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Celestial Desires and Earthly Migrations: Love, Poetry and Agency in Özdamar's *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* TRANSIT vol. 11, no. 1

Elizabeth Mittman

In Bed with Poetry

It is a cold winter's night in the quiet city, and a woman lies in bed, alone, listening to the sound of a dog barking. On the pillow next to her lies a volume of Else Lasker-Schüler's poetry to which she looks desperately for help. The book remains as silent as the rest of the sprawling, communal apartment, but the woman has learned some of the lines it contains by heart and recites them to herself now, first quietly, eventually screaming them as she tries to drown out the incessant barking:

*Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde,
Eisenfarbene mit Sehnsuchtsschweiften,
Mit brennenden Armen die Liebe suchen... (9)*

Strange stars that search for love with burning arms... This arrestingly austere image which gives Emine Sevgi Özdamar's 2003 autobiographical novel its title and resurfaces twice later in the narrative, signals a poetic interest in the topos of migration as something greater than the sum of its protagonist's travels within a divided Berlin. The third installment in a trilogy describing a wide arc of peregrinations between Germany and Turkey, *Seltsame Sterne: Wedding-Pankow 1976/77* is geo-temporally more tightly circumscribed than either of its predecessors.¹ As its subtitle indicates, this volume emphasizes daily experiences of micro-migration at the height of the Cold War; fully two thirds of the text (the entire second part) is rendered in diary form with explicit date markings. Out of this unique configuration, scholarship on the novel has issued along two main trajectories: one pursuing questions of migration and transnationalism, the other calling particular attention to the novel's interventions in German memory politics about both the GDR and the Third Reich.² While both strands make important contributions to contemporary debates, they also overlook the star chart of love and desire mapped by the text's unique interplay of genres, voices, and spatial metaphors.

Taking my cue from the novel's opening tableau—in which a solitary woman shares her bed not with a human partner but with lines of poetic text—I want to explore the

¹ The first two are *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* (1992) and *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (1998). Together with *Seltsame Sterne*, they were re-issued by Kiepenheuer in 2006 in a single volume with the title *Sonne auf halbem Weg: Die Istanbul-Berlin-Trilogie*.

² On migration and transnationalism, see especially Capano, Ette, Hui, Mani, Pirozhenko, and Schade. On German memory politics see especially Bradley ("Berlin to Prenzlau" and "Recovering the Past"), Klocke, Konuk, Littler ("Cultural Memory" and "Fall"), Pizer, and Roy.

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possibilities that present themselves when we read *Seltsame Sterne* less as a migration story than as a love story. This article asks what it means for the Turkish-German author to stage her protagonist, the fictionalized self who shares her first name, Emine, as literally “in bed” with poetry. The doubling of the metaphor through its concretization has the effect of bringing all parties to the text—the author and the narrator, the entire cast of characters, and the reader as well—into a relationship marked by an interiority that defies the inside/outside binarism generally associated with literature of migration. All manner of textual intimacies—from kitchen table conversations about the language of love, to confessions of a desire to kiss to the point of bruising, to the chaste sharing of a bed with a lovelorn friend—are brought to life in poetry and diary writing, both forms that notably foreground the embodied singularity of their author’s voice and a certain genre-given freedom to indulge in narcissistic reflection. Emine’s love of literature, theater, art, and music is repeatedly described in erotic terms, while romantic encounters—both her own and others’—are tangled up in questions of poetry and language.

Authorized by the unusual interplay of aesthetic genres, unexpected thematic interminglings—narcissism and migration, eros and exile—can provoke us into perceiving their individual valences in new ways. In order to appreciate properly the explosive power of love that fills the pages of *Seltsame Sterne*, and in particular to understand the relationship between love and the migrating subject in political terms, I turn to the work of Lauren Berlant, and specifically to her commentary on Michael Hardt’s 2011 essay “For Love or Money.” Following Marx, Hardt argues for a notion of love as revolutionary practice, and suggests that a sufficiently political love might effect social transformation by embracing difference and breaking down barriers between public and private (Hardt 678-81). In her response to Hardt’s model, Lauren Berlant voices skepticism at his valorization of an altruistic model of love—one in which the ego loses itself in the other through a clear cognition of the “thatness” of the other and thus moves *beyond* the self—as particularly suitable for a transformative politics:

Because interest brings us there, no amount of pushing out narcissism—the subject’s aggressive desire to reencounter herself through her objects—can stanch the fierce tendency of love to express a desire to know and be known, to have amoral curiosity and incuriosity, to be excited but not too much, to be transported but not too far, and to feel held in the world without having any obligation to hold the world back. Love is not entirely ethical, if it has any relation to desire, which it must, if it is to be recognizable as love. (684-85)

The energy of such a love, Berlant argues, cannot simply be mobilized, as many contemporary philosophers (including Hardt) have attempted to do, as part of a revolutionary political project.³ Alongside the altruism of a self that is open to the other, we must acknowledge and affirm the self’s investment, on its own behalf and properly—even narcissistically—obsessed with its own agency, in the political dimension of love.

Berlant’s approach can help us to read Özdamar’s apparently “privatistic” turn toward interiority as in fact a complex social and political move. Coalescing around the pursuit of

³ Here Berlant refers, beyond Michael Hardt’s essay in the same issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, to the work of Hardt and Toni Negri (their co-authored *Commonwealth* [2009]), Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani’s notion of ‘impersonal narcissism’ in *Intimacies* (2008), and Zygmunt Baumann’s *Liquid Love* (2003). See Berlant 685.

an extravagant imagining of love, from the heady embrace of literature to nights of bruisingly satisfying sex, Özdamar's narrative at once dissolves interpersonal barriers and gathers up energies into and for the self. Out of the messiness of seemingly disparate forms of desire, a vision of love emerges akin to Berlant's description of a self that is at once open (to the other) *and* (self-)interested. Such a love is limited neither by genre markings nor by the object of the lover's affections, thereby surpassing either an individualistic, object-focused love or an idealized love in which self loses self in a magical mingling with the other. While the narrator's own relationships, described in her diaristic confessions, are driven by the self-absorption of romance and eros, this poetic pillow talk is augmented by a seemingly endless stream of *other* people's love stories whose very repetition diffuses love's narcissistic tendencies in an obliquely universalizing gesture that drives forward the novel's larger project. With its multiple valences, love thus become a guiding textual metaphor that both contains and exceeds the boundaries of personal emotions and experiences.

