

The Holocaust as a Changing Presence in Yoel Hoffmann's Texts¹

by Rachel Albeck-Gidron

Zusammenfassung

Yoel Hoffmann ist ein israelischer Autor, der 1937 in Braşov (Kronstadt), Rumänien geboren wurde. Er wuchs in einer deutschsprachigen Familie auf. Bereits in seinem ersten Buch *Sefer Yosef* (1989) verleiht er den deutschsprachigen Immigranten in Israel (die „Katschen“-Geschichte, 1986) und der osteuropäisch-jüdischen Gemeinschaft im Berlin der späten 1930er Jahre vor Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkriegs eine Stimme. Sein Werk ist mit jüdischen Protagonisten aus Deutschland gespickt, die von der Erinnerung an die Sprache erfasst sind, von der sie sich seit ihrer Emigration nach Palästina in den 1930er Jahren zu lösen versuchen. Ein klassisches Beispiel hierfür ist die Figur des Bernhard in Hoffmanns gleichnamigem Werk.

Der folgende Artikel fokussiert die Darstellungsweise und Ausarbeitung von Hoffmanns einzigartigem Werk, dessen Sprache einerseits durch seine tiefe Identifikation mit dem Zen Buddhismus und andererseits durch einen den Autor anziehenden, modernistischen westlichen Stil des Bewusstseinsstroms beeinflusst wurde. In zentralen Teilen seines Werkes stellt Hoffmann seinen gesamten literarischen Textkorpus als einen Typus der expliziten, anspielenden oder aber verborgenen Holocaust-Literatur dar. Er lädt seine Leserschaft und seine Kritiker dazu ein, seine Anspielungen zu dechiffrieren und das Geheimnis seiner Themen aufzudecken. Dies ist eine überraschende Aussage in Bezug auf Hoffmanns Werk und dessen bisherige Analyse. Der Autor stellt den Holocaust als ein kollektives israelisches Trauma dar, für das seine literarische Fiktion einen speziellen Katalog repräsentativer Charaktere erstellt hat. Bei der Erstellung dieses Katalogs, dies insbesondere da er zeitgleich klassifiziert und individualisiert, ähnelt Hoffmanns Projekt dem monumentalen Katalogisierungsprojekt der 1920er Jahre, das von dem gefeierten deutschen Fotografen August Sander (Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts) durchgeführt wurde. Hoffmann bezieht Fotografien aus Sanders Projekt in sein Werk ein und verwendet sogar einige der Abbildungen für die Titelseite seiner Bücher. Der Artikel behandelt die implizite Beziehung zwischen diesen beiden kreativen Künstlern und lässt diesem Aspekt eine Bedeutung zuteil werden, die bislang in der Forschung über Holocaust Themen in Yoel Hoffmanns schriftstellerischem Werk keinen Niederschlag fand.

¹ Translated from Hebrew by Batya Stein.

Abstract

Yoel Hoffmann is an Israeli writer born in 1937 in Braşov (Kronstadt), Romania. Brought up in a German-speaking family, already in his first book, *Sefer Yosef* (1989), he conveys the voice of German-speaking immigrants in Israel (the “Katschen” story, 1986) and that of the East European Jewish community in Berlin in the late 1930s, on the verge of the Second World War. His works are crammed with characters of Jews from Germany gripped by the memory of the language they abandoned following their emigration to Palestine in the 1930s. The classic one is the character of Bernhard, in the eponymous work.

The current article focuses on the representation and elaboration of Hoffmann’s unique creation, in a language influenced by his deep identification with Zen Buddhism on the one hand, and his attraction to the modernist, Western style of stream of consciousness on the other. In central sections of his works, Hoffman presents his entire literary corpus as a type of explicit, allusive, or secret Holocaust literature, and invites his readers and his critics to decode the allusions and expose the secret in this theme, a surprising statement in relation to Hoffmann’s work and its analysis so far. Hoffmann represents the Holocaust as a collective Israeli trauma for which his literary fiction creates a special catalogue of representative characters. In the creation of a catalogue, and particularly one that simultaneously classifies and individualizes, Hoffmann’s project resembles the monumental 1920s cataloguing project by the celebrated German photographer August Sander (*Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*). Hoffmann included photographs from this project in his works, and even chose some of them for the covers of his books. The article examines the implicit relationships between these two creative artists as conferring a meaning so far not considered in the research of the Holocaust theme in Yoel Hoffmann’s writings.

