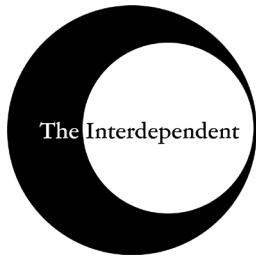


# The Language of Exile



*Kayleen Procanik | [kprocanik@gmail.com](mailto:kprocanik@gmail.com)*

*B.A. Global Liberal Studies, 2023 | New York University, New York*

*<https://doi.org/10.33682/cfpm-m8ng>*

## Abstract

Exile—once used to signify the event of a political banishment—has now evolved to incorporate a wide range of human experiences. It has often been portrayed in literature as a romantic or tragic tale, though in reality there is no simple way to describe the truly complex experience an exiled individual undergoes. This article aims to explore the intersection of exile and literature through an investigation of the lives of writers Joseph Brodsky, Aimé Césaire, and Elena Ferrante. These writers all operate from a place of exile, and together they demonstrate the multifaceted face of exile. As the exiled experience gives way to a dynamic and contrapuntal perception of self, the above writers use language as a tool for exploring and sharing their unique visions of the world around them.

Joseph Brodsky demonstrates the ability of translation to create a homeland made up of fragmented cultures by preserving memories of his past. Aimé Césaire uses his mastery of the French colonial language as a means of resistance, reimagining his lost homeland without the interference of European colonization. As a pseudonymous writer, Elena Ferrante explores the face of an ever-changing identity and the preservation of her own sense of self through a disassociation with her works. These writers show that exile can never be easily defined, as it encompasses a multitude of experiences, from irrecoverable losses to immeasurable liberties.

## Keywords

Exile; Multilingualism; Migration; Identity; Joseph Brodsky; Aimé Césaire; Elena Ferrante; Origins; Displacement; Culture

## **Introduction**

The state of exile, multifaceted and encompassing a range of experiences, cannot be easily defined. The word exile, like the word immigrant, carries with it an air of permanence. The exiled writer will always be identified as an exiled writer, much like an immigrant will always remain an immigrant. Yet, according to exiled poet Joseph Brodsky, the word exile “covers, at best, the very moment of departure, of expulsion.”<sup>1</sup> How, then, has the word exile, in describing a mere moment in time, become such a strong marker of identity? Literature and history often glorify the state of exile, transforming exiles into heroes and martyrs, their tribulations into triumphs.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the romanization of exile trivializes the insurmountable loss felt by those who experience it. Torn apart from tradition, family, culture, and geography, the exile is estranged not only from the nourishment of home, but also from their sense of self. It is a rift that, once broken, can never be fully repaired.

The affliction of exile in the real world far outreaches those portrayed in literature or media, those who are privileged enough to make their circumstances known. In his essay, *The Condition We Call Exile*, Joseph Brodsky acknowledges the particularity of exiled writers who are “gathered...in this attractive and well-lit room, on a cold December evening,” in comparison to those he calls “Gastarbeiter,” the countless refugees and migrants whose grueling plights are often neglected or forgotten entirely.<sup>3</sup> Though the term “Gastarbeiter” specifically refers to migrant workers in West Germany between the years 1955 and 1973, Brodsky uses it as a blanket term to include Vietnamese, Mexican, Pakistani, Ethiopian, and other refugees in various places.<sup>4</sup> He

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1991): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735789109366539>.

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” 100.

<sup>4</sup> Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” 100.

indicates that their neglected circumstances, exemplified by their lack of representation in the very room he is addressing, makes it “difficult to talk with a straight face about the plight of the writer in exile.”<sup>5</sup>

Edward Said, himself an exile, makes the distinction between “exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés,” which he claims can all experience exile to varying degrees. Exile, he says, is indisputably linked to the “age-old practice of banishment,” but has since evolved to denote a metaphysical state of being.<sup>6</sup> Expatriates, however, volunteer to live in exile for “personal or social reasons.”<sup>7</sup> Refugees, an innately political term, represents “large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring international assistance,”<sup>8</sup> while émigrés suggests a more ambiguous definition, including anyone who moves to a different country, for whichever reason. Although these groups experience exile to varying intensities, they have in common the very moment of departure, an experience of exile encompassed by both solitude and spirituality.

Although the writer in exile is spared from experiencing the anonymizing fate of the refugee, Said maintains the importance of literature written by exiles as a means to “lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity—to deny identity to people.”<sup>9</sup> Fighting against a displacement that renders them socially insignificant, a writer in exile takes agency over their unpredictable circumstances in search of what is stable, in search of a lost home. The experience of loss is the testament, the very assurance, that both a native place and the love one has for it, exists. For the exile, this recognition manifests into a terminal longing to reconstitute their broken lives by “choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” 101.

<sup>6</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 178.

<sup>7</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 179.

<sup>9</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 174.

<sup>10</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 175.

