The Transnational/Translational Paradigm in Contemporary German Literature

AZADE SEYHAN
BRYN MAWR

In the last two decades, a major critical concern of German Studies in American academia has been the future trajectory of research and teaching in our discipline. A good number of edited volumes, special issues of scholarly journals, and conference sessions have been devoted to envisioning a new transformative paradigm that would shift the study of modern German language, literature, and culture from the nationally defined borders of traditional Germanistik to a transnationally conceived field of literary and cultural study. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, German Studies in America has taken into its purview gender studies, issues of national, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cross-cultural identity, colonialism and postcolonialism in German literature, and the diasporic cultures of contemporary Germany. Tales from the German diaspora represent a variant of the global flow of cultural capital but also serve as cautionary tales about repressed forms of racism and xenophobia that need to be confronted. Although these interdisciplinary and transnational inquiries got off to a slow start in German Studies – whereas French Studies got a tremendous boost first from poststructuralism, beginning in the sixties and, subsequently, from Francophone literature – the growing visibility of Bindestrich or hyphenated German writers and artists in the European, Balkan, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern cultural contexts has inspired scholars to envision novel modes of cognition and recognition with regard to cultural identity formation, collective memory, language, and translation.

In an age of the transnational flow of monetary and intellectual capital, high-speed communication, and an unprecedented scale of human movement within and without national borders, the question of «traveling» and «hybrid» languages and the growing need for cultural translation have become a focal point of scholarly and political interests. «A language that travels is always made of many languages, since a language that really travels is always an open language, porous, inclusive, and willing to disappear into another language,» notes Paolo Bartolini. It emerges from the other language with «its very own singularity,» thus replenishing «both itself and the host language» (87). This generative fusion of languages is, in Walter Benjamin’s view, the operative
principle of translation that is the appropriate expression of the intimate connection languages share: «So ist die Übersetzung zuletzt zweckmäßig für den Ausdruck des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander» (52). The centrality of language, translation, and bi- and multilingualism is arguably the most prominent characteristic of the diaspora literatures of Germany, since these otherwise resist easy classification. German writers of Turkish origin make up the largest majority among the transnational literary figures who hail from many lands, including Iran (Said, Torkan), Italy (Franco Biondi), Spain (Jose Oliver), Russia (Vladimir Kaminer), and Japan (Yōko Tawada). Since none of these writers share in a colonial history, the idiom of postcolonial studies does not always offer the adequate critical apparatus to understand and appreciate their work.

The crosscurrents of diverse cultures in the contemporary German literary scene, their different ports of entry, and their multiple destinations shape and reshape our notions of critical inquiry and demand appropriate strategies of reading. Since cultures need not «be rooted in a given place, that fragments of culture can survive in multiple places, and that cultural meanings may […] transform themselves across the gaps of time» (Papastergiadis 331), the conceptualization of cultures in transition and translation requires a range of critical protocols. However, as Nikos Papastergiadis duly recognizes, the «appreciation of ‘diasporization’ of culture has been remarkably undertheorized» (331). Neither postcolonial theory nor discourses of identity politics can address the diversity and complexity of diasporic narratives that emerge from transit points between languages, cultures, and belief and value systems and thus resist classification. In Writing Outside the Nation (2001), I used the designation «transnational literature» to describe a literary genre created by writers, living and writing outside their homelands and negotiating different languages and idioms. However, because the semantic field of the term has since geometrically and geographically expanded, it has forsaken its specificity. The implosion of creative and conceptual wealth that characterizes the recent work of transnational writers poses a continuing challenge to theorizing the «diasporization» of culture. Furthermore, if in today’s «global village,» to use Marshall McLuhan’s prescient metaphor, the fortunes of nations are, for better or for worse, interlinked, then our experience of the modern world is grounded in a transnational consciousness. Consequently, writers who write «outside the nation,» cannot be the sole agents of transnational literature(s). Authors who represent and endorse various forms of cultural bi- or multilingualism, whether they write in their nations of origin or in those of their domicile, contest and complicate the notion of the nation state as an object of affiliation.
The transnational turn in European literature was set into motion by the displacement and transplantation of individuals and communities into host countries in Europe. The large-scale migrations of our era are the result of various and at times interlinked histories of political persecution, economic hardship, globalized corporate control, and sociopolitical movements, such as the migration of colonized populations to the countries of their former colonizers and an international division of labor, whereby hosts of Gastarbeiter have fanned out all across Europe and, more recently, moved to India, the Arab Emirates, and Turkey, thus reversing the westbound migratory trend.

