

## **A new German, singularly Turkish. Reading Emine Sevgi Özdamar with Derrida's**

### ***Monolingualism of the Other***

**Birgit Mara Kaiser**

We might call the language of Emine Sevgi Özdamar's novels and short stories a sort of liminal German. As a writer who migrated from Turkey to Germany in the late 1960s on a work visa during a first wave of Turkish labour migration to Germany, who learned German upon arrival and began to write in German in the early 1980s, she was positioned at first on the margins of German literature. This liminality underlies most discussions of Özdamar's by now canonized texts as either examples of Turkish-German migrant literature (Yegenoglu 2005) or as border zone writings (Seyhan 2001). However, the specific composition of Özdamar's texts challenges a reading of them as being somehow *between* Turkey and Germany, which the hyphenated term Turkish-German, but also the border zone implicitly rest on. Her texts certainly resist any straightforward placement within German literature, given their frequent Turkish settings, their references to Turkish history and culture, and their somewhat warped use of the German language. Written in German, they often resonate with underlying Turkish expressions and proverbs that Özdamar translates literally into German, as Leslie Adelson (2005), Bettina Brandt (2004), or Yasemin Yildiz (2008) have demonstrated, producing a highly unusual German with traces of Turkish. These traces are only decipherable as such to readers versed in Turkish, but they are audible as disruptions of a 'standard' use of German to any reader proficient in German, whether or not one is able to say that this disruption stems from a Turkish subtext. In that sense, her texts are situated in the interstices of the Turkish and German languages, as well as of Turkish and German literature. However, to think of this complex literary labour – and of the specific liminality of Özdamar's German – as the expression of a hyphenated migrant existence between cultures

does not carry far enough. Özdamar's texts demand that we pay close attention to their poeticity and aesthetics, as I would like to argue, and if we do, a liminal positioning becomes audible that moves beyond the implications of a migrant caught between cultures.

Border-crossings and the interstices resulting from them are central issues in contemporary discussions of literature by writers who personally experienced migration and whose poetic language differs from their native tongue. And undoubtedly, 'living the history of border crossings, deterritorialization and reterritorialization' which many migrants experience, 'dismantles the core of monolithic national and ethnic identities'.<sup>1</sup> If we examine how the literary expressions of writers, who have migrated in one way or another, take issue with border-crossings, we can indeed question a holistic concept of the nation and the assumed correlation of nation and language. And in that sense, a 'new German literature' under which Özdamar's texts are subsumed does raise questions about the assumed homogeneity of traditional conceptions of German literature, if this was understood as literature written by native speakers of German. From such a perspective, taking these writings as expressions of 'cultural borderlands'<sup>2</sup> permits to deconstruct the presumed unity and homogeneity of national languages and national identities, and to highlight that all imagined communities are vitally constituted at and across their borders and in their productively hybrid border zones. But such a perspective stays with the constitution and/or deconstruction of collectives, it does not yet address the articulation and formation of subjectivities in these zones. If we simply transpose the concept of hybridity from cultural border zones to subjectivity, we easily also imagine these border zones as populated by 'hybrid immigrants',<sup>3</sup> a term Meyda Yegenoglu uses in her reading of Özdamar. We imagine hybrid beings, somehow torn between cultures or perpetually suspended on an 'imaginary bridge "between two worlds"'<sup>4</sup> – an image, which Leslie Adelson's 'Against Between: A Manifesto' rightly deplores and that is complemented by the equally unsatisfactory demand for either integration into one of these worlds or

nostalgia for a return to the other. Such an approach is not only unsatisfactory because it implicitly treats worlds as pre-given and somehow resistant to the changes migration effects within collectives; it keeps, in Adelson's words, 'discrete worlds apart as much as it pretends to bring them together'.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach is also unsatisfactory because it overlooks the productive transformations that occur in a writer's imaginary and language, and it forestalls the chance 'to picture them actually crossing the bridge and landing anywhere new'.<sup>6</sup>

We have to remember that Homi Bhabha clearly stressed the production of *newness* as a crucial thrust of his concept of hybridity. To live – as colonized, migrating or nomadic subjects do – at the borderlines of cultures demands, Bhabha notes,

an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art [that engages these borderlines] does not merely recall that past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.<sup>7</sup>

But despite Bhabha's insistence on hybridity as an '*in-between*' space that intervenes and *innovates* and that permits to elaborate 'strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity',<sup>8</sup> the employment of hybridity in critical discourse largely continues to imply the suspension or split between cultures. Bhabha's *in-between* seems to have retranslated into readings of 'migrant' literature as expressing positions somehow *between* cultures.

Starting from Adelson's critique of the sociological positivism which underlies readings of 'migrant' literature as hanging between pre-established collectives, I will read Özdamar here

with an eye on the 'strategies of selfhood', on the 'new signs' of subjectivity that her texts perform: as intervention in a place and a language, weaving from it a mode of articulation and existence. If we continue to read her texts with a 'hybrid immigrant' in mind, we overlook the creative strategies of selfhood at play in them. In order to delineate this post-nostalgic affirmation of selfhood-in-the-making, situated in one language which is nevertheless diffracted and singularized by the specific twists and layers of a unique voice, it is helpful to read Özdamar together with Derrida's notion of a monolingualism of the other, which he developed in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin* in 1996 [English 1998].

