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IN-BETWEENNESS: AESTHETICS AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSLINGUAL FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE

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**IN-BETWEENNESS: AESTHETICS AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY
TRANSLINGUAL FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE**

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**A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines aesthetics of in-betweenness and identity in the works of contemporary authors who migrated to France from non-francophone regions and chose to adopt French for literary expression: Vassilis Alexakis (Greece), Brina Svit (Slovenia), and Andreï Makine (Russia). Common approaches to translingualism tend to focus on the material interaction between languages in the text (plurilingual practices) or on authors' impressions of changing tongues. This dissertation contributes to scholarship by accounting for aesthetic forms of in-betweenness that have been overshadowed by the bilingual lens. Throughout its three case studies, it argues that the original tension between native and adopted languages is explored under new poetic guises that are not limited to the thematization of bilingualism and migration. This project is informed by the reception and marketization of translingual literature in France. Specifically, it examines how the authors respond to the nation-state's conditional hospitality and engage with reception in their own texts.

The first chapter argues that in Vassilis Alexakis' autobiographic *Paris-Athènes* (1989), the text's polyphonic character resides in the narrator's ability to act as the creator and critic of his own text, rather than in the interaction between Greek and French languages. The second chapter on Brina Svit's novel *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007) demonstrates that, by structurally imitating Argentine tango in writing, the tension typically found between native and adopted languages is transformed into an intermedial dialogue between literature and dance. Rereading autobiographic *Moreno* in light of *Coco Dias* brings to the fore an intersubjective dimension of Svit's translingualism as being beyond traditional communities and conventional affiliations. The third chapter argues that Andreï Makine's *Le Testament français* and *Alternance* (2011) – the

latter written under his heteronymic identity Gabriel Osmonde – share an aesthetic quest for a poetic language of in-betweenness, despite the absence of the habitual Franco-Russian paradigm in the second novel.

My dissertation reveals a tendency to convert linguistic displacement into an aesthetic position of in-betweenness that – rather than being reconciled – is recreated to assert linguistic freedom and test the limits of language by acting on its perception. Collectively, these three case studies call attention to the malleability and instability of translingual postures that challenge the writers’ status as “assimilationist” figures in reception.

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“If identity is shaped by language, then monolingualism is a deficiency disorder. It limits our versions of self, society, and universe.”

– Steven Kellman, *Translingual Imagination*

“The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.”

– Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the European Commission gathered eleven intellectuals¹ from various cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds to advise on fostering an intercultural dialogue with reference to multilingualism.² In the same year, the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, created the controversial Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development to consider questions of national cohesion. According to Simon Patrick, this short-lived institution confirmed that “the identity of immigrants and their descendants is subject to a range of expectations, questions, and, all too often, suspicions” (“French National Identity and Integration: Who Belongs to the National Community?” 2). That these two events occurred in the same year underscores an ongoing tension between the fear of losing a distinct, however mythical, national identity and the need to negotiate transcultural societies across the EU borders. One may observe a similar strain between linguistic nationalism (as tied to the nation-state model) and the reality of multilingual communities. This unfolds against the overarching presence of English as the new

¹ Chaired by Amin Maalouf, it included writers, philosophers, and journalists from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_07_972

lingua franca. Globalization has brought to the fore the relative normalization of living beyond one language and national identity, which has been in historical conflict with the monolingual project of nation-building. Yet it also produced a new concept of monolingualism; one that favors a fast-paced industry of translatability in the face of global exchanges and global readership. Contemporary authors from non-francophone countries who write in French – designated as “translinguals” – are uniquely placed to explore the aesthetic, social, and identitary implications of mono- and multilingualism in this fluctuating environment.

Translingualism is not a historically new phenomenon, and a plethora of writers have famously adopted French for their literary expression. For modernist authors like Tristan Tzara, Samuel Beckett, and Eugene Ionesco, language did not function as a mere vehicle of narration; it was scrutinized in an experimental manner that pushed its limits and generated new forms. The international group of Dadaists worked to supplement and destabilize language through visual, sound, and simultaneous poetry, delivered in several languages at once. The Theater of the Absurd adopted “unwording of the world”³ practices through which they sought to deconstruct language and reach beyond its bounds. It is undeniable that the historical avant-garde has paved the way for contemporary translingual authors, though the latter entertain a different rapport with the French language. In the late 20th and beginning of the 21st-centuries, this phenomenon unfolds in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the expansion of the European Union, increased mobility, and globalization. In light of the transcultural turn of French studies, these writers further contribute to understanding the insufficiencies of the “national” model with regard to personal and literary forms of affiliation.

³ I am borrowing this term from Carla Locatelli’s book entitled *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett’s Prose After the Nobel Prize*, 1990.

In scholarship, translingual literature is no longer an uncharted territory, as evidenced by the wide variety of publications, conferences, and dissertations over the last two decades. Neither is it possible to call these writers “marginalized” in France: many of them have received important literary awards and participate in literary debates (e.g. on the “world literature in French”). Makine in particular has been admitted into the French Academy as its most recent Immortal, and his works are now integrated into school and university curricula. Though these writers are now viewed as a distinct literary corpus in its own right⁴ (as opposed to a series of isolated cases),⁵ they continue slipping through methodological cracks. Steven Kellman coined and defined the term “translingualism” as “the phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one” (*Translingual Imagination* ix).⁶ Though he did not use affectively charged terms such as “native” or “mother” tongue, the notion of a “non-primary” language remains unstable. It must be noted that Kellman did not distinguish between authors who ‘inherited’ the language in the wake of colonial imperialism and those who chose it for more personal or aesthetic reasons. As a result, his roster of translingual writers includes Tahar Ben Jelloun, Chinua Achebe, and Abdelkébir Khatibi alongside Romain Gary, Vassilis Alexakis, and

⁴ There is a mutual sense of intra- and extratextual awareness between contemporary translingual writers of French expression. For example, in *La vie d'un homme inconnu* (2009), André Makine indirectly critiques one of Milan Kundera's novels. In explaining what translingualism means to her, Brina Svít directly references Kundera while implicitly positioning herself against Makine. Vassilis Alexakis has commented on Nancy Huston's practice of self-translation.

⁵ I am referring to Robert Jouanny's designation of translingual writers as “singularités francophones.” See Jouanny's *Singularités francophones*, 2000.

⁶ It has become commonplace to use the notion of translingualism as a general metaphor for writing. Many argue that all literature is produced in a “foreign” tongue, since thoughts are “translated” into a written, stylized discourse: “Autant dire qu'un écrivain est toujours un étranger dans la langue où il s'exprime, même si c'est sa langue natale” (Deleuze *Critique et clinique* 138). In my dissertation, I abstain from universalizing this concept. It is also important to note that “translingualism” is one of the many terms and lenses applied to literary production in a non-native tongue. Others include: “exophonic” (more common in German scholarship), “cosmopolitan,” “migrant,” “allophonic,” “exilic,” “diasporic,” “nomadic,” etc.

Hector Bianciotti.⁷ It is important to recognize hegemonic structures of power historically associated with French in postcolonial literature, which do not characterize translingual production from non-francophone territories. The former often dissects the colonial relationship, giving voice to previously suppressed people and analyzing the implications of ‘inheriting’ French. While expressing preoccupation about their native tongues, many authors from former colonies undertook the task of appropriating “la langue de l’adversaire d’hier” through practices of language negotiation and subversion (Djebar, *L’Amour, la fantasia* 300).⁸ Though this differential relationship to French is not dichotomous, for translingual writers of non-francophone origin, this language often carried a divergent ideological value; it demystified and released them from the weight of their ‘mother tongues,’ literary traditions, and traumatic memories. As a result, the notion of choice became a crucial distinction in understanding translingualism.

To further demarcate the paradigm, scholars concluded that most of these authors started to write in a “non-primary” language following migration at an adult age. Their childhood – this privileged space of emotional and identity development – was spent outside of the French language.⁹ “Mon français n’a pas d’enfance,” wrote Russian-born Luba Jurgenson in *Au lieu du péril. Récit d’une vie entre deux langues* (98). In a neurolinguistic study *Emotions and Multilingualism* (2005), Aneta Pavlenko advanced that the “L1 effects stem from affective linguistic conditioning in childhood when languages are learned with the full involvement of the limbic system and emotional memory” (22). In contrast, when a language is learned later in life, the process relies on “explicit memory,” producing weaker affective responses (22). Due to this,

⁷ Kellman’s book *Translingual Imagination* (2000) contains a roster of writers that does not historically contextualize what “translingualism” means across different eras. It includes writers from the early-modern period, going as far back as Ancient Rome.

⁸ Some authors, such as Haitian-born Dany Laferrière with his *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008), have little interest in adopting the ‘postcolonial’ approach in his work.

late bilinguals may change their behaviors when they switch languages and even have an impression of inhabiting two separate worldviews.

In this dissertation, I draw on the modified definition of translingualism to designate writers from non-francophone spaces who chose to write in French and who adopted this language at a later age. It consists of three case studies, combining iconic figures of translingualism in France, such as Vassilis Alexakis and Andreï Makine, with less known figures, such as Brina Svit and Makine's heteronymic persona Gabriel Osmonde. Each chapter focuses on the works by a translingual author from a different European country: *Paris-Athènes* (1989) by Vassilis Alexakis (Greece); *Moreno* (2003) and *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007) by Brina Svit (Slovenia); *Le Testament français* (1995) by Andreï Makine / *Alternance* (2011) by Gabriel Osmonde (Russia).¹⁰ While some of the texts are widely read, others are less recognized. Though they vary thematically, in each novel, the first-person narrator is an intratextual writer either in the process of writing or anticipating doing so. Whether or not they thematize translingualism, each text explores questions of language, literature, and identity. Chronologically, I limit my study to the post-1989 period. It starts with the beginning of a new era as marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and "the first crack of the Iron Curtain,"¹¹ and ends before the surge of nationalist tendencies in the second decade of the 21st century.

Vassilis Alexakis' first stay in France was academic in its nature; he traveled from Athens to Lille to study journalism. When the oppressive Regime of the Colonels took over his native Greece in 1967, he sought refuge in France, choosing to remain there after the collapse of the

¹⁰ Gabriel Osmonde is Andreï Makine's heteronym. Since 2001, the writer has been publishing under both names.

¹¹ Previous studies adopted broader historical spans. Anne-Rosine Delbart's monograph *Les Exilés du langage: un siècle d'écrivains français venus d'ailleurs* (2005) focused on the 1911-2000 period. Véronique Porra's *Langue française – langue d'adoption: une littérature invitée entre création, stratégies et contraintes* (2011) examined the period from 1946 to 2000.

military junta. Alexakis' first novels were written directly in French. Overtime, he went back to his first language and started writing interchangeably both in French and Greek, translating his works from one idiom to another. Born in Slovenia, Brina Svit moved to Paris in 1980 after marrying a Frenchman. Prior to emigration, she was already an established author in Slovenia. She continued writing in Slovenian during her first two decades in France while also producing radiophonic plays and short films in French. Today, Svit writes in French and independently translates her work into Slovenian. Andreï Makine emigrated from Russia in 1987 at the dawn of Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. He has never published in Russian and writes exclusively in French under the names of Makine and Gabriel Osmonde.¹²

My dissertation is informed by the reception of translingual literature in France; specifically, I examine how the authors in my corpus engage explicitly and implicitly with critical and media reception within their own texts. Combining close reading and sociological analysis of reception, my dissertation aims to answer two central questions. First, what are the strategies for approaching translingual aesthetics in the works that are predominantly monolingual? Secondly, how do these authors explore the identitary and aesthetic implications of translingualism in ways that challenge common interpretations that would pigeonhole them as cultural ambassadors or search for "foreign" accents in their work? Throughout my three case studies, I argue that the original state of in-betweenness – born of the tension between the author's native and adopted languages – is explored under new poetic guises that often transcend writers' personal bilingualism. I posit that this "in-betweenness" is a deliberate process of manipulating and negotiating the liminal space between two forms of expression, which is ultimately concerned with

¹² According to Steven Kellman's typology, Alexakis and Svit are "ambilingual translinguals," those "who have written important works in more than one language" (*Translingual Imagination* 12). Andreï Makine is a "monolingual translingual," meaning he writes "in only a single language but one other than [his] native one" (*Ibid*).

acting on the perception of language rather than on its form. Senses of selfhood are explored in this intermediary space, outside of reductive native/adopted binaries and traditional forms of belonging. The authors in my corpus do not infuse monolingual texts with meaningful forms of multilingualism or produce discernable echoes of their first languages in French. This absence of material means of destabilizing language (e.g. code-switching, formalist play, or language hybridity) has in part contributed to their reputation as “orthodox” writers holding up France’s national imaginary, which I will critique in this project.

In the following, I will acknowledge related critical concepts to demonstrate the conceptual necessity for my “in-betweenness” frame. Some scholars use the term “l’entre-deux” to broadly situate a translingual work between two languages and two cultures. Contemplating whether there are inherent qualities that distinguish translingual texts from their monolingual counterparts produced in a “native” tongue, Steven Kellman advances that a text in a non-primary language possesses a translingual sensibility – “a tragic awareness of the inadequacy of any one language, a utopian aspiration to overcome the plight of Babel through embrace of all languages” (“The Translingual Sensibility: A Conversation between Steven G. Kellman and Ilan Stavans”¹⁵). Beyond this poetic acknowledgement, however, the concept remains elusive, and the two authors do not address how it may function as a critical instrument of analysis. Lise Gauvin coined the influential term “la surconscience linguistique,” which she defined as a “[d]ésir d’interroger la nature même du langage et de dépasser le simple discours ethnographique” (*D’une langue à l’autre* 6). Gauvin acknowledges that the task of any writer is to reinvent the language at their disposal; however, for her, the diglossic situation of francophone writers allows them to go deeper into the “univers du relatif, de l’a-normatif” (9). For them, the relationship to French is a much more unstable terrain that is constantly renegotiated between two extremes, “l’intégration pure et simple

au corpus français et la valorisation excessive de l'exotisme" (9).¹³ The conceptual framework of "in-betweenness" offers an effective approach to translingual texts as I explore more than a general awareness of the potential and limits of language. It allows me to shed light on the way in which translingual authors reframe linguistic displacement into a more flexible aesthetic paradigm that does not rely on multilingualism and reaches beyond the thematization of the translingual practice. The tension between native and adopted languages is transformed and rechanneled to assert linguistic freedom and test the limits of language by acting on its perception.

Lastly, it would be remiss not to note that, in anthropological, cultural, and postcolonial studies, "in-betweenness" designates a paradigm for negotiating differences between cultures and producing new, hybrid communities and identities. It is most commonly associated with Homi Bhabha's elusive and emancipatory "Third Space" and hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). In a 1990 interview with Rutherford, Bhabha combined these two concepts in the following manner: "hybridity to me is the third space that enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structure of authority, new political initiatives" ("The Third Space: An Interview with Homi Bhabha"). Bhabha is more concerned with spaces of cultural exchanges and merges that undo notions of homogeneity and subvert authority. While concerned with questions of transculturalism, this dissertation also considers "in-betweenness" as an aesthetic concept in which the tension between two forms of expression – whether it is between native and adopted, real and poetic languages, or between different semiotic systems – never reaches completion.

¹³ Gauvin's list of francophone writers does not include translingual cases, as they do not come from regions where French is part of a diglossic environment. It may be argued, however, that they navigate a privately diglossic state while in France.

I. Translingualism in French and Francophone Studies

In the last two decades, a tide of new definitions was generated to engage with translingualism in a more systematic way: “écrivains venus d’ailleurs” (Delbart 2005), “écrivains allophones d’expression française,” “la littérature ‘invitée’” (Porra 2011), “la littérature en français langue étrangère” (Ausoni 2013), etc. Oscillating uneasily between French and Francophone studies, translingual authors problematize this dichotomy and call for a fundamental rethinking of existing literary classifications. In response to this uncertainty, a broad spectrum of views has emerged, ranging from those who argue that translingual works do not belong in the field of francophone studies to others who suggest that all writing in French should be simply considered French. Some discuss translingualism as part of renegotiating what French literature means in the global sense, emancipating it from its own teleological narrative.¹⁴ While French literary institutions are prone to absorbing translingual writers into their fold by making them “French” (whether to rival with the hegemonic influence of global English or to reassert the “universal” qualities of French), authors from postcolonial spaces – stuck in the “francophone” zone – are quick to point out the disparity, questioning the arbitrariness and ethnic bias of this designation. Translingual authors, in turn, comment on problems in reception that categorize them as ambassadors to their native countries and exoticize them in ways that are also true for authors from former colonies.

Dominique Combe’s *Poétiques francophones* (1995) was among the first scholarly texts to include translingual authors into the sphere of francophone literature. In response to this, Michel Beniamino argued that, for methodological reasons, they should be excluded from the francophone

¹⁴ See Susan Suleiman’s and Christie McDonald’s *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, 2010.

corpus because translingual writers do not offer “une réponse [...] à la situation d’un groupe social possédant le français dans son répertoire linguistique” (*La Francophonie littéraire* 312).¹⁵ Beniamino suggested that combining different historical traditions of relating to French means “s’interdire *de facto* une définition de l’objet de recherche” (75). In other words, writers that migrate from countries where French is not an official or vehicular language cannot be considered “francophone.” In his later work, Combe acknowledges that translingual writers’ choice of French is of a more individual nature. Without excluding them from the definition of “francophone literature,” he nonetheless points out that, technically, “il n’existe pas de francophonie irlandaise, argentine ou hongroise, dans le sens où l’on parle d’une francophonie haïtienne, libanaise, suisse ou même roumaine” (*Les Littératures francophones* 8). It must be noted, however, that his insistence on writers’ individual paths into the French language underplays the historical tradition of France’s soft power in Europe. Greece, Slovenia, and Russia in particular are all part of France’s network of cultural influence.

Translingual writers are also associated with the highly mediated manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde en français,” published on March 15, 2007 in *Le Monde* and co-signed by 44 writers of diverse francophone and non-francophone origins (including Nancy Huston, Brina Svit, Esther Orner, and Dai Sijie). An ambitious announcement of the “Copernican revolution” and the “death of francophonie” were partially associated with the fact that most 2006 literary prizes were attributed to foreign-born writers. This proclamation of replacing the center-periphery dynamic with a constellation – in which French would be liberated from an “exclusive pact with the nation” – seems unaware of an internal incongruity within its own claim. In order to denounce the centrality of France, it paradoxically relies on France’s institutional practice of attributing literary

¹⁵ While this critical approach includes France (due to the presence of authors of regional languages that respond to the centralized role of French), it leaves translingual writers in suspension.

prices. Though the manifesto later came under heavy criticism,¹⁶ it succeeded in reigniting a discussion about the problematic separation between French and francophone literature and its biases. It has now become commonplace to cite the manifesto in publications on translingual studies to emphasize the significance of translingual authors in France.

This dissertation includes France within the francophone space and considers translingual writers of French expression as a marker of the country's internal plurality. If the writers in my corpus are "francophone," it is predominantly in the neutral sense of the word (French-speaking) that is not limited to France's former colonies. It must be noted, however, that the "francophone" designation, still broadly used in academic circles, is more of a hindrance when it comes to translingual literature. The fundamental issue with the French/francophone dichotomy is that France is paradoxically at the center of francophonie yet not a part of it. Operating at an interstitial space between the global and the national, translingual authors problematize the center/periphery paradigm inscribed in the "francophone" term. They lay bare the inevitable shortcomings of methodological classifications that attempt to give them fixed positions. By adding the "translingual" designation to my title, I also insist on the global scope of this phenomenon. In Alain Ausoni's words, "[p]arler de *translinguisme littéraire*, c'est aussi favoriser le dialogue avec des recherches menées entre autres sur le *literary translingualism*, la *Translinguale Literatur* ou le *translinguismo litterario*" (*Mémoires d'outre-langue* 28).

¹⁶ For more on this, see Véronique Porra, "Malaise dans la littérature-monde (en français) : de la reprise des discours aux paradoxes de l'énonciation," *Recherches & Travaux*, 76 (2010): 109-129.

II. Beyond the Literature of Exile

“Exile” is an umbrella term for a variety of experiences, often synonymous with such notions as “migration” and “expatriation.” To argue that the translingual authors in my corpus do not belong to the phenomenon of exilic literature, the term must be clearly defined. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, exile is “the state or a period of forced absence from one's country or home,” caused by economic, religious, or sociopolitical reasons.¹⁷ The figure of an exilic writer looms large in literary history. Joseph Brodsky's famously defined one as a “retrospective and retroactive being” who, “[e]ven having gained the freedom to travel, [...] will stick in his writing to the familiar material of his past, producing, as it were, sequels to his previous works” (“The Condition We Call Exile” 4). Making a distinction between exile and expatriation, Ahmad Rasmi Qabaha posits that exile is “a political rather than an artistic concept. Exile is when you can't go back” (*Exile and Expatriation in Modern American and Palestinian Writing* 211). Though the two groups may share an experience of solitude and displacement, the fundamental difference between exiles and expatriates is a temporary or permanent impossibility of return (4). Alexakis, Svit, and Makine did not experience this violent rupture. Neither do they succumb to the “pathos of exile,” which, according to Edward Said, is “in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of question” (“Reflections on Exile” 179). For the writers discussed in this project, homecoming was not out of question, and “home” was neither lost nor blocked by an impenetrable barrier.

A writer is not exilic simply because he/she has been exiled but because it impacts their work: literature becomes an aesthetic terrain for negotiating this experience. In other words, exilic

¹⁷ My definition excludes universalizing interpretations of “exile” as a metaphor for the human condition. For circumstances where departure is of elective nature, the notion of expatriation may be more appropriate.

literature responds to the condition of being an exile. According to Claudio Guillén, “[a] certain kind of writer speaks of exile, while another learns from it” (“On the Literature of Exile and Counter-Exile” 272). The “pathos of exile” may be expressed through a narrative of rootlessness, a melancholic urge to gaze back, or an inability to connect with the new environment. Conversely, the shock of separation may prompt exilic writers to treat displacement as creative release and a liberating invitation to set up “residence in homelessness.”¹⁸ These are not mutually exclusive, and some authors experience a combination of both postures. Though the novels by Alexakis, Svit, and Makine/Osmonde are entwined with notions of mobility and border-crossing, I posit that their writing is not bound to this two-pronged paradigm of exile.

It is worth noting that while Alexakis left Greece during the military junta that prevented him from writing, he chose not to return home after the fall of the Colonels’ regime. Indeed, in the autobiographic *Paris-Athènes*, the narrator remarks that he has “no excuse for writing in French”: “je ne viens pas d’un pays francophone, ma langue maternelle n’est pas uniquement une langue orale, je n’ai pas rompu mes liens avec elle, enfin, il y a bien longtemps que la Grèce s’est débarrassée des colonels” (20). Insisting on personal agency rather than being a victim of external circumstances, Alexakis emphasizes that he was not forced to stay in France or write in French. While the initial moment of departure was political, his subsequent decision not to return to Greece was voluntary. Having a home in France and Greece, the narrator goes back and forth between the two so frequently that he confuses the locations and begins buying products in Greece for his fridge in Paris, and vice versa.

Similarly, in *Moreno*, Brina Svit playfully acknowledges: “En tout cas, j’ai toujours circulé librement entre les deux pays, notre voiture connaît la route par cœur. Néanmoins la position de

¹⁸ Vilém Flusser. “Taking Up Residence in Homelessness.” *Writings*. University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 91–103.

l'exilé est bien plus propice et confortable pour la littérature que la mienne dans la voiture qui connaît la route entre Paris et Ljubljana toute seule..." (96). Her admission that exile is a more "fruitful" and "comfortable" posture for writing points to an awareness of a rich literary history in which exile, in Galin Tihanov's words, is "an exceptional experience that embodies suffering or creativity of supposed unique intensity" ("De-Romanticizing Exile" 231). Instead, Svit de-dramatizes and, indeed, de-romanticizes her migrant situation. She distances herself from the lineage of displaced, exilic writers and – despite its emotional appeal – declines to explore the tropes of uprootedness. Svit does not define herself by her point of origin (Slovenia) nor the point of destination (France), settling instead in the ambulatory space of her moving car. Furthermore, in the autobiographic *Moreno*, Svit's narrator emphasizes that the geographic and symbolic path back to her native country was never barred after immigration. Even during the communist era, Slovenia was not separated from the West by the Iron Curtain. Svit crossed the border between Yugoslavia and Italy just to get a good cappuccino and noted that the only time she visited the capital Belgrade was simply to return an umbrella to a man in whom she was romantically interested.¹⁹ Overall, her position echoes Tihanov's plea to move "away from the value-laden language of exile towards the descriptive, non-evaluative, 'value-free' vocabulary of transnationalism..." (231). By virtue of minimizing an emotional attachment to her homeland and reducing the significance of border-crossing, Svit recognizes a sense of belonging that transcends a single nation state without resulting in a hyphenated cultural identity.

Andreï Makine's posture is harder to grasp due to its textual and contextual instability. The writer grew up in the Soviet Union. He left the USSR five years prior to the collapse of the Soviet

¹⁹ In her 2014 essay in *La Nouvelle revue française*, Brina Svit reaffirms her idea that cosmopolitanism is not determined by one's geographic location: "C'est un état d'esprit. On peut être cosmopolite sur les hauteurs de Trieste et provincial à Paris" (34).

Union that permanently brought the Iron Curtain down. In 1985, during a professional trip to France, he chose to remain in the country and requested political asylum. Having situated Makine's appeal for a refugee status in the context of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) – a period of relative “democratization” of the communist party, when many dissidents were returning to the USSR – Nina Nazarova underscored the idiosyncrasy of his request.²⁰ The writer portrayed his decision as a rejection of the country's increasing materialism and cultural decline, which ostensibly accompanied the Soviet Union's transition towards capitalism. In Makine's own words, the country no longer reflected his values: “I didn't leave Russia, Russia left me” (qtd. in Fairweather, “Through the Iron Curtain to Paris”). Though his novels often take place in the Soviet Union and his characters can sometimes be characterized as exilic, as an author, Makine is in a privileged position of being able to distance himself from the literary shadows of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. He often speaks out on political issues, particularly on those pertaining to Russia's reputation in Europe, all the while remaining virtually unknown in his home country. What further complicates Makine's image is his invention of a heteronymic alter-ego Gabriel Osmonde – a French writer whose works are completely removed from all notions of Russianness, the East-West rapport, or cultural integration.

Alexakis, Svit, and Makine are free to circulate between their native and adopted countries in the absence of the Iron Curtain and expanding borders of the Schengen zone. They are not bound by the centripetal pull of their countries of origin; some, as I have shown, remain connected to but not defined by their homelands. Their writing is not home-bound, because the notion of “home”

²⁰ In her book *Andreï Makine: deux facettes de son œuvre* (2005), Nina Nazarova argues that Makine's successful academic career and his ability to join the Soviet delegation traveling to France attests to a “loyauté envers le système communiste.” She suggests that Makine's credentials point to some unavoidable conformism with regard to the Soviet system: “Hypocrite? Oui, mais surtout conformiste. Tout le pays était conformiste, y compris Makine, avec sa carrière brillante et sa tournée en France, un rêve inaccessible tant de ces collègues” (18).

itself is redefined. These writers expand beyond the Romantic thought of rootedness and explore more complex and at times unstable forms of affiliation. I suggest that Adrian Wanner's conclusion about Russian-born translingual writers in the postmodern era is applicable to the contemporary translingual phenomenon as a whole: "Rather than the common trope of victims of adverse historical and political circumstances, these new émigrés are better described as agents who are capitalizing on opportunities for personal enhancement. In this case, they are part of a larger stream of transnational migrants in today's global economy" (*Out of Russia* 4).

III. Reception of Translingual Authors in France

My dissertation builds on scholarship that acknowledges the importance of sociological approaches to literature and recognizes the interdependence between literature and the conditions of its production and reception. One of the underlying frameworks in this project is Jérôme Meizoz's notion of literary posture – a performance that "déborde l'identité de l'homme civil" and "renvoie à la face publique ou au 'personnage' [...] de celui qui se donne comme écrivain" (*L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* 63). I therefore distinguish between the writer as a real, biographical persona and the image of an author, fashioned within and outside of text. This image is constructed through the author's non-verbal self-presentation in public appearances, positions taken on issues in literature and other fields (acceptance speeches, etc.), and autobiographical diegetic utterances. In a self-perpetuating cycle, authors' intra- and extratextual self-fashioning shapes how readers engage with texts and impacts how French literary institutions receives them. Authors negotiate their literary posture in dialogue with critics, media, editors, and publishers in an ongoing struggle for control of the narrative. It is especially true in the Information Age in

which technology-assisted dissemination of information has profoundly changed the nature of communication and how we read and write literature. Books are publicized and reviewed online and on social networks, and more authors maintain carefully curated online profiles and websites. In this climate, as Véronique Porra makes it clear, “la possibilité de l’existence d’un lecteur ‘non informé’ semble réduite à néant” (*Langue française, langue d’adoption* 263).

Books by translingual authors are packaged, advertised, scrutinized, and reviewed in a way that sets them apart from French writers. For instance, in *Paris-Athènes*, Alexakis commented that his publisher did not know whether his novels should be placed with French or Greek literature. In 2017, across FNAC bookstores in Paris, Svit’s new collection of short stories *Nouvelles définitions de l’amour* was shelved together with “new releases from Central Europe,” all of which were translated texts. This adjacent placement tied Svit to her geographic origin despite the fact that her book was written directly in French and had nothing to do with Central Europe. Makine struggled to get published in French due to his strong Russian accent that many publishers feared would seep into his work. He had to pretend to be the author of Russian manuscripts and invented French translators who ostensibly translated his work. Many translingual writers, especially in their early years of visibility, were introduced to the general public through the prism of their foreign origins and an emphasis on their choice to write in French. These two elements of otherness became cornerstone features of their marketability. It is therefore impossible to consider translingual works in a Proustian manner of complete divorce between the text and the author’s biography. As I will show in my analysis of Makine, this does not always passively happen to writers, as some are more implicated in the creation of a public authorial image than others.

In an etymological reconstruction of the term “hospitality,” Émile Benveniste shed light on the homonymic duality of its root to address the historically ambivalent position of a stranger.

He recognized two possible roots within the term “hospitality”: *hostis* (“guest”) and *hospes / hosti-pet* (“guest master”), the latter carrying an identity. Its development across multiple languages led to the discovery of a connection between “guest” and “enemy,” which of both derived from “stranger.” Benveniste thus concludes: “The notion ‘favorable stranger’ developed to ‘guest’; that of ‘hostile stranger’ to ‘enemy’ (75). The rise of nation-states transformed a relationship of reciprocity, which was at the core of the original, primitive meaning of “hostis,” into an attitude of mistrust. Hostility thus dwells in the shadow of hospitality. Drawing on Benveniste’s study, Jacques Derrida reaffirms that the term “hospitality” contains an internal contradiction, as it is parasitized by its opposite – hostility. He therefore coined the term “hostipitalité” to bring to the surface the hidden, etymological tension of the *hostis* root and comment on the interlaced ideas of hostility and hospitality within an act of receiving someone (“Hostipitalité”). Derrida shows how this form of conditional hospitality “interdit en quelque sorte de passer par le seuil qu’elle semble permettre passer” (39). For Derrida, an act of hosting imposes the need to hold the guest to certain obligations, to keep him from doing harm, and to prevent possible confusion of roles. In the history of nation sovereignty, an act of hosting involves regulating the presence of the stranger and protecting the distinction between what is inside and what is outside. In *Les exilés du langage* (2005), Anne-Rosine Delbart issues a warning: “Attention à ne pas s’éloigner des plates-bandes énonciatives que la critique et le public ont imparties aux écrivains invités! Sinon, gare aux foudres du pays d’accueil, prenant volontiers des attitudes de mécène trahi” (156).²¹ Her ironic depiction of France as a “betrayed” national patron or benefactor implies a transactional relationship with

²¹ Mirjam Tautz’ study of journalistic reviews of several translingual authors in France confirms that its “domestic” apparatus of reception does not assess translingual authors in the same way as French writers. See Tautz, “La migration comme critère dans la réception de Milan Kundera et d’Andreï Makine dans la presse française” in *La littérature “française” contemporaine: Contact de cultures et créativité*. Eds. Ursula Mathis-Moser and Birgit Mertz-Baumgartner, 2007.

terms and conditions attached. When designated as “guests” or “venus d’ailleurs,” translingual writers are othered along the national lines (that they seek to blur or move away from) and are implicated in the politics of literary hospitality.²² Charles Forsdick confirms this virtual transaction, calling these conditions “tasks”:

Translingual writers often appear to be tasked with defending French culture against perceived decadence and decline. This tendency is evident in the openness of institutions such as the Académie française to authors who have adopted French as their language of expression [...] Such inclusiveness reflects what may be seen as openness of French literature to outside contributions, but also indicates the extent to which acceptance into French literature is filtered and seen to be associated with responsibilities and even indebtedness. (“French Literature as Global Literature” 212)

Some scholars argue that translingual writers have successfully completed these “tasks.” In *The Migrant Canon in the Twenty-First-Century France* (2018), Oana Sabo advances that the popularity of translingual writers was “due in part to strategies of assimilation: they adopted the French language, embedded references to canonical French literature in their work, and promoted France as a land of hospitality, Paris as the world’s cultural capital, and French as a “universal” (clear and invariable language)” (24). In a similar vein, Véronique Porra categorized authors of non-francophone origin as “converts.” She argues that translingual writers adopt centripetal textual strategies through which they integrate themselves into the French literary ‘center.’ This assessment contains a catch-22 dilemma. If these authors speak of their origins, then they produce an “authentic” narrative of foreign lands, which they are expected to provide and which exoticize them. If they turn instead to current events of the adopted country (where they live), it is viewed

²² For example, in journalistic reception, Milan Kundera was castigated for admitting that he does not like particularly enjoy Victor Hugo as well as for referencing European authors over affirming the preeminence of the French canon (*Libération*, “Kundera, l’avis est un roman” 2005).

as yet another gesture of assimilation. Discussing translingual “assimilationist” tactics from a binary perspective, Porra opposed subversive postcolonial strategies of “writing back” and translingual mode of “writing in,” the latter accomplished through “intertextuality of allegiance” and inscriptions into French literary history (“De l’hybridité à la conformité”).

In *Poétiques francophones*, Dominique Combe reminded that postcolonial writers cannot all be reduced to “la “conscience malheureuse” [...] en conflit avec lui-même,” citing Khatibi’s image of “androgyné,” among others, through which authors insist on the complementary nature of their “entre-deux” that cannot be reduced to the space of distress (135). Similarly, translingual writers cannot all be reduced to practices of allegiance and adherence to France’s national values. While I agree with Porra’s basic premise that these writers develop diegetic strategies through which they mediate the “conditions of hospitality,” I argue that this negotiation is more flexible, unstable, and cannot be contained within schematic dichotomies. My dissertation will therefore consider how France’s enthusiasm about “welcoming” translingual writers and the parallel critique of their “assimilationist” writing overshadowed the complexity of their texts. Seeking new ways to subvert a reductive focus on their biographies, these writers explore their identities and translingual in-betweenness in a variety of ways that range from confrontation to evasion.

Alexakis, Svit, and Makine write in full awareness of how they are received and what labels are attached to them. They are cognizant of representational politics and expectations tied to their translingual visibility, which they address directly or indirectly in their texts. In my first chapter, this framing allows me to consider Alexakis’ *Paris-Athènes* as a polemical engagement with reception and agents of contemporary global and national markets. In my second chapter, I trace Svit’s critique of reception from her essay in *Pour une littérature-monde en français* (2007) to her novel *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2011). Following her exasperated response to queries about

the way she inhabits French – “J’en ai marre, il faut trouver autre chose” – I suggest that *Coco Dias* frees Svit from her own biography and opens the space to explore translingual in-betweenness within a new aesthetic paradigm (252). In my last chapter, I discuss Makine’s post-Goncourt literary posture to consider how his invention of Gabriel Osmonde reframed his quest for a poetic language outside of the Franco-Russian binary.

IV. Autobiographical Approach to Translingual Literature

In the early stages, much attention was drawn to the biographic traces in the works of translingual writers, especially those that could explain their choice to write in French. This was accompanied by a wave of publications and interviews in which translingual authors shared testimonies revolving around the same questions: Why do you choose to write in French? What different outcomes does French allow, compared to the native tongue? ²³ As a result, authors’ voices became louder than their work, which, in turn, was read as a way to shed light on these biographic questions. Not only did this approach diminish the aesthetic significance of translingual texts but the authors themselves became weary of being seen in this light. When asked in an interview whether he was a Russian writer of French expression or a French writer of Russian

²³ For analysis of the choice to write in French and its impact on writing, see Olga Anokhina’s introduction to an edited volume *Vivre entre les langues, écrire en français* (2019), Lise Gauvin’s “L’écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues” (1997), and Patrice Martin’s et Christophe Brevet’s (ed). *La langue française vue d’ailleurs. 100 entretiens* (2001) for interviews with authors. See Steven Kellman’s anthology *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft* (2003) for authors’ reflections on translingualism. In her book *Les exilés du langage : un siècle d’écrivains venus d’ailleurs (1919-2000)*, Delbart has an entire section entitled “Pourquoi écrire en français?” This scholarly interest is mirrored in literary journalism. *Le Figaro littéraire* (2009) released an entire dossier “Ces écrivains étrangers qui écrivent en français,” with the beckoning title on the front page: “La langue de Molière continue de séduire des romanciers de tous les pays. De Beckett et Ionesco à Makine et Kundera. Enquête.” Similar publications and radio interviews are abundant, and this phenomenon has not yet exhausted itself. As recently as in 2017, a radio show on France Culture was dedicated to the image of France from abroad, which replayed testimonies by “foreign” writers (<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/cinq-fois/voix-etrangeres>).

origin, Makine responded: "Je suis ce que sont mes livres. C'est tout" (*Europe* 1).²⁴ With this, he refused to subscribe to any given framework or be defined by a particular aspect of his biography.

Addressing the literary value of a translingual autobiography, Alain Ausoni – via Robert Jouanny – pointed out that this “demande autobiographique” was a bidirectional exploration: the external “Qui êtes-vous?” that the authors were submitted to was acutely matched by the internal “Qui suis-je?” (*Mémoires d'autre-langue* 40). Indeed, many contemporary authors, having crossed into a new language and, arguably, into a new authorial identity, articulate this unsettling experience in writing. In order to work through it, translingual writers often thematize their linguistic displacement; hence the predilection for an autobiography. For some, it is the very first book written in French (Brina Svit's *Moreno*); for others, it comes much later in life (Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*).

Because language shapes memories and the way we interact with the world, translingual self-writing offer a new lens for exploring identity and the genre of autobiography.²⁵ In an edited volume *Le choix d'écrire en français* (2016), Sara De Balsi coined the term “translingual discourse” to define, in the narrow sense, authors' introspection on their linguistic non-native status: “Dans un sens plus restreint, on désignera comme discours translingue l'ensemble des énoncés tenus à partir de la position énonciative translingue, à savoir ceux dans lesquels les écrivains parlent de leur condition de translingue” (31).²⁶ This term describes a metadiscursive engagement of translingual literature with its own condition of possibility and its effects on writers'

²⁴ <https://www.europe1.fr/culture/andrei-makine-etre-sous-la-coupole-de-lacademie-francaise-le-depayement-est-enorme-2690200>.

²⁵ This is the subject of Alain Ausoni's monograph *Mémoires d'outre-langue* (2018). In this book, Ausoni argued that, rather than categorizing translingual writers by origin, examining them based on the rapport they entertain with the French language is more fruitful.

²⁶ De Balsi's broader notion of the *translingual discourse* generally encompasses all literature by those who adopted French at a later age.

identity.²⁷ De Balsi views the translingual discourse as a constant variable in an otherwise diverse literary production as well as in scholarly approaches to it. Indeed, the coherence of these diverging authors starts coming together in a corpus of autobiographical writing where the question of linguistic identity is frequently thematized. It must be added that translingual discourse is often a marketable feature of a translingual text that appeals to readerly expectations.

My first chapter focuses on Alexakis' autobiographical *Paris-Athènes*, a more traditional genre for studying translingualism. The second chapter on Brina Svit is a comparative analysis of two texts, *Moreno* and *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*. One is an autobiographical narrative that resists the conventions of translingual self-writing; the other is a novel that does not thematize translingualism. My third and final chapter offers a dialogical reading of Makine's *Testament français*, which is arguably a translingual text par excellence, and Gabriel Osmonde's futuristic novel *Alternance*, completely removed from the Franco-Russian duality. Neither one is an autobiography, though *Le Testament français* has often been read as such, and *Alternance* is, according to the author himself, the most autobiographical of his work. Throughout my dissertation, I balance autobiographical approaches to translingualism with texts that push against preoccupation with authors' identity and personal negotiations of translingualism. This allows me consider aesthetic forms of in-betweenness in several different ways: starting with Alexakis' more

²⁷ With the notion of a "translingual discourse," Sara De Balsi enters an echo chamber in which reverberate several related definitions produced by scholars and authors alike. Lise Gauvin developed the notion of "la surconscience linguistique" in the works of francophone writers. She suggested that at the heart of their identity writing lies "une réflexion sur la langue et sur la manière dont s'articulent les rapports langues/littératures dans les contextes différents" (*D'une langue à l'autre : la surconscience linguistique de l'écrivain francophone*). In her 1994 essay "On Language Memory," Alice Kaplan defined language memoir as "a genre of autobiography that deals simultaneously with questions of language and identity" (59). Jhumpa Lahiri – an American writer who, after an established career in English, published an autobiographic *In altre parole* (2015) in non-native Italian – called her book a "linguistic autobiography" (213). In *Language Learner Narrative: An Exploration of Mündigkeit in Intercultural Literature*, Helen O'Sullivan discusses "language learner narratives," which are based "on the concrete presence of particular signifiers associated with the target language learning situation within the text" (57).

direct exploration of a translingual identity in public and private spheres and moving into poetic articulations of an intermediary language beyond the translingual discourse as well as beyond Franco-Russian and Franco-Slovenian paradigms.

V. In the Mirror Hall of Linguistic -Isms: On (Post)Monolingualism and (Post)Multilingualism

In “translingualism,” the prefix *trans* – meaning “beyond,” “through,” or “over” – begs the question of the implied point of departure. Kellman’s definition concentrates primarily on the writers’ arrival into a “non-primary” language, which leaves room for considering beyond what translingual authors actually move. It is impossible to examine this phenomenon without addressing how it relates to mono- and multilingualism. Historically, multilingualism has a much longer history than monolingualism. In her seminal book *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2013), Yildiz advances that monolingualism coincided with the emergence of modern nation-states, which erased the pre-monolingual memory of multilingual, multiethnic political realms (3). For Yildiz, the “monolingual paradigm” conflates language and ethno-cultural identity, shaping collective and individual notions of identity as a:

key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. (2)

The monolingual paradigm refers to the notion that each person has a single native language (or “mother tongue”) to which one belongs organically. In terms of literature, this means that “it

became unimaginable for many to write in anything but their ‘mother tongue’” (Yildiz 112).²⁸ Analyzing a corpus in German literature, she developed the notion of a “postmonolingual condition,” which contains temporal and critical dimensions: “it signifies the period since the emergence of monolingualism as a dominant paradigm” and also “highlights the struggle *against* the monolingual paradigm” (4). In this framework, mono- and multilingualism exist side-by-side in an uneasy tension, and writers develop multilingual modes of writing that *work through* the self-evident nature of the monolingual condition.

Advancing in a different direction in his monograph *The Invention of Monolingualism* (2016), David Gramling points out that monolingualism – a floating signifier for all practical purposes – has been often used as an exclusivist ideology and a negative foil in discussions that focus on multilingualism. Gramling suggests that monolingualism regenerates itself with a new emphasis on language management through translatability and transposability in global exchanges.²⁹ Focusing on this “translational” form of monolingualism, he puts forth the notion of “postmultilingualism” (the *linguacene*), suggesting that monolingualism is here to stay, as “it is clearly not yet inclined to be waved off the stage by a university professor, nor even by a ‘multilingual turn’ in one or another discipline” (3-4).

