

WRITERS AND THEIR WAYS WITH WORDS: MIGRATION AND LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY GERMANY

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Abstract

On 9 and 10 December 1991, the European Citizen was created during the Maastricht European Council. Since then, Europeans of the member states of the European Union (EU) have witnessed the introduction of a common currency, and the institutional, administrative, and civic Europeanization of Europe characterizes an arguably new Europe for the new millennium. In contrast to the administrative and civic Europeanization, there many and varied debates about what it means or may mean to be European and about European culture. In the context of these discussions, the comparative study of literature of migrants can be productive. Although somewhat different for the individual EU member states, the history of literature of migrants and its reception have unfolded in similar ways. In addition to the creation of a conflicted relationship between national and migrant literature, terms like the German *Gastarbeiterliteratur* have not only created a separate and distinct category for migrant literature, but have also served to limit its authors to a single characteristic (they are ‘guest workers’) and, by extension, the content of the works to a few themes such as feelings of loneliness, loss of home, a sense of isolation, etc. Significantly, what dominated the discourse about migrant literature was the concern with themes rather than with its vehicle, i.e., language. The literary productions of migrants to Germany during the past two decades invite comparison of these works to explore the extent and degree to which they are contributions to the debates about ‘European identity’. As basis for comparison serve examples from diverse texts and authors with diverse language backgrounds such as Italian, French, Japanese, Arabic, and Turkish, for example. The authors are different in terms of both their (or their parents’) countries of origin *and* in terms of their current homes and languages. The intentional reference to such variegated works serves to illuminate that despite the authors being subject to different first languages, they also have in common the translinguistic character of their texts. Importantly, the translinguistic aspects of the texts do *not* constitute the encounter (or even clash) between two given cultures (homeland and country of residence). Instead, each of the texts presents instances of the linguistic and creative potential when any two cultures ‘meet’ to inform each other and, in the process, both emerge as changed. One of the effects on the reader/recipient of the text or texts is defamiliarization with his or her native language; she or he is thus invited not only to encounter something (another culture/country) or someone (the narrator) Other but to also experience the assumed ‘normal’ (most readers’ native language) as Other. In this sense, the different texts all ‘teach’ that alterity is not far away, but that it exists where one might not expect it (at home, in one’s native language). The creative, aesthetic and profound play with language may not bring anyone closer to answering questions about ‘European identity’ (and may indeed raise new questions in addition to existing ones). However, the turn to its constitutive medium, i.e., language, clearly outlines the challenges that are implicit in recent migrant literatures across Europe and across other parts of the world. For Germany (and Europe), one of these challenges is to acknowledge current realities (as a consequence of historical phenomena) and to reimagine itself as the heterogenous space it has always been.

Perhaps nothing binds people more intimately to missions, ideals, and ancient dreams than language. -Azade Seyhan (36)

“[T]he practice of tendentious literature is aesthetically risky business. When writing turns into whining, it oppresses imagination and inventiveness and reduces experience to an eternal recurrence of misery” (Seyhan, 89). Azade Seyhan writes these remarks in the context of discussing the so-called *village literature* that emerged in Turkey after WWII. Yet some of her comments describe well the reception of migrants’ literature in Germany since the end of said war. The first publications by migrants in Germany led to the neologism *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (guest workers’ literature). The main characteristics of this literature are the supposedly autobiographical content and the focus on—to use Seyhan’s phrase—the ‘recurrence of misery’ that consists mainly of experiencing alienation and marginalization in the host country. The coinage of this new term—applicable to and labeling a ‘new’ genre of literature—served and serves as a controlling power that organizes a new world in terms of an old world. To explain what I mean, I need to make reference to some thoughts developed by Jean-Luc Nancy in his *Creation of the World or Globalization (La creation du monde ou mondialisation)*.

To summarize, Nancy stresses the immanence of the world (8), meaning that there is no model for the world. Being a singular fact, he notes that the world is “the exact opposite” of production, which supposes a given [and] a project (12). The world is instead creation and, as such, also a space where the “im-possible is the possibility of experience” (9). An ‘im-possible’ experience, according to Nancy—here using Derridean thought—is an experience removed from the conditions of possibility of a finite knowledge, and which is nevertheless an experience (9). An im-possible experience takes place when anticipated conditions of possibilities do not coalesce with a given event. At that moment, as I read Nancy, ‘mondialisation’ (world-forming) can occur. The world is not a product of past and present possibilities. The world is becoming, open to possible and impossible experiences.

