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Stuttering in Verse: Tuvia Rübner and the Art of Self-Translation

1 A dual identity

Tuvia Rübner bears a dual identity. Raised in Pressburg-Bratislava in an assimilated German-speaking Jewish family, he was given two names at birth: a secular one, Kurt Erich ("a name I can barely utter today," he notes), and a Jewish one after his paternal grandfather, Tuvia. Upon arriving in Palestine with a Zionist youth group in 1941, he set himself apart from his compatriots, who willingly replaced their "exilic" identities with Hebrew names that reflected a commitment to "build and be rebuilt" by the Land of Israel. Rübner, by contrast, refused to forego the name of the family he left behind in Slovakia. As the only family member to survive the Holocaust, he came to believe that his life had been spared so that he may represent those who perished (Rübner 2014, 38). The decision to preserve the family name posed certain challenges, however: Germans who do not recognize Tuvia as the equivalent of Tobias tend to mistake it for a woman's name, and since it is impossible to write Rübner phonetically in Hebrew, he has come to be known in Israel as Tuvia Rivner. Kurt Erich, Tuvia, Rübner, Rivner – the barrier to library searches is obvious. Yet such inconsistencies may be advantageous, the poet maintains, for they "confuse the angel of death" (Rübner 2006, 47). At ninety-three, Rübner still dwells in the ambiguous space between German and Hebrew, which for him is synonymous with the realm of the living.

Like his name, Rübner's oeuvre reflects a double life. During the 1990s, he began translating his Hebrew poetry into German, an ongoing project that has resulted in ten volumes of German verse to accompany twelve extant volumes in Hebrew. Since the translations are not labeled as such, Rübner is identified as either a German poet or a Hebrew poet depending on the readership. This point gestures at the challenge of analyzing his bilingual body of work. Although self-translation is the consummate expression of his bilingualism, it is as a practice rather difficult to pin down. The term "self-translation" denotes the transfer of a text from one language to another by its author. Yet few self-translators adhere to a strictly linear process, and they are less confined by the demand of "fidelity" (a primary tenet of translation theory since the nineteenth

century).[1] Since self-translators are by definition beholden to no one but themselves, they are free to exercise creativity, to blend the process of translation with that of composition in order to produce not just two versions of a text but two "originals." The binary logic of source and target language, author and translator, original and adaptation is confounded. It is therefore not surprising that self-translators, with the exception of a canonical few (such as Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov), have remained "under the radar" even within the field of translation studies (Grutman 2013, 189).

There is another reason that self-translation remains a slippery and thus under-theorized concept: taken literally, the term points not to the act of translating one's texts but to a translation of the "self" that this act engenders. For Rübner, whose mother tongue is German but for whom Hebrew has long served as a primary spoken language, self-translation constitutes the ongoing renegotiation of subjectivity. When he translates finished Hebrew works into German, he effectively reverses a prior process of translation from German into Hebrew that was essential to his maturation as both a poet and a human being, thereby mediating between two halves of his identity. For Rübner this mediation is not secondary to but rather constitutive of creative expression. Translation, in short, is an essential component of his poetics.

Moreover, the relationship between composition and translation is for Rübner intimately linked with the negotiation of past and present, memory and lived experience, the permanence of childhood and the ephemerality of growing old. He has not abandoned one language for another, just as one does not forget one's childhood upon becoming an adult, but rather dwells with both languages simultaneously, allowing one to echo and inform the other. This mutual echoing of German and Hebrew in his work forms what I call "stuttering in verse." The motif of stuttering that runs through his poetry is key to understanding the bilingual tension upon which his writing process depends. The opposite of fluency, stuttering constitutes a hesitation between thought and speech. Yet Rübner is not a stutterer in speech but rather a "stutterer in language," as Gilles Deleuze describes the poet who effectuates a "perpetual disequilibrium or bifurcation" that causes language itself to "vibrate and stutter" (Deleuze 1997, 108–109). Manifesting itself in fractured verses, ellipses, tautologies, and befuddling repetition, Rübner's poetic stuttering poses a necessary

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1 In contrast to eighteenth century translators such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope, who catered to the contemporary reader by adapting the "spirit" of the original to the aesthetic conventions of his own age, nineteenth century translators such as Matthew Arnold rejected the function of the translator and advocated for strict fidelity to the source text (Bassnett 1980, 70).

barrier to interpretation, challenging the reader to consider what lies beyond the words on the page. As both motif and technique, stuttering is a crucial aspect of his bilingual imagination, for what "lies beyond" is often located in another language.

This essay examines the function of self-translation both in Rübner's individual body of work, which remains underappreciated as a bilingual entity, and in the discourse on Hebrew literature, which until just one generation ago was produced primarily by non-native Hebrew speakers. Rübner's example also points to the need to carve out a more prominent place for self-translating writers in the discourse on world literature, in which the dissemination of translated texts plays a pivotal role. I proceed from the premise that self-translation is inherently subversive, not only because it obscures the conventional categories of translation, but also because its product cannot be labeled according to monolingual national literary borders (Cordingley 2013). Rübner's self-translation is shaped by a unique poetics that eschews hierarchical binaries of primary/secondary and original/translation in favor of doubling, dialogue, and contradiction. Indeed, contradiction, the poet himself has proclaimed, is the most important element in his work (Ofek 2004, 46).

2 "I am not who I am": becoming a bilingual poet in Israel

"It is among the paradoxes of my life," Rübner muses, "that the small amount of German literature I have internalized was acquired in Israel. I am like a tree whose roots reach into the air" (Rübner 2014, 55). Although Rübner was socialized in a German-speaking context, his formal education was cut short at the age of fifteen by an anti-Semitic policy calling for the expulsion of all Jewish students from local schools in the newly formed Slovak Republic.[2] It was only after immigrating to British Mandate Palestine that he acquired a proper literary education. Under the tutelage of two guides, fellow German-speaking émigrés Werner Kraft and Ludwig Strauss, he immersed himself in German literature. He was particularly inspired by Strauss's *Land Israel* (1935), a slim volume of Zionist poems in

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2 Under the influence of the Nazi regime, Slovakia passed its version of the Nuremburg Laws in 1939. Rübner, having just completed ninth grade, was banned from school together with all the Jews of the region. He began working clandestinely as an electrician's apprentice, although this too was forbidden, before leaving Slovakia for Palestine in April of 1941.

which the spirit of the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin merges with that of the medieval Hebrew bard Yehuda Halevi. As Rübner delved into German literature under Strauss's mentorship, the unfamiliar environment of Kibbutz Merhavia, a communal settlement in Israel's northern Jezreel Valley where he first settled and resides still today, became infused with the poetic universe of Goethe, Hölderlin, and Rilke.

The friendship that blossomed between Rübner and Strauss strengthened the former's motivation to write poetry in German, his sole language of composition for roughly twelve years. Yet Strauss continually urged his pupil to begin writing, as Rübner put it, "in the language I speak, which is Hebrew" (Rübner 2014, 59). Eventually, the young poet saw fit to make a shift. This decision marked a "caesura" that coincided with two pivotal life events: in August 1953 Strauss passed away, and in September Rübner married his second wife, Galila Jizreeli, who became a devoted reader of his Hebrew poems (she does not read German). A change of language, the poet recalls, now seemed inevitable:

> I wrote in a language that I now barely spoke. German was my home. In it, I continued to "speak" with my parents, sister, [and] grandparents [...] who possess no grave. But at some point I no longer wanted to live in my poems and remain in the past [...]. Not because I wanted to overcome the past but because I wanted *to live with it*. I started writing in Hebrew exclusively. [...] Hebrew is not a given for me. It is a learned language, but also a spoken language. (Rübner 2014, 66)

In this passage from his autobiography, Rübner presents German in characteristically contradictory terms as the language in which he "speaks" with the dead, that is, as the intimate yet *silent* language of memory. He characterizes Hebrew, by contrast, as a learned and hence artificial medium, but also as a language more accessible than his own mother tongue. Though technically a second language, Hebrew superseded German as a primary language of communication and expression, even if it could never hold the status of a native tongue. Only in Hebrew could the past be brought back to life in the present.

