# "Of all things broken and lost": Durs Grünbein's Elegy for Dresden

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## Abstract

This chapter examines German poet Durs Grünbein's book-length poem for Dresden *Porzellan. Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* (2005), published as *Porcelain Poem on the Downfall of My City* (2020). This controversial text is an elegy for the poet's hometown destroyed in the Allied firebombing of 1945. Written by someone who by dint of his date of birth was not witness to the events, the poem splices together many voices and perspectives, asking who is permitted to mourn and how, and also (explicitly) challenging conventional modes of elegy. The poem was heavily criticised on its publication, but historical distance also allows a renewed examination of some of its radical aesthetic strategies.

**Keywords**

Durs Grünbein – Elegy – Dresden – porcelain – poetry

German poet Durs Grünbein's *Porzellan: Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* (2005), published in English as *Porcelain: Poem on the Downfall of my City* (2020), addresses one of the most controversial episodes of modern German history: the Allied firebombing of Dresden. It does that through the perspective of porcelain, the "white gold" that brought Dresden its wealth and made it a cultural capital of Europe. This chapter explores how these two things (the bombing of Dresden and the porcelain) are linked, sketching in along the way how literature has tried to come to terms with this event; how it seeks to find a language for trauma (one of the most pressing questions of the twentieth century); how it contributes to the search for a mode of modern elegy; how art is implicated in history; and, finally, what is says about our flawed habits of reading poetry.

The Allied bombing of Dresden on the night of 13–15 February 1945 remains one of the most controversial military acts of the Second World War and has spawned a vast historiographical response.[1] The bombing was decried by National Socialist propaganda, but

[1] Compare McKay 2020.

crucially also in the US and even by some in the UK as a war crime. First, the deliberate practice of area bombing, designed to cause chaos in a city known to house many refugees, but also the particulars of the raids (esoecially the repeated bombing raids and their scale), meant that this was seen as an unprecedented attack on a defenceless city. What is more, Dresden was styled as a city of culture, a symbol of German identity. The silhouette of Dresden as a Baroque "Florence on the Elbe," immortalised by the Italian landscape artist Canaletto, imprinted itself on such accounts and eclipsed Dresden's role as centre of industry, garrison city and communications hub in the popular and historical imagination. Even Churchill retrospectively denied responsibility for the order and categorised the attack as "wanton destruction" (also removing the episode from his published diaries; Grünbein likens him to Pontius Pilate). It was left to the famously unrepentant Commander-in-Chief of the RAF Bomber Command at the time, Sir Arthur Travers (popularly "Bomber") Harris, to articulate the logic.

> The feeling, such as there is, over Dresden could be easily explained by a psychiatrist. It is connected with German bands and Dresden shepherdesses. Actually, Dresden was a mass of munitions works, an intact government centre, and a key transportation centre. It is now none of those things. (*Porcelain* 70–71)

Dresden's victim-narrative was, crucially, taken up into the official line in the new Communist GDR (East Germany) after the war, as the ultimate symbol of imperialist aggression, formally dubbed "Anglo-Amerikanischer Bomben-Terror" (the Anglo-American Terror-Bombing), perversely enough, after a phrase concocted by Goebbels, the Nazi Reichs-Propaganda Minister (*Porcelain* 76). In the West too, for reasons not always entirely straightforward, people had an ongoing investment in the sense that Dresden was a special case. Other cities (Rostock, Hamburg, etc.) were similarly bombed; in Hamburg the numbers of casualties were even higher, for example. But what can be said for sure is that the

historical sense of the city, its baroque architecture, its lavish court culture, its landscape, its artistic treasure, its Meissen porcelain all played their part in allowing Dresden to inhabit the imagination as a “Gesamtkunstwerk” (Goebel 505), the true image of German culture and art.

It is not surprising, therefore, that after German unification it was Dresden that became the icon of the new discourse of German suffering in the Second World War. However, when the writer W. G. Sebald launched his influential thesis on the “Leerstelle Luftkrieg” (the absence of the Air-War), i.e., that German post-war literature had been criminally silent on such things, in his Zurich Lectures of 1997 (*Luftkrieg und Literatur*, 1999, published in English as *On the Natural History of Destruction*), Dresden was in point of fact already a glaring counter example.

This cannot be the place to sketch in the now huge literature on Dresden, but it is perhaps worth saying that almost all was written by those who experienced the bombing first-hand, as adults or children, from the famous diaries of Jewish linguist Victor Klemperer who escaped death through the allied bombing, to an international best seller like Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* which recounts his experience of being in Dresden as a POW. Grünbein’s work published in 2005 (on the 60$^{th}$ anniversary of the bombing) is the latest and one of the most controversial contributions to that literature.

Born in 1962, Grünbein had no direct experience of the bombing itself, but he grew up with the aftermath both in the ruins about him and within his own family. Although some of the ruins were present in the Dresden of his youth, the destruction was more present in its absence: the areas of emptiness in the midst of the energetic East German *Aufbau*. These gaps symbolise the inaccessibility of the experience of catastrophe but also serve as a screen for nostalgic projections of the past among those coming to terms with it. Indeed, Grünbein characterised his own response to the events so often recalled by older (generally female) family members as “Phantomschmerzen” (phantom pain, Deckert 192). The first poem of the

book ironically foregrounds the seventeen years that separate the events of February 1945 from his birth.

