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To the word-woods and back: Multi/trans/no-lingual movements

Adnan Mahmutović, Stockholm University

The specific character of "multilingualism" in this auto-analysis is defined by an oscillation between "no-lingualism" and multilingual movements of a transnational writer. I argue that my own writing in English does not merely stem from the fact of my knowing and working in different languages – English, Swedish and Bosnian – but also from specific geographical locations that in themselves contain certain multilingual and translingual movements and histories of languages and national literatures (including Russian, Arabic, and Turkish). Beyond the obvious features like code-switching, which are visually most conspicuous and therefore typically used as indicators of multilingual writing, the intent is to show how historical movements and places shape the main language of my writing (English), as well the style, rhythms, character, and structures. The general core of creativity is proposed to lie more in the continuous osmosis than the deliberate hybridizing of languages and literatures.

Keywords: multilingualism, no-lingualism, place, transnationalism, osmosis, creative writing

> *Man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him; for if not, why should he want all the place*
> Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (p. 126)

In the beginning was the wheelbarrow. Or, as the poet said, "so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow" (Williams, 1938, pp. 1–4). Or, as I wrote in *Comics, war, and ordinary miracles* (Mahmutović and Durneen, 2015), relating an event that turned out to be my symbolic anchor in history and a compass through the word-woods of diaspora:

> So how did we save our collections? We loaded them on a *wheelbarrow* and went to a shed Armin's family had in the woods somewhere on the mountain, but when we got there, we realized that place could be blown away by a big bad wolf and our poor little comics would be destroyed or, God forbid, eaten up by wild beasts. So we tried a few other equally silly plans, and the people in the streets would watch us like the freaks we were,

Corresponding author's email: adnan.mahmutovic@english.su.se
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> pushing that wheelbarrow up and down the street, looking for the best hiding place. Grownups were burying gold and such stuff. My mother buried some, and she never found it after the war. I think my uncle buried a VCR. I came up with the idea to pack the books in waterproof bags and sink them all into a septic tank. The soldiers wouldn't check the shit hole, right? (42, emphasis mine)

This story describes the workings of a teenage mind back in the 1990s, during the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the war presented me with all kinds of horrific scenarios, rapidly creating a disorder that I would later learn is so bad it has to have an acronym for a name, PTSD, I stipulate in this story that my greatest concern was the destiny of my impressive comic book collection. My childhood friend and I loaded the collection on a wheelbarrow and took it deep into the woods because I always felt the woods were a safe refuge. Bosnia is famous for its mountains and its woods and its rivers, and I grew up in those woods, but then the war turned the woods into just a lot of trees and often mined terrains. Every spot was a hiding place, and no spot was the right one. We were lost. Lost in the same way we no longer had a sense of what Yugoslavia and Bosnia were as countries. Everything was chopped up into smaller pieces, and the war itself had so many different features, so many different faces in different parts of the country. The war meant living in isolation and having no sense of what constituted this motherland that is under attack. In Banja Luka, we were facing daily abuse and the beginnings of ethnic cleansing, while in the nearby town of Kotor Varoš, only some forty kilometers away, my maternal grandmother and cousins were facing genocide. Kotor Varoš felt as distant as Scandinavia or Australia. The fact that in my hometown we mainly got local radio broadcast by the new Serb authorities, which was nothing but propaganda, meant we were even more isolated, like singular trees in a vast forest. Piecing together a sense of a country, a sense of a people, was like roleplaying as Dr. Frankenstein. Becoming a refugee, becoming a part of the diaspora, increased this sense of being a part of Frankenstein's creature, always aware of the stitches and worrying how long they might hold.

This leads me to the grounding claim for this introspective paper, this auto(bio)psy that traces a fifteen-year trajectory of writing: the drive and movement of words, which will in one shape or another remain throughout my writing, is this movement of the wheelbarrow between the woods and other places, the movement as a way of stitching things together, an attempt to find the whole but only ever having access to fragments. This movement is what lies at the core of my writing, which I will, wearing a writer's hat (slightly tipped), call not just multilingual and translingual writing, but also "no-lingual" writing.

The labels *multilingual* and *translingual* at first sight appear limiting, and most authors tend to have a default aversion to all labels that serve academic analyses of their work. In simplest terms, multilingual means operating in (rather than just knowing) multiple languages. Translingual would mean that this operating/living in different languages entails frequent, but not always voluntary movements not just between the domains of different languages but also all kinds of border-crossing or transgressions (for instance related to the big spheres of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender, but also smaller, often individualized

spheres of communal life).[1] In any case, I have never encountered a writer who is happy to call themselves anything but a writer. However, zooming in on one's own work with an analytic eye and with a specific idea such as multilingualism and translingualism may produce the exact opposite effect. These terms can, I hope to demonstrate, open up writing, which is exactly what this weird breed of people called writers always believe it to be: boundless. Using the metaphoric oscillation in my term "word-woods," an oscillation between parts and the whole, I want to move through several metamorphoses of my writing which is multilingual and transnational, but also no-lingual as a state of being. By *no-lingual* I hope to refer, to begin with, to that state of a deep sense of inadequacy that follows one's mastery of a language. It is a sense of knowing all the words and structures but still grasping to understand the woods that is the language. It is a sense of developing as a master navigator but still being lost in the word-woods.