If “postmonolingual” writing problematizes the “natural” link between language and identity, then the novels in my corpus certainly exhibit this postmonolingual bend: they undermine the affective underpinnings of the “mother tongue,” especially when it comes to questions of

²⁸ Nowadays, this meticulously constructed principle has become an axiom that most people take for granted. Some translingual authors are not immune to this. Milan Kundera claimed that French has become his new mother tongue, as if breaking away from his native Czech had left him homeless, and there was an imperative to find refuge in another.

²⁹ Gramling further advances that monolingualism has become an emerging model for citizenship (*ius linguarum*), replacing belonging by right of blood or territory (25). In this sense, monolingualism allows to reimagine statehood in the age of cosmopolitan diversity.

identity. Nevertheless, for Yildiz, this type of writing is specifically tied to the “reassertion and reemergence of multilingual practices” (3), which is where the texts I explore diverge. The novels by Alexakis, Svit, and Makine are written in standard French without what I consider to be meaningful applications of multilingualism. In these texts, multilingualism appears in a “shallow” form, to borrow Pandey’s term from *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction* (2015). Non-French words are often italicized, translated, and rendered visible on the page. Even when a text is laced with foreign expressions, they do not appear central to the integrity of the narrative.³⁰ Both Yildiz and Pandey suggest that the presence of multilingualism should not be automatically interpreted as a postmonolingual gesture; multilingual practices can, in fact, reaffirm the monolingual paradigm.

Focusing on stylistic innovation, Marie Dollé inquired whether translingual writers of French expression should be considered as a distinct group. Her answer was both yes and no: “Non parce que rien ne distingue la prose d’Hector Bianciotti de la prose courante; rien ne permet de déceler dans la langue de ses fictions l’origine canadienne de Nancy Huston” (*Les Exilés du langage* 179). Dollé refers to the need to become foreign to one’s literary language, whether it is primary or not. She thus comments on the fact that Nancy does not draw on her native English to produce this literary effect of defamiliarization. Such analysis contains an implicit anticipation that – due to the author’s “foreign” origins – the texts would include stylistic practices connected to

³⁰ It should be noted that this does not refer to the dual works produced via self-translation. A concurrent reading of texts written and translated by the same author produces a different engagement with language than what a single text may allow. My dissertation, however, focuses exclusively on the works written in French.

the writer's native tongue. When this does not occur, translingual writers are perceived as assimilationist and orthodox, producing "une prose sans surprise" (Dollé 180).³¹

Parallel to this, there is a celebratory attitude that a translingual text covertly carries traces of a native tongue. In an article that adopts a panoramic approach to contemporary translingual writing in France, Catherine Douzou writes: "Cette origine étrangère de l'écrivain donne une empreinte particulière au français qui s'écrit alors avec un accent étranger, donnant naissance à une tierce langue subsumant celles que porte en lui l'écrivain né ailleurs" ("La 'légion étrangère' du roman français de la décennie" 112). Together with David Gramling (who comments on Wirth-Nesher's reading of Henry Roth and Mary Antin), I am cautious of scholarship that goes "to inspired lengths to detect 'echoes of another language and culture [...] in so called monolingual prose'" (*The Invention of Monolingualism* 6-7).³² Navigating these diverging interpretations, my dissertation carefully considers the effects of plurilingualism in the text without viewing monolingualism as a "meta-formal constraint" that forcefully curbs authors' plurilingual propensities in writing. I also problematize the "centripetal" interpretation of translingual authors (writing with a purpose of assimilation), as it reduces their oeuvre to a single pursuit. I do not intend to minimize the fact that translingual writers are prone to adopting francophile postures (in my corpus, this specifically pertains to Makine). Instead, I suggest that we consider the multilayeredness of translingual work in which elements of cultural allegiance may be but one of the available (and, sometimes, deceptively straight-forward) points of entry, casting a long shadow

³¹ Assessing the absence of formalist play in translingual works, Catherine Douzou adopts a somewhat patronizing explanation and questions their linguistic competence: it is perhaps because "leur attention à écrire dans une langue qui leur reste moins familière absorbe leur travail formel" ("La 'légion étrangère' du roman français de la décennie" 114).

³² In *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction* (2015), Pandey distinguishes between "deep" and "shallow" forms of textual multilingualism. Examining works by Anglo-Indian writers, she concludes that most cases of multilingualism point to strategies of "re-Englishing" and "multilingualism-lite" (7).

over the deeper meaning of these texts.³³ Throughout the three translingual cases, I consider aesthetic expressions of in-betweenness that can neither be celebrated for their multilingual polyphony nor dismissed as assimilationist for this very absence.

VI. Chapters

Vassilis Alexakis

My first case study explores Vassilis Alexakis' autobiographical *Paris-Athènes* (1989); a text that thematizes a writer's reflection on his trans- and bilingual identity, as well as on linguistic and cultural belonging, writing, and memory. While *Paris-Athènes* received a lot of critical attention, I contribute to scholarship by providing a nuanced reading of the way in which a translingual identity is shaped at the crossroads of an extrospective polemic against France's "rules of hospitality" and an introspective exploration of translingual in-betweenness. The narrator boldly critiques France's literary institution and its monolingual paradigm, asserting his right to write in French, write better than the French, yet not be French. This chapter also takes a closer look at the way this polemic relates to bilingual practices in the text, spatial metaphors of linguistic in-betweenness, and metalinguistic comments on bilingual writing.³⁴ I posit that the polyphonic

³³ In *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (2011), Adrian Wanner expresses a similar concern when it comes to the translingual works of Russian-born writers in France, Germany, and the United States. Asking for a more nuanced reading, he suggests that praising or dismissing an oeuvre based on the recognition of national clichés does not allow to develop "an appreciation of the literariness and the subtleties involved in the translingual construction of a hybrid Russian identity" (*Seeing Russia in French* 14).

³⁴ It is necessary to make a distinction between bilingual and translingual works. A translingual work simply points to the fact that it was written in a writer's non-primary language and does not have to be bilingual.

character of *Paris-Athènes* stems from the narrator's self-doubling as creator and critic of his own text, rather than the material interaction between French and Greek languages.

While contemporary translingual literature is produced in the climate of "French Global", *Paris-Athènes* was published when the critical terms framing the field of transnational and cosmopolitan studies were only being developed. Recontextualizing Alexakis historically, I bring to light his pioneering role in problematizing the ambiguous status of translingual writers of non-francophone origin with regard to national literatures and the global cultural market.

Brina Svit

My second chapter examines Brina Svit's autobiographical *Moreno* (2003) in dialogue with her novel *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007). In *Moreno*, Svit problematizes self-representation as a translingual author while exploring an interpersonal relationship with a migrant worker. *Coco Dias* is a first-person narrative about a French woman learning to dance Argentine tango while preparing to write a novel about her dance partner. It is also Svit's first novel that is completely removed from all things Slovenian. This chapter considers *Moreno* as a narrative that deliberately moves away from conventional tropes of translingual self-writing. It resists the solipsistic "qui suis-je?" approach and turns instead to intersubjectivity and unconventional forms of affiliation in order to articulate the translingual experience. Rereading *Moreno* in light of *Coco Dias* allows a better understanding of the autobiography by focusing on the intersubjective dimension of translingualism as being "beyond" traditional communities.

This chapter also posits that *Coco Dias* offers a new perspective on in-betweenness outside of the Franco-Slovenian rapport and cultural hybridity. It demonstrates that, by seeking to

structurally imitate Argentine tango in writing, its narrator transforms the tension typically found between native and adopted languages into an intermedial dialogue between literature and dance. Intermediality aesthetically displaces translingualism to another form of creative expression, thereby impacting how readers perceive the text.

Andreï Makine (Gabriel Osmonde)

The third and final chapter considers Andreï Makine's novel *Le Testament français* (1995) through comparative analysis with *Alternance* (2011), the latter published under the heteronym Gabriel Osmonde. Makine is a controversial figure in translingual literature, as he is both admired for creating lyrical images of the East-West rapport and severely criticized for capitalizing on his cultural otherness. Within Makine's corpus, the intervention of a literary alter-ego – the heteronymic identity of Osmonde – may be perceived as an escape from his established Franco-Russian persona.

Le Testament français – a story of a Soviet boy growing up with a French grandmother in Siberia and ultimately becoming a writer in France – explicitly addresses translingual poetics. *Alternance*, on the other hand, is a science fiction-inspired narrative about a transnational community that experiments with technology and literature to produce a new, poetic language – alter-language – in order to reimagine the world. By looking at the two novels side-by-side, I show that, despite their striking thematic differences, *Le Testament français* and *Alternance* share the quest for a universal, quasi mythical language that would transcend distinct languages and national forms of belonging. In this search, *Alternance* draws on the tension between real languages and a non-existent idiom of poetic transcendence. Through no longer associated with a

translingual perspective, it reframes an aesthetic project that was pursued through bilingualism in *Le Testament français*. By combining these two novels, I demonstrate that the notion of in-betweenness, which is often tied to the thematization of translingualism, may also be explored in increasingly abstract, poetic ways without the intervention of a foreign language and the native/non-native frame.

“De mon propre visage non plus je ne me souviens pas [...] Les
glaces ne reflètent plus mon image...”
– Vassilis Alexakis, *Paris-Athènes*

CHAPTER 1

« Mais enfin qui est M. Alexakis³⁵ ?”: Seeing in Tongues

I. Introduction

Vassilis Alexakis: Life and Bibliography

Vassilis Alexakis is a key figure in contemporary translingual literature of French expression, whose visibility has been supported by ample critical scholarship³⁶ and literary consecration.³⁷ He has written fifteen novels in addition to several collections of short stories, aphorisms, and drawings. Alexakis was one of the hosts of *France-Culture*’s radio show *Des papous dans la tête* and *Les détraqués* and has directed four films: *Je suis fatigué* (1982), *Nestor Carmides passe à l’attaque* (1984), *La Table* (1989), and *Les Athéniens* (1991). Alexakis’ interest in drawing, filmmaking, and literature attests to his versatile, multifaceted nature as an artist. In an

³⁵ The title was inspired by a passage from *Paris-Athènes* (1989) in which the narrator accidentally comes across a headline in an Athenian newspaper entitled “Mais enfin qui est M. Alexakis?” (295). Referring to an intelligence agency officer involved in a scandal, the title has troubled Alexakis as an uncanny, fortuitous reminder of his own identity quest.

³⁶ In 2001, Variety Moszynski directed a documentary *Vassilis Alexakis, d’une langue à l’autre*, dedicated to the writer’s life between two languages and cultures. In 2011, Marianne Bessy published the first monograph on the author entitled *Vassilis Alexakis: Exorciser l’exil*. In 2006, a journal *Cahiers Vassilis Alexakis*, dedicated exclusively to Alexakis’ oeuvre has been launched.

³⁷ Vassilis Alexakis is the ex-aequo recipient of the Prix Médicis for *La Langue maternelle* (1995). He was also awarded the Prix Albert Camus for *Avant* (1992), the Prix de la Nouvelle de l’Académie Française for *Papa et les autres nouvelles* (1997), and the Grand Prix de l’Académie Française for *Après J.-C* (2007). In 2012, Alexakis received the prestigious Grand Prix de la langue française for the entirety of his oeuvre, and in 2017 – the Médaille de la Renaissance française.

effort to characterize his bilingual authorial identity, the writer has been frequently portrayed as a “Janus moderne,”³⁸ an “apatride,”³⁹ a professional stranger/foreigner, and a wanderer “qui se promène depuis plus de trente ans d’une langue à l’autre.”⁴⁰

Greek by his parents and French by his sons, Vassilis Alexakis was born in 1943 in Athens, Greece. In 1961, having studied French at the Institut d’Athènes and the École des Jésuites, seventeen-year old Alexakis left Greece for the École supérieure de Journalisme de Lille as a stipend recipient. During his reception speech of the Prix Edouard Glissant (2003), Alexakis insisted on his “late learner” status, accentuating that he did not speak French as a child and that he arrived in France without much knowledge of the language.⁴¹ Having completed his studies in 1964, Alexakis returned to his home country to fulfill his military service. In 1968, one year into the ‘Rule of the Colonels,’ the author returned to France, embarking on his second and more permanent stay that has outlasted the duration of the dictatorship in Greece. As Robert Jouanny has aptly pointed out, there was a plethora of reasons inciting the author to settle in France – the initial impossibility to study journalism in Greece, Alexakis’ inability to freely write during the military Junta, and his eventual marriage to a French citizen (“Le vertige d’un romancier entre deux langues” 56). After a career as a journalist and a cartoonist for major French newspapers, it is in France and in French that Alexakis found his literary voice with the publication of his first novel *Le Sandwich* (1974). After the fall of the Junta, the writer resolved the tension between his native and adopted cultures and languages by frequently traveling between Greece and France,

³⁸ Fréris, “Le Dialogue interculturel dans *Paris-Athènes*,” 393.

³⁹ Orphanidou-Fréris, “L’identité ‘apatride’ de Vassilis Alexakis.”

⁴⁰ Alavoine, “Vassilis Alexakis ou le choix impossible entre le grec et le français,” 21.

⁴¹ In a 1996 Gallimard Folio edition of *La Langue maternelle*, a similar editorial strategy was used to highlight Alexakis’ initial foreignness to the language. The paratextual biography included the following information: “À son arrivée à Paris à dix-sept ans, il travaille comme dessinateur humoristique, puis collabore au *Monde* et à d’autres journaux *dès qu’il commence à maîtriser le français*.” The emphasis is mine.

establishing a home in each of the two countries, and – from the literary standpoint – by writing in both languages and translating his own works.

Alexakis' literary reconciliation with his native tongue was triggered after his mother had translated his novel *La tête du chat* (1978) into Greek. *Talgo* (1980/1983) – the first text written in Greek and self-translated into French – marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the author's oeuvre. With this publication, Alexakis initiated what has now become an integral part of his auctorial ethos – alternating between his two languages and producing two versions (extensions) of each text through self-translation. Throughout his literary career, language has been one of the writer's central concerns, as evidenced by the novels' titles: *La langue maternelle* (1995), *Les Mots Étrangers* (2002), *Le Premier Mot* (2010).⁴²

Alexakis' linguistic duality occupies an important role in the paratextual presentation of his work. The evolution of the biographical note on his book covers offers a telling narrative about the framing of his literary posture. With the first publication of *Paris-Athènes* (1989) – the primary source of this chapter – Alexakis' biography was mainly focused on the versatility of his creative skills (novels, radio presentations, drawings, films). The biography to the first edition of *La langue maternelle* (1995) expanded to comment on the author's living situation: "Vassilis Alexakis vit entre Paris et Athènes depuis 1968." After the reception of the Prix Médicis, the novel's second edition triangulated his geographic situation and added a statement about languages: "Depuis le rétablissement de la démocratie dans son pays, il écrit aussi bien en grec qu'en français [...]. Il vit aujourd'hui entre Paris, Athènes et l'île de Tinos en Grèce." Crystallized as part of Alexakis' literary posture, this description has since remained fundamentally unchanged. Readers can

⁴² This has been confirmed in conversation with the author who is currently working on a novel tentatively entitled *Le Dernier mot* (Private interview, Paris, 22 May 2017).

connect this information to Alexakis' narrators whose position often mirrors the paratextual information on the author himself.⁴³

In Alexakis' works, the literary and the real frequently bleed into one another. His narratives tend to adopt a metafictional frame, in which first-person narrators are writers producing the works that readers ostensibly hold in their hands. Alexakis acknowledges the significance of blurring fact and fiction in *Paris-Athènes* – an autobiographic text published in 1989 in French and in 1993 in Greek, following self-translation. Its narrator bemoans the constraints of self-writing within of the genre of autobiography. Calling it a “favourable” outcome, he hopes to pursue his “tentation autobiographique” by crossing over into fiction: “Un texte autobiographique, c'est peut-être un genre de roman écrit sans plaisir. Qui sait ? Cela finira peut-être par ressembler à un roman [...] Si les vents me sont favorables, cela devrait ressembler à un roman” (*PA* 30).⁴⁴ While there is an undoubtable connection between life and writing in the creation of Alexakis' literary persona, it is beyond a facile division between fact and fiction. Though I differentiate between the author (Alexakis) and the intratextual first-person narrator of *Paris-Athènes* (*Alexakis*), the two are connected in the creation of an authorial image. My analysis focuses first and foremost on the intratextual universe of *Paris-Athènes* and the literary posturing that comes from within.⁴⁵ Even the narrative itself, however, constantly strives to reach beyond its own diegetic limits.

⁴³ For more on Alexakis' “flou autobiographique,” see Marianne Bessy's “L'auteur et ses doubles: écriture de soi entre fiction et autobiographie” in *Vassilis Alexakis: exorciser l'exil*, 2011.

⁴⁴ According to the back-cover of *Paris-Athènes* across all editions, it is an autobiographic narrative “aux allures de roman” (Éditions Fayard 1997, Édition Stock 2006, and Gallimard Folio 2007). For the remainder of this chapter, *Paris-Athènes* will be abbreviated as *PA* in citations.

⁴⁵ The narrator of *Paris-Athènes* stresses the singularity of this project with regard to his previous works: “J'ai déjà écrit à la première personne, mais je ne parlais pas nécessairement de moi. [...] je n'étais pas encore prêt à décliner mon identité d'immigré. C'est dire que je me suis souvent dévisagé, mais toujours à travers un masque” (*PA* 30).

Paris-Athènes is a kaleidoscopic story in which the narrator reflects on his childhood in Greece, his life-altering departure for France, his relationships, initiation into writing, his dreams and insecurities, as well as his frustrating, yet relentless search for a balanced life between and within his two languages. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), Linda Hutcheon makes a distinction between “diegetically self-aware texts” that are “conscious of their own narrative processes” and “linguistically self-reflective, demonstrating their awareness of both the limits and the powers of their own language” (22-23). *Paris-Athènes* is self-aware on both accounts. The text may be succinctly summarized as an answer to *Alexakis*’ own rhetorical question: “Comment peut-on choisir entre la langue de sa mère et celle de ses enfants?” (*PA* 48). One simply cannot. Exploring translingualism both as a literary and private experience, *Alexakis* works on two fronts simultaneously: to regulate his literary posture against critical presuppositions of what translingualism does and to cultivate an inner sense of translingual wholeness.

In this chapter, I argue that the narrator of *Paris-Athènes* negotiates his translingual sense of selfhood by intertwining distinct authorial modes – polemical, metaphorical, and metafictional – which shape the narrative’s polyphony and its sense of instability. While *Alexakis*’ novels have often been heralded as heteroglossic, a clearer understanding of polyphony must be articulated with regard to the narrative’s intratextual bilingualism. In other words, we need a more robust understanding of what polyphony means in *Paris-Athènes* and where it stems from. Though the quest for self-understanding is articulated in terms of language, I posit that intradiegetic bilingualism (the material rapport between French and Greek in the text) does not contribute to the sense of linguistic instability and polyphony in the text. Instead, it emerges from the narrator’s self-doubling as a creator and a critic of his own text. The two interact through the mediating presence of a third variable – the hegemonic voice of French literary institutions that curate the

public image of translingual authors. Further, I demonstrate that Alexakis was among the first authors to critically engage with the experience of writing in French as a non- native language outside of the postcolonial paradigm. Neither submitting to the external vision of himself nor entirely circumventing it, he rescripts the notion of translingual “singularity” in a rebellious manner that avoids stable categorizations and impacts readers’ perception of language.

Paris-Athènes in the Totality of Alexakis’ Oeuvre

Several scholars have tentatively divided Alexakis’ oeuvre into three creative periods, establishing a chronological coherence in terms of theme and form. Bernard Alavoine views his first three novels – *Le Sandwich* (1974), *Les Girls de City-Boum-Boum* (1975), and *La Tête du chat* (1978) – as an absurd, humorous trio in which Greece is barely perceptible. *Paris-Athènes* belongs to the period of negotiating a linguistic and identitary crisis. Alavoine further posits that beginning in the early 2000’s, Alexakis’ unrestful bilingualism appears to have found a balance, and everything that follows constitutes a new creative phase: “... s’il est encore à la recherche d’une identité, ses rapports avec la langue grecque sont apaisés et son écriture ne reflète plus les conflits intérieurs” (“Vassilis Alexakis ou le choix impossible entre le grec et le français” 19). Categorizing *Paris-Athènes* into a “transcultural stage,” Olympia Antoniadou analyses Alexakian oeuvre as a gradual opening from personal to universal concerns: “Alexakis arrive à concilier la littérature, ce lieu d’accueil et d’exercice de l’altérité avec la globalisation et ses visées d’emprise et de gain, en créant une littérature hors même des limites de la littérature européenne ou francophone visant à la notion de *Weltliteratur* proposée par Goethe selon des paramètres nouveaux” (“Mondialisation et identité: le cas de Vassilis Alexakis” 224, 229). A similar observation was formulated as early as 1998 by

Maria Orphanidou-Frérès who recognized that Alexakis “élève le personnel au général, l’autobiographique au social, le national à l’international” (“Vassilis Alexakis: écrire et se traduire” 118).

With regard to his own work, Alexakis claims that he hardly looks back at previous publications and that he responds to the urgency of the moment without thinking about the internal coherence of his oeuvre.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in an interview for *Le Matricule des Anges* (2007) with Thierry Guichard, he characterized *Paris-Athènes* as a “tournant” that enabled him to remain a translingual author working between French and Greek at a moment when he was ready to abandon his adopted language (“La Grèce en héritage” 18). *Paris-Athènes* is indeed fundamental for understanding Alexakis’ dual literary position in France and in Greece, but any sense of complete reconciliation remains an illusion. A similar note of settlement is credited to other novels only to be undone and started over in later texts. For instance, in *Je t’oublierai tous les jours* (2005), the narrator concludes that *Talgo* enabled him to make peace with himself. Nevertheless, with each newly found source of reconciliation, including Alexakis’ latest novel *La Clarinette* (2015), his translingual narrators continue being haunted by a shadow of irresolution: “Je ne comprenais toujours pas pourquoi j’avais ce poids sur la poitrine: n’avais-je pas réglé mes problèmes d’identité depuis longtemps?” (217-218). Due to the relentless return of this trope, I conclude that – whether Alexakis’ new direction is “grécisation” as speculate Alavoine and Bessy, or globalization, as argues Antoniadou – language and subjectivity remain privileged subjects that are not confined to nor entirely resolved in *Paris-Athènes*. Though my primary source is a narrative that examines the connection between language and self-perception with distinctive acuteness and urgency, it is important to acknowledge that, within Alexakis’ oeuvre as a whole, these themes evolve overtime.

⁴⁶ Personal interview with Vassilis Alexakis. Paris, May 22, 2017.

II. To Resist and Legitimize: Against ‘Monolingual’ Criticism and Demands of National and Global Cultural Markets

Towards a Translingual Self-Perception

In *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss observed two contrasting ways in which primitive societies deal with outsiders: they either devour them or “vomit out the deviant” (287-288). France has historically been a cannibalizing organism that neutralizes foreigners by ingesting them, which translates into assimilationist migration policies. As a result, in the first half of the 20th century, translingual authors such as Apollinaire, Bosquet, and Beckett were quickly “consumed” by the French literary institution and were ultimately promoted as French. From the mid-1980s until around 2000, the country shifted to an “integrationist” policy, which, according to the Migration Policy Institute, resulted in “devoting government resources to organizations that encouraged immigrants to abide by the law but retain their distinctive cultures and traditions” (Zappi).⁴⁷ Iléana Chirila showed that, in cultural terms, this policy led to “l’apparition et l’intensification d’une production à profond caractère ethnique ou hybride (littérature beur, littérature de banlieue, littérature postcoloniale, littérature transculturelle), même si politiquement les tendances assimilationnistes sont encore évidentes” (*La République réinventée* 58). As part of this phenomenon, in *Paris-Athènes*, Alexakis unmasks for the first time his “identité d’immigré” and discloses his translingual identity while negotiating the terms of his reception and integration. The author demonstrates an acute awareness of the critical

⁴⁷ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/french-government-revives-assimilation-policy>

debate surrounding translingual authors and – through his polemical, intratextual address – expresses a desire to challenge and overwrite certain dominant narratives.

Alexakis begins *Paris-Athènes* with a strongly individualistic stance as someone whose choice of the French language was by no means effected by social, political, or historical circumstances. Early on, he firmly positions himself as non-native writer of French, insisting on the idiosyncratic circumstances of his situation:

Si l'on considère qu'il est impossible d'écrire aussi bien dans une langue étrangère que dans la sienne, il y a effectivement lieu de s'étonner que quelqu'un choisisse librement la première. Pourquoi choisirait-on de s'exprimer moins bien ? On comprend qu'il le fasse sous l'effet d'une contrainte, quand il n'a pas vraiment le choix. J'ai pour ma part aucune excuse d'écrire en français : je ne viens pas d'un pays francophone, ma langue maternelle n'est pas uniquement une langue orale, je n'ai pas rompu mes liens avec elle, enfin, il y a bien longtemps que la Grèce s'est débarrassé des colonels. (*PA* 20)

In this widely cited passage constructed upon the *ex negativo* rhetoric, *Alexakis* asserts his auctorial identity against potentially reductive or inaccurate classifications that misrepresent his identity as a writer. Despite an attempt to assume independence, this self-conscious formulation reveals its own instability, as it is influenced by the way others perceive him. *Alexakis* disavows typical reasons that could justify his adoption of French. He dissociates himself from a dissident and exilic status and suggests that it was not a result of political circumstances or any other kind of constraint. He thus distinguishes himself from francophone authors from former colonies and brackets the impact of the military Junta on his second departure for France.⁴⁸ Though certain elements of the postcolonial critical discourse are applicable for analyzing *Alexakis*' translingual position, he is, in his own words, part of a different socioliterary phenomenon. This affirmation also downplays

⁴⁸ As *Alexakis* eventually shows, coming into French from a more individual rather than collective context does not prevent him from experiencing similar obstacles in reception.

France's history of soft power in Europe, particularly when it comes to the global appeal of the nation's cultural production, and an established history of Greeks emigrating to France.⁴⁹ The narrator insists that Greece is not a historically francophone nation, and he did not grow up hearing or speaking French. A "late learner" of French, *Alexakis* has a 'foreign' ear used to a different system of sounds. The narrator further affirms that he did not have to sacrifice his literary use of Greek to become a writer of French expression.⁵⁰ By emphasizing that he continues writing in both languages, *Alexakis* suggests a logic of accumulation rather than loss. This prevents readers from interpreting his adoption of French as a sacrificial gesture at the monumental altar of French literature.

Alexakis' linguistic position differentiates him from Julia Kristeva's portrayal of adopting French as linguistic "matricide"⁵¹ or Albert Memmi's "linguistic drama"⁵² of having to narrate trauma in the language of the nation that had inflicted it. Although, circumstantially, French gave *Alexakis* a literary voice, he does not succumb to the Rivarolian praise of its intrinsic genius.⁵³ He refuses to conflate French with its seemingly innate characteristics, such as cartesian clarity and discipline, which flatter the national imaginary. The narrator-author confesses that prior to leaving Greece, aside from children's books, he has never read the works of French authors for pleasure.

⁴⁹ In "Diaspora grecque et francophonie aux XXe et XXIe siècles," Efstrafia Oktapoda-Lu posits that "[l]a diaspora hellénique en France n'est pas un phénomène nouveau, la France a toujours été l'attraction pour les Grecs" (2). In *Singularités francophones*, Robert Jouanny called Greece "un vivier d'écrivains francophones," underscoring the history of Greek exiles settling in France, France's interest in Greece during the Romantic period, and the use of French in the salons in Athens (27). *Alexakis* is not the first author to have adopted French as a result of immigration, yet he does not position himself vis-à-vis this historical mobility. This highlights the individualist nature of *Paris-Athènes*.

⁵⁰ If Greek was temporarily abandoned due to historical and personal circumstances, he has since reintegrated it into his literary practice.

⁵¹ Kristeva, "Bulgarie, ma souffrance." *L'Infini*, 51 (automne 1995) : 45-52.

⁵² Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, précédé d'un *Portrait du colonisateur*, 1997. 144-145.

⁵³ In 1784, Antoine de Rivarol wrote an essay entitled *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* in which he supported France's "rayonnement culturel" and its claim to universality. In this essay, he praised the genius of the French language, citing its 'inherent' qualities such as clarity, discipline, and rigor.

The image of France, instead of shimmering with the promise of civilization and elegance, is depicted with lightness and humor from the perspective of the seventeen-year old *Alexakis*: “L’idée que je me faisais de la France n’était pas déplaisante. C’était le pays de femmes bien séduisantes, le pays de Bardot et de la blonde en bikini blanc aperçue sur la Côte d’Azur” (PA 159). Instead of citing high culture, he builds an image of France from pop culture references. In light of the narrator’s polemic against France’s tendency to exoticize translingual authors, this description of France may also be seen as a reversal of stereotypes, in which France is on the receiving end.

Why would a writer purposefully choose to be at a significant linguistic disadvantage (as per common belief), condemned to fail prior to even beginning? Why choose to write in French? *Alexakis*’ response – “je le faisais par habitude et par goût” – resonates with Beckett’s “unromantic” responses: “It was a different experience from writing in English. It was more exciting for me, writing in French” and “[p]arce qu’en français c’est plus facile d’écrire sans style” (PA 16, Beckett qtd. in Forster 87). Though Beckett’s impoverishment of language can be characterized by anything but the lack of style, *Alexakis*’ and Beckett’s answers – however candid or tongue-in-cheek – reflect a sheer aesthetic pleasure of writing in a foreign tongue. Initially unable to read André Gide’s *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* in French, the narrator of *Paris-Athènes* cites Ionesco’s play *La Cantatrice chauve* as the first text he read in the adopted tongue: “Les mots qu’employait Ionesco étaient très simples, c’étaient des mots que je connaissais parfaitement, que j’aurais pu utiliser moi aussi. Il a été le premier auteur qui me donna envie d’écrire en français” (PA 163-164). *Alexakis* thus assumes an aesthetic of writing that stems from orality and simplicity, against linguistic mannerisms and pathos, as evidenced by the following utterance: “Je n’ai jamais écrit le mot *soldatesque*” (PA 191). With intertextual references to Beckett and Ionesco, *Alexakis* inscribes

himself into a literary lineage of translingual writers, choosing them over canonical references to Racine or Proust and signaling a different relationship to the notion of national literature.

Against ‘Monolingual’ Criticism

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a polemic is a “thorough written attack on some opinion or policy, usually within a theological or political dispute, sometimes also in philosophy or criticism” (Baldwick). In *Paris-Athenes*, *Alexakis* stages a conflict with literary reception that is insufficiently equipped to engage with translingual production despite the long, however unrecognized, history of this phenomenon. Refusing to be bound by the internal economy of the text, *Alexakis* seeks to legitimize translingual authors against ideological prejudices that cast them as linguistically inferior or tie them to certain modes of literary production (“foreign” by content and “domestic” by language with “authentic” narratives of cultural otherness). In “Linguistic Profit, Loss and Betrayal,” Susan Stuart briefly commented on Alexakis’ Bourdieusian ‘right to speech,’ and the “tension between what he is able to do (making his living as a writer of French) and the response of others” who question the legitimacy of his literary endeavor (288). Though she acknowledges that “[w]riting in a second language is less of a drama for Alexakis than it is for his critics,” she does not further explore how the author deploys the strain between critical opinion and his own position (291).

While several motivations contributed to the creation of *Paris-Athènes*, public skepticism occupies a prominent place in the narrator’s mind: “Je n’éprouverais pas le besoin d’évoquer les réserves dont j’ai fait l’objet, si elles n’avaient suscité un drame en moi” (*PA* 21). He later confesses that the reaction he had received after the publication of one of his earlier novels prevented him

from writing in French for a year and almost led to a falling out with this language (*PA* 265). Given that criticism is not solely the domain of the critics, ⁵⁴ *Alexakis* strives to understand to which extent he influences and is, in turn, influenced by cultural and sociolinguistic factors shaping his literary posture. In addition to reflecting on his pluri- and translingual identity, he also examines his place in the literary field, engages with reception, and outlines critical frames for interpreting his work. This type of discourse may be characterized as “a borderline discourse, a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, which takes the border as its subject” (Currie qtd. in Waugh, 2).

Within the narrative, *Alexakis* 'explains that his literary adoption of French has unleashed a series of assumptions about his linguistic and literary belonging: “Ah bon ? Vous écrivez en français ? me disait-on quelquefois d'un air pincé et vaguement réprobateur, comme si je commettais un acte contre nature. Ça doit être dur ! Il y a tellement de nuances !” (*PA* 17). The narrator-author shrugs off this remark, explaining that the French would be more inclined to understand his position if they were more in a habit of learning foreign languages. Even his publishing house discretely inquired whether someone was helping him write in French (*PA* 267). Finally, why does *Alexakis* even write novels in French, since there are so many of them on the market, and why does he not thematize his native Greece in them?⁵⁵ By incorporating into his narrative the collective perplexity of the anonymous French “on,” *Alexakis* sheds light on the hegemonic voice of those who believe that only native writers can tap into the creative potential

⁵⁴ Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, 20.

⁵⁵ At a 2004 conference at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Vassilis Alexakis elaborated on this experience in the following manner: “...on me disait [...] mais alors pourquoi vous faites des livres français. [...] C'était comme un boulot des Français. Comme il y a une rivalité dans les boulots entre les immigrés et les Français. Bon, on avait l'air de me dire ‘Mais on a *nos* écrivains qui produisent du roman français, alors toi, fais-nous plutôt du roman grec puisqu'ils nous en manquent.’ Comme si, au fond, l'intérêt de la littérature étaient de fournir des renseignements et une documentation sur un pays, au fond, et non pas l'écriture elle-même.”

of a language and those who deem their language too complex to be grasped by a non-native author (even though *Alexakis* spent nearly half of his life in France). According to this reception, writing in French is tantamount to intervening on the territory to which one does not belong. By bringing these suspicious voices into his text, Alexakis aims to make an extradiegetic impact as part of negotiating his literary posture.

The monolingual paradigm is a sociopolitical instrument that sustains the myth of national integrity and anchors an individual's sense of identity within a narrative of linguistic authenticity. In her seminal work *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), Yasemin Yildiz defined the monolingual paradigm as an ideology stipulating that one is "defined solely by one language – one's 'mother tongue' – as a proper subject fully embedded in a national community" (64-65). While Michael Holquist advances that monolingualism, strictly speaking, does not exist due to "the systemic multiplicity that is at the heart of any spoken language," its ideological effects are permeated throughout *Paris-Athènes* ("What Would Bakhtin Do?" 7). One of the main functions of the monolingual paradigm is to police linguistic borders and nurture national identities, in addition to forging an independent literary history. Yildiz showed how in the late 19th century, the term gained an increasingly affective connotation: the initially political relationship to the language became intimate and familial, much like the one entertained with a mother. Yildiz refers to this gendering of language as the "linguistic family romance," which developed a "fantasy about the natural, bodily origin of one's first language and its inalienable familiarity that is said to establish kinship and belonging" (128). In addition to being intimately connected to the land, a writer absorbs his language with the mother's milk: one mother, one mother tongue. It is not surprising that a myth has emerged in which a writer can only blossom in his native language. What is surprising in the French-speaking context, however, is that it persists

after the many stabs that francophone writers have already taken at this claim. To suggest that an original work can only be produced in a mother tongue is to breed exclusion, translating the politics of nation-building into literature. It is worth noting that to describe the apprehension with which *Alexakis*' works in French were met, the narrator used the term "unnatural." The notion of going against the ordinary course of nature becomes especially significant in light of the history of monolingualism and its intimate connection to the mother figure. As any fiction of power, however, this monolingual ideological script can be rewritten, which is the task that *Alexakis* takes up in *Paris-Athènes*.⁵⁶

The narrator recounts an episode that took place at a francophone conference in Quebec, during which a "well-known" linguist delivered an official, pseudo-scientific claim "qu'on ne peut pas écrire une œuvre originale que dans sa langue maternelle" (*PA* 18). Ironically, the utterance was addressed to a room full of individuals who have successfully ventured into what was deemed impossible. Only in close proximity to the linguistic maternal womb, argued the linguist, can a writer produce creative and innovative work. Having previously commented on the acceleration and the virtual reduction of the modern world, *Alexakis* is astonished to discover the extent to which the monolingual paradigm – an invention of the 19th-century – stubbornly prevails in the contemporary imaginary. While clashing with reality, it continues influencing the way people think about language, identity, and literary production. Integration is then not only a matter of mastering a linguistic code, but of being legitimized by the linguistic community that 'possesses' the language and which can, therefore, scrutinize non-native authors in ways that would be inconceivable for monolingual French writers. Simply put, fluency does not lead to belonging. To shatter the Romantic myth that only native authors can fully tap into the potential of a language,

⁵⁶ If in *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis* addresses his critics with defiance, in the more recent novels, *Alexakis*' narrators are less inclined to defend a certain position while still being intent on distorting categories.

Alexakis proceeds from two seemingly conflicting modes of language contact. He undermines the language-identity homology by demonstrating an ability to appropriate an adopted language as a deeply personal source of inspiration and creativity. In a contradictory stance, the narrator-author also casts doubt over the very possibility of possessing a language, whether it is foreign or native.

Alexakis insists on maintaining an intimate, almost personified relationship with French: “Je ne prétends pas seulement connaître le français, je prétends que le français me connaît aussi!” (PA 18). The language knows him to the point of intuiting his impulses and guiding him in his literary quest for self-reconstitution. The decision to express himself in an adopted language does not equate to being on hostile, ‘inauthentic’ grounds. While the reaction of those who ‘possess’ the language remains guarded, the language itself is welcoming, enabling, and liberating (partially due to the fact that it contains so much of familiar Greek). At the same time, *Alexakis* does not succumb to the humbling pathos of a *venu d’ailleurs* and asserts that he does not feel indebted to the French language. Although he initially became an author by writing exclusively in French, his relationship to it is not one of obligation or veneration. He entertains instead a rapport of mutual enrichment and exchange: “Je lui dois mes romans”, he advances, “mais il me les doit aussi;” “Je n’ai pas le sentiment d’avoir une dette envers le français. J’ai beaucoup plus écrit en français qu’en grec. J’ai l’impression d’avoir rendu au français les mots que je lui ai pris” (PA 49, 266). By demonstrating a meaningful connection to “foreign” French, *Alexakis* subverts the affective integrity of the monolingual paradigm: “Renoncer à cette langue dans laquelle je m’exprimais depuis si longtemps serait fatalement prendre congé de moi-même” (PA 22). His linguistic attachment to this language seems beyond instrumental; it is not a borrowed, mechanical device of expression. Leaving French would be an act of self-destruction, as there is no implied division between his Greek and French ‘halves’. *Alexakis* espouses an organic linguistic model to demonstrate that he can feel as close to

a foreign language as to a native tongue. At first glance, it may seem that *Alexakis* is recreating the monolingual paradigm by trading one language for another. Nevertheless, I suggest that his use of organic terms subverts the intended exceptionality of the first language by refusing the affective hierarchy implied in the native/adopted model. Even if the linguistic balance may tip over to privilege the adopted over the native tongue, the former never replaces the latter and thus never reproduces this affective binary in reverse.

In an ostensible gesture of self-contradiction, the narrator-author goes on to argue that monolinguals are equally estranged from their native tongue, effectively destabilizing the notion of “ownership” in the native-foreign paradigm. Instead of searching for ‘native authenticity’ in French, *Alexakis* advances that one simply does not exist. Despite the harmony he entertains with the adopted language, he shows that no one can fully appropriate or inhabit a language: “...la langue maternelle n’est après tout que la première des langues étrangères qu’on apprend” (*PA* 71). With this, he refuses any proprietary claims to language and indirectly engages with the Derridian rhetoric of linguistic non-belonging, which would be summarized in *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* (1996) in the following way: “La langue dite maternelle n’est jamais purement naturelle, ni propre ni habitable” (112). Language is beyond proprietary reach, it is constantly negotiated and contested in social discourse and power struggles; it cannot be claimed by a nation or its linguistic community.

The recognition of linguistic alterity in his native language only amplifies *Alexakis*’ original challenge to critics and linguists regarding language ownership.⁵⁷ Reducing the affective power of the mother tongue, *Alexakis* brings it back to the pre-Romantic vision of languages and levels the

⁵⁷ See Ioanna Chatzidimitriou’s “Language(s) of Dispossession: Silent Geographies in Vassilis Alexakis’ *Paris-Athènes*” (Dalhousie French Studies, 2006) for Alexakis’ criticism of the political manipulation of his mother tongue in Greece.

hierarchical imbalance between “native” and “non-native” languages. This demystification of the myth of the native speaker accomplishes two things: it enables *Alexakis* to no longer feel remorse about not being an exclusively Greek author and clears the path towards self-legitimization as a writer of French expression outside of the institution’s “rules of hospitality.” Ultimately, he blurs distinct critical positions towards language to arrive at an unstable discursive posture: claiming an intimate understanding of French, he concurrently suggests that such belief is always inevitably an illusion.

Against the Pressure of National and Global Cultural Markets

In *Paris-Athènes*, the narrator vehemently opposes the narrative that accompanies his new translingual visibility. Citing a house party where he was asked to perform a Greek dance that he does not even know, *Alexakis* illustrates his cultural otherness being literally reduced to a form of entertainment. Sirtaki, though often thought to be a traditional Greek dance, was actually choreographed for Michael Cacoyannis’ film *Zorba the Greek* (1960) and ultimately became a tourist attraction in Greece. Extending *Alexakis*’ analogy from a house party to the nation, I infer that French literary institutions ask translingual writers to produce what was quintessentially Greek within their own, limited understanding of what ‘Greekness’ means. As such, in *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis* criticizes an overreliance on the authors’ cultural origins when examining their works: “On les considère davantage comme des représentants d’une autre culture, comme des ambassadeurs d’un au-delà, que comme des créateurs originaux, des auteurs à part entière. On attend d’eux un surcroît d’exotisme. On leur demande surtout des nouvelles de leur pays” (*PA* 19). One adopts French to bring tales of homeland, of the exotic, folkloric ‘ailleurs.’ In literature, as in

dance, *Alexakis* is expected to cater to his audience, providing *Bildungsreisen* – a form of cultural tourism.⁵⁸

In her article “Malaise dans la littérature-monde,” Véronique Porra demonstrated that French critics in the 1990s formed a distinction between “bad” (postcolonial) and “good” (translingual) francophonie, considering the latter as panacea for bolstering French literature in domestic and international arenas and counteracting the more “threatening” voices from former colonies (119). Despite the radically different historical paths that brought postcolonial and translingual writers into French, *Alexakis*’ polemic points to shared concerns in reception despite the fact that his work was generally well received. In fact, the narrator insists that his polemic in *Paris-Athènes* was not a riposte to being rejected by the critical apparatus; on the contrary: “Je crains de donner l’impression que la critique me fut défavorable: elle fut très élogieuse” (*PA* 16). Instead, his response is driven by the misconceptions lodged in the very praise that he receives. *Alexakis* argues that inclusion is often granted for the wrong reasons, and that the process of legitimization frequently compromises authors’ creative agency.

While scholars called attention to *Alexakis*’ opposition to the external conception of a translingual writer, none, to my knowledge, have framed it within the broader context of the contemporary global cultural market that transcends internal politics of French cultural production. As a former filmmaker, *Alexakis* notes that Greek cinema experiences similar pressures from the global cultural market:

⁵⁸ The book covers of *Paris-Athènes* point to the tension between *Alexakis*’ aesthetic intentions and the way in which his work has been promoted. The 1989 edition used the writer’s own drawing, which an attentive reader could link to an episode alluding to the author’s linguistic duality. New re-editions, however, use the famous image of *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* exhibited at the Louvre, one of the most recognizable works of Ancient Greek sculpture. Alluding to *Alexakis*’ origin, this paratext uses his foreignness as an instrument for publicity and shapes readers’ expectations in a way that the writer critiques within this very book.