> Wozu klagen, Spätgeborner? Lang verschwunden war
> Die Geburtsstadt, Freund, als deine Wenigkeit erschien.
> Feuchte Augen sind was anderes als graues Haar.
> Wie der Name sagt: du bist zu flink dafür, zu grün.
> Siebzehn Jahr genügten, kaum ein Jugendalter,
> Auszulöschen, was da war. Ein strenges Einheitsgrau
> Schloß die Wunden, und von Zauber blieb – Verwaltung.
> Nicht aus Not geschlachtet haben sie ihn, Sachsens Pfau.
> Flechten wuchsen, unverwüstlich, über Sandsteinblüten.
> Elegie, das kehrt wie Schluckauf wieder. Wozu brüten?

> Why complain, Johnny-come-lately? Dresden was long gone
> when your little light first appeared on the scene.
> Moist eyes are not the same as grey hair, my son.
> And as your name suggests you're too quick for it, too green.
> Seventeen years, barely a childhood, was all it took
> to erase what had been there before. The somber gray
> of uniformity had closed the wounds and magic ceded to —
> bureaucracy. No need to slay the Saxon peacock.
> Lichen blossomed on the sandstone flowers, implacably.
> Why brood? It comes back like hiccoughs: elegy.

Although he had written about Dresden before in a notably caustic manner, this book-length poem, with 49 rhymed 10-line strophes in classical metre, was his most sustained attempt to come to terms with the events of 1945 set against the history of Dresden. The long poem, or sequence or cycle, (he refers to it differently in different places), began as a ritual, a game even, in that he had sat down on the anniversary of the bombings each year between 1992-2005, and written a poem in the same form which he had then gathered and expanded for publication. The poems are numbered and placed at the top of the page or the bottom, sometimes with blank pages between, creating the sense of isolated shards of poetry. There are no page numbers. A dedication to his mother (who survived the bombing by chance) is

followed by an image of the river Elbe before the bombing and the sequence ends with another of the Zwinger also intact. There are no notes.[2]

The poem is fascinated by the origins of porcelain in Europe. In the seventeenth century Europe was in thrall to Chinese porcelain. With its pure white biscuit, its unique malleability, Asian porcelain surpassed in finesse and craft anything known in the West at the time and was so pure and valuable it was even thought to have magic properties. European aristocracy entered a porcelain craze and Louis XIV famously even melted down the Versailles silver to pay for it. The Saxon Elector Augustus the Strong himself bemoaned his "maladie de porcelain" and spared no expense or effort to secure the sought-after pieces. He also, however, engaged young alchemist Johannes Friedrich Böttger (imprisoned him, more exactly) until after years of experimentation he came up with the red stone-ware porcelain. After that the red clay simply needed to be replaced by the precious kaolin, terra alba, in the local soil, that could be fired with native feldspar and quartz to produce the brilliant white porcelain, which has been associated with Meissen ever since. The manufactory was founded in 1710 and the famous insignia blue crossed swords guaranteed the arcanum.

Grünbein's poem celebrates the figures, dining sets, tureens, life-size figures that were created for the splendour of the baroque court, and the master ceramicists who came after. But he also makes the point that Meissen was also art in the home for ordinary Dresdeners: every family in Dresden had their own small piece of Meissen – an heirloom which would be brought out on special occasions. It thus functions both as grand art but also as a powerful symbol of cultural transmission in ordinary families and thus stands in both for historical accounts but also for ways of remembering.

How do these things come together: the illustrious history of Dresden's porcelain production and the destruction of Dresden? In the very word "porcelain." For the German

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[2] In fact Grünbein had prepared some notes. Their absence may have contributed to the incomprehension faced by the volume. Many of these were taken up into the English-language volume, however.

title “Porzellan,” also carries within it a covert reference to what Grünbein has called “the secret dedicatee” of his work: Holocaust poet Paul Celan (*Porcelain* 62). This was largely missed on its reception, though in fact Celan haunts the work in countless unmarked borrowings.[3] His presence also crucially signals the broader aesthetic and political project of the work: to place the events of February 1945 within the larger context of German aggression during the War: Guernica, Warsaw, London, Coventry. One might speak with Brecht in 1944: “Und unsere Städte sind auch nur ein Teil / Von all den Städten, welche wir zerstörten” (And our cities are also just a part / of all the cities we destroyed) (*Porcelain* 66). Grünbein thus places the destruction of Dresden within the logic of Nazi aggression.

To do this is to enter onto fraught territory: the Dresden bombing is at the centre of campaigns by the political right, who see it as hallmark of German victimhood; and every year the reconciliation ceremonies in Dresden are met also with vociferous protests. But if it is controversial in and of itself, Grünbein also goes about it in controversial ways that have been mirrored in its reception in Germany. Take poem 4, for example.

