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FINDING EVA HOFFMAN IN *LOST IN TRANSLATION*

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ABSTRACT

In her 1989 *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman graphs so articulately the asymptotic narrative that brings her younger self into alignment with the retrospective self who writes the book, that there seems little for the literary interpreter to do but restate the author's lucid insights. Still, appreciative criticism may yet illuminate the artistry with which this work, written by a gifted intellectual who was also a talented amateur musician, is composed: major movements at the macro-level, scrupulous performance by the page and the phrase. Hoffman not only declares here and there what her "life in a new language" means, but also manifests that meaning as an intention unfolding through the design and sequence of its leading episodes. Furthermore, her self-conscious handling of English, including its seasoning by vestigial and not-quite-translated words from Polish and other tongues, lets the verbal medium strike at times a deeply textured chord resisting the forward linearity of narrative. Thus Hoffman rehearses in the reader's company – solicits, indeed, the construing reader's intimate collusion in – those temporal knots of throwback and anticipation which inform her book's most moving passages.

Keywords: Eva Hoffman; *Lost in Translation*; autobiography; narrative; language; translation.

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Pre-eminently among literary genres, even other genres of life writing, autobiography elicits from its student a personal reckoning. In the course of reading an autobiography, we intermittently measure our lives against the life of the author. Exposure to another person's extended self-representation exposes us to ourselves, by glimpses at least, and along a spectrum ranging from sympathy to critique. The genre invites us to take personally, no matter how faintly or with what reservations, the many acts of analysis, comparison, and valuation that constitute its assessment of the changing self it summons from the past and

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reshapes in the present. And this resemblance affects, where it does not indeed tacitly propose, the analytic, comparative, and evaluative means whereby as students we come critically to grips with the book.

Let me accordingly preface the following account of certain formal and lexical features in Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989) by acknowledging, with a little embarrassment, a professional kind of personal rapport with the author – whom I, born and matured in the United States, have never met. Not only are Eva Hoffman and I of the same postwar generation; we might well, *dis aliter visum*, have succeeded one another as denizens of the same university office. Having emigrated with her family from Cracow to Vancouver at age 13, when her Jewish family of survivors became wary of resurgent Polish nationalism circa 1960, this gifted teenager became her high school's valedictorian, won a scholarship to Rice University and a graduate fellowship to Harvard; and then, literature PhD in hand, served on the faculty of several university English departments. While Hoffman proceeded to a cosmopolitan literary career in New York and London, all that academic training left on her book indelible marks that leap out with special force at an academically trained agemate like me. Hoffman's decades in higher literary education manifestly furnish principal terms and tropes whereby the maturing autobiographer comes to conceive of herself and parse the text of her life.[2] Afflicted with the "double vision" (Hoffman 1989: 132) of the "radically marginal person" (Hoffman 1989: 157) who "will always be stuck in some betwixt and between place" (Hoffman 1989: 216), Hoffman crucially learns to assimilate to "the very splintering itself" (Hoffman 1989: 197). "I'll probably always find myself," she concludes, "in the chinks between cultures and subcultures" (Hoffman 1989: 275), where "the fissures sometimes cause me pain, but in a way, they're how I know that I'm alive" (Hoffman 1989: 273).[3]

As such quotations may suggest, *Lost in Translation* keeps taking the words out of this literary critic's mouth. It is a book that steadily anticipates the kind of thing I find myself wanting to say about it. Splintering and marginality – and elsewhere deconstruction, the political and cultural unconscious, the gap between signifier and signified – are all shop terms for which a trained academic of my years is likely to reach when coming to grips with Hoffman's tripartite narrative

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2 In Macpherson's (2008: 85) deft phrase, Hoffman "applies New Critical Theory to her understanding not just of literature, but of life as well". This point is further developed in Jarczok (2015: 31–32).

