ARTICLE – RETHINKING MINOR LITERATURES

'dass diese tauben Geschichten aufflattern': Narrative, Translingual Creativity and Belonging in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014)

Godela Weiss-Sussex
University of London, GB
godela.weiss-sussex@sas.ac.uk

This article argues that reading Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* in the context of minor literature as a literature of deterritorialisation highlights its sense of liberation and emphasises the creation of associations – aspects that are crucial to this transnational and translingual book about retrieving memory across space and time. Going beyond the idea of a binary relationship between minor and major literature and instead focusing on rhizomatic affiliation emerges as key. A wider framework of analysis is also provided by ideas that derive from or have been developed in conjunction with Deleuze and Guattari's thinking: the idea of minor transnationalism (Françoise Lionnet, Shu-Mei Shih), the concepts of multi- and translingualism (Leslie Adelson, Steven G. Kellman) and the ethics of relationality (Sara Ahmed) and multidirectionality in postmemory discourses (Hirsch, Rothberg). Combined, these ideas prove to be useful tools for understanding Petrowskaja's handling of narrative, language and belonging in *Vielleicht Esther*.

Tweetable Abstract: Reading Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* as literature of deterritorialisation throws light on her handling of narrative, language and belonging.

Katja Petrowskaja was born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1970. She grew up speaking Russian but started learning German in her mid-twenties, moved to Berlin in 1999 and wrote her (so far only) book, *Vielleicht Esther* [Maybe Esther], in German. Published in 2014, it includes the short narrative about Petrowskaja's great-grandmother's death in Babij Jar that won her the Ingeborg Bachmann prize in 2013.

   Vielleicht Esther is neither a novel nor a memoir, though both fiction and memory play an important role; rather, it is perhaps best described as a discussion of the process of searching for, coming to terms with and finding meaning in family narrative and history. Petrowskaja retrieves facets of family history on the basis of family legends, oral history, fragments of writing (a recipe, an illegible memoir, a translated article without original), photos and, with

the help of archives and search machines, facts.[1] But her emphasis is on the memories and narratives that are triggered and mediated by these fragments, not the facts themselves.

Vielleicht Esther is an ethical undertaking, in the sense of taking on 'the "guardianship" of a traumatic personal and generational past', as Marianne Hirsch describes postmemory narratives – that is, narratives that transport the memories of previous generations (Hirsch 1). But the book is also more than that: Petrowskaja goes beyond personal, genealogical relationships, towards reflections on the translation of experience and memory per se, beyond boundaries of family or even nation.

This article explores to what extent the act of reading *Vielleicht Esther* as 'minor literature' contributes to an understanding of the text. Explicitly positioning her narrator (who can be read as an alter ego of the author) as a daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter and, indeed, mother in the text, Petrowskaja may be said to write from a minoritarian position vis-à-vis a patriarchally oriented historical context. With her attention to the stories and memories not only of her male ancestors but prominently also of her grandmothers and, of course, her eponymous great-grandmother, she is certainly adding women's voices and stories to the body of literary memorialisation of Jewishness. Rather than focusing on questions of gender, however, I shall argue in this contribution that reading *Vielleicht Esther* in the context of minor literature as a literature of deterritorialisation underlines the aspect of liberation and highlights the creation of associations that is particularly apt for the reading of this transnational and translingual book about retrieving memory across space and time, particularly if read with an emphasis on the idea of rhizomatic thinking, rather than on the binary relationship between minor and major literature. Grounded in, but going beyond Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialisation and rhizomatic thinking, the framework for my reading is informed, also, by ideas that derive from or have been developed in conjunction with their thinking: the idea of minor transnationalism (Françoise Lionnet, Shu-Mei Shih), the concepts of multi- and translingualism (Leslie Adelson, Steven G. Kellman) and the ethics of relationality (Sara Ahmed) and multidirectionality in postmemory discourses (Hirsch, Rothberg). A brief exposition of this theoretical framework, in the following paragraphs, shall prepare the ground for the exploration of Petrowskaja's text that will follow.

I

Central to deterritorialisation is the notion of an author 'in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community' (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 17), as it is this outsider position that allows the potential to imagine new ways of looking at the world ('the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility'; 17). Petrowskaja is an outsider in several respects. She is writing in a language other than the one she grew up with and through which she is addressing a readership raised and situated in a culture she has only recently joined; and she is writing to establish a relationship with a family past of which she has so far been unaware and to which she thus only marginally belongs. She is thus distancing herself from the Russian-speaking/Soviet culture she comes from, and situates herself on the margins of German-language literature as well as of the Jewish culture that forms part of her family history. The freedom of perspective that comes with this position is, as I shall show, tangible in her text.

Deterritorialisation, however, does not denote a fixed position, but a 'function' or a 'vector', as Deleuze and Guattari define it, or, more precisely: 'the movement by which "one" leaves the territory. It is the operation of the line of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 591).

---

[1] For a discussion of Petrowskaja's treatment of archival and digital research and the power structures implied, see Osborne.

The literature of deterritorialisation, consequently, harbours the potential to break with established, hegemonic, exclusive and fixed discourses, allowing instead an emphasis on process, interaction and the fluidity or erasure of boundaries. With this 'revolutionary' potential (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 18), minor literature expresses and embraces ambivalence, futurity and the notion of 'becoming' as an act of crossing borders and barriers.

The 'rhizomatic' (or 'molecular') mode of thought – as opposed to a hierarchical, linear way of structuring concepts and narratives – supports the potential inherent in literature of deterritorialisation. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the implications for writing of the thought model of the rhizome, 'the subterranean stem [that] is absolutely different from roots and radicles', as follows: 'the tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance' (Deleuze & Guattari 2013, 5 and 26). Rhizomatic literary narratives eschew binary logic and hierarchical, linear structures; instead, they embrace multiplicity and 'establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings' (27).

On the basis of this thinking, Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih rightly suggest that, for conceptualising transnational literature, the lateral and non-hierarchical network structures of the rhizome are more important than the aspect of the '["minor's"] critical function within and against the major in a binary and vertical relationship' (Lionnet & Shih 2). What is crucial is the act of border crossing, the 'exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur' (5), in particular as the connections that arise can contribute to cultural expression that bypasses the centre and thus sideline the major/minor binary, toning down discourses of dominance and resistance. With the emphasis thus shifted from the original concept proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in their book on Kafka – and very much in keeping with the philosophers' later works – minor transnationality is, for Lionnet and Shih, crucially about creating 'new literacies […] in non-standard languages, tonalities and rhythms' (8).

These new literacies and non-linear modes of narrative lend themselves to being expressed through the practice of multilingual or translingual writing, writing that uses the interplay of languages to express and support the porosity and openness to contact and influence. Where multilingual texts can open up a space for 'touching tales', drawing out the 'proximate' character of different cultural viewpoints,[2] the notion of the translingual focuses more on the process of moving between and across languages and on the hybridity of identity of the speaker/writer. As Rosi Braidotti, following Deleuze and Guattari, points out, the writer 'who is in transit between the languages, neither here nor there, is capable of some healthy scepticism about steady identities and mother tongues' (Braidotti 1994, 39).

