

## CONTAGION, INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION

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### I

At the peak of the second outbreak of the pandemic, during the severe lockdowns imposed by the government, a feeling of estrangement was on the rise. People were afraid of any kind of contact with others. The fear was sharpened as social encounters were policed by the authorities, who refined their technology for monitoring even accidental kinds of human contact in public and private gatherings. Shoppers who were diagnosed with Covid-19, for example, had to provide a list of places they had visited during the week preceding their diagnosis, to assist investigators in tracking either the origin of the infection or the people exposed to carriers and who might potentially become a source for the spread of the epidemic. It was no surprise when this well-trodden path of concern about the origin of infection engendered parallel discourses in the imaginary sphere. I am thinking of a specific case of literary paranoia, in which a throng of literary experts were commissioned by a leading Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, to examine the similarities between the recent prize-winning Israeli novel by Ilana Bernstein, *Tomorrow We'll Go to the Amusement Park* (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2018) and the French novel, *Bord de Mer* by Véronique Olmi (Babelio, 2001). In the case of the later novel the thematic similarities were examined as if they were pandemic symptoms whose resemblance to the 2001 French novel was sufficient proof that Bernstein's book was written under its influence. This verdict, indifferent to the complex links between texts, insidiously spreads the slander of plagiarism. The dissemination of this accusation at the peak of Covid-19 infections and society-wide responses uncovered an unnoticed connection between the plague and the phenomenon of plagiarism. In Latin, the word *plagiarus*, a kidnapper and a plagiarist, derives from *plaga* which either stands for an open expanse, stretch or net (from the Greek *pelagos*) or from *plaga*, a violent blow (from the Latin verb *plango*), which in post-classical Latin denotes a plague.

Plague, contagion and writing are all forms of communication relying on a process of dispersion whose origin is often untraceable.<sup>1</sup> In Bernstein's novel, the protagonist, a deprived single mother who struggles to become a writer, reflects on the unreliability of her 'own' memories: 'Speech becomes memory. Someone says something, and the next day it's your memory' (Bernstein (2018) *Tomorrow We'll Go to Luna Park* [in Hebrew]: 174). What traces are left by speech in a forgetful mind? Who said it? What actually happened there? How does memory penetrate a forgetful consciousness? Who creates memory? Who is responsible for it? Can memory be copyrighted? The last question concerns the law, which I bracket here. I want to focus rather on questions of influence and inspiration, because they are perhaps the most important ones for poetry, for the existence of creative work. They relate to that liminal space of consciousness that connects forgetting and remembering, without needing to justify itself. It is that liminal space of the self in which transparency is always getting besmirched, obfuscating the boundaries between outside and inside. This vision of the self allows contagious influenza (the first epidemic flu occurred in 1580) to coincide with poetic influence, so that they become synonymous. Both are understood as forces acting at a distance whose effects on mind and body derive mysteriously from outside. In the premodern world, both infectious and creative influences denote an invisible flood, or a flow of energy, originating in the zodiac, towards the inhabitants of earth.<sup>2</sup>

## II

Inspiration and influence are contagious and therefore blur the clear boundaries of the self, whose language isn't the property of anyone, and perhaps only belongs to that which dares to call itself 'no one:' *Outis*. The first instance of influence binding the name of an author to disease is in the *Odyssey* at the Cyclops' cave. Repeatedly filling Polyphemus' wooden bowl with wine, Odysseus gets him drunk. Just before he collapses into a state of numbness, the Cyclops is still capable of hearing the answer to the question he addressed to the unwelcomed guest: what is your name? The cunning Odysseus replies that his name is Nobody, and that his mother, father and all his other companions call him Nobody, *Outis*. Odysseus uses the Greek verb *kiklēskousi*, 'call by name,' and thus creates a pun about his host, the Cyclops, who would hence name the unnamed. Then having been blinded by Odysseus, the wounded Cyclops cries

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<sup>1</sup> On the analogy between cultural exchange and the epidemic, see Cynthia Davis (2002). Contagion as Metaphor *American Literary History* 14(4): 828-63.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of Christopher Wood (2016/2017). Under the Influence *Res* 67-68: 290-98.

out for help. Alarmed by his call, the neighbours inquire about the source of his anguish. The Cyclops replies that Nobody is killing him by a ruse and not by force (*Outis me kteinai dolō oude biēphin* Hom. Od.9. 408) If nobody is killing him, the neighbouring cyclopes assume, Polyphemus surely has been infected by a heavenly disease (*nouson dios megalou* Hom. Od.9. 411). Thus, in the *Odyssey*, the cave of the Cyclops designates a mythic sphere of influence whose effects cannot be traced. Inside the cave, Nobody refers to an indefinite someone whose words or deeds are memorable, unforgettable and even traumatic.

