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Choice of Language and the Quest for Israeli Identity in the Works of Tuvia Ruebner and Aharon Appelfeld

Abstract: Immigration highlights the question of language and raises the dilemma of the relationship between the mother tongue and the language of the new land. For writers this question is even more crucial: should they write in the language of the place and its readers? Immigration to Israel is not exceptional, of course. What choices are open to those writers, and how are they to convey the complexities inherent in the formation of an Israeli identity? This paper focuses on two writers who demonstrate the role played by the “chosen language” in the cultural construction and deconstruction of Israeli identity. Tuvia Ruebner emigrated from Bratislava, Aharon Appelfeld from Bukovina. Ruebner shifted from German to Hebrew and back to German; Appelfeld wrote only in Hebrew. In both cases, their arrival in Israel enabled them to survive. However, the loss of their families in Europe continued to haunt them. Inspired by Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘translation’ and responding to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of ‘minor literature’, the paper shows how their work conveys a multilayered interrelation between national and foreign languages, and between images of exile and homeland, past, present and future – all of which shed light on contemporary issues of Israeli identity.

Keywords: *Immigration; Franz Kafka; Tuvia Ruebner; Aharon Appelfeld; Bilingualism; German; modern Hebrew Literature*

Introduction

At the beginning of their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to Franz Kafka’s remark on the “impossibility of writing”. They reflect on the way Kafka signifies the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and transforms their literature into something impossible – “the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 16). Based on this view they relate to the “minor literature” of Prague

by explaining that this literature does not come from a minor language, but is rather the literature that a minority constructs within a major language. The first characteristic of minor literature is that its language contains a high degree of deterritorialization. Focusing on Hebrew modernism (especially poets such as Ben-Yitzhak and Fogel), which calls into question the simple opposition of minor and major literature, and exposes the fuzziness of the distinction between deterritorialized and reterritorialized languages, Hanna Kronfeld critically claims that “theories of minor languages will continue to replicate the exclusionary practices of the major if they dismiss those forms of positionality, which resists [...] the idiom of the hegemonic language” (1996, pp. 13–14). Instead, she suggests reconsidering an alternative model of “simultaneously maintaining multiple literary affiliations as partial, potentially contradictory and ambivalent” (p. 12).

As we know, Kafka (1883–1924) could not “not write” and chose German, his mother tongue, despite its impossibility. Tuvia Ruebner (1924–) and Aharon Appelfeld (1932–2018) also could not “not write”. In contrast to Kafka, however, whom they both mentioned and address when reflecting on their own poetic work, they chose “otherwise”: their choice was Hebrew – the language of their land of immigration, not just a living language, but rather a viable modern vernacular. Immigration highlights the question of language and raises the dilemma of the relationship between the mother tongue and the language of the new land. For writers this question is even more crucial: should they write in the language of the place and its readers? Immigration to Israel is, of course, not exceptional. However, since the Zionist aliyot at the end of the 19th century and up to the current immigration, Jewish writers who immigrated to Israel had to confront the language dilemma. What choices are open to them, and how are they to convey the complexities inherent in the formation of an Israeli identity? Should they replace the exiled, diasporic languages with Hebrew? Should they continue expressing themselves in their mother tongue and publish the work in translation, or should they perhaps use both languages in their writing in a way that resonates with the issue of the ‘minor’ and/or beyond?

This essay focuses on two contemporary writers in Israel who demonstrate the role played by the “chosen language” in the cultural construction and deconstruction of Israeli identity. Ruebner was born in Bratislava (Czechoslovakia, now Slovakia), Appelfeld in Jadova (the Bukovina region in Romania, currently Ukraine). Ruebner shifted from German to Hebrew and back to German; Appelfeld wrote only in Hebrew. In both cases, coming to Israel enabled them to survive. However, the loss of their families in Europe continued to haunt them. I intend to show how their autobiographies convey multilayered interrelationships between national and foreign languages, and between images of exile and homeland – past, present and future.¹

¹ Both writers are the subject of a wide field of research, including scholarly works which I will not be able to reconsider separately and refer to in this context. To name a few from recent years: Ticozky

