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The verbalization of grief in David Grossman's *Falling Out of Time*

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Abstract: *David Grossman's experimental text Falling Out of Time (2011) examines the theme of the death of a child and parents' attempts to understand and cope with the loss. In order to represent and articulate the sense of unbearable pain and grief, Grossman employs several strategies and techniques related to both content and form which allow for a perspective that is both artistically engaging and sensitive. One of the obvious formal features of the text is his use of poetry, which seemingly represents the most natural means to express the raw emotions and pain of his characters. The paper seeks to examine Grossman's techniques that help him verbalize the grieving experience of his characters while focusing on his use of poetic language. It seems that the capacity of poetry to rely on meaningful silences and a multi-layered interpretive potential enables one to create a healing space which facilitates the process of reconciliation.*

"A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry"

H. D. Thoreau

*"Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things."*

Mary Oliver: from *Wild Geese*

Introduction

In the preface to his 20th-century classic about suffering *The Problem of Pain* (1940) C. S. Lewis voiced his wish to have published the work under a pseudonym, explaining that “if I were to say what I really thought about pain, I should be forced to make statements of such apparent fortitude that they would become ridiculous if anyone knew who made them” (1947, p. vii). Lewis was worried that readers would question his interpretation of pain and doubt the verity of the text if it lacked the support of authentic experience. In his attempt to justify his project Lewis further emphasized that “the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified” (1947, p. vii).

All Lewis’s readers know that the experience which the author felt lacking came some 20 years later and resulted in his book *A Grief Observed* (1961), a deeply personal account in which he reflected on bereavement after the death of his beloved wife Joy Davidman. Interestingly, this time again Lewis did not want to reveal his identity and *A Grief Observed* was published under the pseudonym N. W. Clark. Lewis’s requests for anonymity reveal the complexity and delicacy of the topic of suffering, and manifest how daring the writing experience may be. In the preface to *The Problem of Pain* he felt necessary to clarify his motives and the nature of the book in anticipation of the reactions of his future readers. In *A Grief Observed*, on the other hand, he felt the need to hide his identity because the text he produced was intensely personal, disclosing his innermost frailty and spiritual anguish.

While grief is a highly personal matter, it represents, at the same time, an ultimately universal experience which has been tackled by many artists. Verbalization of grief and suffering in written form has proved to have therapeutic effects on the griever time and time again. As Julia Kristeva points out in her essay “On the melancholic imaginary”, literary representation “has a real and imaginary efficacy: belonging more to the order of catharsis than of elaboration, it is a therapeutic method used in all societies throughout the ages” (1987). There seems to be a shared awareness that writing about loss, grief or trauma is “similar to a psychoanalytic dialogue” which “liberates affect and facilitates mourning” (Ornstein, 2014, p. 86). Writing therefore provides an opportunity for what Anna Ornstein terms *belated mourning* which completes the work of bereavement and brings “the past into the present in such a way that earlier feelings that had laid dormant for a long time can break through and retroactively reshape the present”, thus creating an après-coup phenomenon (ibid.).

In a similar vein, in her book *Mended by the Muse* (2014) Sophia Richman argues that artistic forms provide an effective medium for coping with trauma and its aftermath:

Art in all its forms provides us with opportunities to repair what has been torn asunder by events that have overwhelmed us and rendered us helpless. It is in art, in its various forms and symbolic disguises, that our sorrow is given shape and meaning. By expressing the internal pain, the artist externalizes it, fashions a container for it, and invites others to become witnesses to his suffering. Art facilitates mourning, it restores continuity and connection and helps to master the chaos that follows in the aftermath of tragedy. (p. 3)

Though the benefits of verbalization in connection with grief might be agreed upon, to write about pain and suffering is not easy. Both authors and readers realize that these themes require a great measure of sensitivity and, what seems particularly important, sincerity and honesty. Books which resort to cloying sentimentality and pathos may trigger readers' emotions but eventually appear superficial and false. Literary works about suffering – especially narratives inspired by real-life experience – are susceptible to readers' scrutiny regarding the works' background, factuality and even emotions in which the story originated. Readers' reactions can become intense especially in the case of literary works about suffering inspired by historical accounts. For instance, there are a few well-known cases of Holocaust-themed books, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960), Zvi Kolitz's *Yosl Rakover Talks to God* (1999) and Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* (1965), which provoked controversial and impassioned discussions concerning the authenticity of these narratives and veracity of their historical background.

