



Melinda Nadj Abonji's Prose from a Transcultural Perspective

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Abstract. This paper explores the ways in which transculturality manifests in the prose of Melinda Nadj Abonji. Besides *Tauben fliegen auf* [*Fly Away, Pigeon*] (2010), her well known and highly acclaimed novel translated into several languages, it also looks at her latest novel, *Schildkrötensoldat* [*Tortoise Soldier*] (2017). It is concerned with articulations of the experience of transculturality, closely related to the experience of territorial displacement. *Tauben fliegen auf* describes the life of a family of migrant workers in Switzerland whose background sets them apart from the milieu in which they live. Variations on national identity take on a key role. In the novel *Schildkrötensoldat*, a young man of modest intellectual abilities struggles to find his identity in the face of the threat of the Yugoslav Wars. In the language of her novels, Melinda Nadj Abonji recreates the transcultural interrelationships. Besides the sensitivity to metalinguistic issues, her novels make existence in a multicultural milieu tangible by incorporating multilingual text units. Multilingualism, however, not only characterizes the speech of the characters but also defines the discursive position of the narrator, which is the most distinctive and salient poetic feature of her prose. The possibilities of translating multilingual texts are also discussed in this paper.¹

Keywords: transculturality, territorial displacement, multiple identities, multilingualism, literary translation.

The theory of transculturality was developed by Wolfgang Welsch in the early 1990s. Although the term itself was used much earlier, in the 1940s, by the Cuban anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Fernando Ortiz and other scholars have subsequently made important insights into transculturality, Welsch's theory has not lost its relevance even in the light of recent discourse forms and continues to serve as a relevant foundation for researchers in the field.

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For a long time, transcultural interpretations have existed on the fringes of science, and it is only in the last decade that they have begun to emerge rapidly as a new discipline in the humanities and social sciences. As a result, various definitions of transculturality have been formed, all of which may be relevant to the discipline. From our point of view, the definition of Daniel G. König and Katja Rakow proves to be the most applicable:

The [...] most recent definition uses the term “transcultural” to describe a particular method of approach that, from a thematic point of view, deconstructs concepts such as “society,” “class,” “nation,” “culture,” or “civilization.” Methodologically, this definition encourages analysis of phenomena that question supposed boundaries. It obliges the researcher to analyse phenomena from various angles and thus to insist on the multipolarity, multiple perspectives, and transformative dynamics inherent to the research subject. (König and Rakow 2016, 95)

Although König and Rakow refer to the ideas of the South Asian art historian Monica Juneja, Wolfgang Welsch’s idea is also close to this approach, who, after about fifty lectures, articles, and studies, put his theory into book format in 2017, reviving and clarifying some of his basic concepts. Welsch’s well-known thesis is that the perception of cultures as self-contained spherical structures is untenable; the prefix “trans-” in the sense of ‘transcending, crossing over’ indicates that cultures do not stop at national borders but are interconnected in a system of networks. The volume *Transkulturalität: Realität – Geschichte – Aufgabe* [Transculturality: Reality – History – Mission] presents the historical dimensions of transculturality from Greek culture to present day. It brings examples from sculpture, painting, architecture, poetry, dance, and music, indicating the characteristics of the interlocking branches of art and also highlighting the nature of the genres (Welsch 2017).

Initially, transcultural case studies focused on thematic aspects: the biographical background of the authors and the circumstances surrounding the genesis of the work, which is still inevitable today since autobiographical representation is predominant in the studied texts. Some theoreticians argue that certain literary texts cannot be understood without knowing the background of their authors, their complex life paths, multiple identities, and the diversity of their cultural and national affiliations (Danigno 2013, 135).

No doubt the thematic conclusions themselves provide us with insights for our literary understanding. However, research now seems to be moving away from the mere description of these characteristics and is more concerned with the features that provide the basis for drawing conclusions about the aesthetic aspects of texts that fall within this literary paradigm. The focus is increasingly shifting from a

productive and often disturbing thematic orientation to the literary process and the resulting aesthetic quality.

