

Over the Moon – German-Jewish Women Poets in British Exile

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Introduction

When we think about poetry by German-Jewish exiles, there are certainly aspects that must be described as *loss*: these poets lost their native language and their audience. A not-so-well-meaning acquaintance of the late Michael Hamburger told him towards the end of the 1940s that he would ‘never write good poems because English had not been (his) first language’.¹ If only a poem written in one’s mother tongue can be a good poem, we probably should not bother with the likes of *Carmina Burana* or the work of Petrarca anymore, nor should we consider Nabokov or Joseph Conrad amongst those authors worth reading. I therefore propose a different approach and argue that non-native writers can add something valuable to literature, that they extend language, that they also find something in translation themselves. Illuminated by a ‘translingual’ moon I will show what non-native poets can achieve: almost like Hölderlin’s poetry, according to George Steiner, stretched the German to accommodate ‘Greek and Latin modes of statement and feeling’, these exile poets can stretch the English to accommodate their own heritage.²

In this essay I focus on two writers who came to this country as teenagers, one in 1933 and the other one in 1939. They were both refugees from Nazi Germany. They both *lost* what they had considered their Heimat (in direct translation, ‘home’/homeland) – yet they both *found* their voices as writers in the foreign language and they became far more than just English writers.

Learning English prepositions as a native-German speaker can be confusing: there are rarely one-to-one equivalents. The German ‘über’ for example, can mean ‘about’, ‘above’ or ‘over’. It is usually in these little words, that the non-native betrays herself. The poems I have chosen for this essay are *über* the moon, *about* the moon, and I am *over* the moon about them because they illustrate how seemingly small details change when you change countries, how even the perception of nature changed for those who came as refugees from Germany. These details preserve the traces of German culture in the work of German-Jewish exiles writing in English.

The moon has been a powerful symbol in European literature for centuries. However, the qualities and characteristics ascribed to the moon differ from one culture to the next: in English literature, the moon is seen as *radiant and divine* but also associated with *female fickleness and instability*.³ Particularly in Shakespeare’s work the moon is often female, for example in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.⁴ During the reign of Elizabeth I., particularly in the 1590s, ‘moon-

¹ M. Hamburger, *String of Beginnings: Intermittent Memoirs 1924-1954*, (London: Skoob, 1991), p. 93.

² G. Steiner, *Extra-Territorial: Paper on Literature and the Language Revolution*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 4.

³ The Literary Encyclopaedia online (2002), *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=7109>>, (20.08.2005).

⁴ H. Hackett, *William Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p. 10.

imagery' was fairly common in English literature.⁵ Queen Elizabeth herself was often referred to as a moon-goddess.⁶ In the context of court poetry this symbolism had the advantage of a certain ambiguity as the moon has a dark side as well as a bright one⁷ and could then refer to the queen as a radiant, divine virgin – not unlike the moon-goddess Diana – and at the same time criticise her by pointing at the moon's changeable way and moodiness. Later, the English Romantic poets too, referred to a female moon. Coleridge, in his 'Rime of the Ancient Marinere' for example, conjures up the following image:

Softly she was going up
And a star or two beside

He then proceeds to illustrate the power the moon has over the ocean – 'For she guides him smooth or grim'. Wordsworth, in 'The Idiot Boy' mentions the moon about one hundred times and observes

The moon was setting on the hill
So pale you scarcely looked at her

In German, in contrast, the moon is male. 'He' is described as calm, even distant, but almost always as kind-hearted and consoling. Heinrich Heine, arguably the greatest German poet, calls him the paramour of a woman ('Der Mond, der ist ihr Buhle'), and both Goethe and von Droste-Hülshoff praise the soothing qualities of his mild light as he watches over them like the eye of a friend. German lullabies assure children that the moon will look after them and Theodor Storm's fairytale 'Der kleine Häwermann' – about a boy who does not want to sleep and his encounters with a benevolent (male) moon who he eventually manages to upset – has been a popular bedtime story since its first publication in the mid-nineteenth century.

