Overview Effects: Violence and Planetarity in Durs Grünbein’s *Cyrano oder Die Rückkehr vom Mond* (Cyrano or the Return from the Moon, 2014)

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The ongoing planetary environmental crisis has prompted a reconceptualization of violence. The distribution of harms across time and space, the apparent decoupling of cause and effect, and the problem of how to allocate moral responsibility in complex systems are just some of the issues addressed by contemporary thinking about violence in the environmental humanities. Discussions of environmental violence in the context of our current predicament generally focus on the distinctive types of physical harm experienced by humans and non-humans as a consequence of anthropogenic environmental change, as well as on the epistemic violence wrought by how that predicament is conceptualized. How we think about the earth as a whole planet, and human beings as a species, is important to both of these questions. Although it is self-evident that environmental harms transcend political, social, and cultural borders, and that the ongoing environmental crisis has the potential to affect the planet as a whole and all human beings, it remains unclear how, where, and whether one can speak of a planetary consciousness or culpability, of a unified humanity affected by—and with capacity to address—environmental crisis. Who, in other words, is perpetrating environmental violence, and against whom? Where is “here,” and where is “elsewhere,” and can the two be meaningfully separated in the era of anthropogenic climate collapse?

This chapter explores how Durs Grünbein’s poetry collection *Cyrano oder die Rückkehr vom Mond* approaches these questions.[[1]](#endnote-2) Grünbein’s collection advocates for the importance of poetic language in improving humankind’s ability to imagine violence on a planetary scale. The poems, in their polysemy and subtlety, offer a space to reflect on the instability of positionality and comprehension, undermining subject/object binaries and the illusions of objectivity they generate. *Cyrano* provides a way of thinking about planetary consciousness—and thus also the causes and effects of violence at a planetary scale—which is rich and differentiated, and which acknowledges that human beings can never reach the point of distant, critical observation (and therefore safety from violence) to which many aspire. Interestingly, it also does so without relinquishing a tradition which might be characterized as distinctively German, highlighting the tension between a (re)emerging planetary consciousness in the Anthropocene and the existing (national, cultural, disciplinary) perspectives through which we must make sense of it.

The collection addresses, across eighty-four poems divided into eight cycles of irregular length, what is framed as the “return” or retreat from extra-terrestrial space that has taken place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Dreams of human spaceflight that were so compelling between the 1950s and the 1980s appear, the collection suggests, to have evaporated and left humankind with a poorer sense of the meaning and importance of extra-terrestrial space.

One of the collection’s most striking features is its sustained engagement with the history of science and space exploration: Grünbein is known in the German context as a *poeta doctus*, an erudite or learned poet, and *Cyrano* conforms to this image. The poems are written in a loose *terza rima*, the interlocking three-line rhyme scheme invented by Dante; they encompass a wide range of historical and geographical settings, from ancient Rome to the Challenger disaster of 1986; and they contain many references to real and imagined historical figures. Each poem shares its name with a historical person after whom a moon crater has also been named, generating an eclectic pantheon which includes Pythagoras and Abbas ibn Firnas, Jules Verne, and Neil Armstrong.

Grünbein’s central figure is, as the title suggests, Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655). Cyrano’s *L’autre Monde ou les États et Empires de la Lune* (The Other World, or the States and Empires of the Moon*,* 1657) counts as one of the earliest works of science fiction in the Western tradition. The work is a satire which tells the adventures of a flamboyant narrator, also called Cyrano, who travels to the moon and lives to tell the tale.[[2]](#endnote-3) The text—together with another of Cyrano’s works, *Les États et Empires du Soleil* (The States and Empires of the Sun, 1662) belongs to the early modern tradition of fantastical travel narratives, satirizing and commenting on contemporary intellectual movements, early modern science, and theology.

Grünbein’s use of the figure of Cyrano locates his poem cycle in the context of ongoing debates about (alternatives to) Enlightenment humanism as a means of considering the Earth as a whole planet and humans as a unified species. Although the cycle’s pessimistic engagement with the “return from the moon” speaks to the demise of a mid-century utopian vision of planetary wholeness, it also proposes some alternative ways of thinking about the planet as a whole which resonate with contemporary Anthropocene theory. This reimagining of planetary space takes place in dialogue with Cyrano de Bergerac, early modern philosophy, and the modern German tradition of negative anthropology, as well as in reflections on poetry as an art form. *Cyrano* provides—via the motif of “libration,” an astronomical phenomenon which creates the illusion of planetary oscillation, indicative of a commitment to the polysemy inherent in the writing and reading of poetry—a model for thinking about planetary and species-identity in the context of clashing epistemologies.

There is no doubt that ecological collapse and climate crisis are violent phenomena. The range of harms they cause is too large, and too diffuse, to catalogue, but at a minimum one might note that irreversible changes to our environment in the form of toxins and pollutants affect human and animal health, bringing about individual illness, death, and potential for mass extinction. Changes to the climate are also rendering larger and larger areas of land uninhabitable, causing suffering on a large scale. Rob Nixon offers an influential conceptualization of “slow violence” to describe these, and other, phenomena associated with environmental change, defining “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”[[3]](#endnote-4) Slow violence, for Nixon, is an unstable form of structural violence, which predominantly affects poor and marginalized people, “particularly (though not exclusively) across the so-called global South.”[[4]](#endnote-5)

The dispersion of violence across temporal scales which Nixon signals (“slow,” “incremental and accretive”) is no less important in his thinking than the dispersion of violence in geographical terms. For some, environmental violence is “elsewhere”; for others, it is terrifyingly close. Ecological violence is rendered invisible or elsewhere (to some) not just because it unfolds slowly, but also because its effects can be (or feel) very remote from its causes. For example, the visibly harmful consequences of a flood caused by rising sea levels in Bangladesh are separated, temporally and spatially, from the carbon-emitting actions which can be said to have caused them, as well as from the various stages in the processes which brought them about.