Territorial Displacement of the Author

This paper attempts a transcultural interpretation of Melinda Nadj Abonji's novels, the highly acclaimed *Tauben fliegen auf* [*Fly Away, Pigeon*] and the subsequently published *Schildkrötensoldat* [Tortoise Soldier]. Territorial displacement, multiple identities, and translingualism of transcultural authors are considered common features of all transcultural texts. In the case of Melinda Nadj Abonji, we must not overlook the fact that her relocation was not voluntary. She was born into a family of former Yugoslavian migrant workers who emigrated to Switzerland during the Tito period. The parents left their homeland in the hope of a better livelihood; however, a recurring motif in their autobiographical narratives is that they also wanted to escape the humiliation and the traumatic experiences of the socialist regime. Melinda Nadj Abonji and her sister were brought up by their grandmother. She was five when the family was reunited and she moved to the West. The story of her novel *Tauben fliegen auf*, published in German in 2010, recalls this autobiographical event. The question of identity, however, is more complex: the author grew up as a member of the Hungarian community in the northern province of former Yugoslavia, in Vojvodina, so her cultural identity and the language she acquired was not Serbo-Croatian, the language of the state, but Hungarian, the language of the minority community (see also Toldi 2011a–b). Melinda Nadj Abonji is a so-called translingual author, one of those writers who “for various reasons, have ‘rejected’ their mother tongue and write either in the language of their place of residence or in both languages” (Roguska 2017, 25). Melinda Nadj Abonji did not reject her mother tongue deliberately when she was five, but she was exposed to a foreign language environment at a very young age and used her mother tongue only in the family setting. As a matter of course, her working language became German.

Territorial Displacement of the Literary Text

The novel *Tauben fliegen auf* tells the story of the Kocsis family, who emigrated from Vojvodina to Switzerland and visits the homeland from time to time, during the annual holidays or on the occasion of big family events (celebrations, funerals). Thematizing the movement between the abandoned world and the new one is a transcultural aspect, while we are aware that in the new world, the ties with the one left behind are not broken.

In the role of the narrator we find Ildikó, the adolescent girl. Two main settings define the novel, one of them being the world of childhood in Óbecse, the proximity of the grandmother. The novel opens with the story of an arrival: with their first possession, a brown Chevrolet, the migrant worker family return to their once abandoned environment, a dusty lowland town. The scene is presented from the narrator's point of view, evoking intimate emotions, recalling a bygone, nostalgic world close to her heart. The other location is Switzerland, a family-run café on the banks of Lake Zurich, called Mondial, which represents the ultimate measure of success, the emigrant family's existential goal, and a guarantee of their social security.

At every level, the central organizing principle of the novel is duality. The parents have one view of the situation, while the children, Ildikó and her sister, have another one. "The novel is also an attempt to contrast the children's memory narrative with the parents' memory" (Czeglédy 2016, 94).² The multipolar approach is tangible from the very first pages: the father, drawn with very strong features, frets that nothing ever changes in his abandoned world, while his daughter perceives the lack of change as something positive and hopes not to notice any alteration that would disrupt the return to her once carefree life.

The novel is about the struggle of the narrator to find her personal identity; due to her situation and age, she is sensitive to questions of belonging: who I am, where I come from, what I have left behind, what my life has become. These are the dilemmas of the individual, who is not even sure whether she lives among Swiss who are German or Germans who live in Switzerland. In such circumstances, she is confronted with her parents' exemplary efforts at absolute assimilation, with the imperative to be Swiss, i.e. to identify with something whose outlines she cannot even see clearly.

Furthermore, the concept of the migrant is also layered in the world of the novel. Apart from the "indigenous Gastarbeiter," there are also refugees fleeing the Yugoslav Wars of the last decade of the twentieth century. The staff of the café is also an ethnically mixed community: Serbs, Croats, Serbians from Croatia, Serbians from Bosnia, who have diverse ethnic customs and convictions, carrying the burden of their (recent) past.

