

AUTOR

Kai Werbeck (Charlotte / NC)

TITEL

The West German Student Movement and Its Afterlife: The Ghosts of '68 in Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's »Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte«

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Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Graduate School *Practices of Literature*
Germanistisches Institut
Schlossplatz 34
48143 Münster

textpraxis@uni-muenster.de

Redaktion und Herausgabe: Ina Batzke, Seth Berk, Nikolas Buck, Dominic Büker, Katharina Fürholzer, Nina Gawe, Gesche Gerdes, Lena Hoffmann, Ana Ilic, Japhet Johnstone, Christoph Pflaumbaum, Matthias Schaffrick, Janneke Schoene, Martin Stobbe, Kerstin Wilhelms

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The West German Student Movement and Its Afterlife

The Ghosts of '68 in Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's »Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte«

In an essay from 1969, the West-German, avant-garde poet Rolf Dieter Brinkmann presages a new, worldwide sensibility: »Eine globale Empfindsamkeit beginnt sich anzudeuten, wie sie auch in den Studentenaufständen überall wirksam wird.«¹ Brinkmann speaks of an »einheitliche Sensibilität«, a symbiosis of political and aesthetic renewal, in part realized in the student movements of the Western world.² In the German context Brinkmann was primarily interested in the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* (SDS), »a student group dedicated to changing the political order through direct actions in the streets.«³ His initial fascination with the SDS, however, turned into disappointment by the end of the decade. In his 1972 text »To a world filled with compromise, we make no contribution«, we find the following lines: »»Zeit für eine Revolution?« ›Längst verseucht.«⁴ For Brinkmann, the revolution – literary and otherwise – had been contaminated and the collective had become suspect to the poet.⁵ In an interview, cultural historian Klaus Theweleit sums up this development as follows: »[Brinkmann] distanziert sich von der Pop-Phase und den 68igern, will mit seinen alten Freunden und deren Moden nichts zu tun haben.«⁶ Six years after the tumultuous events of '68 Brinkmann experienced a spectral quality endemic to West Germany's post-revolutionary urban spaces: »[D]ie Stadt ringsum ist abgestorben, das Gespenstische [...] kommt nun deutlich zum Vorschein.«⁷ The

1 | Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: »Notizen 1969 zu amerikanischen Gedichten und zu der Anthologie ›Silverscreen‹«. In: *Der Film in Worten*. Reinbek b. Hamburg 1982, p. 248–269, here p. 250.

2 | *Ibid.*

3 | David Clay Large: *Berlin*. New York 2000, p. 486.

4 | Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: »To a world filled with compromise, we make no contribution«. In: *Der Film in Worten*. Reinbek 1982, p. 121–134, here p. 122.

5 | Burglind Urbe claims that Brinkmann eschews »soziale Kollektive, Gruppen, Parteien, sogar den Begriff Gesellschaft prinzipiell«. Burglind Urbe: *Lyrik, Fotografie und Massenkultur bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*. Frankfurt/M. 1985, p. 14.

6 | Harald Bergmann and Klaus Theweleit: *Brinkmanns Zorn*. DVD-Booklet. Berlin 2007, p. 15.

7 | In 1974, shortly before his death, Brinkmann wrote »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort zu meinen Gedichten« (published in the fifth issue of the well-known *Literaturmagazin*), an essayistic companion piece to *Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte*. Rowohlt's 2005 reprint of *Westwärts 1 & 2* includes the essay, emphasizing the importance of Brinkmann's last prose text for the poems. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort zu meinen Gedichten«. In: Hermann Peter Piwitt and Peter Rühmkopf (eds.): *Literaturmagazin 5: Das Vergehen von Hören und Sehen – Aspekte der Kulturvernichtung*. Reinbek b. Hamburg 1976, p. 229–230.

revolution had not altered West Germany's socio-political and cultural status quo; quite to the contrary, Brinkmann claims, the movement left behind a dead society, suspended in time rather than revolutionized.

Debates on Brinkmann's disintegrating relationship with the student movement and his turn toward the personal are first and foremost debates about the author's political relevance. As Gerhard Lampe explains, the »Vorverständnis« regularly applied to Brinkmann's works after '68 manifests itself as dominated by »neue Subjektivität«.⁸ According to Lampe, literary critics such as Franz Josef Degenhardt and Roman Ritter called Brinkmann's work an escapist return to a less political literature.⁹ Lampe, on the other hand, acknowledges the poet's interest in the personal sphere but still asks for hermeneutic approaches, »denen die Reflexion auf den Einzelnen nicht fremd und für das Thema der Subjektivität nicht nur als Gegensatz zu den Zielen der [Studenten-] Bewegung denkbar war«.¹⁰ Other scholars, in particular Jonathan Woolley, take issue with Lampe's endowment of »Brinkmann's poetry with the type of radical negative subjectivity posited in the Frankfurt School's critical theory«.¹¹ Woolley rather sees a positively political, ethical force at work in the poems, in particular with regard to the implied reader. I concur with Woolley (and Lampe, for that matter) that there is a politics present in Brinkmann's post-'68 texts but find it realized in transfers between their multimedia form, cut-up structures, and decontextualized content rather than as an explicit part of an ethical discourse alone.

The intention of this essay cannot be to settle the dispute – a daunting task indeed – but rather to advocate and apply a permeability and continuity with regard to Brinkmann's development as an artist who did engage with the post-revolutionary spaces of West Germany.¹² While his poetics clearly did undergo radical shifts after 1969, »ein Bruch und eine Verfinsterung in Brinkmanns Schreibearbeit, die mit der gesamtgesellschaftlichen Lage [und] der verflachenden Studentenbewegung [...] zusammengeht«, the texts do not completely eschew the political but to a certain extent rediscover it after Brinkmann's more explicitly apolitical pop-phase.¹³ After he had written modernist poems and some short-stories, Brinkmann was instrumental in the transatlantic transfer of Beat ideas and translated works by Frank O'Hara, Allan Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, among others. In 1968 he also published his only novel, the controversial nouveau roman *Keiner weiß mehr*, set largely in London, in which the city resembles a gritty, yet strangely enjoyable pop-playground, a place full of music, fashion, and sexuality. Deeply dissatisfied with

8 | Gerhart Lampe: *Ohne Subjektivität. Interpretationen zur Lyrik Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns vor dem Hintergrund der Studentenbewegung*. Tübingen 1983, p. 2.

9 | As Lampe argues, Brinkmann did not completely abandon the prerogatives of the student revolution in favor of an apolitical (New) Subjectivity, stating that the author »sich zumindest 1969 noch den Zielen der Studentenbewegung anschließen konnte«. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

10 | *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11 | Jonathan Woolley: *The Ethical Project in Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's Westwärts 1&2*. Berlin 2005, p. 15.

12 | As Heinrich Vormweg writes in a portrait of Brinkmann, he was a »wilder junger Autor, der nicht nur am Schreibtisch, sondern ebenso in persönlicher Aktion aggressiv [...] auf Provokation setzte und schon bald dazu berufen schien, auf seine Weise Idol und Protagonist jener aufrührerischen, doch auch stets literarisch bewegten 60er Jahre zu sein, die 1968 ihren Höhepunkt hatten«. Heinrich Vormweg: »Die strahlende Finsternis unserer Städte. Ein Portrait«. In: Maleen Brinkmann (ed.): *Literaturmagazin 36 Sonderheft: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*. Reinbek b. Hamburg 1995, p. 14–27, here p. 19.

