

Maja Haderlap: IN LIGHT OF LANGUAGE

Klagenfurt Address on Literature

Translated by Adrian West

The origin of this story lies in topography, writes Ingeborg Bachmann at the beginning of her tale *Three Paths to the Lake*. In it, the successful photographer Elisabeth Matrei visits her father in Klagenfurt. During the days she spends at home, she tries to reach the Wörthersee by the once frequently traveled mountain trails over the Kreuzbergl, the local mountain, but the old connections between them vanish into uncertainty. Taking stock of her life, she believes that for the first time, she has finally understood Franz Josef Trotta, the great, difficult love of her life. Trotta is a descendent of that storied Slovenian house that had been ennobled by the Kaiser three generations back, and has not recovered from the catastrophes of the twentieth century. While the urbane Elisabeth, eager for experience, voyages among continents and languages, Trotta is torn apart by all that befell him in the past. In Klagenfurt, with her gaze toward the border, Elisabeth sees that since Trotta entered her life, her view of the world proceeds from a hardly discernible but still tangible location — from the periphery, as she realizes — that makes her thoroughly foreign, for her spirit, her feelings, and her deeds belong hopelessly to the enormous expanses of this spirit-realm.

Can one speak from a margin today, think or write in a time where spaces and distances have, so to speak, imploded, when the world seems in a condition of flux, new territories are thrown up and old borders swept away? With vertiginous speed, the great

achievements of technology suggest that space and location have become irrelevant, while at the same time, positioning programs are being developed that draw the lines of demarcation more narrowly and meticulously than ever before; around, that is to say, each individual person who steps into the sights of assorted interests. Already in Ingeborg Bachmann's story the differences between countries, languages, and continents appear as a muddled chaos that can only be grasped and classified with a gaze from the border....

Today, as we know, peripheries pullulate in the metropolises, while the old centers, frozen in a vestigial posture of power, hold onto their vanished spirit realms from which they affect to reign unchallenged. But the peripheries, as a result of their exposed position, transmute into settings where societal, political, cultural, and social upheavals, ruptures, tendencies are reflected without adornment, nearly all their facets laid bare.

From the periphery, from the German-Slovenian language border, which is formative for Carinthia, I would like to try and reflect on the phenomenon of language shift in literature. For the past three years at the German Literature Days in Klagenfurt, the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize has been won by three women whose mother language was not German. And so? one may interject, that's nothing new, it's happened before, it no longer stands out, the theme has even become something of a commonplace. Whole branches of study, cognitive science, linguistics, comparative literature have all addressed the subject, there are prestigious prizes awarded for non-native authors writing in German, there is talk of a new nomadism, if we may no longer make use of the shopworn concept of "authors with an immigrant background." One hears of itineracy, of postcolonial,

transcultural, and hybrid cultures, a veritable torrent of labels attempts to grasp the concept of language shift in literature. It almost seems as if the authors who have migrated into a language were commodities in an international transaction, torn loose from their social, cultural, and linguistic anchors and washed up onto the shores of a new language.

And yet the reasons that compel authoresses and authors to switch languages could not be more different or conspicuous. Too often, the point of departure is flight from political persecution or escape from poverty and social misery, or a course of study, a new profession, life with its enduring obligations, a multilingual living situation. Following the fashionable discourse of dislocation, one may recognize a new form of cosmopolitanism in these developments, but such a concept makes a presumption of economic and political liberty and pays no attention whatsoever to the generally painful experience of the loss of homeland and security and the great tribulations of those who need a place to go.

