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Heterolingualism in Kermann's and Mouawad's theatre: a way to power through the traumatic silence

1. Introduction

Working on multilingual theatre for years, I have noticed how often traumatic events were at the centre of these plays. If it was not just a coincidence, then there was something to explore: why would multilingualism be connected to the depiction of trauma? What would multilingualism bring to the table compared to monolingual plays? I made the hypothesis that it could be a way to counter the freeze response associated with trauma. When a violent event occurs, our whole brain is requested to estimate the threat. Once this is done, the brain will trigger either a flight response, where one escapes the situation, or a fight response, where one fights back. These are the two most known reactions but Robert Scaer defines a third one: the freeze response. "In other words, when fleeing and fighting are no longer physically possible, and the prey animal is in a state of helplessness, it will frequently enter the freeze, or immobility state, a totally instinctual and unconscious reflex."¹ Moreover, he observes that once one has learned to respond to an attack with this freeze response, it becomes harder to react otherwise.² Trauma occurs when this reaction and the memory of the event are frozen too.

The magnitude of some traumatic events can be overwhelming, making it impossible for a person or a group to process it. Therefore, it locks them inside their memory, and the discourse around it is locked too. Thus, navigating between languages could open new doors to communicate these experiences. In this article, I analyse two plays to better explore this hypothesis.

The first one is by Patrick Kermann (1959 – 2000), a French playwright whose work is often related to death. His writing does not rely on defined characters or situations but gives a key

¹ Scaer, Robert: *The Body bears the the burden: trauma, dissociation and disease* [Third edition]. New York and London: Routledge 2014, 13-14.

² *Ibid*, 14.

role to the language itself. *Leçons de ténèbres*³ is a good example of that. It is about World War II, but it does not tell a story, rather the stupefaction it caused. The scenes are autonomous and make it viscerally obvious that what has to be said cannot be said. Voices are floating in the air. Ghosts are lamenting about their lost ability to see and how everything tastes like ashes. Mythological figures are trying to recall their stories but get confused. Even the playwright himself steps in to comment on philosophy. None of these elements seem connected, yet they provide a general feeling of dread and confusion.

The second one is by Wajdi Mouawad, an actor, writer, playwright and theatre director, born in Lebanon in 1968. After his actor training in Canada, he came to work in France. Most of his plays are about families and the secrets that bind them. Unlike *Leçons de Ténèbres*, *Tous des oiseaux*⁴ has a more traditional form. The story and its whole course of events can be identified: in a New York library, Eitan falls in love with Wahida, who is of Arabic descent, provoking the disapproval of his Jewish parents, still living in Berlin. After a fight, Eitan and Wahida leave for Israel, in search of Eitan's roots. There, he is wounded in a bomb attack, and Wahida has to warn his parents. These events will trigger the revelation of the family secret surrounding the birth of Eitan's father. Each character carries their own trauma that is explored throughout the play.

The two plays embody two extreme strategies that are applied in the theatre regarding the depiction of trauma: either recreating the events or recreating the experience. In *Tous des oiseaux*, the playwright retraces every step leading to the final revelation and its consequences, with the play functioning as an investigation showing the connections between events and how one thing leads to another. In *Leçons de Ténèbres*, on the other hand, confusion is at the core. It is no longer about the 'why' but about how it felt and how it still feels. Both plays try to give words where silence was the rule.

They use multilingualism to depict trauma and its effects. Even though their goal is the same, languages are used in different ways: *Tous des oiseaux* aspires to recreate reality, each character has their own linguistic abilities, matching their personal history, while *Leçons de ténèbres* uses languages as a poetic device to build confusion. These two strategies can be intertwined in one single artwork, but analysing them in plays where one of them is clearly dominant will enable us to fully understand their function and the effects of multilingualism on the depiction of trauma in theatre.

³ Kermann, Patrick: *Leçons de Ténèbres*. Paris: Éditions L'Inventaire 1999.

⁴ Mouawad, Wajdi: *Tous des oiseaux*. Paris: Leméac/Actes Sud-Papiers 2018.