The writer in exile compensates for their disorientating loss by creating an imagined new world of belonging. In his *Theory of the Novel*, George Lukacs argues that the creation of the novel was unlike classical epics that had emanated “from settled cultures...identities stable, life unchanging,” where protagonists like Achilles can never escape his fate and Odysseus ultimately returns to Ithaca. The European novels instead originated from a society of change, a place where middle-class protagonists sought to construct “a new world that somewhat resembles an old one left behind forever.”<sup>11</sup> The novel is thus the form of “transcendental homelessness,” born from the existence of other worlds and the possibility of inhabiting an alternate identity.<sup>12</sup> The literature of exile renounces a world of ready-made language, thought, and possession in favor of a contrapuntal, detached and investigative vision—a vision which, according to Brodsky, is a “form of moral insurance” for society, a testament to “human diversity” against “bull-dozer type mass solution.”<sup>13</sup>

It seems Lukacs’s *Theory of the Novel* is increasingly relevant to our contemporary age. Although exile as a political punishment remains in many parts of the world, the significance of exile and home is rapidly evolving. In our currently globalized and mobile time, exile does not hold the same meanings or repercussions as it once did. With the technological advancements of communication and travel, geographic boundaries are blurring, cultures are intermingling, and the formation of identities are rooted less in a particular place or a particular culture than in a kind of hybrid subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> People who leave their home country are often equipped with the knowledge that they may one day return, friends can visit, and glimpses of home are made accessible by the

---

<sup>11</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 179.

<sup>13</sup> Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” 101.

<sup>14</sup> Eva Hoffman, “Out of Exile: Some Thoughts on Exile as a Dynamic Condition,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 46, no. 2 (2013): 59.

inundation of technology and mobility. The distinctions between us and them, home and elsewhere, inherent to the nation-state, are increasingly blurred in an age marked by burgeoning globalization. Exile as a stable and permanent marker of identity is now increasingly dynamic.

Looking closely at the lives and works of Joseph Brodsky, Aimé Césaire, and Elena Ferrante, this article explores the intersection between the writers, their works and the state of exile in which they operate. These writers were chosen for their unique relationships to the state of exile and their ability to illuminate, through language, the different ways in which exiled humans anchor themselves and their experiences in reality. I will first explore the role of translation in the life and works of Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky, who famously described exile as a linguistic event. Next, I will explore the journey of Aimé Césaire and the world of Negritude. And lastly, I will discuss the life and work of Elena Ferrante, the pseudonymous writer whose chosen anonymity questions perceptions of identity.

## **Joseph Brodsky and Linguistic Exile**

On February 18th 1964, a twenty-three-year-old poet named Joseph Brodsky was called into trial for social parasitism in the city of Leningrad. The indictment fell under the Soviet Anti-Parasite law, an effort by the government to target and expel dissenting intellectuals and academics, whose occupations were considered to be an evasion of socially useful labor. The government declared that those accused had been living a parasitic way of life, exploiting living space and resources at the expense of private citizens. The following exchanges between the Judge and Brodsky took place during the proceedings:

The judge continued, “What good have you done for your country?”

“I wrote poetry. This is my work. I am convinced... I believe that what I wrote will serve people and not only now, but future generations as well.”

“Who put you in the ranks of poet?” The judge asked.

To which Brodsky replied, “No one. Who put me in the ranks of humanity?”<sup>15</sup>

At the end of trial, Brodsky was convicted and sentenced to five years of hard labor at an Arctic work camp near the Soviet city of Arkhangelsk. Due to his undying dedication to his poetry, which had garnered both national and international readers after his trial, Joseph Brodsky was summoned by the Soviet police and exiled to Vienna, Austria.

Although Brodsky had already faced a kind of exile in his own country, for being both a poet and a Jew, the works that will be discussed here are his later poems, which reflect his permanent exile from the Soviet Union in 1972. Exile cannot be labeled or defined by a singular word, because the term “exile” he argues, “covers, at best, the very moment of departure, of expulsion; what follows is both too comfortable and too autonomous to be called by this name.”<sup>16</sup> Leaving with only his language and a small picture of the transcriber, Frida Vigdorov, Brodsky’s expulsion eventually led him to the United States, where he would later obtain American citizenship and the 1987 Nobel Prize in Literature.

In his essay, *The Condition We Call Exile*, Brodsky declared that exile was “first of all, a linguistic event” during which an “exiled writer is thrust, or retreats, into his mother tongue.”<sup>17</sup> In a new and unfamiliar place, exiles are ultimately alone with only their language. In December of the year Brodsky was exiled, he wrote a poem titled *1972*. The poem, originally written in Russian and translated into English by the poet and his longtime friend Alan Myers, is filled with the sense of loss and yearning, where he equates the loss of his homeland to his loss of language, a loss that descends, or rather decays, into a gradual and eternal silence, like death after old age. In an excerpt

---

<sup>15</sup> Frida Vigdorova and Michael R. Katz, “The Trial of Joseph Brodsky,” *New England Review* 34 (January 2014): 185.

<sup>16</sup> Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” 107.