The ongoing transnational traffic of economic and cultural capital has thrown the need for increased translational activity into sharp relief. In addition to the basic necessity of translation in the everyday dealings of transplanted peoples, translation of their social practices, modes of thought and belief, and value systems need to be addressed in order to ensure not only their integration into the life of the host country but also the preservation of their linguistic and cultural heritages. The guardianship of language and memory emerges as a self-proclaimed mission of many writers and artists in diaspora. At the beginning of his celebrated novel, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, a testimony to the persistence of memory in exile, Milan Kundera remarks, «The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting» (3). Jacques Derrida, whose philosophical career is grounded neither in the language of the country of his birth nor in that of his faith, but in French, and who late in life reflected on being «monolingual» in the language of the «Other,» eloquently expresses the trauma caused by the loss of the mother tongue or an originary language. «Today, on this earth of humans, certain people must yield to the homo-hegemony of dominant languages,» he writes in Monolingualism of the Other, «they must lose their idiom in order to survive or live better. A tragic economy, an impossible counsel» (30). In this very personal yet highly theoretical treatise, Derrida mourns the forcible amnesia of one’s rightful inheritance of ancestral and familial languages, «I have only one language and it is not mine» (25).

The writer in diaspora, moving between borders of language, memory, personal and collective identity, and national affiliation needs to plot complex and layered strategies of translating to negotiate these competing forms of identification. Perhaps the least ideology-driven manner of remembering languages and cultures lost, fragmented, or damaged in transport is realized in cultural translation. There have been noteworthy critical attempts to refine and redefine the semantic and conceptual sweep of the term transnational. In a field of cultural production that aspires to keep up with global strides, ter-
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minology gets stretched to elucidate emerging events and developments that can no longer be described by the original term. In *Cosmopolitan Claims: Turkish-German Literatures from Nadolny to Pamuk*, Venkat Mani shows how writers who write in their own lands and languages, such as Sten Nadolny and Orhan Pamuk, and others, such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoğlu (Turkish-German), who write beyond the borders of their homelands in another language make «cosmopolitical claims» by challenging the one-dimensional representations of other selves, cultures, and beliefs. Cosmopolitanism has for some time been the preferred designation for progressive political views and figures prominently in a wide spectrum of social theories. It is seen as an alternative both to a unified grammar of nationalism that is based on such common denominators as territory, language, and religion, and to articulations of a multiculturalism largely driven by identity politics. Mani’s study is one of a handful of monographs that offer a theoretical framework for Germany’s transnational literary scene. While these studies offer different critical approaches to reading contemporary writers of non-German backgrounds, they all see in the work of these writers both the will to participate in the hi/stories (as Geschicht and Geschichten) of their host land and a resistance to nostalgia for home – which has become an unstable and contested category – as well as to a ready identification with the receiving or adopted nation.

Despite the desirable ring of cosmopolitanism, it seems that many treatises on this concept include some disclaimer about being able fully to define it, and this inability of the inclusivity of the term cosmopolitan undermines the desire to contain contemporary diasporic movements and cultures within stable or meaningful parameters. It may be that both terms, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, have become overextended after much use, and, to borrow Nietzsche’s words, appear canonical and binding («kanonisch und verbindlich»); they are like metaphors without sensory impact or empirical basis, coins that have lost their image and exchange value and can be used only as metal, «Münzen die ihr Bild verloren haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen, in Betracht kommen» (114). To extend the metaphor (and avoid overextending the designations transnational and cosmopolitan), can we melt the metal and recast it in a different mold? Can we cast the character and characteristics of diaspora experiences and cultures in another idiom? Is a transnational writer necessarily a hyphenated (Turkish-German) or multiply hyphenated (German-French-Czech) writer? Or given the increasingly shifting economic, ideological, cultural borders of the world, should we remove the hyphen and consider all writers/artists with translingual and transcultural interest transnational agents of literature and art? Literature is also a «travel-
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ing» language that is, as Bartolini notes above, already composed of many languages (and these, I would add, have already been translated in advance) and that is «open,» «porous,» «inclusive» (87) and ready to merge into other languages to form interlingual alliances. Likewise, innovative literature and art invariably participate in intertextual associations. The transnational writer, broadly defined, considers literature a traveling phenomenon that changes the culture of the spaces it enters and is changed by it.

