

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### COUNTRY ESCAPES AND DESIGNS FOR LIVING: CHRISTA WOLF, SARAH KIRSCH AND JUDITH HERMANN

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#### **Introduction: the voice of a new German generation**

When Judith Hermann (b. 1970) made her literary debut with the publication of *Sommerhaus, später* (1998, *The Summerhouse, Later*, 2002), a collection of short stories, critics hailed her as a great narrative talent in a new generation of German women writers. In an influential article in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* the admiring yet slightly condescending term,<sup>1</sup> *literarisches Fräuleinwunder* (literary Miss Miracles),<sup>2</sup> was coined to describe the exciting phenomenon of a group of young female writers who produced highly readable, successful books. Despite obvious differences in style and themes, it has been observed that these young authors have in common a strong affinity with their contemporaries and the *Zeitgeist*, a postfeminist attitude towards gender categories and a reluctance to tackle the political topics of Germany's past that until recently had shaped the literary scene.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Rauch's indignant reaction to the *Spiegel* article in the feminist magazine, *Emma*.

<sup>2</sup> Hage, "Ganz schön abgedreht." My translation.

<sup>3</sup> See Mingels, "Das Fräuleinwunder ist tot;" and Ujma, "Vom 'Fräuleinwunder' zur neuen Schriftstellerinnengeneration. Entwicklungen und Tendenzen bei Alexa Hennig von Lange, Judith Hermann, Sibylle Berg und Tanja Dückers."

Within this group of emerging writers,<sup>4</sup> Hermann in particular was praised for effortlessly capturing the lifestyle of the young generation in post-unification Berlin and for having created "the sound of a new generation."<sup>5</sup> Sometimes accused of focusing too much on describing "intelligent, exquisitely educated, artistically inclined people [who] lounge their way through relationships, trips, the petty tyrannies of daily life,"<sup>6</sup> the ostentatiously apolitical and self-centred attitude that Hermann's characters display seems to suggest that the past has no relevance in these narratives. One of Hermann's first-person narrators famously claims "I was interested exclusively in myself,"<sup>7</sup> a statement that emphasizes the almost egotistically introspective attitude which is prevalent in Hermann's writings and which seems incompatible with an interest in historical developments and political matters. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Hermann herself confirmed this impression when she programmatically declared: "My generation looks at itself."<sup>8</sup>

This outlook in Hermann's works and in the writings of the other *Fräuleinwunder* authors, most notably in Alexa Hennig von Lange's books, has prompted critics to suggest that these young writers are rebelling against the values of the (West) German '68 generation,<sup>9</sup> which famously claimed that everything was political and forced Germans to face up to the Nazi past. However, the deliberate break with the literary tradition of the postwar years that is suggested by this assumption is less clear-cut than one might be led to believe. *Sommerhaus, später* is in fact in many ways informed by the past and shaped by an implicit confrontation with German literary precursors.

However, the authors whose influence can be felt in Hermann's title story "Sommerhaus, später" are not the politically committed, predominantly male West German authors of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, such as Günther Grass (b. 1927) or Martin Walser (b. 1927), who have dominated postwar German literature. Instead Hermann, in her obvious reluctance to address political issues, is reacting to East German writers of an earlier generation – and to women authors in particular – who themselves experienced a profound disenchantment with political idealism.

<sup>4</sup> Other authors who are often included in the controversial category of *Fräuleinwunder* are Zoë Jenny (b. 1974), Tanja Dücker (b. 1968) and Alexa Hennig von Lange (b. 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Literary critic Hellmuth Karasek on German television in the arts programme *Das literarische Quartett*, 30 October 1998. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Currie, "Something about Nothing."

<sup>7</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald, "For Young German Writers, All Is Ich."

<sup>9</sup> See Schlette, "Ästhetische Differenzierung und flüchtiges Glück. Berliner Großstadtleben bei T. Dücker und J. Hermann."

