

Exile

Doerte Bischoff

If migration is the overarching term for changes of location that fundamentally shape life courses and realities, exile can be understood as a special form of migration characterized by violent and involuntary dislocation. Autobiographical accounts as well as general descriptions and theoretical reflections on exile emphasize disconnection as its central characteristic. In his seminal essay on exile, Edward Said describes it as ‘a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past’ (Said 2000, 177). In this essay, the metaphor of cutting is also supplemented by images of breakage and fragmentation (‘broken lives’) as well as of tearing or ripping: exile ‘has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography’ (Said 2000, 174). As becomes apparent in these citations, the description of discontinuity simultaneously produces images that evoke continuity, belonging and wholeness. While performatively demonstrating this logic of mutual affiliation of exile and home, Said’s essay also analyses it critically: the longing for a retrieval of what has been lost, the idea of return that has often been said to define the situation of exile, tends to imitate the very act of claiming homogeneity and wholeness which resulted in the production of exiles in the first place.

In his autobiographical narrative *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov observes that Russian exiles who had fled to Western Europe following the October Revolution tended to stick together, to avoid contact with the people of their host countries and to understand themselves as custodians of the culture of their country of origin. Looking back to this time, he writes, one notices with surprise many of these supposedly ‘free belles-lettrists abroad aping fettered thought at home by decreeing that to be a representative of a group or an epoch was more important than to be an individual writer’ (Nabokov 1967, 283–284). Art and writing for them was secondary and subordinated to moral or political positioning, resulting in a conservative notion of literature which did not encourage creativity. Instead of affirming nationalist ideas and modelling the role of an exile writer as a representative of the country that has excluded him or her, Nabokov pleads for an integration of the experience of breakage and disconnectivity into the process of art. The exchange of letters he had as a young exile with his first love who he left behind appears as a way to connect himself to the lost world. Equating the loss of his country with the loss of his love (Nabokov 1967, 245), writing these letters is depicted as a way of transforming ‘home’ into a place of writing which, unlike the far away real place which cannot be possessed or controlled, stays in connection with the exile’s life and agency. At the same time, it reveals its own nature as a projection, an artificial

and potentially artistic imagination. The claim to represent a lost homeland is thus contrasted and superseded by a commitment to breakage and disconnection as the condition of exile writing. This corresponds to the self-reflexive considerations of another exile writer: for Salman Rushdie, the distant position of the exile results in a fragmentary vision which cannot be completed or healed. If the expatriate writer tries to reflect and reclaim the lost world – and he does so with an unusual energy of longing – ‘he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost’ (Rushdie 1992, 11). For him, this approach to the past resembles archaeology: the broken pots of antiquity can only be reconstructed provisionally, but remain ‘exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects’ (Rushdie 1992, 12).

Remarkably, a similar image of a broken mirror appears in the writing of Anna Seghers, a German exile writer, when she elaborates a notion of realism that corresponds with the experience of a time of transition, exile and loss (Seghers 1973, 288). Seghers, who was herself in Parisian exile in 1939, engaged in the debate on possible models and appropriate forms of contemporary literature which was held by intellectuals who had been widely dispersed by exile by exchanging letters with the literary critic Georg Lukács who then was exiled in Moscow. In the exchange, not only are diverging concepts of literature negotiated, but especially in Seghers’ letters the specific condition of writing in a time of war, persecution and exile also becomes part of these reflections. By insisting on the value of fragments of reality and broken mirrors for contemporary realist art, she advocates a connection between exile and avantgarde practices which is rejected by fellow socialist intellectuals like Lukács. By including remarks on her own situation and everyday aspects of the historic catastrophe of which she is part, a neutral positioning of the exiled critic and writer is shown as ultimately impossible and confronted with a sense of positionality, vulnerability and limitation. Realism, the attempt to present the world as it is, in this context entails abandoning the idea of homogeneity and wholeness. As Nabokov observed and as can be seen in the writings of many exiles during the period of National Socialism, a strong tendency to affirm notions of substantial entities or origins is characteristic of exiles. At the same time, their specific situation tends to engender a sense of the constructed nature of ‘the world’, its being dependent on a dynamic plurality of images and narratives. After the shock of not having a place in the world any more, the realisation dawns on the exile that it is not the world that carries him/her, but that s/he carries the world (De Cesare 2021, 186).