The refusal to fix upon and thereby fetishize any particular love object also offers an aesthetic strategy with which to reconceptualize migration and the migrating subject. If autobiographical German-Turkish texts have been read predominantly for their thematic treatment of migration, in Özdamar's novel migration is represented neither as social question nor as existential dilemma; rather, it forms the aesthetic shape of the text. While the novel is shot through with images, figures, and metaphors of migration from beginning to end, these images are drawn not only or even primarily from the narrator's own experiences as a Turk in Germany, or as a "Westerner" in East Berlin. From the opening citation of Lasker-Schüler's celestial poem, the text issues a clarion call for the centrality of migratory desire: Love itself is represented in spatial terms, and the migrating subjects that populate its pages expend copious energies in its pursuit, traversing not merely geographical but also intercultural, interlinguistic, and interpersonal frontiers. Thus, this seemingly endless cast of nomadic, boundary-crossing characters and their (love) stories move the more familiar *thematics* of migration toward a *metaphorics* of migration. Migration is not an external force that inscribes itself upon humans, but is rather a process by which all humans navigate their most intimate journeys.

This radical reframing of migration and exile through the prism of love and desire points toward a broader articulation of human experience, a provocation that constitutes nothing less than a reclamation of political subjectivity for those marked by explicit migration experiences. With the powerful assertion of self-presence provided by the intimacy of the diary form, the text stakes its claim to a place in the middle of the cultural, linguistic, and geographic lifeworld within which its author/narrator situates herself. From Lasker-Schüler to Shakespeare, from Bertolt Brecht to his pupil and interpreter Benno Besson, Özdamar's female narrator creates a personal and artistic genealogy that does not hesitate to claim the breadth of European culture as her own. On a metanarrative level, then, I argue that the creative act of writing itself constitutes the beloved in this unusual romance. By staging her autobiographical narrating subject, Emine, as author of her own diaristic notes, living a life between and among texts, Özdamar claims her own place as completely imbricated within the world of European letters. Put differently, the tightly sewn yet visible seam between author Özdamar and narrator Emine pulls each into the other's world so that the omnipresence of the literary inside the character Emine's own narrative expands into an argument for the centrality of the text we hold in our hands, a text we know to be written

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by another Emine, while we as readers become part of the cultural world built and inhabited by both. Özdamar hovers about the text as a tangible yet invisible presence beyond “her” character in the story. Ultimately, this twin presentation of cultural creation both as a narrative theme (a character’s encounters with the literary) and as object (the book itself) asserts a uniquely re-situated “German” writing subject.

From the Margins to the Center? Imagining the Transnational Subject

In order to fully appreciate the radical move undertaken in this novel, I will now explore briefly the scholarship it has inspired, for this body of work reveals the tenacity of existing interpretive frameworks for assessing the migrant subject in her given context. With its unusual focus on the narrator’s peregrinations across the Berlin Wall, *Seltsame Sterne* not only upends conventional notions of how and where the German-Turkish migrant lives, but also dissolves calcified narratives about the spatio-temporal relationship of East and West, leading to delightfully complex reformulations of identities. The narrator, Emine, is neither a guest worker in West Berlin, nor firmly established in East Berlin theater culture. Depending on her visa status at any given moment, she sleeps by turns in a West Berlin commune or one of two different apartments in the East; between visas she even sleeps in the bed of Armin, a gay East Berliner whose lover lives in the West, or (secretly) in the Volksbühne’s sauna. This tale of double migration has found resonance among critics who have celebrated the light that the text sheds on a time and place in postwar German culture that is often shrouded in increasingly nostalgic memories. Given the novel’s focus on the complexities of intra-Berlin travel and historical events so tightly connected with the spaces of Berlin, much scholarship has emphasized its spatial, historical, and ideological dimensions, crucially unpacking the stakes for post-unification German identity narratives.

Analyzing the ways in which the East provides the narrator with positive sites for aesthetic and political identification, Laura Bradley identifies a critical inversion: “rather than focusing on the exotic status of the Turkish woman in Berlin, she shows the exotic appeal of aspects of Berlin’s past for the newcomer” (“Recovering the Past” 290). Thus, both the former GDR and the Turkish woman are released from the clutches of powerful binaries in their representation.⁴ Margaret Littler goes so far as to argue that the novel deterritorializes German memory, and embraces the figure of the “immigrating stranger” (Deleuze/Guattari) who, Littler argues, inaugurates change by telling multiple new stories with the potential eventually to transform the majority (“Fall” 50). Moving beyond German national identity politics, a majority of scholars are energized by the possibilities that Özdamar’s narrative opens up for transnational literature as a site for reimagining the migrant subject. B. Venkat Mani reads *Seltsame Sterne* as resisting the recourse to origins while simultaneously refusing to identify with, or assimilate into, new cultures. For him, the exile’s memories and identities remain ever fractured and in flux. Other readings cast

⁴ See also John Pizer’s consideration of the narrator’s unique vantage point as an outsider with privileged access to the host culture. Ultimately, one might argue that Pizer recreates the Wall as a demarcation of difference in his analysis of the narrator’s sexual relationships in East/West terms, drawing the conclusion that the West is associated (negatively) with chaos and the East (positively) with calm (143-44). While acknowledging the presence of critical GDR discourse in the novel, Klocke echoes this conclusion in her discussion of the novel’s treatment of antifascist traditions (151-53).

more optimistic visions of a “migrant flaneuse” (Pirozhenko), or of a writer who is not simply exilic or marginal, but belongs at the center, which is seen as existing “at the intersection of multiple networks that are defined on a global scale. [Özdamar] speaks to the postmodern experience of migration and exile on multiple levels, from the personal to the collective” (Hui 70-71).