The point of Derrida's monolingualism of the other is that it thinks through the paradox of an articulation of singularities, as singular *and* co-emergent with others. This is highly relevant precisely if we wish to take a fresh look at literatures and articulations beyond a logic of 'between', if we wish to consider these articulations as practices and expressions starting from singular bodies (of texts or people) rather than collectives of belonging. Derrida's monolingualism of the other addresses – focussing on one's relation to language – the paradox of being bound to a language that comes from and is addressed to the other, and yet making it one's 'own', the 'natural habitat'<sup>9</sup> of this very body. Derrida speaks of such a paradoxical structure as an 'alienation without alienation'<sup>10</sup>, but what simultaneously occurs – as the flipside of Derrida's point, so to speak – is also an 'appropriation without appropriation': one speaks the language of the other, never one's own, and yet articulates and becomes in it, since one has no other. And in this vein, this process becomes – to evoke Bhabha again – a 'part of the *necessity*, not the nostalgia, of living'. Derrida's monolingualism of the other is not to be confused with unilingualism (the speaking of one pure language) or with bilingualism (the continuous mediation between two language). It is precisely in conversation with and distinction from Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Amour Bilingue*

(1983) that Derrida develops this notion: the condition that our mother tongue is always the language of and from the other, but that – on that basis – we perpetually provisionally make it our ‘own’. In this sense, Derrida’s concept affirms the state of our contemporary world as ‘postmonolingual’<sup>11</sup> if we understood monolingual in the classical sense of homogenous national languages and the speaking of nothing but one language. Languages are no longer – and never were – monolingual in that sense and our contemporary world is past any illusion of such unilingualism. But while affirming the inherent otherness and plurality in language, which precludes any such ‘simple’ monolingualism from the start, Derrida affirms simultaneously that on that basis we are required to account for the fact that there are singular bodies expressing themselves in uniquely inflected tongues – bodies or ‘persons’ are monolingual *of the other* to the extent that they voice *this very* unexchangeable (re)configuration of the language of the other.

Conceptually, we might still lack the terms to describe these strategies of selfhood, and we continue to use terms like ‘between’ and ‘hybrid’ or take recourse to hyphens (as in Turkish-German or Franco-Maghrebian). But Özdamar’s texts present more than that; they show the ‘interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of *identification*, [which is] precisely not identity’.<sup>12</sup> The difference Derrida stresses here between identity and identification is an important one: identification highlights *process* over any ready-made product and *praxis* over property. Both imply the formation of subjectivity as an on-going, partly corporeal, partly imaginary praxis, in which a whole range of cultural and imaginary repertoires and phantasmatic impressions and scenes get diffracted. In what follows, I would like to pursue this praxis in detail. I will first pay attention to the autobiographical resonances in Özdamar’s work, which highlight her texts as ‘strategies of self’ albeit with a difference from the plain representation of a migrant’s life (section I), and then look at the poetic alterations of German as a praxis that initiates new ways of articulating subjectivity (section II). Reading both of

these dimensions of her work in conjunction, I argue that Özdamar explores the parameters of positions *with-in* German, forging unique articulations that move us beyond borders and between-ness.

### **I. The simulations of autobiography**

In *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida takes his own case of a Jewish French Algerian as an example. From his personal experiences of alterity in colonial Algeria, heightened under the rule of Vichy France, he unravels what it means to speak – in his case – French, then the language of the colonizer, and yet to make it under these predicaments one's habitat. Starting from his own relation to the French language as a Franco-Maghrebian (a category whose ultimate insufficiency he demonstrates), he discusses the peculiar predicament of speaking a language which is not his, yet to which he is bound and in which he lives. What becomes visible by taking his singular case of a French-colonial-Jewish-Algerian-under-Vichy is a general structure: of language not as property or inner kernel of a speaking self, but as a *relation* and practice of the 'body of an irreplaceable singularity'<sup>13</sup> which in turn inscribes itself into this language and (re)configures both in the process. And it may be, Derrida adds, that specific cases (such as his own) attest to this general practice in an exemplary fashion, making visible what holds true for each of us. Özdamar herself discards the idea of the mother tongue as a privileged kernel of self when she remarks in 'Meine deutschen Wörter haben keine Kindheit', her acceptance speech for the Adalbert-von-Chamisso Prize:<sup>14</sup>

For ten years, people ask me: 'Why do you write in German?' I play theatre for twenty years on German and French stages, and no one there has asked me: 'Why do you play in German?' 'Why do you play in French?' No one has said: 'But one can only express feelings

properly in the mother tongue...’ When I began writing, I did not think at all about the language, in which I should write.<sup>15</sup>

In Özdamar’s prose texts, we find a gesture similar to this brushing aside of an allegedly natural intimacy of the mother tongue: her texts present no melancholic lament over a lost home<sup>16</sup> or authenticity, nor do they speak of (or as) the addition of multiple identities. Beyond melancholia, but also beyond multicultural fragmentation, and far from a sort of eclectic ‘shopping’ for identity by picking and choosing from a range of options, Özdamar’s texts rather forge a way of speaking *with-in* German. By way of an imaginative, poetic labour on German, they diffract German through Turkish.<sup>17</sup> From a singular palimpsest of impressions of migration, autobiographical fictions, poetic affinities, rhetorical playfulness, rich literary intertextualities and the humorous debunking of social types and stereotypes, Özdamar’s texts form a new, unheard-of pattern and weave a ‘monolingual-of-the-other’ intervention into what we consider ‘German’ to signify.

