

Migration and Translation in a World Literature Perspective

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Abstract:

In recent years two themes have been instrumental for the advancement of world literature studies. One is migration; the other is translation. As disciplines, neither migration studies nor translation studies belong to the field of literary studies in their own right. Migration has for many years been a field within social and cultural studies and is now acquiring increasing urgency in today's geopolitical context. But with the rapidly growing number of works representing various experiences of migration, it has also irrevocably entered literary studies. Likewise, as an academic discipline translation studies was for years a subject hosted by linguistics before new trends emerged in the 1970s and gained ground in the 1990s with a theoretical perspective to also encompass intermedia translation and a broad register of c-cultural discourses, literature included. With Henry Roth's Jewish-American migration novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) as my basic text, I will explore the world literature perspective of migration and translation.

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In recent years two themes have been instrumental for the advancement of world literature studies. One is migration; the other is translation. As disciplines, neither migration studies nor translation studies belong to the field of literary studies in their own right. Migration has for many years been a field within social and cultural studies and is now acquiring increasing urgency in today's geopolitical context. But with the rapidly growing number of works representing various experiences of migration, it has also irrevocably entered literary studies. Likewise, as an academic discipline translation studies was for years a subject hosted by linguistics before new trends emerged in the 1970s and gained ground in the 1990s with a theoretical perspective to also encompass intermedia translation and a broad register of cultural discourses, literature included.¹ Of course, practicing translators have always worked with literature but not as a field of research.

¹ See Lefevere and Bassnett.

These recent developments have made migration studies and translation studies ripe for literary scholars working in a world literature perspective.² They have added a political awareness, in as much as both migration and translation involves power relations, the power of place, and the power of meaning production. Moreover, they have added a much needed theoretical and contextual ramification to literary studies, which has been mainly closed in on itself since its emergence in Europe as an academic research field around 1800. This inward gaze turned in two directions; firstly, towards the aesthetic particularities of literature. From the mid-eighteenth century, with the aesthetic theories of Ephraim Lessing and Alexander Baumgarten in particular, literature was singled out as a quasi-autonomous object of study. The broader cultural outlook, typical of the Renaissance and also the Enlightenment in general, became more and more myopic. Secondly, literary studies tended to look towards the national characteristics of literature. Such features were believed to constitute the immanent essence of literature (and other art forms as well) with a whole panoply of ideological implications ranging from nationalism bordering on fascism to a self-conscious minority awareness.³

Among both writers and critics the effect was that the preoccupation with a shared European literary history beyond the boundaries of national languages and territories withered away. At the same time, comparative perspectives with the potential of opening or re-opening the larger cultural and linguistic context only came second, mainly considered to consist of comparisons between authors, works or entire literatures with an already established and primary national definition.⁴ Consequently, the emerging interest in world literature, as it occurred with Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's critical ideas and poetical practice in the 1820s as the most widespread inspiration, took on an idealistic aspect relying on immanent literary values cast in trans-historical and universalist terms.

In contrast, the revival of world literature today consists in breaking away from this inward-looking idealistic take on world literature and, in particular, from the fervent cultivation of national literatures and its package of ideological implications. Of course, today's world literature studies have also utilized the many and varied critical methodologies that have developed from the founding years of literary studies. Yet, more importantly, the reorientation of literary studies meant a keen receptiveness to other continents, other languages, other types of local cultural formations, other genres, other themes – where 'other' always means other than the physical and colonial boundaries of European culture and the national thinking that underpins it. However, given the century-long global impact of Europe, this so-called provincializing of Europe (Chakrabarty 2007) always unfolds in a dialogue with the undeniable influence of European culture around the world, both in academia and in culture at large. Literary studies as a discipline is also involved directly in the power relations as they are articulated by migration and translation.

Hence, this approach has also called for new theoretical and analytical foundations for literary studies, or at least for a fresh inspiration coming from new angles. As the aim of world literature studies is to re-contextualize the reading of known texts and to enlarge the entire field and awareness of its context by integrating new texts, whether overlooked by tradition or produced today, this inspiration had to come from outside the established paradigms, especially with regard to issues of contextualization. At the same time, the ambition was, and is, to also turn the inspiration 180 degrees around and send it back, transformed, to inspire anew the field where it originated. When translation was exposed to the cultural turn outside linguistics, linguists also had to change perspective. Likewise, when the study of migration moved on from the field of economics and geopolitics and came to include religion, ethics, language, narratives and imagination, migration studies as it has been conceived by social studies acquired new dimensions. In other words, migration and translation are concerned with much more than geopolitics and efficient communication, just as literature is about much more than plot, character and rhetorical devices. In this sense world literature becomes a truly interdisciplinary enterprise.