Introduction

Yoel Hoffmann’s literary corpus is increasingly expanding, currently comprising over ten books. It can already be viewed as a significant body of texts, emerging as a distinct endeavor with potential for growth, where set, profound constructs are discernible. In the spectrum of representations of “Israeliness” in recent decades, Hoffmann’s work is also gradually assuming canonical status.²

² The list of Hoffmann’s literary works so far comprises: *It’s a Good Idea to Buy Elephants in February* [Be-Februar Kedai Liknot Pilim], Givatayyim 1988; *The Book of Joseph* [Sefer Yosef], Jerusalem 1988; *Bernhard* [Bernhard], Jerusalem 1989; *The Christ of Fish* [Kristus Shel Ha-Dagim], Jerusalem 1991; *Guttapercha* [Gutapersha], Jerusalem 1993; *How Do You Do, Dolores?* [Ma Shlomekh Dolores?], Jerusalem 1995; *The Heart is Katmandu* [Ha-Lev Hu Katmandu], Jerusalem 2000; *The Shunra and the Schmetterling* [Ha-Shunra ve-

Since 1987, Hoffmann has published a series of enigmatic and inspiring works of a form so unique and strange that almost all literary scholars who have attempted to review them or analyze them, including myself, have addressed their innovations of style and genre, the immediate decoding dictated by the enigmatic writing, and the mediation between Hoffmann's mystique and his potential Israeli readership.³ It seems that no article or book chapter on twentieth-century Israeli literature can mention Hoffmann without first singling him out for the estrangement of his texts from the traditional codes of epic narration, poetic expression, or philosophical articulation common in literary texts, and even from accepted forms of typography.⁴ This inquiry into the striking uniqueness of his texts has invariably pointed to their profound affinity with the traditions of Taoism and Zen Buddhism,⁵ as warranted by Hoffmann's position as a professor of comparative philosophy at Haifa University who had published a series of translations from classic Chinese and Japanese thought even before he had published his works of fiction. Among his translations are a selection of Zen Koans, Haiku poems, and classic philo-

ha-Shmeterling], Jerusalem 2001; Ephraim [Ephrayim], Jerusalem 2003; Curriculum Vitae [Curriculum Vitae], Jerusalem 2007; Moods [Matsavei Ruah], Jerusalem 2010.

³ Hoffmann's first two books, the children's book *It's a Good Idea to Buy Elephants in February* and the collection of stories *The Book of Joseph* can still be considered traditional in their genre and typography, as shown below, but not so his works from Bernhard onward.

⁴ Thus, for instance, Herzig, Hanna: *The Voice Saying I. Trends in Israeli Prose Fiction of the 1980s* [ha-Kol ha-Omer Ani: Megamot ba-Siporet ha-Israelit shel Shnot ha-Shmonim], Tel-Aviv 1998, who devotes a chapter to Hoffmann and begins with a review of Hoffmann's criticism that takes the uniqueness of his writing as a starting point; Melamed, Ariana: "To Appease the World, I Acknowledge Before the Man in the Next Table that I Have Breasts" [Kedei Lefayes et ha-Olam Ani Modah Bifnei ha-Ish ba-Shulkhan ha-Samukh she-Yesh Li Shadayim], (on *The Heart is Katmandu*). In: *Maariv*. March 24, 2000; Shay, Eli: "The Coop of Cucumbers" [Lul ha-Melafefonim], on (*The Heart is Katmandu*). In: *Kolbo*. Shavuon Haifa, June 8, 2000; Ben, Menachem: "(Beautiful) Chinese He Speaks to Us" [Sinit (Yefeyfayah) Hu Medaber Elenu]. In: *Ha-Ir*, November 3, 1995, p. 73; Albeck-Gidron, Rachel: "I Will Tell You Crazy Words, You Pay Crazy Attention to Them" [Hinei Ashmi'a Lekha Milim Metorafot, Ata Hakshev Lahen Hakshavah Metorefet], (on *The Shunra and the Schmetterling*). In: *Haaretz*, November 4, 2001, p. 6; idem, "On the Way One Smiles with Dolores" [Al ha-Ofen she-Bo Mekhaykhim im Dolores]. In: *Tzafon* 6 (2000), pp. 33-48; Meltzer, Yoram, "Ephraim," (on Ephraim). In *Maariv Weekend Supplement*, April 4, 2003, p. 24, and many others.

