

Aharon Appelfeld and the Translingual Imagination

Naomi Sokoloff

In recent years literary critics have paid increasing attention to translingual authors – authors who write in a language other than their native tongue. Such writers themselves have also produced a wave of memoirs and brought new visibility to this topic.¹ The issues at stake are fascinating, because the journey from one linguistic world to another is inherently a fascinating phenomenon. What is more, since theirs is a verbal art, the works of these writers are products of their linguistic journeys. Whether or not novelists explicitly turn multilingualism into a thematic focus of their fiction, their artistry reflects the process of acquiring and grappling with a new language.

Studies reveal that many translingual writers have deeply conflicted feelings about the languages in which they create. Creative writers often find something unnatural or wrong about writing in a language that is not their mother tongue. The reasons for this unease are several. There is, of course, the difficulty of gaining fluency in a new language. Beyond the simple challenges of mastering a new verbal medium, though, authors also face special artistic perplexities. A second language, for example, may not be mimetically adequate for capturing experience lived in a first language. As the critic Steven Kellman remarks, ‘languages are never exactly commensurate – each always processes experience in its own unique way.’² Added to this is an element of sacrifice; inevitably something is repressed or omitted as an individual moves to a new language and new culture. Many obstacles to creativity are therefore not so much technical as emotional. Elizabeth Beaujour, in her study of these matters, quotes a number of writers who see the act of choosing to be bilingual in terms of disease, a curse or even self-mutilation. It is frequently perceived as illegitimate or as a kind of betrayal. Writing in a second language, she asserts, is initially felt not as growth but as loss – worse, as the

1. The term ‘translingual’ comes from Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln, Neb. 2000). In *Shifting Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on their Craft* (Lincoln, Neb. 2003) Kellman gathers autobiographical reflections of translingual writers. See Elizabeth de Courtivron, ‘Found in Translation’ *The New York Times Book Review* 20 Dec. 1998, p. 31, for a brief survey of recent memoirs by such writers as Eva Hoffman, Ariel Dorfman and Milan Kundera.

2. Kellman, *Translingual Imagination* 12.

3. Elizabeth Kosty Beaujour, *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration* (Ithaca and London 1989) 41.

4. Galya Diment, 'English as Sanctuary: Nabokov's and Brodsky's Autobiographical Writings' *The Slavic and East European Journal* XXXVII 3 (Autumn 1993) 352.

5. For more on Appelfeld's biographical background, see eg Gila Ramras-Rauch, *Aharon Appelfeld: The Holocaust and Beyond* (Bloomington, Ind. 1994). Among the interviews in which Appelfeld discusses his childhood is an important one with Philip Roth that appeared originally in the *New York Times Book Review* (28 Feb. 1988) and was reprinted in *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York 1994). *Sippur hayim* is not yet available in English but brief passages from it are included in 'Buried Homeland' *The New Yorker* 23 Nov. 1998, pp. 48–61.

'dissolution of a sacred tie'. Consequently, it is an act that is 'severely sanctioned by the author's psyche as if it were a primal crime'.³

Still, writing in a non-native language can have undeniable advantages. Galya Diment, referring to the Russian émigré writers Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Brodsky, notes that at times a detached and artificial style allows writers to assume control over personal and painful memories. Sometimes bilinguals choose to write in a new language (even while complaining about the hardship) because it provides impersonality and distance that can prove therapeutic. In this context the alien tongue is a tongue of alienation.⁴ Such a way of putting things has both good and bad connotations: bad, of course, in that alienation means being cut off; good, in that as art defamiliarizes, it fosters what the Russian Formalists considered the essence of literariness. That is to say, the development of an aesthetic that questions ordinary perceptions of reality can produce innovative vision and break routine modes of thinking. Similarly, a new language can prevent a report of events from becoming banal or trivialized. Furthermore, the adoption of a new language often involves exploring a new identity and sometimes includes the adoption of a new name. This process can feel unsettling and exhausting, or liberating and filled with possibility.