David Grossman's narrative *Falling Out of Time* is, to some extent, a personal text akin to Lewis's *A Grief Observed*. However, while Lewis describes his loss in a meditative non-fiction essay, Grossman's experience of the death of his son Uri inspired him to write a work of fiction, an experimental combination of poetry, drama and prose. The paper provides an interpretation of his text and focuses primarily on the author's use of poetry, which appears to be the most natural means to express the deepest emotions of his characters. It studies the form and content of Grossman's poetic language and argues that the capacity of poetry to rely on meaningful silences and multi-layered interpretive potential creates a space in which the process of reconciliation may be completed.

Writing off the pain

The Israeli writer David Grossman lost his son Uri in August 2006 in the Second Lebanon war, a 34-day military conflict in Lebanon, Northern Israel and the Golan Heights. In his lecture *Writing in the Dark* presented in New York on 24 April 2007, Grossman openly spoke about the death of his son and about finding the necessary emotional shelter in the act of writing:

I write. The consciousness of the disaster that befell me upon the death of my son Uri in the Second Lebanon War now permeates every minute of my life. The power of memory is indeed great and heavy, and at times has a paralyzing effect. Nevertheless, the act of writing creates for me a 'space' of sorts, an emotional expanse that I have never known before, where death is more than the absolute, unambiguous opposite of life. (2008, p. 64)

The writer has acknowledged his need to write down his grief in numerous interviews. He regards writing as an effective coping strategy that enables him to find, at least some, consolation in grim reality, since the alternative to writing – silence – entails repression and paralysis. In his own words, “[p]eople who become mute because of a catastrophe lose their trust in almost everything. [...] Nothing is taken for granted after you experience trauma... Language cannot express what you feel, language falls short, both in situations of great happiness and pleasure and in great sorrow and sadness” (In Davidson, 2014). Despite the limitations of language in verbalizing unspeakable loss, Grossman continues to utilize the written word as a remedy. His novels, published in the aftermath of Uri’s death, often portray stories of people struck by catastrophe, paralysed by grief, unable to make sense of unexpected life events. *To the End of the Land* (2008), for example, also echoes Grossman’s experience as the text meditates on the loss of a child deployed in combat.

At the time of his son’s death, Grossman had been personally involved in social commentary on Israel and especially on its difficult relations with the Palestinians for many years. His non-fiction books such as *The Yellow Wind* (1987), *Sleeping on a Wire: Conversations with Palestinians in Israel* (1992) and *Death as a Way of Life: Israel Ten Years after Oslo* (2003) received controversial reactions and Grossman was repeatedly criticized for his too-open attitude to the Palestinian cause. Although *Falling Out of Time* is set in an indefinite time and place, the book appears to be Grossman’s most intimate text about Israel’s present. By depicting the pain of several grieving parents (every character in the book has lost

a child), Grossman creates a world in which there is initially almost no other emotion but suffering and pain. It is the world which strikingly juxtaposes the one in his *Contemplations on Peace*, a lecture presented at the Levinas Circle meeting in December 2004 in Paris, in which Grossman relates how he heard “an interview with an Israeli couple on the eve of their marriage. They were asked how many children they would like to have, and the sweet young bride immediately answered that they wanted three children, ‘so that if one is killed, we still have two’” (2008, p. 117). Although the fictional world of *Falling Out of Time* lacks the bitterness of the Israeli bride’s answer, both worlds share the hopelessness and despair of parents seeing their children die.

It has to be emphasized, however, that although it is possible to read Grossman’s text as a book of political protest, only one couple, the main characters of Man and Woman, lost their child (Uwi) in war. By presenting more stories of bereaved couples who lost their children for various reasons and by not disclosing where and when the story takes place, the author shifts the focus of the text to the universality of parental grief and the exceptionality of its existential essence.

