

Wohnwort: The linguistic homelands of Elazar Benyoëtz

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Abstract: One aspect of Elazar Benyoëtz's poetry is his bold attempt to treat the catastrophe of Auschwitz through a linguistic prism. In this essay, I would like to shed light on his way of inhabiting the German language as an outsider by considering the ethical implications of his bifurcated linguistic soul. To do so, I will first analyze the general representation of language that appears in Benyoëtz's work. In particular, I will point to the dynamics of language and how its movement shapes a land and a language beyond all constraints of ownership, while providing an alternative way of inhabiting it. I will then examine possible interpretations of Benyoëtz's bifurcated linguistic soul along with its ethical implications, including not only a coming to terms with the end of German-Jewish symbiosis, but also a utopian way of repairing it.

I Mut zur Sprache

Every poet has his own wordly domicile.¹

In a letter to Harald Weinrich from 29 October 1981, Elazar Benyoëtz recalls a momentous episode from his childhood, when his mother – who not by chance was sitting at her sewing machine – told him to be brave enough to speak loudly: to have *Mut zur Sprache*.² I would say that these three words represent the core of both Benyoëtz's poetry and his cultural engagement. In his memories, the house, the sun, his mother, and language are entangled together. His mother, who would sing German and Hungarian lullabies to him, taught him Hebrew, which she had learned thanks to her Zionist beliefs. After the death of his father, with whom his mother spoke German, Hebrew truly became Elazar's *Muttersprache*; as he put it, “the river of Hebrew speech washed me far away from the disappearing German shore” [*der Fluss der hebräischen Rede spülte mich weit weg vom sich*

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¹ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 308: “Jeder Dichter hat sein Wohnwort.” Here, I am quoting from the Kindle version of the book.

² Benyoëtz, *Vielzeitig*, 107. Being brave is also a quality that is related to aphoristic writing. In a letter to Friedemann Spicker from December 9, 2004, Benyoëtz writes: “Where does the courage of the aphorism show itself, in an aphorism? Where it stops being a slogan and becomes a confession” [*Wo zeigt sich der Mut des Aphorismus, in einem Aphorismus? Wo es aufhört, Parole zu sein und Bekenntnis wird*]. See Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 206.

verlierenden deutschen Ufer].³ However, years later, he restored his linguistic bond with the German language to such an extent that it became his “philological *Heimat*.”⁴ In German, he found his *Wohnwort*, a wordly place where the poet dwells that does not have a geographical equivalent.

This tension between the geographical location and the philological *Heimat*, which was always a highly debated topic in the Jewish tradition, is central in Benyoëtz’s writings. As an Israeli Jew who chose the German language despite having his own mother-tongue, he paradoxically overturns the positions of many German Jews who had to speak German, but had a *Heimat* elsewhere, the holy land and the holy tongue.⁵ In addition, his choice can be seen as a restoration and a challenge to what Martin Buber called “*das Ende der deutschen-jüdischen Symbiose*” in a famous article published in 1939. In this essay, Buber spoke of “examples of true cross-fertilization”⁶ between the German and Jewish spirits. Despite the fact that “many fine Jews gave themselves all too wholeheartedly and unreservedly to the German nation,” the failure to grasp the tragedy of *Galut* and the “destruction of genuine synthesis” were blatantly obvious.⁷ This end also affected the use of the German language and led to the death of an intellectual world that had been extremely active throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the fact that German-Jewish history had come to an end, Benyoëtz’s poetry shows that something can still be done and that the way to repair it was through language. His linguistic *Zwischen* is an attempt to inhabit a language as an outsider, and, as we will see, it is still audacious precisely because it occurred after the Holocaust. In this essay, I will start by analyzing a general account of language that emerges in Benyoëtz’s work under the prism of *Sprachskepsis* by pointing out his new metaphors and his linguistic movement; secondly, I will examine how this linguistic movement shapes the symbolic landscape of his poetry and offers a model for a *diasporic philosophy of language*; finally, I will discuss his bifurcated linguistic soul,⁸ interpreted not only as a coming to terms with the end of the German-Jewish symbiosis, but also as a utopian way of repairing it.

³ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 160.

⁴ See Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” 17.

⁵ As Franz Rosenzweig wrote in his *Star of Redemption*: “The eternal people lost its own language and everywhere speaks the language of its external destinies, the language of the people with whom it perchance dwells as a guest; and when it is not claiming the right of hospitality, but lives on its own in a closed settlement, it speaks the language of the people from which, in leaving it, it received the strength to carry out this settling; it never possesses this language in its own right.” See Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 320.

⁶ Buber’s article was published in *Jüdische Weltrundschau* on March 10, 1939. The English translation is taken from Wormann, “German Jews in Israel,” 74.

⁷ Wormann, “German Jews in Israel,” 74.

⁸ The expression “bifurcated souls” is used by Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity*, 1–24.

2 An untimely *Sprachskeptiker*

I live in language, not in languages.
One of them is split into two in me,
like what was once called 'destiny.'⁹

The notion of language that emerges from Benyoëtz's poetry is not static or dogmatic; rather, it can be defined as a movement in a field of tension between different elements, such as sentences, words, syllables, and letters. From a theological perspective, language is the bridge between man, world, and God,¹⁰ and the sources of language are the same as those of salvation.¹¹ On the other hand, human beings are deeply concerned with and determined by language, since it can never deny them his *Mitspracherecht*.¹² In fact, communication and truth only happen between human beings. "The truth lies in the middle: between two people walking towards each other" [*Die Wahrheit liegt in der Mitte: zwischen zwei Menschen, die aufeinander zugehen*].¹³

Whereas language can be broadly defined as an omni-comprehensive horizon, words can be conceived as the personal contribution of the author: "The poem, reduced to its untranslatability, to the word, to mine" [*Das Gedicht, auf seine Unübersetzbarkeit zurückgeführt, aufs Wort, aufs Meins*].¹⁴ On another occasion, Benyoëtz defined language as a fortress and words as the guarantors.¹⁵ He uses many geographical metaphors to explain the difference between sentences and words: "The sentence is in the stars, the line in the river" [*Der Satz steht in den Sternen, die Zeile im Fluss*],¹⁶ or "The sentence is the mussel of the word" [*Der Satz ist die Muschel des Wortes*].¹⁷ Sometimes, the word is a window and a curtain,¹⁸ or a "waiting room for the proclamation" [*die Warte der*

⁹ In a letter to Hans-Martin Gauger from July 18, 2006, Benyoëtz writes: "Ich lebe in der Sprache, nicht in Sprachen. Die eine ist in mir in zwei gespalten, wie das, was einst 'Schicksal' geheißen hat." See Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 176.

¹⁰ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 60.

¹¹ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 1268: "Die Quellen der Sprache, die Quellen des Heils."

¹² Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 68.

¹³ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 85.

¹⁴ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 131.

¹⁵ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 73: "Die Sprache – meine Burg; die Worte – meine Bürgen." The relationship between words and power is another important issue in Benyoëtz's work, and he speaks of a "ceasefire of words" [*Waffenstillstand der Worte*]; see Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 79. On many occasions, a sentence, *ein Satz*, becomes *EinSatz*, which means 'use,' 'commitment,' but also 'action.' The sentence exercises a control of the 'wordfield' [*Wortfeld*] (Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 121). However, the word is also a reliable bridge: "There is no more reliable bridge over an abyss than a word that arose from it" [*Es gibt keine zuverlässigen Brücke über einen Abgrund als ein Wort, das ihm entstieg*] (Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 265). Benyoëtz also speaks of *Sprachialgewalt* (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 95) and writes: "Every sentence is already a declaration of power" [*Jeder Spruch ist schon ein Machtanspruch*] (Benyoëtz, *Vielleicht – Vielschwer*, 88).

