

**FULL COLOUR**  
**&**  
**SPLENDOUR AND FATIGUE**

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A Doctoral Thesis in Creative Writing  
Presented to Goldsmiths, University of London

## **DECLARATION**

This is to certify that the work presented in this thesis is my own:

.....

Matthew Gregory

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# *Full Colour*

Matthew Gregory



# Part One

## A Portrait of Matteo Lonardi

I'm with Matteo at café Gambrinus,  
in Piazza Plebescito, Napoli.  
He is in love with Palma Bucarelli,  
the granddaughter of the critic, Palma Bucarelli.

It might be my favourite place in the whole of Italy.  
The rooms are a curtained opal green  
with swannecked interiors multiplying  
in enormous mirrors to infinity.

It is a little too much, though, for Matteo.  
It is better to not overstate.  
It is better to wear your cashmere  
as if a horse had rolled on it.

*Divino*, was what his uncle, the Visconte  
would say to literally anything.  
Matteo had seen a unicorn.  
*O divino*.

His lineage ran through  
the bloodblack drawing-rooms  
of the Italian alps, France and Germany.  
It went innocently.

It ran with the Piedmontese  
in bayonet charges that flowed  
over foothills in the two horns  
of the mountain chamois.

It commanded the first musket shot that went screaming  
through the air  
like the deathscared bleat  
of the mountain chamois, skittering across the parquet  
in the Visconte's lodge.

It went innocently.  
Sometimes it became tan and conversational  
and grew into a boy  
like Matteo Lonardi.

Two cream-filled cornettos arrive on a napkin.  
It is as if someone has lopped the horns  
from a mountain chamois.  
We eat messily.

Palma has not responded to any of his messages.  
She snows blondly across his phone  
in a white cornfield, in the photo  
he took in Tuscany, at the Casa Bucarelli.

Matteo is reading *The Great Gatsby*.  
It is so-so, he tells me.  
Of course Gatsby wasn't quite the real thing,  
he was only an American.

He knocks on the spiral darkling veneer  
of our corner table at Gambrinus.  
A truly rich and beautiful country.  
You should see that place.



## Oranges

- i.           On the Cape Verde island of Sal  
the airline crews refresh  
before they make a turnaround.  
This is the only commerce  
they have with the island.  
The sand dunes draft and redraft  
their long lines.  
The Atlantic ocean rolls  
just over there, that international power.  
Air hostesses done up in the blue and white  
confectionary of the companies  
smoke coldly from the runway,  
and running along the beach  
in each phase of day and night  
there are dogs.  
Generations of surf dogs  
who forgot everything of their ancients,  
piebald, black or white mongrels,  
they know every sawgrass wedge and gulley,  
the boobys' nests and leatherback eggs.  
And then the men  
will stand on the airstairs and throw them  
something so unusual as a ball,  
a new scent codex  
the dogs will follow with their noses  
but lose somewhere at the shivering edge  
of the foam,  
howling and whimpering  
for the plastics of Holland.

ii.           The Sal island surf dogs  
wolves many times removed  
chasing down what exactly,  
compelled by orbits and cycles  
and spaceborn debris  
to yip and break into song,  
who was it who thought of them  
and left them there.

## Circumvesuviana

In the old paintings, the volcano  
sits for its portrait heavy-browed  
and insists it will smoke  
a thin, white cigarillo.

I'm watching little pink and white clouds  
campaign across Vesuvio,  
paused meaningfully for now—  
the flanks a vitriolic green.

In the back of this pasticceria  
a boy is offering his arms  
in desperate figures to explain  
his whereabouts last night.

His girlfriend is silent.  
The gelato counter hums in the heat.  
The little percolator  
reaches its crisis point.

In the cramped ancient quarters  
this scene a hundred times,  
a thousand times.  
Vesuvio has seen Roman, late-Roman

and neo-Roman and heard  
a girl quietly crying in a courtyard  
deranged with statuary  
and nightflowering orange.

Vesuvio erupts in a cyclical way.  
A herd of scooters.  
The prefect and his papyrus.  
Girl capturing a tear.

Each one standing as they were touched  
lightly across the face  
by the anointing hand.  
Each one to carbon.

*C'è un detto.*  
There is a saying.  
*Che abbiamo a Napoli.*  
That we have in Naples.

Anyone who has stood a while  
under its shadow  
has felt themselves very far  
from where they are.

In this courtyard, with clementines—  
Girl capturing a tear, and another  
and another.  
But this particular one.

## A Room in Paris, 1855

An alchemist's gas lamp  
reaches shakily into one corner,  
some paintings nobody  
has a particular opinion on  
are nailed over  
rose ballroom wallpaper.

And on the long bed  
the middle-aged poet,  
Gérard de Nerval.

He would appear restful  
if it wasn't for his eyebrows meeting  
like two dark horses  
in the middle of his forehead.  
He is dreaming of the beautiful apple  
he palmed only a few days before  
on Ile Saint Louis  
and the grief of a wormhole  
in the thing perfected.

He wakes all of a sudden.  
He takes his collection  
*Les Chimères*  
down from its cramped shelf  
and cuts it in half at the spine  
with a knife.  
He will clean  
every sentence.

## A Room at the Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, 1971

Madame likes to air the double she takes for eight weeks  
on the sea-facing east wing.

She has written twelve postcards to Brussels in a month.

Her tone - *La mer est jolie* - is light and blasé though  
she counts six instances of the word

*ténèbres.*

Arthritis has touched her best hand. Outside the sea  
glances her way with distance

where once everything in the world was a man  
asking her to dance.

On one shelf in ribbons, her empty hatbox deepens

into deeper hatboxes that collapse slowly

into the green pinochle halls  
of the pinochle men she knew.

Madame dreams in the window chair

and sees her postcards  
from the Roches Noires  
fly lightly down

over the swathe of sea  
from the undercarriage  
of an albatross.

The ocean bird migrating      but so everything seems  
at this point

*the cad with a tall white grin  
throwing double sixes at midnight  
fresh oysters with their slight cologne  
in the backseats of young France*

The concierge is calling her  
—*Madame. Madame?*

An old albatross the scuffed white of lobby magazines.

An old albatross, but content as she wanders off the edge  
of the continent.

## A Room on the Capitaine Paul-Lemerle, 1941

Yesterday a deckhand confused the new land  
with a cloudbank and its own flocks and Sheppards  
and white houses in the cloud's country.

The sea is green at night  
a violent blue by day  
and wider and deeper than the dreams of André Breton.  
André Breton is aboard the *Capitaine*.

He is writing to someone, one a.m. His bunk wobbles  
in the rough passage and his gaslamp swings.  
On his wrists the eczema has come up again.

His yellow sleeve is spotted with ink as he spills  
his hand across the page. He is writing to his wife  
or to Nadja but won't decide who until he signs off.

He is describing the luminescence that rises  
through the ocean at night and follows the *Capitaine*.

*First there is only a pulse, the propeller turning  
up green sparks, stirring them with its long ladles  
before the lighted halls of plankton appear.*

*It follows us, Dearest, disappearing for days  
then returning in waves like the mind to a place.*



In every light shoal he sees something he remembers.

In every hall an empty lectern and shipment papers.

André Breton walks a Sorbonne in his head  
and goes from room to room, to look for the lights  
left flickering.

He writes how the crew saw

*a manta rise in the glow  
with its dark studies under one arm of its cloak,  
circle once then wing slowly out of their surveillance.*

## A Room in the Pacific Palisades, 1979

*well here's something I never did like Tolstoy awful much  
dontcha know Betty Beverly hell I mean Brenda*  
the old novelist was saying as he thumped the tablecloth  
just missing the silver goblets and service plates  
steaming in drifts before him.

Bald and small he sat  
across from the young actress he wrote to habitually  
praising in his endless beautiful trains  
and clauses that led often now

to great tiredness.

Against the one amber lampshade they were profiled  
a grey king and confidante. Where the sitting room dimmed  
at the periphery, characters from his years abroad stepped  
out of dark friezes and spoke—

a lush with remarkable tattoos  
needled like varicose, an ancient 'legionnaire', the beautiful boy  
leading a wolfhound by the reins, and young Jean Genet who  
*no*, no, he'd not met Jean Genet.

On Montmartre he'd loved  
so many whores. In the young actress opposite  
he sometimes saw them play across her features:  
an eyebrow arched back fifty years, the nose upturned  
or lengthened in the dark, a mole drew itself on her cheek.

Thérèse, Sylvie, or Margot, was it, who sat with him now  
with the fifty, one hundred, one thousand  
who seemed to be there, leaning on an elbow, listening  
brightly, always just across from him, in the other chair.

## A Room in Taiwan, 2010

And how many desert miles of the web  
has she crossed tonight searching  
for the home address of Mastroianni.

Mastroianni is no longer among us.  
She doesn't know this so continues  
her drift from one ruined domain

to the next one, signing herself in  
to empty guestbooks as she goes.

*I would like to write to Mr Marcello Mastroianni*

*please if anyone know where he is.*

*I dream us in light of stars and great city Rome.*

*I want to be like kiss of Anita Ekberg.*

Mastroianni whose thousand pictures  
in these forums lose him on pages  
like palimpsests of man on top of man

where this girl, at her tropical desk,  
who lists for his deep, romantic heart  
touches a hit-counter, once, in the dark.

## A Room in Naples, 2005

*Lo Spagnolo*, unshaven, up in bed  
on his last morning as a free man.

Sunlight grids his face on one side  
as it enters through the shutters.

An early sea-mist lifts from the hits  
his boys left at angles in an alley.

Heavy now, at forty, the bite gone  
somewhat from his muscles,

all of his superstitious tattoos unravel  
to a quiet place in the country.

At this age he's just started reading -  
there's the unlikely Leopardi

some Monica or Mona gave him  
for St Valentines. He tries '*Silvia*'

though puts it aside when he reaches  
'...*where my life was burning out*'.

Isabella, beside him, puts out a thigh  
with its unfinishable sentence.

He swallows his salve from the poet.  
Son of a bitch. Why do they do that.

A Room at the *Sasquatch Symposium*, Montana, 1993

Raymond L. Wallace keeps his schtum.

Feels sadder than he has for ages.

1967 and his monkey suit shambling  
out of focus and into the hungry tract  
of the American imagination.

## A Room in Platinum, 1994

thinking how simian he was  
the singer  
ate waffles and sat  
in his observatory at dawn

watching the willows  
come round like longhairs  
in the mist

but he felt cold among them  
and fudged the television on  
to himself sleepwalking  
part of the tour  
inchoate somehow but there  
how various to see himself

nobody would enter the house  
he might not leave his couch again  
the singer using  
one room out of fifteen

sat on the floor of the whale  
like Jonah and stirred  
his pot of beans

## A Room at the Oregon Coast Aquarium, 1992

the young keepers come with their steadies to smoke  
in the white recesses of the observation bay  
for a long moment nothing then the tiniest fraction  
of him slivers the surface his dorsal melted over  
those beautiful clouds patched around his eyes  
*woah* the girls are lost in him the first time  
he breaches out turns whiteside then spews  
a beachball some metres above the tank  
they'll watch a while longer then he's alone  
until morning a teenage whale listening to the deep  
convolutions sounding inside his head  
the intimate sea mixed up with human ordinance  
Keiko at the glass his dark eye on the dome complex  
in the starlight empty except many strange forms  
of life the whale on his back gazing up  
at the horse the scorpion the implements  
certain other mythic shapes more his size  
he relaxes his flippers he will fall backwards  
into the sky

## A Room in Pëtkwo

An observatory for the antics of remote weather.  
Waterspouts and cyclones spinning up  
on the furthest oceans. And an eye  
watching over it all. The blurring vanes  
of the anemometers high on the dome,  
the dome, its curvilinear sides and funnels,  
the fins and aerials, of an inoperative flying machine.  
The century, here, an inoperative machine.  
And the man who is charged with all this  
watches dials and oscillating nibs  
tighten their circles to the mad dense scream  
of something enormous coming  
into consciousness and moving on the sea.  
It is impressive. You can impress someone  
telling them you're guardian of the weather –  
like the only personable woman in this town.  
Often on the flimsy pier, pale Miss Zwida  
in her straw hat, drawing beautifully  
the faint taxonomies of seashells.  
Shells in their complicated frequencies.  
Or one time – a long line of hotel palms  
leaning into wind like a stranded company  
of islanders, ready to leave Pëtkwo  
for time far away. But this was rare.  
The day before, he surprised Miss Zwida  
on her wicker chair, as a new front  
darkened its interest a few leagues out.  
Pointing to where the registers scribbled  
continuously under the observatory dome  
he said *it's like receiving a secret letter  
from one of the world's great authors  
but late, into the night, you realize how  
cold and far from us his brilliance has come.*



## A Room in Florence, 1266

More of a dog extended in all directions  
over the thin rug, in the stone-wall cloister  
the man begins to kick and whimper  
while his gut, in good voice, escapes his belt.

The sleeping face is moist and flavourful  
intensified by the little bursts of lightning  
in purples across his cheeks and nose.  
Mist. Then a kind of softish light. Certain tropes

of lyric poems pass into the scene where  
the friar, this Loderingo, snores in deep chords  
triumphantly out for all his sermons  
and petitions. Marshes beyond the city walls

thicken with lowlife and schismatic  
but the friar is dreaming, vague transactions  
and soft flatteries, on an ideal balcony.  
He has toothache in one molar but his dream

fills the space where the throb should be  
with a pale horse, clip-clopping on cobbles.  
His head is full of hoofbeats as the horse trots  
through Florence without a rider or cause.

A Room in the Crystal Palace, New Year's Eve, 1853

*..inside Iguanodon a select party  
dine on turbot and mock turtle  
till cognac and the humours  
send them, hats in hand, to bed  
tiny formal spectres of men  
moving across the crescent lawns  
of the starlit palace grounds  
the sculptor, a Mr Benjamin Watkins  
alone at last, nurses his head  
in his hands before it can fall  
forwards like a glass of water  
into wild surmises of the hour  
then steps from the hollow cast  
scene of 'a most unmatched dinner'  
down from the rutted girth  
to look his model in the eye  
the eye chipped into the skull  
the same whorl he'd grafted onto  
Ichthyosaurus and Megalosaurus  
but dull recognition then  
the gaze less a giant reptile's  
gaze than the bulbous fixé  
one of his creationist friend  
the venerable Sir Richard Owen..."*

## A Room in the West Weald –

In the weald the sound of cattle lowing  
over the little stream gently  
downloading back to its source.

Dusk silhouettes the snowcapped pass  
in violet and within a minute or two  
the distance a lone traveller

needs to complete his drama recedes  
to this raftered room, a woodfire  
and a figure on a three-legged stool–

Joric the Younger, in his supply store  
of mead, stonebread and pheasant,  
his dun cloak and snowboots.

He is sitting with his lottery of phrases,  
the episodic life that decides  
between five possible actions.

And time here is divided into bands  
of light that crosshatch the eye  
with the same designs each day.

Neighbours met pulleying water  
from the well are immediately forgotten  
on silvery, mellifluous evenings

and in a late stage Joric may fall somewhere  
in the weald at the hands of malevolents  
but tonight in a dream he asks who

were those faces I knew back there

A Room in the Republic, (Capua), 73BC

[FRAGMENT]

it's forty degrees when the sun really means it  
moving light columns  
through the dark ludus

overhead the white villa is empty

the menials, culinarians, gone  
leaving

walls glancing with lizards  
a few mountain acanthus  
petrified in their pots

the house treasures  
looted or shattered through the corridors

morning after morning from the low foothills  
daylight

a madness returning to a mind  
barely restored

*nihil semper restituit*

nothing will ever be restored

inside the complex barefoot, living on

last pomegranates and dust

domina watches petals blow through the baths

## Part Two

## The Ambassadors

Halfway up the mountain there is a window  
barely noticeable if it wasn't the only window  
flaring in the late sun. The house is white,  
preternaturally white, and the air around it also white.  
I'm working in my room far below  
the mountain in question. What I'm working on  
might be better accomplished if I just walked  
the spiral road up the mountain  
through its atmosphere of fern, alpine crocus, moss  
and knocked at the white door, to be invited in  
by the mysterious embassy there —  
who will appear first as a pale hand opening  
the latch onto a corridor and more  
of their company. My work would be finished.  
No more of the headaches and tense missives  
in my room under the mountain.  
My hosts would lead me down a gentle flight  
to the garden and my place at their table,  
where I'd find myself surprisingly topical and agile  
in the conversations of several  
unknown eminences, who switch lightly between  
'past and present couriers, the character  
of bergamot oranges, the wolverine's potency  
while scenting carrion, a snowball planet'  
and somehow, one of my own recent poems.  
I'd eat golden things, that once eaten  
leave only the delicate shape of a flavour  
with infinite connotations. Then much later  
I would rest my head on the table

to listen to the densely patterned exchanges  
of my new friends, sounding something  
like many books being read by the wind  
in a high place. My head on the table,  
then my head in the lap of the benevolent sovereign  
who will stroke my hair and recount to me  
the dark passages and bright alcazars  
of our history, until I fall asleep there  
in his patter. But the hand would withdraw,  
the front door never open, the spiral road roll  
back down the mountain. So I will continue  
to write letters to these white addresses.



## Hans Castorp in the Mountains

Time stuns us with its leaps  
and reversals  
or envelops us inside  
a huge, motionless clause.  
Think of me as swimming  
in my own clouded levels,  
where the station clocks  
of the Massif confound  
the station clocks of Brussels.  
I could give so many illustrations  
of what happens to a mind  
transported in this mountain air.  
Between two blinks a dark valley  
can be a whole polity  
of sunlight, with golden steeples,  
boulevards and streams  
of folk there and then, not.  
A lammergeyer overhead  
is not ever a lammergeyer.  
A hand of cards at bridge  
can open like a blade  
onto a bitter age.  
The heartsick patients suffer  
from a type of happiness.  
From my balcony, I can see  
the old-time skier of the lodge  
pick his way up one  
of the three colossal teeth  
still blue with winter falls.  
He is this afternoon's Rousseau.

So many skiers have climbed  
for the clear white note  
of a loneliness that is perfect  
and every year  
when the sun is a wild semaphore  
a man will go up there  
to find something  
like a seam in the light  
leaving his equipment  
to the slopes, as if to say:  
*Herr Scholl or Herr Klein*  
*ascended to a certain height.*

## The Links

lead only to more broken gateways  
through which she goes like a courtier  
from one sacked keep to another

searching for one remaining member  
of her line or some other consequence  
to meet her in the darkness

## The Prospect

In Charleville the tousled boy with enormous feet  
stares hallucinated at the last line of cedars.

His puritan mother – *mouth of darkness* – needles him  
about everything, and if she could, would launder him

with her whites and neutrals. Against the trees,  
bouncing gnats, the imbeciles roughing it in the pigsty  
the boy smiles because he knows the tiny sail unfurling  
in his head is rigged to a giant of the open sea.

## Palms at Anacapri

But the year widens and arrives at that point  
when the sun makes its definitive statement,  
burning those who doze off on balconies.  
The billionaires' yachts network in the port.  
The folding chair is called into requisition,  
the boater and nylon blouse are harvested  
from their long racks. All are agreed  
that it is the time of coconut vendors  
to bend spectra from their hoses, to splash  
the Germans arriving, luminous and early, at the resort.  
It is now that the first of the Milanese girls  
roll into town in striped, billowing pants,  
abstract strokes in pristine restaurants.  
Clownfish play peekaboo in marble aquaria.  
All this happens under the watch of the three  
in the square outside Hotel Anacapri.  
Long, tall, cool migrants waded in from elsewhere,  
they stand like every tableau of ancient travellers –  
sunbeat, heads down, stooped after their voyage  
on one of the wild, historical seas.  
The saddest tree. These three had an ancestor  
somewhere in the violent Pacific  
with the grey, reticulated body of a crocodile  
gradually ending in a green spray.  
The tallest thing for miles. At the end of everything –  
this symbol of the infinite liminal  
arrived at and departed, until the symbol  
doesn't know whether it's coming or going.  
The summer races on and we see

their dark bursts against aquatint and magenta,  
the blonde American girl twirling her straw,  
taking their measure. Quite soon  
and without announcement there is a day  
when the last beach towel remains where it fell  
under a light rain. A song traces across  
the lobby tiles and hotel porphyry –  
*...when Bostonians find themselves again  
in Boston they wonder at Capri palms...*  
Then foam tufts the beach, the season closes.  
The island is the last island, day and night chase  
each other in a bewildering colour series,  
the waves exhume turtles and human plastics,  
the last things, bare and boned in this last  
utterance of a fragmentary light:  
the palm tree knows the world as tourist.

## Transmissions

### *45. Maradona in the Azteca*

A mustard-coloured car drags itself along the street  
of a neighbourhood where spaces are oblong or square  
then tails off into a blue garage where the engine  
becomes asthmatic, kicks up, then peters out abruptly

and the man on the boiling leather waits to see if  
his thoughts compose themselves after the kind of day  
where thoughts are a group of white balloons  
released loose and uncomprehending into the sky

and perhaps they do, because he steps out of the car  
carefully with his yellow salesman's suit clean-pressed  
and leaves the engine that carries him around  
to head towards the bulge of white plum and magnolia

then down the little drive, to the bay window's edge  
where inside, the television plays a slow Mexican wave  
of businessmen and contrabandists and vendors  
of Argentina who'll return later to circuits in the dust.

*90. Zidane in the Stade de France*

The young helper draws her troupe of school children  
across the Champ de Mars, one sunburn after the other,  
the trees and sky a stunning mix of crème de menthe,  
and they reach the point where the Eiffel Tower is at its best

and the kids are awed for a moment, and then, not so much  
as they return to fitful spans and fascinations,  
whether their baseball caps peak up, sideways or back to front,  
an oozing bag of eclairs, the weird bug in the grass

but one of the group, a boy in a faded t-shirt and shorts  
trails behind his friends, to gaze alone at the Eiffel Tower  
that in turn considers him, a quiet giant on long legs  
about to stride across the Seine or reach an arm into heaven.



+30. *Messi in the Camp Nou*

The guy in the greasy t-shirt and his sunk-eyed girlfriend  
sit in their little Ronda somewhere outside the city.

They've pulled up to watch storm clouds browse

the tops

of the sand-coloured apartment blocks and basilicas,  
the scrub and dust bristling with electricity in the darkness.

The couple begin to fumble. The girl deals with his belt  
with her long fingernails, and tosses it carefully

onto the backseat.

Somewhere an owl tunes into a mouse. The radio fizzes  
in the dashboard with a shaky station from the capital,

where a loco commentator trips over his tongue

and ten thousand others lose their voices in the stadium.

Only the couple are listening as the dark cloud opens

and rolls like a limousine across Barcelona.

Static and announcements. There are bewildering figures.

## Apostrophe to Disrepair

Like a city you would think of sometimes  
where everything slipped towards the equator  
in a swoon brought on by so much sun,  
where you might enjoy an afternoon drinking wine  
unlicensed by anyone,  
where a word might be spoken  
without addenda hanging from it  
like a nest of wires.

The leaning houses,  
the leaning lines of red, yellow and white houses,  
with porticoes irregular and surprising  
as drawings of porticoes by an infant master.

A city, like an overexposed and faded photograph  
but a city where anxiety  
was a funny thing nobody understood  
as they talked expansively about the way  
the mind was similar to a company of breezes  
or anchovies boiling out at sea or *tufa* warming  
the world with its emanations.

A city, broken down like a soft old horse  
knackered by ducal processions, then by revolutions,  
by men pulling her to market, the great markets,  
now giddy and silly and light  
on her legs in a simple valley.

## Excerpts from *The Scenic World*

*It seemed just as if the typhoon were a part of his programme...*

JULES VERNE, *Around the World in Eighty Days*

*World's simplest...*

NIKON

*Page: 7*

You may encounter lizards, such as this one.  
He is easing into his veins by lying very still on a rock  
in the popular town of Amalfi.