<sup>17</sup> Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile,” 108.

of the poem, he writes:

Listen, my boon brethren and my enemies!  
What I've done, I've done not for fame or memories  
in this era of radio-waves and cinemas,  
but for the sake of my tongue, of my native letters.  
For which sort of devotion, of a zealous bent  
("heal thyself, doctor," as the saying went)  
denied a chalice at the feast of the fatherland,  
now I stand in a strange place. Name hardly matters.

It's windy, dank, dark. And it's windy. Hence  
midnight flings boughs and their leafage onto fence  
and roof-tiles. Now I can state with confidence:  
here I'll live out my days, losing gradually  
hair, teeth, consonants, verbs and suffixes,  
with this hat of mine ladling the ocean surface, as  
with Prince Igor's helmet, just to reduce its size,  
munching raw fish, behaving naturally.<sup>18</sup>

The poem, originally written in Russian, is organized in eight-line stanzas and follows an AAACBBBC dactylic rhyme scheme, a scheme Brodsky described as "destructive," as each triple rhyme position is followed by a sense of movement, such as a slide or a fall as it transitions to the next rhyme position.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, each rhyme position evokes three different representations of loss. The first rhyme position often symbolizes a loss that is either cultural or spiritual, the second rhyme position corresponds to a psychological or emotional loss, and the third position symbolizes a loss that is physical or biological.<sup>20</sup> In his *Variations on the Theme of Exile*, George Kline discusses some examples of Brodsky's destructive rhymes from the original poem which he deemed "untranslatable."<sup>21</sup> The first instance of Brodsky's symbolically layered triple rhyme occurs in the very first stanza, with the words "fortochku/koftochku/kostochku."<sup>22</sup> The Russian

---

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Brodsky, "1972," *The Kenyon Review*, New Series 1, no. 1 (Winter 1979).

<sup>19</sup> George L. Kline, "Variations on the Theme of Exile," in *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics*, eds. Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990): 81.

<sup>20</sup> Kline, "Variations on the Theme of Exile," 82.

<sup>21</sup> Kline, "Variations on the Theme of Exile," 82.

<sup>22</sup> Kline, "Variations on the Theme of Exile," 82.

word ‘fortochku’ refers to the ventilation pane in a storm window (characteristic of Soviet infrastructure) through which, the poet writes, birds had once entered but now do not. The representation of the bird and the storm window symbolize a muse or creative inspiration that is no longer present; a spiritual link has been lost. The second rhyme, ‘koftochku,’ refers to the blouse worn by an attractive young woman he desires, only she refuses to take it off. Brodsky’s sexual desire has also been lost, a loss he feels is psychological. The third rhyme, ‘kostochku,’ refers to a cherry pit he will slip on, but not fall over because he has lost his fast pace.<sup>23</sup> Here, Brodsky’s physical loss is emphasized, like a gradual descent into old age.

While the English translation by Myers and Brodsky attempts to stay true to the original dactylic rhyme scheme and its three-part symbolic layering, the rhyme pattern is much better suited to the Russian language’s broad selection of polysyllabic words with minimal stress patterns. Although much less poignant in comparison, the “1972” translation does manage to retain some dactylic rhymes and layered representations of loss from the original poem. In the excerpt above, Brodsky’s experience of exile and subsequent loss of his hometown is expressed through various physical, cultural, and psychological representations.

The use of poetic language in the first stanza of the excerpt is not a cry for help, nor a wallow in self-pity, but rather a deliberate expression of the devotion he feels for his native language. Although illustrating an undeniable sense of loss and longing for his distant homeland, Brodsky emphasizes the poem’s purpose in preserving his “tongue” and “native letters” against a displacement that renders them insignificant, where even his name “hardly matters.” The tone Brodsky evokes is melancholic, yet simultaneously unapologetic. He describes his isolating and painful predicament with straightforward language, accepting of the circumstances which led him

---

<sup>23</sup> Kline, “Variations on the Theme of Exile,” 82.

to “a strange place,” after having been “denied a chalice at the feast of the fatherland.” He reiterates the purpose of his poetry again in a later stanza, claiming that despite having once been a “scarlet” who has now hardened into “moribund,” he is proud of his speech. A speech he describes as an “object, against a vast, vacant, and/empty space, lit up by so much fire.” Brodsky highlights his commitment to literature as a self-sacrificing act, a loyalty and passion which has cost him his own fiery spirit and submerged him into a desolate isolation. Describing his new surroundings as “windy, dank, and dark” further emphasizes the hollowness he feels and the colorless future he envisions. Soon to lose his “hair, teeth, consonants, verbs,” he perceives his exile as the start of his gradual decline, both physically and psychologically.

