

‘Something youthfully heartless’: Language and Belonging in Christopher Isherwood’s *Berlin Novels*

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Abstract

In a retrospective look at the *Berlin Novels*, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher Isherwood wonders: ‘Hadn’t there been something youthfully heartless in my enjoyment of the spectacle of Berlin in the early thirties, with its poverty, its political hatred and its despair?’ This uneasiness regarding the novels’ portrayal of pre-war Germany is shared by later critics; in the essay ‘Language and Surface: Isherwood and the Thirties’ (1975), Alan Wilde locates its origin in the narrators’ linguistic thinness, a form of non-commitment resulting in a failure to engage fully with their surroundings. Our main gateways into Berlin’s cosmopolitan society in the novels are two English protagonists whose fluent German allows them to circulate freely and fluidly from one layer of society to the other, thus complicating the notion of belonging to any given social or national community. Modernist scholar Bridget Chalk has recently evidenced Christopher Isherwood’s discomfort with fixed national identities and the way his characters tend to escape categorisation. This paper argues that the concept of fluency is essential to understanding Isherwood’s representation of his narrators, of foreign languages, and of Berlin itself. Drawing on key scholarship, such as Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia (1981), Meir Sternberg’s study of polylingualism (1981), and Juliette Taylor-Batty’s *Multilingualism and Modernist Fiction* (2013), I would like to investigate the way the representation of multiple languages seems to contribute to the ambiguity generated by the use of distanced narrative voices. Instead of reflecting the protagonists’ origins or selves, languages are used as tools of performance, entwined in a web of changing and unstable identities that repeatedly resist inclusion in a given community. Setting out to offer a systematic analysis of the use of foreign languages in Isherwood’s novels, I hope to contribute to the recent interest that has arisen around the transnational nature of Modernism and questions of code-switching and translation.

Key Words: Christopher Isherwood’s *Berlin Novels*, multilingualism, translation, narrative voices, Modernism.

Introduction

In his Preface to the American edition of the *Berlin Novels*, reflecting on his experience in Germany, Christopher Isherwood comments: ‘Hadn’t there been something youthfully heartless in my enjoyment of the spectacle of Berlin in the early thirties, with its poverty, its political hatred and its despair?’ (Isherwood 2008, p. xviii). Isherwood’s interrogation draws our attention to his own detachment as an expatriate – and, implicitly, to that of the two British narrators of his novels, William Bradshaw and Christopher Isherwood, who report on their environments in a casual, distanced manner. From the start, this distance has a linguistic component: the fact that the *Berlin Novels* were written in English generates a gap, the authoritative voice of the British narrators mediating and muffling, as it were, that of their German surroundings. The critical response to the *Berlin Novels* reflects a sense of unease regarding the portrayal of the rise of Nazism in Germany and the way these texts engaged – or failed to engage – with their historical context. I intend to investigate the intratextual representation of languages in the cosmopolitan milieu depicted in the *Berlin Novels*.¹ Indeed, the representation of foreign languages in the context of the rise of the unifying and xenophobic discourse of fascism cannot be reduced to a mere mimetic necessity, and seems, from the outset, rich in literary and ethical implications that must be interrogated. How is the presence of foreign languages managed in the *Berlin Novels*? To what extent does this presence contribute to, or lessen, the ambiguity generated by the use of distanced narrative voices? The *Berlin Novels* offer a variety of representations of multilingualism that foreground a modern preoccupation with language and with the portrayal of otherness and national identities in a cosmopolitan environment. The novels are told from the point of view of British speakers, both fluent in German, whose circulation among the layers of Berlin society constitutes our gateway into the reality described in the novel. Ultimately, however, fluency is revealed as another mask that disrupts the notions of identity and adhesion to a community. In order to address these questions, I will first investigate the theme of foreignness in the *Berlin Novels* and relate it to representations of multilingualism. I will then address the problems posed by the narrators’ fluency, and the representation of bilingual speakers in the novels. Throughout, I will draw on theoretical works such as Bakhtin’s essay

¹ This distinction between the language of the literary medium and the intratextual languages it can serve to represent is established in Meir Sternberg (1981), ‘Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis’, *Poetics Today*, 2.4, 221–39, which I discovered thanks to Juliette Taylor-Batty (2013), *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan).

on 'The Discourse of the Novel' (1981), Meir Sternberg's study of 'Translation as Mimesis' (1981), and Juliette Taylor-Batty's *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction* (2013).