The novel presents the identities that the characters embody. The most fleshed-out character, the father, voices his thoughts on the subject at every opportunity. He is not Hungarian but instead has the identity of a Hungarian from Vojvodina. And as the head of the family, he feels it is his responsibility to show his daughters what he envisions an ideal husband to be like:

the last thing he'd want is a Serb, no Russian either, or a Swiss, the ideal man would be Hungarian, best of all a *vajdasági magyar*, a Hungarian from

2 Translations from Hungarian specialist literature are by the author, É. T., throughout the article.

Vojvodina, someone you wouldn't have to explain history to, who knows what it means to be part of a minority and because he knows that he has emigrated to Switzerland, a Hungarian from Vojvodina who is successful here in Switzerland in a proper profession, so nothing to do with words, painting or music. (Nadj Abonji 2014, 136)

Speaking about this, the narrator relies on stereotypes, portraying his father ironically. This kind of identity construction is distorted, taken to extremes, and deliberately exaggerated, which becomes even more obvious in what follows. The list of national character traits does not end here, for his future son-in-law must also possess the following qualities:

he'd also have to have hair on his upper lip, to wear his hair cut short and always be the first to pull his wallet out, discreetly, he would never let a woman pay for him and prefer heavy, manly food – the opposite of those pale men who eat as much salad and vegetables as cows eat grass –, his clothes would always be neat, especially his shoes. (Nadj Abonji 2014, 181–182)

The *Tauben fliegen auf* has two distinct layers: the world of parents who are unable to transcend the migrant discourse and the mindset that maintains national boundaries, and there is a transcultural level, the world of young people who find the parents' attitudes and mentality unacceptable, as enforced by Ildi's first-person narrator. They avoid stereotypes: they do not experience the West as Eldorado, and their former home is not the source of all misery either. The younger girl is the first to be emancipated and, simultaneously, the discourse of "we" in the narrative is taken over by the perspective of the "I" (Gauss 2010). This clearly foreshadows the older girl – the narrator – eventually embarking on her independent journey of self-realization. Territorial displacement also entails a transformation of the concept of homeland and, along with it, a change in their attitude towards the problem of national affiliation. From collective identity, the focus is clearly shifting to individual identity. At the end of the novel, Ildi's move to a house populated mainly by immigrants marks the path towards a new identity.

It was seven years later that Melinda Nadj Abonji's next novel was published. The *Schildkrötensoldat* is not an autobiographical narrative; however, territorial displacement and identity play a major role in it, though with a slightly different overtone than in *Tauben fliegen auf*. The transcultural identity implications are exposed very early on in the novel. The protagonist, Zoltán Kertész, is the child of a Hungarian Gypsy father – Lajos Kertész – and a presumably Serbian mother. All we know about his mother is that her name is Zorka, and she is quite light-blooded. National affiliation is the least of Zoli's problems: he is mentally impaired. Not from birth, only since his father dropped him from the boot of his

motorbike: he fell off like a sack of flour and bumped his head. After the incident, he has changed completely. The accident was caused not – or not entirely – by his father's negligence, not even by Zoli's clumsiness, but also because his baker master, for whom he worked as an apprentice, took advantage of him to the extreme, making him work so hard that he got exhausted. Zoli recovered from the accident, but he was never the same again.

From then on, he can only work as stock handler in the bakery, and there is only one place left where he can still feel at home: the garden, as his name [Kertész] suggests. By watering the garden and tending the flowers, he finds inner peace, harmony with himself and the world. He can feel what others cannot; he is on the same wavelength with the flowers. He can see what is hidden from others, despite the various rude remarks that are thrown at him on a daily basis. It is hard to keep count of how many insulting names he gets. He is called a garden maniac, a loser, a bum, a slob, an idiot, illiterate parent's brat, a bastard, a leper, a clown, a coward, a freak...

