

Durs Grünbein's Lob des Taifuns: Images and city figures of Japan

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This paper aims to analyse the “Lob des Taifuns. Reisetagebücher in Haikus” by Durs Grünbein, with the intention of showing how Japanese theories of thought, poetic and artistic practises – in particular, haikus – have played a decisive role for Grünbein, not only for understanding “another culture”, but also for reflecting on the aesthetic experience and the forms of telling proper to the metropolitan setting. In this perspective, Grünbein’s book becomes an “ideal place” to see the dialogue between “East” and “West” as an establishment of a tension-filled space between different styles which, without denying their own specificity, offer themselves to contamination and give life to the most recent form of the “metropolitan aesthetic”.

Keywords

German poetry, metropolitan experience, forms of telling, haiku

Durs Grünbein's *Lob des Taifuns*: Images and city figures of Japan¹

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Lob des Taifuns: Reisetagebücher in Haikus [Praise of the Typhoon: Travel Diaries in Haiku] is a collection of diaries in the short form of haiku on several journeys to Japan made by the German poet and essayist Durs Grünbein between the end of the '90s and 2005. Published in 2008, it is arranged into four titled cycles – “Zerrüttungen nach einer Tasse Tee oder Reise Tage mit Issa” [Irreconcilable Differences after a Cup of Tea, or Days Travelling with Issa], “Regentropfen auf einem Brillenglas” [Raindrops on a Glasses' Lens], “Lob des Taifuns” [Praise of the Typhoon] e “Stunden im Schneidersitz” [Hours Sitting Crosslegged] – that constitute the lyric diaries of trips to Japan taken in 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2005². The presence of information about the date and the place of composition for every haiku reveals the importance of place in his poetry. As Grünbein himself highlighted in his Frankfurt Poetics Lecture of 2009: «I mention the place name because it is always of some significance where someone is speaking from»³. Sometimes the haiku are accompanied by explanatory prose notes. «Some function as a kind of commentary, mostly from the perspective of a tourist new to Japan; many expose the creative moment. They tend to explain the haiku or tanka part in terms of where and when it was written or reveal something otherwise mysterious about the juxtaposition of elements mentioned in the larger-font lines»⁴.

The peculiarity of this collection of diaries is the use of the haiku to narrate the places visited (Tokyo, Kyoto, Shizuoka, Hiroshima, Miyajima and Kamakura), the experiences had, the sensations felt, the thoughts fully developed. In this way the diary, by talking about the trip, tells us about how a tradition of thought, artistic practices and aspects of a landscape so completely different can upset and strengthen habits of thought and cause intrusions into the

¹ The paper is the continuation of a research project which has been discussed during the 9th Conference of Aisu entitled “*La città globale. La condizione urbana come fenomeno pervasivo*” (Bologna 2019), whose proceedings are forthcoming. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Grünbein's haikus and poems are translated only in order to support the understanding of the original.

² See in this respect R.J. Owen, *A Poetics of Presence. Travel cycles in Aroma and Lob des Taifuns*, in M. Eskin, K. Leeder, C. Young (eds.), *Durs Grünbein. A companion*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2013, pp. 181-203.

³ D. Grünbein, *Vom Stellenwert der Worte. Frankfurter Poetikvorlesung 2009*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010, p. 27.

same forms of expression. *Lob des Taifuns* can thus be considered a place for “intercultural practice”⁵, where the narrating character strives for a mixture of multiple feelings and thoughts that contain, without enhancing them, both the unrelated and the discordant. Grünbein is, therefore, experimenting with a kind of *cultural attitude* that makes him avoid the staunchness of the gaze, which an exotic fascination with otherness wanted to keep firm in its untouchable *difference*. Experiencing this *difference* means instead for Grünbein to recognize it as a *difference* that contains various *differences*, i.e., an open, porous and infiltrated *difference*. This ensures that in capturing the outlines proper to places and lifestyles Grünbein also captures the signs of an active contamination, the turmoil of other cultures, the act of knowledge and strange languages. The *identity* of the country visited is thus the sedimentation of divergent layers and different influences, the unfolding of an unfinished process, that is also exposed to the unpredictability of its becoming. To observe the reality of Japanese cities means then to observe from the inside the messy stream of lives and contemporary stories, the constant intersecting and overlapping of heterogeneous elements, it means to recognize in the here and now the act of remembering what has been, the resonating of the sign of an origin, that expresses itself not in the purity of its uncontaminated language, but rather in a language made impure by the mark of the times and different events that have been layered upon it. It also means as well to recognize in these cities the proliferation of divergent movements, the mixture of different forms and discordant signs, whose appearance is already the sign of their disappearance.

But *Lob des Taifuns* is not only that. It is also the unfolding of a thought that lives and feeds itself on the continuous tension between languages, sources, knowledges of the most different origins. These are intertwined by Grünbein in a complex plot so that elements drawn from both “western” and “eastern” cultural backgrounds not only coexist, but also mix and knit themselves together in order to give birth to *constellations* of thought-images that keep together the disharmonious and the heterogeneous.

In the same “brain”, as he writes in *Mein babylonisches Hirn* [My Babylonian brain] in 1996, they can echo each other and intertwine with each other «a verse of Callimachus of Cyrene» and «the call of the postman in front of the door», «the lament of the lover coming

⁴ R.J. Owen, *A Poetics of Presence. Travel cycles in Aroma and Lob des Taifuns*, pp. 200-201.