I used to be the kind of person who did not believe one could learn different languages so I spent six years studying German and, in the end, I could not speak it to save my life. The refugee life proved me wrong and pushed me into Swedish, probably the easiest language in the world because, as I tend to say, it is not the kind of language in which a wrong accent or some grammatical subtlety will likely cause you to insult someone's mother. The multilingualism of writing does not merely come from the fact of an author knowing and/or working in different languages, in my case English, Swedish and Bosnian, but also from specific geographical locations that in themselves contain certain histories of multilingualism and translingualism. I will now offer a series of examples trying to examine some aspects of my multi/trans/no-lingualism. I will avoid drawing attention to things like code-switching, which are visually most conspicuous and therefore frequently used as proof of multilingual writing. No doubt I have used code-switching quite often, for various reasons, but as my writing developed, I would avoid the most stereotypical uses which often just mean to indicate the foreignness of the character. In contrast, in the following passage from the essay "The origins of smudges" (Mahmutović, 2013) the situation as such requires multilingualism:

> The singing nurse wheeled me down to the reception, where they gave me a prescription for painkillers and called a cab. Turkish songs sounded like Bosnian songs. The driver picked up a German tourist with a sick girl who was going in the same direction. I said the music was nice, and he asked me in German how long I'd been hospitalized.
> I said in English, "Five out of eight vacation days," and he turned to the German woman to ask her how to say Scheiße in English, and she said, "Shit." He said, "Shit," and I said, "Scheiße." He asked me for my name, and when I told him, he said, "Adnan, Türk?"
> Nein. (p. 23)

This passage simply features amusing grappling for words in a multilingual situation for the sake of communication. It is caused by the particularity of the

[1] Given the character of this reflection, I will not enter debates about multilingualism and translingualism, and will in some sense take them for granted. For scholars in the generic fields, their ideological premises will be quite different.

place, which is not simply Turkey, but a tourist town in Turkey where I would often also be addressed in Russian, I suppose due to the fact Bosnian is a Slavic language). I am interested in movements and places and hope to show how places shape the language, shape the style, shape rhythms, shape characters, and shape structure. When it comes to multi/trans/no-lingual writing my general way of working is less by deliberate mixing of language and more by osmosis and mutual cohabitation. Let us compare the opening of my personal essay *A movable fast* (Mahmutović, 2016) and Hemingway's (1996) *A movable feast*.

"A movable fast" (2016)	*A movable feast*
Then the hot weather came to Sweden, in 2014, as if the age of Nordic summers was gone and the monotheistic hell had decided to move closer to me, now that I was about to turn forty. And it was Ramadan, falling, this year, in the period of shortest nights, beginning just before the most important national holiday, Midsummer Eve, when we eat crayfish, dance around straw goats with red ribbons, drink and sing snapsvisor, anything from Helan Går and The Little Herring Said to Bamse, the Dirty Little Bear, whose lyrics have cues when everyone is supposed to drink up the shots. (np)	Then there was the bad weather. It would come in one day when the fall was over. We would have to shut the windows in the night against the rain and the cold wind would strip the leaves from the trees in the Place Contrescarpe. The leaves lay sodden in the rain and the wind drove the rain against the big green autobus at the terminal and the Café des Amateurs was crowded and the windows misted over from the heat and the smoke inside. It was a sad, evilly run café where the drunkards of the quarter crowded together and I kept away from it because of the smell of dirty bodies and the sour smell of drunkenness. (9)

A movable feast reads like an effortlessly written travelogue that follows the events in real-time, but we know it took Hemingway many years to finish and it is an example of how places affect the writing. In it, Hemingway writes that he could only write about America when he was abroad and about Paris when he was away from Paris. These places had to mutate in his imagination and become narrative, and this, I suggest, is true for multi/translingual/no-lingual writing as such. This is why I will try and speak about my writing through real/metaphoric places like the woods, buses, and cemeteries. Above all, they shape the very movement of language, and, like in Hemingway, the movement of the language is the effect of the simultaneous immovability of the place and the movement of the weather (here, also history). He spoke several languages, some of which are obvious through code-switching, but the osmosis that shaped his language and style at a deeper level, which we know from this very book, has to do with for instance some classical Russian and Norwegian literature which he admired. It is not a matter of literal translations of phrases and metaphors from other languages that appear innovative in the new literary language. Joseph Conrad, who was in his time frequently ridiculed for his strong accent while being a master of English prose (Pousada, 1994) was convinced that multilingualism lies much deeper:

> English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And as to adoption, well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language

> … It was a very intimate action and for that very reason it is too mysterious to explain. The task would be as impossible as trying to explain love at first sight.[2]

As a way to at least approach, if not explain the mystery, I ask myself how did Hemingway's globally famous style become the perfect influence for a personal essay about a Bosnian man who happened to be enjoying a Ramadan in his hometown (decades after the war), while at the same time feeling nostalgic for Scandinavia and the Ramadans he experienced there? In this story, which takes place as I am transitioning into my forties and entering a new phase of writing, we see how the linguistic features which Hemingway inherited from people like Knut Hamsun and Leo Tolstoy seep into my story. At the same time, the implied influences of the Russian literature vis-a-vis my mother tongue Bosnian, and Bosnian literature, cannot be overlooked, but here these influences are coming at me transformed through Hemingway's English. Here we have another wheelbarrow of a story that moves between the Balkans and Scandinavia via English shaped by Euro-Asian classics. The multi/trans/no-lingualism of the story is not easy to analyze quite mechanically, grammatically, lexically, etc. No doubt one can look upon complex cultural transfer bound to textual forms, in terms of intertextuality, as Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (2021) might suggest. He argues that intertextuality replaced the notions of "'influence' and 'source'" and came to imply '"connectedness' … 'dialogic interaction' … and 'productivity'," then "memory of literature," and "dialogism" (p. 106). His point about Samoyault's definition of intertextuality as "memory of literature" (p. 106) is particularly interesting in this context because it pushes against the notions of anxiety of influence, and modern notions of plagiarism and referencing, to which I will return at the end of this article. Multi/trans/no-lingual writing is therefore not simply a mosaic of quotations but inter/intra-textual.