Each of these scholars works in a different way toward an understanding of *Seltsame Sterne* as the self-articulation of an exilic global citizen whose experiences—from a “Position gleichzeitiger Innerhalb- und Außerhalb befindlichkeit” (Ette 179)—anchor a new paradigm for identity, belonging, and personhood. While this scholarship has explored, often usefully and creatively, the ways in which *Seltsame Sterne* upends normative, dichotomous thinking about east/west and home/migration, it fails to provide the “nomadic subject” (Bonner) with a way out of her ultimate *objecthood*. After all is said and done, this newly constructed flaneuse is cast more as part of the urban landscape than as an agent of her own volition. These readings emancipate the narrative subject from exotic-object status, only to install “her” as a new ideal-type for the postmodern, global landscape, a categorization that carries with it the peril of perpetuating a paradoxically fixed identity wherein everything she does and says is comprehensible only as an expression of that marked positionality.

In contrast, I am interested in uncovering the ways in which *Seltsame Sterne* allows us to explore migration as an experience that is defined not exclusively or even primarily by loss, exclusion, and discrimination, but by love, desire, and agency. Özdamar’s autobiographical storyteller claims authority to craft a narrative that foregrounds, as Gizem Arslan has fruitfully shown, “productive dimensions of textual elements on the move rather than the recuperation of lost histories” (191). Unique among scholars reading this work, Arslan focuses on the unexpected positivity of the narrator, and reads Özdamar’s works “as more than migrant narratives of loss” (194). While Arslan focuses on the text’s commitment to creativity through inventive word play, in the following I will argue that this reconceptualization occurs on the level of the creation of the text itself. In its incursion against fundamental assumptions about whose voice counts as/at the heart of European and Western culture, *Seltsame Sterne* goes so far as to imagine a Turkish woman occupying the idea of Hamlet. If, through such audacious assumptions, migration can be reconceived as an act rather than as a fate, as quest rather than exile, and as something that is taking place both around and within us all, all the time, then perhaps it becomes possible quite literally to flesh out theories of transnational and cosmopolitan culture with newly and more completely human subjects.

Stars: Not Just Celestial Bodies Anymore

The poems scattered throughout *Seltsame Sterne* like stars across the night sky mediate transitions between places. Brecht’s verse animates Emine’s decision to leave Turkey and turn toward Germany, and her estranged Turkish husband communicates with her through a volume of poems by Konstantino Kavafis.⁵ Twice, the narrator-as-diarist inserts her own

⁵ The Brecht poems will be discussed below. The Greek poet Konstantino Kavafis (Constantine P. Cavafy; 1883-1933) lived between cultures and languages, migrating between Alexandria and Liverpool,

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poetic lines into the text as a means of processing experiences of loneliness and loss (102, 105). But it is Lasker-Schüler's poetry with its emphatic expression of desire that dominates the novel's poetic voice. A complex figure and migrating subject herself, Lasker-Schüler famously mobilized her own "Oriental" identity long before she fled Germany with self-exoticizing performances. While two brief references to the poet's biography in the novel (15, 58) situate her historically, the energies of Özdamar's narrator focus less on the figure of the poet than on the poems themselves which are recited at several points.⁶ Examined in the novel's broader context, it becomes clear that Özdamar's citations of Lasker-Schüler's poetry resist marking as Other and instead signal the move toward the "heart" of Europe without ceding either historical particularity or historical consciousness.⁷ Thematically centered on love and longing, all four poems focus attention on the poet as a voiced subject and align the novel's narrator with a claim to subjectivity embedded in relationships of intimate reciprocity and the uncensored expression of desire.

Introduced in the context of Emine's relationship with Peter, her West Berlin flatmate and sometime lover who hands her a volume of Lasker-Schüler's poetry, the cited poems all foreground an intimate addressee ("du"), and are used as an explicit vehicle for intimate communication between Peter and Emine. Upon her return from East Berlin one evening, she finds out that Peter's girlfriend from West Germany has arrived for a visit and retires to bed alone. The next morning, she finds a sheet of paper with the poem "Vollmond," placed into her sleeping hand:

*Ich kann deine Lippen nicht finden...
Wo bist du, ferne Stadt
Mit den segnenden Düften? (71)*

While at first glance this citation may seem to replicate Emine's othering, rather than undermine it, the coordinates of its implementation undercut the orientalizing gesture. The fact that "ferne Stadt" is sleeping in the next room, in a *Wohngemeinschaft* that pointedly rejects bourgeois conventions of monogamy and that the narrator reports this episode with something approaching an ethnographer's detachment points to a broadly satiric (or at the very least, ironic) narrative attitude. In any event, distance between lovers is presented as the result of Peter's momentary choice, rather than as a fated state. Threads of desire

France and Constantinople (Istanbul). His poems, which appear at the narrator's departure from Istanbul (29) and shortly after her arrival in Berlin (42), thematize the loss of home and of love.

