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**THE POETICS OF RETURN: IMAGINING HOME IN GERMAN
TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES**

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Poetics of Return: Imagining Home in German Transnational Narratives

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Living a life “on the hyphen” — as the Cuban-American critic Gustavo Perez Firma calls it — or in a “third space” — as the Indian literary theorist Homi Bhabha defines it — has become the most common way to describe the condition of those identities in-between, to define the virtual, non-geographical space in which two cultures meet, yet simultaneously remain separated. Within this conceptual framework, my dissertation focuses on the literary and artistic production of transnational individuals in Germany. The literary production of these subjects, which originates in a ‘trans-cultural’ and ‘trans-lingual’ context, becomes the only space in which they can discuss and explore their new condition. In particular, I investigate how the authors reflect upon the idea of home and complicate the notion of belonging. By focusing on various representations of homecoming, I ultimately want to problematize and engage critically with the idea of border-crossing and traveling in recent literature from 1973 to 2007. As I analyze narratives where the protagonists express their need for roots and for a return, I show how

these characters ultimately still entertain a strong relationship with their homelands, but at the same time redefine the very nature of that bond.

The first three chapters are dedicated to the Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar (born 1946), the Italian writer based in Germany Franco Biondi (born 1947), and to the cinematic representations of the acclaimed Turkish-German film director Fatih Akin (born 1973). In very different ways these authors give voice to their shared experience of migration and to the difficulties of adapting as foreigners in German society, while each tries to negotiate a new life and create new roots. The last chapter employs the reversed approach of focusing on a novel by the Austrian writer, Barbara Frischmuth (born 1941), who explores the question of multiculturalism and cross-cultural interactions and analyzes the relationship between German-speaking countries and the Middle East, in particular Turkey. Despite the different geographical and cultural backgrounds as well as the time period in which these works were written, they share stories of losses and restorations that challenge traditional concepts such as home, *Heimat* and belonging.

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Introduction

My own work as a thinker has no mother tongue, only a succession of translations, of displacements, of adaptations to changing conditions. In other words, the nomadism I defend as a theoretical option is also an existential condition that for me translates into a style of thinking.

Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subject*, 1

The very word *metaphor*, with its roots in the Greek words for *bearing across*, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants — borne- across humans — are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us.

Salman Rushdie, *Günter Grass on Writing and Politics 1967-1983*, xii

The necessity to revise the term “migration” and to interpret the narratives that originate from it grows increasingly urgent for a global cultural consciousness. This is the result of recent decades in which traveling from country to country has become something of a lifestyle in the West and in which concepts of integration, globalization and multiculturalism have penetrated all spheres of public discourse. The reconfiguration of geographical borders has created ambivalent and unstable relationships between migrant subjects and “adopting states.” This gives rise to new dilemmas for concepts such as identity, nation and home, dilemmas that call for our immediate attention.¹

Living a life “on the hyphen” — as the Cuban-American critic Gustavo Perez Firma calls it — or in a “third space” — as the Indian literary theorist Homi Bhabha defines it — has become the most common way to describe the condition of those identities in-between, to define the virtual, non-geographical space in which two cultures meet, yet simultaneously remain separated. Against the traditional image of the

¹ If not otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

immigrant suspended between two worlds, the scholar Leslie Adelson advocates the necessity of “rewriting a grammar of migration,” while the literary critic Azade Seyhan highlights the need to update the concept of *diaspora* and explore its new meaning in the current age of globalization (12). In his fascinating and compelling study of migration and identity, Iain Chambers points at the “nomadic experience of language” (4) and the deeper philosophical implications of an identity that lives at the “intersections of histories and memories” (6). Along those lines, the philosopher Rosi Braidotti suggests more than just a modification of the current terminology. A radical new way of thinking is called for as a “theoretical option” and “an existential condition:” the nomadism of modern thought (1).

As a consequence of this new ‘lifestyle’ and way of thinking, the literary production of those subjects, which originates in a trans-cultural and trans-lingual context, becomes a symbolic space in which they can discuss and explore their new condition. Writing, initially a means to vent frustration and share with others the difficulties of a life in a foreign country, becomes a reality in which a balance between the old and the new can be found. Following Seyhan — who in turn follows Bhabha’s theories — I shall look at this “alternative space of writing” or “third geography” created by literature as a fruitful space in which memory, language and translation coexist, a space in which the clash and reconciliation of multiple cultures takes place and new *hybrid* identities originate (15).

How does language translate these new notions? How is the concept of home changing and consequently the sense of nostalgia and the idea of homecoming reshaped, according to the new geographical remapping of the world? The aim of my study is to

examine German narratives that originate in between two or more cultures, and highlight how their unique characteristics make this literary production particularly relevant to a general discourse on transnational studies and multiculturalism. After looking at where and when these narratives originated, I investigate how the authors reflect upon the idea of home and complicate the notion of belonging. By focusing on various representations of homecoming, I ultimately want to problematize and engage critically with the idea of border-crossing and traveling in recent literature from 1973 to 2007. As I analyze narratives where the protagonists express their need for roots and for a return, I show how these characters ultimately still entertain a strong relationship with their homelands, but at the same time redefine the very nature of that bond with their origins. In opposition to what might seem a reactionary approach that could foster nationalistic interpretations or nourish cultural fundamentalism, I propose to use Doreen Massey's idea of looking for a progressive sense of place "not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward-looking" (Massey qtd in Morley 156). Moreover, I observe how, by crossing the border twice or multiple times, the clash and reconciliation of cultures, languages and memories that takes place within these characters reaches a degree of complexity that forces us to rethink the conceptual boundaries of notions like home, *Heimat*, and nation.

While the current American critical and theoretical debate has tended to concentrate on Chicano literature, which gives voice to the complex relationship between Americans and Mexicans, with this work I will shift my focus to the many different voices of hybrid identities in Germany. In particular, my research has led me to analyze several texts by Turkish-German and Italian-German writers whose works merit critical analysis. The first three chapters are dedicated to the Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi

Özdamar (born 1946), the Italian writer based in Germany Franco Biondi (born 1947), and to the cinematic representations of the acclaimed Turkish-German film director Fatih Akin (born 1973). In very different ways these authors give voice to their shared experience of migration and to the difficulties of adapting as foreigners in German society, while each tries to negotiate a new life and create new roots. The last chapter employs the reversed approach of focusing on a novel by the Austrian writer, Barbara Frischmuth (born 1941), who explores the question of multiculturalism and cross-cultural interactions and analyzes the relationship between German-speaking countries and the Middle East, in particular Turkey. Despite the different geographical and cultural backgrounds as well as the time period in which these works were written, they share stories of losses and restorations that challenge traditional notions of cultural and literary identity.

The novels and the films I analyze here not only address these social concerns, they show how works that explore border crossings subvert traditional literary and cinematic genres to give life to unique forms of narration. In particular, by depicting stories of identities that undergo a process of maturation during their traveling, the *Bildungsroman* remains an underlying literary model for these works, which, however is subverted here by new and original narratives. The novel of formation that originated in the eighteenth century and depicts the story of the protagonist's psychological and social growth, usually during a journey, is staged here under new and innovative parameters. The use of the German language in original and experimental ways, or the combination of Western literary forms with Eastern forms of narration — this happens particularly in Özdamar's and Frischmuth's texts — breaks away from this genre to give life to bold

literary works. In a similar manner, Akin's films do not follow traditional Hollywood cinematic forms and belong to a new independent genre of films, the so-called *Accented Cinema* (as theorized by Hamid Naficy). As a consequence of conflict and dialogue amongst multiple cultures that arise from border crossings, the literary and artistic production of these transnational identities become original works of art, which no longer pertain to an established category.

“Minor Literature,” Hybridity and Third Space

Hybrid **2.** transf. and fig. **a.** Anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements; in Philol. a composite word formed of elements belonging to different languages.

Oxford English Dictionary

Cross-cultural interactions and cultural exchanges on a global scale have forced recent literary and cultural scholarship to reevaluate the question of identity in our postmodern societies. When discussing concepts such as identity, self, the other and the nation, current debates focus mainly on the increasing sense of disorientation that best seem to define the contemporary human condition.

In her compelling and groundbreaking work on the foreigner, the Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva retraces the fragmentation of our current societies by outlining the status of “foreigner” in different cultures. Deeply influenced by Freud's notion of alienation, Kristeva invites the reader to a new and drastic re-examination of the self by postulating the existence of a stranger within our own selves. Only if one acknowledges the existence of an intimate foreign part of his own self, can one better relate to external others. Thus when Kristeva depicts the

condition of the foreigner, of his internal contradictions expressed by feelings of love and hatred, and articulated in the conflicting relationship with his past, she ultimately aims to describe his total alienation with himself: “Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply — humanistically — a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself.” (13) This complex and almost paradoxical thought suggests the necessity of recognizing our internal other in order to accept and understand the external manifestation of the other.

Kristeva’s idea of the foreigner certainly occupies a crucial point within the debates around fragmentation of human identity and the encounter with the other. The most controversial part of her theory lies in her discourse dedicated to the foreigner and language. Here the critic describes the position of the foreigner between languages as a problematic status that, instead of generating productive communication, may lead to silence. “The Silence of the Polyglots,” as she entitles this section, describes the incapacity of the foreigner to conduct a real conversation when inserted in a multilingual context. Living between two languages and separated from his mother tongue, the foreigner, according to Kristeva, seems to fall into a “polymorphic mutism” (16).

Current scholarship on the literature written by individuals living between two or more borders however, tend to recognize only a positive value to the linguistic exchange born of a condition of displacement. Precisely in this cross cultural exchange these scholars see great potential and an enriching moment which arises from a multiplicity of voices. Seyhan invites us to look with particular attention at what happens to language

within a transnational context, given that language, as she argues, is considered the “most important determinant of national identity” (8).

What happens when the realm of national language is occupied also by non-native writers, who use the language in new and original ways (Seyhan 8)? Drawing upon Kafka’s works, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari created a theoretical framework, which they called “minor literature,” in order to define precisely that literary production in a “majority language” by an individual belonging to a minority group. A minor literature does not mean coming “from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze and Guattari 16). To further exemplify the conceptual structure of minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari outline three characteristics that define it: deterritorialization, political engagement, and collective articulation. The concept of deterritorialization is related to the use of German by the Jews of Prague at the beginning of the twentieth century, and specifically, to their particular position simultaneously within the German-speaking community and outside of it. German for them works as a sort of “‘paper language’ or and an artificial language” (16) which marks their position of deterritorialization and of their “irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality” (16).

The second characteristic of minor literature is that of being political. Although Kafka’s works do not immediately appear to be as politically oriented, Deleuze and Guattari draw from it a “political program” (17), which does not refer “to an act of social intervention nor to a confrontational critique of political oppression.” Rather it aims to establish new and alternative alliances (Seyhan 27). “The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is

vibrating within it” (DG 17). The political aspect becomes then an act that translates the desire of the collectivity, which, Deleuze and Guattari indicate as the third characteristic of minor literature. By underlining the positive functions of its collective value they write how this “literature [...] produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community” (DG 17).

Despite the different temporal and cultural location in which this definition was elaborated, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of minor literature has certainly become a groundbreaking conceptual model for reading transnational and diasporic literary works (27). Its characterization of ‘deterritorialization,’ in particular, also applies to modern postcolonial literature and to literature born within transnational realms.

While the conceptual flexibility of this theoretical framework has in fact allowed for its applicability in various contexts ranging from diaspora to transnational works, Seyhan underlines that in the comparison of Black English with Prague German, Deleuze and Guattari “find an escape route from their own category and genre” (27). In fact, Black English, like Turkish German today, does not function exactly as the deterritorialized German of the Jews of Prague. Works produced by non-native authors do not use “an imported language in another geography;” rather, they contaminate the standard national language with their very personal accents and nuances (Seyhan 27). Arguing that Deleuze and Guattari created an abstract model that does not reflect a “genuine encounter with particular political contexts and historical situations” (27), Seyhan concludes that: “their model falls short of offering a satisfactory range of reading

strategies” (Seyhan 29). Writing from a position of marginality, “minor writers” become de-centered identities whose personal and cultural backgrounds challenge not only their language but also their traditional dominant culture from the margins, and propose a new take on the relationship between the self and the other. Thus, suggesting that one should “read and understand other literary traditions in their diachronic and synchronic contexts,” Seyhan promotes an approach that could attempt to preserve the specificity of cultures and the heterogeneity of transnational narratives (29).

Recognizing that we are facing a very special historical moment, in which transnational identities challenge major and established parameters – “in a positive and progressive way as well as in a negative and regressive way” (Bhabha 208) – Homi Bhabha takes issue with the danger of an approach that promotes easy assimilation of different cultures by introducing the concept of *hybridity*. Drawing upon Michael Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic (which indicates the mutuality of a relationship), on Frantz Fanon’s theories of colonialism, on Benedict Anderson’s concept of “nation” in *Imagined Communities* (1983), and, finally, borrowing Edward Soja’s concept of “third space,” Bhabha’s notion of hybridity speaks for the respect of a new entity that results from the unique combination of different cultures. Hybridity becomes for Bhabha the third space which “enables other positions to emerge” (211), in other words, a productive space of cross cultural exchange which brings with itself both traditions from which one comes and, at the same time, encourages a new and mutual development of them.

In his crucial essay “The Commitment to Theory” (1989), Bhabha criticizes recent literary and cultural debates (that include deconstruction and poststructuralism) for still being embedded within a Eurocentric and imperialistic discourse. He argues that

today's critical theory is ultimately still "Western" and discusses how it continues to reproduce the polarity and the binarism of self and other. Against an easy idea of assimilation or an idyllic and peaceful coexistence of different cultures, the concept of hybridity should not become another sterile label through which we look for two original moments which generate a third one. It was precisely such an idealistic approach, according to Bhabha, that in the recent years has caused an increase of racism and the desire to place other cultures "within our own grid" (Bhabha, "Third Space" 207-208).

By challenging instead these very notions of identity, culture and nation considered as unified and fixed entities with a coherent historical development, Bhabha looks at the condition of "in betweenness" as a moment in which to produce new "structures of authority" with which to reflect upon our current societies (Bhabha "Third Space" 211). In order to avoid an excess of empty terminologies and the "temptation of producing 'a jargon of the minorities,'" Bhabha invites us to think beyond established categories – as "the use of universal concepts may be dangerous and limiting" (209) and to focus on these "interstitial moments" generated in a context of "differences" (210). As he borrows from Derrida the notion of *différance* in opposition to that of diversity, Bhabha wants to highlight the positivity of this encounter of cultures, while he aims to undermine the perpetuation of fixed binary oppositions.

In order to support this idea Bhabha also introduces the concept of "cultural translation" understanding here the word translation in the very original sense of the term, as Walter Benjamin discussed it in his famous essay "The Task of the Translator" (Bhabha "Third Space" 209). Here Benjamin analyses the function of an original work and of its translation and argues that, despite the different contexts in which they

originate, they ultimately are both part of a “greater language” (78). By postulating language as a “whole” (76), the aim of translation is ultimately that of “integrating many tongues into one true language” (76-77).

Bhabha speaks about cultures in similar terms and in the same way as Benjamin proposes the idea of a greater original and unified language, he suggests that “all forms of culture are in some way related to each other, because culture is a signifying or symbolic activity.” Such a theory of culture then gets closer to Benjamin’s theory of language “as part of a process of translations,” where the word translation is understood here, as suggested by Benjamin, in its meaning of displacement and in its capacity to ultimately demonstrate how the original itself is never finished (Bhabha “Third Space” 209-210). In this productive and fruitful space of cultural exchange originated in this space of liminality, where we see that all cultures are themselves “continually in a process of hybridity” (211), language acquires for Bhabha, as it does for Derrida, a metaphorical nature, open to a network of meanings and a space of translation: “It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same sign can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha *Location* 55).

Precisely in Third Space’s unrepresentability, however, lies one of the limits of Bhabha’s argument. Founded on concepts like Derrida’s difference that can hardly be articulated, Bhabha’s discourse risks falling into abstraction. The very notion of hybridity does not clearly specify which oppositions it aims to transcend, and at the same time it wrongly presupposes the blending of two uncomplicated entities, and does not seem to

do justice to their evident internal contradictions and nuances. Criticizing this abstract position, Seyhan claims that Bhabha's idea of hybridity "forgoes an analysis of actual social spaces where cultures interact and literature as an institution of cultural memory intervenes" (5). As I have shown, to consider the relationship between language and cultural experience within a transnational setting very often results in an abundance of terminologies that only underscores the danger and the limitation of applying general labels to such a variegated condition. Against pure theoretical approaches that "can lose their footing on conceptual ground and turn into their own parodies" (5), Seyhan instead promotes an understanding of literary texts based on a more historical and political context.

Border Crossing, Home and Displacement

The Greek word for "return" is *nostos*. *Algos* means "suffering." So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return. To express that fundamental notion most Europeans can utilize a word derived from the Greek [...]. In each language these words have a different semantic nuance. Often they mean only the sadness caused by the impossibility of returning to one's country: a longing for country, for home."

Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, 5

Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance* tells the story of two Czech expatriates, who randomly run into each other as they return to their homeland after an absence of twenty years. Irena and Josef had once been lovers, but history had quickly put an end to their love story as soon as it had started. While Irena immediately recognizes in Josef the man with whom she was deeply in love, and for whom she was almost ready to die, he does not remember her at all, but decides to play along. The encounter only lasts a few minutes, enough for them to realize that they have something in common, and to decide

to meet again. Reworking the theme of Ulysses in a highly poetic way, Milan Kundera tells a poignant love story which problematizes the sense of belonging and the desire for home. As he very aptly describes the idealized attachment that links the protagonists to their homeland, he also questions their sense of memory. The novel illustrates how as a result of an extended absence from a place one inevitably remembers things in a different way, but is unaware of this and lives in a fundamental state of ignorance. Only when the protagonists return and ignite a new brief love affair, do they realize that homeland is no longer home and that their new love is not what it had once been, but rather translates their desire for something that is forever lost. By problematizing memory, the manner in which we select and remember the past within the context of exile, and questioning the sense of belonging to one place, Milan Kundera's novel underlines urgent necessity of revisiting the ideas of homecoming and nostalgia today.

While the newly emerging geographical structure of the globalized world in which we live presupposes reduced distances, facilitating communication between opposite parts of the globe, it also problematizes our sense of belonging to any single place. As a consequence of this radical internal and external dislocation, the sense of homelessness and disorientation seem to grow stronger. If the globalized world is being remapped and the distances are diminishing, how is the concept of homecoming changing in our current societies?

Stuart Hall suggests that everywhere today there are cultural identities "in transition," (629) and that this is just a "false dilemma" to think of "identity in the age of globalization as destined to end up in one place or another: either returning to its "roots" or disappearing through assimilation and homogenization" (629). As we keep in mind

that the current geography of the world is being modified with increasing speed, we should now consider how notions of home and border crossing are currently changing. Seyhan's work becomes crucial at this point of my analysis, as it builds upon notions of border-crossing and borderland writing. Seyhan describes the topos of border as a theoretical metaphor capable of transforming a geographical space into a space of history and memory, and affirms that: "Although the topos of border originated in an actual topography, at a geographical border, it has since traveled to sites where borders mark passages not necessarily in space but rather in time, history, and memory" (Seyhan "Multiculturalism" 197).

The notion of border as Seyhan describes it, then, carries intrinsically within itself an idea of "perpetual motion, confrontation and translation" (201). At the same time it also subverts the traditional notion of home, becoming itself a sort of new "home" for the traveler. The border thus turns almost into a real space in which the conflicts and confrontations between cultures, nationalities and languages take place, and in which, ideally, the culture of *hybridization* replaces the traditional idea of a national identity. Through the culture of borders, Seyhan focuses in particular on those writings that become a means to recover memory losses, and at the same time, become productive spaces in which both clash and dialogue between the old and the new can be found.

As the result of the increased sense of marginality and otherness I have been describing, Angelika Bammer sees postmodern identity as characterized by the peculiar geography of a simultaneous being "here and there" and "neither here nor there," yet in opposition to Seyhan's idealized and fascinating notion of borders, she arrives at a more drastic conclusion by saying that to "be" in our current postmodern societies is "to be an

Other: displaced” (Bammer xii). By taking into account narratives that depict a return home — or the attempt to return home — of one or several of the protagonists, I essentially move away, geographically and metaphorically, from the “space” of the border, to focus instead on the heightened sense of loss and displacement that identities in between two or more cultures experience, along the lines Bammer outlines. As the protagonists of the narratives I consider travel and attempt a return to their own roots, in fact, they cross the borders twice or multiple times. This complicates the relationship between nation and identity and further problematizes the trope of border-crossing. As these identities acquire the consciousness of their hybridity, they attempt to establish a relationship with those who share similar experiences. Yet the border experience remains fundamentally incomplete and intrinsically unsatisfying. It is at this point that a sense of domesticity and community acquires more importance and that the desire for a return that could promise a place in which to feel at home becomes more urgent.

Double or multiple border-crossing emerge as different experiences also within the linguistic realm. In the act of writing and re-writing in some of the texts I take into account, in their translations and interpretations in one culture and the other, these works problematize the idea of language in a very dynamic way. In the case of Biondi’s “*Passavantis Rückkehr*,” which has a first version in Italian, a following German edition and a new Italian re-translation of the German text, the language he uses seems almost to travel back and forth with the author. In a similar way, we can talk about a “Turkicized German” in Özdamar and of a redeployment of Turkish poetic motifs in German for Frischmuth’s texts. As for Akin’s films the question of language is complicated by the

very fact that the films are shot in multiple languages at the same time, irrespective of whether the scene is set in Germany, Turkey or Italy.

Claudio Magris claims that traveling in modernity has become a “cammino senza ritorno,” a journey with no way back and always directed ahead (Magris xii). Against his position, I propose that the fragmentation that originates in modernity and continues in postmodernity does not always determine an incapacity of traveling back. Rather this journey — if and when it takes place — occurs in our modern and postmodern times under new parameters. I argue that the journeys of displaced identities become spiral-like movements, in which the circularity recalls the movement back home at the end of a journey, while the image of the spiral suggests at the same time both the reaching of a new and higher level of personal consciousness and the awareness of a return to a place that itself has evolved into something different.

Drawing upon the theories of transnational identity, “minor literature” and the notion of border-crossing as already discussed, my project analyzes the journeys of these displaced identities and focuses in particular on those who perform a homecoming, to show that their journeys are motivated by one of the most elementary needs: the desire to find a sense of belonging. “Placeless and disoriented,” as Doreen Massey, describes them (7-8), the identities I depict here find in their return home the possibility of recovering a lost stability. While all of the narratives that I consider problematize the notions of belonging and home, the different types of return that I am analyzing show that the issue of homecoming is not as simple as one may think. In describing returns that are forced, voluntary or planned from the beginning, I conclude that a real homecoming is, in most cases, foreclosed. By foreclosed I mean both that a return in a traditional sense of the

word does not take place and that the character is destined to a perpetual commute back and forth from the place of origin to the newly acquired home and vice versa — as in Biondi's *Passavanti* — or that it only takes place within a space of writing, as in Özdamar's *Mutterzunge*. If this is not the case, homecoming is ultimately conceived not in the public sphere of the nation, but only within the private and domestic space of the house — like in Özdamar's *Karawanserei*, Akin's films, or in Frischmuth's novel, where the narrator's Austrian origin is completely erased.

In her compelling essay entitled “Home”, Margaret Morse argues that: “since home is not a real place (thought it always was once upon a time), feeling at home is, in essence, a personal and culturally specific link to the imaginary” (63). The impossibility of a traditional homecoming like that of Ulysses, demonstrates that the geographical parameters of the world in which we live are changing. Thus, I propose to use and understand the word homecoming in its strictly literal meaning as “home-coming” or, in other words, as the return to a place to call home. As these characters cross the borders again, remembering with love or hatred their lost country, or dreaming of a homeland in which they never really lived, they are ultimately performing a search for a place in which to feel at ease. This desire of familiarity and home informs the very term of *nostalgia* and causes it to acquire a wider connotation than just the nostalgia of a real place — something that a second generation of immigrants has oftentimes not even experienced. This expanded notion of nostalgia becomes the yearning for a home as understood in its most basic definition as: “a place, region or state to which one properly belongs, on which one's affections centre, or when one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction” (Oxford English Dictionary quoted in Margaret Morse, 68).

My reading of the various returns and homecomings in such disparate authors and works is motivated by the fact that no reading of this kind has yet occurred. Leslie Adelson's study, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*, no doubt represents a groundbreaking work and a crucial contribution towards a new way of conceiving narratives by foreign writers. By exploring migrants' works with new eyes, Adelson encourages a positive reading of the narratives by transnational writers in a period in which their work was still scornfully labeled as *Migrantenliteratur*. While exploring the vast body of scholarship around migration and diaspora studies, Adelson outlines their great contribution, but also their major limitation. Situating migrants' culture in a position of "in betweenness," as most of the critics tend to do, connotes a spatial configuration that does not seem to take into consideration the "accelerated movement and transformation" of our age (3). It presupposes a relation between two static elements. Drawing on Hélène Cixous's post-Holocaust reminiscences of Algeria, Adelson points out the conceptual vagueness of the phrase "between two worlds," for its incapacity to effectively describe "cultures of migration *as historical formations*" (3). Moreover, the concept becomes even more imprecise, when "whatever worlds are meant [they — F.F.] are presumed to be originary, mutually exclusive, and intact, the boundaries between them clear and absolute" (4). While attempting to find out the reason for the "enduring rhetorical appeal" (4) of such a concept, Adelson suggests a new "critical grammar for understanding the configuration of cultural contact and the Turkish presence in contemporary German literature" (5). As Adelson sketches the various stages that mark the increasing presence of Turkish people in Germany, she also reports their enormous difficulties in becoming legally and culturally part of German society. Her

critique to the static idea of the immigrants suspended between two worlds, ultimately aims to articulate “postnational structures” (8) that go beyond simple and traditional national frames, to much better suit our age of globalization.

While analyzing the marginal position of Turkish people in Germany, Adelson focuses on their literary contribution in the formation of an already problematic German identity — she discusses in particular the general “sense of disorientation” that characterizes postwar Germany and its multiple transitions following the reunification in the so-called “Wende” period. My approach casts the relationship between identity and nation aside, in order to explore the private and intimate realms of home and domesticity. Bearing in mind how the current scholarship on German transnational literature has highlighted the enriching contribution of hybrid identities for a more inclusive image of national cultural identity, my interpretation examines the immigrants’ enduring desire for roots in many of these texts. My aim is also to show how ethnicity still plays a fundamental role in defining and undermining at the same time the position of displaced identities in the new countries.

Stuart Hall points out that the impact of “the global” and the trend towards global homogenization has also brought with it a fascination for the “local.” In response to a cosmopolitan and a multicultural approach that would cause the gradual disappearance of particularisms and favor the homogenization of cultures and identities, the revival of ethnicity emerges as a desire to maintain the distinctive traits of each and every culture. Nonetheless, despite the fact that “marketing of ethnicity and ‘otherness’” (623) has become a real phenomenon taking place next to globalization, Hall ultimately suggests a new articulation of the terms. He affirms that: “globalization seems to be producing

neither simply the triumph of ‘the global’ nor the persistence, in its old nationalistic form, of ‘the local.’ The displacements of globalization turn out to be more varied and more contradictory than either its protagonists or opponents suggests” (632). Thus, while my approach stresses how the link between displaced identities and the desire for roots — symbolized by a real or an ideal homeland — is still crucial, it favors a “counter-tendency” towards ethnicity only to a certain degree. In order to avoid the risk of including my argument within a conservative or fundamentalist frame, I look at this bond to the roots in a new way that considers the contradictions behind both terms local and global.

Johannes von Moltke’s study *No Place like Home: Location of Heimat in German Cinema*, is crucial in helping me to articulate in a more dynamic and dialectical way the nature of this bond to roots. After establishing the important role that the notion of *Heimat* has played within German culture, Moltke underlines the complicated polysemy of this term, which is what also renders it difficult to understand. According to Moltke, *Heimat*, is a keyword in German culture that is loaded with such great emotional and geographical meaning that the term “has come to accumulate so many meanings – ranging from the mundane to the religious, from the reactionary to the progressive, and from the specific to the unimaginably vague” (8). While underlining the “semantic flexibility” (8) of this word, Moltke also underlines the vantage of using it for various contexts, and he concludes that the term *Heimat* functions as a “galvanizing notion that reconciled a local world with the larger, more impersonal, national sphere” (9), or, as Alon Confino defines it, the word *Heimat* becomes a “‘local metaphor’ for the nation” (9). The issue of delimiting the semantic boundaries of this term becomes complicated

when trying to define the spatial dimension of *Heimat* (9) with words. The best way to characterize it seems to be to regard *Heimat* as linked to a certain localism and to the idea of a space that is experienced by people in familiar terms. “The localism of *Heimat*, its emphasis on experience, presence, and delimitation suggest that we think of it as place, as a limited terrain that affords its inhabitants respite and protection [...]. Quoting Alon Confino again, Moltke adds that: “Heimatlers attempted to transform the impersonal nation into something manageable, intimate, and small” (11).

Drawing upon this idea of intimate space in which one can find protection, I show how in the narratives that I consider, the characters are able to return precisely to such an intimate and enclosed space and no longer to a larger space of the nation. As it would be inaccurate to define *Heimat* “solipsistically as a territory organized towards the inside and excluding any consideration of the spaces beyond its reach” (13), Moltke proposes a new understanding of the term. By responding to new influences from the outside, *Heimat* itself is not insensitive to the idea of progress and to the transformations that modernity entails. Rather, the concept in itself articulates a new and dynamic relationship between the terms of local and global and well expresses a dialectic that “both glorified the past and celebrated modernity” (Confino qtd in Moltke 17).

In light of such a renewed formulation of this term, I would like to claim that the homecoming of the protagonists of these narratives I analyzed becomes a return to a *Heimat*, understood here not as an isolated anti-modern, conservative or ahistorical place, but rather as a place that itself reflects the contradictions of our present globalized world. By understanding the word *Heimat* “by no means limited to the German context” and in its dialectical capacity to reconcile a sense of privacy and localism with an outward-

looking sense of space (Moltke 11), my approach in reading and interpreting these narratives tries to move away from the space of the border to remain *Heimat*-focused, as the retreat to a private space is not mean an escape from modern reality. An example of this new way of conceiving home is discernible in Akin's *Auf der Anderen Seite* (2007), in which Susanne, one of the German protagonists, "goes back" to Turkey, and there finds her new home in the newly established mother-daughter relationship with the Turkish girl Ayten. Or in Akin's *Solino* (2002) where the young man Gigi's return to his roots is only apparently conservative, as the family he creates with his childhood love Ada does not correspond to the traditional idea of the Italian family, but already reflects a new and modern type of personal relationship.

As I suggested earlier, when a return home is physically and geographically undermined, the homecoming then takes place within a realm of writing. In these cases writing becomes fundamental, as these identities find a new way of expression and a new space in which they can finally find themselves at home in the language. Drawing upon Bhabha's idea of Third Space, Seyhan suggests that we look at this space of writing as a "third geography," where geography should now be literally understood as the Greek roots of its two syllables suggest, as a "terrain (of) writing" (15). However, while Seyhan argues that "the writer of the diaspora can *only* [my emphasis] feel at home in the alternative space of writing" and that nostalgia for what has been left behind is negotiated by the writer's many histories and stories of his texts (149), I believe, as I have shown, that writing only represents one alternative.

Forms of Narration, Bildungsroman

To think of migration as metaphor suggests that the very language of the novel, its form and rhetoric, must be open to meanings that are ambivalent, doubling and dissembling. Metaphor produces hybrid realities by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought.

Homi Bhabha “*The Third Space*” (212)

By using the topos of travel and representing characters that undergo a journey which brings them to a deeper knowledge of themselves, the novels I have chosen to analyze clearly imitate the *Bildungsroman*. Yet what happens to the protagonist’s trip when his identity is already fragmented from within?

Seyhan postulates that the similarities to the Bildungsroman are limited to the idea of the protagonist’s travel in search for enlightenment and self-knowledge. At the same time, she argues that contrary to the late-eighteenth century hero, for the “‘exiled’ hero/ine, there is no return.” Challenged by frustration and alienation, the traveler is ultimately unable to recover any lost origins (Seyhan 127). While I agree with the fact that a real and complete recovery of the origins is never going to be possible, as the traveler has undergone a deep and radical change within himself, as I have shown earlier, I do not agree with Seyhan’s idea of the impossibility of a return.

While Seyhan rightly draws attention to the connections between the traditional *Bildungsreisender* and the idea of nation and underlines how this relationship in modernity needs to be reconfigured within a transnational context, I aim to point at a completely new direction which only considers the private and intimate sphere of the home. Thus if the traveler of the eighteenth century was taking a journey “in order to become an enlightened citizen” (128), the traveler of twentieth century undertakes journeys back which lead him to avoid public realms and prefer, instead, the private

space of a home and of family bonds. The new *Bildungsroman* of the twentieth century has lost its perfect circularity to make space for a new idea of traveling, in which the “formation” consists of the awareness of a deep internal fragmentation. The displaced identities of the twentieth century, formed out of clash and dialogue between different cultures, go back to find out that they can recover the lost stability only within a private and domestic realm of an old/new place they can now call home. Also, by returning to places that are different than what they were before, and that are registering the changes taking place in the world, these characters’ return is established under new parameters.

The narratives I discuss here challenge the idea of *Bildungsroman* as a genre also from a stylistic point of view. Using the language in a highly experimental and poetic way or fusing Western literary forms with Eastern storytelling, these novels undermine traditional Western literary genres from within. Writing across cultural divides gives life to unique and original forms of narration that we can hardly classify under common literary rubrics. Seyhan rightly highlights this aspect: “writing is by no means utopian in the sense of an ideal. It is often a subversive force, for it breaks through received tradition and convention and reassembles their traces as an alternative, symbolically potent, and often more empowering version of history” (131).

In some cases, writing acquires a self-reflexive mode that results in powerful metafictional texts where the protagonist is a writer — and maybe also the author. The presence of a metafictional identity, accompanied by complex intertextual references, confer a deeper and allegorical meaning to these stories and transform fragmented and apparently plotless stories into poetic and evocative narratives. While Biondi’s writing experiments with language, mixing Italian sayings with German ones, and consciously

tries to subvert the German language from within, in the works by Özdamar and Frischmuth, language experiments almost assume a figurative and graphic character. The description of letters that almost become “alive” in the texts not only renders these novels highly poetic, but is also partially responsible for reducing the distance between Western literary genres and Eastern figurative traditions. Director Fatih Akin achieves similar effects by using and undermining typical Hollywood style films, with ‘accented’ cinematic representations. Through code-switching, language experimentation or fusion of genres, all of these narratives use innovative strategies I will discuss in my individual chapters.

The chapters

My first chapter is dedicated to Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a Turkish writer and theater performer who has spent most of her life in Germany. Originating from her personal experience, but not limited to a simple autobiographical recount, Özdamar’s work is a fertile ground for the cultural exchange and dialogue between Turkish and German cultures. In particular, I examine how in the collection of stories *Mutterzunge* [*Mother Tongue*] (1990) and in the novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* [*Life is a Caravanserai*] (1992) Özdamar fuses storytelling, folk and fairy tale, normally perceived as Middle Eastern narrative forms, with the conventional Western narrative, to create a fascinating new literary genre. Furthermore, Özdamar establishes a new relationship with the German language, which she twists, modifies and expands in original ways, creating interesting linguistic experiments that blend German with Turkish and Arabic words. Even though Özdamar’s protagonists seem to remain in a borderland zone, the link to the

ethnic origins and to the homeland is strongly expressed in the texts, as to underline that the bond to a culture is still present within the characters.

My second chapter focuses on Italian immigration in Germany. Through an analysis of Franco Biondi's narratives, I explore multiple aspects of the concept of homecoming. While in the short story "Passavantis Rückkehr" ["The Return of Passavanti", or literally, "The Return of the One who Moves Forward"] (1976) Biondi plays with the idea of a doubly foreclosed homecoming, in his later novel *Die Unversöhnlichen* [*The Irreconcilables*] (1991) he develops the theme of homecoming through an attempt to admit that the possibility of reconciliation with the past and of a return home is possible only through language. While the circularity of the journey is maintained, it also assumes a spiral-like dimension to show that the protagonists have reached a new level of consciousness.

In the third chapter my enquiry expands into the field of film studies to explore the notion of *Accented Cinema* as theorized by the film scholar Hamid Naficy. In particular, I analyze films by the German-Turkish movie director Fatih Akin, all of which portray identities on and between borders. Akin not only undermines immigrant stereotypes by underlining the complex contradictions within transnational identity, but he also investigates the issue of hybridity through the use of soundtracks that include traditional ethnic, rock and punk music forms. How should we interpret Akin's musical *pastiche*, if not as another powerful vehicle to express the concept of hybridity? Akin's fairly conservative approach is demonstrated by the fact that all of his characters return home and, even though they have different motivations, they stop traveling only once they find higher degrees of emotional and domestic stability in their homeland. In Akin's

films the family plays a crucial role in representing the maintained relationship to the nation. Thus, when the cut of the family bonds takes place in all of the films, the sense of displacement caused by immigration is further reinforced and the idea of ethnicity and belonging are further called into question.

Chapter four reverses my approach, by discussing Turkey from the point of view of a native German speaker. During a period in which Turkish immigration to Germany increased, European awareness of the relationship between West and Middle Eastern countries also grew. Barbara Frischmuth's *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne* (The Shadow Disappears in the Sun) (1973) which was conceived after a period spent in Turkey represents the author's most important book on the question of multiculturalism and negotiation of cultures. By analyzing her novel I seek to demonstrate how the experience abroad, and the encounter with the other, even for a limited period of time, represents a crucial moment in the process of identity formation. Sharing commonalities with transnational identities, Frischmuth discusses how the notion of border-crossing and multilingualism within a German literary panorama simultaneously succeeds in promoting a new and more positive image of Austria inside the European Union. The suggestion at the end of the novel, that the protagonist will face a problematic return home — one that is planned from the very beginning — demonstrates that crossing the borders of one's own nation can have strong and lasting effects, even when the journey is only intended to be temporary.

1

Metaphors of Return: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Mutterzunge* and *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*

»Ich bin eine Wörtersammlerin.«
Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Mutterzunge*, 48

1.1 Introduction

In 1990 the Turkish German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar published a collection of stories titled *Mutterzunge* (Mother Tongue). Even though the meaning of this title comes across rather clearly, the word 'Mutterzunge' is nonexistent in the German vocabulary. Neologisms like this one are not uncommon in Özdamar's narrative, and aim not only to show the highly experimental way in which she uses the German language, but also the irony that characterizes all her texts. Özdamar is here playing with the typical German construction that allows the combination of two words to create a third new word, with a completely new meaning. Moreover the word applies 'language' as one meaning of the word 'Zunge', which does not exist in German, but still works for Turkish and other languages. Ultimately, the author aims to criticize how a combination of words like *Mutterzunge* is not officially recognized, whereas, for example, the word *Gastarbeiter* is. The word *Gastarbeiter*, currently used in German, was coined to define the non-permanent immigrants like Özdamar, who arrived at the end of the 1950s in Germany. While the historical positive meaning of *Gast* as 'foreigner' in Middle High German has been lost in the course of the centuries, the word has, in recent years, been used solely in its connotation of 'guest.' If the word *Gast* with this connotation is

combined with the word *Arbeiter*, it results in a term contradictory in itself, and, to put it in Seyhan's words, "the expression makes no sense in any idiom" (101). In one of her interviews Özdamar says in fact very ironically: "mir gefällt das Wort 'Gastarbeiter'. Ich sehe immer zwei Personen vor mir, die eine ist Gast und sitzt da und die andere arbeitet" (Seyhan 261). In the way in which the guest, as guest, will never become part of the 'house', so the Turks — and the many other immigrants (or *Gastarbeiter*) who decide to remain in Germany — are not yet part of German society (Seyhan 101). Moreover, with the idea of two different persons, the guest on one side and the worker on the other, Özdamar reinforces the idea of split and fragmentation generated within and through immigration. This provocative use of language is a way to challenge the official language and those easy and lasting labels with which Germans have prevented an open attitude towards foreigners. In trying to restore the dimension of Gast to the Gastarbeiter's experience, Özdamar ultimately shows that the experience of immigration is a transformative one, and that going away becomes the condition for the possibility of writing (Naqvi). Bettina Brandt, who interprets Özdamar's stories through Walter Benjamin's idea of collection, argues that, if in the process of collecting the past works at service of the collector, in Özdamar's texts the collection of past memories does not create a world of nostalgia, "but rather a world of anticipation" (206). Drawing upon Brandt's idea of anticipation, I argue that while she is experimenting with language and recovering traces of her forgotten Turkish past, the narrator's movement backwards also inevitably becomes a journey forward towards the consciousness of her new status.

