Kilroy in Dresden

Nicholas Howe

The graffito made famous by American GIs as a marker of place, of having been somewhere, stands rewritten as the name for a travel agency on Zellescher Weg in Dresden: "Kilroy Travels." This phrase, printed in English over a stylized map that depicts no recognizable part of the world, says much about the story of Dresden in the recent past. The world changes. Kilroy is no longer here or there, leaving graffiti scars behind. He's out of town, on the road, somewhere else. So says the sign on the *Reisebüro*. He's everywhere and become anyone. Or, more complicated, he's become anyone in this city that until a few years ago was nestled deep in East Germany (GDR).

The numerous travel agencies in ex-GDR cities are continual reminders of the changes worked in 1989 by East Germans who went as tourists to other former communist bloc countries like Czechoslovakia or Hungary and, from there, made their way to the West. Every travel agency with posters for Asia and the Mediterranean, with low fares to London, Los Angeles, or Bangkok, marks out the changes of a decade, the possibility of unrestricted and cheap travel.

To see Kilroy the wandering GI celebrated in Dresden seemed odd, even disturbing, in the summer of 2000. For what an American brings to this city is above all the story of the firebombing of February 1945 or, more likely, Kurt Vonnegut's version of it in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Any American who read books as a kid in the late 1960s or early 1970s knew that story. Or at least this one thought he did. That the firebombing of the largely non-industrial city of Dresden—filled with thousands of civilians and war refugees fleeing Russian troops as they advanced through the eastern parts of the Reich—was an anticipation in Europe of the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That it was proof Americans and their allies, waging what they believed to be a noble crusade, were fully as capable of war crimes as those they fought against. Anyone looking at Dresden in 2000, though, needs also to remember Hermann Göring's visionary dream of destroying London from the air with incendiaries rather than high explosives. And with that remembering comes the sense that Vonnegut was not writing about Dresden in 1969 so much as he was writing about the cold war and the napalm bombings of Vietnam. History opens the way to allegory, one place morphs into another, the burden of war guilt looks for some moral repose. But being somewhere means that you have to separate history and allegory for a time so you can begin to see the place as it stands today.

The sections of the city built after World War II can be identified from their poured-concrete buildings, known in German as *Plattenbauten*; they are most visible as you emerge from the train station and look across the plaza on Pragerstrasse. Equally visible, once you wander around Dresden, is the fact that not all of the city was leveled or burned to the ground in 1945. The center of Dresden was devastated by explosions and fires; estimates of the dead run from 50,000 upward to at least 135,000. The exact count will never be known because many of the dead were refugees on the move. The firestorm covered as many as eight square miles at the city center. Elsewhere in Dresden, however, many buildings survive to show that it had been an elegant, wealthy city through the early decades of the twentieth century. As I walked along Zellescher Weg and wondered where K. might be after all these years, I realized that his trademark "Kilroy was here" meant that he had seen a place for him-

self because he had been there. Writing it on a wall was a signature of experience, of becoming less of an innocent abroad. Nowhere does that seem more necessary than in Dresden.

Dresden has the melancholy feel of history about it because so much of the cityscape demands to be read for its stories of the past. Consider first the sector where the bombs fell; and where then the GDR built a Stalinist dreamscape along Pragerstrasse of prefabricated apartments and hotels to announce a new era; and where now retail stores bear the familiar names of German and American capitalism. The monuments of Dresden that speak to the world of high culture were in this zone of destruction: the now rebuilt Semper Opera, the museums in the Zwinger Palace, and the Frauenkirche. To trace the sad, imperial lineage of history, one can look at the mural of Saxon princes first created in 1876 and then redone in 1907 with gold and black ceramic tiles from the Meissen Porcelain factory. Running the length of a city block, this procession of rulers leads up to, but ends safely before, the twentieth century. Melancholy also touches old houses and villas in the city: many reconstructed, some under renovation, others continuing to decay. Some have lost their vivid colors, especially the yellow known as Hapsburg, and now are reduced to brownish-gray stucco. The faded lettering of old signs, usually in a script that belongs to the 1920s and 1930s, can sometimes be made out on them.

How does a place recover from its own history? The story about Dresden, as a student there told me, is that it was destroyed twice. First when it was burned from the air in 1945, and then when it was built from the ground up in the 1960s and 1970s.

