

“Diese heiklen Formen”: Destruction and Desire in Durs Grünbein’s *Porzellan*¹

Abstract

This article considers Durs Grünbein’s use of porcelain in his 2005 collection, *Porzellan: Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* as a symbol for both Dresden’s Baroque splendour and its destruction in the firestorm of February 1945. Moving between beautiful, intact artefacts and their shattered remains, Grünbein scrutinizes and critiques the postwar memorialization of his hometown. But there is, the poet admits, “secret eroticism” in his collection of Dresden poems, and porcelain is also central to Grünbein’s problematic juxtaposition of desire and destruction: beautiful forms are implicated in a fantasy of violation where the poetic subject imagines the bombers’ assault on the city as concubine. Whilst Grünbein surely uses the incongruity of erotic fantasy and Dresden’s desecration to challenge how the city has been remembered, *Porzellan* also betrays a sense of shame and unease about its own excesses, signalling the limits of such provocation.

Key words: Durs Grünbein; Baroque Dresden; Bombing of Dresden; memory; porcelain; eroticism; violation

In *Porzellan: Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* (2005), Durs Grünbein evokes both the opulence of Baroque Dresden and the desecration of “Venedigs Schwester” in the firestorm of February 1945.² Grünbein’s hometown is seen from the perspective of the “Spätgeborener” (1), who comes too late to witness either the city’s greatness or its

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² Durs Grünbein, *Porzellan. Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), poem 2 (n. pag.). All further references will be given parenthetically using poem numbers.

destruction. This is a peculiar, ambiguous view, however, at once distanced from and drawn, almost irresistibly, to the city: the “Spätgeborener” is, on the one hand, critical of the nostalgic, mythologized image of Dresden propagated in the GDR, but on the other, captivated by the objects and images that constitute its cultural legacy. In particular, Grünbein’s poetic subject is fascinated by porcelain artefacts, which he perceives as alluringly feminine, and the city itself appears as a curvaceous, seductive concubine. According to Grünbein, *Porzellan* is a “declaration of love” for Dresden’s lost Baroque beauty, but, he confesses, it also carries “secret eroticism.”³ This erotic element of the collection is only thinly veiled, however, and betrayed in knowing Freudian references to fetish objects and screen memories. Moreover, it is found in the desire to look not only at the titillating image of the Baroque city, but also, problematically, the image of Dresden’s violation, that is, in the desire for destruction. I argue that *Porzellan* carries a lascivious, sexually aggressive undertone, which signals the deeply conflicted relationship of the “Spätgeborener” to his place of birth and questions the extent to which the collection can be read primarily as Grünbein’s challenge to the postwar memorialization of Dresden.

Born in 1962, Grünbein did not witness Dresden’s destruction in the aerial bombings of 1945, but he has always been fascinated by how this event changed the city’s cultural identity. The poet wrote about his hometown in *Grauzone morgens* (1988) and “Gedicht über Dresden” (1991), but claiming this confrontation was too close for comfort, he vowed never to write about it again.⁴ Yet Grünbein returned to the subject in spite of himself,

³ “‘Cadences in the Gaps of Time’: The Poet, the Past and *Porzellan*. Durs Grünbein in Interview with Michael Eskin and Christopher Young,” in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, eds. Michael Eskin, Karen Leeder, Christopher Young (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 219–34; here, 231–32 (hereafter references will be given parenthetically in the text). I am grateful to Chris Young and Sarah Bowden for allowing me access to this manuscript prior to publication.

⁴ Durs Grünbein, “Gedicht über Dresden,” *Gedichte. Bücher I–III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 202; Michael Opitz, “Vom Untergang meiner Stadt”, interview with Durs Grünbein, *dradio* (accessed 14 March 2011).

initiating a sort of commemoration ritual in 1992 that would last for more than a decade: every year around the anniversary of the bombings, he wrote the poems that would be published as *Porzellan. Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt*.⁵ As Anne Fuchs observes, *Porzellan* marks a shift in Grünbein's perspective on his place of birth, moving away from his critique of a crumbling socialist state to a "nostalgic yet ironic tonality that conveys the poet's vicarious affliction with and critical distance from Dresden as a site of cultural memory."⁶ Here Grünbein uses the "Rollengedicht," adopting different voices and perspectives in order to engage critically with the narratives that have developed around Dresden's cultural and political identity.⁷ But, reflecting Grünbein's own belated position, it is the "Spätgeborener" who dominates in *Porzellan* and who is addressed by the poetic subject in an "implicit self-address:"⁸ "Wozu klagen, Spätgeborener? Lang verschwunden war / Die Geburtsstadt, Freund, als deine Wenigkeit erschien. / [...] Elegie, das kehrt wie Schluckauf wieder. Wozu brüten?" (1). Grünbein's "Spätgeborener" must resign himself to the limited perspective of a subsequent generation, but he is also granted the critical distance from which to confront the taboo of Dresden's destruction and to deconstruct the GDR myth of "cultural innocence." Yet as Fuchs points out, although Grünbein critiques Dresden's "original impact narrative," he nevertheless returns to the images upon which this draws, ultimately ensuring its continued visibility.⁹ In particular, Grünbein remains

⁵ Grünbein returned to the topic again in 1996 in "Europa nach dem letzten Regen," published in *Nach den Satiren* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 143–53.

⁶ Anne Fuchs, "Cultural Topography and Emotional Legacies in Durs Grünbein's Dresden Poetry," in *Debating German Cultural Identity since 1989*, ed. Anne Fuchs, Kathleen James-Chakraborty and Linda Shortt (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 184–204; here, 185.

⁷ Ian Cooper, "Direction, Disruption, Voice: Durs Grünbein's 'Historien' and 'Neue Historien'," *Germanic Review* 84, no. 2 (2009): 99–121; here, 111.

⁸ Michael Eskin, "Body Language: Durs Grünbein's Aesthetics," *Arcadia* 37, no. 1 (2002): 42–66; here, 58.

⁹ Anne Fuchs, "The Bombing of Dresden and the Idea of Cultural Impact," in *Cultural Impact in the German Context: Studies in Transmission, Reception and Influence*, ed. Rebecca Braun and Lyn Marven (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2010), 36–57; here, 52. Critical responses to *Porzellan* have focused on Grünbein's recuperative gestures in searching through the fragments of Dresden's destruction and on his challenge to the

attached to the pleasurable aesthetics of Baroque Dresden, embodied in Meissen porcelain, even as he observes the spectacle of its destruction, mediated through iconic images such as rubble photography.¹⁰

