

Leftovers

A Thesis Proposal in Creative Writing

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13/11/2019

שאריות

הצעת מחקר לתזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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מנחה: פרופ' מרצלה שולק

13/11/2019

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Introduction

Growing up in a loving home with my Alzheimer-diagnosed grandmother created maternal feelings in me towards this woman who had raised seven boys and two girls after the death of her husband, and also towards all elderly women. I have witnessed the stages of the disease as it was taking its toll on my grandmother, - consuming more of her brain cells. This made her extremely forgetful, like an innocent child. However, forgetfulness results in a questioned credibility. Eventually, I found myself worrying about all those people whose reality is different from ours, due to hallucinations, loss of memory; some cannot speak for themselves, and even if they manage to utter the words, they are not taken seriously. Thus, they usually end up all alone, with no one to care for them unless the caregiver receives a wage. In this thesis these are called leftover people.

My grandmother's illness left her only a couple of sentences, including lines of poetry, and wiped out the rest of her vocabulary. My grandmother's passion for poetry was passed through the generations so that before I was ten years old, I was able to compete in poetry competitions. However, as I grew older I began to notice that poetry is not recited that often, and that people no longer pass this inheritance to their offspring. As an heir, I consider myself responsible for reminding people of the beauty and importance of poetry. Writing in English may seem an odd way to revive the passion for poetry in Arab society. However, foreign-language poetry can encourage people to dig into the poetry of their mother-tongue languages, and appreciate the poems in the foreign one.

Aims and General Description

“Leftovers” will consist of a collection of about 48 poems that are divided into two sections. The first section will deal with “Leftover” culture, entering the mindset of both the consumer citizens as well as the leftover ones. By leftover people I am referring to neglected people with questioned credibility such as elderly people, mentally-ill patients, and more.

The second section will be dedicated to formally experimental poems, as an outcome of free experimental writing.

Conceptual Background

The poems in my thesis shed a light on themes that are vital for maintaining healthy relationships between people in society, such as respect, empathy, equality and more. I have drawn, for models to think about these issues, on the poetry of Martha Collins, Terrance Hayes, Edgar Allan Poe and T.S Eliot. These models operate in both the realistic world setting, and in the inner landscape of the lyrical.

Martha Collins's poetry book *White Papers*, as well as Terrance Hayes's *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin* dwell on large issues in the American society, such as discrimination against black people. The poetry raises the individuals' awareness of this important matter, in the hope of shaping a better society, where everyone's voices are equally heard. Their poems are documentary poems that reflect on personal anecdotes and news, which give the people whose voices are low or even mute a "speaker" and some space. People whose voices are so loud that they cover up the whispers of invisible citizens, usually consume every space available whether in real concrete platforms or on paper as in a poem. Therefore, one effective way of reminding the dominant members of society of the existence of other people as well, is by cutting or erasing some space leaving the invisible people some vacancy that takes the shape of their whispery voices.

In his book *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin* Terrance Hayes acts as a mediator between the voices of both the dominating and the dominated. He mentions unknown characters that are hidden from society. His poems create empathy in their readers. For example, "Something happens everywhere in this country/ Every day. Someone is praying, someone is prey." (P. 39) and "The names alive are like the names in the graves" (P. 12) connect the

individuals, whoever they were, to a larger frame that is both the community and the poem itself. Although it is merely a world play, it does say something about what lies beneath it. These poems are addressed to black people's assassin, aka the white man. Discrimination against a specific race is connected to the politics of the country, and politics is a dangerous game in which players play with words. Hence, the word play in the – ironically – “American” sonnet is a mirror to what happens every day in society; some white man is praying, some black man is prey.

When bringing prohibited or sensitive issues into the light and putting them in the hands of society, one has to be careful as if dealing with a bomb that could explode any moment. Therefore, in *White Papers*, Martha Collins plays with the words she intends by omitting or breaking them, leaving the readers implicated at the end of the line in a trespass they have committed by stepping into the blank space in their own imagination, for example,

“to mention our young president

Who could scarcely have been

imagined when we when I-” (P. 64)

It is important to explore the doubleness of this pattern. On the one hand, certain words may be omitted due to their relation to sensitive racial topics such as the word “nigger”. Choosing to omit these words is an act of feigned oblivion towards the racial acts that white people commit. On the other hand, they are words. They represent language and are crucial for the completion of the syntax structure of sentences.

In the final poem in the book we realize that the poet has “gone back/ and filled in some blanks,” (P. 64) meaning that she has revised the previous poems and decided which words should not have been omitted, and added them again. This challenges us to figure out the positions of the

recently-filled in blanks in the previous poems. Reading *White Papers* has inspired me to write by omitting and breaking words, such as “useless,” “burden,” “old,” “unreliable,” “liar,” and more to address the sensitive issue of leftover people.

In general, both Terrance Hayes’s and Martha Collins’s poetry deal with real-life situations. Two poets who have served as my guides for the second part of the thesis are T.S Eliot and Edgar Allan Poe, for their ability to depict scenes, their vocabulary, musical devices and, most importantly, their use of surrealism.