Among translingual writers, Aharon Appelfeld presents particularly riveting accounts of journeying into a new language. In essays and interviews, and most trenchantly in the memoirs *Sipur hayim* ('Story of a Life' 1999) and *'Od hayom gadol* ('It is yet High Day' 2001), he has written about losing his mother tongue and about the challenges he faced while adopting a new identity in Hebrew.⁵ For him, the invention of a new self was initially more by imposition than by choice. Brought to the Yishuv by Youth Aliya after the Second World War, he lived in agricultural schools where learning Hebrew was a crucial first step to adjustment. This meant leaving behind the linguistic world of his early childhood as well as his given name, Erwin. Even in the best of circumstances, abandoning a native tongue involves a painful separation. In this case the pain was intensified by exile from the native land, amplified many times over by the collective destruction of the Jewish people in Europe and made most intensely personal by the death of Appelfeld's mother. She was brutally killed by the Nazis, and for Appelfeld loss of the mother tongue is inextricably associated with loss of his mother. He notes in *Sipur hayim* (p. 102)

that throughout the war he had imagined she would somehow return and speak to him in the German he knew from home. After the war, then, to speak Hebrew meant accepting the finality of her death and relinquishing hopes of seeing her again.

If all language switching is in some measure traumatic, the severe traumas of the Holocaust contribute intensely to this psycholinguistic picture. It should be kept in mind that traumatic memory has a distinctive non-verbal quality. As the psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman puts it, such memories are 'not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story'. Instead, they seem frozen and wordless and often consist of vivid images and sensations. Normal memory entails telling a story while traumatic memory 'lacks narrative and context'⁶ and so acquires a kind of timelessness. Traumatized people may relive painful events as though they were continually recurring. It is as if time stops, and often this experience comes intrusively in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. Indeed, the conversion of such images into narrative, so that they are oriented in time, has been seen by many as a central goal of trauma treatment. To transform a traumatic event into a story is held to have healing powers. In this view, to verbalize and to narrate is crucial. However, to do so in a foreign language, which itself spurs resistance, complicates such a move considerably. While entering a new linguistic world has redemptive potential, it is also fraught with dangers.

6. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York 1992) 37.

Coming from the Hitler's Europe, Appelfeld lived a radical disruption of native language. His schooling lasted only until first grade when it was interrupted by the war. Shaped by years of internment, escape, wandering and hiding, his childhood left him with but smatterings of various languages and bereft of a coherent inner world. He remarks in *Sipur hayim*, 'without a language all is chaos and fear' (p. 99). Furthermore, he notes, being without a mother tongue is to be disabled. Recalling his first years in the Yishuv, he describes child refugees new to Hebrew who stuttered, withdrew into silences or swallowed their words. These remarks make an instructive contrast with other memoirs that speak of changing languages in terms of affliction. Elsa Triolet, who wrote in both Russian and French, stated, 'It's like an illness: I'm sick with bilingualism'; even Nabokov, coming from a background of privilege and a sophisticated education at Cambridge, claimed that switching into English from Russian caused

7. Triolet is cited by Beaujour, *Alien Tongues* 40, and Nabokov by Diment, 'English as Sanctuary' 349.

8. Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York 1989) 107–8.

9. Eg, Sidra Ezrahi, 'Aharon Appelfeld: The Search for a Language' *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* I (1984) 366–80, and *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2000) 179–99, and Ramras-Rauch, *Aharon Appelfeld* 112–15.

him a kind of 'mental asthma';⁷ and Eva Hoffman, moving to Canada at age thirteen, worries in her memoir *Lost in Translation* that her native Polish and all the thinking and mental life that goes with it, will 'atrophy' when she writes in English.⁸ As he remarks on speech impediments and physical disabilities, Appelfeld also points to language loss and language learning as affliction, but affliction of a different order of magnitude.

