

Exile and Social Media

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In an interview in 1964 with the journalist Gunther Gauss who asks her if she feels nostalgic about pre WW2-Europe, Hannah Arendt answers: "Pre-hitlerien Germany? I cannot say that I have no nostalgia for it. What is left? Language is what is left" She adds:" You know, I had to leave Germany for more than thirtyfour years; mother tongue is the only thing you can bring with you from your old country. I always tried to keep intact and alive this irreplaceable thing".

One can ask why keeping mother tongue alive is so essential.... for not only Arendt kept German alive but this effort drove her, as she confesses, to put a distance with the other languages that she had to adopt in her exiled life. "I always consciously refused to loose my mother tongue. I always kept a certain distance both *vis à vis* French which I used to speak fluently in previous time and *vis à vis* English in which I write now".

Exile and language is not a new theme and I am not the best qualified to initiate a debate on this matter, for literary critic and comparative literature are not my fields. I speak as someone who spent more than half of her life outside her homeland. Although I have been brought up within a French and Turkish, bilingual family, it has been difficult for me to endure the absence of Turkish language in my life in France. These difficulties doubled these recent years because of the perspective to go to Turkey drifts away, and as one can become estranged to the new everyday Turkish language transformed by AKP's rhetoric and religious idioms.

I will try here to draw a rapid paradigm for exile/language relations based on the discourses of German Jewish refugees from Nazism during WW2. Although living in a politically and historically very different period, and all things being equal, I will use this "model" to try to think about these relations in the context of language mutations coming from the irrevocable spread of social media.

To come back to German exiled one can argue that Hannah Arendt's motivations for fiercely keeping her mother tongue alive can be approached through mainly two different angles:

*First, the archaism of mother tongue as the primary language inside which one is made, one is structured. It is to be approached as a *cognitive/psychological* reality. Besides this is exactly what the idiom "mother tongue" suggests. "There is an incredible difference" Arendt says "between mother tongue and any other language. For me this distance is summarized very simply in these terms: I know by heart many poems in German: they are present within the most profound level of my memory, in the back of my mind and this is impossible to reproduce"¹ Being the essential element in which one's fundamental consciousness and memory is structured mother tongue has also the capacity, for the exiled Hannah Arendt, to prevent from enunciating senseless commonplaces. "Words of mother tongue" she says "have a specific weight which preserve us from the vacuity of commonplaces by the number of mental associations that arise automatically and secretly from the treasury of poetic tradition, the grace of which has fertilised the language"² Saying so she is obviously speaking about the specific cultural sedimentations, mental univers which are carried by a specific language and that are not universal, can not be found in other languages.

The second impulse for keeping German alive in Arendt's life is a kind of loyalty to mother tongue as the guarantor (guardian) of her identity, a kind of fidelity to herself. To analyse this, conceptual tools of *political thought about nation/territory/belonging* must be used. With her kind of moral posture Arendt feels she puts herself in a different, in a more radical position than other exiled intellectuals. Her radical position echoes with what the German Jewish philosopher, journalist and poet Günther Anders, (who happened to be Arendt's first husband) wrote about those who "throw themselves into the arms of the unknown and within two weeks began to play the old Parisian or the native New Yorker, in fact much more quickly than us, Berliners or the Viennese."³ In both Arendt's and Anders's discourses, one can sense the slight blaming tone for forgetting German language too quickly. This corresponds to their specific kind of nationalism, nation being German language. (Besides both of them consider their mother tongue somehow superior to French or English). Both of them claim no other national identity than the German language. Which of course doesn't

¹ in « Seule demeure la langue » traduit par S. Courtine Denamy, *Esprit* no. 6 juin 1985

² H. Arendt's discours when receiving the Sonning price, in 1975, cited by Elisabeth Young Breuhl

³ Günther Anders, *Journaux de l'exil et du retour*, Fage, 2012, Paris, p.86

mean that they consider themselves as citizens of Germany as a country but as “citizens” of the German language. Even after years of living outside Germany, German as language and mother tongue remains the very *non-geographical territory* of their identity. **We face here a radical dissociation between territory/nation and language.** Neither of them considers himself, herself German or Austrian. As far as Arendt is concerned she neither considers herself as being part of German people nor Jewish people. In a letter she writes to Gershom Scholem accusing her of lack of love towards the Jewish people she answers that being Jewish or being a Woman are part of what she considers unquestionable facts of her life... “what was given and not what has been made”. But she says “You are right, I never “loved” from all my life a “people” or a collectivity (community?), neither the German people, nor the French people, nor the American people, nor the working class”⁴.