### East German country escapes

“Sommerhaus, später” focuses on one of Hermann’s typically urban characters who buys an old, derelict house in the country and plans to transform it into a summer refuge for a group of bohemian artist friends, but ultimately fails with his project. This subject matter, with its use of the “topos of life in the country,”<sup>10</sup> not only links Hermann to the wide tradition of imagining country life and of addressing environmental concerns which is prominent in German literary history,<sup>11</sup> it also provides a more specific connection to one particular earlier generation of female authors who were writing in East Germany and who, like Hermann, had fashioned a sound of their own.

In the early 1970s, the well-known poet Sarah Kirsch (b. 1935) who had recently created her famous and highly individual “Sarah-Sound,”<sup>12</sup> forged close links with a group of other GDR women authors, among them Christa Wolf (b. 1929). Wolf is rightly regarded as one of East Germany’s most eminent writers and her works with their foci on questions of national, political and social identity as well as on gender relations still provide food for discussion in today’s Germany.

In the mid to late 1970s Wolf and Kirsch, together with the other authors in the group, bought or rented houses in the rural province of Mecklenburg where they habitually spent the summer months with their families. Two largely autobiographical texts by Wolf and Kirsch that portray this experience of East German country-life, touching on aspects of nature and modernity as much as on gender issues, form an important intertextual backdrop for Hermann’s story. Kirsch’s *Allerlei-Rauh* (1988, Cinderella), one of her few works in prose, and Wolf’s *Sommerstück* (1989, Summer Piece),<sup>13</sup> both published more than a decade after the events they describe took place, each give an account of these summers away from the East German capital before the repercussions of singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann’s (b. 1936) expatriation in 1976 provoked many intellectuals, including Kirsch, to rebel against the state’s repressive cultural politics by leaving the country. This important political event – as well as politics in general – remains unmentioned in both texts, but the permeating sense of disillusion with the socialist government, that it caused among artists, strongly resonates in these accounts. Ultimately, the disappointing political developments, as well as other, more personal events, break up the group, and the social experiment of their life together comes to an end.

<sup>10</sup> Meise, “Mythos Berlin. Orte und Nicht-Orte bei Julia Franck, Inka Parei und Judith Hermann.”

<sup>11</sup> See Goodbody, ed. *The Culture of German Environmentalism*.

<sup>12</sup> See Hacks, “Der Sarah-Sound.”

<sup>13</sup> Neither book has been published in English and thus all translations are my own.

In these narratives, which are written in retrospective, both the intoxicating experience of a liberating sense of space under an overpowering sky in the flat Mecklenburg scenery and the powerful community spirit of the group that they describe, are seen as long gone. In an elegiac manner, Kirsch and Wolf depict a happiness that has already passed. Wolf's narrator mourns the loss when she says: "Now that Luisa has departed, Bella has left us forever, Steffi is dead, the houses are destroyed, life is again ruled by memory."<sup>14</sup> Characteristically only female members of the group are referred to here, early on introducing the sometimes implicit feminist issues with which both books are concerned and which ultimately contribute to the narrators' disillusion. The marginalization of women in patriarchal society is a topic touched on in many of Wolf's books, from *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968, *The Quest for Christa T.*, 1971) to *Medea: Stimmen* (1996, *Medea: A Modern Retelling*, 1998) and beyond, and the idea of a strong solidarity amongst women – most clearly expressed in the female counter society described in *Kassandra* (1983, *Cassandra*, 1984) – is recurrent in her works.