> Porzellan, viel Porzellan hat man zerschlagen hier,
> Püppchen, Vasen und Geschirr aus weißem Meißner Gold.
> Doch nicht dies nur. *Ach, es war einmal* – ein Klirren,
> Und als Donner kam es auf den Tatort zugerollt.
> Nein, kein Polterabend war, was Volkes spitze Zungen
> Die *Kristallnacht* nannten, jener Glückstag für die Glaser.
> Bis zum Aschermittwoch später war da nur ein Sprung.
> Narr und Nazi hatten, heißa, ihren Heidenspaß.
> Unschuld, sagt ihr? Lag die Stadt nicht längst geschändet?
> He, wo seid ihr, Dresdner Schäferinnen, *german bands*?

> Porcelain, endless porcelain was ground to dust,
> crockery, cups and figurines; whitest Meissen gold.
> But not just that. *Ach, once upon a time* – the faintest
> tinkling, then across the crime scene the thunder rolled.
> Not a rowdy wedding-do. It was “*The Night of Broken Glass*”
> or, what sharp-tongued folk called: the glazier’s lucky day.

[3] See, for example, Eskin 2020.

> And Ash Wednesday just a hop, skip and jump away.
> Fools and Nazis— huzzah!— sure they had a blast.
> What's that? Innocent? Disgrace came long ago.
> Dresden shepherdesses, *German bands*, where are you now?

On publication critics took against the line about Jewish pogrom being the "glazier's lucky day" (l. 6) but in fact the more daring leap is the way the destruction of Dresden's famous Meissen porcelain is linked to the violence inflicted on the Jewish population during the war. The sound of the porcelain segues into the smashing glass of *Kristallnacht*, almost like a film dissolve, making a political point – about Dresden's demise being the ultimate consequence of Germany's own aggression – in symbolic terms. But the poem betrays unease in the juxtaposition even as it draws it. The movement between the November pogroms of 1938 and Ash Wednesday bombing of 1945, is "nur ein Sprung" in German, but this is not so much a leap (one meaning of this fatefully overdetermined word) as an uncomfortable rupture of tone, here also embedded in the "Narrensprung," the carnival dance performed as part of the culturally sanctioned overturning of orders. And a "Sprung" is also a precisely a crack in the porcelain itself. The poem juxtaposes its wistful memory – "*Ach*" (l.3) – of a golden age of cultural innocence with an era in which cultural capital operates as a fig leaf for horror. One can hear the shiver of breakage rattling through the verbs of the German, in the repeated sounds, the rhythmic irregularity and the missed rhymes ("hier" / "Klirren"). Which is to say that tone is a matter of structure and perspective and I think here is calculated to provoke, but also to bear witness to the struggle of saying.

Although *Porzellan* has been turned into a libretto performed in the Frauenkirche on the anniversary of the bombings, and has also appeared in a limited edition with illustrations by artist Ralf Kerbach, critics responded immediately and in exorbitantly negative tones. The criticisms were wide-ranging but there are perhaps four salient strands that can be highlighted in the immediate raft of reviews and echoed even more intensely in the academic articles

devoted to the volume that have appeared in the last years. The first issue was the very fact of someone born after, the prominent "Johnny-come-lately" of the first poem, writing about what he had not experienced himself. On the one hand, Grünbein was criticised for not doing justice to the horror, because he remained too distanced, too cynical. Moreover, that possessive pronoun in the title, "Downfall of my City," led some to feel he was taking possession of suffering that was not rightfully his, usurping others' experience. This work then raised in an acute form the very legitimacy of post-memorial writing.

Related to this was a certain unease at what was read as an uncertainty of tone in the poem, especially the juxtaposition of what some saw as a voyeuristic fascination with the violence of the events, with an excessive pathos, especially in the family stories (his mother's own survival as a child), and kitsch in the fetishization (precisely) of the porcelain: note the "Püppchen, Vasen und Geschirr"  (crockery cups and figurines) in l.1 of the poem cited above. This tied in for many with discomfort over the sexualisation of Dresden, a charge that became more pointed after an interview of 2005 in English in which Grünbein called the poem a "rape phantasy" (Grünbein, "Cadences" 233).

Finally, reviewers almost universally rejected the classicized aesthetic form as incongruous and overwrought, critics likening it to "Trauer mit Goldrand" (gilt-edged mourning); the classical metre incommensurate with the overwhelming material. Critics dubbed it more than once pornographic.  Thomas Steinfeld, for example, memorably compared the classicising form to an "empfindsames Nähmaschinchen" (a sensitive little sewing machine) drawing all into its relentless working, "immer hübsch iambisch" (always nicely iambic) – and concluded "wesentlich pornographisch" (essentially pornographic). A more interesting review by prominent critic Michael Braun (to which Grünbein responds in the English edition) was tellingly entitled: "Gibt es eine Sprache für das Inferno?" (Is there a language for the Inferno?), raising the stakes and self-consciously connecting the project to

Sebald's work but also the post-1945 discussions inspired by philosopher T. W. Adorno about how to find a language adequate to the Holocaust.