According to Grünbein, porcelain is “at the very centre of memory culture,” and as such provides a “basic key [...] or metaphor” for his poems (“Cadences,” 231-32). However, this is a fragile medium for the renegotiation of his relationship with Dresden and its significance remains precarious throughout *Porzellan*. On the one hand it symbolizes the fine artistry of Meissen porcelain seen in the famous collection of the Dresden Zwinger and for Grünbein “the essence of the Baroque” (“Cadences,” 231). But on the other it suggests the shards left following the bombing of Dresden. Thus porcelain also signals the loss of an emblem of intact beauty. The craquelé glaze effect on the dust jacket indicates how porcelain is always ready to break, and the dispersion of the 49 poems across single pages with blank-page interruptions also suggests porcelain shards. Thus porcelain makes visible and tangible the before and after of aerial attack. But Grünbein’s poetic symbolism is at odds with historical reality. Timely evacuation meant the official collection was essentially saved from the bombs, and beyond the museum, Meissen crockery is, as Grünbein himself notes, often one of few family artefacts to have survived the long twentieth century (“Cadences,” 232). The porcelain pieces in Grünbein’s collection are, then, “heikle[] Formen” (49), which the poet makes part of a dialectical structure between wholeness and fragmentation: “Actually, this poem is assembled from shards, which are just put next to

nostalgically mythologized reconstruction of the prewar city in the GDR. See Susanne Veas-Gulani, “‘Phantomschmerzen’ Durs Grünbeins *Porzellan* und neue Wege in der Literatur über den Luftkrieg,” *Luftkrieg. Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa*, ed. Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, Malte Thiessen (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009): 277–98 and Rolf J. Goebel, “‘Gesamtwerk Dresden’: Official Urban Discourse and Durs Grünbein’s Poetic Critique,” *German Quarterly*, 80 (2007): 492–510; here, 505.

¹⁰ See Fuchs, “The Bombing of Dresden” and Veas Gulani on the significance of rubble photography for Dresden’s postwar cultural identity.

each other here and there and sometimes stuck together melodically – but they break apart again.”¹¹ The poet explains his work on *Porzellan* in terms of retrieving fragments, suggesting that he relinquishes his sovereign position to prioritize the restitution of a shattered past: “I’m the survivor who has to pick up the pieces” (“Cadences,” 230). But in fact Grünbein’s collection turns on the production of his own fragments, which is to say, the repeated, renewed destruction of porcelain.

The motif of porcelain allows the poet to contemplate the destruction of his hometown repeatedly, even compulsively. Dresden’s losses were sustained quickly, in the blink of an eye: “Und im Handumdrehen versank da eine Welt” (14). The gesture of the German idiom (a turn of the hand) suggests not only the speed of an unthinking movement, but also the sudden (over)turning of catastrophe. It returns in the apparently more careful handling of porcelain crockery, of cups and saucers as family heirlooms: “Teures Erbstück, die Familie präsentiert es dem Besuch. / Teller, Tassen, alles wird hier um- und umgedreht” (17). However, these visitors are the bombers who come to destroy Dresden, and so “um- und umgedreht” refers not to their turning over crockery, appreciating its aesthetic value, but to a more radical act of overturning, of turning things on their head, and this done again and again. As Grünbein combines these two gestures of careful examination and catastrophic assault he indicates his own desire to examine the catastrophe compulsively, repeatedly. This desire manifests itself in Grünbein’s fascination with porcelain, but from the perspective of the “Spätgeborener,” he makes his closest examination not of an intact

¹¹ Opitz, “Vom Untergang meiner Stadt” (my translation). The movement between wholeness and fragmentation which is fundamental to *Porzellan*: as Judith Ryan notes, it “presents itself as a long poem,” but its forty-nine pieces “remain scattered” (“The Long German Poem in the Long Twentieth Century,” *German Life and Letters*, 60 (2007): 348-64; here, 360; ; *The Cambridge Introduction to German Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77). The poet himself uses different formal descriptions, choosing “Poem” for his subtitle, but elsewhere referring variously to “dieses Gedicht” (Opitz) and a “cycle of poems” (“Cadences,” 232). See also Sonja Klein, “Denn alles, alles ist verlorene Zeit.” *Fragment und Erinnerung im von Durs Grünbein* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008), 169-223.

inheritance, but of the fragments that remain following their destruction, that is, after they have been “um- und umgedreht.”

Producing poetic fragments is crucial to Grünbein’s deconstruction and scrutiny of the postwar mythologization of Dresden’s cultural identity. In this way he shows how the destruction of the city cannot be seen as an isolated event, rather it merges with other violent histories. Making broken porcelain into shattered crystal, Grünbein evokes not only the Allied bombings, but also the November pogrom:

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 Gläser.
Bis zum Aschermittwoch später war da nur ein Sprung.
Narr und Nazi hatten, heiße, ihren Heidenspaß. (4)

Here the night of the firebombs becomes part of a chronological sequence preceded by the night of broken glass and the violence inflicted on Dresden’s population by the Allies linked temporally, if not causally, to the violence inflicted on its Jewish population. But *Porzellan* betrays unease in such juxtapositions even as it attempts them. “Bis zum Aschermittwoch,” signals the temporal progression from the November pogrom and the February firestorm, but also with it, the intensification of anti-semitic violence that leads to death in the concentration camps: around the time of this Ash Wednesday the ash of incendiary bombs

is indistinguishable from the ash of the camp crematoria.¹² The movement between these different fates is “nur ein Sprung,” but like the swift move of the “Handumdrehen,” also signals a more radical break. The “Sprung” between different instances of historical violence, between German suffering and Jewish persecution, is not so much a leap, but an uncomfortable rupture: once embedded in “Narrensprung,” the carnival dance performed in the culturally sanctioned overturning of orders, “Sprung” has broken loose, exposing a breach between eras and traumas.¹³ Grünbein’s symbolic use of the material remains of past violence – porcelain and crystal shards – is fundamental to *Porzellan*, but it also reveals the difficulty of engaging with this complex legacy.

Grünbein does not only use the motif of porcelain and its fragments to evoke twentieth-century history, however, he also looks back to Dresden’s Baroque era. The subtitle of *Porzellan, Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt*, echoes the title of Andreas Gryphius’s “Über den Untergang der Stadt Freystadt,” which commemorates a terrible fire witnessed by the poet in 1637.¹⁴ Yet while Gryphius describes Freystadt as a pestilent body, her downfall reflecting man’s own inevitable decline, in *Porzellan* the city is a voluptuous Venus figure (17). In this sense, Grünbein plays on the central tension of the Baroque period between earthly pleasures and their rejection through devotion to higher pursuits, that is, between flesh and spirit. Whilst his subtitle suggests the piety of Gryphius, *Porzellan* carries

¹² Writing about his earlier writing on Dresden, Amir Eshel notes how Grünbein “both amalgamates and keeps apart” the images of war and the Holocaust, but in *Porzellan*, this distinction has been lost (“Diverging Memories? Durs Grünbein’s Mnemonic Topographies and the Future of the German Past,” *German Quarterly*, 74 (2001): 407–416; here, 413).

¹³ See Fuchs, “Cultural Topography,” 204.

