

“It’s better to make one large thing”

Introduction of Hamutal Bar-Yosef in the Cathedra of Human Studies Primo Levi

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“It’s better to make one large thing”, says the mother to the nine year old girl when she give her like a present a handkerchief-duster, something resembling a wallet that she, with her own hands and her own resources, was made.

I hope that Hamutal doesn’t think “It’s better to make one large speech” on this occasion, to introduce to you this Israeli woman with a full life as a woman, as a poet and as professor who has been deservedly rewarded and recognized on her country. My introduction is not larger for two reasons: the first one is that her work is, unfortunately, unknown in Mexico, and hasn’t been translating to Spanish yet. The second one is because, undeniably, we are all looking forward for listen her own voice, today that we have her face to face. I therefore will just tell some aspects of her life and work that I have been able to know by the Internet.

Hamutal Bar-Yosef was born in Mandatory Palestine, 1940, in a kibbutz close to the Sea of Galilee, and she lives since 1976 in Israel. A kibbutz is a farming community founded to receive migrant families from Europe and Asia, families escaping of heathen’s pogroms and threats, looking for their own roots back.

She has been recognized as a poet, translator and literary researcher. But also, she is Jewish, woman, wife, and mother of four.

As a poet, Hamutal Bar-Yosef is one of the influential from Israel and she has received almost every one of the national awards. She is author of nine poetry books, gender that she writes since she was 8 years old, and whereby she has to been able to expressed, on a literary way, the deep pain that has been in her life, most of the cases, this pain is the pain of her people. During the Israeli War of Independence, she lost his only one brother, she was 8 years old and whereby her poems expressed the mourning and the endurance of the life. Later, she lost the youngest of her four children, when he was a teenager.

Since 1971 she has published nine collections of poetry, short stories, a children book and two collections of poetry translated from the Russian of Olga Sedakova (1998) and Yulia Viner (2003). Hamutal has been recognized with the next prizes: Akum (1978), Tel-Aviv (1984), Jerusalem of Poetry (1997), WIZO for the Creative Woman (1999), President of Israel for poetry (2002), and Brenner for poetry (2005). Her poetry has been translated to English, French, German, Russian, Ukrainian, Arab and Yiddish. I'm looking forward for a translation in Spanish.

Hamutal has a bachelor degree in Philosophy and Jewish Literature, and Comparative Literature. Also, she has a PhD for the Hebrew University. She has providing courses in the Department of Jewish Literature in the Ben-Gurion University of Beersheba.

She has been visiting professor in several universities: in the Institute of Oriental Languages (Paris), Columbia University (New York), and the University of Humanities (RSUH), Moscow. In addition, she was a Fellow in the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her main fields of literary research are the Russian context of Jewish literature and culture, and mysticism in Modern Hebrew poetry. She is also translator of poetry in English, French and Russian.

Hamutal has published six books of literary research, which include:

The Genre of 'Notes' as a Mediator Between Realism and Symbolism in Hebrew Literature (1989)

Mysticism in Modern Poetry (2008)

Lea Goldberg (2012)

Metaphors and Symbols in U.N. Gnessin's Stories (1987)

Trends of Decadence in Modern Hebrew Literature (1997)

Symbolism in Modern Poetry (2000)

She edited an anthology of Hebrew literature in Russian translation (RSUH, 2000). Among her poems, the most famous work is the bilingual edition *Night, Morning*, translated by Rachel Tzvia Back and published by The Sheep Meadow Press (2009).

Waking

When I woke after the destruction
the boulders were the gray-white dust of salt,
and salt-dogs cracked open the bones of doves.
Then I saw one hidden chick
thrown into the air,
its wings trembling like wind-blown flames
unfurling a colorful fan,
its skinny legs lifting for the first time
above the Dead Sea.

The Well

I am a poisoned well,
I told the ram
as he flared his nostrils.
Everything in me is poisoned.
Venom flows in my stones.

On the bottom
there's a bag, almost sealed.
In it, silently putrefying,
are the clothes of the dead.

Far away, in day's splendor, even the storks
warn each other
of the pollution.

But the well is poisoned,
I whisper to the ram at night,
the well is entirely poisoned.

And he with his blue tongue licks me
and says: Stars.

Sarah Wetzel Fishman points out about Hamutal's poetry:

Grief never ends, at least for some people, perhaps for more people than any of us acknowledge. Moreover, grief is often complicated and sometimes seems outside individual control. In Israel, where the burned out trucks from Israel's War of Independence still line the way from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, where every year the nation's children travel to the European sites of the Holocaust, where the entire nation shuts down for Memorial Day (Yom Ha-

Zikaron) and Holocaust Memorial Day (Yom Ha-Shoah), memory and the grief attached to memory are impossible to escape. For an American now living in Israel like myself, for someone who is not a Jew, Israel's national obsession with grief often feels impenetrable. How does a people, how does an individual look forward, when it is of the past that one must constantly be reminded?

Our author writes in an essay: "Yet I also believe that Israeli culture demonstrates an unhealthy, even dangerous fixation on grief. Perhaps more troubling, Israeli culture has come to perceive mourning as a permanent state. Regrettably, this cultural approach to bereavement disregards, and even impedes, individual efforts to resume a normal life".

She says too, in an interview contained at the end of *Night, Morning* that she enjoys writing sonnets, odes, elegies, that she considers herself a conservative, both politically and poetically. However, the poems in *Night, Morning* in both their Hebrew and English translations appear entirely in free verse. The omission apparently is deliberate. Bar-Yosef says in the same interview that she and the book's translator decided to avoid poems whose forms were sophisticated, allusive, or, strangely enough, musical.

The critic about her points out that grief can be a form of remembering, a way to make sure that the dead are forever with us. So grief itself provides a form of consolation, but, in Bar-Yosef's poetry, it can also be the only form of revenge against enormous loss. But for her, solace is found in daily life and in nature.

I want to introduce to you two of her poems related with our daily reality in Guadalajara. The first one relates to this beautiful flower and so appreciated in our courses and our traditional "agua fresca" (fresh water, flavored water), the hibiscus. And the second one dedicated to the Sea of Galilee in drought season; in this poem Hamutal expresses the same sentiments that we feel when we see our dry Chapala lake, and then when it recovers on a miracle way.

On her poem "Hibiscus" (Jamaica) she writes:

Lovely Hibiscus!
You have stunned my spirits
with your amazing dimensions
the shining, threatening, laughing purple
of your lips.

O Hibiscus,
you have filled me with burning.
What is yours? What is mine?
And who is the kindling
for the fire?

On her poem to the Sea of Galilee, Hamutal writes:

For years the Kinneret was dying before our eyes,
like an adolescent daughter
refusing to live because of us,
her absent parents

But now, this year,
her face is filling out.
Today the ancient lashes
of our eyes
are moist with joy.