴ See Ulrike Almut Sandig, ‘Ein Portrait’ (2015) by Sascha Conrad, on the Schöffling website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ac4CAfjByh4>. The comment comes at 1.58.

⁵ Ulrike Almut Sandig, ‘Lied aus dem Off. Über die Hörbarkeit von Dichtung am Beispiel der eigenen Stimme’, Mainzer Poetikdozentur, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz’ (25 January, 2017): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_Xb6ZN6bI4. Most recently in discussion after a public reading at the Dylan Thomas Birthhouse, Swansea, 31 May 2018.

⁶ Sandig, ‘Lied aus dem Off’, as above.

gave the invited lecture at StAnza Poetry Festival in St Andrews in March 2018, chose as her subject ‘*Put off that Mask: Persona, Trauma and Authenticity in Contemporary Poetry*’.⁷ Of course the problem of voice is not new in any sense for poetry. How poets find and project a voice has been the subject of numerous critical essays (T.S. Eliot’s ‘Three Voices of Poetry’, as a single, seminal, example); and voice itself is subject of a recent branch of theoretical reflection.⁸ The current discussion, however, highlight new aspects of the debate and I shall return to both of these lectures in due course. One further context is worth pointing out.

The popularity of the spoken-word scene internationally and the crossover of many spoken word poets into mainstream poetry publishers along with the recent debates about ‘Instapoetry’ (a label for poetry shared on Instagram and social media more generally) have catapulted some of these issues into the public arena and highlighted the way voice is linked with aesthetic value in critical opinion. The debate was sparked early in 2018 by a piece in *PN Review* by Rebecca Watts, ‘The Cult of the Noble Amateur’, which criticised the runaway popularity of a wave of ‘Instapoetry’, especially by young women, that won praise for its ‘honesty’ and ‘accessibility’, but, according to Watts, lacked craft.⁹ Her critique centred on the work of Rupi Kaur, which has enjoyed unprecedented sales, but has won little critical acclaim, but also extended to UK poets Kate Tempest and Hollie McNish, who have enjoyed great success through word of mouth but also, significantly, with prestigious publishing houses (Tempest has also won a Mercury award). What might have been understood as a

⁷ Jan Wagner, ‘The Shedding of Skins and Schemes: A Voice of one’s own and the Voices of others’; a recording of the lecture given in the Shulman Auditorium, Queen’s College, Oxford, 20 February 2017 is available on the Poetry Society website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdsCsWLev0o>.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Three Voices of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954). See for example David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁹ Rebecca Watts, ‘The Cult of the Noble Amateur’, *PN Review* 239, 44. 3, January–February 2018: https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=10090.

local spat quickly extended its reach beyond the quiet corners of poetry journals and featured in national newspapers and on mainstream radio, but also drew opinion internationally.¹⁰ At issue – beyond the odd grouping implied in the individual article, the bad tempered scuffle that set accessibility and craft against one another, and an attack on Don Paterson, ‘taste-maker’ and editor who had published both McNish and Tempest – was an understanding of poetry. This hinged, as Paterson pointed out, on the issue of ‘authenticity’, the extent to which the lyric subject bears weight in the poem and how that subject relates to the biographical reality of the poet. This is a conventional concern, with, however, a particular contemporary relevance for female poets, whose poetry is often read as biographically inflected and arguably read in different ways from that of their male contemporaries. The StAnza Festival capitalised on the controversy to explore how young female poets responded to the issues at stake in a newspaper article. Quizzed on whether performance poets (and young women, moreover, are judged by different standards by the poetry world, Sandig interestingly refuses to be drawn into setting up oppositions, reflecting instead on the ‘lifestyle performance’ given by many young poets and a problem of critical orthodoxies that fail to do justice to what is being written.¹¹

I have set out this context at some length in order to argue that Sandig (along with her contemporaries in Germany and the UK) is reflecting on crucial issues for poetry more generally, but with a particular contemporary edge. Sandig’s solutions, which arise out of her

¹⁰ See a summary piece in *The Guardian*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/23/poetry-world-split-over-polemic-attacking-amateur-work-by-young-female-poets>; Don Paterson’s response:

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/26/verses-spoken-word-row-poetry-young-female-poets?CMP=share_btn_tw; and a discussion with Watts and Paterson, on BBC 3 ‘Front Row’: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09nrsg1>.

¹¹ Arusa Qureshi, ‘Who Run the World? How female poets are leading the evolution of the literary scene’: <https://www.list.co.uk/article/99151-who-run-the-world-how-female-poets-are-leading-the-evolution-of-the-literary-scene/>.

particular political and poetic perspectives, and which I shall explore here, can be said to answer key concerns at issue in all modern poetry.

‘Zwischen den Wurzeln der Verben’: Identity

Before focussing on voice *per se* in Sandig’s work I should like briefly to examine the context that makes the issue of such paramount concern. A cursory glance at Sandig’s poetry reveals almost immediately the importance of the theme of loss or disappearance.¹² Thus in *Dickicht* (2011) names are forgotten (*Dickicht*, p. 14, p. 15), identities fall away, things disappear and everything is on the slide. In ‘meine Freunde’ (*Dickicht*, p. 12), for example, a ‘grasgrüne[r] Plastikring’, disappears, but so do the trees, and friends too can be unfathomably and ‘grundlos vergessen’. Another poem remembers what seems to be a childhood landscape before concluding (the gap in the line emphasizing the falling away):

danach hab ich alles
was hier steht, vergessen. zu Neujahr war ich zurück.

Another poem cites a childhood rhyme ‘mein rechter, rechter Platz // ist leer’ (*Dickicht*, p. 35), ‘dieses Foto von uns’ (*Dickicht*, p. 57) conjures the image of a ‘wir’ developing in reverse, until only white paper is left, yet another dreamscape concludes ‘Alle Anderen blieben verschwunden’ (*Dickicht*, p. 46). And the losses are not simply domestic. The poem ‘alles wird immer noch da sein’ (*Dickicht*, p. 67) charts an existential crisis.

¹² This becomes pointed in the prose collection: Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Buch gegen das Verschwinden* (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling & Co., 2015), discussed by Elizabeth Boa in this volume.

fest steht, **alles wird immer noch da sein.**

auch nach dem wieder zu lange Schlafen

dem dich und mich selber Vergessen dabei

dem gleichfalls vergessenen Spätfilm von

gestern, sogar nach allem, was vorgestern

kurz, aber spurlos verschwand, als ich gerade

nicht hinsah: Messer und Gabel und Schere

und Licht aus dem Kühlschrank und Salz

aus dem Brot, Hopfen und Malz und mein

eigener Körpergeruch und auch, dass nichts

fest stand, auch das war ja immer noch da.

