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# Gegenwarts Literatur

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## Political Trauma and Literal Translation: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*

### I

In a 1993 essay about writing and staging her first play, Emine Sevgi Özdamar recalls a train ride from Germany to Turkey in the early 1980s:

Es saßen Griechen, Türken und Jugoslawen zusammen im gleichen Zug, ihre gemeinsame Sprache war Deutsch.

In Jugoslawien stiegen auch ein paar türkische Väter in den Zug, alte Männer. Sie waren mit leeren Särgen aus der Türkei nach Jugoslawien gekommen, um ihre toten Söhne und Töchter, die mit ihren Autos auf der Fahrt von Deutschland auf der Straße in Jugoslawien bei Autounfällen gestorben waren, in die Türkei zu holen. Die Väter rauchten Zigaretten, standen auf dem Zugkorridor und sprachen leise über den Weg und über ihre toten Kinder. Einer sagte: "Dieser Weg hat uns unsere fünf Seelen weggenommen."

Die jugoslawischen Männer sangen Sehnsuchts- und Liebeslieder über ihre Frauen, zu denen sie zurückfahren, und übersetzten diese für uns in ihrem gebrochenen Deutsch. Wir weinten und lachten. Tagelang, so eine Fahrt.

Die Toten in den Särgen, wir zu acht im Zugabteil, die gemeinsame Sprache Deutsch. Es entstand fast ein Oratorium, und die Fehler, die wir in der deutschen Sprache machten, waren wir, wir hatten nicht mehr als unsere Fehler. (Hof 48-49)

At once utopian and melancholy, this passage conjures up an intimacy across nationalities. It suggests that migration is a contact zone that does not simply bring migrants into contact with a host country, but leads to interactions with other migrants as well. The rolling train even creates a common space for peoples who are often considered enemies. Turks are together with Greeks, and Yugoslavs are not yet differentiated by ethnicity. In this mobile periphery of Europe, death, grief, yearning, and pleasure co-exist. The crucial mediator in this scene is the German language. Marked by mistakes, what Özdamar calls "broken German" becomes a powerful affective site

of possibility, in contrast to the long-standing image of *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* as synonymous with language deficiency and even muteness.<sup>1</sup> With these migrants, German moves outside a national territory and becomes a de-ethnicized language.<sup>2</sup>

The fathers in this scene, however, do not speak this emerging *lingua franca*. Their status, their affects, and their language stand apart from those of the labor migrants on the train. Traveling only halfway to Germany, and trafficking in coffins and corpses rather than their labor, these quiet, mournful figures are the only ones given an actual voice in the scene. Though they presumably speak Turkish, the text renders their remarks in the sole sentence of direct speech in German: "Dieser Weg hat uns unsere fünf Seelen weggenommen," a grieving father says. To a bilingual reader, this sentence appears as a direct translation from Turkish: *Bu yol bes canimizi aldı*. As in so many other places in Özdamar's writing, this sentence draws on a literally translated Turkish expression, in this case referring to death, while remaining word for word in German.<sup>3</sup> Though appearing in the general context of migration, the meaning and function of this turn to literal translation is not as obvious as it might seem at first, namely as a linguistic expression of migration. In the linguistic configuration of the train scene, this form of literal translation does not coincide with the broken German of migrants, which is invoked here but not actually rendered. Instead, literal translation in this passage mediates the narrator's engagement with the loss experienced by non-migrants.<sup>4</sup> This configuration indicates that the literal translation that emblemizes Özdamar's writing relates to migration in a more roundabout manner than heretofore assumed. Taking this structural and affective divergence between broken German and translated German as a point of departure, this essay revisits Özdamar's translational writing in order to offer a new account of the relation between language and migration in her *oeuvre*.

Few writers in contemporary German literature have raised the issue of language and migration as emphatically and creatively as Özdamar.<sup>5</sup> One of the most critically acclaimed German-language writers of Turkish descent, Özdamar is widely read as an author of migration, be it internal migration in Turkey (see *Karawanserei*) or transnational migration to Germany (see *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*).<sup>6</sup> Özdamar

introduced literal translation as a literary strategy immediately in her first publication, *Mutterzunge* (1990).<sup>7</sup> As the title story instantly signals, the word *Mutterzunge* itself is to be read as a literal translation of the Turkish term *ana dili* [mother tongue]. With its self-reflexive focus on language, that first short text, *Mutterzunge* is widely recognized as encapsulating Özdamar's language poetics. This essay will therefore focus on this short text and, inspired by the train scene discussed above, recast it from a perspective that does not assume that literal translation simply refers to Turkish-German migration. As I will show, political trauma in the Turkish context plays a far greater role in the formation of Özdamar's literary language, which is characterized by literal translation, than has heretofore been assumed. But this is not just the trauma caused by Atatürk's reforms, to which the text explicitly alludes and that critics have already productively explored.<sup>8</sup> Rather, one of the central traumas in *Mutterzunge* relates to anti-leftist state violence in Turkey during the early 1970s. I argue that the form of Özdamar's literary language is not just mediated by migration, but also by political violence.

Many critics have commented on Özdamar's technique of literal translation. It has been interpreted as a mode of preserving and presenting authentic Turkish culture (Aytaç; Kuruyazıcı), as encapsulating an alternative and affirmative Turkish memory culture capable of countering official history (Seyhan), as enriching German culture (Wierschke), as an exploration of the foreignness of Germany (Sölçün), as intercultural dialogue (Mecklenburg), or as an aesthetic experiment (Brandt). While I agree with some of these interpretations, my own reading emphasizes both a different historical context—Turkey in the 1970s—and a different interpretive context. Literal translation, as I will demonstrate, plays a crucial role in the affective negotiation of traumatic recall. It specifically participates in the working through of the memory of political violence and its traumatic effect on language.

