Writing the Self, Choosing a Language

Non-Arabic Autobiographies by Arabs, non-Turkish by Turks

Stephan Guth

Before writing an autobiography (or any other kind of self-account, e.g., an autobiographical novel), an autobiographer has to think about many things: the events to be told, the experiences to be described, the feelings to be recorded, the arrangement of the material, the style in which to narrate, and so on. However, probably for the great majority of authors *one* thing will not be in question: the language in which to write their life accounts. Yet, there are also a number of autobiographers who, for some reason or other, are lucky to have been endowed with the gift of bilingualism. While I consider them as being "lucky" and possessing a "gift," the bilingual autobiographer might think differently about this. He, or she, may regard this as a heavy weight on his or her shoulders, and not as a gift but rather a curse or an evil spell since each of the two languages form a specific part of his/her self, each of them stand for a world of their own, while both are being lived concurrently, or side by side. For the autobiographer having to decide on one of them means to somehow suppress the other (at least partly, because the two worlds or identities certainly also overlap to a great extent). Therefore, under the premise that as a bilingual autobiographer you really *want* to give the reader an insight, as comprehensive and sincere as possible, into your experiences, you are faced, as far as I can see, with three possible choices:

1. You could either write an *essentially bilingual* account. This would be the most sincere thing to do, probably, but you would have to accept the fact that your autobiography would be understood only partly, since readers lacking the same command of languages as you have would be able to read only those passages that are written in the language they know. Even worse, with a decision for a bilingual narrative you may perhaps deter the majority of possible buyers from buying your book *from the very beginning*–just imagine a book written, e.g., half in English, half in Japanese. Not to speak of the fact that it is quite improbable that such a book should ever see the light of day, since only a publisher with a remarkable degree of mental derangement would let himself in for such a financially disastrous project.

2. The second choice is to write *two* autobiographies, one for each of your two languages. The feeling of comprehensiveness and adequacy would then perhaps not be as complete and satisfying as with a bilingual narrative, the two worlds or identities merging into each other not integrally but only subsequently, and your person seen in its totality again only by those who read both languages (and, in this case, are also ready to spend the money for *two* books). While a real bilin-

gual autobiography has not come to my attention so far, I do know of at least one author who has written two, if not "real" autobiographies, at least highly autobiographical narratives. The Algerian author Rashīd Būjadrah (Rachid Boujedra) wrote his first novels in French and then shifted to Arabic in the early 1980s. His third novel written in Arabic, *Layliyyāt imraʾah ʾāriq* (which may be translated as "A Sleepless Woman's Nighttime Journal"), was published in 1985 and appeared two years later in the French version entitled *La pluie* ("The Rain"). Debbie Cox from the University of Oxford has compared the two versions in a fascinating study, which highlights the significance of making the choice of one language over the other. She writes:

> Even allowing for a fairly loose translation of the Arabic, a close textual comparison reveals at least 130 occasions on which differences occur between the Arabic and French texts. Given the relatively short length of the novel, this gives some indication that the French text is less a translation of the Arabic than an adaptation of the work, containing extensive variations and changes of emphasis. The differences range from small and apparently insignificant details to sections up to 5 pages in length which present completely divergent accounts of events. The differences between the two texts are relevant to a consideration of autobiography because of their implication for the differing elements of identity projected by each text, and the relationship of the texts, and the author, to different contexts of production and reception (Cox 1998: 220).

3. The majority of bilingual autobiographers (or authors of autobiographical novels, as the case may be) will however decide neither on a bilingual narrative nor on two monolingual versions; instead, they will stick to only one language. This current study will deal with this category. To be more exact, I have been looking at some texts written in English, German, and Hebrew, and not, as it would also have been possible, theoretically at least, in Arabic or Turkish. These are Edward Said's autobiography *Out of Place* as well as three pieces of highly autobiographical fiction: Mona Yahia's novel *When the Grey Beetles Took Over Baghdad*, Sayed Kashua's *ʿAravīm rōḳedīm* (i.e., "Dancing Arabs"), and Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge* (i.e., "Mother Tongue"). As there are no Arabic or Turkish "doubles" of these accounts, we are not in the position to compare a version written in one language to that written in the other, as Debbie Cox did with Rashīd Būjadrah's texts. What we *can* do however is to look, within the monolingual accounts, for hints pointing to the motives which may have effected the authors' decisions to write in English, Hebrew, or German, rather than Arabic or Turkish.

Implied in these decisions are of course acts of taking sides. What the authors take sides with, or decide against, naturally may differ from case to case as considerably as the reasons why they do so. In the present article, there will be room to discuss only four exemplary positions.

*Mona Yahia (*1954),* When the Grey Beetles Took Over Baghdad *(2000)*

Mona Yahia's protagonist Lina, like the author herself, is an Iraqi Jew who grew up in Baghdad in the 1950s and 1960s not only with her mother tongue, the Jewish Arabic dialect of Baghdad, but also with Hebrew and English, both of which were taught from the beginning in the Jewish School that Lina/Mona attended.