In her essay *Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky*, Svetlana Boym references Brodsky’s recognition of language’s ability to uphold the collective myths that make up and unify civilizations, citing an excerpt from an essay he wrote to the poet Osip Mandel’shtam:

Civilization is the sum total of different cultures animated by a common spiritual numerator, and its main vehicle—speaking both literally and metaphorically is translation. The wandering of a Greek portico into the latitude of tundra is a translation.”<sup>24</sup>

Brodsky equates civilization to a vessel whose purpose is to translate and transmit cultural memories. To him, civilization should be composite and wandering. Unlike the restricted and confined artistic community under the Soviet regime, Brodsky’s civilization is much like an empire, driven by a “nostalgia for world culture,” it is expansive, transhistorical and cosmopolitan.<sup>25</sup> This is the civilization that Brodsky writes for, the alternate space of cultural memory where he finds belonging. It is an empire from which he can never be exiled. In an excerpt from Brodsky’s “Torso,” the poet describes someone who dreams of waking up outside of an

---

<sup>24</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky,” *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996): 523, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773211>.

<sup>25</sup> Boym, “Estrangement as a Lifestyle,” 524.

Empire, only to find that they have awoken from one dream and into another:

If suddenly you walk on grass turned stone  
and think its marble handsomer than green,  
or see at play a nymph and a faun that seem  
happier in bronze than in any dream  
let your walking stick fall from your weary hand,  
you're in The Empire, my friend.<sup>26</sup>

Brodsky's "Empire" possesses the ability to cast anything into stone, preserving life as it unfolds and providing unfiltered glimpses into history. The Empire is vast, blurring both geographical and temporal boundaries. Yet despite the mystical empire's emanating authority, the speaker encourages another to let go of the "walking stick" from their "weary hand" and know that they are safe within its walls. The Empire's ability to preserve life within its borders is what eases the newcomer, who had seemingly arrived from a place outside the Empire, a place without a preserved past or present. Brodsky's Empire is not defined by its imperial endeavors through geographical or political conquests, but rather by its capacity to retain memory and cultural material through art and literature. Through the idea of the empire, Brodsky reinforces the existence of portable homelands, memories and cultural myths which can be carried by individuals alone.

In 1985, Brodsky wrote his autobiographical essay, "In A Room and a Half," in dedication to his deceased parents. In this essay, Brodsky reflects on his childhood memories in the Soviet Union, his parents left behind, and the ravaging force of the Soviet government, which, after exiling the young poet in 1972, relentlessly and ruthlessly denied him of every opportunity to reunite with his family. Brodsky wrote the essay in English, a language his parents had never understood. In this essay, he defends his choice to write it in English instead of Russian:

To write about them in Russian would be only to further their captivity, their reduction to insignificance, resulting in mechanical annihilation. I know that one shouldn't

---

<sup>26</sup> Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle," 527.

equate the state with language but it was in Russian that two old people, shuffling through numerous state chancelleries and ministries in the hope of obtaining a permit to go abroad for a visit to see their only son before they died, were told repeatedly, for twelve years in a row, that the state considers such a visit *unpurposeful*...I want [my parents] to acquire reality under a foreign code of conscience...May English house my dead English offers a better semblance of afterlife, maybe the only one there is to save my very self.<sup>27</sup>

Brodsky's use of English in this dedication is a literal manifestation of Boym's belief that a home away from home which an émigré creates "preserves an imprint of his or her cultural motherland."<sup>28</sup> By writing their memory in English, Brodsky ensures their existence in his newly constructed world, an existence that is untainted, protected from the destructive force of the Soviet government. Transporting cultural memories into a foreign language is like transporting them into another reality, one free from the lens of a "monolingual existence" and thus becoming a part of Brodsky's portable home.<sup>29</sup> Drawn from an exile's various existences, memories becomes a personalized collective myth and new source of belonging.

## **Aimé Césaire and Negritude**

"Our struggle was a struggle against alienation. That struggle gave birth to Negritude," said the Martinican poet, Aimé Césaire, during an interview with Rene Depestre at the Cultural Congress of Havana in 1967. By then, the poet had already become elected mayor of Fort-de-France, Martinique, and a prominent figure in the literary world, having produced an extensive array of literary works, including four volumes of poetry, three major plays, countless interviews,

---

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011): 656.

<sup>28</sup> Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle," 514.

<sup>29</sup> Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle," 514.

numerous essays, and perhaps his most influential work to date: *Return to the Native Land* and its conception of Negritude.<sup>30</sup>

Césaire’s move to Paris in 1932 reflected the paths of many Antilleans seeking educational and employment opportunities not available to them in the French West Indies. Even during the ancien régime, Paris was “paradoxically both the capital of an empire based in large part on slavery, and a symbol of freedom” for the enslaved peoples in the French colonies.<sup>31</sup> According to Sue Peabody in *There are No Slaves in France*, enslaved people from the Caribbean who had accompanied their masters to the French capital during the eighteenth century could often obtain their freedom by citing the Freedom Principle, which claimed that France was a country for the free. Even after France’s abolition of slavery in 1848, many in the French colonies perceived Paris as being the “good” France, a place of “emancipation and revolution” compared to the French West Indies, which was conversely perceived as the “bad” France, a place ridden with “poverty, colonialism, and ‘former slave owners.’”<sup>32</sup>

It was with “exquisite delight” that Césaire escaped his stagnant town where dreams go to die and inspiration does not strike.<sup>33</sup> For Césaire, moving to Europe symbolized both a desertion of his Martinican influences and an integration into the larger world. Only in Europe could Césaire finally relinquish the particular miseries of Martinique and exchange them with the collective miseries of the world:

To go away.  
As there are hyena-men and panther-men,  
I would be a jew-man

---

<sup>30</sup> Doris L. Garraway, “‘What Is Mine’: Césairean Negritude between the Particular and the Universal,” *Research in African Literatures* 41, no. 1 (2010): 71–86, <https://doi.org/10.2979/ral.2010.41.1.71>.