A more layered understanding of cross-cultural or transnational writing needs to enact both a backward and a forward translation in a geschichtsphilosophisch continuum. Such a strategy lies at the core of cultural translation, which investigates or analyzes cultural differences and convergences not only between geographical entities but also between different temporalities. Simply to graft or superimpose a theoretical model, be this postcolonial, psychoanalytical, or gender specific, on new or emergent forms of writing in a world of increasingly porous borders does not work. On the other hand, the work of translation, an activity that has been indispensable ever since humans have used some form of language, can offer both a historical context and a modern critical insight into diasporic experiences. Many contemporary commentaries on transnational cultures fail to catch the Zeitgeist that gives rise to them, for they almost always circumvent the historical precedents in the chronology of intellectual paradigm shifts. Incorporating critical legacies of translation into the discussion can shed light on contemporary questions of exile and transnationalism. Since language and translation are the twin tropes diaspora writers employ, in the following discussion I also briefly touch on stylistic strategies that destabilize meanings and restabilize them in translational gestures of narration in the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Yōko Tawada.

Translation is conventionally understood as an act that sets into motion a contest for correspondence between two languages that would ideally yield access to the singular modes of expression and models of understanding in a given culture. At the same time, it initiates a competition between expressive powers of respective languages. This contest often poses a threat to the culture that has less power to preserve its expressive legacy. And how can this threat that sets one language against the other and jeopardizes cultural communication and understanding be checked and averted in advance? Under what conditions would languages and cultures be equal partners in translation? What would be the imperative of cultural translatable? Theories of translatability are legion, but let me step back for a moment into the late eighteenth-century moment of early German Romanticism, known as the Frühromantik, where the twin fields of modern hermeneutics and translation premeditated the critical questions of translatability that have been mediated to our contemporary
«transnational» sensibilities through the work of Walter Benjamin, Antoine Berman, Jacques Derrida, and company.

Friedrich Schleiermacher («the veil maker»), who developed hermeneutics into an art of interpretation that went far beyond biblical exegesis and took into its purview all manner of linguistic analysis, in effect unveiled translation as a cultural and sociopolitical act. While his theory of translation has been criticized because of its nationalistic bias – he strove «to shape German into a language of world culture» and educate the citizenry through its linguistic capacities – Schleiermacher argued that «the desire to translate is to be understood positively, as a desire to build community,» and not a desire – by the translating agency – to dominate and domesticate the foreign, a desire incompatible with Schleiermacher’s emphasis on «the interconnectedness of ethics, dialectics, and hermeneutics» (Faull 14). Congruent with Schleiermacher’s theory of language, which understands each speech (Rede) in its historical contingency and with regard to its multireferential nature, is his concept of the «divinatory» (die divinatorische [Auslegung] AS) (Schleiermacher 169) in «psychological interpretation» (psychologische Auslegung), which intimates the perception of the suprasensible (in imagination). In the divinatory method, which complements the comparative method – and the two methods form the basis of psychological interpretation – the interpreter aspires to understand directly and merges into the «other» (the text, the language, or the mind of the writer): «Die divinatorische ist die, welche, indem man sich selbst gleichsam in den andern verwandelt, das Individuelle unmittelbar aufzufassen sucht» (169).

The concept of the divinatory, which has been the source of many misconceptions in Schleiermacher reception, makes perfect sense, if understood in the context of «Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,» Benjamin’s overly referenced essay. Benjamin’s notion of the pure language [die reine Sprache], which connotes a suprasensible or divined language, reveals itself only in translation. This «messianic character of translation,» Derrida notes in reference to Benjamin’s essay, is not a result of translation’s (or interpretation’s) success, because «[a] translation never succeeds in the pure and the absolute sense of the term. Rather, a translation succeeds in promising reconciliation. […] [T]hrough the translation one sees the coming shape of a possible reconciliation. Translation offers the sense or presentiment [or divination, as Schleiermacher would say, AS] of what language itself is – <die reine Sprache.>» This pure language revealed in translation «is what makes a language a language.» Translation shows us «that there is language […] and that there is a plurality of languages which have that kinship with each other coming from their being languages» (Derrida, «Roundtable on Translation» 123). Thus, both the original language
and the translation should be recognizable «als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache» (Benjamin 59). This larger language denotes the translatability of all language. What does this really mean? Benjamin explains thus: one can speak of an unforgettable life or moment that, although it may be forgotten by everyone, lives in God’s memory [Gedenken Gottes]. By the same token, the translatability of language holds the promise of being fulfilled, even if it proves to be untranslatable by human beings (Benjamin 51). The desire inherent in this metaphysics of translation is itself the deepest expression of freedom from rankings of status among languages.