2. Connecting language and trauma

There are many ways to study trauma. For example, Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) explores how trauma can be explained at the crossroad between literature and the psychoanalytic theory: they both show how knowing and not knowing intersect.⁵ Another example is Catherine Naugrette's *Paysages dévastés* (2004) which studies how the Holocaust impacted the art world. She tries to understand why after World War II representing the world and its reality suddenly felt so impossible. Many others in the humanities or art studies worked on this specific theme. But to better understand why multilingualism can be such a powerful tool to depict trauma, I want to make a quick detour by the medicine fields.

2.1. Telling the trauma

In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk offers a large view of the nature of trauma, both physically and mentally. This approach is especially relevant to my analysis since it focuses a lot on how his patients speak about their trauma, which is his starting point to study trauma and its consequences. He collects multiple examples from his own practice as a psychiatrist and reviews decades of psychiatric and neurologic research to understand how trauma rewires our brain, our chemistry, and our social behaviour. One of the first things he explains is how, during group therapy, veterans would always come back to their stories of the war, perfectly able to tell them again and again and again, but were completely oblivious and silent when it came to talking about their everyday difficulties. This retelling served several purposes. First of all, it built the group. Since they were sharing the same kind of stories, they were speaking the same language. Although the rest of the world could not understand them, the group could, and this kind of memory was their *lingua franca*: both a shared history and a shared language they could use to recognise one another. Eventually, van der Kolk realised that the only way they would let him help was if he became part of the group:⁶ since he did not share their experience of the war, the veterans would offer him tokens from their former military

⁵ See Caruth, Cathy: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1996, 3.

⁶ See Van der Kolk, Bessel: *Le corps n'oublie rien*, transl. by Aline Weil. Paris: Albin Michel 2018, 33.

corps to make him one of them. Physical items had to replace the stories and the memories for him to be accepted.

This is also true on an individual level. Not only do these retellings of the same traumatic stories build a common ground for the group, but they also build a familiar environment for each of them. Van der Kolk explains that traumatic events create a distance between people and their usual world. Compared to the intensity of traumatic memories, everything else seems dull, and generates nothing but indifference, to the point where it is common for traumatised people to seek extreme sensations, sometimes through self-harming behaviours. Retelling is a way to dive back into those feelings and maintain not only a sense of familiarity, but also a sense of self: trauma is the root of pain *and* meaning.⁷ Van der Kolk concludes that these constant repetitions can both be a way to finally gain control over the memories and the feelings associated with them, and feed the obsession and the feeling of dread at the same time.⁸

For van der Kolk language is an important tool which gives us the power to evolve⁹ because it allows us to communicate our experiences and helps us find meaning in them. This newly found meaning can also be collective, as with the veteran group therapy.

2.2. Dissociating language

We can now circle back to multilingual theatre and its specificities in depicting trauma. The essence of this art form is collective and requires multiple elements (words, bodies, voices, accessories, etc.). Each theatre creation has its own combination of these different elements, therefore, the hierarchy between them is always different. Multilingual theatre offers an interesting twist on this hierarchy: the text remains very important but the words are no longer the main conveyor of meaning, since they are not so easily accessible anymore. The result is a theatre centred on words not as conveyors of meaning but as physical elements. This phenomenon can be explained by Ferdinand de Saussure's definition of language: a language is a circumscribed collection of associations between a mental image and a sound image.¹⁰ When several languages appear on the same stage, these associations are threatened and broken: we have the sound image, but no mental image can be directly associated with it if we do not

⁷ See *ibid.*, 34.

⁸ See *ibid.*, 52.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ See de Saussure, Ferdinand: *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot 1985, 32.

understand this particular language. Since these languages are placed in a staged context, other elements of the theatre step in to establish new associations without us even noticing. The sound-image does convey meaning, though it might differ from the original meaning. In such plays, languages are no longer circumscribed collections of associations, but a constantly moving ecosystem.

