Achilles Jumps Bungee: Getting Lost as a Way of creating Meaning

A Proposal For a Thesis in Creative Writing

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אכילס קופץ בנג'י: ההליכה לאיבוד כדרך ליצירת משמעות

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Introduction

    Achilles Jumps Bungee relates to the experience of jumping into the unknown from one's most vulnerable part. Many creative ventures start with a waiver of control. The very first midrash in Genesis Rabba describes G-d on the eve of creation playing with the Torah, in a play on the verse: "Then I was by him like a little child; and I was daily his delight, playing always before him "(Proverbs 8:30)… "as a nurse carries an infant" (Numbers 11:12). In order to really engage in play, one must give up control over the outcome. A poetry thesis in creative writing involves putting oneself in the Creator's place, a very problematic stance. What psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden so eloquently in the introduction to his *The Primitive Edge of Experience* is as true of writing as reading:

> A reader, like an analysand, dares to experience the disturbing feeling of not knowing each time he begins reading a new piece of writing. We regularly create the soothing illusion for ourselves that we have nothing to lose from the experience of reading, and that we can only gain from it. This rationalization is superficial salve for the wound that we are about to open in the process of our effort to learn. In attempting to learn, we subject ourselves to the tension of dissolving the connections between ideas that we have thus far relied upon in a particular way: What we think we know helps us identify who we are (or more accurately, who we think we are)…Not knowing deprives us of our sense of who we are, and yet to know is to see that which we cannot bear to see. (Ogden, 2-3).

Aims and General Description

The personal odyssey that has finally led me to the place where I can write this thesis has been going on for close to thirty years. As an undergraduate, and graduate student, I studied social science and social work. I also took courses in my true love--literature-- at Hebrew University, along with part-time studies in Rabbinic Judaism at the Hartman Institute. I worked as research coordinator in a psycho-oncology department, and eventually transferred to the graduate program in the English Department at Bar-Ilan. I found that I was constantly analyzing sessions with patients through literary eyes, and literary texts through psychologically tinted lenses. I studied literary theory and Deconstruction and found that the poets I loved were not deconstruction-friendly. Every week we read new models of criticism, which we tore down the next week. We were reading more theory and less literature, and I was looking for the aesthetic experience and for Truth. But after such knowledge, what forgiveness? I was looking for a new innocence.I left my Bar-Ilan studies uncompleted, and instinctively turned to the study of Sacred Jewish Scripture. I studied midrash and hassidut at several institutions and settings.   I was looking for was an experiential model of interpretation that would involve presence, not absence. I heard about   the field of "bibliotherapy" and went to study it at Haifa University. After a while I realized that this study was more therapeutic than literary, but I stayed and became a professional.

 I have returned to finish my Bar-Ilan MA degree by writing a poetry thesis on "getting lost as a way to create meaning." I basically want to to explore my own process of manufacturing meaning from a place of doubt, or from a traumatic stance in which meaning has been dismantled. The experience of absence has its roots in a

traumatic personal history, and is part of my search for reconciliation with Rabbinic Judaism. For I had lacked support from a religious community which would not recognize that abuse existed, and would not confront the abusers in my hour of need. In my learning of Sacred Scripture, I was attracted to the going back and forth between the biblical text, and the various midrashim, and parshanim holding opposite positions. The story is linked to other stories similar in word tone or theme – while going back and forth, here and there.   This intertextuality, bricolage, this looking for traces and careful "shoring up of fragments" would create a sense of presence. One could throw oneself into the discourse, like Achilles jumping bungee, and ultimately feel that one's leg is connected to something.

The title of the thesis is the name I gave to a piece of art that I created, many years ago, in dialogue with an article by Donald Winnicott, the famous psychoanalyst, and plays with the notion of free falling from the place of trauma. The Greek definition of trauma is a wound, a piercing of the bodily envelope. Achilles' heel was his only vulnerable body part; when jumping bungee, one is often connected to the rope by the ankle. Thus Achilles would be jumping from the place of his wound. I, too, will be writing from the starting point of absence and trauma. The essential questions I am asking in this thesis are: **How does one reconcile or make meaning when one cannot have totality or wholeness? How does one accept that this is the story one has, in the sense that if you can't have the story you love, love the story you have?** Knowing that we are born into a world that precedes us, and that will go on after us , how does one enter the conversation?

Conceptual Background:

As seen above, I'm very influenced by psychoanalytic theory, especially contemporary British objects relation theory, both in my work as a bibliotherapist and as a reader and writer. Bibliotherapy is an expressive therapy in which reading and writing are the major tools. The text serves as the third object, in relation to which both therapist and client have transferential processes. Ogden writes of Winnicott in "Fear of Breakdown and the Unlived life": "…he is using writing as a medium in which to think." I too use writing as a medium in which to think, both in my professional practice with clients and in my individual creative process.