Notice the slant eyes continue even while  
the body does not.

Lizards seem to agree on something  
with the rocks,  
taking up to an hour to change their theme.

The humour of rock is perhaps subtle, and slow.

There are also people in Amalfi, as well as lizards.

Frequently the temperature  
will climb in their heads  
when the sun comes out.

They may throw bread or wine or sharp phonemes  
across tablecloths at each other.

They may move their hands much faster.

If we took the temperature of the lizards and the people  
it would be about the same.

*Page: 67*

You may encounter an older language.

The word *metafora*

is the ghost of the word *metaphor*

for example.

This girl, Annamaria, is laughing at a silly *metafora*  
a boy made up.

She is smiling quietly to herself  
with her lips the colour of an expensive book.

The wit of her country is not  
especially well received in the world today.

Though, she has the soft profile of a Roman  
Belladonna.

This look was once extremely popular.

Page: 74

You may encounter flagstones, such as these in Naples.

They have remained grey, uncomplaining flagstones  
for seven or eight centuries.

Each was chipped so that horses wouldn't forget their hooves  
on wet days

or so that when blood opted out of the busy life  
of the body

the horses could still maintain their footing.

It is difficult to comprehend the hours of blood and sun  
these faces have witnessed.

The closest link we have to either is this  
young woman dressed as a *Lindt* chocolate egg,  
an ungraceful oval

of cardboard sections and crimson tinsel  
in the month before Christmas.

Secretly her red expensive shoes are breaking  
her morale.

Her anonymity as confection has men come to prolong  
her demonstration,  
though it is hard to blame them.

It is dully raining, and her hair is cinnamon and her eyes  
rainy abstractions

surprising here and there in the wet on the flagstones.

Her eyes are green. They were green. This is worth noting.

*Page: 80*

You may encounter scenery, such as in Vietri.  
The Mediterranean is the same colour  
as this girl's iris.  
This could mean she has been gazing into the waves  
her whole life  
or for generations.

She is balancing on the volcanic *tufa* barefooted.  
Where she is standing the coast could cut  
her feet with its long jaw.  
Her name is Federica.  
She is learning English, gradually  
but with beautiful purpose.  
She is looking longingly at some backpackers looking  
at her longingly.  
The coin-op telescope and man consider each other.

*Page: 86*

You may encounter an objective standard.  
This young man, Giulio, for instance,  
has not forgotten the slow methodology  
of perfect espresso  
his mother taught him with her hands.  
He no longer has to measure or time  
this operation—  
the heat communes surely  
in his brain  
and he stirs a small, burnished spoon  
into the set of cups his family keeps  
and soon one tiny, explosive *caffè*  
waits impatiently for you to enjoy it.  
Things can really happen in this country.

*Page: 90*

You may encounter intolerance, as in this girl's of the French.  
The French are unhygienic and their language  
    a mouthful of feathers  
the girl says, pointing her finger at something vaguely  
    ahead of her.  
But this girl is extremely fond of her papa's cuisine.  
If you were to disagree with his linguine or the way  
he does steak Milanese you would soon understand something  
    of indefinite origin.

You may encounter a rainstorm outside  
while you are inside.  
Such as in this resonant baroque arcade  
of seraphim and grapes at 3.20pm.  
Nowhere else in the world  
could you achieve this perspective on rain  
as it sends white bars through  
the moving parts of the day outside.

Some of the droplets are landing  
on the soft down of dying palm trees,  
the blunted marble lions  
or a litter of kittens curled  
inside some old political headlines.  
Some of the droplets are landing  
on the haircut of a resilient midfielder  
growing on the head of a boy.

Perhaps some droplets crash softly  
onto the winged suspension  
of Monica Bellucci's eyelashes  
as she ducks into a slow cab in Milan.  
It is something to imagine this rain  
touching the follicles of famous women  
though standing in your damp soles  
rain washes each distinction  
to something less than its beginning.  
If you listen during rain you will hear  
only the hiss of universal fame.  
This sudden moustache flies past  
on a scooter shouting *figlio di putana*  
at maybe you and the yellow clouds.



*Page: 172*

You may encounter a pigment in two different sources  
such as in the eyes of this goldfish and this dalmation.

It is a wistful or cumulus colour.

The dalmation has its muzzle in the green fountain basin  
and is taking water that may send parasites kicking into  
its bowels.

The goldfish submerged here since the Bourbon princes are slowly  
disintegrating,

many of them with clotted gills and their soft flanks  
softer where time has touched them.

In many ancient beautiful parks there is a big sign that says  
*This water is not for drinking.*

This green water is what Americans would call *European*.

The precise tincture of Bourbon princes remains unknown.

*Page: 190*

You may encounter a busted umbrella.

It has been raining  
in Piazza Plebescito.

The rain has put a lot into this—  
there are a number of busted umbrellas  
with their stalks  
snapped and watery petals open.

The umbrellas are flowers or something  
opening their spokes  
onto several contingencies.

Each leads back to the wet unclenched hand  
of a man, or woman.

This one, for example,  
her latest etching turned into a scroll  
against the storm  
as she stands feeling for a moment.

That idea you had about something, something  
and umbrellas is entirely gone.

*Page: 240*

You may encounter a whale gone astray  
such as this one, in the bay of Amalfi.  
She has breached  
not far from the bathers  
who are surprised by something  
so large this close to them.  
When she blows she brings to mind  
postcards of the famous volcano.  
One of her flukes makes a melancholy signal  
over the sea  
and crashes down emphatically.  
This only momentarily alters  
the temperate waters and fine weather  
and soon people can continue  
with their *chiacchierata* and aftersun balms  
on the improving gold of their bodies.  
Aside from the greygreen of the whale  
gold is predominant in Amalfi.

*Page: 245*

You may encounter a blue bee-eater  
striking brilliantly  
like the genius of blueness itself  
through the Orto Botanico's  
palm shadows.  
On the other hand, you may not also.

*Page: 260*

You may encounter evenings with the old Neapolitan.

His eyes and buttondown shirt are the same diluted blue  
and his eyes, which once accompanied women everywhere  
jump out only a little then retire.

Here he is at the top of the stairs welcoming you into his home  
in a beautiful but remote way with his hands.

*Come in. Entrare, entrare.*

How many praetors, legati, and simple happy citizens  
moved their bodies and voices like this.

Walk forward smiling with your own arms extended to fully  
realize the gesture.

*Page: 272*

You may encounter the sound of a wolf howling  
in the small mountain town of Pogerola.

The sound is going from one side of rock to another.

At first it sounds like a mournful dog but then  
there is a long note sharper and emptier  
than a mournful dog.

It is as if the small ball thrown for you became suddenly  
considerable in flight.

Wolves have flourished in the south of this country as things  
deteriorate

in other areas, such as in waste-disposal, for example.

Several American tourists

have made sightings but were unable to recount the moment  
digitally.

They are here for Herculaneum, vongoles, the ancient fort.

The wolf continues to howl, not quite believing it.

*Page: 285*

You may encounter what it was that moved a people  
to build duomos and cornices and statuary  
all over this country.

Watch this young man in the sit-down pasticceria  
thoughtfully squeeze this cream  
let each dream blossom in an immense space  
on top of these rum babas and sfogliatelle  
before achieving form.

*Page: 300*

You may encounter something in the narrow street  
where you've walked many times already.

A broken wall  
risen out of the ground where there wasn't one before.  
It belongs to no particular moment  
in this peoples' architecture.  
A sudden formation laid down in the interstices  
of the afternoon.

The street ends here and continues over the other side  
where evening falls  
on the cobbles and gutterwater and a riderless vespa  
shaking in fits by the curb.  
Figures begin to drift from the doorways.  
Here is the girl, Annamaria, who writes for the *Gazzetta*.  
She appears in sharp boots and navy poloshirt  
walking very quickly, in profile  
through concentric circles of dusk.  
Perhaps she is going to cover the mysterious wall  
for her newspaper.  
But watch, as she somehow skirts around it  
vanishing down the squeezed alleys and their systems  
of buckets winched  
suddenly upwards to the higher floors.

## Part Three

## Discovering the Early Humans

We reached what they called *hades* with long drills,  
breaking the earth's igneous rocks into biscuit.  
We were surprised by our lack of mishaps, how shallow  
the first reaches of it were. No spitting wells  
or spawn, or lakes of blood, nor chambers of white hate.  
We lowered our wires, went down one hollow  
into another that spanned into a blue panelled room.  
At a dresser, the Overseer, reading, with his legs crossed.  
*You have come with the contract? No, I see  
you are not the others, who are to assume my home.*  
He was an elderly ram, in pointy slippers, a formal tux—  
withered, eyes turned in from each dim century.  
We were disappointed by his wit, how plausible he was,  
how young his face turned when we got up close.



## Four Descending Planes

### i. *The Habsburgs*

The eyrie on the ledge,  
a stronghold wreathed  
by thick thorns.  
The dark pair in the centre  
snaking their necks together  
in a heraldic love duel.  
Ready to drop from the summit  
a sheer rending strike  
on the hare, ptarmigan, marten.  
As the eagle falls  
its cloak opens to reveal  
not an eagle anymore  
at the helm  
but a man, in dark ermines  
racing down the mountainside  
in terrible haste  
to be somewhere.

ii. *'The Mountain'*

On the back benches  
a lot of noise  
comes to one burgher  
whose attention has dropped  
into the grey gulf.  
Back and forth:  
Saint-Just, Danton  
Danton, Saint-Just –  
the interminables.  
The supple voices  
of a generation  
now the low, uniform vowel  
rolling under the rafters.  
The burgher  
is the boy who has fallen  
asleep by the deep wood  
to the soft comings and goings  
of honeybees.  
A sound like remote waters  
moving all together.  
Some modulation  
in the drone stirs him  
to the whole convention  
coming out of the wood  
for an intruder.

iii. *Abisso*

Vesuvius  
in green folds  
over Naples.  
The flat Tyrrhenian  
as far as the painter  
can stretch  
it with his brush.

Amateurs  
of the Grand Tour  
found that the bay  
masterfully painted itself.  
Cicadas rose  
in haunted string movements,  
orange trees disembodied  
their blossoms.

Leopardi died  
somewhere on the declivity,  
among the neo-roman villas  
of the hermetic rich.  
The poet sickening  
in this place of life  
intensely lived.  
A wan, convoluted man  
under the dark stadia  
of umbrella pines.

Somewhere on the slope  
in a summer house  
little Leopardi,  
a white tallow candle  
baring  
the dusky entablature  
and balustrades  
of a staircase  
cambering  
into the earth.

iv. *Arc of Triumph*

With the first spar of sunlight  
the little English girl  
goes into the small quarters  
of the emperor.

Miss Betsey Balcombe  
and the most dramatic figure  
of the age  
in her father's garden pavilion.

A low rattan hanging,  
a few fronded, colonial panoramas  
over estranged parts  
of Empire furniture.

Every morning she comes here  
to play her clear, high accents  
on the powderburnt ear  
of the great Mogul.

Plumped up in bed,  
rotund now, his creaseless head  
an ornament rinsed in milk.  
Still somehow a youthful man.

*See, Boney, this is you.*

The emperor's best, only friend  
on the whole of St. Helena  
brings him a wind-up folly from home

that has him fat, dwarfed, grinning  
despotically as he surmounts  
a peak to his own bicorn hat –  
which the little grotesque  
grasps, misses, before tumbling over  
the other side never to get up.

## Decline of the House –

i.

TOURZEL, LOUISE-ELISABETH-FÉLICITÉ-FLEUR-MARIE-THÉRÈSE-CHARLOTTE-etc, etc,  
MARQUISE DE (1749-1832)

ii.

Any given day a gold plate  
of songbirds, upwards of fifty  
varieties of tarte and cheese,  
critical bowel ailments.

The king was fond of locksmithing.  
He dreamt in whole escritaires  
where locks unlocked  
other inscrutable locks.

iii.

After days running the stag and boar through  
the purple forests of Fontainebleau  
he'd crash out in bed. One or other mistress  
of his would present herself in undress

before they'd lay in brace, a plucked peacock  
and the lion of France. *Majesté is back*  
was the word under the white reliefs  
of all the court salons. In bed he yawned

widely and Mlle. saw how ruinous his teeth  
had become. She scented their world  
braided into his breath, like a composition

opening with a sweet, brief movement  
of perfume, lawns and the *fêtes galantes*—  
closing on dead airs, in rotten ballrooms.



## Novgorod

Spread in all directions,  
the threadbare flag  
of the provinces—

settlements where every house  
has a sack of potatoes,  
a distillery

and the tiny demon  
of boredom  
up in the rafters.

There are summer fires,  
little armies of red  
summoned by farmers  
and landowners  
to shamble off  
into the thicket  
and clear the way  
for more potatoes,  
silage and implements.

In the forest outside  
Novgorod  
a wolf crouches  
listening.

Andrei  
spits his kvass  
and tells Igor  
about wolves.

The wolf is tired  
of hearing this  
dull fable  
with its one note

over the centuries  
and vanishes  
behind the rustic tale's  
draughty door:

there are no wolves  
only infinite versions.

*from Slides from Tolstoy*

*Under Oaks*

When she tore off a leaf to give to him  
he held it up like a note from her.  
They laughed, and he let her go lightly  
ahead under the oak's green print.  
They walked, for interminable passages  
in the Summer Garden that June.

In her silhouettes he saw her elbows  
fly out before her, her bonnet loose  
over her live hair, in her silhouettes  
he saw her plural all around.  
Count Levin looked at the leaf  
in his hand—*forgive me, but I am happy.*

Kitty stopped and posed by one trunk  
that'd surged up the centuries. She was tiny  
under its cambers. *Well, what do you think?*  
*'The Tsarina' by Makovsky?* Levin nodded  
but was a muzhik when it came to art.  
He stood back and saw only his Kitty  
by the high tree, pressing in his palm  
its warm, strange leaf, a fold from the realm.

*The Pause*

With his bag of snipe he came home  
through bulrushes gone to gold.  
His hands were stained with birds  
he'd taken in Pokrovskoye.  
Wet peat on his boots, sarafan, visor  
and his pointer trailing voices  
with her nose over the morass.  
He must make it back in time  
for Agafea's supper, and his servants'  
night address—

but reaching a thicket  
another wave of birds occurred  
in triplets: one, then one, then one.  
He raised his fire. And slowly put it down  
again at the trees containing them

The Count paused, and sat down quietly  
to hear their overhead passage  
like that pianist who stopped his hand  
over his parlour grand  
one evening and simply listened  
to his own haunted composition  
ring out the limits of the room.

## The Giant

it must have  
careered upwards  
to reach this  
point, the moth  
preening on his  
shoulder. Older  
now the eminent  
author tried to  
look at it as the  
first moth he'd  
ever seen. So here  
were its *powder*  
*wings, the thin*  
*tongue a taper lit*  
*on nectar*. And he  
imagined himself  
*remade through*  
*the thousand*  
*prospects of its*  
*eyes*. Guests had  
left him in the  
arbour under the  
spell of fuchsia  
and his prose.  
Drunk and liable  
at his own  
celebration. His  
fourteenth novel  
was indelicate,

yes certainly, but  
he meant it to  
land that way.  
Remotely, he was  
happy— his  
career reached  
backwards and  
some distance  
into the future  
like a ghost  
pointing to the  
man who made it.  
He could feel the  
moth's slight  
being on his arm.  
It was white. It  
had fallen like  
ash from the  
night and if he  
touched it it  
might turn to ash.

## *Poste*

He writes from the south. He writes between researching  
and politely expiring.

He writes from behind a partition, from the black sand,  
from banded shadow.

He writes from the beach, on a collapsible sunchair for hours  
among collapsible sunchairs.

He writes at 3pm, as focus on his assignment shifts to the waves  
of locals backstroking.

He writes, nothing for several days. He writes of the great lapse  
in the Montgomery palms.

He writes from a Sorrento gelateria, of the shadowy associates  
pictured with the proprietor.

He writes from a table at the Hotel Syrene. He writes at 8 o'clock.  
He writes, of diverse *scampi*.

He writes from a porphyry foyer, from the hotel fountains'  
crystal insignia.

He writes of a general postponement, empty trunks in a soft fall  
of rain on the beach.

He writes, how his thesis sprawls out like a peninsula town  
in this reliquary heat.

He writes, ah, the great thesis, Europe, sad thesis...

## Ecuador

Someone was walking evenly over the bronze sand  
in a careful line to where the sea slopped  
and churned in the large waste. I walked parallel  
to my invisible company, never breaking up their prints,  
coming to a standstill as the surf dragged its hissing  
white sheet back downwards. Whoever  
I was following had swum for it, out across  
the cove, never looking back, to one of the great liners.  
A slowly sliding estate of brilliant lights in the dark  
reached at a backstroke, my invisible partner  
was rescued by a light craft, sluiced into the landing bay  
of the giant ship, then lifted onto the upper deck.  
Towelled roughly and made to drink some measures  
of a mercurial brandy, he was undressed, then dressed  
by an anonymous suite of servants, who spoke  
in the hot rain of a New World Spanish  
he couldn't quite place. His first impressions  
were of beneficence, light, and a promise  
spanning its giant rooms around him  
with a creak. A life here. But broader  
than it'd been for years and filled with the murmur  
of conspiratorial voices who'd relay  
a warm, continuous line of currency and news  
to his consciousness. He would be led at last  
to a padded bunk, with its electric light, intercom  
and a porthole's clouded eye onto the horizon—  
and then? The morning skyline. And its blue frames  
falling into each other infinitely, each one  
a vacancy aflame with some possible life.



Somewhere, he could walk out onto another beach  
and stop the first person he saw, a tiny boy  
with miniature nose, ears and feet  
as if blown from fine glass and breathed into being,  
pedalling an enormous cane rickshaw  
over the lonely stretch. Dumbly, he would hand him  
the disintegrated file of his old life  
with its few names, addresses and scars  
for everything piled in the rickshaw.  
Certain mornings people wash up here  
with their wild heads like palm nuts  
that've toured the ocean for years on the current  
of a memory of some original departure.  
The sun coming up on the sea with a blue cheer.  
The rich, valueless flotsam littering the boy's cart.  
Where are we? *¿Dónde estamos?* We are finally here.

## *Notes*

*A Room in Paris, 1855.*

Gérard de Nerval, Symbolist poet who died on the banks of the river Seine, in the winter of 1855.

*A Room in the Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, 1971.*

The Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, in Normandy. The hotel, which can be translated as the 'Grand Hotel of the Black Rocks', was a glamorous hub for the gambling and sporting sets in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, falling into decline years later.

*A Room on the Capitaine Paul-Lemerle, 1941.*

The *Capitaine Paul-Lemerle* was a transatlantic vessel that smuggled a number of intellectuals and artists out of a Vichy-controlled France in the 1940s. Among them were André Breton and Claude Levi-Strauss.

*A Room in the Pacific Palisades, 1979.*

The writer is the novelist Henry Miller.

*A Room in Taiwan, 2010.*

Marcello Mastroianni, Italian actor, famous for his role in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and *8½*.

*A Room in Naples, 2005.*

'Lo Spagnolo', Raffaele Amato, a Camorrista, arrested in 2005.

*A Room at the Sasquatch Symposium, 1993.*

Raymond L. Wallace, the Bigfoot hoaxer from Missouri.

*A Room in Platinum, 1994.*

The singer in the poem is Kurt Cobain, in the last year of his life.

*A Room in the Oregon Coast Aquarium, 1992.*

Keiko, the male Orca who starred in the 1993 Warner Bros production, *Free Willy*. The whale, who had a bent dorsal fin, was released into the wild in 2003, after spending the majority of his life in captivity, but stranded himself a few years later.

*A Room in Pëtkwo.*

Pëtkwo, a coastal town in Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*.

*A Room in Florence, 1266.*

Loderingo degli Andalò, one of the profligate 'Jovial Friars', found among the hypocrites in the Eighth Circle of Dante's *Inferno*.

*A Room in the West Weald –*

The *West Weald*, a sparsely populated, forest region in the emergent-narrative game, *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks).

*A Room in the Republic (Capua), 73 BC.*

The ludus is that of Lentulus Batiatus, ill-fated dominus of Spartacus.

### *The Habsburgs*

'Habsburg': a contraction of 'Habichtsburg', which translates as 'hawk's castle' and designates the ancestral home of the powerful family. They descended, in both senses of the word, to reign over Austria for centuries.

### *'The Mountain'*

The Mountain was the term used for the massed congregation of Jacobins in session, during the French Revolution.

### *Arc of Triumph*

Napoleon, exiled to St Helena, befriended the young daughter of the colonial administrator in whose residence he was initially housed.

*Splendour and Fatigue*

**Travel and History in John Ash and Durs Grünbein**

Matthew Gregory

A Doctoral Thesis in Creative Writing

Presented to Goldsmiths, University of London

## Abstract

This essay discusses the travel poetry of John Ash and the historical portraits of Durs Grünbein in relation to my manuscript, *Full Colour*. Isolated here are the two constitutive elements of my poetry collection: travel and history. Through an appraisal of these two poets, I examine my own thematic concerns and poetics indirectly, before considering the manuscript itself. Overall, the thesis is a practitioner's perspective that includes both critical analysis of the finished text and reflection on points of craft.

Beginning with John Ash's 'Byzantine' travel poems, the chapter considers his valorisation of the ancient scenery, cities and monuments of the 'Old World', as a subtle criticism of modernity. This chapter deploys the concepts of *anti-tourism*, *picturesque* and *non-place* to deepen this analysis, locating an opposition to the commodification of travel and instrumentalisation more broadly.

The focus then turns to the historical portraits of Durs Grünbein and their displacement of a sense of catastrophe (the *post-catastrophic*) – derived from the German twentieth century – onto scenes from ancient Rome. This section examines the imaginative techniques Grünbein employs to 'actualize' his historical scenarios.

These diverse analyses are united in a final chapter on my own manuscript. This dual focus – on travel and history – is necessitated by their mutual role in my work, elicited by the catalyst for many of my poems: a period living in Naples. Drawing from the theoretical categories deployed in relation to Ash and Grünbein, the thesis elucidates a unitary poetics in my manuscript.

## Introduction

The following critical essay consists of a discussion of two poets, John Ash and Durs Grünbein, and a chapter on my manuscript, *Full Colour*. The overall purpose is to illuminate and reflect on my own poems within a wider literary and critical context. To this end, I have adopted a combination of approaches: a critical analysis of the text in the case of the two poets (an examination of their work) and a practitioner's perspective when relating to my own writing (a reflection on process). The essay is both a discussion of the thematic concerns present in my manuscript and a reflection on points of craft. With this latter point in mind, I have considered insights from a variety of other practitioners, as well as critical and theoretical sources.

My manuscript, *Full Colour*, is a diverse body of work, encompassing many different subjects, forms and organisational modes. To give a few examples of its heterogeneity – one poem depicts the abandoned *ludus* of Spartacus's slave-master, while another, feral dogs on a Cape Verde island; there are near-sonnets and concrete poems; there are extended cycles as well as many miscellaneous pieces. There is, however, a common locus. I began work on the manuscript while living in Naples: a catalytic place for my writing. The stimulus of a vivid new city and the continuous presence of the ancient world impressed itself significantly. From this period, my work underwent a shift in focus and tenor – it foregrounded travel as a chief concern as well as articulating something of the disrepair and faded glamour of *Neapolis*. Later, this sensibility was displaced onto historical scenarios that implicated an event, character or locale suggestive of this theme.

This decisive reorientation in my work requires an examination of both tendencies, interrelated and contingent on this period. This essay, then, will consider two categories, the travel poem and the historical portrait, reflected in important influences and in my own manuscript.