As in other poems in the collection, sleep is cast as something dangerous, leaving the subject exposed to an ungovernable reality, in which upon waking everything might not be as it should be.¹³ But here, despite the confidence of the first line, banal forgetting becomes something more uneasy: ‘sogar nach allem, was vorgestern / kurz, aber spurlos verschwand, als ich gerade / nicht hinsah’. And the loss of the light from the fridge, or salt from the bread leads from the domestic – via a clever idiom (‘bei ihm ist Hopfen und Malz verloren’) – into a more sinister loss. The collapsed syntax of the poem finishes by rounding on itself and thus undermining the first line. However, the reader is also invited to read this poem alongside the previous poem, ‘Süden’ (*Dickicht*, p. 66), which also begins ‘fest steht’, and which is one of a

¹³ This might be borrowed from Kafka, motto from whom opens the collection as a whole, and who memorably described waking as the most hazardous moment of the day, in the notes to *Der Process*. Compare ‘noon’, p. 65; ‘Augen auf!’, p. 64; ‘schwanken’, p. 60; ‘ich’, p. 59, ‘wir haben geschlossen’, p. 58; ‘war einmal’, p. 29; ‘für das Tier’, p. 22, ‘Nachtalb’, p. 21. ‘Gänse’, p. 17.

number of pairs of poems in Sandig's collection that reflect and relativize each other until literally nothing is certain.

Ranged against the precarious subject in various poems are the forces of illness, aging and forgetting, absence, night, the forest (fairy tale realm of threat and unknowing) and even the sea. An iteration of disappearance and loss, then, is a key concern of the collection: perhaps best summed up in the sense that this saying might in some sense prepare one for it: 'Übung fürs Wegsein' (*Dickicht*, p. 25). As a theme this has been noticed by reviewers.¹⁴ However, what has been less often noted, is how the iteration itself is the chief concern, and the danger of loss is explicitly associated with a loss of voice, a loss of language. The first poem in the first section starts 'ich werde vom Flirren der Bäume im Licht nichts / sagen' and continues 'kein Wort von der Buche im Hinterhof [...] kein Wort // vom Blauglockenbaum' (*Dickicht*, p. 11), signalling straight away the importance of saying (or not saying) in the creation of reality. This is continued in the urgent injunction in a number of poems to 'schreib auf was wir hatten' (*Dickicht*, p. 46); 'schreib auf Matrose! schreib auf / was noch steht, und lies es dann / vor' (*Dickicht*, p. 48), as if it is only through such a conspicuous and deliberate saying that reality can be preserved. Here it seems to be about listing a local reality of happiness, so that someone might still find a use for what is left behind: for the bed, tee shirt, flowers in a vase the coffee pot before the sea snatches them away. In 'Tamangur' it is 'ein Wort [...], das man aufschreiben kann' that is necessary to guarantee survival in the encroaching forest that threatens to swallow memories, names and, in the last line, even the object of the sentence (*Dickicht*, p. 14). The poem plays on fairy tales from Grimm (especially 'Hänsel und Gretel'), but also in a note suggests that one's language can also go missing high in the Alpine forests

¹⁴ See for example, Wulf Segebrecht, 'Es geht nicht um dich, es geht um alles', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 July 2001: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/ulrike-almut-sandig-dickicht-es-geht-nicht-um-dich-es-geht-um-alles-11115093.html>.

that are spiritual home to the almost disappeared language Romansch.¹⁵ The poem ‘so habe ich sagen gehört’ (*Dickicht*, p. 13) plays this out in a more explicitly German context:

hab sagen gehört, es gäb einen Ort
für alle verschwundenen Dinge, wie

die verschiedenen Sorten von Äpfeln
die Clowns und die Götter, darunter

auch jenen guten Gott von Manhattan
Karl-Marx-Stadt und Konstantinopel

Benares und Bombay und die Namen
von zu vielen Braunkohledörfern

befänden sich, hab ich sagen gehört
in der Mitte des Weißtannenwalds

der jede Schallwelle schluckt. der Ort
wär, **so habe ich sagen gehört**
auf keiner gültigen Karte verzeichnet.

Here again we see the almost archaic, supernatural invocation of the forest as a place beyond reality (not marked on any map), but also a more specific political reality. When some names

¹⁵ See also Elizabeth Boa’s contribution to this volume.

disappear, they take communities and larger ways of belonging with them: as here in the references to the vanished brown coal villages and city of Chemnitz (known between 1953 and 1990 in the GDR as Karl-Marx-Stadt).¹⁶ It would be wrong, I think, to see this as a straightforwardly nostalgic (let alone ‘ostalgie’) poem. There is more at stake, which has to do with the power of naming itself that brings reality and identity into focus, even into being. In another poem it is, after all, ‘alle Sachen die / aussprechbar sind’ that struggle to reach our attention (*Dickicht*, p. 16).

Saying thus becomes a key theme as well as a key facet of the text and chimes with a talismanic fairy tale atmosphere that rests on the magic of naming but also the precariousness when those names escape from memory: ‘an Pflanzen denken. Ihre Namen mal wieder / nicht kennen’ (*Dickicht*, p. 15). It is no surprise that several poems also enact the business of speaking: quite a number include direct speech within quotation marks or in upper case; one poem, ‘scheinen’, is entirely direct speech (*Dickicht*, p. 24); others situate themselves as conversation, e.g. ‘Gespräch mit Ken Taurus’ (*Dickicht*, p. 61); others again constitute speech acts even as they thematize speaking: for example, ‘Sie sagen’ and ‘du sagen’ (*Dickicht*, p. 54, p. 55), a pair of virtuoso comic poems that turn entirely on ways of saying and riff on the pitfalls of the formal and intimate address in German.

That this naming also has, self-reflexively, to do with the writing of poetry is clear. The first poem of the collection outside the two sections ‘Norden’ and ‘Süden’ tackles the theme of *Heimat*. Significantly, home, for all that it is racked with unknowing, is something finally

¹⁶ See also the avowed holding on to the term ‘Sonabend’ for Saturday in ‘alles fällt’ (*Dickicht*, p. 68) a term that was used in the GDR (and is still used in parts of northern Germany). This also turns up in Sandig’s unpublished essay, “‘alles, alles ist gleichzeitig hier, wenn auch nicht hörbar.’” Zu den Gesängen des Funkturms, einem Zyklus in zweiundzwanzig Gedichten nach Walter Ruttmanns experimentellem Dokumentarfilm “Berlin – Die Symphonie der Großstadt”. p. 5.

