'The East' as a transit space in the new Europe? Transnational train journeys in prose poems by Kurt Drawert, Lutz Seiler and Ilma Rakusa[1]

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Abstract

The past three decades, following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, have seen the development of a 'European literature' characterised by the emergence of transnational subjects and spaces. This also applies to a Europe traditionally defining itself by means of a frontier to the 'East'. In German writing, this has been a more recent phenomenon than in other Central or Eastern European literatures, and is not restricted to 'Migrantenliteratur'. In texts subverting East-West dichotomies by contemporary German-speaking writers with an 'Eastern Bloc biography', the train journey into the East emerges as a recurrent motif. The traveller encounters this East in Siberia, but also in various places or spaces in Central and Eastern Europe. Examples discussed here include poems and short narrative texts by Kurt Drawert, Lutz Seiler and Ilma Rakusa, which could be defined as prose poetry. My analysis, based on spatial concepts by Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, will focus on movement in these texts, which tends to affect temporal and genre boundaries as much as those between self and Other. The train itself or the landscape travelled through becomes a transit space in which national borders and frontiers to the East are, at least temporarily, transcended.

Mit dem Ende des Kalten Krieges hat sich in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten eine 'europäische Literatur' entwickelt, die sich durch ein transnationales Raumbewusstsein auszeichnet, in dem dichotomische Konzepte des 'Anderen' bzw. 'Fremden' und 'Eigenen' zunehmend brüchig werden. Die das dominante Europabild traditionell bestimmende West-Ost-Dichotomie wird in dieser Literatur zum Teil ebenso in Frage gestellt, wie andere Vorstellungen kollektiver Identität. Diese Entwicklung lässt sich, vielleicht später als in anderen mittel- und osteuropäischen Literaturen auch in der deutschsprachigen Literaturlandschaft beobachten und ist nicht auf die 'Migrantenliteratur' beschränkt. Dabei greifen insbesondere aus dem ehemaligen Ostblock stammende Autorinnen und Autoren häufig auf das Motiv der Eisenbahnreise in den 'Osten' zurück. Dieser Osten begegnet dem Reisenden in Sibirien ebenso wie an Orten innerhalb Deutschlands, Mittel- und Osteuropas. Beispiele hierfür sind Gedicht- und Kurzprosatexte von Kurt Drawert, Lutz Seiler und Ilma Rakusa, die sich auch als Formen des Prosagedichts bezeichnen lassen. Im Mittelpunkt meiner sich auf Ansätze Michel de Certeaus und Michel Foucaults stützenden Untersuchung stehen ästhetische Formen der Dynamisierung von Räumen und Identitäten, in denen Zeitebenen und Gattungsgrenzen ebenso in Bewegung gesetzt werden wie Grenzen zwischen Eigenem und Fremdem. Der Zug oder die durchquerte Landschaft wird zum Transitraum, in dem nationale Grenzen und solche zum Osten hin zumindest vorübergehend durchdrungen werden.

Introduction

In German literature and literary criticism, where perspectives on East and West were primarily discussed as a German-German issue after 1989, the questioning of such dichotomies on a European level has been a more recent phenomenon than in other Central

and Eastern European writing. Journeys from East to West and vice versa, going beyond existing national borders and creating spaces of hybridity, cultural overlap or encounter, have become prevalent in contemporary poetry and narratives by German-speaking writers. The train journey into the East has emerged as a recurrent motif in texts published in the last decade, especially by writers who spent a considerable part of their formative years in countries belonging to the 'Eastern Bloc'. My analysis will focus on movement in these texts, and how this affects existing cultural, spatial and temporal boundaries, turning the train and the landscape traversed into a transnational, or even 'transcultural',[2] transit space. In this context I am particularly interested in ideas of transition and the subject's performance in space or place by Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault. De Certeau's view of the subject playing an active part in the creation of space by means of its movement, together with aspects of Foucault's 'heterotopia' – both to be outlined in further detail – provide a perspective on how existing dichotomies determine or are crossed by train journeys in the literary texts analysed. Most of these can be defined as examples of prose poetry in the wider sense, expressing movement aesthetically, by means of 'highly patterned' imageries and soundscapes, 'rhythmic and figural repetition, sustained intensity and compactness', thus also transcending traditional genre boundaries.[3] At the same time, they are 'travel texts' which

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[2] Wolfgang Welsch, 'Was ist eigentlich Transkulturalit¨at?', *in Hochschule als transkultureller Raum? Beitr¨age zu Kultur, Bildung und Differenz*, ed. Lucyna Darowska and Claudia Machold, Bielefeld 2009, pp. 39–66.

[3] Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (eds), *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton, NJ 1993, p. 933.

serve as a paradigmatic model of 'Welterfahrung', because they demonstrate different ways of encountering the Other in specific historical contexts.[4]

It could be argued that an East-West dichotomy has been central to concepts of European identity since the Middle Ages, and that German language cultural discourses have largely participated in such Western European concepts. Within this framework, not only Asia, but also what in geographical terms would constitute the European East, appears as a Slavic, semi-Asiatic, semi-Oriental Other of European civilisation. According to Elisabeth Cheaur´e, this image of the East was further reinforced by Russia beginning to construct her national identity in opposition to the West in the eighteenth century.[5] In the nineteenth, and even more so in the twentieth century, Eastern Otherness has at times included Poland and other Central Eastern European countries, marked by their 'Slavonic' soul. In contrast to an occidental and modernist Europe as a cultural entity, the East has been portrayed as timeless, quasi mythical, or as backward, by German speaking writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke.[6] For travellers

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[4] Christoph Bode, 'Beyond/Around/Into One's Own. Reiseliteratur als Paradigma von Welterfahrung', *Poetica. Zeitschrift f¨ur Sprache und Literaturwissenschaft,* 26/1-2 (1994), 70–87 (85). 'Travel texts' are understood here as literary texts of different genres, which have travelling as an experience, motif or metaphor, at their centre.

[5] Elisabeth Cheaur´e, '"Infinite Mirroring": Russia and Eastern Europe as the West's "Other"', in *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*, ed. Barbara Korte, Ulrike Pirker and Sissy Helf, Amsterdam and New York 2010, pp. 25–41.

[6] See Klaus Eder, 'Europe's Borders: The Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9/2 (2006), 255–71 (264–5); Ulrike Meinhof (ed.), *Living (with) Borders: Identity Discourses on East–West Borders in Europe*, Aldershot 2002; Hans- Christoph Graf von Nayhauss, 'Rilke in Russland und anderswo. Zu Rilkes Wahrnehmung fremdkultureller Wirklichkeiten und deren Niederschlag in seinem Werk', in '*Germanistik im Kontext der Kulturen'. Akten des XI. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses* Paris 2005, Vol. 9: *Divergente Kulturr¨aume in der Literatur*, ed. Jean-Marie Valentin, Frankfurt a. M. 2007, pp. 75–83; Michael Schornstheimer, '"Die verschlagenen Augen der Polen" – Kriegserlebnisse und Kriegsdeutung in den Fortsetzungsromanen von Quick und Stern in den f¨unfziger Jahren', in *Schuld und S¨uhne? Kriegserlebnisse und Kriegsdeutung in deutschen Medien der Nachkriegszeit (1945–1961)*, ed. Ursula Heukenkamp, Amsterdam and New York 2001, pp. 733–42; Larry Wolff, 'Die Erfindung Osteuropas: Von Voltaire zu Voldemort', in *Europa und die Grenzen im Kopf*, ed. Karl Kaser, Dagmar Gramshammer- Hohl and Robert Pichler, Klagenfurt 2004, pp. 21–34.

taking the train from Paris or Berlin to Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s the border to the

Soviet Union still marked the 'threshold to a different world', both politically and culturally.[7]

Stereotyping, which reached its zenith during National Socialism, and its deployment in

attempts to colonise the East, continued in public discourse in post-war West Germany,

taking on a different political dimension in the course of the Cold War. This was also

reflected in the literature of the time. The same might be said to some extent for perceptions

in the GDR outside the official political discourse.[8] Against this background, writers with a

post-Eastern Bloc biography such as Kurt Drawert, Lutz Seiler – both born in the former

GDR –, or Ilma Rakusa – a Swiss writer, born in Slovakia – undertake journeys into the East

and into cultural and individual memory, questioning existing dichotomies and ideas of

belonging in a European context. Their ideas of Europe reach beyond the 'Central Europe'

suggested by György Konrad or Milan Kundera in the 1980s.[9] In their texts, after the fall of

the Wall in 1989 the East emerges in different ways as a poetic transit or passage space, a

liminal space which, while setting limits to the subject's movement, still serves as a threshold

to a different perception of reality.

