

LIVES
IN
TRANSLATION
BILINGUAL
WRITERS
ON
IDENTITY
AND
CREATIVITY

EDITED
BY
ISABELLE DE
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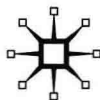
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BILINGUAL WRITERS ON
IDENTITY AND CREATIVITY



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LIVES IN TRANSLATION

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“Si, dans le passé, des experts établirent un alphabet pour fixer les langues, j’aspire à transcrire une écriture libérée, non seulement de l’alphabet, mais encore de mes deux langues: celle de l’endroit où je suis née et celle de l’endroit où j’ai débarqué(. . .) Il y a la langue avec laquelle je pense et me parle, et celle qui ayant acquis une forme, sortira de ma bouche et de la plume. C’est la première que j’essaye d’insuffler aux mots. Sans elle, ils restent sans vie. Il est probable qu’elle se volatilise lors du trajet de ma bouche à la page. Néanmoins, à partir de cette langue sans existence, je me fraye un passage vers les mots institués. Je cherche à l’accorder à eux comme je cherche dans l’espace un son. Je m’efforce d’adapter un état, qui fulgure à l’intérieur de moi, à un état extérieur inaltérable. Il est rare que je puisse les faire se joindre.”

(“If, in the past, experts established an alphabet in order to differentiate languages from one another, I aspire to transcribe a writing that is free, not only from the alphabet but from each of my established languages: the one belonging to the place where I was born and the other to the place where I disembarked(. . .) There exist both the language with which I think and talk to myself, and the language which, having taken on material shape, exits from my mouth or pen. It is the former that I try to breathe into my actual words. Without it, the latter remain lifeless. It is likely that the former will virtually evaporate during its journey from my mouth to the written page. Still, it is out of this language with no existence that I make my way towards the assigned words. I strive to match them up in the same way that I try to snatch a single sound from the vastness of the air. I struggle to make what blazes inside of me take on concrete form. It is rare that I can make them truly coincide.”)

—Sylvie Baron Supervielle, *Le Pays de l'Écriture*

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PERMISSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

ISABELLE DE COURTIVRON

BEING BILINGUAL. WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Living in two languages, between two languages, or in the overlap of two languages? What is it like to write in a language that is not the language in which you were raised? To create in words other than those of your earliest memories, so far from the sounds of home and childhood and origin? To speak and write in a language other than the one that you once believed held the seamless connection between words and things? Do you constantly translate yourself, constantly switch, shift, alternate not just vocabulary and syntax but consciousness and feelings?

Such questions lead to numerous explorations. Linguists ask how one learns language, how and where the human brain stores and uses languages. They analyze critical periods, domains, code switching, the difference between compound and coordinate bilingual speakers. Political scientists explore the relationship between the language of power and the power of language: the role of language as a mechanism of assimilation and nationalism, colonialism, diglossia, and ethnic resistance. Literary theorists and cultural critics reflect on bilingual games and agency, on the translingual imaginary, on hybridity, "in-betweenness," nomadism, and "métissage."

All of these are fruitful and complementary approaches that shed light on a multidimensional phenomenon. But the writers in this collection are engaged in another form of questioning altogether—one that has to do, quite simply, with fundamental issues of identity and creativity.

Despite the fashionable postmodern emphasis on displacement and dislocation; despite the celebration of diversity and “more-than-oneness”; despite the intellectual persuasion that trying to find wholeness in our lives is a somewhat obsolete ideal, the anxiety about fragmentation and the search for existential coherence remain primordial human responses. The life-long struggle to reconcile the different pieces of the identity puzzle (or at least to acknowledge that they cannot be reconciled) continues to be a painful and constantly renegotiated process. All the more so, perhaps, when the fragmentation exists in that most intimate of sites—language. “Are there disadvantages to being a traveler between languages, a double, triple or even quadruple agent crossing frontiers of identity?” George Steiner asks in *Errata: An Examined Life*. The writers in this collection respond to this question in multiple ways. As their essays demonstrate, none eschews issues of identity, of existential anguish, of difficult choices, and of the tortured search for self and place. But none regrets the emotional and literary enrichment that being bilingual has brought them. For in the end, each celebrates, in his or her own manner, the “imaginary soothing solace” of translation (Shammas), their “maddeningly migrant” lives (Dorfman), and their “fluid, uncertain” homes (Desai). Products of the postwar global realities in which they have matured, these authors interrogate the individual; they explore the intimate experience; they ponder the strange itineraries that have led them from a childhood in one language to a writing life in another; they meditate on the upheavals and the transformations, on the challenges and the adjustments, and on the reconciliations—which in some cases have taken a lifetime and in some will never be complete. For them, the answer lies not merely in partial self-

acceptance and understanding of the patchwork of their lives but in acknowledging that if there is a pattern in the quilt after all, what brings together the mismatched pieces is the writing project. What Patrick Chamoiseau calls an “inky life line of survival” (*School Days*).

