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“We Are All Homeless Wanderers”: Transculturality and Modernism in the Works of Edith Södergran, Elias Canetti, Henry Parland and Marguerite Duras

This article investigates the notion of *transculturality* and applies it to four modernist authors of the 20th century: Edith Södergran, Elias Canetti, Henry Parland and Marguerite Duras. The concept of transculturality is used to reach a better – or at least different – understanding of the selected writers and their respective body of work.

What is transculturality?

According to Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*,¹ transculturality is “the formation of multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters”. It has been launched as an alternative to “multiculturalism” and “interculturality”, which are notions often attached to the multiplicity of cultures that “coexist within a specific society”.² Transculturality is considered by some scholars to be a more adequate term to use when describing not only the coexistence of cultures but also cultural fusion and hybridization.³ As the *Oxford Index* definition of the adjective *transcultural* indicates, it emphasizes the movement and fusion of cultures, ideas and

1 Gilsenan Nordin, Irene; Hansen, Julie & Carmen Zamorano Llena. “Introduction. Conceptualizing Transculturality in Literature”, in *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013: ix-xxvii (ix).

2 Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*, 2013: x.

3 See, for instance, Welsch, Wolfgang. “Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today”, in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*. Featherstone, Mike & Scott Lash (eds.). London: Sage, 1999: 194-213 (electronic version available at <http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/Papers/transcultSociety.html>, consulted January 21, 2014).

beliefs.⁴

Gilsenan Nordin *et al.* maintain that current debates on transculturality and literature tend to focus on four central components: *migration*, *cosmopolitanism*, *multiculturalism* and *translingualism*.⁵ ‘Migration’, of course, is associated with the relocation of the individual person: the transcultural identity, then, is a consequence of his or her moving from one place to another. Transculturality can also result from ‘cosmopolitanism’, which is understood to be a conscious, voluntary choice of individuals whose loyalties stretch beyond the nation-state.⁶ ‘Multiculturalism’ is used here to describe the complexity of a person’s cultural background, and the fact that he or she has been exposed to, and has embraced, different cultures. The last component of transculturality, ‘translingualism’, is used in literary studies to describe the “phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one”.⁷ The translingual writer has more than one language to choose from and, in a certain way, he or she “resides between languages”.⁸

Modernism is, of course, a notoriously vague term and therefore difficult to define. This is not the adequate forum to discuss the various facets of the word and the numerous meanings attached to it by different scholars – as such a discussion, if it is to be worthwhile and serious, would require quite a few pages.⁹ Suffice it to say, for this particular study, important aspects of modernism include innovative techniques and novel

4 “TRANSCULTURAL: The movement of ideas, influences, practices, and beliefs between cultures and the fusions that result when the ideas, influences, practices, and beliefs of different cultures come together in a specific place, text, or contact zone” (<http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803105323291>, consulted January 21, 2014).

5 Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*, 2013: xii.

6 Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*, 2013: xvi.

7 Kellman, Steven G., 2000, quoted by Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*, 2013: xxi.

8 Kellman, Steven G., 2000, quoted by Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*, 2013: xxiii.

9 Well-documented discussions of that type can, of course, be found elsewhere – for instance in Lehan, Richard. *Literary Modernism and Beyond. The extended Vision and the Realms of the Text*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012; in Lisi, Leonard. *Marginal Modernity. The Aesthetics of Dependency from Kierkegaard to Joyce*. Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013 and in *Critical Theory Handbooks, Volume 3. A Handbook of Modernism Studies*. Rabaté, Jean-Michel (ed.). Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013 – just to mention a few recently published volumes.

structures, for instance the invention of hybrid narrative genres – and experiments with free verse in poetry, i.e., conscious efforts to break free from the constraints of meter and rhyme. We should also note that the authors who interest us here are not those most often cited in relation to literary modernism. Hence, readers looking for discussions in this article on the likes of Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Kafka, Rilke, Woolf or Gide will, in fact, search in vain.

The authors mentioned in the title are, nevertheless, prominent figures of 20th century European literature. Södergran and Parland represent the Finland-Swedish modernist movement in poetry: Södergran was the forerunner who published her major works in the 1910's, and Parland joined the group in the late 1920's. Elias Canetti has created works in many different genres, for instance, the modernist novel *Auto-da-Fé* [German title *Die Blendung*], several theatre plays in the absurdist tradition and the influential anthropological study *Crowds and Power* [*Masse und Macht*]. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1981. In the 1950's and 1960's, Marguerite Duras was associated with the French *Nouveau roman*-movement. Later on, her name was often cited in connection with the hybrid literary genre *autofiction*, and she is today considered to be one of the most important French writers of the 20th century. These four authors have been chosen because their biographies contain a transnational, or cross-cultural, dimension of one kind or another. Therefore, they make for highly interesting objects of study. All aspects of transculturality presented above (migration, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and translanguaging) are of equal importance to the investigation. The two poets, Södergran and Parland, died at an early age and their works are limited to the first part of the 20th century, whereas Canetti and Duras made their impact on the literary world mainly after World War II. In the section below, focus will be on Edith Södergran.