Nixon’s study is grounded in postcolonial theory, building on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others. For Spivak and Nixon, it is essential to avoid flattening the complex, discontinuous space(s) of the planet into a single abstract globe, the undifferentiated arena of capitalist globalization. Spivak, offering “planetarity” as an alternative to globalization, explains:

Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems. … The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Spivak’s insistence on a particular view of Earth as a real planet—one which is fundamentally other, which does not belong to the same epistemological paradigm as the illusory globe—allows for the complex understanding of and engagement with alterity which is essential in postcolonial thought.[[6]](#endnote-7)

But, as Dipesh Chakraborty observes in his “Four Theses on the Climate of History,” this intellectual move is at odds with how earth systems scientists think about human beings and Earth in the context of the emerging configuration known as the Anthropocene, the proposed term for the current geological epoch in which human beings are leaving an indelible trace on the fabric of the planet:

The word that [earth systems scientists] use to designate life in the human form—and in other living forms—is *species*. They speak of the human being as a species and find that category useful in thinking about the nature of the current crisis. It is a word that will never occur in any standard history or political-economic analysis of globalization by scholars on the Left … The task of placing, historically, the crisis of climate change thus requires us to bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital. (213)

The problem of how to think about planetary space and species-being between the humanities and earth systems sciences becomes a key intellectual issue in contemporary theory: the challenge is to acknowledge that environmental crisis is caused by and affects human beings *as a species*, and the planet *as a whole*, without “flattening” the necessary differentiation between people, places, and cultures that Spivak, Nixon, and others highlight as an ethical imperative in light of global inequality and injustice.

Although the twin questions of planetary unity and species-being have a long history in European intellectual traditions, two closely related Cold War technological developments have framed this discussion in and for the Anthropocene.[[7]](#endnote-8) The advent of human spaceflight prompted reflection on the position of our planet within the universe, including the potential habitability of other planets. Iconic images of the Earth from space, most notably 1972’s “Earthrise,” showed the beauty of planet Earth as an apparently borderless whole, seemingly reaffirming its unique value as the shared home of all human beings in a phenomenon known as the “overview effect.”[[8]](#endnote-9) At the same time, the development of the atom bomb, and the threat of planetary destruction it augured, served as a reminder of Earth’s fragility and isolation. Mainstream responses to both the Earthrise moment and the nuclear threat entailed affirmations of unity and planetary wholeness, with the whole earth image rapidly becoming a symbol of ecological awareness and support for nuclear disarmament.[[9]](#endnote-10) These issues still resonate in the early decades of the twenty-first century, but the tenor of the debate has changed. The fear that geopolitical tensions might exacerbate—or, with the same outcome, fail to stave off—an existential threat to the future of humanity remains live, insofar as both nuclear warfare and the climate crises are concerned. Space exploration continues apace, funded by governments and private corporations.

These phenomena have long since ceased to inspire sentimental affirmations of unity, and it is this profound disenchantment that forms one of the key contexts to Grünbein’s work. As the cover copy notes, it is half a century since the Apollo moon landings, and the cultural focus appears to have shifted away from celebrating those who “conquer” space, towards an elegiac sense of Earth as an isolated, fragile planet.[[10]](#endnote-11) “Heimkehr” (homecoming) and “Rückkehr” (return) are the collection’s keywords, with the motif of the moon in particular playing a central role: what if, Grünbein’s poems ask, the compulsion to explore the space beyond Earth was always connected with a need to return “home” and experience the comfort afforded by old perspectives?

This skepticism about the Cold War-era project of extra-terrestrial adventure, with its overtones of colonization, should be read in the context of other responses to the Space Race in German intellectual tradition. While many Anglophone (and Soviet) thinkers and writers engaged with early landmarks in human spaceflight and exploration in a tone of celebration that reached a crescendo in US poet Archibald McLeish’s occasional poem marking the Apollo 8 lunar landings (“Presence among us … we have touched you!”), published on the front page of the *New York Times* the day after the historic event, some prominent German thinkers were more circumspect.[[11]](#endnote-12)

One notable contribution came from Hannah Arendt, who was asked in 1963 to respond to the question “Has man’s conquest of space increased or diminished his stature?” Her response offers a poignant assessment of the conundrum faced by modern science, in which new discoveries and levels of abstraction proliferate, without improving society’s moral insight. Since man can never see himself from outside, he is, Arendt suggests, engaged in a perpetual search for an external perspective akin to that desired by Archimedes (who is said to have claimed that given a stable enough point, he could create a lever to move the earth). Arendt criticizes man’s search for this “Archimedean point” to which a lever of self-comprehension might be secured:

[T]he attempt to conquer space means that man hopes he will be able to journey to the Archimedean point which he anticipated by sheer force of abstraction and imagination. However, in doing so, he will necessarily lose his advantage. All he can find is the Archimedean point with respect to the earth, but once arrived there and having acquired this absolute power over his earthly habitat, he would need a new Archimedean point, and so ad infinitum. In other words, man can only get lost in the immensity of the universe, for the only true Archimedean point would be the absolute void behind the universe.[[12]](#endnote-13)

Arendt’s pessimistic conclusion continues to resonate in the context of the Anthropocene predicament:

Man, insofar as he is a scientist, does not care about his own stature in the universe or about his position on the evolutionary ladder of animal life; this “carelessness” is his pride and his glory. The simple fact that physicists split the atom without any hesitations the very moment they knew how to do it, although they realized full well the enormous destructive potentialities of their operation, demonstrates that the scientist qua scientist does not even care about the survival of the human race on earth or, for that matter, about the survival of the planet itself.[[13]](#endnote-14)

It is no coincidence that Arendt’s response to a question about “man’s conquest of space” refers repeatedly to the development of nuclear fission, a technology with huge power to unleash violence on a planetary scale. Not only were these two era-defining developments clearly part of the same military-technological and scientific project which is also central to the history of the Anthropocene, as outlined above, but—as Arendt observes—all three speak to the same need to push boundaries and reach for new abstractions, regardless of the deadly and destructive consequences of doing so.

Günther Anders, Arendt’s contemporary (and first husband), explores this connection across an oeuvre which grapples with the issue of moral responsibility for harm and violence in the age of nuclear technology and space exploration. The significance of space exploration for Anders lies in the way it enables humanity to “encounter” itself; he frames the argument of his 1970 book *Der Blick vom Mond* (The View from the Moon) along these lines:

Die Hauptthese [dieser Schrift ist], daß das entscheidende Ereignis der Raumflüge nicht in der Erreichung der fernen Regionen des Weltalls oder des fernen Mondgeländes besteht, sondern darin, daß die Erde zum ersten Mal die Chance hat, sich selbst zu begegnen, wie sich bisher nur der im Spiegel sich reflektierende Mensch hatte begegnen können.