13 | Bergmann: *Brinkmanns Zorn* (ref. 6), p. 15.

both Beat poetry and pop-prose's ability to capture reality faithfully, Brinkmann switched his poetics to the multi-media experiments under consideration here.¹⁴

In the 1970s Brinkmann was convinced that West Germany was at a political, social, and most importantly, cultural standstill and that the short-lived student movement and especially the politically charged literary scene orbiting around it had been unable to acknowledge this lacuna. As a political myth, the standstill had its beginning in the Grand Coalition that governed West Germany from 1966-1969 and to which the student movement (including the SDS) had been – in part – a reaction.¹⁵ However, after the Grand Coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats ended, Brinkmann still sensed an absence of progress, complaining »daß jene lebhaft, lebendige Bewegung [...] zusammengeschlagen worden ist.«¹⁶ He concludes: »Die Generation im Moment transportiert lediglich das erstarrte, tote Begriffsmaterial des 19. Jahrhunderts, das Ende der 60er Jahre die Lust, die Freude erschlug.«¹⁷ For Brinkmann, the demonstrations, sit-ins, and similar public mass incidents staged by the SDS and other protesters had not gone far enough; the revolution and its artists appeared averse to the radically literary risk-taking necessary to push things forward.¹⁸ Denying the effectiveness of the political collective, he formed his own »ästhetisch anarchische Opposition«, a form of resistance executed by a single *agent provocateur* in the streets of the Western city.¹⁹

The term »collective« functions as a counter-position to Brinkmann's own strategies in the early to mid-1970s. In his 1974 essay, »Ein unkontrolliertes Nachwort zu meinen Gedichten«, he coins the term »Viehlologie«, a pun that plays on the German term *Philologie* but changes its Greek root to the German word *Vieh*, while also evoking the term *viel*. Alluding to both Germany's fascist past and its (allegedly reactionary) post-war academe, Brinkmann presents the »skeptische Generation [...] mit der vaterlosen Gesellschaft« as the dominant collective of the preceding years.²⁰ This generation, he claims, blindly follows »dem Fetischwort der Horde, [...] das jeden Einzelnen rücksichtslos verfolgt und bestraft.«²¹ Brinkmann offers a remedy, stating that »immer ist da eine einzelne Person gewesen, und an ihr zeigt sich der Konflikt zwischen dem Einzelnen und der Menge«, a

14 | This turn toward a more »Ich«-related experience finds reflection in Brinkmann's private life. In the winter of 1970/71, he moved into a small, isolated mill – a decrepit building that had no electricity – where he attempted to write a second novel, a *Bildungsroman* of gross detail, that ultimately never materialized in its intended form.

15 | Vis-à-vis the »hyperstabil und starr« Grand Coalition of the two German catch-all parties, CDU and SPD, the Vietnam War, the »conservative« structures of higher education in Germany, and the assumed unwillingness of the older generation to confront their Nazi past, the student movement as well as communist, left-wing, anarchist, and terrorist groups positioned themselves in various forms of opposition. Edgar Wolfrum: *Die geglättete Demokratie: Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Stuttgart 2006, p. 505.

16 | Brinkmann: »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort« (ref. 7), p. 236.

17 | *Ibid.*, p. 237.

18 | Hermann Rasche sums up Brinkmann's artistic discontent: »He was disillusioned, sometimes even abusively critical of the mainstream young writers who were inspired by political ideas before 1968 and after«. Hermann Rasche: »Text und Images in Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns ›Schnitte‹«. In: Florian Krobb and Jeffrey Morrison (eds.): *Text into Image: Image into Text*. Amsterdam 1997, p. 141–159, here p. 142.

19 | Gert Mattenklott: »Versuch eines Porträts«. In: Martin Kagel and Gudrun Schulz (eds.): *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: Blicke ostwärts – westwärts*. Vechta 2001, p. 13–28, here p. 18.

20 | Brinkmann: »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort« (ref. 7), p. 232.

21 | *Ibid.*, p. 241.

resistance to the »Terror des Allgemeingefühls.«²² Why did Brinkmann, who had earlier thought that the student movement might play an important role in the creation of a new aesthetic and political sensibility, suddenly champion the individual? Holger Schenk points us in the right direction, claiming that the break with the student movement took place in part because Brinkmann began to conceive of the collective as a leveling agency. His turn toward the individual thus springs from a fear of the average, the hegemony of compromise that for Brinkmann smacked of *Gleichschaltung*.²³

Since Brinkmann rarely mentions the student movement explicitly in his oeuvre, this essay searches for the *ghosts* of '68 in two of his later avant-garde texts (supplemented by passages from contemporaneous texts). I use the term *ghosts* not only to reflect Brinkmann's own diction with regard to the spectral landscape that the revolution left behind, but also to emphasize the elusive political quality of his art. After an analysis of the titular poems from his lyrical magnum opus *Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte*, this study turns toward the black-and-white instant photographs that frame the poetry collection, reevaluating Brinkmann's own political currency. Brinkmann revisits the assumed impasses of the student revolution, mapping the lessons of its failure onto the crisis of »political« art itself. The poems chronicle the failure of such art and depict the desperate struggle of the avant-garde to produce a spontaneous, vital art as opposed to an abstract and theoretical – read: openly political – art.²⁴ In the second part of the essay, I cross-examine the accompanying sets of instant photographs that frame the poems, not only as another documentation of the *ghost town* – even though they are that too – but also as an interrogation of Brinkmann's own cross-medial aesthetic of resistance. While this study is by no means an attempt to reclaim Brinkmann as an explicitly political writer, it does seek to unearth the relics of his often denied political investment inscribed in the interstices of form and content. In the case of the two poems, the poet engages with questions of mobility and standstill, while the images query the relation of containment and transgression.

Written in 1974, »Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2« showcase Brinkmann's dominant methodology of the time, the cut-up, »die Methode, die dem Einzelnen ein Mittel in die Hand gab, es mit den gleichgeschalteten Medien und der Allgemeinheit aufzunehmen.«²⁵ Woolley calls the anthology an »esoteric and scattered collection, which chartered unchronologically Brinkmann's travels to America, Rome, and London.«²⁶ West German cities, Cologne in particular, feature prominently as well, even though the different places become indistinguishable at times. Most of the poems, as Martin Grzimek points out, are »von [...] Zersplitterung [...] geprägt«, establishing, I argue, not so much a subject constituted by prismatic refraction but rather one determined to record and reveal this

22 | *Ibid.*

23 | See Holger Schenk: *Das Kunstverständnis in den späteren Texten Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns*. Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 39.

24 | See Andreas Kramer, who associates Brinkmann's poetry with Jack Kerouac's, in particular »desen ›spontaner‹ assoziativer Schreibweise«. Andreas Kramer: »Westwärts, Teil 2«. In: Gunter Geduldig and Jan Röhnert (eds.): *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: seine Gedichte / Einzelinterpretationen*. Berlin 2012, p. 836–846, here p. 844.

25 | The technique of the cut-up, advanced by William S. Burroughs, is »die Entdeckung eines neuen Zusammenhangs durch die Zerstörung eines alten«, literally by cutting-up source material and putting it back together in new, seemingly random constellations. Bergmann: *Brinkmanns Zorn* (ref. 6), p. 13.

