

On the (non-)sacrifice of language: my arrival to writing

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For a very long time, I could not choose my language of writing. I had Croatian, French and, later, English at my disposal as writing tools, however, choosing one language for me always meant sacrificing my other languages, other cultures, other identities, other parts of Self. I don't want to sound complacent; my experience is by no means exceptional. The question of language choice and/or language loss has been and still is a recurring one for many writers who have either inherited or have come into a prolonged contact with more than one culture / language / identity. Much later, I came to realize that the problem of language choice is a false problem for me as a writer. It would therefore be more true to say that for a very long time I thought I had to choose a language of writing. As, although I was not explicitly forced to think that way, everything around me led me to believe that I had to do so. I felt compelled to choose one language; the monolingual was, and still is, the standard, the norm, the "default" option.

So, I tried, and tried again to write in one language, and I failed, and failed again; I felt that when I was writing in only one of my languages I was always losing "something". That "something", I came to realize this later, is made up not only of notions and concepts, but also of sounds, images, as well as olfactory, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic and kinetic resonances of the words and the worlds I live in. Each of my languages has its own archeology; one of them contains my sensory and sensual memories, the other inhabits my thoughts, my Self, my consciousness, the third has primarily cultural resonances for me that I identify myself strongly with. Only after I decided that I would not or did not have to choose a language, did I arrive to writing, or more precisely, did I arrive to writing poetry.

At about the same time when I began writing multilingual poetry, I came across a quotation by T.S. Elliot in an article published in the *Paris Review*, 1959.¹ The article, *The Art of Poetry I., T.S. Elliot*, is an interview between the American writer Donald Hall and T.S. Elliot included in the prestigious and long-running series "*The Art of Poetry*" as part of the Paris Review magazine. When asked whether he ever thought of becoming a French symbolist, Elliot replies:

I don't think that one can be a bilingual poet. I don't know of any case in which a man wrote great or even fine poems equally well in two languages. I think one

¹ "The Art of Poetry I. T. S. Elliot", Issue 21, in: *Paris Review*, Paris / New York, 1959. Accessed: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/interview-with-t-s-eliot-from-the-paris-review-1959>

language must be the one you express yourself in, in poetry, and you've got to give up the other for that purpose. And I think that the English language really has more resources in some respects than the French. I think, in other words, I've probably done better in English than I ever would have in French even if I'd become as proficient in French as the poets you mentioned." (Interview with T S Elliot, The Paris Review no. 1., 1959)²

Interestingly, in his answer to an earlier interview question in the same interview, Elliot explains that he went on to write poetry in French after he experienced a writer's block. He continues by saying that this process of writing a few poems in French acted for him as an unblocking device and that he never returned to poetry in French after the episode. Whilst one cannot completely criticize Elliot's decision to write poetry in English, one can question his argument for making the choice to write in one language. According to Elliot, it is not possible, not desirable, to be a bilingual poet. One has to make the choice of writing in one language and one language only. Elliot clearly subscribes here to the monolingual paradigm of thinking supported in the dominant view - one nation, one culture, one identity. The poetic becomes the political. By using multilingual strategies in my own writing, I want to challenge those expectations.

The process of writing multilingual poetry is for me a poetic and linguistic experimentation; a play with language and a language (inter)play. Each of the languages I inhabit has its own timbre, voice, rhythm; it has its own harmonies and melodies, its own colours. Each language mediates my experience(s) of the world differently. This is perhaps why, when I move in a space between languages, I still experience a feeling of loss. At the same time, from this loss, from this lack, comes creativity. It comes in this space of in-between language. So, in an early poem 'Sea of meaning / More značenja / Mer de sens', I write:³

Speaking, a feeling
of loss, slippage,
a rolling of notions,
of waves in motion
flowing gently over
the brown rock
under the sun

² The poets the interviewer refers to are Jules Laforgue and Baudelaire.

³ The Croatian version of the poem 'More značenja' was published in Tema.

