Mute Child in the House of the Spirit: The Relationship Between Creative Expression and Community

Riva Rubin
General Union of Writers in Israel

In memory of Lionel Abrahams

Abstract

The house of the spirit in the title refers to the creative mind of the writer—incorporating the roots that have fed that mind. The mute child is the writer-self that has reverted to the status of a patronized, inarticulate child in the course of the material and psychological struggle for creative survival in circumstances where the language of the writer differs from the language of the community. This article refers to some aspects of the above circumstances, which include: limited audiences in the country of domicile; the viability of translation, and last, but not least, the practical problems arising from disconnection from the writer's linguistic centre. The article also outlines some of the practical ways in which these problems are addressed in the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic society of contemporary Israel.

Language and Meaning

In the words of Lionel Abrahams:

> The literary endeavour places one where individuality and society intersect. The writer without a sense of self has no story to tell. Without a sense of community, he has no one to tell his story to, no means of telling his story, no language. For language is inescapably social, inescapably shared. The nature and business of language is connection.[1]

When there is a weakening of the sense of self that connects what Carl Jung described as "the vast outer realm and the equally vast inner realm" (1978: 137), the writer must reinforce the sense of self by reinforcing the connection between the two realms. This requires the writer to evolve a system of codes by which to perceive the character of the outer realm – when it is *a priori* different from the writer's locale and language—and the way it connects with the inner realm. If the sense of self is thus restored, the writer is able to cope with conditions that are inimical to creativity, conditions that stem from existential elements inherent in locality, ethnicity and other factors to which I will refer below. However, the process of regaining the sense of self by adding new codes of perception is one that devours energy—and the energy that is lost is creative energy. The writer is then in danger of falling silent. In order to continue to write, the writer's multifaceted task is to absorb and convey subliminal meaning to salvage what is lost when the struggle to connect with the outer landscape is complicated by a sense of otherness. It is also to resist the urge to compromise by writing in order to be comprehensible to the mainstream, dutifully addressing local themes and issues to stop the village watchdogs from barking at the writer's different scent and thus to earn, at best, a sort of patronizing approval.

Translation and Context

One solution to the problem of writing without an audience in the local context is to master the mainstream language; another is to find a good translator. Both mean compromise and compromise for a writer is just another kind of silence. With regard to the first solution, I know writers who have mastered Hebrew and no longer write in their native Polish, English, Hungarian and other languages. Most of them seem like swimmers who have jumped into the stream from one bank and are floundering in the shallows because they cannot quite make it to the other side. If the solution were as simple as mastering the mechanics and nuances, and even the spirit of the mainstream language, I would be writing in Hebrew. But my mind is structured in English. I can *mean* only in English. For myself, what Lionel Abrahams called the aesthetic transmutation of experience, cannot take place in any language other than English.

The second solution, translation, is a risk-loaded compromise, but isolation and the hunger for interaction with the surrounding literary community and audience make it a valid compromise. And yet one of the saddest things in my life as a writer is to read myself in another language, even in the best translation. When I find that a work will not cross over I choose silence. Fortunately, my command of Hebrew enables me to work with the translator and to detect missed subtleties of sense and culture, but the inevitable absences and near-misses, the untranslatable elements at the heart of a work always leave me feeling isolated and frustrated. (All the more so when the translation is in a language I do not understand.) I must

add that I have been blessed with gifted Hebrew translators, without whom I would feel even more marginal and frustrated among my peers in Israel.

Is translation ever adequate? Adam was given the task of naming everything in Eden, to give all things their pure meaning. But when he left his garden, did this thing called language that he had shaped help him to express himself, to understand and be understood? Outside of Eden, he had to find a new, coherent frame of reference for that apple or mushroom or tomato that he and Eve had eaten, and the labour he was sentenced to was the labour of words. In Eden, when he said "We have a green leaf, now", Eve knew he meant the cover-up and the pleasure and the consciousness of shame. But outside of Eden, the same words could just as well be understood to mean a new beginning, or bitter food, or a new fashion. Meaning melted away in adapting integral vocabulary to a new landscape (Graves & Raphael 1964: 65).

