Book Review

Beyond the Beyond


Asking whether we should deplore deficiency more than excess, Confucius is said to have answered: ‘To go beyond is as wrong as to fall short’. I came across this aphorism while performing some desultory research on the popularity of ‘beyond the’ as a title phrase in literary scholarship. According to the MLA International Bibliography, in the years since 1980 more than 570 peer-reviewed books, book chapters and essays written in English have featured this locution. Granted, some of these came in the form of citations (six, for instance, refer directly to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)); many more, however, announce that something has been passed or surpassed, transcended or outstripped. This trend has now been augmented by the titles of this special issue of *parallax*, by Yasemin Yıldız’s excellent new book on the ‘postmonolingual condition’ of German writing since Kafka and – because I couldn’t resist – by this review.

One can understand the appeal. The prepositional phrase ‘beyond the…’ has a solid pedigree, turning up in classic works such as Freud’s, as well as the perennially useful idiom ‘beyond the pale’ – a reference to the boundary of the late medieval English colony in Ireland (An Pháil, in Irish) that now describes the limit beyond which any act or thing is considered to be *de trop*. It also helps that ‘beyond’ owns a certain semantic flexibility. It can refer (this is not an exhaustive list) to physical properties of distance, to quantity, to movement or travel and to locations that are as much ineffable as real (‘the back of beyond’, ‘the great beyond’). Individual uses often combine more than one of these qualities, trafficking in the word’s easy slippage between the physical and ideal, the particular and metaphorical. Thus, when C. L. R. James titled his memoir of West Indian cricket culture, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), he evoked both a physical act (hitting the ball out of the playing area) and the social and political fact of the Caribbean’s revolt against the rules and limitations of British colonialism. Perhaps most significantly, the phrase nicely complements the persistent academic fetish for novelty. Why not ‘go beyond’ when the alternative is sitting still?

But this, as Confucius knew, is where trouble can start. The desire to go beyond an existing scholarly paradigm – even the ambition to faithfully record the emergence of some new trait in culture or society – always risks excess. Overconfidence, inattention to detail, reductiveness, hyperbole: the list of possible sins is long and familiar. Indeed, accusations of this kind underlie much academic grumbling and not a few scholarly reviews: not just it is more complicated than that but, more pointedly, it is more important to emphasize continuity, not change.

It is a pleasure to report, then, that Yasemin Yıldız’s *Beyond the Mother Tongue* attends scrupulously to the boundaries between continuity and change. Despite her title’s apparent double renunciation (not just ‘beyond’ but ‘post’), Yıldız never neglects the way that recent German literature continues to be shaped in relation to a monolingual ‘family romance’ (p.10). This is the social and ideological fiction that, since the Romantic period, has tended to naturalize our relation to a ‘mother tongue’, thereby creating a supposedly organic relation between the concepts of a language, a (generally patriarchal) family, an ethno-national people and a nation-state:

> The ‘mother tongue’ functions as a shorthand that barely needs explication. In this shorthand, the weight of the argument falls on the element of ‘mother’ in *Muttersprache*. It stands for a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation. (p.9)
The romance of the mother tongue is familiar to us not because humans have always or usually possessed one language. In fact, by drawing on linguistic research that indicates the prevalence of bi- and multilingualism throughout human history, Yildiz avers that, ‘it is monolingualism, not multilingualism, that is the result of a relatively recent, albeit highly successful, development’ (p.2). Still, even if the ‘monolingual paradigm’ is both partial and recent, Yildiz has no doubt about its power and reach. She describes it as constituting:

[...] a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectivities such as cultures and nations. (p.2)

The rise of the monolingual paradigm is, thus, part of the broader history of modernity – and, most particularly, the chapter of that history titled ‘nationalism and the nation-state’. This fact has two major implications for Yildiz’s argument. First, although she is primarily concerned with twentieth-century literature, she attends to the emergence of the concept of the Muttersprache in the writings of eighteenth-century German intellectuals such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humbolt and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Despite their many differences, these men all wrote at crucial moments in the history of European nationalism and state-formation. What’s more, they managed to combine personal multilingualism with the belief that the uniquely valuable qualities of individual languages not only give rise to distinct cultural identities but might also provide the basis for distinguishing between the proper members of different political communities. It matters little, in this analysis, that few nation-states have been monolingual in practice. What remains crucial is the way that, to use an example from Yildiz’s fascinating chapter on Fremdwörter (German words of foreign origin) in T. W. Adorno’s philosophical writings, ‘because of the close ties between language and nation in Germany, where language was for a long time the only common denominator, the shape of the language and its constitution have been exceptionally critical matters’ (p.69).