<sup>31</sup> Tyler Stovall, “Aimé Césaire and the Making of Black Paris,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 27, no. 3 (2009): 45.

<sup>32</sup> Stovall, “Aimé Césaire and the Making of Black Paris,” 45.

<sup>33</sup> Mireille Rosello and Robert Postawsko, “‘One More Sea to Cross’: Exile and Intertextuality in Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*,” *Yale French Studies*, 83 (1993): 179, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930093>.

A Kaffir-man  
A Hindu-man-from-Calcutta  
A Harlem-man-who-doesn't-vote

Césaire found his newfound purpose in an imagined unification with all of humanity, a unification that would result in the transcendence of race, ethnicity, and religion. Although the Paris school system would equip Césaire with a mastery of the French language and the canons of French literature, the poet would not find himself among the ranks of humanity, but would rather undergo “an exile of which he is not conscious” as his foreignness descends into alienation.<sup>34</sup>

Early twentieth-century Paris had become a locus for African diasporic production, attracting black students, intellectuals, and creatives from all over the world. It was here in this centralization of black intellectualism that Césaire discovered influential literary works from Harlem Renaissance writers and mingled with black creatives.<sup>35</sup> Enriched by the discoveries of black literature, while simultaneously undergoing the cultural assimilation of the French school system, led Césaire to question his own roots, identity and purpose in life as he, along with many other Third World students, experienced a cultural alienation that propelled them “into a radically critical stance towards European civilization and its arrogant claims to superiority.”<sup>36</sup> The supposed universal values of Western civilization that had once drawn Césaire were nothing more than a facade made to serve bourgeois society and justify colonial exploitation. Afflicted by feelings of cultural alienation in Paris and a nostalgia for an idealized homeland he never had, Césaire’s once glorified image of liberating Europe thus takes a startling turn:

What is also mine: a little cell in the Jura,  
A little cell, the snow lines it with white bars  
The snow is a jailer mounting guard before a prison  
What is mine  
A lone man imprisoned in whiteness

---

<sup>34</sup> Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross’,” 187.

<sup>35</sup> Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross’,” 45.

<sup>36</sup> Gregson Davis, *Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7.

A lone man defying white screams of white death  
(Toussaint, Toussaint Louverture)

...  
A man alone in the sterile sea of white sand.<sup>37</sup>

Europe has not released Césaire, but imprisoned him. Caged and isolated above the Jura mountains, the poet attempts to recount all that he possesses. The “whiteness” that imprisons him is simultaneously rendering him nonexistent. It is the jailer, the isolating force designed to ensure his assimilation. To defy the impending “white death,” Césaire recalls Toussaint Louverture and Haiti’s liberation from enslavement. Only by remembering the injustices and the triumphs of his ancestors can the poet resist the systemic erasure of his cultural identity.

Césaire’s recognition of his previously unconscious assimilation causes him to exile himself from his European influences in order to rediscover his culturally authentic self:

This was a sprawling Negro without shape or rhythm.  
A Negro whose eyes were bloodshot, weary.  
A shameless Negro whose toes sneered  
in a quite stinking way from the half-  
open lair of his shoes.  
A ridiculous, ugly Negro, and the women  
behind me laughed as they looked at him  
He was RIDICULOUS AND UGLY  
RIDICULOUS AND UGLY to be sure.  
I hoisted a great smile of complicity...  
My cowardice restored to me!

Just as Eduard Glissant writes in *The Poetics of Relation*, “the power to experience the shock of elsewhere is what distinguishes the poet,” Césaire realizes that he is, in fact, elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> In the first lines of the excerpt, the poet describes an encounter he witnesses between a group of French

---

<sup>37</sup> Aimé Césaire and Mireille Rosello, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land: Cahier D'un Retour Au Pays Natal* (Hexham, United Kingdom: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), 21.

<sup>38</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 30.

women and a “ridiculous and ugly” African-Caribbean “negro.” His identification with the French women is clear from the distance he creates between himself and the perceived other. The poet, who had been assimilated into French society and thus shares the perception of the French women, bears no resemblance to the isolated “negro” he observes and scorns. Through his use of language, Césaire ensures “the tie between the poet and his race has been cut.”<sup>39</sup> The poet at this moment is unaware of the origins of the language he uses to describe his fellow countryman. The language he uses is not his own, but a product of his education in France.