In relation to German prose of the 1990s, Astrid Köhler has pointed out that 'various sub-

genres of travel literature', and in particular travel as a motif, have been 'prevalent in recent

post-GDR literature. Nor is it by accident that the metaphor of the journey to the self is

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[7] Inka Zahn, *Reise als Begegnung mit dem Anderen?: Französische Reiseberichte über Moskau in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Bielefeld 2008, p. 94.

[8] See Thomas C. Fox, 'Imagining Eastern Europe in East German Literature', in *Germany and Eastern Europe: Cultural Identities and Cultural Differences*, ed. Keith Bullivant, Geoffrey J. Giles and Walter Pape, Amsterdam and New York 1999, pp. 284–303 (pp. 294–300).

[9] Kurt Drawert, *Rückseiten der Herrlichkeit. Texte und Kontexte*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001, pp. 48–9; for an overview of the debate on 'Central Europe' in European literatures in the 1980s, see Paul Michael Lützeler, *Die Schriftsteller und Europa. Von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart*, Zurich 1992, pp. 444–52.

frequently to be found in [. . .] autobiographical texts'.[10] While this has been explained to some extent by the new opportunities to travel, K¨ohler reads it as a quest for the rediscovery of a sense of identity by post-GDR writers after the fall of the Wall. I would like to take this a step further and argue for a questioning of concepts of East and West, together with other spatial and temporal coordinates, in relation to individual and collective ideas of belonging by writers with post-Eastern Bloc biographies in a European context. I am not using 'post-GDR literature' or 'post-Eastern Bloc literature' here in the narrower sense that K¨ohler does when referring to the faithfulness of such authors to a conception of literature as a surrogate public sphere,[11] but rather to link the individual authors' eastward journeys which reflect their experience of having spent parts of their lives in states belonging to the former Eastern bloc. They share this experience with other German- and non-German-speaking writers of their generation, such as Catalin Dorian Florescu, Irina Liebmann, Andrzej Stasiuk, Juri Andruchowytsch or Andrei Makine. While authors like Ilma Rakusa tend to be discussed as 'migrant' or 'intercultural' writers, with a focus on their writing in a second language,[12] I am more interested in aesthetic forms of movement and spaces linking their work with that of 'post GDR writers'. I will therefore analyse transit spaces in texts by Drawert and Seiler, who

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[10] Astrid K¨ohler, 'Whither? Away! Reflections on the Motifs of Travel and Identity in Recent East German Prose', in *German-Language Literature Today: International and Popular?,* ed. Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes and Julian Preece, Oxford 2000, pp. 207–20 (p. 208). See also Monika Hohbein- Deegen, *Reisen zum Ich. Ostdeutsche Identit¨atssuche in Texten der neunziger Jahre,* Oxford 2010; Michael Hofmann, 'Der Wilde Osten und der poetische S¨uden. Grundlegungen und Modellanalysen zur Reiseliteratur in der DDR', in *'Nach der Mauer der Abgrund'? (Wieder-)Ann¨aherungen an die DDRLiteratur*, ed. Norbert O. Eke, Amsterdam and New York 2013, pp. 175–93.

[11] K¨ohler 2000, p. 208 (see note 10).

[12] See, for example, Michaela B¨urger-Koftis (ed.*), Eine Sprache – viele Horizonte. Die Osterweiterung der deutschsprachigen Literatur. Portr¨ats einer neuen europ¨aischen Generation*, Vienna 2008; Szilvia Lengl, *Interkulturelle Frauenfiguren im deutschsprachigen Roman der Gegenwart*, Dresden 2012. For a brief definition and overview of Migrantenliteratur see also Klaus H¨ubner, 'Eine un¨ubersehbare interkulturelle Vielfalt – Migrantenliteratur in Deutschland', http://www.goethe.de/ges/spa/msk/de3151492.htm (accessed 15 November 2013).

are generally regarded as 'post- GDR writers', before comparing these to spaces in Rakusa's texts. I would argue that such spaces created by movement, as well as particular modes of movement towards and within them, function as sites for interaction and the formation or performance of – transnational – identities in the texts discussed. They therefore represent a current trend in German language literature which goes beyond 'migrant literature' in the narrow sense, both with regard to the motif of the train journey and to the transit spaces created. The subject's performance in these transit spaces challenges existing ideas of belonging in a Europe that has traditionally been defined in terms of the nation state and/or an East-West dichotomy.

Travelling through 'Abwesenheitsr¨Aume': Kurt Drawert

In his *Fr¨uhjahrskollektion* (2002), Kurt Drawert finds the East in different places, ranging from the former GDR to Siberia, all marked by a sense of dislocation. Twelve poems in the collection address the location and meaning of a dividing line betweenWest and the East from different angles. While shifting borders and questioning traditional images of the East on one level, they still confirm the existence of an East-West-dichotomy on a structural level. In his poem 'Die Engel der Landstraße' Drawert takes prostitution as a metaphor for the relationship between the inhabitants of what after 2004 will be referred to as the New and Old Europe: They are 'die Frauen auf der E55 / der Hauptstadt Europas / und des Erbarmens' near the Czech-German border.[13] As in other poems in this volume which deal with former Eastern European states preparing for accession to the EU in 2004, they seem caught in a different time, economically, politically and culturally, while already participating in the

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[13] Kurt Drawert, *Fr¨uhjahrskollektion*, Frankfurt a. M. 2002, pp. 55–6. Further references appear in the text as 'Fk'.

capitalist system. East Germany, on the other hand, is given a 'Zwischenstatus', 'von Osteuropa getrennt,ohne schon Westeuropa zu sein', as the writer explains in an essay from 2001.[14] Impressions from travels to Poland and Russia in the 1990s, together with historical and intertextual references, create a complex picture of reality, while questioning stereotypes and the subject's perception as such. Explorations of the author's everyday life in a German suburb and of journeys to places conventionally associated with European high culture, such as the Rome of German classicism, or the France of H¨olderlin and Victor Hugo, provide the context to these twelve poems.

They can be read as a positioning of the author in the Europe he finds himself in after 1990, his attempt to overcome an existential sense of disorientation. Drawert, born in 1956 in Brandenburg outside Berlin, moved to West Germany after the fall of the Wall. In his 1993 poem 'Ortswechsel' he addresses the acute sense of uprootedness following this change of place: 'Meine Freunde im Osten / verstehe ich / nicht mehr, im Landstrich zwischen Hamme und Weser / kenne ich keinen'.[15] Somebody he can identify with is the Polish poet and friend Zbigniew Herbert, whose name is the title of a poetic obituary in *Fr¨uhjahrskollektion*. Like Drawert, he is a deserter from real-existing Socialism, and a restless soul between the worlds of the post-1990 European literary market:

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[14] Kurt Drawert, *R¨uckseiten der Herrlichkeit. Texte und Kontexte*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001, p. 22.

[15] Kurt Drawert, 'Ortswechsel', in ndl, 41/7 (1993), 24–6 (24).

Wir trafen uns in einem Supermarkt kurz

vor der Kasse, zeitgleich stipendienverpflichtet und

H¨uter eines vornehmen Hauses h¨oherer K¨unste.

Er im wehenden Sommermantel mit dem Duft

von Paris, oder wo immer er herkam, in jenem Winter.