26 | Woolley: *The Ethical Project* (ref. 11), p. 14.

predominant ontological condition.²⁷ As Lampe discusses at great length, »Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2« in particular »weisen eine Sensibilität auf, die die [...] abgestumpfte Wahrnehmungsfähigkeit des Einzelnen schärft.«²⁸ Brinkmann fears that the group, due to its collective structure, is unable to perceive and compute these fragmented surroundings. Since language, too, is a collective structure, a counter-position to this power structure can only be taken on by an individual whose sensorium has been recalibrated for the task at hand.²⁹ Brinkmann's poems are instrumental in the fine-tuning of the sensorium that he demands. How exactly »Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2« contribute to this fine-tuning has been a topic of scholarly debate.³⁰

»Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2« may not seem to be obvious choices – other poems such as »Politisches Gedicht 13. Nov. 74, BRD« are a more likely place to find a political agenda – but in the light of my argument that the *ghosts* of '68 linger in the interplay of form and content, their superficially apolitical nature serves my purpose well. In »Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2«, Brinkmann places the post-revolutionary Western city in front of the reader as a linguistic abstraction.³¹ While on the level of content the author repeatedly refers to the urban environments, there also exists a structural resemblance on the level of form. The typeset in »Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2« reassembles the grid of the city in new constellations reminiscent of concrete poetry, utilizing the medium's unique possibilities in terms of the representation of space.³² As the reader follows Brinkmann's lyrical I on his trip westwards, the urban landscape reveals itself as riven by tensions and contradictions. Layout techniques produce parallel columns that include indented lines, varied line spacing, and at times the cohabitation of two semantically unrelated elements in the same line. The form of the text challenges centralized perspectives, insinuating a plurality of positions endemic to the urban experience.³³ The discontinuous, at times even swerving quality is further amplified by the poems' division

27 | Martin Grzimek: »Bild« und »Gegenwart« im Werk Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns«. In: Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed.): *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*. München 1981, p. 24–36, here p. 34 (*Text + Kritik*, Nummer 71).

28 | Lampe: *Ohne Subjektivität* (ref. 8), p. 2.

29 | The impotence of language occupies a central position in Brinkmann's poetics and criticism. Words and phrases, when replicated in public discourse, hollow themselves out and quickly turn into repetitive and empty clichés. With regard to Brinkmann, Urbe calls these clichés myths. She states that Brinkmann searches for »Mythen, die unser gegenwärtiges Bewußtsein kolonialisieren und für die Wahrnehmung des Alltags verstellen«. Urbe: *Lyrik, Fotografie* (ref. 5), p. 15.

30 | See Andreas Kramer, who sums up these hermeneutic discrepancies. »[Burgblind] Urbe sieht in dem Gedicht wohl zu optimistisch einen linearen Prozess der »Selbsterlösung«, [Sibylle] Späth dagegen es wohl zu pessimistisch als apokalyptisches Gedicht, in dem ein exemplarisches Subjekt einer zerstörerischen Verfallsgeschichte ausgeliefert sei«. Andreas Kramer: »Westwärts«. In: Gunter Geduldig and Jan Röhnert (eds.): *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: seine Gedichte / Einzelinterpretationen*. Berlin 2012, p. 825–835, here p. 825.

31 | As Mattenklott claims: »Wenn Brinkmann als Generationsgenosse der rebellierenden 68er-Generation vorgestellt wird, so ist die Erinnerung nötig, dass er als entschiedener Widerpart zum mainstream ihrer vorherrschenden Orientierung auftrat«. Mattenklott: »Versuch eines Porträts« (ref. 19), p. 18.

32 | This 1960s art movement of visually and/or acoustically marked texts assumed that, as Ingo Stoehr writes, »in addition to an anarchical pleasure in playing with linguistic material in a way that was not prescribed by social norms or linguistic rules [...] also] aimed at political meaning by making the reader aware of the fact that life in society can be as empty as linguistic rituals«. Ingo Stoehr: *German Literature of the Twentieth Century: From Aestheticism to Postmodernism*. New York 2001, p. 303.

33 | In addition, Brinkmann employs two competing perspectives. The poems offer personal snippets – thoughts and perceptions – that position the lyrical I (based on Brinkmann's own travels) on the »ground level«, while there is a second perspective at work »above« the poetic city.

into larger sections (three in part one, six in part two), free of rhyme scheme and meter. While at first this profound fragmentation seems to support the necessity for a collective (a multitude of subjects), Brinkmann's poetics require a lyrical I in whom these incompatible perspectives converge.

»Westwärts« begins: »die wirklichen Dinge, die passieren...keine Buchtitel, Inhalte, Zitate«, signaling its interest in the real world upfront.³⁴ The ellipsis between »passieren« and »keine Buchtitel« illustrates the scrapbook quality of the text. The term »Zitate«, as semantics and grammatical structure insinuate, belongs to the preceding line (see appendix, fig. 1). In terms of the page layout the term is demarcated from »Buchtitel« and »Inhalte« through a line break. The line does not continue where one would expect it to, namely at the beginning of the next line but rather sits at the far right of it. From the beginning, even what appears to belong together remains separated; a dialogue cannot be sustained any longer. »Westwärts« further confronts the reader with tropes of mobility, a mobility, however, that faces a crisis. The first section of »Westwärts« evokes a heightened sense of pace, rushing the reader through the city along a constellation of words without settling down: »Abflammende Nacht / westwärts / rotierender Sternhaufen, [space] Trampelpfade« (West, p. 43), the third and fourth lines already introduce a paralytic topography, a decaying, almost jungle-like, landscape: »1 Sonne brüllt am Tag, Unterholz, verkrüppelte Vegetation, / und verwehte Straßen« (West, p. 42). Before section 1 ends, the lyrical I states »& dann fing ich noch einmal mit der Zeile an« (West, p. 42). These lines correspond to a similar line at the beginning of the section (West, p. 42). The circular structure suggests that the text is constantly threatened by returning to where it began, a *Leitmotif* also emphasized in the narrative arch of the poem and its sequel.

The poems evoke a barren landscape that remains largely unpopulated; there is no communication between sender and receiver – no visible traces of the students and their *movement* remain; Brinkmann's city is marked as a literary space in which the group does not play a significant role. Brinkmann even includes what could be a political slogan, »Die Negation der Zustände ringsum«, but it is only a fragment, an empty catch phrase floating through the city (West, p. 42). Even though »Westwärts« has moments in which someone else speaks, these unsolicited inputs never connect with the elusive central subject that traverses the pages of the poem. As readers follow him to Austin, Texas, communication is absent. »In London steige ich um«, he comments, compressing several hours into a few lines and states that »einige Zeilen weiter hob das Flugzeug ab. Die nächste Zeile hieß, eine matschige Winterdämmerung in New York« (West, p. 42). The subjective first-person perspective is taken to an extreme in exclamations such as »Fleisch einführen verboten«, which, given the overall context of air travel, relates to the warning signs at airports perceived by the traveler (West, p. 43). This sign – signaling a stop – is set apart from the remainder of the text. We can infer how the lyrical I stands in front of this sign and, after this moment of enforced immobility, proceeds to board the plane, hoping to »get away« from West Germany. »Washington ist nichts anderes beim Drüberfliegen, nachts, als eine Menge Funzeln in der Dunkelheit«, the lyrical I states shortly before his arrival, expanding his limited perspective into a panorama that corresponds to the poem's city map layout (West, p. 43).