Je me souviens d'un débat houleux avec des cinéastes grecs à qui j'avais reproché de puiser systématiquement leurs sujets dans le passé de l'Antiquité jusqu'à la guerre civile. Le passé de la Grèce est tel que le présent paraît forcément un peu fade. Je préfère pour ma part la moindre œuvrette où se reflète quelque chose de la vie actuelle à n'importe quel film d'inspiration historique ou mythologique [...]. Hélas, les marchés étrangers, sans lesquels le cinéma grec ne peut survivre, attendent justement de la Grèce des personnages forts, mêlés à des drames exceptionnels. (*PA* 271-272)

Though literature and cinema often address a global consumer, what is sold to the international public remains inherently “national” in its imaginary. *Alexakis* acknowledges that the welfare of Greek cinema relies on overseas profits, yet he incites his fellow artists to renounce production that, by virtue of focusing on Greece’s mythical, glorious ancestors, conditions them to be disinterested in their own era and its struggles.

The pressures of the contemporary global market are perceptible not only in the production but also in consecration phases. The narrator recounts an incident that occurred at the film festival “Trois Continents de Nantes,” where he served on the prize committee. Though this is an episodic passage in *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis* has left a sufficient amount of extratextual clues to find more information about this event.⁵⁹ According to the festival’s official website, its annual event features films from Africa, Latin America, and Asia with a goal of increasing their visibility in Europe and allowing them to continue working in their home countries. The festival’s website explains that, at its inception, the mission was to “look at countries ignored by most,” privileging “content over form,” without reducing “this opening to ideological and economic concepts.” At this festival, “each country was required to produce its own images.” *Alexakis* explains that the jury opposed giving the first prize to a Taiwanese film *Les garçons de Feng-Kuei* (1983) by Hou Hsiao-hsien because ““son caractère chinois n’était pas assez évident!”” (*PA* 272). As a story about three young men in an urban environment, it lacked expected folkloric elements. Furthermore, the slippage

⁵⁹ <https://www.3continents.com/en/>

from “Taiwanese” to “Chinese” is telling in itself. To summarize in devastatingly simple terms, the film was not sufficiently ‘oriental,’ and this token otherness was a necessary marketing tool for promotion in Europe. *Alexakis* confesses that though he fiercely fought to support the film, he succeeded only halfway – a recipient ex-aequo of the first prize, *Les garçons de Feng-Kuei* ended up not being distributed in France. As an insider, *Alexakis* discloses the often-secret debates that surround the process of selecting an award recipient, revealing that a sense of discovering “something new” is still informed by familiar stereotypes when telling a local story to the global viewer. With this reference to a Taiwanese film, *Alexakis* demonstrates a paradoxical tension between a global cultural market that presupposes a widening of horizons and the reinforcement of borders upon which it operates. The fact that art circulates on a global scale does not erase symbolic borders that reinforce the commodification of cultural difference. Performing the role of a cultural critic, *Alexakis* reveals the pressures that lead to producing what is most suitable for consumption and discloses how literary institutions (prize juries, in this particular instance) are complicit in the way they curate consecration and shape artistic tastes.

Intradiegetically, the narrator-author refuses to perform literary sirtaki within his narrative. Carrying out his own didactic recommendations of resistance, *Alexakis* steers clear of grand cultural and historical narratives and focuses instead on the mundane and on daily life. Even during his career as a journalist, *Alexakis* was drawn toward individuals that were most removed from attention-grabbing headlines: “Les personnages qui me touchent ne sont pas appelés à faire la “une” des journaux. Ceux que j’ai écoutés le plus attentivement n’avaient pas forcément grand-chose à dire. L’innocence que je discernais dans leurs propos me suffisait” (*PA* 234). Insisting that his writing “has nothing extraordinary to recount” subverts expected cultural alterity and solicited images of Greekness on the global cultural market. It is a gesture of resistance intended to catalyze

a dialogue. Though his narrative includes memories about Greece and incorporates expressions in Greek, it does not enable his French readers to plunge into exotic otherness. Because his works in French should be as pertinent as the Greek ones, *Alexakis* underscores that he does not believe in catering to the tastes of French readership: “Que j’écrive en grec ou en français, que l’action (quelle action ? Enfin, passons...) se situe à Athènes ou à Paris [...] c’est toujours le même genre d’histoire que je raconte. Ou bien elle présente un intérêt quelconque dans les deux langues, ou bien elle n’en présente dans aucune” (PA 20-21). What is important for the narrator is the story he is able to tell, no matter the language, the setting, or the public.

Self-Singularization: Translingual Games

Criticizing the problematic visibility of translingual writers, *Alexakis* draws even more attention to his own status. Rather than interpreting it as a failure to normatize himself, I suggest that this heightened visibility reflects the author’s very intention; namely, the need to renegotiate the terms of his singularity without entirely erasing it. The narrator reverses the prejudiced logic of the linguist from the conference in Quebec, transforming translingualism from a hindrance to an advantage:

Je n’envie pas les auteurs qui n’ont jamais usé que d’une langue et fréquenté d’une seule culture. Si le résultat de mon travail est mauvais, ou plus simplement médiocre, ce n’est pas parce que j’écris dans une langue étrangère, mais *en dépit* du fait que j’écrive dans une langue étrangère. Je réclame en somme le droit d’être jugé avec une sévérité accrue. (PA 18)⁶⁰

⁶⁰ The italics are mine.

Despite his earlier rhetoric of belonging, *Alexakis* admits that writing in a non-native language makes him different after all: it makes him a better writer.

He uses the familiar native/non-native framework to unsettle its hierarchy, refute imagined constrictions of translingualism, and subvert the meaning of difference. The standards for judging his work, he argues, should be higher than those for ‘native’ monolingual authors. *Alexakis* advances that if his work is to be viewed negatively, it should not be attributed to his choice of writing in a non-native language. On the contrary, if it merits criticism, it is so much more deserved, because he failed to properly draw on his linguistic advantage. Even his stylistic simplicity – as demonstrated by his admiration of Beckett and Ionesco – is presented not as a consequence of linguistic constraint (as would suggest Brina Svit and as it has been hypothesized for Milan Kundera) but as an aesthetic choice: “J’avais envie de jouer avec les mots que j’apprenais. Cela m’amusait de faire des phrases courtes, sujet, verbe, complément, sujet, verbe, complément” (*PA* 191). Thus, while objecting against the ways in which translingual authors are differentiated (through exoticism, performance of cultural ambassadorship, and patronizing comments on language),⁶¹ he subverts the nature of their otherness without completely erasing the notion of difference. Not seeking to level the field, he asserts instead the superiority of a translingual perspective in writing.

⁶¹ In *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis* succumbs to certain commonplace statements about exile while resisting and revising others. On the one hand, he embraces the notion of being a linguistic orphan: “La France fut comme une sorte d’orphelinat, où l’on ne parlait même pas ma langue. Est-ce pour remédier à ce manque que je me suis si vite marié après mon installation à Paris ?” (*PA* 116-117). However, he remains vigilant when it comes to affect and cultural hierarchization: “Si je vivais à Athènes, je prêterais probablement la même attention aux informations concernant la France données par le journal télévisé, que je prête à présent aux nouvelles de Grèce” (*PA* 283).

Though *Alexakis* has been writing in French for a long time, he has not always been subjected to prejudice of the monolingual paradigm. The narrator-author links this sudden attention to his decision to publicly affirm himself as a non-native author in one of his books:

Je me suis heurté aux préjugés concernant les étrangers d'expression française lors de la publication de mon dernier livre [...] un roman écrit en français, qu'on pourrait qualifier, pour simplifier, de parisien. [...] On s'est étonné ici et là [...] que j'écrive en français et que je ne parle pas nécessairement de la Grèce. On aurait pu s'en étonner plus tôt : c'était le quatrième roman que je faisais paraître en français. Il est vrai que personne n'était censé savoir que mes premiers livres étaient dus à un étranger... [...] Ce n'est qu'après avoir écrit un roman plutôt autobiographique en grec, et l'avoir traduit, qu'on a jugé surprenant que je m'exprime également en français. (*PA* 19-20)

Though not cited by its name, *Alexakis* likely alludes to *Talgo* (1980) as the catalyst for increased critical attention vis-à-vis his translingual status. In *Talgo*'s note to the reader, Alexakis (the writer) explains that translating a Greek text into French allowed him to reconcile with his first language and confirmed his ability to navigate both tongues: "Avertissement: au bout de treize années passées en France au cours desquelles j'ai écrit presque exclusivement en français, j'ai éprouvé le besoin de renouer le dialogue avec ma langue maternelle. La première version de ce texte a donc été écrite en grec. V.A., 28 mars 1982."⁶² The publication of *Talgo* with this "avertissement" marked *Alexakis*' 'coming out' as a translingual author, publicly confirming his 'foreign' status to his French readership. This revelation created the platform from which Alexakis would fully realize himself as an author. It also became the root of miscomprehension making him doubt his future as a translingual writer of French expression.

⁶² This notice did not disappear until the 1997 edition of the novel and has been since reduced to the permanent "traduit du grec par l'auteur." Though making a connection between *Alexakis* (the intradiegetic narrator) and Alexakis (the writer) may seem methodologically unstable, it is important to note that most of his narrators are authors with a literary past that mirrors his own. Within this intratextual network, each novel often echoes the others.

In his polemical address, *Alexakis* regards himself and his oeuvre at an analytical distance, examining the evolution in critical reception over the span of his literary career, and deconstructing a correlation between his self-revelation as a translingual writer and a sudden shift in reception. The narrator ironically remarks that one could have wondered about the quality of his writing in French earlier. If no questions were asked prior to *Talgo*, it is because nearly nothing (besides the author's name), could have betrayed his 'Greekness.' Revisiting the same episode in *Je t'oublierai tous les jours* (2005), the narrator reiterates: "La Grèce n'est jamais évoquée dans ce texte. Personne ne pourrait deviner mes origines dans ce texte en le lisant si mon nom n'était pas si transparent (87).⁶³ It is not, then, the text itself but his eventual self-unveiling as a translingual, self-translating author that has triggered critics' attentiveness to his language and has created expectations with regard to theme. In *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis* reveals a particular phenomenon in the reception of translingual literature when it is viewed as the "littérature 'invitée,'" namely, critics' inability to recognize a translingual work without relying on the author's biographic factors, or without the writer's thematization of the translingual experience.⁶⁴ His pre-*Talgo* novels constitute an implicit challenge to critics: one's translingualism may be concealed if need be. This begs an overall question: to which extent is the search for meaningful traces of the mother tongue at times a projection, inspired by the writer's foreignness and not by the language itself? In other

⁶³ *Alexakis* comments on the giveaway nature of his Greek last name, which constitutes a choice in itself and is not to be taken for granted. Several translingual authors have adopted pseudonyms to obscure their origins or assimilate their literary personae (e.g. Henri Troyat, né Lev Aslanovitch Tarassov, Romain Gary, né Roman Kacew). Romain Gary and Andreï Makine published under different pen names (Emile Ajar and Gabriel Osmonde), while François Cheng gallicized his name from what used to be Cheng Chi-Hsien.

⁶⁴ In his article on translation entitled "The paradox of 'Foreign-Soundedness,'" David Bellos remarked that, historically, a translation was praised when it sounded "as if it has been written in English," yet these very specialists have often been "unable to tell when an alleged translation *was* written in English" (31). This is relevant for *Alexakis*' "Parisian cycle" of novels, which passed without an intense 'multilingual scrutiny' that his later novels were subjected to after the author's 'coming out' as a translingual writer.

words, is there such a thing as a translingual style, a stylistic distinction that makes *Alexakis*' expression in French different? If there is not, does it make his work "orthodox"?

Scholars have suggested that initial self-concealment that characterizes *Alexakis*' "Parisian" novels can be viewed as a strategy of integration, akin to his accent imitation during the early years in Paris: "Au temps où je cherchais du travail à Paris, j'imitais assez bien l'accent français, de sorte qu'on ne devinait pas toujours que j'étais étranger. Plus tard, j'ai désapprouvé mon mimétisme et je n'ai plus dissimulé mes difficultés de prononciation. Je parle avec de plus en plus d'accent" (*PA* 104). In *Paris-Athènes*, the need to sustain his difference becomes the most authentic form of belonging. The narrator-author problematizes and disrupts the dynamic between 'insideness' and 'outsidedness,' alterity and belonging, without fully identifying with either category. Playing on the expectations that readers unconsciously project onto his work, he deforms these binaries as if in a carnivalesque hall of mirrors. On the one hand, *Alexakis* demonstrates an ability to be discreetly "in," as it was with the publication of his "Parisian cycle" and his provisional argument about sharing the same playing field with 'native' monolingual writers. On the other hand, having assumed his translingual identity, *Alexakis* marks himself as an outsider and asks that his works be judged with increased severity. Though he suggests having written in a way that – stylistically linguistically, and thematically – did not reveal his foreign origins, he ultimately chooses to draw attention to them. It is therefore important for *Alexakis* that his readers are aware of his non-native status (as evidenced by the "avertissement") and that they do not use this knowledge to form expectations about the nature of his writing.

Alexakis' polemic erupts in the final, unapologetic rejection of 'monolingual' criticism in *Paris-Athènes*. In a single motion, he admits vulnerability when facing apprehension regarding his work and counters them with a cadenced repetition of "too bad":

Tant pis si certains Français ne comprennent pas qu'on puisse écrire dans une langue étrangère par goût, délibérément. Tant pis s'ils considèrent que les ouvrages écrits en français ne méritent l'attention que s'ils garantissent le dépaysement. Tant pis si je dois m'entendre poser, jusqu'à la fin de mes jours, la question : - Ah bon ? Vous écrivez en français ?" [...] Tant pis si l'on désapprouve mes allées et venues entre deux langues, si l'on y voit le signe d'une déplorable légèreté. (*PA* 265)

He casts himself in the melancholic role of a misunderstood author who may always be exoticized for his use of French, and whose literary back-and-forth between French and Greek may be dismissed as a sign of fickleness. This points to Alexakis' awareness of the readerly practices through which his texts may be interpreted. Accepting that his plea may not change anything, he nonetheless refuses to comply by offering a fully transparent, "readable" authorial image. His unwillingness to settle in a single country – "Je ne souhaite pas me fixer" – is also applicable to his refusal to settle within a single language (*PA* 286). Tzvetan Todorov describes this symbolic type of self-exile as "celui qui interprète sa vie à l'étranger comme une expérience de non-appartenance à son milieu et qui la chérit pour cette raison même" (*Nous et les autres* 450). Although the "tant pis" tirade hints at a position of marginality and therefore exclusion, I posit that it is better characterized by liminality. *Alexakis* transforms sharply drawn distinctions between "native" and "non-native" languages into a state of ambivalence through which he conceals as much as he reveals. Through this discursive tactic, he redefines the imposed meaning of translingual singularity.

From the contemporary vantagepoint, Alexakis' arguments have lost their polemical edge when considered in light of a growing body of scholarship on transnational studies and the "global" turn in literature. It is important to recognize, however, that he was a pioneer in articulating the ambiguous position of translingual writers in France and played an important role in problematizing the tension between non-native writers and national literatures. To better

understand Alexakis' critical intervention, it is worth noting that his polemic was formulated when the cosmopolitan and transcultural branches in social sciences and literary studies were in their nascent stages.⁶⁵ It was articulated before or around the time when major literary theorists (Bhabha, Spivak, Saïd, Gilroy, etc.) in the late 1980s and 1990s provided fundamental concepts, such as *cultural hybridity*, *the third space*, and *double consciousness*⁶⁶ to examine various forms of transnational and transcultural experiences. In the eighties, however, the notions of cultural and linguistic hybridity were still considered with apprehension. *Alexakis* was still perceived as a Greek writer in France and a foreign writer in Greece, since, at the time, most of his works were written primarily in French. He remarks that even his editor did not know whether his novels should be shelved in a section of foreign or French literature and ironically notes that his texts lack a clear sense of national belonging: "Mon stylo me fit penser à une hampe à laquelle il manquait un petit drapeau" (*PA* 21, 23). With his polemical address, Alexakis illuminated and articulated important critical topics in translingualism before these writers had officially entered the public spotlight in mid-1990s. His insightful reflections on old and new challenges that a translingual writer faces point to a profound awareness of the politics of representation in France and mark an early intervention in the field of translingual studies. Indeed, few articles can be found on this subject prior to 1995. With *Poétiques francophones* (1995), Dominique Combe was among of the first scholars to address the presence of authors from historically non-francophone regions in

⁶⁵ In Canada, the concept of "migrant writing" and the accompanying interrogation of existing literary classifications first appeared in the late 1980's with Robert Berrouët-Oriol's, Pierre Nepveu's, and Simon Harel's seminal works on the shifting landscape of contemporary Quebecois literature. See Pierre Nepveu's *L'écologie du réel. Mort et naissance de la littérature Québécoise contemporaine*. Montréal (1988) and Simon Harel's *Le voleur de parcours* (1989).

⁶⁶ Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* 1994, Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* 1995, Stuart Hall's *Questions of Cultural Identity* 1996, Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 1999.

francophone literature, followed by Robert Jouanny's *Les singularités francophones ou choisir d'écrire en français* (2000).⁶⁷

Alexakis foregrounds the strain between an existing literary phenomenon and its inadequate reception that continues relying on borders as a dividing feature as opposed to a liminal ground. Analyzing the reception of his own texts, Alexakis intervenes in the critical debate and points to a need for a new interpretative framework that would be freed from monolingual and ethnocultural biases in literature. This tension – already visible in postcolonial and Quebecois literary studies – would not be thoroughly addressed with regard to the translingual phenomenon in France until the following decade, with amplified attention in the early 2000s.

III. Building Walls and Caring for Trees: Symbolic Construction of the Translingual

Authorial Self

The Other Face of the Polemicist

In *Paris-Athènes*, Alexakis performs the roles of a critic, a self-reflective creator, and his own character or, rather, a series of characters: “les principaux personnages que j’ai été au cours de ma vie, et celui que je serai peut-être plus tard” (*PA* 262). A sense of instability emerges from his ability to be at once an incisive critic and a confused storyteller who writes to hear news about himself. Referring to Raymond Chandler – an American-British author of detective fiction – Alexakis translates this uncertainty into a literary quest mode. He casts himself in the role of a detective on the trail of his own translingual self (*PA* 25). A dual subject of his own detective

⁶⁷ It must be noted, however, that his methodology was based on “le droit à l’arbitraire et à la subjectivité [...] parfois en fonction de nos propres goûts ou lectures” (Jouanny 8-9).

investigation, he simultaneously performs the part of the one who is pursuing and the one who is trying to get away: “Je n’essayais même plus de le [le texte personnel] commencer à vrai dire, je voulais l’oublier, le contourner sans plus céder à la fascination qu’exerçait sur moi cette espèce d’absence de moi-même” (*PA* 30-31).

The public persona that he carefully constructed through his polemical address is disrupted by a private voice that reflects on translingualism in different terms. In other words, on the flipside of an emphatic, unequivocal polemic is a more subtle, anxious exploration. Subtleness and nuance, which have no room in a polemical discourse, come through the narrator’s contrapuntal voice that is neither declarative nor challenging, but rather uncertain and probing. At times, *Paris-Athènes* appears fragmentary, discontinuous, and vertiginously multidirectional. The narrative constantly interrupts itself, drawing attention to itself as an artifact and to the narrator’s status as a writer producing his own manuscript. This deceptively transparent posture produces an opaque narrative that resists its narrator’s intentions. Revealing an inability to master his own autobiographic narrative, *Alexakis* dethrones himself from the auctorial position of authority: “D’habitude, quand je commence une histoire, je sais à peu près ce que je veux dire, je discerne les principaux thèmes que je vais aborder. A présent, je ne discerne rien. J’ai l’impression d’être sur un bateau sans moteur, qui se déplace au gré des courants, au gré du vent. J’écris par curiosité, pour savoir où j’en suis, ce que j’en pense. J’écris pour avoir de mes nouvelles” (*PA* 28). Imagining himself on a boat at the mercy of elements, *Alexakis* introduces a sense of the arbitrary in his self-writing, and the manuscript reflects this lack of control through its meandering form.

While confronting reception and popular opinions on the meaning of translingual difference as a critic, *Alexakis* simultaneously works through personal concerns about his ability to remain a plurilingual author. As Charles Forsdick has aptly pointed out in *The Cambridge Companion to*

French Literature, the true challenge is “not so much the meaning of being bilingual (which, as a condition, is not rare), but rather the challenge of being a translingual author” (215-216). To this I add that it is not only about the meaning of being a translingual author (which, strictly speaking, only pertains to French), but also about the ability to continue writing in both of his languages. In other words, for *Alexakis*, it does not suffice to establish his identity as an author of French expression, but also to assert himself as a writer with French and Greek audiences and, in the context of *Paris-Athènes*, to create an expression that encompasses this duality.

As an author who starts writing in a language in which his characters would naturally speak, *Alexakis* finds himself at a loss. This time, his main character is his bilingual self, which creates an impossible task of writing simultaneously in both languages. This reminds of the Buridan donkey’s aporia: placed halfway between hay and water and unable to choose, it dies of starvation. In *Alexakis*’ case, the dilemma leads to silence that suitably conveys the narrator’s indecision. Alain Ausoni fittingly characterized it as “le deuil d’une métalangue” (“Quand Vassilis Alexakis tricote le moi translingue” 19-20). The absence of this metalanguage makes it impossible for *Alexakis* to express his constraint without automatically defaulting to either French or Greek. The mere verbalization of this hesitation requires a choice in itself: “L’année dernière, j’ai passé des heures et des jours les yeux fixés sur la page blanche sans réussir à tracer un seul mot: j’étais incapable de choisir entre le grec et le français. Je voulais justement écrire sur la difficulté de ce choix, mais comment écrire sans choisir?” (PA 12).⁶⁸ Only a blank page constitutes a valid response to the powerlessness of expression: “...il n’y avait aucune raison de noircir le papier, qu’il exprimait très bien, tel qu’il était, ma situation” (PA 13). It is not incidental that “silence” is the title of the first

⁶⁸ The text begins with a linguistic as well as a temporal hesitation. The narrator feels displaced to the point of confusing calendar dates, mistaking one day of the week for another. He is also unsure of the precise moment of the novel’s inception (PA 11). It is a genesis of absolute uncertainty.

chapter and the first word of the novel. Furthermore, on its last page, the novel returns to the image of a white sheet of paper as if to undo any sense of permanence in the resolution.

Outside of the targeted polemical discourse, *Alexakis* does not understand the exact purpose of his writing, and his linguistic uncertainty becomes one with his identity quest: “*Je ne sais pas, pensais-je, pourrait bien être un début de phrase intéressant, mais devais-je écrire je ne sais pas ou, en grec, dèn xéro? [...] Est-ce que ça vaut la peine de raconter tout ça ? Dèn xéro. Maintenant, j’ai commencé, bien sûr... Je suis en train d’explorer mon incertitude*” (PA 23, 27). The beginning of a translingual subject’s autobiography speaks of its own impossibility. Struck by irresolution, *Alexakis* spends days without leaving his bed, drinking coffee, and smoking his pipe. Listening intently to the silence of his building, he remarks: “Parfois les robinets de la baignoire émettaient un sifflement, suivi d’une espèce d’aspiration prolongée: je m’imaginais qu’une bête s’était trouvée coincée dans les tuyaux et qu’elle était en train de crever asphyxiée” (PA 24). Could *Alexakis* be this very animal caught in the pipes, trapped and voiceless? This metaphoric asphyxiation illustrates the narrator’s impossibility of making a choice between two languages: “Il n’y avait pas de langue en somme pour dire cela” (PA 24). This uncertainty and fragmentation stand in stark contrast with *Alexakis*’ voice as a polemicist writing about translingual writers in France. In addition to the public authorial persona he has carefully constructed as a critic, the narrator also develops metaphorical images through which he seeks to overcome the linguistic impossibility of his autobiography.

In Search of a Metaphor and a Metalanguage to Voice the Translingual Experience

In *Alexakis*’ universe, human and physical environments are indissolubly interlaced. Space carries symbolic significance and plays a major role in negotiating personal and social agency.

Marianne Bessy was among the first scholars to have remarked that Alexakis' identity quests tend to take on a geographic dimension of nomadism and mobility: "Alexakis met en scène des protagonistes désireux de s'inscrire dans et de faire corps avec l'espace et les lieux dans lesquels ils sont mis en présence" (*Vassilis Alexakis : exorciser l'exil* 164-165).⁶⁹ Movement offers *Alexakis* a path of salvation, preventing him from having to choose between his native and adopted environments. Drawing on the premise that Alexakis' geography is an instrument for identity exploration, I analyze several spatial images in *Paris-Athènes* as metaphorical representations through which the narrator depicts his desired relationship between native Greek and adopted French.

Soon after relating the troubling silence and his own voicelessness, the narrator-author directs his gaze outwards. Peeking out of the windows of his Parisian apartment, *Alexakis* observes an idiosyncratic juxtaposition of sound and movement in a scene from everyday life:

On voit très bien les danseuses, le store qui est censé les protéger n'étant jamais baissé, mais on n'entend guère la musique. En revanche, on entend très fort la musique du café, dont la porte est ouverte en permanence. Cette image insolite de jeunes femmes apprenant la danse moderne ou classique sur un fond de musique arabe...me rend mélancolique. (*PA* 13)

On one side of the street, the narrator sees a dance studio where young women rehearse modern or classical dance; on the other – a café playing Arabic music. *Alexakis*' privileged high-angle perspective from the studio window allows him to take in these two distinct spaces as a porous, cross-pollinated image, aurally connecting the open blinds of a dance studio to the open door of the café. This cinematically dynamic image hybridizes sound and movement, leaving an

⁶⁹ On Alexakis' treatment of space, places, and geography, see Bessy's chapter entitled "Lieux et espaces: pérégrinations alexakiennes," *Vassilis Alexakis: exorciser l'exil*, 2011.

impression that the dancers perform to the rhythm of an Arabic melody.⁷⁰ For the narrator, this idiosyncratic scene is melancholic because he views it as an allegory of his own identity instability. *Alexakis* associates it with linguistic dissonance that he frequently experiences when returning to France from Greece: “...j’ai encore l’impression d’entendre quelqu’un d’autre parler à travers moi, utiliser ma voix: je me fais l’effet d’un acteur qui se voit à l’écran en version doublée” (*PA* 13-14). The dancers’ movements, like *Alexakis*’ speech, seem fortuitously connected to an uncanny sound; both appear “dubbed.” As Pavlenko has shown in her neurolinguistic study on bilingualism, this refers to late bilinguals’ tendency to “perceive the world differently, and change perspectives, ways of thinking, and verbal and non-verbal behaviors when switching languages” (*Bilingual Minds* 29). Scholars have previously accepted the narrator’s self-analysis, interpreting melancholy as a symptom of his fatigue of living between two languages and cultures.⁷¹ I posit, however, that this image is also melancholic because it illustrates the type of a text *Alexakis* is unable to sustain. Does this image not echo his desire to express himself simultaneously in two languages? Neither a conflict nor a smooth superposition of two languages, this auditory-kinetic image constitutes a dialogic space, capable of accommodating the realities of his two languages within an idiosyncratic site.

Throughout the narrative, *Alexakis* – an astute observer of his environment – is fascinated by seemingly mundane activities. During a vacation in Tinos, Greece, *Alexakis* started paying close attention to the trees in his backyard, though he has never been previously interested in them. He began checking on them daily, diligently wiping dust from their leaves and destroying insects that prowled around their roots. The narrator is astounded by the trees’ ability to stubbornly defy an

⁷⁰ *Alexakis* chose this crucial episode for the book cover illustration of the 1991 “Le Cercle des Points” edition. This extract has also been selected as a paratextual sneak peek of the novel in the first two editions.

⁷¹ See Fréris, “Le dialogue interculturel de Vassilis Alexakis dans Paris-Athènes,” 1995.

arid, windy climate and the island's rocky environment. Mystified by their growth, he speculates that they must be nourished by the sun itself, with nutrients passing from branches back to the roots: "C'est la lumière qui les nourrit, je ne vois pas d'autre explication. Ce sont les branches qui nourrissent les racines, et non l'inverse" (PA 97). A tree root is an invisible life-giving source. National cohesion is frequently packaged through an emotionally charged evocation of land and language that shapes a community and grounds an individual: mother earth, mother tongue. The image of a tree root explains who we are by *rooting* us within a narrative of linguistic, geographic, and familial belonging. While roots alone can tell a story (e.g. roots supporting the foundation of Odysseus' palace), a tree that is no longer sustained by its roots is bound to die. *Alexakis* develops an alternative image of a tree nourished by its branches, subverting the symbolic value of the root and through it, canvassing a vision of how his two languages interact. The tree metaphorizes the aesthetic space of in-betweenness that results from bilingualism but cannot be reduced to simply possessing two languages. The trees nourish the roots and vice versa. Since one is infused with another, they cannot be unraveled.

In *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, Yildiz argued that the transition from mechanical to organic familial metaphors with regard to language affiliation has significantly contributed to the crystallization of the monolingual paradigm. Though *Alexakis*' metaphor is organic and, furthermore, built upon the archetypal familial symbolism of the tree root, it nevertheless undermines the monolingual paradigm. I posit that the reliance on an arborescent metaphor to conceptualize his linguistic identity makes the subversion so much more powerful. It becomes clear that roots cannot always sustain life. In *Alexakis*' new scenario, however, branches do not form new roots, and one language is not traded for another. By denying the root its traditional function, *Alexakis* moves beyond a foundationalist narrative towards a relational one. A new, non-

hierarchical paradigm suggests an interchanging nurturing capacity between roots and branches and, consequently, between both of his languages. Without denying roots their anchoring function (after all, they firmly hold the tree in the rocky ground), *Alexakis* points to the fact that they do not always provide nourishment, at least not alone. In this way, he reframes his linguistic duality as inseparable and symbiotic.

The question is not only about *what* is being nourished, but also *how*. Sustenance comes not from the soil, but from the sunlight – a mobile, ephemeral force. Its life-giving function de-emphasizes the central role of soil in reconceptualizing belonging and valorizes qualities, such as lightness and mobility. The resulting image is a stark combination of fixedness and movement. As a result, instead of reinventing the primordial metaphor of rootedness in native soil or reverting back to mechanical (pre-monolingual) images, *Alexakis* rewrites the former. He infuses a seemingly fixed notion of belonging with a new sense of mobility.

Alexakis' image of linguistic duality is subtly weaved into the fabric of the narrative and is not explicitly designated as a representation of his translingualism. It is significant, however, that prior to developing this branch-root metaphor, *Alexakis* noted the following incident. One morning, he discovered that the manuscript pages, which he had left overnight under a heavy rock in the kitchen, had been blown out of the window and got caught in the branches of a fig tree. This “curieux arbre aux feuilles blanches” – with the dual meaning of “feuilles” (sheets/ pages) – underscores the connection between *Alexakis'* comment on trees, writing, and the linguistic quest for selfhood (*PA* 94).

In addition to admiring the rare trees in Tinos, *Alexakis* turns to landscaping, supporting the arboreal representation of his translingual duality with a second metaphor. To protect the plants in his garden, the narrator-author built an enclosing wall around them. It is important to note that

Alexakis perceived his final work as a twofold entity: “Du coin de l’œil, je surveille l’ombre du mur. C’est à son extension que je mesure la progression de mon travail [...] En même temps qu’un mur, je construis une ombre” (*PA* 108). Depending on the position of the sun, the shadow may be in front of or behind the wall, or else entirely absent, juxtaposed. Much like the tree metaphor, the wall/shadow image is an unstable, dynamic representation of duality that is both sturdy and fragile, fixed and mobile. Once again, this duality does not obey the binary logic. In her article “Language(s) of Dispossession,” Ioanna Chatzdimitrou confirmed the metaphorical significance of this wall-building, analyzing this dual construction as “traces of both languages [that] are constantly detectable” (116). She interpreted the shadow as an impossible “effacement of the other geography and its language” and an inevitable “intersection of the two languages despite the narrative efforts to keep them neatly apart.” I suggest that the shadow-building is as vital to the project as the wall itself. *Alexakis* is invested in maintaining both, and the value of the shadow is expressed through the author’s insistence on agency and the use of an active voice: “je construis une ombre” (*PA* 108). However inevitable, it is not something that passively happens to the narrator or that evades his control. In other words, the shadow is not inadvertent, unavoidable byproduct of building the wall (or the return of a temporarily repressed language) but rather a desired product.

Historically, what was designated as a city (*urbs*) was an area defined by ramparts.⁷² Building a stone wall around a garden in which grow trees whose roots and branches share a life-giving force may be seen as *Alexakis*’ symbolic act of founding a new settlement; a diglossic space that brings together French and Greek, independently of national borders. This figurative *urbs* undoes hierarchies between native and foreign languages and attests to *Alexakis*’ evolving linguistic sensibility. Nevertheless, there is also something unsettling about this vegetal space as it

⁷² Goodman, *The Roman City and its Periphery: From Rome to Gaul*, 2007.

stands in isolation, as if populated by *Alexakis* alone. While the wall protects the trees, it is also a barrier that separates them. Permeable to its own shadow, it otherwise keeps everything else out, creating what seems like an artificial space of diglossic utopia. This underscores the fact that the narrator's quest is deeply personal and less concerned with relational formulations of intercultural affiliations.

Alexakis derives much of his symbolic imagery of dualism from Greek landscapes. He admits that French forests leave him indifferent, a sentiment that he expresses in linguistic terms. They bore him “comme m’aurait ennuyé une réunion d’étrangers s’exprimant dans leur langue” (PA 98). They constitute an absolute, non-relatable stranger, whereas the olive, fig, and pine trees of his garden in Tinos are part of his story/history (PA 99). Though *Alexakis* believes in an affective superiority of the native landscape, I suggest that his predilection for all things Greek is less straightforward than he would have his readers believe. Even the virtual foundation of his bilingual Franco-Greek settlement, which technically unfolds on a Greek island, belongs to a personal geography that is neither Greece nor France.

Alexakis compares Santorini, another island where he had spent part of his childhood, to Magritte's painting “The Castle in the Pyrénées” – an island floating above the ocean, “une petite planète tout à part” – emphasizing the singularity of the location, which exits beyond the realm of the known (PA 120-121). If the poetic description of Santorini propels the island into the aerial space above the ground, the visions of and from Tinos plunge the narrator under the water, into a no less phantasmic realm: “L’après-midi, quand j’écarte les volets, la mer pénètre dans la chambre: elle se reflète sur les deux battants de la fenêtre, ouverts vers l’intérieur à la manière des volets d’un triptyque. Ce même tableau orne toutes les pièces. La mer se reflète également dans le miroir qui fait face à la porte d’entrée et dans celui de la salle de séjour” (PA 122). Looking across the

water from Tinos onto the neighboring island Andros, *Alexakis* observes the water reflected in all the windows across the bay, “si bien qu’elles paraissaient inondées” (*PA* 122). Although unquestionably Greek, *Alexakis*’ islands get transformed into spaces of alterity above or underneath the ground that deterritorialize the author. These islands constitute for *Alexakis*’ a suitable metaphorical fabric for rebirth within a self-constructed symbolic space that belongs to no nation. These spaces, however, also point to the instability of the narrator’s linguistic endeavor, because what allows the construction of the virtual *urbs* – seclusion – is also what undermines it.

The Linguistic Double: From Metaphor to Metafiction

Since *Alexakis*’ identitary quests are often framed through reflections on language, the notions of linguistic in-betweenness and linguistic palimpsest have been regularly employed in the analysis of his works. Most studies have been thematic; several of them have adopted a multilingual lens to focus on *Alexakis*’ texts in French and in Greek. Fewer have questioned the connection between the thematization of bilingualism and its formal expression in *Paris-Athènes*, beyond the proverbial recognition of hybridity due to the presence of the Greek language.

Though *Alexakis*’ self-translation practice confirms the bilingual nature of his oeuvre as a whole, I am interested in the effects of intratextual bilingualism in *Paris-Athènes* and the conclusions that can be drawn from studying the French publication independently from its Greek extension. Does the effect produced by textual Franco-Greek bilingualism support linguistic interconnectedness, as articulated in the wall/shadow and the branch/root metaphors? If the desired effect cannot be found in the material presence of the native language and cultural references to it, how is it expressed?

Unlike translanguaging that globally encompasses the phenomenon of writing in a non-native language, literary bilingualism designates the presence and interaction of two languages in the text.⁷³ A complex and multifaceted concept, it includes code-switching, consecutive translation, linguistic calques, bilingual puns and homonyms, all of which probe material boundaries between two or more languages. Another methodological clarification needs to be made between the presence of several languages in the text and their function, in other words – between the sheer presence of another idiom and its relation to textual polyphony. Borrowed from music, Bakhtinian polyphony refers to a multiplicity of distinct voices in a novel that are not secondary or subordinate to the authority of a narrator and that do not merge together. Dominique Combe defined polyphony in a francophone text as “le fait d’un plurilinguisme en acte; mais, à la différence du bilinguisme, de traduction et d’autotraduction, les langues s’y rencontrent non plus successivement, mais simultanément dans l’espace du livre” (*Poétiques francophones* 137). He nuanced the definition by explaining that plurilingual polyphony does not simply refer to the co-presence of several languages or to the mere insertion of the mother tongue, but rather to the nature of their interaction. In *Beyond Monolingualism*, Yildiz reiterates this by addressing the rapport between plurilingualism and the monolingual ideology: “Not the fact of multiple languages, but the form in which they are brought together and related to entities such as the social, the individual, and the affective plane matters” (25). What appears multilingual on the surface may be a tacit reiteration of pluralized monolingualisms, and what seems to be monolingual may constitute a form of

⁷³ Rainier Grutman coined the term “heterolingualism” with which he designates “the foregrounding of foreign languages, for whatever reasons, by whatever means and with whatever effects” directly in the text (“Refraction and Recognition” 19). For Grutman, the purpose of introducing this concept is “to avoid unnecessary confusion with real-life situations stemming from language contact, such as societal bilingualism and diglossia.” Sugo Keijiro developed a related concept of “xenoglossia” to qualify “the use of foreign words and literal transpositions in one’s writing” (“Translation, Exophony, Omniphony”). In order to not overload the chapter with linguistic terminology, I will refer to this phenomenon as intratextual bilingualism.

postmonolingualism. A parallel or alternating use of several languages may amplify “la double appartenance de l’auteur” without producing a polyphonic expression (Combe 142). Conversely, a translingual text may be polyphonic without deriving it from plurilingualism. It is therefore vital to remain conscious of potential methodological slippages between languages, voices, and linguistic ideologies when discussing *Paris-Athènes*.

In *Paris-Athènes*, at least thematically, *Alexakis* appears interested in hybridizing practices in languages and arts. During his stay in Quebec, he bought a tape of folkloric songs performed by Edith Butler, concluding: “Je n’ai nullement trouvé dérisoire ce mariage des musiques traditionnelles française et américaine (une des chansons *All Aboard des États*, passe constamment d’une langue à l’autre), pas plus que je ne trouve dérisoire le rébético grec, musique d’inspiration orientale” (PA 50). Nevertheless, on the opposite side of this jubilant code-mixing, is the narrator’s fear of finding himself with two “demi-langues.” In Quebec, *Alexakis* also met with Greek immigrants many of whom forgot Greek and did not know French very well either, “malgré le fait que leurs propos étaient parsemés de mots français hellénisés” (PA 52). For *Alexakis*, this type of language mixing is a sign of a loss and an undesirable type of nomadism: “Ils avaient quitté les rives d’une culture sans jamais atteindre celle d’une autre. Ils naviguaient vaillamment sur un radeau” (PA 52). The narrator compares the immigrants’ code-switching and linguistic calques to being stranded on a raft, which, for him, indicates disconnectedness from both shores rather than freedom from both.

In her article on *Alexakis’ Paris-Athènes* (1989), *La langue maternelle* (1995), and *Les mots étrangers* (2002), Efstrafia Okdapoda postulated that in these texts “...le grec laisse entendre sa voix ‘en transparence’ sous le français par l’intermédiaire de diverses références culturelles” (“Changement de langue et polyphonie romanesque” 326). Drawing on Combe’s definition of

polyphony in a francophone text, Oktapoda advances that Alexakis, not unlike other plurilingual writers, creates an oeuvre characterized by “la polyphonie qui est propre à l’écriture, une sorte de plurilinguisme textuel” (324). In an article “Crise identitaire et bilinguisme littéraire chez Vassilis Alexakis,” Najib Redouane characterizes the author’s literary language in a similar manner:

...mitoyenne, mieux mutante, de l’entre deux langues, français en apparence, grecque sous-jacente qui se glisse dans la chair des phrases lui donnant une saveur venue d’ailleurs. Dans un véritable bruit de fer, perpétuel duel, les deux langues s’imbriquent, s’interposent, s’imposent. Elles deviennent un même corps, une même unité, une même voix. (160)⁷⁴

While Oktapoda argues in favor of a polyphonic “concert de voix” in which voices do not fuse into one, Redouane views Alexakian texts as a linguistic palimpsest wherein two languages constitute a single voice and body. In the latter case, linguistic hybridity resides in the ability of the Greek language to slip under the surface of French sentences, making it French only in appearance and Greek in substance. Though differently problematized, Oktapoda’s and Redouane’s characterizations – reminiscent of Khatibian *bilingue* – celebrate Alexakis’ literary expression as a linguistic space in which both languages coexist not only in theme, but also in form. In *The Invention of Monolingualism*, David Gramling advances that in such accounts, monolingualism functions as “the entry-level lingua franca of literary traffic, a metaformal constraint that nonetheless avows the most various forms of multilingual expression, shimmering in wait between the lines of an apparently monolingual book” (6). Knowing that an author comes from a different linguistic background or reading a text that thematizes cultural and linguistic otherness may, indeed, create a vision of subliminal marks of the primary language – of hidden

⁷⁴ Analyzing Alexakis’ underlying Greek as “une saveur venue d’ailleurs” creates an unintentional pitfall of exoticism.

expressions and echoes that form a dormant, palimpsestal language.⁷⁵ I posit that Redouane's assessment of language in *Paris-Athènes* points to this celebratory tendency of envisioning a plurilingual polyphony in translingual texts. Connecting her analysis to Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's work on Russian bilingual writers, Redouane even speculates that Alexakis' "final years may also involve the creation of a new idiolect, in which elements from his various languages appear in a new polyglot synthesis" (Beaujour qtd. in Redouane 164). In light of Alexakis' recent publications in the last ten years, it appears that this projection did not come true.

Compared to the optimistic tones of the previously cited articles, Ioanna Chatzidimitriou develops a different perspective on language in *Paris-Athènes*. She views Alexakis' polyphony as "falsely euphoric": "...since there is no third space for a hybrid language to anchor itself, he alternatively inhabits the poles of his linguistic geography" (Language(s) of Dispossession" 116). In *L'Interculturalité et le roman contemporain en Europe* (2016), Silvia Rocha argues that Alexakis' bilingualism is descriptive and anecdotal, completely dismissing the text's polyphonic nature. Failing to reach hybridization, she suggests that his is a monological oeuvre controlled by a didactic, omniscient narrator: "Malgré les comparaisons interculturelles, le texte n'accède pas à l'hybridation qu'un roman, qui met en avant les différences culturelles, fait espérer [...] L'absence de polyphonie est donc consécutive de cette position omnisciente, sous l'allure de quête et d'ouverture sur les cultures" (175).

By the sheer material presence of Greek words and expressions in the text, *Paris-Athènes* is visibly bilingual, yet I suggest that it does not produce a "langue mitoyenne, mieux mutante, de l'entre deux langues, français en apparence, grecque sous-jacente," as argued Redouane. While I

⁷⁵ Several important linguistic studies on translingual authors such as Nabokov, Némirovsky, and Kristof have revealed hidden marks of bilingualism in seemingly monolingual texts by studying the writers' manuscripts. For more on this, see Olga Anokhina's scholarship on genetic criticism.

disagree with Rocha's argument about the controlled monologism of Alexakis' novel, her shift from bilingualism to authorial discourse in the discussion of textual polyphony is significant in itself and is worth exploring in a different direction. In the following, I will argue that the way in which Greek and French interact on the page neither constitute a linguistic polyphony nor destabilize the monolingual ideology. It does not follow, however, that *Paris-Athènes* lacks these qualities; rather, they stem from something else.