When we speak of the richness of polyglot writers and their multi/translingualism we tend to forget that for most of us working in various languages there is the dominant myth/reality of *no-lingualism*, that is, having no language to speak of. Conrad expresses this anguish quite vehemently (see Pousada, 1994). As writers in our second language – or in my case my third language – we are Jacks of all trades but supposed masters of none. Or we need to be Master-Jacks. We have to be on the very top of our game to even be in the game and even then, prejudices and suspicions abound.[3] I doubt Hemingway had those problems just as most so-called (and still-called) "native" speakers of any language do not have problems being understood regardless of the level at which their creative language becomes, well, creative. In order to strike back or punch up (to use the woke vocabulary), nowadays we often speak of appropriation and the exotic/decorative multilingualism found in (the trope of) the white Western

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[2] Full text at http://www.online-literature.com/conrad/notes-on-my-books/13/. Also, see a discussion on transcripts by Jean M. Szczypien.

[3] This actually applies back to one's so-called mother tongue. In 2021, I gave a long interview in Bosnian which was quite popular and well-received, but one person wrote to me saying I should only give interviews in English because I master that language and never in Bosnian because I was only a teenager when I left. My natural speech patterns and way of speaking, rather than any grammatical errors, were interpreted as insecurity in handling my mother tongue and therefore a good reason to abandon the notion of speaking publicly in Bosnian. This was indeed a singular opinion, and it was clear it was not based on any objective assessment but a result of an insecurity so common to many exiles.

man. And no doubt there is much truth in that, but the problem is as soon as we get into the politics and powerplay of the writing business we can easily become lost (in new word-woods). A great deal of diversity can fit into this trope of the "white Western male" and the trope obscures this diversity. For instance, I could quite legitimately complain about the success of the Brits and the Americans writing on Bosnia, stories which are often their own stories just set in a different place and therefore perhaps more digestible and moderately exotic, while our own stories are completely overlooked. The second crux of the industry is also that often it is enough to take one name from some nation, make it the symbolic go-to representative, and then there is no need for any other voices. One voice becomes all voices. And yet, at the same time, no ethnically / religiously / politically authentic name guarantees authenticity.

Of course.

Here I separate this "of course" as an entire paragraph to emphasize it is a deliberate move, not a matter of ignorance. For Hemingway, one would probably say it was either a simple mistake or the creative freedom of a native speaker.

In order to objectively evaluate multilingual writing – for instance, the technique of code-switching – and to avoid reading-in our (academic) prejudice, we should at first anonymize the texts. Most times we would discover there is no difference between *authentic* and *appropriating* uses of code-switching. The only difference would be in the reality of the "right." I am not trying to save the White-Western-Man trope and the problematic socio-economic gain of appropriation. Especially not because I am, at my current age, a white Western middle-aged man. Or am I? Have you, the reader of this essay, until this point, thought of me in terms of this trope? Would you put me in the same basket (or trashbin) as Hemingway and so many of the English, American, French, etc. writers? Most probably not. I fit the bill on the surface.

Let me repeat this: I am not trying to save the White-Western-Male trope. On the contrary. It is obvious, from what I already said, that the imbalance of power in writing, as in life, is a fact and we can deal with that in different ways, but if we are to discuss creative art in terms of multi/trans/no-lingualism we have to start deviating from the notions of ownership, especially the ownership of language and sources of inspiration. For a moment we have to bracket all the colossal examples of the powerful punching down and allow an inspection into the freedom of the word to pass vast spaces and go through multiple changes until it is used in a non-native place to signify, in the most authentic way, the feelings of, say, a hurt mother. Were not the Greeks and old Jewish-Christian-Muslim thinkers against any proprietary claims, even when it comes to ideas and patents?[4] I mean, imagine if someone had a patent on wheels and barrows. I could never afford my foundation myth and William Carlos Williams would not have his foundation myth. Imagine I had to pay the Williams estate every time I used "wheelbarrow" poetically (or, at least, "wheel barrow" as he wrote it)? I have, however, had to remove a short Hemingway quote that I used as an epigraph to my novel *At the feet of mothers* just in case it does not backfire.

The bottom line is: places change words that somehow got lost at border-crossings, were smuggled, and found shelter in most unlikely homes. Places

[4] And was I not reminded of this idea from an article by a friend, Mirnes Kovač, wrote on the "Bosnian prayer," which I will use to wrap up this article? I will not, of course, argue against the notion of plagiarism in general. The point is to examine what can happen in artistic discourse.

change powerful words brought to them by powerful colonialist industries, words backed up by the money and the military. Places change the rhythms of sentences, and the way stories desperately wind their way from beginnings to ends. In fact, if I return to my youth, I can see how my stories were defined by refugee buses. Moving from Bosnia to Sweden, aside from the general sense that entire Europe was like the woods we were trying to see as a whole, but perhaps not able for all the individual trees (read whatever you like into this). Those long journeys on busses with stops that were not stations but random resting places for toilet breaks consistently governed the structure of my stories. I still struggle with finding forms that have beginnings-middles-ends. This is why the story "How to fare well and stay fair" (Mahmutović, 2012) takes the shape of a second-person instruction manual for my younger self.