He can no longer dream of becoming a baker, which could have been a great social advancement for him. He would have been a sought-after man in his village, someone who would have earned the respect of everyone. He could have helped his family financially, and as a baker he could have "bleached with flour" his father's 'black' heritage. There is an inherent ambivalence in his personality: he does not meet people's expectations of him; he is different from what is expected from him. His environment refuses to acknowledge his limitations. His mother believes he can be retrained to be "normal," so she urges him to enlist in the military service where he would be disciplined and fixed. His father agrees that the military will turn him into a man. Zoli is humiliated in his manhood too when he is asked what is between his legs, a flower or a cock. But if he were to return home as a veteran soldier, he would be celebrated as a hero, as in the folk songs.

For the most part, the novel is set in Vojvodina. The barracks where Zoli is recruited can be referentialized, it can be found in Zrenjanin. Nevertheless, the driving force behind the events is territorial displacement. Zoli is forced to step out of his comfort zone and leave the homely environment of the garden for the barracks, the site of inhumanity and torture. This kind of displacement is far more transformative than territorial displacement in itself, and it leads to lasting trauma or even loss of lives. In this passage, the reader who is more familiar with the region will often notice that the author substitutes the missing details of reality with fiction.

In the army, Zoli is going through hell. He behaves like a tortoise, working hard but slowly and accurately, tucking his neck and hiding in his shell when necessary. He has no conflicts with the multi-ethnic community, only the cruel training pushes him to his physical limits. He begs his mother to take him home from the barracks, saying he is needed at home for his earnings, but she refuses

to help him. Despite not being understood, he survives the training. But his only friend, Jenő, with whom he marches, who is tied to Zoli's backpack by his superior so that Zoli has to drag him along during the military exercise, dies after the ordeal. For, no matter how much his strength is waning, he is not allowed to stop. Zoli blames himself and decides to stop eating. The military, however, does not tolerate passive resistance. They simply stuff food down his throat like he's a goose. From then on, his physical and mental condition starts to decline rapidly. His speech becomes incomprehensible, his behaviour even more infantile. On the eve of the infamous Battle of Vukovar, the day before the immediate combat mission, he collapses. He is admitted to the military hospital, from where he is discharged with a diagnosis of epilepsy. Four months later, Zoli was found under the table with a piece of bread in his throat. He choked to death.

In the novel, the state of displacement is conveyed through the narration of alterity: society casts out those who are different and weaker. The migrant context is brought into the novel by Anna. We find out relatively soon that Zoli died, Anna, the niece, gets a phone call from Zoli's father. From Zurich, she takes a train home immediately. On the way home, signs of utter neglect appear before her eyes: flickering signs at the bus station, illegible timetables. Every corner stinks of urine, the rubbish bins are hanging tilted, piles of rubbish litter the streets. The war is already raging and while Anna's stream of thoughts evokes the social situation, her impressions of the reality of the war hinterland get condensed into a single, dynamic image born from a feeling of displacement in a non-place, in a Marc Augéan sense:

When the darkness, the dustless air of the summer night, the soft, erratically regular rhythm of the crickets, the scattered flickering lights tell me that behind the darkness another life awaits me; when this night trip gets mixed up with the memory of countless previous night trips; when memories brought to life in dark colours now almost tear my heart out, for this journey is unlike any other, is different from all the others, because for years there has been an irreversible degradation, until recently, to the point of carnage that no one thought possible; when the hours-long traffic jam at the border crossing at Tompa, between Hungary and Serbia, the chaos and confusion there no longer allows one to imagine that a miraculous power inspired by the beauty of the night could suddenly put an end to the killing, the murder, the massacre; so that when you can no longer ignore the bus full to the brim, the passengers, including myself, talking about everything but war; now, when the border police are ransacking the whole bus, giving orders to each other in barking voices, spitting, rubbing their palms at the prospect of a thriving business, then I know for sure that this time I have not come to visit my relatives but to see Zoli, Zoltán. The blinding headlamps at the

border crossing have only one purpose: to burn into my consciousness the phrase so that I never ever forget: Yugoslavia, the country where you were born and grew up, no longer exists. (Nadj Abonji 2017)³

Beneath the emotionally charged sentences, however, the narrator's rationality is at work. She comes home to investigate the incident, to visit the scene, to recall Zoli's days in the barracks, to "find the beginning of the end." She does not want to blame anyone, she just wants to understand why he died and to retrace his path.

