

Space, place, time and nation in Durs Grünbein's *Grauzone Morgens* and John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

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Both John Ashbery and Durs Grünbein are regularly read as poets of 'nation', unofficially appointed by their peers and critics to speak on behalf of a particular literary generation in their respective countries. John Shoptaw, for example, links Ashbery's "all-purpose" poetic representativeness¹ to the democratic heritage of American identity, while it has become commonplace to the point of cliché for both English and German critics to describe Grünbein as 'a poet of reunified Germany', reading him as the central figure of a post-*Wende* generation who helped forge a new sense of national literary identity for modern Germany.² This essay will argue against such readings, suggesting instead that a more radical

¹ John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

² See, for example, 'Durs Grünbein : The Poetry Foundation' <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/durs-grunbein>> [accessed 2 May 2013]; Sylvia Heudecker, 'Durs Grünbein in der Kritik', in *Schreiben am Schnittpunkt : Poesie und Wissen bei Durs Grünbein / Kai Bremer, Fabian Lampart, Jörg Wesche (Hg.)*, by Kai Bremer, Fabian Lampart, and Jörg Wesche, 1. Aufl. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2007), pp. 37–56 (pp. 46–47). There is textual evidence in the work of both writers which supports such a reading. Stephen Paul Miller has noted the relationship between the construction of the subject through 'surveillance' in Ashbery's 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' and the Watergate scandal which formed an important backdrop to its composition. 'Grand Galop', a poem from the same collection, can be read as a quintessentially American 'road trip' poem in which the small details of national habits – 'sloppy joe on bun, scalloped corn' – are captured by means of a grand, cinematic perspective borrowed from the visual vocabulary of the Western movie. In this, and many other Ashbery poems, the cultural and literary references and mode of representation alike support the impression that Ashbery is a firmly 'American' poet.

Various attempts have been made to pin Grünbein's 'Grauzone', the subject of his first collection, to a particular place or nation. As Ron Winkler has pointed out, the poem specifically rejects the poetic project of the GDR and its attendant ideology, refusing to participate its discourse. The 'Grauzone' does not precisely overlap with the GDR: rather, in its generic evocation of a Soviet European cityscape, one could argue, as Winkler does, that 'die DDR in der Grauzone liegt und nicht umgekehrt' ('the GDR is situated in the 'grey zone' and not the other way around' (Ron Winkler, *Dichtung zwischen Grossstadt und Grosshirn : Annäherungen an das lyrische Werk Durs Grünbeins* (Hamburg: Kovac, 2000) p. 44). Thus, the text participates in a national discourse of reunified Germany which would seek to characterise the GDR as a dreary, grey, characterless place for reasons of political expediency. Moreover, the notion of a 'zone', signalled by the title of the cycle and the collection, seems to serve as distancing strategy which allows the former GDR and Eastern Bloc to be portrayed as an anomaly, not part of the continuous narrative of the German nation, nor indeed a

approach is needed in order to fully account for the depth and breadth of perspectives which colour the work of the two writers. In doing so, it will draw on the methods for comparative analysis laid out by recent work in the field of American studies, such as Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* and Paul Giles' *The Global Remapping of American Literature*.³ Dimock and Giles argue that 'American' literature per se should be treated as nothing more than a temporary 'formulation',⁴ calling into question the 'analytic adequacy of the sovereign state' as an organising principle for literary study.⁵

I will argue that Ashbery and Grünbein's work, particularly their respective collections *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and *Grauzone Morgens*, negotiate transnational and ahistorical identities in such a way as to undermine, at least to some extent, the same kinds of rigid spatial and temporal categorisation which Giles and Dimock have rejected. Their work cannot properly be described using the terms of a single national literary tradition, but instead actively seeks to explore the dynamic interrelation of spaces, places, nations and historical eras. Like Dimock's critical work, both writers show an active interest in radical comparisons, including by means of the non-standard temporal perspective which she calls 'deep time'; and, like Giles, they represent experiences of space, place and landscape as 'deterritorialised'. This essay will explore several characteristic techniques in which this tendency is demonstrated: in the content of images which juxtapose past and present, the local and the universal; through polyphony, heteroglossia and an 'expanded personal'

nation in their own right, but a space apart, the implications and consequences of which might be contained without risk of contaminating the post-*Wende* ideal.

³ See Wai-chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006); Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton, NJ; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴ Giles, p. 1.

⁵ Dimock, p. 3.

narration; through the examination of physical and linguistic ‘networks’; and through explorations of liminality in space and in time.

It is worth prefacing this discussion with a brief caveat regarding the political resonance of ‘deterritorialisation’ in the two nations under examination. Dimock and Giles work in the context of American studies: the ideological and political consequences of their grand gesture of ‘dissolving’ the nation state are quite different when translated to the German state, its literature and history. Grünbein, who was born and spent his formative years in the GDR, would hardly need reminding that the borders of nation are ‘temporary formulations’ - and any argument that German poetry might be liberated from its national context ‘after Auschwitz’ should be treated with extreme caution. It is beyond the scope of this essay to engage in debates which overlap with issues of German cultural memory, itself a vibrant and complex area of study – suffice to say that I do not wish to suggest that Grünbein’s work can simply be unproblematically liberated from its national or historical context, but rather to demonstrate that reading his work ‘transnationally’ and in the context of ‘deep time’ can enrich rather than limit our understanding of it and the perspective it takes on history and nationhood in the broadest sense.

Dimock employs the useful metaphor of fractal geometry to express this notion of the richness and texture which an expanded historical perspective can lend both to literary works and our critical appraisal of them: she cites Henry James, in the context of the epic genre, as a writer whose work contains ‘coils and loops of time’, with a sponge-like capacity to absorb various strands of literary language and weave something ‘pulpy, knotted and sometimes indeterminately concave’.⁶ Her strand of comparative criticism investigates these irregularities, ‘pits and pocks ... infinite extension and infinite regress’ and in doing so, seeks

⁶ Dimock, p. 87.

to counter approaches which would aggregate, average out and smooth over complexities – which, borrowing another Mandelbrotian metaphor, ‘wrap a tinfoil around [the] sponge’.⁷

Ralph Schnell comments on this sponge-like tendency in Grünbein’s work:

Geschichte [stellt sich] für Grünbein insgesamt als ein Reservoir von Materialien und Potentialitäten dar, aus dem sich Lyrik nach Maßgabe ihres Bedarfs an poetischen Bildern bedienen kann. Zitate, intertextuelle Verweise, Fortschreibungen, Überschreibungen und Palimpseste bilden Verfahrensweisen einer Dichtung, die ihren Welterfahrungsraum so desillusioniert wie aufmerksam, so bildungsgesättigt wie formbewusst durchmisst.⁸

References to distant history and ancient civilisations, for example, are common in Grünbein’s poetry and exemplify his interest in non-linear time, creating precisely the sorts of irregularities, ‘loops and coils’ to which Dimock refers. *Grauzone Morgens* incorporates, among others, references to and comparisons with the Roman empire (‘Pompeii’), ancient Greece (‘Sappho’, the Pleiades), ancient China, and Baroque Europe.⁹ The sense of an asynchronous or complex temporality is evident, for example, when the speaker of the first cycle of poems, ‘Grauzone Morgens I’, declares that ‘An diesem Morgen gingen die 80er Jahren/zuende mit diesen Resten der/ 70er, die wie die/60er schienen’.¹⁰ In ‘Perpetuum Mobile’, Grünbein imagines the ancient Chinese philosopher Zuangzi encountering Ezra Pound in Hades at the end of the Ice Age.¹¹ Elsewhere, someone is described as chewing

⁷ Dimock, ‘Genre As World System: Epic, Novel, Henry James’, p. 77.

⁸ ‘History exists for Grünbein in its totality as a reservoir of materials and potentialities, from which poetry can draw its imagery at will. Quotations, intertextual references, updates, overwritings and palimpsests shape a poetic method which intermingles the various spheres of worldly experience to create a voice at once disillusioned and observant, replete with learning and formally self-conscious.’ [trans: NT]. Ralf Schnell, quoted in Bremer et al., *Schreiben am Schnittpunkt*, p. 22.

⁹ ‘On this morning, the 80s came/ to an end with the rest of the//70s, which seemed like/the 60s’ (trans: NT) Durs Grünbein, ‘Grauzone Morgens I’, in *Grauzone morgens : Gedichte*, 1. Aufl. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 1–25 (pp. 11, 24, 25). A distinction is made between the collection *Grauzone Morgens* and its untitled opening cycle, referred to here as ‘Grauzone Morgens I’.

