

De jonge Belgische kunstenaar **Mekhitar Garabedian** (°1977, Aleppo, Syrië) is van Armeense oorsprong, werd in Syrië geboren en woont momenteel in België. Zijn grootouders ontvluchtten het Ottomaanse Rijk na de Turkse genocide van 1915 en zijn ouders zagen zich op hun beurt genoodzaakt om Libanon te ontvluchten na het uitbreken van de burgeroorlog in 1981. De familiegeschiedenis is met andere woorden getekend door diaspora.

Garabedian kanaliseert deze familiale geschiedenis in zijn werk en verbindt het met thema's als migratie, geheugen, geschiedenis, identiteit en taal. Binnen zeer verschillende media – zoals tekst, fotografie, klank, neon, boekpublicaties, video's en installaties – bevraagt hij de positie van het individu en de ontwikkeling van een identiteit in een hedendaagse migrerende samenleving.

Gezien zijn complexe identiteit als tweede en derde generatie immigrant, wendt Garabedian zich tot artistieke strategieën die meerduidigheid toelaten. Zijn voorliefde voor de creatieve herhaling resonanceert bijvoorbeeld met het thema van de herinnering en de wederkeer van de doden of *revenants*. Met zijn specifieke gebruik van citaten, zowel in zijn artistieke werk als in zijn reflectieve teksten, raakt hij aan het onvermogen van taal om trauma's naar waarheid te schatten. In de creatieve herhaling van het citaat komt de taal als gebied van non-knowledge naar voor. Hier dekt taal zijn eigen onvermogen niet toe met retorische kwaliteiten. Hier wordt voelbaar hoe we allen een vreemde blijven in elke taal, ook in onze moedertaal.

In the essay *The Foreignness of Language*, I reflect on the experience of language, of the mother tongue, after a migration, and discuss certain conditions of diasporic subjectivity inherently related to questions about the formation of a self and language. How does language (or the use of a mother tongue) shape and form our understanding and sense of being in the world? How can speaking in another language present a form of estrangement from the self? Becoming diasporic happens through acts that are intrinsic to the construction of a self. Language and the other fundamentally constitute us as human beings.

Mekhitar Garabedian. *To a Stranger From a Stranger*. Gent: ArA-MER, 2015.

## The Foreignness of Language

Mekhitar Garabedian

*The Foreignness of Language* is a revised version of a chapter from my doctoral thesis (in visual arts), *To a Stranger From a Stranger*. The main focus of my thesis is 'return': return as in artistic 'modes of repetition' and return as in hauntology, the return of the dead, or *revenants*. The text is deliberately constructed as 'a tissue of quotations' from cinema, literature, philosophy, theory, etc., a montage of carefully selected references—weaving writings, countering 'ones with others'. In four chapters (with each chapter divided in two parts) and an epilogue, I investigate the following themes: citation and reference; the construction of a self and identity; diasporic subjectivity and diasporic haunting; and spaces of non-knowledge. The text moves back and forth from lived and recounted experience to theoretical texts in which concepts are investigated that resonate with my experiences. *To a Stranger From a Stranger* was conceived as an artist's book, designed by Céline Butaye, with the main text arranged on the right side of the pages and the footnotes separately on the facing turn side of the pages.

In the third chapter, *Ce qui reste (What remains)*, I locate some of the complex and ambiguous conditions of diasporic subjectivity. In the first part of this chapter, *What time is it there?*, I contextualise my position through an investigation of (my own) Armenian diasporic subjectivity, and in regard to such categories as dispersion, homeland and boundary-maintenance established by diaspora theory. Diasporic subjects emerge by engaging with such markers of the self as ethnicity, homeland, memory and loss, even as they turn away from them. The relations with these markers are all in a continual process of construction. Diasporic subjectivity emerges through shifting perspectives on these markers, through a continuous dialogue, which sometimes comes easily and is sometimes afflicting. Diaspora has to be conceived and investigated as a process, as *becoming*, through its singularities, its effects on the formation of a self, its relation with the past—a past that remains in the present—and through its relation to power, as histories of dispossession and dispersion result from suppressive or colonial power. Diasporic subjectivity calls attention to the conditions of its formation, to its *becoming*.

In the second part of this chapter, *The Foreignness of Language*, I reflect on the experience of language, of the mother tongue, after a migration, and discuss

certain conditions of diasporic subjectivity inherently related to questions about the formation of a self and language. How does language (or the use of a mother tongue) shape and form our understanding and sense of being in the world? How can speaking in another language present a form of estrangement from the self? Becoming diasporic happens through acts that are intrinsic to the construction of a self. Language and the other fundamentally constitute us as human beings.

“The kind of knowledge that artistic creativity brings—the knowledge specifically inherent to artists’ writings—should be valued notwithstanding or perhaps precisely because of its deviant character”, states philosopher Helena De Preester (14). She argues for more recognition of discursive perspectives that are specific and unique to artists’ writings. “The perspective of the artist is not art critical, not philosophical and not art historical. It is artistic.” (15) In her essay De Preester advances that artists’ writings should not be judged according to the criteria of whatever other discipline(s) from which an artist might borrow or refer to. Art and artists’ writings propose a different kind of knowledge, which does not replace (scientific) knowledge, nor contradicts it, nor should we place it outside of knowledge.