¹⁴ Andreas Gryphius, *Fewrige Freystadt*, ed. Johannes Birgfeld (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2006), 125–28. Gryphius’s sonnets describing the devastating effects of the Thirty Years’ War might carry a particular resonance for Grünbein’s Dresden poems. However, unlike the fire bombings, the fire described by Gryphius was an accident and Freystadt (now Koźuchów in Poland) was not his hometown. Nevertheless, Gryphius’s intense engagement with these events in *Fewrige Freystadt* was perhaps a way of bearing belated witness to two fires which devastated his hometown Glogau, one in 1615, a year before his birth, and the other in 1631 when he was too young to commit his experience to the page, and in this sense suggests a model for Grünbein’s descriptions of the catastrophe he came too late to witness (see Birgfeld’s introduction, XVIII–XXIV).

much stronger echoes of the erotic Baroque poetry of, for example, Kaspar Stieler and the Saxon David Schirmer.¹⁵ Indeed *Porzellan* is not only a kind of memorial project, it is also Grünbein's "declaration of love" for Dresden and the Baroque, with its "fireworks, water music, endless tables, hunting, love affairs" ("Cadences," 231). For Grünbein, the eroticism of the Baroque is a particularly Saxon phenomenon, which although never experienced by his generation is still perceptible in his poetry.¹⁶ Talking of *Porzellan*, Grünbein admits "there's secret eroticism hidden in my cycle of poems" ("Cadences," 232). Here Dresden appears as a Galatea figure, the River Elbe a silver drape tracing her hips (45).¹⁷ Her curves inscribe the city with Hogarth's line of beauty, and when this Venus comes to rest, her beautiful body is immortalized in porcelain: "Venus, stellt euch vor, so weit ins Nebelland verirrt, / Sucht ein Plätzchen, wo sie Ruhe hat auf ihrer Flucht / Durch Europa, und verwandelt sich – in Porzellangeschirr" (17).

The collection's "secret eroticism" is found first and foremost in porcelain artefacts, which are dainty, pretty and conspicuously feminine in form: the enumeration of "Püppchen, Vasen und Geschirr" (4) seems to move from the anthropomorphic to the functional, but Grünbein's list retraces the shape of the dolls in the curves of vases and tableware. Elsewhere, porcelain is titillatingly associated with lace and lingerie: "Wie der Stoff, aus dem man Körbchen formte, Elfenhaar, / Dies Biskuit für Brüssler Spitze" (28). And with the seductive power of August the Strong's concubines, Maria Aurora von Königsmarck, Constantia von Cosel and Maria Anna von Spiegel, known as Fatima:

¹⁵ Robert M. Browning, *German Baroque Poetry 1618–1723* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 89–98, 144–58.

¹⁶ Durs Grünbein, "Auch Dresden ist ein Werk des Malerlehrlings. Ein Gespräch mit Renatus Deckert," *Lose Blätter*, 20 (2002) (accessed 04 April 2011, my translation).

¹⁷ In the limited illustrated edition of the collection, artist Ralph Kerbach foregrounds this erotic element by depicting a naked female muse (Galatea or Venus) (Durs Grünbein, *Porzellan. Mit 7 Kaltnadelradierungen von Ralf Kerbach* (Gotha/Dresden: Edition Balance, 2004–2006)); Grünbein's poetic descriptions of erotic images is discussed by Noël Reukens in "Concept(ion) versus Ekphrasis. Durs Grünbein's Approach to the Pictorial Arts," in *Durs Grünbein. A Companion*, 119–44.

Welche Zierde: schneeweiß wie Aurora nach dem Bade

Steht dort auf der Tafel, appetitlich das Geschirr.

[...]

Kännchen, Butterdosen, rosig transparente Schalen –

Wie der Cosel Nacken, ihre Ohrenmuschel zart,

[...].

Scherben bringen Glück. Doch schöner anzuschauen –

Wie Fatimes Haut war, makellos, dies Steinzeugbraun. (29)

The speaker intimates delicacy and purity in the same breath as erotic flushes and naked bodies, and the appearance and form of porcelain vessels, not their content, whet his appetite. *Porzellan* is replete with scenes of pleasurable viewing: “Porzellan: das ist, als ob man durch ein Brennglas schielt. / Spieglein, Spieglein, gönn mir untern Spitzenrock den Blick. / Zeig sie mir, die Röschen ... säuselt der Barock-Voyeur” (46). Yet Grünbein’s kitschy tone disguises the predatory nature of these voyeuristic urges: “Porzellan” is like looking through a magnifying glass, because it is about the close scrutiny of objects from a lost world, but this gaze (“schielen”) also has more illicit, lascivious tones, and referring to *Porzellan* itself, it suggests a surreptitious look out of the corner of one’s eye. Moreover, with his burning-glass, Grünbein chooses an optical instrument which is used not only for magnification, but also ignition, suggesting an examination that has the potential to destroy its objects.

Porzellan may be a “declaration of love,” but it has sexually aggressive undertones. Its “secret eroticism” is betrayed not only in blushing Meissen figurines, but also, troublingly, in the fantasy of the city as concubine violated from above:

Klar die Frostluft: unterm Flügel, Augenweide,

Lud der Fluss, ein schlankes S, die Bomberstaffeln ein.

[...]

Bombe, Bombe – blankpoliert, fiel durch den Schacht

Tonnenweise Schrott in den Mätressenschoss. (2)

For Grünbein, 13 February 1945 was the climax of the explosive, orgasmic force characterizing Dresden's Baroque culture: "The bombs. [...] They're rape fantasies. [...] It was fit young men who fired the bombs into this womb. [...] In fact, it's pure baroque splendour [...] the destruction of a baroque city in baroque proportions."¹⁸ If the titillating spectacle of Meissen dolls seems misplaced in an evocation of Dresden's desecration, then the perceived eroticism in this act of violation even more so. This incongruence was noted by reviewers of *Porzellan*, who were almost unanimous in judging Grünbein's patchwork of mock classical verse, pop-literature, and post-Auschwitz gravitas a failure.¹⁹ Grünbein had flouted the warning sounded by W. G. Sebald in "Air War and Literature" against producing "aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world,"²⁰ and made a kitsch tea-service of "gilt-edged mourning."²¹ Most problematic for critics, however, was the brutal juxtaposition of beauty and violence, symbolized not merely through intact porcelain artefacts and porcelain fragments, but through a prurient fascination with mass death, which rendered the collection pornographic.²²

When Sebald warns against the instrumentalization of war for aesthetic purposes, he notes the ambivalence felt by many Germans when faced with images of destruction. On

¹⁸ Grünbein, "Cadences," 233. Marek Gross's analysis of *Porzellan* considers the significance of violence, but not specifically sexual violence (*Bruch und Erinnerung. Durs Grünbeins Poetik* (Berlin and Münster, LIT, 2011), 131-47).

¹⁹ Michael Braun, "Gibt es eine Sprache für das Inferno?" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22 September 2005.

²⁰ Dorothea von Törne, "Grünbein zerdeppert Porzellan," *Die Welt*, 24 December 2005 and Jürgen Verdowsky, "Trauer mit Goldrand," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 19 October 2005; W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 53.

²¹ Verdowsky, "Trauer mit Goldrand."

