

## TSIPI KELLER

Alex Epstein, *Blue Has No South*. Translated from the Hebrew by Becka Mara McKay. (Clockroot Books, 2010). 132pp. ISBN 978-1566568067

Thirty-five years or so ago, young Hebrew prose writers, following in the footsteps of their peers, the poets, took to the streets and began to write in a language that, at the time, was defined as “street language,” namely, vulgar, undignified, and certainly inappropriate for the elevated experience of Literature with a capital L. There were loud and heated debates and calls to keep the purity—one wants to add virginity—of the literary language intact. My very first novel, and the only one I wrote in Hebrew, fell victim to such a classification, and was rejected by the three major houses of the time for fusing “street language,” “biblical language” and “literary language.” Let me add here that “street language,” the very language spoken by all, indeed fuses all three, often for ironic effects.

Thankfully, and predictably, the purists lost, and the Hebrew of the “street” flourished and grew and flourishes still, borrowing technical terms from the English, curses and idioms from the Arabic, and from the Russian as well. New publishing houses have risen, and this new competition forced the older, veteran houses to forgo their rigid stylistic rules. Novelists such as Meir Shalev, A.B. Yehoshua, and Aharon Megged, for instance, wrote beautifully long and intricate novels. Among them, a new, strange, and slender flower pushed up from the soil: Yoel Hoffmann, whose prose couldn’t be defined and safely placed in any known category: was he writing “short stories?” “Novellas?” “Short novels?” Here was a writer who didn’t even bother to number

his pages! Who used the Hebrew vowels in his prose, when everybody knows you use the vowels only for printed poetry, or in textbooks and dailies for new immigrants and the very young. (See Hoffmann's latest, and very possibly his best, *Curriculum Vitae*, available from New Directions.)

And then, gradually, more and more women prose writers appeared on the scene, and a new debate raged: Are women taking over the field of fiction? (Pure hubris, as they have already taken over poetry!) Orly Castel-Bloom rose like a meteor in Israel and soon also abroad. Her short stories and short novels (look for her *Dolly City*, to be out soon from Dalkey Archives) are set in an Israel and a Tel Aviv that are equally bizarre, familiar, and disturbing. Also disturbing and mesmerizing is the work of Zeruya Shalev, whose work, like Castel-Bloom's, has been translated into numerous languages (look for her *Love Life*, available from Grove). A few years later, came the stories of Etgar Keret, by now nearly a household name among writers of short stories, if not internationally, then certainly in Israel and in the U.S. And now, finally, the short shorts of Alex Epstein have arrived. The youngest of the lot, Epstein was born in Russia, in 1971, and came to Israel at the age of eight.<sup>1</sup>

I used to tell friends that literary forms reach Israel a little late, about twenty years or so after they've become a "school" in Europe and in the U.S.; naturally, the pace has accelerated with the advent of the Internet. Still, considering the works of Hoffmann, Castel-Bloom, and Epstein, it seems to me that what these three Israeli authors have done with and in their chosen forms, is not only new, but unique. With each one of them, you enter a foreign, exotic world, the world

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1 Of necessity, this is a cursory overview. Readers interested in the authors mentioned, or other Israeli authors and poets, a good source of information is the website of the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature (ITHL).

of the outsider. The form is not new, but what Epstein (and from here on I'll concentrate on him) does within the form is different from what you may find in a collection of short-stories by, say, Lydia Davis, or in any literary journal.

The stories in *Blue Has No South* vary in length, from a couple of lines to a couple of pages (the Hebrew collection includes a couple of stories that reach the epic length of twenty pages), but most of the stories are about half a page, like this one:

*Jung's Nightmare of Watches*

Except for one sentence pierced by the explicit word "reality," almost nothing that will be told here happened in the distant summer of 1926, when Karl Jung, the psychoanalyst, gave his mistress a gift: a wristwatch without a minute hand. He asked her to wear it even in her sleep, because this watch, so he said, measures the time of love.