⁵ See in this respect what Marramao writes in *Passaggio a Occidente. Filosofia e globalizzazione*: «Plurality is not only an *infra* but also an *intra*: it is not only *intercultural*, but also *intracultural*, not only intersubjective but intrasubjective, not only *among* identities, but internal to the symbolic constitution of every identity». G. Marramao, *Passaggio a Occidente. Filosofia e globalizzazione*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2009, p. 264.

from ancient Egypt» and «the strident sonnet of the loafer in the profane night of the metropolis»⁶:

The Babylonian brain, today the basic configuration of the poet, moves through the scenes of the cities in the same way as through picture galleries. Telescopically, it approaches the stars in the same way as a corner of a wall in ancient Rome⁷.

Grünbein's poetics absorbs the plurality of cultures and exposes them to a continuous movement of "transit" [*Transit*] and "condensation" [*Verdichtung*] in terms of images, ideas, figures, voices of a "Babylonian" world⁸. Transit and condensation are the principles that govern the work in verse by Grünbein – but they are also present in his prose work and, especially, his essays – making his poetry the «transit space»⁹ of a continuous succession of thoughts, figures, images that – beyond all geographical, temporal, semantic boundaries – bind each other together in order to give rise to complex «metaphorical fields». Grünbein – writes Ruzzenenti, identifying as a key compositional principle of his poetry a logic that could be defined as «eidetic-associative» – «thinks by images and lets himself be guided by the sound of the voices of *Weltliteratur*», proceeding «by leaps in time and in space»¹⁰. A «Babylonian brain» is, then, the one that allows the poet to «go hunting» for those many images which have emerged over the centuries and appear again on the surface of the present-day world¹¹.

1. A Babylonian Polaroid-brain

To start mapping some of the coordinates of the complex constellation of theoretical questions which can be found in *Lob des Taifuns*, it is worth starting with the recourse to haiku, a poetic form composed of three verses with seventeen syllables in total whose essence is rooted in the poetic immediacy at its core, namely, to recall a sensory experience lived in the moment by the poet or, using Grünbein's terminology, the «sudden mental reaction», the «trance of the

⁶ In D. Grünbein, *Galilei vermisst Dantes Hölle*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1996, pp. 21, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ On the "Transitraum" as the dominant image of Grünbein's work and the foundation of his definition of poetics, see A. Valtolina, *Parole con figura: Avventure dell'immagine da Friedrich Nietzsche a Durs Grünbein*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2010, pp. 109-123.

¹⁰ S. Ruzzenenti, *Forma breve: Durs Grünbein poeta-saggista*, in D. Borgogni, G.P. Caprettini, C.V. Marengo (eds.), *Forma breve*, Accademia University Press, Torino 2016, p. 498.

first instant» caused by an event which offers itself to our senses¹². Far from being a mere stylistic expedient, the recourse to haiku responds here to an irreducible necessity: to recount the experiences of transit through a country like Japan whose cities present a polycentric and reticular urban fabric and in which voices, sounds, and images continually overlap, merge, clash.

Grünbein himself motivates the choice of writing in haiku in the afterword to the book. Their “promise” – he says – is «to fix» «what in the moment of its appearance caused a pressing impression [*Eindruck*] and that could only appear fleetingly [*flüchtig*] before fading – a gesture, a scene on the street, a thought, the appearance of a stranger»¹³:

For me, who I never take pictures, the haiku seemed the more convenient alternative to Polaroid. [...] I wanted to be able to examine the individual internal recordings on the spot – on a white notebook page. [...] What I was told about the old Japanese woodcuts and their *ukiyo-e* technique was also true for my own fleeting creations. They were images of the world floating on the surface. Only in this case a few words were enough (to be precise: seventeen syllables) to capture the snapshot¹⁴.

The haiku appears to him, therefore, as an essential and immediate writing – comparable to the instantaneous shooting of a Polaroid – capable of “fixing”, in the meagreness of its linguistic space, the “images” which emerge in the «floating surface» of the world or «intensely lived moments»¹⁵. Hence the possibility of identifying in it the most suitable narrative method for expressing the extemporaneous visions which are produced and unravelled in the accelerated movement proper to the metropolitan experience, as well as the sudden emergence of ancient figures in present times, or the juxtaposition between divergent places caught *simultaneously* by the gaze¹⁶.

¹¹ See D. Grünbein, *Mein babylonisches Hirn*, p. 21.

¹² See D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns: Reisetagebücher in Haikus*, Insel, Frankfurt am Main-Leipzig 2008, pp. 102-108. See also in this book the essay by Yûji Nawata, *Wasser und Wolken ziehen wie immer dahin* (*ibid.*, pp. 112-128). For more on the genesis and the poetic form of the haiku, see R.H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku*, The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo 1984, vol. I; D. Keene, *World within Walls: Japanese literature of the pre-modern era 1600-1867*, Columbia University Press, New York 1999. For more on time and space as features of Japanese poetry central to an understanding of the poetic haiku, see G. Pasqualotto, *Yohaku: Forme di ascesi nell'esperienza estetica orientale*, Esedra, Padova 2001, pp. 125-147.