¹⁰ Grünbein, ‘Grauzone Morgens I’, p. 16.

¹¹ Durs Grünbein, ‘Perpetuum Mobile’, *Grauzone morgens*, p. 93.

gum, 'weil es die beste/Arznei ist gegen/Barockphobie'.¹² This sarcastic tone which casually threatens to allow the present and past to encroach on one another is also present in 'An Der Elbe', where the ancient, folkish resonance of the river, with its 'Flußgötter' is juxtaposed against the present 'vorüber-/treibenden Unrat' and 'alter Männer/beim Jogging'.¹³

Ashbery's *Self Portrait* also investigates 'deep time' through references to history and antiquity. The opening poem, 'As One Put Drunk Into the Packet Boat'¹⁴ declares its intertextual affiliation to the distant (literary) past in its title, a citation from Marvell's *Tom May's Death* ('As one put drunk into the Packet boat/Tom May was hurry'd hence and did not know't').¹⁵ Intertextuality is one of Ashbery's characteristic strategies for 'folding' temporal frames of reference together, so that description of the minutiae of everyday life which are typical of his poetic style are frequently in dialogue – if not tension – with allusions to the history of music, literature and the visual arts, giving the sense that his poetic voice speaks in the context of the *long durée* of cultural history. Intertextuality pervades the collection, from references to the poetry of Wyatt and Surrey in 'Grand Galop'¹⁶ to the Arabian Nights ('Scheherzade')¹⁷ and Germanic myths and fairy tales ('Oleum Misericordiae')¹⁸ and, most obviously, to Parmigiano's painting in the long poem which gives the collection its name.¹⁹ There are many more examples, too numerous to catalogue here, each of which has its own particular resonance. Intertextuality also plays an important

¹² 'because it's the best/ medicine for/ baroquephobia' (trans: NT) Grünbein, 'Grauzone Morgens I', p. 16.

¹³ 'river gods' 'pastover-/flowing junk' 'old men/out jogging' (trans: NT) Durs Grünbein, 'An der Elbe', *Grauzone morgens*, pp. 35–36.

¹⁴ John Ashbery, 'The One Thing That Can Save America', in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1977), pp. 44–45.

¹⁵ Andrew Marvell and Henry Rogers, "'Tom May's Death'", in *The poetical works of Andrew Marvell: with memoir of the author* (A. Murray, 1870), p. 125.

¹⁶ John Ashbery, 'Grand Galop', in *Self-Portrait*, pp. 14–21 (p. 19).

¹⁷ John Ashbery, 'Scheherazade', in *Self-Portrait*, pp. 9–11.

¹⁸ John Ashbery, 'Oleum Misericordiae', in *Self-Portrait*, pp. 66–67.

¹⁹ John Ashbery, 'Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror', in *Self-Portrait*, pp. 68–83.

role in Grünbein's poetry, and it is telling that Grünbein's reputation in Germany revolves around the fact that he is an autodidact, widely read in fields as diverse as classical mythology and neuropsychology, all of which feature in his work. *Grauzone Morgens* references, among others, Dante, Horace, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, the Catalan poet César Vallejo and the Edo-era Japanese Haiku poet Matsuo Bashô.

Ashbery's 'As One Put Drunk' also thematises the non-linearity of historical experience more explicitly, particularly, as John Shoptaw has pointed out, through its constant sense that events are postponed or deferred, leading to the suggestion that 'you have slept in the sun/Longer than the sphinx'.²⁰ In another poem, 'As You Came from the Holy Land', the limitations of our linear perspective on time is specifically highlighted:

not here not yesterday in the past
only in the gap of today filling itself
as emptiness is distributed
in the idea of what time is
when that time is already past²¹

'The idea of what time is', it is implied, is all the situated individual consciousness can have access to: there is no enduring 'truth' to our perception of history, which is little more than an formal structure populated by 'emptiness'.

Through eclectic intertextual and direct references to the past, Ashbery and Grünbein's work demonstrates its interest in the complex structure of 'deep time'. It should be clear, too, from the nature of these references that neither is content simply to draw on the linguistic and literary heritage of their particular nation, but that their voices are 'deterritorialised' in the sense of Paul Giles' usage: 'jagged and fractious, bound up with tensions and inconsistencies that cannot be comfortably subsumed within global systems or

²⁰ Shoptaw; Ashbery, 'The One Thing That Can Save America', *Self-Portrait*, p. 1.

