

**STARING INTO THE WASTELAND: DIFFERENT
PERSPECTIVES OF SHOCK AND THE AESTHETIC
OF DIRECT GAZE IN GERT LEDIG'S *VERGELTUNG*
AND STIG DAGERMAN'S *TYSK HÖST***

VIVIANA SANTOVITO

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the aesthetic of direct gaze as expressed in Gert Ledig's novel *Vergeltung* and in Stig Dagerman's collection of reportages *Tysk höst*. The article analyses the different modalities of gazing into the extreme suffering caused by the bombings upon German cities during the Second World War, specifically confronting the perspective of the German insider chronicler, as depicted in *Vergeltung*, with that of the Swedish outsider witness, as presented in Dagerman's work. This study focuses on how the inexplicability of shock is overcome in both *Vergeltung* and *Tysk höst* and on the narrative strategies adopted by the authors in order not to dissimulate civilian distress and the sense of horror caused by the consequences of war. The article analyses not only the sense of shock produced by the works, but also how the authors described the civilian reactions to the horrors of combat. A part of the analysis is dedicated to the questions of choice and impartiality regarding the selection of topics and images portrayed in the works. The study focuses moreover on the comparison between, on the one hand, the need perceived by the Swedish Stig Dagerman of giving a voice to the destroyed German society of 1946 through his journalistic work and, on the other hand, the self-imposed German silence on the air bombings and on the German-speaking literature regarding the topic.

Keywords: Stig Dagerman; Gert Ledig; Second World War; bombings; shock; witness; chronicle; survivors; impartiality; journalism

The Second World War can be considered as a divide in the history of warfare and in the national (and nationalistic) discourse and narrative of the countries involved. The discovery and implementation of aerial combat systems revolutionised the idea of conflict, moving from localised theatres of war to the possibility of achieving total annihilation even in remote civilian areas. Thus, the scale of mass devastation brought by technological advance as seen in the First World War reached a new and, until then, inconceivable level.

Albeit civilian targets have always been victims of war actions (see for example sieges, naval blockades or the attacks by wandering troops as during the Thirty Years War), the introduction of area bombing is a remarkable feature of the Second World War. The devastation of Coventry, the *Blitz* bombings on London, the attacks on San Lorenzo

neighbourhood in Rome have remained in the collective memory of the national communities that suffered these tragic events. Even though area bombing tactics were used against civilian targets in Germany as well, public discussion and reprocessing of the horrors experienced by civilians in Cologne, Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, if we limit ourselves to the biggest cities involved, is a relatively new phenomenon. This reticence has also been a characteristic of German-speaking literature, creating a gap in the national German canon about the events that accompanied the German *Untergang* and the immediate aftermath of the end of the war, a gap that began to be bridged starting from the last years of the twentieth century.

This article analyses two exceptions to this self-imposed silence. The study compares the perspective of the Swedish author Stig Dagerman as exceptional reporter across West Germany in the autumn of 1946, with the literary reprocessing of an area bombing of an unspecified German city as experienced by the German writer Gert Ledig. The article focuses on how the inexplicability of shock is overcome in both *Vergeltung* (*Payback*) and *Tysk höst* (*German Autumn*) and on the narrative strategies adopted by the authors in order not to dissimulate civilian distress and the sense of horror caused by the consequences of war.

As indicated in the title of this article, one of the main focuses of the analysis is the act of *gazing*. Although the concept of *gaze* has been employed in many scholarly contexts¹, none of the existing theories fit my topic. I use the term (and its synonym *stare*) in a relatively free manner: to describe the transposition of visual witnessing into a literary form. Both Stig Dagerman and Gert Ledig produced literary works that were meant to represent the rawness of living conditions of the German civilians affected by the air war, and in this the authors tried to be as direct as possible. I also draw a parallel with *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso and the activity of Robert Capa and Gerda Taro as photojournalists during the Spanish Civil War. The problematic nature of transposition and the possibility of a faithful adherence to the observed reality are discussed in the last section of this article.

¹ The concept of gaze has been the object of extensive analysis in postmodern theory and psychoanalysis. Jacques Lacan distinguishes between the eye and the gaze, developing previous reflections expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. The French psychoanalyst defines the gaze as something external to the subject, a point from which the subject is seen and judged, creating a sense of alienation and self-awareness. Under the gaze, the subject feels exposed and vulnerable: the gaze actually makes perceptible the idea of the Other and the way the subject is constituted through the desire and recognition of the Other (Lacan 1998). Michel Foucault, on the other hand, focuses on the analysis of power, surveillance and discipline with the introduction of the concept of panopticism. Panopticism represents a mechanism of power that operates through constant visibility, inducing self-regulation and discipline. Panopticism is a diffuse, impersonal form of power that permeates institution and society, shaping subjects according to societal norms and expectations (Foucault 1995). In post-colonial theory, the act of observing is analysed in the context of colonialism, imperialism, and racial hierarchies and refers to the way colonizers construct and dominate the colonized Other through visual and cultural representations. Thinkers like Edward Said (Said 1979) and Frantz Fanon (Fanon 2008) explore how the colonial gaze objectifies and dehumanizes colonized peoples, reducing them to stereotypes and exoticized others. The gaze reinforces the power dynamics of colonialism by asserting the superiority of the colonizer and the inferiority of the colonized. The colonial gaze is then internalized by the colonized, leading to a form of psychological alienation and self-hatred. Post-colonial theorists also examine the return-of-the-gaze (Amad 2013), where colonized subjects regain agency by challenging and subverting the dominant representations imposed by the colonial gaze.

