

ESCHATOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN LYRICAL POETRY

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For this paper I have selected three contemporary authors whose texts are representative of the latest trends in German lyric poetry - or more precisely, lyric poetry in the German language: Durs Grünbein, Richard Exner and Erich Fried. Durs Grünbein stands for a recent poetic trend that blends in (East German) Marxism, nihilism and postmodern ideas. Richard Exner, an American Germanist, explores some poetical discourses of Judeo-Christian mythology whilst Erich Fried writes in the tradition of (Western) Socialism, Judaism and 19th century German Idealism. All three poets write secular poetry that is not committed to any religious or spiritual institution or system. Yet in their poetry all of them make statements about the nature and meaning of life and death, both of individual persons and of society as a whole. Like their ecclesiastical counterparts, therefore, I feel that their poems have to be measured against Theodor Adorno's statement that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. For in the confrontation with the downfall of German culture and (poetical) language, eschatological poetry in postwar German poetry reveals its significance.

I

The following is typical of Durs Grünbein's poetry:

A farmer in Corinth, Texas killed his daughter's brother
with a chainsaw
His stepson who had been mentally retarded since his birth
Came into his house by a second marriage

Unloved, he was the victim of his mother's courting of the attractive widower
And so he was looking for his sister's attention. Lurking first

He abducted her in the swimming pool. For seconds
One could see his hands at her swimming trunks in the security
camera a mouth close to a neck

Like a scene from *King Kong*

Like a match that is lightened and causes arson.
The water boiled, calmed down and drained away

The farmer nailed the boy to a work bench
The mother turned the kitchen radio on full power

The girl locked herself into her room and masturbated¹

I felt I had to expose the reader to these lines to give just one example of Durs Grünbein's latest poems. It appeared in his recent collection *Den teuren Toten* (*To the beloved Dead*) which features 33 (!) similar texts.

The author of these concoctions is not just any author in Germany today, but highly commended by many intellectuals and the media. For example in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Gustav Seibt, one of Germany's foremost literary critics, comments:

not since the days of the young Enzensberger, perhaps since Hugo von Hofmannsthal, has German poetry had such a darling of the muses who stuns connoisseurs of literature...²

But that is not all: in January 1996 Grünbein received the 'Büchner-Preis', one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Germany and a very public confirmation of his reputation.

What is Grünbein's last collection of poetry all about? Is it an expression of frustration about the global media society and its megadeaths, to which former East Germans like Grünbein are now exposed? Is there an element of sarcastic catharsis in the obscene 'poetical' re-stating of the daily disaster record in the news? Is it an implicit criticism of late capitalist society with its extreme pressure to conform, with its commercialised eroticism and its institutionalised violence? Does Grünbein in his 33 'epitaphs' suggest that German society, and in fact any industrial society, is involved in a process of prolonged collective euthanasia manifested in the lurking ecological and nuclear disaster which is both revealed and concealed by the daily sensationalism of the media?

All of Grünbein's texts deal with forms of death: he calls his poems 'modern epitaphs'. For him death is only violent or alienated, or, even worse, 'virtual death'. All of his texts are full of allusions to contemporary action movies and news programs and full of citations of their language. And in Grünbein's poetry, death almost always takes place before a camera.

In Grünbein's texts there is little distinction between murder and suicide or between the killer and the victim.

All these 'epitaphs', in fact, do not describe the death of individuals and reflect postmodern theory. The text is not about authentic people, their stories, their pain and their memories in real death and thus there is no-one for the reader to identify with. There is a complete absence of 'reality' in Grünbein's poems. His poetical language not only resembles but consists of the anonymous language of the media: 'A farmer in Corinth, Texas...'; 'A retired man in

Berlin...'; 'A Japanese tourist in Florence...' All the author's lyrical protagonists live and die in the icon of the media by whom they are created.

As Grünbein's poems have no addressee, they diverge, of course, from the historical form of the epitaph in ancient Greece or in the Baroque. In these, the addressee of the obituary was invited to contemplate the fate of the hero or attend to the metaphysical early warning systems of established Christianity's *memento mori*.

Without real people as protagonists and addressees Grünbein's texts become just another voice in the cacophony of the postmodern media. News from nowhere to nowhere. Grünbein's lyrical account of the world is one in which absurdity prevails: if poetical language used to be the 'house of being' it is now the house of the (living) dead and the dying.