The novel is based on the alternation of narrative perspectives. Originally written as a play and performed in Basel in 2014, it was published as a novel in 2017, only to be staged again. It has two first-person narrators: one is Zoltán Kertész, who is most often called Zoli, and the other one is his cousin Anna, whom Zoli consistently calls Hanna because he prefers its softer, sweeter sound. The two narrators' chapters are alternating. The titles of the passages told by Zoli are written in all capital letters, and within the words, the letters are connected by a hyphen. This is not just a visual sign, it has a significance too: it refers to Zoli's passion for crosswords – he is known as the king of crosswords – and the fact that he stammers. Hanna's chapters are numbered in Arabic numerals. There are other ways too in which the perspectives of the two narrators stand apart: in Zoli's chapters, there is no sentence capitalization at the beginning of paragraphs, no punctuation at the end, and his sentences are often unfinished or agitated. Zoli's role as a narrator is in fact paradoxical, as he speaks about himself while it turns out that he is already dead. Yet it is not a dead person speaking, the narrative point of view conveys a sense of immediacy all the way through. He experiences the world in a synesthetic unity of the senses (Jelisavčić 2022, 939), his thought process often follows the pattern of automatic writing. Hanna, on the other hand, is an intellectual, a language teacher living in Zurich, who has sleep disturbances and sometimes reaches for stimulants; however, her narrative style is objective. There is a perceptible alternation of rhythm between the two narratives. Zoli's narrative is fast and chaotic, while Hanna's, characterized by long sentences, is slow, powerful, and rational. The critical reception associates the figure of Zoli with that of Gregor Samsa, and the novel's narrative is most closely compared to Faulkner's narrative position in *The Sound and the Fury* (Jelisavčić 2022).

One of the novel's ambivalences is that the simple-minded Zoli, who is going through his ordeals, has a more serene perception of the world around him than the deeply disillusioned Hanna.

3 Translation by the author, É. T.

Translanguaging and Translation

Another characteristic feature of transculturality is translanguaging. It is the condition when the working language of the writer is not the same as the first language s/he has learned. By thematizing the language or by using the logic of the language, the transcultural writer creates a textual world in which the abandoned language comes into play, often as a subtly concealed background text, shaping both worldview and poetics (see Toldi 2019 for more). The language of Melinda Nadj Abonji's novel *Tauben fliegen auf* is a display of linguistic perfectionism, a case of a perfect language change. German critics have repeatedly praised her for the exceptional linguistic performance: "Abonji's story is excellent, but the real delight is the language of the novel" (Becker 2010). Her language is "very beautiful," "melodious and irresistible" (Diener 2010).

The novel is interwoven by metalinguistic utterances. The writer is involved in the question of foreign language acquisition, but she illustrates the discriminatory cases of the lack of perfect language skills with the example of her parents, who were first-generation migrant workers. The inclusion of Hungarian sayings, proverbs, folk and art songs in the original language, i.e. Hungarian or German, clarifies the environment she is talking about or referring to. At the same time, it evokes the Swiss German language spoken by the Yugoslavian migrant workers. The narrator does not speak Serbian, and when she meets a boy who is fleeing to Switzerland to escape the war, English becomes the language of communication. The Hungarian words, the large number of cultural realia, and the incorporation of Hungarian phrases into the German text suggest that the original text can also be perceived as a translated text (more in Toldi 2019).