Potential and Limits of *Alexakis'* Bilingualism in *Paris-Athènes*

In her analysis of stylistic and fictional polyphony, Oktapoda views *Paris-Athènes* as a "théâtre par excellence des emprunts et des glissements des syntagmes empruntés à la langue maternelle" ("Changement de langue et polyphonie romanesque" 333).⁷⁶ She cites Greek names, geographic locations, and other cultural references as examples. To illustrate how "le grec se laisse entendre sa voix 'en transparence' sous le français," Oktapoda mentions instances where the two signifying systems conflate, producing hellenisms such as "assiettes profondes" instead of "assiettes creuses," and "squelettes de lunettes" instead of "montures de lunettes" (326). These instances are fairly rare in *Paris-Athènes* and are handpicked by the author to illustrate his process of learning French. These calques are evidence of the narrator's linguistic *Bildungsroman* or "interlanguage," which Klaus Vogel, Jean-Michel Brohée, and Jean-Paul Confais defined as "la langue qui se forme chez un apprenant d'une langue étrangère à mesure qu'il est confronté à des éléments de la langue-cible,

⁷⁶ It is important to note that Oktapoda's argument covers three novels: *Paris-Athènes*, *La Langue maternelle*, and *Les mots étrangers*, all of which she views as "des oeuvres polyphoniques par excellence" (333). I problematize the relationship between heterolingualism and polyphonic expression only in *Paris-Athènes*. Oktapoda's arguments make a strong case for *Les mots étrangers* and *La Langue maternelle*, where Greek and Sango terms gain an increasing importance and are vital to the development of the narrative.

sans pour autant qu'elle coïncide totalement avec cette langue-cible" (*L'Interlangue, La langue de l'apprenant* 322). *Alexakis* always corrects these morphological slippages to create a comparative prism for the French reader, thus demonstrating exactly how his native Greek impacts certain French words. Without performing deviation from language norm, these examples nonetheless show that even in the life of a seasoned bilingual, two idioms continue seeping into one another in everyday interactions. Oktapoda also remarks that certain nouns and adjectives are occasionally integrated into French sentences, "mis entre guillemets ou pour la plupart en italique, et même les deux à la fois, des mots grecs clairement démarqués typographiquement du reste" (327). The text is, indeed, peppered with Greek names, locations, and occasional terms that are typographically and discursively differentiated. They are latinized, italicized, defined, or translated: Pirée becomes *Piréas*, Santorin is *Sandorini*, an ice-cream vendor is *pagopolis*. Certain words - *tsatsa*, *bourdélotskarka*, *iconitsa*, *kapellatos*, *karéklatos*, *trapézatos* are explained. Others are translated altogether: "—*Ta zoa théloun kaliméra, kalispéra* (les bêtes ont besoin de bonjour, bonsoir)," "—*Dèn ékana kali zoï*, disait-elle. 'Je n'ai pas eu une bonne vie,'" "—*Ma essi issé Gallos!* 'Mais toi, tu es français!'" (*PA* 77, 144, 255). Essentially, the interaction between Greek and French in the text mirrors in many ways what Brian Lennon called "managing" languages in the context of "language standardization" in the American publishing world (*In Babel's Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States*).⁷⁷ According to Lennon, foreign languages are "contained", meaning they are "confined to single words, phrases, or brief exchanges of spoken dialogue, as touches of cultural verisimilitude" (or its simulation) that "season the text ever so lightly with the

⁷⁷ Considering the pressures exercised by publishing houses, it is impossible to ascertain to which extent the final product reflects the author's will. If "editorial standardization" is sometimes resistant of plurilingualism and tends to erase the text's idiosyncrasies, it would be reasonable to assume that *Alexakis'* work would become increasingly more bilingual over time, having already been legitimized by literary institutions. This has not been the case, which allows to speculate that *Alexakis'* interests lie elsewhere.

foreign without dulling its domestic flavor” (10). They are tagged (typographically or otherwise) as well as translated. Texts that thematize language acquisition are expected to include bits of the “other” language to make the reading experience more “authentic.” However, they must also be packaged in a readable form with digestible and non-threatening portions.

Paris-Athènes tends to reflect this paradigm, at least from the perspective of textual bilingualism. Greek is mostly “contained” through italicization, glossing, and translation. Unexplained or untranslated words are rare, and in those instances the context allows to infer their meaning. For a narrator who declares to be rarely thinking of his reader, *Alexakis* is remarkably considerate from the linguistic standpoint. Oktapoda interprets these translations and didactic scaffolding as a gesture of hospitality where the author “se désolidarise de la réalité qu’il représente pour signaler sa connivence avec le lecteur français” (“Changement de langue et polyphonie romanesque” 327). While Oktapoda views the practice of “tagging” Greek as an expression of solidarity through which Alexakis identifies with his French readership, this reasserts linguistic borders and is therefore the opposite of two languages becoming one.

In *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction* (2015), Anjali Pandey explained “linguistic exhibitionism” as “a deliberate use of modern multilingualism for cosmetic effect” (83). As a “shallow” form of multilingualism, it often operates on the lexical level and is glossed, exemplified, thematized, and compared. Pandey argues that this highly visible form of multilingualism is superficial and complicit with monolingual normativity. “Deep” multilingualism, on the other hand, “manages to mitigate reader encounters with unfamiliarity, unrecognizability, and difference” (Pandey 115). Given *Alexakis*’ awareness of the pressures that come from publishing houses and prize committees and his active resistance against commercially lucrative models of cultural otherness, his use of tagged bilingualism in the text seems so much

more unsettling. In a moment of self-reflection, the narrator of *Paris-Athènes* explains that he incorporated Greek into the text simply because he missed the sounds of his native tongue: “La musique de ma langue maternelle me manque: c’est probablement pour cette raison que j’ai éprouvé le besoin de mentionner tant de mots grecs tout au long de ce récit. J’espère que le lecteur en aura retenu quelques-uns, qu’il aura au moins appris que *dèn xéro* signifie ‘je ne sais pas.’ Cela me ferait plaisir” (PA 286). Furthermore, *Alexakis* relativizes his position by suggesting that he would similarly miss the musicality of French if he were ever to give up this language (PA 206). Overall, the narrator-author finds himself in a paradoxical situation: while vowing to avoid exotic forms of writing, he unintentionally (and perhaps unavoidably) falls into the trap of “shallow” monolingualism, even if the endgame is to provide readers with privileged access into the bilingual mind. From the narrative perspective, the use of Greek points to the narrator’s lingering uncertainty with regard to an unattainable metalanguage that would attest to his inability to choose a language: it is as if he weighs his choice by testing and tasting a word in each language.

It must also be noted that the practice of typographically and discursively singling out certain words is not strictly reserved to Greek. When *Alexakis* comments on his struggles during the early period of language acquisition, he italicizes French words and defamiliarizes their meaning to French readers by playing on their homophonic proximity.⁷⁸ He confuses “faits divers” with the phonetically identical “fait d’hiver,” thinking that “l’avalanche de neige était le fait divers par excellence” (PA 182). Similarly, he assumed that the museum “du Jeu de paume,” which he imagined spelled as “pomme,” had to be dedicated to billiard, due to the homonymic resemblance between a billiard ball and an apple. Rather than allowing to “hear” Greek underneath French, he asks a monolingual French reader to reconsider what is often taken for granted in their native

⁷⁸ For more examples, see *Alexakis, Paris-Athènes*, 181-185, 191, 245.

tongue. After all, only what is familiar can become uncanny. *Alexakis* also draws attention to certain words in French to remind of the plurality of francophone communities, and, more globally, to accentuate the inherently multilingual core of any language. For instance, during his trip to Canada, he italicizes and explains Quebecois expressions that differ from those of metropolitan French: *une bonne envolée, t'sais, tchum, dispendieux, prendre une marche* (PA 46). These words remind readers of the internal variability of French that destabilizes the native/foreign binary. Nevertheless, *Alexakis* once again falls into the linguistic trap he attempts to avoid. In the process of reminding about the different uses of French outside of France, the practice of italicizing Quebecois inadvertently supports the primacy of metropolitan French as the neutral, non-italicized ground.

In *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis* cites several instances of syntactic and vocabulary errors to demonstrate a clash of two signifying systems that leave him vulnerable and render both languages uncanny. He illustrates how Greek has helped him feel more welcome in French, comparing Greek-derived terms to a “comité d'accueil bien sympathique” (PA 184). This proximity harbors confusion during his transition into French: “idiomatisme” replaces the correct “idiotisme” and “clistrophobie” substitutes “claustrophobie,” not to mention minor errors in hellenized spelling and article confusion (PA 184-185).⁷⁹ Sometimes, *Alexakis*' corrections appear didactic (especially when it comes to French words of Greek origin) and are addressed as a reminder to himself as much as to the readers: “...de la fête (on ne dit pas *le* fête)” or “du moussaka (on ne dit pas *la* moussaka)” (PA 282). It is not only French that gets modified due to its closeness to Greek; the native tongue also gets ‘contaminated’ by the adopted language: “...influencé par le français, j'appelais les colonnes des journaux κολώνες (kolonès), alors qu'elles se nomment stèles (στήλες)

⁷⁹ For more examples, see *Paris-Athènes*, pp. 281-282.

en réalité” (PA 256). Many concepts become carriers of two unrelated signifiers: “*Ténia* désigne, outre le parasite de l’intestin, le film de cinéma. Le sens courant du mot *aphorisme* est excommunication, et celui de *prothèse* intention, ou préposition. Si l’on m’avait parlé de cette époque d’une bonne prothèse et d’un mauvais ténia, j’aurais compris probablement qu’il s’agissait d’une intention louable et d’un film raté” (PA 184). *Alexakis*’ typographically differentiated French and moments of linguistic confusion are carefully framed and amply commented upon without being performed. The narrator showcases various errors and comments on linguistically uncanny situations in the unrealizable past conditional tense of “si on m’avait parlé.”

Always glossed over, these linguistic and phonetic lapses do not produce humorous, unpredictable situations, as in Roberto Fernández’ short story *Wrong Channel*. In *Paris-Athènes*, the two languages are not left undifferentiated, as in the works by the Swiss writer Daniel Maggetti who freely alternates between Italian and French. *Alexakis* recounts moments of linguistic uncertainty and faux pas without letting his readers witness these scenes or discover the othering of French on their own. Within Linda Hutcheon’s typology of metafictional self-awareness, this constitutes an “overt” form of linguistic narcissism, according to which, the interpretative demands placed on readers are being taught and thematized, rather than being “actualized” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 34). While the narrator conveys the complexities of a bilingual mind, they are framed as observations and annotations that are not performed. There is a notable difference between depicting a plurilingual/polyphonic mind and creating a linguistically polyphonic text.

In *Paris-Athènes*, linguistic errors are explained, demonstrated, and illustrated from the perspective of a narrator who has gone through the process of linguistic re- and deterritorialization and who remains committed to correctness. *Alexakis* confesses that he asked his brother to proofread his current manuscript, stressing the importance of producing a text in ‘proper’ French:

“Il me corrigea également quelques fautes de français: j’avais écrit que mes compatriotes seraient fondés à mes classer “chez” – au lieu de *parmi* – les auteurs étrangers” (PA 210). Error, hybridity, and linguistic deviation from norm do not create an aesthetic in *Alexakis*’ writing; instead, it is a controlled narrative element and a discursive declaration: “Je considère que je connais suffisamment la langue pour avoir le droit de me tromper!” (PA 104). Though the narrator-author asserts the right to make mistakes, none are to be found beyond the visible traces purposefully left and commented upon by the narrator. Overall, bilingualism in *Paris-Athènes* remains subordinated to the narrator who remains, for the most part, in the position of a knowledge bearer.

Self-Translation: From Bilingualism to Metafiction

The above-cited forms of intratextual bilingualism do not reflect the linguistic rapport envisioned in the symbolic foundation of a diglossic *urbs* or in the tree/wall metaphors of symbiotic twoness.⁸⁰ Though they do not create a linguistic polyphony, neither do they make the text monological, as suggests Silvia Rocha. While there are no circulating versions of Alexakis’ manuscripts, in *Paris-Athènes*, the narrator generously thematizes the role of his two languages in the editing phases. Discussing the linguistic particularities of *Talgo* and *La tête du chat*, he comments on erased bilingualism whose traces he revives through a metalinguistic discourse:

Il est certes fastidieux de se relire à travers une langue, mais pas inutile. Telle métaphore qui passe relativement bien dans l’une, l’autre la juge plus sévèrement. On finit par se rendre compte que la métaphore est tout simplement médiocre, qu’il faut la changer, ou la supprimer. J’ai beaucoup modifié le livre traduit par ma mère à l’occasion de sa réédition en Grèce [...] Ce n’est pas la traduction qui me déplaisait, mais certains passages du texte original français. J’ai réécrit en grec à peu près le cinquième de ce livre. S’il devait être réédité en français, je le corrigerais

⁸⁰ Such text could be only understood by readers with the same linguistic background as Alexakis.

en traduisant du grec les pages modifiées. Je finirai peut-être par ne plus savoir dans quelle langue j'ai composé certains de mes romans. Je ne faisais pas un bien grand voyage en allant d'une langue à l'autre. J'avais plutôt l'impression de me promener à l'intérieur de moi-même. Je ne considérais pas le roman que j'avais écrit en grec comme une œuvre à part, mais comme un pas de plus dans mon travail. (PA 264)⁸¹

This provides valuable information about the editing process that characterizes *Alexakis*' work to this day. *La tête du chat* was initially written by the author in French and later translated into Greek by his mother. For the novel's re-edition in Greece, *Alexakis* revised the translation not because he disagreed with his mother's work, but because it revealed shortcomings in the French "source" text. This explains why the second edition of the novel, if ever republished in France, would also be different: *Alexakis* would finally improve the flaws in the French text through the Greek revision of the original translation.⁸²

Whether it is French or Greek, filtering his work through the plurilingual lens of the other language reveals the imperfections of the 'original' text (due to this editing process, the notion of an 'original' manuscript is also stretched). This linguistic laboratory allows *Alexakis* to achieve a more polished and thorough work. As an instrument of revision, self-translation does not lead to a language filled with idiosyncratic resonances or create an impression of hearing Greek underneath the French language. On the contrary, French texts are sharpened by virtue of being edited through

⁸¹ It is by relying on the author's method of "linguistic realism" (writing in the language of his characters or his addressee) that we can identify the language in which the text was originally drafted.

⁸² The first-person narrator of *Les mots étrangers* (2010) reiterates this process: "En me relisant à travers une autre langue, je vois mieux mes faiblesses, je les corrige, ce qui explique que je préfère être lu en traduction plutôt que dans la version originale" (10). In an interview with Marianne Bessy, Vassilis Alexakis further elaborated on his practice of self-translation: "Jamais je ne publie une version avant que les deux soient terminées. En faisant la deuxième version, française ou grecque, peu importe, je modifie le texte. Je vois des faiblesses. [...] En allant d'une langue à l'autre, je poursuis le travail d'écriture. La traduction dure au moins trois mois. Au cours de cette période, je peux avoir de meilleures idées que celles qui sont dans la version grecque que je vais noter et que je vais reporter ensuite dans la version originale. D'une certaine manière, on peut dire que la version originale est la traduction. C'est un paradoxe, mais c'est un peu une vérité" (*Vassilis Alexakis : Exorciser l'exil* 241).

their translation into Greek. As a result, self-translation produces a more robust monolingual text through its imperceptible bilingual backbone. This revelation underscores that *Alexakis* needs to view his work through a second language (whether French or Greek) not only to improve composition, but to truly *see* it as a whole. In other words, completing his work in one of his two languages is an unfinished endeavor. The author remains half-blind until enlightened by the second tongue. This explains *Alexakis*' plea for a more severe judgment of his works. I posit that narrating his recourse to self-translation also becomes the narrator's ultimate expression of the branch/root and wall/shadow metaphors of linguistic symbiosis.

The tree roots and branches share the life-sustaining force within a virtual diglossic city (*urbs*). Similarly, through self-translation, French and Greek languages nourish one another in a dynamic literary oeuvre. Much like the shadow constructed alongside the wall, *Alexakis*' oeuvre is a double, whose monolingual versions co-exist within the shadow of a bilingual editing process. In addition to providing a stylistic advantage, self-translation (both as a dual oeuvre and an editing instrument) satisfies the need for a linguistic balance and becomes the source of the narrator's identitary peace. Commenting on the symbolic proximity between Paris and Athens – the two cities where the narrator resides – *Alexakis* virtually integrated the two maps into a single, uninterrupted path. He imagined a Franco-Greek metro line Cardiani-Levallois in place of the Parisian metro line 3 Gallieni-Levallois. Transforming the physical Levallois bridge into a virtual one, he extended the passage all the way to Cardiani, a Greek village in the Cyclades (*PA* 285). Self-translation occupies a similar role as a virtual bridge connecting his two linguistic realities from the literary perspective. Much like the root and branches that symbiotically nourish the tree in *Alexakis*' diglossic settlement, the process of self-translation makes it difficult for the narrator

to know in which language his texts are actually written: “Je finirai peut-être par ne plus savoir dans quelle langue j’ai écrit certains de mes livres” (*PA* 285).

Although most French readers do not have access to the Greek version of the text, they are made aware of interacting with a work that is conceptually incomplete without its extension in another language; on a deeper, unattainable level, Greek shapes *Alexakis*’ French expression and vice versa. Making references to self-translation allows *Alexakis* to connect French and Greek versions of the same text in the readers’ minds, all the while underscoring that its essential element remains outside their reach. In *Paris-Athènes*, visually demarcated Greek does not attest to the poetic in-betweenness envisioned by the branch/root metaphor. Instead, readers engage with the narrator’s voice that comments on otherwise indiscernible erasures, which impacts their experience of the text.⁸³ The narrator-author’s metalinguistic comments create a *sense* of the oeuvre’s bilingual genesis that is, to a large extent, discursive and not performative. In other words, his aesthetic of in-betweenness does not reside in a “third” idiom but in self-reflexive comments on language performed by *Alexakis* who doubles himself as a creator and critic of his own text.

IV. Conclusion

In her article “Les 'convertis' de la Francophonie: entre création artistique, stratégies et contraintes,” Véronique Porra created an opposition between postcolonial and translingual francophone writers. She argued that the former exhibit practices of subversion, contestation, and hybridity, while the latter – tellingly characterized as “converts” – are largely conservative and

⁸³ In *Alexakis*’ most recent novel *La Clarinette* (2015), the narrator comments on self-translation as an inextricable part of his transcultural and translingual existence: “Je me traduais donc. Les mots grecs rendraient le paysage parisien plus familier, rapprochaient le Luxembourg du Jardin national d’Athènes. En me traduisant je gommait une frontière” (122). No longer a source of anxiety, it has become a well-tested means of connecting his two worlds.

conforming. Contrary to postcolonial authors who *write back*, she advanced that translingual writers from historically non-francophone territories respond with centripetal strategies of *writing in*.⁸⁴ Though Porra argues that a narrative negotiating cultural and linguistic in-betweenness is in itself a form of centripetal writing, *Alexakis* undermines this schematic interpretation by denouncing the roles and tropes frequently imposed onto translingual authors, all the while performing this objection in his self-writing. Though *Paris-Athènes* is marked by contradictions (and perhaps, because of it), it shows that translingual literature cannot be reduced to a singular phenomenon of *writing in*.

Unlike many translingual autobiographical narratives, *Paris-Athènes* stands out in the way it deliberately blurs intra- and extradiegetic boundaries between fiction and criticism to integrate, counteract, and overwrite hegemonic interpretations of translingual production. Alexakis problematizes France's "pact of hospitality" and engages with the double-edged meaning of *hostis*, outlining hostile elements in a hospitable act of integration. Pushing back against his status as an "outsider" yet refusing to erase his singularity for the sake of assimilation, he denounces the roles and tropes frequently imposed onto translingual authors. In *Paris-Athènes*, the narrator resists the production of a literary form of *sirtaki* and refuses to mold himself into the French understanding of "Greekness," all the while exposing these expectations. Alexakis' reluctance to adopt flattering ideological representations of the French language and culture, his playful allusion to Brigitte Bardot as the initial image of France, as well as the references to the Theater of the Absurd as the genesis of his authorial self-awareness make *Paris-Athènes* an elusive text within an "assimilationist" discourse of "writing in."

⁸⁴ Whether voluntary or forced, for Porra, the strategy of *writing in* includes alluding to contemporary events in France, reproducing French national mythology, and embracing identifiable references to the French literary canon (*Langue française, langue d'adoption* 148).

Alexakis generated important critical topics in translanguaging before these writers became widely visible in the mid-1990s and before the first crop of scholarship on this corpus was produced. As a translanguaging writer assuming the position of a critic in his own narrative, Alexakis signaled a previously overlooked literary tradition in francophone literature and inquired about the way it impacted literature in the global age. His polemic challenges critics and readers to redefine epistemic instruments for engaging with translanguaging literature, making them aware of the undercurrent monolingual paradigm that contaminates reception. The narrator's multiple rhetorical strategies – which range from professing an intimate closeness to non-native French to arguing that no one is truly at home in any tongue – subvert the native/adopted dichotomy and problematize proprietary claims on language. His preoccupation with correctness and the “tagging” of Greek, on the other hand, point to the fact that his aesthetic of in-betweenness does not reside in the textual practice of bilingualism.

Despite an unflinching polemic against reception in France, *Paris-Athènes* is an unstable narrative that negotiates bilingualism and translanguaging in more ways than one. Doubling himself as the creator and critic of his own story, *Alexakis* inhabits multiple narrative modes – polemical, metaphorical, and metafictional – which produce a text that is both private and public, fragile and polemical, self-assertive and self-seeking. What contributes to its instability is the narrator's tendency to subvert the familiar by making it uncanny. *Alexakis* does not replace conventional models of linguistic belonging but transforms instead familiar archetypal symbols. As such, he rewrites a traditional metaphor of rootedness into an image of mobility and relationality. Similarly, he does not create a “third” hybrid language in the text but impacts instead readers' experience of the text by introducing the notion of self-translation. *Alexakis'* comments on the intricacies of the editing process ensure that readers perceive to which extent a visibly

monolingual surface may be a product of intensive bilingual work. *Alexakis* claims to have earned the right to make mistakes; yet he also posits that his work in French is more rigorous thanks to the influence of Greek in the editing phase. This shifting position goes back to *Alexakis*' initial challenge: one's translingual position may be disguised if need be.

In *Paris-Athènes*, despite the presence of Greek in the text, *Alexakis* does not lean into bilingualism to destabilize French. French and Greek are not dialectically fused nor synthesized in a new idiolect, but carefully managed in didactic and demonstrative sequences, which allow readers to accept the narrator's premise of forgetting in which language the narrative was written. The residue of meaningful bilingualism lies within the narrator's self-reflexive discourse and the tendency to reveal the invisible: the menace of the blank page in the absence of a metalanguage and self-translation as an editing tool.

In *Paris-Athènes*, *Alexakis*' aesthetic of in-betweenness is highly individualistic as evidenced by the diglossic garden settlement planted in an oneiric location that is neither France nor Greece. It permeates the most mundane scenes of watching modern/classical dance performed to Arabic music, caring for a garden, and protecting trees with an enclosing wall. With his translingual game of hide-and-seek, *Alexakis* resists straightforward interpretations of his authorial persona, blurring literary positions of insideness and outsideness with regard to French literature. He thus develops a translingual self-perception without making it fully transparent; the latter is confirmed by the narrative's ending on an image of a blank sheet of paper submerging into darkness.

“Prends toute la douceur que tu as en toi et mets-la dans le tango
que tu vas danser avec moi”
– Brina Svit *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*

CHAPTER 2

“Il faut trouver autre chose” : Brina Svit’s Translingualism in Other Words

I. Brina Svit: Life and Bibliography

In a growing body of literary criticism on translingualism, Brina Svit (Brina Švigelj-Mérat)⁸⁵ constitutes an important, yet understudied case. An author publishing with Gallimard, a recipient of important literary prizes,⁸⁶ and a co-signer of the highly mediatized manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde en français,” Svit is well integrated into the French literary institution and contemporary literary debates. Whilst she is frequently cited in association with translingualism in Europe, these references remain largely cursory, and few in-depth scholarly works have addressed the originality of her oeuvre.

Born in 1954 in Ljubljana, Slovenia (former Yugoslavia), Brina Svit began learning French at the age of 17 with her high school theater troop.⁸⁷ She went on to study comparative literature and French at the University of Ljubljana. Her immigration to France was not politically driven

⁸⁵ In 1989, during the production of her first short film, Brina Švigelj-Mérat adopted the pseudonym “Brina Svit.” In Slovenian, “svit” signifies the first light of dawn. The writer thus replaced her visibly non-French name with one that has a reduced foreign quality and that evokes her artistic rebirth in France. Paradoxically, because the name still has a meaning in Slovenian, Svit holds on to this language in the very gesture that marks a departure from it.

⁸⁶ For *Moreno*, Svit received the Prix du rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature françaises de l’Académie française (2003), for *Un cœur de trop* – the Prix Maurice Genevoix (2006), and for *Une nuit à Reykjavik* – the Prix littéraire Européen Madeleine Zepter. Her latest book, a collection of short stories entitled *Nouvelles définitions de l’amour* (2017), was shortlisted for the Prix Goncourt de la nouvelle (2017).

⁸⁷ Svit, “Brina Svit à propos de son arrivée en France,” *Des mots de minuit*. France 2. 22 March 2006.

but rather personally motivated: having married in 1980, twenty-six-year-old Svit moved to Paris with her French husband. While in France, Svit wrote her first four novels in Slovenian: *April* (1984), *Navadna razmerja* (1998, co-written with Peter Kolsek), *Con Brio* (1999), and *Mort d'une prima donna slovène* (2001). The last two were translated into French for Gallimard's collection "Du monde entire."⁸⁸ She concurrently led a column accompanied by her own photographs in *Delo*, one of Slovenia's major national newspapers.⁸⁹ In addition to the texts written in Slovenian, Svit composed and directed three short films and several radiophonic plays in French for France-Culture.⁹⁰ Her first literary work written directly in French – *L'été où Marine avait un corps* (2001) – is a short story that appeared in a special supplement in *Le Monde*.⁹¹ *Moreno* (2003) is Svit's first book-length oeuvre in French, followed by five more novels and a volume of short stories in Gallimard's "Blanche" collection. In her autobiographic *Moreno*, Svit describes the transition from Slovenian to French as a seamless experience that occurred without external pressures or the feeling of anguish that typically accompany such a linguistic shift. She wrote *L'été où Marine avait un corps* in French "sans grand effort ou frustration," all the while knowing that "[s]on français n'a pas la distinction ou la correction de [s]a traductrice, la précision d'un Hervé Guibert, [...] le calme néo-classique d'un Houellebecq, le rythme saccadé d'une Angot..." (27). *Moreno*, however, reveals the inevitability of this doubt that eventually catches up with the writer.

In her contribution to the collective volume *Pour une littérature-monde*, Svit adds that "une langue apprise relativement tard [...] n'est jamais complètement acquise" (254). This linguistic

⁸⁸ The last two novels were initially published in Slovenian in 1998 and 2000, respectively, before being translated into French a year later.

⁸⁹ Her interest and expertise in photography are fully deployed in *Visage slovène* (2011), an autobiographic narrative in which Svit artfully combines text and photography to discuss Slovenian diaspora in Argentina.

⁹⁰ Her short films include *Nikola* (1989), *Le Balcon* (1990), and the documentary on Jeanne Moreau, *De Jeanne à Zerline*. She also wrote two radiophonic plays for France-Culture: *Entré dans ma vie par la fenêtre* and *Institutrice au fond du puits*.

⁹¹ *Le Monde*, July 13, 2001.

posture contradicts Alexakis' declaration of having 'conquered' French and his assertion that the ability to work through the prism of a second tongue gives him an advantage over authors working only with one. Having adopted French as her primary literary language, Svit started translating her work into Slovenian. It must be noted, however, that – compared to Alexakis who writes interchangeably in both languages – Svit's first version is always written in French.⁹² She currently successfully occupies both literary markets and remains a prominent writer in France and Slovenia. When asked about her sense of belonging, she responded by claiming a transnational, European identity: "Je suis très européenne. Je suis une Européenne d'origine slovène qui écrit maintenant en français !" (Interview with Douin for *Le Monde*).

Alison Rice – one of the first scholars to have brought Svit into the academic spotlight – underscores the opacity of the author's motivation for changing languages. She rightfully remarks that it could not be simply justified by the author's desire to reach visibility and a wider readership ("Voler de mes propres ailes" 117). Indeed, prior to adopting French, Svit was already published by the prestigious Gallimard house through translation. Neither can Svit's choice be explained by her attraction to the French literary and philosophical tradition. In *Petit éloge de la rupture* (2009), the narrator provocatively defines herself as someone "[q]ui pense que les Anglo-Saxons excellent plus que les Français dans l'art du roman (un Ian McEwan, un Philip Roth...)," effectively rejecting an expected adherence to the symbolic capital of the French language and its literary production.⁹³ Less instrumental than reflective of her changed living situation, Svit's adoption of

⁹² Svit, "Moitié française moitié je ne sais pas," *Pour une littérature-monde*, 2007 : 253.

⁹³ In her article "'Voler de mes propres ailes.' Brina Svit, écrivain européen de langue française," Alison Rice confirms that Svit does not appear to be drawn to the literary qualities of the French tradition. As for its linguistic dimension, Rice cites Svit's interview with France Culture, during which the writer called French a "vieille langue rigide" (*Interculturel francophonies*, 28).

French underscores her evolution as a writer who finds herself more engaged with her immediate surroundings, even at the cost of writing in a language that evades a firm grasp.

In *Moreno*, Svit speculates that writing in French allows her to perceive how she has transformed in emigration. Citing a phrase from her notebook – ““écrire, c’est se montrer, se faire voir, faire apparaître son propre visage auprès de l’autre”” – she concludes: “Si je suis en train d’écrire en français, ça doit être aussi parce que je veux montrer mon vrai visage, celui d’aujourd’hui, celui qui a changé, qui est peut-être en train de changer cette nuit” (*Moreno* 63). In a later work, Svit interprets her choice from a philosophical point of view as the necessary distance that any writer needs to take in order to have a voice: “Parce que si je réfléchis un peu, on ne peut écrire que de là, de ce dehors, dehors de toute communauté, idéologie ou nationalisme” (*Petit éloge de la rupture* 24-25). In other words, all writing must come from a place of exteriority – beyond one’s family, community, and country. Writing outside of one’s native language constitutes yet another form of rejecting the deep-rooted disposition towards the familiar. To further explain the implications of adopting a non-native language for writing, Svit turns to the contemporary translingual network of French expression. Referring to Milan Kundera’s authorial ethos and indirectly evoking Andreï Makine, she suggests that the formal change of language should lead to adjustments in theme. Svit writes: “Parce que Kundera a raison: pourquoi changer de langue si on reste dans la thématique liée à sa langue natale, autrement dit pourquoi écrire la Sibérie ou la Slovaquie en français?” (“Moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas” 255). “Writing Siberia in French” is an unmistakable reference to Makine; many of his novels are devoted to the violent and lyrical pages of the Soviet history that unfold in Siberia.⁹⁴ Svit thus posits that breaking away from traditional communities and circumventing national designations in literature is more complex

⁹⁴ It is noteworthy that in one of his own novels, Makine negatively comments on Kundera’s novelistic themes, which suggests a general intertextual awareness of the translingual network in French.

than simply adopting a non-native language. This linguistic change requires a rethinking of what one writes about. In *Moreno*, she muses that through French, she gained the freedom to write about her mother; “froidement, sèchement, cliniquement, comme si elle était la mère de quelqu’un d’autre, enfin presque (55). It is significant, however, that the writer does not really go beyond this observation. She can certainly write about her family and her homeland, and it would be easier to do so without using against them the words that she had inherited from them. Changing languages makes it difficult to continue writing in the same way as before: “Changer de langue est aussi changer de film” (*Moreno* 97). For Svit, taking distance *from* Slovenian means no longer writing *about* Slovenia. She thus rejects an approach that draws on her country’s otherness or capitalizes on the tension between her native and adopted countries – a theme that looms large in many migrant and translingual narratives. Together with Kundera, Svit shares an aversion towards nostalgic representations of homeland and self-exotisation.

In addition to being Svit’s first book-length oeuvre, *Moreno* is also her most widely cited work and one of the few texts in which the author explicitly addresses her literary language change.⁹⁵ Although her translingual discourse is not innovative in itself, I suggest that the writer seeks a new way of articulating a translingual experience in terms of narrative resistance against existing models of translingual self-writing, such as the exilic narrative, linguistic *Bildungsroman*, and language autobiographies.⁹⁶ In a panoramic article on translingual writers in France, Catherine Douzou outlines several diegetic patterns that are common in translingual texts, such as the

⁹⁵ Another text that may be categorized as such is *Petit éloge de la rupture* (2009).

⁹⁶ Having adopted for the first time an autobiographic “je” in French, Svit fears that she would play into the latest trend of producing navel-gazing literature: “Ne serais-je pas en train d’attraper le pli des écrivains français qui tournent si volontiers autour de leur personne en autofictionnant? Ou est-ce peut-être le français même qui me force au ‘je’ ?” (*Moreno* 37). The narrator-author seems torn between the need for linguistic introspection and a distrust towards self-writing in an era in which the Rimbaudian “je est un autre” has become a predictable artistic posture.

tendency to situate fiction in the author's country of origin and to create narrators in "la position de l'ingénu" with an accompanying "regard critique sans complaisance" on France ("La légion étrangère' du roman français contemporain" 109).⁹⁷ Neither of these two patterns can be found in *Moreno*. Svit does not produce an expected translingual self-portrait and frees herself from many narrative tropes expected from the genre. In her contribution to *Exiles, Travellers and Vagabonds: Rethinking Mobility in Francophone Women's Writing* (2016), Alison Rice remarks that "a significant number of Svit's publications belong to a compelling new tendency in literary composition that are not limited to the "homeland-Paris binary" (79). What distinguishes *Moreno* is that the narrative is displaced from adopted France and native Slovenia to the neutral, "third" territory – Italy.⁹⁸ Further, it does not contain any information on the narrator's childhood in Slovenia, does not comment on her process of learning French ("learner narrative"), or discuss her integration in France as an individual and as a writer. In short, there are no remarks on seeing Slovenia in French or France in Slovenian. This autobiography resists the reductive image of a translingual writer producing narratives that are "domestic" by language and "foreign" by content. Neither does Svit adopt what Véronique Porra has designated as the "perspective du Persan" – a tactic for defamiliarizing the adopted country by depicting it from a foreigner's perspective to either critique or flatter it (*Langue française, langue d'adoption* 191).⁹⁹ Instead, *Moreno* exhibits

⁹⁷ Since Svit started writing in French, she wrote only one novel – *Un cœur de trop* (2006) – that involved an unsuccessful homecoming narrative.

⁹⁸ Italy is a particularly suitable location for an author coming to terms with her literary translingualism. Historically, unlike France, it did not unify under a national language until much later, and to this day, it has a high number of active vernacular languages.

⁹⁹ The term refers to Montesquieu's use of Persian characters as a mask that enabled him to critique his own society in *Lettres persanes* (1721). Adapting this rhetorical position for a translingual writers, Véronique Porra suggests that, unlike their literary predecessors, they must "s'intégrer à l'image que la société a d'elle-même et surtout au code culturel dominant" (*Langue française, langue d'adoption* 195).

a hyperfocalization on the present moment: the events unfolding in Tuscany's writers' residence and Svit's involvement with its multicultural migrant community.

The text is written in French and is predominantly monolingual with few interruptions in Italian, and even fewer in English and Slovenian. Within the diegetic reality of the novel, the interactions unfold either in Italian – with the residency's staff, in English – with the fellow writers, or in French – with Mohammed. Svit frequently accentuates the “translated” nature of the text by injecting linguistic metacomments in addition to lacing the text with foreign, yet easily digestible, words: “Comment *ragazzi* vais-je expliquer une fois de plus où est la Slovénie, et ce à une albanaise qui ne parle pas italien?”; “Je suis abasourdie, *flabber-gasted...Non capizco un cazzo...*” (*Moreno* 14, 46). With a few rare exceptions, Slovenian is almost entirely absent from the text. In a symbolic confirmation of the narrator's translingual uncertainty, one of the few words in Slovenian – *ne vem* (“I don't know”) – is reminiscent of Alexakis' *den xéro*. The novel is also peppered with Italian expressions, none of which interfere with comprehension of the text: *il casiero, non parlo italiano, ragazzi, capisci, carabinieri, grappa, Firenze* (instead of Florence), *viene con me*, etc. None of these expressions are instrumental to the internal fabric of the narrative and can be characterized, in Pandey's terms, as “shallow” multilingualism.

II. Affect and Translingual Aesthetics in Svit's *Moreno* and *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*

Moreno (2003) was written during Svit's six-week stay at a writers' retreat in Italy. The text is an autobiographic representation of this sojourn.¹⁰⁰ Having arrived with a goal of completing her

¹⁰⁰ One of the conditions for working at the Santa Maddalena retreat was submitting a report of the stay, which is available on the official website: <http://new.santamaddalena.org/fellows/brina-svit/>. Written in haste (as evidenced by a number of spelling errors), this brief and overall negative evaluation of Svit's stay

novel *Félicité*, 23 m₂ – a love story taking place in Parisian apartments – Svit found herself facing an auctorial and identitary crisis. The writer abandons the novel to pursue an autobiographic narrative in which she muses on her translingualism while spending time with and writing about the retreat's multicultural staff (and the Moroccan groundskeeper Mohammed, in particular). Having developed with them a more meaningful connection than with her fellow writers, Svit relies on this migrant community as a lens through which she reflects on her own translingual condition. In *Moreno*, Svit problematizes the question of self-representation as a translingual author while exploring an interpersonal relationship with a migrant worker. These two pursuits become one. The text is also concerned with the ethics of writing about others in a work of non-fiction: "...cette fois et pour la première fois, je ne suis pas en train d'écrire un roman. [...] Je ne me suis donc pas posé la question de savoir si je pouvais ou non écrire sur Mohammed. Pourtant il existe. [...] Écrire, c'est assumer sa biographie, d'accord, bien sûr. Et celle d'un autre ? Moins sûr, moins d'accord, n'est-ce pas..." (*Moreno* 75-77).

At the heart of the novel¹⁰¹ *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007) is an interpersonal connection of a different nature – an unwritten contractual relationship between a writer, Valérie Nolo, and a dancer, Orlando Dias, who goes by the nickname Coco. The two strike a deal: if Valérie writes Coco's autobiography, he will teach her to dance Argentine tango.¹⁰² Accustomed

was not produced by the author herself. It draws on the comments that the writer ostensibly made during her stay in Santa Maddalena and evokes *Moreno*, while misinterpreting some of its central premises. In an unpublished interview with the author, Svit posits that *Moreno* constitutes her *true* report that does not comply with the required format.

Svit, Brina. Personal interview. Paris, 24 April 2017.

¹⁰¹ In the novel's paratext, Brina Svit foregrounds the proximity between fiction and autobiography, characterizing her work as a "roman vrai": "Je ne suis pas Valérie Nolo, mais j'ai vraiment rencontré, il y a plus d'un an maintenant, Coco Dias, danseur de tango. Et il m'a fait exactement la même proposition que dans le roman: si tu écris sur moi, je t'apprends à danser."

¹⁰² A similar exchange is the premise of Sally Potter's semi-autobiographical movie *the Tango Lesson* (1997), which explores a relationship between a female filmmaker and a male tango instructor.

to “juggling languages,” Valérie Nolo is an interpreter, translator, and a published author who writes in French.¹⁰³ Orlando Dias is an iconic tanguero and one of the first maestros to have reignited interest in Argentine tango in the 1980s in France. Their dance lessons take place in his studio in the 12th arrondissement, near the “Porte Dorée” metro station, spanning over a period of approximately eight months and culminating in a trip to Argentina. Taking place between Paris and Buenos Aires, *Coco Dias* is marbled with scenes and anecdotes from Coco’s life – his poverty-stricken childhood, his first steps in learning tango, his immigration to France, his friendships, his women; in short, the expected biographical elements that Coco believes Valérie to be faithfully transcribing. This deal, however, produces a work of a greater complexity than the requested biography. “Je ne suis pas non plus son peintre officiel,” announces Nolo (195). *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*¹⁰⁴ is a polycentric text in which Valérie, in addition to exploring Coco’s life, documents the process of writing and elucidates with an equal intensity her own self-rediscovery through tango. An author of a self-reflective narrative, Nolo claims to be following the compositional paradigm of Diego Velasquez’ masterpiece *Las Meninas* in the way she represents herself alongside her characters.

In this chapter, I analyze *Moreno* (2003) and *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007) in dialogue with one another in order to pursue several lines of inquiry. I argue that the narrator-author’s quest to inhabit the defamiliarizing space of Argentine tango produces a text that performs formal elements of this dance. I posit that this intermedial in-betweenness constitutes a translingual aesthetic, as it transforms the tension between two national languages into one between verbal and non-verbal forms of expression. Interpreting *Coco Dias* as a renegotiation of translingualism

¹⁰³ While translation is a common metaphor for life in migration and the figure of the translator often allegorizes the transition between cultures, it is notable that Valérie Nolo does not represent this trend as an interpreter in a translingual novel.

¹⁰⁴ For the remainder of the chapter, I will be referring to this novel in an abbreviated manner as *Coco Dias*.

outside of the author's Franco-Slovenian identity allows me to approach *Moreno* in a different light. Shifting attention away from Svit's direct comments on writing in non-native French, I focus instead on the affective implications of embracing a defamiliarizing form of expression as it pertains to understanding a transnational identity. I argue that Svit's depiction of idiosyncratic couples (Coco Dias and Valérie Nolo in *Coco Dias*, Svit and Mohammed in *Moreno*) sheds light on the affective and intersubjective dimensions of her translingual experience. In *Coco Dias*, self-expression in the "foreign" language of Argentine tango is bound to the presence of a dance partner and is ultimately silent. Similarly, in *Moreno*, instead of coming to terms with her translingual condition on her own, the narrator develops an unconventional rapport with a migrant worker with whom she also shares silence, and whose identity as *extracommunautaire* lends her a paradigm for exploring translingualism.

III. The "Translingual Discourse" and Beyond

In *Moreno*, Svit acknowledges her fascination with translingual writers, clearly viewing herself as part of the tradition that brings together Emile Cioran, Vladimir Nabokov, Milan Kundera, Gregor von Rezzori, and Samuel Beckett (19-20). In this text, she resorts to certain discursive tropes that are commonly found in translingual self-writing. For instance, she concludes that her native Slovenian is "émotionnelle, très élastique et souple," whereas the adopted French is "cérébrale, précise et codée" (20). Svit does not refer here to the languages' inherent qualities but reminds instead of her "late learner" status in French: her linguistic instincts and reflexes have been shaped in Slovenian. This is a fairly conventional illustration of the distinction between one's

emotional rootedness in the native language and the intellectual detachment of the adopted tongue.¹⁰⁵

Svit also develops a repertoire of images that communicate how her writing has changed since the adoption of French: “C’est comme un vêtement trop bien coupé, trop élégant, trop strict et sophistiqué. Je ne suis pas à l’aise dedans, je ne peux pas bouger comme je veux, je ne peux le déformer à ma façon. Il n’arrive pas à se faire à moi et moi encore moins à lui” (*Moreno* 19). She further explains: “Je suis comme un avion qui doit voler à une certaine vitesse pour ne pas tomber. [...] Autrement dit, je suis obligée de courir à l’essentiel. Les pirouettes, les fioritures et autres virtuosités verbales ne sont pas pour moi. Je ne peux bluffer ou envelopper comme il m’arrive de faire parfois dans ma langue maternelle” (*Moreno* 56). This is coupled with an acute awareness of vulnerability, doubt, and a sense of weightlessness that characterize withdrawal from an instinct-based control of the mother tongue. The “why” and the “how” of Svít’s transition from Slovenian to French have already been addressed in several studies. However insightful and compelling, these images are not new in themselves; they play on already existing tropes.¹⁰⁶ Svít’s representation of writing in French belongs to an established tradition of searching for the fitting metaphor that would most effectively describe the exhilaration and fragility of the translingual state. Her witty “Je n’ai pas de papier-cadeau, je n’ai que des cadeaux” resonates with Emile

¹⁰⁵ While Svít’s juxtaposition does not refer to the languages’ inherent qualities, the notion of cartesian rationalism and discipline have been historically associated with the codification of the French language and have been used as an argument for its “naturally” universal qualities. This vision of French culminated in Antoine de Rivarol’s *Discours sur l’université de la langue Française* (1783) and can be traced throughout a number of translingual autobiographies.

