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Presentazione del sesto numero

Nel sesto numero di *NuBE* la sezione *Monografica*, curata da Gabriella Pelloni, Marika Piva e Paola Bellomi, è dedicata alla diversità linguistica così come essa si manifesta, nelle sue varie accezioni e forme, nelle letterature contemporanee. Nei quattordici saggi accolti in questa sezione si indagano le situazioni di superamento del monolinguisimo e le complessità insite nel multilinguismo e nel translinguismo tanto da un punto di vista teorico quanto tramite l'analisi di contesti specifici e una serie di casi di studio. Per una panoramica di questa parte si veda l'introduzione tematica intitolata *A new Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism and Translation in Contemporary Literature*.

Nella sezione *Miscellanea* presentiamo tre studi critici. Il saggio di Pietro Deandrea mette in luce il potenziale critico dei margini e l'importanza politica del dissenso delle opere dei fratelli Talha e Hamja Ahsan a partire dal quadro della diffusa islamofobia britannica. Il contributo di Debora Sciolla propone un'indagine dei *transfuges de classe* nella letteratura contemporanea in lingua francese focalizzandosi sulle specificità delle modalità di enunciazione di tre autori *intransgers*. Lo studio di Lucia Claudia Fiorella contestualizza e analizza l'installazione immersiva di Himali Singh Soin incentrata sui paesaggi ghiacciati dell'Artico e dell'Antartico evidenziando come l'opera multimodale dell'artista promuova un'etica della cura e della reciprocità.

La sezione *Schede, recensioni e segnalazioni* ospita una recensione di Davide Di Maio del volume di Heng Gilbert Barone, *Aufbruch: Heimat aus der Perspektive deutschsprachiger interkultureller Gegenwartsliteratur* (2024), che indaga nella prospettiva dei *cultural studies* il concetto di *Heimat* interrogandone le nuove rappresentazioni elaborate in quattro romanzi contemporanei in lingua tedesca.

La sezione *Materiali*, dedicata a contributi originali di scrittrici e di scrittori, o di esponenti autorevoli della cultura contemporanea, propone una silloge di testi curata da Catia De Marco e Ada Milani. Il romanzo *Aby* (2022) della poeta ed editrice francese Marie de Quatrebarbe, che indaga la figura del celebre storico dell'arte tedesco Aby Warburg e la sua malattia mentale, viene introdotto da Laura Giuliberti che ne traduce due passi. Alcuni estratti del romanzo *Sogar Papageien überleben uns* (2010), dell'autrice plurilingue russo-tedesca Olga Martynova, vengono tradotti e presentati da Elisa Destro e introducono alla ricostruzione frammentaria di quasi un secolo di storia europea tramite i ricordi di una letterata russa. Chiude la sezione una scelta di poesie di autrici svedesi – Burcu Sahin, Bella Batistini, Ida Börjel, Naima Chahboun e Agnes Török – a cura di Asia Busetto, che saldano il conflitto a Gaza e quello in Ucraina in un atto di solidarietà e di testimonianza.

Ringraziamo tutte e tutti coloro che hanno contribuito, a vario titolo, a realizzare questo numero.

La Redazione

A New Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism, and Translation in Contemporary Literature Introduction to the Monographic Section

Let us begin with the title of the present section. The reference to the Tower of Babel comes, of course, from the biblical story; yet in today's context we read that story in a very different light. In the Bible, linguistic diversity is framed as a punishment and an obstacle – what we might now call a barrier to global communication. In contrast, if we look at European and non-European literatures of the past few decades, we clearly see what Yasemin Yildiz (2012) has called, in her now well-known book, the “*post-monolingual condition*”: A condition in which literature moves beyond national and monolingual boundaries, shaped by the ongoing realities of migration and displacement. National literatures are increasingly permeated by different forms of multilingualism, ranging from the use of foreign words within a single language, to mixing multiple codes, registers, and idioms within a single text, or to writing simultaneously in two or more different languages. In a recent essay, Steven Kellmann (2020) argues that the monolingual paradigm, built around the notions of native speaker and national language, is rooted in a kind of linguistic family romance, one that defines the speaker's relationship to her/his mother tongue in terms of fidelity and betrayal. He clearly challenges the pervasive use of these metaphors: Translingualism rather than being an abnormality is becoming more and more a new norm.

Criticism that engages with translingual and transcultural writing often does so in celebratory terms, embracing diversity, difference, and plurality as signs of

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creative and cultural vitality. This is, of course, not a purely contemporary paradigm. Linguistic variety has long had its advocates. In his *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (*New Essays on Human Understanding*), Leibniz spoke of the “marvellous variety” of the operations of the human mind, adding that even the origins of peoples might be illuminated through solid etymologies, best furnished by the comparison of languages –¹ a view that reinforced his positive evaluation of linguistic diversity. And with Wilhelm von Humboldt we arrive at a foundational idea: That language is the formative organ of thought.² Languages do not simply represent what we think – they produce thought itself. As Humboldt writes, languages are not merely tools for expressing truths already known, but rather instruments for discovering truths that are still unknown. Since there is no single language, but rather a plurality of languages, human thought is always shaped through multiple semantic worlds. The diversity of languages, then, is not only a matter of different sounds or signs – it is a diversity of worldviews.

To return to the paradigm of Babel: If we follow these defenders of linguistic variety, we can say that the point is this: Historical and social meanings, as shaped through language, are cultural creations. They are autonomous, and cannot be deduced from any prior, universal sense. If plurality is the very origin of language, then Babel is no longer a symbol of dispersion or guilt. It becomes a founding idea. The astonishing plurality of languages implies a corresponding plurality of cultural creations – creations that are not united by a single, shared reference point. Each language and each culture shapes its own unique relationship with the world and with reality. And it does so through a process that is, by its very nature, aporetic and uncertain: A kind of creation that carves out its own path as it moves forward. And it is precisely because linguistic and cultural plurality is

¹ “[...] la connaissance de notre esprit et de la merveilleuse variété de ses opérations. Sans parler de l’origine des peuples, qu’on connaîtra par le moyen des étymologies solides que la comparaison des langues fournira le mieux” (Leibniz 1966, 293).

² “Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken” (Humboldt 1963, 191).

original and foundational that translation emerges as the emblematic state of culture. Translation, while always risky and imperfect, is both possible and necessary. It is the space where difference is not only acknowledged, but also negotiated and sustained.

But what about the untranslatable? From this perspective, the untranslatable simply bears witness – when faced with the incommensurability of linguistic and cultural systems – to the absence of a neutral, objective middle ground that would allow for automatic or universal transposition. It reminds us that there are no easy hermeneutic shortcuts. Yet, this limit also carries a renewed premise for dialogue. The fact that another language or culture cannot be fully aligned with our own, that it remains in some way foreign to us, calls for an additional effort of understanding. It requires a constant widening of interpretive categories, and it becomes, at the same time, a vital source of new creativity.

And yet, we only need to look at our everyday lives to realize how untimely this vision is and how few defenders language has today in its diversity, ambiguity, and obscurity – just as it had few in the past. From the very beginning of philosophy and scientific thought in ancient Greece, language was seen as a poor image of the world and an obstacle to true knowledge. Plato – and with him a large part of the European philosophical tradition – dreamed of the absence of language as a condition for true knowledge.

Today, we find ourselves in a peculiar situation. Modern media have triggered an explosion of linguistic activity, both spoken and written. Silence and moments without linguistic expression have almost disappeared from our lives. It seems, at first glance, that there is no danger for the future of language.

And yet, language is endangered – both in terms of *languages* and in terms of language itself, that is, the very linguistic nature of the human species. Yes, people still speak and write, but in fewer and fewer, and increasingly impoverished, languages. According to the linguist Jürgen Trabant, modernization reduces the number of languages, and globalization lowers the status of those that remain (Trabant 2016, 135-140). Political interests – or the internal policies of nation-

states – often lead to the marginalization, or even outright discrimination, of minority languages. The abandonment of many languages seems inevitable. According to serious projections, only about 600 of the nearly 6,000 languages spoken today will survive by the end of this century. The “big” languages – that is the national languages – will not disappear. But they will be degraded into vernaculars within the global order. What we are witnessing is the return of a language regime comparable to the medieval diglossic system in Europe. In the Middle Ages, Latin functioned as the language of high discourse and long-distance communication, while the vernaculars were used for everyday, local speech. In a process that lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century this structure was overturned: The European vernaculars gradually rose to the status of high languages. Nations took pride in this elevation, adapting their languages structurally and lexically to meet all discursive, intellectual and artistic needs. The enthusiastic appropriation of their languages was at the same time an explosion of unprecedented scientific and cultural creativity.

According to Trabant, we are now at a new turning point: Global English has become the new high language, while all other languages are being reduced to low languages, suitable only for everyday communication. The status of these languages is declining; their potential for growth is increasingly limited. At the same time, a new English-speaking aristocracy is emerging, deepening the social divide across European societies and condemning many older cultures to either oblivion or, at best, to a folkloric form of survival – we have already seen that in former colonial contexts.

Trabant significantly highlights another dimension of change in our societies that is shaping the way we use language: Its rationalization. We are witnessing an increasing demand for precise, scientific, or practically motivated designations of objects – designations that lie, so to say, beyond language, at its outer limit: In the direction of its scientific refinement. The need of objective designation in the scientific, technological and commercial fields tends to eliminate both the expressive and the appellative functions of language. Language gets reduced to a

system of signs, stripped of nuance, emotion, and ambiguity. Technological sophistication, far from enriching language, actually puts its very nature at risk. What is endangered is language as a human synthesis of expression, appeal, and representation.

Even if some of these scenarios may seem exaggerated, the reality that we have to keep in mind is that – just as in the past – very few of us today still view linguistic diversity as a form of richness. Even fewer recognize that the vagueness and opacity of language are not faults, but rather necessary conditions for non-scientific, creative speech, and, as such, preconditions for truth and for scientific discovery itself. This positive view of linguistic diversity and of language's "vague" semantics remains a minority position, the more as it is contrary to the rational and standardizing tendencies of the globalized world.

It is in the field of literature and the arts that the richness, diversity, and interplay of languages still retain their value. Here, as we noted at the outset, we are witnessing a fertile reappropriation of languages, which are able to display the creative and innovative power inherent in them (see the phenomenon of "codemeshing"; Canagarajah 2011). With Canagarajah, translingualism shows that language does not develop in a linear manner and that "parts of a language can influence different competencies in a different language" (Canagarajah 2009, 22). According to Sara Vogel and Ofelia García, translingualism helps to demonstrate that "rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts" (Vogel & García 2017, 1). Translingualism thus calls into question the concepts of "correctness" or "mistake" with respect to the standard norm and, in doing so, reveals the limits of taxonomic categories that for decades have been treated as immutable and fixed – such as the "prestige" accorded to a majority language over one spoken by a minority, or the clear-cut distinction between "language," "dialect," and "linguistic variety."

It is in this respect that the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant discusses the relationships between different languages, distinguishing among domination, fascination, multiplicity or contagion, polite subservience or mockery, tangency, subversion, and intolerance. He emphasises that defending languages is a way of safeguarding diversity and thereby making possible a rebalancing of relations between communities. For Glissant, the vertigo produced by multiplicity constitutes a reversal of the apocalyptic myth of Babel, and he observes that in every language it is possible to build the Tower.³ In his *Traité du tout-monde (Treatise of the Whole-World)*, he defines multilingualism as one of the modes of imagination, and declares that its task is maintaining languages, helping to save them from wearing out and disappearing. What is at stake here is not simply the need to safeguard linguistic plurality, but rather the determination to listen to the different voices of the world and the recognition that we live and express ourselves in a situation that is not – and must not be – monolingual. It is no coincidence that Glissant repeatedly underscores that he writes in the presence of all the world's languages. Universality, generalisation, and simplification appear not only as means of facilitating exchange but also as forms of distortion: The Other has the right to be heard in its specificity, even when such heterogeneity entails an unavoidable degree of non-understanding. The “right to opacity” thus affirms that every person, culture, or identity may remain partially incomprehensible and that they don't have to be reduced to a single, transparent truth.

The contributions gathered in this monographic issue of *NuBE* represent a selection of the papers presented at the conference *A New Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism, and Translation in Contemporary Literature* (26-28 May 2025), here published in their revised versions. The conference, held at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Verona, took place within the framework of the research project *Representations of Otherness*,

³ “Il est donné, dans toutes les langues, de bâtir la Tour” (Glissant 1990, 123).

Diversity, and Marginality in Contemporary Literatures, which is part of the Department's Excellence Project. This project aims to investigate the most significant developments in contemporary literature as a means of interrogating the cultural structures that shape our societies. Particular attention is devoted to the plural constitution of these structures, as well as to the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion that emerge in relation to the ways in which we perceive and narrate an increasingly interconnected and globalised world. From this perspective, the conference sought to create a space in which to explore various forms of multilingualism and translingualism (acquired, learned, practiced, lost, or abandoned), which have become increasingly prominent phenomena in contemporary literature – especially among authors who do not write in their first language but, rather, in the dominant language of the country to which they have migrated either out of necessity or personal choice, or in which they live, experiencing their condition as either one of exile or of belonging.

Over the last few years, research in this field has gained strength and significance, particularly in light of theories on cultural translation and of concepts developed in the field of postcolonial studies, such as hybridization, *métissage*, transculturation, and the creolization of cultures, languages and identities. Studies on the subject are now broad and diverse, yet the topic cannot be considered exhausted. Moreover, the current historical-political context calls for new interpretations and shifts in emphasis. While it is clear that the phenomenon cannot be confined to an exclusively linguistic or literary analysis, it also seems necessary to move beyond the tendency, from various scholarly quarters, to celebrate and idealize self-translation and hybridity. The inherent risk here lies in overlooking the cultural and linguistic alienation tied to self-translation. Far from representing merely an act of free border-crossing, multilingual and translingual literature invite reflection on power dynamics and relationships between dominant and marginalized languages. Furthermore, they invite to explore the role played by factors such as linguistic culture as related to the mindset of the intended readers, the structure of public opinion, or the characteristics of the literary market.

In this sense, the contributions gathered here all focus on literary production from the early 2000s onward, with some essays devoted to multilingualism and translingualism as they unfold between literature and other media (comics, graphic poetry, theatre, video installations, etc.). They examine the themes and forms of the inner dialogue with one's mother tongue in the writing process, particularly in relation to the distinction between latent multilingualism and manifest multilingualism. Other essays explore the dynamics of language change as a prerequisite for literary writing that confronts the urgency of testimony and the use of a foreign language as a filter through which to communicate what was or is otherwise inexpressible. Still others engage with the paradigm of "self-translation", understood both as the translation of one's own text into another language and as a "translation of the self", that is, the transposition of one's identity into another linguistic-cultural context, or into a self that inhabits another language. Another theme explored is multilingualism and translingualism among minorities, at the "margins", in the context of new exiles and new diasporas.

The languages used during the conference were English and Italian. The contributions published here reflect this linguistic diversity.

Gabriella Pelloni, Marika Piva, Paola Bellomi

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MONOGRAFICA

A cura di

Gabriella Pelloni, Marika Piva, Paola Bellomi

Multilingual Literature, Literary Studies and the Literary Field

Sandra Vlasta
(Università degli Studi di Genova)

Ciao, bella, I'm Tommaso
Addicted to tobacco
Me like mi coffee very importante [...]
Life is like spaghetti, it's hard until you make it [...]
(Cash 2025).

1. Introduction

If you watched the Eurovision Song Contest 2025, or listened to some of its main hits, you will have come across Tommy Cash's *Espresso macchiato*, which I cited in the epigraph of this article. It was Estonia's contribution to the Eurovision Song Contest and came third in the finals of the contest. Tommy Cash, i.e. Tomas Tammemets, is an Estonian rapper who has described in interviews his mixed immigrant ancestry – Estonian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Kazakh – tracing back to his grandparents. In the song *Espresso macchiato*, he mixes at least three languages, namely Italian, English and Spanish – none of them is from his family's cultural and linguistic background. Other contributions at the Eurovision Song Contest 2025 were characterised by multilingualism and transculturalism, too: the

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Dutch contribution was sung in French, San Marino's contribution was dedicated to Italy and the singer of the Albanian contribution has Italian roots.

I do not want to go into any detail here and I therefore will not analyse Tommy Cash's song (and am thereby also avoiding having to discuss the criticism of his art – in the case of *Espresso macchiato*, Italian stereotyping). Rather, the song is just one of many examples of the way multilingualism is used in mainstream pop culture and, in particular, in music, today. Many other examples can be given, also from Italian pop music: Zucchero sings his songs both in Italian and English, the band Måneskin has had international success due to their songs in English. In literature, too, there are several examples of authors and texts that – despite or due to – their multilingualism were successful: for instance, Bosnian-born Saša Stanišić was given the *Deutscher Buchpreis* (German Bookprize) in 2019 for his novel *Herkunft* (2019; *Where you come from*, 2021); Tomer Gardi, of Israeli origin, was awarded the *Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse* (Prize of the Leipzig bookfair) in 2022 for his novel *Eine runde Sache* (2021; *A well-rounded affair*), and Serbian-born Barbi Markovic won the same prize in 2023 for her novel *Minihorror* (2023). These success stories might be read as positive examples of accessibility and inclusion in the literary field, understood as the removal of barriers for multilingual authors to enter the literary field (for instance, gaining access to publishing opportunities and recognition) and the possibility to fully participate and be recognised within literary culture. Furthermore, they go hand in hand with an increased interest in multilingual literature (and multilingual art) in literary and cultural studies as well as in linguistics. I would therefore like to take them as a starting point and, in what follows, give an overview of research on literary multilingualism during the past decades and explore some of the concepts and approaches that have been suggested by scholars. This also includes a definition or, rather, a discussion of the different possibilities to define literary multilingualism and/or multilingualism in literature.

This will then lead me to what I would like to call the “dark sides” of literary multilingualism, i.e. what lies beyond the celebration and idealisation of multilingualism,

self-translation and hybridity. I would like to address these dark sides both in terms of the literary field (or: fields) and in terms of research on literary multilingualism. To do so, I will confront positive and negative aspects of definitions, approaches and methodology in my article.

2. Definitions of Literary Multilingualism

To start with, I would like to discuss possible definitions: what do we talk about when we talk about “literary multilingualism/multilingualism in literature/multilingual literature”? In fact, the term literary multilingualism can refer to various phenomena, as Monika Schmitz-Emans stated already in 2004. In what follows, I build on some of her categories of the various forms of literary multilingualism. To start with, I would like to suggest three possible ways of defining literary multilingualism: (1) multilingual literature as the literatures of multilingual nations, regions and cultures; (2) multilingual literature as the works by multilingual authors; and (3) multilingual literature defined as multilingual texts. In what follows, I will discuss these three possible definitions.

2.1. Multilingual Literature as the Literatures of Multilingual Nations, Regions and Cultures

Literary multilingualism can refer to the literatures of multilingual nations, regions and cultures. A striking example of this is India, where, in addition to the two official languages of the central government, Hindi and English, there are 22 recognised regional official languages and over 400 (if not more) other languages (cf. Eberhard et al. 2025). Austria, to name another example, also has state-recognised minorities whose languages are enshrined in the constitution: Burgenland Croatian, Romany, Slovakian, Slovenian, Czech, Hungarian and, since 2005, the Austrian sign language are so-called minority languages. This means that some of these languages are official languages (alongside German) in certain regions

or municipalities of Austria, and their speakers are entitled to schooling in these languages. Turkish and Kurdish, which are spoken by large groups of the population, as well as the languages of the former Yugoslavia, but also Polish, Arabic and Chinese, are not recognised minority languages, but nevertheless characterise multilingual Austria in everyday life.

Also in Italy, there are twelve languages that are officially recognized as spoken by linguistic minorities: Albanian, Catalan, German, Greek, Slovene, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian. However, full bilingualism (*bilinguismo perfetto*)¹ is legally granted only to the three national minorities whose first language is German, Slovene or French, and enacted in the regions of Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and the Aosta Valley, respectively.

The multilingualism of nations, regions and cultures is influenced by various aspects that are interdependent, such as:

- ideologies: the prestige that languages have in a society depends on various factors such as politics, economy, religion etc. This prestige impacts not least which languages are used in which context, which languages are promoted and which languages are learned and taught at schools;
- foreign language learning: the choice of languages that people study (also outside their school training) depends on traditions, but also on political, economic and cultural factors;

¹ This means that both languages have equal legal status and their use is compulsory in education, administration, and public life. However, it should be noted that there are significant differences in the degree of knowledge and use of the two languages among different communities. For example, the region Trentino-Alto Adige is considered bilingual, but this does not mean that most speakers use both languages fluently. Rather, a German-speaking and an Italian-speaking community coexist in the area. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this aspect.

- cultural developments: cultural artefacts may make single languages more attractive – examples of this are opera and musical terminology in Italian, as developed in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and pop music in English today. French, on the other hand, was the language of the court and thus a prestigious language that was widely used as a lingua franca throughout Europe until well into the twentieth century. This is still expressed in literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, as shown by a dialogue between Hans Castorp and Clawdia Chauchat, largely written in French, in Thomas Mann's otherwise German novel *Zauberberg* (Mann 2012, 508-520; *Magic Mountain*). Mann could assume that his contemporary readers would easily understand the French passages in this dialogue. In current editions of the novel, however, the scene is usually reproduced in translation at the end of the novel. Today, English has taken over this role as lingua franca. In fact, English is usually not translated in contemporary novels that have different main languages. An example for this are the dialogues in Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015; *Go, Went, Gone*, 2017).

These cultural, political and historical aspects affect how multilingualism is perceived and lived in multilingual nations, regions and cultures. They influence the self-perception of a nation, region or culture as multilingual or monolingual. They have an impact on the decision about which languages are promoted – in schools, in public places (from the street to the parliament), at cultural institutions etc.

These factors are therefore also reflected in the literature of multilingual regions, whose multilingualism can be more or less pronounced, depending on the historical development of multilingualism, political influences and social aspects. For instance, we might ask who has the opportunity to write and publish at all – which literary languages are promoted, who is censored or whose writings are suppressed? Which languages have the necessary prestige and are therefore recognised as literary languages? In which languages are texts read? Is there a multilingual common literary culture or rather several separate, perhaps even

rivalling literary cultures (for instance, due to two distinct (monolingual) linguistic communities that coexist)? These questions lead us to possible dark sides of literary multilingualism in multilingual nations, regions and cultures.

In India, for example, works are published and read in many of the official languages of the country; however, it is mainly works written in English that are received abroad and translated into other languages. Thus, internationally, Indian literature is (at times even inadvertently) equated with Indian literature in English when, in fact, this is only part of India's literary production. The resulting one-sided impression of Indian literature abroad has often been criticised (see Findeis 2014, 41-44).

In Austria, Slovenian literature has been published for decades by several publishing houses (such as Drava and Wieser), both in the original and in translation, not least thanks to targeted public funding. In addition, some of the statutes of national literary prizes and awards have been amended in recent years to allow them to be awarded also to Austrian authors who do not write in German. Examples of this are the *Franz Nabl Preis* (Franz Nabl Prize) of the City of Graz and the *Großer Österreichischer Staatspreis* (Grand Austrian State Prize), which were awarded to the Slovenian-writing author Florjan Lipuš in 2013 and 2018 respectively. This decision (and the necessary changes of the statutes) was taken after discussions in 2016, when the Grand Austrian State Prize could not be given to Florjan Lipuš as he did not write in German (Leben & Koron 2019, 13, note 5). Furthermore, at the bookfair in Leipzig in 2023, where Austria was the invited country, it presented its literature as multilingual.

The example of Austria shows that inclusion and accessibility in the literary field can be actively promoted and encouraged, for instance via literary prizes and festivals and the funding of publishing houses. Such interventions eventually can have an effect on the literary canon (also understood as what is read at schools and universities).

2.2. Multilingual Literature as the Works by Multilingual Authors

Literary multilingualism can also refer to works by multilingual authors. Their multilingualism is individually based; it can be related to the region they come from, their family situation and socialisation, their personal life story, which can be shaped by travel, migration, but also flight. There are many examples of multilingual authors; well-known and often mentioned are Adelbert von Chamisso, Joseph Conrad, Elias Canetti, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov or, more recently, the Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro, the German-Turkish author Emine Sevgi Özdamar and the Japanese-German writer Yoko Tawada.

Multilingual authors are not necessarily authors of multilingual literature, especially when we consider that there are probably many authors who understand and speak several languages but do not emphasise this biographical detail. And yet the literary work of multilingual authors can be considered against the background of their own multilingualism – questions can be asked, for example, about how they deal with multilingualism, about their (possible) writing in several languages, about mixing languages, about the reasons and occasions for language change, about statements about multilingualism, etc.

However, multilingual authors often encounter difficulties in the literary field – and this is another dark side of literary multilingualism. This has been analysed for instance in the German-speaking literary field, where publishers of books in German at times do not feel responsible for literary texts produced in German by non-native authors. At times these multilingual authors are not perceived as part of German, Austrian or Swiss literature by literary critics, as interviews with authors (see Sievers et al. 2017; Siller 2023; Siller & Vlasta 2020) and literary sociological studies have shown (see Sievers 2016).

In some contexts, being a multilingual author is in itself a challenge to the traditional concept of (national) literature. This is the case in Japan, for example, where *nihonjinron* writings (i.e. writings on Japan and its national and cultural identity) paint a picture of Japan as “*isoliert* (die Verbindungen zu anderen

asiatischen wie auch den westlichen Kulturen werden geleugnet), *einzigartig* (die Vergleichbarkeit mit anderen Kulturen wird in Frage gestellt), und *homogen* (Japans innere Heterogenität wird negiert)” (Hein 2014, 38, emphasis in the original).² Accordingly, Japanese literature is traditionally defined as “superior linguistic expressions written in ‘Japanese’ by ‘Japanese’ who were born in ‘Japan’” (Komori 1998, 283, cited in Sakamoto 2006, 138). Multilingual immigrant authors such as the US-born Hideo Levy, the Swiss David Zoppetti, the Chinese Yi Yang or the Iranian Shirin Nezamafi, who write their literary works (also) in Japanese, challenge this idea – an aspect that has made it difficult for them to publish and gain visibility in the first place. With the arrival of these authors in the Japanese literary field, also the field itself and the definition of Japanese literature are being transformed.

2.3. Multilingual Literature as Multilingual Texts

Literary multilingualism in the narrowest sense, finally, can refer to multilingual texts. These come in very different forms, and I will therefore restrict myself to some of the approaches that are used to analyse these texts. Giulia Radaelli’s (2011) distinction between manifest multilingualism, i.e. multilingualism that is visible on the surface of the text, and latent multilingualism, i.e. only implied multilingualism, is shared by many researchers.

Manifest multilingualism includes both code switching and code mixing (see also Dembeck 2017a and Blum-Barth 2021), i.e. the coexistence of different languages within a text and the mixing of idioms that can produce a new linguistic form. Both phenomena can occur in different forms, for instance code-switching includes single to more-word-interferences as well as intrasentential and

² “Isolated (the connection to other Asian as well as Western cultures is denied), unique (comparability with other cultures is questioned) and homogeneous (Japan’s internal heterogeneity is negated)”; if not indicated otherwise, translations are by the author of this article.

intersentential switching. The decisive factor in all these phenomena is the visibility of multilingualism in the text.

By contrast, a text is latently multilingual “wenn andere Sprachen nur unterschwellig vorhanden und nicht unmittelbar wahrnehmbar sind; er weist also auf den ersten Blick eine einsprachige Oberfläche auf” (Radaelli 2011, 61).³ Radaelli cites translation, language reference and language reflection as manifestations of latent multilingualism. Phenomena of grammatical interference that involve the adoption of structures and loanwords from one language into another can be considered forms of latent literary multilingualism, too.

Natalia Blum-Barth supplements Radaelli’s classification with the category of excluded multilingualism, which refers to forms of literary multilingualism that occur “wenn im Text eine andere Sprache erwähnt oder thematisiert wird, ohne dass sie die Basissprache des Textes beeinflusst” (Blum-Barth 2021, 61).⁴ For Blum-Barth, excluded multilingualism differs from latent multilingualism in that it “über Mehrsprachigkeit [berichtet], ohne sie *in* der Sprache des Textes zu realisieren” (Blum-Barth 2021, 61; emphasis in the original).⁵ She analyses this form of literary multilingualism in Olga Grjasnowa’s novel *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017; *City of Jasmine*, 2019).

A particular form of latent multilingualism, that Elke Sturm-Trigonakis has suggested, is metamultilingualism (Sturm-Trigonakis calls it “metalingualism”; 2007). This form includes instances of talking about/reflecting on language, about language learning and about multilingualism in literary texts.

In the following poem by Pat Mora we can see different forms of manifest and latent literary multilingualism at work. There are instances of code-switching

³ “When other languages are only subliminally present and not immediately perceptible; it therefore has a monolingual surface at first glance”.

⁴ “When another language is mentioned or addressed in the text without influencing the basic language of the text”.

⁵ “reports on multilingualism without realising it in the language of the text”.

between English and Spanish as well as metamultilingualism as the speaker reflects on language use in her family in migration and her own language learning.

Elena

My Spanish isn't enough.

I remember how I'd smile

Listening to my little ones,

understanding every word they'd say,

their jokes, their songs, their plots.

Vamos a pedirle dulces a mamá. Vamos.

But that was in Mexico.

Now my children go to American high schools.

They speak English. At night they sit around

The kitchen table, laugh with one another.

I stand by the stove and feel dumb, alone.

I bought a book to learn English.

My husband frowned, drank more beer.

My oldest said, "*Mamá*, he doesn't want you

To be smarter than he is." I'm forty,

embarrassed at mispronouncing words,

embarrassed by the laughter of my children,

the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take

my English book and lock myself in the bathroom,

say the thick words softly,

for if I stop trying, I will be deaf

when my children need my help

(Mora 1994, 369; emphasis in the original).

Anna Kim's literary essay *Invasiönen des Privaten* (2011; *Invasions of Privacy*) about Greenland's colonial history and its consequences to this day is another example of manifest as well as latent multilingualism. In addition to many one-word and multi-word interferences, it contains numerous reflections on language,

in particular on Greenlandic, which was suppressed by the Danish colonisers for a long time and has been only “seit Juni 2009 die erste und offizielle Sprache in Grönland” (Kim 2011, 41).⁶

Furthermore, language memoirs represent particular forms of metamultilingualism. Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons* (1993) is an example of this: in the book she writes (in English) about her relationship to the French language. Kaplan is an American scholar of French studies, however, in this book she tells a very personal story about her relation to French. Other authors chose the language they write about also as the medium for their narratives and wrote what Mary Bese-meres calls “translingual memoirs” (2002, 2005). Examples of these are Marica Bodrožić’s *Sterne erben, Sterne färben* (2007; *Inheriting Stars, Colouring Stars*), Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (1989), Ágota Kristóf’s *L’analphabète. Récit autobiographique* (2004; *The Illiterate*, 2014) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In altre parole* (2015; *In Other Words*, 2016).

Another special form of literary multilingualism is the phenomenon of polygraphic writing or script-switching (see Schmitz-Emans 2014, 2017; Vlasta 2014).⁷ Polygraphic texts are not only characterised by multilingualism, but also by the use of alternative writing systems. In these texts, apart from different languages, also different writing systems are mixed, such as the Latin alphabet, Chinese characters, Japanese characters, the Arabic alphabet and the Persian alphabet. Even when using the Latin alphabet (but different languages), situations of script-switching can arise, e.g. when using diacritical marks (such as umlauts in German, but also letters such as å, é, ï, ò, û) or ligatures (such as ß). Not all of these characters will be immediately recognisable to readers of other languages. When completely different writing systems collide, readers will encounter gaps

⁶ “the first and official language in Greenland since June 2009”.

⁷ See also the recent conference on scriptswitching, organised by the research network LangueFlow in March 2025, <https://langueflow.eu> [10/07/2025].

and empty spaces in the text, which may prompt them to reflect on processes of (non-)comprehension.

Examples of such polygraphic texts are the novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2008) by Xiaolu Guo, where Chinese characters are used in the English text and, among many of her other texts, Yoko Tawada's *Schwager in Bourdeaux* (2008; Brother-in-law in Bourdeaux). In this novel, the German-Japanese writer uses Japanese characters (derived from Chinese *kanji*) in the predominantly German text.

I have now discussed some of the approaches that are used to analyse multilingual literature. When looking at actual texts, we see that the various forms of literary multilingualism cannot usually be clearly distinguished from one another. Metamultilingualism is intermingled with actual forms of code-switching, grammatical interferences contain metalinguistic comments and so on. Giulia Radaelli therefore argues in favour of not isolating manifest and latent multilingualism from each other, but rather thinking them together: "Bei der Analyse eines literarischen Textes sollen vielmehr die zwei Kriterien der Wahrnehmbarkeit und der Diskursivierung miteinander verknüpft werden, um zu beschreiben, wie wahrnehmbar die jeweiligen diskursiven Figuren der Mehrsprachigkeit sind" (Radaelli 2014, 165).⁸ Another problem is that attempts to categorise the forms and functions of literary multilingualism are based on the idea of a main language (also referred to as a matrix language in linguistic research) and one (or more) interfering languages (embedded language(s)). This applies above all to the various forms of interference and code-switching, which are usually described as the interplay between matrix language and embedded language (see Sturm-Trigonakis 2013, 122-123; Boumans 1999, 281-301).

⁸ "When analysing a literary text, the two criteria of perceptibility and discursivisation should rather be linked in order to describe how perceptible the respective discursive figures of multilingualism are".

In a literary studies approach we should therefore aim to break up this hierarchical view in favour of a more equal, balanced view of the single languages involved. Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that each literary text presents its own approach to literary multilingualism and therefore needs to be analysed individually. An excerpt from Sophie Herxheimer's poem *London* illustrates the necessity of an approach that takes into account the plurality of forms (and functions) of literary multilingualism:

London

Not zo mainy Dais zinz ve arrivink.
Zis grey iss like Bearlin, zis same grey Day
ve hef. Zis norzern Vezzer, oont ze demp Street. [...]
I try viz ze Busses, Herr Kondooktor eskink me... [...]
Fess plees? To him, my Penny I hent ofa –
He notdz viz a keint Smile – Fanks Luv!
He sez. [...]
Zis is ven I know zat here to settle iss OK. Zis
City vill be Home, verr eefen on ze Buss is Luff.
(Herxheimer 2017, no page)

Sophie Herxheimer is an artist and a poet. Her work includes drawings, paintings, papercuts, prints (for instance a hand printed 300-metre tablecloth for the Thames Festival), book illustrations, but also performances. She has exhibited and performed at Tate Modern, Tate Britain, at the British Library and The Museum of Liverpool, amongst others. *Velkom to Inklandt* is her first poetry collection. It contains 30 poems in which the speaker is mainly her German Jewish grandmother Liesel.

For her poems, Sophie Herxheimer draws inspiration from her grandmother's idiosyncratic language, who emigrated from Germany to the UK as a refugee in 1938. The author transcribes her grandmother's heavily accented English

phonetically and uses it to create poems about this woman's way of coping with her life in migration.

In the poem *London* we find multilingualism on different levels and in different forms: there are instances of code-switching (English and German), code-mixing (English and German syntax and other grammatical elements are combined) and latent multilingualism in the form of reflections on language, on the grandmother's language biography, on pronunciation and voice, on the effect and possibilities of reading aloud. Clearly, to be able to analyse this text, we need a plurality of terms and concepts (and need to be open to create new ones).

3. Research on Literary Multilingualism: Terminology and Approaches

The increased research interest in multilingual literature and its authors has brought with it new theoretical categories. Apart from the concrete terms to analyse the forms and function in texts, descriptive models for literary multilingualism have emerged that attempt to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. In this section, I discuss a few of these approaches, though this is not understood as an exhaustive list.

In the late 1960s/early 1970s the German studies scholar Leonhard Forster was one of the first to undertake research on literary multilingualism (see Forster 1970). He presented a comparative survey of multilingual literature from the Middle Ages to the first half of the twentieth century in which he considered both multilingual texts and multilingual authors.

Thirty years later, this project was continued by Steven G. Kellman (2000), who introduced the concept of translingualism to describe authors who write in a language that is not their first language or who write in several languages. There seems to be no reference to the term translingual as it is used in linguistics, where it represents the idea of fluidity between languages, that are no longer seen as clearly distinct entities; in particular, translingual refers to the fact that plurilingual speakers switch between languages and mix them in their production, so that

static categorisations of languages, but also of bilingualism and multilingualism do not seem to be adequate anymore to describe what speaker's actually do (see Schwarzer 2006).

Kellman's approach has led to a more intensive examination of a number of translingual authors (as illustrated, for example, in the handbook he co-edited in 2022). In many of these contributions, literary multilingualism is understood as a primarily biographically motivated element. Other aspects of the phenomenon (e.g. regional literary multilingualism and multilingual literary fields) are considered less often.

In contrast, the Canadian literary scholar Rainier Grutman (1997) has expanded a more traditional understanding of bilingualism or multilingualism to include Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony:⁹

Der Roman ist künstlerisch organisierte Redevielfalt, zuweilen Sprachvielfalt und individuelle Stimmenvielfalt. Die innere Aufspaltung der einheitlichen Nationalsprache in soziale Dialekte, Redeweisen von Gruppen, Berufsjargon, Gattungssprachen, Sprachen von Generationen und Altersstufen, Sprachen von Interessengruppen, Sprachen von Autoritäten, Sprachen von Zirkeln und Moden, bis hin zu den Sprachen sozial-politischer Aktualität (Bakhtin 1979, 157).¹⁰

⁹ See also the web portal and journal Polyphonie that uses a similarly broad approach: www.polyphonie.at (web portal) and <https://riviste.unige.it/index.php/polyphonie/index> (journal).

¹⁰ "The novel is an artistically organised diversity of speech, sometimes a diversity of languages and individual voices. The internal division of the standardised national language into social dialects, group idioms, professional jargon, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, languages of interest groups, languages of authorities, languages of circles and fashions, right up to the languages of socio-political topicality". I quote from the German translation of Bakhtin's text (and for reasons of coherence with the publication spell his name Bakhtin instead of Bakhtin, the form that is usually used in English).

Accordingly, Grutman presents a more comprehensive view of literary multilingualism under the term *hétérolinguisme*, which also includes social, regional and historical language variants. This means that multilingualism is not only understood as the use of two or more different idioms, but the concept of *hétérolinguisme* takes into account also so-called intra-linguistic multilingualism, i.e. the varieties of a language (such as American, British or Canadian English), as well as dialects, sociolects and non-standard language variants. Examples of such forms of literary multilingualism can be found in Eugène Sue and Charles Dickens, but also in poets such as Sophie Herxheimer or Ernst Jandl (who mixed standard German, Viennese dialect, English and other languages and varieties). Another term used in research on literary multilingualism is exophony. It was first used to describe African authors who write in European languages and is now used to describe the strategy of authors “die über mehrere Sprachen verfügen und die in ihren Texten ihre Zugehörigkeit zu bestimmten kulturellen Räumen, in deren Sprachen sie sich artikulieren, zu transzendieren versuchen” (Ivanovic 2008, 223).¹¹ The concept of exophony was introduced into German studies by an anthology of the same title (Arndt et al. 2007) and is used there primarily for analyses of multilingual authors such as Franco Biondi and Emine Sevgi Özdamar, but especially of Yoko Tawada (see Wright 2008; Ivanovic 2014). It has led to an increased focus on the aesthetic aspect of literary multilingualism and revealed its political potential to break up culturally (and linguistically) homogeneous spaces.

Finally, Till Dembeck has called for a “philology of multilingualism” (Dembeck 2017b), which is characterised by a broad understanding of multilingualism and at the same time takes a presumed basic multilingualism of all literary texts as its starting point. Dembeck exemplifies his approach by the formal analyses of lyrical forms that are taken over from other languages. Furthermore, this approach can

¹¹ “who have several languages at their disposal and who in their texts attempt to transcend their affiliation to certain cultural spaces in whose languages they articulate themselves”.

also be seen in the handbook *Literatur und Mehrsprachigkeit* (Dembeck & Parr 2017; Literature and Multilingualism), co-edited by Dembeck. The volume focuses on multilingual processes and analyses them not least in their application in various genres and media.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have considered various approaches, forms and concepts of literary multilingualism. I did so in order to discuss the *status quo* of research on literary multilingualism and to reflect on what I have called the dark sides of multilingualism, i.e. its negative, problematic or difficult aspects that are at times overlooked when multilingualism and transculturalism and the hybridity that often comes with it are idealised. To conclude, I would like to address a few more aspects that I think we should consider more in our research on multilingual literature.

I agree with David Gramling who called modern literature the stronghold of monolingualism. He reminded scholars of literary multilingualism of the monolingual norm that still persists, although “das den alltäglichen Erfahrungen, Repertoires, Referenzen und Praktiken der mehrsprachigen Welt kaum Rechnung trägt” (Gramling 2017, 37).¹² This monolingual norm can still be felt in the literary field where access is regulated for instance by literary prizes, literary festivals, publishers and agents. As has been discussed above, in the case of many of these, (a national) literature is still written in one language, at times in the one that is spoken by a majority, at times in the one that for historical reasons is the dominant one – for instance English and French in postcolonial contexts.

The monolingual norm, however, also has effects on scholars of literary multilingualism: it has shaped our institutions, our research fields and their limits. In the Italian academia, to name an example, this means that transdisciplinarity meets

¹² “this hardly takes into account the everyday experiences, repertoires, references and practices of the multilingual world”.

settori scientifici disciplinari (scientific disciplinary sectors): two ideas that oppose each other. Also, how do we research literature written in more languages if we are supposed to concentrate on one language according to the sector we work in?¹³ Furthermore, as the monolingual norm has an effect on schooling and therefore also on scholars' linguistic competences, we often feel our limits when dealing with multilingual literature as we do not have the necessary language skills and must rely on translation.

Finally, there is the question which language(s) we use to talk about literary multilingualism. As academics, we often need to use English as the academic *lingua franca*, both to communicate with our colleagues and to publish our research, like in the present article. But is it possible to write about multilingualism in just one language? What happens to the texts we work on – do we need to translate them into a single language in our publications?¹⁴

To sum up, research on literary multilingualism has come a long way but the topic cannot yet be considered exhausted: new texts, new authors as well as new historical perspectives are waiting to be explored. At the same time, we need to reflect on our blind spots as researchers as well as consider the dark sides that multilingualism brings with it for authors and their texts.

¹³ It needs to be added that the scientific sector of Comparative Literature (as well as Comparative Literature as a field also beyond the Italian context) does give space to research also across linguistic borders. However, this is only one sector compared to the many linguistic contexts and literary fields in which multilingual literature occurs (and which are often still studied in distinct research fields). I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

¹⁴ The event series “Offstage. Forum for researchers”, organised by the LangueFlow research group, addresses exactly these issues researchers of literary multilingualism encounter. See: <https://langueflow.eu/cfp-offstage-forum-for-researchers/> [10/07/2025].

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Tongues with no Mother Lost and Found Belongings in the “New” Languages of Storytelling

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1. Introduction

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa posited her own experience as exemplary of a way of being that has become more and more frequent in recent times. “Ethnic identity, she stated, is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language” (Anzaldúa 1987, 59). When claiming the right to accept and speak Chicano, Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, all of them as her mother tongues and consequently the right to write bilingually, she was (and is) standing for a kind of freedom to communicate that is essential for cultural identity. On this topic, she beautifully commented that this was the only way to “overcome the tradition of silence” (60). A few years later, in his *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy offered a broader theoretical framework for understanding linguistic belonging in a world where relying on fixed notions of race, ethnicity, gender, and class rules out a whole set of identities whose sense of belonging is uncertain, and it shows in their linguistic choices (Gilroy 2000, 5-7). As it appears, language is a cornerstone of personal and collective identity. It becomes a complex tool to manage when the profiles at stake – being cross-breds, exiles, refugee seekers or nomadic subjects in any possible sense of the

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word – find themselves navigating a liminal space between different belongings. In most cases, they are denied even the possibility to identify their own mother tongues as markers of identity. The feeling of being “torn between ways” (Anzaldúa 1987, 100) may become an artistic resource and a political tool aimed at acknowledging (and accepting) the lack of purity as a form of power. Therefore, their art deliberately shows fractures and breaks, and translation – intended globally as the operation of switching from one culture/tradition/language to another – is seen as a multi-layered process involving physical and symbolic border crossings as well as linguistic and cultural hybridity.

Precisely for these reasons, though related to translation, my work here does not focus on the simple code-switching that can make a text or a person understandable across borders. I want to focus on the journey as a process of reshaping oneself in order to adapt to a culture that crucially differs from one’s own. Migration places the ones who migrate in the condition of leaving behind everything they had and were and learn a new way of being. If it is true that exile suggests an irreparable loss and fractures never to be healed, it is also undeniable that something new and valuable is often learnt.

In current times, mobility has produced multicultural and multilingual identities (Walkowitz 2015). For the ones who are forcibly dislocated, reasons for translation are often not strictly linguistic: they need being able to explain what pushed them far from their homeland, and they also need the privileged ones – in Europe or everywhere – to be able to grasp what they had to go through to reach what was supposed to be a safe place. Within this frame, language is a perfect tool, and code-switching tends to become something more than a “simple” translation, as widely testified by the recent critical debate on this topic (Bertacco & Vallorani 2020, 23-28). It easily becomes a way to declare a form of belonging, an instrument to give depth to some themes, a political gesture or an act of love. My work samples some case studies from the fields of music, photography and filmmaking, art and theatre. I want to show that the shifting boundaries of identity, language and representation, though disrupting the traditional linguistic and

cultural continuity, may also produce a new space for artistic creation, a *terra incognita* where different codes interlace, each of them serving a very specific purpose and raising some highly urgent issues. The aesthetic practice may consequently become a form of political and cultural resistance.

In developing my argument on the multiple use of translation, both linguistic and cultural, I select my case studies with a specific ratio. Much attention is devoted to two artists – Saint Levant and Shirin Neshat – who navigate between two or more worlds, creating intermedial narratives that switch from one code to another, allowing their personal experiences to take on a universal flavour. In the final part of my article, I focus on how recent narratives of migration tried to translate the journey exploiting some traditional forms of storytelling or ancient Greek myths. Giacomo Sferlazzo reinterprets the Sicilian *cuntu* and composes songs in the specific brand of Sicilian spoken in his island to tell stories of contemporary migrations from the Northern coasts of Africa to Lampedusa. Mounira al Sohl revisits the Greek Myth of Europa to recover female agency in the Middle Eastern tradition. They both engage with complex contemporary issues and artistically describe what is in fact a process of lost and found belongings.

2. Paris, Gaza, Algiers, Los Angeles and Casablanca: Music in Between Worlds

In a 2024 song titled *5am in Paris* (2024), artist and musician Saint Levant expresses his struggle to belong blending the languages that he has been using since his birth. The English from the title crops up here and there throughout the lyrics, though some lines are in French and some in Palestinian Arabic. The line “Mon corps à Paris, mon cœur à Gaza” (“My body in Paris, my heart in Gaza”) captures a sense of being torn between the East and the West. This is followed by “Mon âme à Algiers, mon ex à Casa” (“My soul in Algiers, my ex-fiancée in Casablanca”), a line that brings soul and love into the picture, anchoring them in distinct geographical locations. When evoking the need to be comforted – “Ma

meuf à LA me prend dans ses bras” (“My girlfriend hugs me in Los Angeles”) – he realizes that he does not belong anywhere: “Je me sens chez moi nulle part” (“I don’t feel at home anywhere”). The stanza ends with some lines in Arabic, starting with “My family is in the East/My friends are in the West”.

What Saint Levant offers in this song, like in many others, is a reflection on his own life. Born in Jerusalem as Marwan Abdelhamid, the artist is the son of a French/Algerian mother and a Palestinian/Serbian father. He was raised in Gaza, where he enjoyed a happy childhood and was surrounded by love: the best moment in his life, as he remembers it. During the Second Intifada (2000-2005), he and his family had to move to Jordan. At this point, relocated to Hamman and uprooted from his birthplace, Saint Levant was already trilingual: he used French at home, English at school, and Arabic in Gaza and at the Palestinian refugee camp of Al-Wehdat, in Jordan. To complete his education, he moved to Santa Barbara, in California, and there he started writing songs, devising an original brand of hip hop, R&B, and rap lyrics. In terms of linguistic choices, his music blends English, French, and Arabic to express themes of identity, diaspora, and resilience. His texts openly challenge stereotypes and political narratives, offering a personal yet globally resonant voice. As an artist of mixed genealogy, he exploits his multilingualism to create a connection between each issue and a specific code. For each topic, he needs to choose not only the word, but also the language that would add depth and articulate the meaning of his statements. As Martina Multisanti explains in her close analysis of Saint Levant’s songs, English serves to address a global public, French is the language for love and emotion, and Arab primarily express a political stance, highlighting the sharp divide between the East and the West. Saint Levant translates his message by exploiting code-switching as a tool to shift between topics and to emphasize these transitions rather than hide them. The very act of making a choice among his multiple mother tongues is loaded with meanings that go beyond words (Multisanti 2024, 86-110). In essence, Saint Levant exploits this artistic strategy to tap into music’s potential as a symbolic and political language, ideally suited to a redefined concept of

“imagined community” (Anderson 2006), one that is global, less rooted in blood ties, and profoundly informed by the experiences of displacement and exile. As Georgina Born claims, music can bring imagined communities to life, gathering the members of the audience into groups – virtual and actual – forming them around new hybrid identities overcoming the national ones (Born 2011, 378). Now that the experiences of exile and dislocation are widely shared, this form of belonging may be deeply reassuring for people that otherwise would not belong anywhere.

Though privileged, Saint Levant is an exile. His position resonates with the condition of natural-born migrants, those who, from an early age, understand that they will not be allowed to grow up and grow old in the place where they were born. In migrating, they become people translated into another world. Language is only one side of what can be described as an existential condition that is lived in profoundly diverse ways (Bertacco & Vallorani 2021, 15). In the context of the Middle East, and more specifically the contested region between Israel and Palestine, diaspora began in 1948 (Peteet 2007, 627-629), with the so called *al-Nakba* (“the catastrophe” in English). The word *ghurbah*, meaning “exile”, describes the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands from their homes (Pitner 1992, 61), a process that, in various forms, has been going on till today (Multisanti 2024, 88-89). Hybrid identities like that of Saint Levant emerge from this ongoing history. They belong to a homeland that no longer exist.

Any narrative of exile, relocation, or migration is inevitably tied to the need or the obligation to translate oneself into another culture. As Said notes, “exile is a condition of terminal loss” (Said 1984, 137). It deprives the displaced subject of the fundamental right to belong. Saint Levant gives form to this condition by blending various languages in a highly original mix, a motherless tongue that has multiple lands of origin. Vicente Rafael introduces this issue in a volume entitled, in fact, *Motherless Tongues*. There he explores the aporias of translation that keep emerging when one communicates primarily in a language that is not his/her mother tongue. In such cases, what is frequently experienced is a persistent difficulty in

finding the *right* word. It stems from an unclear and fragmented sense of linguistic – and not only linguistic – belonging. This results in what Rafael describes as “a kind of semantic *bouleversement*, the sense of upheaval whereby the endlessly enfolded meanings of particular events will always make any discourse feel unfinished and incomplete” (Rafael 2016, 18).

Rafael’s reflection on the issue of translation combines well with the notion of born-translated as introduced by Rebecca Walkowitz. In her critical essay published in 2015, she assembles a corpus of literary works that seem to be “written for translation, in the hope of being translated, but they are also written as translation, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed” (Walkowitz 2015, 4). Although her focus is on texts rather than human beings, the notion could be applied to real people rather than texts, but this makes things more complex. In this case, translation becomes a metaphor and a process that is at the same time transitional and translational. It relates to exile, relocation and migration, and evokes the hosts of displacement, isolation, exclusion, slavery. Being an Adult Third Culture Kid, as per Pollock and Van Reken definition, Saint Levant has experienced relocation from an early age and has spent most his life in cultures that significantly differ from those of his parents and relatives (Pollock & Van Reken 2009, 13-15). The very notion of in-betweenness described by Homi K. Bhabha as the condition of living between two worlds (Bhabha 1983, 18-36) has developed into something more articulated, and Bhabha’s third space is seen as an area where more than two cultures and languages are blended and hybridized. Saint Levant and others like him literally *live in translation*. Their mother tongue is a constantly remixed blend of multiple languages. Their culture draws from a variety of overlapping and sometimes conflicting traditions. This condition calls for a rethinking of the very concept of translation, understood, as Brian Baer suggests, not simply as a linguistic act, but “as a complex generative site of negotiation and world-making” (Baer 2020, 158).

3. Existing in Hybrid Spaces

It may be important to note that viewing translation through an expanded lens should not lead to an unchecked broadening of its semantic scope and theoretical application. The “commonly referred to as ‘the translational turn’” (139) hides potential pitfalls that Brian Baer identifies in postcolonial studies particularly in the 1990s (141-145). He goes back to Stuart Hall’s and Homi K. Bhabha’s contributions on the matter to caution against overextending the metaphor of translation: such usage can result in overly generalized critical approaches that may dilute the specificity of cross-cultural discourse. In short, the “fact of translation” (158) in its entire complexity is to be kept front and centre in any discussion on exile, multilingualism and multiculturalism.

In an interview with Kimberly Bradley published in *Art|Base|* on March 4, 2025, Iranian visual artist, photographer and videomaker Shirin Neshat specifies: “My work isn’t fully Iranian or fully Western; it exists in a hybrid space” (Bradley 2025). Like in Saint Levant, this sense of hybridity is deeply intertwined with her personal experience of exile. Born in Iran in 1957, Neshat moved to the US in 1974, a few years before the 1978 Iranian revolution. A student in Berkeley, she experienced the psychological strain of being cut off from her homeland, where the Islamic rule and the war with Iraq were making her return impossible. Her artistic path began to take shape when she relocated in New York, where she currently lives. There she found, in her words, “roots and a community” that provided a sense of belonging and protection (Bradley 2025). At the time and from there onward, she has been a diasporic subject “dwelling-in-displacement” (Clifford 1994, 310), with no permanent roots anywhere and fated to feel a stranger everywhere.

Her first journey back to Iran, in 1990, came after a 12-year absence and more than a decade of artistic inactivity. What she found there, after the Islamic revolution, deeply moved her, to the point that soon after she started the project *Women of Allah*, trying to make sense of what she had seen. When completed, the work resulted extremely controversial. It consisted of 111 photographs each

of them portraying a veiled woman (or a part of her body), a weapon and a text. As Neshat explains, she wanted to focus on the subject of martyrdom as a key concept in the Islamic revolution. By becoming martyrs, men and women were supposed to show their love of God though at the same time choosing extreme violence as a tool. In this context, women female identity is ambiguous, particularly in relation with the veil, that is a symbol of repression – exclusively seen as such in the Western world – but also, for many Iranian women, a free choice showing the rejection of the Western colonial power. The ambiguity is kept in the words accompanying the photographs. They are mostly drawn from two women poets, one of them supporting the Islamic revolution (Tahereh Saffarzadeh) and the other rejecting it (Forough Farrokhzad). The visual vocabulary that Neshat develops in this project is therefore highly articulated, working on images as well as on cultural items that may be read in different ways. The primary addressee of the work is the Western world, and yet the language it employs (Persian) is largely inaccessible to the Western audience. Moreover, following the exhibition of the project, the Iranian government banned Neshat from returning to Iran because *Women of Allah* was perceived as a pointed critique to their regime and ideology.

The project makes sense in terms of the autobiographical references it contains. As an artist living outside Iran, Neshat experiences a constant feeling of displacement and dislocation that leads her to constantly move across cultural, religious and linguistic borders. According to Brah, this is quite typical of diasporic subjects: after being forced to exile, they tend to relocate somewhere else but never fully succeed, never feel at home in the place of arrival (Brah 1996, 202-205). The “positionality of dispersal” that Brah mentions is their constant way of being (204). A few years after *Women of Allah*, Neshat tried again to produce a reflection on the condition of women in Iran under the Islamic rule. *The Fury* was first exhibited in 2022, after she had been experiencing with filmmaking for some time. *Turbulent* (1998) was her first step in this art: exhibited at Venice Biennale in 1999, it approaches again the issue of women in Iran after the Islamic revolution, with

particular reference to the prohibition to sing in public. Conceived as a two-screen video installation, it barely lasts over 9 minutes and develops around two characters, a man and a woman singing on two different stages. The male singer (Shoja Azari) delivers a traditional love song to an audience, while the woman (Sussam Deyim, an Iranian vocalist and composer) sings totally dressed in black, head covered, in an empty concert hall. *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000) completed the trilogy portraying a world radically split into two halves: the men and the women. The use of language that is made in these films seems to deliberately hide verbal meanings. *Rapture* is totally without words and the whole meaning is relied upon landscape and the setting within which the characters are located. The men occupy a fortress, that seem protected and locked. The women move across the desert towards the sea and they end up by launching small wooden boat supposedly to leave. In *Fervor*, the two protagonists – again a man and a woman – meet before and after an event where a storyteller recites a parable from the Quran. The narrative is delivered in Persian without subtitles. Throughout the film, the protagonists remain silent, so their relation develops only through their gazes. The end credits appear in both English and Arabic. There seem to be a deliberate barrier to direct verbal communication. The responsibility of conveying meanings placed on images, gestures, colours and music. All the films in the trilogy are shot in Morocco, and centre on the condition of women under the Islamic rule.

In *The Fury*,¹ Neshat keeps exploring this topic, though the setting changes. In fact, the film was shot in New York, in June of 2022, when the panic from the COVID pandemics was slowly fading away. Technically, the two-screen video is part of an installation including a series of black and white photographs with hand-inscribed calligraphy of poems by Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967). In this case, the focus is clearly stated and unmistakable: Neshat wants to highlight the sexual exploitation of women held as political prisoners. The opening scenes

¹ The whole video is available here: <https://www.goodman-gallery.com/exhibitions/1470>

of the film portray a woman dancing at the centre of a circle of soldiers. As they watch deadpan, marks, wounds, bruises gradually appear on her body. She seems obliged to go on dancing under the cruel gaze of her torturers. Clearly enough this scene serves as a metaphor for the severe beatings, torture, sexual assault and rape that female prisoners often undergo. At one point, the prisoner is able to escape and finds herself in the neighbourhood of Bushwick, Brooklyn, finally free, yet still haunted by her trauma and unable to stop running. The film is shot in a refined black and white, like most of Neshat's video installations. Initially, the nearly naked former prisoner appears almost ghostlike, but as the sequence progresses, she gradually becomes more and more real.

Metaphorically, Neshat conveys a dual message: the possibility of being saved and the enduring impossibility of forgetting. The woman's gradual emergence into visibility by the end of the film is a political gesture: it calls for awareness and for a deeper understanding of the condition of women under dogmatic Islamic rule. In a poignant twist of fate, both the photographs and the video were made just months before the death of Mahsa Amini, on September 13, 2022, following her arrest by the morality police because she refused to wear the veil. As Neshat herself states, "It's uncanny: this video was pure fiction, but it literally came to life a month later" (Bradley 2025).

Therefore, if her earlier work could be seen as ambiguous in terms of a definite political stance, *The Fury* makes her position unmistakably clear. Meanings are purposefully encoded through the strategic use of different expressive semiotic systems. The violence depicted and the resulting trauma resist verbal expression, so Neshat turns to a powerful mix of imagery, gesture, music and dance. The verbal code appears only during end credits, which, as typical in her work, are bilingual (English and Arabic), displayed on two separate screens. The setting, too, is split into two different parts. During the dance scenes, the woman is in a dilapidated warehouse, completely empty except for the chairs occupied by the soldiers and officers. In contrast, when she runs, she is in the street, gradually drawing people behind her in what becomes a kind of protest.

In short, Neshat translates her being between two different cultures primarily rejecting the communicative dominance of verbal language. She avoids subtitling or dubbing Arabic in the films, limiting bilingualism to the end credits. Instead, she turns to alternative sign systems – such as visual imagery, music, gestures – that can at least partially transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. This choice also reflects the complexity of the approached topic – the many sides of the women condition under the Islamic rule – taking a political stance that is clear, though uncomfortable and unsafe. When asked if her work is deliberately political, she meaningfully answers:

I so wish I could make work that isn't political. It really comes down to where you're born. Do you think it's possible for an artist from somewhere like Palestine or Israel or Iran or any politically volatile culture to distance themselves morally, emotionally, psychologically from political reality? Even if you paint a flower, that is a political statement, isn't it? So the reality for artists like myself, who have unresolved relationships with their countries, is the inability to be muted to what is going on. This always impacts your work, even though in my case it's never direct (Bradley 2025).

4. A Journey Towards Understanding

In most cases, as Judith Woodsworth claims, "Translation is not only a mode of writing but also a way of being, a way of knowing: a practice, a subject, and a trope in literature" (Woodsworth 2017, 2). The definition readily applies to the two artists who conclude my study. Each interprets the migration journey through distinct cultural lenses, finding there the right language to translate what they mean. One draws on themes, imagery, narrative methods and paradigms of the Sicilian/Lampedusan tradition, while the other turns to Greek mythology with a new gaze.

Giacomo Sferlazzo, a musician, performer and artist from Lampedusa, founded the collective Askavusa and more recently the cultural association "I figli di

Abele". In his artistic practice, he often uses the Sicilian dialect spoken in Lampedusa to explore themes that are closely related to the island's historical and current condition. On the platform where most of his songs are collected (<https://giacomosferlazzo.bandcamp.com>), albums entirely in Sicilian sit alongside tracks in Italian, English, French. While the use of other languages is primarily a stylistic choice, the Lampedusan dialect responds to a conscious, somehow political decision. The dialect itself is distinctive, as it incorporates elements from various Sicilian idioms, including those from Agrigento, Palermo, Catania, and others. This mix has a particular historical origin. Following the colonial migration from Sicily, intensely encouraged by the Borbons in 1843, people from different areas of the larger island moved to Lampedusa, bringing their dialect with them. Sferlazzo's artistic practice is currently situated within the framework of the initiatives developed at the venue he founded. PortoM – where "the 'M' stands for the multiple dimensions of migration itself: Mediterranean, migrations, militarization, and memory" (Faleschini Lerner 2021, 173) – is a meeting place, cafeteria, puppets theatre and most of all migration museum.

This is where Sferlazzo revives the Sicilian tradition of "teatro dei pupi", a form of theatre featuring large wooden articulated puppets called "pupi". His latest work is firmly grounded in the effort of translating the journey of migration and describes the reflections and choices of the protagonist in relation with the decision to migrate. Amhed – both the name of the protagonist and a part of the play's title – is from a small city in Tunisia and decides to cross the Mediterranean sea in search of a better life. When finding out that this "better life" is an illusion, he decides to go back where he belongs and side with the resistance. *Ahmed di Redeyef* (Ahmed of Redeyef) premiered at PortoM on July 11, 2025 and was made in collaboration with Palermo's Teatro dei Pupi. The marionettes were carved by the young Nino Mancuso and the music were composed by the Tunisian artist Achref Chargui. This cooperative enterprise is currently touring in Italy and Europe.

Also here, the form (*U cunto*) and the language (the Lampedusan dialect) are meaningful choices. Sferlazzo has always been deeply engaged in exploring the Sicilian heritage as inflected in Lampedusa. This has made it almost inevitable that the language “spoken” by that heritage would be the most fitting for his artistic work. Additionally, some idiomatic expressions are hard to translate into Italian or other languages. A song of his in particolare – *Comu na nuci dintra un saccu* –² actually compiles a list of Lampedusan idioms. They have a sound tightly related to a certain meaning that would be completely lost in translation across different languages and cultures. Over time, Lampedusan has become Sferlazzo’s most natural, almost instinctual choice for storytelling in his music and on stage, and this decision carries a political message. There was a time – he claims – when speaking Sicilian was something to be ashamed of. Currently, his research focuses on the very sound of the Lampedusan dialect, the music it holds. In certain expressions, such as the “canto dei carrettieri” (the carter’s song), the dialect resonates with Arabic sounds like the Islamic call to prayer and the flamenco singing. It embodies the voice of Mediterranean people.

In the same mood though exploiting different artistic tools develops the work of another artist, who articulates a reflection on the Mediterranean journey, but using an ancient Greek myth rather than a persisting popular tradition as an artistic grammar and a paradigm. Also in this case, the artist is trying to leave the floor to “dissident histories and voices” and to work on the act of border crossing as a process of change and translation where “the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*” (Bhabha 1994, 4). This “presencing” may also take the form of the reimagining of an already existing story, a myth that has been told in different way and now calls for revision.

At the Biennale Arte in Venice, in 2024, Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh presented a piece entitled *A Dance with Her Myth*. The work was inspired by the

² The song can be listened to here: <https://giacomosferlazzo.bandcamp.com/album/comu-na-nuci-dintra-un-saccu>. The title means “Like a nut inside a sack”.

myth of Europe. The story centres around the beautiful daughter of Agenor, the king of Tyre, a Phoenician girl that came from the current borders between Lebanon and Israel and Palestine, as described by Herodotus. According to the myth, the girl was seduced and abducted by Zeus, who took the form of a white bull, and was taken away, never to come back.

Mounira Al Solh dramatically reinterprets the myth in a multimedia installation consisting of more than 40 pieces, in a combination of sculptures, painted panels, tapestries and videos. At the centre of the room, a Phoenician-style boat skeleton anchors the space. A white cloth drapes from its mast, serving both as a sail and a screen for a video loop, a montage of sequences, which features drawings, and texts in Arabic and English. Scattered throughout the room, the paintings depict Europa and the white bull, but their roles are reversed from the traditional myth: the girl, depicted in the myth as the victim of abduction, is in truth the master of the beast, apparently stripped of his strength. All around them, menacing masks symbolize the pressures of a conservative regime on female identity. Some details throughout the room evoke the city in Southern Lebanon believed to be Europa's point of departure.

In the new version of the myth, she appears to embark on a journey of redemption that could be interpreted as a process of reappropriation of women's identity through solidarity and sisterhood. The video projected onto the sail-screen of a ship recalls both the ancient Phoenician sea voyage and the wreckage of today's migrant crossings. It fuses past and present, weaving myth with contemporary reality. The installation therefore starts on the assumption that by framing Europa's journey as an abduction, European culture has proposed and disseminated a masculine and patriarchal version of history. In response, the artist seeks to retrace the journey, following Europa's path with a different gaze, one that may transform passivity into resilience.

Al Solh cannot use the same language as the colonizers. Therefore, she forges an alternative route, blending multiple expressive codes, many of them non-verbal, to subvert the dominant narrative. Through this process, she reveals a radically

different version of the myth: Europa was not carried away by the white bull, but rather “she held him in a jar, spinning his head with her feet”. This subversive image eventually transforms the victim into an agent of her own destiny. Like the artist herself, she travels by her own decision, aboard a boat that takes centre stage in the installation, a vessel whose sail is also a screen, projecting not just images, but a reimagined story. At some point, the quote appearing in the looping video is, again, a call to acknowledge our shared origins: “I looked for the origins of the name Europa. Erub, according to the Phoenician pronunciation, as some claim”. On the sail-screen, three languages (Phoenician, Arabic and English) interact layering voices across time and space. The multilingual interplay reinforces the work’s central message: history is to be rewoven as to reveal the diverse cultural threads that make for dynamic change and evolution.

Like Saint Levant and Shirin Neshat, Mounira al Sohl is an artist-in-exile. Born in Beirut, she first moved to Syria and later settled in Amsterdam. To tell her stories, she deliberately employs multiple languages rather than offering a more direct, homogeneous, and perhaps more easily accessible narrative. At the same time, the lack of linguistic translation of the sections in Arabic and Phoenician calls for a more attentive, embodied engagement from the viewer. It is in fact an invitation to see and feel the meaning she seeks to convey, beyond words alone. In his *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall argues that cultural identities are not fixed but are dynamic processes that unfold within the realm of representation. Representation, understood as a means of making sense of the world, is inherently unstable, continuously shaped and reshaped, and resistant to any notion of permanence (Hall 1990, 222-224). This is especially true when the identities shift, both synchronically and diachronically, functionally to dislocation in space (the journey of migration) and time (the drawing of new borders). In this fluid landscape, languages and cultures intersect, hybridize, and mutually influence one another. Through this interplay, they give rise to a new motherless tongue, one not rooted in a single origin but emerging as a powerful tool of expression. Thus, tongue may become, in the hands of some artists, a form of translation that honours diversity

of idioms it draws from, weaving them together in ways that foster deeper cultural and linguistic understanding.

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Manifestations of “Bilingualism” in Contemporary Belarusian Prose¹

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1. Belarusian Bilingualism?

During the 2025 celebrations of the International Mother Language Day, Maksim Ryžankoŭ, Belarusian foreign minister, described Belarusians as “lucky twice” because they had “two native languages, both of which have the constitutional status of state languages” (SB.by 2025). He continued by noting that the Belarusian language is the “basis of peace and national unity, for which Belarus has been famous for centuries” (SB.by 2025). However, the current state of Belarusian language in Belarus seems to contradict Ryžankoŭ’s (as an official discourse producer) idealistic and unconflicted framing of the situation.

The linguistic question in Belarus has a number of historical, political and cultural roots. Lewis, presenting Belarus as a “latecomer” (2019, 23) in the mother-language-driven nationalist movements in Eastern and Central Europe of the 19th – early 20th centuries, states that Belarusian nationalism “had peculiar origins in the gaps between national and social identity, and was coloured to a substantial

¹ The article follows the author’s keynote presentation at the conference “A New Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism, and Translation in Contemporary Literature” (Verona, 26 May 2025).

extent by external forces” (Lewis 2019, 23). Among the external forces in the first half of the past century one could mention the Polish-Russian relationships before and after the collapse of the Russian Empire, the multiethnic nature of the territory with Jewish communities often forming the urban majority, two world wars, or Stalin’s purges among national intelligentsia. Thus, as Lewis concludes,

it was only after the Second World War, and particularly during the Thaw period with its newly permissive atmosphere, that Belarusian culture entered a relatively unproblematic formative phase, albeit within Soviet ideological constraints (Lewis 2019, 25).

The abovementioned constraints, operating at the level of regional administration, education and culture policies, had a profound influence on the very concept of Belarusian statehood (which in some respects translated into post-Soviet, Lukašenka-era national ideology):

According to this concept, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was the first state in Belarusian history; Belarus allegedly had no tradition of statehood before 1917, or immediately after, and was under Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian subjugation during most parts of its history (Kotljarchuk et al. 2023, 6).

As in other former Soviet republics, a strong national revival movement emerged in the late 1980’s, promoting the idea of Belarusian sovereignty within the USSR, and, later, of a nation-state after the collapse of the Soviet Union. New language legislation was introduced in 1990, declaring Belarusian the only state language and promoting its use in various social domains. Hence, as Bekus notes, between 1991 and 1994, Belarus became a “nationalizing state” (Bekus 2023, 99) with several “nation reprogramming projects”:

One was related to language identity, which was set to be recast in terms of the “one nation – one language” mode that would have made Belarusian an official language of the country, limiting the official use of Russian (Bekus 2023, 100).

The language-driven nationalizing project was not, however, universally accepted. Instead, it was often met with apprehension, amplified by open public debate in a now censorship-free press. As Zaprudski notes:

Some negative stereotypes about Belarusian nurtured in previous times could be felt at full force during a newspaper debate in the early 1990s. Thus, some publications qualified Belarusian as “a language of writers,” “a home-bred, non-ubiquitous dialect,” “a Russian dialect of the Polish language,” or “a dialect of Russian” (Zaprudski 2007, 107).

This situation contributed to the growing popularity of Aljaksandr Lukašenka, who capitalized on public apprehension about language and national policies during his first presidential campaign. He offered his future voters a more “Soviet” model of the state, with the Russian language retaining its function. After being elected president in 1994, he initiated a referendum on several issues, one of which concerned the status of Russian in Belarus. The referendum, held in 1995, granted Russian, alongside Belarusian, the status of a “state language,” which ultimately led to the decline in the use of Belarusian in almost every sphere of life, from education to political communication. The status of Belarusian suffered from the lack of support in the official discourse, where it was frequently presented as the language of the nationalistic opposition. These processes have profoundly influenced the linguistic and national identity of Belarusians (see Ioffe 2003, Bekus 2014, Rudling 2015), by many of whom Belarusian is not perceived as a means of communication or an anchor of national self-awareness but rather a symbol with different degrees of positive and negative sentiments. Bekus summarized “the sociolinguistic reality” in contemporary Belarus, “in which the prevailing

majority of Belarusians use Russian in their daily life, while claiming Belarusian to be their native language” (Bekus 2023, 100). However, as noted earlier, Belarusian officials continue to present the situation as one of “ordinary bilingual” (Bekus 2023, 103). In reality, as Zaprudski concludes, the relationship between the two state languages is strongly disproportionate, resulting in a situation of “replacive bilingualism”, in which the dominant language (Russian, in this case) steadily displaces the population’s mother tongue (Zaprudski 2007, 114). The official narrative is also contradicted by numerous everyday experiences of individuals who report discrimination or lack of acceptance due to their use of Belarusian. In 2021, civic activist Alina Nahornaja published a book titled *Mova 404*, which she later translated into English (*404 Language Not Found*). A recurring theme across many of the accounts is a conscious shift from Russian to Belarusian, described as the most common path by which one begins to use the language in everyday life. The book compiles dozens of stories from those who made this deliberate linguistic choice and encountered a variety of consequences – from criticism by family members (“Why don’t you speak normally?”) to rejection by public officials:

There were two women [in the passport office] who looked at my documents in Belarusian and burst out laughing, then looked at me and asked: “Why not in Chinese?” [...] “Well, because we have two state languages, and I chose one of them”.
 – Actually, Russian is our main language.
 – What do you mean, where is it written?
 – Well, yes, there are two state languages, but the main one is Russian, so documents like this aren’t accepted anyway (Nahornaja 2024, 174).

The linguistic situation in Belarus is further complicated by the presence of a hybrid linguistic phenomenon known as *trasjanka*² – a “semi-language” that

² The word itself means a mixture of hay and straw.

Tlostanova identifies as the consequence of the hybridization of post-Soviet everyday culture (Tlostanova 2004, 319). This phenomenon, not so dissimilar to Ukrainian *surzhyk*, was closely tied to the processes of urbanization, as many speakers of various Belarusian dialects moved from the countryside into towns. According to Gapova, *trasjanka* became “the folk speech of the first generations of urban residents, residents of small towns, or the rural ‘nomenklatura’” (Gapova 2008, 53). Bekus situated *trasjanka* within the framework of postcolonial theory:

Starting with *traskanka* as a “borderland” between Russian and Belarusian, the whole complexity of linguistic practice of Belarusians represents a variation of what Homi Bhabha called a “third space of enunciation” (Bekus 2014, 48).

In his definition of *trasjanka*, the renowned Belarusian poet Ryhor Baradulin emphasized its distinctly Soviet character, noting that it bears a kind of “trademark”: “Зроблена ў СССР. Рамонту не падлягае” (“Made in the USSR. Not subject to repair”) (Sloŭnik svabody 2000, 215). However, *trasjanka* is not always viewed as a strictly negative phenomenon, as it can serve as a “gateway” for those attempting to switch from Russian to Belarusian in their everyday communication (Hrodna Life 2018).

2. The Language(s) of Belarusian Literature. The Cases of Marcinovič and Filipenka

It is hardly surprising that the question of language choice has become one of the central issues in the Belarusian literary space as well. Synthesizing the points discussed above, it can be argued that contemporary Belarusian culture – and literature in particular – is defined by pronounced bi- or even multilingualism, operating on two main interconnected levels. The first is linguistic: the coexistence and interplay of two codified languages, Belarusian and Russian, alongside the gradual incorporation of *trasjanka* into literary texts. The second level is

ideological: the literary field encompasses both pro-government and oppositional discourses, as well as a spectrum of ambivalent or intermediary positions that navigate between competing ideological and political narratives.

2.1. Linguistic Complexities

In the literary development, the first years of independence reflected the ideological and identity crossroads of the period. They were marked by the coexistence of an older generation of Soviet-era classics (such as Vasil' Bykaŭ, Maksim Tank, Ivan Šamjakin, among others) and a younger generation of authors seeking to address the ideological and aesthetic void caused by the Soviet cultural model. The latter introduced experimental, postmodern approaches to writing, represented by authors like Al'herd (Alhierd) Bacharevič, Adam Hlobus, and Sevjaryn Kvjatkoŭski. This period was also characterized by a profound shift in the status of artists and the everyday conditions of literary life. As Lewis notes:

In the Soviet period, a small core of academics, writers, musicians, etc. had maintained the autonomy of Belarusian language and culture. Perhaps paradoxically, at that time these cultural elites all worked for the state, even if their public activities were sometimes antithetical to the Soviet project: they belonged to centrally funded writers' and artists' unions, published in state-owned journals and publishing houses or exhibited in state-owned institutions. After 1991, that material support was largely withdrawn and the state-funded monopoly on culture vanished. Contemporary Belarusian literature, literary criticism, music and art are, to a great extent, financially and administratively independent. [...] Thus, alternative Belarusian culture operates in a state of politicized opposition, with limited resources, exposure and access to distribution networks (Lewis 2019, 243-244).