Livia Laurent

It was this German moon the young Eva Maierhof, who would later call herself Livia Laurent, grew up with. Born into a Jewish family in 1914, together with her mother she left Frankfurt/Main in 1933 and went into British exile. There is very little information available about her life and upbringing in Germany⁸, nor is there much known about her life in Britain other than that she was 'a bit of a dark horse' – as Charmian Brinson put it.⁹ Apparently Livia Laurent worked as an actress and as a writer – occupations that were then not regarded as appropriate for a young woman and that might have been at least partly responsible for landing her in a British internment camp.¹⁰ What is remarkable though is that after publishing her *Tale of Internment* in 1942, in the very same year, Livia

⁵ Hackett, *William Shakespeare*, p. 17

⁶ Ibid., p 16.

⁷ Ibid., p. 23

⁸ In his book *Im Niemandsland: Deutsche Exilliteratur in Britischer Internierung. Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der Kulturgeschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs*, (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1984), p. 193 the German researcher Michael Seyfert claims that Laurent's father was a surgeon.

⁹ Taken from an email between Charmian Brinson and myself on 12.03.2009.

¹⁰ Reportedly, the chairperson of the tribunal thought her lifestyle immoral. See Seyfert, *Im Niemandsland*, p. 193.

Laurent managed to publish a second book, a collection of poems, at a time, when even native writers found it difficult to get published because of war-related paper shortage.¹¹ Although Thornton Wilder praised her verses as ‘sincere, deeply-felt and movingly expressed’¹² the blurb to her poetry collection also states that ‘[h]er verse does not always conform to the conventional usages of English metre and diction’.¹³ However, the publisher was quick to add that Laurent made up for that with ‘a freshness even enhanced by that nonconformity’.¹⁴ One of these ‘fresh’ and ‘unconventional’ poems is addressed to the moon – the moon of her childhood and teenage years.

THE DRUNKARD

HEY MOON, don’t stare at me so
I felt happy and now you confuse me,
Don’t just sneer and pretend to abuse me
Come along if you like, you can use me
Let us dance down this street to and fro.

For to-night we can do as we please here
No need to look round and take care,
All the houses jump up into air
Were it day-time they wouldn’t dare,
But now I have taken the lease here.

I tell them to dance and be brothers
And to leave their stuffy old places,
I enjoy the change in their faces
As I teach them most intricate paces
Which they do by themselves or with others.

My own house is getting quite jolly,
I have a most beautiful key here,
But the door sways as if it were sea here,
We are all so wonderfully free here,
And refrain from everyday folly.

So come down moon, and let me teach you
I’ll hold on to you if you permit me,
Your roundness will just about fit me,
There is no one here to forbid me,
Come moon, let us dance, I beseech you.¹⁵

Robert Graves, in his ‘Observations on Poetry’ once stated that ‘[r]hymes properly used are the good servant whose presence at the dinner-table gives

¹¹ See letter from 26th August 1940, Mr Goldberg’s documents, Parkes Archives, MS 148 AJ 94 457-540.

¹² L. Laurent, *Poems*, (London: Favil Press, 1942), backcover.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Laurent, *Poems*, p. 29f.

the guests a sense of opulent security; never awkward or over-clever, they hand the dishes silently and professionally'.¹⁶ There is very little evidence of a good servant in Livia Laurent's poem: the almost neurotic pedantry of the rhyme and the unrestrained babbling of the drunkard are definitely not the type of 'servant' one would want to employ for an elegant dinner party. The poem itself seems to be swaying as the rhythm and rhymes do not quite work out and are definitely not the kind of servant you would want to employ for your next dinner party. Particularly in the first and the fifth stanza we can find plenty of auto-rhyme – a constant repetition of the word 'me'. The poet's insistence on words relating to the first person singular suggests insecurity about their legitimate and natural existence: though these words occur again and again, they are never stressed – even when the poetic persona claims 'but now I have taken the lease here'.¹⁷ In contrast, the second person singular is stressed and put into the centre of attention: 'Hey **Moon**',¹⁸ or 'I'll **hold** on to **you** if **you** permit me'.¹⁹ The moon, being this *you* in the poem, is addressed as a human being. In all the uncertainty of exile, the moon is supposed to be the familiar, reliable 'mate'.