⁶ The same three lines of "Liebessterne" that appear in the opening scene are repeated twice later in the novel; in addition, three other poems by Lasker-Schüler are cited, two of them partially ("Schwarze Sterne" and "Vollmond"), while "Senna Hoy" appears in its entirety. The first two of these were originally published in Lasker-Schüler's 1902 volume of poems, *Styx*; the versions Özdamar uses here are from a later compilation published in 1920; "Vollmond" appeared in *Meine Wunder* (1911) and "Senna Hoy" was first printed in a 1917 edition of her collected poems. See Lasker-Schüler, *Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 1* for the full text of all poems (96, 97, 174, and 179, respectively) and details on publication history (375-83).

⁷ Some scholars have read the novel's poetic references to Lasker-Schüler under the sign of the "exilic global citizen" (Ette, Schade). Konuk reads Özdamar's mobilization of Lasker-Schüler as a problematic attempt to create analogies between herself and Jewish victims of fascism. This analysis removes attention from the poetry itself and emphasizes a victim narrative which, in my argument, the novel clearly eschews. As Mani points out, allusions to German history are "quickly aborted by the narrator. Despite the allegedly oriental fantasies that might embark affiliation between Lasker-Schüler and the narrator, there is, and will be, no simple transcoding available from one (minority) woman author to the next—just uneasy insertions and co-optations" (104).

circulate among three people in the same apartment at the same time, and in its fleeting appearance, the poem's expression of subjectivity is not linked to fixation upon a particular love object.

In his poetic address to her, Peter uses Lasker-Schüler to ventriloquize *his* desires: Emine is the “du” implied and he the poet(ess). The migration of the poet's voice takes a yet more striking turn in another scene, this one, too, following her return from a day's sojourn in East Berlin. Her parka having been stolen, she returns to the commune shivering, and as she settles into a warm bath Peter has drawn for her, he reads Lasker-Schüler's poem “Senna Hoy” aloud:

*Wenn du sprichst,
Wacht mein buntes Herz auf.
Alle Vögel üben sich
Auf deinen Lippen.
Immerblau streut deine Stimme
Über den Weg;
Wo du erzählst, wird Himmel.
Deine Worte sind aus Lied geformt,
Ich traure, wenn du schweigst.
Singen hängt überall an dir—
Wie du wohl träumen magst? (58-59)*

In this unconventional sexual liaison, the male lover serenades the woman with a love poem, penned by a woman, that extols the beloved's virtues: neither physical beauty, nor moral goodness, nor seductive power describe the beloved, but rather a series of verbs—*sprechen, erzählen, singen*—and noun phrases—*deine Stimme, deine Worte, aus Lied geformt*—that, when addressed to her, grant Emine the agency of creation. In other words, through his poetic communication, Peter recognizes her as a full-throated subject, not as one who inspires poetic rapture through her beautiful image, but as herself—an author of aesthetic beauty. This categorical affirmation of the migrating subject as an audible participant in artistic creation brings her inside the apparatus of culture itself. Given the relational context of these passages, Özdamar's vital link to Lasker-Schüler is thus the connection to a voice that is at once lyrical and embodied: engaged not in reflection upon her own external image as outsider, nor upon an implicit victim status derived via historical comparison, but rather in the experience and expression of desire in the active pursuit of love.

In the course of the novel, Lasker-Schüler's poems merge with the narrator's own discourse on love and desire, moving the conversation about migration into unfamiliar territory. Literally cosmic in its proportions, this search for love exceeds all imaginable borders: inchoate, undetermined, open in all directions. While some see in the “stars” of the Lasker-Schüler poems cited here a metaphor for migration as estrangement, exile, and thus negatively marked (Konuk 240), I argue that on the contrary, they point toward an emergent self-sense by which the narrator is able to overcome distance and to find intimacy and comfort. Infused with incendiary desire in the search for love, the opening poem's capacious stars, with their anthropomorphic “burning arms,” transform remoteness to

8 | Elizabeth Mittman / Celestial Desires and Earthly Migrations: Love, Poetry and... immediacy, cold to heat, and, vibrating with a formidable passion, evoke a sprawling desire with a universal human claim.⁸

All You Need Is Love: Stories of Poetic Migration

As the stars in Lasker-Schüler's poetry become unlocked from their positions as fixed centers of solar systems and move independently through the heavens in pursuit of their own fates, so, too, do the figures in Özdamar's novel move outside of familiar paths. At the same time, the text's insistence upon an actively desiring subject acknowledges contrapuntally that even such a fundamental human undertaking as love is not feasible for all human beings in all times and places. The search for love that occupies the heart of *Seltsame Sterne* has a deeply grounded prehistory, born of pain and loss amidst political turmoil.⁹ In an extended flashback directly following the novel's opening scene in Berlin, the autobiographical narrator describes the cataclysmic collapse of an entire personal world due to the 1971 military coup and ensuing period of unrest and violence in Turkey.¹⁰ Linking the political and the personal absolutely, Emine attempts to explain to her newfound Swiss friend Josef—whom she met when he came to Istanbul in an apparently open-ended search for linguistic and cultural exchange—why love is an impossibility: presenting the abysmal conditions in Turkey as sufficient grounds for divorce. The depiction of her marriage is embedded in a larger context of love as a human right: “Wenn wir uns liebten, dachte ich immer an die Menschen, die in den Gefängnissen saßen. Sie können niemanden küssen, sie haben niemanden, mit dem sie wie zwei Löffel im Bett liegen können” (25). Love's denial as a political problem is driven home through a series of brief, vividly rendered vignettes, including one that involves an imprisoned young man whose hunger for love has led him to cut a picture of a village girl out of a newspaper; sitting in his cell, he shares details of his daily torture sessions with her. Emine implores her friend: “Josef, jetzt, in meinem Land, wo der Morgen kein Morgen zu sein scheint, *wo nur die Sterne mit Sternen sprechen können*, aber nicht Menschen mit Menschen, mit wem sprach der Junge [...] Wie viele Monate lang? Die ratlosen Nächte verbringen mit einem Papiermädchen?” (25-26, my emphasis) The anguished recital of broken human relations concludes with the unequivocal statement: “Josef, während eines Militärputsches steht alles still. Auch die Liebe” (26-27). The narrator's evocation of stars loops back to Lasker-Schüler's poems, underscoring the shared celestial space of love and poetry, and of the essential communicative aspects of both. Characterizing both love and art as impossibilities under conditions of political repression, the ground is prepared for their intimate interaction and mutual influence in the search for a humanity regained.