Chiara Denti explains that multilingual literature is not a new phenomenon: throughout time, it has been connected to the rules of a specific genre, a personal choice of the author, or the sign of belonging to a community. If we feel that multilingual literature is recent, it is because it has often been considered as a transgression of the unwritten law of monolingualism, therefore pushing these artworks to the margins of the general creation.¹¹ Considering this history, Grutman coins the term “heterolingualism” for this literature, rather than “multilingualism”.¹² The prefix “hetero” emphasises the differences between the idioms rather than their number. It also includes the social, regional and chronological variations of a single language. The presence of these variations brings otherness in the dominant language and forces it to welcome minority points of view.¹³

Thus, multilingualism and heterolingualism may function as tools to depict trauma. Languages are used to tell and retell traumatic events (whether real or fictional) but since they are not employed in their usual way, the retelling cannot be frozen. The sound of words, the imaginary they summon, which references and languages are used, etc., all elements that are usually hidden inside a single language suddenly evolve in the open and are the main conveyor of meaning. Exploring the hidden face of language enables the playwrights to delve into the hidden face of trauma. Moreover, since the multi/heterolingualism is a transgression bringing strangeness in the dominant language(s), it is a powerful tool to tell traumatic stories: playwrights can show how such narratives are built, at both the personal and the collective levels.

¹¹ See Denti, Chiara: L'hétérolinguisme ou penser autrement la traduction. In: *Meta*, vol. 62 (2017), no. 3, 521–537, 523.

¹² Grutman, Rainier: *Des langues qui résonnent. L'hétérolinguisme au XIX^{ème} siècle québécois*. Québec: Fides 1997, 37.

¹³ See Denti, Chiara (note 11), 524.

3. Language as a biography

Using Grutman's concept of heterolingualism, Myriam Suchet explains that these artworks require a greater commitment from the readers than monolingual ones.¹⁴ Usually, words such as "I", "you", "here", "now" define the shape of the story, but in a heterolingual context, the spoken language itself is the clue. According to her, switching between languages redraws the sociolinguistic maps we know to shape a new one, just for this particular story, forcing us to forget what we think we know.

When *Tous des oiseaux* was first created on stage by Wajdi Mouawad himself, no French was ever heard; each character spoke their own language with subtitles included in the setting. But when it was published, the text was written only in French, with no stage direction of the language used. Ironically, this choice makes the published play harder to understand since the languages used by each character convey meaning.

Here is a quick rundown of the characters and their languages:

- Eitan speaks German, English, and Hebrew. He grew up in Germany, in a Jewish family, before he came to the USA for his studies.
- Wahida, Eitan's lover, speaks English and Arabic. She grew up in the USA and distanced herself from her Arabic roots because of racism, even though her PhD thesis is about Wazzân, a Moroccan diplomat from the 16th century.
- Norah, Eitan's mother, speaks German and English. Born in East Germany, her parents felt more communist than Jewish. She can understand Hebrew but barely speaks it.
- David, Eitan's father, speaks Hebrew, German and English. He was born in Israel and only came to Germany when he was a teenager. His father Etgar speaks Hebrew and German, whereas his mother, Leah, whom he has not seen for decades since she had stayed in Israel, speaks Hebrew, Yiddish, German and English.

3.1. Languages as legacy

The staging of the play makes this tedious explanation unnecessary. Just by listening, you know who can communicate with whom and who is isolated. When a family meeting is organised to

¹⁴ Suchet, Myriam: L'imaginaire hétérolingue : ce que nous apprennent les textes à la croisée des langues. Paris: Classiques Garnier 2014, 28.

introduce Wahida to Eitan's parents, the audience already knows that unless the family makes an effort to speak English, she will have no one to talk to. Moreover, the only other character speaking Arabic is her hallucination of Wazzân. The rarity of the Arabic language depicts in a very efficient way how Wahida is isolated in this family, but also, how she has disconnected herself from her own roots: no one around her speaks her language.