Özdamar installs her writings in a language that she does not simply consider her ‘own’. Speaking of learning German, she said that ‘[p]erhaps one loves about a foreign language precisely this journey. You make a lot of mistakes on the way, but you [...] turn the words left and right, you work with it, you discover it’.<sup>18</sup> She acquired German at the age of twenty, after growing up in Turkey as a speaker of Turkish. But ever since her first play *Karagöz in Alamania. Schwarzauge in Deutschland* (1982), a parody of border-crossing, in which the peasant Karagöz and his donkey travel back and forth through the *Deutschlandtür* (the gate to Germany), she writes in German and has become an important figure of what Adelson termed the ‘Turkish turn in contemporary German literature’.<sup>19</sup> Much like her fellow writer Zafer Şenocak, Özdamar makes German a tool for forging what Şenocak has called a ‘house of words’.<sup>20</sup> Şenocak insists that such a dwelling place must not be seen as reflecting real

referential spaces – that is, we miss the work of the imagination and the fictive distortions if we primarily refer them back to the experiences of migration and social contexts. ‘As I understand it’, Şenocak writes,

a poem is not a reaction to the world in which a human being finds himself, but to the world that he carries *inside* himself. I may, for example, live in Berlin. But is the place inside me Berlin? To what extent Berlin? Which Berlin? Where on earth is Berlin? Perhaps I have a Berlin inside me that is located close to the equator.<sup>21</sup>

Şenocak adds to this affirmation of the *imaginary* spaces we carry inside ourselves, and to the reminder that literary texts are fictions and houses of *words*, that what interests him in this is also the moment ‘when a house becomes one’s own house for a human being’.<sup>22</sup> This tension between life and writing, the ‘tension between personal experience and linguistic imagination’<sup>23</sup> he points to here is equally helpful when reading Özdamar’s texts. The fact that one has imaginary spaces inside oneself which do not match geographical space yet from which one builds one’s ‘house of words’ becomes perhaps most obvious in Özdamar’s two short stories ‘Mein Istanbul’ and ‘Mein Berlin’ in the collection of stories *Der Hof im Spiegel* (2001). The moment when a place becomes one’s own, yet necessarily dis- and reconfigured is already in the title of both, with the bizarre possessive pronoun claiming a city space, *my* Berlin and *my* Istanbul. In ‘Mein Berlin’, a short piece of seven pages, the narrator returns to Berlin after spending nine years in Istanbul and describes personalized Berlin, assembled from memories and observations, frozen into a photo in her mind during her absence: ‘[...] Alexander Kluge. Bockwurst. The Brecht-theatre Berliner Ensemble. Arturo Ui. Canals. Pfaueninsel. Bums at the train station. Pea soup. Lonely women in Café Kranzler [...]’.<sup>24</sup> A narrator with a particularly keen eye for literary sites – many items on the list are names of



plays or writers – blends public and private sites, impressions and references, always with a tension between imagined and real, as Şenocak had insisted. And next to these frozen photographs in one's mind, defying linear time and real space, Özdamar's texts are at the same time clearly autobiographically inspired, with migration as a major theme. In her first collection of stories *Mutterzunge* (1990) a first person narrator claims to have lost her mother tongue and goes to search for it in an unfamiliar West-Berlin. And in her trilogy of novels we can easily confuse this house of words with the life of Özdamar, the person. Like the writer herself, the unnamed narrator in the trilogy's first part *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (1992) grows up in Turkey in the 1950s and 1960s, in a family that is forced to move frequently due to relative poverty. With the humour typical for Özdamar, the narrative follows the girl's coming-of-age and her growing fondness of theatre and literature. The novel ends at the end of her teens, when she decides to leave Istanbul for Berlin on a work-permit that was easy to obtain because bilateral agreements between Turkey and Germany facilitated the recruitment of Turkish men and women as 'guest workers'. The trilogy's second part *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (1998) continues where *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* had left off. Triggered by fights with her mother over poor performance at school due to spending too much time on theatre, the narrator decides to go to Germany to 'work one year, then I will enrol in drama school'.<sup>25</sup> The narrated events again run parallel to Özdamar's own work and studies in Berlin in the late 1960s, her return to Turkey after two years, the ensuing drama lessons in Turkey, the increasing political involvement in the worker's movement and ultimate return to Germany in 1975. In 'Meine deutschen Wörter haben keine Kindheit', Özdamar recalls the sorrow that sparked much of these border-crossings, but also how the love for words and the theatre were at the root of them and in turn helped her to cope. 'Brecht's German words helped me in that big void in Istanbul. Back then in Turkey, word equalled murder. You could be shot, tortured,

hung because of words. [...] I became unhappy in the Turkish language'.<sup>26</sup> But since the tongue has no bones, as she remarks evoking a Turkish proverb (one that was already at the basis of *Mutterzunge*, as we will see momentarily), she 'turned her tongue toward German, and suddenly I was happy – there, at the theatre. [...] I became so happy with Büchner, Kleist, Lenz that I even defrosted my Turkish words which I had put in ice'.<sup>27</sup> The trilogy's last part *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (2003) then follows the narrator's theatre engagement at the *Volksbühne* in East-Berlin during the mid-1970s, again in parallel to Emine Sevgi Özdamar's own life.