Beyond the expression of 'transit' between or hybridities of languages, the other two aspects that Deleuze and Guattari highlight as central to 'minor literature' are its political immediacy and its character of collective enunciation. Both of these aspects are inextricably linked to questions of belonging, as we need to ask on behalf of – or in view of – what collective political positions are taken or projections are made. Where steady identities and fixed boundaries or, indeed, territorially based concepts of *Heimat* [the idea of home] are questioned, a global connectedness can be projected that can find expression both in the imagination of present and future communities and in acts of remembrance of the past (both, as I will show, are the case in Petrowskaja's text). Spanning differences of space and time, this sense of connectedness is rooted in the ethics of relationality, which Sara Ahmed has theorised as focusing on the importance of specificity and the mode of encounter, and

---

[2] See Leslie A. Adelson, 'Touching Tales of Turks, Germans, and Jews: Cultural Alterity, Historical Narrative, and Literary Riddles for the 1990s', *New German Critique*, 80, Special Issue on the Holocaust (Spring–Summer 2000): 93–124 (p. 98).

is particularly suited to recognising and building relationships and new communities or 'collectives' across diversity and alterity. Ultimately, '[t]hinking about how we might work with, and speak to, others or how we might inhabit the world with others, involves imagining a different form of political community, one that moves beyond the opposition between common and uncommon, between friends and strangers, or between sameness and difference' (Ahmed 180). Literature, as Amir Eshel posits in his definition of 'futurity', opens up the spaces for precisely these imaginations: it is the 'potential of literature' he writes, 'to widen the language […] we employ in making sense of what has occurred while imagining whom [*sic*] we may become' (Eshel 5).

In the particular realm of Holocaust postmemory writing, the conceptualisation of collectivities links with Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory and a mode of memorialisation that argues for breaking down 'binary oppositions between history and memory or the real and the artificial' (Rothberg 2010, 4). This non-binary process has been developed and discussed extensively under designations such as prosthetic memory (Landsberg), affiliation (Hirsch) or implication (Rothberg).[3] Rothberg, for instance, explicitly linking his concept of 'nœuds de mémoire' to Deleuze and Guattari's mode of rhizomatic thinking as enabling deterritorialisation and identitarian reduction, suggests the benefit of focusing on '"knotted intersections" of history and memory that cut across categories of national and ethnic identity, institutions of knowledge-production, nation-states' (Rothberg 2010, 8) – an approach that is certainly pertinent to a text as intent on transcending boundaries as *Vielleicht Esther*.

Recurring to the framework sketched out so far, my analysis of Petrowskaja's text as 'minor literature' will focus on the three central areas of narrative, language and belonging. I aim to show how the author not only presents a network of narrative rather than a one-strand linear tale, but also challenges the hegemony of fact by complementing it with fiction, before exploring the multi- and translingual language use in the text as practices of association, connection, breaking up and reconstituting of meaning, and showing how concepts of belonging are expanded, beyond any bounded family or ethnic group, into a network of global connectedness.

II

What is immediately striking on reading *Vielleicht Esther* is that, tracing Petrowskaja's own journey into her family history in the voice of a first-person narrator, the text presents and accommodates a narrative with multiple strands, which reflects, sounds out and ultimately embraces incoherencies and contradictions. One example of this is the story of the ficus plant that may (or may not) have played a crucial role in the family history. Preparing to flee Kiev before the invasion of the German army in August 1941, a truck is loaded with the family's most important possessions. A ficus plant in its pot that had been placed on the truck in the confusion is unloaded again at the last minute, in order to make room for the boy who was to grow up to become the narrator's father. Having been told this story in her childhood, the narrator has always concluded: 'Diesem Fikus verdanke ich mein Leben' [I owe my life to this ficus].[4] However, when the father eventually comes to writing down his memories of the evacuation, he does not mention the ficus at all and when asked about it does not even remember its existence.

---

[3] See Maria Roca Lizarazu's in-depth discussion of *Vielleicht Esther* in terms of these concepts, in which she explains how Petrowskaja extends the concept of implication beyond family ties (Roca Lizarazu 2018).

[4] Petrowskaja, Katja. *Vielleicht Esther. Geschichten.* Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015, p. 217. From here on, this text will be referenced with the abbreviation *VE*. English quotations are taken from Shelley Frisch's translation (Petrowskaja 2018), referenced as *ME*, unless otherwise marked.

After her initial shock at the recognition that this 'founding myth' of her existence is not a shared memory, the narrator comes to accept the plurality of memories – and retains her view of the ficus as the lynchpin of the family narrative, which is multi-stranded and woven together from different perspectives ('die Hauptfigur […] meiner Familiengeschichte' (*VE*, 219) [the main character in the history (…) of my family (*ME*, 195)]. Rather than discounting or discarding 'competitive memories', a phrase coined by Michael Rothberg, to indicate the concept of different memories as 'based on the logic of the zero-sum game' (Rothberg 2014, 176), Petrowskaja presents and accepts a polyphony of memories formed through a plurality of consciousnesses and varying with time and with each telling.[5]

This is more than polyphonic writing in the Bakhtinian sense, though, more than the constitution of text through the juxtaposition of various voices. It is a sign of accepting the act of remembering as a joint undertaking, in which truth is not necessarily the aim and harmony is not of the essence, but instead, plurality can be accepted as uncertainty. Petrowskaja is here transcending the linear mode of thinking, foregrounding instead a rhizomatic and relational approach.

Connected to this acceptance of a plurality of memories is the understanding of fiction as a complementary – and, indeed, at times superior – element in the construction of the family narrative: 'Manchmal ist es gerade die Prise Dichtung, welche die Erinnerung wahrheitsgetreu macht' (*VE*, 219) [Sometimes that pinch of poetry is the very thing that makes memory truth (*ME*, 195)], the narrator's father ruminates. He gives this Aristotelian concept of narrative verisimilitude precedence over mere fact as it yields 'mehr […] als eine penibel geführte Bestandsaufnahme' (*VE*, 219) [more than a painstaking inventory (*ME*, 195)]. Misremembered facts give insight into the person's mind, and fiction is thus – to use Aristotle's words – 'more philosophical […] than history' (Aristotle 28). In a mental somersault that is far less absurd than it sounds, the narrator concludes: 'es könnte sich herausstellen, dass wir unser Leben einer Fiktion verdanken' (*VE*, 220) [it could turn out – that we owe our life to a fiction (*ME*, 196)], thus emphasising the character of her narrative as a pluralistic tale of possibilities and contingencies.[6]

Linked to the idea of rhizomatic thinking, this mode of narrative that varies between fact and fiction is an instance of what Braidotti, using another biological concept, calls 'transposition'. 'It indicates', she explains, 'an intertextual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another […]. It is not just a matter of weaving together different strands, variations, on a theme […] but rather of playing the positivity of difference as a specific theme of its own. […] Transposition is a scientific theory that stresses the experience of creative insight in engendering other, alternative ways of knowing' (Braidotti 2006, 5–6).

Narrative, Petrowskaja shows, is a powerful tool for engendering insights for the generation that was born 'too late' to have any first-hand memories of the Second World War and of family history before the war ('dass es nichts mehr zu zeigen gibt, nur zu erzählen', *VE*, 191 [there was nothing more to show – only to tell, *ME*, 170]), for beyond the narration of memories as the only way of keeping them alive, narrative also has a more creative function: it allows

---

[5] Additionally, see Dora Osborne's interpretation of the ficus as a 'fig leaf' that 'covers over […] the shameful possibility that the father might literally, or metonymically, have been given his place on the ark in exchange for someone else', someone who then died in Babij Jar (Osborne 267–8).