In *Sipur hayim* Appelfeld remembers the transition into Hebrew as debilitating. He notes that he found the language hard, uncomfortable and unfamiliar; the words for him lacked all association. In addition Hebrew was integral to a Zionist ideology that, negating the Diaspora, held Holocaust survivors such as himself in contempt. For all these reasons he designates Hebrew a 'stepmother tongue' (p. 103) – in other words, a stranger, or something alien that has become intimate. Other writers, too, have referred to themselves as living with a 'stepmother tongue.' Anton Shammas, for instance, uses this phrase to describe his switch from Arabic, the minority language of Israel, to the majority language, Hebrew. Unlike Shammas, though, Appelfeld eventually comes to feel that Hebrew is genuine family. Even as a stepmother, Hebrew is a parent and provides a home, as well as a framework in which to grow. In addition, Appelfeld ultimately discovers that he and the step-parent have close family connections from previous generations. Reading the work of early modern Hebrew writers, he finds that Hebrew is not so far from Yiddish, thanks to the internal Jewish bilingualism of the old world. Through literature he learns that the world of Europe and the world of Israel are not as distant as he first perceived them to be. Furthermore, Israeli Hebrew has comforting echoes of the past in its proximity to religious language. The Holy Tongue and the contemporary vernacular of the streets have surprising amounts in common. Altogether, Hebrew appeals to Appelfeld precisely because of its pluralism, which is something far other than the monolithic ideology of Labour Zionism that first introduced him to the language.

Critics who have written on Appelfeld and his multilingual background have worked in several directions. Some have made thematic observations, particularly in analysing biographical elements in *Mikvat ha'or* ('Searing Light' 1980). That novel recounts the story of young Holocaust survivors in an Israeli agricultural school, whose encounters with Hebrew in many ways parallel Appelfeld's own.⁹

Also pursuing linguistic themes, David Suchoff writes about *The Age of Wonders* as a world of bicultural Jewish-German identity in which multilingualism is a source of strength. He sees this novel as a vision of cultural plurality, one that the father of the protagonist misunderstands when he loves German but disdains Yiddish and Hebrew.¹⁰ In this analysis the novel is a protest against monolingualism. It recalls Appelfeld's love of the multifaceted linguistic environment he knew in his earliest childhood, where Jews spoke a *mélange* of German, Yiddish, Ukrainian and Romanian.

Taking a different tack, critics have also examined tensions between speech and silence in Appelfeld's artistic vision and in the way his art deals with trauma. They have concerned themselves with what can and cannot be expressed, in what Sidra Ezrahi terms a struggle between inherited and acquired language aimed at retrieving *un temps perdu*.¹¹ These tensions permeate much of his fiction and take on an added charge in novels set in Europe, for there the author presents in Hebrew a world where Hebrew was not spoken. A number of studies highlight the stylistic idiosyncracies that keep Appelfeld's prose, most notably in his early fiction, at odds with colloquial language. Some interpreters have observed hints of German peeking through Appelfeld's unique Hebrew. Among those who have commented on these stylistics matters is Jeffrey Green, translator of many of Appelfeld's novels. He argues that the German substrate adds an element of defamiliarizing and alienation to this fiction. He then takes the discussion of multiple languages in another direction, remarking on his feeling that Appelfeld, more than most of us, seems to think in pre-verbal ways and only subsequently puts those thoughts into words. According to Green, this accounts for some of the unique quality of Appelfeld's prose.¹² While these observations are speculative, they are pertinent here because they resonate in intriguing ways with Beaujour's reflections on the neurolinguistic bases for creativity in bilingual writers. She claims that writers who write in more than one language often sense a physical distance between thought and expression in any language. She suggests, moreover, that for bilinguals the existence of meaning is somewhere beyond or below the words in which it is formulated in any of their languages.¹³ Admittedly, Beaujour is invoking a hierarchy of thought, voice and writing that seem like a throw-back to an era before Derrida and post-structuralist ideas held sway, and they are impossible to prove or disprove. Her comments are interesting,

10. David Suchoff, 'Kafka and the Postmodern Divide: Hebrew and German in Aharon Appelfeld's *The Age of Wonders* (Tor ha-pelaot)' *The Germanic Review* (Spring 2000).

