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Sepp, Arvi

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DIVERSITY, MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL TRANSFER: THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

Arvi Sepp¹

Introduction

An analysis of transculture can be justified on the one hand as regards its interdisciplinary orientation, and on the other (hand) because its constructivist concept of culture relates specifically to mental, social and material culture. In this interdisciplinary context, concepts have become established in various disciplines which overlap with transcultural research (see Welsch, 1999), such as in works on hybridity, interculturality, or the *third space*, although these sometimes set different accents or proceed differently terms of their conceptual operationalization (see Rau, Lavorano & Mehnert, 2016, p. 7). The discussion of the dynamic relationship between identity and alterity, between self and other – however differently these concepts may be defined – is the main focus of interest in this contribution. It is therefore necessary to encircle the respective cultural associations and their consequences, and to identify them accordingly. Due to the incompleteness and dynamics of transcultural contacts, this must in principle always remain incomplete and limited.²

According to Georgeta Vancea, the pattern of interpretation of transcultural literature is based on its alleged "ethical-aesthetic potency" (Vancea, 2008, p. 5), which undermines clichéd images of cultural minorities, migration, integration and assimilation, and allows authors to intervene in public debates "on migration, conflicts, multiculturalism, strangeness, xenophobia and on the dissolution of boundaries and networks" (p. 1). The analysis of transculturalism focuses on the dynamics and permeability of multilingual texts, and its multiple exchange processes with other literatures, cultures and languages.

The model of transcultural interdependencies contrasts with that of interculturality. While interculturality on a hermeneutic basis points to the bipolar interrelationships between cultures, the model of transculturality is stems from concepts of cultural studies which effectively transcend binary boundaries between cultures (see Mitterbauer, 2012, p. 223). That the understanding of culture in Western societies has proven to be unstable in the face of conflicting globalization tendencies has been shown, for example, by the progressive deconstruction or refusal of the 'bridge' metaphor in literature, away from what the German-Turkish writer Aras Ören formulated as the potentiality of "migrant literature" as a kind of bridge between cultures that he developed as early as the 1970s. Although he emphasized its function as a "third space" in this context, he also noted that the bridge itself had become an autonomous - but increasingly unifying - reality:

But with time it turned out that the two ends of the bridge were no longer connected to its banks. They could no longer be. It is important not to imagine that the bridge would have shortened. On the contrary, it seems to me as if the bridge has become longer and longer, it is still expanding, but at an even greater speed the two banks on which it rested are moving apart. In the course of time the bridge has become an independent piece of reality. (Ören, 1977, p. 70 [epilogue])

About a decade later, Yoko Tawada, in her essay "Ich wollte keine Brücke schlagen" ("I didn't want to build a bridge", 1997), addresses the obvious desire of literary critics to build a multicultural bridge between Europe and the Far East (see Tawada, 1997). In Tawada's view, however, transnational literature cannot be reduced to merely the symbolic expression of an (ethno-cultural) collectivity, as its critical infiltration of

* All translations of foreign-language quotes are mine.

¹ Prof. dr., Vrije Universiteit Brussel/Universiteit Antwerpen, e-mail: arvi.sepp@vub.be/arvi.sepp@uantwerpen.be

² For more information on the concepts of 'cultural transfer' and 'transculture', see Sepp (2018).

German-Japanese differences consistently demonstrates. Even if geographical borders may seem increasingly insignificant, it would appear that cultural and linguistic boundaries remain largely intact (see Kraenzle, 2007, p. 107). Similarly, the ethnic categorization of transcultural literature in Germany has been radically influenced by the Turkish-German writer Güney Dal, who explicitly states that he is "not a bridge" between Turkey and Germany, just as he is not a "model Turk". As such, he protests against a reception that ignores the singularity of his works, but rather emphasizes the socio-political import of his texts (see Broder, 2000. p. 34).

The term "transculturality" does not negate the existence of relatively independent cultures, but rather emphasizes the constructiveness of the idea of separate cultural spaces. Cultural self-image, national consciousness and chosen literary languages can by no means be equated. A processual conceptualization of the cultural is not only relevant for the analysis of so-called "migration literature" of e.g. Emine Sevgi Özdamar,³ but also of texts by Galsan Tschinag or Yoko Tawada, for example, whose focus has little to do with migration in the narrower sense. Furthermore, minority literatures, which are located on the multilingual peripheries of their respective linguistic areas, are also characterized by the transfer aspect of cultural relations.⁴

This cultural transfer character, which in transfer research – whose representatives notably include Michel Espagne – can no longer be conceived simply "as a linear connection between two or three units of investigation". Rather it is characterized by multiple processes of exchange of information, discourses, symbols and practices which invariably lead to cultural transformations and reinterpretations (see Mitterbauer, 2005, p. 111). This transfer, understood as the circulation of cultural elements, occurs both between and within cultures (see p. 111). The mediation by actors which this implies are integrated in networks, whether these be groups or nation states. Their implication is fundamental to this transfer process, because it is these actors who make the selection (see p. 113).