3 Mousley (2012: 113) applauds Hoffman for having worked through the coolly distant postmodernist neutrality enjoined by her higher education, to dwell instead in a "consternating, angst-ridden posthumanism". Fanetti identifies in "the space *between* cultures", via Hoffman's transgression of generic narrative boundaries, "a nearly perfect postmodern state" (Fanetti 2005: 406–407) of "essence in essencelessness" (Fanetti 2005: 417).

of dispossession, reorientation, and rehabilitation; and they are all familiarly installed within the narrative itself. Their naturalisation within Hoffman's vocabulary betokens both the story she has to tell and the means whereby it is natural for the intellectual she has become to interpret that becoming in hindsight.

In this sense Hoffman has pre-empted my handiest tools, although in candour I should add that the inheritance we share from 1970s literary theory reads, by the 2020s, like the most dated feature of the book. Her Derridean and especially Lacanian takes on societal and psychic difference now seem as much of their moment as those thinkers' advances once made Marx and Freud seem of their own, anterior moment. While such explanatory structures as fetishisation and the uncanny animate the engrossing rendition of Hoffman's Cracow childhood, and while in narrating its North American sequel she recurs to long since mainstreamed terms like Marxian *alienation* and Freudian *self-division* (Hoffman 1989: 110), those titans-in-exile of diasporic Mitteleuropa are effectively silenced in the book by their revisionist twentieth-century heirs. So it comes to pass, and not for the first time, that history trumps theory: in this case the history of my own tenure in the professoriat, and the theory whereby my generation and Hoffman's learned to make sense of others' stories as well as our own. Categories and concepts that came to both of us unbidden, by educated second nature, have now had their day. Recent acquisitions in the museum of intellectual-disciplinary history, they invite in turn a scrutiny like that which they enabled when Hoffman adopted them as high-powered cognitive lenses when writing in the 1980s.

While no such scrutiny is offered below, I do hope instead to uncover aspects in which Eva Hoffman's autobiographical present survives the superannuation of her hard-won analytic apparatus. What remain freshest today in *Lost in Translation* are not its conceptual elaborations but its imaginative enactments, and it is on the latter that the rest of this paper will focus. These include, on one hand, the macro structural armature of narrative layout, foldup, and long-range correspondence between early chapters and late; on the other hand, the granular micro effects Hoffman achieves by corrugating her prose with lexical dropouts and implants, transparencies and blockages between languages: Polish and English, mainly, but often evincing a polyglot's ad-hoc alertness to other tongues that these incorporate or adjoin because their cultures do. Hoffman's narrative architecture is archivally retrospective, recounting and sorting memories as a teller might handle bank notes; in contrast her verbal devices pertain to the heuristic forward motion of autobiographical telling, and they foreground the narrating mind's ongoing, protensive negotiation with the world.[4]

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[4] As Besemeres (1998: 329) puts it, the book braids together "a forward and outward personal trajectory" with "an essentially backward and inward curve".

To be sure, Hoffman deploys both macro and micro inventions in full awareness that the distinction just drawn between them is provisional at best: in writing as in living, memory and perception and anticipation challenge and reconstitute each other all the time. The macro/micro distinction is a useful one, nevertheless, and it organises the sections that follow.

2

The book opens with a scene dated "April 1959" that properly belongs ninety pages later, at the end of the Edenic account of a Cracow childhood during the 1950s that Part I will contain: Ewa Wydra (her Polish self) spends three opening paragraphs at the rail of the steamer that is taking her and her family from Poland to Canada (Hoffman 1989: 3–4). Then a fourth paragraph jumps ahead to an anecdote from Eva Hoffman's life as a grown-up New Yorker, and the canvas is thereby stretched to portray a series of discretely epiphanic memories from her girlhood. Part III, likewise, begins with a chronological leap forward, from her leaving Vancouver for college in the mid-1960s, into "April 1979" and the smart repartee at a Manhattan cocktail party where, for a moment, Hoffman "flash[es] back" (her phrase, and of course a literary-critical a term of art) "to a party about thirty years ago, in a peasant house" (Hoffman 1989: 167–168). The virtually signposted symmetry between these double-jointed episodes of time travel in Parts I and III establishes the flexibility of Hoffman's story line, which wavers back and forth the way memory is apt to do. Her motivation for such temporal manoeuvring is part curatorial triage – quick, rescue this at-risk image from oblivion; wait, hold that thought – and part mimetic fidelity to how recollection actually works. A salient example occurs when, walking home and taking care not to step on cracks in the pavement, schoolgirl Ewa is presciently "pierced" by the sadness of time's transiency: "Remember this, I command myself, as if that way I could make some of it stay. When you're grown up, you'll remember this. And you'll remember how you told yourself to remember" (Hoffman 1989: 17).