¹⁶ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2686.

¹⁷ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2703.

¹⁸ Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 30. Even in *Fraglicht*, Benyoëtz writes: "In the sentence, the words come to sit at the window" [*Im Satz kommen die Wörter am Fenster zu sitzen*] (Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2386).

Verkündigung], while the sentence is a “boat for the message” [*das Boot der Botschaft*].¹⁹ While children are trapped in words where poetry arises, the sentence is already a fact with its own rationality: “A sentence makes you think, a word makes you write poetry” [*Ein Satz gibt zu denken, ein Wort gibt zu dichten*].²⁰

There is a constant wandering in language,²¹ which is *energeia*, not *ergon*; dynamism, not a fixed entity. He writes that “we walk on the silver/syllable lines” [*wir wandeln auf dem Silberstreifen*].²² However, there is also a pause in language, which is *Aufenthaltswo*te.²³ The movement inside language also affects the fixity of writing: “What is written always shows itself differently. The letters are a guarantee of the changing face of the words” [*Was geschrieben steht, zeigt sich immer anders. Die Buchstaben bürgen für das sich wandelnde Antlitz der Worte*],²⁴ while the vowels are “language’s dancing shoes” [*die Tanzschuhe der Sprache*].²⁵

This movement inside language prevents us from catching, grasping, and defining it in its integrity; in fact, he writes: “There can be no talk of language” [*Von der Sprache kann nicht die Rede sein*].²⁶ Moreover, he condemns the presumption that one may dominate language as if it were an object or an instrument: “Do not think you can control language, but you can determine it if you do not silence anything” [*Glaube nicht, die Sprache beherrschen zu können, doch kannst du sie bestimmen, wenn du nichts verstummst*].²⁷ Overcoming language is indeed an illusion; it is impossible to overcome the linguistic trap: “A thought that seems to rupture the sentence is too bold” [*Ein Gedanke, der den Satz zu sprengen scheint, ist zu fett*].²⁸

The impossible search for the right name is also a *topos* of Benyoëtz’s poetry.²⁹ In accordance with the movement of language, the words are always aligned with the author’s purpose: “The word is looking for the sentence and is aligned with its origin and my destination” [*Das Wort sucht den Satz und ist mit seinem Ursprung und meinem*

¹⁹ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 199. As is so often the case in Benyoëtz’s writings, where the semantic and phonetic elements are embedded, it is difficult to translate the interweaving of these elements into other languages. Here, *Boot* meaning “boat” or “ship” is assonant with *Botschaft* meaning “message,” but also “proclamation” and “embassy.”

²⁰ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 199.

²¹ This movement in his works is perfectly explained by a letter from Claudia Welz from November 11, 2001, where she writes that “you don’t wander from A to B and then arrive at your destination, but you have a crystal in your hand, as it were, which you can look at from different sides, each side on its own, something round with edges, transparent only until you realize that the deepest secret cannot be seen through” [*Man wandert nicht von A nach B und ist dann am Ziel, sondern hat gleichsam ein Kristall in der Hand, das man von verschiedenen Seiten betrachten kann, jede Seite für sich, etwas Rundes mit Kanten, durchsichtig nur so weit, bis man merkt, dass das tiefste Geheimnis nicht zu durchschauen ist*] (Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 239).

²² Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 93.

²³ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 94.

²⁴ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 74.

²⁵ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 639.

²⁶ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 64.

²⁷ Benyoëtz, *Gottik. Eine Lesung*, 182.

²⁸ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 55.

²⁹ See Mieder, “Des Spruches letzter Schluss ist der Widerspruch”; Gauger, “Elazar Benyoëtz – der Wortspieler.”

Ziel unterwegs].³⁰ In a short story, he explains this search for the words that language is always seeking; suddenly, there is a *Silbengestöber*,³¹ a flurry of syllables, but also a syllable storm, and the poet loses his words on the way. In some passages, Benyoëtz underlines the illusory values of language – namely, the impossibility of it grasping the truth and maintaining silence, which is not the limit of language, but rather a constitutive element of each word: “Silence is not the boundary of language, it is its entrance and exit. Every word has its own silence, against which it rises up” [*Schweigen ist nicht die Grenze der Sprache, es ist ihr Ein- und Ausgang. Jedes Wort hat sein eigenes Schweigen, an dem es sich aufrichtet*].³²

Benyoëtz’s work is also his engagement with post-Holocaust Jewish self-perception in both Israel and Germany, in both Hebrew and German. It is not just an elaboration of this trauma, but also a coming to terms with a complex legacy that has psychological³³ and political consequences. The complex cohabitation of these two languages is an issue that takes up a great deal of space in Benyoëtz’s writings.³⁴ He can play with German by enjoying the fact that he is not at home: “I can write books that are completely German because I am at home in Hebrew and have no pretensions” [*Ich kann Bücher schreiben, die ganz deutsche sind, weil ich im Hebräischen zu Hause bin und keine Ansprüche habe*].³⁵ His operation is on the margins of the German language as it rejects all claims of possession. He remains a linguistic outsider: “As long as the German language does not dominate me, I can master it; as long as it only ties me up, my thoughts are in free motion; if it becomes too much of a prison for me, breaking out would be all I could strive for” [*Solange mich die deutsche Sprache nicht beherrscht, kann ich sie meistern; solange sie mich nur fesselt, sind meine Gedanken in freier Bewegung; wird sie mir zu Gefängnis, wäre Ausbrechen*

³⁰ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 163.

³¹ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 122.

³² Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 1086.

³³ Benyoëtz’s dream of two languages also plays a pivotal role in his double imaginary: “A dream. I saw myself laid out between two languages. Both were at exactly the same distance from me and were wailing for me. Neither moved and neither dared to approach me. Only one seemed to be crying. The dream repeated itself. I was no longer a spectator; I was the only one laid out and allowed to open my eyes and look at the wailing ones. I was horrified when I recognized in the figure of the Germans the figure of the Straßburger ‘synagogue’ that I loved so much” [*Ein Traum. Ich sah mich zwischen zwei Sprachen aufgebahrt. Beide hielten sich auf genau dem gleichen Abstand von mir und klagten um mich. Keine rührte sich dabei und kein wagte, sich mir zu nähern. Nur die eine schien zu weinen. Der Traum wiederholte sich. Ich war nicht mehr auch Zuschauer, war nur der Aufgebahrte und durfte selbst die Augen aufschlagen und nach den Klagenden schauen. Ich war entsetzt, als ich in der Gestalt der Deutschen die Figur der von mir über alles geliebten Straßburger ‘Synagoge’ erkannte*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 162).

³⁴ See Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 121: “The Hebrew in me summons up all zeal to refute what is thought through me in German, while my German proves steadfast enough to fix the zealous Hebrew and contradict him with an almost Yiddish suppleness. These contradictions, or more precisely self-contradictions, should constitute my work in German” [*Der Hebräer in mir bringt allen Eifer auf, das durch mich deutsch Gedachte zu widerlegen, während mein Deutsch sich standhaft genug erweist, den eifernden Hebräer zu fixieren und ihm mit einer fast jiddischen Geschmeidigkeit zu widersprechen. Diese Widersprüche, oder genauer Selbstwidersprechungen, sollen mein Werk im Deutschen ausmachen*].