Notwithstanding the importance of the "caesura" that Rübner attaches to the year 1953, his Hebrew literary debut actually occurred several years earlier. In 1944, three years after his arrival in Palestine, he learned that his parents, grandparents, and twelve-year-old sister, Alice (Litzi), had perished in Auschwitz. Mired in grief, he sought solace in the company of a fellow Slovakian émigré, Ada Klein, who soon became his wife and the mother of his daughter, Miriam, born in 1949. Within a few months of the baby's arrival, the couple was in a bus accident that killed Ada and left Rübner severely burned. During his recovery he received a hospital visit from his friend Lea Goldberg,

already an established poet. He dictated his first Hebrew poem to her, which she later submitted to the newspaper *Davar*, where it appeared on 6 October 1950.

I am not who I was,	אֵינֶנִּי זֶה שֶׁהָיִיתִי.
I am not who I am.	אֵינֶנִּי זֶה שֶׁהִנְנִי.
I am neither here nor there.	אֵינֶנִּי לֹא כָּאן וְלֹא שָׁם.
Living between water and air.	חַי בֵּין אֲוִיר וּבֵין מַיִם.
Haltingly, I live in fire.	לְאָטִי חַי בָּאֵשׁ.
My eyes are scorched.	עֵינַי שְׂרוּפוֹת.
My hands are scorched.	יָדַי שְׂרוּפוֹת.
My lips are scorched.	שְׂפָתַי שְׂרוּפוֹת.
Scorched are these words.	שְׂרוּפוֹת מִלִּים אֵלֶּה.
He who whispered them	זֶה שֶׁלְּחָשָׁן
lives in an open coffin.	חַי בַּאֲרוֹן־מֵת[ים], מִכְסֵהוּ פָּתוּחַ
Watching a square of sky	רוֹאֶה שָׁמַיִם מְרֻבָּעִים
drift by.	עוֹבְרִים.
(Translated by Rachel Tzvia Back)	(Freilich 2014)

At first glance, this sorrowful poem, replete with images of burning, seems a response to the injuries that Rübner sustained in the bus accident. Yet it takes on additional layers when read against the backdrop of his family history and his move toward Hebrew. The reference to scorched lips betrays an affinity with the prophet Moses, portrayed in the Bible as a reluctant messenger who initially resists God's summons, saying: "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words.... I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exodus 4:10). The rabbis of late antiquity interpreted this statement to mean that Moses was a stutterer, which the Midrash attributes to his having burned his tongue on hot coals as an infant. The poem's connection with Moses is bolstered by the words "I am not who I am," a variation on the biblical verse in which the prophet, having asked how he should introduce God to the Children of Israel, receives the following reply directly from the Lord: "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:13–14). Rübner's negation of this tautology calls into question not only the poet's identity but also the nature of the poem itself. The negation reaches its climax with the phrase "Burnt are these words," implying that the poem has consumed itself, leaving nothing but the faint stammering of a timid survivor forced to reckon with incalculable loss.

Stuttering, murmuring, and seemingly superfluous repetition emerge through Rübner's oeuvre to signal both the failure of speech in the face of loss and the struggle for self-expression in a new tongue. In "Hebrew, My Love" ('*Ivrit'*

ahuvati), for instance, the poet's relationship to Hebrew is portrayed in terms of overcoming struggle: "I stuttered, became silent, I begged and whispered,/ and you, turning inward, saw nothing./ Until suddenly, you opened up wide like a field in the wind/ and your voice burst forth from my throat" (Back 2014, 279). Grappling with the foreign tongue often merges with the challenge of commemorating the dead, as in the following verses from "Oblivion" (*Shikheḥah*): "To these too many bones you sent me, Lord,/ me, the stutterer. Your spirit was within me." In this poem, which invokes Moses explicitly, the prophet laments his inability to speak on behalf of the dead in his new language: "My God, what am I to say? Oblivion/ veils your words ... Arise! ... As .../ In my mouth my foreign tongue flails about." (Back 2014, 10–11). The fractured, elliptical verses mimic the very act of stuttering.

If we read Rübner's first Hebrew poem in light of his fraught relationship with language, we discover the anxiety of a fledgling Hebrew poet who wishes "to live with" the past in his new language but can "commune" with the dead only in their language, German. The opening lines, "I am not who I was,/ I am not who I am./ I am neither here nor there," point to the threshold between the language of memory and the language of poetry, while the oscillation between past and present tense ("He who whispered [the scorched words]/ lives in an open coffin") suggests that the prior German-speaking self must be brought back to the realm of the living through the turn to a new mode of expression, indeed a new language. The tension between German and Hebrew is encapsulated in the very penname under which Rübner published the poem, T. Ben Moshe, or T. (for "Tuvia") Son of Moses, a double allusion to the biblical prophet and to Rübner's own father, Manfred-Moritz, whose Hebrew name was Moshe.

A recent archival discovery adds another layer to the story of Rübner's first Hebrew poem. Giddon Ticotsky came across an unpublished German version of the poem in Lea Goldberg's literary estate, along with a letter indicating that Rübner had begun, at Goldberg's encouragement, to translate some of his German poems into Hebrew months prior to the bus accident. Based on these documents, Ticotsky conjectures that Rübner's ostensible Hebrew literary debut may in fact have been a translation from German (Ticotsky 2016, 134–135). The existence of an unpublished German twin to Rübner's first Hebrew poem betrays the central role of self-translation in his transition from German to Hebrew (and suggests that the process was far messier than his "caesura" story implies).

It is therefore striking that Rübner later expressed reservations about the translation of his own work: "I was against the translation of my poems, not only because the transition was so difficult for me but also because I was a purist and a pupil of [Ludwig] Strauss [*Straussschüler*]" (Rübner 2014, 59). This resistance was undoubtedly shaped in part by the social and political climate of Israel in

the early 1950s, when the taboo against German was especially strong.[3] And yet, notwithstanding Rübner's refusal to translate his own Hebrew poetry, he remained engaged in translation throughout his career. His seminal achievement in this arena was a translation of S.Y. Agnon's novella *Der Treuschwur* ("The Oath," 1965), commissioned by the Berlin publishing house Fischer Verlag at the recommendation of Gershom Scholem.[4] At a party hosted by President Zalman Shazar in honor of Agnon's reception of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966, Scholem praised Rübner's translation and noted that his efforts "enabled this happy occasion by no small measure" (Ticotsky 2016, 139). Translation from Hebrew into German was seen as a necessary evil, a means of making the culture of the fledgling Jewish State accessible to the world, thereby garnering the international recognition it deserved. By the mid-1960s, Rübner had established himself as a notable translator of Hebrew literature into German.

Translation in the other direction, from German into Hebrew, was a different matter. The young State of Israel was focused on cultivating and expanding its own national literature; it was less interested in importing foreign works, especially those stemming from the land of the perpetrators, as Germany was commonly viewed. Attitudes toward German changed with the passage of time, however, and by the 1970s the taboo was gradually lifted. It was around this time that Rübner began to translate from German into Hebrew, focusing his efforts on prominent writers and thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and Walter Benjamin. He published German translations throughout the 1980s as part of a special series on aesthetics, which he himself edited for the publishing house Sifriyat Hapoalim (The Workers Library).