⁸ Indeed, the star imagery that infuses Lasker-Schüler's entire poetic oeuvre is dominated by the fusion of passion, agency, and universality. In poem after poem, stars are animated as the subjects of action verbs: they play (“Chronica” 11), they sing (“Mutter” 13), they read (“O Gott” 214), they kiss (“Das Lied des Spielprinzen” 209). In „Mein Liebeslied“ they even *become* a verb: “Du nimmst mich so zu dir, / Ich sehe dein Herz sternem” (180).

⁹ On the importance of specific historical and political experiences for understanding the migrating writer, see Seyhan.

¹⁰ This period, dealt with tangentially in *Seltsame Sterne*, occupies center stage of *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*.

The narrator's dream of going to East Berlin to study theater with (Swiss) director and former Brecht pupil, Benno Besson, is swiftly transformed from chimera to reality, aided by Josef's seemingly magical interventions on her behalf. Poetry plays a pivotal role in the realization of this dream; indeed, while Özdamar's most obvious connection to Germany is Brecht's theater, it is notably Brecht's *verse* that operates as the vehicle for transition between places. Emine listens to—and, in her sorrow, sings along with—“Das Lied von der Moldau” on a beloved album of Brecht songs (22).¹¹ We ‘hear’ the lines twice, first when Emine's grandmother plays the record in order to comfort her granddaughter whom she hears crying in the night, then again as soldiers leave Emine's house following a nighttime raid. Theater is distilled into poetry which comes to life as song which the narrator in turn incorporates into her own body through the enunciatory act of singing:

Als sie gingen, sang ich:

*Das Große bleibt groß nicht und klein nicht das Kleine.
Die Nacht hat zwölf Stunden, dann kommt schon der Tag.*

Ich bückte mich in die Zisterne, und die Wörter hallten im ganzen Haus. [...] Ich dachte, auch ich muß weg. Eines Nachmittags saßen wir am Tisch unter dem Baum, Blüten fielen auf die Teller. Plötzlich fiel mir das Brotmesser aus der Hand. ‘Ich will nach Berlin ans Theater, ich will nicht mehr schlafen.’ (27)

Brecht's lyrics offer the narrator an immediate alternative to the difficulties of the present: Rather than wait for the passage of time, as the lyrical subject must, she chooses to move to the world from which the poem itself issued. The narrator stops neither to philosophize nor to assess potential risks, but rather experiences the poetry with the genre's personal immediacy, translating the Brechtian context into her own without comment or hesitation. This chain of events produces an immediate emotional affect *and* a profound effect on the level of *histoire*, and like an oracle, the poem calls her out of a state of passivity and powerlessness, and onto her own path toward consciousness and agency.¹²

In the transitional space of the journey from Istanbul to Berlin, desires become (con)fused—whether the longing for romantic connection or the passion for all-engaging work. Upon boarding the train, the narrator of *Seltsame Sterne* swears she will never marry again (30), yet the impermanence of this declaration is revealed nearly as soon as it is uttered, for the desire unleashed by her new dream brings the narrator new possibilities for love and creativity. On the train she reads and re-reads a book about Besson for three days and three nights, until a fellow passenger approaches her and asks: “‘Schönes Mädchen, machst du Liebe mit diesem Buch? Deine Augen glänzen, deine Brust geht hoch, wenn du

¹¹ The short song functions as the closing chorus to Brecht's 1943 exile drama *Schweyk im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, which transplants Jaroslav Hašek's World War I everyman character to the Third Reich.

¹² The gesture is rehearsed already in *Brücke*, which offers a different imagination of the same migratory moment in the author's biography. The earlier narrator's emergent passion for theater becomes focalized around the figure of Brecht during the initial migratory experience as guest worker (*Brücke* 70), and later, when she finds herself back in a Turkey increasingly fractured by violence and oppression, it is another, strikingly similar piece of Brechtian verse (“Nannas Lied” from *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe* [1936]) that inspires her repeated migration to Germany (329). For more on the role of Brecht's poems in Özdamar's trilogy, see Gezen (88-90) and Simpson (392-93).

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es liest.’ Immer wieder schaute ich auf das Foto Bessons...” (31)¹³ Reanimated to love and to pursue artistic creation, the narrator, presented not as exile or immigrant but as freely mobile traveler, crosses borders uttering the mantra “ich liebe Brecht” (31). Migration is recast not as *origin* but as *consequence* of loss.¹⁴