⁵ See, for instance, the chapter on the nostalgia for redemption in the works of Amos Oz and Yoel Hoffmann in Gurwitz, David: *Postmodernism. Culture, and Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century* [Postmodernism. Tarbut ve-Sifrut be-Sof ha-Meah ha-Esrin], Tel-Aviv 1997, pp. 262-286. See also articles such as Bartana, Ortsion: "A German-Speaking Jewish Narrator, a Polish Tel Aviv, and Buddhist Philosophy: A Critical Review" [Mesaper Yekke, Tel Aviv Polanit ve-Philosophia Buddhistit—Ma'amar Bikoret]. *Moznayyim*. (1991) 7-8, pp. 39-42, and others.

sophical didactic stories from the textbooks canon of Zen monasteries.⁶ Beside the influence of Eastern philosophy, critics have also discussed the impact of the Western stream of consciousness school on Hoffman, particularly that of James Joyce's writing,⁷ the evident meta-linguistic dimension of his work,⁸ and his multilingualism as one of the factors behind the meta-linguistic foundations of his texts. Critics have also considered Lewis Carroll's influence on a nonsense dimension in Hoffmann's *oeuvre*.⁹

Thus, one may already inquire into recurrent characteristics in these texts, less obvious than those that went into the making of the defined and unique formal identity that began to assume such distinct shape with the publication of *Bernhard* (1989). This was Hoffmann's third work of fiction, published after his more traditional children's book and his first collection of stories. The enigmatic character of the Hoffmannesque texts and their connections to continental philosophy, Zen poetry, and Buddhist practice appear to have been established as a kind of language in the course of writing these series of works and the publishing of studies about them. By now, one can already ask about the referents of this unique language, as part of its decoding as a broad area of expression.

One of the possible questions about such hidden, recurrent, and typical elements in these texts that is not necessarily contingent on their specific formal character concerns the representation of events from the history and the politics of the context represented in them – the Israeli context. These questions seemed secondary to the inquiry into the artistic and intellectual mechanism evoked by the initial contact with these works.

⁶ Following is a selection of Hoffmann's English translations from the Taoist and Buddhist canon: *The Sound of the One Hand*. 281 *Zen Koans With Answers*. New York 1975; *Every End Exposed*. *The 100 Koans of Master Kidō with the Answers of Hakuin-Zen*. Brookline (MA) 1977; *Radical Zen*. *The Sayings of Joshu*. Brookline (MA) 1978. Noteworthy among his Hebrew translations are: *Kolot ha-Adamah*. *Selected Excerpts from the Works of Master Chuang* [Kolot ha-Adamah. Keta'im Nivharim mi-Ktavav shel ha-Hakham ha-Sini Chuang-Tse]. Givatayyim 1977; *Le'an Ne'elmu ha-Kolot? Zen Stories and Haiku Poems* [Le'an Ne'elmu ha-Kolot? Sipurei Zen ve-Shirei Haiku]. Givatayyim 1980; *Omrei Shir al Saf ha-Mavet: A Selection of Japanese Poems with an Introductory Essay* [Omrei Shir al Saf ha-Mavet. Mivhar Shirim Yapanim u-Masat Mavo]. Givatayyim 1985.

⁷ See for instance Aran, David: "Guttapercha as Finnegans Wake" [Guttapersha ke-"Finnegan's Wake"]. In: *Al Hamishmar*, February 4, 1994, p. 20.