There is, of course, a long tradition of artists’ writings within which artists explore the themes they are researching through theory. Writing on any number of subjects from their perspectives as artists including, but not only, their own art, they touch on philosophy, literature, etc., without being or wanting to be philosophers, writers, critics or academics. This essay should be read within that tradition and aims to present artistic research expressed through theory. It is based upon personal experiences and it is an exploration and interpretation of literature related to the themes I am investigating, theoretically and practically. In this essay I deliberately do not link theory with my own oeuvre or that of others. The artwork is not an illustration or translation of theory, and also, theory is not used to support, evoke, explain, or (psycho)analyse the work.

All art is a collaboration with what came before and what comes after. My use of citation or references also comes from my interest in the idea that identity is always a *borrowed* identity, borrowed from others. One can never pretend to be someone outside the chain of the past, one ‘can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original’ and is always speaking with the words of others. Talking with the words of others requires a library of words of others. In my work, I use talking with the words of others and the construction of a personal library as a conceptual artistic strategy. My use of ‘modes of repetition’ also relates

to the Catastrophe: after a catastrophe, thinking is only structured as thinking in ruins, in fragments, cut-outs or debris.

My way of working and thinking doesn't move from books to problems (from theory to practice), but from problems, experiences, or questions to serendipitous encounters with certain books, concepts, films or visual art, etc., that resonate with my experiences. I am re-activating selected fragments from my library, tearing fragments out of their contexts and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrate one another and force revelations, and, importantly, not to provide explanations that seek to accommodate causal, systematic or comparative connections, nor a conclusion, but rather to advance an attitude and to '*think poetically*' (as Hannah Arendt describes Benjamin's writing) about the themes and concepts I am investigating (Arendt 54).

1.

Le rêve: connaître une langue étrangère (étrange) et cependant ne pas la comprendre: percevoir en elle la différence, sans que cette différence soit jamais récupérée par la socialité superficielle du langage, communication ou vulgarité; connaître, réfractées positivement dans une langue nouvelle, les impossibilités de la nôtre; apprendre la systématique de l'inconcevable; défaire notre 'réel' sous l'effet d'autres découpages, d'autres syntaxes; découvrir des positions inouïes du sujet dans l'énonciation, déplacer sa topologie; en un mot, descendre dans l'intraduisible, en éprouver la secousse sans jamais l'amortir... (Barthes, *L'Empire des signes* 11).<sup>1</sup>

My mother, quite rightly, says, "Hearing our language is a joy for us." My maternal language is diasporic Western Armenian, a language in the process of disappearing, increasingly with each successive generation. "There is matricide in the abandonment of a native tongue", writes Julia Kristeva (*Intimate Revolt* 244).<sup>2</sup> She calls losing one's maternal language a "tragedy because, since the human being is a speaking being, he naturally speaks the language of his people: the maternal language, the language of his group, the national language. To change languages amounts to losing this naturalness, betraying it, or at least translating it. The foreigner is essentially a translator" (240).<sup>3</sup> Diasporic subjectivity is marked by translation.

Inhabiting two or more languages concurrently challenges our subjectivity, because we are pending, undecided, between two languages. "Here we are, maybe not foreign, but somehow false selves, never completely articulated", writes visual artist Katarina Zdjelar (150). Bilingual or multilingual consciousness is not the sum of two languages, but a different state of mind altogether—defined by the mode of translation. As a foreigner, you are constantly translating, in both directions. You find yourself in a position in which you can no longer speak of a mother tongue—always *in-between* (two, or more) languages, always speaking the words of others. Being essentially a translator, the foreigner is intimately aware of the *untranslatability*, and of the foreignness (or otherness) of language; the uncanny, intractable and disturbing character of language—experiencing that we not only speak a language, but are also spoken by it. Not speaking one's mother tongue, but a host language, means "to descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without ever muffling it..." (Barthes, *Empire of Signs* 6).

Humans are linguistic beings. "It is the linguistic being of man to name things", argues Walter Benjamin (*On Language as Such* 317). Human language is the only

‘naming’ language that we know of. There is a necessity, an importance and also an alchemy of naming. “Alchimie de la nomination, où je suis seule avec le français. Nommer l’être me fait être: corps et âme, je vis en français”, recognizes Kristeva (*L’Avenir d’une révolte* 67).<sup>4</sup> When we live in a language, we are in it body and soul.

From the outset, Walter Benjamin’s philosophical interest concentrated on the philosophy of language. It was “not Plato, but Adam” who gave things their names, who to Benjamin was the “father of philosophy” (Arendt 53). “Naming, in the realm of language, has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself. Naming is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated, and *in* which language itself communicates itself absolutely” (Benjamin, *On language as Such* 318).

In *The Task of the Translator* Benjamin wrote: “The words *Brot* and *pain* ‘intend’ the same object, but the modes of this intention are not the same. It is owing to these modes that the word *Brot* means something different to a German than the word *pain* to a Frenchman, that these words are not interchangeable for them, that, in fact they strive to exclude each other” (75). Each language not only communicates information, but also conveys a particular social unconscious, different cultural attachments and emotional connotations. “Sense in its poetic significance is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it. We say of words that they have emotional connotations” (78). Speakers of a certain language are not just linked in an obvious, external way, but also with an internal, mental code.