The Historical Context

If trenches are directly linked in the collective imagination with the First World War, bombings of civilian targets are one of the symbols of the Second World War. This warfare method was adopted in every theatre of war, but, for the goals of this analysis, we will focus on area bombings committed by the *Luftwaffe*, the RAF and the USAAF against, respectively, British and German cities.

The official beginning of aerial warfare against the United Kingdom is to be determined in the afternoon of the 7th of September 1940 (Overy 1980, 38), when the *Luftwaffe* started the air offensive called *Operation Loge*. This first attack on London alone cost the life of more than 400 individuals (Bungay 2000, 308–313). After the success of the Battle of France, Hitler's goal was to curb British military power by destroying industrial production and civilian morale (Ray 2000, 38). The series of attacks on the capital city that began on that day became known in the United Kingdom as *The Blitz*, a military campaign that persisted until May 1941, when the last raid against London between the 10th and the 11th of May caused the death of almost 1.500 people (Hooton 1997, 37; Stansky 2007, 3).

The *Luftwaffe* attacks were directed not only against London: major raids were committed upon other ports and industrial cities like Liverpool, Birmingham and Bristol (Ray 2000, 131), with an estimated number of victims of 60,000 civilians killed (Stansky 2007, 3; Bungay 2000, 308). The brutality of this campaign manifested itself especially in two episodes: the bombing of Coventry (Bungay 2000, 359) and the attack on London of the 29th of December 1940 (Gaskin 2005).

The bombing of Coventry took place in the night between the 14th and the 15th of November 1940. According to Margaret Gaskin, the *Luftwaffe* dropped more than 10.000 incendiary bombs on the city (Gaskin 2005, 156). The psychological effect of this attack as emblem of the insane brutality of war is still persistent, as Coventry cathedral has remained in ruins until today.

The bombing that occurred in the night between the 29th and the 30th of December 1940, called by the "Daily Mail" *The Second Great Fire of London*, was a consequence of a devastating *Luftwaffe* raid. The fire was so destructive that it reached the level of destruction of the event of 1666 (Gaskin 2005, 156).

Albeit the first RAF attacks against German targets were committed on the 15th of May 1940 as a response to the bombing of Rotterdam (Overy 1980, 38), the end of the *Blitz* and the entry of the United States into the war prompted a wave of Allied raids against German cities. Particularly ferocious were the attacks on Cologne, Hamburg and Dresden.

Cologne was the first German city to experience a so called 1,000 bomber raid, between the 30th and the 31st of May 1942. Nicknamed *Operation Millennium*, the attack was the strongest to hit the city until that moment (previous attacks against the city had begun since January 1942. See Rumpf 1963, 55). The operation caused 460 casualties and left 45,000 people homeless (Rumpf 1963, 56).

One of the most traumatic and gruesome events concerning the attacks upon German civilians is the *Operation Gomorrah*, i.e. the bombing of Hamburg, a series of raids by RAF and USAAF that lasted from the 24th of July to the 3rd of August 1943 (Rumpf 1963, 78). Hamburg was chosen as target because of the relevance of its industrial and mari-

time infrastructures. A lethal mix of incendiary bombs and particularly dry and warm weather caused a firestorm so strong to create winds of up to 50 km/h (Rumpf 1963, 94),² reaching a temperature of 800 °C (Rumpf 1963, 89). At the end of the war, Hamburg lost an estimated number of 55,000 citizens (Rumpf 1963, 83).

Hamburg was the first case of a firestorm caused by a raid. An analogous episode, if not more destructive, occurred in Dresden in 1945, from the 13th to the 15th of February. The city was chosen because of its strategic position as intermediation point between Germany, Czechoslovakia and Vienna (Angell 1953, 4–5). Nevertheless, the lack of relevant factories, the character of the city as artistic and cultural centre, plus the presence at the moment of the raid of a number of refugees of more than 100,000 individuals (Biddle 2008, 420) made this operation a pure war crime. The bombs and the firestorm killed around 25,000 to 35,000 people (Biddle 2008, 424).

Crash, Speed, Boom

The battles described above, by necessity a short and non-comprehensive summary, have two protagonists: the airplane and the bomb. Human factor is expunged from military action, even when the goal is the destruction of humans themselves. This is a direct consequence not simply of the industrial revolution, but of its main effect, i.e. the loss of control on machines. Engines are now so fast and so powerful to pulverise the same humans they astounded a moment ago. If at the end of the nineteenth century this was a matter of minutes, with the relatively slowness of cabriolets, cars and trains, now it is a matter of seconds.

This radical change, from the cyclic slowness of pre-modern humanity to the frenetic run of modern times, reflected itself in a new aesthetic. Jeffrey T. Schnapp traces profoundly the birth and development of this sociological and literary tendency in his *Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation)* (Schnapp 1999): the collective euphoria doesn't stop with the possibility of trying new vehicles. Thrill is the mantra and every form of adrenalinic stimulation is searched and portrayed, both in literature and art. Images of car crashes and the resulting violent deaths overflow magazines and fairs, in a gruesome taste so distant from the sensibility of today's public. There is no turning back, no brakes. Speed is accepted as the feature of the modern era and the inevitable crash is the glorification of the destiny of the modern human being.

