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Hearing voices: on the role of reflexivity and embodiment in Runo Isaksen's *Literature and War – Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian Writers*

Abstract:

In this paper I focus on reflexivity – what it is, its use in cultural and social research practice, its application in creative writing, and the ways in which it contributes to the mutual embodiment of writer and reader. In general, reflexivity challenges traditional positivist approaches that social and cultural research can be considered 'objective'. It asks the researcher to be aware of their own role in the research in order to ensure it can be understood both in terms of *what* is revealed and *how* it is revealed.

Through readings of reflexivity by Miller (1991), DeVault (1997), Schwab (2004), Saukko (2003), Hunt and Sampson (2008), Behar (1996) and others, I consider the different characteristics of reflexivity – such as polyvocality, bearing witness and context – as well as the potential risks involved in its use. I differentiate between reflexivity and reflectivity and examine the role of reflexivity in the creative process, particularly in relation to how it contributes to an embodied relationship between writer and reader that causes the text to 'come to life' when it is read.

As a case study, and to illustrate the use of reflexivity in crafting a work of creative non-fiction, I've chosen Norwegian novelist and journalist, Runo Isaksen's (2009) *Literature and War: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian writers*. In 2002 and 2003, Isaksen travelled to Israel and Palestine to interview fourteen Israeli and Palestinian writers. His aim was to delve deeper into the Middle East conflict to find a greater more complex understanding (beyond the rigid frameworks offered in Norway's media at the time). Isaksen asked each of the writers a list of questions but, particularly, whether they thought reading each other's literature could contribute to 'getting to know the other side' and even peace in the region.

Biographical note:

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In their book, *Writing: Self and reflexivity*, Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (2008) identify *curiosity* as a necessary quality for a writer to transcend cliché and preconception in their writing. They argue that it is through curiosity that we can move ‘beyond solipsism to engage with the “otherness” beyond the self; whether that is the unassimilated in our own experience or a world of the experiences we’ve never had’ (133).

Curiosity led Runo Isaksen (2009), a Norwegian novelist and journalist, to begin reading Israeli and Palestinian literature. It was, he says, the beginning of a journey through ‘a backdoor’ to a more complex view of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict than the ‘narrow framework’ in which it was reported in Norway’s media. Curiosity also led me to pick up Isaksen’s book, *Literature and war: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian writers*, in a Beirut bookshop in early 2009. I was living and working in Beirut and the horrendous nightly television coverage of Israeli bombing of the densely populated Gaza strip, from December through January, had been so distressing that I felt a need to seek answers.¹

In this paper I focus on reflexivity,² what it is and its use in the practice of cultural and social research, how it is applied in creative writing, and how it contributes to embodiment. I will discuss aspects of the use of reflexivity as considered by Miller (1991), DeVault (1997), Schwab (2004), Saukko (2003), Hunt and Sampson (2008), Behar (1996) and others, while also noting a diversity of definitions and approaches which suggests that the term is evolving, and may even have different connotations within different genres or cultural fields.

I will then consider how Runo Isaksen has used reflexivity to craft *Literature and War* as a work of creative non-fiction that investigates what Palestinian and Israeli writers think about the ‘enemy’ and whether they think it important to read each other’s literature as a way of ‘getting to know the other side’ (Isaksen 2009: 8-9).

The role of reflexivity and personalisation in research

In general, reflexivity asks the researcher to be aware of their own role in the research and to acknowledge its impact on their research outcomes and interpretations. It challenges traditional positivist approaches that social and cultural research can be considered ‘objective’ and uses personalisation in the form of life story interviews, journal entries and autobiography to understand the ‘different lived worlds’ of others (Saukko 2003: 56). Its aim is to ensure the work is understood not only in terms of what it reveals, but *how it is revealed*, not just what has been discovered, ‘but how we have discovered it’ (Etherington 2004: 31-3, my emphasis).

In their research into creative writing as reflexive practice, Hunt and Sampson (2006) draw on Donna Qualley (1997) to distinguish between ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ where Qualley defines *reflection* as an individual activity that involves thinking but does not necessarily involve others or affect a change in the person reflecting. *Reflexivity*, on the other hand, is a deeper process that involves ‘a particular kind of engagement with an “other”’, whether another person or oneself as ‘other’ (Hunt and Sampson 2008: 4).³

Framing a context for personal writing and a word of caution in using it

In *Getting personal: Feminist occasions and other autobiographical acts*, Nancy Miller (1991) considers the emergence of autobiographical or personal criticism out of feminist theory's original emphasis on 'the personal'. Miller used Jane Tompkins's essay 'Me and my shadow' (1987) to look at 'what personal criticism seemed to be trying to do and what might be at stake in the process' (Miller 1991: 3-4). Tompkins's essay was written as 'a manifesto' that would 'embody the claims of personal writing' and Miller – while acknowledging Tompkins's view that theory 'weighs down the writer' – argued that personal writing has the potential to reach beyond theory's 'hierarchies of the positional' to engage with, and include, other voices (Miller 1991: 25).⁴ In doing so, she claimed, it also invited the reader 'to participate in the interweaving and construction of the ongoing conversation' (Caws 1990: 2, in Miller 1991: 24).