Language contains latent meanings. Benjamin turns to poetry and literature to make these latent meanings clear. “For what does a literary work ‘say’? What does it communicate? It ‘tells’ very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information” (70). A literary work contains “the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic’” (ibid).<sup>5</sup> In poetic language, something else, beyond the named content, is given expression, something akin to a mood or an atmosphere which is neither semantic nor communicable at the level of the meanings of words, something that cannot be wholly translated, nor translated into a (final) meaning. This ‘other’ message is communicated directly. This immediate communication is what Benjamin calls ‘magical’, since language here acts as a medium. He proposes a magical concept of language, as opposed to an instrumentalist concept of language, revealing a layer of language in which latent meanings are conveyed. Benjamin seeks to

conceptualize a linguistic potency in which something is transferred in language besides what is represented verbally.

2.

Si Dieu le Père avait créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leurs noms, ou en leur en donnant un autre qu'Elstir les recréait. (Proust, *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* 835)<sup>6</sup>

Jacques Derrida grew up in Algeria, as a Jew who spoke French and no longer had any connection with his language of origin. In an interview between Derrida and the (free) jazz musician, Ornette Coleman, the latter asked him: "Can a language of origin influence your thoughts? Do you ever ask yourself if the language that you speak now interferes with your actual thoughts?" (43)

In the same way that Elstir, one of Proust's characters (the painter, presumably based on James Whistler), recreates things by taking away their names, or giving them other names, the Armenian language recreates reality.<sup>7</sup> Dutch does not have the lexical ambiguities or the often vague, plural meanings of the Armenian idiom, "insufficiently severed from Cartesianism, in resonance with the prayer of the heart and the darkness of the sensory" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 246).<sup>8</sup> Armenian uses an alphabet of its own, which consists of 38 letters, invented around 405 AD by the monk, (Saint) Mesrop Mashtots.<sup>9</sup> In the diaspora, Armenian is regularly written phonetically, as diasporic Armenians often speak the language, but have not learned to write the alphabet. The spelling of phonetic Armenian, of course, depends strongly on the host language of the diasporic subject. Someone in France spells phonetic Armenian differently than someone in America.

In *The Spoken Word* Marshall McLuhan argued that every language (every mother tongue and every one of our personal languages) entails a different representation of reality (83-89). Each mother tongue teaches its users a way of seeing and feeling the world, and of acting in the world, which is quite unique. Every single language has its own logic, its particular framework of established distinctions, its shapes and forms of thought. Our experience and knowledge of the world is structured by the particular framework of our mother tongue. Your personal use of language structures the world (*your world*) in a different way than mine does, or as Ludwig Wittgenstein phrased it: "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" (74).<sup>10</sup> Language structures the world and creates a

certain reality. By living in a different language, we create a different and unique world.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wilhelm von Humboldt (linguist, philosopher, diplomat, educational reformer and founder of the University of Berlin), through his studies of foreign languages and 'primitive' tongues, argued that "the difference between languages is not only in sounds and signs but in world-view (in Deutscher 135). Since language is the forming organ of thought, there must be an intimate relation between the laws of grammar and the laws of thinking. "Thinking is dependent not just on language in general, but to a certain extent on each individual language", von Humboldt concluded (in Deutscher 136). The real differences between languages, he argued, are not in what a language is able to express, but rather in "what it encourages and stimulates its speakers to do from its own inner force" (ibid). Humboldt's concept of the inner form of language implies that a specific form of saying something is expressed in a particular language and, at the same time, a particular cultural significance is generated through this linguistic form.

The linguist Benjamin Whorf, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, advanced as his main thesis that the structure of the language we habitually use deeply influences the manner in which we understand our environment, our perception of the world and our ways of thinking. The picture of the universe shifts from tongue to tongue. Speakers of different languages see the world differently, evaluate it differently, sometimes not by much, sometimes widely. Thinking is relative to the language learned. "Every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which is culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness" (252).

In the field of linguistics, this now-disgraced idea, which intoxicated an entire generation in the 1930s, has long been abandoned (Deutscher 131). The dominant view among contemporary linguists, advanced by Noam Chomsky, is that language is primarily an instinct, that the fundamentals of language are coded in our genes and are the same across the human race. In this theory, there is a consensus that the influence of our mother tongue on the way we think is negligible, even trivial, and that fundamentally, we all think in the same way. According to this dominant view, the influence of language on thought can be considered significant only if it bears on genuine reasoning (Deutscher 6, 19,

234-235). “The influence of the mother tongue that has been demonstrated empirically is felt in areas of thought, such as memory, perception, and associations or in practical skills such as orientation”, writes linguist Guy Deutscher (235). The influence of our mother tongue impacts those areas of our lives related to our fast, intuitive thinking, which is far more important for us than our slow thinking and ‘genuine’ reasoning. “The real effects of the mother tongue are rather the habits that develop through the *frequent use* of certain ways of expression. The concepts we are trained to treat as distinct, the information our mother tongue continuously forces us to specify, the details it requires us to be attentive to, and the repeated associations it imposes on us...” (Deutscher 234).

Against the fashionable academic view, research on linguistic relativity has enjoyed a considerable resurgence in recent years, and much new evidence has become available regarding the effects of language on people’s representations of space, time, substances and objects. In her article *Linguistic Relativity* Lera Boroditsky reviews several lines of evidence regarding the question of how language shapes thought. Research shows that the frames of reference and distinctions made available by one’s language impose important constraints on one’s spatial thinking, on how we perceive time, on our conceptualizations of the shapes and materials of objects, as well as on our understanding of numbers, colours, events and other factors. These findings suggest that the private lives of people who speak different languages differ much more than previously thought and that linguistic processes are pervasive in most fundamental domains of thought. Language is a powerful tool in shaping thought about abstract domains, and one’s native language plays an important role in shaping habitual thought (Boroditsky 920).<sup>11</sup> Habits of speech create habits of mind, of thinking, which go beyond language.

