

## TALKS FROM THE CONVENTION

## (M)Other Tongue; or, Exophony

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I want to make a modest case for *exophony* as a term deserving of wider application and scrutiny. The phenomenon of exophony is familiar enough, even if the term itself is not. Put simply, it refers to composition in a nonnative language—which, at first blush, might seem a rather exotic state of literary matter. However, since appearing in Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguschewski, and Robert Stockhammer's 2007 edited collection, *Exophonie: Anderssprachigkeit (in) der Literatur (Exophony: Otherlanguage-d-ness in/of Literature)*, *exophony* has become an increasingly widespread and galvanizing concept in literary studies, of obvious interest to those working on translation but also more generally to those working on migrant or exile literatures, postcolonial literatures, and transnational literatures. Beyond these direct applications of the term, however, I argue that exophony represents not just an exception or special case of translation but the paradigm of literary production as such. To flesh out that thesis, I want to briefly address (and push back on) three related assumptions one often sees at the scene of translation: the idea that translations are secondary or subordinate to the composed literary object (i.e., the original), the idea that exophonic writers represent a vanishingly small minority, and the idea that self-translation is a special case, even among exophonic writers. Assumptions regarding translation as such, then exophony, and finally self-translation: obviously, these are not the only ones we might think about—and I do not treat them in any systematic, sequential way in what follows—but they nonetheless help us begin zeroing in on why translation matters, integrally, for literary studies as a whole.

As a preemptive exercise, maybe we can think about how many exophonic writers we can name off the top of our heads. Here goes: Jhumpa Lahiri; Gary Shteyngart and Kazuo Ishiguro, both of whom moved to English-speaking countries as children (though Ishiguro claims to remember little to no Japanese); Aleksandar

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709

Hemon; Edwidge Danticat; Tahar Ben Jelloun and Assia Djebar (in fact, a great many writers of the Maghreb); Shanxing Wang; Salvador Plascencia; Vladimir Nabokov; Milan Kundera; Ágota Kristóf; Ha Jin; Joseph Conrad; Joseph Brodsky; Samuel Beckett; and Yōko Tawada. . . and this only scratches the surface. If we allow ourselves to go further back in time, the list quickly grows: Oscar Wilde, who wrote *Salomé* in French; William Beckford, who wrote *Vathek* in French; Voltaire, who wrote essays in English; John Milton, who wrote poems in Latin and Italian. Even if this list reflects my own preferences and limitations as a reader, one can see where it is going: setting aside the huge volume of material composed in various court languages, by the time we reach back to the Middle Ages, exophony is the rule, not the exception. When we boomerang back to the present, suddenly we seem to find exophony everywhere.

We might also consider cases of pseudo-exophony, like those of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce (to round up some usual modernist suspects), or what I think of as “exophony-once-removed,” to refer to writers knowledgeable enough in another language to engage or otherwise collaborate substantively with their translators. Tawada, who later developed into a fully bilingual exophonic writer, began her career in this way. Her first publication, *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts / あなたのいるところだけ何も無い* (*Only There Where You Are Is There Nothing*; 1987), is a collection of poems composed in Japanese and presented alongside German translations prepared by Peter Pörtner. Because German and Japanese pagination run in opposite directions, the collection invites a boustrophedonic reading, ordering the poems first in one way and then the other, discomfiting the presumed hierarchy between original and translation. Depending on one’s linguistic preference, the poem “計画 / Der Plan,” for example, occurs either at the beginning or end of the collection, either first in Japanese and then German translation or vice versa. An overtly feminist poem, it is at the same time a “parable of ‘exophony’” (Masumoto 10), framing the speaker’s psychosexual rejection of the maternal order as a prerequisite to poetic self-

determination. In other words, the political dilemma of the poem is intimately bound up with a linguistic one: it is a question of summoning up the nerve to resist not just mother but the mother tongue as well. Tawada stages all this not only within the poem itself but also in terms of its relation to Pörtner’s German rendering.

A perpetual embarrassment of translation theory has been the translation’s subordination to the original, a subordination as much ontological as chronological: the translation arrives after the original (the way one original may arrive after another) and would not exist without the original. In poems like “計画 / Der Plan,” Tawada airs this embarrassment, much like Lawrence Venuti, Karen Emmerich, and other scholars, while also proposing a kind of solution or workaround: the volume’s mise-en-page exploits, even intensifies, the many differences between Japanese and German, producing a collection that can be read from one direction or the other, deprioritizing the original work. At the same time, these differences are as likely to produce startling harmonies as dissonances. Consider the poem’s alternate titles: both 計画 and *Der Plan* carry a temporal sense (e.g., a plan of action, a thing or series of things to do in future) as well as a spatial one (e.g., a visual schema or design). However, Pörtner’s version below perhaps emphasizes the temporal whereas Tawada’s plays up the spatial:

#### 計画

おかあちゃんが、わたしの畳の上に味噌汁をこぼしてしまった。わたしは、がっかりして、来る日も来る日も、ダイズとニボシの染みついた畳を雑布でぬぐい続けた。おばあちゃんのこぼした味噌汁をおかあちゃんが一生ぬぐい続けたように。