When it comes to Eitan, his language competence clearly shows the legacy shared by the members of the family, as languages are transmitted, or not, like genetic features. Considering that they have several common languages, the choice of the spoken language is significant. When Eitan's parents come to visit him in New York and he tells them about Wahida, David only speaks Hebrew whereas Norah keeps speaking German. David tries to explain to his son how his dating choice is a betrayal to him, his family, and their Israeli roots. Feeling attacked by his father, Eitan switches from English to German. For his father, this is the last straw: his own son not only cannot understand the problem with dating an Arabic woman, but he expresses his rebellion in the "language of the persecutors".¹⁵ Norah is now forced to take sides between her husband, her son and her own heritage: "It's the language of his mother, it has nothing to do with the persecutors, stop provoking him! Both of you stop! You're making me sick!".¹⁶

The three of them all speak and understand English, German and Hebrew but each character has their own linguistic strategy. Sticking to one language is a way to cling to their own values and heritage while refusing what the other is saying and the world they want to embrace. Switching between different languages can be a way to meet the other halfway when you switch *to* their language, or a way to deny their culture and mindset when you switch *from* their language.

3.2. The root language

All these strategies fall apart when the family secret is revealed: David is not the biological son of Etgar and Leah. As an Israeli soldier, Etgar was sent into a Palestinian village which was destroyed by their army. They were supposed to clear the village of remaining enemies. Here, Etgar found a baby in a shoe box, hidden in a wardrobe. When he brought the child to a hospital,

¹⁵ Mouawad, Wajdi (note 2), 28. "Et tu oses me dire ça dans la langue des bourreaux!". As stated above, the play is fully published in French. The translations in the main text above are mine, I quote the original in the footnotes.

¹⁶ Ibid., 28. "C'est la langue de sa mère, ça n'a rien à voir avec les bourreaux, arrête aussi de le provoquer!".

the nurse asked him if he was the father. After a second of hesitation, Etgar said yes. David, who is so proud and so vocal about his Jewish descent, sees his whole world collapse and has a heart attack. David is in a coma, and the doctor tells the family that one thing they can do to help is speak to him in his mother tongue. But which language is it? Is it Hebrew, the first language he spoke? Or is it Arabic, the language his biological mother must have used to soothe him, long before his first memories? In doubt, Eitan and Leah ask Wahida to come back so she can speak Arabic to him: "Like you, I have never seen the sky that saw me being born. So, to speak to you in our language, I will speak about me and to speak about me, I will speak about a man dear to my heart".¹⁷ After rejecting her for who she was, David ends up in the same situation: disconnected from his own roots which are not what he thought they were. Just like the veterans of Bessel van der Kolk's group therapy, David and Wahida share the language of trauma: they were both estranged from their own community, even if the reason is different. They do not know who they are, and they must reconcile with Arabic, the language of their community. But at this point, David does not know a word of it, and Wahida is still trying to make peace with it. She starts by teaching David the Arabic alphabet, so he can have a first grip on this language new to him. At the end, in a dream space they share, as his soul wanders towards death, he can still only answer her in Hebrew, still unable to tell who he is. "I can hear in your voice the language of this mother I have never known. Your voice as a net thrown in the sea to give me back old fragments. We must soothe those who are about to die".¹⁸

Using the concept of heterolingualism, we can see how languages in this play create a complete map of the characters' wandering whether real or metaphorical. The characters have to decide which language they embrace, which they reject, and which combinations they accept. This decision is driven by their evolving connections to the other characters, their past, their community, their values, their goals. The trauma of the Holocaust, of being dragged away from their homeland, of having to distance themselves from their own community because of racism, of adopting a child of the enemy, of lying to your child to the point it destroys your family, of realising you belong to the enemy... all these events mark the characters and shape the way they chose the language to express themselves. Through these choices we see that heterolingualism is an important tool to show how trauma impacts personal reactions and histories. The words tell the story, but the chosen language *shows* the story. If trauma cannot

¹⁷ Ibid., 84. "Comme toi, je n'ai pas connu le ciel qui m'a vue naître. Alors pour te parler dans notre langue, je te parlerai de moi et pour te parler de moi, je te parlerai d'un homme cher à mon cœur".

¹⁸ Ibid., 86. "J'entends dans ta voix la langue de cette mère que je n'ai pas connue. Ta voix comme filet jeté à la mer pour me redonner des fragments anciens. Il faut consoler ceux qui vont mourir".

be put in words because the experience separates the person from the world, then language must find another way to express the experience.