> i.
> Cry when you leave your country, if you absolutely must. If you're an expat, please, don't even think about it, but if you're a refugee, make sure you do it out of sight of other cry-babies. You do not want to encourage them, or speed up the progress of their bouts of nostalgia, and feed all the weird bugs they've been infected with from the moment they were packed on those old blue buses, which used to take you to school and your father to his factory job, but which are now used to take you so far north that red-nosed Rudolf has to hide from your sorry face behind frozen trees.
>
> ii.
> Don't sit in the aisle, even though there are no seats left for all the guys and girls of your age. You're young and healthy and not yet smart enough to understand the war and what could have happened to you, and this is why you will one day say that those warm war days were the happiest moments of your life, when soldiers roamed about and shot at will and you spent hours sitting tight with Mother and Father in your neighbour's cellar, because it was less damp and less infested with rats than yours. (pp. 1–2)

Here I deliberately number these random stops. The story has a clear drive. The instructional form makes it extremely clear there is a destination, which is the point from which the speaker sends these instructions into the past. Still, it is not quite clear if that voice really is speaking from a sense of finally grasping the woods or as someone who is still a single lost tree. Each scene in this story is like a single tree and by the end the story asks the reader, can you see me as one singular whole, as one single woods. A scene in the middle of this story is a stand-alone flash-story about me photographing my father deep in the Swedish woods in an attempt to produce an authentic refugee image. He resists. He refuses to act the trope and the camera captures that spite, which in some sense is our (in)famous Bosnian spite ("inat"). Generally, this autobiographical piece tries to, by using multi/trans/no-lingualism, and multi/trans/no-culturalism, give the reader a simultaneous sense of "woods" and "just a lot of trees." Practically, it is like trying to make the reader simultaneously see both the rabbit and the duck in the famous rabbit-duck image. This is symptomatic of my first novel, *Thinner than a hair* (Mahmutović, 2010), which strongly established the trope of the woods as a foundational metaphor of stability (home) that became destabilized (unheimlich) during the war.

> We appeared in the fresh midnight light of the twin crescent moons – one sickle for each of us – and disappeared into the mountain woods. The woods and the night don't discriminate between people.
> 'I'm going to get a life worth living with modern people in Europe, where people don't fight, but have fun instead.'
> 'Where?'
> 'Germany, or Austria, you know, any place is better than this, where everybody hates you. I'll go somewhere where you only walk in the woods for sport.' (p. 110)

The multi/trans/no-lingualism I deal with is always a question of seeing the woods for the trees and, switching metaphors, to see cemeteries for the graves. I came to understand my attraction to graveyards during post-war summer vacations in Bosnia. In my hometown, on the second day of the three-day festivity that follows Ramadan, which we call Bajram (Eid al-Adha in Arabic), there is a tradition to visit cemeteries. It is the official Day of the Martyrs. Usually, a group of local men takes a stroll from graveyard to graveyard, traditionally reciting the "Al-Fatiha," the opening surah of *The Qur'an*. On my first walk, I discovered there were smaller graveyards in people's private backyards. Then there were these places where there were no gravestones but the locals knew there were graves under the asphalt and so they gathered in those places, often in the middle of a crossing, for a moment stopping the traffic. This closeness to death, this relaxed attitude to the dead is not something I had noticed as a child. It was only as a "returnee" with Scandinavian eyes that I could see it, but it was always there, and therefore invisible. It is just a rhythm of life, like a simple manner of speaking. Though this made me agree even more with Hemingway's skepticism about writing about the places where one currently lives, there is a place I used in a story while still living close to it: the graveyard around Katarina church in central Stockholm. It is a unique place, like a park among buildings from different eras of Swedish history, a place where girls sometimes sunbathe among the graves. I have no prejudice against naked women in graveyards, mind you. I simply want to point out how it gives the location its unique character and how it calls for an entirely different kind of language and narrative, especially for a story about a Bosnian woman with PTSD who is both taking care of her ailing mother and working as a carer for an autistic boy. Below are the opening and the ending of "Gusul" (Mahmutović, 2012):

> Emina is working, but her work, the autistic boy Stig, is scuttling from gravestone to gravestone around Stockholm's Katarina Church, knocking over aluminum vases and yellow flowers, his long blonde hair wet and glued to his face. He sings the latest Swedish hit that bombed at the Eurovision Song Contest, 'I wanna be like a star like a hero, love will survive.'
> The ghosts of Sweden past that sit on the mossy and cobbled Church grounds seem kind and cheerful to Emina. They do not look at her with derision. They do not mind that she is looking straight through them as if they did not grace her with their presence. The grave of Erik the smithy is well fenced so that Ivar the baker and Irma the milkmaid do not enter his space like they used to do in the times when the city customs still meant more than the invisible barrier between the rich and the filthy rich. (p. 75)

…

> Stig jumps from gravestone to gravestone in the Muslim section of Skogskyrkogården. Most stones have a crescent and a star carved close to the top, a name or names underneath. A few even have a small white bird perched on the last letter of the surname. Emina stares at a group of graves so close to each other as if the people in them were relatives. But, Ahmed the Egyptian, Zuleyha the Pakistani, Osman the Albanian, Safiya the Malay, and Ibrahim the Somali don't say much to each other. They speak to Emina, in their native tongues. A small-time town of Babel. Emina imagines they are gesticulating to help her understand their afterlife troubles.
> Her mother is still silent.
> Stig shouts to Emina, 'Look at this.' She lifts her eyes from the mound marked with her mother's name. Stig jumps off Zülfikar the Turk's marble gravestone, bends his legs and spreads his arms as if he is going to hug her. He presses his palms with his two middle fingers, to release the spiderweb, and yells, 'Pfzzzz, pfzzzz.' He trips and falls flat on his stomach, and a second later he's up again. He pulls up his Spidey-suit, and points at his skinny torso. 'See, no injuries.' (p. 84)

The story of a Bosnian care person, entitled after a word foreign in English (meaning ritual washing), starts at the Katarina cemetery and ends in the Muslim section of Skogskyrkogården. So the first and the second cemeteries are fixed places, practically like two gravestones that bracket the middle section of the narrative – the story of the mother's death – which is like a limbo, but the language reflects that restlessness I mentioned before. A Bosnian refugee in Sweden almost has to have two gravestones, in two styles, in two languages, or no language at all.