Tuvia Ruebner: Bilingualism and Poetic Testimony

Ruebner's early poems were written in German, whereas his first published poems were written in Hebrew. Fourteen collections followed his 1957 debut volume. Only in 1995 were his German-language poems published. Recently a new volume of poems was published in German. This, however, is not the end of the story. In 1990, Piper Verlag published a translation of Ruebner's poetry into German by Meckel and Gal-Ed, which seemed to open the way for the poet (at this point a well-known translator of the Israeli Nobel Prize laureate, Shmuel Yosef Agnon) to begin to translate his own work. So far, eight self-translated poetry collections have been published by Rimbaud Verlag. In 2002 Ruebner published his literary autobiography in German; two years later a self-translated Hebrew version appeared.² What does this story indicate? Is this a case of multilingualism manifested in the experience of a poet who fled his homeland and had to adopt the language of a new land? In what sense does it relate to identity processes and the complexities of immigration and culture formation? Or perhaps it is the act of translation itself, particularly "self-translation", or auto-translation that intensifies and amplifies that which from the very beginning led Ruebner to poetry? To answer this question, I return to the 1940s. As mentioned, Ruebner's first attempts at writing were in his native tongue, German, an anomaly in the literary landscape of the day, in which immigrant writers more commonly adopted the newly reborn Hebrew. In a poem from 1946 that was published just recently, the poet speaks to a female figure, possibly his murdered sister. The surreal situation bypasses familiar frames of time and place. The poet describes the influence of this figure on him: how since he saw her the trees seem more vital, the sound of the wind is brighter and the night gleams. This sister of the dream, "Schwester des Traums" breaks through the shadows, illuminated. As in Romantic poetry, nature becomes a source of mystic revelation. The moment of revelation defines the role of the poet whose poetic words convey that which cannot be spoken about. In this poem, published in the epilogue of his last poetry collection from 2016, Ruebner acknowledges his entry into writing: The "speechless darkness" of the sister's breath made the poet "sing through the fists of the dead" (pp. 87). The silence of the murdered sister is thus revealed in the sounds of the poem as the birth of the self as a poet.

This female figure continues to haunt the poet in his Hebrew poems as well. In his autobiography Ruebner describes the linguistic transformation.³ Awakening in hospital after a horrific bus accident in which his wife was killed and he himself severely injured, he wrote

(2016), Bram (2017), Sparre (2017), Seelig (2018) on Ruebner; Milner (2013), Hever (2014), Pinsker (2014), Schwartz (2014), Drukker (2014) on Appelfeld.

² For the German version see Ruebner (2004); for the Hebrew see Ruebner (2006).

³ Compare with Seelig (2018), who reads Ruebner's self-translation as a poetic "stuttering". She quotes Ruebner's autobiography to demonstrate that his decision to write in Hebrew had to do with his desire to live in the present, while not forgetting the past: "But at some point I no longer wanted to live in my

the following lines: “I am not the one I was / I am not the one I am / I am neither here nor there”.⁴ The poet looks at himself as if from a tomb. His eyes, hands, and lips are burnt; so too are the words. The surreal elements return once more, this time concerning not the sister but the poet himself, who exposes the split – “I am not the one I was”. The recurrence of an early traumatic experience with a contemporary one, old with new, radicalizes the inner split between self and other (identification with the dead), the familiar and the unfamiliar, past and present. This split, in my view, became the basis of Ruebner’s poetics, an existential contradiction manifested in the language of his work and thoroughly extended in his art of translation.

This transformation, however, did not happen overnight. Initially Ruebner rejected any attempt to translate poetry: “Once I started, I was addicted and didn’t want my poems translated into any other language. As a devoted student of Ludwig Strauss, I knew that sound plays a central role in the meaning of a poem, and aside from rare instances, we are unable to transfer sound from one language to another” (Ruebner, 2014b, pp. xxix). Ruebner refers to his mentor and close friend Ludwig Strauss (1892–1953), who claimed that the form of everyday language and scientific discourse will be forgotten after their mission (information transmission) is completed, unlike poetic language whose form, manifested also in sound, refuses to disappear.⁵ Throughout his autobiography Ruebner describes the central role played by Strauss and Werner Kraft (1896–1991), two intellectuals and poets who wrote in both German and Hebrew (Strauss) or in German only (Kraft), and who encouraged him to write in Hebrew, the language of the land. Together with other European intellectuals and writers such as Lea Goldberg (1911–1970), they embodied an island of European thought within an Israeli reality.⁶ A condensed version of this reality was the kibbutz where Ruebner lives, a home and at the same time a foreign place. In his autobiography Ruebner refers to the alienation he experienced in the kibbutz from the very first day. This alienation, however, enabled him to write. The estrangement was necessary for him in order to become a writer (Ruebner, 2006, pp. 55). And yet writing was one thing, translation another.

I suggest that the impossibility of translation at an early stage might be connected to the fear of losing what was achieved through the poetic work of memory.⁷ Later, however,

poems and remain in the past [...]. Not because I wanted to overcome the past but because I wanted to *live with it* (emphasize in trans., pp. 80).

