

## “In jeder Sprache heisst dasselbe anders”

Migrationsliteratur aus der Schweiz. Beat Sterchi, Franco Supino, Aglaja Veteranyi, Melinda Nadj Abonji und Ilma Rakusa. By Stéphane Maffli.  
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‘Intercultural’ or ‘migrant’ literature occupies a growing area of discourse in the field of contemporary literary studies. The interest is clearly driven by the topicality of the emigration phenomenon in Western societies, and in relation to this, by the vast amount of recent and currently published important literary work on the subject. At the same time, it is not an easy task to navigate this fast-growing research field. The words ‘intercultural’ and ‘migrant’ have multiple shades and emphases of meaning, and their relation to each other is not obvious either. They are associated with different connotations in each culture, but they undoubtedly touch upon the deepest layers of cultural self-identification, and they are not just about addressing the social dilemmas of the present. Migration is a topical, practical, political, and cultural issue surrounded by lively social debate and at the same time an element that determines individual destinies to varying degrees. This might be a reason why this theme so often emerges in literary communication which is also based on a dynamic balance between unique-individual and general-abstract. In any case, determining the relationship between a literary work and a social phenomenon is a fundamental objective for researchers of ‘intercultural literature’: can literature contribute to the understanding of social phenomenon, or do works about individual, fictional, or autobiographical lives merely exploit and prey on social interest?

The ‘transcript’ publishing house in Bielefeld has played a significant role in building the discourse of intercultural literature in German-speaking areas. They are the publishers of the journal *Zeitschrift für interkulturelle Germanistik* (ZiG) and in 2020 they launched a series called *Interkulturelle Germanistik* maintained by the *Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Germanistik* (GiG). The first volume in the series, *Konzepte der Interkulturalität in der Germanistik weltweit* (Ed. Renata Cornejo,

Gesine Lenore Schiewer, Manfred Weinberg, 2020) is intended to formulate the most important lines of inquiry in this field. According to these, intercultural German studies deals with works from multilingual and/or multi-identity authors on the one hand, while on the other it deals with literary manifestations about migration and refugees, and the general theoretical issues raised by these works, such as foreignness and identity and multilingualism, and last but not least, with their features in relation to literary theory (fiction-autofiction, narration, literary style, etc.). Stéphane Maffli's book fully reflects these concepts, although it has been published in the publisher's *Gegenwartsliteratur* series, not in the rapidly expanding series of *Interkulturelle Germanistik*.

The book is based on the author's dissertation defended at the Université de Lausanne in 2019, therefore it is both organized and transparent regarding the genre. In the introduction, the author clarifies the theoretical issues of the study and outlines the literary and social context. This is followed by an analysis of five novels included in the study, broken down into separate chapters, and the work ends with a short conclusion.

First, the introduction clarifies the objectives and methods of the analysis; regarding this, Maffli describes a dual approach: "The goals of this work are thus both hermeneutic-structuralistic (describing the aesthetics and narrative structures of the texts) and literary-sociological (elaborating their social relevance)" (p. 27). The author considers these two aspects to be complementary; i.e., they seem to be related but equal, and are neither contradictory nor competing. The analyses in the volume are based on this logic as well. These two aspects cover the most important topics related to the above-mentioned concept of intercultural literature, but disregard the related questions and unresolved issues. The discussion of the two approaches is therefore not problem sensitive, but rather sketchy and vague. Discussing the "literary sociological" issue, Maffli's main point of reference is a book by Kuzmics and Mozetič (*Literatur als Soziologie. Zum Verhältnis von literarischer und gesellschaftlicher Wirklichkeit*. Cologne: Herbert von Halem, 2003), which, however, mainly reveals only that literature, despite all contrary opinions, is capable of representing social realities beyond Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (pp. 31–33). Maffli's introduction also outlines the history of post-war migration in Switzerland (pp. 17–27), revealing a picture of an essentially closed, xenophobic society in which a more migrant-friendly attitude has been developing, gradually and with reservations. The case of Switzerland is undoubtedly unique in terms of migration policy, but the presentation, for all its historical accuracy, is somewhat one-sided, not addressing, for example, the sensitivity of the 'internal' identity of Swiss society and its linguistic and social divisions, which could nuance the introduction's simplified schema of the "Swiss vs. emigrants" dichotomy. The 'hermeneutical' concept of the

volume remains equally superficial (pp. 27–31), mainly relying on the rather outdated narratological ideas of Gérard Genette and Dorrit Cohn (which are mostly based on the techniques of modern fiction of the nineteenth–twentieth century), emphasizing the importance of narrative strategies, perspectives, and focalization of narration, as well as the issue of the fictionality of literature in relation to migrant life stories. However, it does not take into account recent theories of literary meaning-making and the special status of literary language (including all that modern ‘hermeneutics’ has to say about it), which are largely based on literary works of the very postmodern period to which the novels under study belong. Multilingualism is also discussed as an important aspect of migrant literature (pp. 14–15); foreign language elements in German texts, however, remain simply the effects of alienation, the markers of foreignness—the author does not differentiate in this respect and, at least in relation to the introductory concept, does not treat the various manifestations of multilingualism as part of the hermeneutics and poetics of literary texts (fortunately, the later analyses somewhat refute this schematism).

