

The Intimacy of Words

Mona Takieddine Amyuni

*The intimacy of words
the sheer delight
the freedom
erase all barriers
between you and me
fly to you
on the wings of words
entrust them
with my secret desires
make them heavy
with a weight
I lay down
a weight
I don't want to carry
any more
all alone*

What has been the function of writing in my life? I have kept a diary throughout. I have turned to writing at every new threshold. What has it meant for me?

I was twelve when my father was sent on an official mission to Stalin's Russia. We all went along. I carried with me a lovely *notebook* and started writing down my impressions on the big boat which took us to Batum on the Black Sea.

The discovery of that huge universe, my beginnings in the world a little later, my confusion, my secret readings of *Madame Bovary*, *Crime and Punishment*, and others, the dream of becoming a writer...

I fell in love later. We decided to get married. He became quickly the most precious being in the world. Stunned, I confessed it to my diary. The fight over the impossible marriage, the scandal! I was Druze, he was Christian! Writing handled

overwhelming feelings of rebellion, of anger, of love as well. The wedding took place.

Writing continued to reflect my thoughts and feelings. Writing inserted me in a world I cut down to my own measurements. It organized my experience and clarified my vision. Reading and writing were vital for my soul. Words filled my life. I rejoiced. I celebrated the great masters. I went back to college and completed my higher education in a festive state of being. I specialized in Modern Comparative Literature using Arabic, French, and English as my tools. Thirsty for so much I read the classics and resumed writing. I discovered in my adult age the great themes of alienation, oppression, the search for identity, the quest for self-knowledge, and so many other themes that had deep echoes in my being. I started teaching at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and discovered the passion I had for my profession, and the thrill of daily sharing my ideas with my students in English

gave me the distance I needed to be both reader and actor in the classroom.

The war broke out in 1975. We lost our bearings. We lived experiences I had read about under the pen of great writers. I resisted silently the tragic dismemberment of my country. I moved around under heavy shelling, assuming my teaching. I continued to write and do research.

Suddenly, my life stopped with that of my companion, killed in our own home by a stray bullet. In a split second, a lifetime story was abolished. I wrote. Writing allowed me to carry on. André Malraux said once that art *humanizes the world*. Writing did humanize this harrowing experience. It allowed me to survive.

I worked throughout the Lebanese war (1975-1990) on Lebanese novels written during that violent period. I called my writings "Studies in the literature of Wounded Beirut." Today, with some distance, I realize that this exercise helped me cope with the prevailing violence, by giving it shape and expression through writing.

Indeed, writing soothed my pain, for my sorrow was that of the whole community as narrated by our foremost authors. Expressions of fear, of anguish and guilt, of the whole range of suffering, of the breakdown of a world that had offered us so many opportunities, were mirrored in the literature of *Wounded Beirut*. The novelists themselves were coming to age during those very rough years. Following them closely as they published novel after novel I was extremely involved in the maturation of their novelistic skills. My plan was to put together the various essays I had written on those contemporary novelists, in a book that would be entitled *The Literature of Wounded Beirut: 1975-1990*. I carried within me the book project and felt it was complete in my mind.

Sometime ago, however, as I sat at my desk to start writing, I felt sick and overpowered by deep anguish. The period of mourning in Post-War Lebanon had not yet taken its full course. I was unable to read again those novels which described bombing, killing, kidnapping, and the whole gamut

of agony and suffering.

*I just couldn't
I needed to live.
I needed to forget.*

I put aside the Lebanese war novels and my papers. Instead, I turned and read Marcel Proust! But the book lived within me. I needed more distance for the memory to record once again the war narrative.

At the same period, I heard Jorge Semprun at UNESCO-Paris in a tribute to André Malraux and was very impressed. I read his brilliant *auto-fiction* entitled *Literature or Life*. I turned, later, to the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee, who was awarded, for the second time, the Booker prize for his novel *Disgrace*. I carried on reading Céline, Malraux, Ann Michaels (*Fugitive Pieces*), Kressmann Taylor (*Address Unknown*) and others who turned violent experiences into beautiful artifacts. These writings thrilled me and stimulated my desire to compare our war novels with such world writings around similar experiences. A comparatist study would, I hoped, situate our Lebanese authors at the end of the twentieth century within the universal expression of the very nearly inexpressible.

I am intrigued, indeed, with the issue of the universality of the literature of *Wounded Beirut*. Our writers' novels are being translated into many languages. Would a foreign readership appreciate them? Has someone, so far, written the masterpiece of the Lebanese war novel? Has the time of mourning matured? How will the memory accidentally recover the war experience, to use Blanchot's quote that Semprun puts at the top of his novel? Has anyone taken the risk of "forgetting absolutely," so that the floods of memory would erupt and be poured down on paper? Would the novel of *Wounded Beirut* fulfill its promises? Such are the questions that haunted me as I stopped writing on *Wounded Beirut*.

But the wounds never healed as the July 2006 war suddenly erupted with such violence that many regions of our country were systematically destroyed by the Israelis.

Never in my life had I followed so closely the TV hourly news. The brilliance and the courage of the young reporters who covered the heavy shelling impressed me. The fluent Arabic language they used, their actions and their defiance of all obstacles showed a kind of stamina and commitment that mobilized me fully. Those young reporters incarnated, once again, an oral Arabic tradition which goes far back in our heritage. Is this the reason, I wondered, why the war poetry rather than the novels of *Wounded Beirut* has remained more deeply anchored in my psyche? I end with two examples from Etel Adnan and Adonis's long war poems to make my position clearer: Adnan's (1989) *The Arab Apocalypse* is surrealistic with jazz-like rhythms:

*The sun a pool of blood...
stop the war...
... a sun tattooed with lies spilling your legs.
... a yellow sun a blue and purple sun
lying in a pool of blood... (Adnan, 1989)*

While Adonis walks on the seashore of his *Wounded Beirut* besieged by the Israelis in 1982 in his "Time" poem, he hears bombs that become deafening words in his head, words burning him up. As he composes his poem, defeat becomes conquest, death rebirth, the end a beginning. The symphonic opening of the poem is:

*Carrying the seeds of time my head
a tower of fire
what is this blood sinking deep into the
sand, what is this decline?*

Then three lines stand out, recur, and become the haunting refrain of the poem:

*The tatters of history in my throat
on my face the victim's scars
how unavailing has language become
how narrow the alphabet's door.*

In one long sweep, the poet covers the Arab history then breaks through the "alphabet's door" and soars high above time and space, he the dissenter, the rebel and the prodigal (from my translation of *Al-Waqt* (Time) in the *Journal of Arabic Literature* XXI, 1990).

Such verses have infinite reverberations within me as they join the universal poetry which functions, to quote Malraux again, as "deep repository of tears and the blood of mankind."

Indeed, I sit and listen. I write.

Mona Takieddine Amyuni is senior lecturer at the Civilization Sequence Program at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon.
Email: amyuni@cyberia.net.lb

REFERENCES

- Adnan, E.** (1989). *The Arab apocalypse*. California: The Post-Apollo Press.
Coetzee, J. M. (1999). *Disgrace*. New York: The Penguin Group.
Michaels, A. (1996). *Fugitive pieces*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
Semprum, J. (1997). *Literature or life*. New York: The Penguin Group.
Taylor, K. (1995). *Address unknown*. Ohio: Story Press.