The Aesthetics of Multilingualism in the *Berlin Novels*

I aim to demonstrate that, in the *Berlin Novels*, multilingualism participates in the representation of a stylised cosmopolitan universe characterised by unstable identities. Travel, mobility and exile, as moments of confrontation with otherness and multiplicity, are important modernist tropes. They are associated with a rise in interest in the question of foreign languages and literature, which appears in the multiplicity of representations of foreign languages and cultures, but also in the practice of translation by many modernist writers, such as Ezra Pound or Katherine Mansfield. According to Taylor-Batty, modernism is marked by 'an unprecedented sensitivity to linguistic and cultural plurality and difference – an awareness, in short, of the condition of Babel' (Taylor-Batty 2013, p. 2). The *Berlin Novels* reflect such sensitivity. Both *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* follow the wanderings of British narrators, whose status as fluent expatriates affords them an easy access to the lowest and the highest strata of German society. Christopher Isherwood himself fitted the part of the modern expatriate: after living in Germany from 1929 to 1933, he embarked on a life of wandering until the beginning of World War II, before settling definitively in the United States. A fluent German speaker, Isherwood was certainly receptive to the 'lure' of the foreign (Emig 1998), associated in the mind of the novelist – and of many of his friends, including the poet W.H. Auden – with the possibility of new experiences and transgression.

As a literary form, the novel appears to be particularly adapted to the inclusion of diversity and otherness. In 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin describes the novel as 'a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized' (Holquist 1981, p.262). J. Taylor-Batty suggests that the term 'heteroglossia' he coined to describe the plurality of speeches at work in the novel could be put to use fruitfully for the question of multilingualism (Taylor-Batty 2013, p. 5). Indeed, the presence of foreign languages points to an alterity unsubsumable by the narrative voice and forms part of the 'system of [...] "languages" put forth by Bakhtin to describe the heterogeneity of voices present in the novel (Holquist 1981, p.262). Isherwood's aesthetic and thematic choices, the representation of Berlin and the portrayal of multilingual exchanges in the form of a fragmented narration, seem in keeping with this modern exploration of diversity and otherness through heteroglossia. In this instance, the image of the 'camera, with its

shutter open, quite passive' (Isherwood 1999, p. 243) present at the beginning of the fictional diary that constitutes the incipit of *Goodbye to Berlin* announces this openness to the outside world. However, as we will see, the narrator's self-proclaimed passivity and neutrality should be treated with caution, when dealing with representations of foreign languages.

Linguistic diversity is portrayed in various ways in the *Berlin Novels*. Unless told otherwise, we can read the novels under the assumption that a vast part of the exchanges they portray, although reported in English, happen in German, resulting in a linguistic gap between the reality described by the novels and its reporting by the narrators. Commenting on the variations in occurrences of foreign languages in literary works, Sternberg suggests that 'translational mimesis' (1981, p.223) can serve diverse objectives for the purpose of representation: 'what is artistically more crucial than linguistic reality is the model(s) of that reality as internally patterned or invoked by the individual work' (1981, p.235). In other words, translational mimesis is not to be construed as a naturalistic tool or as proof of linguistic authenticity, but can be integrated within a number of writing strategies that can participate in a stylisation of reality, rather than in a faithful representation. Indeed, as observed by Juliette Taylor-Batty, 'multilingual techniques are, whether implicitly or explicitly, ideologically motivated' (Taylor-Batty 2013, p.43). This ideological component is particularly present in the *Berlin Novels*.