ある日、わたしは、雑布をたたきつけ、湧き起る嘲笑の中を出発した。

一、耳の穴に花束をあふれさせ、燈台に向かって歌うこと

一、蟻たちを呼び集め、正三角形を作ること

一、ゆで卵を星空に向かって投げること

(8/121)<sup>1</sup>

## Der Plan

Mutter hatte  
auf meinen Teppich  
Suppe verschüttet.  
Verärgert wischte ich  
am kommenden Tag  
und den Tagen danach  
mit einem Lappen  
die Bohnenreste und die Reste vom Fisch  
von meinem Teppich.  
Genauso wie Mutter  
die von der Großmutter verschüttete Suppe  
ihr ganzes Leben lang  
weggewischt hatte.  
Eines Tages  
warf ich den Lappen weg  
und brach mir einen Weg durch das Gelächter  
das um mich aufkochte.

1. Laß den Blumenstrauß im Ohrloch überfließen  
und singe in Richtung des Leuchturms.
2. Ruf die Ameisen herbei und laß sie ein  
Dreieck bilden.
3. Wirf ein gekochtes Ei in den Sternenhimmel.  
(120/9)

Setting aside the fact that a *Teppich* (“carpet” or “rug”) covers a floor while a *tatami* 畳 is itself the floor, each term conveys very different spatial information. Whereas *Teppich* might connote anything from an area rug to wall-to-wall carpet, *tatami* are invariably twice as long as they are wide (roughly six feet by three feet), so that Japanese rooms are measured not in square feet or meters but in the number of *tatami* they accommodate: that is, *tatami* are the measure of domestic space. Given this invariable ratio of width to length, we are invited in Tawada’s Japanese version to visualize the inky text on the page as an image of the soup stain on the *tatami*. The etymology of 計画 further underscores this association, particularly the second character 画, conveying (among other things) the sense of the physical brushstrokes of kanji characters. In other words, the Japanese title suggests a strong connection to written and spoken language not necessarily found in the German.

Even to the eye, Pörtner takes a number of intriguing liberties. Tawada’s two prose paragraphs are converted into stanzas consisting of seventeen enjambed lines, and the final three lines in the German version are numbered—cardinality gives way to ordinality, the bulleted list of three items now implies a numerical sequence of actions. Even the typographic quirk of German capitalization produces a visual rhythm different from that of *kanji* and *kana*. Tawada’s poem is not just reformatted but also localized for the German reader. A slightly literal rendering of each version will give a starker sense of the differences. Here are my English versions of Tawada’s Japanese and Pörtner’s German:

## Plan

Mama spilled miso soup all over my *tatami*. Day after day, demoralized, I wiped the *tatami* permeated with soybean and dried sardine. Just as mama had her whole life wiped up the miso soup that grandma spilled.

Then one day, I threw down the rag and set out through the mockery that boiled up.

—Let the bouquet overflow the ear hole and sing toward the lighthouse

—Rally the ants and form an equilateral triangle

—Throw a boiled egg at the starry sky

## The Plan

Mother had  
spilled soup  
on my carpet.  
Upset, I wiped up  
the next day  
and the days after that  
the leftover beans and the leftover fish  
from my carpet.  
Just as mother  
had wiped up  
all her life  
the soup Grandmother spilled.

## One day

I threw away the rag  
and broke myself a path through the laughter  
that boiled up around me.

1. Let the bouquet overflow in the ear hole and sing toward the lighthouse.
2. Summon here the ants and let them make a triangle.
3. Throw a boiled egg into the starry sky.

For Tawada, the differences between her version and Pörtner's represent not infidelities but something like what Venuti calls "hermeneutic" encounters (*Contra Instrumentalism* 2). If the "mother" in question is the mother tongue, then the first section of the poem is about abandoning one language—and its interminable cleanup duties—to open the possibility of another, more defiant and poetic one: the three surrealistic pronouncements that conclude the poem and presumably comprise its titular "plan." Pörtner's translation, which offers up an interpretation of the Japanese version, parallels the revelation of the poem's composition; it is part of the ongoing unfolding of the poem. This unfolding, with its concomitant strangeness, its rejection of conventional beauty, is not just an aesthetic phenomenon for Tawada but a political one, both in the feminist sense already adumbrated (and more or less available on the surface of the poem) and in the broader sense. Tawada has remarked that a primary motivation for her exophony is to combat the "国粹主義的な" ("ultra-nationalistic") notion of "美しい" ("beautiful") Japanese language keyed to dangerous ideas of cultural purity (*Katakoto* 37; my trans.). Tawada surely here has in mind Yasunari Kawabata's 1968 Nobel prize acceptance speech, 美しい日本の私 ("Japan, the Beautiful and Myself"), with its evocations of cherry blossoms, tea ceremonies, and similar pre-modern Japanese iconography. The sort of beauty Kawabata invokes is for Tawada too easily and too often appropriated and weaponized; to resist purity is to resist (the fantasy of) monolingualism is to embrace exophony.

