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Listen to Language: An Analysis of Borders, Surfaces, and the Role of Translation

Rosa Canales '20



Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*, published in 2015 and originally in German, addresses the current refugee crisis in Germany and across Europe. As a contemporary text, Erpenbeck's novel especially reflects the United States border "crisis," a national issue affecting migrants and their families and resulting in an unprecedented government shutdown. The novel follows Richard, a professor emeritus of classics, as he first notices (or notices how he fails to notice) the crowd of refugees at Alexanderplatz in Berlin and slowly becomes a crucial supporter of the refugees in their pursuit of asylum. Also originally published in German, Herta Müller's *Nadirs* (1982), through a series of short stories, uncovers the horrors of oppressive village life in communist Romania. The short stories are largely autobiographical, yet written in the genre of magic realism, they twist into the realm of the bizarre, complicating our perceptions of the real versus the imaginary. Both of these texts deal with the concepts of borders and surfaces--whether explicitly as with Erpenbeck or more subtly through language, as with Müller. Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone* displays the arbitrariness of these borders and surfaces, where she emphasizes nature in opposition to man-made borders. She additionally represents the "listening" of music and storytelling as a means to transcend or see beyond borders and strengthen

Richard's connections with the refugees. Herta Müller's *Nadirs* reflects a similar emphasis on storytelling in its ability to see beneath the surface of language, and underscores a manipulation of this surface as a way to form a connection between author and reader and incite a challenge with her narrative.

The most obvious representation of borders in *Go, Went, Gone* can be seen in the physical borders separating countries, people, and places, and the bureaucratic language used to do so. These physical borders and laws are convoluted and largely unnecessary, where the moment "these borders are defined only by laws, ambiguity takes over" (Erpenbeck 68). With legal documents constantly regulating these borders and whom they attempt to keep in or out, "the law has made a shift from physical reality to the realm of language" (Erpenbeck 68), often preventing the refugees from simply being able to understand their position, and thus change it. Although Erpenbeck generally presents these borders as dealing with nation states and governments, this theme stretches throughout the book, as Richard concerns himself with the questions of, "what is the one true, crucial border?" and "have people forgotten in Berlin of all places that a border isn't just measured by an opponent's stature but in fact creates him?" (210-11). Richard grapples with these borders and the substance beneath the surfaces of people, things, and concepts. As Monika Shafi says in her critical article, "The Lessons of Jenny Erpenbeck's Novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*," Richard "is trying to determine the penultimate criterion separating people into different categories listing social criteria such as race, income, and family status but also personal preferences for food, drink, and music...Richard concludes that all these divisions are ridiculously small and should be regarded as less important than the common

humanity and the short time everyone has on the planet” (188). Through his experiences with the refugees, Richard comes to understand the inconsequence of these physical borders and see past surfaces which originally limited his perspective, and I wish to concern myself with the question of how Erpenbeck portrays this change.

Through emphasis on the border between nature and man, Erpenbeck underscores the insignificance of borders in contrast to the power of nature and the effect of this contrast on Richard. Richard reflects on a time when a colleague asks him to breathe in the Austrian air deeply, where

the Sirocco, his colleague said, came from Africa and across the Alps, sometimes even bringing a bit of desert sand along with it. And indeed: on the leaves of the grapevines you could see the fine, ruddy dust that had made its way from Africa. Richard had run his finger across one of the leaves and observed how this small gesture produced a sudden shift in his perspective and sense of scale. (Erpenbeck 55)

Erpenbeck portrays nature as a force stronger than that of man--of one which can cross man-made borders and create a shift in Richard’s perspective. In nature as well, sometimes on Richard’s late-night strolls behind his house, Richard “walks between the fields and forest on his right, the houses to his left...each step he takes belongs more to the forest than to him, and a state of wakefulness replaces seeing” (Erpenbeck 163, 29). When Richard crosses the border between civilization and nature, he experiences an even greater sense of awareness, more attune to his outside world and environment. Nature has always been there, yet now civilization brushes against it, and like the man at the bottom of the lake, man has crossed the border between

nature and civilization, and he has “dissolved in [the lake]” (Erpenbeck 163). This emphasis on the human dissolving within nature, underscores the idea of nature as more powerful than these man-made borders imposed upon nature and others, where previously none existed. Like the Berlin wall and its eventual fall, these borders will eventually prove arbitrary and pointless in confining humans to imagined nations.