⁸ See, for instance, Hasan-Rokem, Galit: "Christ? Of Fish?: A Critique of Yoel Hoffmann's Book" [Kristus? Shel Dagim?. Bikoret al Sifro shel Yoel Hoffmann]. In: *Davar*, July 12, 1991, pp. 24, 27.

⁹ As is obvious from the back cover of his children's book – a fragment from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures through the Looking-Glass*.

Holocaust and Western Thought in Hoffman's Literary Writings

This study will offer a conceptualization of findings emerging from these second order questions, a thematic and referential order, and will deal with the representation of the politics and history of Israeliness in Hoffmann's works, focusing specifically on the representation of Holocaust events as processed in the Hoffmannesque narrative.

Ample biographical evidence indicates that the Holocaust and its implications are a highly significant focus in Hoffmann's work, and some of it is detailed below. Until the publication of *Curriculum Vitae*,¹⁰ however, these events appeared to have occupied a minor, marginal place in his creative life as artist and thinker, particularly in his later works. By contrast, Zen Buddhist reflection, the meta-linguistic project, and the endeavor of what can only be defined as the lampooning of the Western philosophical project appeared to capture the main interest of his consciousness as narrator and poet.

Hence, the declaration in *Curriculum Vitae* – a work that, as its name attests, is largely a kind of self-definition summing up the artist and his creative life – appears surprising. It forces the reader familiar with Hoffmann's writings to engage in a retroactive re-reading of his entire *oeuvre*. Following is the declaration:

„If you want to tell a story, you'll have to deny the Holocaust.“ (87)

And then:

„In memory of the people in the crematorium, we too are naked. Every time we take off our clothes our bodies are consecrated in their memory like the parchment in the mezuzah.

Likewise, the books we've written are dedicated to them. One explicitly. One allusively. And the others secretly. There isn't a single page from which smoke does not ascend.

Into the books we've gathered the heavenly hosts but we've given them [by the millions] first names. One might say (as they say at dedication ceremonies), we've walked by their light.

[...] May His great name be exalted and sanctified. In the world which He has established according to His will. And may His kingdom be established. And may His salvation be revealed and His anointed draw near. In your lifetime and in your days.

¹⁰ An English translation by Peter Cole was published in New York 2009. Quotes from this work in this article are from the English translation.

And in the lifetime of all the house of Israel. Speedily and soon. And say, Amen. May His great name be blessed for all eternity. Blessed. And praised. And glorified. And lifted. And exalted. And extolled. And elevated. And honored be the name of the Holy One blessed be He. Who is beyond all hymns and praise and consolation that might be uttered in the world. And say, Amen.“ (88)¹¹

Through this declaration, Hoffmann seems to place his entire literary corpus within the genre of Holocaust literature – explicitly, allusively, or secretly – and to invite the reader and the interpreter to decode the allusions and expose the secret.

In the course of his growing fame as a first rank Israeli writer, Hoffmann's conduct, especially outside Israel, may also attest to this radical and sweeping association of his work to the events of the Holocaust. Since some of this conduct had Berlin as its venue, and some unfolded in a dialogue between the parties directly involved, it has not been known in Israel so far.

In the summer of 2001, Hoffmann was invited to attend an international poets festival (*internationales literaturfestival*)¹² scheduled to take place in Berlin in 2002. The location of the festival drove Hoffmann to decline the invitation, though what he told the German conveners was that the date did not suit him. In response, the organizers rescheduled the entire event in order to accommodate him, forcing Hoffmann to agree to participate.

The poets participating in the festival were asked to send two texts ahead of time, one a poem of their own and another by a poet they felt close to, to be read by the participant. In response to the first request, Hoffmann wrote a poetic fragment consisting of one single sentence: “*Oh Berlin, gib mir zurück meinen Vater*” [“O Berlin, give me back my father!”].¹³ This poem was printed on a poster placed throughout Berlin as an advertisement for the poets' festival.

¹¹ This translation of the Kaddish prayer appears in the English version of Curriculum Vitae right after a transliteration of the Hebrew version. Beginning with Bernhard, Hoffmann's books have no page numbers in either the Hebrew or English edition. All references are therefore to fragment numbers, not to pages.

