

My Egypt
A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing
Department of English
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מצרים שלי
הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת
המחלקה לאנגלית
אוניברסיטת בר אילן

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Aims and General Description

The thesis will consist of a set of poems using biblical, mythical and fairy tale motifs to reflect on modern life and personal experience through the imagery of ancient stories and their psychological and sociological fields of meaning. The ambiguity of many of our conditions, choices and encounters—security and jealousy within families, chances and threats of career decisions, the changing faces of helplessness and power in relationships—shall be examined through the metaphor of Egypt and what it meant to Israel, in particular to Sarah who is one of the central characters of this project.

The project will use a wide range of poetic forms, traditional and modern ones. It may include some creative nonfiction pieces where content and/or tone afford a different style of writing. Thus, the thesis will follow a “methodological” objective at the same time: to examine the possibilities and limits of prose poetry with respect to its closeness to (non)fiction and to develop my own language and the prosody related elements that play a role in a strong correspondence between content and form.

Conceptual background

*First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
(...)
I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
(...)
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth*

Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" leads us into the world of myths: the power of language and storytelling. But the "myths" Rich speaks about are not something that happened in a distant past, half legendary and half recognizable human condition; to me they are today's and yesterday's encounters, the conflicts we hear and fight about, or the things I closed in and locked up in my inner self, the stories I don't want to tell. For "[t]he words" are both, enlightening and treacherous, "maps" and "purposes" at the same time. So how can we really, as Rich says, discern "the wreck" and "the story of the wreck", distinguish "the thing itself" from "the myth"?

Before I got bold enough to take my writing seriously and to go back to university to study, I had been working in political advocacy projects, education and teacher's training, youth and parent empowerment programs, and social services for more than twenty years. Here, I was always in touch with the things themselves, I thought, often right in the "eye" of events and the mishaps of

society. But in my last years as an executive, responsible for Public Relations and Human Resource management in our organization, and a math tutor in my spare time for youth with difficulties in natural sciences, I had come to understand that “the thing itself” might in fact not exist. What exists is the story we tell ourselves about what happens (or about ourselves) and the stories of others about who we are—stories we listen to and believe or resist so hard that they determine all our lives. What exists in conflict situations, is two or more stories from different perspectives. The parts we choose are what become “the thing” for us, carefully investigated, crafted and told in journalism or unconsciously taken for reality as happens often to all of us.

Personal and organizational counseling based on storytelling as therapeutic or knowledge management approach tells us that if we want to change ourselves, our achievements or what happens to us, we have to change the narrative of events and of our role in them. I could observe this psychological phenomenon with all of my math students. Every single one of them came to me with an old story of self-perception or teachers telling them they were untalented in natural sciences; sometimes their parents even saw and communicated this as a family genealogy and trait. And every single one of my students turned out to have a very clear mathematical sense and improved their achievements enormously as soon as they believed me when I showed them how talented they actually were.

This thesis follows the same idea: Through my writing, I intend to reconnoiter my story, including the hidden parts of it which determine my narrative before and throughout the facts. The core part of it will be my professional past as “involuntary manager” of a charity organization and the role(s) I took in it. I will put this story into another context, a bigger frame, and try to change it where it blocks my vision and (self-) perception. In a way this is what Adrienne Rich describes in her poem, too: diving into what lies below our perception of things in order to see them anew and tell a new story of deeper understanding.

Thus, storytelling as key instrument is what connects my becoming a writer with my former professional life—with one difference: In my job, my focus was how to change the reality of other people's lives in the first place; now it is how to tell, to read, to shape and re-shape their and my own stories, and how to transform and tell them anew so that the changed narrative alters the way I see the past—and thus changes the past itself, and that which does not yet exist.

I believe that this is what fairy tales and mythology do for us. They provide us with imagery and narrative tools to see ourselves in a different mirror, to tell the story behind the obvious, to touch the unspeakable. They offer us hope and the courage to meet the yet unknown, to explore it and incorporate it into our lives. In these stories, may they be thousands of years old, we tell ourselves and others today who we are. Adrienne Rich says it this way:

This is the place.

And I am here,

(...)

We are, I am, you are

by cowardice or courage

the one who find our way

back to this scene

carrying a knife, a camera

a book of myths

in which

our names do not appear.

Shape of project

Content:

Following the conceptual scheme of storytelling history and practice, the project will have three chapters, drawing upon three clusters of sources of literary / mythological heritage: the Bible, fairy tales, and Greek and Roman mythology. With their familiar imagery, coming from our ancestors and known since our earliest childhood, they speak to our mind and even to our subconscious and may help us to see our personal motives within the bigger picture: human experience throughout the ages.