While Marjorie DeVault (1997) defends the use of personalisation in social research (220),⁵ she also argues for greater attention to be given to its *constructed* characteristics as a genre, especially with regard to the skill required to craft it.⁶ Similarly, the ethnographer Ruth Behar (1996) claims that in order to use reflexivity successfully and responsibly, a writer must be able to skilfully and selectively link the personal and autobiographical to the subject of the text (Behar: 13).⁷

Polyvocality, bearing witness and context

A further aspect of the insertion of personal narrative into scholarly writing has been a 'retheorization' of genres like life history and life story and the merging of these with the *testimonio* 'which speaks to the role of witness' (Behar 1996: 26, 27). This blurring of disciplinary boundaries has, Behar asserts, contributed to the emergence of mediated writing that isn't afraid to incorporate the 'I', the personal and autobiographical, humour and ambiguity, feelings and emotion, punning and poetic effects, anecdote and narrative (29-30).

Polyvocality – the act of listening to many voices and perspectives – is a further characteristic of reflexivity which 'draws attention to the fact that lived realities are many' (Saukko 2003: 73). Paula Saukko (2003) argues that these voices need to be heard within a wider contextual framework that focuses on and analyses the 'social structures of inequality', otherwise the researcher may be at risk of consolidating inequality through the presentation of a 'pointless pluralism' in which any voice might be regarded as being as good as any other (73).

Embodiment, moral judgement and ethics in creative writing

For Hunt and Sampson (2008), the creative process is intrinsically a reflexive, dialogic process and when creative writers practise it, understand how it works, and consciously observe it going on within them, it contributes to a second degree of reflexivity by enabling them to observe changes in 'the self-in-process' (17). At the centre of this change and development is language and its effects on the body – where the embodied writing self (author) draws on memory, feelings, experiences and cultural habits to shape the text, the writing 'happens' as the text is being written, and the text 'comes to life' when it is read (146).⁸

Such reflexive thinking is bound up with free will, moral and ethical capacity and responsibility; and it is through language and the capacity to reflect on and identify what we do – as well as doing it – that we exercise moral judgement (Hunt and Sampson 2008: 153). This aspect of reflexivity is discussed by Isaksen with the Palestinian and Israeli writers and also explored by Gabriele Schwab (2004). Schwab links her personal experience of growing up in post-war Germany with research evidence from a range of disciplines to argue for the political necessity of ‘a dialogical turn in trauma discourses’ – one that looks at the dynamic between victims and perpetrators and intergenerational trauma. She argues that the trauma experienced by perpetrators of violence (as in war, colonialism, genocide and slavery) can be passed on to children and that it is only through the breaking of silence that memory can be recovered and the process of healing begin (Schwab 2004: 181, 184). Thus, language becomes the ‘first tool and mode of introjection’, and ‘[f]inding a voice – whether it is speaking up, writing a narrative, a poem or a memoir, or simply telling one’s story to another – is crucial in this culture of memory of testimony’ (187).

Schwab’s findings have particular resonance with the case study chosen for this paper.

A case study – *Literature and war: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian writers* by Runo Isaksen

In the introduction to *Literature and war*, Isaksen (2009) acknowledges that literature is ‘always about people and therefore also about reality in one way or another’ (8). In particular, he describes how he was inspired to test the view expressed by the South African writer, Andre Brink, that literature can draw one into the experience of the other (9). Of seven Israeli writers interviewed, two are women;⁹ and the Palestinian writers also include two women;¹⁰ the last interview is with Salman Natour, an Israeli Palestinian. All of the writers were against the Israeli occupation: the Israelis favoured an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, and the Palestinian writers were for either a binational state or a Palestinian state.

At the outset Isaksen states that it is critical and necessary to acknowledge that Israel/Palestine is a conflicted zone in which immense suffering continues to be experienced:

Let me make one thing clear, there is absolutely no symmetry between Israel and Palestine. Israel is in many ways like a modern western European country. Palestine is not even an independent country, but an occupied territory and only partly self-governed – where there is immense poverty and very little cultural infrastructure (Isaksen 2009: 10).

Isaksen presents each writer against the background of place, language and culture, life experiences and their writing, and relates this to the ongoing conflict and their lives as professional writers. His research is thorough and he has read and often comments on their work. He describes his attempts to meet with them, including when and where they meet, and provides an explanation or context for the questions he is asking (with historical, ethnographic or cultural notes provided as required).¹¹ He then allows their voices to be clearly heard.