Ein Ruheloser zwischen den Welten (Fk, p. 52)

'Doch alles war Polen' for his friend Herbert, as the poem goes on, who was on the road westward on the map, 'und alles ein faulender Giebel im Auswurf // scheißender Tauben. Denn er war uns im Kopf, / der Osten, dieser Krieg der Sprache gegen die Sprache, / dieses schreckliche Volksst¨uck der Vormoderne' (*ibid.*). The Europe of the Cold War is contrasted with modern Europe as an unlimited space of culture and the free market, in which the 'pre modern' experience of life as a writer under communism has marked both writers' perspectives on the present and the past. The speechlessness suffered by the poet-speaker might have been caused by the suppression of free speech under communist rule, but it continues in the New Europe due to the pressure of market forces on the writer and the role of media and their presentation of reality within this framework. Both lead, according to Drawert, to the inadequacy of signs and meaning, and thus to the abolition of reality, as he writes in an essay in 1996.[16] This comes quite close to Simon Ward's reading of the railway journey in German-language fiction since 1945. Particularly in post-GDR fiction after 1990, the railway constitutes an 'emblem for the historical process from which subjective experience cannot be divorced' and the limits imposed on subjectivity in today's world, where 'modern subjects are both commodity consumers and commodified entities within

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[16] 'Abschaffung der Wirklichkeit', in Kurt Drawert, *Wo es war*, Frankfurt a. M. 1996, 117.

systems'.[17] The journey eastward in Drawert's *Frühjahrskollektion* is a quest for authenticity, the speaker encountering places which trigger memory.

The stereotypical image of an '¨ostlichen Steppe' viewed from a train window appears in a number of his poems, and is questioned from the point of view of different speakers, representing East and West German perspectives of different generations. In 'Polen in Briefen – und wie geht es in Deutschland' the speaker is a young West German tourist – for whom everything beyond the German-Polish border merges into an archaic, backward East, into plains 'so nah an Sibirien', as he writes home, like the German soldier who went the same route before him, and whose voice echoes here.[18] In 'Transsib. Trauma. Dante' the speaker travelling on the famous train seems to reach a place outside time, located 'am Ende der Welt in einem Grenzort / zwischen Rußland und Jetztzeit' (*Fk*, p. 45). However, this place offers no escape, but a view on the barbarity of European history:

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Transsib. Trauma. Dante.

Bis zur Grenze nach Asien, am Maßstab der Karte

gemessen einen Steinwurf nur fern vom Ural,

kann sich, im getr¨ubten Auge des faszinierten

Touristen, die Transsib noch als ein Siegeszug

schleppen des Glaubens an die Maschine

im Austausch zu Gott. Wunderbar,

diese Aufbruchszeit damals zur Wende

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[17] Simon Ward, 'The Passenger as Flˆaneur? Railway Networks in German-Language Fiction since 1945', MLR, 100/2 (2005), 412–28 (428).

[18] 'Es hat mich schon immer gewundert, / was Fliegen auf einer Kotlache suchen, / Mutter / und auch sonst wenig Neues. // Die M¨anner sind tot bis zum Morgen, Polen in Polen finde ich nicht, // und nach Auschwitz kommt man jetzt g¨unstig / in Gruppe und mit dem Sondersparticket' (Fk, p. 58).

in ein neues, schon verscharrtes Jahrtausend,

diese schaukelnde Barke ¨uber den Styx

mit Ausblick vom geheizten Abteil,

Neckermann sei Dank, erster Klasse

auf die endlose, schweigende Weite

historischer Vorstellungswelten – o Hildegard.

Dann, von einem Moment auf den n¨achsten,

wird es unverhofft ernst. Die Handys

mit programmiertem Alarmruf nach Hause

sind aus dem Funknetz gefallen,

[. . .]

Jeder Handgriff ist Ewigkeit, jedes Wort

eine Folge von Kriegen. Mit Blick auf eine Uhr,

der die Zeiger fehlen, und im Rhythmus

mitgez¨ahlter Schienenschl¨age, so geht die Fahrt

jetzt im R¨uckw¨artsgang weiter, die Zeitzonen

abw¨arts, dorthin, wo die toten Schuldigen leben; (*Fk*, pp. 45–6.)

In de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) the train window allows us to see, it creates the spectator's distance and 'makes our memories speak or draws out of the shadows the dreams of our secrets [. . .]. This cutting off is necessary for the birth, outside of these things but not without them, of unknown landscapes.'[19] The train's movement sets the rhythm for the speaker's memory process. It provides, if only temporarily, 'a closed and autonomous insularity – that is what can traverse space'.[20] The speaker finds him- or herself in a moment

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[19] Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA 1984, p. 112.

[20] De Certeau 1984, p. 111 (see note 19).

of transit, a phase in-between places and times, allowing temporarily for a different experience of time and space. It thus offers a different, if negative vision of the East, and with it, of Europe, and the fellow travellers. The rhythm of the train's track beats is setting the rhythm of the speaker's memory process. This is reflected in the poetic language transcending the boundaries between time zones, moving from an account of the journey, which reads like a standard travel guide, to a painful process of remembering.

In order to reach an East which is at the same time a space of European history and of 'absence', and where one has to find a new language and form of belonging, the subject in Drawert's poems does not have to travel to the Urals, but finds it already in the no-man's land of the German-Czech border and spaces further west. These are liminal spaces where 'sich Zeit und Geschwindigkeit scheinbar auf einer anderen Achse und in eine andere Richtung bewegen, in denen alles in Frage gestellt ist [. . .], Abwesenheitsräume, f ür die es keine Sprache mehr gibt'.[21] Drawert's 'Abwesenheitsräume' at first sight seem reminiscent of Marc Augé's 'nonplaces' as a phenomenon of super-modernity and globalisation.[22] The latter include airports, as well as shopping malls, train stations, motels or highways. Their status is one 'of "in-between", where nothing is fixed and stable and where time and place are fluid and hybrid and seem to follow their own rules'.[23] They are similar to Drawert's spaces in

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[21] 'Abwesenheitsräume, f ür die es keine Sprache mehr gibt' (Drawert 2001, p. 24 (see note 14)). As for Hölderlin, this strangeness is for Drawert at the same time the condition of his writing.

[22] Marc Aug´e, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London and New York 1995.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

their emphasis on isolation and anonymity. However, unlike the 'Abwesenheitsraum', a non-place 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity'.[24]

I will therefore employ a spatial concept developed by Anna Luz in her 2006 article on urban architecture for my further discussion of the spaces emerging in Drawert's poems and the texts by Seiler and Rakusa. In contrast to Augé, Luz argues that mobility and the mobile act of transition between spaces might not create a non-place, but rather an 'other' place, which is neither the departure point nor the place which is the objective of the situation (the arrival point), but is related to both. The 'transit' between creates another reality, literally a short-lived transit(ional) place.[25] These mobile places are in essence spaces in which several incongruous sites and moments in time are juxtaposed, co-existent and layered together. In this regard they resemble Michel Foucault's spatial zone of 'heterotopia', shifting senses of time and place.[26] Heterotopia is a counter-site in which all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted as in a mirror. Moreover, this paradox of an open dialogical existence represents also the heterotopian place to be 'elsewhere'. Like heterotopia, transit(ional) places are ambiguous two-way systems that 'close' what was left behind and 'open' the passage to what is ahead, and vice versa. Luz also

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[25] See Ana Luz, 'Places In-Between: The Transit(ional) Locations of Nomadic Narratives', in *KOHT ja PAIK/PLACE and LOCATION. Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics V*, ed. Eva N̈aripea, Virve Sarapik and Jaak Tomberg, Tallinn 2006, pp. 143–65. Luz uses transit 'place' for a concept close to de Certeau's 'space'. In this paper 'transit space' is used instead. For de Certeau, 'a space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements' (de Certeau 1984, p. 117 (see note 19)). A space then is the action of using a place, movement within a place, such as walking and other forms of travelling, and the elapsing of time. In essence de Certeau describes space as a practised place.