The first and main chapter will explore the Biblical story of Sarah as central character of the whole project. Her "Egypt" stands for what frames the experience of women throughout centuries and in different contexts: faith, family, work, friendship. Using this metaphor, the poems will deal with universal topics such as obligations and responsibility, power, women's roles, abuse and freedom of choice, etc. Sarah's story of being loved, admired, becoming the involuntary center of male competition and hidden slander, being left out of crucial decisions, then taking merciless decisions herself and finally not being heard of any more forms the red thread of this first part. We will meet Hagar, the Egyptian, the Pharaoh, and other people and incidents that mark Sarah's connection to Egypt: Egypt, the very place and recurring symbol of threat and abuse, of praise and advancement and the price Sarah has to pay for it and for the survival of her husband and family. We will encounter situations and conflicts well-known to women in all times and places, which offers the chance to link the biblical stories to modern quests and to my personal experience and struggles.

In order to learn how to do this in strong, clear metaphors and verses while leaving enough room for the reader to find out and contemplate further content between the lines, I will study the work of several poets, including Marie Howe and Yehuda Amichai, especially their poems about themes from the Torah.

But Egypt does not only stand for Sarah's or women's challenges. It is the place where all of Israel found food in times of drought, and got enslaved, the place to which Joseph was sold, and from where rescue as well as new trouble came. Egypt encompasses all the ambiguity of Jewish experience, fear and hope. And this stretches into the New Testament, on which the project will touch in a few pieces or an appendix to the first chapter, using references to Sarah's story and metaphoric role in Christian belief.

The second chapter will look into traditional fairy tales such as those of the Brothers Grimm. Their motives are known to us from our earliest days and they are similar to those of many other fairy tales world-wide; so they form a body of work allusions to which speak to our deeper self and are easy to recognize by readers of different backgrounds. This also holds true for a number of Russian fairy tales and parts of One Thousand and One Nights which complete the literary sources used for this chapter.

As a model for how to work with fairy tales in modern writing I will consult poems by German writer Franz Fühmann. Since most of them don't seem to exist in English translation yet, it might be necessary for me to translate several of these poems from the German first—which will offer additional inspiration and writing practice for me.

The third chapter will use Greek and Roman mythology as far as it fits the content and shape of the project. The story of Achilles can serve as a starting point to reconsider the topics of power, strength and weakness, invincibility and how to deal with trauma, hidden rage and other emotions. It also offers access to another field of exploration: philosophical questions of the purpose of life, success and defeat, time and infinity (as opposed to eternity) into which the project may look in some parts as well. Dan Pagis' poetry provides marvelous examples for different approaches to these themes through mythological metaphors and will be a learning source for me in the process of writing the project.

Genres:

The poems will make use of traditional poetic forms such as sonnets, villanelles, litanies, etc. as well as free verse and prose poetry. The project might include some creative nonfiction pieces, too, as one of the things I would like to study and work on practically here is the distinction, the fine line in fact between prose poetry and certain kinds of nonfiction (and even fiction). In order to do this, I will look at two questions:

1. How can I (as a reader and writer) discern one from the other; and on what criteria other than the genre given by the author can I base my classification? And what does this classification mean for the reception of a piece—if anything at all?
2. If the genre classification makes a difference: How do I make the right choice in my own writing which one to use when according to content, tone, and context of a piece?

Form:

My main skill-related concern will be to balance the poetic forms with the sometimes even cruel content behind the mythological and fairy tale “glitter.” An essential question for me is what kind of language to use for themes such as power struggles, jealousy, abuse, famine, hate, etc. The Bible is the major source to study that, of course. One of the things I want to learn in particular is to trust the mundane to not only carry my ideas but to not violate the poetic form. Marie Howe and Franz Fühmann, but also Yehuda Amichai give excellent examples for that.

So, I will focus on the mundane and use different—antiquated as well as modern—language registers. Thus, employing fairy tales and mythology as topic and frame for my project will help and reinforce the process of opening “Pandora's Box” in my life and speaking boldly about the harsh themes mentioned above and their occurrence and impact in our time, in my personal life and other women's experience.

Just as the storyteller in ancient times and the Griot in aboriginal cultures does still today, I will try to take a new look at our Biblical records and seemingly well-known fairy tales and myths in order to tell my current story as an example for those of others—my own past of the last twenty years as a woman in a leading professional position, between responsibility, guilt, success, power relationships, and the quest for a fulfilled life and recognition: “my Egypt”.

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