Yet these mnemonic illustrations ultimately subserve a larger motive, which is Hoffman's finding how to go about her storytelling. She lets on very early that "a story can be told differently, it can be changed" (Hoffman 1989: 7); and it is the *toldness* of her story that gets the last word in Part I, when with her first glimpse of Montreal the transatlantic "interval is over, and so is the narrative of my childhood" (Hoffman 1989: 95). Not *childhood's* end, but that of its *narrative.* A counterpart passage ends Part II, with a suitable gain in sophistication: "What is the shape of my story, the story my time tells me to tell? Perhaps it is the avoidance of a single shape that tells the tale", for Hoffman as for her adoptive American generation, who "slip between definitions with such

acrobatic ease that straight narrative becomes impossible" (Hoffman 1989: 164). While flirting with the trope of "a jigsaw puzzle dancing in a quantum space" (Hoffman 1989: 164), the author acknowledges that the literary medium in which she is working requires definite shaping if she is to "get the different blocks of my story into the right proportions" (Hoffman 1989: 241). Moreover, she adds,

> As every writer knows, it's only when you come to a certain point in your manuscript that it becomes clear how the beginning should go, and what importance it has within the whole. And it's usually after revising backward from the middle that one can begin to go on with the rest. To some extent, one has to rewrite the past in order to understand it.
>
> (Hoffman 1989: 241–242)

What "every writer knows" about the reciprocating action of "revising backward from the middle" becomes, in this writer's hands, a recurrent fractal feature of the events she rehearses, a constitutive ingredient of the narrative building blocks, which themselves have a habit of looking before and after. In order to preserve her identity, which is to say in order to save her life, Hoffman finds she must "crawl backward over it in English", and "retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward" (Hoffman 1989: 272). Not just *from the beginning* but *back to the beginning*; and not *back* but *backward*. Getting her life back entails backing into it, half blind to the past she must clamber over but half guided, too, by the eyes in the front of her head that now see where she was unidirectionally headed during those passing days and years she now traverses in reverse.

Such writerly reversal emerges often as a feature of events in the written story. This is especially apparent when Hoffman writes up in the present an occasion when she was remembering some antecedent occasion. A key passage on little Ewa's chestnut-gathering in the *Planty* park of Cracow renders her sense of existing in the middle of reality itself, "the very center of plenitude":

> I pick up a reddish brown chestnut, and suddenly, through its warm skin, I feel the beat as if of a heart. But the beat is also in everything around me, and everything pulsates and shimmers as if it were coursing with the blood of life. Stooping under the tree, I'm holding life in my hand, and I am in the center of a harmonious, vibrating transparency. For that moment, I know everything there is to know.
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> (Hoffman 1989: 42)

This bravura passage holds its own against mnemonic epiphanies from Vladimir Nabokov or Marcel Proust, both of whom Hoffman cites with admiration more than once; or from William Wordsworth or James Joyce, whom she does not cite but must know; or indeed from her more conspicuously unmentioned secret sharer in exile Joseph Conrad. That anglophone expatriate Pole wrote in his 1923

memoir *A Personal Record*, "These memories put down without any regard for established conventions have not been thrown off without system and purpose", and insisted that an "accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of documentary history" (Conrad 1912: 16 & 35).[5] Hoffman's epiphanic key, like Conrad's, matters less in its own right than for how it unlocks her future and harmonises it with her past.[6]