Whilst for Arendt language is homeland, the place where her roots dive deep, the essence of her identity, For other exiled authors the use of mother tongue is more clearly instrumental to a *feeling of being at home* when everything else (the town, the streets, the culture and habits of people, their ways of being, of moving) ceased to create a sense of familiarity. But these elements that make you feel at home, that are familiar to you, you can only sense them, enumerate them when they are absent, when the absence of familiarity makes you *doubt about your own existence*. “There is not one of us”, says Anders “that didn’t live the experience, one day, of stepping into a town, at a corner of a street and noticed that the voices and shouts and the noise of the world were addressing only others; Not one of us that did not make the experience of *not being there any more*.”⁵ Using mother tongue is the very remedy to this morbid feeling.

For Theodor Adorno, philosopher and German critic, writing is, although fragile and vulnerable, the only accessible way of feeling at home. In his *Minima Moralia: Reflexions from Damaged Life* he writes: “The time of houses (*maisons*) has passed. The destruction inflicted to European cities, like the labour camps and the concentration camps, is executing what the immanent evolution of technology decided long time ago about the future of houses. These houses can be thrown out like old tin cans. And he adds ironically: It is part of moral duty not to live at home anymore”⁶

⁴ Letter to Scholem of the 20th of, July 1963, New York, cited by Barbara Cassin . *La Nostalgie, Quand est-ce qu’on est chez soi*, Autrement, Paris, 2013, p.89

⁵ *idem*, p. 86

⁶ Edward Said *Réflexions sur l’exil et autres essais*, Actes Sud, 2008, p.254-255, translated by NS

The last element of this paradigm I am using would be another definition of what *home* can be. A definition which linked to the perspective of “coming back”. Did German Jewish refugees had the project, the dream to go back to live in post WW2 Germany?

The answer is undoubtedly NO as far as Arendt is concerned.

It is much more complicated for Anders who’s first assumption was, and I quote “Home is the place where you come back, *Ibi Patria* in Latin”⁷ as he puts it.

But where can you come back after WW2? Anders was quite obsessed with this question as his book *Tagebücher und Gedichte* (Verlag, C.H. Beck oHG, Munich 1985) shows and which was translated in French with the title *Journal de l’exil et du retour*”).

Europe not Germany, will be the place for which Anders had the desire to *come back home*. In 1950 from Southampton he writes: “So this is what it is to come back home: leave behind the dead bodies of the parents, stumble among the ruins of a city I have never seen before, to come to a (...) country I have never knew before, to salute the remains of a past which is not ours. And yet you are at home. Not only because for the ones coming from America England is already Europe. But because you are at home wherever innocent victims had succumbed”⁸. Saying this Anders gives the definition of what it is to be European after WW2: “A European is someone nostalgic for Europe”⁹. I would add that Europeans are the ones who, decades after WW2, are still feeling deeply injured by the insult, the scandal to humanity that were the Nazi extermination camps. Europeans are those who inquire about what it is to be a writer, an artist after WW2, how to make theatre or poetry, or philosophy, or to teach at the university after the episode of the industrial destruction of European Jews.

But let me come back to my initial question: What **does** social media to *exile/language* relation?

The rather speculative questions I intend to raise here would be :

*Can communicating on social media produce the kind of “feeling at home” that mother tongue offers? Is mother tongue keeping its capacity to make *feel at home* after all the changes induced into language by new ways to communicate, first by social media and second –as far as Turkey is concerned- by the contamination of Turkish language by AKP’s religious based vocabulary and semantic fields about, “modesty of women and the limitation of her place in public sphere”, “the sacrality of family and of

⁷ G. Anders *Journaux...op. cit*, p.27

⁸ *idem*, p. 112

⁹ Barbara Cassin. *La Nostalgie Quand donc est-on chez soi ?* Autrement, 2013, p.127

religious belief”, “Turkey’s regional and worldwide missions”, “plots against Turkey”, “victimization of Turkey”, “responsibility and brotherhood toward Muslims all over the world”.

* How this reconfiguration of language will affect the exiled?

Now, coming to the effects of social media on language, they can be traced on different levels. They extend from the –

*introduction of new words (a *troll* for example is no longer just a character from Nordic folklore, but someone who makes offensive or provocative comments online; a *sock puppet* is no longer solely a puppet made from an old sock, but a self-serving fake online persona;

*to new meanings for old words (common words like *friend*, *status*, *like*, *wall*, *page*, *profile* have new meanings on platforms like Facebook).,

Brevity, Increasing speed and economising time are the main driving forces of the transformations induced by social media into language.