4. Language contamination

When it comes to trauma, some elements are impossible to tell. In the case of van der Kolk's veterans, some parts of the stories always slipped away: you had to be part of the group to understand. Some things cannot be said. That general feeling applies to the event of World War II, especially the Holocaust. This feeling struck our societies as a whole, including the art and theatre world, leading to a representation crisis: how do you depict events that are beyond your understanding?

4.1. The representation crisis

For Maryvonne Saison,¹⁹ this representation crisis is connected to a political crisis: there is no longer a global and consistent image of the world, no more possible generalisation to understand the world. So, any representation suddenly becomes a critical and polemical discourse. She explains that there is a reality problem in contemporary theatre:

[Theatre] is a witness of the consciousness of otherness, of an incitement to open to the world and to history. But, by its strength and its frequency, it also shows the consciousness of some kind of impediment or a deviation from the spontaneous perception of what our reality is.²⁰

Theatre refers to the reality outside. Rather than being reality, it offers a representation of it by making choices. But as Saison says: if this reality is a problem, because it is so far beyond our understanding that it breaks what we thought was true, then it might be necessary to take a detour.

¹⁹ Saison, Maryvonne: *Les théâtres du réel : pratiques de la représentation dans le théâtre contemporain*. Paris: L'Harmattan 1998, 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 13. "Il témoigne de la conscience d'une altérité, de l'incitation à l'ouverture au monde et à l'histoire. Mais il signale également, par sa force et sa fréquence, la conscience d'un certain empêchement ou d'une déviation de la perception spontanée de ce qui constitue notre réalité".

When it comes to the horrors of the Shoah, Adorno famously said that after Auschwitz it was barbaric to write poems.²¹ Since language was used to spread the worst ideas and actions, it could not be safely used in art. The language itself was traumatised by the Holocaust, and is therefore lost. On the other hand, Catherine Naugrette explains that writers such as Heiner Müller believe that they must write poems; not doing so would be admitting their defeat to Auschwitz. You can only change the machine by getting out of it, the machine being Auschwitz. If language has been caught in the camp, writers have to reclaim it by creating art outside of Auschwitz.²² Naugrette explains that this is where the founding aesthetic principles of the detour practice can be seen in theatre: creating a poetic distance from reality is a more effective way to depict it. This way, reality can be recreated through a well-crafted language and is easier to process. Multilingualism can sometimes be part of it.

As Angela Kershaw reminds us, the Holocaust and World War II have a multilingual nature which leads to the constitution of multilingual texts.²³ Thus multilingualism can be used as a mimetic goal: the text is written in several languages because it recreates events that occurred in several languages. This was indeed the strategy used in *Tous des oiseaux*. But the multilingualism in Kermann's *Leçons de ténèbres* has more to do with an aesthetic detour than mimicking reality.

4.2. Broken languages

Leçons de ténèbres is notably divided into twenty-two scenes denoted by the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Though Hebrew is never spoken by any character, it discreetly shapes the whole play. Hebrew is not spoken, but it is the home of all the events told here. Everything happens within the language, marking the trauma in its very DNA. The point is not to tell the Holocaust in the language of the people living it, but to show how this event marked them to the point where it cannot be expressed, in any language, as it pervades every word, every letter.

²¹ Adorno, Theodor: *Prismes*, transl. by Rainer Rochlitz. Paris: éditions Payot & Rivages 2003, 26.

²² Naugrette, Catherine: *Le détour, le réel et la représentation*. In: *Études théâtrales*, vol. 24–25 (2002), 100–109, 101.

²³ Kershaw, Angela: *Translating war: literature and memory in France and Britain from the 1940s to the 1960s*. Cham: Switzerland Palgrave Macmillan 2019, 217.

The main language of the play is French, which is the language of the playwright, Patrick Kermann. Furthermore, some parts are written in English, and a very few lines in German.

These two languages feel broken:

I was always disappointed by myself : bref, incapable de. Même si, même si, va vers, et tout. Va, va pas, tout sauf. Et puis : sans trop savoir comment faire. Ils disent i feel so tired et encore va faut voir c'est du tout vu.

Au début – après – je voulais chanter: i would have liked to sing on the beginning. J'ai essayé : elle va chanter, ils disaient, attention au chant. Le chant des ténèbres. J'ai essayé, déjà ça de pris.

