

Love, Life, and Mrs. Bojangles.

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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28.07.2017

אהבה, חיים, וגברת בוג'נגלס.

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת (תואר שני)

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

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28.07.2017

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Introduction

One of the first poems I ever read, or at least I like to believe it to have been the first, was 'When We Two Parted' by Lord Byron. I say I believe it to have been the first because it was the first time I felt something from reading a poem, an identification, with the words, perhaps even the style. My love and relationship with the poem would grow and develop as I did. Long before I knew the meaning of this poem, I knew we shared something. Long before I read Byron's biography I knew we were made of the same matter. Sometimes it takes just one poem to draw you in and make a lasting bond with a way of life, a feeling, a belief. This is what happened to me. One cannot fall in love with Byron and his way of life without crossing paths with two very dear friends of his, Keats and Shelley. Their beliefs too, I immediately identified with. In my poetry, I wish to explore theirs, along with the work of other poets I've encountered along the way.

Aims and General Description

This collection of poems and prose will address the changing role of the individual throughout his or her life; the dilemmas in which we find ourselves in matters of love, family and society; the struggle between what the soul desires and that which the reality of life demands. The collection will be split into three sections; the speaker's past, present, and future. The poems will include autobiographical narratives and love lyrics. Poems engaged in direct conversation with certain poets will be written in the original form used by the poet being addressed.

Conceptual Background.

In 360 B.C.E. Plato said that we have three souls. The rational soul (mind or intellect) is the thinking portion within each of us, which discerns what is real and not merely apparent, judges what is true and what is false, and wisely makes the rational decisions in accordance with which human life is lived properly. The spirited soul (will or volition) is the active portion; its function is to carry out the dictates of reason in practical life, courageously doing whatever the intellect has determined to be best. Finally, the appetitive soul (emotion or desire) is the portion of each of us that wants and feels many things, most of which must be deferred in the face of rational pursuits if we are to achieve a salutary degree of self-control.

Plato's view was that a human being is properly said to be just when the three souls perform their proper functions in harmony with each other, working in consonance for the good of the person. It is this harmony that I want to explore and continue within my poetry, the true self in all its beauty. And if as Homer says in *The Odyssey*, "Of all creatures that breathe and move upon the earth, nothing is bred that is weaker than man," I want to ask why an individual is not strong enough to be himself, to develop the self.

My obvious influence comes from the Romantic period, Shelley, Keats, and Byron; Byron being by far for me, the true, new Romantic, the giver of his soul into everything he did. One wonders if he balanced the three souls of Plato, or just simply lived. It is possible they are one of the same. One would imagine, from the numerous and infamous stories that he simply lived and his 'appetitive soul' was the predominant; although if we look deeper we can see the other two aspects of the soul quite clearly in this epitome of the Romantic era. As he notes in *Don Juan*.

“And will not love dare to trust itself in truth,
And Love is taught hypocrisy from youth”.

Byron’s Don Juan was on a personal quest to interrogate the purpose of life, of course, but he also interrogated the writers who came before:

“Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;
Because the first is crazed beyond all hope,
The second drunk, the third so quaint and mouthy”.

Coleridge at least returned the insult when he said of Byron “He is beautiful, his eyes are like portals of the sun”. No mention of talent!

The poems in this thesis are also influenced by the poet and musician, Bob Dylan, the recent Nobel Prize recipient for literature. In particular, I emulate his style of expression, which gives the impression of a spontaneous and sincere expression of belief and feeling through common place words and simple sentence structure. For years I have pleased in his punchy aphorism from “Love Mins Zero, No Limit” - “She knows there’s no success like failure and that failure’s no success at all”. Also, his use of figurative language is very subtle.

From the same song, we can take the line “The bridge at midnight trembles”. This personification of the bridge is hardly felt. Dylan’s genius will always be the words, the combination of thought, heart, and the fact that that he was not scared to borrow from history. Indeed, the structure of the song “A Hard Rains A-Gonna Fall” is based on the British ballad “Lord Randall”. Dylan takes it to his place, as did the romantics when they too, borrowed from the past.