Edith Södergran

Edith Södergran (1892-1923) is widely recognized as being the most important and influential Finnish poet to write in Swedish. She was a distinctly modernist¹⁰ and self-conscious author, as the foreword of her

10 See, for instance, the titles of two important monographs: Schoolfield, George C. *Edith Södergran. Modernist Poet in Finland*. Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1984 and

second collection of poems *Septemberlyran* [*The September Lyre*] (1918) indicates:

No one can deny that my creations are poetry; I would not claim that they are verse. I tried to force certain recalcitrant poems into a rhythm, and in so doing discovered that I possess the full power of word and image only in complete freedom, i.e. at the expense of rhythm. [...] My firm self-confidence depends on the fact that I have discovered my own dimensions. It behooves me not to make myself smaller than I am.¹¹

Södergran was born in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg. Her parents were of Finnish-Swedish descent, but very soon after her birth, the family moved to a small village called Raivola on the Karelian Isthmus. As Brunner,¹² Ström¹³ and Witt-Brattström¹⁴ point out, this was at the time perhaps the most cosmopolitan region of Finland, a place where Russian, Baltic, German, Finnish and Swedish populations met and influenced each other. This was to be Edith's main home until she was 10 years old, after which time she was sent to a German school for girls, *Die deutsche Hauptschule zu S:t Petri*, in Saint Petersburg.¹⁵ Before the revolution, the city was a very cosmopolitan place indeed, and the young Edith attended the German-language school, where she was also taught French, Russian and English for seven years. In 1909, Edith Södergran was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She spent two years in a Finnish sanatorium and three years in Switzerland before she recovered from the disease. In Davos, Switzerland, she also studied Italian, which meant that by the time she was a young woman, she had mastered no fewer than seven languages: Swedish, German, Russian, French, Finnish, English and Italian.¹⁶ When Södergran made her literary debut in 1916, her choice of language was Swedish, although her early poetry from 1907-1909 bears witness to her transcultural

Witt-Brattström, Ebba. *Ediths jag. Edith Södergran och modernismens födelse* [Edith's I. Edith Södergran and the Birth of Modernism]. Stockholm: Norstedt, 1997.

11 Södergran, Edith. *The Collected Poems of Edith Södergran* (transl. by Martin Allwood). Mullsjö: The Anglo-American Center, 1980: 51. All subsequent translations of Södergran's poetry (except where otherwise indicated) are quoted from this volume.

12 Brunner, Ernst. *Till fots genom solsystemen. En studie i Edith Södergrans expressionism*. Stockholm: Bonniers, 1985: 16.

13 Ström, Eva. *Edith Södergran*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1994: 20.

14 Witt-Brattström, 1997: 255-258.

15 Cf. Schoolfield, 1984: 9 and Witt-Brattström, 1997: 20 and 30.

16 Cf. Witt-Brattström, 1997: 34.

background. The vast majority of her 238 poems from this period were in fact written in German, and she also used Swedish (26 poems), French (5 poems) and Russian (1).¹⁷

Before World War I, Edith Södergran returned to the Karelian Isthmus and the village of Raivola, where she lived until her death in 1923. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the place lost most of its cosmopolitan feel, as the multicultural elite of St. Petersburg ceased coming there and were forced to abandon their *dachas*. Not many Finland-Swedes resided in the region, and it is true to say that she lived her whole life somewhat cut off from the Swedish-speaking community.¹⁸ Therefore, her decision to write in Swedish was by no means the obvious choice. According to several sources (e.g., Hans Ruin, Hagar Olsson, Gunnar Ekelöf), German was the language Edith Södergran mastered best.¹⁹ Her contemporaries who had the opportunity to meet her agree that she spoke Swedish with a clear accent. Her speech lacked fluency and had many archaic elements – it was a language learned from books.²⁰

The sense of life both in exile and in isolation appears clearly in Edith Södergran's poetry. For instance, in "What Is My Native Country?" from *Framtidens skugga* [*The Shadow of the Future*] (1920), she writes: "What is my native country? Is it distant, star-strewn Finland?/ It does not matter."²¹ The feeling of not belonging to a specific place is also visible in a verse such as this from the same collection: "We are all homeless wanderers/ and we are all brothers and sisters./ Naked we wander with our

17 See Schoolfield (1984: 27) and Ström (1994: 34). These poems were originally written in an oilcloth notebook by the teenaged Södergran. A selection of poems from this booklet has been translated into Swedish and published under the title *Vaxdukshäftet*. In one of the poems written in German, the young lyricist explicitly addresses the question of what language to choose for poetic expression: "I do not know to whom I shall bring my songs/ I do not know in whose tongue I shall write" (Södergran, Edith, *Vaxdukshäftet. Edith Södergrans ungdomsdiktning i urval av Ebba Witt-Brattström*. Stockholm: Norstedt, 1997: 64, my translation).

18 In a letter from 1920 addressed to Vilhelm Ekelund, her lyrical predecessor and source of inspiration, Edith Södergran deploras being, as she puts it, "impoverished by Bolshevism and tuberculosis, and living in a remote borderland village" (quoted by Brunner, 1985: 35, my translation).