After the end of the “nationalizing state” period, the Belarusian language, although marginalized as a language of everyday life, remained the primary language of “serious” fiction writing. At the same time, the segment of mass literature

became almost entirely dominated by Russian-language works, predominantly of Russian, but also Belarusian origin (Vol'ha Tarasevič, Vol'ha Hramyka, Hanna Al'choŭskaja, among others).

At the turn of the centuries, according to Žbankoŭ, the cultural climate in Belarus was increasingly influenced by administrative and bureaucratic control overtaking the cultural life; the dullness, backwardness, and conformism of official culture, often marked by an “obsessive imitation of nationality”; the “expansion” of foreign mass culture; and the “partisan” nature of unofficial culture (Žbankov 2000, 145-147). The ideological stratification of literature was also mirrored in the creation of “official” and “alternative” institutions (such as writers' unions or literary prizes). This “status quo” – with periods of more intense censorship (2006-2010) and phases of “soft Belarusization” (2014-2019) –³ held until autumn 2020, when mass protests and subsequent violent repressions by the state led to a radical shift. In 2021-2022, alternative writers' organizations (such as the Belarusian Writers' Union and PEN Centre) and independent publishers (Halijafy, Knihazbor, Januškevič) were dismantled. A significant number of leading Belarusian writers ended up in exile, including Svjatlana Aleksijevič, Uladzimir Njakljajeŭ, Saša Filipenka, Uladzimir Arloŭ, Andrej Chadanovič, Al'herd Bacharevič, Julija Cimaŭjeva, and others. In parallel, several exile publishing houses were established, publishing works predominantly in Belarusian (Gutenberg, Januškevič), and in some cases also in Russian (Mjane Njama).

The perpetual political polarization of the cultural and literary landscape in Belarus is closely intertwined with questions of language use. Although the use of

³ In addition to the tightening of censorship and state control over the media and civil society, the first decade of the 21st century was marked by three presidential elections, with the 2006 and 2010 contests followed by mass protests that were violently suppressed. Many opposition figures and presidential candidates (among them M. Statkevič, U. Njakljajeŭ, A. Sannikaŭ) were arrested, and some were sentenced to years in prison. On the “soft Belarusization” period see Posokhin 2019.

Belarusian is often perceived as a marker of oppositional identity, this correlation is not absolute: for instance, the loyal Union of Writers of Belarus has among its members writers writing in both languages (Sojuz pisatelej Belarusi 2025). A more existential and persistently debated question within the (mostly “alternative”) literary field concerns the cultural affiliation of Russian-language literature written by authors from Belarus. This question has sparked significant public debate, particularly during moments of international visibility – most notably, the discussions surrounding Svjatlana Aleksijevič’s Nobel Prize, awarded in 2015 for her works written in Russian (Šaryj 2016, Jeŭradyjo 2016). Controversies frequently arise in the context of literary prize nominations, as many awards exclude Russian-language works, prompting some to speak of the “discrimination” of Russian-speaking writers. Conversely, the 2015 “politically correct” decision to include both Belarusian and Russian-speaking authors into the PEN-centre “Book of the Year” prize has also met resistance. The then-head of the Belarusian Language Society Aleh Trusaŭ claimed that “ніякая рускамоўная літаратура ня будзе спрыяць разьвіцьцю беларускага духу, нацыянальнай ідэнтычнасьці, беларускай мовы” (Cyhankou 2015).⁴

Another dimension of this debate is the one that encompasses all former Soviet contexts, which have variously sought to overcome or resist the Soviet ideological and cultural models and where Russian-language literature has undergone significant transformation. On the one hand, it has developed new means of articulating the linguistic and cultural particularities of specific national contexts. On the other hand, a paradox has emerged: within national literatures such as Belarusian or Ukrainian, Russian – the language of imperial domination – has become a medium for articulating anti-imperial and anti-colonial ideas, as well as for exploring the foundations of new national and cultural identities. One of the popular

⁴ “no Russian-language literature will contribute to the development of the Belarusian spirit, national identity, or Belarusian language”. If not indicated otherwise, translations are by the author of this article.

terms to distinguish “Russian Russian” writings from the ones created in other contexts is “Russophonia”, which can be also applied to Belarusian writers writing in Russian:

Eventually, the term “Russophonia” brings the attention to the performative acts of speaking Russian (and even speaking back to Russia), thus laying the ground for a new potential methodological orientation, with the aim to overcome contradictory ideological constructs based on ethnicity, nationality and territory. Most fundamentally, Russophonia highlights the self-conscious and autonomous nature of the performance that carriers of the Russian language are enabled to produce with their individual speech acts, finally switching the focus to the agency of these new cultural actors (Puleri 2020, 20).

Finally, what adds to the complexity of the linguistic situation within the literary field of Belarus, is the fact that even the Belarusian-written body of texts is not linguistically homogenous and, in its essence, especially with the younger generation of writers, is also translingual. According to Ananka and Kirschbaum’s study (2017), contemporary Belarusian literature and culture are shaped by a performative understanding of national and linguistic identity. This performativity is reinforced by the linguistic flexibility of modern literary Belarusian, which navigates between the two normative orthography standards, *taraškevica* (used, for instance, by Bacharevič) and *narkamaŭka*, while actively incorporating archaic, regional, old-Slavonic, and even pseudo-Polish and Ruthenian elements, alongside lexical innovations. At the same time, as with using Belarusian on the daily basis, the decision to write fiction in Belarusian is also a conscious choice for most of the writers who initially read and start writing in Russian:

У сваіх ідэнтыфікацыйных пошуках сучасная незалежная беларуская культура адмаўляецца ад (імперскай) рыторыкі пасіўнай прыроджанасці, якая прадугледжвае партыцыпацыйнае ўпісанне ў “вялікую і працяглую”, “доўгую і багатую” культурна-гістарычную памяць. [...] Вольны пераход на беларускую

мову, у паўсядзённым жыцці і на пісьме, разумеюць як выбар этычны. [...] (мета)лінгвістычны і адначасова этычны акт валявой метамарфозы “ратуе” ад механістычнасці, характэрнай для гістарычна-эсэнцыялісцкіх афірматыўных ідэнтыфікацый (Ananka & Kirschbaum 2017).⁵

2.2. The Cases of Marcinovič and Filipenka

To illustrate how contemporary authors navigate the Belarusian (and broader) literary space(s), two prominent examples may be considered: Viktor Marcinovič, often regarded as the first “mass-elite” contemporary Belarusian writer, and Saša Filipenka, currently the most widely translated author from Belarus (apart from Aleksijevič). Marcinovič published his first novel (*Paranoia*, 2009) in Russian but later adopted a hybrid writing strategy: he began alternating the language of his novels while ensuring that a translation (prepared by an external translator) into the other language would be published simultaneously. For example, his 2014 novel *Mova* ~~Мова~~ was written in Belarusian and translated into Russian by Lidija Michejeva, while his latest book, the novel *Revoljucija* (*Revolution*, 2020), was written in Russian and translated into Belarusian by Vital' Ryžkoŭ. This approach allowed Marcinovič's works to gain visibility in the Russian literary market while also affirming his legitimacy as a Belarusian writer by publishing in Belarusian. In his Belarusian-themed novels, Marcinovič frequently engages with the country's complex linguistic situation, which he connects to the idea of borderlands

⁵ “In its search for self-identification, contemporary independent Belarusian culture rejects the (imperial) rhetoric of passive nativeness, which presupposes participatory inclusion into a ‘great and continuous’, ‘long and rich’ cultural-historical memory. [...] The voluntary shift to the Belarusian language, both in everyday life and in writing, is understood as an ethical choice. [...] the (meta)linguistic and simultaneously ethical act of a willed metamorphosis serves as a safeguard against the mechanistic nature typical of historically essentialist affirmative identifications”.

(prigranič'e – see Ghilarducci 2021). In *Mova*, he imagines a future Belarus ruled by a union of China and Russia, where the Belarusian language has been eradicated and transformed into a narcotic, sold illegally in paper packets containing fragments of Belarusian books. Crucially, the drug is said to affect only Belarusians. On the textual level, Marcinovič contrasts the primitive “language of the future” with highly poetic Belarusian passages:

Тэкст быў рыфмаваны і дужа прыгожы. Я прачытаў яго першы раз, і не зразумеў прыкладна траціны слоў, пачаў чытаць другі раз – і тут мяне накрыла прыходам. [...] Вось, што прачыталі мы з ёй. Падрыхтуйцеся, бо торкне:

[...]

Бо сэрца дзяўчыны пад кужалем тонкім,
як і сэрца найлепшых сыноў,
гарыць то ж каханнем для роднай старонкі
і спадчыны нашых дзядоў.

[...]

Я ўсё спрабаваў учытацца ў няўцямныя словы кшталту «спадчына», калі пачуў, што стук майго сэрца робіцца гучнейшым, скарэйшым, заглушае клубную музыку і пераўтвараецца ў постук капытоў каня, які нясецца праз поле (Marcinovič 2014, 20–21).⁶

⁶ “The text was rhymed and very beautiful. I read it the first time and didn’t understand about a third of the words, started reading it a second time – and that’s when the drug hit me. [...] Here’s what we read together. Brace yourself, because it’s going to hit hard: [...] For the heart of a girl beneath a fine homespun veil, just like the heart of the noblest sons, burns with love for the native land and the legacy of our forefathers. [...] I kept trying to make sense of the strange words like ‘spadčyna’ (‘legacy’), when I suddenly noticed the beating of my heart growing louder and faster, drowning out the club music and turning into the pounding of a horse’s hooves galloping across a field”.

The fictional plot of *Mova* thus engages with the suppressed part of Belarusian linguistic identity. Notably, the Russian translation adds a further dimension of linguistic interplay through code-switching between Russian as the primary narrative language and Belarusian in the “intoxicating” excerpts:

Тут было что-то весьма необычное, что-то вроде фрагмента из Ильфа и Петрова, или Зощенко, такая же тяжеловатая сатира, то же подражание нечеловеческому казенному языку всех этих райисполкомов, комиссий и больших начальников с серпом и молотом вместо мозга. Вот этот фрагмент. “Як скончылася праца ў выканкоме, я самую пільную ўвагу звярнуў на тое, каб ісці дадому, разам з Крэйнай. У дачыненнях да яе я меў пэўную мэтавую ўстаноўку. Я трымаў курс бліжэй пазнаеміцца з ёю. Ідучы па вуліцы, я загаварыў з ёю ў самых вытрыманных тонах. Я жаліўся ей, што новаму чалавеку вельмі цяжка наладзіць жыццё ў мястэчку, і прасіў яе параіць мне што-небудзь добрае ў гэтым кірунку” (Martinovič 2014).⁷

Saša Filipenka finds himself in a different situation than Marcinovič, as his professional career, both as a journalist and as a writer, began in Russia, where he published his first novel, *Byvšyj syn* (*Former Son*, 2014), which later received the “Russkaja premija” (Russian Prize) for the best Russian-language book written

⁷ “There was something quite unusual here, something like a fragment from Ilf and Petrov, or Zoščenko – a similarly somewhat heavy-handed satire, the same imitation of the inhuman bureaucratic language of all those district executive committees, commissions, and high-ranking bosses with a sickle and hammer instead of a brain. Here is the fragment: ‘When the work in the executive committee was over, I paid the most careful attention to going home together with Krejna. In relation to her I had a certain purposeful intention. I was pursuing the course of getting better acquainted with her. Walking down the street, I spoke to her in the most restrained tones. I complained to her that it was very difficult for a newcomer to settle down in a small town and asked her to advise me something useful in this respect’”.

by a non-Russian citizen. Paradoxically, the novel focuses on social, cultural, and political developments in Belarus under Lukašenka's rule (although no names are mentioned in the text itself).

One of Filipenka's strategies for performing his Belarusian identity in a Russian-language text is the use of exoticizing details – “sprinkles” – that function as subtle signals to alert potential readers to the author's origins. However, these signals may go unnoticed by readers unfamiliar with the specific cultural references they invoke. From the more obvious examples, one can mention the awakening of Belarusian subconsciousness of *Byvšyĭ syn*'s protagonist Cisk, who, recovering from a coma, initially mixes Russian and Belarusian. Filipenko also incorporates *trasjanka* to the speech of one of the secondary characters – a nurse – who appears to embody an internal conflict: while she represents a rough, down-to-earth, rural perspective on life, she is also capable of seeing beyond the official version of current events (namely, 2011 bombing in Minsk metro):

– Ну и каму яны хочут мозги запудрить? Всем же ясно, каму гэта выгодно! Сейчас найдут врага. Ганьба! Якая страна – такой и теракт! Скажут, что во всем виновата оппозиция, которая хотела дестабилизировать ситуацию в стране! Ну эта ж уже совсем в лоб! (Filipenko 2014, 46).⁸

Besides the obvious textual tools, such as code-switching inside longer passages of text, Filipenko also uses less obvious techniques, sometimes incorporating a single word that could potentially have an exoticizing effect. One example can be found in his 2022 novel *Kremuljator* (*Cremulator*), which is based around the life of the first director of the Moscow crematorium Pjotr Nesterenko. After being

⁸ “Who are they trying to fool, huh? It's obvious to everyone who benefits from this! Now they'll find some enemy. Shame! The kind of country it is – such is the terrorist attack! They'll say the opposition is to blame, that it was trying to destabilize the situation in the country! That's just straight-up in your face!”.

arrested during Stalin's purges, Nesterenko is interrogated by a KGB officer, and in one of the dialogues Nesterenko "slips" the word "šufľjadka":

памятные артефакты перекочевали в шуфлядку к товарищу Ежову, которого тоже, как вы знаете, кончили...

– Что такое шуфлядка?

– Когда я служил в Барановичах, так называли выдвижной ящик стола... (Filipenko 2022).⁹

"Šufľjadka" draws interest, because presumably, the author sought to elaborate on the fact that the protagonist had served in the military in Belarus, where his noble, pre-revolutionary Russian became "infected" with Belarusian. Among various possibilities, Filipenko selected a word that is frequently cited as a prominent lexical marker of Russian in its Belarusian spoken variant (Somin 2020), thereby preserving a temporal link to contemporary linguistic discourse.

The other example comes from Filipenko's latest novel *Slon* (*Elephant*, 2025), where Pavel, one of the protagonists, is described as "единственный из всех абитуриентов, писал на *десятку* вступительное сочинение на философский факультет".¹⁰ Although "desjatka" is a Russian word, it signals a different "referential reality," as it is specifically the Belarusian educational system that employs a 10-point grading scale.

On a broader note, *Slon* continues a recent trend for Filipenko, whose books have increasingly been published in Belarusian translations – as was the case with *Byvšyj syn* (*Byly syn*, 2024) and *Kremuljator* (*Kremuljatar*, 2024). The newly

⁹ "The memorable artefacts ended up in Comrade Ježov's šufľjadka, who, as you know, was also offed... – What is a šufľjadka? – When I was serving in Baranoviči, that's what we called a pull-out table drawer..."

¹⁰ "unlike any of the other applicants, he got a 10 for his entrance essay to the philosophy department".

emerging demand may be attributed to the growth of the post-2020 diasporic community with a stronger national, Belarusian language-centred and often anti-Russian component in its identity, which got only stronger since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. For Filipenko, this marked the first instance of working in parallel on an authorized translation, which required significant adaptation on his part to tailor the novel to the Belarusian language.¹¹

3. Post-2020 Sentiments: Hanna Jankuta's *Čas pustazel'lja*

The crackdown on the 2020 protests and the following wave of state repressions, followed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, brought the linguistic complexities of Belarusian society and literature to a new level of sensitivity. These shifts were reflected in the works of established authors – most notably Bacharevič's *Peratrus u muzei* (*Raid in the Museum*, 2023) and *Papjarovy holem* (*Paper Golem*, 2024) –, as well as in the writings of younger, “millennial” authors, who approach the subject from the perspective of a distinct new sensibility. Among them is Hanna Jankuta, who is also active as a literary theorist and as a translator from English and Polish into Belarusian. In 2021, after the start of repressions against the 2020 protesters, she left Belarus and currently resides in Poland. *Čas pustazel'lja* (*Barren Times*), her first novel, was published in 2023. She is also the author of the poetry project *Kanstytycyja* (*Constitution*, 2022, a poetic commentary on Belarusian constitutions and the pitfalls of its applications in real life), five children's books, as well as numerous articles and essays on

¹¹ In various interviews and presentations, one of which I personally attended, Filipenko has emphasized that it was “always” important for him to publish Belarusian versions of his works. However, he recalls being discouraged by a “well-known Belarusian publisher”, who questioned the need for such editions when “everyone has already read the Russian version”. According to Filipenko, the success of the first print run of *Byly syn*, which quickly sold out, proved that publisher wrong (personal notes).

literature and feminism. Her children's books about the cat named Šprot are rare contemporary examples of that genre in Belarusian.

Genre-wise *Čas pustazellja* falls into the category of autofiction, which reflects a broader trend toward increased attention to individual experience, intimacy, and sincerity, while also incorporating elements of modernist writing. According to Dix, “because it has the capacity to modulate between individual voice and collective experience, autofiction has the capacity to operate as a form of testimony or witness-bearing with regard to past cultural and/or political struggles” (Dix 2023, 8). In this respect, *Čas pustazellja* is a distinctly Belarusian book, shaped by post-2020 sentiments: the bitter realization of political defeat after the protest movement was violently suppressed; a paradoxical form of nostalgia, in which an emigrant may still be able to visit the country yet lives in constant fear of repression; the abrupt shift – from being among the most pitied and supported communities to being labelled a co-aggressor after February 2022 – and the resulting feeling of collective guilt. Naturally, these sentiments are not universally shared but resonate more strongly within the émigré community and among “inner emigrants” who remain in Belarus. Another prominent and recurring theme in the novel is the reflection on language and one's cultural and linguistic identity, which informs the novel's partial multilingualism: Jankuta employs code-switching and code-mixing, incorporating Russian, as well as Polish and Ukrainian, depending on the situational pragmatics and the emotional proximity to the depicted events or characters. According to Radaelli's classification of literary multilingualism, in Jankuta's writing the multilingualism qualifies as “manifest”, as the presence of multiple languages is “immediately perceivable” (Deganutti 2024, 604). Furthermore, the narration is enriched by a persistent layer of metanarration, in which the author-narrator reflects on her own writing process and creates the impression that the reader is witnessing the very moment of the book's creation.

While framing her narrative self, one of the first things that Jankuta points out is her accent in Russian:

І. кажа, што я размаўляю па-руску з акцэнтам. Не ведаю, ці мае ён рацыю, а калі мае, то адкуль у мяне акцэнт. У дзяцінстве я размаўляла па-руску, гэта мая першая мова, бо я нарадзілася ў рускамоўнай сям'і – звычайнай, менавіта рускамоўныя сем'і для Беларусі – звычайныя (Jankuta 2023).¹²

However, this accent is not something she is immediately aware of – it is pointed out by someone close to her, yet still an outsider. Hence, one could argue that she still perceives this part of her linguistic identity as a natural one. At the same time, she offers an ironic sociolinguistic commentary by referencing Russian as the typical “norm” in Belarusian society – an idea that, as previously mentioned in relation to Nahornaja's book, as well as the idea of the conscious switch to Belarusian, often in a symbolic, identity-seeking impulse:

У маім досведзе пераход на беларускую магчымы толькі пасля сур'ёзных намаганняў і доўгіх рэфлексій, разваг пра тое, што і чаму я выбіраю. Выбар «рускасці» ж даецца па дэфолце, па змоўчанні, для яго не трэба ніякіх высілкаў. У нейкім сэнсе цябе да яго падштурхоўваюць – абставіны, вонкавыя ўплывы. А калі ты пераходзіш на беларускую, то неўзабаве заўважаеш, што яна – твая адзіная спадарожніца (Jankuta 2023).¹³

¹² “I says that I speak Russian with an accent. I don't know if it's true, but if it is, then where did I get it? I spoke Russian as a child, it is my first language, because I was born in a Russian-speaking family, a typical one, as it is a Russian-speaking family that is typical for Belarus”.

¹³ “In my experience, switching to Belarusian is only possible after serious effort and long reflection – thinking about what I am choosing and why. The choice of ‘Russianness’, on the other hand, comes silently, by default; it requires no effort. In a sense, you are pushed toward it – by circumstances, by external influences. But when you switch to Belarusian, you soon notice that it becomes your only companion”.

The depicted linguistic shift can also be viewed through a colonial lens, in which Russian, as the language of the “metropole”, is universally accepted and perceived as part of Belarusian identity. In this context, conscious linguistic choice becomes a means of reclaiming the suppressed part of one’s identity and distinguishing oneself from the oppressor or colonizer. However, by choosing Belarusian Jankuta’s narrator doesn’t push the Russian out of her identity but rather assign a different pragmatic function to it, almost a different part of her personality. At the same time, a peculiar paradox emerges in Jankuta’s depiction of linguistic adaptation in exile: Russian and Polish, both “colonizing” languages, influence one another, yet neither intrudes upon the safe “Self-space” reserved for Belarusian:

Мы гаворым не так, як рускія, значыць, мы не рускія. Мне здаецца, што я ўжо доўгі час павольна і неўсвядомлена намагаюся размежаваць унутры сябе беларускаць і рускасць, вылучыць з вакольнай няпэўнасці беларускаць як нешта самастойнае [...] Цяпер, калі я гавару на рускай мове, то заўважаю, што выкарыстоўваю ў ёй польскія канструкцыі, і наадварот. [...] Таксама я разумею, што гавару па-руску без нейкіх асаблівых пачуццяў. Гэта проста мова, сродак камунікацыі. Магчыма, таму, што я размаўляю на ёй пераважна з украінцамі. З аднаго боку, гэта можа паказваць, што тут, у Польшчы, я ўспрымаю рускую мову як бяспечную. Гэта наша «лінгва франка», універсальны пасярэднік. Але з іншага, гэта таксама пра дыктат мовы. Я заўсёды папярэджваю, што разумею ўкраінскую, проста не гавару на ёй, і, нягледзячы на гэта, частка маіх суразмоўцаў застаецца пры рускай мове (Jankuta 2023).¹⁴

¹⁴ “We speak differently than Russians, which means we are not Russians. I feel that for a long time now, slowly and unconsciously, I have been trying to separate my sense of Belarusianness from Russianness – trying to extract Belarusianness from the surrounding uncertainty as something independent. [...] Now, when I speak Russian, I notice that I use Polish constructions in it – and vice versa. [...] I also realize that I speak Russian without any particular emotions. It’s just a language, a means of communication. Maybe

Jankuta interprets the paradox of Russian being perceived as a “safe” language by two oppressed nations in the context of emigration and exile as a symptom of the inherited linguistic dictate. In most cases, she even codes her communication with Ukrainians in Russian – something that, in her narrative, also signals a greater emotional and social distance. However, when the narrative calls for bridging this distance, she consciously “manipulates” language, a strategy she openly acknowledges in her metanarration:

Едзем з бацькам праз горад, мінаем ці то лес, ці то парк, у якім хаваюцца старыя яўрэйскія могілкі. [...] У дзяцінстве яны верылі, што надпісы падказваюць, дзе схаваны скарб.

– І што, вы шукалі яго? – пытаю я.

– Як яго шукаць – мова ж незразумелая.

Насамрэч мой бацька не гаворыць па-беларуску, ён рускамоўны. Але я не магу перадаць тут яго словы па-руску, як словы кіроўцы маршруткі ці мытніцы, бо гэта адразу створыць дыстанцыю (Jankuta 2023).¹⁵

that’s because I mostly use it to speak with Ukrainians. On the one hand, this might show that here in Poland, I perceive Russian as a ‘safe’ language. It’s our ‘lingua franca’, a universal mediator. But on the other hand, it’s also about the dominance – the dictate – of language. I always explain that I understand Ukrainian, I just don’t speak it, and yet some of my interlocutors still stick to Russian”.

¹⁵ “We’re driving through the city with my father, passing what might be a forest, or maybe a park, where old Jewish cemeteries are hidden. [...] As children, they believed the inscriptions hinted at the location of hidden treasure. ‘So, did you look for it?’ I ask. ‘How can you look for it – the language is incomprehensible’. In fact, my father doesn’t speak Belarusian, he is Russian-speaking. But I can’t reproduce his words here in Russian – as I would for a minibuss driver or a customs officer – because that would immediately create distance”.

While depicting places such as this cemetery, Jankuta repeatedly references Google Maps ratings to validate or contrast her own emotional responses to them. One peculiar example cites a Russian-written review of the Jel'nja swamps: “Бал на гугл-картах: 4,9, – але негатыўны водгук таксама ёсць: ‘Не впечатлило вообще: однообразный пейзаж с низкорослыми деревьями’”.¹⁶ Historically, the swamps carry deep symbolic weight in Belarusian cultural imagination – as sites of cultural origins, settings for folk tales and classic literature, and even scenes of partisan resistance during wartime. In this moment, Russian functions as a tool of dismissive judgment toward a space that is symbolically and emotionally Belarusian.

Russian is also present in Jankuta’s depictions of her stressful travels to Belarus, where it serves several purposes: reproduces the “real” linguistic situation in Belarus; creates an emotional distance (as opposed to Belarusian as it was in the case of the dialogues with the narrator’s father); when used in contrast with Belarusian, underlines the “decorative” function of Belarusian (“Мінаем краму ‘Парэчка’, а ніжэй: ‘Овощи, фрукты, ягоды’. Беларуская мова як аздаба”, Jankuta 2023).¹⁷ Finally, it also echoes the émigré sentiment of the narrator when the steward in bus calls for the passengers to promptly take their seats while someone asks if there’s still time to leave the bus shortly: “Как хотите, но ждать никого не будем” (Jankuta 2023).¹⁸

¹⁶ “The Google Maps rating is 4.9 – though there’s also a negative review: ‘Not impressive at all: monotonous landscape with stunted trees’”.

¹⁷ “We pass the store *Parečka* [Black current], and below it: ‘Ovošči, frukty, jagody’ [Vegetables, fruits, berries]. Belarusian as decoration”.

¹⁸ “Up to you, but we’re not waiting for anyone”.

4. A Brief Conclusion

Contemporary Belarusian prose, particularly that emerging within the new émigré community after 2020, is a dynamic space in which processes of self-reflection, reassembly, transformation, and the reinforcement of both personal and collective identities are actively unfolding. In this context, bi- and even multilingualism function not only as a reflection of these developments but also as their outcome. The Russian language, in particular, occupies an ambivalent position: while it is often rejected as a colonial legacy, it can simultaneously serve as a tool of decolonizing practises when appropriated in a critically conscious manner (as in the case of Filipenka). Within such literary practices, code-switching and code-mixing are not merely stylistic or playful devices; rather, they emerge as expressions of newly sharpened sensibilities toward one's own, always somewhat hybrid, Self.

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**Translinguismo e memoria traumatica:
prospettive stranianti nella letteratura di lingua tedesca
dall'Europa orientale**

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Il presente contributo mira a indagare il rapporto tra memoria traumatica e translinguismo letterario nella produzione in lingua tedesca di autori e autrici dall'Europa orientale. Sebbene fin dagli anni Novanta il trauma sia un campo di studi ampiamente indagato, se non addirittura inflazionato, la sua relazione con la lingua, o meglio, con le lingue (come nel caso di autori e autrici translingue o plurlingue)¹ resta fino ad ora poco studiata.² Si tratta, per definizione, di un evento "indicibile", che sfida le consuete capacità di comprensione e comunicazione e che tuttavia richiede di essere espresso, al fine di essere opportunamente elaborato e, auspicabilmente, superato (Caruth 1995, 151-157; Caruth 1996, 5). Date queste premesse, il saggio si interroga, in particolare, sul ruolo del translinguismo

¹ Si predilige qui l'aggettivo "translingue" in quanto si prenderanno in considerazione testi scritti prevalentemente in un'unica lingua, pur non essendo questa la lingua nativa dell'autore o dell'autrice. Si tratta inoltre di testi in cui è presente "una riflessione sulla condizione di transito tra le lingue" (Vangi 2023, 12).

² Su questo specifico tema sono apparsi solo di recente due interessanti studi: Deganutti & Vlasta 2022; Deganutti & Vlasta 2023.

come poetica di distanziamento emotivo da eventi traumatici, vissuti in una lingua diversa da quella della narrazione.

La scelta del corpus non ricade in maniera casuale su testi di autori e autrici con *background* di migrazione dall'Europa orientale: essi si ritengono infatti particolarmente rappresentativi dell'esperienza traumatica e post-traumatica in generale, poiché l'ampia zona compresa tra Berlino e Mosca, soggetta nel corso del XX secolo a una violenza di massa senza precedenti, costituisce un caso estremo di sofferenza nella storia dell'umanità a causa dell'avvicendamento di due regimi totalitari, il Nazionalsocialismo e lo Stalinismo (Snyder 2010, VII-VIII, XIX). L'analisi qui proposta verrà condotta su romanzi familiari di ispirazione biografica di Vladimir Vertlib, Olga Martynova e Nino Haratischwili, avvalendosi dei recenti studi sul translinguismo letterario nonché degli studi culturali su memoria, post-memoria e trauma. Si tratta di testi che, più che rielaborare esperienze traumatiche vissute in prima persona, ricostruiscono drammi familiari delle generazioni precedenti consumatisi nel corso del Novecento, specialmente nel periodo della Seconda guerra mondiale. Tra le varie forme di plurilinguismo letterario ci si concentrerà qui prevalentemente su ciò che Radaelli e Blum-Barth definiscono rispettivamente "Sprachreflexion" (Radaelli 2011, 61-66)³ ed "exkludierte literarische Mehrsprachigkeit" (Blum-Barth 2019, 22),⁴ ovvero su quei testi che tematizzano il plurilinguismo stesso con riflessioni di tipo metalinguistico.

1. Auto-traduzione e distanziamento emotivo in Vladimir Vertlib

Tra gli scrittori di lingua tedesca dall'Europa orientale Vladimir Vertlib, autore ebreo austriaco di origine russa, è probabilmente colui che riflette in modo più

³ "Riflessione linguistica"; quando non diversamente indicato, le traduzioni sono di chi scrive.

⁴ "Plurilinguismo letterario escluso", in quanto non manifesto; forti sono tuttavia le latenze della lingua nativa in questi autori e autrici.

lucido sulla propria condizione di scrittore translingue, mettendone in luce limiti e potenzialità:

Die Tatsache, dass ich mir meiner Sprache nie sicher sein kann, dass ich Worte und Formulierungen hinterfrage, die andere mit intuitiver Selbstverständlichkeit handhaben, sehe ich als Vorteil an. Er besteht darin, dass es mir leichter fällt, mein Schreiben aus der kritischen Distanz zu betrachten und somit meine Möglichkeiten und Grenzen besser zu erkennen. Ich glaube, dass die Fähigkeit zur Distanz ein Signifikum von Literatur überhaupt ist. Distanzen müssen aufgebaut werden, bevor man eine Wiederannäherung an ein Thema wagen kann. Kein einziges deutsches Wort hat für mich seine Fremdheit zur Gänze verloren. Darin liegt aber auch die Chance, den scheinbar bekannten und dennoch nicht ganz vertrauten Worten eine neue, manchmal überraschende Bedeutung zu geben oder sie in einen ungewohnten Kontext zu stellen (Vertlib 2012, 59).⁵

Nonostante padroneggi perfettamente il tedesco, Vertlib mette in evidenza la differente carica emotiva derivante dai due idiomi di sua competenza, la lingua madre russa e la lingua tedesca acquisita:

⁵ “Il fatto di non essere mai sicuro della mia lingua, di mettere in discussione parole e formulazioni che altri trattano con intuitiva naturalezza, lo considero un vantaggio. Consiste nel fatto che mi è più facile guardare alla mia scrittura da una distanza critica e quindi riconoscere meglio le mie possibilità e i miei limiti. Credo che la capacità di prendere le distanze sia una caratteristica significativa della letteratura in generale. Le distanze devono essere costruite prima di poter osare riavvicinarsi a un argomento. Non c'è una sola parola tedesca che abbia perso completamente la sua estraneità per me. Ma questo offre anche l'opportunità di dare alle parole apparentemente conosciute, ma non del tutto familiari, un significato nuovo, a volte sorprendente, o di collocarle in un contesto inconsueto”.

Meine emotionelle Beziehung zur russischen und zur deutschen Sprache möchte ich am Beispiel des Ausdrucks „Sobaka / Hund“ verdeutlichen. Für mich hat das russische Wort „Sobaka“ einen unmittelbaren, einen hündischen Klang. „Sobaka“ riecht nach Hund. [...] Es gibt keine Distanz zwischen dem Wort und dem, was es bezeichnet. Im Deutschen hingegen hat sich für mich der Begriff vom Lebewesen emanzipiert. Er lässt den Schatten eines Hundes entstehen oder – noch treffender – einen „Hund an sich“, die Idee eines Hundes. Dies erlaubt mehr Assoziations- oder Abstraktionsmöglichkeiten, ein Vorteil gegenüber dem viel sinnlicheren und stimmigeren, aber dadurch in sich abgeschlossenen Ausdruck „Sobaka“ (Vertlib 2012, 55).⁶

Nella localizzazione provinciale di Salisburgo e nella lingua tedesca acquisita, Vertlib ricerca per la propria scrittura un “territorio neutrale” (cit. in Teufel & Schmitz 2012, 204) al quale non sia collegato alcun ricordo d’infanzia e alcun trauma, per esprimersi liberamente senza essere travolto dalle emozioni.⁷ Non si

⁶ “Vorrei illustrare il mio rapporto emotivo con la lingua russa e tedesca attraverso l’esempio dell’espressione “Sobaka / cane”. Per me la parola russa “Sobaka” ha un suono immediato, canino. “Sobaka” ha odore di cane. [...] Non c’è distanza tra la parola e ciò che descrive. In tedesco, invece, per me il termine si è emancipato dall’essere vivente. Crea l’ombra di un cane o – ancora più appropriatamente – un “cane in sé”, l’idea di un cane. Questo permette maggiori possibilità di associazione o di astrazione, un vantaggio rispetto all’espressione “Sobaka”, molto più legata ai sensi e coerente, ma quindi chiusa in sé”.

⁷ “Hier finde ich die nötige Distanz zu mir selbst, denn im Unterschied zu Wien, Boston oder Rom ist für mich Salzburg ein ‚neutrales Territorium‘, mit dem ich keine Erinnerungen an Kindheit, Emigration oder erlittene Verletzungen verbinde. Ich kann niederschreiben, was mich bewegt, ohne von Emotionen überwältigt zu werden” (Vertlib, cit. in Teufel & Schmitz 2012, 204); “Qui trovo la distanza necessaria da me stesso, perché a differenza di Vienna, Boston o Roma, Salisburgo è per me un ‘territorio neutrale’, al quale non associo ricordi d’infanzia, emigrazione o ferite subite. Posso scrivere ciò che mi commuove senza essere sopraffatto dalle emozioni”.

tratta soltanto di tradurre memorie di eventi che si sono svolti in un'altra lingua, ma spesso anche di tradurre materiali, più o meno documentari e autobiografici, di cui l'autore dispone in russo. Per *Zwischenstationen* (*Stazioni intermedie*, 1999), primo romanzo di Vertlib che narra l'odissea del protagonista-autore durante la sua infanzia e adolescenza per mezzo mondo, lo scrittore si rifà ad esempio a una serie di diari giovanili scritti in russo (Bürger-Koftis 2011, 272). Tale materiale ha dovuto necessariamente essere sottoposto a un processo di traduzione per essere utilizzato ai fini letterari: alla "notevole distanza temporale" si aggiunge dunque "l'estraneità della nuova lingua di scrittura", con cui l'autore, tuttavia, "ha senz'altro potuto recuperare anche nuove possibilità e registri creativi che [...] hanno consentito una precisione nuova e diversa" (272-273).

Un processo simile, ma ancora più stratificato, è alla base del romanzo successivo, *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (2001; La memoria particolare di Rosa Masur), che narra in retrospettiva la storia dell'anziana protagonista, una donna russo-ebrea intorno ai novant'anni, che nel 1999 lascia la propria casa per seguire il figlio Kostik e la nuora Frieda nel loro trasferimento in Germania, nella cittadina fittizia di Gigricht. Gli eventi della storia di Rosa si basano su cinque audiocassette su cui Vertlib aveva registrato i ricordi della propria nonna Mira. Dovettero poi passare ben quindici anni prima che Vertlib si sentisse pronto a tradurre e rielaborare queste memorie "registrate" sotto forma letteraria, per le quali l'autore, ancora una volta, sceglie la forma in cui sente di poter esprimere meglio i suoi pensieri: "eine deutsche Oberfläche, unter der oft, eher unbewusst als gewollt, Satzbau, Melodie und Idiomatik des Russischen mitschwingen" (Vertlib 2012, 59).⁸

Non si tratta solo di questo, tuttavia. Il romanzo in questione presenta una complessa stratificazione a livello formale e narrativo, che presuppone certamente

⁸ "una superficie tedesca, sotto la quale spesso risuonano, più inconsciamente che intenzionalmente, la struttura della frase, la melodia e l'idioma del russo"; sulle latenze del russo nel linguaggio letterario di Vertlib cfr. Hausbacher 2021, 315-318.

anche una riflessione di tipo metalinguistico. L'espedito narrativo da cui prende il via la ricostruzione della storia pregressa della protagonista è un progetto per il quale vengono raccolte le migliori storie degli immigrati di Gigrich, destinate alla pubblicazione in un volume commemorativo per il 750° anniversario di fondazione della città. Rosa si sottopone pertanto a una serie di interviste volte a ricostruire il suo passato, che costituisce la "storia nella storia". Dal punto di vista narrativo, gli eventi sono più volte rifratti nella costruzione del romanzo: "durch ihre eigene Perspektive [von Vertlib's Großmutter], durch die Perspektive (und Intention) der Romanfigur Rosa Masur, die diese Geschichte erzählt, und durch diejenige des Erzählers" (Vertlib 2012, 92).⁹ Anche dal punto di vista linguistico, tuttavia, è riscontrabile una stratificazione interessante: Rosa, sebbene emigrata in tarda età, padroneggia perfettamente il tedesco, lingua di arrivo, poiché ha studiato germanistica e lavorato tutta la vita come traduttrice;¹⁰ ciononostante, l'amministrazione cittadina dà per scontato che gli immigrati non parlino tedesco e offre loro un interlocutore che condivida la loro stessa lingua nativa, in cui verranno condotte le interviste; solo in un momento successivo queste ultime saranno tradotte per formare il volume commemorativo in questione, che naturalmente è previsto in lingua tedesca. Ciò irrita non poco Rosa che, davanti allo stupore dei suoi interlocutori per la sua padronanza del tedesco, parlato con accento ma senza errori, dichiara di non essere cresciuta nella giungla (Vertlib 2001, 33-34).

A differenza di Vertlib, Rosa viene pertanto privata della possibilità di trovare nella lingua tedesca acquisita un "territorio neutrale" in cui esprimere le proprie

⁹ "attraverso la sua prospettiva [della nonna di Vertlib], attraverso la prospettiva (e l'intenzione) del personaggio del romanzo, Rosa Masur, che racconta questa storia, e attraverso quella del narratore".

¹⁰ Nei testi di autori e autrici con un retroterra migrante compaiono spesso figure di interpreti o di traduttori e traduttrici (Hausbacher 2021, 307).

esperienze traumatiche che, nel racconto in lingua russa, continuano a sopraffarla anche a distanza di decenni:

Sobald sie zu erzählen begann, verstärkten sich ihre Zweifel, kamen alte Selbstvorwürfe wieder hoch und der sumpfe Schmerz über versäumte Gelegenheiten. Ängste, die sie mehrmals durchlitten hatte, in der Realität des Augenblicks und danach immer wieder, unzählige Male in Erinnerungen und Träumen, packten sie, hoben Zeit und Raum auf. Gestern und morgen wurden eins und übermorgen ein Tag vor sechzig Jahren. [...] Schon vor dem Eingang zum Institut hämmerte das Herz jedesmal wild, etwas klopfte bedrohlich in den Schläfen. Jedesmal nahm sie sich vor, die Episode zu überspringen, die sie eigentlich erzählen wollte, und erzählte sie dann doch, sobald das Aufnahmegerät zu surren begann. Mit jedem Mal fürchtete sie sich mehr und konnte noch weniger darauf verzichten (Vertlib 2001, 402).¹¹

Come tipico del trauma, i ricordi dolorosi riaffiorano in maniera involontaria e improvvisa sotto forma di incubi e *flashback* (Caruth 1995, 152-153; Caruth 1996, 4), nonché attraverso una temporalità non più lineare (Kratochvil 2019, 44). Rosa è spinta da una necessità impellente di raccontare, ricostruire, riparare (Hirsch 1996, 661), eppure è travolta dalle sue stesse emozioni, poiché non le è data la possibilità di ricordare e riflettere sugli eventi dalla distanza critica di una lingua “altra”. La tanto sperata traduzione e rielaborazione di queste esperienze in un’altra

¹¹ “Non appena iniziava a raccontare i suoi dubbi si intensificavano, riemergevano vecchi sensi di colpa e il dolore sordo di occasioni mancate. Le paure che aveva sofferto ripetutamente, nella realtà del momento e poi innumerevoli volte nei ricordi e nei sogni, la attanagliavano, annullando il tempo e lo spazio. Ieri e domani diventavano un tutt’uno e dopodomani un giorno di sessant’anni fa. [...] Già prima di entrare nell’istituto il suo cuore batteva ogni volta all’impazzata, qualcosa batteva minacciosamente nelle sue tempie. Ogni volta decideva di saltare l’episodio che in realtà voleva raccontare, eppure lo raccontava non appena il registratore iniziava a ronzare. Ogni volta la stessa cosa, tanto più aveva paura e tanto meno riusciva a rinunciarvi”.

lingua, del resto, non avrà luogo neanche successivamente: alla fine del romanzo, infatti, il volume commemorativo non viene pubblicato, poiché si scopre che la data dell'anniversario della città si basava su un errore.

Come accennato in precedenza, Rosa non trova dunque il suo territorio neutrale in cui poter finalmente fare i conti col passato: non lo trova nella lingua tedesca, che le viene preclusa come lingua elitaria dei nativi, appannaggio di chi la pronuncia senza accento straniero; ma non lo trova nemmeno nel suo paese di adozione, la “terra dei carnefici” (Teufel & Schmitz 2012, 220), le cui pratiche memoriali sono mosse da una cattiva coscienza e da presupposti sbagliati, quali la celebrazione di un presunto successo multiculturale o di una riparazione nei confronti dei cittadini ebrei, di cui si accettano contingenti e di cui si tenta di raccogliere storie quanto più sensazionali. La critica di Vertlib verso queste pratiche par volere avvertire il lettore che, senza un riconoscimento e un'integrazione nel discorso pubblico, è impossibile una riconciliazione, anche a livello individuale, con gli eventi traumatici. Essi devono infatti potersi sedimentare e, attraverso rappresentazioni materiali – quale avrebbe potuto essere in questo caso il volume commemorativo –, farsi patrimonio collettivo, ovvero memoria culturale (Assmann 2014, 51-58).

2. Olga Martynova e la “lingua della madre”

Anche per Olga Martynova, nata in Siberia e cresciuta a Leningrado, la presa di distanza da eventi ed emozioni sarebbe un imperativo della letteratura, offrendo così un vantaggio a quegli autori e quelle autrici che non scrivono nella propria lingua nativa: “Man muss unbedingt eine Distanz zwischen sich und der Sprache schaffen. Niemand wird unsere Romane lesen wollen, wenn wir einfach nur niederschreiben, was wir denken und fühlen” (cit. in Scherle 2011).¹² Questo impe-

¹² “Bisogna assolutamente creare una distanza tra se stessi e la lingua. Nessuno vorrà leggere i nostri romanzi se trascriviamo semplicemente ciò che pensiamo e sentiamo”.

rativo renderebbe il processo di scrittura in una lingua “altra” particolarmente adeguato all’elaborazione di eventi dolorosi, quali lutti o traumi, come formulato dall’autrice stessa nel suo recente libro dedicato al tema del lutto (*Gespräch über die Trauer*, 2023; Dialogo sul lutto), scritto in lingua tedesca a seguito della scomparsa del marito: “Warum ich das auf Deutsch schreibe. Das Denken in einer Sprache, die du als Kind nicht kanntest, geschieht in einem gewissen Sinne im Jenseits, oder eher zwischen Jenseits und Diesseits” (Martynova 2023, 54).¹³ Come per Vertlib, anche per Martynova la lingua tedesca fornisce pertanto maggiori possibilità di astrazione rispetto alla lingua nativa, permettendo – proprio grazie all’estraneità suscitata – un riavvicinamento e una trasfigurazione degli eventi dolorosi.

Nel suo primo romanzo, *Sogar Papageien überleben uns* (2010; Anche i pappagalli ci sopravvivono), Martynova ricostruisce in retrospettiva quasi un secolo di storia europea attraverso i ricordi familiari della sua protagonista, la letterata russa Marina, e quelli del suo fidanzato tedesco di gioventù, Andreas, ritrovato solo di recente in occasione di una serie di conferenze che porta Marina in Germania. Anche questo romanzo presenta una struttura articolata ed estremamente frammentaria dal punto di vista della narrazione. Esso è costituito infatti da 88 brevi capitoli, ognuno dei quali è preceduto da un titolo e da una lista di anni che va dal V secolo a.C. alla contemporaneità (fino al 2006). Gli anni rilevanti per ogni singolo capitolo sono riportati in grassetto e rivelano spesso una forte relazione tra loro, laddove più piani temporali si incrociano attraverso ricordi e *flashback*. Ne risulta una simultaneità del non simultaneo, una presenza del passato nel presente (Hausbacher 2020, 118). Anche il testo di Martynova insiste infatti sulla presenza, mai passata, della Storia, in particolare sui ricordi legati al periodo della Seconda guerra mondiale che, anche a distanza di decenni, tormenta coloro che l’hanno vissuta così come i loro discendenti (Aureche-Beau 2012, 3-4).

¹³ “Perché scrivo questo in tedesco. Pensare in una lingua che non si conosceva da bambini avviene in un certo senso nell’aldilà, o meglio, tra l’aldilà e questo mondo”.

Come in Vertlib, anche qui non manca una riflessione metalinguistica che si intreccia alla ricostruzione di un passato, spesso doloroso, e alla critica di certe pratiche memoriali, o meglio, di rimozione. Uno dei capitoli, ad esempio, porta significativamente il titolo “Die Sprache meiner Mutter” (La lingua di mia madre). Si tratta di un capitolo, ambientato nel presente durante una conferenza letteraria, che vede Marina alle prese con due poetesse, una tedesca e una russa. Mentre la prima ammette di ammirare il russo – pur non conoscendolo – per la sua musicalità, la seconda asserisce con veemenza che si tratta di una lingua terribile:

“Eine schreckliche Sprache!” sagt sie. Nein, erklärt sie weiter, sie verstehe, die große Literatur, Mandelstam, der umgebracht wurde, Jessenin usw., aber, wie Paul Celan sagte, die Sprache meiner Mutter ist die Sprache der Mörder meiner Mutter, es solle jeder normale Russe die Sprache hassen, die so viel Leid gebracht hat, auch ihrer Mutter hätten Russen viel Unrecht angetan... [...] “ich zucke jedesmal zusammen, wenn ich jemanden Russisch sprechen höre”, sagt sie (Martynova 2012, 113-114).¹⁴

A questo punto a Marina sfugge istintivamente una scusa, di cui immediatamente si pente poiché lei, a differenza della poetessa russa, non ha rinnegato la propria lingua, della quale – in nessun caso – sente di doversi dispiacere (114). Anche la sua famiglia ha sofferto, non soltanto della violenza sovietica, ma anche e soprattutto delle “forze congiunte di Hitler & Stalin” (Martynova 2012, 190): il fratello minore del padre, ad esempio, fu deportato dai tedeschi, in quanto ritenuto ebreo

¹⁴ “‘Una lingua terribile!’, dice. No, continua, lei capisce la grande letteratura, Mandelstam, che è stato ucciso, Jessenin ecc. ma, come diceva Paul Celan, la lingua di mia madre è la lingua degli assassini di mia madre, ogni russo normale dovrebbe odiare la lingua che ha portato tanta sofferenza, anche a sua madre i russi hanno fatto molte ingiustizie... [...]. ‘Ogni volta che sento qualcuno parlare russo, mi vengono i brividi’, dice”.

a causa dei suoi tratti somatici poco slavi (25-26), e uno dei momenti storici chiave del romanzo, continuamente rievocato, è l'assedio di Leningrado, durante il quale l'intera famiglia soffrì la fame, talvolta fino alla pazzia (127). Per questo motivo, i genitori della giovane Marina provano un vero e proprio orrore quando quest'ultima presenta loro un fidanzato tedesco. Tuttavia, Marina abbraccia appieno entrambe le culture russa e tedesca, non solo nel suo amore per Andreas, che perdura anche dopo la fine della loro relazione, ma anche nel suo rapporto con le due lingue, che parla fluentemente e utilizza in pari misura per la sua attività scientifica, così come nei tantissimi rimandi alla tradizione letteraria di entrambi i paesi, con un interesse particolare per i poeti dell'avanguardia russa OBERIU, ma anche con riferimenti ai più noti Gogol', Tolstoj, Nabokov, Brodskij, Achmatova, o ad autori di lingua tedesca quali Joseph Roth, Thomas Bernhard, Paul Celan, Rose Ausländer (cfr. anche Hitzke 2019, 97; Hausbacher 2020, 112). La letteratura gioca dunque un ruolo fondamentale di testimonianza: il nuovo re-troterra plurilinguistico e transculturale¹⁵ così costituito permette ai protagonisti Marina e Andreas di guardare alla Storia non da un'unica prospettiva, ma di problematizzarla e avvicinarla sempre da molteplici punti di vista, mettendo in discussione le pratiche memoriali mono-nazionali di entrambi i paesi, dove si tenta di rielaborare i libri di scuola o si rievoca ancora la "Grande Guerra Patriottica" sotto la guida del "Grande Papparino Stalin" (Martynova 2012, 137). Per Martynova la letteratura riveste infatti un importante ruolo di elaborazione memoriale, in quanto serve a sensibilizzare il ricordo: "wenn man Vergangenheit anders erzählt, wird sie vielleicht auch anders lebendig" (Martynova 2015).¹⁶

¹⁵ Sul concetto di transculturalità si vedano Welsch 1992; Berry & Epstein 1999; Epstein 2009; Welsch 2017. Sulla memoria transculturale si vedano invece Crownshaw 2011; Crownshaw 2014; Erll 2014.

¹⁶ "se si racconta il passato in modo diverso, esso forse rivive anche in modo diverso".

3. Transculturalità e straniamento in Nino Haratischwili

L'ultimo esempio qui considerato riguarda l'autrice di origine georgiana Nino Haratischwili. Similmente a Vertlib, Haratischwili pone l'accento sull'incertezza derivante dalla scrittura in una lingua acquisita, ma anche sui vantaggi che se ne possono ricavare:

Jede meiner Formulierungen ist georgisch gefärbt, und das wird auch so bleiben. Das bedeutet nicht, dass ich dadurch die Perspektive eines neutralen Betrachters einnehme, aber ich bewahre mir die Freude am Experimentieren. Wenn ich mich in meiner Muttersprache ausdrücke, geschieht alles automatisch. Aber wenn ich auf Deutsch schreibe, frage ich mich ständig: Warum machst du das so? Warum dieser Artikel? Warum muss ich diese Redewendung so und nicht anders benutzen? Es ist schwierig, aber gerade das hat mir schon immer gefallen: diese Freude am Experimentieren. In diesem Sinne ist das Wort „Distanz“ vielleicht sogar ganz passend (Haratischwili 2019).¹⁷

Come per Vertlib e Martynova, anche nelle opere di Haratischwili si trovano personaggi che attraversano lingue, culture ed epoche, specialmente se si considera la sua monumentale saga familiare, *Das achte Leben (für Brilka)*, *L'ottava vita (per Brilka)*, che nel 2014 ha consacrato l'autrice georgiana al successo internazionale e che, articolata in otto libri e su sei generazioni di donne, intreccia gli eventi individuali della famiglia Jashi con quelli collettivi della Storia europea del

¹⁷ “Ogni formulazione che uso è colorata di georgiano, e rimarrà tale. Questo non significa che io adotti la prospettiva di un osservatore neutrale, ma mantengo la gioia della sperimentazione. Quando mi esprimo nella mia lingua madre, tutto avviene automaticamente. Ma quando scrivo in tedesco mi chiedo costantemente: Perché lo fai in questo modo? Perché questo articolo? Perché devo usare questa espressione in questo modo e non in un altro? È difficile, ma è quello che mi è sempre piaciuto: la gioia di sperimentare. In questo senso, la parola ‘distanza’ è forse anche molto appropriata”.

Novecento. Per quanto riguarda l'aspetto translinguistico, due in particolare sono i momenti del romanzo in cui la narratrice-autrice riflette sul passaggio da una lingua a un'altra, rispettivamente a seguito di un'esperienza di esilio forzato e una di migrazione volontaria.

La prima protagonista a doversi confrontare con altre lingue rispetto a quella nativa è Kitty, rappresentante della seconda generazione nonché prozia della narratrice. Durante la Seconda guerra mondiale, il suo fidanzato Andro, di cui lei è incinta, si macchia di diserzione e collaborazionismo con i nazisti. Ne consegue il rapimento di Kitty, al fine di estorcerle informazioni sull'amato, che lei non possiede: la giovane viene pertanto interrogata e torturata fino ad essere indotta all'aborto e alla perdita dell'utero. Tuttavia, Kitty sarà in grado di rintracciare Alla, la donna che ne ha ordinato la tortura, e la ucciderà insieme all'amica Mariam, a cui sarà addossata l'intera colpa. Mentre quest'ultima viene deportata in un gulag e condannata a morte, Kitty è costretta all'esilio all'Ovest e approda in Inghilterra. Oltre a dovere imparare l'inglese, la giovane si confronta anche con il tedesco nella figura di Fred Lieblich, una donna austriaca con cui avrà una tormentata relazione amorosa. Il tedesco ha subito un suono familiare rispetto all'inglese, poiché lo aveva studiato con Andro nella speranza di poter fuggire insieme a Vienna. Tuttavia, la comprensione tra Kitty e Fred non è semplicemente di carattere linguistico. Essa è data piuttosto dal fatto che entrambe le donne intuiscono di avere un retroterra comune di "sopravvissute" (Haratischwili 2024, 491; Haratischwili 2021, 452) e di parlare la stessa lingua, quella del trauma, non tanto a livello verbale quanto a livello esperienziale-emotivo:

Die Rothaarige lächelte. Aber ihr Lächeln war ein anderes als das, was sie als das freundliche Lächeln des Westens kennengelernt hatte. Es war heiter, aber heiter trotz und nicht weil. Die grünen Augen leuchteten ungesund. Die schmalen Lippen waren in ein künstliches Rot getaucht, auch wenn die Frau nicht geschminkt war. [...]

Diese roten Lippen erinnerten Kitty so an die dunkle Wohnung am Heiligen Berg, an das Blut, das aus der durchgeschnittenen Kehle rann [...].

Die roten Lippen und das tote Kind. Die Geburt, die ein Leben hätte feiern sollen im treuen Dienst des Todes. Die Lockenwickler auf dem Boden und das Würgegefühl. Mariam, Mariam, Mariam, Mariam (Haratischwili 2024, 476).¹⁸

La rossa Fred rievoca intuitivamente a Kitty l'esperienza del trauma, poiché ne è a sua volta irrimediabilmente segnata. Fred è infatti l'unica sopravvissuta della sua famiglia al campo di concentramento di Mauthausen, in cui era come se parlassero una lingua diversa dalla sua (Haratischwili 2024, 485; Haratischwili 2021, 447). Eppure, possiamo facilmente immaginare che Fred racconti a Kitty la sua esperienza di deportata in tedesco (Haratischwili 2024, 484-491), in quanto quest'ultima – da poco arrivata in Inghilterra – non padroneggia ancora l'inglese. Il tedesco diventa così lingua veicolare del trauma, che in realtà parla un linguaggio non verbale e universale. Oltre ad avere fatto entrambe esperienze della tortura e della morte, Fred e Kitty condividono un simile retroterra sociopolitico: entrambe vengono dai margini dei rispettivi imperi, Austria e Georgia, ma si tratta comunque di margini che hanno prodotto i dittatori più sanguinari del Novecento, Hitler e Stalin, le cui forze congiunte – come ricorda Martynova – hanno tramutato il panorama europeo del Novecento in un teatro di morte e distruzione.

Sarà la narratrice Niza, pronipote di Kitty, a tentare di trovare una concreta guarigione ai traumi familiari attraverso il percorso terapeutico di scrittura. Per far ciò,

¹⁸ “La rossa sorrise. Ma il suo sguardo era diverso dal sorriso gentile che Kitty aveva conosciuto all'Ovest. Era allegro, ma allegro *malgrado*, non *perché*. Gli occhi verdi brillavano di una luce malsana. Le labbra sottili erano di un rosso innaturale, anche se non erano truccate. [...] E quelle labbra rosse ricordavano a Kitty la casa in penombra sul Monte Sacro, il sangue che sgorgava dalla gola tagliata. [...] Le labbra rosse e il bambino morto. La nascita, che avrebbe dovuto essere la celebrazione della vita e invece era passata al servizio della morte. I bigodini sul pavimento e i conati di vomito. Mariam, Mariam, Mariam, Mariam” (Haratischwili 2021, 439).

tuttavia, anch'essa deve prima prendere le distanze dalla propria terra nativa, emigrando in Germania dopo la caduta della cortina di ferro. In questo nuovo spazio, Niza apprende una serie di nuove lingue che si aggiungono a quelle a lei già note, russo e georgiano, e che la aiuteranno a costruire una narrazione transculturale per la propria storia:

Das Englisch schmeckte nach Meeresflucht und nach einer herbstlichen Dämmerung an einer Nordküste, etwas nach Fischbuden riechend, ein wenig nach Regen. Das Französisch, das ich nie gelernt hatte, müsste wie Aprikosengelee auf der Zunge zergehen und nach trockenem Weißwein schmecken. Das Russisch schmeckte nach einer endlosen Weite, nach Weizenfeldern, nach Einsamkeit und Illusionen. Georgisch aber schmeckte staubig, voll, übervoll nahezu, und manchmal auch nach einem Versteckspiel im Wald. Das Deutsch [...] schmeckte dagegen anfangs eisig und bitter, dann änderte sich der Geschmack und verwandelte sich in den von Algen, es schmeckte nach dunkelgrünem Moos, dann wurde der Geschmack wieder streng, aber angenehmer, und später, viel später, schmeckte für mich das Deutsch nach reifen Kastanien und nach Höhe, ja, nach einer schwindelerregenden Höhe (Haratischwili 2024, 1094-1095).¹⁹

Forse è proprio per questa "altezza vertiginosa", che permette un giusto distanziamento dai fatti traumatici vissuti dalla sua famiglia, e per questo sapore maturo

¹⁹ "L'inglese sapeva di aria di mare e di un crepuscolo autunnale lungo una costa del Nord che odorava di banchi del pesce e di pioggia. Il francese, che non avevo mai imparato, doveva sciogliersi sulla lingua come la gelatina di albicocche e aveva il sapore del vino bianco secco. Il russo sapeva di vastità senza fine, di campi di grano, di solitudine e di illusione. Il georgiano sapeva di polvere, di pieno, di strapieno, e anche di giochi a nascondino nel bosco. Il tedesco [...] all'inizio era gelido e amaro, poi acquistò un sapore di alghe e muschio verde, poi tornò a essere intenso ma più gradevole, e dopo ancora, ma molto dopo, ebbe un sapore di castagne mature e di altezza, sì, di un'altezza vertiginosa" (Haratischwili 2021, 976).

di frutti autunnali, come qualcosa che è rimasto a stagionare, che Niza sceglie il tedesco come sua lingua di adozione e lingua letteraria in cui narrare la propria storia familiare. Si tratta di un'operazione di recupero e rinegoziazione del passato che la narratrice decide di intraprendere affinché sua nipote Brilka, figlia della sua defunta sorella, possa finalmente conoscere i traumi segreti che precedono la sua nascita e liberarsi così dai suoi fantasmi familiari. Come nel romanzo di Vertlib, anche qui c'è un libro nel libro, un manoscritto che la narratrice compila a seguito di una serie di ricerche e che alla fine del romanzo consegna come regalo terapeutico alla nipote. A differenza di Rosa Masur, tuttavia, Niza ha potuto scrivere e far conoscere la propria storia, e ha potuto farlo attraversando una serie di lingue e culture che cita in maniera più o meno diretta.

Ogni libro del romanzo è suddiviso infatti in diverse sezioni, ognuna delle quali è introdotta da una citazione: si tratta di rimandi letterari sia dal mondo orientale che da quello occidentale, ma anche di slogan sovietici e antisovietici, così come di riferimenti alla cultura pop. Queste citazioni da ogni parte del mondo e ogni epoca, sempre tradotte e riportate in tedesco, creano a loro volta un effetto di straniamento, simili a dei cartelli brechtiani che interrompono le singole scene del racconto, permettendo alla narratrice, così come ai lettori stessi, di non farsi sopraffare dagli eventi traumatici. Come in Martynova è rintracciabile un linguaggio lirico, genere in cui l'autrice è attiva, così in Haratsichwili si trovano dinamiche più vicine al teatro, altro suo medium artistico. Il potenziale innovativo della scrittura transculturale²⁰ non è dunque tanto legato alla scelta del genere letterario quanto a un'estetica straniante, favorita dal cambio linguistico di queste autrici (Hausbacher 2020, 120-121).

Al di là della riflessione metalinguistica e transculturale, se si considera il plurilinguismo manifesto dell'opera è interessante notare come nell'intero romanzo, che consta di più di milleduecento pagine, ricorra un'unica parola georgiana, *deda*

²⁰ Sul rapporto tra transculturalità e translinguismo si vedano Dagnino 2015; Preschl 2017; Pelloni & Voloshchuk 2023.

(mamma). Anche qui, pertanto, riemerge la riflessione sul ruolo della lingua nativa, intimamente collegata alla figura materna, che in nessun modo viene rifiutata come “lingua degli assassini”. L’accento posto sulla figura materna e sull’intimo legame madre-figlia non è certamente casuale, se si considera il fatto che i personaggi principali di questo romanzo – così come delle altre opere qui prese in esame – sono quasi esclusivamente donne, in quanto vittime maggiormente colpite dalla storia drammatica del “secolo rosso” (Haratischwili 2024, 16, 1271; Haratischwili 2021, 20, 1127) e, pertanto, quali custodi e divulgatrici ideali di memorie traumatiche (Hirsch 2012, 86-87).

4. Conclusione

Per concludere, è possibile affermare che la produzione letteraria translingue di autori e autrici con retroterra migratorio dall’Europa orientale presenta una visione alternativa della Storia nella sua costruzione letteraria della memoria: essa può essere letta come una sorta di contro-narrazione alle narrazioni mono-nazionali che ingabbiano la memoria culturale e, grazie alla sua prospettiva transculturale, rinuncia a strategie di alterizzazione o esotizzazione dell’altro (Hausbacher 2020, 111-112). La ricostruzione del passato familiare traumatico operata in questi testi, tuttavia, non è mai slegata dall’attualità, quanto piuttosto calata nel contesto delle sfide sociali contemporanee (Wutti 2022, 185, 189),²¹ quali movimenti migratori, politiche di integrazione e pratiche memoriali più o meno riuscite. La prospettiva straniante sulla storia privata, familiare e collettiva, derivante dal cambio di lingua e cultura, contribuisce in maniera significativa alla comprensione, alla narrazione e al superamento di traumi storici e individuali. Pertanto, senza mai perdere di vista il passato comune di sofferenza che ha sconvolto

²¹ Wutti si riferisce nel suo studio ai nipoti dei carinziani sloveni deportati durante la Seconda guerra mondiale, ma il discorso si può a mio avviso applicare anche ai nipoti di altre vittime dei regimi totalitari.

l'Europa nel "secolo rosso" a causa delle "forze congiunte di Hitler & Stalin", la letteratura plurilingue e transculturale dall'Europa orientale propone – e spesso raggiunge – una rinegoziazione e una riconciliazione con esperienze storiche traumatiche attraverso le forze congiunte di tradizioni culturali e letterarie condivise.

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Disappointing Expectations Intersectional Perspectives in Transcultural German Literature

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In the context of the violence against women, this elision of identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because of the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring the differences *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups, another problem of identity politics that bears of efforts to politicize violence against women
(Crenshaw 1991, 1242).

1. Declare Yourself!

Ich werde nie wissen, was es heißt, unsichtbar zu sein. Ich werde nie wissen, wie es ist, unvorsichtig sein zu können beim Küssen im Park, einfach draufloszuknutschen. Was es heißt, durch die Straßen zu streifen und nicht damit rechnen zu müssen, dass jemand im Vorbeigehen meine Haare zu berühren versucht. Wie es ist, sich nicht ständig in Selbstgesprächen zu beschwichtigen, wenn man mehrmals am Tag gefragt wird, ob man Deutsch verstehe. Mich in der Menge

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aufzulösen, ist keine Option für mich. Ich gehöre gleich mehreren Minderheiten an; das kaschieren zu wollen birgt für mich größere Gefahren, als meine Positionen zu benennen (Salzmann 2019, 13).¹

This statement, which underscores the experience of belonging to multiple minority groups and the necessity of openly declaring that belonging, appears in an essay by Sasha Marianna Salzmann, which bears the emblematic title *Sichtbar* (Visible). The essay was published in 2019 in the anthology *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare), edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah. The volume brings together essays by German authors with migrant backgrounds who speak out against the rise of right-wing extremism in Germany. This political shift is encapsulated in the instrumentalization of the term *Heimat*: a uniquely German word that is difficult to translate and, in this context, evokes an exclusive and exclusionary bond between an autochthonous community and its territory.

In Salzmann's case – born in Volgograd in 1985 – belonging to multiple minority groups refers not only to her Jewish heritage and multilingualism (she writes in German, while Russian is the language of her family and childhood), but also to her non-binary gender identity. This experience is reflected in the novels of German-speaking authors of Jewish and post-Soviet origin. Their characters often embody multiple markers of diversity. Consider, for instance, Mascha, the protagonist of *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (*All Russians Love Birch Trees*) by

¹ “I will never know what it means to be invisible. I'll never know what it's like to be able to be careless when kissing in the park, to just go for it. What it means to stroll through the streets and not have to worry about someone trying to touch my hair as I walk past. What it's like not to constantly talk to yourself when you're asked several times a day whether you understand German. Dissolving into the crowd is not an option for me. I belong to several minorities at once; trying to conceal this is more dangerous for me than stating my positions”; unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

Olga Grjasnowa (Grjasnowa 2012), or Alissa in *Außer sich (Beside Myself)* by Salzmann herself (Salzmann 2017). Throughout this essay, brief references will be made to these novels, whose protagonists embody complex identities characterized by multiple “markers of minority”.

This contribution seeks to develop a political reading of multilingual and transcultural literature, drawing inspiration from Salzmann’s essay *Sichtbar*, cited above. Her reflections serve as a point of departure for examining the concept of intersectionality, which has become central in recent decades within diversity and minority studies. In the second part of the essay, I will investigate how certain trans-cultural authors adopt and advocate for an intersectional approach to German language, an approach they actively promote within public discourse.

2. Divide and Conquer

Although Salzmann does not explicitly use the word “intersectionality” in the essay, it is clear that her reference to her identity as a complex set of characteristics that make her an uncomfortable and indecipherable individual in the eyes of the majority society, can be linked to a field of study that has been flourishing in the social sciences for some twenty-five years: I refer to the intersectional studies that arose from research that was itself “intersectional” insofar as it simultaneously explored issues related to critical race studies, gender studies, and labour law. It was in 1989 when legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw published the first of two studies dedicated to the analysis of a 1970s court case in which five black women accused their employer, General Motors, of firing them, as part of staff reduction measures, primarily for being women and black.

As Keming Yang (2024) states, Crenshaw made a powerful case for explaining Black women’s marginalized experiences because of the intersection of their race and gender, which would be ignored by the US legal system as it would only consider either race or gender separately. She referred to such ‘either/or’ reasoning as a “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). The fundamental flaw of

this framework is that the human attributes (gender, race, age, etc.) are taken as mutually exclusive; that is, when one of them is being considered, the others must be excluded (Yang 2024, 6).

What Crenshaw emphasises is a deficiency not only in the American legal system, but also in the feminist theories and racism studies of the time, which were accustomed to considering the problems arising from single axes of discrimination and not the more acute and penalising ones generated by the intersection of these axes. Since then, the category of intersectionality has enjoyed great success not only in the movement for civil rights, but also in gender studies and social theories that study the redefinition of the concept of identity in global society, in particular the strategies of marginalisation of intersectional minorities by majorities (Davis & Lutz 2024, 6).

One of those strategies is to consider a single diversity in isolation, separating it from other “markers of diversity” present in intersectional biographies. Isolating a single diversity turns it into a garrison, a bastion to be defended. In the rhetoric of right-wing populism, however, the garrison is to be defended not from the prevarications and discriminations of majorities, but from the attacks of other declared intolerant minorities.

Getting back to Salzmann’s essay, this “isolationist” tendency can be seen in the strategies used by some German politicians to win support. As concrete examples, Salzmann cites prominent politicians in Germany: Jens Spahn, currently the parliamentary group leader of the CDU/CSU in the Bundestag, and Alice Weidel, leader of Alternative für Deutschland, the second-largest party in Germany, officially classified as far-right by the German Domestic Intelligence Services in 2025. The fact that both Spahn and Weidel have openly declared their homosexuality is considered an indication of democracy in Western and liberal society and, as such, is accepted even by far-right voters, provided they continue to preach hatred and resentment against economic migrants and Muslims. Jens Spahn and Alice Weidel know very well – writes Salzmann – that with right-wing populist

slogans they can advance their careers much faster than through debates on the complex issue of multiple discrimination (Salzmann 2019, 21).

To this “divide and conquer” strategy of far-right populism – which aims to pit minorities against each other – Salzmann responds with a plea for breaking the silence and for a firm rejection of assimilation. Playing with open cards means, first and foremost, unmasking attempts at instrumentalization connected to a broader phenomenon: the reduction of complexity that dominates public discourse. On this topic, Salzmann finds support in the reflections of poet and essayist Max Czollek with whom she created a discussion forum in 2016 on redefining Jewish identity in contemporary German society.

Under the motto *Desintegriert euch!* (Disintegrate yourselves) – the title of his 2018 essay – Czollek calls on German Jews to free themselves from a stereotyped identity assigned to them by a public discourse he defines as a “Theatre of Memory”, an idea he borrows from studies dating back to the 1990s by German Canadian sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann (Bodemann 1996). On this “stage”, the image of the Jew as a descendant of Holocaust victims is performed – a role not chosen by Jews but assigned by the majority society, aimed at stabilizing “the image of the good, redeemed, normal German” (Czollek 2018, 25).

A sociologist had already given in the early 2000s a definition of the “model” Jew in Germany which fits very well with the concept of Theatre of Memory formulated by Czollek:

Highly educated and highly skilled, religious but not orthodox, or at least prepared to observe Jewish traditions again, poor and willing to integrate, largely without any ties to his land of origin, modest and grateful for the assistance given by the new society, and, above all, someone who had migrated because of anti-Semitic persecution and knew about the Holocaust and even had experienced personally (Becker 2003, 23).

It is evident that this image is bound to disappoint expectations, as it does not at all correspond to the reality of contemporary German Jewry. Today, the Jewish community in Germany largely consists of families from the former USSR, who were welcomed into the Federal Republic in the early 1990s as *Kontingentflüchtlinge* (quota refugees). The Jews who arrived from the dissolved Soviet Union at that time were Russian-speaking and predominantly non-religious. The memory of forced assimilation into Russian society – especially during the years of Stalinist terror – was just as present as the memory of the extermination camps. In fact, in a historical paradox, some of these fully Russified Jews tended to not consider themselves victims at all. On the contrary, they see themselves among the winners of the Second World War – the “Great Patriotic War” from a Soviet perspective (Belkin 2017).

To disintegrate, then, means to destabilize stereotypical perceptions of the other, sabotaging binary dynamics in which majorities are always set against minorities in isolation, and to advocate for intersectional identities: according to the aforementioned logic of “divide and conquer”, the Jew who is different from the German is distinct from the Russian speaker who is different from the German speaker, and again distinct from the sexually non-binary person who is different from the heterosexual. A politics of pseudo-integration does not provide for the inclusion of identities that intersect multiple markers of diversity.

It is evident that this critique of the separation and isolation of minorities by the majority society touches the heart of the issue of intersectionality and makes clear that an inclusive mindset within the civil rights movement has become almost a necessary path:

In their writings, the Black feminists themselves included other social groups who were unfairly treated due to their multiple identities, such as lower- or working-class people, LGBTQIA+ people, Asians and Latinos, immigrants, etc. In principle, intersectionality therefore could occur to any human group that belongs to the

intersection of two or more categories of identity, although in reality some intersectional groups are certainly more advantaged than others (Yang 2024, 11).

An intersectional perspective continues to find space within contemporary civil rights movements. This is evidenced by recent mobilizations that, originating from specific instances of racial and gender-based violence, have leveraged digital networks as global catalysts – most notably the *#BLM* (*Black Lives Matter*) and *#MeToo* movements. As Barbara Giovanna Bello has pointed out in a recent article, a lesser-known yet significant aspect of both movements is that they were initiated in the United States by Black women activists. From the outset, these activists articulated an explicitly intersectional framework in their foundational documents. For instance, in the case of Black Lives Matter, “by including transgender Black people in the participation and leading of the movement, the focus on White, cisgender, heteronormative, and sexist privilege is dismantled and broadened” (Bello 2024, 277).

Although a detailed examination of these movements’ specific developments falls outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the internet, as a medium for disseminating intersectional approaches to discrimination, presents both opportunities and contradictions. One such contradiction arises from the emphasis on emblematic figures who often reflect dominant social categories – Black men in the case of *#BLM*, and white women in the case of *#MeToo* – thus reproducing the limited visibility of statistically more represented social groups and classes (278). Nevertheless, alongside these challenges, the digital sphere appears to offer still underexplored potential: through its global and pervasive reach, the emergence of individual narratives recounting cases of intersectional discrimination and abuse, and the consequent formation of alliances among marginalized groups, represent a tangible avenue for advancing intersectional justice. For example, by connecting the two movements, it would be possible to give voice to the experiences of real people in which “racism and sexism readily intersect” (Crenshaw 1991, 1242).

The strategy of alliance among minorities – based on the premise that after all, every individual exists at the intersection of multiple minority identities – is also the path pursued by transcultural German-language authors such as Czollek and Salzmänn. The alliance approach fosters a solidarity-based dialogue among minorities, but also helps to reveal shared axes of marginalization, thereby allowing political struggle to focus on issues that cut across individual minority groups. More broadly, the Jewish-German authors oppose the cultural approach of “either/or”, which renders minorities captive to externally imposed identities.

3. Battleground Language

Intersectionality is a political battleground for transcultural literature that is also reflected – not least – in a reflection on the social consequences of language use. As evidence of this it is worth mentioning once again the forum on contemporary Judaism by Salzmänn and Czollek. In their report at the conclusion of the discussions, they read:

Während wir im Laufe des Kongresses immer wieder mit der polemischen Setzung von ‘wir’ (Jüd*innen) und ‘ihr’ (Deutschen) operierten, zielte das letzte Podium unter dem Titel „Wer sind wir und wenn ja, wer?“ zugleich auf eine Dekonstruktion eben jener Wir-Kategorie. Damit sollte nicht nur ein weiteres Mal auf die Vielfalt innerhalb der jüdischen Gemeinschaft verwiesen werden, es ging uns darum, die Setzung des ‘Wir’ als artifizuell und strategisch zu unterstreichen. Denn letztlich läuft die Gegenüberstellung von Jüd*innen und Deutschen dem zuwider, was wir als Queerness oder Komplexität identitärer Positionen behaupteten (Czollek & Salzmänn 2016, 14).²

² “During the course of the congress, we repeatedly operated with the polemical distinction between ‘we’ (Jews) and ‘you’ (Germans), but the final panel, titled *Who are we, and if so, who?*, aimed precisely at deconstructing that very ‘we’ category. The goal was not only to once again highlight the diversity within the Jewish community, but also to

Language is a tool that must be handled with extreme care, as the writer must strive to avoid externally imposed identity attributions, and avoid falling into the trap of reproducing the logic of simplification and / or isolation through binary oppositions – typical features of the manipulative strategies employed by populist movements.

