The Adventures of the Heart: An Introduction to Yoel Hoffmann

Yigal Schwartz

A. Artistic Discovery

Yoel Hoffmann appeared on the Israeli literary scene like a bolt out of the blue. I remember the moment when I first encountered his writing. I opened the second issue of the journal *Agra* (1985/6)[1] and was leafing through it in a leisurely manner and with much pleasure. The editors, Natan Zach and Dan Miron, and the associate editor, Tzipora Kagan, were strict about the quality of the works as well as the physical form of the issue. It was hardbound in red, a drawing by Lea Nikel adorning its cover, and it was printed in a way that was well spaced and pleasing to the eye. And then I came to page 149, to a story called "Katschen" by Yoel Hoffmann, whose name was unfamiliar to me. I read the prologue of the story. Then I went on and read the following two sections, which appeared after the story:

> Katschen drew a picture of a woman without any legs. He pulled one of her hairs upwards and curled it around the edge of the page. Then he looked at the woman and thought her face was a little frightening, but she did not frighten him at all. Still, she might frighten someone who had not drawn her.
>
> Uncle Arthur squeezed the bird's head at the tip of his cane and the skin on his knuckles turned white. "Komm!" he said, and stood up. Once Katschen had seen a cypress swaying in the wind. But that was before his mother had gone up to the sky. He thrust the woman into his trouser pocket and followed Uncle Arthur.[2]

I was stunned. It was clear to me that I was experiencing the kind of artistic revelation that people have only once in a generation, if ever. I later learned that similar feelings about their first encounter with Hoffmann's work were shared at that time by hundreds of readers of Hebrew, and later also by those who read his works in other languages.[3]

Another shared response of most first-time readers of Hoffmann was confusion. All of them were captivated by the magic of Hoffmann's texts, but the source of that magic was not clear. Many of the first readers who attempted to explain his work, and also some later ones, claimed that the basis of its magic was the fact that it is impossible to understand or that his character was enigmatic.[4]

Quite a few employed terms from East Asian philosophies and traditions, though not always with the necessary caution that they demand.[5] Although this move was "necessary" because Hoffmann specialized in this field (and lived in Kyoto, Japan for the purpose of research between 1970 and 1974), and had acquired an international reputation in it, not everything that was "necessary" is carefully and responsibly examined. Thus, for example, scholars and commentators hastened to connect Hoffmann's stories with the tradition of haiku poems. However, the Japanese poetic connection with Hoffmann's work exists, if at all, as experts on Japanese poetry who also know Hoffmann's work in Hebrew and English translation claim, precisely with tanka poems,[6] which are characterized, as Yoel Hoffmann himself notes in the introduction to his book *Poets on the Verge of Death*,[7] by a prominent personal, lyrical, and philosophical dimension that is very apparent in every line in his writing, a dimension that haiku, which came to the world after tanka, systematically and meticulously shed. The Haiku poets believed, as Hoffmann wrote, that "the poet must become unconscious of himself so as to see the object of his poem with absolute clarity".[8] A small number of critics went even further and argued that what we had before us was a sophisticated trick of the kind successfully carried out by the tailors in the tale "The Emperor's New Clothes".[9]

More than thirty years have passed since the sensational appearance of the novella "Katschen". During this long period, Hoffmann published nine other books of prose for adults,[10] a children's book,[11] and new editions of writings on his research that had been published previously in English and Hebrew. Readers' continuing familiarity with Hoffmann's work has made it more "user-friendly" for them, though not necessarily more understandable. Some readers – those, I suppose, that Hoffmann particularly likes – continued to read his works as they had before, as mainly incomprehensible texts that move and shake them. In contrast, the "professional readers", scholars and critics, gradually calmed down after the panic of the first encounter. Some even formed useful approaches to understanding the ways of the Hoffmannian world with its wide variety of characteristics. These approaches were presented in academic articles, essays, and reviews. Tal Frenkel, in her doctoral dissertation,[12] addressed Hoffmann's unique style as the key to understanding central thematic focuses and philosophical motivations in his work. In their master's theses,[13] Neta Stahl and Karin Neuburger presented interesting interpretations of Hoffmann's poetic and philosophical world, especially by examining the question of the status and role of the various kinds of intertextual links that fill his works. Merav Katz, in her master's thesis,[14] approached Hoffmann's corpus mainly through the use of the concept of the carnival in its postmodern context. Avraham Balaban, in his book *A Different Wave in Israeli Fiction: Postmodern Israeli Fiction,*[15] and Hanna Herzig in her book *The Voice Saying "I": Trends in Israeli Prose Fiction of the 1980s,*[16]

see his poetics as reflecting his affinity with modernism, on the one hand, and postmodernism, on the other (and both see him as a transitional link between the two). Anat Weisman[17] relates to him as continuing and using to the fullest the anti-rationalist movement in Western culture. Ariel Hirschfeld and others required psychological, mythical, and metaphysical terms to interpret Hoffmann's works.[18] Nili Gold[19] opened a discussion on Hoffmann's works through their links with his mother tongue (German), his biography, and the Haifa space in which many of his characters wander. Rachel Albeck-Gidron, in her book *Exploring the Third Option,*[20] discusses several kinds of language that Hoffmann's prose uses: the language of poetry, the riddles of *kōan* and Zen writings, the quoted language of the photograph, the stories of his protagonists, and more.

