NEMO PROFETA IN PATRIA: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PATTERNS IN MAXIM D. SHRAYER'S *WAITING FOR AMERICA: A STORY OF EMIGRATION* (2007) AND *A RUSSIAN IMMIGRANT: THREE NOVELLAS* (2019)

Michele Russo*

This article analyzes translingual writing in Shrayer's *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration* (2007) and *A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas* (2019). It re-maps the writer's linguistic and cultural transition from Russia to America via Europe, by bringing into focus such concepts as separation, loss and displacement in-between the source language and the target language.

Nemo profeta in patria*: modelli linguistici e culturali in* Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration *(2007) e* A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas *(2019) di Maxim D. Shrayer*
Questo articolo analizza la scrittura translinguistica in *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration* (2007) e *A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas* (2019) di Shrayer. Ripercorre la transizione linguistica e culturale dello scrittore dalla Russia all'America attraverso l'Europa, focalizzandosi su concetti come separazione, perdita e disadattamento, tra la lingua di partenza e di arrivo.

Introduction

The upsurge of interest in translingual literature and in the émigré writers' works has been increasing in the context of a globalized world. Emigrating leads to border-crossing, to cross-cultural itineraries and to the need to adopt a second language. If we turn our glance back in time, some language-switching writers will stand out for having paved the way for translingualism, like Joseph Conrad, Irène Nemirovsky, Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky (Hansen 113). A number of translingual writers with Russian-Jewish roots are being unearthed by critics today as plurilingual identities whose works deal with such issues as loss, divided selves, bilingualism and, as Wanner puts it, their leaving «their native Russia behind en route to America» (125).

A new generation of translingual writers who moved to the USA from Russia have drawn the attention of scholars, since they are contemporary literati who have inherited the linguistic and cultural patterns of their translingual "fa-

* Università degli Studi di Foggia.

Oltreoceano. *Erranze tra mito e storia* a cura di Silvana Serafin e Alessandra Ferraro, 2021

thers". In particular, what makes such writers compelling is their inclination to self-narrate their linguistic transition by employing their target language, thus not making their autobiographical writings mere accounts of their own lives, and by using narrative means intended to explore their linguistic world. Besides illustrating the different phases of their emigration, their memoirs are examples of implicit self-translations, as texts written in another language which at the same time hide the author's linguistic original background. Writing in a second language allows the writer to adopt more personal approaches to translation and to be unconstrained by the linguistic conventions of translation. The self-translator is, in fact, both the author and the translator of the text and, as such, is considered more reliable. The translingual autobiography, as a pattern of implicit self-translation, leads the author to self-exploration and to the dialogue between his / her linguistic selves, located, in turn, in different geographical, temporal and linguistic spaces. The translingual autobiography, being the result of an act of self-translation, depicts, therefore, its author's linguistic and cultural evolution and illustrates how his / her own self becomes both the subject and the object of translation as a consequence of its mutations. In particular, as the subject of translation, the self is the author who translates and makes his / her decisions which concern the act of translation. As the object of translation, the author's self represents the new "persona" that is created in the narration after emigration overseas (Wanner 122, Wilson 186).

Among the contemporary Russian-Jewish writers, Shrayer is one of the most interesting translingual personalities who, despite revealing some influences from previous Russian-American writers, like Nabokov, illustrates his linguistic experience in light of the latest events connected with the Cold War. Such events forced many communities, especially the Jewish, to expatriate. The present essay means to analyze his autobiography *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration* (hereafter *Waiting for America*) and his collection of short stories, *A Russian Immigrant: Three Novellas* (hereafter *A Russian Immigrant*), as two narrations contextualizing diasporic issues in different spaces of emigration. The former, in fact, being set in Italy, as a space of in-betweenness, stages «diaspora within diaspora» (Gurfinkel 201), whereas the latter describes the writer's wandering memories between Russia and America.