Viewed in the context of world literature, the two facets of Rübner's extensive translation project performed two distinct yet complementary functions. Translation from Hebrew into German played an integral role in the dissemination of Modern Hebrew literature worldwide, while translation of German texts into

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3 In her study of German language instruction at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Yfaat Weiss describes the intense opposition to German prior to and immediately following the establishment of the State of Israel. The ban against German instruction at the university that was instituted in 1934 in response to the rise of the Nazi regime went unchallenged until the late 1940s, when students and professors began to insist that German was a necessary component of scholarly training in the humanities. Despite their efforts, it was not until 1953, following the signing of the reparations agreement between Israel and West Germany, that German courses were finally reintroduced at the university (Weiss 2014). As Weiss's research illustrates, the animus toward German was particularly virulent during the period that Rübner was negotiating the shift from German to Hebrew.
4 Scholem had himself translated several works by Agnon into German for the journal *Der Jude* while living in Berlin during the 1920s.

Hebrew was a means of feeding the incipient literary imagination of a society moving gradually toward a monolingual national paradigm. Rübner played a seminal role in both sides of this cultural project. By the same token, translation played a seminal role in his own literary oeuvre, setting the stage for his eventual turn to self-translation during the 1990s. How did he overcome the initial resistance to translating his own Hebrew poems? What did it mean to be translated *back* into German? Was such a "return" desirable or suspect? As we shall see, his change of heart was fueled not only by the social and political climate of the day but also by specific aesthetic concerns.

3 "Poetry is what is": writing between Hebrew and German

Although bilingualism has always been a key aspect of Rübner's writing process, he embarked on self-translation relatively late in life. He was sixty-six years old when the translators Efrat Gal Ed and Christoph Meckel approached him to request the publishing rights for *Wüstenginster* (Desert Broom, 1990), a collection of his poems that they had translated into German. Despite his initial opposition to any translation of his Hebrew writing, Rübner was pleased to discover upon reading Meckel and Gal Ed's work that "the poems were still poems" (Rübner 2014, 60). The happy realization inspired him to release a volume of as yet unpublished German poems, entitled *Granatapfel: Frühe Gedichte* (Pomegranate: Early Poems, 1995). The meeting with Gal Ed and Meckel was also the catalyst of his self-translation project, to which he devoted himself with great discipline for the next twenty years.

Underlying Rübner's self-translations are two key poetic principles adopted from his mentor, Ludwig Strauss. The first is the notion that poetry is inherently dialogical: "I learned from Strauss that the poem conducts a dialogue with its listener (reader), who, by virtue of his attentive eavesdropping... is made present by the poem, and the more he gives of himself, the richer [the dialogue becomes]." The second is the idea that "sound always takes precedence in a poem" (Rübner 2014, 53–54). At first glance, these two principles seem obstacles to translation, which implies a *mediated* dialogue between author and reader, as well as the necessary modification of sound. Yet Strauss, a bilingual poet and self-translator in his own right, maintained that translation provides an opportunity to foster exchange between source language and target language. Through translation, in other words, the unique sound of each language is preserved but also brought into contact with its counterpart. Strauss articulated this idea in the following verses from the poem "Dank des Übersetzers an die Dichterin" (The Translator's

Thank You to the Poet), dedicated to Lea Goldberg, whose poetry he translated into German:

> Und mir, in meinen beiden Sprachen lebend,
> Der einen aus der andern Echo gebend –
> Wie horchten beide auf bei deinem Tone!

> [For me, whose languages are two,
> The echo of one does the other imbue –
> How both attend to your sound!]
> (Strauss 2000, 543)

In a sense, Strauss's German rendering of Goldberg's Hebrew poetry allowed the original to reverberate more intensely for him; her writing became whole by virtue of being doubled.[5]

The influence of Strauss's cross-linguistic dialogue can be felt in Rübner's bilingual writing. Like his mentor, Rübner sought to honor the individual sound qualities of German and of Hebrew while bringing the two languages into contact with each other. A striking example of this seemingly contradictory impulse can be found in the differing titles of his German and his Hebrew volumes. At first glance, the German self-translations do not even appear to be self-translations, since the titles differ dramatically, as do the order and grouping of the content. Upon close inspection, however, certain thematic parallels emerge. For instance, many of the poems contained in the Hebrew volume *Shirim sotrim* (Contradictory Poems), published in 2011, appear in German translation in *Lichtschatten* (Light Shadows), released the same year. Although the titles differ, they convey the same sentiment, as the following artist's statement explains:

> My latest volume of Hebrew poems is entitled *Shirim sotrim* – contradictory poems, a poetics of the possible. The various poems often express disparate and opposing [sentiments], no less than the possibilities of life. In our confused, disbelieving, rapidly changing world... a closed statement is simply impossible, [for it is] imbued with both light and shadow. (Rübner 2011a, 80)

Taking advantage of the synthetic capacity of German to produce new words, Rübner offers the compound noun *Lichtschatten* as an imagistic equivalent of the phrase *Shirim sotrim* (contradictory poems). Thus, the two titles "echo" one

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5 The paradox of unity through doubling played a central role in his ensuing bilingual writing. Although he claimed to master Hebrew only in his forties (he penned his first Hebrew poem, "To the Bay," at age forty-two), Strauss came to see himself as embodying two languages that inform and indeed "echo" one another (Seelig 2013).

another while preserving and highlighting the unique qualities of their respective languages.

The merging of light and shadow in a single word is just one example of the contradictory impulses that meld throughout Rübner's oeuvre to produce his "poetics of the possible," among them: living and aging, joy and suffering, and delight and pain. Perhaps the most important contradiction is an unspoken one, the sheer fact that the poems are both German and Hebrew. At times, the unique properties of each language blur the line between original and translation, making the distinction between original and translation practically indiscernible. If we compare the poem "What We Think Is Poetry" (*Mah sheḥoshvim shirah*) with its German translation, each version seems "original" based on the way in which it playfully engages with the language of composition. The Hebrew version reads:

WHAT WE THINK IS POETRY	מה שחושבים שירה
What we think is poetry	מַה שֶׁחוֹשְׁבִים שִׁירָה
isn't poetry	זֶה לֹא מַה שֶׁשִּׁירָה
it's what we think is poetry.	זֶה מַה שֶׁחוֹשְׁבִים שִׁירָה.
Poetry isn't what we think	שִׁירָה לֹא מַה שֶׁחוֹשְׁבִים
thinking isn't poetry	מַחְשָׁבָה לֹא שִׁירָה
what we think we're not thinking is	מַה שֶׁחוֹשְׁבִים לֹא חוֹשְׁבִים
poetry.	שִׁירָה.
What we feel is poetry	מַה שֶׁמַּרְגִּישִׁים שִׁירָה
we feel as feeling. Not poetry.	מַרְגִּישִׁים הַרְגָּשָׁה. לֹא שִׁירָה.
Feelings divided or disturbed	רְגָשׁוֹת מְפֻצָּלִים אוֹ מַבְהִילִים
perfumed praised or cursed	מְבֻשָּׂמִים מְהֻלָּלִים אוֹ מְקֻלָּלִים
are what we feel we love to feel	מַה שֶׁמַּרְגִּישִׁים אוֹהֲבִים לְהַרְגִּישׁ
what we love to feel we think we feel	מַה שֶׁאוֹהֲבִים לְהַרְגִּישׁ חוֹשְׁבִים לְהַרְגִּישׁ
what we love to love we think is love	מַה שֶׁאוֹהֲבִים לֶאֱהֹב חוֹשְׁבִים אַהֲבָה
not poetry.	לֹא שִׁירָה.
What we sense is good or bad	מַה שֶׁחָשִׁים זֶה טוֹב זֶה רַע
we sense. It's not good it's not bad	חָשִׁים. זֶה לֹא טוֹב זֶה לֹא רַע
it's sensing good and bad	זֶה חָשִׁים טוֹב וָרַע
not poetry.	לֹא שִׁירָה.
Poetry is poetry is	שִׁירָה הִיא שִׁירָה הִיא
what is	מַה הִיא
poetry	שִׁירָה
(Translated by Rachel Seelig and Adam Seelig)	(Rübner 2002, 18)