The analysis of Schnapp doesn't continue with an examination of what happens after the *Fin de Siècle*. The First World War embodies actually the climax of this collective intoxication, an event where the dreams of overpowering engines and superhuman

² Rumpf provides a vivid witness of the catastrophe: "As the many fires broke through the roofs of the burning buildings, a column of heated air rose more than two and a half miles high and one and a half miles in diameter... This column was turbulent, and it was fed from its base by in-rushing cooler ground-surface air. One and one and a half miles from the fires this draught increased the wind velocity from eleven to thirty-three miles per hour. At the edge of the area the velocities must have been appreciably greater, as trees three feet in diameter were uprooted. In a short time the temperature reached ignition point for all combustibles, and the entire area was ablaze. In such fires complete burn-out occurred; that is, no trace of combustible material remained, and only after two days were the areas cool enough to approach" (Rumpf 1963, 94).

machines turned in the worst nightmare European youth had ever experienced. The constant progresses in military techniques and weaponry reached a peak so high in dehumanisation to cause a reconsideration of the aesthetic of crash and speed. The thrill gave space to horror, or to silence.

The Precedent *Guernica*

Representations of war and massacres in arts and literature are as old as humanity itself. One specific work of art, however, epitomizes a shift in the perception of the role of the artist towards war, thus anticipating the creative dilemma of the works studied in this article. When in 1937 *Guernica* was exhibited for the first time in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exposition, Europe was on the brink of collapse. Spain had been witnessing a cruel civil war, in fact a prelude for the Second World War, for a year. This conflict that attracted belligerent forces from all over the world (Hugh 1994, 490, 595) constituted a novelty for the way in which it was depicted for the world outside of Spain: it was during the Spanish Civil War that the figure of the photojournalist was consecrated thanks to the engagement of Robert Capa and Gerda Taro (Aronson and Budhos 2017). Nevertheless, the moment that fixed itself in the collective memory of this conflict was the bombing of Guernica and the correlated work of art by Picasso.

The raid on Guernica was not the first bombardment of the Spanish Civil War. A month before, on the 31st of March 1937, another Basque town, Durango, was hit by a raid carried out by the German Condor Legion (Hugh 1994, 616). Why was this event barely forgotten by the public opinion worldwide? What makes Guernica different is its symbolic status: as already noted by Sven Lindqvist (Lindqvist 2001, 73), while Durango was an industrial site, consequently important for the sustainment of the Republican Front, Guernica had no strategic relevance. Its territory, however, is home to the *Gernika-ko Arbola*, the oak tree symbol of freedom for the Basque people. Striking Guernica was then a matter of pride and humiliation.

The facts of Guernica constitute a precedent for the already mentioned episodes of the Second World War not only because of their pure destruction and annihilation, but also for the attention brought on them by a work of art: abstaining from realism, Picasso renders an equally striking and concise representation of the event, focussing on the destruction and pain endured by innocent civilians. Under a carpet of bombs, human destinies equate themselves, leaving the unwilling main characters powerless and the spectator helpless in front of the massacre. The only action possible is having the strength to recount the horror and the force of will to stare into the void, something Stig Dagerman and Gert Ledig tried to do with opposite approaches.

Stig Dagerman: The Outsider as Observer

Stig Dagerman was born in Älvkarleby, near Uppsala, on the 5th of October 1923, as the son of a worker and left-wing militant, Helmer Jansson. Dagerman grew up with a strong influence from his father's ideals, something that led him to become engaged in politics, specifically in the anarchist, trade-unionist sphere.

Dagerman, who began writing in the anarchic periodical *Storm* and was a member of the newspaper *Arbetaren* from 1943, debuted as author in 1945 with *Ormen* (*The Snake*), a novel with strong anti-militarist overtones whose main setting is a garrison. After the publication of his second work, *De dömdas ö* (*Island of the Doomed*), in 1946, Dagerman was offered by the newspaper *Expressen* the chance to visit West Germany and Berlin and write a series of reportages about the daily life of German people and the process of de-nazification and rebuilding of the country. Since official journalists were controlled by the occupying forces and didn't have the possibility of moving freely in the territory, sending Dagerman was a golden opportunity: he was in fact married with a German exile, Annemarie Götze, daughter of the anarchist Ferdinand Götze. The main goal of his journey, i.e. the writing of reportages, could then be camouflaged as a simple private occasion of family reunion.³

What came back from this travel in the early autumn of 1946 across West Germany are eleven articles for the *Expressen*, plus two unpublished writings, reunited in the 1947 collection called *German Autumn*.

German Autumn: Foreign Eyes for the Hidden

Stig Dagerman's journey in West Germany begins in the *Ruhr* region. The fact that the author avoids citing the name of the city he visits contributes to convey the sensation that what is happening there is a common experience in the other communities still devastated by the war. The operation pursued by Dagerman is peculiar: he doesn't choose to interview politicians, soldiers or civilian servants whose task is to de-nazify the German population. He is a witness. He enters in the flooded cellars where entire families try to survive and keep a semblance of everyday life, he is present at assemblies and rallies, he travels with the train and the metro, an alert and receptive stranger among a crowd of prostrate, evasive locals.

When Germans themselves and the rest of the world remain silent, Dagerman describes. This is what he reports, for example, about the living conditions in the cellars:

Läkare som berättar för utländska intervjuare om dessa familjers matvanor säger att det de kokar i dessa grytor är obeskrivligt. I själva verket är det inte obeskrivligt, lika lite som hela deras sätt att existera är obeskrivligt. Det anonyma kött som de på ett eller annat sätt kan lyckas komma över eller de smutsiga grönsaker som de hittat gud vet var är inte obeskrivliga, de är djupt oaptitliga, men det oaptitliga är inte obeskrivligt, bara oaptitligt. På samma sätt kan man bemöta invändningen att de lidanden som barnen i dessa källarbassänger får genomgå är obeskrivliga. Om man vill det låter de sig beskrivas alldeles förträffligt, låter sig beskrivas på det sättet att den som står i vattnet vid kaminen helt enkelt lämnar den åt sitt

³ See the words by Carl-Adam Nycop, the editor-in-chief of the *Expressen*: "Vanliga ackrediterade korrespondenter var helt beroende av att samarbeta med ockupationsmakterna och detta var en belastning som band skribenternas frihet. En okänd författare, som reste för att hälsa på sin hustrus släkt, var något annat. Vi anade att vi här kunde få fram material av helt annan typ" (Dagerman 2010, 80).