*The acronyms for example, they help *speed up* a real-time typed conversation. On mobile phones they minimize the inconvenience of typing with tiny keys. And on Twitter they help making the most with 140 characters. Oxford Dictionary complains:

“An alphabet soup of acronyms, abbreviations, and neologisms has grown up around technologically mediated communication”

An important element Twitter introduced to quasi-daily syntax is the

hashtag – a keyword that you can click on, used to categorize tweets.

Hashtags have also spread to other than Twitter social media platforms – and they’ve even reached everyday speech. They are all over popular culture, from greetings cards and t-shirts to the dialogue of sitcom characters.

Immediacy and spontaneity that characterise the style of communication in social media has induced a subtle revolution in our communication, which became more informal, maybe more open. We are also trained to be more **succinct**, to **get to the point quicker**.

Multiplication of *nonverbal* elements is another important aspect of these changes. I am not mentioning only videos and photos that accompany communication in social media, but also the *smileys* and *emoticons* describing physical actions or facial expressions. An acronym such as *LOL* (‘laughing out loud’) is also an element of non-verbal communication. No need to search for the right word any more to express the best way your very specific feeling, its tonality, its intensity, all the

constellation of evocations you want to raise on your interlocutor's mind. Now you just have to choose an emoticon amongst its large variety of small smiling, sulking, and laughing faces.

Günther Anders tells about his meeting with a transformed German language when coming back from America to Vienna after fifteen years of exile. He narrates a day of effort to write a text when at the end of the day he confesses his text looked like a Gobelin tapestries compared to the newly spoken German in Vienna where he began to live.

Thus the question is not illegitimate to inquire about what this *subversion*, this *impoverishment* of language does to exiled persons who search for "being at home feeling" into language. Motivated by the urge of speeding up, of simplification, language might become a rather disappointing instrument for finding familiarity within lost mother tongue. Because you need time to stroll among old words, to wander among expressions you think you forgot, you need duration to permit the words to emerge and radiate evocations, to convene other idioms and expressions, to enrich the communication and to create the fluid, familiar context you have been looking for.

Does not new habits brought into language by the mandatory nature of brevity converge with the impoverishment that the generalisation of *Globish* (a word coming from the contraction of globalisation and English) induced into language? We write in *Globish* our research projects addressed to Brussels when searching for funds. We use a dried up language, over simplified and reduced to solely its communication role. In France it is the philosopher *Barbara Cassin* who combats *Globish* with her brilliant *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. She looks for the specificities of cultures and languages through their philosophical idioms that resist to be translated.

As far as Turkish is concerned there is another sort of subversion which does not come from social media but from the President of the Turkish state himself and from the years 2010 on. An analysis inspired from Victor Klemperer's method, developed to analyse what he called LTI, *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the language of the Third Reich, would be necessary here to study the corruption of contemporary Turkish driven by the will to erase early Turkish Republican reforms. One can trace into Turkish the obsessive claim of AKP to exhibit continuity with ottoman magnificence. But the so-called old Turkish (*eski Türkçe*) AKP partisans promote has very little to do with the Ottoman-Turkish which was spread from the Palace and from its court, a Turkish mingled with Persian and Arab words, the use of which was a marker of social status. The Turkish language the President is

implementing is stuffed with religious references that are not yet familiar to people's everyday conversation and articulated within a moralizing rhetoric

Examples: for "cafés" President Erdogan proposes to use the word *kiraathane*, (coming from an Arabic root meaning "to read") and he wants the withdrawal of all banners bearing words like café, club etc..¹⁰ He enhances paranoia and victimization to assert his will to "purify" Turkish. But not from Persian or Arabic as the republican reforms implemented, and that **he** uses widely, generously. He wants to get rid of occidental words coming from English, from French and coming and vanishing alongside fashions. A sketch (fragment) from the President's discourse: "*Kültürlere ve medeniyetlere saldırılar önce dilden başlıyor. (=Attacks to cultures and civilizations began by their language) Dilini aldığı anda o milleti çökertiyor (the minute its language is taken from them these people collapse.) Biz işte böyle bir **suikasta maruz kalmış** bir milletiz (=We are exactly this kind of people targeted by, victim of this kind of attempt. Saying so Erdogan chooses words in Arabic for "attempt", for "being victim") . Bu saldırı dilimizle birlikte **onun mütemmim cüzü olan şahsiyetimizi de hedef almıştır** ». I can not understand this third phrase without looking to dictionary but I can say that with the prolongation in time of these trends neither Turkish language nor Turkish society will be recognizable in less than ten years*

¹⁰ « Clup' bu benim değil ki, bütün bu tabelaları sökün, bu senin hakkın, en doğal hakkın. Neyi müsaade edersen onu asmak zorunda. . « Discours of the President at the General Assembly of Turkish Language » in *Aksam* 23 May 2017.