

P·E·N
INTERNATIONAL



Yaffa Berlovitz · *Locality and language*

the poetry of Riva Rubin, an Israeli poet writing in English

Museum piece

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
walking 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

RIVA RUBIN has lived in Israel for many years and is a poet of our place and time, but we are losing her just as we lose other immigrant writers who continue to write in their own languages, neglected by local literary establishments. Needless to say, in the absence of literary dialogue between the Israeli writer in Hebrew and the Israeli writer in other languages, the potential for intellectual interaction diminishes and a cultural distance is created, as in the case of the Russian immigrant community. The members of this community, despite having learned Hebrew to one extent or another, have solved their cultural problems so that they don't need us at all. Their numerical strength is sufficient to support the artists and intellectuals among them by means of their own publications, readings and other cultural events. As a result, the Russians are building a culture within a culture in which their poets and writers address Russian-speakers exclusively.

The question of the target audience is of course integral to a writer's work. Jean-Paul Sartre observed (in *What is literature?*) that it is the joint effort of writer and reader that gives birth to a creative work. Bearing this in mind, we see that the social integration imposed on the Israeli-writer-who-does-not-write-in-Hebrew has given rise to a new anthropology of the writer or poet who has become accustomed to writing without a target reader (and of course with no hope of response or support) but who also comes out in defence of this mode of writing. In any event, this is what I discovered in talking to Riva Rubin.

Rubin says that her writing is an intimate dialogue with herself. She is not motivated by acquiring the title of poet nor by extroversion, but by the desire to explore and communicate with her own inner landscape, since for her that is where the force, intensity and significance of life are to be found. If she were to meet herself in the supermarket, she would not recognize herself. Very little of her identity rises to the surface and the poem is, in fact, her true identity. She goes on to explain that it is a split identity, but a charged one: charged with the constant flow of Hebrew into her linguistic and poetic activity. Living with Hebrew (which is, of course, also Hebrew-Israeli culture) nourishes her landscape with new dimensions of thinking, seeing, understanding. Rubin does not translate the Hebrew into English, but mulls language with language like wine, and the wine in Rubin's poetic domain is richer for the process.

Rubin does not have roots in two homelands, as Leah Goldberg describes in her poem 'Pinetree'. Two roots would add strength, she says. But she has one split root. Her home-root has weakened and split, she does not have a sense of belonging to South Africa – where she was born and grew up and which she left in protest against Apartheid. Although she has returned to visit since that regime fell, she finds no way back; she is no longer part of the Anglo-African culture (of locale) but of the Anglophonic culture (of language).

Obviously, only someone who has severed connection with one homeland and not found a replacement would find such a substitute. Nevertheless, Rubin's inner, universal, landscapes find expression in the Israeli experience, in English. In my opinion, the poem *Museum piece* is a concrete example of the foregoing.

It opens with the poet's waking early on a late summer morning, with physical discomfort expressed in environmentally typical metaphors: the discomfort of violent light that at five in the morning already cuts through slits in the shutters like 'precise slices of sun' (like the sliced melon for sampling on the knife-blade in Israeli markets); the discomfort of a raucous crow in dry eucalyptus leaves; the discomfort of a sweat-soaked body. In other words, this is no slow, caressing awakening to a fresh, welcoming morning, but a harsh threat to the self, a waking to helplessness, heaviness and fatigue.

The second scene takes us back to the time before waking, which Rubin describes as a museum of the self. That is, sleep is an aesthetic transformation of material absorbed in wakefulness (figures, events, experiences) into precious museum treasures among which the self strolls to encounter displays of itself. The visit to the museum of the sleeping self is both rich in objects of moving beauty and art, and a display of objects of high universal culture. Oriental and classical Western culture blend in objects of bone, silk, silver and porcelain; the soft colours, muted sounds (one speaks in whispers here) and the refined materials are all in sharp contrast to the abrasive Israeli environment (in the first verse). But here, too, a passing shock is recorded on the seismograph of the walk

among the treasures when the poet encounters her dead young husband. He whispers to her, not words of love, or reminders of their union, but, like a serpent in this paradise of treasure, of loss ('the long-dead/ husband of my youth/ who whispers clay to me'); that is, the brimming treasures of her museum are not immune, even their art is threatened with dissolution and a return to raw matter (clay), dust unto dust.

This unexpected development is shocking: why does this 'museum piece' (the memory of the husband of her youth) choose to turn against her, however elegantly and gently, here of all places? Does he warn her of the collapse of her museum, which means the death of the poem or the collapse of poetic potential? Or perhaps he is revealing her, or more correctly, her fears to herself? Ecstatic in the midst of her inner treasures she is exposed to the dread of poetic exhaustion, the dread of answering silence for lack of an audience, as Sartre observed, of creative despair?

This twist returns us to the beginning of the poem, the hard awakening after the dream; so that in retrospect we understand the trauma of the awakening and why the poetic self chose those specific hostile elements in the local environment to project the quaking of her inner landscape. Something else that becomes clear in retrospect is that the dialectical contrast between the two scenes is actually a continuity, a connection. For what is the preoccupation of the poetic self in both these scenes, if not to confront the threatened loss of creative power, awake or dreaming?

Indeed, we may note that the poetic self moves along the metaphorical seam between vitality and annihilation: 'Bindings . . . / wrap my face – mildewed rags', she introduces herself in the opening line, comparing her waking body to an Egyptian mummy; she continues: '. . . exude the salt of stones . . . / saltpetre', again indicating foreboding of the end – saltpetre was used in the mummifying process; and finally, the face-to-face encounter with the dead young man, messenger of the end in spite of his youth. Hence the final scene breaks into a lament ('I will sit up and wail/ I will shave my eyebrows/ I will mourn'); a lament which in itself is an integral part of rites for the dead. The lament is the woman's role in the Mediterranean and Semitic cultures as well as in ancient Jewish tradition, the most famous being the Summer Lament in the Rites of Tammuz (see also Ezekiel 8:14). This women's rite which defines summer as the dead season, deals with the death of the son Tammuz (as in the Hebrew summer month by that name) who will be reborn only in spring. And here we have the summer lament of the Anglophonic poet Rubín who, consciously or otherwise, is also connected to this ancient rite of our part of the world: the dead young man who walks the chambers of her memory; the lament of the woman mourning her lover/son/creativity; and the ritual cycle which promises that with the change of season the poetic self, too, will revive.

On the other hand, it's worth remembering that while the lament indeed mourns the end, it simultaneously protests against it by the creative presence of the lamenting self, which is the poetic self. In this way, it seems to me, Rubín also withstands the threat of her poetic death. She does indeed shave her eyebrows (again an ancient Egyptian act of mourning) but continues to write. This lament, even though it sings of loss and fear, ultimately signals life and creativity, creativity in protest against summer nightmares, and declares the poetic act as present and functioning, in spite of everything.

In conclusion, returning to discussion about the Israeli poet writing in his or

her own language and without an audience, I would say that this poetic work of art is indeed an X-ray of Riva Rubin's intellectual and spiritual struggle in an environment unfriendly to a creative person such as she; but first and foremost the poem is a local creation of the highest degree, since in a sophisticated dialectical manner it reveals not only involvement in and belonging to this particular environment, but, as mentioned, it employs the environment and its symbols for the poem's purposes.