[The central argument [of this text is] that the decisive experience of space travel consists not in reaching distant regions of the universe or the distant surface of the moon, but rather that Earth has the opportunity, for the first time, to encounter itself in the way that, until now, only the individual human looking in the mirror has been able to do.][[14]](#endnote-15)

Anders’s thought consistently emphasizes the agency of technology itself, especially its capacity to destroy: in a series of “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” he exhorts mankind to “examine the secret voices, motives and maxims of your instruments … look into your ‘instrument hearts.’”[[15]](#endnote-16) This interrogation of technology is necessary, he argues, because the complexity of the processes which underpin the harm caused by nuclear weapons exceeds the capacity of individual humans to conceptualize their own ethical responsibility for said harm. “Everyone [involved in the building, deployment, and detonation] of a nuclear weapon has a good conscience, because no conscience was required at any point.”[[16]](#endnote-17) Anders’s book *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (The Antiquatedness of the Human Being) signals in the very title his belief, echoed by Arendt, that technological “progress” has the capacity to erode human moral agency entirely, because the power of technologies created by humans exceeds humans’ capacity to imagine their power. In the “Commandments,” he summarizes arguments he also makes elsewhere:

For in the course of the technical age the classical relation between imagination and action has reversed itself. While our ancestors had considered it a truism that imagination exceeds and surpasses reality, to-day the capacity of our imagination (and that of our feeling and responsibility) cannot compete with that of our *praxis*.[[17]](#endnote-18)

Both Anders and Arendt speak of “mankind” and “humanity” as a unified whole, in the voice of an undifferentiated “we.” Anders defends the need for this gesture in terms which borrow from the German tradition of negative anthropology, on the basis that the nuclear threat creates, for the first time, a unified humanity under threat of extinction: “Nicht auf Grund einer gemeinsamen natürlichen Herkunft sind wir nun eine Menschheit, sondern auf Grund einer gemeinsamen, in Zukunftslosigkeit bestehenden Zukunft, auf Grund des uns gemeinsam bevorstehenden unnatürlichen Endes” (We are now one humanity not because of a common natural origin, but because of a common future without a future, because of the unnatural end that is approaching all of us together).[[18]](#endnote-19)

It is perhaps ironic, in this context, that this chapter conforms to the approach Timothy Clark has characterized as “methodologically nationalist,” guided as it is by the questions raised by the present volume as a whole about specifically German-language responses to violence elsewhere.[[19]](#endnote-20) Arendt, Anders, and Grünbein each have a complex, thorny affiliation to the overlapping, unstable traditions which might be described as “German”: Arendt’s essay was written (in English) during her tenure at the New School in New York City, after she left Germany for good; Anders was born in Breslau (now Wrocław, in Poland) and died in Vienna; and Grünbein’s German identity is inflected with the memory of the German Democratic Republic, the vanished state in which he was born. The extent to which a common grounding in German language cultures and traditions of thought underpins their, or indeed any, approach to the topic of planetarity is an open question. It is clear, however, that habits of thought derived from place, language, and culture remain compelling even in the light of our “common future without a future,” over and against the pull of the planetary.

Grünbein’s collection is an extended exploration of hostility, isolation, decline, decay, and malcontent, of the sort which Anders’s and Arendt’s work expresses. The violence it catalogues is overt and latent, contemporary and historical, physical and epistemic. Cyrano’s return to Earth is described in the opening text, “Riccioli,” in melancholy yet peaceful terms: “die Fallschirmseide [raschelt] / Im Herbstwind” (the parachute silk [rustles] / in the autumn wind, 11), but this image is almost immediately contrasted with the violent descent to Earth of the Challenger space shuttle, which experienced a technical malfunction shortly after take-off in 1986, killing all seven crew members on board. The Challenger disaster seems, in *Cyrano*, to mark a turning point in human perceptions of extra-terrestrial space, from a utopian optimism to fear and anxiety. The final communication from Challenger Commander F. Richard Scobee is quoted in the volume’s third text, “Euclides,” (in English: “*Uh oh.*”) before the poem asks: “War der Mensch sein Versagen? Was zählte / Sein Schritt über alle Grenzen hinaus, alle Sinne?” (Was man his failure? To what did / his step beyond all limits, beyond all sense, amount?, 13)—precisely the question Arendt and Anders raise. The violent spectacle of the 1986 disaster becomes an indictment of the senseless pursuit of transcendence via spaceflight regardless of the risks.

The next poem, “Cassini” picks up the dark tone, offering an uneasy vision of an Earth in the shadow of this hostile extra-terrestriality:

der Mond

Hat Mumps seit gestern abend. Was ist los?

Der alte Pfannekuchen strahlt so ungewohnt.

Im Park die Hunde bellen lauter, … (14)

the moon

Has had mumps since yesterday. What’s wrong?

The old pancake shines so oddly.

In the park the dogs bark louder …

Here, the violence is much less immediate than in “Euclides”: first, we learn only the moon “hat Mumps” (has mumps) and shines “ungewohnt” (oddly). Dogs are heard barking, in a reference to Cyrano’s story, according to which the lingering scent of the moon on the traveler’s clothing after his return to earth sends dogs far and wide into a frenzy. The displacement of the moon affects tides and oceans, causing tankers to sink and oceans to rage. An archipelago collapses into the sea “wie getroffen von Torpedos” (as though hit by torpedos). Migratory animals lose their way *en masse,* while human beings hide in dark cinema screening rooms, enjoying the spectacle: “Wo sonst zeigt sich die Elegie der Erde ungetrübt?” (Where else does the earth’s elegy show itself, undimmed?)

Despite the poem’s ambivalent ending—the final line asks if this could be “[e]in gutes Omen?” (a good omen?)—one cannot help but read the events described by “Cassini” as portents, particularly in the context of the contemporary environmental crisis. The violent transformation of oceans, the derangement of non-human animals, and the obliviousness of humans who experience disaster as tragic spectacle all call to mind our current predicament. The type of violence Grünbein describes in “Cassini” is diffuse, latent, and—to the individual spectator—invisible. It echoes not only Nixon’s “slow violence,” but the planetary destruction which Anders describes as “unseeable” —violence which is all the more dangerous because it appears to be taking place elsewhere.[[20]](#endnote-21)

I share Jonas Nesselhauf’s view that, despite the fact that *Cyrano* is by no means a collection of eco-poems, the volume as a whole represents an attempt at “eine engagierte Lyrik im Zeitalter des Anthropozän” (an engaged poetry in the era of the Anthropocene), linking the varied contexts of twentieth- and twenty-first century planetary thinking with which this essay engages.[[21]](#endnote-22) Nesselhauf observes that the poem “Taccini,” which also appears on the book jacket as an apparently programmatic text for the volume, can also be read in this context—and yet another poem, “Hyginus,” refers to the Fukushima earthquake and subsequent nuclear disaster: “Fern in Japan war die Erde aufgebrochen, brannten / Ein, zwei, drei Reaktorblöcke” (far away, in Japan, the earth split open / one, two, three reactors burned, 87).