11. Ezrahi, 'Aharon Appelfeld'.

12. Of special interest are Jeffrey M. Green, 'Omanut haketivah shel Appelfeld mizavit har'ayah shel metargem' (Appelfeld's writing from a translator's point of view), in Iris Parush and Yizhak ben Mordechai (eds) *Beyn kefor le'ashan: mekharim biyetsirato shel Aharon Appelfeld* (Between frost and smoke: studies in the writing of Aharon Appelfeld) (Beer Sheva 1997) 205–11, and Nili Scharf-Gold, 'Betrayal of the Mother Tongue in the Creation of National Identity' in Emily Miller Budick (ed.) *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature* (Albany, N.Y. 2001). For more on Appelfeld's early prose style, see Lily Rattok, *Bayit 'al blimah: omanut hasippur shel A. Appelfeld* (A precarious house: the narrative art of A. Appelfeld) (Tel Aviv 1989), and on changes from his early to his later style, see Bracha Fischler, 'Lehahrish at kolah shel halashon – "ha 'or vehakutonet" ve"timyon" beshte breirot lashon' (To silence language: 'The Skin

and the Gown' and 'The Conversion' as two linguistic alternatives) in Parush and Mordechai, *Beyn kefor le'ashan* 213–36.

13. Beaujour, *Alien Tongues* 33.

14. Steiner is a critic and writer who has reflected at length on these issues; see eg *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York and Oxford 1975). Many current discussions refer back to him and to sociolinguistic-oriented discussion by François Grosjean, *Life With Two Languages* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982).

15. Michal Goldvicht, 'Twisted Tongues' *Ha'aretz* 20 Feb. 2002, www.haaretz.com.

though – if for no other reason – because they call attention to what translingual writers say about their inner experience, and so they challenge us to think about the psychological feel of multilingualism as a lived condition.¹⁴

Appelfeld's novel *Laylah ve'od laylah* ('Night after Night' 2001) merits special attention in connection with all these issues, for it is profoundly concerned with the psychological feel of language loss and of shifting linguistic environments. More than any of Appelfeld's novels since *Mikhvat ha'or*, it emphatically thematizes loss of the mother tongue. The characters, European refugees who are residents of a boarding house in Jerusalem, devote themselves to Yiddish. They resent having been pressured to conform to the mould of Zionist ideals, and they strive to honour the dying *mameloshn* and the Jewish European past by attending poetry readings, holding cultural events and collecting Yiddish books. Tellingly, they associate the language directly with maternal love. 'Like mother's milk,' they say, 'there's no substitute for the mother tongue' (p. 101). As the reviewer Michal Goldvicht noted, this attention to Yiddish does not document the social and linguistic milieu of the period so much as it 'wonders about what the mother tongue stirs in us, to whom and to what it links us, and how it comforts us and becomes a prayer.'¹⁵

Perhaps nowhere are many of the salient concerns of the narrative brought together more richly and concisely than in the following passage:

The morning hours I spend now on long walks. The quiet streets of Rehavia in the morning hours remind me of the lovely streets of my native city. From my native city I've been cut off already for years. Only at times in the dark of night pain slices through me, and I know that the death of the town convulses me. If I were more connected to my mother tongue I would not be so cut off from my town. Because of this sin, because of being cut off, I have forgotten my parents. They do not appear in my dreams at night and they do not tell me what to do. Tzila, I want to cry with all my might, if you knew how many crimes we committed against our language, you would push me to contribute more. Without Yiddish we are cripples, hobbling around on crutches. How long can a man hobble around on crutches? I love Hebrew, but it can't

take the place of a mother. Hebrew is not a language you can embrace. God forgive me, it's cold as ice. What demon provoked us to exchange our mother tongue for a tongue of stone? Who needs eternity? One hour of human warmth is an eternity. Who needs any other eternity? (p. 120)