²² Thomas Steinfeld, "Bomben blankpoliert," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 October 2005.

the one hand, the sight of pictures such as that showing the incineration of thousands of corpses on Dresden's Altmarkt following the February bombings, was "humiliating." But on the other these images had (and still retain) "an aura of the forbidden [...], even of voyeurism" and were often "fingered and examined in a way usually reserved for pornography."²³ As Carolin Duttlinger notes, Sebald articulates how the "Germans' dual role of victims and perpetrators manifests itself in an uneasy mixture of repression and covert fascination with their own suffering."²⁴ This troubling co-presence of desire and its dissemblance persists in *Porzellan*. On one level, Grünbein seems to play down the significance of the collection's "secret eroticism," which can be read as precocious, but harmless, infantile arousal, kept in check through feelings of shame. On another, however, the sexual thrill produced by images of Dresden's violation is irrepressible; it resurges in *Porzellan* in spite of any inhibition felt by Grünbein's poetic subject. As Michael Eskin has shown, Grünbein's poetics are fundamentally erotic: poetic subjectivity emerges through his "poetic affairs" and "erotic intercourse" with different voices from the European lyric tradition.²⁵ But how appropriate is Grünbein's articulation of eroticism not only in the context of, but as a response to, the bombing of Dresden? Asked if it is permissible "to talk about the attack on Dresden as rape or rape fantasy," the poet replied yes, asserting his role as "the conscience of mankind" ("Cadences," 234). Whilst the lascivious elements of *Porzellan* can certainly be read as an extreme example of Grünbein's characteristic irony and part of his caustic critique, they still demand closer scrutiny. *Porzellan's* erotic element,

²³ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 98.

²⁴ Carolin Duttlinger, "A Lineage of Destruction? Rethinking Photography in *Luftkrieg und Literatur*," in W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History, ed. Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long, (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 162–77; here, 168.

²⁵ Michael Eskin, *Poetic Affairs. Celan, Grünbein, Brodsky* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 84–85. Eskin also plays with the title of Grünbein's essay, "Europas Liebhaber," positioning the poet as a lover of Europe and Europe's lover in "Durs Grünbein and the European Tradition," in *Durs Grünbein. A Companion*, 23–38.

criticized by reviewers, has yet to be addressed by scholarship, which has focused instead on Grünbein's engagement with the problematic cultural memory of Dresden. But the frivolity and titillation found in *Porzellan* are at odds with Grünbein's poetological contribution to the culture and politics of memory in Germany and this incongruity might reveal something about the limitations of his project. So how does *Porzellan*'s "secret eroticism" relate to the poet's memory of Dresden, and how can it relate to the commemorative discourse which Grünbein both critiques and furthers?²⁶

Screen Memories

Porzellan's eroticism often manifests itself in scopophilia. Traces of this sexual pleasure in looking which desires mastery of its object²⁷ are found particularly in memories of childhood arousal or desire. Here as elsewhere, Grünbein might be engaging in what Andrew Webber calls an "ironically knowing intertextual dialogue" with Freud.²⁸ Freud famously claims that sexual desires are already aroused in childhood, and thus finds the behaviour of children instructive for understanding the nature of sexuality.²⁹ Whilst the ultimate sexual aim is intercourse, the desire for the sexual object might be expressed through other instincts such as scopophilia (a partial drive linked to exhibitionism), or a tendency towards cruelty

²⁶ Fuchs understands the significance of *Porzellan*'s female figures (including Grünbein's dedication to his mother) in terms of Grünbein's belated perspective, where women feature as mediators between generations ("Cultural Topography," 199-200). The pervasive "bodily presence" in Grünbein's poetry is often read as "self-styled 'physiological poetics' or 'Neuro-Poetik'" (Owen, "A Poetics of Presence. Travel Cycles in *Aroma* and *Lob des Taifuns*", in *Durs Grünbein. A Companion*, 181-203; here, 194-97; Sonja Klein "'Speak, memory! Durs Grünbein's *Strophen für Übermorgen*", in *Durs Grünbein. A Companion*, 163-79; here, 165-66; see also Karen Leeder, "Durs Grünbein and the Poetry of Science," in *Durs Grünbein. A Companion*, 67-93.

²⁷ Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. by Victor Burgin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), 142-53; here, 152.

²⁸ Andrew Webber, "Wunderblock: Durs Grünbein and the Arts of Memory," in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, 145-62; here, 147). I am grateful to the author for making the manuscript available prior to publication.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth, 1973), vol. 7, 123-243.

(expressed in sadism and masochism).³⁰ Resistance to such behaviours is still low in young children, but a growing sense of the taboo surrounding sexuality produces inhibitions which are experienced predominantly as shame and disgust.³¹ Similarly, the sexual impressions made in childhood are often subject to repression, for example through the choice of a fetish object. This can act as a kind of “screen memory,” which both disguises and betrays evidence of early libidinal excitement.³² In *Porzellan* Grünbein emphasizes the immaturity of his poetic persona and his visions of the city (“*greenhorn*” (10), “[d]ummer Junge” (27)). Awareness of his desire for the concubine Dresden and his fantasy of her violation produces feelings of shame, however, and he turns to other, more acceptable images, sublimating his scopophilic urges in the contemplation of art or museum artefacts.³³ Yet such images function in fact as fetishes and screen memories, betraying the child’s desire even as they seem to obscure it. Freud also notes how the child, limited in his choice of sexual object, must indulge in fantasies. He suggests the individual may turn to “primal phantasies,” that is, a “phylogenetic endowment” that allows him to reach “into primaeval experience at points where his own experience has been too rudimentary.”³⁴ Grünbein’s vision of Dresden as seductress makes her into a sexual object in Freud’s sense, but this image is always marked by the fact he was born too late to see her in all her beauty, and so he has recourse to “primal phantasies,” to those icons of Dresden which precede him and which make her more desirable. But as these images of the Baroque city and the city in ruins merge, the poetic subject is aroused by both and his sense of shame intensifies.

³⁰ Ibid., 156-60.

³¹ Ibid., 177-79.

³² Ibid., 154-55.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 15, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Parts I & II (Lecture XXIII “The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms”), 358-75; here, 371.

In “Madonna und Venus,” an essay written for the exhibition *Mythos Dresden* at the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in 2006, Grünbein describes his relationship to two icons of Dresden’s Old Masters Gallery, Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* and Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*.³⁵ The two images seem to be emblematic for different aspects of Dresden’s cultural identity: Raphael’s masterpiece and the cult surrounding it represent the enduring conservative ideal of the immaculate prewar city, whereas Venus is a more explicitly erotic image, her prostrate, naked body both alluring and vulnerable. Grünbein recalls how, despite the curatorial and architectural attempts to focus attention on the Madonna, he was always drawn to Venus as a schoolboy. Yet the young Grünbein was a naive observer, who both saw and failed to see the female body. It was only later, and in perceiving the similarities to seductive Dresden, that he understood her allure: “Und der Fluss ihrer Glieder hatte *natürlich* mit jenem anderen Fluss da draußen hinter den Museumsmauern zu tun, doch davon wußte ich damals noch nichts” (“Madonna und Venus,” 71). As the sweep of Venus’s curves trace those of the city in ways still mysterious to the boy, Grünbein’s fixation on this image also suggests a kind of screen memory or fetish which covers over his image of Dresden: rather than the ruins of his place of birth, he thinks of the painting which escaped destruction.