The poem's first person perspective is transformed into a detached look from above, hinting at the fluidity of the text, its desperate attempt to stay in motion. This second

34 | Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: *Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte*. Reinbek b. Hamburg 1975 (henceforth abbreviated as West), p. 42.

perspective embedded in »Westwärts« utilizes a bird's-eye view looking down at a »North American metropolis«, seemingly disembodied and freed from the limitations that allegedly hamper West Germany's socio-political and cultural progress. North America in the 1960s was indeed a utopian place for Brinkmann with regard to its avant-garde art scene, in particular the Beat poets. The lyrical I arrives at his final destination in the United States where space has turned into pure sign, »(Villa Capri, Motor Hotel, 2400, N. Interregional Highway, Austin Texas 78705)« (West, p. 44). This literary representation of Brinkmann's abode during his stay at the University of Texas as a guest lecturer appears as a stylized building, a square structure without any ornament. As the lyrical I travels from country to country he approaches these text-spaces with excitement; looking at them from the outside offers a brief reprieve from the stifling atmosphere at home.³⁵ At first, his travels grant the lyrical I relief from West Germany's standstill, a moment of elation that refers to Brinkmann's infatuation with the US avant-garde during the late 1960s. He admits »auf einmal, da war ich, an dieser Stelle in meinem Leben«, a moment rooted in the here and now of literary production, the only place where Brinkmann felt that resistance was remotely possible (West, p. 44).

Already on the third page, however, the poem's layout sets up a »visual« moment of deceleration as a continuous line demarcates the top portion of section one from the bottom part and signals a sudden halt. The subsequent second section of »Westwärts« significantly alters the layout and reduces the break-neck speed of section 1 even more, both on the level of form and content. Section 2 refines the grid and suddenly appears as an ordered, if somewhat clunky structure made of neatly centered text blocks. Its »stanzas« are consistently three lines long, assimilating a more rigid literary form. In spite of this order, they do not rhyme, suggesting that harmony of any kind still remains incomplete business. The first stanza in section 2 ends with a period and thus presents itself as a compact and hermetic unit. The other stanzas contain run-on lines, as if its inherent order immediately begins to break down, embedding a more static form of poetry within a more mobile one. The more organized part of the poem conjures up a suburb permeated by a dream-like quality: »Bäume glühten in dem kleinen vertrockneten Park, dessen Farbe verblichen war«, a faded world of picket fences in which »über dem Hundekot ein Stern blitzt« (West, p. 44). The glowing trees and the flashing star set counterpoints to the yellowed world of dog excrement, drawing attention to the schizophrenic nature of these spaces. The text signals an impending breakdown, it advises the reader to expect an incision.

The more traditional formal aspects of section 2 are disruptive and present a block of ordered writing that has succumbed to conformity and compromise. Yet, its apparent symmetry is rife with tensions, expressed on the level of content through tropes of almost romantic quality, such as »Blättern, raschelnd« juxtaposed with metaphoric cut-ups, for example when someone »steckt abwesend den Finger in die elektrische Kaffeemahlmaschine« (West, p. 44). »Westwärts« repeats its formal assimilation of styles on the level of content, describing a (sub-)urban space in which »Polizisten in Grün, Striche, Sätze, Gebrauchsanweisungen für die Sätze« answer the lyrical I's question for clarification, an allusion to the relation between the authority of the state and the dominance of regulated language. Section 2 ends with the reference to the unspecified, almost invisible lyrical I, who »die Dinge schreibt und schreibt, bis zum Ende, wo sich keiner mehr rührt, auf

35 | As Stoehr points out, Brinkmann felt a »tremendous sense of temporary liberation [...] as writer-in-residence at the University of Texas at Austin«. Stoehr: *German Literature* (ref. 32), p. 350.

dem Papier« (West, p. 45). This is also the precise moment of an exchange between section 3 and section 2 on the level of layout, a bridge between the two that initiates a complex transfer (see appendix, fig. 2). Two readings are possible: either, the decomposing state of section 2 – with its symmetric form affected by deterioration – is the source of contamination, infecting, as it were, section 3 which is closer to Brinkmann's preferred technique of avant-garde writing. In the second reading, the framework of section 1 and 3 slowly reconfigures section 2, breaking down its rigid structures like a benign virus. Andreas Kramer points us toward the more likely reading: »diese variable Zeilenform [...] hat Brinkmann u.a. von William Carlos Williams übernommen.«³⁶ The reference to this modernist poet who later influenced the Beats suggests that Brinkmann, looking back from the mid-1970s, realizes the failure of Beat poetry. His hopes for the student movement and a new literary movement have both evaporated.

The bridge between the two sections takes the reader to section 3, which starts with the sudden exclamation: »angekommen. Da bin ich«, establishing the lyrical I in the seemingly redeeming present. Yet, another continuous line quickly stops the flow of the text. The typeset of »Westwärts« forcefully reminds its readers again that the lyrical I has reached not so much his final destination but another moment of looming immobility. »Westwärts« concludes with the words, »hier in der Gegend, mit den wandernden Häusern, nachts [...] als ich den leeren, weiten Parkplatz überquerte« (West, p. 47). This description of the empty parking lot is the final line in part one, leaving two thirds of the page blank. The newness of North America has given way to one of the most generic non-spaces of the Western world, the parking lot, its existential emptiness emphasized by the page layout itself. For a brief moment the lyrical I hesitates, and this is all the time that the standstill needs to catch up. Turning the page, the sequel to »Westwärts« already awaits the reader, mercilessly dragging him (and the lyrical I) back to where he just came from. Similar in layout and style, »Westwärts, Teil 2« takes the lyrical I back to the streets of West Germany, suggesting an inevitable return to the dreaded *ghost town*. The act of movement *per se* remains absent as the poem simply returns the traveler to a »Niemandland am Stadtrand« (West, p. 48). The first part's confusing sense of dislocation also haunts the sequel, while the feeling of immobility increases in intensity – the after-effects of '68 are as bleak as they are universal.

With six sections, »Westwärts, Teil 2« is considerably longer than the first part, and its length alone signals a slowing down of pace. Its layout – despite certain parallels – is much more cramped and cluttered, another comment on the vertiginous condition of Brinkmann's hated home. While progress still seemed possible in part in »Westwärts«, it becomes all but impossible when the path is blocked by words that leave hardly any space between them. Part 2 includes blocks that align text to both left and right margins, visually clogging the structure completely. In fact, section 3 is nothing but a square block of text (see appendix, fig. 3). The lyrical I returns to Germany: part 2 begins »Zurückgekehrt in dieses traurige, alte Europa [...] an einem Samstag frühen Nachmittag im Mai 1974« (West, p. 48). Immediately, he spots »das Gespenst eines Gepäckträgers in der weiten, leeren Halle des neugebauten Airports«, the ghosts that populate West Germany, a stifling space that »meine Bewegung momentlang auszulöschen drohte« (West, p. 48). The first section focuses on the arrival at the airport from which the lyrical I returns to his hometown. Repeating the final moments of part one, he encounters a »weite[n], leere[n] betonierte[n] Platz« that he equates with »eine[r] versteinerte[n], statische[n]

36 | Kramer: »Westwärts« (ref. 30), p. 828.

Zeit« (West, p. 48). Linking the parking lot in Austin to the one in Germany emphasizes the inability to distinguish between the two places.

The situation in which the initial excitement of the first poem eventually breaks down is replayed here with a vengeance: »In dieser gespenstischen Gegenwart«, the lyrical I »ging durch die Innen Stadt, ein Museum« (West, p. 51). The poem switches here from the present to the past tense. Whatever the student movement and its successors claim to have achieved, Brinkmann experiences the city as a museum, a place where old artifacts are put on display and rendered impotent. In the »Nachwort« he states: »Nur vier Jahre sind vergangen, und die ekstatischen Erfahrungen zwischen 1965 und 1970 [...] wieder eingeordnet«. ³⁷ Brinkmann's ecstatic experiences refer, at least in part, to his initial hopes for student revolution. At some point, however, experience has been »eingeordnet«, categorized, theorized, and exhibited, action solidified into theory and idle talk, with the result that there is »kaum eine Bewegung in der Stadt«. ³⁸ As the lyrical I walks the city, familiar motifs of Brinkmann's cultural critique return: »die Nacht war eine zerfetzte Kulisse, ›Petroleum‹ glühte eine Schrift, ›Ersatzteile‹ in roter Schrift« (West, p. 52). The neon-advertisements of the city appear as a stage setting, a surface that conceals the absence of mobility behind the spectacle of blinking lights. Pointing out his recurring negative experiences, the lyrical I bemoans that »Hier sah ich noch einmal die erstarrte Zeit« (West, p. 51).