¹³ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 108.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Although his book does not offer a theorization of the topological categories of Japanese spaces, or an analysis of how these influence or condition the organization of the towns' urban fabrics, Grünbein's choice of the narrative form seems to be capable of restoring the “urban composition” of Japanese cities. It is – as Augustin

Like the walkers, of whom Michel de Certeau writes, Grünbein composes therefore a manifold story shaped out of fragments of trajectories in the floating labyrinth of Japanese cities by living «down below», i.e., by letting himself be «clasped by the streets [...] according to an anonymous law»¹⁷, in order to narrate their intimate plurality, their unsolvable complexity, through the rapid proliferation of temporary and discordant images.

Not unlike some sequences of the film *Tokyo-ga* by Wim Wenders (1985)¹⁸, Japan is thus narrated by Grünbein as an intertwined juxtaposition of different places – Buddhist temples and shopping centers, *torii* and shopping streets, in addition to hotel chains and bars, railways and airports – where the most remote and the most recent coexist exactly as they coexist in the multiplicity of figures that populate those cities: masses of tourists and monks¹⁹, kabuki theater actors and teenagers made-up like manga dolls, etc.²⁰ Images of places intermingle with those of everyday life and refer both to the ancient traditions rooted in Japanese culture and such new phenomena as the performance art of cosplay (which consists of wearing the costume of a specific character taken from anime, manga, or comic books) and such forms of mobility as the growing wave of international tourism, which embodies the compression of space through globalization²¹.

Berque writes in *Du geste à la cité: Formes urbaines et lien social au Japon* – about a composition whose «spatial order» «is characterized by juxtaposition rather than by the hierarchisation», by «the succession of points of view rather than the overall views», because «the same contingency for an agreement of the parties, which are strongly autonomous, generates the cohesion of the whole». See A. Berque, *Du geste à la cité: Formes urbaines et lien social au Japon*, Gallimard, Paris 1993, pp. 131-132. For a deeper analysis of these matters, see L. Ricca, *Dalla città ideale alla città virtuale: Estetica dello spazio urbano in Giappone e in Cina*, Carocci, Roma 2014.

¹⁷ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by S. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1984, pp. 92-93. As an example of the “voyeurs” perspective (*ibid.*) one may quote the novel *Points and Lines* by Matsumoto Seichō (1958): the crime recounted in this novel is in fact planned by a man able to see that tangle of railways connections that cross through the Japan and for this reason to direct from above the mobility down below of the two predestined victims.

¹⁸ Filmed by Wim Wenders in the '80s, *Tokyo-ga* is – as is well known – a “filmic diary” dedicated to the Japanese film director Ozu Yasujiro. The movie includes sequences of Yasujiro’s films and reports with the director of photography Yuharu Atsuta and the actor Chishu Ryu alongside sequences of Tokyo, its gardens of cherry trees and mechanized golf-courses, Pachinko’s players and teenagers dancing to rock and roll. Here it is worthwhile to underline that in some sequences, where publicity images and images of the streets filmed inside a taxi follow each other Wenders reflects on the impossibility of a “view” able to create order in a “world out of order”.

¹⁹ See «Zwischen Touristen / Steht ein Wandermönch, betend, / Den Hut tief im Gesicht» [Between tourists / there is a wandering monk, in prayer, / his hat right in front of his face]. In D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 12.

²⁰ See «Wer kommt da gehinkt? / Achtung, Girlies in Gruppen! / Auf kothurnen und grell geschminkt, / Gesichter wie Manga-Puppen, / Bis unters Haar pink» [Who comes here limping? / Caution, girls in groups! / In tragic boots and garishly made-up, / faces like manga dolls / under pink hair]. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²¹ For an in-depth analysis of the connection between tourism and globalisation, see Z. Bauman, *Globalisation: The human consequences*, Polity Press-Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge-Oxford 1998. See, in particular, chapter 4.

However, for the poet it is not only a matter of grasping «at a glance» what is performed in the present. What needs to be grasped are also the images and sounds of the past which have sedimented in these places and which can suddenly re-emerge at the moment of conscious perception in the present of a given event and relate to images, voices, thoughts, which, just as suddenly, emerge in the poet's memory. In this way, images and voices typical of Japan find unexpected forms of “condensation” with those of Grünbein, thus giving rise to a dense and wide network of correspondences and references.

The core of the compositional process of many of the haiku present in *Lob des Taifuns* is, in fact, the “transit” between visual or acoustic images which connect the sensory experience of an event which is felt in the moment and the experiences lived, remembered, or imagined by the poet, that is to say, between the “here” of the impulses which, in the uninterrupted “murmur” [*Gemurmel*] of the world, are expressed by the senses, and the “everywhere” – both spatially and temporally – to which, in an «intuitive recollection» of such impulses, the «infinitely large memory» activated by sensory stimulation, *can* gain access²².