One example from the research concerns gender, a common feature of language. Recent studies suggest that the grammatical genders assigned to objects by a language influence people’s mental representations of objects. “When an object’s or entity’s name is grammatically masculine in a language, speakers of that language will describe that object using more masculine adjectives, will rate the object as being more similar to biological males, will rate the objects as having more masculine properties, will be more likely to personify the object or entity with a masculine voice or body, and so on.” (Boroditsky and Prinz 110).<sup>12</sup>

3.

The organs concerned in the production of English speech sounds are the larynx, the velum, the lips, the tongue (that punchinello in the troupe), and, last but not least, the lower jaw; mainly upon its over-energetic and somewhat ruminant motion did Pnin rely when translating in class passages in the Russian grammar or some poem by Pushkin. If his Russian was music, his English was murder. He had enormous difficulty ('dzeefeecooltsee' in Pninian English) with depalatization, never managing to remove the extra Russian moisture from *t*'s and *d*'s before the vowels he so quaintly softened. His explosive 'hat' ('I never go in a hat even in winter') differed from the common American pronunciation of 'hot' (typical of Waindell townspeople, for example) only by its briefer duration, and thus sounded very much like the German verb *hat* (has). (Nabokov, *Pnin* 54-55)

Ne pas parler sa langue maternelle. Habiter des sonorités, des logiques coupées de la mémoire nocturne du corps, du sommeil aigre-doux de l'enfance. Porter en soi comme un caveau secret, ou comme un enfant handicapé – chéri et inutile –, ce langage d'autrefois qui se fane sans jamais vous quitter. (Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* 26-27)<sup>13</sup>

Armenian is a language I was never taught, which I speak with a grammar I make up myself and with a limited vocabulary. I speak it, but I barely read or write it, so that very few or no new words are added to my basic vocabulary. I only use it with my immediate family. My Armenian, like Kristeva's Bulgarian, is a language that is in the process of disintegrating without ever leaving me. It is a maternal memory "because [it is] at the border of musical words and unnameable drives" (*Intimate Revolt* 245).<sup>14</sup> My Armenian: "It is not me. It is this maternal memory, this warm and still speaking cadaver, a body within my body, that resonates with infrasonic vibrations and data, stifled loves and flagrant conflicts." (ibid).<sup>15</sup> "Exile always involves a shattering of the former body", of the old language; substituting it with another, more fragile, and which feels artificial. (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 30).<sup>16</sup>

Dutch is the language of my scholarly education, the language of my public (and intellectual) life, yet "(my own experience) adds another time of another language to the time of the [Dutch] language" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 252).<sup>17</sup> Katarina Zdjelar argues that the imprint of our mother tongue is unavoidable, that it cannot be suspended or erased, and the mark it leaves is permanent. "Our mother tongue is infectious and has the ability to insert itself in another language,

corrupting it, [haunting it] and expanding its own territory. (...) It carries the territory of our *home* with it, even if we don't always feel at home with it." (148) Even when the foreigner blends in perfectly with the host language, without forgetting the source language, the mother tongue, or only partially forgetting it, he is perceived as foreign because of this translation, which however perfect, betrays a melody and a mentality that does not quite accord with the identity of the host. While aspiring to assimilate the new language absolutely, the foreigner injects it with the archaic rhythms and instinctual bases of his native idiom.

In Nabokov's novel professor Timofey Pnin never manages to remove the added Russian music from his English, the otherness of his tongue (or the *motherness* of his tongue, as Zdjelar would call it), undermining his efforts to be or become neutral, colourless, to blend in (147). In detail, Nabokov explains the biology of how Pnin finds himself having to use his muscles differently and has to reinvent the way he shapes the air into sounds. "It seems that our anatomy is culturally shaped. This means that the specific sound of our first language, something so immaterial, has the power to mould our physical speaking apparatus." (Zdjelar 156) No matter which foreign language we are speaking, we are always speaking our mother tongue in these different languages, and every other language is dependent on our mother tongue. "It is as if the mark of our mother tongue is a bruise on another language. (...) Sometimes it is our choice of words that marks us out, but it is also the *sound* of our language that has its own features that distinguishes one from another", notes Zdjelar (148, 150).

I speak Dutch with my brother. I do not speak my mother tongue with my brother, but a foreign language—experiencing how we not only speak a language, but are also spoken by it; an awareness of the foreignness of language, of language as a form of otherness. When I speak Dutch out of habit, language starts speaking me. To hear oneself speak, speak a certain language, is constitutive for (the illusion of) the self and autonomy. In a psychoanalytical sense, it is even more elementary than the recognition in the mirror, as Mladen Dolar argues: "The illusion—the illusion par excellence—is thus constitutive of interiority and ultimately of consciousness, the self, and autonomy. *S'entendre parler*—to hear oneself speak—is maybe the minimal definition of consciousness. (...) To hear oneself speak—or just simply to hear oneself—can be seen as an elementary formula of narcissism that is needed to produce a minimal form of a self. (...) Yet the voice can be seen as in some sense even more striking and more elementary—for isn't the voice the first manifestation of life and, thus, isn't hearing oneself, and

recognizing one's voice, an experience that precedes the recognition in the mirror?" (13)

4.