³⁵ Benyoëtz, *Lebtage und Leseabend*, 60.

alles, wonach ich trachten könnten].³⁶ This kind of resistance, which also means freedom beyond grammars, is central in Benyoëtz's aphoristic writing.

This stretching of grammar to its limits and the *spielerische*, sometimes hermetic word-building show a specific extension of Benyoëtz's linguistic capacity and also a particular approach to the German language that characterizes a non-native German speaker. His pathos of distance allows him to play with the German language with surprising freedom and a desecrating and celebrating courage. His original creativity touches the slippery slope of making a mistake and paves the way for new metaphors.³⁷

Benyoëtz's account of language, his linguistic practice, the tension between different elements, and the stretching of the German language to its limits situate him in the context of the so-called *Sprachkrise* or *Sprachskepsis*. This can be broadly defined as a complex phenomenon of language critique that was diffused in philosophical and literary debate among poets and intellectuals before World War I. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many writers, poets, and thinkers were dealing with the crisis of an entire set of values, with the failure of the teleological concept of history, with the loss of structure and order, and with a rejection of traditions, which had its starting point in Nietzsche's philosophy. This collapse of a general worldview led to a radical skepticism regarding language's ability to grasp reality and disclose the truth. However, this *Sprachkrise* was not a mere refusal of language *tout court*, but rather a questioning of some uses of language through a permanent linguistic critique that became the task of philosophy itself. Many aspects were involved, such as the role of silence, the theoretical conjunction between community and linguistic practice, the search for a remedy against philosophical illness, which is also a strong critique of philosophical essentialism, and the need for a redefinition of philosophy as a *Lebensform*.³⁸

This leap into the past and the comparison between Benyoëtz and the *Sprachskeptikern* should not be an issue, since Benyoëtz himself admits his untimely affinity with fin-de-siècle Germany.³⁹ In fact, it was not by chance that he emphasized his fascination with

³⁶ Benyoëtz, *Filigranit*, 119.

³⁷ An important part of Benyoëtz's creativity is his neologisms, such as *Ichmandu*, *Fraglicht*, *Nurnoch*, *Hörsicht*, *Gegenwarten*, *Sich verjansseitigen*, *Augenblicklicht*, *Irrlicht einer Sternstunde*, *Umarmut*, *Poesinn*, *Vollstellbar*, *Leeraus/Leerein*, *Sprachgewühl*, *Vielleicht/Vielschwer*, and *Toleranzig*.

³⁸ On this topic, see Mittermüller, *Sprachskepsis und Poetologie*; Pisano, "Misunderstanding Metaphors."

³⁹ See Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 166: "Once again, I cannot comment on German problems, either intellectually or poetically. Literarily, however, I am still to some extent a contemporary of the last poets of the Weimar Republic" [*Ich kann, noch einmal, zu deutschen Problemen nicht Stellung nehmen; es sei den gedanklich oder dichterisch. Literarisch bin ich allerdings noch einigermaßen Zeitgenosse der letzten Dichter der Weimarer Republik*]. It is worth noting that Benyoëtz emphasizes this possibility of being – in German and not in Hebrew – "contemporary to many times" [*Zeitgenosse vieler Zeit*]. See his letter to Burkhard Talebitari from December 2013 (Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 26), or his letter to Friedemann Spicker from November 2004, where he writes: "After all, I have lived more in literature than in my time" [*Ich lebte ja mehr in der Literatur als in meiner Zeit*] (Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 48).

Karl Kraus, Fritz Mauthner, and Gustav Landauer.⁴⁰ Mauthner (1849–1923), a philosopher who devoted most of his works to radically calling into question the epistemological value of language, was the *Sprachskeptiker* par excellence. Although for many years he remained a largely forgotten figure, his critique of language offers one of the most radical linguistic forms of skepticism in the history of philosophy. Mauthner’s linguistic skepticism is based on the assumption that there is an immeasurable gap between reality as a flux in incessant change and the rigidity and immobility of language, which cannot grasp this process and gives an improper experience of the world. However, language is impossible to avoid as it is the only medium for our thought, and philosophy is an exercise in stretching the limits of human language. Like Benyöetz, Mauthner believed that language is impossible to define and that it cannot be restricted within political or geographical boundaries, since it exists in the social and living interaction between human beings.

Landauer (1870–1919) was a German-Jewish anarchist who was brutally murdered in the Bavarian Republic and who connected Mauthner’s linguistic skepticism with an anarchist concept of community.⁴¹ His communitarian project required an anarchic grammar in order to undo and dismantle the old one. Therefore, his political engagement led Landauer one step further away from Mauthner’s approach: whereas his friend sought to describe the catastrophe of language, Landauer looked for new, alternative

⁴⁰ In *Fraglicht*, Benyöetz admits his affinity with Mauthner’s philosophy, with which he became acquainted through Wilhelm von Scholz, who gave Mauthner’s eulogy and later became a Nazi (Benyöetz, *Fraglicht*, 1772). In a letter to Hania Fodorowicz (October 2013), he stated that he had consulted Mauthner’s estate. He also mentions Mauthner’s audacity as a model for the art of quoting (letter to Franziska, November 8, 1988, in Benyöetz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 225). After a personal exchange with Benyöetz, whom – thanks to the mediation of Claudia Welz – I had the honor of contacting in the process of revising this article, he confirmed to me the pivotal role that Fritz Mauthner and Gustav Landauer, whom he views as “certainly holy names” [*gewiss heilige Namen*], played in his poetry. In addition, he told me that he considers the occasion on which he discovered Mauthner’s *Nachlass* as a “solemn day” [*feierlicher Tag*].

⁴¹ In a letter to Edith Silbermann from August 10, 1991, Benyöetz recalls the start of his friendship with Clara von Bodman. He admits that he was acquainted with the work of her dead husband, the poet and writer Emanuel von Bodman, who was a friend of Fritz Mauthner and Gustav Landauer (Benyöetz, *Fraglicht*, 1776). What interested Benyöetz most was von Bodman’s correspondence with Gustav Landauer (Benyöetz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 36). There is a famous letter that Landauer wrote to von Bodman in 1912 in which he clearly defines what he means by ‘nation’: “The nation is precisely such an equality of individuals, such a feeling and such a reality, which in a free spirit leads to unity and union. All nations are anarchic; i.e., without coercion; the ideas of nation and coercion are completely incompatible. The nation is the best, because it is the only real example in public life of what I call spirit” (letter to Emanuel von Bodman, October 18, 1912, in Landauer, *Sein Lebensgang in Briefen*, 2:424). Landauer had a positive conception of the nation as the opposite of the state: while the former is a real bond between people, the latter is a trap and a coercive abstraction. The Jews are a people of transcendence who can show unity in dispersion beyond a geographical demarcation, and they are a nation based on their common diasporic historical heritage, a temporal legacy rather than a spatial one. Concerning Landauer’s brutal death, Benyöetz quotes a passage by Hans Blüher, famous for his antisemitic and antifeminist positions, who admitted that “Germany’s debt account is burdened with the murder of Gustav Landauer. This act will be more difficult to bear than the Versailles Peace Treaty” [*Auf Deutschlands Schuldkonto lastet die Ermordung Gustav Landauers. An dieser Tat wird es schwerer zu tragen haben als am Versailler Friedensvertrag*] (Benyöetz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 26).