¹² The website of this annual festival, which is held in Berlin, is www.literaturfestival.com.

¹³ See: Publikation dokumentiert das 2. internationale literaturfestival. Edited by Ulrich Schreiber, Berlin 2002, pp. 57-59. I am indebted to the festival's organizers for sending me the poster.



Fig. 1: Poster of the 2nd International Literary Festival, Berlin, 2002.

In response to the second request, Hoffmann chose “The Hill of Corpses in the Snow” by Uri Zvi Greenberg. In this poem, the speaker tells how a German soldier murdered his father during a mass massacre. Greenberg’s poem was published in the festival’s brochure as Hoffmann’s chosen text.

Hoffmann’s father had settled with his family in Mandatory Palestine in the late 1930s. Contrary to what might be implied by the two texts that Hoffmann chose to represent himself, his father was not killed in the Holocaust. A kind of metaphorical, collective father is the one calling for redress here, not a biographical one.

On another occasion, a body that organizes cultural events on behalf of the European Union approached Hoffmann in 2004. The request was to write a brief text of poetry or prose conveying greetings on the union of Europe and dedicated to the Yiddish language, as part of a project of reviving vernacular European tongues. Hoffmann phrased his greetings in the form of an expanded haiku comprising one single syntactical clause:

The Jews too
Greet the Union of Europe
In their ancient Yiddish
From below.

The black, spiteful Yiddish humor and the refusing-consenting timbre of this poem are typical of Hoffmann's attitude toward all activities related to the third generation's connection with Germany.

The events reviewed here provide incontrovertible evidence of two things. First, they attest to the distinctly canonical status of Hoffmann's works beyond Israel's borders, which is lent further support by the fact that the English translations of his works are published by New Directions, the prestigious label specializing in experimental masterpieces.

Hoffmann's reception in Israel appears to be more complicated. His works are welcomed by an elitist readership whose familiarity with Western intellectual and artistic traditions enables Hoffmann's ambiguous allusions to them to resonate more deeply. Second, and indeed central to my concern here, these events attest to Hoffmann's stormy, assertive, and harsh connection with Europe in general and with Germany in particular, given its historical relationship with Jews. This connection becomes even more complex if compared to Hoffmann's general view on continental philosophy as a source able to endow human life with meaning, and especially if some kind of causal relationship is assumed between these two separate positions of the writer.

Typological Categorizing as a Poetic Response in Hoffmanns Writings

As a rule, the representation of the Holocaust in Hoffmann's texts can be considered from two points of view. The first is diachronic and related to the author's *biographia literaria*. From this point of view, Hoffmann's first collection of stories *Sefer Yosef* [The Book of Joseph] can clearly be said to be dedicated in many ways to the representation of the Holocaust, the most obvious one being the thematic concern with *Kristallnacht* in the novella that gives its name to the collection. By contrast, in his later works this theme became less obvious, its traces discernible only within a whole range of associations emerging from various linguistic and narrative components but not as an independent or dominant theme. One could thus say that, just as Holocaust events have been present in every situation of Israeliness since the late 1930s, so are these events present in the narrative and conscious space of Hoffmannesque fiction and language in his later works. This is true, as noted, of his writings up to and

excluding *Curriculum Vitae*. In this respect, as in many others, this particular work can be viewed as the closure of a full, organic course.¹⁴

The second point of view that could be used to examine this question involves the identification of categories cutting across his entire *oeuvre* to locate within it, as in a synchronic spectrum, recurrent constructs that can be mapped and classified. This is the perspective that was used in the present study, and following are the findings.

A kind of *catalogue* of prototypes for the elaboration of traumatic experiences, personal or collective, is discernible in Hoffmann's works. The various characters in his books, as they find themselves within a given "situation" and make decisions within it, weave a set of mutual relations and go through profound processes in response to the situation's demands. They can thus be classified into basic personality types, individual or sociological, which react to this type of situation in ways typical of, and consistent with, their specific label. In the many works already published, it is possible to trace the repetitive or developing manifestations of Hoffmann's narrative characters and identify them as units and as groups that shift from one work to another. The names assigned to these characters in the various stories are already a kind of brief enumeration of a consistent index of types.