The novel tells the story of Lina's childhood and early youth, i.e., of a girl growing up as a member of the Jewish minority in an atmosphere which was becoming more and more hostile to that community. After the anti-Jewish pogroms in the early 1940s, and a worsening of the situation in the wake of the foundation of Israel in 1948, some 300,000 Iraqi Jews emigrated, most of them to Israel. Those who stayed had to suffer even more, especially after 1967. Lina, who was then just entering puberty, had fallen in love with Lawrence, the son of their British neighbors, and was fond of everything fashionable that she came across in the French journal *Nous Deux*. And it was this young girl who witnessed her friends, acquaintances, and also her own brother being arrested, Jewish shops being forced to close down, Jewish students barred from studying at university, and her father losing his job. Finally, some Jews were executed for alleged treason, their corpses displayed in public, after obvious torture, and among them was Lina's swimming instructor and her brother's table tennis partner.

Before the family eventually succumbs to the ever-increasing anti-Jewish hostility and before the novel ends with their flight to Iran, we come across a dialogue which is highly significant with regard to the question why Mona Yahia may have written her novel in English, not in Arabic. In it, Lina explains to her friend Selma why she has decided to systematically erase Arabic from her life:

[Selma:] Drop your voice, Lina, we're in the street!

[Lina:] But that's precisely what I'm talking about. Arabic has been silencing us for the last fifteen years! It's my turn to silence it. […]

[Selma:] You're talking nonsense, crap […] Your language's not a piece of clothing you can just shed! [...] Arabic's in your tongue and in your ears, p-h-y-s-i-c-a-l-l-y! [...] Can you laugh at English jokes, do you understand French puns? It's as if… as if your whole life is stored in your mother tongue.

[Lina:] Including fear. If I forget Arabic, I might forget what fear is…

[Selma:] [...] You'll always live in translation, forever a foreigner in your own mind. [...]

[Lina:] Better a foreigner in a free mind than a prisoner at home.[1]

1 Yahia 2000, ch. "The Dictionary of Hatred." (Since there are a number of new editions with different paginations, I am quoting by chapter, not by page number. This will also facilitate to find my references in the many translations that have been made into various languages.)

Arabic, for Lina (and we may safely assume, for Mona as well) is the language of an oppressive regime that has been trying to silence the Jewish minority for many years. Although it is her mother tongue in which her "whole life is stored" and without Arabic she will have to face a "life in translation, forever a foreigner in [her] own mind,"[2] Lina is unwilling to bear anymore what she associates with Arabic in the first place–fear. She once could love Arabic,[3] but the regime has deprived it of all its beauty, or at least added the aspects of horror and cruelty and made them overwhelm all the other positive features. In order to regain room for freedom, Lina/Mona has to give up, or even destroy, that part of her identity which is contained in the Arabic language.[4] In this respect, Mona Yahia's situation is similar to (though not identical with) the one, e.g., German authors of the World War II years and the early post-war period found themselves in. For many of them, the German language was losing, or had lost, its "innocence" through what the Nazis were able, or had been able, to abuse it for. There is a famous poem by Bertold Brecht, written on the eve of World War II (1938), in which the following verses on language are to be found:

Wirklich, ich lebe in finsteren Zeiten!
Das arglose Wort ist töricht.
[...]
Was sind das für Zeiten, wo
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist.
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!
Der dort ruhig über die Straße geht
Ist wohl nicht mehr erreichbar für seine Freunde
Die in Not sind?
[...]
Die Sprache verriet mich dem Schlächter. [...][5]
(B. Brecht, "An die Nachgeborenen")

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2 The problem of losing one's self when giving up natural language has been explored by Eva Hoffman's signal memoir *Lost in Translation* (1989), cf. Besemeres 2002: 9.

3 Especially when spoken by persons to whom she was emotionally attached. There is a lot of sympathy, e.g., in the way she describes the verbosity with which her swimming instructor usually "seasons" his commands and comments during the lessons in the Tigris river ("Let me exaggerate a bit, can you speak Arabic without exaggerating, anyway? Life is boring, kids, so you have to season it with fantasy."). There are other passages in the novel, however, where Arabic appears in a cruel context. Lina asks herself for some time why, among the languages she knows, only Arabic has a dual form; this question is answered, suddenly, in an anatomy lesson at school when the children have to dissect a frog that has not been killed before dissection but only been anaesthesized. Observing how the frog's legs are pinned to the desk, Lina suddenly has the idea that the Arabic dual reflects the body's symmetry (beginning of ch. "The Anatomy of Hope").

4 Cf. Spoerri 2002.

5 "I am living in dark times, indeed! / The guileless (unsuspecting) word is foolish (stupid). / [...] / What kind of times are these times where / talking about trees is almost a crime. / Because it includes keeping silent about so many misdeeds! / The one who is crossing the street over there / Is probably nomore in reach for his friends / Who are in trouble? / [...]

As a member of the persecuted minority, Lina does not experience the same feeling of guilt as German authors did because they belonged to the majority; but the horrors of the past stick to the language in her case in a similar way.