Criticism of personal pronouns, symbols of belonging to totalizing identities, is also found in many pages of novels in transcultural literature. Consider only, a dialogue between Masha, the protagonist of Olga Grjasnowa's *All Russian Love Birch Trees* – with whom the author shares some biographical traits – and Daniel, a German friend of Masha. In a conversation at a party, the friend describes himself as anti-German, and by that he means pro-Jewish, pro-American and, in a sense, radical leftist (Grjasnowa 2012, 62):

“Du, ich stehe voll hinter euch” sagte Daniel. “Hinter wem?” “Na euch eben”. [...] “Welches euch?” Ich schrie beinahe, ein paar Leute aus der Schlange drehten sich um. “Hinter Israel, natürlich” “Hast du gerade noch so die Kurve gekriegt?” “Du bist gemein. Was hältst du von der Situation? Ich meine du als Jüdin” “Daniel, lass mich mit dem Scheiß in Ruhe. Was willst du überhaupt von mir? Ich lebe in Deutschland. Ich habe einen deutschen Pass. Ich bin nicht Israel. Ich lebe nicht dort, und ich habe auch keinen besonderen Draht zur israelischen Regierung” (63).³

emphasize that the construction of ‘we’ is artificial and strategic. Ultimately, the opposition between Jews and Germans runs counter to what we assert as queerness or the complexity of identity positions”.

³ “‘You, I’m right behind you’, said Daniel. ‘Behind who?’ ‘Well, you guys’. [...] ‘Which you?’ I almost shouted, a few people in the queue turned around. ‘Behind Israel, of course’. ‘Did you just get your act together?’ ‘You’re mean, what do you think of the situation? I mean you as a Jew’. ‘Daniel, leave me alone with this shit, what do you want from me anyway? I live in Germany. I have a German passport. I am not Israel. I don’t live there, and I have no special connection to the Israeli government’”.

Again, there is a rejection of assimilation to “we Jews”, especially since Mascha’s family biography, as Jewish refugee from Azerbaijan, does not allow for an identification with Israel. On the contrary, the protagonist’s character is explicitly constructed around the frustration of others’ expectations, including the readers, precisely because in her biography the contradictions and inconsistencies accumulate (Vangi 2021, 191): in her training as an interpreter she decides to learn the study of the Arabic language and not the Hebrew language, despite bright career prospects she accepts the proposal of a menial job, and the journey she undertakes to Israel is not dictated by the need to find a cultural identity, but to escape the pain caused by the loss of her fiancé (Grjasnowa 2012, 223).

Playing with personal pronouns, questioning them, implies a willingness to make the subject-person unclassifiable. It rejects not only belonging to one culture of origin, but also to gender categories. Emblematic is the example of Alissa, the protagonist of Sasha Marianna Salzmann’s *Außer sich*, who likes to call herself Ali, cultivating ambivalence with respect to her identity. She is a young Russian German woman, Jewish and nonbinary. After the disappearance of her twin brother Anton, Ali searches for him for a long time and, having failed to find him, decides to “recreate” her brother in her own body by injecting herself with testosterone. However, Ali is not transformed into a man, but rather into an unclassifiable being. In an emblematic passage, she/he slips out of her body, observing a conversation with her mother from the outside, oscillating between times, bodies (Salzmann 2017, 272). The rejection of the binary opposition of categories, taken to extremes, becomes a rejection of any category of identification. Much more desirable appears to the character to float in a dimension of transit without necessarily having the intent to land on the outcome of a sexed body: “Ich fühle mich unfähig, verbindliche Aussagen zu treffen, eine Perspektive einzunehmen, eine Stimme zu entwickeln, die nur die meine wäre und für mich sprechen würde. Ein festgeschriebenes Я”⁴ (Salzmann 2017, 274). The liberation of an (id)entity

⁴ “I feel incapable of making binding statements, of adopting a perspective, of developing

is symbolized at the linguistic level by the abandonment of the personal pronoun: the Russian first person singular pronoun Я, homophone with the German “ja”, symbolizes the rejection of any identification in a body, whether female or male. In this radical rejection of the identity of a sexed body, there are consonances not only with the intersectional paradigm, but also with the research of the Feminist Posthumanities, which identifies phallo-logocentrism as a system of oppression, proposing the overcoming of exclusively anthropomorphic and gender-binary conceptions of living beings.⁵

The critique of language thus conveys in these authors a critique of the “monopolies” of social discourse, articulated according to individual axes of discrimination, which impose their own interpretation of the other that does not correspond to the multifaceted reality of individuals conceived as intersectional.

The German language itself represents a monopoly of a culture that wants to be autochthonous and monolithic and that does not yet seem to have developed a multilingual sensibility. The battle for a polyphonic conception of German is conducted with militant fervour especially by German-speaking authors of the so-called second or third generation with migrant backgrounds. On the question of language and public discourse is centred entirely, for example, Kübra Gümüşay’s influential reflection in the 2020 essay *Sprache und Sein* (Language and Being). To speak out, then, means to claim the right to uniqueness and to the complexity of individuals who seek to free themselves from others’ definitions. It is interesting

a voice that would be mine alone and speak for me. A codified Я”.

⁵ In particular, Patricia MacCormack has deconstructed sexual desire, usually informed by an isomorphic binarism that defines and delimits the male body as well as the female body, crystallizing them into a reified object. The subject, on the other hand, should not be defined: “To define the subject is a humanist project, to understand the subject as an expressive and affected conduit in perpetual relations with other expressive and affected entities is instead the goal of the new theoretical approaches of Feminist Posthumanities” (MacCormack 2018, 38).

to note that this liberation, in the cases described by multilingual writers, occurs through a mode of interpersonal communication that is open and sincere: telling one's own story – finally outside of pre-established frameworks or imposed formats – has a cathartic effect, especially when the listeners are someone capable of understanding because they have experienced similar forms of marginalization (Gümüşay 2020, 66).

The web, similarly to what happens in the United States, appears to offer a space of resonance for the diverse voices of global society. Austrian journalist of Bosnian origin Melisa Erkurt has examined, for instance, the case of the hashtag *#MeTwo*, which – through a clever play on words referencing the most widely known protest movement – was launched in German-speaking countries in 2018. *#MeTwo* gave voice to the discomfort experienced by individuals with migrant backgrounds when faced with situations of discrimination, including subtle or implicit forms of racism.

Beyond the success of sharing similar experiences, the hashtag also enabled users to engage in creative self-expression, particularly through the use of self-ironic and inventive language. Migrants shared neologisms, linguistic creations in German that reflected their unique deviations from standard usage and their rich contaminations with other languages spoken in their communities (Erkurt 2020, 58-78).

New spaces of communication thus allow for the recognition of the intersectional nature of language itself, which increasingly reflects the plurality of voices and accents of its new speakers and writers. Second- and third-generation individuals with migrant backgrounds feel the need to reclaim the German language – a language in which they have often felt like guests – by enriching it with their lived experience of intersectional otherness. In doing so, they contribute to the emergence of a “new language,” one that resonates both publicly and symbolically with their intersectional identities.

This enrichment does not end in the creation of hybrid neologisms or the integration into German of borrowings from other languages, but is, in a more profound

way, a conception of language that arises from the experience of those who express themselves in different languages and cross the boundaries between them on a daily basis, feeling the need not to decide for one language and claiming the need to express themselves, depending on their needs and moods, in one or the other language, sometimes contaminating them.

This experience of translingualism is well exemplified, according to Gümüşay, by the writing practice of some transcultural authors, not only German-speaking, who take advantage, for example, of self-translation that is often a rewriting of the text or of playing with signifiers through the insertion of untranslated words and expressions from other languages into German (Gümüşay 2020, 26-33). That this experience of language also has a socio-political implication is well understood by the author:

Wir Kinder, die in verschiedenen Sprachen leben, sehen Mauern, die sich durch unsere Gesellschaft ziehen, die für die meisten Menschen, die ausschließlich die dominierende Sprache sprechen, vermutlich nicht sichtbar sind. [...] Wir leben auf beiden Seiten der Mauer, wechseln hin und her und hoffen, die auf der einen Seite können sehen, was auf der anderen Seite geschieht. Und umgekehrt. Wir tragen Dinge von hier nach dort, wir laufen, wir erklären. Irgendwann sind wir erschöpft, doch wir wissen auch, dass wir nur auf beiden Seiten in unserer Vollständigkeit existieren können. Dass wir alle unsere Sprachen brauchen, um zu sein (34).⁶

⁶ “We children, who live in different languages, see walls that run through our society that are probably not visible to most people who speak only the dominant language. [...] We live on both sides of the wall, switching back and forth and hoping that those on one side can see what is happening on the other. And viceversa. We carry things from here to there, we walk, we explain. At some point we are exhausted, but we also know that we can only exist in our completeness on both sides. That we all need our languages in order to exist”.

Once again, the metaphor of the (in)visibility of barriers erected between linguistic identities comes into play. These barriers are not even perceived by the majority but are very clearly felt and overcome by multilingual speakers through their daily use of two or more languages. Giving visibility to the multilingual reality of everyday life in Germany is practically revolutionary in a society that still perceives itself as predominantly monolingual in its literary tradition and in key areas of cultural transmission, such as the education system (Grjasnowa 2021, 38-40).

Furthermore, in reclaiming the right to ambiguity and constant oscillation between idioms Gümüşay advocates the overcoming of binary opposition even at the linguistic level. Against the normative character of a language codified in a grammar and spoken with a single accent, transcultural authors claim an intrinsically plural and polyphonic German that, as a medium forged by intersectional biographies, can rightfully call itself intersectional.

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Multilingualism, Identity, and Language Ideologies: Insights from the globale°-Polyphonie Cooperation

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1. Introduction

In recent years, it seems that writers dealing with stories of transnationality and multilingualism have claimed their space in the German-speaking literary market. One of the highlights was Saša Stanišić's win of the German Book Prize 2019 for his book *Herkunft (Where you come from)*, which deals with questions of migration and origin. In a German-speaking context, texts by authors with a transcultural biographical background were categorized as literature of a second class, not being recognized by literary critics or by media focusing on cultural life (*Feuilleton*) as in literary studies. Historically intertwined with the political events of workers coming to Germany from e.g. Turkey and elsewhere, the literature produced by those with said background was classified as "Guest worker literature"

¹ Paragraphs 1. (Introduction) and 2.1. were written by Daniel Schmidt; paragraphs 2. to 4.1. were written by Ramona Pellegrino, while paragraph 3 was co-written with David Pappalardo; finally, paragraphs 4.2. to 5. were composed by the latter.

(*Gastarbeiterliteratur*) (Amodeo 1996). The discourse and conversation evolved since then and topics of polyphonic writings in different contexts shape not only literary studies, but literature itself.

This paper aims to lay out the plan of the synergy between the *globale°* festival for border-crossing literature in Bremen, Germany, and the Research Center Polyphonie at the Universities Genoa and Catania, Italy. The cooperation, detailed in the following pages, focuses on topics of multilingualism and literary creativity, and seeks to connect cultural praxis and academic thinking to broaden dialogues and open new perspectives on contemporary issues of polyphony and writing. Since both pillars do not exist in a vacuum and can benefit from each other, this cooperation represents a best practice example for interdisciplinary research. For this paper, the research questions in the Center are:

- How do multilingual authors writing in German navigate issues of agency, identity, and solidarity in the face of hegemonic language ideologies?
- What is the contribution of *globale°* in such a debate?

Over the course of the next chapters, the cooperation between *globale°* and Polyphonie is explained, before, based on examples drawn of said cooperation, questions of language ideologies are discussed with examples from interviews with writers Katja Petrowskaja and Marjana Gaponenko. This is not accidental, but rather selected due to the pressing issue of the Russian and Ukrainian language, which happens against the backdrop of the full-on invasion in Ukraine by Russia. In this case, political events also shape questions of literary production which are illustrated in this paper.

2. The *globale°*-Polyphonie Cooperation

In 2023, a collaboration was initiated between the literary festival *globale°* and the research network Polyphonie (cf. Pellegrino et al. 2025; Schmidt et al. 2025).²

² See also the joint website of the collaboration: <https://globale-polyphonie.de/> [06/06/2025].

This partnership represents an innovative interdisciplinary approach that addresses the future challenges facing German Studies in the context of multilingualism, migration, and cultural forms of expression. The primary aim of the collaboration is to foster long-term, transnational scholarly exchange between the fields of culture and academia on topics such as multilingualism, border-crossing, and literary and cultural transfer. The following sections provide a brief overview of the festival and the research center.

2.1. globale° – Festival for Border-Crossing Literature

In 2007, the first globale° festival for transcultural contemporary literature, its title at that time, took place at the Shakespeare company Bremen. Organized by journalist Libuše Černá and Wolfgang Schlott, president of P.E.N. exile, authors Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Artur Becker and Marica Bodrožić were invited to talk about questions of writing in German and not in their mother tongues, being recognized by the literary market and their individual understanding of being an author.³ The discussion was lively and fruitful, all three authors claiming to be seen as 'German writers' without any other labels.

After the first edition of globale°, the festival grew and broadened its spectrum. Nowadays, the festival takes up one week and consists not only of readings, but also of symposia, panel discussions and a program for young readers (young globale°) as well. Globale° played an integral part in the application of Bremen as a UNESCO City of Literature, which the city was eventually awarded in 2023.

The term border-crossing has since widened and does not only include writers from transnational backgrounds, but also subjects of gender, (East-)Germany, class and politics. It has been organized by the club globale e.V. since 2013. The

³ For more information as well as all the programmes so far see the globale° website at globale-literaturfestival.de/en.

festival has had a connection to universities and the academic world for more than half of its lifetime. Already in its second year, the festival worked together with the Jacob's University Bremen where Immacolata Amodeo served as professor for literature. Together with her staff, she not only helped organizing the festival, but also published three volumes of books focusing on the writers and their topics attending the festival (2009, 2010, 2011). After the departure of Prof. Amodeo, the University of Bremen came into play with Elisabeth Arend, Professor for transnational literary studies, as the bridge between festival and academia. She implemented a globale° seminar where students worked on the books at each festival, visited the festival, wrote reviews and conducted interviews with the authors, which were then published on the platform blogsatz.org. After Prof. Arend's retirement, Karen Struve, Professor for romance language and literary studies, took over, with Prof. Arend remaining in the festival's team. As of now, the festival is organized by the club, the University of Bremen and Theater Bremen. As one of the city's main international cultural institutions, the festival holds connections to many partners outside Germany, e.g. Ukraine (Centre Gedankendach), Czech Republic (Czech Literary Center), the Netherlands (Netherlands Embassy), USA (Dickinson College).

2.2. Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben

Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben (Polyphony. Multilingualism_Creativity_Writing) is a permanent international research project that originated from a 2009 workshop attended by Italian and Austrian scholars. The project systematically investigates the complex interconnections between multi-lingualism and creativity in writing from an interdisciplinary perspective, with particular attention to the following disciplines: biographical research, multi-lingualism stud-

ies, neurolinguistics, applied linguistics, translation studies, literary studies, comparative literature, media and communication studies, foreign and second language didactics.

The Polyphonie-project seeks to explore the nuanced relationship between individual/societal multilingualism and creativity, with a particular emphasis on literary creativity. The first outcomes of the initiative were published in Bürger-Koftis et al. (2010). These initial contributions laid the foundation for a broader scientific endeavour, culminating in the launch of the web portal Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben⁴ in 2012, and the establishment of the inter-university research center POLYPHONIE⁵ in 2018, jointly coordinated by the Universities of Genoa and Catania (Italy).

A central component of the Polyphonie-project is the collection and dissemination of language-biographical interviews, conducted primarily in audio format and, in selected cases, as video recordings. A key consideration in the preparation phase is the choice of interview format – whether to adopt a narrative, a segmented structure, or a hybrid model –⁶ depending on the specific objectives of the inquiry. In any case, the interview protocols are designed to elicit detailed linguistic and cultural biographies, with a particular emphasis on language biographies (see e.g. Franceschini 2010; Busch 2013; Luppi & Thüne 2022). This approach aims

⁴ <https://www.polyphonie.at> [06/06/2025]. The web portal Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben is a platform that offers an opportunity for publishing articles, but it is also a multilingual portal which offers the support of “collective intelligence” (Malone & Bernstein 2015) by bringing together both primary and secondary material on the subject.

⁵ <https://www.polyphonie-centroricerca.it/> [06/06/2025].

⁶ On the different types of qualitative interviews, see <https://methodenzentrum.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/e-learning/qualitative-erhebungsmethoden/qualitative-interviewforschung/unterschiedliche-formen-qualitativer-interviews/> [06/06/2025].

to offer a comprehensive view of the language socialization processes experienced by writers, beginning with early language acquisition through caregivers (so-called “motherese” or *Mutterisch*),⁷ and continuing through the development of one or more first languages via informal and formal learning environments. The interviews further explore the acquisition of additional languages in later life – both second and foreign languages – and the continued processes of learning and using these languages, particularly in written form.

Special attention is devoted to the language biographies of authors who write in German, with the aim of examining the role of multilingualism in their personal narratives and literary production. Through this focus, the interviews contribute to a nuanced understanding of the linguistic socialization of multilingual writers and the significance of language in shaping their identities and creative expression.

3. Language ideologies and Biographical Narratives: a Qualitative Perspective

In their study on identity construction strategies in biographical-narrative interviews, Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann (2002, 20) highlight the central role of autobiographical narration in shaping individual lives. Through narrative, speakers can convey experiences, evaluations, and themes that are meaningful for them, while also articulating their worldview. This function becomes particularly salient when individuals reflect on their relationship to the languages that constitute their linguistic repertoire (cf. Busch 2013).

To explore how multilingual authors writing in German negotiate issues of agency, identity, and solidarity within the framework of hegemonic language-related ideologies, this study draws on the concept of language ideologies.

Michael Silverstein, arguably the first scholar who provided a definition of language ideologies, defines these as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by

⁷ See <https://dorsch.hogrefe.com/stichwort/motherese> [06/06/2005].

users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Silverstein 1979, 193). According to Paul Kroskrity, language ideologies are “multiple, context-bound, and necessarily constructed from the sociocultural experience of the speaker” (Kroskrity 2010, 192), thus suggesting that the experience of speakers shapes their beliefs about language, language practices and language use. Language ideologies, in other words, consist in “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interest” (Irvine 1989, 255).

However, the empirical observation of such ideologies in human interactions poses a substantial challenge. Hence, Kathryn Woolard argues that language ideologies can be embodied and made visible in communication practices carried out by speakers. For example:

a listener’s shudder upon hearing a grating vowel pronunciation, a student’s blush at an instructor’s attempt to use youth slang, or a speaker’s own stammering shame at speaking a language variety she believes she controls imperfectly (Woolard 2020, 2).

In sum, “[i]deologies are morally and politically loaded because implicitly or explicitly they represent not only how language is, but how it ought to be” (ibid.).

Up to date, the concept of language ideologies has been widely used as a both theoretical and analytical tool to explore the views on language practices by speakers belonging to different socio-cultural communities. Only more recently it has, however, been explicitly used to study the beliefs of individuals in their own linguistic biographies.

Therefore, this paper adopts the concept of language ideologies as developed by Busch (2013, 2015; Spitzmüller et al. 2021). As Busch explains, “[I]n linguistic ideologies are used to construct social, ethnic, national and other affiliations and exclusions. They have a major influence on whether we feel that a language we

speak brings respect, or whether we try to hide it from others or even to get rid of it” (Busch 2015, 8).

Busch’s reflections on language ideologies, linguistic categorization, and the power asymmetries embedded in and expressed through language – especially as they manifest in contexts of migration – provide a valuable analytical lens for interpreting the language-biographical interviews collected as part of the Polyphonie-project (see § 2.2). These interviews foreground the experiential and subjective dimension of language, conceptualized by Busch (2015) as *Spracherleben* (lived experience of language). This is especially relevant here, as in recounting their linguistic trajectories, speakers reflect not only on their attitudes and practices, but also on the impressions and emotions associated with the languages in their repertoire. Regarding language attitudes, Busch notes:

Personal attitudes to language are largely determined by the value ascribed to a language or language variety in a particular social space. [...] this means that the restrictive or exclusionary power of linguistic categorizations is at its most noticeable when language is not available as a matter of course, for example when people are not acknowledged (or do not perceive themselves) as legitimate speakers of a particular language or way of speaking. This may happen [...] also when spaces that were familiar to them are reconfigured, and as a result change their linguistic regime within a short space of time. Such situations can arise when state borders are redrawn or radical political changes occur, bringing a re-evaluation of linguistic ideologies (Busch 2015, 8-9).

Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine following the Russian invasion in February 2022, it becomes especially relevant to examine how Ukrainian authors articulate their linguistic attitudes toward the Russian language. This contribution focuses on two interviews with two Ukrainian-born writers who work in German – Marjana Gaponenko and Katja Petrowskaja – and explores how their language ideologies emerge through biographical interviews conducted within

the framework of the literary festival *globale°*, in collaboration with the Polyphonie-project.

The choice of these two authors is grounded mainly in linguistic-biographic and literary reasons. Gaponenko and Petrowskaja are among the most prominent contemporary German-language writers of Ukrainian origin, and their works engage deeply with themes of memory, identity, and multilingualism, which makes them particularly relevant to an inquiry into language ideologies. Moreover, their active involvement in *globale°* as invited guests and participants in public dialogues provides a unique opportunity to analyze their reflections within a transdisciplinary space that bridges artistic practice and academic discourse. Their dual positioning – as literary figures and as contributors to the *globale°*-Polyphonie collaboration – makes them especially suited to examining how language attitudes are shaped, challenged, and renegotiated in times of geopolitical crisis.

The interviews were analyzed using a qualitative-interpretative approach that combines elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Thematic Analysis (TA), allowing for an exploration of both individual experiences and recurring patterns across the narratives.

4. Language Ideologies in Interviews with German-Speaking Authors: Two Examples

The following sections present two case studies that illustrate how language ideologies are reflected and negotiated in the autobiographical narratives of multilingual authors. Drawing on interview excerpts, the analysis highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and political context. While both writers share a Ukrainian background and a strong presence in contemporary German-language literature, their linguistic attitudes reveal notably different responses to the ongoing war and to the role of Russian in their personal and creative lives.

4.1. Marjana Gaponenko

Marjana Gaponenko was born in 1981 in Odesa, Ukraine, where she spent her childhood and youth. Her family background reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the post-Soviet space: her mother is from Vladivostok and her father from Georgia. Russian was the language spoken at home, while Ukrainian was part of her formal education at school. Gaponenko studied German at Odesa University, and began writing poetry in German early on. Her linguistic and cultural border crossings inform much of her work, which often engages with themes of identity and belonging.

Her literary breakthrough came with the novel *Wer ist Martha?* (2012), which received widespread acclaim and earned her the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis, a prestigious award that honours authors whose first language is not German, and who have made a significant contribution to German-language literature (cf. e.g. Occhini 2025).

Gaponenko was a guest of the literary festival globale° in 2016 and returned in 2024 to take part in a reading session organized within the framework of the globale°-POLYPHONIE conference on 18th July.⁸ On that occasion, she was interviewed by Libuše Černá as part of a dialogue addressing the challenges – and at times the perceived impossibility – of writing in times of war.⁹

In the first excerpt, Gaponenko conveys her perception that, in light of recent events, the Russian language has become untenable as a means of communication for her:

Marjana Gaponenko: Ich hatte oft einen Traum als Kind und in dieser Phase, wo ich Deutsch gelernt habe. Ich habe mir vorgestellt: So, jetzt kannst du diese paar

⁸ See <https://globale-polyphonie.de/programm/> (06/06/2025).

⁹ The interview is available in the interview database hosted on the web portal Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben (see § 2.2).

Brocken Deutsch in meinem Halbschlummer, ich habe mir vorgestellt – das war etwas Schönes sogar –, dass ich in der Zeit zurückreise und irgendwie Offiziere anspreche und sage: Bitte, tut das nicht. Das ist völlig surreal, eigentlich. Das ist so eine absurde Vorstellung. Kann man natürlich (nicht). Man kann nicht mit Unmenschen reden. Genauso wie ich jetzt mit den Russen nicht unbedingt über solche Themen diskutieren würde auf Russisch, obwohl ich es könnte. Irgendwo ist so eine Grenze überschritten, da versteht man, man kann mit der Sprache nichts mehr erreichen, gar nichts.¹⁰

Gaponenko's reflections underscore the symbolic burden that can come to weigh on a language in the context of political violence and war. Despite her fluency in Russian and its status as her first language, she describes a point at which *eine Grenze ist überschritten* (a boundary has been crossed), rendering the language ineffective or even inappropriate for certain forms of communication. Her reluctance to use Russian to discuss ethical or historical questions with Russians, even though she could (*obwohl ich es könnte*), suggests a disillusionment with the communicative potential of the language in specific contexts. This reveals the extent to which language ideologies, as defined by Busch (2015), are not only tied to social and political power structures, but also deeply entangled with personal experiences, moral boundaries, and the perceived (in)efficacy of language. Russian, in this instance, becomes ideologically marked not only as the language

¹⁰ "Marjana Gaponenko: I often had a dream as a child, and during that phase when I was learning German. I imagined – half-asleep – 'Now you know a few scraps of German', and I pictured myself – actually, it was even something beautiful – traveling back in time and somehow speaking to officers, saying: 'Please, don't do this'. It's completely surreal, really. Such an absurd idea. Of course you can't. You can't talk to people who have lost their humanity. Just like I wouldn't necessarily discuss such topics with Russians today in Russian, even though I could. At some point, a boundary is crossed, and you realize that language can't achieve anything anymore, absolutely nothing." (if not specified otherwise, translations are by the article's authors.)

of the aggressor, but also as a language that, in the speaker's experience, no longer offers a viable medium for negotiation or resistance.

In the second excerpt, Gaponenko reflects on the evolving dynamics of her linguistic identity and language use amid the ongoing conflict:

Marjana Gaponenko: [...] inzwischen bin ich mir nicht ganz sicher, was meine Denksprache ist. Ich kann mich selbst nicht mehr so gut treffen. Also ich koche inzwischen so stark in diesem Kriegssüppchen. Ich lese auch hauptsächlich ukrainische Nachrichten und kommuniziere eher mit Ukrainern. Und wenn ich mir selbst im Kopf zuhöre, glaube ich, dass ich ja, dass das Deutsche nicht mehr so wichtig ist, dominant ist. Aber es ist auf jeden Fall meine Arbeitssprache. Ich werde alle meine Bücher auf Deutsch schreiben.

Libuše Černá: Das ist jetzt die Entwicklung in den vergangenen zwei Jahren. Oder war das schon vorher?

Marjana Gaponenko: In den vergangenen zehn Jahren, würde ich sagen. Es wurde immer mehr und mehr. Und ich höre mich im Kopf eigentlich nur auf, zum Glück, auf Ukrainisch schimpfen, nicht mehr auf Russisch. Das ist irgendwie so, funktioniert nicht mehr.¹¹

¹¹ "Marjana Gaponenko: [...] by now, I'm not entirely sure what my thinking language is. I can't really reach myself that well anymore. I feel like I'm steeped in this war broth, so to speak. I mainly read Ukrainian news and mostly communicate with Ukrainians. And when I listen to my own thoughts, I think, yes, German is no longer so important, no longer dominant. But it is still my working language. I will write all my books in German. Libuše Černá: That's a development from the past two years, right? Or was it already the case before? / Marjana Gaponenko: I'd say it's been developing over the past ten years. It grew gradually, more and more. And when I hear myself swearing in my head, luckily, it's only in Ukrainian now – not in Russian anymore. Somehow, that just doesn't work anymore."

Gaponenko expresses uncertainty about her “thinking language” (*Denksprache*), signalling a shift in her inner language repertoire shaped by the ongoing war. Her increased engagement with Ukrainian media and communication primarily in Ukrainian suggests a realignment of linguistic allegiance, which is emblematic of how language ideologies operate within socio-political contexts. This shift underscores the powerful role of language ideologies in shaping not only external language practices but also internal linguistic subjectivities: Gaponenko’s distancing from Russian as a language of thought and emotional expression reveals the deep affective and symbolic disassociation from Russian, fueled by her ideological repudiation of Russia’s actions in the current war. Gaponenko’s detachment from Russian as the language in which she processes thoughts and emotions is underscored by the following remark: “And when I hear myself swearing in my head, luckily, it’s only in Ukrainian now – not in Russian anymore” (*ich höre mich [...] nur auf, zum Glück, auf Ukrainisch schimpfen, nicht mehr auf Russisch*). Given the deeply emotional nature of swearing, this statement reflects not only an affective reorientation, but also a profound symbolic rupture with Russian.

4.2. Katja Petrowskaja

Daughter of the historian Svitlana Vasylivna Petrowska and the literary scholar Miron Petrowski, Katja Petrowskaja was born in Kyiv in 1970. She was brought up in a Russian-speaking household and received her early education in a Russian-language school in Kyiv. However, while Russian is the primary language of her upbringing, Petrowskaja's biography is marked by a variety of multilingual and transnational educational experiences: she studied Literary Studies in Tartu, where Jurij Lotman taught, obtained a scholarship from the University of Stanford (USA) and a doctorate in Moscow. Eventually, she moved to Berlin in 1999, where she nowadays lives with her family and works as a journalist, literary scholar and writer.

While writing newspaper columns in German – most notably for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* – Katja Petrowskaja published her literary debut *Vielleicht Esther* (*Maybe Esther*) in 2014. This work, a collection of short prose texts, explores the impact of twentieth-century history within the author's family genealogy. *Vielleicht Esther* was received with significant international approval and has since been translated into over thirty languages. Petrowskaja received the Ingeborg-Bachmann Prize in 2013, widely regarded as one of the most prestigious literary awards in the German-speaking area, for its eponymous chapter, *Vielleicht Esther*, which had been published before the full work. Additionally, she won the Premio Strega Europeo in 2015. Indeed, her debut work marked a significant turning point in her career. A few years later, she published two collections of her columns under the titles *Das Foto schaute mich an* (2022, *The Photo Was Looking at Me*) and *Als wäre es vorbei* (2025, *As Though It Were Over*). Additionally, Petrowskaja participated in the 2014 edition of *globale°*, where she was interviewed by Lore Kleinert.

David Pappalardo (author of the present section) had the chance to conduct a semi-structured linguistic-biographic interview with the author in her apartment in Berlin in December 2022. The conversation focused on Petrowskaja's linguistic background and the relationship between her lived experience of multilingualism (Busch 2015) and her writing practices, as shaped throughout her personal and professional biography.¹² In the following paragraphs, two excerpts from the interview will be, therefore, presented and commented with particular emphasis on the impact of linguistic-ideological discourses on the author's linguistic repertoire and writing process.

In reflecting on her relationship with Ukrainian, the author – herself a Russian-speaking individual born and brought up in Soviet Ukraine – expresses a critical

¹² This interview is part of the data corpus of the author's PhD dissertation. The full interview text will be published in his thesis soon with a thorough linguistic analysis and a comparison with the author's literary work.

stance towards ideologically charged conceptions of language as fixed national symbols. She positions this stance as a deliberate act of resistance against the essentialist conceptions of linguistic identity, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

Katja Petrowskaja: Ja, es ist auch ganz komisch jetzt für mich, dass ich Ukrainisch kenne. Also mein Ukrainisch ist auch nicht perfekt und ich kann zum Beispiel so wirklich wichtige Gespräche auf der Bühne nicht richtig auf Ukrainisch führen. Aber natürlich so die Alltagssprache schon, und ich kommuniziere jetzt mit sehr, sehr vielen Menschen, natürlich auf Ukrainisch. Äh, in der Familie, puh/ Aber mich zum Beispiel irritiert, wenn meine Mutter mit mir auf Ukrainisch spricht.

DP: Ah!

KP: Ich finde das nicht okay. Also, und das ist auch die Situation mit der russischen Sprache jetzt. Weil tatsächlich (.) möchte ich nicht, dass Putin von uns unsere Muttersprache wegnimmt, ja? Es reicht schon, dass er ukrainische Städte, die auch zum großen Teil Russisch gesprochen haben, zerbombt. Wir müssen ihm noch die Sprache abgeben? Das wäre wirklich eine Kapitulation für mich, ja?

DP: Mhm (bejahend)

KP: Es ist natürlich eine sehr, sehr komplexe Frage jetzt, weil für viele Ukrainer Russisch ist einfach ein rotes Tuch, obwohl auch für Teil des Landes das seine Muttersprache ist oder Teil des Lebens.¹³

¹³ “Katia Petrowskaja: Yes, it’s also quite strange for me now that I know Ukrainian. My Ukrainian isn’t perfect either and I can’t really have important conversations on stage in Ukrainian, for example. But, of course, I can have everyday conversations, and I now communicate with many, many people in Ukrainian. Uhm, in my family, phew/ But it irritates me, for example, when my mum speaks to me in Ukrainian. / DP: Uh! / KP: I don’t think that’s okay. Well, and that’s also the situation with Russian now. Because actually (.) I don’t want Putin to take our mother tongue away from us, right? It’s enough that he’s

The author's words underline the sociolinguistic consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on her everyday language practices. While Ukrainian has become more present in her daily interactions, Petrowskaja deliberately maintains the use of Russian within her most intimate family context, particularly in communication with her mother. For the author, abandoning the use of Russian in her private sphere would constitute a form of "capitulation" – a surrender to the ideological confusion of languages with national allegiance. By rejecting the notion that states possess legitimate authority over individual linguistic choices, her continued use of Russian functions as an act of sociolinguistic resistance.

The dramatic nature of such an act of resistance is, after all, clearly visible in the author's word choice, which includes such phrases as "*take away our mother tongue from us*", "*we still have to give him our language?*", "capitulation" and "red rag". The linguistic violence involved in the aggression is expressed through military metaphors, with an accentuated use of deictic pronouns that clearly depict the power dynamics involved (*our mother tongue, from us, we still have to give him, etc.*).¹⁴ The act of resisting aggression entails a refusal to acknowledge the centralisation of linguistic authority, which, in this particular instance, is attributed to the Russian regime.

Similarly, a comparable act of resistance is manifest in her debut work, *Vielleicht Esther*. The text is principally written in German, which may appear an intriguing

bombing Ukrainian cities, most of which also spoke Russian. We still have to give him our language? That would really be a capitulation for me, you know? / DP: Mhm (affirmative) / KP: It's of course a very, very complex question now, since for many Ukrainians Russian is simply a red rag, even though for part of the country it is their mother tongue or at least a part of their life."

¹⁴ See Kindrachuk 2015 on how the spread of Russian in Soviet Ukraine between the 1960s and the 1970s is connected to a political plan of russification of Ukraine, and Bo-man 2023 on how russification is problematised in Ukrainian linguistic-political discourse since its independence.

choice given that the entire book aims to reconstruct the story of the author's family, who were partly of Jewish origins and some of whose members were murdered or deported by the army of the Third Reich. Petrowskaja's decision to adopt German as her writing language for her debut work has several grounds (See Byrnes 2020), one of which is the morphological closeness of the Russian word for German to the word "mute", as the author explains:

Katja Petrowskaja: Ich meine, ich kann tausende Gründe nennen, warum ich *Esther* auf Deutsch geschrieben habe und auch diese Problematik mit Taubstummheit. [...] Taubstummheit auf Russisch ist немота ("nemota"). Also, немой ("nemoy") ist jemand, der nicht sprechen kann, und немец ("nemetz"), das ist so die Bezeichnung von Deutsch.¹⁵

Some of the relatives in *Vielleicht Esther* – the protagonist's grandfather Ozjel, who directed a school for deaf children in Kyiv, and her grandmother Rosa, who taught at a similar institution in Warsaw – were professionally engaged in deaf education. The term "deaf-mute", while now recognized as obsolete and discriminatory, remained in institutional use during the period in which Ozjel and Rosa were active. Within the narrative, muteness emerges as a metaphorical bridge between Russian and German, drawing on the etymological similarity in Russian between the words for "mute" (немо́й) and "German" (неме́ц), both of which derive from the same root. In this framework, German becomes symbolically associated with silence, i.e. with those people who do not (or cannot) speak Russian. This metaphor is further reinforced in the context of historical trauma: German is also the language of the perpetrators of Nazi violence, including the presumed

¹⁵ "Katja Petrowskaja: I mean, I can name a thousand reasons why I wrote *Esther* in German and also this problem with deaf-muteness. [...] Deaf-mute in Russian is немота ('nemota'). So немой ('nemoy') is someone who can't speak, and немец ('nemetz'), it's the word for 'German'."

murderers of the protagonist's grandmother, Esther, in Kyiv in 1941. Paradoxically, however, German is also the official language of Petrowskaja's current country of residence, and the language in which her book is written and published. German, therefore, occupies an ambivalent position in the story: it is, at once, a language of violence and loss, and one of literary expression and production.

Thus, the decision to compose a literary work in German, which centres on the narratives of her own relatives whose stories have been cancelled by the horrors of the 20th century, can be interpreted as an effort to transcend a wide-spread dichotomy between victim and aggressor languages. In this context, it is crucial to note that no language is inherently responsible for any wars; these are the actions of nations, armies, governments and people.

Petrowskaja's confrontation with language-ideological discourses – particularly those that position certain languages as inherently oppressive – distinguish her debut work. Her refusal to abandon Russian, despite its indexing as a language of political aggression, reflects a broader stance of resistance against the instrumentalization of language by authoritarian regimes. In this context, languages are not inherently aggressors or victims; rather, it is their appropriation for ideological ends that must be critically examined. Petrowskaja's literary and biographical choices thus exemplify a refusal to cede linguistic authority to political regimes that seek to employ language as a tool of hegemony.

5. Conclusions

The Russian attack on Ukraine has had a dramatic impact on Gaponenko's and Petrowskaja's linguistic repertoires. Marjana Gaponenko's reaction involves a symbolic detachment from Russian, a deeply affective response to Russia's actions in the current conflict. In contrast, Katja Petrowskaja actively opposes the view that languages ought to be regarded as representatives of nations or political

forces, by refusing to give up the use of Russian in her daily communication. While the way authors navigate issues of linguistic ideologies may vary, it is evident that their personal views and experiences exert a visible influence on their respective repertoire and, inevitably, in their writing processes. Marjana Gaponenko eschews the use of Russian, while Petrowskaja's *Maybe Esther* features mixtures of Russian and German, both languages that in the story of the protagonist's family have been employed as means of repression and violence.

In order to further investigate the interplay between language ideologies and writing processes, cooperations between culture and academia remain crucial. In this context, literary festivals such as *globale°* offer a platform for debates on how (language) ideologies contribute to expanding conflicts on (socio)linguistic levels in the lives of contemporary authors. Exploring the manifold nuances of conflicts, even those affecting language use itself, may prove helpful in uncovering possible connections between the lived experience of multilingualism and its impact on writing.

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A Messy Language

The Linguistic Conflict in Modern Lebanese Literature

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Rien n'est plus dangereux que de chercher à rompre le cordon maternel qui relie un homme à sa langue. Lorsqu'il est rompu, ou gravement perturbé, cela se répercute désastreusement sur l'ensemble de sa personnalité
(Maalouf 1998, 152).¹

1. Introduction

“Hi kifak, ça va?”. A casual phrase heard daily in Lebanon blending English, Arabic and French in a single breath. This hybrid greeting, at once intimate and expressive, captures the essence of Lebanon’s multilingual reality: a vibrant coexistence of languages that transcends mere communication and enters the realm of culture, politics and identity. The same linguistic layering that colours oral exchanges also marks the country’s visual and symbolic landscape, from shop

¹ “Nothing is more dangerous than attempting to sever the maternal bond that ties a person to their language. When this bond is broken or severely disrupted, it can have devastating effects on the entirety of their personality”; translations are by the article’s author.

names and graffiti to advertising and digital content. Yet, beyond the streets and screens, this multilingualism finds a profound echo in literature. Lebanon's multilingual reality is a cultural richness that bears the weight of colonial history, political divisions and identity conflicts. Writers in Lebanon often face the challenge of choosing a literary language, a choice that is never neutral but deeply symbolic and ideological; it is a country where Arabic, French, English and the Lebanese dialect coexist in daily life and in literary production. Even when a writer commits to one language, the presence of others continues to haunt his/her work, creating a complex interplay of linguistic influence. Thus, writing becomes a site of tension between identity, heritage, and global affiliation.

In this article we will explore how Lebanese literature, through its multilingual forms and stylistic hybridity, mirrors the fractured, plural identity of the nation. Also, we will analyze the manifestation of linguistic and cultural conflict in Lebanese literature, reflecting the larger identity crisis of the nation and languages hybridation. Whether through the deliberate use of code-switching, intertextuality, or polyglossia, Lebanese authors reinvent the act of writing as a negotiation between multiple cultural legacies. By examining selected literary texts, we aim to understand how language becomes a battlefield, a refuge, and a creative force all at once, a reflection of Lebanon's messy but generative literary space.

2. Historical Evolution of Multilingualism in Lebanon

Lebanon's story is a linguistic tapestry woven over thousands of years, shaped by countless cultures, faiths, and empires. From ancient Phoenician to Greek, Aramaic and Syriac, different languages have always lived side-by-side, creating a unique blend that defines Lebanese identity even today.

Fast forward to the French Mandate (1920-1943), French became formally established alongside Arabic, giving it a certain prestige and a sense of modernity: "Pendant cette période, le français et l'arabe sont considérés comme deux

langues officielles” (Ayoub 2022, 20-21).² After gaining independence in 1943, English gradually joined the mix, reflecting Lebanon’s growing connection to the wider world. By the time of the civil war (1975-2000s), Lebanon was truly trilingual, but this linguistic diversity also became entangled with political and religious divisions: Arabic became linked to nationalism, French to a sophisticated, cosmopolitan past, and English to economic aspirations.

So, this isn’t just about speaking multiple languages; it’s a deep-seated part of Lebanese culture, brimming with political, religious, and even ideological layers. While it has enriched writers, it has also created a fascinating internal tension, reflecting the ongoing push and pull between East and West, tradition and modernity. In essence, Lebanese multilingualism isn’t just a skill; it’s a complex, living testament to a nation constantly navigating its own voice.

3. The Crisis of Identity and the Haunting of Language

Par conséquent, quelque soit l’état de la langue, l’homme de génie est celui qui, en connaissance de cause, fait éclater la langue pour y faire passer son monde original ; c’est pourquoi son apport est indissociablement de l’ordre culturel et linguistique (Abou 1962, 363).³

Lebanon is a country of unresolved identities. The persistent question “Who am I?” posed by nearly every Lebanese individual, is rarely met with a clear or unified answer. Am I Phoenician? Arab? Mediterranean? Or simply Lebanese? Amin Maalouf famously treated these identity layers, often contradictory and overlapping, in his book *Murderous Identities*, published in 1998, where he explored the

² “During this period, French and Arabic are considered two official languages”.

³ “Therefore, regardless of the state of the language, the man of genius is the one who, knowingly, breaks open the language to let his original world shine through; this is why his contribution is inseparably both cultural and linguistic”.

complex and often destructive ways in which individual and collective identities can become sources of conflict and violence, identities that divide rather than unite, that wound rather than heal. In the Lebanese context, this crisis is not only personal or political, but it also seeps into the very act of literary creation. The plurality of languages and faiths, coupled with a volatile political landscape, has shaped a national psyche marked by instability, fragmentation, and ambivalence; this instability becomes manifest in Lebanese literature, where writing is not a neutral act, but one charged with the burden of self-definition. The Lebanese writer does not only write; he or she must first choose the language in which to write, and this choice is never innocent. Each language in Lebanon carries its own historical and ideological weight. But even once the choice is made, the struggle is far from over: the other languages continue haunting the text like echoes from a divided soul, they appear as interjections, idioms, untranslated expressions, or subtle shifts in tone. No single language seems sufficient to contain the totality of Lebanese experience. Thus, literature becomes a space of multilingual hauntings, a messy terrain where language fractures, overlaps, and reconstructs itself in an attempt to grasp the elusive nature of identity. This linguistic haunting is not a flaw; it is the very aesthetic of Lebanese literature; the messiness reflects the nation's composite reality. Writers like Amin Maalouf, Farjallah Hayek, Wajdi Mouawad and Morice Awwad among others have embraced this fragmentation as a generative force. Amine Maalouf confides in the novel *Periple de Baldassar*: "J'écris dans ma langue, mais en lettres arabes, et avec le code qui m'est propre" (Maalouf 2000, 415).⁴ This private, coded, hybrid form of expression encapsulates the creative negotiation at the heart of Lebanese writing: the need to invent a new linguistic space that can hold the weight of a fragmented identity.

⁴ "I write in my language, but in Arabic letters, and with a code of my own".

3.1. Writing as a Site of Linguistic Conflict

If identity is fractured in Lebanon, writing becomes the ultimate stage where this fracture is exposed, negotiated, and performed. Writing is, *par excellence*, the place where languages meet, resist, overlap, and challenge each other. It is not merely about linguistic plurality on the page, it is about the inner battle of the writer, pulled between multiple languages that each carry distinct emotional, cultural, and ideological resonances.

In this context, the question arises: can one truly be bilingual or multilingual in writing? Theoretical linguistics might affirm that bilingualism is the capacity to master and manipulate more than one language. But from a literary and affective standpoint, the answer is far more complex.

Maalouf has often reflected on his own position as a writer “between languages”, and his writing embodies that ethical tension. For him, French is not the language of domination but a chosen tool of mediation, a way to carry Lebanese stories to a global readership. But he refuses to let that choice result in cultural dilution. Instead, his French prose is haunted by Arabic rhythms, references, and terms, creating what we might call a francophone Levantine voice. This voluntary hybridism is markedly different from the unconscious or conflicted multilingualism seen in other Lebanese authors. Maalouf does not suffer from linguistic fragmentation; he embraces it, managing multiplicity with control and purpose. His style is smooth, but his content remains deeply layered, an elegant mask over historical trauma, displacement, and colonial entanglement.

This imbalance is not a failure; it is the very texture of writing in multilingual contexts. The Lebanese writer, even when writing fluently in French or English, may carry within a nostalgia for Arabic, its imagery, its rhythm, its oral beauty. Conversely, a writer in Arabic may long for the conciseness or cosmopolitan tone of French or English. The writer’s pen becomes a compass that spins between inherited and chosen tongues, between mother tongue and adopted idiom, between national affiliation and global aspiration. Thus, multilingualism in literature

is not only a stylistic device but an existential condition. It reveals not a mastery of languages, but rather a *tension* between them, a productive tension that gives rise to a unique literary form. Lebanese literature, in this sense, is not harmonious; it is dissonant, layered, and often contradictory. Yet it is precisely in this conflict that its richness lies.

3.2. Linguistic Grafting

In contemporary Lebanese literature, linguistic mixing is not a stylistic flourish, it is an existential necessity. It reflects the fragmented identity of the writer, and the collective memory of a country suspended between multiple heritages. This phenomenon manifests at the most fundamental level: the syntax of the sentence. A seemingly ordinary line by Farjallah Hayek offers a powerful illustration: “Mais on dirait que j’ai peur de Ammo lui-même?” (Hayek 1957, 217).⁵

At first glance, this sentence combines two languages: Lebanese Arabic dialect (“Ammo,” a familiar term for “uncle”) and standard French. Yet this is more than code-switching. The sentence reveals a hybrid syntactic structure, one that speaks to the deep cultural and linguistic layering at the heart of Lebanese identity. The word “Ammo” may seem colloquial, even affectionate, but it is rich in historical resonance; Hayek himself notes in a footnote that “Ammo” has Syriac origins as well as Arabic roots. This seemingly minor detail situates the word within a linguistic genealogy that predates the Arabization of Lebanon, calling back to a pre-Islamic, Semitic cultural memory. In a single word, the ancestral and the contemporary coexist, a reminder that in Lebanon, even everyday expressions are palimpsests of layered identities.

What is even more striking in this sentence is the invisible influence of Arabic syntax on a grammatically French construction. In everyday Lebanese Arabic, one would say: “Ammo, j’ai peur de lui?”. This structure includes a vocative object

⁵ “But it seems like I’m afraid of Ammo himself”.

("Ammo"), plus an object ("lui", him), and a present progressive verb, a double object formation that is natural in Arabic but redundant or awkward in French. By replicating this pattern, Hayek unintentionally (or perhaps deliberately) introduces a Lebanism, a uniquely Lebanese usage of French marked by Arabic grammar. This is not a mistake but a linguistic trace of identity conflict, or what Jacques Derrida might call a "fracture grammatologique",⁶ a place where language reveals its instability and multiplicity. The explanatory footnote that accompanies "Ammo" is not merely informative, it is meta-literary. It acknowledges the heterogeneous nature of the readership: is the reader Francophone? Arabophone? Diasporic? Foreign? No single group can claim exclusive access to the text. The footnote exposes the inherent incompleteness of communication in a multilingual, multi-cultural context. Lebanese writing must always negotiate meaning across borders and often resorts to self-translation or contextualization within the body of the text itself.

Ultimately, this single sentence encapsulates a core principle of Lebanese literary aesthetics: disorder is not a flaw, it is the form. The hybridity here is not decorative, it is constitutive. It gives shape to the writer's inner fragmentation, reflects the unresolved tensions of a fractured nation and resists the linguistic homogeneity often expected by literary canons. As Roland Barthes wrote, "Le texte est un tissu de citations, issues des mille foyers de la culture" (Barthes 1993, 67).⁷ In this case, Lebanese literature is a tissue of languages, memories, and resistances. The sentence by Farjallah Hayek, then, is more than a phrase: it is a

⁶ The "grammatological fracture" refers to a fundamental rupture or tear in the relationship between language, discourse, and thought, which challenges the notion of a stable difference or hierarchy among these elements. It emphasizes the difficulty or impossibility of achieving a fixed unity or totality in meaning, highlighting the concepts of *différance* and the infinite depth of the text.

⁷ "The text is a tissue of citations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture".

linguistic map of Lebanese complexity, a mirror in which language, history, and identity are entangled.

In *Le Rocher de Tanios* (1993), Amine Maalouf crafts a French-language novel that is deeply anchored in Lebanese geography, history, and orality. While the narrative unfolds within the smooth, elegant flow of literary French, the insertion of Arabic terms such as “Tanios”, “Sheikh”, and “Kechek” functions not as exotic embellishment but as an intentional gesture of cultural affirmation. Through these lexical intrusions, the author practices what we might call a voluntary hybridism, a deliberate strategy that refuses the erasure of cultural specificity within the dominant language of the former colonial power. Maalouf, who has long chosen French as his primary language of expression, does not abandon his Lebanese roots; instead, he brings them into French, forcing the language to accommodate the weight of another culture. His usage of terms such as “Sheikh” (a tribal or religious leader), or “Kechek” (a traditional fermented yogurt dish), is not translated or explained, and their meanings are left to be understood through context. This decision creates a space of opacity, a moment of resistance where the French reader is momentarily displaced, and the Lebanese reader is subtly privileged. In doing so, Maalouf subverts the typical direction of cultural translation, where peripheral identities must adapt to a central linguistic norm. Instead, he reverses the gaze: it is French that must stretch, bend, and absorb the reality of Mount Lebanon in the 19th century. This movement echoes what Édouard Glissant described as the right to opacity, the idea that cultural difference does not always need to be explained or simplified to be legitimate.

One of the most revealing strategies through which Lebanese authors navigate multilingualism is linguistic grafting, the insertion of words, expressions, or structures from one language into another, often resulting in hybrid semantic fields. This technique goes beyond simple code-switching or borrowing; it reconfigures linguistic and cultural meaning. A striking example of this appears in *Le Rocher de Tanios*, where the term “kaff” (in Lebanese Arabic) simultaneously denotes “the hand” and “the slap.” The sentence “Dans le parler des gens du pays, le

même mot, kaff, désignait parfois la main et la gifle” (Maalouf 1993, 20)⁸ reflects the dual register of the word: one referring to the body and the other to symbolic violence. Maalouf explains how feudal lords weaponized this ambiguity, turning the slap (“la gifle”) into a metaphor for dominance. “Il faut qu’un paysan ait toujours une gifle près de la nuque” (Maalouf 1993, 20),⁹ meaning that a peasant must always live in fear, shoulders lowered in submission. Here, “kaff” becomes a semantic graft, anchoring the Lebanese vernacular into the French narrative, while retaining its cultural and historical connotations. Furthermore, the author extends the metaphor when he writes that “gifle” became a shorthand for “fers, fouet, corvées” (irons, whip, chores), layering the concept with images of labour, punishment, and servitude. This grafting technique enables Maalouf to embed the Lebanese sociopolitical experience into French literary discourse, transforming language into a vehicle of historical memory and postcolonial critique.

Wajdi Mouawad’s play *Incendies* (2003) presents a monolingual theatrical text, primarily in French, characterized by a universal, poetic language that intentionally distances itself from specific local dialects or linguistic hybridity. In this context, there is no evidence of linguistic grafting – the intentional blending or insertion of elements from other languages or cultural codes. The language remains abstract and elevated, aligning with the play’s thematic focus on myth and tragedy. In contrast, Denis Villeneuve’s 2010 film adaptation of *Incendies* introduces extensive linguistic and cultural grafting, particularly through its bilingualism (French and Arabic). The cinematic version incorporates Arabic inscriptions, local idioms, graffiti, songs, and Islamic calls to prayer, deeply rooting the narrative in a realistic Lebanese context. This stylistic shift marks a significant departure from the play’s abstract language, embedding the film within a specific cultural and socio-political milieu. Additionally, the concept of phraseological tracing (*calque*

⁸ “In the local people’s speech, the same word, kaff, sometimes referred to both the hand and a slap”.

⁹ “A peasant must always have a slap ready behind the neck”.

phrastique) is relevant in this adaptation process; it involves the literal translation of fixed expressions or idioms from one language into another, preserving syntactic structure and figurative imagery. This technique further reinforces the interplay between languages and highlights the translational dynamics at work in Villeneuve's cinematic interpretation.

The interplay between linguistic form and sociopolitical context in both the play and its cinematic adaptation reveals a profound reliance on culturally coded expressions rooted in Lebanon's historical trauma. A central scene features the protagonist Nawal recounting a harrowing experience aboard a bus, during which she escapes death by asserting,

NAWAL. J'étais dans l'autobus, Sawda, j'étais avec eux ! Quand ils nous ont arrosés d'essence j'ai hurlé: "Je ne suis pas du camp, je ne suis pas une réfugiée du camp, je suis comme vous, je cherche mon enfant qu'ils m'ont enlevé!"

Alors ils m'ont laissée descendre, et après, après, ils ont tiré, et d'un coup, d'un coup vraiment, l'autobus a flambé, il a flambé avec tous ceux qu'il y avait dedans, il a flambé avec les vieux... (Mouawad 2003, 72).¹⁰

This utterance functions through parallelism and anaphora, emphasizing both syntactic structure and ideological distancing. The negation ("Je ne suis pas du camp", "I'm not...") signals religious and national identity boundaries, implicitly contrasting Christian Lebanese identity with Palestinian Muslim refugee status. The phrase encapsulates a cultural code comprehensible primarily to a Lebanese audience, invoking memories of the civil war and the notorious practice of "murder

¹⁰ "NAWAL. I was on the bus, Sawda, I was with them! When they doused us with gasoline, I screamed: 'I'm not from the camp, I'm not a refugee from the camp, I'm like you, I'm looking for my child who was taken from me!' So they let me get off, and then, then they opened fire, and suddenly, really suddenly, the bus went up in flames – it went up in flames with everyone inside, it burned with the old people...".

based on ID card". This is mirrored in the film's translation of the statement to "Massihiye – ana massihiye" (Villeneuve 2010),¹¹ which reconfigures the original negative formulation into an affirmative declaration of religious identity, again employing anaphora. Both expressions reflect the existential stakes of identity during the Lebanese Civil War, especially in relation to the bus massacre of April 13, 1975, often cited as the conflict's ignition point, where Kataeb militants killed Palestinian civilians. Thus, the dialogue operates on two registers: as a narrative device revealing personal trauma and as a symbolic reenactment of collective memory, illustrating how linguistic performance and historical violence are deeply intertwined in Lebanese cultural production.

In theirs *Incendies*, both Wajdi Mouawad and Denis Villeneuve explore identity as a fragmented construct shaped by memory, language, and the violence of historical erasure. The play constructs identity through denial and ambiguity, emphasizing what remains unspoken rather than what is named an aesthetic of silence that mirrors the trauma of identification in a sectarian and war-torn context. In contrast, the film adaptation undertakes a process of cinematic grafting: what the play implies, the film explicitly reveals, using bilingual realism, French and Arabic, to give voice to buried identities and hidden histories. This linguistic shift marks a crucial movement from theatrical abstraction to visual and cultural specificity, turning a French-language play about Lebanon into a hybrid cinematic object grounded in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Mouawad's deliberate use of purified French in the play functions to universalize trauma, resisting local linguistic colour in favour of metaphorical and symbolic layering. The film, however, reintroduces the local through grafted language and imagery, anchoring exile, memory, and return in the specificity of place. This duality is further expressed through onomastic symbolism: names are not merely identifiers, but vessels of memory, carriers of loss and reconstruction. Nawal – et-

¹¹ "Christian – I am Christian".

ymologically meaning “gift” or “grace” in Arabic (Tamer 2004) – embodies a sacrificial mother whose fragmented identity offers her children painful truths in place of comforting origins. Her silence becomes a form of resistance, her legacy a symbolic reconstruction of a violated homeland. The son, born as Nihad, becomes Abou Tareq, a transformation that reflects the violence of naming under ideological regimes. His multiple names represent a tragic grafting of self, imposed by war, ideology, and unknowing filiation. Each name he acquires is a narrative rupture, mirroring the fragmentation of identity in times of conflict. The act of naming, in both play and film, emerges as a performative gesture to restore narrative continuity, to reclaim buried histories, to reconcile silence with testimony. *Incendies* thus stages onomastics not merely as a narrative device, but as a philosophical inquiry into how identity is constructed, effaced, and finally reassembled through language, trauma, and remembrance.

4. Morice Awwad: Multilingualism as Rebellion and Style

Morice Awwad is a significant figure in contemporary literature, known for his profound insights and eloquent expressions that resonate deeply with readers. His body of work is extensive and multifaceted, reflecting a rich tapestry of cultural and emotional narratives. For this study, we will focus specifically on illustrative excerpts from his work *Testament to a Young Poet*, written in 2009 and published for the first time in the posthumous collection of 2025. This selection allows us to delve into the thematic and stylistic elements that define Awwad’s literary contribution while highlighting the relevance of his message for aspiring poets and writers. The author emerges as a linguistic innovator in Lebanese literature, challenging traditional norms by adopting Lebanese language written with Arabic letters. This innovative orthographic approach prioritizes phonetic accuracy over classical etymology, allowing Awwad to authentically capture the spoken language of his culture. For example, the phrase يا ولادي (Oh my children) is phonetically transcribed as /ja w'la:di/, where the pronunciation nuances reflect the Lebanese language

richness. By contrasting this with the Modern Standard Arabic equivalent أولادي (awlādī), which is rendered as /ʔaw'la:.di/, Awwad showcases not only the emotional depth of familial ties but also the legitimacy of Lebanese language as a literary medium.

The author further disrupts conventional linguistic boundaries by integrating French lexicon as it organically appears in the vernacular of contemporary Lebanese society. His work does not merely exemplify code-switching; rather, it constitutes a form of linguistic resistance and a poetic assertion of national identity. By advocating for Lebanese as a distinct national and literary language, Awwad affirms its legitimacy and expressive potential. His writing becomes a dynamic site of cultural and linguistic grafting, where French serves as the syntactic substrate, while Lebanese Arabic functions as the semantic graft (“scion”) that imbues the text with localized character and affect. For example, in *Testament to a young poet* he mixed both languages Lebanese and French in the same paragraph:

وبيئنا متلك لُ أعلا: مش بس يا ويلي نُ ما لبنتب

Je crois au miracle des mots

(Awwad 2025)¹² تحفنتك لعم تحلما، تحفرك ع زكرة لبنان ل لغا ل لبناني إنجيلك

w jʔi:bʔa: mat'lek lʔa:la: mɪʃ bæʃ jawɪli nʔ me lɛbnaɪet... Je kɔwa o miʁakl de mo... ʊ ɦɪftak lʕam tɛɦlama, ʔɦafrak ʕa za:krat lɛbnaɪ la lɪʔa lɛlbanani: jɛ ʔɪnʒi:lak
(phonetic transcription)

This interplay results in a hybridized stylistic form, characterized by lexical grafting and the transposition of Lebanese idiomatic expressions into French structures,

¹² “May your highest goal not just be to say ‘woe to me if I do not Lebanese’, but also to believe in the miracle of words by realizing your masterpiece, which will engrave you in the memory of Lebanon in the Lebanese language, your Gospel”.

thereby producing a translingual poetics that defies monolingual paradigms. A key aspect of Awwad's innovation is creating a poetic landscape that resembles a puzzle: in this intricate tapestry, readers encounter both Lebanese and French verses, reflecting the everyday spoken language of Lebanon. This interplay not only enriches the text but also mirrors the linguistic reality of contemporary Lebanese society, where multiple languages coexist and interact. Awwad's poetry captures the rhythm and intonation of spoken Lebanese Arabic while maintaining the structure of French, ultimately producing a translingual aesthetic that transcends traditional boundaries.

Morice Awwad adopts and develops this revolutionary dialectal aesthetic while bringing to it an even more poetically intense and politically provocative energy. His work represents not only linguistic innovation and aesthetic rebellion but also identity performance.

يا ولادي إنتو، ولادي ل عم إتمخضكن تاني مرّا ت تخلء فيكن روح ل لغا لبناني. ل ب دونا إنتو غربا،
من لبنان ل سبع نارا
13 (Awwad 2025) بس يا ويلي إذا ما لبنتت

Ya wladi: intu wladi: ja:lli l ʔam ʔitma:xadkon tani marra: ta tixlaʔ fikon ru ħ la liya
lbnani li bi duna ʔintu ʔuraba min lbnan l sabiʔ ʔara (phonetic transcription)

The phrase يا أولادي (Oh my children) encapsulates the profound emotional bond between Awwad and the young writers and poets, highlighting a crucial connection in the face of globalization, which often threatens to dilute cultural roots. The speaker's aspiration to promote the Lebanese language signifies more than a

¹³ "My children, you are my children. I'm giving birth to you all over again, so that a Lebanese language spirit may be born within you. / Without it, you are strangers – strangers to Lebanon, scattered to the seventh corner of the earth.... / But woe to me if I do not Lebanese-ize you!".

mere linguistic endeavour; it represents a cultural renaissance, emphasizing the Lebanese language as a vital vessel for history, values, and communal ties. Awwad's metaphor of giving birth again conveys the importance of nurturing this cultural spirit, for without it, writers risk becoming strangers to their homeland, scattered across distant corners of the earth. The expression "woe to me if I cannot" poignantly reflects Awwad's deep sense of responsibility to instill a strong Lebanese identity, where the interplay of languages mirrors the country's historical complexities and diverse influences. Philosophically, the notion of the "miracle of words" suggests that language possesses the power to evoke emotions, bridge the divide, and foster understanding among individuals from varied backgrounds. Culturally, it acknowledges poetry's role as a medium for social commentary and resistance, allowing voices to rise against oppression and celebrate heritage. The impact of such expressions is profound, fostering a sense of community and belonging while affirming the unique identity of the Lebanese people. Ultimately, this belief in the magic of words serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring influence that language has in shaping thoughts, experiences, and societal narratives. Through the art of language, individuals can reclaim their stories and assert their place in the world, reinforcing the enduring strength of their cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

Lebanese literature is not merely written in multiple languages – it is *written through* them. It is a literature born from fracture, diaspora, colonization, and ideological tension, yet it never succumbs to fragmentation. On the contrary, it draws its strength from disorder, forging aesthetic harmony from historical chaos.

As we have seen, this multilingualism is far from neutral. From Farjallah Hayek's hybrid syntax to Amine Maalouf's voluntary insertion of Arabic into French prose, from Wajdi Mouawad's play *Incendies*, where the function of French is to universalize trauma, to Maurice Awwad's impure poetics of rebellion, every linguistic choice is a political and identity-laden act. Language becomes a contested space,

a battleground of memory, ideology, and cultural belonging. Through these examples, we observe how linguistic plurality intersects with spiritual and symbolic plurality, giving birth to literary spaces that are simultaneously sacred and profane, local and universal. Yet this literature is not content with documenting conflict, it *sublimates* it. It reconfigures the ruins of colonial legacies and sectarian divisions into new forms of literary expression. Poetry becomes a space of alienation, but also of transcendence. Language becomes both song and signature. Script becomes a tool of revolution. And the verb – the act of writing itself – becomes the last refuge of identity when national definitions fail.

In this sense, Lebanese literature is neither merely Francophone, nor Arabophone, nor Anglophone, it is Lebanophone: a body of writing that reflects the country's unique position at the crossroads of East and West, tradition and modernity, heritage and invention. It is a literature of the *in-between*, where contradictions coexist, where languages contaminate one another, and where meaning emerges not in spite of complexity, but because of it. Multilingualism, in this context, is not a lack of mastery in language. It is the very condition of possibility for a literature that resists essentialism and embraces plurality. The result is a corpus that, while diverse in form and tongue, remains unified in its thematic preoccupations: identity, exile, memory, and the dream of a homeland still being written.

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Beziehungskommunikation in der Translation von Kinder- und Jugendliteratur: Selbstübersetzung als Sonderform kultureller Mediation

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1. Einleitung

Die literarische Übersetzung als Übertragung von Texten in eine andere Sprache ermöglicht die globale Verbreitung von Literatur. Dabei gilt die literarische Übersetzung seit jeher als ein hochkomplexes Feld, das sich mit vielschichtigen sprachlichen, kulturellen und ästhetischen Herausforderungen konfrontiert sieht (vgl. Kittel 1988; Ungar 2006; Spivak 1993, 2003; Simon 1996; Frank 1984; O'Sullivan 2000; Apter, 2008, 2013; Parks 2015). Diese Herausforderungen intensivieren sich signifikant, sobald es sich bei den zu übersetzenden Texten um Kinder- und Jugendliteratur handelt (Kuzminykh 2025a, 5). Die grundlegende Asymmetrie zwischen der/dem realen Autor:in und dem antizipierten Lesepublikum, die auch für die erwachsenenliterarische Übersetzung anzunehmen ist, fungiert im Bereich der kindliterarischen Übersetzung als zentrales Legitimationselement für vielfältige Eingriffe in den Originaltext. Diese werden häufig mit moralpädagogischen, entwicklungspsychologischen, soziokulturellen oder stilistischen Erfordernissen begründet, die auf eine präsupponierte homogene Kindlichkeit der Zielkultur rekurrieren (Reiß 1982, 1; Oittinen 1990, 50; Grimm 2021, 48).

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Adaptionen, die primär auf die Überwindung von Fremdheit im Sinne eines potenziellen Nicht-Verstehens abzielen – sie firmieren unter dem Terminus „domestication“ (Parks 2015, 68) – verweisen auf eine deutliche Zielsprachen- und Zielpublikumsorientierung. Damit korrespondiert eine Marginalisierung von Alterität und Polyvalenz zugunsten einer simplifizierenden und amplifizierenden Erzählweise. In der Konsequenz kann dies zur Entstehung eines Zieltextes führen, der sich signifikant vom Originaltext entfernt und dessen ästhetische Tiefendimensionen partiell nivelliert oder transformiert.

Eine zusätzliche Komplexitätsebene ergibt sich im Kontext der Selbstübersetzung (vgl. zu Autorübersetzung Fišer 1998; Autorversion Kramer 2000; und Eigenübersetzung Kaczmarek 2009 sowie zur Eingrenzung des Terminus Grutman & Van Bolderen 2014, 323).

Im Rahmen dieses Beitrags wird Selbstübersetzung in Anlehnung an Anton Popovič (1976, 19) als eine spezifische Konstellation gefasst, in der die Autorin beziehungsweise der Autor und die Übersetzerin beziehungsweise der Übersetzer identisch sind. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf jenen Fällen, in denen Textfassungen in unterschiedlichen Sprachen tatsächlich vorliegen und nicht lediglich als imaginierte Konstrukte existieren. Diese Einschränkung verweist auf den in der Literatur- und Translationswissenschaft kontrovers geführten Diskurs zum Konzept der Autotranslation, in dessen Zentrum die Frage nach der kontinuierlichen Synthese von Schreib- und Übersetzungstätigkeit steht. So konstatiert Ottmar Ette: „Trennscharfe Grenzziehungen zwischen Schreiben und Übersetzen sind hier nicht mehr angebracht“ (Ette 2005, 14). Robert Stockhammers Kritik konzentriert sich ebenfalls auf die mentale Selbstübersetzung, die das direkte Schreiben in einer Zweitsprache inkludiert. Er bezweifelt die Existenz einer „palimpsestartig verborgenen ‚Schicht‘ unter dem Geschriebenen“ (Stockhammer 2009, 284). Dolores Poch ordnet die Selbstübersetzung als Form zweisprachigen Schreibens in den Bereich der Komparatistik ein (Poch 2002, 9). Simona Anselmi fasst diese als „first and foremost a translational phenomenon, which deserves to be studied as such, and not as an exceptional writing practice“ auf (Anselmi 2012, 19). In ihrer

Studie *On Self-translation. An Exploration in Self-translator's Telo and Strategies* untersucht sie den Zusammenhang zwischen den Gründen für die Selbstübersetzung und der Wahl der jeweiligen Übersetzungsstrategie. Auch Sara Kippur diskutiert unterschiedliche Praktiken der literarischen Selbstübersetzung (vgl. Kippur 2015).

Rainier Grutman akzentuiert sowohl das Produkt als auch den Prozess der Selbstübersetzung (Grutman 2009, 257). Eva Gentes berücksichtigt in ihrer Dissertation ebenfalls beide Dimensionen des Begriffs (Gentes 2017, 14), zudem regt sie an, „self-translation als eigenständiges, interlinguales und interdisziplinäres Forschungsfeld“ (31) zu betrachten, das literatur- und übersetzungswissenschaftliche Ansätze in sich vereint. Dieter Lamping wiederum fragt nach deren Funktion und identifiziert drei zentrale Aspekte: Sie könne der „Vermittlung“, der „poetischen Sprachübung“ oder der „Fortschreibung eines Werkes“ dienen (Lamping 1992, 214-218). Michaël Oustinoff untersucht in *Bilinguisme d'écriture et autotraduction: Julien Green, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov* (2001) vergleichend die Übersetzungsstrategien dieser Selbstübersetzer. Er konstatiert, dass dem Selbstübersetzer neben der verfremdenden und einbürgernden Übersetzung im Vergleich zu einem Fremdübersetzer noch eine dritte Option offensteht, nämlich die „autotraduction créatrice“ (Oustinoff 2001, 33) (dt. selbsterneuernde Übersetzung): Diese ermögliche es ihm, wesentliche Modifikationen am Originaltext vorzunehmen. Ähnliche Resultate erzielen Robert Wechsler (1998, 214) und Georg Kremnitz (2015, 107). Michael Boyden und Liesbeth de Bleeker weisen 2013 darauf hin, dass Selbstübersetzer möglicherweise anderen Normen unterliegen als Fremdübersetzer. Abweichungen sollten daher nicht zwangsläufig als Ausdruck größerer Freiheit interpretiert werden (Boyden & Bleeker 2013, 181). Konträr zu diesen Ansätzen steht die Auffassung von Susan Bassnett, die in ihrem Aufsatz *The Self-translator as Rewriter* für die Aufhebung der Differenz zwischen Selbst- und Fremdübersetzung plädiert (Bassnett 2013, 23).

Dieser punktuelle Forschungsüberblick verdeutlicht einerseits das wachsende wissenschaftliche Interesse an der Selbstübersetzung. Andererseits zeigt sich

die Tendenz, dass sich der Großteil der bisherigen Studien auf detaillierte Übersetzungsvergleiche konzentriert.

Ziel des vorliegenden Beitrags ist es hingegen zu ergründen, inwieweit in Fällen der Selbstübersetzung die beziehungskommunikative Funktion literarischer Texte trotz der sprachlich-semiotischen Rekonfiguration des Originaltextes erhalten bleibt. Der Terminus Beziehungskommunikation wird von Matthias Freise für die Beschreibung der spezifischen Funktion der Literatur verwendet (Freise 2019, 364). Er übernimmt ihn von Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas und Don Jackson (vgl. Watzlawick et al. 1967). Die Forschergruppe verwendet den Begriff im Rahmen ihrer Studie zu Kommunikationsstörungen, die weder auf Informationsdefiziten noch auf Informationsinkompatibilitäten basieren. Watzlawick, Bavelas und Jackson stellen dabei fest, dass für die Initiierung, Aufrechterhaltung und Gestaltung zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen nicht der faktische Informationsgehalt ausschlaggebend ist. Vielmehr erfüllen die nicht-propositionalen Anteile der Kommunikation (etwa Mimik, Gestik, Intonation sowie syntaktische und lexikalische Nuancierungen) eine konstitutive beziehungsstiftende Funktion. Als Signum jeder Beziehungskommunikation wird Ambivalenz determiniert. Matthias Freise transferiert dieses Konzept auf Literatur und attestiert ihr die Fähigkeit, die beziehungskommunikative Dimension aufzubewahren und gesellschaftlich zu verbreiten (Freise 2019, 364). Aus dieser Perspektive leitet er die Notwendigkeit der Originalsprachlichkeit ab (363), denn bei jeder Übersetzung sei das Faktum zu berücksichtigen, dass sie trotz aller Bemühungen, die ästhetische Qualität eines Textes zu bewahren, mit „massiv[en]“ (365) Modifikationen der originalen sprachlichen Verfasstheit des Ausgangstextes einhergeht. Aufgrund dieser Eingriffe wird die beziehungskommunikative Funktion der Literatur kompliziert (364-369).

Wie bereits dargelegt, untersucht der vorliegende Beitrag, inwieweit in Fällen der Selbstübersetzung die beziehungskommunikative Funktion literarischer Texte trotz der sprachlich-semiotischen Rekonfiguration des Originaltexts erhalten bleibt. Diese Fragestellung wird am Beispiel des jugendliterarischen Textes

Breaking Stalin's Nose von Eugene Yelchin (2011)/*Stalinskij Nos* (dt. Stalins Nase) (2013) geprüft.

Der Analyse geht eine komparatistische Lektüre voraus, bei der es vor allem darum geht, die Abweichungen zwischen beiden Versionen zu erkennen und zu erklären. In einem weiteren Schritt werden die Übertragungsschritte fokussiert, um die zugrunde liegenden Übersetzungsstrategien im Detail nachvollziehbar zu machen.

2. *Breaking Stalin's Nose* von Eugene Yelchin

2.1. Eugene Yelchin und seine kulturelle Neuverortung

Eugene Yelchin (geb. 1956) ist ein Autor, dessen literarisches Schaffen in entscheidender Weise von seiner biographischen Sozialisation im spät- und post-sowjetischen Russland geprägt ist (vgl. Lushchevska 2013). Er steht paradigmatisch für eine Generation intellektueller Akteure, deren ästhetische Produktion wesentlich durch die strukturellen Erfahrungen politischer Repression, ideologischer Rigidität und kultureller Desillusionierung innerhalb der sowjetischen Gesellschaftsformation determiniert wurde. In seinem Œuvre manifestiert sich eine komplexe Auseinandersetzung mit einem Trauma, das nicht lediglich auf individueller psychischer Ebene verortet ist, sondern als historisch-systemisch bedingte Disposition im Sinne eines kulturellen Gedächtnisses kollektiven Überlebens im repressiven Staatsapparat zu begreifen ist. Dieses sedimentierte Erlebnis artikuliert sich nicht nur auf vielschichtige Weise in Yelchins Sprachwahl, sondern auch in der narrativen Perspektivierung sowie in den thematischen und motivischen Konstanten seiner Texte (vgl. Yelchin 2014).