Following and applying Nancy’s elaborations, the segregation of guest workers’ literature (in German) from German literature thus means to experience and classify such works in accordance with anticipated conditions. Importantly, these anticipated conditions uphold and even underscore a division between the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘foreign’. This phenomenon is not unique to the reception of migrants’ literature in Germany or in German, but can also be observed in France, Italy, and elsewhere. Relegating migrants’ literature to its own genre helps maintain ideas about an (imagined) homogenous ‘us’ distinct from ‘others’. Clear borders seem to exist between these literary worlds and the real worlds they represent. This division also ‘fixes’ the world in a state of being that precludes any ‘becoming’.

The purpose of this presentation is to explore how some texts by migrant writers may be read as instantiations of ‘im-possible experiences’. To capture this dimension, it is crucial to disregard all consideration of content or plot and instead focus on the aesthetics of the texts. By aesthetics, I here simply mean first to imply the definition the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides, according to which aesthetics refers to “things perceptible by the senses, things material (as opposed to things thinkable or immaterial).” As I shall demonstrate, the writers instrumentalize their tool, i.e., language, to make the material world perceptible to the readers’ senses—especially the auditory and visual senses. The effect of such manipulation of language is to foreground language itself. In turn, this foregrounding of language creates a frame within which a second, playful aesthetics can unfold.

For the second, ‘playful’ aesthetics, it will be useful to consider Schiller’s prescription to activate the play drive as central to an individual’s ‘aesthetic education’. According to Schiller, the play drive serves as mediator between the material drive (sensitivity) and the form drive (reason): “Schiller identifies the play drive with art and the experience of the beautiful, which can transcend the culturally determined claims of rationality and materiality and reconcile the fullness of existence with the highest autonomy” (Seyhan 137). Using language in a playful way, the writers unsettle and question the reader’s natural or automatic sense of the native speaker’s language. The unsettled state also constitutes the possibility of an im-possible experience. From here, the world that is becoming is one in which the creative power of language becomes central and, significantly, one in which the question of ‘indigenous’ versus ‘foreign’ is renegotiated and a new world is redefined in new terms.

Making the material world available to the readers’ senses is observable in all the texts under consideration. Underlying these attempts is the awareness that all production of language is the result of the very materiality of the uttering body. A passage from one of Yoko Tawada’s texts illustrates this awareness:

Within the cave, out of which blows wind, there lives a naked monster with reddish-wet skin. The ground is sticky, wet and shimmers bloodred. The monster’s lower body is fixed to the ground. It does not snarl, does not howl, does not speak. But when the animal moves, a moaning wind ensues. It flies out of the cave and changes into words. (*Aber die Mandarinen* 46; translation my own)

This ‘monster’ the Japanese author who lives in Germany invokes here is, of course, the tongue without which spoken language would not be possible. The tongue is part of the physical apparatus that is essential for speech to take place. As the ‘wind’ becomes ‘words’, communication and social interaction begin. Both are a result of the physical or material precondition of production and are also the result of particular histories, conventions, and cultures. Sometimes, no interaction is possible as a consequence of different particular histories which have, among other phenomena, produced different languages. The grandmother of Özdamar’s narrator, for instance, notes that “the neighbors don’t knock on our door because their tongue does not understand our tongue. They are said to have come here from Albania” (274). On other occasions, it is a particular social reality that drives the activities of the speech-producing organs. Quoting Özdamar again, the reader finds that “the money of the rich makes the tongue of the poor tired” (180).

In addition to emphasizing the tongue as an *a priori* of speech and communication, the writers use other means to position their texts as links between the material world and the readers’ senses. This includes the creation of onomatopoeic renditions of sounds, on the one hand, and the introduction of foreign, i.e., non-German, words that often refer to food items or—especially in Özdamar’s texts—prayer rituals. The extent to which the texts are successful in engaging the reader in both a textual and a material world highlights and foregrounds the significant role that language has in both of these worlds.

Moreover, the central role of language is also the base from which the second, ‘playful aesthetics’ can be discerned. And it is here that the texts suggest novel relations between the ‘foreign’ and the ‘indigenous’. It is useful to look at some foreign words that migrant writers so frequently insert into their texts. Clearly, one function of such insertions is to educate the reader about another culture. Indeed, where cultural practices differ considerably, this kind of ‘education’ may be necessary to understanding a text. Yet education of the reader alone cannot account for all foreign insertions to a text. In Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*, for example, four young girls stand behind their respective windows and sing a song because rain prevents them from playing with each other in the street: “Yağmur yağıyor / Seller akıyor / Arap Kızları / Camdan

bakıyor” (“It is raining / Water is flowing / The black girls / Are looking out of the window” 75; translation my own). Arguably, the reader understands the girls’ disappointment and frustration with the weather without this song—no matter in which language it is presented. Yet its presence suggests that the narrator willfully stresses his or her foreign provenance to the reader. The presence of the foreign serves to highlight language itself and is also likely to disturb the reader who, in this case, is probably both German and does not know Turkish. Such ‘disturbances’ are frequent in the texts under consideration and are ‘exacerbated’ when they are left untranslated, as is true in the majority of such instances. The ‘indigenous’ reader is thus deprived of ‘losing’ him- or herself in a given text because the ‘foreign’ in the text serves as an interruption and as a reminder of the social realities that can be seen and heard daily in the streets of cities and towns in Germany.