Waiting for America: spaces of emigration and linguistic transition

Waiting for America embodies the diasporic space in a neutral area, Italy, where the writer's family spent the summer in 1987 on their way from Russia to America as *refuseniks*. Although such an emblematic word does not appear in Rus-

sian-Italian dictionaries, Shrayer points out its meaning in the first pages of his memoirs, and explains that it «corresponds to the Russian word *otkaznik* and means "one who was refused, denied permission" to leave the Soviet Union» (5). The town of Ladispoli, near Rome, was, as is known, the first destination for all those Russian-Jewish *refuseniks* who were bound for America. The itinerary was Moscow-Vienna. Once arrived in Vienna, the emigrants had to communicate to the local authorities whether their journey would proceed to Israel or overseas. If bound for the USA, they had to reach Ladispoli by train and, after some months, fly overseas. The sense of in-betweenness, of non-belonging to and lacking a national identity pervades the whole text. The author underlines, when he recalls his arrival in Vienna, that he «was a person of no country, a tired wanderer through the Vienna Woods» (14). Similar remarks appear frequently throughout the text.

As often occurs among emigrant writers, the two spaces of emigration, Russia and America, include a third space as well. The latter results from the emigrant's further dislocation from his/her place of emigration or, as in Shrayer's case, it is the neutral space, the temporary space in-between Russia (the origin, the first space) and America (the destination, the second space). Thus, the Italian town near Rome represents the third space of emigration which becomes such prior to reaching the second space located overseas; it is the place where, according to Shrayer, «America was both a remote dream and a near future» (111). As the story progresses, the sense of longing and waiting increases and the writer seems to be stuck in a new unforeseeable cultural and linguistic space. Ladispoli is the grey area of the present, where the past is left behind, albeit it is often evoked, and the future still appears as a mysterious horizon: «Maine or Connecticut or New Jersey, I barely knew the difference. [...] Neither of us had been to America; everything we knew about it was from movies, from reading, from what we had heard from others» (120). The third space blurs, for the first time, the writer's national identity and values, along with his linguistic mindset. Owing to its liminality, Ladispoli becomes a theatre stage, where the Russian emigrants, as actors, enjoy the freedom to perform «their gender and sexual identities» (Gurfinkel 198).

Being the place of dislocation, uprootedness, unhousedness and in-betweenness, the Italian town is the environment where immigrants discover the freedom to give vent to their own personalities and thoughts, after being forced to keep them hidden by the Regime. Among the eccentric people that crowd the Russian community in Ladispoli, homosexuals disclose their feelings, like Aleksandr Abramov, whom the author meets when he has his hair cut, and certain women, like Alina, his mother's friend, become symbols of matriarchy through showing their strong characters and independence. In this context,

where immigrants are allowed to express themselves, new meanings and linguistic overtones, which had been concealed in the first space, in the emigrants' native country, are brought to light (Wilson 196). Italy, being historically the crossroads of cultures and languages, represents the place where Shrayer forges his identity as a writer and a translator or, better, a self-translator. Ladispoli is a "social text", a polysemic world, where the author experiences linguistic and cultural overlap. This leads to the birth and to the expression of new meanings. The word itself "refusenik", as aforementioned, is not quoted in Russian-Italian dictionaries, but is overtly explained in the text, since it is the narrative space of revelation, the space of translation which brings to light new phrases and meanings not otherwise expressible in the writer's source language. In this overlap of cultural and linguistic identities, the author implicitly introduces the concept of cohesion (Edwards 8-10) by employing expressions in Russian and Hebrew, as adjoining languages emerging from his background.

When he describes his first visit to the American Center in Ladispoli with his family, Shrayer highlights the warm welcome they received: «"Welcome to the American Center," the American greeted us, both in English and in Russian. "Menia zovut Dzhoshua Friman" (My name's Joshua Freeman). In Russian, he sounded like a Latvian or an Estonian» (134). Loanwords, code-switchings and cross-language interferences have a double aim in *Waiting for America*. From a sociological perspective, foreign expressions and phrases stand for the writer's linguistic "reminders", fragments of his original identity, whose purpose is to emphasize his ties with his source culture. He never dwells, in fact, on his time in Russia and his story starts in *medias res*, with his imminent flight to Vienna, the first door to the West. He, therefore, starts his narration by turning new pages of his life and immediately parting from his motherland. In this regard, the metaphors used to refer to the Russian exiles are meaningful: «We were still a feeble creek as compared to the torrents of the 1970s – or to the massive outflow of the late 1980s – early 1990s» (76). He is a "drop" in the human outflow uprooting thousands of people in search for a promised land. From a linguistic angle, the outflow is formed by agents of translation, people who are forced to face linguistic problems (Polezzi 348). The problems of communication emerge as a result of the negotiation among cultures, spaces and meanings that the concept of translation entails.