2 Just a few recent examples from a growing bulk of literature: Walkowitz, "The Location", Apter, Thomsen, Beecroft, Walkowitz, "Born Translated".

3 See Lionnet and Shih.

4 See Larsen, "From Comparatism".

1. A Helluva Country

So far, the political have only been mentioned in the opening and will remain so until the end of this essay. In between I will take a look at a somewhat neglected American masterpiece with migration and translation as its backbone and, by doing so, also offer a relevant perspective on the political. The text is Henry Roth's debut novel *Call It Sleep* from 1934, one of those texts that explodes in the hands of the reader – and the writer as well: drawing on his own experiences Roth, then only 28 years old, emptied his imaginative resources for quite a while, unable to write again until late in life, even close to his death in 1995, but never at the same level again.

The novel is set in the United States before World War I, during the great influx of immigrants through the port of New York and Ellis Island. The Schearl family, a young Jewish family, settles in New York in 1907, first in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and then on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The first location was the major Jewish neighbourhood of New York with about 50,000 Jews when the Schearls arrived, the second one was closer to the metropolitan turbulence of the big city, but still a Jewish neighbourhood yet in much closer contact with other immigrant groups.

Albert has crossed the Atlantic first, arriving from the rural areas of Austrian Galicia. Later he welcomes his wife, Genya, and their young child, David, to New York. Galicia, in today's Western Ukraine around the town of Lviv/Lwów/Lemberg close to Poland, was then part of the Austrian-Hungarian double monarchy. This is a region where European conflicts have moved boundaries and peoples repeatedly over the centuries, the twentieth century included. In Mary Louise Pratt's apt terminology (Pratt 6f), it is a contact zone between German/Austrian, Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Russian and Yiddish languages and cultures. Coming to New York means changing one type of multicultural locality of a vanishing feudalism with another, the urban multicultural contact zone of an emerging modernity. The protagonist is young David, living with his embittered, grumpy and often violent father, Albert, who changes jobs several times, but eventually ends up as a milkman, and with his gentle and infinitely protective and loving mother, Genya. Her sister, Bertha, comes over and other people, mostly Jews from their neighborhood and boys from the street, enter David's world. He is about three when he arrives and eight when the novel ends.

Among migrating peoples, the Jews have an almost mythical status, related to the Jewish diaspora. Likewise, New York is the mythical destination for migrants. With the foundation of Israel, the post-holocaust history of Jews has added to the myth – in contrast to the foundation of other states over the centuries in the wake of great wars, this foundation was interpreted by many as a fulfillment of a religious prophecy more than a repetition of a geopolitical reorganization that is common when conflicts have shattered a stable geopolitical arrangement.

New York, as an embodiment of the American melting pot, also represents a myth, but a secular one, often expressed as the entrance to the land of the American Dream – “the Golden Land” as Genya says, nervous and hopeful, when she leaves the ferry (Roth 11)⁵ – where everyone can advance from rags to riches by his, and to a lesser extent her, own force and initiative. However, the idea of America was first shaped and dressed in religious garments by the Quaker and Puritan settlers in the seventeenth century before it lost its religious core, which is only echoed today in the religious fundamentalism used in public rhetoric to present the USA as a place selected by God. Jews and New York have been attributed with a global transcendence – the stuff myth and dreams are made of.

It remains to be seen whether the reality of history will come back with a vengeance in Israel and the USA when it challenges their proto-transcendental self-interpretation. Yet, it is clear that after the formation of the state of Israel, the mythical status of Jews, as the iconic migrating people against whom the fate of other diasporic peoples has to be measured, has been profoundly contested. In his introduction to historical types of diaspora, *Global Diasporas* (1997), Robin Cohen shows how the

5 Cf. the title of Larsen, “A Helluva”.

Jewish diaspora and its diversified developments is only one among several diasporas from the older and also more recent history of Mankind of an equally tragic nature, not a comprehensive and trans-historical model of them all, an alleged *Idealtypus* in the sense of Max Weber with an added mythological twist. Diasporas should not be understood through a model, but as intersections of different and thus comparable historical processes.⁶

In their essay on globalized memories, “Memory Unbound. The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory” (2002), Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder point to the fact that the memory of the Holocaust has gone global and thereby entered a field of de-localized myths, in this case as the prototype of extreme atrocity compared to which other genocidal horrors appear less important. In this position the Jewish people run the danger of losing a sense of the historicity of their persecution, while other victims of genocides, when filtering their sufferings through the Holocaust model, may have difficulties in approaching their misery in its particular historical conditions. In other words, diasporas and their commemoration should not be organized vertically under the umbrella of a trans-historical model, but leveled out horizontally as different events with an equal importance to those involved, each of them to be captured and commemorated on their own historical conditions.

