

Traveling in Gypsyland

Cécile Kovacsazy

1. What about nomadism?

Today in France, but not only there, it can often be heard, including among academics, that Gypsies are nomads, that nomadism would be inherent to their culture, and therefore, practically, to their genes. But nothing is less true. Academic research, that are nowadays more detailed and more scientific than the fancies that one could read through to the 18th century, start to prove that all the circulations of the Gypsies in the last decades and even the last centuries are *compelled* circulations. The aim of all these travels/circulations is to flee an economical destitution or a persecution either moral or physical.

The cliché is that there would be one gypsy culture which would consist in travelling – this supposing, by the way, that there would be one unique and homogenous gypsy culture – which is totally inaccurate. Contrary to the forcibly displaced Gypsy groups, the vast majority of Gypsies has been sedentary, often for decades. The link between a gypsy culture and the travelling is therefore complex and sometimes one says that Gypsies travel a lot, but they do so in their head from now on. The literature and song lyrics consist, therefore, in internalized landscapes. There is a paradoxical connection between reality and fantasies. This paradox is to be questioned here. These fantasies are those of non-Gypsies, projecting their own ignorance. But these fantasies can also be those of Gypsy writers themselves, who expose a kind of ‘brand’, sometimes in the perspective of being read by gadje (non-Gypsies).

I have to specify that I will only take examples from literary texts written by Gypsies (and not literature representing Gypsies), thinking this analysis in terms of center and periphery.

What kind of position can literature adopt, when it is written by persons who are pushed to the margins by a center that defines and prescribes its own characteristics? Which place can one write from and what can one write, if marginalized?

2. Finding space

According to Aleida Assmann, the author who belongs to a collective identity whose accessibility to a space is forbidden will claim even more space. Writing attempts to create, through literary creation, « the space where the victims can find peace... Something which,

above all, brings individual peace¹. » Gypsies, from Spain to Russia, without forgetting Finland or Macedonia, have extremely different political and social histories, and it makes no sense to speak about *the* Gypsies as if these approximately ten million people had a unique history, a unique past, a unique culture. However, they have in common that they are being refused a space in their society. No, let's be more precise: on the contrary, they are being assigned space in the society, but outside its centers of decisions and recognitions. They are being placed at the margins of society.

Confronted by this marginalization, three postures are possible: 1. One can recognize his or her relegation to the periphery in order to demand a right to the center, to the central culture. 2. One can assert the particularity and superiority of those who are at the margins. In this posture the margins are seen as a place favourable to creation and inner freedom. 3. A third posture consists in treating with disdain this centripetal constellation and consider the cultural world as a perpetually moved away or *decentered* world. This third way corresponds to an archipelago vision of literature, which has been emphasized for several decades by the post-colonial literary critics, and particularly Édouard Glissant.

I would like to show here how the texts written by writers who assert themselves *publicly* as Gypsy and thematize it in his/her written work² can be an exemplary case of a world-literature. This vision overtakes the dichotomy of center/periphery. Three notions enable a definition of current gypsy literatures. 1. An emerging literature, 2. A world-literature, 3. A minor literature.

3. Emergent literature

Literatures written by Roma appeared only a few decades ago and they develop in a context where their actors represent a population that is dominated socially and economically. They constitute what is called an "emergent literature". Emergent literature characterizes itself through three aesthetic criteria: self-referentiality and meta-textuality, heterogeneity, as well as decentering.

Self-referentiality and meta-textuality

It is obvious that the tackled themes are almost always self-referential and often, even, autobiographical. In order to exist in the world of Culture, one has to start with being known,

¹ Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume : Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* [1999] Munich, C.H.Beck, 2003, p. 260.