What Donald Winnicott writes about his methodology in "Primitive Emotional Development" is an inspiration for my own way or proceeding:

> I shall not first give an historical survey and show the development of my ideas from the theories of others, because my mind does not work that way. What happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories and then, last of all, interest myself in looking to see where I stole what. Perhaps this is as good a method as any. (Winnicott, 145)

In other words, meaning is created by a process of "getting lost", a stage Winnicott terms "unintegration,",which describes his own creative process. Winnicott is not only talking about his method, but illustrating the theory. In terms of psychological development he writes:

> There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is in many bits or one whole being, or

> whether he lives in his mother's face or in his own body, provided that
>
> from time to time he comes together and feels something. (150)

So in this thesis, I am going to follow the same methodology: of thinking through writing, of being in bits and pieces, and gathering and using whatever I find, whether it be forms, or fragments or stories. Only afterwards , will I analyze what I've done and what I've used. The writing of this thesis will enact this.[1]

In literary history, while Modernist writers recognized the fragmentation of experience, yet still strove to find and express meaning, postmodernists, skeptical of such a possibility, instead place their emphasis on "play. The postmodern skepticism about the possibility of knowing, and the constant deferral of meaning means that one is always running after what is absent, either what was never there in the first place, or what had been there and is gone. I would like to utilize this idea of play, not to examine the exile of language from meaning, but rather in the service of a search for

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[1] Various literary theorists write in a similar vein. Roland Barthes' "writerly" reading process is a series of interruptions rather than an attempt to reach closure; he advocates rereading texts because "rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology ('this happens *before* or *after* that') and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*)" (Barthes 5). A work's meaning is not found in its linear sequence of events, after all, and one who rereads is liberated from the need to piece such a sequence together, and can instead interpret the work freely. J. Hillis Miller, in *Ariadne's Thread*, describes the processes of tracing and retracing that occur during reading and discusses the various entry points into the text. Using the example of Ariadne's thread, Miller provides an example of the reader's *inability* to capture a work's complete meaning; one can never exactly recapture the original labyrinth, because even Ariadne's thread was a retracing, one step removed from the original (Miller 19). Wolfgang Iser's work is an additional resource, focusing on the subjective filling of gaps which takes place during the process of reading, as he describes in "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction". Reading, according to reader-response theory, to which Iser is an important contributer, is perceived as a performative act within the relationship between the text and the reader.

solace. This is another meaning of my title: Achille's joyful swinging from the abyss is a playful mode of creativity, connected yet free to explore.

However, what happens when there is no one to hold the pieces and one is suspended all alone? In *The Primitive Edge of Experience* Thomas Ogden writes about the anxiety and despair of not knowing, created when the mother has difficulty recognizing or responding to the baby's internal states, and of a mechanism of mis-recognitions that the infant deploys to create the illusion that he knows what he is feeling, and knows who he is. In an analyzing Winnicott's last paper, he writes:

> The infant who is in an unintegrated state , *by himself …*is in a terrifying state. To protect himself, Winnicott suggests, the infant makes use of the psychotic defence of disintegration, that is, he pre-emptively annihilates himself…Similarly, the primitive agony that Winnicott calls "falling forever" is short-circuited (not experienced) because it would be unbearable for the infant to experience it *by himself*…In order not to experience the unbearable agony of falling forever, the infant defends himself by means of "self-holding' – a desperate attempt, in the absence of the mother, to hold his very being together…What I think he [Winnicott] means is that 'the fear of breakdown is a fear of a breakdown that has *already happened*, but has *not yet been experienced*.' In other words, we have ways of experiencing or not experiencing the events of our lives.

(Ogden 210-11)

Furthermore, according to Ogden,

...a principal, if not the principal motivation for an individual who has

not experienced important parts of what happened in his early life is

the urgent need to lay claim to those lost parts of himself, to finally

complete himself by encompassing within himself as much of his

unlived (unexperienced) life as he is able. [his italics] (214)

Cathy Caruth, one of the leading theorists of trauma studies, writes of the "complex relation between knowing and not knowing"(3) in the traumatic experience:

At the core of these stories…is a kind of double telling, the oscillation

between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the

story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the

unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories, both incompatible

and absolutely inextricable, ultimately define the complexity of what I

refer to as *history* in the texts that I read. (Caruth 7)

My aim in this thesis is to start the writing process from the place of trauma, of absence and unlived experience; to try to find a way to represent that which cannot be said , to find a language that can speak what words cannot wholly contain.

Daniel Mendelsohn, whose work is non-fiction, writes how stories change on retelling and in relation to whom the listener is, or what other stories are juxtaposed in relation or difference: "What they revealed about the people who told them, I said, was also part of the facts, the historical record" (*The Lost* p. 411). I would like to claim that the acts of tracing and re-tracing, the weaving warp and weft, are that which constitute the ultimate representation of loss, and are that which create the experience of presence and provide solace in the face of that loss. As mentioned

before, one of the things I want to do is to let the gaps speak. Laub and Podell call this the art of trauma; claiming that language, as a construct of culture, cannot sufficiently contain the traumatic experience (which inherently destroys those very constructs). They suggest that the artist step back into the role of editor and utilize "creative spaces, holes and silences, without foreclosing the process through the superimposition of a traditional aesthetic form"(Laub and Podell 1992)[2].