Isherwood's stylisation of reality is first evidenced by the variety of devices used by the narrators to indicate the presence of a foreign speaker. The representation of foreign languages such as German (or, sometimes, French) in the novels is negotiated in different ways, from occasional slips into another tongue to longer transcriptions of German, evidencing the protean nature of 'translational mimesis' (Sternberg 1981, p.223). The most salient case of use of a foreign tongue is what Sternberg terms 'vehicular matching' (1981, p.223), which consists in the faithful reproduction of utterances in their original language. This rarely occurs in the *Berlin Novels*, but we do find examples of exchanges occurring in German, such as this dialogue between Sally Bowles and her lodger in *Goodbye to Berlin*: 'Nicht wahr, Frau Karpf?' She appealed to the toad landlady, 'ich habe geweint auf Dein Brust' (Isherwood 1999, p.273). In this case, however, the use of vehicular matching is not motivated by linguistic accuracy, but serves to point to Sally's faulty German, and is used as a comic device. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, the arrival at the German frontier is announced by an untranslated quotation from German in direct speech, or 'selective reproduction' (Sternberg 1981, p.225): '*Deutsche Passkontrolle*' (Isherwood 1999, p.8). The use of German contributes to defining the spatial frame of the novel, while encapsulating the encounter with

German culture and language for the hypothetical English-speaking reader. Later, describing a Chinese delegate giving a talk at a meeting of the Communist Party, the narrative voice specifies that ‘he spoke careful, academic German’ (Isherwood 1999, p. 60). This example of ‘explicit attribution’ (Sternberg 1981, p.231) allows the narrator to point to the presence of a foreign tongue without reproducing the speech in its original version. Finally, the presence of a non-native speaker can also be reflected by mistakes (‘symptomic’ instead of ‘symptomatic’, Isherwood 1999, p.142) or by the use of ‘verbal transpositions’ (Sternberg 1981, p.227) of German pronunciation reported in direct or indirect speech. For example: ‘And soon we were on to Fritz’s favourite topic: he pronounced it Larv’ (Isherwood 1999, p.269). This last, playful example confirms that the representation of foreign languages and accents is by no means a mere replication. The deformation of the word ‘Larv’ can indeed be read as a derisive comment on the character of Fritz, portrayed as a decadent womaniser.

The narrators are not immune to this process of stylising reality: commenting on his acclimatisation to his new country in *Goodbye to Berlin*, the narrator Christopher Isherwood observes that ‘people no longer turn their heads on hearing [his] English accent’ (Isherwood 1999, p.255). On a representational level, this could be interpreted as a neutral observation. However, in the context of a novel written in English, the secondary effect of this annotation is, by underlining the situation of translational mimesis, to contribute to the characterisation of the narrator as a foreigner, an isolated figure, but also as a linguistic gateway for the reader, while instituting a separation between the expatriated narrator and those around him. To illustrate the consequences of translational mimesis, I will now investigate the part played by the narrators, and the crucial importance of their linguistic status and fluency in the *Berlin Novels*.

Fluency and Transparency

The slippery presence of the narrators of the *Berlin Novels* has attracted frequent critical attention, as the starting point or the conclusion of a questioning of the novels’ portrayal of pre-war Germany. In a linguistic and stylistic analysis of the novels, Wilde condemns the narrators – both ‘fluent, detached observers’ – and what he defines as an attempt at linguistic thinness, which he relates to the aesthetics of the Auden group and to the language of the writers of the thirties in general: ‘Sharpened to a fine point of negation, the decade’s language is, in the final analysis, incapable of effecting the interaction between self and world that is its primary desideratum’ (Wilde 1975, p.487 and p. 490). Despite its ideological normativity, this

analysis is particularly interesting in that it addresses the problem posed by language, and in particular by the narrators' handling of language(s) in the *Berlin Novels*. Indeed, both William Bradshaw and Christopher Isherwood are only portrayed obliquely. From a linguistic standpoint, this portrayal is defined by the use of fluency, not only as a linguistic reality but also as a stylistic device.