² These are the two cumulative criteria to define what I call "Romani literatures" (see the following three reviews on what was probably the very first conference on the topic, *Littératures romani: construction ou réalité?* (I), Paris, *Études tsiganes*, n°36; *Littératures romani: construction ou réalité?* (II), Paris, *Études tsiganes*, n°37; *Une ou des littératures romani?*, Paris, *Études tsiganes*, n°43, 2011. All texts include a summary in English.

with asserting him or herself, Gypsies write about the condition of being a Gypsy. They are so frequently victims of the ignorance of the non-Gypsies that they urgently express the desire of simply saying who they really are. It includes an “ethnological temptation” – using the expression of Jean-Luc Moura³ –, that can make the text lose its literary dimension. Another risk is the wish to be so mimetic, that literature becomes a historical testimony, as it is often the case with memories of concentration camps. For example, we can think about the texts of Ceija Stojka (born in 1933) or Philomena Franz (born in 1922). In his novel, *Füstös képek*⁴ (1975), the Hungarian Menyhért Lakatos (1926-2007) succeeds in combining the very autobiographical and informative dimension of living in a gypsy ghetto in Hungary before the Second World War with a highly literary narrative structure. On the contrary, one of the contemporary Hungarian poets, József Daróczi (born in 1939), said Choli chooses not to use an explicit referentiality in the following poem:

<p>UNGRÏKO THEM Ungriko them, tu svùnto, bari pàca, kathar o tràjo súvlöl tő kolin. Si tu manro, si tu pai dòsta – sa bakhajven tē but corre čhave. Bokhajven manresθar, Bokhajven godãθar, Bokhajven zurales Pala manušipe.</p>	<p>GROUND OF HUNGARY Ground of Hungary, You so holy, so serene, You with a bosom full with overwhelming life. You so full with wheat and living sources– Nevertheless numerous are your sons that hunger. They are hungry for bread, They are hungry for reason, They are terribly hungry For humanity.</p>
--	---

In this case, the referential inaccuracy contributes to the obvious literariness of the text.

Heterogeneity

We will focus on the poem of the French *manouche* poet Sterna Weltz-Zigler, in order to illustrate the second criterion, heterogeneity:

La pluie se rince de son eau grasse
 Le champ du ‘gadjo’ est visqueux
 Crucifié sur le drap du ciel
 La charrette étend ses bras !
 Au ras des crottes de poules
 La violette fleurit, comme l’amour du
 sang haineux du voisin
 Pas un cri quand il engendre
 pour faire savoir, homme pareil aux autres
 Mais non ! un ‘gadjo’ ça reste un ‘gadjo’
 La remise pue le moisi, dans les sacs
 de grains les rats se démènent et

³ Jean-Marc Moura, *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 65.

⁴ Menyhért Lakatos, *Füstös képek*, Budapest, Magvető Kiadó, 1975.

j'enverrai 'Peffro' le chat (mon chat)
GITAN ! VOOLEEUR DE POULES !
La pensée en avant comme un balcon de résidence !
Son regard est trop bleu !
Crève donc ! pensai-je !
Tes poules sont trop blanches pour que
MA DENT les veuille⁵ !

In this poem, three voices are linked, and they are difficult to separate – typography is of no help. Probably can we recognize the lyric voice of the poet, the one of the Rom, and the one of the racist gadjo, where the Rom reacts to and simultaneously echoes the gadjo's racism. Poetry distinguishes itself from prose primarily in the homogeneity of a lyrical voice. This poem, however, is characterized by a very high coefficient of polyphony, thanks to a dialogicity or even a theatricalization of the poetic text. This rhetorical device enables the integration of the voice of the Other, the one who thinks he is in the centre, or, in postcolonial terms, a participant in the dominating culture. The polyphony enables the overtaking of the confrontation between dominator and dominated. These texts, penned by Gypsy authors, as a new phenomenon, open a new cultural space. Or, to use the term central to the thought of Jacques Rancière, they create a *dissensus*. « Dissensus is the reconfiguration of the relationship between [...] perceptible presence and significance. It can be described as an excess [...] compared to the efficient count of bodies and meanings. In politics, this dissent takes the form of the introduction of subjects who were not counted and who, by giving themselves a name, get acknowledged as apt to count the objects and beings being part of the community, to reshape given situations, and to change the names given to themselves⁶. » It consists in a « speech event ». But contrary to certain cultures (the Haitian culture for instance), gypsy cultures are not associated to a unique physical territory or to the claim of a nation. To that extent, they are similar to Yiddish literatures.