B. Post-apocalyptic Poems

In this article, I would like to look at Yoel Hoffmann's work through the generic prism that, if it is used intelligently, may explain, I believe, several seemingly strange characteristics in his narrative art and pave the way toward a better understanding of his poetic world. I would like to define his entire opus as a series of post-apocalyptic poems that rely massively on autobiographical material. The philosophical premise that stands behind the entire great artistic undertaking before us is post-apocalyptic. Hoffmann's writings suggest that with the events of the Holocaust, Western civilization, and in particular the achievements of "universal" European ethics and rationalist philosophy,[21] came to an end. The events of the Holocaust are perceived in the works of Hoffmann, who neither forgives nor forgets, as the suicide of the civilized Western world, which was replaced by barbarism in its renewed Teutonic Nazi-pagan incarnation, which lifted its head and tried and nearly succeeded in eliminating the Jews who are, in Hoffmann's eyes, along with Jesus as he appears in the New Testament, the ultimate representatives of morality, justice, and grace in the monotheistic space.[22] (The opening remarks that he sent to the body that organizes cultural events on behalf of the European Union when he was asked to compose a brief greeting that related to the union of Europe and was dedicated to Yiddish as part of a project of reviving vernacular European languages, were telling in this regard: The Jews too/Greet the Union of Europe/In their ancient Yiddish/From below). The fatal encounter between the representatives of the legacy of Mount Moriah, the site of the sacrifice of Isaac, and Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion of Jesus, on the one hand, and the representatives of Valhalla, the Nordic "Hall of the Fallen," on the other, is shaped in the novella *The Book of Joseph*, which is included in Hoffmann's first book of the same name, through a plot with two paths. On the first path, we become acquainted with the story of Joseph Zilbermann, Yingele, his son, and Miriam, described as "the holy family". On the second, we become acquainted with the

story of Siegfried, a German boy, named after one of the murderous heroes of *Nibelungenlied*. The events that take place along these two paths take place parallel to one another throughout most of the story, and their protagonists do not meet one another. The plot reaches its dramatic peak when on Kristallnacht, the night between the ninth and tenth of November 1938, when the Nazis carried out a pogrom against the Jews of Germany and Austria, Siegfried meets Yingele and Joseph on the street. The meeting is described as follows:

> Siegfried raised the club and hit Yingele's head, a single blow. From the force of that blow, Yingele's skull caved in and a bone splinter from the knife split Yingele's brain in that place where the dreams reside. And when Joseph saw the blood from Yingele's head streaming down his face, his heart broke.
>
> As for the rest, it is already written in the history books that Joseph was left up there, alone, and said "Mayn got, mayn got, farvos hastu mikh farlozen!" [Yiddish for "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"]and died.
>
> Siegfried raised the club for a second time and hit Joseph on the chest, a single blow. And from the force of that blow, Joseph's heart of flesh also split. "Na," Siegfried thought, "I'm certainly quite good with a club."[23]

The collapse of the civilized Western world following the Holocaust is reflected in the imaginary world of Hoffmann in the destruction of the axis mundi and in the cancellation of the law of gravity. The result has been – and in this matter Hoffmann's world resembles that of Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr in his novel *The Last World* [24] – that all the elements of this fictional, post-apocalyptic world, human beings, books, works of art, and so on, everything and everyone who survived the great catastrophe, move along independent paths, and connect to other elements, if at all, only in a random manner.

A distilled expression of this position appears in Hoffmann's latest book, *Moods*, which is prominently philosophical and strongly conveys the sense of a conclusion, a last will and testament:

> And we too are the product of a virgin birth. We were born twice. First when a woman of flesh and blood delivered us in the ordinary manner. Later, like everyone, we were wiped off the face of the earth, with the people who were sent to the ovens. And if we're alive, we are—like some sad kind of miracle—among the babies not in the ground, or far above in the place where the smoke from the chimneys ascended. Beyond history.[25]

> The counting did in fact begin, as the Christians have it, with the birth of the infant Jesus. But it

concluded with the birth of Adolf. We were given just 1,889 years of life.

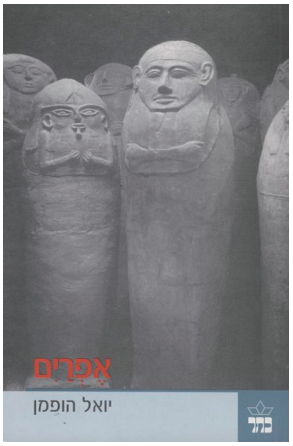
Now we're in the age of ash. Beyond time. As though in a game that has just come to an end. There's no more movement on the field. Just kicks toward the goal. Everything only *seems* to be. A thin wash of color covers it all, and beneath that—blackness.

Only giraffes remain. Mountains. Wisps of clouds. Celestial bodies. Woods. Bodies of water and shells of men. Europe, apparently. Hallucinations. A real sun rises over nothing.[26]

The post-apocalyptic nature of "Planet Hoffmann" is also expressed in the huge number of bizarre phenomena, objects, and linguistic configurations. It sometimes seems as though the author has established for himself a museum of antiquities devoted to strange things and created within it a separate wing for anachronistic objects, simulacra, or pastiches. This is the place to note, perhaps, that Hoffmann frequently watches television programs that deal with the buying and selling of seemingly rare objects, and in the past he had a special fondness for auctions. His open affection for bizarre performances is also prominently expressed in the photographs he chose for his book covers, front and back[27] For example:

(The Christ of Fish, back cover)

(Guttapercha, front cover)



(Ephraim, front cover)

Hoffmann's books are filled with linguistic eccentricities of all kinds: anachronisms (words no longer customarily used in spoken language); neologisms (linguistic innovations – but only, "of course", those not absorbed into the living language); barbarisms (linguistic mutations). In addition, there are words from dead languages (ancient Greek, Latin, Sanskrit), and words, phrases, and even entire sections in esoteric languages (for example, Hungarian), many times unaccompanied

by a translation to the language of the reader. These are all joined by weird phrases, the fruit of Hoffmann's whims.[28] Here, for example, are some numbered sections from Hoffmann's third book of prose, *Guttapercha* (1993) (in the Malayan language, *guttapercha* means "rubber tree"), which includes a typical range of performances from all the bizarre linguistic categories mentioned above:

128
We can think of Professor Takeuchi as being tossed from side to side with Noah. In the Ark. His fish eye watches the flood. As far as he is concerned, the rainbow pulled straight to the linguistics chair. What good were his shleikes [suspenders] to him? In any case, his body was in his trousers.
129
[and the trousers]
130
[in the world]
131
He must be registered in the corridor and returned to the room. And to take him out again to the end of the corridor and back to the room […]
132
And to bring him together with Franz. He should sit under the chandelier [and say "in Hittite esti and er ist"] and see a kind of electricity. Like the sight of fire.
133
What was lacking was the mindervertigastaytagfila. Feelings of inferiority.
In the Pacific Ocean air, Franz is flip and flop fish.
Here it must be explained. Sometimes a fish appears on the horizon.
The fish of virtues. The fish of strength. Franz grasps it at the angle of the head and forces it by the power of the dream into the individu-al pool.
134
Completely. A person has to walk around with a shredder. If a paper flutters away, it should be shredded. **Only foreign letters should be written.**[29]

The post-apocalyptic Hoffmannian universe is a forest of signifiers and signifieds with a very loose connection between them. This is an immense forest. It is packed with historical affairs, shreds of philosophical discussions, quotations and many references to hundreds of works of literature and art, both from the Western corpus and the East Asian corpus, and in addition it includes autobiographical segments, sections of biographies of well-known historical figures, numerous ars-

poetical discussions, dozens of scientific explanations, most of them clearly unfounded, moral and immoral judgments, tongue-lashings aimed at academic institutions, and political barbs, as well as riddles, proverbs, pieces of nonsense, hundreds of private jokes, and more.[30]

This chaotic forest contains characters from different places and different times. They are frequently engaged in esoteric subjects, like Professor Takeuchi of Japan and Franz, the Jew who immigrated to Palestine from Europe, in the excerpts above. Each of them moves around in a circle, trying to make sense of "foreign letters" whose meanings we have lost. Professor Takeuchi and Franz from *Guttapercha*, and like them, Bernhard in *Bernhard*, Yehoahim in *The Heart is Katmandu,* Ephraim in *Ephraim,* and all the rest of Hoffmann's main characters, including himself in his autobiographical and pseudo-autobiographical stories (in the story "Curriculum Vitae" in *The Book of Joseph*, and the novella of the same name, in *The Shunra and the Schmetterling*, in *Moods*, and so on), all of these and dozens more minor characters in stories, unusual men, women, and children, are heroes par excellence, in Hoffmann's lyrical post-apocalyptic epic.

These are, like similar figures in all epics, modern and post-modern (those that are not fantasies, and the exemplary model here is Cervantes's Don Quixote),[31] heroic figures who are larger than life and at the same time pathetic and ridiculous. Their heroism and ridiculousness stem from the same source – their repeated Quixotic attempts to impose on the post-apocalyptic reality the laws and rules that were valid in the reality that preceded the colossal destruction. They are, by their very nature, anachronistic characters who developed in one world and were planted into another. In addition, there are figures that have been excluded by society, a large and colorful group of outsiders, strange and bizarre. A good portion of them are immigrants from Central Europe and Germany who grew up in the lap of European liberalism and rationalism, which collapsed with a resounding bang.[32] Alongside them are other living refugees of history, kings and dukes who were removed from their high positions by the masses, eccentric women, larger than life, who seemed to come into the world from out of fairy tales, orphaned children, handicapped people, and so on. What all of these characters share is the unique cognitive mechanism with which they are equipped, which replaces, whether they are conscious of it or not, the old cognitive mechanism that has expired. I would like to call this alternative cognitive mechanism the "Cyclopean eye". Katschen, the boy protagonist whose mother dies and whose father loses his sanity (or, more precisely, his normative sanity) aptly conveys the nature and function of this "eye" in the following amazing excerpt:

> Once Margarethe had told Katschen about Cyclopes. "He who sees with two eyes", she said, "closes one eye when the sights he sees are painful. If he is also pained by the sights he sees with the eye that remains open—he closes both eyes. But the Cyclops never closes his one and

> only eye". On hearing this, Katschen closed one eye and saw that there was not a great deal of difference between the sights he saw with one eye and the sights he saw with two. Then he closed the eye that remained open and thought to himself, "Now I will never see anything ever again". But then, when his eyes were closed, an eye in his forehead opened. The sight he saw with this eye was not clear, but it held a kind of transparency missing from the sight he saw with his other two eyes. When Katschen looked in the mirror, he could not find the eye in his forehead, but when he closed his eyes again he knew for sure that the eye was there. Since that day, Katschen knew that he was a Cyclops and would look at people to see if they had an eye in their foreheads.[33]

The Cyclops's eye, the third eye through which all of Hoffmann's protagonists and Hoffmann himself absorb the world in their moments of revelation, is, according to Katschen's dead mother, a product of suffering that ordinary eyes cannot bear. This is a mystical organ that gives a chosen few the ability to see things that are invisible to ordinary mortals and/or the ability to endure sights that ordinary mortals cannot tolerate. The eye of the Cyclops is the "power of the dream" that gives Franz the ability to take the imaginary fish that appears on the horizon of his vision, "the fish of virtue or the fish of strength", and move it "at the angle of the head" to "the individu-al pool". In other words, not to the province of ordinary individuality, represented by the word "individuality" in its usual graphic form, but rather to a different, idiosyncratic "individuality", marked by a new word: "individu-al", which is based on the original word and divided by a hyphen that separates it into two parts in accordance with an arbitrary and completely random logic. Moreover, Hoffmann's characters have the Cyclopean eye, which allows them to see what other humans are unable or unwilling to see. But this advantage is also a disaster, because, as his mother tells Katschen, he whom fate has chosen to have a Cyclopean eye will never have the privilege of being able to close his eyes entirely.