Isherwood's later comments on his work shows his awareness of the manufactured nature of his representation of Berlin. Comparing the reception of the *Berlin Novels* in France and Germany, the author points to the paradoxical trickiness of translating these writings and their subsequent theatrical adaptation into German: 'there are things that are very difficult to translate: half puns and concealed quotations and little things like that' (Scobie 1974). This untranslatability evidences the limits inherent to fluency and of translational mimesis as a tool for the representation of polylingual realities. Isherwood's mediation is very much present, even throughout the German text, be it at the level of 'wrong words in German . . . silly things like that' (Scobie 1974). Likewise, throughout the *Berlin Novels*, fluency constitutes a form of blind spot that aggravates the elusive quality of the narrators by mediating their relation to their surroundings, through the use of translational mimesis. The narrators' linguistic ease, which results in the erasure of the translational process, conveys a false impression of transparency to the reader. This feeling is all the more dangerous as these experiences take place within a world where identities can be appropriated and shed at will.

Chalk relates the narrators' fugitiveness to the collapsing of the frontiers between reality and fiction, and connects it to the concomitancy between the writing of the *Berlin Novels* and Isherwood's own 'forced queer itinerancy' through Europe with his German lover Heinz Neddermeyer (Chalk 2014, p.151). In this respect, she says: 'the identity confusion presented by the narrators becomes particularly charged in a world that seeks incessantly to fix "real" identity' (Chalk 2014, p.165). In the *Berlin Novels*, this 'identity confusion' and the blurred frontier between fact and fiction are first reflected in the narrators' names: 'William Bradshaw' and 'Christopher Isherwood' are both variations on the writer's full name, Christopher William Bradshaw-Isherwood. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, the elusiveness of the narrator's identity is also hinted at through the variations or translations his name undergoes in the course of the novel: 'Herr Issyvoov' (Isherwood 1999, p.245) to his landlady, Frl. Schroeder, 'Chris' (Isherwood 1999, p.267) to his friend Fritz, 'Christoph' (Isherwood 1999, p.335) to Otto. This protean identity enables the protagonist to move seamlessly from the ghetto of Berlin, during his stay at the working-class Nowaks, to the affluent society of the Landauers. His bilingualism, a token of his expatriate identity, even grants the narrator some

additional social advantages by affording him entry into some places, like the Troika: ‘A commissionaire braided like an archduke regarded my hatless head with suspicion until I spoke to him in English’ (Isherwood 1999, p.256). Christopher’s experience of Berlin is marked by social and linguistic fluidity.

Fluency seems, in the first analysis, to enable both narrators to belong in German society, by giving them the means to make several German acquaintances. However, a sense of separateness remains, as illustrated, for example, by William Bradshaw’s encounter with young Germans in *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. This passage taken from the description of Olga’s party at the beginning of the novel is worth quoting at length:

Meanwhile, several of the girls and boys had stopped dancing. They stood round us, their arms interlaced, their eyes fixed on Arthur’s mouth with the naïve interest of savages, as though they expected to see the words jump visibly out of his throat. One of the boys began to laugh. ‘Oh, yes,’ he mimicked, ‘I speak your Englisch, no?’ (Isherwood 1999, p. 34)

The encounter is explicitly dramatized by the exchange of stares between the narrator and the (German) ‘girls and boys’, a term evocative of the bohemian milieu represented in this passage, but which, in this context, takes on particularly belittling undertones. The representation of the narrator being stared at could be interpreted as a reversal of his dominance over the narration. However, the use of verbal transposition through the deformation of the ‘boy’s’ speech, along with the characterisation of the young Germans as ‘savages’, gives an unexpected colonial feeling to the scene. The use of direct reported speech to reproduce the character’s German accent further undermines his attempt at mimicking English. As observed by Taylor-Batty, the use of accents is not innocuous: ‘the foreigner’s accented speech in Anglophone literature is used as a way of undermining that character’s authority’ (Taylor-Batty 2013, p.59). This representation contrasts with William Bradshaw’s own linguistic skills. During a meeting with Bayer in the company of Arthur Norris, the latter praises Bradshaw’s ‘excellent German’ (Isherwood 1999, p.79). Bradshaw’s utterances in German are usually represented through translational mimesis. References to his linguistic status (‘My English accent had reassured her’, Isherwood 1999, p.103) seem, as in the case of Christopher Isherwood, to act as door openers, resulting in an impression of linguistic authority.