Decentering

The third defining criterion of emerging literature is decentering or off-centering. It consists in taking into account the centre – cultural, ideological, and political – to take it elsewhere; not to the margins but to a new era that will build a new dynamical field, central in its own way. The aesthetical applications are numerous: on one hand, to start from the centre, means to consider the other's voice, through polyphony, as we saw. It means, according to the questionings of

⁵ Sterna Weltz-Zigler, *Romanes*, Laval, Les Éditions du Hameau, 1975, section « En sabots », p. 47.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, Paris, 2009, page 563, and page 66 for the second quotation.

imagology⁷, to integrate the stereotyped imagery that the Other carries (in a logic that is as frontal as the other). This is the case in the poem of Sterna Weltz-Zigler, which confronts violently the prejudices of the gadjo against the Rom. The decentering also consists, on the formal plane, in investing the most canonical forms of the dominating culture in order to apply them to an emerging literary identity. Weltz-Zigler resorts, for instance, to classical alexandrines:

Gitans de la lune noire accrochée aux rayons
Guitare à la peau sèche pour sablier de nuit
Marée bleue chevelure de femmes en serpent
Rouges pétales montants comme des papillons⁸

We find again the problematic of the link with the canon in all emerging literatures, whether it be with the Afro-Caribbean poetry of the end of the 19th century that has been through a wave of imitation inspired by Victor Hugo, Lamartine and others (see Charles Séguy-Villevallaix or Oswald Durand) or with the French-language African novel in relation to the fixed academism of the French language of France (see for instance *Soleils des indépendances* [*The Suns of Independence*] from Ahmadou Kourouma)⁹. If one renounces the idea of the couple center/periphery, one renounces at the same time an (absurd) definition of literature as a temporal evolution of canons to which creators would be more or less faithful. One enters, then, like the assertions of Bertrand Westphal, the author of a 'geocritic', in an era of « multiple non-hierarchical centers of perception, of reading. [...] Failing to ensure convergence on its name, the center cracks, splits, and through its very weakness, legitimizes the concentration of peripheral energies, which constitute themselves in many alternative cultural, heterogeneous impulses¹⁰. » A paradox thus becomes a reality: centers are numerous. A completely different connection between cultures is established, a connection that has been observed for about twenty years and about which literary texts written by Roma seems to be an exemplary case.

4. World-Literature, All-World Literature

⁷ On the issue of imagology see developments of Beate Eder-Jordan in *Geboren bin ich vor Jahrtausenden... Bilderwelten in der Literatur der Roma und Sinti* [I was born thousand of years ago... Images of the world in Roma and Sinti Literature], Klagenfurt, Drava, 1993, p. 178-229.

⁸ Sterna Weltz-Zigler, *Romanes*, *op. cit.*, p. 59. These four verses are without punctuation.

⁹ See Jean-Marc Moura, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

¹⁰ Bertrand Westphal, « Quelques observations sur la théorie de l'émergence », in *Poétique de l'émergence*, *op. cit.*

The dichotomy center/periphery, seems not to be valid in a world that no longer has a unique center and that constantly develops many mobile centers. Applying the notion of *world literature* to the French language, a notion that comes from Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, Michel Le Bris speaks of a « littérature-monde » that currently develops itself, a true globalization of culture, where the earth is no more pyramid-shaped but at last round since the decolonization. We would have entered a world, where intertwining of cultures are much more defined than ever, where « a generation of immigrant writers, instead of flowing into their adopted culture, intend to make their oeuvre from the starting point of its plural identity in the ambiguous and moving territory of this friction¹¹. » Michel Le Bris takes, among others, the example of Salman Rushdie, who is the reigning English language author of Indian origin. And yet a Rom who chooses to take pen, if he or she is to work as a writer, is the transcultural writer par excellence; the majority of Gypsies cultivate a twofold cultural affiliation, the one of the country where they live and which is theirs, and an ancestral Gypsy culture. The later, it should be noted, succeeds in the miracle of a minimal of acculturation given the number of centuries spent without a "compact territory" primarily by maintaining a living Romany language¹². On the other hand, they are not immigrants from a specific country¹³.

