

Pandemic Imaginations

Writing in a Time of Epidemic

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Abstract:

Prima facie, so far it has been and still is impossible to offer a proper study of the literary manifestation of covid19 – the epidemic is not quite over yet; one doesn't have yet an historical perspective of it; writing, and moreover publishing, require time.

However, there are early sprouts of writing on covid19. We shall focus on Dana Freibach-Heifetz's book, *In the Desert of Things* ("Numbers, Deuteronomy"), which was written in Hebrew during the first two months of the epidemic (2-3/2020).

The book is composed of 113 fragments in various genres, which spread a fan of voices, sights and feelings of life under the epidemic – from everyday details (e.g. the engagement with food) to more cultural and philosophical layers (like concepts of inside and outside), combining realism with a world of dreams and fantasy. These micro-stories create a collage of images that captures the new reality. The book was published in two versions: one is only textual, and the other includes 36 color photographs by the artist Yoram Kupermintz, that create a rich dialogue with the texts.

The paper examines the relation between the stylistic characterizations of this book – the form of fragments, various genres, and the combination of the texts with visual images – and its nature as a book which was written right in the eye of the Covid's storm. Furthermore, it exposes the thematic means that literary writing in a time of epidemic can use, in order to confront the trauma of such

an extreme experience: myths; fresh glance at daily life, humor and fantasy; alongside a critical examination of the ars-poetics of such a writing.

This paper is a rare collaboration of the author, who is also a philosopher, and a literary researcher. Together, they aim to bring new perspectives of literature under Covid 19 in particular, and life in a time of epidemic in general, and the unique attributes it brings.

Keywords: Epidemic, Fragments, Genres, Trauma

One can talk about trauma, and perhaps also about disassociation. About the unbearable and the unresolved. Fear of collapse (whether conceivable or not). The ability to contain. Defenses. Their breakdown. Survival versus extinction (what survives? what becomes extinct?). Subversion and reconstruction. Regression. The attempt to convert psychosis into neurosis. Either way, reality evades the stubborn attempt to understand it. What good would words do.

But at certain moments the need to talk is felt, and of all things, in terms of standing at the threshold of a black hole.

And then of falling into it.¹

This passage from Dana Freibach-Heifetz's book, *In the Desert of Things* ("Numbers, Deuteronomy") not only contains short and fragmented sentences, and uses many periods, as if the speaker is short of breath, but also generates a fast pace that fuels anxiety. The

¹ Dana Heifetz, *In the Desert of Things* (Tel-Aviv, 2021), №56. The translation of fragments from this book is by Shir Freibach.

text staccatos “Collapse. Breakdown. Extinction. standing at the threshold of a black hole”. Freibach-Heifetz's book was written in February and March 2020, In the midst of the first wave of COVID19, when no one knew how it would change the world, and millions of people were quarantine. This book was thus one of the first to confront the trauma of the pandemic.

The book is composed of 113 fragments in various genres, encompassing a range of voices, sights and senses of life during the epidemic that range from everyday details (e.g. eating) to more cultural and philosophical concerns (like the concepts of inside and outside), and combines realism with the world of dreams and fantasy that portray the **archetype** of a plague. The book was published in two versions, one of which includes 36 color photographs by Yoram Kupermintz that create a rich dialogue with the texts.

This talk examines Freibach-Heifetz's text to articulate the relationship between the stylistic features of this book – such as using fragments, different genres and points of view, the combination of texts with visual images – and its thematic components, with the fact that it was written dead center in the eye of COVID storm.

(A) Style

Trauma is our starting point, and more specifically: an experience of an ineffable split in reality.¹ Trauma theorists such as

¹ Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra all consider that the structure of experience and the pathology of events cannot be fully assimilated by the psyche, and are repeatedly replayed in the mind's eye. See the works of Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Geoffrey Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies", *New Literary History* Vol, 26 (1995), 537-563; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Robert Eaglestone, "Knowledge, 'Afterwardness' and The Future of Trauma Theory", *The*

Dominik LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth have examined the power of literature to deviate from realism through devices such as retrospection, deconstruction and reconstruction of memory, repetitions, and fragmentation.¹ When a theorist such as Stef Craps maintain that "trauma theories often justify their focus on anti-narrative, fragmented, modernist forms of pointing to similarities with the psychic experience of trauma", he means that when critics talk about trauma in literature they tend to refer to literary modes that disrupt the "conventional mode of representation, such as can be found in modernist art."² Specific narrative techniques, usually adhering to notions endorsed by post-structuralism and deconstruction, are thought to be the most potent ways to communicate trauma.