[6] Petrowskaja's search for 'die letzten Erzähler' (Petrowskaja 222) is in this sense reminiscent of Wim Wenders's figure of Homer in his film *Der Himmel über Berlin*. Interestingly, Petrowskaja mentions this film in an interview, explaining her original attraction to Berlin in the 1990s and referring to the importance of narrative, personified by Curt Bois's Homer figure, who endows the pre-unification Potsdamer Platz, an empty space in which the scars of the war were still visible, with meaning and memory. Petrowskaja highlights the attraction of such 'Brachstellen' [urban fallow land] as free spaces, undefined, unclaimed and promising potential and futurity. See Böttiger.

the listener to continue to develop and evolve the family narratives. The cognitive activity of the listener is 'imaginative investment, projection and creation' (Hirsch 5). Members of the postmemory generation create their own narratives. Indeed, it might be argued that only fiction can maintain the openness and multiplicity of meanings needed to bridge the divides of space and time that separate us from the people and the events we want to remember and commemorate.

Petrowskaja's story of the ficus exemplifies this, but we see it even more clearly in her telling of the fate of her great-grandmother, whose name was – perhaps – Esther. 'Vielleicht Esther', as the narrator keeps calling her to draw attention to the unreliability of memory, had been left behind in Kiev in 1941 after the departure of the rest of the family; on 29 September 1941 she followed an 'Aufruf an Alle Juden in der Stadt' [summons to All Jews in the city] to assemble at the ravine of Babij Jar – and was shot along with thousands of other Jewish inhabitants of the city. In the absence of witnesses and testimonies to this event, the narrator imagines her great-grandmother's fateful last walk, bringing details to life, providing possible explanations, drawing out the affective power of the narrative and inviting the reader's empathy. She makes sure, in her own words, 'dass diese tauben Geschichten aufflattern […] und anfangen zu leben' (*VE*, 52) [(that) these deaf stories (…) flutter up and take on a life of their own (*ME*, 44)].

Shifting focus between her great-grandmother and her own writing experience, and even explicitly addressing and including the reader, Petrowskaja emphasises the process of text production as a joint undertaking. She presents us with a double narrative: discussion of the value of fiction, exemplified by the family myth of the ficus plant, interrupts the narration of Esther's fateful last walk. At the same time as bringing the story of her great-grandmother to life, she reflects on the process of doing so. This honest and thoughtful approach supports the understanding of this act of creative narration (or fiction) as an attempt to elicit empathy, that is, to 'live with', 'feel with', to 'imagine the sensation of being in that situation', if we follow Steven Pinker's definition (Pinker 860). Empathy is posited here not as an alternative to knowledge of historical circumstance, or as an imposition of the reader's sentiments on those of the protagonist, but as a deepening of understanding through affective involvement, and thus as a political act.[7]

In an attempt to experience Esther's sensation of being in Babij Jar on 29 September 1941, Petrowskaja imagines her protagonist's thoughts and speech: her reaction to the 'Aufruf' [summons] ('Wenn Alle, dann Alle, sagte sie sich, als ob es eine Ehrensache wäre', *VE*, 211 [If All, then All, she said to herself, as though it was a matter of honor, *ME*, 188]) and her exchange of words with a German officer who (may have) shot her. Here, a paragraph is rendered in Yiddish, in quotation marks indicating direct speech, which allows the reader a sense of unmediated closeness.

Gabriele Eckart, in her study of multilingualism in *Vielleicht Esther*, points to the importance of code-switching for the definition of identity and to the potential of bringing characters to life through writing in – what is assumed to be – their own idiom (see Eckart). This is particularly poignant in Petrowskaja's use of Yiddish in this passage, as the author imagines how Esther may have spoken in a muddled German-Yiddish idiom to a German officer, in the belief she was speaking perfect German – only to be shot immediately and routinely. However, Petrowskaja holds a balance here between empathic closeness and rational distance. As the conversation is very clearly fictional – and deliberately framed as such – Esther's hybrid

---

[7] In this sense, the concept of empathy has been used, for instance, by Ann Russo, *Taking Back Our Lives: A Call to Action for the Feminist Movement* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001). For a reading of *Vielleicht Esther* in the context of affect theory, see Bühler-Dietrich.

Yiddish-German underlines not the 'authenticity' of the situation (a term that would in any case contradict Petrowskaja's embracing of the system of interplay between fact and fiction), but constitutes an explicit reminder of the task of fiction to provide the dead with a voice of their own and thus restore their individuality and personal dignity.[8] The ethical aspect of this reflective approach is evident and Petrowskaja's mode of 'subjunctive remembering' also 'prevents the appropriation of someone else's experience' (Roca Lizarazu forthcoming). There is no pretence at omniscience here; the author is aware of the futility of the attempt to get near. Rather, she is highlighting the process, the work of empathy, asking questions, debating with herself, correcting the narrative she is constructing: 'Obwohl, nein' (*VE*, 211) [Come to think of it, though (*ME*, 188)]; 'Oder nein, nein' (*VE*, 221) [Or no, no (*ME*, 196)]. The effect is one of distancation, but not of alienation, as a second level of empathic relationship is established: a bond of understanding between the reader and the author-narrator, as we are given access to the author-narrator's attempts to really 'see' what happened.

These attempts at grasping the historical reality are ultimately futile; even though the narrator is the creator of the scene ('Ich beobachte diese Szene wie Gott aus dem Fenster des gegenüberliegenden Hauses' [I observed this scene like God out of the window of the building across the street]) she has to acknowledge: 'Ich sehe die Gesichter nicht, verstehe nicht, und die Geschichtsbücher schweigen' (*VE*, 221) [I don't see their faces, don't understand, and the history books maintain their silence (*ME*, 196)]. She focuses, instead, on the process of building a narrative, while still allowing for other possibilities in the narrative flow – and on making explicit the active work of empathy and of remembering, which goes beyond an understanding of the facts and takes the form of embodied experience. At one point, Petrowskaja reaches out and includes the reader in the creative practice of empathy through narration: '[Esther] ging zu ihnen', she writes, 'aber wie lange dauerte dieses *ging*? Hier folge jeder seinem eigenen Atem' (*VE*, 212) [She walked to them, but how long did this *walked* take? Here each and every one must follow his own breath (*ME*, 189)]. Instead of providing (or imposing) a single 'master story', the author invites multiple interpretations; she acknowledges difference and works with it, keeping individual experiences in abeyance rather than seeking to combine them into a unified experience. This is an instance of a collectivity being encouraged – in Sara Ahmed's terms – across diversity and alterity, by moving beyond any conceptualisation of 'them' as a sign of difference, through what Ahmed terms 'closer encounters', that is, 'encounters with those who are "other than the other" or "the stranger"'. 'In such acts of getting closer, of speaking to each other', in such 'acts of alignment (rather than merger)', Ahmed continues, 'we can reshape the very bodily form of the community, as a community that is yet to come' (Ahmed 180).

The narrative approach, then, that Petrowskaja uses in *Vielleicht Esther* frees the text from a linear account of the search for truth through several – related – strategies: the intertwining of historical fact and fiction, of narration and authorial self-reflection, and the advocacy of empathy and individual embodied understanding. The effect is an openness, which, through undermining definitions, barriers and binary delineations, allows the reader to understand – and even be part of – the construction of narrative, meaning and memory.

The book's structure supports its character as an open, additive and potentially non-finite text: rather than a novel or a family chronicle, we are presented with 'Geschichten' [stories/histories], the subtitle insists.[9] These 'stories' are framed by short sections functioning as preface and postscript ('Google sei Dank' [Thank Google] und 'Kreuzung' [Intersections]),

---

[8] At the same time, the author also makes a point about the dangers of hybridity, in an environment that punishes hybridity by death.