öde och går till sängen med de tre hostande barnen och befaller dem att genast ge sig iväg till skolan. (Dagerman 2010, 11)⁴

Dagerman challenges the convenience of using the concept of *indescribability*, when in reality the adjective *obeskrivligt* is just an alibi to avoid an unpleasant, or disturbing, matter-of-fact. He demonstrates that a direct description is not only possible, but it is the right approach for a reporter who wants to preserve its intellectual honesty towards the public.⁵ The text continues with a description of the conditions of the school the children have to attend and of the problematic nature of the concept of *morals* in a time of starvation and of need to obtain food for the whole family (Dagerman 2010, 11–12; Dagerman 2011, 7–8). Dagerman goes beyond while discussing the fundamental question of the remainders of Nazi sympathies among Germans. His thesis is a lesson in observation and empathy:⁶

Man frågar någon som svälter på två skivor bröd om dagen om han hade det bättre när han svält på fem och får utan tvivel samma svar. Varje analys av det tyska folkets ideologiska position under denna svåra höst, vars gränser naturligtvis också bör flyttas fram att gälla närvarande tid i den mån de skärpta former av nöd och elände som utmärkte den fortfar att vara aktuella, blir djupt oriktig om den inte samtidigt förmår skänka en tillräckligt etsande bild av den miljö, av det sätt att leva som de människor, vilka man analyserar, tilldömts. En erkänt skicklig fransk journalist bad mig i all välmening och i objektivitetens intresse att läsa tyska tidningar i stället för att titta på tyska bostäder eller lukta i tyska grytor. Är det inte något av den inställningen som präglar en stor del av världsopinionen och som fått den judiske bokförläggaren mr Gollancz i London att efter sin tyska resa hösten 1946 se »Västerlandets värden i fara«, värden som består i respekt för personligheten även om

⁴ “Doctors who talk to foreign interviewers about the eating habits of these families say that what they boil up in their pans is indescribable. It is not indescribable at all, any more than their whole manner of existing is indescribable. The anonymous meat which in one way or another they come across, or the dirty vegetables which they find God knows where, are profoundly unsavoury, but the unsavoury is not indescribable – only unsavoury. We can in the same way meet the objection that the sufferings which the children in these cellar-pools must undergo are indescribable. If one wants to describe them, they can be described quite perfectly – in the following way, for instance: the woman standing in the water by the stove leaves the cooking to its fate, crosses to the bed where the three coughing children lie and orders them to get off to school at once” (Dagerman 2011, 7).

⁵ As Cecilia Aare has pointed out, Dagerman’s use of colours plays an important role in *German Autumn*. While exploring the themes of guilt and suffering as expressed in the text, Aare focuses on the visual contrasts produced by Dagerman with his prose, highlighting the use of grey and vivid colours in order to render the bleak and tragic atmosphere of post-war Germany and the rare moments of hope or the fleeting and apparent gestures of normal life among the civilian population (Aare 2023).

⁶ In her book *Dark Lens. Imaging Germany, 1945*, François Meltzer has shown that empathy is a significant element in *German Autumn*. The first chapter, called “When Words Fail: Writing Disaster”, is devoted to literary journalism and autobiographical renditions of life during the Second World War. Meltzer compares Dagerman’s *German Autumn* with coeval reportages from Germany by Hanna Arendt, J. Frank Dobie, Margaret Bourke-White and Gertrude Stein, remarking upon the empathy with which the Swedish author approached and portrayed the civilian population in contrast with the harsh moral judgment expressed by Arendt, Dobie and Bourke-White and the detachment that characterised Stein’s article (Meltzer 2019).

denna personlighet förverkat vår sympati, och medlidande, det vill säga förmåga att reagera inför lidandet, detta lidande må sedan vara oförskyllt eller förskyllt. (Dagerman 2010, 13)⁷

The Swedish author affirms that a trustworthy report cannot be produced if all the factors involved and the context aren't taken in consideration: since excluding the background of the reported events can contribute in creating a partial or misleading image of the situation, pure objectivity is useless in the best-case scenarios, while it can be a powerful tool if used to sustain an ideological stance. In this case, the premise is the irremediable and incorrigible guilt of German people:

Man hör rösterna som säger, att det var bättre förr, men man isolerar dem från det tillstånd deras ägare befinner sig i och lyssnar till dem på samma sätt som man lyssnar till en röst i etern. Man kallar det objektivitet därför att man saknar fantasi nog att föreställa sig detta tillstånd, ja skulle av moraliska anständighetsskäl tillbakavisa en sådan fantasi därför att den vädjade till ett orimligt medlidande. Man analyserar; i själva verket är det utpressning att analysera den hungriges politiska inställning utan att samtidigt analysera hungern. (Dagerman 2010, 14)⁸