One of the decisive conclusions of postmodern philosophy is that following the events of World War II, the "I" in its Western modernist format, whose most consolidated and well-known embodiment appears in Freud's writings, was shattered to bits. Some of Hoffmann's critics believed that this phenomenon was also characteristic of the human condition in the writings before us.[34] There are also those who believed that the Western modernist conception of the "I" in Hoffmann's writings was taken over by the principle of the Buddhist "I" – assuming that indeed it is possible to use the term "I" in the context of Buddhist thought – which is somewhat similar to the conception of the "I" of the Western post-modernist philosophers.[35]

I believe otherwise. I also think that Hoffmann's perception of human beings is profoundly influenced by the horrors of World War II. But Hoffmann, whose distaste for Freudian psychology is reflected on every page of his books,[36] never went, in the context of the concept of the "I," the way of postmodernism or Buddhism. Hoffmann's poetic conclusion from the rise of Nazi barbarity and the collapse of Western enlightenment is largely the opposite of the conclusion reached by postmodernists.

In Hoffmann, the systematic murder, the banality of evil, the sickening combination of kitsch and death, and the departure of the Teutonic monsters from their caves, on the one hand, and the Judeo-Christian silence of heaven on the other, did not lead to an explosion or erasure of the "I," but rather, on the contrary, to its empowerment and growth to semi-mythical dimensions, like those of the heroes of the epics. In fact, it is possible to say that the protagonists in the corpus before us decisively violate Galileo Galilei's famous assumption. In Hoffmann's cosmos, the sun, moon, and all the host of the heavens surround his most admired characters, particularly, but not only, his female characters. Here are three examples, almost random, from three different books, the first from *Ephraim,* the second from *Curriculum Vitae*, and the last from *Guttapercha*.

Here is the excerpt from *Ephraim*:

> Now we have to look deep into the heart of Yosepha.
>
> At first, we see a green landscape like the hills of southern England and we can go north up to the cold regions of Scotland.
>
> Boats sail along the lakes and the ducks hide in the bushes at the edge of the bank.
>
> You pass little villages there and in every town there is a square with stores where they sell all kinds of antiques.
>
> Her human form carries whole continents and when she sits with Esther Shapira you can see the atmosphere that surrounds her, just as space travelers see the earth from a distance.[37]

Here is the excerpt from *Curriculum Vitae*:

> Every morning Mrs. Kido came back from her night jog in the Gion quarter, with a cloud of sake before her like a pillar (of fire) that went before the camp.[38]

And, finally, an excerpt from *Guttapercha*:

> 34
>
> Afterwards, Mr. Moskovitch said "Di bist a kurveh" [Yiddish for "You are a prostitute," but also "crooked" or "a curve"]. He meant the dangerous non-Euclidean line. [In those days it was

known that parallel lines did meet.]

Stella Moskovitch was a very pretty girl. She caused the great snowfall that covered Ramat Gan in nineteen hundred and fifty.[39]

C. Adventures of the Heart

Almost all the critics and scholars who have written about Hoffmann's works have addressed their unusual formal appearance, first and foremost the fact that most of his belletristic works (in fact, all but *The Book of Joseph*) are presented to the reader in paragraphs that consist of lines shorter than those that usually appear in works of prose. In my opinion, this graphic presentation is nothing unusual. On the contrary, it is required by the generic nature of Hoffmann's works, since most epics, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* through *The Aeneid*, as well as Serbian, British, German, and Norse epics, were written in the same graphic format. In all of these, we follow a plot with many lines presented to us in stanzas separated by caesuras. The stanzas and the caesuras in Hoffmann's works have attracted the attention of many Hoffmann scholars, but they have attributed them to the poetic nature of his work, the influence of haiku and/or philosophical essay writing such as that of Schlegel, Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein.[40] Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the Japanese poetic tradition and the tradition of philosophical essay writing in the style of the three philosophers I have mentioned influenced Hoffmann's choice of a format that became one of the hallmarks of his work. But in my opinion, this is essentially a technical influence, while the influence of the epic poetic tradition is essential, both because Hoffmann's works are characterized precisely, and in contradiction with the first impression that they create, by their narrativity (thus, for example, the story in *Bernhard*, which is Hoffmann's most lyrical philosophical book, progresses along a number of parallel plot lines, in an almost completely consistent chronological order. The events begin after the death of Paula, Bernhard's wife, on September 18, 1938, and end on July 22, 1946, with the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The story that mediates between these two framing events includes dozens of historical events that can be dated precisely), and Hoffmann himself was exposed to the mythological and epic traditions of the West many years before he was exposed to the other two writing traditions. This is the place to note that the epic graphic pattern perfectly suits the Hoffmannian temperament since, on the one hand, he is a "wild" author with a "Hungarian-gypsy" nature. He addresses, as I have mentioned, countless issues, and intentionally leaps wildly between them. On the other hand, he is a very meticulous author, extremely sensitive to order, with a "Yekke" (a term used to refer to Jews of German origin that connotes particular attention to detail) or perhaps a "Yekke-Japanese" temperament. The epic, like

the novel that succeeded it, is very permissive, a literary repository that accepts almost anything. At the same time, the formal character of epic expression is binding and inflexible. It imposes measured and precise conduct in the area of graphics that must not be breached.