The first chapter focuses on the travel poems of John Ash. Moving from his native Manchester to New York, then to Istanbul in later years, Ash presents a useful analogue as a British poet responding to the ‘Old World’.<sup>1</sup> I discuss these later ‘Byzantine’ poems with special consideration of a longer narrative piece, ‘The Women of Kars (or Some Other Places I Know And Do Not Know)’.<sup>2</sup> The chapter is multifaceted, but unites around Ash’s subtle criticism of modernity through the valorisation of its opposite – the ancient scenery, cities and monuments of northern Turkey. It considers James Buzard’s notion of the *anti-tourist* in relation to the digressive journey essayed by the poem, in opposition to the commodification and instrumentalisation of travel. Subsequently, the essay identifies Ash’s staging of the *picturesque* – a predilection for all that is irregular and ‘uselessly’ decorative – as an analogous opposition to this instrumentalising tendency. Also considered is his textured evocation of the historical, as an attitude that resists the ahistorical and ephemeral: that which is obliterative in modernity.<sup>3</sup> This latter point is developed – via Ash’s own appraisal of the poet Christopher Middleton – to consider this valorisation of the ‘pre-industrial’ as ‘a standard by which he measures a loss of meaning’ rather than as a simply escapist or nostalgic instinct.<sup>4</sup> There is also a discussion of the ethical implications of his travel writing, as well as a contextualization, regarding other travel poets and contemporaries.

Ash was a useful model as I responded to living in Naples – I recognized similar instincts forming in my work. Here, specifically, Ash’s travel poems register an apprehensiveness at Western touristic perspectives and behaviours, subverting the ‘travel itinerary’ with his digressive perambulations and descriptions. My own work signals this

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<sup>1</sup> I deploy ‘Old World’ aware of its colonial connotations – in this case, it is shorthand for the places whose ancient civilisations are present and visible, that feature in my own and Ash’s work.

<sup>2</sup> The pieces considered here are referred to as Ash’s ‘Byzantine’ poems. Though the Eastern Roman Empire is most significant to him – it is the source of his enchantment – his poems encompass wide tracts of history, including Antiquity and the Ottoman period. I use ‘Byzantine’, then, with this proviso.

<sup>3</sup> As formulated in Marc Augé’s, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, (New York: Verso Books, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> John Ash, ‘The Poet’s Grandmother and other dilemmas’, *PN Review* 47, Volume 12, Number 3, January - February 1986, [http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=5738](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=5738).



slightly differently: by self-consciously foregrounding the touristic, notably in my long poem 'Excerpts from *The Scenic World*'. This apprehensiveness, however, is analogous – an *anti-tourism*, uncomfortable with the simplifications of commercial travel. In response, both Ash and I present 'curated', or subverted, itineraries of our own. Aligned with this, is a discomfort with Western hubris and orientalism, articulated directly in reflective passages of Ash and indirectly in the self-consciousness of my own '*Scenic World*'.

In two other main aspects, Ash's poems provide a useful comparison. Firstly, their valorisation of the picturesque, faded corners of Anatolia and the decorative qualities of the 'Byzantine'. In their attention to the *irregular* scenery of Anatolia and the purely decorative, the poems extol that which is not reduced to pure utility – a human largesse and feeling in the face of instrumentalisation. In my manuscript, this is formulated in 'Apostrophe to Disrepair', which eulogizes a gently declining, featureful city that bears superficial resemblance to Naples or Palermo.

This sense is embodied, obliquely, in the richer descriptive language, exorbitant imagery and digressions of other poems – most acutely in the longer pieces, like 'Palms at Anacapri' or 'The Ambassadors'. Their 'carefulness', a distillation of slower, gentler attitudes, throws into relief an opposing tendency – the ephemerality and functionality of Western modernity. As Ash notes of Middleton, this sentiment in my own work is not simply escapist or nostalgic, but more deeply reflective of an anxiety, at shifting surfaces, a loss of meaning.

Secondly, the digressiveness of Ash's longer poems presented a useful aesthetic for my own – a formal structure that permitted expansion through various tangents and phases rather than concentrated linearity. Overall, Ash provides a salient model through which to examine my Naples suites and reflect more extensively on the contemporary travel poem.

The second chapter considers the historical poems of Durs Grünbein – albeit in Michael Hofmann's English translation. These translations, a composite creation, were nevertheless

important to the development of my own historical poems. This section considers how Grünbein has displaced a predominant theme in his work – the *post-catastrophic* – onto certain historical scenarios. It examines the continuity of this sense, derived from the destruction of Dresden and the collapse of the GDR – two epochal events close to Grünbein’s life and work – through his portraits of ancient Rome. Subsequently, the chapter considers how Grünbein animates, or ‘actualizes’, the ancient world. Drawing on the notion of ‘presence’, I argue that he instils his historical scenes with a ‘somatic’ quality that connects them to the intimate experience of the reader. Then, referring to Gaston Bachelard’s theory of poetics, I consider how Grünbein’s images of the past attain a state of ‘emergence’. Lastly, I reflect briefly on the challenge he faces when depicting a ‘polyphonic’ historical moment.

Grünbein’s pertinence to my own historical poems is twofold. Firstly, the ‘displacement’ of a consistent theme onto his historical portraits corresponds with my own work. For Grünbein, who has noted the centrality of Dresden’s erasure and the deterioration and collapse of the GDR to his writing, the shaping events are delineated: the German twentieth century. My own historical poems are coloured by a quieter sense of ruin and disrepair, derived, perhaps, from the post-industrial, coastal decline of my hometown, as well as the grander decadence of the Neapolitan scenes that prompted them. However, this essential component, of *displacement* – of articulating a particular air or *mien* through the props and figures of the distant past – is something I share with Grünbein. In psychoanalytical terms, it might be formulated as ‘transference’, as noted in the Grünbein chapter.

Aesthetically, too, Grünbein’s work was a significant model, providing a useful study in animating historical events, places and figures. My own poems sought to mirror their essential simplicity and evocation of a sensory ‘reality’ – necessary if an image of the remote past is to be sustained convincingly.

The final chapter is a discussion of my own work. It reflects on the centrality of Naples in more detail, before examining individual poems, my process and the shape of the manuscript as a whole. Following the structure of the thesis, the chapter is in two parts, considering the pieces that are explicitly ‘travel poems’ first, before moving onto the historical portraits. This discussion brings together the themes and arguments developed in the sections on Ash and Grünbein, while, simultaneously, considering stylistic and formal choices made while writing and editing. While the chapter remains within the parameters of the Ash and Grünbein analysis, it touches on other areas – the specific quality of disrepair in my work, the poem cycle, for instance – as the subjects and formal tendencies of the manuscript are diverse.

## *A Byzantine Nobleman in Exile:*

### **The Travel Poems of the Later John Ash**

Born in Manchester in 1948, John Ash is the author of ten collections of poetry, a travelogue, *A Byzantine Journey* (1995), a travel guide, *The Other Guide: Western and Southern Anatolia* (2001), and travel articles on Turkey and the Middle East. His poetry is, by turns, linguistically extravagant and demotic, elegiac and comedic. Through the years, his poems have been aerated by travel: by cities he has lived in for extended periods of time, as well as those he has never visited and places wholly imagined.

After moving to Istanbul in 1996, Ash has published four collections of poetry that depict the city, its Byzantine history and the wider Turkish landscape. This chapter will consider a poem from this period in detail: ‘The Women of Kars (or Some Other Places I Know and Do Not Know)’ from *In the Wake of the Day* (2010).

The discussion will engage with three main concepts to better understand the thematic and aesthetic preoccupations of Ash’s travel poems. Firstly, I will consider James Buzard’s notion of the *anti-tourist* in relation to Ash’s digressive, perambulatory movement through the places he explores. I will contend that this movement exhibits a resistance to the commodification and instrumentalisation of travel. Secondly, I will reflect on the *picturesque* in regard to the Anatolian landscape, considering Ash’s resistance to a broader instrumentalising tendency implicit in his predilection for *irregular* scenery and ‘useless’ decoration. Thirdly, I will claim that Ash’s textured evocation of place signals a resistance to the ephemeral and ahistorical, as characterized in Marc Augé’s conception of *non-place*. What unites these considerations is Ash’s subtle criticism of Western modernity through the valorisation of its opposite. Within this chapter I will also reflect on the ethical implications of Ash’s travel writing – his appropriation of another cultural history and present. Finally, I

consider the broader context of Ash's work, reflecting on his first mentor, John Ashbery, and travel poems by Kenneth Koch, Blaise Cendrars and Valery Larbaud.

'The Women of Kars (or Some Other Places I Know and Do Not Know)' is a long narrative poem across six pages that appears in *In the Wake of the Day*, John Ash's fourth collection since he moved to Istanbul in 1996. Like the majority of poems in the collection, it is delivered in the first person and has the character of a travelogue:

[...] It was a journey  
Of extreme beauty and desolation. The bus struggled  
Creaking and grinding, first climbing through  
Bright, alpine meadows on which handsome  
Wooden houses with window boxes were disposed  
In a manner recalling the better aspects of Switzerland.  
Then, in a moment, everything changed utterly. On  
The summit of the pass, the trees vanished,  
And did not return. The houses of the villages seemed  
Sunk into the earth, and were so overgrown with grasses,  
They resembled burial mounds. Were those I saw  
In the streets ghosts? Exhausted, I arrived in Kars [...]<sup>5</sup>

The poem chronicles an ostensibly lived journey through remote mountain towns in north-eastern Turkey. As it is narrative and syntactically limpid, it is possible to offer a broad

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<sup>5</sup> Ash, 'The Women of Kars (or Some Other Places I Know and Do Not Know)', *In the Wake of the Day*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010), 37.

‘synopsis’. The poem begins with a list of historically significant places the narrator *hasn’t* visited, before noting they *have* been to Kars, described as ‘possibly/The most depressing town in Turkey’ by a guidebook.<sup>6</sup> Outlining a number of competing reasons for embarkation, the journey is then described with its various local minutiae, the characters met on arrival, as well as the palimpsestic history of the region. The speaker encounters two men at different points of his trip, one of whom conveys his version of the town against the literary impressions of the novelist Orhan Pamuk (whose novel *Kar* is set in Kars), while the other, named Celil, met in a hotel lobby late at night, offers to take him to Ani, a city he has wanted to visit for ‘more than forty years’.<sup>7</sup> The trip to Kars culminates, then, with arrival in an entirely different location to the one intended and the enigmatic spectacle of ‘a pavilion/Attached to a palace, a cool retreat/For summer days’ where ‘young soldiers/Casually patrolled’.<sup>8</sup> ‘A banquet was being prepared, but for whom/Was unclear’.<sup>9</sup> The poem ends with a conversation with Celil as they drive back from Ani. Celil speaks of his Armenian grandmother, someone who ‘never knew a day’s ill-health’ and regarded ‘all modern prescriptions with perfect disdain’.<sup>10</sup> This detail leads the narrator to recall a photograph he found in an ‘obscure New York library’, one ‘humid and oppressive/Summer afternoon’, of some women in Kars. The women, in long, dark robes, veils and diadems, ‘resembled/Heroines from the age of Agamemnon’.<sup>11</sup> The women, finally shrouded by the classical archetype, are enigmatic, unknowable. The journey – a record of plunging into mystery – concludes, felicitously, with that inscrutable and alluring image.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker lists several places that he would like to visit: ‘I have not been to Mardin, which everyone praises’, ‘Nor have I seen the shattered bridge of

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<sup>6</sup> Ash, ‘The Women of Kars’, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Hasankeyf’, ‘Then there is Abrahamic Urfa, seat/Of the Abgarid kings’.<sup>12</sup> Though there is something esoteric about his detailed knowledge of these particular settlements and ruins, their historical significance falls within the compass of the travel guide’s recommendation. In the next movement, however, the speaker contrasts these great capitals, centres of learning and aristocratic seats, with the ostensibly much less remarkable Kars. The speaker seems to delight in the particular, personal reasons he has for visiting Kars – incidentally discovered and capriciously decided upon – from the ‘unfailingly/Courteous’ owners of his local corner store who are from the town, to a desire to contradict an ‘invincibly/Condescending’ guidebook.<sup>13</sup> Later in the poem, after reaching Kars, Ash’s narrator takes a similar pleasure in informing us that ‘instead of honey or cheese’ (a local speciality for which the place is known) ‘I bought socks/As is my custom when visiting Turkish towns’.<sup>14</sup> He lists the extent of this quirk: ‘In Antakya the socks were olive grey/In Egridir blue, in Kars cream and grey’.<sup>15</sup> In all of these details, which depict the narrator as a traveller with contrary, individual tastes, Ash exhibits a tendency towards what James Buzard identifies as *anti-tourism*, in his comprehensive study, *The Beaten Track*. Since the late eighteenth century, those travelling to the continent from Britain – and, later, America – developed various strategies to differentiate themselves from the crowds who supposedly followed their Murray & Baedeker guides from one spot to the next. Buzard formulates the anti-touristic:

[...] anti-tourism evolved into a symbolic economy in which travellers and writers displayed marks of originality and ‘authenticity’ in an attempt to win credit for acculturation; and visited places were perceived as parts of a market-place of cultural goods, each location chiefly of interest for the demonstrably

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

appropriatable tokens of authenticity it afforded. Travel's educative, acculturating function took on a newly competitive aspect, as travellers sought to distinguish themselves from the 'mere tourists', they saw or imagined around them. Correspondingly, the authentic culture of *places* – the *genius loci* – was represented as lurking in secret precincts 'off the beaten track' where it could be discovered only by the sensitive 'traveller', not the vulgar tourist.<sup>16</sup>

In Buzard's conception, the anti-tourist is consequently a tourist themselves, similarly remote, culturally and economically, from the visited country. It is only by degrees of separation from their fellow travellers – regarding 'acculturation', class, the 'originality' of their posture – that they distinguish themselves in an illusory manner. Ash's Byzantine poems correspond with the outline of this description, as evinced by his veering off 'the beaten track', his querulousness regarding travel guides and his cultivated idiosyncrasies. His work, in its quest for authenticity, exists in this 'symbolic economy'.

However, despite the 'marks of originality' he exhibits, Ash's anti-tourism is not of the same tenor as Buzard's formulation. In 'The Women of Kars' there is a milder, more amenable, more pensive note in the narrator's demeanour, compared to the elitism of Buzard's early travellers. Throughout the whole of *In the Wake of the Day* the traveller appears to be someone far less sure of himself, humbled by the proximity of things much older than he is and less likely to scorn others regarding their lack of 'acculturation'.<sup>17</sup> He does level an accusation: 'I fell asleep thinking of towers,/Of finely cut red and black stone, fallen/Vaults, and the origins of styles we name/Too confidently, for our arrogance breaks/Beyond all bounds'.<sup>18</sup> Here the

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<sup>16</sup> James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, And The Ways To 'Culture' 1800-1919*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>17</sup> This perspectival uncertainty is addressed more specifically, in my later discussion of the ethical dimension to Ash's work.

<sup>18</sup> Ash, 'The Women of Kars', 40.



criticism isn't of the 'vulgar tourist', but rather the cultured observer from a more recent civilisation: someone much like himself. There is not the high disdain of Byron, when he wrote of remembering 'at Chamouni, in the very eyes of Mont Blanc, hearing [an English] woman ... exclaim to her party, "Did you ever see anything more *rural*?" as if it was Highgate, or Hampstead, or Brompton, or Hayes,—"Rural!" quotha. Rocks, pines, torrents, glaciers, clouds, and summits of eternal snows far above them—and "rural!"'<sup>19</sup> If Ash's anti-tourism is not the open elitism of the nineteenth-century excursionists, then how does it manifest and what aspect of tourism does it look to subvert?

In a curatorial sense, Ash's poem offers its own 'guide' to the scenery. As a text which purports to be a travelogue, it promises to illuminate a remote corner of northern Turkey. However, there is a tension between the purposefulness anticipated in any such report and Ash's perambulatory narrative. To delineate this tension, or disobedience, we first must determine what it is ranged against. Behind the elitism of some of Buzard's travellers, there is opposition to the inhibitory aspects of tourism. For his anti-tourists, there is the belief that the cultural experience of travel is "outside" ordinary social life, comprising a compensatory domain of autonomy and creativity to which utilitarian capitalist social arrangements pay no heed.'<sup>20</sup> The reliance on prescribed experience – on commercial guides and mapped routes – mirrors the conformity and utilitarianism of the work-place. The commodification of travel smooths the path from conformity at home to conformity abroad. Such conformity squeezes out travel's 'identities privately and intensely possessed, which are congruent with [...] freedom.'<sup>21</sup> What occurs in 'The Women of Kars', then, is a reinstatement of that 'domain of autonomy', through its narrative's digressive, exorbitant, contingent nature. There is the apparent indirection of his progress, the generous periods for taking in the *milieu*, the

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<sup>19</sup> Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron in Verse and Prose*, (New York: Alexander V. Blake, 1840), 245.

<sup>20</sup> Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

susceptibility to the incidental events that alter the path of the journey, as well as the absence of a ‘resolution’ to the trip. In the first example of this list, Ash’s narrator only chose to visit Kars because he was already travelling nearby (‘I found myself in the small town of Shavshat, which is only/A few hours distant from Kars, and there seemed/No good reason not to go’).<sup>22</sup> In the second, he languishes before the kitsch and atypical (‘when I saw/A sign proclaiming PLANET BAR./I could not resist’)<sup>23</sup> as well as more classical scenery (‘climbing through/Bright, alpine meadows on which handsome/Wooden houses were disposed’).<sup>24</sup> In the third instance, he welcomes the capricious detour (‘I was greeted by a short man with bright,/Intelligent eyes, who introduced himself as Celil/And asked: ‘Do you want to go to Ani?’’).<sup>25</sup> Lastly, there is the deferral of a summative ‘point’ to the trip, with the spectacle of the enigmatic banquet in Ani and the suggestive, but inscrutable, image of the women of Kars.

In these perambulations there is something of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*. Though, with Ash, the *flâneur* strays from his urban setting and exhibits a salutary lack of purpose in a broader sense, closer to the ideas of Nassim Taleb, who has contrasted an open, flexible approach to living and thinking with ‘touristification’. Taleb defines this term as: ‘the systematic removal of uncertainty and randomness from things, trying to make things highly predictable in their smallest details, with a precise itinerary to follow — and a known teleology’.<sup>26</sup> The digressive quality of Ash’s narrative, its harmonious contingency, is the means by which he establishes an original outline to his journey, against a depersonalizing itinerary.

There is a wider point here, concerning Ash’s poetics more generally. This digressive tendency was present in his work before these later, more identifiable ‘travel’ pieces. For instance, in an earlier poem like ‘Street Musicians’ from *The Goodbyes*, a meditation on Athens

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<sup>22</sup> Ash, ‘The Women of Kars’, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, ‘New Term: Touristification’, Facebook, November 3rd, 2007, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10150371053418375&id=13012333374](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10150371053418375&id=13012333374).

is drawn across disjunctive phases. In three sections, it encompasses a panoramic vista ('the sea flashing like a hero's shield'),<sup>27</sup> the architecture ('the last, Byzantine well-heads')<sup>28</sup> and a peopled square, where each character is depicted, from 'the aging clarinetist' to 'the punks emerging/empty-handed from the record store'.<sup>29</sup> The poem meanders and reflects on the disrepair and lassitude of the city, its dream of renewal with a 'new Acropolis',<sup>30</sup> before culminating with the street musicians gazing into the 'linings of their instruments' cases [...] like divers, like archaeologists', who discover 'a lost beauty, a vanished art like a living face – /Philip of Macedon's tomb.'<sup>31</sup> Rather than linear progression, the poem drifts across its terrain, shifting focus, embarking on tangents, until it reaches this startling, providential image. These digressions follow a wider intuition – that which has been described as the poet's 'own will-o'-the-wisp'.<sup>32</sup> This is the nature of imaginative consciousness more generally, but accurately describes digressiveness – the mind able to slip across associations, to tie powerful insights together. In Ash's Byzantine poems, the physical journey reflects that of the discursive mind.

Something that links the nineteenth-century travellers that Buzard considers in *The Beaten Track* is a shared antipathy to what they perceive as the trappings of modernity brought to a scenic Europe. Ash's Byzantine poems are concerned in their own manner with this scenic world. Unlike some of his earlier work, which was marked, in the words of Robert Sheppard by 'a wilful lack of definition',<sup>33</sup> and an attempt to build 'a morphology of pure sensation',<sup>34</sup> poems like 'The Women of Kars' are far surer in their portrayal of the definite objects of this

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<sup>27</sup> Ash, 'Street Musicians', *Selected Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), 92.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Durs Grünbein, 'My Babylonish Brain', trans. Michael Hofmann, in *The Bars of Atlantis*, ed. Michael Eskin, (New York: Farrar, Giroux & Strauss, 2010), 60.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Sheppard, 'The Unknowable Symphony', review of *The Goodbyes*, by John Ash, *PN Review* 37, Volume 10, Number 5, March - April 1984, [http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=6385](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=6385).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

world – vistas, cities, ruins, monuments, people. Speaking of the difference between Ash’s earlier poems and his ‘Byzantine’ period, the British poet Luke Kennard writes:

[Ash is] very much a eulogiser of place, combining the discerning eye of the aesthete with the inexhaustible wanderlust of the explorer. The long poem that opens his 2002 collection *The Anatolikon* begins, “They said ‘Why do you want to go to that place? There is nothing to see’”. The poem that follows is a conventional travelogue, and while Ash is as likely to admire “The dazzling aprons of the waiters” as “a mountain too high and too broad / For the mind to take in”, it is the wonder of the tourist – a tourist possessed of a finely tuned literary talent and a rare gift to inspire a similar enthusiasm in his readers, but a tourist nonetheless.<sup>35</sup>

While I question Kennard’s undifferentiated use of ‘tourist’, he accurately locates a clarity in Ash’s later work: a more definite enthusiasm for the scenery. Ash’s Byzantine project is unapologetic in its admiration of prospects and ruins, as well as the lugubrious tokens of modernity he discovers in remote places. On arriving in Kars, he takes in the surroundings:

I walked beside the river, which turned east,  
Around a grim fortress to join the Akhurian,  
Which then led south to the Araxes, all  
These turbulent waters debouching at last  
Into the Caspian amid rotting oil rigs,

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<sup>35</sup> Luke Kennard, ‘The Expanse: Self-Consciousness and the Transatlantic Prose Poem’, (PhD diss., University of Exeter: 2008), 107.

And soon I came to streets of elegant houses,  
And a park where an artificial waterfall  
Plunged voluminously down a real rock face.<sup>36</sup>

This relish in the lineaments of the scene, arrayed in this particular way, is that of the landscapist. The delight in contrast: the elision from the ‘Caspian’s rotting oil rigs’ to the ‘streets of elegant houses’ holds a note of disrepair, of remote, despoiled modernity, against the civility and refinement of the town.<sup>37</sup> This first contrast is accentuated by the second, the ersatz waterfall on a real rock face – a lonely touch of artifice that suggests the meeting of a number of different worlds: art and nature, modernity and pastoral, the kitsch and serious, the ‘inauthentic’ and ‘authentic’.

There is also a careful attention to texture: ‘the turbulent waters debouching at last/into the Caspian’.<sup>38</sup> The placement of ‘debouching’, a relatively rare verb, allows Ash a very precise control over the action of the water – it is not simply flowing or rushing, it is being released from a smaller to a larger valley. The physics of the act are implicit in the French *déboucher* – to unblock, uncork; to finish; to culminate. The positioning of the word, falling just before the line-break (‘debouching at last/into the Caspian’), amplifies this release of tension and lends an energy to the water as it goes.<sup>39</sup> As well as these active properties, attached in a centrifugal sense, is the martial connotation (*a body of troops debouching*), faint in this instance, but because of the deeply stratified history of Anatolia’s plains, not quite outside the wider picture.