created through saying – ‘das hast du dir selber gedichtet’ (*Dickicht*, p. 7) – translated in the English version as ‘you wrote yourself the poem of it’.¹⁷ The confidence of this gesture is matched, though, by an anxiety about the trustworthiness of language and whether the voice can be heard. This appears to be confirmed in the final poems of the collection. ‘Lied’ (*Dickicht*, p. 71), the final poem of the ‘Süden’ section is, Sandig explains, a response to ‘Three Songs without Words’, a concerto for clarinet and piano, by the Israeli composer Paul Ben Haim. It begins with the contention ‘dieses Lied hab ich nur / aus Wörtern gemacht’ and seems to be precisely a description of home. Of course no poem is made only with words – as the poem cunningly underlines by working with metres, sounds, rhymes, quotations, rhythms, traditions and so on. But on closer inspection the poem is actually a list of the *sounds* of home, or more precisely, the sounds of the poem of home, even down to the ‘ticke tack / ticke tack ticke tack tack STOP’ of the neighbour’s pacemaker, which is in fact the rhythm of the following partial quotation ‘morgen früh, wenn Gott will / wirst du wieder ge-’ which comes from the lullaby ‘Guten Abend, Gute Nacht’ included by Arnim and Brentano in their celebrated collection of German folksongs *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and well known through Brahms’ ‘Lullaby’ setting, op. 49 no. 4. The poem ends by introducing a song to come that it hopes will last forever, and that is made ‘ganz ohne Wörter’, before concluding tantalizingly with a warning and a colon: ‘Achtung! / an genau diese Stelle / geht alles erst los:’. This is not the end of the collection, however. If one turns the page one finds the mathematical infinity symbol, the lemniscate, occupying a page of its own, and apparently introducing a new section. The subsequent single poem ‘von allen guten Geistern’ (*Dickicht*, p. 75) looks to a time after the end of the last song and the sound of a record turning infinitely. This seems to be the realm of the poem, the new poem, the realm of sound.

¹⁷ I talk about the structure of the collection in the ‘Introduction’, in Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Thick of it* (Calcutta, New York, London: Seagull Books, 2018), pp. ix–xvi (pp. xi–xii). The poem appears on p. 3.

wenn das letzte Lied aus ist
 wenn die Sinuskurve des letzten Akkords

in kleinen und kleiner und kaum mehr
 vernehmbaren Wellen dem Horizont ∞

sich entgegen bewegt, die Langspielplatte
 zu Ende gedreht ist, die Diamantnadel

kreiselt, wenn leis aus zwei blauen Boxen
 ein fast verschwundener Ozean rauscht

wenn die Herzkammern flimmern und wenn
 du bei mir bist und das hier vernimmst

dann sag's den Anderen weiter: wir sind
von allen guten Geistern verlassen

aber immer, immer noch hörbar.

Striking here is the return of the infinity symbol, of course, but also the emphasis on a poetry of sound, without words, beyond and after words, that will serve in the end to guarantee a kind of community of identity. The poem charts that poetry in its single, elastic, sentence, its insistence on a vocabulary of hearing and sound ('Lied', 'Akkord', 'vernehmbar',

‘Langspielplatte’, ‘kreiselt’, ‘leis’, ‘Boxen’, ‘Ozean’, ‘vernimmst’, etc.), but also simultaneously enacts it, in the way the sounds themselves take hold of the poem and vibrate through it (‘Lied’, ‘Sinus’, ‘Spiel’, ‘Horizont’ ‘Diamant’, ‘flimmern’, ‘vernimmst’, ‘bist’, ‘immer’; ‘klein’, ‘kleiner’, ‘kreiselt’ ‘leis’, ‘zwei’, ‘bei’, weiter’ ‘Geister’, etc.), concluding in a final declaration in which the two strands of sound come together. It ends by insisting on the poem of ‘us’ in a sense, following a love story that has played through the collection and which there is not space to discuss here, an us that has been abandoned, has found a path ‘zwischen den Wurzeln der Verben’ (*Dickicht*, p. 14), has survived, and persists – on the margins of everything, to be sure – but significantly ‘aber immer, immer noch hörbar’.¹⁸

‘Ein Lied aus dem Off’: Audible Poetry

That the final word of the collection *Dickicht* is ‘hörbar’ is significant in multiple ways. It points forward to the fact that out of these poems Sandig will develop a CD of poetry and music with Marlen Pelny, and performance versions of the poems using this music, in which many of the poems take on new forms. It points forward to the concept of ‘hörbare Dichtung’ as it appears on Sandig’s website (and in her essays and lectures). But also it will be taken up in explicit form in the next collection *ich bin ein Feld voller Raps verstecke die Rehe und*

¹⁸ Marie T. Martin makes the point that there are several needles that become significant in the collection, pine needles, a needle to sew together the centre of our fractured being, the needle of a compass, and a record needle: ‘Reise zum Mittelpunkt der poetischen Welt’, *FIXpoetry*, 25 September 2011: <https://www.fixpoetry.com/feuilleton/kritiken/ulrike-almut-sandig/dickicht>. This record needle will reappear in Sandig’s later poem ‘Holz (Holes)’, commissioned as a response to fiftieth anniversary of the Beatles *Sergeant Pepper* album in 2017, which plays also with the image of the infinitely turning record and ‘Easter egg’ hidden on the album which can be heard as the needle turns after the song ‘A Day in the Life’. <https://www.sgtpepperat50.com/artists/holz-holes-ulrike-almut-sandig/>. Printed in *Jahrbuch der Lyrik*, ed. by Christoph Buchwald and Nico Bleutge (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling & Co., 2018), p. 125.

leuchte wie dreizehn Ölgemälde übereinandergelegt (2016).¹⁹

The first poem of the collection ‘Lied aus dem Off’, appearing under the rubric ‘Anfangsland’ and the Greek symbol for alpha (α), stands outside the complex internal structure and occupies a preliminary role of aesthetic self-reflection, in a similar way to the first poem of *Dickicht*. It is explicitly about the connection between sound, the birth of language and poetry and also lends its title to Sandig’s 2017 Mainz Poetics Lecture: “‘Lied aus dem Off’: Über die Hörbarkeit von Dichtung am Beispiel der eigenen Stimme’. The lecture takes its cue from a comment about Sandig’s reading of one of her stories and becomes a wide-ranging reflection on voice and gender, voice and the body, the written and audible forms of the poem and the relation between the poem and its audience, with a number of literary examples. The first of these is Sandig’s own ‘Lied aus dem Off’ (*Raps*, p. 9). Following the rubric of origin, the poem charts the beginnings of identity in language, or more precisely, a baby’s cry.

im Anfang steht niemand.
 im Anfangsland lag ich und schrie.
 am Ende schweig ich und zieh
 ein weiß beschriftetes Spruchband
 hinter mir her. was draufsteht?
 am Anfang, am Ende der gleiche
 Vokal und immer, immer im Liegen
 hört ihr meinen Anfang: [...]

¹⁹ Ulrike Almut Sandig, *ich bin ein Feld voller Raps verstecke die Rehe und leuchte wie dreizehn Ölgemälde übereinandergelegt* (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling & Co., 2016). Henceforth: *Raps*.