[9] The subtitle is not included in the American edition. The translation is my own.

but the focus on characters, time and place in the stories within this framework creates the impression of a mosaic, a series of reports from a quest that is not completed. Cohesion is provided by the self-conscious reference to this quest, by an emphasis, throughout, on connections between the individual stories, and the balance provided between 'Leben, Überleben und Tod' [life, survival and death] (Bühler-Dietrich 238), but the mode is essentially one of association, of a scepticism towards linearity and a resistance to the illusions of totality of grand narratives.

III

Petrowskaja's use of language supports her mode of narration in crucial ways. Two previously quoted sentences – 'dass diese tauben Geschichten aufflattern' and 'aber wie lange dauerte dieses *ging*?' – make evident what the writing rests on: the questioning and creative, associative handling of language: homonyms lead to powerful images ('taube[…] Geschichten'); and the refusal to accept the glib use of words that hide more than they reveal ('ging') stops the reader in their tracks.

'[A] fluid language', Deleuze and Guattari explain with reference to the German language in Czechoslovakia, a 'language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish, will allow Kafka the possibility of invention' (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 20). The same fluidity characterises the German of the language learner Petrowskaja, and she takes advantage of the potential for creative freedom this affords. At times, her inventiveness is merely playful ('Ich war auf den Fikus fixiert, ich war fikussiert', *VE*, 219 [I was fixated on that ficus, I was ficusated, *ME*, 194]), but in other instances, it can carry highly evocative multiple layers of meaning. The word 'Familienbaum', for instance, used instead of 'Stammbaum' (the correct German word for 'family tree'), is here imagined as 'so etwas wie ein Tannenbaum' (*VE*, 17) [something like a Christmas tree (*ME*, 11)] – a word most often used to denote a cultural icon around which the family gathers and celebrates its togetherness (as Christmas tree, as *yolka*, the Russian New year tree, or even as the North American Hanukkah bush). The reference to a tree that is (literally) uprooted and dead may also infer a degree of loss and displacement, but most significantly, it makes room for a more active and fluid constitution of family and family history than the 'Stammbaum' allows. For the narrator expresses the hope that the 'Familienbaum' (*VE*, 25) [family tree (*ME*, 18)] might be made to blossom again through the narration of family stories and the reconstitution of memories of dead or lost family members. More than that, referring to family members who, floating in mid-air rather than grounded in the earth, get entangled in this tree, she frees the idea of family membership from that of the rooted and fixed inscription of a particular place in the family genealogy, as suggested by the concept of the 'Stamm' [trunk], evoking the possibility of family affiliation that resists the necessity to be tied down and rather grants freedom of motion and suspension of identitarian belonging: 'Andere waren wie vom Himmel gefallen, sie schlugen keine Wurzeln, sie liefen hin und her, kaum die Erde berührend, und blieben in der Luft wie eine Frage, wie ein Fallschirmspringer, der sich im Baum verfängt' (*VE*, 17) [Others seemed to have come out of nowhere; they did not put down roots, they ran back and forth, barely touching the ground, and hung in the air like a question, like a skydiver caught in a tree (*ME*, 11)]. The principle of rhizomatic affiliation, of an associative way of thinking, narrating and constructing one's world that replaces 'arborescent' linearity (Deleuze & Guattari 2013, 15), is here extended, through the neologism of the 'Familienbaum', into a compelling image of an innovative concept of familial belonging.

The formation of new concepts through interrogation of a metaphor (here that of the tree) that native speakers take for granted is possible when language is understood to be malleable, is tested for its literal meaning and used as a springboard for associative images. With

the meta-linguistic awareness that is so characteristic of translingual writers,[10] Petrowskaja probes language, creating an effect of alienation, making the world 'unfamiliar'. Not taking any word or phrase for granted, she uncovers the multiple or literal meanings of words and phrases, and forges new intellectual and affective connections, be this in a grand historical context and clichéd memory discourse or in everyday conversations. Her use of the location name Oświęcim, for instance, instead of 'Auschwitz', conveys her resistance to the formulaic. As Aleida Assmann has called for regarding any writing on Auschwitz, Petrowskaja recognises the necessity to break up 'die formelhaft verfestigte Bedeutung des Namens' [the formula-like fixed meaning of a name] and to make the place available again for true 'Erinnerungsarbeit' [memory work] (Assmann 329).

On a much smaller scale, Petrowskaja's probing of the word 'Glück' in the context of Holocaust research startles the reader, as it so evocatively differentiates the data search from the act of empathic remembrance: 'Sie haben Glück' [You're in luck], the archivist at the Jewish Genealogy & Heritage Center, Warsaw, says, referring to having found a photo of the narrator's family's house in the Warsaw Ghetto before the city's destruction in the Second World War. 'Was für ein Glück?' (*VE*, 109) [What sort of luck? (*ME*, 95)], she asks back, thinking of her family's fate as part of the murdered thousands in Warsaw.

Exposing language in its components and structures, by stripping utterances from their habitual mainstream usage and thus pointing out the actual meaning of generally unquestioned phrases, is a way of deterritorialising language. This can be read as a political act of resistance and as a way of reappropriating language to actively and consciously forge more direct and meaningful ways of thinking and communicating.

Petrowskaja reminds us that language is an arbitrary system, the questioning of which can amount to a questioning of boundaries, linguistic as well as conceptual. As a translingual writer – a polyglot – she has access to a mode of writing that 'is about disengaging the sedentary nature of words, destabilizing common sensical meanings, deconstructing established forms of consciousness' (Braidotti 1994, 43 and 44). Most importantly, though, her meta-linguistic awareness opens the way to a different mode of thinking: that of associative connections, rather than of rational linearity – thinking that, through its direct access to the subconscious, allows for new connections and perspectives, for contingencies rather than fact-based 'truths', thinking that is appropriate for piecing together a multi-perspective puzzle rather than following a one-strand narrative.

Petrowskaja's associative thinking often transcends language barriers; her translingual word associations, playful though they may seem, provide genuinely new perspectives. This is the case in the following associative series of words: 'Polen, Polyn, Polonia, Polania, po-lan-ja, hier-wohnt-Gott, drei hebräische Wörter, die aus dem slawischen Polen ein gelobtes Land der Juden machten' (*VE*, 55) [Poland, Polyn, Polonia, *po-lan-ya*, here-lives-God, three Hebrew words that made a Promised Land for the Jews out of the Slavic Poland (*ME*, 47)]. Here, near-homophones are allocated new meaning through a process of 're-reading bilingually'[11] – or 'listening bilingually'; for the basis is not the written sequence of letters but the phonetic shape of the words. By thus freeing words from monolingual boundaries, de-functionalising them,[12] accidental connections are made (or discovered), which may lead to new insights or to the expression of new affective and intellectual connections.

---

[10] See Steven Kellman's contention that translingual sensibility 'embodies and awareness of both the power and the limitations of its own verbal medium' (Kellman 2015, 6).

[11] Yasemin Yildiz describes this strategy in reference to Yoko Tawada's work (Yildiz 134).

[12] In an interview with *Der Standard*, Petrowskaja speaks of 'eine Entfremdung von Funktionalität' [an alienation from functionality], based on sound associations, 'weil die Welt klingt und die Sprache schmeckt' [because the world resonates and language tastes] (Petrowskaja 2015).