More generally, the fullness of the vision is given to it by the variety of features it encompasses. In allowing the syntax to run across eight lines, it is as if the narrator has assembled a whole ‘view’. He follows the course of the river as it winds around the elevated

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<sup>36</sup> Ash, ‘The Women of Kars’, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

‘grim fortress’, joins two other rivers, the Akhurian and the Araxes, then flows out into the Caspian, with its oil rigs, before the narrator returns to his own vantage point, with the ‘street of elegant houses’ and the artificial waterfall.<sup>40</sup> It is a concern for the vista as a whole.

These assemblages are better addressed with a consideration of the *picturesque*. The inventor of that notion, eighteenth-century clergyman, writer and painter William Gilpin, summarized the picturesque, simply enough, as: ‘that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture’.<sup>41</sup> Developing the idea from this tautological definition, Gilpin considered the ‘picturesque’ to be somewhere between the *sublime*, with its connotations of vastness, magnitude and intimations of power, and the *beautiful*, with its emphasis on regularity, smoothness and order.<sup>42</sup> Gilpin wrote that ‘roughness forms the most essential point of difference between the beautiful and picturesque’.<sup>43</sup> Through Gilpin and others, the term came to refer to scenes with more variegated or textured surfaces, an absence of regular or linear elements, light and shadow, ‘variety’ and perspective – all elements consistent with Ash’s assembled view. While I want to keep Gilpin’s pictorial definition in mind, it is a looser meaning of the word I refer to here: the usage that shifted from landscape studies in the nineteenth century to encompass cities and their inhabitants, taking influence from the theatre and *tableaux vivantes*.

This notion is more illuminating when we consider observations by other writers who have looked on similar scenes. Henry James, who travelled widely in Europe in the nineteenth century, had a complicated relationship with the picturesque but found it seductive early in his touring. Back home, in America, all he seemed to find were ‘eternal straight lines and right

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> William Gilpin, *Essay on Prints*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, (London: A. Strahan, 1802), Kindle.

<sup>42</sup> ‘In England, the picturesque was defined [...] as an aesthetic quality existing between the sublime (i.e., awe-inspiring) and the beautiful (i.e., serene), and one marked by pleasing variety, irregularity, asymmetry, and interesting textures. For example, medieval ruins in a natural landscape were thought to be quintessentially picturesque.’ ‘Picturesque’, Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 19th May 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/art/picturesque>

<sup>43</sup> Gilpin, *Three Essays on picturesque beauty; on picturesque travel; and on sketching landscape: to which is added a poem, on landscape painting*. (London: R. Blamire, 1792), Kindle.

angles'.<sup>44</sup> What he longed to encounter was 'that delightful element of the crooked, the accidental, the unforeseen'.<sup>45</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his preface to *The Marble Faun*, contrasts his book's Italian setting with America, where he found: 'no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight.'<sup>46</sup> In these remarks, both he and James seem to extol similar aspects to those characterised by Gilpin: more variegated or textured surfaces, light and shadow, an absence of regular or linear elements. What is accentuated, in James's case, is the 'irregularity' of the picturesque, while Hawthorne introduces the shadow of 'antiquity' to the vocabulary.<sup>47</sup> These are aspects that I will isolate – separately – as they coincide pertinently with Ash's poem.

Firstly, however, I would like to consider the broader cultural framework within which Ash's picturesque appears. The richness of scenery and phrasing in 'The Women of Kars' has several effects and connotations. The most immediate result, for a reader in the modern, technologized West, is that it throws into relief its opposite. Being made aware of so much textured antiquity, we recall that our experience of space and use of language is mostly very different to Ash's poem. By evoking the picturesque, like those nineteenth-century travellers, he valorises qualities in it that are 'missing' from what he has left behind. What then, broadly, is being left behind in terms of this discourse? As Buzard notes in *The Beaten Track*, 'domestic society appeared as stultifying to feelings and imagination', while travel outside 'one's busily modernizing society' 'could be seen to offer opportunities for the exercise of thwarted human potential'.<sup>48</sup> This picturesque world offered 'alterity', which can be conflated with the 'authentic' – that which is excluded from living in a 'busily modernizing society'. As the

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<sup>44</sup> Henry James, *Transatlantic Sketches*, (1875; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1893), Chapter 1, Kindle.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Preface' to *The Marble Faun in Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 854.

<sup>47</sup> In his disdain of 'prosperity' and valorisation of the 'gloomy wrong', there is also a bourgeois callousness and orientalism. This I will consider in regard to Ash later in the chapter.

<sup>48</sup> Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, 176

academic Erik Cohen notes, travellers seek this alterity ‘in varying degrees of intensity, depending on the degree of their alienation from modernity.’<sup>49</sup> By this criteria, we can argue that Ash’s later poetry signals, at the least, a dissatisfaction with ‘modernity’ in its obsessive, perambulatory attention to its opposite – the alterity of the picturesque.

Now to the first of the picturesque aspects isolated above: its *irregular* quality. What follows is a passage from ‘The Women of Kars’ in which the narrator gazes on the city of Ani for the first time:

I was not disappointed. The great fragments  
Rose from the long grasses above the deep gorge  
Of the Akhurian. It seemed a city  
At the world’s edge. All the while there was  
A faint whistling or sighing as if the wind passed  
Through a stack of bones, bleached and forgotten,  
And the grinding of machines, wounding the landscape.  
The mosque was not a mosque, but a pavilion  
Attached to a palace, a cool retreat  
For summer days, and here young soldiers  
Casually patrolled, and under red vaults  
A banquet was being prepared, but for whom  
Was unclear, except that they had the power  
To command such a place. Small birds flew  
In and out of the cathedral’s opened O, and here  
Early travellers saw a prefiguring of the gothic  
In composite piers and softly ogival arches [...] <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Erik Cohen, ‘Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism’, in *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15, (1988), 376.

<sup>50</sup> Ash, ‘The Women of Kars’, 40-41.



Ani, 'a city/At the world's edge'. We expect it to be anomalous: the city of a remote, parallel civilisation. The scene has an archetypal quality, as if the narrator is gazing on an animated tableau from the ancient world, only disturbed by the 'grinding of machines'. Ash then offers an impression from which we must discern his delight. In the sweep of his gaze he takes in abundant features tumbling against each other: 'the great fragments' rising from the gorge, the 'mosque that was not a mosque', the young soldiers patrolling the palace – all the way to a close-up of small birds flying '[in] and out of the cathedral's opened O' where there were 'composite piers and softly ogival arches'.<sup>51</sup> It is a delight in things abutting one another, in surprising juxtapositions and perspectives: in rich miscellany.

With an aficionado's care, Ash details each point of interest in the landscape: 'the composite piers and softly ogival arches'. With this precise and textured inventorying, it matches the busy, irregular view: we slow when we come to the specificity of 'softly ogival arches', as we might when surveying a detail in the architecture. In its lineation, the passage also reproduces the way we might assimilate a scene like this. By loosely enjambling separate features, it mirrors the gaze falling on one part after another: 'a pavilion/Attached to a palace, a cool retreat/For summer days, and here young soldiers/Casually patrolled, and under red vaults/A banquet was being prepared'.<sup>52</sup> In that 'pavilion/Attached to a palace', the break engenders the moment in which the eye and mind correlate one feature with another in a disparate vista.

In reproducing the contours of this scenery, the poem betrays a predilection for the irregularity common to parts of the 'Old World'. It is not unique to the 'Old World' – but the surprising abuttal, the odd intrusion, is more prevalent in ancient places where utility and industrialisation have not regulated the topography. Each detail is singular, delineated. The

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 41.

general, the regular, the anticipated, is anathema. Another poem from *In the Wake of the Day*, ‘The Tower of Alyattes’, articulates this directly:

The Half Mosque of Sivrishiar presents  
No such problems. It can be plainly seen.  
Work began in the mid-thirteenth century,  
But the builders grew tired, and simply stopped.  
It was just too big. But its curious a-  
Symmetry has enchanted untold generations.<sup>53</sup>

A ‘curious a-/Symmetry’ lends the building its enchantment. With its unique characteristic, it refuses to serve a general purpose, to be reduced to the role of simply another mosque. Its asymmetry, useless as a structural or organisational feature, directs attention to its particular aesthetic – or ‘poetic’ – quality. Implicit in Ash’s preference for these ‘aberrations’ in architecture or the broader landscape is a feeling for all that lends us distinctiveness. This affinity for ‘mistakes’ in artisanship, little flourishes of décor and ceremony, the surprising detail in grander panoramas, is for the irreducibly human component.

This suspicion of all that is workmanlike and instrumentalised, it must be said, is an extension of an earlier thread in Ash’s work. Rather than quietly or resentfully dignifying the quotidian, as other post-Movement poets in England have done, Ash has often been attracted to what might be thought of as ‘useless splendour’. In his earlier poem ‘The Other Great Composers’, he eulogizes the unrealizable music of these esoteric figures: ‘It is impossible to say that they were wrong:/the music is unproved and undisproved; their operas/require cathedrals in which the angels and grotesques/come alive for one scene only; their fugues and

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<sup>53</sup> Ash, ‘The Tower of Alyattes’, *In the Wake of the Day*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010), 33.

toccatas/demand the emergence of a pianist eight-handed'.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere in 'The Women of Kars', this instinct can be perceived, as we have already seen, in the exorbitant nature of the narrativized journey itself, with its digressions and absence of resolution. But it is also present in the narrator's penchant for antique ornament and obscure systems, things superseded because they do not facilitate efficiency and smoothness. In regard to ornament we have the artisanal designs: 'composite piers and softly ogival arches'.<sup>55</sup> In the case of obscure systems, it is revealing that the metaphor that Ash reaches for, when contemplating the 'torpor' of Kars, is 'an inscription in cuneiform,/Which the custodian will translate for you/Into another language you also do not/Understand'.<sup>56</sup> And as we have observed above, in the richer diction of 'The Women of Kars', there is little in common with the language of pragmatism. It languishes on detail, exuberantly flaunts its specialisation and pedantry. Also, in its *configural* quality, in its syntax, individual passages stretch out over generous periods that demonstrate unconcern for more pressing communication. In all of these aspects, there is an opposition to that which is purely *useful*.

Intimately related to this tendency is recourse to the pre-industrial past. Above, I suggested that Ash valorises the picturesque for some quality that is missing from what he has left behind, while earlier, via Gilpin, I identified 'variegated or textured surfaces' as one of its salient properties. In the places Ash portrays, I would suggest this texturedness is congruous with the visible signs of historical narrative, with the 'antiquity' Hawthorne thought missing from the American landscape.

Discussing his early 'Byzantine'-period poem 'The Anatolikon' in an interview with the Istanbul poet George Messo, he notes that the piece, written in New York, was 'full of a

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<sup>54</sup> Ash, 'The Other Great Composers', *Disbelief*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), 13.

<sup>55</sup> Ash, 'The Women of Kars', 41.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

yearning to be in this Old World, the Eastern Mediterranean and to drop shopping malls, and delis and whatever else'.<sup>57</sup> Later in the same interview he states:

I am very much concerned with time and how time affects us and how people lived in the past and how finding something beautiful that is thousands of years old and perfectly preserved can actually make you feel as if you can touch the past, which is especially true of the Byzantine sites I was talking about. [...] You enter a Byzantine town of the fifth or sixth century and everything is still there, the churches, the houses two or three stories high, the porticos, the olive presses, the wine presses, the baths, everything.<sup>58</sup>

These admissions run porously between Ash's poems and his reflections to comprise an overall perspective that I will attempt to convey here. With 'everything still there' in these faded towns and ruins, there is preserved a certain sense of place, of its history and custom, that is eroded in the perpetually remodelled centres of global modernity. What Ash seems to be drawn to – beyond 'the shopping malls' – are the delineations and textures of places that bear the marks of their individual histories, rather than the shifting planes of what Marc Augé refers to as *non-places*. While specifying that his formulation is not absolute, Augé posits the notion of *anthropological place* 'as any space where inscriptions of the social bond [...] or collective history can be seen', while offering that *non-places* are 'spaces of circulation, consumption and communication', 'bearing the stamp of the ephemeral and the transient.'<sup>59</sup> The proliferation of *non-places*, in Marc Augé's thinking, leads to a decentring of the individual, who is 'less and

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<sup>57</sup> Ash, 'John Ash in Conversation', interview by George Messo, George Messo's Blog, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <https://georgemesso.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/john-ash-in-conversation>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, (New York: Verso Books, 1995), VIII.

less sure [of] where they are.’<sup>60</sup> What Ash finds in the living artefacts of the ancient Byzantine towns and cities is a reminder of ‘a part of a civilization [he] was born into’ and ‘a sense of recognition’.<sup>61</sup> It would seem that Ash’s first exile, from the United Kingdom, has been followed by a second: from what Augé has termed ‘supermodernity’.

Augé’s formulation, though relative, is revealing within the narrower confines of this essay. Augé speaks of the ‘inscriptions’ of the ‘anthropological place’, which can be associated with the lineaments and texture found in the continuity of a past civilisation. This corresponds with the Anatolian landscape and ruined towns that Ash inhabits in his poems. With its fine detailing, a poem like ‘The Women of Kars’ posits an attitude where the past offers a sense of relation and purchase amidst the ephemeral. In its evocation of the variegated and textured – the composite architectures, the rich gloom of Kars’ ‘shabby patisserie’, the dramatic vistas – and its phrasal qualities, the poem builds a general morphology of precise features, rather than one that matches the slippery and changing surfaces of Augé’s supermodernity. In this sense, Ash’s enthusiastic orientation in Anatolia, in his life and poems, marks a resistance to the transience and ahistoricity of the growing *non-place*. In the opening lines of ‘The Women of Kars’, for example, Ash’s narrator is careful to demarcate the world he inhabits:

I have not been to Mardin, which everyone praises.  
Its houses of honey-coloured stone gaze out  
Over the immense, Mesopotamian plain –  
An ocean of earth that seems to swim in the light.  
Nor have I seen the shattered bridge of Hasankeyf,  
Capital of the illustrious Artukid princes,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>61</sup> Ash, ‘John Ash in Conversation’.

Which may soon be drowned. I had better hurry.  
It is already too late for Zeugma and Samosata.  
Then there is Abrahamic Urfa, seat  
Of the Abgarid kings, with its cave, and pools  
Stocked with sacred carp. When will I get there,  
And what is the best time to pay a visit? <sup>62</sup>

The exactitude of ‘Mardin’, ‘Hasankeyf’, ‘Artukid’, ‘Zeugma’ and ‘Samosata’ pins the poem with coordinates, with the sense that the narrator surveys a landscape (albeit a disparate one) of relatable parts. Each name evokes a history that, though complex and unstable, still accords with an imagining of geography as intimately related to its past. The careful inventorying – ‘Abrahamic Urfa, seat/Of the Abgarid kings, with its cave, and pools/Stocked with sacred carp’ – reveals an instinct to shade and adorn the landscape with the particular.<sup>63</sup> There is another note, too, beyond the gentle humour, in the almost incantatory listing of towns and ruins – ‘I have not been to Mardin’, ‘Nor have I seen the shattered bridge of Hasankeyf’ – that is like someone numbering treasured materials he doesn’t want to lose, as if this world of precise coordinates might slip into incomprehension and oblivion.<sup>64</sup> ‘Which may soon be drowned. I had better hurry’.<sup>65</sup>

Consistent with the proliferation of *non-places* is a loss of signification. As one’s orientation in the exterior environment is weakened, so the world of signs becomes unfixed. As the ‘inscriptions’ that demarcate the social and historical are overlaid with the ephemeral surfaces that characterize global modernity, so the sense of relation to the exterior world recedes into confusion and alienation. Writing on Christopher Middleton’s essay collection *The*

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<sup>62</sup> Ash, ‘The Women of Kars’, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

*Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, John Ash discusses the poet's invocation of 'pre-industrial artefacts' in a manner that sheds light on his own recourse to the Old World's antiquity and picturesque:

The poet-as-artificer stands opposed to 'a nightmare of designification' and a fetishization of commodities based on 'yawning indifference – or tight-lipped hostility – toward a world of objects that confuses our perception and multiplies the signs of our alienation'. Middleton's invocation of the 'intrinsic virtues of pre-industrial artefacts' is not, in the end, escapist or nostalgic. It is a standard by which he measures a loss of meaning.<sup>66</sup>

In their careful delineation of Anatolia's richly-historied landscapes and ruins, Ash's poems resist this 'nightmare of designification'. But as he points out elsewhere in the essay, the poet who valorises aspects of the past must be careful not to replace 'a myth of progress with a myth of atavism'.<sup>67</sup> This brings the discussion to my earlier observation that, by illuminating certain qualities of this older world, Ash's Byzantine poems throw into relief its opposite. While ruminating on antiquity and manifesting an elegiac, lost sensibility, they reveal the present 'configuration' through its difference. His excursions in Anatolia are able to reveal a contrast: 'a standard by which he measures a loss of meaning.' As Ash says of Middleton in the same article: 'He refers frequently to the past – a realm full of objects and resonances that imply values – but his chief concern is with the future: [...] 'What is this marvel on which we might take hold before it abandons us, whose disappearance we must resist?''<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ash, 'The Poet's Grandmother and other dilemmas'.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Many of Ash's later poems are records of ostensibly lived journeys and encounters – a mimesis of experience. However, there is still something of what Robert Sheppard identifies, in earlier collections, as 'the authentic whiff of 'aestheticism''.<sup>69</sup> In his review of *The Goodbyes*, he notes how, in one poem, 'Early Views of Manchester and Paris: Third View', 'what delights Ash in the post-industrial, post-imperial landscape is precisely its stagy and incongruous artificiality'.<sup>70</sup> In the later Byzantine poems, this staginess is present, not only in the drama of the terrain, but in the exaggerated air with which Ash's narrator colours his travelogues. In the opening section of 'The Women of Kars', when listing places he hasn't yet visited, each one is lauded with a few outstanding features, like faraway demesnes in a fairy-tale: 'Capital of the illustrious Artukid princes'.<sup>71</sup> In one spot, there were 'impassioned symposia' – a similarly fantastic prospect.<sup>72</sup> Then, while checking-in at the hotel in Kars, he found that 'the manager's air/Of bearded despondency' 'brought to mind/The moralisings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn' – a humorous characterisation that lends him a literariness some distance from the 'naturalistic'.<sup>73</sup> Although not as accented as before, Ash's earlier distaste for naturalistic-realism reveals itself in the imaginative licence, the elaborations and forays. It is there in the complex, disjunctive similes: 'torpor like an inscription in cuneiform,/Which the custodian will translate for you/Into another language you also do not/Understand'.<sup>74</sup> In these passages, Ash renews our perception of the familiar, requires us to imagine further than the plainly correlative. Through these deliberately exaggerated impressions, Ash establishes an aestheticized version of place – where contours are accentuated and atmospheres heightened. Kars and its landscape serve as an extension of his sensibility.

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<sup>69</sup> Sheppard, 'Unknowable Symphony'.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ash 'The Women of Kars', 36.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



Here, though, is a potential problem: as ‘The Women of Kars’ mirrors a travelogue, it cannot attain formal and imaginative autonomy to the degree permitted in some earlier poems. Following Herbert Marcuse, Sheppard notes that the ‘modern aestheticism’ in *The Goodbyes* uses ‘autonomy from the entailments of the social world as a radical critique of it’.<sup>75</sup> In ‘The Women of Kars’ and the more direct travel poems, while they posit an uncommon richness, they do so by using materials from a real place. What is more, those materials belong to a culture that is ‘foreign’ to Ash. When asked, by the Istanbul poet George Messo, if he felt that imaginative distance might legitimise appropriating another country’s cultural past, Ash answered:

I don’t feel that I’m appropriating a cultural history of Anatolia or Istanbul because [...] it has contributed so much to what we laughingly call Western European civilization that it’s a part of a civilization I was born into. I mean, you could regard my coming here as a search for the roots of the civilization I was born into. It began here. Virtually nothing I encounter in Anatolia strikes me as foreign. I have a sense of recognition rather than a sense of strangeness or orientalism.<sup>76</sup>

In the end, this is perhaps not quite enough of a justification. This narrow study will not pass judgement on whether or not a writer might take a foreign place and its history as inspiration. But it will note that there are qualities in Ash’s poems that temper the worst of orientalist appropriation. Although Ash admires and aestheticizes the picturesque ruins and landscape, there is a porousness in his work that means that he rarely straightens out a place at the cost of its inhabitants:

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<sup>75</sup> Sheppard, ‘Unknowable Symphony’.

<sup>76</sup> Ash, ‘John Ash in Conversation’.

Feeling somewhat bewildered, a not unpleasant  
Sensation when one has just arrived in  
An interesting place, I stopped to ask directions  
Outside a mobile phone store. At once,  
A young man rushed out and exclaimed:  
'What are you looking for? I can help you!'  
He was a student of literature. Had he read *Kar*?  
No, but his friends had, and they didn't like it. They said:  
'Kars is not like that. We are not like that.'  
But perhaps they were wrong. He would decide for himself.  
Then he asked: 'What do you think of Kars?'  
And I said that it seemed like a very pleasant town.<sup>77</sup>

There is something almost implausible in this sudden apparition of a 'student of literature', ready to proffer an opinion on Pamuk's novel, so that it raises suspicions as to whether Ash has positioned him as a textual device. However, whether it represents a 'real' encounter or not, this exchange serves as a corrective to Ash's overarching perspective. In registering the student's friends' assertion that 'Kars is not like that. We are not like that', Ash demonstrates self-consciousness in regard to his position as foreign observer.<sup>78</sup> In this instance, where the inhabitants of Kars contradict a literary impression of their home,<sup>79</sup> a note of uncertainty is introduced in relation to an 'accurate' rendering of it, and, by extension, to the version we receive from Ash. It is a moment of indirect criticism that permits him to continue to admire the scenery with his authority gently, necessarily, undermined. Moments like this are important

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<sup>77</sup> Ash, 'The Women of Kars', 37.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Albeit from Pamuk – a fellow countryman but still remote in his cosmopolitanism.

in relation to the rest of the poem, as they interrupt what might otherwise be an aestheticized portrait of the landscape and its necropoli, with little concern for those for whom life goes on differently.

This passage also reveals the capaciousness of Ash's register. The ease of movement, between baroque description to dialogic limpidity in this case, is a means by which Ash can allow for 'intrusions' on his reflections. There is a flexibility that is able to incorporate the world outside of, say, architectural nomenclature and Byzantine fiefdoms to better accommodate the living, contingent parts that make up a place beyond the visitor's expectations. Whether that means the sudden appearance of the 'student of literature' outside a mobile phone shop or Celil's story about his grandmother's suspicion of medicine, the poems are better set to encompass the broader life of the region. This composite quality – the ability to shift and mingle different registers – has been a part of Ash's work for some time.<sup>80</sup> However, writing of a foreign country appears to have forced him to more flexibly encompass the *other's* speaking voice. To offset the centrality and certainty of his perspective, there are frequent interjections from local travelling companions and passers-by.

While the tendency in Ash favours the aesthetic over the demotic or prosaic elements of travel, in these later poems there is a more comfortable synthesis, an acknowledgement on his part that he occupies a remote and privileged position. There is a sense that humility, in the face of unknowable aspects of a foreign country, has softened Ash's more stringent aestheticism. The 'assiduously cultivated world of fictive stimulants', that the critic Stephen Clark identified in Ash, has opened to the contingencies of the foreign place.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> For example, see the early poem "Salon Pieces", in *The Bed & Other Poems*, (London: Oasis Books, 1981).

<sup>81</sup> Stephen Clark, "Uprooting the rancid stalk": transformations of Romanticism in Ashbery and Ash", in *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, ed. by Edward Larrissy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163.