[26] Foucault gave permission for the publication of his paper 'Des espaces autres (1967) in English in 1984: http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html (accessed 15 November 2013). See also Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', in Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory, ed. Neil Leach, London and New York 1997, pp. 350–56.

calls them 'corridor places', indicating the limits they pose to free movement.[27] Such a place is created functionally and formally by moving within a physical space of two locations (here and over there). Hence, a place of transition in a literal sense is an experiential zone that is made up of interlocking and exchange, which is normally erased after the time of happening.

According to de Certeau, an active engagement during the transit(ional) situation, the act of producing, consuming and using the locations, constitutes the starting point towards the in-between place.[28] One of these locations is the train, others may be different modes or localities of transportation or communication and liminal places of transition and passage. In contrast to other liminal spaces, such as city squares or passageways, where the walker has a more active role with regard to his physical movement and direction, the train passenger depends on the movement of the machine as 'primum mobile'.[29] He is subjected to the 'immobility of an order' inside the train, as much as to the 'ephemeral and quiet strangeness' of the things passing by outside the train window.[30] The separation from the outside world through the window pane and the silence the traveller finds himself in, only broken by the vibrato of the rattling window panes and partitions, lets 'dreams reign supreme'.[31]

The 'threshold' of the terminal, which differs from the threshold function of the transit space in its collective meaning and concrete presence, signifies the passenger's return to normality.

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[27] Luz 2006, p. 149 (see note 25).

[28] De Certeau 1984, p. 113 (see note 19).

[29] According to Foucault (1984) the point where the eighteenth-century traveller located himself on a linear 'extension', created by him walking, has been replaced by a variety of 'sites', defined by specific relations of proximity between points or elements (see note 26).

[30] De Certeau 1984, p. 113 (see note 19).

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

Once again he becomes part of his everyday world and its history. The limits set to free movement of the passenger on the train may be more restrictive, even if not of a physical nature – or provoke stronger counter-movement – when the train functions as a symbol of progress in the dominant discourse, in the case of the authors discussed, the former socialist state discourse. The latter would include Marx's image of society's structure and superstructure as a railway, 'placing the machine at the heart of a system which can ultimately destroy that humanity'.[32] In Drawert's 'Transsib' as a primum mobile such linear notions of history and progress are inverted, with the train bringing its passengers down into an abyss of European history, the latter a cyclical movement of barbarism and nationalism, with National Socialism as its most painful example. The Transsib thus represents an embodiment of the 'dialectic of the Enlightenment' in Drawert's poem,[33] it stands for a technology linking continents, a modern, technological society and the communist system, and at the same time, by its archaic appearance to the 'Neckermann' traveller, the decay of this political system, and of modernity.

In order to allow for a longer-term change in the subject's perception of reality, elements of the anthropologist Victor Turner's approach will be included in the definition of 'transit' employed in this paper. This is of particular relevance when looking at Lutz Seiler's Turksib. Turner describes the process of transit as a passage ritual, structured around three stages common to all passage rituals: separation, passage/transition, and reconnection/reincorporation. The first phase of separation uses symbolic behaviour to detach

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[32] Ward 2005, p. 427 (see note 17). On Marxist historiography, see Andreas Dorpalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective. The East German Approach*. Detroit, MI 1985, pp. 24–34; 501–5.

[33] See Ward 2005, p. 423 (see note 17).

the individual from his or her previous social status and demarcate sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time. A cultural realm is constructed 'out of time', beyond profane or secular time.[34] With regard to the train journey, this is perhaps a mundane rite, rather than an event that changes the subject fundamentally and permanently, but it still opens new perspectives on the everyday self. On the train, this symbolic behaviour resides perhaps in validating one's ticket. Phase two, passage or the liminal phase, is a free-floating in-between space, the result of a suspension of everyday rules and identities. Phase three is reconnection at the end of the journey, where one picks up the threads of one's own identity. Status, goals and time-schedules once again are set in place, but these are different from before the passage.

The journey east as a rite of passage: Lutz Seiler

The story of Lutz Seiler's *Turksib* is the 'Nachhall' of a reading tour eastward that the author undertook in December 2001,[35] told as a dark romantic fairy tale, a ghostly 'Winter's Tale', containing numerous intertextual references to Heinrich Heine's *Winterm̈archen* and 'Loreley' poem, to E.T.A Hoffmann's tales, but also to Franz Kafka's short narrative 'Der Heizer' (1913).[36] 'Nachhall', or reverberation, already points to the importance of sensory

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[34] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York 2001, p. 24.

[35] The author claims to have 'nichts Wesentliches hinzuerfunden' to the story, except 'einen Teil der Personage vielleicht' (Elmar Krekeler, 'Lutz Seiler im Gespr̈ach', in *Die Besten 2007. KlagenfurterTexte. Die 31. Tage der deutschsprachigen Literatur in Klagenfurt,* ed. Ingrid Radisch, Munich and Zurich 2009, pp. 41–7 (p. 46).

[36] Originally planned as a chapter of his fragmentary novel Amerika ('Der Verschollene'), published by Max Brodt in 1927, Kafka's novella describes the journey west by boat of Karl, a 16-year-old sent to America by his parents when they find out he has a child with one of their servants. On board he meets the boat's 'Heizer'. Karl's attempt to support him by making a case for fairer working conditions in front of his superiors fails. Overall, the text depicts an individual's failed search for justice, with the protagonist increasingly lost in the society he finds himself in. While Seiler's protagonist travels east rather than west, he also finds himself, not by his own choice, crossing frontiers and encountering injustice.

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impressions, imagery and, in particular, sound for a poetic language which turns this allegorical tale into a complex prose poem, moving along the borderline between the real and fantastic, and playing with words, their sound and meaning. As in his shorter poems, which are closely linked to the landscape around his home village of Culmitzsch, Thuringia, where the author was born in 1963, the movement of the poetic language takes the reader on a journey to experience spaces of memory and belonging. The 'Stimmung' evoked at the beginning is immediately subverted by being linked to the radioactive contamination of the author's village, part of a uranium mining area,[37] and the reader continues to be jolted between the sublime and the banal, the abstract and the concrete, as the narrator is by the movement of the train.

The first-person narrator from East Germany is undertaking a journey through Kazakhstan on board a 'Nachtzug namens Turksib', a night train of the Turkestano-Siberian Railway, to deliver papers in several Kazakh towns and cities.[38] His subject is 'St¨adte im Nichts', planned cities like Brasilia, Nairobi or Astana, 'die Hauptstadt der Steppe', which was at the centre of the Virgin Lands Campaign led by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s, which aimed to turn Kazakhstan into a second grain producer for the Soviet Union (*TS*, p. 10).[39] His talks are thus about the changing of an unmarked 'natural' space into a planned urban space, the imposition of an order, similar to the laying of a railway line, or, in de Certeau's words, '[t]he

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[37] Lutz Seiler, 'Heimaten', in *Sonntags dachte ich an Gott. Aufs¨atze*, Frankfurt a. M. 2004, pp. 31–51 (pp. 34–7).

[38] Lutz Seiler, *Turksib. Zwei Erz¨ahlungen*, Frankfurt a. M. 2008, p. 17. Further references appear in the text as '*TS*'.

[39] In the Stalinist era, Kazakhstan had hosted several Gulag-like labour camps, including the ALZHIR camp outside Astana for the spouses of those considered 'enemies of the people' by the government (see Didar Kassymova, Zhanat Kundakbayeva and Ustina Markus, *Historical Dictionary of Kazakhstan*, Lanham, MD 2012, pp. 36–7).

iron rail whose straight line cuts through space and transforms the serene identities of the soil into the speed in which they slip away in thedistance'.[40] While there is a parallel implied in the act of writing here, this is a permanent and intrusive act, differing from a purely transitional movement such as walking.