In this chapter, I will show how in the collection of stories *Mutterzunge* and in the novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* Özdamar establishes a new relationship with the

German language, which she twists, modifies and expands in very original ways.

Originating from her personal experience on the border between two cultures, but not limited to a simple autobiographical recount, Özdamar's work is a fertile ground for cultural exchange and dialogue between Turkish and German culture. As Magrit Frölich suggests, Özdamar's social experience and literary production becomes a challenge against the traditional borders of German literature precisely because it takes place between two cultures (56). Through the frequent use of Turkish words within her texts and constant explicit and implicit references to her country and places in which she grew up — the novel *Karawanserei* is set almost entirely in Turkey — Özdamar reconnects linguistically to her origins. Her hybrid texts become the ground for linguistic experimentations in which German blends with Turkish and Arabic words by directly translating proverbs and fragments of religious texts. By reestablishing the link to her homeland via the language, Özdamar writes powerful texts which metaphorically translate her relationship to her past. The result is a new literary genre that resists any classification, and which fuses Middle Eastern narrative forms of storytelling, folk and fairy tale with the conventional Western narrative. By combining the written modern European literary production with the oral tradition of Turkish-Arabic narrative, Özdamar's work "calls upon her German as well as upon her non-German readers to re-think their often one-dimensional and tenacious national-cultural expectations of each other" (Milz 9). Her language works as a tool that, through intense images that involve her body, explicitly attempts to give a linguistic representation of the border crossing experience in general, with the interesting particularity that the cultures to which she is referring are not only German and Turkish, but also Turkish and Arabic.

While keeping in mind that dealing with identities at border crossings demands new tools of inquiry, I will show that what is at stake here is not only the possibility or impossibility of recovering the ‘roots’ that define Turkish identity, but also the articulation of a fascinating and unique identity that has originated from the clashing of multiple cultures. It soon becomes clear, however, that the past to which Özdamar refers is perceived as a mythical and ideal moment, an anterior point of pure authenticity that she observes from her distanced position in Germany. Given that these identities have undergone such deep internal changes, I will look first at how she realizes her internal split and attempts to reestablish the link to her origins, and later how her desire for a mythical past becomes a nostalgia of domestic memories in her novel. While a real and physical homecoming does not take place in Özdamar’s short stories — none of the characters returns home — I argue that a homecoming takes place by means of the writing process.

Throughout these years, Özdamar was awarded for her works prestigious literary acknowledgements² among them the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Prize. They contributed to her recognition as “a formidable literary talent on the contemporary landscape generally” (Adelson 40). Born in 1946 in Malatya, one of Turkey’s eastern provinces, where Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic are spoken, Özdamar arrived in Germany at the age of nineteen. After working in a factory for a short period of time, she returned to Istanbul and studied drama for three years. For political reasons in the early seventies, she was forced again to leave Turkey and lands in the former East Berlin, where she started working in German theaters as an actor and a playwright. Her experience in the theater

² Among others, she was the recipient of the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 1999 for her first literary works in German, and the Kleist Prize in 2004.

clearly influenced her writing, in which, as I will show, she literally lets language perform. As a result of this life spent at border crossings between Germany and Turkey, Emine Özdamar becomes a perfect example of those hybrid identities, who, as Stuart Hall notes: “are not and will never be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and at the same time to several “homes” (629). Crossing the borders multiple times has an immediate effect not only in unsettling her identity, but also on her writing. Belonging to no specific genre, Özdamar’s texts clearly demonstrate the nomadic nature of her language and literary experience (Ghaussy 5).

While in *Mutterzunge* the narrator focuses on the search for her lost identity and roots through the process of re-learning the Turkish language via Arabic, the semi-autobiographical novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* [*Life is a Caravanserai*] (1992) tells the past of a young girl in Turkey during the 1950s through a fascinating narrative that bears features of magic realism. The crucial role of language in *Mutterzunge* is anticipated in this earlier novel. It acquires a fundamental position and an onomatopoeic value, which further calls into question the relationship between Özdamar and her Turkish roots. By unveiling the nomadic natures of her identity and language, Özdamar “appropriates the foreign idiom and makes it conform to memories of childhood origins and homeland” (Seyhan 144). Thus, if in *Mutterzunge* the narrator still looks at the past within a public and official dimension, in the novel *Karawanserei* the stories are reduced to domestic memories of an intimate and familiar period. It is precisely the recollections of home on the part of the child narrator that reset the author’s idea of the bygone past, locating her desire to go back not within the frame of a lost nation, but rather in the

restricted and personal sphere of the house. Recollecting private memories linked to her family highlights the metaphorical meaning of this journey back to her childhood.

In general, the attempt to recover lost origins is problematized by two crucial elements, the first of which is characterized by the disappearance of the idea of a pure identity per se in our modern cultures. As I explained in the introduction to my work, modernity has postulated that there is no longer such a thing as a “pure identity.” Moreover, in the case of Özdamar this internal fragmentation is further complicated by the process of migration and cross-cultural interactions. Thus, if on the one hand the hybrid nature of her identity in between two cultures surely adds a new and original perspective, one from which Özdamar in particular is able to see both East and West in a different manner, this internal split becomes at the same time the main obstacle to a return to any such thing as an authentic origin.

The second critical point to keep in mind is represented by the special hybrid nature of Turkey itself, located at the intersection of two continents. Situated between Asia and Europe, Turkey has always occupied a strategic position with contacts to both the West and the East. Since the cultural reforms of 1923-1928 under Kemal Atatürk, which I will discuss in greater detail later, Turkey has increased its relationship to Europe in particular undergoing an interesting process of ‘Westernization,’ especially in the way of living. Today the majority of the population is still Muslim, which is reflected in several cultural aspects and many traditions. This has also guaranteed a continuation of the relationship with the Middle East and Asia. Turkey has always been also a very multiethnic state, comprised of Armenian, Greek and Kurdish minorities among many others, and thus making the very identity of this state even more variegated. Besides the

author's personal experience between Germany and Turkey, the very special position of Turkey has clearly shaped the nature of her stories.

1.2 *Mutterzunge*: Language, Body and Identity

Und die deutsche Sprache habe ich natürlich aus den Körpern von Schauspielern erfahren, oder wenn ich die Wörter gespielt habe, habe ich auch körperlich gespielt. Die Wörter, die ich am Theater gehört habe, haben Körper für mich.

Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Interview with Annette Wierschke, 251

As Wierschke underlines, for Özdamar “Sprache ist Identität” (182). Identity not only in a spiritual sense, but also in a very physical one. A close reading of the first two interconnected stories of *Mutterzunge*, called “*Mutterzunge*” and “*Großvaterzunge*,” will show that to speak a language, or in her case to speak different languages, is for Özdamar an experience strongly located in the body. “*Mutterzunge*” and “*Großvaterzunge*” tell the story of a young Turkish woman, presumably the author herself, who after living in Germany for many years suddenly realizes that she has forgotten her own mother tongue. The story is set in the divided city of Berlin, which seems to mirror her interior split. This fragmentation is identified with the unexpected and inexplicable loss of her language, which leaves her disoriented and confused: “Wenn ich nur wüßte, wann ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe” (MZ 9). Throughout the entire book, the necessity of recovering a sense of identity is felt very strongly, and made even more urgent by the deep sense of fragmentation that she experiences while in Germany. The reconstruction of her identity becomes more difficult when she decides that, in order to get back to her roots, she needs to relearn Turkish via Arabic, since its alphabet was used in the Turkish language as well before the reforms of 1923-1928.

In this first section, I will focus on how the first two stories of *Mutterzunge* become crucial in understanding Özdamar's literary production, as they represent a kind of linguistic manifesto of Özdamar's way of writing. These stories become an emotional and linguistic journey (Neubert 154), during which the German language functions as a fundamental tool in the recovery of the narrator's cultural identity. The protagonist wanders between West and East Berlin in search of herself and starts literally "collecting words" in her native language. "Ich bin Wörtersammlerin" (MZ 48), as which she defines herself at the end of the second story while answering a German girl who has asked her what she is doing in Germany. This curious image immediately recalls Walter Benjamin's idea of collection, inviting us to look at the words that Özdamar "has lost" through the eyes of a collector. The scholar Bettina Brandt, who revisits Özdamar's text through Benjamin's idea of 'collecting,' reminds us that for Benjamin a true collector creates his collection of pieces through a gradual process of acquisition, made up of fortuitous moments in which the collector finds a piece, or is "found" by the object itself. In a similar way, Brandt argues, Özdamar's narrator finds lost words and is found by them at the same time. Drawing a parallel to the idea of a collection brings Özdamar's words closer to Benjamin's idea that the objects found have an "external, sociohistorical reality" which "might be redeemed by the profane illumination of the artist" (Brandt 297). As a matter of fact, words come back accidentally in the narrator's mind during her dreams or randomly appear on the street, as if they were objects that she could physically pick up and add to a greater collection. In the same way that the collector is almost bringing something back to life by acquiring an old book (Benjamin 61), so too Özdamar restores her lost mother tongue by recovering Turkish words.

The childlike dimension of the collector that according to Benjamin enables the book's rebirth (61) can be compared to a similar excitement and surprise that Özdamar's narrator experiences when she finds 'lost' words. The childish dimension recalled by the enthusiastic recovery of the words is reinforced by the idea, expressed a few pages later, that "in der Fremdsprache haben Wörter keine Kindheit" (MZ 44). If words in a foreign language have no childhood, by recovering her native language Özdamar seems to bring with it also the enthusiasm and the excitement of that period early in life, transposing it into the experience of foreign language acquisition. In Özdamar's texts Turkish words come back to life in a renewed way, almost acquiring new meanings now that they are inserted within a new context.

In her essay, Brandt delves into explaining the meaning of the first three Turkish words that the narrator remembers, giving them a structural as well as a political significance within the story (297-298). She also aims to underline the uniqueness of these linguistic moments during which Turkish words are found like unexpected epiphanies, and the reader, along with the narrator, is invited to take part in this process of learning.³ Such a unique relationship to language is demonstrated also by the many neologisms like those I mentioned earlier, which frequently recur in the text.

"*Wörtersammlerin*" [collector of words], or "*Lebensunfälle*" [life accidents] (MZ 12)⁴ are only a few examples. Side-by-side with them there are also several metaphors and Turkish sayings that the narrator translates directly into German.

Brandt establishes the interesting parallel between Benjamin's and Özdamar's idea of a "political identity" of the collector. If Benjamin compares "the collector's

³ "Görmek" [Sehen]; "Kaza gecirmek" [Lebenumfälle erleben]; "ISCI" [Arbeiter]; are some of the words she remembers.

⁴ Other neologisms are for example: "Werbefilmcowboy" (MZ, 13) or "Polizei-korridor" (MZ, 13).

passion to the passion of the revolutionary” for their common visionary dreams of a mythical era in which “objects and people are freed from the banality of everyday life” (304), so does Özdamar go back to a remote, mythical past to find the origins of those Arabic loan words in Turkish. Brandt extends the parallel further by comparing the revolutionary with the surrealists, as both see reality with contempt. In a similar way, Özdamar’s narrator attempts to undermine the Turkish language by creating connections to Arabic words of the past “that have become extinct” creating at the same time “entirely new connections and meanings” (304).⁵

The linguistic journey in search of her cultural identity takes place, then, in two different steps. First, the acknowledgment of the loss of the Turkish language, accompanied by a feeling of disorientation, then the decision to learn Arabic in order to re-learn Turkish. Following the so-called “War of Liberation,” started in 1923 and lead by one of the first presidents of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey underwent a long and wide process of modernization and westernization through a series of reforms. One of the most important transformations was the abolition of the Arabic script used to write Turkish, replacing it with the Latin script. Even though Özdamar is not directly affected by these reforms — the narrator was born many years after the reforms had already taken place — the decision to go back to Arabic shows that her attitude to her mother tongue is more intricate than simply returning to what she knew before moving to Germany. The reorganization of the culture on a national scale, especially through the reforms to the language, has deep repercussions for her and is perceived as a profound interference in her family identity. She imagines that:

⁵ To further underline how the author is creating new connections, Brandt also interestingly establishes a connection to silent films like Buñuel *Un Chien andalou* [Andalusian Dog] (1929) and especially Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), that the narrator watches one day in Berlin. (Brandt 304).

mein Großvater konnte nur arabische Schrift, ich konnte nur lateinisches Alphabet, das heißt, wenn mein Großvater und ich stumm wären und uns nur mit Schrift was erzählen könnten, könnten wir uns keine Geschichten erzählen. Vielleicht erst zu Großvater zurück, dann kann ich den Weg zu meiner Mutter und Mutterzunge finden. (MZ 14)

This image is interesting for two reasons. First of all, the idea of the narrator and her grandfather being dumb and unable to speak stresses the importance of voice and speaking and anticipates the importance of orality and storytelling — into which I will delve in greater extent later. Secondly, the idea of going back to the mother through a return to the father raises interesting questions related to gender issues and nationality. The detour through the male figure to reach any origin suggests the idea of a language ultimately considered feminine. This concept will be reinforced in the second story, when the narrator falls in love with her Arabic teacher. When, later in the text, the narrator informs us about the historical context in which the new Turkish language originated, the idea of a loss is directly connected to a corporeal image.

[E]r [Atatürk — F.F.] hätte die arabische Schrift nicht verbieten müssen. Dieses Verbot ist so, wie wenn die Hälfte von meinem Kopf abgeschnitten ist. Alle Namen von meiner Familie sind arabisch: Fatma, Mustafa, Ali, Samra. Gottseidank ich gehöre noch zu einer Generation, die mit vielen arabischen Wörtern aufgewachsen ist. Ich suchte arabische Wörter, die es noch in türkischer Sprache gibt. (MZ, 29)

The linguistic representation of her split head represents the first example of how the protagonist's body enters the narration and graphically aims to translate the narrator's internal fragmentation. By explicitly using the body to express her internal status, Özdamar gives an interesting physical value to the German language, while she attempts to give a verbal description of the border crossing experience in general. Talking about borders, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, a scholar of immigrant and transnational literature notes that: "to cross a linguistic border implies that you de-center your voice. The border-crosser develops two or more voices" (156). In *Mutterzunge*, the multiple voices of the

narrator speak German, Turkish and Arabic at the same time. Aware of this sort of “mini Babel confusion” taking place inside herself, the narrator sits in Berlin with a “twisted tongue,”⁶ an interesting image, which again inscribes the body of the narrator into the text. “‘Zunge drehen’ (turning or twisting the tongue) is a literal translation of the Turkish idiom *dili doenmek*, often used in the negative as *dilim doenmueyor* (I cannot say or pronounce). The narrator refers to herself as one with a ‘twisted tongue’ [gedrehten Zunge] (7), a person capable of mastering difficult sounds. Seyhan informs us that the image of a twisted tongue comes from a Turkish saying literally translated in this sentence, and which gives a good idea of the power of a language and its capacity to be twisted and changed (118).

Self-knowledge mixes with alienation within a strongly corporeal experience made up of loss and attempts at restoration. Stephanie Bird notes that the loss of language is always associated with the loss of something tangible in Özdamar. At the very beginning, for example, her mother tells her: “Du hast die Hälfte deiner Haare in Alamania gelassen” (MZ 9). When the idea of a physical split encountered previously comes up again, it is accompanied by the sensation that something disappears in the process of border crossing. In both of these stories, and as I will show also in the third one, the narrator associates migration and clash of cultures with a negative experience, which instead of bringing new gains, results in the loss of something. The very loss of language becomes a painful experience that hurts and almost physically injures the body of the narrator:

Wenn der Zug in Köln ankam, ich machte immer die Augen zu, einmal aber machte ich ein Auge auf, 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

⁶ “Ich saß mit meiner gedrehten Zunge in dieser Stadt Berlin” (MZ 9)

mehr da, ich machte mein zweites Auge auch auf. Vielleicht habe ich dort meine Mutterzunge verloren. (MZ, 12-13)

The image of the train connects the experience of traveling and migration directly with the idea of pain and loss. Crossing the borders of Turkey to arrive in Germany, symbolized by the Cathedral of Cologne, is a painful event, one that she identifies with a razor blade penetrating her body. The attempt to linguistically express the pain reminds us here of the painful experience that Gloria Anzaldúa, a *Chicana* writer and critic, ascribes to the moment in which Mexican-Americans become conscious of their “borderlands” condition. “The U.S. Mexican border es una herida abierta [is an open wound], where the Third world grates against the first and bleeds,” she writes (3). Despite the different geographical and ethnic dimensions to which she refers, Anzaldúa’s revolutionary book *Borderland/ La Frontera* (1987) prompts a new way of viewing the condition of being in between two cultures. In this book, she describes how the “mestiza,” a woman of mixed racial origins, acquires the awareness of her “plural personality” and therefore realizes the necessity to operate “in a pluralistic mode” (79). However, precisely in this moment of revelation of this new condition and in the attempt to survive all the contradictions, the *mestiza* undergoes a painful experience:

In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness – a *mestiza* consciousness – and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each paradigm. (79-80)

The sense of pain is followed by a flow of creative energy that pushes the “mestiza” to move towards a new direction that undermines the traditional paradigms. In a similar way, Özdamar’s narrator experiences a painful moment when she sees the Cathedral in Cologne and is forced to close her eyes. When the pain goes away, she can finally open

her eyes, and for her, as for Anzaldúa, the experience of pain becomes a new source of energy that results in the creation of texts that reconcile her cultural, linguistic and geographical experiences. As a lesbian writer of mixed origins, Anzaldúa herself lives through a multiplicity of sites, always “transgressing/trespassing at border sites” (Seyhan 115). She ultimately aims to defend the identity of the *Chicanas* against male dominance. By expressing the pain of the border experience and by promoting the feminine value of a hybrid Turkish language and culture, Özdamar's texts get close to Anzaldúa's despite the new geographical context.

In Özdamar, the loss of the Turkish language is accompanied by the progressive loss of familiarity with her culture and a gradual acquisition of a Western point of view. At some point in a dialogue with her mother she is surprised that Istanbul had become so dark. Her mother answers that the Turkish city has always been dark and that it is her eyes, instead, which have grown used to “Alamanien-Lichter” (MZ 9). As a result of her experience of migration, the narrator's capacity of sight seems to be compromised, and it becomes clear that eyes occupy an important position within the text (Naqvi). The idea of a damaged ability to see within a Western realm had already been suggested in the image previously discussed, in which the narrator closes her eyes to alleviate the pain as soon as she enters Germany and sees the cathedral of Cologne is in front of her. The role of eyes reconnects with two other moments in which Özdamar engages with the regime of sight, framed within an Arabo-Turkish context. If the image of the twisted tongue discussed earlier had conveyed the flexibility of the narrator's language skills, it also had pointed out how the sudden loss of Turkish had left her confused and disoriented. While she no longer remembers in which language she recollects her memories, she seems to be

capable of still aurally and visually recognizing the linguistic sign. Neither her ears nor her eyes can locate the linguistic signs that come before her: “die Sätze selbst kamen in meine Ohren wie eine von mir gut gelernte Fremdsprache” (MZ 9) and “die Schriften kamen auch in meine Augen wie eine von mir gut gelernte Fremdschrift” (MZ 11). While the narrator experiences a high level of alienation, during which she even perceives her own language as foreign, the realm of sight gradually acquires a higher importance, until it becomes the only sense capable of recognizing those signs.

As she slowly goes back into a Turkish world via the Arabic language, she also falls into a dream-like dimension in which the reconnection to her Turkish roots takes place primarily within the realm of the visual. Özdamar undermines the capacity of sight within a Western world to postulate the possibility of visual only within an unreal Arabo-Turkish realm, and in this way gives her texts an even higher metaphorical value. The perfect example of this poetic language that very strongly relies on a vivid imagery comes with the special physical and graphical bond that she established with Arabic during her private classes with teacher Ibni Abdullah — which take place in the second story. The physicality of the language that may be related to Özdamar’s involvement in theater — she is also a playwright — is represented in two ways. Words seem to have bodies; they are personified and humanized, taking on the role of another character in the scene. After the first Arabic class, she says: “ich ging aus dem Schlafzimmer mit fünf ersten arabischen Buchstaben raus zum anderen Berlin” (MZ 17). Back in Abdullah’s apartment for a second class, she enters the room and says: “Der Diwan, auf dem ich saß, machte mich artig. Ich sah dort auf mich wartende Buchstaben” (MZ 18). The fascination

with the Arabic language and letters culminates in a very poetic passage in which the German language becomes pictorial, recalling Arabic calligraphy.

Es kamen aus meinem Mund die Buchstaben raus. Manche sahen aus wie ein Vogel, manche wie ein Herz, auf dem ein Pfeil steckt, manche wie eine Karawane, manche wie schlafende Kamele, manche wie ein Fluß, manche wie im Wind auseinanderfliegende Bäume, manche wie laufende Schlangen, manche wie unter Regen und Wind frierende Granatapfelbäume, manche wie böse geschreckte Augenbrauen, manche wie auf dem Fluß fahrendes Holz, manche wie in einem türkischen Bad auf einem heißen Stein sitzender dicker Frauenarsch, manche wie nicht schlafen könnende Augen. (MZ 18)

This excerpt, which reappears in the novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*,⁷ also shows the high graphical potential of the Arabic language, interestingly expressed in German. Thus, this “parade of images” enables the narrator to envision Arabic calligraphy, recontextualizing it within the German world (Seyhan 147). Drawing upon Benjamin’s idea of the childlike state of perennial enthusiasm, Brandt compares the narrator’s sensory perception to that childlike capacity of transforming objects into living things. By giving each letter a face, Özdamar’s narrator invents images that “are reminiscent of illustrated alphabet books that children use to learn to read” (Brandt 305). As in a Western context each letter illustrates an object that starts with that same letter, so “in the context of the Arabic alphabet, the fifth letter is ‘gim for gámal,’ or camel” (306). In this way Özdamar’s child-like narrator seems to possess the qualities of a physiognomist, a characteristic that Benjamin ascribes to collectors. The visualizations of the text thus belong at one and the same time to “the tradition of the illustrated alphabet, to Arabic calligraphy and poetry and to the physiognomic skills of the collector herself” (Brandt 306). Entranced by the imaginative potential of images, the narrator is dragged

⁷ See *Karawanserei* p.18

temporally back into a mythical and authentic past, perceived within a Western context as “Oriental.”

To reinforce the corporeality and the strength of the graphic sign of the texts, the reverse also seems to work: not only do the letters become characters in the story, but people’s features are compared to them. Brandt also ascribes this capacity to transform persons into letters to that childlike nature of the collector previously discussed: “[f]or children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways” (Benjamin 61). One day, looking at Abdullah’s face, she is surprised that it appears first as an angry letter: “Ibni Abdullahs Gesicht sah wie ein zorniger Buchstabe aus, der seine Augenbraue hochgezogen hatte” (MZ 19), and later as a “bettelnden Buchstaben, der auf Knien läuft“ (MZ 23). When she wants to describe her incapacity for speaking, she pictures her hands lying down as if they were some letters with no language: “Meine Hände lagen wie Buchstaben ohne Zunge auf meinen Knien” (MZ 24). The narrator openly talks about her physical relationship to words and writing, describes herself lying on the rug next to letters and texts, and participates in their conversation as they speak to each other, continuously and with different voices: “die Schriften lagen auf dem Teppich, ich legte mich neben sie, die Schriften sprachen miteinander ohne Pause mit verschiedenen Stimmen” (MZ 26). Continuing the personification of the letters, she later tells the reader how the texts looked her in the eyes and how she looked in their eyes, too: “Ich saß da, schaue in die Augen von Schriften, die Schriften schauen in meine Augen” (MZ 40). Once again, an image that privileges the role of sight is immersed within a dream-like dimension in which the protagonist is involved in an imaginary connection via the eye with some Arabic letters. Through an intense sense of imagination, like that of children,

the narrator enters a magic world in which German occupies the most important position, as it is the fundamental medium for rediscovering Turkish and learning Arabic. Since the beginning of her Arabic classes in Germany, she is aware that speaking German with an expert of Middle Eastern Studies is rude, yet she has to acknowledge that German remains for now the only common language between the two (MZ 15). Her recognition of the communicative value of German in this delicate moment automatically inserts her personal identity search for her Turkish origins within the German literary tradition. The language functions here as a palimpsest, that, as Iain Chambers says, “emphasizes the power of impurity” (75). Gradually unveiling all of the complicated sides of this identity, language embraces history, memory and geography, and functions as a means of estrangement as well as a tool of understanding. Özdamar’s texts become a fertile ground in which her experiences take shape and questions related to identity and cross-cultural interactions mingle with linguistic experimentation and a new sensitivity for language.

In the second story the clash between Eastern and Western cultures is felt even more deeply. By further exploring the desire of the narrator to go back to her origins, this story unveils how little experience the narrator has of the culture she wants to possess. Because of her internal fragmentation and her incapacity to find herself at home, either in Germany or in the new “fragmented” Turkey, she seems to be forced to look into an even more ancient and authentic time in which she hopes to find traces of herself. The situation is complicated further when, during her private lessons, the narrator falls in love with her teacher, who somewhat resembles the figure of her grandfather. The Arabic teacher becomes then the symbol of a tradition and of a patriarchal system that has now been lost, so that rather than real love, the narrator’s feelings mirror her desire to return to the past.

As anticipated at the beginning, the stories in “Mutterzunge” also call into question gender issues related to migration. If in “Mutterzunge” the narrator wants to reconnect to her grandfather in order to go back to her mother, here the figure of the teacher is used by the narrator as a detour to arrive at the mother tongue. By reaching her own language through the masculine, the narrator ultimately postulates that the hybrid Turkish language is somehow feminine, establishing a connection between femininity and nation, which will later emerge also in the novel *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*. In this novel in fact, the feminine figures are directly charged with preserving the memory and the tradition of the past through storytelling.

The narrator’s hybrid and multifaceted identity is reinforced by the contrast between her acquired emancipation and the image of the Islamic woman she is trying to become. “Ich schämte mich vor meinen offenen Haaren, vor meiner nackten Haut, ich dachte alle Farben vom Schlafzimmer schreien auch aus Scham“ (MZ 42). Muslim culture appears to her as a rigid culture and collides with the independence in which she has lived until now. The prospect of a restricted freedom, however, does not result in making her change her mind, but rather in making her feel ashamed of her own physical appearance because acting as a typical Western woman is no longer a sign of independence but of shame. As she struggles with her different selves, even the teacher notices her multiplicity of identities and tells her that she is one and ten women at the same time: “Manchmal bist du eine Frau wie eine Feder, so leicht, manchmal bist du zehn Frauen zusammen“ (MZ 43).

If on the one hand she appears as a typical Western woman, on the other she starts feeling the strong necessity to obey her teacher and his beliefs. She shows him deference

and patience, which is considered one of the highest virtues of a woman in the Islamic world. Patience is a recurring theme in Özdamar's texts and it is presented here through a fairy tale inserted within the main narration. The fairy tale of the "Geduldstein" ("the patience stone") — starting with "Es war einmal , es war keinmal" (33), another typical Turkish saying, as Seyhan informs us — serves to highlight the meaning and the importance of patience within Islamic culture. At the same time the form of storytelling with which the fairy tale is introduced intervenes to complicate the main structure of the story and brings the reader directly into a Middle Eastern world by way of narration. The fact that she has listened to her grandmother tell this fairy tale also points out the abovementioned importance of the feminine figures in the transmission of culture and tradition and will become even more evident in the novel.

It is once again a special bond with language that shapes the relationship between the narrator and her teacher. Learning Arabic becomes a physical experience which involves both her mind and body. When Abdullah leaves to go to Arabia, and she realizes that she cannot go along, she decides to wait for him. Confined in a room separated from Abdullah's room by a curtain — in which most of the scholarship on Özdamar sees the Berlin wall — she waits for the symbolic number of forty days for his return: "Ich war genau vierzig Tage im Schriftzimmer" (MZ 44). As Brandt points out, forty has a high symbolic value in the text. Not only it is the period that emblematically spans the generation between the mother tongue and the grandfather (303), but it is also a number that generally in Judaism, Christianity and Islam represents privation (312).⁸ In this way, As Bird underlines, the wait in Abdullah's room acquires a sort of religious value, yet at

⁸ Brandt also informs us that: "In the Koran, forty is used five times: II 48, V 29, VII 137, X 17, and XLVI 114. In Arabic numerology, which is known as Abjad, the Arabic letter Meem, the equivalent to the letter "M" in English, is the first letter of the name of the Prophet Muhammad and has the value of forty" (312).

the same time it turns out to become a sort of double temptation for both (166). Since learning is supposed to be only a spiritual experience, her corporeal and emotional involvement with language distracts him and almost becomes a physical temptation. Unable to concentrate on his work, he asks her to leave. At the same time, the Arabic experience in Abdullah's apartment turns out to be a temptation also for her. The carpeted room in which the teacher usually welcomes the students resembles a mosque to her and pulls her even more towards a culture to which she wishes to belong. While according to Bird, the narrator's desire towards her teacher "translates her desire to enter the Arabic culture and her roots" (161), I propose that there remains a fundamental tension between the two worlds, and that the Arabic roots are seen by the narrator only as an intermediate step in order to go back to her original culture. Her desire to be part of that culture and to almost possess it despite her actual foreignness to it reveals a new type of nostalgia not directed towards a specific geographical space, but rather towards a pure moment in historical time.

I believe that the highly poetic and symbolic language of these texts does not allow the reader to interpret these stories in a univocal way; it ultimately remains in doubt whether she prefers one culture or the other. Brandt suggests the possibility of an interesting conciliatory reading of the text, in light of the conclusion of the second story. As language is the means to stage the collision of cultures, so it is the language again, writes Brandt, that could in the end offer a sort of resolution. Among the Turkish words that the narrator re-collects, there is also *Ruh*. *Ruh* means soul in Turkish. *Ruh* is also an Arabic loan-word, which remained in the Turkish language. The acoustic similarity with the German word "Ruhe" is clear to the narrator, who, regardless of the different

meanings of the words, seems to reconcile the three languages in this exact moment and in this sound: “*Ruh. Ruh* heißt Seele, sagte ich zu dem Mädchen. Seele heißt *Ruh*, sagte sie” (MZ 48). As Brandt points out, however, this is “what a linguist would consider a ‘false friend’” (307) since, despite a similar pronunciation, the words have different meanings. It also presupposes a somewhat highly improbable knowledge on the part of the average German reader of the Arabic origin of this Turkish word — which, as Brandt herself points out, is not explicitly indicated by the author. Moreover, the German word “Ruh(e)” as a verb with the meaning of “rest,” is only one of the several meanings.⁹ Within this very limited semantic field, Brandt establishes the connection among the three languages. Regardless of the knowledge or not of the multiple meanings and the origins of this word, this conclusion clearly reconciles only apparently these cultures. In the analyses of the following story, it will be clear that the author continues to show the complex sides of an identity at border crossing through her writing and through an ambivalent characterization of her narrators and characters. Despite the physical involvement in the process of learning Arabic language, an actual physical return to her origins or the re-acquisitions of a lost identity clearly does not take place at the end of the story. We are facing a new type of experience, one in which language has reached a new level of signification and a higher degree of symbolism. By using such powerful language, Özdamar elevates her experience of migration in an allegoric experience and transcribes her desired homecoming through the poetics of her metaphorical language. Homi Bhabha’s suggestion, that we look at migration itself as a metaphor, appears here particularly appropriate: “To think of migration as metaphor

⁹ Generally the word “Ruhe” means peace, but it also has a negative connotation. For example in Goethe’s “*Wanderers Nachtlied*”, where the word “Ruhe” has a disquieting meaning, suggesting death.

suggests that the very language of the novel, its form and rhetoric, must be open to meanings that are ambivalent, doubling and dissembling. Metaphor produces hybrid realities by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought” (212). Thus, keeping in mind that traditional interpretations do not apply in Özdamar’s texts, a reading of the following story will only reinforce the idea that both language and content continue to work in multiple directions as to mirror the constant transformations taking place with and within her identity.

1.3 *Karagöz in Almania*: A Modern Fairy Tale

The third story of Özdamar’s collection, *Karagöz in Almania*, engages primarily with identities before and during the actual process of migration. In this story, Özdamar continues to play with language in a creative way and aims to mirror the unique linguistic experience of identities at the borders in order to ultimately demonstrate that they are just victims of the process of immigration. As anticipated in the first two stories, the experimental use of the German language provokes a destabilization of the reader’s position, who now faces new structures of the language which nearly alienates him/her. The linguistic sign starts losing its conventional meaning and the reading of the text provokes an almost uncanny feeling in the German reader, who takes part in a process of linguistic de-familiarization. This unruly and sometimes faulty language of Özdamar’s and the sudden use of Turkish or Arabic words in the middle of the text become in this third story the mirror of the immigrants’ experience of learning a new language. Özdamar clearly aims to create a similar effect of dislocation and disorientation that she herself probably experienced when she arrived in Germany. The act of crossing the border

becomes crucial here since the figures that the author describes develop a particular sensitivity for languages, a sort of unique code of communication that is understandable only by those who undergo the same experience. As Wierschke underlines: “Hier hat sich eine ganz eigene, nur Schicksalsgenossen verständliche Sprache entwickelt, eine Synthese, die weder für Muttersprachler der einen noch der anderen Sprache zu verstehen ist, sondern nur von Menschen, die zwischen beiden Sprachen und Kulturen leben“ (181). The scholar rightly points out that many sentences are short, fragmentary and frequently not connected with each other, but are instead intended to merely transmit some information. At times entire paragraphs are written in Turkish, interrupted here and there by German words pertaining to the field of bureaucracy and to experiences and concepts unknown before immigration to Germany:

Sonra Dolmetscher geldi. Meisterle konustu. Bu Lohn steuer kaybetmis dedi. Finanzamt cok fena dedi. Lohnsteuer yok. Bombok Kindergeld falan alamazin. Yok. Aufenthalt day ok. Fremdpolizei vermiyor Wohnungsamt day ok diyor. Arbeitsamt da Erlaubnis vermedi. Ben oglani Berufsschule ye Goenderiyorum. Cok Scheisse bu. Sen krankami ciktin. (MZ 77)

The complete lack of understanding here, except for a couple of words, provokes a high sense of alienation in a German reader who does not speak Turkish. Code switching works here not only as a linguistic exercise for the author, but primarily, as an example of that new language born from the clash between two cultures.

The incipit, “Es war einmal ein Dorf” (MZ, 49), immediately sets the tone of a fairy tale, a structure of narration that, as we have seen, had already been anticipated in the second story of *Mutterzunge*. The entire story becomes a fairy tale where the magic mixes again with elements from reality. The story presents a series of elements that the Russian linguist and anthropologist Vladimir Propp categorized as typical in the structure of a fairy tale: an unfair situation, the need to move and travel, the entrance into a new

realm, the meeting with the enemy and speaking animals, and finally a return home. Moreover, with the introduction of a dream at the very beginning of the story, the structure of narration and the difficulties in discerning what is real and what is not are even further complicated. By using the form of a fairy tale within a context of migration, Özdamar undermines this literary genre and mixes it with realistic, historical elements, so that we can define *Karagöz in Alamania* a modern fairy tale of migration to Germany.

The protagonist, the Turkish farmer Karagöz, decides to go to Germany in search of a job and leaves his pregnant wife in a small town in Anatolia. According to Propp's general schema of a fairy tale, the departure of the protagonist marks the rupture of the initial balance, and from now on everything revolves around the attempt to restore the original situation. The departure is preceded by a dream of the farmer's wife, in which she imagines a bizarre dialogue between her husband's father and the owner of an apple tree. Through the dream Özdamar not only anticipates the protagonist's immigration to Germany, but most importantly she challenges the structure of the story even further, by introducing new linguistic forms of speaking. In fact, when the owner of the apple tree — from whom her husband is stealing apples — talks to Karagöz's father asking for Karagöz to work for him, the two men do not discuss the business directly, but by means of certain sayings: "Die beiden sprachen über dieses Geschäft nicht direkt, sondern in Sprichwörtern." (MZ 50). The "dialogue" goes on for an entire page, until, as Seyhan points out, Karagöz's father is forced to give up "not only because the latter wields the power of money but also because the father runs out of fitting proverbs and the other man does not" (110).

As in a traditional fairy tale, the characters are defined in a fairly rigid and fixed way and are nearly reduced to prototypes. Wierschke points out that we have the *Gastarbeiter* Karagöz, his wife, as the typical Turkish woman financially dependent on him and constantly pregnant, the ignorant farmer of the town, and finally a speaking animal, who symbolizes the intellectual (205). The introduction of a speaking donkey inserts the story within a frame of magic and imagination, while the rhymes and moral sayings that it pronounces quote Marx and Socrates and thus link the story indelibly to a Western tradition of thought. As they journey starts, the farmer and the donkey begin to sing, but realize that the way to Germany is long. The donkey does not want to walk any more and in order to alleviate the long distance, the farmer suggests that they tell each other stories, and carry each other alternatively. The idea of telling stories in order to kill time is not new in literature. As the two start rhyming, “[s]ie kriegten große Lust und reimten und reimten, und steigerten sich so, daß sie gar nicht merkten, daß sie von zwei Musikern mit Flöte und Geige begleitet wurden” (MZ 56). While Özdamar is clearly blending fairy tales and stories from various origins, it appears that her knowledge and fascination with different literary genres spans from Eastern to Western culture. The dimension of magic is further reinforced when a few pages later a new additional magic element is introduced by a rather unreal promise: “Hast du nicht gehört? Es regnet in Deutschland Perlen. Eine Perle davon hat ins Ohr von dem Onkel des Bauern geregnet, und der Bauer geht nach Alamania Perlen sammeln” (MZ 57).

It is clear that through linguistic experimentations, code switching and mix of narrative forms, Özdamar engages in new and unique forms of expression that ultimately undermine the genre of the fairy tale. Looking at the origin of this story will support the

idea that defining it only as a fairy tale would be too reductive and that we are, in reality, dealing with a multiplicity of genres. Seyhan informs us that Özdamar had originally written “Karagöz in Alamania” as a theater play in 1982, which was staged at the Frankfurter *Schauspielhaus* in 1986. In turn, Özdamar based the play on a letter written by a *Gastarbeiter* who had permanently returned to Turkey. Finally, its title refers to a traditional Turkish shadow play, usually called *Karagöz*, that takes the name from the main character, a “comic fast-talking smart aleck who constantly ridicules his sidekick” (Seyhan 111-112). The story has also maintained in the prose form some of the most characteristic elements of a play. While some of the descriptions of the characters recall stage directions, the interchange of scenes determined by the expression “Es wurde dunkel, es wurde hell” resembles a typical closure, almost the curtain fall in a theater at the end of each act. This sentence, which recurs several times in the course of the story, however, only visually separates the different scenes. The setting of some of the scenes remains unclear. In addition, the change of place is often very difficult to determine, since the sequence of departures and returns occur so many times in the text. Crossing the borders multiple times provokes a heightened sense of alienation in the readers who ultimately lose track of the actual location of the characters. Wierschke argues that at the end, the readers are no longer sure where the protagonists are, and they are finally left with the impression of “Hin- und Hergerissenheit” or “ein Nirgendwosein in Bewegung, im Dazwischensein” (203).

The experience of migration still has for Özdamar a negative connotation that she connects with an idea of loss and psychological disruption. Within this context, the image of the door on the border to Germany reinforces symbolically the idea of a split, by

figuratively representing the division between the two countries. At the same time, the concrete geography of the two worlds, the Western one of the possibilities and the Eastern one of poverty, is once again masked behind the elements of the magic and the unreal. As crossing the “Deutschland Tür” represents the border to another culture, it also represents the entrance into a new world in which the traces of the old one are brought along. The desire to go back to the lost origin pursued very strongly by the narrator in the first two stories returns in the figures of the Turkish farmer and his wife. While, however, the real person that inspired Özdamar’s story returned to Turkey, here, as in “Mutterzunge” and “Grossvaterzunge,” a final return will not take place. Neither Karagöz nor his wife in the end find any happiness in life, and Karagöz is destined to a perpetual move back and forth.

The use of irony, common in Özdamar’s narration, reaches an apex in this story, not only through the characterization of the protagonists, which enables Özdamar to undermine the prejudices against Turkish people in Germany, but also through the invention of the ‘Handbuch für Gastarbeiter.’ On the way to Germany, Karagöz receives the “guidelines for the guest worker,” a sort of survival tool in the foreign country:

Das war ein Buch, das die türkische Arbeitsvermittlung für die nach Alamania gehenden Arbeiter geschrieben hatte. Es heißt: Ein Handbuch für Gastarbeiter, die in der Fremde arbeiten gehen. Drinnen stand: »Lieber Bruder Arbeiter! Die Toiletten in Europa sind anders als bei uns: wie ein Stuhl. Ihr sollt nicht darauf stehen, ihr sollt euch unbedingt darauf setzen. Für die Sauberkeit benutzt man nicht Wasser, Blätter, Erde, oder Stein, sondern ganz feines Toilettenpapier. (MZ 65)

Details like this one contribute to the irony of the text, making a caricature of reality and of the Western world. Here Germany and the Western way of living are presented as ridiculous and bizarre, while the stay in Germany is already foreseen as an experience out of the ordinary. By now, irony, mix of genres and code switching have completely

destabilized the typical vision of migration, and provoked a heightened sense of alienation in the reader. Left without any familiar structure to grasp, the readers, like the characters, now experience the disruptions of migration.