This necessary decentring and uncertainty before the foreign is what Jeffrey Gray has termed ‘mastery’s end’ in his study of postcolonial-era travel poetry. The Western travel poet still receives myriad impressions, but no longer as the polestar of the world around them.<sup>82</sup>

To contextualise Ash’s Byzantine work, it is necessary to consider poets who have written of travel from a modern or postmodern Western perspective. More generally, though, it is impossible to consider Ash without reference to the poet who served as his early mentor: John Ashbery. In his criticism of Ash, *Uprooting the rancid stalk*, Stephen Clark is tempted to consider Ash as a ‘gratuitous duplication and junior partner’.<sup>83</sup> He points to the ‘slithering pronouns, opaque allusions, truncated narratives, elided tenses, ebullient cliché’ that Ash has copied studiously from the older poet.<sup>84</sup> In the case of Ash’s earlier poems, this is not inaccurate – there are occasions when his indebtedness to his mentor is overbearing.<sup>85</sup> It is also a comparison that Ash has seemed content with (‘what Ashbery does and what I do...’).<sup>86</sup> However, I believe it is a restrictive prism through which to view the bulk of even the earlier work – simply filing Ash under ‘Ashberyan’ is an obfuscation that leaves their individual characteristics unexamined. In parenthesis, I would argue, for instance, that there is an insistent rationalism in Ash’s earlier poems that differs from Ashbery’s more listless compositions; that Ash’s attention to England’s post-industrial landscapes has echoes in a tradition closer to home, sharing thematic concerns with ambitious mavericks like Roy Fisher; that his prose poems are best read in relation to French ‘modernists’, like Max Jacob and Francis Ponge. In the case of the Byzantine poems, Clark’s criticisms are much less apposite. Certainly, the ‘slithering

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<sup>82</sup> ‘Mastery’s end’ refers to American travel poets during the twentieth century experiencing all the stimuli of travel, but no longer assuming mastery of the foreign, in Jeffrey Gray, *Mastery’s End. Travel and Postwar American Poetry*, (Athens: University of Georgia, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> Clark, ‘Uprooting the rancid stalk’, 164.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>85</sup> A striking example of Ash’s indebtedness to Ashbery is in the poem “The Ungrateful Citizens” in *The Burnt Pages* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991) which mirrors the subject, form and tone of Ashbery’s “The Instruction Manual” in *Some Trees* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

pronouns' and 'ebullient clichés' have all but vanished as the early poems' decentralized speaker has been replaced by Ash's traveller, a more concrete presence who identifies with his observations. However, there are still some similarities with Ashbery, even if they have been diluted.

Regarding narrative, there is a correlation between Ash's circuitous 'movement' through the Byzantine terrain and the wide digressions of Ashbery's longer poems. Though Ash's narrative progress refers to the mimesis of a journey through the Turkish landscapes and Ashbery's to the record of a more abstracted consciousness, they both value digression. Then, the composite nature of Ash's register – its facility in encompassing both the elevated and prosaic, and the 'intrusions' of other voices – is still inflected by Ashbery. As Clark notes of Ashbery: 'no attempt is made to segregate the poetic from the prolix or demotic'.<sup>87</sup> However, rather than signalling the more radical polyphony and instability of the speaker as it does in Ashbery, the Byzantine poems maintain a more consolidated narrative voice, albeit one able to absorb and reflect the contingencies of a foreign place.

I would like to move on from Ashbery, as undue emphasis on this correlation would be unfair to these later poems which have established themselves beyond the early mentor. It is to another of the New York School that I would like to turn: Kenneth Koch. Koch, who is eulogized twice in *In the Wake of the Day*, shares Ash's enthusiasm for travel. Writing in *PN Review*, Brian Morton notes that: 'Koch makes it nakedly clear what has motivated [...] his travelling. He talks of going to China, 'Where were things I wanted to see but I hadn't known/I could get to with my physical presence/Which is everything, the reason for life'.<sup>88</sup> Aside from this fundamental zeal for the stimulus of travel, there is an aesthetic correlation. Here, in full, is Koch's 'Passing Time in Skansen', from *One Train* (1997):

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>88</sup> Brian Morton, 'Mondo This and That', review of *A Possible World*, by Kenneth Koch, *PN Review* 159, Volume 31, Number 1, September - October 2004, [http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=2155](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=2155).

I went dancing in Stockholm at a public dancing place  
Out-of-doors. It was a beautiful summer evening,  
Summer as it could only come in Sweden in nineteen-fifty.  
You had to be young to go there.  
Or maybe you could be old. But I didn't even see old people then.  
Humanity was divided into male and female, American and other, students  
and nonstudents, etcetera.  
The only thing that I could say in Swedish  
Was "Yog talar endast svenska"  
Which meant I speak only Swedish, whereas I thought it meant  
I DON'T speak Swedish.  
So the young ladies, delighted, talked to me very fast  
At which I smiled and understood nothing,  
Though sometimes I would repeat  
Yog talar endast svenska.  
The evening ended, my part of it did, when they started to do folk dances.  
I didn't even know how to look at them, though I tried to for a while.  
It was still light out though it was after eleven p.m.  
I got on some kind of streetcar that eventually stopped near my hotel.<sup>89</sup>

As with Ash's later poems, the mode is limpidly narrative, without much in the way of the disjunction found elsewhere in Koch's own work, or differently, in Ashbery or Frank O'Hara. Koch's long, commodious lines are especially useful for detailing travel impressions. Each is able to contain a single instant ('It was still light out though it was after eleven p.m.') in a

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<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Koch, 'Passing Time in Skansen', *One Train*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 5.

concatenation. Rather than concentrated meditation, where a single facet or abstraction is crystalized, Koch's poem facilitates the essaying forwards and backwards, in space and time, that comprises travel and travel's reflections. An excerpt from a longer poem of his, 'Currency', is more illustrative in this regard:

Here I am in Paris being miserably lonely. All the same.  
All the same even Amadis de Gaul knew when it was time to go home.  
When he had conquered his enemies.  
I have not yet conquered France.  
By the time I get close to it I think death may have conquered me.  
My first "moment" on French soil which is the soil of Normandy.  
The ship at Degrasse lands and I put down my foot  
On some sparsely grown grass mud that leads up to the platform where the train  
Is that will be taking me to Paris  
To Montparnasse its beds are its streets  
Its pillows the cafés [...] <sup>90</sup>

As with 'Passing Time in Skansen', the poem moves swiftly from one instance to the next – geographical (from Normandy to Montparnasse) and semantic (from the expatriate's loneliness to Amadis de Gaul). The prose line is able to accommodate all that the traveller might encounter – like Ash, the diction is broad, omnivorous. In place of a distilled lyricism, there is capaciousness. These characteristics appear to be integral to a particular seam of twentieth-century travel poetry, which Ash draws from.

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<sup>90</sup> Koch, 'Currency', *Selected Poems*, ed. Ron Padgett, (USA: The Library of America, 1998), 149-150.

Koch's fleet motion and breadth is prefigured in the work of two French writers of the early twentieth century who wrote substantial travel poems. The first, Blaise Cendrars, alive to the possibilities of transit afforded by fast trains and boats, is especially illustrative. In his long poem, 'Prose of the Transsiberian' (presented here in Walter Albert's English translation), great distances are covered, semantically and geographically.

At Chita we had a few days' rest

Five days stopover because of blocked tracks

We spent it with Monsieur Iankelevitch who wanted to

give me his only daughter in marriage.

Then the train took off again.

Now it was I who was at the piano and I had a raging toothache

When I want to I can still see that calm interior the father's

store and the eyes of the daughter who would come each

evening into my bed

Moussorgsky

And Hugo Wolf *lieder*

And Gobi sand dunes

And at Kailar a caravan of white camels [...] <sup>91</sup>

Though Cendrars's long poem mirrors the engine's inexorable forward motion, it shares an essential quality with Ash's and Koch's travelogues. Moving from the recollection of a 'stopover' in the remote Russian city of Chita and the 'calm interior of the father's/store and

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<sup>91</sup> Blaise Cendrars, 'Prose of the Transsiberian', trans. Walter Albert, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century French Poems*, ed. Stephen Romer, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 24.



the eyes of the daughter’, Cendrars’s narrator lists a string of redolent images.<sup>92</sup> Though they fly at us in the dreamlike, disassociated manner that is familiar to anyone who has passed in and out of wakefulness on a long journey, it is the poet’s impulse to enumerate them that is significant to my comparison. When Cendrars listlessly registers: ‘And Gobi sand dunes/And at Kailar a caravan of white camels’, it is this *And*, the conjunctive, that discloses an important feature in the travel poems considered here.<sup>93</sup> As Stephen Romer writes of Valery Larbaud in his introduction to Penguin’s *20<sup>th</sup>-Century French Poems*, the travel poet is always ‘*en route* for somewhere else’.<sup>94</sup> There is always another prospect, port town, mountain slope, carnival – another turn down an unknown street. In Larbaud’s nostalgic impressions, we find this essential architecture of the travel poem:

(An autumn morning, eight o’clock, and the beautiful soprano  
With violet eyes was singing in the next compartment.)  
And you, wide seats across which I saw Siberia go by, and  
the mountains of Samnium,  
Castille raw and flowerless, and the sea of Marmara under  
warm rain!<sup>95</sup>

In this short excerpt from Larbaud’s ‘Ode’, we see the conjunctive employed to link one scenic frame to the next, to maintain the sense of motion - ‘Castille raw and flowerless, and the sea of Marmara under/warm rain!’<sup>96</sup> Over the breadth of a collection, the inventorying of all the memorable images of travel displays a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with stasis. In Ash’s ‘The

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Stephen Romer, ed., ‘Introduction’ to *20<sup>th</sup>-Century French Poems*, XXIV.

<sup>95</sup> Valery Larbaud, ‘Ode’, trans. Alan Jenkins, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century French Poems*, 47.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Women of Kars', this sentiment is articulated acutely in the passage where the narrator approaches the city of Ani: 'It seemed/That I lived in a permanent state of suspension,/Always hoping that I might arrive *there*,/Wherever that might be'.<sup>97</sup> As we've seen, Ani is slowly revealed as the *there* in Ash's imagining. But rather than satisfying his need for travel, it is merely another pause in a series. Of course, the place he is seeking will never be arrived at: it is the possibility of the undiscovered, the unrealized, that lures the traveller and the writer onwards into the journey and the process of creation. The journey in 'The Women of Kars' culminates with an image:

On our way back to Kars, Celil spoke with  
Deep affection of his Armenian grandmother  
Who spoke fluent Russian, and, during a long  
And dignified life, never knew a day's ill-health,  
Regarding all modern prescriptions with perfect disdain,  
And I thought of a photograph of the women of Kars,  
Taken, I believe, at some time shortly before 1921,  
Which I had found one humid and oppressive  
Summer afternoon in an obscure New York  
Library. Magnificent in long, dark robes, veils,  
And gold diadems with pendants, they resembled  
Heroines from the age of Agamemnon.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ash, 'The Women of Kars', 40.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

It would appear that this chance photograph has, in some way, precipitated the journey itself: beguiling, finally inscrutable, it serves as a synecdoche for the larger elsewhere that is sought but never arrived at. The enigma of the image – redolent with place, but never disclosing itself fully – mirrors the horizon line that the traveller heads for and that, necessarily, is always withheld. How is this achieved? The image, even in description, refrains from total signification. Most immediately, the women evoke a distant, fuliginous classical age. The name of Agamemnon, as the very last word of the poem, is especially impactful. The journey ends on these exotic syllables, which recall the breadth of Homer’s world – its ancient wars and, saliently here, its long journeys. Then, as we recall that it is a photograph of the early twentieth century, we see the women as living anachronisms at a moment of great change. The robes, diadems and pendants, emblemizing superannuated rituals and hierarchies, indicate their remoteness from the technological upheaval of the period. Then, as with the memory that has invoked them, we associate their heroic posture with Celil’s admirable grandmother who ‘regarded all modern prescriptions with perfect disdain’. Finally, as these meanings collapse into one another, the individual women in the photograph are lost in time: their essence eludes us. By concluding the journey with the polysemic image and not a summative statement, Ash reveals that the allure of travel is in its potentiality – that there is always something else to be witnessed, another *And...*

This open-endedness is where my analysis closes. In the separate aspects of Ash’s Byzantine poems considered here, his subtle criticism asserts itself consistently. As a political project it is undogmatic, understated, but insistent. Its target is always the ‘terrible simplifications’ that Christopher Middleton warns against in *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*.<sup>99</sup> In their digressiveness, the poems advocate a ruminative freedom that quietly subverts the

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<sup>99</sup> Christopher Middleton, *The Pursuit of the Kingfisher*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), quoted in Ash, ‘The Poet’s Grandmother and other dilemmas’.

itineraries of a commercial Western culture. In their valorisation of the surprising, irregular Anatolian scenery and ruins, they level a complaint against an instrumentalising tendency in modernity. And the poems insist on the historical, on the value of historical knowledge in the face of its erasure. They are able to stimulate us to reflect on the gulf between Ash's world – a place that exists as sensibility, as much as geography – and the one we inhabit.

## *Club of Rome:*

### **Actualizing History in Durs Grünbein**

Durs Grünbein, born in Dresden in 1962, is widely considered to be the preeminent German poet since reunification. He is the author of twenty collections of poetry and eleven books of critical and reflective prose. Available in English translation are *Ashes for Breakfast: Selected Poems* (2005, translated by Michael Hofmann), *Descartes' Devil: Three Meditations* (2010, translated by Anthea Bell) and *The Bars of Atlantis: Selected Essays* (2010, translated by Michael Hofmann). His poems are protean in subject and shaped by an urbane and sardonic humour. There is variation in form – the earlier work is characterized by fracture, in line and syntax, while Grünbein deploys more traditional constraints in later poems. He has written extended sequences, with varying degrees of experimentation, as well as collections of miscellanea.

As Helen Vendler notes, 'Clio [...] is Grünbein's primary muse.'<sup>100</sup> Throughout his oeuvre, history is a central concern. In this discussion, I will consider how he has displaced a sense of catastrophe, derived, by his own admission, from epochal events of the German twentieth century, onto the historical scenes he depicts. In Grünbein's case, this sense of catastrophe arises from a collective memory of the destruction of Dresden and the later decline of the GDR. I will consider how he has transposed this theme onto the more ancient collapses of Rome. While noting the 'reiterative' quality of this displacement, the emphasis will be on the poems' imaginative achievements. Drawing on the notion of 'presence', I will argue that Grünbein instils these historical scenes with a somatic quality that connects them to the intimate

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<sup>100</sup> Helen Vendler, 'Oblivion City', review of *Ashes for Breakfast*, by Durs Grünbein, *New Republic*, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008, <https://newrepublic.com/article/62492/oblivion-city>.

experience of the reader. Referring to Gaston Bachelard's formulation of the poetic image, I will consider how Grünbein's poems 'actualize' their historical scenarios. Lastly, I will discuss the challenge presented when evoking a 'polyphonic' historical moment.

As my grasp of German is insufficient, I will be reflecting on Michael Hofmann's translations in *Ashes for Breakfast*, a selection that spans over a decade of Grünbein's writing. With this in mind, it is important to note that when I refer to Grünbein, I speak rather of this composite text, constructed by Hofmann from Grünbein. This discussion, then, is a practitioner's response to a poet encountered in the only manner possible for them. However, it was a crucial encounter in the development of my own manuscript – to dismiss the translated text on account of it being translated would mean a lacuna in this thesis. In justifying this response, I refer to Helen Vendler's own 'encounter' with Grünbein:

With Grünbein, as with other poets whose language I did not know – Miłosz, Szymborska, Tranströmer – I have been compelled to write on the principle that those poets were so striking, even in translation, that some proportion of their poetic qualities could be described and investigated. Many things from foreign poems can be imported into consciousness – montages of images, epigrams, historical panoramas, allegorical emblems, passages of personal distress – and English-speaking poets have often owed significant developments in their own writing to works they cannot read in the original (see Seamus Heaney's *The Haw Lantern*, visibly influenced by Eastern European poetry).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Before considering individual poems, it is necessary to reflect on the wider context of Grünbein's work. In his 1995 laudatio at the Georg Büchner prize ceremony, Heiner Müller noted that the 'secret of Grünbein's productivity is his insatiable curiosity about catastrophes, of which this century has plenty to offer, under the stars and under the microscope.'<sup>102</sup> For Grünbein, two of these cataclysms appear to have shaped his imaginative world particularly. The first, woven deeply into Grünbein's story, is *Die Wende* or the Turn – the collapse of the old East German government and the Berlin wall. Although ostensibly a welcome event for the young poet – who was twenty-seven when the Wall fell – the sense of a grand failure that permeates his poems of fated Roman campaigns, deranged emperors and ruined Pompeii, corresponds with this disintegration. Helen Vendler, reviewing *Ashes for Breakfast*, notes that the 'early poems are pervaded by the deterioration of East Germany'.<sup>103</sup> As we shall see, this deterioration reaches far beyond his early, sardonic vignettes of life in the late GDR.

The second important catastrophe, is the fire-bombing of Dresden by British and American aircraft in February 1945. Though the event precedes Grünbein's lifetime, the collective memory of the city's destruction presses on his poems, essays and public statements. In an interview with Michael Eskin and Christopher Young, Grünbein stated 'When I was younger, I spoke about Dresden in a relatively raw, distanced tone: most of my rather sarcastic views on the history of the twentieth century come from this period. The older I've become, the more consciously I've acknowledged Dresden as a personal loss.'<sup>104</sup> Earlier he notes 'At some point, I realised there's a particularly vehement culture of memory in Dresden. Other German cities were completely destroyed, too, but only in Dresden do you have this topos of

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<sup>102</sup> Heiner Müller, 'Portrait des Künstlers als junger Grenzhund', in Durs Grünbein, *Den Körper zerbrechen. Rede zur Entgegennahme des Georg-Büchner-Preises 1995. Mit der Laudatio 'Portrait des Künstlers als junger Grenzhund' von Heiner Müller*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), quoted in 'Durs Grünbein and the Wende', by Christopher Young, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, eds. Michael Eskin, Karen Leeder and Christopher Young, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 11.

<sup>103</sup> Vendler, 'Oblivion City'.

<sup>104</sup> Grünbein, 'An Interview with Durs Grünbein', by Michael Eskin and Christopher Young, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, 228.

inconsolability, of absolute annihilation.’<sup>105</sup> This ‘topos’ emerges in Grünbein’s Dresden cycle ‘Europe After the Last Rains’, which details the event, its historical context and aftermath, in which the writer was born. Invoking Max Ernst’s devastated landscape, *Europe After the Rain II*, the series depicts a world after catastrophe. He returns to the city of his youth, but it has disappeared. ‘Memory has no real estate ... no city/where you come home and know where you are’.<sup>106</sup> In another poem in the sequence, Grünbein evokes the death of his grandmother, Dora, in the bombing raid: ‘And when the third wave came, she was walking/Calmly in the line of refugees, on tottering legs/To the afterlife.’<sup>107</sup> The erasure of Dresden remains as a wound.

Writing of Robert Lowell’s historical poems, Jonathan Veitch notes a ‘reiterative typology’ with the ‘obsessive quality of a tic which finds in the costumes, props, and dramatis personae of ‘History’ the opportunity for an exploration of the Self.’<sup>108</sup> Rather than the amplified autobiography that characterizes Lowell’s historical poems – which are described by Veitch as ‘Oedipal’ expressions – Grünbein’s more ‘objective’ depictions of historical scenarios reflect a different kind of ‘tic’. Similar to Lowell, there is the ‘reiterative’ quality, where central themes are revisited through historical prisms. As with Lowell, whose own historical poems draw from a family drama, there is a centripetal force in Grünbein’s work, whose nucleus is this sense of the post-catastrophic, derived from the epochal events described. Grünbein’s historical poems can be conceived as the site of transference. As he has commented in regard to his poems’ subjects: ‘[psychological] diseases manifest themselves when certain memories are forced to return over and over. The writer has a similar disease, but he’s aware

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Durs Grünbein, ‘Europe After the Last Rains’, *Ashes for Breakfast: Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hofmann, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 267.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>108</sup> Jonathan Veitch, ‘Moondust in the Prowling Eye’: The ‘History’ Poems of Robert Lowell, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 426, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208478>.



of it and tries to work with it.’<sup>109</sup> Whilst some of Grünbein’s important ‘memories’ are *collective*, rather than lived, he confirms this reiterative quality in his work.

I offer this psychoanalytical perspective as framing for the link between the integral events of Grünbein’s life and their thematic echo in his historical poems, not as a focused ‘interpretation’ of the work. It serves to illuminate something of their broader psychic impetus, rather than as a method through which to extrapolate biographical significance from specific images and metaphors. In opposition to the ‘psychoanalytical’ method, Gaston Bachelard has noted: ‘the psychoanalyst will abandon ontological investigation of the image, to dig into the past of man. He sees and points out the poet’s secret sufferings. He explains the flower by the fertilizer.’<sup>110</sup> I look to avoid similar projection in my close reading of Grünbein’s work. This requires the acceptance of two divergent points, which Bachelard reconciles in his discussion of poetics. Though he states that we ‘cannot disregard the deep psychological reality of the processes of sublimation’,<sup>111</sup> his conviction is that ‘the causes of the psychoanalyst do not allow us to predict the poetic image in its newness.’<sup>112</sup> While this study traces a line from Grünbein’s ‘interest’ in the catastrophes of his time to their resonance in his historical portraits, it also emphasizes the autonomous, unpredictable nature of the poetic imagination.

To locate the particular tenor of Grünbein’s post-catastrophic mood, I will first consider, in brief, two poems that depict a place and circumstance close to the writer. Then a comparison will be made with one of Grünbein’s historical portraits. This first example, is poem ‘VIII’ from the ‘Europe After the Last Rains’ cycle:

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<sup>109</sup> Grünbein, ‘An Interview with Durs Grünbein’, 221.

<sup>110</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) XXX.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, XXXI.

Nothing veiled anymore, history,  
The hot, dusty wind that eradicates,  
And I care. And in the name of what happened there  
One gives up the Vermeer (burned)

And the Bach (disappeared).  
Was it worth it? That whole cities,  
From which the death transports rolled  
Became wastelands on Lethe's banks.

The plowing is done with bombs here, and no farmer  
Is familiar. Dandelion  
Chews up the figures on the frieze.  
What does the mole care about the damage he does?<sup>113</sup>

This short poem is illustrative of Grünbein's Dresden. It is both an elegy for vanished civilisation ('One gives up the Vermeer (burned)/And the Bach (disappeared)') and a rebuke to the demagoguery that brought about its destruction ('Was it worth it?').<sup>114</sup> It is as succinct an expression of the 'topos of inconsolability' as Grünbein has written. The last stanza, particularly, evokes the sense of ruin and finality visited on the city. High civilisation is abandoned to insensate nature. The 'Dandelion/Chews up the figures on the frieze.'<sup>115</sup> Then,

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<sup>113</sup> Grünbein, 'Europe After the Last Rains', 281.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

as with the blind impulses that contributed to Dresden's erasure: 'What does the mole care about the damage he does?'<sup>116</sup>

Earlier in the cycle, Grünbein depicts the post-war city before the *Wende*. This is number 'V' from 'Europe After the Last Rains':

And at night the silent German city,  
austerely north-facing station,  
using street lamps sparingly as question marks  
  
and behind every sentence a period – how many watts?  
“What became of Xanadu post-Kubla Khan?”  
“Who are these gray people, scrabbling around like mice?”

Like Islamabad-on-the-Elbe ... The fantasy mosque  
puffed out its cheeks and summoned – from the abattoir turrets  
to the big garden – the faithful to the fast.

You hadn't left the station before you heard the first “*Nee*”  
and saw giraffe necks, long floodlight stanchions,  
craning peculiarly, hunching round the soccer stadium.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

The Blue Wonder was the name of a bridge upstream,  
a somewhat unmotivated construction. Still, it stood there,  
handy and cast iron, useful in the postwar jungle of the city.