Is it business as usual then? If only there were not the sundry clamoring, the reprimands, the categorizations, the constant reiteration of questions about the authors and their identities. Does a wish for a boundary line, for a demarcation of the ancestral literary domain, not make itself noticeable thereby? Not so long ago, it was possible to read in the culture pages of German-language newspapers that the authoresses and authors who have migrated into German should stick to their own special set of themes and not try to pass into the domain of German literature proper. This was followed by a brief discussion it

quickly seemed one had conceded to, affirming that “enlanguaged” authors, in Ilija Trojanow’s term, represent an enrichment of German-language literature. And yet I cannot shake the feeling that we now find ourselves in a moment of calm before the storm, when there is a wish to call out to the arriving authoresses that they ought not pride themselves excessively on their stories and efforts, that after all, there are still the ancestral authors who remain the true proprietors of the sanctuary language.

My own experiences after switching to the German language and winning the Bachmann Prize confirm my sense that language shift is a highly difficult process bound up with cultural and personal conflicts. The discussions I have had in the past three years were marked by great emotion and extremely heterogeneous demands placed upon me as a writer. At almost every literary appearance and in almost every interview I was persistently interrogated as to my language and my national and cultural identity. Why did I write in the German language, though I grew up Slovene, a member of the Carinthian Slovene community, and wrote in Slovenian at the beginning of my career? Which culture did I feel I belonged to, did I see myself as a Slovenian or Austrian writer? These situations resemble a neverending checkpoint, interminable naturalization proceedings throughout which I am compelled to convince my questioner of the goodness of my intentions and clarify the nature of my specific cultural affiliation.

Against the backdrop of the language conflict in Carinthia, is it even possible to decide freely as to one’s choice of language?

In my linguistic biography I am always thrown back upon a certain point, a distinct rupture. There my experiences of language flow together, marked by an awareness of the lack of language and of spoken or unspoken linguistic prohibitions. Not only because where I grew up, in remote southern Carinthia, the language of a girl or woman is held to be improper or intrusive, but also because in Carinthia, my Slovenian mother tongue often proved a stumbling block. On account of it I was classed among those politically unreliable citizens who did not care to relinquish their right to a second national language and thereby called the country's unity into question. Before I could flee into a language, before I could cleave to a language, I had to defend my mother tongue, without knowing precisely how one speaks on a language's behalf.

Even before I could have said what a language was — a medium of thought, a means of approaching the world, of communication, interaction, imagination, yearning — the indigenous languages of Carinthia were presented to me as an ideological, political category, as two mutually exclusive poles between which I was compelled to decide. It was a matter of the promise of a homeland, a matter of belonging, bound up with the reproach of maladaptation with respect to the majority population. My family and I were exposed to German nationalist demagoguery, because we lived in the country and the propaganda was addressed to the bilingual rural population and not to the cultured few in the small cities. Decades after the Second World War, the German nationalist homeland associations continued to affirm to the bilingual Slovene population that only those willing to give up the Slovenian language among their families and in public could be counted as fully fledged Carinthians. Not only did policy eagerly accommodate the

homeland associations, it even took advantage of their phobia, if that is the word for it, when it came to delaying the implementation of laws concerning minority rights that had been ratified by a decree of the Austrian state. Whoever worked for the adaptation and assimilation of the bilingual or Slovenian population, whoever was willing to make such a sacrifice for the beloved homeland, could be said to have actually arrived in the country. The absurd part of it was that I had always considered my beloved bilingualism an asset, and even as a child I could not understand why it was supposed that being monolingual was better. Later, through cultural and political engagement, I could object, acting as though I moved between two equally worthy languages and cultures. But with the years it became clear to me that from the beginning of the twentieth century onward, due to its structural marginalization in society, the free and comprehensive realization of the Slovenian language in Carinthia was hardly possible. A mediatic, cultural bond to Slovenian was impeded by political and ideological hurdles. The cultural efforts on the part of Carinthian Slovenes just barely sufficed to mend the threadbare patches in the linguistic tapestry composed by the Slovenian language in Carinthia.