The retrospective knowledge that this would-be liberating social experiment of a life in the country was doomed, gives *Sommerstück* and *Allerlei-Rauh* a sense of utopia. Both texts make it clear from the start that this seeming idyll with its bucolic feel will eventually give way to loneliness, death and destruction. There are several shocking episodes which come to symbolize impending doom for the characters' chosen way of life, and at the same time signal the disintegration of the group. In their seemingly perfect retreat they must – amongst other things – witness the struggle of a mole which is being eaten alive by maggots<sup>15</sup> and watch the inexplicable behaviour of cattle which keep trying to return to a burning barn.<sup>16</sup> These portents make the group feel uneasy as they symbolize to them at once the incomprehensibility of nature and the inability to escape the demands of modern life, including the claim laid on them by the state. They begin to understand "that their retreat into country life was a new illusion."<sup>17</sup> The group realize that they have willingly fooled themselves into believing they could start a new existence and escape the dubious effects of technological progress and the omnipresent influence of the state by sitting in "an imitated farmhouse where they didn't belong."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wolf, *Sommerstück*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Kirsch, *Allerlei-Rauh*, 62-3.

<sup>16</sup> Wolf, *Sommerstück*, 194.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

### Alienation in the new Germany

One generation on, Hermann who is living and working in the new, reunified Berlin, describes a scenario which is in many ways similar to the one in Wolf's and Kirsch's texts and yet displays some notable differences. In "Sommerhaus, später" the first-person narrator and main protagonist one day picks up a homeless taxi driver called Stein. They have a brief affair and he then becomes part of her circle of friends. He joins in all the group activities, yet he remains an outsider: "He didn't belong, but for one reason or another he stayed."<sup>19</sup>

Stein also joins them on their summer outings to Brandenburg, the province surrounding Berlin. These trips away from the city are clearly in the tradition of the summers described by Kirsch and Wolf, an affinity which is further demonstrated by Hermann's deliberate decision to set her story in an exclusively eastern German context. She herself was born and brought up in the western part of Berlin but later moved to Prenzlauer Berg, an area in the east with a strong continuing tradition of artistic, alternative lifestyles that has survived the transition from socialist times to the present. Many of her texts are so obviously part of that environment that readers and fellow authors alike at first believed her to be from the east.<sup>20</sup> Several small details make "Sommerhaus, später" an ostentatiously eastern German story: one of the characters, Falk, bears a typically eastern name, lines from a 1970s East German rock song are quoted, and the action never moves beyond the old borders of the GDR.

Even though the characters physically never leave the territory of the former GDR, they quite obviously live in today's world, where the old East Germany is only a distant memory. When the group move into their newly acquired holiday cottages, they throw out the disfiguring "rubber and plastic" of the socialist past.<sup>21</sup> It soon becomes obvious that together with these mundane relics of the GDR, in the new Germany the old political tensions have also disappeared or been transformed. As in most books written by the *Fräuleinwunder* generation, for Hermann's protagonists unification – even if it is not expressly mentioned – has resulted in a rupture.<sup>22</sup> Maybe in a move to shape a sense of continuity in the new unified Germany, Hermann's characters somehow feel the urge to imitate their East German precursors and experience

<sup>19</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 103-4.

<sup>20</sup> See Claussen, "Glück ist der Moment davor."

<sup>21</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 104. The words *Plaste* and *Elaste*, which Hermann uses, are brand names of materials that were only produced in East Germany. For German readers they immediately conjure up the socialist GDR, an effect the neutral "rubber and plastic" of the English translation necessarily fails to achieve.

<sup>22</sup> Mिंगels, "Das Fräuleinwunder ist tot – es lebe das Fräuleinwunder. Das Phänomen der 'Fräuleinwunder-Literatur' im literaturgeschichtlichen Kontext," 15.

the countryside. But they clearly sense less of a need to escape and do not really know what they are hoping to find in the country: "But we wanted to be there regardless."<sup>23</sup>