The trilogy is so ostensibly close to the author's life that the reader is enticed to read it as another Turkish immigrant in Germany writing about her experiences of travelling back and forth between two worlds. Özdamar makes it quite hard for us, so to speak. But in order to fall for the mirage, we first of all have to disregard the fact that '[a]utobiography [...] is not to be in any way confused with the so-called life of the author, with the corpus of empirical accidents making up the life of an empirically real person'<sup>28</sup> of which Rodolphe Gasché reminds us. But more specifically, we would have to disregard the fact that Özdamar signposts her texts as literary imagination and poetic work on words right from the start. *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* begins with the narrator's hallucinated memories from a time prior to birth. 'First I saw the soldiers, I stood there in my mother's belly between the bars of ice, I wanted to hold on and grabbed the ice and slipped and landed on the same spot, banged on the wall, no one heard'.<sup>29</sup> The first part begins here from a phantasized origin and the trilogy continues to blend the imagined with the real, continuously reminding us of the phantasmatic dimensions of any narration of self and autobiographically inspired writing. We should note this as an attempt to destabilize any conflation of these narratives with the mimetic account of an empirical person's life, the 'corpus of empirical accidents' Gasché referred to.

Hence, by narrating events that are ostensibly close to the author's life, Özdamar's texts evoke autobiography and signal to us that they work on and with a narration of self. But at the same time their mode of composition forestalls any mimetic reading of them as 'mere' autobiography of a migrant. An opening passage from 'Mutterzunge' makes this evident and might serve here as a stand-in for analogous instances in the other texts. After wondering when she lost her mother tongue, the narrator presents a collage of several disconnected scenes in which she chances upon words from this mother tongue. In the first scene, she walks around a prison in Stuttgart and comes across the word 'to see: *Görmek*'<sup>30</sup> which she overhears two prisoners exchanging (it remains unclear if the prisoners spoke these words in German or Turkish). In the following scene, the narrator recalls a dream, in which she has a telephone conversation with a friend in Istanbul about story telling, lamenting the fact that stories are often 'told out of the corner of [one's] mouth, superficially'. She asks her friend: "What does one have to do to narrate depth?" He said: "*Kaza gecirmek*, experience life accidents". *Görmek* and *Kaza gecirmek*'.<sup>31</sup> And finally in a third paragraph, another word comes along in a dream: *ISCI*, the acronym for immigrant worker stamped in the passport, which the narrator wants to hide in order not to be targeted by the approaching train conductor. She would rather be able to show her student card or prove herself as an 'artist'. The constellation of these three words highlights the autobiographical as a spring board and tool for the *poetic* work that Özdamar's texts do on its foundation. It is in view of 'narrating depth' that life accidents (*Lebensunfälle*) are lived and recorded, a recording dependent upon seeing (*görmek*) and done in view of recoding fixed labels or categories (*ISCI*). Somewhat tongue in cheek, life accidents are lived in view of writing, not the other way around. This reverses the order of any "pacified autobiography", "memoirs" in the classical sense<sup>32</sup> written as accounts of a life lived prior or external to narration. For Özdamar, the collection of *Lebensunfälle* seems necessary for a good story, as 'Mutterzunge' indicates here, which

destabilizes any reading of her texts as autobiographical in the 'pacified' or 'positivistic' sense. We cannot be certain if the narrated events that are so eerily close to the events in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's life are not searched out after all mainly in view of 'narrating depth'. And even if they were just 'empirical accidents' in the sense that Gasché warns us about and not actively pursued in order to tell better stories, we are still not certain to what extent they are transformed into a phantomatic universe, into one of the 'imagined houses and other social spaces of Turco-German culture',<sup>33</sup> sketching poetic universes that exceed and reconfigure any latent referent. This passage from 'Mutterzunge' stood at the beginning of Özdamar's prose writing. As such, it also set the tone for what was to follow until *Stille Sterne starren zur Erde*, and we should read her texts in that light.

With this in mind, I would like to turn now to Özdamar's two short stories 'Mutterzunge' and 'Großvaterzunge'. Both stories are, as I will argue with Derrida, instances of the process of inventing 'one's language and one's "I," to invent them at the same time'.<sup>34</sup> In both, the theme of a journey to the mother tongue is performed not as a return to linguistic purity or a recovery of lost origins, but precisely as a journey towards an articulation within German, only coming about insofar as German itself becomes other in the process. If we read with an ear attuned to these efforts, we can begin to hear a singularized German, diffracted through Turkish and (per)forming a 'new' landing.