The poem revolves around a basic lacuna in Hebrew grammar: the lack of a present tense form for the verb "to be." Due to this absence, Hebrew permits nominal sentences (i.e. sentences that lack a verb), such as *maḥshavah lo shirah* (thought [is] not poetry).[6] In light of the missing copular verb ("is"), the phrase *mah sheḥoshvim shirah*, or "What we think [is] poetry," is rendered ambiguous; it may either be understood as a statement of equation, i.e. "poetry is thought," or as a descriptive term, i.e. "what we think of as poetry" (which is promptly undercut by the words "isn't poetry"). The grammatical lacuna is crucial in the final three lines of the first stanza, which similarly may be read in two different ways. The first, more literal reading draws a clear distinction between the realm of thought and the realm of poetry: "thought and not poetry/ is what we think. We don't think/ poetry." A slight shift of emphasis produces a more positive yet puzzling reading: "thinking isn't poetry./ what we think we're not thinking / is poetry." According to the second reading, poetry is not separate from thought but rather constitutes the deepest form of subconscious thought. We the readers are clearly treading on shaky ground, for poetry is not what we think – and yet it also is.

The German version of the poem bears a very different title:

KLEINE POETIK	SMALL POETICS
Gedicht ist nicht, was man denkt, was man denkt	A poem is not what you think, what you think
ist gedacht, nicht Gedicht.	is thought, not poem.
Gedacht ist Gedanke, nicht Gedicht.	Thought is thought, not poem.
Gedicht ist	Poem is
Nichtgedanke	nothought
ist	is
nicht was man fühlt.	not what you feel.
Was man fühlt ist Gefühl nicht Gedicht.	What you feel is feeling not poem.
Was man fühlt liebt man fühlen	You love to feel what you feel
Liebt Gefühl, liebt Liebe fühlen	love feeling, love to feel love
Was man fühlen liebt wird gedacht, man fühlt	what you love to feel is thought, you feel
Gefühl ist	feeling is
Nichtgedicht	notpoem
Ist	is

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6 A more precise and elegant way to say "thought is not poetry" would be: *maḥshavah 'eyna shirah*.

Was man meint es sei	what you consider
Gut oder schlecht	good or bad
Wird gemeint gut schlecht	is considered good bad
Was man meint wird gemeint	what you consider is considered
Nicht Gedicht.	not poem.
Gedicht ist – Gedicht ist –	Poem is – poem is –
Was ist ein Gedicht?	What is a poem?[7]
(Rübner 2007, 20)	

As in the Hebrew version, the German version is characterized by playful engagement with specific features of German grammar. Three come to the fore in the opening stanza. The first is repetition of the prefix "ge-," used to form both collective nouns and past participles, which produces assonance in the pairing of *Gedicht* (noun: "poem") and *gedacht* (past participle: "thought"). The second feature is the use of the contradictory compound constructions, *Nichtgedanke* and *Nichtgedicht*, comprised of a negation (*nicht*) and a noun (*Gedanke* means "thought" or "idea"), which reveal the proclivity of German for compound constructions. Bringing to mind Paul Celan's tendency to reify negations, as in the title of his volume *Die Niemandsrose* (the no-one's rose), Rübner's compound constructions preserve the negation (*nicht*) while simultaneously converting it into a substantive concept, a "thing." These concepts both do and do not exist, just as poetry both is and is not thought.

The third aspect relates to punctuation. German grammar marks a subordinate clause (*Nebensatz*) by setting it off with a comma, as in the following phrase: "Gedicht ist nicht, was man denkt" ("Poem is not what you think," with the words "was man denkt" serving as the subordinate clause). If we read this phrase as a complete statement, two possible readings emerge: first, "Poem is not that which is thought" (i.e. poetry surpasses thought); and second, "Poem is not what you think [it is]." Both readings are complicated by the fact that the subordinate clause is repeated twice, forming a "stutter": "Gedicht is nicht, was man denkt, was man denkt." One way to make sense of the repetition is to read it as the start of a new sentence that flows directly into the following line: "Poem is not what you think. What you think/ is thought." Yet the latter reading overlooks the fact that the repetition is set off with a comma, and therefore, according to the rules

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7 Throughout the translation I have elected to translate the German indefinite pronoun "man" as "you" (used here as an unspecified pronoun rather than as the second person pronoun), rather than as "one," which sounds less colloquial than the German "man."

of German grammar, constitutes an additional subordinate clause. The result is a perplexing statement: "Poem is not what you think you're thinking" (Gedicht ist nicht, was man denkt, was man denkt). Doubling the subordinate clause exploits the precision of German grammar in order to create ambiguity and confusion.

The final stanzas of the two versions differ dramatically with respect to punctuation. In the German version, the first line contains dashes that produce a stammer: "Gedicht ist – Gedicht ist –" (Poem is – poem is –). This version concludes with a clear question: "Was ist ein Gedicht?" (What is a poem?). The Hebrew version, by contrast, is devoid of punctuation. Whereas the previous stanzas play with the absence of the verb "is," the final stanza employs the feminine third-person pronoun *hi* (pronounced *hee*), used in Hebrew either as the pronoun "it" or as an optional copula: *shirah hi shirah hi/ mah hi/ shira* (poetry is poetry is/ what is [it]/ poetry). The absence of a question mark suggests two different readings. The first, as in the German version, is a simple question: "What is/ poetry?" The second reading contains a question and an enigmatic answer: "What is it? It is poetry."[8] This reading produces a tautology, a statement whose negation is unsatisfiable. The implication is that poetry simply cannot be defined (so why bother asking?). Poetry is poetry is poetry.

In both languages, interpretation relies on the way in which the poem is spoken. It is therefore interesting to note that Rübner freely admits to reading Hebrew like "a six-year-old child who must sound out every word" (Rübner 2014, 86). Hebrew may have become a primary language in his daily life, but it remains an artificial medium. He reads German much more fluently and frequently, yet his spoken German has become ossified over the years. He also confesses that he required help translating his poems from Hebrew into German because he did not feel confident about his ability to write natural, idiomatic German, a language he spoke primarily as a child and during the early years of Israeli statehood. (It is for this reason, Rübner freely points out, that he sought the assistance of German poet and translator Frank Schablewski.) Rübner's remarks about both languages point to an implicit hesitation that lies between thought and speech. When read aloud, both versions of the poem capture the poet's inner stutter by forcing the reader to falter, stammer, and stumble. Reading aloud causes the tongue to become tied.