Il a fallu longtemps, a so long time, le ciel est bleu – encore – là je disais, i'm going to sing mais ça l'a pas fait, le fera pas. The reality. Mouvement d'ailes. Envolés les anges. To late. [sic]²⁴

This excerpt from *Vav*, the sixth scene of the play, stages an unidentified female voice, looking for her lover. She tries to remember him and their last moments. Some hints, such as the use of English, point to the arrival of the Allies' troops in France. Her memories are clearly confused and she spends most of her time trying to say something, and failing. Here, she keeps trying to sing for them, but never does. She never goes beyond "I miss him and I want to remember". Language, even in French, is broken, and grammatically inaccurate: she starts sentences she cannot finish. English is written like a French person who learned it only by ear would write it: "desappointed", "to late", non-capitalised "i" subjects. She switches from one language to another, trying them on as if one could work better than the other to finally say what she has to say. The huge presence of reporting verbs and the constant use of the near future also contributes to this failure: the voice spends more time announcing that she is going to say or do something but for an unknown reason, the moment to act on it never comes. In this particular context, "to late" is both a mistake (one would expect "too late") and the correct spelling to express the idea that this moment is postponed to later.

Multilingualism here is another symptom showing how she is unable to express what she wants: it is both an additional tool and a failure. English is the language spoken by the soldiers who came, which she associates with angels. Switching to this language can be a way out from her own language which is filled with the absence of her lover. Furthermore, if the soldiers free them from the enemy, maybe their language can free something in her mind. But just as in French, her sentences have no conclusion. There is no escape from the silence, no way to say what she has to say. Multilingualism in the play accentuates this dead end, making you feel as if there was a possible escape in another language just to fail in the exact same way.

²⁴ Kermann, Patrick (note 1), 28.

4.3. The cursed language

When French is a dead end, English is a regular solution. German, however, is limited to minimal appearances: “Itou diras car si vois l'étant ne vois le néant ni le rien donc l'étant est tout de même (das Dasein ist)”.²⁵ Or

Coryphée 2: je commence ici
Chœur: “ja das ist der Platz”
Coryphée 1: “oui c'est le lieu”²⁶

In these two quotes, German is used as a direct reference to the outside world of the play. The first one is written in an obscure French which is barely understandable. The sentence feels as if it is just spiralling, trying to start over and over but with no clear ending. Nonetheless, you can guess that it speaks about what the void and the being are and concludes with a reference to the German philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger. This reference works more like an accomplice wink than a direct quote: if you know this philosophic concept, it adds a layer of meaning to the sentence; if you do not know it, it adds a layer of complexity to an already cryptic sentence. The switch to German here plays with the French impression of Germany and its language: something complex, obscure, and quite frightening. Once again, beyond the words themselves, multilingualism is already providing meaning by its sole presence. The point is not to figure out the meaning of each word, but to experience the feeling of confusion this cryptic phrasing triggers.

In the second excerpt, the German sentence is presented like a quote, a direct reference to the outside world. In this scene, *Noun*, a chorus talks with not one, but five coryphaei, to the point where the coryphaei outnumber the chorus. The events were so violent the chorus cannot stay united. No meaning can be built collectively, which leads to its scattering into multiple coryphaei. Just like the female voice of *Vav* was struggling to launch the next action, the chorus and the coryphaei are struggling to start, so they can skip to the next move. The difference is they seem to be able to pinpoint why they cannot move on: they have to decide where to begin, and doing so is admitting they have to begin at Auschwitz, which is unbearable. Thus “ja das ist der Platz” can be considered like a metonymy: the place cannot be named, it is beyond their ability, so they switch to the perpetrators' language. The trauma is so big that “the place”, when

²⁵ Ibid., 63.

²⁶ Ibid., 66.

said in German cannot be anything else than *this* place, so big that the German language can only lead to *this* place. The quotation marks are another way for these voices to distance themselves from Auschwitz: it is not directly in their speech, it is an outside discourse, separate from them. The quotation marks, not naming Auschwitz, switching to German are ways to defuse the trauma.