Shrayer is aware of the problems of translation and communication when he remembers running into Greta in Vienna, a Russian girl he had met near Moscow during his «field semester» (29). He asks the girl some questions, like «"Do you miss Russia?" […] "Do you feel like you're forgetting Russian?"» (28). Greta's answer gives Shrayer a foretaste of what living as an exile means: «"I don't know. I rarely speak it outside of the family. Occasionally I write to my

old girlfriends. We write in Russian, of course, but it's getting harder without practice. My life's so different now. I can't even explain certain things in Russian. So yes, I probably am losing my Russian. […]"» (28). Greta admits her proficiency in the target language and discloses the problems a bilingual usually deals with; she lacks the immediate links to her source language vocabulary, thus confirming the theory, according to which bilinguals' lexical background in each of the languages that they speak is poorer than monolinguals' (Bialystok 4). The cohesion emerging from the linguistic texture combines with foreign expressions, characterized by the use of Italian phrases, such as «"Dove…si vendo vino?" […] "Si vendo vino?"» (51), «"*novicento mille lire*" […] "*molto grazie, signora*"» (84), Polish expressions, «"*Jeszcze Polska nie zginela*!"» (54), and a number of frequent Russian words interspersed throughout the English macrotext. The author sometimes lingers on the metasemantic aspects of such expressions, as well as on the overtones of some English and Russian words. One of the most remarkable examples in this regard is his analysis of the origin of the word *bistro*, in Russian "hurry up":

> «"*Bistro, bistro, tovarishch,*" […]. The Russian word *bystro* means "quickly"; it's believed to have entered the European languages after the Russian troops came to Paris in 1815 and kept repeating it as they demanded service. Hence *bistro*(t), to designate a casual restaurant with simple, quickly prepared food. *Tovarishch* means "comrade"» (54).

The narration oozes with Russian expressions that Shrayer self-translates. When a JIAS (Jewish Immigration Aid Service) official gets angry with his father, he says «"and you'll *fly* out of here" (*i vy otsyuda vyletite*)» (16). And when he comments on the rabbi's accent in Ladispoli, he says that he spoke Russian with a double accent: «a Jewish-Ukrainian one and a Brooklyn one. Emerging from his mouth, the words "*predstavitel' lyubavicheskogo Rebbe*" ("representative of the Lubavitcher Rebbe") sounded mysterious, alluring, like the name of a folk tale» (143). Shrayer's plurilingualism and multiculturalism stands out in a passage towards the end of the autobiography. In the chapter titled "Napoleon at San Marino", he describes his visit to San Marino with his family; he depicts in a grotesque manner his grandmother, who announces through the city speakers that she has got lost, giving vent to her angry feelings and revealing, at the same time, her plurilingual background:

> "*Daite govorit'*" (Let me speak!) "[…] *Dochen'ka, ty gde?*" (Darling daughter, where are you?) […] "*Mayn libe tokhter*" (My beloved daughter), […] "*Moia donka…kokhana moia*" (My daughter…my beloved), she sang out in Ukrainian. "*Zgoda, jedność, braterstwo*" (Concord, unity, brotherhood), she chanted in Polish. And finally she barked in German: "*Was ist das? Donner-wetter!*" (173).