## II. Diffracting German through Turkish

The first person narrator of 'Mutterzunge' wonders, where and when she has lost her mother tongue. Before we even come to the three scenes mentioned before, in which words contingently come to the narrator's mind, the pun of the story's title already alerts us that some word-play and word-labour is to follow. Ironically, despite the correct translation of the German *Mutterzunge* as *Mother Tongue*, this pun is largely lost in English, where the

metonymic substitution of tongue for language is so common that we fail to notice it. To a German ear, the title might, however, do two things: at first, it bewilders since in German the native language is referred to as *Muttersprache* and Özdamar's use of tongue (*Zunge*) instead of language (*Sprache*) is unusual and not immediately placeable. We could either discard it as an awkward use of German, or read it as a literal reference to the muscle involved in speaking, but are then still not certain if it refers to the muscle generally involved in speaking, or to the literal tongue belonging to a specific mother. If we are versed in Turkish and German, we could hear the underlying Turkish 'ana dil' (meaning 'mother tongue') and presume that 'Mutterzunge' is its literal translation, as yet leaving us in the dark about what all of this 'means'. But whether or not we can place these undercurrents and sources of our hermeneutic uncertainties, Özdamar exploits here the fissures opened by translation and figurative speech. She plays with the possibility to translate too literally, which distorts and produces in this case an irresolvable dynamic between figurative and literal meanings: the Turkish word for *Muttersprache* gets translated literally as *Mutterzunge*, setting off in German into unexpected directions, most of all perhaps disturbing the expectations of a German ear and stressing dimensions of corporeality (the muscle) and kinship (the mother) when it comes to languages.

Once we move into the text proper, the opening repeats precisely this oscillation between the figurative and the literal, as well as between Turkish and German. The story opens as follows:

In my language, 'tongue' means 'language'. A tongue has no bones: twist it in any direction and it will turn that way. I sat with my twisted tongue in this city, Berlin. A café for Negros, Arabs for guests, the stools are too high, feet dangle. An old croissant sits wearily in the

plate, I give baksheesh right away, don't want the waiter to feel ashamed. If I only knew, when I lost my mother tongue.<sup>35</sup>

While the first sentence confirms the title's metonymy, the second sentence takes up the alternative implication of a literal tongue, smooth muscle without bones, flexible enough to be twisted. This literal reference again disappears in the next sentence when in 'I sat with my twisted tongue in this city, Berlin' the figurative returns with the twisted tongue as trope for a speech impediment, or some sort of confusion, an unease about sitting in this German city, underlined by 'an old croissant sit[ting] wearily in the plate', and the 'baksheesh' given to avoid awkwardness and embarrassment. Thus, before the text's theme – 'If I only knew, when I lost my mother tongue' – is evoked for the first time, the text already worked heavily on the figurative qualities of language, the possibilities of twisting and turning they open up, and brought these to the fore precisely through the almost inaudible detours through Turkish: Grafting all of these layers onto one language, one tongue, yet making it reverberate with Turkish and with the potential for many more future twists.

At the same time, we also find right from the start a concern for the corporeality involved in speaking, and, even more importantly, the implied irreplaceability of the tongue of the mother and the ear of a 'me' receiving mothersentences.

My mother and I once spoke in our mother tongue. [...] I recall now mothersentences that she spoke in her mother tongue, [yet] only, when I imagine her voice, the sentences themselves entered my ears like a foreign language that I had learned well.<sup>36</sup>

Building on the general, inescapably figurative qualities of language, and weaving together Turkish and German by exploiting these qualities, 'Mutterzunge' evokes the unique

memories of the voice of a mother spoken into the ear of a child. The mother tongue, in pursuit of which the narrator and the text embark, refers to a native language – Turkish, German or Arabic (which comes into play, as we will see momentarily, in ‘Großvaterzunge’) only insofar as we find in their interplay a constellation of sentences, words, writings, memories, and fantasies that is *unique* to a specific, irreplaceable set of mouths and ears, which comes to speak this specific tongue. And much like its mothersentences enter the ears, the foreign writing later enters the eyes: ‘the writings (*Schriften*) came into my eyes like a foreignerscript that I had learned well. A newspaper clipping.’<sup>37</sup> The plural of writings (*Schriften*) is surprising, as one would expect either its singular (*Schrift*), denoting the system of writing in general, or the plural of ‘sentences’ (*Sätze*) as several particular semantic units that were seen. The plural of *Schriften*, however, makes it a concrete (and open) set of specific writings, a vast set of clippings entering the eyes in an equally corporeal and irreplaceable process as the mothersentences had entered the ears.

In *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*, these newspaper clippings return when the narrator remembers how she responded, whenever addressed, by reciting German newspaper-headlines that she had learned by heart from newspapers on display which she walked past.