Again, rooted in nature, the most commonly recurring motif throughout the book, and the one which plagues Richard the most--the man lying at the bottom of the lake--represents the importance of what lies below the surface, of what is not visible to the common eye. Ever since the accident, “day after day, [the lake] has been perfectly calm.... Strangers who walk past his garden gate on their outings return just as happy as they came. But he can’t avoid seeing the lake when he sits at his desk” (Erpenbeck 5). Just like the refugees at Alexanderplatz, the man at the bottom of the lake remains obscured to the common passerby; however, Richard cannot help but dwell on what lies beneath the surface--his ruminations on the lake appearing in almost every chapter. Although the lake visually obscures him from seeing the man at the bottom, it provides him with an alternate form of “seeing,” in that it serves as a reminder to look beneath surfaces. As Gary L. Baker says in his article “The Violence of Precarity and the Appeal of Routine in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen*,” the lake “stands throughout the novel as an allegorical reproach of bystander apathy” (508). This lake further stands as a symbol for its circular shape. When Richard gets home from the new refugees’ center in Spandau, he decides to go on a walk--a circular walk around the lake, because “maybe a circular walk could hold something together” (Erpenbeck 163). In a circle, there is

no beginning or ending point, which again alludes to the cycle of time and history we see repeated throughout the novel, where this invisibility cycles throughout time, generations, and groups of people. As Richard “[draws] a circle even around some who don’t see him: the dogs asleep in the houses, the children sitting in front of TV sets inside, or even some lost drinker sorting out the empty bottles in his basement” (Erpenbeck 163), he creates complicity between him and those in their houses, unaware to the outside world and the refugee crisis, including them in this circle of culpability. Richard used to be just like those in their houses, absorbed in his “existentially restless existence that is sustained through conditioned movements satisfying his own needs: eating, sleeping, and watching television” (Baker 509); however, now he sees past these insignificant everyday comforts--hyperconscious of the lake, the outside world, and the refugees around him.

Even more powerful than the role of nature, Erpenbeck presents the constructs of music and storytelling as means to see past borders and beneath surfaces. When Osarobo, one of the refugees Richard meets, says his greatest desire would be to play the piano, Richard expects him to expertly replicate Bach and Chopin at his unused grand piano, yet Osarobo simply plucks the black and white keys. Despite this, Osarobo keeps returning to play, and “what Osarobo is playing isn’t Bach, nor is it Mozart, jazz, or blues, but Richard can hear Osarobo’s own listening and this listening turns these crooked, lopsided, harsh, stumbling, impure notes into something that, for all its arbitrariness, still is beautiful” (Erpenbeck 121). Until this moment, Richard had been consumed with seeing and with the question, “Why didn’t [I] see these men at Alexanderplatz?” (Erpenbeck 19), yet now, as Richard instead learns to listen, to listen to “Osarobo’s own

listening” (Erpenbeck 121), his mind opens, and he experiences a transformative moment, as through music, he hears and sees the beauty in his connection with Osarobo. He is no longer content with his passive watching, and only now does it occur to him how long his daily life has been lacking sounds other than the ones he himself makes. He was always the most content, back in his old life, when his wife practiced the viola while he was sitting at his desk one room away, working on a lecture or article. *The joy of the parallel universe* is how he’d described in to her. (Erpenbeck 121)

For Richard, music possesses the ability to unite not just him and his wife in a “parallel universe” but to bridge the differences between the parallel universes of his life and the lives of the refugees. When Richard listens to music with Osarobo, rather than simply watching him play, these feelings are intensified, and “For a long time the old man and this young man sit there side by side at the desk, watching and listening as these three musicians use the black and white keys to tell stories that have nothing at all to do with the keys’ colors” (Erpenbeck 161). Not only does music cultivate a deeper understanding through listening, but the “keys’ colors,” and thus the color of the fingers playing them, become irrelevant to the stories emanating from beneath them.

Erpenbeck continues this metaphor of listening versus seeing in emphasizing the ability of oral storytelling to see and understand across borders. Richard’s position as a classics professor reflects his belief in storytelling, as he translates the present world through the classics--in his head naming the refugees after Tristan or Apollo from the Greek myths. As he listens to “Apollo” tell his story about fleeing from Libya, he is amazed by the power of stories to

guide the men across the desert and borders, where, rather than a map or modern technology, “they find their way by these stories” (Erpenbeck 150). The oral power of these stories remains stronger than any man-made border but also reflects Richard’s newfound understanding and respect for these men, as “never before has the connection between space, time, and words revealed itself to him so clearly as at this moment” (Erpenbeck 151). Furthermore, the stories shared between the men and Richard remain rooted in memory, and “without memory, man is nothing more than a bit of flesh on the planet’s surface” (Erpenbeck 151). Without stories, but more importantly without memory, man cannot break borders or see beneath the surface of the planet--past natural and human constructions. Erpenbeck thus reflects this transformative power of oral storytelling to “listen” past borders in the reversal of storytelling at the end of the novel. While Richard spends the majority of the novel listening to the refugees’ stories, the novel ends with Richard sharing with his German friend, Detlaf, and with the refugees, a story of his wife, which he and Detlaf, and definitely he and the refugees had “never spoken about anything like this before” (Erpenbeck 281). With this reversal between storyteller and listener, Erpenbeck underscores the ability of storytelling to see past borders of race and culture, and she more greatly includes Richard in this process. Listening acts as a higher form of seeing, in which borders of race, place, and understanding have been bridged through Richard and the refugees’ equal participation in listening and telling.