Second, and more importantly, the long hegemony of the monolingual paradigm necessarily shapes the nature of the ‘postmonolingual condition’ that this book seeks to outline and explain. Yildiz sees the works of German-language authors such as Franz Kafka and Yoko Tawada as reflecting the ‘ongoing dominance of the monolingual as well as [...] [their] incipient moves to overcome it’ (p.4). It is this complex temporal and social relation (and emphatically not the successful transcendence of monolingualism) that the prefix in ‘postmonolingual’ is supposed to capture. For Yildiz, ‘post-’ signifies ‘the period since the emergence of monolingualism as [a] dominant paradigm’ (p.4; emphasis in original). But it also possesses what she calls ‘a critical function, where it refers to the opposition to the term that it qualifies’ (p.4). In this way, ‘postmonolingual’ names a condition in which writers ‘struggle against’ a monolingual paradigm that, because it is so ingrained within the habits and institutions of the majority culture, they cannot fully overcome (p.4; emphasis in original). This does not make Beyond the Mother Tongue a dispirited or pessimistic book – far from it. There are occasions when Yildiz points to the apparent normalization of a new linguistic paradigm, as when she describes the European Union as an institution that may face the ‘challenge’ of managing multilingualism, but that cannot simply pretend to ‘discard it’ (p.3). There are still more moments in which her analyses attest to the moral and aesthetic force of imagining language as ‘a home that is not exclusionary, that is impure, marked, tainted, “enriched,” and charged’ by the presence of foreign peoples and tongues (p.210). Nevertheless, Beyond the Mother Tongue is not a Utopian book. It is clear-eyed and tough-minded. It is measured in its celebrations and cautious in its declarations of novelty. And it is all the better for it.

What, then, will the reader of Beyond the Mother Tongue learn? An introductory chapter draws out the history of multi- and monolingualism in Europe and defines key terms and arguments. Although generated out of Yildiz’s knowledge of German history and the German language, much of this argument is relevant to other national and transnational contexts. For instance, her observations about how contemporary artworks stage individuals ‘as primarily monolingual [...] when at the same time they are posited as the building blocks of a larger multilingual whole’ might easily be extended into a critique of multiculturalism as a whole, which so often ‘celebrates diversity’, as the saying goes, without troubling the underlying representational structures of society (p.22). Above all, the introduction builds to an account of how aesthetic and linguistic form ‘shapes how social formations are imagined’ in literary works (p.25). This means that reading for the post-
monolingual involves more than stacking up examples of foreign linguistic traces in German texts. It rather obliges us to consider the manner in which distinct languages are brought together within literary works. Postmonolingual reading means looking for aesthetic, lexical or grammatical effects that ‘disrupt the homology between language and ethno-cultural identity’ (p.26).

This is not just a general brief on behalf of close reading – though it is that. The body chapters of Beyond the Mother Tongue are each organized around a different linguistic or aesthetic affect. Thus, Chapter One, ‘The Uncanny Mother Tongue’, considers the affective mode of the uncanny in Franz Kafka – a familiar enough trope in criticism about, say, The Trial (1925), but here explored as the condition of Kafka’s relationship to the German language, which Yildiz sees as being reconfigured by the author’s detour, via French, into the ‘jargon’ of the Yiddish language and the Yiddish theatre (p.56). Chapter Two, ‘The Foreign in the Mother Tongue’, turns to a peculiar lexical quality of Adorno’s writings: his persistent use of foreign-derived German words. In Minima Moralia (1951), Adorno famously described Fremdwörter as ‘the Jews of language’ (quoted in Yildiz, p.84). In Yildiz’s compelling analysis, these lexical resident aliens therefore function as the ‘internal other’ to German, opening up ‘the possibility that the foreign is lodged right in the mother tongue’ (p.67).

As these descriptions suggest, Yildiz’s opening chapters are strongly German-Jewish in orientation. For obvious historical reasons, they also tilt towards a modernist cultural and political context in which questions of empire and state nationalism loom larger than those of Euro-federalism, globalization, or diasporic immigration. These latter concerns animate the second half of the book, which focuses on contemporary German writers, especially on migrant and ‘postmigrant’ (p.170) writers of the last three decades, who learned German as a second language or grew up in bilingual homes. As it changes historical and thematic focus, the book retains conceptual and methodological consistency via its interest in the trope of the Muttersprache and by continuing to organize each chapter around a specific formal or linguistic operation.

Thus, to continue my summary: Chapter Three, ‘Detaching from the Mother Tongue’, explores Yoko Tawada’s peculiarly bilingual writing, which comprises discrete oeuvres in Japanese and German and, thus, is not so much multilingual as (in Naoki Sakai’s phrase) ‘heterolingual’ (p.124). In Tawada’s writing, Muttersprache gets re-coded into Sprachmutter [language mother], which I take to suggest that we are less born into a language community than spoken into being by language. In this way, migrating into another language-community does not mean that one betrays one’s mother; instead, one enters into a relationship with a new mother, who is just as adoptive as our first.