For more on bilingualism and emotions, see Aneta Pavlenko’s *Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experience, Expression, and Representation* (2006).

¹⁰⁶ They do, however, point to shared experiences of writing in a non-primary language, which allowed Sara De Bansi to generate an umbrella term “translingual discourse.”

Cioran's famous comparison of writing in French to wearing a straitjacket¹⁰⁷ or Jhumpa Lahiri's comparison of writing in non-native Italian to wearing the same outfit seven days a week (*Moreno* 56). It also reminds of Alexakis' comments on being inspired by the "simple" language of Ionesco. The difference, however, is that Alexakis affirms this simplicity as an aesthetic choice, while Svit relates her frontality to the more constrained ability to navigate French. Translingual writers often confess to their readers the double-edged nature of writing in a non-native language: with discipline and freedom comes precariousness and certain limitations.

One of the marketing strategies for Svit's work has been her translingual status. It virtually divides her production into "French" and "Slovenian" cycles, while counting the number of novels written directly in French. For example, the paratext of her latest collection of short stories *Nouvelles définitions de l'amour* (2017) identifies it as Svit's seventh book written directly in French. Intended to pique readers' interest and help anticipate content, the selected excerpt on the back cover of *Moreno* is the narrator's reflection on her uneasy relationship with the French language. Svit's biography below the excerpt also emphasizes the unique status of the text as the author's first incursion into French.¹⁰⁸ This reinforces an impression that the thematization of the writer's relationship with the French language would be the text's central concern. In an article "Writing as a Mirror," Adele Parker takes Svit at her word¹⁰⁹ and rightfully confirms that "[e]ven

¹⁰⁷ In *Entretiens*, Cioran compares his experience of writing in French to wearing a straitjacket: "La langue française m'a apaisé comme une camisole de force calme un fou. Elle a agi à la façon d'une discipline imposée du dehors, ayant finalement sur moi un effet positif. En me contraignant, en m'interdisant d'exagérer à tout bout de champ, elle m'a sauvé. Le fait de me soumettre à une telle discipline linguistique a tempéré mon délire. Il est vrai que cette langue ne s'accordait pas à ma nature, mais, sur le plan psychologique, elle m'a aidé. Le français est devenu par la suite une langue thérapeutique" (http://www.lexpress.fr/informations/les-confessions-de-cioran_603961.html).

¹⁰⁸ Though this is Svit's first book-length project, it is not her first text written directly in French, as specified in the introduction.

¹⁰⁹ In an interview "Les petits peuples sont plus européens que les grands" for the journal *Le Français dans le monde*, Svit explains that *Moreno* is "...surtout l'histoire de quelqu'un que j'ai rencontré. Un homme instruit, cultivé, fin, qui à un moment de sa vie se retrouve domestique chez une riche baronne italienne" (May 2004, 28-29).

though one of the most commented-upon aspects of this text [*Moreno*] is Svit's commentary on writing it in French," it does not constitute the most important aspect for the narrative (194-195). With this in mind, how can we discuss translingualism in a text marketed through its non-native status without limiting it to the translingual discourse? To answer this question, it is necessary to take into account Svit's contribution to Michel Le Bris' and Jean Rouaud's volume *Pour une littérature-monde en français* (2007).

In her essay *Moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas*, the writer denounces the essentialism with which she has been cast as a translingual author. This awareness is underscored through her ongoing dialogue with scholars: "Alors Katarina ne sait pas dans quelle catégorie me ranger: est-ce que je suis dans le groupe Beckett-Julien Green, Huston-Alexakis, Agota Kristof-Kundera?" (253). This exposes an existing paradigm in which authors are categorized based on their relationship to their adopted and mother tongues.¹¹⁰ Svit further laments: "Depuis des années [...] on n'arrête pas de m'interroger sur l'identité et la langue. Comment habitez-vous la langue française (ou comment vous habite-elle) ? Comment peut-on être francophone ? Je pourrais ouvrir un dossier avec mes réponses intitulé : 'J'en ai marre, il faut trouver autre chose'" (252). The discussion of translingualism is often reduced to the way in which Svit inhabits her adopted language and her translingual (francophone) identity. In the same essay, she refers to the manuscript of *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* – her first text with a non-Slovenian protagonist who, according to the author, "n'a rien à voir ni de près ni de loin avec la Slovénie" (255). Whether deliberate or not, there is an invitation to make a connection between *Coco Dias* and the plea to "find something else." Rather than interpreting the novel as a complete departure from translingualism, I argue that in *Coco Dias*, Svit renegotiates its aesthetic position of in-

¹¹⁰ See Alain Ausoni, "En d'autres mots: écriture translingue et autobiographie." *L'Autobiographie entre autres: écrire la vie aujourd'hui* (2005) and

betweenness, divorcing it from identity politics and aestheticizing the experience beyond her biography and the native-adopted binary.

IV. The Postmonolingual “Moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas”

Though Svit insists that Valérie Nolo is her first major protagonist unrelated to Slovenia, even this French character does not have a fixed, “de souche” background. She is neither a migrant nor a citizen with an uncontested “francité.” In the opening pages of *Coco Dias*, the narrator-writer Nolo declares: “Je suis moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas, je ne vais pas me mettre à raconter l’histoire de ma mère, adoptée à la naissance, ne connaissant pas ses origines” (13).¹¹¹ Though there is no indication that her mother was adopted from another country or born to immigrant parents, Nolo willingly attributes linguistic and geographic foreignness to her mother’s life and through it – to her own. Interrogating the monolingual paradigm, she seeks to subvert the hereditary notion of a “mother tongue” and national belonging by deliberately inscribing “foreignness” to her mother’s past as an adopted child. This is a paradoxical gesture, as it reveals the stubborn vitality of the very paradigm Nolo tries to deny: inserting foreignness into a family narrative still implies the latter’s continued potential to impact identity. As a result, Valérie¹¹² Nolo

¹¹¹ This formula is reiterated several times across the novel (pp. 128, 188). This more-than-dual identity is a recurring motif in Svit’s oeuvre. In her *Pour une littérature-monde en français* essay, she explains it in the following manner: “C’est une formule idéale pour un romancier. Une formule qui affiche une identité ironique et laisse la place à une autre identité, à une autre vérité, au reste du monde. Elle dit le manque de certitudes qui empêche de tourner en rond à Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Elle suggère un certain inconfort et en même temps une liberté. On se place en dehors des littératures nationales. On n’a pas une cause nationale à défendre. On n’est à personne” (*Moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas* 256).

¹¹² It is noteworthy that even a fairly common French name “Valérie” is gradually othered in the novel. Due to a Spanish accent, Coco Dias calls her “Balerie,” unintentionally injecting the verb “bailar” (to dance) into her name. This is further accentuated when Fabian, her dance partner (and, ultimately, lover) in Buenos Aires calls her “bailarina,” which means “dancer” in Spanish. While still phonetically connected to the Spanish pronunciation of “Valérie,” her name becomes one with dance.

undermines and sustains the significance of origins all at once. The narrator's posture would be entirely different if she simply dismissed her family's history regardless of its nuances. Instead, Nolo's "moitié je ne sais pas" is an intentional manipulation of her mother's story and a willed inscription of otherness into her life. Hypothetical and unverifiable, it is a posture fashioned by the protagonist herself. It reveals a desire to infuse her own life with a degree of unknowability that is simultaneously bound to and freed from national designations.

Composing an ironic portrait of her mother through reductive national stereotypes points to a certain futility and a lack of meaning in the narrative of origins and family roots:

Je l'observais avec méthode et entêtement comme si je devais découvrir une partie de moi que je ne connaissais pas. Ma mère, chimiste dans un laboratoire médical, avait un teint nordique, un regard latin, une mélancolie slave et un raisonnement bien carré à la française. Elle aimait l'opéra italien, les auteurs russes et la côte normande [...] A bien réfléchir je n'avais rien contre cette partie incertaine et étrangère de moi, au contraire, avec les années, je commençais à la revendiquer, à me sentir étrangère dans mon propre pays. C'est certainement la raison pour laquelle je voulais apprendre les langues : chaque nouvelle langue pouvait se révéler une langue maternelle. [...] Est-ce vraiment important, cette histoire des origines ? (*Coco Dias* 189-190)

Analyzing this passage in "Writing as Mirror," Parker rightfully suggests that through this catalogue of clichéd national distinctions, Nolo mocks "the somewhat random manner in which nationally described traits are ascribed to an individual," and how little they reveal about a person (204). Unable and unwilling to derive meaning from these superficial "national" manifestations, Nolo abandons her discussion of origins on a rhetorical question. The narrator does not directly confront the monolingual paradigm or critique the constraints of national characterizations. Though the story of origins is unimportant to the extent that it does not carry identity-shaping information, it is significant that this question is not entirely erased from the text. Instead, Nolo

subtly engages with it by means of circumvention: not entirely abolished, the question remains suspended.

Extrapolated from a blind spot in her mother's life, the "moitié je ne sais pas" becomes central to Nolo's perspective on identity and belonging. Her self-articulation is crystallized in the potentiality that never completes itself. Playing on the familial underpinnings of the concept "mother tongue," Nolo suggests that she simply does not have one. Though her first language is French, it may not necessarily be her mother's native language. Through this strategy, she distances herself from an affective rapport with her primary tongue. Svit's irony-clad description of her mother and the circumvention of a "mother tongue" reflect the postmonolingual need to "work though" (and ultimately reject) the notion of linguistic origins.

In *Coco Dias*, national, linguistic, and cultural belonging are no longer the narrative's focal point or the main paradigm for thinking about identity. In other words, it is not the physical displacement (forced or willed) that makes a nomad, but rather a mode of thought that actively seeks and constructs porosity in one's own identity and refuses to be limited to a single or even dual cultural narrative. From this lack of umbilical attachment to France and to the French language comes a latent potential of being 'at home' anywhere and nowhere at the same time. Revisiting Svit's "il faut trouver autre chose" request, it becomes clear that the writer has not yet exhausted her exploration of language and identity but has taken a different direction. With her narrator-author Valérie Nolo, Svit transitions towards a broader, geographically-uncentered articulation of what constitutes "native" and "adopted" categories.

V. It Takes Two to Tango: Translingualism as a Relational Concept

In Svit's works, the articulation of the self – however fragmented or unstable– is generally explored through unconventional communal belongings and, more intimately, through the image of an uncanny couple. Compared to Alexakis' distinctly individualist perspective in *Paris-Athènes*, where the closest interlocutor is language itself, here, intersubjectivity is at the core of the translingual experience. The narrators-authors of *Moreno* and *Coco Dias* conceptualize self-expression in a non-native language through a relational presence of the other who, in various capacities, shares the literary space of their texts. In her article "Writing as a Mirror," Adele Parker remarks that it is "a different sort of couple, one that has none of the usual logic behind it," allowing it "to transcend or simply sidestep the kinds of shared connections that are conventionally considered most important, allowing more subterranean bonds to develop" (206-207). For Parker, the couple is also an external manifestation of the writer's internally doubled identity from before and after emigration. She suggests that when an author adopts a second language, the "inner reader"¹¹³ – meaning, the imagined readership addressed while writing – disappears and gets reconstituted through intratextual figures of doubling. She interprets the figure of the couple as Svit's attempt to recuperate this "inner reader," lost in the transition from the native to the adopted tongue. Though indebted to this acute observation of intersubjectivity in Svit's novels, my analysis of couples pursues a different trajectory. Rather than interpreting them as a symptom of the author's own dual identity, I suggest that in *Coco Dias* and *Moreno*, the figure of the couple creates a different approach to translingualism: it valorizes intersubjectivity and focuses on the affective

¹¹³ Parker borrows the term "inner reader" from Tijana Miletic's book *European Literary Immigration into the French Language* (2008).

conditions of the text's production in a "non-native" language rather than on the author's linguistic and cultural duality.

The events of *Moreno* unfold in the Santa Maddalena retreat in Tuscany, which provides ideal conditions for writing by isolating authors in a virtual cloister of contemplative solitude. During her stay, Svit was housed in the residency's tower, a quiet place meant to nourish her literary imagination as she worked on her proposed novel.¹¹⁴ Instead, la Torre became an unintentionally self-imposed gilded cage, disconnecting her not only from the real world but also from herself: "Je ne sais pas ce qui m'arrive. C'est peut-être la Torre. Elle a un pouvoir décapant et dissolvant sur mon roman. Elle s'attaque au clinquant, à l'inutile, au fabriqué... Elle le mange à petit feu" (*Moreno* 36). Instead of writing, Svit finds herself destroying already written pages. The novel – cast aside as useless and artificial – melts away together with the author's confidence in herself: "Si je n'ai plus de roman, je ne sais plus qui je suis" (*Moreno* 36). A traditional plot of *Félicité* 23 *m*₂ is replaced by an expression of doubt with regard to Svit's choice of writing in French and her identity as an author. The solution lies in Svit's immediate surroundings. The owner of the retreat – la Baronessa – has a team of migrant workers that help maintain Santa Maddalena's climate of intellectual pursuit. An Albanian housekeeper, a Moroccan groundskeeper and driver, a Berber chef, and a Sardinian gardener and cook take care of the writers' basic needs, such as cooking and cleaning. Unable to write or sleep, Svit becomes increasingly engaged with this community, immersing herself in their routine, chores, and celebrations. These people begin to populate her new narrative: "...on a déjà tant écrit sur les gens qui ont séjourné et travaillé ici,

¹¹⁴ The image of the tower evokes Montaigne's withdrawal from social life into a tower on his estate, where he wrote *Les Essais*. The strict working ethos of the Santa Maddalena retreat suggests that the best literature is produced in monastic contemplation; a stance against which Svit rebels. Her writing stems from engagement with the world. The notion of self-writing that cannot occur in introspective isolation continues to be conceptualized in Svit's later work.

qu'on le fera encore et encore, qu'on a forgé leur légende et créé leur mythe et que personne ne le fera jamais pour Mohammed, Lika, Walter..." (*Moreno* 37). While writing herself into the retreat's staff community, Svit reconsiders her own translingualism through the prism of this uncanny affiliation. In terms of producing a different kind of a translingual autobiography, she articulates an individual experience of writing in an adopted language from the perspective of intersubjectivity and difference, unrelated to either France or Slovenia.

During her stay in Tuscany, Svit grows particularly close to Mohammed whom she makes not only her "être vital," but also the central character of the new text (*Moreno* 42). The narrator-author is conscious of her privileged socioeconomic position and does not deny the material difference in the way she and Mohammed experience displacement. She introduces him through his virtual homelessness, invisibility, and the physical precarity of his situation: "Mohammed, il s'appelle Mohammed, lui n'a pas de maison, il n'a rien. On dit que la Baronessa est allée le chercher au foyer des chômeurs et des SDF à Florence. [...] Sa présence est tellement discrète qu'on ne le remarque pas tout de suite" (*Moreno* 13). A cosmopolitan woman with two homes in France and Slovenia, Svit transcends the notion of rootedness without losing a material home. Mohammed, on the other hand, is a migrant seeking to improve his standard of living. Next to the Romantic notion of exile that characterizes many writers and that many writers embrace, his presence evokes a harsher reality of those who do not have a home or a voice, who are invisible and dependent on others for survival.¹¹⁵ Seeking a connection with Mohammed, Svit is aware of

¹¹⁵ This comparison brings to mind Joseph Brodsky's speech "The Condition We Call Exile" at the 1987 conference on exile, held by the Wheatland Foundation in Vienna. In the opening remarks, Brodsky reminded his fellow writers of their privileged ability to discuss the exilic condition, evoking the anonymous, suffering masses of Turkish *gastarbeiters*, Mexican immigrants crossing the US border, and Ethiopians escaping the famine: "As we gather here, in this attractive and well-lit room, on this cold December evening, to discuss the plight of the writer in exile, let us pause for a minute and imagine those who, quite naturally, didn't make it to this room. [...] one thing is absolutely clear: they make it very

the conflicting and complex process of identification with him. During her time in Santa Maddalena, the relationship with Mohammed supersedes Svit's traditional affiliations and forms of kinship (with her husband and daughter). Unconventional and temporary, her bond with Mohammed gains the same degree of legitimacy and importance as her relationship with family.

Upon arrival to Santa Maddalena, Svit begins paying close attention to Mohammed's habits, his heavy silences, and his laughter. She seeks to align her daily routine with his in order to see him as much as possible, even though their interactions do not always result in conversations. The act of gazing frequently appears one-sided, as confirmed by a repeated metaphorization of Mohammed as the mountain Sainte-Victoire: "Il ne dit rien il se laisse regarder. Il est ma montagne Sainte-Victoire" (*Moreno* 50). With this pictorial reference, Svit casts herself in the role of the Post-Impressionist artist Paul Cézanne for whom the mountain Sainte-Victoire was a major motif celebrated in paintings across several years. Read superficially, this ekphrastic reference suggests that Svit sees herself as the artist while Mohammed is the passive subject of her creation. Close to their parting, however, the latter recognizes reciprocity and awareness of her gaze: "Parce que je te regarde, moi aussi..." (*Moreno* 110). With this, Mohammed tacitly acknowledges an ongoing silent exchange that underpins the narrative and remains invisible (or better yet, inaudible) to the naked eye / ear. Throughout the novel, Svit references other paintings to depict Mohammed. Imagining him as a child, she compares him to the boy in Picasso's *Le Meneur de cheval*. Later, when attempting to understand his solitude, she views him yet again through the visual prism of

difficult to talk about the plight of the writer in exile with a straight face" (1). Brodsky embraces the Romantic image of a writer that is physically liberated yet socially insignificant and without a voice in his adopted country. He provocatively suggests that "[i]n this respect, the plight of an exile writer is indeed much worse than that of a *Gasterbeiter* or the average refugee" because he is "constantly fighting and conspiring to restore his significance, his poignant role, his authority" (2-3). Though Svit does not consider herself an exilic writer, she puts these two types of migrant experiences in conversation with one another in *Moreno*.

art: “C’est un homme seul, sans fond, peint directement sur la toile nue, comme chez Mušič (80-81). Zoran Mušič’s black and white sketches of human figures have a haunting quality with blurry outlines and obscure facial features. While the reference to Cézanne’s mountain Sainte-Victoire produced an impression of a subject/object relationship between Svit and Mohammed, subsequent references to art complicate this initial reaction. I posit that these painterly lenses are part of Svit’s search for an ethical representation of the other; a way of respecting Mohammed’s right for opacity and not subjecting him to the violence of representational transparency. The paintings reveal something of him while simultaneously protecting him.

Growing closer to Mohammed without ever crossing the threshold of physical intimacy, Svit is very clear about the unusual status of their couple that defies all classifications: “Il n’est pas mon mari, il n’est pas mon amant, il n’est pas mon père ou mon frère, il n’est pas mon ami non plus [...] Je n’ai jamais aimé ce mot : ‘couple,’ mais je veux bien qu’on l’utilise pour Mohammed et moi” (*Moreno* 51). Her relationship with Mohammed simply cannot be defined. Through a rhythmic enumeration of negative definitions, she circumvents traditional relationalities between a man and a woman without creating a new one. Rather than giving a “less than” impression, this creates an unexplored space around the notion of togetherness. The narrator wonders: “Est-ce que j’ai jamais composé un ‘nous’ pareil dans ma vie? Un ‘nous’ qui ne demande rien, qui n’exige rien, qui se réjouit de chaque moment de son existence incertaine ? Un ‘nous’ qui ne se serait peut-être jamais formé dans la vie normale...” (*Moreno* 106). Reflecting on what sustains such an arbitrary rapport, Svit concludes that she has always searched for the company of people who are different from her, yet whom she resembles through this very dissimilitude (106-107).¹¹⁶ Mohammed’s and Svit’s transient connection draws strength from its fragile exceptionality

¹¹⁶ This resonates with Valérie Nolo’s explanation of why she is drawn to Argentine tango as a heterogenous environment in the novel *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*.

and does not expect anything from the other person, besides their presence. Blurring opposition and intimate proximity, it is a chance rapport that may have never come into existence outside of Santa Maddalena.

Though Svit and Mohammed shared meaningful conversations (as evidenced by his list of the most important people in his life, all of which she was able to identify),¹¹⁷ these tête-à-têtes constitute an elliptical, shielded presence in the text. The ones that are available to the reader are of a mundane nature, and the majority of their shared moments remain meaningfully silent. This silence is of an entirely different nature than the one required by the Santa Maddalena retreat. It is a silence of solidarity and companionship, not of discipline, rules, and interdiction. It becomes the leitmotif of Svit's and Mohammed's relationship. They go on errands, drive, and drink together, he smokes while she observes him, or, rather, they contemplate one another. As Svit's departure grows nearer, their silences become even longer. "On s'est déjà tout dit," she writes, though few of these exchanges were ever conveyed to the reader (*Moreno* 104). It is not a rapport of two autonomous solitudes coming together but a paradoxical kinship, as manifested by Svit's insistent use of the word "couple." One of the most lyrical passages in *Moreno* illustrates this non-verbal communication : "Nos yeux se rencontrent, se reconnaissent, se prennent par la main. [...] Il ne vient pas toute de suite vers moi et je ne vais pas vers lui. C'est tout ce que j'aime : une proximité qui n'a pas besoin de se montrer ou de s'afficher" (*Moreno* 101). This is not a proximity that needs to be acknowledged aloud. Their shared silences and exchanged glances constitute a more meaningful communication than what a transcription of verbal conversations could provide.

¹¹⁷ A single exception to these "silent" conversations is Svit's recounting of a private episode from Mohammed's life – the kidnapping of his daughter from a former spouse. Svit, *Moreno*, p. 34.

In the beginning of the narrative, Svit expressed a desire to understand how she has changed since her adoption of French in terms of an ability to perceive her face.¹¹⁸ She concludes that such transformation is imperceptible in the mirror and can only be expressed in writing: “...ça ne se voit pas dans un miroir. Ça se dépose dans l’écriture” (*Moreno* 63). Yet Svit does not go on to probe the deepest recesses of her mind in isolation of her Ivory Tower in Santa Maddalena; instead this process is intrinsically bound to her relationship with Mohammed. Svit’s insistence on exploring the “face” in a non-visual, philosophical sense echoes Levinassian “rapport de face à face” – an ethical encounter with another. By “face,” Levinas does not refer to a visual or verbal interaction, but rather a silent, pre-linguistic appeal that calls one to responsibility. For Levinas, “le visage” is “[l]a manière dont se présente l’Autre, dépassant *l’idée de l’Autre en moi*” (*Totalité et infini* 43). Instead of embarking on a confessional narrative, Svit writes about the relationship with the one to whom she reveals herself without dissimulation: “Je lui montre mon visage nu de tous les jours. Pas de trucage (*non mi trucco*, disent les Italiens pour le maquillage) ou autres dissimulations” (*Moreno* 51). Though Svit plays on the visual meaning of “the face” by mentioning makeup, its “nudity” refers in fact to the vulnerability of the interaction, to presenting oneself and relating to another outside of habitual contexts. If showing her true “face” to Mohammed implies complete openness, it must be noted that the text – due to its elliptical nature – does not fully reveal Svit’s confidences. Does she share with him her doubts about writing in French or feeling alienated from her community of fellow writers? If the narrator’s face is turned primarily to Mohammed whose opacity she protects,¹¹⁹ then readers receive only their glimpses in an indirect, shielded

¹¹⁸ The inability to see or recognize oneself in reflective surfaces is a prominent trope in translingual self-writing. It is for this reason that Svit populates her texts with narrators-authors who are in the process of writing self-reflexive texts.

¹¹⁹ Possessing limited information about Mohammed and sharing even less, Svit turns to visual arts to envision him and their relationship.

form. In terms of writing a translingual autobiography differently, it translates an individual experience of translingualism onto an intersubjective plane, suggesting that the text would not exist without Svit's bond with Mohammed. Their meaningful silences, elliptical conversations, and mutual gazes point to a different way of relating to and understanding the other without attempting an in-depth knowledge of this person. In *Moreno* as in *Coco Dias*, both couples communicate in an affective space of silence, whose opacity the readers cannot easily penetrate. The possibility of representation is contingent upon the relationship of difference; being is inevitably "being with."

Mohammed is what one would call an *extracomunitario*. Only recently added to *Le Petit Larousse* (2019), the term "extracommunautaire" is defined as "qui ne provient pas, ne fait pas partie de l'Union européenne." This is also a pejorative designation used by Italians to describe low-skill foreign workers from developing countries outside the European Union. As Svit bluntly remarks, they are "les étrangers de deuxième classe" (*Moreno* 52). Adopting for herself a term that is used to marginalize and to exclude, the narrator-writer redefines herself as being both outside and beyond national borders and traditional communities. This unfolds gradually throughout the narrative. In the first self-description as *extracomunitario*, Svit expresses distance by writing the word in italics and in Italian (*Moreno* 48). Nevertheless, she quickly espouses the term, as evidenced by the removal of typographic differentiation and its translation into French. Instead of viewing it as something that happens *to* her, the narrator-writer adopts an active position:

Je ne suis pas une Yougoslave, je ne suis plus une vraie Slovène, je ne suis pas une vraie Française non plus... [...] Extracommunautaire. Voilà le mot qui me convient. En dehors. En dehors des communautés nationales, communautés tout court, familles, groupes, cercles et fondations de toutes sortes... En lisière. [...] J'ai fait le dernier pas : j'ai déserté ma langue maternelle. Ou encore mieux : je ne l'habite plus. Je ne l'habite plus fatalement, fidèlement, fraternellement, comme disent

faussement les faux romantiques et les faux dissidents qui n'ont pas de choix.
(*Moreno* 92-93)

Svit's stay in Santa Maddalena next to its migrant community gave her a conceptual framework to articulate her linguistic displacement in terms of transgressing social barriers and borders. In light of these interpersonal relationships, translingualism – beyond its immediate literary and linguistic concerns – functions as a cipher for greater existential ruptures from what is familiar, allowing to rethink what constitutes a coherent group identity. The abandonment of the mother tongue is Svít's final step in breaking away from communities in an ongoing redefinition of belonging.

Establishing affiliation with the “extracommunautaires,” Svít develops a notion of a group identity through collective non-belonging. She experiences a sense of kinship with Santa Maddalena's migrants not because their positions are the same (they are certainly not), but because their difference from one another is viewed as a shared quality. Temporary and ephemeral, the Santa Maddalena migrant community is composed of parts that do not amount to a coherent whole. Instead of allowing difference to become a barrier, Svít transforms it into a binding matter that fosters a sense of solidarity and belonging she can be a part of, even at the cost (or, rather, under the condition) of transgressing Santa Maddalena's social conventions. Through it, she articulates her translingual condition not as an isolating experience, but as belonging to a community of difference. She therefore layers the sense of otherness by adding a socioeconomic component to the linguistic one and by adopting for herself the notion of “extracommunautaire” – a term used to disempower – as a source of empowerment.

This redefinition of belonging is played out microcosmically in Svít's relationship with Mohammed. Drawn towards this man, the narrator-writer feels disconnected from the retreat's hostess and her peers, an Irish poet and an English Canadian writer. It is noteworthy that the

monolingualism of her two colleagues constitutes an exception to the Santa Maddalena community: “Seuls les deux anglophones, l’Irlandais et le Canadien, campent confortables et imperturbables dans leur langue maternelle” (*Moreno* 21-22). Svit sees the retreat’s multicultural milieu as the new norm, suggesting that the notion of comfortably inhabiting a single language constitutes an irregularity and a privilege (or a handicap), solely possessed by English speakers. Svit’s monolingual fellow writers interpret her mobility across languages as a sign of fickleness and a lack of commitment: “Tu es constamment en train de jouer avec les langues. Tu penses peut-être que c’est drôle...C’est ça, n’est-ce pas...Tu trouves que c’est drôle...” (*Moreno* 47). In turn, the narrator-writer sees herself as an impostor amongst the privileged circle of anglophone writers and the Baronessa. Svit’s unstable membership comes at a price of concealing her sense of alienation. This functions as an inadvertent form of sociological passing,¹²⁰ whereby Svit is misidentified as belonging to a group that she does not want to be a part of and is viewed as radically different from those to whom she relates the most. Turning towards Santa Maddalena’s staff constitutes her natural desire to belong to a diverse, multilingual community that reflects how Svit relates to the world. Surrounded by the “extracommunautaires” – the people that do not resemble her on the surface – she experiences a sense of solidarity and belonging.

Svit’s question of changing language is resolved not through introspection, but rather by sharing vulnerability and forming an interpersonal relationship with someone radically different from the author. The narrator-writer’s shift in symbolic and social allegiance is performed in spatial terms. Svit abandons the verticality of “la Torre,” her Ivory Tower, to join the “extracommunautaires” in the kaleidoscopic horizontality of their “grand champ d’immigrés” – a large lawn where migrants get together to socialize on Sundays (*Moreno* 53). Svit’s venturing out

¹²⁰ Sociological passing is defined as a process by which an individual crosses over from one culture, group, or community (based on race, social class, gender, ethnicity, religion) into another undetected.

with an unlikely partner into the periphery of the estate and into the community of migrants represents a rebellion against classifications and a refusal to be defined. Whether it is of linguistic or social nature, Svit is admonished for not respecting established social boundaries at Santa Maddalena. The Baronessa views the narrator's closeness with the staff community as a violation of the retreat's status quo. She explicitly forbade her from speaking to the "domestiques" in order to reinforce the necessary social distance: "C'est mieux pour eux. Sinon ils ne savent pas quelle est leur place ici"; "vous n'avez rien compris à Santa Magdalena. [...] C'est un endroit où on ne parle pas. Sauf entre nous le soir" (*Moreno* 85-86). It is clear, however, that the silence and the "nous" of which they speak are radically different. While the Baronessa's "us" excludes staff, Svit's own definition excludes the Baronessa as well as her guests: "nous, c'est Mohammed et moi, bien entendu" (*Moreno* 68).

The relationship between Mohammed and Svit is one of tension between opposition and intimate proximity. Despite their reciprocity, this unconventional "couple" retains its distance from one another. Throughout the narrative, the narrator-writer carefully negotiates this delicate framework of sameness and difference. Spending time with Mohammed at a bar, she mocks the oblivious gazes of local villagers who see a "drôle de couple" that presumably could not belong together. Svit suggests that they see "[u]n extracommunautaire, un déclassé, un Arabe, toujours la même dégaine, la même chemise, le même pantalon" with a small, white, blonde woman instead of recognizing in them two of the same kind: "Non, stop, c'est beaucoup plus simple que ça: deux, deux extracommunautaires qui passent leurs soirées ensemble" (*Moreno* 99). She relies on this external scrutiny and imagines that it visually separates her from Mohammed. Though the narrator-writer ultimately redefines kinship through difference by subverting the meaning of the gaze, it must be noted that she is also the one who projects this visual difference onto the bystanders'

perception of Mohammed and herself. As a result, Svit enters a murky ethical ground in her quest for self-identification via the underprivileged category of migrant workers. While accepting their difference, she inadvertently filters the precarity of Mohammed's existence into a philosophical form of (non)-belonging. As much as she problematizes the socioeconomic spectralization of the Santa Maddalena community, Svit draws on the social and visual contrast between herself and Mohammed to arrive at her personal self-understanding as "extracomunautaire." Her interpretation of the concept underscores her deliberate choice to be outside of traditional communities, whereas those who are specifically labeled as *extracomunitarios* are on the receiving end of symbolic and judiciary othering. In her appropriation of the term, Svit problematically individualizes a collective "non-EU" designation with distinct political and economic connotations.

For Mohammed, the relationship with Svit does not resolve anything, and perhaps even leads to more devastating consequences. In the end, the narrator-writer returns to her family, routine, and her habitual circulation between the two countries. She even picks up her novel *Félicité 23 m²* that had been so abruptly abandoned at the beginning of her stay in Santa Maddalena. Svit marvels at the immensity of doubt she had experienced at the Tuscan retreat from which she now feels removed, as if the stay was an uncanny parenthesis in her life. Shortly after her return home, she receives a phone call from an Italian hospital, informing her of Mohammed's accident. After her departure, he sunk into drinking and depression and got fired by the Baronessa, thereby losing his only home in Italy. This confirms Antony Easthope's critique of Homi Bhabha's invitation to permanently inhabit the "third" space of hybridity, which he compared to "the state of psychosis" ("Bhabha, *Hybridity and Identity* 345). He argues that this liminal space should not be taken seriously, warning against the tendency to romanticize the state of hybridity. Whereas

Svit went back to the privileged position of “des fesses entre deux chaises” and a clearer understanding of her translingual identity, Mohammed lost all stability. It is therefore important to distinguish between existential nomadism and a basic human need for a physical home; between transcendental and socioeconomic ways of being “extracommunautaire.”

Instead of condemning or justifying Svít’s method of articulating her translingual experience, I remain in the ambiguity that the text itself sustains. Seeking an ethical approach, the narrator-author does not suggest an ontological equalization of their life trajectories nor does she exoticize Mohammed, protecting instead the opacity of their “couple.” Translingual identity, much like any other, is not an intellectual act of self-begetting but an intersubjective process, constructed relationally through the necessary presence of others. I suggest that Svít’s decentring of the narrative from her own life in France and Slovenia and her focus on Mohammed is not an affected rhetoric but a sign of a genuine interest in an encounter with this man. The narrator’s understanding of their unabolished difference allows her to imagine a community beyond familiar forms of affiliation through the prism of “extracommunautaire” (non)belonging. It must be noted however, that this pursuit produce an ethical problem of drawing on the experience of an underprivileged other.

In *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*, Svít continues reflecting on belonging through difference; this time through the prism of Argentine tango. Known for its complicated, hybrid history, the dance originated in the Rio de la Plata region in the port cities of Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay). It was especially popular in the working-class, immigrant communities, before being adopted by the dance halls of major European cities at the beginning of the 20th

century. Though it contains a series of codified, recognizable movements, Argentine tango ultimately relies on spontaneity and improvisation. It draws on one's partner's ability to signal the steps and the other's ability to recognize and respond to them. Argentine tango provides a singular combination of being a transnational cultural phenomenon and retaining a strong sense of closeness to its origins.¹²¹ Not unlike Valérie Nolo's "moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas," it is steeped in the local Rio Platan culture while also facing the world.¹²²

In *Coco Dias*, Valérie Nolo observes how Argentine tango brings together not only people from various geographic locations across France and the world, but also from a wide spectrum of professional occupations: psychologists, professors, doctors, as well as cooks, truckers, hairdressers, and the unemployed. For Nolo, tango creates a community from people who seem to have nothing in common: "Je suis curieuse des autres. Les gens m'intéressent, tous, surtout ceux qui ne me ressemblent pas. Et le tango est un milieu idéal pour ça : dans le tango, il n'y a pas de milieu, dans le sens où les gens viennent de tous les milieux" (*Coco Dias* 56). Unlike the socially divided Santa Maddalena community where Svit's communication with staff was seen as a transgression, a tango hall fosters a dialogue in which social status loses its meaning and is replaced by the economy of dance. More than merely putting strangers together in one room, Nolo muses on the way Argentine tango peels back the varnish of professional occupations to reveal personalities by the way dancers engage with their partners. As a result, for Valérie Nolo, an Algerian electrician from Marseille "au visage banal" constitutes a more desirable partner than an attractive lawyer who "même en dansant, ne dansant que pour lui, ne cesse de s'admirer dans le miroir de la personne en face" (*Coco Dias* 57). When meeting her tango partners on the dance

¹²¹ Davis, Kathy. *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World*, 2015, p. 1.

¹²² In 2009, Argentine tango was added to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/tango-00258>).

floor, the narrator wonders whether she would have noticed these men in a different environment, or whether they would have otherwise remained invisible to her. In other words, the narrator-writer of *Coco Dias* considers tango as a different way of seeing and being seen.

In her essay contribution to *Pour une littérature-monde en français*, Svit compares tango to a new language (255). In vastly reductive terms, *Coco Dias* recreates translingual displacement by thematizing the acquisition of a new, kinetic idiom –Argentine tango. I suggest that Nolo’s exploration of an intermedial dynamic between text and dance constitutes a new aesthetic of “in-betweenness.”

In an article “Is Dance a Language?” Henrietta Bannerman relies on the definition of verbal language as a foil for explaining the communicative power of dance, and she accomplishes this without creating an analogy between the two mediums. For her, dance is “structured like a language,” though it does not stem from a codified semiotic system (Bannerman 65). If language is based on the arbitrary, rule-governed use of symbols and a shared meaning, dance is comprised of “floating signifiers which are not tied by habit or custom to referents and to which meaning is attached on a more allusive and less literal basis” (69). Bannerman advances that, just like language, dance “communicates according to cultural codes,” though it “neither achieves nor is limited by a literal or factual form of artistic expression” (66-67). In “Ephemeral Signs: Apprehending the Idea through Poetry and Dance,” Mary Lewis Shaw expands on dance’s signifying process, suggesting that “[d]ance movements may constitute signs for the spectator, but unlike most linguistic signs, these signs are inherently open-ended. Only the signifier is given; the reader is free to choose the signified” (4). In *Coco Dias*, Svit recognizes the history of cultural encoding in Argentine tango and pursues dance as a non-verbal signifying process. Her character does not simplify tango to an embodied language of movement that can be easily observed,

analyzed, and transcribed. Nolo's tango is an intimate exchange not meant to be performed for public contemplation, which complicates readers' interpretative role as spectators and their ability to decode the "inherently open-ended" signs of the dance. It is my contention, however, that in Svit's novel, intermedial in-betweenness has nothing to do with the thematization of dance figures or movements.

Though Valérie Nolo is not a translingual author, as a writer, she documents the experience of acquiring a new medium for self-expression in her life as well as in her writing. These two narrative threads are intimately connected. A master of words, she shifts the meaning of language to the body, aspiring to see beyond words, while being inevitably bound to the text she writes. For Nolo – an author and a translator, someone who works closely with languages on a daily basis – tango becomes significant as a non-verbal, corporeal paradigm that takes expression outside of nation-bound linguistic distinctions. The language of Argentine tango cannot fill the lacuna in the author's "moitié je ne sais pas" formula, resisting the completion of a hyphenated identity and the type of in-betweenness that would exist in the knowability of the two cultural poles of one's identity.

Prior to meeting Coco Dias and before her trip to Buenos Aires to study tango, Valérie Nolo took her first dancing steps in a Parisian studio:

Il faut imaginer un cours collectif, une trentaine de personnes en rond, et moi au milieu, comme à l'école, avec le prof qui me dit pour la troisième fois de suite qu'il ne comprend pas pourquoi je n'y arrive pas, c'est pourtant simple, cet enchaînement de pas, gauche, droite, pivot, gauche... très facile même, tout le monde l'a fait sauf moi, et que j'ai un problème dans le tour à gauche, je soulève le pied au lieu de glisser sur le sol...sans parler du fait que je me tiens trop droite, je suis raide dans le bassin et mal latéralisée... Mal quoi? (*Coco Dias* 13-14)

This passage describes an environment in which a cognitively overwhelmed narrator attempts in vain to acquire a new corporeal language. Though tango is a couples' dance, Nolo receives no cues on how to learn by means of a couple's dynamic; she is treated as a solo dancer. In this setting, learning Argentine tango becomes a metalinguistic, cerebral experience, composed of repeated verbal cues, unfamiliar jargon, and memorized choreography, focused on technique and correct execution of dance figures. This leads Valérie to frustration, a sense of helplessness, and public humiliation.

During her subsequent lessons in Buenos Aires, Nolo's instructor shifts the focus from precision and mechanics of movement to affect and an almost instinctual, intersubjective rapport with the dance partner: "Il me prenait dans les bras, il me serrait contre lui, franchement, fermement, fraternellement...Tu vois, c'est ça, le tango, *muchasita*, me disait-il à l'oreille. C'est l'*abrazo*..." (*Coco Dias* 14). The two methods reveal radically opposing ways of understanding tango. The mechanical vocabulary of the dance that Nolo had experienced in a Parisian studio is replaced by a subtler organic paradigm.¹²³ While the former focuses on footwork and dance figures, the latter cultivates the importance of intercorporeal relationality and response to contact. The second model also suggests the superfluousness of a verbal exchange. Nolo's instructor in Paris overwhelms her with verbal pointers that she does not understand, further preventing her

¹²³ Outlining the evolution of Argentine tango in Europe, Elia Petridou noted that the myth of tango as a site of glamour and passion, once debunked, was replaced by that of authenticity – to which Valérie is sympathetic (62). Petridou writes that authenticity "was associated with the experience of emotion, a sense of collectiveness and sacredness, and a process of transcendence" (63). Though Nolo does not buy into the discourse of tango as a site of glamour promoted by cultural tourism and popular cinematic representations, she does contribute to the myth of tango's "authenticity." It is important to acknowledge the North-South exploitative dynamic that has become part of Argentine tango as a global cultural phenomenon. Nolo is anxious when one of her dance partners calls her a tourist, suggesting that she is one of many to be enticed by tango's "economy of authenticity" in Buenos Aires. This points to the general malaise that surrounds the commodification of Argentine tango and the consumption of its "intimacy" by foreign clients from the North. For more on this, see Maria Törnqvist's *Tourism and the Globalization of Emotions: The Intimate Economy of Tango*, 2013.

from properly executing dancing figures. The instructions provided by Coco during their weekly lessons confirm that the central element of Argentine tango literacy lies in the ability to relate to the body of the other. When Nolo does not understand his verbal cues, he asks her to *feel* his instructions through physical contact:

- Enlace-moi bien. Serre-moi dans tes bras...Comme ça tu vas comprendre... [...] Je ne vois pas où il veut en venir. Il commence à danser, à m’entraîner avec lui.
- Est-ce que tu me sens contracté ? demande-t-il au bout d’un moment, toujours avec son air entêté.
Non, il n’est pas contracté, c’est sûr. Il est fluide, il est chaud, il est vivant sous son appareil de danseur de tango ; il est Coco Dias. (*Coco Dias* 113)

As suggests Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in her article “Thinking in Movement,” “dancing involves a thinking in movement rather than a thinking about movement; body and intentionality being are one” (10). When dancing is improvisational and unchoreographed, it produces a kinetic form of reflection that is “clearly not the work of a symbol-making body” (10). Movement is born not from a series of memorized figures, but in response to engagement with a partner. “Les pas, juste les pas, ça n’a aucun intérêt,” affirms Coco, “Tout le monde peut faire des pas...” (*Coco Dias* 115). After all, even perfectly executed choreography at the expense of losing engagement with the partner is contrary to the spirit of Argentine tango.¹²⁴ Coco asks Valérie to be fully present, to listen carefully to his body, feel its tensions and plasticity, and replicate them. The ensuing conversation is composed of sensing and reacting to one another, which does not pass through verbal exchanges and is purely phenomenological. The body and intersubjectivity intertwine in complex ways to produce a pre-reflective form of communication that is not scripted but rather improvised. In the absence of a verbal dialogue, tango brings to the foreground Nolo’s eloquence not only in the

¹²⁴ Dennison, Christine. *The Meaning of Tango: The Story of the Argentinian Dance*.

technical sense, but largely in terms of her ability to focus on and follow her dance partner, to move as one while performing different roles. This explains why the novel contains few descriptions of the dance and its visual impact on the viewer. Valérie Nolo's tango cannot be perceived through external, observable gestures, because her primary goal is to capture an intercorporeal intimacy and exchange within the internal space of the dancing couple when tango is not a choreographed set of memorized, pre-planned figures. This spontaneity pertains to Nolo's and Coco's tango, and it further complicates the narrator-writer's task of transcribing this experience as a textual aesthetic.