Another key component of theories of trauma representation is the relationship between trauma and graphic vision. Judith Herman noted that "traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images."³ As she points out, "the ultimate goal [...] is to put the story,

Future of Trauma Theory (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014).

¹ Fragmentation and the deconstruction of realistic literary norms drive LaCapra's reading of Borowski and Morrison, Felman's reading of Albert Camus' works, and Caruth's reading of Resnais and Dorfman. In this sense, it is not surprising that the literary theory of trauma has evolved through the writings of poststructuralists and deconstructionalist writers such as Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

² Craps, "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma theory and the Global age", *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary Criticism*, eds. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 45-62, esp. 50.

Craps reads Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* to show that "literary realism, which does not derive its haunting power from the convention of turning unspeakable suffering into broken, traumatized speech," can express traumatic expression as well (Craps, "Beyond Eurocentrism", 57). Roger Luckhurst shares this criticism when he discusses texts and cultural forms of trauma narrative. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 82-83.

³ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 38.

including its imagery, into words", but obviously many texts that delve into trauma use visual, realistic or imaginary snapshots.

The first poetic device implemented in *In the Desert of Things* ("Numbers, Deuteronomy") is fragmentation. The book itself is a collection of fragments. However, some of the **fragments themselves** are written in a fragmented, disassembled style as **lists** of actions, objects, feelings, concepts or imperatives that express the incomprehensible nature of the experience and its absurdity. The fragment we cited earlier, is a good example; and more so is the next one:

The archives still hold some copies of the pasquinades that were posted at that time in the streets of cities and villages. They read:

Solidarity in the community is crucial now more than ever (nobody wants to be alone).

You are requested to do. To hang up to ensure to remain to safeguard to organize and to sing.

And especially: to not stop.

The current time is challenging.

Each and every one of us must demonstrate social responsibility.

We join the call: possibilities. Adjust ourselves. Be ready.

A new era summons widespread global possibilities.

An important educational lesson that teaches agility and adaptability to changing needs in an age of uncertainty.

A huge opportunity for leveraging.

We are doing all we can. Standing together in these difficult days. Assisting as well as receiving ample support.

We shall not give up!

Life goes on!!!¹

¹ *In the Desert of Things*, #20.

This fragment mimics "erasure poems" where the author takes a text (in this case, an email sent by the dean of the college where she teaches) and deletes words from it, mainly conjunctions, thereby produces a new, **defamiliarized** text.

Lists and catalogues also reflect an attempt to **hang onto** acts and objects when causal or rational explanations fail to produce satisfactory responses. Putting them in a list eliminates any type of hierarchical relationship and assigns an **equal** value to them all. This intensifies the loss of meaning and priorities in the extreme situation of a plague, by turning them into nonsense.

Another poetic technique that expresses the traumatic nature of this experience is the merging of genres. The book is characterized by a mixture of genres that includes prose, poetry, documentary and contemplative texts. It also takes different points of view in that the fragments are written in the first, second or third person, in the singular or the plural. All these different nameless voices are juxtaposed, creating a collage of images, thoughts, feelings and micro-stories. This multiplicity is designed to reflect a reality which cannot be conceived as one coherent story.

In terms of the visual aspect of the text, the book is a dialogue between the texts and Yoram Kupermintz's photographs. Kupermintz is a multidisciplinary artist, who has held dozens of exhibitions in Israel and abroad. Kupermintz suffers from PTSD from the 1973 War, whose horrors left a profound mark on his artistic work. The book emerged from a poetic dialogue between the author and the artist, and once the text was written, 36 out of hundreds of photographs were selected to complement the text by adding various layers of meanings – ironic, painful, tender or yearning – that demonstrate the comforting power of beauty to confront the pandemic.

(B) Themes

Covid 19 has caused huge losses all over the world. These range from the loss of daily routines, the loss of personal freedom of movement, human companionship and intimacy, and the death of loved ones. These losses are embodied in the fragments of this text but are combined with other, less tangible contexts of loss, such as the loss of meaning and sensemaking, especially as transmitted via cultural institutions and schools which normally provide value, sense and comfort in difficult times but became yet another black hole during the lockdowns. Psychology was rendered speechless (as seen in the opening fragment), and philosophy is dying, as have new age pursuits such as astrology, numerology, pagan rituals and Zen meditation.