*Cyrano*, then, is interested in disaster and violence as spectacle, as in the Challenger disaster, as well as in the “slow violence” of environmental degradation, linked to the gradually unfolding catastrophe of technological modernity in general. However, the form of violence perhaps most central to *Cyrano* is epistemic violence: violence wrought by the conflict between different ways of knowing the world, and in the suppression of expression of knowledge.[[22]](#endnote-23) Perhaps surprisingly, the primary engagement with epistemic violence is not via direct engagement with the contemporary discourses of globalization and planetarity; rather, *Cyrano* goes back in time to examine the *origins* of European humanist whole-earth thinking, and the emergence of philosophies of species-being, at the transitional moment of early modernity. Cyrano, the central figure, serves as a means of reflection on proto-Enlightenment engagements with rationality, the conflict between science and ethics (in the form of religious morality), and attempts at transcendence through creativity.

In this context, as so often, epistemic violence is literalized in acts of bodily, political violence. The poem “Pitiscus” finds Grünbein’s Cyrano in Toulouse:

Ein Nest voller Inquisitoren, romgetreues Gewürm.

Hier schrie Vanini im Feuer. Dies war die dunkle

Seite der Erde. (20)

[A nest full of inquisitors, papist vermin.

Here Vanini screamed in the fire. This was the dark

Side of the earth.]

Lucilio (Giulio Cesare) Vanini, a libertine philosopher whose work influenced Cyrano de Bergerac’s circle, was executed for blasphemy in Toulouse in 1619. Like that of other thinkers referenced in the cycle, including Cyrano himself, Vanini’s work can be seen as an early part of the Enlightenment transition to a humanist world-view, one which was able to reconcile religious faith with scientific empiricism. The religious violence Grünbein’s poem portrays is a direct consequence of clashing epistemologies in early modern Europe. It is notable that one of Vanini’s heresies was to contend that the heavens were part of the same material sphere as the earth, rather than belonging to a separate (divine) realm—a poignant reminder that extra-terrestrial space has long been a conceptual battleground. Different ways of conceptualizing the planet as a whole are more than abstract intellectual exercises: they reflect closely-guarded religious and social principles and world views.

Another notable feature of the collection is its depiction of global space, and here the question of epistemic violence takes on a different resonance. As Spivak notes, “[t]he clearest available example of … epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project,” she notes, “is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity.”[[23]](#endnote-24) The geographic focus of the poems is very wide-ranging, and the lyric speaker(s) do(es) often appear to occupy precisely the transcendent, geographically free-floating, perspective that the Earthrise moment appeared to offer. In excerpts quoted above, we have been shown Toulouse and the Kattegat (the sea between Denmark and Norway). A repeated stylistic feature of the texts is the listing of geographically disparate place names which evoke a sense of planetary “overview”: “Rom / oder Riad, Brasilia” (“Philolaos”); “[der] Weiße[] Nil, [der] Biwa-See” (“Orontius”); “Ätna, Krakatau, Hverfjall” (“Kant”); “Paris, Jerusalem und London” (“Demonax”) “Ich … / Sah die Mauern von Helsingör und Borobudur / in der Morgendämmerung, Tokyo und Rom” (“Abenezra”). Individual poems take us to Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Japan, or explore the legacies of scientists from outside of Europe after whom moon craters are named. For instance, a poem entitled “Hirayama” starts:

Am Sakurata-Tor ein Zwischenfall. Ein Weiser

Stand dort und sah hinab vom Paß. Das klare Wasser

Möge nach Osten fließen, Westen—sein Gebet. (58)

[At the Sakurada Gate, an incident. A wise man

Stood there and looked down from the pass. The clear water

Would flow to the East, to the West—his prayer.]

The Hirayama crater is named for two Japanese scientists, Shin and Kiyotsugu Hirayama, and the “incident” described in the poem is likely the assassination at the Sakurada Gate in Tokyo in 1860 of an official of the Japanese military government who had signed a controversial treaty of trade co-operation with the United States. While this context to the poem suggests a nuanced engagement with the history of capitalist colonialism, the images of a “wise man” and the proverb-like final sentence invoke orientalist clichés which reflect the poem’s positioning of the non-European culture as profoundly other.[[24]](#endnote-25)

Since the title and intellectual framing of the collection remain very much grounded in European, proto-Enlightenment ontologies and epistemologies, the poems appear to play what Donna Haraway would call a “god trick,” adopting a whole-earth (and, by extension, whole-species) “conquering gaze from nowhere.”[[25]](#endnote-26) Indeed, the very names of the poems—the pantheon of global intellectuals and spaceflight pioneers which, Grünbein explains, have a somewhat arbitrary relationship to the poems they title—reflect this gesture of overview.[[26]](#endnote-27) There is no doubt that the transcendent perspective is apt for the themes of planetary self-reflection the volume explores, but it could also run the risk of itself perpetuating epistemic violence, offering a false objectivity that denies its own positionality and its own grounding in a particular intellectual tradition.

This epistemologically violent gesture is replicated in the notion of the Anthropocene. As Zoe Todd and Heather Davis note, the notion of the Anthropocene enacts a form of epistemic violence on marginalized, and particularly Indigenous, populations.[[27]](#endnote-28) The species-being implied by the idea of the *anthropos* elides cultural and power dynamics, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg explain: flattening humanity into an undifferentiated mass; implicating all of “us” equally in the Anthropocene predicament; and implying evenly distributed culpability for evenly distributed suffering.[[28]](#endnote-29) In reality, nothing could be further from the truth: as Nixon and Spivak’s work highlights, both the causes and effects of climate change and environmental/ecosystem collapse are highly differentiated according to geography, race, class, gender, and other categories. Not only that, but the very conceptualizations of geological time and planetary space that the Anthropocene idea takes for granted are culturally specific, rather than universal, paradigms—the European/Western traditions of history and geography tend to dominate and overwrite other ways of thinking about time, the self, and environments. Here, again, we push up against the tension Chakraborty highlights, between a sense of planet, and a sense of humanity, which are in some ways necessary or obvious in the age of potential planetary destruction and human extinction, and in other ways prove flawed or no longer intellectually sustainable when seen in the context of the same violent phenomena.

The elegiac tone of Grünbein’s collection, I propose, is the product of a mourning for this lost, obsolete or defunct aspiration towards an Enlightenment humanist planetary thinking. Spivak, Nixon, Malm, Hornborg, and Todd and Davis represent the emergence of a new, critical-postcolonial planetarity which rejects the tradition of Enlightenment humanist whole-earth thinking. *Cyrano*—in the vein of Anders and Arendt—mourns that same humanist tradition from within, and asks whether any aspect of it can be salvaged.