Armenians are historically divided between East (from the Republic of Armenia) and West (originally from Eastern Anatolia). After the Catastrophe (of 1915-1916), the Anatolian Armenians established themselves in what would become the centres of the communities of the Western diaspora: Beirut, Aleppo, Jerusalem, etc., in the Middle East; Marseille and Lyon in France; Los Angeles in the United States; and Toronto, etc., in Canada. This dichotomy, philosopher Marc Nichanian argues, is constitutive for Armenian life and culture. "All of Armenian intellectual life and literature are in fact inscribed in such a framework of *double* dichotomy: first between language and cultural traditions, then between historical circumstances. (...) Separated for centuries, confined within different empires with sealed borders, Russian on one side, Ottoman-Turkish on the other, they developed their traditions without much contact with one another. They still do not speak the same exact language.... (...) The separation between these two variants of the same language became definitive in the middle of the nineteenth century." (2-3)

Western Armenian was spoken in Anatolia and became the language of communication and culture in the diaspora, in particular the language of education for the Armenians of the Middle East. Eastern Armenian became the official and standard language of the Soviet republic that bore the name of Armenia. Diasporic Western Armenian incorporates many influences from Turkish and Arabic, as well as from European languages. It has become a very idiosyncratic mixture, a language signalling in its very body that the homeland was left a long time ago. Most Armenians in diaspora are bilingual, if not multilingual and/or multidialectal, and each language serves a certain purpose and/or context. At different ages, too, people make transitions between languages, changing the emphasis from one to another. Yet there is an evolution towards a monolingualism of the host language (Pattie 190, 192).

Although there are (many) similarities between the two Armenian languages, there are differences in pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary and grammar which are so strong that I can hardly understand an Armenian from Yerevan, which creates a truly uncanny experience—the experience of the foreignness of language, of language as a form of otherness—of having difficulty understanding, and basically not understanding, someone of your own ethnic background,

someone who speaks your mother tongue. What is known and familiar, and what should have been known and familiar (for a long time), is at the same time experienced as *other*, as strange. Otherness is located within what is truly my 'own and proper'.

Diasporic subjects easily develop what James Clifford calls "the ethnographic ear" (in Martínez 188). "Usually, once the rules of communication are established and the conditions are adequate to hear the other properly, listening is an unconscious act. But in the absence of common rules—the command of grammar and lexicon—listening becomes an exercise of ethnographic decoding: if we do not understand the other, we start wondering about every sound and become like hunters that follow traces to help us make sense, desiring and assuming meaning. Every vocalization may or may not signify, and we immediately sense the necessity of starting to recognize and interpret in order to set up conditions for communication." (Martínez 188) In addition to Armenian and Dutch, my parents also used a third language, Arabic, the language of *their* education and public life, which they employed as a secret code in regards to us, their children, when they wanted to discuss something in private. Language has the power to create an immediate sense of inclusion or exclusion. If you want to stigmatize someone as a foreigner, simply speak a language he or she does not understand in their presence. The subtleties and differences in the language we speak can unite as well as distinguish us. As Edward Sapir notes: "He talks like us" is equivalent to saying "He is one of us" (16).

Language nurtures and alienates; it is at the same time a homecoming and alien, or even enemy territory. How do we come to terms with the foreignness of language? Walter Benjamin suggests that "an instant and final (...) solution of this foreignness remains out of reach of mankind", arguing that the "temporary and provisional solution" is revealed, only, through translation (*The Task of the Translator* 75). Translation expresses the central reciprocal relationship between languages, which rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole, in what they want to express. Benjamin saw the task of a translator as revealing the untranslatability of language and as a coming to terms with the foreignness of language—advancing the idea of exile as the first metaphor for language and the human condition. Similarly, Kristeva professes that "speaking an 'other language,' in other words, is quite simply the minimum and primary condition for being alive" (*Intimate revolt* 254).<sup>18</sup> Our human condition is marked by exile. We all speak a foreign language.

5.

I manifest myself through my voice, but the sentences I speak are not mine, because I borrow my means of speech from a linguistic structure that preceded me, which pre-exists the subject; a linguistic structure that is therefore not inherently mine, but *other*, foreign. Roland Barthes speaks of the “primary languages afforded him by the world, history, his existence, in short by an intelligibility which pre-exists him, for he comes into a world full of language, and there is no reality not already classified by men: to be born is nothing but to find this code ready-made and to be obliged to accommodate oneself to it.” (*Critical Essays* xvii-xviii)<sup>19</sup>

These *borrowed* words do not seamlessly overlap with the outer world, so when we utter something, there is always a difference, a lack. Part of our desire cannot be spoken within the bounds of language. Whatever we may want to say, we probably won't say exactly that. For Jacques Lacan, our unconscious is structured *like* a language (48). “What Lacan endeavoured to think was how language *introduces* difference (a cut, fissure, lack) into the world, and how this symbolic difference *positively* affects and structures human drives and desires.” (Schuster 230) For Lacan, language is a performative structure, which ‘splits’ the subject as he or she enters the domain of culture. Accepting language and entering the symbolic world therefore comes with alienation.