For Grünbein, the word Venus is inextricably bound to the beautiful nude, displacing its astronomical significance: “bei der Erwähnung des gleichnamigen Himmelsgestirns [taucht] nicht irgendeine abstrakte Planetenoberfläche vor mir auf (rotglühende Aschenmeere, mondsteinähnliche Geröllhalden), sondern in aller Unschuld sie, das Meisterstück des Giorgione” (“Madonna und Venus,” 74). The woman screens more than

³⁵ Durs Grünbein, “Madonna und Venus,” in *Mythos Dresden. Eine kulturhistorische Revue*, ed. Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 69–77 (subsequent references given parenthetically in the text).

the planet Venus, however: Grünbein's descriptions of its surface echo those used in *Porzellan* (evoking Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*) to describe Dresden's desolate ruinscape after the firestorms:

[...] es braucht nicht viel, aus einer Stadt

Eine Mondlandschaft zu zaubern. [...]

Schon herrscht Wüstenwind, fegt übers Häusermeer.

[...] Der letzte Luftalarm

Kaum verebbt, da war im Zentrum noch die Asche warm. (3)

Thus, the erotic image of Venus not only obscures its astronomical meaning as Grünbein tells us, it also screens the image of Dresden in ruins. Yet by overlaying this traumatic vision with an erotic one, Grünbein in fact betrays the desire he comes to associate with the image of Dresden's destruction. In the museum desire might be sublimated in contemplative admiration, but for Grünbein it is the site of "kleine Ekstasen,"³⁶ which reveal the pleasure not only in viewing the female body, but also the fantasy of her possession or violation. Indeed, the thought of Raphael's Madonna in Soviet hands after the war actually makes her more attractive to him ("Madonna und Venus," 70). Grünbein ends his essay by describing a recent visit to the gallery to look at these two paintings again. Whilst the child's perspective is as innocent as that of the Virgin, growing up means seeing himself as desiring subject, that is, becoming aware of himself taking pleasure in the spectacle before him: he is no longer a harmless museum visitor, rather exposed as a peeping Tom ("Madonna und Venus," 71; 73).³⁷

³⁶ Durs Grünbein, "Kindheit im Diorama," in *Galilei vermisst Dantes Hölle und bleibt an den Maßen hängen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 117–28: here, 122.

³⁷ Elsewhere, Grünbein suggests that adopting a devotional stance before Dresden's icon might provide answers to the broader questions surrounding the representation of Dresden. This might be understood as

In *Porzellan* spaces of exhibition and voyeurism are pivotal to Grünbein's representation of Dresden from the perspective of his "Spätgeborener." Artefacts relating to the city's past are viewed, on the one hand, with the innocent fascination of a child, but on the other, necessarily overlaid with the subsequent knowledge of destruction. The poetic subject recalls seeing one of Dresden's extraordinary museum treasures as a boy.³⁸ A cherry-stone engraved with a catastrophic scene represents in emblematic form the violent history he came too late to know:

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.

[...]

Kaum zu fassen, da – *in nuce* – war verdichtet,

Was der Stadt bevorstand demnächst – zum Emblem.

Dresden selbst war jener Kirschkern, aus dem All gesehn. (7)

Likening the stone to a planet seen from space, Grünbein recalls the image of Dresden as extra-terrestrial landscape and by association Giorgione's Venus, the screen memory which both disguised and betrayed the arousal provoked by the thought of the city's violation. Moreover, his aerial view initiates an awareness of (and desire to adopt) the perspective of the bombers who brought destruction to Dresden from above. The child looks at nothing more than a cherry-stone, but in fact feasts on a spectacle of catastrophe, which through visual associations is exposed subsequently as erotic.

Grünbein's (ironic) attempt at sublimating (or even confronting) his earlier feelings of sexual arousal (Grünbein, "Auch Dresden ist ein Werk des Malerlehrlings").

³⁸ The museum is a key location for Grünbein's thinking more generally, see "Kindheit im Diorama," and "Im Museum der Mißbildungen," in *Galilei vermißt Dantes Hölle*, 221–28.

According to Freud, libidinal excitement is betrayed in small bodily sensations such as the child's need to urinate.³⁹ In interview Grünbein recalls how, as a boy, the confrontation with Rembrandt's *Rape of Ganymede* and the vivid depiction of a micturating child provoked the same urge in him to urinate.⁴⁰ Such bodily sensations anticipate the moment of exposure when the viewer becomes aware of himself viewing, and even aroused by, the spectacle of the human form: "Rubens, Rembrandt, Raffael – und dann die Blöße" (8). In a single line of *Porzellan*, Grünbein writes alliteratively of the gallery's Old Masters and metonymically their principal works. He suggests, of course, the *Sistine Madonna*, but also the museum's more overtly erotic pieces, such as Rubens' *Leda and the Swan*, and so fails to differentiate between the immaculate and the sexualized body. As he was drawn to Venus when he was supposed to be looking at the Madonna, Grünbein implies both a devotional gaze and an illicit look askance to other voluptuous bodies.⁴¹ Yet after her violation by the bombers, the allegorical body of Baroque Dresden is no longer a nude in the tradition of the Old Masters, rather she is naked, laid bare to the gaze of the "Spätgeborener." He becomes aware of himself looking at this abused body, stripped not only of her Baroque splendour, but now also the "Feigenblatt" of the GDR mythologization of her fate (9). The sight produces waves of shame, feelings which are renewed each year at the anniversary of the bombings: "[...] im Winter flößt, / Leidgeprüft, die Stadt mir Scham ein, nichts als Scham" (8). In *Porzellan* the "Spätgeborener" is overwhelmed by shame as he is

³⁹ Freud, *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, 190.

⁴⁰ Durs Grünbein and Heinz-Norbert Jocks, *Durs Grünbein im Gespräch mit Heinz-Norbert Jocks* (Cologne: DuMont, 2001), 52.

⁴¹ This recalls Freud's famous analysis of Dora, who spends two hours in Dresden's Gemäldegalerie transfixed by the *Sistine Madonna*. Perhaps inevitably, Freud interprets this devotion as an expression not of admiration for the Virgin, but Dora's desire for sexual fulfilment (Freud, *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, 1-122; here, 96-104).

exposed to Dresden's recent history and his impotence in coming too late, but also as he becomes aware of his fascination with the violence of that history.