I have set these things out here because they go to the heart of what the poem is about, indeed how we read poetry. What is more they illuminate issues at the heart of thinking about elegy today. Critics have too often missed the fact that the poem as a whole stages these dilemmas as a way of questioning the very premise of who can write and how about such things. This is, in fact, placed centre stage from the very beginning with the seemingly oblique and, at first reading ironic, reference to elegy returning as hiccups in the first poem, see above). This is one of the many places where the poem references Celan. In his poem "Deine Augen im Arm" ("Your eyes embraced"), Celan's lyric subject attempts to swallow the ashes representing the genocide, but they return as "Aschen-/Schluckauf" (Ash-/hiccups). Eric L. Santner argues that that Celan's poem embodies Germany's failure to mourn (Santner, 45). Grünbein here (and elsewhere, compare, for example, his first volume in English, *Ashes for Breakfas*t) suggests the same is still true.

What is more, and this should not really need stating, the lyric subject of the poem should not be confused with Grünbein himself, although he shares some aspects of his life. Careful reading shows that many voices are overheard, spliced together and quoted here, not only many poets and writers (including Klemperer and Vonnegut themselves), politicians, myths and even in poem 4 above, the Dresden shepherdesses and German bands have migrated from Sir Arthur Harris's defensive speech. In the same way, the poem often autocorrects, testing out different approaches, criticising its own lapses in taste, as if trying out different ways of creating forms of address that might stand as a form of contemporary elegy. If the lyric subject veers too far towards sentimentality or pathos, the voice is there to burst the bubble, as for example in poem 38, after likening Dresden to Troy or Pompei. This comes to the fore particularly in poem 42 where the lyric subject's ignorance and lack of

sensibility is made plain, and he is ironized as one of the post-war-Zombies unable to comprehend the reality of the suffering for those who went through it.

> Keinen Schimmer, was das ist: die Stabbrandbombe.
> Diese Brut, die Krieg nur aus den Kinosesseln kennt,
> Popcorn futternd dort im Dunkel, weit zurückgelehnt –
> Schatten, Schulstoff-Wiederkäuer, Nachkriegs-Zombies.

> … not the faintest notion what they are: incendiaries.
> The only war they know is on the silver screen, these brats.
> Scoffing popcorn in the dark, feet on seats, leant right back,
> shadows regurgitating schoolbooks, post-war zombies.

More than that: the poem does not embrace a single view of Dresden either; but juxtaposes versions of Dresden, like the voices commenting on it. In fact, the poem as a whole explicitly thematizes looking and not looking, seeing and not seeing, but also, above all, the issue of perspective. Poem 32, for example, sees the silhouette of Dresden “drawn in cavalier perspective.” Others again make use of instruments: the child under museum lights with a magnifying glass in poem 7, for example, examining the famous Baroque cherry stone from the Green Vault carved with 185 heads screaming in horror.

> Ist ein Wunderding, kaum daumennagelgroß, ein Kern,
> Ausgespuckt von einem Kirschendieb – mehr nicht.
> Hab als Kind ihn lang betrachtet im Museumslicht,
> Unterm Lupenglas, ein Kleinplanet, auratisch fern.
> Großtat eines Juweliers. Ins harte Holz geschnitzt:
> Augen schreckgeweitet, lauter schreiende Gesichter,
> Ein Inferno auf der Nadelspitze,Tröpfchen, glitzernd.
> Kaum zu fassen, da – *in nuce* – war verdichtet,
> Was der Stadt bevorstand demnächst – zum Emblem.
> Dresden selbst war jener Kirschkern, aus dem All gesehn.

> It’s a marvelous thing, not even thumbnail-sized,
> a stone spat out by a cherry-thief — no more.
> As a boy I’d stare at it for hours, under museum lights

> and magnifying glass, like a tiny planet seen from afar.
> Carved in hard wood, a jeweler's masterpiece:
> eyes wide with terror, on every tiny screaming face,
> inferno on a needle tip; the droplets glisten.
> Hard to fathom, there — *in nuce* — what would come to pass:
> emblem of the future and my hometown Dresden
> was itself that cherry pip as seen from outer space.

This, incidentally, is also an excellent example of a technique used throughout, of moving in for close-up or pulling out for a long perspective, here from the tin heads under the magnifying glass to a view from outer space of our planet. Later a burning glass appears in a hand of a Baroque voyeur looking under the skirts of the porcelain figurine (poem 46). At another point again (poem 30) it is the lens of a wedding-snapper at a family wedding which gains a further charge from being seen through a subterranean reference to a poem by Philip Larkin (Cooper 39). Poem 22 offers a nightmare vision of a lone statue helplessly surveying the devastation, which seems to cite in absentia the famous image of Dresden taken by Richard Peter in 1945 and published in his *Eine Kamera klagt an* (*A Camera Accuses*) in 1949. These are also of course images of Dresden through art.

The perspectival view also bears on the issue of sexualisation. Throughout the poem Dresden is linked with feminine figures: the mistresses of Augustus the Strong, later a pin up girl, a Galatea figure, the Elbe like a sash about her hips (both poem 45); the sinuous forms of the Meissen porcelain figurines. In the second poem the feminized city becomes explicitly styled as the victim of a sexual assault from the air.