However, the latter part of the excerpt’s shift in tone embodies the poet’s revelation that his words do have an origin and that he speaks in the voice of another. Unlike his first utterance of the phrase “ridiculous and ugly,” his later choice to capitalize the words “RIDICULOUS AND UGLY” reduces it into the ready-made phrase that it is, removed from his natural voice. The repetition of the phrase further highlights it as a mimicry, an acknowledged adoption and simultaneous renouncement of colonial speech. The capitalization and repetition of RIDICULOUS AND UGLY now serves as an act of defiance. The speaker experiences a sudden revelation of the words as being “elements foreign to his own language.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the subsequent inclusion of “to be sure” expresses the narrator’s desire to feel validated by the French women, while simultaneously exposing his status as an “other.” This excerpt, often referred to as the streetcar scene, displays Césaire’s choice to exile himself from “words which he had thought were his own and from the reassuring ideology which made him an assimilated member of society.”<sup>41</sup> Here, Césaire exercises his mastery of the French language to manipulate a “language and a culture which also manipulates him.”<sup>42</sup> Césaire begins to realize that not only had he been exiled from the

---

<sup>39</sup> Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross,’” 185.

<sup>40</sup> Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross,’” 188.

<sup>41</sup> Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross,’” 188.

<sup>42</sup> Rosello, “‘One More Sea to Cross,’” 181.

Antillean masses through his assimilation into bourgeois society, but also from the dispossession of his African heritage as an Antillean.

The revelation of his assimilation and of the colonial injustices faced by his people propelled Césaire's Negritude movement. The movement, according to Césaire's works, represented both a "reappraisal of the cultural distinctiveness and vitality of African-descended peoples around the world" and an "attack on the Europeans supposed right to teach, to impose patterns of civilization."<sup>43</sup> By appropriating the language of the colonizer to instead embrace Africa and African singularity, Césaire's Negritude is thus transformed into "a strategic instrument of resistance" and a collectivizing force for racial solidarity.

Césaire reclaims his African diasporic community, liberating them from the lens of the civilizing missions that had unjustly cast them as barbaric. He highlights that Africans, unlike the colonizers of Western civilization, were "indifferent to conquering" and instead captivated by the "motion of all things" and "playing the game of the world."<sup>44</sup> He reminds his people that the accomplishments of Western civilization are not indicative of a "superior" civilization, but of a civilization that had evolved by depriving "whole peoples ... of their culture ... of all culture."<sup>45</sup> Césaire defies the colonialist narrative that not only claimed to have "domesticated and Christianized" his African descendants, but also "inoculated [them] with degeneracy."<sup>46</sup> He emphasizes the civilizing mission as a hypocrisy, a guise concealing the barbaric and destructive nature of colonization and all the suffering it imposes. Césaire descends into the past to resurface what had previously been suppressed by Western civilization, calling forth the painful memories

---

<sup>43</sup> Gabriel R. Coulthard, "Negritude — Reality and Mystification," *Caribbean Studies* 10, no. 1 (April 1970): 43.

<sup>44</sup> Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Eileen Julien, "Terrains de Rencontre: Césaire, Fanon, and Wright on Culture and Decolonization," *Yale French Studies*, no. 98 (2000): 154.

<sup>46</sup> Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 38.

of the Atlantic slave trade that uprooted his people from their origins and thus from their cultural identities:

I hear coming from the hold the enchained curses, the  
gasps of the dying, the noise of someone thrown into the sea  
... the baying of a woman in labor ... the scrape of fingernails  
seeking throats ... the flouts of the whip ... the seething of  
vermin amid the weariness ...<sup>47</sup>

By resurfacing the collective memory of their forced exile and historical enslavement, alienated blacks can finally begin the process of decolonization and rediscover their authentic cultural identity which had previously been deprived from them. Negritude is thus a springboard for self-reclamation and a relinquishing of a Western assimilation that aims to obscure the African heritage filled with alienation and oppression.

Although the precise meaning of Negritude remains ambiguous in Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the passage most often referenced is the “surrealist image,” which suggests a contrast between “blackness, organic nature, and irrational forces of the universe” and the “inert matter or the immobile, vertical edifices of Western reason.”<sup>48</sup> Césaire’s Negritude does not take the form of fixed structures like towers or cathedrals, it is not made of stone, but soil and flesh. Plunging itself into the depths of land, Césaire’s Negritude refuses to wander adrift. It grows as it speaks, telling its story of Africa, its suffering and enslavement, its civilization disrupted and decimated. Césaire proposes a new vision of civilization against the Western values of reason and logic that had contributed to the subjugation of African civilization. His vision of Negritude is an acting agent, the subject and creator of its own narrative. It is the voice of Negritude that both liberates and rehabilitates the alienated black, igniting a process of internal dissimulation through

---

<sup>47</sup> Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Garraway, “‘What Is Mine:’ Césairean Negritude between the Particular and the Universal,” 73.

the “metaphorical effect of the poetic language, the imagination, and the revolutionary force of words.”<sup>49</sup> Only by taking back the agency over their own narrative can the colonized contribute to the creation of a more universal history. If Negritude were a tree, Césaire’s poetry would represent its fruit, projecting visions of restored origins, a restored people, and in turn, a restored future.

