Caesura and Holding in Yoel Hoffmann's Texts

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A.

In the introduction to his book, *Where Did the Sounds Go: Zen Stories and Haiku Poems*, from 1980, Yoel Hoffmann wrote:

> [...] Haiku poems represent an attempt **to say something without saying anything**. The silence says more than the words, but remains unclear without the words. That is what the words are for, like the handful of ink strokes that figure in Chinese and Japanese landscape paintings, to emphasize the empty space, the nothingness. Haiku, in all its seasons, contains something of the beauty of a snowy winter landscape. We cannot perceive the landscape unless there is at least a single point that is not covered with snow, a single dot of color that accentuates the white landscape. The Haiku's words are that dot, and the meaning of the Haiku – the entire expanse [the snow] (page 15).

In this study, I will explore the status of the empty space, the silence, the caesura between the different numbered segments in Yoel Hoffmann's texts. I will suggest, in the spirit of a quotation from Hoffmann's description of haiku poems, that the **space** between two "stanzas" in Hoffmann's novels is the essence, the very idea that he wishes to express.

The text on both sides of this space is the patch of color, whose only purpose is to call attention to the snow, the main subject matter. I will discuss the issue of this space, this caesura from the perspective of the [individual] subject that emerges from this rhetoric of lacunae and spaces, or rather from the perspective of the subject's distress as it emerges from the rhetoric of lacunae and spaces and represents the very heart of the narrating voice in Hoffmann's text. Perhaps this is the very source of motivation and the impulse of the creative act.

In this study, I will not address the important and significant question of "nothingness" (or "emptiness") in Buddhist thought, despite its profound relevance to this issue. Nor will I explore the issue of the "nothingness" of the "Kyoto School," which involved major interfaces with the philosophies of Descartes, Heidegger and Zen, specifically in regard to the questions of nothingness and of dialectics and dichotomy. Hoffmann was clearly aware of this school and these issues in its texts from the period when he audited lectures at the University of Kyoto, in the early 1970s.

These are weighty and highly charged issues within this area of caesura, spaces and caesura's relationship with speech and being. But here I will deal with other structures and a different lexicon that can support the meanings of the issue not from a philosophical and metaphysical point of view, but rather from a psychoanalytical one. Using a lexicon of terms borrowed from the post-Melanie Klein school of psychoanalysis, I will define different presences of a subject in Hoffmann's fictional space.

I will then ask: what kind of deficiency, what kind of deprivation produces a creativity that appears in the form of fragmented, segmented rhetoric, a rhetoric whose caesurae, whose spaces are highlighted by so many forms – in terms of its typography, rhetoric, narrative and poetic genre. What I want to look into is which area of the psyche is marked by a highlighted caesura and how does that area construct a world.

B.

Hoffmann's works are described by him – and are identifiable by their form and content – as novels. In other words, they contain a long story plot in the form of fiction. They tell a story, and they have the fictional time and space of novels; they have characters, background, development. It may be difficult to point to a structure of "complication and resolution" in them, as demanded by Aristotle in *Poetics*; this is certainly an issue of a separate study of the works of Hoffmann, but we can clearly point to a process in them, and to what Frank Kermode called "eschatology," that is, a directionality of striving towards an end, towards a culmination.

However, in terms of their rhetoric, typographic layout and substance, his novels are constructed in the form of fragments, numbered segments, between which the space is accentuated and emphasized. This is the case starting with Hoffmann's first novel-like work, *Bernhardt*.

In Hoffmann's later novels, the basic form is maintained in which the text appears on only one page, opposite which is a blank page. Whether or not this is an "empty page" is, of course, a matter of interpretation.

C.

The first term I would like to present is one I already used in its disciplinary sense known to scholars of literature and poetry from the field of metrics and prosody: "caesura." As we know, a caesura is a metric break or pause in a poetic line, which divides the line into hemistichs or creates a break between two lines, etc. In terms of the poem's melody, as well as in terms of the relations between melody and meaning, a caesura can have a large range of meanings for notation,

interpretation and analysis, and just like any other metrical signs, it becomes an actual semiotic component of reality, rather than mere absence. That is to say that the caesura already offers a dialectic quality of presence and absence in the poetic dictionary, of a sign and a non-sign by the very fact of it being a sign.

But I would like to reinvest the term with the deeper meanings given to it by the psychoanalytic discourse of Wilfred Bion (1897-1979), following Freud's work, especially as articulated in his essay named for this term "Caesura." [2] With it I will start building the lexicon I will use to discuss the subject of the space.