Two examples are particularly powerful in this respect: when, in a nightmarish half-awake stream-of-consciousness sequence after a performative 'casting' for a documentary on a film on the Warsaw ghetto, the words 'schau' [show] and 'scheu' [shy] keep sliding into the Hebrew 'shoa' (*VE*, 117–18; *ME*, 102–3), Petrowskaja shows how translingual boundary-crossing can provide access to trauma. In another instance, using the 'multilingualizing estrangement of literal translation' (Yildiz 148), the author muses on the phrase 'Hast du nicht alle zu Hause' (*VE*, 21) [Don't you have them all at home (*ME*, 15)], a literal translation of the Russian expression for 'Hast du nicht alle Tassen im Schrank?' [Have you lost your marbles], thus making the link, by association, between mental disturbance and loss of family members.

As Kafka, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, sees Yiddish 'less as a sort of linguistic territoriality for the Jews than as a nomadic movement of deterritorialization that reworks German language' (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 25), so Petrowskaja uses the flexibility and openness of the German language which, to her, is not over-familiar and unquestioned, but still experienced as a new encounter; she listens to it, weighs and evaluates it, and reserves for herself the right to free it from the bounds of fixed and defined meaning. As she is keen to point out, she is not controlling language, not 'playing with words', but is instead 'led by the language', open to it and showing where the act of listening without preconceptions can lead (Petrowskaja 2019).

But the translingual language use also contributes to the pluralistic, multi-perspective view of the world conveyed in *Vielleicht Esther*.[13] As Steven Kellman puts it: translingualism makes it possible to 'simultaneously view the incompatible perspectives of an M.C. Escher visual puzzle' (Kellman 2000, 34). When the narrator describes her (Ukrainian) father's mourning for Poland as a process of translation, for instance, language becomes a metaphor for affective experience and multilingualism enables transnational empathy.

> Mein Vater, ein Kriegskind, ein Angehöriger des auserwählten Volkes, das in seiner Stadt Kiew, vor allem aber in Polen, fast vollzählig ermordet worden war, trauerte großherzig um Polen […]. Die polnische Tragödie schmerzte ihn, als dürfe er das Eigene nur im Schmerz der anderen erkennen, in einer Art Übersetzung. (*VE*, 92–93)

> [My father was a child of the war, one of the Chosen people, nearly all of whom had been murdered in his city of Kiev, and even more in Poland, yet he forgivingly grieved for Poland (…). He regarded the Polish tragedy as a source of anguish, as though he could fathom his own pain only in the pain of others, in an act of translation. (*ME*, 80)]

Obversely, mis-translation destroys the truth and denies the subject humane treatment: when Jeguda is mis-translated as 'Judas' ('Judas ist die deutsche Übersetzung, ein fataler Fehler, denn so hieß der Verräter von Jesus, niemand sonst', *VE*, 156 [it was written as Judas in German, a fatal error, because that was the name of the one who betrayed Jesus, no-one else carried this name],[14] the hapless bearer of the name is condemned to death as a traitor without a fair hearing.

Language, then, denotes care, relationality – and translation and heteroglossia afford access to different perspectives. This has implications for the translingual narrator's identity, which is described, in almost Deleuzian terms, not as static, not even as situational or

---

[13] Indeed, Andree Michaelis-König, who analyses the functions of different languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Russian and Greek) in *Vielleicht Esther*, reads the book as a mediation between Petrowskaja's Jewish heritage, her 'Russian-oriented past and her European-centred present'. Andree Michaelis-König, 'Multilingualism and Jewishness in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*', in Katja Garloff and Agnes Mueller (eds), *German Jewish Literature After 1990*. Camden House, 2018, pp. 146–66.

[14] My translation, I am diverting here from Shelley Frisch's version.

as a result of self-conscious positioning, but as a movement: 'Ich hatte das Glück, mich in der Kluft der Sprachen, im Tausch, in der Verwechslung von Rollen und Blickwinkeln zu bewegen' (*VE*, 115) [I was lucky to be able to move in that space between languages, swapping words and switching roles and viewpoints (*ME*, 100)].[15] Petrowskaja is careful not to get carried away with an unthinkingly celebratory attitude towards migrant identity; she describes the ambivalence of the in-between, the oscillation between 'Verlorenheit' (*VE*, 61) [having lost one's way] and the 'Glück' [luck] of the flexible state of the between-ness with great honesty, but predominant is the sense of a self-determined freedom and a pluralistic perspective that comes with a lack of rootedness.[16]

The narrator's family, which is spread across the Ukraine, Poland and Austria, is rooted not in place but in their professions and endeavours; and the words Petrowskaja chooses to describe the driving force of their ambitions – 'in dem hellen, aber nie ausgesprochenen Glauben, sie würden die Welt reparieren' (*VE*, 17) [in the unswerving, implicit belief that they would fix the world (*ME*, 11)] – imply a rootedness, too, in the Jewish tradition of 'tik-kun olam', the religiously anchored sense of social responsibility.[17] When Petrowskaja thus constructs an image of her family in free movement – 'sie fliegen Richtung morgen, parallel zu Zeit und Raum, manchmal quer dazu, der eigenen Flugbahn folgend und den weisen und strengen Büchern, die wir nie verstehen werden' (*VE*, 56) [they fly toward tomorrow, parallel to time and space, sometimes crosswise, following their own trajectory and the wise and stern books that we will never understand (*ME*, 47)] – there is a clear and close relationship to be seen between her imagery and the associative images by Marc Chagall, the painter of East European Jewry as a people following their spiritual and literary heritage, and not aligned with space and time.

Rather than the spatially rooted and stationary concept of *Heimat*, the reference point for the family identity is that of learning, books, words, language: the narrator's ancestors are characterised as 'die Sprachgetriebenen' (*VE*, 55) [those driven by language (*ME*, 47)]. Indeed, for generations they have worked as teachers for deaf-mute children. Hers is thus a genealogy of providers of a voice to others while experiencing problems of speaking for themselves. The narrator, who feels the loss of not having been told about her Jewish history in her youth, sees her exploration and telling of the family history as alignment with the family lineage, describing herself as 'Nachkommin der Kämpfer gegen die Stummheit' (*VE*, 101) [a descendant of battlers against muteness (*ME*, 88)]. 'Stummheit' can here clearly be read metaphorically as well as literally, as Petrowskaja explores the parallels between deaf-muteness and the Jewish experience of oppression.

But 'Stummheit' is also associated with the German language, as the Russian word for 'German', 'nemeckij', originally meant both 'mute' and 'foreign' (i.e. unable to express oneself in Russian). Indeed, Petrowskaja writes: 'Deutsch, *nemeckij*, ist im Russischen die Sprache der Stummen' (*VE*, 79) [German, *nemetskiy*, is in Russian the language of the mute (*ME*, 68)]. Writing this book in German, therefore, has a particular resonance with her family history. Beyond that, however, the choice of German is also of significance for Petrowskaja's construction of belonging. For *not* writing this book in her mother tongue, Russian, allows her to liberate herself from the Russian hegemonic nationalistic discourse, in which Russians emerge

---

[15] Petrowskaja expands her questioning of fixity to the concept of place, too, raising the question of whether a place like Babij Jar can be conceived as one and the same place before and after the murder of thousands of innocent victims: 'Bleibt ein Ort derselbe Ort […]?' (*VE*, 183–4) [Does a place stay the same place […]? (*ME*, 164)].