In the lecture Sandig locates this as a reminiscence of a formative experience: being aware of a trauma as a baby, but being simultaneously aware that this could not be communicated to the adults around, as it predated language. That experience of ‘Noch-nicht-Sprechen-können’ still, she claims, characterises her literary production. However, before language the human makes itself known through the inarticulate cry, which at this point has pre-eminence over the word: ‘Unsere Stimme geht mit dem menschlichen Selbstverständnis Hand in Hand’; ‘Literatur wurzelt in der menschlichen Stimme’ (‘Lied aus dem Off’). Whether or not this reminiscence is actually true, it is fair to say that the poem can be read as a broader metaphor for the human condition: that between birth and death humans come to know themselves and others through language: ‘Der Mensch spricht: also ist er in der Welt und in der Lage die Welt zu begreifen’ (‘Lied aus dem Off’). In the poem itself the lyric subject is thus ‘ein Strom, der in andere mündet / in den wieder andere münden. / ich bin ganz aus Sprache gemacht’. Moreover, in this the lyric subject is representative of a species ‘die sprechen muss / um sich selbst zu begreifen’. However, at a third level, the poem can also be read as a reflection on the silence before the poem (*Raps*, p. 9):

im Anfangsland lag mein Flösschen
mit Schnabel. am Anfang lag ich
niemand war ich und niemand
werde ich sein. dazwischen bin ich
Stimmgabel aus flüssigem Stoff
ich bin mein eigenes **Lied aus dem Off**

Interesting here is the imagery, which seems to borrow from traditional ideas of poetic inspiration of the sort one might find in Rilke, for example, of the poet as the conduit, the mouthpiece ('Schnabel'), for the song of the earth, which is figured as a river ('Stimmgabel aus flüssigem Stoff'). The build up to the voice at the end, the 'Lied aus dem Off', is given prominence in the chiming of 'Schnabel' and 'Gabel' and the rhyme (the only one in the poem) of 'Stoff' and 'Off'. We are back almost in the same position as the liminal voice at the end of the final poem of *Dickicht* discussed above ('aber immer, immer noch hörbar'), but here the voice asserts itself within a broader landscape which gives the collection as a whole its structure and contour: 'ich bin mein eigenes **Lied aus dem Off** / über ein vollkommen weißes / Rapsfeld im Schnee'. The perfectly white field of rapeseed in the snow (unlike the other appearances of the 'Feld voller Raps' in the collection, where it is yellow at the height of summer), can be read with the idea of the white space, the blank page before the poem, in mind.²⁰

Who's that voice is and how it relates to the lyric subject is a question that the collection poses explicitly and implicitly. The first poem of the first section, which provides the title for the collection as a whole, opens with a scenario of insecurity that suggests a biographical context (*Raps*, p. 13).

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?

²⁰ Compare Glyn Maxwell's *On Poetry* (London: Oberon, 2012; repr. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018), for example, for an excellent introduction to this idea.

Immediately, however, that apparent context is dissolved as the voice suggests numerous alternative identities for the lyric subject – mother, daughter, landscape, hunter, the field of rapeseed, the shadow, a part of a soldier, the text fraying at the end, the pregnant girl, the thirteen rifles, the wind, the woman on the tower – sometimes even offering and then denying them within a line or two. This is complicated by the fact that the poem relies on an intertext, what Christian Metz in an insightful review reads as a palimpsest, or referring to Sandig's title ('Überlagerung'): Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's 'Am Turme', another poem about potential and thwarted identities.²¹ A further poem also does away with a secure identity, swapping 'eine zweite Ulrike' and a real Berlin address with antipodean alternatives: 'wie wäre es mit **Hinemoana**?' (*Raps*, p. 16).²² In yet another poem the 'ich' detaches itself from a fixed identity to experiment with alternatives (*Raps*, p. 28).

nicht alt und nicht jung sein, aber alt genug sein

um mehrere Dinge auf einmal zu sein: Ulrike

und Almut, ein großes Tier mit aufrechtem Gang

ein seltsames Tier sein, das spricht. staunen

²¹ Compare the chapter in this volume by Nicola Thomas. Christian Metz, 'Einfach mal Feld sein. Wie das gelingt und klingt zeigt Ulrike Almut Sandigs neuester Gedichtband', *Signaturen* (n.d.): <http://signaturen-magazin.de/ulrike-almut-sandig--ich-bin-ein-feld-voller-raps-....html>.

²² Referring to the New Zealand poet Hinemoana Baker with whom Sandig was involved in a poetry project in 2016: *Transit of Venus: Poetry of Exchange / Venustransit-Lyrik-Austausch* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016), see esp. pp. 11–57. Baker and Sandig made a poetry film which incorporated this interspersed with sections of one of Baker's poems in 2016 (and which similarly plays with identities), 'It wasn't me und du warst es auch nicht' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-syWM_TMKCM), and also planned a multilingual performance workshop exploring voice for StAnza (2018) <https://www.list.co.uk/event/903547-a-double-voiced-bird-hinemoana-baker-and-ulrike-almut-sandig/>.

über das Tier, das 'ich' sagen kann, das sich
erinnert.

Here the projected subject moves further and further from what we would conventionally understand as markers of identity becoming generic, unanchored and losing its contours until finally it becomes a desire for an inanimate – yet integrated – existence (*Raps*, p. 28):

keinen Namen
mehr tragen, nicht länger zu sagen 'ich bin'

Holz eines Tisches zu sein, an dem jemand sitzt

Metz comments on Sandig's 'überbordende Selbstvervielfältigungslust', which expresses itself in a constant recasting of selves in dozens of animate and inanimate versions from fields to strands of DNA. But this is done in the spirit of playfulness and delight in invention, rather than the 'Subjektkrise' much touted in contemporary criticism. In the lecture, with reference to this collection, Sandig concedes that she has enjoyed starting to play with versions of identity and testing the readers' expectations of the lyric subject. On one level this concerns the relation to biographical reality: 'In meinem jüngsten Gedichtband [...] habe ich mit wachsender Begeisterung Autobiographisches fingiert' ('Lied aus dem Off'). Indeed, the collection cites numerous details that demonstrably relate to Sandig's life, but also suggests many more that there is no reason to believe are true. But more than that, she conjures deliberately with that most beguiling and dynamic of words in a poem: 'I'. This raises questions that go to the core of reading poetry at all: how far one invests in (what must be a

fiction of) a transparent and authentic lyrical I in the texts, and how far one is aware of the pitfalls – especially in poetry by women which tends historically to be read more naively than that of men. Emily Dickinson, whom Sandig cites in *Dickicht*, famously reflected on the I vouchsafing her poems in a letter of July 1862: ‘When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person’.²³ While Dickinson proposes abstraction to the general as an antidote to the tendency to read *ad personam*; a more playful or aggressive formulation comes from Vona Groarke in her editorial for *Poetry Ireland Review* in 2017. Responding to her own questionnaire for the rising generation of Irish poets, she insists that the ‘I’ is ‘the most dangerous and dynamic word at a poet’s disposal. Introduce it into a poem and the game changes instantly’. She continues: ‘But I can see why people are wary of it, it’s such a sly little thing. Two-faced. Half the time, it’s not even interested in itself, it’s just throwing shapes’.²⁴ This hits the mark for Sandig too. She exploits the reader’s investment in the subject, but revels also, precisely, in the shapes it throws (*Raps*, pp. 14–15).

alles muss ich zweimal sagen, alles

muss ich zweimal tun. alles

muss ich wiederholen: alle Fehler

und jeden Verrat, immer zweimal: TEST

TEST! ich bin ein zweistimmig singender

²³ Letter of July 1862 to Thomas Higginson:
<http://archive.emilydickinson.org/wkintronew.htm>.