In light of this tongue-tying effect, it is perhaps no coincidence that the poem evokes a well-known German tongue twister: "Denke nie, gedacht zu haben, denn das Denken der Gedanken ist gedankenloses Denken" (Never think to have

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8 In public readings, Rübner prefers the latter interpretation, taking a noticeable pause at the line break between the penultimate and last lines of the poem.

thought, for the thinking of thoughts is thoughtless thinking). One wonders whether this playful aphorism was not the inspiration behind the poem, even if it was composed initially in Hebrew. Is it possible, in other words, that a specter of German underlies the Hebrew "original"? In private conversation with Rübner, I explained why I mistook the German for the "original." He cheerfully dispelled my error: "How lovely! I suppose such things can happen in translation," he replied. He went on to explain that the Hebrew versions of his poems are almost always "the original," and yet in the next breath described German unequivocally as "the source" (*hamakor*).[9] This paradoxical statement confirms Rainier Grutman's definition of self-translation as a kind of "cross-linguistic creation" in which the borders between source and target languages, poet and translator, creator and mediator are confounded – often deliberately.

4 "There are words from which writing recoils": poetry between life and death

The relationship between German and Hebrew, opposing languages paradoxically bound together, is connected in Rübner's imagination with the inextricability of life and death. In a sense, death has been the strongest and most constant presence in his life, a life marked not only by the loss of his family of origin in Slovakia but also by the sudden death of his first wife, Ada, and the inexplicable disappearance of his youngest son, Moran, during his travels through South America in the 1980s. Being and absence figure as inseparable phenomena in Rübner's writing, as the poem "My Father" articulates: "Today he gazes at me from the wall and asks with his eyes / if I know, do I really know, that one cannot separate / life from death, and that language is sometimes nothing more than / the mourning of lost tenderness" (Back 2014, 209). Just as life is often but a shadow of death, so too language bears witness to that which it cannot articulate. Read in these terms, the ontological negation contained in Rübner's first Hebrew poem, "I am not who I am," captures the anxiety of the bilingual poet who is suspended between linguistic, geographical, temporal and even spiritual realms.

Poetry's resistance to definition, the main theme of "What We Think is Poetry," may also be viewed from a negative angle; that is, poetry serves as a repository of suppressed thoughts and experiences, which, when transformed into words, threaten to crumble under their own weight. The poem "Ungedicht"

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9 Rübner offered this paradoxical comment in one of our private conversations.

(which translates as "unpoem" or "anti-poem") offers an extreme counterpart to the neutral term *Nichtgedicht*. Like "What We Think is Poetry," this poem is metapoetic; yet, whereas the former inquisitively seeks a definition for poetry, the latter proceeds from the opposite angle to construct poetry's *via negativa*.

UNGEDICHT	UNPOEM
Nachdem ein Gedicht zuende ist,	After a poem has come to an end,
keine zu lauten, keine zu leisen Worte,	No word too loud or too quiet,
und du fühlst: ein Druck hat dich nachgelassen,	And you feel the pressure has left you,
von einem Joch befreit atmest du auf.	Freed of a burden you breathe freely.
Nicht immer.	Not always.
Bisweilen bäumen die Wörter sich,	Sometimes the words rise up and
stoßen zurück in dich, gar nicht zart,	thrust into you, not at all gently,
bereiten dir Schmerz, den Schmerz, den	causing pain, the pain with which
du ihnen eingeimpft hast, drängen sich,	you inoculated them, crowding together,
pressen sich aneinander, fallen zusammen	pressing into each other and collapsing
wie ein schwarzes Loch.	like a black hole.
Du schreibst: ersticken? Ersticken erwürgt ersticken.	You write: choke? Choking strangles choking.
Du schreibst: Rauch? Rauch verdunkelt Rauch.	You write: smoke? Smoke expunges smoke.
Du schreibst: Asche? Asche häuft sich auf Asche.	You write: ash? Ash piles onto ash.
Du schreibst: Züge? Züge zertrümmern Züge,	You write: trains? Trains crash into trains,
lautlos, in Totenstille.	silently, quiet as death.
Es gibt Dinge,	There are things
die Schrift schrumpft unter ihnen zusammen.	under which writing contracts.
Es gibt Dinge,	There are things
die Worte schrecken vor ihnen zurück.	from which words recoil.
Es gibt ein Gedicht, das ist ein Ungedicht.	There is a poem that is an unpoem.
(Rübner 2007, 39)	

The doubling of nouns in the third stanza points to a fundamental tension between events experienced and the poems they inspire. Can signifiers such as "smoke" or "ash" truly capture that which they purport to signify? Does the written word threaten to cover over or even "expunge" the poet's experience? Or is the opposite true, namely that the intensity of certain events has the capacity to incinerate the written word? A partial answer is supplied in the final stanza, which doubles as a definition of "Ungedicht": the poet who is compelled to relive certain events in the process of writing will necessarily fall prey to them, a victim of poetic post-traumatic stress.

In German, the inseparable prefix "un-" has a unique function that differs from negative prefixes in most other languages. When attached to a noun, it often denotes not just a reversal of the base noun's meaning but a perversion thereof, as in *Untat* (atrocity), *Unsinn* (nonsense), or *Unmensch* (barbarian; monster). The term "Ungedicht" therefore brings to mind a monstrous entity, a ghastly creature that vies with the poet as it comes into being, threatening to destroy and degrade poetry itself.[10] Echoing Theodor Adorno's oft-rehearsed adage, "poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," Rübner implies that certain poems simply cannot be written, or at least cannot be counted as poetic. The *Ungedicht* is the *Unmensch* of poetry, the poem that rises up against its creator.

Whereas in German the conceptual kernel of the poem is contained in the title, the Hebrew version revolves around a double entendre that is absent from the German. The penultimate stanza and final line of the German version are reduced to two ambiguous lines in Hebrew:

יֵשׁ דְּבָרִים שֶׁהַכְּתָב מִתְכַּוֵּץ תַּחְתָּם.
יֵשׁ שִׁיר שֶׁאֵינֶנּוּ שִׁיר.

[There are words from which writing recoils.
There's a poem that's not a poem.] (Rübner 2002, 40)

The double meaning of the word *devarim*, which may be translated as either "words" or "things," captures the insoluble tension upon which the poem constructs itself, the tension between representations of words and events/experiences as they exist in the phenomenal world. According to Jewish mystical belief, which posits a link between the world of speech and the world of the spirit, the godhead represents "the original archetypal writer, who impresses his word deep into his

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10 This struggle is amplified by the peculiar use of the phrase in line three, "ein Druck hat dich nachgelassen" (literally "a pressure has left you"), generally used in German only intransitively (i.e. "ein Druck hat nachgelassen," meaning "the pressure released"). The transitive use of this phrase personifies the poem and the pressure it produces within the poet.

created works" (Scholem 1972, 68). Rübner's poem, by contrast, presents words and the "things" they signify as a negative force that "unforms" the poem, producing "a poem that is not a poem" (*shir she'eyno shir*).

Since it is impossible to replicate this double entendre in another language, two additional lines are needed in the German version, which reinforce the word-thing duality through juxtaposition rather than wordplay: "Es gibt Dinge, / die Worte schrecken vor ihnen zurück" (There are things from which words recoil). This variation demonstrates an important strategy of self-translation: the substitution of a particular rhetorical structure or figure of speech in one language with another structure better suited to the other language. By the same token, the Hebrew version is unable to reproduce the evocative force of *Ungedicht*. Although the word '*Alshir* (literally "unpoem") is technically equivalent to *Ungedicht,* it sounds odd, since the Hebrew prefix '*al-* ("un-") is more often attached to adjectives than to nouns.[11] What the German version loses in one form of wordplay it gains in another, and vice versa.