Falling into poetry

In his essay “Books That Have Read Me” (1998/2002) Grossman writes:

If asked to describe the qualities that motivate someone to become an author, the first I’d name would be a strong urge to invent stories: to organize reality, which is frequently chaotic and unintelligible, within a structure of storytelling; to find the visible and hidden contexts that load every event with its particular meaning; to accentuate the shade of ‘plot’ within each such event and coax out its ‘heroes’.
(2002, p. 29)

Falling Out of Time is structured as an economical, though intensely poignant, mosaic of dramatic dialogues and poetry that slowly discloses the stories of people who have lost their children. The fragmentation of the text testifies to a reality which is impossible to organize – a reality dominated by a hopelessness and despair that the author fails to confine within a structure. The text is not reminiscent of any other book written by Grossman previously; its form clearly calls attention to the book’s emotional extremity. Grossman’s fragmented text gradually reveals seven stories of grieving individuals and families. The text is primarily focused on the verbalization of grief; the reader’s knowledge of individual characters is very

scarce and needs to be carefully reconstructed. By disclosing small bits and pieces of information we learn that the central couple (Man and Woman) lost their son, familiarly called Uwi, five years ago and have not spoken since then.

“For five years
we unspoke
that night.
You fell mute,
then I.
For you the quiet
was good,
and I felt it clutch
at my throat. One after
the other, the words
died, and we were
like a house
where the lights
go slowly out,
until a somber silence
fell-” (Grossman, 2014, pp. 12-13)

The Net-Mender, another character in the book, had lost her six-year-old son nine years previously and remained silent ever since. The child of the Centaur was 11 when he died 15 years ago and the Math Teacher’s son Michael died in a foolish accident 26 years ago. The Midwife and the Cobbler lost their daughter Lilly when she was just a year and a half, five years ago. The Chronicler witnessed how his daughter Hannah drowned in a lake, and the Duke is also grieving the loss of his son.

The opening scene of the book takes place in the kitchen, the very same room where the couple had received the tragic news five years previously. Their story and the tension between them strongly echoes Robert Frost’s powerful conversational poem *The Home Burial*. Frost himself experienced the tragedy of the loss of a child when his son Elliott, not yet four years old, died in July 1900. Frost blamed himself for his death and the grief estranged him from his wife, Elinor. In *The Home Burial*, the wife is more expressive, while her husband cannot communicate his pain so manifestly. They are, in fact, unable to sympathize with each other’s mourning and both feel lonely and misunderstood. The poem thus captures the ambiguous

feelings and difficulties of sharing one's sorrow, when "[t]he anguish of one may not have been completely understood by the other" (Bober, 1991, p. 61). *Falling Out of Time* also accentuates the loss of a child as an extremely strenuous experience for the couples. Centaur's wife left him three years after their son Adam died, and the text begins with the departure of the Man into a self-imposed exile. He changes into the Walking Man who begins to walk, first around the house and then in larger and larger circles around the town.

Falling Out of Time opens with despair and the ultimate question whether it is possible to find consolation and overcome grief. To relate the couple's story to other narratives of suffering, Grossman introduces the character of the Chronicler. At the beginning, his role of a recorder of other people's grief remains unexplained; it is only later that the reader learns about the Duke's project and the task he gave to the Chronicler to observe and record how people experience grief. It is interesting to point out that Grossman deliberately disorients the reader when almost at the very end the Duke himself denies he had given the Chronicler such a task and his motivation and reasons for his behaviour remain uncertain.

According to the American poet Stanley Kunitz, "[o]ne of the great resources of the poetic imagination is its capacity to mount thought on thought, event on event, image on image, time on time, a process that I term 'layering'" (1985, p. 69). In the discussion of the poem *The Layers*, Kunitz draws attention to the capacity of poetry to connote and evoke, to symbolize and multiply meanings. In his view, poetry is a special form of communication which best represents man's ability to create, his search for meaning and its discovery in places where it is not noticed at first sight. Grossman's decision to write much of *Falling Out of Time* in verse has a significant impact on the reader's perception and interpretation of the text. The layout in the form of verse creates a series of important effects. It reminds us of the theme of falling, repeatedly mentioned in the text, as the reader's eyes fall down on each page as they follow the lines. By putting a very limited amount of words into a line (sometimes a verse is formed by only one word) Grossman encourages the reader to put emphasis on every single one of them:

"I share the vast expanse his death
created in me –
and he surges
and he wanes with me,
unquiet
unquiet
roaming
embittering

redeeming
shackling
healing
purifying,
not letting go,
not letting go,
this
lonely
dead
child.” (Grossman, 2014, pp. 37-38)

Grossman’s words seem simple and uncomplicated, yet it is the space between them that underlines their importance and emotional heaviness. The verses consisting of a minimum number of words require the reader to go through the text slowly, the text needs to be read with intervals of silent reflection and pause, each accentuating the impact of the word but also the effort on the part of the speaker to voice the ideas aloud; they call for concentration on the connotative appeal of every expression. The poetic form, its layout and minimalistic wording establish a pattern that Grossman retains throughout the whole text.