²¹ Ashbery, 'As You Came from the Holy Land', in *Self-Portrait*, pp. 6–7.

regimes of capital accumulation'²². As well as dynamically juxtaposing past and present, both writers also juxtapose present and absent, here and elsewhere.

In addition to these referential strategies, the poetic voice adopted by Grünbein and Ashbery itself contributes to the impression that their work is best read in the context of non-standard approaches to spatiality and temporality. Use of heteroglossia, a strategy associated with novelistic rather than lyric narrative perspective, polyphony and experimentation with scale – the juxtaposition of largeness and smallness, another quality observed by Dimock in James' writing – are all characteristics of a perspective which rejects the spatially and historically situated subjectivity traditionally associated with the lyric 'I'.²³ These qualities exemplify what Shoptaw calls, with reference to Ashbery, the sense of telling "“anybody's story” in general, [which] sounds like nobody's story in particular", a formulation which, it may be argued, could equally apply to Grünbein's work.²⁴

As well as introducing 'other voices' through intertextuality, as discussed above, Ashbery also incorporates other speakers and registers quite directly. In the third stanza of 'As One Put Drunk', for example, thoughts are ascribed to 'you': 'was I the perceived?/Did they notice me, this time, as I am/Or is it postponed again?'²⁵ In the fourth stanza, too, it is not clear whose 'voice' we hear telling us to 'Come in' – before another (female) speaker is introduced. The turn from 'I' through 'we' to 'you' is also characteristic, comparable with Grünbein's shifting use of personal pronouns in 'Grauzone Morgens I'.²⁶

Here and elsewhere, different registers are also woven together to create a subtle polyphonous effect, so that the lyric 'I', if one is identifiable at all, does not speak with a

²² Giles, p. 15.

²³ See Dimock, 'Genre As World System: Epic, Novel, Henry James'.

²⁴ Shoptaw, p. 2.

²⁵ Ashbery, 'The One Thing That Can Save America', p. 1.

single, coherent ‘voice’ but oscillates between the grandiose – ‘a moon of cistercian pallor’ – and the prosaic – ‘kept in a white cardboard box somewhere’.²⁷ In other poems in the collection, advertising slogans, references to industrial landscapes, domestic incidents, other ‘low’ cultural minutiae and trivia are juxtaposed with classical references, archaisms, and grand turns of phrase – again, enacting the global/local, self/other relationship outlined above. Indeed, this is explicitly foregrounded in ‘As One Put Drunk’: in the third stanza, the speaker speculates on the beginning of ‘a ballade/That takes in the whole world’, but eventually settles, in the final stanza, for ‘a sigh [which] heaves from all the small things on earth’.²⁸

Grünbein’s poems, too, are full of quotations from other voices and speakers and mix registers freely – indeed, even languages: *Grauzone Morgens* refers to its reader as both ‘mon frère’ and (more often) ‘Amigo’, unusual apostrophes evoking different resonances and registers.²⁹ The first few words of each poem in the first section of the collection constitute the titles of the poem according to the collection’s index, but are not visually separated. Instead, they are formatted in small-caps, as are some other intervening lines or part lines, thereby introducing ‘another voice’ even at the level of material signifier, particular in lines such as ‘(zäh://WIE DAS DEUTSCHE SAGT)’.³⁰ Grünbein’s poetic style also favours parentheses such as this one, which ‘interject’ against the flow of the main syntax and, as with Ashbery’s quotations and changes in register, frustrate attempts to read the narrative of a transparent lyric ‘I’ within or across poems.

²⁷ Ashbery, ‘The One Thing That Can Save America’, p. 2.

²⁸ Ashbery, ‘As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat’, p. 2.

²⁹ Grünbein, ‘Grauzone Morgens I’ in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 10; Durs Grünbein, ‘MonoLogisches Gedicht No. 13’, in *Grauzone morgens*, pp. 88–89.

³⁰ ‘(tough: LIKE THE GERMAN SAYS)’ (trans: NT) Grünbein, ‘Grauzone Morgens I’, p. 10.