If at first glance sexual desire and intellectual work seem to be focalized in the figure of Besson, the text soon disabuses us of this simplistic notion. In marked contrast to the Arabic language pupil in Özdamar’s earlier “Großvaterzunge” text, this narrator does not enter into a sexualized master-apprentice relationship, but rather embarks on a quest that defies hierarchical structures, including those of patriarchally defined romance. The ambiguity of the narrator’s love for Besson is a critical step in dismantling the exotic, Orientalized muse, and it quickly becomes clear that Emine’s breast heaves not with desire for a sexual relationship with a particular man, but rather for entrance into Brecht’s and Besson’s arena of artistic creativity. Besson himself thus remains peripheral to the narrative—an episodic presence rather than a permanent obsession—and attention turns instead to the private passions of those Emine encounters in both Berlins: the Indian Brecht scholar who clumsily attempts to seduce her; Gabi, an East Berliner with a boyfriend in Munich; Peter and the rest of the commune in Wedding whose resistance to bourgeois-normative relationships sets up several comic scenes; the Turkish men who go across the Wall to fuck; or the Turkish man, Murat, who goes across the Wall and falls in love. In their sheer number and variety, these diverse fates illustrate the universality of desire; As stories, they acquire a greater density in the novel’s second part, when Emine’s narration of her interactions with others becomes fixed through the logbook of her own daily experiences. The shift to diary entries coincides with Emine’s shift from provisional status in Berlin to sustained collaboration with Besson once she has received her GDR visa, and is her means of recording this dream-turned-reality (84). The diary genre allows Özdamar to present the migrating subject as thoroughly invested in ordinary human pursuits, rather than in problems issuing from exile: neither integrated nor separate, the narrating subject is quite simply the center of her own universe of experiences and emotions. With its fluid incorporation of the mundane tales of those around her, it also reminds us that this is, in some way, every one’s story. More importantly, perhaps, the interiority of the genre underscores Özdamar’s insistence on approaching the “migrating subject” as a *voice* rather than a *figure*: we do not *see* how she appears, from without, but rather *hear* what she thinks and feels, from within. As with Lasker-Schüler’s poetry, the text’s energies are expended toward the articulation of human selfhood in the active stance of yearning, desiring, seeking: “Heute will ich jemanden küssen, bis ich blaue Flecke bekomme” (167); “Ich muß mir jeden Tag wiederholen, daß ich zum Lernen hier bin. Warum habe ich keinen Geliebten?” (193)

Twice in the course of the novel, the narrator does experience romantic love with men who, like her, are also migratory creatures—Graham, a set designer and the British son of German-Jewish emigrés, and Steve, an American teaching English in Denmark. Both stories satisfy reader expectations for romance, deploying the full range of affective

¹³ The book that is referred to here is *Der Regisseur Benno Besson*, a 1967 East German collection of interviews, notes, and photos relating to Besson’s directorial work in East Berlin (Müller).

¹⁴ This point is made in passing by Yildiz in her chapter on Özdamar: “Just as this chapter argues with regard to ‘Mutterzunge’, migration in Özdamar’s third novel does not constitute the cause of the loss, but rather represents a potential solution for it” (166).

registers from erotic playfulness to heartsick yearning, and yet they significantly defy one key convention of the genre: the narrator is clearly not on a quest for her one “true love” but for the ability to love and to experience a state of love. The representation of these encounters compels acknowledgment of the female migrant subject as *at once* same and different, self and other, as ‘just simply’ human. The assertion of the mobility and transmutability of love is strikingly focalized in the novel through the rather miraculous vehicle of language when Katrin, Emine’s first East Berlin roommate, decides to learn Italian: “Ich weiß, ich werde Italien wahrscheinlich nie sehen, aber ich muß etwas tun, mein Mann liebt eine andere Frau” (80). Desire shifts abruptly, from a man to a new language, with its open, endless potential; recognizing the liberatory power of this unexpected shift, Emine frequently consults Katrin about how to express what she is feeling in Italian, as in the entry dated Wednesday, May 26, 1976: “‘Katrin, was heißt glücklich?’ ‘Felice.’ ‘I am molto felice’” (126). The affirmative mash-up of no fewer than three languages in this brief exchange highlights multilinguality as part of a utopian recalibration in the unmooring of identities. Characters are constantly learning new languages—from Josef, who went down to the station in Zürich “um dort von den jugoslawischen und türkischen Arbeitern ihre Sprachen zu lernen” (21) to Emine herself who mourns the loss of her language of origin (23), then pivots to learn German (and English, and French). Rather than serving as occasions for misunderstanding or alienation, translinguistic operations—much like migration itself—shimmer with possibilities for new relationships, communication, and love.¹⁵

To Be or Not to Be Brecht, Besson, Hamlet...and Paul Anka?

In manchen Nächten sprachen wir leise von Bett zu Bett im an- und ausgehenden Hebbeltheaterlicht über Theater. Rezzan fragte: “Welche Rolle willst du spielen, Ophelia?” — “Nein, für Ophelia bin ich zu dünn, zu groß. Aber Hamlet vielleicht.” — “Warum?” — “Ich weiß es nicht. Und du?” (*Brücke* 23-24)

Lying in the dark in the workers’ dormitory, discussing theater dreams with another guest worker shortly after their arrival in Berlin, the narrator of Özdamar’s second installment in the Istanbul-Berlin trilogy stakes a clear claim: not just to perform Shakespeare, or *Hamlet*, but in fact to occupy the part of Hamlet himself. The narrator’s expressed desire to inhabit the most iconic role in all of Western theater lacks political programmaticity: she does it to subvert neither cultural expectation nor gender norms, but—“Ich weiß es nicht”—simply because. *Seltsame Sterne* reiterates this desire most emphatically when its female Turkish protagonist, staking her claim to all the rights and privileges of European masculine subjecthood, has sex with her American lover—naked, in full view of snapshot-taking tourists—on the steps of Hamlet’s castle at Helsingør (223). The staging of this public act of copulation near the novel’s end reminds us of the merger of categories of sexual agency and artistic creativity glimpsed earlier in Emine’s passionately heaving breast as she read about Besson on the journey to Germany. Such a merger implicitly proposes a human subject that can occupy the heart of Western culture on its own terms in an exhilarating appropriation that makes mainstream traditions entirely hers without becoming colonized

¹⁵ On the significance of the mother tongue and its loss in Özdamar’s work more generally, see Yildiz 144-68.

herself in the process. This new subject is neither burdened by reverential subjugation to the original source (Shakespeare), nor indeed somehow magically separate from the shadows cast by that tradition. This latter point is made patently clear by the embedding of the lovers' episode in the larger, complex narrative:

21. Juni 1977 [...]

Die Touristen fotografierten uns von ferne. Sie dachten vielleicht, zwei Schlangen auf den Steinen vor Hamlets Schloß. Im Zug von Helsingør nach Kopenhagen hörte uns ein älterer dänischer Mann deutsch sprechen und verließ schimpfend das Abteil.