In a moment like this, when one's language becomes the language of oppressors and murderers, many authors decide to defend it against its usurpation and to preserve the cultural values of which the usurpers have deprived it. After some time in exile spent in careful consideration and hesitation, weighing up the pros and cons, they continue to write in their native language in order to give it back its dignity and save from extinction the values stored in its memory. This is what Thomas Mann did in his famous speeches delivered on BBC to German listeners (cf. Kucher 2003: 141), or what Ernst Bloch advocated for in stressing the fact that "one cannot preserve and develop a *Kultur* without talking in the language in which this *Kultur* has been shaped and lives,"[6] and this is what also some of Mona Yahia's Iraqi Jewish fellow writers did after arriving in their Israeli exile.[7]

Mona Yahia however, like others, decided to discard Arabic. While the above dialogue between Lina and her friend certainly gives sufficient explanation for her doing so, it does, however, not say why *English* may have become the language of her narrative. Having lived in Israel for one and a half decades, having served in the Israeli army, having graduated from university, and having worked as a psychiatrist in Tel Aviv, she is fluent in modern Hebrew. So, why English? There may be many reasons for her eventually preferring that language, but if I should judge only from the novel then I'd say it was, in the first place, because of the emotional qualities the English language had gained for Lina on account of her acquaintance with, and later love to, Lawrence, the son of the British neighbors in Baghdad. For Lina, the time spent in Lawrence's company is a time full of adventure, breaking taboos, getting initiated into secrets which the grown-up always tried to conceal from the children, and also the time when she first experienced sexuality. Already on the very first day, when she and the twelve year old boy first meet in the neighbors' garden, Lina returns home and, totally excited, tells her mother that she has been talking English all the day![8] When her parents notice that their daughter's attachment to the neighbors' son is "getting serious" they intervene; Lina senses that the main motive for them doing so is fear for the family's honor, but she cannot counter the argument her father gives as a pretext when forbidding her to see Lawrence anymore: under the difficult

/ Language has betrayed me to the butcher. [...]." As in this quotation, translations into English from other languages are my own.

6 "Zerstörte Sprache – zerstörte Kultur" in: Ernst Bloch (1970), *Politische Messungen. Pestzeit, Vormärz*, Frankfurt a.M., 277-299, here 277.

7 The most prominent among them probably being Samīr al-Naqqāsh. This author and some other intellectuals of Iraqi Jewish origin have been portrayed recently in a documentary by the Swiss-Iraqi film maker "Samir" (pen name), *Forget Baghdad* (2002, a Dschoint Ventschr production).

8 Yahia 2000: end of ch. "The English Club."

circumstances prevailing in Iraq during and after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, anyone having contact with the British would be suspected as being a foreign agent and traitor. Thus, the children are prevented from seeing each other, though Lina nevertheless continues to long for Lawrence. For a while they do not meet, without letting the boy know why. Nevertheless, when his parents decide to return to England, he comes to say goodbye to Lina and, in the cloud produced by the DDT disinfectant car passing by, he kisses her, in this way declaring his love to her in the moment they have to part.

Besides its association with love, English contrasts Arabic also because of its clarity and truthfulness as opposed to the truth-concealing verbosity of Arabic, cf. Lina's brother's comments on the Arabic *versus* the English way to "read" history as represented in the *Nuṣb al-Ḥurriyya*, the Freedom Memorial, on Baghdad's Taḥrīr Square.[9] Earlier in the novel, Hebrew shares with Arabic this truth-concealing quality, so that during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War the only report about the events which Lina's family believes in is the one broadcast in English on the BBC.[10] The clarity and truthfulness attached to English during these events may thus be an additional explanation for the author's preferring English to Hebrew.

*Sayed Kashua (*1975),* ʿAravīm rōḳedīm *(Dancing Arabs, 2002)*

This is again a childhood/early youth narrative, this time of a boy from a Palestinian village in Israel. As one of only two Arabs, he is allowed to attend an Israeli elite school in Jerusalem. When, in the first week at this school, his Israeli classmates laugh at him because of the way he dresses, because of his ignorance of table manners, or because of his inability to differentiate in pronunciation between the Hebrew *p* and *b*, he begins to hate his Arab background. For him, to be an Arab is possible "only in the form of wanting not to be an Arab,"[11] and therefore he decides after only one week to completely assimilate into the new surrounding and become more Israeli than the Israelis themselves. At first, this strategy seems to be successful. He becomes accepted among his schoolmates, finds some friends among them, and even has a Jewish girlfriend. But it isn't long before his belief in the possibility of becoming an equal member of the Israeli society turns out to be nothing more than an illusion. The girlfriend's parents persuade their daughter to end her love affair because in the long run it would be an obstacle to her career. No sooner has the narrator finished his secondary education than he has to find out that despite his intelligence, he will

9 Yahia 2000: ch. "Freedom Memorial."
10 Yahia 2000: ch. "Six Days, a War, and a Transistor Radio."
11 Roedig 2002: [2]. – Page numbers in square brackets shall refer to my print-out of the website.

not be allowed to continue his studies in a field he would have liked;[12] therefore, he chooses another subject. However, following the second Intifāḍa, he becomes increasingly depressed. With the Israeli society becoming more polarized, once again he is being treated like an Arab, in spite of his almost total assimilation. The hero becomes torn between his two identities, lost between the two fronts, belonging to neither (cf. Ecker 2002: [2]). On the outbreak of the second Intifāḍa, e.g., "he oscillates between his sexual attraction to Jewish women soldiers appearing on TV and his hatred for the Israeli army, between the wish to convert to Judaism and the desire to blow himself up" (Granzin 2002: [1]). An attempt to commit suicide fails; but this is not yet the end of his decline. He drops out of university, starts drinking, and eventually returns to the village from where he came. However, he can no longer identify with the Palestinian society, while finding that he also has no place in the Israeli society.