1.4 Restoring the Past through Childish Eyes. *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*

*Tanto tiempo sin verla casa mia,
mi cuna, mi hondo nido de la huerta.
"Soledad"*¹⁰

It may be argued that the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity [...] but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of this present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere'.
Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 12

Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei is a semi-autobiographical novel published in 1992, in which Özdamar retraces the past of a young girl in Turkey from the moments which precede her birth until her decision to move to Germany. By setting the story entirely in Turkey, Özdamar automatically restores a link to that lost past only evoked in "Mutterzunge". The author herself in an interview with Annette Wierschke declares that in the novel: "wollte ich mich vielleicht in diesem schon sehr schnellen Rythmus an einen schon vergangenen erinnern, der sich aber auch schon bereits geändert hat" (257). The desire to recuperate something that has gone lost because of the intense rhythm of life that carries events away with it seems to be what motivates Özdamar to re-establish the bond to the past.

¹⁰ "It's been such a long time since I have seen you my home, my crib, my intimate garden nest". Soledad is sung by the group Haciendo Punto en Otro Son, quoted in G. Anzaldúa p. 775.

In this novel, which has the apparent structure of a *Bildungsroman*, “findet die Erzähltradition des Orients Eingang in den Westen” (Wierschke 255). The author, however, does not look back at her roots with nostalgia, but with the new perspective of someone who, from her position in between two cultures, is capable of seeing all the contradictions and the conflicts within a nation. The very title of the novel suggests the idea of a constantly changing life spent on a perennial journey. As Seyhan writes: “Caravansaries were large inns built around courtyards to accommodate caravans traveling on the long commerce routes through the Middle East and Asia” (142). The connection to Özdamar’s own life and to that of many Turks is clearly alluded to with this image. What makes the story even more authentic is the “innocent voice of a child narrator” (Seyhan 143) through which the novel explores the contradictory and complex history of a land, in order to renovate its memory for that generation of Turks now living in Germany. By revisiting the past of Turkey via the German language and through the eyes of a Turkish child, Özdamar creates an interesting metaphorical novel which challenges notions of national and cultural memory. Moreover, by focusing mainly on private memory belonging to her family, the narrator reduces the return to the past to an intimate dimension. Finally, by choosing storytelling as the principle medium for the exchange of information, Özdamar shifts the focus from written words to language as an oral medium.

In her detailed analysis of the text, Bird highlights the “impressionistic” character of the novel, in which the events occur one after the other without a link, as they are evoked according to “their value and interest at that point” (184). The constant switching of scenes — as in the story of Karagöz and a clear legacy of Özdamar’s experience in

theater — reinforces the effect of spontaneity and suggests the idea of an apparent a plotless novel. In particular, the narration takes on the form of storytelling and is determined by what the young narrator sees and hears around her. The form of storytelling becomes a fundamental moment in recounting the life of the family, as it represents the exchange of “a shared experience” (Bird 201). In the course of the novel people entertain each other with stories and anecdotes and it is precisely through the combination and the alternation of all the different stories narrated that the texture of the novel gradually takes shape.

The idea of the written text as a woven texture clearly belongs to the Western literary tradition. This notion is however here interestingly inserted within a new frame, which involves its visual representation in the image of the Grandfather's beard. During a trip from Istanbul to Anatolia, the young narrator of the novel is entertained by her grandfather who starts telling the chronicle of his life and that of the Ottoman Empire, while he is weaving his growing beard into a carpet: “Sein unrasieter Bart wuchs aus seinem Gesicht, und der Bart fing an, einen Teppich zu weben” (K 38). The popular image of a character with a long beard establishes once again a connection with the world of fairy tales, where the long beard usually indicates a long period of time that a character is forced to wait. At the same time, this image is fused with another image especially emblematic in the oriental tales, the magic carpet (Seyhan 143). In this carpet, the Grandfather weaves the main events that characterize his life from the moment he left the Caucasus until the moment he became a farmer in Anatolia. He tells about his five wives and children, his participation in the First World War and the following period that he spent as a bandit. As Bird also suggests, real events are fictionalized and “history is

shrunk into caricature” (202). The fairy tale elements clearly function to undermine the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and to fuse different literary traditions with each other.

By choosing storytelling as her prime mode of narration for her characters, Özdamar negates Benjamin’s statement that in modernity “the art of storytelling is coming to an end” (83). With *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*, Özdamar demonstrates the importance of what is transmitted orally by the grandparents, the parents, or the family members. Thus, while Benjamin laments the disappearance of people capable of telling “a tale properly” (83) and a fundamental incapacity to exchange experiences, Özdamar demonstrates just the opposite with her novel. By presenting a text in which every single experience, even the smallest one, occupies a fundamental position, she contradicts Benjamin’s idea that experience in modern time “has fallen in value” (83-84). Moreover, in the portrayal of her characters Özdamar shows how they have something of both archaic types of the storyteller: “people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions” (84). Benjamin sees the end of storytelling coinciding with the rise of the novel in the modern times, which “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it” (87) and considers “the solitary individual” as the birthplace of the novel. (87) By combining both forms of novel and storytelling via a multiplicity of voices that recount stories, legends and anecdotes, Özdamar’s work does not only challenge Benjamin’s idea of the disappearance of storytelling, but she also undermines his idea of the novel. Following the real art of storytelling, which keeps “a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (89), it does not matter if what these characters narrate is unclear or disconnected.

While supporting the general idea of the importance of storytelling, it is mainly to the women that Seyhan entrusts the power and the task of transmitting stories and experiences. Underlining the greater importance of the narrator and of the other feminine characters within the novel, Seyhan argues that the “transmission of culture to children in the form of narratives (folktales, fairytales, or family anecdotes)” is part of women’s life. Thus, women are seen by her as the “managers of the ‘iconotheque of family memory’, [...] firmly committed to preserving the art of storytelling” (144) and in this way they are also capable of maintaining cultural memory and fighting against oblivion. It is immediately clear when reading that some of the most fascinating stories are those told by the women, in particular by the grandmother Ayse. As Bird points out, her stories deal with the themes of patience and marriage, topics that, according to the critic, are in general essentially related to a feminine world. Once again Özdamar discusses the theme of patience, and she shows not only how much this story is actually embedded within a Muslim cultural tradition, but how it is simultaneously connected with her other literary works. As a recurrent topic in her narratives, patience becomes a fundamental notion within Özdamar’s texts — the fairy tale of the “Geduldstein” is repeated in this text — constantly reminding the reader of the virtue expected from Muslim women. At the same time however, by using stories in the form of fairy tales or legends and always dealing with magic or superstition, Özdamar contaminates the Islamic religious world (Bird 202). Bird observes that while women’s stories seem to be linked more to magic and superstition, men’s narratives in Özdamar deal with real events relating to the history of Turkey. Either way, it is evident that “history represented as oral story rather than official discourse allows for the affirmation of community” (202).

Through an apparent plotless form of the novel, Özdamar perfectly reproduces the effect of an oral narration. While most of the events narrated relate to a specific historical period, they pertain to very private and personal moments. The environments depicted describe familiar and domestic spaces in which the narrator and her family share stories, exchange opinions and recount life experiences. By preferring a style that more closely resembles oral expression, rather than following rigid rules of a written text, and by giving voice to different characters along the story, Özdamar emphasizes the “importance of the individual in constructing their version of events” (Bird 202). Assigning validity to storytelling, both masculine and feminine, signifies that in this novel, it is precisely through this medium “that a sense of Turkish identity is asserted” in all its ambivalence and contradictions. (Bird 202-3) After all, in an interview Özdamar herself defined her idea of ‘culture’ with these words: “das waren die Menschen [...] die das Leben mitteilen wollten, die erzählt haben, was sie erlebt haben” (Wierschke, 162).

The idea that Turkish identity is formed by the orally exchanged stories also reduces the idea of the nation to a personal dimension and consequently forces us to reshape the idea of homecoming as perceived by the author. By giving importance to the singular experiences of the protagonists, the author’s attempt to go back to any origins and recreate the lost dimension is now linked to private memories and familiar places. If in “Mutterzunge” the idea of homeland was associated with a pure and authentic dimension, with this novel Özdamar reconnects with Turkey on a concrete and domestic level. Despite the historical references, which no doubt help the readers contextualize the story, the homeland that the narrator reconstructs pertains to a personal sphere, made of familiar figures, relatives and friends. Here again I see a connection to Anzaldúa’s image

of the *mestiza*, described as she returns to the “tierra natal” or birthplace (773).

Anzaldúa’s memories of the childhood past revives when she sees again all the places she has missed during her absence. They are all the domestic spaces of her family, populated by garden animals, and full of the smell of the *tamales* and of the perfume of the roses in her mother’s back yard:

Again I see the four of us kids getting off the school bus, changing into our work clothes, walking into the field with Papí and Mamí [...] Below our feet, under the earth lie the watermelon seeds [...] We water them and hoe them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*. (775)

Like Anzaldúa’s, Özdamar’s narrator also restores to her novel a domesticity that has gone lost. The memories that Özdamar recollects recall well-known domestic spaces, in which smells of clean laundry mix with odors of olives and fruit. While the narrator again sees the various homes in which she lived, the school that she attended, the neighborhoods in which she spent time, the idea of the land that she remembers takes form as an intimate space that keeps the memory of her family and of her loved ones.

Like the *Chicana* poet, Özdamar’s memories are tied to the cyclic experiences of life. Death and birth are constantly associated in Özdamar’s novel, as a reminder of the most primal experiences of life. Not only, as Bird notes, “the narrator herself is left in a freshly dug grave as a baby, to let Allah decide if she is to live or die” (204). When she is older, the grandmother starts listing the signs that might announce death:

»Ja«, sagte Großmutter Ayşe, und zählte auf, wie der Tod sagt, daß er kommen wird:
Wenn zu Hause die Türen quietschen.
Wenn zu Hause das Holz am Boden knarrt.
Wenn ein Hund gegen eine Tür heult. (K 87)

Another time, while visiting the mausoleum of Atatürk, the young narrator notices how much life is connected with death: “Jeder sieht jeden, und die Schatten von den

Friedhofsbäumen verbinden die Lebenden mit den Toten” (K 316). However, as Bird notes, when life is absent, then death becomes even more frightening for the narrator: “Die Gasse ist still, so still, daß ich den Tod nicht mehr liebe, nicht mehr mit ihm spiele” (K 121). With time, the narrator gets used to dealing with death, up to the point that the deaths are remembered as if they were part of everyday life. The monotonous rhythm of the prayers for the dead aim to maintain the memory of them in the minds of those who are still alive, and “bring together the disparate people she has met or of whom she has heard” (205-206). Özdamar herself declares in an interview: “[I]ch wollte auch die Toten reden lassen in meinem Roman” (Wierschke 255).

Creating a written text out of storytelling has an important and fundamental consequence in Özdamar’s style of writing, which becomes a “highly visual and metaphorical language” capable of recreating the effect of oral narration (Seyhan 142). Voices, sounds, and noises occupy a fundamental place in this novel and the use of a very colloquial style and of words of everyday life very easily capture the reader’s attention. The repetitions, in particular, put emphasis on the sounds more than on the real meaning of the words. As with the expression “Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,” we are left with a sound that is incomprehensible for someone who is unfamiliar with a Middle Eastern world and yet aware, at the same time, that the word is more than just a sound and that it holds some fundamental meaning. Through some very personal and, at times curious episodes recounted by the narrator, we realize the importance of this expression within Turkish and Arabic cultures. By remembering the time in which she first heard this expression, learnt it and repeated it, the narrator also confesses how it completely lacked in meaning for her for a very long time. And while this rather long and almost unpronounceable word

ritually intoned at Muslim religious ceremonies, “Bismillahirrahmanirrahim,” is repeated by the narrator an incredible number of times and is used on the most disparate occasions,¹¹ the readers start acquiring a certain familiarity with it, while the narrator remembers the episodes in which this expression turned out to be surprisingly useful for her:

Diese Bismillahirahmanirrahim haben mir im Leben zweimal geholfen, einmal, leise Bismillahirahmanirrahim, beim zweiten Mal lauter Bismillahirahmanirrahim. Leise Bismillahirahmanirrahim: In der achten Klasse machte unsere Biologielehrerin eine schriftliche Prüfung. Oben auf dem Prüfungspapier über die Fragen habe ich Bismillahirahmanirrahim geschrieben. Ich wußte nicht viele Antworten auf die Fragen. Die Lehrerin zog aus ihrer Mappe die Papiere und erzählte laut, daß sie mir eine gute Note gegeben hat, wegen dieses Bismillahirahmanirrahim. (K 56-57)

The meaning of the word remains obscure until she discovers it in a book: “Dann habe ich im Buch geguckt, was Bismillahirahmanirrahim heißt: Im Namen Gottes, oder im Namen Allahs, der schützt und verbirgt” (K 58).

Like this expression, other words, sentences or phrases in Turkish or Arabic are often inserted within the text or in the middle of other sentences. Bird rightly points out that it does not matter if the meaning of the word repeated is understood, as “the ignorance of literal meaning does, of course, apply to most readers. But by the time the prayer has been repeated six times as intervals throughout the book, these sounds [...] become gradually familiar even to readers unfamiliar with Turkish and Arabic” (188). Sometimes the repetition of sounds, words, phrases, or syntactical structures includes entire paragraphs or even pages. Sometimes the repetitions include just onomatopoeic sounds, for example; “Yelele yelelele yelelelelelelelelelele. Aaahhh, yelelelele” (K 128), or “Hehehehehehehehehe” (K 97), or “tätärä tätärä tist tat tist tat tist tat tätärä”

¹¹ Bird notes that at some point the narrator repeats the word over forty times in only three pages. (187)

(174), that also visually catch the reader's attention. Here Özdamar is interested in recreating the effect of the event by producing an onomatopoeic sound, while, at the same time, she also creates a visual effect on the page. If in *Mutterzunge* Turkish words were compared to existing objects, animals or things, here the written repetition of the onomatopoeic sounds and letters does not resemble anything, but furthers a disruption of the entire page, creating unfamiliar visual effects.

A different example of these endless repetitions is represented by one of her prayers in which she lists the soldiers by number because she does not know their names:

Dann kamen die vier Millionen Soldaten. Für den ersten toten Soldaten, für den zweiten toten Soldaten, für den dritten toten Soldaten, für den vierten toten Soldaten [...] für den neunundsiebzigsten toten Soldaten ...[...] für den achtundachtzigsten toten Soldaten, für den neunundachtzigsten toten Soldaten, für den neunzigsten toten Soldaten, für den einundneunzigsten toten Soldaten, für den zweiundneunzigsten toten Soldaten [...] für den hundertdreißigsten toten Soldaten. (K 199-202)

I here report a rather long excerpt, with the precise intention of reproducing, in a smaller way, the effect of boredom that passages like this one produce in the reader.

While, as Bird notes, the lists of soldiers become longer and longer as she becomes older (206), it is hard to resist the temptation to jump to the end of the paragraph or page.

Along Bird's argument, Brandt adds that since the soldiers are listed not by their names but by their number, these prayers end up having a sort of soporific effect on the narrator so that "remembering the dead in this way then quickly results, like the counting of sheep, in drifting off to sleep, and in the morning, the narrator no longer remembers at which soldier she stopped" (302). While the narrator's prayers almost become exasperating repetitions, they clearly remind us of the ritualistic aspect of Islamic prayers, recalling also the idea of patience, and showing how much the religious aspect is still part of everyday life.

No matter how well the narrator remembers, or how precisely the reader actually reads, these long lists ultimately serve the narrator to insist on the importance of memory versus forgetting (Bird 204). The singular recounting of each one of the soldiers, in fact, works as a powerful tool in order to remember to preserve the memory of each one of them and give them value. Death, as pointed out earlier, occupies a fundamental position in this novel, and by exercising her memory Özdamar also guarantees the remembrance of those who were part of history. Recognizing memory as “the epic faculty par excellence,” Benjamin points out the importance of remembering on the part of the listener when hearing a story (97). As an active agent who later has the task of reproducing the story, the listener is linked to the storyteller through memory, which, according to Benjamin, creates a sort of web that ultimately connects all the stories together: “one ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop” (98). Thus, if “memory creates the chain of tradition” (Seyhan 42) and “the story is the keeper of memory” (42), I argue that Özdamar’s use of the repetition is voluntarily aimed at exercising the listener’s — and by extension the reader’s — memory. Through the use of storytelling, memory becomes crucial in order to remember and share stories with the others in the future.

Remembering the deaths is also a very strong experience that links a person to his/her land. By attempting to maintain a close link to the people who were part of it, Özdamar entertains the impossible project of remembering all of them. This project is complicated by the fact that the characters are portrayed as hybrid identities in their

appearance and personality. A persuasive example can be, as Wierschke points out, the description of the father:

Also, mein Vater war für meine Mutter Müteahhit, für meine Großmutter Assistant eines arbeitslosen Meisters, für mich war der Mustafa der Käufer meines Fastentages [...] Für meinen kleinen Bruder Orhan war Mustafa der Mann mit Schnurrbart, für mein Bruder Ali war der Mustafa der Mann, vor dem er sich manchmal verstecken mußte. (K 63)

The various identities that define the father symbolically seem to represent the hybridity that characterizes Turkey itself as a country. The narrator herself acquires a variety of identities through her continual migration from one part of Turkey to another, witnessed in particular by the changes in her language. Depending on the place in which she is or has been, she takes on a different dialect and she is defined according to the one that she speaks in a certain moment. When she arrives in Istanbul directly from Anatolia, she is called by one of her teachers as a "Kurdin aus Anatolien mit einem Schwanz am Arsch" (K 68), a sentence that not only offends the narrator, but at the same time underlines the multiethnic nature of Turkey, precisely defined by her grandmother with these words: "Das ist unser Land [...] Wir sind ein an Menschen reiches Land, aber ein armes Land" (K 157). After spending the summer in the small town in Anatolia, the narrator comes back speaking dialect and forces her mother, who is concerned with the consequences of not speaking proper Turkish, to take severe action against her. While these examples show that "mit dieser Sprachveränderung vollzieht sich auch die gewünschte Identitätsveränderung [...] Menschen haben mehr als eine Persönlichkeit, sie spielen verschiedene, manchmal im Konflikt stehende soziale Rollen" (Wierschke 185-186).

Ultimately the accents presented through the characters and their stories serve the author to undermine the traditional image of Turkey as a mere agricultural land, obsolete

and ethnically homogeneous. At the same time, by writing the novel in German, the Western world, and Germany in particular, is asked to revise its idea of Turkey (Wierschke 188). As shown the different literary genres fused together do not allow readers to define Özdamar's production in a uniform way. As a product of a life spent at border crossings, her texts demonstrate that, as Iain Chambers observes, "our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as 'origins' or signs of 'authenticity' capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters" (19). The hybridization of the forms echoing the hybridity of the author's identity shows that "what we have inherited — as culture, as history, as language, as tradition, as a sense of identity — is not destroyed but taken apart, opened up to questioning, rewriting and re-routing" (Chambers 24). Özdamar's literary production, a result of both cultures in which she lives, represents a step forward in that idea of plurality and multiculturalism which is becoming the distinctive symbol of our current societies.

2

Italian-German literature: stories of impossible homecomings. Franco Biondi's works "Passavant's Rückkehr" and *Die Unversöhnlichen*

2.1. Introduction

Italian immigrant writers in Germany have suffered for not being recognized either by the general reading public in Germany, nor by literary critics, even more than their Turkish counterparts. This lack of interest is in part determined by the very attitude Italian writers had for a long time. In order to promote a collective emancipation and to defend the rights of the immigrants, these authors focused their works only on the *Gastarbeiterwelt*. Thought of as personal journals recounting the difficulties and the problems faced by some proletarian workers in a foreign land, the works by Italians in Germany is defined as 'too intimate,' too 'negative' and sometimes simply 'depressing' by many critics [Chiellino *Ufer*; Lüddersen]. Over thirty years since its presence in Germany,¹ the Italian community has not yet produced any real literary masterpiece (Silvia Crivella).²

There is a writer however, whose works have undeservedly been overlooked.

Both in their content and style, as well as in the writer's development through the years, Franco Biondi's texts represent an interesting viewpoint that adds yet another perspective

¹ The presence of Italians in West Germany dates back to a recruiting pact for labor signed between Germany and Italy in 1955. Historically, then, the Italian community is one of the oldest community of foreigners present in the country after 1945. After this pact, in which Carmine Chiellino sees an ancient trace of the European Community, the borders of Germany opened to other nationalities, among others, to the Turkish, who have become the largest foreign community in Germany today.

² Silvia Crivella, *Passavant's Rückkehr. Franco Biondi uno scrittore italiano di lingua tedesca*. Web link: <http://www.club.it/culture/culture2002/silvia.crivella/corpo.tx.crivella.html>

to the variegated panorama of transnational writing in Germany. Biondi's work distinguishes itself in that it goes beyond the mere autobiographical narration of the experience of immigration. His texts raise relevant and fundamental issues linked with the theme of immigration and clearly explore them on a more complicated level than what other Italian immigrant writers have done. Moreover, by unveiling multiple contradictions within an identity on the borders and depicting the difficulties of a life between two cultures, they present a new, at times very experimental language. Biondi's personal experience as a *Gastarbeiter* in Germany was — as for Özdamar — limited to an initial phase and thus becomes only the starting point for his writing.

Born in Forlì (Italy) in 1947, Franco Biondi moved to Germany in 1965. There he started working in industry, but soon after an apprenticeship as an electrician and mechanic, he decided to study. He did his *Abitur* and graduated from the university with a diploma in psychology; today he works as a family therapist. Biondi is an author of both poetry and prose; he has published collections of short stories, poems, a novella, and two novels.³ Together with his Syrian friend Rafik Schami, Franco Biondi is also known for being one of the most active members of the group of foreign intellectuals in Germany. As the author of several articles and essays promoting the activity of foreigners, and careful investigator of the conditions of immigrants,⁴ he was deeply engaged in several associations of immigrants in the seventies and early eighties.

³ Biondi, *Ode and die Fremde*, in: Ders., *Ode and die Fremde*, Avlos Verlag, Sankt Augustin 1995, pp. 59-67; Biondi, *Abschied der zerschellten Jahre. Novelle*. Neuer Malik-Verlag, Kiel 1984; Biondi, *Die Unversöhnlichen oder Im Labyrinth der Herkunft. Roman*, Heliopolis, Tübingen 1991; Biondi, *In deutschen Küchen. Roman*, Brandes und Apsel, Frankfurt a. M. 1997.

⁴ See the most famous essays: Franco Biondi/Rafik Schami, "Literatur der Betroffenheit. Bemerkungen zur Gastarbeiterliteratur." Christian Schaffernicht (Ed) *Zu Hause in der Fremde. Ein Bundesdeutsches Ausländerlesebuch*. 124-136; and Franco Biondi/Rafik Schami: "Mit Worten Brücken bauen! Bemerkungen zur Literatur von Ausländern." Rolf Meinhardt (ed), *Türken raus? Oder verteidigt den sozialen Frieden*. 66-77.

Together with Schami and other intellectuals, Biondi founded the *PoLiKunst* (*Polinationaler Literatur- und Kunstverein*), an international literary and artistic association meant to promote books and exhibits and which also wanted to be a point of reference for a multicultural exchange. In 1987 he was awarded with the *Adalbert von Chamisso Prize*, together with Gino Chiellino. This is a prize instituted specifically for foreign authors writing in German.

This chapter explores in particular two of Biondi's works, the short story "Passavant's Rückkehr" and the novel *Die Unversöhnlichen*, written at different times, but still deeply linked to each other. In these stories (one a sort of anticipation of the other), Biondi explores the issue of identity in immigration, questioning, whether, after leaving one's own country, homecoming is possible at all. He also analyzes the profound implications between language and cultural memory using the German language in a challenging way at the same time. To use Seyhan's words, his works "assume the form of memory banks where fragments of different histories and languages, traces of cultural accents, and images of lost geographies are deposited" (30). Like "compact archives of memory across borders" (Seyhan 30), Biondi's works become then both the report of a private, intimate search for identity in immigration, but also an important document of great social and aesthetic value in order to understand the experience of Italians in Germany.

In one of the few articles dedicated to the literary production of Biondi, Maria Kotsaftis rightly points out that: "literature produced by 'migrant authors' is an intriguing subject since it does not easily fit into contained literary niches" (67). If this statement, as already pointed out in the introduction, is valid for all the authors considered in this

research, it is particularly true for those works written by Franco Biondi. His works demonstrate that ultimately in our current, globalized world, the idea of integration of cultures needs to make space for a more realistic idea of a multiethnic society, in which prejudices are overcome and differences coexist simultaneously. By bringing something of his Italian heritage into his works and by mixing it with his experience in Germany, both on a cultural and on a linguistic level, his books become an interesting mirror of his experience between two cultures.

2.2 “Passavantis Rückkehr”: A Doubly Foreclosed Homecoming

In an essay dedicated to the works by immigrant writers, Carmine Chiellino points out that one of the recurrent themes in the literary production of Italian authors in Germany is homecoming. The very strong tie to the land and the culture left behind, traditionally present in the literature of immigration, is in the works by Italians in Germany accompanied also by a clear and strong desire to go back to the homeland. However, as I will show in this chapter, this attempt fails most of the time, and, as Chiellino remarks, a permanent return home is replaced by a sort of “perpetual commuting,” both geographical and emotional.⁵

I want to illustrate this idea of the impossibility of a return and of a continuous search for a place to belong through the analysis of Franco Biondi’s short story “Passavantis Rückkehr,” published in Italian first (1977), and in a longer German version later (1981). This short story narrates the life of an Italian immigrant, Passavanti, who

⁵ In: Carmine Chiellino, *La Letteratura degli scrittori italiani in Germania*, weblink http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/id_1-issue_02_08-section_6-index_pos_1.html

after living and working in Mainz for fifteen years, decides to go back home, because the expectations he had in immigration were unsuccessful. Back in Italy, however, he feels that something has changed and the reintegration into the town where he grew up becomes more difficult every day. He soon realizes that it is not only complicated but rather impossible for him to remain there and decides at the end of the story that going back to Germany is the only thing he can do. In Immacolata Amodeo's words: "Die Erzählung 'Passavanti's Rückkehr' erzählt die Geschichte einer Rückkehr, besser gesagt, die Geschichte zweier Formen von Rückkehr" (162). Biondi depicts here not only the failure of a homecoming, but also, how this failure instigates in the protagonist another return back to the country of immigration.

More than just the story of an attempt to go back and to find lost 'roots' again, what have here is the story of a series of attempts to find a place in the world, to finally realize however, that there is no place that can be called "home" any more. As I will show, the text, not only through the content but also with a rather repetitive structure, suggests a sense of circularity and repetition of events, which ultimately implies the idea of a doubly foreclosed homecoming. Moreover, the use of rhetorical figures such as paradox, chiasmus, and tautology serve the author to reiterate his incapacity to change anything in his condition. In a Freudian way, Biondi almost produces here the experience of a compulsive repetition of the traumatic event of detachment and return with the only difference that the return — in this case the physical return home — because unsuccessful, does not provoke any unconscious pleasure in the protagonist. What the protagonist does perform, however, is what Freud calls the "instinct for mastery" in this game for power. Passavanti, in fact, is not helplessly driven by events, as it may seem;

rather, he is consciously and continuously making decisions about his life. The choice of a new departure functions here for him as a new chance to actively intervene in his existence in order to recover from the experience of loss.

Between the expectations projected for the new place and the nostalgia for things left behind, the homecoming serves as an allure for the immigrant, who is unable to find a place in which to feel at ease. Along the lines of Claudio Magris' suggestion, who defines the journey in modernity as a linear journey always projected ahead, as opposed to the circular journey of ancient times (the one of Ulysses, for example)⁶ I would like to

suggest that the journey of the immigrant has not lost that circularity, but has become more similar to a spiral. In this spiral-like journey the departure almost always implies a return — or at least the attempt of a return. As Seyhan suggests: “the pull of place, the siren song of the homeland, transforms lived experience into a cherished past” (Seyhan 131). In an effort to recover what has gone lost, however, the new identity clashes with the old, and while reintegration becomes difficult, it is the very homecoming which instigates a new departure in order to overcome the feeling of displacement.

The very title of this story already hides the irony and the contradictions that lie behind the condition of the immigrant. In order to clarify this point, we need then to look more closely at the name of the protagonist. “Passavanti” evokes three different possible meanings at the same time in Italian. I will refer here to Amodeo's exact description of

⁶ “Il viaggio diviene allora un cammino senza ritorno, alla scoperta che non c'è e non può e non deve esserci ritorno. Al viaggio circolare, tradizionale, classico, edipico, conservatore di Joyce, in cui Ulisse torna a casa, subentra il viaggio rettilineo, nietzscheano [...] un viaggio che procede sempre avanti.” [The trip becomes a journey with no return and leads to the discovery that there is not, there cannot and there must not be a return. This circular, traditional, Oedipal and conservative journey of Joyce, in which Ulysses returns home, is replaced by the rectilinear, Nietzschean [...] one that always moves forward.] Claudio Magris, *L'Infinito Viaggiare*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milano 2005, xii

the word (161). First of all, the term can suggest a verbal construction “passare avanti a qualcuno,” which in Italian means to pass or overtake someone; secondly it calls to mind also the substantive “il passo in avanti,” which signifies a step forward; finally this word can suggest an expression, very common in Italian, which is “fare un passo in avanti,” which means to take a step forward, in the sense of ‘making progress’. Regardless of which one of these nuances is meant or evoked by the author, all three meanings clearly indicate a movement forward. Thus “Passavanti Rückkehr” could be literally translated as “the return home of the one who moves forward.” In this oxymoronic construction, the title becomes a paradox, which not only alludes to that spiral-like movement discussed earlier, but also anticipates the conflicts inside the character. The very name of the protagonist, in fact, already negates in itself the possibility of the return he attempts to undertake (Amodeo 170).

A close reading of the story and of its structure supports this idea. For example, the first sentences describing Passavanti before leaving for Germany and then back in Italy, present a redundant structure, which already implies that nothing will change for him: “Er fuhr nach Deutschland mit einem Pappkoffer, und mit einem solchen kehrte er zurück. Er war dort mit wenigen Sachen ausgekommen, nahm auch nur wenige wieder mit” (39). These two sentences with a kind of chiasmic-structure create an effect of closure, which does not allow any intervention. They immediately suggest, just like the title, that this new journey will not change anything: Passavanti’s future seems to be already decided at the beginning of the story.

Unemployed and with no money, Passavanti feels humiliated. Even with Giorgio, the only friend he seems to have left in his hometown, he is unable to speak about his

experience in Germany. The shame of not having achieved what was expected of him prevents him from facing reality. He quenches Giorgio's great curiosity with a concise sentence: "[...] wie es einem in der Emigration ergangen ist, kann man nicht mit Worten beschreiben" (43). If Passavanti *cannot* yet explain what living in the immigration is like in words, he soon expresses this experience through his behavior.

His ambivalent position at the border of two identities is shown already in the attitude he has now back in Italy. Differently than what other immigrants do, Passavanti is not interested in showing off fake stories of great accomplishments: "Passavanti war jedoch einer der Arbeitsemigranten, die weder mit großen Autos noch mit überheblicher Pose nach Hause kamen" (40). Rather, he is immediately only concerned with what he had heard abroad: that coming home was not an easy thing, and that immigrants were usually greeted by everybody with coolness and distance. Moreover, during a conversation he has in the bar with Giorgio, Passavanti becomes very critical towards the ideals of immigration, attempting to destroy the image of the "gelobtes Land" (44) and the fairy tale of Germany, in which everybody back home seemed to believe. Ironically, the more critical he is towards the attitude of Italians and immigration, the closer he comes to Germany. While praising Germans' way of living, their capacity of controlling emotions, and their organized bureaucracy, he quickly drinks up a large bottle of beer, like, he says, only Germans know how to do.

Showing a very stereotypical "German side" then, he increases the gap between Giorgio and himself. This distance will be clearly stated by his friend a few lines further, when he does not allow Passavanti to pay, because, after all: "Gäste sind Gäste," as the waitress in the bar also reiterates right after him. (48) The use of a diaphora, a particular

type of a tautology — which, by definition describes a name/word using the very same word, with the aim of emphasizing its meaning reinforces the idea of a loop, which does not leave space for anything else. The word *Gast* also inevitably evokes that of *Gastarbeiter*, so that Passavanti's condition of visitor both in Italy and in Germany is alluded to here at the same time. Trapped forever in the condition of guest, Passavanti finds himself in a sort of a vicious circle, out of which he is not able to come.⁷

Since the single dream he had when he decided to leave: “viel Geld verdienen und schnell nach Hause kehren und sich selbständig machen” (50) failed miserably, he now projects, back in Italy, the same hopes he had had before leaving: finding a job and making some money. Repeating the same pattern of his first move, he now acts like an immigrant in his own country. After all, as he justifies himself, in Germany, “war es alles zu schwierig geworden, verdammt schwierig; und zurück in die Bundesrepublik traute er sich nicht mehr” (52). Hence, the “German attitude” previously underlined, which had suddenly distanced him from Giorgio, is immediately contradicted by feelings of detachment and uneasiness towards Germany as well. Gradually Passavanti's identity becomes unclear, while the contrasts within himself become stronger and stronger.

The final chapter of Passavanti's story begins with a bet in a bar started for some unknown reasons, at the end of a card game. Passavanti, “the German” for everybody on one side, Giorgio “the Italian” on the other, bet on who can drink the most: Passavanti (obviously) with beer, Giorgio with cognac. Staging the clash of cultures in a rather stereotypical way, the grotesque night is summed up in the description of the two, who gradually lose control of their actions and of their minds: “Nun wirkten ihre Posen nicht

⁷ He is completely “lost,” in his own country, or we could rightly say in Italian, “spaesato”, which, as Iain Chambers interestingly remarks, not only means ‘lost’, but literally means also “without a country.” in: Iain Chambers: 1994, 18.

mehr selbstsicher, eher marionettenhaft” (52-53). It anticipates the tragic end when Giorgio later dies because of the drinking.

That night, in a flow of reminiscences, Passavanti realizes the emptiness and the inconsistency in his life, as he gradually understands that his hopes of a reintegration in Italy are being disappointed. People do not appear as they used to be, while not even his friends are any longer his friends. He feels that everybody is holding a mirror in front of him, in which he can only see fragments of himself: “Aber auch hier hielten ihm die Leute einen Spiegel vor. Und Giorgio hielt ihn am besten. In dessen Spiegel sah er sich noch zerteilter als in einem anderen” (54).⁸ Precisely in this moment Passavanti starts realizing that the problem lies within himself. Seeing his own image reflected in a mirror, he realizes that his identity has lost its unity and it is now fragmented into many little pieces, as in a puzzle.

Giorgio war tot, und mehr als der Verlust eines Freundes schmerzte ihn, daß durch seinen Tod ihm ein schärferer Spiegel vorgehalten wurde: ein Spiegel, in dem er sich nun ganz zerstückelt sah, ganz und gar: er in vielen kleinen Puzzleteilchen, Teilen, die nicht mehr zusammensetzbar schienen. (55)

By using the image of the mirror, one of the symbols of the double par excellence, and by combining it with the image of the puzzle, Biondi reinforces the split inside the protagonist's identity. Passavanti realizes that the pieces of his identity do not match with each other any longer and feels multiple internal splits he cannot heal. Now the clash of cultures does not take place outside, but inside his own identity. Before Passavanti finds out about his friend's death, though, he spends the following day in bed, and in a flow of reminiscences he, once again, reveals the emptiness and the inconsistency in his life. His departure from Germany was more a flight than a long pondered decision. He had left

⁸ The use of the word with a prefix 'zer' increases even further the idea of fragmentation.

without even saying goodbye to his girlfriend, showing his incapacity to love her and commit to her in a serious way, admitting, instead, that their relationship was a further reason for coming home:

Ihm wurde klar, daß auch die Beziehung zu Luise ein wesentlicher Grund seiner Rückkehr war [...] Ausserdem hätte die Heirat einen endgültigen Abschied von seiner Heimat bedeutet. In der Bundesrepublik war er nach fünfzehn Jahren nicht heimisch geworden, und er spürte, daß er dort nie mehr heimisch werden konnte. Und er liebte Luise nicht. (54-55)

These memories and confessions suggest again that it was never his intention to become established in Germany. Rather they show that in the fifteen years spent in Mainz he never even tried to feel at home. In the night after Giorgio's death, Passavanti has a dream, which becomes a sort of premonition of what will happen to him later. A threatening figure orders him to leave, with the dramatic forewarning that he will never get rid of Giorgio: "Du mußt weg, und egal, wo du hingehst, Giorgios Leiche wirst du in deinen Koffer packen und mitnehmen!" (55). By again using the same image of the poor immigrant with a cardboard suitcase, Biondi reiterates the inconsistency of Passavanti's life, with the sad and grotesque idea that the only new thing he could bring with him now is the corpse of his friend. Finally, it is important to observe that Biondi chooses for Passavanti's friend a name with an interesting meaning. Giorgio in fact literally means 'farmer' or 'the one who works the land' and thus evokes and reinforces a direct link with the earth and the ground, as opposed to the transitory condition of Passavanti.

In a progression of failures, this old image of Passavanti, newly stained with the responsibility of a quasi murder, does not leave him any other choice than a new/old departure to Germany. Yet this time, in the return and in the new beginning, there are no dreams of happiness or money expected, but just the hope for a compromise: "Sein Leben

sollte zwar nicht glatt laufen, das erwartete er gar nicht, jedoch wenigstens ohne Groll. Das erhoffte er sich” (60-61). Moreover, the return to Germany is only evoked, but not represented, as if the author already implied its unsuccessful outcome. The story ends depicting Passavanti sitting by himself in the corridor of a traveling train to Germany. And as Amodeo interestingly observes: “Wer sich in einem fahrenden Zug gemütlich macht, hat keinen Grund, an einem bestimmten Ort zurückzukehren zu wollen” (173). This last image of the traveling train as the symbol of the “Nicht-Ort[es]” or “der Ortlosigkeit” (Amodeo 173), is then a key image to understanding Passavanti’s personality and that, in this “Zwischenstation” (Amodeo 164) lies the final realization that he belongs neither in Italy, nor in Germany. Julia Kristeva’s description of the foreigner fits here perfectly:

Always elsewhere the foreign belongs nowhere [...] living neither before nor now, but beyond they [the foreigners – F.F.] are bent with a passion that although tenacious, will remain forever unsatisfied. It is a passion for another land, always a promised one, that of an occupation, a love, a child, a glory. (9-10)

At this point it is clear that none of those meanings evoked by the name Passavanti matches with what the character tries to do or achieves. Passavanti failed in Germany as he failed in Italy and thus does not show the progression that his name suggests. In fact, his character, as Amodeo points out, is the exact reverse of his name (Amodeo 170).

There is a tangible sign that tells us that this short story really represents the idea of transition. “Passavanti’s Rückkehr” is the only text by the author to exist in two languages. Written first in Italian, and published in episodes in the *Corriere d’Italia*, a newspaper from the seventies that published works by Italian immigrants in the attempt

to promote their culture in Germany,⁹ the story was then in the same years translated, indeed re-written by the author himself in German, which is now also the most commonly known version.¹⁰ The first version in Italian is shorter and simpler, while this later German version has a much more elaborate structure.¹¹ Biondi gives us interesting information about its origin which also reveals how his position towards immigration gradually came to a clearer definition:

Ursprünglich schrieb ich die Erzählung *Passavantis Rückkehr* in Italienisch. Die spätere deutsche Version ist ein vollkommen anderer Text, für den der frühere sich nur als Vorlage erwies. Beide Erzählungen sind auch unterschiedlich lang. Die ursprüngliche Idee, war eine Geschichte zu schreiben, in der ein Mann sein Leben im Zug verbringt. Er fährt zurück in seinem Heimatort und steigt dort am Bahnhof aus, um auf den Zug zu warten, der ihn wieder nach Deutschland bringt, und umgekehrt. Die deutsche Erzählung habe ich drei Jahre später geschrieben. Sie ist viel metaphorischer, plastischer und poetischer als die italienische Version. Die Erkenntnis, daß eine Heimkehr nicht mehr möglich sei, ist klar zum Ausdruck gekommen. (Biondi "Interview" 59)

Interestingly enough, "Passavantis Rückkehr" and the entire collection of short stories in its later German version, has been re-translated into Italian and edited by Amodeo in close collaboration with the author himself and recently published by the small Italian company Cosmo Iannone.¹²

I believe that the existence of this story in multiple versions marks the peculiar position of this work and its very being in between two cultures, two languages and two

⁹ In the *Corriere d'Italia*, as Amodeo notes, there were hosted also the so-called "Dibattiti", debates in which the immigrant authors were expressing their points of view on this literature. As Amodeo writes, there is still the idea that we are dealing with a "Letteratura operaia", thus a proletarian literature. (Amodeo *Heimat* 52-53)

¹⁰ About more precise information on the origin of this story see the end of this chapter.