Not only is loss of mother tongue equated here with loss of mother love and warmth but also the lack of mother tongue is described as crippling, and is equated with physical ailment. (The phrase 'bli yidish anakhnu ba'alei mum, mehalkhim 'al kabayim' [without Yiddish we are cripples, hobbling around on crutches] echoes *Sipur hayim*, where Appelfeld states, 'Belo safat em adam hu ba'al mum' [without a mother tongue a man is a cripple], p. 99.) Moreover, this passage emphasizes a sense of guilt. Switching languages is conceived of as a crime or even as apostasy. These feelings are implicitly connected to disdain for Yiddish. Such disdain was common among assimilated European Jews before the war and is featured as a central theme elsewhere in Appelfeld's fiction, notably in the novel *For Every Sin* (1987). Here the narrator carries a keen sense of having sinned, and he wishes to do penance by contributing money to a fund for preserving Yiddish books. Having survived the Holocaust and then gone on without the language is cast as a kind of despicable disloyalty.

Two remarks about the prose style are in order. First, it is terse, and it relies on narrow vocabulary and frequent repetition. These qualities, plus the musicality of the passage, are two of Appelfeld's signature moves.¹⁶ They keep the text at a remove from everyday spoken Hebrew. But the effect is mild compared to Appelfeld's early fiction, which is marked by subtle syntactical and morphological eccentricities and which thereby conveys a sense of alienation. The language of *Laylah ve'od laylah* has moved much closer to standard contemporary Hebrew. At the same time, the intensity of loss – specifically, the loss of a linguistic world – is expressed very clearly. It seems that the recognition of that loss has crystallized over time, even as the author's Hebrew grows simpler, sharper and more natural. As time passes alienation diminishes in the style but increases in the thematic content. This passage explicitly calls attention to the character's discomfort with Hebrew and to his yearning for the language of the past. Altogether, the experience of alienation from and in language is brought into focus again here, as in earlier narratives, but through a different lens.

16. The musicality, which is integral to the Hebrew, is difficult to convey in English. In my translation here I have tried to preserve the lexical repetitiveness.

Prominent in the passage, too, are references to time, and this adds to the portrayal of language in relation to trauma. For one thing, the paragraph is framed with comments on temporality. It opens with the phrase 'the morning hours' and at the end the word *netsah* (eternity) appears three times. In between comes the pain in the darkness, which introduces the timelessness of post-traumatic suffering. Like the nightmares mentioned frequently throughout the novel, this visceral agony wordlessly makes the past intensely, insistently and repeatedly present. It is notable that the narrator wishes explicitly to escape the peculiar temporality of trauma. He hopes to find conventional time, in a framework of human contact (*sha'ah ahav shel hamimut halev* – an hour of human warmth). He has tried to comfort himself by celebrating Yiddish, which is said elsewhere to have an eternal quality (like the soul), but that is insufficient consolation. What he truly seeks is an experience of real love in real time. Since these are not attainable, he seeks connection with the past through his walks, searching for reminders of his hometown. This activity takes place in the 'morning hours' – that is, in measurable intervals of time. In effect, he converts his longings for a lost geography and a lost language into sequence and duration, which are the rudiments of narrative.

17. The text ends with a father trying to comfort his child, whose mother has abandoned them both. The father promises the boy that she will come back *be'od laylah*, the next night. This ending, which expresses hope, is also an expression of hopelessness. Like the narrator with his morning walks, the father makes an ongoing effort to live one day after another, but what he offers as a reassurance also implies endlessly deferred resolution.