If the haiku aims to restore the instantaneous sensation of a configuration of elements that, at the moment, unfold in their essentiality, singularity and temporality, this is assumed by Grünbein and made to act within his own conception of the «physical origin» of the poetic word. This – as we can read in *Mein babylonisches Hirn* – «maintains the link with singularity, with the ideography of primary perception»²³, with the task of writing memory traces – engrams²⁴ – visual images which, through the imagination, gather themselves around the multiplicity of perceptive stimuli and which are inscribed in the nervous system. For Grünbein, however, the «intensely lived moment» includes both what we are sensorially experiencing (visions, sounds, smells) and everything that can “come” from the «regions of

²² D. Grünbein, *Mein babylonisches Hirn*, pp. 28-29.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19. It is by maintaining the link with the «ideography of primary perception» that the poetic word differs from the «everyday language» which is «without memory» [*erinnerunglos*] to the extent that there is no remnant left in the visual images inscribed in the central nervous system.

²⁴ In *Drei Briefe*, for example, Grünbein writes about the acoustic experience: «the ear, in its internal structure, looks already like a shell since it is an opening to the chaotic sea, which means the world». Being «perpetually surrounded by a fullness of noises», we live «in an urban trance, from which, in certain moments of proper listening, only the dialogue of the voice [*Stimme*] with memory [*Gedächtnis*] it helps to go out. This is the quiet second of an engram engraving». In D. Grünbein, *Galilei vermisst Dantes Hölle*, p. 41. It should, however, be kept in mind that, for Grünbein, the poem itself is capable of “leading” the «thought to a sequence of physiological short-circuits» in which «each charge» is immediately followed «by a new charge and vice versa». «The energy – he explains – is generated by a complex that the *body* [*Körper*] definition describes only inadequately, since it goes much deeper under the skin. Perhaps one can find traces of it by studying the neurology and the structure of the nervous system. Since the idea of the engram itself, whether it is hypothetical or certain, is definitely more enlightening compared to any timid hermeneutics». *Ibid.*, p. 41. For a deeper

the brain» – a «mobile dune of neurons» [*Wanderdüne aus Neuronen*]²⁵ which, triggered by stimuli, allows further images, memories, thoughts, ideas, etc.²⁶ to emerge – giving rise, in an «act of imaginative suddenness», to unprecedented interlacements between the new traces that are inscribed for the sensory experience and those already inscribed in the memory.

The task that Grünbein identifies as peculiar to poetry is, therefore, to become a «machine of memory» [*Gedächtnismaschine*] and, at the same time, to become a «space for memory» [*Gedächtnisraum*]²⁷. As a «machine of memory», poetry performs the “same” function as memory since this is a movement that traces images under the flow of sensory stimulation and through the imagination. As a «space for memory», it is the place where the intertwining of such images with any memory [*Erinnerung*] – an experience, an observation, or a more complex thought process – is associated with the effect of the neural processes caused by the stimulation of the senses and the consequent registration of sensory visions in the relevant regions of the brain. Hence the definition of poetry [*Gedicht*] as a «rapid sighing of the memory under the daily turmoil of impressions»²⁸ in which sensory perception, imagination, and thought recall and compact themselves in an instant. This shows how for Grünbein the poetic word (and, more generally, every writing as a poetic act) springs *together* from the sensory experience – «there is nothing effective in writing that was not first in the senses»²⁹ – and from «psychic acts»³⁰, both rooted in the central nervous system.

Thus, in *Lob des Taifuns* one goes from images captured when they are unfolding and offering themselves to the sensory perception towards images emerging from «walks through the collective memory»³¹ – there are many references to the bombardments suffered by Japan during the Second World War – or from the «tangle of voices» also described by Grünbein: philosophical and literary readings which extend from *In Praise of Shadows* by Tanizaki to *Gespräch von der Sprache* by Heidegger, from the haiku of Bashō to the lyrics of Rilke. His “brothers” on the journey through Japan are, however, above all Issa and Baudelaire, and so

analysis of the idea of the engram in Grünbein's work, see A. Müller, *Das Gedicht als Engramm: Memoria und Imaginatio in der Poetik Durs Grünbeins*, Igel, Hamburg 2014.

²⁵ See D. Grünbein, *Porzellan: Poem vom Untergang meiner Stadt*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2005, p. 20.

²⁶ Consider what Grünbein writes in *Mein babylonisches Hirn*: if thoughts [*Gedanken*] can “change” into «sensory visions» [*sinnliche Anschauungen*], these can, inversely, turn into thoughts. In D. Grünbein, *Mein babylonisches Hirn*, p. 27.

²⁷ Cf. A. Müller, *Das Gedicht als Engramm*, pp. 107-110.

²⁸ D. Grünbein, *Mein babylonisches Hirn*, p. 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁰ The word – one reads in *Mein babylonisches Hirn* – is «just a wall», “behind” which is the «psychic act». *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

in a fertile “hybridization” between East and West. If the first of the travel diaries is dedicated to the Japanese poet, entitled *Zerrüttungen nach einer Tasse Tee oder Reisetage mit Issa*, Baudelaire is evoked in a haiku in which the Ginza district with its shopping centres appears as «the biggest temple of goods»³²; if *with* Issa Grünbein enhances brief details and events that occur³³ while walking through Japanese landscapes, *as* Baudelaire Grünbein dives into the cities as «a *kaleidoscope* equipped with consciousness», by exposing the sensorium to a complex kind of training and to the possibilities of shock³⁴.