That Grünbein's poetical language is identical with the language of the media means that his poetry cannot be a reservation for 'beautiful' language. Would the aestheticisation of poetry be a trivialisation of contemporary society's most lethal weapon, its language? Does Grünbein, by exaggerating this language, hope to expose it?

Grünbein's collection of 33 (!) of these painful poems is, however, interspersed with some metatexts, set in italics, which reveal hints of a lyrical narrator. One of his statements reads:

I [In German the accusative case *mich* is used, N.P.F.] am moved
by the sadness of the bodies.
Ecstasies, mucus, the empty shell of skin,
What disintegrates into space, twisted, atomised
Once walked upright, smiling, lightweight-bull.

What awaits you, you see early in others.
Crystal clear:.... Future replaced by nothingness
Life is a zero-sum game...³

Here the dilemma of contemporary discourses in German poetry becomes obvious: poetry is either understood as an expression, if not manifestation, of the postmodern media machinery with its sensationalism, its violence, its cynical participation in an all-comprehensive destructiveness. Or: poetry manifests itself as an analogue of the body in all its fragility and in its most precarious state: as the mortal body. Yet poetry-as-body is subject to the absurdities of society and its historical discourses and society does not ultimately consist of persons and individuals but of subjected bodies in their absurd physical existence.

Grünbein's poetry collection also features an 'Epilogue' that is in fact part of the poetical text as a whole. The voice of an 'editor', who allegedly found the

actual poems 'in the attic of an old house in Dresden', declares them to be 'mediocre'. What is the effect of this post-neo-romantic conjuring trick? Now the 'editor', who bears a faint resemblance to the author, can distance himself from the obscenity of the lyrical texts. Now it is the mysterious 'Pseudonymus 13' who is responsible for the mediocre poems and no longer Grünbein himself.

It has been suggested that Grünbein's poetry collection can be understood outside its political context simply as an expression of black humour.⁴ But I have my doubts whether, for instance, a poem about the total immersion baptism at an African mission station where the person to be baptised is attacked by a crocodile and the subsequent reflection as to whether he acquired a Christian soul before he was devoured is indeed an example of this genre of humour or whether it is simply sarcastic, racist and bad taste. If humour enables us to break taboos and by breaking the ultimate taboo, death, to triumph briefly over death, if only linguistically, more of this humour must surely be required in a society whose 'entertainment' is based so much upon the display of violence and death. But this would require a different calibre of language.

The 'editor' also produces a short essay that gives an account of the history of the epitaph and certain topoi of lyrical lamentation. This historical archaeology of the epitaph is a strangely concocted mixture of the language of traditional (Hegelian) 'history of ideas' and old fashioned (Marxist-style) 'historical materialism'. Here is an example:

The chainsaw, the hairdryer, the TV-set (are) bodies of evidence in the rough poetical sketches which represent a clearly determined material world, for instance the world after Stalingrad, Europe during the Cold War, America in the Electronic Age...⁵

In his historical classification the 'editor' mentions Stalingrad. But there is no mention of Auschwitz. Is this Grünbein's poetic strategy as he, despite some similarities between 'editor' and author, occasionally also clearly distances himself from the metatext? And should we therefore take the 'editor's' voice as typically representative of the German petit bourgeoisie which has repressed the memory of Auschwitz for so long? Is the 'editor', a petit bourgeois in the disguise of an intellectual? Does he represent contemporary German academics? In particular those East German academics who in an enforced yet opportunistic way, use the new post modern babble blended with some traditional Marxist terminology? And is the whole text, therefore, a criticism of the German bourgeoisie and its academics? Does the blank page of Auschwitz in this collection of texts about death represent a pedagogical move? And is the

graphic cynicism of Grünbein's poetry in this context also educational in so far as it shows that the post modern media horror and the fascist holocaust have similar roots in the bourgeois psyche, which they both express and produce?