The term *Ungedicht* can be seen as a microcosm of Rübner's poetic language, replete with paradox, negation, and contradiction. If we imagine the *Ungedicht* as an animate being, it might resemble Kafka's Odradek, that "extraordinarily nimble" creature made of "broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together" (Kafka 1995, 428). The parallel is hardly incidental; Rübner pondered Kafka's work extensively and even claimed that Kafka "lives inside [him]" (Ofek 2004, 53). In a published in interview dedicated to Rübner's views on Kafka's writing, he argued that every aspect of "Kafka's world exists by virtue of self-negation" (Ofek 2004, 45–46). When asked to describe Kafka's impact on his writing, Rübner offered: "It is possible that an element exists in my poetry that may aggravate readers, lines that may be read this way or that way, an internal dynamic that causes them to become lost in the labyrinth of what is being said" (Ofek 2004, 46). If we consider Rübner's poetry in light of his affinity with Kafka, Odradek comes to life in the prevalence of tautologies and negations, forms of language that unravel as they come into being. Underlying this contradiction is not only the tension between signifier and signified, between word and world, but also a bilingual tension. Just as Odradek's name is either of Slavonic or of German origin, with neither interpretation providing "an intelligent meaning of the word," so too each of Rübner's Hebrew poems conceals a German counterpart that both completes and complicates it.

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11 There are a few exceptions, such as the noun '*almavet*, meaning "immortality" (literally: "non-death").

5 Unhomely homecoming: bilingualism, identity, and negation

The unraveling of language is amplified in the German translations, which sometimes seem less like translations from a Hebrew original than a reversion back into German that in turn expose a gap in the Hebrew "original." Self-translation from Hebrew into German performs an "uncanny" or "unhomely" (*unheimlich*) homecoming, exposing a familiar yet spectral German presence behind the Hebrew "original." At times this homecoming manifests itself in a direct "retranslation" of a German quote, as in the poem "Century," in which a phrase from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* ("Wie wenn ich schriee") returns to its source (Rübner 2007, 7). In other poems, the German translations introduce direct allusions that are at most subliminally present in Hebrew, such as the inclusion of quotations from Goethe's "Prometheus" and Kafka's parable *Der Aufbruch* (The Departure) in the German version of the poem "Anmerkungen zu einer Arbeit über Hiob" (Notes to an Essay on Job; Rübner 2007, 12–14).

At times the "reversion" back into German is even subtler, manifesting itself in a minor shift in translation. A clear example is the brief two-line poem "Postcard from Jerusalem," which in Hebrew reads as follows:

יְרוּשָׁלַיִם יָצְאָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם וְהִסְתַּלְּקָה לָהּ.
זֶה שָׁם לְמַעְלָה בָּאֲוִיר, הֲלֹא לֹא יִתָּכֵן שֶׁזֹּאת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם?

[Jerusalem took leave of Jerusalem and made herself scarce.
That up there in the air, there's no way that's Jerusalem?]

The title of the German version, "Keine Ansichtskarte: Jerusalem," or "No Postcard: Jerusalem (Rübner 2000, 27), anticipates the very negation depicted in the poem:

Jerusalem hat sich aus Jerusalem aus dem Staub gemacht.
Das da oben in der Luft kann doch nicht Jerusalem sein?

[Jerusalem left Jerusalem in the dust.
That up high in the air couldn't be Jerusalem?]

The idiom "sich aus dem Staub machen" (meaning "to get lost," or, literally, "to make oneself out of the dust"), approximates the colloquial definition of *lehistalek* (to make oneself scarce), as well as the literal definition (to die), by invoking the biblical decree of mortality spoken by God to Adam and Eve: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). The two languages are almost equivalent here, yet German carries a biblical allusion that ironically is absent from the Hebrew. In a sense, the German version surpasses the Hebrew through its evocation of the stones and dust of "earthly Jerusalem" (*yerushalayim shel matah*), which is juxtaposed with the "heavenly Jerusalem" (*yerushalayim shel*

malah) floating ephemerally in the air. Jerusalem is both earthbound and imper-
manent as dust, just as the language used to describe Jerusalem both concretizes
and expunges it. Only by viewing the two versions of this poem alongside one
another do the limitations and gaps of each language come into full view.

Like the relationship between the German and Hebrew "equivalents" (which,
we have established, are never quite equal), Rübner's poems do not offer formu-
laic equations but rather gesture at the dissimilarity between words and things
(*devarim*) and between past and present realities. The phrase "I am not who I
am," an expression of the rift between former and existing selves, exemplifies
this mode of signification through negation. This is not the language of a poet
who has been reborn into a new language but rather that of a poet equally bound
to and estranged from both of his languages. His identity exists only in bifurca-
tion, differentiation, and mediation. In contrast to Gertrude Stein's famous quote,
"Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," Rübner's language may be described as the law
of identity via negation, for no word can capture a definable essence, and the
semiotic relationship between word and thing in one language often conceals an
altogether different type of relationship in another language.

This negative law of identity is powerfully expressed in the poem *Te'udah*,
translated as "Testimony," a word that may also denote a "certificate" or official
"document" such as an identity card (*te'udat zehut*). In this poem, bearing witness
doubles as a statement of identity and of purpose.

TESTIMONY	תעודה
I exist in order to say	אֲנִי קַיָם כְּדֵי לוֹמַר
a house is no house	בַּיִת זֶה לֹא בַּיִת,
place of spread nets, bare rock, fear	מִשְׁטַח חֲרָמִים, צְחִיחַ סֶלַע, פַּחַד
there by the central square, did I say central square?	שָׁם לְיַד הַכִּכָּר, אָמַרְתִּי כִּכָּר?
Paved wilderness.	צִיָה מְרֻצֶּפֶת.
I exist in order to say	אֲנִי קַיָם כְּדֵי לוֹמַר
a path is no path,	דֶרֶךְ זוֹ לֹא דֶרֶךְ,
its caravans clinging, ascending in the rust of dreams	יִלְפְּתוּ אָרְחוֹתֶיהָ, יַעֲלוּ בַּחֲלֻדַת חֲלוֹם
from the forest, the sand mountain	מִן הַיַעַר, הַר הַחוֹל
I walk, there, who's walking? when I used to walk with childish steps, in the sun	אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ, שָׁם, מִי הוֹלֵךְ? שֶׁהָיִיתִי הוֹלֵךְ בְּשַׁעֲלֵי יֶלֶד, בְּשֶׁמֶשׁ
of cessation, with outstretched arms, asking	חִדָלוֹן, בִּפְשֻט יָדַיִם, שׁוֹאֵל,
walking and asking after my father's face and my mother's	הוֹלֵךְ שׁוֹאֵל פְּנֵי אָבִי וְאִמִי

I exist in order to say

אֲנִי קַיָּם כְּדֵי לוֹמַר

chronicles of my ancestors, coal,
ash, wind
of my sister in my hair blowing
back and back, a night wind

קוֹרוֹת אֲבוֹתַי, פֶּחָם,
אֵפֶר, רוּחַ
אֲחוֹתִי בִּשְׂעָרִי הַנּוֹשֵׁב
אָחוֹר, אָחוֹר, רוּחַ לֵילִית

in my day I exist in order to say
to their nocturnal voices yes, yes to their
weeping, yes to
the lost in the house of their absence,
fallen
from the
shadow of its walls upon the fear of my
voice saying yes
in this vacant space.
(Rübner 2005, 24).

בְּיוֹמִי אֲנִי קַיָּם כְּדֵי לוֹמַר
לְקוֹלָם הַלֵּילִי כֵּן, כֵּן, לִבְכִיָם, כֵּן
לָאוֹבֵד בְּבֵית אֵינוֹתָם, לַנּוֹפֵל מִצֵּל קִרוֹתָיו
עַל פַּחַד קוֹלִי לוֹמַר כֵּן
בַּשֶּׁטַח הָרֵיק.