From the start these outings are very different from the ecstatic experience described by Kirsch and Wolf. Unlike their predecessors in the 1970s who never tire of admiring the beauty of the scenery around them, Hermann's characters do not develop a relationship with nature and unappreciatively treat the landscape as an uninteresting piece of art: "We gazed idiotically at Tree Clump Circled by Swarm of Gnats."<sup>24</sup> This aimlessness which borders on alienation from their new and strange rural environment is also reflected in the characters' relationship with the locals. Unlike Kirsch's and Wolf's protagonists, who are quite friendly with the people in the village even though they sense a distance to them and feel like "foreign plants,"<sup>25</sup> Hermann's libertine group of friends avoid the bourgeois locals "who hated us and whom we hated. [...] We disfigured the villages, the fields and even the sky; [...] we strode around [...], flicked our burnt-down roaches into the flower beds in their front yards [...]."<sup>26</sup> Instead of experiencing moments of feeling at one with nature, as the characters in Kirsch's and Wolf's books do before they witness the cruel and dark side of country-life, Hermann from the start describes her characters' estrangement from the countryside and its people. This marked difference in the authors' perceptions of life in the country as an alternative to the urban existence has its roots in the different ways they experience the city and ultimately in the political changes that have taken place.

### Leaving the city, fleeing the state

The authors of Kirsch's and Wolf's generation and their characters experience a strong need to leave the "city of stone."<sup>27</sup> They feel trapped in the concrete of the new prefabricated *Plattenbau* houses endorsed by the socialist government. For them, these represent an alienating, collective world in which the actions of the individual do not make an impact. Kirsch symbolically denies the possibility of change and simultaneously underlines the lost relationship with nature in an episode which relates how an egg, dropped from a high-rise building, never reaches the ground and simply seems to have disappeared. This destructive feeling, of being incapacitated by the urban environment, is intrinsically linked to a sense of political powerlessness. In Kirsch's text as well as in *Sommerstück*,

<sup>23</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 104.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>25</sup> Wolf, *Sommerstück*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> Kirsch, *Allerlei-Rauh*, 57.

“the city functions as a metonym for the state.”<sup>28</sup> The desire to withdraw from an intolerant government and its inhospitable towns is a strong driving force behind the escape to the country as described by Kirsch and Wolf.

Hermann’s narrator, however, telling her story after the collapse of the GDR, does not know or feel this opposition to an oppressive state and its capital and hence also has a more ambivalent attitude towards the dichotomy of city and country. Driving through Berlin with Stein, she shares her impressions of the city with him. Significantly, for her depiction of the German capital, Hermann chooses the Frankfurter Allee with its Stalinist buildings, silent witnesses of a bygone-era, that strike the narrator as “huge and strange and beautiful.”<sup>29</sup> They are of a different era and seem slightly alien, but they also possess a beauty to which the protagonist feels attracted. An escape seems, if not unnecessary, at least less urgent than in the earlier texts. The hopeful feeling described by Wolf, that the move to the country symbolizes a fresh start in a political climate where old ideals have been lost and new beginnings seem increasingly unlikely and futile, is something to which Hermann’s characters, living more than twenty years later and under different political conditions, can hardly relate.

Stein, the outsider, is the obvious exception: against the attitude of ostentatious indifference that the others display, he revives the old romantic idea of life in the country. For him the city is not beautiful: in his perception it is “like a giant pre-historic animal,”<sup>30</sup> an extinct life form that has outlived itself and offers no future to its inhabitants. His Berlin is a confusing place of uncertainty, a labyrinth of changed street names that reflect the political developments.<sup>31</sup> His generation is free from political oppression but has to fight a sense of disorientation caused by the alienation of being surrounded by the now meaningless testimony of the past.

The friends’ half-hearted trips to the country side, their annoyingly flippant behaviour and blasé attitude, as well as the inadequacy of their makeshift little country houses, provoke Stein to start his own project of finding a proper house away from Berlin. Characteristically he describes it using words that reflect the capitalist society in which he lives and which poignantly blend a romantic vision with an estate agent’s jargon: “a country house, a manor house, an estate house, linden trees in front, chestnuts at the back, sky above, a Brandenburg lake, at least two and a half acres of land.”<sup>32</sup> This description also serves to

<sup>28</sup> Kuhn, “Zweige vom selben Stamm?,” 200.