Democracy, Understanding, and Multilingualism

The world as a meaningful place is always a phenomenon that is conveyed in particular through language. To understand and take into account the 'otherness' of others in the world by means of linguistic sign processes poses a challenge within all ethical codes. A communicative ethic in conversation, of wanting to understand oneself as a translation, is, for example, asserted by Zafer Şenocak: "Every conversation that wants to be more than a meeting of monologues is translation" (Şenocak, 2011. p. 17). In order to understand the other person, one must engage with his or her sense of truth, and this understanding is always language-related, as Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes in *Wahrheit und Methode*, his hermeneutics of language philosophy. Accordingly, language always functions on the "border horizon of an hermeneutic experience of being" (Stolze, 2003, p. 71), which includes that of the other and other linguisticities.

Multilingualism in transcultural literature is not primarily pragmatic in nature, but rather aesthetically and ethically determined (see Sepp, 2017, p. 53-66). Its aim is symbolic rather than realistic: it symbolises the variety, contact and blending of cultures and languages (see Wilson, 2011, p. 244-245). Thus, dealing with questions of multilingualism has a distinct ethical dimension: one is born into family, economic, political and national circumstances which determine the linguistic development and future of the individual and the community. The linguistic habitus of the speaker includes inseparable technical and social skills that determine his or her ability to speak and the ability to articulate in a specific, socially required or appropriate way. In that respect, linguistic competence as the basis of linguistic communication is generally also permeated by domination and power.

Against this background, the choice of German as the language of writing instead of his or her first language (i.e. Japanese for Yoko Tawada) or the dominant national language (e.g. German as a minority language in Belgium) also has, according to Georg Kremnitz, direct ethical implications for the debate

³ In this context, Helmut Schmitz speaks of a "paradigmatisation of German-Turkish literature", in that it often functions as a model cultural paradigm of a German immigration society as regards intercultural approaches (see Schmitz, 2009, p. 9).

⁴ Jean-Pierre Bertrand and Lise Gauvin also emphasize the cultural transfer character of peripheral literature in "major" languages in their study of Francophone literature in Canada and Belgium. See Bertrand & Gauvin, 2003.

between the linguistic-cultural periphery as opposed to the centre (see Kremnitz, 2004, p. 202-212). Multilingualism in transcultural communication refers to the preference for communication situations in which one can practice changes of perspective and "put oneself in the position of other participants in the discussion" (Lesch, 2013, p. 21). The equal rights of all discussion partners, the recognition of the other and the possibility horizon of a linguistically conditioned consensus-oriented discussion of norms and values is also considered a basic ethical requirement for transcultural communication in literature. In their foreword to *Grenzen der Überschreitung* (2016), Ariane Rau, Stephanie Lavorano and Carolin Mehnert suggest that if transculturality is understood as involving a communication network that overcomes constellations of power in language policy, then transcultural exchange is no longer bound to two opposing parties, but rather emphasizes the changes of position and dynamics of the dialogue partners (see Rau, Lavorano & Mehnert, 2016, p. 11).

The implicit connection between multilingualism and the rule of law has also been pointedly formulated by Lesch, where an "ethic of multilingualism" becomes "a passionate plea for the future viability of the rule of law and liberal democracy, and not a retreat into an elitist sphere of culture" (Lesch, 2013, p. 28). The ethical potential of multilingualism, however, is also rooted in a fundamental aporia, where a fundamental respect for linguistic diversity risks contradicting the ethical objectives of genuine communicative understanding. From an ethical perspective, it is important on the one hand to deconstruct the discourse of the mother tongue, since this discourse prevents a level of receptivity to the other and his or her linguisticity; while on the other hand, it is important to reinforce the semantics of the mother tongue, so as to enhance the mother tongue's emancipatory power which seeks to dissolve social differences.