Ultimately, this distance has consequences on the real extent of the narrators’ involvement in German society. In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, this lack of commitment is illustrated by William Bradshaw’s dealings with the Communist Party. As he attends a political meeting of

the Party, his characterisation of one of the Chinese delegates foregrounds his detachment. The delegate's political speech seems somewhat concealed under his accent, which reminds the narrator of 'the faint, plaintive twanging of an Asiatic musical instrument' (Isherwood 1999, p.61). This orientalist simile brings out the narrator's failure at taking this speech seriously, as did his dismissal of young Germans as 'savages' (Isherwood 1999, p.34). The delegate's intervention is only reported in the text in the form of one sentence in direct speech, and remains confined to its musical sonority, while silencing its political dimension. William Bradshaw's withdrawal from his supposed Comrades' display of enthusiasm when he listens to a speech delivered by Arthur Morris at the same committee is also quite telling: 'it was difficult for me to understand why everybody in the hall didn't burst out laughing' (Isherwood 1999, p.61). Here, distance is embodied by what could be qualified as a sudden slip in the translating process, as the narrator temporarily returns to vehicular matching. Otto, a character mostly portrayed by the narrator as the image of brutal strength and naivety, is allowed a brief utterance in direct speech: '*Mensch! Der spricht prima, nicht wahr?*' (Isherwood 1999, p.62, quoted in Emig 1998, p.51) This exclamation exposes the narrator's incapacity to subsume, but also to embrace alterity altogether.

In *Goodbye to Berlin*, the same separateness eventually shows through. At the very end of the novel, Christopher Isherwood comments on Fräulein Schroeder's growing indoctrination:

Thousands of people like Fräulein Schroeder are acclimatizing themselves. After all, whatever government is in power, they are doomed to live in this town.
(Isherwood 1998, p.489)

The delimitation between 'I' and 'Them' is one that cannot seem to be resolved in *Goodbye to Berlin*. This is particularly evidenced by the repeated use of national stereotypes. The first part of the novel, 'A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)' is a case in point. This section consists in a depiction of the daily life of the narrator, including an introduction of his landlady, Fräulein Schroeder, and of the other lodgers. Fräulein Schroeder is a recurring character in the *Berlin Novels*. However, in *Goodbye to Berlin*, she evolves into a sort of German caricature. A noticeable feature of her characterisation is the increased use of selective transposition, through interjections ('Ja, ja') and German words interspersed in her speech to accentuate her Germanness (Isherwood 1999, p.251). She addresses the narrator as 'Herr Issywoo' and her repeated use of German titles in her sentences result in a somewhat comical effect, as in: 'Think of your Herr Papa and your Frau Mama' (Isherwood 1999, p.247). The

comical effect results from the use of code switching, added with the colliding of the respectful ‘Herr’ and ‘Frau’ with the childish ‘Papa’ and ‘Mama’.

In *Goodbye to Berlin*, the boarding house – which in *Mr Norris* only served as a background to the conversations between William Bradshaw and Arthur Norris – turns into the stage of a display of national stereotypes. The place is marked by the presence of national identities, ingrained in details such as the name of the ‘Swedish Pavilion’ (Isherwood 1999, p.250). As observed by Judy Suh, the boarding house is ‘saturated by fascist codings’ (2008, p.48) that reveal a contamination of everyday life by the fraught political context of the novel. This contamination transpires in Isherwood’s portrayal of Fräulein Mayr, another character of the boarding house, characterised as ‘an ardent Nazi’ (Isherwood 1999, p.254). Although her singing is not directly portrayed in the text, she is introduced as a ‘music-hall jodlerin’, speaking ‘a Bavarian dialect with peculiarly aggressive emphasis’ (Isherwood 1999, p.252). This direct reference to her regional accent adds up to other aspects of her characterisation (her nickname, ‘Fritzi’, is reminiscent of the derogatory ‘Fritz’ used by French and British soldiers to mock the German soldiers during World War I) to characterise her as a sort of extreme embodiment of aggressive Germanness.