<sup>29</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See Meise, “Mythos Berlin,” 150.

<sup>32</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 101.

outline the dream house as a real, solid object.<sup>33</sup> In addition Stein's own name ("stone") reinforces this idea of stability and reliability.<sup>34</sup>

To the narrator's surprise Stein actually manages to find his elusive dream house, a beautiful but derelict manor house. On a cold and dark winter's day, the pair inspect the ruin. It is a dismal scene which strikes the reader in every respect as the exact opposite of Kirsch's and Wolf's accounts of happy summers spent in farmhouses, and indicates a doomed undertaking. The narrator barely listens to Stein's plans. There are brief moments when she understands him, "his enthusiasm, his anticipation, his excitement,"<sup>35</sup> but ultimately her scepticism prevails. The following spring, Stein disappears and begins to renovate the house on his own. He repeatedly writes to her, saying "when you come,"<sup>36</sup> but she does not accept his implicit invitations. In May, before the summer begins, the house burns down. Stein's dream has come to an end.

This destruction of the house by fire is again a clear reference to *Sommerstück* and *Allerlei-Rauh*. In Kirsch's and Wolf's books the fleeting experience of happy summers spent in the country is continually threatened by fire and when the houses actually burn down this symbolizes the sad end of a futile attempt to escape the social demands that life in the city and a repressive state impose.<sup>37</sup>

In Hermann's text, the fire – most likely a deliberate act by Stein who has tired of waiting for the protagonist to join him<sup>38</sup> – ends his futile project of returning to a life which is even more traditional and unspoilt than the country escapes described by Kirsch and Wolf. It suddenly emerges that Stein disapproves of the group's urban, drug-fuelled lifestyle:

You can plant your goddamn grass here, and mushrooms and hemp and shit. [...] I'll build you a salon here, and a billiard room, and a smoking room, and separate rooms for everyone and a big table in the back of the house for your shitty meals and crap, and then you can get up and walk over to the Oder and snort coke there till your skull splits.<sup>39</sup>

This critical assessment of the friends' disaffected way of life is clearly a distorted version of the harmonious country life in Wolf's and Kirsch's texts and emphasizes Stein's need to move beyond the experiences of the 1970s and return to a rural existence of a more distant past. It soon becomes clear that in

<sup>33</sup> See Meise, "Mythos Berlin," 146.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>35</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 113. Hermann's emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Eigler, "Verlorene Zeit, gewonnener Raum," 182. My translation.

<sup>38</sup> See Prangel, "Eine andere Art von Rückblick."

<sup>39</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 109-10.



Stein's view this country life style also includes a traditional family life which he values above the communal way of life that both the 1970s narratives and Hermann's other characters favour.

### Safety in numbers? Couples and communal living

This question of relationships as a lifestyle choice is the second main issue that Hermann deals with in confrontation with Kirsch and Wolf. At first glance the characters in *Sommerstück*, *Allerlei-Rauh* and *Sommerhaus, später* all seem to live in similar set-ups, as part of a group, relying on it for stability and comfort. Characteristically, though, the circle in Wolf's and Kirsch's books, unlike the group in Hermann's story which consists of individuals, is mainly made up of a number of nuclear families and married couples. This traditional and bourgeois way of life is then challenged to the same degree as the feasibility of an escape to the country is questioned.