With all these characteristics the poem is nothing short of a treasure when it comes to exploring the hybridity of minor poetry. My definition of hybridity here is very similar to what has been labelled 'the creation of new transcultural forms' and was initially used in a postcolonial context.²⁰ I use the term here with reference to the linguistic or literary 'cross-breeding' visible in Livia Laurent's work. Equally, when using the term 'minor literature' I do not suggest that this literature is inferior but I am referring to Deleuze's and Guattari's definition of 'minor literature'. In their book on Kafka they define 'minor literature' as something that 'doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language'.²¹ They identify three main characteristics of minor literature: 'deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation'.²²

To illustrate the first characteristic, Deleuze and Guattari quote from Kafka's letter to Max Brod where he refers to 'the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise'.²³ The situation of exiled German-Jewish women poets like Livia Laurent or Lotte Kramer is not dissimilar: while not writing at all is impossible, writing in English seems equally impossible (as we already know from the above mentioned acquaintance of Michael Hamburger) – and writing otherwise is impossible as well – there is no German audience and, after years in exile, many refugee writers doubt their command of their mother tongue.

¹⁶ P. O'Prey, (ed.), *Robert Graves: Collected Writings on Poetry*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), p. 6.

¹⁷ Laurent, *Poems*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

¹⁹ Laurent, *Poems*, p. 30, my emphasis.

²⁰ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 118.

²¹ G. Deleuze, and F. Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, Transl. by Dana Polan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

And, like Kafka did when he wrote in German, they also opt for the impossible and become English writers.

For Lotte Kramer and Livia Laurent English now plays the role of what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'vehicular' and a 'cultural' or 'referential' language: in the first instance it is a language of deterritorialization, in the second it is a language of cultural reterritorialization.²⁴ To illustrate this I want to draw attention to the subject Livia Laurent's poem alludes to: it reminds the reader of a traditional English street poem, such as the ones written by the English poet and editor W.E. Henley, most notably his sonnets of the collection *London Types* (1898). However, Henley's poems would describe the outsider or underdog from the perspective of an uninvolved spectator, the voice of Livia Laurent's poem is the drunkard – and this voice is talking to a German moon. Moreover, the drunkard's monologue, together with the stylistic aspects mentioned above, can be regarded as a private event that symbolizes a complex political situation: the moon as an external witness to the tragedies faced by outcasts and strangers – someone who can follow their way even into exile, who is seen almost as an ally – but who remains silent and indifferent to their fate. In this sense, everything in this light hearted poem is political – another characteristic of minor literature according to Deleuze and Guattari.

Lotte Kramer

In 1939, fifteen-year-old Lotte Wertheimer came to England on a Kindertransport. Three years later she would receive a telegram from her native Mainz (Germany) reading "Wir müssen unseren Wohnsitz ändern. Leb wohl, geliebtes Kind"²⁵ – the last words of her parents that would reach her. Lotte stayed in England after the end of World War II, she married Fritz Kramer and when she had her son she still did not know what had happened to her parents. Only later she would find out and it took her thirty years to write, and even longer to talk about it.²⁶ In the early 1970s, Lotte Kramer and her family had just moved from London to Peterborough where she often felt alone and isolated. Eventually, she began to write – for the first time facing the pain of losing her parents in the Shoah (Holocaust). In clear English she often uses Jewish metaphors to express her German loss – prompting the acclaimed Hungarian poet George Szirtes to call her poems 'a silent watercolour *Kaddish*'.²⁷

Lotte Kramer is very aware of her life between languages; she has talked about this issue in both her writing and in interviews.²⁸ Though she does not use the term 'minor literature' her relation to English as her vehicular and cultural language becomes apparent in her writing. Her poems are witnesses to her life between languages and she reflects on aspects of her change of language and perception of the world in her work. One example of this process

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka. Towards a Minor Literature*, p. 23f.