Édouard Glissant, which has developed in various works what he calls a "poetics of Relation", that is to say, a poetics that emphasizes a whole world, a multiplicity of diverse cultures according to a non-hierarchical archipelago, dedicated in his *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (1996) a few pages to Gypsies: he explains that this people is a prime example of the cultural richness he is calling for. It is exemplary of an "opening to the world" by its "métissage" and its "créolisation"(as opposed to acculturation)¹⁴. For Glissant, Roma embody better than any other a people of diversity that has no territorial boundaries and claims none, and which conveys several cultures. So to Glissant, Roma naturally utter a "multilingual

¹¹ Michel Le Bris, *Pour une littérature-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 33. This is my emphasis.

¹² The Romani language is a language with a complex grammar and a rich vocabulary. It is almost by chance that István Vályi, a Hungarian student residing in Leyden, discovered the Indian origins of the Roma language (Source: Heinrich Grellmann *Die Zigeuner*, 1783, Dessau und Leipzig). Romani is an Indo-Aryan language, as well as Hindi or Bengali.

¹³ Even if a nostalgic fantasy of the home country, India, or on the contrary, the racist argument of 'go back to your country, namely India' sometimes occurs. This argument, which is at the origin of the quadruple murder in Oberwart in 1995 with the sign "Roma zurück nach Indien", is an argument that contradicts the Nazi theory of Aryan: Gypsies do have Aryan origins...

¹⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

speech." While they are, for the vast majority of them, not at all nomads. In fact, their cultural identity, which is ontologically diverse, makes their literature what Glissant calls, in a laudative way and inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, "the thought of wandering." This expression has to be understood in the most positive sense.

Alongside this enthusiastic vision of Glissant, one must nevertheless remember, with Benedict Anderson, that the notion of a people is linked to national or nationalist claims that are almost nonexistent among Roma activists and one must also remember, with Shlomo Sand, that the concept of people is linked to a dimension of mythic narrative. In fact, the notion of "people" applied to Gypsies is common since the narrative and thought of the Nazi have systematized in an attempt to instigate the idea that Sinti in Germany and Austria would not be members of the "German people", but of another "people". The idea persisted, and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many people insist on the idea of a "Gypsy people".

More recently, in the postcolonial trend of a world-literature, Ottmar Ette, a German literary critic in Potsdam, advances the idea of a literature that would firmly be in the cracks, in the interstices, that he calls *ZwischenWeltschreiben* (Writing-between-worlds)¹⁵. According to his theory, there are "literature-without-fixed-residence" (*Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz*), which have developed worldwide since the Holocaust. These literatures correspond to authors in transit, without a univocally assignable national identity. Far from an approach of texts by national categorization – an approach that Erich Auerbach in his time had already condemned in favor of a global approach to creative writing – "literature-without-fixed-residence", according to Ette, contains the key concepts of the postcolonial theory that puts at its core the notions of exile, diaspora, migration and interlanguage. It touches transareal, transcultural and translingual literatures. And yet, as wide-spread as this literature is today, Ottmar Ette made the observation that "it will be a long time before these literatures without fixed residence shall be recognized as something other than a peripheral and marginal part of world literature¹⁶". We see that the vision of the theorist, however rhizomatic, is much more pessimistic than Glissant's and more prophetic than descriptive. But for Ette, contemporary literary critics lack the conceptual tools to construct a poetic of the movement corresponding

¹⁵ Ottmar Ette, *ZwischenWeltschreiben*, Berlin, Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2005.