On at least three later dates, distributed across the book, a fresh experience becomes intelligible in reference to that remembered scene of superlative meaningfulness under the chestnut tree, which by dint of recurrence becomes a touchstone for intelligibility as such. When piano lessons awaken Ewa's keen musicianship, she recalls feeling how "Music seems as lucid to me as books, as that moment in the park when everything was rolled into one" (Hoffman 1989: 68). Years later and worlds away, in studying the last stanza of W. B. Yeats's poem "Among School Children" she finds that "The chestnut tree in the stanza summons my private chestnut tree", and folds into it for good measure the previous association with music. Yeats's famous line about the dancer and the dance triggers "what it's like to play the piano, in those moments when I can no longer tell whether I'm playing the music or the music is playing me" (Hoffman 1989: 180).[7] Lastly, as a grown woman Hoffman returns physically to Cracow, and to the originary scene at the *Planty* garden, "and when I come to a spreading chestnut tree, I pause. It is here, under its protective branches, that I once sat cupped in the heart of childhood knowledge" (Hoffman 1989: 238). This late empirical rendezvous takes place under the sign of difference, not sameness; now it tells her something other than the everything she knew once upon a time. "No", she writes, "that knowledge cannot be recaptured by any tricks or mnemonic aids; and yet, like a pinpoint pulsar of light, it emits an intermittent glow" (Hoffman 1989: 238–239). Intermittency is the tune time hums, describing a patterned oscillation that respects the uniqueness of discrete moments in their

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5 The first episode of Conrad's memoir describes his composition of the novel *Almayer's Folly* on shipboard (1912: 17) – which is where Hoffman's memoir of emigration also begins – and at a critical career pivot between a seaman's life and an author's. In an additional coincidence, the maritime job that Conrad turns down in favor of authorship is that of conveying emigrants from Europe to Canada (Conrad 1912: 25).

6 See Hoffman's remarks in *After such Knowledge* (2004) about the "indigestibility" of the "compressed, packed, sharp" memories conveyed in her parents' spare allusions to survival during the Holocaust: "humble, homely, disconnected units of narration" that lay under "a kind of prohibition on the very quality of coherence" (Hoffman 2004: 11–14). Sabin (2008: 293–295) shows how the scope and reach of Hoffman's later book brings out dimensions of her Polish girlhood that the earlier book had hidden undeclared within its texture. For the literary epiphany's dependence on narrative, with reference to Wordsworth and Joyce, see Tucker (1992).

7 "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?": "Among School Children" (1928), lines 63–64, in Yeats (1983: 217).

temporal sequence yet underscores an uncanny copresence of future with past. That is how Hoffman's narrative reprises itself; it also may be why each of the three reprises just quoted is couched, like the originating incident in the park – for that matter, like most of the book – in the narrative present, which is the tense that keeps faith with what keeps recurring.

3

Macro manoeuvres like these illustrate a gentle strategy of reader-disorientation. Hoffman wants us to lose touch with the linear sort of chronological thread that undergirds Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), a Russian-Jewish-American anthem to immigrant success that Hoffman adduces near the end of Part II in explicit contrast to her own less settled autobiographical account (Hoffman 1989: 162–164).[8] Hoffman offers us instead an imaginative engagement with unresolved dialectics of alienation and accommodation, a perennial reorientation that can never be more than underway. What the stitched folds of narrative patchwork perform at large, she does more diffusively at the level of language, which is at once the avowed subject of the book and its now pellucid, now purposely thickened and darkened medium of transmission. *Lost in Translation* presents several kinds of interlingual impediment to smooth reading, each of which conspires locally with the disorientation strategy of the book as a whole. Tactical lapses in translation serve to jar us a little, set us off balance and on edge, so as to nudge us away from secure observation of Hoffman's testimony and towards a more vulnerable, vicariously participatory relation to what she has been through. In this sense, what Hoffman late in the game calls her "translation therapy" (Hoffman 1989: 273) is prescribed not just for herself but for her readers too. Momentarily yet repeatedly lost in language, and estranged from her story, we are in a better position to find her where she lives.