In *Moreno*, intersubjectivity and collective non-belonging constitute a prism through which Svit articulates her translingual identity. With Argentine tango, relationality and expression in a new language become one. Compared to the idiosyncratic relationship between Svit and Mohammed in *Moreno*, the rapport between Coco Dias and Valérie Nolo is at once more and less complex due to the kinetic dimension of tango and the reciprocal nature of physical contact. Though the narrator never explicitly designates Coco and herself as a "couple," it falls under the same category of ambiguous intimacy, echoing the one shared by Mohammed and Svit. They are neither friends, family, nor lovers. They are also more than an instructor and a student or a writer and her character, yet they do not fall under any definition of conventional relationships. Their intimacy – amplified by the physical proximity of dance – does not come attached to a familiar label of closeness.

Argentine tango is an external manifestation of relationality as well as a channel of non-verbal communication, as demonstrated by Nolo's reflection: "Est-ce qu'il existe une autre activité où l'on est à ce point à l'écoute de l'autre que dans le tango?" (*Coco Dias* 55).¹²⁵ For Nolo, the

¹²⁵ The emphasis is mine.

language of this dance is characterized by an inescapable openness and candor that a verbal discourse does not readily possess: “J’ai mis longtemps à trouver la Porte Dorée et à commencer à parler avec mon corps. Oui, c’est ça, parler autrement qu’avec des mots ; d’ailleurs je pense que je devrais dire à Giovanna et Gaby [ses collègues interprètes] que ce n’est probablement pas le langage qui nous révèle en premier lieu” (*Coco Dias* 114). Rather than suggesting that dancing transcends interpersonal functions of language, she posits that it offers a different communicative plane similar to that of language.

Dance, however, compresses the time needed to get to know someone by circumventing scripted conversations and allows to reach intimacy with greater urgency and frontality: “Il y avait des choses plus intéressantes à découvrir sans devoir passer par la parole ;” “J’aimais bien cet accès à l’envers du décor” (*Coco Dias* 57-58). This intercorporeal intersubjectivity enables Nolo to interpret people differently by observing whether they dance only for themselves, for the admiration of an audience, or for the couple’s internal communication. For instance, when meeting Ocho Cuarenta – Coco’s mysterious childhood friend from Buenos Aires – Nolo turned to Argentine tango to fill the lacunae in the way he narrated his own life. She asked him to take her into his arms as if they were going to dance tango together. Their “close embrace” – the dance hold – is a fundamental gesture of Argentine tango. It involves two dancers standing in close proximity and leaning into one another as to allow a point of contact at the chest level; the heads are also often touching. Though Nolo and Ocho did not dance in the true sense of the word, for Nolo, their *abrazo* revealed to the narrator something that Ocho Cuarenta’s story did not willingly expose. This silent encounter strikingly resembles the elliptical communication between Svit and Mohammed in *Moreno*. It constitutes another type of relationality: it allows to understand someone without fully knowing them and without cognitively processing the information, while respecting

their right for opacity. The key lesson that Nolo learns from Coco Dias is the following: “Prends toute la douceur que tu as en toi et mets-la dans le tango que tu vas danser avec moi” (*Coco Dias* 166). This gesture of giving something of herself to the other becomes a source of self-understanding that teaches “bien plus de choses sur nous qu’on n’est prêt à le reconnaître” (165). Through a mutual abandonment of the self to the rhythm of the couple, the search for self-perception is linked to the figure of the other. In this paradigm, self-understanding is an embodied experience constructed in a shared affective space. It is important to note, however, that Nolo does not naively assume that dance provides access to an otherwise unattainable, pre-Symbolic form of expressivity, akin to Kristeva’s “instinctual *chora*,” which “in its very displacement, transgresses representation, memory, the sign” (*The Semiotic and the Symbolic* 102). Dance, like language, obeys certain cultural codes and, despite the singular affective space created within the couple, Nolo is aware of its constructed social nature.¹²⁶ When describing practices surrounding Argentine tango, Nolo recognizes the codified nature of these non-verbal interactions, such as the rules for inviting or getting invited to the dance floor without speaking.

While Coco Dias is a performer capable of dramatizing Argentine tango for scenic effect, Valérie seeks to communicate privately with her dance partners. Her dancing is not meant to be staged as a dramatized, theatrical image of passion. For the narrator-writer, this means revealing one’s vulnerability to the other. Nolo describes tango with older Argentinian milongueros as

¹²⁶ For Julia Kristeva, the process of signifying reveals a hidden “semiotic” (as opposed to symbolic) layer, which she links to otherwise unattainable or repressed desires: “Music and dance, inasmuch as they defy the barrier of meaning, pass through sectors within the signifying process which, though fragmentary (since there is no signified, no language), obey the same lines of force as those induced by the productive device of significance seen in texts” (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, p. 104). In her book *Dance and British Literature: An Intermedial Encounter* (2015), Maria Marcsek-Fuchs draws on Judith Butler’s critique of Kristeva to problematize the idea of dance as being closely linked to “the semiotic.” Alongside Marcsek-Fuchs, I reject the notion of dance as pure, inexpressible emotion, viewing it instead as a “signifying practice that is constructed and embedded in a certain cultural context” (55).

confessions: “Les Silvio, les Jorge, les Bernardino n’ont jamais cherché la lumière et les applaudissements [...]. Sauf que maintenant ils savent que leur vie – la seule vie que nous ayons – touche à sa fin. Alors ils repensent à tout ce qu’ils ont désiré et n’ont pas eu, à tout ce qu’ils ont voulu faire et n’ont pas fait [...] et ils le mettent dans leur danse” (*Coco Dias* 230). She characterizes dancing with one of her partners in Buenos Aires as a form of storytelling: “Il se raconte en dansant” (*Coco Dias* 234). Argentine tango’s potential for narration is expressed through and in movement, beyond the narrative arch of a verbal discourse or the spectators’ ability to interpret. Though it is unclear what stories Nolo hears or offers in exchange,¹²⁷ it is evident that the partners mutually surrender to one another and reveal their vulnerability in the shared space of tango. In *Moreno* as in *Coco Dias*, couples share the complicity of silence. Facing one another away from the voyeuristic gaze, they form an opacity that the reader cannot entirely penetrate. In both narratives, neither half of the couple attempts to “capture” the other by submitting them to the forcefulness of absolute knowability.

Inevitably linked to the figure of the other, self-understanding in this new medium of Argentine tango is constructed within a shared affective space. Since dance creates a mutual conduit, the act of giving something of herself becomes a source of self-awareness for Nolo: “Comment peut-on ne pas avoir soif de cette sorte d’intimité qui nous dévoile et nous apprend bien plus de choses sur nous qu’on n’est prêt à le reconnaître?” (*Coco Dias* 165). In this formula, being is inevitably being *with*, and self-understanding stems from being “à l’écoute de l’autre.” This brings to mind Arnold Modell’s “affective sphere” of intersubjectivity, where the absence of “boundary to the self” does not lead to its dissolution (*The Private Self* 115). The moving, listening,

¹²⁷ Neither is it clear what Svit shares with Mohammed to whom she shows her “visage nu.”

and responding body becomes a source, an instrument, and a canvas for self-knowledge and communication.

Though it is not my intention to equate Nolo's Argentine tango to Svit's writing in French, it is noteworthy that the directness experienced through dance echoes with the way in which Svit interprets her translingualism: "Je dois inventer, y aller, ne pas avoir peur, m'exposer. Difficile d'envelopper, de biaiser, de louvoyer. Je suis plus frontale en français, obligée de savoir ce que je veux dire et y aller franchement. J'avance bien plus à découvert en français qu'en slovène. Je suis plus tranchante aussi. Je dois aller à l'essentiel" (*Moreno* 55).¹²⁸ Nolo's tango is described with a similar sentiment of frontality and boldness: "Tu dances bien," points out her partner, "J'aime bien comment tu t'appuies sur moi. Tu n'as pas peur. Tu y vas franchement. Avec le cœur" (*Coco Dias* 256). In both cases, Svit's narrators-writers embrace silent exchanges, forthrightness, and the vulnerability of leaning into another. The intersubjective paradigm in which this negotiation occurs is central to understanding Svit's translingual aesthetic. Neither is a purely introspective, self-reliant endeavor.

VI. *Coco Dias* as the "Dancing Text"

In *Moreno*, Svit insists on writing with fierce, unadorned directness that she can only access in French. Nevertheless, certain literary critics see in this autobiographic narrative a Slovenian palimpsest, as demonstrated by the following accolade: "Une si heureuse conversion à notre

¹²⁸ Comparing her experience of writing in French and in Slovenian in *Pour une littérature-monde*, Svit supposes that, if "la vérité fondamentale du roman est de dévoiler l'envers des apparences," her sharp-edged, unadorned French brings her linguistically closer to this intrinsic quality of the novel ("Moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas" 254-255).

langue, que Mme Svit manie superbement et à laquelle elle apporte toutes les richesses et les subtilités de la sienne propre” (Michel Déon). The notion of Slovenian inhabiting French, pronounced at Svit’s reception of the *Prix du rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature françaises de l’Académie Française* (2003), was certainly meant as a congratulatory remark. This is a typical response to the early works of translingual authors in which the linguistic shift becomes their most salient feature. In an article dedicated to the patterns in journalistic reception of translingual writers in France, Mirjam Tautz concluded that “[l]es adjectifs désignant l’origine des auteurs servent également à qualifier ce qui est ressenti comme un style particulier ou un tempérament exotique” (“La migration comme critère de réception 76). Déon’s comment on Svit’s ability to bring the richness of her native Slovenian into French belongs to this tendency of applying the adjective of an author’s origin to qualify their text. Overall, he seems to be responding to an image of what a translingual author does rather than to the reality of Svit’s oeuvre. The statement says little about Svit’s literary French, and *Moreno* provides no evidence of such a linguistic palimpsest. The writer has explained that she writes differently in both languages, and that for her, writing in French enables her to escape the structures of her native tongue.

In a similar vein, Thibaut Grenez’ succinct review of *Coco Dias* in *Le Figaro* suggested that “[l]e rythme du récit suit celui d’un tango : aérien, subtil, léger, mais aussi intense, mystérieux et passionné.”¹²⁹ The notion of *Coco Dias* following the rhythm of tango is a simple acknowledgement of the novel’s theme. This impression is heightened by the fact Grenez speaks of the passion and mystery of Argentine tango – images that have become familiar clichés of this dance in western imaginary. Nevertheless, I suggest that the reviewer’s suggested premise – the

¹²⁹ Thibaud Grenez, “Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée”, *le Figaro*, 21/09/2007.
http://www.lefigaro.fr/lefigaromagazine/2007/09/21/01006-20070921ARTMAG90608_coco_dias_ou_la_porte_doree.php

connection between the dance and the text – merits closer analysis. I argue that the intermedial presence of tango in the text allows the novel to accomplish something that was erroneously projected onto *Moreno*; meaning, the translucent presence of another “language” in the text. Though there is no perceptible linguistic palimpsest in *Moreno*, I suggest that a similar claim holds more weight when considering the way in which the two mediums – text and dance – interact on the pages of *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*. In other words, I suggest that the “kinetic otherness”¹³⁰ of Argentine tango nourishes the novel in ways that exceeds its thematization and functions as its unmentioned structuring device.

Dance is often interpreted as a text, and writing is frequently imagined through the metaphor of dancing. Multiple literary works have been transformed into dance choreographies (Hoffman’s fantastic tales, Shakespeare’s plays), and the kinetic energy of movement, in turn, has inspired literature. Compared to the intersection between literature and music or visual arts, the intermedial rapport between literature and dance has received significantly less critical attention.¹³¹ While it is possible for two or more semiotic systems to cohabitate within the space of a single work (e.g. text and photography in Svit’s *Visage slovène*), two signifying systems may also coexist implicitly by means of one medium virtually absorbing another. In her article “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation,” Irina O. Rajewsky specifies that “[r]ather than combining different medial forms of articulation, the given media-product thematizes, evokes or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific

¹³⁰ Maria Marcsek-Fuchs, *Dance and British Literature: An Intermedial Encounter*, p. 1.

¹³¹ For a comprehensive overview of intermedial typologies encompassing *intramedial* relationships (e.g. intertextuality) and *intermedial* relationships (e.g. ballet adaptation of a play) see “Typology: Literalised Dance as Intermedial Encounter” in Maria Marcsek-Fuchs’ *Dance and British Literature: An Intermedial Encounter* (2015). For an overview of intermediality as medial transposition, combination, or reference see Irina Rajewsky’s article “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,” 2005.

means” (53). Rajewsky uses the term *intermedial reference* to designate this virtual form of intermediality, wherein “*by definition just one medium – the referencing medium (as opposed to the medium referred to) – that is materially present*” (53). Due to its “as if” nature, a literary text may possess an “illusion-forming quality” of another medium, thus stretching the representational mode of the given form (Rajewsky 54, 57).¹³² In *Coco Dias*, the referencing medium is the literary text, while the referenced media are dance (Argentine tango) and – as the narrator herself has suggested – painting (Velasquez’ *Las Meninas*).

In *Coco Dias*, the first-person narrator Valérie Nolo is a writer in the process of producing her new novel.¹³³ Though she promised Coco Dias to write his life story, it is not the expected biography. Nolo builds her personal story relationally with regard to Coco’s life. In a series of metatextual comments, she foregrounds a multi-axial approach to this project by creating a parallel between her own narrative and Miguel Velásquez’ *Las Meninas* (1656), a masterpiece of the Spanish Golden Age. This framing functions as a conceptual paradigm through which Nolo explains the structure of her novel and reveals her approach to (self)-representation:

Personne ne me demandera de cette façon de le mettre sur le [Coco Dias] tableau. De le regarder, de l’observer, de l’écouter, de tout noter dans mon cahier. De composer un portrait avec lui. Un portrait avec d’autres personnes, forcément, des personnes que je ne connais pas encore [...] Puis de me mettre sur le tableau, moi aussi, un pinceau à la main, suspendu comme celui de Velásquez, et le regard porté devant moi, au loin, dans tout ce qui va se passer que je ne connais pas encore [...] Oui, c’est ça, il faudra que je sois dans cette histoire, moi aussi. Moi, mes hommes, mon miroir dans l’entrée, mon vieux chat Robert. Même toi. C’est ça, toi. (*Coco Dias* 24)

¹³² Joellen A. Meglin and L. M. Brooks used the concept “textual choreographies” to designate “the innumerable ways in which literature has imagined the ontological fact of existing in a body” (Meglin & Brooks 2). Though there are different means of describing a relationship between various mediums, I am drawing on Irina Rajewsky typology.

¹³³ This metatextual mise-en-abyme is symptomatic of much of Svit’s writing.

Known for the multiplication of its subjects and the absence of a clear center, *Las Meninas* invites the audience's gaze to glide from one figure to another, constantly moving without being able to anchor within a single perspective. Depicting herself as a forward-gazing artist with a paintbrush in hand, the narrator-writer evokes Velázquez' departure from traditional portraiture modes. Drawn to the painting's polycentrism and the disjointed nature of representation, Nolo places on the same "canvas" people from Coco's life (friends, children, family, former spouses) alongside her own, having them interact or stand in isolation, seemingly disconnected, resisting a coherent reading. Though *Las Meninas* is meaningful for understanding *Coco Dias* due to its multidirectionality, I argue that it does not entirely account for the novel's dynamic. In addition to the overt reference to *Las Meninas*, there is a second, subtler structural frame – Argentine tango.

During a discussion of her new novel with a potential reader at a book fair, Nolo reiterates that she views her novel as a velasquian text-painting, but she adds a striking new detail to its description:

Disons que c'est un tableau, un portrait de groupe, avec, au centre, un danseur de tango. [...] Il lui apprend à y aller franchement, à être en face, à ne pas avoir peur, à jouer, à séduire, à être vivante, exigeante, audacieuse et libre... [...] Qu'est-ce que vous dites ? Je n'ai pas compris... Que je dois aller à la télévision si je veux que ça marche ? Je veux plus que ça. Beaucoup plus. Je veux que ça dance. Oui, c'est ça. Que ça danse, avec ou sans télévision. (129)

In response to a suggestion that, in order to succeed, she should advertise her work on TV, the narrator plays on the literal and figurative interpretations of the verb "marcher." Instead of understanding the word as the interlocutor intended it – meaning, "to go well" – she deliberately interprets "marcher" as a verb of motion, "to walk." She further adds that it does not suffice that the text walks; it must be, in fact, a dancing text. Nolo arrives at this important conclusion

fortuitously through a spontaneous interaction. Though she neither revisits nor elaborates her notion of the “dancing text,” it cannot be dismissed as a clever exploitation of one of the novel’s central themes.

Theorizing the intermedial relationship between text and dance in her book *Dance and British Literature* (2015), Ursula Marcsek-Fuchs discusses the notion of a “moving text” as a function of the reader’s imagination, contingent upon his or her mental ability to transform dance terms and descriptions into movement. Marcsek-Fuchs suggests that embedding explicit dance references in the text “leaves gaps to the reader, through which he playfully participates in the creation of ‘mental’ (literary) choreography” (261). From the song titles and lyrics to the iconic figures and places of the Golden Age of Argentine tango, *Coco Dias* is indeed laced with multiple direct references to this dance’s culture. Svit mentions Juan D’Ariezo’s “tangos archiconnus et bien rythmés” (136), Carlos Gardel’s *Volver* and *El día que me querías* (175), Osvaldo Pugliese’s tangos (178), as well as the iconic concert hall “Les Trottoirs de Buenos Aires” in Paris (177). The novel also introduces readers to tango’s basic steps, such as *el abrazo*, *el giro*, and *el voleo*. It also comments on social conventions surrounding the dance with a note on *el cabeceo*, which is a non-verbal invitation to dance, and the rules pertaining to milonga. Nevertheless, though Argentine tango is of central importance for the text, it contains few in-depth descriptions of the dance shapes, preventing the reader from mentally recreating movement. Indeed, as previously argued, the basic grammar of the dance is less important than what the narrator seeks to convey through it. Svit’s vision of a “dancing text” therefore differs from Marcsek-Fuchs’ theorization of the “moving text.”

Drawing on Nolo’s desire to produce a “dancing text,” I aim to elaborate a more intimate entanglement between text and dance in *Coco Dias*. The intermedial presence of Argentine tango in the novel underscores a polyphonic relationship between literary and kinetic modes of

representation. The proximity between Nolo's occupations as a writer and a dancer are foregrounded from the very beginning. After all, writing and dancing Argentine tango are of equal importance: when Valérie Nolo makes no progress in one neither does she advance in the other (*Coco Dias* 48, 132). In the following, I will show that Valérie Nolo expands and challenges the limits of her text by means of intermediality, as she draws on the intersubjective, intercorporeal nature of Argentine tango, reflected in the structure of the novel. Further, through metatextual guidance, *Svit* impacts readers' experience of the text by suggesting that dance is weaved into the novel's fabric. Coco teaches Nolo how to tango, and Nolo, in turn, incites her readers to interpret the novel through the prism of the dancing experience.

One of Argentine tango's fundamental figures that sustains this tension is *el abrazo* – the dance hold or “the frame” – an initial contact maintained by partners throughout the dance, which is formed by slightly leaning into one another to establish connection. In this position, each partner executes a different role, leading and following. It is my contention that this embodied relationality is translated to the structure of the novel in the way Coco's and Nolo's stories interact. In other words, *Coco Dias* explores the textual form of *el abrazo*. Just as in Argentine tango, where both partners invite each other into their space through various dance figures, Nolo and Coco invite each other into their respective creative realms: him – into the dancing studio, her – into the text. Inevitably existing through the presence of the other, they play different roles in different medial contexts: writing and being written, following and leading. In an article on the psychotherapeutic properties of tango, Laurie Hawkes describes a dancing couple as “at once *two* persons and *one* dyad, with two contrasted aspects working together to form a whole yet remaining different so we do not merge into an undifferentiated mass” (291). Whereas Coco expects a formal biography¹³⁴

¹³⁴ “Je ne vais pas rectifier qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une biographie, mais d'un roman, ce qui n'est pas du tout la même chose” (*Coco Dias* 222).

and attempts to be actively involved in the writing process, Nolo rejects her role as an “official painter,” seeking instead a more hybrid form of representation. These two contrasting visions of the project open up the space for co-creation in which two stories sometimes lose their distinctness. “Si je reviens à mon histoire, c’est-à-dire à l’histoire de Coco Dias qui par moments croise la mienne...,” writes Valérie Nolo about her emerging narrative (*Coco Dias* 147).

The two-person dynamic of the dance affects the structure of the novel that Nolo is writing. She admits that everything does not depend solely on her: “Pour une fois, je ne suis pas toute seule dans une histoire. Tout ne dépend pas de moi, pour ne pas dire que je ne peux rien sans lui. Je ne sais pas où je vais. Parfois je ne suis même pas sûre de lui” (*Coco Dias* 146). This is tango’s element of improvisation. Her reliance on Coco for the production of the text is different from the impact of Mohammed’s presence on the creation of *Moreno*. Even though the latter reciprocates Svit’s gaze, he never assumes an active position in her text. Unlike the couple in *Moreno* who maintained a physical distance (and whose “touching” was limited to the figurative handholding of their gazes), the intimacy in *Coco Dias* extends to the physical embrace in dancing, remaining otherwise platonic.¹³⁵ Adopting the improvisational dynamic of Argentine tango, in *Coco Dias*, Nolo writes with a dialogical awareness of her partner. She responds to Coco in her text as much as in their dancing, letting him propel the narrative forward, interpreting his gestures, while sharing the roles of a “leader” and a “follower.” More precisely, the novel’s intermediality superposes “leading” and “following” modes, making the two characters perform both roles at the same time.

¹³⁵ The line between dancing with its intense bodily intimacy and making love is often thin and is one that Nolo frequently crosses. In the analysis of *Coco Dias ou La Porte Dorée*, it is important to distinguish between Nolo’s relationships with tango partners who become her lovers (Fabian) and the platonic rapport with Coco Dias. Her bond with Coco explores a corporeal intimacy that does not translate into a sexual relationship.

Some of the recurring verbs used by Nolo to describe tango are “se laisser guider,” “suivre” and “répondre,” many of which also refer to her writing style in the novel. These verbs invoke an interaction in which a partner (typically, a woman) is a recipient and a follower: “Je ferme les yeux. Je me laisser guider. Je le suis. Je le suis en faisant confiance à son corps, mais aussi au mien qui répond au sien comme par miracle” (*Coco Dias* 210). It is impossible to sidestep the frequently problematized nature of gender relations when writing about Argentine tango. Its grammar is firmly founded upon the distinct roles of a leader and a follower that have become more gendered overtime. In feminist theory, Argentine tango has been criticized for promulgating heteronormativity and problematic gendered stereotypes about masculinity and femininity. In contrast, in *The Meaning of Tango*, Christine Denniston posits that “[t]he vocabulary used by the dancers of the Golden Age implied no such value judgement” (22). Arguably, the “leader” is simultaneously in the position of a “follower” to the extent that his leading stems from reacting to the partner’s responsiveness or lack of thereof. Svit’s textual and actual tango produce a space in which no one has the upper hand.

Though Coco never becomes a first-person narrator in the novel, he tries to impose his own vision onto the text. Nolo stresses his theatrical habits and his intent on “staging” his life for the sake of the manuscript. He presents himself in a way he wishes to be portrayed. Coco selects and supplies (if not to say, “writes”) scenes from his life, expecting Nolo to observe and transcribe: “Car il ne faut pas oublier ses grands talents de metteur en scène. Il ne cherche pas trop comment me dire qu’il a un fils : il me met en scène, il me fait participer à la pièce, y jouer même un rôle surprise pour l’occasion” (*Coco Dias* 137). Wanting to not merely be depicted but to actively contribute to the process, Coco offers to Nolo easily digestible and highly comprehensible scenes from his life: “la première, l’initiale, pourrait s’appeler: Coco a un fils. Elle est efficace, fluide,

presque sans paroles. Tout est clair, tout est dit, l'essentiel en tout cas" (*Coco Dias* 37). In these instances, he attempts to position himself in the "leading" role in the text as much as in their dance. Nolo pushes against Coco's attempt to choreograph the dancing text for her.

Though Coco Dias wants his biography to depict him as a legendary tanguero, Nolo writes in a way that would resemble how she dances tango with him – in a simple, relational manner that is not meant for the stage:

J'ai envie de savoir qui est vraiment Coco Dias, d'enlever les mauvais vers et les majuscules avec lesquels il tente de déguiser sa vie pour en faire une légende (sans parler des inexactitudes, dissimulations et inventions qui sont au cœur de l'évocation de soi). Et je ne veux pas le faire à la manière d'une biographe - dates, chronologie, faits –, il faudra bien qu'il le comprenne à un moment ou à un autre. (*Coco Dias* 225)

Nolo is not interested in writing about Coco the way her Parisian instructor taught her to dance tango – cerebrally, with the mechanical precision of dates and facts. Replicating the dynamics of Argentine tango in which dancers make themselves vulnerable to one another, Nolo seeks to strip away protective, stylized layers of Coco's self-representation in order to be truly "à l'écoute." Coco, in turn, has to assume vulnerability by making himself the subject of Nolo's text. Though he can suggest and provide certain information, the story is ultimately shared. It has a dual quality, mirroring the connection of "el abrazo" in which both parties apply pressure, adapt, and respond to each other's movements.¹³⁶ If Valérie Nolo "follows" Coco in Argentine tango, she takes on the "leading" role as an author of her novel-in-progress, all the while writing in full reliance on her

¹³⁶ This dual connection is maintained in the dual title of the novel – *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* – which suggests two possible narrative accents for a reader. The narrator-author also emphasizes the creative tension between the "Porte Dorée" (a metro station where the two characters meet for their dance lessons) and the "porte dorée" (the opportunities opened up by Argentine tango).

partner, listening to his cues, never fully in control. Without erasing Coco's staged "scenes," she co-writes and co-improvises alongside her tanguero.

Coco Dias is a "dancing" text that reverberates the kinetic tension of Valéries and Coco's *el abrazo*. The intermedial reference to Argentine tango allows to recognize that the writer and the dancer both perform leading and following roles on the pages of the novel, and that the dynamic of the dance seeps into the structure of the text. Contrary to the velasquian model, in Argentine tango, the figure of the painter is not singular, and – together with the subject of the painting – it is constantly mobile. The intercorporeal dynamic of tango thus accounts for the polycentrism in *Coco Dias* in more meaningful ways than the proposed paradigm of *Las Meninas*. It is a novel in which both characters face one another to move as one, all the while telling individual stories in the interstices between Argentine tango and the literary text.

Conclusion

In *The Translingual Imagination* (2000), Steven Kellman defines translingual sensibility as an "aspiration to transcend language in general, to be pandictic, to utter everything. Impatient with the imperfections of finite verbal systems, they [translingual authors] yearn to pass beyond words, to silence and truth" (16). In a literary conversation with Ilan Stavans,¹³⁷ Kellman asks whether translingual sensibility may be available to a monolingual writer. With *Coco Dias*, Brina Svit seems to answer this question by inventing Valérie Nolo – her first non-Slovenian, multilingual character who writes in her first language while refusing to call it her mother tongue; a character who seeks to express herself through the defamiliarizing, kinetic sensibility of Argentine tango. If

¹³⁷ Kellman and Stavans, "The Translingual Sensibility: A Conversation Between Steven G. Kellman and Ilan Stavans." *L2 Journal*, 7 (1), 2015.

writing in a “non-native” language leads to a sense of rebirth and to severing the link with previous sites of belonging, the immersion in the space of tango (mentally and spatially) creates a similar dynamic. Both narrators engage in a deliberate search to redefine “home” and “community,” nurturing fortuitous encounters and sidestepping inherited forms of affiliations.

Examined in dialogue with one another, *Moreno* and *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* reveal Brina Svit’s search for a new paradigm to engage with translingualism on her own terms, circumventing the native-adopted binary and an excessive interest in her own biography. After *Moreno* and contrary to what one may expect after Svit’s emphatic “il faut passer à autre chose,” *Coco Dias* continues exploring the aesthetics of in-betweenness through an intermedial encounter between a novel and Argentine tango. The dynamic between verbal (text) and non-verbal (dance) forms of expression is further removed from affective hierarchies implied in the native/adopted paradigm of national languages. Neither is entirely inhabited nor entirely foreign. Venturing into the intercorporeal territory of movement, Valérie Nolo writes about learning to dance tango while seeking to incorporate it into the fabric of her literary expression. The bodily relationality of Argentine tango’s *abrazo* and the improvisational nature of the dance structurally support the novel by creating a kinetic impression of a “dancing text.” If Valérie Nolo’s partners share their stories through dance, similarly, Nolo’s text dances while telling its story. Whether it is through an adopted tongue or an acquired language of dance, Brina Svit pursues defamiliarizing modes of expression, making relationality the central driving force behind her creation.

Unlike a multilingual text that mixes or switches between several languages, Svit’s intermedial take on expressing oneself in the “non-native” language of tango does not exclude the monolingual reader. At the same time, compared to the more visible modes of language hybridization, the intermedial impact of Argentine tango may be unattainable without the

narrator's metatextual clues. The notion of "dancing text" functions as an instructive gesture. With it, Svit sets her readers on a quest to perceive an intermedial palimpsest of Argentine tango in the narrative's structure, beyond its thematization. It is important to once again bring up Nolo's comments on the two styles of learning Argentine tango: the cerebral, analytical lessons in Paris, (where she was treated as a solo dancer) and the relational, affect-based approach in Buenos Aires. Svit's own didactic approach resides between these two educational models. A limited amount of metatextual guidance is needed to establish a reading practice in which Argentine tango would be viewed as a different language that affects the text. Nevertheless, this intermedial presence does not depend on the technical terminology or explicit descriptions of tango (much like Alexakis' expression of translingualism does not reside in the Greek words that pepper his text). Instead, it is expressed through the affective proximity between Nolo and Coco, which seeps into the structural organization of the novel.

In both narratives, new form is explored in the process of forging interpersonal relationships with individuals that are different from the narrator-author; rapports in which the expressive potential of silence is of utmost importance. Whether it is the French language or Argentine tango, Svit's articulation of translingualism remains profoundly relational: it occurs within a non-linguistic, dialogical position of being "à l'écoute de l'autre." *Moreno* – an autobiographic text known for explicitly addressing Svit's translingualism – pursues this linguistic reflection by turning away from the frontality of the "translingual discourse" and from the author's own Franco-Slovenian identity. It adopts instead a subtler prism of affect, intersubjectivity and the *extracommunautaire* belonging through difference. Through her affiliation with a diverse group of migrant workers who do not share a 'native' language or a single point of origin, Svit seeks to reconfigure the meaning of a collective identity beyond conventional forms of belonging based on

race, ethnicity, culture, or national origin; and without the possibility of fixedness. Although *Moreno* undoubtedly reflects the traditional tropes of translingual self-writing, it ultimately explores this condition by shifting away from typical narrative frameworks, thereby adopting a different paradigm for self-representation. Svit's aesthetics of writing in a non-native language are intimately tied to the conditions of its production – the opaque, silent conversations with an extracommunautaire in *Moreno* and the kinetic relationality with a fellow tango dancer in *Coco Dias*.

Coco Dias – a novel ostensibly removed from an explicit exploration of translingualism – helps to engage more effectively with Svit's autobiography by focusing not on the account of how her writing in French differs from writing in Slovenian, but on the circumstances that make this reflection possible. *Coco Dias* accomplishes to a greater extent and with deeper complexity what had been attributed to Svit's autobiographical account of her translingual journey. Ultimately, the critical lens of in-betweenness offers a new way of engaging with *Coco Dias* through aesthetics of intermediality. Through Argentine tango, the novel continues a reflection on alterity in literary expression through the dialogical tension between text and dance.

“La vraie langue poétique, c’est une langue d’étonnement. C’est la langue de quelqu’un qui n’accepte pas l’apparence banale des choses. [...] Nos langues individuels sont riches, mais, malheureusement, elles sont castrées par notre communication quotidienne. À force de parler des choses fonctionnelles, utilitaires, on les mutile” (Andreï Makine, *La Langue française vue d’ailleurs*)

CHAPTER 3

Andreï Makine, Gabriel Osmonde, and the Poetic Language of In-Betweenness

I. Makine’s Biographic Plasticity

In her monograph *Andreï Makine: deux facettes de son œuvre* (2005), Nina Nazarova fittingly observed that, based on the available information on this author, only the following can be stated with assurance: “Andreï Makine est né... Et là commencent déjà des contradictions” (12).¹³⁸ This is by no means an exaggeration. In the early novels, the author’s paratextual biography listed Novgorod, Russia, as Makine’s birthplace, while multiple journal and scholarly sources named Krasnoyarsk – a city halfway across the country. Overtime, the city in the paratext was changed to encompass Makine’s national origin as a whole – Russia. Starting with the novel *La Musique d’une vie* (2001) and onward, Siberia – an extensive region in Russia – replaced the national designation. While it is impossible to make definitive claims in the absence of an official biography, the paratextual evolution of Makine’s birthplace alludes to an active process of self-

¹³⁸ This witty preface strikingly resembles Nancy Huston’s characterization of Romain Gary to whom Makine was frequently compared both in the public eye and in critical scholarship: “He was born. That much is certain” (“A Foreign Body in French Literature,” *Poetics Today*. 17.4, 1996, p. 548).

fashioning. The final choice of Siberia may be interpreted as a measure of distancing from the ‘familiar’ urban centers of Russia towards a more rugged territory that holds a distinctive symbolic status in the Russian literary imaginary as well as abroad: a manifold space of exile, punishment, purity, and hope.¹³⁹

Little is known about Makine’s pre-immigration life in the Soviet Union and during his early years in France, including the circumstances in which he learned French. Much of the “factual” information about the writer was drawn from his novel *Le Testament français* (1995), which has often been interpreted and promoted as autobiographic. Instead of resolving this ambiguity, Makine further blurred fact and fiction through indirect acquiescence to rumors and amendable narratives during interviews. In *Out of Russia* (2011), Adrian Wanner went as far as to suggest that Makine’s biography – assembled through interviews and indistinguishable from publicly spun myths and speculations – is part of his oeuvre, a “parallel body of work that allows him to cast himself in a particular fashion” (23).¹⁴⁰ In 2011, the author revealed that he had also been secretly publishing under the heteronym Gabriel Osmonde. He further muddled the situation by stating that “Makine” was not his real name, thereby complicating further attempts to unravel truth from fiction.

In an encyclopedic entry on the author, Murielle Lucie Clément speculates that Makine spent his childhood and adolescence in a Siberian orphanage and that his parents were probably deported to work camps (*Passages et ancrages en France* 572). Having completed his

¹³⁹ Bassin, Mark. “Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century.” *The American Historical Review* 96.3 (1991): 763-794.

¹⁴⁰ This is similar to the case of Romain Gary whose life, according to Francesca Lorandini “a été entourée d’un halo mythique continuellement alimenté par l’auteur lui-même, au moyen de jeux de dédoublement, de falsifications, de confessions et de démentis qui, issus de sa vie publique, sont devenus matière romanesque” (“On est toujours piégé dans un je” 26). The distinction between fact and fiction in Makine’s life is beyond the scope of this chapter, as it only addresses the author’s literary posture and its impact on reception.

undergraduate studies at Tver State University, Makine spent several years teaching at the pedagogical Institute of Novgorod while contributing to the journal *Littérature moderne à l'étranger*. In 1985, he defended a dissertation on representations of childhood in contemporary French literature (1970-80s) at Moscow State University. In the same year – and five years prior to the fall of the Soviet Union – Makine travelled to France as part of an instructor's exchange program and stayed behind as a political asylum seeker. While in Paris, he taught Russian and defended his second doctoral thesis on the Russian author Ivan Bunin at the Sorbonne in 1993.¹⁴¹ Three years after obtaining political asylum, thirty-year old Makine published his first novel written directly in French.

Adrian Wanner invoked a poetic parallel between Andreï Makine's and Samuel Beckett's motivations for leaving their home countries, suggesting that "Makine's decision to become a French writer may have preceded his decision to emigrate to France" (*Out of Russia* 22-23). Just as Beckett was fleeing Joyce's literary shadow, Makine readily recognized the need to escape the "ombres trop intimes de Tchekhov, Tolstoï ou Dostoïevski" (Van Renterghem, "Andreï Makine, Goncourt des steppes"). In a similar vein, yet with a radically different connotation, a Russian critic Tatyana Tolstaya suggested that Makine became a writer in France because his oeuvre – filled with bromidic, exoticized representations of Russia – would have failed in his own country.¹⁴² If Makine's literary drive, as suggests Ray Taras, is "his search for the Russia he left behind," it is ironic that these images are rejected by the very country he seeks to represent ("A la recherche du pays perdu": Andrei Makine's Russia" 52).

¹⁴¹ Ivan Bunin belonged to what is commonly referred to as the "First Wave" of Russian emigration – exiles who fled the country in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Bunin settled in France but continued writing in Russian.

¹⁴² Tolstaya, "Russkii chelovek na rendezu." *Znamia* 6 (1998): 200-209.

Makine struggled to launch his literary career in France. Commenting on the obstacles he had to overcome to be integrated into the French literary milieu has become an essential component of his authorial posture. In several interviews, he lamented that French publishers rejected his manuscripts due to a linguistic prejudice. Makine speculated that he had been judged by his strong Russian accent, which, as the publishers must have feared, would produce a text of an inferior quality: “Il valait mieux qu’ils me lisent avant de me rencontrer. Dès qu’ils m’entendaient parler avec mon accent, ils se disaient : il écrit certainement avec le même accent” (qtd. in Lievois “Pseudo-translation et image d’auteur” 452). As a result, his first two novels – *La Fille d’un héros de l’Union soviétique* (1990) and *Confession d’un porte-drapeau déchu* (1992) – were published as pseudo-translations. This ploy was necessary to shift publishers’ attention from concerns about language to content. Though Makine wrote both texts directly in French, he pretended to be the author who produced the original Russian manuscripts. He also invented two fictional translators – Albert Lemonnier and Françoise Bourg – who ostensibly translated his Russian novels into French on his behalf.¹⁴³ Similarly to Vassilis Alexakis, Makine faced suspicion about his ability to write in a non-native language; however, the two authors responded differently to this situation. Alexakis condemned the belief that masterpieces can only be written in one’s native tongue and denounced the pressure to produce culturally “exotic” images. Makine opposed the former while, to a certain extent, giving in to the latter. His first four novels remained unknown to mainstream readership until the writer’s triumphant literary consecration several years later.

¹⁴³ In his article “‘A la recherche du pays perdu’: Andrei Makine’s Russia,” Ray Taras examines *La fille d’un héros soviétique* (1990) as if it were an actual translation from Russian completed by Françoise Bourg. He interpreted Makine’s decision to write in French as a result of being dissatisfied with the quality of translation that “did not do justice to his command of prose” (53). It is not clear, however, if Makine submitted his original French manuscript whilst pretending to be the author of its Russian original or whether he also had to produce proof of the “original” manuscript by rewriting his own text in Russian.

In 1995, Makine went from disguising his translingual identity to making it the focal point of his novel entitled *Le Testament français*. Its first-person narrator, Aliocha, is a young Soviet boy who grew up with his French grandmother's tales about the Belle Epoque, symbolist poetry, and old Parisian newspaper clippings. He spent his childhood yearning for the refined otherness of French civilization while wrestling with his Franco-Russian identity. The narrator eventually emigrated to France where he became a translingual writer of French expression. *Le Testament français* was crowned with an unprecedented combination of France's most prestigious literary awards – Goncourt, Goncourt des lycéens, and Prix Médicis (*aex-aquo* with Vassilis Alexakis) – making Makine a household name almost overnight. A representation of a tumultuous life between two languages and cultures as well as an homage to France have undoubtedly contributed to the author's literary break. It must also be noted, however, that Makine's oeuvre remains virtually unknown in his home country. This invisibility may be partially explained by the fact that he writes exclusively in French. *Le Testament français* is the only work to have been translated into Makine's first language by a team of two translators, and it was met with negative criticism.¹⁴⁴ What French readers interpreted as an authentic expression of a dual cultural identity and francophile admiration¹⁴⁵ was regarded as a profitable mask and a series of clichéd representations of Russia by Russian critics. After this caustic reception, the writer censored further translations of his work into his native tongue.

¹⁴⁴ In a 2008 interview with the Russian journal *Ogonek*, Makine noted that his novel *La Musique d'une vie* (2001) has been translated into Russian in Minsk, Belarus; this remains to be verified.

¹⁴⁵ In conversation with Nathalie Heinich, Makine explains his post-Goncourt/Médicis media presence as a performance: "On joue le jeu, on met un masque, on joue le jeu d'une interview, d'une conférence, et après on revient quand même à la solitude" (151). While his answers were interpreted as a genuine expression of francophilia, for the author himself, they were quick, superficial reactions to the pressures of the public spotlight. For more on this, see Nathalie Heinich, "Andreï Makine ou le prix de la continuité" in *L'Epreuve de la grandeur: Prix littéraires et reconnaissance* (1999).

On March 3, 2016, Andreï Makine was elected to the French Academy, becoming the second Russian-born author to receive this honor after Henri Troyat. He currently occupies the seat that formerly belonged to the francophone author Assia Djebar (F5). Alongside an expected homage to his predecessor, Makine's speech painted a historical panorama of an intellectual and literary alliance between his native and adopted countries, which served as a foil for critiquing France's modern-day (and, according to Makine, undeserved) enmity towards Russia.¹⁴⁶ This highly mediatized speech was received in a politically divisive way: conservative publications reported on "la Coupole sous le charme russe" (*Le Figaro*), while the leftist channels wrote about a "poutinien à l'Académie française" (*L'Obs*). It remains to be seen whether this ultimate gesture of consecration within France's oldest and most conservative literary institution will impact the direction of Makine's subsequent oeuvre.

In this chapter, I put Makine's *Le Testament français* (1995) in dialogue with Osmonde's latest novel *Alternance* (2011) to show that they share the search for a poetic language of in-betweenness. By poetic, I refer to the unrealizable aesthetic expression freed from the constraints of real, existing languages. This chapter is organized in three parts. In the first one, I discuss Makine's post-Goncourt literary posture and the history of his reception as the necessary context that allows to interpret the invention of Osmonde and to reread *Le Testament français* outside of exotic markers of the author's cultural identity. In the second part, I focus on Makine's *Le Testament français*, analyzing the evolution of "in-betweenness" from the narrator's Franco-Russian psycho-linguistic duality towards an intermediary poetic space between existing tongues.

¹⁴⁶ While it is important to acknowledge a conservative dimension of Makine's oeuvre, it does not bear directly on the analysis of selected works in this chapter. His 2016 speech at the Académie française, combined with politically charged essays such as *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* (2012), merit an independent consideration.

In the third one, I advance that, as Osmonde, Makine freed himself from his public authorial image. With *Alternance*, instead of pursuing an entirely new literary direction, he went on to reframe his aesthetic project of testing the limits of language, already initiated in *Le Testament français* through bilingualism. It is my contention that with *Alternance*, Makine revisited his quest for an intermediary poetic language outside of the habitual Franco-Russian paradigm.

II. Makine's Literary Posture and Reception in France

Le Testament français bred fascination, as many recognized Makine behind the novel's thinly veiled alter-ego. As a result, the man and the book became one. It is telling that most literary reviews and interviews during the 1995-97 period focused on the writer's personal story rather than his work. At the center of attention was Makine's French grandmother, his Slavic otherness, and the incredible narrative of becoming a writer in France (his homelessness at the Père Lachaise cemetery, denial of French citizenship, etc). "Personne ne pouvait être mieux fait pour la légende qu'Andreï Makine," writes Marion Von Renterghem in *Le Monde*, "Russe, exilé, immigré, solitaire, pauvre, refusé par tous les éditeurs, inconnu et, soudain, Prix Goncourt" (12). In her article, she depicts Makine as eccentric and ex-centric, both geographically and symbolically. Von Renterghem opens her review with the folklorization of Makine's origins and a literal interpretation of his marginal position. She writes that it is impossible to find the author who hides away in the Landes forest. It is in these woods that Makine – a penniless and homeless exile during his early years in France – built his own tiny "isba," a traditional Russian log house ("Andreï Makine, Goncourt des steppes"). The review is accompanied by Noëlle Herrenschidt's sketch of a smiling, bearded Makine settled in front of a wall of paintings and surrounded by books. This

image opportunely includes a corner of a volume *Судьба России* (*The Fate of Russia*, 1918) by Nikolai Berdyaev – an exiled Russian in France and a Christian philosopher who explored a spiritual dimension of the human condition. For those who read the Cyrillic alphabet, this inclusion provides an intertextual clue to Makine’s oeuvre.¹⁴⁷ For those who do not, the visually foreign aspect of the script simply reinforces the writer’s cultural otherness. Another review concludes that it is difficult to appear more Russian than Makine. Thin, with steel-blue eyes, a frayed beard, and the stature of a giant, “le gagnant du Goncourt 1995 a l’air tout droit sorti d’un cercle de poètes ou de philosophes moscovites du début du siècle” (Robitaille “Les écrivains migrants”).

