

Exiled to/from Language: Regenerative Disorder in Rose Ausländer's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper explores the themes of exile, language, and identity in Rose Ausländer's poetry, with a focus on her late poem *Mutterland* (*Motherland*). Situating Ausländer's work within the historical upheavals of Czernowitz—her birthplace, repeatedly deterritorialized over the 20th century—the paper examines how the concepts of *Vaterland* (*Fatherland*) and *Mutterland* function as metaphors for personal, cultural, and linguistic displacement. It analyzes the death of *Vaterland* as a symbolic loss of identity and belonging, juxtaposed with *Mutterland*, a linguistic and creative refuge marked by ambiguity and indeterminacy. Drawing comparisons with Salman Rushdie's concept of exile, the paper highlights Ausländer's terminal disconnection from homeland and language, contrasting it with Rushdie's reclamatory approach. Through the interplay of historical context, linguistic analysis, and philosophical inquiry, this paper argues that Ausländer's experience of exile reflects a permanent fragmentation of identity and meaning, offering a profound meditation on the regenerative possibilities of disorder in the aftermath of loss.

Keywords: Exile, Fragmented Identity, Linguistic indeterminacy, Deterritorialization, Regenerative disorder

Introduction

Historical background. A historical encounter with Czernowitz, the city where Rose Ausländer was born, is almost apocalyptic. Here is a short account of the becoming of Chernivtsi: When Ausländer was born, it was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. When she was in her late teens, in 1918, the Dual Monarchy dissolved and the city fell to the Kingdom of Romania. In 1940, just one year after Ausländer published her first collection *Der Regenbogen*, the Red Army captured the city and the USSR allotted it to the Ukrainian SSR only to be retaken by Romanian Army the next year. In 1944, the Red Army concluded this tragic tug-of-war by recapturing the city. Chernivtsi is now a part of Ukraine. In a sense, over the course of some forty years, the city was repeatedly deterritorialized and reterritorialized. This unveils how the political concept of a "city" floats over the physical presence of the land. This insight opens the concept of an "Exile" to the extent of erasure.

The poet and the poem. This paper primarily focuses on the poem *Mutterland* (*Motherland*), which is quoted below in its entirety along with Boland's translation:

Mein Vaterland ist tot

(*My Fatherland is dead*)

sie haben es begraben
(*they buried it*)
im Feuer
(*in fire*)

Ich lebe
(*I live*)
(*in meinem Mutterland—*
in my Motherland—)
Wort
(*Word*)

Ausländer wrote this poem towards the end of her career and her life, it was around the same time that she secluded herself after a turbulent life. Born into a Jewish family in Czernowitz in 1901, she was forced by her mother to migrate to New York in 1920. She got US citizenship in 1926 and published her poems in German newspapers. She got Romanian citizenship after her US citizenship was lost, where she lived in Bucharest from 1933-39. During the second World War, however, she was back in the relative safety of New York but was forced to return to Czernowitz because of her mother's failing health; on returning she had to live in a Ghetto as a forced laborer. After the war, she returned to New York and published exclusively in English for many years. She would return to Germany and German only in the last phase of her writing and displacements.

Methodology. Entering Rose Ausländer's experience of Diaspora and Exile through *Mutterland* and following the connections to her life and history, this paper aims, not to offer a definitive reading of the poem but to creatively encounter her unique experience. The method of exploration does not primarily apply pre-existing thoughts to the poem, but it thinks through the poem. The method is a form of subjectivized empiricism to create concepts out of a specific sequence of images and ideas.

ENCOUNTERING MUTTERLAND

Mutterland, when it meets the eye, makes sense with almost no delay. Its colloquial language gives it a deceptively simple appearance, but not for long. How does one read the final word, "word"? It brings some complexity to the poem. At the same time, it is the only word with relatively literal meaning. The meaning of "Fatherland" "Dead" "Buried" "Fire" and "Motherland" are not easy to pin down. The word "word," however, means what it is. Its relatively rigid meaning demands a rethinking of the rest of the poem. Mainly with the words "Fatherland" and "Motherland."