19 Witt-Brattström, 1997: 46. See also Schoolfield (1984: 9), who states that Södergran "never wholly mastered Swedish orthography and grammar" and even towards the end of her life called German her "best language".

20 Witt-Brattström, 1997: 46.

21 Södergran, 1980: 102.

satchel,/ but what do the princes possess in comparison with us?”²² It is very much under the influence of Nietzsche that Södergran uses the motif of the wanderer as an ideal character.²³ If a sense of belonging to a physical place appears in her poetry, it is merely a nostalgic childhood memory of a less complicated life in the Russian metropolis:

Petersburg, Petersburg,
 from your turrets flutter the enchanted banners of my childhood.
 It was the time before the deep wounds, before the huge scars,
 before your rejuvenation’s bath of oblivion.
 Petersburg, Petersburg,
 on your pinnacles lies the glow of my youth
 like a rosy curtain, like a light overture [...]²⁴

As Witt-Brattström has pointed out, Saint Petersburg was of the utmost importance for the young author. Quite a number of poems in *Vaxdukshäftet* [*The Oilcloth Notebook*] have the city as a central motif, and Södergran considered herself to be a member of the Russian intelligentsia.²⁵ This scholar has also shown how closely linked Södergran’s poetry is to both Russian folklore and Russian feminist writers of the 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁶

Indeed, all four aspects of transculturality (migration, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and translanguaging) fit the description of Edith Södergran. During her short life, she lived in several countries, had access to numerous languages and was influenced by different cultures. She is today considered by many people, literary critics and “ordinary” readers alike, as the most influential modernist poet to write in Swedish. She has

22 Södergran, 1980: 119. Other examples include: “I am a stranger in this country/ which lies deep under the oppressive ocean,/ [...] no face here is familiar./ Was I a rock which they threw to the bottom here?/ Was I a fruit that was too heavy for its branch?” and “My soul so loves the foreign lands/ as if it had no home./ In the distance stand the great stones/ on which my thoughts are resting.” Both excerpts are from her first collection, *Dikter* [*Poems*], originally published in 1916 (Södergran, 1980: 21 and 38).

23 Many scholars have touched upon the Nietzschean influence on Södergran’s writing, especially manifest in the period around *Septemberlyran* [*The September Lyre*] (1918) and *Rosenaltaret* [*The Rose Altar*] (1919): see, for instance, Schoolfield (1984: 62-100), Brunner (1985: 94-97), Ström (1994: 98-102) and Witt-Brattström (1997: 168-204).

24 “Fragment” from *The September Lyre*, in Södergran, 1980: 68.

25 Witt-Brattström, 1997: 39-42.

26 Witt-Brattström, 1997: 93-138.

never ceased to attract new generations of admirers, who are often intrigued by her expressive, visionary and, as it has turned out, timeless poetry. It is somewhat ironic that during her lifetime, this iconic modernist author, whose body of work is a centerpiece of the Swedish literary canon of the 20th century, had virtually no interaction with Sweden and Swedish citizens – and only occasional contact with the Swedish-speaking community in Finland. Instead, Edith Södergran used her position in the geographical and cultural margin to develop a highly individual and powerful poetic voice. She was a transcultural author in the true sense of the word.

Elias Canetti

The parents of Elias Canetti (1905-1994) were Sephardi Jews living in Ruschuk (German name Russe), Bulgaria, at the time of their son's birth.²⁷ When the boy was six years old, the family moved to Manchester, then on to Vienna, Zürich and Frankfurt. In the 1930's, Canetti fled Nazi Germany and returned to Britain for a long period – and he also lived in France and Switzerland after World War II.²⁸ Hence migration became a constant feature of his life. The fact is, however, that transculturality was part of Canetti's existence even before the first relocation of his family. In the first part of his memoirs, *Die gerettete Zunge* [*The Tongue Set Free*], he describes his Bulgarian birth town as follows:

Ruschuk, on the lower Danube, where I came into the world, was a marvelous city for a child, and if I say that Ruschuk is in Bulgaria, then I am giving an inadequate picture of it. For people of the most varied backgrounds lived there, on any one day you could hear seven or eight

27 Sephardi Jews are descendants of the Hispanic Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492. They founded Jewish communities at different locations around the Mediterranean and elsewhere, for instance in Turkey, Greece, Morocco and Bulgaria. Their language, Judaeo-Spanish (or Ladino), is a variant of old Spanish, with elements incorporated from other languages such as Catalan, Turkish and Hebrew.