I did not speak a word of German and learned the phrases, as one sings ‘I can’t get no satisfaction’ without speaking English. [...] For example, someone asked ‘Niye böyle gürültüyle yürüyorsun?’ (Why do you make so much noise when you walk?), and I replied with a German headline: ‘When chattels turn clutter.’<sup>38</sup>

The plural of *Schriften* in ‘Mutterzunge’ contains this scene as if in a nutshell: the collage of clippings semi-consciously piercing the eyes, whose comical poeticity when taken out of context trained the narrator’s ear for German. We have to keep this poeticity and humour

unfolded in the above passage from *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* in mind, when reading 'Mutterzunge', and especially when considering its ostensible theme of a pursuit of the mother tongue. Even when the narrator at the end of the story decides to 'go back to the other Berlin' to find out when exactly she lost the mother tongue, this going back – before any 'effort to regain a lost origin', or the 'presumed "real" roots that the intense process of Westernization in Turkey has wiped out'<sup>39</sup> – primarily opens another journey: the study of Arabic that 'Großvaterzunge' then pursues. 'Mutterzunge' ends by announcing:

I am going to learn Arabic, that was once our writing, after our war of liberation, 1927, Atatürk outlawed Arabic script and the Roman letters appeared, my grandfather only knew Arabic script, I only knew the Latin alphabet, that means that had my grandfather and I been mute and could only tell each other things in writing, we could not have told each other stories. Perhaps first back to grandfather, then I can find the way to my mother and my mother tongue.<sup>40</sup>

This proclamation and the search of the mother tongue have been seen as a return to a lost origin, an 'attempt to go back to the roots' in the sense of a 'correction of a loss',<sup>41</sup> a reading which the passage's English translation supports. It renders the wish to 'find the way to my mother and my mother tongue' as 'find my way *back* to my mother, *back* to my mother tongue'.<sup>42</sup> However, the German version merely notes the hope to *find the way* – no going back is evoked here – and the only place to which the narrator returns is West-Berlin. We have to take into account the three 'words' or mottos of narration (*görmek*, *kaza gecirmek*, *ISCI*), an actress' love for words, and a writer's careful labour on words – clipping from and riffing on Heine, Lasker-Schüler, Hölderlin, Brecht, Yücel, Baudelaire and others, combined with skilled intonations of the rudimentary German of the stereotypical Turkish charwoman



and satires of the lingo of the equally stereotypical German forester.<sup>43</sup> Unless we disregard all these signposts, the journey to the mother tongue is a journey forward, not backward, *en route* to weaving 'her' German, or what V.S. Naipaul has called a writer's 'way of seeing and feeling'.<sup>44</sup>

The journey to the mother tongue, via the detour through the grandfather tongue is, as Brandt notes, 'no exercise in nostalgia'.<sup>45</sup> As wittily as 'Mutterzunge', 'Großvaterzunge' first of all embarks on a journey out toward *ata sözleri*, the 'words of ancestors' (or grandfather's words), also meaning 'proverbs' in Turkish.<sup>46</sup> It is again the playfulness of and with language that is central. In 'Großvaterzunge', the narrator begins to take lessons in Arabic, but she studies Arabic mostly in the same vein as the narrator of *Die Brücke zum Goldenen Horn* learned German: as a collection of words, this time not contingently piercing the eyes, but assembled on the principle of their homophony with Turkish words.

I searched for Arabic words that still exist in the Turkish language. I asked Ibni Abdullah: 'Do you know them?'

*Leb* – mouth

*Ducar* – smitten

*Mazi* – past

*Medyun* – bound

*Meytap* – fireworks

*Yetim* – orphan

'Yes,' said Ibni Abdullah, 'it sounds a tiny bit different.' I said: 'By the time these words got up and walked from your country to my country, they changed a little bit on the way.'<sup>47</sup>

The narrator's fascination with phonetic parallels and word-lists is complemented by her interest in Arabic script. She takes lessons with a 'great master of Arabic writing', returns daily to her 'writ lessons in Wilmersdorf' and on the first day left the first five Arabic letters that she has learned – 'elif be dal zal re' – in the 'writing room'.<sup>48</sup> The fact that she remembers them not in alphabetical order does not bother her, as she is more interested in their shapes that set off her imagination: 'The letters came out of my mouth. Some looked like a bird, some like a heart, with an arrow attached, some like a caravan, some like sleeping camels [...]'.<sup>49</sup> When returning the next day, the letters are greeted as quasi-corporeal entities, some of which 'have dignified faces today [...]'. Some are thin orphans with pale faces, some Allah's bird, wandering from hand to hand'.<sup>50</sup> Parallel to the love-affair with the teacher, the narrative is equally a love affair with Arabic, its graphics and phonetics. Özdamar takes this affection for the materiality of language beyond the kinship of Arabic and Turkish and confirms a similar affinity to German when she says that although 'my German words have no childhood, my experience with German words is entirely corporeal. For me, the German words have bodies. I met them at the wonderful German theatre'.<sup>51</sup> Charged with the bodily experiences connected to them and found along the way, these German words are now, in 'Großvaterzunge', friendly facilitators and a switchboard between her post-reform Turkish written in Latin script and her grandfather's pre-reform Turkish using Arabic script. The narrator's present lessons – as well as their narration – are channelled through German, the language she shares *in the present* with Ibni Abdullah, her lover and teacher (as well as with the reader, for that matter). As Ibni Abdullah remarks: 'for the moment we [...] only have that language',<sup>52</sup> referring to German, a fact that the narrator does not lament. To the contrary. At the end of the story, the play between two phonetically similar and graphically diverging words in Turkish/Arabic is explicitly opened onto this third elective affinity. A Turkish and a German word are now linked in much the same way as Arabic and Turkish