Further in ‘A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)’, as the narrator depicts his dinner with the family of one of his English pupils, Hippi, the narrator reports, in direct speech, her father’s dismissal of her mother’s fears of walking in the street:

Ach, what does that matter? If they throw stones at you, I will buy you a sticking-plaster for your head. It will cost me only five groschen. (Isherwood 1999, p. 264)

The basis of this argument (the father refuses to lend his car as repairing it would cost him more than paying for a – limited – medical treatment, should his wife be attacked by the Nazis) associated with the interjection ‘Ach’, results in the characterization of Hippi’s father as a stingy, insensitive man. Later in the novel, Natalia Landauer mentions Hippi as one of her acquaintances. This possible allusion to Hippi’s Jewishness sheds a rather problematic light on the depiction of her wealthy family’s lifestyle and of her father’s miserly manners, which would then coincide with the anti-Semitic stereotype of the stingy Jew. This distance results in a feeling of uneasiness, as illustrated by Christopher Isherwood’s life at the Nowaks’, in the chapter of the same name. ‘*Herr Christoph*’ is repeatedly reminded of his status as a ‘gentleman’, despite Herr Nowak’s inebriated claims to the contrary: ‘We’re all the same flesh and blood.... *Argent*, money – all the same!’ (Isherwood 1999, p.371)

Multilingualism is, to Herr Nowak, synonymous with a fraternity born of his experience as a

soldier in the First World War. However, fraternity seems to have run out by the epoch depicted in the novels: this joyous linguistic jumble is explicitly presented as the discourse of a drunken man. The utopia of a cohabitation that would abolish the gap between classes and nationalities proves short-lived, as Christopher soon leaves the Nowaks, before leaving Berlin altogether. Christopher Isherwood's reporting may produce the illusion of a fluid communication, but proves ultimately incapable of redeeming his separateness from the Nowaks. The narrators' fluency is ultimately another mask, all the more ambiguous as it is concealed by translational mimesis.

Fluent Speakers and Self-fashioned Identities

The critique of fluency as a possible bridge between speakers of different nationalities in the *Berlin Novels* results in a questioning of national identities. Indeed, the bilingual figures portrayed in the novels further complicate the link between translational mimesis and personal and national identity, as language becomes associated with performance and theatricality. B. Chalk points out that the characters of the *Berlin Novels* conceal themselves under 'layers of fictionality' (2014, p. 150) in order to elude the imposition of a clearly delimited identity, which Chalk assimilates with the official discourse of the state in the form of the passport. Language can be said to rank among those 'layers', as it is repeatedly used to disrupt the link between language and identity. J. Taylor-Batty (2013, pp.16 – 79) remarks that the increased importance of multilingualism in modernist fiction also reflected the divide between an 'essentialist' conception of language founded on ideas of national identity, in keeping with Herder's romantic equation between national language and national spirit, and its 'constructionist' counterpart, which interrogates the separation between language and national origin. In the *Berlin Novels*, skilful fluent speakers illustrate this interrogation.

In *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, the figure of Arthur Norris offers a disquieting example of the gap between language and identity, and of the ambiguity of fluency. Eventually exposed as a fraud and a political spy, Arthur Norris is introduced as a fluent German speaker, capable of assuming the identity of an enthusiastic communist in the course of a dexterous speech. His elusiveness is further accentuated by his mastery of French, which becomes associated with deception and treachery. The coded letters addressed to Arthur Norris, later revealed to be selling political information to the French secret services, are written in French and represented through translational mimesis, as in this example: 'kisses are for good boys – Margot' (Isherwood 1999, p.124). Their content as well as the name of their signatory are

fraught with suggestive connotations that play on the cliché of the flirty French girl. As Frl. Schroeder exclaims after reading them: ‘These French girls must be a shameless lot’ (Isherwood 1999, p.120). Besides, the name ‘Margot’ is frequently associated in French with prostitution or, at least, with women of loose morals. Significantly, the only authentically French character of the novel, Marcel Jamin, is himself subject to misidentification on the part of the narrator, who assumes him to be Margot based on overheard fragments of conversation. Moreover, Marcel Jamin is characterised as a pornographic novelist, a playful reminder of the erotic innuendos of the letters written by the fictitious Margot, but also a potential reference to Arthur Norris’s own writing activities, as the end of the novel uncovers him as the author of the erotic novel *Miss Smith’s Torture Chamber* (Isherwood 1999, p.215). Through a tightly woven network of representation and intratextual references, French becomes the language of coding and forgery, and symptomatically occurs in Norris’s speech (*‘façon de parler’*, Isherwood 1999, p.90), or in Anglicised forms in association with Norris (‘he certainly knew how to play the Grand Seigneur’, Isherwood 1999, p.214) and his shady manoeuvres (‘reconnoitre’, Isherwood 1999, p.180).