To differentiate between the two possible reactions to exile and to understand their interconnectedness, it is helpful to turn to Svetlana Boym’s works on nostalgia which also focus on the condition of exile. She distinguishes between two different nostalgic attitudes: while restorative nostalgia, the longing for an unchanged home

and heritage, evokes unity and thinks of a lost world as a retrievable substance, reflective nostalgia 'dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity' (Boym 2001, XVIII). The latter sides with Rushdie's 'imaginary homelands' and has a predilection for irony, montage and polyphony. In fact, here, Rushdie's phrasing resonates that those 'who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon' them (Rushdie 1992, 12). The 'we' that Rushdie evokes does not coincide with the idea of national exile communities representing a country and a specific culture as expatriates. Rather, it refers to a heterogeneous group of fateful companions across national affiliations, shared languages and even historical constellations. The 'world's community of displaced writers' (Rushdie 1992, 15) explicitly comprises authors from different times and places, thus offering a new kind of affiliation which defies national ties and frameworks.

The appeal to a globalised perspective on exile can be found in many examples of exile literature even if they lament the loss of a habitual world and language sphere. In his essay 'The writer in exile' from 1943, Lion Feuchtwanger not only explicitly relates the specific miseries of his own exile, the most painful of which was having been separated from 'the lively stream of the mother tongue' (Feuchtwanger 1984, 535, my translation). He also frames his considerations by referring to writers in exile who hold a recognized place in world literature: Ovid, Li-Tai-Pe, Dante, Heinrich Heine, Victor Hugo (Feuchtwanger 1984, 533). In a similar vein, two poems by Bertolt Brecht, written during his exile in Denmark, connect his own situation as a displaced writer with others who shared a similar fate and can now provide him with a perspective of community beyond the national one that has been disconnected and denied. Homer had no home and Dante had to leave his, the first verses of 'The emigration of the poets' (Brecht 1967, 495) remind the reader. Others like Li-Po or Lukrez follow until the poem ends with a reference to Heine and Brecht (explicitly) who himself took flight under the Danish thatched roof (Brecht 1967). In another poem by Brecht, written three years later, the names of the banned poets from the first one reappear with several others who are all now given voices to address the newly arrived (Brecht 1967, 663–664). They come with advice, consolation and warnings, establishing a situation – here presented as a dreamlike encounter – of mutual recognition and comfort. Brecht's poems construct a tradition of exile literature into which they inscribe themselves (Benteler 2015).

In her reflections on exile, Dubravka Ugrešić, born in Yugoslavia, remembers that the official multiculturalism propagated as a social glue in the former multi-ethnic state was subject to a reality check when during the civil war refugees from Yugoslavia found themselves in camps in foreign countries together with other

unfortunate fugitives, including those from the Global South, whom they rejected. Like Said, Nabokov or Boym, she also observes that exile can favour the development of ostracism and a regressive utopia, but by critically observing or experiencing this, another view of the world can emerge. When she is in her chosen homes in New York, Berlin, London or Amsterdam, Ugrešić writes, she truly feels surrounded by ‘brothers’, people from different parts of the world who have stranded in western cities, living at the margins, trying to survive: ‘I recognize the gleam in their eyes, I know my “race” of exiles, nomads, emigrants.’ (Ugrešić 2002, 149) Coherence and belonging are articulated by using a citation: the word ‘race’ is put into quotation marks, implying its detachment from a specific context and a transplantation into her own text in which it is still marked as a foreign body. The notion of a ‘race of exiles’ connects two terms which usually signify something completely incompatible: while race ties belonging to biological categories and an essential nature of community, exile is associated with the social and political circumstances of human life. Their combination subverts the idea of essence and points to the social and political effects of its rhetoric: exile is produced by ethnonationalist and racist discourse and the practices it legitimates. Self-reflexive exile then implies a rejection of the assumptions and consequences of these ideas. The exile, as Ugrešić depicts him/her, fiercely tears off all labels and refuses to be classified as a representative of the country whose passport s/he holds, s/he does not want to be a member of any ‘family’ (Ugrešić 2002, 145) – another potentially essentialist metaphor for belonging which is deconstructed in this essay. The detached perspective of exile appears particularly suited to this activity of deconstruction. Instead of the usual association of writers with a particular country (of origin), Ugrešić finds the term ‘transnational’ more appropriate for her self-description (Ugrešić 2002, 141). In the context of her observations and arguments, transnationalism, however, does not refer to a more encompassing sphere beyond the nation state and the idea of nationally rooted and framed cultures; it instead implies a reflexive turn towards these notions and their impact upon human lives and cultural production. Transnationalism, thus conceived, does not abandon or transcend the national, but focuses on the complex interdependencies between the local and the global (→ **Local-global-global**), between connectedness and discontinuity, without resorting to universalist concepts.