I find it somewhat amusing and fateful from the point of view of the tropes I have been using that Skogskyrkogården literally translates as "forest cemetery," because the following ten years I would spend writing a novel called *At the feet of mothers* (Mahmutović, 2020), which takes place in the woods of the Smoky Mountains. Its story would lead me to several cemeteries in North Carolina and Gaza, as well as individual gravesites in various woods and in the Negev desert. All these became central to the shaping of my American story. The movement between the woods and cemeteries, always a state of simultaneously being lost and found, always simultaneous attention to individuality (of people, of words, of places, of cultures, of histories) and the big picture, shaped the English language of the story. This language was of course well researched in terms of local peculiarities, some of which I use to give a sense of the place, but not as much as to (re)create a language that would be too obscure to a more global audience. Did I fear becoming a cultural appropriator? Yes, and No. I knew from my writings on Bosnia that the language would always be something charged with politics, something always contested. There is no writer, good or bad, who can avoid this in their choices. In other words, there is no such thing as a purely native writer, not in the essentialist sense of the word. Authenticity does not require that. Authenticity depends a lot more on the genuineness of the approach. In the following passage, it is obvious, in comparison to the excerpts I quoted earlier, how different the language is:

> The wind was slow and patient. I leaned on the old poplar over Caddy's grave and slowly sank down to the ground and felt the moss and touched a few new plants. I sat down and waited for the cold to seek its way into my muscles and then I stood up and rubbed my legs, and walked on. I followed the edge of the woods, thinking the smooth darkness to my left must be at least five yards deep. No sounds came from it. The hooting and rustling and screeching and gnawing and breaking and twirling came from the trees and swept over the dark and into the trees on the other side, which then answered with a vengeance, and now that I no longer sought any sense in the ancient row between the plants and animals, it was all clear to me, and plain, like the wind that kept blowing at the same pace, still strong, and still patient. I picked a star and followed it. It was a puny star, whose name I didn't know, and I didn't care which way it led me. I was hungry so I sang the bear song, but no bears came. I was not afraid of anything save myself. (p. 104)

Here I am, a writer who made an imaginative leap from the Bosnian woods to the American woods following the character of the adopted Palestinian boy Joseph to deserts, on freighters, the open seas, etc. And this style of writing will constantly evoke this sense of being at home in the woods and always trying to see the woods for the trees. To return to the multi/translingual influences I mentioned in the case of Hemingway, the following passage is a reworking of a famous passage from the 19th century Bosnian classic *Death and the dervish* by Meša Selimović (1996):

At the feet of mothers	*Death and the dervish*
I closed my eye thinking, so what were they then my mothers? Madwomen? Wretches? The most complicated women on the face of the earth? History hasn't played a joke on anyone like it has on them. On us. And what the hell am I? Until yesterday I'd been what I wanted to forget today, but today I didn't become anything else. I'd finished my path, stunned. I'd been torn from my roots, twice, but I didn't become a part of anything else. Like a pilgrim whose course was diverted by a flood and no longer has a source or an estuary, too small to become a sea and too big to be drunk up by this tough earth. With a feeble sense of guilt because of my origins and shame because of my ignorance, I felt detached from kin and strangers, and I didn't even have pride or hate to defend myself from these ghosts. I guess I… we… my mothers and I, wanted to save ourselves, but in the end we got lost. In the end, the tragedy was that we have loved this failure to grow	"So what are we then? Lunatics? Wretches? The most complicated people on the face of the earth. Not on anyone else has history played the kind of joke it's played on us. Until yesterday we were what we want to forget today. But we haven't become anything else. We've stopped halfway on the path, dumbfounded. We have nowhere to go any more. We've been torn away from our roots, but haven't become part of anything else. Like a tributary whose course has been diverted from its river by a flood, and no longer has a mouth or a current; it's too small to be a lake, too large to be absorbed by the earth. With a vague sense of shame because of our origins, and guilt because of our apostasy, we don't want to look back, and have nowhere to look ahead of us. Therefore we try to hold back time, afraid of any outcome at all. We are despised both by our kinsmen and by newcomers, and we defend ourselves with pride and hatred. We wanted

roots and be a part of a people, and everything has its price, even this love. Was it a coincidence that they were so softhearted and cruel, my mothers, so damn sentimental and so damn hard, joyful and melancholy, always ready to surprise others and surprise themselves? Was it a coincidence that they have taught me, if despite themselves, how to hide behind this love, the only certainty in this mess, and find no reason to rage. Why did they do it? Why was I doing it? Because, after all, I wasn't indifferent. Because they weren't indifferent. And if we weren't indifferent then maybe, just maybe, we'd always been honest, especially when we lied, and if we were honest, then please God, please salute our madness. (pp. 248–249)	to save ourselves, but we're so completely lost we don't even know who we are anymore. And the tragedy is that we've come to love our stagnant tributary, and don't want to leave it. But everything has a price, even this love of ours. Is it a coincidence that we're so overly softhearted and overly cruel, so sentimental and hard-hearted, joyful and melancholy, always ready to surprise others and even ourselves? Is it a coincidence that we hide behind love, the only certainty in this indefiniteness? Are we letting life pass by us for no reason, are we destroying ourselves for no reason, differently than Jemail, but just as certainly? Why are we doing it? Because we're not indifferent. And if we're not indifferent, that means we're honest. And if we're honest, then let's hear it for our madness!" (p. 231)