Both poets are placed side by side through a game of proximity and difference: for both it is proper to describe this tension as “lightning” [*Blitz*], since it is proper of both to speak of the research experimentation of a language able to welcome and to express the sudden movements of real life. This is a task which Issa fulfills by resorting to language «concentrated on the essential» of the haiku³⁵ and Baudelaire by resorting to a poetic prose capable of «adapting to the lyrical movements of the soul, to the undulations of fantasy, to the setbacks of the consciousness» in «living in enormous cities» and «of the crossing of their innumerable relationships»³⁶.

2. Images and city figures

Starting from his idea of poetry as an «ideography of primary perception» and a present-day immersion in the «tangle of voices of many past times» of the world, Grünbein narrates his journey across Japan by resorting to an essential script, capable of receiving lightning images of cities and landscapes, gestures and figures. These images are intertwined with others which flicker from the collective past and/or re-emerge in memory by attracting personal memories, thoughts, reflections of Grünbein. All of this is offered in a circular movement without interruption which serves neither to unify nor to dissolve the inhomogeneous but to rely on its own productivity.

³² D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 48.

³³ In some haiku it seems in fact that Grünbein aims to come close to the experience proper to the Japanese poetic genre of haiku, i.e., by describing the immediate visions of what is seen without any mediation of the I who writes.

³⁴ See W. Benjamin, *Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in *Charles Baudelaire*, translated by H. Zohn, Verso, London-New York 1997, p. 132.

³⁵ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, pp. 105-106. For analysis of the poetics of Issa, see, in particular, D. Keene, *World within Walls*, pp. 366-367; R.H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku*, vol. I, pp. 349-427.

³⁶ I refer to Charles Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris*, in C. Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. par C. Pichois, Gallimard, Paris 1975, vol. I, pp. 275-276.

And this is how Tokyo is described: Grünbein does not talk about its districts, its buildings, or its sanctuaries but relies on details, refers to everyday scenes of figures glimpsed in the streets, crossed in the markets or in the big commercial centres. But Tokyo is also a place of sounds and noises: it is the rain which, when falling, beats against the windows or resounds in the puddles³⁷, it is the piercing scream, similar to that of the magpies, of two gangsters in a restaurant³⁸. In this way Tokyo reveals its contradictory multiplicity, since it is both the place of the “demonic” spectacle of goods and public squares with enormous video screens³⁹ and the one where, suddenly, after a thunderstorm, the starry sky becomes visible⁴⁰. It is the noise of the Akasawa district, in which «it is very difficult» «the life of a sparrow»⁴¹, but it is also the silence interrupted by a ticking whose rhythm is driven into the ear of the poet:

Pingpong im Hausflur. / Oder sind das die Schritte / Der Frau mit dem Tee?⁴²

[Ping-pong in the hallway. / Or are these the steps / Of the woman with the tea?]

It is a ticking of which the origin cannot be identified: it may be the bouncing of the ball in a game of ping-pong or the steps of a woman wearing the geta⁴³: both possibilities co-affect the space of the haiku.

And yet Grünbein likewise resorts to a sharp contrast between images to show a Tokyo plagued by pollution, by traffic lights that «strike the pupils», by the «artificial green» of plastic bottles, by the waste left on the side of the road and in rivers.

Wieviel er doch schluckt, / Der Fluß: Schildkröten, Karpfen – / Ein Fahrrad sogar⁴⁴.

[How much he swallows / The river: turtles, carp – / Even a bike.]

Sometimes Grünbein comes close to the audacious conciseness proper to this Japanese poetic genre, by writing haiku that diminish «to the point of pure and sole designation», i.e., «neither

³⁷ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, pp. 37, 67.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 93.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴³ These traditional Japanese sandals, having in fact the wooden sole raised by two dowels, emit a sound similar to the one produced by a board game on contact with the ground.

⁴⁴ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 38.

waves nor flow of meaning»⁴⁵, as in this haiku dedicated to one of the most famous symbols of Japan.

Das hölzerne Tor / In der Bucht von Miyajima – / Ein rotes *kanji* im Meer⁴⁶.

[The wooden gate / In the bay of Miyajima – / A red *kanji* in the sea.]

And if the haiku is also “lazzo” [*Scherz*]⁴⁷, Grünbein does not hesitate to resume and sarcastically twist one of Bashō’s most famous haiku to describe the damage caused by the birds to the statues of the Buddha: «No Platsch!» awakens a «sleeping Buddha»⁴⁸.

Sometimes attention focuses on a marginal detail, like the gesture of a man who quickly draws «on the palm of a hand» the “meaning” of a sentence not understood by his interlocutor:

Was hat er gemeint? / In die Handfläche malt er / Den plötzlichen Sinn⁴⁹.

[What did he mean? / He draws in the palm of the hand / The sudden sense.]

It may also happen that a bustling and noisy Tokyo in the morning will not be likened to a «Sleeping Beauty» but instead to the disquieting awakening of a Godzilla, the prehistoric monster that re-emerged from the Pacific Ocean, among thunderous waves and dazzling lights, following the experiments carried out in those waters to test the hydrogen bomb (see the 1954 film *Godzilla* by Ishirō Honda).

Tokyo am Morgen – / Nicht die schlafende Schöne, / Godzilla erwacht⁵⁰.

[Tokyo in the morning – / Not the Sleeping Beauty, / Godzilla awakens.]