If this is the strategy, I am afraid I cannot follow Grünbein. Not only does it seem inadequate to instrumentalise Auschwitz in any poetry, even in that with an educational intention. But I also doubt the validity of the equation of Auschwitz with the post modern media. I am not convinced that Grünbein's stark language is an example of what a holocaust survivor, Günther Anders expressed in an aphorism: 'Bluntness is rooted in the love of human kind'.⁶

Grünbein's language does not show respect for human integrity and well-being. He celebrates obscenities and cynicism in his poetry. His bluntness does not have the effect of shaking his readers up or of implicitly educating them. Rather, Grünbein is the poetical heir of Ernst Jünger's celebration of the battles in the First World War and of Gottfried Benn in his lyrical post mortems. His language not only represents an unconditional surrender to the real and perceived horrors of the age, but it is also partially (ie. linguistically) reproduces them.

What remains is the author's criticism of the petit bourgeoisie - which is, of course, the socio-economic group in which fascism has its roots. But Grünbein's criticism is highly projective and involves the danger of spotting the splinter in the eye of the other and overlooking the beam in one's own. In as far as it is true that most fascist killers are recruited from the petit bourgeoisie, so it can also be argued that German intellectuals and poets should take some responsibility for the crimes of history because of their having served, ignored or looked down on the petit bourgeoisie thus helping to deliver up this most susceptible sector of society in the hands of fascist demagogues. Interestingly, the theologian and poet Dietrich Bonhoeffer never joined the poetical bourgeoisie bashers. He knew that the lower middle classes' political aggressiveness derives from their fear of death and their inability to live a fulfilling life. He also knew that these middle classes have widely been abandoned by politicians, clergy, intellectuals and artists alike. So Bonhoeffer developed a critical solidarity which accepts the individual and encourages their striving to live a good life (including the acknowledgment of the fear of death) and at the same time refutes the ideology of death by which fascism is structured. The use of language is critical in Bonhoeffer's strategy.

What I would like to suggest is that, as in the Twenties and early Thirties, there is again a 'betrayal by intellectuals' such as Grünbein, Botho Strauß, Heiner Müller, etc. who do not show solidarity with the petite bourgeoisie and try to educate them by poetic use of language. Instead they engage in a

dangerous arrogance, making their poetical mark at the expense of a social group to which they themselves belong more than they are willing to admit.

Grünbein is a good example of a young former East German intellectual who is responding to the breakdown of Marxist ideology. Now that the Marxist belief in a political eschatology in the form of a Communist society appears to have been hardly more than philosophical daydreaming, *any* form of eschatology seems to be discredited. And after the failure of totalitarian social engineering in the closed Eastern societies *any* engagement in civil society seems to be futile. The proletariat, in Marxist thought the sociological projection screen for a new heroic society, no longer exists and it becomes increasingly obvious that even in the former Communist countries the workers displayed a class consciousness not foreseen by the Party's ideology. In Germany this became clear when, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the East German proletariat tried to catch up materially and politically with the West German lower middle class. What remains for Grünbein is a biological materialism, which also underlies the historical materialism of Marxism, and the notion that the Western system, the total triumph of capitalism, is itself a form of totalitarianism. We find here a version of the former East German equation of capitalism and fascism. According to Grünbein the Marxist vision of a historical and philosophic-linguistic eschaton has disappeared what remains is the dehumanising omnipresence of capitalism and its language.

II.

'It is barbaric to write a poem after Auschwitz'.⁷ Two generations of post-war poets and critics had to confront Adorno's dictum in their writings. It seems that it has become increasingly forgotten or that it is being levelled by post modern theories of late 20th century bourgeois totalitarianism.

Can poetry still be written after Auschwitz? Most intellectuals, including Adorno himself, have understood the statement that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz not as a total ban of poetry but rather as a constant reminder to reflect upon content and form of poetical language so that it never again becomes a tool of totalitarianism. What does Adorno's statement require of the author? Particularly the author who writes in the language in which the holocaust was organised and executed. Elias Canetti offers a poetology which beautifully sums up the implication of Adorno's statement for the author:

I have said that a person can be called a poet only if they feel responsibility... It is a responsibility of life, which is destroying itself, and one should not be ashamed to say that this responsibility is nourished by compassion... Even if all people consider it a futile

undertaking, the poet will shake away at it and never, under any circumstance, give up. It will be their pride to resist and fight... the envoys of nothingness, who are growing more and more numerous in literature...⁸

I now take a look at two poets who set out to observe Adorno's statement and to meet Canetti's call for the poet's moral and social commitment.