The novel *Tauben fliegen auf* won two awards at the same time, the Best German Book and the Best Swiss Book awards, which launched a series of translations. Translating translingual authors' texts is a real challenge for a translator. The Hungarian translation by Éva Blaschik (*Galambok röppennek föl*, 2012) is concerned with "reintroducing" the "foreign" into the translation. For it is precisely the specific atmosphere that makes the German text special and that is lost in the Hungarian translation. A great deal of transculturality is lost, the cultural specificities are eliminated. In Hungarian, nothing particular survives when we read the name of a Hungarian dish as *paprikás*, which is one of the most common words, or when we call grandpa *papuci* and Aunt Panni *Panni néni*. Therefore, to compensate for the lost foreignness, the Hungarian translator retains some of the German culture-specific terms in the original German language. But even so, she cannot eliminate domestication in her translation, so she alters one of the characters' names. The narrator, the eldest daughter in the family, is called Ildikó, which is fine, as it is a common name in Hungarian. Her sister, however, is called Nomi. This is not a typical Hungarian name; it is extremely rare, therefore

the translator renames her Bori, a name that sounds similar and is also widely used, but it is associated with a slightly older person than the character in the novel. It is possible that Melinda Nadj Abonji chooses this name precisely to show that the younger generation is no longer attached to the culture they have left behind like the parents do, even when it's a question of identity. Although the Hungarian translation does not detect this aspect, it still manages to balance successfully between the foreign and the native.

A Serbian translation by Dragoslav Dedović was also published at the same time as the Hungarian one due to the novel's thematic content and its referential local context (*Golubije srce* 2012). The translator's task is not easy either: he has to identify and match Hungarian cultural realia, which he does not always succeed in doing. Often he cannot find the Serbian equivalent and translates literally. For example, in the phrase *isten, isten!* (Nadj Abonji 2010, 42), he fails to recognize that this is a toast greeting, correctly: *Isten-isten!* In Serbian, the regretful *Bože, Bože*, i.e. 'my God, my God' is uttered (Nadj Abonji 2012b, 43). In Tess Lewis's English translation, it is as if they were drinking to God's health: "To God! To God" (Nadj Abonji 2014, 30). However, I do not think that the translators did not recognize the phrase *Isten hozott benneteket* ('Welcome,' literally 'God has brought you') but rather they considered it to be an intimate phrase and therefore translated it literally (in the German text this appears in Hungarian). In Serbian and Bosnian, it is *Bog vas je doveo* (instead of *dobrodošli*), and in English it is translated as the biblical-sounding "The Lord has brought you" instead of simply 'Welcome.' The Serbian translator also had to render the incorrect German speech of the Croatian and Bosnian characters in a corrupted form of the Serbian language. To compensate for the foreignness, where he can, the translator domesticates and corrects the linguistically incorrect sentence almost everywhere, minimalizing the errors.

Mira Đorđević's Bosnian translation (*Golubovi lete u nepovrat* 2015) goes the farthest in terms of domestication, to the extent of adding footnotes to foreign words and cultural realia. For example: "*Förderalismus*, sagte Vater, und wir lachten mit butterschmierten Mündern, was wirst du fördern?" – reads *förderalism*: "Instead of federalism (referring to the father's uncertain knowledge of the language)," and then adds another footnote after the sentence: "Fördern – German: to promote, to support" (Nadj Abonji 2015, 93). The Hungarian translation makes the meaning explicit, incorporating the explanation into the body of the text: "*Förderalism*, said father, instead of *Föederalism*, and we laughed, our mouths full, what is it you want to *fördern*, to support" (Nadj Abonji 2012a, 130). The English translator finds a suitable distorted form of the word, and thus manages to transpose the original German equivalent, leaving the most on the reader: "*furtheralism*, father said and we laughed, our mouths full, what is it you want to further?" (Nadj Abonji 2014, 97). He assumes that the reader understands

there is a mix-up of words. The Serbian translation eliminates the error, does not quote the word in the wrong form, but then inserts a pun: “»*federalizam*«, kaže otac, i smeјemo se sa ustima umrlјanim maslacem, šta ćeš sa tolikim federima?” (Nadj Abonji 2012b, 125). The humour comes from the sound of the word *feder*, which means ‘spring.’ “What do you want with all those springs?” – they ask the father. But it is not clear why the otherwise perfectly suitable word becomes funny, why they make a joke of it.