Parallel to the reader’s alienation by the ‘foreign’ insertions, an alienation from the ‘indigenous’ or native is set in motion. When migrant authors begin to play with the readers’ native language, they remind the audience that creative potential exists in languages at all times and that this potential transcends the chasm that divides the indigenous and the foreign. At the same time, the creative potential becomes most powerfully tangible in precisely the encounter between indigenous and foreign. Yoko Tawada writes: “I was often disgusted by people who spoke their native language fluently. They gave me the impression that they could not think or feel anything but that which their language provided quickly and easily” (*Das Fremde* 15; translation my own). The degree to which language comes ‘quickly’ and ‘easily’ is also a measure of the automatic or formulaic aspect of such language. The implication is that because this language is automatic, unreflective, and thus non-creative, it both relies on and perpetuates a ‘finite knowledge’ that establishes ‘fixed expectation of contingencies’ that prevent im-possible experiences.

Examples of how a reader is compelled to reflect on his or her native language are frequent in migrant authors’ works. Yoko Tawada, for instance, often describes the effects the German language has on a new speaker and invites the reader to imagine his or her language not as automatic but like a new discovery and ‘from the outside’ under the guidance of the Japanese newcomer: “Each foreign sound, each foreign glance, and each foreign taste had unpleasant effects on the body until the body itself changed. The ö-sounds, for example, pushed too far into my ears and the r-sounds scratched in my throat” (*Das Fremde* 14; translation my own). Apart from the repeated emphasis on the physicality of language production, Tawada here underscores the constructedness and conventionality of even the most minuscule elements of language, namely its sounds. In the same passage, the narrator moves from units of sounds to those of expressions: “There were also expressions that gave me goose bumps, such as ‘auf die Nerven gehen’ (to walk on nerves / to annoy), ‘die Nase voll haben’ (to have one’s nose full / to have had it), or ‘in die Hose gehen’ (to go into the pants / to go wrong)” (*Das Fremde* 14; translation my own). This quote serves to illustrate the potential for and the character of an im-possible experience. On the one hand, the narrator quotes a few very common expressions that—within assumed contingencies—merely or automatically trigger the meanings ‘to be annoyed’, ‘to have had it’, and ‘to go wrong’, respectively. On the other hand, the non-native speaker, lacking the automatic response, takes recourse to the literal level and finds that all three of the expressions lead to somewhat stark images involving the body or its functions. For the sympathetic reader, this constitutes a disturbance. Automatism is suspended in favor of exposure to the creativity that lies at the heart of the expressions and of feeling the native language in a new way.

Another method of injecting ‘the foreign view’ into a reader’s native language is to translate a foreign expression and thereby to create something new in the reader’s language. This is what Rafik Schami, a Syrian writer living in Germany, accomplishes when his narrator points out: “if the morning already starts out like a pile of dung, noon cannot smell

like rose water” (*Der ehrliche Lügner* 219; translation my own). This image does not exist in German; it lies beyond ‘the expected linguistic contingencies’. The im-possible experience here comes with the ability to translate the new or foreign to ‘indigenous’ comprehension. Importantly, this translation cannot be automatic but has to involve creative imagination.

While there are many more examples and there is much more to be said about these playful encounters between the foreign and the indigenous, time today only permits to draw some preliminary conclusions. When readers focus on the content or plot of a migrant writer’s work, they risk categorizing such work in terms of a foreign other that is understood as separate or additive to an indigenous literary culture. Paying instead particular attention to a text’s aesthetics opens the possibility to perceive a ‘becoming’ world in which im-possible (language) experiences occur that blur the borders which separate cultures or nationalities. Moreover, as the foreign and indigenous intermingle and inform each other, one cannot describe the texts as creating a hyphenated entity such as Turkish-German, Japanese-German, Syrian-German, etc. Rather, the texts belong to a transcultural realm in which the foreign becomes inseparable from the indigenous history as much as the indigenous becomes part of the foreign. The point is precisely *not* to create a link between any two cultures (which would keep each distinct and separate) but show a hybrid culture—dependent on all of its constitutive elements—that continues to emerge in a ‘becoming’ world. I conclude with a quote from Yoko Tawada, who advises: “Don’t build a bridge / between here and there / Let the gap live on / on a bridge they stop / to spit into the water / first they spit stones / then they spit themselves / don’t build a bridge / Let the gap live on / out of the gap comes a miracle” (*Wie der Wind* 44; translation my own).

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