Images of Beauty and Destruction

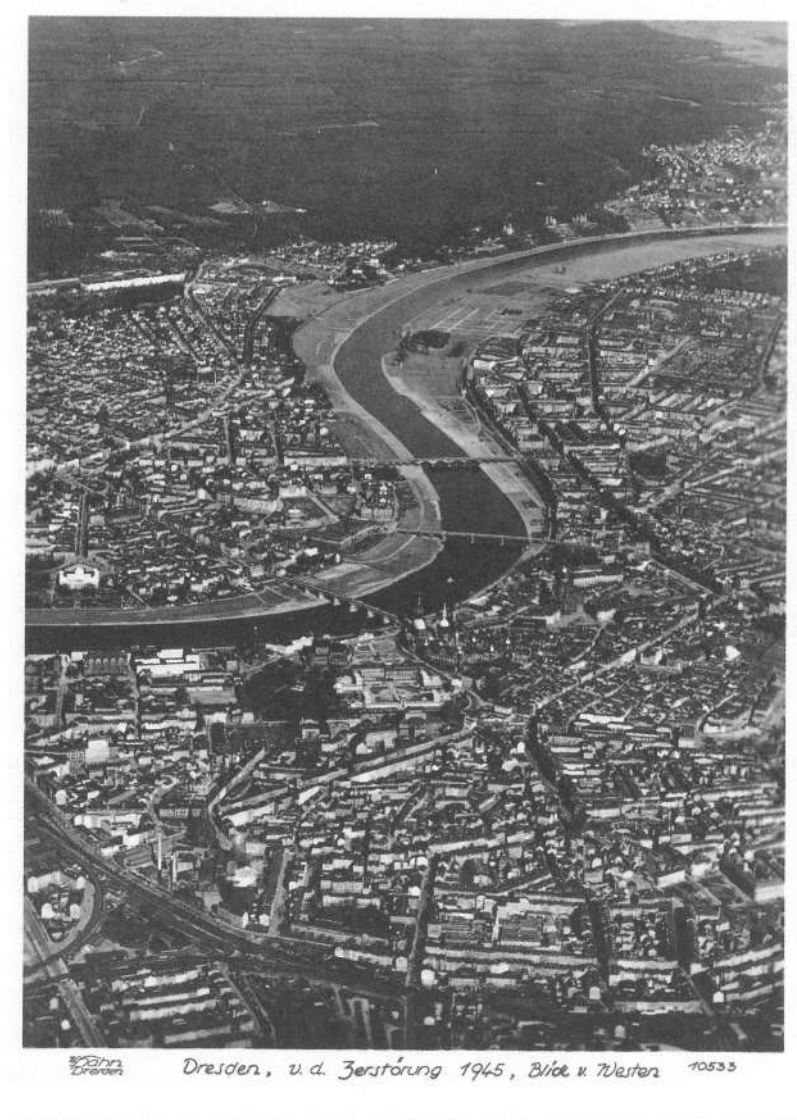
The child's fascination with the jeweller's "Großtat" in miniature (7) anticipates the fascination of the poetic subject with the spectacle of the bombings. In his earlier "Gedicht über Dresden," Grünbein effectively describes this as a "Meisterwerk," exposing an uneasy dialectic (or even reciprocity) between art and destruction: "Die Technik flächendeckender Radierung / Durch fremde Bomber, Meister ihres Fachs."⁴² As Andrew Webber notes, Grünbein echoes Brecht here, playing with the notion of "Radierung" as both artistic technique of etching and catastrophic erasure.⁴³ In *Porzellan*, the detached observation of "fremde Bomber" shifts to the technical mastery of aerial photography. From this perspective the poetic subject imagines himself in the position of the bombers and shares the fantasy of the city's violation. Grünbein describes the fantasy of rape to which he alludes in interview, and concludes: "Von der Bella *ante bellum* – nichts mehr da" (2). Mirroring beauty in war (Bella/*bellum*), he shows that from the outset and from the perspective of the "Spätgeborener" the two are mutually implicated.

Grünbein draws on now-familiar photographs of wartime Dresden to render highly evocative events which neither he nor a younger generation of readers could have witnessed. But these iconic images are implicated in *Porzellan's* "secret eroticism," which emerges in its scopophilic urges and fantasies of violation. The collection is framed by two photographic reproductions. Following the dialectical movement between wholeness and fragmentation which structures the cycle, Grünbein might have used a pairing of before-

⁴² Grünbein, *Gedichte*, 202.

⁴³ See Webber, "Wunderblock," 158-59.

and-after images familiar from collections of iconic rubble photography, but in fact the two images show an intact city.⁴⁴ The first photograph is taken from an aerial perspective and shows the city before its destruction.



Opening image, Durs Grünbein, *Porzellan. Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* © Suhrkamp Verlag

It captures the seductive curve of the Elbe which apparently invites the bombers' explosive deposit, and so anticipates the fantasy of violation described in the second poem. It also signals how throughout *Porzellan* the "Spätgeborener" insists on a superior vantage point (a

⁴⁴ Klein, 222; see, for example, Kurt Schaarschuch *Bilddokumente Dresden, 1933–1945* (Dresden: Druckerei der sächsischen Volkszeitung, 1946).

bird's-eye-view (21) or the draughtsman's "Cavelier-Perspectiv" (32)), seeking to see what he came too late to witness from the perspective of the perpetrators. With the second, closing image, Grünbein stops short of presenting an after-image of this traumatic assault, although this is surely evoked in the highly visual descriptions of destruction which run through the collection proper. A shot of the Stadtpavillon of Dresden's Zwinger returns the gaze to the seemingly more acceptable excesses of Baroque architecture. With these framing images, Grünbein directs the gaze of his reader so that it follows his own, apparently moving from erotic fantasies of violence to the sublimation of desire in aesthetic objects. The grounding of the opening omniscient perspective suggests the resignation of the "Spätgeborener" who desires to see what he came too late to witness, but ultimately must accept the limited view from below.



Dresden

Dresden - Zwinger, Stadtpavillon 2005

Closing image, Durs Grünbein, *Porzellan. Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt* © Suhrkamp Verlag

Yet the second image is perhaps equally subversive: it captures a naked figure from behind, suggesting a predatory perspective after all: an object of beauty will be violated once again. The head of the sea creature can just be discerned with its aggressively open jaw, but its defence is misdirected and it does not see the threatened rear assault. Approaching 4 o'clock, the porcelain bells of the Stadtpavillon are about to chime, or perhaps to sound alarm at imminent renewed attack. This photograph might offer a decorative, restorative

image of time, but is associated instead with the iconography of destruction and Richard Peter's famous rubble photograph of the bare clock-face of Dresden's Rathaus, arrested at the fateful hour of the firebombing. Furthermore, the statue pictured in the second image is ambiguously gendered; the cropped curls suggest a man or boy, but the lines of the thigh, buttocks, and vertebrae, as well as the fish it holds, retrace in multiple form the seductive S of the concubine Dresden: "Hogarths Schnörkel [...] schreibt sich fort und fort" (17), reinscribing itself in *Porzellan's* framing visual inscription. Moreover, as critics note, the Line of Beauty is always ready to become the double insignia of violence, tracing the brutality of the SS which will obliterate so much and which is as caught up with Dresden's cultural identity as its Baroque tradition.⁴⁵ By the end of *Porzellan*, the erotic appeal of Baroque aesthetics has failed to displace fully the taboo of a fantasy of violation. Dresden is seen as both Baroque beauty and beauty violated, where the two are bound through sexually charged desire and of equal fascination to Grünbein's poetic subject.

For Veas-Gulani, we cannot view these framing prewar images without their being overlaid with Richard Peter's icon of rubble photography, the view from the roof of the Dresden Rathaus.⁴⁶ Grünbein does indeed evoke this image and from its aerial perspective has his poetic subject imagine being a witness to the destruction of the city, all the while caught mute in the stone skin of an angel-figure looking down on the ruined cityscape:

Wirrer Traum, der zwanghaft wiederkehrt: ich bin dabei,

Anonym, ein stummer Zeuge, in der Bombennacht.