I tried to explore more fully this relationship between loss, writing and unwriting in my trilingual poem “Reveries about Language / Sanjarije o jeziku / Reveries autour de la langue”. In each of the three versions of the poem the visual aspect and the typography vary, something that I have tried to play with consciously and as can be seen in the extracts presented here:

(And for ease, the English version in this presentation is marked in blue, the Croatian version in purple, and the French version in green):

I traverse the territory of language the way I traverse the desert
Listening to the sounds of silence
Contemplating the void
Searching for the blue, brilliant star

Prelazim prostranstvom jezika poput šetača koji prolazi kroz pustinju

Osluškujem zvukove tišine

Razmišljam o praznini
U traganju za plavom, blistavom zvijezdom

Je traverse le territoire de mes langues comme on traverserait un désert,

en écoutant les sons

créés dans le silence,

en quête de l'étoile bleue, brillante⁴

It might seem surprising that I usually begin by writing a poem in English (a language that I acquired much later than my native and mother tongues, Croatian and French). However, writing in English has become natural for me; it is the language I feel closest to, at one level, and one that I feel most comfortable in inhabiting. At the same time, words in English possess very few emotional resonances for me. To compose poetry in a language that has very little or

⁴ Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani, ‘Reveries about Language’, ‘Rêveries autour de la langue’, ‘Sanjarenje o jeziku’, in: *Still Point Journal*, Issue 1, November 2015.

no emotional resonance for me as a writer may sound paradoxical, yet, I have found this lack liberating. My process of writing goes as follows: I first write a poem in English, then I translate it into Croatian and, finally, into French. This process of translation or re-writing, of a constant moving between languages, is quite an interesting one. Only after translating a poem in English into Croatian, am I able to go back to the English ‘original’ to perfect it. Through that process of translation, new echoes, new resonances emerge, rendering the English version more precise, more ‘real’, but also enriched with an emotional layer that I feel was lacking there before I moved to translating it into Croatian. With that also comes the realisation that maintaining the concept of the ‘original’ (language) in the process of translation is an illusion; the concepts of the original and of the translated language become meaningless in the space of the multilingual. Furthermore, the three versions of the poem that I have written become translations of something that does not reside at the level of the linguistic; they become representations, reflections of a non-linguistic form of thought, of a series of images that exist “before” language and that only acquire their meaning and linguistic form in the system of language. I made another interesting observation during my writing process. Contrary to what I expected, my relationship to the French language has become more neutral; sounds, images, words and phrases in French have less emotional resonance for me now (although French is my mother tongue or my mother’s tongue), except for a few images, or words, that somehow retained that status. Such is the status of the word, image, concept of *écume*, motivated, no doubt, by my reading of Boris Vian’s *L’écume des jours* (Paris: Gallimard 1947) that marked me profoundly in my youth.⁵ In the English version of the poem ‘Reveries about language’, I write:

My dreams are haunted

by the emotional resonance of words, images

écume

L’écume se languissant

sur les vagues paraît telle une dentelle

fine...

imperceptibly

He stands behind her and touches her naked shoulder almost imperceptibly

vision

I am but a fleeting vision at the corner of your eye dancing

feathers

The city receives her, enfolds her in its soft feathers.

⁵ *Froth on the Daydream*, 1967, Rapp & Carol (translated by Stanley Chapman). The novel was translated also as *Mood Indigo* (1968, translated by John Sturrock, Grove Press) and *Foam of the Daze* (2012, translated by Brian Harper, TamTams Books).

So, while the English words ‘imperceptibly’, ‘vision’ and ‘feathers’ seem to have acquired an emotional value for me in that language, the French word *écume* has suppressed its English equivalents, ‘froth’ / ‘foam’, in the poem. In the context of the poem, the omission of the English equivalent marks an empty place; it signifies silence. At the same time, the French word *écume* becomes a prime emotional marker in the poem through it remaining untranslated into English. This complex process of writing or unwriting in the space of the multilingual can be further unpacked if one compares the English version with the other two versions. In the Croatian and the French versions of the poem, the verses of that section have become enriched with additional layers of meaning and sound, as can be seen in the corresponding verses in Croatian and French:

Emocionalna dimenzija riječi, slika

progoni moje

snove

écume

L’écume se languissant

sur les vagues paraît telle une dentelle

fine...

Morska pjena lijeno se odmara, podrhtava

Na valovima

Poput čipke

imperceptibly

He stands behind her and touches her naked shoulder almost imperceptibly

On stoji iza nje i sasvim lagano dodirne njezino golo rame

vision

I am but a fleeting vision at the corner of your eye dancing

Ja sam vizija koja titra i nestaje na rubu tvog oka

feathers

The city receives her, enfolds her in its soft feathers.

Grad ju prihvaća, umotava u svoje meko perje.