Have I understood the meaning of writings I have read in English translations? Not absolutely, but I would be infinitely poorer without it. Thus, while translation is not the ultimate answer, it has been a necessary tool ever since the construction of the Tower of Babel was brought to a halt because heaven itself would not gamble on the nature of humankind's power as a unilingual entity.[2]

Categories of Minority Language Writing

Minority literature falls into three main categories: indigenous writing from a separate ethnic group within a national entity; the writing of immigrants from a country with a different language; and the writing of immigrants from a country with the same language, but with differences in accent and idiom, culture and other formative components of the writer's inner landscape (for example, from one Anglophonic country to another). The problem of language and meaning is particularly significant in poetry, which builds on the way words are pronounced, on rhythm, phrasing, and primarily, on culture-based allusions and symbols—with the result that the meaning of a whole poem can be thrown off balance even when the reader and the writer have the same mother-tongue from different localities. In all cases, the energy is diverted and meaning itself is lost.

The Roots Factor

The Israeli Hebrew writer, Rina Litvin illustrates the point in the following anecdote from her childhood:

> About three months after I immigrated to Israel, when words were still shrouded in fog, the national anthem, Hatikva [The Hope], was associated with pumpkins in my mind. Tikva is the Russian word for pumpkin ...

Pursuing the subject of identity and a common associative denominator, Litvin quotes from the conversation between Alice and the caterpillar in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "'Who are you?' the caterpillar asks and Alice answers 'I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present I can't remember things as I used – and I don't keep the same size for 10 minutes together ...'" The caterpillar advises her to seek her identity in the canon of texts imprinted on her memory (Litvin 2003).

Alice's quest in the subterranean realms of herself leads me to consider the nature of roots, with particular reference to my own. I used to think that the ideal is one unbroken root tapping some kind of archetypal soil, or, failing this, one bifurcated root. However, like so many people today, my origins are in a branched root system. In my case, these roots are spread over three continents and at least two religions (not to mention the scientific possibility that all of us originate in stardust). My root system supplied me with English, the voice of my mind. It supplied me with Hebrew and the Jewish heritage to add dimensions to my spirit. It supplied me with South Africa to hone my senses, the way a first love does.

When I read Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and came across the passages about Kroonstad as it was in my childhood, when I spent weeks at a time there, it was like finding a forgotten letter from that first love. Krog encapsulated and revived segments of my own hierarchical material for me: the green river with the twisted willow trees and the pavilion where dancing took place on its banks; the beautiful little synagogue attended by my uncle who was the president of the Jewish community, and by the optician, the jeweler, and the owner of the pungent shop that sold saddles and leather straps. She even named the street in which my uncle's good, solid house stood at number 41, with the lysol-scrubbed white wooden outdoor toilet—from the time before the town had indoor sewage. Recording loss, Antjie Krog energized the dormant roots of an unknown reader, proving her assertion that, "You have a voice solely through your community—whether it is language they give you or ancestral stirrings, or food, it doesn't matter."[3] Indeed, those glimpses of her inner landscape stirred my "community" memories: the boy who dived into the Kroonstad river in his white shirt to save his drowning dog; myself the shy watcher at the pavilion dances; my mother's illness that was the reason for the time spent in Kroonstad in my uncle's house; the terror of the white spiders that haunted the spotlessly sanitized toilet in the yard, and more.

Indeed, the meaning of that town is profoundly bound to my individual "ancestral stirring", but the myth-creating zone of the mind is common to most people and transcends individual language. Minds remote from each other in time and culture have a tendency to produce similar ideas and images, as we learn from psychological theory. In order to release meaning, what Krog calls the "community voice", must be evoked—and language is the instrument. "But who are you writing for?" Krog asks:

> Writers in "smaller" languages must not only demand the right to write in their own languages, but also [their right] to be translated in order to form part of all the voices in their country. (2003: 304)

Towards Recognition by the Establishment

I will here attempt to show some practical ways to encourage the emergence of writers who have no proper platform where they live. In Israel, minority language writing has, at last, been formally recognized, to a certain extent. While not perfect, and despite some historically unique features, aspects of the way this was achieved might be usefully applied in other countries. With the great waves of Jewish immigration that followed statehood, Israel needed to adopt immediate, practical measures to crystallize a society that was becoming increasingly and rapidly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual—one might even say multi-minority—without drowning the mother-culture. Since the psychological, ideological, socio-political and ethical climate in the early years of the new state is beyond the scope of this article, I will merely give a brief overview of the difficulties encountered by writers in languages other than Hebrew.