Bathos, and its attendant humour, is characteristic of Grünbein's tone, as it is of Ashbery's: The poem 'Eine einzige silberne Büchse' reads 'was dieser Morgen am Schönheit verspricht' through the prism of a squashed tin of sardines, which – by the poem's own admission – appears 'ziemlich bedeutungsarm'.³¹ Other poems strongly recall Ashbery in their lists of domestic and urban minutiae: 'Resten Kekes und Brot/Ölschlieren, Grus und//Koffern',³² 'alten Autoreifen, Glas/Sperrmüll und der Attrappe/eines kleinen Wehrs'.³³ 'Monologisches Gedicht No. 4', like Ashbery's 'As One Put Drunk', appears to thematise the relation between particular images, individual details, and the 'universal' whole: 'du stellst//die Bilder um ordnest die/Augenblicke aber du horst//ihnen nicht zu'³⁴. Even the syntax here, little more than a list of words without grammatical 'signposts', enacts the difficulty of 'organising' the elements of experience into coherent units. Given the meta-poetic theme which runs through the 'Monologisches Gedichte' in the collection, it seems apparent that Grünbein is at least partly describing his own poetic praxis here, as an attempt to mediate between what seems to be the particular significance of individual images and the larger universal 'meaning' they might communicate.

We can conclude, then, that these strategies which mix tone and register and incorporate the voices of other speakers, both directly and indirectly, and which mix narrow perspectives on the detail of particular situations with grand notions of a universal 'whole', frustrate attempts to read the lyric subjects in Ashbery and Grünbein's poetry as particular

³¹ 'A single tin' 'whatever this morning promises/by way of beauty' 'pretty//lacking in significance' (trans: MH) Durs Grünbein, 'Eine einzige silberne Büchse', in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 27. Translated by Michael Hofmann in Durs Grünbein, *Ashes for Breakfast: Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 2005), p. 3.

³² 'Leftover biscuits and bread/oilslicks, grit and/suitcases' (trans: NT). Durs Grünbein, 'Tauben', in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 65.

³³ 'old auto tyres, broken glass/household junk and the bones/of a small fort' (trans: MH, p. 21). Durs Grünbein, 'Belebter Bach', in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 71.

³⁴ 'you re-/fine the images you order/the moments but you don't//listen to them' (trans: MH, p. 27). Durs Grünbein, 'MonoLogisches Gedicht No. 4', in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 85.

individuals, citizens of a particular nation in a particular historical period. Instead, the fragmentation of narrative constructs, in the work of both writers, a poetic voice which is both general and specific, mixing local and universal perspectives – or, to return to Shoptaw’s phrasing, everybody’s story and nobody’s. Once again, we are returned to the notion that a critical approach which seeks to smooth over these irregularities and read Ashbery or Grünbein’s work as straightforwardly ‘representative’ of a situated temporal and spatial perspective according to a category as arbitrary as national identity would be extremely limiting.

In addition to references, direct and intertextual, to other spatial and geographical frames of reference and the polyphony, polysemy and heteroglossia which characterise their poetic styles, another complex ‘layered’ dimension in the work of both writers which mediates issues of ‘deterritorialisation’ is the idea of the network. Giles writes about the significance of electronic, broadcast and digital networks for modern American novelists.³⁵ In relation to Ashbery and Grünbein, I would like to consider the more ‘traditional’ networks of personal and industrial transportation – trains, cars, ships, trams and planes – with the intention of demonstrating how these networks enact, using a spatial metaphor, the construction of affiliations and relations which mirror the complexities of Dimock’s fractal geometry.

Transport networks have a particular political resonance Grünbein, a poet whose youth and early adulthood in Dresden, then part of the GDR, are almost invariably mentioned in critical essays on his work, as are his early experiences of crossing the border between East and West Germany in order to give readings. ‘Grauzone Morgens I’ is, in part, a narrative about a character ‘auf dem/Weg durch die Stadt/heimwärts/oder zur Arbeit’ – the directional

³⁵ See Giles, “‘Suburb, Network, Homeland: National Space and the Rhetoric of Broadcasting’”, in *The global remapping of American literature*, pp. 141–180.

ambiguity testifies to the importance of ‘network’ rather than ‘journeys’ from A to B.³⁶ Indeed, the transportation networks which feature in almost every poem in *Grauzone Morgens* are manifold and chaotic, and seldom is a ‘journey’ made which has a particular purpose. Instead, transport modes – trams, trains, motorbikes, cars, ships, aeroplanes – and subjects – goods, livestock, humans – are scrambled and confused. The sense of ‘perpetual motion’ (the title of the collection’s final poem) through the ‘dröhende Labyrinth der Industrie’ is clearly felt to be part of modern ‘nomadic’ existence: ‘Schiefer Nomade, wach endlich auf!’, we are exhorted in ‘Amabo, Amabis... Amabunt’.³⁷