words had been. This opens, as Brandt has argued, the possibility of new word-lists, this time by two languages that come into contact only as a result of the unique and contingent association produced by Özdamar, rather than linguistic kinship.<sup>53</sup> At the end of 'Großvaterzunge', a German girl asks the narrator what she is doing in Germany. 'I said: "I am a word-collector."' And, I thought, Ibni Abdullah, the soul in my soul, and remembered another word in my mother tongue: *Ruh* – "*Ruh* means soul," I said to the girl. "Soul means *Ruh*", she said'.<sup>54</sup> The possibility of a new series opens up here, of which the Turkish 'Ruh' and the German 'Ruh' (a poetic abbreviation of 'Ruhe' (*silence*)) are the first set. When thinking of Ibni Abdullah as 'the soul in my soul' she recalls the word 'Ruh' in her mother tongue, as she said – but we are not anymore certain to which language the term refers. She might remember 'Ruh' by thinking of Ibni Abdullah as the (Turkish) soul in her soul, but she might also remember 'Ruh' because of the quietness of which he was so fond and of which they spoke in German. "It is wonderfully quiet (*ruhig*) here, isn't it?" said Ibni Abdullah, "you are looking for quietness (*Ruhe*), rest (*ruh*), I have to teach [...]"'.<sup>55</sup> While *Mutterzunge* so far mostly operated with the deterritorializing potential of Turkish subtexts to German words, we are at this moment no longer able to tell which of the two is subtext to which. In the chiasmus of the couple *ruh-ruh* ('*Ruh means soul, I said to the girl. 'Soul means Ruh', she said.*) the transformative potential works in both directions at the same time – no exercise in nostalgia, but an affirmative practice of crafting one language from different tongues.

### III. Novel ways of speaking *with-in* a different German

In order to perceive the difference between nostalgia and an affirmation of present corporeal practice open onto a future we need a keen ear. As Derrida notes,

[a] keen ear is an ear with keen hearing, an ear that perceives differences. [...] to perceive differences is to pass on the distinction between apparently similar things. [...] the keen ear must be able to distinguish the active from the reactive, the affirmative from the negative, even though apparently they are the same thing.<sup>56</sup>

Özdamar herself has a keen ear for German, and such an ear is also needed to read her texts. They ask us to pay close attention to the directions in which they twist German: we have to hear the humour that debunks stereotypes, to listen to the disturbances of standard German and to our own responses to them, to attend to the corporeal dimensions of language that the narrator cherishes. The task to hear the *diffraction* of German into a new pattern – by means of a Turkish subscript, that is only detectable as such to anyone proficient in Turkish, but that leaves its traces nonetheless – is not an easy task. But what makes it worth our attention is that it allows us to explore the parameters of positions *with-in* German, whereby German also moves somewhere else and a *new, singularly diffracted* German is somewhat removed from the 'old', 'plain' German. These articulations with a difference push our ideas about identification into other directions than the habitual options of 'either-Turkish-or-German', 'neither-Turkish-nor-German', or even 'both-Turkish-and-German'. Instead of thinking in terms of collective national belonging (or the suspension or accumulation thereof), as all of these options do, Özdamar's writings invites us to start from the singularity of her texts and this one body writing mothersentences and to pursue with her the potential of German for becoming otherwise. If we pay attention to *this* set of eyes and ears and *this* constellation of poetic affinities, personal phantasms, memories, and affections – which the clear autobiographical markers of her texts highlight – our reading shifts its starting point: from pre-existing imagined collectives to the processes of materializing differences within 'our' languages, that is within the spaces of expression that we share. In order to do so, we also

need to pay attention to our very set of ears and eyes and their potential to transform in the process.

One of the most immediate effects of Özdamar's writings might be that readers feel slightly disoriented and *unheimlich* (in the Freudian sense) in a language they deem their own. But the further reaching effect, which I have been mostly interested in here, is that her writings – in their blend of an autobiographical *mise-en-scène* and their insistence on poeticity, imagination, and humour – destabilize our presumptions of 'migrant' stories and perform a new strategy of selfhood. Instead of referring us back to nationality or their border zones as the implied horizon of identification, Özdamar's texts create a linguistic situation that makes audible identification as a process within complex and contingent circumstances, constantly and interminably directed at others, listening to others, alongside others, echoing others, and dependent upon others to listen, none of which occurs in view of 'integrating' into a pre-existing collective but in view of stretching the leeway to articulate oneself with others and within a shared and co-constructed world. How to account for the myriad of ultimately singularly reconfigured articulations in culturally, linguistically and historically complex contexts, and how to cohabit and share beyond or underneath imagined 'imagined communities'? This is what Özdamar's texts reflect on, despite the accidentality of writing in German that Özdamar suggests – tongue in cheek – in the acceptance-speech for the Adalbert-von-Chamisso Prize ('When I began writing, I did not think at all about the language, in which I should write'<sup>57</sup>). Her poetic practices in and on German bring to the fore what Derrida calls for in *Monolingualism of the Other*: a 'thinking of the unique, precisely, and not the plural',<sup>58</sup> but on the very basis of a language that relates us with and indebts us to others. Özdamar performs both: her irreplaceable German-diffracted-through-Turkish is, on the one hand, a unique (re)configuration of languages and cultural repertoires that (perpetually) becomes 'her' German and opens a space of existence, and, on the other hand, it

opens German (and what we are willing to imagine 'German' to signify) for differences and differentiation *with-in*. This moves us beyond margins and borders and toward a yet to be charted future of what we say when we speak 'German', *with* each other and with *each* other.