²⁵ 'We have to change our domicile. Farewell, beloved child.'

²⁶ See 'Kaddish', published in Kramer, *The Desecration of Trees*, (Frome, Somerset: Hippopotamus Press, 1994).

²⁷ See extracts from George Szirtes' review at www.inpressbooks.co.uk/black_over_red_by_lotte_kramer_i015920.aspx. Szirtes' review was published in full in *European Judaism* (1997). The term 'Kaddish' refers to the mourning prayer said as part of the mourning rituals within Judaism for the deceased.

²⁸ See 'Bilingual' in Kramer, *The Desecration of Trees*.

of creating what the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha would probably call a 'third space' can be found in the following poem.²⁹ Here, Lotte Kramer describes how moving from one language to another entails fundamental changes to how one perceives the world.

ANDROGYNOUS

Long ago
There was the man in the moon.
The cold-eyed guard
Over my childhood.
He watched my nights chillingly.

Now he's turned female.
Benevolence in liquid white.
A veiled eye of knowledge
In a veteran sky,
Elusive in a cloud of history.³⁰

While she remembers the moon of her childhood as male, nothing is left of the caring and well meaning character attributed to him in German literature. Quite the opposite: the German moon became for her a 'cold-eyed guard' who allowed atrocities to happen. While Goethe felt comforted by his moon, and Livia Laurent continues to encourage her old companion to engage with her, Lotte Kramer relinquishes the concept of the male German moon altogether. In the second stanza the most amazing transformation takes place: 'Now he's turned female' – the *translocation* of the refugee girl and her following *translingual* life create a *transgendered* moon that can comfort again. Kramer's, clearly, is not the fickle English moon, she is 'at home in none' of her two languages. But as a 'minor writer' she subverts the major language from within and builds herself a home where she can live between the two languages under her moon's 'benevolence in liquid white'. Kramer has created a 'third space' in which she rejects the exclusiveness of both, the German and the English tradition. Almost one hundred years before Lotte Kramer wrote her poem the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire famously claimed that 'reality can never be discovered once and for all'.³¹ Like the cubist painters who added another perspective to what had previously been regarded as real, Lotte Kramer's poem adds another dimension to how we look at the world. When she left Germany as a young girl she did not know that she would never see her parents again. She did not know what it would mean to lose the security of her native tongue; to lose the security that things are what they are. To the exiled person, 'nothing comes natural' everything is far more complex than it looks in one language.³² As Michael Hamburger pointed out: 'to write in a language that is not one's first is to be at one remove from the seeming

²⁹ See H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁰ Kramer, Lotte, *Selected and New Poems 1980-1997*, (Ware, Herts: Rockingham Press, 1997), p. 110.

³¹ G. Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, Transl. by Peter Read, (Forest Row, East Sussex: Artists. Bookworks, 2002), p. 12.

³² N. Huston, *Loosing North*, (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2002), p. 21.

identity of word and thing'.³³ However, in discovering reality anew and building a dwelling between languages, 'people in exile are rich – rich with the accumulated sum of their contradictory identities'.³⁴

Conclusion

German-Jewish women poets writing in British exile are very unlikely candidates for a nation's literary canon. In a world of refugees, displaced persons and exiles they are far more important: they can show us how loss and pain do not have to be brushed aside, how new forms and expressions of life can thrive in spaces created by those exiles who refuse to fall silent but who stretch their language of refuge so that it can become their home.

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³³ Hamburger, *Strings of Beginning*, p. 93.

³⁴ Huston, *Loosing North*, p. 8.