While Özdamar was one of the first writers to have introduced literal translation successfully into contemporary German literature, she by no means invented the form. In the twentieth century alone, modernist writers such as James Joyce, on the one hand, and postcolonial writers such as Gabriel Okara or Ahdaf Soueif, on the other, have utilized literal translation for

different purposes. In his discussion of the contemporary Egyptian-British writer Soueif, comparatist Wail Hassan speaks of "translational literature" in this context. Given some of the similar techniques, it is clear that Özdamar's form of literal translation is part of a larger transnational literary phenomenon that draws on translation in developing new literary languages. Hassan, for his part, emphasizes the act of inscribing colonized languages into the colonial ones. However, despite the sociolinguistic situation in which the Turkish language in Germany is marginalized and frequently treated with disdain, such a matrix of oppressed and oppressing languages does not apply to Özdamar. In her writing the relationship between Turkish and German takes on a very different quality, where Turkish is the traumatized and traumatizing language, German offers relief from this trauma. Özdamar's linguistic constellation can thus be understood in a transnational, but not in a postcolonial vein.<sup>9</sup>

The change in focus from migration to political trauma that this essay proposes draws on the literary text, but it also takes seriously Leslie A. Adelson's call for new practices of reading the contemporary literature of migration. In *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*, Adelson argues that "no cultural frames of reference are pre-given in any authoritative sense for the literature of Turkish migration, and that each text must be interpreted for relevant frames of reference or contexts to be rendered meaningful" (12). In the case of Özdamar, what is frequently assumed as a pre-given fact is that negotiation of cultural difference is the most important reference point for understanding her writing, as well as her turn to literal translation. She is generally seen as either negotiating Turkish or German culture, or as pursuing an intercultural project. Though cultural difference is indeed important, focus on culture alone can obscure the significance of other strands in the literature.

The grief of the fathers in the opening train scene, for instance, does not fit readily into a framework of cultural difference, and Özdamar's rendition of their language in literal translation is only weakly explained in terms of an intercultural agenda. Rather, the fathers serve as emblems of a different loss and grief. Indeed, the figures of grieving fathers with empty coffins return elsewhere in Özdamar's writing and speak

to another historical context. In her speech upon receiving the 1999 Chamisso Prize, Özdamar describes the situation in the 1970s in Turkey: "Damals bedeutete in der Türkei Wort gleich Mord. Man konnte wegen Wörtern erschossen, gefoltert, aufgehängt werden. [...] 'Heute sind 8 Studenten ermordet worden. Ihre Väter sind mit Särgen gekommen und haben die Köpfe ihrer Söhne gesucht'. Jahrelang solche türkischen Wörter." ("Meine deutschen Wörter" 128-129). Like this passage from the speech, *Mutterzunge* links language to the same context of political violence. The text does not just tell a story about culture in migration. Rather, it draws on migration as one side of a larger constellation of historical experiences in order to work through political traumas of the left.

With this call for a more careful assessment of the assumptions about cultural difference that accompany our reading practices, this essay joins recent critical arguments against "Kulturalisierung," along with Adelson's intervention into the "framing" of the literature of migration. "Kulturalisierung" refers to the translation of political and social issues into cultural ones, with "culture" conceived of in essentialist terms.<sup>10</sup> While this tendency is currently particularly evident in German discourses on Islam, it describes a general tendency to see all aspects of Turkish migration only in terms of cultural difference. By considering the narrative structure of *Mutterzunge*, by elaborating on encoded historical referents, and by analyzing particular instances of literal translation both thematically and formally, I will demonstrate that it is the political—and not primarily the cultural—that inflects Özdamar's employment of literal translation. After identifying the particular political trauma that is at stake in *Mutterzunge*, I turn to the concept of trauma itself to understand the affective work that the form of literal translation accomplishes. In the final part, I suggest how this affective reworking also functions to resituate the post-Holocaust German language as a site of relief.

## II

The loss of the 'mother's tongue' is the guiding motif in *Mutterzunge*.<sup>11</sup> A female Turkish narrator situated in the divided city of Berlin asks herself repeatedly when it was that she lost her 'mother's tongue.'<sup>12</sup> In response to her own question, she recalls seemingly disjointed scenes from the past that all figure

as possible moments of loss. In this section I pursue the reasons for this loss and the turn to literal translation that this short, but crucial, text presents.<sup>13</sup>

Most scholars to date have presumed that the loss of the mother tongue that Özdamar's narrator laments is related to, if not actually caused by, migration. Kader Konuk asserts: "Die 'Mutter Zunge' ist durch die Migration verlorengegangen" (*Identitäten* 88). Regula Müller lists the "Verlust der Muttersprache" as part of the "Folgen der Migration" (134). Seyhan sees a similar cause: "After her long sojourn in Germany, [the narrator] feels that when she thinks of her 'mother sentences' spoken by her mother in her mother tongue, they sound like a foreign language she has mastered well." (118). Neubert speaks of "culture shock"—again implicitly related to migration—as leading to "speechlessness" (158). Other scholars, who do not directly comment on the reasons for the loss, still emphasize migration to Germany as the pivotal reference point for understanding Özdamar's translational form (Sölçün; Horrocks). In most of these cases migration is primarily understood as a cultural experience or a cultural challenge. A closer look at the text, however, reveals that the presumption linking the loss with migration and the realm of cultural difference does not quite capture the text's treatment of loss.