Although Benjamin sees the pure language of translation as an arbiter between languages (59), the tales of today’s displaced and exiled come with a more sobering message: that other worlds are not necessarily transparent in translation, that there are spaces of irreducible untranslatability between cultures, that such spaces mark the silences of exile, and that the idea(ity) of a pure language that equalizes languages does not conform to the reality of a world where many are dispossessed of their familiar spaces and the hospitable environment of their own idiom. It is in the work of writers whose writing is conceived in and operates between cultural heritages and addresses issues confronting what I call «paranational» communities that problems of cultural translation are perhaps best articulated. These works represent the influence of cultural translation on the world of interdependent economies that have emerged from the transnational movement of capital and, in turn, necessitated increased communication across languages and cultures. In my earlier work, I considered the unruly bi- and multilingualism of these works as representing transnational intellectual and cultural crossings. What do such concepts as the transnational and global really mean today? University administrators pronounce statements like «we have to train global citizens» so frequently and unthinkingly that these have been emptied of all meaningful content. The idea of the global resides neither in the universal, since that Enlightenment ideal is seen as culturally specific, nor in the normative parity of cultures in a hermeneutic pact but in the constant interaction and interpretation of cultural differences which we understand as a process of cultural translation.

The literary expression of contemporary exilic experience embodies a culturally and emotionally more complex sensibility than that of the long-established exile literature which claims an illustrious past, particularly in the work of such writers as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, or James Joyce. The unprecedented scale of mass migrations that have marked the last decades of the twentieth century have thrown issues of cultural, public, and collective memory as well as national or ethnic identity in sharp re-
lief. Although modern writers of diaspora invest a certain amount of heritage capital in their work, their literary and sociocultural portfolio has become increasingly diverse. This diversification has not only expanded and transformed the semantic field of «transnational» but also given rise to an imposition of commentary to contain the steady flow of literary and critical works issuing from national, international, between-national spaces. Since questions of the transnational, of location and nation, and of identity now confront us with a particular insistence, the critic needs to summon, in Cynthia Ozick’s words, «multiple histories, multiple libraries, multiple metaphysics and intuitions» (73) that make good on the promise of nonexclusionary conversations that lead to an understanding of different, unknown, or emergent cultural movements.

The multiple starts with the singular that casts abstract argument in the form of detail, a specific idiom, in the corporeality of re-membered languages fractured, erased, or lost in traumas of colonialism, political persecution, abjection, and military invasions of sovereign states by arrogant superpowers. The scribes and artists of diasporic geographies become translators/voices of the dead – of languages and cultures drowned in the currents of colonialist expansion. But they are also translators of living languages that are, nevertheless, relegated to diminished status in a Europolitan culture. In the alternative spaces now being created in that cultural geography, the transcultural intellectuals, whether they write in the language of their homeland or host land, move far beyond sociologically oriented accounts of the migrant experience through works of unprecedented sociopoetic scope. They become cultural translators in the most comprehensive sense of the term, for in narrating they not only link personal or community memory to a larger history (often in autobiographical voices that serve as what I have elsewhere called an unauthorized biography of the nation) but also correct the misinterpretation/flawed translation of their languages/cultures in the host country.

Two prominent multilingual women writers, writing in Germany in their – to use Assia Djebar’s felicitous phrase – «stepmother tongue,» Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who is Turkish born, and Yōko Tawada, who is well known both in her native Japan and in Germany for her critical fictions, have shown that questions of translation and bi- or multilingualism confront prejudices that go beyond problems in cultural communication. By remapping the territory of translation, Özdamar and Tawada initiate a conversation above and beyond nationality and race and provide novel forms of linguistic identity to travelers between languages. Although the two writers hail from the opposite borders of the East, their writing is informed by an uncanny resemblance in terms of an alienating/foreignizing translation of their respective idioms that
jolts German readers into reflecting on the biases of their own language use and how this in advance condemns the foreign. Their work is a testimony to Benjamin’s view that translation reveals the essence of language, language as such, and the visible and hidden kinships between languages. Through a third language, German, Özdamar and Tawada «translate» Japanese into Turkish and vice versa, and this three-way translation supplements, in the Benjaminian— and Romantic— sense, the two original languages. At the same time, translation illuminates or points to inexplicable content or the impossibility of interpretation. In one of her essays, Tawada speculates that since a lot of meat is eaten in German culture, German curse words often name animals that are cannibalized— e.g., Kuh, Schwein— and since the Japanese diet is mostly vegetable based, Japanese curse words make use of vegetable names, e.g., a stupid person is an eggplant [Aubergine], a provincial person a potato [Kartoffel], a teacher who cannot teach, is paprika (Überseezungen 25). Özdamar reflects similarly on her mother tongue in a collection, aptly named Mutterzunge [Mother Tongue]— here the translation illuminates something that is concealed in the original. While tongue also means language in Turkish and English, it does not in German. Özdamar explains this by showing how in Turkish tongue is used metaphorically to express a range of linguistic and oratory skills.