As all Grossman characters eventually confess, their ultimate struggle is the struggle with words. It is difficult to verbalize one’s grief and thereby confront reality at its face value. It is almost impossible to say aloud that the child died; and just the effort to do so seems like a sign of resignation, acceptance of something that does not seem right to accept; as if one deserted the child, left it alone and unprotected. The fact that this fear of verbalization always hangs over the mourner like some kind of emotional threat is obvious from the words of Centaur pronounced at the very end of the book:

“Yet still it breaks my heart,
my son,
to think
that I have –
that one could –
that I have found
the words.” (ibid., p. 192)

It is important to observe that poetry becomes a natural means to express the character’s feelings and it represents the most appropriate medium that enables them to process their grief. In fact, the first words pronounced after five years of silence are the words of poetry. Grossman

does not want us to suspend our disbelief that the characters speak in poetic lines. It is not an artificial discourse drawing attention to itself; it is not a metaphor but an actual language, the only possible and appropriate way the characters use to speak. It is the only language possible and available to them.

When the Duke says to the Net-Mender,
“poetry
is the language
of my grief” (ibid., p. 160),

he indicates that one’s pain cannot be compressed within intellectual categories of prose. Only poetry, with its form and diction, enables one to express the inexpressible and inscrutable. In the aforementioned lecture, Grossman emphasized how the act of writing allows him to create “a ‘space’ of sorts, an emotional expanse that I have never known before, where death is more than the absolute, unambiguous opposite of life” (2008, p. 64). The space of poetry created in *Falling Out of Time* is defined by a freedom and expressiveness that a prosaic text may establish with somewhat greater difficulty.

Moreover, the inventiveness of poetry helps the characters to overpower their hopelessness and gives them a chance to modify the unmodifiable reality. It is speech, and in particular poetry, that helps them to face grief. The character of Centaur, for example, tries to understand death through experiments with language:

“Sometimes I play games
on it, the goddamn it,
activities: “Death is
deathful.’ I wink at it,
like it’s a little game
we play: ‘Death will deathify,
or is it deathened? Deatherized?
Deathered?’ I patiently recite,
over and over, rephrasing, finessing:
‘We were deathened, you will be
deatherized, they will be
deathbed.’
What else can I do –
neither write

nor live. At least
language
remains, at least
it is still
somewhat free,
unraveled.” (Grossman, 2014, pp. 93-94)

His attempts to extend the words’ meaning appear playful (he himself calls it a game), but at the same time his words become very serious, their playfulness sarcastic and bitter.

At the same time, the experience of grief as a shock which paralyses speech is mentioned in several stories. Many characters are unable to articulate, physically, literally, the impact of their loss. The Net-Mender has not uttered a word for nine long years; the Midwife stutters as she attempts to talk to her husband. Then there is the silence of the first couple which complements the Math Teacher’s ruminations on how little there is to say about one’s despair:

“Yet surprisingly,
and embarrassingly,
I know nothing
about it.
‘But what is it like?’
people ask,
and I, too, not infrequently,
ask myself:
Like a block of concrete?
An iron ingot?
An impassable dam?
Like basalt rock?
Or rather – like the layers
of an onion?” (ibid., pp. 70-71)

The Math Teacher’s speech confirms the inscrutability of pain and the fact that people naturally resort to poetic images, to metaphors and similes when they attempt to understand it. Substituting the ‘reality’ with poetic images proves necessary because otherwise the intensity of the experience is weakened and appears inauthentic.

In that respect, poetry turns out to be not only the means through which one communicates one's experience, it is also a prerequisite for one's process of healing and reconciliation. The act of verbalization facilitates understanding and eventually leads to acceptance. In the words of the Centaur, "I can't understand anything until I write it [...] *I must re-create it in the form of a story!* [...] The thing that happened! What's not to understand? *It!* The sonofabitch thing that happened to me and my boy." (ibid., p. 77). Clearly, the characters in Grossman's text are caught in their own painful universe. They think life is what has passed. They find refuge in the past because it is safe and they feel that they may still live with their children there.