For Maurice Blanchot, language is *always already* active at the most basic level of our perceptions, sensations and emotions; at what is our most ‘own and proper’, namely the absolute singularity of our own experience. What is our most ‘own and proper’, our experience, thus remains something from a time immemorial, as if it does not regard our own experience, but that of an other inside of us, a stranger inside us (Vande Veire 245-270). Nonetheless, it is language that provides the world with meaning and coherence, making it possible for people to feel to some degree at home in the world. However, this meaning and coherence, which we owe to language and the alphabet, come at a cost. As Nietzsche expressed it: “We believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (Nietzsche 86).<sup>20</sup> Our nouns, adjectives and verbs are not real. They are just arbitrary signifiers, conglomerations of syllables and sound. Language hijacks the mind. We live with the illusion that language directly reflects reality.

In *The Principles of Psychology* William James declared that “language works against our perception of the truth” (in Lehrer 153). The concepts and categories we impose on our sensations are imaginary. “Writing creates an artificial memory, whereby humans can enlarge their experience beyond the limits of one generation or one way of life. At the same time, it has allowed them to invent a world of abstract entities and mistake them for reality. The development of writing has enabled them to construct philosophies in which they no longer belong in the natural world. (...) Plato’s legacy to European thought was a trio of capital letters—the Good, the Beautiful and the True. Wars have been fought and tyrannies established, cultures have been ravaged and peoples exterminated in the service of these abstractions. Europe owes much of its murderous history to errors of thinking engendered by the alphabet”, states philosopher John Gray (56, 57-58).

“*Platonicity*”, writes essayist and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb, “is our tendency to mistake the map for the territory, to focus on pure and well-defined ‘forms’, whether objects, like triangles, or social notions, like utopias (societies built according to some blueprint of what ‘makes sense’), even nationalities” (xxix). When these ideas and constructs inhabit our minds, we privilege them over other “less elegant objects, those with messier and less tractable structures” (xxx). Platonicity is what makes us think that we understand more than we actually do. “The *Platonic fold* is the explosive boundary where the Platonic mindset enters in contact with messy reality, where the gap between what you know and what you think you know becomes dangerously wide” (xxx).

With language, we are able to create enduring fictive selves, strong enough to ignore the intuition that we result from terrific accidents, that we consist merely of fragments and remain mysteries to ourselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> “The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; to know, positively refracted in a new language, the impossibilities of our own ‘reality’ under the effect of other formulations, other syntaxes; to discover certain unsuspected positions of the subject in utterance, to displace the subject’s topology; in a word, to descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without ever muffling it...” (Barthes, *Empire of Signs* 6)

<sup>2</sup> “Il y a du matricide dans l’abandon d’une langue natale....” (Kristeva, *L’Avenir d’une révolte* 69).

<sup>3</sup> “Tragédie, parce que l'être humain étant un être parlant, il parle naturellement la langue des siens: langue maternelle, langue de son groupe, langue nationale. Changer de langue équivaut à perdre cette naturalité, à la trahir, ou du moins à la traduire. L'étranger est essentiellement un traducteur.” (Kristeva, *L'Avenir d'une révolte* 61)

<sup>4</sup> “In this alchemy of naming I am alone with French. To name being allows me to be: I live in French, body and soul.” (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 243)

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Gilles Deleuze states: “What is the relation between the work of art and communication? None whatsoever. The work of art is not an instrument of communication. The work of art strictly does not contain the least bit of information. To the contrary, there is a fundamental affinity between the work of art and the act of resistance. There, yes. It has something to do with information and communication as acts of resistance.” (*Having an Idea in Cinema* 18).

<sup>6</sup> “If God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew.” (Proust, *Within a Budding Grove* 893)

<sup>7</sup> “Thus, regarding the character of Elstir: ‘If God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elstir created them anew.’ Elstir, thus Proust.” (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, 248)

“Ainsi, à propos d'Elstir : ‘... si Dieu le Père avait créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leurs noms, ou en leur en donnant un autre qu'Elstir les recréait.’ Elstir, donc Proust.” (Kristeva, *L'Avenir d'une révolte* 76)

<sup>8</sup> “...insuffisamment rompu au cartésianisme, en résonance avec la prière du cœur et la nuit du sensible.” (Kristeva, *L'Avenir d'une révolte* 71)

<sup>9</sup> ‘The ‘discovery’ or invention of the alphabet is often presented in mythological – and, it is hoped, inspirational – terms. The alphabet is explicitly linked to the sacred in Armenian telling. It was inspired by God, penned by a monk, used first to transcribe the Bible. Its eventual position as an integral aspect of Armenian identity thus brings with it a residue of the sacred....’ (Pattie 197).

<sup>10</sup> „Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt“ (Wittgenstein 74).

<sup>11</sup> In *The Language Lens*, Part II of *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*, Guy Deutscher discusses some of the same and other recent research on linguistic relativity, or the question on how language shapes thought.