In the eighties I wrote in Slovenian, not only to endorse, to conquer, to explore my mother language, but also, I thought — I hoped — in order to forestall the decline of Slovenian in Carinthia and to delve into my own history. For a while I even believed that in my work as a writer I could resuscitate the romantic, linguistic, and political utopia of nineteenth century Slovenian literature, in a cultural sense if not a national one. But the deeper I penetrated into the narrowness of regional Slovenian culture and the anxious escape attempts Slovenian literature represented, the more I thought of breaking free. But

how do you abandon the very thing that shores you up? How can you willfully withdraw from a written language when the relinquishment of Slovenian in Carinthia is precisely what is expected?

My anguish was deepened by the knowledge that in the National Socialist period, my parents' and grandparents' generations had been made to pay for their commitment to the Slovenian language and culture with persecution, oppression, and even with their lives. This awareness left behind a fissure, a blue or white blot in my linguistic biography that I neither wish to nor can conceal. There is no such thing as an untainted decision in a constellation of inequality. Nonetheless, writing in German remains an escape route for me from the narrow confines of the constant invocation of national and social attributes. For this step into freedom, I had no need to leave a country behind, I had only to probe my bilingualism and shift into a linguistic landscape that was already prepared to admit me.

Language does then its place. The point of departure for every history lies in topography. The decision for or against a language is always inscribed in a societal and political process. The processes of assimilation, of the extinction or flourishing of languages, often take place in remote peripheries, around the arbitrarily drawn sovereign borders that also strive to be cultural and national ones. The whole of the European continent is riven with visible and invisible linguistic conflicts, with histories of linguistic displacement and dominance. "If we knew nothing of history apart from the evolution of languages... we

would possess a historiography perhaps more precise than the one we know now,” writes Olga Martynova in her essay *Good-bye America, oh*.

Arrival in a language is always also a story of rescue. Many-voiced, the texts of enlanguaged authoresses and authors bear witness to such. With their work, they undermine the ideology of globalization, which takes disengagement from geography and from history to be a matter of course. For some time now, in their written images, they have recorded the histories of the people and places they have left behind, or where they live, or between which they shuttle, and reflected them in a multitude of ways. They are pathfinders between languages and cultures, they replenish the archive of their language — new, conquered, borrowed — with the histories of their families that have been left behind, destroyed, or broken apart, with the richness of their cultures of origin. On their desks, words and their meanings come together in manifold similes. They balance one another, sound each other out, lay stress on delicate nuances, shadings, and distinctions. For a long time in literature there has been a vigorous, abiding dialogue enriched and broadened by every language that has opened its door to new arrivals. The tales of enlanguaged authoresses revolve around the vulnerable *conditio humana* and open our eyes to the fragility of every cultural attainment.

Hungry, the languages of migrant authors at times seek out nourishment, and return with new quarry, new fruits, as can be read in the text of the 2012 Bachmann Prize winner Olga Martynova. Her bilingual verse seems to frolic between the Russian and German

literary traditions, inaugurating a novel linguistic world that flouts, exuberantly and anarchically, the imagined borders of language.

Arrival in another language is a dangerous liaison: “My German persists in the tension of remoteness and insulates me from routine,” writes Katja Petrowskaja, last year’s prizewinner, in her novel *Perhaps Esther*. “As if it were the smallest change, in this language, which I acquired late, I paid back my past with the passion of a young lover... My German, truth and treachery, the language of the enemy, was a way out, a second life, a love that never lapsed, because one never reached it, blessing and blight, as if I had set free a little bird.”

There is a phrase that comes up repeatedly concerning authoresses and authors who have migrated into a language: “writing between languages” or “writing between cultures.” At first glance it sounds obvious, but on closer inspection it fails to approximate the phenomenon of language-shift or language-conquest. In fact it is the case that one writes not between languages, but rather can only write within language, or write oneself into language. So long as a person writes, she never finds herself outside a language and its traditions. A phrase like the foregoing could only apply to the social situation of those writers who imagine themselves to inhabit a political and personal no-man’s land between cultures and traditions.

