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Encapsulating the Memory of the Lost: Ice as Metaphor in the Lyrics of Durs Grünbein and Paul Celan

I will discuss the function of ice as a metaphor, especially ice on the ground, in the poems of two contemporary poets, Durs Grünbein and Paul Celan.

In some of Grünbein's poems, which were written at the beginning of the 21st century and in which the memory of the socialist era in Eastern Europe is mentioned, ice covers the ground and hides memories related to the place. This image shows the coexistence of mental distance to the past era and also a desire to preserve the memory of it.

In Paul Celan's poem "Ice, Eden" (1960), the figure of ice represents the untouchable and unattainable character of the "Land Lost," which can be understood both as the Lost Paradise and as the culture before the Holocaust. In a meta-poetic dimension, it also indicates the mechanism of poetic speech that preserves the memory of something lost by not saying what it is. This means that the figure of ice is related to the impossibility of preserving an authentic memory in a speech act, for memories become constructed in language. In Celan's poem, the poetic speech appears to preserve memories by not saying their contents, but confirming their presence, as symbolized by the figure of ice.

In the historical contexts of both Grünbein and Celan—after the collapse of the GDR and after the Holocaust—the literary figure of ice embodies a desire not to distort memories of the "Lost" by integrating them into political discourses in the new social orders.