Before offering that alternative reading, it is useful to consider why migration has been so frequently seen as the ready and obvious answer to the narrator's question. This is in part due to the text itself. Immediately after locating herself in a Berlin café, the narrator recalls two fragments of conversations with her mother. In both of these her mother tells her that she has physically changed in Germany: "[Meine Mutter] sagte dann: 'Du hast die Hälfte deiner Haare in Alamania gelassen.' [...] Ich fragte sie auch, warum Istanbul so dunkel geworden ist, sie sagte: 'Istanbul hatte immer diese Lichter, deine Augen haben sich an Alamanien-Lichter gewöhnt' (7).<sup>14</sup> It is the mother who sees the daughter's loss of hair and her changed visual perception as having been caused by her migration to Germany. While she does not explicitly dispute this interpretation, the narrator nevertheless continues her search, thereby indicating that this answer is not yet satisfactory. Assumptions about the link between migration and loss are

thus formulated in the text itself—but as conjectures of the mother that the daughter does not share. In this regard it is important to remember that, in many of Özdamar's texts, the female protagonist's own mother is not a site of unproblematic origin and belonging. Rather, as revealed in a key passage in *Karawanserei*, for instance, the mother is shown as acting to enforce a version of the mother tongue that adheres to the specifications imposed by nation-state institutions. Upon returning from an extended stay with relatives in an Anatolian small town, the young female protagonist of *Karawanserei* begins to pronounce the word 'mother' in dialect. Her own mother rejects this version of the word: "Meine Mutter sagte: 'Sprich nicht so, du musst wieder istanbultürkisch, sauberes Türkisch sprechen, verstehst du, in zwei Tagen fängt die Schule an. [...] Sag Annecigim [my dear mother]! Nicht Anacugum [my dear ma].' [...] Die beiden Wörter fochten in der Mitte des Zimmers" (53). As the invocation of the school indicates, the 'mother tongue' is closely linked to the nation and its claims on the formation of its citizens, a process of formation that reaches into intimate familial relations. The mother tongue is thus not a private, authentic site of belonging, but rather is contested affectively, as well as institutionally, between state-sanctioned language and the vernacular.

Returning to the reasons for the loss of the 'mother's tongue' in *Mutterzunge*, the structure of the text provides a further clue that this is not a straightforward story of migration from Turkey to Germany and its effects on the language of the migrant protagonist. The text consists of two parallel series of vignettes, rather than constituting the kind of linear narrative that is presupposed by the prevailing arguments about the impact of migration on language in *Mutterzunge*. One series of vignettes is set in the narrative present, in divided Berlin, and frames the overall text. In this framing, the text ends with the narrator resolving to learn Arabic, the "grandfather tongue" as a detour to recover more than the three words in the "mother's tongue" that surface in the course of *Mutterzunge*.<sup>15</sup> In the subsequent, much longer text "Grossvaterzunge," that resolution leads to a more clearly discernible story line, involving an unhappy love affair with the Arabic teacher. The second series of vignettes in *Mutterzunge* records remembered scenes such as brief exchanges, snapshot-like images, and

surreal dream sequences.<sup>16</sup> The vignettes move from scenes in Turkey to scenes in Germany and back to scenes in Turkey. Arrival in Germany is by no means the endpoint of the story, but rather represents a stop along the way, albeit a central one. Thus, while migration to Germany is an important reference point, both thematically and poetically, the moments prior to that migration are structurally much more prominent in the text than is generally acknowledged by current scholarship. These moments also relate in a distinct manner to the loss of language, yet they do not do so on the grounds of culture or identity.

The Turkish vignettes primarily recall the impact of political violence. Although the concluding moment of *Mutterzunge* explicitly invokes the politics of the early Turkish Republic regarding language and writing, in the vignettes relating to Turkey Özdamar returns time and again to the subject of the political persecution of young leftists during the 1970s. Following a period of broadening democratic participation partially enabled by the left-leaning military coup of 1960, the 1970s in Turkey, as elsewhere in the world, saw an intense politicization and an increased polarization of society. The right-wing military coup of 1971, which attempted to limit civil rights and the spread of socialist ideas, was followed by increased repression and violent crackdowns on leftists. Throughout the 1970s, leftist youth in particular were the target of both arrests and abuses by the state and of brutal attacks and killings by state-sanctioned fascist death squads.<sup>17</sup> Much of the second part of *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*, Özdamar's second novel, describes this historical moment and generational experience in great detail, while the same history also provides the backdrop to her third novel, *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde*.<sup>18</sup> In *Mutterzunge*, the first extended memory vignette already suggests a very precise moment in Turkish political history. The narrator remembers a mother's story about losing her son to anti-leftist political persecution. Although Özdamar renders the remembered monologue of the mother in very personal terms, focusing on the mother's experience of the police searching her house and of her son being sentenced to death, one detail—death by hanging—links this story to history. While many young leftists died in the early 1970s in different ways, only three were sentenced to death by hanging. The hanging in May 1972

of the iconic leftist student leader Deniz Gezmiş, along with two of his comrades, had a profound impact on Turkish politics of the 1970s and beyond.<sup>19</sup> Özdamar invokes this background by specifically mentioning the hanging, but otherwise remains within the domestic perspective of the illiterate mother who vainly attempts to resist the police.