Die Entscheidung, literarisch primär in englischer Sprache zu schreiben, ist dabei keineswegs allein den pragmatischen Gesichtspunkten einer globalen Rezeption geschuldet. Vielmehr kann sie als ein bewusster Akt symbolischer Distanznahme gegenüber der Herkunftssprache gelesen werden, die – in ihrer historischen Verfasstheit – codiert als Vehikel ideologischer Indoktrination und somit als eine

dominante Konstituente des erfahrenen Traumas erscheint. Die Hinwendung zur englischen Sprache stellt insofern einen Akt autonomer Subjektkonstitution dar. Eugene Yelchins vielfach ausgezeichnetes Werk *Breaking Stalin's Nose* (2011), ursprünglich in englischer Sprache publiziert, wird erst zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt durch ihn selbst (in Zusammenarbeit mit Olga Buchina, die vom Verlag Rozovyy Žiraf engagiert wurde (vgl. Lushchevska 2013) ins Russische übertragen. In seinem Interview mit Oksana Lushchevska erinnert er sich an die Zusammenarbeit und legt seine Motive für die von ihm vorgenommenen finalen Modifikationen Buchinas Übersetzung offen. Folgt man Oustinoffs Klassifikation, liegt im Fall von *Breaking Stalin's Nose* eine selbsterneuernde Übersetzung vor (vgl. „autotraduction créatrice“, Oustinoff 2001, 33):

Pink Giraffe [Verlag] hired Olga to translate the English text, and she did a wonderful job, but when I read it I realized that I needed to tell more. Given the hot-button nature of my novel, I assumed that both adults and children would be my readers in Russian. As a result I had to take a different approach than just a standard translation; I had to ensure that there were no inaccuracies and that the world felt authentic to a Russian audience. Using Olga's translation, I essentially rewrote the book in Russian, and then she corrected what I had written. It was a true collaboration. In addition, Nadya Kruchenitskaya, our Moscow editor was very much involved in the process. We worked and reworked the text countless times, sentence by sentence, word by word. As a result, nothing was lost in translation but much was gained (Lushchevska 2013).

Die russische Fassung zielt nicht nur auf eine retrospektive Verarbeitung persönlicher und kollektiver Erinnerung inklusive der basalen Emotion der Angst, sondern auch auf eine kritische Aktualisierung fundamentaler Konfliktkonstellationen (vgl. Yelchin 2011, 160; Lushchevska 2013 und die offizielle Homepage <https://www.eugeneyelchin.com/books#/breaking-stalins-nose>).

Im Rahmen dieser Re-Kontextualisierung akzentuiert Eugene Yelchin insbesondere die strukturellen Grenzen individueller Handlungsfähigkeit sowie das Fehlen

tragfähiger Alternativen innerhalb autoritärer Systeme. Seine narrative Strategie transzendiert bewusst die historiographische Linearisierung, indem sie intertextuelle Referenzen integriert – einerseits auf Nikolaj Gogols Erzählung *Nos* (dt. *Die Nase*) (vgl. Gogol 1836), andererseits auf die Graphic Novel *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* von Peter Sís (2007). Die Allusion auf Gogol ist mehrfach motiviert: Zum einen lassen sich deutliche inhaltliche Parallelen identifizieren, zum anderen wird eine besondere Sensibilität zentraler Figuren für die Täuschungsmechanismen ideologischer Inszenierungen erkennbar, die jedoch in Yelchins Narrativ eine kontrafaktische Wendung erfahren. Peter Sís soll Eugene Yelchin zu der Abfassung seines historischen Textes inspiriert haben, da er im autofiktionalen Stil vom Aufwachsen im sozialistischen Prag für Kinder erzählt. Yelchin grenzt sich von Sís jedoch durch die Kreation eines mehrfachadressierten Textes ab (vgl. Lushchevska 2013).

2.2. *Breaking Stalin's Nose* (2011) – das englischsprachige Original

Breaking Stalin's Nose inszeniert die Entwicklung des neunjährigen Protagonisten Sasha Zaichik als Trägerfigur eines exemplarischen Bildungs- und Emanzipationsnarrativs. Erstes folgt dem Paradigma einer teleologisch angelegten Reifung durch Selbsterkenntnis, während Letzteres ein spezifisches Modell subversiver Subjektkonstitution unter restriktiven soziopolitischen Bedingungen realisiert. Charakterisiert ist dieses Modell durch die Prozesse der ideologischen Desillusionierung wie der performativen Selbstdetermination des Protagonisten gegenüber den Diskursen hegemonialer Gewalt. So wird die Destruktivität des totalitären Regimes für die zentrale Figur im Verlauf einer Reihe von kognitiv und affektiv disruptiven Schlüsselerlebnissen erfahrbar. Exemplarisch hierfür stehen die Exklusion und Diffamierung eines Mitschülers aufgrund seiner Herkunft, die Zeugenschaft bei Akten der Denunziation, die Verhaftung des Vaters sowie das Gespräch mit dem Mitarbeiter des Geheimdienstes. Sashas mentale Erkenntnis bedingt den Übergang von einer internalisierten Loyalität hin zu einer kritisch-

reflektierten Distanzierung. Narrativ wird seine Anagnorisis durch den Einsatz von Oppositionen gestaltet. Zu Beginn, beispielsweise in dem panegyrischen Brief des Jungen an sein Idol, wird die kindliche Perspektive als bewusst limitiert inszeniert:

Dear Comrade Stalin,

I want to thank you personally for my happy childhood. I am fortunate to live in the Soviet Union, the most democratic and progressive country in the world. I have read how hard the lives of children are in the capitalist countries and I feel pity for all those who do not live in the USSR. They will never see their dreams come true (Yelchin 2011, 7).

An einer anderen Stelle beschreibt der kindliche Erzähler weiterhin überzeugt von seiner glücklichen Kindheit die Umstände seines Aufwachsens:

It's dinnertime, so the kitchen is crowded. Forty-eight hardworking, honest Soviet citizens share the kitchen and single small toilet in our communal apartment we call komunalka for short. We live here as one large, happy family: We are all equal; we have no secrets. We know who gets up at what time, who eats what for dinner, and who said what in their rooms. The walls are thin; some don't go up to the ceiling. We even have a room cleverly divided with shelves of books about Stalin that two families can share (8-9).

Am Ende kulminiert die Erzählung in einem Akt der symbolischen Emanzipation von der aufoktroyierten Ideologie. Die vehemente Ablehnung der affirmativen Sozialisation wird in Sashas Entscheidung, bei einer oppositionellen Frau zu wohnen und dabei bewusst die Meinung des Vaters zu ignorieren, evident: „I should ask my dad, I think, but instead I say, ‚Sounds good. Thank you‘“ (158).

Das Lexem ‚Vater‘ erscheint in dieser Passage in einer allegorischen Bedeutung, nämlich als „Father of all Soviet Children“ (160) sowie grundsätzlich als jede (beliebige) Autoritätsinstanz. Die Befreiung aus den Netzen der Fremdbestimmung

führt zur sozialen Diskreditierung und findet ihren traurigen Tiefpunkt in der finalen symbolischen Geste des Sich-Einreihens in die Gruppe der Marginalisierten – ikonographisch verdichtet in der Metapher der Warteschlange vor dem Gefängnis in der Ljubjanka-Straße. Der Schnee, der in den letzten Sätzen erwähnt wird, symbolisiert jedoch einen Neubeginn. Zugleich vollzieht sich eine ironische und kontrafaktische Expansion des Bedeutungspotenzials: ‚Светлое будущее‘ (dt. die helle Zukunft, im englischen Original ‚radiant future‘) tritt in einer von den Machteliten nicht intendierten, vom offiziellen Diskurs abweichenden Form ein. Die kantische ‚docta spes‘ – verstanden als residuales utopisches Potenzial innerhalb der repressiven Systemlogik (vgl. Kuzminykh 2024) – verdichtet sich in den letzten Worten des Erzählers zu einem subversiven Hoffnungsmoment.

2.3. *Stalinskij Nos* (2013) – die Übersetzung

Die russischsprachige Erstübersetzung des historischen Narrativs aus dem Jahr 2013 markiert nicht nur eine translinguale Übertragung des Textes, sondern fungiert zugleich als kulturell codierte Re-Inszenierung zentraler semantischer Strukturen. Der kontrovers diskutierte Text erscheint am sechzigsten Todestag Stalins (5. März 2013) unter dem Titel *Сталинский нос/Stalinskij Nos* (dt. Stalins Nase) und ist laut der Selbstauskunft des Autors „the first book in Russian language that addresses the issue of Stalinism for young readers“ (Lushchevska 2013).

Bereits an der Wahl des russischsprachigen Titels werden die translatorischen und kulturell-ideologischen Eingriffe sichtbar. Diese tangieren nicht ausschließlich die Titelökonomie, um mittels einer elliptischen Reduktion die Prägnanz zu erhöhen und Aufmerksamkeit sowie Interesse zu wecken, sondern zielen vielmehr auf die Verschiebung der semantischen Gewichtung. Im Englischen liegt der Akzent durch die Positionierung des Gerundiums (i.e. engl. Present Participle) ‚breaking‘ an der ersten Stelle auf der Handlung, also auf dem Bruch mit der kultisch überhöhten Person sowie mit der von ihr verkörperten Ideologie. In der russischen Übersetzung liegt der Fokus hingegen auf dem Objekt (Stalins

markanter Nase). Der subversive Akt erscheint impliziert und kann aufgrund der realisierten Polyvalenzsteigerung des Titels nicht antizipiert werden. Die direkte Übersetzung ‚Ломаю нос Сталину‘ (dt. Stalin die Nase brechen) wäre gegebenenfalls für die Markteinführung zu provokant gewesen.

Signifikante semantische Verschiebungen lassen sich auch auf der Ebene der anthroponymischen Codierung zentraler Figuren im Vergleich zur englischsprachigen Originalfassung nachzeichnen. Diese onomastisch bedingte Rekontextualisierung kann als ein Fundament für die Beziehungskommunikation mit dem ideellen Adressaten der Zielkultur interpretiert werden.

Der Familienname des kindlichen diegetischen Erzählers – Zaichik (dt. Häschen) – aktiviert im russischsprachigen Rezeptionskontext eine konventionalisierte Bedeutungsassoziation, die sich aus einer hochfrequenten kulturellen Kollokation speist: ‚трусика зайчик серенький‘ (dt. das ängstliche graue Häschen).

Die intertextuelle Referenz auf das populäre Neujahrslied im kinderliterarischen Repertoire evoziert nicht lediglich die Tier-Metaphorik, sondern fungiert als semantischer Marker für die kindlich konnotierte Angst und für die zu Beginn der Narration deutlich erkennbaren defensiven Verhaltensmuster (Yelchin 2013, 13-15). In der Übersetzung wirkt die anthroponymische Codierung somit als kulturell gerahmter Bedeutungsvektor, der narrative Erwartungshaltungen im Horizont kollektiver Erinnerungsmuster konstituiert. Die Tier-Metapher steht zugleich in einem engen Nexus zur strategischen Anpassung: So zieht sich Sasha Zaichik nach dem Vorfall mit der beschädigten Stalin-Büste, motiviert durch eine präzise Antizipation repressiver Konsequenzen, zurück:

I look at the broken nose. I look at the banner, spread nearby. Then I look up at Stalin, now without a nose. It doesn't take much to know what will happen next. First, I will never become a Pioneer. Second, the principal will telephone the State Security to report an act of terrorism in his school. Third, everybody will find out who did it. Next, the guards will arrive to arrest me. It won't be a mistake like with

my dad; I should be arrested. Son of a hero and a Communist, I have become an enemy of the people, a wrecker. I have damaged our precious Soviet property. No, more than that. I have defaced a sacred statue of Stalin. Not on purpose, of course; it was an accident – I lost hold of the banner. It could have happened to anyone. But who's going to believe me? Nobody saw how it happened (Yelchin 2011, 80).

Die narrativ etablierte Angst wird somit nicht als Ausdruck kindlicher Schwäche, sondern als Ausdruck kognitiver Handlungsfähigkeit innerhalb eines totalitären Regimes gerahmt. Im Kontrast zur diminutiven Tiermetaphorik des Familiennamens steht die onymische Struktur des Vornamens, deren semantische Ambivalenz die komplexe Figurenkonzeption narrativ verdichtet. Das im Russischen gebräuchliche affektive Diminutiv Sasha fungiert als Marker emotionaler Intimität und kindlicher Vulnerabilität, während die formale Langform Aleksandr – insbesondere im narrativ hervorgehobenen Moment der oppositionellen Selbstpositionierung nach der Inhaftierung des Vaters – ein Bedeutungsfeld politischer Subjektwerdung und autonomer Handlungsfähigkeit aktiviert. Die Koexistenz beider Ebenen generiert ein semantisches Oxymoron, das nicht nur die Identitätsdynamik der Figur modelliert, sondern auch eine ambivalente Codierung in Bezug auf die hegemoniale Ordnung nahelegt: Der kindliche Erzähler erscheint gleichermaßen als harmloses Objekt fürsorglicher Zuschreibung wie als latenter Träger subversiver Potenz. Diese Dopplung verleiht der Figur eine narrative Tiefenstruktur, die zwischen Anpassung und Widerstand oszilliert und dadurch den ideologiekritischen Gehalt des Textes maßgeblich mitformt. In dieser Situation verfügen russischsprachige lesende Personen über einen Rezeptionsästhetischen Vorsprung, insofern sie – im Sinne von Wolf Schmid's Konzept des „idealen Rezipienten“ (Schmid 2014, 46) – potenziell in der Lage sind, die internymischen Komponenten sowie die intertextuell eingebetteten Allusionen auf außerdiegetische historische Persönlichkeiten, etwa Alexander den Großen oder Aleksandr Poskrëbyšev, kultursemantisch zu dechiffrieren (Kuzminykh 2025b, 237).

Im englischen Ausgangstext erfolgt weder eine explizierende Semantisierung noch eine kulturelle Kontextualisierung oder eine metadiegetische Kommentierung des Namens der zentralen Figur.

Eine vergleichbare, auf den Aufbau der Beziehungskommunikation zielende Strategie zeigt sich in der Figurenbenennung des Nachbarn der kindlichen Hauptfigur. Im Unterschied zur englischsprachigen Originalfassung bietet die russische Selbstübersetzung eine explizitere Semantisierung. So erzeugt die Ergänzung des ursprünglichen Familiennamens ‚Stukachev‘ durch den Spitznamen ‚Shchipachev‘ eine partielle Redundanz: Während das Derivat ‚Stukachev‘ etymologisch auf das Verb ‚стучать‘ (dt. klopfen) zurückgeht, ist diese Denotation in der zeitgenössischen russischen Alltagssprache idiomatisch um die Konnotation des Denunzierens erweitert. In der russischen Version trägt der Nachbar offiziell den Namen ‚Shchipachev‘ (von ‚щипать‘, dt. kneifen), wird jedoch innerhalb der Diegese von den Figuren mit dem Spitznamen ‚Stukachev‘ angesprochen. Dieser Umstand wird von dem kindlichen Erzähler Sasha irritiert kommentiert:

Один сосед, Щипачев по фамилии, за нами в коридор. Соседи почему-то называют его между собой не Щипачевым, а Стукачевым. Почему, неизвестно, надо бы у папы спросить, он все знает (Yelchin 2013,15).

Ein Nachbar, mit Nachnamen Ščipačev, [folgt] hinter uns in den Korridor. Die Nachbarn nennen ihn aus irgendeinem Grund untereinander nicht Ščipačev, sondern Stukatčev. Warum [das so ist], ist unbekannt, [ich] müsste den Vater fragen, er weiß alles (Yelchin 2013, 15, wörtliche Übersetzung KK).

One neighbor, Stukachov, follows us down the corridor (Yelchin 2011, 15).

Die partielle Wiederholung mit Alliteration stellt eine explizite Markierung dar, die durch die parallele Aktivierung zweier negativ nuancierter Wortfelder – Denunziation

und Aggression – eine doppelte ethisch-moralische Abwertung des Charakters erzeugt.

Die Substitution der Fremdwörter durch russische Lexeme in der Übersetzung kann ebenfalls als gezielte Strategie zur Herstellung beziehungsweise Intensivierung der Beziehungskommunikation interpretiert werden. Dies manifestiert sich etwa in der bereits zitierten Passage, in der Sasha im englischsprachigen Original sein Herkunftsland als „the most democratic and progressive country in the world“ (7) charakterisiert. In der russischen Übersetzung wird hingegen die Attribuierung ‚demokratisch‘ durch ‚справедливая‘ (dt. gerecht) ersetzt. Diese lexikalische Substitution verändert die semantische Nuance der Aussage. So wird der Akzent von dem politisch-ideologischen, im internationalen Diskurs verankerten Begriff auf ein ethisch-moralisches Attribut verlagert. Dieses bedingt zwar die Absenkung des Abstraktionsgrades, verstärkt jedoch zugleich die Ironie und lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit auf die sowjetische, emotional und normativ aufgeladene Diskurstradition.

Ein weiteres Beispiel für die in der russischen (selbsterneuenden) Selbstübersetzung realisierte Amplifikation zeigt sich zu Beginn des 14. Kapitels, in dem Sasha in den Keller geschickt wird, um die Flagge zu holen. Dort begegnet er dem Hausmeister Matveich. Die Figur des Hausmeisters indiziert eine Oszillation zwischen folgenden drei Polen: Erstens ist seine vollständige Subordination unter das herrschende politische Diktat zu nennen. Die Unterordnung artikuliert sich in seiner rigiden Befolgung bürokratischer Vorschriften (78). Zweitens verweist seine nahezu pathologische Furcht vor jedem (auch kindlichen) Individuum auf die internalisierten Mechanismen staatlicher Repression der damaliger Zeit. Schließlich ist sein eskapistischer Rückzug aus der sozialen Wirklichkeit zu erwähnen. Matveich' Eskapismus manifestiert sich narrativ in einer triadischen Markierung von Schwerhörigkeit, Schlaf und räumlicher Marginalisierung im Keller. Sashas Handlung (Aufwecken durch persistentes Klopfen) stellt in dieser Passage eine exakte Imitation der

verbreiteten Praktiken dar, welche für die im Text verhandelte historische Periode charakteristisch waren. Im englischsprachigen Ausgangstext ist die Ironie zwar unverkennbar, doch ist die gewählte Lexik neutral. In der russischen Autoübersetzung wird die stilistische Registerebene in den Bereich des Vulgären verschoben, um die Diffamierung der nonkonformen Individuen durch die Apologeten des Regimes zu demonstrieren:

THE STORAGE ROOM is in the basement. I knock on the door, but it doesn't open, so I knock again.

Matveich, the janitor, is half deaf, and I bet he's sleeping now. Some people are just ignorant; they slow down our march toward Communism. I knock louder. I'll knock for as long as it takes – Nina Petrovna sent me here to get the banner, so I'm not leaving without it (78).

Зная в пионерской комнате, а ключ от комнаты у Матвеича. Он сторож. Сидит Матвеич всегда в кладовке, а кладовка в самом низу, в подвале. Я дверь ткнул, она не поддается. Стучу. Ногой пинаю. Ни ответа, ни привета. Матвеич то ли оглох, то ли спит. Вот же есть идеологически отставшие граждане – тормозят наше шествие к победе коммунизма. Ну, меня это не остановит – буду колотить, пока он дверь не откроет. Нина Петровна послала меня за знаменем, и я без него возвращаться не собираюсь (Yelchin 2013, 77).

Das Banner ist im Pionierzimmer, und der Schlüssel zum Zimmer ist bei Matveič. Er ist der Hausmeister. Matveič sitzt immer in der Abstellkammer, und die Abstellkammer ist ganz unten, im Keller. Ich drücke gegen die Tür, sie gibt nicht nach. Ich klopfe. Ich trete mit dem Fuß dagegen. Keine Antwort, kein Gruß. Matweitsch ist entweder stocktaub geworden oder schläft. So gibt es eben ideologisch zurückgebliebene Bürger – sie bremsen unseren Marsch zum Sieg des Kommunismus. Nun, mich wird das nicht aufhalten – ich werde klopfen, bis er die Tür öffnet (Yelchin 2013, 77, wörtliche Übersetzung KK).

Im Unterschied zur englischsprachigen Originalfassung, in der Bedeutungsimplicationen nur latent angelegt sind und dem „idealen Rezipienten“ (Schmid 2014, 46) vorbehalten bleiben, bietet die russische Übersetzung eine explizitere Semantisierung und Stilisierung. Die additive Benennung, explizite Wiederaufnahmen und Wiederholungen fungieren dabei nicht nur als narrative Intensivierung, sondern auch als implizite ideologiekritische Geste gegenüber der Denunziationspraxis innerhalb totalitärer Strukturen (Yelchin 2011, 160).

Der abstrakte Autor des Originals, der sich durch narrative Zurückhaltung und strategische Mehrdeutigkeit auszeichnet, wird in der translatorischen Instanz des abstrakten Übersetzers (vgl. Kuzminykh 2025b) durch einen vermittelnden Textproduzenten substituiert. Diese Instanz scheint die semantische Offenheit zugunsten eines intendierten ‚richtigen‘ Verstehens zu minimieren.

Die hermeneutisch gelenkte Kommunikationshaltung kann als Versuch gedeutet werden, eine Beziehungskommunikation herzustellen – analog zur Figur eines fürsorglichen und kompetenten Erwachsenen, der seine kindlichen Rezipientinnen und Rezipienten umfassend zu instruieren sucht. Die Verschiebung reduziert jedoch die im Original angelegte potenzielle Polyvalenz, welche zur selbstreflexiven Lektürepraxis einlädt und als konstitutives Merkmal jeder Beziehungskommunikation fungiert.

3. Fazit

Das Ziel des Beitrags bestand darin, zu untersuchen, inwieweit in Fällen der Selbstübersetzung die beziehungskommunikative Funktion literarischer Texte trotz der sprachlich-semiotischen Rekonfiguration des Originaltextes erhalten bleibt.

Die Analyse von Eugene Yelchins autoautorialer Übersetzung seines ursprünglich englischsprachigen historischen Entwicklungsnarrativs *Breaking Stalin's Nose* in das Russische offenbart exemplarisch die Möglichkeit der Aufrechterhaltung beziehungskommunikativer Strukturen im Rahmen der Übersetzung durch denselben Autor.

Gleichwohl bleibt die beziehungskommunikative Kohärenz zwischen Text und Leser nicht in der Form der Ausgangsfassung bestehen. Sie erfährt vielmehr eine signifikante Transformation durch Amplifikation und Registerverschiebung sowie durch die domestizierende Substitution von Fremdwörtern durch herkunftssprachliche Lexeme. Die russischsprachige Version bedient sich somit narrativer Strategien, die stärker auf Transparenz und Dechiffrierbarkeit abzielen, wodurch die potenzielle Polyvalenz des Originaltextes zugunsten einer stärker gelenkten Lesart reduziert wird. Dies erzeugt wiederum eine asymmetrischere Rezipientenposition als im englischen Ausgangstext.

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Multilingual Narration and Narrating Multilingualism in Comics: Mikael Ross's *Der verkehrte Himmel* (2024)

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1. Comics and Multilingualism: Introductory Remarks

Comics are a diverse and complex field, and so are, expectedly, the aspects of multilingualism connected to it. First of all, comics have a rich multilingual heritage. As modern mass media they emerge in US immigrant milieus, and they expose the linguistic diversity of these milieus by means like mock accents and artificial code mixing. The most prominent example of this can probably be found in *The Katzenjammer Kids*, a classical comic strip invented by German immigrant Rudolph Dirks (1877-1968) in which most characters use a mixed code of English as a matrix language with German phonographemic and lexical markers (see Braun & Eckhorst 2022). One reason that connects comics and multilingualism therefore lies in the historical emergence of the classic comic strip in a multilingual environment. Another one would be the travelling hero. Comics have been dominated by genres like adventure, western, science fiction, and, of course, superheroes, full of first contacts and translingual encounters – or encounters that should actually be translingual. Comics can be multilingual to expand their potential audience, like Finnish comics are often published bilingually, usually with English subtitles (see Kauranen 2020). They also may be multilingual to expand their audience's language skills, as in the series *Les aventures de Kazh*, which

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promotes German-French family bilingualism (Guetz 2018), or to preserve minority languages (such as Yenish in Peterhans & Schönett 2022). And finally, they may be multilingual to tell multilingual stories in a multilingual world – an opportunity, however, that is often missed. In *Le lotus bleu* the famous Belgian reporter Tintin is in China dressed up as a Chinese, has an argument with British soldiers, is captured by a Japanese secret agent and confronted with his Italian-Greek-American archenemy Roberto Rastapopoulos – but surprisingly everybody is speaking French (Hergé 2006).

This is quite different in Mikael Ross's acclaimed graphic novel *Der verkehrte Himmel* (2024), a fast-paced crime story set among Viet-German youth in Berlin that displays not only the use of German and Vietnamese, but also of English and Russian, capturing multilingual reality by the "visual language of comics" (Cohn 2013a). The following section 2 will make some general remarks on the semiotic potential of comics for multilingual storytelling and the display of multilingualism, before section 3 is going to show how *Der verkehrte Himmel* uses this potential.

2. Multilingualism and the Semiotics of Comics

2.1. Modes of Representation

Languages can be represented in comics in different ways and by different means. A taxonomy of six basic modes of representation has been proposed to describe how comics deal with different languages and language differences: presence, indication, evocation, subsumption, substitution, and elimination (see Laser 2024, 201-208; Laser 2025, 94-95).¹ PRESENCE means that different

¹ Laser 2024 and Laser 2025 contain core ideas of the first two sections of this paper. The taxonomy was developed based on categories suggested by Walshe (2018) who adapted a taxonomy of the representation of languages other than English in Hollywood

languages appear as themselves. They may appear in speech balloons, but also on objects in the depicted world, in scripts familiar or foreign to the reader and they may or may not be translated. INDICATION means that the usage of a language other than the basic language of the publication is indicated outside the speech: like by a narrator's metalinguistic comments, by angle brackets, form and colour of speech balloons or by typography, often used in combination like in the *Astérix* series, where the gothic or blackletter type together with square speech balloons is intended to indicate the (fictitious) Gothic language of the character. In EVOCATION the usage of a language other than the basic language is evoked by markers within the speech, like phonographemic shifts, syntactic transfers or lexical code-switching. Jason Lutes' graphic novel *Berlin* is set in Germany of the early 1930s. The context makes it clear that the characters speak German. But this is also signalled by lexical markers like the addressing *Herr* for *Mr.* or the frequent use of *Good day*, which – unlike the German *Guten Tag* – is not very common as a greeting in English. SUBSUMPTION is very similar to evocation. The modifications of the speech may even be the same, only the aim is not to elicit the use of another language but the use of a language as L2. The variety used is therefore subsumed as an L2 variety under a basic or matrix language, just as the characters in *The Katzenjammer Kids* signal their German language background when they speak English. SUBSTITUTION is the case when what is said or written in another language is replaced by the basic language of the publication without any means of indication or evocation. The context, however, makes it clear that the basic language does not stand for itself but represents another language or other languages. Finally, ELIMINATION is arguably the most common mode in comics when dealing with different languages, meaning that just one language is used where several languages should be involved and that whole narrative worlds are monolingualized – like Tintin's China in *Le lotus bleu* (Hergé

movies from Bleichenbacher (2008). For an overview of the rather limited research on multilingualism in comics see Laser 2024, 185.

2006), and even the heroes themselves can be surprised by this: “The monster speaks... English!”, the X-Men observe while fighting giant green creatures on some distant planet, and the beast replies: “Doesn’t everybody?” (*Uncanny X-Men* #107, cit. Walshe 2018, 50).

2.2. Textual Positions

Comics, of course, are not only about language but a multimodal form of communication. The multimodal character of comics is most evident in the fact that they “have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined in multifaceted ways” (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2013, 100). We can think of comics as a fundamentally visual form of communication in which according to Cohn (2013b) text can appear in three different ways, inherent, emergent, and adjoined:

- inherent, as part of the depicted world and of the image itself, like text on signs or posters or cell phone displays;
- emergent with a source within the depicted world. That is the case with speech balloons or sound words or also song lyrics that can sometimes be seen hovering through comic panels;
- and adjoined when text and image appear separate but are connected by proximity (e.g. a narrator’s voice in captions).

The semiotic positions of different languages and language differences in comics show, however, the need for two further distinctions to be made: for emergent text between characters’ voices and soundscape, for adjoined text between captions and subtitles. Characters’ voices in speech balloons and thought bubbles appear regularly in the basic language and are subject to translation while words as part of the soundscape – mostly in song lyrics, sound words, or as ambient noise – are more likely heterolingual and may stay untranslated (e.g. Tietäväinen 2014). For adjoined texts the distinction between captions and subtitles should be made for the simple reason that, if a comic is published bilingually, the captions themselves can be subtitled. As a result, we have five different textual positions for

language in comics, and multilingualism with it, making the *discours* of graphic literature semiotically more complex than that of a (regular) linear literary text.

2.3. A Specific Potential: Simultaneously Sequential

In comics there are various modes of representing languages and various positions for the appearance of text. Furthermore, there is a special relationship between simultaneity and sequentiality or, more generally, between space and time which generates a specific potential of graphic literature to display multilingualism and to tell multilingual stories. We are talking about a – or maybe *the* – core feature of the media form, famously described in Scott McCloud's "inescapable" (Hatfield & Svonkin 2012, 431) classic *Understanding Comics* with its very broad, strictly formal, and very frequently quoted definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 1993, 9). It is this combination of sequentiality and juxtaposition that leads to a special relationship between time and space. The time focused, the panel one reads, is always now. The images before that panel represent the past, the images to come represent the future. But

unlike other media, in comics the past is more than *memories* for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities. Both *past* and *future* are *real* and visible and ***all around us***. Wherever your eyes are focused, that's ***now***. But at the same time your eyes take in the *surrounding landscape* of *past and future!* (104).

Time in graphic literature acquires a spatial quality that it cannot shake off anymore. Since the representation of time as space has even been described as "a truism of comic scholarship" (Nel 2012, 449) this is not a very surprising statement. But concerning multilingualism, this truism enables comics to juxtapose and to position different languages to make them visible and present: in the course of a story, within the framework of a single or double page and even within

a single image. In *Astérix legionnaire*, an entire conversation takes place in a single panel between a Belgian, a Greek, a Briton, and a translator for Egyptian and Gothic, speaking Belgian, Greek, British, and Gothic, as is indicated for Greek and Gothic by typography and evoked for Belgian and British by lexical markers (Goscinnny & Uderzo 1967, 30). Of course, this is *Astérix*, and that's why we are talking about fictional languages, not real ones. The crucial point, however, is that they are all there: sequentially in the course of the conversation, and simultaneously as part of the image. What has been said and what will be said is always accessible. Languages, different languages and linguistic differences become visibly and permanently part of the narrated world. This should predestinate comics to tell multilingual stories and to tell stories multilingually, and it may quite well be that graphic literature has not really lived up to this potential yet. A work that without doubt attempts to use this potential is *Der verkehrte Himmel* by Mikael Ross (with the Italian title *Il nirvana è qui*, 2025a).²

3. Multilingual Storytelling in Mikael Ross's *Der verkehrte Himmel*

3.1. The Book and its Author

Mikael Ross was born in Munich, lives in Berlin and has become one of the most important German comic artists in recent years. His graphic novel *Der Umfall* (*The Thud*) about Neuerkerode, a village in Germany run by people with special needs, received the most prestigious award for German language comics, the Max-und-Moritz-Preis, in 2020. In the same year Ross published *Goldjunge* (*Golden Boy*), a biography on Beethoven's youth, celebrating the composer's 250th anniversary. *Der verkehrte Himmel*, a crime and coming-of-age story set among Viet-German youth in Berlin, not only shows a complete change of subject

² At time of writing there is also an edition in Spanish (*Il nirvana está aquí*, 2024b) and French (*Le nirvana est ici*, 2025b), but no English language edition yet.

again, but with its predominantly black and white manga aesthetics also a significant change in artistic style. It was named Comic Book of the Year by a jury of critics from German speaking countries in 2024 (Törne 2024).

The original title *Der verkehrte Himmel* would translate as “heaven upside-down”, while the Italian title *Il nirvana è qui* translates as “Nirvana is here”. Both are quotes from a famous poem by Vietnam’s most important female poet Hồ Xuân Hương (1772-1822). The poem is quoted several times throughout the work (Ross 2024a, 9-11, 78, 215) and serves as a kind of leitmotif.³

At the centre of the story there are 12-year-old Tâm and her elder brother Dennis, whose parents have been living in Germany since the 1980s (see. Ross 2024a, 118) and are now running a small Vietnamese Restaurant in Berlin-Lichtenberg. In the parking lot at a Polish border market, they meet a young Vietnamese woman who is apparently locked up in a van. Back in Berlin, a severed finger turns up in a fast-food bag, and Hoa Binh, the girl from the parking lot, turns up, too, trying to escape from a gangster named Boris. Other notable characters include Alex, a twelve-year old who is striving to become an actor or a secret agent or both, Jutta, a former actress who’s now an impoverished alcoholic and lives in an allotment hut, and the Roller Girlz, a combination of Huey, Dewey, and Louie and superheroines who are there when needed.

Ross, as he explains in a promotional interview, was inspired to create *Der verkehrte Himmel* by his work as an assistant teacher at an elementary school in Berlin-Lichtenberg, where he encountered the daily life of the Viet-German community, but which is also a hot spot for human trafficking in Berlin (Avant-Verlag 2024).

³ The original title of the poem is “Đài khán xuân”. An English translation, “Spring Watching Pavillion”, by John Balaban can be obtained from <https://www.johnbalaban.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/h%E1%BB%93-xu%C3%A2n-h%C6%B0%C6%A1ng-poem.mp3> [23/06/2025].

3.2. Languages

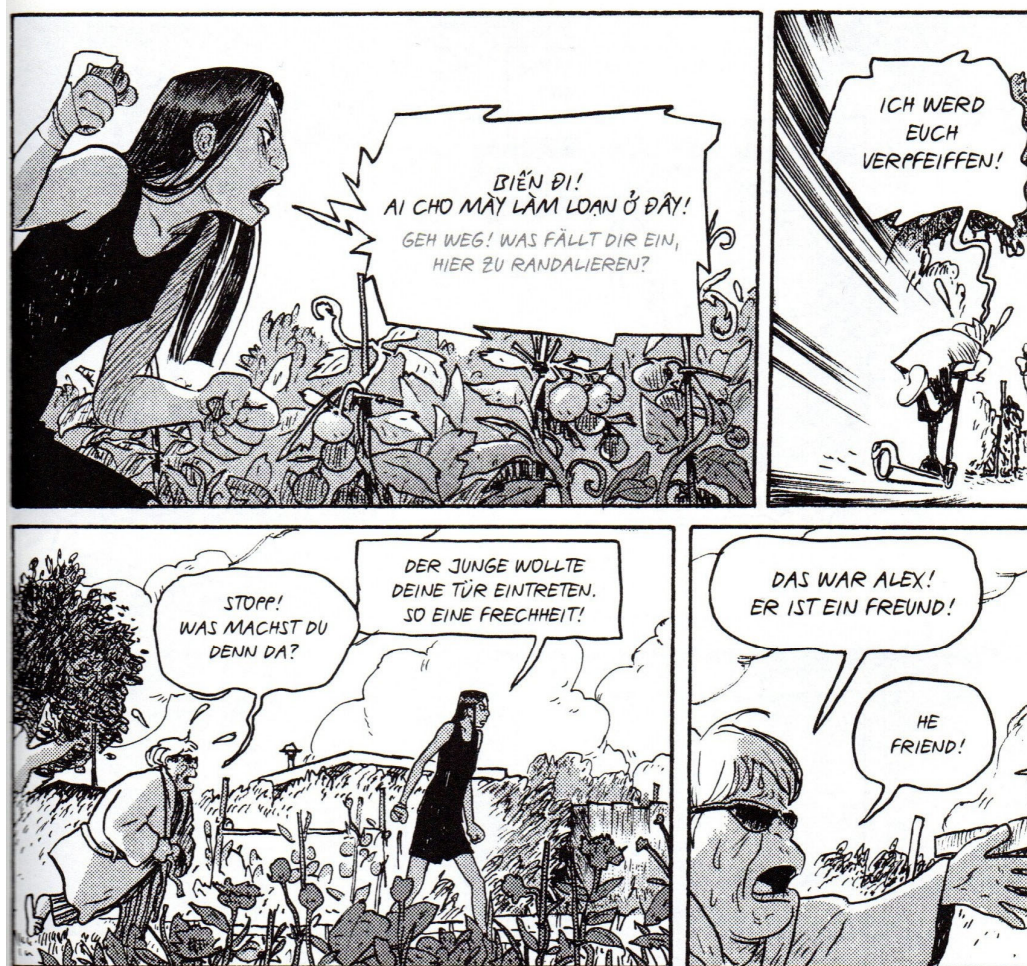


Image 1 (Ross 2024a, 185)

Telling a story in this environment at least suggests taking the characters' languages into account. In Image 1 we have Vietnamese, standard German, and very rudimentary L2-English present. Furthermore, there is Berlin dialect, Russian, and L2-Varieties of German spoken in the book. In this scene with Hoa Binh, Jutta, and Alex Vietnamese is not only spoken in the speech balloon in the first panel, where it is present, but also in the third panel, where it is indicated by the square speech balloon. Other than in the rounded speech balloons the language we read there in the narration or *discours* is not the language spoken in the

narrated world, the *histoire*. This is explained on the very first page of the comic, before the story begins:

Untertitel, wie es sie im Film gibt, sind im Comic [...] etwas unpraktisch. Deshalb gilt in diesem Buch folgende Regel: vietnamesisch Gesprochenes steht in eckigen Sprechblasen, deutsch Gesprochenes in runden Sprechblasen (Ross 2024a, [7]).⁴



Image 2 (Ross 2024a, [7])

⁴ "Subtitles, as they exist in movies, are somewhat impractical in comics [...]. Therefore, the following rule applies in this book: Vietnamese speech appears in square speech balloons, while German speech appears in rounded speech ones"; if not specified otherwise, translations are by the article's author.

This explanatory page is remarkable in at least three ways:

1. The explanation is given a whole page. A discrete footnote might have done and is quite more common, like in the *Love and Rockets* series where angle brackets indicate that Spanish is spoken where we read English (e.g. Hernandez 2001, 4) – or that English is spoken where from the context is clear that the language usually spoken by the characters in the story is Spanish (e.g. Hernandez 1989, 26).
2. The so-called subtitles are placed in speech balloons and not at the bottom of the panel where they would appear to be more discrete and less impractical.⁵ One could even argue that subtitles in comics, properly placed, would be easier to handle and therefore less impractical than in the movies since they do not create any modal divergence (see Laser 2024, 208-209).
3. Subtitles are criticized; indication via the shape of the speech balloons seems to be preferable, but subtitles in speech balloons are obviously still used, for example on this very page in Image 2 and in the scene with Hoa Binh, Jutta, and Alex in Image 1. Instead of a “pure” solution, various means are apparently combined here.

Based on these three observations some remarks can be made on the multilingual storytelling in *Der verkehrte Himmel*.

1. The size of the explanation

There may have been functional considerations, but the mere fact that the explanation of the speech balloon shape takes up a whole page puts languages and multilingualism in the spotlight and makes them a central theme for the book. This can be compared to Bücke Schwarz' graphic novel *Jein* where the opening scene with a cat meowing in English and being addressed in German and Turkish forms a kind of overture (Schwarz 2020, 10-11): a more discreet way to weave the subject of languages into the story. The explicit explanation in *Der verkehrte Himmel* does not, however, mean that the multilingual way of telling the story dominates

⁵ This can be seen in the already mentioned subtitled Finnish comics in Kauranen 2020.

the story being told. In the reviews of Ross's work this aspect hardly appears – which can perhaps be seen as a sign of how natural and thus well the representation of the different languages works.⁶ The family's internal language use for example where Vietnamese is generally spoken but the siblings speak German among themselves can be captured at a glance (e.g. Ross 2024a, 104-105, see Platthaus 2024).

2. The subtitles

The decision to place the subtitles within the speech balloons rather than below the panels or at the bottom of the page may have had very practical and simple reasons. But the use of different languages as *emergent* within the narrated world instead of *adjoined* to it as subtitles also makes them a more integral part of the narration of the world, be it via presence in subtitled speech balloons or simply indicated by the balloons' form.

3. Various means

Subtitles are called “somewhat impractical in comics” while in some speech balloons they still appear. But the subtitled speech balloons are not used randomly, of course. They mainly appear for two reasons: transition and phrasemes.

On page 104 German is spoken by Tâm and Dennis in rounded speech balloons, on page 105 the square speech balloons show that Vietnamese is spoken. But when Dennis first addresses his parents, the square speech balloon is bilingual,

⁶ Grau (2024) describes the language situation in Tâm's and Dennis's family with Vietnamese and German and praises Ross for his precise observation of youth speech. Platthaus (2024) mentions the shape of the speech balloons as a “simple trick” (“simpler Kunstgriff”) that Ross had invented “for the bilingualism that characterizes the interaction of the main characters” (“für die Zweisprachigkeit, die das Zusammenspiel der Hauptfiguren ausmacht”) and calls it “a prime example for this kind of visual storytelling” (“ein Musterbeispiel für ein derartiges visuelles Erzählen”). The issue of language and multilingualism is not mentioned in the reviews of Courth, Hartmann, Heinze, Heller, Merten, Roth, and Schmechta (all 2024).

with the original Vietnamese subtitled by the German text which is thereby marked as a translation. For the dialogue in its course, this transition point can be seen as an alterity sign that marks the linguistic otherness of the following speech balloons and establishes their square form as an indicator – or re-establishes it since this procedure is found in an extended form at the beginning of the book. In the opening scenes at the Polish border market, the transition periods are significantly longer. Tâm and Dennis talk in German. Then, Dennis takes up his father's phone call, and the original Vietnamese stays present in the square balloons during the whole conversation (Ross 2024a, 14). A little later, Tâm discovers Hoa Binh in the van, and their conversation is also initially presented bilingually (17). Only after the turning of the page the indicational function of the speech balloon shape seems to be fully established (18).

The other main case where subtitles in speech balloons appear are phrasemes, Vietnamese sayings and proverbs, usually spoken by the father and less often by the mother. On page 105 we find a political slogan ("Sparsen ist nationale Politik!"), in Image 2 a traditional Vietnamese proverb: "Selbst ein scharfes Messer kann seinen eigenen Griff nicht schnitzen" ([7])⁷. The use of phrasemes here is a specific speech act that serves a dual purpose: to make the Vietnamese language visible and to characterize literary figures, aptly in the generation of the parents, who thus appear as representatives of traditional Vietnamese values and culture.⁸

⁷ "Parsimony is a reason of state!" and "Even the sharpest knife can't carve its own handle".

⁸ The presence and translation of Vietnamese lyrics on page 268 can be interpreted in the same way. Less clear is the function of the bilingual speech balloon in Image 1 (185). Since it follows after two pages in which Alex thinks and speaks in German, it may be a transition point as well, but it also may emphasize the confrontational nature of the situation in which Alex is not only pelted with stones but is also greeted in a language he does not know. That Hoa Binh is shouting and the speech balloon therefore is neither really square nor really rounded may also play a role.

Another language made visible in *Der verkehrte Himmel* is Russian. It is spoken only by Vasja, a Russian member of a people smuggling ring, and mostly to his dog Tyson – or Тайсон, since Russian in the novel is displayed in Cyrillic letters. There are only a few incidents and single speech balloons where Russian is used. In most cases it is subtitled (264, 306, 311, 313, and 314), in very few cases it is not: One time it is a simple “Да. Да.” (“Yeah, yeah.”, 290), two other times Vasja insults his (probably male) dog as “цыка” (‘bitch’, 293 and 314).⁹ In one case, what looks like a subtitle is not a translation, but a continuation of what is said in Russian: “Да блядь! Geh schon ran!”¹⁰ (222). When Vasja speaks German he does so with morphosyntactic markers subsuming his speech as L2 variety (e.g. 222, 265-266). Other L2 varieties of German are used the one time the father speaks German (118), when Hoa Binh tries to pronounce the word *Schrebergarten* (allotment garden) used by Tâm, since she doesn’t know a Vietnamese word for it (203), and when Tâm imitates her mother’s accent to excuse herself from school (125). L2 varieties of English are spoken by Jutta, Hoa Binh, and Vasja (185, 290) and they remain untranslated, as it is probably assumed that they are understandable to the readership.

3.3. Glotta-Pithanony and Glotta-Aporia: On Poetry and Translation

English, German, L2-German, Russian: All Languages except Vietnamese appear in rounded speech balloons. The rounded speech balloons therefore do not indicate German as the square ones indicate Vietnamese. They are the unmarked case, signalling that what one reads in the *discours* is what is spoken in the *histoire*.

⁹ Apparently, the meaning of the words here is considered sufficiently clear from the context or not really important. The same can be assumed for the only Vietnamese present without translation, the “Hoan Hô!” when Tâm and Hoa Binh toast with ice tea (206).

¹⁰ “Well, shit! Pick up the phone!”.

However, there is one passage in the book where this doesn't seem to work. Tâm speaks Vietnamese fluently, but she cannot read or write it. She complains that nobody has taught her, and she has to rely on her elder brother Dennis to read what is written on the back of a photograph she found (78). It turns out to be the poem on nirvana by Hồ Xuân Hương, which appears here for the second time in the novel as it is read aloud by Dennis (see Image 3). The written text is marked as Vietnamese, and Dennis's spoken words should also be Vietnamese when he reads the poem to Tâm. But while the speech balloons with the poetic text are clearly different from those in the siblings' normal conversation, their shape does not indicate Vietnamese.



Image 3 (Ross 2024a, 78)

We could, of course, regard this as inconsistency and criticize the author for it. On the other hand, it seems to work. Readers read to understand, and as long

as the text is understood in the *discours*, there is no urgent need to question the languages of the *histoire*. Furthermore, the shape of the speech balloons sets the poem apart from everyday life and everyday speech, not angular, but airy and floating, fitting the poem's content. But the question remains: What language is being spoken here?

With terms coined by Robert Stockhammer (2015) this is a question of glottapithanony and glottaaporia. Together with glottamimesis and glottadiegesis these terms refer to the narration of languages in literary texts. More specifically, they refer to how languages appear in the narrated world (glottamimesis), how their use is narrated (glottadiegesis), to what extent the use of languages in the communication of characters is credible (glottapithanony) and to what extent impossible constellations arise (glottaaporia), in which literature can prove its autonomy. Regarding glottamimesis, Stockhammer identifies three basic possibilities for how languages spoken at the level of the *histoire* are represented in the *discours*. If French is spoken in a German text, the text can 1. glotta-amimetically appear in German, 2. appear in French in iconic glottamimesis, and 3. can appear in German, but indicate in indexical glottamimesis through linguistic clues such as "Monsieur" that French is being spoken (Stockhammer 2015, 148). In the taxonomy presented in 2.1, this corresponds to substitution, presence, and evocation. Glottadiegesis is about how languages are identified when they are not marked glottamimetically: Do phrases like "he answered in French" or "they switched to Spanish" glottadiegetically indicate which languages are being spoken, or does the context simply presuppose, e.g., that characters in France speak French (149)? The phrases would be examples of indication; the glotta-adiegetical text would correspond to substitution again.

Glottapithanony is about the credibility of the described use of language and the possibilities of making it plausible: If astronauts on a foreign planet can communicate with the aliens there without difficulty, that would be glotta-apithanon. However, if it is explained that they possess a universal translator, that would be glottapithanon (151).

Glottaaporia occurs when linguistic constellations in the *histoire* are not only implausible, but actually impossible, at least in the sense of linguistic consistency in the narrated world: for example when a business card is translated from Spanish into Spanish (165) or when in *Astérix* the Romans do not normally speak Latin, but a basic language shared with the Gauls, which is also understandable for the British, Belgians, Spaniards and Normans.

But back to Dennis and the question of which language the poem is recited in. That the declaration of the poem is in German is not credible and therefore glottaapithanon. Tâm would understand the spoken Vietnamese, so Dennis would not have to declaim a German translation even if he knew one by heart or was able to do one spontaneously. At the same time the markers for Vietnamese are missing, so that there is no indication that the declaration of the poem is not in German. This is classical aporia or – to quote from Stockhammer’s abstract – a case “in which it is impossible to determine the language spoken within the fictional ‘world’” (146).

Constellations like this are not that rare in comics at all: Apart from the universal language in *Astérix* just mentioned, one could think of the classic Western comic *Blueberry* in which the discourse of the Apache characters bear the same markers regardless of whether they are speaking to Mexicans, Anglo-Americans, or among themselves (Giraud & Charlier 1990, 3, 5, 47) or of the French everybody seemingly speaks in Tintin’s China (Hergé 2006).

But is it French? On the level of the *histoire* a cartoon character like Tintin is hardly linguistically specified or nationally assigned, but rather “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” (McCloud 1993, 36). In an English or German translation of *Le lotus bleu* the reader would, as long there is no information to the contrary, assume that the language spoken is English or German. If we ignore the specific translation, we arrive at a nameless, unmarked basic language that only needs to fulfill the condition that it agrees between the reader and the perspective of the reader’s identification.

This leads us to the question of whether the language in the unmarked speech balloons in *Der verkehrte Himmel* is actually German. The question may seem a bit odd, though, since the language is glottadiegetically referred to as German, and the story is not set in any genre-based fictional world, but in our world of today. But apart from the fact that there are several intertextual signals throughout the book that connect it to genre worlds,¹¹ its translations raise precisely this question. Obviously, the story is set in Berlin, “en ce début d’été Berlinois”, as the French blurb reads (Ross 2025b). But the language in the rounded speech balloons isn’t supposed to be German, but French: “Les phrases en vietnamien figurent dans de bulles carrées, les paroles en français dans des bulles rondes” (Ross 2025b, [7]). The same goes for the Italian edition: “nuvolette quadrate per il parlato in vietnamita e nuvolette tonde per il parlato in italiano” (Ross 2025a, [7]).

There appears to be a tension between the semiotic potential of comics to represent multilingualism and the aesthetic potential of comics to create (mono-)linguistically coherent worlds. Perhaps this is one reason why multilingualism in comics has not yet received that much attention yet: neither in production nor in reception nor in academic research.

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¹¹ E.g. the manga aesthetics with its extremely dynamic speed lines (Ross 2024a, 153) or a snot bubble signalling a person is asleep (283), the superheroine like Roller Girlz (53) or Dennis’s friend Götz who is visually and character-wise a blend of Beavis and Butt-Head (80-82).

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Writing and Translating on the Margins Dissonance in J. M. Coetzee's *The Pole*

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1. Prelude

In *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, literary scholar Daniel Albright uses the musical concept of dissonance as an approach to the relationship among the arts. He writes, “[t]here is a dissonance *within* music, such as the minor second or the tritone; but there is also a dissonance *between* music and painting or poetry – or other arts” (Albright 2000, 29; italics in original). Then in his 2014 book *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*, Albright looks systematically into “the ways in which artistic media interact – sometimes cooperating genially, sometimes poaching on one another’s territory, sometimes dissonating, clashing” (Albright 2014, 4). As in his earlier study, dissonance becomes a way to understand various forms of artistic expressions: Albright’s panaesthetic view explores the interconnectivity of the arts and the boundaries of intermediality through figures of dissonance (see Albright 2014, 210-212). Although inspired by music, the use of dissonance is not limited to musical spheres, as it also helps illuminate boundary-crossing relationships beyond music. This is how Rosi Braidotti reflects on her own migratory journey between Europe and Australia. In *Patterns of Dissonance*, Braidotti claims the coming together of various languages – Italian, French, Dutch, and a variety of English – as crucial

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in the interdisciplinary conception of her research. In particular, she refers to this coexistence of different voices as “[t]ranslation, transposition, transferral” that “contributes considerably to the creation of the effect of dissonance” (Braidotti 1991, 14-15). Similarly, a fellow Australian scholar named Mary Besemeres is also inspired by the constant movements between languages such as her own bilingual upbringing in a Polish Australian household (Besemeres 2008, 128). For Besemeres, the immigrant’s navigation between languages is a process of “*cultural* self-translation” (Besemeres 2003, 32; italics in original). Like many immigrants, Besemeres is struck by a paradox: she is between languages and cultures, because she feels attached to both Polish and Australian yet does not quite belong to either.

It is in this light of dissonance and marginality that I approach John Maxwell Coetzee’s 2023 novel *The Pole*, which was first released as *El polaco* in 2022 by the Argentinian publisher El hilo de Ariadna. Born in South Africa in 1940, Coetzee moved between Africa, Europe, and the United States in his early life. In 2002, Coetzee permanently relocated to Australia. Language and identity have always been among the central issues of Coetzee’s fiction and nonfiction alike since his debut novels *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), both of which bear traces of Coetzee’s family history in South Africa (see Attwell 1993, 37 and Dovey 2018, 18). In particular, Coetzee’s “either/or” identity (Coetzee 1992, 209) has come to shape his linguistic, cultural, literary identity and vision. The split between Coetzee’s European heritage and his South African reality thus generated a perpetuating dissonance in his life, which is then reflected in his literary works. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee claimed that “in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (Coetzee 1992, 17). In many ways, Coetzee’s own migratory journey – echoing that of Braidotti and perhaps also Besemeres – has enlightened him on his otherness and the “dissonating” (Albright 2014, 4) interaction between different languages and cultures, which prompts him to critique “the exclusionary tendencies of national-literary traditions” (Van der

Vlies 2023, 484). In his most recent novel *The Pole*, Coetzee once again brings the issue of marginality to the fore: by shedding light on the dissonance among languages and artistic media both *within* the work and *about* the work, Coetzee also turns a musical novel into a modern allegory about writing and translating on the margins in the multilingual age.

2. Before *The Pole*

In Michael Gorra's review of *The Pole*, Coetzee was juxtaposed with Jhumpa Lahiri – a British American writer of Bengali parents – in their distancing from English as acclaimed writers in this language. Similar to Coetzee, Lahiri finds her life split between languages and cultures, and as a result she continues to reflect on her existential dissonance in her works. In the introduction to her 2022 collection of essays *Translating Myself and Others*, Lahiri looks back at her life between languages: “I was raised speaking and living, simultaneously, in English and Bengali, and this meant translating between them, constantly, for myself and for others” (Lahiri 2022, 3). Having been well versed in translingualism, Lahiri aptly refers to her writing in English as “a form of cultural translation” (2). Lahiri launched her career as a writer in 1999 with *Interpreter of Maladies* – a collection of short stories that won her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year. Having already established herself as a prominent writer in English, Lahiri moved to Italy in 2012 and began to write in Italian. This dramatic transformation of linguistic landscape (3) is not imposed but rather a choice willingly made in adulthood. In the essay “Why Italian?” Lahiri explains her switch to Italian as an act of “transgression” coming from “a writer without a true mother tongue” (10). Lahiri writes:

The more I write in Italian, the more I feel in turmoil, suspended between my old knowledge of English and the new door in front of me. I'm forced to acknowledge that there is a distance between me and both languages. [...] Writing in another language reactivates the grief of being between two worlds, of being on the outside. Of feeling alone and excluded (14).

Yet unlike Lahiri, who recently adopted Italian as her language of writing, Coetzee has never turned away from English (Gorra 2023). Indeed as Gorra claims, Coetzee did not abandon English but rather made an effort to marginalize English – or at least *his* English – by drawing attention to *other* languages through translation: “Coetzee claims that his books are not only easy to translate but that their translations are ‘in no way inferior to the original’” (Gorra 2023). In recent years, Coetzee’s multilingual deliberations have turned into a growing mistrust of English and even a “War Against Global English” (Marshall 2022), which is the befitting title for the 2022 review on *The New Yorker* for Coetzee’s latest novel *El polaco*. As Colin Marshall explains:

“El polaco” is the second of Coetzee’s novels to appear in Spanish first, but he began privileging translations much earlier in his career: in the past twenty years, he’s seen to it that many of his books be made available in Dutch before any other language (Marshall 2022).

It is in this background of linguistic displacement that *The Pole* first appeared in a Spanish translation by Mariana Dimópulos (see Marshall 2022). Before the publication of *The Pole* in English in 2023, the first glimpse of Coetzee’s novel must come from *El polaco* (see Kusek 2023). Coetzee’s refusal to make *The Pole* available first to the English-speaking world is not only a linguistic recalibration but also a reconsideration of the North-South hierarchy in the literary world. As Meg Samuelson argues in her article on Coetzee and “Literatures of the South” (a term translated from “Literaturas del Sur” seminar, which Coetzee launched in 2015 in Buenos Aires), Spanish has been conceived as “a language of the South” in Coetzee’s literary works such as the Jesus trilogy (Samuelson 2021, 138-139, 146). And in a recent conversation with the American publisher and translator Valerie Miles that took place in Barcelona, Coetzee reflected on the choice of publishing *The Pole* first as *El polaco* as an attempt to reshape the privileged position of

the Anglo audience in the northern hemisphere. In fact, it has been a transformation long in the making, as Coetzee described his partnership with his Argentinian publisher María Soledad Costantini from *El hilo de Ariadna*:

It was no accident that these collaborative books were published first in Argentina, then later in Australia, two countries of the southern hemisphere. They appeared first in Spanish just as the after world in which my three Jesus novels are situated is a Spanish-speaking world. Spanish-speaking, not because I think Spanish is in some sense better than English, but simply because in the world we live in, Spanish is viable as an alternative to English. And also because I thought it would give a jolt to Anglo readers to find that the language of the afterlife would not be English. These collaborative texts appeared first in Spanish and then appeared first in the southern hemisphere. Thus, they did not have to pass the scrutiny of the gatekeepers of the North, the editors, reviewers, etc., before they could be read in the South. It's important.

So in this way, we arrive at *El polaco*, which first saw the light of day in Buenos Aires in 2022. Then in Australia some months ago, then a few days ago in the North (Coetzee & Miles 2023).

As explained by Coetzee, multilingualism has been built into the life story of *The Pole* not simply as a form of resistance against “the hegemony of the English language” (qtd. in Marshall 2022) but also as a dissonant counterbalance to the dominance of the northern gaze (see Vold 2011, 47). At the same time, Coetzee’s juxtaposition of *The Pole* and *El polaco* also creates a sense of dissonance that is reminiscent of a musical counterpoint, which can generate “interesting patterns from their friction against one another, without agreeing on a single effect” (Albright 2014, 211f.). By giving *El polaco* the same weight as *The Pole*, Coetzee also seeks to turn the vertical relationship between languages and hemispheres into a horizontal and contrapuntal interrelation.

3. Marginalizing *The Pole*

In many ways, *The Pole* is a displaced and dissonant literary work, whose origin is deliberately altered by its author. By publishing it first as *El polaco* and thus placing translation in center stage, Coetzee has cast *The Pole* to the margins. Like many of Coetzee's works with strong autobiographical echoes, *The Pole* also reflects its author's own marginality despite his status as an "international author" (Samuelson 2021, 146). Growing up in an English-speaking household with Afrikaans ancestry, Coetzee was surrounded by linguistic, cultural, and racial divides. In comparison to Lahiri, who has come to realize her lack of mother tongue due to the absence of a truly dominant language, Coetzee has only "speculated that he might not have a mother tongue", feeling "like an outsider" to both English and Afrikaans (Attwell 2016, 34, 38-39). The dissonance in Coetzee's linguistic background leads to his own marginalization, as he confessed: "No Afrikaner would consider me an Afrikaner [...], because English is my first language, and has been since childhood" Coetzee (1992, 341f.) confessed, whereas English offers Coetzee no sense of belonging either:

I became [...] an English writer in the sense that I wrote in the English language. Though I tended to treat the language with suspicion rather than affection, reflecting a feeling that it did not really belong to me (Coetzee & Miles 2023).

In other words, Coetzee has been plagued by his own in-betweenness (see Karwowska 2014, 1; Wiegandt 2016, 156) that in turn sharpened his sense and awareness of marginality, when he was growing up in South Africa and later on when he was working in the United Kingdom, when he was studying and teaching in the United States, and as an immigrant in Australia for the past two decades. As summarized aptly by Laura Wright, Coetzee is an outsider "in the realm of white South Africa, as an English speaker with an Afrikaans surname and by virtue of his own self-placement" (Wright 2006, 193). It is thus no surprise that Coetzee

continues to focus on the complex relationship between language and identity in his literary works.

The title protagonist of *The Pole* is a foreigner who is surrounded by other foreigners, and they communicate in a language that is foreign to all of them. At first glance, it is a love story in the shadow of Dante and Chopin – about a Polish pianist pursuing a Catalan lady named Beatriz. The story is narrated in the third-person voice from the perspective of Beatriz, and with almost half of the novel taking place after the death of the Pole, Beatriz turns out to be the real protagonist of this novel. This mismatch between voice and stance, between titular and actual protagonist already sets up a dissonant background for this “tale of translingual seduction” (Fry 2023), and the Polish pianist’s musical translation also adds another level of dissonance to it.

Coetzee’s approach to music resonates in particular with Albright’s application of dissonance as a point of both convergence and contention. Already before *The Pole*, Coetzee has cleverly woven music into the fabric of his novels, such as the use of Schubert in *Summertime* and the essay “On J. S. Bach” at the end of *Diary of a Bad Year* (see Englund 2017, 99-113). Then in the novel *Disgrace* (1999), the protagonist David Lurie – a professor of English with an academic interest in music – was working on an opera called *Byron in Italy*. “What he wants to write is music: *Byron in Italy*, a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera” (Coetzee 2000, 4). In the words of Carrol Clarkson:

It is through the composition of his opera that David Lurie in *Disgrace* hopes to create a sound that cuts across all cultural divides, that expresses something common to all forms of animal existence, both human and non-human (Clarkson 2009, 121).

Lurie envisioned *Byron in Italy* as a love story with the fabric of dissonance interwoven into its plot and music. It is thus an artistic expression of linguistic and temporal displacement that predates Coetzee’s own migration.

That is how he had conceived it: a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man; as an action with a complex, restless music behind it, sung in an English that tugs continually toward an imagined Italian (Coetzee 2000, 180).

However, with a vision of utopia and yearning for harmony, Lurie's opera in post-apartheid South Africa is doomed to fail. Two decades later, after having settled down in a new home in Australia, Coetzee picked up from where his protagonist had once left off with his unfinished opera. This time in *The Pole*, Coetzee moved the story from Byron's Italy to the cacophonous soundscape of contemporary Europe.

The titular hero of *The Pole* is a pianist named Witold Walczykiwicz, yet his name does not appear until almost halfway through Part One. Until then he is simply referred to as "the Pole". Witold's life is inseparable from his art, just as his personal identity is woven into his nationality:

He is a Pole, a man of seventy, a vigorous seventy, a concert pianist best known as an interpreter of Chopin, but a controversial interpreter: his Chopin is not at all Romantic but on the contrary somewhat austere, Chopin as inheritor of Bach. To that extent he is an oddity on the concert scene, odd enough to draw a small but discerning audience in Barcelona, the city to which he has been invited, the city where he will meet the graceful, soft-spoken woman. But barely has the Pole emerged into the light than he begins to change. With his striking mane of silver hair, his idiosyncratic renderings of Chopin, the Pole promises to be a distinct enough personage. But in matters of soul, of feeling, he is troublingly opaque. At the piano he plays with soul, undeniably; but the soul that rules him is Chopin's, not his own (Coetzee 2023, 4-5).

The Pole's un-Polish interpretation of Chopin – "as an inheritor of Bach" – represents his inner dissonance: by characterizing his art as foreign, Coetzee also draws attention to the often ignored fact that musical interpretation is in fact a

form of translation. Rather than being cast as an artist in his own right, the Pole is portrayed as an interpreter under the command of the composer. In other words, Witold is less of a pianist and more of a faithful translator:

“So you have always been a pianist. From a child.”

Gravely the Pole considers the word pianist. “I have been a man who plays piano,” he says at last. “Like the man who punches tickets in the bus. He is a man and he punches tickets, but he is not a ticket man” (Coetzee 2023: 22).

Witold’s uneasiness towards being characterized as a pianist is both a choice of identity and a choice of word by alluding to the act of translation: the word “pianist” suggests a deliberate distancing from the Polish word *pianista*, as Witold opts for the German equivalent *Klavierspieler*, literally a piano player. The German resonance is in line with Witold’s un-Romantic and austere translation of Chopin under the influence of Bach, as two languages and musical traditions – rather than the monolingual Polish – interweave into an illuminating dissonance that is deliberately foreign, as Walter Benjamin lays out in *The Task of the Translator*:

If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through a vague likeness between adaptation and original. It stands to reason that kinship does not necessarily involve likeness (Benjamin 2000, 18).

Paradoxically perhaps, Benjamin’s view of linguistic kinship underscores the innate dissonance or “alterity” of languages (Yoo 2013, 234), which Coetzee explores in the linguistic polyphony – with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin – in his earlier novel *Slow Man* that reaches “beyond the boundary of one national language” (Yoo 2013, 250). Although seemingly contradictory, Coetzee’s status as an international writer and his marginality are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are even inseparable, because in 2003 the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Coetzee, “who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the

outsider” (qtd. in Van der Vlies 2023, 481). Coetzee’s marginality is tied to his boundary-crossing sensibilities as a translingual and transnational writer.

Almost as an act of transgression, *The Pole* is also Coetzee’s attempt at an intermedial narrative with the interplay of both text and music (see Albright 2014, 209). In this dissonant music-literary space, Coetzee draws attention to the question of authenticity regarding one’s identity, as reflected in Beatriz’s opinion about the Pole’s concert:

She is not satisfied. The fact is, she listened this evening, listened intently, and did not like what she heard. [...] *It is not Chopin who fails to speak to me, Witold, but your Chopin, the Chopin who uses you as his medium* – that is what she would say. *Claudio Arrau – you know him?* – she would go on – *Arrau remains, for me, a better interpreter, a better medium. Through Arrau, Chopin speaks to my heart. But of course Arrau was not from Poland, so perhaps there was something he was deaf to, some feature of the mystery of Chopin that foreigners will never understand* (Coetzee 2023, 24-25; italics in original).

According to Jennifer Wilson, Beatriz’s disappointment in Witold’s interpretation of Chopin has cast doubt on her belief that a Polish pianist must have had “the music [of Chopin] in his bones and blood”, which implies Coetzee’s very own critique of national purity (Wilson 2023). In addition, Witold’s “idiosyncratic renderings of Chopin” are a form of artistic displacement and self-elected marginalization – not unlike Coetzee’s choice of diverting this book’s course of production by releasing it first in translation. According to one of the reviews, Witold’s rejection of the “historically authentic Chopin [has] led the way for a new generation of Chopin interpreters in his native land” and thus should be praised (Coetzee 2023, 6). In a similar way perhaps, Coetzee’s war against global English is just as daring and groundbreaking as Witold’s “revisionary reading of Chopin” (7). Here, the matter of authenticity surrounding Witold’s interpretation of Chopin is juxtaposed with Coetzee’s own musing on textual originality when it comes to the life story of

The Pole, for which the Spanish translation would assume the status of the “original” – or as Coetzee had intended, “no translation of this particular book should be inferior to the English language version” (Coetzee & Miles 2023). Although *El polaco* does not quite break free from the shadows of *The Pole*, the novel’s complex linguistic border-crossings are crucial to Coetzee’s ambitious endeavor to shake the English-dominated publishing industry with translation.

4. The Translation Game

Paradoxically, this choice of marginalization – for the Pole and Coetzee alike – has also pushed them to the center of the stage. And ironically perhaps, despite his effort to distance himself from Polish authenticity, Witold is still unable to escape the shadow of Chopin. At his concert in Barcelona, Witold played Chopin’s preludes, which had been finished in Mallorca, when Chopin was accompanied by his French lover George Sand. It is no coincidence that Witold and Beatriz would also meet in Mallorca, prompted by the occasion of the Chopin festival there. In some way, this rather dry and sparkless affair between Witold and Beatriz is conditioned by a doomed precedent – between Chopin and George Sand. Without even realizing it perhaps, before meeting Witold, Beatriz had already imagined the Pole as Chopin in her head: “There is no reason to expect he speaks Spanish”, thought Beatriz, “What if he does not speak English either? What if he is the kind of Pole who speaks French?” (Coetzee 2023, 9). To Beatriz, her interaction with Witold is defined by his linguistic foreignness, which also strikes the first dissonant chord in their relationship.

After his death, Witold left behind a series of poems written in Polish dedicated to Beatriz. The dissonance between languages culminates in the second half of the novel, which centers around Beatriz’s effort to retrieve and her struggles to translate these poems. Beatriz’s linguistic journey started with a phone call mixed in German and English with Witold’s daughter who now lives in Berlin. Beatriz

then asked a Russian violinist for help in an attempt to translate a message for Witold's Polish neighbor in Warsaw:

"I don't speak Polish," says the violinist. "Polish is not Russian, is different language".

"Yes, I know, but this is an elderly lady, she has lived through a lot of history, she must know some Russian, and it is a very simple message".

"Speak Russian to Poles is like insult, but for you I try" (107).

In the end, the Russian violinist wrote a message in Roman alphabet using not-so-good Russian to approximate a pseudo-Polish through what Beatriz believed to be a process of translation and the Russian violinist's transliteration:

"Write the text in Russian and I will send it. The text is: Good day, Pani Jabłońska. My name is Beatriz, I am the friend of Pan Witold. A courier will come on Friday. Please give the box to the courier".

"I write in Roman alphabet", says the violinist. He writes: *Dobri den, Pani Jablonska. Menya zovut Beatriz, ya drug... You write his name. Kuryer priyedet u pyatnitsu. Parhalysta, otdayte korobku kuryeru.* "Is not good Russian, but maybe Polish lady understands. I go now. You tell me if you have success, yes?". And he hurries off (108; italics in original).

This pithy lost-in-translation episode encapsulates a dissonance in crescendo as Beatriz moves to the linguistic margins, where her knowledge of dominating languages – English and Spanish – intensifies her own marginality. After bringing these poems back to Barcelona, Beatriz had to go through her linguistic journey backwards from Polish to Spanish.

Beatriz's first attempt to translate these poems with a Polish-Spanish translation program failed given the obscure literary quality of poetry – a form resistant to automated decryption:

She does not demand that the computer provide a perfect translation. All she wants is an answer to the question: Is the tone of the poems positive or negative, celebratory or accusatory? Are they a hymn to the beloved; or on the contrary are they a bitter parting shot from a rejected lover? A simple enough question; but the computer is as tone-deaf as it is stupid (126).

Beatriz's disappointment with the computer-based translation program is not only a shrewd take on the dissonance between human intuition and modern technology; it also recalls an earlier episode in Coetzee's life. After graduating from the University of Cape Town with a degree in English and mathematics, Coetzee moved to England in 1962 and worked in computers before devoting to literature (Head 2009, 1). This period was then transformed into the second installment of Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy *Youth* (2002):

There is something about programming that flummoxes him, yet that even the businessmen in the class have no trouble with. In his naïveté he had imagined that computer programming would be about ways of translating symbolic logic and set theory into digital codes (Coetzee 2003, 46).

Here, the protagonist John reflects on his training to be a computer programmer at IBM in terms of translation. Towards the end of the novel, John's interest in programming would intersect with his pursuits in literature, when he used the Atlas to generate "pseudo-poems" from the translation of Pablo Neruda's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* and published them back in Cape Town¹ (see Head

¹ "Although Atlas is not a machine built to handle textual materials, he uses the dead hours of the night to get it to print out thousands of lines in the style of Pablo Neruda, using as a lexicon a list of the most powerful words in *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, in Nathaniel Tarn's translation. He brings the thick wad of paper back to the Royal Hotel and pores over it. 'The nostalgia of teapots.' 'The ardour of shutters.' 'Furious horsemen.' If he cannot, for the present, write poetry that comes from the heart, if his heart is not in

2009, 14). According to Samuelson, Neruda once claimed that “I felt Chilean, Peruvian, Americ” having been inspired by the sight of Macchu Picchu (qtd. in Samuelson 2021, 144). Thus it is no accident that in *Youth* John chose a poem both *from* and *about* the South, which alludes to a transhemispheric vision of the poet. Over half a century later, Coetzee refashioned John’s early failure to become a poet into the modern computer’s failure to untangle poetry in a telling story about translation. The journey of *The Pole* also took off in the southern hemisphere, even with a musical nod to Neruda through his fellow countryman Arrau. And not surprisingly perhaps, the Pole’s poems – like his renderings of Chopin – did not speak to the heart of Beatriz either, as if they had been generated by a machine.

Writing and translating are often interwoven endeavors for multilingual authors. In the words of Lahiri, “[t]o be a writer-translator is to value both being and becoming. What one writes in any given language typically remains as is, but translation pushes it to become otherwise” (Lahiri 2022, 8). Similarly in her *Reflections on Translation*, Susan Bassnett reveals how translation can offer multilingual writers “a vital liminal space where they could be neither one thing nor the other, neither here nor there” (Bassnett 2011, 10f.). Here, she refers to Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, which Steven G. Kellman deems as a translingual memoir (see Kellman 2020, 77-88). Bassnett’s characterization of Hoffman’s tangled language and identity as a celebration of plurality (Bassnett 2011, 11) also echoes Braidotti’s description of her own translingual mode as a multilingual scholar: “My work as a thinker has no mother tongue, only a succession of translations, displacements and adaptations to changing conditions” (Braidotti 2011, 21), like the patterns of dissonance that she described in her first book – “a play of lines which intersect only to break up instantly, of breaches which open into the void, of tracks

the right state to generate poetry of its own, can he at least string together pseudo-poems made up of phrases generated by a machine, and thus, by going through the motions of writing, learn again to write?” (Coetzee 2003, 160-161).

which multiply indefinitely” (Braidotti 1991, 15). Perhaps for Coetzee, too, this is the paradox of language and identity: *The Pole* is the ultimate expression of a multilingual author seeking to capture dissonance both as an in-between space and a “null linguistic state” that can generate plurality through translation itself (Coetzee & Miles 2023).

In the end, Coetzee failed to make *El polaco* as the new original in place of *The Pole* (see Coetzee & Miles 2023), so the story about translation in *The Pole* turns out to be a prophecy of real life. In the novel, Beatriz found a translator who works mainly with “commercial and legal documents [and] speaks rapid Castilian with an Italian accent” (Coetzee 2023, 128-129). The presence of the translator named Clara Weisz Urizza further adds to the linguistic dissonance between Beatriz and the Pole, as Señora Weisz is a foreigner to both of them and their languages. It is also no coincidence that Coetzee cast this translator as “a grey-haired woman” with a Jewish-Italian name and a first degree from Trieste.² As expected perhaps, Beatriz’s endeavor to translate this linguistic mess is futile, let alone the puzzle of the Pole’s mediocre literary hodgepodge. This “penetrating examination of translation and its ultimate defeat” (Kusek 2023, 280) is the only fitting conclusion to a rather dull love affair. It also reflects Coetzee’s own critique of the center-periphery model which he had considered obsolete years ago, as explained in his interview with Attwell:

To an extent the metropolitan center has run out of steam, to an extent the ex-colonial subjects are running the show. But to an extent also, with electronic communications, the old opposition metropolis-periphery has lost its meaning; and to

² Here, Coetzee also alludes to the atmosphere of twentieth-century multilingualism and multiculturalism, as well as the marginalization and dissonance that come with it. The cultural and linguistic diversity of turn-of-century Trieste are featured in Coetzee’s essays on the Triestine writer Italo Svevo and – by extension – James Joyce (see Coetzee 2007, 1-14).

an extent the success of “international” writers (a telling word!) flows from a metropolitan taste for the exotic, provoked and catered to by the entertainment industry (Coetzee 1992, 202f.).

Coetzee’s own remark has also become a fate foretold, as he would consolidate his status as an international writer with his second Booker Prize in 1999 and the Nobel Prize in 2003. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz argues in *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature*, Coetzee seeks to challenge the status of English as the literary lingua franca by electing Spanish as the alternative medium, thus pushing translation to the foreground (see Walkowitz 2015, 5). If the vaguely Spanish backdrop of Coetzee’s Jesus trilogy set the stage for his writing in English on the margins, then a decade later English has become a foreign language submerged in the foreignness of *The Pole*, just as Coetzee admitted, “my particular ‘idioma’, lacks the earthiness, the rootedness, the solidity of the English of less self-conscious native speakers” (Coetzee & Miles 2023). Coetzee’s lack of linguistic belonging and growing suspicion towards the language in which he writes would make *The Pole* not simply a “born-translated novel” but rather an imperfect or imperfectible imitation in itself. It “ask[s] readers to consider that literatures, as we have known them, are already combined” (Walkowitz 2015, 22), while at the same time, the Pole’s untranslatable poems – like an irresolvable dissonance – illuminates the multilingual reality that aspires to a homeless and rootless future.

5. Coda

Having now sealed his fate as an immigrant, Coetzee can look back at his own linguistic and cultural wanderings from a marginal perspective, like his fellow Aussies Braidotti and Besemeres, whose translingual and transnational life experience is central to their intellectual identity. In her debut as an Italian writer in 2015 (*In altre parole*), Lahiri described a state of marginality familiar to them all:

I write on the margins, just as I've always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it's impossible for me to feel rooted, but where I'm comfortable. The only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong (Lahiri 2016, 93).