¹⁶ Ottmar Ette, *id.*, p. 36.

to “literature-without-fixed-residence”, knowing that the *third space* of Homi K. Bhabha, as hybrid as it is, does not correspond to a poetic of the movement, but to a poetic of space, as it becomes fixed in a third space¹⁷. It is therefore very surprising that thinkers of the world literature – which has been developing in an archipelago manner for a while –, including Ette who develops a notion of literature in constant motion, did not think to give literary texts written by Roma as an example of their theses.

The third point of my argument regards the only territory remaining when all geographic territories have disappeared or, regarding Roma, when a location is denied to them, which is language.

5. The choice of language: minor literature

Postcolonial literatures, that is to say, literatures written in contexts of cultural oppression and developing what Jean-Marc Moura calls an "aesthetics of resistance" are distinguished by the fact that they are "literatures of disquiet regarding the language¹⁸." For the big question that remains, in a new dynamic that attempts to exceed the frontal between dominant and dominated cultures, between center and periphery, is the choice of language in which to write. We know the pages of Deleuze and Guattari on the use of German by Kafka that allows them to develop the concept of *littérature mineure* (*minor literature*). Two meanings of the term are possible: one expected, the other set up by the two philosophers. First sense: The Gypsy authors write either in Romani or in any language of the country where the writer lives. When the Roma author, all the more bilingual as he is a scholar, chooses to write in Romani, that is to say, in a language that the majority of people, the gadje, do not know, he deliberately stands at the periphery, unless he relegates the gadjo to the periphery, or he wants to move the center. Because while it is marginal, Romany is a language spoken over a wide geographical area, beyond the centers and margins. In this fashion, literature written in Romani resolutely exceeds the idea of literature-nation.

But we know that Deleuze and Guattari understand the concept of minor literature differently: "a minor literature is not that of a minor language, rather it is a minority

¹⁷ Ottmar Ette, *id.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ Jean-Marc Moura, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

literature using a major language¹⁹." Remember the three characteristics of minor literature: "(1) The language is assigned a high coefficient of deterritorialization, [...] (2) Everything is political, [...] (3) Everything takes a collective value. "And indeed, without exception, Romany literatures meet those three criteria. One can read the first pages of a story written by the Austrian writer Stefan Horvath, *Katzenstreu*²⁰ (Cat Litter 2007), to illustrate this: Horvath says in the first chapter that serves as the pact between the reader and writer, that he feels driven by an unknown force compelling him to write the story of the racist crime that caused the death of four young people in his camp. Horvath/ The narrator is obsessed almost hallucinatorily with the exact time of the attack, a very personal tragedy, since he lost one of his sons. However, while trying to write this personal drama:

"At the same time a huge concentration camp has suddenly arisen. It was surrounded by highest barbed wire, and behind the barbed wire, I saw my people. And suddenly Roma started talking to me, telling me about their pain and they demanded of me that I do not condone any of this, as did other Roma before. At first I thought I was suffering from hallucinations. [...] I closed my eyes and after a short while I reopened them. But the concentration camp was still there, with all prisoners who kept yelling at me. [...] I felt suddenly a charge was imposed on me and I had to carry that weight²¹."

The three criteria of Deleuze and Guattari are met here: The individual voice is superimposed on a choir voice, and is its spokesperson. What is important to report is a major collective political event, that of the Nazi genocide, which made about 500 000 victims and which some still deny or have trouble remembering today. Finally, there is a deterritorialization of both voice and literary genre that oscillates between autobiography, historical evidence, lyrical effusion and multiple focus. Each chapter changes focus to alternate between the points of views of the father of one of the victims, of the murderer, of the murderer's parents and of guests of a hostel who embody the *vox populi*.