²⁴ Vona Groarke, ‘Editorial: The Rising Generation questionnaire’, *Poetry Ireland Review*, 120 (2017), p. 5: <https://www.poetryireland.ie/publications/poetry-ireland-review/editorial/poetry-ireland-review1>.

Vogel mit Menschengesicht

und schwer als schräges Tier zu erkennen

wenn ich im Farnbaum sitze

und zweistimmig klirre, zweistimmig

klicker und mit dem Schnabel

knirsche und knarr. ich bin

eine Reisegesellschaft und lock dich

gen Süden, als läge das Glück

tatsächlich unterm Äquator begraben

aber lass dich nicht täuschen! mir

ist nicht zu trauen oder wenn

dann immer nur zweimal. dir

ist nicht zu helfen, kein einziges Mal

ich bin ein Teekesselchen auf zwei Beinen

und trage den schwarzen Talar

meines Vaters, seinen weißen Kragen

und die Mädchenträume meiner

Mutter trag ich auch mit mir herum

wenn ich dich verlasse, dann

immer zweimal:

einmal im Süden, aber das nur zum Test

und einmal STOPP! auf Nordwest

As Sandig points out in the Mainz lecture, this poem references the tui bird, found in New Zealand, which Sandig visited in 2012. The tui generally appears black with a white tuft of feathers at its throat, which Sandig claims reminded her of clerical attire. She might also have known that the tui is associated with life-fulfilment, confidence and spiritual harmony, and indeed, in Māori culture, acts as a messenger to the gods in the heavens. However, most significant for the poem is the tui song. This species has a dual voice box allowing it to produce a wide range of vocalizations combining bellbird-like notes with clicks, cackles, timber-like creaks and groans, and wheezing sounds. Moreover, it resembles the parrot, in its ability to imitate human speech. Here the poem plays with versions of identity on a number of levels: the appearance of the bird foreshadowing the ‘schwarzen Talar / meines Vaters, seinen weißen Kragen’ later in the poem and referencing the fact that Sandig’s own father was indeed a Lutheran pastor in the GDR and still serves today. So, at one level, the poem seems to suggest the inheritance from parents: an important theme in the collection as a whole. At another level, the poem also stages a speech act, ostensibly a confession of sorts, of the untrustworthiness of the subject’s own speech (ll. 15–18). Not only this: it does it explicitly as a performance, as indicated by the interpolated ‘TEST / TEST’ (introducing Sandig’s own

profile as a performance poet and the mechanisms of performance), but also perhaps raising the question of who is speaking (maybe the bird?). The I's song is a siren-song of sorts luring the addressee to the 'South', a motif that functions in the collection, as well as in *Dickicht*, as an illusory ideal, powered by sheer longing for the other.²⁵ What is more, it riffs on the motif of the 'Zweistimmigkeit' so that reference to language quickly becomes simultaneously a virtuoso imitation of voice: 'und zweistimmig klirre, zweistimmig / klicker und mit dem Schnabel // knirsche und knarr'. In this it chimes with the later poem 'von der Sprache' (*Raps*, p. 47), which seems to posit language as a baby adrift on the Elbe 'mit Vögelchenherz' and culminates in 'Gelbschnabel- / gackern, ein Keckern und Krachen'. Both poems of course also refer back to that (on the face of it) curious image of the 'Schnabel' in the first poem (*Raps*, p. 9), confirming the notion that this elusive, double-talking, unreliable performer is a brilliant image for the poet, indeed the voice of the poem (*Raps*, p. 14): 'ich bin ein zweistimmig singender / Vogel mit Menschengesicht'.²⁶

Appearing early in the collection this poem (*Raps*, 14) explicitly cautions the reader about the trustworthiness of voice and the play of speaking likenesses in the collection as a whole. This is underlined by the many quotations in the collection, almost none of which are formally signalled. Two of the poems that most give the impression of an autobiographical frame of reference, for example, 'jetzt aber mal was Ernstes' (*Raps*, p. 21) and the final poem 'wo ich jetzt bin' (*Raps*, p. 87), are in fact 'after' the GDR poet Helga M. Novak and cite her biographical experience, as well as individual (unmarked) poems. Other poems here and in *Dickicht* that seem to take pains to offer themselves as 'authentic' experience, quote any

²⁵ Compare my comments on the South, 'Introduction' to *Dickicht*, pp. xiii. It notably reappears in 'im süden' (*Raps*, p. 22) in very similar terms.

²⁶ Note the phrase 'schwer als schräges Tier zu erkennen'. It may also be of significance that while at first sight appearing plain black, the tui, when seen in the right light, is in fact iridescent with colour. On the unreliable narrator in Sandig's prose, see also Heike Bartel's contribution to this volume.

number of other sources, from Nietzsche, Kant, Goethe, Kafka or Rilke to Udo Lindenberg or Wolfgang Borchert and many traditional songs, children's rhymes and counting games.²⁷ The *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the Brothers Grimm is a special case. Quotations from well-known and less well-known stories appear in a large number of poems and not only the twenty that appear in the section 'übereinandergelegt' and constitute the 'Grimm' cycle.²⁸ The section title is telling, for these poems do not only cite the sources, they also incorporate and layer other voices, for example, newspaper articles (see the notes to the collection). None of these quotations is marked; and in an email to the author Sandig insisted that they should function as authentic parts of her poems and not be read as quotations.²⁹ In the space of the poem different voices and times can coexist and converse.

'alles ist gleichzeitig hier': The Sound of History

This bringing together of different voices across time has a self-evident political dimension. In *Dickicht*, for example, two of the most striking poems 'Sprechchor' and 'Angesehen werden' (p. 18 and p. 19) deal with National Socialist history through the lens of voice. The first poem is projected into a time and place when history as performance is over 'wenn die

²⁷ Jan Wagner asks whether the poet's voice is the result of the way he or she has surrendered to early influences 'Are poets ultimately nothing but the sum of their literary influences?', 'The Shedding of Skins and Schemes', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdsCsWLev0o>.

²⁸ Sandig's cycle of twelve poems, 'Grimm', first appeared independently in pamphlet form for the 'Wege durch das Land' Festival edited by Brigitte Labs-Ehlert (Detmold e. V.: Druck des Literaturbüros Ostwestfalen-Lippe, 2015), where it was also reimagined as a performance piece and performed by Sandig herself, along with Natalie Bewernitz and Marek Goldowski. The preoccupation has continued in the form of a number of further poems within the gravitational field of the cycle, two of which appear in Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Grimm*, translated by Karen Leeder (London and Oxford: Hurst Street Press, 2018). That the poems have continued to develop in other ways is demonstrated by new performance versions of several of them, often in collaboration with Klangkosmonaut sound-artist Sebastian Reuter, and which appear on Sandig's website: <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/>.

²⁹ At issue was whether these quotations should be marked for an English readership altogether less familiar with Grimm: 'Sie sollen genuine Teile meiner Gedichte sein, ich habe sie mir also angeeignet.' Email to the author of 14 June 2018.