A similar questioning of a mythological logic applies to New York as an iconic destination of immigrants with the Statue of Liberty meeting the newcomers next to Ellis Island. In this context, the city becomes a concept in the history of migration more than a place. In 1907, when the Scheerls arrive, and in the 1930s, when Roth came to the city, the immigrants did not enter a land which was a nation in the same way as the old European or Asian countries were. Only as late as 1893, during the world’s fair in Chicago, did Frederick Jackson Turner introduce a collective sense of national identity in his much-debated speech on the closure of the frontier. At that time, this idea had not yet seeped down to the inhabitants, least of all to the host of immigrants who did not come to a nation with a closed frontier, but to a land of infinite possibilities and endlessly open spaces.

Nations or local communities in the traditional sense had for centuries been the homes for peoples, their cultures and languages, all of which was immediately visible and audible in the landscapes and cityscapes, to the inhabitants as well as to visitors. In 1907 and today, as Europe amply exemplifies in 2015 and 2016, during the still ongoing refugee crisis such places where everything already has a place and a meaning are not easy to be part of for immigrants. However, the Scheerls’ situation is different. Although they leave a region where migration and political changes since time immemorial have moved around with rulers and political borders, and still do, by 1907, the clear outline of the local place and its traditions had not moved. This was a place with a *genius loci* for its peoples, in spite of the fact that it was a multicultural locality, as feudal states and many modern nation states were and still are, although this aspect has been underplayed, more or less violently, in nineteenth-century national ideology.

After the family has been re-united in the first chapter of the novel the sense of belonging evaporates, not only because they are immigrant but also because the place is different. They soon find out that the vague ideas they had about an American Dream have no foundation in the everyday reality in the Jewish community in New York and probably not anywhere else. We do not hear much about ‘elsewhere’. Yet, they cherish their memories from Galicia, a point of comparison for what a ‘real’ place means, and Genya buys a picture of an unspecified rural landscape that keeps their memories alive. There is no evocation of any competing American national idea or reality to which they have to adapt, not even to an American Dream. We are not in the world of social climbers of, say, Theodore Dreiser or Scott Fitzgerald, but of people seeking security. The Scheerls are definitely not rich but are not destitute either. They would never figure in Jacob Riis’ shocking photo report *How the Other Half Lives. Studies of the Tenements of New York* (1891). Their main task is to adapt to the tough urban reality where survival rather than social advancement comes first, supported only by the Jewish faith and traditions. At times, they are confronted with habits and beliefs of

⁶ See Knott and McLoughlin.

other migrant communities in the neighborhood, but with no requirement from die-hard Americans to accept a new national identity. The opposition between indigenous and foreign does not apply; only different types of foreignness are involved.

There is no notion that this place is the home of somebody else with a shared history, identity and language necessary to know and adapt to; it is only a living place for many people whose home was elsewhere but is now of no common relevance but for themselves. Place bound identity is something definitely lost and is only retained as a fantasy. Here, home is the known apartment, the street, a few people, maybe the neighborhood, the broken languages they use, often different broken Englishes. Outside, the bustling city is a place of confusion, surprise and sudden danger. A helluva country, as frightening as it is promising.

Roth's novel is built upon these two mythical phenomena, the people of the iconic migration and the iconic city of migration, but the hierarchy of each of the mythical entities and other waves or places of migration, considered as less typical or less important when measured against the Jews and New York, is broken down in the novel. The centre of the story is the Jewish community because that is where the main characters belong, though it is never seen as a particularly noteworthy example of a migrating community compared with others. It just happens to be theirs, and neither the identity of the Schearls nor of anybody else is related to New York or America as a particular historical place, a nation, but to a social entity and its human and social relations which could be located in any other place than New York, a free floating Galicia carrying them further and further away from their old home. The shared language of most of the characters is Yiddish, a vernacular language but not a national language; it is an Eastern-Central European *lingua franca* amalgamating German, Hebrew/Aramaic, Polish and other Slavic languages as well as a bit of Romance languages and Hungarian, and with an adapted Hebrew script including vowels, although often written in Roman script. This is a travelling language of migration.