> Klar die Frostluft: unterm Flügel, Augenweide,
> Lud der Fluß, ein schlankes S, die Bomberstaffeln ein.
> Nachts der Stadt blieb keine Zeit, sich anzukleiden.
> Besenhexe kocht. Kocht Glas, Metall, Asphalt und Stein.
> Bombe, Bombe – blankpoliert, fiel durch den Schacht
> Tonnenweise Schrott in den Mätressenschoß.
> Augusts Pracht … »Nie gutzumachen, diese Nacht«.
> Schwarz vom Phosphorbrand: das sandsteinhelle Schloß.
> Spaniens Himmel flammte auf, und Coventry und Guernica.
> Von der Bella *ante bellum* – nichts mehr da.

> Frosty night air: below the wings a sight for weary eyes,
> the river's slender S, beckoning the bombers on.
> No time for the city to get dressed up that night.
> Witch on a broomstick, brews up glass, metal, asphalt, stone.
> Bomb after bomb, polished smooth, tumbling from the bay
> and tons of rubble fall into the waiting mistress's lap.
> "This night is irredeemable."…Augustus's pride and joy—
> bright sandstone castle—phosphorus burns it black.
> The skies of Spain alight and Guernica and Coventry.
> Of the bella *ante bellum*—nothing left to see.

This is a further controversial aspect of the cycle: not only, or even chiefly, the implied sexual violence but rather the sentimentality inherent in styling the city feminine; it comes up again in poem 15, in a different mode, when the Dresden Frauenkirche is praised for its motherly care in standing after being mortally wounded by bombs to protect its children before finally falling (Fuchs "Cultural Topographies" 199-200).

Grünbein has repeatedly called the poem "impossible troubadour poetry," love poems to Dresden (Grünbein, "Cadences" 231-232). City and art in the poem are associated with the eroticised encounter with the feminine: this trope reaches a climax in his interview in English cited earlier in which he interprets the bombing of Dresden as a rape fantasy. But this is not Grünbein's fantasy.[4] Instead, he cites it as part of a culturally legitimised fascination with the violation of beauty in art and literature (and Dresden is everywhere seen through the lens of art in this poem). That is captured in the shift in the last line cited above: "bellum / bella." But this is more than a grammatical joke. Grünbein charts the terrible historical reality of just such attitudes in the accounts of the pilots from the Gulf War (where the sexualisation of bombing was ubiquitously documented) and projects back onto those Allied bombers in 1945 following the sinuous "S" of the Elbe towards their target.

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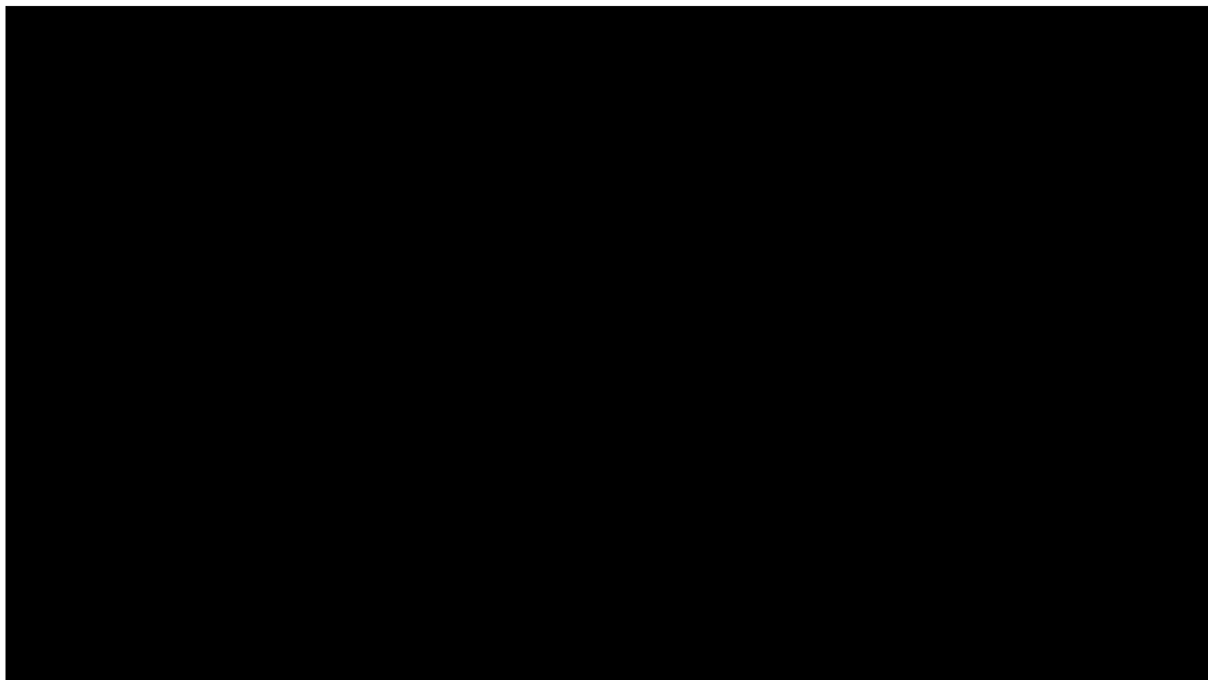
[4] Contrast Osborne 2014.