As mentioned earlier, section 3 of »Westwärts, Teil 2« is a short and neatly ordered block of text that slows down the speed of the poem even further. As the lyrical I walks on – into section 4 – »post-revolutionary« West Germany takes center stage again. The preceding section releases him into the streets; the first lines of section 4 are centered, a rare instance of equilibrium in the sequence that suggests balance. From this centered position, the lyrical I spots »Lautsprecher an der Straßenbahn« and hears commands, »»Einsteigen bitte!« 1 Befehlston / in deutsch«, implying that language immediately attempts to police him (West, p. 53). He continues his odyssey saying »ich gehe an Schatten vorbei. Schattenmenschen bevölkerten die Straßen, redend«, before he enters section 5 and eventually 6 (West, p. 53). On his journey, the lines and stanzas abandon the initial centrality of their position on paper and the hard-won balance vanishes. In massive blocks they sluggishly »move« from side to side without having much space on the page to maneuver. As the lyrical I finally approaches his depressing home – presumably his original point of departure – his last words are »ich schleppte meinen Koffer zur Haltestelle [...] westwärts« (West, p. 60). Completing the circle, »Westwärts, Teil 2« ends at the precise moment when the lyrical I reluctantly arrives home, a caesura that allows the reader to use the photographic images as a visualization of this circular journey.

Brinkmann's later multi-media works are rhizomatic constellations, clusters of interconnected texts that utilize a variety of different media to document the Western world. Of particular interest are the photographs from 1969 to 1974 that are an essential part of the poetry collection. ³⁹ While his photographs retain many of the central elements from »Westwärts« and »Westwärts, Teil 2« – the cut-up technique, the multiplicity of perspectives, even certain images and symbols – they rely on visual rather than textual representations but nonetheless stand in dialogue with the poems. 144 black-and-white

37 | Brinkmann: »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort« (ref. 7), p. 236.

38 | *Ibid.*, p. 233.

39 | For more information, see Roberto Di Bella's essay, »Die Fotofolgen aus Westwärts 1 & 2«. In: Gunter Geduldig and Jan Röhnert (eds.): *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: seine Gedichte/Einzelinterpretationen*. Berlin 2012, p. 847–860.

photographs, shot with the Instamatic system, frame *Westwärts 1 & 2*. 72 images preface the poems, while 72 more book-end the collection. The pictures are colorless, visualizing the bleak landscape that Brinkmann experienced. They, too, omit people in general and large groups in particular and present the streets as a place devoid of life: »anthropomorpher, versteinertes Wahn«. ⁴⁰ Brinkmann's instant photographs catalogue what he controversially calls »ein riesiges Konzentrationslager der Arbeit«. ⁴¹ His reference to the concentration camps of the Third Reich conjures up images of incarceration and impending death, raising implied questions of resistance. Wolfgang Strauch claims that »diese Bindefolge und die Durchsichtigkeit des Materials [es] erlauben [...], daß Texte von Bildern und Bilder von Texten durchdrungen werden«. ⁴² In contrast to Brinkmann's other wild collages – such as the ones in the material collection *Schnitte* – these already show a relatively clear-cut relation between image and text. No pictures are inserted between the poems, a choice that limits the permeability between the frame and the contained elements rather than allowing for an intermedial transfer.

The very organization of photo and work in *Westwärts 1 & 2* challenges us to think in terms of containment. The first twelve pages of *Westwärts 1 & 2* present six pictures each, all of which are allotted the same amount of layout space (see fig. 4). At first glance, the layout suggests a strong sense of balance and symmetry, a »Fotoroman« to which Roberto Di Bella assigns a »narrative Funktion«. ⁴³ Brinkmann's particular image configuration creates the notion of a grid, the urban pattern of order *par excellence*. *Westwärts 1 & 2* openly engages with the city's organizational principles but also its boundaries. The photographs that bookend *Westwärts 1 & 2* position the reader right in the middle of the post-revolutionary city: Traffic signs police the environment and writings on facades reveal a patchwork-topography comprised of disconnected places and texts. The conflicting perspectives in the juxtaposed pictures result in a decentered aesthetic with a disorienting mixture of points-of-views that range from ground level shots to bird's eye perspectives. The photographs evolve along a broken temporal and spatial axis whose chronological order cannot easily be assessed in retrospect. Brinkmann's visual narrative of post-revolutionary Germany (interspersed with images taken in Rome and Austin, among other cities) slowly moves from nature to culture, including images of advertisements and buildings. Later this trajectory is partly reversed. What begins in the city culminates in depictions of symbols, icons, and indexes of war and death embedded in a distinctively urban environment before it solidifies into a semi-natural state, the »Todesterritorien« that Brinkmann repeatedly evokes: »diese verdorrte farblose Luft, [...], die verzogenen Gesichter der Dinge«. ⁴⁴

40 | Brinkmann: »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort« (ref. 7), p. 233.

41 | *Ibid.*, p. 230.

42 | Michael Strauch: *Anmerkungen zur Text-Bild-Montagetechnik*. Tübingen 1998, p. 53.

43 | Di Bella: »Die Fotofolgen« (ref. 63), p. 853.

44 | Brinkmann: »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort« (ref. 7), p. 235.



Figure 4. Vein-like trees against a pale sky; photographs from *Westwärts 1 & 2*. Copyright © by Rowohlt.

The first pages show a series of black-and-white Instamatic pictures of bare-branched trees located, as Brinkmann admits, in Austin (see fig. 4 above).⁴⁵ Their dark, organic, and vein-like branches stand in stark contrast to the pallid sky in the background, representing the rhizomatic structure endemic to Brinkmann's work.⁴⁶ At first, the trees in the pictures seem to have points of connection, creating the impression of a continuous network through which they retain a stable perspective and fluidity. A closer look, however, reveals the ultimately discontinuous quality of the six juxtaposed photographs, in particular at the frame lines even though the photographer takes great care to keep distance and angle constant. While the tree motifs create the impression of connectivity, they immediately contest this notion of coherence as they struggle with their containing medium. The meandering branches create a feeling of organic development, while the inconsistencies at the seams contradict this impression. While Späth detects a »gleichbleibende Perspektive auf eine uralte, scheinbar tote Natur«, I contend that the perspective does not remain the same and that the trees are overtly still alive and overall less obedient to the grid than the subsequent »urban« photographs.⁴⁷ Thus, their non-connectivity is a positive condition that stands in contrast to the *ghost town*. The trees resemble written words, insinuating that literature and art struggle with the fossilization of West Germany's natural and

45 | Di Bella: »Die Fotofolgen« (ref. 63), p. 849.

46 | Referring to fig. 4, Späth describes the trees as »dunkle Scherenschnitte« and »ein genaues Abbild des menschlichen Nervensystems«. Sibylle Späth: *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*. Stuttgart 1989, p. 76. See also Di Bella: »Die Fotofolgen« (ref. 63), p. 854, for more information about the idea of the rhizome.