What he tries to achieve through his daily rounds is to make his homeland come alive. He fails, of course. No one can restore the world of his childhood. Consequently, his motions are repetitive and circular, ever returning to the same unsatisfied yearning. He will continue to suffer at night and attempt to ease the suffering in the daylight. The title of the novel, 'Night after Night', suggests that the narrator's struggle with different kinds of temporality will continue indefinitely, one night at a time.¹⁷ Nonetheless, he at least articulates his desire to revive the past, so this character has made a distinct move away from the wordlessness of traumatic memory and from recurring nightmare, towards a verbal narrative that can be assimilated into an ongoing life story. The passage then evolves into an anguished and passionate, if stifled, cry. Silently addressing his lover ('Tzila, I want to cry with all my might'), he laments his inability to hold onto his memories. Even though ultimately his is a tale of loss, this character – like the author – makes mighty efforts to seek the healing power of story.

Unavoidably, since it is told in Hebrew, this story at a basic level

is about loss of the native language rather than recovery of it. Yet at the end of the passage cited, the Hebrew has moved closer to the cadences of Yiddish. The sonorous and rather formal assonance and alliteration of the opening ('Rehovot Rehavia harog'im bishe'ot haboker, ma'alim 'al libi et harehovot hayafim shel 'ir moladti') gives way to a *kvetch*: 'who needs an eternity?' ('lemi nahuts netsah aher?'). Then again, perhaps this line is also a solemn philosophical declamation. The hints of a Yiddish conversational tone are not quite compatible with the high register of the Hebrew employed here, so the text becomes the site of an undecided contest between the two languages. Also worth noting in this passage is the absence of attention to German. Appelfeld grew up in an assimilated, German-speaking family. Yiddish was the language of his grandparents and, later, a language he studied as an academic specialty at the Hebrew University. Accordingly, learning Yiddish for him was more a way to re-imagine and reconnect with Jewish identity than a way to re-educate himself in a first language. For many of the characters in *Laylah ve'od laylah*, judging by their names, interests and the little we learn of their pasts, Yiddish is also not a first language.¹⁸ Consequently, it is difficult to say how much this passage expresses nostalgia for a well-loved past and in what measure it constructs an imaginary, idyllic past not based on actual memories.¹⁹ These considerations add another layer of complexity to the novel and its linguistic themes. A story about language is being told here, but not all dimensions of it are told openly.

Translingual writers develop many varieties of artistry, just as they express different perspectives on what it feels like to move from one language to another. Think, for instance, of Eva Hoffman, who in English searches for ever more nuanced, supple vocabulary with which to describe the world. This is a way of compensating for loss of her native Polish that had its own particular powers of denotation and connotation. Other writers delve into code switching and a creative mix of their two languages. Henry Roth, for example, comes to mind among American Jewish writers, as does Yoel Hoffman in the Israeli context. I mention these among many possibilities because they put Appelfeld's achievements into relief by contrast. He does not seek lexical abundance or polyphonic exuberance. The passage cited from *Laylah ve'od laylah* is typical in this regard. It gives an overall impression of concise simplicity but a great deal is going on in this text. Like the novel as a whole, this one brief paragraph is

18. My thanks to Sidra Ezrahi for calling this point to my attention. Thanks also to Assaf Oron for discussing with me the dejection of this passage.

19. Yigal Schwartz, *Aharon Appelfeld: From Individual Lament to Tribal Eternity* (Waltham, Mass. 2001) 3–28, explains how central this kind of dynamic is to Appelfeld's art. Appelfeld's recollections of his childhood are fragmentary and spotty; it is useful to see his writing as an extensive imaginative reconstruction of the past rather than a claim to accurate memories of it.

animated by many tensions. While it expresses grief over loss of a native language, the prose testifies to Appelfeld's great creativity in an acquired tongue. Indeed, part of what makes Appelfeld's art so powerful is precisely that he speaks as a voice of alienation from within Hebrew. He is at once profoundly indebted to and grateful to that language, yet he crafts it to remind readers deftly of another world, and of what has been left behind.