Both Wolf's and Kirsch's characters are confronted with experiences which indicate that the traditional family unit is threatened and should be replaced by other forms of community. The fact that the group is to a large extent a female network, with the women at the centre of the narrative, is indicative of a growing resistance to male domination. While the older generation still sees marriage as the natural lifestyle choice – even if they wonder whether passion can survive after a number of years – the younger characters are much more sceptical and mistrustful where traditional love relationships are concerned. They are beginning to experiment with different forms of communal living, and as the female members of the group increasingly rely on themselves and on each other, temporarily “men seem dispensable for the women's self-definition.”<sup>40</sup> Jenny, the youngest member of the group in *Sommerstück*, brands romantic love as a “substitute for life” and derisively talks about “the delusion of finding happiness in the love for one person.”<sup>41</sup> In her view, the ideal of the one-to-one love relationship is mainly upheld by the men in the group because “the men seemed to profit the most from [it].”<sup>42</sup> Her own relationship with her former boyfriend-turned-confidant is decidedly different from her elder sister's failed marriage and from the traditional couples of her parents' generation.

Twenty years on, Hermann's ideas of community and of what constitutes a group are clearly influenced by this earlier critique of patriarchy and her protagonists' promiscuous group-centred lifestyle must be seen as a reaction to the failed family life of the generation before. In Wolf's and Kirsch's books the

<sup>40</sup> Eigler, “Verlorene Zeit, gewonnener Raum,” 181. My translation.

<sup>41</sup> Wolf, *Sommerstück*, 98 and 97.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

traditional notion of a circle of friends that is made up of couples is facing disintegration, and the social ideal of marriage and the conventional family unit is no longer valid. This erosion of traditional lifestyles is continued in Hermann's story where the group acts as a family substitute and is kept together not by legal unions but by the tenderness and sexual attraction they feel for each other, across the gender boundaries. Typical behaviour in the group is described like this: "Falk kissed Anna, and Anna kissed me, and I kissed Christiane."<sup>43</sup>

Then Stein enters the group and confronts the narrator with the vision of a different, much more traditional lifestyle. At first he joins in the group's promiscuous, commune-like lifestyle: "He moved in with Christiane [...], then with Anna, then Henrietta, then Falk, then with the others. He screwed them all."<sup>44</sup> Despite this behaviour, there are little hints throughout the story that Stein would prefer to be in an exclusive relationship with the narrator and leave the group behind. His real objective is to live a conventional life in an old-fashioned home, removed from the modern urban existence and its alienating influence.

The protagonist finds it difficult to react to this. She clearly has mixed feelings about being or becoming a couple with Stein and sharing his life in the country. At times she feels an intense, intimate connection with Stein and occasionally enjoys being alone with him, without the rest of the group, but she does not believe in "relationships" and has learned to trust a group more than an individual. At the same time, she feels "the longing for something like a normal life" that all of Hermann's characters have in common – as the author stressed herself in an interview.<sup>45</sup>

Part of the reason why the narrator-protagonist keeps postponing a decision, the hesitant attitude which is captured in the title word "später" (later), is Stein's reluctant way of courting her: "What should I tell you? This, here, is one possibility, one of many. You can go with it, or you can forget it."<sup>46</sup> He too, seems to see how volatile his project is and finds it difficult to outline his vision in a convincing way. But Stein's lack of initiative or passion, which is even more obvious in his failure to respond to the love lyrics she quotes to him, is only one motivation behind her hesitation. To accept Stein's implicit proposal would mean to give up the safety of the group in exchange for a dubious life, involving the return to traditional gender relations, with the man as the provider for his family. The protagonist clearly dislikes the prospect of starting a traditional, patriarchal family with Stein and bearing his children. Whilst he likes being around one of the neighbours' children, she describes the child as "disgusting," a statement which she seems to extend to all children. She is not

<sup>43</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 112.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>45</sup> Prangel, "Eine andere Art von Rückblick." My translation.

<sup>46</sup> Hermann, *The Summer House, Later*, 111.

prepared to become dependent on a man and she is afraid of losing herself in a relationship with Stein: "I clung to him all this time, yet I no longer existed."<sup>47</sup> Part of her responds to his romantic notion of a simpler life in the country and the old-fashioned security it might offer. It even seems that she sympathizes with Stein's critique of the group's tendency to numb their feeling of alienation and futility with the consumption of drugs. However, despite the attraction she feels, she is not ready to exchange her current lifestyle for the doubtful project which Stein hesitantly offers her.