## **Elena Ferrante and Dissolving Margins**

An anonymous writer presents a puzzle for readers to solve, and in our modern age the anonymity of the author can surpass the work itself. According to Foucault, “If by accident or design a text was presented anonymously, every effort was made to locate its author. Literary anonymity was of interest only as a puzzle to be solved as, in our day, literary works are totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author.”<sup>50</sup> Such was the case for author Elena Ferrante, the pseudonymous writer of the popular Neapolitan series that catapulted her into worldwide fame and whose status as an anonymous writer resulted in rigorous and coordinated attempts by both the public and the media to uncover her true identity.

Rather than using her anonymity as a form of modesty, Ferrante’s anonymity allows her to protect herself from the complete immersion she experiences when writing. In her work *Frantumaglia*, a collection of the author’s written interviews and various exchanges, Ferrante describes her dual identity as an author:

Perhaps the old myths about inspirations spoke at least one truth: when one makes a creative work, one is inhabited by others—in some measure, becomes another. But when one stops writing, one becomes oneself again, the person one usually is, in terms of occupations, thoughts, language. Thus, I am now me again, I am here, I go about my ordinary business, I have nothing to do with the book, or to be exact, I entered it,

---

<sup>49</sup> Julien, “Terrains de Rencontre: Césaire, Fanon, and Wright on Culture and Decolonization,” 81.

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 126.

but I can no longer enter it. Nor on the other hand, can the book reenter me ... I wrote my book to free myself from it, not to be its prisoner.”<sup>51</sup>

For Ferrante, anonymity allows her to create a sense of distance between herself and her writing. It allows her to fully immerse herself in both worlds—at separate times. One where she is completely consumed by the creative work at hand, and the other, where she is her usual self, going about her day-to-day life. Ferrante goes on to note that the relationship between a creative work and an artist is a one-way street, in the sense that once the work is completed and the artist returns to their other self, they are no longer able to return to the alternate identity they once inhabited. In effect, anonymity brings Ferrante a sense of self separate from not only her readers, but also from her own creative mind. While her creative mind experiences a kind of death at the end of her creative work, her everyday self remains intact and untouched.

For Ferrante, whose anonymity reserves her sense of self, the self that she “usually is, in terms of occupations, thoughts, language” prevents her from becoming a prisoner of her own work. Foucault finds that the “individual characteristics” of a writer experiences a “death” when writing and is thus transformed into “a victim of his own writing.”<sup>52</sup> Foucault describes the evolution of writing from having the duty to create immortality to, in the modern era, becoming the murderer of its author.<sup>53</sup> Where the author is not anonymous, the union of the writer and their work results in the death of the writer as an individual, an entity indistinguishable from their creative work. In her novel, *My Brilliant Friend*, the first book of her Neapolitan series, Ferrante touches on the dual nature of a writer through Lenu’s depiction of Lila as a writer:

Lila was able to speak through writing; unlike me when I wrote, unlike Sarratore in his articles and poems, unlike even many writers I had read and was reading, she expressed herself in

---

<sup>51</sup> Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey* (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), 74.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, "What Is an Author," 117.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, "What Is an Author," 117.

sentences that were well constructed, and without error, even though she had stopped going to school, but—further—she left no trace of effort, you weren't aware of the artifice of the written word.<sup>54</sup>

Here, Ferrante explores the link between death and the writer, Lena describes Lila's ability to write without a trace of effort, as if, to the reader, her existence as a writer simply did not exist at all.

The link between the death of the writer as an individual and the act of writing allows Ferrante to express a level of sincerity that is ineffable through the self she inhabits in her everyday life. In a written interview with Stefania Scateni, when asked to what extent her anonymity helped her to capture the sincerity of a very terrible moment in a woman's life, Ferrante responds:

I've always had a tendency to separate everyday life from writing. To tolerate existence, we lie, and we lie above all to ourselves. Sometimes we tell ourselves lovely tales, sometimes petty lies. Falsehoods protect us, mitigate suffering, allow us to avoid the terrifying moment of serious reflection, they dilute the horrors of our time, they even save us from ourselves. Instead, when one writes, one must never lie. In literary fiction, you have to be sincere to the point where it's unbearable, where you suffer the emptiness of the pages. It seems likely that making a clear separation between what we are in life and what we are when we write helps keep self-censorship at bay.<sup>55</sup>

To Ferrante, literary fiction is more truthful than everyday life, which is an important distinction between the two. Everyday life is defined by things that individuals have to do in order to tolerate their own existence, a means of mitigating the suffering and terror of having to reconcile with one's own reflection. To reconcile requires the relinquishing of the ego and instead to embrace the multiple egos inherent within not only a writer, but every unique individual. This separation, between the empty facade of reality and the brutal sincerity of literary fiction, is the tool that allows writers to be truthful with themselves and 'keep self-censorship at bay.'

---

<sup>54</sup> Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* (New York, N.Y: Europa Editions, 2012), 226-227.

<sup>55</sup> Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 104.