---

## References

<sup>1</sup> Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Seyhan (2001), p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Meyda Yegenoglu, 'From Guest Worker to Hybrid Immigrant: Changing Themes in German-Turkish Literature' in *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*, ed. Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 137-150.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Adelson, 'Against Between: A Manifesto' in *Unpacking Europe*, ed. Iftikhar Dadi, Salah Hassan, Ken Lum et. al. (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers 2002), pp. 244-255, here p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Adelson (2002), p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> Adelson (2002), p. 246.

<sup>7</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge 1994), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Bhabha (1994), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p 1.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida (1998), p. 25.

---

<sup>11</sup> Yasemin Yildiz uses the term 'postmonolingual' in this sense in *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); see also Yildiz, 'Political Trauma and Literal Translation: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's "Mutterzunge"' *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 7 (2008), pp. 248-270.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida (1998), p. 28. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida (1998), p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> A literary prize awarded to non-native writers who write in German for their innovation of German literature.

<sup>15</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, 'Meine deutschen Wörter haben keine Kindheit. Eine Dankrede' in Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Der Hof im Spiegel* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001), pp. 125-132, here pp. 130-1 (all translations into English are mine, unless otherwise indicated).

<sup>16</sup> See also Anke Gilleir, 'Melancholia, Migration, and Mise en Scène. Comparing Else Lasker-Schüler and Emine Sevgi Özdamar' *European Review* 19/3 (2011): 385-403.

<sup>17</sup> I borrow the term 'diffracted' from Karen Barad, who adopts it from quantum physics to describe the patterns of difference formed by interfering waves (*Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 71-96. Barad also inherits the term's critical potential from Donna Haraway's use of it to address emergent and co-implicated differences beyond binaries (see *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan®\_Meets\_ OncoMouse™* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), p. 273). In 'Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come' *Derrida Today*, 3/2 (2010), pp. 240-268, Barad also explicitly makes 'diffraction' a reading method.

<sup>18</sup> Özdamar (2001), p. 131.

---

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Adelson, 'The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature and Memory Work' *The Germanic Review*, 77/4 (2002a), p. 326.

<sup>20</sup> quoted in Adelson, (2002), p. 252.

<sup>21</sup> Zafer Şenocak, *Atlas of a Tropical Germany. Essays on Politics and Culture, 1990-1998*, ed. Leslie Adelson (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 49. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Şenocak (2000), p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> Şenocak (2000), p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, 'Mein Berlin' in Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Der Hof im Spiegel* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001), p. 56; for a similar procedure in 'Mein Istanbul', see *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Die Brücke zum Goldenen Horn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1998), p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Özdamar (2001), p. 129.

<sup>27</sup> Özdamar (2001), p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Internal Border' in Jacques Derrida *The Ear of the Other. Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 41-45, here p. 41. For the unstable limits between life and work, in relation to writing, see also Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992), p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Mutterzunge* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 2006 [1990]), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 10.



<sup>32</sup> Derrida (1998), p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> Adelson (2002), p. 249.

<sup>34</sup> Adelson (2002), p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Özdamar (2001), p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Yegenoglu (2005), p. 145.

<sup>40</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 12. The last sentence reads in German: 'Vielleicht erst zu Großvater zurück, dann kann ich *den Weg zu meiner Mutter und Mutterzunge* finden.' (emphasis added)

<sup>41</sup> Seyhan (2001), p. 122 and p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Mother Tongue*, trans. Craig Thomas (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994), p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> For both examples, see 'Karriere einer Putzfrau. Erinnerungen an Deutschland' in Özdamar (2001), pp. 102-18.

<sup>44</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *A writer's people. Ways of looking and feeling* (New York: Knopf, 2007). Frauke Matthes' 'Beyond Boundaries? Emine Sevgi Özdamar's MutterZunge and V.S. Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival as Creative Processes of Arrival' *eSharp* 5 (2005), at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/issues/5/> also suggests an affinity between the two writers, but continues to perceive their writings from the angle of 'their hybrid existence as migrants' (p. 12).

<sup>45</sup> Bettina Brandt, 'Collecting Childhood Memories of the Future: Arabic as Mediator Between Turkish and German in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*' *The Germanic Review*, 79/4 (2004), pp. 295-315, here p. 295.

<sup>46</sup> I am indebted to Brandt (2004) for this.

<sup>47</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 15, p. 17, and p. 15 resp.

<sup>49</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Özdamar (2001), p. 131.

<sup>52</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 17

<sup>53</sup> See Brandt (2004), pp. 304-5.

<sup>54</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 46.

<sup>55</sup> Özdamar (2006), p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Reply to Christie V. McDonald' in Derrida (1988), p. 50.

<sup>57</sup> Özdamar (2001), p. 130-1.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida (1998), p. 26.