Both Stein's restrained behaviour and the narrator's own doubts about the validity of this vision have to be interpreted in the light of earlier generations' experiences, in particular with reference to both the failed East German attempts to escape political and urban pressures and to their realization that heterosexual exclusive relationships based on the ideal of romantic love (and consolidated by the rules of patriarchal society) were, even then, a way of life without a future.

Stein's apparent inability simply to whisk the narrator off her feet and assert a romantic male power over her indicates a new uncertainty in gender relations. He longs for a return to a traditional lifestyle with bourgeois gender roles but is himself incapable of displaying the typically patriarchal male behaviour expected of the man as provider. Interestingly, this weakened masculinity corresponds to the narrator's sexual ambiguity. Even though, according to heterosexual norms, readers would traditionally imagine the main character to be a woman – and though Hermann herself speaks of the narrator as "Icherzählerin" (female first person narrator)<sup>48</sup> – the nameless protagonist is in fact never identified in the text as either female or male. This illustrates how conventional gender relations that are questioned, and to a degree rejected, in Kirsch's and Wolf's books become invalid in Hermann's text, which has moved beyond the feminist concerns of her precursors.

### **Conclusion: no turning back, cross-generational lessons learned**

It has to be concluded that Hermann, despite being focused on the present and interested mainly in portraying her own generation, assesses the position of her contemporaries, their hopes and fears, by tracing them back to the concerns of older generations, in particular to the East German women writers of the 1970s. She strongly relates to their sense of disenchantment and their reliance on a group of friends.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>48</sup> See Prangel, "Eine andere Art von Rückblick."

The concept of escaping to the country to start a new life, which was explored by Kirsch and Wolf, still holds a certain attraction for Hermann but at the same time the slow and painful disillusion that her precursors experienced is already a given for her. She knows that Stein is chasing an illusion.

In addition, her characters do not feel the same urge to leave the city as their precursors did. Hermann belongs to a new urban generation of Berliners who inhabit the reunified capital without experiencing the political tensions that shaped Kirsch's and Wolf's life in the city. Hermann's characters endure their very own sense of alienation – which they try to keep at bay by consuming drugs – and it is more difficult for them to trace the roots of their feeling of displacement than it is for Kirsch's and Wolf's protagonists. To escape this feeling of unease by returning to traditional forms of life – both in terms of being close to nature and in terms of exclusive love relationships – which *Sommerstück* and *Allerlei-Rauh* cannot endorse because their authors have seen these strategies fail, is even less of an option for Hermann's characters. The narrator's way of life, which evolves around her group of friends, has to be seen as a consequence of the feminist critique voiced by the 1970s generation. To accept Stein's offer would in fact mean going back to an existence which had already been discarded as unsuited to the demands of modern life. The fact that both Stein and the narrator fail to conform to the conventional categories of masculinity and femininity makes the prospect of a return to a traditional lifestyle even less feasible and highlights the postfeminist context of the story.

It is this situation, of being familiar with the failed initiatives of previous generations and of being confronted with the alienation of the present, that is at the core of Hermann's apolitical attitude. The often-voiced criticism that Hermann's works "are about nothing much"<sup>49</sup> and that she at most manages "to identify the empty centre"<sup>50</sup> is justifiable in part. However, to claim that Hermann is primarily concerned with the petty problems of a vapid generation neglects the ways in which this author engages with the previous generation's hopes, dreams and eventual disillusion. That interpretation deliberately disregards the extent to which *Sommerhaus, später* must also be read as testimony to the sense of disorientation in the new Germany, both in terms of politics and of gender relations, resulting from a confrontation with the lost ideals of literary and political precursors.

<sup>49</sup> Currie, "Something about Nothing."

<sup>50</sup> Böttiger, *Nach den Utopien*, 295. My translation.

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