The final recalled vignette in *Mutterzunge*, rarely discussed by critics, establishes the intricate relationship between political violence in the Turkish nation-state, language, and migration to Germany most explicitly. The vignette reads in its entirety:

In den Polizeikorridor haben die auch den Bruder von Mahir gebracht, Mahir, der in den Zeitungen als Stadtbandit bekannt gemacht war. In den Tagen hatten sie Mahir mit Kugeln getötet. Mahirs Bruder saß da, als ob er in seinem Mund was Bitteres hatte und es nicht rausspucken konnte, er hatte ein sehr dünnes Hemd, ich hatte einen schwarzen Pulli mit Hochkragen. "Bruder, zieh es an." Mahirs Bruder sah mich an, als ob ich eine fremde Sprache spreche. Warum steh ich im halben Berlin? Geh diesen Jungen suchen? Es ist siebzehn Jahre her, man hat ihnen die Milch, die sie aus ihren Müttern getrunken haben, aus ihrer Nase rausgeholt. (11-12)

This passage, too, contains implicit historical references. Given the publication date of 1990, the reference to "siebzehn Jahre" identifies the historical moment in question quite precisely: it is around 1972-1973, in the aftermath of the second military coup. The insistently repeated name "Mahir" further recalls the well-known radical student leader Mahir Çayan, who was killed by police bullets in March 1972. Çayan explicitly emulated tactics of urban guerrillas, a stance pejoratively encapsulated in the word "Stadtbandit."<sup>20</sup> The focus on the nameless brother rather than on "Mahir" himself indicates, however, a perspective on this period that shifts to the familial. In this passage, the narrator recalls a scene of utter alienation in the hallway of a Turkish police station many years earlier, before abruptly moving to the text's present in divided Berlin. In the remembered scene, the alienation manifests itself in the failure of a caring gesture to soothe, or even to be communicated to, the nameless young man. This alienation deeply affects language: "Mahirs Bruder saß da, als ob er in seinem Mund was Bitteres hatte und es nicht rausspucken konnte." What seems to be

stuck and become bitter in the young man's mouth is language, specifically Turkish, the language in which this scene presumably takes place. In the context of this scene, the bitterness is produced by state violence, political repression, and familial loss.

While "Mahir's brother" is unable to produce any language at all, the narrator's own language is affected differently. In a sentence that functions as a crucial pivot for the entire text, the narrator's language turns foreign: "Mahirs Bruder sah mich an, als ob ich eine fremde Sprache spreche." On one side of the pivot is the silent gaze of a young man situated in the past. On the other side, the narrator is suddenly situated in the present, and the status of her language is in question. The uncomprehending gaze of the past ("sah mich an") provokes a radical temporal jump into the present ("als ob ich eine fremde Sprache spreche"). The sentence thus testifies both to a radical caesura and to its lingering linguistic effect. The second part of the sentence is remarkable as well. It offers a hypothetical ("als ob") and a metaphor ("fremde Sprache spreche"), yet what it says is in fact literally true for the narrator in the present. She does speak what Mahir's brother would have considered a foreign language, namely German. The metaphor 'speaking a foreign language' becomes literalized, so that the sentence pivots not simply from past to present but also from the figurative to the literal. This literalization of the act of speaking a foreign language is indeed enabled by migration, yet the crucial sentence indicates that the turn to the literal use of language is provoked not by culture shock, but rather by the unredeemed moment in the police station hallway.

The turn to the literal mode enables a new perspective, as well as the establishment of a new mode of recalling this trauma. Although the object of the narrator's quest seems to be changed for a moment from the 'mother's tongue' to the persecuted young leftists ("Warum steh ich im halben Berlin? Geh diesen Jungen suchen?"), the odd sentence about young men and their mother's milk reconnects these two subjects by means of a literal translation: "Es ist siebzehn Jahre her, man hat ihnen die Milch, die sie aus ihren Müttern getrunken haben, aus ihrer Nase rausgeholt."<sup>21</sup> This sentence plays on colloquial Turkish expressions that mean 'making someone regret something they did, making someone pay for their transgression.'<sup>22</sup>

The sentence thus can be understood to mean 'it has been seventeen years since these young men were made to suffer for their actions, that they had to pay a price for their beliefs.' Yet through literal translation, the text not only recalls the fate of the young men who suffered thus, but also encompasses the mothers along with their milk and the bodily experiences of mouth and nose that the Turkish idioms conjure up. In German these elements produce an odd, and even an unsettling, image that invokes an incongruous torture scenario.<sup>23</sup> In this manner the translated form refers obliquely to the tortures to which many young leftists of that generation were subjected.<sup>24</sup> In addition, it suggests the impact of the violence in the familial realm.

The operations of literal translation, though relying to a degree on an underlying Turkish matrix, also cast that language in a new light, as being both necessary and insufficient to the text. When spoken in Turkish, the idiomatic expression discussed above (about the mothers' milk) lacks the unsettling connotations it has in German. It gains this at once threatening and evocative quality only when "defamiliarized" in literal translation. An actual retranslation into Turkish erases the poetic and critical edge of the text. The unenthusiastic reception of the Turkish translation of *Karawanserei* (as *Hayat bir Kervansaray* 1993) seems to bear this out. Turkish Germanists have suggested that this was due to the fact that, retranslated into Turkish, Özdamar's literary language simply sounded colloquial, and thus lost its suggestive quality (see Aytaç; Kuruyazici). Gürsel Aytaç also relates the intriguing anecdote about the well-known Paris-based Turkish writer Nedim Gürsel, who was not impressed with Özdamar's first novel after reading it in Turkish, but had a completely different reaction after reading it in French translation (176). Literal translation, therefore, is not a means of simply recovering a lost mother tongue that would have been better able to articulate these experiences. Instead, the "loss" pertains to the mother tongue itself just as much as to the protagonist of the text. What the text testifies to, namely a deep-seated defamiliarization and estrangement in the mother tongue, is expressed in *Mutterzunge* through simultaneous recourse to both Turkish and a non-Turkish language.