The main motive for Sayed Kashua's writing this highly, albeit not totally, autobiographical[13] novel in Hebrew rather than Arabic was certainly the fact that his major target group consisted of Jews, not Arabs, as he aimed to show the former "how unwanted an Israeli Arab basically is"[14] in Israeli society. Having studied philosophy and sociology at the Hebrew University, as well as photography at the Academy of Arts in Jerusalem, having worked as a film critic and columnist for the Hebrew weekly *Ha-ʿīr* (Tel Aviv), the author has an intimate knowledge of this society. Therefore, he knows very well that "in order to exert some influence in Israel, you have to write in Hebrew" (Avidan 2002: [1]). So, language choice for him, unlike for Mona Yahia, is instrumental rather than emotional; he wants to impress the Jewish elite.[15]

The success of his book in Israel has proved his choice to be the right one in this respect. *ʿAravīm rōḳedīm* was hailed as a new, sensational discovery in modern Hebrew literature (Parlament 2002), for Hebrew literature written by Arabs "is almost inexistent: the last time an Israeli Palestinian writer published a novel

12 Proud of his son, the narrator's father had wanted him to become the first Arab nuclear scientist to construct an Arab atomic bomb, or at least a pilot.

13 Both author and first person narrator were born and grew up in the same village, both attended a prestigious Israelian boarding school, both went to university, both are now living with wife and daughter in Bayt Ṣafāfah near Jerusalem, etc. The important difference between the two lies in the fact "that Kashua himself has obviously succeeded in getting accepted by Israeli society [..., whereas] his alter-ego fails" Granzin 2002: [1].

14 Schwarz 2002. – Other reasons for the choice of Hebrew were (according to Kashua's own words) the fact that there are very few Arabic publishing houses in Israel, and that he has been reading, from the age of fifteen, only Hebrew literature, so "it is much easier for me to write in Hebrew" than in Arabic. Avidan 2002: [1].

15 Cf. Avidan 2002: [1]. – The first incentive for Kashua's hero to learn Hebrew, however, was curiosity: after he had discovered, in a locked suitcase, old newspaper cuttings in Hebrew showing his father he wanted to know the secret of his father's past. Kashua 2002: ch. I/1. (I am using the German translation.)

written in Hebrew was in 1986"[16]–Anṭūn (Anton) Shammās' *ʿAravesḳōṯ* ("Arabesk"). So, Kashua, like Anṭūn Shammās before him, successfully occupied hitherto unoccupied literary terrain, thereby "writing the history of a whole generation of young Arabs into the Hebrew reading books" (Granzin 2002: [1]). Establishing in this way a counter-canon is a method of resistance and protest against Israeli/Jewish dominance that is followed also by other Arab writers living in Israel.[17] According to Shammās, and probably also for Kashua, this strategy is aimed at exerting a deeper influence on the Israeli public opinion than other strategies of opposition, especially resorting to violence. [18]

Kashua's novel is, however, not only critical of the Israeli Jewish society, but also–and not less so–of the Palestinian Arab society. The author rejects the claim that he wrote in Hebrew because he might have feared Arab reactions to his criticism. On writing in Hebrew, he says,

> I did not want to conceal anything from the Arabs, for the great majority of them have a good command of Hebrew […] They read Hebrew newspapers, watch Hebrew news on TV, and buy Hebrew books in Jewish bookshops […] (Avidan 2002: [1]).

But, in my opinion, his criticism of Arab society is so harsh and breaks so many taboos that it would have been very difficult to publish the novel in Arabic. The most offensive aspects are probably his representation of fellow Palestinians, the role of the father in Arab societies, of Islam, and of the protagonist as an anti-hero.[19]

To begin with the last, the narrator's mocking of himself (or Kashua's mocking of his main character) could have been, to Israeli Palestinian readers, the least objectionable of the four aspects, since the target of mocking is (at first sight, at least) the protagonist himself, not the Israeli Palestinian society, it is the anti-

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16 Granzin 2002: [1]. Shammās' ʿAravesḳōṯ had provoked similar reactions in the Israelian public, reactions that were far more vehement than at the publication of another, earlier, key work of modern Palestinian literature, Emile Ḥabībī's *al-Mutashāʾil* ("The Peptimist") which had appeared in 1974 in Arabic.

17 E.g., the Iraqi Jew Sāmī Mikhāʾīl (*1926), for whom writing "Arab" literature in Hebrew means challenging especially Zionist literature (which, according to the author, modern Hebrew literature has essentially remained). In a discussion following readings from his novels in Berne (17 March 2003), Sāmī Mikhāʾīl expressed his conviction that the Israeli reading public is also fed up with this conventional, "zionistically" restricted canon and longs for a broadening of their horizons.