It is also on the margins that Coetzee wrote *The Pole* – in a language he considers as foreign and from which he continues to distance himself. And this story about translation is further marginalized by taking place in Catalonia, which remains at an angle to the Spanish center. It is off-center, which brings to mind Coetzee's 2000 story "A House in Spain". The protagonist, an aging writer from a different continent, bought a house in rural Catalonia, where his hesitant and bookish Castilian makes him stand out among the locals (Coetzee 2014, 72). The bumpy start of a foreigner's life in a Catalan house is narrated as an unlikely love story:

What it comes down to, astonishingly, is that he wants a relationship with this house in a foreign country, a human relationship, however absurd the idea of a human relationship with stone and mortar might be (19).

Now two decades later, with *El polaco/The Pole* Coetzee seems to have settled in a metaphorical house in Spain, a foreign space distant from his languages and continents, living a life no longer new and always on the margins.

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Le parole sporche e il multilinguismo nel romanzo

Lingua madre di Maddalena Fingerle

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1. Introduzione

Per Paolo Prescher, il protagonista del romanzo *Lingua madre* (2021) di Maddalena Fingerle, esistono parole ‘pulite’ e parole ‘sporche’.¹ Le parole ‘pulite’ sono quelle ‘oneste’ mentre le parole ‘sporche’ deve lavarle via dalla pelle, non può più metterle in bocca a rischio che lo macchino.² Paolo è alla ricerca di una lingua ‘pulita’, non contaminata, e per questo deve lasciare la sua città natale, Bolzano, dove le persone, soprattutto sua madre e sua sorella, infettano la sua lingua. Paolo è sinesteta, per lui le parole hanno colori, suoni o odori, ma possono anche essere agenti patogeni per il suo corpo, non appena si sporcano. Il padre, afasico e muto, rimane la sua ancora di salvezza; quando muore, Paolo deve partire per sfuggire all’ipocrisia della madre e alla cattiveria della sorella. Odia la sua città

¹ Vorrei cogliere l’occasione per ringraziare Cristina Belloni per aver corretto il mio articolo e migliorato la lingua. Questo contributo non sarebbe stato possibile senza la visita alla città di Bolzano da lei organizzata.

² Sulle categorie di parole in *Lingua madre*, Alessandra Locatelli (2022, s.p.) afferma: “La categoria della sporcizia e della pulizia in materia linguistica ha in realtà a che vedere con la situazione familiare di Paolo che accusa madre e sorella di mancanza di comprensione nei confronti del padre: sono loro che gli ‘sporcano’ le parole”.

natale, che considera una città di bugie e di finto multilinguismo, così finisce a Berlino, dove incontra Mira che riesce a ripulire le parole che credeva sporche: Paolo la ama e tutte le parole usate dalla ragazza assumono connotazioni positive. Tuttavia, il protagonista evita di parlare italiano, resiste alla propria lingua madre e usa il tedesco, finché il passato non lo raggiunge e la sua ossessione ricomincia. L'autrice scrive contro una romanticizzazione del multilinguismo altoatesino e a favore di una reale consapevolezza linguistica della situazione nella regione alpina.³

Nel mio articolo intendo esplorare il multilinguismo nel romanzo di Maddalena Fingerle concentrandomi in particolare sulle seguenti questioni: quale ruolo svolge la letteratura nel contesto del multilinguismo? qual è il rapporto tra identità e lingua o perdita di identità e lingua? esistono parole 'pulite' o incontaminate, oppure ogni parola nasconde un significato latente più o meno apertamente connotato negativamente?

2. *In varietate concordia* – Il multilinguismo nella letteratura europea contemporanea

L'Unione Europea conta attualmente 24 lingue ufficiali: lo spirito dell'Europa si manifesta così, attraverso questa pluralità linguistica, nel valore fondante del multilinguismo all'interno della nostra unione di principi e ideali occidentali (Corona 2004; Garzone 2007; Raus 2010; Montini 2014).

Tale diversità linguistica è un'espressione di autostima, Roland Ißler (2016) parla in questo senso di uno "heterogene[m] Kulturraum, dessen Diversität sie [= die EU] nicht etwa als hinderliche Einschränkung, sondern vielmehr ausdrücklich als

³ Gli studi di Costazza (2015; 2017), Costazza & Romeo (2017) e Locher (2013; 2016) dimostrano come la letteratura altoatesina sia ricca di sfaccettature e versatilità nell'affrontare il tema del multilinguismo e dell'identità. Per la situazione linguistica in Alto Adige si veda ancora Egger 2001, Risse 2013, Lupica Spagnola 2019 e Dorigo 2024.

Bereicherung und Gewinn begreift" (Ißler 2016, 107 s.).⁴ Per lui il multilinguismo non è solo uno dei "wichtigsten Bildungsaufgaben und großen Herausforderungen"⁵, ma piuttosto una "alltägliche europäische und weltweite Realität" (Ißler 2016, 118)⁶ della nostra comunità mondiale internazionalizzata e globalizzata.⁷ Il multilinguismo romanistico, dal canto suo, comprende circa 15 lingue romanze standard e diverse lingue non standardizzate, alcune delle quali sono considerate dialetti, con circa 700 milioni di parlanti nativi.⁸ Nei testi letterari, spesso l'intreccio linguistico delle lingue è un'espressione dell'idea di multilinguismo e, come affermano Dembeck & Parr (2020, 9), l'interesse della ricerca in questo ambito è aumentato in modo significativo negli ultimi anni. I critici forniscono tre motivi per cui gli studi letterari, che finora non si sono particolarmente soffermati sull'aspetto più linguistico e sociologico di tale questione, dovrebbero riconoscere il multilinguismo nei testi letterari come un importante principio linguistico:

⁴ "spazio culturale eterogeneo, la cui diversità [l'UE] non vede come una restrizione ostruttiva, ma piuttosto come un arricchimento e un beneficio esplicito"; salvo diversamente indicato, le traduzioni sono dell'autore dell'articolo.

⁵ "compiti educativi più importanti e delle principali sfide".

⁶ "realtà quotidiana europea e globale".

⁷ Il fatto che il multilinguismo e la traslitterazione siano un fenomeno socio-culturale fortemente radicato nella società è dimostrato, tra l'altro, dalla diversità culturale presente nelle scuole e nelle istituzioni educative (Baker & Wright 2017; Cenoz & Gorter 2021; Haukås 2016; Lewis et al. 2012; Martini & Torregrossa 2023).

⁸ In questo contesto, Franz-Joseph Meißner (2016, 8) ha assemblato un dettagliato vocabolario di base del plurilinguismo romanistico: "*Der Kernwortschatz der romanischen Mehrsprachigkeit* (hinfort KRM) stellt gestuft die jeweils 5000 häufigsten Wörter der französischen, italienischen, portugiesischen und spanischen Sprache sowie ihre englischen und deutschen Entsprechungen zusammen. Hinzu kommen die (zumeist lateinischen) Etyma"; "*Il vocabolario di base del plurilinguismo romanistico* (d'ora in poi KRM) raccoglie le 5000 parole più comuni delle lingue francese, italiana, portoghese e spagnola, nonché i loro equivalenti inglesi e tedeschi. A queste si aggiungono gli etimi (per lo più latini)".

Erstens verspricht die Beschäftigung mit und die Analyse von Mehrsprachigkeit und insbesondere mehrsprachiger Literatur allen, die sich für Fragen der Inter- und Transkulturalität sowie der Migration interessieren, einen wichtigen Zugang zu Phänomenen sprachlicher, kultureller und auch sozialer Differenz. Zweitens kommen mehrsprachige literarische Texte dem neu erstarkten Interesse an der sprachlichen Struktur der literarischen Textualität entgegen. Damit stellen sie auch eine Herausforderung an die philologischen Arbeitsinstrumente dar, die sich zunehmend linguistischer Konzepte und Terminologien bedienen bzw. diese sogar adaptieren müssen, um ihren Gegenständen gerecht zu werden. Drittens schließlich bietet Mehrsprachigkeit die Möglichkeit, die Einschränkungen der nationalphilologischen Betrachtungsweise zu überwinden. Dies ist insbesondere vor dem Hintergrund der aktuellen Diskussion um "Weltliteratur" und die sich wandelnde Rolle der "Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft" reizvoll (Dembeck & Parr 2020, 9 s.).⁹

In questo contesto, anche Patrut et al. (2022) intendono l'Europa come un concetto 'plurale' ed 'empatico' che prende sul serio l'interculturalità e il multilinguismo fin dalle proprie fondamenta, così come il multilinguismo in letteratura è inteso da McMurtry et al. (2023) come una "introduzione sperimentale di nuove regole" nel sistema di regole delle lingue e della loro rete linguistica. Per limitarci

⁹ "In primo luogo, lo studio e l'analisi del multilinguismo, e della letteratura multilingue in particolare, promette a tutti coloro che sono interessati alle questioni dell'interculturalità, della transculturalità e della migrazione un approccio importante ai fenomeni della differenza linguistica, culturale e sociale. In secondo luogo, i testi letterari multilingue rispondono al nuovo interesse per la struttura linguistica della testualità letteraria. Rappresentano quindi una sfida anche per gli strumenti filologici che sempre più spesso devono fare uso di concetti e terminologia linguistica o addirittura adattarli per rendere giustizia al proprio oggetto. In terzo e ultimo luogo, il multilinguismo offre la possibilità di superare i limiti dell'approccio filologico nazionale. Ciò è particolarmente interessante sullo sfondo dell'attuale discussione sulla 'letteratura mondiale' e sul cambiamento del ruolo degli 'studi di letteratura generale e comparata'".

ad alcuni noti esempi germanofoni e italofofoni, autori come Uljana Wolf (*Falsche Freunde*, kookbooks, 2009; *Sonne From Ort. Ausstreichungen/Erasures englisch/deutsch nach den "Sonnets from the Portugese" von Elizabeth Barrett Browning und den Übertragungen von Rainer Maria Rilke*, kookbooks, 2012), Daniel Graziadei (*geh dichter*, Iduna Verlag, 2010) e Francesca Melandri (*Eva dorme*, Mondadori, 2010) mettono in atto il multilinguismo nelle loro opere letterarie con modalità diversificate: scrivono in lingue diverse, decostruiscono e riassemblano i significati, riflettono sul contatto tra le lingue.

3. Il multilinguismo in *Lingua madre*

Se il multilinguismo negli studi letterari è un'area di ricerca attuale e vivace,¹⁰ mi vorrei qui soffermare sulla specificità del multilinguismo realizzato da Maddalena Fingerle nel proprio romanzo *Lingua madre*. Come già detto, Paolo Prescher si preoccupa della pulizia delle parole. La sua stessa lingua madre, l'italiano, è per lui una lingua sporca, non di per sé o per questioni storiche o sociali, bensì perché le persone che disprezza, come sua sorella e sua madre, sporcano tale lingua. Quando arriva a Berlino, di conseguenza, non parla più italiano, ma tedesco. Presenterò l'uso del plurilinguismo in *Lingua madre* utilizzando due passaggi testuali esemplari, in stretta connessione con la riflessione sulla situazione linguistica dell'Alto Adige:

A volte capita che qualcuno ancora non lo sa che vengo da Roma, si avvicina e mi chiede: Wo kommst du her, Paólo? Pàolo. Ja, Paólo, wo kommst du her? E io non voglio più correggerlo e non voglio nemmeno più dire Roma, e ci riprovo: Bozen. E l'altro: Österreich! Nein, nein, Alto-Adige-Südtirol, Italien, ich bin Italiener, provo io. Ach komm, Südtirol ist doch nicht Italien!

¹⁰ Come dimostrato recentemente da Schwerter et al. (2024), Hodaie et al. (2024) e Kilchmann (2024).

E allora io mi infastidisco e ribadisco che è in Italia, cazzo; Ehm... technisch gesehen, ja, eigentlich schon. Mi accorgo che in tedesco non dico mai le parolacce o comunque raramente, e me le dico in testa in italiano, e ora capisco quello che sosteneva Jan: aveva ragione, sono belle le parolacce, in italiano.

Quello riprende: Dann bist du ja zweisprachig aufgewachsen, wenn du aus Südtirol kommst. E allora io mi incazzo per davvero e ribadisco: Ehm... nee, das funktioniert so nicht. Ma in tedesco non mi incazzo, no, succede solo in italiano, in testa. Mi chiede: Wieso nicht? Ich hab' mal einen Artikel gelesen... Ah no, se l'ha letto in un articolo, che sono tutti bilingui, non posso più replicare, alzo le mani e cambio le carte in tavola e mi scuso e dico che mi sono sbagliato io, certo che sono italiano, vengo da Roma, è solo che sono nato a Bolzano: Entschuldige, ich meinte es nicht so. Ich komme aus Rom, hab' ich wirklich Bozen gesagt? Nee nee, natürlich komm' ich aus Rom, Italien. Es ist nur so, dass ich in Bozen geboren bin.

Divento presto il ragazzo di Roma, nato a Bolzano, che sa male il tedesco. Miglioro velocemente, così dopo metà anno divento il ragazzo di Roma, nato a Bolzano, che sa perfettamente il tedesco perché a Bolzano sono tutti bilingui e un po' ci rimango male, ma capisco che non ha senso discutere e me ne faccio una ragione (Fingerle 2021, 80 s.).

In questo passo, Paolo viene interrogato dai suoi amici tedeschi, conosciuti a Berlino, che esplicitano una serie di convinzioni verosimilmente diffuse. Innanzitutto, per loro l'Alto Adige non è una 'vera' regione italiana, bensì austriaca; inoltre, sono fermamente convinti – e questo inquieta il protagonista – che tutti i sudtirolesi siano bilingui, quindi Paolo dovrebbe essere in grado di parlare perfettamente il tedesco e non gli credono quando dichiara che non è così. E poiché Paolo non ha voglia di discutere, dice di essere originario di Roma e di essere nato solo a Bolzano. Come si può notare, i passaggi multilingue sono, dal punto di vista narrativo, il linguaggio mentale della prospettiva di Paolo, l'italiano, che non viene tradotto letteralmente in tedesco, lingua in cui vengono riportate le conversazioni che nascono tra i personaggi e che prendono la forma di dialogo.

La comunicazione multilingue e la riflessione metalinguistica sul presunto multilinguismo dell'Alto Adige costituiscono, in questo punto del testo, un principio strutturale: il *code-switching*¹¹ tra le lingue (tedesco e italiano) e tra le prospettive (interna ed esterna) assume una funzione narrativa. Il passaggio da una lingua all'altra non ha quindi una funzione puramente comunicativa, ma è semanticamente pregnante: le lingue, e in particolare il multilinguismo, si rivelano portatori di tensioni culturali e di assunzioni identitarie.

Inoltre, si evidenzia come il 'multilinguismo ipocrita' dell'Alto Adige si rifletta sul personaggio principale. Il conflitto interiore generato da una presunta competenza multilingue diventa parte integrante della sua identità: Paolo rivendica la propria identità italiana, ma viene costantemente messo di fronte all'affermazione che l'Alto Adige non farebbe parte dell'Italia, bensì dell'Austria, o sarebbe tutt'al più una regione 'particolarmente bilingue'. Attraverso queste eteronimie identitarie, il testo tematizza il campo di tensione politico e culturale della regione alpina. Questo allontanamento linguistico dalla città natale e dalla lingua italiana lo destabilizza, rendendo evidente che l'identità linguistica non può essere ridotta alla mera provenienza geografica. D'altro canto, la decostruzione del mito sudtirolese di un 'idillio bilingue' avviene per mezzo dell'ironia e attraverso la caricatura di narrazioni stereotipate. Le reazioni di Paolo – tra cui rassegnazione, ironia e finzione – rivelano le pressioni psicologiche legate a tali attribuzioni identitarie e la frustrazione che prova chi vi è sottoposto di fronte al fatto che molti esterni non siano in grado di comprendere appieno la situazione reale in Alto Adige.

¹¹ Il principio linguistico del *code-switching* viene spiegato da Pelloni e Voloshchuk (2023, 11) nei seguenti termini: "In seiner sprachwissenschaftlichen Bedeutung bezeichnet der Terminus 'Sprachwechsel', auch 'Code-Switching' genannt, einfach ein Phänomen, in dem Sprachen vermischt werden"; "Nel suo significato linguistico, il termine 'alternanza linguistica', detto anche 'code-switching', indica semplicemente un fenomeno in cui le lingue vengono mescolate".

Per Paolo, le due lingue sono cariche di valori estetici e di valenze emotive differenti. Egli afferma di capire la bellezza delle imprecazioni italiane, di fatto lascia intendere che in tedesco non gli sia possibile imprecare in modo efficace, mentre l'italiano, grazie alla sua carica affettiva, glielo consente. Questa codificazione emotiva dell'uso linguistico mostra come l'impiego delle lingue da parte del protagonista non sia mai neutrale o arbitrario, ma dipenda dai contesti comunicativi. Tuttavia, la scelta linguistica ha soprattutto un valore performativo per l'autorappresentazione di Paolo, parlare una lingua anziché un'altra diventa per lui un atto strategico di camuffamento: a Berlino, essa diventa una maschera sociale con cui egli può rimuovere – o almeno nascondere – le proprie origini.

Tuttavia, non è sempre così, poiché nel romanzo si riflette anche sulle peculiarità delle singole parole (tedesche in questo caso) e il plurilinguismo si presenta sotto forma di riflessione filosofica sul linguaggio, come mostra il secondo brano tratto dal romanzo:

Fremdschämen è una parola che non c'è in italiano, ma con cui riesco a capire tanto di quello che provo per mia madre: significa vergognarsi per qualcun altro. E poi c'è anche la Schadenfreude, che mi fa pensare a mia sorella, che è felice quando agli altri succedono cose brutte. In italiano si traduce con stronza. La mia parola preferita, al momento ancora pulita, è Sollbruchstelle. Indica un punto di rottura prestabilito che può essere quello delle tavolette di cioccolata e per me significa confine.

L'unica volta che prendo l'autobus è perché sono in ritardo, mi guardo attorno e leggo: Im Notfall die Scheibe einschlagen. Notfall è una parola che ti fa precipitare e Scheibe è una parola scivolosa, mentre einschlagen mi fa pensare alla panna montata perché montare la panna si dice schlagen, che però vuol dire anche picchiare e quando la leggo penso sempre alla panna e quando ci penso si crea una grossa macchia scura e sporca sulla parola. La parola che mi confonde di più però la trovo in biblioteca: lo scaffale è un Regal, a me ricorda un regalo, così si ricopre di piccole macchioline brune. Ci sono anche tante parole che si macchiano involontariamente, come quando la collega dice che si veste in maniera dezent, che

significa discreto, senza eccessi, ma per me è il decente italiano, con la voce insopportabile di mia madre e allora le macchie diventano così tante e così fitte che si sporca tutta, per davvero. La parola che mi mette più a disagio in assoluto però è la lattina, die Dose: per me ha un che di degrado da parquet con la droga e mi sento sempre un po' osservato quando chiedo alla barista una dose di coca (Fingerle 2021, 88 s.).

Il passaggio mostra un confronto tra parole tedesche e italiane e la diversa semantica di termini che hanno somiglianze fonologiche. Questo secondo tipo di riflessione sul plurilinguismo avviene quindi a livello lessicale e parte dalle singole parole: riflettendo su parole tedesche o italiane, tuttavia, si passa alla riflessione sulla lingua e sul plurilinguismo nel loro complesso. L'integrazione sintattica e lessicale del multilinguismo è particolarmente evidente nel passo in questione; l'intreccio semantico è il risultato di associazioni spontanee e la modalità di inserimento di singole parole tedesche è primariamente giocosa.

Tuttavia, dalla riflessione sul multilinguismo di Paolo emerge anche un principio strutturale: egli non si sofferma su sistemi grammaticali, bensì su singoli lessemi, attraverso i quali indaga le lingue italiana e tedesca, le loro somiglianze e differenze. Si può dunque parlare di una negoziazione del multilinguismo a livello lessicale, sebbene emerga chiaramente anche in questo caso come le parole selezionate suscitino reazioni e associazioni spontanee, soggettive ed emotivamente forti. Questa sinestesia linguistica e l'affettivizzazione¹² dei lessemi porta a una vivificazione del linguaggio, dando luogo a uno spazio multilingue primariamente

¹² Con "affettivizzazione" si intende non solo che la semantica delle singole parole non è priva di emozioni, ma anche che i loro significati vengono ampliati nel processo di decodifica attraverso orizzonti esperienziali soggettivi e affettivi. In altre parole, il linguaggio è codificato in modo affettivo. Per quanto riguarda le strutture sinestetiche nella lingua, è interessante lo studio di Angelika Ebrecht e Klaus Laermann (2005), in cui vengono presentati scritti filosofici che si interessano al fenomeno della sinestesia nella lingua, tra cui quelli di Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling e August Wilhelm Schlegel.

affettivo, in cui le lingue vengono concatenate tra loro tramite connotazioni associative personali che solo in seconda istanza aprono a questioni più generali e teoriche.

Le lingue di Paolo non sono mai neutre, ma sempre codificate attraverso la sua biografia personale, ne consegue che i singoli vocaboli si fanno portatori di connotazioni, per lo più negative. La percezione multilingue di Paolo è influenzata da processi di contaminazione linguistica: il suo centro linguistico funziona come un archivio affettivo di esperienze traumatiche – vergogna, disgusto e incomprendimento –, attribuendo a ogni parola una semantica e una codificazione individuale che esclude una percezione oggettiva e impersonale.

4. Una ‘contaminazione linguistica’ delle parole e giochi linguistici

Nel suo romanzo, Fingerle gioca con i nomi dei suoi personaggi, che sono anagrammi; l'autrice, affascinata da Giambattista Marino sul quale ha scritto la tesi di dottorato (Fingerle 2022), vede anche le singole lettere come portatrici di segreti da decifrare. I nomi di *Lingua madre* possono in effetti essere decifrati come segue:

- a. Paolo Prescher = *parole sporche*;
- b. Giuliana Prescher = *sprecherai lingua*;
- c. Mira di Pienaglossa = *Sapone di Marsiglia*.

Appare evidente come il contesto delle parole ‘sporche’ e ‘pulite’, sottotesto multilingue del romanzo, divenga anche un gioco con il linguaggio. Per Fingerle, come si è detto, le singole lettere sono portatrici di codici e di significati, di conseguenza una disposizione modificata comporta un cambiamento nei contenuti e nei valori. Per il protagonista, questo significa che anche la ricombinazione delle parole può contribuire a renderle ‘sporche’. La polivalenza del linguaggio è in effetti un principio fondamentale del romanzo ed è basata anche su giochi linguistici con le lettere e le combinazioni di parole. Gli anagrammi, intesi come giochi linguistici di de- e ricostruzione, appaiono come un riflesso meta-linguistico della

lingua (madre) che si concilia con l'ossessione linguistica del protagonista, mentre la complessità multilingue dei nomi propri sottolinea l'ibridazione: laddove Paolo e Giuliana sono nomi italiani, Prescher è un cognome tedesco e l'anagramma del terzo nome è un prodotto di origini francesi. Tutto ciò contribuisce alla permeabilità e alla mutevolezza delle lingue e degli elementi; gli anagrammi come messaggi nascosti combinano diversi livelli e codici linguistici, sottolineando la natura enigmatica del linguaggio. Non va ovviamente dimenticato il significato degli anagrammi che insiste ulteriormente, e talvolta ironicamente, sul valore della mescolanza linguistica, indicando come le parole possano, da un lato, essere sporche e sprecate e, dall'altro, venire pulite grazie all'azione di un elemento estraneo e straniero.

Nel complesso, questo gioco anagrammatico con le parole rappresenta un'ulteriore strategia per mostrare come, per Paolo, ogni parola sia classificabile come 'sporca' o 'pulita'. I lessemi, codificati emotivamente, sono categorizzati in modo estetico, sinestetico e psicolinguistico, secondo criteri soggettivi propri del protagonista. Quando una parola viene 'contaminata', essa non provoca solo disgusto, ma diventa pressoché inutilizzabile nella vita quotidiana, poiché arreca una sofferenza tangibile al personaggio. La sua percezione linguistica è dunque primariamente concreta e corporea, di certo non appare esclusivamente cognitiva.

Le parole diventano 'sporche' in particolare quando vengono pronunciate da persone contro le quali Paolo prova un'avversione profonda, come sua madre o sua sorella. Per purificarsi, deve sottoporsi a lavaggi intensi, processo patologico di pulizia che fa emergere la sua convinzione che le parole possono 'infettarlo' e 'ammalarlo', corrompendolo sia sul piano morale sia su quello corporeo. Il linguaggio viene così inserito in una logica immunitaria: Paolo deve 'mantenersi pulito', 'lavare la propria lingua', per restare integro da ogni punto di vista.

Quando i singoli vocaboli risultano 'sporcati' da esperienze negative o dall'uso da parte di persone detestate, emerge una vera e propria ideologia linguistica soggettiva: Paolo è alla costante ricerca di una lingua autentica e onesta, priva di ipocrisia. Si tratta di un atteggiamento nevrotico chiaramente connesso a un

desiderio tipicamente romantico che chiama in causa una natura del linguaggio e dei popoli che lo parlano.

Dal discorso sulla 'purezza linguistica' emerge – anche attraverso gli anagrammi e la struttura narrativa del romanzo – che l'italiano, pur essendo la lingua madre di Paolo, risulta per lui 'contaminato' a causa delle esperienze vissute a Bolzano. Il tedesco, d'altro canto, pur fungendo da strumento di fuga dall'italiano, appare freddo, meccanico e privo di carica affettiva (come si è visto, Paolo non riesce a imprecare in tedesco). Solo la lingua francese sembra offrire una possibilità di 'purificazione' (*sapone di Marsiglia*), rimanendo per Paolo una lingua non parlata e dunque ancora 'intatta', 'non profanata'. In tal senso il multilinguismo appare in questo romanzo come un concetto (sin)estetico che opera su tutti i livelli della lingua: grammaticale, semantico, affettivo ed estetico.

5. Conclusione

Nel complesso, *Lingua madre* si configura come un romanzo che utilizza il multilinguismo non soltanto come elemento formale o oggetto di riflessione, bensì come dispositivo narrativo strutturale che non ha una funzione puramente comunicativa, ma è semanticamente carico: ogni lingua, ogni parola, diventa portatrice di tensioni identitarie, affettive e culturali. Le 'parole sporche' e le 'parole pulite' non sono categorie assolute, ma vengono continuamente ridefinite attraverso l'esperienza soggettiva e sinestetica del protagonista; Paolo non si limita a parlare le lingue, ma le *sente* – nel corpo, nella memoria, nell'immaginazione.

In questo contesto, il codice linguistico assume una valenza performativa: scegliere una lingua, evitarla, storpiarla o tematizzarla diventa un atto di autorappresentazione e autodifesa; Paolo trasforma le lingue in maschere sociali e affettive, dietro le quali si protegge o attraverso cui si espone. L'italiano, pur essendo la sua lingua madre, è percepito come contaminato; il tedesco è utile ma affettivamente sterile; il francese diventa metafora di una purezza ancora intatta. Questa

gerarchizzazione soggettiva delle lingue evidenzia un'ideologia personale e patologica della lingua, fondata sull'ossessione per la 'pulizia'.

Il romanzo mette in crisi qualsiasi idea romantica di bilinguismo 'armonioso' o di multilinguismo come risorsa interculturale neutrale, al contrario, *Lingua madre* mostra come il multilinguismo possa produrre conflitto, alienazione, malessere psichico – ma proprio per questo anche riflessione critica. Attraverso la contaminazione linguistica dei lessemi, i giochi anagrammatici e la sinestesia percettiva, Fingerle costruisce un universo linguistico stratificato, in cui l'identità del soggetto si disgrega e si ricompone continuamente.

Infine, il multilinguismo nel romanzo agisce anche come principio estetico: esso amplia la testualità, destabilizza le certezze linguistiche del lettore e lo costringe a interrogarsi sul valore delle parole. La letteratura si dimostra così il luogo privilegiato per una negoziazione profonda tra lingua e identità, contaminazione e purificazione, appartenenza e rifiuto.

Si tratta di un romanzo di matrice nevrotica, non privo di elementi comici: nella sua ossessione per una lingua 'pura' e definitiva, Paolo seziona in modo patologico frasi, parole e perfino lettere, salvo poi rendersi conto che il linguaggio è inevitabilmente legato all'esperienza e alla memoria. Ogni tentativo di 'ripulire' una parola attraverso la sua scomposizione produce nuove contaminazioni tramite associazioni impreviste, esemplificativa è in tal senso l'autoironia che si manifesta con forza con l'anagramma di Paolo Prescher: *parole sporche*. Il protagonista è letteralmente composto di parole 'sporce'.

Se si trasferisce questa linea tematica sul piano poetologico, emerge con forza la tensione interna che attraversa il romanzo di Fingerle. Da un lato, esso mette in scena il tentativo di costruire una lingua 'pulita', assolutamente denotativa, fondata su verità, chiarezza e onestà; dall'altro, è il testo stesso a smascherare l'irrealizzabilità di tale progetto. Sebbene *Lingua madre* non fornisca una risposta esplicita, resta il dubbio che una lingua 'pura' possa esistere, dal momento che tutte sono inevitabilmente 'usate' e 'contaminate'. Non è forse vero, come suggerisce il testo, che ogni lingua è sempre già attraversata da ambiguità,

mascheramento, dissimulazione, travestimento? Il romanzo dimostra così che la ricchezza del linguaggio risiede proprio nelle sue connotazioni: storiche, culturali, psicologiche, individuali. Privare la lingua di questa dimensione, come vorrebbe fare velleitariamente il protagonista, significa ridurla a un sistema magari preciso, ma di fatto astratto e privo di significato.

Forse, come suggerisce Paul Celan, è necessaria una lingua più 'grigia', una lingua che non aspiri alla purezza assoluta, ma che sia capace di contenere anche l'opacità, la memoria e la ferita. Solo così, anche Paolo, il sinesteta, potrebbe non esserne più contaminato.

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**Negating Multilingualism:
Anti-mimetic Speech Representation in Terézia Mora's
Seltsame Materie and *Alle Tage***

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1. Literary Multilingualism and its Analytical Models

In contemporary German-language literature, multilingualism represents both a thematic concern and a formal strategy of significant importance, so much so that Sandra Richter describes the German-language literary landscape as “deterritorial, transnational, multilingual” (Richter 2017, 432). Consequently, numerous studies have focused on individual authors or on the broader development – or, more accurately, the diverse developments – of this phenomenon, especially in the past fifteen years.¹

These analytical approaches require further expansion, as evidenced by the analysis of selected works by the German-language author and translator Terézia Mora. This expansion should focus on two key aspects: the function of multilingualism within the plot, and its interaction with the narratological structure of the

¹ For the most significant studies that address the categorical definition of multilingual literature and aim to develop analytical tools for its investigation, see: Kremnitz 2004; Radaelli 2011; Yildiz 2012; Dembeck & Mein 2014; Dembeck & Parr 2017; Blum-Barth 2021; Kilchmann 2024.

text. In order to highlight the distinctive features of Mora's use of multilingualism, I adopt the deliberately ambiguous expression "negating multilingualism". In the following pages, this concept will be contextualized within the scholarship on multilingual literature in the German-speaking context.

The broadly accepted term used to refer to this aesthetic phenomenon,² literary multilingualism ("literarische Mehrsprachigkeit"; see Dembeck & Parr 2017; Kilchmann 2024), emphasizes the distinction between multilingual speech as it occurs in real-life communicative contexts and its function within literary texts. In other words, literary multilingualism encourages us to examine multilingualism as a component of diegetic construction, rather than as a direct reflection of extradiegetic reality. That is to say, multilingualism does not appear in a literary text simply because the author aims to depict a multilingual environment, nor does the author's ability to speak multiple languages automatically justify or require its inclusion (Sepp 2017, 52-54).

This does not mean, of course, that literary multilingualism is entirely disconnected from extradiegetic reality; on the contrary, it is frequently – but not exclusively – discussed with regard to questions of cultural difference (Dembeck 2017, 17). Simultaneously, though, such a perspective asserts the need to develop specific analytical tools both to examine and, crucially, to recognize its presence in literary texts.

This is the aim of the groundbreaking handbook edited by Dembeck and Parr in 2017, in which various analytical models are applied to a wide corpus of texts from a diachronic perspective, drawing on tools from linguistics (e.g., categories such as code-switching, code-mixing, etc.) and integrating translation and intertextuality as strategies for engaging with plurilingualism.

However, the analytical tools developed so far – while focusing primarily on the formal interaction between languages – still require refinement from a semiotic and narratological perspective, particularly with regard to narrator's speech and

² For a comprehensive overview of the terminology see Helmich 2016, 13-32.

character speech, the alternation and construction of narrative voices, and the placement of focalization. The need for a more systematic integration of these elements, central to narratological analysis, is acknowledged within the handbook itself by Rüdiger Zymner, who regards such integration as a desideratum in current scholarship. In his view, an exception is the volume by Giulia Radaelli (2011), which builds on Gérard Genette's categories of narrative voice (Zymner 2017, 295) to demonstrate, among other things, that literary multilingualism should not be reduced to the presence of clearly identifiable and measurable languages within a text. Thus, Radaelli (2011, 54-66) distinguishes between manifest forms of multilingualism ("manifeste Mehrsprachigkeit") and latent ones ("latente Mehrsprachigkeit"). The former refers to visible deviations from the dominant language of the text and is typically recognizable in practices such as code-switching – i.e., the insertion of words, expressions, or entire sentences from other natural languages – as well as in forms of code-mixing or interference, in which hybrid constructions draw on multiple idioms. By contrast, latent multilingualism is less immediately perceptible. It includes any textual feature – formal or thematic – that draws attention to the role of language(s) within the narrative. One prominent example of this category, according to Radaelli, is the presence of translation, whether in thematic form (e.g., through the figure of the translator) or through subtler practices such as "hidden" translations from other languages. In my opinion, it is evident that such latent multilingualism often becomes more legible when accompanied by manifest multilingual elements, which, in a sense, prepare the reader to recognize and interpret the less explicit linguistic layering of the text. Radaelli's categories will prove useful in the present analysis, alongside other tools firmly rooted in narratology which, perhaps surprisingly, are not referenced in Zymner's survey – that is, Robert Stockhammer's taxonomy of languages' functions in narrative speech (2015).³ It offers valuable support to identify and

³ For the discovery of Stockhammer's text, I am indebted to Kilchmann's work (2024, 27), which provides an overview of his categories. For their application – specifically in

describe more subtle or nuanced instances of multilingualism, particularly those of the latent kind. Firstly, building on Bakhtin, Stockhammer argues that works of literature can create their own linguistic world – and even their own language – by determining the degree to which linguistic variation is modulated or foregrounded. The diegetic linguistic world of each text – its “linguality” (“Sprachigkeit”) – thus makes no mimetic claim to real-world language use and may not even be internally consistent: “Jeder literarische Text [...] ist insofern einsprachig: Jeder entwickelt das Idiom, in dem er verfasst ist” (Stockhammer 2015, 170).⁴ Within this framework, Stockhammer develops several analytical categories to address different manifestations of multilingualism in literary speech. The first distinction lies between “glottomimetic” (“glottamimetisch”) and “glottodiegetic” (“glottodiegetisch”) forms (147-151). In a glottomimetic representation, linguistic diversity is visibly marked on the level of *discours* – that is, the narrative surface – through syntax, orthography, or morphology, reflecting the multilingual reality of the characters on the level of *histoire*. By contrast, a glottodiegetic representation involves a discrepancy between *discours* and *histoire*: the presence of a foreign language is acknowledged within the story, but it is not formally rendered in the text. This form often appears in narrative prose, where linguistic diversity is reported or implied rather than directly displayed. The last two categories, which are at times difficult to separate, are *glottapithanony* (“Glottapithanon”) and *glottoaporetic* (“Glotta-Aporetik”). The former concerns the plausibility (or lack thereof) of linguistic interaction – such as situations where characters’ foreign language abilities seem implausible or difficult to have been acquired within the diegetic world (151ff.). The latter refers more broadly to instances in which linguistic constellations are implausible or outright impossible, encompassing any violation of the expected mimetic consistency in the representation of language

the field of comics analysis – and further discussion, see also Laser 2024, 202-204.

⁴ “Every literary text [...] is monolingual in this sense: Each one develops the idiom in which it is written”. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

(164ff). However, even with respect to this taxonomy, the analysis of Terézia Mora's texts reveals a particular manifestation that, while fitting within the last category, still requires further clarification. Firstly, from a structural perspective, multilingualism in Mora's work may initially seem less prominent than in texts often cited as paradigmatic examples of literary multilingualism. Moreover, as we will see, certain instances of multilingualism in Mora's works defy reader expectations – for instance, by repeating sentences in only one language where multilingual passages or conventional markers of linguistic diversity would typically be expected. This overt play with the reader's expectations does not appear to be accounted for in Stockhammer's taxonomy – or indeed, in any existing framework. However, it is on another level – the function of multilingualism and its cultural value – that the distinctive use of multilingual strategies in Mora's texts sets them apart from much contemporary literature and calls for the development of new analytical tools.

In its various manifestations, multilingual literature is frequently viewed as an ethically charged literary strategy: by emphasizing the presence of multiple cultures and their syncretism within society, it resists any claim to cultural purity or homogeneity (Sepp 2017, 53), thereby challenging what Yasemin Yildiz (2012) has termed the “monolingual paradigm” and revealing the potentially subversive political dimension of multilingual writing.

So much so that, according to Esther Kilchmann (2024, 23), who here builds upon Helmich's work (2016), literary studies often harbor a positive bias toward multilingualism, interpreting it as a marker of “culture-connecting” and “progressive values”. Kilchmann argues that “[...] Yildiz' unumschränkt positive Besetzung von „multilingualism“ in der historischen Kontextualisierung [sich] nicht halten [lässt]. Gerade jene Texte, die mit Zweitem Weltkrieg und Shoa und deren Nachgeschichte verbunden sind, lassen demgegenüber in der Mehrsprachigkeit eher ein Signum der Katastrophe erkennen” (25)⁵. She further contends that this

⁵ “Yildiz's unreservedly positive connotation of ‘multilingualism’ in historical

interpretation stems from a culturally oriented and politically progressive reading tradition originating in U.S. scholarship (23).

Mora's distinctive deployment of multilingualism appears to corroborate Kilchmann's thesis, as in the diegetic world of the texts to be analyzed, multilingualism is represented in non-celebratory terms, if not outright carrying a negative connotation. Multilingualism is a fraught condition – a symbol of loss, fragmentation, and alienation, one that negates belonging, identity, and stability.

The term *negating* thus refers both to the apparent absence of multilingualism in the text and to its negative function within the diegetic construction of Mora's reflection on language. It also points to the ways in which multilingualism is actively suppressed or undermined in her narrative strategies.

Employing the above-mentioned categories, Mora's negating multilingualism will be analyzed following a discussion of her linguistic background, which offers insightful perspectives on the poetic motivations behind her narrative use of literary multilingualism.

2. Terézia Mora: A Brief Language Biography

Terézia Mora was born in 1971 in Sopron, a city in western Hungary near the Austrian border, and belongs to one of the country's German-speaking minorities – specifically, the bilingual German-Hungarian minority known as the *Ungarndeutsche*. When talking about her childhood, she describes her life as that of an outsider (“Außenseiterleben”, Weidermann 2004). As Tatasciore reconstructs in detail (2009, 27-28), Mora's family background is marked by significant linguistic stratification, which in turn was shaped by the geopolitical history of the Sopron region. Her maternal relatives spoke an Austrian variety of German enriched with Hungarian vocabulary, while Mora herself would address them in

contextualization cannot be maintained. Especially those texts connected to World War II, the Shoah, and their aftermath reveal multilingualism rather as a sign of catastrophe”.

Hungarian. German only became an actively mastered language for Mora during her secondary school years. Prior to that, her use of the language had been passive, limited to the family context and to brief early childhood exposure.⁶ Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, she moved to Berlin and attended university. Here, her language competencies were reinforced as her “own” German was confronted with that of the city:

Als ich – 1990, im Alter von 19 Jahren – nach Deutschland, genauer, nach Berlin, kam, konnte ich bereits etwas, das man eine deutsche Sprache nennen konnte. Aber zum einen stammte diese Sprache aus einem anderen Territorium: Minderheitendeutsch aus dem ländlichen Ungarn vs. Nachwende-Ostberlinerisch vs. Nachwende-Westberlinerisch vs. Humboldt-Universitätshochdeutsch vs. so weiter. Du kommst mit deiner Sprache, die von vornherein deterritorialisiert gewesen wäre, in eine Situation, in der auch in der Sprache der bereits anwesenden Mehrheit gerade eine starke Wandlung vor sich geht. Du kannst dem Schock, den ihr gerade parallel erlebt, keinen Namen geben, und sie ebenso wenig (Mora 2015, 12-13).⁷

Her German, or rather “something that could be called the German language”, is “deterritorialized”: first, it was the language of a minority in Hungary and thus

⁶ For a comprehensive linguistic biography of Mora, as well as an overview of the *Un-garndeutsch* dialects spoken by the communities to which she belongs – and the processes of linguistic transfer within them – see Tatasciore 2009, 24-34 and 55-58.

⁷ “When I – in 1990, at the age of 19 – came to Germany, more specifically, to Berlin, I could already speak something that could be called the German language. But on the one hand, this language came from a different territory: minority German from rural Hungary vs. post-reunification East Berlin German vs. post-reunification West Berlin German vs. Humboldt University High German, and so on. You come with your language, which would have already been deterritorialized from the start, into a situation where a strong transformation is also taking place in the language of the majority already present”.

never fully belonged to that community; second, this language was later transplanted to Berlin, where it encountered the city's diverse and historically layered varieties of German. It was in Berlin that Mora began writing. One striking aspect of her language biography is that she writes exclusively in German and translates only from Hungarian into German, never the other way around. She reportedly followed the Hungarian translation of her novel *Alle Tage* only with some difficulty (Tatasciore 2009, 33). Her relationship to language(s) is undeniably complex, particularly within a context in which individuals are often assigned a language based on their place of birth. To give an example, when Mora was awarded the controversial Adelbert von Chamisso Prize for emerging writers – an award intended for so-called “non-native” authors –⁸ she implicitly rejected the label of “foreign-language writer,” stating:

Offenbar nimmt man an, daß ich es (aus bekannten Gründen) besonders gut wüßte, wie es ist, fremd zu sein. Nun, ich weiß es, aber ich weiß es nicht deswegen, weil ich nicht in meiner Muttersprache schreibe. In meiner Muttersprache war ich stumm. Und ohne diese „fremde“ Sprache, die deutsche, wäre ich es immer noch, nicht gedoppelt zwar, aber dennoch fremder als fremd, denn erst dadurch, was man (anders als die Herkunft) wählen kann, bin ich schließlich geworden, was ich bin: ein freier Mensch. Eine, die sich äußern kann, Schriftstellerin (Mora 2000, 839).⁹

⁸ The Adelbert von Chamisso Prize (1985-2017) was traditionally awarded to authors writing in German who were considered either non-native speakers or of non-German origin.

⁹ “Apparently, it is assumed that I, for obvious reasons, would know very well what it is like to be foreign. Well, I do know, but this is not because I do not write in my mother tongue. In my mother tongue, I was mute. And without this ‘foreign’ language, German, I would still be mute – not doubly so, but still, more foreign than foreign, because only through that which one can choose (unlike origins) have I finally become what I am: a free person. One who can express herself, a writer”.

In this somewhat unconventional acceptance speech, Mora asserts that German had never been a foreign language (*Fremdsprache*) to her; rather, it was foreign to the community she belonged to – and, as a result, it made her a foreigner as well. Conversely, the native language of that community, Hungarian, which should have been her mother tongue, did not offer her a sense of expression or belonging. Mora's language biography, along with her reflections on language, identity, and diversity, profoundly shapes the linguality of her works and the role language plays within them. In the following, I will focus on Mora's first two publications: the short story collection *Seltsame Materie* (1999) and the novel *Alle Tage* (2004). It is important to note that the coexistence of Hungarian and German in Mora's writing – particularly in these two works – has already been extensively examined by Bianka Burka (2016) and Tatasciore (2009).¹⁰ What follows, therefore, concentrates exclusively on the forms that build the phenomenon I have termed negating multilingualism, a dimension which, to my knowledge, has not yet been systematically explored.

3. Forms of Negating Multilingualism

To date, Mora has published seven works of fiction,¹¹ which primarily center on marginalized individuals – figures she presents as archetypes of subjectivity in a globalized society. She has even coined a term for this archetype: the

¹⁰ While Hungarian words and expressions appear in many of Mora's texts, the presence of the language is not always overt. It often remains concealed in calques and quotations (Tatasciore 2009, 53-59), syntactic structures, or even in the conceptualization of time and its representation within the grammatical verbal system (68-81).

¹¹ *Seltsame Materie* (1999); *Alle Tage* (2004); *Der einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent* (2009, part of the Darius Kopp trilogy); *Das Ungeheuer* (2013, Darius Kopp trilogy); *Die Liebe unter Aliens* (2016); *Auf dem Seil* (2019, Darius Kopp trilogy); and *Muna oder Die Hälfte des Lebens* (2023).

“Überzählig”, meaning “superfluous” or “redundant”. This concept functions as one of the key codes through which the anthropological transformation of contemporary society is articulated. Indeed, the experience of otherness and estrangement in Mora’s work is not bound to specific linguistic, national, geographic, or historical contingencies. In this context, literary multilingualism often functions as a means of further articulating the Otherness of the characters; it has an “isolating” function, as Anne Fleig points out: “die Mehrsprachigkeit ihrer Figuren [ermöglicht] keineswegs mehr Verständigung [...] – Mehrsprachigkeit ist vielmehr Teil der Erfahrung von Flucht, Migration und globalisierter Ökonomie und kann dadurch sogar isolierend wirken” (Fleig 2019, 56).¹²

3.1. *Seltsame Materie*, or Negating the Native Language

The collection *Seltsame Materie* comprises ten short stories, all set within the same geographical and temporal frame: a small, unnamed village near three borders in East-Central Europe, during the latter half of the twentieth century (Mora 2007, 334). In the diegetic world, however, neither the location nor the historical moment is explicitly stated. Nevertheless, it is evident that the setting is inspired by Mora’s own biography and her upbringing behind the Iron Curtain. The work can therefore be read as a narrative unit (Tatasciore 2009, 46). Each story is narrated by a different unnamed homodiegetic narrator, frequently young adults – most of them women – who are portrayed as outsiders.

The protagonist of the second story in the collection, *STILLE.mich.NACHT* (Mora 1999, 21-52), works as a border patrol officer. Though born in the village, he was raised abroad by his father and acquired other languages during that time. Upon his return, he is unable to reintegrate into the community. His sense of alienation

¹² “The multilingualism of her characters by no means enables greater understanding [...] rather, multilingualism is part of the experience of flight, migration, and the globalized economy, and can therefore even have an isolating effect”.

is underscored by his inability to fully master either his native language or any other, as he recalls referring to the reason he stopped attending school:

Ich habe nichts verstanden von dem, was da vor sich ging. Ich habe die Worte nicht verstanden. Ein einziges Chaos. Das geht mir nicht ins Gehirn. Ich erzähle ihm, ich habe im Ausland gelebt. Und als ich hierherkam, als mich unser Vater einfach wieder hierherbrachte, hatte ich das Gefühl, ich verstehe meine eigene Vatersprache nicht. Ich spreche fünf Sprachen. Und ich habe nicht eine verstanden. Und nach einer Pause: Ich hab's aufgegeben (23-24).¹³

When a foreigner is caught at the border trying to flee the country, the protagonist is called upon to act as an interpreter, as the prisoner does not speak the local language. In this scene, we encounter a clearest example of manifest multilingualism in the collection. The protagonist attempts to communicate in French, English, Russian, and Italian; however, the man appears to understand only Romanian – a language the protagonist cannot speak:

Bonjour, sage ich. Je suis le traducteur. Quel est votre nom ? [...] Eu nu înțeleg, sagt er [...] Nu vorbesc decît românește. Er schaut mich an, mit geringer, fast desinteressierter Hoffnung: *Românește?* [...]

Maybe we could try it in English, then? versuche ich es. [...] Schließlich sage ich, und die Stimme zittert mir, weil was, wenn das die einzige Sprache ist, die er kann und ich nicht: *Kak was sowut?* [...]

Er ist kein Russe, sagt der Diensthabende hinter meinen Rücken. Es klingt ungeduldig. Ich drehe mich nicht um.

¹³ "I didn't understand any of what was going on there. I didn't understand the words. It was total chaos. It doesn't go into my brain. I tell him, I've lived abroad. And when I came back here, when our father simply brought me back here, I had the feeling that I didn't understand my own father's language. I speak five languages. And I didn't understand a single one. And after a pause: I gave up".

Alors, vous venez de la Roumanie, sage ich zum Mann.

Romania, da, sagt er.

Ich sage ihm, sein Versuch, illegal die Grenze zu passieren, sei gescheitert, und mache mit den Händen eine schneidende Bewegung. *C'est la fin de votre voyage*, sage ich. [...] *Finito. Pas de chance*. [...] *Solo una questione di tempo*. Diesen letzten Satz sage ich schon, ohne zu erröten, fest und sicher, verleihe meinem Gesicht ein strenges Aussehen. [...] Der Mann blinzelt, sagt nichts. [...]

Dabei ist das alles nicht meine Schuld. Ich spreche fünf Sprachen. Rumänisch gehört nicht dazu (31-33).¹⁴

Sentences in these four languages – four of the five spoken by the protagonist – are presented in italics, and at the end of the book, they are translated in a glossary. This form of code-switching can be identified as a glottomimetic representation of language in speech, according to Stockhammer's terminology. Regarding the function of multilingualism here, it is important to consider the protagonist's psychological state in this scene: he trembles and is as nervous as the prisoner. Rather than facilitating dialogue, multilingualism intensifies the protagonist's feelings of worthlessness.

¹⁴ "Bonjour, I say. Je suis le traducteur. Quel est votre nom ? [...] Eu nu înțeleg, he says [...] Nu vorbesc decît românește. He looks at me with slight, almost disinterested hope: Românește? [...] Maybe we could try it in English, then? I try. [...] Finally, I say, and my voice trembles, because what if this is the only language he knows and I don't: Kak was sowut? [...] He's not Russian, says the officer behind my back. It sounds impatient. I don't turn around. *Alors, vous venez de la Roumanie*, I say to the man. *Romania, da*, he says. I tell him that his attempt to illegally cross the border has failed, and I make a cutting gesture with my hands. *C'est la fin de votre voyage*, I say. [...] *Finito. Pas de chance*. [...] *Solo una questione di tempo*. I say this last sentence already, without blushing, firmly and confidently, giving my face a stern look. [...] But none of this is my fault. I speak five languages. Romanian is not one of them".

Another example of multilingualism, this time latent, appears in the fifth story, *Der Fall Ophelia*. The protagonist comes from a German-speaking family that has recently moved to the community and experiences marginalization, partly due to their language, which still bears the negative connotations linked to the Second World War:¹⁵ “In der Geschichtsstunde drehen sich alle um und starren mich an. Die Lehrerin hat es gerade erklärt: Wer spricht, wie man in meiner Familie spricht, ist ein Faschist” (116).¹⁶

In the few instances when German is actually spoken at the level of the *histoire*, it is explicitly marked by a comment in the text, signaling a deviation from the fictional dominant language of the community: “Was ist das, was ihr da sprecht? Kroatisch? Ich sage ihr, es sei Deutsch” (121);¹⁷ “Guten Tag, sage ich zu Herrn Priester, aus Versehen in unserer Sprache” (117).¹⁸ Obviously, this cannot be visible on a formal level in the *discours*, since the text itself is written in German – making it an example of glottodiegetic representation of speech. But observing these examples, at this point we might ask ourselves: how is the linguistic world created by all the stories in the collection structured? What does this world’s linguality look like?

Several foreign languages are mentioned and also appear in the text: English, French, Italian, Romanian, and Russian are formally visible, while German and Croatian are only referenced. What is neither visible nor directly named in the diegetic world is the fifth language spoken by the protagonist of *STILLE.mich.NACHT* – the language of the community, typically the national language of the setting. This language should be present, yet it never appears, and

¹⁵ For the connotations associated with the German language in these territories, see Tatasciore 2009, 24-25.

¹⁶ “In history class, everyone turns around and stares at me. The teacher had just explained it: Anyone who speaks the way people in my family speak is a fascist”.

¹⁷ “What is that you all are speaking? Croatian? I tell her it’s German”.

¹⁸ “Good day, I say to Mr. Priest, accidentally in our language”.

its absence is made even more striking by the fact that the stories are written in German.

We could refer to Mora's biography and infer that this language must be Hungarian. Its absence of is also noted by Tatasciore (2009, 54-55), who points out that Hungarian is present within the German used by Mora, as many quotations from Hungarian songs, sayings, and literary works are reported in translation. However, this makes the concealment of Hungarian even more evident. It may respond to a desire to trace the power dynamics and hierarchies operating between languages (137-140), to shield herself from being labeled a foreign-language writer, as suggested by Fleig (2019), or to extend the discourse on linguistic otherness beyond the specific example of German-Hungarian conflict (128-135).

In any case, if we stay within the diegetic world and do not expect from it any mimetic claim, we must conclude that the native language of the community does not exist. All languages mentioned or used are those considered foreign, including German. This makes narrative sense, since the narrators are all outsiders, and from their perspective there is no language that creates a sense of belonging – that is, no native language.

3.2. *Alle Tage*, or Anti-Mimetic Multilingualism

A similar function of language characterizes Mora's first novel, *Alle Tage*, where multilingualism also plays a central thematic role. The protagonist, the translator Abel Nema, flees his homeland in the wake of a civil war – although his reasons for leaving are of a different nature. Over the ten years covered in the book, the conflict leads to the fragmentation of Abel's country. Eventually, he settles in the metropolis called B. Mora has confirmed that Abel comes from the former Yugoslavia, the story is set in the 1990s, and B. can be understood as Berlin. However, the third-person narration never explicitly states these details. Similar to *Seltsame Materie*, the novel avoids toponyms. While language names do appear, neither Abel's native tongue nor the national language of the metropolis B. are

mentioned. Instead, they are replaced with deictic terms such as “Landessprache” (national language) or “Muttersprache” (mother tongue).

Before arriving in B., Abel is involved in an explosion that grants him the extraordinary capacity to speak no fewer than ten languages, initially mixing them all together but eventually mastering them flawlessly. He also loses his accent, making it impossible to infer his origin from his speech.

The scene in which the protagonist acquires this Pentecostal ability is one of the few instances of glottomimetic speech and manifest multilingualism in the novel. This appears as a form of code-switching on the lexical level, where foreign language elements are not formally marked. There is no gloss indicating which word belongs to which language or providing translations, although the meaning of some words or expressions can be deduced from context: “Prime bjen esasa ndeo, sagt der Junge [Abel], Prime. Was? Songo. Nekom kipleimi fatoje. Pleida pjanolö [...] Man denkt, man versteht, was er sagt, und dann versteht man’s doch nicht” (Mora 2004, 72-73);¹⁹ “Er dachte: Semmel, zsemle, roll, petit pain, bulotschka. Dachte vaj, Butter, butter, maslo, buerre. Dachte...ein großes Durcheinander” (90).²⁰

Similar to the protagonist of the short story *STILLE.mich.NACHT*, Abel’s multilingualism also serves as a marker of his Otherness and is a product of his many losses: the fragmentation of his homeland, the trauma of war, and his dispersion in the globalized world. Not only that, but his extraordinary linguistic ability seems to replace other cognitive functions, such as his sense of orientation, significant parts of his memory, his sense of self, and even his ability to have sexual intercourse. In other words, rather than being a Pentecostal apostle, Abel – as noted

¹⁹ “Prime bjen esasa ndeo, says the boy [Abel], Prime. What? Songo. Nekom kipleimi fatoje. Pleida pjanolö [...] One thinks they understand what he’s saying, but then they don’t understand it after all”.

²⁰ “He thought: Semmel, zsemle, roll, petit pain, bulotschka. Thought vaj, Butter, butter, maslo, buerre. He thought...a big mess”.

by several scholars (see Allocca 2016, 134-135) – is a messenger of the chaos of Babel.

This may explain why, similarly to that of *Seltsame Materie*, the linguistic world of this novel explicitly detaches itself from any mimetic claims. The first example occurs when Abel works as an interpreter alongside colleagues who translate into various languages:

Irgendwann im Laufe des Frühlings war Abel [...] zu einem weiteren Job gekommen. Synchrondolmetschen in einem nahen Kongresszentrum [...]

Sie sind ein Skandal! Brüllte der Ire.

Sie sind ein Skandal, sagte die kleine Frau mit dem Pagenschnitt in der Kabine nebenan.

Sie sind ein Skandal! brüllte der Serbe zurück.

Sie sind ein Skandal, sagte Abel ins Mikrofon (Mora 2004, 183).²¹

The different languages are nowhere to be seen; instead, the original German phrase is repeated four times. A similar scene occurs when Abel imagines giving a Russian lesson to his stepson, Omar:

Abel hätte den Satz auf Russisch niedergeschrieben und ihn vorgesprochen, Omar hätte ihn wiederholt.

Willst du verreisen?

Niet, ja ne chatschu ujechatj

Nein, ich will nicht verreisen.

Wolltest du jemanden abholen?

²¹ “Sometime during the spring, Abel [...] had gotten another job. Simultaneous interpreting at a nearby conference center [...] You are a scandal! shouted the Irishman. You are a scandal, said the small woman with the pageboy cut in the adjacent booth. *You* are a scandal! shouted the Serbian in return. You are a scandal, said Abel into the microphone”.

Wolltest du jemanden abholen?

Nein.

Was wolltest du dann dort?

Was wolltest du dann dort?

Ich wohne in der Nähe.

Ich wohne in der Nähe (260).²²

This passage begins with code-switching between German and Russian. However, the scene continues solely in German, once again duplicating the sentences. This anti-mimetic choice might be placed within Stockhammer's category of the glottoaporetic, as a sort of subcategory. Nevertheless, this categorization fails to fully capture the explicit anti-mimetic nature of Mora's narrative strategy, and more importantly, the aspect of negation or obliteration of multilingualism.

Indeed, among the many possible interpretations of this strategy, my belief is that it projects the protagonist's estrangement and dissociation – expressed through a latent multilingualism that plays with the reader's expectations – onto both the diegetic world and the reading experience.

A particularly striking example of this anti-mimetic use of language concerns another character, Abel's flatmate Kostantin. His voice is characterized by a neurotic and prolix discursive style that, upon his first appearance, unfolds in a three-page monologue alternating between direct and indirect speech, the latter filtered through the narrator. Here is a brief excerpt:

Was kann ich dir sagen, diese sind *hysterische Zeiten*! Als würde die ganze Welt Die Reise nach Jerusalem spielen. Panik, Geschiebe, Gewimmer, Gekreisch. Suchen ihren Platz. Oder einen. Eine harte Kante für den halben, Verzeihung, Arsch.

²² "Abel would have written the sentence in Russian and spoken it aloud, Omar would have repeated it. Do you want to travel? Niet, ja ne chatschu ujechatj. No, I don't want to travel. Did you want to pick someone up? Did you want to pick someone up? No, I don't. Why were you there then? Why were you there then? I live nearby. I live nearby".

Freiwillig, unfreiwillig. Hart ist das Leben überall, gerade jetzt, da sie nichts Eiligeres zu tun haben, als sämtliche Kontingente einzufrieren, als gäbe es keine, wie sagt man so schön: *internationale Lage!* [...] Es war nicht notwendig oder möglich, etwas zu sagen, er redete ohne Pause, moderierte die fabelhafte Rettung *unseres jungen Helden*, zwischendurch holte er hektisch Atem, als würde er schwimmen, die Armbewegungen waren auch so [...] Voilà, der Ort, an dem es keine Dunkelheit gibt. Oder nur Dunkelheit. Das ist so eine Ja-und-nein-Angelegenheit (alle Kursive: Kostantin) (93-94).²³

But after this introduction to the character, the narrator continues as follows:

So lernte Abel Kostantin T. kennen. Er schien eine Vorliebe fürs Französisch zu haben, aber abgesehen davon, war von seinem Monolog, ehrlich gesagt, nicht allzuviel zu verstehen. Er sprach, obwohl schon ein Jahr hier, die Landessprache nicht besonders gut. Gerade mal das Wesentliche. Du Hunger? Essen? Eier und das hier (95-96).²⁴

²³ “What can I tell you, these are *hysterical times!* As if the whole world were playing musical chairs. Panic, shoving, whining, screaming. Searching for their place. Or one. A hard edge for half an, pardon me, ass. Voluntarily, involuntarily. Life is hard everywhere, especially now, when they have nothing more urgent to do than freeze all quotas, as if there were no, how do you say it nicely: *international situation!* [...] It was neither necessary nor possible to say anything, he talked nonstop, narrating the fabulous rescue of *our young hero*, catching his breath hastily in between, as if he were swimming, his arm movements matched that too [...] Voilà, the place where there is no darkness. Or only darkness. That’s such a yes-and-no kind of thing (all italics: Kostantin)”.

²⁴ “This is how Abel met Kostantin T. He seemed to have a preference for French, but apart from that, to be honest, not much of his monologue was understandable. Although he had been here for a year, he didn’t speak the local language very well. Just the essentials. Hungry, you? Food? Eggs and this here”.

Kostantin, therefore, is unable to express any of what he has just said. And despite this revelation by the narrator, the character will continue to speak within the diegetic world in a convoluted German, rich in adjectives and complex constructions. To conclude, negating multilingualism means that these anti-mimetic forms – which can be classified under the broad category of glottoaporetic, that is, phenomena that theoretically should not function as they do – intervene precisely where multilingualism is introduced as a thematic element and thus expected as a formal one. By disrupting the reader's expectations, these formal strategies provoke a broader reflection on the relationship between the self and language, whose strong ties are negated by Mora. The result of these anti-mimetic speech representations is the opening of an abyss that separates the textual universe from the reality that language is supposed to represent. Thereby, through multilingualism, the referential capacity of language is negated – not of any single language, not of the native language nor of any foreign language, but of all languages. This negating multilingualism in Mora's writing participates in a much broader reflection on the fraught relationship between the individual and their language.²⁵ As Claudia Tatasciore notes, in Mora's work,

la lingua non è tematizzata nei testi in qualità di lingua straniera (con tutto ciò che questo può portare con sé: apprendimento, estraneità, emarginazione), o meglio, questa è solo una componente di un'interrogazione molto più generale che riguarda la capacità di linguaggio dell'uomo nelle condizioni di panico e violenza in cui è costretto a vivere. Una situazione insomma in cui il problema non è il conflitto con e tra una lingua L1, L2, L3..., ma con la lingua tout court (Tatasciore 2009, 97).²⁶

²⁵ This conflict often manifests in the physicality of Mora's characters. See also Willner 2007 and Tatasciore 2009, 97-128.

²⁶ "Language is not thematized in the texts as a foreign language (with all that this might entail: learning, estrangement, marginalization), or rather, this is only one aspect of a much more general interrogation concerning human beings' capacity for language under

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La presenza e l'assenza nella parola Considerazioni attraverso la scrittura di Maja Haderlap e il paesaggio (linguistico) della Carinzia

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Der Dichter muss an der Grenze sich aufhalten, damit ihm
das geschehen kann, was geschieht. Nur an den Grenzen
fallen die Entscheidungen, die immer solche sind über
Grenzen und Grenzenlosigkeit
(Heidegger 1980, 170).¹

Le parole dell'epigrafe significano appieno l'essenza di ciò che ci proponiamo di esporre: è nostra intenzione approcciare il confine attraverso il tortuoso alveo della memoria scandagliato da Maja Haderlap – una scrittrice nata in una famiglia appartenente alla comunità di lingua slovena della Carinzia. I suoi testi dissecano i tratti dei paesaggi alpini rendendo una comunità sottaciuta d'Europa. Segnatamente il suo romanzo *Engel des Vergessens* (*L'angelo dell'oblio*, 2011) significa il *pólemos* identitario, la lotta fra la lingua slovena negata e l'idioma tedesco imposto dai confini. È questione di un'opera rappresa nell'*amnios* dell'autrice,

¹ “Il poeta deve soggiornare al confine, affinché gli possa accadere ciò che deve accadere. Solo ai confini si prendono le decisioni che sono sempre decisioni su confini e sconfinatezza” (Heidegger 2005, 180-181 [tr. modificata]).

un'opera che sonda il crinale dell'umana esistenza, incisione dopo incisione. Qui, attraverso gli interstizi delle fratture austro-slovene, germano-(jugo)slave, ci proponiamo di sviluppare le nostre considerazioni intorno alla scrittura di Haderlap e al paesaggio (linguistico) carinziano.

Al fine di cogliere più propriamente la riflessione di Heidegger apposta a mo' di esergo al nostro testo, è opportuno rilevare la biografia di Haderlap. Nata nel 1961 a Bad Eisenkappel/Železna Kapla, l'autrice è cresciuta in una comunità stretta attorno alla propria lingua, apprendendo il tedesco quale seconda lingua – per lei lingua della scuola primaria, degli studi (secondari e universitari) nonché della collettività austriaca, in cui si è integrata dapprima addottorandosi in scienze teatrali all'Università di Vienna e poi lavorando come drammaturga al teatro di Klagenfurt. Quanto alla sua scrittura, qui notiamo che la sinopia è segnatamente lirica, come evidenziano i suoi esordi letterari *Žalik pesmi* (1983) e *Bajalice* (1987), due raccolte di poesie scritte in sloveno. Commentando i versi di Haderlap, Mihael Vrbinc scrive come “die Dichterin”, la poetessa, oltrepassi e trasgredisca spesso i confini nella sua vita, tra Vienna, Klagenfurt/Celovec, Ljubljana e Trieste/Trst/Trieste, vivendo da pendolare al di sopra delle frontiere politiche ed estetiche: “Immer jedoch ist sie sich bewusst, dass sie einer Nationalität angehört, deren Bewusstsein in erster Linie durch den Sprachgebrauch geprägt wurde, in der auch das Erleben der Peripherie ausschlaggebend ist” (Vrbinc 1998, 206).² Dopo la pubblicazione del terzo volume di poesie, trilingue, *Gedichte/Pesmi/Poems* (1998), Helmut Gollner ha invece osservato che la lirica di Haderlap non documenta soltanto uno stato d'animo individuale, bensì uno stato d'animo culturale sloveno (Gollner 2000, 8). *A fortiori*, tale osservazione si è comprovata quando Haderlap ha ottenuto il premio Ingeborg Bachmann nel 2011 con il suo debutto quale autrice in prosa tedesca: è questione del romanzo *Engel des*

² “Purtuttavia essa è cosciente di appartenere a una nazionalità, la cui coscienza è forgiata in prima istanza dall'uso della lingua, in cui anche il vissuto della periferia è decisivo”; ove non altrimenti indicato le traduzioni sono di chi scrive.

Vergessens (che si è in seguito aggiudicato altri riconoscimenti, tra cui il premio Bruno Kreisky, il premio Rauriser e il premio Vinzenz Rizzi; cfr. Prutti 2014, 86). È un testo che marca una cesura personale nonché collettiva, come ha riconosciuto la stessa autrice riflettendo su questo suo passaggio alla lingua letteraria tedesca: “Ein Sprachwechsel ist ein äußerst schwieriger Prozess [...] und notgedrungen verbunden mit kulturellen und persönlichen Konflikten” (Haderlap 2011, 2).³

1. Del contesto

Al fine di delucidare i “conflitti personali e culturali” di Haderlap, è opportuno ragionare intorno al contesto della sua opera. Il termine inglese *displacement*, dislocazione, così come viene utilizzato dalla critica postcoloniale, ci rimanda alle forme di transfer nello spazio che possono causare una crisi identitaria: gli spostamenti volontari o involontari, le migrazioni individuali e collettive (Ashcroft et. al. 1989, 8-11). Tuttavia, riferendosi al malessere percepito in seguito a denigrazione o oppressione culturale, la nozione di dislocazione rimanda alla problematicità più generica del rapporto tra l’Io e lo spazio (culturale) che può originare da uno spostamento effettivo oppure dall’imposizione di una norma culturale percepita *in toto* o in parte come estranea (Dupré 2009, 37). Conseguentemente, la dislocazione finisce col disturbare il rapporto tra l’Io e lo spazio rendendo impossibile ogni processo di identificazione – ciò vale altresì e a maggior ragione in una comunità di confine, in cui l’incertezza diventa *forma mentis*. In tal senso l’esperienza di Haderlap ha a che fare con la dislocazione. Al fine di illustrarla, è necessario procedere attraverso un *excursus* storico-culturale (cfr. Burz 2014). In Carinzia, notiamo, il dialogo tra la cultura di lingua tedesca a quella di lingua slovena risale al primo millennio. Benché una disparità egemonica si sia presto

³ “un processo estremamente difficile [...] e necessariamente legato ai conflitti culturali e personali”.

manifestata a favore della germanofonia, vi sono state anche fasi marcate da una interculturalità costruttiva, ad esempio all'inizio dell'Ottocento con la rivista *Carinthia*, pubblicata a Klagenfurt (Strutz 1998, 232). Purtroppo, il Novecento ha portato con sé le cesure dei due conflitti mondiali. Dopo la Prima guerra mondiale e la deflagrazione della *koinè* austro-ungarica, nel 1920 si è tenuto un plebiscito in cui la maggioranza dei carinziani – inclusi molti sloveni – ha rifiutato l'inglobamento del territorio nel Regno di Jugoslavia, decidendo di voler restare nella neonata repubblica austriaca (cfr. Tiemann 2020); agli sloveni di Carinzia sono stati così riconosciuti costituzionalmente i diritti dovuti alle minoranze. Con l'*Anschluss* al Terzo Reich, però, la situazione per la comunità slovena è mutata profondamente a causa della politica linguistica nazionalsocialista: la lingua slovena doveva sparire dalla vita pubblica e dalle scuole. Tale "germanizzazione" si è radicalizzata dopo l'attacco della *Wehrmacht* alla Jugoslavia nel 1941; sono iniziate le prime deportazioni, mentre la resistenza slovena si è organizzata nel movimento partigiano. Alla fine delle ostilità, nonostante i crimini perpetrati, gli austriaci non hanno tuttavia fatto i conti con il proprio recente passato, anzi: si è affermata molto rapidamente il cosiddetto *Opfer-Narrativ*, secondo il quale l'Austria sarebbe stata la prima vittima di Hitler.⁴

Con la Dichiarazione di indipendenza del 1945 e la creazione del mito fondante della seconda repubblica austriaca, la società austriaca si è *de facto* accontentata di far propria la Dichiarazione di Mosca del 1943, secondo la quale l'Austria fu il primo paese libero vittima del nazismo. Così non si è soltanto permessa la negazione della colpa e delle responsabilità, bensì anche la codificazione multipla del concetto di vittima (Lehngut 2010, 119), che ha prodotto una sorta di inversione fra i carnefici e le vittime (Botz 1998, 232). Soltanto la lenta erosione dei

⁴ In Carinzia, lo scontro intorno alla memoria e alla lingua slovena è quindi continuato nel secondo dopoguerra, culminando negli anni Settanta con l'allontanamento dei cartelli toponomastici bilingui.

miti postbellici e il caso Waldheim⁵ hanno determinato un cambiamento di basilare importanza della cultura del ricordo, che ha portato con sé una nuova definizione dei rapporti con il passato nazista e una nuova discussione della storia (Uhl 2002, 221). La letteratura austriaca – segnatamente dalla metà degli anni Ottanta – ha contribuito allo smascheramento delle bugie storiche con lavori che ancora oggi rivestono un ruolo importante nel confronto della società con l'eredità storica del passato nazista: le opere teatrali *Burgtheater* (1985) di Elfriede Jelinek e *Heldenplatz* (1988, *Piazza degli eroi*) di Thomas Bernhard, il saggio *Politik der Gefühle* (1987) di Josef Haslinger.⁶

In ogni caso, dobbiamo sottolineare che in Austria le minoranze etniche non hanno avuto accesso alla narrazione collettiva della nazione. Qui si devono rimarcare gli sforzi compiuti da autori che hanno voluto stimolare la mediazione culturale in Carinzia: Peter Turrini (1944) presso il pubblico germanofono; Andrej Kokot (1936-2012), Janko Messner (1921-2011) e Janko Ferk (1958) presso il pubblico sloveno. Con Klaus Amann, evidenziamo una manifestazione che, a partire dagli inizi degli anni Ottanta, si sottraeva consciamente al protezionismo e al tradizionalismo provando a contribuire a una normalizzazione: la primavera di Carinzia, *Kärntner Frühling*. Secondo Amann, per la prima volta autori sloveni,

⁵ Si tratta di un *affaire* sul coinvolgimento di Kurt Waldheim in crimini di guerra durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. Iniziato nel 1986 durante la campagna elettorale che ha poi portato Waldheim alla carica di Presidente federale dell'Austria, è durato fino alla fine del suo mandato, nel 1992. Waldheim aveva omesso nelle proprie informazioni biografiche le sue attività di ufficiale della *Wehrmacht* nei Balcani, in Grecia e in Jugoslavia; dopo che queste erano diventate note, egli aveva negato qualsivoglia coinvolgimento nei crimini nazisti dichiarando altresì di non esserne stato a conoscenza all'epoca. In seguito al caso Waldheim, per la prima volta in Austria si è discusso apertamente del coinvolgimento degli austriaci nei crimini nazisti (cfr. Pollak 2002).

⁶ Gli esempi indicati costituiscono una selezione, in quanto le opere letterarie che fanno luce sul passato torbido dell'Austria sono più numerose e in parte anche anteriori agli anni Ottanta.

tedeschi e dialettali si presentavano su un piede di parità (cfr. Amann 2004). Dal canto suo, Peter Handke – carinziano di madre slovena –, con le sue traduzioni in sloveno delle opere di Florian Lipuš (1937) e di Gustav Januš (1939) ha contribuito considerevolmente alla conoscenza e alla valorizzazione della letteratura slovena di Carinzia. In questo contesto, la figura di Haderlap è paradigmatica, segnatamente il suo romanzo *Engel des Vergessens*: prima di tale opera testi letterari sul vissuto traumatico degli sloveni carinziani avevano avuto una ricezione quasi nulla; tale lacuna della memoria è venuta a colmarsi, contribuendo a un radicale cambiamento della narrazione del ricordo (cfr. Amann 2013, Wintersteiner 2019).⁷

2. Del testo

In *Engel des Vergessens* Haderlap ha cercato di trasferire la memoria insita nella lingua slovena, nel collettivo esperienziale degli sloveni, alla lingua tedesca; lo riconosce l'autrice stessa, secondo la quale si tratta del racconto dell'abbandono di una lingua e dello scivolamento in un'altra, che era da sempre lì: "Es ist die Geschichte eines Übergangs, einer Metamorphose, eines Verlusts vielleicht" (Haderlap 2013b, 2, 4).⁸

Bin mir sicher, dass es die Haltung der Vergangenheit in diesem Lande mit sich bringt, dass unsere Familiengeschichten so befremdlich erscheinen und sich in solcher Verlassenheit und Isolation vollziehen. Sie stehen in nahezu keiner Verbindung zur Gegenwart. Zwischen der behaupteten und der tatsächlichen Geschichte Österreichs erstreckt sich ein Niemandsland, in dem man verloren gehen kann. Ich sehe mich zwischen einem dunklen, vergessenen Kellerabteil des

⁷ Notiamo qui il romanzo di Lipuš *Boštjanov let* (2003), tradotto in tedesco *Boštjans Flug* (2005), che non ha affatto avuto le stesse attenzioni di *Engel des Vergessens*.

⁸ "È la storia di un passaggio, di una metamorfosi, forse di una perdita".