Ferrante's anonymity also always allows readers to develop a more critical reading of her texts, unclouded by any predisposition they may have of her as an individual and of her beliefs. In

*Frantumaglia*, Ferrante confesses:

I would like to think that while my book enters the marketplace, nothing can oblige me to make the same journey. But maybe I would also like to believe, at certain moments, if not always, that the my which I refer to is in substance a convention, so that those who are disgusted by the story that is told and those who are excited by it cannot, in a mistaken logical step, be disgusted or excited by me as well.<sup>56</sup>

Discourse on whether anonymous works encourage a more critical response has been debated since the age of antiquity. In his article, "The Ethics of Anonymity," Mark Robson explored, through historical texts, ideas regarding the critical response induced by anonymous works. His work examined the ideas of Erasmus of Rotterdam, a well-known thinker from the Renaissance, who remarked that anonymity was, in comparison to false attribution, a tool which encourages critical reading. The reader is forced to reconcile the book simply with what is contained within its pages, and not any outside information that they would otherwise have regarding the author. A parable that Erasmus used to demonstrate this was that when presenting a text to a scholar, if he remarked that the author was a contemporary writer, the scholar would be inclined to review the work more coarsely and ridicule the author. Erasmus would then reveal that the actual author of the piece was none other than Cicero. This demonstrates that anonymity, in comparison to false attribution, can mitigate the harmful predispositions an audience carries, and thus encourage a more critical approach to the text itself.

As a writer, Ferrante's sense of self is established through the act of preservation. She removes herself from the consecration of a ready-made identity, which—simplified for the digestibility of the consumer—is devoid of truthfulness. Her characters, by contrast, are oriented in every way the

---

<sup>56</sup> Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 74.

pseudonymous writer, existing within a state of exile by virtue of being anonymous, is not. Through her works, Ferrante demonstrates that the formation of identity is intrinsically tied to the process of relation, and like the act of relating, which is never stable, but in constant flux, so too is identity: conforming, disrupting and erupting anew.

## **Conclusion**

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul,” asserts French philosopher and exile Simone Weil in her *The Need for Roots*.<sup>57</sup> Humans, she claims, inherently desire and require a sense of rootedness that can only be achieved by forming relationships to solid and lasting things.<sup>58</sup> These *things*, however, are both tangible and intangible, man-made and natural. They embody cultural traditions, ancestry, worship and initiation ceremonies, to matter and forces of the natural world, seen and unseen. These things are necessary as a means to not only orient humanity in time and space, between past and future, but to also reaffirm each individual of their very own existence. No one knows this better than the exile, whose profound experience of loss hurls them into an endless search and reimagining of lost origins. While life in exile is irredeemably mutilated and imbued with tragedy, it is also conducive to the attainment of liberation and an authentic sense of self.

This inner ‘dissolving of margins’ is echoed by the writers discussed earlier, all of whom operate from within a state of exile. Brodsky’s formation of his own ‘Empire’ is intentionally constructed through his integration of and translation into the English language (and language in general) as a means to preserve his most cherished memories. After being awarded the Nobel Prize

---

<sup>57</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (1949; repr., Routledge, 2020), 40.

<sup>58</sup> Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 255.

in Literature, when asked whether or not Brodsky identified as an “American or a Russian,” the poet famously responded: "I'm Jewish; a Russian poet, an English essayist—and, of course, an American citizen."<sup>59</sup>

While Aimé Césaire’s Négritude sought to reimagine the lost origin of the African homeland, it did so with a contrapuntal vision. The streetcar scene, which catapulted the poet’s consciousness of self and thus renouncement of his complicity in adopting colonial speech, embarked Césaire on a journey to find his authentic self, free from the bondages of colonialist perception and displacement. For Césaire, Négritude became the means by which he could intentionally form his authentic self, incorporating his education in France, and an imagined past and future of his native land. Turning the language of the colonist into a form of resistance, Négritude reimagines an African civilization, rooted in black creation and agency. The pseudonymous writer Elena Ferrante, whose exile, unlike that of Brodsky and Césaire, is self-inflicted, is nonetheless contrapuntal. Like Brodsky and Césaire, she embraces her dynamic and ever-changing sense of self by removing herself from a simplified and marketable identity as a writer. Ferrante’s Lenu and Lena further emphasize the search for one’s authentic self as an ongoing process, as an act that requires a constant putting into relation. Her notion of identity, like Said, Brodsky and Césaire, involves an intentional and dynamic integration of experience, memories, and language. What is true of all these exiled writers is not just their dynamic identities, but above all, their ability to forge, through language, a life of their own creation.

---

<sup>59</sup> “About Brodsky,” Joseph Brodsky, <http://www.josephbrodsky.org/about-brodskiy>.

## **Acknowledgments**

This article is a revised excerpt from my senior thesis. I am deeply grateful to NYU for the transformative global experiences that nurtured my passion and shaped my interest in these topics. I would also like to thank Professor Matt Longabucco for his invaluable guidance and support throughout this process. Additionally, my appreciation goes to the staff of *The Interdependent* for their editing and revisions.