A few days later, Jung's mistress bumped into Jung's wife, who stood examining the window display of a paint-supply shop on a Zurich Boulevard. The two women, who had already met once at a party, shook hands politely. Jung's mistress couldn't help noticing that on her wrist, Mrs. Jung wore a watch that had no hour hand. This encounter certainly had consequences in reality, though reality, as is well known, is paler than its own shadow. In any case, in one of Jung's dreams the two women also asked each other for the time.

And, if the title of the collection confounds you, all you need do is look for the title short (p. 65), which should clear all doubts and questions. In this half-page story, a poet, in a sleepless night, leaps into a dream with a paintbrush dripping with blue paint. A voice tells the poet to paint a wall in black, and he wonders is it even possible "to paint

black with blue?" Upon waking, he realizes that the room he dreamed of was a stanza in a poem and he ponders if it's time "he turned to writing prose."

Fantastical, whimsical, and flighty, Epstein's tales tantalize us, as we waver between bemused incredulity and a need to "believe" what we read. The tone, invariably, is intimate: the narrator, holding our trust, is confiding a "truth," or a "fact," as, for instance, when he invokes his great-grandmother—whose name may or may not have been Genya, who may, or may not, have had an encounter, in the spring of 1909, on Nevsky Boulevard in St. Petersburg, with Kandinsky—or when he plucks prominent, and, one might add, mythologized figures, lodged deeply in our collective Western conscience, and borrows (or kidnaps) them for the duration of a short, making them present for us, albeit in Epstein's private slant now made public. Freud, Kafka, Magritte, Homer, Walter Benjamin, Einstein, Poe, Max Brod, to name a few, make an appearance, with a bow (some appear more than once), and major European cities, as well as figures from Greek mythology, also populate these pages. It's as if Epstein is attempting *A Brief History of Time and Culture*. These shorts, in fact, may be viewed as a kind of "found art," or as Epstein's way of keeping these personalities relevant and alive, for a span, for a spin, a sort of literary homage, while, at the same time, he doesn't hesitate and takes liberties with their biography.

In a recent forum with readers, Epstein asserted, to the astonishment and "protest" of those present, that he has no imagination. When they pushed back, he sort of retreated, which is a pity. Readers are trained to believe in "imagination" which they supposedly lack. Writers are trained in work, deep concentration, and intuition, and so I believe Epstein when he says he has no imagination. In that same forum, Epstein, responding to a question, said that he doesn't have

## METAMORPHOSES

a mother's tongue (presumably the Russian he lost upon arriving in Israel), and that he considers Hebrew to be his father's tongue. (My mother's tongue was Yiddish, and I lost it in favor of Hebrew when I was about 5-6 years old. In later years I came to think of Hebrew as my stepmother's tongue. Hoffmann, who arrived in Israel as a baby in 1938, probably had two mother tongues going: Yiddish and Romanian.)

In many of the shorts, love (or the potential for it), longing, and nostalgia are present. Love, Epstein tells us, "like music, is always a true story." "Longings are more a story than a word." "Nostalgia, so they say, is a mixture of small illusions and great regrets." And yet, alongside this tender—and perhaps ironic—leaning onto the past, Epstein is very much a person of today. In addition to his blog (<http://www.notes.co.il/epstein/>) where he regularly posts shorts in Hebrew, English, and Russian, he is now working on a book titled *Imaginary Library*, which he intends to publish gratis on the Internet.

Over the years, some readers and critics have questioned the validity of the genre, the purpose of a short-short, asking what exactly is it trying to accomplish, and, if brevity is the ultimate goal. Others accuse the author of lacking the necessary long breath, the stamina, and demand to know if the short-short is short because the author willed it, i.e., deciding, a priori, that the piece s/he's writing will be a short-short, or whether the material required the brevity. These are useful questions and issues to ponder, but, as with any piece of writing, when you're in good authorial hands, you may find that whatever answers you come up with, they are all equally valid, and that, in the end, they don't matter when the story works. Or, in the words of Georg Büchner: "The feeling that a created work has life... is the only criterion in artistic matters."