4.4. From language failure to new meanings

Sometimes, the switch to the German language is harder to spot. It is not directly spoken, but it contaminates the other languages, just like French contaminates English:

something is rotten
only apparitions disappear only disparitions appear
i am what i am you are what you are
the ideal place is not the ideal place of the ideal place
 you have to get out of my mind
yesterday is not tomorrow today is not today
 i'm not here where i'm
 it's the way to walk the way
 the same is the same is the same
the death of the life ist not the life of the death
 what i see is what i see
the other side is not the other side of the other side
my dream is not your dream is not our dream
no story of the end no end of the story²⁷

The short scene *Daleth* is written in English only, except from the German word “ist”. Once again, there is some broken English with the words “apparition” and “disparition” directly taken from French. In a French-speaking context, these words are pretty close to their English counterpart “appearance” and “disappearance”. These two pairs are so close to the French ear that some new speaker of English might just use the French words with an English accent. Once again, even though the voices of the play are speaking English, this shows that it is not their first language. But here, it contains an extra layer of meaning since, unlike “disparition”, “apparition” does exist in English, but refers to some kind of ghost or spirit. Placing the English “apparition” face to face with the French “disparition” highlights the idea that something is missing while still being here in some way. The English language holds an important place in this context since it is the language of the Allies, but it is not the language of the voices and

²⁷ Ibid., 21–22.

ghosts Kermann summons in this play. By using broken English, the playwright stages how the languages contaminated one another, thus creating new possibilities of meaning inside the languages.

The German discreet appearance is another trace of this contamination: “the death of the life *ist* not the life of the death” which could be overlooked as a typing mistake if contamination of the languages were not one of the main uses of heterolingualism here. The verbs “to be” and “sein” are not very similar except for the third person singular, respectively “he/she/it is” and “er/sie/es ist”. In this scene, the voices are not talking about how to keep going, or how to begin, but want to make sure that “this” is over. Unable to name “this”, each sentence is the reflection of another while not being it. At this point, the nuances of each sentence are very hard to grasp because it just sounds like a broken record. The German utterance of “ist” functions like a bug: it breaks the English language from the inside, replacing the English verb with its German counterpart, and breaks the cycle of sentences closed on themselves. This is especially ironic since German is the language that leads to this situation of pain and confusion in the first place. The intrusion of German here is discrete and could easily be overseen, but it shows very well how something as simple and small as the verb “to be” can be marked by the trauma. Especially since this verb is one of the most commonly used, meaning that each occurrence of it could trigger a new intrusion of the German language, and thus trigger the trauma itself, leading us to feel like this trauma is endemic and unavoidable.

Multilingualism in *Leçons de ténèbres* is based on a system of confusion and contamination between the languages. There is no proper story that can be identified. The play itself is a tragedy of the language: we witness the inability of the language to portray the events, and how *even this inability* is also impossible to phrase properly despite every strategy used in the twenty-two scenes of the play.

5. Conclusion: Getting out of the machine

These two plays exhibit one of the main characteristics of tragedy: the situation is doomed from the beginning. In *Tous des oiseaux*, there is no possible reconciliation in Eitan's family because the conflict at stake goes way beyond them. Solving this family's issues requires solving the whole situation between Israel and Palestine, which is unattainable. In *Leçons de ténèbres*, the voices try every possible way in search of the combination of words that could contain the pain

and horror of Auschwitz without success. In both cases, the role of multilingualism is not to solve the issues at stake, but to create new ways to escape a locked-up world.

5.1. Poetry and reality

Kershaw says about translation that “while distance offers the comfort of taking refuge in the exotic, proximity is disturbing because it threatens the boundaries between self and other”.²⁸ This is also true for multilingualism; the two plays demonstrate both facets with the distance they create from reality. *Tous des oiseaux* feels real: each character has a proper name, their connections are clearly identified, they have a personal biography, clearly identified events happen and one can easily pinpoint the causes and consequences. The play mimics reality. *Leçons de ténèbres*, on the other hand, is a succession of unconnected scenes where voices, figures and mythological characters struggle to say something. We can guess what it is, but could not perfectly phrase it if we tried. Even if we cannot name it, we still feel as if we know what this something is. All the voices of the play fail to say this something, in different ways. Just as we cannot phrase what they are trying to say, it is impossible to pinpoint why they are failing, but it still feels obvious. The play has a poetic approach to reality.