Along the scuffed banks, worn brown in parts,  
you still encountered massy baroque. Some souls might find  
their personal Angkor Wat there in the chilly moonlight.<sup>117</sup>

Through these tercets, twentieth-century Dresden is overlaid with oriental architectures – the ‘austerely north-facing station’ becomes, at various points, a hallucinatory Xanadu and Angkor Wat.<sup>118</sup> In this monochrome state, Dresden elicits reveries of a chimerical elsewhere – ‘Some souls might find/their personal Angkor Wat there in the chilly moonlight.’<sup>119</sup> Prompted by the domes of Yenidze, the Orientalized cigarette factory (‘the fantasy mosque’), these reveries elaborate in the cold air.<sup>120</sup> But underneath these apparitions, the real city appears in the aftermath of its great trauma: “‘What became of Xanadu post-Kubla Khan?’/‘Who are these gray people, scabbling around like mice?’”<sup>121</sup> The ‘gray people’ in their privation are concurrently the citizens of Dresden and those in the ruins of Xanadu, after the invading Ming had put it to the torch. Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’, with its subtitle ‘A Vision in a Dream’, will always be invoked by the mention of Xanadu. Here Dresden’s fate is mingled with the Khan’s opulent summer residence and the poet’s vanished dream. ‘What became of Xanadu post-Kubla Khan?’ the voice asks.<sup>122</sup> In Grünbein’s city, a romantic reverie like Coleridge’s has been

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

extirpated by the ‘abattoir turrets’.<sup>123</sup> The ‘silent German city’ is no longer the splendid baroque ensemble that was compared to Venice by travellers. It is worn and grey, a ‘postwar jungle’, where the reflective might find solace in remnants of ‘massy baroque’.<sup>124</sup>

In both excerpts from ‘Europe After the Last Rains’, Grünbein depicts his home, shaken and in a state of disrepair: the ‘silent German city’ with its fragments of the old world.<sup>125</sup> This ‘tenor’ is present throughout his poems on the subject – it is the emptiness in the wake of catastrophe and the decline and shabbiness of the present.

In regard to this last piece (‘V’), there is a deeper engagement with history. Rather than a linear, contemporaneous picture of the German post-war landscape – in a similar fashion to Wolfgang Hilbig’s story collection *The Sleep of the Righteous*, for example – Grünbein reaches for a synthesis of remote past and present.<sup>126</sup> This poem, with its elision of the giraffe necks (from some ancient menagerie, considering the rest of the poem) and the ‘long floodlight stanchions’, is where Grünbein’s two worlds meet.<sup>127</sup> It is in poems like this, where another writer might have narrowed their sphere of reference to more recent symbolic events, that Grünbein’s historical range is evident. The poem is an exposition of his thinking – the past is continuous with the present, each amplifying the other. Dresden’s palimpsestic topography makes transparent the subtler interplay between past and present that characterizes his ‘portraits’ of older civilisations.

By comparison, I would like to consider a poem that situates itself *within* the ancient world, rather than simply referring to it. From *Ashes for Breakfast*, this is ‘Club of Rome’.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Hilbig depicts the everyday lives of postwar Germans, on both sides of the divide, in atmospheric fragments. Wolfgang Hilbig, *The Sleep of the Righteous*, trans. Isabel Fargo Cole, (California: Two Lines Press, 2015).

<sup>127</sup> Grünbein, ‘Europe After the Last Rains’, 275.

Deleted Carthages behind them, and sheer ahead of them  
Blinding white Alps, elephants' graveyards—  
Wasn't the Roman a survivor, from whom time  
Fled eastwards?

Underfoot were catacombs in whose dripping tunnels  
Dwelt fanatics, stoking the fires of hell to boil  
Their once-a-day porridge; fear of the barbarians still  
Worked like a charm.

Vases and staircases gleamed more brightly  
For every chip in the marble. The threshold creaked  
Like the mattresses in the brothels. Enemies sprang up  
Like mushrooms in the forests.

Lunar shadows lengthened to cover the rank expanse  
Of the gardens. Hogs were fattened  
On the sarcophagi. The water supply was laced with blood  
From the public latrines.

Only a few admirable oldsters went on  
Gleefully buying up their neighbours' erstwhile estates. Their speciality  
Was the seamless alternation between laughter and tears; their refrain,  
"Après nous—etcetera."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Grünbein, 'Club of Rome', *Ashes for Breakfast*, 197.

From the same collection as ‘Europe After the Last Rains’ (*Nach Den Satiren*, 1999), there is a subtle difference in tone. Grünbein’s grim humour is evident in this portrait of Roman decline, while, inevitably, there is a rawer, more sombre note in the Dresden cycle. There are still moments of sardonicism in the Dresden poems, however – the description of Loschwitz Bridge, ‘The Blue Wonder’, as a ‘somewhat unmotivated construction’ and the pointed ‘how many watts?’ asked of the street lamps in the East German state, for instance.<sup>129</sup> His humour – a morbid pleasure – betrays his ‘fascination’ with the catastrophic.

Both Grünbein’s twentieth-century Dresden and the Roman Empire are in a state of deterioration. In the Dresden cycle, this is embodied by the signs of material disrepair: ‘Dandelion/Chews up the figures on the frieze’,<sup>130</sup> the ‘scuffed banks, worn brown in parts’, then the ruins of ‘massy baroque’<sup>131</sup> (indeed, Grünbein has been censured by the German press for referring to Dresden as ‘Barockwrack an der Elbe’ – ‘Baroque wreck on the Elbe’).<sup>132</sup> In the Roman poem, this deterioration is a forewarning of what is to come, rather than invoking the aftermath of disaster, as with the former. ‘Vases and marble gleam more brightly/For every chip in the marble’ – Rome in its final stages, chipped and worn, is lustrous.<sup>133</sup> Then, ‘Lunar shadows lengthened’, portentously, ‘to cover the rank expanse/Of the gardens.’<sup>134</sup> This ‘rank expanse’, as well as being the unkempt, dank flora of the emperors’ and citizens’ gardens, also suggests the wilderness of the ‘barbarians’ at the fringes of the Empire. ‘Civilisation’ is threatened by disorder, which echoes the broken friezes and the tunnelling mole, at the end of ‘VIII’.

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<sup>129</sup> Grünbein, ‘Europe After the Last Rains’, 275.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>132</sup> Grünbein, ‘An Interview with Durs Grünbein’, 228.

<sup>133</sup> Grünbein, ‘Club of Rome’, 197.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

Vitality, beyond the material damage, there is a wider sense of enervation in the two distant worlds – post-war Dresden and late Empire. In ‘V’, there is the German city’s lonely gloom, in which life has been constrained. Grünbein has described his emergence from this ‘post-war jungle’ after the *Wende*, as ‘bringing an end to my own *Grey Period*.’<sup>135</sup> His Dresden is a submerged, muted, fatigued place. Differently, in ‘Club of Rome’, the weakened Empire continues in suspended animation before its collapse. This is evoked with dark comedy in the final quatrain: ‘Only a few admirable oldsters went on/Gleefully buying up their neighbours’ erstwhile estates. Their speciality/Was the seamless alternation between laughter and tears; their refrain, /“Apres nous–etcetera.”’<sup>136</sup> The listless, schizophrenic malaise of these ‘admirable oldsters’ suggests that this decline is as much moral, internal, as it is brought upon them by the advancing Goths. Dresden is the ‘evidence’ of a different type of malaise. In both cases, a catastrophe has occurred.

Contemplating Grünbein’s representation of ancient and modern cities, Andrew Webber describes the poet’s ‘troubled fantasy conurbation’ of differently ruined places.<sup>137</sup> Considering the poet’s ‘My Babylonish Brain’ essay, he notes how Grünbein conceives ‘the mind of the writer [...] as an allegorical place of collapsed architecture, as well as discursive correspondence and confusion.’<sup>138</sup> This is an accurate summation of Grünbein’s transposition of his modern calamities onto the ancient world – inexact, interrelated. His poems evoke a type of *ur*-disaster, where the ‘collapsed architecture’ might be a Roman villa or an industrial dockland. What is evinced in these comparisons is that there is a recognisable ‘tenor’ in Grünbein’s poems – the post-catastrophic.

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<sup>135</sup> Christopher Young, ‘Durs Grünbein and the *Wende*’, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, 13.

<sup>136</sup> Grünbein, ‘Club of Rome’, 197.

<sup>137</sup> Andrew Webber, ‘*Wunderblock*. Durs Grünbein and the Urban Arts of Memory’, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, 151.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*



The remoteness of the historical subject is a challenge for the poet who depicts specific figures or scenes from the past. In his interview (in English) with Michael Eskin and Christopher Young, Grünbein states: ‘I don’t write historical novels – if I write about Descartes, then it’s because I want to recall the immediacy of the past, not to produce a costume drama. My work is about actualizing the past, which is [...] an exchange of time – I go and fetch it quickly.’<sup>139</sup> There are two operative words in this assertion. Firstly, Grünbein speaks of the ‘immediacy’ of the past, which implies an experience of it as dynamic and unmediated as possible. Secondly, more boldly, he claims his poems seek to ‘actualize’ history. The dictionary definition of ‘actualize’ is: ‘to make actual or real; turn into action or fact.’<sup>140</sup> This aspiration corresponds with the notion of ‘presence’ in Grünbein’s work. In her essay on Grünbein’s travel poetry, ‘A Poetics of Presence: Travel Cycles in *Aroma* and *Lob des Taifuns*’, Ruth J. Owen investigates the ‘impact of foreign places on the body, voice and language’ in the two sequences mentioned.<sup>141</sup> She notes that the places Grünbein documents – Rome and Japan – are ‘written viscerally, deploying a poetics of presence that takes the body skating along the surface of the here-and-now, propelled by the human body’s sensory perceptions.’<sup>142</sup> In one example, Owen observes how his *Aroma* sequence ‘evokes the alien dust of Rome as the taste of history, registered on the body by a furry tongue.’<sup>143</sup> I contend that much of Grünbein’s work aspires to this ‘presence’ – he is a poet of aromas, textures, colours, the business of bodies. His historical poems are no exception. When Grünbein speaks of ‘an exchange of time’, he refers to the immediate ‘present’ of the poem, where events situated far into the past are ‘actualized’ through sensory impressions.<sup>144</sup> He states: ‘Images, words, tone and meter – these, as far as

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<sup>139</sup> Grünbein, ‘An Interview with Durs Grünbein’, 227.

<sup>140</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. ‘actualize’, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2017, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/actualize>.

<sup>141</sup> Ruth J. Owen, ‘A Poetics of Presence. Travel Cycles in *Aroma* and *Lob des Taifuns*’, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, 181.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>144</sup> Grünbein, ‘An Interview with Durs Grünbein’, 227.

possibly reduced and isolated are the elements [of this alchemy]. With their help the poem [...] becomes a chunk of embodied time, visible, palpable, almost a thing itself, able to enter into combinations with other things in various ages.’<sup>145</sup> In this context, his ‘visible, palpable’ ‘thing itself’ is the successful imagining of the past moment, brought to the reader’s sensory apparatus through the word, ‘that most shopworn of all ingredients of art’.<sup>146</sup> In his essay, ‘My Babylonish Brain’, there is a passage encapsulating this notion. He proclaims of poetry:

Whatever it produces, a sigh, a physical agitation, an epiphany, or an abrupt projection of a scene – until the very end there is a sense of the how incorporating the why. It lulls you, then, even as it concentrates thought and returns to each word its semantic primogeniture. It hushes the outside world, the domination of the present, by sensitizing you to another, kaleidoscopic present [...] so that only the intense is actual and reality becomes a somatic category.<sup>147</sup>

To ‘actualize’ their historical circumstances, Grünbein’s poems must succeed in sustaining a present that brings sensory and emotive responses to the fore – conflating them into a ‘somatic category’. To consider this closely, I would like to reflect on another poem from *Ashes for Breakfast*. Below is ‘Lament of a Legionnaire on Germanicus’s Campaign to the Elbe River’:

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<sup>145</sup> Grünbein, ‘My Babylonish Brain’, 65.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

There's nothing worse than this deadly retreat  
following a battle, except the same retreat in prospect  
weeks before...

Black as death the expression on the general's face,  
the shambling, exhausted troops.

Behind the shields are the remnants of those unhurt,  
footsore, running  
with sweat. Incessant rain  
has softened the tracks, the woods are one long ambush,  
and the barbarians in packs, the wolves,  
bite pieces out of our rear guard.

Whoever did not drown in the North Sea, far from home,  
goes down in the swamps, as remote from the eternal city.

Overnight, morasses detain the whole legion,  
by day it's rotten causeways, moldering ladders,  
from whose rungs a man slips to his death  
with fingers crushed. This land merely punctuates fog  
like some archipelago at sea ... Germania Magna,  
where the forests are still integral and dense,  
no tree bobs on the sea cut to bank of oars—  
or a blazing hulk. The futility of fighting  
over provinces as vast as continents, and territories  
that can only be defended by further wars.

In the depths of the forest there is no triumph, and no Latin order.  
And when, aged by many years, you finally make it home,

it will be to see the German installed under your lintel,  
and waving to you your wife's towheaded offspring.<sup>148</sup>

A wide geographical territory is encompassed in the 'Lament': 'Germania Magna', with its morasses, forests and the North Sea, and then the Italian Peninsula itself. For the dispirited Legionnaire, there are foreign 'provinces as vast as continents', intimating how – symbolically, psychologically – the 'eternal city' has shrunk in the minds of its standard-bearers.<sup>149</sup> As a broad chronicle of a historical event, it would appear difficult, then, to evoke the immediacy and intensity of a 'kaleidoscopic present', as Grünbein suggests. The Roman campaign comes with a repository of familiar images and associations that are difficult to enliven beyond the museum and textbook.

However, if we move from the general coordinates of Germanicus's retreat to close detail, we see how Grünbein intensifies his focus: 'the shambling, exhausted troops./Behind the shields are the remnants of those unhurt,/footsore, running/with sweat'.<sup>150</sup> As the troops retreat 'Behind the shields', the physical cost of those miles tramping across once-conquered territories is felt. They are 'footsore, running/with sweat.'<sup>151</sup> The propinquity of 'footsore' to 'running' means that the line reaches beyond its literal sense. This closeness makes the line semantically live: the retreat seems hurried, more arduous, while another sense of 'running' has the sores and blisters of the abstract legions in a state of suppuration. This is the first detail that draws the poem out of generalized description and relates the campaign to the palpable. It is there again in: 'Overnight, morasses detain the whole legion,/by day it's rotten causeways, moldering ladders,/from whose rungs a man slips to his death/with fingers crushed.'<sup>152</sup> This

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<sup>148</sup> Grünbein, 'Lament of a Legionnaire on Germanicus's Campaign to the Elbe River', *Ashes for Breakfast*, 193.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

last detail arrives surprisingly, painfully specific. When we imagine death by falling, it is not the thought of our fingers that comes to us first. Here, though, the acuity of the pain of ‘crushed fingers’ is localizable, imaginable: the physical reality of the nameless Roman soldier is suddenly keener.

Moving from the corporeality of the troops, the poem depicts the wilderness beyond the ‘eternal city’: ‘This land merely punctuates fog/like some archipelago at sea ... Germania Magna,/where the forests are still integral and dense’.<sup>153</sup> The land can only ‘punctuate’ its miasma – the choice of the verb articulates the uncharted range of the ‘barbarian’ territories. Then, key to this impression is the deployment of ‘integral’, to suggest the forests’ impassable nature. The ‘integral’ forests – not only dense with thicket, but complete, indivisible. Through this textured language, the extent of ‘Germania Magna’ (where there is ‘no Latin order’) becomes tangible.<sup>154</sup>

The poem’s final lines narrow the perspective: ‘And when, aged by many years, you finally make it home,/it will be to see the German installed under your lintel,/and waving to you your wife’s towheaded offspring.’<sup>155</sup> The Legionnaire, having returned from defending the outer marches of the Empire, is confronted with this bitter image. From the impressions of vast ‘Germania Magna’, we have this painful specificity: ‘the German installed under your lintel’.<sup>156</sup> Then, the Roman’s indignity on seeing the interloper waving to him his ‘wife’s towheaded offspring’.<sup>157</sup> Though this ‘Lament’ might have encompassed the great impersonal territories of Empire, this final detail is intimately wounding. The children, ‘towheaded’, are totemic of the foreigner’s mastery over the Roman. The adjective is potent: Grünbein’s ‘Strohblonde’ becomes ‘towheaded’ in Hofmann’s translation – both evoke the coarser, rustic

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

materiality of the intruder. This quality – the straw or tow-like hair – is the visible mark, the ‘stamp’, a more virile successor has left on the children. We share in the Legionnaire’s stifling helplessness and sense of displacement: it elicits, as Grünbein notes in his ‘My Babylonish Brain’ essay, ‘a sigh, a physical agitation’.<sup>158</sup>

In these passages from ‘Lament of a Legionnaire’, the historical is made palpable. This is most acute in the final lines of the poem – the particular, penetrating cruelty of the image reaches beyond the diaristic account of the campaign. The ‘towheaded’ children waving to the alienated Legionnaire has an arresting precision – it is an image that belongs to any age where there are possessing and dispossessed, conquerors and vanquished, on a dramatic or domestic scale. This is Grünbein’s ‘actualizing’; ‘reality as a somatic category’. It is what he refers to as an ‘exchange of time’.

At the end of his wide-ranging essay, ‘The Bars of Atlantis’, Grünbein turns to Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* to reflect on his own practice. This is the quote with which he concludes:

The poetic image is an emergence from language, it is always a little above the language of signification. By living the poems we read, we have then the salutary experience of emerging. This, no doubt, is emerging at short range. But these acts of emergence are repeated; poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Grünbein, ‘My Babylonish Brain’, 67.

<sup>159</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, XXVII.

This ‘state of emergence’ is elicited by the most resonant poetic images – those whose insight Bachelard attributes to a ‘flicker of the soul’, a Bergsonian vital intuition.<sup>160</sup> Regarding Grünbein, it has salience to his attempt to render historical scenes immediate. The ‘salutary experience of emerging [...] in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity’<sup>161</sup> is correlative with Grünbein’s understanding of poetry where ‘the intense is actual and reality becomes a somatic category.’<sup>162</sup> The most successful moments in his historical poems are when an evocation of a scene in the deep past is as arrestingly proximate as the face of a sleeping partner or the skin on a cup of coffee. In ‘My Babylonish Brain’, Grünbein speculates on the transhistoricality of poetry. He states, ‘poetry is a form of unsolicited intimacy, not entirely dissimilar to a schizophrenic patient picking up the thread – as himself or someone else – where he lost it the day before yesterday, or else in 1207.’<sup>163</sup> Though he refers to the nature of address, this ‘unsolicited intimacy’ is analogous with Grünbein’s ‘immediacy’: what is important when ‘picking up the thread’ in 1207 is that it has the same sense of ‘emergence’ as today.

This thesis proposes that there is a similar psychological tenor running through Grünbein’s depictions of post-war East Germany and his historical portraits. The similarity is inexact, troubled by precise context, but the sense of collapse and failure that characterizes his portraits of Dresden and a deteriorating GDR is present in historical poems like ‘Club of Rome’ and ‘Lament of a Legionnaire on Germanicus’s Campaign to the Elbe River’. I think it is not unreasonable to assume the influence of the epochal events in Grünbein’s biography on his historical poems. However, I make this contention with the qualifier in the introduction: that it would be injudicious to neglect the ‘autonomy’ of the imaginative process. Like Bachelard, I

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., XXI.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., XXVII.

<sup>162</sup> Grünbein, ‘My Babylonish Brain’, 67.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 69.

believe that, when writing a poem, ‘the mind is obliged to make projects that prefigure it.’<sup>164</sup> These ‘projects’ are all of our experiential, mnemonic and habitual processes. However, I also believe that an integral part of the creative act is *felicitous*: to create a resonant image, as Bachelard notes, there is ‘no project; a flicker of the soul is all that is needed.’<sup>165</sup> Bachelard investigates this in detail in his introductory chapter to *The Poetics of Space*. He observes that, because of ‘its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and dynamism of its own’.<sup>166</sup> He continues:

To say that the poetic image is independent of causality is to make a rather serious statement. But the causes cited by psychologists and psychoanalysts can never really explain the wholly unexpected nature of the new image, any more than they can explain the attraction it holds for a mind that is foreign to the process of its creation. The poet does not confer the past of his image upon me, and yet his image immediately takes root in me. The communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance.<sup>167</sup>

For poems that depict long-dead figures and vanished civilizations, Grünbein’s historical poems must, paradoxically, contain something of this vital impulse – the ‘wholly unexpected nature’, which arises from the *élan* of the living imagination. It is precisely this quality – what Bachelard has termed the ‘sudden salience’ of the poetic image – that is important here.<sup>168</sup> When evoking scenes that might otherwise be locked in a *museal* state – in a culture’s familiar

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<sup>164</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, XXII.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, I.



historical memory – the ‘novelty and action’ of a poetic image confers vitality to them. According to Bachelard, out of all literary expression, the poetic image brings us closest to Bergson’s *élan vital*, the essential creative impulse. As Bachelard explains, ‘the reader’, experiencing an interesting image, ‘participates in the joy of [its] creation, that for Bergson, is the sign of creation.’<sup>169</sup> He continues: ‘Here, creation takes place on the tenuous thread of the sentence, in the fleeting life of an expression.’<sup>170</sup> This experience – a *micro-experience*, requiring intimate attention and sympathy on the reader’s part – means that the poem continually affirms the present.

From the many nuanced and enigmatic pronouncements Bachelard makes on poetry, one has special pertinence to this discussion. Bachelard observes that the poetic image is ‘the property of a naïve consciousness; in its expression, it is youthful language.’<sup>171</sup> The poetic image’s ‘simplicity’ is necessary for the fleet, intimate exchange between two subjectivities. In regard to Grünbein’s historical poems, it is this simplicity, ‘this youthful language’, that expedites the immediacy of their scenes. It is also this simplicity that means the poetic image is always somewhere above and beyond the precise context. A poetic image ‘speaks on the threshold of being’, between milieu, specific dates, figures.<sup>172</sup> For instance, consider this excerpt from poem ‘V’, of Grünbein’s ‘In the Provinces’ cycle, which depicts various dead animals in pastoral settings:

As though brushed aside by the cart of a fleeing settler,  
The dead blackbird lay on the Roman road, in tatters.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., XXVI.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., XIX.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., XVI.

One who was always there, always indifferent, the wind  
Had hoisted a black sail out of the wings.

And that's how you spotted her from afar, knocked aside,  
Your sister pinned now to the earth by the marauding hordes,

Whether Dacians or Huns, Mongol ponies or Vespas [...] <sup>173</sup>

This startling comparison, between the tattered body of the blackbird and the sister 'pinned now to the earth by the marauding hordes' has an unsettling, elementary quality. The transition from the ominous 'black sail' of the dead bird to the girl being assaulted ('Whether Dacians or Huns, Mongol ponies or Vespas') seems to be a fluid, just-formed association, a snatched impression. <sup>174</sup> It has an incipient quality: an image from the cusp of consciousness. It elicits, through what Bachelard terms 'resonances', a whole seam of associations: localized images of dead and desiccated birds by roadsides, the particular action of the wind on inert things, then, like the wing's 'black sail', the shapes that stir a primitive sense of alarm or dread. <sup>175</sup> These elementary associations strike us before the montage joins the idyllic Roman *campagna* to the ancient past of the hordes. Rather than the wider psychologized or intellectualized context of the work, the image provides a quick, preliminary impression.

This, perhaps, is what Bachelard implies when he speaks of the 'naïve consciousness' or 'youthful language' intrinsic to poetry. Grünbein himself observes how the 'image is

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<sup>173</sup> Grünbein, 'In the Provinces', *Ashes for Breakfast*, 191.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> 'After the original reverberation, we are able to experience resonances, sentimental repercussions, reminders of our past. But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface.' – Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, XXIII.

preserved in *statu nascendi*.<sup>176</sup> This incipience mirrors a rudimentary frame of consciousness – the mind apprehending, in the first, sense-dominated, unconscious moments, before deliberative thought. The poetic image, as Bachelard observes in his introduction, is ‘iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions.’<sup>177</sup> This ‘unceasing action’ is intrinsic to its polyvalent, embryonic quality. It lends Grünbein’s historical scenes, whether they are in Rome, Herculaneum or old Dresden, the nascence of the present, which connects them intimately to the reader’s ken.