28 Canetti recalls, and dramatizes to a large extent, events from the first 30 years of his life in his three volumes of memoirs: Canetti, Elias. *The Memoirs of Elias Canetti. The Tongue Set Free, The Torch in My Ear, The Play of the Eyes* (transl. by Joachim Neugroschel). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999. Recollections from the English period during and after World War II have been published posthumously in Canetti, Elias. *Party im Blitz. Die englischen Jahre*. München: Carl Hanser, 2003.

languages. Aside from the Bulgarians, who often came from the countryside, there were many Turks, who lived in their own neighborhood, and next to it was the neighborhood of the Sephardim, the Spanish Jews – our neighborhood. There were Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Gypsies. From the opposite side of the Danube came Rumanians; my wetnurse, whom I no longer remember, was Rumanian. There were also Russians here and there.²⁹

Being of Sephardi descent, the parents of Elias Canetti spoke Judaeo-Spanish (also called Ladino) with their children, but they apparently preferred to communicate with each other in German. Bulgarian was also featured in the boy's early childhood, before he moved to England and German-speaking countries:

To each other, my parents spoke German, which I was not allowed to understand. To us children and to all relatives and friends, they spoke Ladino. That was the true vernacular, albeit an ancient Spanish, I often heard it later on and I've never forgotten it. The peasant girls at home knew only Bulgarian, and I must have learned it with them. But since I never went to a Bulgarian school, leaving Ruschuk at six years of age, I very soon forgot Bulgarian completely. All events of those first few years were in Ladino or Bulgarian. It wasn't until much later that most of them were rendered into German within me. Only especially dramatic events, murder and manslaughter so to speak, and the worst terrors have been retained by me in their Ladino wording, and very precisely and indestructibly at that. Everything else, that is, most things, and especially anything Bulgarian, like the fairy tales, I carry around in German.³⁰

It was only when he was eight that Elias Canetti began learning German, but with time the language became extremely important to him, both emotionally and intellectually. The biographer Thomas Falk calls it the "magic language of his childhood"³¹ and Canetti himself, in his memoirs, speaks of a "belated mother tongue, implanted in true pain". The agony associated with the process of learning German was soon replaced by a feeling of happiness that "tied [him] indissolubly to that language".³²

In many respects, Elias Canetti is a prime example of a modernist

29 Canetti, 1999: 6.

30 Canetti, 1999: 12-13.

31 Falk, Thomas H. *Elias Canetti*. New York: Twayne, 1993: 5.

32 Canetti, 1999: 76-77.

writer, even though he is seldom cited as such. However, in her study of childhood recollection in literary modernism, Lorna Martens speaks of Canetti as a modernist writer who revered memory, individual memory in particular, at a time when remembering had become more difficult and problematic – partly due to Freud’s declaration of memory as untrustworthy.³³ William Collins Donahue, for his part, argues that Canetti’s novel *Auto-da-Fé* must be separated from what he calls “aesthetic” or “high modernism”. Instead, he prefers the term “analytic modernism” to describe this particular text.³⁴ In other studies on modernism, Elias Canetti’s name may not be mentioned explicitly, but the reader might come to think of him nevertheless. One such example is Richard Lehan’s study *Literary Modernism and Beyond*. This scholar states that, in the tradition of Baudelaire, “the quintessential modernist is alone in the crowd. It is the varied consciousness of that viewer that is central to modernist thought”.³⁵ Here we can identify a parallel to Canetti’s memoirs, which are to a large extent guided by the consciousness of the individual observer. And when Lehan proceeds to discuss the crowd and the need for control of the mass,³⁶ the association with Canetti’s study *Crowds and Power* seems evident, as the two intellectuals share an interest in this particular field – which is not to say that Canetti necessarily arrives at the same conclusion as Lehan.

Even though Elias Canetti published in German only, it is safe to say that he was a thoroughly European writer, transcending cultural boundaries as did few other authors in his era, or as do few other authors in any era for that matter.³⁷ As we have seen, he moved on numerous occasions from one

33 Martens, Lorna. *Promise of Memory. Childhood Recollection and Its Objects in Literary Modernism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011: 183-188.

34 Donahue, William Collins. *The End of Modernism. Elias Canetti’s Auto-da-Fé*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. In the preface of his study, Donahue maintains that although Canetti is part of the same anti-realist tradition as Joyce, Musil and Rilke, the novel’s wicked humour and its analytic posture distinguish it from “aesthetic” or “high modernism”.

35 Lehan, 2012: 3.

36 Lehan (2012: 7) writes: “The artist as social witness, the crowd as state of mind: this intersection is mutually defining. [...] The artist is the perfect spectator, whether it is Baudelaire or Gide’s Edouard or Proust’s Marcel in Paris, Mann’s Aschenbach in Venice, or Joyce’s Dedalus in Dublin. The idea of the crowd is inseparable from the problems of mass culture. A mass demands a master, a situation that questions the merits of democracy and suggests the need for some kind of control – an elite, an intellectual aristocracy, or a strong, perhaps totalitarian, leader.”

37 As John Bayley states apropos of the novel *Auto-da-Fé* [*Die Blendung*], it could only

country to another, and he was exposed to many languages and to a great variety of cultural input. When Canetti received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1981, virtually every commentator wanted to present him as a representative of *his or her* own culture. As Thomas Falk points out, Canetti was at that time called “the first British citizen to win the Literature prize since Winston Churchill” in the British press (*Sunday Times*).³⁸ Austrian commentators highlighted the author’s connections to their nation by writing: “Canetti is not an Austrian citizen, but in recognition of his acknowledgement we may include him in our literature. He is the first author of truly Austrian spirit who has received the Nobel Prize.”³⁹ In the Spanish press, he was presented as a Spanish laureate, due to the fact that his forefathers were Jews living on the Iberian Peninsula before the Inquisition of the 15th century. The *New York Times*, which had no national stakes to defend, labelled him “the first native of Bulgaria to win the prize”.⁴⁰ This heterogeneous reception indicates that Canetti’s works do not belong to any specific culture – but that he was, indeed, a transcultural author.