Goodbye to Berlin recurrently portrays characters speaking in a language explicitly different from their native tongue. These moments could be interpreted as ‘performative acts’, (Butler 1988) whereby characters can theatrically assume and discard an identity through the adoption of a foreign language. The staging of bilingualism can be interpreted as a moment of self-stylisation – the success and implications of which I will now investigate. The characters of Sally Bowles and Natalia present us with two opposed examples of this process. In ‘Sally Bowles’, the second part of *Goodbye to Berlin*, the eponymous character’s first appearance coincides with a highly stylised performance of bilingualism, reported through the form of vehicular matching:

‘Hilloo’, she cooed, pursing her brilliant cherry lips as though she were going to kiss the mouthpiece: ‘Ist dass Du, mein Liebling?’ Her mouth opened in a fatuously sweet smile. Fritz and I sat watching her, like a performance at the theatre. ‘Was wollen wir machen, Morgend Abend? Oh, wie wunderbar...’ (Isherwood 1999, p.269)

The direct quotations from German evidence the fact that the theatricality and self-awareness of Sally’s behaviour do not go unnoticed by the narrator. The use of the verb ‘cooed’ and Sally’s mannerisms shows her awareness of her observers. However, Sally’s faulty German undermines the success of her performance, as does the presence of her idiosyncratic turns of phrase: ‘Mein liebling’, ‘wie wunderbar’. Likewise, in a later scene, ‘Willst Du sein ein Engel

und bring zwei Tassen von Kaffee?’ (Isherwood 1999, p.273) is a comically blatant calque, immediately recognizable by the reader, even without previous knowledge of German. The narrator comments that ‘Sally’s German was not merely incorrect; it was all her own’, (Isherwood 1999, p.273) stating the vanity of Sally’s acting. Sally’s attitude, however, suggests that she is aware of, and enjoys this linguistic bastardizing, as she insists upon pronouncing every word in a ‘specially ‘foreign’ manner’, (Isherwood 1999, p.274) which implies a possible use of the resources of her foreign status. Far from being language-shy, Sally pragmatically embraces this imperfect self-fashioned identity, proving her capacities of linguistic adaptation as the novel goes on. In a later scene the narrator ‘[notices] the improvement in her German accent’, and it is worth noting that this change is accompanied by an apparent improvement in Sally’s material condition, symbolised by her move to a more fashionable and well-off part of the city (Isherwood 1999, p.311), in keeping with the social mobility associated with fluency throughout the novel.

Sally’s strategic use of her linguistic resources can be contrasted with another example of bilingual female figure, Natalia, in ‘The Landauers’. Natalia aspires to correspond to a certain stereotype of cosmopolitan young woman by showing off her knowledge of English as early as her first meeting with Christopher Isherwood: ‘Natalia had begun talking at once, in eager stumbling English’ (Isherwood 1999, p. 410). She adopts ‘the modern student manner’ in her salute to the narrator, and her conversation, consisting in a hasty enumeration of Natalia’s rather conventional tastes (‘Mozart’, ‘Goethe’), reads like a young girl’s clumsy attempt at mimicking a cultivated socialite, in keeping with Natalia’s characterisation as ‘a schoolgirl’ (Isherwood 1999, p.410). Thus, it seems that a parallel can immediately be drawn between her and Sally, in that Natalia’s English, just like Sally’s German, is a mask, a self-made fiction. Natalia’s first utterance (‘You like Mozart? Yes? Oh, I also! Vairy much!’), (Isherwood 1999, p.410) evidences her tentative command of English: the narrator, emphasizing her foreignness, mimetically transposes her German accent and syntax.