Similarly, Ashbery’s poetic is characterised by industrial and personal transport networks linking cities, suburbs and landscapes. In particular, the suburb, which plays a particular role in American discourse, as Giles points out, constitutes the ‘local’ environment whose relationship to the wider network is placed under scrutiny, in poems such as ‘As You Came from the Holy Land’, where the suburbs, with ‘crossroads’ and ‘avenues’, forms part of a wider landscape ‘stretch[ing] away’³⁸; or ‘Grand Galop’, which describes the movement of a ‘caravan’ (recalling Grünbein’s ‘schiefe Nomade’) passing through a suburban landscape. Again, the direction and ‘purpose’ of the journey matters little – indeed, the poem highlights the ‘flatness’ of the landscape: ‘I might as well/Decide to climb a mountain (it looks almost flat)/As decide to go home... There is no use trying to escape’.³⁹ Similarly, in the final lines of the poem, we learn that ‘the overland trail/Is impassable’.⁴⁰ Ashbery’s roads do not lead ‘out’ of one place and into another, but rather link the various ‘local’ experiences in such a way as to suggest the emergence of a larger picture: the universal ‘network’.

³⁶ ‘on the way through town/homewards/or to work’ (trans: NT) Grünbein, “‘Grauzone Morgens I’”.

³⁷ ‘droning labyrinths of industry’ ‘Nomads astray, wake up!’ (trans: NT). Durs Grünbein, ‘Amabo, Amabis...Amabunt’, in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 26.

³⁸ Ashbery, ‘As You Came from the Holy Land’.

³⁹ Ashbery, ‘Grand Galop’.

⁴⁰ Ashbery, ‘Grand Galop’.

Both Ashbery and Grünbein, through their representation of spatial networks, undertake precisely the project which Giles describes - of 'restoring the spatial dynamics inherent within ... culture, understanding such dynamics to be a conceptual correlative to the more general transition from a modern to a post-modern state'.⁴¹ This sensitivity to the deterritorialised 'postmodern' network – in contrast to the metropolitan urgency of modernist cartographies – is evident in the way both writers focus on the suburban, marginal, marginalised and chaotic, rather than on the purposeful, subject-centred 'journey'.

Having established the significance of the spatial network, I would now like to examine a further network of affiliations which is explored by Ashbery and Grünbein, and which provides a further link with the critical methodology of Dimock's *Through Other Continents*: the 'linguistic' network. Reference has already been made to the proliferation of intertextual references in both Ashbery and Grünbein's work as a means of incorporating 'folds' in the texture of temporality which resemble those Dimock identifies in the work of Henry James. At the level of word and phrase, Ashbery also frequently employs what John Shoptaw has called 'cryptography': the inclusion of 'marginal words' by means of homophonic adaptation, omission or linguistic displacement. Shoptaw gives the example, from 'A Boy', of 'mincing flag', concealing the phrase 'mincing fag'.⁴² There are many examples in 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror': 'equalizing' for 'evening' in 'As One Put Drunk'; the 'open and shut' case in 'A Man of Words'; or 'writing' and 'writhing' in 'No Way of Knowing', to cite more of Shoptaw's examples. With the Derridean notions of 'trace' and *différance* in mind, one might argue that this strategy draws attention to the 'present

⁴¹ Giles, p. 141. The ellipsis indicates the omission of the word 'American', since the point has a general relevance.

⁴² See Shoptaw, p. 6; and John Ashbery, "A Boy", in *Some trees* (Corinth Books, 1970), p. 21.

absence', deferred multi-dimensionality of linguistic networks, thereby enacting the radical perspective on temporality which is a key feature of Ashbery and Grünbein's work.