Without indulging in morbid details or pathetic accounts, Stig Dagerman's aesthetics stares into the void of the post-catastrophe, analysing the effects of the bombs and hunger on the collective psyche of the German people. This passage is, in this regard, illuminating: "Tåget är fullt som alla tyska tåg, men utom vi två finns det inte en människa som ser ut genom fönstret för att få en skymt av Europas kanske ohyggligaste ruinfält, men när jag ser upp möter jag blickar som säger: 'Någon som inte hör hit.'" (Dagerman 2010, 20).⁹ The mere act of gazing is what constitutes the difference between a survivor and an outsider. The setting of this scene is a train travelling across Hamburg. As already mentioned before, the port city was the first German community that experienced a firestorm caused

⁷ "If you ask someone starving on two slices of bread per day if he was better off when he was starving on five you will doubtless get the same answer. Each analysis of the ideological position of the German people during this difficult autumn will be deeply misleading if it does not at the same time convey a sufficiently indelible picture of the milieu, of the way of life to which these human beings under analysis were condemned. A French journalist of high reputation begged me with the best of intentions and for the sake of objectivity to read German newspapers instead of looking at German dwellings or sniffing in German cooking-pots. Is it not something of this attitude which colours a large part of world opinion and which made Victor Gollancz, the Jewish publisher from London, feel, after his journey to Germany in this same autumn, that 'the values of the West are in danger' – values consisting of respect for the individual even when the individual has forfeited our sympathy and compassion, that is, the capacity to react in the face of suffering whether that suffering may be deserved or undeserved" (Dagerman 2011, 10–11).

⁸ "People hear voices saying that things were better before, but they isolate these voices from the circumstances in which their owners find themselves and they listen to them in the same way as we listen to voices on the radio. They call this objectivity because they lack the imagination to visualize these circumstances and indeed, on the grounds of moral decency, they would reject such an imagination because it would appeal to an unreasonable degree of sympathy. People analyse; in fact it is a kind of blackmail to analyse the political leanings of the hungry without at the same time analysing hunger" (Dagerman 2011, 11).

⁹ "The train, like all German trains, is packed full, but apart from the two of us no one looks out of the window to catch a glimpse of what is perhaps Europe's most dreadful collection of ruins. When I look round at the other passengers I meet glances that say: 'Someone who doesn't belong here'" (Dagerman 2011, 21).

by a fatal combination of dry weather and incendiary bombs. Three years later, Hamburg appears as a city whose inhabitants are searching for a way to rebuild a sense of ordinary life. The train is full and the citizens of Hamburg appear as industrious as the inhabitants of a country in reconstruction would be expected to be. The refusal to look, if not stare into the ruins, is however a symptom of what constitutes the coping strategy of post-war West Germany. About the lack of contemporary testimonies of the reality of civilian sufferings during and directly after the Second World War, Winfried Sebald expressed himself in *Luftkrieg und Literatur (On the Natural History of Destruction)* (Sebald 1999) pointing at frenetic industriousness of the economic miracle of the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to the silenced experienced traumas.

While Stig Dagerman arrives later and describes the aftershock for a neutral and foreign public, another author, a survivor of the bombing of Munich, gave voice to the shock of finding oneself under the ongoing catastrophe, without the fear of staring too directly into the void. The already mentioned attitude of the German public, however, determined the *damnatio memoriae* of this work of art, as well as of his author, the German Gert Ledig.

Gert Ledig: A Direct Witness under the Bombs

Gert Ledig was born on the 4th of November 1921 in Leipzig. After completing his schooling, he joined the army as volunteer in 1939 and was dispatched on the Eastern front, where he fought during the battle of Stalingrad. Two serious injuries, however, were the cause for his discharge in 1942. Ledig returned to Germany and settled in Bayern, being employed as marine engineer: here he experienced the USAAF and RAF bombings, a trauma that persecuted him for the rest of his life and an event that gave the inspiration for his later works.

Gert Ledig debuted as author in 1955 with *Die Stalinorgel (The Stalin Organ)*, a novel set during the battle of Stalingrad. The plot sees two opposed battalions, German against Soviet soldiers, fighting to death to conquer a hill. The audacity of the style adopted by the writer, characterised by harsh and fearless descriptions of the realities of fighting, as well as the use of a choral perspective in the narration, launched Ledig as a promising voice of post-war German literature. Soon *The Stalin Organ* was translated into 14 languages (Ledig 1999, 178) and the success of its author began to spread internationally. Ledig's career, however, halted abruptly with the publication of his second novel, *Payback*, in 1956. While *The Stalin Organ* was praised for his direct and harsh depiction of war, *Payback* saw an unfavourable critical reception and a generally negative reaction among the same public that saluted Ledig's debut. The author fell rapidly in a condition of exclusion and oblivion, something that not even the publication of his third, and last, novel, *Faustrecht (The Brutal Years)*, in 1957, could revert. Ledig left literature and conducted a simple life as worker. Only during the last years of his life the interest for his literary production arose again, with a new German edition of *Payback* and a series of translations of this novel.

The distinct difference in the reception of *The Stalin Organ* and *Payback* is not to be attributed to a lack of literary quality in the latter work or in a suddenly mutated cultural

context. The reason for the refusal of *Payback* and the subsequent silence on and around the novel lies in the topic chosen by the author: Ledig shifts the perspective of war, from soldiers to the victims of a raid. *Payback* is in fact a brutal account of 70 minutes of carpet bombing upon an unspecified German city. In a post-catastrophe society, whose social pact had been founded on silence about the horrors endured by the population, addressing this topic directly was more than infringing a taboo: Ledig was not even allowed the role of rebel or *rogue* author. He was destined to a sudden and lasting *damnatio memoriae*, being entirely expelled from the canon of post-war German-speaking literature.