metaphors.⁴² This search for other metaphors coincides with the philosophical need to overcome the limits of our language in order to express something new. The anarchist calls for a suspension of linguistic designation, which is the reificatory process of meaning based on vision. In a surprising way, Landauer separates linguistic meaning from voice, the word from the sound heard, space from time. As for his friend Mauthner, for Landauer meaning is also like a Medusa that reifies a particular sound as soon as a word is uttered. However, he claims that it is possible to search for another way of dealing with language that takes into account the transition from space to time. This means overcoming a single, established form of expression in favor of a multitude of possible forms such as music and poetry. Therefore, according to Landauer, this different language had to be similar to primordial words: poetry that had a playful relationship with reality. For Landauer, poetry meant “*dictare*, to capture and dictate what has been lived as it has just turned into what has been said, and to separate it from the progress of life with what has been said: its crystallization, its elevation to a work of art” [*dictare, das Gelebte, wie es gerade zum Gesagten geriet, festhalten und diktieren, mit dem Sagen aus dem Fortgang des Lebens aufschneiden, die Kristallisation, die Erhebung zum Werk*].⁴³ Liberation from a narrow idea of language could only occur through poetry and metaphor. This gesture has played a pivotal political role in Landauer’s thought since the *terra abscondita* of anarchism, and thus the path to a new community passes through a new way of conceiving language.

I would say that Benyoët’s prose, with its anarchic and poetic playing with language, is a fulfillment of what Landauer imagined for poets. For Benyoët, metaphors are the way in which he can talk about language in itself without defining it. This impossibility of grasping the linguistic fundament can also be seen through a topologic prism of Benyoët’s wandering poetry; namely, in the dialectic between roots and uprootedness and in its utopian implications. As for Landauer, Benyoët’s playful use of language plays a highly political role, as we will see in the last part of this essay. In the next paragraph, I would like to analyze the anarchic landscape of Benyoët’s poetry and the concrete use of his new metaphors, which problematize a naïve concept of language and belonging.

3 Poetic landscape and diasporic topology

I never leave the ground and the sky of poetry,
I don’t say land, I don’t see land.⁴⁴

In a letter from September 3, 1987, Eginhard Hora, a lector at Hanser Verlag, insisted on the necessity of visual thinking in Benyoët’s book, conceived as the “landscape of his thinking, his writing, his existence by marking points such as Judaism, antisemitism, belief, thought, language, and love.”⁴⁵ It is in this landscape that his powerful expression

⁴² For Landauer’s concept of metaphor and poetry, see Pisano, “The Desert and the Garden.”

⁴³ Landauer, “Eine Ansprache an die Dichter,” 16.

⁴⁴ Letter to Werner Helmich from November 8, 2011, in Benyoët, *Beziehungsweisen*, 73.

⁴⁵ Benyoët, *Beziehungsweisen*, 221.

properly manifests itself. Benyoëtz's account of space is a poetic and mnemonic one where the coordinates of nearness and distance are overturned. In *Gottik*, he writes: "Far be from me what is near/obvious" [*Fern sei mir das Naheliegende*],⁴⁶ also playing with the polysemy of *Naheliegend* to mean both what is near and also what is obvious. This spatial and geographical tendency in his poetry, far from having a descriptive function, plays an important role in his oscillation between divine and human, between fixity and migration.

While the notion of *Heimatlosigkeit* also has a kind of theological afflatus in Benyoëtz's works, as he stated in his "Credo,"⁴⁷ there is also a sense of unity in being in exile, whose utopian fatherland is *Galutopol*, which is the paradoxical polis of Galut, the city of exile. As a reply to Seneca's motto "*musquam est qui ubique est*," according to which "he is nowhere who is everywhere," Benyoëtz defends the possibility of finding the homeland in every land: "It is only my residence that is denied, not my fatherland. I find it in every country. There is no banishment, only a second homeland" [*Da wird nur mein Aufenthalt, nicht aber mein Vaterland verwehrt. Ich finde es in jedem Land. Es gibt keine Verbannung, nur eine zweite Heimat*].⁴⁸

There is also another form of wandering in Benyoëtz's writing, which is that of the poet, of his words and also his thoughts.⁴⁹ Poetry is, in fact, connected to wandering and the word is his precarious destination: "Wherever my journey goes, the word is my arrival. I give you my word: your groundwater in times of drought" [*Wohin meine Reise auch geht, das Wort ist meine Ankunft. Ich gebe dir mein Wort: Dein Grundwasser in Zeiten der Dürre*].⁵⁰

The wandering poet can be defined as somebody who lives elsewhere, but "only wake[s] up here" [*Ich lebe woanders, erwache nur hier*].⁵¹ This approach as a guest and not as the owner of the earth sheds light on another way of inhabiting the earth. This is also evident in Benyoëtz's conception of a mother-tongue that is not forced into the trap of an earthy *Heimat*, but is rather more spiritual and overcomes borders. In fact, Benyoëtz distinguishes between *Heimatsprache* and *Muttersprache*; the first is that of a small village, which is cramped in the tiny streets, while the second is a diasporic language that wanders with kith and kin.⁵² However, where is this wandering heading? In Benyoëtz's works,

⁴⁶ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 33.

⁴⁷ Benyoëtz, *Sahadutha*, 22: "Nowhere at home; everywhere in God's hand" [*Nirgends zu Hause; allerwegs in Gottes Hand*].

⁴⁸ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 249.

⁴⁹ There is a fascinating passage concerning the exile of words: "Words also go into exile, it is not possible to banish them" [*Auch Wörter gehen ins Exil, vertreiben kann man sie nicht*] (Benyoëtz, *Lebtag und Leseabend*, 47). His thoughts also wander: "My thoughts are better equipped for wandering than I am" [*Meine Gedanken sind zum Wandern besser gerüstet als ich*] (Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 231).

⁵⁰ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 137.

⁵¹ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 273. He also repeats this sentence in *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*: "I live somewhere else, only waking up here, dreamless because rooted in the dream" [*Ich lebe woanders, erwache nur hier, traumlos, weil im Traum verwurzelt*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 98).

⁵² Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 250: "Heimatsprachen bleiben mit der Kirche im Dorf, Muttersprache wandern aus mit Kind und Kegel."

there is a metaphorical topology that withdraws from and deconstructs nature from geographical and geopolitical notions by restoring a poetical meaning to it.

Benyoëtz's conception of the sea, considered as an infinite space in which he has to catch words, is particularly fascinating. He writes: "*Ich lausche dem Wort sein Meer ab, noch ehe es vermuschelt.*"⁵³ The meaning of this hermetic verse is that the poet disentangles the word from the sea before it becomes a shell; the sea represents the fluidity of the water and language, before it takes on a stable form, even that of the shell. This fluidity is contrasted with the fixity of the stone: if language is the sea, names are compared with the rocks, while works are mountains⁵⁴ and the truth is carved out of words and stone,⁵⁵ as Magritte's painting *L'art de la conversation* precisely shows.