Walking through Dresden in hot summer weather, I could see it trying to recover the glory it had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it was a city of luxurious villas. It had been a place where Canaletto came to paint in the late 1740s; it was then, in the customary phrase, Florence on the Elbe, a city of cultivation and wealth. Canaletto's paintings of the market square and of the River Elbe are so much a part of the place's history that they were used to guide the reconstruction of the city after 1945. They still hang in the collection of old masters in the Zwinger, though visitors today are likely to rush past them as they seek out Vermeer's "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window." This is the painting Swann wanted to visit so he could write his book on Vermeer. That he never gets to Dresden is Marcel Proust's reminder that Swann is a Parisian aesthete content to stay in his cocoon rather than a tourist on the worldwide culture circuit. In other words, he was not at all like those who walk through the downtown of today's Dresden.

For that is how Dresden seems to be marking its place on the evolving map of a new Germany. As it returns to capitalism, the city finds its best source of investment for the future is its past. The survival of an older Dresden—with its villas, opera house, museums—gives the current version of the city a means to establish itself in post-*Wende* Germany, unlike so many other places in the old GDR. None of this means that Dresden has been spared the problems of racism and neo-Nazi violence that have erupted more visibly in other, formerly East German cities. It simply means that Dresden distances itself from such manifestations or, at least, succeeds better in distracting the foreign visitor from them.

Dresden is one of the few eastern cities other than Berlin that West Germans will visit. Baroque architecture, Vermeer, expensive opera tickets that sell out months in advance—these mark Dresden as a site of traditional culture in ways difficult to find elsewhere in the reunified state. The GDR years seem to have frozen the buildings. They remained, darkened by coal soot, but still there, so that now what catches and holds the eye is almost always from before 1900. Dresden stands today as the contrary to Berlin, the city of the ever-recurring new. In time, I suspect, even the sad buildings of communist-era Dresden that stretch along Pragerstrasse will take on a nostalgic charm, and not just for those who have their reasons to lament the passing of the GDR. Something about the city's setting in the bend of the Elbe seems to slow one's sense of time, to smooth the edginess of the late twentieth century in this part of the world.

Work continues on the Frauenkirche — Nicholas Howe

Dresden is certainly not building monuments to the passing of the twentieth century, as is Berlin, with its grand constructions by the likes of Daniel Liebeskind and Frank Gehry. Instead, it is rebuilding, restoring, refurbishing, always returning. At a glance, the horizon lines of Berlin and Dresden can look the same because both are punctuated by construction cranes. But as you study what these cranes are doing, two different cities emerge. Berlin is creating a monumental version of itself that verges on the grandiose scale Adolf Hitler wanted for his capital after the final victory; and Dresden is artfully restoring itself by honoring past models for creating a decorous urbanscape. Each city has chosen its era: Dresden before 1900, Berlin after 1989. That these are as much historical allusions as stylistic choices says something telling about how each presents itself so as to evade the twentieth century.

What a visitor cannot evade in Dresden's cityscape is a huge cube of scaffolding, perhaps eighteen or twenty stories high, that enwraps the Church of our Lady, the Frauenkirche. From it will emerge a rebuilt church. Across its front it displays a huge banner proclaiming reconciliation: "*Brücken bauen / Versöhnung leben*" ("Build bridges/Live in Reconciliation"). Bombed flat, its surviving pieces of stonework numbered and meticulously stored for years in open-sided sheds, its ruins a continuing reproach—that is the politically laden legend of the Frauenkirche. This summer, a concert was held in its reconstructed crypt to raise funds for a new synagogue in Dresden. A moment of ecumenism, an act of ritual atonement for the crimes and horrors of the past, an acknowledgment that all suffered—one can easily summon forth these phrases of reconciliation. And of erasure. For that all seems too easy, too much a ritualized gesture of our post-everything time to accept so quickly.

I gave money to the synagogue but not to the church, partly because I know that Americans, in the shadows of Vonnegut, feel so guilty about Dresden they will contribute generously to the Frauenkirche. But more, I did so because these acts are not as symmetrical as they are made to seem. The church is being rebuilt out of fragments cynically preserved by the GDR

government as a pile of rubble so it could present this act of destruction as overwhelming proof of capitalist evil. The synagogue is being built new because nothing survives to rebuild. Here, to rebuild and to build are not the same. The first is an act of pious recovery; the other is creation from nothing. The rebuilt Frauenkirche will take its place with the monuments of old Dresden: the reconstructed Semper Opera, the Zwinger Palace, the other state buildings. In its late-twentieth-century modernism, the synagogue will stand alone in a narrow site wedged in at the edge of downtown. Whatever Jewish community gathers there will quite literally occupy marginal space.