⁴ See Tuvia Ruebner, “I am not the One I was”, trans. by Shahar Bram, gloucesterwriters.org, April 8, 2015, retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmE3dtsT65I>

⁵ Ruebner edited Strauss’s German text (StGW II, 1998), and translated it into Hebrew as well.

⁶ For an insightful discussion of these relationships, see: Ticotzky, 2016.

⁷ In her introduction to the English translation of Ruebner’s poetry collection, Rachel Tzvia Back claims how the early refusal to have his Hebrew poems translated into other languages speaks of a refusal to undergo additional loss – the inevitable loss that accompanies any transfer from language to language, as from land to land (Ruebner, 2014b, pp. xxix).

translating the self (from Hebrew to German and vice versa) becomes the innermost act of working through the trauma. For Ruebner, a German-speaking Jew from Slovakia, the impossibility of translation seems to envelope the translation as the only possible expression, just as Kafka's (a German-speaking Jew from Prague) impossibilities bar access to writing, while at the same time revealing (a specific) writing as the only possible, true expression of being.

In 1923 Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) defined “the task of the translator” as follows: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not black its light, but allows the pure language as though reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original all the more fully” (2002a, pp. 260). For Benjamin, translation is not about identity and likeness, but rather about kinship between exiled fragments of a concealed whole (vessel) which otherwise cannot be grasped. The original and the translation are fractures that bear witness to ruptured being. Translation does not exclude or cover the original, but rather is influenced by and extends its boundaries towards its foreign element. This foreign, ruptured being, is found also in Kafka's figures, as Benjamin reveals: “Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted”. He mentions the strange sound of Odradek's laughter “something like the rustling of falling leaves” (2002b, pp. 134),⁸ by concluding, however, that the “prototype of distortion... [is] the hunchback” (pp. 133). In Benjamin's essays, the foreign element is conveyed through the visual image. In Ruebner's translations (from Hebrew to German, from the adopted tongue to his mother tongue), this split that cannot be spoken of is conveyed also through the sound. Like a musical dissonant, which calls for a solution that never arrives, the torn, fragmented word keeps longing for the whole sentence.

Ruebner learns about fragments from Kafka, whose parables, as he writes in his autobiography, “show that the illegible is illegible; this we know already. The fragmentary, which is not a parable however, demonstrates how the non-conceptual is conceived by its inconceivability”. Therefore, he concludes, “the fragmentary endows Kafka's stillness with movement” (2006, pp. 105). This “movement in stillness” resonates with Ruebner's poetry in translation, and conveys through his deconstruction of language. The fragments, “Air” and “Being” from “Contradictory Poems”, originally written in Hebrew and translated into German under the volume title “Lichtschatten” (Luft, Sein; respectively) demonstrate this: “es gibt / und / es gibt sie nicht” (2011, pp. 30). The trace of a duration is conveyed through the fragmentation – a prompt cut, unexpected stillness: “Es ist. / Es kann nicht sein, es / ist” (pp. 50). Additional tension based on a caesura conveyed through “The Shortest Poem (on Life)” which consists of three words only: “Noch / Nicht / Mehr” (2014, pp. 55). Vertically each word disconnects from the other; horizontally, however, they “long” for a connection, thus demonstrating a paradoxical time concept that juxtaposes “before” (not yet) and “after” (no more). Ruebner displaces the words and sounds along the sentence, cutting off, breaking,

⁸ See Kafka, GW, 1950b, p. 130.

negating and contradicting. His work – a poetics of deconstruction – thus reveals the foreign and the remote, the otherness that is out of reach, enabling it to illuminate the darkness and to resonate with silence.

Aharon Appelfeld: Polyphonic Language of Diaspora and Homeland

Aharon Appelfeld also creates in his literary work a transgressive space through which the other languages can be heard. As Yigal Schwartz and others have shown, Appelfeld's insistence on looking back, of dealing with what was no longer current and even rejected by the Zionist meta-narrative of the "new Jew" or "muscular Judaism", interfered with his reception as a canonic Israeli author (Schwartz, 2014, pp. 348–350, 308–310). This changed in the 1980s as a result of internal cultural and political developments in Israeli society, but for many years Appelfeld had to pay the price for choosing what he called the "Orphic" as opposed to the "Promethean" poetics of the Israeli author.⁹ This choice was bound up with language. In contrast to Ruebner, Appelfeld's first and only choice was Hebrew, not his German mother tongue from which he was brutally torn away at a young age.