It is not surprising, then, that a number of the women and men included in this collection have written language memoirs—all of which echo one another, despite their radically different contexts and histories. For many, it is the shock of discovering a new language that precipitates the loss of childhood paradise. Then there is the ambivalent discovery of school (and how many absurd colonial and postcolonial school systems are described in these bilingual memoirs!) but also of books that reveal a world both alien and mesmerizing. We’re frequently shown an alienation from parents who do not share the same linguistic and cultural metamorphoses; the glacial paralysis of self-imposed silence, of being temporarily without language; the reluctant mastering of the second language (and, for some, the return to the original language after a period of alienation and rejection). Then there are the complex aesthetic and political choices. Finally, a voice emerges from the dualities, molded by the cadence, the rhythm, and the memories of the original melodies and boldly charting new language territories.

While exile is “hot,” and it is chic these days to celebrate our multilingual, multicultural and mobile world, the essays in this volume remind us that this condition is often less romantic than its academic version would have us believe. Today’s younger “global souls” may feel comfortable everywhere, as Pico Iyer claims in *The Global Soul*, but our writers challenge this claim. While acknowledging that “we have come to value exactly those qualities of experience that exile demands—uncertainty, displacement, the fragmented identity,” Eva Hoffman (in *Letters of Transist*) reminds us that real dislocation is “a matter not of willful psychic positioning but of an upheaval in the deep material of the self.” And where does the deepest material of the self lodge itself

if not in language? For, indeed, you can never sidestep the question of identity when you learn to live in a new language. Questions of home, of assimilation, of linguistic and cultural alienation, of triangulation and translation; the elusive search for one-ness, and the haunting quest for the self are perhaps foregrounded more acutely in texts by bilinguals because their authors face an ultimate disconnection. How much more difficult the fragmentation when you don't quite have "the words to say it"?

Of course there are many reasons for being bi- (or multi-) lingual—the word itself can be defined in many ways, though it always involves some sort of continuum—and varying historical and individual contexts color each experience. You can be bilingual because your parents spoke different languages, the culture in which you were raised was a multilingual or diglossic one to begin with, or because the one where you sought refuge is monolingual and learning that language was the price of assimilation. It can be because another tongue was imposed on you for political reasons, or because you chose another tongue for affective or aesthetic reasons. You can be bilingual because you have maintained your ties to a regional tongue like Breton or Catalan, in addition to speaking the majority language, French or Spanish. Or because you live in an officially bi- or multilingual country like Switzerland or Canada or India or Nigeria. You can become bilingual when you are five, thirteen, or twenty-five. And of course bi- and multilingualism became increasing phenomena during the twentieth century as migration, technology, postcolonialism, and globalization dissolved borders and increased cross-cultural mobility.

Some of the writers whose memoirs relate their bilingual journey have attempted to come to terms with dualities by dividing their linguistic identities once and for all. Thus Richard Rodriguez, in *Hunger for Memory*, remembers that early on he resolved to split Spanish and English into private and public languages. Marjorie Agosin, discussing Spanish and English as well, explains that she always differentiated between the language of memory and that of order, each with its own function: "One

language insisted on forgetting, the other on memory" (*The Alphabet in My Hand*). Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, referring to the diglossic situation in Ireland, writes (in this volume): "Irish [is] the language of the emotions and even the preverbal and English [is] for me a bridge to the outside world." While some hold on to the original tongue as a memory of wholeness and poetry, others are wrenched between the two. Or else they resist the competing exigencies of both assimilation and purity.

Metaphors of duality and dislocation and betrayal abound in bi- (or tri-) lingual autobiographical texts. In this volume, Ariel Dorfman refers to an "incessant and often perverse doubleness," Nancy Huston to "theater, imitation, make-believe." Anton Shammas describes himself as a "cultural smuggler." Sylvia Molloy characterizes the works of bilingual writers as "always altered never 'disaltered,' always thirsty, always wanting, never satisfied." These themes are present in the works of bilingual writers not included in this volume. For Marjorie Agosin, existing in two languages means "being split in half and belonging to no one." Luc Sante, in *The Factory of Facts*, writes of feeling "excluded at the gate," of living in a succession of "rented rooms," of "crossing borders but never straddling them." Vassilis Alexakis, in *Paris-Athènes*, describes himself as an actor watching himself on the screen in a dubbed version. As Ilan Stavans switches among four languages, he perceives himself as if he were "inhabiting other people's tongues" or "borrowing another person's suit" (*On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language*). Early on in his memoir *Out of Place*, Edward Said admits: "I have never known which was my first language, and have felt fully at home in neither." Just as Shirley Geok-lin Lim distinguishes between homelands of memory and homelands of the future (in her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*), there are languages of memory and languages of the future. And sometimes there are even, during privileged moments, two languages of the present.