18 When asked why he preferred to write in Hebrew, Shammās once replied by pointing to a short story by A. B. Jehoshua "in which a dumb Arab sets fire to a reafforested plantation close to a deserted Arab village. Here, Shammās said, the Arab has only the language of fire at his disposal" Szyska 1991: 24.

19 Cf. Stagh 1993: 127, where Stagh talks about obscenity, blasphemy, and political opposition as three major "minefields where the writer has to move with great precaution," as well as Cachia 1990: 175, where "a marked reticence to strike themes that may cast doubt on national unity" is stated for Modern Arabic literature.

hero who, because of his inferiority complex, "assimilates to the majority (the Jewish society) to such a degree that he can tell his life only as a joke."[20] Yet these traits are not restricted to the hero himself; they reappear in the society that he disgusts. What he, the educated intellectual, does is not much different, at a closer look, from the behavior of those fellow countrymen to whom he thinks himself to be superior. Having quitted university and working now as a barkeeper, the narrator and his Palestinian colleague, the waitress Shâdiyah, watch two other Arabs on the dance floor:

> They are really ugly, especially the small one with the moustache. He is swinging his ass around in his tight trousers in circular movements which ridicule not only himself but also everybody dancing close to him, [...] and especially me and Shâdiyah. If he had only a scrap of brain, he wouldn't even dare to dance. Why should Arabs like him dance in a disco? Don't they even realize that they are different, how little this suits them, how ugly they look? (Kashua 2002: ch. IV/10).

It is not by accident that the dancing Arabs of this scene have given the novel its title. It is a metaphor in which at least three aspects of the Israeli Palestinians' situation unite. It not only shows the shame felt by Palestinian intellectuals *vis-à-vis* what they experience as the backwardness of their own community (as compared to "civilized" Jewish society), but it is also characteristic of how ridiculous the hero's arrogance is towards those who are attempting to assimilate (in principle, at least) as he has done. This ironical distance notwithstanding, the text does not deny the hero the right to mock himself of his compatriots' behavior; for, if he is ridiculous, then they are, too.

Had Kashua written his novel in Arabic it would have been quite difficult for him to find a publisher since the latter would have run the risk of being accused of supporting a writer who aims to criticize his own people.[21] Especially so, since Kashua does not refrain from exposing his ridicule of his compatriots exactly in those fields which are the most sensitive of all because they provide the reservoir from which a positive identity and pride are derived, and which therefore represent the great taboos of Arab society: sexuality, the family, nation (Arabness), qne religion (Islam). For example, in terms of sexuality, the dance floor passage previously quoted continues like this:

> Especially the small one with the moustache who does not stop cracking peanuts and swinging his ass around. He does not doubt that he is a super-model and that every girl dancing on his side is a whore. Every time he orders a beer he points to a woman saying "She is Russian, isn't she?" (Kashua 2002: ch. IV/10).

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20 Review of Kashua 2002 by Ludwig Ammann in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19 April 2003, summarized by Perlentaucher 2003: [1].

21 Cf. what the text tells us about Shâdiyah, a drop-out of Palestinian society with a Bedouin background. She had written a book and sent the manuscript to some publishers in Egypt, but never got a reply. Kashua 2002: IV/10.

This is a clear barb against that kind of "manly" behavior which has been, and obviously still is, a typical reaction of the colonized against the colonizer. The Sudanese writer al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ presented a masterly portrait of this type of personality back in 1966 in his famous novel *Mawsim al-hijrah ilā 'l-shimāl* (*Season of Migration to the North*), in the form of his character Muṣṭafā Saᶜīd, who undertakes a "retaliation campaign" against the British colonizer in the form of seducing their women, one after the other, and who eventually kills the one who refuses to surrender to his attempts at gaining superiority by subjecting the victims to his sexual desires–this Muṣṭafā Saᶜīd has since become a well-known symbol of a "machoism" which seeks sexual (i.e., symbolical) compensation for (actual) political inferiority.

Sayyid Kashua does not stop at the point where the "holiness" of traditional family structure is at stake. Almost no member of the narrator's family remains safe from his criticism; the most severe accusations are directed at his father:

> I will take my father to the court. I will open a case against him for having planted hope into my heart. A hope that has deceived me. [...] I will raise a claim against him for having told me during the Lebanon war that this is the great darkness before the great bright day. I laugh at him because every time they throw bombs on Gaza and Ramallah he says "It's over, now they are finished." [...] There is not the slightest bit of hope left in my heart, I am full of hatred. I hate my father, for it is because of him that I am unable to leave the country, it's he who has taught us that there is no room for us, that it is better to die on our land, that one must not give up. [...] Without all that rubbish which he has taught us, I could have left long ago (Kashua 2002: IV/5).

The father, i.e. the older generation, is also the one who holds up the idea that being Palestinian is something to be proud of, that "the land" is something "holy" and that on its preservation depends a Palestinian's honor, just like a family's honor depends on the chaste behavior of their women.[22] He is convinced of the Arab nation being something great, and of the Arabs supporting the case of their Palestinian "brothers" in solidarity and unity. After a trip to Egypt, where the father comes to know, for the first time, a part of the Arab world outside Palestine, his former idealism is shown to collapse totally; experiencing the Egyptians as a people who do not care very much about the destiny of the Palestinians, the father returns from this excursion into "reality" as a broken person.