¹¹ All the editions of the story: F. Biondi, "Il ritorno di Passavanti", in: *Corriere d'Italia*, Frankfurt am Main 1977 (in three episodes); "Die Rückkehr von Passavanti", in: F. Biondi/J. Naoum/ R. Schami/ S. Taufiq (Ed.), *Zwischen Fabrik und Bahnhof*. a.a.O., Edition CON, 1981, 120-143; F. Biondi, "Passavantis Rückkehr", in: F. Biondi, *Passavantis Rückkehr*, Fischerhude 1982 pp.7-30; F. Biondi, "Passavantis Rückkehr (1976)", in: F. Biondi, *Passavantis Rückkehr. Erzählungen*, München, Detuscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1985, 39-61.

¹² The story is part of a collection of stories in the book titled *Vita Migrata*, Isernia, Cosmo Iannone Editore. 2007.

identities. Thus, we can conclude that the entire story — which as we have seen in its original idea was to be set entirely in a train — carries with it the signs of a perennial transition, mirroring with its origin, structure and content the complex experience of a displaced identity on the borders. In his traveling back and forth from one culture to the other, from one language to the other, the story, like its author, does not stop in one place. Rather, it suggests that dialogic mode necessary in order to articulate the identity of a multicultural subject. By setting the story in a border site, the story inevitably suggests, to put it in Seyhan's words, the idea of “perpetual motion, confrontation and translation” (115).

The various versions of “Passavantis Rückkehr,” in particular the newly published edition in Italian, open the issue of translation within the bi- or multilingual works by immigrants and of the linguistic and cultural implications of it. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's idea of translation, Biondi's multiple versions of the same story suggest an intrinsic idea of movement and invite us to look at the notion of translation in its very idea of ‘transit,’ and in its power of giving “continued life” to works of art (Benjamin 71). Moreover, if for Benjamin translation works as a tool to unveil the connection that exists between all languages in general, the text by Biondi, in all of its versions, really seems to point at the deeper connections within two very different languages. It is a link that, as Benjamin affirms, goes beyond any historical dimensions:

Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. [...] As for the posited central kinship of languages, it is marked by a distinctive convergence. Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express. (Benjamin 72)

Here, the very existence of the story of Passavanti, both in German and Italian, ultimately seems to indicate one greater meaning of recounting a life in immigration, a

story that, technically, can be expressed in any language, because translation, Benjamin argues, “intends the language as a whole” (76), and sees all the languages as ultimate belonging to a unique “larger language” (Benjamin 78). Benjamin’s idea of translation as giving “an afterlife” to the original however (71), appears more complicated in Biondi’s case, as the issue of authenticity is now called into question at the same time. In fact, the core of the story originates in Italian, finds its complete form in German, and “travels” back into the Italian language at the end. But, by being both author and translator of the story,¹³ Biondi complicates Benjamin’s idea of the relationship between poet and translator, and, in particular, of their supposedly different intentions.

Thus, along Leslie Adelson’s suggestion of looking for a new “grammar of migration,” to describe the dynamic conditions of the immigrant as opposed to an antiquated image of two static worlds (4-5), we should not see Passavanti as suspended in an abstract dimension between Italy and Germany. Rather, his belonging nowhere and everywhere at the same time, together with the image of the physical and linguistic traveling to one place and back, highlights precisely this dynamicity. On the basis of these last observations, can we then really say that the story does not propose any step forward at all? By presenting a destabilized and decentered position, both thematically — with the final image of a traveling train — and linguistically, — by moving the story from one language to another — I believe that Biondi does suggest, already in the seventies, a *passo in avanti*/, a step forward, into the consciousness of a new position, far from a conformed and objectified totality. A dialogic mode, as Seyhan affirms, challenges “pretensions to objectivity and truth” (9), so that by problematizing the notion

¹³ Biondi translated the text together with the editor of *Passavantis Rückkehr*.

of authenticity, the various versions of Biondi's work do not establish any final conclusion. In its apparent simplicity the story unveils in reality many of the contradictions that lie behind the word "immigration" and works against easy theories of integration and cultural assimilation. With this text Biondi distances himself from the *Gastarbeiterliteratur* of those years and locates himself on another, more complicated level. "Passavantis Rückkehr" clearly anticipates the author's position of the later novels, in particular *Die Unversöhnlichen*, in which the theme of the homecoming is still central. However, here the theme will be further developed to admit the possibility of reconciliation with the past and of a return home, but only within language.

2.3 *Die Unversöhnlichen: Homecoming within Language*

More than ten years after the publication of "Passavantis Rückkehr" and of the short stories in the eponymous collection, Franco Biondi is still troubled with the issue of homecoming. While, as I have shown in the story of Passavanti, homecoming is ultimately impossible and the return home is replaced by a perennial commuting to and from places that are no longer homes; in the novel *Die Unversöhnlichen*, Biondi's position towards immigration develops into a new, more mature consciousness of the condition of a displaced identity.

Published in 1991, the novel tells the story of Dario Binachi, an Italian immigrant who lives in Frankfurt during the eighties. In order to fill a growing emptiness he feels inside from a life spent abroad,¹⁴ he decides to return to his hometown, the fictive town of

¹⁴ He refers to it several times as "das Loch der Existenz" (12)

San Martino, and to search there for traces of his past. Like an archeologist and with the intention of writing a book about it (Reeg *Fremde*: 100), Dario investigates his past and starts looking for any possible information that could help him shed some light on his past and his current identity. Next to the homecoming and the search for identity, other traditional themes of the *Migrationsliteratur* are present: the conflict with the family, the realization that being abroad has left indelible signs, and the projections for a better life (Reeg *Fremde* 100).

This novel is inscribed in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, yet, to use Seyhan's words, it rewrites the genre in a new "metafictional mode" (127) in which the narrator's travel in search of knowledge is as an intimate journey projected not towards an unknown place, but rather backwards into a lost past. Still clearly playing with the idea of directionality and in particular with the notions of linearity and circularity, Biondi suggests again and more strongly, that idea of a spiral-like journey we have seen in the story of Passavanti. However, if in Passavanti the circuitous and almost compulsive journeying led to a doubly foreclosed homecoming and ultimately to the impossibility of finding a place in which to stop, in contrast to Passavanti, Dario is already aware from the very beginning that in the return back home, he is already taking a step forward into the consciousness of a new condition: "Diese Rückreise, dachte ich während der Bahnfahrt, ist eine Reise nach vorn. Ins Zurück bringt sie mich weiter" (U 17).

Thus, Dario's geographical travel back to Italy is first of all an allegorical journey during which the personal search for the lost origins goes along with the discovery of the potential of the present condition and the newly acquired German language. In this novel past and present fuse in a complex and difficult story that challenges the reader in several

ways. While attempting to reconstruct his identity, the protagonist ultimately understands that life is not a linear path, but a labyrinth — hence the subtitle to the novel, *Im Labyrinth der Herkunft* — in which all the different pieces of Dario's dislocated identity emerge, trying to reconcile into one. The difference to Passavanti's condition appears again. While Passavanti's fragmented identity had been compared to a broken mirror whose pieces he was trying to put back together like in a puzzle, Dario's pathway towards the reconstruction of his internal fragmentation becomes here a labyrinth, an image which clearly suggests a higher degree of complication. By definition, in fact, a labyrinth presupposes a series of confused pathways, technically all leading to a center. By comparing the return to the origins to a labyrinth, and thus identifying the search of the origins with a tortuous path, Biondi complicates even further the idea of homecoming.

The complex path that the protagonist is about to undertake is mirrored by an equally complex structure of the novel, which becomes evident from the very attempt to establish its genre. Both the structure of the novel and the topos of journey enable a parallel with the *Bildungsroman*. However, this definition becomes problematic in Biondi's case and subject to revision. As Seyhan notes:

The German *Bildungsroman* was a product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the concept of nationalism in a “dispersed” Germany that consisted of numerous principalities and petty states could only be realized as a cultural nationalism. Thus, *Bildung*, as a form of ideal education for German youth, became intimately linked with the idea of nation. (127)

In Biondi's novel the protagonist does not belong to a “German youth”. Moreover, also the Germany in which he lives no longer consists of “numerous principalities” but rather of numerous nationalities. By inscribing Dario's journey into the new German panorama where various minorities coexist, Biondi undermines the idea of German nation, while he

complicates at the same time the idea of formation. Born out of the clash and union between both his Italian and his German memories, Dario's unique hybrid identity is the result of this modern *Bildungsroman*.

In relation to the *Bildungsroman* Seyhan also observes that the “Bildungsreisende always returns home” while “for the ‘exiled’ hero/ine, there is no return” (127). If this statement is valid for the story of Passavanti, and for many other stories of Biondi's early period of literary production,¹⁵ it does not seem to be true in *Die Unversöhnlichen*. I argue that in this novel Biondi's protagonist has reached a new consciousness, which ultimately does not negate the possibility of his return home. It is a homecoming, however, that does not take place under traditional and conventional parameters, but it is inscribed in the language, which will become another protagonist of the story. In particular, multiple meta-linguistic references, which occur in the text from the beginning to the end, contribute to reinforce and underline the crucial role of writing itself.¹⁶ The text suggests the evolution of two types of writing that of Dario on one side, and that of his alter ego, the fictive writer Franco Biondi on the other, which describe the specific progress of the immigrants' engagement within German society. The presence of a book within the book and apparently of another similar book written by the fictive Biondi however, complicates the novel and the plot immediately starts suffering from an extreme mix of points of view and from a surplus of writers.¹⁷ The novel never suggests an idea of harmonious writing, becoming, instead, at times rather obscure. If this is a clear attempt to undermine a traditional idea of the novel — and this work certainly resists the

¹⁵ Other stories contained in the collection “Passavantis Rückkehr” present the topic of the impossibility of return.

¹⁶ See for example p.125; 156; 242; 247; 282.

¹⁷ At some point there is also the reference to another writer, also called Biondi, who lives in Italy. In this chapter I will leave out the analyses of this other character.

traditional *Bildungsroman*, or even simply the genre of autobiography — the overlap of voices and the abundance of perspectives also become its biggest weakness and limitation. In the attempts to express the multifaceted nature of an identity on the borders between two cultures, the novel presents exaggerated complications, a deeply fragmented structure and very convoluted writing, which is what, I believe, ultimately prevents it from becoming a popular success. The result is a novel whose genre is impossible to establish and whose hybridity symbolizes the very nature of its own author. In the analyses that will follow I will first focus on the crucial role that writing assumes in this novel, both in the content and in the structure, then I will problematize the notion of writing in relation to the multicultural, decentered identity of the protagonist/narrator.

2.4. Metalinguistic Experiments, Self-Reflexive Thoughts

“Creda che siamo veramente sei personaggi, signore,
interessantissimi! Quantunque sperduti.”¹⁸
Luigi Pirandello, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* 37

A first reading of the novel immediately confirms that language occupies a central and crucial position in this work, and that its author is engaging with it in a challenging way. The self-reflexive tone of the work in fact, proves Biondi's mastery of the German language, which he deliberately manipulates and fuses with Italian. It also shows that, in comparison to his earlier stories, his writing style has clearly become more refined and sophisticated. The very fact that the protagonist is a writer and that the whole novel is centered on the attempt to write another novel, and to safeguard its originality, draws the

¹⁸ “Believe me, sir, we are really six characters, and very interesting ones, even though we are lost.”

reader's attention immediately towards the special position occupied by the process of writing itself and the opposition between authenticity and fiction. The book within the book, a fictional device not new in literature, serves here a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it focuses on the attempt of reconstructing and re-telling Dario's life and his past including even a remote time which he has experienced only indirectly; on the other, though, it underlines even further the peculiar nature of the work itself, which, as I have anticipated, disrupts the traditional boundaries of literary genres and becomes a hybrid text impossible to classify.

Dario introduces himself as the first narrator of the story, yet in the course of the novel, other voices mingle with his in such sudden and unexpected ways that they, at times, surprise and confuse the reader. They are all different personifications of Dario, members of his family or people who were part of his past (Reeg 102). Through the respective encounters with each of them, Dario will be able to add pieces to the complicated mosaic of his life in order to reconstruct his past and his identity. One voice in particular intrudes and interferes with his narration. It is a writer whose name is, as already anticipated, Franco Biondi, and who, according to Dario, is there to "steal" his life and write the same book! It is immediately clear that the fictive Biondi is an alter ego of the protagonist, a sort of "Doppelgänger" (Möhrle 103), or an imaginary creation of the protagonist himself who disturbs him in his writing project.¹⁹ As Kotsaftis points out, the idea of the existence of another character, who is out to steal the protagonist's life story, and to use it in turn for a character in his novel, represents an allusion to Luigi Pirandello's short story "La tragedia di un personaggio," (1911) (73-74) — or to his most

¹⁹ "Und wenn ich den Schriftsteller Franco Biondi erfinden würde? [...] Nein, ich konnte ihn nicht erfinden: Er ging lebhaftig soeben an mir vorbei und bot dem Landschaftshintergrund ein absurdes Profil." (U 202-203)

famous theatre play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921) [*Six Characters in search of an Author*], inspired by the short story. In this play the allusion to fictional writing is put onto the stage with the representation of six “unfinished characters” who show up in a theater in search of an author to complete their story. After an initial reluctance to even listen to them, the Manager of the play finally decides to stage them, thus giving them the chance to present their story. In the same way as the self-reflexive style serves Pirandello to discuss the process of writing, and, in this case, of exploring the unfinished identity of his characters, so does Biondi problematizes the idea of writing not only by creating two figures who are themselves literary authors, but also by continuously mixing and confusing reality with fiction. That Biondi knew Pirandello’s work is made clear by a direct reference to another acclaimed work, *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* (1904) [*The Late Mattia Pascal*], which Biondi gives Dario in the novel (Kotsaftis 74). As if to reinforce the link with Pirandello, this novel problematizes the idea of fragmentation of identity, through the narration of the double life of the protagonist Mattia Pascal and of his ironic “double-death.”²⁰ Finally, with Pirandello Biondi seems also to share a tendency to create peculiar characters and a similar humorous style, despite the tragedy of the story narrated.²¹

The tension between Dario, who is writing the novel of his life for a therapeutic reason, and the fictive Biondi, a professional writer, grows during the reading of the novel, and Dario starts seeing his antagonist even in his dreams, fearing that Biondi could

²⁰ The protagonist, Mattia Pascal, who conducts an unhappy and miserable life, takes advantage of a misunderstanding to make everyone believe that he is dead. He disappears and goes to Rome where he starts a new life, with a new name. Yet, he soon realizes that he cannot continue with this plan, because the freedom he thinks to have acquired is a lie. He then decides to fake his death, and to return to his original life. But this reveals to be difficult, as everybody there, his wife included, have by now accepted his death and started with a new life. In the end, Mattia Pascal twice-dead is reduced to a figure destined to live as an outsider.

²¹ On the connections with Pirandello see also Biondi “Interview” 61.

somehow also have an influence even on his own thoughts. Obsessed by the figure of Biondi, Dario stops writing his novel and decides that a direct encounter with the mysterious writer is the only solution to preserve his book.

Chapter 23, as Reeg points out, becomes then a crucial chapter for the continuation of the novel and for the continuation of the novel within the novel (104). The encounter between Dario and the fictive Biondi is described in very realistic terms and becomes furthermore a crucial moment in which the real author Biondi hides his own programmatic reflections on literature and immigration. As Reeg further comments, during their discussion, the fictive Biondi invites Dario to have a more informal approach, and he is able to prove to him that the relationship between them can be closer, since they *do have* common life experiences, and most of all, a similar way of perceiving the German language:

Wollen wir uns nicht duzen? Wir haben doch so viele Gemeinsamkeiten, so viele, sprach er, ohne eine Gebärde der Anspielung, ohne Pathos, fast zynisch. [...] Obwohl wir uns nicht näher kennen, haben wir doch so viele gemeinsame Erfahrungen! Wie du eben hörst, schließt die deutsche Sprache, eine Sprache, die gemacht wird, eine Erfahrung aus [...] So ergeht es oft Minderheiten – ihre Erfahrung ist sprachlich nicht vorgesehen; und wenn einer wie ich sich daran machen will, geht er in der sich verschließenden Sprache unter. [...] Das ist das Problem, mein Freund, Minderheiten und Deklassierte überhaupt müssen die Mehrheit, die Herrschenden verstehen, sie sind darauf angewiesen, wenn sie überleben wollen [...] (247-248)

This is not only a decisive moment that pushes Dario to start writing again, more importantly it is a crucial moment in which the real author Biondi expresses his programmatic reflections on writing. In these few lines, Biondi declares the need to give a voice to minorities, who for too long have been neglected and unheard, as well as his intention to open up the German language to new linguistic experiences.²² This excerpt

²² As Reeg writes: “lo scrittore riesce infatti a scuoterlo facendogli notare come abbiano esperienze e presupposti teorici comuni, che risalgono a riflessioni programmatiche dell’autore empirico Franco Biondi,

also evokes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theoretical framework on minor literature, by pointing out at the relationship that exists between the official German language and the German spoken by minorities. By looking at how the minority contaminates the language of the majority, Biondi recall the idea of deterritorialization as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari and seems to be aware of the social and political value of the language that he uses. As he underlines the common ground between the two writers, in opposition to a German reading public, Biondi emphasizes the position of immigrant writers, advocating the necessity of "improving" the German language in order to include words that could describe also their own experience. Finally, the possibility of expanding the German language to other experiences so far unknown to Germans adds to this novel that collective value and that capacity of solidarity that Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to minor literature. In particular, in the reunification of the two writers — Dario on one side writing the story of his family in order to understand himself; and the fictive professional Biondi on the other — the novel becomes:

eine Parabel über die Entwicklungs- und Entstehungsgeschichte der Literatur ausländischer Autoren in der Bundesrepublik: Aus dem therapeutischen Schreiben der sechziger und siebziger Jahre ist eine Literatur mit dem Anspruch auf geschichtliche und ästhetische Gültigkeit geworden. (Amodeo 49)

Through this progression, Amodeo argues, the novel can be considered as a sort of "*Bildungsroman* of [...] immigration" ("Die Ästhetik" 12).

come quella che rileva che la lingua tedesca esclude un certo tipo di esperienza, ovvero l'esperienza della minoranza, che le strutture di potere basate sul rapporto maggioranza-minoranza pretendono sforzi di comprensione solo da parte della minoranza." [In fact, the writer succeeds in shaking him to the extent that he notices that they have common experiences and theoretical assumptions. These derive from the programmatic reflections of the real author Franco Biondi, such as the ways in which the German language excludes certain types of experience - for example, the experience of minorities. Power structures based on the relationship of a majority to a minority demand that only the minority make efforts to assimilate.] (Reeg *Fremde* 105-106).

While the question remains whether writing in immigration nonetheless aspires from the very beginning to historical and aesthetic validation, it is clear that this writing was originally thought of as a way to facilitate communication of one's own experience in the new country. As the author openly discusses the common goals of the two writers, Biondi's reflections prove that this literature now openly claims a wider confirmation of its literary and social value. Moreover, by intervening directly in the German language, which he describes as artificial, limited, and incapable of offering the linguistic tools to express all of the life experiences one could encounter as immigrant, Biondi claims to acquire a precise position within German literary panorama. The critique against the German language that comes out in the novel had been openly expressed by Biondi in two previous essays on language. In the first and more famous one, he describes how he has tried to find a new home and a sense of belonging first of all in the German language. By exploring the multilayered identity through the German language, he realized, however, how inadequate the language was to express his experience and concluded that the very experience of foreignness lies not in the people, but rather in the language itself, hence the title to his essay: "Die Fremde wohnt in der Sprache."²³ In the later essay "Sprache, Literatur, Anwesenheit und Begegnung,"²⁴ Biondi starts from a similar position. Describing his personal process of German language acquisition and the difficulties he had learning it, he uses a rather interesting image to describe the German

²³ "[...] um darauf hinzuweisen, wo in Wirklichkeit die Fremde wohnt. Sie wohnt bereits in diesem Satz und nicht in dem Menschen, der eine andere Herkunft hat. (...) Gerade in diesem Wörtchen als einem Sinnbild für Möglichkeiten, (...) gerade hier entdecke ich die Mauer inmitten des Wortes, hier spüre ich meine Verlassenheit und meine Einsamkeit in der Sprache. Gerade in der Sprache, dem echten Ort der Begegnung," Biondi, "Die Fremde." *Eine Nicht Nur Deutsche Literatur. Zur Standortbestimmung der „Ausländerliteratur“*. Irmgard Ackermann and Harald Weinrich (ed.), pp. 25-32.

²⁴ The essay was published in Scimonello, Giovanni. (Ed) Cultura Tedesca. Letteratura e Immigrazione. Roma, Donzelli Editore, Dicembre 1998.

language. German is for Biondi like a “Festung,” highly protected from anything that could attack or destroy it.

Im Verlauf dieser Jahre ist deutlich geworden, daß die deutsche Standardsprache wie eine Festung verteidigt wird. Diese Verteidigung einer Standardsprache mutet manchmal wie ein Glaubenskrieg gegen Andersglaubigen an, ähnlich wie sie Auseinandersetzung um die Rechtschreibreform, die verbittert verteidigt oder bekämpft wird. Dieser Glaubenskrieg, durch manche Hüter der deutschen Sprache gefochten, beruht auf Mutmaßungen. Die eine ist, daß es eine Muttersprache gibt und demzufolge ihre Beherrschungsgrade von deren Zugehörigkeit herrührt. (Biondi “Sprache” 15)

Deprived of the tools to express their condition, the immigrants find, according to Biondi, first and foremost in language the primary reason for that feeling of foreignness within the borders of Germany. Forced to conform as much as possible to the standard language used by the majority, the minorities are cut out from truly becoming part of this society:

Anders ausgedrückt: es wird postuliert und danach gehandelt, daß die Muttersprachler die deutsche Sprache beherrschen, während die Nichtmuttersprachler nur Gäste sind, die Mühe haben, die Sprache in ihrer umfassenden Art zu benutzen. Demzufolge sind Muttersprachler sprachkompetenter und per Definition vollständig. Eine andere gründet sich auf die Vorstellung, daß Differenzen nur auf ein Zentrum hin vorhanden sind, daß also die kulturellen Minderheiten in Deutschland ihre Sprachkompetenzen an die der Mehrheit angleichen sollen. Daraus folgt, daß kulturelle Differenzen in der deutschen Sprache nicht vorkommen dürfen. (Biondi “Sprache” 15)

Arguing that the German language is not open to different linguistic ways of expression, Biondi’s critique ultimately results in a strong denunciation of Germans’ reluctance to accept a multicultural society, which contemporary Germany is becoming. If it is true that “language is the single most important determinant of national identity” (Seyhan 8) as many have declared, Biondi’s statement assumes an even more severe tone.

In opposition to this perception, Biondi proposes a language that can be subject to manipulation, even usurpation, in order to give to its users the means to articulate any experience. The deep connection that exists between writing and identity is openly expressed in one of the perhaps most meaningful and insightful excerpts of the novel,

expressed by the fictive Biondi: “Die Sprache, die Literatur sind Räume wie alle anderen, sie können besetzt, usurpiert werden, man kann in ihnen wohnen, wie man in der Fremde wohnt, der eine ist genauso unsichtbar und grenzlos wie der andere” (U 248). Thus the language becomes a malleable dimension that can, or better yet, shall be manipulated according to one’s own wish and desire in order to create in it a place to live. That impenetrable fortress closed to cultural differences contrasts here very much with this idea of a language whose boundaries and limits are instead “unsichtbar” and “grenzlos.” This idea of an open and flexible language echoes Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s concept of a *bi-national* dialogue to be established between cultures, which he defines as a “a two-way, ongoing communication between peoples and communities that enjoy equal negotiating powers” (qtd. in Seyhan 7). Like Gomez-Pena who is advocating “the necessity of creating cultural spaces for others” (Seyhan 6), Biondi underlines with his works the necessity of opening up the national boundaries to what is new.

Thus we can conclude that Dario’s personal experience in the foreign land is clearly associated with the experience of writing, which becomes the first concrete instrument to overcome the feeling of displacement. Writing for Biondi’s character as for the writers in the “Fremde,” becomes “ein Mittel, um sich eine Heimat zu schaffen” (Wolfzettel 20), or at least “ein Zuhause,” as the author himself affirms in an essay (Biondi “Die Fremde” 15).²⁵ Creating a new place to live, Biondi does not seem to aim for a real, existing geographical space, but rather a dimension, a “mental category” (Reeg 101). The permanent difficulty that the reader encounters in defining time and place in this novel becomes further proof that the only space we have here is, to say it with

²⁵ “Damal sah ich die Möglichkeit in der Sprache zwar keine Heimat, wohl aber ein Zuhause zu finden.” (Biondi “Zu Hause” 15).

Seyhan's words, "a non territorial space of writing" (131). However, as the critic further suggests: "This writing is by no means utopian in the sense of an ideal. It is often a subversive force, for it breaks through received tradition and convention and reassembles their traces as an alternative, symbolically potent, and often more empowering version of history" (131). In other words, this type of writing appears as a new force that surpasses and bypasses the traditional borders and is capable of destroying the established linguistic rules to create new ones.

Also Biondi's language seems to possess that "subversive force" and to have a great power capable of conveying the painful feelings of a life spent abroad. Rich in neologisms and archaisms, onomatopoeic words and oxymoronic constructions, Biondi's language "radically disrupts the dominant discourse practice" (Kotsaftis 70). This audacious use of the language unsettles the general meaning which "refuses to remain fixed within (dominantly) ascribed lexical boundaries" (70). Biondi plays with the language in such a way as to confuse and disorient the reader, especially German native speakers, who no longer recognize the meaning in the familiar linguistic sign. As Özdamar does with Turkish, so too does Biondi introduce and translate into German Italian sayings which Germans cannot readily understand.²⁶ This is not done in the attempt of giving an aura of exoticism to the novel, rather, as stated earlier, it is the "minor author" (Kotsaftis 71) testing the "major" German language, in order to see how ready it is to open up to new ways of expressions.²⁷

²⁶ To see a more detailed description and examples on the use of language in this novel see Kotsaftis' article pp. 70-71.

²⁷ "È altrettanto pensabile che la lingua tedesca venga messa alla prova per verificare in che misura è in grado di accogliere e di sopportare quanto ha origine altrove. Detto in termini più semplici: se è in grado ed è pronta ad assimilare e a trasportare elementi che (solo) in superficie sembrano appartenere ad una cultura straniera/estranea" [It could be equally argued that the German language is tested in order to verify to what extent it is capable of accepting and bearing the weight of what originates somewhere else. In other words:

This subversive force of the language echoes Kristeva's description of the foreigner, "capable of the most unforeseen audacities" with a language that it is not his own (31). However, while for Kristeva a second language is destined to remain forever "artificial" (32), Biondi is showing us with this novel that his language wants to be real and vibrant and that it is the authentic and genuine result of a life spent on the borders between two cultures. With this language, Biondi's protagonist starts articulating the growing split inside his identity and to witnessing the condition of many other immigrants like him.

Along with the suffering description of his condition, Dario also expresses his biggest fear, that of having no place at all to live in and of having left no traces of his past behind him:

Ich existiere in einem Zwischenraum [...] Ich spüre, daß ich nur das spüre. Ich sehe mich niedergestreckt auf der Landschaft. [...] Im Leben bin ich ein anderer, im Schwebezustand zwischen Leben und Tod, in der Emigration ohne Platz bin ich ich selber. Ich bin auf die Reise gegangen, um mir auf die Spur zu kommen, aber es gibt keine Spur. (U 263)

The awareness of being in an in-between space not only reinforces the idea of fragmentation and disorientation, but the search for traces reminds us of labyrinthic path that the narrator is trying to follow in order to find himself. It is that same "in-between status" anticipated in the short story "Passavant's Rückkehr". In the attempt to define with words the painful consciousness of a complicated condition full of contradictions, the narrator voices here the author's awareness of the condition of the immigrant.

The representation of the encounter between Dario and the fictive writer Biondi, which takes place around the middle of the novel and which could also be read as a

if it is capable and ready to assimilate elements that only on a superficial level seem to belong to a foreign culture] (Biondi *Fremde* 74).

metaphorical description of the encounter between the inner I of the protagonist and his outer identity, only temporarily unblocks the situation, but it does not become a definite resolution. On the contrary, the situation collapses when, flipping through the pages of the manuscript, Dario reads some chapters he has not written, and, at the highest level of paranoia, he attributes those pages to Biondi. In one of the most meta-fictional excerpts, we also turn the pages of his novel while turning the pages of the real book with Dario: “Dann blätterte ich zurück, Blatt für Blatt, bis ich beim Abschnitt »Der Riß der Augen« stutzig wurde: Das war nicht von mir. Das hatte ich nicht geschrieben, ich nicht! Er war das, er! [...] Das war der endgültige Beweis, daß er meine Sache an sich reißen wollte! (U 282). Convinced that Biondi’s real identity is even more fragmented than his, Dario is furious about the supposedly real writer who is preventing his recovery of the past: “Biondi verhindert meine Rückkehr, er blockiert den Zugang zu meiner Herkunft. Ich mußte bekennen, daß er gerissener war als ich” (291).

While he decides to plot against Biondi and defines the details of the plan against him, Dario realizes at the same time that nothing will change, but that everything will be just the beginning of a new labyrinth. The sensation of loss and the incapacity of communication expressed by the text are also supported by the novel’s structure. The rather broken and fragmented language of this paragraph mirrors the internal fragmentation that Dario is experiencing. And while he searches for words to describe the countless “Darios” existing within himself, a rather repetitive structure suggests the idea of a circuitous language with which he is still struggling to articulate his thoughts. Once again, in a quite metalinguistic tone the process of writing itself is described in details as we follow the movements of Dario’s pen along with his thoughts. It follows that:

[...] das Ende kein Ende, nur der Beginn eines neuen Labyrinths ist [...] Mit dem Bleistift fahre ich einerher, streiche Sätze, die ein Leser nie lesen wird, füge neue hinzu, auf der Suche nach Wörtern, die beschreiben, wie ein Fluß aus der Perpetuierung herauskommen könnte, wie die unzähligen Dario Binachis die Kristallwände zwischen ihnen abreißen, sich treffen, sich umarmen, in feierlicher Freude ihren Tod annehmen und mir endlich geben, was mir gehört: einen einzigen Dario Binachi. (324)

The attempt to find the right words involves writing sentences but also eliminating them in an endless search that resemble an never-ending walk through a labyrinth with no exit. The high metalinguistic level of the novel suggests, as Kotsaftis rightly highlights, a new connection with Italian literature, in particular, with Italo Calvino's metanarrative novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979) [*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*]. Dario's reflections upon his novel and on the progression of his writing evoke Calvino's narrator and his thoughts about the novel and reading in general.

The self-reflexive style of the novel reaches its climax in the representation of the murder of the fictive writer Franco Biondi. As Kotsaftis underlines, we really participate in a "mise-en-scène of the death of the author" (73), which, as the critic immediately adds, obviously echoes the more famous "Death of the Author" by French critic and theorist Roland Barthes. In a similar way that Roland Barthes calls for the murder of the author so that the reader can be born, here Dario affirms the necessity of killing the fictive Biondi, in order for his novel to originate. Despite the different context, Biondi's narrator shows a similar desire to kill the author that threatens his novel. He does not realize, however, that by killing the fictive Biondi he will also kill himself: "Ich werde dich umbringen, sagte ich kaltblütig. Gleichzeitig spürte ich mich in ein Verlangen verstrickt: In der Vernichtung Biondis ich selber zu sein" (313). Only then can the novel

of Dario's life be created with no impediment. As Reeg notes, the murder of Biondi coincides with the decision to end the writing there:

[...] und für den Bruchteil einer Sekunde hatte ich das Gefühl, daß er immer noch nach mir spähte, daß sein Blick mein Hirn durchbohrte. In diesem Moment fühlte ich, daß er wieder auftauchen könnte. In dieser Ungewißheit beschloß ich, den Roman an dieser Stelle abzuschließen [...] (U 356)²⁸

As we are assisting in the creation and the conclusion of a book and of a book within a book, it is clear that the process of writing itself has become another protagonist, if not *the* protagonist of the novel. Looking more closely at the text now will, in fact, reveal that a deep connection exists between Dario's identity and language expressed in the very structure of the novel and its style. The book, as I have previously noted, hardly falls into the category of a traditional *Bildungsroman*. But that we were reading a rather unconventional text had already been anticipated by the very first paragraph: "Franco Biondi ist widerlich. Ich hasse diesen eiteln Typ, der mit der Fremde kokettiert" (U 9). As Kotsaftis suggests "a novel that starts with the name of its author is fairly unusual and one is immediately warned that simple explanation will not go far" (72). The image of the labyrinth with which Biondi defines Dario's identity can be applied to describe the very structure of the text. Just when the reader thinks he/she has found the exit to this labyrinth (perhaps in these meta-linguistic excerpts that explain something of what is going on) a new point of view emerges, another paragraph becomes intricate, and Biondi's language reaches an even higher degree of experimentation.

While it is true that the changes in the perspectives and voices often annoy and confuse the reader, it is true, as well, that they serve the narrator's very practical purpose. Assuming a different point of view each time allows Dario to get in touch with the

²⁸ Quoted in Reeg *Fremde* 106.

different members of his family and to establish a link with the past that he is trying to reassemble. It is a controversial relationship characterized by feelings of guilt, fear and uneasiness for having left home long before (102). The incommunicability between Dario and the members of his family does not seem to heal in the reconstruction of the past.

What clearly comes out of reading the story is that Dario is certainly obsessed with the understanding of what happened. From the beginning to the end, the story continuously suggests that the protagonist is attempting to remember his past while re-membering his family, in order to understand his own identity. As Julia Kristeva notes, the “[foreigner’s – F.F.] origins certainly [still] haunt him, for better and for worse” (29), an observation which denotes how leaving one’s own country never means breaking the bond with the past, but rather the opposite. In Biondi’s case, the distance to the country of origin and to one’s own culture seems in fact to reinforce that link with the past, and moreover to nourish the desire to understand it. Not only in this novel, but, as shown, also in other works, Biondi engages with stories in which the protagonists have not settled in the new place, but are haunted by the idea of a return home. Also here, as in Özdamar, the memory of the past relates to his family and brings him back to a domestic environment.

The attempt to return to the origins calls for an intimate space which does not include the larger space of the nation. While in the course of the novel the point of view switches from one character to the other, the picture of the family tree at the end of the book becomes very helpful in order to follow the thoughts of this parade of characters. At the same time, it also adds to the novel an element of epic chronicle set within a very personal and private space of a family saga. However, despite the fact that the novel is entirely set in Italy – like that of Özdamar was entire set in Turkey – the physical return

does not correspond to a real homecoming, because the fragmentation caused by immigration impedes a final reconciliation between Dario and his family members.

The novel not only undermines the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, but, as Kotsaftis rightly points out, also that of the autobiography (73), and creates a hybrid novel whose genre is ultimately impossible to determine. Hence, if writing is the real protagonist of the novel (Reeg 107), we need to specify that it is writing in all of its forms. The realistic descriptions — normally more appropriate to an autobiography — are mixed with narrations of dreams and visions, or meta-commentary, which all easily interrupt long interior monologues. Even the first authorial narrator cannot be trusted any longer (Kotsaftis 74), as his voice unexpectedly mingles with others.

At this point we are left with the impression that many parts of the novel just clash with each other, exactly like the many fragmented identities of Dario. While it seems that, ultimately, Dario's multiple identities will not be reconciled, it is Biondi himself in an interview with Johannes Röhrig who attempts to prove the opposite, by using the very structure of the text in support of his point:

Die verschiedenen Identitäten Binachis sind letztendlich versöhnlich. Schauen Sie, die Titel mancher Kapitel verschmelzen auch mit deren erstem Satz. So wie die Kapitel miteinander korrespondieren, entsteht hiermit eine Kohärenz auf erzähltechnischer Ebene, gegen die der Inhalt vordergründig zu verstoßen scheint (...) In konzentrischen und elliptischen Annäherungen erschließt sich die Suche nach Identität. (63-64)

By pointing out a structure in which many times the titles of the chapters fuse with the first line of the text, Biondi draws our attention to the coherence of his narrative technique, despite the often apparently irrational or incoherent content. Moreover, by using the adjectives “concentric” and “elliptic” the author seems to suggest again the notion of circularity I already used earlier to describe the immigrant's journey. It recalls the spiral image discussed at the beginning. However, despite the claim of a

mathematical perfection to describe the very nature of this search, we hardly get the impression of reconciliation within this text. The novel ends with yet another enigmatic sentence making impossibility the condition for the possibility of such literature: “die Literatur ist möglich aus ihrer Unmöglichkeit” (U 357). This sentence, as Amodeo rightly suggests, could be the “motto of the novel” (49), not only because paradoxical and oxymoronic constructions are a very typical trait of Biondi’s prose²⁹ but also because it shows the author’s attempt to give a linguistic and written form to the concept of difference, showing that “die Differenz nicht auflösbar ist, aber ausgehalten wird, sobald sie zur Sprache kommt, versprachlicht oder verschriftlicht wird, eine Form bekommt” (Amodeo, 49). In this way, Biondi once again underlines the necessity of opening up the cultural panorama in which he lives, encouraging the coexistence of differences, but ultimately suggests tension rather than reconciliation.

Biondi’s language experimentations and neologisms, rather unexpected from someone who has learned German as a second language, have been ignored or simply criticized by most of the German critics.³⁰ His novel encountered difficulties in being published; publication always occurred after the editors applied corrections and changes to the extremely experimental language, erasing in this way the specific effect that the writer wanted to obtain (Reeg *Fremde* 99). It is interesting to quote one very ironic and critical comment by Harald Weinrich, who sees in Biondi’s production only an attempt to create solidarity among the foreigners:

Franco Biondi als Gastarbeiter und als literarischer Anwalt der Gastarbeiter schreibt eine harte Sprache. Da wird den Deutschen nichts geschenkt, selbst wenn sie bereit sind, den Italienern, denen sie sich vielleicht durch ein paar Ferienerlebnisse sentimental fühlen, einige Schritte weiter entgegenkommen als den angeblich nicht

²⁹ See in this chapter footnote 25.

³⁰ See for example Kofstakis p.74.

assimilierbaren Türken. Diesen fremdesten Fremden hält Franco Biondi daher, zusammen mit seinem literarischen Mitstreiter Rafik Schami aus Syrien, loyal die Stange: ein Gastarbeiter ist ein Türke [...] Die Klassensolidarität hat sich in der Identifizierung mit dem schwächsten Glied der sozialen Kette zu bewähren. (Biondi “Tränen” 20)

While it is true that Biondi’s language is not easy and that it challenges the reader in various ways, comments like this one attempt to work against the existing prejudices and the reluctance of many Germans to openly accept and welcome new expressions and experimentations within the German language. Not only Biondi’s programmatic project seems to unveil a much deeper issue, which concerns, in general, the possibility or not of the articulation and the expression of experiences within the specificity of each culture.

2. 5. A Bi-Cultural Memory

Dario’s fear of losing his roots and of having no traces left of it is clear throughout the course of the novel. This fear invites us to rethink the issue of cultural memory which will be resolved only at the end of the book. Looking for signs of his past, Dario cannot find them, not only because they belong to a time long gone but mainly because his attempt is pursued in a new language. German, in fact, is for Dario a language without memory, in other words, as Chiellino argues, a language without childhood³¹ — a sentence that recalls Özdamar’s similar concern in *Mutterzunge*.³² Hence, the real tragedy lies in the painful connection of the “now” and the “before,” the “outside” and the “inside” of the protagonist: “Es ist nicht die Zeit, die die Fremde

³¹ About the idea of a language without a childhood, which is only capable to see the present but not the past, see also Chiellino and in particular his poem “Sich die Fremde nehmen”.

³² See E. S. Özdamar, *Mutterzunge*, p. 44

ausmacht, nicht der Ort. Es ist die Verbindung zwischen außen und innen, die schmerzt” (U 281).