The figure of Cyrano de Bergerac offers the ideal means by which to do so. This “Schriftsteller-Musketier” (author-muskeeter, 120)—as Grünbein’s “Lyrische Libration” (Lyric Libration), an essay accompanying the collection, describes him—encapsulates the contradictions of Baroque Europe on the verge of the Enlightenment. Cyrano de Bergerac led a varied and adventurous life, by turns a soldier, scientist, poet, and philosopher. Although he is now best known for his satirical writings (and as a character in Edmund Rostand’s eponymous play of 1897), these works are part of a wider project of anti-authoritarianism and intellectual radicalism which is based on scientific learning and scholarship. Formally and tonally, Grünbein’s Cyrano, like the historical figure on which he is based, is a poet—a flamboyant figure who belongs in the Baroque tradition—but this aspect of his persona is combined with a belief in scientific rationalism and philosophical materialism. As “Lyric Libration” explains, Cyrano de Bergerac was a pupil of Pierre Gassendi, a peer of René Descartes who was committed to the principles of classical (Epicurean) atomism, and who developed a theory of cognition revolving around the movement from sensory perception, to rational understanding, to imagination, based on a belief in “effluxions” as the means by which visual images reached the eyes (and mind) from the material world. The theory of effluxions, at least according to Grünbein’s summary, thus underpins Cyrano’s poetic creations:

Sie war das Herzstück aller Beschreibungskunst—das Fundament, auf das vor allem die Dichter, geborene Sensualisten, zu bauen hofften. Sie versprach, den Abstand vom Ich zur mannigfaltigen und doch konturenscharf verdichteten, in lauter herrlichen Formen ausgeprägten Materie zu überbrücken. (130)

[It was the beating heart of all the arts of description—the foundation on which poets, above all, those born sensualists, hoped to build. It promised to bridge the gap from the “I” to the manifold and yet sharply contoured, concentrated, material of the world, shaped as it was into pure, wonderful forms.]

Gassendi’s theory represents a significant intervention in the moral and religious philosophy of the early Enlightenment; his commitment to materialism is, in many ways, at odds with conventional understandings of divinity and spirituality. His philosophy attempted to make room for the divine because he rejected the idea of absolute knowledge, a stance which brought him into conflict with Descartes. As a pupil of Gassendi and as a poet, Cyrano’s relationship to Cartesian principles—the principles which define and inaugurate Enlightenment humanism—is complex. Descartes appears, Grünbein explains (along with other ancient and early modern philosophers), as a character in one of Cyrano de Bergerac’s sketches, in which “[“d]ie cartesische Kognitionslehre, ein Kristall, löst sich in den Spiralnebeln auf” (the Cartesian theory of cognition, a crystal, dissolves into the spiral of mist, 131).

There is, as this quotation demonstrates, a certain ambivalence in the figure of Cyrano, who appears in Grünbein’s text on the one hand as an empiricist and rationalist, and on the other as a showman and storyteller; a disciple of the pious Gassendi, but himself an adventurer and associate of the early libertines. Rather than critiquing humanist planetary thinking from the perspective of its (post)colonial others, Grünbein uses the ambivalent Cyrano as a way of exploring its historical contingency and inherent contradictions—and the violence and harm these bring about—from within. Cyrano belongs to the intellectual milieu in which Cartesian principles were formed, but before they were solidified by centuries of philosophical habit. These same principles have been reopened for debate by postcolonial and postmodern theory—mind-body dualism and (crucially for our argument) the self-other, subject-object divide on which all humanist notions of the planet as whole, and of violence elsewhere, are predicated.

The way Grünbein’s poems use the pronoun “er” (he) sheds light on the slipperiness of identity, selfhood, and otherness in *Cyrano*. This pronoun is the opening word of the collection:

Er ist zurückgekehrt. Jemand hat ihn gesehen

Hinter den Hangers, wo die Fallschirmseide

Im Herbstwind raschelt, ein Ballon sich bauscht. (“Riccioli,” 11)

[He has returned. Someone has seen him

Behind the hangars, where the parachute silk

Rustles in the autumn wind, a balloon billows.]

We can read this pronoun in at least two ways. Perhaps the most self-evident interpretation is that the “he” simply refers to Cyrano, the collection’s titular figure, whose “Heimkehr” (homecoming) is—again, as noted in Grünbein’s accompanying essay—the moment at which his experience becomes public, narrativized as fable in Cyrano de Bergerac’s satire.[[29]](#endnote-30)

At least one reviewer of the collection offers an alternative explanation, however. In German, the masculine pronoun could refer to “der Mond,” the moon itself: returned after a period of darkness, the new moon of the lunar cycle, peeping out from behind a building, rounding into a balloon.[[30]](#endnote-31) Grünbein proposes further interpretations: “Unter dem voraussetzungslosen ‘Er’ machen sich mindestens drei Vertreter auf die Reise: die barocke Persona Cyrano de Bergerac, der weltraumerobernde Mensch an sich – und der Poet” (At least three agents are on the move in the unqualified pronoun “he”: the Baroque figure of Cyrano de Bergerac, space-conquering man *per se*, and the poet).[[31]](#endnote-32) In light of this view, Grünbein explains, “schon die erste Zeile führt ja in eine Unbestimmtheitszone—und aus ihr folgt vieles weitere. Ein leichtes Schwindelgefühl ist von Anfang an im Spiel—so als würde man plötzlich von der Erde abheben ohne zu wissen warum. So hat das Subjekt der ersten Zeile sofort etwas Schillerndes” (the first line leads immediately into a zone of ambiguity—and things escalate from there. A mild vertigo is in play from the very beginning—as though one might suddenly take off from the Earth without knowing why. Thus the subject of the first line immediately has an iridescent quality).[[32]](#endnote-33) The shimmering subject “er” destabilizes the subject/object binary as it relates to Cyrano and the reader, who may or may not identify as “der weltraumeroberne Mensch an sich” (space-conquering man *per se*), self and other, Earth and moon.