[16] As the author confirms in an interview: 'Für jede Freiheit bezahlt man. Man ist ein bisschen überall und nirgendwo zu Hause' [You pay for your freedom. To a certain extent you are at home everywhere and nowhere] (Petrowskaja 2015).

[17] I am grateful to Maria Roca Lizarazu for pointing this out.

as victors only, with no room for guilt towards oppressed ethnic minorities or oppositional groups.[18] Petrowskaja's choice to write in German, in the language of the enemy, means to resist and to complicate the picture: for it is a step, too, in overcoming the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims, and in creating a common history of suffering, one that is based on the experience of the Second World War as 'eine gemeinsame Antike' [a shared Antiquity] for all participating nations (Timm 2013).

In contrast to Russian, the German language connotes innocence for Petrowskaja: 'Deutsch ist für mich ein Mittel geworden, um wieder Kind zu sein, ganz unschuldig auf die Dinge zu blicken, Gewalt nicht zu akzeptieren' [German has become a means for me to be a child again, to look entirely innocently at things, not to accept violence] (Petrowskaja 2015). She is echoing a point here that has been made time and again by translingual writers; Julia Kristeva has remarked that for her, 'the new language is a pretext for rebirth: new identity, new hope' (Kristeva 287), and Steven Kellman, in *The Translingual Imagination*, describes the creation of a new voice through the use of a new language as 'the invention of a new self' and 'a form of self-begetting' (Kellman 2000, 20 and 21). Petrowskaja seems to agree with this when she writes: 'Mein Deutsch, […] die Sprache des Feindes, war ein Ausweg, ein zweites Leben, eine Liebe, die nicht vergeht, weil man sie nie erreicht' (*VE*, 80) [My German, (…) the language of the enemy, was an outlet, a second life, a love that does not leave if it does not get (*ME*, 69)]. But, in keeping with her resistance to linearity and the logic of singularity, writing in the new language is for her not a sign of a single newly assumed identity; rather, it is a conscious choice of expressing herself as a 'stranger' in the language, and of indicating a sense of hybridity and balance between a number of identitarian facets. 'Gemeinsam schufen wir, mein Bruder und ich, durch diese Sprachen ein Gleichgewicht gegenüber unserer Herkunft' (*VE*, 78) [With these languages, my brother and I together balanced out our provenance (*ME*, 67)], the narrator explains, referring to the fact that her brother learned Hebrew when she took up German.

Agency and the choice of self-positioning are emphasised here, but in a self-aware and self-confident way, one that is not triumphalist. Petrowskaja thus reveals a thoughtful approach, an ambivalence, and a certain doubt as to how far this choice is actually open. She expresses this doubt in the metaphor of language as camouflage, hinting at the concept of 'passing' (see Schoenfeld 2014): 'obwohl ich mich immer wie in einer Männersauna fühle, getarnt mit meiner deutschen Sprache, alle denken, ich gehöre dazu, dabei bin ich nicht von hier' (*VE*, 116) [although I always feel although I'm in a men's sauna, camouflaged by my use of the German language; everyone thinks I belong even though I'm not from here (*ME*, 101)]. And yet, in spite of all reservations, there is a clear decision to adopt – with the translingual writing process – an identitarian position that is located not within the narrow confines of one or the other identity, but rather across all divides and thus open to transnational and transcultural affiliation.

Petrowskaja's openness to extended and multiple affiliations is expressed through her referencing of several tiers of belonging. She does not deny the existence of national structures and boundaries, rather her writing shows a great affinity with minor transnationality, as conceived by Lionnet and Shih: she 'points towards and makes visible the multiple relations between the national and the transnational' (Lionnet & Shih 8).

Firstly, the narrator does reference her regional and national belonging: she speaks of Kiev as 'meine Stadt' [my city]; and uses 'bei uns' [back home] to indicate 'in the Ukraine' (*VE*, 31; *ME*, 23). But she also recalls how, from childhood on, she has been aware of a wider sense of

---

[18] See Petrowskaja 2015. Similarly, in an interview with Deutsche Welle, she explains: 'Wenn man über diese Zeit auf Russisch schreibt, ist man unweigerlich in einem moralischen Diskurs von Sieg und Opferbereitschaft gefangen' [Writing about this period in Russian, you are inescapably embroiled in a moral discourse of victory and sacrifice] (Heimann 2013).

belonging: namely to Europe. The link was initially created through the Italian street name of her address in Kiev: she used to live in Uliza Florenzii, but letters sent mistakenly to Uliza Venezii also arrived (see *VE*, 40 and 43).

The sense of a European identity is then reinforced more explicitly in her definition of the diaspora Jews as 'letzte[…] Europäer' [the last Europeans], a 'Hypothese' founded on the thought that, 'schließlich haben sie alles gelesen, was Europa ausmacht' (*VE*, 31) [(they had), after all, read everything that constitutes Europe (*ME*, 23–4)]. Belonging is again based on knowledge here, on books, the transmission through speaking and writing, and thus links up with the idea of the 'Sprachgetriebenen'.

Beyond the European affiliation, language, words, in this case a family name, also provide access to global connectedness: exploring the semantic possibilities inherent in the name of one of her family branches – 'Stern' – the narrator links it to the five-pointed star of the Soviet Union and the six-pointed star of David, and expands its meaning even wider: 'Jeder Stern schien mir ein geheimer Verwandter zu sein, auch die am Himmel' (*VE*, 75 and 27) [every Stern, every star, seemed like a secret relative, even those in the sky].[19]

This expression of global belonging and the transcending of identitarian boundaries emerges as one of the motivating factors for the writing of this book. For well beyond writing a family history, Petrowskaja wants to spell out the relevance of this history to the 'abstrakter Mensch', the 'Mensch an sich' (*VE*, 184) [person in the abstract, person per se (*ME*, 164)], rather than only the descendants of the Jewish victims.[20] In this sense, she sees her book as 'mein friedlicher Feldzug, mein Weg, eine Umkehrung für einen tiefsitzenden Diskurs der Kulturen zu finden' [my peaceful campaign, my way of finding a new direction for the deeply engrained discourse of cultures] (Petrowskaja 2015).

Transnational relationality is foregrounded here in a spatial sense, as connectedness and dialogue between cultures, but in other instances the author-narrator also emphasises the need to recognise connectivity across time. On a visit to the concentration camp Mauthausen, she points out the acuity of the place's history for contemporary ethical and political thinking, stretching its significance spatially and temporally: 'Ich werde nicht in die Vergangenheit katapultiert. Es passiert jetzt. Wann, wo und mit wem es passiert, spielt keine Rolle' (*VE*, 248) [I am not being catapulted into the past. It's happening now. When, where, and with whom it happens is not the issue] (*ME*, 220). She is urging, in other words, the 'interaction of different historical memories' that Michael Rothberg has termed 'multidirectional memory'. Rothberg defines this practice as a 'productive intercultural dynamic' that sees memory discourses as 'ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing', as this allows the consciousness of Holocaust memory to interact with and raise consciousness of the memory of other genocides and persecution elsewhere (Rothberg 2009, 3). As Thomas Weitin remarked on Wladimir Kaminer, another Russo-Jewish German author writing in German: 'Solches Erzählen arbeitet an einem kulturellen Gedächtnis, das die Vergangenheit nicht traditionell, sondern offensiv gegenwartsbezogen erinnert und gerade dadurch erinnerungspolitisch wirken kann' [This kind of narrative contributes to a cultural memory that commemorates the past not in a traditional but in an offensively present-related way and that, consequently, can have an impact on the politics of memory] (Weitin 216).