When toddler Ewa sets up to tell her mother the story of everything and utters, "*Ramaramaszerymery, rotumotu pulimuli*", she and her mother know, as do we, "perfectly well that what I am making up are nonsense syllables" (Hoffman 1989: 11). But how much better off were we mere anglophone readers when the previous page italicised, imposed an English plural on, but did not translate, the Polish word "*dorozhka*"? What is the difference between the tot's extemporised "*rotumotu*" and the real Polish word "*kogelmogel*", but for Hoffman's explanation that the latter is the name of a chocolatey eggnog (Hoffman 1989: 50)? Where an English translation is forthcoming – "prescription" for *recepta*, medical "cuppings" for *banieczki* – we may wonder why the Polish medical term is supplied at all, until we realize that we too are

[8] An extended comparison between Hoffman and Antin may be found in Kellman (1998).

being nursed into recovery, via more or less scrappy empathy with the autobiographer's backward reach after what is long gone: the hominess of the Cracow home of Ewa Wydra, whose exilic translation to Vancouver, and transliteration from Ewa to Eva, as yet form part of an unimaginable future. As for Vancouver, by the way, the Wydra family commit to moving there long before they learn to pronounce its name like Canadians; the phonics of Polish lead them instead to sound it out in four syllables. "Vantzo-ouver" (Hoffman 1989: 84) is a harmlessly cute mistake at first, but it will eventually mature into Hoffman's hard-bitten conviction that "You can't transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text" (Hoffman 1989: 175). The onomastic shibboleth of "Vantzo-ouver" repeats in reverse the trouble Hoffman has given us earlier with her aunt's Polish title – "Ciocia Bronia" – and, more mischievously, with the overview of Cracow that Hoffman has centred on "the long Renaissance building in the middle with the ancient name of Sukiennice" (Hoffman 1989: 39). That "ancient name" means nothing fancier than cloth-hall; but the roundabout kenning Hoffman contrives for it boosts its mystique as a hallowed place resistant to exportation.[9]

This tactic merges with its opposite when Hoffman omits not the English translation of a Polish word, but the Polish word itself. Upon arrival in Vancouver the frustration of learning a different language quickly seizes on difference as deficiency, resents that condition acutely, and projects it in self-defence onto the new language:

> The problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold – a word without an aura.
>
> (Hoffman 1989: 106)

Not the lost aura but the fact of its loss is visited on the reader by withholding the noun (presumably *rzeka*) that in Polish evokes it. A tactical interruption in the readerly stream of consciousness puts us in something like teenage Ewa/Eva's place, gives us an instantaneous taste of the verbal drought that has choked the flow of her experience. Small wonder that the first English idiom she grasps contextually from other kids in the schoolyard is "Shuddup" (Hoffman 1989: 104). That one language can silt or dam another one up is a threat often noted in the trans-lingual subgenre of memoir to which *Lost in Translation* belongs. Agota Kristof's *The Illiterate* (*L'Analphabète*, 2004) still regards her adoptive French, twenty years after fleeing Hungary, as "an enemy language"

[9] See on these matters Karpinski (2012: 134–135).

that "is killing my mother tongue" (Kristof 2014: 20); and conversely Jhumpa Lahiri, in a fine recent book entitled *In Other Words*, resuming her native English after a year's immersion in Italian, fears that English is "angry at me" (Lahiri 2017: 117). Both these memoirists are recounting a glossicidal struggle of attrition to which Hoffman too bears witness, when in Vancouver her "Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness" (Hoffman 1989: 107).[10]