Another influence for this project is Walt Whitman, a man who tried to bring a nation together with his poetry. Whitman was a man who wrote and spoke from the heart, as in this following quote from *Leaves of Grass*.

“I am enamour’d of growing out-doors,
 Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
 Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses,
 I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.
 What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,”

Ironically with Trump’s America today, this book could resurface as a very important document to America’s future progress. I will also answer Whitman and try to bring him into the modern era. I will enter direct conversation with Whitman, elaborating on many of the issues he tackled in *Leaves of Grass* as a fellow human who wants the same things.

I also look to poets who have written in dialogue with the three romantics I mentioned earlier. For example, Mike Smith’s collection, *Byron in Baghdad*, is written in heroic couplets, like Byron’s dramatic poems. This form both entices the reader forward and, at the same time leaves him in suspense.

The idea that the conversation is with Byron was appealing to me, and I would like my poems to talk to these poets as humans, as we are sitting over a coffee, or perhaps, as Galway Kinnell did in his poem “Oatmeal,” over a bowl of porridge. I admire Kinnell’s wonderful poem for its simple and humorous style. I enjoyed the humour of Kinnell imagining what Keats might have said and by having him read his poem, he brought Keats right up to the present. Just the thought of Keats sitting at the table in the 1980’s is exciting. I will include a series of conversation poems in my thesis

Shape of Project

This project will deal with the question of free will and the individual asking if we have really made the right choices in terms of love, and beauty. I will draw from my own experiences growing up in London, England, and the effect London society had upon me. Wherever possible I will make a parallel between incidents in my life to those of my influences. Plato's theory of the three souls will guide my inquiry. I will especially focus on Plato's concept that man cannot live only for himself, but for the society, with each of us having our given gift, which we are duty bound to perform and carry out. At what point, if any does one relinquish the desire to develop one soul more than the other? At what cost should the individual succumb to social pressures to conform, if any? These questions will also be a guiding force both when addressing my own experiences and those of the poets from the romantic period.

This autobiographical project consists of three sections. The first will deal with my past and address very specific events and turning points in my life. Here I draw from Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry: "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility". This section will examine moments that have shaped me as a person, although I did not recognize them as such then. This section will represent hindsight, in which I can look back and understand where certain attributes or behaviors stemmed from. It is here that my poems will directly address poetic personae of Lord Byron, Walt Whitman, Bob Dylan, as well as Keats, and, Shelley. I will set to them direct questions about their life and actions, sometimes outside of the sphere of their poetry, although in many cases, the two are entwined. I will attempt to engage their minds in hope of seeing them in a different light.

I will use their texts, poems, prose, and letters as my base and then try to directly compare a few personal events.

The second part will chronicle the present moment, and explore the tensions between the individual's free will and how each of Plato's three souls (rational, spirited, and appetitive) influence the strictures placed upon him by society, culture, family obligations, etc. I am keen to explore the notion of what might happen if we were to selfishly focus on one soul. Once again, I will tackle these issues when conducting conversations with poets; for example, with Byron one might be led to believe that his appetitive soul was the domineering amongst the three!

This question of all three working together in harmony creates great interest, because it begs the question of what is perfect harmony, what is it that drives man, how can we even know these things, for society, as Plato states, has made man a product and not a self, so these true feelings have been suppressed for centuries. Even today as we have broken so many boundaries, a different kind of society is dictating for the individual what to do, to wear, to say.

Lastly, I will step lightly and carefully into the future and ask questions of society and where it is taking us to, also addressing Plato's theory that society must be made up of the individual working together as a whole and not for the self. Perhaps now more than ever, this theory could be a possible answer, as could Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, as could Byron's "Darkness", and equally so Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall". Can there be a place on earth for each of us to be who he wants, who we need to be? Can society survive with this as its base?

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