Conclusion: On the roads of the All-world

Thanks to the imaginary and fantastical nomadic identity²², thanks to the willy-nilly linking of territories and of stories, though totally different, which is an archipelago of cultures, and

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975, p. 29.

²⁰ Stefan Horvath, *Katzenstreu*, Oberwart, Lex Liszt, 2007.

²¹ Stefan Horvath, *id.*, p. 6.

²² Certainly, today there are nomadic Gypsies, but they represent about 1% of all Gypsies!

thanks to a bilingualism that lets you choose one writing language or another, without one being a centripetally attracting force towards a linguistically dominant center (since it is the first language) and the other being nation specific, but exist beyond all national routes; thanks to these different characteristics, literatures written by Roma are the model par excellence of the modern meaning not of literature without borders – literature always needs to draw frontiers to exist – but of a world-literature²³. Beyond national boundaries, the world-literature offers a permanent shift, a poetic movement.

And yet it is the quintessence of all creative writers, whether Rom or not, to try to deterritorialize him or herself or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari in their book on Kafka, to try to "become the nomad and the immigrant and the Gypsy of his or her own language²⁴".

Bibliography

FIRST:

- FRANZ Philomena, *Zwischen Liebe und Hass: Ein Zigeunerleben*, Freiburg, Verlag Herder, 1985.
HORVATH Stefan, *Katzenstreu*, Oberwart, Lex Liszt, 2007.
LAKATOS Menyhért, *Füstös képek*, Budapest, Magvető kiadó, 1975.
STOJKA Ceija, *Wir leben im Verborgenen. Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin*, Wien, Picus, 1988.
WELTZ-ZIGLER Sterna, *Romanes*, Laval, Les Éditions du Hameau, 1975.

SECOND:

- ANDERSON Benedict, *Imagined Community. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.
ASSMANN Aleida, *Erinnerungsräume : Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* [1999] Munich, C.H.Beck, 2003.
BHABHA Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, New York, Routledge, 1994.
DELEUZE Gilles et GUATTARI Félix, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975; *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 1986.
EDER-JORDAN Beate, *Geboren bin ich vor Jahrtausenden... Bilderwelten in der Literatur der Roma und Sinti* [I was born thousand of years ago... Images of the world in Roma and Sinti Literature], Klagenfurt, Drava, 1993.
ETTE Ottmar, *ZwischenWeltschreiben*, Berlin, Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2005.
GLISSANT Édouard, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.
GRELLMANN Heinrich, *Die Zigeuner*, 1783, Dessau und Leipzig.
HANCOCK Ian, *The Pariah Syndrom. An account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*, Ann Arbor, Karoma Publishers, 1987.
KOVACSHAZY Cécile (éd.), 2011, *Une ou des littératures romani ?*, Paris, *Études tsiganes*, n°43.
KOVACSHAZY Cécile (éd.), 2009, *Littératures romani : construction ou réalité ?*, Paris, *Études tsiganes*, n°37.
KOVACSHAZY Cécile (éd.), 2008, *Littératures romani : construction ou réalité ?*, Paris, *Études*

²³ The Postcolonial notion of "world literature" must still be used in turn with caution, because the singularity it conveys could extend to a centralized and hierarchical conception of literature and culture. Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau prefer to use these concepts in the plural or the term "All-world", preserving and praising the plurality and cultural diversities.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

- tsiganes*, n°36.
- LE BRIS Michel, *Pour une littérature-monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.
- PENEL Jean-Dominique, « Les sources sous la mer. Pour une phénoménologie de l'émergence en littérature », dans *Poétique de l'émergence*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2009.
- MOURA Jean-Marc, *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale*, Paris, PUF, 1999.
- RANCIÈRE Jacques, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, *Entretiens*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2009.
- SAND Shlomo, *וואיך הומצא העם היהודי?*, *When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?*, Tel-Aviv, Resliyg, 2008.
- WESTPHAL Bertrand, « Quelques observations sur la théorie de l'émergence », dans *Poétique de l'émergence*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2009.