Hauses Österreich und seinen hellen, reich ausgestatteten Räumlichkeiten hin- und herpendeln. Niemand in den hellen Räumen scheint zu ahnen oder vermag es sich vorzustellen, dass es in diesem Gebäude Menschen gibt, die von der Politik in den Vergangenheitskeller gesperrt worden sind, wo sie von ihren eigenen Erinnerungen attackiert und vergiftet werden (Haderlap 2013a, 185-186).⁹

Così la protagonista-narratrice rende lo sfondo socio-politico-culturale della memoria in cui i personaggi di *Engel des Vergessens* sono costretti. L'intreccio procede lungo il tortuoso alveo dei ricordi personali e familiari dell'Io narrante; le vicissitudini di una famiglia e di un popolo emergono nei meandri del non detto di una vita. La contemporaneità si dissolve pertanto nel *limen* della cesura bellica, negli accadimenti e nei riflessi della Seconda guerra mondiale, nell'elaborazione e nel rimosso individuali e collettivi, nei luoghi della sopravvivenza. La Storia traversa la storia di questa saga familiare, che si estende attraverso tre generazioni. La storia della famiglia della protagonista è inseparabile dalla Storia, segnata dai suoi travagli che non di rado si acutizzano lungo i meridiani dell'Europa centrale. Il padre e il nonno partigiani, la nonna sopravvissuta al campo di concentramento di Ravensbrück, gli zii materni disertori della *Wehrmacht* caduti nella resistenza partigiana: le vicissitudini familiari – simili a quelle di altre famiglie slovene di Carinzia – sono profondamente marcate da perdita, violenza e morte. Quanto alla fabula: essa spazia dall'età prescolare all'età adulta della narratrice,

⁹ “Sono certa che l'isolamento delle nostre storie familiari, e il fatto che siano percepite come strane, sia riconducibile all'atteggiamento che questo Paese ha nei confronti del passato. Sono pressoché slegate dal contesto contemporaneo. Tra la realtà storica asserita e quella effettiva dell'Austria si estende una terra di nessuno nella quale ci si può perdere. Io mi vedo fare la spola tra uno scantinato buio e dimenticato di Casa Austria e i suoi ambienti luminosi, finemente arredati. Nessuno degli abitanti che vivono negli spazi luminosi sembra intuire o immaginare che in quello stesso edificio ci sono persone che la politica ha rinchiuso nello scantinato del passato, aggredite e avvelenate dai loro stessi ricordi” (Haderlap 2014a, 191).

chiudendosi con la sua visita al lager di Ravensbrück, nella ricorrenza del giorno dell'internamento della nonna. Si delinea così anche una *Entwicklungsgeschichte* che segue una bimba slovena da una vallata carinziana agli studi universitari a Vienna, dove inizia a scrivere poesie e a lavorare in teatro. Da ultimo il lettore arguisce che la bambina slovena, oramai donna matura, scriverà; il testo narra pertanto la genesi del romanzo. Ora, però, sebbene dietro la protagonista del romanzo traspaia l'*alter ego* di Haderlap, non dobbiamo vedere lo scritto come una autobiografia letteraria dell'autrice. *Engel des Vergessens* costituisce piuttosto un suo approdo poetologico. A stimolare Haderlap a scrivere quest'opera – per sua stessa ammissione – sono state le contraddizioni tra i ricordi privati e la storia ufficiale relativa al periodo nazista (Haderlap 2001, 217): “Das Faktische sind die Mosaiksteinchen, die dem Text zugrunde liegen. Was ich über Verwandte und Nachbarn erzähle, ist tatsächlich passiert. [...] Alles andere aber ist Literatur, eine Inszenierung, Zuspitzung” (Haderlap 2012a, 25).¹⁰ In questo il romanzo divaga ben oltre il ricordo autobiografico:

Diese Geschichte, diese Szenen haben viel mit meiner Biographie zu tun. Während des Schreibens hat sich die Geschichte jedoch verselbstständigt, ist zu einer literarischen Erzählung geworden. ‚Engel des Vergessens‘ ist kein simples Erinnerungsbuch. Ich erzähle dieses Mädchen, es erzählt sich nicht selbst, und ich versuche auf Distanz zu den Geschehnissen zu bleiben. Genau diese Distanz lässt mich die Spuren deutlich sehen, die der Krieg in den Menschen hinterlassen hat (Haderlap 2012b, VIII).¹¹

¹⁰ “I fatti costituiscono le tessere del mosaico alla base del testo. Tutto ciò che racconto su parenti e vicini, è realmente accaduto. [...] Tutto il resto però è letteratura, una messa in scena, un'esasperazione”.

¹¹ “Queste storie, queste scene hanno molto a che fare con la mia biografia. Durante la scrittura la storia però si è resa indipendente, è diventata un racconto letterario. *Engel des Vergessens* non è un semplice libro della memoria. Io racconto questa bambina, non si racconta da sé, e io cerco di restare a distanza dagli avvenimenti. Proprio questa

Il flusso dei ricordi è incanalato segnatamente dalla figura della nonna della narratrice; nonna e nipote avanzano assieme nella necessità di dover raccontare,¹² con la consapevolezza della problematicità legata alla stesura del racconto: “Ich beginne in Großmutter's Lagerbuch zu lesen, das ich als Kind oft in Händen hielt. [...] Wörter sind unbeholfen, nicht für das Aufschreiben gedacht, sondern für das Erzählen” (Haderlap 2013a, 276).¹³ Oppressa dai meccanismi di potere sulla narrazione del ricordo – che esclude qualsivoglia narrazione ai margini dall’ufficialità – la protagonista decide di dare una forma scritta alla frammentarietà orale che ha marcato in gran parte la trasmissione intergenerazionale del ricordo, decide di elevare il racconto al rango della memoria culturale. La scrittura acquisisce in questo modo una dimensione politica che riflette criticamente intorno alla questione dell’appartenenza e ai meccanismi identitari sottesi dal tracciamento di un confine.

Der Grenze wegen, die in den Augen der Mehrheit in unserem Lande nur eine nationale und sprachliche Grenze sein kann, muss ich mich erklären und ausweisen. Wer ich bin, zu wem ich gehöre, warum ich Slowenisch schreibe oder Deutsch spreche? Solche Bekenntnisse haben einen Schattenhof, in dem Ge-

distanza mi permette di vedere chiaramente le tracce che la guerra ha lasciato dietro alle persone”.

¹² Nelle prime pagine del romanzo emerge il rapporto pressoché simbiotico tra la nonna e la protagonista, significato da alcune parole di quest’ultima: “Kaum setzt sie sich in Bewegung, folge ich ihr. Sie ist meine Bienenkönigin und ich bin ihre Drohne” (Haderlap 2013a, 7); “Non appena si mette in movimento, la seguo. Lei è la mia ape regina e io il suo fuco” (Haderlap 2014a, 11).

¹³ “Comincio a leggere il taccuino del lager di mia nonna, che da bambina ho spesso tenuto tra le mani. [...] le parole sono impacciate, non destinate alla forma scritta, ma alla narrazione orale” (Haderlap 2014a, 283).

spenster herumstehen mit den Namen Treue und Verrat, Besitztum und Territorium, Mein und Dein. Das Überschreiten der Grenze ist hier kein natürlicher Vorgang, es ist ein politischer Akt (Haderlap 2013a, 220).¹⁴

Il confine non rappresenta soltanto una divisione linguistica, ma anche simbolica, presso la quale molti austriaci si dividono dalla comunità degli sloveni di Carinzia, dai loro racconti identitari fondanti; il confine si rivela uno spartiacque invisibile della memoria. “Seit ich denken kann, bewege ich mich im Kraftfeld dieser Grenze” (Haderlap 2013a, 190),¹⁵ afferma la protagonista di *Engel des Vergessens*. Per Haderlap, la contiguità linguistica, il plurilinguismo, si rivela dunque quale esperienza di conflitto, un’esperienza del confine.

3. Osservazioni (pen)ultime

Volgendo ora il passo verso la conclusione, possiamo ragionare intorno al caso Haderlap con le seguenti parole dell’autrice intorno al “campo di forze” determinante la sua scrittura:

Wenn man künstlerisch arbeitet und aus einem politischen Konfliktraum kommt, stößt man immer an Grenzen, an politische, ideologische, sprachliche, inhaltliche,

¹⁴ “A causa del confine, che nella percezione dei più nel nostro paese può essere solo di tipo nazionale e linguistico, sono tenuta a dichiarare e dimostrare la mia identità. Chi sono, a chi appartengo, perché scrivo in sloveno o parlo in tedesco. In queste affermazioni c’è un cono d’ombra in cui si aggirano fantasmi che rispondono al nome di fedeltà e tradimento, possesso e territorio, mio e tuo. Oltrepassare il confine qui non è gesto naturale, è un atto politico” (Haderlap 2014a, 226).

¹⁵ “Da che ho memoria mi muovo nel campo di forze di questo confine” (Haderlap 2014a, 226 [tr. legg. modificata]).

formale, die man zu überwinden sucht. Das ist eine permanente Herausforderung, auf allen Ebenen. Daran will sich nicht viel verändern (Haderlap 2014c, 101).¹⁶

Haderlap ha piena coscienza del conflitto che alimenta (e da cui trae origine) la sua poetica. Relegato ai margini della Storia, il popolo sloveno si rassembra da sempre attorno alla propria lingua, attorno ai difensori della propria parola. Qui è necessario rimarcare la centralità della produzione letteraria nella storia della Slovenia: la letteratura si è *de facto* rivelata quale principale istituzione nazionale, pilastro nazionale, al punto che potremmo affermare che i poeti e gli scrittori hanno dato alla luce il popolo (Mitrović 1995, 10). In Haderlap tale sentimento è amplificato dalla sua doppia perifericità, carinziana e slovena, quale appartenente a una minoranza di un popolo periferico. Per sua stessa ammissione, i suoi inizi lirici in lingua slovena non sono soltanto legati a motivi personali o all'intento di contrastare il crepuscolo degli sloveni in Carinzia: per lungo tempo pensava di poter ravvivare le utopie romantiche, linguistiche e politiche della letteratura slovena dell'Ottocento, se non nel discorso intorno alla nazione, almeno in quello culturale (Haderlap 2011, 4). Da qui si può forse coglier meglio il travaglio linguistico di Haderlap. Sebbene l'autrice stessa definisca il proprio lavoro letterario come bilingue (Haderlap 2016), il suo plurilinguismo è frutto di un territorio in cui le due lingue che lo plasmano le sono state presentate come categorie politiche e ideologiche, come due poli che si escludono (Haderlap 2011, 3). Lo significa una domanda formulata dall'io narrante in *Engel des Vergessens*: "Aber ist Friede in dieser Gegend überhaupt heimisch geworden oder tragen die hier gesprochenen Sprachen immer noch Uniform?" (Haderlap 2013a, 219-220).¹⁷ Nel romanzo di Haderlap, così come nella sua poesia, vi sono

¹⁶ "Quando si lavora artisticamente e si proviene da uno spazio di conflitto politico, ci si imbatte sempre in confini, politici, ideologici, linguistici, contenutistici, formali, che si cerca di superare. È una sfida permanente, a tutti i livelli. A tal proposito non cambierà molto".

¹⁷ "Ma la pace si è radicata in questa terra, o le lingue che vi si parlano indossano ancora

molti elementi manifesti di plurilinguismo.¹⁸ Vi sono anche forme di plurilinguismo latente – è evidente, ad esempio, che i dialoghi tra la protagonista e la nonna, resi per lo più attraverso il discorso indiretto, avvengono in sloveno; oppure lo si rileva quando nel testo si fa appello allo specifico dell’esperienza collettiva nella lingua:

In den Wald zu gehen bedeutet in unserer Sprache nicht nur, Bäume zu fällen, zu jagen oder Pilze zu sammeln. Es heißt auch, wie immer erzählt wird, sich zu verstecken, zu flüchten, aus dem Hinterhalt anzugreifen (Haderlap 2013a, 75).¹⁹

I balbettii, i tentennamenti, le mancanze si appalesano lungo il cammino scolastico della protagonista, segnatamente attraverso lo *hiatus* manifesto nell’apprendimento del tedesco.

Ich kann nicht ergründen, was ich wirklich lebe. Meine Gefühle sind nicht mit den Wörtern vertraut, die ich spreche. Konnte ich früher mit den Wörtern nach Gegenständen, Gefühlen und Gräsern werfen und sie treffen, prallen die Wörter jetzt von den Gegenständen und Gefühlen ab (Haderlap 2013a, 100).²⁰

la divisa?” (Haderlap 2014a, 226).

¹⁸ Nella poesia rileviamo il titolo di un componimento, *trieste trst triest* (Haderlap 2014b, 8), nonché la lirica intitolata *barje* (32); i versi si sviluppano in tedesco per chiudersi infine con la parola *Moor*, palude, traduzione di *barje*. Sul plurilinguismo di Haderlap, cfr. Spreicer 2024; Neidlinger & Pasewalck 2021; Gutjahr 2025.

¹⁹ “Nella nostra lingua, andare nel bosco non significa solo tagliare alberi, cacciare o raccogliere funghi. Significa anche, da quando si tramanda, nascondersi, scappare, tendere agguati” (Haderlap 2014a, 80).

²⁰ “Non riesco a venire a capo delle esperienze che vivo. I miei sentimenti non hanno dimestichezza con le parole che articolo. Mentre in passato ero in grado di lanciare parole su oggetti, sentimenti e fili d’erba, colpendoli, adesso queste rimbalzano su oggetti e sentimenti” (Haderlap 2014a, 104-105).

È un processo marcato dal fallimento, anche quando si prova a tornare alla lingua d'origine, i tentativi di scrittura in sloveno si risolvono in frasi maldestre: “unge-lenk, als wären sie aus herausgerissenen Buchstabenreihen zusammengestellt” (Haderlap 2013a, 175).²¹ Non sembra possibile neanche un ancoraggio sicuro nel paesaggio carinziano:

Die heimatlichen Hügel haben sich in eine Falle verwandelt, die jeden Sommer nach mir greift und zuschnappt. [...] Noch versuche ich in der Landschaft Trost zu finden, einen Lebensort in ihr aufzuspüren, der mich nicht bedroht (Haderlap 2013a, 190).²²

Come spiega Martin Pollack, si delinea uno spazio in cui i perpetratori cercano invano di occultare tutte le tracce dei massacri, provano a eliminare i testimoni e a normalizzare il paesaggio nascondendo le fosse comuni (Pollack 2014, 20). *Engel des Vergessens* insiste su questo paesaggio, rende l'impossibile *camouflage* storico-culturale che non cancella le tracce del massacro nel paesaggio dell'anima dei personaggi (Siller 2020, 199). Come riconosce la protagonista: “Ich lerne im selbstvergessenen Kärnten nicht vergessen zu können. Der Boden, auf dem ich stehe, muss eine unsichtbare Unterseite haben, die vollgesogen ist mit Gewesenem, aus dem ich zu wachsen scheine, auf das ich zurückgeworfen werde” (Haderlap 2013a, 275).²³

²¹ “maldestre, come se fossero state composte con file di lettere scompigliate” (Haderlap 2014a, 180).

²² “Le patrie colline si sono trasformate in una trappola che mi viene tesa e scatta ogni-qualvolta arriva l'estate. [...] Cerco ancora di trovare conforto nel paesaggio, di rintracciare in esso un posto dove vivere senza sentirmi minacciata” (Haderlap 2014a, 196).

²³ “Nell'immemore Carinzia imparo a non dimenticare. Sotto il suolo che calpesto ci dev'essere uno strato invisibile completamente intriso di ciò che è stato, dal quale sembro erompere e in cui vengo rigettata” (Haderlap 2014a, 281 [tr. legg. modificata]).

Stando alle parole della stessa Haderlap, le ragioni che l'hanno portata a scrivere *Engel des Vergessens* in tedesco sono tre: in primo luogo, la lingua tedesca le ha consentito di avere la distanza necessaria – il tedesco quale *Distanzsprache* dunque –, poiché il racconto familiare e la propria esperienza di emarginazione sono troppo vicine allo sloveno; il secondo motivo è invece letterario e consiste nella sua intenzione di legarsi alla tradizione della *Erinnerungsliteratur*, la letteratura della memoria tedesca; il terzo motivo è infine politico-culturale ed esprime la volontà di voler parlare allo spazio culturale tedesco, ovverosia allo spazio in cui non vi era posto alcuno per la memoria della comunità slovena di Carinzia (Haderlap 2012c). Nel “campo di forze del confine” in cui si muove Haderlap sembra emergere il pensiero di Maurice Blanchot, segnatamente la riflessione intorno alla scrittura animata da una *parole dépossédée*, privata del potere di inglobare l'altro. Blanchot parla in modo esplicito di una esperienza doppia della parola, la “parola dialettica” e la “parola non dialettica”. La prima, parola di potere, opposizione, scontro, negazione, è destinata a ridurre qualsiasi opposto e ad affermare la verità nel suo insieme come uguaglianza silenziosa. L'altra è una parola al di fuori dell'opposizione, al di fuori della negazione, afferma ma allo stesso tempo è al di fuori dell'affermazione: non dice nulla se non la distanza infinita dell'Altro (Blanchot 1969, 92).²⁴ La parola non dialettica, o plurale, è esente dall'esercizio del potere. Praticare tale parola significa rompere il linguaggio della dialettica che si fonda sul primato dell'esigenza ottica attorno alla quale si sviluppa tutto il pensiero occidentale: a partire dall'allegoria platonica della caverna, la luce è a misura di tutto il dicibile e di tutto il pensabile; per Blanchot, invece, parlare non è vedere, parlare

²⁴ La “logica” di Blanchot significa il rifiuto della “comprensione assimilatrice”, ovvero di quell'attività che riunisce il diverso nell'uno, e riduce l'altro al medesimo. L'ostilità verso la dialettica hegeliana è manifesta: nella forma dialettica, secondo le riflessioni blanchotiane, il momento della sintesi e della riconciliazione finiscono sempre col prevalere (Blanchot 1969, 8).

distoglie dal visibile e dall'invisibile (82). La lingua slovena "abbandonata" da Haderlap significa così anche la rinuncia a una parola plurale, all'idea di un idioma non corrotto, l'allontanamento dal mito di una cultura e di una società non alienate, senza borghesia, senza aristocrazia. Il dono della distanza, della *Entfernung*, che, come scrive Massimo Cacciari (2005, 22), "l'uomo postumo" Robert Musil ha forse compreso meglio di chiunque altro, Haderlap lo affida al tormentoso passaggio alla lingua tedesca, provando ad allontanarsi da quella Slovenia considerata come un'entità universale, una sorta di Arcadia, significata a suo giudizio dal testo handkiano *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land* (1991) (Haderlap 2001).

Engel des Vergessens è un travaglio tanto tormentoso nell'elaborazione quanto significativo nell'esito. Confessa la narratrice: "Einen Moment lang fürchte ich, vom Vergangenen gänzlich überrollt zu werden, mich unter seinem Gewicht zu verlieren. Dann beschließe ich, das Versprengte, Erinnernte und das Erzählte, das Anwesende und Abwesende in eine geschriebene Form zu bringen" (Haderlap 2013a, 282).²⁵ Haderlap raccoglie l'eredità della parola con la forma del romanzo, concretando la scrittura negli interstizi plurilingue delle fratture austro-slovene, germano-(jugo)slove. E un quesito della protagonista – che sottende il romanzo, la sua molteplice ricerca (poetica, linguistica, culturale, politica ed esistenziale) – par riecheggiare ben oltre il limitar del testo: "Wo ist eigentlich die Grenze?, frage Ich Vater" (Haderlap 2013a, 78).²⁶

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²⁵ "Per un attimo temo di essere completamente travolta dal passato, di sparire sotto il suo peso. Poi decido di dare una forma scritta a questi frammenti sparsi, ricordi, fatti narrati, a ciò che è presente e a ciò che è assente" (Haderlap 2014a, 289).

²⁶ "Ma dov'è il confine, chiedo a papà" (Haderlap 2014a, 83 [tr. modificata]).

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Trasmissione e mediazione linguistico-culturale tra genitori e figli in *Montecore. En unik tiger* di Jonas Hassen Khemiri e *De kaller meg ulven* di Zeshan Shakar

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1. Introduzione

Il concetto di postmigrazione nasce per rispondere all'esigenza di capire più a fondo le dinamiche che governano le società europee contemporanee, ormai profondamente plasmate dai recenti fenomeni migratori. Le influenze non si riscontrano solo nella composizione demografica, ma anche, e soprattutto, nel riassetto dello statuto identitario dei paesi europei. Questo è proprio il punto focale che il concetto di postmigrazione vuole portare al centro dell'attenzione: la migrazione non interessa soltanto gli individui etichettati come "immigrati", ma la società nella sua interezza (Foroutan 2010, 10; Foroutan 2019; Schramm et al. 2019; Gaonkar et al. 2021).

Focalizzare lo sguardo sulla condizione postmigrante dei paesi scandinavi permette di approfondire alcune questioni rilevanti che hanno a che vedere con le sfide, le negoziazioni e le ambivalenze aventi luogo in queste arene sociali, da intendersi come spazi conflittuali in cui gli individui partecipano a una lotta sulle identità. La ridefinizione delle identità nazionali e dei concetti di "norvegesità", "svedesità" e "danesità" tocca inevitabilmente anche il tema della lingua. A partire

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dal secondo dopoguerra, le persone immigrate in Scandinavia dagli angoli più disparati del pianeta hanno originato fenomeni linguistici, oltre che culturali, i quali hanno avuto l'effetto di influenzare le lingue scandinave, introducendovi prestiti o dando vita a nuovi modi di parlarle. Il concetto di *condizione postmonolingue* si pone proprio l'obiettivo di descrivere questa realtà inedita, mettendo in evidenza il contrasto tra il cosiddetto *paradigma monolingue*, ora più che mai obsoleto, e le nuove, molteplici forme di multilinguismo che stanno emergendo in questi ultimi decenni (Yildiz 2012).

La cosiddetta "letteratura della postmigrazione", tra le altre cose, riflette proprio su queste tematiche, contribuendo ad arricchirne il dibattito. Attraverso la loro produzione letteraria, lo svedese Jonas Hassen Khemiri e il norvegese Zeshan Shakar si impegnano a raccontare alcuni dei conflitti, delle negoziazioni e delle ambivalenze che hanno luogo all'interno delle società scandinave in rapporto ai fenomeni migratori. L'oggetto dell'analisi di questo lavoro sono i romanzi *Montecore. En unik tiger* (*Una tigre molto speciale* (Montecore))¹ di Khemiri (2006) e *De kaller meg ulven* (Mi chiamano il lupo) di Shakar (2022), riconducibili al concetto di "letteratura della postmigrazione" (Peters 2012; Geiser 2015; Jagne-Soreau 2021), in quanto presentano temi che ruotano attorno a radici, famiglia, identità e appartenenza. Inoltre, i protagonisti sono entrambi "misti", cioè hanno una madre svedese/norvegese "bianca" e un padre immigrato da un paese non occidentale (Tunisia/Pakistan).

In entrambi i casi, si riscontra una tendenza propria della letteratura della postmigrazione (Ciaravolo 2021), ovvero uno sguardo retrospettivo da parte delle nuove generazioni alle esperienze di migrazione dei loro genitori. Nei due romanzi è fondamentale il rapporto tra padre e figlio e, in particolare, assume una rilevanza centrale la lingua, o meglio le lingue, che diventano espressione di precisi progetti identitari o di un'eredità che si teme di perdere con il passare delle

¹ La traduzione del titolo è inserita in corsivo se corrisponde a quella dell'opera tradotta in italiano, in tondo quando l'opera è inedita in Italia.

generazioni. Analizzando i due romanzi in parallelo, l'intento è di mostrare l'ampio ventaglio di declinazioni del plurilinguismo e le diverse funzioni che la lingua può assumere in contesti diasporici. Per quanto riguarda *Montecore*, si approfondirà il conflitto tra padre e figlio, in cui anche la questione linguistica assume rilevanza, dal momento che il monolinguisimo autoimposto del padre va a scontrarsi con la visione multilingue, ibrida e antagonista del figlio. Del romanzo *De kaller meg ulven* si analizzerà invece la questione della lingua legata all'eredità, in cui, anche qui, il paradigma monolingue agisce quale forza omologante.

2. Jonas Hassen Khemiri e Zeshan Shakar

Jonas Hassen Khemiri, di madre svedese e padre tunisino, si è affermato fin da subito nel panorama letterario svedese con il romanzo di esordio *Ett öga rött* (Un rosso occhio), pubblicato nel 2003 da Norstedts, uno dei più grandi editori svedesi. Finora sono usciti altri cinque suoi romanzi: *Montecore: en unik tiger* (2006) (*Una tigre molto speciale (Montecore)*; 2009); *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012; *Chiamo i miei fratelli*); *Allt jag inte minns* (2015) (*Tutto quello che non ricordo*; 2017); *Pappaklausulen* (2018) (*La clausola del padre*; 2019); *Systrarna* (2023; *Le sorelle*). Inoltre, Khemiri è autore di alcune opere teatrali, racconti e saggi. Alcuni temi ricorrenti nelle sue opere, talvolta accompagnati da uno sperimentalismo linguistico che svolge un ruolo fondamentale all'interno della storia, sono le sfide insite nella società svedese contemporanea, legate alla migrazione e alle sue conseguenze, la ricerca dell'identità, il conflitto generazionale.

In *Montecore: en unik tiger* si assiste al tentativo di ricostruire la storia di Abbas, un fotografo di fama internazionale di origine tunisina trapiantato in Svezia, da parte del figlio Jonas Hassen Khemiri che è stato convinto da Kadir, un amico del padre, a collaborare a questo progetto. È un racconto polifonico di autofiction, in cui le voci di Jonas, di Kadir e, in minor misura, di Abbas si mescolano e dipingono il quadro di una Svezia multiculturale, segnata dalla xenofobia e dal razzismo,

che sta attraversando profondi mutamenti. Allo stesso tempo, Khemiri ci racconta anche la storia del conflitto generazionale tra padre e figlio, in cui l'elemento linguistico gioca un ruolo prominente. Spesso i punti di vista di Jonas e Kadir sono conflittuali: il primo cerca di tornare al passato per approfondire il proprio rapporto con il padre, il secondo invece pare più intento a fornire una versione celebrativa della vita di Abbas. Padre e figlio non si parlano più da anni, e Abbas è ora misteriosamente scomparso.

Zeshan Shakar, di madre norvegese e padre pakistano, ha ottenuto un successo enorme con il suo romanzo di debutto uscito nel 2017 per Gyldendal, una delle maggiori case editrici in Norvegia: *Tante Ulrikkes vei* (*Oslo blocco boyz*, 2022). Gli altri due romanzi pubblicati finora, rispettivamente nel 2020 e nel 2022, sono *Gul bok* (Libro giallo) e *De kaller meg ulven* (Mi chiamano il lupo). Benché non siano collegati tra loro, questi tre romanzi costituiscono una sorta di trilogia sulla Oslo postmigrante, giacché ciascuno è ambientato nella capitale del paese scandinavo e si incentra su tematiche legate alle trasformazioni innescate nella società norvegese a seguito dei fenomeni migratori. Shakar ha inoltre scritto testi brevi e la sceneggiatura di uno spettacolo teatrale.

De kaller meg ulven racconta la storia di una famiglia del Groruddalen, un'area periferica situata a nordest di Oslo e caratterizzata da una spiccata multietnicità. Tramite la voce narrante del figlio, l'attenzione si concentra in particolare sulla vita del padre, un immigrato pakistano che, dopo una vita trascorsa in Norvegia, si accinge a tornare nel suo paese di origine. Il comune ha deciso di ricollocare il padre e gli altri inquilini senza figli a carico di una palazzina in altre case popolari, in un'altra zona della città. Si tratta della goccia che fa traboccare il vaso, l'ennesimo muro che il personaggio incontra sul suo cammino, ostacolato da sempre da meccanismi marginalizzanti che non lo hanno mai portato a sentire un vero e proprio senso di inclusione sociale. Questa partenza imminente getta il figlio – ormai grande, con una famiglia propria – in una sorta di crisi esistenziale, che lo conduce a ripensare alla vita dei suoi genitori, ormai divorziati. Nel ripercorrere gli eventi che appartengono al passato familiare, in particolare quelli legati al

padre, si può notare un focus peculiare sul tema della lingua, che rientra in una riflessione più ampia sull'identità, sull'eredità e sulla trasmissione linguistico-culturale tra generazioni.

3. *Montecore: en unik tiger*: lingua e conflitto generazionale

Nel romanzo di esordio, *Ett öga rött*, Khemiri aveva rappresentato il multietnoletto svedese conosciuto come *rinkebysvenska*,² ovvero svedese di Rinkeby, una città satellite a nordovest di Stoccolma. Anche *Montecore: en unik tiger* presenta peculiarità linguistiche sempre riconducibili al rapporto tra migrazione e lingua svedese, anche se di diversa tipologia. Mentre il *rinkebysvenska* di *Ett öga rött* è associabile al modo di parlare dei discendenti di immigrati, nati e cresciuti in Svezia – ma non solo, visto che la giovane generazione in generale ne fa largamente uso –,³ in *Montecore* Khemiri costruisce una lingua stravagante e vulcanica (Leonard 2022, 200), ovvero quella del padre, che ha appreso lo svedese in una fase avanzata della sua vita; si tratta del cosiddetto *khemiriska* (khemirico), difficilmente riconducibile alle consuete rappresentazioni dello *invandrarsvenska*, svedese degli immigrati (Calvani 2023, 73). Come osserva Massimo Ciaravolo (2021, 213), il lettore è portato a domandarsi se la lingua di Kadir corrisponda a questo codice e, quindi, se Kadir non sia in realtà Abbas che tenta di riavvicinarsi a suo figlio sotto mentite spoglie. Inoltre, Jonas porta all'attenzione di Kadir la “sospettosa” somiglianza del suo modo di esprimersi con quello del padre, come

² I multietnoletti sono codici orali, parlati perlopiù dai giovani nelle periferie multietniche delle capitali e delle grandi città europee, che si caratterizzano per l'uso di prestiti da svariate lingue e l'infrazione di alcune regole grammaticali della lingua standard. Per un approfondimento sul *rinkebysvenska*, vedi Bassini 2009.

³ Coloro che scelgono di esprimersi tramite il multietnoletto marcano la loro affiliazione al gruppo transculturale, e alla relativa sottocultura, di un determinato contesto suburbano (Fraurud 2003, 82-85).

si legge in una mail di risposta di Kadir, ragion per cui pare lecito impiegare il termine “khemirico” per riferirsi al linguaggio di entrambi (Calvani 2023, 72).

Da piccolo, Jonas apprezza molto la creatività linguistica del padre e descrive così il khemirico:

för vanliga föräldrar pratar antingen svenska eller intesvenska, men bara pappor har sitt eget språk, bara pappor pratar Khemiriska. Ett språk som är alla språk blandade, ett språk som är extra allt med glidningar och sammanslagna egenord, specialregler och dagliga undantag. Ett språk som är arabiska svordomar, spanska frågeord, franska kärleksförklaringar, engelska fotograficitat och svenska ordvitsar (Khemiri 2006, 107-108).⁴

Come osserva anche Emilio Calvani (2023, 77), il carattere fantasioso e apparentemente sovversivo della lingua del padre rende Jonas orgoglioso e contribuisce a rafforzare il loro rapporto. Forzando i limiti della lingua svedese e reinventandola quotidianamente, Abbas infrange la rigida gabbia del paradigma monolingue, in cui si infiltrano impulsi linguistico-culturali di varia origine. Come sottolinea Kadir in una mail, la fantasia e la comicità linguistica del padre è passata in eredità a Jonas, che è stato “smittat [...] med författerens ambition” (Khemiri 2006, 51).⁵

In realtà il carattere innovativo del linguaggio di Abbas deriva dalla sua svogliatezza nell'imparare lo svedese standard, convinto com'è di diventare presto un fotografo affermato, e dalla conseguente necessità di appoggiarsi sulla

⁴ “I genitori normali parlano svedese o non parlano svedese, ma solo il pappo ha la sua lingua personale, solo il pappo parla il ‘khemirico’. Una lingua che è un miscuglio di tutte le lingue, una lingua che è più di tutte le lingue con sottintesi e parole composte, regole speciali ed eccezioni quotidiane. Una lingua fatta di parolacce arabe, forme interrogative spagnole, dichiarazioni d'amore francesi, citazioni fotografiche inglesi e giochi di parole svedesi” (Khemiri 2009, 105).

⁵ “contagiato con l'ambizione della scrittura” (Khemiri 2009, 52).

conoscenza pregressa di altre lingue, tra tutte l'arabo, che rende lo stile piuttosto ornamentale (Ciaravolo 2021, 209), e il francese e l'inglese,⁶ da cui attinge per neologismi e calchi (Calvani 2023, 74).⁷

A un certo punto, per garantire la sopravvivenza del suo studio fotografico, Abbas si convince di dover abbandonare il khemirico, oltre che l'arabo e il francese, per dedicarsi all'apprendimento dello svedese standard, per il quale chiede aiuto al figlio, Jonas, eletto a "guide in i det svenska språket" (Khemiri 2006, 200).⁸ Il processo di svedesizzazione linguistico-culturale a cui Abbas decide di sottoporsi comporta che, come dice Jonas, "Pappor krymper en aning" (200),⁹ vale a dire che è costretto a rinunciare a una parte fondamentale della propria identità. Oltre alla lingua, per attirare più clienti al negozio Abbas professa di adeguare all'ideale svedese anche la sua mentalità, arrivando perfino a svedesizzarsi il nome in "Kristen Holmström Abbas Khemiri".

Maïmouna Jagne-Soreau (2018, 84; 2021, 64) e Luca Gendolavigna (2023, 203) osservano che lo scontro generazionale scaturito da strategie postcoloniali di sottomissione da parte dei genitori è uno dei temi riscontrabili nella letteratura della postmigrazione. In particolare, il comportamento di Abbas è riconducibile al *mimicry*, ovvero al comportamento del soggetto colonizzato che imita lo stile di vita, i valori e le idee di chi detiene il potere, in modo da ottenere un tornaconto socioeconomico. Infatti, si può osservare che "if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase their value in the social

⁶ Abbas è cresciuto nella Tunisia francofona.

⁷ Per una descrizione più esaustiva del khemirico, vedi Skowronska 2006; Ciaravolo 2021; Calvani 2023, 71-75. In generale, per un'analisi più approfondita del multilinguismo in *Montecore*, vedi Calvani 2023, 68-88.

⁸ "guida nella lingua svedese" (Khemiri 2009, 189).

⁹ "Pappo si rimpicciolisce un po'" (Khemiri 2009, 188).

world” (Norton 2001, 166). Ciò che osserva Luca Gendolavigna nella sua analisi di *Ett öga rött* è rilevante anche per il personaggio di Abbas in *Montecore*:

L'imitazione della pronuncia come sforzo assimilatorio alla cultura svedese corrisponde a un processo di *mimicry* che [...] si presenta come un insieme di strategie di imitazione linguistico-culturale per disciplinarsi all'identità dominante (Gendolavigna 2023, 203).

È interessante notare, quindi, l'intervento sulla lingua che questo insieme di strategie comporta, per cui l'individuo “camuffato” diventa, in rapporto alla società dominante, “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 86).

L'espressione “quasi la stessa cosa, ma non del tutto” è riconducibile anche alla lingua di Abbas, come fa notare Jonas. Lo scarto dalla norma insito nel *mimicry*, che dovrebbe produrre l'effetto di destabilizzare le strutture egemoniche di potere, diventa qui una riconferma della ineludibile condizione subalterna del padre rispetto alla società dominante svedese:

Pappor lär sig allt som finns att kunna. Men ändå. En enda felaktig preposition är allt som behövs. Ett enda ”ett” som borde varit ett ”en”. Sen deras sekundlånga paus, pausen som dom älskar, pausen som visar att hur mycket du än försöker kommer vi alltid, ALLTID att genomskåda dig. Dom njuter av maktövertaget och väntar väntar väntar tills precis när pappor tror sig vara besegrad (Khemiri 2006, 239).¹⁰

¹⁰ “Il pappo impara tutto quello che c'è da sapere. Ma nonostante questo una sola preposizione sbagliata è quanto basta. Un unico 'ett' che avrebbe dovuto essere 'en'. E poi le loro pause lunghi secondi, le pause che adorano, le pause che mostrano che, per quanto tu insista, noi ti scopriremo sempre, SEMPRE. Godono della loro supremazia e aspettano aspettano aspettano proprio fino a quando il pappo sembra essere sconfitto” (Khemiri 2009, 225).

Si evince allora che, per quanto Abbas si sforzi di imparare bene la lingua svedese, è sufficiente un piccolo errore per essere scoperto e categorizzato come immigrato, e dunque collocato al di fuori della comunità immaginata (Anderson 1991), espulso dalla categoria della svedesità. Questa problematica di matrice linguistica non tocca invece Jonas, madrelingua svedese, il quale è interpellato dagli svedesi bianchi affinché sia lui a esprimere in svedese “corretto” ciò che tenta di comunicare il padre: “Leendet [...] vänder sig ned mot dig för att du ska agera tolk. Förklara nu det som pappors tungor inte kan” (Khemiri 2006, 239).¹¹ Questo sorriso apparentemente innocuo sortisce l’effetto di delimitare il campo della svedesità, da cui Abbas resta escluso, ed è riconducibile al concetto di “Good Sweden” (Hübinette & Lundström 2014; Hübinette 2021), ovvero alla percezione che gli svedesi hanno di sé quali persone tolleranti e senza pregiudizi, ma che, in realtà, percepiscono le minoranze come nient’altro che una “gradevole appendice esotica” (Ciaravolo 2017, 47).

Come si è detto, Jonas aiuta Abbas e Kadir ad apprendere “[det] rätt[a] språk[et]” (Khemiri 2006, 202),¹² e in questo frangente avverte “en makt som du aldrig haft innan” (201),¹³ ovvero il potere di colui che padroneggia appieno la lingua egemonica della nazione.¹⁴ Jonas si immerge sempre di più nelle sue riflessioni sulla lingua svedese e sulle sue strutture, in modo da fornire regole generali ai due allievi, che vengono messe per iscritto in un quaderno. Per esempio, nell’introduzione si legge: “Svenskan är svenskarnas språk” (203)¹⁵, ma questa affermazione, che riporta a un’idea di purezza, viene ribaltata subito dopo dalla concezione dello svedese quale lingua contaminata da prestiti di varia provenienza:

¹¹ “Il sorriso [...] si gira verso di te perché tu intervenga come interprete, per spiegare quello che la lingua del pappo non riesce a dire” (Khemiri 2009, 225).

¹² “la giusta lingua” (Khemiri 2009, 190).

¹³ “un potere che non ha mai avuto prima” (Khemiri 2009, 190).

¹⁴ Sul potere linguistico di Jonas, vedi Hjorth 2015, 18.

¹⁵ “Lo svedese è la lingua degli svedesi” (Khemiri 2009, 191).

“Svenskan är lånets språk” (203)¹⁶. A un certo punto, Jonas tenta di convincere il padre che

svenska faktiskt är värsta arabhatarspråk och pappor frågar suckande varför och hinter bara ge ett exempel: Vad sägs om svenska uttryck som *Fy farao*? Vad är mer arabhatande än det? Och pappor flyger runt och örflen bränner din kind till rodnad och pappor väser: Du är ju svensk, din förbannade jävla idiot! (201-202).¹⁷

Si assiste quindi alla volontà da parte del padre, preoccupato per l'integrazione del figlio, di imporgli un'identità monolitica, che Jonas però rifiuta, poiché la percepisce come una gabbia incapace di rappresentarlo, al contrario della “kreoliserad krets där allt är blandat och mixat och hybridiserat” (293)¹⁸ in cui si riconosce. Questa divergenza di vedute è la causa principale dell'interruzione del rapporto tra padre e figlio in *Montecore*. Mentre Abbas si abbandona all'accettazione dell'assimilazione e del paradigma monolingue quale chiave di inclusione sociale, Jonas non vuole sottostare a tali strutture egemoniche di potere e mette in atto strategie di resistenza, anche sul piano della lingua: “Vi är dom som tar ert äckliga språk och krokas till det. Vi är dom som aldrig kommer att acceptera ett språk som är konstruerat för att sälla ut oss” (292).¹⁹ Jonas considera il padre un traditore, ma si rammarica e prova una profonda rabbia contro la Svezia, ovvero “ett

¹⁶ “Lo svedese è la lingua del prestito” (Khemiri 2009, 191).

¹⁷ “Io svedese è la lingua più antiaraba che ci sia e il pappo chiede sospirando perché e tu riesci solo a fare un esempio: Che ne dici dell'espressione svedese ‘Fy farao’? Porco faraone? Cosa c'è di più antiarabo di questo? E il pappo fa volare uno schiaffo che ti brucia la guancia fino a farla diventare rossa e il pappo urla: Tu sei svedese, deficiente che non sei altro!” (Khemiri 2009, 190).

¹⁸ “cerchia creola dove tutto è mescolato, mischiato e ibridato” (Khemiri 2009, 272).

¹⁹ “Siamo quelli che prendono la vostra lingua disgustosa e la fanno a pezzi. Siamo quelli che non accetteranno mai una lingua costruita per scartarci” (Khemiri 2009, 272).

land som har stulit ens pappa” (342).²⁰ Oltre alla perdita di un padre, si aggiunge anche il rischio della perdita della lingua del padre, l’arabo, che probabilmente Jonas ha smesso di esercitare dalla svolta monolingue di Abbas. Nel *post-scriptum* di una mail, Kadir definisce infatti l’arabo di Jonas “naivt krokiga” (30),²¹ evidenziando così la sua scarsa competenza.

4. *De kaller meg ulven*: lingua ed eredità

Zeshan Shakar, nella sua opera di debutto *Tante Ulrikkes vei*, aveva impiegato il multietnoletto norvegese, conosciuto come *kebabnorsk* (norvegese kebab).²² Questo terzo romanzo, *De kaller meg ulven*, accenna solo brevemente a questo tipo di linguaggio. Si intuisce infatti che il figlio, personaggio anonimo che scrive in prima persona, ormai adulto, parlava il *kebabnorsk* da adolescente. Ci viene descritto un episodio in cui lui si trova nel Groruddalen, zona alla periferia di Oslo in cui è cresciuto, per ritirare delle pizze. Quando si rivolgono a lui in *kebabnorsk* per scusarsi del ritardo, lui riflette sulla sua capacità di comprendere “questa lingua, piena di tante altre lingue”, come la definisce Siri Nergaard (2019, 173) in un suo articolo:

Jeg skjønner hva han mener, skjønner alle orda, de han kutter ut, legger til, norsk, arabisk, engelsk. Jeg kjenner tonene, trykket på stavelsene, stemmene rundt meg, fra Banjul, Asmara, Manila, Oran, Faisalabad, som om de bratte dalsidene har pressa orda våre sammen til ett språk(Shakar 2022, 83).²³

²⁰ “un paese che ha rubato un padre” (Khemiri 2009, 316).

²¹ “ingenuamente tortuoso” (Khemiri 2009, 33).

²² Per un approfondimento sul *kebabnorsk*, vedi Checcucci 2020.

²³ “Capisco cosa vuole dire, comprendo ogni parola, quelle che elimina, aggiunge, norvegese, arabo, inglese. Sento i toni, l’enfasi sulle sillabe, le voci intorno a me, da Banjul, Asmara, Manila, Oran, Faisalabad, come se i ripidi fianchi della valle avessero

Così come in *Montecore*, però, anche qui a risaltare è la lingua del padre, che potremmo definire una forma di ibrido anglo-norvegese, che mescola quindi elementi del norvegese e dell'inglese, con l'infiltrazione di alcuni termini urdu. Inoltre, talvolta capita che si esprima totalmente in urdu, e in questi casi le frasi sono riportate in alfabeto latino senza traduzione. Il padre proviene dal Pakistan e parla sia urdu che inglese, essendo anche quest'ultima una lingua ufficiale del paese a causa del dominio coloniale britannico, durato fino al 1947. Prima del pensionamento, gestiva un negozio di generi alimentari, e questo potrebbe essere uno dei motivi per cui non ha sentito la necessità di perfezionare il suo norvegese. Da questo breve estratto, si intuisce il carattere peculiare della sua lingua:

Vi er i middle of nowhere. Bussen stopper. Hele veien er full med sheep. Full! Sjøføren tuter. Mange ganger. Men sheep bare står der. Folka er utålmodig. Sjøføren går ut og after a while kommer en shepherd. De snakker sammen. Sjøføren kommer inn på bussen igjen. Han går fra person til person og spør oss om tobakk. Han får sikkert tre pakker cigarettes. Når han kommer til oss, jeg spør: 'why?' Sjøføren peker på sheep (32).²⁴

Oltre all'uso di termini ed espressioni inglesi, rilevante è l'infrazione della regola V2, per cui il verbo sta sempre in seconda posizione nelle principali, nella frase "Når han kommer til oss, jeg spør...", che in norvegese standard vorrebbe la forma verbale "spør" anteposta al soggetto "jeg".

compattato le nostre parole in una sola lingua". Le traduzioni, salvo diversamente indicato, sono opera di chi scrive.

²⁴ "Siamo nel middle of nowhere. Il bus si ferma. L'intera strada è piena di sheep. Piena! L'autista suona il clacson. Molte volte. Ma le sheep se ne stanno lì. La gente è impaziente. L'autista esce e after a while arriva uno shepherd. Parlano insieme. L'autista rientra nel bus. Va di persona in persona e ci chiede del tabacco. Di sicuro accumula tre pacchetti di cigarettes. Quando viene da noi, gli chiedo 'why?' L'autista indica le sheep".

L'accento e la pronuncia, sia del norvegese che dell'inglese, sono altri aspetti interessanti del suo linguaggio, poiché deviano da quelli standard a cui i norvegesi sono abituati. Per quanto riguarda l'inglese, il figlio ricorda la prima persona che si è dimostrata disponibile a dare in affitto un appartamento al padre, che fino a quel momento aveva ottenuto solo rifiuti a causa del "sterke aksenten på engelsken hans" (15).²⁵ L'appartamento si trova nel quartiere di Grønland, denominato all'epoca "Lille Karachi", sebbene la maggior parte dei pakistani che abitava lì provenisse dal Punjab. Appartiene al figlio una considerazione riguardo alla pronuncia "scorretta" del padre della parola *kua* (la giovenca/la mucca), che però evita di esternare: "Jeg husker jeg fikk lyst til å si det til ham, *kua*, *uuuu*, men jeg gjorde det ikke" (157).²⁶ La scena si inserisce in un *flashback*, in cui il figlio ricorda di quando il padre gli insegnava le sure del Corano, e in particolare quella denominata "al-Baqarah", ovvero "la giovenca".

Il figlio esprime d'altro canto un apprezzamento sul norvegese del padre, affermando che, quando si impegna, parla quasi meglio della madre etnicamente norvegese – la cui influenza linguistica è riscontrabile nelle terminazioni in -a di cui il padre fa uso per costruire la forma determinata di alcuni sostantivi femminili. Il figlio aggiunge però che la gente si sofferma in maniera quasi ossessiva su "den gebrokne uttalen" (134)²⁷ del padre, evidenziando dunque come questa contribuisca a relegarlo al di fuori dei confini della norvegesità. Ovviamente, la lingua si inserisce in un insieme di altri fattori che, agendo in maniera simultanea, lo rendono un cittadino spesso ancora considerato di serie b, tra tutti il colore della pelle, la fede musulmana, lo *status* di immigrato, la precarietà economica. Anche per questo motivo decide di tornarsene in Pakistan, e avendo impiegato più di metà della sua esistenza per imparare il norvegese, il figlio definisce la lingua del

²⁵ "il forte accento del suo inglese".

²⁶ "Ricordo che mi venne voglia di dirglielo, *kua*, *uuuu*, ma non lo feci".

²⁷ "la pronuncia stentata".

padre “et bortkasta språk” (134).²⁸ Il razzismo dilagante di quegli anni, che oggi si è fatto più subdolo e agisce sotto la superficie, ci viene raccontato in diversi episodi; per esempio, una volta la madre riceve una telefonata in cui uno sconosciuto la insulta dicendole “Du er en skam, din jævla pakkishore” (76).²⁹ La vicenda più grave risale però al giorno in cui il padre si scorda di pagare una lampadina al supermercato. Diventato rosso dalla vergogna per una dimenticanza simile, viene subito preso per un ladro e, pur avendo rimediato all’istante pagando la differenza, viene bloccato bruscamente da una guardia, che lo trattiene con una tale violenza da farlo urlare dal dolore: “Han ropte, men språket gikk i oppløsning, punjabi, urdu, engelsk og norsk” (183).³⁰

Al contrario di Abbas in *Montecore*, qui il padre non sembra essere disposto a rinunciare al suo background linguistico-culturale e lasciarsi assimilare nella società norvegese. Il contatto con il Pakistan rappresenta sempre un elemento fondamentale durante la sua vita trascorsa in Norvegia. Ciò è evidente dal mantenimento dei legami affettivi e dall’invio di denaro ai parenti in Pakistan, dalla necessità di leggere quotidiani e guardare notiziari in urdu e dalla frequentazione in Norvegia di un gruppo di immigrati pakistani, con cui condivide le proprie esperienze di vita e porta avanti battaglie sociali orientate all’ottenimento di migliori condizioni lavorative.

D’altro canto, anche la condizione linguistica e identitaria del figlio è interessante. Significativamente, si descrive come “den mørkhåra, men lyshuda gutten” (16),³¹ un’espressione che, tramite la contrapposizione di scuro-chiaro, suggerisce la sua condizione di individuo “misto”, plasmato da due sistemi linguistico-culturali differenti. Per quanto riguarda la sfera linguistica, da una parte, si può constatare

²⁸ “una lingua sprecata”.

²⁹ “Sei una vergogna, fottuta troia di un paki”. *Pakkis*, tradotto qui con “paki”, è un epiteto razzista utilizzato per insultare i pakistani.

³⁰ “Ha gridato, ma la lingua si è disgregata, punjabi, urdu, inglese e norvegese”.

³¹ “il ragazzo con capelli neri, ma pelle chiara”.

che questo personaggio è madrelingua norvegese, e dunque detiene in Norvegia un potere linguistico maggiore rispetto al padre. Nonostante ciò, gli capita di essere “migrantizzato” e inferiorizzato, per esempio quando un suo compagno di classe afferma di possedere una maggiore padronanza linguistica, anche se è evidente il contrario, perché entrambi i suoi genitori sono norvegesi (bianchi) (80-81). Dall'altra parte, una questione che emerge a più riprese nel corso del romanzo sono le sue scarse competenze nella lingua urdu. Questo è dovuto principalmente a due motivi. Il primo è l'assenza del padre, causata dall'intensa attività lavorativa, che lo tiene occupato dall'alba fino alla sera tardi. Quando ancora il figlio è piccolo prova a insegnargli la lingua, ma, a detta del padre, la mancata continuità lo porta ad abbandonare l'impresa. Il secondo motivo è invece rintracciabile nella convinzione del padre, dettata dal paradigma monolingue, secondo cui l'apprendimento di una sola lingua, il norvegese, gli avrebbe portato solo vantaggi: “han tenkte det var best om jeg brukte kreftene på *ett* språk, lærte det så godt som mulig. Det var en fordel på skolen, i jobb” (172).³² Il figlio avrebbe voluto invece sviluppare delle competenze più solide, anche per andare più a fondo nella relazione con suo padre,³³ infatti afferma: “Han burde tenkt lenger. Heller enn å snakke språket han kunne dårligst, for at jeg skulle forstå ham bedre” (172).³⁴ Anche qui, la pressione omologante del monolinguismo si lega a una scelta compiuta dal padre e sortisce effetti deleteri nella costruzione identitaria del figlio.

³² “pensava fosse meglio che impiegassi le mie energie in *una* lingua, imparandola al meglio. Era un vantaggio a scuola, al lavoro”.

³³ L'apprendimento della *heritage language* (lingua minoritaria di origine di uno o entrambi i genitori) facilita la comunicazione intergenerazionale (Park & Sarkar 2007). Sul concetto di *heritage language*, vedi Benmamoun et al. 2013.

³⁴ “Avrebbe dovuto pensarci meglio. Invece di parlare la lingua che sapeva peggio, affinché lo capissi meglio”.

In effetti, la sua scarsa conoscenza dell'urdu gli crea dei disagi sia con i coetanei che con i parenti, tanto da indurlo a porsi degli interrogativi inerenti a identità ed eredità. A un certo punto, ricorda di una volta in cui giocava a calcio con altri ragazzi, molti dei quali erano di origine pakistana. Quando sente dare indicazioni in urdu, ne parla addirittura come “et annet av skolegårdens språk jeg ikke helt forsto” (85),³⁵ quasi non vi avesse alcun legame particolare. Quando un compagno di squadra gli chiede, in urdu, se sappia parlare quella lingua, lui risponde in norvegese “non molto”, riflettendo sul fatto che anche qualora i padri dei suoi coetanei lavorassero duramente quanto il suo, a casa le loro madri pakistane sarebbero pronte a insegnargli la lingua, al contrario della sua che è norvegese. Un altro episodio risale invece alla sua infanzia e riguarda una cena in famiglia, quando lo zio gli chiede in urdu di passargli i ravanelli:

«Mooli», sa han, og jeg forsto at han ville jeg skulle sende ham noe, men det sto plutselig stille for meg hva *mooli* var. [...] Det var reddiken, innså jeg, men før jeg fikk sendt ham den, så han surt på meg og sa: «Oeh», men ikke noe mer, reiste seg opp og tok tallerkenen med grønnsakene selv (117).³⁶

L'uso e la padronanza di una o più lingue sono strettamente legati alla costruzione identitaria di un individuo. Anche se incentrati su una diversa area geografica, diversi studi hanno dimostrato i benefici che l'apprendimento della *heritage language* porta a una persona mista (Lee 2002; You 2005; Jo 2001; Soto 2002), permettendole di sviluppare una identità etnica positiva (Park 2019, 3). Al contrario, individui misti monolingue tendono a provare un maggiore senso di

³⁵ “un'altra lingua del cortile di scuola che non capivo benissimo”.

³⁶ “‘Mooli’, disse, e capii che voleva che gli passassi qualcosa, ma d'un tratto ebbi un vuoto su cosa fosse il mooli. [...] Realizzai che erano i ravanelli, ma prima di riuscire a passarglieli, mi guardò irritato e fece: ‘Oeh’, ma nient'altro, si alzò e prese il piatto con le verdure da solo”.

isolamento sia nella comunità maggioritaria che in quella minoritaria di origine dell'altro genitore (3; vedi anche Pao et al. 1997). La mancata padronanza della *heritage language* influisce quindi negativamente sul loro “sense of identity because it is [also] through language that one constructs an identity defined in collective terms of a shared culture” (Lee & Suarez 2009, 142).³⁷ In *De kaller meg ulven*, il rapporto tra lingua e identità diventa particolarmente interessante poiché si intreccia con il discorso sull'eredità. A un certo punto il figlio si trova a riflettere su ciò che gli ha lasciato il padre, il quale ha innescato in lui ragionamenti di questo tipo dal momento in cui ha annunciato il suo imminente ritorno in Pakistan:

Jeg har igjen bokstaver, ord, lyder, rekkefølger, bevegelser.

Jeg kan si *Khan*. Jeg kan si *Afghanistan*.

Jeg kan bevegelsene i namaz, veit når jeg skal stå oppreist, når jeg skal bøye meg, når jeg skal legge panna mot teppet, hva jeg skal si mellom bevegelsene.

Jeg kan al-Fatiha og an-Nas, den første og siste suraen i Koranen.

Jeg mangler resten.

Men det er noe, tross alt.

Det er mer enn jeg har lært Mariam (Shakar 2022, 173).³⁸

³⁷ Oltre alla lingua, molteplici altri fattori sono coinvolti nella costruzione identitaria di un individuo e nella riproduzione delle disuguaglianze. Secondo la teoria intersezionale, infatti, le categorie sociali, biologiche e culturali di genere, classe, razza, etnia, religione, ecc. agiscono in maniera simultanea e sono imprescindibili l'una dall'altra (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2022). Malgrado questo aspetto sia stato accennato solo brevemente e non ci sia l'occasione di approfondirlo ulteriormente in questo articolo, in entrambi i romanzi l'aspetto linguistico si interseca inevitabilmente con altre categorie appena menzionate.

³⁸ “Mi sono rimaste le lettere, le parole, i suoni, le sequenze, i movimenti. / So dire *Khan*. E *Afghanistan*. / Conosco i movimenti del namaz, so quando stare eretto, quando chinarmi, quando poggiare la fronte sul tappeto, cosa dire tra i movimenti. / So al-Fathia e an-Nas, la prima e l'ultima sura del Corano. / Mi manca il resto. / Ma è qualcosa, dopotutto. / È più di quanto abbia insegnato a Mariam”.

Qui si parla soprattutto di religione, ma viene toccato anche l'aspetto linguistico. In questa riflessione sulla trasmissione linguistico-culturale tra padre e figlio, quest'ultimo si dichiara, comunque, in parte soddisfatto di ciò che ha ereditato, anche se avrebbe voluto che il padre gli insegnasse più cose. Così avrebbe forse provato un minor senso di smarrimento e avrebbe sviluppato una identità etnica più positiva. Giunge infine alla consapevolezza che questo bagaglio andrà piano piano a perdersi, come si intuisce quando parla di ciò che lui stesso ha trasmesso – o meglio, non ha trasmesso – a sua figlia Mariam. A un certo punto il narratore afferma: “hans historier er også mine” (33),³⁹ sapendo però che non potranno mai essere quelle di sua figlia. Dal padre ha imparato tutto ciò che sa del Pakistan, ed è lui il suo unico vero ponte verso una lingua e una cultura che, dopo la sua partenza, non potranno che sembrare ancora più lontane e inafferrabili.

5. Conclusioni

Come osserva Emilio Calvani (2023, 86), lo scontro linguistico-ideologico tra Abbas e Jonas mostra uno degli aspetti conflittuali della condizione postmigrante, in cui ormai la tradizionale omogeneità culturale, etnica e linguistica è sottoposta inevitabilmente a continui processi di negoziazione. La pressione omologante del paradigma monolingue, secondo cui a una determinata nazione corrisponde un'unica vera lingua, esercita il suo effetto sia in *Montecore* che in *De kaller meg ulven*. In maniera diversa, entrambi i padri incoraggiano i figli a plasmare la propria identità sulla base di una concezione monolingue, che, però, ormai non riesce più a rispondere alle esigenze della generazione postmigrante, cresciuta in una Scandinavia profondamente trasformata dal fenomeno della migrazione e segnata da processi di ibridazione linguistica e culturale.⁴⁰

³⁹ “le sue storie sono anche le mie”.

⁴⁰ Per quanto ciascun paese scandinavo disponga delle sue specificità, tutti e tre sono definibili “postmigranti”, poiché il fenomeno della migrazione ha condotto a importanti

Anche se in diverse modalità, le risposte dei figli segnalano proprio questa necessità di andare oltre i rigidi confini della monolingua e della monocultura. Il carattere conflittuale di *Montecore* evidenzia bene questo aspetto, il quale traspare anche nell'altro romanzo da alcune riflessioni del protagonista su eredità, lingua e identità. Inoltre, entrambi i figli sono accomunati dalla scarsa o imperfetta competenza della lingua dei padri e dall'adozione, in fase adolescenziale, di linguaggi orali delle periferie multietniche che si contrappongono ai sistemi linguistici e socioculturali egemonici delle società svedese e norvegese. Traspare così anche il diverso carattere delle sfide che due generazioni diverse, dei genitori e dei figli, devono affrontare nella Scandinavia odierna in rapporto alla lingua e al consolidamento della propria posizione all'interno della società. Inoltre, si può parlare di mediazione linguistico-culturale reciproca tra genitori e figli. I genitori rappresentano la chiave di accesso a un universo lontano, fuori dai confini dei paesi nordici, che i figli spesso conoscono solo parzialmente e in maniera indiretta; i figli, viceversa, il più delle volte rappresentano per i genitori un ponte di collegamento verso le culture e le lingue scandinave.

Per concludere, sia *Montecore* che *De kaller meg ulven* mostrano alcune sfide complesse dell'epoca postmigrante, che si sviluppano anche sul piano linguistico: la lingua come luogo di potere, capace di includere o escludere le persone da una comunità; la lingua come luogo di conflitto, tra omologazione e resistenza; la lingua come assenza, che rende arduo esprimere una parte della propria identità. Alla base di tali questioni vi è sempre l'influsso del paradigma monolingue, oggi sempre più contrastato da pratiche multilingue capaci di reinventare il

trasformazioni politiche, culturali e sociali (Karakayali & Tsjanos 2014, 34). La sociologa tedesca Naika Foroutan (2016, 246) osserva che le società postmigranti sono spaccate in due da una "linea bipolare", che ha l'effetto di suddividere la popolazione in due blocchi sempre più contrapposti di apertura e di chiusura nei confronti della diversità. L'aumento dei consensi che i partiti di estrema destra hanno ottenuto anche in Danimarca, Svezia e Norvegia è riconducibile a questo processo.

rapporto tra lingua/e e nazione. I concetti stessi di svedesità e norvegesità, di cui la sfera linguistica rappresenta un tassello fondamentale, sono al centro di importanti negoziazioni che, si spera, porteranno ad ampliare il loro significato, per includere al loro interno anche quelle pratiche sociali, culturali e linguistiche che, fino a poco tempo fa, erano inimmaginabili in Scandinavia. Per quanto la strada da percorrere sia ancora lunga, vista anche l'ascesa della destra populista e anti-immigrazione in Europa e altrove, la letteratura di finzione dà un contributo importante in questo processo, poiché crea maggiore consapevolezza e comprensione tra le persone, mostrando possibili vie da intraprendere per plasmare il nostro futuro.

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MISCELLANEA

I, Otherstani:
War on Terror and Defence of the Margins
in Talha and Hamja Ahsan

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1. Introduction

terrorist violence is explained as the outcome of something innate in Muslims: their racial character [...] the cause of their violence is said to be Muslim culture, ideology or religion – a racial essence [...] this logic is eventually genocidal (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 21, 26-27).

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan's recent book *Tangled in Terror* is founded on an idea shared with other scholars: the recent decades following the London bombings of July 7th, 2005,¹ have been polluted by a widespread Islamophobia, as the

¹ On July the 7th, 2005, in central London, “[f]our coordinated attacks on three tube trains and a double-decker bus killed 52 people and left several hundred injured in the worst single terrorist atrocity on British soil” (Grierson 2025, n.p.). Sivanandan (2006, 4-5) describes how formally integrated into British society the four bombers were, and concludes that the cause of the bombings “must be sought in the degradation and hopelessness of Muslim life in the here and now”.

epigraph above claims. In 2010 Featherstone, Holohan and Poole (173) reasoned about this de-politicised view of terrorism as an ideological process which ends up covering the real roots of the phenomenon, that is to say the insecurity produced by neo-liberalism. Sadly, twelve years later Manzoor-Khan offers a similar analysis – including a reference to genocide which carries a blood-chilling prophetic connotation today. Several times in her book, Manzoor-Khan insists that the origins of Islamophobia are colonial (2022, 8-23); they may also be seen as a recent development of the orientalism described by Edward Said, who indicated the stereotypical association between fundamentalism and Islam, an association not always made in the case of other religions which also display traces of fundamentalism (Said 1997, xvi).

The second part of this article focuses on the laws and policies which have been fostering Islamophobia in Britain, and on their fallout on British Muslims; it then moves to the 2003 Extradition Act as one of the decisive contributions to this general atmosphere of racial injustice. The third part concentrates on the ordeal experienced by Talha Ahsan, one of the victims of the Extradition Act, and above all on the creative response represented by his poetry; he broadens the scope to reflect on various forms of otherness (such as his being autistic), when not on the concept of otherness itself. The fourth part of this article examines how Talha Ahsan's brother, the writer-artist and activist Hamja Ahsan, developed these ideas in *Shy Radicals*, where concerns for marginal subjectivities are taken to their extreme consequences through convincing (and sometimes provocative) claims.

Overall, this article argues for the need to focus on the importance of creative responses to terrorism and the war on terror in Britain – a subject which, in my view, has been understudied so far. The rationale behind the choice of Talha and Hamja Ahsan as my case studies lies in the emblematic nature of their personal and artistic ordeal. The manifold connections between their histories and their artistic productions bring to the fore, as the following paragraphs show, the urgency of an intersectional approach capable of examining formal/theoretical aspects and political issues at once. This is meant to be especially evident in the

Conclusion of this article, where the works by these two authors are considered as imaginatively coalescing the critical power of margins and Britain's contemporary atmosphere resulting from the so-called war on terror, which has been restricting space for all forms of dissent.

2. Post-7/7 Islamophobia and British Anti-terror Policies

As early as 2006, Ambalavaner Sivanandan (novelist and head of the Institute of Race Relations) was warning the public about the discriminating measures that were being increasingly adopted by British institutions, criminalising minority groups. Just like the previous SUS Laws against black youths, anti-terror laws meant targeting specific categories "not for an actual offence, but for being likely to commit one" (Sivanandan 2006, 4). These strategies *à la Minority Report* (Bigo 2006, 140) have produced a large-scale arbitrariness among those who implemented them, leaving room for many forms of discrimination. Sixteen years after Sivanandan's article, Manzoor-Khan's *Tangled Terror* shows how deep and how far these policies have reached. In her chapter "Racist Prediction as Public Duty" she examines how the Prevent programme, introduced in 2003 and made law in 2015, has been legally forcing public sector workers "to participate in national security policing and monitoring". The dystopian atmosphere, then, added Orwell to Philip Dick. These workers were supposed to watch out for "signs of radicalisation" so vague that they inevitably ended up relying "on their own stereotypes":

In terms of Prevent, because of the two decades of the war on terror narrative, we live in a context where "terrorism" is singularly associated with Muslims in the public consciousness. Consequently, the ambiguity of Prevent's 'signs' makes people more, not less, likely to target Muslims (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 64-66).

These institutional policies have contributed to spreading unease and suffering in the British Muslim community. If Sivanandan wrote of a "metaphysics of fear" and

“siege mentality” (2006, 3, 4), Manzoor-Khan describes their effect as PTSD: “Islamophobia alters our physiologies through trauma, lives in our nervous systems, makes us hypervigilant and afraid” (2022, 7). She also mentions NGOs which specifically help individuals and their families to recover, such as HHUGS (42) and CAGE (104); these organisations have provided care for 2710 families involved in terrorism-related arrests, “of which 54% result in the detainee being released without charge”, and numberless cases of freedom-restricting control orders (T. Ahsan 2020, n.p.).

The foundations of these discriminatory persecutions were probably laid even before 7/7, with the 2003 Extradition Act whereby “the UK would be expected to extradite any individual to the US on request”, on the sole grounds of “reasonable suspicion”. The Act was “fast-tracked into UK legislation without a formal consultative parliamentary process” (Kapoor 2013, 181) and involved no British tribunal. Predictably, a controversy ensued around this breach of national sovereignty which Nisha Kapoor (2013, 189) defined as “the legal equivalent of rendition”, hence going against the international law on human rights (Peirce 2010, 185; in Kapoor 2013, 100). This Act affected a great number of Muslim British citizens and their families. Numerous cases of institutional racism were brought to light, too, such as Home Secretary Theresa May cancelling the extradition of Gary McKinnon, a white Briton and autistic person accused of cyber-related crimes (Kapoor 2013, 194-195), whereas the same thing did not happen to Syed Talha Ahsan – born in London in 1979 of Bengali parents, graduate at SOAS in Arabic Studies, autistic person, poet, and translator.

Accused of having supported Bosnian, Chechnyan, and Afghan fighters (before 9/11) under an online pseudonym, Talha Ahsan was held in UK prisons between 2006 and 2012, extradited to a maximum-security Connecticut penitentiary, tried, and released in 2014 after accepting a plea bargain (H. Ahsan 2020, n.p.). Talha Ahsan may be seen as an example of a large number of British Muslims who, in words of lawyer Gareth Peirce:

accessed the Internet prompted by an interest – shared with millions of their contemporaries around the world, Muslim and non-Muslim – in the workings of political and radical Islam [... they were] not remotely involved in any terrorist activity (Peirce 2007, n.p.).

3. Talha Ahsan's Written and Video Poetry

Talha Ahsan was recipient of the Koestler Award for his poetry. In the light of his ordeal, the poems which are most likely to strike a reader's attention are those related to his story. One case in point is *Mind the Gap*:

() until proven (),
() and (),
anti-()

some allegations
the firmer denied
the greater proven,

the chasm between
() and () widens,

jump it,
don't fill it
(T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.).

This formal experiment carries ironical undertones, but it is certainly bitter irony hinting at the fact that the 2003 Extradition Act did not include “the need to provide *prima facie* evidence” (Kapoor 2013, 181). According to lawyer Fahad Ansari, who defended cases like Talha Ahsan's, “to not be shown or told of the evidence against you to be able to challenge it results in feelings of complete and utter

helplessness [...] some equate the process with fighting ghosts” (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 53). Denying the allegations, therefore, cannot but lead to a Kafkaesque situation, as the second stanza suggests. The poem closes on an exhortation to “jump” the gap in order not to fall into the empty space below it; travellers on the London Underground (and some railway stations) are familiar with the exhortation to “mind the gap” between the train doorway and the station platform, regularly broadcast from loudspeakers.

Images of empty spaces, invisibilisation and disappearance return in *Life Sentence*:

To kill
is to erase an image
off a mirror:

swift glance &
side step,

no body

just a gaping hole
upon an indifferent world
(T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.).

The lines convey a sense of abandonment easily relatable to the indifference of British society towards his plight, as the ending says. Once again, what dominates the scene is “a gaping hole”: the swishing movement that creates it is phonetically reinforced by the alliteration on [s] in “swift”, “side”, and “step”.

The titular poem of Talha Ahsan’s collection, *This Be the Answer*, is directly connected to his imprisonment, affirming resilience in the face of humiliation:

A prisoner on his knees
scrubs around the toilet bowl
and the bristles of the brush
scuttles to and fro
as a guard swaggers over
to yell rather than ask –

Where is your God now? [...]

He is with me now, gov.
My God is with me now
hearing and seeing,
whilst your superiors
when they see you, do not look at you
and when they hear you, do not listen to you [...]

My God wants me to call Him
whilst your superiors demand you knock

And when I go towards Him a hand span,
He comes to me a yard
and when I go to Him walking,
He comes to me running
(T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.).

It seems that this kind of situation is rather common for British Muslims in prisons or in administrative detention. In British jails, “guards are more likely to restrain and segregate Muslim prisoners. Islam is routinely weaponized against them”, while in detention centres for migrants “[u]nhygienic conditions have also forced Muslims to pray next to open toilets – judged a human rights abuse by a High Court in 2018” (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 51, 126-127).

In the poem, the guard's bullying and the prisoner's answer are paralleled by the repetition-cum-variance of "gov" and "God". The prisoner's reply deconstructs the stereotypical equivalence (widespread even among progressive intellectuals) between Muslim faith and reduction of freedom; this affirmation of dignity is confirmed in the poem's ending: "a prisoner on his knees, / still, as if in prayer" (T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.). In this regard, Talha Ahsan's stance is close to Manzoor-Khan's: far from adopting a secular perspective, the latter acknowledges her religious faith as a means to fight against injustice and change the world – in opposition to British policies trying to impose a vision of Muslim faith as appropriate only for one's private dimension, lest it run the risk of radicalising: "when Muslims internalise these parameters, we submit to a reductive vision of Islam as merely a part of our private identity that stays at home away from 'politics', rather than an impetus to transform our world" (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 119). The poem's religious atmosphere may also be construed in the light of the intertextuality of its title – as if its "answer" were a response to the popular poem by Philip Larkin *This Be the Verse* (1971), often quoted as emblematic of the liberation of mores during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nevertheless, Talha Ahsan's poetic output is not limited to lines related to his ordeal, be they on issues of religion, ethnicity, Islamophobia, or war on terror. Some of his poems widen his preoccupations regarding otherness, as in the case of *On a Foreign Plain*:

This voice within
 Silent I hear
 May not have an accent
 But is as foreign under my skin
 As an arrow.

The grammar and syntax sound
 But the unidiomatic grates.

Calligraphy to a blind man,
Music to the deaf, I am [...]
(T. Ahsan unpublished, n.p.).

The wounding estrangement felt as a consequence of his neurodivergence culminates in the last two lines quoted above, which openly point to a condition of incomprehension described throughout the poem thanks to an extended linguistic metaphor.

This imagery recurs in his video-animated poem *I, Otherstani*. In its captioned prologue, the author states the double rejection that he was victim of: “stranger in the country of my birth yet mocked as quintessentially English by American correctional officers mimicking accents and catchphrases from English movie characters”. The poem itself begins by depicting a fictional world scarred by a polarisation (“And so the world was divided into Hereistan and Thereistan”) where violence runs amok and killings “feed into each other like a snake chasing its tail [...] Infinity groans and falls to his side” and each murderer “grapples for the beginning of blame”. Torn between these Manichean opposites, the poetical voice helplessly asks: “Where would I go? Where would I live? Is your country the one you will be born in or the one you died in?”. The immediate answer is “I want to belong to the country of birds” (a hoopoe is the protagonist of the poem’s animation) and triggers the wish for a homeland untainted by that spiral of violence: “So where’s Otherstan?”. As in *On a Foreign Plain*, the location of this desired home for otherness is related to language: “It is between the gaps of words; the hollows between syllables”. Talha Ahsan thus envisions a sort of post-structuralist deconstruction of Manichean oppositions rooted in his personal experience, vindicating the rights and agency of otherness at large: as the conclusion of the poem says, “I remain truly an Otherstani” (T. Ahsan 2020, n.p.).

This defence of otherness was taken up by his activist brother Hamja Ahsan, who developed it in surprising forms and genres, as the next section shows.

4. Hamja Ahsan's Activist Writings

In a short documentary presenting his *Shy Radical* project, Hamja Ahsan describes the project as having been in his mind for a long time when he was struggling with depression related to his own withdrawn character; at the same time, he acknowledges that his brother Talha's imprisonment and writings acted as a sort of catalyst:

I always daydreamed about this important book I would write, which would take revenge on the world, which would bring all of those grievances together [...]. I feel like it's something that's always been in me. [...] One morning in summer 2006 my life changed forever [...]. Police officers took my brother away [...]. They put him in Belmarsh Prison. Police officers on orders from the United States were made to go through every corner of my room – diaries, my mobile phone, my entire CD collection [...]. I was forced into spotlight which was incredibly traumatic for an introvert person. I don't want any other British family to go through the nightmare we went through. [...] In the seventh year of his detention without trial Talha, my brother, imagined a land called Otherstan [...]. It was Talha's poetry, written from solitary confinement in a death-row prison, that inspired my own ideas for Aspergistan and the Shy Radical movement (H. Ahsan 2020, n.p.).

I first came across Hamja Ahsan's activism in 2012, at an event organised by him and called *Extradite Me, I'm British*. That was actually my very first encounter with both Talha's and Hamja's works. I went to that evening of political speeches and stand-up comedy because of the curiosity triggered by the title – of course, it referred to Talha Ahsan's imprisonment and pending extradition to the US, against which his brother was organising awareness-raising events of this kind. Much later, Hamja Ahsan would curate an exhibition to celebrate the 10th anniversary of his brother's release: *My Brother Is Back – On Islamophobia, Extradition and Prisoner Solidarity* (London, 21st August-8th September 2024), collecting works and interventions by many artists and intellectuals; worthy of note is the

fact that its bill stated: “Closing events on personal resilience and community support, with letters and short stories that look at state cruelty from Theresa May to Keir Starmer”.

This section focuses on the volume *Shy Radicals: The Anti-Systemic Politics of the Introvert Militant* (2017), where Hamja Ahsan develops his own version of Talha Ahsan’s Otherstani. It is based on the fictional existence of the Shy People’s Republic of Aspergistan: about its genesis, the author declared “there wasn’t a collective identity or history that I could turn to, so I just made one up” (H. Ahsan 2020, n.p.). The most appropriate definition for this book, in my view, is offered by its Italian translator Piernicola D’Ortona, who calls it “un manifesto fantapolitico” (“a political fiction manifesto”, translation mine; D’Ortona 2019, 9).

The publication is connected to Hamja Ahsan’s project *The Aspergistan Referendum*, winner of the Grand Prize of the 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts in 2019. Small and compact like a booklet, from its very physical shape *Shy Radicals* hints at fundamentalist Islam and at how we imagine its religious handbooks; chromatically, this suggestion is enhanced by some of its pages being black with white titles. The same parodic frame of reference is strengthened by puns such as “shy” (hinting at “Shia”) and “Shyria Law”. At the same time, the book conveys a message which represents a clear refusal of fundamentalism: “Shy Radicals reject the recent attempt by the Extrovert World Order [...] to place it on a list of proscribed terrorist organizations” (H. Ahsan 2017, 51; hereafter, the book will be referred to as *SR* followed by page number). Furthermore, the “Introvert Movement” on which the worldview of Shy Radicals is based declares itself against both “Terrorism and Extrovert Supremacism”, which “exist on the same plane. Terrorism aspires to be the centre of attention. Attention is the central category of politics in Extrovert ideology [...] they are both] powers of distractive mass-media populism” (*SR* 50).

In imagining this non-existent movement and country, *Shy Radicals* is constructed as a series of parodies of various textual genres, notably beginning with a long “Draft Constitution of the Shy People’s Republic of Aspergistan”. Just to

mention a few, Article 1 defines “an independent Pan-Shyist state representing the interests of all Shy, Introvert and Autistic Spectrum peoples, herein referred to as Aspergistan”; Article 16 “guarantees the right to silence”; Article 17 grants “freedom from Extrovert harassment during leisure time and national holidays [...] from all Extrovert epistemic violence, including all accusations of being anti-social or aloof”; Article 19 “guarantees the absolute protection of quiet children against bullying, peer pressure and introvert hate crime” (SR 16-20).