As I said, I did much research on the local dialects and was influenced by a number of American authors, but the core influence for me was Selimović's (1996) story about a man lost in the word-woods of his own mind. You have to know this writing really well, and perhaps his influences – other classics from the major languages like Russian, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, German etc. – in order to see how it shapes what looks quite local to Joseph's own Smoky Mountains. I always liked playing with languages but always with an intent to create connection and not obscurity. It is my general belief that we can speak the same language and not understand each other and speak different or multiple languages at the same time and create intimacy.

Now I want to take you deeper into the word-woods and hopefully back into more comfortable clearings in those woods. In recent years, I have been asked several times to write essays on language. I never expected I would have to reflect more explicitly on my own writing, especially in a creative, rather than academic form (like this article). Since this theme had already preoccupied my life, early on I wrote "Afterword: homecoming" (Mahmutović, 2021), in which I describe the feeling of visiting my homeland a decade after the war and having some peculiar experiences with language, which reminded me of those Sartrean moments of existential crises when words lost sense (of reality), those moments when a word like "tree" had no connection whatsoever with the actual tree. Years later, a woman from Serbia (but living in the USA) asked me to write an essay for an anthology on language, *Život na drugom jeziku* (*Life in another language*) (Mahmutović, 2019), and it had to be in Bosnian. I panicked, of course. The thought of writing in Bosnian so many years after I left, now with my own mother tongue stuck in the form it had in the 1990s, terrified me. What I did was something I felt perhaps represented my inner multi/trans/no-lingualism that was hiding under the nice veneer of all my stories. I took "Afterword: homecoming" and pulled it through Google translate and then wrote the essay as a response to that machine translation. This was like diving deep into the word-woods, really going crazy on this, exposing myself to Google's own

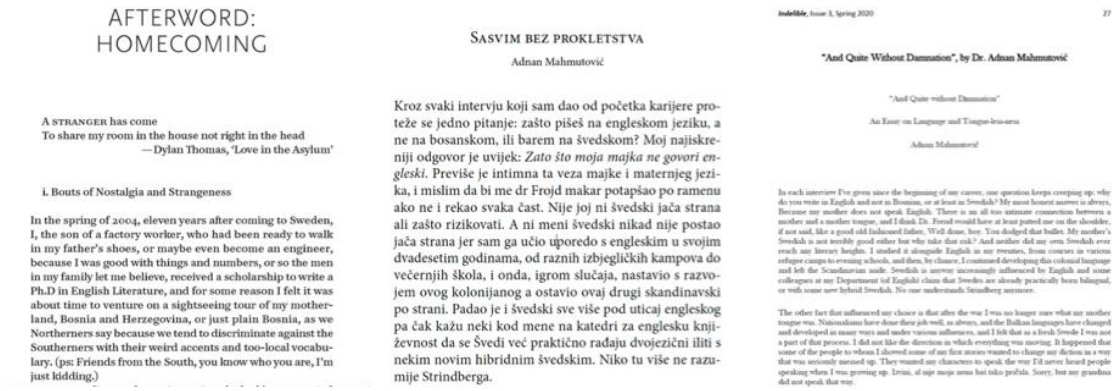
multi/trans/no-lingualism because, in my view, it showed more precisely what it meant to have many languages and yet, perhaps, no language. The title "Sasvim bez prokletstva" (literally "quite without damnation") (Mahmutović, 2019) was the warped machine translation of the phrase I used in the story "quite curseless." Later this essay was translated into English and became "And quite without damnation." In it, I reflect on my use of language for different situations, often being puzzled by the way languages change and force you to constantly catch up. This means that however much you master it, the language is always your master, it always opens up and asks you to run a few more miles, and do a dozen more pushups. You never become a true master. Always a follower. Always a slave. Always an adoptee, as Conrad would have it. So, in "And quite without damnation" (Mahmutović, 2020) I write:

> In each interview I've given since the beginning of my career, one question keeps creeping up: why do you write in English and not in Bosnian, or at least in Swedish? My most honest answer is always, Because my mother does not speak English. There is an all too intimate connection between a mother and a mother tongue, and I think Dr. Freud would have at least patted me on the shoulder, if not said, like a good old-fashioned father, Well done, boy. You dodged that bullet. (np)

This passage in the third version arises from a process many years in the making which resulted in several texts which individually, as single trees/gravestones, have their shape and work as they do, but taken together, as if forming a small woods/cemetery, they seem to resist qualification and show a search for a place, for form, for expression, for a language if not the language. The image below shows the openings of the original story from 2005 (republished in 2012), then an essay in Bosnian which reflects on this story, then the English "translation" of this essay which metamorphosed into a story of its own (figure 1).