In reconstructing the tormented and conflicting history of his childhood and adolescence in Italy, the procession of the family members appears first through some pictures, then through their appearance in the text. Through the changing of points of view Dario assumes the personality of many of them, and what emerge is a conflictual relationship to the father, an ambivalent bond to the mother and also to the little brother. Moreover, while talking about the story of the family, Biondi also makes references to specific Italian historical events of the 20th century that are clearly foreign to a German public.

The gradual dismissal of all the “Binachi-Varianten” (U 271) becomes, according to Rosa Pugliese, the main object of the story (73). Everything in the novel, according to the critic, seems to revolve around a returning to the past to ultimately distance oneself from it. However, while Dario tries to take on himself only the sense of guilt for the conflicts of the past, a complete liberation from the bond to the family ultimately fails: “Deshalb war ich bereit, alle Schuld der Binachis auf mich zu nehmen, sie allein zu tragen. Aber ich habe nicht verstanden, welche Schuld ich auf den Schultern hatte. Das ist die Schuld. Das hat mich zerstört” (U 338).

It is clear at this point that the labyrinthine structure of the novel serves the author to mirror the incapacity of communication within the Binachi family (Pugliese, 107): “Wir sprachen uns zu, und es gelang uns nicht, uns mitzuteilen” (U 50) — where the word ‘mitteilen’ conveys the idea of bringing a part of oneself along, in order to enable communication, or in this case showing the lack of it. Again, very interestingly Biondi

inscribes linguistically the subject's fragmentation in and through language (Helfer). What is furthermore fascinating here is that the incapacity to communicate ultimately comprises also the relationship with us, the readers. Thus, if the novel, as Pugliese suggests, takes on the "hybriden Existenz seines Protagonisten," also the reader himself "gerät so selbst in die Rolle des ratlos gewordenen Migranten" (107). Hence the novel ultimately establishes not only a dialogue with the members of the family, or of the protagonist with himself, but also with the reader, who becomes another "fictive interlocutor" ["fiktiver Dialogpartner" (107)]. The clearest example of this is at the very end of the story in one of the highest meta-fictional, paradoxical and ambiguous excerpts of the novel:

Beendender Prolog

Wanderer dieser Zeilen! Der Gipfel ist erreicht und erweist sich als Tal. In dieses Tal ragt: Der Roman ist an einem Tag, an dessen Datum ich mich nicht mehr erinnern kann, beendet worden; noch vor der hier dargestellten Fahrt nach San Martino. Die beginne ich übermorgen, in der Hoffnung, die Augen von einer vergessenen Vergangenheit streicheln zu lassen. Und ich werde zudem hoffen, daß der Schriftsteller mir nicht folgen wird. Falls er es doch auf meinen Schatten abgesehen haben sollte, schwant mir nichts Gutes. Er will über mich und meine Familie schreiben — ich werde Widerstand leisten. Auf dem Trittbrett dieser Rückreise werde ich dann über den folgenden Satz sinnieren: Die Literatur ist möglich aus ihrer Unmöglichkeit. So wie die Geliebte Möglichkeit die Fee der Unmöglichkeit küssen wird. Und ich sie. (U 357)

The novel is over and we realize that Dario's physical travel to Italy has not yet started. Hence, before being a real geographical journey, Dario's homecoming is first and foremost an internal psychological return to the past. Along with Kotsaftis we can finally conclude that the autobiographical elements of the novel "are only used as a subtext to the real issue, namely that a meaningful reconstruction of the ethnic subject has become questionable and inevitably futile. Identity has to be seen as a malleable construction." (73). In this context Biondi's critique of the limitations of the German language does not

simply call for an improvement of the language, but rather, I argue, it unveils at the same time the complications behind the articulation of some concepts and becomes an implicit declaration of the untranslatability of specific cultural experiences. These literary works, in fact, as Seyhan notes, “cultivate an appreciation for the translatability of languages and cultures as well as for the untranslatability of certain forms of cultural specificity” (157). Talking about the relationship that exists between original and translation, Benjamin affirms that “the original undergoes a change [...] even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” (73). Tales of immigration, like the ones by Biondi, go even beyond this. They suggest that words, in general, are completely losing a “fixed meaning” and that they are acquiring new connotations when inserted within new panoramas. Hence, even a calling for a “pure language,” as Benjamin defines it, is further problematized in this novel, which seems to show that diasporic texts “come with a more sobering message: that other worlds are not necessarily transparent in translation, and that there are spaces of untranslatability between languages, cultures, and texts” (Seyhan 157).

It is interesting to note that in re-telling the story of how he learned German, Biondi was already well aware of the implication of cultural differences:

Zwar verstieß ich fortwährend gegen die grammatikalischen Konventionen, aber dennoch kamen verschiedene Kollegiaten zu mir, um Hilfe für ihre Aufsätze zu holen. Sonderbar war das Ganze vor allem deshalb, weil das, was ich in den Schriften meinte, nicht das war, was Lehrer und Kollegiaten glaubten darin zu verstehen. Diese Unterschiede lagen nicht an meinen vermeintlichen Mängeln in der deutschen Sprache, noch beruhten sie auf dunklen Italianismen oder gar den absurdesten Wortschöpfungen. (Biondi “Die Fremde” 26)

Already in the early eighties, well before this novel was written, Biondi had realized that he was looking to establish a new relationship with the German language, a relationship that could be more prolific and fruitful if based on the unlimited capacities of a language:

Gegenwärtig interpretiere ich daher meinen Bezug zur deutschen Sprache so, daß ich darin eine multikulturelle Identität suche, jenseits der nationalen und kulturellen Schranken, die mit einer Sprache verbunden sind. Ich glaube, daß in der Unerschöpflichkeit der Sprache diese Möglichkeit enthalten ist. (Biondi "Die Fremde" 30)

By setting his novel entirely in Italy and inside the Italian culture and language but by choosing to give a German voice to his past, Biondi felt that "la sua memoria abitava in una lingua e si esprimeva in un'altra" (Gallo, 72).³³ The dialogic process between cultures begins just here. Realizing that life and language in the foreign land do not follow familiar paths, Biondi is forced to overcome an initial feeling of the uncanny for things around him, which brings him later to develop a forceful language able to transplant and "re-write" his past experiences within new grammatical rules.³⁴ Hence, in the search for the past roots, Biondi's novel and his work in general are not aiming to simply retell in German the loss of identity of the protagonist and his search for a new one. Rather his writing wants to contribute to a greater project: the creation of what Chiellino calls a "bi-cultural" memory (Scimonello, 23-32).

In his essay called "La nascita della memoria bi-culturale," Chiellino investigates the implications of immigration and memory, wondering in which language the experiences of a displaced identity are registered. Here he suggests that it is through the German language that Dario realizes the rupture with his past, because German "è la lingua che permette al corpo del protagonista di rendersi conto dell'esistenza in lui di una frattura consumata da tempo ai danni della realtà"³⁵ (30). Furthermore, he suggests

³³ "His memory lived in one language and was expressing itself in another.

³⁴ "La vita in terra straniera e la lingua straniera seguono percorsi non familiari (unheimlich)", "[Life in a foreign country and the foreign language follows 'non familiar' (unheimlich) paths.] Franco Biondi, "Sui Sentieri della Lingua Letteraria." *Fremde* 62.

³⁵ "It is the language that permits the protagonist's body to realize that there exists in itself a long standing fracture which negatively affects reality".

that it can only be through the second language that Biondi is paradoxically able to go deeper in the search of his roots, because German is a language free from any personal intimate connection with his past, its contradictions and its conflicts (29). Only with the distance that a new language enables a foreigner to have can the protagonist of the novel reestablish that link to the past.³⁶ By initiating this dialogic exchange between Italian and German, Biondi is able to develop a technique of “reciprocal integration” of the information, and it is with the same language that he attempts to heal this fracture (Chiellino “Memoria” 30). As Chiellino argues further, it is a special language “in grado di far nascere momenti e spazi, dove ogni interlocutore può sentirsi in sintonia con il suo passato per rafforzare il suo sviluppo nel presente”³⁷ (31).

The German language thus enables Dario to overcome the feeling of the uncanny in the reconstruction of his past, until it becomes a familiar language through which he revives the relationship with his origins, in their very personal and domestic dimension. As Pugliese rightly underlines:

Dadurch, daß Biondi die deutsche Sprache mit seinem ureigenen, ihr fremden Kulturgedächtnis ausstattet, erlangt die Literatur aus seiner Feder die Funktion einer interkulturellen Balance [...]. Schreiben ist nicht mehr als Angebot zum Dialog zu verstehen, sondern die Sprache selbst wird nun in der Überwindung nationaler Beschränkungen in einem dialogischen Prozeß zum Ort eines bikulturellen Kulturgedächtnisses. (Pugliese 74)

If Biondi’s novel ultimately remains rather obscure and seems to affirm that this journey has apparently not brought the protagonist where he wanted to be, there is one thing that proves to be successful, and it is the act of writing itself. As Amodeo rightly

³⁶ On the idea of freedom from any past cultural attachment or influence, see also Julia Kristeva, p. 15

³⁷ “Capable of bringing to life moments and spaces where every interlocutor can feel at peace with his past in order to reinforce his development in the present.”

suggests, writing enables Dario to give voice to his past and interestingly enough, as we have seen, not in his mother tongue.

Die Herkunft, die zunächst keine Sprache hatte, und doch diktatorisch das Leben bestimmte wird immer noch das Leben bestimmen, aber sie ist am Ende des Romans zur Sprache gekommen, und zwar kurioserweise zu der Sprache, in der sie sich nicht abgespielt hat: Der Roman ist auf Deutsch geschrieben. (49)

Dario's journey to Italy becomes then the allegory for a special homecoming within language, a metaphorical union of the past and the present that takes place within the realm of the German language. It is not a return to the past, rather a "translation" — in a revised sense of the term — or a re-inscription of Dario's memories in the very present of his German language.³⁸

³⁸ On this see also Pugliese p. 106. She talks about the origins which are "neu geschrieben und neu erschrieben."

3

The Seductions of Homecoming¹

In the beginning of a folktale in Propp's model, there must be a disequilibrium of some kind; the hero must leave home before anything in the story can happen. Thereafter, the point of the story is to get home again – either to one's original home or, by marrying the princess, to a new kingdom. Home is the beginning and the end, the "long" or "last" home.

Margaret Morse, **Home** 70

3.1 Introduction

One of the main concerns of transnational, accented filmmaking is, according to Hamid Naficy, the controversial relationship that hybrid identities establish with territory, roots, and geography.² The presence of open, closed or border space/time representations within these films highlights this preoccupation and emphasizes even more the opposition between homeland and notions like immigration, exile, and diaspora. Accented filmmakers, says Naficy, "cross many borders and engage in many deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys, which take several forms, including home-seeking journeys of homelessness and homecoming journeys" (Naficy "Home" 5).

¹ I take this title from the article by Rey Chow, in "Rethinking Third Cinema," Anthony Guneratne, Wimal Dissanayake, (Ed.), London ; New York : Routledge, 2003

² "Accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. Consequently, they are simultaneously local and global, and they resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that they benefit from them. As such, the best of the accented films signify and signify upon the conditions both of exile and diaspora and of cinema. They signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers. They signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism." (Naficy *Accented* 1)

My aim in this chapter is to analyze how Fatih Akin explores notions of birth, race, and ethnicity in his films *Head on (Gegen die Wand)* (2004), *Solino* (2002) and *The edge of heaven (Auf der anderen Seite)* (2007), and how he postulates that the search for “roots” and “rootedness” in transnational identities leads to journeys that always end with a homecoming. They are journeys though that “are not just physical and territorial but are also deeply psychological and philosophical.” They become “journeys of identity,” during which “old identities are sometimes shed and new ones refashioned” (Naficy *Accented* 6). In particular, I will examine how Fatih Akin problematizes the idea of a return home in new ways which call for an innovative discussion of the term “homecoming” itself and of its nuances. In his stories of immigrant and transnational identities, traveling takes different forms: either as a journey back to find lost (often idealized) roots, or as a desperate attempt to escape a disappointing, unsuccessful reality to find shelter in a remote and apparently idyllic place. Akin’s films depict various ideas of physical and psychological journeys and returns, calling into question the very idea of home, homecoming, and belonging.

My study starts by taking into consideration, first of all, the notion of *space* and specifically the idea of *home* in these films, understood as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “a place, region or state to which one properly belongs, on which one’s affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction” (Morse 68). A detailed analysis of some of the spaces and the mise-en-scene of these movies will demonstrate that the protagonists of Akin’s stories inhabit spaces that are often claustrophobic and closed; places in which they have lost their freedom or have no longer sense of security and protection. Lacking a real feeling of being at home, these characters become

metaphorically home-less within their condition of exile and cultural hybridity. The use of Bakhtin's notion of *chronotope*, a category which describes both spatial and the temporal configurations, helps Naficy relate in different ways displaced or transnational identities to territory and their roots. Thus, while in most cases homeland is represented as an idyllic place to which to return, in others, on the contrary, it becomes the complete opposite, a space to avoid. It is from their liminal position of a deep love for what was left behind, or of the most intense refusal of it, that these protagonists land in a new hybrid place, a third space in which borders fuse and chronotopes "are not just visual but also, and more importantly, synaesthetic, involving the entire human sensorium and memory" (Naficy *Accented* 153). From here, they attempt to establish a new relationship to the space in which they ultimately realize, however, that they are still linked to somewhere else. The final incapacity to adapt to a new environment is expressed by a growing sense of claustrophobia, which interestingly in Akin's movies invests not only the feminine world, as in the traditional early *Accented Cinema*, but extends also into a masculine world (Naficy "Phobic" 128). By problematizing the traditional categories of *Accented Cinema* and "using space subversively" (Fachinger 243), Akin thus elaborates a new depiction of the situation of immigrants and hybrid identities in Germany, in which even though gendered, the transnational cinematic production does not fall into the traditionally binary opposition, where home is maternal and the place of exile is coded as masculine. (Naficy *Accented* 154)

Akin's films ultimately deal with a "quest for Heimat, understood as a structuring absence as well as a utopian promise" (Daniela Berghahn 3). Drawing upon Daniela Berghahn's argument, which proposes Akin's movies as a sort of new "transnational

form of German *Heimat* film” (145-148), I look at how homecoming in these films is depicted as a return to *Heimat*. However, while Berghahn suggests that *Heimat* is an “unattainable utopia,” I argue that Akin’s movies show the protagonists’ real and tangible search for a place to call home, in which to discover first and foremost a sense of belonging. Analyzing the spaces and settings of these movies, I will demonstrate that the memory of a distant and lost ideal of *home* and the desire for recovering a sense of rootedness and belonging originates even before the actual, physical journeys that these characters undertake. Thus, they are journeys that end with a *home-coming*, understood here not only, traditionally, as a return to one’s roots, but in a very literal meaning of the word, as a final journey that brings/takes the protagonists to a place to call *home*. Eric Hobsbawm underlines a fundamental distinction between the terms of *home* and *Heimat*, in a manner that is fundamental for my argument: “Home, in the literal sense *Heim*, chez moi, is essentially private. Home in the wider sense *Heimat*, is essentially public [...] Heim belongs to me and mine and nobody else [...] Heimat is by definition collective. It cannot belong to us as individuals” (qtd in Morley 151). Drawing upon this distinction, I argue in fact that the protagonists of Akin’s movies cannot go back to a public Heimat, but only to private home.

Starting from Naficy’s suggestion that mise-en-scene carries a “heavier narrative burden than editing” for its “configuration of space and in the manner in which characters occupy the space or are occupied by it” (Naficy *Accented* 153-154), I will first turn my attention to see how the spaces and the environments add a further meaning to the final interpretation of the film. I will be using and questioning the categories of ‘*house*,’ ‘*home*,’ and ‘*homeland*’ making use of the category of *home*, with the abovementioned

definition, along with that of *house* understood instead as “the material place in which one lives” (Naficy “Home” 5). I will thus look at the various settings of the films and show how Akin renders the places inhabited by his protagonists as slowly suffocating and inhospitable (Naficy “Phobic” 129) and how the memory of lost culture and/or the desire for a place in which to feel at *home* is expressed in this negative reality. Furthermore, with the support of Margaret Morse and Laura Marks’s critical studies, I will engage in a critical analysis of these films that will incorporate not only the visual aspect of the mise-en-scene, but also the so-called “unrepresentable senses” such as touch, smell, and taste in order to see how they all may intervene to create a “sense of home” (Marks, xvi). I argue, in fact, that in these films Akin describes how the experience of displacement and the search for a lost home or a lost “sense of home” is also reinforced by the memories of the senses other than sight, which often come to surface instinctively and involuntarily. The presence of a sensory memory reinforces the idea of a special bond that the protagonists maintain with certain elements, which link them to their ethnic territory and culture. Looking for a sense of belonging as well as for domestic and private realms, Akin’s protagonists undertake real and symbolic journeys that ultimately allow them to restore a link to their lost roots and rediscover a special bond with a refused or abandoned culture and ethnicity (*Solino* and *Gegen die Wand*), or to newly establish familiar bonds with unfamiliar spaces (*Auf der anderen Seite*).

Finally, I agree with David Morley that this “search for a sense of place” should not at all be considered as a reactionary movement, aiming towards a pure and original past — as it is argued in traditional criticism (Morley 157) — rather, it has to be understood as dynamic movement looking forward and establishing a wider system of

relations and a connection to the outside world (Morley 157). In other words, Morley is attempting to offer a “progressive notion of home” which is particularly true for displaced and hybrid identities and originates precisely from the intercultural exchanges between the “new” and the “old” self and of its spaces. (152) In fact, as Naficy also highlights, exilic transnational identities entertain a controversial relationship with the host society and with the homeland, so that — as Akin’s de-territorialized characters show — they establish a dynamic relationship with the space they inhabit, and the world around them. From their interstitial location, they are free identities yet still “in the grips of both the old and the new, the before and the after” (Naficy 2001: 208). This will ultimately bring them to articulate renewed types of bonds with the spaces they (re)discover.

In *Gegen die Wand*, Cahit (Birol Ünel) and Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), two German-speaking people of Turkish descent meet in a psychiatric hospital in Hamburg, where they are brought after trying to commit suicide. Sibel, who had already attempted suicide, sees in death the only way to escape the rigid rules of her conservative Turkish family. Despising their Turkish origins but unable to really integrate in German society, both live at the margins of Hamburg society. In the hospital Sibel approaches Cahit asking him to get formally married, so that she can finally be free from her restrictive family. Cahit initially refuses, but he is eventually convinced to help her, and the two finally fall in love with each other. Things are complicated when Cahit kills Sibel’s lover out of jealousy and is put in prison. Disowned by her family, Sibel goes to Istanbul, where Cahit follows her once he is out of prison. Despite their refusal of origins, at the end both protagonists surprisingly decide to return and remain in Turkey. As Petra Fachinger has rightly

argued, homecoming gives the characters the chance for a new beginning, but, as I will later point out, it is not only an ideal return to a lost country, rather, first of all, an internal return to a sense of “Turkishness” that starts in Germany, before the actual physical journey back to Turkey. Rediscovering a lost “Turkish” side within their identity allows them to recover a sense of familiarity with their ethnical origins and a sort of domesticity. The reemergence of this hidden side will become visible only successively in the physical return to that culture.

Solino (2004) tells the story of the Amato family — consisting of father Romano (Gigi Savoia), mother Rosa (Antonella Attili), and their sons Giancarlo (Moritz Bleibtreu) and Gigi (Barnaby Metschurat) — who, at the end of the 1950ies, leave the small Italian town of Solino to start a new and more prosperous life in Germany. After initial difficulties of adaptation, Romano leaves his job in the mines, and decides with Rosa to open a restaurant. Despite the successful business, Rosa is unhappy and wants to return home. When she gets sick, and finds out that her husband is cheating on her, she leaves Germany to return to Solino. In the meantime the family ties between the brothers are also slowly falling apart. As in *Gegen die Wand*, *Solino* ends with two homecomings. Here, however, Rosa’s desired return home stands in contrast to her son Gigi’s forced homecoming, which only with time will turn out to be successful. The restorative power of this film, which seems to suggest that happiness can be found only in the return back home, is not only expressed by the happy ending of Gigi and Rosa’s life in Italy, but it is also reinforced by the isolation and unsuccessful life of Romano and Giancarlo, who remain in Germany.

While both *Gegen die Wand* and *Solino*, even if in very different ways, still maintain traditional elements in the elaboration of the condition of the immigrant character and of the return home, Akin's latest film *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007) requires an interpretation on a completely separate level. It is a film that tells various stories intersecting with each other, and in which we observe a series of journeys and displacements. Ali (Tuncel Kurtiz), a Turkish German widower who lives in Bremen and is in search for company, asks the Turkish prostitute Yeter (Nursel Köse) to move in with him. His son Nejat (Baki Davrak), a professor of German literature, is initially unhappy with his father's new living situation, but finally accepts her. One day, in a moment of rage, Ali kills Yeter and is put in prison. Out of regret, his son moves to Turkey in search of Yeter's daughter Ayten (Nurgül Yeşilçay), a political rebel who in the meantime has left the country to go to Germany. While Nejat looks for Ayten in Istanbul, she in vain looks for her mother in Bremen. Here she meets the German student Lotte (Patrycia Ziolkowska), who offers to help her, against her mother's will. Susanne (Hanna Schygulla) completely disapproves of the ambiguous friendship between the two, but understands that she is losing her daughter when Ayten is denied a residence permit in Germany and is sent back to Turkey. Like victims of an ironic game of destiny, each of the protagonists undertakes different journeys, during which their paths meet, clash, and separate again until they reach an ending point. By observing these various journeys and traveling, I argue here that the protagonists' final stations can all be defined as homecomings.

In the second part of this chapter, I will show how the sound and the soundtracks of *Gegen die Wand* and *Solino* in particular become a fundamental element that

reinforces the internal contradictions of the protagonists' identities. The mixture of different musical genres presented in these two films functions as a mirror of the protagonists' internal hybridity – resulting from their life spent across cultures – while it also suggests a local and a global nature of these movies and of their protagonists at the same time. Akin's cinema, perfectly embedded in an international panorama, shows us in this way another, innovative function of transnational cinema, in that its global and local concerns clearly “have overtaken national ones” (Gemünden 181). Interestingly, Akin uses the music in a completely different way in *Auf der anderen Seite*. Here he seems to be less concerned with the power that a mix of different genres of music can create. Instead he uses a soundtrack composed completely of Turkish and Middle Eastern songs which, in different ways, accompany the protagonists along their travels.

3.2. *Gegen die Wand*: Homecoming as a Way of Re-establishing a Link to a Lost Culture

When the movie *Gegen die Wand* starts, both protagonists, Cahit and Sibel, live in Hamburg. Both of them however, live a dissatisfied life at the margins of German society. A closer look at some scenes in which the environment is particularly significant will shed light on the personality of the characters, helping us better understand more of their intricate and complicated personalities and identity crises. Cahit and Sibel's first meeting takes place in an aseptic hospital where both are kept after attempting suicide. When the set moves to their respective *houses* the atmosphere does not get better. The bar in which Cahit works at night collecting empty bottles is dark and oppressive as is his

dark, messy, and dirty apartment, which is filled with empty beer cans and cigarettes butts. Sibel lives still with her parents. Her house, even if neat and clean, is psychologically equally oppressive — the rooms are all very small — and her uneasiness there and with her family is rather evident. The *mise-en-scène* in both settings consists of closed locations and dark lighting, which immediately suggest a sense of claustrophobia. To use Morse's words, these spaces are "empty shells" (68) in which the protagonists do not feel a sense of belonging and start instead to think that there is some other place in which they would have felt more at home.

Within this initial oppressive setting, the two characters start a process of re-definition of the space in which they live while attempting to express their real personality and needs. The rediscovery of lost smells, tastes, and physical sensations will help them reestablish the link to their Turkish background that is still present but denied and forgotten in their German existence. Victoria Fincham proposes that the characters are forced to decide between Germany or Turkey and that:

This conflict is shown by the fact that Sibel and Cahit seem to change the extent to which they feel more German or more Turkish as their personal lives becomes complicated. That is to say, they cannot achieve a balance between a German and a Turkish identity, but shift between the two until eventually the instability and incompatibility of the 'two worlds' becomes unbearable and a choice must be made. (Fincham 50)

While the two countries and cultures appear as binary oppositions, what is at stake here is a process of hybridization and the acceptance of hybridity. If, for Fincham, the second generation represented in these films "seem to look beyond race, gender and ethnicity when forming relationships and their identities" (51), I will investigate how Akin problematizes these very notions of race, ethnicity or even birth. By observing that they instinctively establish links between people and a certain territory, I will look at how

some of the values transmitted through the family bonds, in fact, seem to be unconsciously always at work within these characters' personalities and play a great role in their identity conflicts and formation. This process of unveiling a cultural connection to one's origins will take place in gradual steps during which — through the memory of the senses — the characters will first restore a familiarity to the lost places of their familial histories recreating a sense of home in the foreign country, only to undertake later a physical journey to the homeland.

Although Cahit has completely rejected his Turkish origins, it is necessary to emphasize that he is not integrated in German society either. He conducts a life that has lost any meaning and sense, and in fact he drives himself against a wall with the precise intention of killing himself (Fincham 63).³ His return to Turkey, which physically takes place after he comes out of prison, originates, I argue, much earlier, when he decides to marry Sibel. From having no contact at all to his Turkish past, except for one friend, Cahit slowly reestablishes the connection to the Turkish world while he is still in Germany, through Sibel and her family. The decision to marry her is taken without a genuine interest for her, but it turns out to be what activates Cahit's first movement into a future in which he finds out about his past. By accepting to marry her, in fact, Cahit also inevitably, even though still unconsciously, accepts the start of a symbolic journey back to his Turkish past.

The process of reconfiguring his identity that Cahit is about to undergo is emblematically represented by a self-cleansing and, in particular, with the cutting of his hair. His uneasiness towards a world that has become foreign to him is shown in several

³ Fairbairn proposes the interesting distinction between self-harm and attempted suicide: 'whether a given act is a suicide depends not on whether the individual ends up alive or dead, but on whether in acting, death was what he wished for and intended (qtd. in Fincham 63).

scenes from the very beginning, but becomes particularly evident in the moment in which he meets Sibel's parents. Speaking a rather broken Turkish, Cahit makes up a story of his life and family, to create a suitable and convincing background for Sibel's family.

Although at this point his behavior only shows a still scornful attitude towards his ethnic origins — he plainly and shamelessly admits to Sibel's brother that he has “thrown his Turkish away”— he ultimately succeeds in pretending to be truly interested in her. From then on, we observe not only Cahit's rehabilitation, but also a restoration of his Turkish self. The wedding scene is, at this point, very interesting as it plays on the contradictory feelings that the two protagonists experience: on one side they are forced to follow Turkish traditions, against Cahit's will, and, on the other, under the effect of some drugs they also let themselves go and enjoy the music. After the initial refusal and reluctance to dance, in fact, Cahit begins to participate in the celebration, as the Turkish tradition requires, and, what is interesting here is that he appears to truly enjoy the music and the dancing. Turkishness seems to be acceptable only in an out-of-body/mind state and under the effect of drugs.

As a child of the second generation, Sibel's relationship to her Turkish past presents other types of complications and concerns. In Germany, Sibel is forced to strictly follow the Turkish traditions, constantly controlled by the male figures of her family. As a way to express her refusal of this life, she resorts to multiple suicide attempts, although as Fincham proposes, with no real intention of ending her life, but rather of just perpetrating self-harm (63). It is when all her attempts fail that she starts to realize how only by following those very traditions, or pretending to do so, will she be able to find a way towards freedom. “Exchanging” her freedom with the promise to take

care of Cahit's apartment, Sibel enters a disgusting and filthy place, a clear mirror of Cahit's internal degradation and hatred of life. She decides to become his (house)wife and with the patience and perseverance of someone who is fighting for her freedom, she succeeds in transforming his disgusting house into a very feminine-coded *home*. Little by little Cahit too, at first annoyed by this intrusion, acquires more confidence with her and gets used to her presence. Sibel's smell is all around the house, and he slowly falls in love with her. In this atmosphere, the two get closer and start behaving like a real couple.

The scene of the Turkish dinner that Sibel prepares for Cahit one night suggests a real sense of familiarity and home for the first time, and most of all a strong link to their common Turkish background. The scene lasts for a few minutes, while the close-ups of the camera capture every detail in the preparation of the food. A traditional instrumental Turkish music accompanies Sibel's looks and actions which she carefully carries out like a ritual. The preparation of the dinner shows a side of Sibel proud to be Turkish — which we had not seen before — and as one who has learned traditions and is able to pass them on. Also Cahit, who until now seemed to be displeased by anything Turkish, appears to enjoy the food very much. It is not the first time now that we see him sincerely enjoying the traditions of his ethnic culture. While the scene conveys the enjoyment of Turkish food, the two are portrayed for the first time as a couple in a real *home*.

Analyzing this scene further and considering the suggestions of Laura Marks on the multisensory effects of transcultural cinema, we can notice further details demonstrating the importance of this episode. The images suggest the colorful world of Turkish traditions and, with some clichéd aspects of food and ethnicity, present a scene almost as in a cooking show.



Ill. 1 *Cooking Scene*, *Gegen die Wand*

The scene appeals to other senses as well. It is a very complex synesthetic construction.

Marks argues:

By appealing to one sense in order to represent the experience of another, cinema appeals to the integration and commutation of sensory experience within the body [...] audiovisual images call up conscious, unconscious, and non-symbolic associations with touch, taste and smell, which themselves are not experienced as separate. (222)

On a similar note, Naficy writes that smell, taste, and touch “often provide more than sight and hearing, poignant reminders of difference and of separation from homeland” sustaining again this idea that cinema “calls upon collective sensory experiences to respond to exiles’ longing for their homeland” (Naficy *Accented* 153-156).

If it is true, as Marks argues, that memory can work multisensorially (22), the food also becomes an “important source of memory” (Marks 224). Turkish smells and tastes may be unfamiliar to many of us viewers; however, the film “encourages us [also F.F.] to engage with them” (223). In this way, the film acquires also for us another level of significance and “a means of access to an ultimately synesthetic experience” (223). In

this scene, Cahit eats voraciously and plainly admits that it was not at all a bad idea to marry Sibel after all. Therefore, although Cahit's love for Turkish food clashes with his initial hatred of the culture, this scene shows how he is unconsciously linked to the Turkish and how they slowly come closer to each other.



Ill. 2 Dinner, Gegen die Wand

While Cahit is slowly falling in love with Sibel, we also realize that he entertains a much stronger link with Turkey than it seemed at the beginning. As with the food, Turkish music also seems to signify for him, much more than he wants to admit. Cahit in fact enjoys going to clubs and bars with Sibel, even where modern Turkish music is played. It is significant also that after realizing his love for Sibel, Cahit attempts to declare his feelings within a Turkish environment of a bar and accompanied by modern Turkish pop music. The two get closer as their Turkish roots acquire more importance within their newly established relationship. In the scene following the one in the bar, we see Sibel cleaning Cahit's wounds from a fight. When the two return home something has already changed between them and the clear sign of it is Sibel leaving the door of her room open. Cahit accepts the clear invitation to enter, however, even though technically married, they do not make love in the end. Both Cahit and Sibel, so sexually open and transgressive, seem here to be subject to more conservative religious and cultural values

in marriage and give sexual union a higher and deeper value as customary in Turkish tradition.⁴

The two protagonists have already fallen in love but the circumstances separate them and from now on the film takes a brutal and violent turn. One day in a bar, Cahit kills Nico, out of jealousy. He is taken to prison, and Sibel is rejected by her family. While Cahit is in prison, the shame of Sibel's family is so intense that she decides to leave Germany and take shelter at her cousin Selma's, a divorced businesswoman in Istanbul. Her departure becomes a flight from a society and a culture of which she so desperately wanted to be a part. Sibel's return to Turkey is thus an imposed journey she had never planned nor conceived of before. Paradoxically, she returns to a purported home, from which she is estranged and with which she is unfamiliar. At this point the film seems to take it for granted that after the rejection by her family, the only thing left for Sibel to do is to go back to Turkey. But why Turkey and not any other Western European country, for example, where she knew she would surely be able to live in freedom and independence? Why does Istanbul, a place that so far she obviously associates with strict rules and an absence of freedom, become the first and only place to which to escape? Turkey seems to be working here as an unknown and distant part of her identity, which attracts her and may offer her the protection that she now needs. These questions are further problematized by the way in which Istanbul is presented, as an interesting mixture of modern and traditional – which in the film is invariably patriarchal. Sibel tries to settle in a city which has become far more modern than she could have ever imagined. There, she falls back into her suicidal, destructive mode, conducts a

⁴ Of course, a similar understanding of marriage and sexual union can be found in other traditions as well.

mechanical life as a cleaning lady in her cousin's hotel, and is trapped in a claustrophobic small universe made of rigid work. She soon also breaks off all contact with her cousin Selma and is too self absorbed to be able to express her pain. If Sibel's return to Turkey is a flight from a family who has disowned her and it is a return to a distant, unknown "homeland," Cahit's return to Turkey is initially mainly determined by the desire to find Sibel again and reunite with her. Turkey hardly qualifies as homeland for both, and especially for him, yet the decision to go back to Turkey represents a strong break with the German part of their identity and with their unsuccessful and unhappy life in Hamburg.

The moment of their reunification, during which they also finally consummate their marriage, interestingly takes place in the confined small room of the hotel⁵ and in an adulterous context. At this point, despite the initial introduction and description of spaces in a transnational setting, we shall not fall into the easy equation of small and claustrophobic versus open and free. Naficy, in fact, argues that:

It must be emphasized, however, that the connotations of the open, closed, and transitional forms do not reside inherently or permanently in these forms; their significance and meaning must be derived from the contexts in which they are deployed. That is why [...] closed spatiality [...] sometimes is interpreted by the accented films as entrapment and other times as safety and liberation. (Naficy 2001: 154)

Although both the spatial and the temporal settings are closed and constrained, the impression we have here is not of closure and claustrophobia, but rather of freedom and openness. This openness is emphasized by the fact that the protagonists move freely between the room and the balcony. In this private space of a "shabby-chic Western hotel" (Naqvi) separated from Istanbul, the two lovers are finally given the chance to express

⁵ It is interesting to note how the hotel, built in a turn-of-the-century building, modeled after the Grand Hotels of Western Europe, greatly contrasts with the hotel of Sibel's cousin.

their love to each other, remaining safe from view of other people and far from everyday reality. Within this utopian space, they dream of the possibility of a new life in Turkey and of a future together.

As mentioned previously, it is significant that both characters decide to go back to a place they earlier despised. Sibel's return, in particular, is the more controversial and open to interpretation, as she is portrayed at the end conducting precisely that life that she wanted to avoid. The traditional behaviors and principles she refused at the beginning seem now to be part of her life. The critics have interpreted this homecoming in several ways, coming to different conclusions. Fachinger, as mentioned at the beginning, points out that going to Turkey gives them both the chance for a "radical new beginning" (257), yet she does not elaborate further. In a more penetrating analysis, Daniela Berghahn affirms that only after Cahit and Sibel "are reunited at last in Istanbul they exorcise and finally overcome their *kara sevda*, their dark passion" (15), and they can come back to normal life. While Berghahn focuses more on the dark and melancholic side of Sibel and Cahit's love and to a typical traditional Turkish "addiction to catastrophe" (15), in order to interpret Cahit and Sibel's return to a land "fundamentally alien to them" (14), I argue instead that, despite the fact that Turkey may be physically "alien" to them, its culture is actually still actively part of them. As I have shown, they slowly recover or better yet rediscover the "Turkish" side of their identity even before the concrete and physical homecoming.

Concerning Sibel's renunciation of a life with Cahit for a life with her new boyfriend/husband, I argue that it is only this type of life, definitely calmer and trouble-free, that can help her fulfill that desire of *home* previously discussed. It is not, I believe,

an incapacity to fight, as it may appear at first. Instead, I see here a process of maturation which incorporates some lost family values and domestic rituals as well as looks forward toward a sort of new “Turkishness.” Her home-coming thus is translated into a creation of a new microstructure organized according to Turkish principles and protected from outside threats. It is in this newly created space with her new boyfriend and her daughter that she is finally able to find a place “on which one’s affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction.”⁶ This conclusion however can be read positively only if we consider that this new and resigned Sibel has grown up, is less self-absorbed and finally aware that her actions affect other people’s lives. The possibility of a life with Cahit in the small town of Mersin is just a romantic dream, an idyll in which the new Sibel can no longer believe, while the two days of passion just reinforce the romanticism of their love situation, and its irreality. As for Cahit, we are left with the doubt whether by going to Mersin he will really be able to find a new home, or whether, as it often happens to many returning immigrants, his homecoming will be just as difficult as immigration is in most cases. As Naficy again points out in fact: “return is rarely the grand homecoming that many of them desire, for both the exiles and the homelands have in the meantime undergone unexpected or unwanted transformations” (Naficy *Accented* 232). The film ends with the setting of the sun, depicting Cahit leaving Istanbul for a new — maybe last — journey back to his birthplace. While the melancholic song that accompanies these last scenes emphasizes the dramatic moment, we realize that Cahit, who has in vain waited for Sibel, is leaving to retreat to an even more private and remote place.

⁶ See definition of ‘home’

3.3. *Solino*: Homecoming with a Restorative Aim

In *Solino* the oppositions of traditions on the one side and the new reality in Germany on the other is much clearer. A closer analysis of the spaces here will provide evidence for this, as the contrast between open and closed spaces is quite evident. The plot is based on the story of an Italian family that moves from a little town in the south of Italy to the most industrial area of Germany in the early sixties, during the first major wave of immigration after 1945. While the narrative is rather clichéd and revolves around the love-hate relationship between the two brothers, it is the mise-en-scene and the representation of environments and spaces which add interesting information to the overall interpretation of the film and shed more light on transnational identities and homecoming. *Solino*, in fact, like *Gegen die Wand*, ends with two of the characters returning home.

The film establishes from the very beginning a strong contrast between the open and friendly spaces in Italy, versus the new space in Germany that gradually and inexorably becomes more and more claustrophobic. From the very beginning, Italy is characterized by images of countryside and open spaces; and it is not by chance that the small town in which part of the story takes place is called Solino, literally “little sun.” It is a magical place, in Bakhtin’s words it would be an “idyllic chronotope,” where “all temporal boundaries are blurred thanks to the unity of place” (qtd in Naficy *Accented* 155).

In contrast to these peaceful images of Italy’s open spaces, where the characters experience a sense of safety and belonging, there is Germany, where the whole family moves, following the father’s decision. If in Solino the sun always shines, in Duisburg,

Germany, it is rainy and cold. Duisburg's grey houses, a reminder of post-war typical Ruhrpott houses, have big, but closed windows. As if to reinforce the clash between Italy and Germany, the shot that captures the house where they are going to live lasts over ten seconds with no sound. This contrasts greatly with Solino's houses with open doors. While Romano, the father, is the only one enthusiastic to be there, Rosa, his wife, expresses all her disappointment and uneasiness for being in a place in which she does not feel at home. The sad realization that she is now somewhere else starts from the simplest things she cannot find any more. In one scene in which she is at a small local grocer Rosa looks at the vegetables with frustration and astonishment. Unable to buy something that even vaguely resembles what she normally finds in Italy, she feels lost as she cannot find familiar smells and sights around her.⁷

The growing sense of claustrophobia that characterizes Germany is suggested by several closed and open places, involving both feminine and masculine characters. Rosa's first feelings of disorientation, in fact, are immediately followed by an intense sense of claustrophobia experienced also by Romano. Inside the mines where he is called to work, Romano almost has a panic attack that eventually forces him to quit the job. It is a short but intense scene in which Romano is inside a noisy, dark and oppressive space. A constrained shot, which follows his movements, reveals the complete absence of natural light and the impossibility of moving around too much. Within a restricted space, where all the men are forced to stay very close to each other, Romano, and the audience with him, experiences a sense of claustrophobia. Moreover, the intense and metallic sound of the machines forbids any communication whatsoever. The irrevocable decision to leave

⁷ "More than someone who has always lived in one place, the exile is acutely aware of his or her sensuous geographies both of the new land and the one left behind" (Laura Marks 231).

that same job that had been the reason for their move to Germany also causes the first fracture in the relationship between Romano and Rosa. Within this already fragile setting, the idea of opening a restaurant immediately becomes an exciting alternative which, however, fades away very soon. The restaurant, in fact, that was supposed to become a sort of “little Italy” and a point of reference for all Italians in Duisburg, turns instead into another closed and almost claustrophobic space. In particular the kitchen where Rosa spends most of the time is a tiny room underground with a very small window. It is in this small place that things between Romano and Rosa start irreversibly falling apart. In one of the scenes in which they have another argument, the *mise-en-scène* is more eloquent than the words between them. The shot composition is fixed and the camera angle captures a restricted space, made even smaller by the kitchen walls framing and reducing the visual field and by the presence of three people, Romano, Rosa and Gigi. Inside this small space Rosa can barely move and vainly attempts to react to a life and a place she has not chosen. Of this scene, in particular, Akin informs us, that he was trying to recreate a kind of triptych with the three family members and hint at the religious topic that runs through *Solino*⁸ — which he later calls a very “Catholic film.”⁹

⁸ Fatih Akin, audio commentary of the film’s DVD release (2003)

⁹ Talking about another scene, Akin clearly states that this film has a lot of religious hints: the topics of guilt, the ‘Cain and Abel’ theme with the two brothers etc.