Hoffmann's uniqueness in this genre is twofold: first, in the relatively independent character of poetic sections, which can be called the "stanzas," in relation to the entirety of the story, and second, in the lyrical philosophical perspective that dominates all of his works. The relatively independent status of the segments, the "stanzas," in relation to the narrative whole seems to stem from the same post-apocalyptic attitude that is responsible for the anachronistic, quixotic stance of the characters and the abundance of linguistic peculiarities. The relative independence of these "stanzas" was already apparent in Hoffmann's first stories, which were included in *The Book of Joseph* and written in regular prose form. Thus, we have, for example, the following passage, which was chosen, almost by chance, from the first story, "Katschen":

> Katschen was about two and a half years old when he first heard that his father was krank [German: sick (here, mentally ill)]. His mother placed a bowl of fruit on the table and walked out of the house. Katschen's father sat silent in the armchair, and when Katschen offered him an apple a tear appeared in the corner of his eye. Katschen opened the doors of the sideboard and arranged the silverware on the carpet. Then he surrounded his father's slippers with the silverware and the feet of the father inside the slippers did not move. After that, Katschen made a habit of asking whether this or that person were krank. By the time he found out that other people were nicht krank [German: not sick] his father was already in "the institution."[41]

This passage, like many others in Hoffmann's works, can be read as an independent little story, a closed and meaningful linguistic entity. It includes clear structural units that are interdependent, complement one another, and create a coherent narrative. In terms of syntactic logic, the segment consists of a frame unit and an interior unit. The frame unit consists of two parts, the expositional opening sentence. ("Katschen was about two and a half years old when he first heard that his father was krank"), which, like other opening sentences by Hoffmann, contains the kernel of the entire story,[42] and a concluding sentence ("After that, Katschen made a habit of asking whether this or that person were krank. By the time he found out that other people were nicht krank his father was already in "the institution"). The opening part is connected to the concluding part by a pattern of cause-and-effect relationships that are anchored in matching particles of time intervals: "Katschen **was** about ..."; "**After that**, Katschen made a habit..."; "**By the time** he found out that..."; "his father **was already** in 'the institution'". The interior unit in this section includes two mini-scenes that

modify the cause-and-effect relationship between the two parts of the frame, giving them emotional and conscious validity. These two mini-scenes occur after Katschen, aged two and a half, learns that his father is krank, and only the father and the son take a prominent part in it after "[h]is mother placed a bowl of fruit on the table and walked out of the house".

In the first mini-scene we learn about the relationship between the two. The father sits in his armchair and is silent, and the movement between them opens up precisely in the direction of the child. The child's (baby's) gesture to his father, which hints at a kind of role reversal between them, touches the father's heart, which is indifferent to his surroundings most of the time, and brings a tear to the corner of his eye.

The second mini-scene is less clear and more charged, both consciously and emotionally. Katschen opens the sideboard doors and arranges the silverware over the carpet. This is an unusual action. After all, it is reasonable to assume that a two-and-a-half-year-old child is not supposed to play with the silver – some or all of which may be sacred objects – especially not on the carpet. This deviation, which seems to signify the child's entry into a taboo area, continues with his next activity: he surrounds his father's slippers with the silverware – another unclear and charged move, for, on the one hand, this is a children's game and no more. Many children play with toy cars on the floor and sometimes even between their parents' feet. However, on the other hand, in this scene there are a number of uncanny factors that are disturbing and evoke displeasure. This is so because of the use of silver instead of toys and because Katschen delineates the father's space (restricts him, protects him, and so on) with the (sacred) silverware, and also because the father cooperates and seems to accept the decree: "the feet . . . inside the slippers did not move" and as a result of the tension produced between the components of domesticity (for example, the father's slippers) and the uncanny baggage (insanity, sacredness, and so on).

Either way, or in both ways, this short section may be read as an independent unit. It briefly, yet sufficiently, sketches the relationship between father and child, allowing us to understand the facts and conclusions contained in his two final sentences. First, we understand why Katschen divides the whole world into two types: krank and nicht krank. And secondly, we understand that Katschen is burdened with a sense of guilt for no real reason. Katschen, we understand from the final sentence, only later understood that his father was exceptional – but then he could no longer help him (as he had already tried when he was two-and-a-half years old), since he had already been admitted to the institution.

The relative independence of the passage before us is an essential characteristic of many of the passages, the "stanzas," in Hoffmann's prose. We may assume that this is the case because most

passages were written, as Hoffmann has testified, with one disappearance – a picture that arose in the author's dream or waking moments and was written in its brilliant isolation, bound to the chain of passages, the "stanzas" that preceded it, which were also created in exactly the same manner. We can assume that there is a deliberate concatenation of distinct units and relatively autonomous parts. In any event, the product is the same: an acute structural tension between the "stanzas" and the narrative.

The second unique characteristic of Hoffmann in this generic context – and he was influenced, in my opinion, by Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* – is the dominant lyrical perspective in all his works, including those written in the first person singular, as is customary in this subgenre, and those written in the third person.

One of the most prominent manifestations of the lyrical perspective in Hoffmann's works, alongside its stunning figurative nature, is his close, very intimate treatment of his protagonists. Hoffmann loves his protagonists. He loves them when he describes them with admiration as forces of nature and when he places them in a ridiculous light necessary because they are anachronistic entities not suited to their time and place. He relates to all of them as relatives – both the characters who really represent his family, his father, his mother, his stepmother, his uncles, his children, and so on, and the "foreign" characters: "real," historical characters and completely or partially fictional characters.