Henry Parland

If Edith Södergran was the predecessor, the first of the Finnish modernists writing in Swedish, one can say that Henry Parland (1908-1930) was the last, and the youngest, of the modernist group to appear on the literary scene. He made his debut in 1928, in the legendary but short-lived literary magazine *Quosego* – to which he contributed poems and prose

have been written in German, but it could never have been written *by a German* – because such a man would have been too much at ease in the *Gemütlichkeit* of his mother tongue. (Bayley, John. ”Canetti och makten” [transl. by Margareta Eklöf], in *Elias Canetti – förvandlingens väktare*. Stockholm: Forum, 1985: 52-66 [53].)

38 Falk, 1993: 146.

39 *Literatur und Kritik*, quoted and translated by Falk, 1993: 146.

40 Falk, 1993: 146.

articles.⁴¹ One of his articles, “Sakernas uppror” [The Rebellion of Things],⁴² served as a manifesto for himself and for the Quosego circle – a group that included modernist Finland-Swedish poets like Gunnar Björling, Elmer Diktonius, Hagar Olsson and Rabbe Enckell. Only one collection of poetry, *Idealrealisation* (1929), was published before Parland’s death from scarlet fever at the age of 22. An unfinished novel, *Sönder*, was published posthumously in 1932 and collected prose and poetry followed in the 1960’s and 1970’s.⁴³

Henry Parland was born in Vyborg, at the time a Finnish (now Russian) town on the Karelian Isthmus. Just as Södergran before him, he grew up partly in the cosmopolitan city of Saint Petersburg. His father was an engineer employed by the railroad company of the Russian Empire. He spoke Russian with his children. Henry’s mother was of Baltic German origin and communicated with the children essentially in German, the same language that Henry and his brothers used with each other until they were in upper-secondary school.⁴⁴ Early in Henry Parland’s life, the family moved to a village called Tikkala on the Karelian Isthmus – another parallel to the life

41 Per Stam has shown that Henry Parland had, in fact, published some poetry before his “official” debut in *Quosego*. In 1927, a total of six poems appeared in the newspapers and periodicals *Hufvudstadsbladet*, *Allas krönika* and *Studentbladet*. (See Stam, Per. ”Med Gud och Gunnar Björlings hjälp”. Henry Parlands *Idealrealisation*”, in *Erhållit Europa/ vilket härmed erkännes. Henry Parland-studier*. Clas Zilliacus (ed.). Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2011: 17-42.) And as Agneta Rahikainen points out, a short story by Parland was accepted for publication in *Allas krönika* as early as March 1926. (See Rahikainen, Agneta. *Jag är ju utlänning vart jag än kommer. En bok om Henry Parland*. Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2009: 22.)

42 Reprinted in Parland, Henry. *Säginteannat*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1970: 53-55. His important critical essay “Den modernistiska dikten ur formalistisk synpunkt” [The Modernist Poem from a Formalist Perspective] is also worth mentioning in this context. In this article, originally written for *Quosego* in 1929 but not published until 1932, Parland takes on the role of the intellectual theoretician of modernist poetry. His discussions on the likes of Shklovsky, Mayakovski and Diktonius illustrate his interest in and deep understanding of the subject matter (see Parland, 1970: 156-163).

43 *Idealrealisation* has been translated into English and published with the title *Ideals Clearance* (transl. by Johannes Göransson, Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006) and the novel *Sönder* also exists in the English language (*To Pieces*, transl. by Dinah Cannell, London: Norvik Press, 2012).

44 See Rahikainen, 2009: 215. The preserved letters from the father addressed to Henry are, for instance, written in Russian, and those from his mother are written in German (*ibid.*). Henry’s two younger brothers Ralf and Oscar Parland also had intellectual and artistic interests, and they both became authors when they grew up.

of Edith Södergran. Here he also came into close contact with Finnish. It was not until the age of 14, when the family relocated to the small town of Grankulla (Kauniainen in Finnish) in the Helsinki region, that Parland came to attend a Swedish school where he was regularly exposed to Swedish, which would later become his literary language of choice.⁴⁵ He lived in Finland until his early twenties, but personal debts and an irregular, alcohol-infused lifestyle made his parents act to “save” their son, who was still a minor at the time, from the destructive influence of his careless and bohemian friends – in particular the modernist (and homosexual) poet Gunnar Björling. Consequently, they forced Parland into exile in Lithuania, where he spent the last one and a half years of his life working as a secretary in the Swedish consulate in Kaunas, the capital of independent Lithuania in the inter-war period. There he was under the supervision of an uncle, a professor of philosophy at the local university. In Lithuania, Parland worked on his novel *Sönder*, which would remain unfinished at the time of his death. He also wrote articles (in German) for the Lithuanian press and other articles (in Swedish) for Finnish media.⁴⁶ The 18 months Henry Parland spent in Kaunas made for an extremely productive period in his life, one that was important for the development of his poetry and prose. One can see that quite a few elements from the town appear as motifs in his posthumous poems: e.g., the Jewish theatre, the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the ice floes of the Neman River when spring comes to Kaunas.⁴⁷ His novel *Sönder* also has an epilogue set in the Lithuanian town.⁴⁸