Ill. 3 In the Kitchen, Solino

In time, although confined in a limited space where there is only artificial light and no open doors as in Italy, Rosa manages to make of the kitchen her own little place, in which she recreates a familiar and domestic space, surrounded by the smells and the flavors with which she grew up. In the discussion of *Gegen die Wand*, I pointed out the scene in which Sibel is cooking the traditional dinner for Cahit and how this simple gesture becomes crucial in the strengthening of their relationship. There, we have seen how precisely with the food, the smells, and the taste, the characters become closer, as if some sensations, like smell, were enough to tie them to Turkey again. In *Solino*, where the story revolves around a restaurant, the images of food and cooking clearly abound. Rosa's desire to be back in Italy and to recreate the lost domestic and familiar space is then evidently suggested also by the typical Italian dishes she is able to make. The images of cooking and the typical Italian food she makes add an ethnic element to the film that serve here to recreate "the sense of home." They also help Rosa to feel closer to the traditions she is afraid to lose and keep her closer to her roots and the places she belongs

to. Within this context, Romano's cheating on her with a German woman, which takes place in the kitchen, is twice as offensive to her, first because this gesture ultimately destroys her marriage and the unity of the family, secondly because it is perceived by Rosa as a violation of her own space. Standing in her kitchen, Rosa can only disgustedly close her eyes in front of her husband's adulterous act. Doubly betrayed, she realizes that even the family ties that were keeping her close to her roots are gone, and she decides to leave Romano for good.

In the meantime, the two brothers have left the paternal house in an act of rebellion, refusing to continue to work for their father. While Giancarlo only wants to maintain his job as a mechanic, Gigi is still pursuing his dream of making movies and becoming a film director. At this point Akin is doing more than just showing first generation immigrants rebelling against some imposed family traditions. He is, in fact, inserting the brothers' reaction within the broader international context of the youth revolutions of the late sixties. From a couple of scenes that precede Gigi and Giancarlo's departure from the house, — it is now 1974 in the film — we understand that the two are perfectly embedded within the time-frame of that period of great social revolutions. One night, while the parents are working in the restaurant, they organize a party in which drugs circulate freely and sex is done with no restrictions. When the parents come back home and find their house occupied by a mass of unknown drunk people, the already fragile relationship between the father and the two sons is definitely compromised. Under the effect of some drugs Gigi and Giancarlo start seeing their grandfather's picture animated and making vulgar gestures. Mocking their father, who is at this point just yelling at them, and by extension the family rules through the picture of the grandfather,

Akin, once again, reverses the characters roles, undermining stereotypes and genre conventions, while inserting transnational issues within the temporal references of that time. Giancarlo and Gigi's departure from the paternal house becomes both a reaction of two young individuals claiming their aspirations and dreams within a generational conflict and a rejection of their Italian values of strong family ties. To reinforce their desire for liberation, they decide to move in with Jo, who represents German female emancipation very much in contrast with Rosa and as we will see later, even more in contrast with Ada.

In the same way as the restaurant had initially represented a moment of relief from the austere German environment and a chance to create a unique space in which to revitalize lost memories, the brothers' apartment is also at first a space of hope and great expectations. The excitement for the restoration and the redecoration of the apartment brings the three together and sets the basis for the love story between Gigi and Jo. However, as anticipated earlier, the masculine spaces are destined to become claustrophobic, and in fact after the initial excitement fades away, Gigi and Giancarlo face the reality of having to share a very small room, in which their two beds barely fit. The impractical logistics of this double room is emphasized by the very fact that in order to go out they have to move one of the beds blocking the door or use the window. The scenes filmed in this space are always restricted in their *mise-en-scène* with very fixed shot compositions. The brother's tiny bedroom, with one of the beds in front of the door, reinforces the impossibility of movement, suggesting enclosure. When the mother moves in with them after leaving her husband, the sense of enclosure and suffocation grows. Confined in this small apartment, Gigi, Giancarlo, and Rosa experience a high level of

claustrophobia, a sensation that increases even further when thinking back to the open and sunny spatial dimensions of Italy.

As the story goes on, it is clear that the settings in Germany are always either interior locations and closed spaces with unnatural lighting, or open spaces, like the mines, which are dark and dismal. In both cases the very dark shot compositions intensify a mood of restriction, and amplify the sense of uneasiness. Within this constrained setting, even the tragic scene of the grandfather's death at the beginning, in which the bird flying into a house through the open door now suggests an open space and direct contact with outside nature. Akin is here reversing a stereotype (the flying bird inside the house normally signifying bad luck) to question transnational issues and to emphasize at the same time the growth of a physical and a psychological claustrophobia of the characters living in Germany. As far as the temporal dimension is concerned the memory of Italy is "experienced retroactively by means of a nostalgically reconstructed past or a lost Eden" while, on the opposite side, the time spent in Germany "is driven by panic and fear narratives, in essence, a form of temporal claustrophobia, in which the plot centers on pursuit, entrapment, and escape" (Naficy *Accented* 153) — which is in particularly true in the case of Rosa.

As for the two types of homecoming in *Solino*, for Rosa it is clearly a nostalgic return shaped by the continuous dream of going back and made more and more urgent by her incapacity to adjust to life in Germany; for Gigi, instead, it is a forced return to a place and a land he does not consider home anymore. As in a traditional accented movie, Rosa's desire to go back and her incapacity to adapt to the new place create a mythical image of the homeland left behind. While she lives in Germany with the constant hope of

a return to Italy, the images of Solino, its nature and its landscape are vivid in her mind and always remembered in a nostalgic vein. Berghahn suggests to look at this term in its meaning as explained by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688 who identified ‘nostalgia’ as an unfulfilled yearning and melancholia to return to one’s *Heimat*” (9). It is not only an absent smell, or a lost taste, but sometimes also an object “a small, insignificant object taken into exile” that can easily turn into “a powerful synecdoche for the lost house” (Naficy “Home” 6). Thus, such objects like Gigi’s little photo projector with pictures of Solino which he takes with him, or the picture of the grandfather — which is the very first thing that Rosa places in the new house as soon as she enters — establish direct ties to the past, emphasizing the lost idyll. They become a bond to what was left behind and symbolic pieces of that territory that the characters — at the beginning of the film it is mainly Rosa and little Gigi — fear to lose.

Once she has lost her husband and her sons also move out, Rosa’s new home in Germany falls apart and she realizes soon that she has no reasons left to remain there. As if the difficulties of adjustment and Romano’s betrayal were not enough, Rosa also falls ill which further complicates her stay in Germany. Rosa’s decision to go back home seems at this point irreversible. As we observe her physical journey back to Italy, we realize that this very journey is at the same time also a psychological one. In fact Rosa, diagnosed in Germany with a deadly illness, goes home and amazingly recovers. As Berghahn suggests, Rosa is nothing else but “homesick” and she “miraculously recovers from her fatal illness (9). By contrast, Gigi’s return to Italy is, like Sibel’s in *Gegen Die Wand*, at first an unplanned return. Unable to leave his mother alone while she is sick, Gigi decides to accompany and assist her with the initial intention to remain there a

limited time and with the promise of his brother Giancarlo to soon come and take his place. As time goes on and Rosa settles down again in Italy, Gigi waits in vain for his brother to come. When Giancarlo openly refuses to go back to Italy and to spend some time with their mother, Gigi does not have the courage to leave her alone. Driven by a strong attachment to her and naively ignoring the fact that Giancarlo is in the meantime also working to destroy his relationship with his girlfriend Jo by interfering in their communication — Giancarlo hides and later destroys the postcards Gigi sends to Jo — Gigi decides to remain in Italy and attempts to adjust to life in Solino again. Yet Italy is not a familiar place for him any longer, and he is forced to face again the difficulties of a country that has become foreign to him.

While for Rosa the return to Solino represents the metaphorical end of her physical suffering, by going back Gigi experiences a period of interior suffering and paradoxically his return to Italy is initially a radical new immigration rather than a homecoming. This is demonstrated in a later, very funny scene in which Ada is teaching him how to pronounce correctly in Italian again. This homecoming turns into something positive for him only with time and against all expectations, giving him the chance for success both in his private life as in his career. Gigi, who was the first one to learn German and to have a German girlfriend, is unexpectedly able to adjust again to life in Italy. Like Istanbul for Sibel, Solino becomes a new home for Gigi. Here, he decides to restore an old movie theatre and pursue once again his dream of making films. Surprisingly, as Berghahn notes: “Solino provides ample opportunities to fulfill Gigi’s ambitions as a filmmaker: not only does the environment inspire him to make a most

poetic short film but he also re-opens the local open air cinema turning it into a magical space” (9).

Gigi’s realization of his dreams gives Akin’s movie a new self-reflexive connotation, which at this point should not be overlooked. From the passion for photography to that of making films, Akin interweaves the history of Italian immigration to Germany with that of making films and in particular to the tradition of Italian cinema. Akin indeed builds some interesting intertextual connections with the Italian cinematic tradition into *Solino*, positioning the film as *Accented Cinema* within a new and broader perspective.

Gigi’s little photo projector with idyllic pictures of Solino is what first allows him to maintain the link to Italy. When Giancarlo breaks it out of jealousy, the little projector becomes the excuse to establish a long lasting friendship with their neighbor, a German photographer, from whom he will later receive his first camera. Yet, the real encounter with cinema takes place when Romano’s restaurant is chosen to become the setting for a historical movie on the Second World War — which also instigates Rosa’s initial misunderstanding and increases, for a moment, her utter dislike of Germany. Here the meeting with the rude and churlish movie director, Mr. Baldi, will inspire Gigi’s passion for the cinema. From him he will learn the best lesson of his life: “*Vivere con ardore e passione*,” or “live your life with enthusiasm and passion,” a lesson that Gigi will keep in mind and attempt to follow.

It is primarily Gigi's passion for the cinema and filmmaking that will allow him to re-establish a direct link to Italy, to Italian culture, and its cinematic tradition.¹⁰ With the new camera Gigi films a documentary on the working conditions in Germany, which, in its style clearly evokes Italian Neorealism — with the only difference that from the post-war setting typical of Neorealism, Gigi moves to observe the condition of the immigrant workers in the Ruhr. Once in Italy he reopens and renovates the cinema theater and changes his film entirely and from the neorealism he now produces apolitical comedy, which immediately obtains the audience's positive reception and enjoyment.

What connects this movie to Italian cinema is not only Gigi's interest in cinema, but, as Berghahn also notes (9), a series of more or less clear intertextual references to one of the most popular movies in the Italian cinematic tradition, Giuseppe Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (*Cinema Paradiso*, 1984). Despite Akin's claims that his movie more closely resembles Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (1960) than Tornatore's *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, which, he says he had not yet seen at the time of the shooting of *Solino*; the numerous citations of Tornatore's film are hard to be overlooked.¹¹ Little Gigi's enthusiasm for films and cinema clearly mirrors Tornatore's young protagonist, Totò, and his determination to help his friend Alfredo work in the movie theater of the small Sicilian town. Both films choose the flashback — a narrative device not infrequent

¹⁰ Akin affirms that the figure of the director should originally be Luchino Visconti, who in those years was shooting a film on the war. Only later the figure of the director became the fictional character Baldi. In: Akin comments on the film.

¹¹ Berghahn writes about Akin's comments on his film: "In interviews about *Solino*, Akin mentions Italian Neo-Realism as a key influence despite the fact that there are no stylistic correspondences at all. However, in the audio commentary of the film's DVD release (X Edition, 2002) he acknowledges certain thematic correspondences with Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers* (Italy, 1960), which tells the story of an Italian family migrating from southern Italy to Milano and which depicts fraternal rivalry and feud. Surprisingly, he makes no reference to *Cinema Paradiso* and even denies having seen the film" (9).

in accented films ¹²— and a deeply nostalgic tone to retell the story: *Solino* starts with a grown-up Gigi showing his first film in his town; *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* with Totò already an adult and living in Rome, where he has become an important and famous movie director. Another common element in both movies is related to the female characters. Both movies present the romance between the protagonist and a young woman, who remains back home when the protagonist travels away but waits for her lover to come back.¹³ There is also another interesting connection between *Solino* and *Cinema Paradiso* in the mother figure, played in both movies by the same actress, Antonella Attili (Berghahn 150). Finally, to further confirm that Akin does have something in common with Tornatore's movie, there is Gigi's movie theater in *Solino*, which he decides to name *Cinema Nuovo*, clearly evoking Tornatore's title.



Ill. 4 *Cinema Nuovo*, *Solino*

¹² Naficy points out that the use of the flashback is not uncommon in accented cinema where the return by means of flashbacks help “inscribing recollection or reimagination of the experiences of childhood and of homeland [...] The remembered past is fluid and malleable, empowering the remembering subjects.” (Naficy *Accented* 235).

¹³ In Tornatore the female protagonist is actually married when Totò comes back, but lives the romance with him for one night, while, on the contrary, Gigi and Ada will at the end get married.

Gigi's film production and the multiple connections to Tornatore's film ultimately results in making *Solino* a self-reflexive movie, in which, as previously pointed out, Akin connects the independent *Accented Cinema* to the mainstream cinema. While Naficy underlines the position of marginality of *Accented Cinema* and affirms that "transnational cinema is concerned with the output of filmmakers, who not only inhabit interstitial spaces of the host society, but also work on the margins of the mainstream film industry" (208), Akin undermines this very characteristic. The presence of films in the film as well as the multiple references to filmmaking and to a passion for cinema give a deeper dimension to this movie and to the condition of transnational identities. Akin who is clearly interested in different waves of immigration (Turkish, Italian, Serbian, Greek), seems, however, to use clichés more where he cannot rely on his own background, as in *Solino*. A lack of real knowledge involves also leaning more heavily on mainstream cinema and results in negotiating popular themes with transnational concerns, complicating in this way the genre of accented cinema.

Gigi's ultimate decision to remain in Italy depends in great part also on his love for Ada, his childhood friend. Initially uninterested and even annoyed by her insistent attentions, Gigi starts looking at her with different eyes when, shortly after returning from a trip to Germany, he finds out that she had taken care of his mother while he was away. Akin seems here to build an allegorical structure, where Ada, the "dark beauty," clashes with Jo, the blond. However, the blond is not the pure one, rather the false and unfaithful one. While Jo is cheating on Gigi with Giancarlo, Ada is shown to possess family values that are also very important to Gigi. During the time spent with Gigi, Ada shows him how to live life *con ardore e passione*, exactly like the director Baldi had taught him when he

was young. Just when he is about to return to Germany, Ada's sincere declaration of love and her strong values ultimately convince Gigi to remain in Solino.

That returning to the homeland is still "better" than remaining in the new place is then reinforced by the destiny of those who, in contrast, decide to remain in Germany. Gigi's success in his personal and professional life and Rosa's unexpected recovery are counterbalanced by Romano's solitude and Giancarlo's failures. Both Giancarlo and Romano are portrayed at the end in great isolation and unhappiness. It is interesting to note that among the scenes that Akin decided to cut out there was one at the very beginning, in which Giancarlo was resisting the father's decision to leave Italy. The removal of this scene, which would have shown a nicer and more sensitive Giancarlo, contributes even more to making him the "bad" character of the story, the one who is able to forget Italy and the past and to integrate best in Germany, and to even refuse to go back home for his ailing mother. It is Giancarlo's rivalry with his brother and his jealousy of Gigi's constant successes which push him to take advantage of Gigi's absence and to take his place both in his brother's professional and personal life. Not only does Giancarlo pretend to be Gigi at the cinema competition, receiving a prize in his place, but he also manages to win Jo's interest and love in the short term. Only at the end, will he be able to redeem himself. While Giancarlo is in Germany 'stealing' Gigi's life, Gigi slowly rebuilds a new and more successful existence in Solino. Gigi's achievements against his brother's failures which had been anticipated throughout the entire movie and the representation of his personal and professional accomplishments at the end of the movie make Giancarlo's life appear, by contrast, even more unsuccessful. Even more than with Sibel in *Gegen die Wand*, Gigi's homecoming is, to say it using Naficy's words, a sort of

“home-founding” (Naficy *Accented* 234) journey. “[H]ome is found not only in a geographic place” in this case Solino but also in the newly formed relationship with a female character Ada, which transforms a place foreign to him into a renewed domestic and familiar space. This return, however, is not a retreat to the past, as the relationship with Ada no longer corresponds to a traditional idea of the Italian family, but already mirrors a new and modern type of personal relationship.

The film ends with the two greatest events of Gigi’s life: the celebration of his wedding and the projection of his films to the whole town of Solino. Gigi and Ada’s wedding many years later — it is now 1984 — presents the entire family, except for Romano, sitting around a big table and having a nice Italian meal in the open air. At this point, Gigi’s happiness and Rosa’s recovered health strongly clash with Romano’s tears in his now almost empty restaurant,¹⁴ and Giancarlo’s loneliness — he embarrassingly admits to his nephew and niece’s insistent questions that he has no wife and no children. In these final scenes Akin does not completely reverse the traditional images of an Italian community celebrating family bonds, but uses them instead as an ultimate sign of the restorative power of the film. Coming home also signifies coming to a cinematic place. As if to reinforce the intimacy of this return, in place of a popular success that was foreseen for him in Germany, Gigi privileges the more intimate success of a smaller movie theater in Solino.

¹⁴ To emphasize even more the ending of an “era,” of Italian immigration, Akin shows an empty Italian restaurant and a Turkish waiter now working for Romano.

3.4. *Auf der Anderen Seite* or Various Ways of Returning Home

Newly released in 2007, Akin's latest film questions again the idea of homecoming and return, yet in a more provocative way than we have seen in the films previously discussed. The entire film is permeated with the question of what it means to be 'on the other side' and interweaves multiple journeys that could all be defined as journeys of homecoming (Naficy *Accented* 232). While in the earlier films the opposition between open and closed chronotopes was rather clear, what we watch in this film is instead a series of 'border' or 'thirdspace' chronotopes, which clearly emphasize the sense of displacement and hybridization of the protagonists. The film is also deeply concerned with the theme of reconciliation between first and second generations embedded within a transnational setting. Here the relationship of the young Turkish-German professor Nejat and his father Ali parallels the one of the German student Lotte and her old-fashioned mother Susanne, as well as, in part, the one of the Turkish prostitute Yeter and her daughter Ayten.

The condition of the protagonists' hybrid identities is echoed in the very title, and their complicated destiny is mirrored by an intricate plot made up of separate episodes that will all, at the end, connect to each other. Thus Akin maintains his usual style with the typical division into "chapters," but complicates the construction of the film that reminds us – among others – of the style of the popular Mexican film *Amores Perros* by Alejandro González Iñárritu, where all the stories come together like the pieces of a large puzzle. This time, differently from *Gegen die Wand* and *Solino*, he also gives a title to each episode. Yet the impression that he is giving away too much information by naming the episodes is immediately denied by several elements which occur to complicate and

confuse the situation — for example the political issues. What is interesting for my study, however, is not the political aspect of the movie, but how, Akin faces the topic of traveling and displacement, and how, the journeys depicted here can all be considered journeys of homecoming.

The first episode entitled “Yeters Tod” takes place in Hamburg. Ali, an old and misogynist Turkish widower in search of company, meets Yeter, a Turkish woman who works in Germany as a prostitute. Against his son’s wishes, Ali invites Yeter to move into the house with him and to take care of him exclusively. One day, in a moment of violence and rage, Ali hits Yeter and kills her. Ali’s son, Nejat, a professor of classical German literature, and in the movie, the symbol of perfect integration in Germany, is deeply ashamed of his father’s deeds and decides to go to Turkey in search of Yeter’s young daughter, Ayten, with the intention of helping her.

As we see Yeter’s coffin in its final journey back to Turkey, Nejat is ready to undertake his personal journey to Istanbul, where his temporary return becomes permanent. This decision is interestingly instigated also by a small coincidence. As soon as he arrives in Istanbul, Nejat comes across a German man, the owner of a bookstore, who is about to sell the store and return to Germany. This small particular reveals that, even when sketching minor figures, Akin seems to be interested in the theme of homecoming and return. Thus, while the German plainly and simply admits to be affected by deep *Heimweh*¹⁵ and is ready to go back to his homeland forever, Nejat decides to take the store transforming his temporary journey into a permanent stay, like

¹⁵ “Wissen Sie... ich bin seit zehn Jahren ungefähr hier. Auf einmal vermisse ich Deutschland, und auch die Sprache. Wo ich natürlich von der hier umgeben bin, die ganze Literatur. Aber das ist wie ein Museum, ja... ein bißchen tot so... wie Latein. Und ich habe einfach Heimweh.”

Gigi's in *Solino*. At this point, while Nejat is in Istanbul looking for Ayten, she is already in Germany in search of her mother, ignorant of the fact that she is already dead.

The film moves on to tell the story of Yeter, and by the time the second episode begins, we have already reached a high sense of displacement as most of the characters that we have encountered so far have moved somewhere else. Going from Germany to Turkey and vice versa happens rather easily and traveling and relocating itself becomes one of the themes of the film. An analysis of the space, like the one I provided for the previous movies, becomes here rather difficult, as the places and the spaces of the movie change continuously. Because characters arrive and leave, no place is represented like a real *home*.

Yeter's daughter, Ayten, is a Turkish political rebel who enters Germany under a false name and with false documents. As a political refugee her immigration to Germany is driven by the search for a new home, in which she can feel safe and where she can openly express her ideas; in other words a home in the sense of "an institution providing refuge or rest for the destitute, the afflicted, the infirm, etc. or those who either have no home of their own, or are obliged by the vocation to live at a distance from the home of their family" (Morse 70).¹⁶

Homeless, alone, and without money, Ayten goes to the university and mingles with the students. Here Nejat and Ayten's lives briefly intersect. However, it is at this point impossible for Nejat to even imagine that that girl sleeping in his classroom is the one for whom he will later search in vain in the streets of Istanbul — the exact temporal moment is represented with two different scenes, once in the first part, then later in the

¹⁶ This, as Morse highlights is another definition of *home* from the Oxford English Dictionary.

second episode. But it is only the second time we see the scene that we realize that Ayten was already in Germany before Nejat's departure to Istanbul. At the university Ayten meets Lotte, a friendly, open-minded German girl, who is ready to help her. As their friendship immediately turns into something more, Lotte decides to take Ayten home with her. Here she attempts to make her feel at ease, providing her new friend with all that she needs. Yet, Ayten is far from feeling at home in a place where Lotte's mother, Susanne, immediately shows dislike towards her daughter's openness and fears the young Turk's rebellious attitude. While Lotte is generous and open-minded, her mother is mistrustful and suspicious. When Ayten's request of political asylum is rejected by the German government, she is sent back to Turkey and put in prison by Turkish police for her illegal political activism.¹⁷ Lotte, who by now feels completely involved in Ayten's existence, decides to leave for Turkey to find her. In a further move of interconnectivity in this movie of journeys of homecomings, Lotte's life intersects with Nejat's, who becomes her new roommate while in Istanbul.

After intense negotiations, Lotte is finally allowed to see Ayten in prison, who secretly directs her to a place where she will find a gun. Even before finding out what to do with it, Lotte is robbed by some children whom she chases through the streets of Istanbul, and finally killed by them with that same gun. Her death occurs so unexpectedly and suddenly that it emphasizes the "omnipotence of death" (Rings 31) and upsets the

¹⁷ "After all, the plot remains firmly embedded in official Turkish discourse within which the discussion of systematic torture of Turkey appears to be merely a product of the flourishing fantasies of German tourists and Kurdish fighters. While in the context of Turkish interests in joining the EU major improvements of the governmental human rights records have certainly been achieved, the clash between cinematic images of complete fairness up to harmonic relationships in Turkish jails (interrupted only by inner Kurdish conflicts) and critical Amnesty International as well as Human Rights Watch Reports can be hardly overlooked" (Rings 31).

already unstable balance of events. During the commentary to the film,¹⁸ Akin himself points out that the scene in which Lotte finds the gun uses the same exact low angle as in a previous scene with Ayten, as to reinforce the idea of repetition and circularity of the film. To underline the crucial role of repetition in this movie, the second chapter ends with the image of Lotte's body brought back to Germany, with a *mise-en-scène* that is the exact mirror image of dead Yeter's return to Turkey.¹⁹ As before for Yeter, I would argue that Lotte's body returning home can be considered as a sort of tragic and final homecoming in death.

The third and last chapter takes the name of the movie itself, in English literally "on the other side." The episode starts and ends in Turkey, where both Nejat's father, who is by now out of prison, and Lotte's mother have arrived. In Istanbul Susanne, completely unaware, goes the same steps as her daughter — again a same camera angle and *mise-en-scène*, as a sign of the repetitive elements of this film — in order to look for the places where her daughter has spent her last days. In one of the most poignant and grievous scenes of the movie, we see Susanne endlessly crying in a hotel room, probably the same hotel room where Lotte had stayed before renting the apartment.²⁰

¹⁸ Fatih Akin, audio commentary of the film's DVD release (2007).

¹⁹ The image with the coffin coming out of the plane is exactly the same in both moments.



Ill. 5 Susanne's Hotel Room, Auf der anderen Seite

Thanks to the slightly distorted perspective of a high angle fixed for the entire duration of the scene shot in the room — over two minutes long — and to a quick sequence of actions almost overlapping each other, Akin conveys the effect of the passing of the time. We realize that Susanne spends an entire night and an entire day in the room, and as Akin himself explains, the choice of an angle of framing looking down was determined by the necessity of taking both the entire room and the windows at the same time, necessary in order to show the outside and thus the progression of day and night. The peculiar camera angle turned out to be also a suggestive “eye from above,” maybe Lotte’s watching her mother in Istanbul.²¹ That the presence of Lotte continues even after her death is reinforced in a later scene by the motif of the dream and Lotte’s appearance in Susanne’s sleep.

²¹ Fatih Akin, from: audio commentary of the film’s DVD release (Edition, 2007)

Once again Akin has destabilized and almost distorted the spatial dimension, creating an absence of domestic places and suggesting instead new spaces in which the characters have to learn how to readjust. Only when Susanne visits her daughter's room and finds among her objects traces of her lost daughter, she feels temporarily compensated for her loss. Like Gigi's photo projector or the picture of the grandfather that worked as a synecdoche for the lost house, Lotte's belonging recreate for Susanne a familiarity in a foreign place. The slow process of healing a mother's suffering continues in a Turkish restaurant, where in front of Turkish food and with Turkish music playing in the background, Susanne toast to death,²² reaching a sort of temporary reconciliation with that same culture and land that has taken away her daughter.

Susanne's pain will calm down only at the end, when out of love for her Lotte she will reconcile with a desperate and still lonely Ayten. In her, Susanne will find another daughter, as Ayten will discover a mother. Out of their losses and one with the other, the two women are able to create a sense of home and belonging. It for this reason, I believe, that also Susanne's journey to Turkey can be considered itself a sort of home-coming, understood here not as a return to one's origins, rather as a return to a sense of *home*; a new familiar nucleus that she is able to form through the newly created mother-daughter relationship with Ayten. It is no coincidence that precisely at this point Nejat has decided to finally take away from the bookstore's board the flyer with the picture of Ayten's mother, giving up the idea of finding Ayten. Thus, the scene can be read also at a deeper level, in which also Ayten has now found a new mother in Susanne. The director leaves

²² In his comments to the film Akin interestingly points out that the background music is Turkish ballad to death.

unclear what will happen later, yet, while Susanne's plans remain uncertain, and her stay in Turkey may become longer, it is hinted that the two will remain together.



Ill. 6 The Embrace, Auf der anderen Seite

This reconciliatory moment is mirrored by a second one between Nejat and his father. Through Susanne's love for her lost daughter, in fact, Nejat understands how deeply his father loves him and he decides to reconcile with him. Although we do not watch this moment — the film ends with Nejat waiting for his father — Akin has already created all the conditions for this final reencounter to take place.

The circularity of journeys of homecoming, during which all the characters will return home is interestingly mirrored also by the rather repetitive and circular structure of the film, already mentioned. As pointed out earlier, several scenes use the same mise-en-scène and shot composition with different characters. This repetitive mode is shown not only in singular moments or scenes, but also within a greater picture. Repetition highlights the sameness of the search, but makes every journey different in crucial ways. The last sequences of the film with Nejat driving a car in Turkey, in fact, bring us back to

the opening scene. Yet the colors and the music are changed, and we are invited by the director to read this moment in a different way, a surely more positive and hopeful one.²³ The film ends, in fact, with a strong idea of hope, while the reconciliation of the first and the second generation, also symbolically represents the end station of the characters' traveling. The reconciliatory moment is suggested also by the religious theme of the story of Isaac which exists both in the Christian and in the Muslim religions. When the story is evoked by Nejat and Susanne, the moment is symbolically also accompanied by the images of a church first and of a mosque right after in the background.

3.5. Transnational Cinema: Sounds of Local and Global Dimension

In the first part of this work, I analyzed Akin's movies underlining the importance and the role played by other senses, de-emphasizing the authority and the predominance of visuality. Within this new conceptual framework, a special place is occupied, in particular, by the role of sound. Borrowing the name from linguistics, the very name of *Accented Cinema* highlights, first and foremost, precisely the importance and the value of the vocal signs that make those identities on the borders special and unique. In technical terms, in fact, the accent is "one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well as of individual difference and personality" (Naficy 1999: 23). In other words, it is a sort of indicator that enables us to recognize the specificities of each individual. By emphasizing each and everyone's accent, thus, transnational films

²³ Fatih Akin, audio commentary of the film's DVD release (Edition, 2007)

results are often bilingual, multilingual or multivocal. In his introduction to *Accented Cinema*, Naficy writes:

At the same time that accented films emphasize visual fetish of homeland and the past (landscape, monuments, photograph, souvenirs, letters), as well as visual markers of difference and belonging (posture, look, style of dress and behavior), they equally stress the oral, the vocal, and the musical — that is, accents, intonations, voices, music, and songs, which also demarcate individual and collective identities. [...] Stressing musical and oral accents redirects our attention from the hegemony of the visual and of modernity towards the acousticity of exile and the commingling of premodernity and postmodernity in the films. (Naficy “Home” 24-25)

Looking for the “acousticity of exile” I will thus turn my attention now to the function of sound in these films and in particular the role of music in these films. When watching one of Akin’s films, one is immediately struck by the powerful and fascinating soundtrack that accompanies the stories on the stage. It is an eclectic choice of songs in which traditional ethnic music often fuses with rock and pop songs of more recent times. I argue here that these contradicting genres of music coexisting together within the same film are a conscious choice of the director who aims in this way to reinforce the idea of multiple contradictions within identities on the borders between two cultures. This last part of the chapter will thus explore how the themes of migration, the idea of hybridity and the conflicts of cultures and identities are underpinned by the songs that the director chooses. I want to suggest here that through this very special choice of music, Akin is intentionally mirroring the contradictions within the characters themselves and within the condition of immigration and displacement and that this very choice allows him to give simultaneously a local and a global dimension to his films. In an online review of *Solino*, the soundtrack of this film is interestingly defined as a “Song-Cocktail.”²⁴ This comment can rightly apply to all of Akin’s films, and perfectly describes the first impressions one

²⁴ <http://www.filmmusik2000.de/eolsol.htm>

gets by watching them, where the music spans traditional melodies to rock and pop music that apparently clash with each other.

That Akin has a strong personal interest in the music is shown by his film/documentary *The Sounds of Istanbul* (2005), in which a German musician Alexander Hacke, bassist of the famous German industrial-rock group *Einstürzende Neubauten*, visits the streets of Istanbul to find out that there is a great variety of music there. In discovering various genres of music, Akin wants to underline how different musical experiences all coexist in a city that itself becomes the symbol of a modern hybrid city on the border between the Middle East and the West. The documentary has been described in one of the first film reviews also as the “Eastern Buena Vista Social Club” with “flat caps and cigars replaced by *raki* and *shisha* pipes.”²⁵ As the reviewer highlights, Akin first conceived this documentary on the set of *Gegen die Wand* “to look more into [Istanbul’s F.F.] world” and show its brighter side. But it soon became an “enjoyable musical mosaic” and, most importantly, an “anthropological study of modern Turkey” at the same time. While filming this documentary, Akin realized even more what an amazing melting-pot of races and cultures Turkey is. The same review reports also his words on that experience: “It was like a machine-gun of impressions. But even so, we just scratched the surface. This is not the whole map.”²⁶ Through the representation of various types of music within a panorama of tradition and modernity coexisting together, Akin aims to demonstrate that there is no pure Turkishness.

One must add, however, that we are not dealing here with a simple and banal equation of traditional music, intended as representative of an old world, versus rock

²⁵ *Eastern vista social club* in: “Sight and Sound Film Review volume”, London: BFI Publishing, 5/3

²⁶ Ibid.

music, symbolizing the new world. By using the music in a rather original way, Akin underlines deeper nuances behind the relationship between the new spaces occupied by transnational identities and the homeland left behind. It is precisely through such a provocative use of music that Akin succeeds in emphasizing this new dynamic relationship between hybrid identities and space.

While *Auf der anderen Seite* presents a homogeneous Turkish soundtrack, both *Gegen die Wand* and *Solino* have powerful and almost disparate soundtracks that deserve closer analysis. I will then focus here on a more accurate analysis of the role of music in the film, not only when the lyrics become an interesting commentary on the visuals, but also on how the coexistence of various genres at the same time adds further meaning and complicates the ultimate interpretation of Akin's movies, and how music functions as a tool to emphasize the local and the global dimension of these stories. In *Auf der Anderen Seite*, surprisingly, the music adds much less to the final meaning of the story. I ascribe this to the presence of an already very intricate plot and to much more ambivalent characters.

3.5.1. *Gegen die Wand* and the sounds of Turkey

In an interview on the origin of the soundtrack in *Gegen die Wand*, and the importance played by the music Akin affirms: "Ich wußte schon während des Schreibens, welchen Song ich zu welcher Szene haben möchte. Für die Schauspieler gab es später den Soundtrack zum Drehbuch. Bei den Dreharbeiten habe ich die Szene der Musik angeglichen."²⁷ This statement clearly confirms Akin's deep knowledge of and passion for the music. At the same time, however, it also interestingly presupposes a position of

²⁷ <http://www.kino.de/news/tuerkische-musik-hat-viel-mit-punk-gemeinsam/148406.html?channel=kino>

greater importance of the music and a sort of reversed work that seems to take place, where the music precedes the visuals rather than viceversa.

The letters of the title appear in solid red color fixed in the center of a black background, with the word “wall” (*Wand*) of the title bigger, almost echoing the image of a real wall. A nondiegetic voice counting in Turkish introduces the first song and the first musical sequence in which a Turkish group appears and brings the audience directly to Istanbul. Here, facing the Bosphorus and the Suleymaniye Camii (mosque) in the background, a woman in red starts singing a love song, accompanied by six men dressed in black and playing various instruments. Even before we could possibly imagine that the characters will return to Turkey, Akin is already inviting the viewers to a Turkish experience, by entering its musical world with the audience.

The critical work by Matthias Knopp is by far the most detailed and accurate investigation we have on these five musical moments.²⁸ His work highlights their specific function and characteristics indicating also the effect that they have in the overall interpretation of the movie. It also underlines the specificity of each scene by pointing at some, at first sight, hardly noticeable differences. A long and static shot captures the band within a frame that reminds us of a postcard’s panorama (Knopp 63), and immediately establishes a special relationship between space and music. It is a composition of four elements, all in a horizontal position, the red rugs, the canal (the Haliç), then the buildings of Istanbul, finally the sky (Knopp 63). The only movements are provided by the singer slightly beating the rhythm of the song and by the ships moving in the background. The red of the woman’s dress connects immediately to the red of the title,

²⁸ Matthias Knopp. “Identität zwischen den Kulturen: Gegen die Wand” in: Kontext Film. Beiträge zu Film und Literatur. Erich Schmidt Verlag, Berlin, 2006.

alluding to the love story but also hinting at the blood that will come. This is the first of five musical excerpts, all of which occur in almost the same way in the course of the film. Like a chorus in an ancient Greek tragedy, they work as a “caesura” so that, by slowing down the pace of the film, the public is invited to reflect on the scenes and then think about them in a more critical way (Knopp 65).

The function of the Turkish band/chorus as a theatrical element is emphasized by the way it appears on the stage. First of all, the particular position of the band facing both the West and the Middle East reinforces, as already mentioned, the position of Turkey itself — and of the protagonists — between the Middle East and the West. The image of the mosque in the background and the ships travelling are all elements that hint at a dynamic relationship between East and West (Knopp 65). Besides the place, the band/chorus also informs us about the time frame within which the major sequences of the films are played. Thus, the shorter or longer shadows of the members of the band and the color of the sky signal the time of the day and, in a metaphorical way, also the ascending or descending point of the story. Finally, if present, the lyric of the songs add further hints to the moral content of the film. While the performances vary — the singer is at times sitting and at others standing and singing, while other times she is not singing at all — the subtitles to the lyrics do not interpret directly Sibel and Cahit’s story, yet they suggest that these songs are in a way related to the narrative, anticipating or commenting on a tragic love story. Knopp draws our attention in particular to the first

song “Saniye’ m” about a love not reciprocated. It insinuates into the audience’s mind a tragic element in the story about to be narrated (65).²⁹

The woman is not singing in all the excerpts. However, each sequence is in its way peculiar and in each one of them there are other interesting elements that add further meaning to the events. The second sequence, for example, presents all the members of the band sitting, there are no lyrics and the tragic music evidently anticipates the descending moment which is about to arrive, which coincides with the killing of Nico by Cahit, and the following arrest.

The third sequence is the shortest and, as in a tragic Greek chorus, is the one in which we reach the climax. There is only one person standing and no one is singing. The shot moves quickly from the band to the sea and then the sky, crossed by the plane going to Istanbul, clearly hinting at Sibel’s journey to Turkey. Among all, the fourth excerpt is perhaps one of the most dramatic and intense ones. The combination of deeply sad and dramatic music and of a very particular light composition — we don’t know how much time has passed precisely — indicate that we are again at a crucial point. Here the darker lighting that prevails in the musical excerpt suddenly contrasts very much with the following image, in which Cahit is enveloped by a strong white light, as he exits from prison. The dramatic moment seems thus to signal the end of a phase in which Cahit, who has ‘paid’ for the murder is acquiring his freedom again.

The fifth and final music excerpt is evidently shot at the end of the day, the long shadows of the members of the band and a darkening color of the sky hint at the sunset symbolically signaling also that we have reached the end of the story. Once again a song

²⁹ M. Knopp gives the whole text: “Am Bach entlang gehe ich spazieren, sehe den Fischen im trüben Wasser zu. Betrübt bin ich aber deinetwegen, meine geliebte Saniye mit den wehenden Haaren. Traurig bin ich, weil deine Blicke meine Liebe nicht erwidern” (76).

this time with lyrics accompanies and indirectly comments on the conclusion of the story.

Regarding the band, Akin himself affirms that:

das ist eine Hommage an das türkische Meisterwerk “Muhsin Bay”. Dieser Chor hat mir auch geholfen, die fünf Akte von *Gegen die Wand* besser zu verbinden. Bei der Musik selbst handelt es sich um einen Roma-Gypsy, den ich vor drei Jahren in einem Punk-Club in Istanbul gesehen habe. Damals ist mir aufgefallen, daß traditionelle türkische Musik viel mit Punk gemeinsam hat.³⁰

Emphasizing the musical dynamism of Akin’s filming technique, Busche compares

Gegen die Wand to a “Punksong mit dem die Band *Abwärts* im Film ganz ungestüm und verbehaltlos die Nöte und Ängste der Liebe besingt.”³¹

The multiple functions of these musical passages give the audio element a larger role within the ultimate interpretation of the film. Yet, the traditional Turkish music is present not only in the five choral songs, but also throughout the course of the movie. A relevant example is represented by the celebration of the wedding scene, already mentioned earlier, in which Cahit takes a metaphorical and literal “first step” back into a Turkish world. Once married, Cahit and Sibel also enjoy going dancing in Turkish clubs. It is in a Turkish bar that Cahit, after realizing that he is in love with Sibel, tries to announce to the whole world his love for Sibel.