T.S Eliot is notable for his ability to set a scene – particularly a melancholic one, for example, in the poem “The Portrait of a Lady,” which begins, “Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon.” The poem takes the readers into the gloom with eyes wide open. After all, the speaker has “saved this afternoon for you.” These mysterious atmospheres featured in Eliot’s most famous poems, nearly always depict air that has become visible, such as “The evening is spread out against the sky/ Like a patient etherised upon a table.” (*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*) Similarly, the earth-related elements in his poems tend to be unresolved somehow, as in “half-deserted streets.” These elements create a kind of surrealism, in which two worlds merge together and a new world is born. His poems combine both the real, as in “the evening,” and the imaginary, as in the “etherised patient.” This gloomy surrealism reinforces the reservation of the readers, for although they grasp the words, they cannot put their fingers on their effect. These uneasily expressed feelings and emotions are what I am striving to achieve in the lyrical poems in the thesis.

T. S Eliot is also a model of musicality. His constant use of end-rhymes echoes the mystical surrealism in his poems. For example in these lines from his poem “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” “Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life.’/ The last twist of the knife” the first line sounds

like-hypnosis. Then, the following line echoes that dread in hypnotizing someone with the use of the word “knife” that rhymes with “life.” This patterned musical beat creates a contract between the author and the audience, in which the audience expects the author to be consistent with the pattern he/she offers at the beginning of the poem. It is likely that T.S Eliot’s readers will encounter such patterns in most of his works. It is important to note that the use of end-rhymes sometimes highlights certain words at the end of the lines, particularly, when the pattern of the rhymes is intentionally broken.

What draws me to Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry is the combination of dark tones and the beauty of language. Many of his poems deal with death such as “The Raven,” “Annabel Lee,” and “The Lake.” However, the words are simply beautiful. In his poem “The City in the Sea”: “Lo! Death has reared himself a throne/ In a strange city lying alone” he leads us into a peculiar world of his own, surrounded by terror and dread. Yet, it is still admirable and alluring, especially for those whose reality is different from ours, such as leftover people. Edgar Allan Poe’s poems reflect the beautifully seductive side of horror and death, which shows the readers a surrealist world which “leftovers” – who experience suicidal thoughts at a higher rate than the general population – inhabit sometimes.

Shape of Project

The thesis will take us into a number of different worlds entering the mindset of the people who inhabit them. It will guide us through a cozy grandmother's house that smells of love and freshly baked cookies into a dark cold basement, and right out of the window, up in the air towards the *second star to the right and straight on till morning*. This span incorporates both the lyrical and narrative subgenres of poetry. The project will be compromised of two sections featuring; leftover people, in the narrative genre, and set in a real or surreal world, and formally experimental poems, in the lyrical genre, and set in realistic and/or imaginary realms.

The poems in the first section will be narrative, telling the stories of the characters whose credibility might be questioned because of health issues, age, or personality. Some characters would be Leftovers, while others are the ones who "threw" them away in fictional narratives. According to Booth (1961) in *Rhetoric Fiction*, unreliable narration does not necessarily indicate intentional deceitfulness, rather unconsciousness and lack of self-awareness, as it is the case in leftover people. The Leftover characters in this manuscript are unreliable narrators due to mental issues, such as hallucinations and old age, while others may have questioned credibility due to certain motives and personal interests. Some of the poems will be indirectly told from the perspective of the leftover people, in order to depict the world through their eyes using inanimate objects, such as a stained bedsheet, or a phone.

Some of these poems will experiment with surrealism, since most of the leftover people's realities are different from ours. The world of the poem will be a result of the collision of two realities; ours, and theirs.

The mystical and mysterious world of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry helps me dive into worlds of people who have a different sense of reality, such as people with Schizophrenia, Alzheimer and drug addiction. A fair number of the characters are old parents or grandparents. The poems will depict real life encounters between people and also between speakers, and inanimate objects. Some of the poems will project a certain scene through the eyes of a neutral witness.

The second section will be free experimental writing inspired by the poetry of both T.S Eliot and Edgar Allan Poe, in terms of rhymes, language and tone. Some elements of classical Arabic poetry will appear in some of the poems, such as rhyme schemes and forms (Sadr-wa'jz).

T. S Eliot's rich and diverse vocabulary is the basis of some of the poems in the second section of "Leftovers". I have dedicated a notebook to recording Eliot's recurring words that are unfamiliar to me, such as "reiterate" and "bric-a-brac." Little by little, these words merge with the one I already have in my poetry, creating a multi-layered conversation. I will reinforce this conversation with patterned rhyming and regular meter to create musicality in the poem.

T.S Eliot's metaphors are a vehicle for surrealism, in the sense that allows two realities to exist at once. One of my favorite metaphors is from his poem "The Boston Evening Transcript" "if the street was time and he at the end of the street," where he mixes both time and two temporal realities anchored in a single space. In another line from his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" Eliot picks two realistic scenes to create a surrealist image in "Like a patient etherised upon a table." I am hoping to follow his lead in creating rich images that could be put side by side with omitted or broken words in a poem, which would make these images last longer in the readers minds. Many poems will have a number of different forms to embrace as much diversity in poetry as possible. They may be multi-genre, describing a multi-faceted reality.

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