Shape of the Project

All of this may sound somewhat vague, but since I will be investigating the mechanism of "getting lost" as part of my own writing process, I cannot know at this point what I will know at the end. However,a tentative scheme, a proposed plan is as follows The thesis will consist of poems of various lengths and genres, and short prose pieces. I will attempt to create a sense of presence out of a fragmented writing style that intersperses traditional Jewish texts with a combination of past and present, a style that splices together "witness" accounts of mythological or fictional characters, personal biographical accounts, and geographical wanderings, moving from the fictional to the biographical **.**

Chapter One: *Confusion of Tongues* will include poems written through the voices of mythological, biblical and literary characters. This allows the preservation of the dialectic of revealed and hidden, allowing things to be said and not said at the same time. Ruth Reichelberg[3] explained that Oedipus' mistake in solving the riddle of

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[2] The work will also be informed by Laub and Felman's *Testimony*

[3] In a lecture I attended in the framework of a course given in 1987 in the Comparative Literature Department in BIU. The course was called "Love Myths in the West". Professsor Reichelberg was a former Chair of the Comparative Literature Department in Bar-Ilan University,

the Sphinx was that he said "This is man" instead of the more open "is this man?",
thereby exposing man and determining his end. Marc-Alain Ouaknin[4] claims that this
is the definition of "the evil eye", the enclosing of the other inside a definition, a box.
These claims accentuate the tension between factuality and experience, corresponding
to the claims made by Podell and Laub on the art of trauma. This also allows
Winnicott's procedure: to gather things I find, use them and only afterwards see
where they come from.

One of the poems will be an elegy written through Geppetto's voice about
Pinnochio at the age of fifty-two who is tired of being a real boy and wants his strings
put back. This poem is an attempt to find a vehicle or form to carry or contain a
friend's mental deterioration and suicide, and what went on right before. Another
poem is written in the voice of the little lame child left behind in Hamlin after the
Pied Piper had swept all of the children away, dealing with the aftermath of her
suicide.

Chapter Two: *Standing in the Spaces* will relate to mythological themes of
representation and transformation. Dov Herzenberg[5] defines representation as that
which marks something which once was present, then absent and subsequently re-pre-
sent. The French psychoanalyst Andre Green claims that writing, in contrast to
speaking, is directed towards an absence, when one writes one is alone. Yet it creates

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[4] In a lecture heard in a seminar on Kafka held in the Yakar synagogue of Jerusalem in the spring of
1995. Also formerly of the Comparative Literature Department in Bar-Ilan University.

[5] "ישראל ואומות העולם: הוויה ורפרזנטציה". מתוך: אמנות ויהדות, בעריכת דוד קאסוטו. המכון ליהדות ולמחשבה בת-
זמננו ע"ש קוטלר, אוניברסיטת בר-אילן. ישראל תשמ"ט. עמ 175-194. דפוס.

"Israel and the Nations: Being and Representation". In: *Judaism and Art*, ed. David Cassuto p. 175-94
(Hebrew).

the illusion of presence. In contrast to speech, writing is the language of silence.[6] This chapter will also contain attempts to create a dialogue with traditional Jewish texts and themes, and with presence. Christopher Bollas writes of the search for transformational objects (art, poems, religion) in adult life, unconsciously arising from intense pre-verbal memories of the process of self-transformation, of being transformed by the object. An example of a such poem will be my Jewish interpretation of Odyssey, or collages of various borrowed texts placed next to each other to create a dialogue (for example: Song of Songs with Ecclesiastes), allowing the spaces to speak.

Growth involves not only gratification but also frustration, moments of beauty but also of terror. Winnicott writes: "The most aggressive and therefore the most dangerous words in the languages of the world are to be found in the assertion I AM." ("The Child in the Family Group"). Insistence on being is an act of healthy aggression, delineating the boundaries between self and the other, but is also frightening. Nothing says "I" more than writing a thesis in creative writing**. Chapter Three:** *HineniAyekaHineni* will deal with the question of being, and the experience of living "under erasure"[7]in a traumatic familial and social setting. The conflict of saying or remaining silent, wanting to be seen and wanting to be unseen, doing or observing will be central. It might contain attempts to write form poetry, using form as a support for traumatic content. One example is a Sapphic Ode about repeated miscarriage. A second example is "Litany at a Gravesite in the Middle of a War," directed towards the

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[6] גלדמן, מרדכי. ספרות ופסיכואנליזה . הקיבוץ המאוחד 1998. דפוס. פרק שישי: "פסיכולוגיית העצמי", עמ. 78-70 .

[7] In dialogue with the concept of "sous rapture" coined by Heidegger and borrowed by Derrida.

deceased. The writing process of going backward and forward, created in Chapter

Two, will be the container which will make it possible to write this kind of content.

Borges writes: "Every poem in time becomes an elegy" ("Possession of

Yesterday"). **Chapter Four** will deal with moments of beauty and solace, in an

attempt to collect those parts of unlived experience. The last section may contain

attempts to write poems of mourning for my parents. Hopefully the writing process

coming before this last part will allow the space in which to do so.

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