As exile experiences have often been an incentive for the discovery and reflection of transnational or transcultural dynamics (→ **Transcultural/Transculturalization**), recent exile studies have accentuated their interrelatedness (Bischoff and Komfort-Hein 2019, 3, 22). A similar logic has recently been discovered between cosmopolitanism and exile. While a traditional appeal to cosmopolitanism was based on a notion of the world as an inhabitable space (mostly) for an elite who could afford to travel and advocated an idea of intellectual border crossings and

explorations, concepts of a ‘new cosmopolitanism’ imply the irreducible diversity and multiplicity of perspectives on ‘the world’ (Köhler 2006; Narloch 2022). Confronting exclusion, impassable borders and the violent effects of claims to homogeneity and control, exile can sensitize us to what is lost in globalisation when it is primarily understood as a process of ever-expanding access and appropriation. By not extrapolating an individual sense of belonging or a nationally specific (or Eurocentric) idea of culture onto a global totality, alternative modes of referring to ‘the world’ can be brought to the fore. The cosmopolitan who masters a bifocal way of seeing, bringing together the global and the local without merging or identifying them, as Ilija Trojanow describes it in his book on flight and exile (Trojanow 2017, 111), can preserve fundamental aspects of the exile experience: the imaginative quality of visions of belonging, its irreducible plurality and its dynamic character.

If displacement and movement force the refugee to reassess habits and convictions, they also, because of being in motion, challenge the truths people hold at the place of arrival. For Trojanow, estrangement is not just an existential condition, but can also be regarded as a technique that restores agency and autonomy to the exile who is otherwise extremely subjected to heteronomy (Trojanow 2017, 96). Similarly, Vilém Flusser writes about the exile experience as a challenge for creativity: the reaction to violent disconnection does not have to be a desperate wish for restitution, but can also result in an ongoing need to rid oneself of ‘roots’ which hinder movement and change. Flusser goes as far as to describe this act of freedom as a violent attack against one’s own ‘vegetative’ heritage, meaning everything that pretends to be natural and inescapable (Flusser 2007, 107). Repeating the act of cutting off can thus be a way to cope with forced separation and to transform it into a self-determined creative activity. However, the agency that Flusser, Trojanow and others envision does not imply the idea of a sovereign individual, but rather considers sub-jection and dis:connection, which accompany exile, as integral aspects of identity constitution. Here, a tendency can be discerned to draw on exile to sketch out alternative concepts of identity and cohabitation, not only on an individual level, but also in view of living together in a world endangered by political conflict, the depletion of resources and climate change.

Reflections on exile often stress the ultimate singularity and the hardships of its experience which should not be levelled by indiscriminate universalizing or metaphorizing. At the same time, it obviously invites critical thinking about categories of belonging, place-making (Dogramaci 2022) and the potential role of art and literature in conceptualizing modes of referring to the world as a shared space. To the extent that exile confronts the unavailability of a lost home and redirects energies to possible worlds without claiming to possess or control them, it is perceived as a phenomenon that helps to reassess globalism. For Svetlana Boym, nostalgia as a feeling that springs from an exile experience ‘is a feature of global culture’, but one

