

Language Was My Home: I had it in my mind - but not on my tongue (Grappling with Aphasia)

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Abstract

Language was my home. I had a prolonged aphasic speech and writing block. Felt as if I was in exile. I slowly fought my way back amongst the 'language owners.' Because of my funny stroke-induced accent, people tend to treat me like a foreigner. I began to write lyrics and prose to improve my language ability and also to show 'them,' as well as myself, that I can do it. And that I can say again: language is my home.

Keywords

Silencing, language-as-identity, aphasia, writing-as-retrieval

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Introduction

Aware of the rift between thought and spoken word, which was ushered in by the unwelcome guest Aphasia, I felt compelled to mirror the thoughts through writing. Using the process of writing, I kind of placed the written into a retrieval space, wherefrom I could begin to choose the wanted word. I experience writing like a bridge between thought and speaking.

The poems are perceptions of fighting back into the spoken. Going through experiences from not wanting to hear what Aphasia did to my voice, to being confronted by a bottomless pit, the abyss, and then words with an invisibility cloak on. Those are a few of the insights of feelings and knowings that I want to portray.

I always thought of language to be my home. Aphasia changed that. But only partially. I let my inner voice, my thoughts be active. When I started to write again, I used it - the writing - to bring my thoughts a bit closer to my speech. The spoken voice was locked up in my head, and I had to think of different ways to get the words onto my tongue. So, in a way, I grappled with the limits of language, to overcome it.

Don't want to see¹

I don't want to see
what the stroke
did to me

walk, walk, walk

through
moss covered forest
moss over my eyes

walk, walk ,walk

through
moss covered forest
shrouded in veil

asking the butterfly

through
not hearing my voice
do I undermine myself?

transmitting
that I don't want to hear myself
because my voice sounds

too dreadful



Corinne Othenin-Girard, collage of magazine clippings

¹ See Othenin-Girard, 2017, pp. 74-75.

Can no more ignore²

where am I
far, far away
don't want to see

not yet

in my mind, I'm no other
in my mind I'm complete
don't want to see

broken mirror

I can't hear my voice
don't want to know
that right arm of mine

now I have said it
can no more ignore

Wordfindings and interruptions

his (b)looming 'which' I try to answer
for Beckett³ wrote
*to drill one hole after another
into it [language]
until that which lurks behind
be it something or nothing
starts seeping through
lurking behind*
is the 'Abgrund' - an abyss
you find yourself confronted with a bottomless pit
without any possibility
to utter or write anything understandable
but your thoughts are present
producing soundlessness
you are not alone in that abyss

To represent the unspeakable
is somehow familiar to me - yet in a different way
silence is not a utopian state for me
it was forced on me
fought it tooth and nail

² See Othenin-Girard, 2017, p. 68.

³ See Samuel Beckett's letter to Axel Kaun on July 9, 1937, in Beckett, 2009, p. 518.

was catapulted into speechlessness
and writing - knew single letters
but put them together into a word - no chance
*je vais continuer*⁴ (as Beckett's nameless man said)
continuing writing and speaking or trying to
again and again scanning my thoughts
giving them a point of fixation
written thoughts are fixed thoughts
inner voice - mine - was speaking
and energy went into thinking

I had it in my mind - but not on my tongue
words crawled into a swamp hole
they have an invisibility cloak on
speechlessness is being in no-man's land
my identity won't settle for that
plucked every word out of the swamp hole
again and again and again
polyglot I am
I've got a word collection by now
in any case I've come a long way
my speech knows intermissions
sometimes a word disappears in an undertow
I don't care what others think (do I really?)
I can write now - write better than I speak
don't hear the interruptions whilst writing

I couldn't talk any more
my exophasia was aphasic
but I could think
immense boost got my inner voice
talking without sound
Beckett⁵ calls it
voice without a mouth
my inner voice burbling quite happily along
writing retrieves my speech - it is
like a bridge
between thinking and the spoken
a must is writing for me
journeying through the bumpy terrain
to prove that
thinking I escaped the speechless

In his essay *On the gradual
formulation of thought while speaking*

⁴ See Beckett, 1953) *L'Innommable*.

⁵ See Beckett, 1984, p. 152

Heinrich von Kleist⁶ denoted
thoughts develop through the process of speaking
if so for some reason
the act of speaking were to get interrupted
it would mean - according to Kleist
that any thought would be suspended in time
waiting for the speaking to return again
I have experienced this speechlessness
yet my thoughts compensated
through reflection, observation and creation
I wasn't thrilled about being silenced
my thoughts I had - and
spoke in my inner voice

Piss off, aphasia!⁷

Piss off, aphasia!
go jump in a lake
and yet, she rides on my back
sometime I can shake her off
sometimes only

when anger set my voice free of her claws
I'm staggered
no word pauses
no silent sounding out of my almost right words
plainly shot from the belly

aphasia
you don't stand a chance
against the fire in my belly
don't you see, I am laughing at you
you can go now

nobody will mourn over you
this notch, that you cut in me
is neatly growing together
and flowers begin to burgeon
even in italian

aphasia
you do not
stand a chance
against
the fire in my belly

⁶ See von Kleist, 2009, p. 255.

⁷ See Othenin-Girard, 2017, pp. 98-99

I drew a burning castle⁸

I said to her
'No idea what's the meaning of a burning castle'
She replied

Sometime you will know

Sometime is now
What that stroke did to me
Is like a burning and pillaging

Sometimes you will see

I see ...
Now I'll see what?
That all is better now?

Sometimes you will heal

Are you joking?
Fine, some new places are opened now
but the burning hurt badly

Sometimes the question echoes
And the answer goes walk-about

⁸ See Othenin-Girard, 2017, p. 69

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