This shifting, overlapping, and unstable quality runs through the cycle in numerous ways, amounting to a meta-poetic motif which Grünbein elaborates in “Lyrische Libration” (Lyric Libration) and which offers some hints as to the role of poetry in addressing the ethical and conceptual challenge of violence at a planetary scale. Libration, in the context of astronomy, refers to a visual phenomenon whereby the surface of the moon closest to earth appears to slightly rotate when observed over a period of days and weeks. In part, it is an effect of the Earth’s rotation, in essence a kind of optical illusion; but a very minor proportion of the effect is caused by actual movement of the moon as a consequence of tidal forces. It is a kind of interplanetary oscillation, and is both real and illusory at the same time. For Grünbein, it replicates the “Schwindelgefühl” (vertigo) which his poems draw out of the polysemous pronoun “er,” as well as the shifting quality of (poetic) language in general:

Es war dies ein Taumeln, wie es einen ähnlich auch bei gewissen Worten erfassen konnte—festen, verläßlichen Größen wie Liebe, Einsamkeit oder Nacht … Auch bei ihnen gab es dies Schwingen zwischen Nähe und Ferne—ihre *lyrische* *Libration*, wie man sie in Anlehnung an den Astronomenausdruck nennen konnte. Man sagt, im Gedicht seien die Wortbedeutungen schwankend, je nach dem Neigungswinkel des Lesers, seiner seelischen Inklination. (118–19)

[It was a wobbling, like the one that can hit you when it comes to particular words—solid, dependable giants like love, loneliness, or night … In these, too, there is an oscillation between proximity and distance—their *lyric libration*, as one might call it in reference to the astronomical expression. It is said that the meaning of poetic language varies according to the reader’s angle, the inclination of his soul.]

Indeed, this suggestion is neatly reflected by the pun on “Schwindel,” which can mean either dizziness or lightheadedness, as in “Schwindelgefühl”; or deception, as in the English word “swindle.” Puns and double meanings evidently contribute to the semantic instability the collection celebrates.

The essay goes on to explore the relationship between the poetic imagination and the reality of space travel, positing that the reality of space travel (that is, the seemingly objective planetary perspective it affords) effaces the complexity of this individual perspective which is drawn out (or better: restored?) in poetry. Even the word “moon” itself, Grünbein suggests, is deprived of its thickness of meaning by its straightforward scientific-technical application.[[33]](#endnote-34)

The concept of “lyric libration” accounts for one of the collection’s most striking qualities, its sustained meta-poetic, programmatic engagement with poetry as a form and language *per se*. Aside from the fact that the cycle is densely intertextual, referencing works of moon art and poetry from Cyrano de Bergerac to Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* (1634), poems by Novalis, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich Schiller among others, many poems explore the connections between language, rhythm, poetry, and meaning. In “Quetelet,” modernist poetic rhythm – as influentially considered by Stephanie Mallarme in his essay on poetics “Crise de Vers” (1897), is celebrated:

Vers-Krise war das Wort, mit dem die Wende kam.

Das Ohr, befreit vom Metronom, lotet hinein

Ins Auf und Ab der Silben in der losen Rede. (74)

“Crisis in poetry” was the word that brought the change.

The ear, free of the metronome, took its soundings

In the rise and fall of syllables in loosened speech.

In “Mendeleev,” the focus is on the interplay of word and image: “Denn Worte und Bilder / Kreisen fremd umeinander—Sputniks, Trabanten” (Since words and images / Circle one another strangely—sputniks, satellites, 69). In “Zeno,” the “er” is positioned as language-lover: “War er ein Kind des Überflusses, Narr der Parallelen / Von All und Alphabet? … // Ein Glückatlas war ihm die Sprache” (Was he a child of surfeit, a fool of the parallel / between the All and the Alphabet? … // Language was his map of happiness, 44).

Perhaps the best examples of the collection’s meta-poetic reflexivity, however, are in the poem “Novalis,”’ named for the crater named for the poet, in which (once again) it is the etymology and meaning of the moon’s names which are at stake:

Es war der weiße Glanz, ein Perlmuttschimmer

Der ihm den Namen gab bei Juden und Etruskern,

Lang vor den Mythenächten bis in unsern Tag.

[It was the white shine, a mother-of-pearl shimmer

Which gave it its name for the Jews and Etruscans

Long before the mythological nights, until today.]

Even if the name itself is now “[i]m Dunst verblass[t]” (covered in mist), the poem goes on to imply, the moon itself still shimmers, albeit through a veil of irony. The shimmer of moon-language (in poetry, in the imagination) functions as a mirror for the Earth:

Es scheint wie wir. Sein milchiges Trompe l’oeil

Öffnet am Himmel Tunnel in den Meeresgrund,

Auf dem die Sterne leuchten wie Medusen. (36)

[It shines like us. Its milky trompe l’oeil

Opens in the heavens a tunnel to the ocean floor

On which the stars gleam like jellyfish.]

In addition to the programmatic meta-poetic reflection—and the punning play on words like “scheint” (shines/seems) and “Medusen” (jellyfish/Medusae, in the sense of the ancient gorgon)—two further qualities of this poem speak to the guiding concept of “lyric libration.” These qualities can be seen, in the context of the volume as a whole, as part of Grünbein’s attempt to work out a post-Enlightenment planetary poetics for the Anthropocene, one which can express the violent causes and consequences of overlapping planetary crises.

The first is the move from singular to plural (and vice versa), a kind of “splintering” of subject and/or object into multitudes, as in the final line of “Novalis” in which the singular presence of the moon refracts into the plural, star-like, jellyfish. This move is repeated time and again throughout the collection and contributes to the vertiginous atmosphere Grünbein describes: in “Phocylides,” “Jeder Apfel ist ein kleines Weltall für sich” (23); in “Grimaldi,” the “Vielheit der Welten” is compared with the lice on the head of a beggar; “[es] wirbelte mehr als nur ein Volk um die Sonne,” we are told (18). In “Copernicus,” this pluralism is explicitly associated with the question of poetic *Neigungswinkeln* (angles of inclination) towards the moon:

Nach all den Mysterien, fragt keiner: Was blieb

Von den tausend Definitionen des Mondes?

Die eine, sagt sie. Und auch er sagt: die eine. (34)

[After all the mysteries, no-one asks: what remained

Of the thousand definitions of the moon?

The one, she says. And he, too, says: the one.]

Of course, it will forever remain unknown—indeed, unknowable—whether and how the two speakers’ definitions overlap. This plurality of perspectives must be seen as part of what Grünbein argues that poetry can accomplish: a kind of harmony in multiplicity, a productive polysemy grounded in shared language and shared image, which feeds into a sense of planetary wholeness that is playful and subjective, rather than monolithic.