Roth anticipates the more recent take on globalized migration assuming that people do not move from one home to the home of others, from which they may strive to go back to the old place which defines their identity, or where they have acquired a new identity by being successful in the eyes of the indigenous population. The world he depicts is a world where migration itself is the basic condition for identity without one community serving as a model for others, but where they all share this condition whether they are settling somewhere or moving. The Austrian Galicia of the Schearls had dissolved by the time Roth grew up and moved to the USA. Should the Schearls have wanted to go back in the 1930s, there would have been no place to return to. After World War II, Hannah Arendt's *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (1950) pointed to the many refugees who had no home left, but were on the move and could not be returned to anything. Their home was not necessarily physically destroyed, but like that of the Palestinians or the Kurds it had no sovereign political status. In Arendt, Roth's intuition meets with a philosophical reflection that finally explodes as a social reality today.

2. A Place of Migration

Nevertheless, Roth does not write in the post-World War II world of globalization. New York is still a locality with clear boundaries between neighborhoods, but is also described as a globalized micro-world. The way this generalizable effect is obtained has to do with Roth's use of the narrator and point of view. The Prologue, the arrival of Genya and David in New York, is related to us by what is traditionally called an omniscient narrator, with a transpersonal point of view, in the know of everything about history and life in general, but not quite as much about the interior life of the characters: "It was May of the year 1907, the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States" (9)⁷, or: "The truth was there was something quite untypical about their behavior" (11), 'they' being Genya and David. The narrator knows things, but not about the two newcomers:

7 All references to the novel are given only with page numbers in brackets.

They had been standing in this strange and silent manner for several minutes, when the woman, *as if driven* by the strain into action, tried to smile, and touching her husband's arm said timidly, "And this is the Golden Land." She spoke in Yiddish. (11, ital. mine).

When it comes to interior motivations and thoughts, even the narrator will have to rely on inferential guessing: 'as if'. This is the key to the narrative strategy for the rest of the book. The protagonist is David. He carries the point of view, the incomprehensible new world is seen through his perceptive, scared, attentive eyes, often with no clue to any understanding of what is going on. If David is guessing about the ways of the world, the narrator is doing the same with David. He is balancing on the edge of David's consciousness and the world around David, often using not only free indirect discourse but also increasingly interior monologue as David's experiences and reflexive capacities grow through the novel. There is also plenty of direct speech and at times de-personalized descriptions of the external world. David is only between three and eight years old, but his small world embraces the significance of the whole universe; his insecurity represents the general insecurity of human life.

This strategy of enlarging the limited individual perspective is applied to the two separated worlds, the outdoor world of the city and the indoor world of David's apartment. *Outside* is the turbulence of the foreign city, now and then with a fragile familiarity along the streets he comes to know, but taking a wrong turn, one is lost. When they move from Brownsville to Lower East Side, David realizes that Brooklyn after all has become somehow a familiar space. *Indoors*, David feels the coziness and safety emanating from his mother, while the Jewish traditions make it a safe haven for him, only interrupted by the threatening demeanor of his father. Here, memories from Galicia now and then are contrasted with the tensions of their urban life, but also recalling the hidden traumas of the past which, maybe, made them leave the old home. In a fit of anger Albert has caused his father's death by leaving him alone with a raging bull, and Genya's affair with a local Christian organist of Hungarian descent, a *goy*, made her pregnant with David. His parents have no love for each other, but need each other in order to leave the local shame and contempt behind. So, all three spaces, the city, the home and the memorized old home, are penetrated by a fragile balance between familiarity and insecurity, but mostly tending towards insecurity. The characters dangle in empty space, frightened, lonely and left to their own limited powers. David's love, angst and hope are condensed into a prism for the same feelings and losses in everybody else's life.

The slight change in David's thoughts and reactions at the beginning and at the end shows the quiet development of a three-year-old to an eight-year-old, from someone who does not know anything about his new abode to a boy who becomes slightly more acquainted with new life conditions, but then is also caught up in new unanswerable questions. All the way through, the fragile individual grasp of a situation is rendered with a general perspective.

In the opening paragraph of the novel David is just three. He is thirsty, but the passage is about his own entire life and about the whole world:

Standing before the kitchen sink and regarding the bright brass faucets that gleamed so far away, each with a bead of water at its nose, slowly swelling, falling, David again became aware that this world had been created without thought of him. He was thirsty, but the iron hip of the sink rested on legs tall almost as his own body, and by no stretch of arm, no leap, could he ever reach the distant tap. Where did the water come from that lurked so secretly in the curve of the brass? Where did it go, gurgling in the drain? What a strange world must be hidden behind the walls of a house! But he was thirsty. (17)

Towards the end of the novel the same embedding of situation, individual life and outlook on the world at large is still made by a child who does not comprehend the world around him, but with all the experiences he has had, his thoughts mushrooming into a confused bundle of fears and memories. The situation is

that he has been promised a rosary from his admired older Catholic friend, Leo, who is free and resourceful, who has skates and a kite, who helps himself in the family kitchen. David is supposed to help him secretly to find an opportunity to grope David's step-cousin, Esther, without exactly knowing what this early sexuality is about, but clearly recognizing that this promise and the rosary will cause trouble.