Apart from the numerous linguistic interferences, quite common in translingual writers, Shrayer even quotes an aphorism written by Nabokov in Cyrillic, which he translates into the target language (this is the only example of a "fragment" quoted in Cyrillic): «Vo-pervykh: epigraf, no ne k etoj glave, a tak, voobsche: literatura eto lyubov' k lyudyam. (Literally translated from the Russian, the sentence reads: "At first, the epigraph, but not to this chapter, but in general: literature is love for people.")» (my transliteration, 179). The author is fond of Nabokov, whose works he praises for his sophisticated use of literary English: «And his [Nabokov's] glorious English, half-invented by him in a fête of self-compensation? It still drives Anglo-American authors madly jealous» (185). The foreign expressions in the autobiography explicitly voice the author-translator's involvement in the act of translation, whereas the English macrotext hides his presence and does not allow the reader to experience first-hand the traditional process of translation, nor to participate in the translator's choices by comparing the source text and the target text. Shrayer directly expresses his thoughts, impressions and memories in the target language and, as a consequence of this, the reader cannot always perceive his presence, nor can he/she make a contrastive analysis. At the same time, however, the text discloses the author's voice in the unnatural syntactic organization of some sentences and in certain lexical and grammatical inaccuracies. The writer conveys his linguistic alienation by means of the foreignizing effect of his writing, with the purpose of leading the reader towards a different perspective of the world (Venuti 41-44). When he remembers his Italian friends asking him out for a walk, he writes: «We want that…that you come with us» (86). In another passage the reader runs into such a sentence: «I thought immediately of my Ladispolian friend Leonardo whose dream it was to immigrate to Australia» (130); and when he refers to his grandfather, he claims: «Him I knew very well» (201). The presence of unsuitable syntactic structures and vocabulary leads the reader to the emigrant's linguistic world and to experience a steady dialogue between languages. Shrayer introduces his language of translation into the text and forges unnatural expressions in order to emphasize his foreignness and displacement (Venuti 392). As a consequence, the creation of this linguistic mosaic represents the groundwork for self-translation.

As Cronin argues (2013: 64-66), translators build bridges between languages and cultures with the purpose of connecting different linguistic identities. In addition, Cronin (2013: 75; Dewilde 944-946) compares the overlapping languages to a river and the translator to a bridge which could not exist without the Babel of languages. Likewise, Shrayer embodies the

bridge, since he both shapes and overcomes the linguistic boundaries: on the one hand, he exposes the linguistic differences by employing foreign expressions and loanwords, on the other hand, the linguistic inaccuracies, as narrative devices voicing foreign sounds and cultures, are used in order to overcome the barriers and to foster communication between different worlds. Shrayer's foreignisms and linguistic inaccuracies express the essence of translation. To concur with Cronin's assertion, «If translation is proverbially a bridge-building exercise, and much is said about how it bridges gaps between cultures, it must not be forgotten that translation has as much a vested interest in distinctness as in connectedness» (2006: 120). If, again in Cronin's words, «connectedness has as a necessary prerequisite the identification and maintenance of separateness» (2006: 121), translation cannot accordingly exist without differences. The foreign expressions, therefore, remind us that diversity represents the basics to build translation and communication.

Self-translation, even if intended in its implicit form, is for Shrayer the means to blur the boundaries between different linguistic territories. If we conceive of translation as a mark separating the source text from the target text, self-translation removes such separation and makes different languages come together in a single text. Translation is like a door which allows communication between the source text and the target text, keeping them separate at the same time (Spilka 213-217). Self-translation, in *Waiting for America*, overcomes the spatial-linguistic frontiers of the source text and of the target text, thus merging different echoes into a single text. Self-translation lets the reader enjoy the freedom to experience a plurilingual context, where the rules of translation fade amid the influences of the environments that the author explores. Unlike translation, self-translation preserves the dimension of in-betweenness and represents the author's ever-changing self, since it receives the influences of the different voices it is in contact with. This ever-changing identity cannot but split in the act of self-translation to generate, as the writer claims, «the detachment of the Russian "I" from the American "me"» (215). As the numerous parallel stories that characterize the narration overlap and form a plurality of present times, the communication between the past and the future takes place between the Russian "I" of the narrator and his American "me". The self-translation of his life as a Russian leads to the formation of his American identity. As the Russian subject translates himself, he becomes a new "persona", namely the object resulting from the creative act of self-translation (Stavans 3-10). The latter represents, therefore, the linguistic transition that takes the writer from his motherland to his promised land.