This concept of memorialisation is underpinned by an emphasis on the fluidity of space and time, and on the exchange of perspectives that engenders inclusiveness. If we follow Gisela Ecker's definition of *Heimat* as 'eine Stiftung von Identität, die Ausschlüsse vornimmt' [(the) basis of a construction of identity that works through exclusions], and as 'weniger ein realer Ort […] als ein innerer Zustand von Widerspruchsfreiheit' [less a real place than an inner

---

[19] Translation my own.

[20] 'Es bedeutet automatisch dass diese Geschichte ist nicht nur meine Geschichte' [It automatically means that this story is not only my own story], Petrowskaja explains in an interview with Ulrike Timm (Timm 2013).

state of absence of all contradictions] (Ecker 30),[21] the incompatibility of the *Heimat* concept with Petrowskaja's stance is evident. Rather than 'Widerspruchsfreiheit', it is precisely the interest in the contradictions, gaps and in the meaning that results from these that characterises her narrative; her ideas of identity and of belonging are based on commonality, and precisely not on 'Ausschlüsse', exclusion or selection of any kind. Significantly, at the very start of her narrative project, Petrowskaja realises that 'die Meinigen sind nicht zu unterscheiden von Hunderten anderer, die genauso hießen, dabei wäre es für mich nicht möglich, die Meinigen von den Fremden zu trennen wie den Weizen von der Spreu, es wäre eine Selektion gewesen, und ich wollte keine, nicht einmal das Wort' (*VE*, 27) [mine cannot be distinguished from hundreds of others with the very same names, and anyway it would not have been possible for me to distinguish my family from strangers the way you separate wheat from chaff, seeing as it would have been a *selection*, and I didn't want that, not even the word (*ME*, 20; emphasis in the original translation)].

Instead, as Petrowskaja has explained in an interview: 'Was zählt ist, mit wem man mitfühlt' [What counts is who you feel with] (Petrowskaja 2015). Again, she stresses agency and a self-determined sense of belonging, and again we see the link to the quintessentially relational concept of affectivity ('Wem gehören diese Opfer?' she asks in Babij Jar, 'sind sie Waisen unserer gescheiterten Erinnerung? Oder sind sie alle – unsere?' (*VE*, 191) [Who do these victims belong to? Are they orphans of our failed memory? Or are they all ours? (*ME*, 171)].

The final pages of the book confirm the significance of this kind of extended and inclusive understanding of remembrance and belonging for the conceptualisation of future communities. Reaffirming one of the underlying principles of Petrowskaja's narration – the meshing of fact and fiction – it is a figure in ethereal white, hovering between the real and the imaginary, who points the way forward, admonishing the narrator 'Ich treffe Sie etwas zu oft hier in letzter Zeit!' (*VE*, 283) [I've been meeting you here somewhat too often lately! (*ME*, 250–1)]. The warning not to lose oneself in the contemplation of the past is a theme picked up again from the prologue – '[i]ch bin zu oft hier' (*VE*, 8) [I am here too often (*ME*, 2)], the narrator muses there, referring to the Hauptbahnhof, the station that embodies to her 'all die Verluste, die mit keinem Zug einzuholen sind' [all the losses you cannot retrieve with any train].[22] Encircling, bookending the text as a whole, the rebuke indicates the way ahead: not towards the binary opposite of her obsessive search of the past, an abandonment of the dead, but towards moving on in their company.

Rather in the way that Liliane Weissberg has described Hannah Arendt's writing of Rahel Varnhagen's biography,[23] Petrowskaja acts as 'Nachlassverwalterin eines Erbes, als Entdeckerin und Archäologin einer jüdischen Tradition, welche auch ihr selbst […] die Handlungsposition – agency – einer [europäischen; GWS] Jüdin gibt' [a guardian of a legacy, explorer and archaeologist of a Jewish tradition which, in turn, accords her (…) the agency of a [European; GWS] Jewish woman] (Weissberg 107).[24] The approach that her guardianship takes is based on rejecting the language and rhetoric with which she was raised (Russian) and instead opting for a voice that she has described as 'das leicht Gestörte und Nicht-Funktionierende' [slightly defective and dysfunctional] (Heimann). This is a voice that questions, tests and tastes (see Petrowskaja 2015),

---

[21] Ecker further explains that the concept offers 'eine Reduktion von Komplexität (unter dem Stichwort "Vertrautheit"), begegnet der Angst vor Instabilität (unter dem Stichwort "Beständigkeit"), der Angst vor Auflösung von Identität (unter dem Stichwort eines starken 'Wir' und der Grenzziehungen zwischen Innen und Außen)' [a reduction of complexity (emphasising 'familiarity'), it counters the fear of instability (emphasising constancy) and the fear of dissolution of identity (emphasising a strong 'us' and the boundaries between insiders and outsiders] (Ecker 30).

[22] Translation my own.

[23] See Hannah Arendt. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess.* East and West Library, 1957.

[24] In the original: 'deutschen' [German].

and is thus singularly appropriate for showing up fault lines and dissonances in narratives that are too smooth and thus smooth over and hide more than they reveal.[25] Petrowskaja's translingual text thus stands in a tradition of Jewish writing in German that Hannah Arendt has identified as a 'verborgene Tradition' [hidden tradition], a tradition of conscious and active self-positioning as 'paria', outsider, who provides a critical perspective on all exclusionary modes of thinking and thus supports alternative conceptualisations of the future. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, this self-positioning is very clearly an act of performing 'being minor' – and it is an act, too, that forces us to rethink the commonly accepted concept of German-Jewish writing. For what stands out very starkly is the difference between the situation of the Russo-Jewish immigrant choosing to write in German and that of many postwar *German*-Jewish writers, who, taking their Jewish heritage as identitarian reference point, struggle with German as the language of the perpetrators and as indication of their problematic (part-)German identity – some, like Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt for instance, to the point of rejecting it completely.[26]

For Petrowskaja, in contrast, the choice of German implies an indication of freedom and distance. Just as for other translingual writers who were born in oppressive political regimes and have chosen to write in German – the Romanian-born Herta Müller, for example, or the Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar – German is, for her, 'an oppositional language, rather than [...] an oppressive majority language' (Yildiz 166).[27] Analogous to Deleuze and Guattari's characterisation of Kafka's use of Prague German, it can thus be described in this context as a 'deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses', where a 'minor use' designates 'the revolutionary conditions for every literature' (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 17 and 18).

Reading Petrowskaja's book in the context of rhizomatic thinking, relationality and multidirectional memory has helped to highlight the author's strategies of exploring these revolutionary conditions, of liberating her text and her Jewish family history from linear modes of thinking and from the constraints of cultural, political or even linguistic boundaries. Petrowskaja, as I hope to have shown, has made a remarkable contribution to 'deterritorializ[ing] the question of Jewishness and boundedness' (Morris 6) in the dimensions of narrative and genre, language and belonging. She is one of a number of contemporary authors who are currently redefining the character and trajectory of Jewish writing in German, liberating it from the confines of 'German-Jewish literature'. In 2007, Andreas Kilcher pondered in an influential article whether the young authors among the East Europeans coming to live in Germany would write within what he saw as the two established patterns of German-Jewish writing – either emigrating and writing from abroad in order to free themselves from the 'negative symbiosis', which he saw, with Dan Diner, as underlying current German–Jewish relationships, or working with the dissonances of the relationships between Jews and Germans – 'oder ob ein drittes, ganz anderes Muster deutsch-jüdischen Schreibens entstehen wird, das durch den Blick von außen neue Perspektiven ermöglicht'

---

[25] See Petrowskaja's reference to the official 'ritualisierte[...] Feiern', 'Denkmäler' and 'Siegestag[e]' (*VE*, 230–1) [ritualistic ceremonies, monuments, Victory Day[s] (*ME*, 204)]; but also to the reminiscences of her grandfather, who turns out to have led a double-life: 'In dieser kompakten Version stimmte alles. Im Rhythmus einer Ballade liefen ein paar Zeilen seines Lebens an mir vorbei' (*VE*, 228) [Everything in this compact version fitted. A few lines of his life ran by me in the rhythm of a ballad (translation my own)].