In post-war Germany, it was difficult to utter the word *Vaterland* (fatherland) because it was heavily used in Nazi nationalist rhetoric (Wierzbicka 174). Ausländer's use of the word, however, is not dismissive. There is a sense of loss when she writes "Mein Vaterland ist tot" (my fatherland is dead). It comes mainly from the word "mein" (my) and "sie" (they), both of which

suggest that *Vaterland*, even though written in German, refers to something personal. Something other than what it refers to in the culture in which this language is constituted. In other words, the word *Vaterland*, out of Ausländer's pen, is deterritorialized from its historical and political context. One possible way to reterritorialize it is through her personal and religious identity and *Mutterland*.

Ausländer's father passed away when she was only in her late teens, which ultimately forced her to go to America. Therefore the death of the father meant migration away from home. In addition to that, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, "The Father" comes with heavier connotations. In a post holocaust world, there was a general disbelief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent Father in the sky. Therefore, as Kathrin Bower states, that the image of father for Ausländer carries "a contradictory combination of reverence and disappointment: a nostalgic reverence for the deceased, biological father and a disappointment mixed with lingering expectations in the Divine Father." Along these lines, death of *Vaterland* also implies disillusionment. What the poem *Mutterland* brings to this image is not so easily revealed. How "Vaterland" must be read is contingent on how it is related to "Mutterland" and "wort".

One of the ways to relate Fatherland to Motherland is through negation. The poet, after the horrors of war and genocide, does not wish to associate with the "masculine" values and has replaced them with a nurturing (opposed to conquering) figure of the Mother. The word "Motherland," however, is not bereft of political connotations. The USSR was one of the major antagonistic forces in Ausländer's life and the word "motherland" was a Soviet personification of their homeland. Clearly, a nurturing female personification of her homeland does not fit. In addition to that, the word "wort" puts into question the very assumption that it refers to a physical space. So, this negation which depends on the *Vaterland*/*Mutterland* binary does not seem to hold up. Another relationship between the two terms can be considered through the word "tot" or "death." It is only after her Fatherland's death can she inhabit her Motherland. In Leslie Morris's words, "her lost *Vaterland* is at the same time her *blessing* of her new *Mutterland*" (my emphasis). This way of conceiving the relationship between the two deconstructs the aforementioned binary and opens the potential for "wort" in the play of meaning.

It was Ausländer's mother who forced her to go to New York after her father's death and it was her mother's failing health which called her back home from the relative safety of America, and put her into a ghetto in Czernowitz. During this time she looked after her mother while also living under pressing conditions. The image of mother, through Ausländer's personal history, has contradictory meanings. It gives *and* needs nurturing. It is what calls back home *and* forces out of it.

The word "wort" means what it is but it is also metonymic for Language. Ausländer's relationship with language was anything but simple. She wrote in both English and German and even translated her own work. When her "fatherland", Czernowitz, was dying, she said "while we waited for death, there were those of us who dwelt in dreamwords—our traumatic home amidst our homelessness. *To write was to live*" (Boland 16). Her mother's death in 1947 was a crisis with which writing could not immediately help her deal with. She did not write for almost a year after the death and interestingly when she did return to writing, she wrote exclusively in English for a considerable time. After her mother's death, she did not live in her "mutterland - wort" but in her "motherland - word," and when she did return to "wort," it was full of word

play, slippages and multiplicity of meaning (as is evident in this paper.) There is, as Leslie Morris observed, linguistic indeterminacy prevalent in Ausländer's work.

Here are the connections that have sprouted out of this subjective encounter with *Mutterland*:

1. Vaterland: reverence - disappointment
2. Death of Vaterland - disillusionment
3. Mutterland: word - nurturing - in need of nurturing - born out of the ashes of Vaterland - linguistic - indeterminacy.
4. Czernowitz: elusive¹

HOME AND EXILE

In his essays *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie silently engendered the concept of a writer in Exile. Exile! Hardly is the word out when the question "Exiled from where?" is raised - by our own mind is no one else. Rushdie himself answers the question in the essay: an Exile is "out-of-country and even out-of-language" and it is "present that is foreign, and that the past is home." Then, Rushdie's Exile is exiled in space, time and language. At this point, it must be stated that Rushdie is not attempting a theoretical framework around this concept of "Exile," instead he is merely putting his own experience to words, and not offering a *whole sight*². He writes, "we can't lay claim to Olympus," emphasizing the writer's lost authority as someone with divine perspective on things, instead, he says writers "describe our worlds in the way in which all of us... perceive it from day to day."