Human life, suggests Bion in the wake of Freud, starts with a great "caesura", one that is unbridgeable and yet is bridged. It is the one from which every other caesura later in life will derive its strength and character – the caesura of the act of birth, of being born. This is the caesura between the state of the fetus, its modes of absorption, its sensory dimension, and the state of the baby after the event.

In 1977, Bion published this essay, and it has since served as a therapeutic work tool in the clinic, but also as a subject of discussion in its own right. In many senses, it crossed the border of psychoanalytic discourse and moved over to broader neighboring issues, as Bion himself suggests already at the beginning of his essay.

He introduces the subject with a series of quotes or epigraphs. For our subject, it is important to see that not only does he cite Freud – which is a given, since Freud was the first to point to the caesura, and he did so in the same sense as it is dealt with in Bion's article, and it in fact serves as the basis for Bion's thought on this matter – but he also cites Martin Buber in *I and Thou*. From Buber, Bion borrows the universal philosophical-experiential ramifications of the subject, expanding the concept's range of possibilities, and going far beyond the clinic.

Bion, following Freud, tries to show that there is continuity between the life of the unborn fetus and post-natal life. That is why both of these divisions can be seen as a single existence having a continuous cognitive, experiential, existential meaning. In the middle of this existence is a huge break, which is the event of birth. In Bion's view, many aspects of human life are affected by how this first caesura is experienced. Every aspect of life that involves a transition from one state or matter to another, even as mundane decision in everyday life, carries an echo of that first caesura and the way in which it was experienced and processed. And this has practical therapeutic implications.

The broad emotional, philosophical and perhaps transcendental meaning given to this break can be embodied in a quotation from Buber's *I and Thou*, which is also cited as an epigraph by Bion in the introduction to his essay as follows:

> "Every developing human child rests, like all developing beings, in the womb of the great mother – the undifferentiated, not yet formed primal world. From this it detaches itself to enter a personal life, and it is only in dark hours when we slip out of this again (as happens even to the healthy, night after night) that we are close to her again. But this detachment is not sudden [...] like that from the bodily mother" (M. Buber, *I and Thou*). (p. 38).

Here too we can talk about analogous Buddhist dimensions, but I will not address that here. In other words, the caesura is the embodiment, a reminder and presencing of that which can never be repeated: being in the huge, all-embracing bosom of the "great mother" in a state of perfect union with it. And at the same time, there is the separation from this primordial state, the monumental removal from it. The split, the fissure, remains. This removal is in of itself the individuation, the being of the "self." In other words, it is the possibility of life and its great joy, which is embodied in the multiplicity and the cleft (as exemplified by the Dionysian orgies, according to Nietzsche's interpretation, for example).

Toward the end of his essay, Bion cries out with all his heart:

> "Investigate the caesura; not the analyst; not the analysand; not the unconscious; not the conscious; not sanity; not insanity. But the caesura, the link, the synapse, the counter-transference, the transitive-intransitive mood. (pp. 54-55).

In that and in other respects discussed earlier, I have responded to his call in this study.

Another addition to the glossary that will help me discuss the workings of space in Hoffmann's writing is Winnicott's terms *holding* and *indwelling*. Both terms are used by Winnicott to describe the proper state of the mother-baby relationship (in which the mother, as part of her identification with her baby, "holds" it, in empathy, as a whole). Consequently, she also holds the possibility that emanates from this sound relationship to create integrative life, a normal mind-body relationship, a normal perception of subjects that are not me (objects) and generally good, caring and empathetic interpersonal relations.

In his *The Fear of Breakdown*, (1986), Winnicott writes:[3]

> The facilitating environment can be described as ***holding***, developing into ***handling***, to which is added *object-presenting*.
>
> In such a facilitating environment, the individual undergoes development which can be classified as integrating, to which is added in-dwelling (or psycho-somatic collusion) and then object-relating. (p.89)

> [...] primitive agonies
> From this chart, it is possible to make a list of primitive agonies (anxiety is not a strong enough word here).
> Here are a few:
> 1. A return to an unintegrated state. (Defense: disintegration.)
> 2. Falling forever. (Defense: self-holding.)
> 3. Loss of psycho-somatic collusion, failure of indwelling. (Defense: depersonalization).
> 4. Loss of sense of real. (Defense: exploitation of primary narcissism, etc.)
> 5. Loss of capacity to relate to objects. (Defense: autistic states, relating only to self-phenomena.)
> And so on (p. 89-90).

Here, he describes those cases that reach the clinic, situations in which normal holding and indwelling did not occur, and in which the individual suffers from varying degrees of disintegration and different types of anxiety associated with it.