Lautsprecher aus sind, [...] wenn der letzte Sprechchor verklungen / sein wird'. At this point a 'you' will get up onto the stage and, the lyric subject urges 'say after me':

es war alles nicht
echt. es ist niemand zu Schaden gekommen.

also sprechen Sie nach: es war alles nicht STOP

The hopes of the liberal conscience that cannot bear the truths of historical reality are abruptly interrupted from outside. Or could it be the voice of Holocaust deniers that is truncated? Such a reading would be strained but possible enough to leave an uncomfortable taste when reading. That the poem is about the legacy of fascism becomes clear in the partner poem which localizes the memory to 10 November 1938 and the Jews that were rounded up in Leipzig and made to stand in the dried-up river bed before being sent to Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. Again the poem ends with a reflection on how the legacy of such events persists. The phrase 'noch später das Wäldchen aus / Buchen + Buchen + Schnee' (*Dickicht*, p. 19), with its staccato highlighting of the final words, spells out the shadow in the German language when even a beech tree inevitably recalls the horrors of the concentration camp.

The final line also contemplates historical continuities with a reference, in the word 'Durchgang', to the memorial stone at the river in Leipzig made of diabase (Greek for 'transit'): 'dort endet diese Geschichte. / aber hier ist der Durchgang, hier fängt alles neu STOP'. The 'Durchgang' is ambiguous: it has featured in the first line of the poem too as a, literal, way of accessing the past. Here, beyond the fates of the Leipzig Jews, it seems to signal the fact that history is never over and will interrupt and contaminate the present. This is underlined by the implied rhyme of 'Durchgang' and 'fängt an', which the ear hears even

though it is not present on the page, and the missing full stop at the end of the poem: both of which imply a legacy that continues beyond the spoken intervention (in performance these words are spoken by another voice). Elsewhere Sandig is concerned about the rise of the new Right in Germany, and a note describes ‘wir werden DNA-Stränge sein’ (*Raps*, p. 43) as ‘in Inhalt und Ausdruck der rechtspopulistischen Bewegung Pegida nachempfunden’ (*Raps*, p. 92). Given this context, one comes to read these two earlier poems as attempts both to preserve the voices and events of history, but also guard against their corrosive legacies.

It is, I think, in this light that one should also read the ‘Grimm’ cycle. Although it refers to the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the Brothers Grimm, the word ‘grimm’ also means rage: a rage that permeates the cycle as a reaction to the darkness in the collective German consciousness.³⁰ Quite apart from the familiar (or less familiar) characters of folklore, the poems contain, on closer inspection officers, fathers, authorities who embody the dark tyranny of the past. They exert a terrible, often invisible, power like the orgone-radiator in ‘Rosenrot’; the unspoken legacy of the Second World War dominates the family: ‘er irrlichtert in allen Familien. die anderen Kriege lässt / er o-beinig aussehen’ (*Raps*, p. 70). Never far from the surface is the fear that these things might return on account of ignorance or inattention. As in the cartoon-like image of the ‘other wars’ mentioned above, several poems map contemporary struggles against this background. The brother who, in Grimm’s ‘Brüderchen und Schwesterchen’, cannot resist the lure of the forest nor be saved by his sister, morphs into a figure from one of the first trials of those Jihadists returning from Syria (*Raps*, p. 80, p. 81). The boy who, in the original story, ‘goes forth to discover what fear is’, here becomes a girl contemplating the terror of contemporary drone-warfare which impinges on her consciousness as the ‘klingender Schmettergesang der Kraniche’ (*Raps*, p. 79). And

³⁰ In an email (15 June 2018) to the author, Sandig insists that this is in fact her primary meaning.

heading towards us through the cycle as a whole are those desperate migrants pitched into the Mediterranean in their search of salvation in Fortress Europe (*Raps*, pp.64–65, p. 83). The willed indifference of the public is also a source of rage, in that it allows the space for those who would cleanse (‘ordentlich aufräumen’, as the poem has it) Germany anew (*Raps*, p. 67). The poems also touch on ecological threat, injustice, information-overload, prejudice and political apathy, but strikingly always through the voices of the fairy tales (as before many poems are situated as speech acts, a multitude of voices, integrating quotations and references).

This same spirit and technique are at work in the libretto ‘Gesänge des Funkturms’, written by Sandig to accompany Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 film *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* and performed with her poetry-band LANDSCHAFT. From the beginning the text self-consciously references various media: film (in the references to light and shadow and the Lumière brothers); drama (it appears in five acts and references theatre), graphic media and computer games (in the interventions from cartoons and Pokémon Go), music (in the quotations from folksong and references to Edmund Meisel’s lost score); and finally both in the title and as a constant theme within, language and more specifically, voice. All these things come together at the beginning of the text which is intoned by Sandig and appears on screen against a dark background before the film proper begins.³¹

am Anfang war Schatten und Schatten.

hörst du sie nicht: diese Stille?

³¹ The text is not yet published in printed form but is available in video format, including Semenchuk’s soundtrack, on Sandig’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZitvf3HRSA&t=568s>, 0.00mins–0.38 seconds. See also the chapter by Rebecca May Johnson in this volume.

die Geister stimmen ihre Geräte
 sieh dich nur um: hinter dem Publikum
 drehn sich die Rollen. Lumière!
 voller Körpereinsatz der Mimen im Bild
 warme Maschinen.

[...]

dreh, dreh dich, metallisches Mädchen
 dreh dich im Kreis! Lumière!
 sei gottlos und leis. ei, welche Götter?
 hier drehen sich nur die Geräte.
 Schatten und Schatten und
 pst! ohne Stimme kann ich nicht sagen

es werde –

There is not space here to analyse this complex text in the detail it deserves, but it is worth pointing out that the implied but absent ‘Wort’ of the first line couples with the implied ‘Licht’ of the last to initiate the work. If the film captures the everyday life of Berlin before the war, the libretto comes from the standpoint of the present, but is alive to the layers of history between these two moments that make Berlin what it is. These layers are there even if we are not immediately attuned to them: ‘alles ist gleichzeitig hier, wenn auch nicht hörbar’ (16.49 minutes). We are used to the idea of peeling back layers of wall paper or architecture to reveal visible traces of history, Sandig, however, characteristically works instead with sound. The business of the performance text is to uncover these layers and make them audible. Analogous to Ruttmann’s own controversial editing technique, Sandig thus uses ‘Sprechakte aus nachfolgenden Jahrzehnten aneinandergesetzt’, ‘ein Übereinanderlegen von

Bild- und Sprechindrücken' in order to characterize the epochs that go up to make the present.³² So at 38.40 minutes, coinciding with a view of Anhalter Bahnhof in the film, the radio song broadcasts the fate of past travellers:

Ankunft Anhalter Bahnhof.

früher wurde hier Viehmarkt getrieben

später wurden hier Alte mit Sternen verschifft

ein paar Waggons dritter Klasse an die

Personenzüge und in Theresienstadt wieder

gelöst. Anhalter fahrn, sagen sie hier, dreh dich

nicht um! metallisches Mädchen, dreh dich

auf die Seite, leg dein Ohr aufn Sportplatz

den Beat aller Züge unter den Stollen

der Spieler von Tükiyemspor

pst! hörst du den auch?