However, the comparison between Sally and Natalia can only extend up to a point. The contrast between the two women becomes salient in their first and only meeting, which ends in a genuine linguistic dual. Indeed, after being offended by Sally, Natalia decides to speak German, lest she should ‘give Sally a chance of laughing at her English’ (Isherwood 1999, p.435). Conversely, during the meeting, ‘Sally’s German [is] so much more than usually awful that [the narrator wonders] whether she [isn’t] deliberately exaggerating it in order, somehow, to make fun of Natalia’ (Isherwood 1999, p.435). In this scene, the linguistic situation reflects an underlying conflict between two opposite definitions of identity, which

results in a symbolic *agon*. Indeed, in his exegesis of this passage in *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood revealingly describes this scene as a ‘test’ for Natalia (2012, p.66), the implications of which I will now examine.

Natalia seems to stand for a form of linguistic candour. Her frequent misunderstandings with the narrator reflect their fundamental divergence on language, as illustrated by this exchange:

‘I never laugh when I’m amused,’ I said.
 ‘Oh, yes, perhaps! That shall be one of your English customs, not to laugh?’
 ‘No Englishman ever laughs when he’s amused.’
 ‘You wish I believe that? Then I will tell you: your Englishmen are mad.’
 (Isherwood 1999, p.414)

Here the narrator’s mocking of Natalia by taking her answers in their literal sense contrasts with her blunt reactions, accentuated by her foreign syntax. In her confrontation with Sally, Natalia is eventually defeated by her rival, whose ‘murderous German’ (Isherwood 1999, p.435) does not preclude her from symbolically winning the exchange. Sally’s pragmatic linguistic position, her easy if imperfect use of German, her playful manipulation of identities, her awareness of the performative use of languages prove, ultimately, more effective than Natalia’s clinging to her mother tongue. From then on, Natalia’s character symbolically fades into the background, only to make a quick – and last – reappearance at the end of ‘The Landauers’. Thus, Sally and Natalia both use language as a performative tool of self-fashioning. However, Natalia’s exit embodies the definitive gap between language and identity and reflects a blurring of values. In pre-war Berlin, the imperfect duplicate symbolically prevails over the original.

Conclusion

The cosmopolitan society portrayed in the *Berlin Novels* reflects an attraction to the foreign that characterized many modernist literary works and Isherwood’s own adhesion to a cosmopolitan lifestyle. A sustained analysis of the use of foreign languages in these novels is essential to understanding the ethics of their representation of foreignness and mobility. The stylised representation of foreign languages in *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* exposes a deeper concern with speech, ultimately reduced to a manipulable entity in the hands of fluent narrators, whose authoritative voices permeate the text. In this respect, fluency, depicted through translational mimesis, proves an evasive tool which conceals the mediating presence of the protagonists in the two novels. It is, as Isherwood puts it ‘a complicated simplicity, the negation of a negation’ (Isherwood 1999, p.439), which generates

a duplicitous relationship between the narrators and the reader. In this respect, the sinister figure of Arthur Norris, whose linguistic skills provide him with an efficient laissez-passer into the arcana of Berlin politics, offers an ominous example that begs the question of the significance of the narrators' slippery personae. Furthermore, on an ethical level, fluency is insufficient to bridge the gap between fluent speakers and the society they temporarily inhabit, as the expatriates depicted by Isherwood eventually reveal themselves to be unreliable, non-committal figures. William and Christopher's extreme social mobility in *The Berlin Novels* aggravates the separation between them and their German counterparts, and allows the former to remain detached observers, seemingly confirming their author Christopher Isherwood's fears about his own distance to his German surroundings. Finally, in the context of rising tensions regarding the status of national identity, characters such as Sally and her playful appropriation of German show the vacuity of any clinging to one's national origins, thus undermining nationalist discourses. However, by contrasting her linguistic performance with naïve Natalia, Sally's fluency, instead of being associated with a positive self-fashioning, reflects a definitive divide between language and identity that seems to come at the cost of authenticity.

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