This leads me to speak again of a place that can only with the most extreme reticence be described as a no-man’s land, for it rarely appears as deserted and lifeless as the empty,

menacing security perimeters that divide two countries. It is a sensitive, evocative place, because it is emblematic of the differences between languages and their self-involvement and keeps alive, even invigorates, the need for communication, arrival, crossing-over, for reaching out to others. Iliana Rakusa once wrote that as a polyglot, you learn there is no such thing as the obvious, that everything is based on difference. There is no place that begs as much for deliberation, for translation, as the border between languages.

I also inhabit such a place, or better said, such a space. It is not visible, and resembles a shadowy passageway I have built or dug between the languages that define me. Unlike the narrow, precariously constructed passageways that lead to other tongues, it is rife with set pieces from the past and the history of my languages. All the drawers and cupboards overflow with stories: thought, heard, lived. In this corridor I train myself to be invisible, I move constantly back and forth, up and down, inspecting one side, then the other. I enact my own ostracism over the history of a conflict, my own, and I train myself in the art of association. The ropes that bind me to my languages and cultures are the net that constricts and secures me. Sometimes calls and voices wander through the privacy and quiet of the corridor, resonances of fears, experiences of violence, and apprehensions, and they are chased away by the echoes of auspicious dialogue.

In the corridor I set aside all signifier and signified, I am freed from all attribution. Outside the corridor I see the languages glimmer. They give off a potent, alluring light. Everything that plunges therein appears in light of language, and is rendered real and vital and discernible. Language for me is the eternally unattained, the yearned-for, a place

of longing, a stage for veracity and its directors. My basic experience in relation to language is that of presumptive language-owners, language-protectors, ushers and gatekeepers trying over and over to wedge themselves between me and my languages. They acted as if their language had fallen down from the sky, bestowed on them by the will of God irrespective of whether they were capable of doing anything with it. My concern as a writer is therefore to usurp a part of the stockpiled, as it were hegemonic linguistic estate, because a fortune that has been hoarded and locked away should and must be shared.

What counts in the end, writes Michael Hamburger, whose mother tongue was German and who wrote in English, is not the specific way we are classified or labeled, least of all by ourselves, but rather how we deal with our identity. Concerning literature, he was opposed to any qualification of authors springing not from the nature of the work itself, but from the externalities of biography. I can only agree that the literary work of enlanguaged authoresses and authors should irrupt into the space currently reserved for the discussion of their provenance and biography, because it is the written text that counts.

Sometimes, however, the biographies, and with them what Michael Hamburger calls externalities, appear as if conceived by some great director who chases them in concentric circles through the ether. Franz Josef Trotta from Ingeborg Bachmann's tale is a descendent of that Trotta in Joseph Roth's novel *The Emperor's Tomb* who hastens to the Capuchin Tombs in Vienna at the novel's end. After the collapse of the multiethnic

state comprised by Hapsburg Monarchy, on the eve of the menacing apotheosis of nationalism in the German Reich, he believes he has lost his homeland once and for all. It had been a country that drew on the peripheries, on the substance of its crown lands with their languages and cultures, a country where one could be anything, Slovene, Ruthenian, Galician, Ukrainian, Bosnian, and yet nevertheless Austrian. That was to change. Ingeborg Bachmann takes up the thread of this story and spins it further in her time with a gaze turned back on what took place in the intervening years. In the last chapter of her novel, Katja Petrowskaja comes to Vienna on the day when the mortal remains of Otto von Hapsburg are being laid to rest in the Capuchin Tombs. In search of her ancestors, she comes, like Joseph Roth, from what is now the Ukraine, a country that at that time was at the center of Europe and now lies on its periphery, in the borderlands, where it may once more become the proving grounds for catastrophe. Petrowskaja has covered a great distance, traveling through countries and cities, places known and unknown as well as those that over the last century have been thrust like specters into our awareness, places with names like Babi Yar, Gunskirchen, Mauthausen, and others that remain unnamed. The end of Europe is prophesied, but Europe has yet to come into its own, to apprehend the center of its strength, the greatest book of which is the diversity of its languages and cultures and its social achievements.