The building of train lines in Russia and the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century was celebrated as an act of civilising wilderness, the taming of huge natural landscapes, [41] since the trains were seen as a symbol of modernity and progress in socialist discourse. The Russian director Victor Turin's documentary *Turksib*, released in 1929, shows the building of this railway linking Turkestan with Siberia, to carry cotton from the former in exchange for cereals and vegetables from the latter, as one of the Soviet Union's very first large-scale construction projects. [42] The Trans- Siberian Railway, which most readers would also associate with the Turksib, opened in 1916, and remained the only land route between Europe and East Asia for most of the twentieth century. The Turksib in turn became a major icon in ending the economic 'backwardness' of the USSR's minority republics, and, also through Turin's film, one of the most potent metaphors of the creation of a unified socialist nation. Built between December 1926 and January 1931 by nearly 50,000 workers and at a cost of more than 161 million roubles, the Turksib embodied the Bolsheviks' commitment to end ethnic inequality and promote a cultural revolution in Kazakhstan as one of the far-flung

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[40] De Certeau 1984, p. 112 (see note 20).

[41] This also applied to the celebration of industrial projects in official GDR discourse, reflected, for example, in Brigitte Reimann's Siberian diary *Das gr̈une Licht der Steppen* (1965).

[42] http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Thr-Tur/Turksib.html#ixzz2ExZL5oP9 (accessed 15 November 2013).

corners of the old Tsarist Empire.[43] In Seiler's text these connotations are present. Together with the train as a tool and symbol of progress, the story also signifies the negative outcome of a system driven by a machine. This includes the loss of workers' lives during construction (and radioactive pollution as a more recent example), attempts at cultural standardisation across the Soviet empire, and the transport of prisoners to Stalinist camps. At the same time, readers would associate the transport of Jews and other victims of National Socialist Germany to concentration camps in the East with the train as tool of transport within a rationalised system. Nationalism is also evoked by the reference to the 'Loreley' in Seiler's text.

The narrative begins in the here and now of a dirty toilet on the train, from where the narrator takes the reader along into the 'Erzählraum' of the train journey.[44] For the narrator the toilet seems to provide a hiding place from the translator and the consul accompanying him on his journey. But now he fears he will have to explain his prolonged absence on his return to the dining car, and that the words will multiply in their mouths, his explanation, and language itself, getting even further out of his control:

> Die Stöße der Gleise waren jetzt stärker und kamen unregelmäßig; mit ausgestreckten Armen hielt ich mich zwischen den Wänden der winzigen Kabine. Aus dem kotbespritzten Stahlpott dröhnte ein metallisches Winseln und Fauchen herauf, in dem sich ab und zu auch ein Gelächter Luft zu machen schien, das irgendwo im Abgrund, im Schotter des Bahndamms, hocken mußte und mir wie ein verächtliches Semeysemey in den Ohren hallte. Lange konnte ich nicht mehr bleiben ohne bei meiner Rückkehr etwas erklären zu müssen, das sich im Mund der Übersetzerin sofort verdoppeln und in den Kommentaren des Konsuls verzehnfachen würde.
> (TS, p. 7)

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[43] Matthew Payne, *Stalin's Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism*, Pittsburgh, PA 2001.

[44] Lutz Seiler, 'Sonntags dachte ich an Gott', in *Sonntags dachte ich an Gott. Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a. M. 2004, pp. 132–48 (p. 132).

That the journey is also about cultural encounters and leads into a shared history is said a few pages later. The narrator describes himself travelling with 'einer Karawane vorsintflutlicher Blechkarossen, auf einem Gleis namens Seidenschiene, das mitten durch die Steppe schnitt, von Orient zu Okzident' (*TS*, p. 17). He tells a story about transition and the transgression of cultural spaces on the margins of the familiar world. More than the plains outside, which the train travels through, the train itself emerges as a transit space, in which to encounter the stranger outside, the Other in a phenomenological sense, and within the narrator's own self.[45] The situation he finds himself in on the train is that of an unpleasant 'inbetween', emerging from an array of destabilising optical-haptic-acoustic bodily perceptions. The narrator feels strong and irregular 'Stöße der Gleise' which make him struggle to keep his balance (*TS*, p. 7). These neither match the rhythm of riding a camel, nor do they evoke any other exotic, archaic way of travelling in a positive sense. While the narrator's experience of the train ride, which is largely restricted to his bodily experience of the train's movement and his own attempts to move within the train, does resemble that of an explorer fighting his way through a wild and unknown territory, there is nothing romantic about this. Consequently, the positive, orientalist image the reader might associate with caravans travelling the old 'Seidenstraße' is turned on its head. Similarly, the natural beauty of the steppe outside appears briefly as a cliché̱ed, romantic image of a wild East before disappearing completely from view behind the ice crusted windows.

The narrator's journey through the train is a violent rite of passage, with the train acting as a hellish machine, threatening to swallow him, throwing him off balance, making it impossible

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[45] The stranger is understood here primarily in a phenomenological sense, as the one who speaks a different language and uses a different code of behaviour.

for him to control his own movement. He suffers physical, largely unpleasant encounters with different co-travellers, including members of the Kazakh train personnel and the narrator's entourage.[46] These are partly brought about by conscious attempts by the others to make contact, and partly by the shocks of the train tracks the narrator has to endure throughout, and which function, like the encounters, as a leitmotif of the text. While the other travellers are also subjected to the train's movement, they seem more in tune with and attuned to it. The narrator will, however, fall in the course of the journey, before tuning in to this rhythm in an all-encompassing sexual act at the end of the story.

The train's movement is accompanied by strange sounds, such as the 'whining and hissing' or 'laughter' rising from the dirty steel toilet bowl at the beginning. These sounds, which recur throughout the journey, further unsettle the narrator, and irritate the reader since no source can be identified. In this sense, they are in stark contrast to the silence in Drawert's poem, which is a key element of the train as a transitional space according to de Certeau. Seiler's text brings instead the train as a form of 'incarceration' and rite of passage to an extreme. It is not clear whether the sounds constitute mere noise, a soundtrack to the journey, or communicate a mysterious message. They lack any bodily presence, are acoustic hybrids of human and animal, technology and nature sounds which cannot be interpreted clearly as signifiers. At the same time these sounds further structure the narrative space by complementing the horizontal, and vertical, movement of the train, and of the narrator in it

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[46] 'Ich strauchelte, rammte gegen etwas am Boden, zwei oder drei Beine, die plötzlich wie gefällte Baumstämme in den Gang ragten [. . .]. Zeitweise wurde ich wie von selbst in langen Stößen durch den Gang getragen, bald aber mußte ich einsehen, daß es nötig war, in kürzeren Schritten zu gehen, damit der Korridor sich nicht losmachte vom Fuß und unter mir hinwegraste' (*TS*, p. 16); 'Zwei halb uniformierte Gestalten waren imWasserdampf des Samowars aufgetaucht; [. . .]. Ich versuchte, nicht zu lächeln; ich dachte daran, mit einem Sprung in mein Abteil zu fliehen, aber jetzt rückten beide rasch näher' (*TS*, pp 18–19).

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with a more pronounced vertical direction of movement, but also with a historical dimension: The onomatopoeic word 'Semey', imitating the noise of the wheels on the tracks, is a reference to the destination of the journey, thus implying there might be a message behind the other sounds as well. Images and sounds deviating from the meanings associated with the words allow for new signification processes. The reader shares this experience with the narrator, as well as his journey through the train. Like the other places where the narrator is presenting papers, Semey is a place of destruction, both in an ecological sense, and with regard to human rights, both under Tsarist and communist rule. Semey, or Semipalatinsk in Russian, was a Soviet test site for nuclear weapons until 1990. At the same time, it was the place where Dostoevsky wrote his *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1854–9, 1861), after his release from the prison camp in Omsk, Siberia. In Seiler's text this becomes a concrete and historical space, a *lieu de m´emoire* where a major writer, widely read in East and West during the Cold War, turned a traumatising experience into literature. Thus it is a symbolic and heterotopian space, of 'translation' from chaos into order, which becomes a – potentially inspiring – transit space for the traveller. Semey is the only place in which the narrator himself chooses to speak.[47]

Radioactive contamination of his childhood landscape in Thuringia and a politically oppressive socialisation under communism are closely linked in Seiler's writing in general. His language is informed by the 'Schwere' of his childhood village's inhabitants, who were