47 | *Ibid.*

cultural sphere. The »biological« force of the barren trees – the natural act of aesthetic production ultimately framed by the grid – throws the standstill into relief.

By page three, we find the photographs still dominated by this calligraphy of trees. However, a distinctively urban landscape appears in the background, at first barely visible and hardly noticeable against the still stark contrast between the branches and the sky (see fig. 5). The grid, as Brinkmann suggests, threatens to take over and absorb the organic pattern as the text clashes with the streets, the major stage for the student movement: »Eine neue Begriffskulisse wird hineingeschoben«. ⁴⁸ The trees now appear plastered onto the geometry of the grid suggesting that the architecture of the metropolis becomes a screen or a billboard for a deflated art. From page 4 onward, the city becomes plainly visible – for example via its skyline – occupying and pushing out natural space and thus rendering it more submissive to the grid. In other words, we see the organic being assimilated into the artificial, literature turning into clichés. While Brinkmann's narrative is a historiographical one, history eventually comes to a screeching halt, visualizing the standstill that dominates West Germany roughly half a decade after '68. The city's mediated condition results in the crystallization of creative energy into a static monument.



Figure 5. The city appears behind the trees; photographs from *Westwärts 1 & 2*. Copyright © by Rowohlt.

The flowing sequential structure of the earlier pictures is gradually replaced by iconic allusions to movement preserved in showcases of frozen time. These images chronicle the fate of art in such an environment and thus become prophecies of their own downfall. This, too, is a critique of the assimilation of revolutionary art into the dominant system, a reminder that the overly political writings of '68 have been rendered ineffective. Even

48 | Brinkmann: »Ein Unkontrolliertes Nachwort« (ref. 7), p. 233.

though Brinkmann establishes both nature and culture as prisoners of the visual spectacle – we see people »walking« on the sidewalks, cars »driving« in the streets, and billboards »appearing« in the background – the trees at least stand a chance of exploding the grid, while the people in contrast are already static copies: the ghosts that populate West Germany's streets after '68. The photographs depict encounters with the allegedly mobile city – *the* public stage for the student movement. But the photographs' mimetic value is reflected in the suspension of temporality and physical paralysis inherent to the medium. Brinkmann suggests that the standstill of Western society becomes increasingly vexing. If modernity used to be defined by an increasing impermanence, this impermanence has become an illusion, a static snapshot of modernity's former paradigm of acceleration.

Through their idiosyncratic arrangement, Brinkmann's street-scenes further comment on the fragmentation of the city in terms of sensory impressions for which the student movement was ill-equipped. Multiple perspectives again illustrate the distortion of the urban sphere, a process of slow erosion that Brinkmann visualizes through the composition and the layout of his pictures. While the trees exude an organic flow and a mesmerizing beauty, the street compositions appear much more instrumental. The six pictures on the left (fig. 5) simultaneously trigger a feeling of disorientation and express an inability to find a secure position from which to look at the city. All six images force themselves onto the onlooker at once and, through their kaleidoscopic quality, represent the city as a space in which master narratives are absent. While the branches remain relatively easy on the eye, the urban motifs completely refute linear processing. Part of these dizzying tableaux are instances of language; words taken from several languages dot the landscape, such as »Rama« [a brand name], »walk«, »one way«, »exit«, »Polizia«, »Car W[ash]«, and an inverted »Autobad«. Thus Brinkmann presents the cultural sphere as a perverse palimpsest in which nothing can be told apart. It presents itself as a realm devoid of degree, direction, and differentiation – there is only one homogenous, mediated super-space left to maneuver.

After the city invades and corrupts the trees in the first photos, Brinkmann repeatedly captures cultural artifacts such as angelic sculptures and graveyards (see fig. 6). These symbols are associated with death, giving form to Brinkmann's concept of the *ghost town*. These German and Italian *memento mori* bespeak a standstill endemic to the city, a stifling notion of immobility and lack of direction. The space of the modern city in these images is filled with death and decay: As Judith Ryan puts it, »skulls actual and metaphorical are never far beneath the surface.«⁴⁹ Next to a naked body of a »dead« girl lying in the grass and cut-down trees, Brinkmann places the picture of a memorial, the stone figure of a soldier located in what appears to be a churchyard, complemented by a high concentration of dilapidated buildings and railroad tracks seemingly leading nowhere (see fig. 6). The middle picture on the left margin even depicts Brinkmann himself, staring back at us apathetically. He makes onlookers aware – casting his accusing but powerless gaze – that even the artist is contained by the frame. Brinkmann insinuates that the Western world only superficially recovered from the standstill and that the after-effects of the botched revolution are still there, in front of our eyes, waiting to be recorded and linked to the country's tumultuous past.

49 | Judith Ryan: »The Skull beneath the Skin«. In: David E. Wellbery et al. (eds.): *A New History of German Literature*. Cambridge 2004, p. 959–964, here p. 964.



Figure 6. Brinkmann looking back at us; photographs from *Westwärts*. Copyright by © Rowohlt.

Several photographs include indexical images of the Second World War in connection to the bombed out cities and the deportation of people to the concentration camps. Rasche postulates that Brinkmann presents the »brutal monotony of a decaying and dying urban landscape, of drab industrial wasteland with filthy scrapyards and car dumps, gigantic and bleak ruins, [...] tasteless advertising, accidents, wars and pain and suffering«. ⁵⁰ Even though Brinkmann at times refers to the Third Reich, for example on his 1973 Cologne tape recordings, the critical observation here is the inherently difficult identification of the depicted places. ⁵¹ The images show Chicago, Rome, and Cologne as one super-space, an interchangeable slideshow of the Western world. ⁵² This is not to say that national specifics play no role at all but rather a reminder that the relation between the various places is one of approximation. Brinkmann proposed what he called the »Ideologie des Vorwärts«, a belief deeply ingrained in the West-German psyche after 1945 that hard work exonerates the individual from the crimes of the Second World War (WSS, O7). Brinkmann's programmatic slogan »Literaturbeherrschung durch Österreicher« creates a link between the failure of literature and the shadow of the Third Reich in the form

50 | Rasche: »Text und Images« (ref. 18), p. 246.

51 | Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: *Wörter Sex Schnitt: Originaltonaufnahmen 1973*. In: Katarina Agathos and Herbert Kapfer (eds.). Intermedium Records 2005. Recording. Henceforth abbreviated as WSS, followed by a letter and a number. The letter denotes the label-color of the five CDs (G = green, O = orange, P = pink, Y = yellow, B = blue) and the number the track on the respective CD.

52 | As Späth argues: »Ob Chicago, London oder Köln macht hier keinen Unterschied mehr. Parkhäuser statt Wohnungen, Autos statt Menschen beherrschen [...] das Bild der Stadt. Menschliche Sprache ist in diesen Bildern zur leeren Formel der Werbung und der Verbotsschilder geworden.« Späth: *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann* (ref. 70), p. 76.

of Adolf Hitler (WSS, B1). Brinkmann claims that the preoccupation with one's own guilt (and the urge to compensate for it through work) preempts the production of truly transgressive art. Still, it seems to me that the visual references to '45 function as symbols for the *goals* of '68, insinuating that the unsolved questions against which the student movement rebelled still determine the socio-cultural landscape.