Was, wenn du das warst, der Engel in der Haut aus Stein,

⁴⁵ Veas-Gulani, "Phantomschmerz," 293. Andrew Webber notes how the typeset of "Gedicht über Dresden" already creates the double effect of the SS insignia, but gives way to the softer curves of the city-seductress in *Porzellan* ("Wunderblock," 158). Judith Ryan, meanwhile, sees this as imitating the shape of the stairs of Brühl's Terrace in Dresden (*Cambridge Introduction to German Poetry*, 178).

⁴⁶ Veas-Gulani, "Phantomschmerz," 296.

Arme ausgebreitet, die Figur dort auf dem Kirchendach?

Unten sinkt die Stadt in Schutt, nur er bleibt unversehrt,

Von der Glut gehärtet, Asche auf den kalten Lippen.

Diese Ohnmacht: niemand hört dich, in ihn eingesperrt. (22)

Although the evocation of the iconic Rathaus image is unmistakable, Grünbein refers to a church, not the city hall. The angel's outspread arms correspond to those on Peter's photograph, but the *bonitas* statue is, as Fuchs explains, an allegory of civic virtue, not a sacred figure.⁴⁷ Moreover, Peter's photo shows the female figure "Güte," but Grünbein's "Engel" is gendered male. Thus his use of a documentary, archival image here does not authenticate the scene, rather it produces disorientation and confuses identity. Grünbein takes possession of something iconic and familiar in the postwar history of Dresden for his own poetic project, literally getting under its skin in his recurring nocturnal fantasy. His appropriation of the image produces further disorientation, since he has his poetic subject change position: elsewhere he desires the violator's perspective, yet here he adopts the position of a passive body, mute beneath stone skin, but not averse to the experience of being overwhelmed from above. Indeed, rather than a gesture of benevolence, in Grünbein's evocation, the outstretched arms might suggest a submissive posture (like that held by the city as concubine in the second poem) and the incendiary ash a feverish caress of the silent lips. Such is the desire of the "Spätgeborener" to see what he missed that he fantasizes a position of witness in relation to both aggressive and passive bodies. That he finds both experiences arousing renders his vision of Dresden almost sadomasochistic: from this belated perspective he imagines and finds perverse pleasure in both her violation and victimhood.

⁴⁷ Fuchs, "The Bombing of Dresden," 48; Sonja Klein notes that the statue is commonly referred to as 'angel,' 210.

In contrast to the evocation of Peter's iconic image, the thirtieth poem describes a more ordinary family photo taken at a wedding:

Polterabend. Unvergeßlich, Topf und Tassen fliegen
An den Bordstein, von Erwachsenenhand geschleudert.
Dann der Kuß, wenn Braut an Bräutigam sich schmiegt –
[...]
Weiß die Tante, und der Onkel denkt sich seinen Teil.
[...] Noch sind Turteltäubchen geil,
Sprich verliebt, denkt sich der Photograph und mahnt:
"Bitte lächeln." [...] (30)

The missiles flung down against the curb by adult hand mirror the violence of war evoked in the fourth poem and across *Porzellan*. But anticipating nuptial union, this scene of symbolic, deliberate violation links violence with eroticism once again. Whilst the child's perspective suggests innocence, a lewd undertone betrays the carnality of the young lovers' desire ("Noch sind Turteltäubchen geil"). Grünbein presents the occasion as spectacle: the family, including a lascivious uncle, look on and the wedding photographer regards the scene through his viewfinder. This voyeuristic element is underscored by the intertextual link to Philip Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings," identified by Ian Cooper.⁴⁸ Sitting on a train, Larkin's poetic subject witnesses the parting scenes of various nuptial celebrations. The laconic observer sees straight through the charade, recognizing (probably identifying with) the salacious gaze of "the uncle shouting smut," which Grünbein references in his knowing uncle ("und der Onkel denkt sich seinen Teil"). Despite his social and emotional detachment from the scene, Larkin's accidental voyeur is still aroused by what he sees and the poem

⁴⁸ Ian Cooper, "Grünbein and Anglo-American Poetry. Dickinson, Pound, Larkin," in *Durs Grünbein. A Companion*, 39–65.

reaches an auto-erotic climax: “And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.”⁴⁹ The release felt by Larkin’s cynical observer on his train journey recalls Grünbein’s description of the bombers as they fly over the city and deposit their load; here, Larkin’s “falling [...] arrow shower” is the incendiary rain of the bombs. Through this intertextual link, the seemingly innocuous family scene of nuptial celebration becomes part of *Porzellan*’s more pervasive and persistent spectacle of desire and destruction. Yet, as Cooper points out, whilst Larkin’s observations are shameless, *Porzellan* is coloured by uneasiness. This “shameful acknowledgement of an excess” is certainly to be understood in Anne Fuchs’ terms of “historical excess that can never be grasped,” that is, the violence of war which desecrated a city and which came to symbolize the overwhelming violence of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ But the shame of Grünbein’s poetic subject is also shame for *Porzellan*’s own excesses, specifically, its pleasure in the erotic spectacle of Baroque Dresden and the fantasy of her violation.

Indigestible Shards

Grünbein is of course all too aware that the association of Baroque aesthetics embodied in Meissen porcelain with the spectacle of twentieth-century violence is unpalatable. In many ways, *Porzellan* is his most flagrant and blatant exhibition of this incongruity. But the presence of other poetic voices in the collection alerts us (and Grünbein) to its limitations. *Porzellan* carries echoes of Czesław Miłosz’s “Piosenka o porcelanie” [“Song of Porcelain”], written in American exile in 1947, where broken porcelain cups and saucers represent not only all that has been lost through the violence of war, but also, as Geoffrey Hartman notes,

⁴⁹ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 92–94; here, 94.

⁵⁰ Cooper, “Grünbein and Anglo-American Poetry,” 64–65; Fuchs quoted in Cooper, 64.

“the inadequacy of those fragile symbols.”⁵¹ This failure of porcelain to carry the weight of history is heard in the broken, even pained half-rhyme of the refrain: “Niczego mi proszę pana / Tak nie żal jak porcelany” [Of all things broken and lost / Porcelain troubles me most].⁵² Struck by Miłosz’s “farewell to Europe and its landscape of war,” Grünbein uses porcelain to perform his own gesture of farewell to Dresden in *Porzellan*.⁵³ But as porcelain troubles Miłosz, *Porzellan* troubles Grünbein and his reader. The echoes of Miłosz in *Porzellan* are evidence not only of Grünbein’s attempt to accommodate “historically different memories” in a “shared poetic space,” but also the inadequacy of porcelain as a symbolic resource for this attempt, particularly when its overwhelming associations for the poet are erotic.⁵⁴

Most significantly, however, *Porzellan* carries echoes of Paul Celan, to whom Grünbein pays homage already in his title: “*Porzellan: (Pour) Celan*.”⁵⁵ And besides this dedication, intertextual references to Celan are dispersed across the collection and experienced in small bodily sensations such as shame. As such they interrupt the cycle, reminding Grünbein and his reader of the breach between their realms of experience and resisting its “secret eroticism.” In the eighth poem of *Porzellan* “Schwarzer Schnee” refers to incendiary ash, but through its echo of Celan’s “Schwarze Flocken” also suggests the ashen residue of the concentration camps and the violence of the Holocaust.⁵⁶ The dark deposit that falls on Grünbein’s “Spätgeborener” tells of the violence that came before him, violence

⁵¹ Geoffrey Hartman, “The Book of the Destruction,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 318–34; here, 334.