«While transitioning» from the popular imagination to the Grünbein haiku, Godzilla becomes a figure for the contradictory complexity of Tokyo: a very ancient city with the signs of

⁴⁵ See R. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, translated by R. Howard, Hill and Wang, New York 1992, pp. 83-84.

⁴⁶ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

technological development engraved upon it, together with the signs of the bombings during the Second World War or even the nuclear tests conducted by the United States of America at the Bikini Atoll in 1946.

There are also references to rituals – from the tea ceremony to *harakiri* – and to artistic practices. Among these are the same haiku whose composition can be effected through a «dissolution of the ego» [*Auflösung des Ichs*] which allows us to look at nature as being “indifferent”⁵¹ or through the “quiet” [*Stille*] which can be found in places such as cedar wood bathrooms⁵². The appearance of haiku as an essential genre which fleetingly rises from the emptiness and then returns to it is both described and also *demonstrated* in the following verses in which what is recorded is the sound of the «seventeen larynx clicks» that some women let resonate while reading a haiku in a park in Tokushima:

Siebzehn Kehlkopfklicks – / Ein Gedicht auf japanisch. / Vorbei, kaum gehört⁵³.

[Seventeen laryngeal clicks – / A poem in Japanese. / Gone, barely heard.]

To the memory of two of the most important Japanese writers, Mishima and Kawabata, are instead dedicated those verses that recall their choice to commit suicide:

Durch Freitod scheiden / Nach dem letzten Roman hier / Die Schriftsteller aus. / Dem Handwerk treu
setzen sie / Den Schlußpunkt im Leben selbst⁵⁴.

[It is here, by suicide, / after the last novel / that the writers resign. / Being faithful to the craft they /
put the final point to the life itself.]

In such a way the narration of a city includes the recollection of the writers and poets who have lived in it and have narrated it in their turn.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵² See «Manch Haiku entstand / an dem stillsten der Örtchen, / im Zedernholz-Klo» [Some haiku were created / in the quietest of places, / in cedar wood bathrooms]. *Ibid.*, p. 47. This alludes to what Tanizaki writes in *In Praise of Shadows* concerning the “Japanese toilet” as a place where many haiku authors have found the «theme of their verses»: «Here, more than anywhere else, is the place where to pay attention to the chirping of insects or bird songs, and enjoy the moonlight; here it is delicious to taste the fugitive signs of the four seasons in a melancholic way». In J. Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, Leete’s Islands Books, London 2010, par. 2, p. 10.

⁵³ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Another haiku reveals how Tomio Tezuka's phrase «*Ohne Iro kein Ku*», reported by Heidegger in *Gespräch von der Sprache* – meaning, as Grünbein has written in the explanatory note, that «Color is emptiness, emptiness is color» [*Farbe ist Leere, Leere ist Farbe*]⁵⁵ – has been decisive in “equipping” the poet's gaze by prompting him to recognize the co-implication of color and emptiness in the reverberation of the colors of the sky.

Erst das Blau, das Grau, / Macht den offenen Himmel / Sichtbar, die Leere⁵⁶.

[Only the blue, the gray, / Render the open sky / Visible, the emptiness.]

And if Issa's influence is felt in the verses where images of murders of crows or schools of fish are found, in which figures of orphans and the dispossessed appear, the influence of Baudelaire is felt in the haiku dedicated to the woman glimpsed in Kyoto:

Rolltreppe abwärts. / Der schöne, traurige Mund / Einer Dame in Schwarz⁵⁷.

[Escalator downwards. / The beautiful, sad mouth / Of a woman in black.]

The figure of a «mourning, thin and tall» woman in *A une passante*⁵⁸ who stands out for a moment in the «deafening street», is here replaced by the figure of a woman glimpsed on an escalator. It is not the crowd which, like a «floating veil», makes the «woman in black» suddenly appear and then disappear⁵⁹, but the movement expressed by Grünbein is a similar one: the sudden appearance of «the beautiful, sad mouth» of the woman. There is no trace here of any emotional reaction, nor does the fleeting encounter with the woman become a source of regret for what might have been⁶⁰. Mindful of the lesson in Baudelaire, Grünbein does refer to the «fugitive beauty» of the figure of the passerby – «A flash ... and then the darkness!»⁶¹ – but he stresses the lightning of the apparition by resorting to the extreme syntheticity and to the neutrality proper to haiku. By contracting in a visual image

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵⁸ In C. Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, pp. 92-93.

⁵⁹ See W. Benjamin, *Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, pp. 124-125.

⁶⁰ I refer to Baudelaire's *A une passante*. See «I will only see you then after life, / rather than elsewhere, far away, – and late, and perhaps *never?*».

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

accompanied neither by any allusion to the subject nor by any psychic reflection or sentimental emotion related to it, Grünbein's haiku ends up enhancing the sense of impermanence in Japanese culture by linking it to the accelerated movement of the contemporary city.

3. «The hardest Zen exercise is not to think about *it*»

For Grünbein walking around the city is also “listening” to *how much* the past unexpectedly emerges and cracks the appearance of daily life. And what emerges may include traces of a past or a very recent war, as happened in the Akasaka district, destroyed by the American air attacks during the Second World War. Here the flashing of a *sign* of war refers to that technology of death with which the air itself is imbued through the destructive violence of human beings:

Zwei Raben kämpfen / Wo sie eng wird, die Straße. / Luftkrieg in Tokyo⁶².