The portrait emerging from these publications is firmly planted in the realm of the exotic with generous references to Russian literature and stereotypical attributes of Russianness. After the publication of *Le Testament français*, André Brincourt cast Makine in a prophetic role, dramatizing his arrival in France at “the age of Christ” and with “a face of Prince Myshkin” (*Langue française terre d’accueil* 200). Makine is thus a mysterious pilgrim walking out of the anonymous immensity of the Siberian steppes directly into the French literary limelight. He was also famously called “plus français que les Français” by Bernard Pivot, the host of the popular TV literary program *Bouillon de culture*, which reinforced a conservative aspect of Makine’s literary posture.¹⁴⁸

In an entry on Makine in *Passages et ancrages en France*, Murielle Lucie Clément argued that “[l]a réduction de l’œuvre makinienne au thème du contact de la culture russe et de la culture française serait une vue simpliste” (576). Early scholarship, however, tended to focus on autobiographical elements of Makine’s fiction, his reasons for choosing French, as well as the

¹⁴⁷ Berdyaev’s *The Fate of Russia* (1918) addressed the psychology of the Russian people, nationalism, messianism, and imperialism, among others.

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.ina.fr/video/I09352659/les-invites-de-bernard-pivot-a-propos-des-francais-video.html>. Viewed 30 May 2019.

East-West rapport, under which fall many of his identity quests.¹⁴⁹ It is impossible to dismiss that with *Le Testament français*, the author met a commercial demand by either deliberately or circumstantially tapping into the lucrative vein of France's national self-image and its traditional visions of Russia. A contemporary Russian writer Mikhail Shishkin refers to authors like Makine – alongside Wladimir Kaminer in Germany and Gary Shteyngart in the United States – as the phenomenon of “unRussian literature” (“нерусская литература”). With this designation, he points to the fact that these writers' reputation in the West is built on a particular way of inhabiting their Russian identities. It is this quality that makes their work inconceivable for translation into their native tongue, as they anticipate what Western readers would expect from a “Russian book” (www.kontrakty.ua).¹⁵⁰ Commenting on Makine's style, Katrien Lievois noted that Russian critics often insist on the impossibility of such writing in their contemporary literary space, calling it “lente, trop sérieuse, dépourvue d'humour et de surprises, volontiers esthétisante, basée sur des banalités, des clichés et des métaphores usées” (458). Ironically, similar qualities of Makine's work (namely, the absence of irony or lightness) were also characterized as “too Russian” or “too Slavic” by their French counterparts. This demonstrates the extent to which “Frenchness” and “Russianness” operate within the general economy of national stereotypes that do not carry real meaning. Both are placeholders for something that is external to a given community and therefore rejected as “other.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ See Marianne Gourg “La problématique Russie/Occident dans l'œuvre d'Andreï Makine,” *Revue des études slaves*, Vol. 70, 1998 ; Margaret Parry et al. *Andreï Makine : La Rencontre de l'Est et de l'Ouest*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.

¹⁵⁰ “В переводе, это читать невозможно – набор банальностей, шаблонов и стереотипов, но они знают ожидания французского, американского, немецкого читателя от русской книги и вот об этом и пишут” (Шишкин, *Контракты*).

¹⁵¹ Mirjam Taut'z study of journalistic reception of translingual authors brilliantly demonstrated “une tension permanente entre la mise en relief des origines étrangères et des tendances à l'acculturation” (“La migration comme critère dans la réception de Kundera et de Makine” 76). Studying reception demonstrates

French scholars have previously criticized *Le Testament français* as a “commercial hit” written to satisfy French readers (Porra 1998, Dollé 2001, Wachtel 2006, Chirila 2012). Porra concluded that there are few works “où l’on assiste à une reprise aussi systématique et aussi orthodoxe des mythes constitutifs de l’identité collective française que dans *Le Testament français* d’Andreï Makine” (*Langue française, langue d’adoption* 154).¹⁵² Others, while acknowledging this phenomenon, provide a more nuanced reading of the novel (Safran 2003; Morgan 2016; Ausoni 2018). These scholars argue that Makine’s representation of the East-West relationship transcends a simple dichotomy and defies national borders. As a metaphorical and “mythopoetic” space, it is more concerned with depicting the character’s internal geography rather than objectively representing either country. Makine recognizes this point of tension in his own novel, emphasizing the literary constructedness of France in his childhood reveries: “Oui, c’était un pays livresque par essence, un pays composé de mots dont les fleuves ruisselaient comme des strophes, dont les femmes pleuraient en alexandrins et les hommes s’affrontaient en sirventès” (*Testament français* 323-324).¹⁵³ It is undoubtable that this novel has singularly shaped the reception, marketization, and consecration of Makine’s subsequent work. My analysis therefore acknowledges the novel’s appeal to the French readers but moves beyond the cursory impression of a purely assimilationist endeavor.

to which extent “foreignness” is a malleable concept in the hands of critics: it is a selling point when it comes to flattering revelations about France and a marginalizing quality when the conditions of hospitality are violated.

¹⁵² In what may appear as an indirect response to Porra’s analysis, Gabriella Safran demonstrated how Makine’s seemingly “francophile” references to French literature (e.g. Nerval) are actually used to question the notion of a closed national canon (“Andreï Makine’s Literary Bilingualism and the Critics” 212, 263-264).

¹⁵³ For the remainder of the chapter, I will use the abbreviation *TF* to cite *Le Testament français* in the body of the text.

III. *Le Testament français*: Translingual In-Betweenness and Beyond

Aliocha – the first-person narrator and the main protagonist of *Le Testament français* – grows up in an industrial Russian city in the 1960s-70s, surrounded by his family’s stories about Stalinist terrors and the devastation of the Second World War. His Soviet upbringing is suspended during the long summers spent in a Siberian village with his French grandmother Charlotte Lemonnier.¹⁵⁴ As a child, Aliocha spoke French with her without ever treating it as a foreign language; for him, it was a “family dialect,” one of those “tics langagiers et ses surnoms qui ne traversent jamais le seuil de la maison, son argot intime” (*TF* 41). The narrator spent time enveloped in the magic of Charlotte’s otherworldly stories about France’s Belle Epoque and pre-revolutionary Russia, all of which radically contrasted with his own Soviet reality. “Dreams of France,” as pointed out Tatyana Tolstaya in the New York Review of Books regarding *Le Testament français*, “is an old Russian tradition” (“Love Story”). In this sense, Aliocha’s fantasies about France are a symptom of Russianness itself; a reminder of multilingualism and francophilia of the Russian elite in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was through the linguistic, cultural, and literary prism of his grandmother’s narratives that Aliocha was able to perceive his own country as a foreigner and see Russia in French: “Pour la première fois de ma vie, je regardais mon pays de l’extérieur, de loin, comme si je ne lui appartenais plus. [...] Je voyais la Russie en français, j’étais ailleurs” (*TF* 51).

¹⁵⁴ Charlotte is known as Charlota Norbertovna in her Siberian village. Her French name “Charlotte” is transformed into Russian “Charlota.” “Norbertovna” is a makeshift patronymic, derived from Charlotte’s father’s French name – Norbert – and Russified with the *-ivna* suffix. The transformation of the name acknowledges the woman’s ties to both French and Russian cultures and underscores the ease with which she navigates both identities. This makes her an ideal guide in Aliocha’s quest for self-understanding as a bilingual individual and a translingual author.

Overtime, this dual linguistic gaze became a source of instability for young Aliocha. One day, his schoolteacher characterized the last tsar of the Russian Empire as “Nicholas the Bloody,” thereby asserting a Soviet teleological view of history. This resulted in a conflicting, twofold image of the historical figure, which the narrator connected to his bilingual vision of reality. Spoken in Russian, Nicholas II was a cold-blooded oppressor responsible for slaughtering his own people. Seen through the prism of Charlotte’s stories in French, he was a sophisticated nobleman who visited the French Academy and appreciated Corneille’s *Le Cid*:

Je crus pouvoir expliquer cette double vision par mes deux langues : en effet, quand je prononçais en russe “Царь”, un tyran cruel se dressait devant moi ; tandis que le mot “tsar” en français s’emplissait de lumière, de bruit, de vents, d’éclats de lustres, de reflets d’épaules féminines nues, de parfums mélangés – de cet air inimitable de notre Atlantide. (*TF* 66)

Irreconcilable yet undoubtedly pertaining to the same person, Aliocha’s two linguistic systems pluralized the subject, leading to opposing interpretations of Nicolas II. The parallel (French) existence of the “tsar” revealed to Aliocha the constructedness of Soviet ideology, producing an unstable, anti-totalitarian image. Seeing these two versions of reality, he could no longer fully identify with either. Makine thus insists on bilingualism’s well-acknowledged ability to relativize one’s cultural perspective by gaining reflexive distance from it. The narrator’s subsequent literary aesthetic is built on the tension between the two universes that French and Russian languages carry, on their potential “untranslatability,” and the quest to overcome it. Few scholars examine Makine’s translingual aesthetics without referring to the iconic “tsar/ царь” episode, as it touches at once on the notions of bilingual identity, translation, as well as linguistic and cultural transposition. Due to its self-reflexive nature, it is a clear, powerful, and easily discernable representation of a bilingual

mind and an interrogation of cultural untranslatability.¹⁵⁵ In bringing up this well-known episode, my objective is to show how Aliocha's understanding of bilingualism evolves overtime.

During his last summer in Russia, the seventeen-year old narrator traveled to his grandmother's village to accuse her of having "condemned" him to bilingual instability. Instead, a radical transformation occurs that allows him to peacefully inhabit both of his identities without fully belonging to either. During one of his walks with Charlotte, Aliocha made and immediately corrected his own lexical lapsus, one of those "duos perfidies, aussi risqués que ce 'luxe-luxure'" (*TF* 270). This led to a sudden realization that, throughout his Siberian summers, he had been speaking not an intimate familial dialect but a foreign language, external to the surrounding community. The narrator's understanding of French was never the same thereafter, yet it was not the language itself that had changed but Aliocha's perception of it:

Enfant, je me confondais avec la matière sonore de la langue de Charlotte. J'y nageais sans me demander pourquoi ce reflet dans l'herbe, cet éclat coloré, parfumé, vivant, existait tantôt au masculin et avait une identité crissante, fragile, cristalline imposée, semblait-il, par son nom *tsvetok*, tantôt s'enveloppait d'une aura veloutée, feutrée et féminine – devenant "une fleur." (*TF* 271)¹⁵⁶

The moment of Aliocha's linguistic separation draws on the vocabulary of birth. Much like a newborn, he no longer floats in the amniotic sound of his grandmother's French language. Reborn with an independent linguistic "I," he is now aware of the distance between himself and Charlotte's

¹⁵⁵ Many translingual writers have preceded Makine in their reflection on the doubling of a signified in a plurilingual mind. This includes Nathalie Sarraute's Franco-Russian (солнце/soleil) and Hector Bianciotti's Franco-Spanish (oiseau/pájaro), among others. They either discuss the poetics of varying sonority or explore how meaning changes across languages. Though the Царь/tsar observation is made by a future writer who is yet unaware of his translingual destiny, it contributes to the meditation on the choice to write in a non-native language.

¹⁵⁶ In "Crise de vers," Mallarmé uses the flower imagery to evoke an act of poetic creation: "Je dis: une fleur!"

language. This also marks a permanent disruption of the notion of the “mother tongue” as an organic fabric of one’s identity. The rupture from a seemingly natural, instinctive connection to French enabled the narrator to reshape it on his own terms, no longer passively dominated by it. Though Aliocha provides yet another twofold signifier (*tzvetok/ fleur*), it is unlike the previously unreconcilable image of Nicolas II, which had provoked a quasi-schizophrenic reaction. This marks an evolution from an impenetrable density of cultural and linguistic borders (which reinforce stereotypes along the lines of “civilized France” and “barbaric Russia”) to a more deliberate exploration of in-betweenness. Rather than a carrier of cultural information, this dual reference to a flower points to the poetic texture of words and their varying aesthetic manifestation through sound.

Awakening to the foreignness of French, the narrator realized that this language became “a tool” whose impact he was only beginning to understand: “Ma découverte, pour déconcertante qu’elle fut, m’apporte une intuition pénétrante du style. Cette langue-outil maniée, affûtée, perfectionnée, me disais-je, n’était rien d’autre que l’écriture littéraire” (*TF* 271). Aliocha went from unconsciously floating in the French language to wielding it as a literary instrument that he could control, manipulate, and bend to his will. Gabriella Safran is acutely on point when – arguing against a common stance that *Le Testament français* is an homage to the French language – she advances that “Makine’s narrator does not write in French because he identifies with and loves France: rather, he writes in French only after he has ceased to identify with France completely, after he has attained some distance from it” (253). Indeed, Makine’s choice is not driven by the inherent qualities of the French language but rather by its relationality and otherness with regard to his native Russian, its divorce from everyday expression, and, most importantly, its function as a conduit towards the language of literature that takes him beyond the mundane. Aliocha compares

his renewed perception of reality to the “émerveillement” of a child who, after much contemplation, recognizes a familiar shape within a seemingly chaotic image. In this allegory of self-reflexive bilingualism, a second language gives form and clarity to a previously shapeless entity.

Aliocha definition of a literary language as “un étonnement permanent devant cette coulée verbale dans laquelle fondait le monde” strongly echoes with the principles of Russian Formalism (*TF* 271). Scholars often refer to Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* to engage with Makine’s tactic of acting upon perception of language. In “Art as Device,” Shklovsky addressed the connection between foreign and poetic languages: “In practice, such [poetic] language is often quite literally foreign: just as Sumerian might have been regarded as a ‘poetic language’ by an Assyrian, so Latin was considered poetic by many in medieval Europe” (12). In other words, the effects of a foreign idiom perform in quite literal ways the “foreignness” of a literary language. This can also happen on a monolingual level through multiple sociolinguistic registers, argued Shklovsky, suggesting that “Pushkin employed folk speech as a special device of arresting the reader’s attention precisely in the same way that his contemporaries interspersed *Russian* words in their everyday French speech” (13). Similarly to Shklovsky, Makine is interested in replicating the defamiliarizing effects of writing in a foreign idiom within a single language. After all, “царь” is one of the few Russian words in the text and the only time when Makine introduces a term in Cyrillic. Russian is mostly pseudo-present and processed through French.¹⁵⁷ Aliocha’s poetic language thus seeks to perform the simultaneous presence of two “tsars” and to communicate how it refracts reality without actually mixing languages.

¹⁵⁷ This is similar Alexakis’ translingual techniques in *Paris-Athènes*, where bilingualism has the strongest impact on a metalinguistic level.

In this absence of material bilingualism in the novel, Alice Duhan connected Makine's poetic language to the "recreation of the bilingual vision, conscious of the presence of other languages." She suggested that this mainly occurs by means of relying on characters who are themselves in a bilingual position (225-226). In other words, the defamiliarizing role of non-native French acts on readers' perception of language without resorting to diegetic bilingual practices ("L'écriture en langue étrangère comme pratique et comme poétique" 213, 226). On multiple occasions, Aliocha orchestrates his bilingual vision through exemplary illustrations, such as the famous tsar/ Царь episode and related images of cultural (un)translatability. The reader only has access to this privileged space of psycho-linguistic in-betweenness through the narrator's metalinguistic framing. While Duhan connects Makine's translingual aesthetics to the immersive universe of his character's bilingual mind, I suggest that he ultimately aspires to a literary language of "wonder" that would retain the defamiliarizing effects of bilingualism without having to rely on the narrator's linguistic duality.

Indeed, when describing Charlotte's gift of telling stories in "une sorte de langue intermédiaire," Aliocha notes that it could have been in either French or Russian or, presumably, in an entirely different language:

Charlotte avait parlé en français. Le français avait pénétré dans cette isba qui m'avait toujours fait peur par sa vie ténébreuse, pesante et très russe. Et dans ses profondeurs une fenêtre s'était illuminée. Oui, elle avait parlé en français. Elle aurait pu parler en russe. Cela n'aurait rien enlevé à l'instant recréé. Donc, il existait une langue intermédiaire. Une langue universelle ! Je pensai de nouveau à cet "entre-deux-langues" que j'avais découvert grâce à mon lapsus... (TF 279)

At first, an isba (a traditional log house) – this dark, quintessentially Russian space – seems illuminated and "penetrated" by Charlotte's narrative in French. This defamiliarizing "radiance"

clashes with the Russian reality, allowing the narrator to experience the moment described by Charlotte. For a split second, Makine gratifies the French reader by offering a peaceful incarnation of the “mission civilisatrice.” Moments later, it is withdrawn. Aliocha immediately corrects himself, adding that the same effect could have also been produced in Russian. Though linguistic in-betweenness is viewed as essential for poetic perception, it is clear that the narrator is making broader claims about literature. Ultimately, Aliocha’s notion of foreignness transcends the specificity of any given national language. Though French as a non-native language is instrumental to the narrator’s conceptualization of literature, it is not an integral part of it. The “langue-outil” is not limited to French, yet its initial foreignness and the translingual shock provide a defamiliarizing catalyst that would later allow the narrator to write. As a result, for Aliocha, it is not a matter of transitioning from one language to another but of preserving the mobility and the tension inherent in this very transition: “...étrangement, ou plutôt tout à fait logiquement, c’est dans ces moments-là, en me retrouvant entre deux langues, que je crois voir et sentir plus intensément que jamais” (TF 272). For the narrator, the journey across languages can never be complete. His is not a story of literary “transplantation”, but rather of someone who creates from the liminal position between languages. This translingual in-betweenness is accompanied by a simultaneous propulsion and inability to speak. Aliocha has the clearest vision of what must be said when he is stranded between two signifying systems, which compels him to being silent. So, how can Aliocha produce this “langue d’étonnement” and the “silencieux entre-deux langues” in a way that would not involve bilingual code-switching or excessive concern with technique,¹⁵⁸ and would not be limited to the narrator’s personal bilingualism (LF 175)? Though *Le Testament français* concludes on an open-

¹⁵⁸ For Aliocha, the poetic language cannot be expressed through a purely formal virtuosity: “Je devinais qu’il ne s’agissait même pas d’artifices verbaux ni d’un savant assemblage de mots” (TF 164).

ended, unfulfilled desire to produce this poetic language, it does not leave the reader entirely without answers.

In the novel, the narrator provides several mysterious examples of the “words” of his new literary language. These can be best described as a collection of lived moments powerful enough to jolt its observer from *perceiving* reality towards *seeing* it anew. Just as his notion of bilingual in-betweenness evolved from a child’s uncritical fascination with French to a teenager’s schizophrenic vision, and, ultimately to a literary tool; similarly, Aliocha does not immediately arrive at a suitable paradigm for his literary sensibility. As a child, prior to awakening to the foreignness of French, the narrator was mesmerized by the aesthetic potential of a mysterious formula – “bartavelles et ortolans.” He first discovered these words by listening to Charlotte read the menu prepared in honor of the Imperial Russian couple in Cherbourg, France. Aliocha’s grandmother was unable to translate the terms in a way that would allow a Soviet child to understand this culinary delicacy. As a result, the narrator was primarily seduced by the aural impression and musicality of the syllables rather than by their capacity to signify.¹⁵⁹ To him, “bartavelles et ortolans” became an incantation that stimulated imagination like a “cabalistic formula” (*TF* 46). It enabled Aliocha to pluck himself out of the gloominess of the Soviet routine and enter into the luminous moment in Cherbourg. At first glance, this is similar to Aliocha’s reflection on the dual textual tonality of the flower. However, a foreign language functions here as a conduit to elusive moments that expand the narrator’s own universe and transport him into an imaginary space that resembles but also transcends France. This experience triggered in Aliocha the first realization of needing to verbalize this language-based aesthetic experience: “Une terrible envie de le dire à tout le monde me saisit. Mais le dire comment ? Il me fallait inventer une langue

¹⁵⁹ This is evocative of the modernist search to bypass *cogito* through the evocative power of sound.

inédite dont je ne connaissais pour l’instant que les deux premiers vocables: bartavelles et ortolans” (*TF* 69). The evocative, transformative power of these two words disappeared after the narrator learned their meaning; discovering that the words refer to birds used in gourmet cooking made the formula “caduque” (*TF* 174). While the existence of a mysterious elsewhere that Aliocha glimpsed through his “incantation” did not disappear, its pathway got severed.

Later in the novel, the narrator readjusted his approach and redefined the first word of his poetic language of in-betweenness: “Je sentais que la ‘Koukouchka’ serait désormais le premier mot de notre nouvelle langue. De cette langue qui dirait l’indicible” (*TF* 193).¹⁶⁰ This time, the first word is in Russian. Nevertheless, without the necessary context, it would be just as opaque to the Russian readers as to the French. “Koukouchka” – the cuckoo – refers to the local freight train near Charlotte’s village in Siberia and to the sound produced by it. Operating on a narrow circuit, it always seems to be melting in and out of the steppe haze as if having no distinct points of departure or arrival. As the first word of the new language, “Koukouchka” is already imbued with the presence of its French counterpart; Charlotte evoked a train “un peu cousin de cette Koukouchka” that she had once taken in Provence as a child (*TF* 193). What sprang to her mind was not the destination-oriented function of the train (Charlotte did not even remember where she was traveling), but rather the rush of sounds and colors that burst through the open windows of the moving vehicle. The first “word” of the new language encapsulates a lived moment that conveys a different perception of reality. As the first word of Aliocha’s literary language, “Koukouchka” no longer refers to the train itself but rather to the feelings, emotions, and sensations associated with it. Through this, the narrator hints at another aesthetic dimension outside of the semiotic

¹⁶⁰ *Le Testament français* contains an important discussion of what may be gained in translation. In one of the episodes, Aliocha listens to his grandmother’s discussion of Russian translations of Baudelaire, which are retranslated back into French for the readers. For its benjaminian analysis, see Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora*, 2011.

system on which it inevitably relies. The difference between the two formulas – “bartavelles et ortolans” versus “la Koukouchka” – is that the latter does not exoticize the unfamiliar sounds of French but draws on an image that inhabits both worlds. Furthermore, as an onomatopoeic word formed from the sound, “koukouchka” can already be considered as partially outside of the confines of language, symbolically marking Aliocha’s desire to stretch towards a space between languages. Though Aliocha’s meditation on the cultural and linguistic duality of Nicholas II is addressed in many scholarly works dedicated to Makine’s translingual and transcultural ethos, few mention “la Koukouchka.”¹⁶¹ The relation between translingualism and these instances is more difficult to parcel out precisely because it strains beyond linguistic duality. “Koukouchka” stands a sensibility ostensibly unrelated to either French or Russian, yet for the narrator, it takes root in the bilingual perception of reality.

In a moment that can only be described as epiphanous, Aliocha mentally combines all the experiences that provided an opening to the poetic space of in-betweenness into a single, luminous, constellation. Despite its connotation of extreme distance – “un univers singulier” and “une autre planète presque,” he ultimately defines it as “le même monde mais vu autrement” (*TF* 289). *Le Testament français* concludes on an open-ended note: “Seuls me manquaient encore les mots qui pouvaient le dire” (*TF* 343). I suggest that the ongoing search for an ideal, poetic language in Osmonde’s *Alternance* provides new conceptual tools to engage with Aliocha’s ineffable constellation. Osmonde goes even further in trying to imagine the poetic, social, and political freedom of being reborn through an idiom outside of existing languages.

¹⁶¹ For a different reading, see Gabriella Safran’s article “Andreï Makine’s Literary Bilingualism and the Critics.” *Comparative Literature*, 55.3 (2003).

IV. Gabriel Osmonde: A Heteronymic Life Outside of Russianness

In 2011, an article in *Le Figaro* revealed that Makine has published four novels under the name Gabriel Osmonde, with *Alternance* (2011) being the most recent one.¹⁶² This parallel body of literature is largely divorced from the themes of “Russianness” and the East-West trope. Provided this revelation, it is important to consider Makine’s need to create a second literary persona by taking into account his reception in the French literary field. Furthermore, it is also necessary to re-examine the questions and aesthetics explored by Makine in light of his work as Osmonde and vice versa. Murielle Lucie Clément¹⁶³ has paved the way for comparative analysis by pointing out certain stylistic and thematic similarities between the two corpora. Nevertheless, compared to a large number of publications dedicated to *Le Testament français* alone, Osmonde’s texts remain largely unexplored.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² The other three novels are *Le Voyage d’une femme qui n’avait pas peur de vieillir* (2001), *Les 20 000 femmes dans la vie d’un homme* (2004), and *L’Œuvre de l’amour* (2006).

¹⁶³ Murielle Lucie Clément, “Andreï Makine et Gabriel Osmonde : passerelles,” *Le Monde selon Andreï Makine. Textes du collectif de chercheurs autour de l’œuvre d’Andreï Makine*, 2011.

It should be noted that Makine’s play *Le Monde selon Gabriel. Mystère de Noël* (2009) contains heteronymic qualities and strong intertextual references to Osmonde’s publications. It puts on stage an imprisoned writer named Gabriel who interrogates contemporary, image-driven, complacent society unable to think for itself.

¹⁶⁴ Compared to Makine’s novels, Osmonde’s are significantly more erotic and voyeuristic. In one of the rare articles on Osmonde, Murielle Lucie Clément described his œuvre as “nettement plus charnel, sensuel, érotique jusqu’à obsession métaphysique, philosophique aussi” (“Gabriel Osmonde. Métaphysique des gros seins et Troisième naissance” 262). Clément’s analysis of *Alternance* does not address the problematic aspects of the novel, such as a caricaturized representation of feminism and objectification of women, among others. In a conference paper, Ruth Diver openly critiques Makine/Osmonde: “What the mask of Osmonde is allowing Makine to express is a disturbing mixture of disaffection for French society, and in particular for the literary establishment, as well as negative attitudes towards women, immigrants, Jews and people of colour, and a complacent acceptance of pornography and sexual violence.” Diver’s study also reveals that Osmonde’s novel *L’Œuvre de l’amour* was a roman à clef, disguising a scathing attack on Parisian literary critics and publishers. Though the problematic aspects of Osmonde’s writing are beyond the scope of my dissertation, it is important to acknowledge the need for their further analysis. The presence of dystopian themes in *Alternance*, such as surveillance methods and genetic modification in its vision of a “better” society, are also a subject for a separate study.

While there are as many reasons for fabricating a new name as there are authors, it is never a neutral shift, especially for a writer from outside the national literary field with a fairly sedimented public image. Many authors have changed their names as a result of migration – Tristan Tzara, Henri Troyat, Romain Gary, Brina Svit, among others – either visibly gallicizing them or simplifying pronunciation. Compared to the above cited cases that register a permanent name change, “Gabriel Osmonde” is a heteronym. A heteronym – from Greek *hetero*, meaning *other* or *different* – is an alternative identity with an independent biography and a diverging personality that an author invents to pursue a different creative direction. Rather than a form of disguise, a heteronym reflects a writer’s plural identity capable of exploring diverging literary themes, styles, and philosophies.

In Western literature, the Portuguese modernist Fernando Pessoa is credited with bringing forth the notion of a heteronym, which he defined in the following manner:

A pseudonymic work is, except for the name with which it is signed, the work of an author writing as himself; a heteronymic work is by an author writing outside his own personality: it is the work of a complete individuality made up by him, just as the utterances of some character in a drama may be. (qtd. in Kevin Jackson’s *Invisible Forms: A Guide to Literary Curiosities* 41-42)¹⁶⁵

Pessoa’s definition emphasizes that, when writing under a heteronymic name, the author does not write as him/herself. He compares this to the practice of making up a fictional character but this time – outside the text. Though Pessoa writes of a heteronym as if it were a conscious act of self-begetting (or self-pluralization), his personal experience with them was not unlike possession. Nevertheless, since it implicates an author’s personality as much as their work, the heteronym rests uneasily between a metamorphosis, performance, and pure artifice. Examining Pessoa’s self-

¹⁶⁵ Throughout his life, Fernando Pessoa created over 75 heteronymic personae.

multiplication, Max Saunders interrogates the significance of attributing biographies to heteronymic alter-egos. While steering attention away from the author's real life, it paradoxically acknowledges its relevance by creating a new one. In the latter case, a heteronymic biography is also an ironic gesture made to "incite biographical readings [...] from naïve readers; or to mock such a tendency" (*Self-Impression* 305).

The Makine-Osmonde case has been often compared to the famous literary predecessor Romain Gary and his heteronym double Emile Ajar. Claudia Almeida posited that Gary fashioned himself into a new writer because he was unsatisfied with the way he was treated by literary criticism, which classified him as a decadent author ("L'enchanteur Romain Gary" 95).¹⁶⁶ After Gary's second Goncourt as Ajar, the suspicion of trickery is never far behind. This is categorically denied by Nancy Huston in her article "Romain Gary: A Foreign Body in French Literature" where she argues that "Gary's frequent recourse to pseudonyms was not a hoax on the literary world, but instead reflected his will to be *everyone* because, in many important ways, he was no one" (547). These two diverging interpretations about Gary's invention of Ajar – the need to regain control over his literary posture and to entirely liberate himself from all identity molds – constitute relevant perspectives for understanding Makine's creation of Osmonde.

Both Pessoa's and Gary's heteronymic personae were discovered posthumously, so these writers never lived alongside their creations in the public eye. Given that Makine did not recognize his own identity behind the figure of Osmonde by choice, it is plausible that he would have pursued a similar path and kept it a mystery. Though Makine did not describe his heteronymic persona in his writings as did Pessoa and neither did he invent a proxy as did Gary, he created instead an website with Osmonde's biography and "borrowed" photographs; it was taken down around 2015-

¹⁶⁶ This invites a comparison between Gary and Makine, as both stand against popular formalist tendencies of their respective eras: the *nouveau roman* and the postmodern playfulness and shock-writing.

2016.¹⁶⁷ According to this online presence, Osmonde is a French writer born in Paris. By choosing May 1968 – a period of civil unrest and social upheaval – as Osmonde’s birthday, the writer positions his second identity as an inheritor of a rebellious spirit and perhaps alludes to the revolutionary roots of his own writing. The photographs depict a young-looking man sailing and snowboarding, and the biography mentions that he enjoys reading English writers as well as Michel Houellebecq.

This self-reinvention also involves creating a new name – Gabriel Osmonde. The root of the last name refers to the “world,” which indicates gravitation towards the transnational, the universal, even the planetary.¹⁶⁸ The prefix “os” – from Latin *os*, *ossis* – means “bone” or “mouth,” “an opening.” In Christianity, bones signify the truth, as it is the only thing remaining after flesh perishes. Together with “mouth,” the organ of language, the last name combines the notions of the “world,” “truth,” and “speech,” all of which seem to come together in the chosen first name – Gabriel – an archangel that brings God’s message to earth. Combined together, the onomastic analysis of “Gabriel Osmonde” conjures an image of a writer-prophet who addresses the world and speaks the truth. Steeped in spiritual connotations, the name conveys an authorial ethos. Ruth Diver pointed out that “osmonde” also refers to a fern species, “one which dies down every winter and comes back in the spring, thus conjuring images of rebirth and perhaps perpetual youth” (“Changing Stories”). Osmonde thus marks Makine’s rebirth from his Franco-Russian posture, which allows him to escape being reduced to a single facet of his literary identity. Yet the

¹⁶⁷ Internet archives have retained some of its original information.

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20150815170404/http://gabrielosmonde.com/2.html>>

The pre-2011 version of Osmonde’s website included a folder with pictures of a young man windsurfing and snowboarding. These images have been taken down after the author’s identity had been revealed. Attributing a “face” to an otherwise elusive writer is perhaps as close as Makine approaches Gary’s embodiment of Emile Ajar in the figure of Paul Pawlovich.

¹⁶⁸ This may be a subtle intertextual reference to the Gary-Ajar case. In *Pseudo*, Ajar wrote: “J’ai des problèmes avec ma peau, parce que ce n’est pas la mienne... Je me découvrais planétaire” (1976, 10-11).

heteronym also acknowledges a deeper function of renewal, as the name signals the desire to communicate the truth to the world; he no longer addresses the French readership alone.

Makine has undoubtedly collaborated with institutions of reception to produce a Franco-Russian persona that supports his current celebrity status in France. Nevertheless, his authorial posture has also been shaped *for* him. Meizoz anticipated a reverse effect of an authorial mise-en-scene, suggesting a posture that had once been generated by choice could become obligatory (*L'œil sociologue* 64). “More French than the French,” Makine was also characterized as a Russian writer in France and an unRussian writer in his home country.¹⁶⁹ Taking on different shades, the image has ultimately revolved around the Franco-Russian national lines. While there is room for considering Makine’s desire to pursue diverging literary trajectories as Osmonde, to miss his crystallized authorial image and the commercial pressures associated with the “Makine” project would be an oversight. Makine thus complicates Pessoa’s original definition of a heteronym as an identity that lives outside of the writer’s personality. For him, writing as Osmonde is both an act of distancing and a rapprochement. This heteronym allowed the writer to move away from certain expectations informed by the ethnocultural determinism of his background. Nevertheless, through it, he also reclaims his literary project by freeing it from the well-rehearsed “Makine” legend. This is perhaps what the writer means when he says that “Osmonde est plus profondément ancré en [lui] que Makine” (De Larminat).¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ In his recent monograph, Alain Ausoni confirms this observation, suggesting that the adoption of a heteronym is a “tentative d’échapper à ce type relectures qui voudrait que l’écriture de soi et la thématization du choix de langue et de culture soient des passages obligés du translinguisme” (*Mémoires d’outre langue* 42). In other words, writing as Osmonde relieved Makine from being reduced to the “translingual discourse.”

¹⁷⁰ Romain Gary explained his own need to create Emile Ajar in similar terms: “J’étais un auteur classé, catalogué...J’étais las de l’image de Romain Gary qu’on m’avait collée sur le dos une fois pour toutes depuis trente ans” (*Vie et mort d’Emile Ajar* 28).

Through *Alternance*, Osmonde recreates Makine's quest for a new poetic language, staging it in a global context outside of the French-Russian framework. Through this tacit reconsideration of *Le Testament français*, Makine brings into sharper focus the ideas that were overshadowed by an exotic dimension of his identity and an excessive interest in his choice to write in French. In this way, Makine's stance is similar to what Alexakis expressed in *Paris-Athènes*. The adoption of a heteronym is not a response to negative criticism but rather to the misreading of his literary project; a misreading that is embedded in the very accolades Makine receives. Inclusion into the literary "center" is often granted for the wrong reasons, and the terms of legitimization sometimes compromise writers' creative agency.

Though Osmonde's *Alternance* (2011) was heralded by several literary critics as mature, subversive, and erudite, few scholars to date have examined this novel beyond considering why Makine chose to adopt the heteronym. At first glance, *Le Testament français* and *Alternance* do not have much in common. One is a bilingual/bicultural coming-of-age story of a Russian-born writer of French expression. The other is a fantastical narrative about a spiritual reimagining of the world and the quest for a language that would stimulate this process. Though *Le Testament français* is known as Makine's most "autobiographical" narrative, the writer himself claims that "Osmonde" is closer to his essence, and that *Alternance* is, in fact, his most autobiographical text ("Osmonde sort de l'ombre"). If bilingualism and transculturalism are the cornerstones of Makine's pseudo-autobiography,¹⁷¹ then the idea that a novel unconcerned with these questions is closest to his life seems quite puzzling. The author thus subverts a traditional understanding of an autobiography by suggesting that a futuristic novel about a nomadic narrator

¹⁷¹ Andrew Wachtel defines pseudo-autobiography as a "first-person retrospective narrative based on autobiographical material, in which the author and the protagonist are not the same person" (*The Russian Pseudo-autobiography and the Creation of Russian Childhood* 3).

is more pertinent to him than a story about a Russian boy growing up to become a translingual writer in France. For Makine, the truth lies not in the facts but in the philosophical framework and the ideas that drive his literature. Studied side by side, *Le Testament français* and *Alternance* exhibit a sense of continuity, multiple points of confluence, as well as a growing tone of urgency, disenchantment, and hope.

One point of convergence has been offered by the author himself. In a 2001 interview with Catherine Argand, Makine stretched his definition of bilingualism to include a Russian Formalist distinction between spoken (everyday) and poetic words. Connecting the two, he qualified poetry's ability to reinvent language as another form of bilingualism: "Devenant bilingue, je découvre aussi une autre forme de bilinguisme: celle que manie la poésie en réinventant la langue. Les poèmes (de jeunesse) que j'écris me laissent expérimenter cet 'entre-deux-langues' que j'ai déjà exploré dans le passage du russe au français" (27). Makine thus suggested that his discovery of an internal duality of language (poetic vs. non-poetic) was influenced by his Franco-Russian bilingualism and that both provide access to the creative space of linguistic in-betweenness. For Makine, translingualism is a symptom of a broader sense of a literary language.

In the following, I will briefly outline the plot of *Alternance* to provide a new context for Makine's continued exploration of the poetic space of in-betweenness in the absence of the bilingual prism. This novel resists easy genre classification, as it combines elements of science fiction, eco-fiction, a philosophical tale, utopia/dystopia fiction, *Bildungsroman*, and, in Makine's own words, an autobiography. Its anonymous first-person narrator is a former soldier and a writer who, after much trauma (loss of parents in the gulags, war, coma, and attempted suicide) discovers the Diggers Foundation in the Australian desert and joins their revolutionary cause. Makine likely

borrowed the name from a radical, counter-culture group of activists in 1960's San Francisco.¹⁷² Much like Osmonde's invented society, historical Diggers called for a peaceful revolution. They sought to subvert society by liberating it from the capitalist mind frame through street theater, performative art, re-education, and political action. Contrary to their American precursors, fictional Diggers in *Alternance* have hubs across the world, forming a global, rhizomatic network "des êtres en rupture de ban, pas seulement vis-à-vis de leur milieu social, mais face au monde tel qu'il est aujourd'hui et surtout tel qu'il menace d'être demain" (34).

The Australian Foundation is a virtual workshop that experiments with visual media¹⁷³ and technological advances to observe and analyze human behavior, reveal to the rest of society its own shortcomings, and undo its complacent existence in the current world order. In this way, the Diggers' community is "un lieu où l'existence humaine était mise en scène, révélant son vrai sens, où plutôt sa déraison" (*Alt* 24, 21).¹⁷⁴ Their main objective is to offer an alternative approach to life through a mysterious *alternance*, "the third birth." The first birth is based on the faculties that one is born with: physical strength, fitness, and attraction. The second birth integrates an individual into social structures of power; "la musculature s'efface devant les traditions, les lois, les usages héréditaires..." (*Alt* 246). The physical constraints of being born a man or a woman are renegotiated through questions of social class and socioeconomic privilege. The mythical "third birth" is a promise of freedom from the first two. It would liberate identity development from cultural assumptions and expectations of social structures and would lead to a more ethical, self-

¹⁷² I am indebted to Murielle Lucie Clément for this observation.

¹⁷³ The Diggers produce didactic movies through which they demonstrate the absurdity of society. An example would be a Sisyphus-inspired short film about two men pushing a weight uphill only to let it roll back and mindlessly restart this chore after an evening of easy entertainment. Such videos are diffused in the Digger communities and in experimental halls across the world.

¹⁷⁴ For the remainder of the chapter, I will use the abbreviation *Alt* to cite *Alternance* in the body of the text.

aware life. While the first two births are sufficiently explained on multiple occasions, the third one lacks a clear definition. This *alternance* is described as “[u]ne dimension d’une altérité radicale” and “un au-delà qui rendait cette mécanique [la machine de l’humanité] étonnamment vaine” (*Alt* 138, 64). The Diggers conclude that only a new language would convey the meaning of *alternance*, exposing the insufficiencies and freeing people from the tenets of their first (biological) and second (social) births: “Il nous faut une langue à part entière et qui sera la matière même de notre nouvelle façon d’exister” (*Alt* 451).¹⁷⁵ The vision of a new language is at the core of transforming society: to create alter-language is to bring the “third birth” into existence; it is “une langue qui, tout en exprimant la Troisième naissance, la crée” (*Alt* 447). This search possesses distinct ethical imperatives: it would become a precursor to the revolution of the human spirit that would change how society functions.

Alternance can be partially summarized as the quest for a poetic language that would convey this indefinable rebirth. The Diggers asked the narrator to write a book that would generate this idiom and through it pave the way for a new philosophy of life. The creation of the “third birth” thus becomes a literary endeavor that would stretch the capacity of real languages to attain the poetic otherness of the alter-language. The book was never written,¹⁷⁶ and the desired language was never produced (nor could it ever be truly produced). Its ineffability was underscored by the literal silencing of the narrator at the end of the novel. During his attempt to flee the Diggers’ compound under attack, he was severely wounded and fell into a coma. Though the deficiencies

¹⁷⁵ It must be noted that the new language is not the sole condition for bringing the world into *alternance*. Other important strategies include taming sexual desire and creating an ecologically minded economy, among others. Liberating people from the constraints of sexual, social, and financial competition include the dystopian themes of genetic modification and eradication of the nuclear family.

¹⁷⁶ Aliocha also dreamt of producing “une œuvre absolue, unique [...] qui pourrait par sa beauté refaire le monde” (*TF* 324). This is reminiscent of Mallarmé’s all-encompassing but never realized *magnum opus*: *Le Livre*.

of language are never fully untangled, in my reading of the novel, I focus on the process through which it strives towards a resolution.

V. Two Narrators in Search of a New Language

In *Le Testament français*, Aliocha's identity is deeply connected to literary and imagined constructions of his Franco-Russian duality. The final revelation of the novel is a posthumous letter that the narrator receives from Charlotte. In this message, she reveals to Aliocha that he was adopted after his mother's death in a workcamp, and that he had no biological relation to her. This reaffirms the conclusion that the meaning of "Frenchness" in the novel has nothing to do with hereditary transmission but rather with personal agency and a cultural sense of affiliation. In the last pages of the novel, as the narrator collects his notes on Charlotte, he remembers an episode that took place prior to his departure from the Soviet Union. His grandmother led him to a clearing in the forest near her village where she proudly showed off several grapevines. Her success in growing a plant that requires warmer climates and longer summers may very well symbolize Charlotte's own ability to plant her French roots in Siberia. What is more significant, however, is that Aliocha is utterly unimpressed by the grapevines and seems oblivious to the triumph of his grandmother's viticultural experiment. The only answer he musters is a vague "Ah, bon..." (*TF* 342). This anecdote foreshadows the revelation of Aliocha's adoption. He was not attached to Charlotte's expression of rootedness because he does not draw meaning from physical connections to the land, even if it implies a narrative of transplantation.

In *Alternance*, the anonymous narrator's cultural background is far from being formative in his linguistic quest. He is deliberately elusive about his origins,¹⁷⁷ which is underscored by the fact that he is not even sure where his parents come from: "Avaient-ils fui en tant que Polonais devant l'avancée des Russes, ou bien en tant que Russes devant l'invasion des Allemands?" (*Alt* 53). Both characters spend a significant amount of time in the Siberian margins of the Soviet empire and are influenced by grand-maternal figures of French origin. The narrator in *Alternance* mentions an older woman who taught him foreign languages (English and French, at least) and who spoke to him of a certain "capitale européenne." Contrary to the events in *Le Testament français*, France is never deployed as a defamiliarizing prism for seeing Siberia anew or for letting the narrator perceive his own life from a "foreign" perspective.