Fredrik Hertzberg quotes the American author and translator Eliot Weinberger, who has called Parland “a Finno-Swedish Russian German Lithuanian teen prodigy”, a presentation which sums him up quite nicely.⁴⁹

45 Cf. Rahikainen, 2009: 31 and 216-217. In the article “Henry kosmopoliten” [Henry the Cosmopolite], the author’s younger relative Stella Parland confirms these facts. She states that Henry’s mother tongues were German and Russian, and that he learned Finnish before he was exposed to Swedish. Henry Parland also studied French and Lithuanian prior to his death. (Parland, Stella. ”Henry kosmopoliten”, in *Erhållit Europa/ vilket härmed erkännes. Henry Parland-studier*. Clas Zilliacus (ed.). Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2011: 11-15.

46 See, for instance, Oscar Parland’s postscript in Parland, Henry, 1970: 169-228.

47 Parland, Henry. *Hamlet sade det vackrare* (samlade dikter redigerade av Oscar Parland). Göteborg: Gargantua, 1992 [orig. 1964]: 136, 142, 155. Similar motifs also found their way into Parland’s prose: see Parland, 1970: 59-61 and 78-82.

48 Parland, Henry. *Sönder (om framkallning av veloxpapper)*. Stockholm: Författarförlaget, 1987: 121-125.

49 See Hertzberg, Fredrik. ”Oersättlige, översättlige Mr. Parland”, in *Erhållit Europa/*

Hertzberg also discusses the somewhat unique position of the Swedish-speaking modernists in Finland in general, and Henry Parland in particular. He argues, with reference to Lars Kleberg, that the fact that they were bilingual (or multilingual in the case of Parland) and belonged to a national minority placed them on the periphery both from a Swedish and from a Finnish point of view. Therefore, they “found themselves in the productive borderland where interaction between the self and the outside takes place”.⁵⁰ One can wonder if such a cultural position is always productive for the individual. Presumably it is not, but for Henry Parland it seems to have been a blessing, since he was able to use the diverse cultural input in his creative work. In the above-mentioned essay, Stella Parland affirms that one of Henry Parland’s most fascinating qualities was his ability to feel at home in different cultures, at the same time as he would move easily between them.⁵¹ He was able to enter a new culture and make it his own while being equally at ease in others. A similar idea is expressed by Rahikainen, who argues that the feelings of homelessness and rootlessness experienced by Henry Parland’s parents upon arrival in Finland were *not* transferred to their children.⁵² They were actually rather well assimilated in Finnish society.⁵³ Even during his forced exile in Lithuania, where he did not speak a word of the local language upon his arrival, Parland managed to find himself a place in society as he became acquainted with the intellectual and artistic milieu of Kaunas.

vilket härmed erkännes. Henry Parland-studier. Clas Zilliacus (ed.). Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2011: 127-143 (128). In fact, the quotation is interesting in its entirety, as it also establishes Parland as a modernist poet. Weinberger writes: “Just when you thought there were no more discoveries to be made in modernist poetry, along comes a Finno-Swedish Russian German Lithuanian teen prodigy from the 1920’s, Henry Parland, in Johannes Göransson’s zippy translation. Did anyone ever pack so much delightful weirdness into so few lines?” (Weinberger, quoted by Hertzberg, 2011: 128-129.) One could, in fact, add “British” to the list of adjectives, as the Parland family had British roots (*cf.* Rahikainen, 2009: 215).

50 Hertzberg, 2011: 128, my translation.

51 Parland, Stella, 2011: 12.

52 Rahikainen, 2009: 215.

53 From the Estonian city of Tallinn, Henry Parland once wrote the following lines in a letter to a friend: “Manifestly, I feel homesick. You must smile slightly: where to? To Finland? I am a foreigner wherever I come. But I seem to have something in common with *Espen* [the esplanade in Helsinki] and with the litterbins at Grankulla station” (Henry Parland, letter to Sven Grönvall, August 16, 1930, quoted by Rahikainen, 2009: 198, my translation). In fact, Rahikainen takes the title of her monograph *Jag är ju utlänning vart jag än kommer* [I am a foreigner wherever I come] from this particular letter.