The two main languages whose imperfect parallax brings Hoffman's identity into focus each entrain a further entourage of affiliated tongues, by luck of neighbourhood or force of appropriation. "Tallithim" and "Hasidim" (Hoffman 1989: 37–38), for example, show up as untranslated Hebrew plurals that, like the perhaps more familiar words "Torah" and "shofar", look as foreign in Polish as they do in English but behave, unitalicised, as if they belong in Ewa's Cracow, sponsored no doubt by the Yiddish she hears at home. Well before being told that "Poland is a Francophile culture" (Hoffman 1989: 32), we have inferred as much from the wish of Ewa's father that his girl should grow up "*sportif* – good at games" (Hoffman 1989: 9).[11] So we are prepared to appreciate later, during her first days in Vancouver, how the bald acknowledgment of obligation harboured by the English phrase "You're welcome" should not just rub Ewa the wrong way but strike her, with pronounced gallic disdain, "as a gaucherie" (Hoffman 1989: 106). Linguistic *ménages à trois* occur frequently in Hoffman's prose: from showing off another foreign student's restiveness with "the Japanese weltanschauung" (Hoffman 1989: 212); to describing a teacher's reprimand to Cracow students protesting Soviet domination as "a diktat about 'hooligan behavior'" (Hoffman 1989: 63), where both "diktat" and "hooligan" have arrived from the West by way of intermediary Russian adoption; to reporting the explosive "*Wiwat! Wiwat!*" – Latin applause, but Polish *w*'s – that a Cracow concert hall showers on Arthur Rubinstein's performance of – what else? – Chopin's A Major Polonaise (Hoffman 1989: 73).

The striking linguistic mastery on exhibit in such passages is rendered if anything more impressive by the tiny number of gaffes one can find in the text. Hoffman writes "like I" at one point instead of "like me" (Hoffman 1989: 163),

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10 In Hoffman's book the agon between languages takes form more than once (Hoffman 1989: 119–120, 199–200, 230–231) as a scripted debate between her Polish- and English-speaking selves, a phenomenon analysed in Jarczok (2015: 28–30). Fjellestad (1995: 139) calls this struggle between tongues "a carnivorous process". On the general phenomenon of first-language attrition see Karpinski (2012: 136–138), and Espino Barrera (2017), whose essay considers Nabokov, Hannah Arendt, and Jorge Semprún as well as Hoffman.

11 The overlap between Polish and other languages is of course substantial. On the French connection in Conrad's Polish, Najder (1964: 29) advises that "The alleged 'gallicisms' of his English are in fact not gallicisms but simply polonisms".

in the course of comparing her memoir and Mary Antin's. She puts "whomever" for "whoever" (Hoffman 1989: 174) as the grammatical subject of a clause – the way fully half my students do, and not least the native speakers of English. Twice on the same page Hoffman (1989: 271) misremembers a canonical English text: first misquoting the King James Bible ("lilies of the valley" for "lilies of the field" in Matthew 6: 28) and then remembering King Lear's "poor, bare, forked animal" as a "poor, two-forked creature."[12] Admittedly these mistakes may have been set out mischievously as bait for English professors like me. Still, waiving the question of intention, let me call them exceptions that, proving the rule of a scrupulous excellence few of us sustain in a first language, never mind a second one, attest the thousands of errors whose patient detection and diligent repair over the years have made Hoffman's English so limber and resourceful.[13]

Such are the myriad signals whereby the author of *Lost in Translation* shows us the way with words: now smooth and now rugged, now vagrant and now direct. Take last of all two of her dearest, and I gather least translatable, Polish terms: the diametrical pair *tęsknota* and *polot*.[14] It is not that she does not define them: she carefully informs us that *tęsknota* is "a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing" (Hoffman 1989: 4), *polot* "a word that combines the meanings of dash, inspiration, and flying" (Hoffman 1989: 71). But these definitions *describe* the words, rather than *translate* them – perhaps lest their definitively Polish idiosyncrasy be forfeited. Emphasizing that each is "a word", she reserves to them a kind of diplomatic immunity from English search and seizure. While I myself still do not assuredly know what either word means, I am convinced that between them they divide the dialectal/dialectical field on which the book plays. For if *tęsknota* yearns and hearkens backward, in heart-bursting loyalty to that which is lost, *polot* swaggers ahead, its confidence tempered by ironic awareness that disappointment is the future's favourite trick.