And, as Sandig points out in her essay, the Tükiyemspor football club, a Turkish team playing recreationally in Kreuzberg, now trains where the Anhalter Bahnhof stood until 1945, adding a fresh layer of history. This history is apprehended through listening for the forgotten

³² Sandig, 'alles, alles ist gleichzeitig hier, wenn auch nicht hörbar' as above.

voices and sounds (the trains), but also through the intervention of the ‘metallisches Mädchen’, that seems in her turning to generate the song. On the one hand, this figure is the radio tower (visible at the end of the film). In her essay Sandig also makes reference to the Ministry for State Security, formally housed in East Berlin’s Magdalenenstraße and thematised in GDR singer-songwriter Bettina Wegner’s mysterious and savage song ‘Magdalena’, figuring the Stasi as a femme fatale who kills who she loves.³³ This makes of the ‘eisernere Lenchen’ of Sandig’s song a complex figure, the ‘maschinelles Adressat des Sprechgesangs dieser Texte’, but also what Sandig calls ‘ein deutsch-deutscher Zwilling’, foreshadowing the ‘twin’ theme of the text itself (‘du trägst deinen Zwilling im Kehlkopf / du schreist in zwei Dialekten’ (6.40 minutes)).³⁴ Much could be said about this figure, as indeed about the thematization of voice in the text at a number of levels (for example, the double voiced-ness of Germany itself during the forty years of the GDR, and perhaps even the kind of schizophrenic double-talk that was a mark of life in the GDR itself), but key here is the fact that multiple aspects of contemporary history, in the post-*Wende* context, are layered upon memories of the GDR and the history of Fascism, almost inescapably. It is done through the audible traces of these various histories, both in the local (family) context, but also in a broader political context. Perhaps it is finally significant that the repeated pulse of the radio tower at the end, ‘dreimal kurz, dreimal lang’ is the international code for SOS.

Conclusion: The Sound of the Poem in Performance

That the twin-figure of ‘Gesänge des Funkturms’ is also ‘double-voiced’ points back to

³³ Bettina Wegner, ‘Magdalena’, on the album *Sind so kleine Hände*, CBS Schallplatten GmbH 83507 (1978). Wegner was arrested during the protests after the crushing of the Prague Spring for ‘staatsfeindlicher Hetze’ and was interrogated in Magdalenenstraße. Jürgen Fuchs also called his 1998 novel about the Stasi files *Madgalena*.

³⁴ Sandig, ‘alles, alles ist gleichzeitig hier, wenn auch nicht hörbar’, as above.

Sandig's attention to the way history, and local history, becomes legible in voices. The essay 'Mein Löffel, Mein Fluss, Mein Pfefferminzspeich: Versuch über die Sprache', traces a similar interest in Sandig's own early language (Russian words, her grandmother's Gdansk dialect heritage and Silesian colouring, local terms from Sandig's childhood home in Saxony, and the languages of multicultural Berlin).³⁵ Thus the voice itself bears witness to family history and legacy, the disappearing words and phrases that betoken local ways of being, but also the new words that are coming into an evolving language. This makes for a vibrant and above all constantly changing resource, 'Meine Sprache liegt nicht irgendwo vergraben, sie ist ziemlich beweglich'. Later in the essay she even likens it to a river (recalling the introductory poetological poem of *Raps*). This is a river that one must dive into without fear, trusting oneself to it rather than controlling it in any way.³⁶

It also points forward to Sandig's speculation about a language to come: 'Ich trage die Zukunft meiner Sprache schon im Mund'.³⁷ This she imagines as a rich celebratory amalgam of different voices, the enemy of monoculture, and far from the dystopian pidgin beloved of science fiction: 'Nachricht von der deutschen Sprache, 2026 AD' (*Raps*, p. 59).

Berlin. wenn es gelingt, bin ich ein Feld voller Raps,
verstecke die Rehe und leuchte wie dreizehn
Ölgemälde übereinander gelegt. wenn es jetzt schon
gelingt, will ich Schaum sein vom Sirup irakischer
Datteln, Würfel aus türkischem Honig, syrischer

³⁵ Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Mein Löffel, Mein Fluss, Mein Pfefferminzspeich: Versuch über die Sprache*, p. 00.

³⁶ Sandig, 'Mein Löffel', p. 0.

³⁷ Sandig, 'Mein Löffel', p. 0.

Lyrik, eine rundgeschliffene geometrische Form wie
 Kiesel, Wiesenblüten, Bonbonmund, spricht aus: ich
 bin das Pidgin der schönen, schwarzlockigen,
 schweren Jungs, die ihre Rhymes austeilen in
 zärtlichen Bomben, gucks du: keiner fliegt hier in
 die Luft außer den Tauben. (wenn es nicht gelingt,
 will ich meine Sprache vergessen. je suis ein Feld
 voller Monokultur, ersticke die Schlehen und drehe
 mich weg. je suis nicht mehr mein eigen
 Heimatland, jedoch) wenn es gelingt, werden wir,
 ihr alle und ich, zeitgleich ein Kinderlied reimen wie
 aus einem einzigen Mund voller Raps, [...]

In its utopian internationalism the language of the future ‘gives shelter’ to all the different influences (rather than suffocating them - note the rhyme) that flow like streams into it. It offers a chance for universal understanding that figures as a smoothed pebble or a children’s rhyme from a single collective mouth. And Sandig claims her part in that too: both in the essay (in which very similar images occur, p. 00), but more particularly in the poem, where the different languages, the exquisite imagery but above all the sound play describe what that language might be, but also, significantly, enact it. Once again the ‘Feld voller Raps’ serves as an image of the poem itself, but here not white, rather bursting with life and colour.

The celebration of the resources of poetry to name, but also contain, the possibilities of language is a constant in Sandig’s work. In this the voice of the poem and the voice of performance is crucial. She praises the ability of the poem to hold multiple voices and forms

of speech: ‘das Gedicht ist ein Allesfresser [...] grösstmögliche Form der sprachlichen Freiheit’, then goes on to explain:

Was ich an Gedichten mag, ist natürlich ihre Hörbarkeit, aber es geht auch um orale Tradition. Ein Gedicht bringt so vieles rein, du hast diesen Song-, Lied-Faktor; du hast diesen Geräusch-Faktor im modernen Gedicht, du hast immer ein Teil Gebet mit drin, auch Selbst-Gespräch.³⁸

That capaciousness is perhaps best imagined in spatial terms and indeed four poems explore the legacy of written after composer Edgar Varèse’s ‘Poème électronique’, a revolutionary multimedia presentation, one of the earliest compositions fully realized through electronic sound and composed for the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair (*Raps*, pp. 48–51). Le Corbusier was commissioned to design the pavilion, which was intended as a showcase of their engineering progress and the visual productions were projected onto the walls. Sandig’s poems realise that experience of holding past and future, light and song, as ‘ein Häusergedicht’ (*Raps*, p. 50), ‘das Gedicht eines Hauses’ (p. 00) and two of the poems even mimic the shape of the pavilion.³⁹

Yet for Sandig the written poem itself is simply a starting point, a ‘Partitur’ (‘Lied aus dem Off’). This has various dimensions. At its most basic this can affect the text of the written poem. *Zunder*, for example, appeared in two editions, the second one substantially re-written, so that some of the original poems were unrecognizable. But that is simply a starting point.