Arab pride turns out here to be totally inappropriate, a false pride. A similar unmasking takes place with regard to religion, especially the new Islamic piety as an ideology of salvation. For the disillusioned protagonist, who is seeking firm ground after his attempt at assimilation has failed, a "return to religion," so *en vogue* these days, seems at first glance to be the easiest solution:

> During the last days I have been thinking of God quite often. Everybody returns to religion. In Islam, returning to religion is easier than in Judaism. You are allowed to stay in

[22] al-arḍ zayy al-ᶜarḍ: "The land is like honour," the father uses to say, "who sells the land sells his honor." Kashua 2002: I/12.

> the same house [...]. [...] an imam and a whore may live in the same house. In order to return to religion you have only got to wash yourself [i.e. practice ablution] and pray (Kashua 2002: V/3).

So, given the fact that there is no other hope, why not try Islam? The narrator lets himself in to accompany his friend ʿĀdil, one of the new converts from nominal Islam to a "true," practicing belief, to the Ḥijāz in order to perform the pilgrimage. He will, however, not only have to state, painfully, on their arrival that "there is no beer in Saudi Arabia, not even malt beer" (Kashua 2002: V/3), but what he observes in the believers is also unmasked as the naïve belief of children in what some authority tells them:

> [In Paradise] you get everything you want. You think of a pear, and immediately you find a pear tree in front of you. [...] In the Garden of Eden people sit around on a meadow the whole day, as in a park. When you think of women they come to you, and it is possible to think of women and eating at the same time. It is not clear whether you will get women like in Saudi Arabia. Probably not (Kashua 2002: V/3).

After visiting the tomb of the Prophet, the narrator confesses to ʿĀdil that the sight of the holy place has left no particular impression on him ("inside me, it is void, I have seen nothing but a green carpet on which surahs of the Qur'an are written"), and in vain has he also tried "to become part of the great circle of people dressed in white who constantly revolve around the Black Stone" (Kashua 2002: V/3). The sarcasm with which Kashua lets his protagonist report on the events that happened during the *ḥajj* is topped in the paragraph where, on their way back to Israel, his friend ʿĀdil wants to leave the bus in the middle of nowhere in order to return to Mecca:

> He was convinced that the Mahdi would come just now and that he would miss his arrival. When we reached the river Jordan, he said to me: "Maybe He is already in Jerusalem." But the presence of the Israeli soldiers and the border officials [...] convinced ʻAdel that the Mahdi had not arrived yet (Kashua 2002: V/3: last paragraph).

All the issues just mentioned are very sensitive in modern Arab, especially Palestinian, consciousness, and it would have been quite difficult to find a publisher for the novel had the author written it in Arabic. Hebrew, thus, for Kashua is not only a "stepmother tongue,"[23] but also a language that grants him a greater freedom of expression.[24]

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23 "Stiefmuttersprache:" Avidan 2002.

24 The same is true for Anṭūn Shammās: "One of the main reasons that Shammās wrote Arabeskot in Hebrew was the freedom in Israeli-Jewish society–more than Israeli-Arab society–to criticize not just the other, but also itself. In this novel, Shammās offers some rather harsh criticism not just of Jewish society in Israel, but also of Arab society inside and outside Israel, and he was not willing to criticize his society in its own language," Elad-Bouskila 1999: 54. – Cf. also what Iranian author Said (pen name), who writes in German, holds: "Every language gives me additional room for development" (quoted in Kucher 2003: 129).

Edward Said (1935-2003), Out of Place *(1999)*

Like Yahia's and Kashua's text, Edward Said's *Out of Place* explores a childhood and youth lived between different cultures–in this case, between Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and the United States. One of the many reviewers of the memoir is perfectly right in saying that at its center lie the author's "experience of continually being an outsider and the confusion caused by his multiple identities–Arab, Christian, and U.S. citizen" (Semcoop [2000?]), and we may also add: Egyptian and Palestinian. However, in spite of the multiplicity of identities and exiles/"exiles" that Edward Said shares with Yahia and Kashua and of which a dualism of languages is an integral part, the question in which language to write his autobiography probably did not cross his mind a single time. Like many Arabs who received higher education not in Arabic but in English (or French, etc.), Edward Said lacked the level of Arabic that such a project would have afforded. His command of the Arabic literary language *(fuṣḥā)* was by far not as unflappable as that of his English;[25] he had in fact lost much of his Arabic long before and would have been completely unable to express himself in that language in a way that would have been appropriate to his character and intellectual abilities.[26]

But even if Said's Arabic had been sufficient to produce an *Out of Place*'s equal in Arabic, he might have preferred English because of the *public* he wanted to address with his text. As a most politically-minded writer, he would have wanted to give a voice that is heard to a region whose (hi)stories tend to pass unnoticed and remain unknown in the West if they are told in Arabic only.[27] In that, his motives would not have been different to that of a number of other Palestinian writers before him. As Enderwitz states,

> [t]he call on the conscience of the West to do, at last, historical justice to the Palestinians has been the earliest of the motives which made the [Palestinian] authors take up writing. [...] This motive is also an essential reason for the fact that a disproportionate

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25 This was also one of the reasons brought forward by Sayed Kashua not to write in Arabic, cf. note 14 above. – Kashua's case is not exceptional also with regard to the fact that many Israeli Palestinians do not have the opportunity to study in Arabic during their university years and therefore lack an academic level of writing in Arabic. (Thank you, Louis Fishman, for this remark.)