The influx of West German businesses on Pragerstrasse—the showplace of the old communist regime—is another act of physical rebuilding and thus of historical rewriting. These businesses run from elegant department stores with luxurious food halls to small shops where teenagers buy clothes they'll wear for a few months and then forget. Here and there scattered around the shopping district are fiberglass lions, about life-size, painted in bright colors. These lions, representing the heraldic animal of Saxony, are a touch of whimsy in a cityscape of poured concrete. Small groups of German tourists amused themselves by posing with the gold lion set in front of the Wempe jewelry store with its prominent logo for Cartier. Dresden seems to have rediscovered the possibility that a city can be a place for satisfying all sorts of desires.

Among these stores, what seemed most beautiful to me was an improvised stand of crates and boards tucked away under the edge of a gray concrete building scarred with graffiti. Its shelves were flooded with the bright colors of fresh fruits and vegetables: yellow lemons and bananas, purple plums and eggplants, red berries. It was evidence of life's abundance, a cornucopia unimaginable fifteen years ago. The crates labeled Dole and filled with imported pineapples were a sure sign that the borders had been opened, and American agribusiness had found another market.

In the heat of June, Dresden seemed a city without shade. Its large, open spaces—some from the GDR, some from long before—gave a sense of being exposed to wind and rain and sun. Along its streets, yellow trams and buses added a pulse of color. The liveliest part of Dresden I saw was not a ceremonial space but rather the student neighborhood during a Saturday afternoon street fair. Instead of gold lions and fast-food places, there were crafts for sale, beer stands, sausages being grilled, a cheerful skateboard shop on Böhmische Strasse called "FUCK YOU TOO," and strange segues of music from techno-pop to folk ballads that emerged as you went from block to block.

Young people walked around in the regalia of the late twentieth century: tattered jeans, livid tattoos, metal poking through skin, electric-colored hair. The worthy locals were all there to check out the scene, some to enjoy being shocked, others no doubt to confirm their suspicion that German youth had been served better by the old regime. Here the buildings dated from before World War II; if they had been fixed up at all, it was with the improvised wit of the streets: bright colors on the walls of the inner courtyards, little shops offering heavy earthenware pottery and weavings, the occasional spray-painted slogan. Here the shabby, worn-out buildings, some not painted or repaired since the 1920s or 1930s, came to seem welcoming amid the lives of young people free to express themselves as they wished. Even if that expression meant being something as sweetly clichéd as a multi-studded, green-haired slacker with a taste for mechanical European rap music.

At the campus center of student life in Dresden, the Technische Universität, the kiosks were plastered with bright orange posters for "*Die größte Party der TU*" ("The biggest party at TU"), with music by "FURY/intheslaughterhouse," "THINK ABOUT MUTATION," "natural born hippies," and "BIONIC MICROPHONES." All the bands had English names, a tacit gesture toward the non-native sources of the music and the international culture of the students. These names spoke with more than a little unease about what it might mean to be entering adulthood in Dresden in 2000: echoes of the 1960s (slaughterhouse, hippies) mixed with an ambivalence about the future (mutation, bionic),

or so it seemed to me. I liked the wit, though, even the elegance of self-assertion in a foreign language. Another poster announced, in a clever pun, "DEKAdance." But it sounded to me like more than a pun, for that word had been a favorite adjective of Fascists and communists alike for denouncing those who lived outside the accepted norms of belief and style.

These signs and their forms of self-invention were all the more engaging when set beside the newly wealthy Dresdeners who cruise the chic shopping neighborhoods of the Neustadt in expensive cars. Watching the finest products of German automotive engineering parade up and down reminded me of nothing so much as small-town America. The cars were different—burnished Porsches and BMWs, rather than customized Mustangs and low-rider Chevy pickups—but the scene had the same feel about it of too much horsepower and no place to go, of people trapped in a familiar, provincial place.