[Two crows fight / Where it gets tight, the road. / Air War in Tokyo.]

The image of the “fighting” crows literally evokes *another memory* which reconfigures the experience lived by the poet in the very moment at which this vision is given. By connecting one of the distinctive features of the haiku with the reasons for its own poetics⁶³, Grünbein here rethinks the sensory feeling of an event which appears at that moment (the vision of the crows) as a “lightning” which makes an image of the past burst into the present collective (the recorded image of the aerial bombardment of Tokyo).

To “timely” connect those images – this is a decisive question – is not an historical logic, but rather a «logic of images». The connection between these two arises, in fact, from an «act of imaginative suddenness». This is an act that some events can trigger by binding together

⁶² D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 65.

⁶³ Here the matter is not – as it is characteristic of haiku – to say the instantaneous and pure feeling that originates directly from the vision of a thing, of an event, but to say the recollections which emerge by seeing something, i.e., by letting «that kind of internal radiophony continually *sending* in us» emerge with the vision itself. See in this respect what Barthes says about the connection between Zen and haiku. In R. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 74.

sensory stimuli of the present apperceptive and «psychic acts» provoked by the sensory stimulation itself⁶⁴.

Among the events recollected by Grünbein, there is also the attack on the Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995.

Eiskalt am Bahnsteig / Grüßt eine Plastikflasche: / Köstliches Grün⁶⁵.

[Frozen on the platform / a plastic bottle greets: / delightful green.]

The presence of a green plastic bottle, which is abandoned on the platform of a subway, is here a *sign* of the security measures which were taken immediately after the attack, namely, the removal of the garbage cans from the subway stations. Through a sole, sarcastic, image Grünbein tells us how an unexpected and sudden *incident* – such as seeing a simple object – can have the effect of provoking the recollection of a traumatic past event, the accomplice to the typical urban fear that people feel by having an awareness that wars nowadays are waged *inside* cities themselves.

But Hiroshima is the place where the memory of the past – a past in which not even the clouds have been left unchanged in the landscape – is *such* that it strongly affects the way we look at the landscape⁶⁶.

Die Luft ist rein jetzt. / Dem blanken Himmel sieht man / Die Wolke nicht an⁶⁷.

[The air is pure now. / In the bare sky you don't see / the cloud.]

The now clear sky can only be a reference to the absence of *the* cloud which had darkened it on the day of the bombing, as the poet stresses by using the singular definite article “die”.

⁶⁴ D. Grünbein, *Galilei vermißt Dantes Hölle*, p. 22.

⁶⁵ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 79.

⁶⁶ It must be remembered here how, in the poet's memory, Hiroshima is closely linked to his hometown, Dresden, since «it is said» that the latter could have been destroyed by the atomic bomb instead of the Japanese city. See what Grünbein writes in *Europe nach dem letzten Regen*: «Ach, Hiroshima war nur zweite Wahl. / Premiere haben sollte sie (sagt man) in Dresden, / die Bombe, die heut jedes Schulkind malt –». [Ah, Hiroshima was only the second choice. / She should have had her premiere (it is said) in Dresden, / the bomb, which nowadays every schoolchild paints –] In D. Grünbein, *Nach den Satiren*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1999, pp. 149.

⁶⁷ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 43.

Elsewhere, Grünbein expresses his astonishment at the “reappearance” in Hiroshima of a blue hortensia.

Blaue Hortensie, / Auch du, unverwüsthliche, / Bist wiedergekehrt⁶⁸.

[Blue hortensia, / You too, indestructible, / Have returned.]

If it is evident here that the poet is referring to the lyric *Blaue Hortensie* by Rainer Maria Rilke, which “celebrates” the ephemeral blooming of the hortensia whose vivid blue color *already* bears faded marks⁶⁹, the haiku of Grünbein instead emphasizes the ultimate indestructibility of nature, to which the blooming of the hortensia bears witness.

But it is above all where Grünbein mentions Zen to emphasize the impossibility of *emptying* the mind and thereby freeing it from the thought of what happened to Hiroshima – the emptiness necessary to access a status of abandonment and pure attention to phenomena⁷⁰ – that the event of the atomic bombing is revealed as a memory which, unable to be eradicated or consigned to oblivion, “interferes” with experiencing the “here and now” of the city.

In Hiroshima / Die schwerste Zen-Übung ist / Nicht *daran* denken⁷¹.

[In Hiroshima / The hardest Zen exercise is / To not think *about it*.]

The memory of such an event, so rooted in the collective memory that it does not even need to be named – the poet alludes to it *only* with the adverbial pronoun “*daran*”, which is not preceded or followed by an explanatory proposition – affects the very exercise of thought, locking it up. Hence the divergence between the activity of thinking and the Zen practice which aims at a “purification” of «everything that can interpose between us and the immediate data of the experience» in favor of a concentrated attention on the latter⁷².

The haiku written by the poet in English at the “Big Box” bar, in which a woman from Kiev appears dancing in a thong bikini on one of the tables, contrasts with the other haiku

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁹ R.M. Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, Insel, Frankfurt am Main 1975, vol. II, p. 519.