From these two perspectives, significant light can therefore be shed on the ethics of multilingualism from two separate perspectives. On the one hand, the relationship between alterity and linguistic reflexivity can be highlighted; while on the other hand, the ethical significance of translation can be explained. Indeed, multilingualism in literature is often a sign of a high degree of linguistic reflexivity, which in turn reveals the contingency of rule-based linguistic systems. By emphasizing the arbitrariness and the non-referentiality of language signs, the idea of 'language ownership' is subjected to deconstructive criticism. Language always emerges from 'the other', which effectively leads to the observation that the difference between mother tongue and foreign language is often relativized in multilingual literature (see Heimböckel, 2013, p. 142). Translation as an analytical category, theoretical concept and linguistic practice is of considerable importance in the debate on multilingualism and ethics. During the cultural turn in literature and cultural studies, translation has increasingly come to the fore as a medium that enhances both foreign cultures and intercultural communication, as well as a deconstruction of the ideology of the mother tongue (see Baumann, 2004, p. 679).

In transcultural literature, the idea of language as 'possession' has been repeatedly deconstructed. In this respect, Yasemin Yildiz speaks in *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (2012) of a "post-monolingual condition" in which we currently find ourselves (see Yildiz, 2012). In *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (1996), Derrida uses the term 'mother tongue' in order to question the relationship between birth and blood on the one hand and language on the other (see Derrida, 1996). If the notion of 'foreign' is fundamentally inscribed in every language, then by extension every language already constitutes a translation: "not an originally natural language, but an originally cultivated, constructed language" (Haverkamp, 1997, p. 9). The connection between the foreign and the self in the first language has been further emphasized by many contemporary authors, such as Herta Müller in the German-Romanian context. In her essay *Heimat ist das, was gesprochen wird*, Müller depicts one's 'own' language as by nature interspersed with 'foreign' elements:

It does not hurt any mother tongue if its overlaps become visible in the events of other languages. On the contrary, to hold one's own language in front of the eyes of the other leads to a thoroughly authenticated relationship, to an unrestrained love. (Müller, 2001, p. 21)

The deconstruction of the national political ideology of individual languages in transcultural literature shows how multilingualism, both with its potential for encounter and conflict, has been staged as an

interference in the social processes of mutual understanding. The linguistic reflexivity in transcultural literature that is often mentioned, accompanied by an emphasis on the fundamental polysemy of linguistic utterances, implies an ethical dimension inasmuch as it demonstrates the multi-track nature of thought as well as the diversity of human coexistence and its resulting social identity constellations.

Transcultural Multiple Identities

The transcultural processes of individuation can be contrasted with the idea of a uniform literary canon within national language spaces (see Rau, Lavorano & Mehnert, 2016, p. 12). Transcultural constellations show how complex concepts of identity are evoked, established and articulated in literature as a differentiated set of relationships. In particular, they underline the extent to which, at first glance, poles of tension such as the global and the local or the universal and the particular are compatible in transcultural identity models. Against this background, Wolfgang Iser asserts that the concept of the transcultural, in its dimension as a dynamic network, includes both the internal differentiation and the external networking of culture:

The concept of transculturation is able to do justice to both global and local, universalist and particularist aspects [...]. Aspirations in terms of globalisation and the need for emphasis on individuation can both be attained within transculturation. Transcultural identities have both a cosmopolitan dimension as well as that of belonging more locally. (Iser, 1997, p. 80).

From the discontinuous transcultural self-designations between cosmopolitan and local affiliation it thus emerges that both personal and collective identity invariably undergoes changes in relation to the lifeworld context and can be, moreover, defined by social inclusion or exclusion.

Here an additional light can be shed on the question of group dissociation as an impulse for socio-critical writing with the possibility of a performative connection between subjective identity and collective foreign designation being established. Based on Louis Althusser's concept of "invocation",⁵ Judith Butler understands identity as the result of a discursive practice of naming, whose material consequences are produced through contained repetition. Performative speech acts generate what they imply and thus can be considered as producing reality. Butler, like Althusser, speaks of a subjugated subject that is assigned an identity by being identified externally. As a performative act of distancing, "collective ascription" is also to be understood as a form of linguistic violence:

Being hurt by speaking means that you lose context, literally not knowing where you are. Perhaps it is precisely the unpredictability of hurtful speech that is the collateral cause of the injury, in that) the addressee is deprived of self-control. (Butler, 2006. p. 13)

Transcultural literature sharply criticizes modes of society in which collective identities operate in a system of hierarchical power relations, by breaking its Manichaean logic between unification and differentiation (see Rau, Lavorano & Mehnert, 2016, p. 13). Zafer Şenocak accordingly emphasizes the cultural plurality of Islam: "There are cultures inspired by Islam, but certainly not Muslim culture" (Şenocak, 2011, p. 96). To avoid falling into the trap of binaristic homogeneity/hybridity, the rhizomatic aesthetics of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari offer a starting point that at least conceptually places transcultural literature in a particular light, whose centreless, non-hierarchical system no longer allows for a difference between the foreign and the own (Deleuze & Guattari, 1976, p. 62).