In his riveting Essay titled *The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1947* Rushdie asks the question "Does India Exist?" This question, however, was answered by himself five years earlier in *Imaginary Homelands*. Throughout the essay, there is an essential presence of India, following are two such instances from the essay:

1. "One of the things I liked, and still like, about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy"
2. "This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems'. The form— multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country"

Existence of India is a prerequisite for his concept of Exile. It is defined through its relation to the homeland. The Exile is "haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim." Even the pressing questions of an Exile presuppose its national identity, "What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India?" So naturally, Rushdie's focuses on how and Exile can represent the homeland³. In other words, Salman Rushdie's Exile inclines toward telos.

EXILE TO/FROM LANGUAGE

It was shown earlier how the political concept of the "city" floats over the physical land. Floats is the key term there. Another way to conceive is Lacanian terms. The "city" belongs to the Symbolic Order, not to The Real. *Vaterland* is, then, what Lacan calls The big Other⁴. Its death is only possible in the Symbolic. After all, how does one "bury" land? The violence and destruction that erased Czernowitz was an interruption of the Real - it was *traumatic*. It shattered the Symbolic. Over time, this traumatic event had to be reintegrated with the "newly emerged horizon of narrativization-historicization-symbolization" (Žižek) This is precisely what seems to be happening when Ausländer writes *I live/ in my Motherland -/ Word*.

The relations established earlier make more sense now. Ausländer's disillusionment (*death of Vaterland*) gave birth to a new order, an order that she had to create to support herself (*Mutterland*) and this new order was explicitly linguistic (*wort*). Once the territorializing force of national identity was shattered, its constituents were set free. In this poem, it is Language. It does not mean she now finds comfort in her native language. Being a German Jew in post holocaust Germany and being a German speaking Bukovinian Jew in Germany are different, only the latter can use *Vaterland* without invoking Nazi Nationalism because she does not belong to the culture that birthed and was most influenced by it. The Language, for her, is freed but this freedom came with tragic consequences. The Language she is exiled from is the lacanian sense of the word - Language as a signifying system. The system that gave her her identity. Language as a signifying system is *Vaterland*. The Language she is exiled to is the deterritorialized tool that she can now use with more freedom and play because it no longer belongs to the context that engendered it for her. It is almost nihilistic. This is Language with linguistic-indeterminacy and openness, this is *Mutterland* (Leslie Morris)

When this experience of Exile, as revealed in *Mutterland*, encounters Rushdie's Exile, a new concept is born. One that is not any less subjective than the former but it has some ontological inclination which the former arguably lacks⁵. Ausländer's exile adds to Rushdie's in following ways:

1. Ausländer did not have a homeland since Czernowitz was reconfigured multiple times and the shifting borders practically erased the region. She is terminally exiled, permanently uprooted. Rushdie's Exile is contingent on her homeland.
2. English Language, for Rushdie, needs to be remade for Indian themes. He can return to India to rediscover his roots. Ausländer exiled herself to English after her mother's death and returning to her *wort* leaves her in an indeterminable space. (Leslie Morris)
3. The reclaiming that is so prevalent in Rushdie is an impossibility for Ausländer. She has nothing to reclaim, what she needs is reintegration of the trauma that comes with the death of *Vaterland*. This difference is especially prevalent in the literary productions of the two writers. Rushdie's intricate and comprehensive work is a way to reclaim his lost life, his "continuity" in India. Ausländer's condense and deceptively quotidian work inhabits a restless space, with nothing to do but to write to live. In other words, the reformist aim that Rushdie can have, is impossible for Ausländer. She can only reflect and try to make sense of her own experience and condition.