Secondly, we might also note the gesture of reflexivity *per se*, the mutuality of the relationship between self and other, Earth and moon, conveyed by the line “Es scheint wie wir” (it shines [or appears] like us). The figures of the circle, cycle, mirror, and orbit are everywhere in *Cyrano*, including in the title and opening line, reflecting the importance of “Selbstbegegnung” (self-encounter), as theorized by both Anders and Arendt, in the context of Space Age thought.[[34]](#endnote-35)

In light of these qualities of plurality and self-reflexivity, one could compare the intricate structure of the collection as a whole with its multiple cycles and points of cross- and interreference, as well as the balanced forms of individual texts, to the movement of an orrery: a microcosm of a universe in balanced motion, moving not in perfect circles but rather in elliptical orbits. Grünbein’s choice of tercets contributes to this effect: used freely (as can be seen in the examples above), they are formed and grouped into poems of different lengths, making prominent use of internal and end-rhyme. Though the rhymes rarely adhere to a fixed pattern, there are clear echoes of a Dantean *terza rima*, the quintessential form for poetic explorations of the cosmos. In the final poem, “Möbius,” the poem begins in *terza rima* but, as it works through a list of lunar metaphors (“treue[r] Hund der Erde / … Ein Gong auch, lautlos, korrodierte Narrenschelle / … ein grauer Riesenpilz,” “Himmels Jo-Jo” (the Earth’s faithful hound / ... A gong, too, silent, a corroded jester’s bell / … a giant grey mushroom,” “heaven’s yo-yo”), the rhymes begin to falter somewhat, moving from the *aba bcb* pattern of the *terza rima* to *cde dfe* and finally ending on a half-rhyme (“Pharaonen“ / *Cyrano…*” (pharaohs / *Cyrano*). The italicized name which is the collection’s final word—“Schreib einen Brief an den Mond. Schreib *Cyrano*…” (Write a letter to the moon. Write *Cyrano…*) opens up a range of possibilities: it could, perhaps, refer to the character or historical figure, or (as suggested by the italics) the title of a text, or indeed the very text we are reading—which would complete the collection’s elliptical orbit.

Achille Mbembe, a thinker influenced by both Spivak and Michel Foucault, works to trace the “necropolitics” of planetary relations, a correlative of Foucault’s “biopolitics” which illuminates the entanglement of death, violence, and war with questions of political and social power. Although explicitly framed by reference to coloniality, Mbembe’s necropolitics also offers a framework for approaching other forms of violence in the Anthropocene: nuclear disaster, environmental crisis and catastrophe, space colonization. Crucially, Mbembe sees the violent impact of structural configurations at a planetary scale, describing contemporary necropolitics as a consequence of the attempt to “constitute a world outside relation”—to exclude death, war, and violence from some contexts by directing them elsewhere. This attempt, Mbembe cautions, is destined to fail, since the subject-object relation on which it is predicated is inherently unstable:

Owing to this structural proximity [between self and other], there is no longer any “outside” that might be opposed to an “inside”, no “elsewhere” that might be opposed to a “here”, no “closeness” that might be opposed to a “remoteness”. One cannot “sanctuarize” one’s own home by fomenting chaos and death far away, in the homes of others. Sooner or later, one will reap at home what one has sown abroad.[[35]](#endnote-36)

I believe Mbembe’s conclusion here mirrors the ideas mapped by Grünbein’s *Cyrano*, albeit reached via an entirely different route. “Was ist innen, was Außen?,” (What is inside, what outside?) the poem “Pythagoras” asks (53). This collapse of subject and object, inside and outside, is prompted by the twin crises of Cartesian dualism and subject-object relations which permeate both postcolonial theory and the intellectual tenor of *Cyrano*. The question asked by both writers is: what happens if there is no “other” against which to perpetrate violence and harm, and we (whomever “we” connotes) see ourselves as a fragmented, uneven whole, unable to reach an “Archimedian point” of self-knowledge and safety? Returning to the titular concept of the volume, it becomes clear that (in the context of colonialism, the nuclear threat, or environmental crisis—all questions and issues of the utmost significance in late-twentieth and twenty-first century societies) there is no violence elsewhere.[[36]](#endnote-37) Violence at this scale affects humanity as a whole, requiring a differentiated and complex sense of species-being and planetary wholeness which can grasp the full scope and scale of the threat, while remaining alive to distinctions of class, gender, culture, and experience.

*Cyrano* belongs, I contend, to the same German tradition of “negative anthropology” as Anders’s thought, a tradition which, as Hannes Bajohr puts it, “holds on to [the human] as a variable that is impossible to solve, but which can’t be canceled out from the equation, either”; this position overlaps with the approach taken by theorists of the Anthropocene, and is distinct from “posthumanism,” in which the human is consciously decentred.[[37]](#endnote-38) Bajohr describes negative anthropology’s chief intellectual gesture as “a turning back without returning,” a description which could hardly be more fitting to describe the reprisal of proto-Enlightenment philosophy in Grünbein’s *Cyrano.* Negative anthropology understands human species-being specifically as grounded in experiences of violence and the possibility of annihilation, from its origins in Weimar and National Socialist Germany to Anders’s emphasis of the nuclear threat in the twentieth century; these experiences continue to resonate in the context of overlapping existential threats facing humankind today.

*Cyrano*’s way through this conceptual minefield is guided by the figure of libration, particularly as a way of thinking about language and its function. The collection serves, in many ways, as an extended defense of poetry and the potential of polysemous lyric language to enable a differentiated planetary imaginary. That poetry, and the imagination, should be foregrounded again speaks to the relationship between Grünbein’s work and the work of Arendt and Anders: “speech and everyday language” are one of the features of a common humanity which, Arendt postulates, would become invisible as a consequence of the extreme “view from outside” to which scientific thought appears to her to aspire—“[it] would indeed be no longer a meaningful utterance that transcends behavior even if it only expresses it, and it would much better be replaced by the extreme and in itself meaningless formalism of mathematical signs.”[[38]](#endnote-39) And for Anders, it is precisely human beings’ lack of capacity to *imagine* the destructive consequences of rapidly-developing technologies which must urgently be addressed in the interest of saving humanity from destroying itself: “your task consists in bridging the gap between your two faculties: your faculty of *making* things and your faculty of *imagining* things … *widen your moral fantasy*.”[[39]](#endnote-40)

Restoring, or reshaping, this capacity is also *Cyrano*’s task: “Bis dahin hatte die Vorstellungskraft genügt: Sie war der natürliche Antrieb, Brennstoff der raumgreifende Psyche, die von der Erde abhob und wie immer nichts von sich wußte” (Up until this point imagination had been enough: it was the natural impulse, fuel of the space-conquering psyche, which took off from Earth and, as ever, knew nothing about itself, 141–42). Thinking through the planetary violence of the Anthropocene, which is in no sense “elsewhere,” requires us to address, slow down, or perhaps even reverse the consequences of this shift from imagination to praxis, to “widen our moral fantasy”; poetry and poetic language are one means by which we may do so.