Richard Exner, whose poem 'Since Auschwitz' (first published in 1982) employs decidedly religious imagery, dismisses the religious metaphysics of the 19th century as well as 20th century political optimism, as he dismisses any form of secularised eschatology that undertakes to realise the Kingdom of God on earth. Auschwitz brought to an end the traditional beliefs about God and the course of history underlying Christian civilisation. Since then history continues only as a flow of chronological time. Political history has not fundamentally changed for the better since then. It is still to a large extent the history of oppression:

Since Auschwitz
They have not succeeded in
Killing history. But still 'labour
sets us free'...⁹

According to Exner, there is nothing left but the immanence of time and the hardship of daily existence. This has come to be accepted as 'grace' simply because our existence could be worse. Too often history has been worse: a monstrous ordeal.

Using the language of Christian mythology, Exner portrays history as the result of a primeval fall. With the possibility existing that the creator himself is a demiurge: 'The door is still quivering / from the slamming / of the garden's gate / and a voice / that commanded Adam and Eve to work (It was grace, believe me, daily routine and the consolation that comes from exhaustion)...'¹⁰

Yet not only is modern history involved in the fall, it is now the apocalypse:

The Apocalypse
(John at Patmos,
Hieronimus Bosch,
the terrifying story-tellers)
has long since begun...¹¹

We no longer await the end of the world: it is here. Translated in the language of the Latin Requiem (*Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in flavilla, teste David cum Sybilla*): The saeculum has gone up in ashes - the ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It

is just that the process of human self-destruction is just not yet completed. Our age is not yet brain dead, but its heart has stopped beating.

Today
shortly before
the third millennium of the cross
the First and Second World
devour the Third World¹²

The notion of total destruction, however, is not only a abstract political one. Even in 'the First World' it reaches the most intimate private sphere:

As long as I can feel your skin
They do not cut it into lamp-shades¹³

The extreme tension between private hope that originates in love and historical pessimism is in the tradition of poets like Paul Celan, a holocaust survivor who committed suicide in 1979, and of Ingeborg Bachmann, who was one of the first poets in the German-speaking countries to point out the connection between male chauvinism and fascism. She died in suspicious circumstances in Rome in 1973.

The poet cannot reclaim the (German) language for optimism and the traditional ideas of Western, Christian modernity. Love and its expressions in love poetry cannot overcome the monstrous onslaught of institutionalised oppression and its ideological language. Love poetry and even the very body of the lovers is no safe haven for human dignity. What language can still express is the desperate hope for personal closeness: 'Wake up / Touch me / Do not wait for better times / Time does not change' and a reminder that poetical language is 'like the smoke of people / who burned'.¹⁴

III

Erich Fried also recognises the complete breakdown of German civilisation and language. And in his poetry he struggles for a new language:

Mnemosyne
Dedicated to the Braunmühl brothers and Peter-Jürgen Boock

In misery, close to the end
The lost language may be reclaimed
Without which everything is lost

But how, my dear one? Do we not also touch the abyss
Even before death? Do the sunshine and the dust of the earth

not support us?

But if we lose the words here where we are at home
The words that first gave us a home in the midst of the desert
but which we have lost towards annihilation, that than, what
used to be home, is now utterly deserted...

No cry for help to be heard: Each one of the towers
we built has become Babylon, our language is in fatal confusion

Yet feverish ravings speak of hope, remembrance: Perhaps
language will be born again, painful and
with hard birth pangs. This language could save us
because it has the power to transform us back into ourselves
Into living mortals, human beings, vulnerable and distinct
again, full of possibilities. And never again we are
only a sign, without meaning¹⁵

The poem is dedicated to the Braunmühl brothers and Peter-Jürgen Boock. Boock had been a member of a terrorist organisation which killed representatives of the West German 'establishment' at random before he broke away from the 'Red Army Fraction' at a very high personal risk. The terrorists perceived West German liberal democracy and capitalism as the successor of Nazi Germany. Often born in the last years of the war, these 'children of Hitler' rebelled against the perceived and real Nazis by applying murder and terror, the very things they detested in the fascists. The Braunmühl brothers are heirs of an industrialist who was murdered by the terrorists. They acknowledged the structural violence of the capitalist system and gave away a huge amount of their inheritance to social organisations. In addition they entered into an open dialogue with reformers of the system.

