

TRAUMAS OF EXILE AND WAYS OF BECOMING A MINOR: POETIC MEMORIES OF “A SUNKEN LANDSCAPE”

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*For a man who no longer has a
homeland writing becomes a place to live.
(Adorno)*

As indicated in the title of my paper, it both sets out to investigate the Traumas of Exile and Ways of Becoming a Minor in the sense described by Deleuze and Guattari in their famous book on Kafka (Deleuze, Guattari 1986).

More specifically this means looking into ways in which two German speaking Jewish poets, Rose Ausländer (1901-1988) and Paul Celan (1920-1970) – both of them from Bucovina, the “sunken landscape” in the title of my paper – who, having had to leave their home and native country to escape and to survive the Holocaust, in the aftermath of the Jewish tragedy and from the perspective of exile, dealt poetically with their traumas of the loss of home and belonging, both to a landscape in a topographical and emotional sense and in a time-spatial sense of the word.

Relating their poems to the notion of “a minor literature” as described by Deleuze and Guattari by coining the concept of “becoming a minor” through deterritorialization, I will argue that the poetological strategies and manoeuvres of the poems are deeply rooted in a kind of aesthetics of resistance, where the only means of escaping the traumatic experience of loss, lies in becoming a nomad, stranger or gypsy, in other words “a minor” in their own language.

A key word here is metamorphosis indicating transformation, or the linguistic process of perpetual change, which semantically speaking means being constantly on the move and never in a fixed position: in the emotional, semantic, logical or geographical sense of the word.

Rose Ausländer and Paul Celan were both from the city of Chernovitsy, the old capital of Bucovina, a region, which throughout its history has been on the move on a kind of nomadic journey, back and forth across the borders of Rumania, Russia and Austria. It was once the heart of the Rumanian Principality of Moldavia, from 1775 to 1918 it was the easternmost Crown Land of the Austrian Empire, and is today divided between Rumania and the Ukraine.

In other words what once used to be one region, a so called crown land, marking the easternmost border area of the Habsburg monarchy, like many other countries and regions after the catastrophe of WW II suffered the destiny of division and fragmentation.

Without going into the current politics or for that matter ideological complexities of the historic development of the region in any way: to the people still living there at the time and to those having had to leave it, their home land as they knew it, was no longer there, it had gone under, only to be remembered as “the sunken landscape” of their dreams or as “the landscape where books and people used to live”, as Paul Celan from his position of exile in Paris, put it in one of his many attempts to deal with the extreme trauma of loss. In the poem “Black” (“Schwarz”) (Celan 1983: 57)¹ he looks back at his loss in the following way:

BLACK,
 like memory’s wound mark,
 eyes are digging for you
 in the crown land, –
 bitten bright by heart’s teeth –,
 which forever will be our bed: [...]

As we can see Celan, by evoking “memory’s wound marks”, both mourns the loss of his homeland, the crown land Bucovina “bitten bright by heart’s teeth” and insists that it is still there as the land, “which forever will be our bed”.

Celan’s traumatic-poetic memory of this lost or sunken landscape, as he saw it, may thus serve as an indication of the kind of poetic strategy, which is characteristic of the poems I have chosen for this paper.

¹ If nothing else is noted, all translations from German into English are mine. (SL).

In the sense once suggested by Adorno from his American exile, since they no longer have a homeland, in a metaphysical sense writing poems seems to have become “a place to live” (Adorno 1997: vol. 4, 152). In other words the earthly sense of belonging or home has to be substituted by a metaphysical one, in order for the hope of still belonging, in order to survive: In Celan’s case some of this can be seen in his reading of the German-Jewish poet and philosopher Margarete Susman, whom he met in Zürich in 1963, read and greatly admired.