1. Durs Grünbein, *Cyrano oder Die Rückkehr vom Mond* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014). Further references to *Cyrano* are given in-text and translations from the text are my own. I am grateful to Karen Leeder for her comments on these translations. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. In this chapter, I will use “Cyrano de Bergerac” to refer to the historical figure; and “Cyrano” to refer to the character who appears in Grünbein’s poems. *Cyrano* is the short title of the volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Piraí, Brazil: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., 4. On structural violence, see also ibid., 10; Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, Wellek Library Lecture Series at the University of California, Irvine (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72. In this chapter I employ the term “planetarity” according to Spivak’s usage, and “planetary thinking” or “whole-earth thinking” to refer to ways of thinking about the earth as a whole planet other than Spivak’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Spivak’s definition of planetarity has proved influential in postcolonial studies and beyond, and there is an ongoing debate in the environmental humanities about contemporary planetary awareness, and the dialogue between human culture and earth system sciences. See, for example, Cecilia Åsberg, “Portmanteau Planetarity,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12, no. 3 (November 1, 2022): 476–80; Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski, *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. *Gattungswesen*, the German term often translated as species-being or species-essence, is a salient concept for both Hegel and Marx; Cartesian dualism implies human (species) uniqueness. (Descartes famously designated animals as “bête-machines.”) See Paul Santilli, “Marx on Species-Being and Social Essence,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 13, no. 1/2 (1973): 76–88; Peter Harrison, “Descartes on Animals,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 167 (1992): 219–27. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (Reston, VA: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (New Haven, CN and London: Yale University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. The cover copy to *Cyrano* positions the speaker(s) of Grünbein’s collection precisely in the terms of species identity: “...während hier unten eine Spezies in fragilen Elegien begreift, daß sie mutterseelenallein ist im All” (while down here a species grasps in fragile elegies that it is all alone in the universe). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Archibald MacLeish, “Voyage to the Moon,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1969: 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Hannah Arendt, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 18 (2007): 43–55, here 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Ibid., 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Günther Anders, *Der Blick vom Mond: Reflexionen über Weltraumflüge* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1994), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Günther Anders, “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” in *Burning Conscience: The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly, Told in His Letters to Gunther Anders*, by Claude Eatherly and Günther Anders (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1962): 11–20, here 18–19. Anders’s insights into the agency of technology itself anticipates Anthropocene critical theories in science and technology studies and object-oriented ontology. See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Günther Anders, “Reflections on the H Bomb,” *Dissent* 3, no. 2 (1956): 146–55, here 149. See also Christopher Müller, “Desert Ethics: Technology and the Question of Evil in Günther Anders and Jacques Derrida,” *Parallax* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 42–57. The echoes of Arendt’s *Banality of Evil* are striking, and indeed Anders’s philosophy of technology is very clearly informed by ongoing debates in German philosophy, culture, and society about moral culpability for the Shoah. In an exchange with one of the pilots involved in the mission which resulted in the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, Claude Eatherly, Anders describes Eatherly—who could not come to terms with the small role he played in the mission which killed hundreds of thousands of people—as the “antipode” of Adolf Eichmann, Eatherly and Anders, *Burning Conscience*, 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Anders, “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. Günther Anders, *Ketzereien* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1996), 146. Translated by Hannes Bajohr; see Hannes Bajohr, “Anthropocene and Negative Anthropology,” *Public Seminar*, July 29, 2019. https://publicseminar.org/essays/anthropocene-and-negative-anthropology/. See also Günther Anders, *Hiroshima ist überall* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995).Anders’s notion of species-being extends across time: “For if the mankind of today is killed, then that which has been, dies with it; and the mankind to come too … the door in front of us bears the inscription: ‘Nothing will have been’; and from within ‘Time was an episode,’” Anders, “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 131–32. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2. Anders, “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Jonas Nesselhauf, “Zur Lyrischen Inszenierung ‘natürlicher Heimat,’” *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* 5, no. 1 (October 1, 2020): 77–90, here 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271–313. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid., 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Grünbein’s collection makes little reference elsewhere to the early history of colonialism, despite the fact that this theme features prominently in Cyrano de Bergerac’s narrative. The first attempt made by the protagonist of Cyrano de Bergerac’s story to reach the moon fails, and he lands instead in the colonial territory of Nouvelle-France, where he is received as a curiosity. Ann T. Delehanty and Tyler Blakeney contend that “Cyrano’s imaginative travels offer both a critique of any attempt to categorize the Other based on a pre-existing epistemological system, and a model for privileging an ethical, rather than definitional, approach to it.” This part of *L’Autre Monde* recedes into the background in Grünbein’s work and is only alluded to briefly in the accompanying essay. Ann T. Delehanty and Tyler Blakeney, “Textual Engagement with the Other in Cyrano de Bergerac’s *L’Autre Monde*,” *French Studies* 68, no. 3 (2014): 313–27, here 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, here 581. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Durs Grünbein, “Brief über Cyrano,” *Suhrkamp Logbuch* (blog), accessed May 12, 2023, https://www.logbuch-suhrkamp.de/durs-gruenbein/brief-ueber-cyrano/. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (December 20, 2017): 761–80. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 62–69. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. “[Er plante] den Aufstieg zum Mond in aller Stille …, während er die Rückehr an die große Glocke hängte als das wahre Spektakel” ([he planned] his ascent to the moon in silence, but shouted his return from the rooftops as the real spectacle, 123). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Arno Widmann, “Der Er ist der Mond, auch wird er bewohnt,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, September 15, 2014, https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/mond-auch-wird-bewohnt-11647579.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. Grünbein, “Brief über Cyrano.” [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Ibid.. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Here we find another direct reference to the context of Anthropocene violence which informs this essay; the word *moon* is associated with “‘Nacht, Romantik, Liebesweh, Melancholie … usw.’ Aber auch ‘Ödnis, tote Materie, Kraterlandschaft, *Klimahölle, Atommülldeponie*,’” (“night, romanticism, heartache, melancholy … etc.” But also “desolation, dead material, crater landscape, *climate hell, nuclear waste dump*,” 138). Emphasis mine. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. See Anders, *Der Blick vom Mond*, 89–97. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. See also Knittel and Forchieri’s chapter in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Bajohr, “Anthropocene and Negative Anthropology.” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Arendt, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Anders, “Commandments in the Atomic Age,” 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)