This ancient language was kept alive, if frozen, for over 2000 years after the nation's exile and dispersal. It blossomed as a modern language at the beginning of the twentieth century and became the official language of the state of Israel when it was established in 1948. However, with the great waves of immigration to the new state in the wake of World War II, the influx of scores of other languages posed a threat to the status of Hebrew as the national language and its significant role in shaping the national identity. In light of the existential and emotional need to ensure this status, modern, Hebrew literature received strong official encouragement, while support of Israeli literature in other languages was noticeably lacking.

The major challenge to Hebrew came from Yiddish, the language of the European Jewish Diaspora. Often mistakenly perceived as a sort of pidgin German with Hebrew components, Yiddish arose more than 800 years ago as an adaptation of Middle High German with a considerable percentage of vernacularized Hebrew. Over the centuries, it developed a rich literature which included poetry, fiction, drama, journalism and a distinctive humorous tradition and folklore. By the twentieth century it had become the language of some eleven million Jews and declined only when more than half of them were murdered in World War II (Rubin 1991: 158-160).[4] As mentioned above, the profoundly significant claim of Yiddish, in addition to the abovementioned importation of so many foreign languages caused the Hebrew establishment to dig in its heels. Writers in other languages, including Yiddish, were effectively

shut out of the cultural mainstream and the prestigious Hebrew Writers Union firmly closed its doors to the outsiders. Eventually, as Hebrew assumed its rightful place, unchallenged, this defensive stance became unnecessary and in 1975 the Israel Federation of Writers' Unions was founded, with government support, as the roof organization for minority literatures. Today the federation numbers some 500 writers—roughly equal to the number of members in the Hebrew writers union—and represents the Arabic, Yiddish, English, Russian, Rumanian, German, Hungarian, Spanish, Polish and French language groups. It assists publication of books, literary periodicals, translation to Hebrew, literary events and awards, workshops, seminars and a club for new immigrant writers. I offer this information in the hope that it provides some practical suggestions and will contribute to an exchange of ideas enabling minority literature writers to benefit from one another's experiences. Nevertheless, old prejudices die hard and mainstream attitudes remain patronizing or indifferent in Israel. Some writers fall silently by the wayside. Some concentrate on publication overseas, but the latter step is complicated because, in addition to international sanctions and prejudices against Israel that amount to book-burning, writing at a distance from the natural language centre contributes to marginalization. Some writers return to their language centre.

For example, Mikhail Gendelev believed that 27 years of artistic activity in Israel gave him the right to be called an Israeli poet in the Russian language.[5] His sophisticated and *avante-garde* poetry made him an icon in the Israeli Russian literary community as well as in Russia, where, ironically enough, he is known as an Israeli poet. Finally, in 2003, after nine collections of poetry and several volumes of prose, a Hebrew translation of his work was published. Although the book sold out, it received no response from the mainstream Hebrew critics. The barrier remained intact. Refusing to "...hang from the rim of my country," as he said, Mikhail Gendelev returned to Russia and has stopped writing, bringing to mind Lionel Abrahams' words: "Defection into silence would annul the inner galaxy" (1995: 7–9).

The late Olga Kirsch, on the other hand, was a poet who was able to continue writing at a distance from the centre of her poetic language. Born in South Africa, Kirsch lived in Israel from 1948 until her death in 1997. She was ranked among such esteemed Afrikaans poets as Elisabeth Eybers and Ingrid Jonker, although her mother- tongue was English and she later became fluent in Hebrew. She began writing in Afrikaans when she was still at school and her affinity for the language stood apart from any exterior association. Afrikaans was simply where she found her poetry and where her meaning came to life. Even though she wrote for a distant, minority readership in a language virtually unknown outside of South Africa, Olga Kirsch did not fall silent. These lines which I have translated from Afrikaans, speak of the connection that cannot be erased.

My life will remain cracked:
Green stalks, when the axe
has chopped them core deep
will never regain wholeness.
But the sap sticks to the axeblade.[6]

Amos Tutuola[7], the great Nigerian writer, is another example of how minority writing need not stifle creativity or succumb to compromise. His writing demonstrates that inspired usage and invention provide tools for a revitalizing adaptation of language that makes meaning universally available, despite exotic cultural references and deeply embedded ethnic rhythms.

In conclusion, I wish to refer at some length to "Locality and Language", a critical essay by Professor Yaffah Berlovitz (Berlovitz 1997). Since she addresses issues I have raised and since she analyses a poem of mine as the pivot of her essay, I include the whole poem before referring to her comments:

MUSEUM PIECE[8]
Bindings of late summer
wrap my face—mildewed rags
I lie on pillows like fur
I spit from my lips
at five in the morning, and
a yellow shirt on the line
jabs precise slices of sun
into my eyes through the slats
a crow rattles in the eucalyptus.