The source of this warm and loving treatment is Hoffmann's perception of the post-apocalyptic nature of the world we have been living in since World War II and the Holocaust. Hoffmann believes, and in this matter corresponds in distorted ways with a Buddhist approach, on the one hand, and with an existentialist attitude, on the other, that the tragedy of human beings stems from the fact that they are conscious beings and cannot escape the realization that they are doomed to suffering and death. This epistemological fact makes them, especially when they are trying to attribute meaning to the essential absurdity of their situation, creatures who are worthy of love and kindness. And indeed, if I had to choose one attribute that characterizes Hoffmann's ethics, I would say that it was generosity, generosity to all people, with the exception of the Nazis and those who collaborated with them, and with particular attention to the Cyclopes, migrants, hallucinatory people, prostitutes, widows, orphans, in short, all who are blind, but wise.

If you need additional confirmation in this regard, see the amazing photograph by August Sander that Hoffmann placed on the cover of his first book, *The Bok of Joseph*.

In this photo we can see two blind children, a girl and a boy. The girl seems a bit older than the boy. She holds his left hand in her right hand with gentle authority. With her left hand, she demonstrates to the boy, blind like her, the approximate height of a person, child, or some object. This shocking photograph, which has a sarcastic and perhaps even a grotesque side, but also touches the heart and brings tears to the eyes, sums up the spirit of the entire tremendous artistic enterprise of Yoel Hoffmann.

*All translations of Hoffmann's texts by Dr. Hannah Komy, unless otherwise noted.

Notes

1 יואל הופמן, "קצכן" *אגרא,אלמנך לספרות ואמנות* 2, תשמ"ו,1985/6. 149 - 190.

2 Yoel Hoffmann, *Katschen* in *Katschen and The Book of Joseph* [*Katschen* trans. Eddie Levenston and David Kriss; *The Book of Joseph* trans. Alan Treister and Eddie Levenston] (New York: New Directions, 1997, 1998), 97.

3 These are some of the enthusiastic responses to the original Hebrew version of *The Book of Joseph*, Hoffmann's first book of prose:

שלומית גינגולד-גלבוע, "חגיגה אמיתית", *ידיעות אחרונות*, המוסף לשבת (1.2.1987) 22,21; הדה בושס, "עין הקיקלופ", *הארץ*, תרבות וספרות (4.1.1998) 14; דן דאור, "שבוע של ספרים: מקור", *הארץ* (8.1.1988); יעל לוטן, "הישאר איתנו יואל הופמן", *על המשמר* (12.2.1988) ב 6; דוד שיץ, "והילד הזה", *כותרת ראשית* 279 (6.4.1988) 32.

And here are some of the enthusiastic responses to the original Hebrew version of *Bernard*, Hoffmann's first novel:

אריאל הירשפלד, "הגלאקסיות של יואל הופמן", *הארץ* (31.3.1989) בס-ב9, (7.4.1989) ; אמנון נבות, "'על כיסוי הדם' ועל הנס", *מעריב* (26.5.1989) 5.

And following are some of the enthusiastic responses that appeared in the United States upon the publication of the translation of several of Hoffmann's books in English translation L. David Ulin, "On Katschen and the Book of Joseph," *Chicago Tribune* (11.12.1998); William Riggan, "Hebrew Literature in the 1990s", *World Literature Today* 72. 3 (1998), 478–477; Betty Falkenberg, "Tales Dreamlike and Precise": *Katschen and The Book of Joseph* by Yoel Hoffmann, Hoffmann, Translated by David Kriss, *The New Leader* 5 (1998); Nicole Jones, "9 New Must-Read Books," *Vanity Fair* (1.6. 2015).

4 רוני סומק, "ציפור מוזרה, רבת יופי", *במחנה* 37 (17.5.89) 5; הדה בושס, "קצה גבול האפשר", *הארץ* (16.11.1993) 4; לאה שניר, "'גוטפרשה' – הקוטב הסמוי מן העין", *דבר*, (31.12.1993) 24; שירי לב-ארי, "חידה ושמה הופמן", על הספר *מצבי רוח* , אתר *גלובס*, (14.2.2010) http://www.globes.co .il/news/article.aspx?did=1000538881.

5 מנחם בן , "חידות זן ברוטב ייקי", *ידיעות אחרונות* (5.11.1993) 89; עמוס לויתן, "קואן האהבה של הופמן", *עתון 77* 243 (2000), 31-32; אלי אשד, "בודהה מהפרברים", Time Out תל אביב 383 (3.2010 .4-11) 142.

6 Masato Goda, "A Philosophy of 'Death Poems'", in this volume.

7 יואל הופמן, *אומרי שיר על סף המוות, מבחר שירים יפניים ומסת מבוא* (מסדה, 1985), 8-17.

8 Yoel Hoffmann, *Japanese Death Poems Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (Clarendon, VT: Tuttle), 24 (English edition of the Hebrew book mentioned in the previous note).

9 גבריאל מוקד [גדעון מירב], "שני צדדים של בגדי המלך: קסטל בלום והופמן", *עתה*, כתב-עת לענייני חברה ותרבות 1 (1994) 34; דפנה שחורי, "פרה קדושה ושמה הופמן", *עכשיו*, גל' 72 (חורף תשע"ב, 2011–2012), 198–200.

10 יואל הופמן, *ברנהרט* (ירושלים: כתר, 1988); *כריסטוס של דגים* (ירושלים: כתר,1991); *גוטפרשה* (ירושלים: כתר, 1993); *מה שלומך דולורס* (ירושלים כתר, 1995); *הלב הוא קטמנדו* (ירושלים: כתר, 2000); *השונרא והשמטרלינג* (ירושלים: כתר, 2001); *אפרים* (ירושלים: כתר, 2003); *Curriculum Vitae* (ירושלים: כתר, 2007); *מצבי רוח* (ירושלים: כתר, 2010).