***Payback*: A Literary Editing of Live Footage**

“Es gebe Freunde in Kroatien, die er gelegentlich besuche - und etwas über den Krieg dort zu schreiben, das würde ihn reizen. ‘Aber ich habe nur ein paar Seiten geschafft’, sagte Ledig. ‘Es ging nicht. Zuviel Distanz. Die Angst muß dir selbst im Genick sitzen, du mußt das genau kennen. Sonst bist du bloß ein Berichterstatter, kein Schriftsteller.’” (Ledig 1999, 182). This quote, derived from the addendum of the *Suhrkamp* edition of *Payback*, is an excellent starting point for the analysis of this novel. The context is an interview the author gave to Volker Hage in the last decade of the twentieth century. The choice of words operated by Ledig is illuminating: the writer speaks about a pervading sensation of fear and an optimal distance from the topic. This is in fact the difference between a chronicle and a work of art about war.

The art of Gert Ledig is difficult to approach. *Payback* is a peculiar novel because of two characteristics: its cinematographic style and the extreme violence depicted. The reader is not spared from the sheer brutality of what actually happens during a raid. As an example, here a passage from the beginning of the narration is quoted:

Als die erste Bombe fiel, schleuderte der Luftdruck die toten Kinder gegen die Mauer. Sie waren vorgestern in einem Keller erstickt. Man hatte sie auf den Friedhof gelegt, weil ihre Väter an der Front kämpften und man ihre Mütter erst suchen mußte.
Man fand nur noch eine. Aber die war unter den Trümmern zerquetscht. So sah die Vergeltung aus.
Ein kleiner Schuh flog mit der Bombenfontäne in die Luft. Das machte nichts. Er war schon zerrissen. Als die emporgeschleuderte Erde wieder herunterprasselte, begann das Geheul der Sirenen. Es klang, als beginne ein Orkan. (Ledig 1999, 6)¹⁰

The most interesting feature of Ledig’s narrative is the impression of being *in medias res*. Even though *Payback* is a literary product developed from the personal reprocessing of the author’s past experiences, the text appears to the reader as a documentary filmed

¹⁰ “When the first bomb fell, the blast hurled the dead children against the wall. They had suffocated in a cellar the day before. They had been laid in the graveyard because their fathers were fighting at the front and their mothers were still missing. / Only one was found, but she was crushed under the rubble. That was what *payback* looked like. / A little shoe soared high with the cascade of earth thrown up by the bomb. It didn’t matter. It was already torn. When the earth pattered down again, the sirens began to wail. It sounded like the start of a hurricane” (Ledig 2003, 1).

with the technique of the live footage. The inescapable sense of ongoing destruction pervades the lines of the novel through the absence of an omniscient narrator and of the sense of plot. *Payback*, however, is not simply a novel about death by the air. It is a fine analysis of the psychology of different individuals under the total catastrophe of a newly-discovered collective experience, i.e. carpet bombing.

The structure of the novel, which combines first-person and third-person narration, is striking: the work includes a prologue and an epilogue, where the reader is confronted with collective scenes of brutal devastation, and thirteen intermediate chapters. There is a graphic distinction in these pages: every chapter begins with a portion of text written in italics. This is a key feature of the book: *Payback* is a choral work like the previous *The Stalin Organ*. With his second publication, Ledig composed a novel whose narration in the chapters follows the lines of action of thirteen different characters, every one of them protagonist, in their own way, of the raid. It is meaningful that this group does not comprehend only German civilians.¹¹ Here, though, lies the peculiarity of Ledig's cinematographic style. The different sublines of action are developed throughout the entire novel, since the narration skips from one storyline to the next in the chapters themselves with a technique that resembles an editing process. The sense of entirety procured by a common narration is therefore shattered, as is the faith in existence being an ordered and meaningful succession of events.

The passages in italics, then, play a crucial role. Among the collective chaos, the beginning of every chapter is a space carved out for individuality, a space where every one of the thirteen protagonists has the chance to speak about their upbringing and their previous life. Here is an example, taken from the tenth chapter:

Ich, Heinrich Wieninger, Leutnant in einer Flakabteilung, geboren am 9. September 1911, bin gelernter Koch und sollte am 65. Geburtstag meines Vaters unser Hotel übernehmen. Als Siebzehnjähriger schnitt ich mit meiner rechten Hand Zwiebeln. Als Zwanzigjähriger streichelte ich mit meiner rechten Hand die nackte Schulter eines Mädchens. Vor drei Jahren hackte ich mit der gleichen Hand einem Toten die Beine ab. Er lag im Schnee, war erfroren und besaß Pelzstiefel. Den ganzen Körper konnte ich nicht auftauen. Da nahm ich die Stiefel mit den abgehackten Beinen und stellte sie in unseren Unterstand. Als sie warm wurden, fielen die Beine heraus. Das war ganz einfach. Zwei Jahre später zog ich mir mit einer Hand aus Pappmasse die Hose an. Wenn ich betrunken war, schlug ich damit auf den Tisch. Falls ich in zehn Jahren noch lebe, stehe ich in der Halle eines Hotels. Mit dem Kopf nicke ich den Gästen zu. An meiner rechten Seite hängt eine Hand aus Pappmasse. Mich wird keiner fragen, wo meine richtige Hand aus Fleisch liegt. Wen interessiert das? Mich! (Ledig 1999, 132; italics in original)¹²

¹¹ These characters are: Maria Erika Weinert, a young girl; Werner Friedrich Hartung, a teacher; Alfred Rainer, an old man; Nikolai Petrowitsch, a Russian prisoner of war; Fischer, a cannoneer; a priest; Viktor Lutz, *Fähnrich* of the German army; Hans Cheovski, a clerk who had lost his sons in the war; Maria Sommer, a widow; Heinrich Wieninger, lieutenant of the Flak; Jonathan Strehen, an American pilot; Anna Katharina Gräfin Baudin, a woman who had lost her son in the war; Egon Michael, a medical doctor.