The translation of the title also deserves a special note. Out of the four translations I have looked at (Serbian, Bosnian, Hungarian, English), the Hungarian is the one that best captures the original meaning, evoking the symbolism of the doves flying upwards (*Galambok röppenek föl* [Pigeons Flying Up]). The upward orientation is no coincidence either: the peace doves were flown upwards during the socialist era, but in a figurative sense the girls’ flight from the family nest can also be interpreted as an upward movement, a step forward. In English, the pigeon is urged to fly away [*Fly Away, Pigeon*]. The Serbian translator’s gesture of domestication is perhaps the most over the top in translating the title. For *Golubije srce* (‘Dove Heart’) is a phrase borrowed from a Hungarian song that is sung at a family celebration, thus it alters the meaning, shifting it towards the song-singing, stereotypically sweet-and-sad perception of Hungarians in the South Slavic region. The Bosnian doves fly away in a direction of never return (*Golubovi lete u nepovrat*), in a highly sensitive, metaphorical translation.

The Bosnian translation is annotated by the translator, Mira Đorđević, who highlights the multiple perspectives of the narrative. Not only does she note that the novel is connected to the history of disintegration of Yugoslavia, and provides an opportunity to observe the differences among cultures, languages, social and political attitudes both in the spaces of the abandoned homeland and the longed-for prosperity, but she also highlights the novel’s curious German language. She points out the striking length of the sentences, in which humour, nostalgia, and the gravity of the migrant theme alternate in a well-paced rhythm. According to her, the author even gives up the syntactic regularity of the German language in favour of the musicality of the sentences. The “sometimes bewildering narrative style” (Đorđević 2015, 207) lends the text a specific melody and a peculiar sound and, in particular, a strongly marked rhythm, achieved through the use of unusually long, rolling sentences punctured by a multitude of commas. The translator considers this structuring of sentences a grammatical error but acknowledges that in order to structure the rhythm, Melinda Nadj Abonji deliberately employs this seemingly arbitrary punctuation so she can deliver her message in a single long breath. Commas do not interrupt the flow of thoughts or the emotional charge of the narrative as full stops would. Parentheses also play an important role in the text, not from the point of view of rhythm but from that of meaning, because they help the protagonist to express her own latent thoughts.

The novel *Schildkrötensoldat* makes the relationship between language and music even more explicit, especially because Zoli's simple-mindedness frees the narrator from the constraints of a strictly logical narration. At the same time, the narrative is an experimentation with language, which is no small task to translate. The Serbian translator, Dragoslav Dedović, achieves this the best, alternating between the strict logic of Hanna's text and Zoli's extreme, experimental attempts of self-expression. The title appears in a literal translation (*Vojnik-kornjača*), using a hyphenated structure instead of the compound structure common in German.

Not to the same extent as in the novel *Tauben fliegen auf*, still, Hungarian words, culture-specific expressions, idioms, typical building names appear in the German text, and the translator retains those that have no Serbian equivalent (for example, *kánikula* 'heat wave' is kept in Hungarian, but *palacsinta* 'pancake' is not). A few Serbian words also appear, as well as brand names specific to the region (Jelen Pivo). The bilingualism of the region is also reflected when he writes in Serbian and Hungarian: "Autobuska Stanica. Autobusz Állomás." The spelling mistake in Hungarian here reinforces the referential authenticity.

Once again, the translator domesticates. The mother, Zorka, presumably of Serbian nationality, sings. The lyrics of the song have been recognizably translated from Hungarian to German: "in der Liebe befiehlt kein Richter" – "Szerelemben nekem nem parancsol a bíró" ('in love no magistrate can give me orders'); "eine Knospe war ich, als ich geboren wurde, eine Rose, als ich Soldat wurde" – "Bimbó voltam, mikor én megszülettem, rózsa voltam, mire katona lettem" ('I was a bud when I was born, a rose when I became a soldier'). These are translated literally; however, there are some original solutions too. For example, *wenn die Theiss aus Tinte wäre* is the equivalent of the Hungarian folk song *Ha a Tisza tinta volna* ('if the Tisza were ink'). The translator, however, finds a Serbian song with a similar meaning: "Pokraj mene više nisi, čamcem plovim sam po Tisi" ('you are no longer with me, I'm rowing alone on the River Tisza'), but for the sake of accuracy and to avoid omitting the ink, he modifies the Serbian song by adding the word "black" as an adjective for Tisza (Nadj Abonji 2020, 163). This is how the blonde Tisza becomes black in the Serbian translation.