11 יואל הופמן, *בפברואר כדאי לקנות פילים* (איורים גל כרמי) (ירושלים: מסדה, 1988).

12 טל פרנקל, "סגנון ופואטיקה ביצירתו של יואל הופמן", מחקר לשם מילוי חלקי של הדרישות לקבלת התואר "דוקטור לפילוסופיה", אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב, נובמבר, 2004.

13 נטע שטהל, "אינטרטקסטואליות בין-ז'אנרית ביצירותיו של יואל הופמן", עבודת גמר לתואר מוסמך, אוניברסיטת תל-אביב, 1998; קארין נויבורגר, "רקמת טקסטים –'כריסטוס של דגים' מאת יואל הופמן", עבודת גמר לתואר מוסמך, האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים, 1999.

14 מרב כץ, "פואטיקה פוסט-מודרנית קרנבלית: עיון ביצירותיו של יואל הופמן"; נטע שטהל, לעיל הערה 13.

15 אברהם בלבן, *גל אחר בספרות העברית –סיפורת עברית פוסטמודרניסטית* (ירושלים: כתר, 1995).

16 חנה הרציג, *הקול האומר: אני – מגמות בסיפורת העברית בשנות השמונים* (תל-אביב: האוניברסיטה הפתוחה, 1988) 381–305.

17 ענת ויסמן, "אף מילה על כריסטוס", *דבר*, משא (12.7.1991) 27.

18 אריאל הירשפלד, "פואימה דפרסיבה", *הארץ* (7.4.1989), ב 8; הנ"ל, "הגלקסיות של יואל הופמן", *הארץ* (31.3.1989) ב8, ב9; הנ"ל, "הגלקסיות של יואל הופמן – איך קשור 'ברנהרט' לדיוקן", *הארץ* (7.4.1989) ב8; הנ"ל, "איש רואה דברים" על "Curriculum Vitae" מאת יואל הופמן, אתר *הארץ* (4.4.2007), http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1400202.

In this context, see also:

שי צור, "הכל נפצל רק למראית עין", *הארץ*, מוסף ספרים 379 (כ"ו באייר, תש"ס, 31.5.2000) 8; יגאל שוורץ, "הסיפורת העברית – העידן שאחרי", *אפס שתיים* 3 (1995) 1-51; הנ"ל, "'מ'מקום אחר' ל'דולי סיטי': הרהורים על אדם ומקום בסיפורת העברית בשנות השישים ובשנות התשעים", *הארץ*, תרבות וספרות, (16.6.1995) ב8, ב9; הנ"ל, "שירת הכוכבים", *הארץ*, תרבות וספרות (26.5.2000) ב14.

19 נילי שרף-גולד, "'הספר כנהר: עיון ב'ברנהרט' ליואל הופמן", *עלי שיח* 36 (קיץ תשנ"ה 1995), 67-72; הנ"ל, "ללכת ברחובות הפנימיים: יואל הופמן ו'אפרים'", *ביקורת ופרשנות: כתב עת בין-תחומי לחקר ספרות ותרבות*, כרך 43 : על הסף-לימינליות בספרות ובתרבות, (תל אביב, 2010), 229-247;

Nili Gold, "Yoel Hoffmann's "*Curriculum Vitae* and *Japanese Poems* as Keys to Reading his Work", *Conference on Jewish Studies*, Vol. 9, 2017 (see this volume); Gold, Nili, "Bernhard's Journey: The Challenges of Yoel Hoffman's Writing," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1 (1994), 271–287.

20 רחל אלבק-גדרון, *השלישי האפשרי, מחקר מונוגרפי על עבודתו של יואל הופמן* (באר-שבע: אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב, דביר, 2016).

21 See:

אלבק-גדרון, "מפעל ההגחכה של הפילוסופיה המערבית", בתוך הנ"ל, *השלישי האפשרי*, 130–111.

22 Similar positions are presented in the following works:

שלמה גיורא שוהם, *אנטישמיות: ואלהאלה, גלגלתא ואושוויץ* (תל אביב: צ'ריקובר, 1992); אוריאל טל, *תאולוגיה פוליטית והרייך השלישי*. הקדמה ועורך מדעי, פול מנדס-פלור; פתח דבר ויועץ מדעי: שאול פרידלנדר (תל אביב: ספריית פועלים, 1989);

Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). See also:

נטע שטהל, "האב ובן האלוהים: ישו ביצירותיו של יואל הופמן" בספרה *צלם יהודי: ייצוגיו של ישו בספרות העברית של המאה ה-20* (תל-אביב רסלינג, 2008) 165-187.

23 Hoffmann, *The Book of Joseph*, 79.

24 Christoph Ransmayr, *The Lost World*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

25 Yoel Hoffmann, *Moods*, trans. Peter Cole (New York: New Directions, 2010), [124].

26 Ibid., [125].

27 See in this context: אלבק-גדרון, *השלישי האפשרי*, 131-177.

28 See in this context:

טל פרנקל, *סגנון ופואטיקה*, 103-217; יהודית בר-אל, "מה רואים בשוק ודיון בפואטיקה של 'כריסטוס של דגים'", *אפס שתיים* 1 (1992) 70-74. שמעון זנדבנק, "מעבר לכל המילים: הקסמים של יואל הופמן", אתר *הארץ*, 12.2.2010, http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1188332

29 הופמן, *גוטפרשה*. Emphasis mine

30 Nonsense, Common Sense וטראומה ביצירתו של יואל הופמן, בתוך: אליעזר פאפו, חיים וייס, יובל הררי, יעקב בן-טולילה (עורכים), *דמתה לתמר, מחקרים לכבודה של תמר אלכסנדר, איל פריזינט*, מחקרים בתרבות יהודי ספרד, כרכים ח-ט. *ומכאן*, כתב עת לחקר הספרות והתרבות היהודית והישראלית, כרך טו (תשע"ה) 745-774.