This morning it is going to happen. Genya is cleaning the windows. David is thinking both of his trip with Leo and of his mother on the window sill, and looming behind that the memory of some of the street urchins who had been peeping from the roof when Genya washed herself in the kitchen, naked:

High morning.

His nervous gaze wandered from frosted window to clock and returned to the window. [...]

– Wish she came in! Get scared when she sits like that. Fourth floor too – way, way down! If she –! Ooh! Don't! And that window it was. Can see the roof from here. Yes, there where they – Son-of-a-bitch! – there where they looked.

Irritably, he shifted his gaze to the other window, which was open and looked out on the street. The sky above the housetops, rinsed and cloudless after rain, mocked him with its serenity. In the street, too far below the window to be seen, the flood of turmoil had risen with the morning and a babel of noises and voices poured over the sill as over a dike. The air was exceptionally cool. Between the drawn curtains of an open window across the street, a woman is combing a little girl's hair with a square black comb. (329)

As in the opening lines, this is a concrete situation with an intense sensual perception at the center. Here, the focus is not a simple faucet, but a complex interwoven set of observations; some, like the window, motivated by things present, others, like the clock, by the secret excursion with Leo he is going to embark on, and others again, like the very precise registration of the girl and the 'square black comb', are signs that his thoughts are easily being diverted by his double fear, both of his outing with Leo and of his mother. Again, with the noisy city below and the sky above the situation is extended to the world at large.

When the narrator dives into David's flickering thoughts, the free indirect discourse, blended with inner monologue, shows that the complexity of the outer world reigns also in his mind. He has not thought of the rosary as an anti-Jewish symbol – he is just eight – but as beads bringing him much needed luck:

The beads made you lucky, he said. Don't have to be scared of nothing. Gee if I had! – but don't want it, that's all. Ain't going. And that funny dream I had when he gave me it. How? Forgetting it already. Roof we were with a ladder. And he climbs up on the sun – zip one two three. Round ball. Round ball shining – Where did I say, see? Round ball and they busted it off with a cobble and puts it in the pail. And I ate it then. Better than sponge cake. Better than I ever ate. Wonder what it's made of – Nothing, dope! Dreams. Just was dreaming – (330)

Here his fear of actually going with Leo is overshadowed by the dreams triggered by the acquisition of the rosary beads: to be without fear, eating the sun and taking in the light and the whole universe. But then, as with his thirst at the beginning, he returns to the world of immediate sense perception, thinking of sponge cake. His mother, now coming in from the window cleaning, senses his nervousness, but with no idea about the inner turmoil of her child. His world is expanding, but with it his fear and his loneliness. The familiar space of the apartment has been invaded by the outside space, the city and the big uncertain world.

After a noisy, violent family brawl, the rosary is found by his father and David flees into the street, now seemingly a safer place than home. The world is turned upside down:

Dusk. Storelight and lamplight condensed – too early for assertion. The casual, canceled stur and snarling of distance. And on the sidewalks, men and women striding with too certain

a gait, and in the gutter, children crossing, calling, not yet conceding the dark's dominion. The world dim-featured in mouldering light, floating, faceted and without dimension. For a moment the wild threshing of voices, bodies, screams, the fury in the pent and shrunken kitchen split their bands in the brain, flew out to darkened east, the flagging west beyond the elevated, the steep immensity of twilight that dyed the air above the housetops. For a moment, the rare coolness of a July evening dissolved all agony in a wind as light as with the passing of a wand. And suddenly there was space between the hedges of stone and suddenly there was quiet even in the fret of the cities. And there was time, inviolable even to terror, time to watch the smudged and cluttered russet in the west beckon to the night to cover it. A moment, but a moment only, then he whimpered and ran.

– Can't! Ow! Can't! Can't run! Can't! Hurts! Hurts! Ow! Mama! Legs! Mama! (403)

For a moment he is transposed to a surreal space of peace and rest and loses contact with physical reality, as he experienced when he went with his father through the city to distribute the milk: "He felt as if his mind had slackened its grip on reality" (274). This lasts only until the physical pain in his legs calls him back; the dreamy space of tranquility without dimensions, encompassing the whole universe, disappears in a flash of a second.⁸ Belonging is nowhere in the real world; migration is turned into a human condition.