Born in 1932 to an assimilated German-speaking Jewish family in Bukovina, Aharon Appelfeld (originally Ervin Appelfeld) was eight years old when the Romanian Army reclaimed the region from its Soviet occupiers, murdered his mother and deported him and his father. After escaping from a concentration camp, Appelfeld spent a few years hiding in the Ukraine forests before joining the Soviet Army. As a post-war refugee he made his way to Italy and arrived in Eretz Israel in 1946, where he found himself facing another language: "The effort to adopt Hebrew and to turn it into my mother tongue continued for some years; the yellowing diary that lies on my desk is enduring testimony to this [...] Every letter signals great rupture and sorrow, but not a lack of self-consciousness. What will become of me without a language?" (Appelfeld, 2004, pp. 111). Later, in his autobiography he admits: "My mother tongue which I greatly loved died within me after two years in Israel. I tried to revive it in different ways by reading and even repeating words and sentences, but despite these efforts it still died rapidly. From the moment I arrived in Israel, I hated the people who forced me to speak Hebrew, and with the death of my mother tongue my hostility toward them only increased" (pp. 111). Stuttering, which embodied Appelfeld's immediate reaction to this brutal tear from German, was gradually replaced by a precise and a fine poetics of memory in Hebrew.¹⁰

This choice of language is also described in his novel *The Man who Never Stopped Sleeping* (2010) a fictive autobiography which, however, is based on Appelfeld's biography.

⁹ See Daniel Ben Simon's interview with Appelfeld, in *Tunnel* 1, 24.9.07, 26.11.07, 26.5.08.

¹⁰ Scholars (e.g. DeKoven Ezrahi, 1984; Nash, 2002) have mentioned the role of language in Appelfeld's literature as a representational mode of sublimation which enable the author to work through the traumatic experience.

The novel follows Appelfeld's road into writing: his "breaking through the barriers" (קורפּל (רעשׂה תּא) of the non-representable. Literature replaces dreams and the infinite sleep that reverberates with trauma and a mother's death, transforming the transitional space into a site of holy, sacred revelation. *The Man who Never Stopped Sleeping* reflects on this experience, interweaving non-fiction with fiction in what looks like a *Künstlerroman* (artist's novel). The narrator, Erwin, a young Holocaust survivor takes his initial steps toward creating a new life in the newly established state of Israel. Erwin doesn't remember much about his journey across Europe when the war finally ended because he spent most of it asleep, carried by other survivors as they emerged from their hiding places or were liberated from the camps and made their way to the shore of Naples. As he struggles to stay awake, Erwin becomes part of a group of boys being rigorously trained both physically and mentally by an emissary from Palestine for life in their new home. After the British authorities in Palestine release them from the detention camp in Atlit, he and his comrades are assigned to a kibbutz, where they learn to tend the land and speak their new language. A part of Erwin, however, would not let go of the past: "Waves of darkness carried me along, and I moved forward. *Where are you heading?* I asked myself. *Home*, I replied, surprised at my own answer. Only a few of the refugees wanted to go back to their homes. Everyone else streamed to the sea in trains and trucks. People knew what they wanted. I had just one wish – to return to my parents" (Appelfeld, 2017, pp. 4). When he is wounded in an engagement with snipers, Erwin has to spend long months recovering from multiple surgeries and trying to regain the use of his legs. During this period, he copies passages from the Bible in his newly acquired Hebrew and takes his first steps as a writer.

The novel sheds poetic light on two issues: The Yishuv's negation of exile and Appelfeld's search for the precise expression of his traumatic experience. Thus, when lying in hospital, he asks for Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. The book he wishes to read is part of the corpus of German literature that also embodies his parents' cultural world. It takes him a while to realize that he is not going to get the book: German culture is taboo in the new Jewish land. Similarly, he is required to use the Hebrew name Aharon instead of the foreign name Erwin. So he changes his name as well as his language. He abandons German in favor of Hebrew, which also becomes his language of writing. The narrator describes a deep feeling of betraying his parents when he chooses to write in Hebrew instead of German, as repeatedly conveyed through Appelfeld's memoir: "My mother and her language were one and the same. Now, as that language faded within me, it was as if my mother were dying a second time" (2004, pp. 110).