The sea has as its pendant the desert, which could symbolically be seen as a sea: *Die Wüste vermeert*.⁵⁶ In Benyoëtz's writing, the desert is always the space of the call [*Ruf*].⁵⁷ It represents a precarious stability which is not *standfest* [steady], but rather *sandfest* [stable as the sand]. In the infinity of the desert, letters are buried in the sand, even though they were previously stars,⁵⁸ which enlighten Benyoëtz's poems. The stars are connected to the original *Sehnsucht*: "*Sehnsucht of the beginning, written in the stars, in the book of books*" [*Sehnsucht des Anfangs in den Sternen, im Buch der Bücher geschrieben*].⁵⁹ They have a prophetic value and a mysterious reserve that contains what has not yet been written: "What is written in the stars is in my hand, yet not written" [*Was in den Sternen steht, das steht in meiner Hand, doch nicht geschrieben*].⁶⁰ Stars, as the first light in the sky, are also the first orientation for the wanderer. It is not by chance that, quoting Goethe, Abraham is defined as the "man of the stars" [*Herr der Sterne*],⁶¹ who started to wander by following the sky when God told him to count the stars.

For this reason, Benyoëtz considered the sky to be an abysmal inverted ground, the ground of the groundless [*Festland der Bodenlosen*] and as "the tolerability of the earth" [*Himmel – die Erträglichkeit der Erde*].⁶² In another passage, he defines belief as the experience of God as the nearest and the farthest; if the fragility of water and sand is where belief needs to be built, the sky is its foundation: "Faith is built on sand and water, the sky is the ground" [*Der Glaube baut auf Sand und Wasser, der Himmel ist der Grund*].⁶³

⁵³ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 34.

⁵⁴ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 235.

⁵⁵ See Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 337: "Wahrheit wird aus dem Wort, wie aus dem Stein gehauen."

⁵⁶ Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 125. For instance, in *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, he again writes the same sentence, but in a reflexive form: "Es vermeert sich die Wüste" (Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 131).

⁵⁷ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 39.

⁵⁸ Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 125.

⁵⁹ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 62. This link between stars and *Sehnsucht* is also to be founded in Susman's thought. See Susman, "Sterne."

⁶⁰ Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 108.

⁶¹ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 13.

⁶² Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 275.

⁶³ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 121.

However, the sky – even if it represents a “stable ground” [*fester Boden*]⁶⁴ – is not a place where one can find the divine. In fact, God is essentially to be found in words, not in the sky, nor on the earth.⁶⁵ “God is in the sky, writing his book there: do you want to go to heaven? No, I want to go to the book” [*Gott ist im Himmel und schreibt dort sein Buch: willst du in den Himmel? Nein, ich will in das Buch*].⁶⁶ In another passage, Benyoëtz connects the scattered presence of God in the sky, earth, and books with the quotability of human beings. This idea of quotation has a theological and messianic foundation, since it is not just a kind of resurrection, but also an inversion of time that has nothing to do with repetition.⁶⁷ “He is in heaven, is on earth, is to be sought in ancient books. We have to fulfil what is written in order to become quotable ourselves” [*Er ist im Himmel, ist auf Erden, gesucht wird er in alten Büchern. Wir haben zu erfüllen, was geschrieben steht, um selbst zitierbar zu werden*].⁶⁸ In the wake of these celestial metaphors, Benyoëtz defines language as his “heavenly umbilical cord” [*die Sprache – meine himmlische Nabelschnur*],⁶⁹ in order to show the physical link, but also the most abstract and highest connection to God. In the briefest possible way, Benyoëtz offered one of the most beautiful definitions of the ambiguity of language, as mechanism and spirit.

Another semantic field is that of the garden, including linguistic roots and trees. For instance, Benyoëtz writes *Linguabaum, Babel(l)laub*,⁷⁰ which means “language tree, Babel foliage” and is one of his sharpest definitions connecting language, nature, and religion. Not only is language compared to a garden,⁷¹ but there is also a process by which human

⁶⁴ Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 137.

⁶⁵ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 1929.

⁶⁶ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 423.

⁶⁷ The idea of quotation in Benyoëtz’s works has a theological foundation, since he writes that “God is also substantiated with quotations” [*Auch Gott ist nur mit Zitaten zu belegen*] (Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 292). Quotation is a kind of resurrection, a call to the afterlife, “ins Nachleben rufen” (Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 176), but it is not a repetition: “I wouldn’t repeat myself, I like to quote myself” [*Würde ich mich nicht wiederholen, ich zitiere mich gern*] (Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 16). Citability has also the power of giving wings: “Zitierbarkeit beflügelt” (Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 122). The ash, the rest of the human being’s domicile, is also a form of quotation according to him (Benyoëtz, *Nadelind*, 145). In addition, there is also a secret of quotation: “Quotation: the visage of the faceless” [*Zitat – das Anlitz des Gesichtslosen*] (Benyoëtz, *Lebtage und Leseabend*, 59). His secret and messianic use of quotation recalls Walter Benjamin, whose third thesis states that “only for the redeemed humanity is the past quotable in every moment of its moment.” See Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 389.

⁶⁸ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 54.

⁶⁹ Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 284.

⁷⁰ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 91.

⁷¹ In *Fraglicht*, Benyoëtz writes: “Language lies in the shadow of a word; the shadow embraces the whole tree, inconceivably comprehensible: language foliage” [*Die Sprache ruht im Schatten eines Worts; der Schatten fasst den ganzen Baum zusammen, unfassbar begreiflich: Sprachlaub*] (Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2516–17). This garden motif is also to be founded in Rose Ausländer’s poetry. For instance, in her poem entitled “Sprache I,” she writes: “It is treetop, stem and foliage / From the root springs the sound / Swells the syllables breathless / Air-living, dream-abstract” [*Sie ist Wipfel, Stamm und Laub / Aus der Wurzel quillt der Laut / Quillt die Silbe atemnackt / luftebendig, traumabstrakt*]. She also recalls the same movement in language: “we plant words / in the air field / move / from word to word” [*Wir pflanzen Wörter / im Luftfeld / gehen / von Wort zu Wort*] (Ausländer, *Wir wohnen in Babylon*, 133). The poetess “ohne Visum” emphasizes her *Heimatlosigkeit*: “I am

beings metamorphize into trees, as seen from the phrase “the human being has her roots in the dream – grows into reality, branches out in memory” [*der Mensch wurzelt im Traum – wächst in die Wirklichkeit, verästelt sich in der Erinnerung*].⁷² He interprets his aphoristic work as a radical gesture of uprooting a word from its context.⁷³ Even if words are taking root, he needs to catch them in order to build a sentence: “I cast a net of words and pull my sentences out onto land” [*Ich werfe ein Netz aus Worten aus und ziehe meine Sätze aus Land*].⁷⁴ However, Benyoëtz’s linguistic creativity also means working with word roots. In fact, in a letter to Claire von Bodman, he underlines how Germany was his studio in which he worked on new word roots: “In Germany, in the grey, in the shadows, completely unmolested, I could now develop my thinking from a new word root and gradually rearing myself up between oak and cedar” [*In Deutschland, im Grauen, im Schatten, ganz unbehelligt, konnte ich nun mein Denken aus einer neuen Wortwurzel entwickeln und allmählich mich selbst zwischen Eiche und Zeder aufbäumen*].⁷⁵ It is worth noting the polysemy of the verb (*sich*) *aufbäumen* in this sentence, which has at least two different meanings. The first refers to a posture, namely, to rise upward like a tree, as might be the case with a snake or a horse; the second is more metaphorical, making this rearing an act of opposition, rebellion, and resistance. The natural gesture of imitating a tree in its firm repose has the political meaning of a calm and deliberate revolt.