3. Lost in Translation

Can one at least talk about it? Yes, but only with a shared language across the different peoples and cultures meeting or colliding in the urban space of migration. This heterogeneity of languages is a key problem, also for the narrator who has to translate David's inner life into a language we can understand and which also exposes the increasing complexity of his life and thoughts. David's thoughts are mostly articulated in Yiddish, the first language of his family and many people in his surroundings. The same goes for the actual conversations between the characters, if not in Yiddish, then in broken Englishes not able to contain what David has on his mind, but only rather practical things. The characters are lost not only in space but also in translation. In this way translation is a central driver in the novel on two levels where mutual communication and understanding are at stake in a world which for most characters is a place of alienation, transition and loneliness, interrupted only by passing moments of love and reconciliation. There is the level of the characters, and there is the level of the narrator who has to translate the speech and thoughts of the characters into readable English without losing the linguistic and cognitive confusion, if not despair, of the characters. The novel is a huge experiment on the necessity, the limits and possibilities of translation in a world of migration.⁹

The sense of alienation and confusion is transferred to the reader as well. In some places we have unfiltered sentences in Hebrew, though transcribed into the Roman alphabet, in Italian, Hungarian, or Yiddish, not always translated by the narrator into English. When David registers that he cannot understand Aunt Bertha's babble, we learn that she and Genya speak Polish as well, which at times is not translated into English but simply left out. When English is used in direct speech, it is rendered as more broken than most readers will be able to decipher without some re-reading of many passages. If David finds the world impenetrable and hard to decode, we are at times at no less of a loss than the boy.

Let us take a random passage to show how the narrator represents the conversation between the characters, the like of which can be found on any of the c. 450 pages. David is talking with the older Leo, from

⁸ At the end David makes an experiment with tram rails, creating a flashing light by creating a short-circuit with a piece of metal as he has seen other street boys do. He hopes to see the light of God as he has heard from the book of Isaiah in the school of the local Jewish rabbi. God touches the lips of Isaiah with burning coal, his sins are forgiven and he sees the light of God. David has an obsession with light as a vision of safety, purity, freedom, security beyond his day-to-day world, but also an experience he can have in this world. In this final section we are also beyond the daily mind of David who is knocked unconscious and believed to be dead. Here, the narrator can no longer just represent the inner and outer events in broken English, free direct discourse or inner monologue, but inserts passages of poetry as well. The whole novel moves to another discursive level.

⁹ See Wirth-Nesher's afterword to Roth.

a Catholic Polish family, while David is a Yiddish-speaking Jewish boy. They have to bridge their cultural differences and their different types of broken English as well. However, they are united by the shared kind of kids' street language of mixed linguistic backgrounds. The narrator has to translate all this for the reader together with the mental state of David. They are talking about David's aunt, Bertha, who now has a candy store:

“Is she got a reggiler big canny staw?” Kneeling before the ice-box, Leo had been buttering bread. And now he pushed several objects from a large platter onto a small one. “Ice cream poller too?” He arose.

“My aunt? Naa. She god just a –” [David] broke off, gaped at what Leo had placed on the table. In one of the plates was a stack of buttered bread, but on the other, a heap of strange pink creatures, all legs, claws, bodies – “Wod’s dat?”

“Dese?” Leo snickered at his surprise. “Don’cha know wat dis is? Dem’s crabs.”

“Cre–? Oh, crebs! Dey wuz green-like, w’en I seen ‘em in a box on Second Evenyeh–“

“Yea, but dey a’ways gits red w’en ye berl ‘em. Dey’re real good! Gonna eat some?”

“Naa!” His stomach shrank.

“Didntcha ever eat ‘em?”

“Naa! Jews can’t.”

“Cheez! Jew’s can’t eat nutt’n.” He picked up one of the monsters. “Lucky I ain’t a Jew.” (319f)

This is an amazing piece of phonetic writing, one of the easier examples in the novel. The problem with the use of plural and singular in verbs, some problems with some of the vowels and with English [ð] and [P] are obvious, and some of the deviations from standard English are not unusual in colloquial speech in many places. They are just boys, so they talk about concrete things, like eating habits, not about the larger religious ramifications.