He had read her book on Job and the destiny of the Jewish people (Susmann 1946/1992) which was written in 1946 one year after the Holocaust. In his private library in the German Literature Archive in Marbach traces and signs of his search for hope of belonging can be found in his personal underlinings in the margins of Susman’s essay on Spinoza “Spinoza und das jüdische Weltgefühl”, where he marks the following sentences: “Deeper than the earthly feeling of home is the metaphysical one” and Susman’s remark on Spinoza saying “that the metaphysical home of Judaism has not been lost together with the earthly one”.¹

Regardless of Celan’s own doubts and questions about God and Judaism, to a survivor of the Holocaust these sentences must have given both some hope and paved a way or strategy to deal with the loss and traumas following the catastrophe.

My point of departure is that the strategy of these poems may be described as a kind of poetic memory of what they see as a sunken landscape, or as Paul Celan called it U-topia, a no-place, with the intention of becoming original or recovering the land, territory and place of birth. In the sense of Deleuze and Guattari it may be read as a strategic manoeuvre to reterritorialize the deterritorialized in and through language. And what we have is a kind of aesthetics of resistance where the poets try to overcome their loss by making the poem or text their home (Adorno 1997: vol. 4, 152), as Adorno, once put it.

¹ “Tiefer als das irdische Heimatgefühl ist das metaphysische” and “dass die metaphysische Heimat des Judentums nicht mit der irdischen verloren gegangen ist” in: Vom Judentum. Ein Sammelbuch. Verein jüdischer Hochschuliler Bar Kochba in Prague, Leipzig 1913, p.51-70.

An example of this strategy can be seen in this poem “Motherland” (“Mutterland”) (Ausländer 1985: vol. IV, 98) by Rose Ausländer:

Motherland
 My Fatherland is dead
 They have buried it
 in the Fire.
 I live in my Motherland
 Word.

I will get back to this poem by Rose Ausländer, who like Paul Celan and many other German speaking Jewish poet friends from Chernovitsy, had to leave her home town, and consequently – after the catastrophe with its dissolution of borders and communities – called it a “a sunken city”.

But before I go closer into to it I will briefly draw your attention to the notion of a minor literature and the process of “becoming minor” through deterritorialization as described by Deleuze and Guattari with reference to Kafka in their book *Kafka: Towards a minor literature* (1975/1986), where they both ask and answer the question: what is a minor literature?

To answer the question they outline three characterizing elements of a ‘minor literature’: the element of deterritorialization, its political nature and its collective, enunciative value.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a minor literature, like that of Kafka, in addition to its being political, collective, revolutionary, is spatial in the sense that it deterritorializes one terrain as it maps another. And in it “language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization”.

The focus on the element of deterritorialization of a major language through a minor literature written in the major language from a marginalized or minoritarian position, where it is possible “to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility”, as Deleuze and Guattari put it.

To explain the language aspect of a minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari, as you can see, distinguish four languages: the vernacular, vehicular, referential, and mythic: the vernacular language is

the maternal or territorial language, functioning within the rural realm, and as such is a language of territorialization. The vehicular language operates within the urban, governmental or commercial realms and as such it is the first sort of deterritorialization. The referential language is the language “of sense and of culture” and entails cultural reterritorialization. And finally the mythic language, also a language of reterritorialization, is involved in the spiritual and the religious.

An interesting point of this concept, is that Deleuze and Guattari explain that the four languages in this linguistic model differ according to spatiotemporal location: “vernacular is here; vehicular language is everywhere; referential language is over there; mythic language is beyond” (23). Minor literature, they say, escapes signification and representation: a ‘minor literature’ resists resemblance and mimetic representation, much in the way that abstract art resists figuration, representation or imitation of real life. Language then enters ‘becoming’ through a non-significatory, non-representational ‘line of flight’ in which words and things often are ‘intensities’ in which sounds vibrate.

In their investigation of Kafka’s writings Deleuze and Guattari conclude that his uses of the Czech language function as the rural or vernacular language, Hebrew as the mythic language, Yiddish, as “a nomadic movement of deterritorialization” (25), and finally Prague German, the language he chose to write in, functions as the vehicular or major language by which “he will make the German language take flight on a line of escape” (25).