Hanna Ruutu has shown how essential the Russian futurist movement was for Henry Parland. She argues that he intuitively felt sympathetic to the ideas introduced by its key figures (Mayakovski in particular).⁵⁴ It is worth mentioning that his translingual background allowed him to study their works directly in Russian, in many cases years before they were translated into other languages.⁵⁵

Henry Parland is often characterized as an extremely *modern* author. Even for a *modernist* and iconoclastic poet and novelist he is considered unusually modern. The reason for this is, presumably, that Parland's main textual motifs have become iconic features of modernity: jazz, cinema, city life, advertisements, alcohol, fashion, money and everything money can buy. Leif Friberg argues that this lyrical universe of his is not intended to be an ironic divertissement, but rather a "serious-minded poetic examination of the shiny surface of modernity and popular culture".⁵⁶ This means that Parland is not only modern, but also international – since popular culture from Parland's era and onwards has been one of the main vehicles for globalization and cultural standardization.⁵⁷ This is, in fact, another aspect of

54 Ruutu, Hanna. "Diktens uppror. Om Henry Parland och den ryska futurismen", in *Erhållit Europa/ vilket härmed erkännes. Henry Parland-studier*. Clas Zilliacus (ed.). Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2011: 145-156.

55 Parland's knowledge of Russian culture and language also enabled him to write an essay on the subject of Soviet cinema, which was banned at the time in Finland but not in Lithuania (cf. Parland, 1970: 95-102). Olga Mäeots discusses Parland's critical texts on the Russian poet and novelist Ilya Ehrenburg, whose works he, of course, read in the original. (See Mäeots, Olga. "Parland och Ehrenburg", in *Erhållit Europa/ vilket härmed erkännes. Henry Parland-studier*. Clas Zilliacus (ed.). Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2011: 173-185.)

56 Friberg, Leif. "'litet svalkande likgiltighet'. Henry Parland och den nya sakligheten", in *Erhållit Europa/ vilket härmed erkännes. Henry Parland-studier*. Clas Zilliacus (ed.). Helsingfors & Stockholm: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland & Atlantis, 2011: 45-55 (54), my translation.

57 Many researchers have associated modernist movements with mass culture. Leonard Lisi (2012: 5), for instance, declares that "the content of modernist works also has strong ties to popular culture". Parland's whole body of work, both his poetry and his prose, illustrates this observation. And when Richard Lehan (2012: 6-7) argues that "modernism involved the contradictory concern of pursuing an ideal at the same time that the culture was giving way to mass culture", it appears almost as a reformulation of Parland's poem from 1929, in which he – tongue-in-cheek – seems to embrace this very development. In a market economy with mass production, prices of commodities tend to fall – including the price of ideals, according to Parland. Hence the idea of an ideals clearance: "Ideal-realisationen / – ni säger, den har redan börjat / men jag säger: / vi måste ytterligare sänka prisen" [The ideals clearance / – You say: It has already begun / but I say: / we must cut

Parland's transculturality: in his works he transcends national borders and cultural boundaries. His poetic and fictional universe is very universal and international in scope – and maybe even more so today than in 1929, when *Idealrealisation* [*Ideals Clearance*] was first published. No matter where you live, as long as it is in a reasonably urban society of the Western world, you are almost bound to feel at home in Parland's poetry, as well as in his posthumous novel *Sönder* [*To Pieces*].

Marguerite Duras

Marguerite Duras (1914-1996) was born in French Indochina and lived there for almost 20 years before moving to metropolitan France to become, in the 1950's and 1960's, a key figure of the *Nouveau roman*-movement, with such novels as *Moderato cantabile* and *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* [*The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*]. The fact that she spent her childhood and adolescence in Vietnam and Cambodia is clearly visible in her literary works. A number of key Durassian texts, such as *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) [*The Sea Wall*, 1952], *L'amant* (1984) [*The Lover*, 1985] and *L'amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991) [*The North China Lover*, 1993] are set in Indochina during French colonial rule, and it becomes evident from studying them that the author has an intimate knowledge of life in that part of the world.⁵⁸

Duras's Prix Goncourt-winning novel *The Lover* centres on the family life and the amorous adventures of the writer's *alter ego*, a young white girl of French descent living with her mother and two brothers in Indochina. The main character is described by her Chinese lover in the following way:

He says all the years she's spent here, in this intolerable latitude, have turned her into a girl of Indochina. That she has the same slender wrists as they, the same thick hair that looks as if it's absorbed all its owner's

prices even more] (Parland, 1992: 96, my translation).

58 For a long time, the public has shown a keen interest in Marguerite Duras's life and career, and her biography has been extensively covered. See, for instance, Blot-Labarrère, Christiane. *Marguerite Duras*. Paris: Seuil, 1992; Lebelley, Frédérique. *Duras ou le poids d'une plume*. Paris: Grasset, 1994; Adler, Laure. *Marguerite Duras*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998 and Vallier, Jean. *C'était Marguerite Duras*. Paris: Fayard, 2006.

strength, and it's long like theirs too [...]⁵⁹

We can see from the quotation above that the white adolescent is perceived by the male character to be a Vietnamese girl to such an extent as to have become one. Ethnic assimilation with “the Other” is thus the governing theme of the picture painted of her. The passage from *The Lover* echoes an earlier description in a text called “Les enfants maigres et jaunes” [Thin, Yellow Children] first published in the feminist revue *Sorcières* in 1976 and later reproduced in *Outside. Papiers d'un jour* (1984).⁶⁰ In this short (two and a half pages) and autobiographically inspired text, Duras reflects on a childhood spent with her mother and her beloved brother in Indochina. The children are depicted as completely creolized, and in this respect they feel alienated from their mother, who was not born in the colony but who emigrated there as an adult:

We were small and thin, my brother and I, little half-breeds, more yellow than white. Inseparable. She beat us together: dirty little Annamites, she said. She, she was French, she wasn't born there.⁶¹

The mother tries her best to make them feel and act like French children, but with no great success. She feeds them apples that become the symbol of their mother country – in the concrete sense of the word: the country of their mother – but one to which they themselves feel no sense of belonging:

One day she said to us: I've bought some apples, fruit from France. You're French, you must eat apples. We tried and spit them out. She screamed. We said we were choking, that they tasted like cotton, that they had no juice, that it was impossible to swallow. She gave up. Meat, too, we spit out. We liked only freshwater fish cooked in brine of *nuoc-mam*. We liked only rice, the sublimely insipid flavor of rice from the boats that smelled like their cotton cargoes and the thin soups sold by the itinerant merchants of the Mekong.⁶²

59 Duras, Marguerite. *The Lover* (transl. by Barbara Bray). New York: Pantheon, 1985: 98.

60 English translation in Duras, Marguerite. *Outside. Selected Writings* (transl. by Arthur Goldhammer). Boston: Beacon Press, 1986: 234-236.

61 Duras, 1986: 234.

62 Duras, 1986: 236.

As we can see from the excerpt above, the children prefer local food and they feel perfectly assimilated with the Vietnamese culture. According to the narrator, they have an “ineffable belonging to the land of mangoes”,⁶³ and they even speak the local language without difficulty. Thus, everything separates them from their mother, who cannot understand Vietnamese, who suffers from the heat and who longs for a return to her native France:

But she, she wasn't crazy about mangoes. And while she slept, in the magical quiet of her siestas, we thin little monkeys filled our bellies, bellies of a different race from hers. And so we became Annamites, you and I. She gave up hope of making us eat bread. We liked only rice. We spoke a foreign language. We went barefoot. She was too old. She couldn't get into a foreign language. We didn't even try to teach her. She wore shoes. And once she suffered a sunstroke because she hadn't worn a hat, and she screamed, she shouted that she wanted to go back to the northern hemisphere, to wheat and raw milk and cold weather, to her family of farmers, to Frévent in Pas-de-Calais, which she had left behind.⁶⁴

The description of these thin, yellow children, who “became Annamites” and who had “bellies of a different race” from their mother's, thus reminds us of the adolescent from *The Lover* who, as we have seen, turned into “a girl of Indochina”.⁶⁵

Marguerite Duras is an interesting author to study from a transcultural perspective because of her Franco-Vietnamese background. The diverse cultural influences she absorbed, the different languages she was exposed to and her willingness to embrace, and even assimilate into, the culture of “the Other” that can be identified in her works are all important aspects of her transculturality. In this short presentation, focus has been on transculturality at the thematic level. Therefore, it supplements in some respects another, and much more extensive, study by Catherine Bouthors-Paillart. In her monograph entitled *Duras la métisse*, she shows that there also exists a “métissage linguistique” in Duras's texts, i.e., the language employed by the author is influenced in important ways by Vietnamese (especially with regards to morphology and syntax).⁶⁶

63 Duras, 1986: 235.

64 Duras, 1986: 235.

65 Duras, 1985: 98.

66 Bouthors-Paillart, Catherine. *Duras la métisse. Métissage fantasmatique et linguistique dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras*. Genève: Librairie Droz, 2002.

Conclusion

The authors discussed in this article share some important characteristics. They have all contributed, in one way or another, to modernist literary movements of the 20th century – by using free form verse and idiosyncratic poetic motifs (Södergran and Parland) or by inventing new ways of writing narrative prose (Canetti and Duras). They also share a transcultural background, which may very well have provided them with “multifaceted, fluid identities resulting from diverse cultural encounters”.⁶⁷

Of course, one cannot conclude that personal experiences of transculturality are a *sine qua non* for participating in a modernist literary movement. For each one of the *migrating, cosmopolitan, multicultural* and *translingual* authors discussed in this article one could easily cite the names of other modernist writers who had more sedentary lifestyles and who were exposed to far less diverse cultural input during their lifetime. One can, however, argue that the transcultural experiences enriched the works of these four authors. Without the heterogeneous cultural influences, Södergran’s poetry would have been radically different. The linguistic diversity of her early poetry, for instance, is impossible to imagine without her translingual background. Parland’s body of work would also lack important dimensions should we (and could we) take away all transcultural aspects of his biography. And what about Canetti’s memoirs, and Duras’s Indochinese texts? These important *oeuvres* of the 20th century are virtually impossible to imagine without the thematic presence of transculturality, a presence that constitutes such a central part of their legacy.

⁶⁷ See Gilsenan Nordin *et al.*, 2013: ix.