A Russian Immigrant: the eternal displacement

The prevailing dimension of the present in *Waiting for America* turns into a dynamic time dimension in *A Russian Immigrant*, a collection of three short stories about the writer's memories mostly set in the two main spaces of his emigration: Russia and America (Kasradze). The linguistic approach is slightly different if compared with the previous work, owing to the more sporadic use of foreignisms and to the more romantic overtones that imbue his memories. Shrayer is more concerned with social-cultural issues than with linguistic issues in these stories, since he often dwells on his relationships with the Russian and the American contexts. The whirlpool of flashbacks and flashforwards leaks further details about the Russian and the American spaces that crowd his memories. The first story, "Bohemian Spring", takes the reader from New Haven, where the protagonist Simon Reznikov had been living with his family for six years after moving from Moscow, to Prague. Simon is a Ph.D student and flies from New York to Prague to do research on the writer Felix Gregor in a library in the Czech capital. Although foreignisms are not as frequent as in *Waiting for America*, English is a "fictitious" language in the text, because the reader is often informed that the characters are sometimes using other languages in their dialogues. Even when those dialogues occur in Russian, German or Czech, they are reported in English, for the sake of the reader's comprehension. The writer does not quote the foreign dialogues in their original language; he acts as a "fictitious" translator, citing them directly in the target language and pointing out that such dialogues are held in a different language other than in English. We are informed, for instance, that Simon uses German to introduce himself on the phone with the landlord's wife, Irenka, and when she shows him his room, she starts speaking Czech and then continues speaking in German: «"This is like a private apartment," she explained in German» (12). When Simon meets the archivist at the library, he has a short conversation with her about their origins and we are told, in-between the lines, that the conversation is held in Russian. The stories read like English texts, supported by invisible subtitles in other languages which provide the reader with linguistic information. The author conveys the sense of foreignness by introducing his short linguistic remarks on the immigrants' accents and cultural roots. During Simon's introductory conversations with Milena, his Czech lover, he is told «"You don't sound like an American when you try to speak Czech"» (40). Shrayer employs the same device in *Waiting for America* to emphasize his displacement by introducing linguistic inaccuracies into the text. When Simon asks Milena out for dinner, he says «"Milena, what do you say we have a glass of wine together [...]?"» (19). And, when the protagonist hands Milena his letter of invitation to go and see him in America, she asks: «"This is for me?"» (55).

Even in these stories, the author's split soul stands out, since Simon highlights that he «felt trapped in a no-man's-land that separated his Soviet past and his American present» (36) and that his Russian double «was called Syoma» (54). "Bohemian Spring", like *Waiting for America*, dwells on a temporary space of emigration, where the present time of the narration mostly takes place, but, more than in his autobiography, such a time dimension is bordered by the Russian past and the American future, which he is already familiar with: the time of the narration starts after Shrayer's emigration overseas, when he is about to leave for Europe to do research. As regards the space dimension, the protagonist illustrates two main contexts: the USA and Prague, where he spends most of his narrative time. The Czech setting dominates and the American spaces are given few pages. Although he keeps these spaces separate, owing to the presence in the text of specific cultural elements typifying the features and the geographies of the two places, the writer gradually depicts translation zones, namely «the cultural and geographical spaces that give rise to intense language traffic» (Cronin and Simon 121). As the story begins and unravels along Simon's route from America to the old continent, a multilingual context seems to be outlined because, considering the concept of multilingualism, a space of isolated linguistic pluralities stands out. However, the passage to the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 1990s, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, transforms the "translation" of such linguistic pluralities into contact zones, where the linguistic cohesion of the protagonist's setting gradually surfaces owing to the revivified interaction of different languages, determining the steady (re)construction of his identity. Thus, the narration ranges from the "distancing" effects of translation (122), which underscore the distances and the differences between languages and cultures, to the "furthering" effects of translation (122), characterized by the birth of new and enriching meanings generated by the spontaneous dialogue between languages. As Simon's plurilingual identity emerges, his displacement is gradually perceived, until it is uncovered in the Slavic setting of Prague, where the girl he woos turns down his invitation to go to America. His return to America and his encounter with a Latin-American fisherman emphasizes once again that he cannot but accept his displaced condition, which denies him the title of "prophet" wherever his identity tries to take root.