The relevance of Kafka’s situation and use of language to my project, you can see indicated in the following poem by Rose Ausländer “Bukowina I” (Ausländer 1985):

Bucovina I
 Green Mother
 Bucovina
 Butterflies in her hair
 Drink
 says the sun
 white corn milk
 I made it sweet.

Violet cones
 Airwings Birds and leaf
 The Back of the Carpathian Range
 Fatherly
 Invites you in
 To carry you
 Four Languages
 Four language songs
 People who understand each other.

Like in the case of Kafka, who lived on a German speaking linguistic island in Prague surrounded by Chech and two more other languages, Rose Ausländer's Bucovina was a region, where four languages existed side by side. Both like the other poets in Bucovina and like Kafka she chose to write in German from her outsider position on the margins of the German speaking monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

Before we look more closely at this poem, I would like to refer again the above mentioned "line of escape", which Deleuze and Guattari see as essential to a minor literature. In this sense a 'minor literature', then, is both political and subversive: It creates "the opposite dream: knows how to create a becoming-minor" (27).

This process in language may be seen as a movement beyond boundaries which transcends the limits of a specific territory, at the same time generating a closeness in distance and a relative distancing from what is close (Hernández 2002). The dynamics of this observation indicate a time-spatial simultaneousness of the unsimultaneous as fundamental to the phenomenon of deterritorialization.

Deleuze and Guattari, as we saw, use it in connection with its opposite, reterritorialization, to develop a model for conceptualizing minor literature where deterritorialization constantly aims at the disruption of traditional structures of language and expression, whereas reterritorialization reinforces its traditional structures.

Deterritorialization thus tries to upset the balance by way of using deterritorialized language which disrupts the logic of language by transgressing its semantic norms and limitations. In other words, as a strategy deterritorialization implies deterritorializing

mimetic representation, as Kafka did in *Metamorphosis* where he let words become blurred through animal noises.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, using deterritorialized language means stopping “being representative in order to [...] move towards [the] extremities or limits” of language. The skill and will of being inventive, the “intensive utilization of language” (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 159) of a minor literature, is a way of resisting the lure of language hegemony and of becoming major by way of „opposing the oppressed quality of major language to its oppressive quality.“, as Deleuze and Guattari put it (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 163).

Bearing this in mind let us now turn to the poems written in memory of a sunken landscape from the perspective of exile by Jewish German speaking poets, dealing with the catastrophe. First let us look again at the poem by Rose Ausländer “Motherland” (“Mutterland”) (Ausländer 1985: vol. IV, 98), which indicates what is the essence of my argument:

Motherland
 My Fatherland is dead
 They have buried it
 in the Fire.
 I live in my Motherland
 Word.

The poem, as I see it, is an example of an effective strategic way of coming to terms with the loss of home and native country by resorting to language or words by way of substituting one word for the other

Rose Ausländer uses the word “Motherland”, or as in the German original version of the poem “Mutterland” instead of “Vaterland”, meaning the land of the father: and by doing so she points to the significant opposition of the two, thus both indicating her loss of home in the sense of belonging to a territory and the fact that it is now “a sunken landscape”, no longer being “there” as the time-spatial place she remembers.

A similar transition from home land and native country as a geographical area and cradle of cultural identity to language as a substitute for the loss, can be seen in the following statement made

by her friend Paul Celan: “Obtainable, close and un-lost in the midst of all losses only this one thing stayed: language”¹ (Celan 1983: vol. III. 185).

This line of escape, where the only refuge lies in language by virtually transforming or slipping into it, is directly addressed by Rose Ausländer in the poem “Mutter Sprache” (Ausländer 1985: vol. IV):

Mother Language
I have
transformed myself
into myself
from moment to moment

Split into pieces
on the Wordway

Mother Language
reassembles me
Human Mosaic

In another poem, “Nobody” (Ausländer 1985: vol. III, 132), she states:

I am King Nobody
carrying
my No Man’s Land in my pocket

With my Foreigner’s Pass Port I travel
from Ocean to Ocean

Water your blue eyes
your black eyes
the colourless

My pseudonym

¹ “Erreichbar, nah und unverloren blieb inmitten der Verluste dies eine: die Sprache”.