Some of the constitutional articles trace a clear connection with urgent contemporary issues which directly impinge on introverts. According to Article 54,

The Shyria Court System recognises that mindless environmental destruction [...] accords with the culture of bragging and ostentatiousness, and that compulsive consumerism brings destruction and exhaustion of the world’s resources in the pursuit of insatiable decadent Extrovert extravagance (SR 30).

Article 61 takes sides with free movement and migrations:

Asylum is guaranteed for all those engaged in struggle and resistance as part of the Pan-Shyist ideology. Safe passage from Extrovert-Supremacist states to Aspergistan will be provided for all those suffering political persecution (SR 32).

As I have said above, the rest of the book is composed of a collection of textual genres which all contribute to depicting the many facets of the Introvert Movement, such as an interview with jailed Shy Radical activist Amy Littlewood, who declares that “shyness is a political position” (SR 64) and accuses those who belong to the “Trendy Club system” of living “for their Friday night release, their complicity justifying the sheep-like zombie death they endure every other week-day” (SR 61); documents from the Shy Radical Students’ Movement (SR 69-78); film reviews from an Introvert critical perspective (SR 79-90); an Oral History Pro-

ject, where one testimony criticises the noisy aggressiveness of Westernised Islam: “I thought that Islam was the last remaining bulwark against the forces of Extrovert-Supremacism. I was wrong [...]. Urban Islam came as a shock to my system” (SR 99); reports from Shy Radical delegations worldwide (SR 107-120); and a directory of helpful services with a donation page (SR 131-135, 164-165). Overall, the originality of *Shy Radicals* rests on the ambivalent reactions that it is bound to produce in readers: some of its claims are especially convincing – when not fascinating – whereas others emerge as hard to accept, when not provocative. On one hand, why shouldn’t the rights of shy people (in the broad definition mentioned in Article 1) be respected? How could one not agree that the “Trendy Club cultivates man’s very worst traits: shallowness, vanity, arrogance, sexual chauvinism, ostentatiousness” (SR 61)? How could one not feel sympathy for the statements “Extrovert-Supremacists confuse their lifestyle with life itself; and our privileging of inner contemplation, slowness and depth of reflection with death. [...]. We teach life. They teach zombification”?

On the other hand, *Shy Radicals* occasionally pushes its challenging stance so far as to present apparently negative contexts or structures as positive, or vice versa. Although I understand that reactions are perforce to some degree subjective, I think readers are likely to feel perplexed in the face of the Hikikomori movement #OCCUPYBEDROOM (“our silence and reclusiveness means that our message cannot be misused or instrumentalised”; SR 37); of campus feminists described as having monopolised the interpretation of Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* but “they didn’t consider why it connected with us too as alienated men” (SR 102); of the description of North Korea as in tune with the principle of Shy Radicals and opposed to Trendy-club-dominated South Korea (SR 66); and of the book’s reflections on the wearing of Niqab as the

right to anonymity in public space [... it is] assumed the women who wore the face veil were always submissive, subjugated and oppressed. But this is the way the Extrovert-Supremacist pig views us Shy peoples too (SR 129-130).

5. Conclusion: Margins and Dissent

Our place was the very house of difference
rather than the security of any particular difference
(Lorde 1990, 224).

attention to the wholly other must be constantly reviewed
(Spivak 1990, 5).

This article focused on the Islamophobic persecutions and detentions carried out by British institutions against Muslim individuals and their families, taking Talha Ahsan's ordeal as emblematic of the phenomenon. With profound respect for the suffering involved for Talha Ahsan and his whole family, these pages have examined his and his brother Hamja's artistic responses in their branching out to touch upon marginalised groups at large, thus acquiring a wider and more complex resonance. Arguably, works like *I*, *Otherstani* and *Shy Radicals* are to be seen as pointing to two different but related aspects – one theoretical, the other political. As far as theory is concerned, their concepts are reminiscent of the importance placed on margins as such by some key postcolonial thinkers from the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as Gayatri Spivak, who stressed the “wholly otherness of margins” which are to be seen as ever elusive, never becoming central, demanding to be defended as the guardians of our critical spirit (Spivak 1990, 4). In *Shy Radicals*, this is especially clear in Article 8 of the Draft Constitution: “Mainstream life has no place in Aspergistan. All politics will remain underground” (SR 17). Relatedly, the primacy of the margins as such is evident in the works by some African American feminists, as in Audre Lorde's epigraph above. Much like Spivak, bell hooks, too, brings to the fore the critical potential of marginality, which “is also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance [...]. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (hooks 1989, 20). As easily inferred, in this quote the closing

reference to the making of new spaces bears a stunning resemblance to what both Talha and Hamja Ahsan achieve in their art.

While abstracting concrete issues related to Islamophobia and war on terror, Talha's and Hamja Ahsan's conceptualisations on the value of otherness may also be taken as strictly connected to the impact of those policies on a socio-political level. Analysts have repeatedly brought to the fore how the war on terror helped to foster a repressive militarisation of British society, shaping a continuum which ranges from terrorists abroad to migrants and internal minorities, and exacerbating the living conditions of the most vulnerable subjects (Bigo 2006, 115-116). This "permanent state of exception" (135) led to the creation of new crimes of thought, speech, and solidarity, such as "provocation to commit terrorism", which all worked "in the direction of criminalising ideas" (Fekete 2009, 105). In this light, it is all forms of dissent that have been dangerously relegated to the margins:

National security measures expand the state's powers to repress more broadly at its own discretion. So, although the apparatus has been built at the back of Islamophobia, it threatens even those who consent to it (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 46).

In the end, these two aspects – theoretical marginality and political dissent – are bound to be seen as related. This connection is traced clearly by Spivak, who aptly warns us (and herself) about the issue of intellectual positionality:

if you forget the productive unease that what you do with the utmost care is judged by those margins, in the political field you get the pluralism of repressive tolerance and sanctioned ignorance, and varieties of fundamentalism, totalitarianism [...] and in the field of writing about and teaching literature, you get both the benign or resentful conservatism of the establishment *and* the masquerade of the privileged as the disenfranchised, or their liberator (Spivak 1990, 4; her italics).

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L'hybridité en héritage: il caso dei *transfuges de classe* “inrangers”

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1. Introduzione: i *transfuges de classe* francofoni tra ibridità ed eccezionalità

Il presente articolo si concentra su alcuni casi di *transfuges de classe* francofoni contemporanei che potremmo descrivere come *inrangers*, servendoci del neologismo creato da Yassir Benmiloud nel romanzo *Allah Superstar* (2003). Per lo scrittore algerino, l'*inranger* è un giovane “d’origine difficile”, una sorta d’“étranger dans [s]on propre pays” (Benmiloud 2003, 237).¹ Il termine è stato poi trasposto sul piano critico da Ilaria Vitali (2011), riferendolo alla condizione dei figli di genitori immigrati che tentano di trovare la loro strada conciliando i valori del paese in cui sono nati e cresciuti (o in cui si sono trasferiti da piccolissimi) con quelli dei loro genitori o del loro paese d’origine. Approfondiremo più avanti il ruolo di Vitali nel far acquisire a questo termine un preciso significato tecnico.

Quella del *transfuge inranger* è una condizione che potremmo definire doppiamente ibrida ed eccezionale. Doppia perché somma due dimensioni di ibridazione. In quanto *transfuge de classe* è già una “créature à faces multiples” con “des traits mobiles de la personnalité” (Jaquet 2015, 106);² uno dei tratti che

¹ “di origine difficile”, “straniero nel [suo] stesso paese” (Benmiloud 2004, 123).

² “creatura dai molteplici volti” [con] “dei tratti mobili della personalità”; quando non

accomuna i racconti dei *transfuges de classe* è infatti la “mise en scène du clivage entre deux mondes sociaux, notamment à travers les différences culturelles [...] et l’ambivalence linguistique”(Abiven & Véron 2024, 11).³ Si tratta di un individuo che, grazie alla cultura, ha migliorato le sue condizioni rispetto al contesto di partenza, ovvero rispetto alla situazione dei suoi genitori. Tuttavia, è una condizione altamente instabile e potenzialmente molto conflittuale: il *transfuge* è diviso tra il contesto di partenza, che è quello delle classi popolari o delle “personnes dominées” e quello di arrivo, ovvero quello della borghesia intellettuale o delle “personnes dominantes” (11). A questo, nel caso del *transfuge intranger*, si aggiunge una seconda ibridità, che è quella di razza, o meglio l’ibridazione tra le due culture legate alla razza di origine e quella prevalente nel paese di adozione. Il termine *transfuge*, secondo la scrittrice e sociologa Kaoutar Harchi, è di per sé un “concept blanc” che non tiene conto dell’“imbrication de la classe et de la race” (Andras & Harchi 2023).⁴ Per questo motivo proponiamo di affiancare al termine *transfuge* quello di *intranger*, al fine di mettere maggiormente in luce le implicazioni di tale condizione.

L’eccezionalità riguarda invece una particolare postura nei confronti del trasferimento sociale: se generalmente il *transfuge* è colui che abbandona i valori dei genitori, i casi di *transfuges de classe intrangers* che esamineremo rifiutano di “tradire” le loro origini, rivendicando invece con forza la propria appartenenza. Attraverso un confronto fra le dichiarazioni di alcuni *transfuges non intrangers* (Édouard Louis, Didier Eribon e Annie Ernaux) e quelli di tre *transfuges intrangers* (Nesrine Slaoui, Faïza Guène e Omar Benlaâla), metteremo in evidenza come questi ultimi non vogliano perdere la loro cultura d’origine, ma integrarla nel contesto di arrivo. Se, nel caso di *transfuges* come Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon e

diversamente indicato, le traduzioni sono mie.

³ “Messa in scena della frattura tra due mondi sociali, in particolare attraverso le differenze culturali [...] e l’ambivalenza linguistica”.

⁴ “concetto bianco” [che non tiene conto dell’]“incastro della classe e della razza”.

Édouard Louis, almeno in una fase iniziale di rivolta, le parole e i discorsi dei genitori vengono messi a distanza attraverso il discorso diretto o l'uso del corsivo, i *transfuges intrangers* tendono piuttosto a privilegiare il discorso indiretto, in modo da integrare (nel senso derridiano di incorporare) nei propri enunciati quelli dei loro familiari.

Questi casi di *transfuges* eccezionali che rifiutano di tradire le loro origini non sono in realtà del tutto nuovi. Andrea Del Lungo, in una comunicazione dal titolo *Archéologies des transfuges de classe (Balzac, Flaubert, Zola)*, ha mostrato come anche nel XIX secolo siano esistiti casi di *transfuges* che, pur cambiando classe sociale, hanno mantenuto intatti i propri valori (Del Lungo 2024). È il caso di Maximilien, nel *Bal des Sceaux* di Balzac, e di Denise, in *Au Bonheur des Dames* di Zola.

Attraverso un confronto tra la traiettoria più comune dei *transfuges de classe*, caratterizzata, almeno inizialmente, dalla presa di distanza dal contesto di partenza, e quelle più atipiche di alcune autrici e autori contemporanei definiti *intrangers*, questo articolo riflette su forme e percorsi alternativi di mobilità sociale. Ai fini di questa riflessione, evocheremo brevemente i casi di due personaggi di Balzac e di Zola che sembrano prefigurare alcune tendenze che si sviluppano nel contesto contemporaneo francofono.

2. Tagliare i ponti con le proprie origini: le traiettorie più tipiche dei *transfuges de classe*

Nella sua analisi dal titolo *Individu et groupe dans le roman*, Michel Butor parla del romanzo come di uno specchio che riflette i cambiamenti del suo tempo; il critico francese si sofferma inizialmente sul caso dello scrittore *parvenu* del XVIII secolo, il quale, nelle opere di Le Sage, Marivaux, Fielding, viene respinto per via delle sue origini. Le gerarchie sociali a quell'epoca si stanno sgretolando, ma alcuni privilegi rimangono ancora intatti: nei più prestigiosi salotti viene ammesso solo chi ne sa adottare "le langage", chi è "décrassé", chi ne ha "pris les tournures,

la culture admise pour modèle, s'il peut faire illusion, si son origine roturière n'est pas trop voyante" (Butor 1962, 124).⁵

Tagliare i ponti con un certo modo di essere e di pensare è dunque tipico del *transfuge de classe*. Nel XIX secolo gli esempi più celebri di coloro che accedono a una diversa classe sociale, cercando di abbandonare una parte di sé, sono Lucien de Rubempré, eroe delle *Illusions perdues* (1837-1843) di Balzac e Julien Sorel, protagonista di *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) di Stendhal. Lucien, per accedere al mondo del giornalismo ed essere ammesso nei circoli letterari, deve liberarsi delle sue origini provinciali, legate al cognome paterno Chardon. Anche Julien, per diventare *instituteur*, dovrà prendere le distanze dalle sue origini contadine. Nel panorama contemporaneo, tra gli autori più noti, citiamo Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon ed Édouard Louis. Tutti e tre, nei loro testi, oscillano tendenzialmente tra una prima fase di tradimento delle proprie origini e una successiva di vendetta.⁶ Qui ci interessa in particolar modo il loro tradimento, ovvero la presa di distanza dal contesto d'origine.

⁵ "[Il parvenu sarà ammesso alla casa, al 'salotto', se ne adotta] il linguaggio, [se è] 'ripulito', [se ha] preso a modello le forme, la cultura ammesse, se può fingere, se la sua origine plebea non è troppo vistosa" (Butor 1977, 165). Lo spaesamento dei *parvenu*, nel constatare l'adozione di un certo modo di esprimersi (che loro avevano dovuto abbandonare) da parte dei ceti più alti, è simile allo stupore del *transfuge* contemporaneo che ritrova nei circoli in cui riesce ad entrare alcune abitudini che aveva bandite (si pensi al caso di Didier Eribon quando si rende conto che nella cerchia degli intellettuali vi sono degli appassionati di calcio o di bricolage, due attività cui aveva rinunciato ritenendole inaccettabili per il suo nuovo status).

⁶ I tre casi, pur nella loro somiglianza, presentano divergenze significative. Se nei testi di Édouard Louis il percorso autoriale appare scandito da una fase iniziale di tradimento delle origini, seguita da una di vendetta, nel caso di Annie Ernaux sembra piuttosto che le due dimensioni coesistano (cfr. Ernaux 2003 in cui l'immagine del coltello evoca allo stesso tempo il tradimento e la vendetta).

Questi scrittori si confrontano, almeno in una prima fase di rivolta, con l'allontanamento dal modello familiare al fine di emanciparsi. Ernaux inserisce in esergo a *La Place* una frase di Jean Genet: "Je hasarde une explication: écrire c'est le dernier recours quand on a trahi"(Ernaux 2006, 7);⁷ Didier Eribon, in *Retours à Reims*, afferma, riferendosi al padre: "j'investissais bien sûr tout mon désir de ne pas lui ressembler, de devenir socialement autre que lui" (Eribon 2009, 57).⁸ Si leggono frasi molto simili anche nei testi di Édouard Louis; in *Changer: méthode*, concepito come una sorta di *mode d'emploi* del cambiamento, il personaggio Édouard descrive l'eccitazione nell'immaginare la rottura definitiva con i suoi genitori e con tutto ciò che quel mondo rappresentava per lui: "Sur le chemin vers le théâtre, l'excitation monte, il se voit déjà avoir une nouvelle vie, ne plus fréquenter sa famille, rompre tous les liens avec eux et vivre dans une minuscule chambre sous les toits avec Elena" (Louis 2021, 131).⁹

2.1. Le forme della messa a distanza del contesto d'origine

La necessità di allontanarsi dal contesto di partenza risulta molto chiara se ci si sofferma sul trattamento degli enunciati che riportano alcune affermazioni dei genitori. Nei testi di Eribon, Ernaux e Louis, le voci dei familiari sono messe a distanza tramite l'uso del discorso diretto, talvolta rafforzato dal corsivo.

⁷ "Azzardo una spiegazione: scrivere è l'ultima risorsa quando abbiamo tradito" (Ernaux 2014, 8).

⁸ "E investivo in questa incapacità voluta – avrei potuto anche decidermi a imparare qualcosa da lui – il mio desiderio di non somigliargli, di diventare socialmente altro da lui" (Eribon 2017, 50).

⁹ "Durante il tragitto verso il teatro l'eccitazione sale, vede già una nuova vita in cui non frequenta più la sua famiglia, rompe ogni legame con loro e vive in una mansardina con Elena" (Louis 2023, 81).

Ernaux riporta con disagio alcune espressioni che circolavano in casa, come “*il ne faut pas péter plus haut qu’on l’a*”, o il francese scorretto per cui veniva ripresa a scuola: “se parterrer”; “quart moins d’onze” (Ernaux 2006, 41 e 44).¹⁰ Si dispiace anche del fatto che i suoi genitori si rivolgessero la parola sempre su un tono di rimprovero – “Mets ton cache-nez pour dehors!” o “Reste donc assise un peu!” – che spesso sfociava in uno scambio di insulti: “Cinglée! Triste individu! – Vieille garce!” (49).¹¹ Anche Eribon deplora espressioni come “Encore ça que les Boches n’auront pas!” o “Si quelqu’un me fait une remarque, je lui fous mon poing sur la gueule”(Eribon 2009, 36 e 33),¹² da cui ha fin da subito voluto dissociarsi. Sulla medesima scia, Louis, in *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, descrive il comportamento del padre e riporta le sue parole prendendone le distanze:

Mon père continuait à la regarder, de plus en plus agacé, de moins en moins à même de masquer son état. La rage déformait son visage comme lorsqu’il tapait des poings sur les murs. Il lui a demandé si elle n’était pas en train de se moquer de lui. Il disait qu’il ne voulait plus la voir si elle continuait à fréquenter ce garçon et il ne l’a plus vue pendant plusieurs mois. Nous savions que sa réaction était disproportionnée: ma sœur n’était pas responsable. Mais il n’avait pas su maîtriser ses nerfs une fois de plus. Du reste, il essayait peu de le faire, et même, il s’en vantait *Moi je suis nerveux, je me laisse pas faire, et quand je m’énerve, je m’énerve* (Louis 2014, 43-44).¹³

¹⁰ “*non bisogna pisciare troppo lontano*”; “dabbassarsi”; “un quarto meno le undici” (Ernaux 2014, 28-30).

¹¹ “Mettiti la sciarpa per uscire!”; “Stai seduta un momento!”; “Sei pazza! Poveraccio! – Vecchia carogna!” (Ernaux 2014, 33).

¹² “Crucchi”; “Alla faccia dei crucchi, che questo non avranno!”; “Se qualcuno mi dice qualcosa, gli do un cazzotto in faccia” (Eribon 2017, 32).

¹³ “Mio padre continuava a guardarla, sempre più irritato, sempre meno capace di nascondere il suo stato d’animo. La rabbia gli stava deformando la faccia come quando prendeva a pugni i muri. Le ha chiesto se niente niente lo stesse prendendo in giro.

L'autore utilizza in questo caso il discorso diretto libero (le parole riportate sono esattamente quelle del padre, ma non ci sono né verbi dichiarativi né virgolette) con un chiaro intento dispregiativo. Laurence Rosier sostiene che “la transcription de traits parlés à l’écrit, même les plus banals comme l’élision du *ne* ou du *e* du pronom (*j’suis pas là*)” sia una pratica delicata perché produce “un effet dévalorisant” (Rosier 2008, 25).¹⁴ L’io narrante, riportando le parole del padre in maniera disinvolta, mostra di volersi dissociare dalla reazione paterna che considera ingiusta e inadeguata.

Più in generale, Ernaux, Eribon e Louis, trasponendo le parole dei membri delle loro rispettive famiglie mediante il discorso diretto, le collocano al di fuori della propria voce e le “oggettivano” prendendone le distanze. Evitano così quella *incorporation* nella propria voce con cui finirebbero loro malgrado per fare tali parole un poco proprie se le citassero al discorso indiretto.

3. Alcuni casi eccezionali di *transfuges de classe*

Se l’atteggiamento più tipico dei *transfuges de classe* consiste nel prendere le distanze da alcune parti di sé, inclusi i valori legati alla famiglia d’origine, esistono tuttavia alcuni esempi che si orientano in una direzione opposta. Due tra questi sono stati descritti nella già citata comunicazione di Andrea Del Lungo sul romanzo ottocentesco.

Diceva che non voleva più vederla se continuava a frequentarlo e non l’ha più vista per qualche mese. Sapevamo che la reazione era spropositata: non era lei la responsabile. Ma ancora una volta non era riuscito a mantenere i nervi saldi. D’altronde non ci provava poi molto, se ne vantava pure *lo sono fumantino, non mi lascio fare, e quando m’arrabbio, m’arrabbio*” (Louis 2024, 43).

¹⁴ “la trascrizione dei tratti del parlato allo scritto, anche dei più banali come l’elisione del *ne* o della *e* del pronome (*j’suis pas là*)” sia una *pratica delicata* perché produce un “effetto svalutante”.

Il primo caso menzionato dal critico è quello del *Bal des sceaux* di Balzac (1830), in cui troviamo Maximilien, un personaggio che da umile commerciante diventa pari di Francia. Si tratta di una riuscita economica di tipo borghese, ma l'individuo non cambia; si potrebbe anche dire che Maximilien è già nobile d'animo, e che il riconoscimento in quanto pari di Francia non fa che confermare queste sue (pre)disposizioni. Il secondo caso è quello di Denise nel *Bonheur des dames* di Zola (1883), in cui il personaggio deve scegliere tra la vecchia boutique di proprietà dello zio Baudu, con il quale quest'ultimo sostiene tutta la famiglia, e il primo grande magazzino, che rischia di far fallire l'attività dello zio. Il fascino esercitato dal grande magazzino ha la meglio, ma Denise riesce a conciliare i valori della famiglia con quelli del luogo in cui è impiegata. Il critico, commentando questi due esempi di *transfuges* eccezionali, sostiene che: "dans ces deux cas, l'ascension ne passe pas par l'imitation des classes dominantes, mais par une affirmation identitaire d'un individu qui change de place sans pour autant sacrifier ses valeurs" (Del Lungo 2024).¹⁵

Questi due esempi ci conducono verso i percorsi di alcuni *transfuges intrangers* contemporanei, che cercano di conciliare la mobilità sociale con la fedeltà alle loro radici.

3.1. Il *transfuge intranger*

Se, come si è visto, il *transfuge* è colui che ha raggiunto una migliore posizione sociale rinunciando a parti del sé, l'espressione "transfuge de race" (Rachedi 2022, 119) dovrebbe piuttosto riferirsi a chi ha lasciato dietro di sé le sue origini etniche. Il termine *intranger* descrive più accuratamente i casi di chi ha cambiato classe sociale senza però rinunciare ai propri valori.

¹⁵ "In questi due casi l'ascensione non avvenga per via dell'imitazione delle classi dominanti ma come affermazione identitaria di un individuo che cambia posto senza però sacrificare i suoi valori".

L'espressione *intranger*, come abbiamo detto, è stata usata per la prima volta da Yassir Benmiloud nel romanzo *Allah Superstar*, dove lo scrittore spiega di essersi ispirato per questo neologismo all'*Étranger* di Camus:

le ciel de septembre il est bleu comme le bleu de mon âme, le bleu des condés, des vigiles, des marchands de fruits et légumes, le bleu de la mer au tournant de chaque rue d'Alger, non, là je pars en vrille, ça c'est dans *L'Étranger* de Camus, moi je l'ai lu au bahut, qu'est-ce que j'ai kiffé ce book tellement le mec il écrit avec ses pieds-noirs, le total style blébard, d'ailleurs depuis le bouquin je l'appelle *L'intranger*, c'est un mot que j'ai inventé que si tu es pas d'origine difficile tu peux pas piger, mais moi je t'explique, ça veut juste dire que tu es un étranger dans ton propre pays (Benmiloud 2003, 237).¹⁶

Se per Benmiloud l'*intranger* è un personaggio finzionale con la percezione di essere straniero ovunque, nel saggio di Ilaria Vitali il termine acquisisce valore critico e viene impiegato come categoria letteraria.

Nella sua analisi sulla letteratura *beur* e sulla post-migrazione, Vitali sostiene infatti che il neologismo di Benmiloud “semble saisir mieux que les autres [“littérature beur”; “littérature urbaine”, etc.] le concept d'une identité interstitielle, qui se bâtit à partir des assonances et des dissonances de deux cultures différentes que l'on s'efforce de mettre au diapason” (Vitali 2011, 13)¹⁷ e viene pertanto

¹⁶ “il cielo di settembre è blu come il blu della mia anima, il blu degli sbirri, dei vigili, dei mercati di frutta e verdura, il blu del mare che sbuca all'angolo di ogni via di Algeri, no, non sto dando di matto, c'è nello Straniero di Camus, l'ho letto a scuola, come mi ha fatto strappare quel libro da quanto quell'uomo scrive coi piedi neri, in pieno stile magrebino, comunque da allora il libro lo chiamo *L'intrangero*, è una parola che ho inventato io che se non sei di origine difficile non la puoi capire, ma io te la spiego, vuol dire che sei uno straniero nel tuo stesso Paese” (Benmiloud 2004, 123).

¹⁷ “[il neologismo di Benmiloud] sembra più adatto degli altri termini [“letteratura beur”; “letteratura urbana”, ecc.] a descrivere il concetto di un'identità interstiziale, che si forgia

scelto per descrivere la condizione dei figli di immigrati i quali oscillano tra due lingue e due culture. Già Yamina Benguigui, cercando di definire questa realtà, si era chiesta: “Qui sommes-nous aujourd’hui? Des immigrés? [...] Des enfants d’immigrés? Des Français d’origine étrangère? Des Musulmans?” (Benguigui 1997, 9-10)¹⁸ insistendo sulla complessità degli elementi in gioco.

Ciò che ci interessa qui indagare sono le “formes textuelles de cette hybridité” (Moura 1999, 150),¹⁹ ovvero come si manifesta in questi autori dalle origini complicate “la volonté de s’intégrer à la culture française sans pour autant renier [leur] culture d’origine” (Vitali 2011, 26).²⁰ A differenza di Ernaux, Eribon e Louis, infatti, i *transfuges intrangers* dialogano o incorporano espressioni e modi di dire dei loro genitori nei propri enunciati.

3.2. Le forme della vicinanza ai genitori nei racconti dei *transfuges intrangers*

Ci soffermeremo in particolar modo su tre diverse strategie di rivendicazione delle origini da parte dei *transfuges intrangers*: la prima consiste nell’incorporazione di motti o modi di dire dei genitori che i personaggi ritengono esemplari (incorporazione che avviene attraverso l’uso del discorso indiretto); la seconda consiste nel rendere omaggio alle traiettorie familiari e nell’identificarvisi pienamente (le vicende dei genitori diventano uno specchio in cui riconoscersi); mentre la terza consiste nell’esplicita rivendicazione della propria vicinanza al contesto d’origine. Il primo caso è esemplificato dai testi di Faïza Guène, scrittrice francese di origine algerina, nata e cresciuta nella banlieue parigina, nel dipartimento della Seine-

cercando far dialogare due culture diverse”.

¹⁸ “Chi siamo noi oggi? Immigrati? [...] Figli di immigrati? Francesi di origine straniera? Musulmani?”.

¹⁹ “forme testuali di questa ibridità”.

²⁰ “la volontà di integrarsi nella cultura francese senza però rinnegare la loro cultura d’origine”.

Saint-Denis. I personaggi dei suoi romanzi sono quasi sempre attivamente alla ricerca di un loro posto nel mondo e, a questo proposito, Vitali scrive che i personaggi di Guène “traduisent une évolution des mentalités où les personnages de l’immigration ou ‘issus de l’immigration’ se mobilisent pour agir. Le personnage devient acteur social, citoyen engagé” (Vitali 2011, 113).²¹ In questa ricerca sono spesso sostenuti dagli insegnamenti e dai valori dei genitori. In *Un homme, ça ne pleure pas* questo è particolarmente evidente se ci si sofferma sugli enunciati di Mourad quando scopre di aver passato il concorso per diventare professore di francese:

Et puis, j’ai enfin vu mon nom apparaître. Je ne l’ai jamais trouvé aussi beau, mon nom. Je me suis levé lentement, en silence, et j’ai pleuré en me frottant le dessus du crâne. J’ai vite essuyé mes larmes. Le padre dit qu’un homme, ça ne pleure pas, et ça m’était resté dans la tête (Guène 2014, 26).²²

Questo insegnamento familiare è così rilevante da dare il titolo al romanzo. Guène, come è evidente, si serve del discorso indiretto per mostrare quanto i posizionamenti del padre siano fatti propri dal personaggio in questione: contrariamente ai *transfuges non intrangers*, Mourad non prende le distanze dai motti paterni, ma li incorpora nel proprio discorso. E non si tratta dell’unico caso in cui il personaggio menziona dei modi di dire utilizzati dal padre, si veda ad esempio quando si riferisce a delle verità transculturali: “Mais c’est toujours la même

²¹ “rappresentano un’evoluzione della mentalità per cui i personaggi immigrati o ‘di origine immigrata’ si mobilitano per agire”.

²² “E poi ho finalmente visto apparire il mio nome. Non l’ho mai trovato così bello, il mio nome. Mi sono alzato lentamente, in silenzio, e ho pianto tenendomi la testa tra le mani. Mi sono asciugato in fretta le lacrime. Mio padre ha sempre detto che un uomo non piange, la frase mi è rimasta in testa”.

rengaine: personne ne repart jamais de zéro, pas même les Arabes qui l'ont pourtant inventé, comme disait le père" (260).²³

Il secondo modo in cui si manifesta la solidarietà con il contesto di partenza da parte degli autori *intransgers* è esemplificato da *Tu n'habiteras jamais Paris* di Omar Benlaâla, scrittore nato a Parigi da genitori traferitisi a seguito dell'indipendenza algerina. L'autore rende omaggio al percorso del padre, muratore arrivato in Francia nel 1963, identificandosi nei suoi gesti e nei suoi tratti:

Je me vois en lui; mêmes gestes, même sourire. Des traits suivant la courbe d'une existence sans véritables vagues, malgré les tempêtes. La bouche bordée par le temps qui trace (Benlaâla 2018, 14).²⁴

L'intento di Benlaâla è quello di creare, tramite la scrittura, uno spazio in cui sia lui che i suoi genitori possano riconoscersi. Il romanzo, incrociando e alternando le voci del padre e quella dell'io narrante, alter ego dell'autore, rivela l'importanza del padre per il figlio, la cui identità dipende in larga parte dalle scelte compiute molti anni prima che lui nascesse:

Mon père insiste pour régler, comme d'habitude. Moi, ce sont des mots que j'avance. J'essaie – autant que possible – de retranscrire sa façon de parler: pas pour faire couleur locale ou jouer la carte de l'authenticité, mais pour qu'il puisse me relire, et s'entendre. Comme ma mère – que je ne désespère pas d'interroger, elle aussi –, il lit avec difficulté, faute d'avoir appris. C'est à eux et avec eux que j'écris (15).²⁵

²³ "Ma è sempre la stessa solfa: nessuno ricomincia mai da zero, neanche gli arabi che pure l'hanno inventato, lo zero, come diceva mio padre".

²⁴ "Mi rivedo in lui; stessi gesti, stesso sorriso. Lineamenti che seguono la curva di un'esistenza senza vere onde, nonostante le tempeste. La bocca segnata dal tempo che incide".

²⁵ "Mio padre insiste per pagare, come al solito. Io, invece, metto sul tavolo delle parole. Cerco – per quanto possibile – di restituire il suo modo di parlare: non per fare folklore o

Qui l'intento è quello di essere fedele a un certo modo di parlare e di pensare del padre, non per ridicolizzarlo o per distanziarsene, ma per mostrare la sua ammirazione per quell'uomo così coraggioso. Se Édouard Louis rifuggiva dallo specchio che per lui costituiscono i genitori, Benlaâla è alla ricerca dei tratti che lo accomunano al padre e ne è profondamente fiero.

L'ultima modalità di rivendicazione delle proprie origini è esemplificata da *Illégitimes* di Nesrine Slaoui, scrittrice franco-marocchina nata a Fès e arrivata in Francia all'età di 3 anni. Il suo testo si presenta come una sorta di riflessione sul suo percorso di *transfuge*. È la prima della famiglia ad andare all'università; sua madre lavora come donna delle pulizie mentre suo padre è muratore:

Quand j'ai essayé de comprendre mon parcours de «transfuge de classe», surtout ses névroses et ses blessures, j'ai refusé de me voir comme une traîtresse à mon milieu ouvrier d'origine. Je comprends pleinement que l'ascension sociale exige un abandon d'une partie de soi-même mais moi je ne peux pas renoncer à la fois à ma classe et à mon appartenance ethnique, la violence serait trop grande, j'ai besoin de ceux qui partagent mon histoire, et mon histoire est celle d'une femme issue de l'immigration qui a grandi en milieu semi-rural et en milieu populaire (Slaoui 2022, 43).²⁶

giocare la carta dell'autenticità, ma perché possa rileggermi, e riconoscersi. Come mia madre – che non smetto di interrogare –, anche lui legge a fatica, non avendo mai veramente imparato. È a loro e con loro che scrivo”.

²⁶ “Quando ho cercato di capire il mio percorso di ‘transfuga di classe’, soprattutto le sue nevrosi e le sue ferite, mi sono rifiutata di concepirmi come una traditrice del mio ambiente operaio d'origine. [...] non posso rinunciare sia alla mia classe che alla mia appartenenza etnica, la violenza sarebbe troppo grande; ho bisogno di coloro che condividono la mia storia, e la mia storia è quella di una donna immigrata, cresciuta in un contesto semirurale e popolare”.

L'autrice prende esplicitamente le distanze dall'atteggiamento tipico di rottura con il contesto di partenza, rivendicando invece la sua storia e i suoi valori. A differenza dei *transfuges de classe non intrangers*, in lei vi è il desiderio manifesto di portare con sé, nel suo percorso ascensionale, i suoi familiari, garanti di una parte fondamentale della sua identità:

En citant mes cours de sociologie, j'essayais de décrire à ma mère, avec mes propres mots, une cartographie de la société. Désespérée que les déchirures que sa fille était en train de vivre lui échappent, tout comme à ses camarades de Sciences Po. Derrière cet exposé documenté de chiffres, je l'appelais en fait au secours. Je voulais partager avec elle tout ce que je réalisais au quotidien: mes vêtements, ma façon de me tenir et mon débit de paroles en disaient trop sur moi. [...] Tout était trop épais, je voulais donc du raffinement: de la hauteur sous plafond, des objets d'art, je voulais embarquer les miens dans l'ascenseur social même s'il était étroit, mal éclairé et qu'il débouchait sur un escalier raide (82-83).²⁷

Conclusione

Questi tre esempi, di cui due più narrativi (*Un homme, ça ne pleure pas* di Guène e *Tu n'habiteras jamais Paris* di Benlaâla) e uno più (auto)riflessivo (*Illégitimes* di Slaoui), rappresentano tre diversi modi di rivendicare le proprie origini da parte

²⁷ “Citando le mie lezioni di sociologia, cercavo di descrivere a mia madre, con parole mie, una mappa della società. Affranta perché non riusciva a capire le lacerazioni che sua figlia stava vivendo – e nemmeno i miei compagni di Sciences Po ci riuscivano. Dietro quella presentazione piena di dati e cifre, in realtà stavo lanciando un grido d'aiuto. Volevo condividere con lei tutto ciò che realizzavo ogni giorno: i miei vestiti, il mio modo di stare seduta, il flusso di parole che non riuscivo a contenere dicevano troppo di me. [...] Tutto era troppo grezzo, e allora desideravo raffinatezza: soffitti alti, oggetti d'arte... volevo trascinare i miei nell'ascensore sociale, anche se era stretto, poco illuminato e che si apriva su una scala ripida da affrontare”.

dei *transfuges intrangers*. Così come Denise e Maximilien nel XIX secolo avevano scelto di non sacrificare parti di sé nei loro rispettivi percorsi ascensionali, allo stesso modo, questi casi di *transfuges intrangers* contemporanei rifiutano di abbandonare le loro origini. Il loro percorso di realizzazione personale non può implicare la perdita di valori che li caratterizzano pienamente. In termini ricœuriani, i *transfuges intrangers* rivendicano quindi la componente *ipse* dell'identità, ovvero la permanenza nel cambiamento, il rimanere fedeli a sé stessi nell'evolvere.

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**Art for the Earth:
we are opposite like that by Himali Singh Soin**

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1. *Dear Earth: Art and Hope in a Time of Crisis* (21 Jun – 3 Sep 2023, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London)

Among the various exhibitions burgeoned on the art scene in 2023 and addressing the issue of climate change, *Dear Earth* has brought together some of the best talents among artists whose main concerns are ecological violence, environmental protectionism, and climate-related social injustice. The exhibition showcased 15 male and female artists presenting as singles, duos, or collectives, and working across disciplines from a variety of ethnocultural perspectives. It comprised paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, tapestries, site-specific installations, videos, performances, and even an ecotherapy scheme which led to the creation of a public garden on the rooftop of Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall.¹

¹ The Grounded Ecotherapy scheme by gardener Paul Pulford combines care practice for people entrusted to social services to a transformative method of planting recuperating Native Americans farming practices and creating a garden for the whole community. If this is not a complete novelty, the use of indigenous technique to grow crops without water certainly is (Carrier 2023, 142).

However, what characterized and distinguished this show from similar, parallel exhibitions was its hopeful outlook and its relative immediacy of language. Rather than simply documenting ecological catastrophes and contributing to the sense of impotence of those who cannot make the crucial decisions (a feeling often described as “climate doomism”, which is the paralysing perception of one’s insignificance, and may be as detrimental as denial is), the creators of the exhibition selected (and in some cases commissioned) artworks promoting a practical ethics of care and reciprocity in our relationship with the physical environment as well as its plant, animal, and human inhabitants as the only possible way out of the sense of a sealed destiny.

In fact, as the exhibition chief curator Rachel Thomas states in the introduction to the show catalogue, there is a need for “stories of quiet but positive environmental change to inspire new perspectives” (Thomas 2023, 15); and she then quotes a passage from botanist and activist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass. Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* stressing the importance of cultivating hope: “We are deluged by information regarding our destruction of the world and hear almost nothing about how to nurture it. [...] Our natural inclination to do right by the world is stifled, breeding despair when it should be inspiring action” (Kimmerer 2020, 327). Judging by the huge success her essay collection has enjoyed worldwide in the last decade, the analysis seems to be correct, and the change in strategy may be able to intercept wider audiences as well as recuperate among disillusioned activists. Therefore, even though the Hayward Gallery show did include artists such as Richard Mosse or Imani Jacqueline Brown documenting and representing ecocidal practices and policies which widen deep-seated structural inequalities between the very few who can avoid their destructive impact and the most who are instead severely affected, the overall tone of the ensemble met the curators’ intentions and the visitors’ expectations.

Building on the pioneering work of activist and feminist artists such as Hungarian Agnes Denes (born 1931) and American Andrea Bowers (born 1965), the

exhibition traced an inter-generational – rather than a chronological – path, beginning with the present day and relatively recently established Otobong Nganka (Nigerian-born 1974) and then proceeding to emergent talents (or at least emergent on the international scene) such as Himali Singh Soin (born 1987) or Jenny Kendler (born 1980), so that three generations of (predominantly women) artists were included. The curators astutely contrasted early attempts to reflect on environmental issues (represented by Agnes Denes's exquisite 1970s map projections) with contemporary intersectional approaches. These new perspectives complicate the picture of environmental struggles into the wider scenario of an international demand for a greater economic, social, racial, gender, and also inter-generational justice – as the Fridays For Future movement has brought to the fore, and as Cornelia Parkers (born 1956) focuses on in her *The Future (Sixes and Sevens)*. The need for generational justice is further underlined by the inclusion, in the exhibition catalogue, of the transcription of a speech Greta Thunberg delivered at the Southbank Centre in 2022 for the global launch of her *Climate Book*.

Overall, and as pointed out by Rebecca Empson (2023), the exhibition seemed to be strongly committed to the ideals of prefigurative politics – a phrase designating non-centralized, non-hierarchical sociopolitical movements holding that the future is and should be made in day-to-day practice. Frequently referring to Gandhi's precept "Be the change you want to see in the world", they advocate for a profound transformation of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, what is represented in the show is not so much what already exists but what one would like to bring into existence – and in this sense it is "prefigurative": Agnes Denes's and Himali Singh Soin's manipulations of world maps, for example, resonate and allude to this need to rethink our ways of seeing and being in the world.

This ideological stance – based on an ideal of broad political participation achieved at a local level, and often influenced by anarcho-communist suggestions, spontaneism, experimentation in neo-utopian, transnational communities – expresses a precise idea of the nature and role of art that Rebecca Solnit enunciates in a clear, didactic way in one of the essays opening the catalogue. In her

view, art is very influential; it is requested to play a role in the present crisis, and this role must be just and useful. Art may be informative, but it must be mainly formative, denouncing power, escaping commercial logic, evading the individual in favour of the collective. Art may be a conduit for resistance to intersectionality, an injection of hope, a means to heal the world, and a factor of real progress (Solnit 2023). Himali Singh Soin, whose work I am now going to turn to, clearly shares this view of ethical art, as she stated in 2019: “Art is inherently political. I don’t know about making political art as such, because that tends to be bad. But I do think artists have to be good citizens” (Dawson 2019).

2. Himali Singh Soin: *we are opposite like that* (2018-19, Audio-Visual Installation, Two-Channel Looping Video Projected on a Screen over a Pool of Still Water, 12 min 54 sec)²

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors were confronted with an installation by Otobong Nkanga, whose works were given pride of place as the whole show took its lead from her idea of care “as a form of resistance” (Thomas 2023, 16). Yet, upon stepping into the hall, visitors were also engulfed by the music of Soin’s immersive environment, so when they were eventually able to see it in the darkest area of the exhibition ground floor, they had already been introduced to it. The music is an original score for a string quartet created by musician David Soin Tappeser (Soin’s partner in creative as well as personal life) which incorporates late Victorian composer Edward Elgar’s renown chorus for women’s voices and orchestra *The Snow* (1894, rev. 1903) as well as sounds from Soin’s video footage of Arctic locations (she had made an expedition to both poles in 2017). Her piece – which is part of an extended project by the same title comprising a number

² Excerpts from the video can be seen at <https://www.himalisinghsoin.com/we-are-opposite-like-that>. Soin’s work title is written in lower case, which is a statement per se. All images in this paper are courtesy of the artist.

of artifacts ranging from poetry to an artbook, prints, textile, sculpture, performances and moving image (2017-22) – is in fact conceived as a sort of reclamation of the Polar regions from the blankness which has been instrumental to far too many colonial enterprises – which to a scholar of literature as I am, and a sophisticated reader as Soin is (she graduated in English literature), is a clear reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The supposed emptiness and wilderness of the Poles were indeed used to justify the savage extractivism of the first half of the twentieth century, which was put on hold only by the establishment of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959 (see Fiorella 2020) and the Arctic Council in 1996. Yet, international appetites are far from being subdued, and, paradoxically, they are even enhanced by the transition to a post-fossil fuel society, as electrification requires an enormous amount of rare earth minerals.³

2.1. An Indian Woman in the Arctic

Soin has recovered a story and a lesson from this imperialistic practice visiting the forlorn site of Ny London, or New London – a deserted mining settlement in Blomstrandhalvøya, Svalbard, which was established in 1911 by the English Northern Exploration Company with the aim of excavating its substantial marble deposits. However, upon delivering their precious load in England, the entrepreneurs found that the stone blocks had crumbled due to evaporating permafrost – which proved to be their nemesis and put an end to the marble rush in 1920. Yet, as it was to be expected, the place was never restored to its original state, and in fact Ny London is today visited as a “cultural heritage site”, a treasure of industrial archaeology – even though not even the Norwegian Polar Institute website, on which I have drawn for these facts, can fail to notice that “the remains of the

³ For a comprehensive overview of the history of extractivism in the Arctic, see Sörlin et al. 2022. On the representation of extractivism in contemporary visual arts, see Fowkes & Fowkes 2022 (ch. 2 “Scars of extraction”).

facility would perhaps be regarded as scrap elsewhere, and may seem like disgraceful and disfiguring litter in the otherwise magnificent and pristine natural environment” (Norwegian Polar Institute 2015).



Image 1: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

In Soin’s film, their alien presence insults the fragile surface of the island shore, but her focus is not on the temporary, albeit destructive, imprints of human raiders: only a tiny fraction of the film shows shots of the remains – which is allusive of the relativity of human time if compared to the “deep time” of the Earth, that is, geological, as opposed to historical, time.⁴ She has conceived of Polar ice as an

⁴ Soin worked on the same theme in a parallel work (*Too Much and Not Enough*, 2022), a sculpture representing the miniscule Deception Island, located in South Shetlands, Antarctica. By reproducing the island features in marble, she makes a similar point on Nature’s capacity to resist human extractivism. The island, turned into a slaughtering site of seals and whales for over a century, was eventually abandoned due to a volcanic eruption in 1967, which to environmentalists cannot but appear as Nature’s sickness at ruinous human presence.

archive of stories risking extinction, and she has conjured up a sort of *genius loci* acted by herself: a brown, female body in the Arctic, a striking decolonial statement responding to nearly two centuries of masculine narratives of Polar expeditions.



Image 2: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

The tiny figure – which may well be a revenant from the colonial unconscious – materializes out of a block of ice and begins to walk on the shore, wrapped in an emergency blanket which sadly reminds us of migrants approaching Mediterranean shores, fleeing hunger and violence – a reference reinforced by the Indian or Sikh turban she is wearing; but her boots and leggings are also reminiscent of an astronaut or an alien, suggesting the idea of a future including the past as well as the present, in what Soin calls South Asian futurism, or “Subcontinentment”.⁵

⁵ From her website: “Subcontinentment is a manifesto that stems from my fieldwork in the polar circles, where I was confronted with my alienness as a brown body in a landscape

2.2. Beyond the Binary

A voiceover, poetic commentary spoken by the artist – who refers to herself primarily as a *poet*, and this is a significant point –⁶ tells her loosely-connected narrative in five scenes of different length. The performer is to be understood as the embodiment of Polar landscape, “an elder” delivering an invigorating message (“the ice fortified her”) to those who are willing to listen; a message in the third, feminine person (“She’d take the third person over you”),⁷ and a testament against the antipodal semiotics of the poles, which is an attempt to overcome the Cartesian dualism of the I-you, male-female, North-South alternatives. These binary oppositions have structured Western civilization and epistemology since the antiquity, when polarity par excellence was conceived, and Antarctica was to all effects invented to provide a complementary counterpart to the Arctic. Binary logic has eventually sustained a system of power and exploitation that has persisted for centuries, legitimized by both religion and science, and made invincible by technological development. This is the central theme of Soin’s work, as foregrounded in the title and often declared in various interviews and on her website: “In fact, I don’t think binaries exist at all [...] And if we think about any binary, we realize that they are actually not that far away from each other” (Wilch 2022, E11).

The first scene of the video visually translates this idea of polarity as a misconception by means of a two-channel sequence regularly interrupted by a single-channel shot. The former shows at a quick pace a series of photos of the Svalbard

commonly used for outer-space simulation experiments. As part of a series of fictional ice archives, south asian futurism, renamed subcontinentment, anti-chronicles the geopoetic links between the poles and the subcontinent” (Singh Soin n.d.). The artwork can be listened to at https://soundcloud.com/st_age/subcontinentment-2020-duration-1022english.

⁶ See for example her introduction of herself in the video presenting her *The Third Pole/El Tercer Polo* exhibition at Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza (Stir World 2023).

⁷ All quotes are sourced from the video transcript courteously provided by the artist.

coast and a vessel – bare rock, bare ground sparse with blocks of ice, remains of mammals and birds strewn along the seashore, two portholes, cordage. Most pictures are inverted or rotated, which is a way to undermine the up and down opposition, or an allusion to the difficulties in navigating the North Sea even when provided with adequate instruments. It can also be a hint to the fact that Polar history is now glitching in the technological sublime – an idea emphasised by the 5 seconds, single-channel shot of a mountain wall pixelating and reflecting on the water which punctuates the two-channel sequence. This wall of bare rock – to all effects immersed in a pool of still water – is allusive of glacial melting, and repetition helps stress the point that we are losing mountains of ice. At the Hayward Gallery recurrence was further duplicated by the reflection of the video in the real pool of water underneath.



Image 3: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

The sense of loss is moreover emphasised by the third person narrative. As Benveniste famously put it, the third person is in fact the *non-person*, the one excluded from direct communication – the one who is not there, who is not

present.⁸ As if she were reminiscent of that construal of the third person, Soin's narrative is in the *past* tense as well as in the third person, so as to describe the ineffable, the unattainable, what is beyond the human, post-human, or more-than-human – according to expressions that have become common currency in the art of the Anthropocene.⁹

Soin's voice from the past tells a greater story than human history but it is capable of some significant insight on that smaller scale, focusing on the transmutation of Polar landscape from the Medieval *locus horridus* into the Romantic *locus almus* – a conversion epitomised by Burke's codification of the sublime. Among the Romantics, Coleridge, the Shelleys and Byron thoroughly explored the imaginative potentials of icescapes as *coincidentia oppositorum* (Wilson 2003, 34), incidentally playing a significant role in the birth of glaciology in the 19th century (Clarke 1987, 4). In particular, Coleridge's *Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni* praising the majesty of Mount Blanc, constitutes a touchstone in the history of mountain theology, which has its roots in the antiquity; and Soin's prose

⁸ “In the first two persons, there are both a person involved and a discourse concerning that person. ‘I’ designates the one who speaks and at the same time implies an utterance about ‘I’; in saying ‘I’, I cannot not be speaking of [others but] myself. In the second person, ‘you’ is necessarily designated by ‘I’ and cannot be thought of outside a situation set up by an ‘I’; and at the same time, ‘I’ states something as the predicate of ‘you’. But in the third person a predicate is really stated, only it is outside ‘I-you’; this form is thus an exception to the relationship by which ‘I’ and ‘you’ are specified. Consequently, the legitimacy of this form as a ‘person’ is to be questioned. [...] The consequence must be formulated clearly: the ‘third person’ is not a ‘person’; it is really the verbal form whose function is to express the non-person” (Benveniste 1971, 197-198). Working on the idea of the third as a sort of middle voice able to overcome the binary logic, Soin has developed another scientific suggestion, namely the idea of the Himalayas (of which she bears the name) as a third pole: an “equatorial” pole which seems to be a contradiction in terms, and yet it makes the exotic presence of an equatorial woman on the ice possible and legitimate.

⁹ See Davis & Turpin (2015, 6-8) for a useful survey of these designations.

poem is certainly reminiscent of Coleridge in her almost exact quotation of his “suspension of disbelief” in scene 3 (“She’d take misdirection, indecision, intuition. Suspension over disbelief”). In this which is the climax scene of the whole work – a climax emphasised by a *crescendo* of the narrative voice – the artist is opposing or integrating an intuitive epistemology to technological knowledge: stuck and lost in the Arctic, when chronometers and compasses fell short and the sky was clouded, “sailors were down to their kidneys. Because kidneys contain these fluids [such that] you’re able to tell how you are placed in accordance with the seas. You really have to *become sea* in order to know your way” (Wilch 2022, E15). Soin learnt about these and other sailing practices and wisdom in 2017 as part of a residency program in the international territory of Svalbard. There, she and her fellow participants were taught how to navigate a traditionally rigged vessel in the Arctic sea, how to read charts and maps (which resurface regularly in her entire work), how to plot a course, and stay on it.

2.3. The Alien Invader

The residency in Svalbard was fruitful in other respects, as on that occasion Soin met a science historian, Alexis Rider, who was working on the Polar sublime and scientific dissemination in the Victorian age. The second and the fourth scene of *we are opposite like that* are the result of the collaboration between the artist and the scientist, in an ideal composition of fields of knowledge usually perceived as quite distant one from the other. These scenes focus on the ideological construction of the ice as a potential invader in Victorian popular press and culture: they re-create the narrative of the alien invading British landscape by manipulating visual scientific archive material such as the *Erratic Blocks or Boulders Resting on Glaciated Rocks in Foreground, Coolin Mountains, Skye*¹⁰ or artworks as

¹⁰ Picture 4 illustrating *The Age of Ice* (1874, 652).

Gustave Doré's *The New Zealander*.¹¹ In fact, among the many anxieties afflicting the Victorian public just at the time when their country was ruling the greater part of the world – a malaise known as Victorian pessimism –,¹² the paradoxical fear of being invaded made not only alien human races but also alien animals or plants or even inorganic matter (such as the boulder) unwelcome:

With space destabilised and time porous, the illusion of ice as a looming cosmic monster sends shudders across the British Empire.

Interglacial beings worry over the annihilation of their perceived centrality in the world. The potent imaginary of a sublime terra incognita is superimposed on the landscapes of home (sc. 4, transcript).

As the many citations and interpolations from archive sources of all sorts – fictional and non-fictional, popular as well as academical – illustrate, a significant portion of late Victorian society was paranoid about the possibility of an impending glaciation, which was to be the culmination of the Little Ice Age in Europe – that is, a prolonged span of time from the 14th to the 19th centuries when average temperatures in the Northern hemisphere dropped by 2° C (see Blom 2019). Scientists such as astronomer Robert S. Ball – referenced and briefly quoted in Soin's film – theorized a causal connection between the Earth's orbit and the coming ice age. The conclusion to his influential *The Cause of an Ice Age* reads as follows:

Slumbering in the Arctic regions lies at this moment the agent of the most dire of calamities. That agent has once, and more than once, been aroused into activity.

¹¹ See Doré and Jerrold 1970 (188-189). *The New Zealander* is the final plate of the series; it is a sort of *vanitas* reworking the trope of the colonial visiting the ruins of London after its fall. In Soin's work it is referred to as *The Southern Savage*.

¹² On the rise of pessimism in late Victorian age and its connections with the spread of Darwinism, see Lane 2011.

Time after time it has happened that the planets have by their influence on the earth's orbit brought down on our temperate regions the devastations of the great ice-sheet. From its normal home at the Poles the great glaciation has spread southward; a sheet of ice and snow hundreds or thousands of feet thick has crept from the highlands of Norway and Sweden, has invaded Central Europe as far as Saxony, while the greater part of Great Britain was also submerged by an icy covering (Ball 1891, 170).

This perceived climate crisis was adequately and repeatedly ridiculed in *Punch*: Soin beautifully animates a cartoon depicting polar bears breaking through the crowd of London's weekenders.¹³

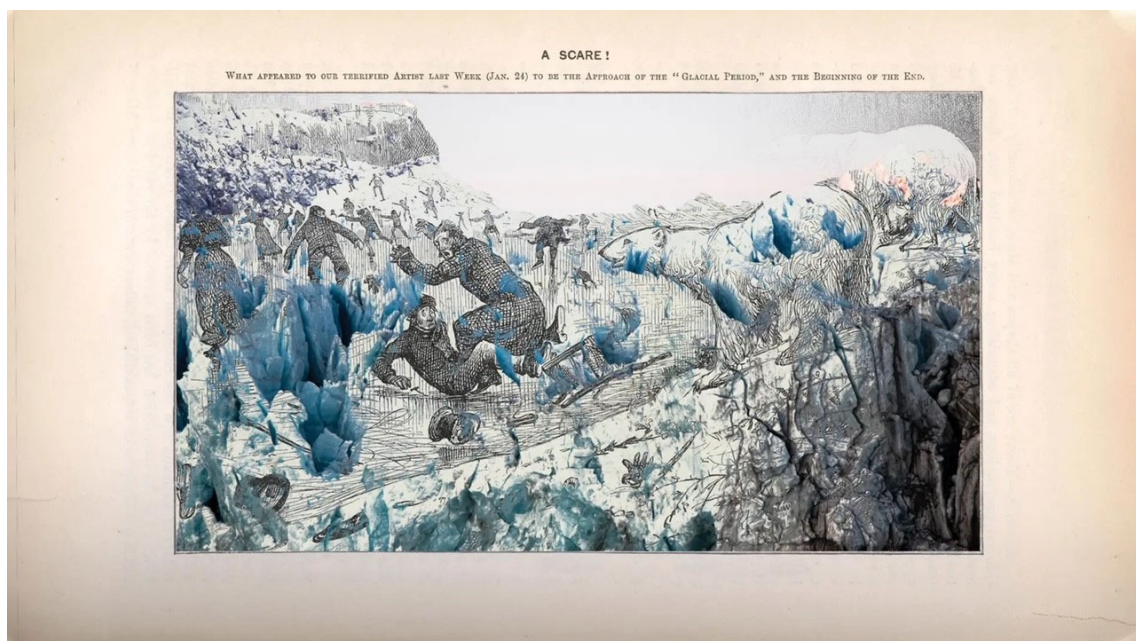


Image 4: Himali Singh Soin, *we are opposite like that*

¹³ In the magazine, the picture is accompanied by a hilarious *Glacial Diary*: "February 21. Palaeolithic pterodactyl shooting commences. Gas extinct. Westminster Abbey lighted by fireworks. Sell my last damaged hot bottle to a distinguished personage for a magic lantern (lamp trimmed). Polar bears, without being admitted after seven, appear in the pit at the Haymarket Theatre, and are addressed courteously by the Management" (*All Froze Out* 1881, 46).

The press and popular fiction exploited the sensational aspects of stories of Polar explorations, touching upon contended issues such as the authority of scientific discourse and its legitimisation processes. If that context may be missed by the unaware viewer of the film, one cannot fail to see the close parallel between Victorian obsessions for climate change and our present condition and concerns; and from our perspective of melting glaciers and rising temperatures, one may also grasp the sad irony of history, and realise that the real alien was not the erratic block on British soil but the British miners in Svalbard – a presence not less alien than that of an Indian woman.

2.4. Repurposing Found Materials

The way Soin is capable to make art and meaning by using found materials can further be appreciated by looking not only at what she has taken in but also at what she has left out. Edward Elgar's *The Snow* is a case in point, as the melody has been reworked but the lyrics have been dropped. The chorus text – which was written by Elgar's wife, the poetess and writer Caroline Alice Roberts – is a religious meditation on the importance of preserving one's integrity and hope in spite of the many hardships and challenges one may face in life.¹⁴ As already mentioned, the song was meant for women's voices, which is a clear illustration of the moralising function ascribed to the feminine, with women expected to

¹⁴ The full text of the lyrics follows: "O snow, which sinks so light, / Brown earth is hid from sight / O soul, be thou as white as snow, / O snow, which falls so slow, / Dear earth quite warm below; / O heart, so keep thy glow/Beneath the snow. // O snow, in thy soft grave / Sad flow'rs the winter brave; / O heart, so soothe and save, as does the snow. / The snow must melt, must go, / Fast, fast as water flow. / Not thus, my soul, O sow / Thy gifts to fade like snow. // O snow, thou'rt white no more, / Thy sparkling too, is o'er; / O soul, be as before / Was bright the snow. / Then as the snow all pure, / O heart be, but endure; / Through all the years full sure, / Not as the snow" (Roberts 1879, 9-10).

maintain the moral fabric of Victorian society. If the didactic message seems to be transparent at the beginning (“O soul, be thou as white as snow”), the imagery used is in fact deeply ambivalent, with the snow conveying both the ideas of tenderness and sterility (“O snow, in thy soft grave”), purity and inconstancy (“O snow, thou’rt white no more”); it is a shelter as well as a tomb, fantastic and spectral at the same time – a veritable semeiotic plenum, as I have noted elsewhere (Fiorella 2007), and again, a coincidence of opposites. The contradictory exhortation of the closing stanza, where the listener is invited to both be and *not* to be like the snow – which is pure but short-lived – confirms and emphasizes this ambivalence.

One may speculate on the reasons for choosing this particular piece, and there may be an autobiographical resonance. Caroline Alice Roberts was born in India like Soin; Soin and Tappeser are an artistic duo as well as a married couple, just like the Elgars. One may also note that the exhibition title words “Dear Earth” are actually mentioned in Roberts’s lyrics. Yet, I believe the most obvious reason is that to the wider public this famous chorus is reminiscent of melting (snow-melting, and therefore ice-melting) which is materialised in front of their eyes by means of the pool of still water underlying the screen: an ominous preview of our planet’s likely future, incidentally the opposite of what Victorians feared.

The pool remains always visible in the foreground, even when the film ends and the screen vanishes into a few seconds of darkness – which is symbolic of final annihilation. Nonetheless, Soin strikes a perfect balance between giving warning and offering hope, creating an exquisite as well as thought-provoking work of art. She strikes a remarkable balance also between a sort of neo-Romantic inspiration and a harmonious, symmetrical, even classical formal solution, with its five-scene score and circular structure. In scene 5, in fact, the camera returns to the performer walking on the shore, the two-channel sequence, the mountain reflection on the water, effectively closing where it began. And it is in this final scene that the voiceover commentary becomes strongly reminiscent of another celebrated nautical poem, Coleridge’s *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, which Soin’s work seems to be perfectly attuned with. I am now going to focus on the lyrical

and rhetorical aspects of the installation script – which I have been referring to passingly so far – as a whole.

2.5. A Prose Poem

When inquired about how she navigates her artistic approach across different media, Soin replied: “I always say that I start with the written word, and then it transforms – into immersive environments, into moving image, into performance, into being able to give those words, essentially, a sort of life of their own” (Wilch 2022, E10). In *we are opposite like that*, that written word has resulted in a combination of verse and prose, alternating in the five scenes of the transcript. Scenes 1, 2, and 3 are cast in free verse, mostly stanzas, whereas Scenes 2 and 4 are structured as a loosely organised narrative, partly original, partly sourced from archival materials. Poetry and prose perform different functions, and the difference is further emphasised by the fact that only the poetry sections are actually voiced by the artist, whereas the prose is given as running captions. Moreover, poetry and prose are accompanied by distinct musical scores. The prose is more bound to the necessity of *explaining* Victorian paranoia about an impending ice age; accordingly, the composer clearly references Edgar, yet modifies the original and emphasizes the shift between Victorian and contemporary times. The poetry is instead aimed at *conjuring images* that are not necessarily logically or coherently connected; likewise, the score for these sections is non-melodic, with the pizzicati frequently in sync with the editing.¹⁵ The lyrical images are subjective and may be only partially intelligible – a “translucency” which Soin elevates to a compositional principle and is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s “luminous halo”. Indeed, in what she termed “a mytho-poetic manifesto” of her work, she defines translucency as “both the right to illegibility and the desire for interpretation”

¹⁵ I would like to thank my friend and fellow academic Roberto Calabretto, professor of Music History, for his insightful contribution.

(Singh Soin 2023) – in other words, the reclamation of an in-betweenness resisting the conventional quest for meaning.

The tension between clarity and opacity translates into the undecidability of form, in the constant oscillation between poetry and prose. Scene 1, for example, opens as poetry: despite the unmetrical setup of thought, the passage retains the visual architecture of verse as well as other cohesive features that are typically lyrical:

A clear inverted mountain floating above the horizon.
For historians the present had lost itself over time.
There were no shadows
Echoes of no surface.
Nobody left to be beautiful.
The ghost of what-was-to-come singed.

The first line focuses on image over narrative by omitting the main verb and effectively suspending time, which is probably the ultimate goal of poetry – to transcend the prosaic time of the world. The idea of a suspension is then reinforced in the second line by the unexpected mention of a “present” that has been “lost” (where the past is by definition the portion of human time which goes irretrievably lost). “Lost” then reconnects with “left” in the fifth line; and in general, the suggestion of some momentous loss is given by the succession of words expressing absence (“shadows”, “echoes”, “ghost”) and by the repetition of negative syntagms (“no shadows”, “no surface”, “nobody”). The ghostliness of the scene is then in tune with the idea of extinction, of a landscape “haunted by past ways of life” as well as “by imagined futures” of rubble, as sketched in the introduction of an influential anthology on landscapes in the Anthropocene, that Soin mentions in the interview given to Wilch (2022, E12).¹⁶

¹⁶ The reference is to Tsing et al. 2017, G2.

Scene 2 leans heavily towards prose; yet, a closer inspection reveals a meticulously crafted prose that is rich in poetic features:

A foundling, an immense and immovable boulder, lies in a field of unfamiliar rocks. Native to Spitsbergen, this wanderer has found itself adrift in Britain.

What terrible force could have moved this monolith? Wind, water, eruption, erosion: none of these natural cycles explain the foundlings scattered across British land. [...]

Rumbling and grinding in a deep and frigid past, thick sheets of ice had dragged material, scratched surfaces, and pulverised rock.

Here the *staccato* paragraphs, all of similar length, imitate the visual layout of regular stanzas; the repetition of “foundling”, “ice”, “rock”, tightens what is initially given as distinct units, as a sort of invisible *enjambment*; several alliterations (“what”, “wind”, “water”; “immense”, “immovable”) and alliterating consonant clusters (such as “grinding”, “frigid”, “dragged”, “scratched”) contribute to the overall effect of reading or listening to a poem. Finally, the vocabulary chosen to refer to the subject of this scene (the “boulder” displaced by ice) is not as objective as we would expect in the description of a natural phenomenon. The “monolith” – supposedly coarse inanimate matter – is humanized; it has been given poetic dignity in an exquisitely human kind of activity, which is artistic practice. It is a “foundling”, which finds itself in an “unfamiliar” environment, eliciting the readers’ sympathy. It is also a “wanderer”, who has lost its way and is “adrift” – a solitude any reader can relate to. Yet, the main point here is that the boulder is not used to project human feelings or symbolize universal states of the human condition; rather, it is presented as a fellow natural being from another time, having a longer-than-human story deserving attention and respect.

The proposition for a new foundation of human relationships with the natural environment is further protracted and intensified in Scene 3, where the female subject seems to have a sexual intercourse with ice (“the ice moved through her for a few hours”).¹⁷ The image of a physical union with inorganic matter is reinforced by a *crescendo* in both pitch and speed of the narrative voice, culminating in what may be interpreted as an orgasm in the last two lines, with “the opacity leak[ing] out of her blood and her bones” and “the heat” being “dispersed”.¹⁸

Scene 4 follows as a prose pause focusing on Victorians’ confrontational, imperialistic approach to the Arctic, construed as an inaccessible, “looming cosmic monster” claiming victims among the boldest pioneers of coeval polar expeditions; in this perspective, their distance from the North Pole proves to be spiritual as well as physical – and arguably also very similar to current neo-imperialistic schemes over the Poles.

Scene 5 returns to the Arctic visitor, whose ecstatic but necessarily short-lived fusion with the ice has given way to the awareness of the ineffable distance between human and geological time (the word “distance” is repeated at least four times in the space of a few lines: “the great distance,” “our distance,” “distances,” “long-distance”). This realization is expressed through the image of “her broken chronometer,” signifying the inadequacy of human standards of measurement and/or the transformative impact of the polar experience: her timepiece has ceased functioning, “love letters” are “congealed,” and something is, or has been, “petrified,” as the subsequent text reveals:

¹⁷ The suggestion is confirmed by the dedication of the piece, in the credits following the video, to “Devra Freeland, who literally made love to ice”, an artist who explored climate change and geology from an ecofeminist perspective and who was killed still in her twenties in a bicycle accident.

¹⁸ The physical union with natural elements, such as animal, plants, ground, stones is a common motif in contemporary ecological and ecofeminist art.

Dead reckoning

Adjusting for parallax

Distances were deceptive due to atmospheric clarity and the absence of trees.

The gloop of algae, and nets and straws and long-distance love letters congealed the ocean into a jungle.

Gelatinous gossip.

Quartz, astral, petrified.

Phosphorescent flares.

“Dead reckoning” is a navigational term, indicating a method of establishing one’s current location by using a previously determined position when astronomical observations are not possible and there are no identifiable landmarks. In other words, it is a kind of guesswork, subject to error, and it has become a synonymic phrase for a doomsday, or a settlement of accounts. The sense of bewilderment and impending disaster (a slow and silent demise) recalls Coleridge’s *Mariner* and his haunted ship sailing between the Tropics and the South Pole, and then the Tropics again, caught between extreme cold and intolerable heat. Soin captures this in-betweenness through the image of the ocean congealed into a jungle, which fuses the characteristic landscapes of the poles and the equator in an ideal *coincidentia oppositorum* dismantling binarism. A further allusion to *The Rhyme* may be seen in the “phosphorescent flares” – the emission of light without appreciable heat – which resonates with “the shining white”, “the elfish light [which] fell off in hoary flakes” of the celebrated water-snakes passage (lines 275-276), when the eerie beauty of the slimy creatures prompts the Mariner into the blessing which will be able to break the spell. If the reference to *The Rhyme* in Soin’s text is not obvious, the resonances are striking, as Coleridge’s ballad can be seen as an allegory of the present state of humans’ relationship with Nature – stuck, as we are, in a languishing world because of a curse that we have brought upon ourselves. Yet, Coleridge’s poem, just like Soin’s, is also a tale of potential redemption and reconciliation, as it is evidenced by the last four lines of her poem:

She went inside the boat.
Anchored never too close to shore.
She was thawing. Dripping afterlife.
Still, a thin haze persisted. She was translucent.

The visitor prepares to leave the icepack, boarding the vessel which has never touched the coast – a sign of the divergence between technology and wilderness. She is warming up and dripping melting ice; yet, the transformative nature of her euphoric connection with the Arctic is reflected in her shining expression.

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SCHEDE, RECENSIONI, SEGNALAZIONI

Heng Gilbert Barone, *Aufbruch: Heimat aus der Perspektive deutschsprachiger interkultureller Gegenwartsliteratur*, Wallstein, Göttingen 2024

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Il denso studio di Heng Gilbert Barone mette a confronto due concetti che, per etimologia, ricezione e utilizzo, danno luogo a un ossimoro, ovvero “interculturalità” e *Heimat*. In effetti, questo lemma tedesco di difficile, se non impossibile, traduzione in un’altra lingua a causa della complessa stratificazione semantica che lo contraddistingue, si è prestato nel tempo a un utilizzo determinato da criteri di omogeneità, di monoculturalismo e da una buona dose di ermetismo. Criteri che, a loro volta, hanno agevolato meccanismi di esclusione, delimitazione, regolamentazione, binarismo. I fenomeni della globalizzazione e delle migrazioni di massa si annoverano paradossalmente tra le cause dello sviluppo dei suddetti criteri, come immediata risposta al bisogno di ordine, di sicurezza e di punti di riferimento. Da questo quadro emerge l’esigenza di ripensare in profondità i concetti stessi di *Heimat* e di nazione, come ha fatto esemplarmente Aleida Assmann nel noto saggio *Die Wiedererfindung der Nation. Warum wir sie fürchten und warum wir sie brauchen* (2020, La re-invenzione della nazione. Perché ne abbiamo timore e perché ne abbiamo bisogno), dal quale anche Barone ha attinto per le sue analisi.

Davide Di Maio, Recensione di Heng Gilbert Barone, *Aufbruch: Heimat aus der Perspektive deutschsprachiger interkultureller Gegenwartsliteratur*, Wallstein, Göttingen 2024, NuBE, 6 (2025), pp. 343-348.

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A fornire le coordinate dell'impostazione di questo studio è il termine *Aufbruch* presente nel titolo, che indica tanto il "mettersi in marcia" quanto il "forzare" qualcosa di chiuso. Lo studioso prende in questo senso le mosse dal poeta e saggista andaluso-tedesco José F. A. Oliver che in una intervista del 2015, ricordando le raccolte di poesie *Auf-Bruch* (1997, Rottura), *HEIMATT und andere FOSSILE TRÄUME* (1989, Heimatt e altri sogni fossili) e *Heimatt. Frühe Gedichte* (2015, Heimatt. Poesie giovanili), spiegava di come avesse avvertito la necessità di "forzare" (*aufbrechen*) e di "dare scacco matto" a un certo uso del concetto di *Heimat* allora diffuso in Germania, ma del tutto distante dalla sua personale visione di patria (19). Partendo da questa suggestione Barone cerca di dimostrare come quei testi letterari contraddistinti da tematiche o approcci interculturali possano fungere da strumenti di "rottura", di "risveglio", in un duplice senso: "da un lato, i protagonisti partono per crearsi un'esistenza più umana in un altro Paese; dall'altro, i testi rompono le rappresentazioni tradizionali e consolidate di patria, basati sulle idee di monoculturalismo, omogeneità ed ermetismo, e che di conseguenza hanno contribuito alla costituzione e al mantenimento di modelli di pensiero binari ed emarginanti" (20). In questa prospettiva, l'autore non si limita a decostruire il concetto di *Heimat* analizzandone i presupposti teorici e i romanzi che affrontano il monoculturalismo e l'omogeneità in relazione a tale concetto, ma si interroga anche – ed è proprio questo l'aspetto più stimolante e innovativo del suo lavoro – su quali nuove immagini di *Heimat* vengano elaborate, consapevolmente o meno, nella più recente letteratura interculturale di lingua tedesca. A tal fine l'autore ha articolato lo studio in due sezioni. La prima sezione è dedicata ai fondamenti teorici del concetto di *Heimat*, che vengono analizzati da una prospettiva specifica ispirata ai *cultural studies*, in particolare allo *spatial turn*. Tale approccio si rifà, da un lato, al datato ma ancora valido studio di Ina-Maria Greverus, *Der territoriale Mensch. Ein literaturanthropologischer Versuch zum Heimatphänomen* (1972, L'individuo territoriale. Un tentativo antropologico-letterario sul fenomeno della *Heimat*), e, dall'altro, al fortunato volume collettaneo *Heimat. Konturen und Konjunkturen eines umstrittenen Konzepts*, a cura di G. Gebhard, O. Geisler e S.

Schröter (2007, *Heimat. Contorni e congiunture di un concetto controverso*). Al centro di questa prospettiva si pone il principio della multidimensionalità. In che termini? L'autore osserva come molte delle attuali teorizzazioni del concetto di *Heimat*, così come numerose suggestioni culturali e simboliche a esso associate nel contesto tedesco, continuino ad attingere a immagini e cristallizzazioni risalenti all'epoca romantica – presenti in particolare nelle opere di Novalis, Eichendorff, Heine e Hölderlin. In questa prospettiva, Barone dedica ampio spazio all'analisi delle declinazioni spaziali, temporali e linguistiche di *Heimat*, estendendo l'indagine anche a figure oggi marginalizzate della cosiddetta *Heimatkunstbewegung* o *Heimatkunst*, come Wilhelm von Polenz, Gustav Frenssen, Hermann Löns e Ludwig Ganghofer, laddove il discorso assume connotazioni chiaramente monoculturali, omogenee e divisive. In questo senso lo studioso riprende un presupposto ampiamente consolidato dagli studi specialistici – con un grande debito nei confronti della filosofia heideggeriana – per cui l'attestazione del concetto di *Heimat* funziona in primo luogo per il tramite di categorie ausiliari, come la tradizione, la famiglia, il paesaggio ecc. Tra queste, Barone sceglie di focalizzarsi in particolare su tre categorie fondamentali e ausiliari, ovvero: lo spazio, il tempo e la lingua.

Particolare menzione spetta al capitolo dedicato al concetto di "ibridità" del teorico Homi K. Bhabha, autore dell'ormai canonico *Location of Culture* (1994) che chiude la prima parte teorica dello studio. Sulla falsa riga del concetto di nazione ibrida di Bhabha, Barone intende enucleare la teoria di una *Heimat* ibrida, presente nelle opere di scrittrici e scrittori che decostruiscono le idee tradizionali e consolidate di *Heimat* da una posizione marginale. Qui risiede, dal punto di vista dell'autore, l'enorme potenzialità sovversiva di rottura e di rinnovamento della letteratura interculturale contemporanea. Attraverso una lettura serrata in particolare di due saggi di Bhabha contenuti in *Location of Culture*, *Signs taken for wonders* e *DissemiNation*, l'autore si concentra sulla teorizzazione del passaggio da un'accezione simbolica del concetto di ibridità a quella segnica, per dimostrare come questo valore segnico possa contribuire ad una messa a fuoco del concetto

di *Heimat* nella letteratura di lingua tedesca contemporanea. Nello specifico, Barone evidenzia la riflessione di Bhabha sul concetto di *Heim*, ovvero sulla particolare dinamica per cui chi ha lasciato il proprio Paese d'origine tende a colmare la mancanza di un determinato senso di *Heim* cercando di riattivare un concetto di *Heimat* alternativo nel nuovo contesto. Tale concetto alternativo di *Heimat* viene, cioè, messo simbolicamente in scena per riempire il vuoto provocato dal confronto con il discorso nazionale dominante. Ma questa rievocazione genera a sua volta un senso di inquietudine, un sentimento di estraneità, un sentimento “unheimlich” (124): poiché si tratta di una ripetizione, la *Heimat* così intesa non conserva l'autenticità dell'originale, ma introduce inevitabilmente una differenza. Differenza che a sua volta risulta disturbante rispetto al discorso dominante del Paese di adozione: somiglia all'originale, ma resta comunque alterata, e per questo non può integrarsi pienamente. È attorno a questo punto contatto che Barone introduce il termine *Aufbruch* secondo l'accezione che ha voluto dargli. Seguendo le riflessioni di Bhabha, lo studioso cerca infatti di dimostrare come la “rottura” non corrisponda necessariamente alla negazione di un discorso dominante. Quanto piuttosto a uno spostamento interno di significato che trasforma un simbolo fisso in un segno polisemico (127-128). Il concetto di ibridità elaborato da Bhabha rappresenta un approccio teorico alternativo alla prospettiva letterario-estetica di Oliver sulla disgregazione del concetto di *Heimat*. Il passaggio da un simbolo fisso a un segno polivalente, dinamico e aperto – elemento chiave nell'interpretazione bhabiana – si manifesta chiaramente nel modo in cui la letteratura interculturale contemporanea in lingua tedesca affronta e decostruisce una concezione di *Heimat* spesso caratterizzata da tratti conservatori radicati nella società (361).