As a translingual writer, Melinda Nadj Abonji successfully incorporates elements of her "emitting" medium into her German prose. The novelty of *Schildkrötensoldat* is that it also contains intertextual references, including quotations from Ödön von Horváth and Miloš Crnjanski. The cultural references drawn from the different languages, the insider elements make Melinda Nadj Abonji's texts distinctive, often even poetic. By contrast, the domesticating translations homogenize the text and go against transcultural tendencies.

Osterweiterung or Balkan Turn?

The integration of the oeuvre of transcultural authors into national literatures takes – or can take – two different forms. On the one hand, it is seen as part of the national literature of their chosen working language. At the time of its publication, critics specifically pointed out that *Tauben fliegen auf* was a testimony to the fact that German literature would be innovated both thematically and stylistically by writers with a migrant background (Gauss 2010). Since then, this idea has also been given a theoretical framework. In this paradigm, however, the classification of the author, who is well known in Swiss and German literature, is uncertain, since as a translingual author with a Hungarian cultural background her place would be among the authors of the “Osterweiterung” (Bürger-Koftis 2009), while her thematic choice would place her in the “Balkan turn” (Previšić 2009) paradigm. But the identity of her characters and narrators defies both options. In the novel *Tauben fliegen auf*, the identity of Hungarian from Vojvodina as an identity category results in a double exclusion, even within a transcultural framework. This duality is also the fundamental driving force behind the *Schildkrötensoldat*, in which Serbian cultural references are more prominent, which is perhaps why it has not been translated into Hungarian so far.

On the other hand, most of the transcultural authors are also considered part of the literature of their source culture, regardless of the language. The idea of Mihály Szegedy-Maszák has greatly contributed to the spread of this approach in Hungarian literature. He was the first to draw attention to the fact that literature and language do not necessarily overlap in Hungarian literature. He considered an appendix of Hungarian literature those works and authors who can be classified as such through their cultural ties (Szegedy-Maszák 2007, see also Toldi 2011a).

The spelling of Melinda Nadj Abonji's name also raises the question of national affiliation. Above all, Hungarians of Vojvodina are bothered by this, as in the official Serbian state language the spelling of Hungarian names in the registers is deformed. Because of this official procedure, the Hungarian community in Serbia/Vojvodina feels discriminated, and even humiliated or disadvantaged. However, Melinda Nadj Abonji thinks there is nothing wrong with the spelling of her name. Although in her novels she explores the quest for identity and the theme of national identity, its transformation and variations, in her statements she declares that national identity is not important because it is always charged with heated political connotations. For her, there is no such thing as national identity, it is more important to find one's personal identity (Nadj Abonji 2012c). The underlying structure of her novels also hinges on this idea.

The latter aspects support the Welschian concept that the traditional understanding of cultures is overly nation-oriented. Transculturality, in which individual choice plays a major role, is precisely what dissolves the national

character. He goes so far as to claim that man as a biological being is essentially transcultural since the total human genome does not exceed ten percent, but in the course of evolution, as in the lifetime of the individual, humans undergo changes that repeatedly break through their limitations. Transculturality is thus an entity that defines the very essence of being human (Welsch 2017, 57).

Classifying the literary works of transcultural authors within a national literary paradigm often confronts us with the transformation of traditional notions regarding literary belonging, both in the literary field and within the ever-changing interpretive frameworks. This is no different in the case of Melinda Nadj Abonji either. Although there have been recent attempts to include her in Hungarian or Serbian literature, her true medium is not the literary canon of the different countries but a transcultural space that transcends national boundaries.

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