Each time, Akin seems to carefully choose the music to go together with the scenes, or better yet, as mentioned earlier, he films the scenes in such a way that they adapt so well with the music to add a deeper dimension to the scene itself. Yet, while in the scenes in the Bosphorus the space is static but open and naturally lit, here the shots’

³⁰ <http://www.kino.de/news/tuerkische-musik-hat-viel-mit-punk-gemeinsam/148406.html?channel=kino>

³¹ Ibid.

foreground remain within a constrained and dark environment, which suggest the coming failure.

As if he were trying to underline the continual coexistence of traditions and modernity, Akin constantly alternates different types of music in English and in Turkish. Thus, if Sibel is in one scene listening to traditional Turkish music, she is filmed in the next dancing to the rock or punk music of the eighties, a symbol instead of Western society. While the Turkish traditional music remains as a symbol of that past time which is still vivid in Sibel's parents' minds, I believe that the modern Turkish music is still rather unknown to the protagonists; and it implies the development within a culturally hybrid Turkey. In contrast to what a generation like Sibel's parents probably remembers, the music anticipates the existence of that process of modernization that Turkey is currently undergoing.

In this movie the songs are clearly carefully chosen according to both rhythm and lyrics in order to describe, comment on, and illustrate what is happening on the "stage." As Andreas Busche contends, the result is a success which no German film production has seen for a long time and a clear hint to the hybridity described:

Lange nicht mehr hat ein deutscher Film so stilsicher und motivisch kohärent Musik eingesetzt, um die Lebenszusammenhänge und Gefühlsverwerfungen seiner Protagonisten zu schildern. 40 Songs bilden eine eigene Erzählstruktur, die immer wieder kommentierend auf die Bilder einwirkt [...] Auf permanentem Konfrontationskurs rockt, groovt und hämmert der Film gegen alle kulturellen Zuschreibungen an.³²

³² Andreas Busche, "Punk oder Türkische Folklore?" in: [http://www.zeit.de/2004/12/Gegen die Wand](http://www.zeit.de/2004/12/Gegen_die_Wand)

3.5.2. The Songs of *Solino*

Also in *Solino*, as in *Gegen die Wand*, the soundtrack adds a deeper dimension to the events, as the songs work as an additional commentary on the stories represented. In an online review of the film's soundtrack, a journalist captures in one sentence the spirit of the music of this film: "Die Filmmusik zu *Solino* steht ganz im Zeichen eines Nostalgietrips in die 60er Jahre. Italienische Schlager der Ära [...] stehen deutsche und englische Lieder [...] gegenüber." This *Song-Cocktail*-soundtrack is furthermore accompanied by a symphonic score created by the Greek composer Jannos Eolou, while most of the songs of the movie are performed by the Bulgarian Symphony Orchestra.

Just as in *Gegen die Wand*, there is here a careful choice of music and songs for the various events represented. The song that opens the film, "Canto di Solino," is a very dramatic song in waltz rhythm and sung in dialect. The minor key and the nostalgic tone emphasize the sad and dramatic content of the song that suggests all the melancholy that characterizes the life of an immigrant. In the lyrics, some major natural elements are evoked: earth, wind, sea, sky and stars which have the effect to underline even more a deep and intense link with the earth. The lyrics also compare this "terra sfortunata" the *unlucky place* that does not offer any opportunities, to a "figlia perduta," a *lost daughter*. Thus the abandoned land becomes like a lost female child, who seems to be gone to never come back. By comparing the land to a lost daughter, Akin seems to imply that Italy is coded as feminine. While both music and lyrics reinforce the dramatic tension between people and their homeland, within a few lines the song retells the story and the destiny of many Italian immigrants forced to leave their land in order to find a better life. It is interesting to note that the content undergoes an unexpected change in the second

strophe, which, however, we hear only after the film ends. In this second part of the song the place becomes now “fortunata” *lucky* for a “figlia ritrovata,” a *newly found daughter*. While the pessimism persists in the melancholic tone of the song and in the instrumental line that remains in minor key, the content seems to transmit now a positive message of hope. This change in the content of the song interestingly also reflects the events of the film, where the return home is charged with a very strong connotation of hope.

Next to other dramatic and sad songs like this one, both in Italian and in dialect, and that are commenting the moments of departures or separations, Akin puts some very famous hits of the period, most probably known also in Germany in those years. Besides showing knowledge of the songs popular among the Italian community,³³ the immediate effect that Akin obtains with this is that the characters do not resemble fixed caricatures, but appear more realistic and convincing. Songs in Italian clearly prevail — there is only one song in English and one in German³⁴ — which suggests that even during the period in Germany the Amato family still maintains a strong link to Italy. This is illustrated, for example at the very beginning of the “German period,” when the actors of a film contract their *Mittagessen Pause* at the restaurant. While “Uno per tutte,” a romantic love ballad of the sixties plays in the background, the shot captures German actors playing Nazis in a war film. The light rhythm of the song, in which the singer declares his eternal love to several girls unable to decide which one to choose, emphasizes the cliché of the typical Italian lover. An image that is reinforced even more by the use in the song of the mandolin, one of the most typical instruments that evoke Italy. The result is a rather

³³ In the audio commentary to the film, Akin thanks his friend Andreas Thiel, who has worked with him with the choice of the songs, helping him to get “das richtige Gefühl für die Zeit”.

³⁴ The two songs, one in German and the other in English, are interestingly played during the period of time in which the two brothers are most inserted in the German environment.

bizarre combination with a comical effect that is amplified by the fact that the actors playing the Nazi are forced by Rosa to take off their boots and their jackets if they want to enter and eat.

In another scene, the very popular Italian romantic song, “Una storia d’amore” originally sung by Adriano Celentano, a very popular singer during those years, becomes the background sound of a significant scene. Driving a stolen car and evidently high on drugs, Giancarlo and Gigi sing loudly together. The entire scene seems to show the two brothers united and happy together. Interestingly, the lyrics of the song, which talk about a hate-love relationship between a man and his friend’s lover, seem to hint also at the love relationship that the two brothers have with Jo. It is a song in which the music is evidently complementary to the lyrics. In fact the words prevail on a melodic line that is simple and very rhythmical and kind of onomatopoeic, almost mirroring the heart beating. A deeper analyses of this song, reveals some interesting themes that we encounter also in the film: the lack of maturity, the tendency to commit errors, and, most importantly, the singer’s obsession in this hate-love relationship, reinforced by the rhythmical and repetitive lyrics and music. Finally, there is also an interesting hint to the woman, who is defined “an angel”. As these words are sung, however, they are accompanied by a rather dissonant sound, which does not follow the melodic sounds we have until now, as to negate what has just been said. On a different level, the song may also insinuate the hate-love relationship between Gigi and Giancarlo and the rhythmical melody may suggest the thrill of speed that the two experience driving the car. The two brothers, although perfectly integrated in the German environment and usually speaking German with each other, are in this scene singing in Italian. This seems to show that they

are still linked to Italy since this is one of the few moments in which they get along. It perhaps also suggests that they find some sort of common ground only in the Italian music or in the excitement of driving a stolen car.

Among all the scenes, there is one particularly which remains to me open to different interpretations. It is the moment accompanied by an acoustic version of the song “House of the Rising Sun.” The song starts with no lyrics while the scene is still in Germany, and continues in Italian as the scene moves to Italy. Yet, as we move to Solino, the Italian version of this song completely changes the meaning of the original transforming it into a romantic ballad, in which the words almost perfectly correspond with the scenery.³⁵ While Gigi and Ada see and sing of a warm sun, diffusing its rays — nothing remains of the original American folk ballad sung by *The Animals* and narrating the life of the drunkard and gambler father of the singer — the music accompanies one of the most romantic scenes of the film, which clearly anticipates the love between the two, and Gigi’s renewed love of Solino. At the same time, this song is important as it adds that special value, which I mentioned before, of a local and global dimension at the same time. Famous all over the world in the mid sixties, “House of the Rising Sun” was well known especially among young people. The song arrived a few years later also in Italy, in different but censored versions, one of which is also used in the film. Despite the differences in the lyrics, the use of a famous tune during those years works as a proof of a connection between even a small community of a little Italian town and an international environment. Once again, Akin broadens the spaces of the film and adds a deeper dimension to the story he narrates. Next to the nostalgic tone describing immigration,

³⁵ There are several Italian versions, the first one was translated by the famous writers Mogol and Vito Pallavicini.

Akin is capable of telling the story of two young brothers whose personal issues are like those of any other young person everywhere else.

The beginning of the third and final chapter is not only signaled by the date, it is now 1984, but also by another song sung by Adriano Celentano which, as the title itself says “Il tempo se ne va,” talks about the passing of the time. The final scenes are set entirely in Italy where the scene of Gigi’s wedding is particularly significant. As in *Gegen die Wand*, also here the wedding scene is accompanied by traditional music. It is an Apulian very popular dance called *Pizzica* normally performed at private and familial occasions, or, in ancient times, even during pagan rituals. Here the rhythmic dimension prevails over the melody, which is almost absent. There is instead an evident use of percussions, while the lyrics are rather irrelevant, not homogeneous, and used in a very repetitive way, and ultimately only aims to work as an invitation to dance. This traditional song suggests a strong and radical attachment to the land and to its strongest and oldest cultural dimensions. Thus, while both the music and the dance reiterate the intense link to the land of origins, the film ends depicting the successful life of Gigi, reinforcing one more time the restorative power of the film.

4

Crossing Borders: The Process of Cultural Negotiation in Barbara Frischmuth's Novel *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne*

4.1. Introduction

In the speech “Das Heimliche und das Unheimliche” published in 1999, the contemporary Austrian writer Barbara Frischmuth discusses the topic of multiculturalism and border crossing. To approach the issue, Frischmuth recounts one of the suggestive fairy tales from the *Thousand and One Nights*, a book that, as she admits, stimulated a very early interest in foreign cultures and the Middle Eastern world. In this story, Abdallah, the man of the land, meets and become friend with Abdallah, the man of the sea. After enjoying wonderful gifts from the sea, Abdallah of the land is convinced by his friend to go and explore the world of the sea. After some time there, however, tired of being scorned by the creatures of the sea because of his different appearance and surprised to see a way of living that he does not understand, he decides to go back to the land and the two Abdallahs end their friendship. The story ends with Abdallah of the land realizing his mistake of judging another way of life and trying to be forgiven by his old friend. Back at the shore, however, he realizes that the friendship is lost forever.

This suggestive fairy tale, which precedes Frischmuth's reflections on the encounter of different cultures, depicts what the author calls “die heimliche Sehnsucht nach dem Unheimlichen,” in other words, the curiosity that drives one to get closer to

what is simultaneously known and unknown. With it, Frischmuth engages in a broader discourse on what it means to travel to another place, cross geographical and cultural borders and face another way of life. Looking at the story of the two Abdallahs, the author wonders what would have happened if the two, instead of fighting, had peacefully lived together, and if Abdallah of the land had remained in the sea. Would he have finally accepted and understood the way of living of that world? Would he have, in the end, *become*, also in his appearance, a man from the sea? Frischmuth uses this story as an allegory to describe the condition of literary immigrants living in Europe who, faced with differences and new ways of life, develop a special sensibility for cultures. These writers — whom she interestingly defines as “Asylanten der Literatur” — are trying with their work to awaken in everyone that same sensibility for different cultures. Bringing up their example, Frischmuth encourages each writer to promote a “creative and instructive dialogue with the other in order to peacefully coexist with other cultures.” (Yesilada 2).

Like this essay, many other works by Frischmuth investigate inter- and multicultural aspects, and demonstrate that notions such as diversity, multiculturalism and cultural assimilation represent some of the most important and challenging issues of our contemporary society. Among her works dedicated to this topic, the novel *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne* (1973) remains the most compelling and controversial. Regarded by Peter Hertz-Ohmes as Frischmuth’s Turkish novel (195) and by Jennifer E. Michaels as a novel that most interestingly mediates the Islamic culture with the West (77), this story sheds light on the newly formed relationships between Middle Eastern countries and Europe, in particular German speaking countries.

In this chapter I will explore how Frischmuth problematizes the notions of multiculturalism and cross-cultural interactions, and I will demonstrate that the discussion in this novel is ultimately not only about negotiating cultures. Rather, it depicts how crossing borders and encountering the unknown provokes a deep internal confusion within the narrator's identity, which will bring her to question and to reevaluate her own self. Moreover, by exploring the interaction of a Western narrator with the "Orient," Frischmuth investigates the relationship between Austria and the Middle East during a period in which, as many critics point out, the contacts between Austria and the Mediterranean countries were quickly expanding. As Dagmar C. G. Lorenz highlights, the Vienna of those years was opening its doors to many students and migrant workers from the Middle East, while Austrians were attracted by and traveled to Turkey in increasing numbers (263). The novel clearly invites readers to take part in this important debate on the relations between German-speaking countries and Turkey in particular and raises the question of whether the story narrated can give us a new perspective on this issue.

Most of the recent criticism on this novel has underlined the narrator's incapacity to negotiate the other. Lorenz, for example, highlights the fact that the protagonist's preoccupation with prejudices and her approach to Turkish culture still reveals a clear Western stance and, therefore, does not represent nor assess Islamic culture in any innovative way (277). Monika Shafi, on the other hand, focuses on the efforts of the narrator to adjust, underlining the conflicts generated during this process of assimilation. If it is true that in the novel the narrator is incapable of looking beyond the theoretical frames of the world to which she belongs and that she maintains a Western point of view,

she, nonetheless, reaches a heightened sense of disorientation, which ultimately calls her identity into question. I would like to focus my attention on this extreme sense of confusion and deep frustration that the narrator experiences during her stay. In doing so, I want to draw a parallel between the narrator's state of mind and the condition of displaced and hybrid identities nowadays, to see how this condition ultimately contradicts Frischmuth, the author, in her theoretical positions on the relationship between crossing borders and identity. I will demonstrate that Frischmuth's ideal image of travel, identity, and the possibility of negotiating disparate cultures, — one that emerges in her theoretical essays — is countered by the condition of extreme confusion and identity crises reached by the protagonist of her novel. I will also show how cross-cultural interactions, and the understanding of another way of living, in the manner in which Frischmuth wants to depict them, is destined to remain an ideal and unattainable wish, replaced by the very postmodern condition of hybrid and hyphenated identities. Both in its content and style, the novel gets close to narratives produced by transnational identities as it shares with them a similar experience of cultural, linguistic, and geographical displacement. In this sense, Frischmuth's novel, published in the seventies, anticipates much of today's criticism on the literature about border crossing and critically engages the question of identity within a transnational context.

Evoking Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and his investigation on the psychological effects of colonization, Frischmuth's text explores cross-cultural interactions between her Austrian protagonist and the resident people of Turkey. Despite the different geographical and political context — there is clearly no colonizing attitude on the part of the protagonist here — Frischmuth's narrator is deeply affected by the

encounter with the locals and the way they look at and interact with her. Fanon demonstrates that the gaze of the Other provokes in the colonized consciousness of his condition, and unveils a fundamental desire of being like the colonizer. In the interaction with Turkish people, Frischmuth's narrator acts like the colonized in Fanon's account and thus reaches a new level of consciousness of herself. Despite all the effort of assimilation, mingling with the others reveals differences that still persist between them. At the same time, the narrator will finally grasp her own internal fragmentation, and realize that her return home is forever prevented. Not because she will never go back — as we know from the very beginning of the novel, the narrator already has a return ticket — but rather because something has changed in her perception of things which will lead her to a new consciousness of her identity and of the interaction with other cultures.

By depicting the narrator's internal fragmentation and her incapacity for writing coherently, as she originally planned, Frischmuth also establishes a link between Austrian's modern literary tradition of the investigation of the self with today's broader debate on hybrid identities and the postmodern condition of displaced identities. The deep interest in the mysticism of the Bektashi, the mystical group that the author, as well as the narrator of her novel researches, reveals her attempt to find the lost unity of the self in the mystical unity of Being. Thus Frischmuth's narrative, written in a particularly poetic language, and recounting puzzling dreams and mysterious legends, results in a suggestive novel that connects the Western world with the Eastern one in a unique form that subverts traditional literary genres. By displacing her experience in the foreign country in and through the text, Frischmuth's novel gets closer to Özdamar's works, with whom she also shares an original and highly poetic type of narration.

First published in 1973, the book was re-published in 1996, which highlights the actuality of the novel, not only with respect to the question of displacement, but also in regards to its treatment of multiculturalism. By suggesting the union of various cultures and the peaceful coexistence between peoples, Frischmuth shows that she is aware of the deep changes that the current social and cultural geography of Europe is presently undergoing. At the same time she also participates in the ongoing debates that aim to promote a new and more positive image of Austria within the European Union and the international panorama in general. Renate Posthofen, who tries to define Austria's identity by retracing its inclusions and exclusions within the European panorama, highlights how, in the past, Austria has undeservedly been labeled as a "small and vulnerable country [...] characterized either by waltzing, skiing or ugly remnants of a totalitarian past" (200). In particular, in the exclusion of Austria from the German Federation in 1871 Posthofen detects the seeds of a psychological trauma that affected the country for many years, and that ended only with its integration into the European Union in 1995. Since then, and with Austria's participation in the Frankfurt International Book Fair and a series of lectures and discussions, several figures — literary and non-literary — engaged in the attempt to eradicate the old myth of Austria, as a nation-victim. In order to promote a new image, they also tried to implement a new interest in Austria's multiethnic Habsburg history. By touching on topics like multiculturalism and border crossing, Frischmuth's work becomes one of the "multicultural and progressive voices" that Posthofen evokes as necessary for "the reconfiguration of [Austria's] national self-representation" (199), and contributes to the development of a new image of Austria as a liberal nation open to foreign cultures.

Finally, by choosing a female traveler, Frischmuth extends the question of multiculturalism to gender issues connected to femininity and to what it means for a Western woman to travel to a Muslim country. The narrator's encounter with female characters, and the relationship with her roommate Sevim, in particular, will bring about new contradictions within her own identity, and will serve to further investigate the tensions between Western and Middle Eastern countries.

4.2. The First Experiences Abroad and the Encounter with the Foreign

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity
a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.

Edward W. Said, **Orientalism** 1

Born in 1941 in Austria, Barbara Frischmuth was attracted to foreign languages and cultures at a young age. In the early 1960s, when she was only nineteen, she received a fellowship to study at the University of Erzurum in Anatolia and to conduct research for her dissertation. The sojourn was the first of many others to come, as she frequently returned to Turkey in the following years. Her dissertation project, like the protagonist's of the novel, was about the Dervish order of the Bektashi, a mystical group existing in Turkey in the thirteenth century. This group, often associated with the religious group of the Alevi, based some of its founding principles on the concept of "Unity of Being" and shared some principles with Shi'ism. In her essay "*Der Blick über den Zaun*" (1994),¹ Frischmuth affirms that she was particularly attracted by the mysticism and by the purity that this order maintained with respect to others. Its literature in contradistinction to

¹ In English: translation by Lisabeth Hock. "Looking over the Fence." *World Literature Today*, 69.3, 1995

Ottoman Turkish in fact, was not influenced by Persian and Arabic loans and thus remained “relatively ‘pure’ in comparison to Turkish literature” (Frischmuth “Looking” 460).²

The difficulty in researching this topic was heightened by the fact that any historical evidence of the group’s existence is mostly given by vague information or legends. Moreover, after being banned throughout the Ottoman Empire, the order continued to exist in clandestine organizations, which makes its very being even more difficult to retrace. As a result of this complexity, it was soon clear that Frischmuth’s project, as the literary scholar Peter Hertz-Ohmes puts it, had “no scholarly hold, no history worth repeating, and no foreseeable future” (196), and in fact, it was soon abandoned. Frischmuth never finished her dissertation and decided instead to specialize in Near and Middle Eastern studies to later become a certified interpreter for Turkish and Hungarian. This choice lead her to abandon the scholarly world for good to attempt the career of writer, from which, however, her initial project and her experience in Turkey did not completely disappear. From that period in Erzurum, in fact, clearly stems her first novel *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne*; traces of her original research project and of its importance are spread throughout the entire text. Suggesting mystery and ambiguity and destined to “always remain something foreign” (Frischmuth “Looking” 460), the story of the Bektashi’s order and of its mysticism enters the novel in such a way to function, as I will later show, as a sort of subtext and a commentary, through which we can read and explain the entire novel.

²“Eine Literatur [der Bektâshiye], die vom Türkischen aus gesehen, ziemlich rein geblieben, das heißt also, nicht völlig von persischen und arabischen Lehnkonstruktionen überwuchert war wie das osmanische Türkisch, und die — das ist der Witz an der Sache — in neueren Zeit, nach der türkischen Sprachreform, plötzlich als Quelle für reines Türkisch angesehen und veröffentlicht werden mußte, obwohl man den Derwisch-Orden bereits Ende der zwanziger Jahre verboten und aufgehoben hatte” (Frischmuth *Blick* 22).

Because of the many similarities between Frischmuth's own experience in Turkey and that of the novel's protagonist, it is difficult to delineate the narrator's position within the novel and in relation to her own culture. While Shafi tends to see the narrator of *Das Verschwinden* in an in-between condition, Dagmar C. G. Lorenz suggests a completely different view, which considers the narrator "not in between but rather outside of the two cultures," a position which leaves her rather "disconnected from the cultural codes and gender codes of both spheres" (264). While, as we will see later in this chapter, it is true that the position of the narrator of the novel remains debatable and open to discussion, Frischmuth, the author, instead, seems to have a very precise idea of the topics of multiculturalism and the encounter with the other, which she discusses in various interviews, and expresses programmatically in her theoretical essay mentioned before, "Der Blick über den Zaun".³

In this essay the author reveals that her interest in foreign cultures originated during her summers spent in a hotel in the Austrian mountains. Despite this typical cliché image of Austria as a land of tourism, the multicultural environment of this hotel hosting people from all over the world became the first place in which she became conscious of other cultures: "Ich wollte die Länder, aus denen sie kamen, selber sehen und wünschte mir bald nichts so sehr, als reisen zu können" (19). It is not until her first journey to Turkey, however, that Frischmuth really opens her eyes to what a multicultural society is. To her surprise she found different ethnic groups there all under a young "modern republic" (459), which the government of Turkey already was in those years. As Michaels point out, Turkey becomes for her the "ideal setting" for her later investigation

³ See, among others, Karin Yesilada and Dietrich Simon.

of the notions of multiculturalism and the other, both for its geographical location and its variegated society (69). As Frischmuth states, at the very beginning of her stay, she had not noticed all the different ethnic groups that compose Turkish society, and despite the multiethnic background that a state such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire had once been, Frischmuth realizes in Turkey that, at the beginning, she was not ready at all to face and discern cultural differences. Only after some time spent there, when she becomes aware that she is living within a reality made up of various ethnic groups all living together under the same government, she starts developing a sensitivity for differences. While undergoing what she defines as a real “culture shock” the author experiences a period that, as she says, helped her expand the horizons of her identity (20).⁴

The essay in particular becomes the space in which Frischmuth discusses a new approach to what is foreign. Here the author advocates the necessity of having a “point of return” when traveling to another country and getting to know another culture. Maintaining a distance between one's identity and the new culture is, according to her, an essential condition in order to come as close as possible to the other, still maintaining one's own identity. Only by becoming an expert on the new culture, says the author, is a “pure stance” possible, a position from which, as Frischmuth claims, one can render the experience of another culture in the best way, avoiding cultural misunderstanding and the perpetuation of false prejudices. At the same time, the distanced approach of an expert scholar would secure full respect of the identities involved, while keeping an open-

⁴ “Am Anfang merkte ich nur wenig. Ich hatte zwar eine Anhang vom Vielvölkerstaat Österreich-Ungarn, aber mein Blick war noch nicht geübt in der Wahrnehmung der kleineren und größeren Abweichungen in Akzent, Kleidung, Benehmen. Für mich war erst einmal alles türkisch, das war Kulturschock genug. Türkisch und vordringlich muslimisch. Ich befand mich nicht nur in einem Land, sondern in einer anderen Kultur, und das nicht in ihrer weltstädtischen Form, wie zum Beispiel in Istanbul, sondern im Osten, in Erzurum, wohin es mich während des Menderes-Putsches verschlagen hatte.” (20)

minded perspective. The identity becomes then the place to which to bring back her “findings, maintaining a reporter's stance” (Frischmuth “Looking” 460). What appears as a paradoxical attitude is, however, a necessary condition in order to be able not only to talk, but also to write about another culture in an authentic way.

That her fear is a typical Western fear,⁵ as Rutherford points out, is reinforced by the way Frischmuth talks about this “distanced relationship” with the foreign. In order to speak and write about another culture, she not only evokes the necessity of approaching the other with respect and in a sincere and genuine way. She encourages transcending one's own identity to assume the nature of the other. This is an approach that is destined to fail if one remains too strongly attached to his/her own identity:

Es ist eine Frage des Anspruchs, wie weit man das Andere der anderen Kultur als sein eigenes Anderes begreifen kann. Der Versuch, sich dieses Andere anzuverwandeln – und genau darum geht es –, wird und muß scheitern, solange man krampfhaft an der eigenen Identität festhält. Wie aber schreiben ohne diese Identität, die meine Erzählhaltung erst ermöglicht? (Frischmuth *Blick* 20-21) ⁶

A certain fluidity becomes the precondition — both on her existential and narrative level — for a rapprochement with the other. In her novel, Frischmuth seems to resolve this issue by choosing a nameless protagonist and by avoiding to make any direct reference to her Austrian origin throughout the entire course of the novel. In this way the author also protects herself, safeguarding the possibility of writing. At the same time, despite the choice of a protagonist with no name in *Das Verschwinden* and the statement that the novel is not autobiographical, an initial common ground between author and

⁵ “In the hierarchical language of the West, what is alien represents otherness, the site of difference and repository of our fears and anxieties” (Jonathan Rutherford quoted in Monika Shafi 244).

⁶ Interestingly the English translation renders the expression “sich dieses Anderen anzuverwandeln” with “appropriating the other,” which recalls a colonialist attitude and a superior point of view that Frischmuth probably did not want to have.

narrator can be easily traced in the same obsession with misunderstandings and in the similar intense attempt to enter and integrate into the culture of the other. In this same essay, Frischmuth reveals that it took her years before she was able to talk about her first experience in Turkey, stressing and reinforcing one more time her close relationship with the narrator-protagonist of her book:

Ich hatte keine Ahnung, wieviel Abstand man braucht, um in einer anderen Kultur überzeugend zu wildern. Erst dreißig Jahre später ist es mir möglich gewesen, das Phänomen Erzurum — den Ort, an dem ich Türkisch- und Muslimischsein am heftigsten erlebte — halbwegs glaubwürdig zu gestalten, das heißt, erst da konnte ich über meine Erleben so verfügen, daß jene unabdingbare Selbstverständlichkeit sich — wenigstens teilweise — einstellte, die der Exotik das Kunstgewerbliche nimmt. (Frischmuth *Blick* 20)

While recognizing the important role that speaking Turkish played in order to get closer to the new culture and become more acquainted with the environment, the author also acknowledges that it may have been for this reason that it took her so long to then detach from it and be able to use German language again. The incapacity of writing about her experience and the necessity of gaining some distance from it, open up the issue of language as a means to express one's own identity. The narrator's incapacity to express herself with language is not new in Austrian literature. It draws upon a long tradition of crisis of the language that started at the beginning of the twentieth century with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Brief des Lord Chandos" (1902), and reached contemporary literature with Peter Handke's works such as *Kaspar* (1967) or *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (1970) and *Wunschloses Unglück* (1972). Frischmuth, who with Handke was a member of the literary *Grazer Gruppe*, has clearly been influenced by the debates around German language, and her novel can be rightly embedded within a much larger literary

tradition that links the questioning of self identity with a crisis of language that comes at crucial moments. By choosing a scholar and writer as the protagonist of her novel — a meta-reflexive device — Frischmuth stresses the issue of writing even more.

Furthermore, by exploring the issue of identity and language within a bi-lingual context she also extends the language crisis into a transnational context, inserting an historical Austrian crisis into a global and international panorama.

4.3. The Novel

The lack of a clear plot appears as a first sign of the author's incapacity of writing about her experience. However, in light of the language crisis just discussed, Frischmuth's plotless novel should be here understood programmatically. By clearly attempting to approach rationally another culture, the author seems to ultimately postulate the impossibility of writing about it in a coherent way. The analyses that will follow, demonstrate how her experience abroad and the encounter with the foreign culture are mirrored by a complicated and articulate text, in which a rational stance of the expert gives space to a highly poetic and dreamlike narration of an intense personal story. The recounting of the events is furthermore made harder by the fact that we never get to know the name of the protagonist, nor do we find out any information about her background and origins. The little information we receive is that the narrator of the novel is, like Frischmuth herself, a scholar specializing in Middle Eastern studies and Turkish language, and that, like the author, she is driven toward the unknown by a deep curiosity and by a strong desire to learn more of a culture by which she is deeply fascinated.

As we look for an effective method with which to best narrate the story, the narrator herself suggests a way, the same one she is using to put her experience into words: “Wortreich, aber mit Vorsicht, um Mißverständnissen vorzubeugen” (V 7). This crucial sentence at the very beginning of the novel immediately establishes the attitude that the protagonist will have throughout her entire stay in Turkey. It is precisely this fear of being misunderstood, this “coming as close as possible to the other” without indentifying with it, that runs beneath every action that the narrator performs. It determines her attitude and her approach within the new environment, also influencing her relationship with the locals, and ultimately her overall experience in Turkey.

With the precise intention of adapting herself into the new culture and settling down as best as possible, yet deeply scared and almost obsessed with the possibility of being misunderstood, the narrator approaches her new reality assuming an attitude of complete acceptance and minimal criticism towards the places and the people amongst whom she finds herself: “Ich versuchte mich anzupassen, so zu leben, als würde ich das Funktionieren des System der verschiedenen Beziehungen, in denen ich stand, durchschauen und akzeptieren. Ich wollte so wenige Fehler wie möglich machen, obwohl ich wußte, daß ich immer welche machen würde” (V 20). Thus, even if moved by the most genuine interest and by a real desire to come closer to the other, she seems to focus instead on the effort of systematizing the Turkish way of living and trying to establish what she can or cannot do.

From the very first pages, the novel presents the conflict between the narrator's desire to diminish the distance between two different cultures and, at the same time, her attempt to avoid a complete identification with the new and the foreign. In her critical

work on Frischmuth's novel, Monika Shafi underlines precisely the capacity of this text to generate a tension between notions of home and displacement, which however culminates with the narrator's failure in her project of negotiation of the two cultures. In fact, while the protagonist attempts at any cost to adapt to Turkish life, behaving according to its norms and rituals (Shafi 245), she ultimately remains a stranger, alien to the events taking place around her. This is what Shafi calls the condition of "resident alien," a definition, with which she very effectively illustrates the position of the narrator within her new environment. The juxtaposition of these two terms can be used at the same time to describe the postmodern condition of hybrid identities, and to highlight the paradoxical condition of migrant and displaced identities nowadays. Despite the temporary stay, Frischmuth's narrator in fact experiences an ambivalent relationship with the hosting country, which is similar to the one that immigrants usually undergo. Like Frischmuth's protagonist, these identities are in search for a place in which to feel at home yet continue to remain strangers to it. Even a strenuous and conscious attempt to adapt to a new style of life seems destined to fail, as some traits of one's origins remain and do not easily assimilate with the new environment. The return to the origins, or in the case of Frischmuth's narrator the rediscovery of some peculiar traits of her identity, work as a sort of response to the phenomenon of increasing globalization and homogenization of cultures, highlighting at the same time this tension and a fundamental incapacity of finding a final reconciliation between different cultures. As she is part of daily and domestic life of her friends and roommates Sevim and Turgut, Frischmuth's protagonist automatically becomes a resident who is expected to behave according to the customs of the Turkish society in which she lives. At the same time, however, she remains

fundamentally foreign to the new environment, and ultimately unable to assimilate with it. (Shafi 243) While Shafi highlights the underlying conflicts within the text until the end, Michaels sees instead a positive conclusion to the narrator's experience despite the clash of cultures, and writes: "Even though the narrator fails in her hopes of appropriating the other, Frischmuth shows that different cultures can approach each other with warmth and respect" (76). While Shafi's interpretation focuses mainly on the conflicts, Michaels' conciliatory final comment trivializes the novel and does not do justice to its meaning either. I claim in fact that Frischmuth's novel does not simply describe the failed attempt of a person to fully assimilate within a new culture, nor does it solely evoke the tensions that her attitude may provoke. In this paradoxical process during which the more she tries to resist a full identification, "the more she enters the world of the other" (Bammer xv), the narrator discovers a layered and contradictory self while she begins to lose all her certainties. The crisis of identity that originates from the encounter with the other, however, does not lead Frischmuth to postulate only a fragmentation of identity. Through the mysticism of her research topic, she also suggests the possibility of a new identity, in which boundaries are no longer fixed. In the "Verwischung von Grenzen" (Frischmuth "Blick" 22) that the author advocates as the condition for a higher and mystic unity of the self, lies the possibility of a multicultural society.

As Frischmuth herself points out in "Der Blick über den Zaun" (22), the novel works on two levels, one in the present and represented by the narrator's everyday life in Turkey, the other directed towards the past and strictly related to her research. The two levels are interconnected, which further complicates the novel. Moreover, as suggested at the beginning, it is hard to outline a precise structure to this novel, as the various episodes

that constitute it are strictly entwined yet disconnected at the same time. Like entries in a journal, or flowing recollections coming back to memory from the past, the narrator reports the events sometimes as they take place one after the other and other times as they return to her mind. Her thoughts and reflections mingle with the recounting of her encounters in the city and with the events occurring to her. The episodes evoke a domestic and familiar atmosphere, where however, even the most clichéd and obvious incidents hide a deeper meaning, gradually revealing details of the experience of the narrator, and, at the same time, uncovering her complicated identity.

The narrator's experience in Turkey revolves around her life at home with Sevim and Turgut, her intellectual meetings with the professor Engin Bey, the romantic — and instructive — encounters with doctor Aksu, and, mostly, by her endless wanderings around the city. As Shafi notes, it is perhaps important to point out that it is not entirely correct to consider *Das Verschwinden* a Turkish novel as Hertz-Ohmes defined it. The narrator, in fact, encounters only a particular class of Turkish people, and her experience is limited to a certain intellectual group made up of urban and mostly educated individuals.⁷ Getting in touch with the most orthodox part of the culture would have probably made her stay more difficult and challenging, forcing her to face a reality much different than what she actually experiences. Moreover, the narrator is not only immersed within the environment of a Turkish “intelligentsia” (Shafi 246), but she also likes to spend most of the time with men, rather than with women.

⁷ Interestingly enough, the first encounter of the narrator with her Turkish friends takes place not in a market or in the bazaar, where ordinary people get to meet, but, instead, in the “Gasse der Antiquare” as to underline as sort of higher and more exclusive environment, permeated by culture. (10)

With her roommate Sevim, the narrator establishes a kind of love-hate relationship. On the one hand in fact, Sevim, more than anyone else, helps her adjust to the new environment including her in daily and domestic life in Turkey. She involves her even in the household chores and tries to get closer to her by learning German. It is precisely during these everyday activities of their present reality however, that Sevim points out the narrator's contradictory behavior, highlighting the fundamental distance of her research from the actual reality of Turkish people. One day, while doing laundry they have a conversation about her research topic: "Sevim zuckte die Achseln. Was willst du damit? Ich verstehe, daß dir die Gedichte der Bektaschis und Alevis gefallen, daß man daraus etwas über unsere heutige Sprache erfahren kann, aber all die Velis und Habibullahs, die Hadschis und Pirs, die Engel, Teufel und Dämonen, wozu sollen die gut sein?" (V 116) By continuously inquiring about her work and judging and criticizing her attitude, Sevim is the one who will first provoke the narrator's internal crisis.

It is during her aimless wanderings around the city that the narrator's alienation emerges even stronger, and in these occasions her identity is called into question the most. One time she runs into some tourists and, as Shafi underlines, she seems annoyed by the fact that she still has something in common with them: "Ich erschrak vor der Ähnlichkeit, die ich mit diesen Leuten noch hatte, in meinem Verlangen, alles zu sehen, jeden Weg zumindest einmal gegangen zu sein, einen Überblick zu bekommen" (13). From the very beginning of the novel, the attitude of the narrator is clearly represented in an ambiguous way. She is annoyed at being taken for a tourist, yet she attempts to maintain a distance and avoids a full identification. By erasing all traces of her Austrianness in order to adjust, the narrator obtains a sort of opposite effect, revealing

instead how some traits and characteristics of her identity are still there. With time the relationship she establishes with the city reveals her fundamentally contradictory behavior:

So als wohnte ich nicht wirklich in der Stadt, sondern ginge nur in ihr umher. Es kam mir noch darauf an, sie mir Stadtteil für Stadtteil vor Augen zu führen, zu wissen, wo ich war, wie weit es von hier nach dort war, welche Verbindungen es gab. Ich besaß Stadtpläne, auf denen ich bestimmte Orte mit Kreuzen und Kreisen markierte, je nachdem, welche Art von Bedeutung sie für mich hatten (V 13-14).

As she conducts a very meticulous visit of the city, circling places she has visited and routes still to take on her map, the narrator attempts to maintain a scholarly attitude towards the city. She aims to know Istanbul “Stadtteil für Stadtteil” (13) with the precise intention of later being able to recognize parts of it and possibly acquire a familiarity with them. However, it is precisely by attempting to act out the neutrality Frischmuth professes in her essay that the narrator’s subjective approach comes out even stronger. In place of a detailed and detached knowledge of the city, she constructs an emotional topography, characterizing and distinguishing places according to the different meanings they have for her. Sometimes she connects places with dreams which emphasizes even more her subjective attitude.

Another day she goes to a mosque and runs into some Turkish women who are clearly struck by her physical appearance so very different to them. With surprise the narrator reports that the women’s attention is attracted by the color of her eyes and her dress,⁸ a clear sign of her exotic look for them. If this episode reassures the narrator of the

⁸ “Während sie mich durch Kopfnicken dazu aufforderten, noch ein Glas Tee zu trinken, machten sie sich gegenseitig auf die Farbe meiner Augen aufmerksam und auf mein Kleid. Sie suchten zu erraten, woher ich kam, lachten mir zu, deuteten auf meine nackte Hand und zeigten mir ihre Eheringe [...]” (V 19)

fact that a full identification with the foreign culture cannot take place — because they ultimately remain strangers to each other, no matter how well she speaks the language — at the same time it helps her become aware of herself and her condition. Despite a very different geographical context, Fanon's reflections on racism and colonialism result at this point extremely relevant in order to interpret Frischmuth's narrator. By exploring the psychological relationship between an identity and what is perceived as "the Other," and by drawing upon Hegel's *Phenomenology of The Spirit*, Fanon highlights the dialectical struggle that determines the relationship between colonizer and colonized. His study in particular aims to analyze the historical relationship between blacks and whites.⁹ This interaction reveals how the colonized ultimately seeks "recognition" — another term he borrowed from Hegel — from the colonizer and shows how this attitude is all a "question of the subject" (212) looking for security and self-affirmation.

I am the Hero. [...] I am the center of attention. If the other seeks to make me uneasy with his wish to have value (his fiction), I simply banish him without a trial. He ceases to exist... I do not wish to experience the impact of the object. Contact with the object means conflict. I am Narcissus, and what I want to see in the eyes of others is a reflection that pleases me. (Fanon 212)

In search for admiration "in the eyes of the other" (212), the Object becomes an instrument to reach personal and individual subjectivity, while everything is done for Him: "because it is the Other who corroborates him in his search for self-validation" (213). In addition to that, while underlining the Antilleans' typical feeling of inferiority, Fanon points out that when the subject "encounters resistance from the Other," in other

⁹ "It is because the Negro belongs to an 'inferior' race that he seeks to be like the superior race" (Fanon 215).

words, in the absence of recognition, “self-consciousness undergoes the experience of desire” (218).

Although Fanon’s discussion relates to what he sees as a typical Martinicans’ feeling of inferiority, and relates to issues larger than those analyzed here, the relationship between the locals and the Other in Frischmuth has a similar outcome. In the same way as for Fanon the Martinican attempts to imitate white people, but realizes in this confrontation that he is fundamentally different, Frischmuth’s narrator is desperately trying to mingle with the locals and to be accepted by them. As she strenuously attempts to be recognized as one of them, the narrator ultimately realizes that she is different. Annoyed by this discovery, she ends up unveiling traits of her personality and characteristics of her identity that she was trying to cast aside in order to completely assimilate. In the gaze of the Turkish women she does not find the sought for recognition, but instead the confirmation of her fundamental and intrinsic difference. She realizes that her imaged integration will never take place. The event in the mosque, like the ones mentioned earlier, becomes then a sign of the contradictions inherent in the narrator. It also stresses the fact that, despite her knowledge of the language and the culture, there is still a gap between her and Turkish culture; she is still perceived as a foreigner, both by the local people and by her friends (Michaels 74). Moreover, by evoking places that are commonly associated with the exotic and the mysterious ‘Orient’ like the bazaars and the markets where she likes to walk around to get lost, she involuntarily further reinforces the distance between the world she is from and her new environment. Little by little the readers are drawn into the magic exoticism of this poetic world, while the narrator’s

perceptions and impressions make of her still an “observer, an outsider, in a certain sense a voyeur” (Michaels 73).