<sup>12</sup> See also Lera Boroditsky. “Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers’ Conceptions of Time”. *Cognitive Psychology*, 43 (2001), and Lera Boroditsky, Lauren Schmidt and Webb Phillips. “Sex, Syntax, and Semantics”. *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Cognition*, Eds. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> “Not speaking one’s mother tongue. Living with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body’s nocturnal memory, from the bittersweet slumber of childhood. Bearing within oneself, like a secret vault, or like a handicapped child – cherished and useless – that language of the past that withers without ever leaving you.” (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 15)

<sup>14</sup> “parce qu’à la lisière des mots musiques et des pulsions innommables.” (Kristeva, *L’Avenir d’une révolte* 69-70)

“Non pas involontaire, ni inconsciente, mais je dis bien maternelle: parce qu’à la lisière des mots musiques et des pulsions innommables, au voisinage du sens et de la biologie que mon imagination a la chance de faire exister en français, la souffrance me revient, Bulgarie, ma souffrance.” (Kristeva, *L’Avenir d’une révolte* 69-70)

“Not involuntary, or unconscious, but maternal, because at the border of musical words and unnameable drives, in the precincts of meaning and biology that my imagination is able to create in French, suffering returns to me, Bulgaria, my suffering.” (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 245)

<sup>15</sup> “Ce n’est pas moi. C’est cette mémoire maternelle, ce cadavre chaud et toujours parlant, un corps dans mon corps, qui vibre à l’unisson des infrasons et des informations, des amours étouffées et des conflits flagrants.” (Kristeva, *L’Avenir d’une révolte* 70)

<sup>16</sup> “Toujours l’exil implique une explosion de l’ancien corps.” (Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* 47)

<sup>17</sup> I have replaced the word ‘French’ (in the original quote) with ‘Dutch’.

“Not content to convert time to sonorous, semantic, linguistic space, my own intimacy (my own experience) adds another time of another language to the time of the French language.” (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 252)

“Car non contente de convertir le temps en espace sonore, sémantique, linguistique, mon intimité à moi (mon expérience à moi) ajoute au temps de la langue française un autre temps d’une autre langue.” (Kristeva, *L’Avenir d’une révolte* 83-84)

<sup>18</sup> “Parler une autre langue est tout simplement la condition minimale et première pour être en vie.” (Kristeva, *L’Avenir d’une révolte* 87)

<sup>19</sup> “des paroles premières que lui fournissent le monde, l’histoire, son existence, bref un intelligible qui lui préexiste, car il vient dans un monde plein de langage, et il n’est aucun réel qui ne soit déjà classé par les hommes : naître n’est rien d’autre que trouver ce code tout fait et devoir s’en accommoder.” (Barthes, *Essais critiques* 17)

<sup>20</sup> „Wir glauben etwas von den Dingen selbst zu wissen, wenn wir von Bäumen, Farben, Schnee und Blumen reden, und besitzen doch nichts als Metaphern der Dinge, die den ursprünglichen Wesenheiten ganz und gar nicht entsprechen.“ (Nietzsche, *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne* 1083)

Henri Bergson also commented on the cost that comes with the meaning and coherence we owe to language and the alphabet. “Without language, Bergson suggests, human intelligence would have remained totally involved in the objects of its attention. Language does for intelligence what the wheel does for the feet and the body. It enables them to move from thing to thing with greater ease and speed and ever less involvement. Language extends and amplifies man, but it also divides his faculties. His collective consciousness or intuitive awareness is diminished by this technical extension of consciousness that is speech.” (McLuhan 86)

## Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. "Introduction." Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zorn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. London: Pimlico, 1999. 7-58.
- Barthes, Roland. *Critical Essays*. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1979.
- Barthes, Roland. *Essais critiques*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964.
- Barthes, Roland. *Empire of Signs*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.
- Barthes, Roland. *L'Empire des signes*. Genève: Skira, 1984.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Language as Such, and on the Language of Man." *Reflections*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. 314-332.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zorn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. London: Pimlico, 1999. 70-82.
- Boroditsky, Lera. "Does Language Shape Thought? Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time." *Cognitive Psychology*, 43 (2001) 1-22.
- Boroditsky, Lera. "Linguistic Relativity." *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*. Ed. L. Nadel. London: MacMillan, 2003. 917-921.
- Boroditsky, Schmidt, Lera Lauren and Webb Phillips. "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics." *Language in Mind: Advances in the study of Language and Cognition*. Eds. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003. 61-79.
- Boroditsky, Lera and Jesse Prinz. "What Thoughts are Made of." *Embodied Grounding: Social, Cognitive, Affective, and Neuroscientific Approaches*. Eds. G. Semin and E. Smith. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 98-115.
- Coleman, Ornette and Jacques Derrida. "The Other's Language (Jacques Derrida interviews Ornette Coleman, 23 June 1997)." *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 37:2 (2004), Trans. Timothy Murphy. Ed. Mark Osteen. Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press. 37-40.
- De Preester, Helena. "Notes on Artist's Writings in Higher Art Education." *Graduation 2015*. Eds. Liene Aerts, Wim De Temmerman, Ilse Den Hond, Els Roelandt and Claire Stragier. Ghent: School of Arts, 2015. 11-17.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "Having an Idea in Cinema (On the Cinema of Straub-Huillet)." *Deleuze and Guattari. New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy and Culture*. Eds.

- Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller. Trans. Eleanor Kaufman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 14-19.
- Deutscher, Guy. *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*. London: Arrow Books, 2011.
- Dolar, Mladen. "The Object Voice." *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1996. 7-31.
- Gray, John. *Straw Dogs*. London: Granta Books, 2002.
- Kristeva, Julia. *L'Avenir d'une révolte*. Paris: Flammarion, 2012.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1988.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Intimate Revolt*. Trans. Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Strangers to Ourselves*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar, Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Lehrer, Jonah. *Proust was a Neuroscientist*. Edinburgh: Cannongate Books, 2012.
- Martínez, Chuz. "Manon de Boer: An Informal Study of the Mind." *Manon de Boer*. Eds. Manon de Boer, Monika Szewczyk, Chuz Martínez and Nicolaus Schafhausen. Frankfurter Kunstverein, Witte de With Publishers & Revolver, 2008. 185-193.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "The Spoken Word. Flower of Evil?" *Understanding Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994. 83-89.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Nichanian, Marc. *Writers of Disaster, vol. 1, The National Revolution*. Princeton: The Gomidas Institute, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense." *Philosophy and Truth*. Trans. & ed. D. Breazeale. New York: Humanities Press, 1979. 79-97
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne." *Nietzsches Werke*. Salzburg: Verlag "das Bergland Buch", 1952. 1079-1092.
- Pattie, Susan Paul. *Faith in History*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997.
- Proust, Marcel. *A la recherche du temps perdu, I, A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

Proust, Marcel. "Within a Budding Grove." *Remembrance of Things Past*. Trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. New York: Vintage, 1982, vol. 1.

Sapir, Edward. *Selected Writings*. Ed. David G. Mandelbaum. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963.

Schuster, Aaron. "Is Pleasure a Rotten Idea? Deleuze and Lacan on Pleasure and Jouissance." *The Catastrophic Imperative: Time, Subjectivity and Memory in Contemporary Thought*. Eds. Dominiek Hoens, Sigi Jöttkandt and Gert Buelens. London: Palgrave, 2009. 205-235.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.

Vande Veire, Frank. "Maurice Blanchot." *Als in een donkere Spiegel*. Amsterdam: SUN, 2002. 245-270.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. *Language, Thought and Reality*. Ed. John B. Carroll. Cambridge: The Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1959.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: German and English*. Trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Zdjelar, Katarina. "When Language Starts Speaking Us." *Resonant Bodies, Voices, Memories*. Eds. A. Bangma, D.M. Donoghue, L. Issa and K. Zdjelar. Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2008. 146-156.

*Following pages:*

Mekhitar Garabedian  
*I Remember (Nora Karaguezian, May 2011)*  
2011, ink on paper, dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and Albert Baronian Gallery  
©Mekhitar Garabedian

*I Remember*

*Nora Karaguzian*

*May 2011*

**MEKHITAR GARABEDIAN**

I remember I used to go with my mother to the cinema near to where we lived, to watch Indian movies.

I remember when we went to the movies, on the way back home we stopped to buy falafel sandwiches in Arax Street, eating the falafels on the way back home... how tasteful!

I remember the nice time we had when our family gathered all together at Christmas time at Aunt Dousatzine's house; my five Aunties and their family, and each child received a present from Papa Noël.

I remember that because of the hot summers, we used to rent a summer house in the mountains for about three months. I remember the carefree time we enjoyed there.

I remember that my father played the clarinet in the army band. When he took special care putting on his clothes and shining his shoes, we knew that a foreign President was arriving that day and his band would play the national anthem.

I remember when we were still young we used to go to Tounch; for so called "San balash" meaning "free swimming" in the Mediterranean. Nowadays they have built so called chalets, with all the luxuries (which you can buy or rent seasonally).

I remember when we were very young, we waited impatiently for the Easter period; because then we received colourful dresses from our parents.

I remember we went to Chamoun football stadium to watch a football game, between Homentmen and Mijmeh Clubs. The army was present outside and inside the stadium to keep order. Suddenly, a supporter of the Homentmen team, who was not satisfied with a decision of the referee, started firing his handgun in the air. There was panic in the stadium and most of the spectators lied on the ground to avoid being hit by a stray bullet, because by then the army soldiers had started shooting in the air. The game was stopped.

I remember my mother used to cook Oakea, because it is healthy. We, the children, all hated it, but my mother insisted we either eat it or stayed hungry all day.

I remember that I used to work as a secretary at the Nursing School of the American University of Beirut (AUB). Our house was in East Beirut, and AUB was in West Beirut, Hamra District.

I was obliged to take two 'taxi services'; these are taxis for a specified route, which take on passengers on their itinerary.

The first taxi service brought me to the centre of town; here I had to take a second taxi service which brought me near to where I used to work. The same procedure on the way back home.

I remember when we were children how impatiently we waited for 'St. Sarkis Day' because on that occasion all the patisseries sold 'St Sarkis sweets,' which were very delicious.

I remember the Secondary School I went to was adjacent to our house. I remember seeing my mother at the first floor window looking to make sure that my younger sisters and I did not loiter in the street before entering school, and also on the way home after leaving school.

I remember during the civil war in Lebanon, my younger brother, Onnig, was returning home from West Beirut. He was stopped by militias and forced at gunpoint to abandon his car to the militias; otherwise his life would be in danger.

I remember during the Lebanese civil war, there was a military coup, and therefore a curfew. Nobody was supposed to go out. My husband was arriving the same day from Paris as the coup d'état. He had phoned us two days earlier about his arrival and we had promised him to fetch him from the airport. We were obliged to take the risk. Under difficult circumstances; being stopped several times at army and military checkpoints, we finally reached the airport. We fetched my husband and returned under the same difficult circumstances.

I remember on the occasion of my younger sister's engagement we went with about twenty people to the village of Anjar in the Bekaa valley. We celebrated, ate, drank and danced the whole day. In the evening on the way back home, we heard on the radio that a Palestinian bus filled with youngsters had provoked the Kataibs, the Maronites, by passing through Ashrafieh, the stronghold of the Kataibs. With this incident began the Lebanese civil war.