which challenges the features traditionally associated with globalism, especially progress (Boym 2001, XVII). If reflective nostalgia reminds us of the fatal effects of essentializing and totalizing ideas of home and explores modes of playfully distancing oneself from their traditions, it can also open the way for new conceptualizations of the global. Exile has also been associated with the global in different contexts. On the one hand, people's flight to almost all countries of the world, e.g. in response to expulsion and persecution by fascism in the 20th century, can be seen as a dispersion into globality which challenges the discursive binary of national home and exile (Bischoff 2019). Moreover, the ubiquitous and massive event of forced migration since the last century also compels us to adopt a global perspective on the phenomenon of exile as such. This is also suggested by the explicit interweaving of exile literature which, as could be seen, is reflected as part of a transnational and transhistorical corpus of texts. Finally, global exile has also been described as a condition resulting from the vanishing of distinctions and local cultures as an effect of globalisation processes (Ambrosioni 2000). When Vladimir Vertlib, himself an Austrian author of Russian origin, speaks of the 'global aspects of exile', all these perspectives obviously play a role. For him, exile, which is a central theme of his own literary and essayistic works, is a crucial experience of our time. He, like many others, considers drawing attention to the global dimensions of exile to be one of the crucial challenges of contemporary art and literature (Vertlib 2008, 60).

References

- Ambrosioni, Maria Gabriella. 2000. "Global Exile." In *Literatur im Zeitalter der Globalisierung*, edited by Manfred Schmeling, Monika Schmitz-Emans, and Kerst Walstra. Königshausen & Neumann: 261–70.
- Benteler, Anne. 2015. "Bertolt Brecht zu Besuch bei den verbannten Dichtern." *Exilograph*: 23: 10–1.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1967. *Gesammelte Gedichte. Bd. 2*, edited by Suhrkamp Verlag and Elisabeth Hauptmann. Suhrkamp.
- Bischoff, Doerte and Susanne Komfort-Hein. 2019. "Programmatische Einleitung: Literatur und Transnationalität" In *Handbuch Literatur & Transnationalität*, edited by Doerte Bischoff and Susanne Komfort-Hein. De Gruyter: 1–46: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110340532-001>.
- Bischoff, Doerte. 2019. "Globalisierung der Literatur: Literarische Reflexionen von Exil und Migration helfen, Zugehörigkeit neuzudenken." *Politik und Kultur* (6): 18.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books.
- Di Cesare, Donatella. 2021. *Philosophie der Migration*. Translated by Daniel Creutz. Matthes & Seitz.
- Dogramaci, Burcu. 2022. "Place-Making und Exil." In *Exil, Flucht, Migration. Konfligierende Begriffe, vernetzte Diskurse?*, edited by Bettina Bannasch, Doerte Bischoff, and Burcu Dogramaci. De Gruyter: 151–61.
- Feuchtwanger, Lion. 1984. "Der Schriftsteller im Exil." In *Ein Buch nur für meine Freunde*. Fischer: 533–540.
- Flusser, Vilém. 2007. *Von der Freiheit des Migranten. Einsprüche gegen den Nationalismus*. Europäische Verlagsanstalt.

- Köhler, Benedikt. 2006. *Soziologie des Neuen Kosmopolitismus*. Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. 1967. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Narloch, Sandra. 2022. "Kosmopolitismus und Exil." In *Exil, Flucht, Migration. Konfligierende Begriffe, vernetzte Diskurse?*, edited by Bettina Bannasch, Doerte Bischoff, and Burcu Dogramaci. De Gruyter: 114–123.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1992. "Imaginary Homelands." In *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*. Granta Books.
- Said, Edward W. 2000. "Reflections on Exile." In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press: 173–186.
- Seghers, Anna. 1973. "Ein Briefwechsel zwischen Anna Seghers und Georg Lukács." In *Die Expressionismusdebatte. Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*, edited by Hans-Jürgen Schmitt. Suhrkamp.
- Trojanow, Ilija. 2017. *Nach der Flucht*. Fischer.
- Ugrešić, Dubravka. 2002. "Der Schriftsteller im Exil." In *Lesen verboten*, edited by Dubravka Ugrešić. Translated by Barbara Antkowiak. Suhrkamp: 127–150.
- Vertlib, Vladimir. 2008. *Spiegel im fremden Wort. Die Erfindung des Lebens als Literatur*. Thelem.