Except for few minor quibbles one may find here and

there in the English text, McKay's quiet translations convey Epstein's imperceptible wink to the reader, as well as the often elegiac and formal tone of the original. However, for some reason, a decision has been made to omit a number of stories in the present English collection, and to ignore the careful arrangement of the stories in the Hebrew text. It would have been helpful if the translator and/or the publishers had explained what was the thinking process that guided them while deciding which stories not to include, and in which order to place the ones they did choose to publish. The Hebrew text is divided into four parts with sub headings, while the English does away with them.

Toward the end of the Hebrew collection, there's a short titled "The Semi Lost Paintings of Yoel Hoffmann", a tribute, a nod, to a fellow-traveler, another *olé hadash* (a new immigrant) from eastern Europe; a meditation in his honor.

*The Semi Lost Paintings of Yoel Hoffmann*

Yoel Hoffmann has a tree he dreams about again and again. In its arms, the tree hides the line of the horizon, which is God's dental floss, but this already is an entirely different matter. Under the tree his mother sleeps. On the tree trunk words are carved: "In order to rouse me, cut the tree." Every night, Hoffmann circles the tree in his dream. When he goes round the tree clockwise, bells toll. Bells toll as well when he goes round the tree counterclockwise (and the doors at the bottom of the sea groan, but this, again, is another matter). In the morning, immediately upon waking, Hoffmann gathers from his dream another fistful of dew—which he has yet to place on the blank page—and places it on the reverse side of the blank page.

I'd also like to mention a short titled "The Short Story

## METAMORPHOSES

and Love,” which, for me, epitomizes Epstein’s work in *Blue Has No South*. The short first appeared in Israel in 2007, too late for the Hebrew collection (2005) and it begins: “Maybe it will rain. This is how the story I’ll write for you will open. For the time being, I know very little about this story: it takes place at six in the morning, when all the stray cats are sleeping under the engines of cars.” The quiet is disturbed when a woman appears in a second floor window and proceeds to toss out the Who’s Who of the international (and Israeli) literary canon: Carver, O’Connor, Chekhov, Kundera, Dan Pagis, Dan Tsalka, Nabokov, Borges, Agnon, Tony Morrison, Calvino, Cortázar, and, of course, Yoel Hoffmann. A few tattered dictionaries also land on the pavement. Soon, the narrator tells us, kitchen utensils will follow, as well as chairs, clothes, and so on. “After all,” the story concludes, “it will be a love story.” We can speculate as to why the woman is getting rid of the books. They may belong to her lover. They may have belonged both to her and the lover/husband. Or, she decides to toss them out because they fed her lies. They gave her momentary and not lasting pleasure. Epstein doesn’t say it, but, after the books, the clothes, and the furniture, the woman, too, may jump, giving up on her dreams, her life. There’s an underlying humor in the story, the familiar picture of a lovers’ quarrel, but the potential for tragedy is there as well, mythologized perhaps, but still a tragedy. The eternal Romeo and Juliet, who do make an appearance in a story of their own in the collection.

A friend in Israel, who was an *olé hadash* from S. Africa, told me once that one needed a healthy dose of humor to survive in Israel among “these crazy Israeli Jews,” a truism that, I believe, is still valid today. Reading Hoffmann and Epstein one gets the sense that these two new immigrants, while embracing Hebrew and knowing it better than most “natives,” still lean heavily on that other sensibility, on that

other tongue they've heard in their young years, especially so Hoffmann, whose Hebrew is saturated with the juiciness of Yiddish, with its bitter humor and irony. No one in Israel (or elsewhere) writes like Hoffmann; to me he is a human and literary phenomenon, a stand-alone fortress where his outsider status survives. It is too early to tell if Epstein will achieve such uniqueness, if he will be able to maintain his outsider vision, but this collection hints at a sensibility and an outlook, which are different from those around him.