Nobody
 is legitimate
 Nobody
 suspects
 that I am a king
 carrying in my pocket
 my homeless land

Despite the playful and seemingly optimistic mode of this poem, “home”, as we can see, is no longer there visible and in a fixed position, but is carried and hidden in transit by “King Nobody” in his pockets with a new or hidden identity as “No Man’s Land”. And consequently it is conceived of as “homeless land”, which means U-topia, a sunken landscape neither here nor there, but still potentially everywhere in a line of flight or escape, the place where the only hope lies in not being fixed.

In other words, the land has been deterritorialized in the sense that it has lost its expected significance as such. And even though the lyrical subject claims to be carrying it with her in her pocket, it can no longer be inhabited. Therefore it does not exist anymore as a home offering a permanent shelter to its inhabitants.

In this sense the only means of escaping and surviving the traumatic experience of loss, lies in becoming a nomad, stranger or gypsy, in other words “minor” in your own language, a language where you, strategically, can set your own terms.

Some of this can be seen in the next poem “Selbstporträt” (Ausländer 1985):

Self Portrait
 Jewish Gypsy
 German speaking
 Raised
 under a black yellow flag

Borders drove me
 To Latinos, Slavs
 Americans, Germans

Europe
 On your lap
 I dream
 my next birth

Both the destiny and the hope of this poem lie in the line of escape and flight into the dream of being reborn as someone else, in other words in being transformed through the kind of metamorphosis, which can only take place in a dream or mytho-poetic world.

Rose Ausländer wrote this poem towards the end of her life when she lived in the Nelly-Sachs-Haus in Düsseldorf. And the essence of what it is all about was addressed by Nelly Sachs, a German Jewish poet born in Berlin living in exile in Stockholm. In the poem “In Flight” (“In der Flucht”) from the collection fittingly called *Flight and Metamorphosis* (Holmquist 1986: 204), she describes the metamorphosis of the world from the perspective of a butterfly changing into an inscription on a stone which the poem’s lyrical subject ends up holding in her hand, stating that “Instead of Home / I hold the Metamorphoses of the World” (Holmquist 1986: 204).

I mention Nelly Sachs and her poem since it not only sums up the experience of exile and loss as a consequence of a never-ending process of flight and continual metamorphosis, but it also corresponds to the line of flight and escape, which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is an important characteristic of a minor literature, in the sense of becoming a minor through deterritorialization. Which in essence may be seen as strategy of resistance to overcome the traumas of loss of home and belonging.

Paul Celan, friend to both Rose Ausländer and Nelly Sachs, chose a more distinct strategy of resistance to deal with his traumas by way of transgression, radically playing with the limitations of logic and language, where he situates himself in a linguistic play of neologisms constantly on the move between being both neither here nor there, but thus potentially everywhere, like in the following poem “In den Flüssen” (Celan 1983: vol. II, 14):

In the Rivers north of the Future
 I throw out the Net
 which you
 reluctantly burden
 with Shadows written
 by Stones.

As we can see, the poem both situates itself in a time-spatial territory of u-topia virtually in a homeless No- Man's- Land, and describes the line of flight and escape rooted in metamorphosis. Thus in fact it creates what Deleuze and Guattari described as a becoming minor through deterritorialization. Yet at the same time its strategic manoeuvre may be seen as the kind of aesthetics of resistance, which I referred to at the beginning of my paper.

In this respect the poem may be read as an expression of both the traumas of exile and loss and as ways and means of becoming a minor, in the sense of it being simultaneously imagined as potentially present and absent in a time-spatial territory beyond limitation, signifying nothing but mytho-poetic memories of “a sunken Landscape”, strategically deterritorialized as u-topia.

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