Since Hoffmann's characters invariably tend to find themselves in a "situation" that requires them to process private or collective experiences of loss, hardship, sorrow or even trauma, one may speak of different and consistent types of processing traumatic situations that are recurrently represented in these works. These types materialize as a voice of consciousness, in that aspect of Hoffmann's work that can rightly be called "fiction written in the style of the stream of consciousness school". This is just one out of many potential ways of reading these works, but it is the way relevant to this study.

In the context of processing traumatic circumstances, the Holocaust is the paradigmatic instance of a collective Israeli trauma for which Hoffmann's fiction creates verisimilitude. But it is not the only instance, and its status as a

¹⁴ This very first collection of stories, *Sefer Yosef*, includes a short novella entitled "Curriculum Vitae," so that even in the formal terms of names it is possible to speak of a full circle that, so far, appears to have closed. A comparison of these two works, inquiring into some of this circle's qualities, would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor. See Hoffmann, Yoel: "Curriculum Vitae." In: *Sefer Yosef*, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 155-169. This novella has not been translated into English. For translations of two other texts from the same collection, see Hoffmann, Yoel: *Katschen*, translated by David Kriss, and *The Book of Joseph*, translated by Alan Treister with Eddie Levenston, New York 1998.

meta-narrative of the Hoffmannesque world emerges fully only in the explicit declaration to this effect in *Curriculum Vitae*.

The classification that Hoffmann's corpus produces is thus a typology of processing situations of distress. It offers a series of defined and consistent groups characterized by socio-economic, ethno-mental, and ethno-ideological attributes, which appear frequently in all of Hoffmann's fictional works and are personified by the various characters. This frequency may be viewed as a repetition that enables and corroborates generalization. In this respect, the taxonomy in the Hoffmannesque catalogue is an index of groups making up the Jewish immigrant society congregating first in Palestine and then in the State of Israel, from the 1930s and up to this day. These groups are a fixed combination of social, economic, and ethnic variables to which the various characters "belong". In other words, they operate the linguistic, behavioral, psychological, and ideological codes characteristic of their respective groups, and the kind of particular subject that this group produces as a language of consciousness and a precondition for experience in the course of contending with the challenges of life.

The implicit assumption underlying such practices is that groups composed of the same texture of social, occupational, gender, and other features give rise to characteristic types of "subject". The exposure of this assumption in a literary work can, and perhaps must, be approached as a poetic and artistic issue before it turns into an ethical or political question.

The possibility of discerning in these works the features of a novella or a novel with a clear plotline depends to a large extent on this very fact, namely, on the notion that they deal with processes of elaborating distress. The reason is that the elaboration of such experiences, as understood in contemporary psychology and as verbalized and conceptualized through its research and practice, is perceived as a three-staged developmental process involving onset, complication, and resolution, that is, as a process that can be decoded in narrative terms.

The reliance of the Hoffmannesque catalogue on typical group representatives in no way dismisses the individualistic dimension of his fictional characters or the deep sense of empathy and identification they create in the reader. This is one of the more prominent features of the Hoffmannesque story: its ability to mobilize in the reader a broad range of feelings toward its characters, drawing on the paradigm of compassion, protectiveness, and concern for them as they stand in their "situation" and as a result of their "report" of it. The duality sustained by these characters in their existence as items within a classi-

fication, but also as unique, full, total, and monadic entities is also a persistent quality of Hoffmann's fictional endeavor.