26 Thank you, Stefan Wild, for what you pointed out in your comment on my paper at the Istanbul conference. – So, the Arabic titles, few as they are, which bibliographies of Said's works do show are probably translations from an English original or have been edited from a draft in Said's own defective fuṣḥā.

27 The same idea lies at the basis of the choice of English made also by other Palestinians for their autobiographical accounts. In the case of Raja Shehadeh, e.g., a Western journalist convinced the Palestinian lawyer and founder of the renowned human rights organization al-Ḥaqq, that the Palestinians needed someone like him to raise public conscience for their cause in the West, and that this has to be done in English. The outcome was the memoir *Strangers in the House* (Shehadeh 2002). Personal communication by Nadja Odeh. Thank you, Nadja. – The idea is of course similar to that of establishing a counter-canon which we have met with already in Kashua's text.

> lot of Palestinian autobiographies were published originally in English or another European language.[28]

Strangely enough, there is no textual evidence at all to be found in *Out of Place* for any of the possible motives put forward so far for Said's using English. The autobiography leaves the reader without any internal clue as to why it is written in English, and not in Arabic. This is all the more astonishing for two reasons. First, as a text on identity, homelessness, etc., it makes clear, from the very beginning, the close interrelationship between language and identity. The narrative abounds in very detailed, very subtle and very sensitive observations concerning the question what was said or written by whom in which language under which circumstances or, e.g., which were the moments when somebody shifted from Arabic to English, refused to talk Arabic, did not remember a certain word in English, etc. It is therefore not by accident that the author approaches the linguistic dilemma of his life already on the second page of his account, immediately after having said a few words about his name. "I have never known," he writes,

> which language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one of the two really and without any doubt was mine. But I know that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often correcting, and commenting on, the other. Each can seem like my first language–but neither is.

So, secondly, the text of the autobiography leaves the reader with the impression that Arabic and English for Said are absolutely equal, and the author continues, stating that in his opinion this "primal instability," as he calls it, is due to his *mother* who, as far as he can remember, used to talk to him in English as well as in Arabic. The total balance between the pros and cons of both English and Arabic is maintained throughout the text, which holds the narrated instances concerning each of the two languages, according to my reading, in a perfect equilibrium.

Given the fact that the language theme is surely one of the major topics the text raises every now and then, and given the plenitude of language-related events and the balance just described between Arabic and English, one wonders why Edward Said's text remains silent about the fact that for him English has become the language of writing.

From this, it has to be concluded that the decisive events which finally tipped the scales in favor of English must have occurred only later, i.e., outside the temporal scope covered by *Out of Place*, when the "primal instability" had ended and writing in English for Said became indeed more natural than writing in Arabic. It would have been appropriate to ask Said if this conjecture is right, but this

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[28] Enderwitz 2002: 62, cf. also ibid., note no. 142 and, for the aim of "reaching the hearts of people especially in the West via the 'human dimension,'" ibid.: 63. – See also preceding footnote.

is no longer possible: in 2003 he died from the disease of which the diagnosis in 1991 had convinced him to write this autobiography. The opening sentence of the preface tells us that he intended for *Out of Place* to be essentially an account about "a lost or a forgotten world." In any case, the fact that it is written in English has made the English-speaking readership the main addressee of his endeavor to save this world from oblivion.[29]

*Emine Sevgi Özdamar (*1946),* Mutterzunge *(1991)*

Quite a different case is Emine Sevgi Özdamar, the only Turk figuring in my selection. She was born in Malatya in 1946 and came to Germany at the age of nineteen, where she first worked in a factory for electric valves, but only in order to earn a living which enabled her to study theater. She wrote for the stage (*Karagöz in Almania*, 1987) and later also short stories and novels. (For further details about her life, cf. the contribution of Olcay Akyıldız in the present volume.)

Among the four bilingual writers included in my selection she is perhaps the one who comes closest to what I've termed "truly bilingual writing" at the beginning of my paper (cf. choice no. 1, above). But "truly, or essentially, bilingual" here does not mean that she writes both in German and Turkish; apart from a few words or, at most, some short sentences, her texts look perfectly German on the surface. However, a more profound analysis reveals a different reality. Her narrative combines German grammar with the Turkish way of thinking or saying something. A good example in this respect is the title of her first collection of short stories and essays, *Mutterzunge* (highly autobiographical and also highly indicative of the fact that the question of language is central to Özdamar's thinking; it is no accident that the title of this first collection bears a relation to language; for Kucher, the texts are in themselves narratological-linguistic reflexions[30]). The word "Mutterzunge" is formed from two components in total accordance with the rules which govern word formation in German. It is however a *literal*, one-to-one translation from Turkish *ana dili* and does not give the meaning of "mother tongue" in German, i.e., a language, but only of the speech organ of a mother (*ana dili* "mother tongue" in German would be "Mutter*sprache*"). The alienation effect[31] that accompanies this kind of "word process-

[29] I have been unable to consult Said's "An Ethics of Language," a review of Foucault's *The Archeology of Knowledge*, in *Diacritics* 4/2 (Summer 1974): 28-37. Although it may contain information related to the choice of language I would nevertheless hesitate to build an argument for a text of 1999 on one of 1974.