After presenting the methodological concept, the introduction reviews the literature on migrant literature to date (pp. 37–58), with particular reference to the results of Anglo-Saxon postcolonialism (especially the work of Homi K. Bhabha) and the institutionalized discourse of ‘intercultural literature’ since the 2000s (cf. Carmine Chiellino ed. *Interkulturelle Literatur in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2000). In this respect, it not only presents the most important publications, but also the history of the Chamisso Prize and the surrounding debates, and, briefly, the specificities of Swiss research. This sequencing of the introduction foreshadows the fact that the presentation of the discourse – including, for example, the “Criticism of the concept of intercultural literature” (pp. 50–51)—remains merely illustrative, without substantially affecting the earlier specified methodological premise of the study. The author balances his own investigations on only two not particularly essential issues; namely, the relationship between the concepts of ‘migrant’ and ‘intercultural’ literature: “The field of research on migration literature is to be considered [...] a part of intercultural literary studies” (p. 47)—on the other hand, he puts the choice of subject before the biography of the author as far as the criteria of intercultural literature are concerned; i.e. it is not a necessary condition for intercultural literature for the writer to actually be a migrant (pp. 39, 43). Without questioning the legitimacy of this distinction, the problem can be further nuanced in this case as well; the book does not mention, for example, Hungarian-born Swiss writer Agota Kristof (perhaps because she wrote in French, not in German), who undoubtedly emigrated to Switzerland, and whose works are not directly about emigration yet are still connected to the issues of intercultural literature. Beyond that, the introduction only presents the positions, concepts, theses, and almost

limitless diversity of the discourse of intercultural literature from a cautious distance. The author concludes this overview with four questions that define the matrix for the following analyses (pp. 56–58): the primary aim is to understand the phenomenon of migration through texts, to examine the narrative forms and multilingualism in migration literature, and finally, to confront the texts with the social and linguistic reality of Switzerland.

The interpretative chapters do indeed follow this fourfold approach, resulting in comprehensive, very thorough and detailed analyses, with a multi-pronged approach, which in many cases allows for deeper, more layered insights than those offered in the introduction. Maffli presents the subject of his study, the context of the work, and the relevant reception in detail, while at the same time in each chapter he gets close to the text, highlighting essential details and supporting his opinions with microanalyses. The five selected novels illustrate the diversity and variations of Swiss migrant literature, and in view of the recent exponential growth of the intercultural literature (market), it can be said that Maffli has selected the ‘classics’ of the subject; books that represent the typical ‘voices’ and modes of expression of intercultural literature. The selection is indeed diverse, and offers many points of comparison, but the volume only mentions a few rather obvious similarities and differences in the introduction and conclusion, leaving the reader to draw the poetic and literary-historical lessons of the detailed analyses. As the five novels, discussed in chronological order of their publication, reveal certain trends, their differences also highlight important issues not raised in the introduction. ‘Migration’ means something different in the poetic architecture of each novel:

1. in Bernd Sterchi’s novel *Blösch* (1983), the narrative is built around the symbolic parallels between the life of the protagonist (a manual laborer in Switzerland) and the objects of his work (the animals in the slaughterhouse);
2. Franco Supino’s book, *Musica Leggera* (1995), is essentially a love story in which the—second-generation—migratory background of the characters is important, but not the central aspect of their character development;
3. in Aglaja Veteranyi’s *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht* (1999), migration is actually relegated to the background at the plot level, but the ‘style’ of the novel and its fragmentary, symbolic, expressive use of language is closely linked to the linguistic alienation and loss of language that results from migration;
4. Melinda Nadj Abonji’s 2010 novel *Die Tauben fliegen auf* has a more traditional autofictional narrative, with the event of emigration as its clear focus, and almost all the motifs and layers of the text revolve around this theme; as in...
5. Ilma Rakusa’s biography *Mehr Meer* (2009), in which travel and the alternation of places and cultures form the basic layer of the narrative; this is what the book ‘is about.’

In other words, these five examples also outline a certain emancipation of the migratory, intercultural thematic; how the issue can be taken out of context and placed into the poetic center.

The emphases of these thorough and multi-faceted analyses also emerge: in the first novels, the author mainly tries to highlight the appearances, examples, and aspects of the migration problematic, while in the more recent volumes he first takes up the characteristics of the narration and the narrative language (such as the emergence of multilingualism), and then, in more detail and as a conclusion, the social aspects of migration. These emphases are also reflected in the fact that the longest chapter is devoted to Nadj Abonji's book, which is perhaps the most ideological novel about 'migration' in the social sense (starting from Eastern Europe, ending in integration). Maffli has less to say about Ilma Rakusa's—also internationally acclaimed—book, which deals with the individual-cultural rather than the social dimensions of immigration, as well as about Veteranyi's novel, which, apart from its "sensitive" themes (child abuse, violence), stands out primarily for its creative, lyrical, and expressive language. Here too, Maffli provides detailed, sensitive textual analyses and raises important issues for reading Veteranyi's text (lyricism, trauma, intertextuality, narrative), but the analysis ultimately seems to be a description of the confusion (the "ambiguity" [p. 149]) related to the text; i.e., the author does not establish a close connection between the intercultural features of the novel and the poetic construction of the text. The analysis of Ilma Rakusa's novel is similarly restrained when it comes to the lyrical solutions and linguistic games of the text (Maffli is mainly focused on the question of autofiction in the context of *Mehr Meer*). The analyses show that the author of *Migrationsliteratur aus der Schweiz* sees the novels under analysis primarily as possible representations of immigration understood as a sociological phenomenon, rather than as attempts to find linguistic forms for the experience of interculturality.

Compared to monographs that deal with one or two works, the five quite different novels analyzed by Maffli reveal a particularly broad spectrum of intercultural literature, encouraging the reader to reflect on, add to, deepen, and debate the topic. The comprehensive selection in *Migrationsliteratur aus der Schweiz* and its detailed analyses—always attentive to the social aspect—make a convincing case that the recent history of Swiss literature can hardly be discussed without an intercultural perspective—and in this regard, even if it represents a special case, Switzerland is certainly not alone.