[26] Michael A. Meyer has pointed out that the current situation of Jews in Germany is a reversal of that before the Second World War: while many were then struggling with their Jewish roots and admired the German 'Kulturgeist' [cultural spirit], today it is no longer their Jewishness that is the problem, but their Germanness (Meyer 31). Andreas Kilcher, too, points to the 'angespanntes Verhältnis zur deutschen Kultur' [tense relationship with German culture] of contemporary German-Jewish writers (see Kilcher).

[27] See, as another example, Herta Müller's insistence that a mother tongue that has been used as means of political oppression by a repressive state apparatus cannot offer *Heimat* (Müller 23–4).

[or whether a third, entirely different model of German-Jewish writing will emerge that provides new perspectives by looking in from the outside] (Kilcher). With *Vielleicht Esther*, Katja Petrowskaja has presented exactly that: a literature that goes beyond and develops outside of a – however constituted – 'negative symbiosis' and contributes to forging a body of Jewish writing as minor transnationalism instead.

References

Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Aristotle. *Poetics*, translated and with an introduction and notes by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00258601

Assmann, Aleida. *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006.

Böttiger, Helmut. '"Wir sind die letzten Europäer": Katja Petrowskaja'. *Die Zeit*, 13 March 2014, http://www.zeit.de/2014/12/katja-petrowskaja-vielleicht-esther.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subject: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

Bühler-Dietrich, Annette. 'Sprache als Bemühen, das Gleichgewicht zu gewinnen: Katja Petrowskajas *Vielleicht Esther*'. Edited by Marion Acker, Anne Fleig, and Matthias Lüthjohann, *Affektivität und Mehrsprachigkeit. Dynamiken der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*. Tübingen: Narr, 2019, pp. 225–46.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, transl. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Eckart, Gabriele. 'The Functions of Multilingual Language Use in Katja Petrowskaja's Vielleicht Esther'. *Glossen*, 40, 2015, http://blogs.dickinson.edu/glossen/archive/most-recent-issue-glossen-402015/gabriele-eckart-glossen40-2015/.

Ecker, Gisela. '"Heimat": Das Elend der unterschlagenen Differenz (Einleitung)'. Edited by G. Ecker *Kein Land in Sicht: Heimat – weiblich?*. Munich: Fink, 1997, pp. 7–31.

Eshel, Amir. *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226924960.001.0001

Heimann, Holger. 'Deutsche Sprache kam einer Befreiung gleich'. *Deutsche Welle*, 10 July 2013, http://www.dw.com/de/deutsche-sprache-kam-einer-befreiung-gleich/a-16935579.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Kellman, Steven G. *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

Kellman, Steven G. 'The Translingual Sensibility: A Conversation between Steven G. Kellman and Ilan Stavans'. *L2 Journal*, 7: 6–17, 2015 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5070/L27124348

Kilcher, Andreas. 'Trotz und Triumph. Die deutsch-jüdische Literatur der Gegenwart wandert auf einem Grat zwischen Vergessen und Erinnerung'. *Jüdische Allgemeine*, 11 October 2007, http://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/article/view/id/4480.

Kristeva, Julia. 'Forgiveness: An Interview'. *PMLA*, 117(2): 278–95, 2002. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X62006

Lionnet, Françoise, and Shu-Mei Shih. 'Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally'. Edited by Françoise Lionnet, and Shu-Mei Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*. Durham,

NC: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 1–23. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/97808223 86643-001

Meyer, Michael A. 'Entwicklung und Modifikationen der jüdischen Identität in Deutschland vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart'. Edited by Elke-Vera Kotowski *Das Kulturerbe deutschsprachiger Juden. Eine Spurensuche in den Ursprungs-, Transit- und Emigrationsländern*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 21–31.

Morris, Leslie. *The Translated Jew: German Jewish Culture Outside the Margins*. Evanstown, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv4g1qsv

Müller, Herta. *Heimat ist das was gesprochen wird: Rede an die Abiturienten des Jahrgangs 2001*. Saarbrücken: Grollenstein, 2009.

Osborne, Dora. 'Encountering the Archive in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*'. *Seminar*, 52(3): 255–72, 2016. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3138/seminar.52.3.01

Petrowskaja, Katja. 'Encounter: Conversation between Katja Petrowskaja, Shelley Frisch and Godela Weiss-Sussex'. 30 May 2019, https://www.sas.ac.uk/videos-and-podcasts/culture-language-and-literature/encounters-katja-petrowskaja-and-shelley-frisch.

Petrowskaja, Katja. 'Licht auf das große Ganze'. *Der Standard*, 17 October 2015, https://der-standard.at/2000023983449/Katja-Petrowskaja-Licht-auf-das-grosse-Ganze.

Petrowskaja, Katja. *Maybe Esther*. Translated from the German by Shelley Frisch. London: 4th Estate, 2018.

Petrowskaja, Katja. *Vielleicht Esther: Geschichten*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015.

Pinker, Steven. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity*. New York: Viking, 2011.

Roca Lizarazu, Maria. 'Moments of Possibility. Holocaust Postmemory, Subjunctivity, and Futurity in Katja Perowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014) and Robert Menasse's *Die Hauptstadt* (2017)'. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, forthcoming.

Roca Lizarazu, Maria. 'The Family Tree, the Web, and the Palimpsest: Figures of Postmemory in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther*'. *Modern Language Review*, 113: 168–89, 2018. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.113.1.0168

Rothberg, Michael. 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory. From Lieux de mémoire to Nœuds de mémoire'. *Yale French Studies*, 118(119): 3–12, 2010.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Rothberg, Michael. 'Multidirectional Memory'. *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 119: 176, 2014. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.1494

Schoenfeld, Jené. 'Can One Really Choose? Passing and Self-Identification at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century'. Edited by Julie Cary Nerad, *Passing Interest: Racial Passing in US Novels, Memoirs, Television, and Film, 1990–2010*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014, pp. 95–105.

Timm, Ulrike. 'Es gibt keine Grenze zwischen Literaturen'. 8 July 2013, http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/es-gibt-keine-grenze-zwischen-literaturen.954.de.html?dram:article_id=252300.

Weissberg, Liliane. 'Der Staat und die Dichter. Hannah Arendts Reflexionen über eine verborgene Tradition'. Edited by Elke-Vera Kotowski, *Das Kulturerbe deutschsprachiger Juden. Eine Spurensuche in den Ursprungs-, Transit- und Emigrationsländern*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 100–16.

Weitin, Thomas. 'Exil und Migration. Minoritäres Schreiben auf Deutsch im 20. Jahrhundert – von Kafka zu Zaimoglu', *Weimarer Beiträge*, 58(2): 195–224, 2012.

Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.