> In Dresden, beauty was attacked. Dresden was attacked precisely because it was beautiful and defenceless. And because it was an attack on the defenceless part of European culture, it was essentially an attack on the bombers' own culture. There's a poem in my early cycle "Europa nach dem letzten Regen" ["Europe after the Last Rains"], in which I describe this from the perspective of a young bomber – "Las Vegas an der Elbe". Today we get pictures from the Iraq war and you can see that it's a lot of fun to fire away at something, to shoot massive fireworks over great distances. That's the essence of bombing: you don't feel it at all. Bombers turn round after they've dropped their load. It's powerful!
>
> In fact, it's pure baroque splendour. The dialectic is exciting, at least for a structural thinker like me. In Dresden, a baroque work of art was staged for the last time, the last great celebratory act, the destruction of a baroque city in baroque proportions. No-one has gauged the contradictions of the twentieth century, in which a visual feast for one person can mean instant conflagration for thousands of others below. (Grünbein, "Cadences" 233)

This view that also appears in the second poem is pre-empted by the first image in the German volume, where we see the classic image of the course of the Elbe through the valley, notably before the bombing.



We are invited to share the pleasure of that view – the view of a picture postcard, after all, signalling the importance of cultural significance of Dresden. What is more, the sinuous lines of the river are explicitly linked with the curves of Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus" (also

known as “The Dresden Venus”) in Grünbein’s essay “Madonna und Venus” (Madonna and Venus), and in the poem itself. And, for good measure, it echoes Hogarth’s line of beauty, which is mentioned in poem 17, an image of which is now included in the notes of the new English edition.

The curves of the Elbe through the Dresden valley form, when viewed from a bird’s-eye view (the bomber’s view), a balanced wavy line in the form of the letter S. According to William Hogarth, this is the so-called “line of beauty,” described in his practical aesthetics “The Analysis of Beauty” (1745). However, one can also see the runic S associated with the SS implying a different perspective on the city: as the seat of fascism, notwithstanding the cultural legacy and the abstraction of beauty. Thus, violence and beauty are associated at a structural level once again then but only from a certain perspective. So that is to say reality, art, history are overlaid as so many perspectives.

But the destruction is then reinterpreted again, structurally as it were, so as to move beyond the historical specificity. In Grünbein’s Oxford lectures of 2019 published in Germany as *Jenseits der Literatur* (2020) and in English as *For the Dying Calves* (2021), Grünbein expands his thoughts on the role of aerial photography in war to linger on a memory of his own descent into London and render the issue one of perspective:

> Erinnern kann ich mich noch an den Anflug auf London, den ich damals in einer seltenen Euphorie erlebte, Grund war das herrliche Sommerwetter. Die Verheißung begann schon an der Themse-mündung ins Meer. Die Sicht war so außerordentlich gewesen, das Panorama der Hauptstadt am Horizont so gestochen scharf, daß ich unwillkürlich an die Piloten und Bordkanoniere der Royal Airforce in ihren Glaskanzeln der *Vickers Wellington*- und *Avro Lancaster*-Maschinen denken mußte. In aller Seelenruhe sah ich die große europäische Stadt wie ein Angriffsziel vor mir auftauchen. Träumerisch war ich den Windungen der Themse bis zu den Hochhaustürmen in der Ferne gefolgt, sah den *Millenium Dome*, einen weißen Stacheligel, in Canary Wharf, und die Docklands, und erkannte in dem majestätischen Flußverlauf, wie in einer Überblendung, die berühmte S-Linie der heimischen Elbe bei Dresden wieder. Aber nicht nur die Flüsse, auch unsere Städte, durch den Krieg verbunden, sind mir in solcher Raubvogelperspektive plötzlich in ihrer ganzen Schönheit und Wehrlosigkeit

> aufgegangen, und ich war, soviel weiß ich noch, auf eine mir unerklärliche Weise gerührt. (Grünbein, *Jenseits*, 88)
>
> I can still remember the approach to London by air, which I experienced in a rare euphoria at the time, on account of the glorious summer weather. The sense of promise began at the mouth of the Thames estuary. The view had been so extraordinary, the panorama of the capital so razor sharp on the horizon that I was involuntarily put in mind of the pilots and on-board gunners of the Royal Air Force in the glass cockpits of the Vickers Wellington and Avro Lancaster aircraft. As cool as you like, I saw the great European city appear like a target spread before me. Dreamily, I had followed the Thames as it meandered towards the high-rise towers in the distance, saw the Millennium Dome, a white hedgehog, Canary Wharf and the Docklands, and recognized in the majestic course of the river, as in a film dissolve, the famous S-shape of the river Elbe at my hometown Dresden. Not only the rivers, also our cities bound together by war, suddenly opened up before me in all their beauty and defencelessness from this perspective of a bird of prey, and I was, I remember, moved in an inexplicable way. (Grünbein, *For the Dying Calves* 85)