Negations such as "a house is no house" resemble mantras used by the poet to meditate on the painful experience of surviving his family. The house that once was the family home is twice purged, transformed in his memory into "the house of their absence" (*beyt 'eynotam*) and literally obliterated, reduced to "coal, ash and wind." The double-entendre of the word *korot*, meaning both "crossbeams" and "chronicles," suggests that his family's physical home has been reduced to memory. The "vacant space" where they once thrived is repeatedly juxtaposed with the poet's affirmation of his own survival – "I exist" (*'ani kayam*) – an ontological statement that doubles as a mission statement: "I exist in order to say...."

If we compare the Hebrew and German versions of the poem, we discover "gains" and "losses" in each. The Hebrew version contains biblical references that cannot be replicated in German, yet the German contains wordplay that is absent from the Hebrew. In the Hebrew version, the site where the family home once stood is described as "the top of a rock" (*tsiaḥ sela'*), a biblical phrase taken from Ezekiel's prophecy against Jerusalem following the Babylonian siege, and as "a place for spreading nets" (*mishtaḥ ḥeramim*), an allusion to Ezekiel's prophecy against the city of Tyre. In Modern Hebrew, the latter phrase takes on additional meanings, since the biblical word for "fishing net" (*ḥerem*) can be translated as either "excommunication" or "boycott," bringing to mind the boycott of Jewish businesses and the deportations of Jews during World War II. These biblical allusions are perforce lost in German translation, yet the translation to some extent compensates for these losses:

ZEUGNIS

Ich bin da um zu sagen

dieses Haus ist kein Haus
dort neben dem Marktplatz,
sagte ich
Marktplatz? Gepflasterte Öde.

Ich bin da um zu sagen

dieser Weg ist kein Weg
vom Wald, vom Sandberg her
gehe ich, dort, wer geht? ging
in der Sonne des Untergangs
mit fragenden Händen
Schritt für Schritt
Nach dem Gesicht meines Vaters
Nach dem Gesicht meiner Mutter.

Ich bin da um zu sagen

Die Balken meines Vaterhauses,
Kohle
Asche, Wind
meiner Schwester in meinem Haar,
es weht
rückwärts, rückwärts, nächtlicher
Wind

in meinem Tag bin ich da um zu
sagen
Ja ihrer nächtlichen Stimme, Ja
ihrer lautlosen, Ja
Dem der verlorengeht im Haus
ihrer Abwesenheit
Dem das abfällt vom Schatten der
Wände
Auf die Furcht meiner Stimme zu
sagen Ja
Am wohnlosen Ort.
(Rübner 1998, 66)

TESTIMONY

I am here to say

this house is no house,
there next to the marketplace,
did I say
marketplace? Paved wasteland.

I am here to say

this path is no path
from the forest, from the sand
mountain
I walk, there, who walks? walked
in the sun of destruction
with hands asking
step by step
after my father's face
after my mother's face.

I am here to say

The beams of my father's house,
coal
ash, wind
of my sister in my hair that
blows
backwards, backwards, nocturnal
wind

in my day I am here to say
yes to her nocturnal, silent
voice, yes
to him losing his way in the house
of her absence
to that which falls off the
shadows of walls
at the fear in my voice to
say yes
in this home-less place.

An obvious "gain" in translation is the sinister-sounding *Sonne des Untergangs* (sun of perdition), which conceals the innocuous word *Sonnenuntergang* (sunset), symbolizing the end of an era. The path where the child once walked is not the same path upon which the adult now treads, for the sun has set, so to speak, on that former time and place. Another shift in translation is contained in the second line of the final stanza: "Ja ihrer nächtlichen Stimme, Ja ihrer lautlosen…" ("yes to her nocturnal voice, yes to her silent…"). Both adjectives modify the same noun, *Stimme* (voice), yet the unusual syntax allows for the omission of "voice" from the second clause, literally silencing it. In the final line, the term "wohn-losen Ort" (translated above as "home-less place") amplifies the absence of the speaker's former home. In contrast to the Hebrew version, which ends on the simple image of a "vacant space" (*shetaḥ reyk*), the German offers a neologism, "wohnlos," which denotes not just "empty" or "uninhabited" but "uninhabita-ble"; this is a place of non-domicile. Through the experimental engagement with German grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, Rübner effectively produces a second original that at once resembles and departs from the Hebrew original.

The tendency to express identity through negation often relies on subtle shifts in time, place, and language. In the poem "Postcard from Pressburg-Bratislava," for instance, a tautology is transformed into a trilingual enigma: "Bratislava is Press-burg is Pozsony" (Back 2014, 149). One city, three names, the subject of the poem is divided among the three nations – Slovak, German, and Hungarian – that competed to control it. The next line reads simply, "For me it is Pressburg," transporting the reader to the poet's childhood home in the German-speaking Jewish community of the Slovakian capital. Inspired by Rübner's travels through Europe several decades after emigrating, the poem reconstructs a conversation with a former teacher:

Bratislava is Pressburg is Pozsony.	בְּרָטִיסְלָוָה הִיא פְּרֶשְׁבּוּרג הִיא פּוֹזֹ'וּנִי.
For me it is Pressburg.	בִּשְׁבִילִי הִיא פְּרֶשְׁבּוּרג.
My teacher, Mr. Wurm from the elementary school	מוֹרִי, מַר ווּרם מֵהָעַמְמִי
drew a class photo from his drawer and pointed:	הוֹצִיא מִמְּגֵרָתוֹ אֶת תַּצְלוּם הַכִּתָּה וְהִצְבִּיעַ:
"This one was a Nazi, and this one and that one too. This one	זֶה הָיָה נָאצִי וְגַם זֶה וְזֶה. הַהוּא
was especially brutal. This one fell in Russia	הָיָה אַכְזָרִי בְּמִיַחַד. הַלָה נָפַל בְּרוּסְיָה
and that one was deported. Which of the Jewish pupils	וְאוֹתוֹ גֵּרְשׁוּ. מִי מֵהַתַּלְמִידִים הַיְּהוּדִים
survived and lives – I don't know."	שָׂרַד וְחַי — אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ.
Pressburg was a tri-lingual city. Its fourth language	פְּרֶשְׁבּוּרג הָיְתָה עִיר תְּלַת–לְשׁוֹנִית. הַלָּשׁוֹן
is silence.	הָרְבִיעִית הִיא הַשְּׁתִיקָה.

The last two lines of the passage, a response to the silence surrounding the fate of Pressburg's Jews, move fluidly between past and present tenses, as if to say that the history of this once trilingual city is now shrouded in silence. Oscillating between present and past, the poem weaves its way through layers of history. Although the Nazi-Slovak alliance lurks in the shadows ("Were there once borders to evil?"), it is obscured by older and more visible historical landmarks, from an ancient Celtic fortress to Roman ruins and strongholds built by medieval Moravian princes. As the poem comes to an end, the speaker bids farewell to the same city he had departed alone as a teenager in 1941, a city whose memory extends through the centuries but retains no monument to the poet's "happy childhood" there:

This is a very old city.	זֹאת עִיר בָּאָה–בַּיָּמִים.
So very old that I no longer know her.	כֹּה בָּאָה–בַּיָּמִים עַד שֶׁאֵינִי יוֹדְעָהּ עוֹד.
Until next time, my love, it's hard to imagine.	לְהִתְרָאוֹת אֲהוּבָה, קָשֶׁה לְשַׁעֵר.