If Makine's Aliocha struggles with his dual (non)belonging, the anonymous narrator of *Alternance* lives by a single lesson learned from his parents: "il fallait éviter de définir qui nous étions" (*Alt* 53).¹⁷⁸ His family legacy is to reduce the prominence attributed to origins in the way he understands and presents himself to others. For a young boy who lost one of his parents to the authoritarian regime, this line of flight became a strategy of self-defense and resistance. As a child, when he questioned his mother on their family origins and the "great Fatherland," the latter responded by pointing to a remote corner behind an old church that was transformed into a warehouse: "'Ta patrie est là...' me dit ma mère en indiquant d'un geste circulaire le recoin ensoleillé où nous restions réfugiés. [...] 'Ta patrie'... Un sentier dans la neige, ce soleil sur un vieux mur, et, de temps en temps, le vent qui parvenait à nous atteindre dans notre abri" (*Alt* 54).

¹⁷⁷ Certain parallels between the lives of the two characters may have been Makine's clin d'œil to attentive readers, prior to the official revelation of Osmonde's identity.

¹⁷⁸ There is certainly enough information to deduce that the narrator grew up near the Soviet work camps in Siberia in "...un milieu de bagne en somme, que mes parents l'appelaient tout simplement 'le Nord', en l'insérant dans un ensemble plus vaste qu'ils nommaient, avec une petite note d'accablement, 'ce pays'" (*Alt* 53). None of these spatial or temporal frames visibly impact the narrator's identity.

The mother's open-ended answer reveals a radical condensation of belonging to a singular place and a single moment that are both outside of time and space. Unlike Svit's novels where characters grapple with family narratives to eventually discard their identity-forming significance, in *Alternance*, the need to "work through" traditional forms of belonging seems entirely removed. The narrator's "patrie" – a sunny, windy shelter and a path in the snow – points to a general experience of nature rather than a specific territory. Combining images of instability (the wind, a church that lost its primary function) and mobility (snow path), it does not appear grounded in any particular reality and, as an experience, seems transportable. In his quest for a new language, the narrator of *Alternance* spends time in India, Israel, Ukraine, Germany, Australia, and the United States without calling any of these places his home. This overall evasiveness and de-emphasis of national and linguistic/cultural frames of belonging point to a different approach to language and identity in *Alternance*.

The narrators of *Le Testament français* and *Alternance* feel isolated in their immediate communities. In Makine's novel, the sense of "foreignness" in Russia is tied to the defamiliarizing effect of the French language. Young Aliocha saw his "dédoublement" – an ability to live between his Soviet reality and the stylized, imagined French past – as "a provocation in the eyes of those who lived in the present" (*TF* 154-155). He concluded that his ability to produce a decentered cultural perspective should be kept hidden as if it were a transgression. Similarly, Osmonde's protagonist feels like "un émigré de l'intérieur" prior to discovering the Diggers' community (*Alt* 57). Resorting to a similar lexical pool, he comments on suffering from a dual vision: "[q]uand au dédoublement que je vivais, on l'aurait, à coup sûr, qualifié de schizophrène. Les hommes nous jugent et leur seul critère de santé mentale est simple : il faut correspondre aux exigences du monde qu'ils ont construit" (*Alt* 63). His "étrangeté," however, is of a philosophical nature, linked to his

ability to see glimpses of the mysterious *alternance*. Having another perception of reality hidden from others is at the core of both protagonists' inner doubling, and it constitutes a common theme in *Le Testament français* and *Alternance*. Despite their diverging life stories and experiences of language, their quests are similar: to forge a poetic idiom that would utter the ineffable, which they pursue from the liminal perspective of in-betweenness. While *Le Testament français* attempts to reach this aesthetic dimension through the prism of bilingualism, *Alternance* immediately expands it to the ambitious level of all human discourse.

VI. "Instants Perliers": Allegorizing Poetic In-Betweenness

When the anonymous narrator of *Alternance* first arrived at the Diggers' Foundation, he was not yet aware of its purpose. Having wondered through its mysterious experimental spaces, he finally ran into an individual whom he asked whether this was an artists' sanctuary. Confronted with the man's silence, he repeated his question by translating it from English into French. In lieu of a response, the other man retrieved a small sign that read: "*I don't speak human*" (Alt 17). The statement was in English. The individual in question was certainly not so otherworldly as to not understand human speech. Instead, this was meant as a performative gesture foregrounding a different approach to language in the Diggers' Foundation. The reason behind the failed exchange is not purely linguistic but rather philosophical. It marks a divorce from languages as discrete systems of communication, moving instead towards a higher-order paradigm. Writing about *Le Testament français*, Gabriella Safran argued that, because of Aliocha's notion of an intermediary language, "Makine suggests that he does not see himself as writing in standard literary French but rather as creating a new language, which is not 'églué' in the banalities of French or Russian life"

(257). A similar conclusion can be drawn about the introductory episode of *Alternance*. Though the narrator is asking a question in English and the sign is also in English, the silent man does not see himself as speaking the same language. “I don’t speak human” becomes an ultimate challenge for considering freedom from language.

The Diggers resignify familiar words to draw others into their perception of reality. Paraphrasing a treatise by Godb – the fictional philosopher of the three births – the narrator refers to “Magma” as the enclosed space of the human universe where any rebellion is bound to failure if it cannot break away from the viscous, all-encompassing material of the first two births. In this vicious cycle, “nos jugements et les théories de beaux esprits ne fixent rien, en vérité, mais fluctuent au gré de ce va-et-vient permanent” (*Alt* 74). To liberate humanity is to open this viscous “monde clos” of Magma. The Diggers also refer to the network of nerves or vessels in a body to explain the power structure of society: a “plexus” is someone who – through his social position of influence – is related to millions of other people. An “homme-plexus” is surrounded by “hommes-satellites,” who, in turn, are surrounded by “hommes-fichiers,” etc (*Alt* 144-145). Through these concepts (which are partially borrowed from Émile Durkheim’s social theory),¹⁷⁹ the Diggers recognize the interconnectivity of the social world based on power, profit, and influence. By attaining the alter-language, they hope to provide an exit from existing social structures. The connections imagined in volatile glimpses of the new poetic language would transcend the utilitarian exchanges within the “Magma” system. It remains to determine the processes through which this alter-language may be understood in more precise terms.

The narrator and the rest of the Diggers provide ample illustrations of what the alter-language is *not*, never quite attaining a clear explanation of what it is. It carves out a negative space

¹⁷⁹ See Émile Durkheim, *De La division du travail social*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1922.

for understanding this linguistic enigma. It is not a fictional invention with its own linguistic properties. Its “mots nouveaux” are not connected to foreign languages, multilingualism, or translation because it is “inexprimable dans aucun langage connu” (*Alt* 479). Though sufficiently “foreign” to existing registers, the search for the alter-language is also constrained by a refusal to rely on esoteric and jargon-filled vernaculars “qui transforme[nt] la pensée vivante en blocs de béton comme font la philosophie et la religion : être, âme, éternité, illumination, aura, transcendance et tant d’autres abstractions mortes” (*Alt* 476). Throughout *Alternance*, the Diggers critique several prominent philosophers of the 20th century, including Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Carnap, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. One of the Diggers – a professor in Paris named Taraneau – recognizes the long history of a philosophical and artistic search for a “pure” language only to conclude that it “se heurte contre l’hermétisme farfelu de la poésie moderne, contre l’imposture de l’art contemporain, contre l’industrie culturelle faussement créative” (*Alt* 396). The Diggers are dismissive of self-containing, self-referential forms of modern art and poetry, rejecting them as arcane and unnecessarily affected. The new alter-language must hold an effect of estrangement to influence how people engage with reality and trigger their ability to *see* its insufficiencies instead of complacently *recognizing* its comfortable familiarity. Nevertheless, this cannot be accomplished through a purely linguistic virtuosity and formalist innovation.¹⁸⁰

The language of *alternance* would therefore be born of a polyvalent set of impossibilities: the impossibility of being expressed in an everyday language (*byt*), in foreign idioms, in specialized tongues of religion and philosophy, nor through modernist poetry or contemporary art. The narrator further clarifies that “...le rêve des Diggers mourra s’il est défini dans notre habituel langage de sophismes et d’abstractions, il faut un vers neuf pour dire la

¹⁸⁰ A similar observation characterized Aliocha’s search for the poetic language in *Le Testament français* : “Je devinais qu’il ne s’agissait même pas d’artifices verbaux ni d’un savant assemblage de mots” (164).

nouveauté radicale du Ralliement [la révolution]” (*Alt* 448). The notion of a “new verse” emphasizes the literary nature of the quest wherein a non-existent idiom would allow to sidestep the limits associated with existing languages. Within this paradigm, “in-betweenness” alludes to working towards this ideal language of poetic and social freedom that inevitably falls short.

To express the beauty and the frustrating inability to communicate *alternaissance* to others, the philosopher of the three births introduced the notion of “instants perliers.”¹⁸¹ They are elusive, transcendental moments that offer a glimpse of “the third birth,” which, I argue, function as metaphors of a poetic experience:

De grands coquillages qui s’ouvrent ensorcellent notre regard par la beauté de la perle, mais dès que nous tendons la main pour la saisir, ils se referment. Il allait même plus loin dans sa métaphore : le coquillage se referme et nous restons à l’intérieur, prisonnier d’une beauté que nous ne parvenons pas à nous expliquer ni à faire comprendre aux autres... (*Alt* 210)

These “pearl instances” constitute a poetic moment that cannot be grasped in any way other than through transient perception. Attributing a name to them points to an interest in organizing and systematizing this aesthetic rethinking of the world, which mirrors the Diggers’ more pragmatic approaches to *alternaissance* through experimental technology. In terms of language, exposure to a “pearl instance” stages a liminal episode. One is on the outside, mesmerized by the fleeting awareness of a poetic experience yet unable to reach it. At the same time, one is in intimate communion with the beauty of *alternaissance*, consumed by it to the point of being unable to grasp nor communicate it to others. For the narrator, these instances provide tangible evidence of the

¹⁸¹ Compared to the gems found in the ground, pearls are the only stones that do not need to be polished or cut. Choosing a pearl as a basis for the metaphor of *alternaissance* may be explained by the fact that every pearl is unique due to its organic production in a living organism. Similarly, each “pearl instance” is unique to the person experiencing it. This explains the difficulty of communicating its pathos to others: one person’s “instant perlier” may not be another’s.

“third” birth and the poetic alter-language that would generate it. He therefore connects his search for the new language to an ability to evoke the affective power of these fleeting “pearl instances” that evade speech.¹⁸²

These moments often stem from seemingly banal, mundane scenes, which produce an unexpectedly raw emotional response that the observer is unable to explain. In these still, silent instants, the observed parties appear distracted, lost in reveries, and uninvolved in goal-oriented tasks.¹⁸³ For the narrator, liberation from the first two births does not stem from negating existing social power structures but by discovering behaviors that would render them ineffective. Inaction as a form of resistance is the first step towards *alternance*: “La première révolte véritable consiste à s’absenter, à s’écarter, à se débrancher car, vous le savez, même les plus contestataires parmi vous sont happés dans les rouages de la machine...” (*Alt* 272). It is a paradoxical kind of disengagement that redefines engagement, and ultimately allows to engage in a different way – the Diggers’ way. The affective reaction to “pearl instances” is often at odds with the unremarkable, stilled nature of the perceived phenomenon.¹⁸⁴ The narrator experiences such a quasi-spiritual epiphany¹⁸⁵ when he observes a woman taking a cup of coffee in the first light of the desert sun at the Diggers Foundation:

¹⁸² Before further examining the aesthetic paradigm of the “pearl instance,” it is important to recognize Osmonde’s tendency to instrumentalize women as poetic components of the “alternance” landscape. As part of the conduit to the “third birth,” the female presence is often mystified, fetishized, and othered.

¹⁸³ The notion of resistance by means of circumvention and non-inclusion recalls Roland Barthes’ “neutral,” which he defined as “that which outplays the paradigm” and “baffles the paradigm,” particularly with regard to binaries (*The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France*, 1977-1978).

¹⁸⁴ This description echoes numerous episodes in *Le Testament français*; those directly connected to the narrator’s bilingualism as well as others that resemble the “Koukouchka” episode. The “instants perliers” *avant la lettre* are also recurrent in Makine’s other novels. In *Alternance*, however, Osmonde adopts a more systematic, in-depth approach to these moments, deliberately linking them to a search for a new, poetic language.

¹⁸⁵ For more on the notion of an epiphany, see Mary Theis, “Makine’s Postmodern Writing and Exile,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 14.5 (2012) and Marco Caratozzolo, “Le concept

Sur le perron de l'entrée, est assise une femme que je vois de profil. Ou plutôt, ma vue dirigée à la verticale distingue le haut de sa tête, son épaule dans l'échancrure large d'une chemise en gros coton. Sur une marche, la femme a posé une petite tasse blanche. Dans l'air brumeux du matin plane la senteur du café. Un rayon de soleil pâle se coupe sur l'angle de l'immeuble et s'étend jusqu'au perron. Je suis incapable de dire à quoi tient la beauté de cet instant. A l'attraction du corps féminin ? Oui... Et non. Car, sans ce soleil hésitant, sans cette odeur torréfiée, il manquerait quelque chose d'essentiel à la silhouette (*Alt* 205)

His mind wanders back and forth between the woman's silhouette, the sunray creeping towards the front steps, the white cup in the misty light of dawn, and the scent of coffee. Having no focal point, each component is connected to others in a fragile balance. Conscious of another perception of reality bursting into his own through this banal event (or rather non-event), the narrator is desperately trying to decode and define its significance. Incapable of transmitting its powerful effect, he resorts instead to a catalog-like record: "D'un regard halluciné, je fixe la femme, la cour, la trainée du soleil" (*Alt* 205). He immediately reshuffles this list of components and restates them in a slightly different manner: "Une béatitude exprimée par une tasse de café, une rai de lumière, une femme à moitié endormie sur le perron d'une usine désaffectée. Le miracle!" (*Alt* 205). Beyond a meticulous description of the scene and a reordered inventory of its primary elements, the narrator stumbles in his attempt to verbalize his vision, turning to passe-partout expressions like "miracle" and "mystery." I posit that the ostensible simplicity of the above-cited passage is deliberate and aimed to underscore the fissure between real languages and the poetic experience. The notion of "in-betweenness" encapsulates the process of working *towards* the ideal, poetic idiom by attempting to represent the transient perception of a "pearl instance" through available

d'épiphanie dans l'œuvre de Bounine et de Makine." *Andreï Makine. Le Sentiment poétique*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008.

means and inevitably failing to do so. In this paradigm, the desired poetic language is foreign par excellence: unknown, non-materialized, and outside the boundaries of known reality.

Though the narrator is unable to recreate the desired texture of the “pearl instance” through languages available to him, he is nonetheless compelled to speak. This paradox is highlighted by his faltering account of the scene in which he reverts to surface-deep descriptions and a repeated, emphatic listing of its individual components. This state of tension resembles Aliocha’s remark on his own aphonic in-betweenness: “...étrangement, ou plutôt tout à fait logiquement, c’est dans ces moments-là, en me retrouvant entre deux langues, que je crois voir et sentir plus intensément que jamais (*TF* 272). Both liminal positions – whether it is between French and Russian or between a real and a poetic language – generate moments of clarity that resist and challenge articulation. Working through this barrier is the task of both narrators.

In *Alternance*, the narrator plucks these humble “pearl instances” from a merely descriptive function and deliberately treats them as a cipher for a new idiom. I suggest that the rapport the narrator cultivates with existing languages, particularly its insufficiency when facing *alternance*, prevents readers from treating the language of the text as a monolithic, self-sufficient structure. Guided by the narrator, they are compelled to think of the novel as an experimental zone of contact between real and poetic languages, which – though marked by a general sense of an absence – strives to approximate the fleeting experience of “pearl instances.”

VII. “Le même monde, mais vu autrement”: Mise-en-scènes of the Poetic Gaze

From the very first page, the narrator of *Alternance* addresses the indeterminate “vous” that implicates the reader: “Rares sont ceux qui succèdent à l’existence secrète dont j’aimerais vous parler” (9). In an article on ellipses and the “non-dits” in Makine’s oeuvre, Diana Mistreanu

comments on the responsibility placed on the reader in light of the linguistic inaccessibility of the “third birth”: “...le texte ne se transforme-t-il pas dans un espace de la réflexion critique, qui se contente de poser des questions sur le sens de l’existence, mais qui ne déroge pas au lecteur la tâche de chercher des réponses, remplies les espaces vides, enfin, rompre lui-même le silence? (189). Though it never truly manifests in the text, the language of *alternance* haunts the narrator as much as the reader, and its absence shapes the aesthetic exploration of the narrative. It is my contention, however, that the narrator does not simply leave his readership stranded in moments of silence when faced with an impossible task of verbalizing this language. Guided by a strong metatextual framework, the reader is compelled to engage with “pearl instances” as part of the linguistic quest and to perceive the tension between available forms of expression and the desired alter-language. Through didactic, self-reflexive comments and the mise-en-scene of the poetic gaze, the narrator expresses the need for collaboration, guiding his reader towards another way of perceiving reality.

The co-habitation of the mundane and the otherworldly in “pearl instances” suitably allegorizes the strain between existing “everyday” languages and the poetic tongue. The danger with ordinary scenes, however, is that they often go unnoticed because our gaze is drawn elsewhere.¹⁸⁶ To address this, the philosopher of three births (Théo Godb) provides the metaphor of a paperknife, which I interpret as a didactic mise-en-scène of a poetic gaze:

Depuis deux ou trois siècles, cet objet n'a servi qu'à cela. Il coupe les pages, c'est sa fonction, sa mission, sa vie. Un peu comme nous mangeons, travaillons, enfantons. [...] Mais tu vois, une nuit, ces rideaux n'étaient pas tirés, et sa lame

¹⁸⁶ To address this problem, the novel introduces the idea of apprenticeship. Professor Taraneau, for instance, asks his university students to produce films in which they capture what they interpret as someone else's “instant perlier”: “Et c'est déjà beaucoup, pouvoir devenir chez l'autre des instants qui le libèrent du jeu” (*Alt* 416).

reflétait la lune, les ombres des branches...C'était le même coupe-papier et pourtant j'avais l'impression de pénétrer dans sa vraie vie qu'il m'avait toujours cachée. (*Alt* 139)

The “essence” of a paperknife is revealed outside of its intended purpose for which the object was designed. Instead of opening letters, it reflects a landscape, becoming a defamiliarizing, aesthetic surface that disobeys its primary function. This image strikingly resembles Aliocha's musings in *Le Testament français* where he grapples with the notion of “the same world but seen differently.” Aliocha produces a similar image, which allegorizes the need to turn away from a utilitarian engagement with reality and to perceive instead what the latter disguises:

C'est ainsi qu'un menuisier façonnant, à la longueur de jours des pieds de chaises ou rabotant des planches n'aperçoit pas que les dentelles des copeaux forment sur le sol un bon ornement scintillant de résine, attirant par sa transparence claire, aujourd'hui, le rayon du soleil qui perce à travers une étroite fenêtre encombrée d'outils, demain – le reflet bleuté de la neige. (*TF* 308-309)

For Aliocha, literary potential is concentrated in the ability to perceive wood shavings, which are disregarded by the carpenter as a superfluous byproduct of a functional object. Through the narrator's transformative gaze, the discarded residue becomes the primary locus of an aesthetic experience. While Aliocha compares his newly found literary language to an instrument (“langue-outil”), his approach to carving reality radically differs from the carpenter's and resembles instead the displaced function of the paperknife in *Alternance*. One cuts through the bluntness of everyday discourse and the other – through the bluntness of everyday, utilitarian perception. Both cases represent a writer's engagement with the world and the transformative practice of perceiving the poetic within the mundane. In *Theory of Prose*, Shklovsky argued that “[t]he purpose of the image is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to

allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a ‘vision’ of this object rather than mere ‘recognition’” (10). Similarly, for the Diggers as well as for Aliocha, the notion of a poetic language is connected to imbuing mundane non-events with significance and meaning. This requires a new literacy, a new interpretative approach, and a new “interpretative community.” To perceive the moonlight reflected on the paperknife blade or the sunlight reflected on the wood shavings is to imagine new poetic spaces outside of familiar frameworks of functionality.

In addition to the quest for a poetic language of in-betweenness, *Le Testament français* explores a sense of belonging that transcends national borders. Despite the sci-fi tendencies of *Alternance*, Osmonde did not make the question of belonging the primary focus of his narrative but neither did he create an entirely post-national world. Operating within existing nations, the rhizomatic community of the Diggers thinks globally and searches for a universal idiom that would impact the entire world. It is a futuristic, transnational society whose concerns for humanity’s environmental, ethical, and social survival make them work across linguistic and state borders. The language of *alternance* is the subject of a deliberate, collective search that is constantly discussed and negotiated. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore that Osmonde sidesteps historical confrontations between languages and disregards existing realities of multilingual societies and monolingual nation-states. It is as if the intermediary nature of the alter-language makes it applicable across all idioms. We know that the narrator speaks at least Russian, French, and English. He also travels around the world, listening to Diggers’ presentations in other languages, yet the linguistic nature of these transnational exchanges is never explicitly addressed. It is also unclear in which language the narrator would have eventually produced his own revolutionary

oeuvre. Though his perspective may appear elitist due to the search for an ideal, poetic language on a philosophical plane, it is noteworthy that Osmonde pursues the possibility of absolute freedom from existing languages as manifold spaces of power and constraint (the same constraint that has contributed to Makine's exotic image in France).

VIII Conclusion

Andrei Makine's authorial posture and oeuvre are riddled with contradictions. Having settled in France, he adopted a Proustian position of not letting his life overshadow his work all the while deliberately mystifying his persona. In an interview with Murielle Lucie Clément, he opposed "toute cette effervescence factice de la littérature des exotismes," though a certain dose of this exoticism is undeniably present in his Russian-themed novels. After *Le Testament français*, Makine's literary persona became associated with a francophile, "Slavic" image, which made for great publicity but also placed constraining expectations on his literary production. Post-Goncourt Makine was seen as a "model assimilator" and a "transplanted" writer. This interpretation is supported by the author's personal assertion that he writes "without an accent."¹⁸⁷ Overall, Makine's literary posture became a complex back-and-forth between positions of belonging and non-belonging with regard to France and the French language, accompanied by attempts to simultaneously reinforce and deconstruct this framework. Maintaining a double authorial posture as Makine and Osmonde allows the writer to perform the roles of an outsider negotiating a position

¹⁸⁷Makine, interview in *Hors Presse*, April, 2002.

This position is contested by Marcel Ferrand in "Le français d'un prix Goncourt vu par un russisant." In his linguistic analysis, the author meticulously combs through *Le Testament français* to illustrate the lingering effects of Makine's native Russian on his French grammar, syntax, and punctuation.

of cultural duality within the French center and of an insider writing beyond “national” concerns. This challenges the categorization of authors by their origins.

Though the East-West trope has gradually lost its prominence in Makine’s work, he remains strongly associated with a Franco-Russian posture, which was reinforced in 2016 by his controversial speech at the Académie française. His heteronymic self-doubling is, to a certain extent, a break from this image. Through Osmonde, Makine refuses to be encompassed by the singular, “most Russian of the French writers” dimension of his literary persona. This chapter has demonstrated, however, that a search for a new poetic language links Makine’s and Osmonde’s aesthetic projects despite their striking differences. In *Alternance*, Osmonde continues exploring the creative potential of in-betweenness outside of the familiar Franco-Russian paradigm. In other words, though “Osmonde” marks a change in creative direction, *Alternance* is not a radical departure from Makine’s aesthetic concerns but rather their reframing in a new context.

For much of *Le Testament français*, Aliocha “others” his Soviet reality through the defamiliarizing prism of non-native French. While his bilingual perception allows to view the novel as a product of linguistic in-betweenness, the narrator also probes deeper the intermediary language of literature. The “tsar” metaphor reveals the narrator’s psycho-linguistic duality as a way of relativizing one’s cultural reality; the bilingual image of a flower focuses more on aesthetic qualities of language. Finally, with “la Koukouchka” and the subsequent explosion into a universe of interconnected poetic images, the narrator of *Le Testament français* springs beyond tangible experiences of “Russian” and “French” realities, entering an elusive expanse between existing languages – the space of literature itself. For Makine, translingualism constitutes a distinctive point of entry to the literary realm of languages. “Koukouchka” – a word-sound encompassing a unique

moment outside of time in *Le Testament français* – already anticipates a more abstract approach to language in *Alternance*. Instead of exploring the intermediary space between two national idioms, Osmonde’s narrator turns to the tension between real and poetic tongues. The latter is so elusive that it can only be glimpsed through fleeting “pearl instances.” These sudden, ephemeral instances of beauty reveal themselves in mundane non-events, when contemplating stillness and absence to the world. Though these moments can never be fully separated from their silent immediacy, they function as an aesthetic site of “in-betweenness” where existing tongues stretch towards an ideal poetic idiom without ever reaching it. As manifestations of a liminal experience, “pearl instances” foreground the insufficiencies of real languages while calling a virtual one into being.

Reading *Le Testament français* and *Alternance* in dialogue with one another allowed to integrate Osmonde into a critical debate that has been predominantly centered on Makine. This comparative approach allowed to pivot the analysis of *Le Testament français* from questions of transcultural identity to broader concerns of language beyond bilingualism. Though Makine did not fail to please the Western reader with expected images of Russianness and flattering comments on the French civilization, this brought into sharper focus the poetic dimension of in-betweenness in *Le Testament français*. That Makine revisited Aliocha’s quest for a new language in Osmonde’s *Alternance* confirms the greater aesthetic complexity of the novel, which cannot be reduced to functions of cultural and linguistic assimilation.

Both *Alternance* and *Le Testament français* explore a “langue d’étonnement” maintained through an aesthetic position of in-betweenness, whether it is between native Russian and non-native French or between real and poetic languages. “Seuls me manquaient encore les mots qui pouvaient le dire” – pronounced by Aliocha on the last page of *Le Testament français* –

are as applicable to him as they are to the anonymous narrator of *Alternance* (TF 345). In fact, Osmonde's novel concludes on a similar open-ended note: "— Donc, jamais on ne pourra espérer saisir sa brève éternité [celle de l'instant perlier] ? Puisqu'elle est inexprimable dans aucun langage connu" (Alt 479). Though the language of *alternance* could never be invented, working through this impossibility reveals the importance of in-betweenness as framework that can articulate the quest for an ideal, fictive language in its state of incompleteness. While Makine is often lauded in French reception for confirming the "universality" of the French language, what the writer is truly after is the universality of a poetic tongue.

CONCLUSION

In an increasingly interconnected global landscape, more people imagine themselves living in foreign countries and speaking a language other than their native one. In this age of globalization, the choice to write in a non-native idiom – especially if it is not the world’s *lingua franca*, English – appears significant. Translingualism contributes to interrogating affiliations and literary classifications beyond the nation-state, and therefore beyond exilic and monolingual paradigms. This dissertation considered autobiographic and fictional narratives by three contemporary translingual writers of French expression from Greece, Slovenia, and Russia: Vassilis Alexakis’ *Paris-Athènes* (1989); Brina Svit’s *Moreno* (2003) and *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007); and Andreï Makine’s *Le Testament français* (1995) as well as his heteronymic Gabriel Osmonde’s *Alternance* (2011). Throughout the three case studies, this project examined practices of selfhood and aesthetic expressions of in-betweenness, broadly framed by the impact of reception on translingual production.

The first question that this project set out to answer was the following: how do translingual authors explore the identity and aesthetic implications of their non-native status to French in ways that challenge common interpretations that would pigeonhole them as cultural ambassadors or search for “foreign” accents in their work? While several studies addressed how translingual authors of non-francophone origin adopt “orthodox” tendencies to assimilate themselves into the new literary terrain, my analysis focused on the way in which they negotiate representational politics by destabilizing, sidestepping, or subverting expected roles of cultural and linguistic

otherness and affiliation. This led me to interrogate critical labels often assigned to translingual authors, such as “venus d’ailleurs,” and “invités,” as these terms reinstate symbolic boundaries that writers are seeking to blur or move away from. Furthermore, schematic classifications that rely on oppositional others (e.g. postcolonial authors) obscure the instability that characterizes translingual writers in my corpus. Though it is important to differentiate the aesthetic choice of writing in French for authors from historically non-francophone countries, it must be done outside of the epistemological fallacy of refashioning old binaries through new oppositions. Alexakis, Svit, and Makine are all conscious of the way their “foreignness” is manipulated as a marketing label on the literary market. Their selected works entertain an explicit or implicit dialogical rapport with media and literary reception that shape their authorial postures. These authors exploit their liminal positions and negotiate the “rules of hospitality,” through which they lay bare the methods that attempt to assign fixed positions to them. As such, they practice malleable identities and engage in strategies of inside-outness.

Part of Alexakis’ *Paris-Athènes* can be characterized as a polemic in which the author openly criticizes literary institutions for their tendency to sell translingual authors to readers as literary and cultural others. Blurring the lines between fiction and criticism, Alexakis scrutinizes the reception of his own oeuvre and polemicizes against the pressures that the national literary market exercises on contemporary artistic production. No longer satisfied with hiding behind Paris-themed novels, the narrator-writer asserts his difference as a translingual author: rejecting expected expressions of alterity, he also refuses to be completely assimilated. In *Paris-Athènes*, Alexakis insists on preserving his translingual singularity while redefining the terms of its difference. He articulates this position in a way that is full of paradoxes and inconsistencies. The narrator-author asserts complete ownership of the French language only to destabilize it by

claiming that no one could fully inhabit a language, regardless of whether it is native or adopted. He expresses anxiety about making errors yet expects to be judged more severely, since, for him, authorial bilingualism constitutes a linguistic advantage. The narrator also claims to have earned the right to make mistakes while producing a text in precise, standard literary French.

While Svit continues to explore questions of language and identity, she distances herself from those that dwell on her choice of French: “Comment habitez-vous la langue française (ou comment vous habite-t-elle)? Comment peut-on être francophone ?” To this, she responds: “J’en ai marre, il faut trouver autre chose” (“Moitié française, moitié je ne sais pas” 252). In her autobiographic *Moreno*, Svit shifts the articulation of her translingual experience from an anticipated Franco-Slovenian dichotomy to a third location, Italy. Rather than producing a linguistic *Bildungsroman* and dramatizing her integration as a writer in France, she unexpectedly writes about a multilingual community of migrant workers that she encounters in Tuscany. Svit does not negotiate translingual displacement through the native/adopted paradigm. Instead, she explores it relationally through intersubjective connections bound by difference. In *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée*, Svit creates a plurilingual, French-born narrator-author who writes in French but refuses to call it her mother tongue. By incorporating Argentine tango as the new language into her text, she once again sidesteps the native/non-native binary. As a result, the symbolic space in which Svit explores her translingual in-betweenness supersedes both Slovenia and France and the politics of hyphenated identities.

Andreï Makine is arguably the most contentious of the three case studies due to his conservatism and a predisposition to exhibit a somewhat essentialized Franco-Russian persona in public appearances, which has contributed to his status as a bestselling author in France. While Alexakis polemicized against the pressures to produce culturally “authentic” literature and Svit

circumvented the issue by exploring translingualism in different terms, Makine collaborated with reception to produce the desired, recognizable type of Russianness. This posture problematically co-exists with his critique of readers' excessive interest in the writers' ethnic origins and the "exotic" turn in francophone literature to which he, in his own assessment, does not belong. In my third chapter, I argued that Makine's posture – with its biographic plasticity and heteronymic self-doubling – cannot be characterized as fixed or stable despite his self-fashioning as the "most Russian of French writers." A cursory interpretation of *Le Testament français* may leave the reader with a flattering image of France and a suitably exotic image of Russia. My purpose was not to fully absolve Makine of capitalizing on cultural otherness, but rather to suggest that a more complex dimension of this novel got obscured in the post-Goncourt hubbub. Makine's creation of the heteronymic Gabriel Osmonde further complicates his posture. Osmonde is shaped as a younger French author who travels extensively and produces novels unconcerned with Russianness and the East-West rapport. This heteronymic identity relativizes Makine's sedimented posture and invites a rereading of his novels beyond the habitual Franco-Russian dichotomy.

Because the rapport between French and Francophone literature has always been uneasy, translingual authors – who are arbitrarily placed in both of these categories – problematize this division. Incorporating these writers into French literature contributes to rethinking what French literature means in the global context. This is what Susan Suleiman and Christie McDonald pursued by devoting a chapter to Samuel Beckett and Irène Némirovsky in their influential volume *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (2010):

Our contention is that such questions - about the tensions between multiplicity and unity, between diversity and uniformity, between “same” and other,” as well as related questions of migration and diasporic identities – are not limited to the emergence of “Francophone literature”; rather, they have informed every period of French literature, starting with some of its most canonical texts” (McDonald & Suleiman xi).

In *Born Translated* (2015), Rebecca Walkowitz points out that we are still trapped in the mindset of national languages and national literary traditions: “We can tell this is so because writing in a second language has its own special name, ‘translingual writing’” (12). Instead of creating new terms to designate these writers, which would continue setting them apart, it is necessary to implode the narrative of literary “unity” by bringing to the foreground authors like Alexakis, Svit, and Makine who write in French without necessarily being French, who circulate between several countries and oscillate between different languages; authors whose singularity cannot be erased through assimilation or regulated through conditional hospitality of a nation-state. The debate remains open: while some view the inclusion of translingual writers as a reaffirmation of the nation-state model in literature, others consider it as a way to destabilize it by recognizing its historical porosity to other literary traditions, languages, and cultures. My analysis of the three case studies revealed a similar tension: writers valorize transnational modes of writing and belonging, yet they inevitably have to negotiate their position with “national” literary institutions that seek to consume them for their own means.

Steven Kellman’s definition of “translingualism” was meaningful in that it created a corpus around authors from different countries based on the shared practice of writing in a “non-primary” language. Writing about non-native writers of German expression, Chantal Wright argues that they bring to the foreground stylistic innovation (“Writing in the ‘Grey Zone’” 38-39). In a similar vein,

in her work on translingual Russian-born authors, Julie Hansen modified Kellman's definition of translingualism to focus on "the presence of more than one language within a text" with intratextual evidence of "creative interaction between languages," which she distinguished from bilingual "language-switching as a binary operation" (114).¹⁸⁸ Hansen's take on translingualism would therefore exclude works by Alexakis, Svit, and Makine as they are predominantly monolingual.¹⁸⁹ This prompted my second research question: how can we approach translingual aesthetics in monolingual works? To answer this, I adopted the framework of "in-betweenness" that guided my approach to translingual literature of French expression with "shallow" forms of multilingualism. This did not entail reading Makine's novels for the signs of Russianness or Alexakis' work for the signs of Greekness. Neither was my analysis about the celebration of a native tongue under the surface of adopted French. Instead, my dissertation called attention to the fact that translingual novels often perpetuate an aesthetic tension of in-betweenness as a means of cultivating new poetic spaces of expression and testing the perceptual limits of language.

While writing often functions as a space of self-reterritorialization and reconciliation or, as Svit has put it, as a way of accessing one's "vrai visage," this project showed that there is a tendency to transform one's linguistic displacement into a self-reflexive position of in-betweenness that – rather than being reconciled – is transformed, recreated, and reiterated under new poetic guises in ways that are not limited to the thematization of bilingualism. In the early stages of writing, I sought to reinforce a shared experience of translingual in-betweenness across

¹⁸⁸ Multilingualism is also a fruitful lens in genetic criticism, as multilingual manuscripts offer a new outlook on monolingual publications. For more on this, see Olga Anokhina's scholarship on Vladimir Nabokov.

¹⁸⁹ I have acknowledged in the introduction that studying self-translated works in both languages produces a new lens for multilingualism. This dissertation, however, is solely concerned with texts written directly in French.

the three case studies only to discover that each author explored it in unique, individual ways. This prompted me to readjust and adapt the concept for each writer, and its flexibility became one of the unpredicted outcomes of this project. Each chapter reinvented the intermediary, poetic space between two forms of expression as a foundation for a language-based quest.

Vassilis Alexakis

My first chapter on Alexakis' *Paris-Athènes* (1989) considered the most concrete expression of translingual in-betweenness, as tied to the tension between two national languages – French and Greek. Oscillating between self-writing and criticism, this autobiographic text explores Alexakis' authorial crisis as a translingual writer in France. It was written when he considered no longer writing in his adopted French. As a polemic, *Paris-Athènes* is turned outward to challenge reception and public suspicion about his translingual identity; at the same time, turned inward, the text becomes the fabric for cultivating translingual in-betweenness as a literary aesthetic. This chapter demonstrated how these two endeavors come together through the analysis of metaphorical images and the narrator's metalinguistic comments on self-translation.

Alexakis' notion of in-betweenness is conveyed through a symbolic transformation of space into a personal, linguistic geography, the most notable being the image of a diglossic tree in a virtual garden-city (*urbs*). The rapport between French and Greek languages is depicted as a tree whose branches and roots mutually sustain one another; its symbiotic rapport undoes affective associations between "native" ("mother") and "non-native" tongues. It is significant that the narrator turned to the ultimate symbol of rootedness and belonging to undermine languages' origin-based hierarchy and inscribe them into a relational narrative.

Though Greek is incorporated into the French text, I argued that textual bilingualism in *Paris-Athènes* fell short of reflecting the type of linguistic interaction that was articulated through spatial metaphors. While Greek helped convey the inner workings of a bilingual mind, it remained largely monitored by the narrator. However, Alexakis' revelation about using self-translation as a revision tool offered a solution. By disclosing the bilingual genesis of his monolingual texts, he subverted the function of bilingualism in an unexpected way: instead of producing a hybrid, "third" language, he filters one language through the prism of another, thereby producing a more robust monolingual text in new editions across both languages. In this space of literary in-betweenness, one language cannot be untangled from another, and it is this notion of productive symbiosis that Alexakis expressed through the branch/root metaphor and reflections on self-translation.

Brina Svit

A comparative study of Brina Svit's *Moreno* (2003) and the novel *Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée* (2007) demonstrated a distinctly intersubjective dimension of in-betweenness. Whether between two national languages or between a verbal (text) and non-verbal (dance) forms of expression, each narrative mediated displacement through the figure of an uncanny couple. In *Moreno*, the unusual relation develops between a migrant worker and a translingual writer; in *Coco Dias* – between a tanguero and a writer who learn to relate to one another through the language of dance. Both cases circumvent traditional relationalities between a man and a woman without falling under conventional definitions of intimacy: they are not family, lovers, or friends. While Alexakis' exploration of translingual in-betweenness was of a more personal nature, Svit's fictional and autobiographical narratives draw on the formation of a couple as a microcosm for

imagining new modes of solidarity and identification. Her narrators exhibit empathy and a genuine interest in an encounter with the other. In autobiographic *Moreno*, the writer's individual experience of translingual displacement turns into a reflection on new forms of belonging where difference becomes the binding quality of a group (as opposed to sharing national, occupational, linguistic, or social affiliations). Her rapport with the community of migrant workers – the “extracommunautaires” – lends the narrator-writer a paradigm for defining her own translingual experience. Overall, Svit's oeuvre is reminiscent of the way in which Subha Xavier characterized migrant literature in *The Migrant Text: Making and Marketing a Global French Literature* (2016). Xavier writes specifically about texts thematizing migration, yet its definition as a category that “does not complete with national literatures” but rather “sidesteps them” in a “deliberate circumvention of the paradigms of nationhood and nationality” also applies to Svit's ethos as a cosmopolitan writer (19).

Coco Dias ou la Porte Dorée is Svit's first novel completely removed from all things Slovenian, yet it does not lead to embracing the “opposite” pole of the Franco-Slovenian dichotomy. It is a hybrid narrative about an author who prepares to write a tanguero's life story while exploring her own self-awakening through Argentine tango. My analysis of *Coco Dias* revealed that in-betweenness, though often associated with a rapport between two languages, may produce an aesthetic expression open to other semiotic systems. Chapter 2 thus argued that the narrator did not just thematize the process of learning Argentine tango but rather sought to incorporate a kinetic form of expression into her own text, transcending the binaries of language. It suggested that the intermedial tension between a verbal language (text) and a non-verbal one (dance) creates the potential of a “dancing text;” one that absorbs into its structure the ethics and aesthetic of Argentine tango. This transforms the tension between native and adopted languages

into an intermedial dialogue between literature and dance. This process compels the reader to perceive the text through the conceptual prism of a dance, which attributes a semantic density to a monolingual text with minor irruptions of Spanish.

Andreï Makine

My third chapter explored translingual in-betweenness, connecting Andreï Makine's *Le Testament français* (1995) and *Alternance* (2011), published under the heteronym Gabriel Osmonde. That Makine and Osmonde are two authorial personae representing the same writer has been known since 2011, and the two bodies of work have co-existed since 2001. Nevertheless, little scholarly work has addressed the fissures and connections between the two corpora. *Le Testament français* is undoubtedly one of Makine's well-known and analyzed novels for several reasons. As a recipient of France's three most prestigious literary prizes, it made the writer famous almost overnight. Scholars have previously suggested that this unanimous acceptance is due to the fact that Makine's novel celebrated France's cultural patrimony and flattered its national imaginary. While it is important to acknowledge the author's ability to meet a commercial demand, I argued for a more nuanced reading of *Le Testament français*. This chapter aimed to bring to light an evolution in the narrator's treatment of language. While French was the language that liberated young Aliocha from his Soviet reality, as a translingual writer, he pursued an elusive poetic space between his two languages, in which French alone could not carry the burden of literary defamiliarization.

This chapter further argued that, as Osmonde, Makine reframed his pursuit of testing the limits of language and artistic perception. In *Alternance* – rather than turning away from

Makine's literary project (as Pessoa's definition of a heteronym would suggest) – the author recreated the poetic dilemma first elaborated in *Le Testament français* outside of the habitual Franco-Russian paradigm and in a more global context. In *Alternance*, it is no longer a single writer's meditation on writing, but a deliberate, methodical quest to change the world through a new language and to utter that which lies beyond existing verbal discourse. Studying the two novels side by side has brought to the fore a common search for a new literary language that could only be glimpsed in moments of tension when existing idioms (French, Russian, and beyond) stretch to utter an unrealizable, ideal poetic expression. The ensuing space of in-betweenness foregrounds the insufficiencies of language while also calling a new one into being.

Though each case study revealed a singular interpretation on in-betweenness, they all share an important feature. Across all texts, the first-person narrator is a self-reflexive intradiegetic author either in the process of writing a book or preparing to do so. They set up metalinguistic frameworks that guide readers' attention to these aesthetic liminal spaces. This unfolds through recurring remarks on self-translation, the potential to create a “dancing text,” or the existing languages' insufficiency to capture the poetic experience of *alternance*. An intended emphasis on the creation of intermediary spaces of in-betweenness impacts the aesthetic experience of a text without the intervention of a foreign tongue.

By electing to write in non-native French, translingual writers choose the freedom outside of linguistic determinism. It is this freedom that they reclaim with each new iteration of “in-betweenness” as they test the limits and stretch the perception of language towards the ineffable. Throughout their self-reflexive texts, Alexakis, Svit, and Makine explore in-betweenness by

imagining new intermediary spaces of expression (between native and non-native, verbal and non-verbal, real and poetic languages), which generate a different way of writing, relating to others, and perceiving reality. Applying “in-betweenness” as a critical lens allowed me to engage with translingual works in new ways, combining traditional texts that thematize bilingual duality while shedding light on those that are entirely removed from these considerations.

Devising future research stemming from this dissertation, I would like to propose three possible directions. It may be fruitful to trace the evolution and development of translingual expressions of “in-betweenness” within a larger historical frame and across a broader span of individual writers’ careers to consider the viability of this framework overtime. Of particular interest may also be a comparative analysis of “in-betweenness” in the contemporary works of translingual authors and those from former colonies that deliberately circumvent the postcolonial lens in their works. By looking at how these sets of texts engage with cosmopolitan realities and create new imagined communities (instead of writing to or about their respective nations), we may discover new paradigms to bridge the two corpora that have been traditionally kept separate. Lastly, it may be productive to take a closer look at the translingual writer’s oppositional “other” – the monolingual author – and consider the applicability of translingual in-betweenness as a critical lens in contemporary monolingual works by French authors. If “in-betweenness” designates a particular approach to mediating language that is part of the broader interrogation of linguistic freedom and constraints, identity, and belonging in an era of globalization, some contemporary French authors may offer new insight to this evolving sensibility.

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