31 Marthe Robert, *The Old and the New, From Don Quixote to Kafka* (Berkeley;University of California Press, 1977) 200–221.

32 See, among others:

אמנון נבות, "מתוך שבר הקיסרות: הערות למקרא ראשון בסיפוריהם של אהרן אפלפלד ('עד שיעלה עמוד השחר') ויואל הופמן ('מה שלומך דולורס')", *מעריב*, מוסף לספרות (10.11.95) 47; מיכל ארבל, "מצב התרגום כמצב של גלות: 'קצכן' ליואל הופמן", *מאזניים*, כרך כ"ה 2 (2001), 38-42; מירי קובובי, "גלות במולדת: 'קצכן' ו'אפרים' ליואל הופמן", בתוך: *על בריאה ועל יצירה במחשבה היהודית: ספר היובל לכבודו של יוסף דן במלאת לו שבעים שנה*, עורכים: רחל אליאור ופטר שפר (טובינגן: מוהר סיביק, 2005), 225-237; רחל אלבק-גדרון, "מהי המולדת שבה מדברים הופמנית? סוגה וקהיליית מוצא בלקסיקון-אפוס של הופמן", בתוך: הנ"ל, *השלישי האפשרי*, 4-55.

33 Hoffmann, *The Book of Joseph* , 120.

34 In this context, see also:

בלבן, *גל אחר בסיפורת בעברית*, 13-82 ; אבנר הולצמן, *מפת דרכים*, סיפורת עברית כיום (הקיבוץ המאוחד/ספרי סימן קריאה 2005) 21-26;

Smadar Shiffman, "Orly Kastel-Bloom and Yoel Hoffmann: On Israeli postmodern prose fiction," *Hebrew Studies* 50 (2009), 215–227.

35 Different positions in this context are presented in the following:

אורציון ברתנא, *שמונים, ספרות ישראלית בעשור האחרון*, (תל אביב: אגודת הסופרים העברים בישראל, 1993) 163-164 ; בלבן, *גל אחר בסיפורת העברית*, 1995, 13-82; הרציג, *הקול האומר: אני*, 305-386; הולצמן, *מפת דרכים*, 229-231.

36 This is also made clear in a very open manner, in his latest book, *Moods* , for example in the following three sections:

A. "[109] How can it be that we walk around under the sky and nonetheless have an unconscious? Don't believe these lies. The world is large and wide and has no measure. And all is revealed."

B. [152] "We forgot to with the psychologists a Happy New Year. No doubt the cold makes it harder for them to look into souls. If only the New Year would bring about a condition in which their souls would melt (as one melts lead) into the great form of the soul of the world, and there'd no longer be any separation between their eyes (behind glasses) and the eyes of the people they're looking into. And that the rule against hugging might be dropped, and above all, that someone would hug them.Because there is no loneliness greater than that of the psychologist. His thought is always doubled, as he's forced to consider thought upon thought, and sometimes thought upon thought upon thought."

C. [189] "And don't be put off by the fear in people's faces. And don't worry about the policeman who might take you away. You can embrace him as well. And, above all, don't lose that love when you're with the psychiatrist they'll quickly call in. It isn't his fault. Just tell him: You too are worthy. You too."

Hoffmann is similarly uneasy regarding teachers, academics, and representatives of religious institutions. See:

יגאל שוורץ, "'הביצה שהתחפשה','בפברואר כדאי לקנות פילים': דן פגיס, יואל הופמן, מודרניזם ופוסט-מודרניזם", *צפון* ז: קובץ ספרותי, (2004) 277-293; רחל אלבק-גדרון, שם, 111-130.

37 הופמן, *אפרים* , 192. Translation mine.

38 Yoel Hoffmann, *Curriculum Vitae*, trans. Peter Cole (New York: New Direction, 2007), 88.

39 הופמן, *גוטפרשה*.

40 Rachel Albeck-Gidron, "Caesura and Holding in Yoel Hoffmann's Texts", in this volume.

41 Hoffmann, *The Book of Joseph* , 99.

42 Such expositions appear in the openings of all Hoffmann's great poems. For example: "After his wife died, Bernhard thought: "'The world / is infinite, beyond any common galaxy / another galaxy.'" [Yoel Hoffman, *Bernhard*, trans. Alan Treister (New York: New Directions, 1998), Part 1.] "At night, Uncle Herbert came like a / slow hunter of rabbits of air and spoke to me. I said/to my father: 'Is not Uncle Herbert dead, am I dreaming?' And my dead father said: 'He lives.' [Yoel Hoffmann,*The Christ of Fish*, trans. Eddie Levenston (New York: New Directions,

1999) Epilogue]. Hoffmann exposes this trick in the exposition of his latest book, *Moods*, in an ars-poetic passage that itself is similar to the same trick: [1] “Ever since finishing my last book, I’ve been thinking of how to begin the next one. Beginning is everything and needs to contain, like the seed of a tree, the work as a whole. And so, what I see is the figure of a man descending (from the sidewalk?) five or six steps to a basement apartment, and he’s halfway there. I know it’s a love story. And maybe there’s a woman in the basement apartment. It’s probably November.”