This difference might not be the most meaningful point of comparison. The line between mimicry and poetry is not so clear-cut. Multilingualism in *Tous des oiseaux* is used in a mimicking way. But the play still has a poetic dimension, especially when Wahida or David hallucinate and speak with Wazzân, the dead Moroccan diplomat. On the other hand, *Leçons de ténèbres* is distancing itself from reality as much as possible, yet the languages chosen in this play fit the reality of the events. Moreover, they include mistakes and approximations made by new speakers of a language, which grant the dialogues a sense of authenticity.

Mimicry and poetry are the two faces of the same coin when it comes to depicting trauma in theatre. Multilingualism in *Tous des oiseaux* seems easy to understand. The clues are in plain sight, and they make sense without overthinking them. And that is the point: understanding the words and the issues does not make it easier. The best example of this is the doctor's question, first asked about Eitan after the bomb attack, then about David, after his heart attack: what is his mother tongue? For Eitan: is it German, his mother's language, or Hebrew, his father's

²⁸ Kershaw, Angela, (note 22), 6.

language? He speaks both, but for the doctor, one must be more important than the other. David tries to claim that Jewishness is transmitted by the mother, but for Norah, her main language is still German. Admittedly, multilingualism here is the reality of the characters. The characters have common languages and could agree on a *lingua franca*, but the play traps them each in their own language. It gives a very physical impression of what is going on. It becomes even more obvious when the doctor asks the same question about David: what is his mother tongue? When Wahida comes and talks to him in Arabic while he is in a coma, he understands everything, even though he has never learned this language. Again, it is not mimicking reality, but instead offers a poetic representation of how David is trying to come to peace with his origins. Multilingualism here is not only about reality, it is about the characters' journeys through trauma.

On the other hand, the multilingualism of *Leçons de ténèbres* seems cryptic, it creates confusion over confusion. In a way, that is all there is to understand: the voices of the play reach a point where languages cannot make sense of what happens. If the world makes no sense, why should languages? Maybe it is impossible to tell this experience, but it is possible to recreate the maelstrom of emotions, the feeling that it is impossible to move on, the urge to tell so the dead did not die in vain, and that maybe if the voices can tell about them, the dead will not be so dead. Multilingualism recreates this emergency. The play does not try to mimic the events, it mimics the impossibility to react to them and the general stupefaction the world experienced at that time. Multilingualism embodies the trauma itself.

5.2. The illusion of a dead end

Despite their different approaches, when it comes to the depiction of trauma the two plays end up in the same paradox. On the one hand, they both give the impression that language is a failure, unable to express what needs to be expressed, constantly missing the point. On the other hand, through multilingualism, the two plays create a new relationship to language. Language refers to a reality. Since theatre is a poetic creation, it decides how to filter this reality. Thus, it opens up new possibilities by not telling the event, but offering an experience. Or, to circle back to Müller's words: it offers a way out of the machine. Mouawad's play is a way to discuss the Israel-Palestine conflict, racism and the legacy of the Holocaust two generations later. He does not take sides. He tells a story about people being caught in events bigger than them.

Heterolingualism here prevents the will to pick a side by forcing us to literally hear every side. Since all the languages intertwine, there is no side anymore. Kermann's play does not tell a story, because it is impossible, but it also refuses to give up. Every voice keeps trying, by any means possible. They look for the beginning, for a way to keep going, for the next move. Knowing that it is impossible does not stop them from trying. Multilingualism is just another tool to try to achieve this impossible goal: tell the story.

Finally, even when it creates confusion, multilingualism is a way out of the silence, a catalyst to start moving again. It is a powerful tool to apprehend the hole created by the trauma: if you cannot *name* the trauma, maybe you can tell the shape of it. Even if it is not a solution to the freeze response of trauma, it multiplies the chances to connect to others. By using the concepts of multilingualism and heterolingualism side by side, we can see how multiplying the present languages *and* opening breaches in the dominant language for different variations offer new possibilities to understand events that are beyond our understanding.

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