Corresponding With A. Sander's Project: "Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts"

Regarding the production of a catalogue, especially one that simultaneously classifies and individualizes but also in many other profound ways, Hoffmann's project resembles the monumental 1920s endeavor of the famous German photographer August Sander (1876-1964).¹⁵ He called his project "The Face of the Twentieth Century" or "Man of the Twentieth Century", and he presented in it a gallery of individual and group portraits of men, women, and children. Sander arranges these photographs – all artistically and technically flawless – according to a major classification plan based on membership in specific groups, mainly social and economic. His categories ratify the familiar scheme of social stratification within German society between the two World Wars, one that Sander may indeed have perceived as universal. This ratification of sectorial groupings is compelling for various reasons, *inter alia* for the same reasons that Michel Foucault noted, that is, for the large trove of implicit social information concealed in all vast classification projects, whatever their nature: encyclopedias pioneering in their structure, such as that of Denis Diderot, or dictionaries developing new models, such as that of Samuel Johnson, and others.

The comparison I wish to draw here between Sander's and Hoffmann's projects may draw significant support from Hoffmann's inclusion of photographs from Sander's project "Man of the Twentieth Century" in his works, while

¹⁵ August Sander, *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Ein Kulturwerk in Lichtbildern eingeteilt in sieben Gruppen, Herausgegeben von Die Photographische Sammlung / SK Stiftung Kultur, Bearbeiter und neu zusammengestellt von Susanne Lange, Gabriel Conrath-Scholl, Gerd Sander, Distributed by Harry N. Abrams Publishers, N.Y. 2002. Vol. I-VII. New prints from the original negatives. On Sander's work see: August Sander: *Photographs of an Epoch 1904-1959*. *Man of the Twentieth Century*. Rhineland, Landscapes, Nature Studies, Architectural and Industrial Photographs, Images of Sardinia. Preface by Beaumont Newhall, historical commentary by Robert Kramer, accompanied by excerpts from the writings of August Sander and his contemporaries, Cambridge, MA, 1980; August Sander, with an essay by John von Hartz. Hong Kong 1977; August Sander 1876-1964. Edited by Manfred Heiting, essay by Susanne Lange, with a portrait by Alfred Döblin. Köln 1999.

building various graphical and conceptual relationships between these photographs and his written texts.¹⁶

I refrain from simply stating that “Hoffmann *illustrated* his texts with Sander’s photographic works” because Hoffmann assigned highly complex roles to these photographs vis-à-vis his texts – at times a synonymous role, at times a refuting or alternative role, and at times one that determines the musical rhythm and creates a poetic fact for the work as a whole. Be it as it may, he never assigns them a decorative or illustrative purpose, that is, Hoffmann never uses them as a visual confirmation of the meanings suggested by the text, or as an explanation of these meanings. The photographs are always placed outside the text/picture hierarchy and, invariably, produce a highly challenging dialogue that requires decoding vis-à-vis the text and along with it. This being the case, pointing to a space of similarity between these two great artists cannot be incidental and cannot be considered an instance of what Michael Riffaterre called “surplus of interpretation”.

A small selection of Sander’s works from the “Man of the Twentieth Century”¹⁷ series can illustrate this dual cataloguing aspect:

¹⁶ On the fact that the photographs in Hoffmann’s *How Do You Do, Dolores?* do not maintain a simple relationship with his text, see Gur, Batya: “On the Isolation of the Female Human” [Al Bediduto shel ha-Adam mi-Min Nekevah], *Haaretz Literary Supplement*, November 17 1995, p. 8.

¹⁷ Photographs in Figures 2-13 from Sander, *Photographs of an Epoch*, pp. 61, 65, 71, 70, 73, 53, 43, 48 (twice), 58, 57, 74 respectively.



Fig. 2: The Architect Hans Heinz Lüttgen and his Wife Dora, c. 1928.



Fig. 3: Farming Family, 1911-1914.



Fig. 4: Pastry Cook, 1928.



Fig. 5: Varnisher, c. 1930.

Much can and has been said about the place of Sander's project in the tradition of dividing people into social as well as physiological and morphological cells, and about turning the classification of various professionals and artisans into actual facts of hierarchy and class.¹⁸ In the West, the sources of this tradition can also be traced to the logical, political, and even ontological discourse of ancient Greece. The photographs have a charismatic presence and succeed in preserving a vivid individuality in the photographed faces, so that they are actually in conflict with Sander's cataloguing project.