In Kopenhagen besuchten wir einen Abendkursus an der Uni: "Warum ist die Dritte Welt arm?" (223)

The nearly simultaneous invocation of two problematic transnational contexts—Danish memories of World War II and global economic imperialism—alerts the reader to the inescapability of history, the absence of any simplistic notion of an innocent positionality, and invests the nonchalantly narrated sex scene with a radical energy.

Özdamar's appropriation of a site so replete with symbolic meaning for European culture changes the ground on which both author and narrator stand irrevocably; it also builds on a rich, century-long tradition of Turkish reception of Shakespeare's tragedy, beginning with the first Turkish translation of *Hamlet* in 1908, at the dawn of the nationalist movement toward secularization and modernization. From the intense cultural labor in developing a modern identity under the sign of Kemalism, to the more recent unrest around forces of globalization and Islamization, *Hamlet* has—through no fewer than six new translations in as many decades, and countless adaptations on stage and screen—played a key role in the development of a self-understanding of the modern Turkish subject.¹⁶ As Savaş Arslan notes, the play and its creator have served as vehicle for the importation of a much-contested Western concept of universal humanism: "[Turkish actor and director Muhsin] Ertuğrul linked Shakespeare to universal humanism, asking, rhetorically: 'What am I if Shakespeare is human? What is Shakespeare if I am human?'" (160). The play has also been taken up and continually reshaped for the articulation of specific forms of subjectivity, the figure of Hamlet being re-imagined as everything from a leftist revolutionary to a modern, professional woman (Arslan 161-62).¹⁷ Özdamar inserts her narrator into this tradition by asserting her authorial intentions: "Der Theaterverband der DDR hat meine Probenzeichnungen zum *Bürgergeneral* gekauft. Mit dem Geld werde ich mir eine Schreibmaschine kaufen und ein Theaterstück schreiben. Vielleicht nach *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* ist eine türkische Dorfgeschichte" (194). In Emine's village tale, Hamlet, renamed Ahmet, travels to Germany at his uncle's behest as a guest worker; when he returns with a new tractor he becomes a prosperous farmer who forgets his revenge fantasies and instead installs his father's ghost as a scarecrow. Özdamar's hilariously inventive manipulation of Hamlet as a migratory cultural figure makes it abundantly clear that occupying this role

¹⁶ See Savaş Arslan's excellent 2009 article on "Turkish Hamlets" for a detailed discussion of the complexities of this reception history.

¹⁷ See Batuman for a fascinating report on a rural Turkish women's theatre company whose founder, Ümmiye Koçak, cajoled other village women, many of them barely literate, to join her, arguing "that they already played roles, every day—that the theatre was all around them, whether they liked it or not" (72-74). In 2009 Koçak played the title role in her own all-female adaptation of *Hamlet*.

does not mean slavishly mimicking Western cultural examples, but rather freely adapting the modern human subject to his (or her) unique political and historical coordinates.

The ever-expanding notion of a universally intelligible authorship undergirds Emine's various experiences of erotic and creative agency—from love and romance to writing and stage direction. When she returns from Copenhagen, it is in fact to take her turn directing the Volksbühne production of *Hamlet* for which she is Besson's assistant (225).¹⁸ If Emine rewrites Shakespeare's monumental play as a village tale, she is equally involved in rewriting her own identity, and with the reclamation an active and uncensored female sexuality that acknowledges its own self-interest, repudiating existing scripts for women. When the relationship with Graham ends, she suffers but ultimately concludes: "Es war wahrscheinlich ein Training der Gefühle. Jetzt sind meine Gefühle offen, am besten viel küssen, Haare streicheln, dann Hand geben und gute Arbeit wünschen. Brecht hatte auch viele Geliebte, aber die Arbeit hat er nie aufgegeben" (131-32). Rather than comparing her lovers to Besson as competing objects of her desire, much less serving as sexualized muse to Besson, she compares *herself* to both Besson and Brecht as fellow desiring subjects, and ponders equivalencies in their situations. Shortly after her return from Denmark, the narrator visits Brecht's grave:

Heute ging ich zum Friedhof zu Brechts Grab. Ich dachte: "Jetzt wird er aus seinem Grab steigen und sich an seine Schreibmaschine setzen. Licht auf seinem Schreibtisch. Hat man Brecht mit seiner Brille begraben?" Als er starb, war er sechsfünfzig Jahre alt. Er war so alt wie Benno Besson jetzt, und Benno hat sich gerade wieder verliebt. Ich bin verliebt in einen Amerikaner. Benno ist in Paris. (225-26)

Comparing Brecht with Besson (same age), and Besson with herself (both newly in love), the narrator uses the transitive property to place herself squarely into the pantheon of great figures of European theater. What links all three, as Emine's rather sly insertion of her own speculations about Brecht (emerging from the grave to strike his typewriter keys? buried with his glasses on?) points out, is identification with and devotion to their work.