"*Geschichte und Schwermut*" or "History and Melancholy" is the title of a section in Elias Canetti's 1977 memoir *The Tongue Set Free*. I was reading it, as well as his two later volumes of memoirs, while I was in Dresden. These books memorialize a German-speaking Jewish culture that flourished for a time across the heart of Europe—in Vienna, Zurich, and Berlin—and then met its end with the rise of Nazism. Canetti never mentions Dresden. It was not his kind of city in the early part of the century; it was not a place where the new was making itself felt. But the experience of being in Dresden in the summer of 2000 took on some form for me when I encountered his phrase "*Geschichte und Schwermut.*" Victor Klemperer's diaries have made Dresden the most intimately known German city of the Nazi period and the Holocaust, but I could not help feeling that I learned something different about what Dresden had been like from Canetti's silence.

The melancholy of Dresden endures and now seems part of its allure for tourists. As I walked through the heart of Dresden, around the museum, I saw racks of postcards for sale on the streets. Many of them have brightly colored images of the obvious sights that are meant to prompt a cheerful message on the reverse to friends and family back home: "Having a great time. Wish you were here." But there are also many postcards made from old black-and-white photos taken of Dresden immediately after the bombing. They are unsparing in their images of destruction: collapsed buildings, huge piles of rubble, isolated human figures amid the wreckage. Some of these photos were taken on the exact spot where one looks at them as postcards some fifty-five years later. Who is supposed to buy them? To whom do you send such images? What do you write on the reverse: "I wasn't here. (signed) Kilroy"?

Fiberglass lions dot the cityscape — Nicholas Howe

There are occasional reminders in Dresden that it was once a city of porcelain; elegant shop windows display services of new china, with each item bearing an impossibly high price tag. Several hundred Deutsche marks for a single teacup tells you that this is no longer the workers' paradise. To parody the fashionably ironic terms of the more sophisticated guidebooks, Dresden is a place of contradiction. It is the home of porcelain so fine it has become a standard of delicacy; it is the site of an incendiary bombing so calculated it has become a metaphor for the mass destruction of aerial warfare. The two are linked by a degree of heat sufficiently intense to transform basic elements. The similarity is meaningless, how-

ever, more a writer's stretching for a clever conceit than a revealing insight about the place. But the attempt to find some such similitude says something worth considering, if not about the place itself then about those looking at it. For Dresden is a city that evokes discordant memories and extreme responses.

The boat trip down the Elbe as far as Königstein, some twenty kilometers from the Czech border, is one of the rituals of tourism in Dresden. The boats that make the run are either newly restored paddlewheel steamers from the nineteenth century or high-tech euro river cruisers that make you think of heavy meals and too many drinks. Here, on the Elbe, you can choose the past or the future. As the boat leaves Dresden, it makes its way past vineyards and villas on the north bank. It passes first the elegant suspension bridge known as the Blaues Wunder or Blue-Wonder, from the fact that its original green paint turned bluish a few months after it was finished. And then it passes the Schillergarten, which the poet Johann Schiller frequented because of the landlord's beautiful daughter. Some of the villas are true palaces, with elaborate gardens and cut-stone walls terracing down to the river. There are a few barges chugging along, as well as the occasional speedboat or scull with rowers. Along the bank, the old roads run, busy now with cars and bicyclists out for fun on a beautiful day. Leaving Dresden, you see a landscape formed mainly of low hills, but the closer you get to the border, the stonier and craggier the terrain becomes until you appreciate why the Germans call it "Swiss Saxony."

On the Sunday morning in June when I took the trip, the boat was full of West Germans, many from Bavaria. They drank coffee and beer, admired the scenery, snapped photos of each other, played cards and petted their dogs, and got off at one charming town or another for lunch. Among them sat an old woman who told my friend that she had a year-pass for the boat and took the trip most weekends. As a young woman she had hiked along the river and the cliffs above it. Now, she rode the boat. Her slow, patient viewing of the scene made me think about the rituals of internal travel, of moving through a native landscape much loved. She must have been born sometime around 1925, so the valley of the Elbe was most likely the only one she had been able to travel for many years of her life. From 1939 to 1989 her chances for foreign travel would have been severely limited. And the tourist boats along the Elbe had only been put back in service in the early 1990s. Turning the woman on the boat into a parable of how one can live in a time and place with few chances for mobility was almost too tempting. Traveling in place, looking again and again at a familiar scene—that was what her gaze suggested. This kind of experience may not offer the thrill of the new, the encounter with the other that we glamorize as travel; nor can it easily provide the challenge to a totalitarian regime that comes from seeing how others live elsewhere. But this traveling within a familiar place does offer the freedom of seeing for oneself, of watching a place over time. Within the larger dislocations of her era, the old woman on the boat had lived long enough to know cheap and easy travel arranged by one *Reisebüro* or another.