In the written text, where the dominant features are separation rather than sequence, atomism rather than totality and logical poetic causality, the segment rather than the long, continuous text, might we not inquire about the "holding" dimension of the discourse, the holding dimension of the rhetoric and of the characterization, and of the fictional universe as a totality? It seems that the "indwelling" of the meaning within the language and of the image within the word also become a wish.

About a text in which caesura is the subject, in which holding is the wish, we can say, as Martin Buber put it in the epigraph cited by Bion: The Great Mother herself, is, like the absence, the metaphysical subject of the text, and she has the ability to be a metaphor for its utopia. And the question will be: What is it that this metaphor seeks to describe?

The question of empathy and caring, which Winnicott considers to be a direct result of normal holding, is an important one when discussing certain issues in Zen Buddhism which border in it. This chiefly involves two important concepts: "compassion" and "disattachment," concepts that at first blush appear contradictory. I will discuss this subject later on. At present, I would like to discuss the series of terms *caesura, holding*, and *indwelling* and to return to Hoffmann's text and the subject that he proposes and to that certain dimension that the Hoffmannesque subject suggests as poetics.

D. Exemplification

Let me focus, in the final section of my paper, on a caesura between two consecutive fragments in Hoffmann's novel *Guttapercha* (1993).[4] I chose this novel because it pursues a particular autobiographical dimension: The book deals with the life of a linguist named Franz, a scholar of isogloss, a German expatriate living in Israel, who travels to Japan with his beloved Lillian to explore certain linguistic aspects of the Japanese language. In Japan, he marries Lillian and they have a baby. He is involved in learning Japanese, and is in a dialogue with a Japanese professor of linguistics, Professor Takaotzi of Kyoto University.

Very typical of this subject is an aspect of the plot that is difficult to accept: As it happens, the book has another protagonist with a different name, Hugo Togenhaft, who has a similar yet different biography, except that he does not go to Japan and continues to live in Israel. He is described in one paragraph as being identical to, interchangeable with, the protagonist, Franz.[5] And further on, in yet another paragraph, Franz and Hugo are described as being identical with yet a third person, one named "Yoel Hoffmann," the character of the narrator, who for his part, it goes without saying, has his own identity, which needs to be distinguished from the biographical author Yoel Hoffmann who lives outside the fictional space, (to which, by the way, is added yet another character as an identity: Jehoiachin). In other words, in this novel, as in other novels by Hoffmann, questions of identity, unity, and their fissuring are present both as narrative content, as an interface between rhetoric and the real, and as a constant call to the reader to accommodate the impossible caesura, that is, to assume that different objects, which have individual idiosyncratic features and a personal biography of their own, are still, despite this existential and logical contradiction, one and the same. The reader is forced to create an active "holding," an especially challenging holding, for the sake of the narrative content in order to enable it to exist, and to "agree" to consider possible a universe containing characters and events. The holding is such a difficult challenge for the reader, because he must expand significantly the concept of "indwelling," the indwelling of the psyche inside the body, the indwelling of the individual inside his own body, so that he can accept a double or triple body that is actually one, and a triple psyche that is one person. In other words, the reader must accept a kind of "soft" arithmetic, which is usually enlisted by myths and religions, but not by novels and literature. Holding is the dominant distress experienced by the reader as a demand made of him that he cannot fully agree to, despite the flexible epistemology that he brings to his reading.

Let me now illustrate the **caesura, holding and indwelling** in terms of a poetic question and textual feature, that is in the sense of the claim that the text is the "patch of color," and the space, the caesura, is the snow: This is the subject of the artistic endeavor, its main point and purpose.

In fragments 154 and 155, the protagonist is already in Japan, his home, which is in a temple converted into a residence. He has just finished giving his baby a bath, and he looks out of the window into the autumn cityscape. Here is how Hoffmann describes it:

154

אם פורשים עיר פורשים אותה בסתיו.
מחלקים. כמו על לוח שח. את הפגודות.
זבובי הסתיו נחלשים מאד. אם מחפשים
מוצאים מתחת לעצים פגרי ציקדה.
מה שקשה זה למתוח קו רקיע. אדם נדחף
[כלומר מרגיש מן דחף] לשרטט קווים בלתי
אחראיים. קווי בריאה. קו אור גדול. קו
חושך. קווי עצים קדמוניים. או את צורת
המוות: מעגל ונקודה.

155

החלון שקוראים "עין הרוח" הוא הפיווט
[כלומר הציר] שעליו מתרחשים
האירועים.
צריך לראות איך פרנץ נשקף שם. את
המרחק שבין אוזניו. את קדקדו.
מה. הוא כפוף? אם הכפוף הגדול כפוף גם
הוא כפוף.