Shadows also play an important role in Benyoëtz’s writings, since they are mostly associated with the palm tree, which also assumes a theological relevance due to its assonance with ‘Psalm’: “In the light of the Torah and in the shadow of many Psalms” [*Im Licht der Thora und im Schatten vieler Psalmen*].⁷⁶ His praise for the palm as a metaphor

King Nobody / carry my No Man’s Land / in my pocket” [*Ich bin König Niemand / trage mein Niemandsland / in der Tasche*] (Ausländer, *Wir wohnen in Babylon*, 155).

⁷² Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 53.

⁷³ See Benyoëtz, *Die Zukunft sitzt uns im Nacken*, 153: “Aphorismus – das Ausreißen des Wortes aus seinem Zusammenhang.”

⁷⁴ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 257.

⁷⁵ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 124.

⁷⁶ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 224. In his writings, there is a praise of the Psalms that can adapt to each person’s mouth [“Psalmen nehmen die Form jedes Mundes an”]. Whereas the Torah represents a Judaism from above, from Sinai, the Psalms are a Judaism from below, “with the view up to the mountains” [*mit dem Blick zu den Bergen hinauf*] (Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 222–23). This Judaism from below helped the Jews to bear the Torah over the centuries. Moses and David represent two different ideas of Judaism: the first is more elitarian, while the second is more democratic, since everybody can understand the Psalms (Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 223–24). It is worth noting that the comparison between palms and the German forest was also very popular among the early Zionist movement. For instance, as George Mosse reported, Moses Calvary, one of the leaders of the Blau Weiss Jewish Youth movement who left Germany for Palestine, acknowledged that his nationalistic dreams blossomed “under pine trees and not under palms” in order to stress his familiarity with the German landscape and his deep connection with German culture. See Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology*, 183. On the other hand, this reference to the tree in Benyoëtz’s writings – as Claudia Welz has correctly suggested – was also inspired by Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s *Die Judenbuche* (1842), which was a great inspiration to him, as he confirmed in the exchange we had in the process of revising this article.

for a restorative oasis can be shown in the wonderful words of Gustav Landauer, who in a letter quoted by Benyoëtz⁷⁷ compared Margarete Susman to a palm:

I would like to be able to compare you to a palm tree, and by that I mean: in your desire for height and depth, in your intercourse with the juices of the earth, the high air and the light, you are a thoroughly sublime, heroic nature. [*Ich möchte Sie einer Palme vergleichen dürfen und meine damit: in Ihrem nach der Höhe und Tiefe Begehren, in Ihrem Verkehr mit den Säften der Erde, der hohen Luft und dem Licht sind Sie eine durchaus erhabene, heroische Natur*].⁷⁸

As an opposite scenario to that of the palm in the southern sun, there is the German forest. In a wonderful passage from a letter to Benyoëtz from August 14, 1990, Conrad Wiedemann states: “What do we do now with the mighty, beautiful tree (beech) in the German forest, which belongs to the Jews and is unfellable; but also unplantable, because it is so old and death dwells in it?” [*Was machen wir jetzt mit dem gewaltigen, schönen Baum (Buche) im deutschen Wald, der den Juden gehört und unumhaubar ist; aber auch unverpflanzbar, weil er so alt ist und der Tod in ihm wohnt?*].⁷⁹ As a warning for the coming generation, Wiedemann raises a pivotal question: “Who can say when and to whom that a language is one’s own?” [*Wer kann wann und wem sagen, eine Sprache sei die seine?*].⁸⁰ The core question of a *diasporic philosophy of language* is a naïve and dangerous belonging as well as the coincidence of language, nation-state, and territory. It can be defined not only as a reflection on language under diasporic conditions or in diasporic communities, but also as the radical calling into question of a unique linguistic autochthony. Benyoëtz expressed a wonderful aphorism that perfectly shows how language can be a dwelling place and the path of wandering, the closest and the most distant, home and exile: “Language is the poet’s homeland, but at the same time also the path on which he searches for his homeland” [*Die Sprache ist die Heimat des Dichters, aber zugleich auch der Weg, auf dem er nach seiner Heimat sucht*].⁸¹ The last part of this article will consist of a concrete analysis of this oscillation.

⁷⁷ Benyoëtz dreamt that Gustav Landauer was Margarete Susman’s lover, and specified that this dream was his first “German-Jewish dream” (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 117).

⁷⁸ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 117. It should be pointed out that in the collection of Landauer’s letters edited by Martin Buber and published posthumously in 1929, Susman also compares her friend to a “mighty tree” [*mächtiger Baum*]. Landauer’s restful firmness is also – according to Susman – his secret: “He still possessed the roots in a world [...]. The Spirit was the soil of this great tree, from which it drew all the strength for its work and life, from which it unfolded its glorious, broad-shadowed crown over the life at its feet.” See Susman, *Gustav Landauers Briefe*, 194–95.

⁷⁹ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 227.

⁸⁰ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 227.

⁸¹ Benyoëtz, *Sahadutha*, 32.

4 A bifurcated linguistic soul

My path as an Israeli and a Jew into German
is not only my life's path,
it is also the outcry of my life.⁸²

Benyoëtz's works do not deal with the German-Jewish legacy in an obvious way. On the one hand, he emphasizes the importance of Jews in German culture, especially for the Bible, whose translation made the German language accessible to them;⁸³ on the other, he tends to consider the history of German Jews to be predominantly German, even if he defined himself as "an old Jew in his new homeland" [*ein alter Jude in seiner neuen Heimat*]⁸⁴ who had lost access to the core of German history. It is not by chance that he shared Margarete Susman's approach, according to which the Jews who live in *Feindesland*, the enemy's land, bring with them the responsibility for human beings in general.⁸⁵ In a superb passage quoted by Benyoëtz, Susman defines the German Jews as the "Don Quixote of German reality: they saw nothing, they loved and dreamt" [*die deutsche Juden waren recht eigentlich der Don Quichotte der deutschen Wirklichkeit: sie sahen nicht, sondern sie liebten und träumten*].⁸⁶ Her reflection helped Benyoëtz to explore the abyss of German history in the awareness that the murdered Jews were also German.⁸⁷

Benyoëtz does not explore the complex bond of German Judaism through a definition, but rather does so through language itself: "To be the quintessence of what has ever been thought of as Jewish in German, yet I cannot say what is Jewish about me; only the German language would be authorized to give information about it" [*Die Quintessenz dessen zu sein, was je im Deutschen jüdisch gedacht wurde, dennoch kann ich nicht sagen, was*

⁸² This is a letter to Jürgen Stenzel from November 19, 2007. Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 17: "Mein Weg als Israeli und Jude ins Deutsche ist nicht nur mein Lebensweg, ist auch der Schrei meines Lebens."

⁸³ He connects the history of the Jews to the legacy of the Bible: "Die Welt ohne Juden wäre die Welt ohne Bibel" (Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 188). For instance, he quotes a passage by Ludwig Speidel, where he writes: "The Jews gave us a God, they put a book in our hands, 'the book' par excellence, from which, through a strange chain of circumstances, we learned German" [*Die Juden haben uns einen Gott geschenkt, sie haben uns ein Buch in die Hände gedrückt, 'das Buch' schlechterwegs, aus dem wir durch eine merkwürdige Verkettung der Umstände deutsch lernten*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 75).

⁸⁴ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 166.

⁸⁵ For the relevance of Susman in Benyoëtz's work, see the excellent article by Welz, "Elazar Benyoëtz, Margarete Susman und das Hiobproblem."

⁸⁶ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 120.