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[47] Other places on his schedule include Pavlodar, the site of an eighteenth-century Russian military fortress, or Karanga, provincial capital of Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago and the site of the strongest electromagnetic impulse effect ever measured, caused by the test of a Soviet nuclear weapon in October 1962 (see Ursula Renner, 'Das Erz¨ahlerk¨astchen. Zur "Portalfunktion" eines seltsamen Dings zwischen Chaos und Ordnung in Lutz Seilers Erz¨ahlung "Turksib"', in *Konzepte von Chaos und Ordnung in Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. V. Ahamer et al., Nizhniy Novgorod 2011, pp. 377–89 (p. 383)).

exposed to low levels of radiation due to the mining of uranium.[48] This is also reflected in the Geiger counter the narrator buys on the platform of a Russian station, amongst stalls selling onions, animal hides and other 'Waren seltsamster Art' as 'Suhweniehrr[s]!' (TS 8). With its origin an archaic market stall and its mysterious, unpredictable nature, turning into an 'Erz¨ahlerk¨astchen' (*TS*, p. 13), behind a 'Maske' (*TS*, p. 9) to which the narrator is drawn, the Geiger counter's status is an ambivalent one, between a – broken – technological tool and a magical voice. On the one hand it is noted that Geiger counters are recommended to visitors to the region by travel guides to reassure them that radioactivity on the trip is below a dangerous level. On the other hand, its ticking is a constant reminder of the present danger. The Geiger counter can thus be read as a portal to the narrator's ambivalent transit experience as a rite of passage on a number of levels.[49]

Living with radioactive contamination and socialisation in a communist system also provide a link to the Kazakh fireman of the train, the encounter with whom constitutes the climax of the story. The tall and broadly built fireman, guided and introduced by the conductor who tries to act as a translator, stops the narrator on his way through the train to give the fireman the opportunity to recite a poem to the German. Due to the strange and uncomfortable setting and the man's foreign pronunciation, it takes the narrator some time to recognize this as Heine's 'Loreley' ('Ihrrweiss niehrt, wahs sohlbe deute, / dass ihrrsoo trau riehrrtbien, / eim¨ahrre aussallteseite . . . ', [*TS*, p. 20]). Their encounter begins with a formal Soviet military greeting, as a shared code of communication between two postcommunist individuals. It ends in an effusive and painful brotherly kiss the narrator receives from this stranger, in the course of

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[48] Seiler 2004, p. 132 (see note 44).

[49] See Renner 2011 (see note 47).

which both of them fall on the floor, due to a movement of the train. The kiss is the result of a gift the narrator, both as an individual and a representative of German culture, has unwittingly given to the fireman by providing him with a missing line from Heine's poem the fireman had forgotten. What the narrator only understands gradually, as he is being subjected to the fireman's painful embrace, and thanks to information on the role of song in Kazakh funeral rites received earlier by his translator, is the huge importance of this song for the fireman within his Kazakh cultural code (which apparently has not been changed by the Soviet-Military socialisation process). Wherever he learned it, the Loreley is his song. According to the narrator, in Kazakh culture, having found one's own song, and being able to sing or recite it, to pass it on to the community and enable them to sing it during one's funeral, is the precondition for finding eternal peace. This existential concept of finding and expressing one's own song (which is also central to Seiler's own poetics) makes the narrator understand the fireman's exultant reaction:

[. . .] endlich begriff ich es: Dies war *sein* Lied. Sein eigenstes, auswendig aufbewahrtes; jenes, das der Heizer, nachdem es ihm, woher auch immer einmal zugeflogen war, zu seinem pers̈onlichsten, posthumen, *seinem* Klagelied erẅahlt hatte – wie sonst sollte der unerbittliche, beinah verzweifelte und selbst im Stocken nicht nachlassende Ernst seines Auftritts zu verstehen sein?

'Das-kommt-mir-nicht-aus-dem Sinn' – fast hatte ich es geschrien, den Korridor des dahindonnernden Schlafwagens hinunter, eine Befreiung, ein Weckruf, vor dessen posaunenhafter Heftigkeit ich selbst erschrak. Augenblicklich fand ich mich in den Armen des Heizers. Kraftvoll zog er mich ein St ̈uck zu sich hinauf, ẅahrend er, als sei der entscheidende Sieg errungen, ein ums andere Mal den Vers wiederholte: 'Koohmtnierrh-aus-Sienn'. Dann stieß er mich fort, aber nur um mich sogleich wieder einzufangen und auch gegen seine andere Wange zu pressen.

(*TS*, pp. 22–3)

When both of them fall over due to a jolt by the train, their mouths interlock. The narrator is speechless, caught in this situation, feeling uncontrollable anger rising in himself; the Geiger counter also falls silent. The violent encounter, which can be read as a slapstick version of German- Soviet friendship, an interpretation encouraged by the earlier reference to the

military training of both men under communism as a shared experience, is based on the sharing of language and its potential for misunderstanding, due to differences in sound and cultural codes. For the time being, still as part of the transition process, the narrator is redeemed by the intervention of the translator, who, having calmed him by gently continuing to translate the words of the fireman during his forceful embrace, brings him to her compartment, where the tension is resolved in a sexual act in accordance with the now less violent rhythm of the train:

> Langsam trat ich an sie heran, und während sie die feinen, regelmäßigen Schwingungen des Wagens in sich aufnahm, sein leichtes Schaukeln und Schwanken und auch die festeren, unregelmäßigen Stöße der Turksib, für die ich mich an ihren Hüften hielt, geschehen ließ, entdeckte ich im Spalt zwischen den Gardinen, vor dem Fenster des Abteils, eine Flut von dunkelroten Punkten – aber das war nur ein Schweif von Glut, der denWagen umhüllte. (*TS*, p. 30)

The narrator lets himself be enchanted by the translator as a Kazakh Loreley. Her translation of the fireman's words, and of the conductor's apologies for the incident make the narrator sink back, 'Staunend, mit weitgeöffneten Augen [. . .] und etwas Kühles strömte über meinen Körper, ein weicher, klarer Wellengang' (*TS*, p. 28). The Turksib railway could be read as a heterotopia, bringing together the communist vision of progress and its collapse into a state of existential uncertainty and chaos. The waves caressing the narrator's body suggest a poetic, dissipative energy in this space – a positive sensation in comparison with the mechanical jolts endured when struggling through the train, attempting to avoid contact with the other passengers throughout the journey. His finally letting himself completely merge into a joint movement could even be seen as a form of resistance to a dominant system represented by the train and its linear movement, which normally forces its passengers into a state of passivity, in which interaction is to be avoided.[50] Read as a rite of passage resembling

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[50] De Certeau 1984, p. 113 (see note 19).

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a birth process which leads to painfully changed perspectives, the jolts can be understood as part of this metaphor of birth. The collapse of an existing system and perspectives leads to new experiences of belonging, perhaps even to the establishment of a different order at the end, if the narrative is read as a novella.[51] This includes a different perspective gained on 'translation', regarded as a frightening loss of control over one's language by the narrator at the beginning of his journey. It appears now as a poetic and transcultural movement, more productive than transit, leading to a new happy, transcultural existence and overcoming of the narrator's isolation.[52]

The eastern Steppe as a space of transition and transformation: Ilma Rakusa

Central to Ilma Rakusa's literary oeuvre is the key role played by language as a medium of self-discovery, self-formation and self-transformation. In Rakusa's texts, language functions as a navigation tool by means of which the narrated and narrating self charts imaginative and geographical spaces. She collects fragments of her past that she finds scattered across Central and Eastern Europe, her own biography linked with its Cold-War history, and experiencing moments of belonging and homelessness on her journeys across East-West divides.[53]

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[51] For a reading of *Turksib* as a novella, see Renner 2011, p. 383 (see note 47).