### III

The interplay between forgetfulness and memory is intrinsic to the drama of the birth of poetry, revealing the way memory penetrates a forgetful mind: it begins with hearing ‘someone saying something.’ One day, as he was walking by night on Mount Helicon, a shepherd heard a voice. The voice he heard was the divine song of the Muses who were ‘shrouded in thick invisibility’ (Hes. *Theog.* 9).<sup>3</sup> The Muses are performing divinities: They dance performing choral dances and sing to the gods. But they also make an appearance on earth whenever they wish to select those few who are destined by them for poetic greatness. Hesiod’s *Theogony* stages the setting of the encounter between someone who says something and someone who hears something as the preliminary, the necessary condition, for the birth of human poetry. The dramatic scene of the inception of Greek poetry is composed of several stages involving a number of participants. It begins when a shepherd, a kind of ‘no one,’ who still goes without a name, hears something obscure, unclear, something that moves him, and that would eventually move him to speech. Then, after going through the mysterious auditory experience, the shepherd is prepared to meet the Muses face to face. They approach him. And although they degradingly address him as one of those nameless rustic people pasturing lambs, their intention is to teach him and to transform him into a poet. Thereby he is named Hesiod – a poetic name resonating through *Hesi-odos* the meaning of ‘he who sends forth song.’<sup>4</sup> They accomplish their task of nomination and initiation by touch:

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<sup>3</sup> All translation from Hesiod is by Glenn Most, *Hesiod’s Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA: 2006.

<sup>4</sup> This interpretation is offered by Glenn Most in his Introduction to the Loeb edition of Hesiod’s *Theogony* (2006: xiv-xv).

So spoke great Zeus' ready-speaking daughters, and they plucked a staff, a branch of luxuriant laurel, a marvel, and gave it to me; and they breathed a divine voice into me, so that I might glorify what will be and what was before

Hes. *Theog.* 29-34

By touching the human mouth, the nine Muses authorize, stimulate, awaken memory. They enable poetry to escape the mouths of the forgetful poets. The divine inspiration is physical. The Muses breathe (*enpneusan*) the divine voice into Hesiod who is now endowed with the poetic capacity to sing of the past and the future. Their voice is understood to be the product of memory. The Greeks indeed understood poetry to be created by memory, which we know is the divine power of the goddess Mnemosyne.

Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, doesn't herself associate with poets. For that purpose, she gave birth to nine daughters, the Muses. Homer and Hesiod testify that when touched by the Muses, a memory is awakened in them, a memory of the immemorable, of that which they have never experienced before. But what kind of memory is this? And whose memory is it? Who experiences it? The Muses? The Poet? The goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne? Who actually was there? Who saw? Poetry is the remnant of a memory of something someone said and which became the memory of a poet.

#### IV

It's this touching the lips of the poets I want to talk about. A touch which in the days of pandemic became a threat because it was understood to be contagious, dangerous, communicating the plague. Poetry is truly a contagious matter, passed on like a disease. Artistic work doesn't exist without contagion. A critic of poetry too, such as Plato, understands that poetry cannot exist without touch. In the *Ion*, Plato called poetry's power to touch magnetic. The magnet stone offers him a visual image for poetry's contagious effect (Plat. *Ion.* 533d-534d). It attracts iron rings but also imparts to them the power to attract other rings as well and so forth creating thereby an endless chain of infection: The Muses touch poets; Touched by the Muses, poets are filled with passion and their audience gets infected with enthusiasm. It's a long chain of infected people contracting passion, filling up on it; it goes from one to another, from culture to culture, from one period or moment in time to another. A series of contagious fires, each of which begins outside and comes to reside inside. This process makes each member of the magnetic chain an *entheos* (Plat. *Ion.* 534b) full of the god. To be enthusiastic

is to be gripped by *enthousiasmos*, inspiration. Yes, it's this unfashionable concept I want to talk about. Recall the passion that gripped Agathon ('all alone on the farthest couch') at the moment he saw Socrates at last entering the dining hall in (Plat. *Sym.* 175d) when he calls to him: 'Socrates, come lie down next to me. Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom that came to you under my neighbour's porch.'<sup>5</sup>

And although Socrates responded with a sceptical smile, saying if only wisdom could pass between two people by physical contact, during the course of the *Symposium* the inspiring touch of the Muses takes on a new erotic meaning. In the *Symposium* it is Diotima, the priestess from Mantinea, the love theoretician, who succeeded in averting the plague for ten years. We can only wonder whether Diotima's theory of Eros was helpful in averting a plague transmitted by touch. Perhaps it is connected to the exclusion of a deathly and destructive contagious love from Diotima's erotic theory, which mainly consists of the kind of love whose erotic touch leads to impregnation and the 'birth of the beautiful' (Plat. *Sym.* 206e).