On various occasions, the narrator confronts the fact that the way in which she perceives life is still different than that of her friends, but she is still too caught up in her research to realize its full implications. As Andrea Horvath underlines, the narrator seems incapable of seeing that her research represents an inadequate means to read and interpret reality. Her historical interest in the order of the Bektashi dates back so far in time that it is impossible for her to find any connection between the tradition and the actual reality she is experiencing:

Ihr Sprachstudium wird durch die täglichen Veränderungen im Land, die sie nicht durchschaut, widerspiegelt. Ihr akademisch-intellektueller Versuch, sich den gegenwärtigen Zuständen des Landes durch das Studium der Literatur und Geschichte des mystischen Ordens zu nähern, scheitert, da Tradition und Fortschritt in keinem Verhältnis mehr zueinander stehen. (89)

This is demonstrated also by her friends’ inquiries into her work, their difficulties in understanding what she is doing and, finally, even by her “absent” adviser who “hardly gives her any concrete suggestions” (Shafi 248).

Despite her apparent inability to make her topic relevant, the “purity” of the literature of the Bektashi can be used to interpret the narrator’s attitude and to find a deeper meaning in her actions. What fascinated Frischmuth about this literature, in fact, was the way of seeing a unity of all beings in one thing. In “Der Blick über den Zaun,” she explains that the concept of a “unio mystica” professed by the Bektashi — a mystic experience which embraced all individuals into the divine — was precisely the type of experience that she was looking for (460). Among the several stories that exemplify this

concept in the literature of the Bektashi, Frischmuth likes in particular the one of the thirty birds who set out to search for the divine bird. Representing the human souls and their striving in life, the thirty birds have to face a series of difficulties and troubles before finally reaching the “den of nearness” (460). Here they are revealed to be themselves the *Si murgh*, which in Persian means thirty births. At the end of this journey “the unity of all being establishes itself, and the shadow disappears in the Sun” (460). This story is never recounted in the novel itself, which explains the mysticism and gives the novel its title.

In the afterword to the English translation of the book, Nicholas J. Meyerhofer draws an analogy between this parable and the narrator’s journey into self-awareness. He sees in the title of the novel the figuration of her passing from the dreamlike, romanticized sphere of her research to the realm of rationality of present reality, symbolically represented by the light of the sun.¹⁰ In the mystic unity that it evokes, in fact, I see the strenuous attempt of the narrator to find a harmonious co-existence of all the different cultures and the lost unity of her fragmented self. In this deeply spiritual moment Frischmuth recognizes the possibility of a larger union among all cultures:

Der Hauptgedanke der Mystik, die All-Einheit, ist an Seelenlagen gebunden, die sich bei Menschen aller Kulturen finden, wenn auch die Formen entsprechend variieren. Und dieser Gedanke der All-Einheit zeigt am besten, wohin die Verwischung von Grenzen, nämlich jener des eigenen Ichs, im glücklichsten Fall führen kann und soll, zur unio-mystica, die das Eigene aufhebt im Göttlichen. (Frischmuth “Blick” 22)

By extending this union to a much wider and earthly sphere, the term *multiculturalism* acquires almost a spiritual and religious meaning for her. For Frischmuth,

¹⁰ As Michaels points out, the parable plays a crucial role in the understanding of the novel (72).

multiculturalism suggests “ein möglichst reibungsloses und friedliches Miteinander möglichst vieler Sprachvölker” (Frischmuth “Blick“ 23).

Yet, the results of her research start pulling her towards a magical and rather unreal realm, demonstrated by the confusion and the puzzlement into which the narrator gradually falls. As Horvath correctly points out, the more she reads and learns about the Bektashi, the more she generates elements that cause misunderstandings in the present (Horvath 94). Moreover, the great value that she puts on her research and on the events she is investigating brings up more questions than answers. Soon she realizes that the project she is working on is far more complicated than she originally thought, and that the subject she chose can lead to new and different approaches. Overwhelmed by too much information, the narrator begins to lose track of her dissertation topic. Carried away in long and tireless wanderings around the city, she rarely goes to the university and almost stops working on her project, preferring instead to lose herself in the meandering streets of the city. Very early in the novel she admits: “Zur Universität ging ich selten. Alle fragten sie mich nach meiner Arbeit, aber ich antwortete immer etwas anderes” (12). Only with her friend and adviser Engin Bey is she less evasive: “Nur Engin Bey sagte ich die Wahrheit. Ich wußte zwar, welches Material ich bearbeiten wollte, nur nicht, von welchem Gesichtspunkt aus. Ich hatte noch keine Frage gefunden und war mir nicht klar darüber, was ich überhaupt beweisen sollte” (V 12).

Frischmuth imagines the process of negotiation taking place in an idyllic, harmonious and smooth way; her narrator, in reality, falls very early into a confused

state, in which her certainties start collapsing:¹¹

Es wurde immer schwieriger, mir einzureden, daß alles, was ich hier tat, in einem anderen Bezugssystem stand, daß es letzten Endes keine Gültigkeit hatte und ich mich durch eine Fahrkarte von allem, was mit mir und um mich herum geschah, absetzen konnte. Ich war bereits einbezogen und wurde es mit jedem Tag mehr. Ob es sich um Sevim und Turgut, um Aksu oder meine Arbeit handelte, ich hatte die Position des Beobachters, der außerhalb steht, nicht halten können. (V 20-21)

This sentence, together with the episodes mentioned earlier, can be taken as exemplary of the ambiguity and the conflicting feelings in which the narrator gradually falls.

Eventually she wonders what the initial motivation for her research was and even asks herself for what reason she is working on this topic at all:

Manchmal fragte ich mich allen Ernstes, wozu ich mich auf das alles eingelassen hatte, ob ich nicht mit demselben Aufwand etwas ganz anderes hätte zuwege bringen können. Ich sah einer Sprache zu, wie sie sich änderte, aber der Versuch, mit ihr Schritt zu halten, brachte nichts als Niederlagen. Ich vergaß, was ich gelernt hatte, und lernte, was ich vergessen hatte. (V 32)

As she gradually loses her motivation, she realizes that all she can think of are series of inconsequential sentences that do not make sense (Michaels 74):

Da fiel mir eine Reihe von Sätzen ein, doch sobald ich mich hinsetzte, um sie niederzuschreiben, erschienen sie mir so unwesentlich, daß ich nicht wagte, auch nur davon auszugehen. Was mich nicht daran hinderte, von ihnen zu reden, als hätten sie mich wirklich auf eine Spur gebracht, die ich von nun an mit vollem Einsatz verfolgen würde. Und ich wurde gelobt dafür. (V 33)

As anticipated earlier, the narrator's incapacity to express herself with language informs a

¹¹ This statement occurs in the first pages of the novel and describes the great confusion in which the protagonist already is. Far from being the expert she is supposed to become in order to appropriate Turkish culture and activate a process of negotiation with her own culture, we realize that from the very first confessions she seems to anticipate what will happen later.

language crisis embedded in a larger literary tradition in Austria. Frischmuth understands language programmatically and inscribes with and through it her fragmentation and the difficulties of expressing her experience abroad. Her confusion is expressed in the image of a landscape she cannot survey — and hence ‘possess’:

Ich kam immer wieder vom ursprünglichen Thema ab und noch weiter von den Möglichkeiten, eine Arbeit über etwas Bestimmtes zu schreiben. So als öffnete ich eine Tür und, um einen Blick in eine ganz bestimmte Richtung zu tun, aber statt dessen stürzte die ganze Wand ein, und ich erblickte Landschaften in den seltsamsten Farben, besser gesagt in Linien, nicht unähnlich denen der Buchstabenbilder, bei denen jedes Detail eine neue Frage stellen ließ. Ein Gefühl der Hilflosigkeit vor dem Hintergrund, der mangelnden Erkennbarkeit, trieb mich weiter. Ich wußte selbst nicht mehr, was ich eigentlich wollte. (V 150-151)

This comment, expressed in relation to her dissertation, in reality reveals much more than her frustration with her project. This feeling mirrors the personal and intimate conflicts within her own identity. As she receives more input on her dissertation, going back and forth from the original topic to new ones, the encounter with the Turkish culture starts wearing on her and sends her identity into crisis. The image of the wall crashing down represents the certainties she believes are being called into question and are destined to collapse. The new landscapes that open in front of her, in which strange colors and lines take shape, metaphorically represent the Eastern realm entering her Western world. Foreground and background become indistinct, giving way to a multifaceted writing-image, a “Buchstaben-Bild” (Naqvi). The alphabet pictures recall Özdamar’s poetic and pictorial writing and evoke in this way a new type of narration. The narrator’s secure Western world is undermined from within, through the language that no longer is a familiar tool she can use to recount her experience. As to intensify her confusion, the material she is reading increasingly becomes part of her dreams: “Wenn ich schlief, zog

sich die Lektüre durch meine Träume, immer deutlicher und hartnäckiger” (V 161). Only in her dreams she perceives herself as having once been in the condition to understand what she was reading: “Und wieder konnte ich alles Geschriebene lesen. Ich hörte es mich Wort für Wort sagen, im Traum bereits wissend, daß ich die Bedeutung des Gelesenen in einem mir im Traum schon nicht mehr bewußten Zustand einmal verstanden haben mußte” (V 161).

Even Sevim points out that the dimension in which she lives and experiences Istanbul and Turkey is just like a dream. “Du gehst wie im Traum. Ich will dich warnen. Du sollst nicht glauben, daß du alles besser verstehen wirst, wenn du in der Zeit immer weiter zurückgehst. Es ist nicht nur die Tradition, weswegen alles so ist, wie es ist. Schau dir diese Stadt an, es geht schon um etwas ganz anderes” (V 117-118). As the narrator understands that her “dreamy” attitude prevents her from being part of the present-day reality, she also realizes that it was a mistake to avoid asking questions and approaching reality in an uncritical way. She realizes how much she has missed out on the reality around her:

Wenn ich an all das zurückdenke, fällt mir auf, daß ich eigentlich kaum danach gefragt hatte, warum es Aufmärsche und Demonstrationen gab. Ich kann mich auch nicht daran erinnern, daß ich mit Engin Bey oder mit Sevim je wirklich darüber gesprochen hätte, so als wäre die Unausweichlichkeit und Unausbleiblichkeit der Veränderung unanfechtbar, als würden alle zumindest in diesem Punkt übereinstimmen, daß es eine Veränderung geben mußte oder besser gesagt, daß es eine geben würde. (V 158)

She literally wakes up from a dream at the end: “Mir kam alles so unwirklich vor, und trotzdem hatte ich das Gefühl, als wäre ich plötzlich aufgewacht, als würde ich jeden Schritt, jede Bewegung in diesem mir so vertrauten Raum auf eine neue Weise begreifen”

(V 173-174). She immediately tries to catch up on what she missed: “Mich überkam die unbändige Lust zu fragen, nach jedem Detail [...]” (174). It is again a distorted way of learning things, which however unveils a subtle irony against the Western encyclopedic way of categorizing events pertaining to an unknown world.

Ich wollte all die Tage rekonstruieren, und das nicht nur insoweit, als sie mit mir in Zusammenhang standen, sondern überhaupt, jede rekonstruierbare Minute. Nun, da ich angefangen hatte, etwas zu wissen, wollte ich es genau wissen. Ich würde Sevim fragen. An alle Tagen, die ich noch da war, würde ich ihr eine oder viele Fragen stellen, bis sie selbst nicht mehr wußte, was ich nicht auch wußte. (V 175)

In fact, if her obsession of discerning things and interrogating reality turns a lack of knowledge into something she truly desires to know, at the same time her research does nothing but increase, rather than diminish the distance between her and the environment in which she exists.

Criticizing her intellectual attitude, Dietrich Simon underlines how the experience in Turkey helps her realize the meaninglessness of her job for her present experience:

Objektiv vollzieht sich in Istanbul der Versuch der Ich-Erzählerin, aus diesem rein intellektuell bestimmten Selbstbildnis auszubrechen. Sie erlebt die Bedeutungslosigkeit ihres bürgerlich-intellektuellen Berufes in der Welt, die dem Gegenstand dieses Berufes entspricht, und deshalb muß sie über den Beruf hinausgelangen und eine neue Existenz finden, eine Existenz, die dem vorgegebenen Bild des spezialisierten bürgerlichen Intellektuellen entgegengesetzt ist. (V 429)

Clearly the narrator acknowledges that it was a mistake to expect to find in the past, and in her scholarly research, the keys to interpret the present (Horvath 94).

However, it is not entirely correct to say that the project in which she invested so much time and energy, has been only “an intellectual experience” as Michaels affirms (76). It is

precisely the poetics of her writing, permeating dreams and legends of the Bektashi, that counters the “uselessness” of her research and elevates the novel on a higher meta-reflexive level. Language works for Frischmuth in the same way as for Özdamar, as the tools in and through which she can stage the encounter and the clash of cultures.

The lack of concrete results in her research not only affects her state of mind but it also invites her to reconsider her relationship with her friends. In Turkey she has learned something about the bad condition of medicine and health from her lover, Doctor Aksu, and she has become aware of the difficulty of expressing ideas through her friend, the writer Ersever. Yet she starts wondering what she really knows about her roommates, recognizing that also her love relationships with Aksu and later that with Turgut remain full of questions. As Horvath argues: “Sie begegnet mehreren Personen aber die Bekanntschaften mit Sevim, Turgut, Ayten, Aksu und Engin Bey helfen ihr ebenfalls nicht, die kulturellen Unterschiede zu überwinden. Die junge Orientalistin muß gerade hier erleben, wie schwierig es ist, das Anderssein zu erleben” (Horvath 95). As most critics point out, approaching her friends and their culture with no criticism at all results in a blind acceptance that, in turn, undermines the process of negotiation and prevents her from realizing what takes place in present-day Turkey.

On the other hand, her friends also accept her the way she is, showing at the same time an overprotective attitude towards her. One day she hears Sevim and Turgut whispering in the kitchen, and she realizes with disappointment that they are obviously excluding her from their lives. The narrator gets annoyed by the exaggeratedly reserved attitude of her friends and understands that they are not doing this to protect her, as she thinks, but rather to protect themselves:

Die Art, wie sie mich von vornherein ausgeschlossen und überhaupt nicht damit gerechnet hatten, daß ich mich für das, was ihnen so wichtig zu sein schien, interessieren könnte, verletzte mich. Es war so, als hätten sie nicht im entferntesten an die Möglichkeit gedacht, mich einzubeziehen. Und langsam begriff ich, daß meine vollkommene Unwissenheit eine Art Schutz für sie gewesen sein mußte. (V 175)

Retrospectively, she realizes that their protectiveness was also a reaction to her ‘tourist-’ attitude, as Sevim claims:

Eines Tages wirst Du zurückfahren und uns vergessen, sagte Sevim. Du wirst dorthin zurückgehen, wo du auch vorher gelebt hast, und du wirst unsere Fotos in eine Schachtel geben oder sie sogar irgendwo einkleben und dich an uns erinnern, wenn du die Schachtel öffnest oder das Album aufschlägst. Das andere wirst du nicht vergessen oder nicht so schnell. [...] Du wirst mit deiner Wissenschaft ruhig in deinem Land sitzen und darüber nachdenken, wie das eine oder andere Zeichen zu deuten sei, während wir hier Seuchen oder Krieg oder Revolution haben (V 119).

Her experience abroad will be secured in a box of memories or an album of pictures that she will open and close whenever she wants. As in the case of her dissertation, this knowledge remains abstract, compartmentalized — signs to interpreted rather than a part of herself. Oscillating between the narrator’s fear of self-loss and that of creating misunderstanding, the novel comes to an unexpected crescendo only within the space of the last few pages. While the narrator is getting ready to go home, trying to cope with a failed cultural negotiation and starting to reconsider her overall attitude in Turkey, her friend and lover Turgut is unexpectedly killed in a street demonstration. The sudden confrontation with violence and bloodshed forces the narrator to acknowledge a reality she had not even thought existed. The dreamlike status that Sevim accused her of having terminates in the last pages of the novel, with a drastic step into reality that, as Horvath correctly points out, comes from the outside and not from the inside:

Das wirkliche Erwachen kommt aber dann ganz anders, nämlich nicht durch ihre eigene Initiative, sondern von außen her, durch die plötzlichen Veränderungen in ihrem Leben. Und erst am Ende des Romans, als ihr Freund Turgut während einer Straßendemonstration ermordet wird, erfährt sie, daß ihre Bekannten in der aktuellen gesellschaftlichen Realität lebten. (Horvath 98)

The final understanding of what is happening in Turkey also compromises forever her return home, and the narrator's homecoming is symbolically blocked precisely in this moment. As she becomes aware that her friend Turgut was involved in political activities, which eventually led to his death, she also realizes that something in herself has changed forever. Her return home can and will physically take place, but it will not bring her back to what was before. The experience in the foreign country then, leads her to anything but a conciliation of cultures. By contradicting the plans and principles she had at the beginning and by reaching a new hybrid status, the narrator ultimately arrives at a new level of awareness, which tells her that the process of negotiation needs to be conducted under rules other than hers. The realization of the necessity of a new way of investigating one's own self is brought together with the idea of a foreclosed homecoming.¹²

Frischmuth seems to use her novel to invite her readership to conduct a personal analysis of what it means to deal with other cultures. The way in which the narrator has been welcomed and hosted does not correspond to what her country would reserve to her friends if they were to visit her.

¹² Before the dramatic ending, the narrator is aware that the return home would separate her and Turkey, and that she would perceive things in a distant way very soon: "Ich würde eines Tages aufwachen, und das alles würde mich nicht mehr betreffen, zumindest nicht unmittelbar. Und ich würde an Turgut denken, der in seinem Dorf irgendwo im Innern von Anatolien saß, und es würde mir exotisch vorkommen. Ich würde Sehnsucht haben und mir sagen, daß ich schon längst wieder einmal hätte hinfahren sollen. Wie viele Jahre würden es dann sein? [...] Vielleicht wäre es dann auch so, daß man gar nicht mehr fahren konnte, daß die Grenzen gesperrt und das Land in einen Bürgerkrieg verwickelt wäre. (V 178-179) Despite her attachment to those places and people, the way in which the narrator imagines what will happen after her departure, shows detachment, and almost indifference to what could occur there after her departure. The idea of Turgut sitting somewhere in a small Anatolian village will become just an exotic and nostalgic memory.

Vielleicht käme Aksu mich einmal besuchen, und ich versuchte mir vorzustellen, wie er sich ausnehmen würde in dem anderen Land, in das ich bald zurückfahren würde, und ich schämte mich, weil ich wußte, daß man ihn nur halb so gut aufnehmen würde, wie man mich hier aufgenommen hatte. (V 179)

As Yesilada points out, Frischmuth's literary engagement gives voice to the author's intercultural views and represents an "open minded Austria, that reflects upon its multicultural past" (3). By commenting on the current political situation in Austria, Frischmuth recognizes that foreigners are not in danger, yet not all Austrians seem to be ready to face the issues linked to migration in Europe. In one interview she refers to the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire as another possible model for cross-cultural encounters: "I find far too few traces of the multicultural past in Austria today. I wish that more had been preserved from this centuries-long tradition" (10). While she criticizes Austria and its fundamental closedness towards other cultures, at the same time, the events occurring in Turkey seem to overcome her. The future she images lets us now believe that she will remember these experiences only with nostalgia, which will eventually lead to a new sense of foreignness:

Es wurde mir immer unerträglicher, daran zu denken, daß dies alles einmal keine Wirklichkeit mehr für mich sein könnte. Die beginnende Trennung verwirrte mich so, daß ich wieder anfang, mich fremd zu fühlen, wenn auch auf eine andere Art, so als würden mir sogar die Gegenstände unterm Griff zerbröckeln. (V 179)

4.4. Traveling and simulation

In "Der Blick über den Zaun," Frischmuth explains that "[es] geht nicht nur um ein Spiel von Anziehung und Abstoßung, sondern um Formen der Durchdringung. Die

Ich-Erzählerin begibt sich ziemlich vorbehaltlos ins Andere, versucht, es sich anzuverwandeln und flieht, sobald sie ihr Eigenes sich auflösen spürt" (23). While it is true that the narrator strives to adapt to and integrate within Muslim culture, it does not appear to me that she opens herself so "unconditionally" towards the other, as Frischmuth says. The analysis of the novel conducted so far has revealed, in fact, a rather contradictory attitude of the protagonist, who appears to be very conscious of her position and of her identity. This is shown in particular in those moments in which she is confronted with her status as a "foreigner." While she admits to trying her best to adapt and integrate, she is at times pleased, at times annoyed, by the fact that she is seen as something "exotic." At the very beginning of the novel she says:

Ich hatte die Position des Beobachters, der außerhalb steht, nicht halten können. Daß ich Ausländerin war, bedeutete keine Attraktion mehr. [...] Doch es gab immer wieder Tage, an denen ich mein Einbezogensein für Schein hielt und mir vorkam, als würde ich nackt unter lauter Angezogenen stehen. (21)

Other times, like in the episode with the Turkish women previously mentioned, she is almost annoyed by the fact that they point out her different physical appearance. Lorenz and Shafi suggest looking at other episodes as well, in which the narrator's contradictory behavior comes to light. For example, at the beginning when she is still adapting to the smells around her, she is so nauseated by them that she needs to buy ham just to carry it around with her in a bag. Also, on the day in which she seems to be finally convinced to visit her friend Sueheyla whom she only knows by correspondence, she ends up instead buying foreign newspapers and reading them in a café frequented by foreigners, another episode that shows how she continuously switches from one culture to the other (Shafi 246). In her essay, Shafi detects a precise act of dissimulation directly linked if not

caused by the necessity of performing within different cultures (246), while Lorenz talks about a “theatrical behavior” and of a “superficial play-acting designed to win the trust of the ‘natives’” (272-273).

But what does it mean to “perform” in a different culture? Does it mean disguising our real selves and presenting an identity that is not our own? Earlier, in the analyses of the narrator’s interaction with the local Turkish people, I had underlined how their way of gazing at her led to a new consciousness of her identity. Fanon’s investigation of the psychological relationship between black and white helped articulate in a clearer way the differences between one identity and what is perceived as “the Other.”

In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva describes how the foreigner, far from his homeland, acquires a new sensitivity and is forced to reflect on how to act in the new environment. Analyzing the experience of the foreigner not only in a social context but also within a psychological and internal perspective, Kristeva affirms the necessity of recognizing first and foremost the stranger that lives within our own selves. “Never completely true nor completely false” (8), the foreigner, according to Kristeva, enacts a sort of performance, while he realizes that he can be “constantly other according to others’ wishes, and to circumstances” (8). As she describes the condition of the stranger, she adds that “without a home he disseminates [...] the actor’s paradox: multiplying masks and ‘false selves’” (8). Kristeva questions the very existence of the self, suggesting that in this sort of “role play” the foreigner ultimately may not have a real self: “I do what *they* want *me* to do, but it is not “me” – “me” is elsewhere [...] does “me” exist?”(8). In this “kaleidoscope of identities” (13), I believe that the encounter with the others, rather

than unveiling no real self, ultimately discloses the profound fragmentation and the extreme contradictions that inhabit postmodern identities: “Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply — humanistically — a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself (Kristeva 13). Although Frischmuth's narrator does not voluntarily simulate, she, nonetheless, is aware of playing a temporary role, which will last until her trip home.

Also her academic commitment is not as authentic as she initially wants to pretend and she is aware of playing the role of the intellectual with her closest friends. In fact, not only is she confused about the topic of her dissertation, but with certain people she evidently simulates a dedication that she does not really have: “Ich tat, als würde ich ernsthaft arbeiten, oft nur um Sevim zu beruhigen” (V 33). Under the severe and scolding look of Sevim,¹³ the narrator is forced to fake her progress, pretending that she is reading or studying when she is not. At times she even starts wondering whether her position were not the result of Sevim's expectations, as if she were an actor playing a part assigned to her from the very beginning:

Vielleicht war es ihr nie darum gegangen, so rasch wie möglich Deutsch zu lernen. Oder, und das erschien mir noch richtiger, sie hatte mich, nachdem sie mich näher kennengelernt hatte, in dieser Funktion eingesetzt. Und ich hatte meine Rolle ganz nach Wunsch gespielt, keine Fragen gestellt und mich angepaßt, es hingenommen, von Spielregeln beherrscht zu werden, die ich zwar als solche erkannt hatte, von denen ich aber nicht wußte, zu welchem Spiel sie gehörten. (V 176)

¹³ Auch bereite es mir kaum mehr Vergnügen, Sevims vorwurfsvollem Blick standzuhalten.” (V 44)

The narrator attempts to play the part of the exotic character also at the end, when she dreams of her friends waving goodbye to her. When unexpectedly Turgut tells her that he is leaving, she does not question why, she just does not like the idea of being the one who stays behind. She plays with the idea of being the one who is leaving, while the others stay behind: “Plötzlich glaubte ich, Turgut zurückhalten zu müssen, ihn, wenn Argumente nicht halfen, einfach zu bitten, daß er noch bleiben möge, zumindest so lange, bis ich selbst wegfuhr” (171), until she openly admits it to Turgut that she just was trying to find a way to hold back his departure: “Ich wollte nur nicht, daß du vor mir die Stadt verläßt. Ich will dich an meinem Zug stehen und winken sehen” (172-173).

According to Shafi, the protagonist is well aware of the differences and she “is not trying to go native, for both she and her friends know that, as a ‘resident alien’, she is engaged in a temporary cultural switch, in a game of make-believe that will be abandoned once she returns home” (246). To stress that her simulating attitude also has a physical and theatrical component, we can think of the episode in which the narrator discusses the meaning of wearing a *Salvar*, the traditional baggy trousers of Turkish women's dress. By clearly judging her behavior, Sevim points out to the narrator that she would make the *Salvar* become again something exotic.¹⁴ In this way, wearing a piece of clothing that in the culture of today has become an ordinary outfit, she stages a symbolic act, marking her difference even more (Shafi 246). It is episodes like this one, that

¹⁴ “Am liebsten würdest du meine *Şalvar* anziehen, aber was hast du davon? Ich gebe zu, du weißt besser Bescheid über Pir Sultan Abdal als ich, und wenn ich dich frage, woher das Wort *Şalvar* kommt, wirst du es mir sicher erklären können. Ich aber, ich ziehe diese dummen Hosen an, weil ich mich beim Wäschewaschen zu oft bücken muß. Ich ziehe sie an, weil es darum nicht schade ist. Du aber, du würdest dabei etwas fühlen, wenn du sie anziehst. Wahrscheinlich, sagte ich. Ich würde mir einbilden, etwas kennenzulernen, das es schon nicht mehr gibt [...] Ich würde mir für einen Augenblick ein Gefühl der Exotik gestatten, nicht nur das, ich würde eine Art von Befriedigung erleben, indem ich mich für kurze Zeit durch das Tragen eines ihrer sichtbaren Merkmale mit einer anderen Auffassung von Zivilisation identifizieren könnte.” (V 116-117)

demonstrate that any border crossing cannot pretend to authenticity (246). Somewhere else she has another, more “real” life.

According to Peter Hertz-Ohmes, dissimulation informs the entire novel even the movement of the Bektashi itself, which, as pointed out earlier, has continued to exist in a concealed way parallel to the Turkish regime (196). The critic underlines how one of the leitmotifs in the novel is that of “Verborgenheit” a word that appears in the novel very often in italics and in reference with the Sufi orders like the Bektashi.¹⁵ According to Hertz-Ohmes, the Bektashi, politically banned by the government and forced to live in secret, continued to be present by “letting themselves be seen as others want to see them [...] as legitimate citizens” (197). Thus, the imposed secrecy led to a dissimulation of their real identity, which enabled them to continue to exist undisturbed as a popular movement.

4.5. Rewriting the Bildungsroman. A foreclosed Homecoming

Because the protagonist undergoes a process of self discovery and personal growth once she is about to go back to her own country, the novel has been compared to a *Bildungsroman*.¹⁶ A closer look at the events described and at the form of the novel will, however, reveal that Frischmuth problematizes the very form of the *Bildungsroman*

¹⁵ See in the novel pages 132-139.

¹⁶ „Erst in der fruchtbaren Spannung zwischen Ich und Gesellschaft, zwischen Eigenem und Anderem entwickelt sich der junge Mensch zum tätigen Mitglied der Gesellschaft. In diesem Sinne ist das Ende des Romans als durchaus positiv und optimistisch zu verstehen. Die Heldin steht am Ende ihrer Reise in den Orient, am Ende eines Reifeprozesses und ist als stabile Identität bereit zur Rückkehr ins eigene Land, in dem sie eine eigene Rolle spielen wird. So behandelt Brokoph-Mauch den Roman als einen traditionellen *Bildungsroman*“ (Horvath 99).

to create a new, hybrid genre, which, in reality, cannot be easily classified. As Fachinger points out, Frischmuth “rewrites the traditional *Bildungsroman* to subvert Eurocentric assumptions underlying much travel literature that the protagonist grows emotionally and spiritually through the encounter with the foreign culture” (242). In fact, as we have seen, the encounter with the other provokes a deep internal crisis inside the narrator but not yet a personal growth. That the narrator will change her attitude and learn from her mistakes is only hinted at, but not shown in the novel. Moreover, as she realizes that she failed in the process of negotiation, it is time for her to go home. Perhaps the problem lies precisely with that return ticket. It symbolically represents that the links to her country and culture are always maintained and ultimately prevents her from entering the world of the other in the way she had originally thought. Despite her efforts to settle in the new environment as if it were meant to become a new *Heimat*, the domesticity of her new Turkish home is clearly only a temporary dimension.

The lack of a traditional structure, in the manner in which we normally understand it, makes the novel particularly interesting especially from a stylistic point of view. The two levels of the novel then, the historical one and the one connected to the present day reality of Turkey, are, as I stated earlier, interwoven. This unique ‘literary hybrid’, made of the narrator’s accumulation of thoughts, dreams and events evokes the way the Tatar woman, the wife of Engin Bey — the narrator’s advisor — is telling her strange and somewhat ridiculous legends of the Bektashi.¹⁷ Of all the characters, the Tatar woman, evoking with her ethnic background a tradition of oral folktales and legends, is perhaps the one who most clearly establishes the link to the ‘Orient’. When telling the narrator the

¹⁷ In his essay Hertz-Ohmes reports a few legends from the book. See pp.197-198

stories of the Bektashi, the Tatar woman transports the protagonist into magic and dreams. In one of the descriptions of the Tatar, the narrator highlights her unusual and fascinating way of talking: “Wie immer, wenn die Tatarin mir eine Geschichte erzählte, legte sie sich die linke Hand auf meinen Arm, während sie sich die rechte so vor den Mund hielt, daß nur ich verstand, was sie sagte” (11). Even her physical appearance — her earrings with a half moon and a star, clearly evoke stereotypes of the Orient — adds something exotic to the character and increase the impression of the foreign. The stories told by the Tatar woman occur randomly and at different times and seem to influence the narrator herself in the way she recounts her experiences. The novel itself in its structure and in its poetic passages starts resembling those legendary stories. It is a new type of narration, which departs from the traditional and scholarly form of writing she was trying to pursue in order to enter another to her more fascinating realm. Shafi sees a deliberate intention on the part of the narrator to “withhold meaning” in the absence of a real plot (249), and she affirms that it is “this lack of clarity, order, and meaning that helps the protagonist avoid the Western modes of objectification” (Shafi 249). By contrast, Lorenz argues that the protagonist reproduces the experience of the foreign and maintains a clear opposition between East and West: “Frischmuth's narrator reproduces the traditional Orient, as a realm replete with magic, legendary creatures, and romance, fantastic and antimodern” (276). According to her, the author perpetrates the traditional vision of the Orient as it has always been described and criticized by the West. It emerges as a place of “freewheeling fancy free love, and freedom from responsibility” and also “irrational, depraved, childlike” (Said, qtd in Lorenz 265).

Although the narrator ultimately remains immersed in a masculine world — Lorenz highlights how, on the part of the narrator, there is a “predilection for masculine-coded activities” (264) — she does, however, share several moments of exclusively feminine intimacy with some Turkish women. Fachinger recalls the episode in which the narrator is invited to “an afternoon of clandestine drinking and intimate conversation” (244) with Sevim and Ayten, and the several instances in which the Tatar woman talks to her about her pregnancy (243).

Finally, by underlining the fragmentation of the text, especially when there are references to the Turkish world, Lorenz proves how the depiction of the Orient becomes even more enigmatic, “impenetrable” and mysterious (266). In the same way as Western eyes look at the Orient — as postulated by Said — “Frischmuth's narrative voice constructs positions of superiority in two ways, vis-à-vis the Orient and the reader, making ample use of the elements of mystery and the uncanny” (Lorenz 266). Moreover, the fact that the narrator never really mentions her own culture and avoids making comparisons evidently keeps her background “safe” from possible critiques (Shafi 248). In fact, she collects her impressions but avoids a direct confrontation with her own origins for fear of “anchoring these impressions in a particular system of knowledge and representation” (Shafi 248), making her idea of Turkey and of Turkish people emerge only from her point of view. This mode of narration inevitably negates the possibility of other critical approaches to reality, establishing her implicit superiority in the relationship with the locals.¹⁸

¹⁸ Lorenz ascribes the frustration and the growing sense of confusion to the narrator's “inability to conceptualize the Orient” the way she would like to, seeing her personal success achieved only when, years later, she is able to write about it from a distance (267). The critic concludes with a quite negative view of

Although it would be wrong to identify Frischmuth with the narrator of the story, it is inevitable, as shown, to note multiple similarities between the two, not only for the biographical elements they share, but also for a similar initial approach within the new environment. I believe that it is necessary at this point to also reconsider the position of Frischmuth, the author, in regard to multiculturalism and the encounter with the foreign. The narrator of the novel in fact demonstrates that “a genuine interest and a readiness to become spiritually and emotionally involved with the Other” (“Looking” 459) — conditions that Frischmuth poses as necessary in order to go beyond the stereotypes and get closer to another cultures — are not enough. The protagonist's willingness to openly adapt to the new environment and her respectful approach do not prove to facilitate the process of assimilation into the foreign culture. The sense of displacement and the confusion reached by the narrator of the novel show instead that, in the encounter with the other, identity is involved in a more complex and multifaceted way than what Frischmuth proposes in her essay. In light of the current theories on transnational and hybrid identities, her approach today appears somewhat dated and perhaps framed too much within fixed and pre-established categories that do not really explain our reality,

the novel: “Frischmuth's text, rather than revising Orientalist concepts, relegates the Orient and Islamic culture to the same discovery and conceptual position that Western discourses have traditionally assigned to women, children, non-Europeans, animals, and nature” (271). Between the reality and dream worlds that she has created, the narrator is, in the end, incapable of discerning the truth about what she learned from books. As the reader is inevitably drawn into this world with her, the narrator tries to link her intuitions, the “random impressions” and speculations about the Bektashi to today's Turkey (Lorenz 269). Despite the validity of this comment, I would like to stress how the positive outcome of the novel lies precisely in this new and unique type of narration. Hardly classifiable under traditional parameters, *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne* finds its value in the special way in which the narrator perceives and recounts her experiences in Turkey. Even though the negotiation between the narrator's own culture and the local culture does not take place the way she had imagined and she leaves the country under confusion and frustration, I believe that the story should not be considered in a negative light. The very fact that at the end of the novel the narrator has realized her mistakes leaves the possibility of a change still open. Precisely the fact that the narrator's certainties fall, and her perception of life and reality is called into question suggest a starting point for a renewed way of approaching and researching reality — opinion also shared by Pichler — especially within an intercultural environment.

that even her own novel contradicts. The “neutral-stance” that Frischmuth once suggested as the best way to come closer to the foreign turns out to be an inappropriate approach, as the knowledge of the expert — like the narrator of *Verswinden* proves — sometimes loses touch with reality. By experiencing a strong sense of displacement, the narrator demonstrates that border crossing brings new and enriching perspectives to the international dialogue between cultures. At the same time, she shows that it is not easy to depict the process of negotiation, since a real assimilation — in the manner in which Frischmuth talks about it — will never take place.

CODA

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 15

The British Indian novelist Salman Rushdie uses the image of an “ambiguous and shifting ground” to symbolically describe the space of hybridity, and to argue that, despite its instability, this space can become a fertile territory for a new and original literature. This image also puts emphasis on the importance and the role of territory in general. The narratives of the present study have shown that authors who live across cultural divides are deeply concerned with linguistic belonging as well as with territorial origins. Returning to their origins, or establishing relationships in new places, and/or reestablishing relations to old ones, the protagonists of these narratives problematize the notion of homecoming in such a way as to undermine the traditional meaning of this term. By calling into question the sense of belonging and the way in which space is perceived, I proposed we understand the term of homecoming in its strictly literal meaning, as a return to an intimate sphere divorced from concepts such as rootedness.

While highlighting the hybridity of their protagonists — Akin emphasizes it particularly well through the use of an eclectic soundtrack that spans traditional music to rock as well as pop songs — these authors point at a strong link to the origins that their protagonists entertain. By looking at the various types of homecoming that these characters undertake, I demonstrated how this bond to the origins is still strong. At the same time, this project showed that these journeys are not only physical but also deeply psychological and metaphorical. Constantly moving and traveling somewhere, these

characters mirror their authors' preoccupation of (re)defining their origins accompanied by a desire to return to a real or an ideal homeland.

By challenging traditional literary genres, Özdamar's as well as Biondi's works turn into symbolic journeys in which language acquires a highly metaphorical meaning and becomes the place in and through which the authors inscribe their return to their supposed origins. Özdamar creates fascinating and poetic narratives in which she fuses Western traditional forms of narration with Eastern storytelling and in which the letters almost become another character of her stories. While Özdamar transform the pages into a sort of arabesque, Biondi plays with rhetorical figures and a circuitous language, which perfectly represent the circularity of the journey. The convoluted and intricate language of his works mirrors the circuitous and labyrinthic paths that his characters traverse. Within this space characterized by bold linguistic experimentations, the German language is undermined from within, and traditional literary genres are reshaped into new forms. By using language in a subversive way, these authors not only create new links to their places of origin, but also inscribe their works within a specific German literary tradition that should not be ignored.

In Akin's films, homecomings become multisensory experiences appealing to the senses of taste, smell, and sound. The protagonists of Akin's films are able to recover a link to lost familiar bonds or to establish new ones. In particular, this link is often represented by the presence of an object, a particular music, or a smell of a special type of food that allows them to create a sense of familiarity and home, and that becomes a sort of journey into memory as well. While in *Solino* the desire to return home is nostalgic and melancholic, in *Gegen die Wand* it is initially almost nonexistent and until

the end very ambivalent and problematic (Berghahn 10). A strong desire to (re)establish intimate and personal bonds is what animates the protagonists of *Auf der anderen Seite*, where, however, traveling and journeying become, as we have seen, more complex and multifaceted.

Barbara Frischmuth's novel *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne* is aimed at reversing the gaze within my study. The renewed interest in her novel, which brought about its republication in 1996, is no doubt linked to the importance of this very topic. Its intercultural approach, together with a deep ambiguity of the narrator-protagonist of the story, describe, I argue, a very actual condition of displaced and hybrid identities on the borders between more than one culture. The encounter with the foreign represents an urgent issue within a German-speaking environment. By acknowledging that identity undergoes a process of change wherein the parameters are called into question, Frischmuth highlights its importance and actuality. The author's speech on behalf of what she calls the "literature's asylum seekers" (Yesilada 2) together with her novel *Das Verschwinden*, underline Frischmuth's active engagement in restoring not only the memory of Austria's multiethnic past, but also in taking an open and tolerant approach towards the other. In particular, writers who have learned another language or lived abroad for some time should act as an example for everyone. I agree with Frischmuth that those who have experiences of border-crossing have the important task of becoming "translators" of other cultures in order to foster a fruitful dialogue amongst them, but I also show the problems this openness can create.

Analyzing such different authors and narratives, this project becomes essential to our understanding of more general issues with which we are confronted on a daily basis.

Some questions to which this study gives rise are: What is identity in a multicultural context? Can we imagine a new geopolitical configuration of the world beyond the concept of nation? How do we create a sense of home in an increasingly globalized world, where we are continually being asked to negotiate between the global, public and the local, personal and private? In the future works of these authors, I hope to find a further engagement with these issues.

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