According to Fried, the language of destruction is still present in post-war Germany. The linguistic links with fascism are still obvious. Both the establishment and its radical critics are unable to communicate as human beings. They all live 'close to the end': the ultimate destruction of civilisation by nuclear weapons and ecological disasters which are mostly the result of this breakdown of human communication.

How can a compassionate and comprehensive language be regained? For Fried, the key lies in Mnemosyne (Greek for remembrance), the mother of all the muses. To remember that the other person, whatever their political or philosophical beliefs, is like us a human being with joys and sorrows: Someone's beloved. This recollection opens up a way for a new attitude and a new style of communicating: it is metanoia.

Frequently Fried's poetry alludes to that of Friedrich Hölderlin. In fact 'Mnemosyne' is an allusion to one of Hölderlin's works by the same title. Between 1790 and 1793 the young Hölderlin, together with Schelling and

Hegel, belonged to a 'Dead Poet's Club' in which the three students were studying the theoreticians of the French Revolution while writing their own 'First Systematic Program of German Idealism'. Full of high hopes for themselves and the cause of history their slogan was 'Kingdom of God'. But whereas both Schelling and Hegel later detached their systems of philosophical idealism from personal experience, Hölderlin always insisted on the compassion and directness of personal communication as the driving force and ultimate goal of any philosophical and political movement or system. And while Schelling postulated the *perfection* of nature and Hegel the *perfection* of knowledge and society, Hölderlin explored discourses of *wholeness* in the synaesthetic language of his poetry. Central here is the word 'love' intended comprehensively to express affection, friendship, eros and charity.¹⁶ He linked this with the Hebrew term *yada*, which links together the intimate personal experience (lovmaking) and the gaining of knowledge. This is Hölderlin's safeguard against totalitarianism. Yet it is not a private affair. In the words of his famous poem 'Love' ('Die Liebe'): 'Language of lovers / Be the language of the land'.¹⁷

The political applications of Hegelianism, both in its right wing (Nationalism) and left wing (Marxism) strands, have had catastrophic results in this century. Is Hölderlin's 'language of lovers' still an alternative? In Fried's Mnemosyne the (re-) birth of a new humane language shows the sign of messianic coming ('birth pangs'). Fried makes interesting use of the German pronoun for language, too. *Die Sprache* should be reborn that is, as the feminine form: 'sie/she'. Does Fried follow here some arcane beliefs of a female Messiah? Does he hint of the redemption of Schechina in language? Mnemosyne is, after all, the mother of the muses. Full of erudite allusions, Fried's text nonetheless remains centred in the story of very real persons, the Braunmühl brothers and Peter-Jürgen Boock.

The possibility of a new language as the mode of humane communication is encapsulated in Fried's poem, but through the expression of many doubts ('*Perhaps / the language will be born again...*', see also the frequent use of subjunctive). For him, too, eschatology has no metaphysical place. For Fried, like for Grünbein and Exner, the dignity of human life and the outcome of history is not secured by an afterworld or the teleology of any religious or ideological system nor by poetic language alone. For Fried, however, understanding and communication are still grounded in a language, that is 'vulnerable and distinct'. This language is an immanent occurrence, fragile and precious, yet it happens and that it still happens is nothing less than miraculous.

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- ⁴ In the blurb of Grünbein.
- ⁵ Grünbein, p. 44.
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- ⁸ Elias Canetti, speech given in Munich in January 1976, in Canetti, Elias, *The Conscience of Words. The Writer's Profession* (Joachim Neugroschel, trans. New York : 1979), pp. 245.
- ⁹ Richard Exner, *Nach Auschwitz*, in Kiedaisch, Petra, ed., *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter* (Stuttgart :1995).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- ¹⁵ Erich Fried, *Mnemosyne*, in Gnüg, Hiltrud, ed., *An Hölderlin. Zeitgenössische Gedichte* (Stuttgart: 1993).
- ¹⁶ By including the Greek terms of *storge*, *philia*, *eros* and *agape* in his usage of the German word *Liebe*, Hölderlin tried to connect the love discourse of his time with that of the Ancients and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Fried, too, tried to reinstate these terms and traditions.
- ¹⁷ Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Die Liebe', in *Sämtliche Werke* (München und Wiesbaden: 1972).