The Centaur says:

"I'd like to learn to separate
memory from the pain. Or at least in part,
however much is possible, so that all the past
will not be drenched with so much pain." (ibid., p. 175)

Grossman's characters are entrapped in their grief when they cease to ask questions and limit themselves to passionate defence of their beliefs in the unreality of death. It is language and poetry that brings a new openness to the unknown, and they increasingly identify poetry as a vehicle of revelation. In the words of the author, "[y]ou create new combinations of words, you juxtapose a word next to a word, next to another word [in ways] never before seen ... You suddenly find a metaphor that touches a nuance of life, human relationships, the human mind, in such a profound way ... When you create new combinations of words, suddenly you enlarge the human experience, you open the little gap between the places that started to congeal, that became scarred, and because of that, you allow new content to surface and flow" (Davidson, 2014).

Grossman's world suggests that there are inevitable steps which need be taken on the road to emotional healing. A willingness to speak about grief is followed by a willingness to listen, share and sympathize with the grief of others. Interestingly, the process of healing is initiated by the Walking Man who decides to abandon his house. The circular movement of the Walking Man corresponds to the healing process outlined in the book *Transcending Grief* by Ashley David Prend. Prend writes:

Actually grief does go around in circles, but the circles do not exist on the same plane. Think of grief like a spiral, a coil moving in a vertical direction [...] Processing the grief is about moving up the spiral in a dynamic upward motion,

constantly reencountering old material, but never at exactly the same place [...] The repetition is actually generating growth as the movement goes up the spiral because the more the grief is absorbed into your life, the easier it will ultimately be to move on. (1997, pp. 83-84)

What appears to be an escape initially, or another expression of the Man's denial, turns into a journey towards acceptance and reconciliation. Prend compares the process, the movement forward, to a gradual circling of a mountain when the person moves up to new heights until he or she reaches the top of the mountain. It is at the peak of the mountain that one reaches a state that Prend refers to as Transcendence, a stage of advanced healing which allows the griever to gain a new perspective and reconceptualise his or her loss into a meaningful, redemptive experience.

The initial seclusion of the griever is soon supplanted by a collective effort to move forward. One by one, the grieving characters are joining The Walking Man on a journey towards liberation. It is thus only through human interactions and acts of kindness that Grossman's characters slowly find their ways to recovery. As the Woman states: "Mourning condemns the living to the grimmest solitude, much like the loneliness in which disease enclothes the ailing" (Grossman, 2014, p. 24). The turning point for the Chronicler, for example, comes when he recognizes his own suffering in Centaur's pain: "Then, having no choice, I begin to listen to the different layers of his sobbing until I hear one I know well. If I were to cry, this is likely how I would cry" (ibid., p. 96). The sharing of grief, which is embodied by the collective voice of the Walkers in the second part of the book, unburdens the griever to a certain extent and enables them to experience catharsis, providing a hopeful closure. In order to recover from loss, one needs to rediscover emotions, the essence of what makes a human being human, such as love, empathy and understanding. Pain and suffering may never become fully meaningful, but they may represent an important function when through the act of sharing stories of pain and suffering they are turned into a source of support and strength.

Conclusion

Falling Out of Time defies genre categorization and is a unique semi-fictional representation of human grief. It is a story of a community that shows how man is actually never alone in his pain and suffering even if he subjectively feels lost and abandoned. The author concludes the story on a hopeful note, suggesting there is always the potential for human

contact and healing. Despair, which seemed beyond endurance, has been eventually overcome by a collective expression of unrecognized pain. The characters held themselves in a condition of surrender, caught in the past and memories and it was only due to their efforts to process their grief that they grew and were symbolically reborn at the end.

Suffering and pain differ in their form and manifestation; they are unique and personal and may actually never become fully meaningful. Their meaning, Grossman's fragmented text suggests, lies in their capacity to ease another person's suffering. Grossman's use of poetry implies that in moments of unbearable grief, words often fail. The qualities of the ordinary language of prose are not expressive enough to capture the emotional turbulence and instability. The language of poetry, on the other hand, provides one with the means through which the process of healing may be realized and through which pain may be best communicated to others.

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