"Brotherly Love" conjures up both the American and the Russian years in a more balanced way. Shrayer devotes the same narrative time to his Russian and American memories and, despite the presence of numerous flashbacks, this section appears as the sequel to the previous one. From a space-time angle, this part of the work illustrates a superimposition of places and memories, since the author evokes his Russian years in the American setting. The motif of nostalgia is conveyed by the title, owing to the reference to his link with his Russian friends, and assumes two aspects in this story: it is both reflective and restorative (Boym). On the one hand,

the writer cherishes scattered fragments of his past and brings back his teenage Russian years; on the other hand, the circle of his friends in the USA is composed by Russians only, which testifies to his lack of adaptation to the American environment and his attempt to "restore", to reconstruct his home. This combination of identities and settings exposes the writer's state as a displaced. As time goes by, there is no space for the immigrant's settlement into the American context.

The "triptych" of stories illustrates a gradual dislocation towards the final space of emigration: from "Bohemian Spring", mostly set in Prague, that is the third and temporary space of emigration, to "Brotherly Love", depicting the superimposition of the Russian and the American contexts, to "Borscht Belt", entirely set in the USA, in the Russian community. The distance from Europe to America shortens as the stories progress, until the Russian setting is "transplanted" into the American one in the final story. The analysis of the space models that the narrations depict reveals a shrinking distance from the East to the West and, as the two "antipodes", Russia and America, get closer, Shrayer experiences a process of linguistic "furthering", a gradual cohesion of different cultures and languages, re-energizing and expanding the dialogue, the influences and the combinations of foreign cultural systems. The narration of the author's holidays in a summer resort in "Borscht Belt", among the Jewish-Russian community, unravels by means of a foreignizing language[1]. Following the typical structures of the target language, Shrayer addresses the immigrant readers by employing a domesticating approach, consisting of concise sentences, simple words and syntax, and few phrasal verbs, aimed at involving immigrants and making their comprehension more feasible. Such an "outbound" approach - addressed outwards with the purpose of reproducing a domesticating effect from the immigrants' perspective - is, at the same time, foreignizing and decentering if considered from an "inbound" perspective, from the point of view of the target language reader, who comes across unnatural expressions (Sanfelici 142). The writer underscores once again his foreignness through his characters' linguistic inaccuracies. Simon, the protagonist in all three stories, at the restaurant he worked for in "Borscht Belt", «was rewarded with extra tips [...] for mixing up the words "swim" and "bathe" (as in "I bathed twice today, the water is lovely")» (102). When his immigrant friend, Styopa, suggests that he go to Catskills on holiday, Simon's understanding is hindered by his friend's mispronunciation: «"Where's that?" Simon asked. "In the Catskills." "The Castiles?" Simon compulsively punned. "All the way in Spain?" "Hilarious, Syoma. Not the Cas-*teels* but the Cat-*skills*. In Upstate New York," Styopa replied, unperturbed. "They used to call it the 'Borscht

[1] Borscht Belt was a term used to refer to the summer resorts in the Catskill Mountains, Upstate New York, where Jewish immigrants used to spend their vacations.

Belt'"» (104). Mispronunciation, grammar and syntactic mistakes reflect the writer's inner world and represent narrative devices to uncover the translator's doubts and the challenges of translation. Mistranslation and misinterpretation characterize the process of intralingual translation, whose purpose is to (re)translate into the writer's target language the distorted and mispronounced elements of the target language itself (Jakobson 233).

Conclusions

Shrayer's autobiographical writings emerge from different linguistic phenomena, like interferences, inaccuracies, mispronunciation, hybridization, intralingual translation, all forming the grey zone of his borders between translation and self-translation. The linguistic ambiguities permeating the works generate two outstanding features in the writer's act of translation: it reveals both a decentralizing and a recreating approach. From a decentralizing angle, Shrayer's English macrotexts are interspersed with elements of the source language, making them distant from the rules and the canons of the target language. The narrations read like texts written in the immigrant's language, imperfect reproductions uttered by a displaced personality. Owing to his double role as the author and translator of his life, Shrayer recreates, at the same time, his ontological dimension, his state of being, his cultural and linguistic identity, by reformulating and rephrasing the environment of his space of emigration in a new language. Being influenced by his own world, he recreates, from the target language readers' perspective, a foreignizing writing, employing a metonymic process of semantic transposition and giving the words, in their passage from the source language to the target language, new powers of semantic representations. The changing entity of the words reflects the complex semiotic negotiations taking place in the writer's cultural world, which enables him to look into his intralingual and interlingual discourses from different perspectives.

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