This spirit of linguistic depropriation also characterizes Yildiz’s final two chapters, which turn to Turkish-German writers and ask pressing questions about the language politics of contemporary Germany. For my money, they offer some of the most compelling and energetic readings in a consistently fine book. Chapter Four, ‘Surviving the Mother Tongue’, explores how Emine Sevgi Özdamar utilizes a tactic of ‘lateral translation’ in which German becomes haunted by the ghost of a foreign figure of speech, idiomatic phrase, or proverbial expression (pp.143–144). Correcting readings of Özdamar’s prose narratives that overemphasize the traumatic affect of ‘losing’ one’s mother tongue, Yildiz instead historicizes those texts, arguing that ‘translational exchange’ creates the aesthetic and imaginative conditions in which the German language becomes ‘the means to remember and rework a Turkish trauma – a trauma brought on by state violence, but brought to language in migration’ (p.168). Finally, Chapter Five, ‘Inventing a Motherless Tongue’, takes on Feridun Zaimoğlu’s popular and controversial volume, Kanak Sprak: 24 Mißblicke vom Rande der Gesellschaft (1995), the title of which Yildiz translates as ‘Kanak Speech: 24 Discordant Notes from the Margins of Society’ (p.172). Yildiz explains how Zaimoğlu re-appropriates the racist slur Kanak (originally a Pacific-islander term for ‘human’, now connoting something like ‘cannibal’) as the starting-point for creating a minority speech that ‘is not actually found on the streets, even as it mimics some characteristics of postmigrants’ language’ (p.173). As a deliberately synthetic vernacular, Kanak Sprak occupies an interstitial zone between linguistic appropriation (seizing and transforming the German language in the interests of new ethnic communities) and depropriation (treating language as a malleable tool that has no organic relation to an ethno-national ‘mother’). Perhaps most interestingly, Yildiz then tracks those elements of Turkish and ‘oriental’ culture that Kanak Sprak deliberately occludes or leaves out. The result, she argues, is an ambivalently demotic German purged of any association between the foreign and the feminine – a ‘motherless tongue’ twice over.

Beyond the Mother Tongue ends with a brief conclusion in which Yildiz evokes the possibility of a de-
ethnicized German that might express (without ever modeling) the values of a ‘disaggregated community’ (pp.203–211). In such a postmonolingual world, German might be as much the (non-)property of Turks in Turkey as of German citizens of whatever background. This is a nicely hopeful note on which to end an otherwise unillusioned book – though I confess that, as a scholar of global Englishes, I have found that even an apparently ‘de-ethnicized’ language still remains open to nationalist or ethnocentric mobilization.

As the above implies, I am not a professional Germanist and, thus, cannot assess whether Yildız’s close readings might bungle some linguistic detail, or if she has omitted or obscured some necessary literary-historical reference. I leave such judgments to writers in specialist journals. As an interdisciplinary reader, educated in literary modernism and the theory and practice of cultural nationalism, I find Beyond the Mother Tongue wholly convincing and – best of all – energizing. I want to know more about Kanak Sprak and ‘literal translation’. The next time I teach Adorno, I shall be sure to steal Yildız’s brilliant suggestion that the persistence of Fremdwoérter within his prose testifies to how his philosophy of dialectical negation gets encoded at the level of language (p.70). I did wonder, however, at some apparent omissions. In particular, I found myself asking if there was more to say about the status of German as a Muttersprache in WWII-era debates about the character and limits of the Nazi Großdeutsches Reich and, perhaps more interestingly, about the development of the language after 1945, when Germany simultaneously split apart and saw the repatriation of many German-speakers from Poland, the Sudetenland and elsewhere.5 It was, likewise, curious to see that the chapters focusing on contemporary Germany had relatively little to say about linguistic and cultural change in the wake of post-Communist reunification. While I understand that a single book can only attempt so much, I suspect that further engagement with these intra-ethnic dimensions of German history and language might have complemented Yildız’s central interest in the nation-state’s relations with its ethnic internal others.

Beyond the Mother Tongue is an ambitious and deeply fascinating first book, written in a clear and accessible style. It is an entirely suitable candidate for subvention under the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s prestigious Modern Language Initiative, which provides vital support for scholarly publishing in modern languages at a precarious time for this precious discipline. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the language politics of modern and contemporary literature, German or otherwise. It will delight all readers interested in the possibility of what Adorno called ‘language without a soil’ – a tongue that is ‘suitable for expression’ precisely because it maintains and cultivates an inassimilable foreign presence (pp.103–104).

Notes


2 It is, I think, pedantic to complain that ‘post’ ought to mean ‘after,’ rather than the temporal condition of ‘after the beginning’ or, as is sometimes the case here, ‘the beginning of the end.’ Although, like ‘beyond’ constructions, ‘post-’ prefixes always risk hyperbole, this double temporality is quite common. Yildız cites Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory,’ in which the prefix “reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture” (p.4). Wendy Brown, meanwhile, has recently described a ‘post-Westphalian condition’ in which “‘post’ signifies a formation that is temporally after but not over’ (Walled States, Waning Sovereignty (New York: Zone, 2010), p.21; emphasis in original).

3 Yildız explains that Fremdwoérter are not simply ‘foreign words’ — the type of word that, in English, would usually be marked by estranging italics. Nor are they simply German words of foreign origin — e.g. Fenster [window], long ago adapted from Latin (p.68). They are common German words that nevertheless retain a visible trace of their foreign origin. Yildız gives the example of Handy [mobile phone], which derives from English but is in fact peculiar to German speech.


5 Some of this history is covered implicitly in the Adorno chapter. Still, with its appropriately tight focus on German-Jewish relations, the chapter does not really open out onto the broader linguistic and political history of the mid-century.