Mes rêves sont hantés

par la résonnance

émotive des mots, des images

écume

L’écume se languissant

sur les vagues paraît telle une dentelle

fine...

imperceptibly

Il se tient derrière elle et touche son épaule nue presque imperceptiblement
He stands behind her and touches her naked shoulder almost imperceptibly

vision

Je ne suis qu'une vision brève dansant dans le coin de ton oeil
I am but a fleeting vision at the corner of your eye dancing

plumes

La ville l'envoûte dans ses plumes douces
The city receives her, enfolds her in its soft feathers.

In the process of translation of the English version of the poem into Croatian and French, words and images in the poem have become more 'rounded', but also more precise; they have acquired emotional resonances and layers of meaning that are present only partially in the English version. At the same time, the different languages used in the French, and especially in the Croatian version, become traces of each other. They become echoes. Echoes of what other language, one might ask?

Writing poetry in my three languages is for me a constant experience of identity re-discovery. It is a return to my earlier Selves; a return to my Croatian (but also to my Algerian) roots that I thought I had lost for the most part through the experience of moving out of the country and (involuntarily) suppressing these parts of my identity. My Croatian has always been in competition with my French; when I arrived in Great Britain, I became much more preoccupied with losing my French than with losing my Croatian. Gradually, Croatian took a more prominent position. Paradoxically, I always viewed French as the language of literature and culture, but I also felt a sense of inadequacy in relation to that language. I still sometimes feel as if I am an intruder in that language. Consequently, I cannot relate the memory of French to my Algerian roots. Yet, some of my earliest childhood memories go back to summers in Algeria. Until I was five, I visited Algeria during the summer with my family. The two main languages spoken were French and Algerian. My Algerian experience is accompanied by a complex relationship I hold to French. I remember the intensity of dark red, blue, ochre colours, smells of jasmine and bougainvillea, the garden of orange and lemon trees, my grandmother's cooking outside and my grandfather's driving. Yet, I do not relate these experiences to speaking French. Instead, I still hear echoes, traces of sounds in Arabic. Although I do not speak Arabic, it resonates with me; it feels familiar. The missing, the silent language in my poetry, I think, is the Arabic I heard and began to speak as a very young child. It is the language of my Algerian grandparents, my Algerian ancestry tattooed on the back of my memory. Language itself becomes a trope of the desert, a trope of absence. The space of the desert is also the prime locus of imagination for Algerians, as the Algerian writer Mohammed Dib writes when comparing the image of the desert to a white page on which

anything can be both written and erased:

Cela, cet abîme de l'essence, l'Algérien le porte en lui, son imaginaire, sinon sa conscience éveillée, en porte l'estampille. Cela, sans mémoire dont on ne saurait perdre la mémoire.⁶

This abyss of essence, the Algerian carries it within her/himself, it is imprinted on both his imaginary and his consciousness. This, with an absence of memory that cannot be unwritten. (my own translation)

Finally, both as a writer and as a researcher, I am fully conscious of the fact that one can very easily fall into the trap of nostalgia, sentimentality, something that I have always been trying to avoid. All through my adult life I refused to be nostalgic about my Croatian and French/Algerian roots. Except, deciding that one is not going to be nostalgic and sentimental about one's roots, culture, identity, does not actually resolve anything. My multilingual writing experience is teaching me that reviving the sounds, the images, the smells and the colours of my earlier identities and memories through the kind of poetry I am trying to write allows me to tap into parts of my identity that I thought I had lost irrevocably. It is through a much later re-awakening of sensory and sensorial processes of memory recovery that the loss of my Croatian native tongue became apparent. At the same time, the traces of the Arabic tongue that is part of my Algerian heritage have also resurfaced. These are the parts of Self that I had suppressed, I think, as I was trying not to lose the other equally important part – the French one, whilst also gaining a whole other language - English.

In conclusion, the kind of multilingual poetry I write allows the reader to move between the words and the worlds of my poems. It creates 'unbound' lines, 'unbound' expressions. I am conscious of the fact that most readers do not read, speak and understand the three languages I write in, but I hope that they are able to experience the poems in the space of the multilingual as an invitation to embrace the 'unfamiliar' signs on paper through play rather than through fear and uneasiness. This cross—cultural, spatial type of reading may require more openness and concentration, but hopefully, it is also one that is more enriching and thought-provoking.

⁶ Dib, Mohammed, *L'arbre à dire*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1998.