The last two words of the poem – *kasheh lesha'er* (hard to imagine) – are puzzling. Do they refer to the past (i.e. it is hard to imagine what took place then) or to the future (i.e. it is hard to imagine that the poet will ever revisit his birthplace again)? The German translation contains a peculiar variation that in a sense answers this question without making the interpretation entirely transparent: "Auf Wiedersehen, Liebe, kaum," meaning, "Until next time, love, hardly" (Rübner 2000, 10). The German farewell, *Auf Wiedersehen*, like the Hebrew word *lehitraot*, literally means "see you again." Yet the future possibility implied in this leave-taking is undercut sardonically by the word *kaum,* meaning "hardly" or "rarely," which brings the poem to an inconclusive, seemingly interrupted ending. Yet when read alongside the Hebrew version, the German word *kaum* appears to be shorthand for *kaum zu glauben* (hard to believe), the equivalent of the Hebrew phrase *kasheh lesha'er*. Both endings break off into silence. Only when read in tandem does the sentiment behind the truncated ending emerge: the poet casually bids farewell to a city he doubts he will ever see again.

    The sense of "homecoming" felt in Rübner's German self-translations betrays the limits of the cardinal binary categories of translation studies: original vs. translation, composition vs. interpretation, and poet vs. mediator. Only by brokering between German and Hebrew and their respective literary traditions is the bilingual poet able to explore the boundaries of self-expression while preserving ambiguity and opacity of meaning (the landmark of Kafka's writing that Rübner so admires). It is perhaps appropriately inconsistent – in light of Rübner's proclivity for contradiction – to describe the German and Hebrew halves of his bilingual oeuvre as simultaneously complimentary and antagonistic. Insofar as the German and Hebrew versions differ and yet "echo" one another, their pairing forms a vocal hesitation between languages and between thought and speech that is antithetical to conventional notions of fluency and mastery, notions for

which Rübner has expressed disdain: "Why should the relationship to a language be one of mastery?" (Rübner 2014, 40). Relating to language less as master than as humble servant, he feels equally liberated and encumbered by German and Hebrew. The heavy-tongued prophet must retain both languages, even if this means submitting to paradox, contradiction, and stuttering as the only means of authentic expression.

6 Israeli or German? Rübner's reception and the limits of national literature

The deliberate confounding of borders between original and translation in Rübner's bilingual oeuvre presents a challenge not only to the conventional view of translation but also to the conventional conception of nationally demarcated literatures. Rübner's resistance to categorization along national lines comes into clear view when if we compare his reception in Israel versus his reception in Germany. In 2008, he came out of the shadows of the Israeli literary establishment with his receipt of the Israel Prize, the country's highest honor. The official "Judges' Decision" contains the following description of the poet: "Tuvia Rübner deals in his poetry with the major issues of Jewish history in modern times, chief among them World War II and the Holocaust of European Jewry" (Calderon et al. 2008). The essay makes no mention of German whatsoever; it is identified neither as his mother tongue, nor as his primary language of composition, nor as the language from and into which he has translated extensively for more than sixty years. Instead, Rübner is portrayed as an under-appreciated Holocaust poet who writes poetry about "Jewish history" exclusively in Hebrew.

Rübner's reception in Germany is quite different – yet equally problematic. In 2012, he was awarded the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Literature Prize. In the essay about him that appears on the foundation's website his writing is described as "part of the corpus of modern exile literature" (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2012a). The implication is that Rübner is a German poet who living "in exile" in Israel. During the award ceremony in Weimar, however, Chairman Hans-Gert Pöttering remarked that the award was given to Rübner in recognition not only of his "autobiographical and extensive lyric work in German and Hebrew" but also of his "tremendous significance as a bridge-builder between cultures, languages and literatures" (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2012b). In contrast to the official Israeli context, where Rübner is identified primarily as a Hebrew poet and a Holocaust poet (thus furthering the Zionist narrative in which the Holocaust plays a central

role), Pöttering presented Rübner as a proponent of German-Israeli rapprochement. Neither portrait properly captures the complexity of his bilingual identity.

During a conversation with Rübner, I asked how he responds to such attempts to categorize him, and how he would categorize himself. He stated emphatically that he regards himself as a bilingual poet, but "first and foremost as a poet." Yet he does not bristle at how critics categorize him. His indifference to the contrast between his reception in Israel and in Germany reveals both the complex self-image of the self-translator and the limits of nationalized literary cultures that invariably try based on the labels available to them to classify and thus flatten this image. Rübner's role as a self-translating poet allows him to rise above such designations, since he sees his Hebrew and German poems as twin expressions of a single voice. In either language, the poems are, as he puts it, "still poems," still *his* poems.

The failure of both German and Hebrew critics and award committees to account properly for Rübner's bilingual literary achievement can be attributed to the lack of attention given to the role of self-translation in his creative process. His achievement as a self-translating poet surpasses the constraints of national literary prizes. It is therefore more efficacious to explore his work through the lens of the contemporary discourse on world literature, which highlights unequal power relationships among languages and literatures on the global stage (Apter 2005; Casanova 2004; Lennon 2010). The question of linguistic hierarchy is particularly important for self-translation. As Rainier Grutman has shown, in contrast to the "symmetrical self-translation" of Samuel Beckett, who wrote in the world's two most established literary languages (French and English), an asymmetry is involved for self-translators working in languages of lesser diffusion. These include writers from established linguistic minorities who translate themselves into the language of the majority (such as Milan Kundera), postcolonial writers who alternate between native tongue and colonial European language (such as Rabindranath Tagore), and immigrant writers who move between native and adopted languages (this is especially prevalent in among Latino American writers like Rosario Ferré) (Grutman 2013, 195). In all three cases, self-translation is "centripetal," involving the transfer from a minor native language into a major language (Grutman 2013, 189).

The case of bilingual German-Hebrew writers like Rübner complicates Grutman's scheme somewhat. German, the poet's native language, is of course richer in literary capital than Hebrew, and can therefore be designated as the "major" language. Yet, within the Israeli context German represents, even today, a historical taboo. Although Hebrew is "minor" on the global scale with respect to literary capital and readership, it is nonetheless the dominant language within

the multilingual Israeli state. For Rübner, German is a major language that became "minor" in Israel, whereas Hebrew is "minor" on the global stage yet endowed with power in its local context as the language of Israeli sovereignty. Self-translation, for Rübner, involves the crucial play between major and minor, between insider and outsider, and between global and local. Mixing German and Hebrew produces an ambiguous alternative in which each language deterritorializes the other.

Rübner's poetics cannot be fully appreciated without a careful examination of his self-translations. In contrast to Pöttering's bridge-builder metaphor, which implies mediation between two discrete camps, Rübner's self-translation project should be viewed as a "psychic dialogue" resounding within a "divided self." I borrow this psychological terminology from Naomi Seidman's work on German-Jewish translation, in which she recasts the German-Jewish "dialogue" as a "schizophrenic" rather than a "symbiotic" dynamic, "a form of talking to oneself" (Seidman 2006, 159). In keeping with Seidman's approach (which admittedly focuses exclusively on conventional source-target translation and not on self-translation), I argue that Rübner's self-translations must be seen not as a secondary phase in his writing process but rather as a foundational aspect of his poetics, an ongoing oscillation between German and Hebrew that precludes either language from being defined as "primary" or "secondary." The numerous gaps, slips, and variations that prevent the two versions of his poems from "lining up" form the heart of his "poetics of the possible," which is by the same token a poetics of the impossible. A masterful stutterer, Rübner has produced an unusual bilingual oeuvre borne of the hesitation between thought and expression, between youth and mortality, and above all between German and Hebrew.

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