The topos of duality extends to writing, of course. The writer who has placed language at the center of his or her creative life,

and for whom writing has become home, must at some point make a fundamental choice. "In what language will he express his confused awareness of these intimate paradoxes?" asks André Aciman in his introduction to *Letters of Transit*.

This question of creative choices is far from new: Conrad, Beckett, Ionesco, Joyce, Kafka, Nabokov, and Sarraute have preceded the contemporary writers cited above and left looming shadows. Modernism also was a literature of exile and immigration, and it too was defined by experimental linguistic practices. But this earlier generation lived in a different world and had doubts of a different nature, as does the vibrant new generation of young bilingual writers such as Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, or Shan Sa. Nevertheless, the question remains acutely relevant, as Susan Suleiman reminds us in the introduction to *Exile and Creativity*. Noting that the state of being "not home" implies a distance from one's native tongue, she wonders: "Is this distance a falling away from some original wholeness and source of creativity, or is it on the contrary a spur to creativity?"

Both, of course. For some writers, the hard-earned mastery of the adopted language (the "stepmother" tongue, as Assia Djebar calls it in *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade*) is a painful apprenticeship, but it is often a successful one. This is notably the case for Russian author André Makine whose classical prose has earned him a place in the pantheon of prize-winning "French writers," and for Chinese-born Ha Jin, who won the U.S. National Book Award for his English-language novel, *Waiting*. For Eva Hoffman, Richard Rodriguez, and André Aciman, the command of the other tongue, in this case English, may have come at a price. But each has developed a very personal style that owes its elegance and power, in part, to this initial struggle. For Ariel Dorfman and Nancy Huston, the temptation to be one, the fantasy of feeling happier and more "one's self" in a second language, may have briefly promised peace; but it also brought an unexpected longing that has led them to write in two languages, including in the rejected mother tongue. In the case of Yoko

Tawada, the haphazard meeting of languages as radically different as German and Japanese has not been resisted; on the contrary, the odd juxtaposition has provided an unexpected aesthetic liberation, bringing with it the discovery of a style filled with playfulness, humor, and surrealist encounters. Sylvia Molloy translates and retranslates herself and finds that her texts improve in this shuttling. Linguistic merging, mixing, and "métissage" find their way into Assia Djebar's lyrical passages with their overtones of Arabic; into José Oliver's poetic Andalusian-German images; into Patrick Chamoiseau's weaving of franco-creole orality, and into Gloria Anzaldúa's defiant code-switching, most pointedly exemplified in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

One can be inhabited by bilingualism even if one does not speak two languages fluently but writes from the absence of what should have been. For sometimes, after the loss of an early language, the music nevertheless remains alive *en creux*, leading one to write as on a palimpsest, in one tongue but always over the body and the sound of a buried language, a hidden language, a language whose ghosts reverberate in words (German, Hindi, and Urdu for Anita Desai, Spanish and Amerindian tongues for Richard Rodriguez, Arabic for Leïla Sebbar, Malay and Hokkien for Shirley Geok-lin Lim).

Bilingualism has a bad name in the United States, often for absurd political reasons. It has been enlisted in nationalistic culture wars and held hostage by polemics; it has been used as an accessory in reductive ideological stances. And its opposition has sometimes been bolstered by the regrettable smug assurance that one need only speak one language to be a citizen of the world, as long as that language is English. So it is time to restore to the term to its more capacious and endlessly enriching acceptance, one that inevitably leads to what Ursula Hegi in *Tearing the Silence* calls "a deeper way of seeing."

In the end, we are all exiles. Exile is, after all, only a metaphor for the human condition. We have all lost our childhood paradises, even if this did not happen because we left behind our

mother tongue. We all struggle to understand the self as well as to reach out and communicate with others. Bilingual beings have no particular claim to these more universal themes. But perhaps because they experience them more acutely as they navigate between words and between worlds, they remind us, as does Shirley Geok-lin Lim at the close of her own autobiographical journey, that in the end "home is the place where our stories are told."

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