First of all, David is horrified and then uses his Jewishness as a shield. Crabs are not kosher, but he does not know crabs when he sees them. Although the narrator interrupts with passages in standard English, he is not neutral. He sees things with David’s eyes all the way through. From the observant use of the word ‘objects’ when the crabs are just unspecified things to David via creepy-crawly descriptions, to the generic word ‘monstrous’ when the full digestive horror has entered his timid mind, supplemented by his knowledge of forbidden food without knowing why.

If the theme of migration opens the question of what it means to feel at home in a volatile world of migration, or just safe, translation brings up another issue of safety. This is the topic of trust and mistrust. Matters of language, cognition and honesty are compressed into the problem of translation. Can we trust that we are able to understand what we hear? That people speak the truth? That people are able to express themselves so what they want to say actually comes across? – Clearly, David is ambiguous with regard to crabs, hiding his immediate fear of the food with reference to Jewish habits that he cannot explain. He admires Leo, but does not trust him, and with good reason: Leo wants to exploit him to get close to his step-cousin. When Leo uses the word ‘crab,’ David repeats it, slightly stuttering, a pronunciation different from Leo’s (‘cre–, crebs’), showing that this is an alien word to him, as ‘rosary’ is a little later. David cannot understand the life of Leo and the words and things that belong to it – and vice versa.

Can we trust the translator in spite of the meticulously phoneticized rendering of speech? In the beginning he represents David’s Yiddish, as spoken by a three-year old, in simple English: “Mama, I want a drink” (17). The same applies later when David has lost his way in the city and a woman addresses him:

“Little boy.” The words were in Yiddish. [...] “Are you a Jew?” For a fleeting instant, David wondered how he could have understood if he hadn’t been a Jew.” “Yes” (237).

They both speak Yiddish, not street English where ‘yes’ would have been written as ‘yeah’. On the written page, Aunt Bertha seems to speak colorful English with lots of scolding and swearing, but she actually speaks Yiddish, not English. As with the boys’ broken English translated into phonetic writing, the narrator renders Bertha’s forceful outbursts into a well pronounced and grammatically correct but non-idiomatic English, echoing her Yiddish way of speaking: “He was an old monster, the Baron, may he rot away! His eyes were rheumy, and his lips munched as though he were chewing a cud. He had a back as crooked as his soul.” (147). At times, though, aunt Bertha’s Yiddish accent is shown. David visits her in her candy store:

“Hea, I giff you an pineapple vit’ emmend. Do I speak English better?” – “Yea.” He pocketed them. – “End a liddle suddeh vuddeh?” – “No, I don’t want it.” He answered in Yiddish. For some reason he found himself preferring his aunt’s native speech to English. (309)

No wonder that David finds her loud Yiddish in the streets embarrassing, now that he himself is more accustomed to variations of migration English. It gets even worse when she escorts him to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the small boy has to calm her down and translate for her in his combination of children’s language and broken English (147-151).

David has an astute awareness that language is a source of doubt and mistrust needing translation which, however, only adds to the doubt and discomfort. Hence, what the narrator does when he both thematizes and practices translation, is to represent how the persistent questioning of trust among the uprooted characters is attached to the limits of language and translation just as much as it is connected with the urban turbulence of New York. David’s father, Albert, is the extreme case. He does not have the command of a differentiated language, either of Yiddish or of English, and translates his linguistic deficiency into violence, or a threatening silence, when he is overwhelmed by powerlessness.

In one situation in particular, the narrator uses the whole scale of narrative devices to expose how translation at the same time moves the boundary between trust and mistrust with regard to language, cognition and honesty. David, now aged five, is in the kitchen, sitting on the floor near Genya and Bertha. His presence is forgotten by the two sisters who talk about painful memories from back in Galicia. These memories also involve David, although he only vaguely intuits what it is all about, a lack of understanding which is amplified by the women’s mixing of Polish with Yiddish. That it actually is Polish, he does not know. It is just a strange tongue, the narrator tells us. David is still the eyes and ears of the narrator, but as the narrator also offers us fragments of the conversation in direct speech, which David does not quite apprehend, the adult reader has no difficulty in grasping that it is about Genya’s love affair and David’s biological father.

David only understands that something about him and his beloved mother is hidden, and this remains with him as a mistrust even of her, the safest person in the world. Nobody is lying to him, though, and he is not lying either. They are just talking about things he should not know, and he is just in a place where he should not be at that moment without having the courage to make his presence known. So, whereas the two sisters trust each other when sharing the hidden details of the past – “Can’t you trust me?” Bertha exclaims (192), the situation as a whole produces mistrust.