When contemplating the overall success of Grünbein’s historical poems, there is a final point I would like to consider. A concern regarding ‘history poems’ is encapsulated by Ian Cooper in his essay, ‘Grünbein and Anglo-American Poetry. Dickinson, Pound, Larkin’. It relates to the rendering of ‘historical experience’ – which is polyphonic, multiple – in the unitary subjectivity of the poet. Referring to Ezra Pound’s *Personae* poems (which Cooper considers an influence on Grünbein’s work) and the German poet, he notes that [if] ‘the experience of history involves exposure to events which exceed the idea of an enclosed, isolable subjectivity, then the organizing consciousness of these history poems is not itself historical.’<sup>178</sup> The criticism is that, ‘far from revealing a properly historical consciousness’, Grünbein’s poems ‘inscrutable aesthetic sovereignty’ ‘tells against any attempt at receptive diversity’.<sup>179</sup>

I would contend, however, that the narrowness of his ‘portraits’ is appropriate when depicting the past. In poems like Grünbein’s – which ventriloquize historical figures or narrate historical scenes in the third-person – there is not the ‘receptive diversity’ that Cooper indicates.

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<sup>176</sup> Grünbein, ‘My Babylonish Brain’, 67.

<sup>177</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, XIX.

<sup>178</sup> Ian Cooper, ‘Grünbein and Anglo-American Poetry. Dickinson, Pound, Larkin’, in *Durs Grünbein: A Companion*, 55.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

They do not aspire to a truly ‘polyphonic’ rendering of history. The ‘enclosed, isolable subjectivity’ is integral to poems like these. Indeed, I would argue that their relative simplicity and linearity is what establishes their proximity to their (imagined) historical circumstances. Their projection of historical characters and scenes is – as far as there is such a thing – an extension of the ‘poet’s inviolate self’, but it is the proximity and intimacy of that self in the poems that makes their forays into the past convincing.<sup>180</sup> On a very fundamental level, the exterior world and the human response to it have not changed so drastically as for the past to be entirely inconceivable. As explored above, the poems’ attention to an intimate ‘somatic’ reality means that their limited ambitions are perhaps the most felicitous way of evoking what has long passed from view.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

## *Splendour and Fatigue:*

### **The Centrality of Travel and the Past in My Manuscript**

The poems included in my manuscript, *Full Colour*, were written over a period of four years. The first of them were drafted while I was living in Naples for a short period – a catalytic moment in my writing life. Though the collection may appear protean on first glance, with its miscellaneous subjects, geographies and forms, the poems share aesthetic qualities and concerns that emerged during my time in Italy.

My earliest poems, written from my late teens onwards, tended towards imaginative forays in milieu that had only a tenuous relation to real places. They were, as near as possible, placeless confections, influenced by surrealists like James Tate and Central and Eastern European writers such as Miroslav Holub and Vasko Popa, but without the skewed American settings of Tate or different political contexts of Holub or Popa. They were often short psychological studies, but exaggerated and escalated by fabulism. Though I believe something of these early stylistic influences remains – more particularly through those European writers – the poems collected in this manuscript enter into an altogether deeper correspondence with place and history.

This chapter considers these two related aspects consecutively. It will analyse several illustrative poems, before reflecting on my writing process and the shape of the collection as a whole. The decision to isolate the two themes follows the trajectory of my interests – on moving to Naples, the stimuli of a vivid city elicited ‘travel poems’, before the antiquity of the place stirred a historical interest, latent until that point. Before I move on to individual analyses, it is necessary to consider my initial response to the ‘catalyst’ of the manuscript more thoroughly.

The city of Naples and its surrounding *campagna* is the setting of a fifteen-part sequence, ‘Excerpts from *The Scenic World*’, and seven individual poems throughout the

collection. It inspired much more in the way of wider reflection, but to engage with its mercurial effect would require an infinitely larger and more intimate project. Here I will limit myself to that which is visible in this manuscript, but not before I note, in broad agreement with W.H. Auden, Lord Byron, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Susan Sontag and others who have eulogized it, that there is a singularly tonic quality to the Neapolitan region. Auden, preparing to depart Ischia, reflected how this part of southern Italy could still impel us to ‘behave like our fathers and come/Southward into a sunburnt elsewhere/Of vineyards, baroque, *la bella figura*...’<sup>181</sup> There are many superlative passages on Naples and Campania, all extolling its vitality, colour, antiquity, mystery: life sharpened by the reminder of death in the shadow of Vesuvius. I second them, and attribute the impetus behind many of these poems to this first contact with the city.

After closer acquaintance with the region, a shift occurred in my work. My poems began to explore place from the perspective of someone who found ‘travel writing’, with all its idle exoticization and implicit privilege, a fraught enterprise. I looked to shape poems that could register this anxiety, while still being able to respond to the salutary impressions I discovered wherever I went. These encompassed the first group of poems – exemplified by ‘Excerpts from *The Scenic World*’.

As time passed, there was a growing sense that the region held aesthetic possibilities that would be significant to my work beyond travel impressions. I was drawn to what was reified in the splendid, fatigued architectures and the shambling quarters – a sense of disrepair and textural richness unlike much I had experienced at home. This contrast, between the life I was familiar with in England and the dramatic formal differences I found in Naples, was crucial. It drew qualities from my writing that seemed to have been awaiting a catalyst.

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<sup>181</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘Goodbye to Mezzogiorno’, *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 642.

The first quality was stylistic. My writing began to dwell a little longer on detail and texture – tracing the lineaments of particular milieu with more precision: accoutrements of a room, a city vignette, a scene in nature. In the more infrequent longer poems, I embraced digressiveness in a way that reflected the shape of my experience there. Which is to say the *morphology* of my experience resembled a digression – from the circuitous trips with friends from one piazza to another, to indolent conversations on hot days, to the languor and inefficiency of the systems that Neapolitans relied on. All of this was accentuated through contrast with life in chillier, more utilitarian Britain.

The second part of this shift was related to the new slowness in my work: the past began to saturate the things I described. In no other city have I been more continuously reminded of the compacted strata of history – in both its visible signs and pervasive atmosphere, in the accretive *tufa* of narrow backstreets and squares. Rather than simply prompting a series of poems on Neapolitan history, the palpable sense of disrepair touched a latent mood in my writing. The sense of time having wreaked a slow, continuous destruction became prominent in my work in such a way that it implied a deeper psychological foundation. Again, the substance of this observation requires a more intimate and phenomenological study, but I will reflect here briefly on its possible source. In his essay, ‘Turner and the Barber’s Shop’, John Berger speculates how a regular impression of ‘water, froth, steam, gleaming metal, clouded mirrors’<sup>182</sup> from the painter’s childhood had shaped his early imagination, that a ‘phantasmorgia’<sup>183</sup> of these details had reassembled in his elemental portraits of sea and sky. I suspect that a similar phenomenon occurred in my own work: when I attempt to evoke a *mien* of disrepair in different historical circumstances, there is much of the crumbling facades and faded interiors of the dwindling seaside resort where I spent my early life. Travel has the facility

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<sup>182</sup> John Berger, ‘Turner and the Barber’s Shop’, *About Looking*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 150.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

to sharpen our impression of home, and I believe that Naples' sun-beaten piazzette, parks lined with dying palms and bleached portside induced an atmosphere in my poems that had a ready and abundant source. Though it is unwise to confidently attribute origins in regard to writing, it is important to emphasize the centrality of my time in Naples to this manuscript. It underlies much of what I discuss in the following analyses.

'Excerpts from *The Scenic World*' comprises a cycle of fifteen short poems which affect the style of a travel guide. Each poem is assigned a page number to intimate the existence of the fictive guidebook from which they are excerpted. Before I analyse the aesthetic and strategic qualities of the work, I must consider the initial impulse behind the sequence. As I have noted, my first contact with Naples prompted a period of creativity. However, as I began to write poems which served as snapshots of what I had witnessed, I registered an uneasiness. On one hand, was the temptation to record the rich sensory impressions in diaristic poems, while, on the other, was the concern that I was simply exoticizing that which I detailed. I feared that my poems offered little more than colourful bulletins from a tourist's perspective. I reached an impasse.

My chief anxiety was the 'naturalization' of my spectatorial voice – a concern that the poems would fail to register the tension and ambivalence that I felt in observing from so remote a vantage point. I was, inescapably, a tourist and anything that I wrote would have to acknowledge that in a way that panegyrics on the scenery could not. This apprehension encouraged me to experiment with foregrounding the spectatorial in a formal manner. The first of the poems that would constitute 'Excerpts from *The Scenic World*' were written:



You may encounter lizards, such as this one.  
He is easing into his veins by lying very still on a rock  
in the popular town of Amalfi.  
Notice the slant eyes continue even while  
the body does not.  
Lizards seem to agree on something  
with the rocks,  
taking up to an hour to change their theme.  
The humour of rock is perhaps subtle, and slow.

There are also people in Amalfi, as well as lizards.  
Frequently the temperature  
will climb in their heads  
when the sun comes out.  
They may throw bread or wine or sharp phonemes  
across tablecloths at each other.  
They may move their hands much faster.  
If we took the temperature of the lizards and the people  
it would be about the same.

The opening 'You may encounter...' employs the idiom of the travel guide – it is suggestive of a caption under an illustrative photograph, or an advisory notice at a forest campsite, for instance. This idiom is sustained throughout the piece in the notational flatness of 'There are also people in Amalfi, as well as lizards./Frequently the temperature/will climb in their heads/when the sun comes out'. Through this parodying of guidebook lexicon – quasi-

instructional, deadpan – the poem resists ‘naturalizing’ the perspective, in the way that it would by adopting a more subjective, *participatory* voice. The impersonal, passive ‘you’ indicates the remoteness of the perceiving subject. Their perspective is isolated and signposted, just as other parts of the scenery are.

By foregrounding the touristic through these tonal signifiers, the ‘Scenic World’ poems maintain a critical distance. They narrate each scene through the medium of the ‘guide’, which serves as a reminder of their self-consciousness, a scepticism of travel writing *enclosed within* the form. However, there is an implicit tension, as the sequence doesn’t simply critique foreign travel: the poems are also enamoured, in their own way, with what they depict. Although their self-consciousness is a reminder of the mediating forces of tourism, they reflect on what they find pleasing, surprising, humorous or underwhelming in the scenery, too. It is this negotiation, between self-consciousness and spectating, that comprises the ‘anxiety’ of the travel writer.

The staging of the touristic perspective is used throughout in a curatorial manner. Each section presents a portion of ‘scenery’, of which the reader is to take note. Here is ‘Page 172’:

You may encounter a pigment in two different sources  
such as in the eyes of this goldfish and this Dalmatian.

It is a wistful or cumulus colour.

The Dalmatian has its muzzle in the green fountain basin  
and is taking water that may send parasites kicking into  
its bowels.

The goldfish submerged here since the Bourbon princes are slowly  
disintegrating,  
many of them with clotted gills and their soft flanks  
softer where time has touched them.

In many ancient beautiful parks there is a big sign that says

*This water is not for drinking.*

This green water is what Americans would call *European*.

The precise tincture of Bourbon princes remains unknown.

This is a brief digression on the correspondences between colours, dilapidated old Europe and America, as well as the tourist's appetite for authenticating experience, even in 'the precise tincture of Bourbon princes'. Pertinent here is its initial focus – the pigmentation in the goldfish's cataracts and the Dalmatian's eyes. There is an incongruity, in the particularity and smallness of the detail, and the authoritativeness of the guide: 'You may encounter...' By imparting significance and interest onto seemingly non-dramatic minutiae, the poem attempts to gently mock the language with which commercial tourism impels us to gaze on its attractions.

But there is another impulse in this focus on travel's incidental phenomena. The celebrated sights, especially in the region the guide pertains to (Pompei, Vesuvius, Ischia, etc.) are so freighted with symbolism that it is difficult to occupy them meaningfully. This guide, then, directs attention away from the 'expected' itinerary, in a curatorial manner, and onto the ubiquitous, unremarkable and unvisited, to assemble a more acute view of the contemporary place. The various 'pages' of the guide ask the reader to consider 'flagstones', a girl standing in the rain as an advert for Lindt chocolate, a man ogling through a coin-op telescope, a 'busted umbrella', and finally a piece of broken wall, amongst more striking bits of scenery. It is a gentle subversion of the program of commercial tourism. It portrays travel as comprised of fragmentary impressions and contingencies, beset with little disappointments, loneliness, trivia, as well as moments of elevation and insight.

In this context, the decision to frame the poems as ‘excerpts’ from a fictive travel guide is crucial. On one hand, the implied guide intimates the larger subtext – that the poems exist as a *product* of the limitations of commercial travel and simultaneously as a *response* to these limitations. On the other hand, their excerpted quality is congruous with the experience of travel: the fleeting, fragmentary impressions that we preserve from the whole experience and ‘excerpt’ in memory.

‘Excerpts from *The Scenic World*’ was my first response to living in a new city, but other poems followed after a period. Amongst these was ‘Palms at Anacapri’. One of the longer poems in the collection, it depicts nearby Capri during the main tourist season with a group of palm trees as its central feature. Less self-conscious than ‘Excerpts...’, the poem is an attempt at distilling the atmospheric quality of the resort. The impulse for the piece arrived after witnessing the island at different points of the year, from the beginning of the tourist season to tumultuous storms and darkness in midwinter. In changing casts of light and mood, Capri appeared a far more complex setting than the dimensionless, crystalline resort I knew from a distance, and my intention was to flesh out some of this nuance. The subsequent poem was to prove aesthetically significant to the development of the manuscript. The poem opens:

But the year widens and arrives at that point  
when the sun makes its definitive statement,  
burning those who doze off on balconies.  
The billionaires’ yachts network in the port.  
The folding chair is called into requisition,  
the boater and nylon blouse are harvested  
from their long racks. All are agreed

that it is the time of coconut vendors  
to bend spectra from their hoses, to splash  
the Germans arriving, luminous and early, at the resort.  
It is now that the first of the Milanese girls  
roll into town in striped, billowing pants,  
abstract strokes in pristine restaurants.

Opening, abstractly, with the ‘widening’ of the year and the advent of summer, the focus narrows to a detail: balconies and sunburnt bodies. From here onwards, the poem layers detail on detail in an attempt to concretize this sense of climatic airiness and to build a panoramic picture of the island: ‘The billionaires’ yachts network in the port./The folding chair is called into requisition,/the boater and nylon blouse are harvested/from their long racks.’

The narrative movement, which can be perceived as a gentle digression, is the means by which the portrait is sustained. The focus slides, indolently, from one image to the next: ‘All are agreed/that it is the time of coconut vendors/to bend spectra from their hoses, to splash/the Germans arriving, luminous and early, at the resort.’ The break that allows the hanging ‘All are agreed’ to drop down lazily into ‘it is the time of coconut vendors’ is demonstrative. Then, the manner in which the syntax elongates, across line-breaks, means that the tableau evolves in slow frames: the arcing of water into spectra, the splashing droplets, the German tourists arriving. The poem drifts forwards, gradually, organically.

This digressiveness seemed to be the most suitable manner of depicting Capri – to slowly build a portrait, piece by piece, was congruous with the languor of the island, as if each feature was being disclosed by early sunlight. It also reflected the way the island’s topography predisposes meandering on its uneven paths and little streets, the indolence of its climate, the attitude of *laissez-faire* in its visitors and affluent residents. These were qualities I wanted to

invoke in the configuration of the poem – the long syntaxes, the gentle phasing from scene to scene.

This particular disposition means that the poem lingers on precise detail, too. The yachts ‘network’ in the port – as a verb, it imparts a geometric quality to the rows of anchored boats, while also intimating the fraternizing and beguilement of the billionaire owners. Then, the ‘folding chair is called into *requisition*’. The use of ‘requisition’ suggests a slightly anachronistic procedure, formal, sweetly out-of-time – something in keeping with quixotic Capri. In the last lines of the excerpt, ‘Milanese girls/roll into town in striped, billowing pants,/abstract strokes in pristine restaurants.’ Here, the poem is attentive to the palette formed by the girls’ summer-wear and the restaurants’ aesthetic. Together, I felt the adjectives built a sensory impression of the island beyond the particular image – the stripes, the billowing, the strokes, the pristine quality, were evocative of various interiors, fabrics, the play of light throughout the resort.

As noted earlier, the two qualities outlined here – the digressiveness and the tendency towards richer descriptive language – became more prominent in my work. With the digressive narrative movement, my poems could encompass wider semantic and geographical terrain as in the manuscript’s longer poems ‘Ecuador’, ‘The Ambassadors’ and ‘A Portrait of Matteo Lonardi’. This enabled a more ‘polyvalent’ structure, permitting them to move through various phases and tangents, while, before, they had remained relatively linear and limited to a few aspects. Then, the richer descriptive language I employed broadened the atmospheric, physical and – as we shall see – temporal realms I could depict. Certain vocabulary that I had felt *outside* of my sensibility allowed me to describe places, artefacts and characters in ways impossible before.

In ‘Palms at Anacapri’ there is another note that would become prominent in my work, which can be detected as the poem approaches the central feature – the palms:

All this happens under the watch of the three  
in the square outside Hotel Anacapri.  
Long, tall, cool migrants waded in from elsewhere,  
they stand like every tableau of ancient travellers –  
sunbeat, heads down, stooped after their voyage  
on one of the wild, historical seas.  
The saddest tree. These three had an ancestor  
somewhere in the violent Pacific  
with the grey, reticulated body of a crocodile  
gradually ending in a green spray.  
The tallest thing for miles. At the end of everything –  
this symbol of the infinite liminal  
arrived at and departed, until the symbol  
doesn't know whether it's coming or going.

These old palms, in the little piazza outside the hotel, cast a shadow over the transient pleasure and cavorting on the island. Having 'waded in from elsewhere,/they stand like every tableau of ancient travellers –/sunbeat, heads down, stooped after their voyage/on one of the wild, historical seas.' The passage gives the trees several, distinct qualities evocative of the island's histories. There is something of the antique seafarer in them – Phoenician or Saracen, but closer to a more indistinct, ancient archetype. Then their posture here, 'sunbeat' and 'stooped' beside the Hotel Anacapri, evokes the faded splendour of the region as seen by Grand Tourers and later pleasure-seekers in the centuries when Italy's various golden ages seemed far behind it. They are the 'saddest tree'. Then, with their ancestor's torqued trunk like the 'grey, reticulated body of a crocodile', there is a note of the inhuman, mineral prehistory from which they

originate – they stand as reminders of the ‘violent’ natural world, on the periphery of Capri’s resort.

Contained here are the themes that would inform a significant strand of my poetry. There are the visible signs of a faded grandeur and the powerful, elemental forces of disrepair that wear down our endeavours. There is resonance with some of the main threads in W.G Sebald’s work, who I began to read while writing my second batch of ‘Neapolitan’<sup>184</sup> poems. A passage from *The Emigrants* is characteristic of these themes in the German writer:

I cannot say whether I was expecting Deauville to have something special to offer – some remnant of the past, green avenues, beach promenades, or even a stylish or scandalous clientèle; whatever my notions may have been, it was immediately apparent that the once legendary resort, like everywhere one visits now, regardless of the country or continent, was hopelessly run down and ruined by traffic, shops and boutiques, and the insatiable urge for destruction. The villas built in the latter half of the nineteenth century, neo-Gothic castles with turrets and battlements, Swiss chalets, and even mock-oriental residences, were almost without exception a picture of neglect and desolation.<sup>185</sup>

Intrinsic to Sebald’s writing is a pessimism, informed by the darker passages of the early twentieth century, encompassing human frailty and potential for ruin. His particular pessimism is located, very generally, in the failure of the European Enlightenment and our continuing ability to inflict irrational, destructive acts on each other and the natural world. Beyond this, the more elemental erosions of time. The manner in which Sebald evokes the

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<sup>184</sup> Which were not, on the whole, situated in Naples itself.

<sup>185</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse, (London: Vintage, 2002), 116.



signs of this destruction, in those ‘visible pictures[s] of neglect and desolation’<sup>186</sup>, is consonant with my own impression of post-imperial and post-war decline in the place I was born. It seemed no coincidence that one of the most memorable episodes in *The Rings of Saturn* features the crumbling Victorian promenade of my hometown. Though an exaggeration in empirical terms, Sebald’s remark that ‘everywhere one visits now [is] hopelessly run down and ruined’<sup>187</sup> carries a powerful truth for those who have lived in the more fatigued corners of Europe.

However, like Sebald, my feelings on this twilight world are not uniformly pessimistic. There is a lonely appeal in declining things. Observing the manor at Somerleyton Hall in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald remarks ‘And how fine a place the house seemed to me now that it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion.’<sup>188</sup> My own deliberations on this subject comprise melancholy at seeing the decorative and artisanal fall into disrepair, and a quiet satisfaction at the state of these remnants of empire. Beyond these conscious reflections, there is a more decadent and aesthetic pleasure in this atmosphere, like that which Thomas Mann depicts in *The Magic Mountain*, where his protagonist Hans Castorp falls prey to the voluptuousness of the sanatorium. This aestheticization of decline is visible in the final group of poems I consider here – poems which reflect this dissolution in different historical moments.

Before I analyse these in more detail, I’d like to pause on another nuance of decline. Another, more deliberative appeal of this mood is its transformative potential. There is a sense that this decline is congruous with a languor and ease that is freeing of an instrumentalising tendency of modernity. In the non-apostrophic ‘Apostrophe to Disrepair’, I directly address the felicitous aspects of that state:

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse, (London: The Harvill Press, 1998), 36.

Like a city you would think of sometimes  
where everything slipped towards the equator  
in a swoon brought on by so much sun,  
where you might enjoy an afternoon drinking wine  
unlicensed by anyone,  
where a word might be spoken  
without addenda hanging from it  
like a nest of wires.

The leaning houses,  
the leaning lines of red, yellow and white houses,  
with porticoes irregular and surprising  
as drawings of porticoes by an infant master.

A city, like an overexposed and faded photograph  
but a city where anxiety  
was a funny thing nobody understood  
as they talked expansively about the way  
the mind was similar to a company of breezes  
or anchovies boiling out at sea or *tufa* warming  
the world with its emanations.

A city, broken down like a soft old horse  
knackered by ducal processions, then by revolutions,  
by men pulling her to market, the great markets,  
now giddy and silly and light  
on her legs in a simple valley.

Embodied in this picturesque city – a shadow version of Naples or Palermo – is an approach to living at odds with the competitive pragmatism of much of the global north. The poem celebrates a mental climate, a posture, encouraging lassitude and an easy expansiveness. This is visible in the architecture ranged across its streets: ‘The leaning houses,/the leaning lines of red, yellow and white houses,/with porticoes irregular and surprising/as drawings of porticoes by an infant master.’ This world is overseen by capricious and congenial spirits – this *putto*-like ‘infant master’ – unprejudiced towards irregularity and offbeat expression. In its last lines, the poem celebrates a state of extinguished energies – ‘[a] city, broken down like a soft old horse’ – where the inhabitants have lapsed into a kind of beatitude, heedless of dynamism and direction. Formally, too, the uneven lines tumble gently into one another, in an echo of this state. ‘Apostrophe to Disrepair’ is unusual in my manuscript in that it valorises the quality that permeates much of my work in an open, declarative manner. It reflects my more cognisant ideas on this state rather than the intuitive and aesthetic instincts that predominate.