In the grids that compose the second set of photographs, the depressing necropolis with its anonymous high-rises, sketchy back alleys, and empty winter streets moves to the background, although it never vanishes completely. Symbols of control and coercion then begin to multiply continuing the meditation on containment started by the images' formal aspects. A traffic light commanding the urban individual to »walk« and a contradicting street sign labeled »DO NOT ENTER« further stress how mobility is policed, suggesting that Brinkmann's juxtaposition of motifs indeed mirrors the dead end produced by assimilative systems (see fig. 7). The only collective present at all in the pictures is the (Italian) police, dressed in riot-gear. The implied demonstrators – those to be subdued and contained – are invisible, like *ghosts*, a critique of their long-time effectiveness. Overall, Brinkmann argues that hope for progress in the Western world away from its past remains a fallacy as long as literature does not intervene forcefully. The feared paralysis is already always there, solidified into images and urban topographies that suggest a straight line when in fact temporality is fractured, moving forward in disjunctive leaps. In Brinkmann's hands, the technological apparatus exposes this misconception of the FRG's belief in steady progress as a fallacy. In this way Brinkmann suggests that experimental art is vital for the representation of this phenomenon.



Figure 7. Street-signs in the city; photographs from *Westwärts 1 & 2*. Copyright © by Rowohlt.

In searching for the *ghosts of '68*, this essay revisits Brinkmann's magnum opus, *Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte* in order to reveal the political undercurrent in his works that critics often deny. The collection's lyrical centerpieces and the black-and-white images framing the poems catalogue the after-effects of the student movement. For Brinkmann, West Germany was a *ghost town* whose denizens were disembodied and suspended in time. In the cultural imaginary, the revolutionary ferment in the literature (and actions) of the student movement gave way to a »general feeling of exhaustion and disappointment« in the mid-1970s.⁵³ Clearly, Brinkmann remains inherently skeptical whether or not revolution is possible at all. Transgressive political interventions as well as literary ones are threatened by a swift incorporation into the dominant power matrix. »Westwärts« and its sequel depict an empty city dominated and policed by language, giving literary form to one of Brinkmann's major concerns: the controlling power of language and discourse and its solidification into clichés. The pictures create a similarly bleak representation of unpopulated spaces. They also bring out the problem of (media) containment and the relation between frame and image by utilizing the medial characteristics of photography to comment on West Germany's status quo half a decade after '68.

Inevitably, this study leaves many of the nooks and crannies, the short cuts and detours, and the parking lots and crossroads of Brinkmann's poetic city unvisited: the interrelation of the two poems to the other texts in the collection, for example, or the three contemporaneous *Materialbände*, and even earlier works such as Brinkmann's Super-8 films which he shot from 1967-1970, and which already exhibit many of the dominant motifs in *Westwärts 1 & 2: Gedichte*. Brinkmann was extremely disappointed with what the student movement had achieved but kept a strong interest in its primary site of resistance, the streets, and some of its strategies, such as a need for mobility. Mixed media provide him with a pool of materials to build a literature *on the move*. This literature (in the broadest sense of the term) captures and deconstructs the post-revolutionary *ghost town*. Even though Brinkmann displays a profound skepticism towards the possibility of sustaining resistance, he ultimately assumes a greater potential for change in transgressive art than in the politically charged but aesthetically conservative works that revolved around the student revolution – it is important to acknowledge that this transgressive art is not politically disinterested and that it relegates its own subtle politics to the level of form rather than content.

53 | Stephen Brockmann: *A Critical History of German Film*. Rochester/NY 2010, p. 295.

Appendix

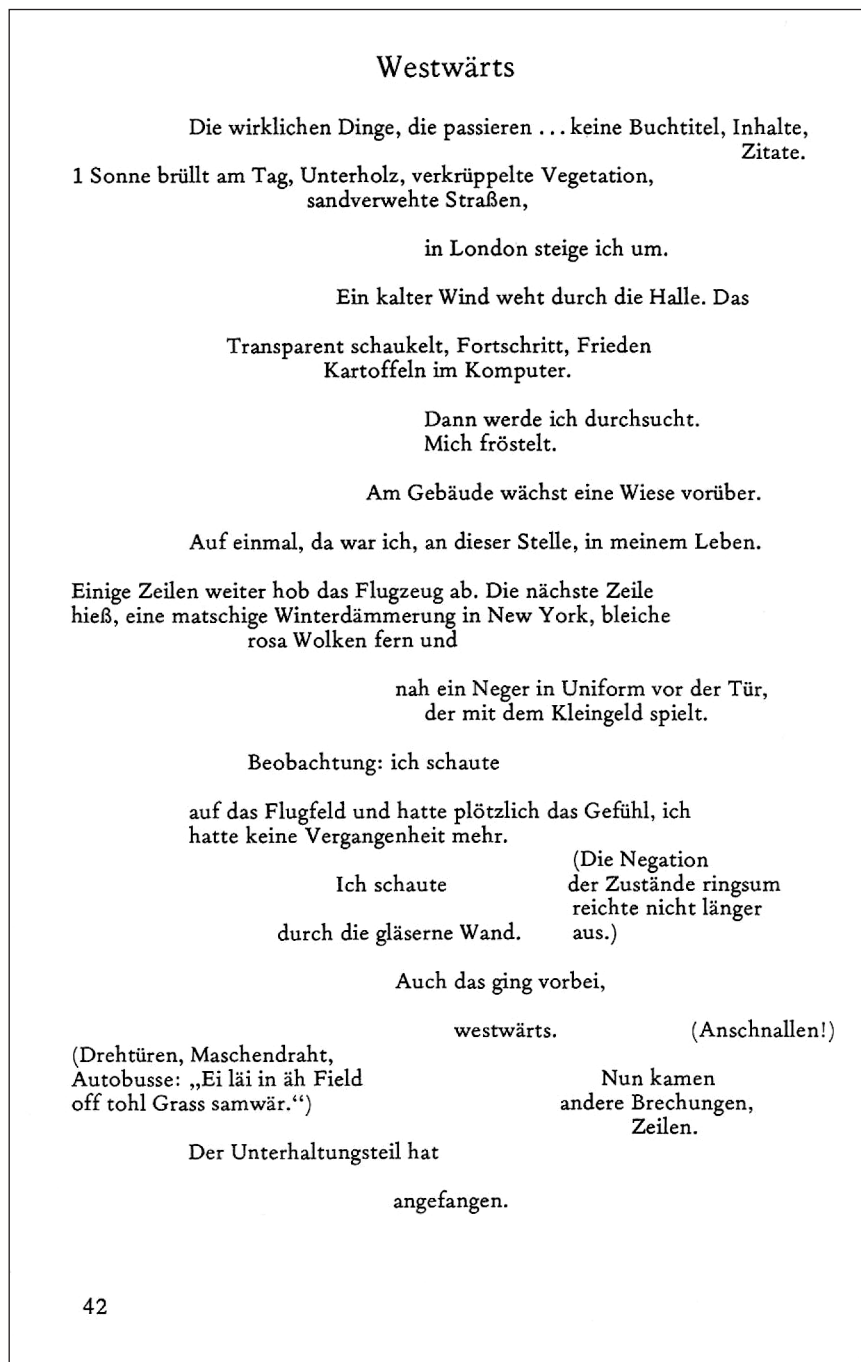
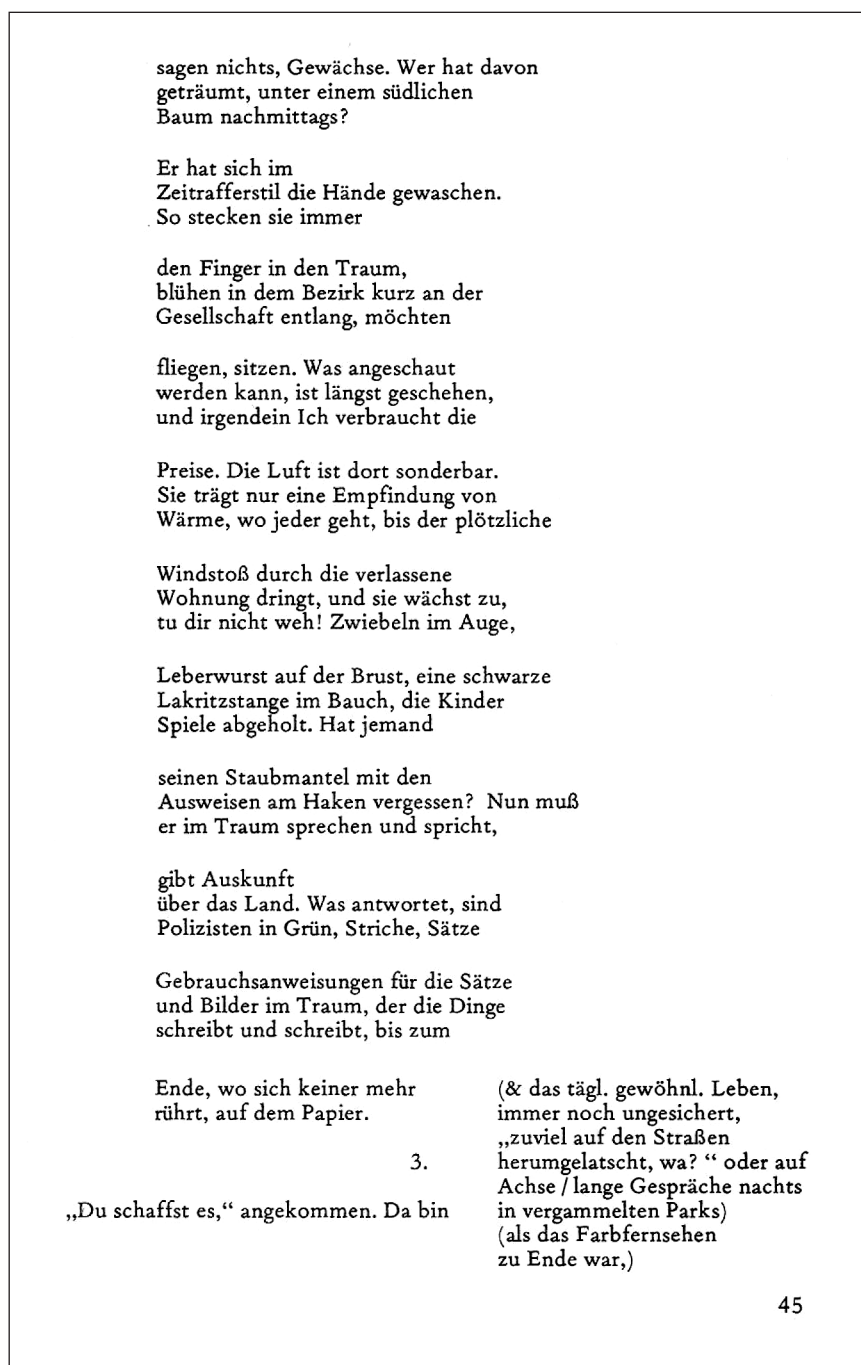