³⁸ Sandig, ‘Portrait’ as above.

³⁹ This sequence also appeared as a limited edition Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Vier Gedichte nach Edgard Varèses Poème électronique. Mit der Partitur „Poème électronique“ von Edgard Varèse und einem hyperbolischen Paraboloid mit Faltanleitung*, design by Sabine Golde (Leipzig: Carivari, 2012).

Some of the poems discussed here have an independent existence off the page as performance pieces. Sandig often sings parts of the poems (especially the quotations from songs), or uses her theatrically trained voice to create striking effects, for example, a kind of background to the lines of ‘Augen auf!’ (*Dickicht*, p. 64) created by intoning the beginnings of each word so that the line seems to emerge from this incantatory background. She sometimes uses a loop pedal and mixer so that phrases from her own performance can be repeated and overlaid over her performance in real time, creating, literally, a double-voiced effect and extending the reach of the individual poem many times over. In ‘Augen auf!’ for example, the title phrase is repeated as if in an echo-chamber and becomes a container for the whole poem. Her equipment also allows for particular effects and in recent performances she has even experimented with building in the English versions of her poems: another form of double-voicing.

Several of the poems have been turned into sound pieces in collaboration with Sebastian Reuter ‘auf der Suche nach dem hörbaren Gedicht’ (‘Lied aus dem Off’). Sandig discusses one poem in her lecture which uses sound effects at odds with the imagery of the poems, but, in point of fact, many of the ‘Grimm’ cycle exist in a version with complimentary sound effects (such as the talk show effects and canned laughter of ‘das Märchen vom Schlauraffenland’, *Raps*, p. 64–65) or the sound versions of the ‘Elektronische Gedichte’ which incorporate Varèse’s music and that appear on her website. A further dimension is added when Sandig creates versions of the poems in collaboration with musicians. Her CD of poems from *Dickicht* with Marlen Pelný has already been mentioned. A performance version of ‘Ballade von der Abschaffung der Nacht’ (*Raps*, pp. 18–20), a poem that mixes torture in Guantanamo with an incantatory fairy tale sound, together with students from the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, Cologne, incorporates singing, classical piano, readings with three male

speakers, sound effects and interpolated choral music, and appears on the website; a version of ‘Nachricht von der deutschen Sprache, 2026 AD’ also appears with electro-pop music and loop pedal effects.⁴⁰ There have been sustained collaborations with the Kashmiri ethno-fusion band Alif, for example, at the 2016 Mumbai ‘Poets Translating Poets’ Festival (2017), in which Alif’s own texts in Urdu ‘find shelter’ in Sandig’s poems; but also with Grigory Semenchuk in the context of LANDSCHAFT, culminating in the 2018 album of the same name. A version of ‘ich bin ein zweistimmig singender Vogel mit Menschengesicht’ appears on Sandig’s website playfully embedded within Semenchuk’s electronic synth music.⁴¹

Sandig is aware of the possible pitfalls of such an enterprise: essential for her is the premise that the poem and music meet as equals and that the music neither becomes accompaniment, nor the poem a song. For Sandig this creates the possibility of a third form, a hybrid (‘Lied aus dem Off’), rather like the gloriously creative hybrid future she posits for the German language. That this hybrid future will lead to further creative possibilities for the voice of the poem is certain. It also, however, to return to the discussion of identity with which this chapter opened, offers possibilities for manoeuvre for the lyric subject. We have seen that for Sandig, despite the desire to conserve old ways of being and old words, the future for language is to be imagined as a celebratory multi-voiced opportunity. In this way the threat of disappearance (a real fear for Sandig)⁴² becomes the inspiration for new playful versions of self that can exist in multiple hybrid forms. Indeed, facing disappearance and forgetting head on is what allows these possibilities to come into being.

⁴⁰ <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/alif-featuring-ulrike-almut-sandig-edward-theatre-bombay/>; <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/ballade-von-der-abschaffung-der-nacht/>; <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/nachricht-von-der-deutschen-sprache/>.

⁴¹ <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/audiothek/>.

⁴² See for example <https://thebombayreview.com/interview-ulrike-almut-sandig-by-nandini-varma/> (2017).

Coda: June 2018

In an interview of 2011 Sandig had playfully suggested ‘im besten Fall wird ein Gedichtband zu einem Ort in dem man selbst verschwinden darf’.⁴³ She might not have meant this as literally as, in the event it turned out.⁴⁴ The short video ‘Alice was it by mazhar – Poetry without the Poet’ takes up the poem ‘ich bin ein zweistimmig singender Vogel mit Menschengesicht’, inspired by the tui bird and discussed above. This was recorded as sound poem with Sebastian Reuter, using multiple effects and layering voices to create a literal double voicing. When Sandig was unable to perform at an event, the recording was played and a video captured the empty space, without the author, but with people passing by and with the sound of the recorded performance. This was posted online with automatically generated subtitles in English that, however, worked on an algorithm that resulted in mishearings, misunderstandings and a phonetic rendering of key terms. Thus ‘Alles muss ich zweimal sagen / alles muss ich zweimal tun’ becomes ‘Alice was it by mazhar Alice music by my tune’. The poet is absent, but the voice, the voices, remain. And they remain in a creative hybrid form, a found poem of sorts that throws up all kind of bizarre and ironic counterpoints to the poem, in this way enacting Sandig’s desire for the future of poetry. Delightfully, as Sandig points out, the term ‘mazhar’ in Turkish means ‘found by chance’.

Karen Leeder is Professor of Modern German Literature and Fellow in German at New College, Oxford. Her research interests include modern and contemporary German poetry and her *The Fifth Dimension: on Contemporary German poetry* will appear shortly. She has also translated much German poetry, including by Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Thick of it* (2018) and *Grimm* (2018).

⁴³ Ulrike Almut Sandig, “‘Im besten Fall wird ein Gedichtband zu einem Ort in dem man selbst verschwinden darf’”. Die Lyrikerin Ulrike Almut Sandig im Interview mit Raoul Walisch’, *Tageblatt Luxemburg* (Beilage Bücher) March/April 2013, [n.p.].

⁴⁴ Posted on FIXpoetry, 26 June 2018: <https://www.fixpoetry.com/sound-vision/0/alice-was-it-by-mazhar-poetry-without-the-poet>. Sandig argues that the translation colours Arab-sounding terms negatively, but a sustained analysis would be necessary to bear out this impression.