Interesting here is a shift in perspective, the film dissolve, that allows the Thames to reveal the Elbe and its fate. The bombers of the Luftwaffe and the Royal Airforce are elided, and both are linked with the subject himself and a bird of prey. The conclusion from a few lines further on, “Das Luftbild ist das Phantasma der falschen Hoheit” (the aerial image is the phantasm of false sovereignty, 90), implies that more than anything it is the perspective per se that is up for scrutiny and the power it accrues. In the course of the lecture, Grünbein makes the further point that it is the destruction of the landscape, the industrial areas and the city had been preceded by their mapping from the air, their surveying with the aid of photography. Only the precise aerial images, the capturing of enemy sites in a grid of squares, had made possible the preparations of the bomber strategists. And ironically it had been postcards, so-called aerial views, that had provided the template. And yet as mentioned it is precisely these historical postcards that Grünbein uses in *Porzellan* and also in his volume of lectures. We are all implicated through our use of perspective.

A key aspect of this, as I have already suggested, is the role of art and especially porcelain in this equation. Grünbein's poem hints at this when one poem has munitions disastrously hidden in soup tureens (poem 45) and indeed the Meissen factory was used to produce arms during the War. But this aspect gains an added urgency when one remembers the role of German porcelain under fascism: the beautiful pure-white art that was hailed as "the embodiment of the German soul." Goering and Goebbels ordered Meissen as gifts. Porcelain factories turned to making white Hitler busts, Teutonic maidens, and stormtroopers to fund the war effort. This has all been documented by Edmund de Waal in his *The White Road: A Pilgrimage of Sorts* (2005). The culmination was the founding of a porcelain factory in Dachau itself with the inmates in a special block producing the delicate white ware while prominent Nazis came to choose their figurines.

To put it another way: no art is pure. Nor is the perspective afforded by elegy. Grünbein's poems knows that and make it manifest from the start. One of the inspirations that Grünbein cites for his poem is Czeslav Miłosz's famous "Song of Porcelain" (Washington DC, 1947). The line from Miłosz's "Piosenka o porcelane" written in American exile in 1947 is one of many shards of European poetry that trouble Grünbein's poem. The broken porcelain cups and saucers of Miłosz's poem represent not only all that has been lost through the violence of war, they are at the same time a symbol of its beauty and its ruin, but also a synecdoche for the precarious transmission of cultural memory from generation to generation. But also finally, as Geoffrey Hartman has noted of Miłosz's poem, it demonstrates "the inadequacy of those fragile symbols" (Hartman 334). The failure of porcelain as a symbol to carry the weight of history is heard in the broken, even pained, half-rhyme of Miłosz's refrain ("pana"/ "porcelany"), brilliantly captured in Robert Hass's translation: "Of all things broken and lost / Porcelain troubles me most."

Those lines, while not quoted in Grünbein's poem, appear in the notes to the English edition, and can be reckoned programmatic. Grünbein's poem does not attempt to make the losses of Dresden whole but attempts to capture the memory of wholeness and the reality of loss in the language and in the form itself. Finally, and indeed through this, it seeks to make a contribution to what can be thought of as modern elegy, with all its complications, and the fault lines that run through it. Traditionally elegy has been thought to offer solace, consolation and closure, to practise an "art of losing," as Elizabeth Bishop termed it (Bishop 178). Instead, modern elegy, from the 1950s on, but especially in recent years, seems to have permitted of a much more robust reckoning with the deceased and the past more generally; tempered by the scepticism of a critical present and thus encompassing disagreement, accusation or disaffection. Jahan Ramazani, in his *Poetry of Mourning* of 2003, highlights such a tradition as offering not solace as traditionally understood, "not answers but memorable puzzlings" (Ramazani, ix). Edmund de Waal echoes this thought from a slightly different angle.

> The modern elegy is a constant battle between knowledge and emotion; it has to give itself up to knowledge; and at its core, it contains a contradiction between insight into the inevitable processes of modernization on the one hand and an increasing awareness of loss on the other, a contradiction that irrevocably rips it apart. (de Waal, *Letters*, p. 21).

Why was Grünbein's project so fundamentally misunderstood and why does it continue to be so? The answer hinges on the issue of the historical moment, perspective and genre but also in the way he has radically reinterpreted the possibilities of elegy for the modern poem. Many of the most aggressive critics were writing at a time only shortly after

unification, when Dresden was at the centre of a cultural war about the legitimacy of German mourning: a discussion that continues to this day, sharpened by the political propaganda of the new right. The trauma certainly lives on in families and it will be interesting to see if the English version, coming with a certain temporal, geographical and linguistic distance, can be read beyond that fraught context. But finally, the poem interrogates the possibility of approaching such fundamental questions from a different, or indeed multiple perspectives, but also demands a reading that attends to the specificities and forms of poetry. That is that to insist that what Derrick Attridge called the "experience of poetry" is more than what a poem says.