[52] On cultural translation, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994; 'Kulturelle ¨ Ahnlichkeit bedeutet nicht, daß unsere Hemden gleich sind.' ¨ Ahnlichkeit und Differenz in Kultur und Kulturtheorie. Interview mit Anil Bhatti in *Kulturalisierung, Zeitschrift f¨ur Kulturphilosophie*, 5 (2011), 343–56 (349); L. D'Hulst, 'Cultural Translation. A Problematic Concept?' in *Beyond Descriptive Translation Studies*. Investigations in Homage to Gideon Toury, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 2008, pp. 221–32. With the translator as his Loreley, however, this Romantic happy ending is ambivalent, encompassing both a poetic fusion of the I and the universe, and death by drowning.

[53] Born in 1946 in Rimavská Sobota, Slovakia, to a Hungarian mother and a Slovenian father, Rakusa spent her childhood in Budapest, Ljubljana, Trieste and Zurich.

In 'Steppe', the prose poem that lends its title to a 1990 collection of short pieces moving between poetry and prose, she explores 'wild' Eastern spaces by means of an experimental language inspired by French symbolism. The first few lines give the impression of a concrete Bashkir landscape seen from the window of a departing train or car: 'Das baschkirische Abenteuer ist vorbei. Die Steppe winkt diesmal hinter dem Konsum, wo die Fräuleins mit den Armen zucken und extrafetten Lachs tranchieren.'[54] Nonetheless, it soon becomes apparent that these impressions are associations, images arising from dream and memory, of a relationship falling apart and of the writing process itself, rather than the concrete experience of a place: 'Vom Schreibtisch aus begehe ich im Wechselschritt die Graslandsenke, Hochsteppe, kotierend. Längst verlernt Kotau zu machen, der Himmel ist hoch' (*S*, p. 68). The steppe becomes an open language field for the narrator's inner journey to an unknown destination ('Wäre ankommen eine Lösung? Aber wo?' (*S*, p. 68)), as well as an actor in itself:

> Die Steppe kommt und geht. Tagein, tagaus, mit wechselndem Wind. Mit ungewöhnlicher Schnelligkeit, Otto, jage ich der fliehenden Ferne nach. Und nach mir: Sonnenglut und das langgezogene Lied. Schreib. Langgezogen? Schreib das Gras auf. Anascha, Lilienschweif, Steppenraute, Grashüpfer, Hüpfer, zerreißt zirpend die Luft, rosa funkelnde Flügel. Der Fleck wird kleiner, so klein, daß mein Zurückbleiben, sein Wegdriften mein Zurückbleiben, sein sein Punkt. (*S*, pp. 68–9)

The speaker takes being 'in Bewegung' as her existential state (*S*, p. 71) as such, her being, and her imagined 'Steppe', as her place of belonging. But this also reflects the condition of the contemporary, migratory subject in a globalised world: 'Eigentlich hat jeder seine Steppe. Einige kommen zwar nicht an, aber alle ihre Ortsveränderungen sind Vorbereitungen auf die Steppe' (*S*, p. 72). As a place, the Eastern steppe stores political and social pressures

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[54] Ilma Rakusa, 'Steppe', in *Steppe. Erzählungen*, Frankfurt a. M., 1990, pp. 66–72 (p. 66). Further references appear in the text as '*S*'.

remembered of the old Soviet system ('Ordern', *S*, p. 70), as part of the speaker's own past, but through her movement becomes a boundless space for an ongoing search on an existential and aesthetic level. In other autofictional texts by Rakusa, the steppe as a space of transition, but also transformation, reappears, and is contrasted with different spaces encountered and traversed, such as the sea in her autobiographical novel *Mehr Meer Erinnerungspassagen* (2009).[55] Here the train, and travelling by train, represent the author-narrator's nomadic existence since her early childhood, a constant state of transit, not by choice and difficult to endure:

> Den Osten Europas, über den sich das Netz der Familiengeschichte breitet, habe ich kreuz und quer bereist, vor allem auf Schienen. [. . .] Irgendwo ertönt ein Glockenzeichen, hebt sich eine winkende Hand, und der Zug ruckelt los. [. . .] Es geht immer weiter, im Takt der Schwellen. Und seltsam, dieses Weiter, wenn es sich denn nicht selbst genügt, zielt nicht auf Ankunft, sondern erscheint mir wie eine Kette von Abschieden. (*MM*, p. 21)

In Ljubljana, one of the stops during a nomadic childhood represented by constantly packed suitcases, the enclosed garden is a space of security and home, a 'Paradies', starkly contrasting with the noise of trains moving on the bordering marshalling yard at nighttime 'Jenseits des Paradieses' (*MM*, p. 44). These noises frighten the listening child who knows subconsciously that the journey will go on again:

> Nachts war der Garten dunkel und schrumpfte. Im Bett liegend dachte ich an seine farbige Fülle, aber das half nichts gegen die grellen Schreie der Züge. Nachdem der Garten verstummt und verblasst war, hatten die Züge das Sagen. Sie waren ganz nahe, fauchten durchs Zimmer. Stöhnten, ächzten, gaben metallische Laute von sich. Ich wußte nicht, was da verschoben und verkoppelt wurde, [. . .] hörte nur diese Unrast, unheimlich in der Nacht. (*MM*, p. 45)

However, the movement of the trains sets the rhythm for the child's language and becomes part of the author's poetic language. It is therefore also inspiring: 'Durch die Nacht rollten,

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[55] Ilma Rakusa, *Mehr Meer. Erinnerungspassagen*, Graz 2009. Further references appear in the text as '*MM*'.

mit den Z¨ugen, dieWortkolonnen, etwas reimte sich, etwas stieß sich. Zusammenprall' (*MM*, p. 45). For her journey to Leningrad as a student, which marks the importance of her discovery of the Russian language and culture on both a professional and an emotional level, the train reflects the changing levels of familiarity or strangeness of the landscapes and cultures it travels through: 'Bis Wien kenne ich jeden Halt, der Zug ist mein H¨auschen-Kab¨auschen, gem¨utlich zum Einschlafen' (*MM*, p. 259). This changes, however, between Warsaw and Moscow: 'Gibt es eine Steigerung von Fremdheit? An den Wolken liegt es nicht, aber der Zug mit seinen abgewetzten Pl¨uschpolstern ist noch ostiger' (*MM*, p. 261). When the train stops at the Polish-Russian border, to have its wheels adjusted to the Russian tracks, indicating that 'fortan andere Gesetze herrschen', the childhood fear of constantly being uprooted and 'incarcerated' in the train because of political circumstances during the Cold War haunts the narrator as a traumatic memory:[56] 'Eingesperrt im Eisenroß, in einem streng bewachten, von Scheinwerfern angestrahlten Niemandsland, erlebe ich wieder die Angst, verfrachtet zu werden, Gott weiß wohin. Der Atem stockt. Ich denke: Z¨asur, und dann nicht weiterdenken' (*MM*, p. 261).

Connotations of the train as a symbol of the official discourse of progress, and of political suppression under communism, also reverberate in the image of the 'Eisenroß'. Visiting the Leningrad train station where the Transsib departs during her stay, she reflects further on this feeling of a caesura. Reading the signs marking different stops on the Transsib route, 'Omsk, Nowosibirsk, Wladiwostok', she finds herself once more in this inbetween situation which, as

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[56] De Certeau refers to being 'incarcerated' and subject to the movement of the train already in the title of the chapter 'Railway Navigation and Incarceration' in *Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 1984, p. 111 (see note 19)).

she realises now, has always dominated her life: 'Der Drang fortzugehen, gepaart mit der Angst vor Verlust' (*MM*, p. 263).[57]

Die Szenerie prägte sich mir für immer ein, weil die Sinne alert (ja alarmiert) waren. Es roch nach Braunkohle und irgendwie säuerlich nach Metall, manchmal ertönten Pfiffe [. . .]. Ein bißchen unheimlich war das Ganze, aber das entsprach der Wirklichkeit: ich fuhr in ein Land, das seine Bürger so sorgfältig überwachte, daß jede einzelne Schreibmaschine registriert war. Trotzdem florierte der Samisdat . . . ' (*L*, p. 78)