In the original essay/story, I am using Shakespeare's Caliban to say something about not having a language and yet being lost in the multi/translingual woods, and I use Caliban's notion of being able to curse or being curse-less, that is, not having any (linguistic) agency. Since the reflective essay was supposed to be in Bosnian, I first Google-translated it into Bosnian. Seeing how my attempts to be playful in English became extremely quirky phrases in Bosnian, often defying comprehension, I used those random turns of phrases to develop my long-term thinking about language and writing. The title "Sasvim bez prokletstva" is something that sounds very much like something produced by someone who knows how to open a dictionary but knows nothing about Bosnian semantics, that is, a complete foreigner. This phrase then reflects quite perfectly the state of no-lingualism. The machine translation, having no innate creativity, manages to produce an authentic linguistic sense which would require an extreme amount of creativity and courage to actually use and try to publish (referring back to my point about mistake vs. ignorance). Hardly any author of any renown would be able to pull this off without some meta language or some kind of indication of the intent. The use of the machine itself, in my case, was a perfect gimmick to establish this ground without it being in the least gimmicky. The original text was already affected by my Bosnian and Swedish so translating back was an interesting exercise, to say the least. The essay in Bosnian worked well since I used machine translation to reflect on the nature of language and being a refugee.

Figure 1. *Collage of three texts.*



AFTERWORD:
HOMECOMING

A STRANGER has come
To share my room in the house not right in the head
—Dylan Thomas, 'Love in the Asylum'

i. Bouts of Nostalgia and Strangeness

In the spring of 2004, eleven years after coming to Sweden, I, the son of a factory worker, who had been ready to walk in my father's shoes, or maybe even become an engineer, because I was good with things and numbers, or so the men in my family let me believe, received a scholarship to write a Ph.D in English Literature, and for some reason I felt it was about time to venture on a sightseeing tour of my motherland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or just plain Bosnia, as we Northerners say because we tend to discriminate against the Southerners with their weird accents and too-local vocabulary. (ps: Friends from the South, you know who you are, I'm just kidding.)

SASVIM BEZ PROKLETSTVA

Adnan Mahmutović

Kroz svaki intervju koji sam dao od početka karijere proteže se jedno pitanje: zašto pišeš na engleskom jeziku, a ne na bosanskom, ili barem na švedskom? Moj najiskreniji odgovor je uvijek: *Zato što moja majka ne govori engleski*. Previše je intimna ta veza majke i maternjeg jezika, i mislim da bi me dr Frojd makar potapšao po ramenu ako ne i rekao svaka čast. Nije joj ni švedski jača strana ali zašto rizikovati. A ni meni švedski nikad nije postao jača strana jer sam ga učio uporedo s engleskim u svojim dvadesetim godinama, od raznih izbjegličkih kampova do večernjih škola, i onda, igrom slučaja, nastavio s razvojem ovog kolonijanog a ostavio ovaj drugi skandinavski po strani. Padao je i švedski sve više pod uticaj engleskog pa čak kažu neki kod mene na katedri za englesku književnost da se Švedi već praktično rađaju dvojezični iliti s nekim novim hibridnim švedskim. Niko tu više ne razumije Strindberga.

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"And Quite Without Damnation", by Dr. Adnan Mahmutović

"And Quite without Damnation"

An Essay on Language and Tongue-less-ness

Adnan Mahmutović

In each interview I've given since the beginning of my career, one question keeps creeping up: why do you write in English and not in Bosnian, or at least in Swedish? My most honest answer is always, Because my mother does not speak English. There is an all too intimate connection between a mother and a mother tongue, and I think Dr. Freud would have at least patted me on the shoulder, if not said, like a good old fashioned father, Well done, boy. You dodged that bullet. My mother's Swedish is not terribly good either but why take that risk? And neither did my own Swedish ever reach any literary heights. I studied it alongside English in my twenties, from courses in various refugee camps to evening schools, and then, by chance, I continued developing this colonial language and left the Scandinavian aside. Swedish is anyway increasingly influenced by English and some colleagues at my Department (of English) claim that Swedes are already practically born bilingual, or with some new hybrid Swedish. No one understands Strindberg anymore.

The other fact that influenced my choice is that after the war I was no longer sure what my mother tongue was. Nationalisms have done their job well, as always, and the Balkan languages have changed and developed in many ways and under various influences, and I felt that as a fresh Swede I was not a part of that process. I did not like the direction in which everything was moving. It happened that some of the people to whom I showed some of my first stories wanted to change my fictions in a way that was seriously messed up. They wanted my characters to speak the way I'd never heard people speaking when I was growing up. Ironi, al nije moja nena bai tako pričala. Sorry, but my grandma did not speak that way.

"Afterword: homecoming"	"And quite without damnation"
Now, back in the safe corridors of the English Department in Stockholm, a linguist colleague tells me that babies are exposed to their mother tongues even in the womb. It is an uncanny thing: swimming in a language like in the amniotic fluid, then swimming out of it as if I have emerged from the ice-cold Scandinavian sea on to some unfamiliar shore, breathless, and quite speechless. Quite curse-less. (p. 140)	When I returned to the fine and secure halls of the English Department in Stockholm, my colleague told me that the babies were exposed in tongues even in their subjects. Fantastic thing, imagine, swim in the tongue like in the mother liquor, and then spill like a cold Scandinavian sea on an unknown shore, breathless and without tongue. Quite frankly. Even in the subjects. The mother liquor. Quite frankly. This was brilliant. Quite frankly, there was some fun ingenuity in all this. It'd take a certain kind of mind to call amniotic fluid mother liquor. Freud, stop laughing, please. (np)

I translated this essay from Bosnian to English by first pulling the entire text through Google translate. It would have been interesting if the machine translation of "Afterword: homecoming" just returned it to the original, but of course, as expected, this did not happen. The machine much produced another freaky installment like in the game of Chinese whispers ("gluhi telefoni" /deaf phones/ in Bosnian). Had I continued translating back and forth I am certain already the tenth version would sound like an alien language. In any case, this play produced some incredibly amusing word-trees and fascinating word-woods. I loved how this Google translation accomplished that which I actually wanted to do 15 years earlier, and yet, had I done it, it would have been too deliberate, too conscious, and for that reason really not what the intention was. The multi/translingual detours that took me from that to this point in 15 years were really quite remarkable.