The alienation and pain in this "Turkish scene" differ substantially from that recorded in the encounter with the cath-

edral in Cologne, one of the vignettes from the middle of the text that many critics have commented upon. In it, the narrator recalls a physical reaction to the moment when she opened one eye to the sight of the Kölner Dom from a train window: "in dem Moment sah ich ihn, der Dom schaute auf mich, da kam eine Rasierklinge in meinen Körper rein und lief auch drinnen, dann war kein Schmerz mehr da, ich machte mein zweites Auge auch auf" (10-11). The razor in this surreal image has an anesthetic effect, as Bettina Brandt points out.<sup>25</sup> The pain recorded here thus does not last, but rather passes as the razor is incorporated. This scene in particular has been read as signifying the arrival of the migrant as she is confronted with one of the most iconic landmarks of Christian religious and German national identity. Yet the text does not end there, but rather moves back to Turkey and to the scene in the police hallway. This latter scene, in contrast to the one set in Cologne, ends in pain and necessitates a radical jolt from the past to the present. That "razor" is not incorporated; instead a sudden temporal caesura cuts into the remembered scene. The cuts of state violence, and those of migration, differ from each other: the violence of the state continues to haunt as a loss, while a sharp new tool is gained in migration.

### III

While the previous section has considered the implicit reasons for the loss of the 'mother's tongue,' this is actually not the main question that the text itself pursues. The question that the narrator asks repeatedly is not *why* she has lost her mother's tongue, but rather *when* this has happened: "Wenn ich nur wüsste, wann ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe" (7), "[w]enn ich nur wüßte, in welchem Moment ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe" (9). Rather than being a minor difference, this explicitly temporal focus points to a core concern of the text. The recurrent search for a specific moment of loss and the concomitant turn to literal translation can be elucidated, I suggest, through trauma theory.

Following Cathy Caruth, one of the leading theorists in the field, trauma refers to the impact of an injurious event that is too unexpected and overwhelming to be experienced at the moment it occurs and is therefore not fully integrated by the subject. Because of its unassimilated nature, it returns, albeit

with some delay, repeatedly and insistently. What characterizes this traumatic recall above all—and distinguishes it from memory—is the “literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits” (Caruth 5). Rather than actually remembering the event and being able to reflect on it, the subject is revisited by the event in the form of flashbacks. Caruth emphasizes that “[i]t is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event.” (5). Trauma is thus a mode of recall in which the exact return of the event coincides with amnesia: “the vivid and precise return of the event appears [...] to be accompanied by an *amnesia* for the past” (152, emphasis in original).

Read in that light, *Mutterzunge* therefore does not just recall “traumatic” events on the level of content—the death sentence of a young man, the murder of another, the unbearable loss felt by families—but is itself constituted by a traumatic structure: the paradoxical coexistence of literal recall and amnesia. The narrator recalls monologues, snapshots, and dreams in vivid detail, yet at the same time she insists that something is amiss in her memory. A newspaper headline, “Arbeiter haben ihr eigenes Blut selbst vergossen,” for instance, is recalled and even explained (“Streik war verboten, Arbeiter schneiden ihre Finger, legten ihre Hemden unter Blutstropfen, in das blutige Hemd wickelten sie ihr trockenes Brot, schickten das zum türkischen Militär” [9]). But rather than comment or reflect on this bloody history, the narrator is preoccupied with the strangeness of her mode of recall. The headline appears like a “Fremdschrift,” the moment of reading it seems “fotografiert,” not experienced (9). Even though the scene thus returns to the narrator, it does so as something alien and unassimilated. The dimension that is missing from it and is staged as affected by amnesia, is the very experience of that moment itself. *Mutterzunge*, in other words, does not simply tell the story of a lost language, or of state violence, or migration for that matter, but rather enacts the “delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even seeing, an overwhelming occurrence.” As Caruth further emphasizes, trauma “does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is

not yet fully owned” (151). The text's repeated focus on the missing dimension of its memory functions therefore as its primary testimony. It testifies to the excessive, incomprehensible nature of the recalled events.

Trauma, however, is also tied to survival in multiple ways. Again, Caruth's elaboration is helpful: “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; [...] *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*.” (9, emphases in original). The pivotal sentence in the police hallway scene stages this moment. The second part of the sentence that jolts the narrator into the present leaves out the moment of leaving the scene. That “passing out of” the scene remains only silently captured in the caesura, but not narrativized. What is missing is the remainder of the scene with Mahir's brother, whose fate—survival, death?—we do not learn. Missing moments are thus constitutive of trauma. The narrator's search for a lost moment, rather than for any underlying reason for loss, itself thereby points to the predicament of trauma. Yet the structure that constitutes trauma also contains the elements that “can make survival possible” (Caruth 10). This is the case because trauma is a “temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site.” It thereby testifies to a “*departure*” (10, emphasis in original). In its sudden jump from a time, place, and language of state violence to a much later state of migration, *Mutterzunge* testifies to this simultaneity of trauma and survival and, within that, to the particular means of its departure.

In Özdamar's text, literal translation enacts the link between trauma and survival, between acting out and working through, in the most condensed form.<sup>26</sup> Literal translation is in fact the means of working through. Because trauma is constituted by literal return, that is, by a pure form of repetition, the ability to work through relies on distorting that literality—that is, on repetition with a difference. This difference can come in various forms. Caruth, considering the workings of testimony, mentions geographic and temporal dislocation, a new addressee made available through translation, a slight change in narrative. Translation, with its potential of addressing a new audience in a new place and time, for instance, can



enable "the passing out of the isolation imposed by the event" (Caruth 11). On the one hand, as the carriers of greatest—that is, 'most literal'—literality, the passages rendering Turkish idiomatic expressions in German words record exactly the combination of literal recall and amnesia. In other words, they attest to a traumatic structure. On the other hand, translation into a new linguistic context necessarily dislocates the words and images from their usual signifying networks and produces entirely new associations, addressed to a new audience. Thus, no matter how literal the translation, literal translation is always about difference and about telling the "slightly different story" that the working-through of trauma requires (Pierre Janet, cit. in Caruth 154). As the sentence with the mother's milk has demonstrated, in translation the same idiomatic expression begins to tell a different, in this case much more ominous story.