This connection to memory surfaces throughout the book, as Richard constantly reflects on his own personal memories and the collective memories of German history. Combined with storytelling, Richard uses these memories as a means to see beneath surfaces and borders in

cultivating a greater understanding of the refugees and empathy for them. He filters the present day through associations with Nazi Germany and the Berlin wall, where presently tourists are here to “see ‘Alex,’ the center of that part of Berlin long known as the ‘Russian zone’ and still often referred to as the ‘Eastern zone’ in jest” (Erpenbeck 15). As Baker says of these historical cycles,

Erpenbeck does not simply show a direct link between violence and precarity; her novel discerns as well politically divergent categories of violence across generations, geopolitical situations, geographical locations, and points in history... Though commonalities can be found in these experiences of violence, the aftermath of the violence that Richard knows from his own national history is radically different from that which the refugees experience in the twenty-first century. (511,13)

Although Erpenbeck may set up these contrasts in violence to highlight the radically different types of violence experienced by Richard and the refugees, Richard’s memory and reflections also serve as a point of translation, allowing him to see and understand connections across cultural memories. He uses these historical changes to understand from the men’s perspectives, searching for a grounding in similarity among his own historical memories and those shared with him by the refugees.

Herta Müller, in her text *Nadirs*, as well seeks to see beyond borders and surfaces, most notably doing so through the surface of language itself. Through the genre of magic realism, Müller crafts a narrative at first confusing for its encompassment of both the real and the absurd. Although storytelling does not carry the same oral tradition as shown in Erpenbeck’s novel, in this text, it instead

reflects the idea of bridging the border between author and reader. Playing with language and meaning, Müller's novel develops a set of codes for readers to decipher, mimicking a theme common to *Trümmerliteratur*, German "literature of the rubble" post WWII. Ernestine Schlant argues in her well received book, *The Language of Silence*, that feelings of denial, rationalization, and chaos controlled post-war Germany, and "most literature of the immediate postwar period was dominated by vague feelings of guilt ... and the relief over having managed to escape (21-22). Because of this, German *Trümmerliteratur* rarely spoke directly to the Holocaust, where "this silence was pervasive; it rested on unstated shared thinking, established unconscious bonds of complicity, and relied on code words for communication" (Schlant 25). Although *Nadirs* cannot be classified in this category of literature for its much later publication date, it shares this trait of language as speaking through code words and beneath surfaces. One notable instance of this in *Nadirs* is Müller's use of the word turnip as a "code word" or symbol of violence against women. In regard to the rapes committed by her father during WWII, the narrator hears, "Your father stuck a turnip between her legs. When we left she was bleeding. She was Russian. For weeks afterwards, we would call all weapons turnips" (Müller 3). This symbol of the turnip repeats itself through the novel, as later, when the narrator herself gets raped: "Jesus hangs on the side of the road bleeding and looks disinterested into the turnip fields through a window of broken plum trees" (Müller 92), where the turnip again alludes to violence against women. This coding throughout the novel infiltrates the surface of Müller's simplistic sentence structure, subscribing deeper meaning to language and crafting a fuller narrative of violence.

Nadirs as a text defined by the genre of magic realism additionally appears at first to act as an inhibiting surface to understanding yet ultimately affords Müller increased literary agency. As Costica Bradatan writes of Müller's style in his critical article "Herta Müller's Language of Resistance,"

Language is like air. You realize how important it is only when it is messed up. Then it can kill you. Those working for totalitarian regimes know this better than anyone else: messing with language can be an efficient means of political control...If the system's power comes from its ability to affect people's minds through language, any resistance should come from language as well. The regime may use magical thinking for its own purposes, but the writer can oppose it through an enchantment of her own.

Müller uses the surface of magic realism to gain power, manipulating language in the face of its manipulation by totalitarianism regimes--a form of oppression also reminiscent of Nazi Propaganda. To accomplish this, Bradatan speaks to Müller's description of village language completely its own--a language which "remains unaffected by political intrusion" (Bradatan). I would add that, through magic realism, Müller additionally gains control over acts of violence otherwise dominated by the regime. As Müller writes, "A man was leaning his cane against a big rock. He aimed his rifle and shot down the sleeve. When it sank to the ground in front of me it was covered with blood. The funeral congregation applauded" (4). This idea of language--and Müller's representation of violence--as far from stagnant, as shifting before your eyes, highlights a refusal of the dominant of language of violence and power. While the people remain powerless to the government and

perpetrators of genocide, Müller's violent imagery appears and then disappears throughout almost every sentence, allowing her, through imagery, to control the language of violence. As Bratadan quotes Müller in his essay, "Even though she does not use it for literary purposes, the language 'always accompanies me as I write, because it has grown into my own seeing.'" In this manner, Müller manipulates the surface of language to extend seeing and meaning beyond rhetoric and beyond who controls this rhetoric.

This idea of language as a surface--as something to be seen beneath, and as a tool to be translated into greater meaning, reflects the idea of translation itself. According to Walter Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator," "a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language" (79). Individual words and their meanings act as a surface to "a greater language," or a larger overall meaning. As both *Go*, *Went*, *Gone*, and *Nadirs* are both translated texts, this powerful message of surfaces and borders applies to more than just themes throughout the novels but to the role of the translator in bestowing a greater language beneath the surface of words. The act of translation occurs doubly as the translator seeks to maintain the greater meaning behind the authors' original texts, and as readers attempt to translate the surface of language in uncovering this larger intention.

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