It is a long sequence, comprising the whole chapter 9 of book 2, but a few selected details will illustrate the point. David hears and sees his mother:

“There are only three people who know,” she began with an effort. “Mother, father, myself of course, and – and another – in part. I shouldn’t want –.”

“Oh, No! No! No! Trust me Genya.”

David squirmed, shivered with anticipation, fear. [...] The oblique nod of her head seemed to beckon her sister to join her in the realm of another speech [Polish]. For when she spoke again her words had fused into that alien, aggravating tongue that David could never fathom. [...] Her

eagerness tantalized him, goaded him into sharper listening. It was no use. He scrutinized her mother. The color has risen to her throat. Now her eyes stared and were dark and she spoke rapidly. Now they narrowed and the wide brows knit crookedly. Pain. What hurt her?" (195)

Now and then the two interlocutors again shift into Yiddish and David snatches some words, but also new words he does not know. So he still has no clue as to what the sisters are talking about:

– But – Listen! That was a Yiddish word! A whole phrase! “After the old organist, dead” ... Another! “Alone in the store” ... A word! “Handsome” Like mica-glints in the sidewalk, another phrase! “A box of matches” ... He turned steadily to watch her. [...] What was an “orghaneest”? He was educated, that was clear. And what else, what did he do? He might find out later if he listened. (196)

He has to make a combined linguistic and conceptual translation beyond his abilities. The transcription of ‘orghaneest’ both mimics the foreignness of the word to him and the accent of the two women. Moreover, like his mother who has “no words” (198) and asks: “How shall I put it into words” (200), David is also engaged in the initial translation of experience on the brink of comprehensibility into language.

Toward the end of the conversation, his confusion becomes almost unbearable and the disquieting shift to Polish only adds to his uneasiness:

With the same suddenness as before, meaning scaled the horizon to another idiom, leaving David stranded on a sounding but empty shore. Words here and there phrases shimmering like distant sails tantalized him, but never drew near. [...] It seemed to him, lying there almost paralyzed with the strain, that his mind would fly apart if he brought no order into this confusion. Each phrase he heard, each exclamation, each word only made the tension within him worse. Not knowing became almost unbearable. He felt as nothing he had ever known were as important as knowing this. (197)

David’s whole world depends on his capacity to translate the words, comprehend their meaning and grasp their wider bearing on his life. He has an acute sense of being lost in translation without ever being found or being able to find a way out.

4. The Political

I promised eventually to come to the issue of the political. Politics, as we know, involves the governance of a state, a community, an institution or a company and the principles and power relations these are based upon. Political is an adjective that will specify different aspects of the type of governance and power in question – political programs, political decisions, political parties, political discourse, political propaganda, political power, political intrigues etc. Of course, literature with a marked political profile is also political, that is, literature engaged in certain ideological battles or addressing political issues as constitutive themes with a decisive influence on plot, characters etc. such as migration, finance or geopolitics. However, there are endless shelves of books without any such political features, or books that engage with political issues so as to create a backdrop for the narrative, the imaginary language or the use of other aesthetic devices that does not determine the basic structures of the text. Roth’s novel is clearly a novel of that kind.

Hence, the term ‘the political’ may be more relevant. Both politics and the political have to do with *polis*, the city-state. If politics concerns its governance; the political involves everything that defines the shared life of humans in a larger social organization on an individual and collective level. ‘Everything’ ranges from language, the orchestration of sense perception, psychology, cognition, communication, rheto-

ric, ethics, imagination – to the extent that such factors shape the shared life of humans.

Chinua Achebe, who more than most writers brought the political onto the literary scene, makes the following point:

The matter is really quite simple. Literature, whether handed down by word of the mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us. (Achebe 170)

A novel like Roth's could be said to be such a second handle. Highlighting place awareness and language as crucial, also outside the field of politics in the narrow sense, Roth makes the political a concrete experience in human life, determining the identity of humans in a social and cultural setting where the power and limits of place and language are questioned through the themes of migration and translation. The use of politics in literature is based on reference, whereas the unfolding of the political has to do with a contextualization that reveals the political as a dimension of most literature.

To look for references to geopolitics and capital in this novel will not get us very far, although both aspects frame people's lives. The task at hand is rather to challenge literary studies to constantly work in a more subtle way with new contextualizations of literature in order to make it engage with the political through literary strategies. This is a pressing issue in a cultural setting of intensified globalization. It is important to make us recognize that politics belongs only to isolated spots of the larger landscape of the political. We need more detailed maps to cross the whole landscape of literature and open our eyes to new social and cultural vistas encompassing a larger and more complex dimension of culture than the space of politics.

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