Neither of these orientations to the world proves viable on its own; each turns out to need correction by the other. Against what Hoffman (1989: 104) calls the "Big Fear" of chaotic incomprehension, which makes the world unintelligible and overwhelms the self, *tęsknota* sandbags the affective levee of memories. But nobody can live on that levee for long, and Hoffman, even while citing Theodor Adorno's severe insistence that when refugees lose their alienation they lose their soul, rejects it as too extreme (Hoffman 1989: 209). No less plausible – yet no less unavailing – is the proactive gambit that *polot* enjoins: to pre-empt

12 *King Lear* 3.4.102, in Shakespeare (1969: 1085).

13 Najder (1964: 30) writing on Conrad supplies a defence of Hoffman's practice *avant la lettre*: in *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* may be found "an artistically successful subordination of the rules of grammar to the conveyed vision".

14 Besemeres (1998: 333–335) discusses these paired terms. See also Kella (2015) on *tęsknota*.

alienated passivity by practicing, in coolly observant detachment, the *de facto* ethnography of one's own life (Hoffman 1989: 131–138). Intellectual remoteness on that order needs irrigation by feeling, which in turn threatens to swamp and suffocate the self unless leavened by wit.[15] In order to dodge "the true peril of living an alien life" (Hoffman 1989: 245), Hoffman must effect a rapprochement with contingency: "This is not a place where I happen to be, this happens to be the place where I am; this is the only place" (Hoffman 1989: 171); or, as she tells her old friend Danuta on a return trip to Cracow, "It's just that it happens to be the life I happen to have lived" (Hoffman 1989: 241). Unforeseeably improbable though they be, it is the chances of a lifetime that furnish the only firm basis for a life. The conversion of happening into belonging braids the light serendipity of *polot* into *tęsknota*'s grave aplomb. Hoffman (1989: 280) can say at last, in the final two sentences of her book, "The language of this is sufficient. I am here now".

This final brace of sentences, we may note in conclusion, signifies on two levels that are cognate yet quite distinct. One is the arbitrary yet binding plane of worldly contingencies, where a network of openings and foreclosures that spans continents and decades has shaped the person Hoffman is. The other is the linguistic plane of the signifier, where "I" and "here" and "now" occupy textual coordinates in a verbal system. The two planes taken together furnish – as does *Lost in Translation* at much larger scale – Eva Hoffman's address. They are where we find her.[16]

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15 For reasons rooted alike in the text and in the recent history of critical theory, much of the published scholarship on *Lost in Translation* highlights Hoffman's balancing act between converging – and competing – imperatives. Ingram's (1996) is one strongly theorised treatment. In Karpinski's view Hoffman at last "forgoes the opportunity to turn her complex location into the source of radical cultural questioning and redefinition" (Karpinski 2012: 148); the balance her book strikes is tantamount to "complicity with the tradition of bourgeois autobiography" (Karpinski 2012: 150).

16 Hoffman's valedictory envoi, situated in what Zaborowska (1995: 237) calls "a perpetual present, a fiction in which time does not move and the past is continuously being relived within the present", draws together in a postmodern knot the aspects of academic discourse and of personal rapport noted at the start of this essay. A like tension between experience and discourse pervades studies of autobiography that are roughly contemporaneous with *Lost in Translation*. See, for example, the theoretical preface to Elbaz (1988: 1–16), which appeared within a year of Hoffman's book. For an overview of the critical climate for autobiography studies circa 1990, see Smith & Watson (2010: 204–211).

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