Grünbein's means of evoking linguistic 'networks' in *Grauzone Morgens* is somewhat different from Ashbery's, and depends on some of the poetic techniques mentioned above: parenthesis, ellipsis and citation. Each of these strategies introduces, by implication, language which has been 'left out' of the poem, recalling Guillén's equation of the local/universal relationship to presence/absence. Parenthetical insertions frequently cause us to question word choices or inferences in the rest of the poem, for example: 'Zähigkeit (zäh, WIE DAS DEUTSCHE SAGT)' or 'Heiß das nicht . . . Entropie?' 'TRAUM oder TRAUMA'.⁴³ Ellipsis quite explicitly suggests the failure or absence of particular words: in 'Lokpumpe', for instance, 'als wäre da/irgendein Regen . . . irgendein Todes . . ./Geheimnis in ihr' seems to enact a failure of specific language, gesturing instead to the words which *could* have been used, but which remain absent from the text.⁴⁴ Similarly, citation – particularly of clichéd and well-worn phrases, another technique used by both Ashbery and Grünbein, represents a kind of deliberate failure which draws our attention to the 'limits' of poetic language. In 'Notizblatt', for instance, the speaker's description of his head as a 'Schwarzes Loch' both describes and demonstrates, though the use of a self-consciously clichéd expression, the absence of what one might expect from vibrant poetic language.⁴⁵ Leaving 'gaps' such as these hints at unexamined possibilities: in other words, at the 'network' which underpins language.

⁴³ 'tough: LIKE THE GERMAN SAYS' 'Isn't that called... entropy?' 'DREAM or TRAUMA' (trans: NT) Grünbein, "'Grauzone Morgens I'", p. 10; 15; 22.

⁴⁴ 'As though there were/some kind of rain .../ some kind of death/secreted within it' (trans: NT). Durs Grünbein, 'Lokpumpe', in *Grauzone morgens : Gedichte*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ 'black hole' (trans: NT). Durs Grünbein, 'Notizblatt', in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 57.

This radical linguistic indeterminacy shows parallels with the ‘network’ of intertextual references which Dimock examines in relation to Henry James: that is to say, like James, Ashbery and Grünbein ‘fold’ other dimensions, words, places and times into the texture of their work, not only by means of direct references to other texts, but also through subtle evocations of a language which is absent. Like their ‘postmodern’ transport networks, which reflect an interest in the relationship between the local and the universal or general space, these indeterminate linguistic networks reflect an interest in the relationship between the *particular* word (i.e. the one the poet chooses and inserts into his poem) and the vast capacity of absent ‘other’ words which underwrite it. Dimock’s metaphor of fractal geometry and vocabulary of knots, wrinkles, loops and bumps – continues to have resonance with Ashbery and Grünbein’s work.

A final common feature of both writers’ work which reflects their interest in subverting established notions of the linearity of space and time is an interest in liminality, temporal and spatial. For both, more interesting than the progression from one space, or time, to another is the suspension of progression, the idea of being trapped ‘in between’ two conditions or states of being. This is reflected most clearly in the images of waiting and *bordeom* which feature in both writers’ work as a means of exploring suspended temporality; and images of borders and border-crossing, a subject touched on briefly above, which demonstrates their interest in spatial liminality.

Turning first to the idea of the border, as the most obvious example of their exploration of the permeability of territorial categorisation, we may note that both Grünbein and Ashbery include images of international travel and border crossing in their work. As mentioned above, the significance of the ‘zone’ in Grünbein’s text relies specifically on its indeterminate status – as a transitional, temporary ‘border’ space between legitimate states –

and the imagine journey through this space which the text describes reflects his interest in this liminal state. That the journey is undertaken in the morning is doubly significant: the ‘grey’ of the title suggesting dawn and attendant notions of transitional temporality.

Another poem, ‘Grund, vorübergehend in New York zu sein’, performs a different (metaphorical) border-crossing as it imagines its insomniac subject temporarily ‘elsewhere’. The empirical certainty with which the text describes the action of turning on the television lends this imagined journey the weight of a real one – particularly in light of the title, which seems to suggest the subject really *is* in New York.⁴⁶ In fact, it is clear from the subjunctive mood of the final sentence that this is not the case. Here, again, the action takes place in the ‘in between’ space and time of a sleepless night, exemplifying the suspension of temporality which is a characteristic mood in ‘Grauzone Morgens’. In ‘Tauben’, for example, passengers are described waiting outside a railway station, ‘errstarrt vor Ankunftssehnsucht’.⁴⁷

Waiting is also a theme in *Self Portrait* – beginning, as has already been suggested, with the first poem in the collection, which describes the build-up to some anticipated ‘great, formal affair’. ‘Grand Galop’ also draws our attention to this theme: ‘Only waiting, the waiting: what fills up the time between?/It is another kind of wait, waiting for the wait to be ended/.../The wait is built into the things just coming into their own.’⁴⁸ Ashbery seems to share Heidegger’s interest in the ‘boredom’ which ‘reveals being as a whole’ – only in this liminal state, free from other limiting categorisations, can the true nature of experience be scrutinised.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ ‘Reason to be temporarily in New York’ (trans: MH, p. 14). Durs Grünbein, ‘Grund, Vorübergehend in New York zu sein’, in *Grauzone morgens*, p. 49.