⁵ In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* Louis Althusser formulates the most important thesis of his theory of ideology as follows "Ideology invokes individuals as subjects." (Althusser, 1977. p. 140). According to the French philosopher, this process of subjectivation can be compared to a policeman in the street saying: "Hey, you there!". (p. 142). At the moment when someone feels addressed and turns around, he has already been subjectivized by the underlying ideology due to the fact that he "recognizes through his action that the call was directed 'exactly' at him." (p. 143)

'Rhizomatic' identity patterns, as they appear in a literary text, can be understood as linked to an approach to the question of the relationship between mental, social and material facets of culture with the concept of "heterotopia" as developed by Michel Foucault, which was metaphorically called "fold" or "convolution" by Gilles Deleuze in his essay "The folds or the inside of thought (subjectivation)" (see Deleuze, 1992). Interestingly, Foucault's model of a linear demarcation between discursive inner and transgressive outer space was modified by himself, following his earlier literary essays from the 1960s and 1970s, in which he focused on the counter-discursive potential of literature, which he extended in his concept of "heterotopia" (see Foucault, 2005). The hybrid space of heterotopia, which can be understood as the *folding of* the outside (*dehors*) into an inside (*dedans*), thus opens up a third place for the literary text, poised on the borderline between life and text. It is precisely this transcultural subjectivity that arises at the point where there is not simply a demarcation between the interior and exterior space, but where, as Deleuze underlines in his philosophical investigation *Foucault* (1992), the exterior space is, as it were, "turned inside out" by a folding into the interior space, and where an inclusion – *un pli* – of inwardness arises: The emergence of the folding of subjectivity is due to a relative permeability of the boundary between inside and outside, which enables a subject to make what is foreign – such as what is heard, read or experienced – his or her own. This 'fold', as Deleuze understands it, represents an intermediate area between discursive and non-discursive practices, creating a kind of complex cultural origami figure that can only come about through folds and which can appear, in a specific form, beyond any cultural essentialism.

Essence and Hybridity of Culture

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said points out that cultures are neither monolithic nor, in a reductive sense, isolated, separate or specific (see Said, 1994, p. xxii). Here, not only is there no essence or spirit of "culture", but also that the definition of "culture" is always thwarted, he asserts, by power discourses and power relations. It is precisely the emphasis on 'hybridity' and the multiple references to Anglo-American *postcolonial theory* in intercultural literary studies that runs the risk of blurring latent power complexes, by assuming implicitly that there is a non-existent equality and equal rights between cultures (see Schmitz, 2009, p. 10). In Zafer Şenocak's early essay, "Das Unbehagen an der Kultur" (1994), the author underlines how the definition of "culture" is established by the majority society: "Culture is a paraphrase of the relations of domination, according to which those in power hold their positions and convince those in power to do the same" (Şenocak, 1994, p. 59-60).

The realities of social differences and the inequalities in material resources for social mobility risk being overlooked if, as Helmut Schmitz also points out, the overemphasis on modern uprootedness and the hybridity and fluidity of identity constellations it produces leads to the normative structure of cultural homogeneity being replaced by a heteronormative model of cultural, geographical and economic hybridity (see Schmitz, 2009, p. 11). The specific differences between modern uprootedness, which cannot be traced back to migration experiences, and a hybrid migration identity would consequently be blurred.

The paradox of transcultural comparisons exists fundamentally in the fact that cultures are conceived as specific entities, with their own codes, characteristics and history, which explain this cultural 'specificity'. In view of such a conceptualization, cultural relations can be described as being contact, mediation, transfer or exchange in nature (see Werner, 2013). On the other hand, the opposite view emphasizes the processual aspect of culture. Culture is, from the outset, a form of negotiation which by definition is always determined by actors and context. In this sense, culture essentially constitutes a process of exchange and transfer.

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