In his introduction to Yōko Tawada: Voices from Everywhere, Doug Slaymaker names the artistic markers of Tawada’s work as «parody and tongue-in-cheek joking, non-sequiturs that hide surreal punches, winks at myths and folktales, and persistent toying with national identities and linguistic traditions» (1). Özdamar employs almost identical writing strategies. As a professional actress and theater director, she choreographs intricate steps of words that weave in and out of languages. In her bilingually titled stage play, «Karagöz in Alamania/Schwarzauge in Deutschland,» included in Mutterzunge, she borrows the figure of the protagonist Karagöz from a traditional Ottoman-Turkish shadow play, where a cast of characters from the diverse ethnic populations of the Ottoman Empire spar in different idioms and exchange double entendres to comic effect. In Özdamar’s play, Karagöz is a migrant worker and crosses the border into Germany with his talking donkey who smokes Camel cigarettes and lectures on Marxism. The play’s motley crew speaks in different tongues, switching and transferring codes. The object of Özdamar’s relentless parody is capitalism’s ruthless exploitation of human labor and resources. The indentured laborers are not only alienated from their work, in the Marxist sense, but also from their origins, languages, and families. The play proceeds in the tempo of a macabre tango between various borders.
In a certain sense, Tawada and Özdamar share a Nietzschean sensibility that sees the truth of human experience as embedded in metaphor (as in «Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn»). For these two cultural translators, metaphor metamorphosizes the world and our experience of it in a way that defies constriction and conscription. Metaphor reminds us of a time before the emergence of logical thought. In Tawada’s view, under the dominance of language that claimed reason and truth, the metaphorical force of language was repressed. Its purchase now survives only in literature and dreams. In constantly translating German and Japanese – and also English – into the terms of the other, Tawada shows how cultural difference is performed in linguistic space. This space is both the absence of a lost language and its circuitous transport into a new idiom. But is it really an alternative space where a translingual and transnational agent can claim a nonterrestrial geography? I’ll return to this loaded and, by now, contested question momentarily.

As various forms of migrant experience – intellectual, academic, economic, sociopolitical – impinge on historically rooted and orthodox lives and communities, those affected by such experience often engage in corrective retranslations of cultural mistranslations that reveal new forms of knowledge. Adolf Muschg, a contemporary Swiss author who grew up in Japan, attempted to translate the masks of Japanese faces into a recognizable German idiom. In «Japan – Versuch eines fraktalen Porträts,» the central essay of his book *Die Insel, die Kolumbus nicht gefunden hat: Sieben Gesichter Japans*, Muschg begins with a reference to Churchill’s famous bon mot about Japan as «a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma» (34) to underline the «Mehrdeutigkeit» that informs Japanese culture which we mistakenly see as «fuzzy logic» (38). What Churchill may have seen as fuzzy logic, Muschg sees as open-endedness and generativity (a marker of Tawada’s writing) that has enabled the Japanese to regenerate tradition or update it in the wake of relentless technological progress without giving in to traditionalism. By employing the critically valorized notion of multivalence, Muschg explains the enigma in terms understandable to the reader/critic schooled in the postmodern notions of the fragmentary, nonlinear, or nonreferential. Before Muschg, another German-speaking author Kurt Singer, a refugee from the Nazis who taught for many years in Japan, translated the enigma of Japanese signs, so to speak, into English through the lens of German idealistic philosophy – a three-way translation. While Singer’s *Mirror, Sword, and Jewel* has for long been considered the most insightful portrait of Japanese culture by an outsider, it is in Tawada’s work – a form of self-translation (since she writes in German) and retranslation – that the multiply embedded riddle reveals itself not in explana-
tion but as an experience of the absence of explanation, as the experience of the irreducibility of the enigma. Tawada as well as Özdamar both alienate the reader with language games whose rules are not given and invite them to cross the bridge that simultaneously connects and separates the original and target languages.