Exophony pluralizes rather than hierarchizes. It presents composition and translation on an equal footing in a way that closes the ontological gap that has been one of translation studies' embarrassments. Emmerich's *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals*, which begins with a consideration of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and concludes with the work of Jack Spicer, destabilizes the notion of

the original text. Such originals, to vastly simplify her argument, emerge belatedly as the result of concerted efforts by institutional, disciplinary, and above all market forces with a vested interest in canonicity. (Venuti makes a similar argument in *The Scandals of Translation*, in which he discusses the weird division of labor constructed by institutional and disciplinary forces in order to promote the literary *Ding an Sich*—the original—and subsequently marginalize translation.) The so-called universal appeal of works like *Gilgamesh* often assumes the bizarre notion of linguistic equivalence that, to the translator's embarrassment, "invisibilizes" translation by presenting it as a negligible presto chango. To the contrary, Emmerich asserts, there is nothing "modest" about translation: "The entire translation is a text that didn't exist before: all the words are added; all the words are different. A translation adds a new iteration, in a different language, to the sum total of texts for a work" (3).

I am returned to Walter Benjamin's sense that, as Jacques Derrida puts it, "in the translation the original becomes larger; it grows rather than reproduces itself" ("Des Tours" 191). Exophony, in addition to its other virtues, offers us another way to push ever closer (and in this case, more literally) to the putative original while discomfiting the notion of originals. Chantal Wright instead refers to the exophonic text as a "grey zone" that both alienates and is alienated from any notion of an original, especially one buttressed by ideas of a "national literature" ("Writing" 27). For Wright, Tawada seems most to epitomize the exophonic writer, vacillating between languages with very different grammars as well as different orthographic schemes (kanji and kana versus Latin alphabet) and visual formats (vertical, right-to-left versus horizontal, left-to-right). The issue becomes less about establishing which of Tawada's novels are Japanese and which are German—either in conception or composition—than about the mutual pressure of defamiliarization that each language exerts on the other. This defamiliarization can appear in style—for example, in the form of neologisms and other wordplay, grammatical deformations or errors, broken or telegraphic language—and also in content.

Whatever the origin of the text (whether it was conceived in the language of its composition) and whatever its destiny, so to speak (the extent to which it emerges from the “grey zone,” the defamiliarizing but also fruitful overlap between languages), the text emerges straightaway as a product of self-translation.

This defamiliarization takes us finally to the third assumption, that self-translation is a special case, even among exophonic writers. Of the writers listed above, only a few (Nabokov, Beckett, and Lahiri) translated their own work into the “other” language. While most exophonic writers are not listed on the book jacket as their own translators, the work, philosophically speaking, is always already the product of translation. Miho Matsunaga uses the expression “Partnertexten” to describe the relation between Tawada’s German and Japanese texts, because exophony makes translation a permanent feature of the writing process (534). Tawada’s translational poetics insistently “point to the reverberation and figurations of languages” through experimental techniques including “literal and interlinear translation, translations featuring certain characteristics of computer translation, surface translations, strategic non-translations, and self-translations within one work, from German works into Japanese or vice versa” (Brandt 181).

Here the seemingly exceptional case of exophony and self-translation suddenly assumes a startling theoretical centrality. Consider Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s study of Kafka, *Toward a Minor Literature*, or Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other*. What these two works have in common, which bears on exophony, translation, and self-translation, is a profound incredulity toward the notion of a mother tongue. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka’s work emerges from a kind of productive impasse or force field of competing languages—German, Czech, Yiddish, and Hebrew—none of which (on account of the others) is fully “occupied” or “possessed,” and thus the site of his literary enunciation is always minoritarian and subversive, an “absolute deterritorialization” that makes Kafka “a sort of stranger *within* his own language” (26). In a similar vein, Derrida—a Jewish, Parisian *piéd-noir*—finds in the “exceptional situation” of Franco-Maghrebian writers “a universal

structure . . . an originary ‘alienation’ that institutes every language as a language of the other,” a condition he calls “the impossible property of a language” (*Monolingualism* 63). In other words, even in the monolingual situation, one is always speaking a foreign tongue; the multilingual or exophonic situation simply brings this to the fore. All language is, to use an expression from Tawada’s most recent novel, “homemade language” (*Scattered All Over the Earth* 7).

To the extent that we credit these insights, we are forced to concede that at some level exophonic writers represent not a vanishingly small minority but the entire community of writers, and indeed language users. Exophony represents not an exception or special case of translation but the paradigm of literary production as such. Put differently, and less polemically, if we want to understand literary production—particularly in a way that preserves its political stakes—we could do worse than begin with a phenomenon like exophony. And at the mention of politics, maybe what I want to emphasize in the end is that exophony, for me, represents less a state of schism or dispossession than a precondition for solidarity. And this for me is, humanly speaking, the task of the translator.

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## NOTES

These remarks were originally offered two days after the riots on 6 January 2021.

1. I give dual page numbers for quotations from “計画 / *Der Plan*”; the first number represents the page if the poem is read according to the perspective of its language, and the second number represents the page from the perspective of the other language.

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