Ostensibly the battle for Israeli identity was over. Appelfeld's literature, however, demonstrates the opposite: by making the choice to write in Hebrew, his act of rejection began. Here Kafka enters the picture. The novel describes the complex relationship between father and son. The father, who struggles to find the true, genuine mode of expression, invokes Kafka's book as the only possible way of writing. In the father's view, Kafka broke away from the restrictions and barriers of expression, which is what the father demands from

his son: to succeed where he himself failed. The narrator apparently repays this devotion in the final pages of the novel when he reencounters his mother in a dream, telling her that he broke through the barriers. The novel's author, however, did not. Like both the gatekeeper and the "man from the land" in Kafka's parable (GW, 1950a, pp. 120–122), not only does he stand in front of the barrier (before the law), but he also keeps it from falling by rebuilding it with every sentence – the barricades, a foreign element that he inserts into the wheels of Israeli canonic literature. But there is another way to look at it: This deconstructive foreign component does not falsify or hide the disaster under the cover of ideological integration, but rather insists that the "here" and the "there" were not cut off from each other. This coexistence becomes essential for Appelfeld's literature that maintains multiple literary affiliations as partial, potentially contradictory – just like the "scorched sounds", a hybrid blend of organ descants and Jewish folk music, sad, stuttered, grotesque voices of children who survived the Holocaust by escaping to the forests and the monasteries. In these children's blind melodies Appelfeld found a new mode of expressing the trauma (1979a, pp. 47–48). In relating to the limitation of language to bear witness to catastrophe, Appelfeld returns to Kafka, calling the latter a savior who endowed him with new words, rather than old speech that betrays. In Kafka's use of language, German that "listened" to Yiddish, Hebrew and Czech, Appelfeld found contradictory doubt and deep longing for meaning (1979b, pp. 15).¹¹ Kafka's legacy, therefore, is a negation, one that writes the impossibility of writing. By choosing the "otherwise" Appelfeld managed to do for Israeli literature what Kafka did for the German, deconstructing and constructing, while transgressing its lines with ambivalent and contradicting voices.

This claim raises another thought. In his memoir, Appelfeld mentions one of his mentors, Dov Sadan (1902–1898), who showed him a way into the world of letters, the Jewish bilingual tradition of East and Central European writers: "In Sadan's inclusive vision, there was no monolithic Jewishness, neither linguistic nor artistic. He saw contemporary Jewish life as though after a catastrophic rupture, to use a Kabbalistic term. He believed that then, as now, there were many fragments of Jewish life that had splintered off from that rupture, and that it was our job to reconnect them, drawing out the sparks of holiness hidden within them all and bringing them together" (Appelfeld, 2004, pp. 114). In referring to Sadan, Appelfeld connects the job of the writer – should we say the task of Benjamin's translator – and the contradictory, polyphonic textures of his work, as an alternative to the monolithic perspective of the dominant culture in Israel. Appelfeld's resistance to the ideology conveyed through the negation of exile ("Forget the Diaspora and root yourself in the present!", pp. 114) is inherent in his concept of writing and the role of a poetic language. As a writer, his job – or rather vocation – is to bring together fractures of Jewish life splintered off from the rupture. According to this understanding, the literary, creative work becomes a space of translation in

¹¹ On the relationship between Kafka's poetics and Appelfeld's work see also Schwarz, 2014, pp. 240–241, 258–260.

which, however, translation does not exclude or cover the original, but rather is influenced by and extends its boundaries towards its foreign element.

Conclusion

To conclude, both Ruebner and Appelfeld demonstrate the dilemma of writing and expressing oneself in the land of immigration. Their autobiographies show how the choice of language is deeply connected to the acquisition of identity haunted by traumatic experience. How then can the past reverberate in the present, the German with the Hebrew, the home that exists only in dreams and nightmares, with the political agenda of the new homeland?

As I have tried to show, Ruebner's and Appelfeld's choices demonstrate the ambivalence of admiration and rejection in the construction and deconstruction of an Israeli identity. Ruebner learns from Ludwig Strauss and Werner Kraft about the German writers such as J.W. Goethe, F. Hölderlin, R.M. Rilke and F. Kafka, while being encouraged to write in Hebrew only; Appelfeld learns from Dov Sadan about the bilingual Jewish writers such as S.Y. Abramovich, H.N. Bialik, Y. Steinberg and S.Y. Agnon, while the need to have a different connection to Hebrew became clear to him. Both started publishing their literature in the 1950s. However, while Ruebner initially wrote in German and oscillated between the languages in working through his traumatic past, Appelfeld wrote only in Hebrew, and his struggle with the dominant Israeli culture appears elsewhere. Appelfeld's deterritorialization thus embodies a poetic movement in standstill, as he breaks through the barriers to the troubling diasporic landscapes and transitional zones of the living dead. The German sound of his mother tongue is not heard, but rather reverberates with its words that close the fictive autobiography: Stay where you are and let the remote places reach you.

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