The boat trip was relaxing because it was so slow, perhaps ten kilometers an hour; its nineteenth-century pace suited the scene. In the landscape were old villages and old castles like the great fortress at Königstein; all from before the twentieth century. Among the boats on the river were restored steamers. The river seemed, amid these signs, to flow backward in time, or at least it let one's mind drift backward. If rivers have long been the familiar metaphor for the passing of time, for the sense that an event occurs in a unique moment never to be repeated, they also provide ways to go back in history. Traveling upstream, against the ceaseless flow of time that deceives us into treating all events as unique, is to learn about a place and its topography. The route set by the Elbe is old and is paralleled by roads and railroad lines. Stone from the riverside cliffs was quarried centuries ago for the royal palace in Copenhagen; then it was floated downriver to Denmark. For a brief time after World War I, Czechoslovakia had a free port on the North Sea near Hamburg; the Elbe was its lifeline from within landlocked eastern Europe. River routes obey the patterns of topog-

raphy. They are like the established caravan routes that followed the lay of the land when travel was by foot or animal.

A modern caravan route ran outside the university building in Dresden where I taught. Highway 170 led directly to Prague and points beyond; as it went through the south of Dresden, it ran along Bergstrasse. This route was the metaphoric "door to the east" from Germany and suggested why it was that Dresden had once been a wealthy city. Calling this stretch of road a highway would be an exaggeration. It is, in fact, a narrow city street hemmed in by university buildings and clogged with huge tractor-trailers carrying goods. As its name says, the street is on a hill, and all day and into the night, you hear the sound of trucks shifting gears as they go up or down. Sometimes the traffic gets too heavy, and an accident happens. One morning, a bus from the Prague-Copenhagen Express rear-ended a car waiting at a red light. Students told me that such accidents happen all the time along this stretch of road, but what struck me as wonderfully surprising, as a sign of the year 2000, was that there should be an express running regularly between Denmark and the Czech Republic. Roads replace rivers but connections can still remain.

Along Highway 170 ran trucks and buses with markings from Thessaloniki, Budapest, Brno, Moldavia, Sofia, Vilnius. I spent an hour or so photographing trucks along this route to catch their caravan markings:

Rosner Spedition / Jumbotransporte:
Poland<—>Deutschland<—>Tschechien
Tatai Trans / Hungary
Glaverbel / Czech
N&K Spedition Denmark
EURO-Holz Ihr Schwedischer Holzpartner
mit Sitz in Zentraleuropa
Metuva—Vilnius Vokietoja—Mainz-Kastel
UPS Weltweiter Zustelldienst
Kapos Kamion International Transport

Each truck was following the route of its time, reestablishing old lines of continuity between this part of Germany and the Slavic regions of Europe. In an hour or less, the trucks would be at the Czech border and all that lay beyond. When the bypass for the new autobahn around Dresden is finished in a few years, Bergstrasse will no longer be clogged with long-distance trucks forcing their way through the middle of a university. That traffic will become a memory of the 1990s, of the decade that restored free passage across borders to this part of the world.

Although that flow of traffic is the visible story of the moment for Dresden, the one that kept coming back to me after I left shaped itself around the old woman on the boat. She was dressed for all weather: sweater, coat, hat tied under her chin with a ribbon, stout shoes. She had her coffee and cake with great pleasure as she looked with youthfully clear, blue eyes at the landscape where she had spent her life. The story I invented for her was not just that she had lived through the tumultuous years of the last century, not just that she still seemed wonderfully engaged with the world around her, but also that her persistence in that place was a warning against generalizing too easily about epochal historical change and its irreversibility. Or its inevitability. And yet I cannot really know what she thought as she looked at the landscape. Perhaps she mourned for a lost world; perhaps she celebrated the changes of the last decade. There is, I see from a distance, no reason to idealize her, though there is every reason to remember that no traveler can share her sense of the place and its history. It is the traveler's luxury to visit a place and proclaim it as the future that works or, just as easily, to cancel its past with a phrase. It hardly matters either way, because the traveler always moves on to somewhere else. Meanwhile, the woman on the boat, watching the river flow through the landscape, stays and looks. •

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