I sweat like a stone
exude the salt of stones
a crust of saltpetre.

In the museum of my sleep
waking among silks and silver
I found my husband
he the long-dead
husband of my youth
who whispers clay to me
beside the jewels and cloaks
the carved camel-bone studs
and the exquisite porcelain cat.

I will sit up and wail
I will shave my eyebrows
I will mourn

Berlovitz chose *Museum Piece* because, in her opinion, it reveals the juxtaposition of the poet's inner and outer landscapes. She analyses the poetic metaphors drawn from the physical environment: the harsh light and humidity so early in the morning, the raucous crow in dry eucalyptus leaves and harsh awakening into fatigue, helplessness, heaviness. She adds:

> The third stanza takes the reader to the time before waking, to what Rubin describes as a visit to the museum of the sleeping self, rich in objects of beauty and art, a display of universal culture. Eastern and classical Western culture blend in objects of bone, silk, silver and porcelain… one speaks in whispers here… but here, too, a shock is recorded in the seismograph of the walk among the treasures, when the poet encounters her dead young husband. He whispers to her, not words of love, but, in this paradise of treasures, words of loss … implying that the treasures in the museum are not immune to dissolution and threaten to return to clay. (Berlovitz 1997: 35–36)

Berlovitz wonders if the figure of the husband whispering clay to the poet is there to

> …warn her of the collapse of her museum, which means the death of the poem or the collapse of poetic potential …or, ecstatic in the midst of her treasures, is the poet vulnerable to poetic exhaustion, to the dread of the answering silence in the absence of an audience, to creative despair? … In retrospect, we understand the trauma of the awakening and the menace encountered in the museum of the self. And something else becomes clear: the dialectical contrast between the awakening scene and the museum scene is actually a continuity, a connection. For what is the preoccupation of the poetic self if not to confront the threatened loss of creative power …? (ibid: 36)

In her analysis of the poetic metaphors, Berlovitz draws attention to the Mesopotamian/Semitic/Middle Eastern elements in the poem, such as references to the death of Tammuz and the ritual cycle of death and rebirth which promises that the poetic self, too, will survive:

> In this way, it seems to me that Rubin also withstands the threat of her poetic death. She metaphorically shaves her eyebrows (an ancient Egyptian act of mourning) but in writing she declares the poetic act as present and functioning, ... Above all, "Museum Piece" is inherently a local creation, since in a sophisticated, dialectical manner it ... employs the local environment and its symbols for the poem's purposes. (ibid: 36–37)

As a rule, minority language literature is so remote from mainstream literary circles, that whether a writer like Gendelev falls silent or a writer like Olga Kirsch continues to write is of little consequence to the critics and readers at the centre. It simply goes unnoticed. Professor Berlovitz's incisive essay is an all too rare expression of the respectful critical response we writers in minority languages desire and deserve.

Notes

1 Lionel Abrahams (1996: 25) was born in 1928, in Johannesburg, South Africa. A distinguished poet, critic, essayist, editor and publisher, he devoted his life to the promotion of South African literature, which is particularly indebted to him for his editing and collection of the works of Herman Charles Bosman. His open defiance of censorship laws, and his discovery and publication of the Zulu poet, Oswald Joseph Mtshali and other Black South African writers at the height of the apartheid era, were characteristic of his courage and integrity. In 1986 he received honorary doctorates from both the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Natal. Herman Charles Bosman (1905–1951) was a master of the short story form and a humorist. He became the foremost exponent of Afrikaans folk humour although he wrote in English. His stories and prison memoirs brought him international renown.

2 *Genesis* II: 1–9 "...let us go down and confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech."

3 Cited in an article by Jane Rosenthal (See *Mail & Guardian*, 3-9 October 2003).

4 See also Rubin (1996).

5 Mikhail Gendelev (2003) *An Incomplete Collection of Gendelev's Poems* [in Russian]. See also Isakova (2004: B10).

6 Afrikaans original: " My lewe sal gesplete bly: / groen stamme, as die byl hul kap / kerndiep, sal nooit weer heelheid kry. / Maar aan die staallem klewe sap."

7 Tutuola, Amos. For list of works, see Faber and Faber Ltd.: London.

8 Rubin (1996: 63).

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