If you spread out a city spread it out in the fall. // Divide it. Like on a chess board. The pagodas. // Autumn flies are very weakened. If you look // you find cicada carcasses under the trees. // What is hard to stretch out is a skyline. If urged // [that is if it feels the urge] // to draw lines that are not // responsible. Creation lines. A great line of light. A line // of darkness. Lines of primordial trees. Or the shape of// death: circle and dot.

155

The window that is called “the eye of the wind” is the pivot // [meaning the axis] upon which occur // events. // Have to see how Franz is reflected there. The // distance between his ears. The crown of his head. // What. He’s bent? If the big bent is also bent // he is bent.

One can say many things about these two fragments and their continuity. But as I noted earlier, I am exploring here the caesura, not the analysand, not the poem, only the caesura.

I want to examine the place where the caesura was created between the fragments, that is, the last sentence of the fragment 154, and the first sentence of fragment 155:

> of darkness. Lines of primordial trees. Or the shape // of death: circle and dot.
>
> 155
>
> The window that is called "the eye of the wind" is the pivot // [meaning the axis] upon which occur // events.

Let us then enter this white space and cross through the fact that it is no more than blank paper, and restore to it the semiotic status it had when we read the text sequentially.

The last line was, as previously noted, the second half of a complete sentence, whose words are: "of death: circle and dot." The white space is filled, then, with death, which seems a natural metaphor for it, in analogy to eternity rising from the ocean of the word "circle" and in the finality – a kind of end for every form and vision – that arise from the semiotic equivalent of the word "dot," and especially the fact that it is accompanied by the grammatical symbol of the period, which immediately follows. (Here too, I will not address symbols of the type that could be dealt with here).

While a regular storyline mentions death by means of the denotation "death," the poetic form of the fragmentary work enables us to experience the tiny death, panic and loss of grip on the epistemological abyss. The final words of each fragment resonate powerfully as they open inner associations through a kind of conduit to the unconscious, made possible by the void that crosses the epistemological strata, of the pause.

Thus, the caesura forces the reader to retain the multiple meanings, all of which are impossible to take in, in the absence of any text. He is forced to "face" that thing that cannot be faced. To face the nothingness. To face the naked material. The paper itself. This refers to the nothingness that constitutes the naked reality, the suchness. [Once again, I will not address the specific Zen issue of this aspect at this time].

And therefore, the number 155 in the line after the space is like a return to the orderly, the rational, the anthropomorphic – it is salvation. The salvation intensifies as the reader moves to the words that follow next: "the window" – and it is a kind of escape hatch. Upon seeing the phrase "the eye of the wind" in this line – the reader actually breathes a sigh of relief.

This caesura is then exactly what Wilfred Bion says about the caesura: It is the thing that must not be crossed, but is nevertheless crossed, like a baby at birth.

Summary

The caesura is the great theme of Hoffmann's text, and his desire is the holding and indwelling of the soul in the body, of content in form. His desire is empathy and compassion, unity and rest, the opposites of conception and individuation. One might say that his question is the nothingness, to which he points by using the being. It is this secret that he learned during his years in Japan: the secret of the Zen literary genre form, to contain the void as its essence. To draw the void, to speak it. This secret led Hoffmann to his writing subject, in order to express the deprivation that this art seeks to describe: the deprivation of maternal holding, as a metaphor, as an experience, as the "human condition."

Let me conclude by saying that I am not speaking here of a Japanese influence in the pure and independent sense of "Japanese." This is a Japanese possibility as seen through the Hebrew lens of an Israeli immigrant, the son of immigrants from Center Europe, who moves between languages, between belonging, between different modes of "holding" that different civilizations create and pass on. This is Japanese as seen through a Hebraism such as this, one that is borrowed along with its patterns, as a kind of image, learning and wonder. This Hebraism borrows space and void from haiku poems, and on the other hand, lends biblical Hebrew's Chaos and the European perception of the subject to a reading of haiku poems through the prism of Hebraism as Hoffmann embodies it – all the while drawing on the haiku poems' subtle ability to mark nothingness.

Notes

1 *Where Did the Sounds Go: Zen Stories and Haiku Poems*, [Hebrew] translated from Chinese and Japanese with introduction and commentary by Yoel Hoffmann, (Ramat Gan, Massada, 1980), p. 15.

2 Wilfred R. Bion, *Two Papers: The Grid and Caesura*, (Karnac Books, London, 1989).

3 D. W. Winnicott, 'The Fear of Breakdown', in: Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeline Davis (Eds). *Psycho-Analytic Explorations*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1989), pp. 87-95.

4 Yoel Hoffmann, *Guttapercha*, (Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem, 1993).

5 Fragment number 52.