⁴⁷ ‘numb with yearning for arrival’ (trans: NT). Grünbein, ‘Tauben’.

⁴⁸ Ashbery, ‘Grand Galop’, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)* (Taylor & Francis, 1977), p. 101.

Certain poems in *Self Portrait* describe international journeys. ‘On Autumn Lake’, for example, refers to a trip to Quebec with friends (48);⁵⁰ and ‘Worsening Situation’ contains a strange, disorientating reference to ‘Olso-Oslo, France, that is’⁵¹ (4), which can be read as a satire on the stereotype of American insularity and ignorance of world geography. More interesting, though, is Ashbery’s conception that all space is liminal, peripheral and ‘border-like’, much like Grünbein’s ‘Grauzone’. In ‘The One Thing That Can Save America’, a heavily ironic title which already implies the subtext of the dissolution of America, we are asked ‘Is anything central?’⁵² The poem goes on to explore fragmented space – partitioned into public and private, ‘in fenced areas’ and suspended time – ‘waiting/For a letter that never arrives’.⁵³ Again, these representations of liminality undercut traditional narratives of rigid temporal and spatial categorisation, and particularly narratives of ‘nation’, the unifying force of ‘national heroes’ and the redemptive power of national unity.

This essay has explored several ways of reading the work of John Ashbery and Durs Grünbein ‘against’ received wisdom which perceives them primarily as poets of nation. It has argued instead that their interest in radical temporality (juxtaposing past and present, incorporating a broad range of intertextual references and employing an expanded, ‘impersonal personal’ narrative style) and spatiality (exploring ‘postmodern’ networks and liminal states) renders a reading which relies on the geographical construct of the national state at best incomplete and at worst, deeply limiting. Rather, in the texture of references to space, place time and nation, these works seem share Wai Chee Dimock’s interest in ‘deep time’ and Paul Giles’ desire to ‘deterritorialise’ the object of their representations.

⁵⁰ John Ashbery, ‘On Autumn Lake’, in *Self-portrait*, p. 48.

⁵¹ John Ashbery, ‘Worsening Situation’, in *Self-portrait*, pp. 3–4 (p. 4).

⁵² Ashbery, ‘The One Thing That Can Save America’, p. 45

⁵³ Ashbery, ‘The One Thing That Can Save America’, p. 45.

Rather than merely expressing the national identity of their local circumstances, historically or geographically speaking, both Ashbery and Grünbein demonstrate an interest in exploring the relationship between the nation and its broader spatial and historical context. This can be seen quite clearly in the radical comparisons they employ, with classical civilisations and antiquity, Baroque and Renaissance art and architecture, as well as their representations of spatial and linguistic networks, cross-border negotiations and suspended temporality. It is this same impulse which motivates Dimock and Giles in their critical work, which seeks to exceed the paradigm of American studies by instigating innovative comparisons to the literatures of other spaces and times. Indeed, it can be argued that this impulse to explore the relation between the ‘local’ and the ‘universal’ characterises comparative study more general, as Claudio Guillén argued in his 1978 work *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, when he set out the task of the comparatist to investigate

the ... tensions existing between the local and the universal, or if you prefer, between the particular and the general. between the specific circumstance and the world (the worlds), between the present and the absent, the experience and its sense, the I and whatever is alien to it, the perceived and the longed for, what is and what should be, what exists today and what is eternal.⁵⁴

This formulation expresses very clearly the shared ambition of Ashbery and Grünbein’s poetry and Dimock and Giles’ criticism, all of which constitute, in a sense, ‘comparative’ literature: that is to say, literature or literary criticism which is interested in exploring the interrelation of systems of thought and experience at a supranational level; and which, though it recognises the validity and usefulness of ‘local’ categories of organisation, also seeks to go beyond them into the ‘universal’ – and returns to find them changed.

⁵⁴ Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 42 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 5.

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