⁸⁷ The most challenging question that Susman asked was to what extent the Jews were part of the same German essence: "Didn't we, the German Jews, share in this spirit, this nature? [...] Do we not speak its language? Did we not receive everything we know and are in German? Did we not call ourselves and were we not Germans? [...] Our judgment would not be able to reach this guilt; our forgiveness would be self-conceit and disloyalty. Forgiveness is that of which judgment is; ours is the boundless, inextinguishable faithfulness" [*Hatten den nicht, wir, die deutschen Juden, an diesem Geist, diesem Wesen teil? [...] Sprechen wir nicht seine Sprache? Haben wir nicht alles, was wir wissen und selber sind, in deutscher Sprache empfangen? Nannten wir uns nicht und waren wir nicht Deutsche? [...] Unser Gericht vermöchte diese Schuld nicht zu erreichen; unsere Vergebung wäre Selbstüberhebung und Untreue. Die Vergebung ist dessen, dessen das Gericht ist; unser ist die grenzenlosen, unauslöschlichen Treueste*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 176–77).

jüdisch an mir sei; einzig die deutsche Sprache wäre befugt, darüber Auskunft zu geben].⁸⁸ In fact, German Judaism was not only a culture, but this hybrid tradition was also hidden in the German language itself, which was enriched by the Jews who spoke it. According to Benyoëtz, the proud awareness of the splendor of German culture was also largely fed by Jewish sources, which Germany had to renounce.⁸⁹ While before the advent of the Nazis, it was perfectly possible to speak German or to think in a German-Jewish way,⁹⁰ after Auschwitz, this was no longer possible:

Until 1933, it was possible to think Jewishly in Germany and in German. German was once Jewishly viable; one not only thought it through, one even believed one could think oneself out in it. The German into which one could think one's Jewishness no longer exists. [*Bis 1933 war es möglich, in Deutschland und im Deutschen jüdisch zu denken. Deutsch war einmal jüdisch tragfähig; man durchdachte es nicht nur, man glaubte sogar, sich selbst darin ausdenken zu können. Das Deutsch, in das man sein Judentum hinendenken konnte, gibt es nicht mehr.*]⁹¹

For centuries, the German language had been Lorelei, the siren of German mythology who had seduced the Jews. “A Jew entering into German did not think he would remain misunderstood. He was already speaking (again) to Jews, while Mendelssohn could not yet speak to them” [*Der ins Deutsche eingehende Jude dachte nicht, er könnte unverstanden bleiben. Er sprach schon (wieder) zu Juden, während Mendelssohn zu ihnen noch nicht sprechen konnte*].⁹² Now Benyoëtz, a Jew after Auschwitz, in Jerusalem, had to go back⁹³ to Mendelssohn or Rosenzweig,⁹⁴ who translated the Hebrew Bible into German and

⁸⁸ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 253.

⁸⁹ See Benyoëtz, *Filigranit*, 116: “Aus jüdischen Quellen gespeist. Die Quellen mußte sie einbüßen.”

⁹⁰ This is also connected to his idea of history, which far from being a praise of progress, is a “walk over dead bodies [...] History is the time that walks over dead bodies” [*über Leichen gehen [...] Geschichte – die Zeit, die über Leichen geht*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 71). In the same book, with a wonderful neologism, Benyoëtz speaks of *Leichenwörter* [the words of dead bodies] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 95) in order to emphasize the connection between history, language, power, and violence.

⁹¹ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 89.

⁹² Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 90.

⁹³ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2817: “In Hebrew, I can go far back to God, in German foreign gods come to meet me, I have to go through a lot and can only calm down with Moses Mendelssohn or Franz Rosenzweig, but by then I am exhausted and fall into a Hebrew swoon” [*Im Hebräischen kann ich weit auf Gott zurückgehen, im Deutschen kommen mir fremde Götter entgegen, ich muss viel durchmachen und kann mich erst bei Moses Mendelssohn oder Franz Rosenzweig beruhigen, da ich bin aber auch schon erschöpft und falle in hebräische Ohnmacht*].

⁹⁴ Franz Rosenzweig is defined as “the last Jewish event to still count as German philosophy” [*das letzte jüdische Ereignis in der noch deutschen Philosophie*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 106), and clearly Benyoëtz is more inclined to Rosenzweig's conception of translation as *Verdeutschung*, considered as a revolutionary act against the nineteenth century: “What Rosenzweig did cannot be repeated. He did not concede to the Hebrew in German. He was thinking big and it wasn't an easy task” [*Was Rosenzweig machte, läßt sich nicht wiederholen. Er gab im Deutschen dem Hebräischen nicht nach. Er machte sich große Gedanken und keine leichte Arbeit*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 108). Starting from Rosenzweig's translation, Benyoëtz developed an ethic of translation as a paradigm of the encounter with otherness: “We desire to get to know the foreign, but at the same time we want to be drawn into the familiar. But only the translator who protects the foreign

represented the beginning and end of German-Jewish symbiosis. However, Benyoëtz distinguished between Mendelssohn, who tried to forge a key to the gate that could open the German intellectual world to the Jews; Heinrich Heine, who did not want a key, but rather a ticket to enter; and Rosenzweig, who believed that he did not have to take notice of any gate. The only one to be overcome by “threshold fear” [*Schwellenangst*]⁹⁵ was Kafka, who was able to read in the inscription on the Rosenthaler Tor, the gate through which Mendelssohn entered Berlin, “Arbeit macht frei!”⁹⁶ There is, therefore, a continuity from the assimilation to Auschwitz, a line that starts from Mendelssohn’s first translation and ends at Benyoëtz’s aphorism.

However, there is also something else that was lost after Auschwitz that does not concern the German-Jewish element. In a significant reply to Hans-Martin Gauger on December 29, 2008, Benyoëtz argues that the biggest casualty of WWII was the German language, which previously may possibly have become a *Weltsprache*, also thanks to the Jews, but afterward had meant that Germanists were writing in English, even in Berlin, where people would rather speak English.⁹⁷ He asks a decisive question: “Can a language lose the war/victory?” [*Kann eine Sprache den Krieg/den Sieg verlieren?*].⁹⁸ Moreover, he adds: “How closely is the language sacrifice (learning German) related to the victims of National Socialism, the poets who were killed and those who survived?” [*Wie weit das Sprachopfer (Erlernen des Deutschen) mit den Opfern des Nationalsozialismus zusammenhängt, den getöteten und den überlebenden Dichtern?*].⁹⁹ “The German language now has several reasons to mourn” [*Die Deutsche Sprache hat Grund zu trauern und kennt ihn*], Benyoëtz stated.¹⁰⁰ The terrible crime perpetuated in German turns it into a mourning language, “*die trauernde Sprache*.” The Shoa had left its traces in the German language, which bore the scars of Auschwitz. The end of this symbiosis also had a negative effect on the Jewish side, since it was the end of the nomadic movement and its nomadic thought.¹⁰¹

from us and makes the unfamiliar accessible deserves our trust” [*Wir begehren, das Fremde kennenzulernen, wollen aber zugleich ins Vertraute gezogen werden. Doch nur derjenige Übersetzer verdient unser Vertrauen, der das Fremde vor uns schützt und als Nichtvertrautes zugänglich macht*] (Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 108).

⁹⁵ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 110.

⁹⁶ See Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 110.

⁹⁷ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 44.

⁹⁸ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 187.

⁹⁹ Benyoëtz, *Beziehungsweisen*, 188.

¹⁰⁰ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2543.

¹⁰¹ Benyoëtz, *Filigranit*, 116. See also Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2548: “The nomadic movement [*die nomadische Beweglichkeit*] and fast-riding thoughts [*die schnellreitenden Gedanken*].”