Looking across the grand sweep of the novel, what has taken place in the migratory, questing journey from Istanbul to Berlin is nothing less than the creation of a new self through love and through work in equal measure, animated by a radically feminist reconsideration of the idea of love. The significance of mutuality in the loving relationship is underscored in the closing pages of *Seltsame Sterne*, when Besson explains to Emine that he has asked her to join him in Paris to collaborate on his new production of Brecht's *Kaukasischer Kreidekreis*, precisely in order to liberate him from his own past master-apprentice relationship: "Du mußt mich von den Bildern, die ich von Brechts Inszenierung habe, entführen. Du mußt hier mein Schatten werden und verhindern, daß ich zu den alten Bildern zurückkehre" (247). Filled with creative vision, Emine has in fact arrived in Paris carrying 20 puppets fashioned from empty wine bottles that represent the roles in the Brecht play. She and Besson promptly begin to play together with them at his kitchen table;

¹⁸ See Hays for an excellent description of Besson's historically nuanced, dialectical 1977 production of the play staged first in East Berlin and later that year in France and Belgium.

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in a utopian scene of collaborative creation, now the apprentice in essence teaches the master.¹⁹

The reinvention of Hamlet—indeed, the desire to *be* Hamlet, or Shakespeare, or Brecht, or Besson—signifies a vital moment in Özdamar’s project of cultural migration. It demands rethinking the particular *as* universal, and each human subject as equally complex. In the previous volume, *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*, an intensive engagement with Western culture unfolds by way of Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Brecht—and eventually through the figure of Kafka, who focalizes the link between creativity and sensuality in that text. Shortly after receiving the gift of a Kafka biography, her desire to study theater leads her to Paris where she meets a German on the subway:

Er fragte mich: “Can you speak English.” — “No, I can not little bit. I can say only: ‘the maid washed the dishes and can I put my head on your shoulder’”. Nachdem ich alle meine englischen Wörter herausgegeben hatte, fragte ich ihn, warum er mit mir Englisch sprechen wollte. Er sagte: “Ich geniere mich in Paris für die deutsche Sprache, das ist die Sprache von Goebbels und Hitler.” Ich sagte: “Ich liebe Kafka.” (*Brücke* 125)

Beyond the obvious parallel to the sensual reading experience in *Seltsame Sterne* (“Ich liebe Brecht”), this passage clarifies the radical claim offered by the trilogy as a whole for German literature.²⁰ Where the German sees in his own culture only a dead end, Özdamar’s narrator envisions utopian potential, re-marking and re-making a tainted culture through nothing less than the process of *loving* Kafka—and later, in the final volume of the trilogy, Brecht and Besson.²¹ The precise nature of love—spiritual or physical—and the identity of the love object itself are ultimately less important than the power of such a love to activate the desiring subject’s own agency.

While Emine chooses to follow Besson, their relationship remains both literally and figuratively in motion. The closing lines of *Seltsame Sterne* return us once more to the Parisian Métro, and to a vivid scene of a world on the move. Crowded around the Swiss director and his Turkish assistant are other immigrants—from Algeria, from Vietnam—whose stories remain to be told. Against the tangible backdrop of literal migration, Emine’s own life remains an act of ongoing translation. As they move through the subterranean space, surrounded by the sounds of all of those subway voices, Besson says to Emine: “Du

¹⁹ A photo of four of these bottle puppets which the autobiographer Özdamar seems to have actually made appears opposite the last page of text (246). In this brief scene, she also helps herself to a Gauloise from the pack sitting on his table, completing a series of playful references to the iconic French cigarettes, which both she and Besson smoke throughout the novel (33-34, 39-40, 53, 84, 247). If both smoke the same brand independently, then surely they are kindred spirits; the sexual connotations attached to cigarettes further underscore the erotic energy of creative collaboration.

²⁰ *Brücke* and *Sterne* are specifically linked through the uncanny repetition of sensual reading experiences. About Kafka: “Ich las in dem Buch und immer wieder schaute ich mir Kafkas Gesicht an und stellte mir einen schönen, schlanken Mann mit schwarzen Haaren vor, der steppte” (*Brücke* 110). Özdamar’s Istanbul-Berlin trilogy as a whole can be read as a self-authorizing *Bildungsroman* for its author-narrators. The closing pages of *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserai* already offer the tentative beginnings of a authorial genealogy with names scratched into the desks of the narrator’s high school classroom (Beatles, Beethoven [364]) and overheard in students’ conversations (“Der Name machte mir Angst. Wie schrieb man Mozart?” [366]). Representing worlds of potential new experience, these larger-than-life names provide the launching pad for the narrator’s initial migration from Turkey to Germany.

²¹ See Yildiz 165-68 on the recoding of German in Özdamar’s work.

bist müde von der Reise, leg deinen Kopf auf meine Schulter und schlaf etwas” (247). These words echo a song lyric that, according to a September 1977 diary entry, she had recently learned from her American lover: “Steve gab mir täglich Englischunterricht. [...] Ich lernte den Satz: ‘Can I put my head on your shoulder?’ Ich glaube, er ist von den Beatles” (231). For those familiar with *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn*, of course, it also echoes that novel’s subway conversation between the narrator and the German.²² The lyric is in fact from Paul Anka’s 1959 song, “Put Your Head On My Shoulder,” which was famously covered by The Lettermen in 1968 and has nothing whatsoever to do with the Beatles. The fact that the narrator gets the song’s origin wrong matters only in the sense that it doesn’t matter at all: as *Seltsame Sterne* makes abundantly clear, cultural producers and products exist to be adapted, stars to be integrated into new creative galaxies. Significantly, we never discover whether the narrator actually puts her head on Besson’s shoulder, but in the ceaseless exchange of cultural capital—even in something as simple as a popular song lyric—and the migration of a singularly tender expression of connection and acceptance from one figure to another, the infinitely generative commingling of love and work posited at the outset of the novel finds ultimate affirmation. Still and always in motion both physically and metaphorically, the narrating subject has arrived in a life worth loving, and Özdamar’s literature of migration, her “strange stars” forming new constellations from Hamlet to the Beatles (or more properly, to Paul Anka), assumes its place as a new German and European literature.

²² In addition, the reference to the Beatles returns us back to the schoolgirl in *Leben* reading the names scrawled on her desk.

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