¹² "I, Heinrich Wieninger, lieutenant in an anti-aircraft unit, born on 9 September 1911, trained as a cook and was due to take over our hotel on my father's 65th birthday. At the age of seven I was cutting onions with my right hand. / At the age of twenty I was stroking a girl's bare shoulder with my right hand. Three years ago I used the same hand to cut off a dead man's legs. / He was lying in the snow, he had frozen to death and he owned a pair of fur boots. I couldn't thaw out the whole body, so I took the

The structure of these quotes is constant: it is a confession that begins with the first person singular pronoun, I, followed by the name of the subject, and the tale of past experiences and wishes for the future.¹³ The presence of these moments for intimacy constitute a breath of fresh air, a resurgence of a sparkle of individuality against the anonymous death by bombs; they are, however, also a time for reflection about the sense of personal responsibility in a time of war and of individuality being a mere auto-fiction. This is true especially for those characters that are seen committing cruel actions during the bombing. Are they conscious about them? Would they still describe themselves as pacific persons, after the war? With his *literary film camera*, Ledig explores how an extreme situation unleashes the banality of evil, something every human being from every background (ethnic, gender, economical) has in common. Given the profound level of intimacy reached in the passages in italics, the death of almost every member of the group of protagonists is a necessary play of empathy that preserves the reader from a reaction of desensitisation. Here, however, lies a dilemma, something that every documentarist has to handle: is it actually possible to stare into the void and find the right words to express the inexpressible?

Conclusion: Is a Direct Gaze Possible?

The tragedy of the Second World War is a well-documented topic, especially when we consider that some of its aspects, like the Holocaust, constitute a matter for international, collective reflection. While the sufferings of the populations attacked by Nazi Germany have been covered extensively by operations of collective memory and the efforts of scholars, the effects of the attacks on German civilians have been overlooked, if not silenced, for decades. The main cause for this double standard is obviously the sense of historical guilt towards Germany. Germans were considered the instigators of the First World War and the direct culprits for the outbreak of the second conflict. Was it possible to show a sense of mercy towards a people reputed responsible for the brutal killing of millions of individuals?

It is impossible to provide an answer: the chronological and emotional distance from the events bring us to a conclusion that sounded unnatural for those who endured and survived those horrors. In this regard, the works of Stig Dagerman and Gert Ledig constitute a precious testimony of an effort, i.e. the effort of not closing the eyes in front of a disturbing reality beyond our sense of morality.

German Autumn and *Payback* represent two sides of the same coin: while Dagerman, the activist and author from neutral Sweden, faces a *fait accompli* in the total destruction of German houses and souls, Ledig is himself a direct witness and survivor of the annihilation brought by devastating air raids. Their works, however, wouldn't have been

boots with the chopped-off legs and put them in our dug-out. When they warmed up, the legs fell out. It was very easy. / Two years later I put my trousers on with a hand made out of papier maché. When I was drunk I used to beat it on the table. If I live another ten years I will stand in the lobby of a hotel. I will nod my head to the guests. On my right side hangs a hand made of papier-mâché. No one will ask me where my real flesh-and-blood hand is. Who cares about that? I do!" (Ledig 2003, 151).

¹³ Chapter V and VIII constitute the only exceptions to this structure.

possible without distance: the socio-political background of the Swedish author, a left-wing, antimilitarist journalist who spent his days among impoverished civilians and his nights in luxury hotels for affluent expats¹⁴ and who collected reports that were to be consumed by an affluent, pacific society, matches with the ten years of creative gestation that Gert Ledig, a young German man who had joined the army and faced death in battle and death as a civilian, experienced before reprocessing on paper the pains of war. Both expressed the inexpressible, the former by questioning the effectiveness of compelling German civilians in a state of total humiliation and degradation,¹⁵ the latter by describing what individuals have to see and endure under a raid without euphemisms. *German Autumn* and *Payback* are uncomfortable works because they challenge one of the intents of literature: to escape from reality.

A question, however, arises: to what extent can these texts be defined as works of art? Where is the boundary between journalism and literature?

As Dagerman leaves the German soil flying back to Sweden, the distance lets his memories sediment in his conscience, prompting a profound reflection:

Hur långt är det mellan litteraturen och lidandet? Beror distansen på lidandets art, på lidandets närhet eller lidandets styrka? Är det närmare mellan dikten och det lidande som vållas av eldens återsken än mellan dikten och det lidande som springer ur elden själv? I tiden och rummet näraliggande exempel visar att det finns ett så gott som omedelbart samband mellan dikten och det avlägsna, det slutna lidandet, ja kanske man till och med kan säga att redan detta att lida med andra är en form av dikt, som känner en häftig längtan efter ord. Det omedelbara, det öppna lidandet skiljer sig från det medelbara bland annat därigenom att det inte längtar efter ord, i varje fall inte i det ögonblick det utspelas. I jämförelse med det slutna är det öppna lidandet blygt, tillbakadraget och tystlåtet. (Dagerman 2010, 73)¹⁶

The mere act of directing the gaze towards suffering is a prompt to provoke empathy in the reader, thus moulding a report into a literary piece. There is, however, another issue bound with the mechanics of looking: we as readers are not in the position of gaining a full picture of a reported event, since we see what the writers chose for us to see. A report can never be completely objective, as there is always a selection on the part of the writers: it is they who decide what to show, which topics to cover, what to discard. It is fundamental, therefore, when reading a text with a claim to objectivity, to analyse deeply the goals and the ideological stance of the writer in order to intercept the plausible

¹⁴ See what Dagerman recounts about his nights spent while playing table tennis, eating meat and drinking with American officials in Düsseldorf (Dagerman 2010, 82).