In the process of translation, what is recalled is both preserved and altered, not just in its meaning but also in its affective quality. This conjunction explains why Özdamar's writing, despite referencing traumatic histories, does not ultimately read like a lamentation. Instead, her language is evidently "playful," it displays "irony and humor" and has a "comical and absurd tone," as Sohelia Ghaussy correctly notes (6). A closer look at a passage from *Mutterzunge* demonstrates how the text produces divergent affects in its translational response to trauma. The first Turkish vignette, in which the narrator recalls the story of a "Mutter eines Aufgehängten," once again registers more than just the story told. The woman describes how she felt after hearing about her son's death sentence:

[...] wir haben zusammen geweint, unser Hodscha von Gassenmoschee ist auf seinen Knien wie ein halber Mensch gestanden, geweint, der Aschenbecher, der so dick wie zwei Finger war, ist an dem Tag von seiner Mitte in zwei Teile gesprungen, ich hab ein 'Schascht' gehört, der Aschenbecher lag gerade vor mir. (8-9)

The effect of the state's death sentence is to cause splits and breaks in the familiar environment. The Hodscha is likened to a "halber Mensch," the ashtray is in two pieces. These splits, in turn, signify other splits. For the mother whose story it is, the ominous splitting apart of the ashtray, an everyday object, sig-

nifies the force of an emotional rupture due to her loss. For the narrator who is retelling this story in response to her own question about the loss of the 'mother's tongue,' on the other hand, it is one of the possible moments in which her loss might have occurred. In both cases, the split relates to grief over state violence against leftist youth and the loss it caused in the familial realm.<sup>27</sup> The more fundamental split to which the narrator ultimately draws attention, however, is the split between recall and amnesia, the characteristic structure of trauma that we already encountered earlier: "Dieser Sätze, von der Mutter eines Aufgehängten, erinnere ich mich auch nur so, als ob sie diese Wörter in Deutsch gesagt hätte" (9). With that, the passage as a whole is explicitly marked as translation. In this translation the split runs between two different linguistic units, the *sentences* of the mother and the *words* supplied by the narrator. Although signifying a split, this separate attribution of sentence and word also serves to highlight a double perspective. While the mother's story expresses death and grief in its recalled sentences, the words used to recount it in German are highly original, creative, and lively. By speaking of an ashtray that "springt", rather than as having a "Sprung," or, more accurately, as breaking into two pieces, the narrator enlivens the object, which now sounds more active: it jumps instead of merely cracking or breaking. Whereas the sentences of the mother tell a story of loss and grief, the words in the new language produce an enlivened environment full of suggestive movement. It is in these German words, that is, in the form of a non-normative translation, that new affects are produced.

#### IV

The affective transformation that occurs via the German language on the textual level in Özdamar's writing is accompanied by her reconsideration of discourses on the German language on a macro-level. Özdamar's critical perspective on Turkish and her mobilization of German as the language of "working-through" are both enabled by the manner in which she constructs the German language as a historical entity. Özdamar draws on the history of German in two interrelated moves. On the one hand, she references the discourse on the post-Holocaust German language that aims to come to terms with a tainted language, yet she transfers this problematic to

Turkish. On the other hand, she constructs a genealogy of German that situates it as an oppositional language, rather than as an oppressive majority language.

Özdamar's focus on the conjunction between language and political violence recalls the debates around the German language after the Holocaust. This implicit invocation becomes apparent in key passages in her third novel *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde*, where she explicitly thematizes the effect of anti-leftist politics on the Turkish language. The protagonist, a Turkish theater actress who is unable to continue working under the military regime, explains to a Swiss friend in Istanbul why she is in despair:

Ich bin unglücklich in meiner Sprache. Wir sagen seit Jahren nur solche Sätze wie: Sie werden sie aufhängen. Wo waren die Köpfe? Man weiß nicht, wo ihr Grab ist. Die Polizei hat die Leiche nicht freigegeben! Die Wörter sind krank. [...] Wie lange braucht ein Wort, um wieder gesund zu werden? Man sagt, in fremden Ländern verliert man die Muttersprache. Kann man sie nicht auch in seinem eigenen Land verlieren? (23)

For the narrator, the words are "sick" because of the things to which they must refer. Here the narrator explicitly suggests the possibility of a loss of the mother tongue that is not caused by migration, but rather by "one's own country." To escape this loss, the protagonist goes to Germany and begins working in the *Volksbühne* in East Berlin. Just as this essay argues with regard to *Mutterzunge*, migration in Özdamar's third novel does not constitute the cause of the loss, but rather represents a potential solution for it. Yet this description of the linguistic situation of the Turkish language in the 1970s in *Seltsame Sterne* and more implicitly in *Mutterzunge*, invokes discourses about the German language in the aftermath of Nazism and the Holocaust. As the "Sprache der Täter," German has had to carry "unabweisbar[e] historisch[e] Hypotheken" as Stephan Braese put it (8). Paul Celan, for instance, for whom the language remained "unverloren, ja, trotz allem," nevertheless characterized it as "'angereichert'" by the events and experiences of which it was a part, and grappled with this medium throughout his writing (185-186). Though radically different both in the scale of the violence involved and in the extent to which the status of the language was affected, this