This happens on multiple levels. On the surface Grünbein's poem thematically uses porcelain as a way into considering generational transmission. "So for me, *Porzellan* is more than just a title, or even a metaphor. It's a powerful key to the whole thing and stands at the very centre of memory culture. Porcelain is also one of the few things handed down in all families. Even when there was nothing left, there was still one small plate to pass down. I knew lots of Dresden families of all classes – even poor ones – who saw the collection of small plates in their sideboard as the heart of cultural transmission" (Grünbein, "Cadences," 233). It is no chance that the seventeenth poem focuses on precisely this family scene: "Teures Erbstück, die Familie presentiert es dem Besuch. / Teller Tassen alles wird hier um- und umgedreht" (Precious heirlooms brought out at every family do. / Plates and cups turned endlessly that way and this). The porcelain is turned and turned again, looked at from every angle, just as the poems turns the shards of poetry like pieces of now broken crockery to catch the light, figure connections and see new perspectives.

But at a linguistic level, Grünbein holds up German cultural and linguistic heritage to the light just as families turn their Meissen heirlooms. And this, like that of the porcelain, is a questionable heritage, something to which Grünbein himself draws attention in this final

poem linking the ceramic and poetic expressions: these are, as referenced in poem 49 “heikle Formen” (dicey forms). Throughout a specific lexis is examined. Words in German like “aufgerollt,” “durchgeboxt,” “abgeknallt,” “ausradieren,” are brought into focus. These are all words which Victor Klemperer author of a seminal linguistic analysis of Fascism, *LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii*, first published in 1947), has shown came into being in Fascism, the violence to come prepared for already in the language.[5] From there they entered into the language of the German automobile industry and after the war into media and now belong to the language of everyday life. But Grünbein forces us to see them with all their history, by drawing them to our attention, in what he calls in the English edition “a poetics of short exposure times” (Grünbein, *Porcelain*, p. 67).

In similar terms, while critics deplored what they saw as a striving for wholeness in the poem implied by the very fact of this long sequence and the of use of rhythm and rhyme, Judith Ryan in an early piece reminds us that the return of the long poem “allows for a historically informed treatment of war, violence and destruction” and that “the reflective modality of the long poem also permits a sophisticated and more critical approach to the ‘nostalgic turn’” (Ryan, 348). This is important. In an article *Der Spiegel* of February 2021, entitled “Die missbrauchte Tragödie” (the misused tragedy), Grünbein deplored how mourning for the destroyed city had been instrumentalised by revisionist politics of the right, thus removing the right of ordinary people to mourn. So Grünbein’s is also a political intervention and the form allows Dresden’s fate to be reinserted into the historical narrative which gave rise to it, placed within different historical perspectives.

Finally, any sense that the “elegance” of Grünbein’s poetry serves as an obscene decoration to the horrors it adumbrates, is surely the result of inadequate reading of poetry. In fact, rhyme functions, as does the rhythm (not iambic at all, never mind “nicely iambic”),[6] as

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[5] Grünbein also tracks this in *For the Dying Calves* (ch.4).
[6] This error is taken up in Apel, 2006.

part of a highly self-conscious strategy both to suggest past glory, past wholeness, but also to subvert it. That is to say that rhyme deliberately missed or half-rhyme signals the gap between wholeness and ruin, between pre- and post-War imaginings; between Goethe, say, and Celan himself who figures in the poem as “Der Entreimte” (the unrhymed one).[7] He is the poet stripped of conventional linguistics possibilities and also the rhyme he so associated with his mother learning German.

The apparent wholeness of the poem is always ambiguous; the form always references its own brokenness. This can be usefully illustrated by referring to a synergy that occurred as I was preparing the English volume. During the war, Klemperer’s own collection of porcelain dishes was confiscated from him and handed over to the official Nazi porcelain collection. However, eighteen pieces from it were bought, fire-blackened and broken, by ceramist, writer and master potter Edmund de Waal and exhibited in the historic Japanisches Palais in Dresden (Augustus’ special porcelain house) in February 2020 and included in his exhibition “Library of Exile” which then travelled to London. But the plates have been worked on by contemporary Japanese artist Maiko Tsutsumi who has reassembled the shards using the traditional kintsugi method that involves mending the piece with gold lacquer so that the mend is visible, and that the artwork can be appreciated along with its history. The gold lacquer marks moment of rupture, the moments of loss, and makes apparent the fact of artistic dialogue across the ages. But it also places the object within a historical time span that goes beyond the life of the artist and the present of the object itself. It is a compelling comparison given the way historical time and different works are highlighted in the poem. Could Grünbein’s *Porcelain* also be understood as kintsugi? The shards of history turned in the hand of the poet and worked with words to make an object that bears its historical scars but speaks also of all that is broken and lost. Perhaps. And this might be a fitting way to

[7] This is clearly Celan, as demonstrated by the hidden quotation, and not Grünbein himself as suggested in Osborne (39).

imagine his understanding of elegy too, as something broken in the present but calling back to its history and remaking the form for the present day.

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