Figure 1. Reproduction of the first page of »Westwärts«, exemplary of the poem's fragmented layout; from *Westwärts 1 & 2*. Copyright © by Rowohlt.

Figure 2. Section 3 of »Westwärts« intruding into section 2; from *Westwärts 1 & 2*. Copyright © by Rowohlt.

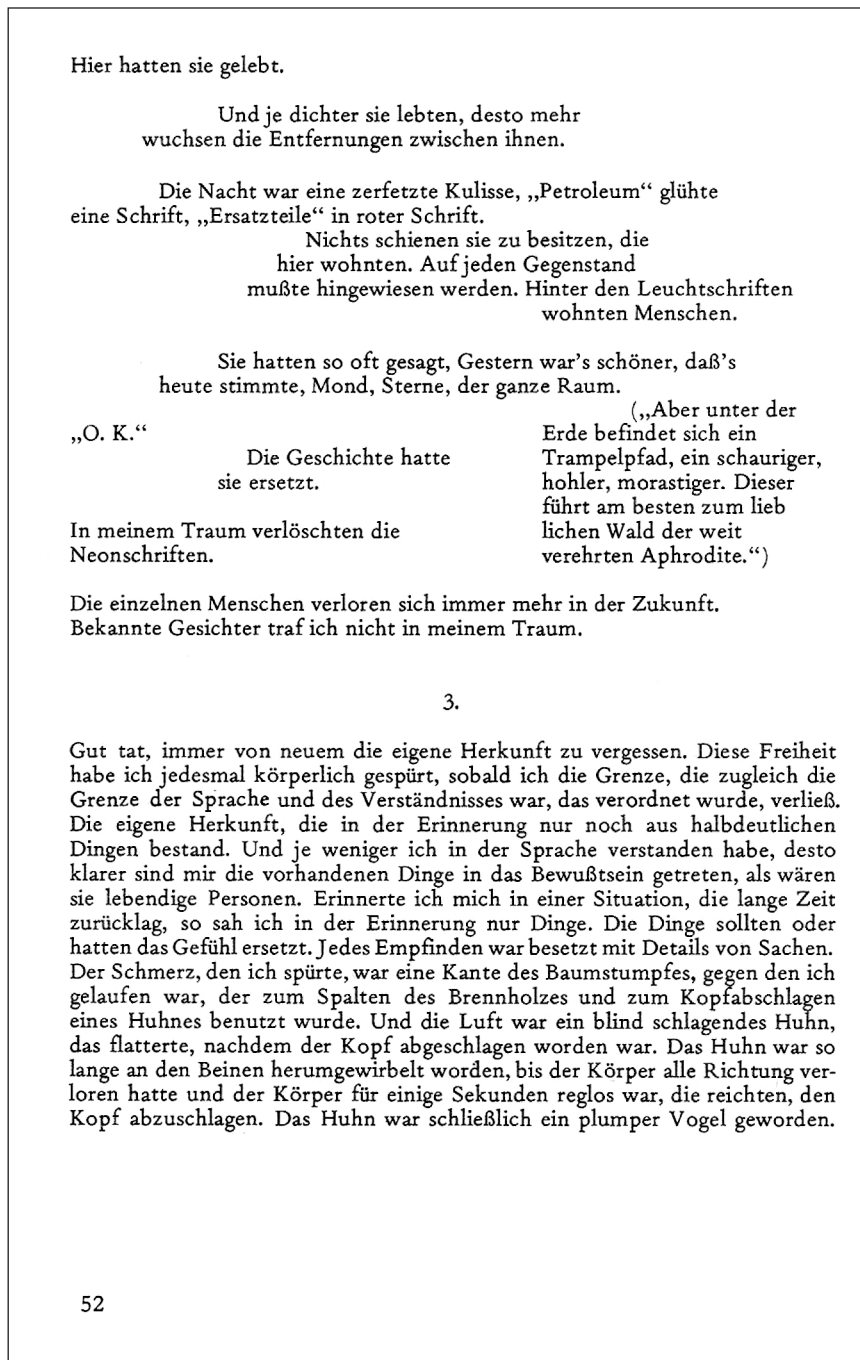


Figure 3. The text in »Westwärts« »coagulates« and »clogs« the page; from *Westwärts 1 & 2*.
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