La seconda parte dello studio propone un'analisi ravvicinata di quattro romanzi, considerati dall'autore come emblematici per la riflessione sullo *Aufbruch* nel contesto della letteratura interculturale contemporanea di lingua tedesca. L'attenzione si concentra in particolare sulla tematica della *Heimat* dalla prospettiva della perdita, della riscoperta e della decostruzione. Nell'ordine, si tratta di: *Meine*

weißen Nächte (2024, Le mie notti bianche) della scrittrice di origini russe Lena Gorelik, di *Tauben fliegen auf* (2010, Le colombe si alzano in volo, tradotto in italiano nel 2013 da Voland con il titolo *Come l'aria*) della scrittrice serbo-svizzera Melinda Nadj Abonji, di *Mein andalusisches Schwarzwalddorf* (2007, Il mio villaggio andaluso nella Foresta nera) e poesie scelte del succitato Oliver e, infine, di *Herkunft* (2019, Origine, tradotto in italiano nel 2021 da Keller con il titolo *Origini*) dello scrittore bosniaco-tedesco Saša Stanišić.

L'analisi dei quattro romanzi, strutturata attorno alle tre suddette dimensioni, mostra come la letteratura tedesca contemporanea sia capace di trasformare e dinamizzare un concetto tradizionalmente connotato da staticità e chiusura, senza tuttavia eliminarlo. Per quanto riguarda la dimensione spaziale, è ad esempio emblematica – già discretamente nota anche al pubblico italiano – la scena della pompa di benzina che, nel romanzo *Herkunft* di Stanišić, si trasforma in una *Heimat* provvisoria per tutti coloro che, insieme al protagonista, vivono l'esperienza dello sradicamento e della costruzione di una nuova esistenza lontano dal luogo d'origine. Barone interpreta questo particolare luogo come un esempio di "third space" secondo la teoria di Bhabha, poiché esso si configura come uno spazio-focolare liminale, in cui "qui si incontrano individui di diversa provenienza con l'intento di raccontarsi a vicenda la propria vita" (318). Diverso è il discorso per il romanzo di Abonji dal quale Barone estrapola la dimensione temporale, ovvero quella del ricordo – un tema complesso che l'autore legge con l'ausilio degli studi di Aleida Assmann. Si tratta di ricostruzioni di luoghi di memoria, e dunque di *Heimat*, che in realtà intersecano diverse tradizioni culturali, dato che il luogo nel quale avviene il ricordo è diverso da quello oggetto del ricordo. In questo caso si ha evidentemente a che fare con un atto selettivo e legato al momento di volta in volta presente (363). Nel caso della lingua, poi, ovvero della terza dimensione, Barone dimostra come nel caso del romanzo di Gorelik o nell'opera di Oliver il senso di *Heimat* non sia più necessariamente ancorato alla lingua madre o a un determinato dialetto, né a una specifica area culturale. Al contrario, qualsiasi lingua – o anche una combinazione di lingue – può assumere il ruolo di *Heimat*, a

condizione che il processo di apprendimento linguistico sia stato portato a termine con successo.

Particolarmente significativo è, in conclusione, l'accento posto da questo studio sulle dinamiche performative (e dunque soggettive) associate al concetto di *Heimat*, così come emergono dalle analisi dei quattro romanzi esaminati. Barone dimostra infatti come nella letteratura interculturale contemporanea di lingua tedesca, le rappresentazioni della *Heimat* non vengano intese come qualcosa di innato o naturale — uno spazio o una lingua in cui i protagonisti nascono e che determina automaticamente il corso della loro vita — né come un'entità statica e immutabile legata al passato. Al contrario, la *Heimat* emerge come una costruzione dinamica, plasmata attivamente o appunto performativamente: i personaggi si auto-localizzano, si riappropriano degli spazi, rielaborano i ricordi, apprendono nuove lingue o stringono legami affettivi. In questo senso, non è la *Heimat* a formare i personaggi, ma sono i personaggi stessi a darle forma (363).

MATERIALI

A cura di
Catia De Marco e Ada Milani

“Dottori – Ninfosi”

Estratti da *Aby*

Marie de Quatrebarbes

(traduzione e cura di Laura Giuliberti)

Il simbolo apparteneva quindi per lui a una sfera intermedia fra la coscienza e la reazione primitiva, e portava in sé tanto la possibilità della regressione che quella della conoscenza più alta: esso è uno Zwischenraum, un “intervallo”, una specie di terra di nessuno al centro dell’umano.

(Giorgio Agamben, La potenza del pensiero, Neri Pozza 2025, p.133)

Potremmo racchiudere questo libro nella storia di un nome, Aby.

Quello di un uomo che ha rinunciato ai benefici della primogenitura. Lo stesso che è uscito dall’alfa-omega del linguaggio rappresentativo, per fare del mondo dei segni un universo in continua espansione, senza fuori e senza fine, A, B, ...

Quando Aby Warburg entra nella clinica psichiatrica di Bellevue, la sua diagnosi oscilla tra uno stato maniaco-depressivo e la demenza precoce. Due patologie che designano pressappoco la stessa cosa, la schizofrenia, e che si riferiscono a uno dei più importanti intellettuali tedeschi del XX secolo.

Nel 1921 Aby Warburg ha già rinunciato a un’immensa eredità, fondato uno dei più prestigiosi istituti di ricerca del mondo, rivoluzionato gli studi di storia dell’arte, attraversato l’Atlantico e conosciuto gli indiani Hopi. Nel 1921 si trova alle soglie

Marie de Quatrebarbes, “Dottori – Ninfosi”. Estratti da *Aby*, traduzione e cura di Laura Giuliberti, NuBE, 6 (2025), pp. 349-359.

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di una crisi psicotica e, sismografo del suo tempo, anticipa l'orrore che vivrà l'umanità con l'ascesa del Nazismo.

Tra il 1921 e il 1924 Aby ha paura che suo fratello venga torturato dagli antisemiti, che i suoi figli vengano fatti a pezzi e che il loro sangue nascosto negli alimenti, che i fiori piangano sotto i suoi passi.

Si è concluso il conflitto che ha diviso l'Europa, ma la guerra non è finita per Aby. Fine delle conferenze, dei viaggi di ricerca sul campo, delle energie che ne guidavano il pensiero di intellettuale di prestigio; Aby è adesso attraversato da un altro tipo di forze, tanto devastanti quanto rivelatrici delle più profonde correnti che animano il mondo di quell'inizio secolo.

Alla fine della sua degenza, per dimostrare la propria guarigione, Aby scrive Il rituale del serpente in cui descrive un rito diffuso tra gli indiani Pueblo del Nord America per scongiurare le catastrofi. Dei serpenti, che per quel popolo simboleggiano il fulmine e con esso le forze indomabili della natura, vengono introdotti vivi nelle bocche dei danzatori e liberati in seguito. Affrontare le paure significa integrarne il simbolo. Nel libro di Marie de Quatrebarbes la malattia non è il serpente infernale che minaccia di perderci, ma il sintomo (il simbolo?) di altre potenze, delle intensità che ci attraversano; il serpente che, calato nella bocca, viene poi gettato a terra per destinarlo all'unica domesticazione possibile: riconsegnarlo al mondo e leggerne le tracce che lascerà sul terreno.

Questo romanzo è una liberazione dalla dicotomia in cui è racchiuso il pensiero: raziocinante e sano o delirante e patologico. A partire dal "caso Warburg" ci mostra ciò che la letteratura può fare della malattia: come sta stretta una vita in una cartella clinica, come lo sguardo si stringe quando al centro c'è la sofferenza, com'è stretto il letto (kliné) su cui ci chiniamo. Ci mostra ciò che si trova intorno all'allettato. Non ne sonda la psiche, non misura il suo disfacimento, ma mettendo insieme frammenti (il cibo che si estrae da un veleno, il pavimento instabile e alterno che s'offre al posarsi d'un passo, il muggito che incurva una notte altrimenti ugualmente tetra e buia) tesse un mondo. È della possibilità di questa finzione che Aby rende conto.

Abbiamo detto romanzo, ma si potrebbe dire saggio poetico o poesia clinica, definizioni che non soddisfano né da un lato né dall'altro, perciò lasciamo romanzo, nella cui ombra ci basti pascerci di finzione.

Se la forma è l'adattamento del corpo alle intensità inscritte nella materia – per quel che ne è della vita come della letteratura, non vi è materiale inerte – la scrittura di Marie de Quatrebarbes è la forma che prende il testo quando si affaccia “al bordo della falesia”, lo stesso a cui Warburg sente essere arrivato Nietzsche prima di lui. Quando si viene “fulminati dai segnali che emergono dal fondo di quell'oblio.” Quando i pensieri sono fatti “di tensioni, contatti elettrici, pressioni atmosferiche, opposizioni estreme.” Si lascia “incantare dal vuoto.”

Marie de Quatrebarbes è poeta ed editrice, dal 2023 dirige insieme a Maël Guesdon le edizioni José Corti. Nel 2022 ha curato un'antologia dedicata alle giovani poetesse francesi contemporanee (Madame tout le monde, Le Corridor bleu). Dal 2012 pubblica regolarmente libri di poesia, il più recente nel 2024 (Les Éléments, P.O.L.). Aby, uscito nel 2022, è il suo primo romanzo.

Si ringraziano l'autrice e la casa editrice P.O.L per il permesso di pubblicare gli estratti in traduzione.

DOTTORI

Kreuzlingen, 1921.

Nel 1921 Aby ha paura dei metalli, degli oggetti di metallo, dell'elettricità, dell'avvelenamento, delle polveri sciolte nella vasca da bagno. Ha paura che il suo cibo sia insozzato dal sangue mestruale, dallo sperma o dal moccolo, ha paura dei pogrom, dell'ipertrofia della prostata, di essere coinvolto in un errore giudiziario, dell'ipertensione, del diabete, di una stufa che fuma, di una capra che abortisce, di una cisterna guasta, della lettera di credito, che rubino le sue lettere o i suoi bagagli, che torturino la sua famiglia o che la uccidano. E più di ogni altra cosa, Aby ha paura di essere imprigionato, assassinato, ha paura che gli Ebrei vengano sterminati, che la sua opera venga mandata al macero e che del sangue sia aggiunto alle sue medicine. A Bellevue tratta le sue cose con la massima cura, teme che gli rubino i vestiti e gli stivali, o che glieli insozzino, ha paura che gli scambino i lacci, che il dottor Embden assassini la sua famiglia, che il dottor Otto Binswanger II, fratello di Ludwig, lo avveleni e che la moglie di costui sia una spia. Un giorno, afferma che il tè servito in albergo è sangue, il giorno dopo si preoccupa della scomparsa del nido di merli del Parkhaus, poi è il guardiano che ha ucciso le sue farfalle, il parrucchiere gli ha tagliato la testa, le palle del bowling sono le teste dei suoi famigliari e, di nuovo, gli hanno avvelenato il tè. Quando esce dal Parkhaus, sente delle canzoni antisemite inneggiate alle sue spalle per prendersi gioco di lui. Nel campo da tennis ci sono dei criminali, le ciliegie sono degli uomini, il suo passaporto è stato falsificato, il tappeto grida ogni volta che lo calpestano. Ha paura che l'acqua del lago non sia davvero umida e che i ragazzini ne escano completamente secchi, o che Ludwig Binswanger spedisca in treno della carne umana in casse, ha sentito dei colpi di arma da fuoco, delle esplosioni, oppure M. Goldschmidt nasconde sua moglie e i suoi figli, la sua farfallina non ha niente da mangiare e la zanzara che ha punto l'infermiera è stata male. Ma non è tutto,

nella buca del parco, seppelliscono uomini vivi, Aby ha paura di una lettera raccomandata con un timbro nero, del tino dell'uva in cortile, che la sua voce venga imitata, suo fratello ucciso o messo in una cella di isolamento. Crede che lo abbiano ipnotizzato, che le sue figlie siano finite tra le mani di alcuni abitanti del Senegal, che sua moglie e i suoi figli siano nella sua valigia, che i suoi fratelli siano rinchiusi nella stanza di un altro paziente, che l'infermiera abbia ucciso sua moglie in bagno e che N., un paziente, abbia ucciso i suoi figli.

Dopo l'assassinio di Walter Rathenau, l'allora presidente della compagnia generale dell'elettricità e ministro degli Affari esteri, Aby ha paura che suo fratello venga rapito e assassinato. In effetti Walter Rathenau e Max erano amici e quest'ultimo sarà presto l'obbiettivo dello stesso gruppo di estrema destra. Il delirio di Aby si mescola ai fatti, li illumina con un lampo di proiettore. Aby ha paura, paura che le lettere siano false, paura del telegramma inviato per rassicurarlo sulla salute del fratello, paura che il cavolo verza sia il suo cervello, che le patate siano il cervello dei suoi figli e che le bistecche siano la carne dei suoi famigliari, ha paura che il latte non sia di mucca, che il pane della colazione sia suo figlio e che Binswanger tenga la sua famiglia nascosta in cantina o in una cella di isolamento. Tre bambini sono rinchiusi nella sala da biliardo, Aby li ha massacrati e divorati, i loro cadaveri sono nel letto dell'infermiera, la sua lingua è sempre gonfia.

NINFOSI

Kreuzlingen, 1921.

Quando Frida entra in camera trova Aby immerso nei suoi pensieri. È andata a prenderlo per portarlo da Hertha Binswanger che lo aspetta per l'ora del tè. Aby si prepara con una cura quasi religiosa, volteggia come una ballerina davanti allo specchio, controlla più volte la piega del vestito. Arrivato nel parco, cammina in silenzio al fianco di Frida, avanza con prudenza, di cinque foglie in cinque foglie. Il sole gli scalda la punta del capo. Il canto degli uccelli sembra filtrato da una lente di ingrandimento. Intorno a loro i fiori sono sfrontati. I papaveri crescono nell'anarchia. Con la testa in su, gli asfodeli inselvaticiti si pavoneggiano mentre i gladioli dondolano in cima agli steli come se approvassero qualcosa in silenzio. Quando gli passa accanto, Aby alza il cappello e li saluta con rispetto.

Ai margini del parco, il paesaggio si espande in terrazzamenti costruiti sulle vestigia di un'antica via romana. Per seguirne il tracciato bisogna tagliare per i campi e continuare fino alla chiusa dove a volte, d'estate, fanno il bagno i bambini. Poi i prati intonano in coro il canto dei fiori, del vento. I meli si inchinano sotto l'acqua della pioggia. La vegetazione è ancora scombussolata dal temporale mattutino. Sembra che il giorno si sia appena levato e che si stia scrollando per sbarazzarsi delle tracce di un brutto sogno. E, ancora, un ciuffo d'erba è uguale a un ciuffo d'erba. Delle parole identiche si assomigliano. Poco lontano, la foresta inverte i rapporti di prossimità. Aby osserva il tessuto opaco, lanuginoso, gli piacerebbe affondarvi, farsi strada fra i tronchi come fra le pagine di un grande libro. Da sempre sogna di un libro nello spazio, il codice della sua vita, capace di prolungarne la storia personale al di là dei propri limiti. Conserva vivo dentro di lui questo desiderio, una fuga nella notte, un richiamo insistente e che non vuole finire.

Mentre percorre il viale in discesa Aby osserva una mandria di vacche spumare in emulsione leggera sul fianco della collina, immergersi sotto una linea di alberi

di altezza ridotta, affondare nelle fustaie e sottrarsi alla vista prima di riapparire dall'altro lato, dove le vacche prendono definizione, guidate dal vaccaro e da un cane con le zampe corte che va a zigzag tra i mantelli, guaisce, mordicchia i garretti, strofina la testa sulla pancia saponosa dei vitelli. Le vacche col muso rosa spugna muggiscono un suono tenue filtrato che si imprime nell'aria come una lingua di bruma. A ogni passo gli zoccoli sollevano la polvere che va a depositarsi sottopelo, mescolandosi al profumo di cardì, di acanti, eucalipti e cordilinee spoglie. La prateria è quasi oleosa, si vedono affiorarvi delle ancore posate sui cordaggi ai piedi delle querce. Il terreno bagnato dalla sera prima è scivoloso, perché la pioggia è andata a gonfiare il ruscello in cui ora, chiaro e vitreo, un po' di cielo s'intorbida. Bianco come la neve o le dita di un fantasma, il sole fruga l'erba. I suoi raggi tastano i ciottoli erbosi che costellano il bordo del ruscello saturo d'acqua piovana e li vetrificano.

Passeggiando dentro di sé, in quella foresta in cui a volte si perde, Aby prende una direzione che è l'unico a conoscere e che esiste solo per lui. Accosta ripetutamente gli imbarcaderi della memoria. L'aria è rotonda, appena turbata dal volo delle anatre e, un po' più in là sulla collina, dal sonno dei vitelli. Sembra che ci sia una rete a maglie straordinariamente fini gettata sulla realtà. Ogni macchia, posta alla superficie del cerchio di visione, si accorda alla precedente. Tutto è umidità. Se Aby stringe la terra tra le dita questa espurga tutto il suo peso d'acqua mista ad alghe e a pesci d'acqua dolce, finché non resta più niente della riva, a parte due o tre granelli di polvere o qualcosa di completamente secco. Nel cuore della variazione, l'acqua ammette una costanza feroce. Scorre senza interrompersi e dissolve tutto ciò che il paesaggio contiene di solidità. E il ruscello non esce mai da se stesso se non al fine di ritrovarsi. Straborda, e ogni cosa dentro di lui straborda di questa vita satura, suppurante e traboccante, che si riconfigura incessantemente e inventa nuove traiettorie per contenere ciò che incessantemente lo satura. Presi in una sorta di trance, i giunchi scarmigliati che costellano la riva si tuffano e rituffano nel piccolo fossato fangoso pieno di acqua vibrante e uvulare in cui tutto vive e si agita di vita mobile ostinata. L'acqua modifica il suo

corso improvvisato, improvvisa nuove curve e la riva sfugge per riemergere al punto d'arrivo. Aby si sente trascinato all'infanzia. Come la mandria che si origina nella sua apparizione, le bolle di sapone scoppiano e liberano sulla riva un profumo di libellula e di riva. Nella valle intessuta d'erba verde e minuta, gli insetti saettano sotto gli alberi schierati in eserciti di rami efflorescenti, e sotto il cielo laccato di una mattinata passata a contemplare il mondo nel momento preciso della sua messa al mondo, Aby si tiene in equilibrio su una pietra di zucchero imbevuta d'acqua. Osserva la sagoma di un animale chino, a meno che non si tratti del suo stesso riflesso che si staglia sull'erba. Si è seduto vicino a una piccola cascata che le libellule accarezzano con le ali bollose e la pioggia non cade più nell'acqua ma si posa direttamente in superficie come i ragni d'acqua. La pioggia non cade più nell'acqua per esserci già tante volte caduta. Le sponde del ruscello sono abitate da fauni, Aby ne intravede i corpi coperti di rovi, indistinguibili dall'acqua che bordeggia, fa delle increspature tra le rive rallentate dove quelli si mettono in posa. Lui li insegue in ogni anfratto roccioso, ogni piega di ramo in cui, furtivamente, una ninfa prende forma, spuntata per caso dal fondo dell'acqua.

Non è raro che Hertha Binswanger riceva i pazienti di suo marito per il tè. Questi inviti fanno parte del processo terapeutico messo a punto da Ludwig, oltre a dare ad Hertha l'occasione di intrattenere conversazioni a volte piacevoli con delle personalità fuori dal comune. Proprio a questo titolo, Aby è un suo visitatore assiduo. A lui piace la compagnia di quella donna dal volto che sembra sempre sul punto di sorridere. Prima di sposarsi Hertha ha lavorato come infermiera nella clinica psichiatrica universitaria di Iena quando Otto Binswanger, lo zio di Ludwig, ne era direttore. Giunto al pensionamento, due anni prima, Otto si è trasferito a Landschlacht, vicinissimo a Kreuzlingen, e da lì fornisce un utile appoggio alla clinica. La presenza di Otto a Bellevue è la prova, per Aby, di essere vittima di un complotto fomentato da quello che chiama il "clan Binswanger", composto, oltre che da Ludwig, dal fratello, dal cugino e dallo zio. Aby detesta Otto, di lui detesta il fatto di non essere riuscito a salvare Nietzsche quando fu internato a Iena nel

1889. Aby pensa spesso ai pianti del filosofo, al cavallo martire, alle cartoline firmate "Dioniso il Crocifisso". Trema all'idea che la sua crisi sia una replica di quella di Nietzsche, come se la storia potesse ripetersi e il suo destino chiudersi su quello del filosofo. Sin dall'adolescenza è un fervido lettore di Nietzsche. Quando era giovane, sua sorella Olga gli ricopiava interi paragrafi di *Aurora*. Si ricorda delle lettere scambiate con Mary, prima del loro matrimonio, a proposito di *Considerazioni inattuali*. Come lui, Nietzsche si è sporto sul bordo di un abisso e si è fatto stregare dal vuoto. È stato folgorato dai segnali che ha ricevuto dal fondo del baratro. Il suo pensiero è fatto da tensioni, da contatti elettrici, pressioni atmosferiche, opposizioni estreme. Aby ne trae ispirazione per la propria concezione delle polarità, la quale associa le oscillazioni periodiche della storia alle fluttuazioni psichiche dello schizofrenico. Ciclicamente la ninfa estatica danza sulle alture dell'antico fiume della depressione. Prolifera sulla sua tomba prima che lui la inghiottisca e inneschi così un nuovo ciclo.

A ogni visita Aby sfoglia i volumi presenti nella libreria dei Binswanger. Li manipola con dolcezza, come animali tra le mani del tassidermista. Quando lo vede, la piccola Hilde Binswanger, di circa dieci anni, gli salta tra le braccia. Poi si sentono delle risate, delle corse, Aby è trascinato nella camera dei bambini che vogliono fargli vedere i giochi. Lui improvvisa per loro delle storie che li tengono occupati fino a tardo pomeriggio. Quando quel giorno arriva seguito a ruota da Frida, Hertha lo sta aspettando in giardino. È seduta sotto la pergola, su una poltroncina di vimini le cui forme disegnano sull'erba delicate triangolazioni. Il suo volto è nascosto da un cappello ad ampia tesa che le protegge la pelle dai raggi del sole. Indossa un vestito di seta gialla con un motivo a minuscoli fiori. Il suo ultimogenito, Johannes, le dorme tra le braccia. Aby si avvicina al neonato svegliato dal movimento della madre. Prende la piccola mano nella sua, la agita con delicatezza mormorando delle parole che fanno ridere il bambino.

Il traliccio della pergola lascia filtrare stralci di un cielo violaceo, simili ai fiori di glicine che tempestando il giardino in primavera. In poche settimane la vegetazione si è infittita, le piante sono cresciute come Johannes, che ora apre dei

grandi occhi brumosi sul mondo. Il tè scorre nelle tazze. Aby porta la sua alle labbra, soffiando leggermente. Nell'attimo preciso in cui il tè gli entra in bocca, sente una sostanza molle, insipida, appiccicarsi al palato. La trattiene un attimo, come una questione indiscreta che si teme fuoriesca troppo in fretta dalla soglia delle labbra, alla fine la sputa fuori, per scoprire sul fondo della tazza una falena crassa e pelosa. Piccola come un'unghia, d'un bianco lattiginoso che tende al giallo. Riconosce subito la femmina del bombice anche nota come lymantria dispar, tipica delle querce e dei carpini. Aby non apre bocca, per paura di vedere le parole trasformarsi a loro volta in insetti, ma non può staccare lo sguardo dalla forma insensata che sbatte le ali in fondo alla tazza. Pochi attimi prima una vita che non era la sua gli riempiva la bocca. Ora si dibatte per salvarsi la vita. L'ora del tè è propizia agli spettri, agli elisir, alle farfalle generate nelle praterie di asfodeli e ai messaggeri alati. Dicono che chi mangia la crisalide di una farfalla acceda alla vita eterna. Aby immerge il cucchiaino nella tazza e mescola, prima lentamente poi sempre più veloce, finché si forma un vortice da cui la falena si lascia portare senza opporre resistenza.

Silenzio d'atomi. Frastuono d'atomi. È giorno oppure è notte. Il corpo gira e si rigira su se stesso. Aby è nudo, steso sulle lenzuola. Sente il suo cuore battere a distanza. Più passano i minuti, più sente crescere dentro di sé una specie di iato. Come se qualcosa mancasse o si prendesse gioco di lui. L'oscurità lo schiaccia con tutte le sue forze. Come il fazzoletto del mago che fa sparire e riapparire gli oggetti, la caraffa, la spugna, la brocca, i vestiti buttati ai piedi del letto cambiano posizione. Aby prova a stabilizzarli, si raccoglie completamente nell'atto di guardare. Il suo occhio è un arco con cui scocca le frecce che attraversano le diverse superfici della stanza come se si trattasse di una scenografia teatrale. Il giorno sta per sorgere ma l'idea del risveglio resta priva di esistenza. I simboli danzano ovunque, ovunque copulano demoni e fate come se dovessero approfittare della notte fino all'ultimo, lasciarsi portare da un turbine di possibilità che solo il mattino sa portare alla luce.

Aby si alza sudato e annaspa. La sua mano affonda nel centro molle del letto mentre, con l'altra, afferra la scatola di fiammiferi posata vicino alla lampada, solleva il globo e accende lo stoppino. In un attimo la stanza riacquista i suoi contorni. Le masse confuse tornano a galla. I demoni colti sul fatto si acquattano e simulano una sorta di stasi, gli danno la schiena curvandola come gatti che fingono l'indifferenza, ma le orecchie li tradiscono. Aby respira con più calma. Il cuore riacquista una pulsazione regolare e questa regolarità lo tranquillizza. Il reale sembra reggere, ma lui non si fida. Gradualmente le farfalle notturne si avvicinano e affluiscono verso la lampada. Sembra che le attiri come un canto. Desiderano così tanto ciò che le brucia. Aby osserva il corpo di ballo lepidottero muoversi scollato dalla propria ombra. Tra tutti gli spettacoli del mondo, questo è il suo preferito. Quando le falene si avventano su di lui, ha l'impressione che sia il suo cuore che cercano di capire. Parla loro a bassa voce come parla a se stesso, le chiama le sue "piccole anime", per lui sono molto di più che esseri viventi. Sono delle ninfe, delle fate che lo consolano e lo confortano. Il globo della lampada è decorato con delle foglie d'edera. Una falena un po' più audace delle altre vi si è appena posata sopra. Aby tende la mano e sente sotto le dita una specie di neve. Dei fiocchi cadono sulle lenzuola. La mano trema sempre dal desiderio di toccare, trema nell'abitare lo spazio in cui si intreccia il suo desiderio. Ci sono, nell'intermezzo del sonno, delle linee che si incurvano, spinte dal vento che gioca tra i capelli della ninfa e incolla al suo corpo le pieghe del vestito. Da migliaia di anni una giovane donna avanza sotto un sole rovente. I suoi passi sollevano sempre le stesse braci. Aby osserva una piccola lucertola verde e oro sguisciarle tra i piedi prima di sparire tra due assi del pavimento. Sa che mai e poi mai raggiungerà la falena. Mai potrà avvicinare la giovane donna in volo. Si accosta all'orecchio della farfalla-grammofono e vi depone il suo segreto.

Tratto da Marie de Quatrebarbes, *Aby*, P.O.L, Paris, 2022, pp. 62-64, 103-112.

“Temo i segreti del tempo”
Estratti da *Sogar Papageien überleben uns*

Olga Martynova

(traduzione e cura di Elisa Destro)

Olga Martynova è un'autrice plurilingue russo-tedesca. È nata nel 1962 in Siberia (Dudinka) ed è cresciuta a Leningrado, dove si è laureata in lingua e letteratura russa e dove è stata cofondatrice, negli anni Ottanta, del gruppo di poesia Kamera chranenija (Камера хранения). Dopo un periodo a Berlino nel 1990, nel 1991 si è trasferita a Francoforte sul Meno insieme al marito Oleg Juriew (1959-2018), scrittore e poeta russo, e al loro figlio Daniel.

Dagli anni Novanta scrive testi di vario genere, principalmente lirica in russo e, a partire dagli anni Duemila, romanzi e saggi in tedesco. Oltre a proseguire la sua attività lirica nella propria lingua nativa, Martynova traduce in tedesco alcune sue raccolte di poesie: Brief an die Zypressen (Aachen, Rimbaud, 2001, Lettera ai cipressi), In der Zugluft Europas (Heidelberg, Wunderhorn, 2009, Nella corrente d'aria dell'Europa) e Von Tschwirik und Tschwirka (Graz, Droschl, 2012, Di Tschwirik e Tschwirka). Nel 2010 pubblica il suo romanzo d'esordio Sogar Papageien überleben uns (Graz/Wien, Droschl, 2010, Anche i pappagalli ci sopravvivono), di cui qualche anno più tardi uscirà una seconda parte, Mörikes Schlüsselbein (Graz, Droschl, 2013, La clavicola di Mörike), seguita infine da un terzo romanzo, Der Engelherd (Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer, 2016, Il focolare degli angeli). In anni più recenti Martynova si dedica alla produzione saggistica con la raccolta Über

Olga Martynova, “Temo i segreti del tempo”. Estratti da *Sogar Papageien überleben uns*, traduzione e cura di Elisa Destro, NuBE, 6 (2025), pp. 361-374.

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die Dummheit der Stunde (*Frankfurt a. M.*, S. Fischer, 2018, Sulla stupidità del momento) e con Gespräch über die Trauer (*Frankfurt a. M.*, S. Fischer, 2023, Dialogo sul lutto), un'intima riflessione sul tema del lutto, a cui l'autrice lavora dalla morte del marito (2018), con riferimenti ad altri autori noti che si sono interrogati sull'argomento, da Roland Barthes a Joan Didion, da Elias Canetti a Emmanuel Lévinas. Dalla morte del marito, Martynova abbandona il russo anche per la produzione lirica, come testimonia la sua ultima raccolta di poesie apparsa in tedesco, Such nach dem Namen des Windes (*Frankfurt a. M.*, S. Fischer, 2024, Cerca il nome del vento).

Martynova è membro del PEN International, della Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung (Accademia Tedesca di Lingua e Poesia) e della Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur (Accademia delle Scienze e della Letteratura) di Magonza. Ha vinto numerosi e importanti riconoscimenti, quali il premio Adelbert von Chamisso nel 2011, il prestigioso premio Ingeborg Bachmann nel 2012 nonché il Berliner Literaturpreis nel 2015. Nello stesso anno è stata ospite presso la Freie Universität di Berlino, dove ha ottenuto la cattedra Heiner Müller di poetica in lingua tedesca.

La narrativa di Martynova si distingue per il suo linguaggio raffinato e carico di lirismo. Nelle sue opere, l'autrice riflette in maniera sapiente sui 'segreti del tempo', come risulta evidente dal suo romanzo d'esordio, di cui si presentano qui alcuni estratti in traduzione. In quest'opera, Martynova ricostruisce in retrospettiva quasi un secolo di storia europea attraverso i ricordi familiari della sua protagonista, la letterata russa Marina, in tour in Germania per una serie di conferenze, dove ritrova Andreas, il suo fidanzato tedesco di gioventù. Il romanzo presenta una struttura articolata ed estremamente frammentaria dal punto di vista della narrazione: esso è costituito infatti da 88 brevi capitoli, ognuno dei quali è preceduto da un titolo e da una lista di anni che vanno dal V secolo a. C. alla contemporaneità (2006). Gli anni rilevanti per ogni singolo capitolo sono riportati in grassetto e rivelano spesso una forte relazione tra loro, laddove più piani temporali si incrociano attraverso ricordi e flashback. Ne risulta una "simultaneità del non

simultaneo”, una presenza del passato nel presente: il testo insiste infatti sulla presenza, mai passata, della Storia, in particolare sui ricordi legati al periodo della Seconda guerra mondiale che, anche a distanza di decenni, tormenta coloro che l’hanno vissuta così come i loro discendenti. I passaggi selezionati si concentrano proprio su questo aspetto, in particolare sull’assedio di Leningrado che rappresenta un momento storico chiave per l’intera narrazione.

Si ringraziano l’autrice e la casa editrice Droschl per il permesso di pubblicare i passaggi in traduzione.

ANCHE I PAPPAGALLI CI SOPRAVVIVONO

Decorazioni natalizie per la notte di Capodanno

V secolo a. C. • 1453 • 1529 • 1714 • 1717 • 1787 • 1871 • 1917-1933-1934-1937-1941-1942-1943-1944-1945 • 1955 • 1973 • 1976 • 1982 • **1986 • 1987** • 1988 • 1989 • 1990 • 1991 • 1992 • 1995 • 2001 • 2002 • 2005 • **2006**

[...]

Cos'altro ricordo di quell'inverno? Non è rimasto molto della sostanza del tempo che conoscevamo. È divenuta liquida. È divenuta rada. Si vedeva che era quasi scomparsa. Il mondo tondo e chiuso in cui ero nata è volato via come un palloncino.

Cosa c'era ad esempio in questo palloncino e cosa con esso è volato via – di me:

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L'orrore dei miei genitori per il fatto che presentassi loro un tedesco come mio fidanzato. In particolare mio padre, che all'epoca aveva già settant'anni e per età avrebbe potuto essere mio nonno, non lo vedeva di buon occhio. Mio nonno morì di tisi nel 1937, più tardi mia nonna venne a sapere che l'ordine di cattura era già stato emesso e che solo la morte lo aveva salvato dal lager e molto probabilmente da una morte più straziante. Lui, un generale con medaglie al valore della Prima guerra mondiale, aveva deciso di servire il nuovo potere, di non andare in esilio. All'inizio degli anni '30, la Repubblica di Weimar inviò i suoi ufficiali nella

Russia bolscevica. Qui potevano svolgere le esercitazioni tecnico-militari che erano state vietate all'Impero tedesco dopo la Prima guerra mondiale. Gli storici dicono che queste esercitazioni dovevano servire all'addestramento tecnico-militare. I due Paesi erano nemici, ma entrambi erano anche sconfitti di guerra, questo forse assicurava una certa solidarietà tra i militari. Comunque sia. Il tempo passò. Non tornarono più. Mio nonno morì. I vecchi nemici tornarono ad essere nemici. Mia nonna, anch'essa una divinità egizia, il falco Horus, di corporatura più robusta di nonna Thot, con un naso non altrettanto lungo ma più arcuato, doveva vivere ancora per decenni tra gli sterminatori di divinità egizie, doveva fingere di non esserlo, doveva crescere i suoi figli in modo che nessuno riconoscesse che appartenevano a questa specie di uccelli. Scoppiò la guerra. I giovani con la testa d'uccello (erano le poche eccezioni, la maggior parte aveva deposto le proprie teste d'uccello e le aveva sostituite con teste normali) pensavano che combattere per il governo comunista fosse spregevole. Ma le stesse teste mantenevano principi rigidi: un uomo deve difendere la propria patria. Non avevano comunque scelta. Nonna Horus non voleva rendere tutto questo ancora più difficile per mio padre. Inizialmente rimase in silenzio a fianco del marito, che aveva optato per il nuovo potere. Poi non mostrò ai figli quanto detestasse tutto ciò che era sovietico. In questo senso, fu una moglie da manuale, altruista e paziente. Decenni dopo, negli anni '60, mio padre partecipò a un ricevimento come giornalista. L'ambasciatore svedese aveva bevuto troppa vodka. Era forse la migliore vodka sovietica, chiamata "Posolskaja" (ambasciatore). Lo svedese ubriaco disse in modo poco diplomatico che i suoi colleghi russi erano bravi ragazzi, ma un po' troppo plebei, mentre lui vantava cinquecento anni di nobiltà. Mio padre (anche lui si era concesso la vodka dell'ambasciatore) rispose: "Come nobile, sono più vecchio di Lei di qualche secolo, ma non ne vado fiero. Sono fiero di appartenere al partito comunista dal 1944". Nonna Horus rimase in silenzio anche su questo. Le opinioni di suo figlio non erano le sue, ma le custodiva. Aveva educato mio padre a essere consapevole solo della seconda parte del dilemma: lui andò in guerra con l'orgogliosa sensazione di fare il suo dovere. Con quale

sentimento andò in guerra il figlio dell'ufficiale tedesco che aveva manifestato a mio nonno il suo profondo disprezzo per i nazionalsocialisti? Il fratello minore di mio padre fu deportato dai tedeschi insieme agli ebrei, il suo delicato viso da falco fu riconosciuto come non slavo, cioè ebreo. Nessuno ebbe più sue notizie. Questa fu l'ultima cosa che mia nonna scrisse a mio padre prima che le sue lettere smettessero di raggiungerlo. I compagni di reggimento di mio padre dicevano che era fortunato a non avere più parenti, in questo modo la morte non appariva così terribile. Solo alla fine della guerra l'ufficio postale da campo fu in grado di consegnargli nuovamente le lettere di sua madre. Nel febbraio 1945 lei scrisse: "Oggi ho sognato Pietro I. Ha detto che la guerra sarebbe finita il primo maggio". Di recente ho trovato le lettere di mio padre, i triangoli della posta da campo, in un libro, in "Guerra e pace". Scriveva dalla Prussia orientale: *I tedeschi non hanno cultura, non ho mai visto un libro in nessuna casa, solo album con disegni di Hitler*. Andrjuscha diceva anche di nonna Horus che era una *Pique Dame*. Mia nonna Horus e la nonna di Antonia, Thot, erano amiche. Per questo sono stata accettata in questa società, in cui Antonia regnava in silenzio, anche se avevo almeno dieci anni in meno di tutti gli altri.

Quando annunciai ai miei genitori la visita di Andrjuscha rimasero scioccati. O addirittura sconvolti. Mi chiedo se mio padre avrebbe reagito allo stesso modo se Andrjuscha fosse stato un tedesco dell'Est?

Cosa c'era ad esempio in questo palloncino e cosa con esso è volato via – di Andreas:

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Quando Andreas disse a suo padre che, oltre a germanistica, avrebbe studiato anche slavistica e sarebbe andato in Russia, suo padre tacque. Tacque per una settimana. Il suo braccio destro era rimasto davanti alla Leningrado assediata. Poi disse (anche se nessuno gli aveva chiesto il permesso) che approvava. (*Va', ma riprenditi il mio braccio* – questo naturalmente non lo disse).

Pellicce di gatto

V secolo a. C. • 1453 • 1529 • 1714 • 1717 • 1787 • 1871 • 1917-1933-1934-1937-1941-**1942-1943-1944-1945** • 1955 • 1973 • 1976 • 1982 • **1986 • 1987** • 1988 • 1989 • 1990 • 1991 • 1992 • 1995 • 2001 • 2002 • 2005 • **2006**

[...]

Quando la nonna di Antonia, una divinità egizia, Thot dalla testa di ibis, era ancora in vita, nel corridoio scarsamente illuminato c'era una cassapanca di legno scuro e pieno di buchi, misteriosa come tutto il resto dell'appartamento. Ora serviva (scoperta) come fioriera per un secchio di bambù, il regalo di Antonia per l'ultimo compleanno di Pawel.

“Cosa hai fatto con le pellicce di gatto?”, chiesi.

“Lo sapevi?”, chiese Antonia. “Tarme, dopo la morte della nonna sono state divorate quasi subito dalle tarme. Strano, vero? Le avrei buttate via comunque, naturalmente. La pelle d'orso di Pawel, vedi, è stata risparmiata. E abbiamo messo in naftalina tutto quello che c'era nell'armadio”.

“Ricordi”, dissi, “nelle favole degli spiriti-volpe di Pu Songling, alcune pellicce di volpe ritornano in vita. Se uno studente compra una volpe morta da un cacciatore, la pelliccia, dopo che lo studente l'ha tirata fuori dalla borsa, può tornare in vita

sotto forma di una ragazza bella e ben educata. E loro – lo studente e la sua amata – placano l'emozione dei loro cuori bevendo vino di prugna caldo da piccoli bicchieri di porcellana e leggendosi poesie a vicenda. In questo momento, i gattini di tua nonna sono probabilmente seduti in un palazzo con colonne di lacca rossa intagliata. Il maestro intagliatore si trovava al largo con la sua barca, perché voleva che il vento salato del mare asciugasse l'ultimo strato di lacca prima del suo lavoro di intaglio, e vide oscillare sulle onde le pelli di gatto colorate, che inizialmente pensava fossero draghi marini portafortuna. Le prese sulla barca. Si tramutarono in donne, così minute (in realtà emaciate, ma il maestro intagliatore non se ne rese conto) che la barca non affondò sotto il loro peso. Tornato a terra, le portò all'alto funzionario a cui era destinata la sua arte della lacca. E ora sono sedute in un palazzo con colonne rosse di lacca intagliata, come i tuoi meravigliosi braccialetti, Tonja (perché nessuno, tranne Pawel, chiamava Antonia Antonia, ovviamente, né Antonina, come era scritto sulla sua carta d'identità, ma la chiamavano con quel bel nome familiare di Tonja), e parlano di fame, freddo e bombardamenti. La famiglia nobile del vecchio funzionario si meraviglia della disumanità dei barbari dietro il muro”.

Antonia rise: “Allora i gatti della nonna hanno sbagliato epoca!”

Vedevo che era un po' imbarazzata dal fatto che sapessi delle pellicce di gatto. Risposi: “Beh, naturalmente sarebbe anche bello immaginare le ragazze-gatto nella Repubblica Popolare Cinese. In questo caso, probabilmente sarebbero finite in un monastero in Tibet”.

“Oddio, i monaci le annienterebbero come spettri”, disse Antonia.

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Nonna Thot era sopravvissuta all'assedio di Leningrado. Non ne parlava mai. Solo una volta, quando le raccontai che uno scrittore tedesco a me sconosciuto, a un ricevimento, mi disse che voleva scrivere un libro sull'assedio di Leningrado perché suo padre era stato lì ed era tornato con molte ferite: "In questo Paese nessuno sa di questo assedio. Nemmeno in Russia, perché in Russia era vietato parlarne". "No", dissi io, "questo non è vero". "Certo", disse lui, "l'ho letto sul giornale". Non sapevo come reagire. È da quando ho memoria che sento parlare dell'assedio, del blocco. Da bambini non ci si rende conto di una cosa del genere, o meglio, si confonde con il frastuono della propaganda ufficiale, solo più tardi la portata della catastrofe diventa chiara, così chiara da sembrare di nuovo irreale.

Tutti i gatti e i piccioni furono mangiati.
Tutta la corteccia dagli alberi rosicchiata.
Tutta l'acqua della Neva bevuta.
Tutto il miele del sole succhiato via.
La luce negli occhi dei cannibali.

A differenza dello spettro che i monaci taoisti di Pu Songling hanno così abilmente scacciato, tuo padre, Andrjuscha, è giunto alle porte della mia città.

"Crede a tutto quello che legge sui giornali?", chiesi allo sconosciuto tedesco. "Sì, perché?", mi chiese a sua volta.

Quando lo raccontai a nonna Thot, lei disse: "Certo che si mangiavano i gatti. Solo che presto non ci furono più gatti. Fa rabbrivire tutti anche solo a pensarci, ma credi che non si mangiassero i gatti, in qualsiasi parte del mondo, quando c'era una carestia?"

"Ti faccio vedere una cosa", disse nonna Thot. "Mio zio era davvero impazzito, beh, come tutti a quei tempi. Pensava che la pelliccia di gatto fosse qualcosa di

prezioso, come quella di volpe o di scoiattolo siberiano. E che potesse scambiarla con il pane. Sapeva qualcosa di pellicceria perché prima della guerra andava a caccia con i suoi amici e aveva anche lavorato le pellicce degli animali catturati. Credo che dopo la fine di tutto, dopo la guerra, abbia dimenticato ogni cosa. Semplicemente dimenticato. È stato cancellato dalla sua memoria. E io” – nonna Thot aprì la cassapanca nel corridoio, dove giacevano le pellicce di gatto colorate e ben lavorate – “da allora ci parlo e chiedo loro perdono”. E accarezzò la pelliccia con le sue dita lunghe e sottili che portavano scuri anelli d’argento (quelli d’oro erano stati scambiati con il pane).

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Queste pellicce erano l'unica stranezza dell'anziana signora, che per il resto era una vera signora, benevola, asciutta. Ora mi pentivo di non aver taciuto ad Antonia che avevo visto le pellicce di gatto. All'improvviso pensai a quando Thérèse aveva raccontato una barzelletta francese alla nostra festa di Capodanno in questo appartamento:

Natale 1871.

Le truppe prussiane assediano Parigi.

Fame.

Il vecchio Jacques non ha scelta: deve mangiare il suo fedele cane.

Mangiato.

Davanti a lui (tra le lacrime) il piatto pieno di ossa.

Sospira: “Povero amico mio, come ti sarebbero piaciute queste ossa!”

Alcuni di noi risero. Gli altri, che erano al corrente del segreto delle pellicce di gatto (io all'epoca non ancora, compresi la scena solo dopo questa

conversazione con Antonia), rimasero in silenzio.

Così Antonia ed io eravamo sedute sulla pelle d'orso e dicevamo assurdità [...]

Le pellicce di gatto

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Katharina, che è sposata con un produttore di biancheria qui in zona e gestisce un'associazione locale russo-tedesca, non sapeva molto dei suoi vecchi compagni di studi: "Pensavamo tutti che tu e Andreas vi sareste sposati. Beh. Hai più avuto sue notizie da allora? Dicono che ora abbia divorziato. Ma tu hai fatto davvero carriera, ne sono felicissima, verrai a trovarci all'associazione l'anno prossimo? Organizzerei io la cosa".

Mi chiama e mi chiede se sono disposta a parlare dell'assedio di Leningrado, perché le immagini della città assediata sono ciò che l'ha colpita maggiormente della mia relazione. Tutto il resto, gli oberiuty e così via, sinceramente, non l'ha capito molto, dice.

Certo che verrei. A causa tua, Andreas, colgo ogni occasione per andare in Germania. Ma cosa dovrei raccontare se non degli oberiuty? Gli oberiuty che in vita non esistevano come poeti al di fuori della loro ristretta cerchia di amici (uno dei loro amici scrisse in seguito: *È con loro che ho capito che la genialità non è un grado del talento, o non solo, ma una disposizione speciale di tutto l'essere*). Sarebbe potuto accadere che al loro posto ci fosse un vuoto (con ovvie conseguenze per la poesia russa) se uno dei loro amici, il filosofo Yakov Druskin,

anch'egli quasi morto di fame nella Leningrado assediata, non si fosse recato nella casa semi-bombardata dell'arrestato Daniil Charms, non avesse trovato il suo archivio e non lo avesse riportato a casa su una slitta per bambini. La slitta carica di manoscritti era un fardello pesante per i muscoli consumati dalla distrofia. Le probabilità che riuscisse a tornare a casa erano minime. All'andata o al ritorno avrebbe potuto morire sotto le bombe tedesche, o sarebbe potuto cadere e morire assiderato, o in seguito morire di fame come più di un milione di abitanti a Leningrado; oppure avrebbe potuto essere arrestato e condividere il destino dei suoi amici.

Devo raccontare delle pellicce di gatto? Saranno in grado di comprendere la catastrofe, o diranno semplicemente: *Beh, i russi, i barbari, che altro ci si può aspettare da loro?*

Quando sono nata, c'era un quarto di secolo tra me e la Seconda guerra mondiale. Da bambina, per me questa guerra (che aveva privato mio padre della sua giovinezza) era lontana quasi quanto le guerre napoleoniche, le guerre puniche o la guerra di successione spagnola. Un bambino russo istruito era (è?) il sovrano del suo regno di libri e della sua storia mondiale. Colombo con le sue patate, la sua sifilide e la sua cioccolata è più familiare a un bambino russo istruito che lo scopritore della Siberia, l'atamano cosacco Jermak, con il suo argento e il suo ferro, le sue pellicce. Oggi, la Seconda guerra mondiale, che sta sprofondando sempre più nella palude della storiografia, è molto più presente per me di quanto non lo fosse allora. Mio padre è morto, il padre di Andrjuscha è morto, vedo come i posteri riscrivono la storia. Un anno fa stavo ascoltando la radio nella sala colazione di un hotel di Dresda. Era il 22 giugno, l'anniversario dell'attacco tedesco alla Russia. L'annunciatore diceva che i russi insistevano ancora sul fatto che il loro Paese in quel giorno era stato attaccato dalla Germania. Nel pomeriggio Andreas ed io eravamo davanti alla Madonna Sistina di Raffaello nello Zwinger, raccontai ad Andreas di come mio padre si fosse recato a Mosca nel 1955 proprio

per vedere il capolavoro prima che venisse restituito dalla (non più esistente) Unione Sovietica alla (non più esistente) Repubblica Democratica Tedesca. Il dipinto, di cui mio padre mi parlò con reverenza per decenni e che all'epoca impressionò Dostoevskij fino a farlo svenire, mi deluse. Dissi ad Andreas: "I vincitori scrivono la storia. Ma la storia della Russia è scritta dai vinti". "Sì, sì", disse Andreas ridendo, "la Grande Guerra Patriottica sotto la guida del Grande Papparino Stalin". "Sciocchezze", dissi, "sai cosa ho capito di recente? Quando la Germania ci ha attaccato, gli uomini di buona famiglia, cresciuti prima della Rivoluzione, si sono trovati di fronte a questa alternativa: da un lato, un uomo deve difendere la patria, dall'altro, è una vergogna combattere per i Bolscevichi. Quelli nati poco dopo la Rivoluzione, in genere, conoscevano solo il dovere. E noi, probabilmente, non conosciamo proprio nulla". "Ma questo è un bene", rise ancora Andreas, "altrimenti oggi i miei compatrioti si preparerebbero per la marcia della vendetta e non vorrebbero solo rielaborare i loro libri di scuola".

Bene, Katharina, racconterò alla tua associazione dell'inverno dell'assedio di Leningrado. Charms era morto, Vvedenskij era morto, Oljenikov era morto. Tuo padre, Andreas, era alle porte di Leningrado e aveva un freddo cane. Si accese una sigaretta. "Idiota, non si fuma di notte. Ci vedranno e ci spareranno", inveì il suo vicino di trincea. L'uccello del terrore, un pappagallo grigio, sorvolava la Leningrado buia, tutte le guglie e le cupole delle chiese erano avvolte nei teli mimetici, come il Reichstag mezzo secolo dopo è stato avvolto dall'artista Christo (ero proprio a Berlino nell'estate del 1995, Andreas mi presentò sua moglie, Sabine, e ammirammo insieme lo spettacolo dell'avvolgimento).

Temo i segreti del tempo

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Nessuno cammina impunemente sotto la pioggia asciutta della clessidra, e i sentimenti cambiano di certo quando una clessidra viene vista dall'interno, i granelli di sabbia, la pelle d'oca del tempo... Nessuno cammina impunemente e i sentimenti cambiano di certo... Vvedenskij e Charms hanno visto da vicino queste bollicine formicolanti del tempo; stavano per svelare i segreti del tempo. Ci erano quasi riusciti, ma poi furono annientati dalle forze congiunte di Hitler & Stalin: Charms, arrestato dai servizi segreti sovietici poco dopo lo scoppio della guerra, morì di fame nell'ospedale della prigione, uno dei milioni di morti di fame a Leningrado durante l'assedio tedesco; Vvedenskij fu catturato a Charkiv poco prima dell'avanzata delle truppe tedesche come elemento inaffidabile e fucilato sul trasporto dei prigionieri. Mentre giaceva nella neve, incapace di proseguire a causa della debolezza, davanti alla canna del fucile ebbe soltanto questo secondo, che aveva scoperto essere l'unico esistente:

“Perché prima che si aggiunga un nuovo secondo, quello vecchio scomparirà. Lo si potrebbe rappresentare così:

Ø Ø Ø Ø Ø Ø
Ø Ø Ø Ø O

Solo che gli zeri non vanno barrati, ma cancellati”.

Il romanzo perduto (secondo i lettori sopravvissuti: geniale) di Vvedenskij si intitolava: ASSASSINI SIETE VOI GLI SCEMI.

Tratto da Olga Martynova, *Sogar Papageien überleben uns*, Droschl, Graz/Wien 2010, pp. 23, 24-26, 27, 124-128, 135-138, 190-191.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”: dissenso, empatia e resistenza nella lirica svedese contemporanea

Burcu Sahin, Bella Batistini, Ida Börjel,
Naima Chahboun, Agnes Török

(traduzione e cura di Asia Busetto)

“Per poter scrivere poesia che non sia politica / dovrei ascoltare gli uccelli / e perché io possa sentirli / gli aerei nemici devono tacere”, scrive il poeta palestinese Marwan Makhoul, dando vita a versi che sono ad oggi sinonimo di resistenza e solidarietà per la causa palestinese a livello internazionale. A settantasette anni dalla Nakba il suono incessante di aerei e droni israeliani soffoca il cielo sopra la Palestina occupata, il canto degli uccelli rimane inudibile e la politica è una componente inestricabile della poesia per tutti coloro che vogliono rendersi testimoni della lotta palestinese, divenuta un simbolo della resistenza di popoli oppressi da pratiche coloniali e imperialiste. Il tempo e il luogo possono cambiare ma i progetti etno-nazionalisti restano dolorosamente familiari, monito del reiterarsi di quello stesso schema che Ida Börjel riassume magistralmente nella raccolta Röd Anemon (Anemone rosso, 2025) in cui racconta la Cisgiordania occupata: “frantuma il tempo / e la parola e la casa. Ciò / che rende le persone persone” (p. 214, “Kross mal tid / och ord och hem. Vad / som gör folk till folk”). La selezione di poesie di autrici svedesi qui presentata si colloca all’interno di una lunga tradizione scandinava di poesia di guerra che affonda le proprie radici

Burcu Sahin, Bella Batistini, Ida Börjel, Naima Chahboun, Agnes Török, “Ciò che rende le persone persone”: dissenso, empatia e resistenza nella lirica svedese contemporanea, traduzione e cura di Asia Busetto, NuBE, 6 (2025), pp. 375-423.

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nel modernismo degli anni Venti e si costruisce sia come atto di solidarietà che come testimonianza della lotta palestinese e di quella ucraina. In particolare, le voci che seguono riflettono sulle intersezioni tra il corpo, la terra e la lingua in quanto siti che preservano la memoria e la cultura, anche di fronte ai tentativi di cancellazione sistematica da parte di una potenza coloniale, facendo scontrare l'ideale romantico dell'amor patrio che così spesso sfocia in un nazionalismo di stampo fascista con la realtà di coloro che preferirebbero morire piuttosto che abbandonare la terra a cui appartengono o vederla distrutta. Al discorso culturale si intreccia la riflessione metaletteraria sul ruolo della poesia nel mondo contemporaneo. Nonostante l'affermazione di Naima Chahboun che "la storia è scritta dai vincitori / Le poesie dagli idioti", la fioritura di una nuova generazione di poeti socialmente impegnati dentro e fuori la Scandinavia e il ritorno in auge della poesia di resistenza riconfermano l'importanza dell'espressione poetica come affermazione identitaria, atto di resistenza e testimonianza, nonché come spazio utopico nel quale immaginare e creare un mondo libero e giusto, poiché, come sottolinea Sahin, "Il vecchio mondo è già in rovina". Allo stesso tempo viene anche ribadita l'importanza di essere "un corpo tra gli altri", senza lasciarsi sopraffare dall'impulso a intellettualizzare l'orrore tramite il linguaggio poetico, correndo il rischio di dimenticare l'azione, che deve rimanere componente imprescindibile della resistenza e della lotta per la libertà.

L'antologia En viktlös skärva av tid i Gaza (Un imponderabile frammento di tempo a Gaza), da cui sono tratte quattro delle cinque poesie della selezione, è stata tempestivamente annunciata da Aska Förlag alla fine del 2023 e pubblicata all'inizio del 2024, come raccolta fondi e atto di solidarietà verso la popolazione di Gaza a seguito dell'escalation della violenza di Israele nei confronti della popolazione civile. La raccolta, che unisce oltre cinquanta autori, è accompagnata da una dichiarazione pubblica della casa editrice, ancora disponibile sul loro sito, che invita alla resistenza e critica la risposta dell'Europa e degli Stati Uniti alla violenza di Israele: "piangiamo la perdita di volontà e ardore politico. Il mondo

guarda in silenzio, continua a inviare armi supportando ciecamente Israele. Ma noi non stiamo in silenzio” (Aska Förlag 2023).

Nella raccolta Ringa hem (Chiamare casa), da cui è tratta la quinta poesia della selezione, Börjel racconta l’invasione russa dell’Ucraina attraverso le telefonate intercettate dei soldati russi, tradotte in svedese, montate e trasposte in forma poetica, fornendo un resoconto quasi giornaliero dell’inferno della guerra e mettendo a nudo la cruda realtà di un conflitto disumano che nasce da una cultura suprematista spesso riflessa anche nei momenti più intimi dei soldati che vi prendono parte; la poesia che chiude Ringa hem lascia invece spazio alla voce di un soldato ucraino “whispering his celebration of life”, ribaltando la prospettiva della raccolta.

Biografie delle autrici:

Burcu Sahin

Poeta, spoken word artist, studiosa di letteratura e docente alla scuola di scrittura Biskops-Arnös dove si è diplomata, ha debuttato nel 2018 con la raccolta Broderier (Ricami), premiata con il Katapultpriset. Fa parte del collettivo letterario Ce(n)sur e del collettivo poetico BAM. Ad oggi le sue due raccolte sono inedite in Italia.

Bella Batistini

Autrice di due raccolte incentrate sulla repressione e la vita carceraria, ha debuttato nel 2019 con Mata duvorna (Dar da mangiare ai piccioni). Scrive sotto pseudonimo e la sua identità rimane al momento sconosciuta, sebbene partecipi a eventi pubblici. In un vecchio numero della rivista svedese Glänta l’autrice viene presentata come “en anarkistiskt textkollektiv” (un collettivo di testi anarchici). Ad oggi le sue due raccolte sono inedite in Italia.

Ida Börjel

Scrittrice, traduttrice e studiosa di letteratura, ha debuttato nel 2005 con la raccolta Sond (Sonda), premiata con il Katapultpriset. La sua raccolta del 2014 Ma è stata nominata per l'Augustpriset. Insieme ad altre poetesse svedesi partecipa al progetto femminista di traduzione e condivisione poetica reciproca Shaerat. Ad oggi le sue sette raccolte sono inedite in Italia.

Naima Chahboun

Poeta, autrice di libri per bambini, insegnante e ricercatrice al Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche dell'Università di Stoccolma. Ha debuttato nel 2012 con la raccolta Okunskapens arkeologi (Archeologia dell'ignoranza), premiata con il Katapultpriset. Ad oggi il suo lavoro è inedito in Italia.

Agnes Török

Poeta bilingue e spoken word artist di fama internazionale, scrive e dirige per il teatro e tiene workshop che uniscono scrittura e attivismo. Dirige il programma di Performance Poetry e Storytelling dell'Università di Stoccolma e dall'autunno 2024 è Reading Ambassador della Svezia. Ad oggi il suo lavoro è inedito in Italia.

Si ringraziano le autrici e la casa editrice Aska Förlag per l'autorizzazione alla pubblicazione degli originali e delle rispettive traduzioni.

OM NI MÅSTE DÖ OCH VI MÅSTE LEVA I NATT

Svarta träd och vit snö ska lysas upp i natt.
Genom fyrverkerier och bomber i natt.

Klockan ringer in medan tiden gurglar bort.
Stå inte bara där och titta på i natt.

Ring ut tiden och ring in det sköra hoppet.
Det förblir intakt medan ryktet går i natt.

Vi ska ta isär klockan och tända ett bål.
Denna midnatt ska brinna till aska i natt.

Världen är ett fängelse med fler fängelser.
En sked räcker för att gräva sig ut i natt.

Det finns ingen kärlek som gudomlig kärlek.
Vi avskaffar makten som ger order i natt.

De som har omringats av hungriga hundar.
Vi minns ert motstånd och er värdighet i natt.

Det finns ingen rättvisa kvar för någon här.
Om ni måste dö och vi måste leva i natt.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

SE VOI DOVETE MORIRE E NOI DOBBIAMO VIVERE STANOTTE

Alberi scuri e neve bianca si illumineranno stanotte.

Con fuochi d'artificio e bombe stanotte.

L'orologio suona la sveglia mentre il tempo gorgoglia via.

Non startene lì a guardare stanotte.

Dì addio al tempo e accogli la fragile speranza.

Che resta intatta mentre la voce si sparge stanotte.

Smontiamo l'orologio e accendiamo un falò.

Riduciamo questa mezzanotte in cenere stanotte.

Il mondo è una prigione fatta di tante prigionie.

Basta un cucchiaino per scavarsi una via d'uscita stanotte.

Non esistono amori come l'amore divino.

Aboliamo il potere che dà ordini stanotte.

Chi è stato circondati da cani affamati.

Ricordiamo la vostra resistenza e dignità stanotte.

Non c'è più giustizia per nessuno qui.

Se voi dovete morire e noi dobbiamo vivere stanotte.

Den gamla världen står redan i ruiner.
De begravdas namn är våra löften i natt.

Änglarna sveper sina vingar över oss.
De sjunger bara om paradiset i natt.

Burcu Sahin, *En viktlös skärva av tid i Gaza*, Aska Förlag, Malmö 2024, pp. 39-40.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

Il vecchio mondo è già in rovina.

I nomi dei sepolti sono la nostra promessa stanotte.

Gli angeli spiegano le loro ali su di noi.

Cantano solo del paradiso stanotte.

vikarna
hudens veck
de små kropparna

en hade kunnat föreställa sig
en annan ordning
en annan skuld

där samfundet pekats ut
som ansvariga

jag kan fortfarande stå
jag kan räkna
men jag vet ingenting
om hur det känns att hitta döda spädbarn
en, två, tre, fyra

det är inte försent

att gräva upp kropparna
att önska människorna tillbaka
det är inte försent att gråta.

häll kaffet ned i sanden
oljan
koka stenarna

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

le pieghe
le rughe della pelle
i piccoli corpi

uno avrebbe potuto immaginarsi
un altro sistema
un'altra colpa

in cui la comunità viene indicata
come responsabile

riesco ancora a stare in piedi
riesco a contare
ma non ho idea di
come ci senta a trovare neonati morti
uno, due, tre, quattro

non è troppo tardi

per riesumare i corpi
per desiderare che le persone ritornino
non è troppo tardi per piangere

versa il caffè nella sabbia
l'olio
cucina le pietre

lyft molnen
flytta marken
så att den ligger
lugnt inbäddad i lunden

viska;

berätta för mig
om en karta
med dörrar överallt

där finns kuvöser
vattendrag
tårkanaler

raketer
och stenar

vi har inte försonats
vi har inte viskat

vi skakar
och marken skakar

Bella Batistini, *En viktlös skärva av tid i Gaza*, Aska Förlag, Malmö 2024, pp. 97-108.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

solleva le nubi
muovi la terra
così che da rimboccarla
serena nella boscaglia

sussurra;

raccontami
di una mappa
con porte dappertutto

dove ci sono incubatrici
corsi d'acqua
dotti lacrimali

missili
e pietre

non ci siamo riappacificati
non abbiamo sussurrato

tremiamo
e la terra trema

SLAVA UKRAINI

4 JUNI

slava Ukraini

Vi kan återvända
tillbaka till vår källare
men då hade vi blottat
våra positioner
för fiendens artilleri
det är därför
som vi väntar här
mellan de här träden

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

SLAVA UKRAINI

4 GIUGNO

slava Ukraini

Potremmo ritornare
al nostro scantinato
ma così riveleremmo
le nostre posizioni
all'artiglieria nemica
ecco perché
aspettiamo qui
tra questi alberi

ler

tjut från artilleri

i ögonblick som detta
för att inte förlora förståndet
för att rädda min hjärna
och hålla mig lugn
för det kan
vara skrämmande här
da ser jag mig omkring
ser på naturen

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

risata

ruggito d'artiglieria

in momenti come questo
per non perdere il senno
per salvare la ragione
e mantenere la calma
visto che può
essere spaventoso qui
mi guardo intorno
osservo la natura

en humla flyger
precis här intill
jag lyssnar
på en fjäril
känner vinden
mot mitt ansikte

och jag påminner mig
om vad det är som jag
kämpar för varför
jag är här

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

un bombo vola
proprio qui accanto
ascolto
una farfalla
sento il vento
sul viso

e mi ricordo
per cos'è che sto
lottando perché
sono qui

jag är här för att få ett slut
på den här ondskan
för att hindra den från att spridas
för att försvara
vårt folk och vårt land

i ögonblick som detta
tyst skratt
blir allting så lätt
när du vet vad du kämpar för
kan du ta dig igenom allt

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

sono qui per mettere fine
a questo male
per impedire che si sparga
per proteggere
il nostro Popolo e la nostra terra

in momenti come questo
risata silenziosa
tutto diventa così facile
quando sai per cosa stai lottando
riesci a sopportare tutto

det här är inte
nagon sorts romantiska tankar
från böcker eller filmer
det är mina verkliga tankar
medan jag ligger på mage i gräset
under fiendens artilleri
och väntar här i Donbas

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

questo non è
un qualche ideale romantico
tratto da libri o film
sono i miei veri pensieri
mentre sono steso a pancia in giù sull'erba
sotto i colpi del nemico
e aspetto qui in Donbass

om jag lyckas överleva
ska jag dela dessa tankar
på nätet
kanske kan de vara
till någon nytta
för någon

ser sig hastigt över axeln

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

se dovessi sopravvivere
condividerò questi pensieri
in rete
magari potrebbero essere
utili
a qualcuno

si guarda velocemente alle spalle

säkert är ryssarna så arga nu
därför att jag
och mina vänner
var helt nära
deras positioner
under en rekognosering
för ett par dar sen

och vi förintade många
många orcher
och deras fordon
och tekniska utrustning

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

di sicuro i russi sono furiosi ora
perché io
e i miei amici
eravamo vicinissimi
alle loro posizioni
durante una ricognizione
un paio di giorni fa

e abbiamo distrutto tanti
tanti orchi
e i loro veicoli
e attrezzature tecniche

så de är arga ursinniga
men allt de kan göra är
att skicka artilleripjäser
mot skogen efter oss

tyst skratt

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

quindi sono furiosi furibondi
ma tutto ciò che possono fare è
mandare l'artiglieria
verso il bosco contro di noi

risata silenziosa

som ni märker
har det ingen verkan
vi är här vi kämpar
och vi vinner

men därför
så lyssnar jag mycket noga
där jag ligger

vi kan fortfarande
bli angripna
av fiendens infanteri

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

come noterete
non ha alcun effetto
siamo qui lottiamo
e vinceremo

ma per questo
ascolto molto attentamente
da dove sono steso

possiamo ancora
essere attaccati
dalla fanteria nemica

ler det är bara
två av oss
just här och nu
på frontlinjen

livet är underbart
så länge man lever
det är sant

Ida Börjel, *Ringa hem*, Ariel Förlag, Linderöd 2022, pp. 198-215.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

risata siamo solo
in due
proprio qui e ora
in prima linea

la vita è meravigliosa
finché si rimane vivi
è vero

Alla krig handlar om
två saker Vem
ska begrava vem och
i vilken jord

När vi förlorat allt
förlorade vi
oss själva Våra namn
sjönk som aska
i havet

Nu lyssnar vi inte
längre till våra mödrars
förbannelser Hör
inte ropen från våra
ofödda barn

Vi går bort Bortom
gräset och stenarna
och luften
som tillhör de levande

Historien skrivs av segrarna
Dikterna av idioter

Tutte le guerre riguardano
due cose Chi
seppellirà chi e
in quale terra

Quando abbiamo perso tutto
abbiamo perso
noi stessi I nostri nomi
affondati come cenere
nel mare

Adesso non ascoltiamo più
le nostre madri
imprecare Non sentiamo
le grida dei nostri
figli non nati

Andiamo lontano Oltre
l'erba e le pietre
e l'aria
che appartengono ai vivi

La storia è scritta dai vincitori
Le poesie dagli idioti

.

Om vi kan lära oss något
av framtiden
är det att priset kommer att vara
för högt

Fråga vallmon
som blommar i öknen
När allt är försent
sänder den sina kronblad
som nödraketer
mot den sjunkande solens
utsträckta arm

Det finns inga ord för den smärtan -

Vem kunde ana
att det skulle vara så lätt
att nå världens ände
Ett steg
och vi föll över kanten Ut
ur sanningen
och allt som förintas
i kampen mellan ont
och ont

Naima Chahboun, *En viktlös skärva av tid i Gaza*, Aska Förlag, Malmö 2024, pp. 90-91.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

Se possiamo imparare qualcosa
dal futuro
è che il prezzo sarà
troppo alto
Chiedi al papavero
che fiorisce nel deserto
Quando tutto è perduto
lancia i suoi petali
come razzi d'emergenza
verso le braccia tese del
sole calante

Non ci sono parole per quel dolore -

Chi avrebbe potuto prevedere
che sarebbe stato così facile
arrivare alla fine del mondo
Un passo
e siamo caduti oltre il bordo Fuori
dalla verità
e tutto ciò che è annientato
nella lotta tra il male
e il male.

EN KROPP BLAND ANDRA KROPPAR

mellan samtalen från sjukhuset
samordningen med hemtjänsten
rundorna av IVF:en

nyheterna

mellan
nån måste laga middagen
och vems städvecka var det igen
och har du packat lunchlådan älskling?

folkmordet

jag försöker skriva nåt som gör nåt -
skillnad eller avstamp, skapar ett

före och ett

efter, en historieskrivning
som inte börjar 7:e oktober

ett annat

alternativ

jag ser

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

UN CORPO TRA ALTRI CORPI

tra le telefonate dall'ospedale
l'organizzazione dell'assistenza a domicilio
i cicli di FIVET

i notiziari

nel frattempo
qualcuno deve preparare la cena
e a chi toccano le faccende questa settimana
e ti sei ricordato il pranzo al sacco tesoro?

il genocidio

cerco di scrivere qualcosa che faccia una qualche
differenza o dia una spinta, che crei

un prima e un

dopo, una storia
che non è cominciata il 7 ottobre

un'altra

opzione

vedo

bilderna

från det bombade sjukhuset

kliver av

bussen, går till

jobbet, försöker

fungera.

jag läser

statistiken på mördade barn

diskar

disken

ställer tillbaka, försöker

räcka till.

jag hör

rösterna från sit-ins

världen över

något

tänds

ett hopp

ett tillsammans

som kan bära genom sorgen

tänker på orden 'brott mot mänskligheten'

tänker på hur någon av oss klarar att hålla fast

vid vår egen mänsklighet

när vi hör

när vi ser

när vi förstår

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

immagini

di ospedali bombardati

scendo

dall'autobus, vado a

lavorare, cerco

di funzionare

leggo

statistiche sui bambini uccisi

lavo

i piatti

metto in ordine, cerco

di essere all'altezza

sento

le voci di proteste

in tutto il mondo

qualcosa

si accende

una speranza

una comunanza

che può resistere al dolore

penso alle parole “crimine contro l'umanità”

penso a come alcuni di noi possano riuscire ad aggrapparsi

alla propria umanità

mentre sentiamo

mentre vediamo

mentre capiamo

när vi –

och samtidigt:

betala hyran

svara i telefonen

gå till tvättstugan

när jag stannar upp

för att skriva

för att läsa

börjar jag gråta

kan inte sluta

vara människa

igen

läser Masha Gessen i New York Times

om hur Shoah-historieskrivningen kräver delegitimeringen
av en Nakba-historieskrivning

av positioneringen av berättelsen om förintelsen av judar
som en unik ondska

en som aldrig tidigare eller senare har eller kan upprepas
mot andra grupper

en berättelse som kräver att vi ser på folkmord som en
annan kategori än då utförda

under kolonialismen, slaveriet, utrotningen av ursprungs-
folk, interneringen av muslimer.

som kräver ett hål i mitten av blicken på Palestina

gör det omöjligt att sätta kriterier för vad folkmord är
för hur en apartheidstat implementeras

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

mentre –

e intanto:

paga l'affitto

rispondi al telefono

vai in lavanderia

quando mi fermo

per scrivere

per leggere

inizio a piangere

non riesco a smettere

di essere umana

di nuovo

leggo Masha Gessen sul New York Times

che scrive di come la narrazione della Shoah esiga la delegittimazione
di una narrazione della Nakba

del posizionamento del racconto dell'olocausto ebraico come
un male unico

che non si è mai ripetuto e non potrà mai ripetersi
su altri gruppi

un racconto che esige che guardiamo al genocidio come una
diversa categoria rispetto agli atti commessi

durante il colonialismo, la schiavitù, l'eradicazione dei popoli
indigeni, l'incarcerazione dei musulmani.

che impone un buco al centro dello sguardo sulla Palestina

rende impossibile stabilire dei criteri per definire il genocidio

per definire come viene implementato uno stato apartheid

för hur en avhumaniseringsprocess genomförs

jag försöker skriva en dikt som säger något som
spelar

roll

som är

nog

som gör

skillnad

men jag har läst och gråtit för länge

i väntan på de rätta orden

nu är jag på väg att bli sen till demonstrationen

och det finns en ironi där

jag inte har kapacitet att skratta åt

men kanske orkar en annan gång

jag försöker skriva en dikt om Palestina

säga något som inte sagts förut

av Palestinier själva

av anti-zionistiska förintelseöverlevare själva

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

per definire come venga attuato il processo di de-
umanizzazione

cerco di scrivere una poesia che dica qualcosa che
abbia un

ruolo

che sia

abbastanza

che faccia

la differenza

ma ho letto e pianto troppo a lungo

in attesa delle parole giuste

ora rischio di arrivare tardi alla protesta

e c'è dell'ironia in questo

che non sono in grado di apprezzare ora

ma forse ci riuscirò un'altra volta

cerco di scrivere una poesia sulla Palestina

dire qualcosa che non sia stato detto prima

sui palestinesi

sui sopravvissuti all'olocausto antisionisti

de vars mostrar hör bomberna genom tältduken om natten
de som håller sina barns kroppar i askan
de som inte har någonstans kvar att fly

det finns inget att säga
som inte redan är sagt

den här dikten är bara bläck på ett papper
pixlar på en skärm
en symbol som lajvar handling

och jag behöver vara en kropp bara
kan inte vara annat än en kropp bara

en kropp bland andra kroppar
en som fortfarande är vid liv
fortfarande kan säga ifrån

en kropp som sätter sig
bland andra kroppar
på ett golv
tyst
bakom målade bokstäver

‘aldrig igen’
betyder ‘aldrig igen
för någon’

som sitter i tystnaden
för allt det vi inte har ord för

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

quelli le cui zie sentivano le bombe di notte da dentro le tende
quelli che stringevano i cadaveri dei propri figli tra le ceneri
quelli che non hanno più alcun posto in cui fuggire

non c'è niente da dire
che non sia già stato detto

questa poesia è solo inchiostro su un foglio
pixel su uno schermo
un simbolo che simula l'agire

e io ho bisogno di essere solo un corpo
non posso essere altro che un corpo

un corpo tra gli altri
un corpo che è ancora in vita
che può ancora protestare

un corpo che si siede
tra gli altri
su un selciato
silenzioso
dietro lettere dipinte

“mai più”
significa “mai più
per nessuno”

un corpo che siede in silenzio
per tutto ciò per cui non ci sono parole

jag försöker skriva klart den här dikten

 men det är dags nu

 bussen går och det finns en plats

 som behöver mig

mer än orden

 demonstrationen börjar

 och dikten

Agnes Török, *En viktlös skärva av tid i Gaza*, Aska Förlag, Malmö 2024, pp. 51-56.

“Ciò che rende le persone persone”

cerco di finire questa poesia

ma è arrivato il momento

il bus parte e c'è un posto

che ha bisogno di me

più che di parole

la protesta inizia

e la poesia