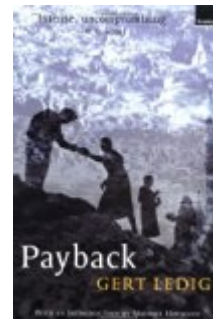


Gert Ledig. *Payback*. London: Granta Books, 2003. xv + 200 pp. \$12.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-86207-565-8.



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Stratigraphy of an Inferno

Gert Ledig's novel *Vergeltung* begins in a graveyard, in the middle of an aerial bombardment. "When the first bomb fell," he writes, "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" (p. 1). This laconic reporting of unfathomable events is typical of Ledig's work, first published in 1956, but only recently translated into English as *Payback*. The work is graphic, shocking, and so vividly written that the reader is appalled, yet finds the book difficult to put down. Ledig opens a window into the experience of aerial bombardment that no historian's account can match.

The subject of the novel is the bombing of an unnamed German city in July 1944. Instead of telling a single story from beginning to end, however, the book is composed of vignettes. The reader is offered glimpses into a whole series of lives,

a whole series of experiences of bombardment. It is as if one were looking at a collection of very vivid segments of film, retrieved from a cutting-room floor. Each belongs with the others, but the exact order is unclear, and there is little continuity from one to the next. The novel ostensibly takes place over sixty-nine minutes, but in fact, time seems to slow down and speed up at will. One moment, we are underground, with the families huddled in a cellar. The next, we are up in a bomber with an attacking crew of Americans. Then, Ledig leaves us hanging somewhere in between, watching a group of young boys on a high-rise bunker, literally strapped to the Flak guns they are aiming at the enemy above. The novel creates, in effect, a vertical cross-section of the city at a particular point in time. As it skips randomly from one stratum to the next, the only constants are chaos and destruction.

When Ledig's book was first published in the mid-1950's, its reception was disastrous. A reviewer in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called the work "a deliberately macabre horror-painting," while his counterpart at *Die Zeit* suggested

that the work was so appalling as to be barely credible.[1] Ledig had written a successful first novel about war on the Eastern Front (*Die Stalinorgel*), that was rapidly translated into fourteen languages, but *Payback* was something else. *The Stalin Organ* depicted the chaotic amorality of battle, but when Ledig tried to suggest that war on the home front had often been just as bad, the public did not want to listen. As W.G. Sebald put it, Ledig's works "wurden aus dem kulturellen Gedächtnis ausgeschlossen, weil sie den *cordon sanitaire* zu durchbrechen drohten, mit dem die Gesellschaft die Todeszonen tatsächlich entstandener dystopischer Einbrüche umgibt." [2] Ledig broke the quarantine seal on the past, reminding Germans about something that most preferred, at least for a time, to forget.

The fact that an English translation of *Vergeltung* has only just appeared testifies to the depth of the black hole into which Ledig's work fell. Another sign of this is that Sebald did not even mention the book in his initial series of lectures in Zurich, from which he drew the material for *Luftkrieg und Literatur*. Sebald was simply not aware that the work existed, until the discussion surrounding his own lectures helped to bring Ledig back into the public eye. A German republication of *Vergeltung* appeared in 1999, just after its author's death.[3]

The mercilessly graphic quality of Ledig's work, clearly part of what offended his contemporaries, had its roots in the fact that Ledig wrote, at least in general terms, about his own experiences. Michael Hoffmann informs us, in the short essay that opens the English translation of *Payback*, that Ledig volunteered for the German army in 1939, at age eighteen. He fought for about three years, including time spent in a punishment unit in 1942, as a result of "inflammatory talk" (he was later a convinced Communist). After the loss of two fingers of his right hand and part of his lower jaw on the Eastern Front, he returned to Germany, where he worked as an engineer in Mu-

nich. Thus, Ledig came to know not just the soldiers' war, but also the civilians' war from the inside, and these experiences formed the basis for *Payback*. [4]

The work is valuable, from a historian's point of view, for several reasons. It is fiction, to be sure, and it is at times overwrought. Sebald writes in *Luftkrieg und Literatur* that in Ledig's text, "manches wirkt unbeholfen und überdreht." [5] Still, this is fiction written by someone who experienced aerial bombardment himself, and who is therefore able to describe it with an immediacy that evades the historian, no matter how hard he or she tries. Even Jorg Friedrich's chapter on the experience of bombing, *Ich*, which does a good job of capturing the absurdity of an air raid and the population's near-hysterical vacillation between despair and grim humour, cannot bring the reader into a bombed city the way Ledig's fiction can. This kind of novel fleshes out gaps in the documents, and brings them to life.