¹⁵ Dagerman confutes the efficacy of the brutal approach to the collective punishment and re-education of the German civilians (Dagerman 2010, 14–18; Dagerman 2011, 11–17).

¹⁶ “What is the distance between literature and suffering? Does it depend on the nature of the suffering, on its closeness or on its strength? Is the distance less between poetry and the suffering caused by the reflection of the fire than the distance between poetry and the suffering arising from the fire itself? There are examples to hand that show there is a more or less immediate connection between poetry and remote or closed suffering. Perhaps we can say that simply to suffer with others is a form of poetry, which feels a powerful longing for words. Immediate open suffering distinguishes itself from the indirect kind by, among other things, not longing for words, at least not at the moment it occurs. Open suffering is shy, restrained, taciturn” (Dagerman 2011, 111).

presence of a supported narrative behind the text itself. Not even Ledig and Dagerman's works are immune from this *aporia*, since this is something strictly bound with the dynamics of seeing and reporting. Nevertheless, the genuineness of their endeavour lies not in the willingness of supporting propagandistic manifestos, but in the willingness to trigger empathy for the horrible fate of human beings punished for a crime bigger than their range of action.

WORKS CITED

- Aare, C. 2023. A Poetry of Grayness: Stig Dagerman's *German Autumn* as Postwar Reportage from Germany. In *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, ed. J. S. Bak and B. Reynolds, 107–117. London and New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Amad, P. 2013. Visual Riposte: Looking Back at the Return of the Gaze as Postcolonial Theory's Gift to Film Studies. *Cinema Journal* 52 (3): 49–74.
- Andress, R. 2003. "Medusen schminkt man nicht"? Die Bombardierung Dresdens in der deutschen Prosaliteratur. *Colloquia Germanica* 36 (3/4): 247–268.
- Angell, J. W. 1953. *Historical Analysis of the 14–15 February 1945 Bombings of Dresden*. USAF Historical Division Research Studies Institute, Air University.
- Biddle, T. D. 2008. Dresden 1945: Reality, History, and Memory. *The Journal of Military History* 72 (2): 413–450.
- Bungay, S. 2000. *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain*. London: Aurum Press.
- Crew, D. F. 2007. Sleeping with the Enemy? A Fiction Film for German Television about the Bombing of Dresden. *Central European History* 40: 117–132.
- Dagerman, S. 2010. *Tysk höst*. Stockholm: Norstedts.
- Dagerman, S. 2011. *German Autumn*. Trans. R. Fulton Macpherson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fanon, F. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press.
- Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Vintage.
- Friedrich, J. 2002. *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945*. Munich: Propyläen.
- Gaskin, M. J. 2005. *Blitz: The Story of 29th December 1940*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hage, V. 2005. Wie die deutschen Schriftsteller den Bombenkrieg bewältigten. *Osteuropa* 55 (4/6): 265–280.
- Hooton, E. R. 1997. *Eagle in Flames: The Fall of the Luftwaffe*. London: Arms and Armour.
- Hugh, T. 1994. *The Spanish Civil War*. New York: Touchstone.
- Huszar, A. 2016. "Ein Massengrab lässt sich nicht beschreiben." Zur Repräsentation des Luftkrieges in Gert Ledigs Vergeltung im Kontext von W.G. Sebalds Luftkrieg und Literatur. *Anuari de Filologia. Literatures Contemporànies* 6: 53–61.
- Lacan, J. 1998. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York and London: Norton.
- Ledig, G. 1999. *Vergeltung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Ledig, G. 2003. *Payback*. Trans. S. Whiteside. London: Granta Books.
- Lindqvist, S. 2001. *A History of Bombing*. New York: The New Press.
- Meltzer, F. 2019. *Dark Lens. Imaging Germany, 1945*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Norberg, J. 2011. Perspectives on Postwar Silence: Psychoanalysis, Political Philosophy, and Economic Theory. *German Politics & Society* 29 (4): 1–20.
- Overy, R. J. 1980. *The Air War 1939–1945*. New York: Stein and Day.
- Prager, B. 2005. A Collection of Damages: Critiquing the Violence of the Air War. *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 41 (3): 308–319.
- Ray, J. 2000. *The Battle of Britain: Dowding and the First Victory, 1940*. London: Cassell.
- Rumpf, H. 1963. *The Bombing of Germany*. London: Frederick Muller.

- Said, E. W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Schnapp, J. T. 1999. Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation). *Modernism/Modernity* 6 (1): 1–49.
- Sebald, W. G. 1999. *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser.
- Stansky, P. 2007. *The First Day of the Blitz: September 7, 1940*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Suppan, A. 2014. *Hitler – Beneš – Tito: Konflikt, Krieg und Völkermord in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa*. Vienna and Bristol: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
- Veenis, M. 2012. *Material Fantasies: Expectations of the Western Consumer World among East Germans*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Wieden, A. 2018. Sexuelle Gewalt während des Luftkriegs: Eine neue Perspektive auf weibliches Leiden in Gert Ledigs *Die Vergeltung*. *Neophilologus* 102: 497–513.

Viviana Santovito
 Sapienza University of Rome
 viviana.santovito@uniroma1.it