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Descartes of Metaphor: On Durs Grünbein’s Vom Schnee

Beginning from Osip Mandelstam’s designation of Dante as ‘the Descartes of metaphor’ – quoted by Grünbein in the course of his own dialogue with the Italian poet – this article traces the ways in which Grünbein takes up and displaces Mandelstam’s moniker in the context of his extended engagement with Descartes’ life and work in Vom Schnee oder Descartes in Deutschland. More specifically, this article inquires into the significance of Grünbein’s endeavour to invent a Descartes who has, at times, very little to do with the real, historical Descartes and explores the more general question of Grünbein’s strategies of authorial constitution.

[...] larvatus prodeo.
(Descartes)

1. ‘ergo sum’

The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) – one of Durs Grünbein’s chief points of poetic reference – once made the following observation: ‘I compare – therefore I exist, – Dante could have said. He was the Descartes of metaphor’. In his poetologically pivotal essay ‘Galilei vermißt Dantes Hölle und bleibt an den Maßen hängen’ – among other things, a tribute and response to Mandelstam’s Conversation About Dante, in which the Dante-Descartes connection is established – Grünbein approvingly cites Mandelstam’s designation of the Italian poet as ‘the Descartes of metaphor’, thus bringing together three of his ‘favourite’ poetic and existential interlocutors: Dante, Descartes, and Mandelstam.

What does it mean to be identified as ‘the Descartes of metaphor’? According to Mandelstam, who implicitly relies on the conception – going back to Aristotle – of metaphor and simile as more or less identical tropes, it means existing by dint of comparing, which is to say, by dint of creating metaphors – and this, in turn, means by dint of creating poetry tout court, insofar as poetry is taken to be predicated on the ‘capacity for metaphor’, which, according to Aristotle, ‘alone cannot be acquired from another, and is a sign of natural gifts’. In other words, Mandelstam’s ‘I compare – therefore I exist’ can be read as more or less equivalent to saying ‘I write poetry – therefore I exist’. Given that his Conversation About Dante – Mandelstam’s aesthetic summa – is as much about Dante as it is about Mandelstam himself and given that calling Dante ‘the Descartes of metaphor’ is itself a complex act of metaphor (and metonymy),
Mandelstam ought to be taken to suggest that he, too, is a ‘Descartes of metaphor’ of sorts, and this means, that he, too, lives by dint of poetry – that for him, too, the motto ‘I write poetry – therefore I exist’ holds true. In approvingly citing this poetic-philosophical nexus in his own Dante essay, Grünbein implicitly aligns himself with Mandelstam’s (and Dante’s) practice of poetry as (a mode of) existence.

However, as his most recent poetic opus, *Vom Schnee oder Descartes in Deutschland*, suggests, Grünbein does more than simply endorse and follow the Russian’s functionalization of Descartes as a philosophical anchor for more general poetological-existential concerns. Giving the screw of Mandelstam’s metaphor another turn, as it were, Grünbein re-conceives of Descartes himself, whom Mandelstam leaves intact as an historical-biographical entity, as the very creation of metaphor: in Grünbein’s hands ‘the Descartes of metaphor’ becomes ‘the Descartes [born of] metaphor’ – read: the Descartes born of poetry.

What does it mean to be ‘the Descartes of metaphor’ in this second sense? Beginning from this basic question and with Mandelstam’s original Descartes trope in mind, I want to trace Grünbein’s engagement with and creation of an idiosyncratic Descartes in this essay, focusing, in particular, on *Vom Schnee* – Grünbein’s extended improvisation, or poetic commentary, on the theme of Mandelstam’s metaphor. More specifically, I want to inquire into Grünbein’s strategies of authorial constitution with a view to suggesting that Mandelstam’s trope can be considered the driving and organizing force not only behind Grünbein’s most ‘philosophical’ text to date but, *mutatis mutandis*, behind much of his other poetry, insofar as it hinges on authorial charades and displacements.

2. Doppelgänger
René Descartes (1596–1650) has been a fixture in Grünbein’s poetic universe since he first broke into print in the late 1980s. Thus, Grünbein’s concern, throughout his *œuvre*, with the question of (the springs of lyrical) subjectivity, his attempt poetically to refract *Realsozialismus* through the prism of, and cast it in terms of Pavlovian reflexology, and his poetic interest in anatomy, physiology, and medicine are all in one way or another indebted to and informed by – if not exclusively, of course – Descartes’ manifold philosophical-scientific legacy: the philosopher’s inquiry into the constitution of the human subject, his discovery of the conditioned reflex *avant la lettre* through the observation of dogs, and his attempt to conceive of the human being squarely in terms of anatomy and physiology resound