Platonic theory of love is the source of what we today call intertextuality. Consider Diotima's instruction:

Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, one would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind – offspring, which because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance

Plat. *Sym.* 209cd

Diotima commemorates Homer and Hesiod as literary fathers, admired creators of immortal poetry. She singles out Hesiod and Homer among good poets (*poiētās tous agathous*), who are worshiped like heroes. They are a sort of demigod (*hēmītheoi*), and thus escape a nameless death in Hades, according to Hesiod in *Works and Days* 160. Homer and Hesiod gain immortal glory (*athanaton kleos*) and remembrance (*mnēmēn*). In making beautiful works of art, Homer and Hesiod were motivated by an erotic drive, and their effect on their reader (or listeners) is also primarily erotic. Indeed, according to Diotima, any process of giving birth, whether physical or mental, depends on a bond between two parental figures. The lover becomes

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from Plato's *Symposium* are from Nehamas and Woodruff, Indianapolis, IN, 1989.

productive through contact with someone whose soul (erotic drive) incites and reflects the lover's desires. In being close to his source of inspiration, the lover 'remembers that beauty, and in common with him he nurtures the newborn' (Plat. Sym. 209c). That process is apparent in the interaction between authors and readers; and in so far as authors are themselves readers of other texts it affects how we view the relationship between authors and their literary sources. As a result of a prolonged intimacy with other texts, the reader 'conceives and gives birth to what she has been carrying inside her for ages' (Plat. Sym. 209c with my gender adjustment). A text is therefore always a product of more than one author.

Diotima uses the language of love (which always has an analogous relation to the plague discourse). She describes the effect of the author on the reader: 'Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets *with envy and admiration* for the offspring they have left behind' (Plat. Sym. 209d). In turning the reader into a viewer who gazes (*apoblepsas*) with envy and admiration at the poet, Diotima effectively characterizes him as a lover (*erastēs*). This is what happened to Sappho, Vergil and Dante, when the poetry of Homer and Hesiod stung them into admiration and envy. Every poet, in Diotima's view, gives birth with a literary mate. Creators touch creators, and reading, which is closeness, intimate familiarity with another text, is the actual heart of the creative act, according to Diotima. It is very much like erotic experience, inundating lovers and birthing new poetry. In Plato's *Symposium*, there's no hierarchical distinction between the source and the copy, a distinction so important to Plato in the *Republic*. In the *Symposium* Plato takes the opposite view. A work seen to resemble a revered source is not condemned, and is not thought of as a copy twice removed from the truth. On the contrary, a work resembling another betrays a desire for the source, a desire which is testament to the creative artist being a creator. Lines of similarity between works are welcomed as preserving humanity. For Diotima, giving birth to beauty (with all its material and spiritual aspects) derives from erotic contact, which is the only source left to mortal humanity by which it transcends finitude. And from our point in time, in a technological world in which human engineering is preoccupied with overcoming death, it might be worthwhile to challenge posthumanism with Diotima's more humble values of inspiration and contact.

## V

What is creation without touch? Without touch, there's no culture, and no creation. It is, to our sorrow, what happens today in the time of Covid-19, which hallows the mask and a prohibition

on touching. Contact between languages, between strangers, between lovers, and even between enemies, is what makes for culture. Roman literature is made out of contact between cultures and languages, and above all between itself and an admired rival: Greek literature. Roman literature is born in the act of copying. The first Roman work of Livius Andronicus was a translation from Greek into Latin of the *Odyssey*. In Rome, translation had a different meaning from that which obtains in the modern world of copyright. It wasn't only that translation in Rome was creative effort as it was the essential activity that defined a poet's originality. This is to say that the transition of a work from one place to another, one language to another, was considered a poetic movement with a contagious effect. Hence the interaction between a source text and a translating text created contamination. Terence, for example, is proud to infect the Greek source text by producing a Latin translation that spoils two Greek originals (Terence, *Andria* 16). The Roman poets saw cultural transmission as an important key to creativity.

In our time of the pandemic, it is worth recalling what Dr Bernard Rieux says in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Rieux, alone in his room, contemplates what has happened to his town, at a time when the word 'plague' is not yet to be spoken in public and the people of Oran still haven't realized that they have been struck by it. Thoughts jostle for Rieux's attention as he pauses by the window and looks out at the town:

Our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves;... they were humanists: they disbelieved in pestilences. A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away, and the humanists first of all, because they haven't taken their precautions

Camus 1991: 35 (my emphasis)

Yes, this is why we are in lockdown and why we wear masks. But are we safeguarding humanism? In Camus, humanism comes to life in the form of the protagonist's stream of consciousness, in Rieux's racing thoughts as he gazes out the window. He remembers Procopius' description of the plague, accounts of the plague in Jaffa from the nineteenth century, and that of Thucydides, and of the Roman Lucretius, who 'copied' him, and Boccaccio, who copied ... from whom? The plague provokes a yearning for a humanity that

remembers the significance of human touch, a remembering achieved through contact between texts.

### Abbreviations

- Hes. Theog. *Hesiod. Theogony. Works and Days, Testimonia* (ed and trans) G.W. Most. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Hom. Od. *Homer. Odyssey, Vol. I: Books 1-12* (trans) A. T. Murray. Revised by G. E. Dimock. Loeb Classical Library 104. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919.
- Plat. Ion *Statesman. Philebus. Ion* (trans) H. N. Fowler and W. R. M. Lamb. Loeb Classical Library 164. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- Plat. Sym. *Plato. Symposium* (trans) A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff. *Plato Complete Works*. Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1997.

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