specifically German discourse provides a language for a Turkish historical experience in Özdamar's translational writing. This discursive transfer might be best described as a "touching tale," rather than a simple equation of histories, to use Leslie Adelson's concept.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the invocation of this burdened historical dimension of German, the protagonist of *Seltsame Sterne* does not see that language as tainted and, instead, eagerly embraces it as an alternative idiom.<sup>29</sup> This positive view of the language is enabled by the genealogy of German that the book constructs throughout—beginning with its title, which is a quotation from an Else Lasker-Schüler poem. German is invoked as the language of Lasker-Schüler, Brecht, Heine, and Kafka, that is, as the language of canonical, yet minoritarian and/or oppositional figures.<sup>30</sup> This mode of constructing an alternative, minoritarian and, in particular, German-Jewish genealogy of German can be found in other contemporary minority writers as well. Dilek Zaptçioğlu's 1998 youth novel *Der Mond isst die Sterne auf* features a discussion of Heine at a key moment in the story, Celan is an important reference point for Zafer Senocak's poetry and Hilde Domin for José F.A. Oliver's. Iranian-German novelist Navid Kermani offers a programmatic construction of this genealogy, with a strong emphasis on Kafka, in his essay "Was ist deutsch an der deutschen Literatur?"<sup>31</sup> Through this genealogy, minority writers reclaim German for themselves. In this perspective German is neither a tainted post-Holocaust language, nor is it the dominant majority language oppressing minority languages, even though recent years have seen an increasingly hostile attitude emerge, especially towards the Turkish language in Germany.<sup>32</sup> It is also not a 'colonial' language. While Özdamar herself has invited a postcolonial reading of German literature on migration by suggesting that the situation of *Gastarbeiter* was a form of belated internal colonialism, this reading does not account for her own textual practices and the status of German in her writing.<sup>33</sup> In *Mutterzunge*, as in many of Özdamar's other texts, German is the language in which a traumatic story can be told, rather than being a traumatized or traumatizing language. The translational exchange between the two tongues creates a constellation in which German offers the means to remember

and rework a Turkish trauma—a trauma brought on by state violence, but brought to language in migration.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a critique of the figure of the mute Turkish guest worker in contemporary theory see Leslie A. Adelson (12-13).
- <sup>2</sup> For an elaboration of a different project of de-ethnicizing German, see my essay on Feridun Zaimoğlu's *Kanak Sprak*.
- <sup>3</sup> Numerous scholars have identified this characteristic of Özdamar's writing. See for example Hansjörg Bay, Elizabeth Boa, Kader Konuk, Azade Seyhan, and Sargut Sölgün for some of the more detailed discussions.
- <sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, "migrant" refers to labor migrant.
- <sup>5</sup> To date Özdamar has published three novels, two prose collections, a number of plays, and numerous short essays in German. Most of her prose writing, in contrast to her plays, has an autobiographical basis. Her three novels consecutively tell the story of a young girl growing up in Turkey in the 1950s (*Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* [1992]), and follow her migration to Germany and her frequent travel between Turkey, Germany, and other countries (*Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* [1999]), and finally chronicle her stay in both East- and West-Berlin in the tumultuous late 1970s while working in the Volksbühne (*Seit same Sterne starren zur Erde* [2003]). Many of the themes of the novels also reappear in various forms in her two collections *Mutterzunge* (1990) and *Der Hof im Spiegel* (2001). In late 2007, Özdamar published her first book written in Turkish, *Kendi kendinin terzisi bir kambur* [The hunchback as his own tailor]. The book is a memoir of her friendship with the important but controversial Turkish poet Ece Ayhan (1931-2002) and includes a diary she kept while caring for him in Zürich in 1974 and her correspondence with him from the 1990s.
- <sup>6</sup> Among other prizes, Özdamar received the Ingeborg Bachmann Preis (1991) and the Kleistpreis (2004). Tom Cheesman notes that there is "far more critical literature on [Özdamar's] work than on that of all other Turkish German writers combined" (13). Eva Kollinsky and David Horrocks' volume on Turkish culture in Germany is primarily devoted to Özdamar and her work.
- <sup>7</sup> Though still present in all of her subsequent writing to some degree, Özdamar employs literal translation most extensively in her early publications, *Mutterzunge* and *Karawanserei*.
- <sup>8</sup> See for instance Azade Seyhan, Bettina Brandt, Margaret Littler.
- <sup>9</sup> I am arguing here specifically about the linguistic constellation at hand. A reading inspired by a postcolonial framework can be useful with regard to other aspects of Özdamar's writing. See for example Stephanie Bird, Dirk Götttsche, and Margaret Littler.
- <sup>10</sup> See İman Attia for a discussion of "Kulturalisierung." The term describes a discursive process similar to what in the 1980s had come to be associated with neoracism, the substitution of the term "culture" for "race" in discourses that continued to hold on to racist essentializations.
- <sup>11</sup> I translate "Mutterzunge" as 'mother's tongue' in order to retain the dimension of linguistic estrangement that is so important for Özdamar's text and in order to distinguish it from 'mother tongue.'

<sup>12</sup> Although the gender and national markers are implicit in the text, the narrator ultimately is not a "figural person" but remains an abstract site of enunciation, in an important distinction highlighted by Adelson for readings of the literature of Turkish migration (see especially 16-20).

<sup>13</sup> Though I will touch on "Grossvaterzunge," the following reading focuses solely on "Mutterzunge" as the more programmatic text.

<sup>14</sup> On "Alamania" see Haines and Littler (n.11, 123).

<sup>15</sup> The three words are "Görmek, Kaza gecirmek, İSCI" [to see, to have an accident, WORKER] (10). The text itself translates "Kaza gecirmek" poetically as "Lebensunfälle erleben" (10), though generally the expression simply means 'to have an accident.' See also Brandt who convincingly argues that the narrator's collection of words serves to replace kinship as a mode of affiliation in "Großvaterzunge."

<sup>16</sup> On Özdamar's preference for this mode of writing see Bay, Bird, Brandt, and Cheesman.

<sup>17</sup> On the political history of Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s, see for instance Feroz Ahmad (121-180). Jane Cousins' 1973 publication *Turkey: Torture and Political Persecution* vividly documents the extent of political oppression, by collecting testimonials and witness accounts of tortured and killed leftists.