Her fear is in fact a somewhat nostalgic longing for an Eastern 'Heimat' as a concrete place which can, in contrast to supermodern non-places, be experienced through the senses, and where the pace of life still leaves time for meaningful communication, represented by the 'Samisdat'.[58]

Objets trouvés collected on her journeys also serve as storage spaces for moments of memory: 'Träger eines bestimmten Moments, winzige Zeugen einer Konstellation, die mich einschloß. Im zugigen Leben bildeten sie Erinnerungsspeicher' (MM, p. 311). The constantly changing constellations both in 'Steppe' and in Rakusa's writing in general, represent oscillating 'Selbstentwürfe jenseits verabsolutierender Gewissheiten', and changing perspectives, with the East as a 'kultureller Transitraum dichterischer Migration'[59] which is not restricted to a geographical or political entity, or Western stereotypes. The oscillating self that emerges in her shorter texts and in the vignettes of *Mehr Meer* is the result of the

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[57] The journey is also a sensory experience, and on this level a positive counter-example to the absence of a concrete reality experienced by the plane passenger in Rakusa's essay 'Langsamer!' (2005). The plane passenger arrives as 'apathische "eingepackte Ware" in einem no man's land', an Augean non-place of supermodernity (Ilma Rakusa, *Langsamer! Essay 54*, Graz 2005, p. 76. Further references appear in the text as 'L').

[58] 'In Leningrad dann erfuhr ich, daß der Weite der russischen Landstriche ein weites Zeitverständnis ihrer Bewohner entsprach. [. . .] Mit "asiatischer" Gelassenheit machte man sich an die Bewältigung von allem und jedem' (L, p. 78).

[59] Andreas Blödorn, '"Nie da sein, wo man ist". "Unterwegs-Sein" in der transkulturellen Gegenwartslyrik', in *Literatur und Migration*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold, Munich 2006, pp. 134–47 (p.136).

movement between external reference points (diverse historic, linguistic, ethnic and cultural spaces) and internal ones (trans-generational and personal memories and experiences). Within this configuration, identity in Rakusa's texts is negotiated between different locations and cultural paradigms, including collective and individual images of the East and the German language. In her unpublished excerpt 'Transit. Transfinit', she asks herself 'Aber geht es um Ankunft? Ist der Zustand des Unterwegsseins nicht besser als alles, was bevorsteht? Ein Zustand tr¨aumerischer Disponibilit¨at [. . .]?'[60]

Conclusion

In none of the texts discussed is 'nomadism' a chosen state of being, although the travellers the reader encounters are privileged, enjoying a greater freedom of choice – at the time of their travel – than other political and economic migrants from within and beyond the new Europe.[61] While central to Rakusa's writing because of her childhood experience, the movement across national borders has an existential meaning for all three writers on the basis of their individual 'migrant' experiences. In the case of Drawert and Seiler, the experience of crossing the border between the two Germanies, and of finding oneself in a globalised, Western world and literary market after the Fall of the Wall is expanded to the search for different modes of belonging within the new Europe and beyond it. These are attempts to locate oneself, while questioning new borders emerging within and around this new Europe, which serve to exclude a 'wild East' located in Siberia, Kazakhstan and Bashkortostan, as

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[60] http://www.bosch-stiftung.de/content/language2/html/14760.asp (accessed 2 December 2013).

[61] For an overview of the discussion on postmodern 'transmigrants' (Bauman 1993), 'flˆaneurs' and cosmopolitan nomadism (Lo¨fgren 1995), see Julia Reuter and O¨ zkan Bucakli, 'Bedingungen und Grenzen der Hybridisierung', in *PostModerne De/Konstruktionen. Ethik, Politik und Kultur*, ed. Susanne Kollmann and Kathrin Sch¨odel, M¨unster 2004, pp. 171–82.

well as within Central and Eastern Europe. In the course of this search, the East emerges as an aesthetic and existential transit space, the train moving through it suspending the traveller temporarily from the rhythm of his or her everyday life, to reflect on his/her individual and collective histories as well as on old and potential new forms of national and transnational belonging in the new Europe and a globalised world. This includes the memory of the former Eastern bloc as a transnational system, defining itself as in pursuit of equality and progress, which proved ultimately destructive, suppressing cultural difference and individual freedom. The train, experienced both as an archaic beast and a vehicle progressing at a perceptible speed (in comparison to, but also providing a basis for, supermodern, 'virtual' modes of travel) [62] by the traveller, works as a codification of memory processes, ranging from traumatic ones to 'Ostalgia'. Its archaic appearance signals the end of an Eastern bloc culture associated with modernity, industrialisation and history as a progressive force, and of a post-1945 world characterised by dichotomies that were limiting but also offered a sense of orientation. At the same time, a 'return' journey always implies, and questions or deconstructs, the original journey into the opposite direction, in this case an individual and collective migratory journey westward, into a transnational space following different rules, experienced as liberating, even if disorienting, and limiting on a different level. [63] With 'the train to the EU' as a metaphor for the integration of accession states into the EU, employed widely in political discourse, it also refers to a collective experience, with the EU – and

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[62] See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise. Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a. M. 2000, pp. 25–7.

[63] There are parallels to Yoko Tawada's narrative 'Wo Europa anf̈angt', based on her first journey from Asia to Europe on board the Trans-Siberian Railway (in Yoko Tawada, *Wo Europa anf̈angt*, T̈ubingen 1991, pp. 65–87).

Switzerland – representing dominant ideas of European culture and the globalised Western world at large.[64]

Finding oneself – established and/or marginalised – in this world triggers the urge to retrace one's initial journey geographically and back into the past it embodies: 'Mit dem Schweizerpaß begann meine R¨uckkehr in den Osten', the author-narrator in *Mehr Meer* remembers (*MM*, p. 253). The journeys eastwards act as catalysts. While the journey, both east- and westwards, is experienced as the imposition of a linear movement on the passenger in all the texts, it both creates a liminal, catalytic space and is challenged by the traveller's own physical and aesthetic movement, temporarily establishing a creative space that subverts existing dichotomies and opens a variety of directions and links. Past and present converge, allowing forgotten individual and collective memories and different narratives of origin to re-emerge and create new contact points. As in Seiler's Kazakhstan and Drawert's Siberia, the reference to the Bashkir people in 'Steppe' creates a network of links, transcending cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries which separate the 'wild' East from a civilised Europe. (N)ostalgic images, ever-present in German TV documentaries and travel guides, of Eastern steppe landscapes beyond history and of their exotic, nomadic inhabitants are subverted. And Rakusa's Bashkortostan as a region extending on both sides of the Ural Mountains, is the place where Europe meets Asia. Both continents are linked, while at the same time the idea of following this link on a straight line is subverted. The fact that the Bashkirs have lived in various countries of the former Soviet Union, as well as on the Danube plain, being referred

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[64] See Sandra Petraˇskaite-Pabst, 'Metaphors in German and Lithuanian Discourse Concerning the Expansion of the European Union', in *Contesting Europe's Eastern Rim: Cultural Identities in Public Discourse*, ed. Ljiljana ˇSari´c, Andreas Musolff, Stefan Manz and Ingrid Hudabiunigg, Bristol 2010, p. 40.

to as Danube Bulgars or Magyars in the tenth century, makes this steppe appear much closer to Central Europe and to the author's own biography.

The initial sense of linear movement thus also provides a corridor space for a rite of passage, or a – vain – hope of arrival in a different state of mind, before this is dissolved by other movements. At the same time, the train, in contrast to other modes of transport, allows for the sharing of this experience with co-travellers as Rakusa points out in 'Transit. Transfinit': 'Und bildet sich im Waggon eine Schicksalsgemeinschaft, gehorcht scheinbar anderen Gesetzen. Alles deutet auf ein Iudicium intervallum hin, eine Art Ausnahmezustand.'[65] There are few other places than the train where one is forced into such close proximity to strangers for extended periods of time. And it is difficult to isolate the self from contact continuously. In the texts analysed, the subject is shifting the lines, performing between self and other, private and public.

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[65] http://www.bosch-stiftung.de/content/language2/html/14760.asp (accessed 2 December 2013).