Aside from Google-translate, I realized I could use global social media where I had, in the same space, friends and followers, all of which moved across vast linguistic landscapes. None of us mastered the same languages, but between ourselves we mastered dozens. The translate function that is built into Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allowed me to continue writing in English and not alienate

many new followers across different ethnoscapes. Often I could use various language games to connect people from Sweden to Bosnia, Pakistan, China, The USA, South Africa, and New Zealand. In one series of linguistic jumps on the Bosnian word "edevsuz," which to me obviously had old Ottoman origins, I discovered the way the possible original traveled all the way to South Asia and metamorphosed in many wonderful ways, sometimes even meaning the exact opposite of what it meant in the old Ottoman and modern Bosnian languages. The multi/trans/no-lingual communication that took place in search of this word was like a beautiful chimera. The most beautiful aspect of it all was that this was not a unique event. This is happening quite frequently and words do not need to travel with merchants and armies like they used to. In a split second, they can circle the globe a few times. A simple question "What do you call this dish" within the same ethnolinguistic space of a country as small as Bosnia is likely to produce dozens of different answers and often cause quite a stir.

These new games lead me to write *How I stopped worrying and learned to trivas with words* (Mahmutović, 2021):

> When I was rather new to Sweden, with only a few years of refugee life behind me, I worked in a group of care assistants, and when one of us died, we all went to his funeral. The priest pulled out an electric guitar and played a famous pop song by Ulf Lundell, "Jag trivs bäst i öppna landskap." I was lost for words, of course, but quite enjoyed it. My first big culture clash. The main verse translates roughly as "I best enjoy being in vast landscapes," but the Swedish verb trivas really means to thrive, to grow, and in more everyday use to feel good and at home. You can trivas at work or trivas with someone. It signifies that everything is just Swedish lagom, just enough, balanced. It doesn't ooze the intensity of strong love but evokes a preferred mood or a mode of being. Perhaps it is like that line of Raymond Carver, "In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another's company." I think there is a way to trivas with words and for words to trivas with you like you can trivas with someone you love. It hasn't always been like that. There is also a way to live with words that makes the ground arid. A way to always and utterly distrust words. (p. 10)

The way the Swedish word operates here is to evoke, and become, a metaphor of an organic and authentic, authored and authorless, multi/translingualism that constitutes creativity at its core. This creativity may be, as I have shown, deliberate or unconscious, arising from the various ways words travel to us individually and collectively. Towards the end of this essay, I use the wonderful example of something called "Bosnian prayer" (Mahmutović, 2021):

> It is not Bosnian in origin, of course. It started, they say, as poetry in the mind of the great Tagore, probably as fragments, and traveled all the way from Calcutta for a century, over many borders and open landscapes, transformed through different languages, to the pen of a Bosnian translator, and became one of the most cited prayers in all kinds of official and private contexts. The Bosnian prayer jumped into English, and from there it bounced back into the world and impressed people so much they called it by our name. And it is ours. And it is Tagore's. And it is yours, like all words. At least that's what the legend says.

> And so, in the end, if I may think of, or hope for, the future, my idea of an eternal afterlife is not, as in some people's opinions, a life in a place where everyone speaks one and the same language, some dialect of the protofather Adam, which encompasses all words that capture the essences of all things; instead, it's an eternity spent learning millions of languages, getting to know each other, trivas for all eternity. (p. 13)

I knew Tagore from my postcolonial studies, but this discovery was something quite extraordinary and it came to me by way of a political commentator I was following on the Balkan Twitter, Mirnes Kovač.[5] He wrote a short article on the origins of the Bosnian prayer and later sent me a project proposal he had written for a conference. In short, Kovač (2018) writes of the multivectors of the "Bosnian prayer" and the way it becomes deeply, authentically Bosnian, in fact, becoming a tradition, while retaining certain universality which allowed it to travel in this way. Furthermore, if one did not know it was recited by Muslims the prayer could easily be adopted by most religions and could, in my view, be tweaked into a secular well-wishing. The point Kovač (2018) is trying to make is summed up in his question: To whom belong ideas? It is of course a formalized convention of modern writing and publishing, especially in academic fields, to make sure ideas and quotes are properly attributed. I have no quarrel with that. Authorship has to be ascertained and authors must be paid their due at least in social capital. While this works well for quotations, ideas are still a lot trickier exactly because they enter us, like words, at a much deeper level. Kovač (2018) emphasizes the fact that ancient Greek and Babylonian philosophers, and later Jewish-Christian-Muslim thinkers, refused to sign their ideas and thoughts arguing that no one can lay claims on ideas. By virtue of being ideas, they belong to everyone. Kovač (2018) states that we can find classical painters who did not sign their paintings and that this notion of the common good is at the core of all religions (especially if they have universalist claims). Ideas are often seen as these clear powerful (abstract) things. What the Bosnian prayer shows to me is the multi/trans/no-lingualism that takes shape in the maddening oscillation between singular word-trees and the word-woods of our lives.

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[5] He frequently showed fascination with literature and theology and we connected when he discovered my essay "Black Moses Matters," which was translated into Bosnian for the newspaper he works for.

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