In both ‘Palms at Anacapri’ and ‘Apostrophe to Disrepair’ there is a baroque note – ornate imagery, a heterogenous vocabulary and, sometimes, heightened diction. An essential quality of the baroque is a surfeit of some kind. In my poems, that is a surfeit of detail, the elaborateness of an image, or syntax. Its correlative in architecture and decor entails great expenditure. There is a jubilantly non-utilitarian motive implicit in this. As Durs Grünbein notes, when reflecting on vanished, decorative Dresden: ‘The Baroque was always celebratory and representative in character, and can’t be explained by the rules of capitalism.’<sup>189</sup> It was ‘a golden age of debt’ for the sake of expression, decoration, felicity.<sup>190</sup> This impulse is congruous with the themes isolated in ‘Apostrophe to Disrepair’, but perhaps quietly insistent throughout.

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<sup>189</sup> Grünbein, ‘An Interview with Durs Grünbein’, 231.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

On my return from Naples, I began to write poems that evoked historical scenarios. As noted earlier, I sought to deflect my thematic interest in decline onto germane historical circumstances. These circumstances were chosen because they implicated an event, character or locale suggestive of this theme. That might mean the first signs of the end of a kingdom (that of the Bourbons in 'In Decline of the House'), the onset of illness (the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi's in 'Abisso'), or the faded glamour of the elderly rich ('A Room at the Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, 1971'). It is important to note that this motif is not the sole organising principle of the manuscript, or even of one sequence, but certainly the most visible. Here I will demonstrate how two of my poems reflect this theme particularly. From the 'Rooms' series, 'A Room at the Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, 1971':

Madame likes to air the double she takes for eight weeks  
on the sea-facing east wing.

She has written twelve postcards to Brussels in a month.

Her tone - *la mer est jolie* - is light and blasé though  
she counts six instances of the word

*ténèbres.*

Arthritis has touched her best hand. Outside the sea  
glances her way with distance

where once everything in the world was a man  
asking her to dance.

On one shelf in ribbons, her empty hatbox deepens

into deeper hatboxes that collapse slowly

into the green pinochle halls

of the pinochle men she knew.

Madame dreams in the window chair

and sees her postcards

from the Roches Noires

fly lightly down

over the swathe of sea

from the undercarriage

of an albatross.

The ocean bird migrating but so everything seems

at this point

*the cad with a tall white grin*

*throwing double sixes at midnight*

*fresh oysters with their slight cologne*

*in the backseats of young France*

The concierge is calling her

—*Madame. Madame?*

An old albatross the scuffed white of lobby magazines.

An old albatross, but content as she wanders off the edge  
of the continent.

Firstly, like all fifteen of the 'Rooms', the poem depicts an interior located precisely in time and place. The place: the Hotel des Roches Noires in Trouville-sur-Mer, Calvados, an establishment famous for its popularity with bourgeois and high society during the Second Empire, Belle Époque and Roaring Twenties. The hotel looks onto a short beach and the Channel. The time: nineteen seventy-one, long after the sporting and gambling sets of the early twentieth century had vanished, when the hotel was still frequented by those who, in their seniority, sought to remember their youth.

By assigning a specific time and place to these 'Rooms', the fuller context is intimated immediately. As they are relatively short pieces (no more than forty lines long), the titles convey a concentrated amount of information. In this respect, there is a remote formal similarity with an inscription before a photograph. This inscription often instils the image with an elegiac quality – the precisely marked is elegiac, very simply, because what it denotes is vanished. It serves as a reminder that time has interceded and is rubbing away the traces. In this poem, the date and place engender an elegiac note on two counts – they signal distance from the hotel's heyday and the woman's youth *and* the poem's own moment, when the cognizance of this distance and decline has already passed. The poem is an elegy for two periods, one folded inside the other.

Through the evocation of shades, textures, redolent objects, the poem attempts to sustain a particular atmosphere. Consider these lines: ‘On one shelf in ribbons, her empty hatbox deepens/into deeper hatboxes that collapse slowly/into the green pinochle halls/of the pinochle men she knew.’ The poem’s opening, describing ‘Madame’ writing postcards from ‘the sea-facing east wing’, narrows to this solitary object: an empty hatbox. The plush interiors of the box are seen to ‘deepen’, with the bottom falling away into further compartments, into a vision from the past. Here we encounter the ‘green pinochle halls/of the pinochle men’ of the woman’s youth. From a moment of stillness, the life of the previous era is conjured. But with the poem’s next movement we are reminded that it is a reverie – ‘Madame dreams in the window chair’ – and the present’s inertia and frailty are restored.

In this short passage, there are precise details that sustain the general theme. The hatbox ‘in ribbons’ is suggestive of a more decorative period, now shelved. Then the collapsing interiors of the hatbox recreate a sense of the past’s envelopment. The verb, ‘collapse’ works hard here – suggesting also, more distantly, the age and frailty of the box’s materials. Unvoiced, though intimated in these envelopments and collapses, are other properties of the hatbox’s interior: its silkiness, mustiness, darkness. Then, in the ‘green pinochle halls/of the pinochle men she knew’, the colour, coupled with the card game, recalls the glamour of the inter-war years. The green note is suggestive of baize, emeralds, crème de menthe, fronded interstices: the *milieu* of the period. The colour green, more abstractly, also conjures an atmosphere of opulence and enigma. Compressed within this image, then, are intimations of a splendid past, remote from the lonely object that instigated them.

To sustain this mood requires attention to a palette, which means a careful adjustment of the qualities of things. Gaston Bachelard, writing on the prose of the Lithuanian poet O.V. Milosz, noted: ‘A gloomy life, or a gloomy person, marks an entire universe with more than just a pervading colouration. Even things become crystallizations of sadness, regret or

nostalgia. And when a philosopher looks to poets [...] for lessons in how to individualize the world, he soon becomes convinced that the world is not so much a noun as an adjective.’<sup>191</sup> The adjectival, in the case of my poem, pertains to the qualities given to the objects of Madame’s room and her reveries. While Bachelard’s enigmatic formulation works literally – the pinochle hall is precisely *green*, the old albatross is the *scuffed* white of lobby magazines – it also describes the shading given to this world more subtly and intrinsically. The whole of the poem’s language works ‘adjectivally’.

Another poem which seeks to reflect this theme, differently, is ‘A Room in Florence, 1266’, which describes a morning in the life of Loderingo degli Andalò, one of the profligate ‘Jovial Friars’, found among the hypocrites in the Eighth Circle of Dante’s *Inferno*. Whereas the life of the Roches Noires is accessible (the hotel is much the same now as it was in the nineteen-seventies), the world of the Guelphs and Ghibellines has receded from view.

Writing of the remote past presents a quite different imaginative challenge:

More of a dog extended in all directions  
over the thin rug, in the stone-wall cloister  
the man begins to kick and whimper  
while his gut, in good voice, escapes his belt.

The sleeping face is moist and flavourful  
intensified by the little bursts of lightning  
in purples across his cheeks and nose.

Mist. Then a kind of softish light. Certain tropes

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<sup>191</sup> Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 143.



of lyric poems pass into the scene where  
the friar, this Loderingo, snores in deep chords  
triumphantly out for all his sermons  
and petitions. Marshes beyond the city walls  
  
thicken with lowlife and schismatic  
but the friar is dreaming, vague transactions  
and soft flatteries, on an ideal balcony.  
He has toothache in one molar but his dream  
  
fills the space where the throb should be  
with a pale horse, clip-clopping on cobbles.  
His head is full of hoofbeats as the horse trots  
through Florence without a rider or cause.

This poem depicts the friar's quiet degeneracy, as an imagistic and sensory reality, as well as a symbol for the Florentine hypocrisies of the day. It is an elaboration on a figure who appears only briefly in the darkness of the *Inferno* – whose punishment is to continually pace around one of the underworld's rims, wearing a cap that is gilt on the outside, but leaden within. Like several of the other characters in the 'Rooms' – the suicide Gérard de Nerval, the Neapolitan gangster Raffaele Amato and Spartacus's plundered *domina* – he is damned in his own way. In this sense, decline is perceived as an ineradicable pattern, a human impediment, that traverses the centuries.

As previously mentioned, Durs Grünbein has said of his own historical poems, 'if I write about Descartes, then it's because I want to recall the immediacy of the past, not to

produce a costume drama.’<sup>192</sup> He continues: ‘My work is about actualizing the past, which is [...] an exchange of time – I go and fetch it quickly.’<sup>193</sup> This is the central challenge, as I perceive it. In my case, as someone attempting to evoke a particular atmosphere that has resonance with the present, it is necessary to make it tangible. In ‘A Room in Florence, 1266’, I attempt this in the physicality of the friar. On the floor of his quarters, degli Andalò’s ‘sleeping face is moist and flavourful/intensified by the little bursts of lightning/in purples across his cheeks and nose.’ To evoke the friar’s profligacy, which remained an abstraction for me, I had to fill in where Dante had left a lacuna. I gave him capillaries like ‘little bursts of lightning’ to manifest his insobriety. I hoped that a startling estrangement of the features – the transmutation of the blood vessels to electricity – would render them visible, something which would be forcefully ‘present’ in the historical room. The elision from ‘little bursts of lightning’ to the purple colouration is a hallucinatory blending that lends a further singularity to the image.

In the penultimate and final stanzas, the poem intrudes on degli Andalò’s dream. When his throbbing toothache is merged with the ‘clip-clopping’ of the horse, the poem depicts a recognisable phenomenon that belongs to the dimmer regions of consciousness. Similar fusions occur in dreams with alarms, voices, traffic, slamming doors. The portmanteau of ‘hoofbeats’, with its double syllable, renders the throb in a tangible way. Then, the white horse trots through the Florentine streets ‘without rider or cause’, implicating the dreamer – who sleeps through his religious duties – in its purposelessness. Through elaborating this seemingly incidental phenomenon, the historical context is ‘actualized’ – the impiety of the Jovial Friar becomes singular, concrete. The scene is individuated enough for degli Andalò to

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<sup>192</sup> Grünbein, ‘An Interview with Durs Grünbein’, 227.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

appear as a man subject to toothaches, covetous dreams and curious sensations, as someone outside of the abstractly 'historical'.

As with 'Excerpts from *The Scenic World*', 'Four Declining Planes', 'Transmissions' and 'Slides from Tolstoy', the 'Rooms' demonstrate my inclination towards the poem cycle. In this case, one poem was written which contained the seed of the rest – this was 'A Room in Paris, 1855', which defined the loose aesthetic criteria that would shape the others. This comprised the interior itself, a solitary character, and an atmosphere invoking loneliness, regret, nostalgia, dissolution. Together, they are an attempt at rendering what Bachelard termed 'pervading colouration' in different circumstances. It was this impulse that determined new additions – the elderly Madame at the Hotel des Roches Noires is connected to the Taiwanese girl searching the internet for Mastroianni's 'address' by this 'pervading colouration'. Rather than rigidly plotting the series, I allowed it to take shape poem by poem, with new ideas suggesting themselves organically from literature, media and cinema. This meant that the sequence developed in a lightly associated, miscellaneous manner with each addition striking the reader as part of a larger assemblage from which the index has been lost. This was important. I intended for the poems to appear as textual debris – curios and bibelots from the same gloomy store, so to speak. In arranging them for the manuscript, they appear in the order that they were written to preserve this sense of the miscellaneous, to invoke the dissolution that has scattered them this way.

This brings my appraisal to the question of 'process'. Each poem was arrived at uniquely: it goes without saying that their genesis was as kaleidoscopic as experience itself. However, there are some constants in my process, which are the accumulated habits of fifteen years of writing. To begin with, my poems are written directly onto a computer. I might refer to notes – scribbled synopses, sensory impressions, a single phrase – but the body of the poem takes

shape in a Microsoft Word document in twelve-point Times New Roman. The poem and its subsequent drafts are kept in one document with the earliest version at the bottom of the document. Throughout the writing process, I have online dictionaries and thesauruses to hand. I may also research specific objects, life histories or geographies, for example, in a browser window if that is required. Or I may refer to phrases from novels, essays and other poems. Though there is great variation, it is likely that the poem will pass through five or six drafts, with innumerable, less significant changes lost through continuous erasure.

To map one instance of my process, I will turn to ‘Decline of the House’. As often the case, the poem grew from a fascination – for a few weeks I would return in my mind to a round of images, phrases, an atmospheric climate. This ‘fascination’ began with seeing Antoine Watteau’s variations on the *fête champêtre* and talking at length about the dissolution of the court of Versailles with a friend. With Watteau’s paintings, my interest was in the pallor, the subtle note of decay, amid the festivities he depicted. These images became intermingled with the long conversations with my friend and suggested a poem that might touch on the first traces of decline at Versailles. I decided, after a period of experiment, that the work would be a formal sequence: I wrote three unmetred ‘sonnets’. This seemed congruous with the subject – which was, at heart, the collapse of a monolithic formal structure, with all its retinue and etiquette. Situating it within an identifiable form was congruous with the ceremonial principles of the court. By allowing the sonnets to slip out of pentameter, for them to be ‘imperfect’, I could intimate the burgeoning nature that characterized Versailles.

After finishing a first draft, I decided that the three poems were somewhat inanimate. They were too opaque, laden with historical fact, with little of the sensory immediacy necessary to evoke Versailles. For example, one of the poems described the pears of Louis XIV’s favourite gardener: ‘The sloping fontanelles, white, pink and ochre./The fruit sweetened, summer on summer,/for the young imperator, who walked/behind his expert

gardener, La Quintinie./A man who penned a eulogy for the species/he loved best: *Bon Chretien d'Hiver.*' For the most part, the poems imparted historical information, but little more than that. Rather than abandoning the project here, I collected some of the more vivid phrases and attempted a fourth sonnet on the Sun King. It began with a stray line from one of the discarded poems. It was finished in one draft:

After days running the stag and boar through  
the purple forests of Fontainebleau  
he'd crash out in bed. One or other mistress  
of his would present herself in undress  
  
before they'd lay in brace, a plucked peacock  
and the lion of France. *Majesté is back*  
was the word under the white reliefs  
of all the court salons. In bed he yawned  
  
widely and Mlle. saw how ruinous his teeth  
had become. She scented their world  
braided into his breath, like a composition  
  
opening with a sweet, brief movement  
of perfume, lawns and the *fêtes galantes*—  
closing on dead airs ... in rotten ballrooms.

This was an improvement on my initial attempts: a more live portrait of the court. With the king's sweeping entrance after the hunt, there is an immediacy, a drama that the other poems were unable to sustain. In the short narrative, the king is depicted with a physical tangibility: his carnality, his leonine yawn, the effect he has on the salons. He impresses himself on his world. Then there is a final, olfactory elaboration, when the courtesan scents the royal court 'braided' into the king's breath along with a premonition of its dissolution, which slips into an auditory hallucination of 'dead airs'. This synaesthetic merging suggests a critical overload, a dangerous surfeit, that will lead, finally, to the 'rotten ballrooms.'

I felt that the sonnet form was inhabited more wryly, too – the gauche early rhymes, in 'undress' and 'mistress', the slightly bathetic enjambment of 'yawned' and 'widely'. This staginess, the heightened silliness, was commensurate with an essential quality of the court. In this way, the poem was more proximate to its subject than my earlier, historically dutiful sonnets. It also signalled, self-consciously, the distance between the poem's context and the world of these long-dead aristocrats. This distance manifests in an element of caricature: Versailles, a shorthand for cartoon opulence, is difficult to approach in the twenty-first century without some cognisance of this. By adopting a certain 'artificiality' the poem could, paradoxically, set its stage more convincingly. Then, the poem could more naturally approach its sensory insight, its comment on the court's decadence.

However, this one sonnet was not enough to satisfy my initial vision. The historical context was neatly contained within the form – but too composedly, I thought. If 'Decline of the House' was to reflect the disintegration of the Bourbon line, then the structure should more closely embody that. So, from the offcuts of my first three poems, I saved two fragments: one, a simple list of the many surnames of a later courtier, piled on top of each other, like the layers of Marie Antoinette's toque; the other, a detail from the life of Louis XVI, dreaming of his obsession – locksmithing. I would edit and append these above the sonnet. These two

indulgences contributed to the surfeit of Versailles, which would culminate in the ‘dead airs’ and ‘rotten ballrooms’. They also disturbed the linearity of the sonnet, and suggested a fracture and a discomposure. There is no temporal continuity between the sections. The reader encounters the House of Bourbon incompletely, already in pieces:

i.

TOURZEL, LOUISE-ELISABETH-FÉLICITÉ-FLEUR-MARIE-THÉRÈSE-CHARLOTTE-etc, etc,  
MARQUISE DE (1749-1832)

ii.

Any given day a gold plate  
of songbirds, upwards of fifty  
varieties of tarte and cheese,  
critical bowel ailments.

The dauphin was fond of locksmithing.  
He dreamt in whole escritaires  
where locks unlocked  
other inscrutable locks.

By adjusting the typography of the first section, the name reads as if inscribed on a memorial or listed in an index. It is visibly a fragment. The second part strikes us abruptly, as if excerpted. The portrait is assembled section by section. The subtext is that it is to be put back together.

In this account of composing and editing, I can isolate what is consistent in my overall process. The willingness to radically pare-down a poem and to recombine it with discarded fragments has been a feature of my editing process for many years. When I begin writing a new poem or sequence, I accept that it might be drastically different from its first few versions and my initial conception. The process, which is difficult to quantify, is characterized by a period of sifting and shifting, sometimes with dramatic augmentations or reductions. It is more often the latter.

The process of reduction was the most common factor when organizing the full manuscript. I began with *all* the poems I had written during a certain period. I removed those that didn't develop particular nuances of the collection or those which opened up too disparate channels. For instance, a 'Room' depicting the British tycoon and asset-stripper James Goldsmith was removed, as it shaded the others with a political context that was too localized to contribute much to the palette. The final batch was sifted until there was a core – these poems fell into the ambit of the themes discussed here. Some fell just outside, but were still in harmonious correspondence.

In arranging the manuscript, I followed the same instincts that guide me when editing a single poem – the sifting and shifting that engages a necessarily unpremeditated critical sense. The resulting order, with the different sections, allows for motifs to be introduced – incrementally, variously – until they are returned to and developed elsewhere. Rather than seeking to separate the manuscript into single themes, I allowed for some felicitous juxtapositions and transitions. As the collection touches on travel's providential quality, I attempted to reflect that in the shape of the manuscript. There is a teeming, miscellaneous quality that is an integral part of my vision. There were, however, some definite constraints. I intended to facilitate the two central sequences, 'Rooms' and 'Excerpts from *The Scenic World*', with graduations in between. I decided that the concentrated quality of both would



require some spacing, some relief. Thus, the numbered sections of the manuscript provide definite pauses that require a form of disengagement, before continuing. In between, individual poems are ordered in such a way that dramatic tension is maintained.

The manuscript's first poem, 'A Portrait of Matteo Lonardi', introduces many of my work's main tropes – international travel, old opulence, history reaching into the present. It opens, with urgency, in a café in Piazza Plebescito, central Naples, the collection's dominant geography. The closing poem, 'Ecuador', concludes the manuscript with a journey. A swimmer is hauled aboard an enigmatic ocean liner at night, then emerges on a remote beach, where, in the early light, their first contact is with a young peddler. The traveller stands and looks at the 'rich, valueless flotsam', at the debris of the past, and is exhilarated and lonely. The 'sun comes up on the sea with a blue cheer.' After casting back so often on the 'picturesque and gloomy wrong', the collection closes on renewal.<sup>194</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This essay, crucially, is a practitioner's critique. My discussion of Ash and Grünbein serves as an oblique consideration of my own practice rather than as disinterested analysis. This has consequences regarding the scope of the thesis, as the line of enquiry is circumscribed by the thematic and aesthetic tendencies of my manuscript. However, the chapters on the other poets facilitate a wider self-reflection, difficult to achieve for a writer considering only their own material. The process of self-criticism is constrained and complicated by the dual perspective of reader and writer. The opportunity to project one's own concerns onto the canvass of another's work is less problematic.

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<sup>194</sup> Hawthorne, 'Preface' to *The Marble Faun*, 854.

The two poets considered here were chosen because they exemplify chief tendencies and movements in my own writing. Of course, they are also influences, but as influence is various, unstable and disorderly, this was a secondary consideration. They provide an opportunity to engage with the two most prominent seams in the manuscript.

John Ash's travel poems are salient, as the context for his work – as an itinerant or 'exile' in one of the truly ancient European cities – mirrored my own, relatively uncommon in contemporary British poetry. This, no doubt, is because the contemporary 'travel poem' is a fraught construct, troubled by the consciousness of orientalism and the decline of the imperial 'master view', where the 'expatriate' writer is at the centre of a foreign experience. However, Ash's circumspection towards Anglo-American hubris and his own position in this equation presents a more palatable model for 'travel poetry'.

Closely linked to these instincts is Ash's *anti-tourism*, which provides a vital framework for comprehending the impulse behind my own 'Excerpts from *The Scenic World*' and travel writing in general. My work signals this by self-consciously foregrounding touristic perspectives and behaviours, rather than with the 'perambulatory' digressions that Ash deploys, but the concept is analogous.

Then, his poems' valorisation of ancient places has resonance with my work. Their relish in the 'useless splendour', irregular scenery and lonely gloom of remote corners of Anatolia is close to my own sensibility. This is illustrated in poems like 'Palms at Anacapri', 'Apostrophe to Disrepair' and numerous of my historical portraits, like 'A Room at the Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, 1971'. Through my consideration of the *picturesque* in Ash, I concluded that this aesthetic signalled towards that which is not merely useful: a suspicion of instrumentalisation in modernity. If not articulated directly, as in the 'manifesto piece' 'Apostrophe to Disrepair', then the tendency towards 'useless' exorbitance and decoration is manifest in my work elsewhere.

My interest in Durs Grünbein here is – necessarily – narrow. The consideration of his historical portraits covers only a small, but important, aspect of his diverse work. The growing, but still comparatively limited, presence he has in the English language also confines me to a narrow corpus. Then, of course, the issue of translation means that my critical attention is directed to an echo of his writing: ‘composite’ texts made by Michael Hofmann. Nevertheless, even constrained in this way, his work provided a useful analogue through which to consider my own historical poems.

Of foremost importance, was Grünbein’s *displacement* of a particular atmosphere or *mien* onto his historical scenarios. Rather than the epochal events which shaped his poems, my own work is typified by a quieter, less dramatic note of disrepair. It can be perceived most clearly in my ‘Rooms’, where a consistent tenor is sustained through different historical interiors. This conjoins the poems considered here, ‘A Room at the Grand Hotel des Roches Noires, 1971’ and ‘A Room in Florence, 1266’. Though it is not in the remit of this essay to consider the psychological background of this ‘transference’ in depth, I have suggested that the source of this atmosphere may lie in the pervasive decline of the seaside resort where I spent my early life.

The second section of my Grünbein chapter focuses on the means by which his poems ‘actualize’ or animate events in the remote past. I reflect on the sensory reality evoked by his historical portraits and, with recourse to Bachelard, the manner by which his images attain a state of ‘emergence’. This pertains to my ‘Rooms’, which depict the intimate circumstances of individuals in the near and remote past. I contend that it is necessary to conjure the sensory, or ‘somatic’, detail to build convincing portraits of historical figures and places. Following my discussion of Grünbein’s Roman poems, I locate similar attributes in my ‘A Room in Florence, 1266’ – reflecting on the evocation of the sleeping friar degli Andalò, his physicality, ailments and the recognisable strangeness of his dream. My ‘Rooms’ and other

historical poems aspire to the immediacy and sense of ‘emergence’ that I discuss in relation to Grünbein’s work.

The thesis’s dual focus – on travel and history – is necessitated by their mutual role in my work. My final chapter, which locates the catalyst of both tendencies in my time in Naples, demonstrates this mutuality. In both the travel sequence and the historical poems it is possible to discern a unitary sensibility, an aesthetic underpinning: a poetics. Its coordinates have their analogues in Ash’s baroque surfeit and in Grünbein’s darkly-observed vignettes. Its outline is given shape by the theoretical categories deployed here.

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