<sup>18</sup> Other scholars, such as Konuk (*Identitäten* 85), Haines and Littler (123-124), Brandt (296), and Cheesman (71), have also highlighted the importance of this historical context, though they have not related this particular historical experience to Özdamar's translational form.

<sup>19</sup> See also the last section of *Brücke*, in which the fate of "der Studentenfürher Deniz" and his comrades is recounted and interspersed with the protagonist's own experiences (302-325).

<sup>20</sup> On Çayan, see for instance Cousins (32-37) and Wikipedia. The fact that currently there are Wikipedia entries on this figure only in Turkish and in German underlines the virtual extension of Turkish memory space into German.

<sup>21</sup> The same expression reappears in the section "Stimmen der Mütter" in *Brücke*, right after the death sentence for Deniz Gezmiş and his comrades. An anonymous mother says "Die Milch, die sie aus unseren Brüsten getrunken haben, kam aus ihren Nasen heraus" (326).

<sup>22</sup> The Turkish expressions are 'anasından emdiği süt burrundan geldi' [literally: the milk which he/she drank from his/her mother came out of his/her nose] or just 'burrundan getirdiler' [literally: they brought it out of his/her nose]. See *Türke Deyimler Sözlüğü* [Dictionary of Turkish Sayings].

<sup>23</sup> The "bizarre Imagery" of some of these literally translated expressions, Sohella Ghaussy observes, may be "disconcerting for many native German speakers" (7).

<sup>24</sup> See the numerous accounts in Cousins.

<sup>25</sup> See Brandt on the "calming anesthesia" of the cut, which she relates to the technique of montage (299).

<sup>26</sup> On the relationship between acting out and working through, see also Dominick LaCapra.

<sup>27</sup> This context once again contrasts with the one most often assumed by critics, namely splitting into two due to migration and cultural difference. The

notion of being split between two cultures is closely related to the dominant trope of *dazwischen* that Adelson has most forcefully criticized (3-7).

<sup>28</sup> See Adelson (20-21) for an elaboration of this concept.

<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that the Nazi past is absent in Özdamar's writing, though. For a reading tracing the encoding of this past in "Großvater Zunge," see Adelson (150-158). See also Konuk on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in *Seltsame Sterne* ("Taking on").

<sup>30</sup> Özdamar of course does not only reference German writers. Besides anonymous Turkish folk poetry and song and the Koran, her texts regularly feature writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Nazim Hikmet, Konstantinos Kavafis, and Can Yücel. Overall there is a greater concentration of modernist writers among those whom she cites. Sometimes writers and texts are present in more implicit ways, such as the echo of Hölderlin in the phrase "klirrende Fahnen" in "Grossvaterzunge" to which Adelson draws attention (153-154). In the current context I am primarily interested in the shape that the German literary tradition as a form of genealogy takes in her writing on the most explicit level.

<sup>31</sup> Kermani presented this essay, which was also discussed in *Die Zeit*, printed in *Wespennest*, and reprinted in a shorter version in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, initially at the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung in Berlin in December 2006. The full text is available on the author's website.

<sup>32</sup> See for example the newspaper article by Ingrid Müller-Münch "Ich will auf dem Pausenhof kein Türkisch mehr hören" about the recent German-only debate in German schools and the suggestion that students who speak Turkish should be punished.

<sup>33</sup> Özdamar has articulated this idea in a number of places. See for example her interview in Horrocks and Kolinsky (52-53).

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BARBARA NEYMEYR

## Narrative Zeitkritik und Rekonstruktion von Biographie: Markus Werners Roman *Am Hang*

In seinem 2004 erschienenen Erfolgsroman *Am Hang*<sup>1</sup> entfaltet der Schweizer Autor Markus Werner eine problematische Dreieckskonstellation vor dem Horizont radikaler Kulturkritik, die er durch subtile Ironie und groteske Komik kunstvoll ausbalanciert. Indem Werner die Schicksale zweier Männer verschiedener Generationen miteinander verschränkt und auf dieselbe Frau als latentes Interaktionszentrum bezieht, reflektiert er die Geschlechterproblematik unter den spezifischen Rahmenbedingungen des beginnenden 21. Jahrhunderts. Der Roman ist dreiteilig konzipiert: Die beiden ersten Kapitel stellen zwei Begegnungen zwischen den Protagonisten Thomas Clarin und Felix Bendel (alias Thomas Loos) dar; im dritten Teil sieht sich der Ich-Erzähler Clarin mit der plötzlichen Abreise seines Gesprächspartners konfrontiert, der ihn mit einem Konglomerat offener Fragen zurücklässt.

### I

Im Spannungsfeld von Liebe und Sexualität, das auch andere Autoren der internationalen Gegenwartsliteratur variantenreich thematisieren<sup>2</sup>, gestaltet Markus Werner die Beziehungstragödie seines Romans vor dem Hintergrund zeittypischer Verhaltensmuster. Unter dem Druck krisenhafter Erfahrungen löst sich das von Klischees bestimmte Selbstbild des Ich-Erzählers Clarin ebenso auf wie die Identität seines Gesprächspartners Loos. Das scheinbar Eindeutige verflüchtigt sich ins Hypothetische, da die vermeintliche Faktizität der erzählten Welt durch Fiktionalisierungsstrategien überlagert wird. Indem Felix Bendel das Pseudonym Thomas Loos wählt, kaschiert er seine wahre Identität<sup>3</sup> und das Rivalitätsverhältnis zu seinem Gesprächspartner. Obwohl er sich hinter einer partiell fingierten Lebensgeschichte verbirgt, treten wesentliche Charakteristika deutlich hervor, etwa seine subtile Beobachtungsgabe, die Fähigkeit zu feinfühligem Empathie und ein kritisches Urteilsvermögen.