⁵² Czesław Miłosz, *Utwory poetyckie* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Productions, 1976), 141–42; *Selected Poems 1931–2004*, trans. Robert Hass et al (New York: Ecco, 2006), 41.

⁵³ Grünbein during a reading of “Song on Porcelain” at the 2005 PEN World Voices Festival <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/2143/prmID/1530> (accessed 18 April 11).

⁵⁴ Eshel, “Diverging Memories?” 409.

⁵⁵ Michael Eskin, “Streets of China,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 June 2005, 30.

⁵⁶ “Schwarzer Schnee” featured already in “Gedicht über Dresden” and the “Schwarze Flocken” it suggests are found in the “Flockenwirbel” of “Europa nach dem letzten Regen” (Grünbein, *Nach den Satiren*, 152).

which encompasses aerial bombing and genocide and which leave him overwhelmed by feelings of shame (“Scham [...], nichts als Scham” (8)). As this complex traumatic legacy merges with the erotic fantasy of Dresden as Baroque concubine, the sense of shame in *Porzellan* intensifies, and in turn betrays the poet’s uneasiness about the presence of Celan’s voice in his collection of porcelain erotica.

Porzellan is a very daring balancing act between what can and should be said about the poet’s relationship to Dresden. Grünbein walks a precarious line between fantasy and reality, between desire and destruction, pleasure and pain. This act is shown in emblematic form at the centre of the collection where the poetic subject sees his child-self fascinated by the spectacle of a tightrope walker:

“Dummer Junge. Fragst, was macht der Mann denn da
Mit der Stange auf dem Seil? – Er hält sich fest.”

[...]

Keine Sorge, meistens schwebt er dort wie angeleimt –
Balancierend, während unten manchem schwindlig wird.

[...]

Der *Entreimte*, in den Abgrund starrend, lauscht verwirrt,
Wie es drunten, selig-sinnlos, weitersummt, das Wort. (27)

The acrobat is a poet-figure after Celan’s “Entreimte[r],” and perhaps the acrobat’s pole is language, by means of which the poet keeps himself aloft (and alive) and which threatens to fall before him into the abyss below. This was the threat felt so acutely by Celan and of which Grünbein, undertaking a perhaps still more precarious act of walking across the gap bridging an erotic cultural legacy and a legacy of historical trauma, is also conscious. The

word still resounds from the depths, “Selig-sinnlos,” after Celan’s “heilig-sinnlos,” as a reminder of what Grünbein cannot pass over.⁵⁷

Although Grünbein’s poetic persona finds pleasure, even arousal in Dresden’s artefacts and images, “[d]er Betrachter schluckt mehr, als er verdauern kann.”⁵⁸ Despite the illicit pleasure of *Porzellan*’s “secret eroticism,” the poetic subject must still confront the reality of the city’s demise. The bullet may have been bitten, hard facts swallowed, but they are never digested: “Ja, es tut noch weh. Geschluckt ist sie, die Kröte – / Doch verdaut niemals” (11). In fact they are prone to return, like the engraved cherrystone, “Ausgespuckt von einem Kirschendieb” (7), an undigested remnant which remains as an emblem of terrible violence. And perhaps this is how the undigested elements of Grünbein’s collection should be read: in psychoanalytic terms, the poet attempts to work through loss by a process of introjection, that is, by attempting to appropriate and assimilate the remnants of Dresden’s past, but where introjection fails, fragments remain as a sign of unresolved trauma. Introjection is attempted literally through the gesture of swallowing (“schlucken”), but fails, as signalled by the involuntary counter gesture of “Schluckauf,” that is, the return of the ingested object: “Elegie, das kehrt wie Schluckauf wieder” (1).⁵⁹ Likening elegy to “Schluckauf” recalls Celan’s attempted ingestion of ash in “Deine Augen im Arm.” Here, ash is consumed together with language itself: “Aschen-Helle, Aschen-Elle –ge- / schluckt.”⁶⁰ The very possibility of giving voice to the subject is consumed, only to return at the end as “Aschen-/Schluckauf.” Through words of annihilation and the annihilation of words, Celan’s

⁵⁷ Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, 183.

⁵⁸ Jocks, Grünbein, *Gespräch*, 23.

⁵⁹ Such bodily eruptions expose the self in the (failed) attempt at its articulation, that is, in saying I (See Grünbein, *Das erste Jahr. Berliner Aufzeichnungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 171).

⁶⁰ Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, 123.

poem inscribes the self in exposing that self to a process of erasure.⁶¹ In some ways, Grünbein's project is a ritual attempt to ingest and digest the ashen legacy of Celan's poetry, constituting a diet of "Asche zum Frühstück."⁶² But in *Porzellan*, ashen residue is confused with porcelain fragments, an uncomfortable, unpalatable effect, particularly given the erotic charge that Dresden's porcelain holds for the poet. Yet these are the things that are left to the "Spätgeborener" and his poetry has to accommodate them.

According to Abraham and Torok, if loss cannot be worked through, the process of introjection is obstructed, resulting instead in the encryption of that which cannot be spoken directly or explicitly.⁶³ A trace remains within the subject, but, never properly assimilated, as a foreign body. Whilst Fuchs remarks that "Grünbein does not hermetically encrypt his poetry in the manner of Celan," we could say he encrypts Celan's poetic remains in *Porzellan*: Grünbein positions himself as Celan's "Entreimte[r]" (27), rendering his "heilig-sinnlose[s] Wort," spoken in "Seelenblind, hinter Aschen," as "selig-sinnlos [...] das Wort," and uses the paralysing goose-step from "Die längst Entdeckten" as an epigraph to his twenty-fifth poem.⁶⁴ These traces of Celan's broken poetry (Por-zellan) trouble *Porzellan*, as Miłosz is troubled by porcelain in his song ("Of all things broken and lost / Porcelain troubles me most"). And in this sense his refrain echoes through *Porzellan*, producing a further point of resistance to its "secret eroticism." This dual reminder persists in *Porzellan* as Miłosz's mis-rhyme "lost/most," left unspoken, but always alluded to, and as Celan's "Aschen-/Schluckauf," the return of that which cannot be digested.

⁶¹ Werner Hamacher, *Entferntes Verstehen. Studien zu Philosophie und Literatur von Kant bis Celan* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 361. For Eric L. Santner, Celan's poem is to be understood as a symptom of Germany's "failure to mourn": "It is as if with every word, every name one took into one's mouth, every totem one tried to internalize, one spit up ashes: 'Aschen-/Schluckauf'" (*Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 45).

⁶² Grünbein, *Nach den Satiren*, 72.

⁶³ Nicholas Abraham & Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁶⁴ Fuchs, "Cultural Topography," 194; Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, 183, 133.