⁷⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the issues inherent to Zen Buddhism, see D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Lightning Source Inc., London 2013.

⁷¹ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 42.

dedicated to Hiroshima. Recounting Hiroshima means, for Grünbein, also recounting the uprooting provoked by the phenomenon of migration and the entertainment industry connected with the phenomenon of globalization, the latter understood as the «transition to the West by all cultures» of which Marramo writes in *Passaggio a Occidente. Filosofia e globalizzazione*. It consists of a «transition to modernity» destined to produce profound cultural changes. All cultures are permeated with various forms of otherness such that the world appears more and more like a «Babylonian space», «where differentiation goes hand in hand with standardization and centrifugal, autonomic and idiosyncratic forces intertwine in an inextricable plexus with a technological-commercial homologation of lifestyles and consumption»⁷³.

Lady from Kiev, / Why do you dance in Japan / On a table, barebreasted, / Your tanga-slip stuffed
with yen?! / “Shitsurei. Globalisation...”⁷⁴

Here the phenomenon of globalization is implicitly represented through the confusion of languages and is explicitly referred to in the verses that close the haiku. However, neither here nor in the entire collection of diaries can we find any trace whatsoever of any criticism of the changes which have been wrought upon Japan through globalization. There is the suggestion that, for Grünbein, it is rather about «diving into» the “tangle” of images and voices of his places and his «several times», exploring the complexity and heterogeneity of a country which has also become *Babylonian*, in the phrase pronounced by the woman or that the poet imagines her uttering. The word “Globalisation” is, in fact, preceded by the Japanese word “Shitsurei” which, as Grünbein states in the explanatory note, means “Forgive me” [*Vergib mir*] and whose original meaning can be rendered with: «I have lost my virtue» [*Ich hab meine Tugend verloren*]⁷⁵. What the final verses offer is, therefore, an ambivalent request for “forgiveness” for being guilty of something which is, at the same time, attributed to a phenomenon beyond its control. “Globalization” – as Bauman writes – «is not about what we all, or at least resourceful and enterprising among us, wish or hope to do. It is about *what is happening to us all*. The idea of “globalization” explicitly refers to von Wright’s “anonymous forces”, operating in the vast – foggy and slushy, impassable and untamable – “no man’s

⁷² See D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*.

⁷³ G. Marramao, *Passaggio a Occidente. Filosofia e globalizzazione*, p. 254.

⁷⁴ D. Grünbein, *Lob des Taifuns*, p. 43.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

land”, stretching beyond the reach of the design-and-action capacity of anybody’s in particular»⁷⁶. According to Grünbein, globalization is furthermore a phenomenon which is waiting to be questioned. Hence the suspension points that *instead* of closing the haiku leave it open with a visible trace of emptiness, of words and/or reflections which are *missing*.

A cultural attitude similar to Grünbein’s one can be traced in Hakuri Murakami’s novels, where one may pass through a plurality of Japanese landscapes and cities – among which Tokyo plays a pivotal role⁷⁷ – by passing at the same time through an equally intricate intersection of both Western and Eastern elements⁷⁸. As an example it is possible to quote here *Norwegian Wood* (1987), in which the Japanese writer embarks upon a novel on the model of European novels of the nineteenth century in order to write about the difficult emotional education of a young university student, Tōru Watanabe, at the time of the student riots in Japan in the late 1960s⁷⁹. In the novel Tokyo emerges through the different fragments of trajectories that the protagonists *write* by walking inside it, i.e., by walking among artificial channels and gardens of cherry trees, subway stations and staircases of Shinto shrines, concrete buildings and neighborhoods that escaped the bombings which the city suffered during the Second World War. Thus Murakami lets this discordant plurality reveal itself through the possible ways to criss-cross and narrate it. It is possible to walk inside it, becoming disoriented like the melanconic Naoko, who gets lost in the unending labyrinth of the city in the same way she gets lost in her thoughts, unable to explain them in words. Or it is possible to plan ways of playing with the memory of the different places as the cheerful Midori does by writing texts in the maps of Tokyo, in which we find not only detailed information about tourist routes, but also anecdotes which intertwine present visions and past events. Thus a flock of birds flying around an artificial dam, in circles, can narrate that in that place there was once a village that has been submerged. Places are so lived not only through what is present, but also as presences of diverse absences.

⁷⁶ Z. Bauman, *Globalisation*, p. 68.

⁷⁷ See, in this respect, D. Flynn, *The Transcreation of Tokyo. The universality of Murakami’s urban landscape*, in M.C. Strecher, P.L. Thomas (eds.) *Haruki Murakami*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam 2016, pp. 87-100; P. De Luca, *Introduzione to Abitare possibile. Estetica, architettura, new media*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano-Torino 2015, pp. VII-XV.

⁷⁸ Here it should be noted that Murakami belongs to the new wave of writers who since the 1970s have animated the Japanese literary scene with works outside the bounds of tradition. With regard to the latter there are fewer references to typically Japanese artistic practices and rituals. See, in this respect, G. Amitrano, *Introduzione to H. Murakami, Norwegian Wood. Tokyo blues*, Einaudi, Torino 2006, pp. V-XVII.

⁷⁹ H. Murakami, *Norwegian wood*, Kodansha, Tokyo 1987.