[30] Kucher 2003: 152. – Similarly, Seyhan 2001: 19 holds that *Mutterzunge* is one of the works which "critically engage questions of bilingualism and interlinguality and reflect on the relations of power and language".

[31] Cf., e.g., Angelika Burkhard's account of a literary soirée with Özdamar, in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, no. 46, 23 February 1991, where she characterizes the author's German as "seltsam verfremdet" (quoted in Kucher 2003: 151).

ing" makes the reader (or listener) aware that the customary way of looking at things, which corresponds to the customary use of the German language, is just one of many other possible ways to do so, and therefore produces creative energy and irritation.[32] At the same time, the polyphonic narrative technique enables the author not only to retain her "Turkishness" in a German structure (which, of course, is also hers), but at the same time it essentially becomes a cross-culture writing[33] in order to open up the German language to fantasy and all kinds of creative games with the language.[34] This is why her narrative, in spite of its "simplicity," often becomes very poetic and is successful in integrating–to quote only one example–pieces of Ottoman-style "wine poetry" into the text *as though* it were a German tradition. Writing in German thus does not restrict the author to only one part of her identity, but allows her to melt both into one, to live both at once; literary exile, and exile in general, is thus not only dealt with but essentially abolished (cf. Ette, in Sinai 2003: [2]). Apart from that, this technique provides a means for the author to convince the German reader that a bit of "Turkification" may also enrich the language as well as the society. An element which equally supports the feeling that "Turkification" is nothing to be afraid of is the fact that Özdamar's technique also has an amusing effect. It makes the reader smile at the outcome of such a "melting" of languages, "mentalities," and identities. Sympathetic humor (not ridicule!) also prevails when Özdamar writes about the problems she herself or her characters encounter in Germany because of Turkish being their "Mutterzunge." All these factors combine to promote the "acceptance of the otherness," of the "strange" and foreign.

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32 As Kucher 2003: 129 notes, plurilingualism in literature can often be observed to produce subversive side-effects. In Germany, this holds true not only for Özdamar but also for a number of other immigrant writers, the most "rebellious" among whom is probably Feridun Zaimoğlu. On the language he coined *Kanaksprak*, i.e. the broken German spoken by immigrant workers, especially Turks (derogatorily called "*Kanaken*" in German slang), and which was raised by him onto the level of literariness, Zaimoğlu said in an interview on German Radio International (Deutschlandfunk) in 1999: "Kanaksprak is an artificial language. It is a form of visibility. ... Part of that is also a combative gesture in language, a staccato or a hard beat, part of it are one-to-one translations [...], as well as verbal poses, but in the end there is, again and again, Presence, the right of every single person to his own, very individual being-there."

33 Kucher 2003: 130, points to the fact that, as a result of constant migration into Europe since the 1970s, there is now a considerable number of texts which, like Özdamar's, have two or more "worlds of reference" (Bezugswelten).

34 Cf. Ottmar Ette's finding that Özdamar "does not attempt to translate Turkish idioms into their properly German equivalents, but rather transforms and expands the expressive possibilities of German through a constant violation of grammatical and lexical norms" (Sinai 2003: [2]).

Resumee

A look, rather superficial as it had to be, at only four narratives is certainly not sufficient in order to draw conclusions on a systematic level. Yet, what I think this short glance at some autobiographies written by bilinguals has been able to show is a) how manifold the motives may be for Arabs or Turks to make use of a non-Arabic or non-Turkish language for their autobiographical writings, and b) that it might be worthwhile to study these motives in a systematic manner.[35] Furthermore, I hope that this contribution from the field of Oriental studies may have added some new aspects to the theory of autobiography written by bilinguals, or language migrants, in general, a theory which a considerable number of studies from other disciplines have already made great efforts to establish.[36]

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35 Gabriele Jancke has already started to do so in her field (cf. her contribution to the present volume).

36 For a short, but very comprehensive survey cf. the Introduction in Besemeres 2002: 9-35. The question of language choice in the autobiographical writing of bilinguals is of course only a sub-question of the question of language choice in literature and, in the end, of language choice in general. For the former cf., e.g., ch. 2 "Mehrsprachigkeit und Literatur", in Strutz & Zima (eds.) 1996: 113-226, Kremnitz & Tanzmeister (eds.) 1996, as well as for diaspora literature, among many others, Seyhan 2001. The problem of language choice in general is mostly approached from a very linguistic perspective, cf. e.g. the chapters "Dimensions of bilingualism" (Li Wei), "The description of bilingualism" (W. F. Mackey), as well as the whole section on Language Choice (several authors), all in Li Wei 2000: 3-25, 26-54, and 63-106.

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