Thinking through Ausländer's *Mutterland*, through the relations established above, allows us to think of an Exile-in-itself and not through its relationship with homeland - since homeland is dead. Ausländer is not only exiled to/from Space (like Rushdie) and time (like all of us) but Language too.

REGENERATIVE DISORDER

This encounter paints conflict zones as a "site of interactive disorder generating new orders and of order transforming to regenerative disorder" (Demastes). These new orders are not coherent and in any way a substitute for what is lost, rather they remain fragmented as the ambiguity of "wort" suggests. The fragmentation that comes with being an exile gave Rushdie a double mentary vision. That is to say, in Yeatsian fashion, that out of all the chaos *a terrible*

*beauty is born*⁶. Same can not be said of Ausländer. So the conclusion must be in T S Eliot's words, *these are the fragments I have shored against my ruin*⁷ because the fragments, for Ausländer, had to be embraced.

CONCLUSION

Rose Ausländer's *Mutterland* and her broader body of work offer a compelling exploration of exile that transcends traditional notions of homeland and displacement. Through the lens of her lived experiences, we see exile as not merely a spatial or temporal dislocation but also a profound linguistic and existential one. The death of her *Vaterland*—Czernowitz—represents not just the loss of a physical homeland but the collapse of a symbolic order that once defined her identity. In its wake, the emergence of *Mutterland* signifies a linguistic and creative rebirth, albeit one marked by fragmentation, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. Her relationship with language, particularly the interplay between *wort* and *word*, encapsulates the tensions of exile: language as both a refuge and a reminder of loss, a space of creation and an acknowledgment of disconnection.

Unlike Salman Rushdie's exile, which is tethered to the idea of reclaiming a lost homeland and reconfiguring language to fit new cultural expressions, Ausländer's exile resists such reclamation. For her, there is no homeland to return to—Czernowitz has been repeatedly deterritorialized, its borders shifting to the point of erasure. Consequently, her exile is terminal and permanent, rooted not in a longing for continuity but in a relentless confrontation with fragmentation. This distinction highlights the impossibility of restoration in Ausländer's experience and reflects in the minimalism and restless ambiguity of her poetry. While Rushdie's intricate narratives attempt to rebuild connections to a lost past, Ausländer's sparse and poignant verse seeks to survive within the ruins, to inhabit the shattered space of exile without resolution.

The regenerative disorder inherent in Ausländer's work aligns exile with the creation of new, albeit unstable, orders. However, these new configurations—whether linguistic or existential—do not offer a coherent substitute for what is lost. Instead, they remain fragmented, as the polysemy of *wort* demonstrates. Language, for Ausländer, becomes a site of play and reinvention, freed from its original cultural and historical contexts but burdened by the trauma of displacement. This deterritorialized relationship with language allows for both liberation and alienation, as Ausländer navigates between the constraints of her inherited symbolic order and the indeterminacy of her creative reinvention.

Ultimately, Ausländer's exile embodies a stark contrast to Rushdie's vision of exile as a doublementary perspective enriched by the possibility of reclamation. For her, exile is a permanent state of being—rooted in the loss of symbolic and physical homelands and the irreparable fragmentation of identity. Her poetic fragments, like T.S. Eliot's, are not attempts at reconstruction but rather acknowledgments of ruin and survival. In embracing these fragments, Ausländer invites us to confront exile not as a journey toward resolution but as a condition to be inhabited, a perpetual negotiation between loss and the regenerative possibilities of disorder.

Endnotes

1. Because of repeated historical deterritorialization
2. From Imaginary Homelands, "John Fowles begins Daniel Martin with the words: 'Whole sight: or all the rest is desolation.' But human beings do not perceive things whole." Essentially, a whole sight would be the theory of everything. The objective account of the world. An impossibility. This paper itself does not seek to offer a whole sight.
3. Through a stereotypic vision: "Indian writers in these islands, like others who have migrated into the north from the south, are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society."
4. The Symbolic Order as it is experienced by the subject in it.
5. Rushdie's Exile inclines towards telos, as shown above.
6. From Easter, 1916
7. From The Waste Land

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