While these various forms of cultural translation suspend absolute concepts of home and nation, do they offer the displaced a sense of place that preserves the integrity of their diminished or lost languages in the continuum of their (hi)stories? The social and political significance of translation inheres in the process of nation building. While deconstructionist readings of various persuasions can debunk all essentialisms, it is the actual dictate of political realities – the great divide between, say, the superpowers and the «small nations» that Milan Kundera sees «secluded behind their inaccessible languages» (Testaments Betrayed 193) – that constitutes our lived experience. Here Kundera is not referring to a smallness of scale, but of destiny, the destiny of nations that have at some point or another «passed through the antechamber of death; always faced with the arrogant ignorance of large nations» (192). So, why do we have so little access to other imaginations and forms of knowledge? Who declares these languages inaccessible? English, French, and German were inaccessible to Tawada, Özdamar, Rafik Schami, Said, and many others before they engaged in their translational endeavors. The recognition that they were expected to access the inaccessible does not suffice to rectify such lack of parity.

Although I once used the term «transnational literature» to define/designate mostly those literary narratives written outside the nation by authors no longer residing in their homelands and negotiating different cultural idioms, it is probably time to expand the semantic field of the term to include writing written inside national borders yet that defies the limits of nation-specific canons. It is not only the writers of diasporas who translate from spaces at the intersection of different languages – of the home land and the host land – and personal and communal destiny, but also writers writing from «home,» such as Orhan Pamuk, German-speaking writers Sten Nadolny, Barbara Frischmuth, or Robert Menasse, who have broadened the scope of transnational and translational engagement. Their writing variously challenges the traditional notion of the nation state as a locus of identity and an object of affiliation. As the network of international and multinational connections expands, the consequences of one- or two-dimensional representations of other selves, cultures, beliefs, and practices begin to show dire effects beyond the borders of text and image and demand the recognition of diversity in the ways we live, learn, worship, become political, fight, and die. While academic and intellec-
tual imaginations and discourses create theoretical or virtual spaces for genuine democratization, their translation into intervention in actual sociopolitical life is poised at the initial station(s) of an unmapped itinerary.

On the other hand, writers and artists, such as the Spaniard Juan Goytisolo, living in self-imposed exile in North Africa, the Austrian novelist and critic Robert Menasse, the Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk, currently teaching at Columbia University, or filmmakers, such as the Turkish-German Fatih Akın, the Indian Mira Nair, or the Mexican Guillermo del Toro, all living and working between literal and figural borders, explore the transnational not so much as a literal crossing of boundaries but as a way of being and seeing which includes means of approaching time and space, complex constructions of selfhood, and ways of navigating our pathways through the world. They bear witness to the centrality of fiction, of representation, of translation – which, as the German Romantics and Walter Benjamin, whose doctoral dissertation was on the concept of art criticism in German Romanticism, well knew, is representation par excellence – to our understanding of our and others’ worlds. Speaking the «stranger’s» language may be the most empathetic form of identification with the others. While we cannot learn all the languages of the others we hope to understand, an engagement with translating in the many senses of the term brings us, as in Schleiermacher’s favored model of translation, whereby the translator brings the reader to the text rather than bringing the text to the reader, to intersubjective understanding. In Oneself as Another, Paul Ricœur remarks that the life history of each one of us is caught up in the histories of others. He then asks if this entanglement of life stories with one another is hostile to the narrative understanding nourished by literature, or if it finds in these interlocking narratives a model of intelligibility (161).

The transnational writers participate in different collectivities, lend voice not only to their own compatriots in exile but also to those exiled in their own lands, and employ the metaphorical purchase of language(s) to empower its subjects. In the final analysis, translation marks an entry point into another language and culture. It also implies disassembling and reassembling language. In every reassembly there is the danger of a gap caused by parts that may be missing or are misaligned. Ultimately, how we assemble our versions of the self, translate ourselves, lies at the core of our identity, our forms of being and seeing and facing the brave new world. The tales of transnational Scheherazades recover the centrality of fiction to our understanding of how cultures get interpreted as they move from geography to geography and generation to generation.