Contributing to the realistic quality of the novel is the fact that Ledig allows almost no distance between the reader and the events he depicts. This is in direct contrast to most other German authors who have described the experience of an aerial bombardment. To take perhaps the best-known example, Hans Erich Nossack's *Der Untergang* is written from the perspective of a narrator who has left Hamburg for a short vacation. The narrator watches his home city burn from out on the heath, then studies the aftermath of the bombardment when he returns to town. He is merely an observer, and Nossack's text reads much like a report. [6] Ledig's characters, in contrast, are inside the inferno, living through firebombing, and dying in it. In many ways, the book bears a greater resemblance to later American novels, like Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, than to contemporary German works.

Ledig's novel is an uncomfortable read, particularly so in Shaun Whiteside's effective English

translation, which captures the economy of Ledig's language, and his edge. For an Anglophone, even one well-versed in German, this version brings the stories closer to home, and it sometimes seems more "real" than the original German. The translation makes the work accessible to non-German speakers, and it would be an excellent addition to any undergraduate course on the Second World War, or war and society more broadly. The language is clear and direct, the text is relatively short, and most importantly, *Payback* offers no easy answers.

Indeed, perhaps the most striking aspect of the novel, and one which surely contributed to its glacial reception in post-war Germany, is Ledig's refusal to judge, his refusal to be caught up in determining who is guilty, who is innocent. A reader of *Payback* enters into the world of both perpetrators and victims, moving from bunker to bomber, and back again. The novel is built, in fact, on the conviction that there is no point in making a clear distinction between one group and the other, for perpetrators and victims are often one and the same. In one scene, a young girl is raped by a man while they are both buried under a collapsed building. We may be tempted to assume that the girl, at least, is an innocent victim, until we remember that in an earlier episode, she grew tired of carrying an elderly neighbour down the stairs into the cellar, and dropped her. This "accident" led to the older woman's death. Similarly ambiguous is Ledig's depiction of a group of forced labourers from the East, cowering in a shallow ditch, coolly speculating about how long it will take for their most feeble comrade to die, and which one of them will be able to claim his coat when he does. One is reminded of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* here, an equally sober non-fiction work about a different kind of hell, and the weird absence of moral markers that such places produce.

Not only does Ledig refuse to judge, and refuse to pander to our desire for clear distinc-

tions, but *Payback* offers no redemption, no happy ending. In contrast to others who have written fiction about the bombing, Ledig refuses to assign it a deeper significance.[7] Each life the reader visits in the course of the novel is profoundly affected by the air raids, but this experience does not make anyone better. There is no easy resolution offered, there are no platitudes about redemption in the ashes or phoenixes rising from flames.

Even the victors are denied comfort. Ledig does not allow any reader to see these bombings as just punishment, revenge, or even fair play. He fights our desire to simplify war, to read it as a clear matter of good and evil, victory or loss. The English version makes this explicit, translating the German title *Vergeltung* as *Payback*, when "revenge" might also have been used. Revenge implies honour, however, and suggests that a just punishment has been visited on one's enemies. This is not what Ledig means. The author's discomfort with moralizing "justifications" is evident from the novel's very first paragraph, quoted above. We are shown dead children thrown into the air, killed, in effect, for a second time, and told that this "was what payback looked like." The scene is ugly, and even though we later find out that the American setting the target aimed for the graveyard precisely to avoid killing any more Germans, the result of the bombing seems pointless, and absurd.

Ledig included no question mark in his title for the book, nor has one been added in English, but the scenes in the novel make it clear that we should read it as if a question mark were there. This is a lesson about the brutality of bombing with morality taken out. It asks the reader to reflect on whether the bombing of Germany was, in fact, payback, and if so, whether any payback should ever look like it did.

Notes:

[1]. Volker Hage, afterword, *Vergeltung* by Gert Ledig (1956; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999): 208.

[2]. W. G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1999): 112.

[3]. Hage, 201.

[4]. Michael Hoffman, introduction, *Payback* by Gert Ledig, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Granta, 2003): x-xi.

[5]. Sebald, 110. The author adds, however, that it was surely not the work's aesthetic weaknesses that led to its virtually complete disappearance.

[6]. Hans-Erich Nossack, *Der Untergang* (1948; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996); Susanne Veas-Gulani, *Memory and Destruction: a psychiatric approach to understanding literary depictions of air raids in world war II* diss. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2001: 103.

[7]. Veas-Gulani, 137-38.

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