As I examine some of the ways in which the writers’ voices interweave and flow over, under and towards one another, I also outline my responses and impressions to the text and its parts, and add my own voice to the conversations between Isaksen and the interviewees. Because I

have limited my observations to two writers in this brief review – Etgar Keret, an Israeli, and Liana Badr, a Palestinian – to some extent, it does not do justice to the polyphony Isaksen's text embraces.

Etgar Keret – 'What really matters is the quality of what's in our heads'

The first interview in the book is with Etgar Keret, a young Israeli writer 'who is known for his highly absurd take on Israel and the world' (18). Isaksen describes his writing style as distinctive, straightforward and bold and his short fiction, we are told, are popular with young Israelis. He is also read and admired by Palestinians and has Palestinian friends.

From the very beginning with each conversation, Isaksen takes the time to embody both himself and the author in the text. For example:

Keret talks without stopping for breath. At first glance he looks like an archetypal artist: unshaven, with messy hair and a very laidback attitude. But when you look closer, he is obviously in remarkably good health and alert ... (18).

The interview covers a wide range of subjects¹² but one issue Keret is keen to talk about is the damaging effect on young people of serving for three years in an occupying army:

This country has ideological arguments for and against the occupation, but no one talks about what happens to young soldiers when they have been in the army for three years, three years of violence. ... I have many left-wing friends who have demonstrated against the occupation one day, only to find themselves moving into the West Bank as soldiers the next, and suddenly beating people senseless (33).

The brutality of this statement takes me by surprise and causes me to reflect on what Schwab (2003) has said about the impact of violence on both victims and perpetrators, and the intergenerational nature of the effects of trauma.¹³

With each writer, Isaksen asks if there are things they can't or find difficult to write about. In response, Keret identifies three taboos that are all closely linked to personal grief: soldiers killed fighting, the Holocaust and victims of terrorism. He says, 'You must not criticise them, and you must not humanize them. But I do, I'm always writing about them in my short stories' (37). He believes these three taboos also 'help to underline the need for Israel's continued existence' and when Isaksen asks if this has something to do with the role of the victim as well, he replies:

'Something in the myth of the victim fuels the myth of heroism. You only have two choices: to be a victim or a hero. There is no third option.'

'But if there was, would the alternative be to be human?' (37)

Keret shrugs, he's been talking for several hours, they pay the bill and get up to go before he responds:

To be human? That doesn't seem to be particularly relevant to most people around here.' (37)

They have come to the end of their conversation and the thoughtful and profound issues discussed are underlined by the observed casualness of Keret – I am struck by Isaksen's

ability to take the conversation into places I hadn't imagined, and moved by Keret's openness.

As he makes his way back and forth between meetings with Israeli and Palestinian writers in 2003, Isaksen says 'Sometimes I feel like a messenger between two distant planets' (104). At the various Israeli checkpoints he bears witness as Palestinians are forced to wait in thirty metre queues, or as a soldier raises a gun, shouts. No matter what happens though, the Palestinians remain patient, expressionless, and Isaksen says, 'I stand there trembling, more than ready to throw myself down in the dust' (114).

Liana Badr¹⁴ – 'My aim is to survive'

Badr's story is largely one of exile and being forced to seek asylum in one country after another.¹⁵ So, for her, she says, writing has been a form of resistance:

I wanted to rebuild what had been destroyed. I realized that the Israelis would continue to persecute us and try to obliterate our memories, so I thought I could do the opposite, I could save lives – by remembering (149).

Isaksen meets with her three times and she argues passionately that literature has played an important role in helping to form a kind of national Palestinian identity. Her voice is clear, strong and passionate.

When you live with people who are oppressed, occupied, controlled, imprisoned, humiliated, murdered, then as a writer, you are the voice of freedom that brings a sense of pride. Because literature is the bird of freedom in your soul ... [it] is somehow living out our humanity ... it gives us strength and it also opens the way for dialogue with others (155).

In his last interview with her, however, Badr reveals she is no longer writing: 'Before, I vowed that I would write every day, but now I'm too frightened and anxious, and don't have the energy. With Israeli tanks thundering around me, writing is no longer foremost in my mind' (158). Isaksen leaves the statement hanging but I feel moved by depths of sadness that this feisty woman has given up (at least for now) the very thing that has sustained her. I feel her tiredness and sense of despair that the conflict will end. And I'm reminded of those months in Beirut when we anxiously watched the madness in Gaza and prayed that Hezbollah didn't send a rocket into Israel that would expose Lebanon to a similar onslaught.