These have been replaced by myths and tales that correspond to helplessness and despair such as the doomed Greek mythological characters Sisyphus and Kasandra or the pessimistic book of Ecclesiastes. The title of the book itself in Hebrew: "במדבר דברים" ("Numbers, Deuteronomy") traces an ancient, exhausting journey that expended many lifetimes before the Hebrews reached the promised land.

In such a disastrous time, comfort can be derived from simple things. First and foremost, from a fresh glance at daily life, which has suddenly become so precious. This is illustrated by a bowl of soup, the flora and fauna around us even when reduced to the bare minimum, the routine of housework, music, manifestations of human solidarity.

Often, these everyday events are described from a new, somewhat humoristic perspective, such as the shortages of toilet paper:

Did you ever think about the splendor of toilet paper?
The unadulterated whiteness.
The softness.
The generosity with which it puts itself at your disposal.
The compassion with which it gathers unto itself all
your filth so that you will be able to go on with your
affairs, clean, unperturbed.
The magnanimity with which it accepts the
ungratefulness of being discarded post-use, without ever
being contemplated by anyone.
Did you ever think what will happen when all the toilet
paper in the world is exhausted?¹

It is shocking to compare the pandemic to the horrors of the Holocaust. However, Ruth Bondi, a Holocaust survivor showed how humor in the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto, helped cope with extreme situations. She says:

In humor there was consolation, a momentary victory over reality, a touch of illusion, a trace of freedom. Humor helped the inmates hold out as long as they could, to maintain the integrity of their personalities, to cast off fear, to chuckle instead of giving in, to disguise the dread, to view the present as temporary, a bridge to tomorrow.²

Humor is a way to face reality and transform the trauma into a bearable picture. Fantasy is another source of comfort. Quite a few fragments describe fantastic places or elements, which alongside escapism also create an effect of estrangement that reflects people's

¹ *Ibid*, #10.

² R. Bondi, R. C. Naor, *Trapped: Essays on the History of the Czech Jews, 1939-1945*. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2008), p.89. See also: Liat Steir-Livny, *Is it OK to Laugh About It?: Holocaust Humour, Satire and Parody in Israeli Culture* (London & Portland: Vallentine Mitchel, 2017).

feelings during the plague, such as imaginary places like North Pangea and the Kingdom of Lumaria, or being kidnapped by aliens who take their captives to a new paradise.

Last but not least, much comfort can be found in writing. There are quite a few references to ars-poetics in the book, including constant doubts regarding its very possibility and value, and repeated statements like "there's nothing to say about it". Nevertheless, the book was written, and a certain number of fragments express optimism regarding the act of writing, such as the one that appears on the cover:

Out of me writing on and on, the world reverses to its dawn.

I write garden, and a garden grows and rises up from the ground. Its paths spread before my feet.

I write man, and he emerges and comes around the bend and runs towards me to embrace me.

I write mountains and rivers and sky and sea. And behold, mountains and rivers and sky and sea.

I write bustling streets, cafes crowded with people, concert halls in whose spaces music is playing, theatres on whose stages words are spoken and dancers twirl. And they rise before my eyes and their sounds fill my ears and their movement sends currents which tremble my body with thousands of tiny vibrations.

I write: I.¹

Thus, the ability to imagine and write what one imagines in fact has a godlike power to **recreate** the lost world destroyed by the pandemic. It enables the writer to recreate **herself** as an artist, perhaps even as a human being.

These poetic means do not negate the trauma, but treat it with aesthetic distance, often creating the distancing that is necessary in

¹ *In the Desert of Things*, N°108.

such circumstances. They do not make a moral judgment – no one is guilty or responsible for this traumatic event – although the book does suggest some ethical ways to behave in such circumstances and relate to them; from this aspect, the book can also be seen as an essay on the human condition.

(C) Conclusions

Can we discuss writing in a time of pandemic when COVID19 is not over? Can we say something meaningful without a proper historical perspective?

In our talk we focused on one example: Freibach-Heifetz's *In the Desert of Things*. We showed how the fragmented text aims to cope with the trauma. We discussed the variety of juxtaposed points of view and genres that result in a text about the trauma that is universal, perhaps archetypal, but at the same time very personal and intimate, while meticulously resisting the temptation to provide a coherent account of the pandemic which would betray its dissociative nature. We demonstrated how the text offers a picture of life during COVID and the use of humor, fantasy and myth. In its writing, the text confronts these traumatic events that are still upending our world.

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