5 A linguistic *tiqqun*

An adequate poem after Auschwitz
can only exist in the German language.¹⁰²

In Jerusalem in 1961, Gershom Scholem criticized the recently finished Buber–Rosenzweig Bible translation as a *Gastgeschenk*, the Jews’ “symbolic act of gratitude upon departure” to German and at the same time its tombstone, since its audience no longer existed.¹⁰³ With his poetry, Benyoëtz takes the same burden on his shoulders, but he proposes a way to overcome this catastrophic gap. As we have seen, for him, German is “the brutal playful language” [*die brutal verspielte Sprache*],¹⁰⁴ but it is also a “*mich heimsuchende Deutsche Sprache*,”¹⁰⁵ where *heimsuchend* means ‘haunting,’ but also *Heimatsuchend*, looking for a homeland. Benyoëtz is perfectly aware that:

A Jew who writes in German today is no longer (also) writing for Jews. I would be a fool if I forgot that. But if I don’t want to be a fool, I must not make myself forget that I write my German as a Jew in Jerusalem. [...] That is my situation, also that of my texts, perhaps also that of my language [*Ein Jude, der heute Deutsch schreibt, schreibt nicht mehr (auch) für Juden. Ich wäre ein Narr, wenn ich das vergäße. Will ich kein Narr sein, darf ich mich aber auch nicht vergessen machen, daß ich mein Deutsch als Jude in Jerusalem schreibe. [...] Das ist meine Situation, auch die meiner Texte, vielleicht auch die meiner Sprache*].¹⁰⁶

However, Benyoëtz’s Jewishness represents in a way a form of resistance – “*der Widerstand, den ich hervorrufe und leiste*”¹⁰⁷ – and his linguistic choice also has a powerful political motivation: “The German language conquered – the Third Reich defeated and overcome” [*Die deutsche Sprache eingenommen – das dritte Reich besiegt und überwunden*].¹⁰⁸

Writing in German “as imperfectly as possible” [*so unvollkommen als möglich*]¹⁰⁹ relies on an ethical purpose that deals with the addressee of his poetry: his audience is made up of “the survivors of his people.”

Why do I do this? Because it is the only possible means of solidarity for me. It is my Auschwitz. With distance. With respect. What good is a lifetime without Kristallnacht, a hibernation without a gas oven. What am I trying to say with this? That we too have our feelings of guilt [*Warum ich das tue? Weil es die mir einzig mögliche Weise der Solidarität ist. Es ist mein Auschwitz. Mit Abstand. Mit Verlaub.*

¹⁰² Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 142.

¹⁰³ Scholem, “At the Completion of the Buber’s Translation of the Bible,” 318.

¹⁰⁴ Benyoëtz, *Gottik*, 265.

¹⁰⁵ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 162.

¹⁰⁶ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 88.

¹⁰⁷ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 122.

¹⁰⁸ Benyoëtz, *Fraglicht*, 2565.

¹⁰⁹ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 141.

*Was soll mir auch ein Lebtage ohne Kristallnacht, ein Überwintern ohne Gasöfen. Was ich damit sagen will? Daß auch wir unsere Schuldgefühle haben].*¹¹⁰

After Auschwitz, Benyoëtz sees as a possible way out through languages: German and Hebrew can be reconciled in Yiddish.¹¹¹ Auschwitz was – according to Benyoëtz – codetermined by the German language. Therefore, the way out from the *Ofen-Perspektive* could be that of considering Yiddish as a common legacy:

The poem after Auschwitz, the German poem with the Yiddish *taam*. For an adequate poem after Auschwitz can only exist in the German language, because it itself helped to determine Auschwitz and was completely and utterly raw in the process – until the gas ovens, where it had to fail. [...] But if the language accepts Yiddish as its heritage, then the ‘oven-perspective’ will also open up for it [Das Gedicht nach Auschwitz, das deutsche Gedicht mit dem jiddischen Taam. Denn ein adäquates Gedicht nach Auschwitz kann es nur in der deutschen Sprache geben, weil sie selbst Auschwitz mitbestimmte und ganz und gar roh dabei war – bis zu den Gasöfen, da mußte sie versagen. ... Nimmt sie aber das Jiddische als Erbe an, dann wird sich ihr auch die Ofen-Perspektive öffnen].¹¹²

One of the most brilliant and ingenious sentences in Benyoëtz’s collections concerns his definition of Nazism as “the cruelty of Darfinism” [*die Grausamkeit des DARFinismus*].¹¹³ *Darf* is the third-person singular of the German modal verb *dürfen*, which means “to be allowed to.” On the other hand, *Darfinism* sounds like “Darwinism,” used in this case as a synonym for the brutal argument of natural selection. The linguistic structure and order are intertwined with a supposed natural superiority. Taking language seriously, Benyoëtz shows the narrow ridge of the grammar of power and the extermination plan. However, choosing the language of the murders as his philological *Heimat* reminds us of the power of poetry as an inverted world that could cure evil and repair what is broken. Therefore, there is a *tiqqunic* attempt in his linguistic choice.

This definition of Nazism as “*die Grausamkeit des DARFinismus*” recalls Jacques Derrida’s arguments in his *Monolingualism of the Other*, where he harshly criticized Hannah Arendt’s defense of the German language. In this famous essay, Derrida, as a French-Algerian Jew, developed a radical critique of the uniqueness of the mother-tongue based on his autobiographical experience that made him an outsider of language. The fragmentary identity brings him to consider his linguistic dwelling “on the shores of the French language [...] on the unplaceable line of its coast.”¹¹⁴ In a famous footnote, which is a wonderful treatise of philosophy of language, Derrida harshly criticized Arendt, who emphasized her “unfailing fidelity”¹¹⁵ to German on many occasions. In

¹¹⁰ Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 141.

¹¹¹ See Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 303: “The most natural German after Auschwitz would be Yiddish” [*Das natürlichste Deutsch nach Auschwitz wäre Jiddisch*].

¹¹² Benyoëtz, *Treffpunkt Scheideweg*, 42.

¹¹³ Benyoëtz, *Finden macht das Suchen leichter*, 292.

¹¹⁴ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 2.

¹¹⁵ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 85.

her famous interview with Günter Gaus, quoted by Derrida, Arendt said that the German language was not guilty: “It is not really the German language, after all, that has gone mad [...] and in the second place, nothing can replace the mother tongue.”¹¹⁶ For Arendt, the health and sanity of the German language are taken for granted, while for Derrida, its origin and uniqueness are in themselves the premise for the madness. In fact, he states that “absolute uniqueness renders one as crazy as absolute replaceability.”¹¹⁷ According to Derrida, Arendt’s linguistic essentialism “remains the ultimate essence of the soil, the foundation of meaning, the inalienable property that one carries within oneself.”¹¹⁸ However, in that book, Derrida’s position oscillates between a critique of territorial essentialism and a need for linguistic belonging in an expropriated language (French). I would say that Benyoëtz’s approach is a third path between the sacrality of the linguistic root represented by Arendt and the ambiguous link between an open form of belonging and a linguistic ban in Derrida’s autobiographical experience. The third path is to choose, to transform, to forgive a language where one can enter as a wanderer, who refuses any claims of possession, but whose playful attitude reveals and heals the scars of the abyssal linguistic catastrophe.

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¹¹⁶ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 85.

¹¹⁷ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 89.

¹¹⁸ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 91.

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