Conclusion

The inhumanity of the occupation and the suffering is unimaginable, yet this is the context into which Isaksen has stepped and with which he must also engage with me as a reader – its presence and effects infuse the conversations regardless of what is being discussed, and each writer bears witness (*testimonio*) to the lived realities of the occupation, whether as an Israeli or Palestinian. The book's key strength is that it is genuinely polyvocal with no one truth or right answer, just many considered perspectives and layers of opinion. In each section the 'other' (there are many 'others' actually) is present and the reader bears witness to the

writers' shared humanity and feelings of anger, pain, suffering, disappointment, fear and trauma, but also the joys and pleasures they take from daily living.

Isaksen establishes a friendly, respectful rapport with the writers, and what comes through is his empathy and real desire to listen and understand. He began the journey with a question and a great deal of curiosity and my guess is that he was tested and confronted as he would like me to be also. He personalises his own voice in the text as he describes, engages, questions, probes, explains and does not hold back from naming, describing or presenting the structures of inequality, which Saukko (2003) recognises as a key issue in reflexivity. With each interview he includes details of what is happening as they proceed – interruptions, meals and drinks being served, incoming phone calls, news broadcasts, joking, his anxiety about reaching the checkpoint before dark. All of which give me, the reader, a strong sense of 'being there'. Each time I return to the text I learn more, feel more, discover more. The book is skilfully crafted and, despite several meetings with many of the authors, there is a seamlessness in the text, with each topic flowing one after the other.

As for the question of whether reading the other's literature can contribute to understanding the other, it seems that all the writers thought that it could. And, could literature contribute to peace? For most the answer was no – because it is only when the occupation has ended, and a political solution has been reached, that literature will have a chance of bringing Israelis and Palestinians together in understanding and peace.

Endnotes

¹ In December 2008, Hamas fired rockets and mortar shells into Israel and Israel retaliated with air strikes that killed about 1300 Palestinians and wounded many others.

² Other terms include: personalisation, personal writing, self-reflexivity, self-reflexion, autobiography, life story.

³ I use 'reflexivity' in the broader sense as defined by Hunt and Sampson (2008: 4).

⁴ Barbara Christian (1985) makes a similar case in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (ix-xv).

⁵ DeVault (1997) notes that while personal stories have long been part of a fieldworker's notes, they have traditionally been marginalised in research reports, eg by being placed in the introduction, method section, appendices or, in some cases, removed entirely (218-19).

⁶ For example, DeVault (1997) asks: What material should be included/left out in a personal or autobiographical account? On what basis should a selection be made? What experience does the writer wish to reflect? For what purpose? How should she do that? How can this self analysis contribute to the production of knowledge? What ethical considerations should be taken into account (eg to do with confidentiality, consent, hurting people's feelings, issues of power and authority)? (224)

⁷ 'Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinised the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observer.' (Behar 1997: 14)

⁸ Derek Attridge (2004) describes this as the 'double life of the text': 'In so far as it is an act, reading responds to the *written*, performing interpretative procedures upon it [...]; in so far as it is an event, reading is performed by the *writing*' (105).

⁹ Etgar Keret. David Grossman, Yoram Kaniuk, Amos Oz, Meir Shalev, Orly Castel-Bloom, Dorit Rabinyan

¹⁰ Mahmoud Shuquair, Ghassan Zaqtan, Liana Badr, Zakariyya Muhammad, Yahya Yaklif, Sahar, Khalifeh, Mahoud Darwish and Izzat Ghazzawi

¹¹ Isaksen's list of questions also included: What was the position of the author and literature in Israel and Palestine? What were they free to write or not write about? What actually happens in the texts they have written? What role did the Holocaust play in Jewish/Israeli literature and identity? Did literature contribute to forming a sense of national identity? (9-12).

¹² For example, they discuss Jewish identity and Israeli identity, the absence of humour in Israeli writing, differences between different generations of writers (24).

¹³ We learn later that Keret had a friend in the army who committed suicide.

¹⁴ Liana Badr is Director of Art at the Palestinian Ministry of Culture and, when he speaks to her by phone in 2002 as they waited for Israeli forces to withdraw from the West Bank, she is he says 'apoplectic': 'She raged against Israel and the new occupation and railed against the Jewish settlements on the hills above Ramallah. Much of the shooting was coming from there. ... [and] she no longer dared use the office for fear of getting shot ... I searched for something suitable to say. And I remember thinking to myself that even though we were so close now ... I was still unable to see and truly understand what she was going through' (148).

¹⁵ Badr's family fled Palestine during the Six-Day War in 1967 and went to live in Amman. She married the Palestinian activist, Yasser Abed Rabbo and in 1971 they were forced to flee Jordan to Beirut where she had a family, worked with women in the refugee camps, and began writing. In 1982, the Palestinians were forced out of Beirut and she moved to Damascus (149).

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