Furthermore, the *visuality* of the photographs – their well shaped composition, the positioning of the photographed objects, the relations between light and shadow, the ratio between the areas shown in detail as opposed to those roughly outlined – creates a profound tension with their *textuality* – their telling a story, making a claim, expressing an opinion, demanding conceptual, diachronic reception rather than one that is only visual and synchronic. This tension is part of their “showing something” to the spectator.

Consider, for instance, the following picture:¹⁹

¹⁸ In his preface to Sander's book, Robert Kramer places Sander's cataloguing work within the ongoing European tradition of illustration series dating back to the fifteenth century, which classify individual physiognomies, gestures, and clothing into categories of social classes, guilds, and groups. He points to series such as the *Ständebüch* or *The Book of Trades*, or to the series that appears in a book of this type that was published in 1568 with Jost Amman's illustrations. So also books of the *Totentanz* type (*The Dance of Death*), the most famous of which was the work of Hans Holbein the Younger published in Lyon in 1538. This also applies to the tradition of the *Spiegel* or *Mirror* books, which are illustrated with representations of social groups. Kramer also lists Johann Kaspar Lavater's monumental project of human physiognomy, dated 1775, and other works. See Sander, *Photographs of an Epoch*, preface, pp. 18-20.

¹⁹ Taken from *ibid.*, p. 62.



Fig. 6: The Notary, 1924.

This work could be approached as a study in composition. Note that it is cut lengthwise by a kind of winding and dynamic pathway that begins with the open rectangle formed by the shadow cast by the dog's front legs, that is, by the dark surface that includes the dog and the man's feet, winds up to the entrance at the top of the staircase, and ends with the narrow rectangle of the opening, pointing to the outside of the composition. Both sides of the composition are framed by two dark lengthwise stains: on the left the shrub and on the right the wall. The center of the picture is taken up by the striped horizontal space of the stairs, creating a minor crisis of directions due to the top turn to the left and the many linear directions formed by the architecture of the front surface, the brick lines of the walls, the fence posts, and the alignment of the entrance. Other directions are the vertical of the figure and the short, dominant horizontal line of the pocket fold and the sleeve cuffs, the vertical of the entrance at the top of the staircase and that of the dog's legs as opposed to the horizontal lines of the staircase and of the dog's body and face. Thematically, they can be marked as the various directions to which the three major objects in the picture turn: the dog to the left, the man to the right, and the stairs upward. Notable are also the beautiful surface of the dog's shining fur, alien to the lusterless texture of the surroundings, and of the man, except for his shoes, even before entering into the meaning of all these specific features.

As a "text", this photograph tells a story, characterizes a man. This is how Roland Barthes understood it:

„Sander's Notary is suffused with self-importance and stiffness, his Usher with assertiveness and brutality; but no notary, no usher could ever have read such signs.

As distance, social observation here assumes the necessary intermediary role in a delicate aesthetic, which renders it futile: no critique except among those who are already capable of criticism.“²⁰

The dimension of this work as an aesthetic and artistic presence, that is, as *visuality*, maintains direct and indirect relations with its *textuality*, that is, with its being a record of a person's individual or sociological character and with its conferring meaning upon this character. Even if, like Barth, we question to what extent Sander allows his work to be socially, ethically, or politically judgmental, the flawlessness of all these types of speech as created by the photograph is indisputable.

²⁰ Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York 1982, p. 36.

The many and different demands imposed on the reader by the photograph is one example of Sander's works in general. Their presence as an artistically "beautiful" or "fascinating" icon struggles with their rare ability to create an imposing presence in the photographed object, a presence that surges from and is helped by the artistic beautiful and still negotiates with it from a contested balance.

A disturbing element concerning these series of works, precisely because of the historical circumstances in a Germany on the brink of the Second World War, is its purpose as formulated by Sander:

„More than anything else, physiognomy means an understanding of human nature... [...]

The individual does not make the history of his time; he both impresses himself on it and expresses its meaning. [...].

The time and the group sentiment will be especially evident in certain individuals whom we can designate by the term 'type'. Thus the photographer with his camera can grasp the physiognomic image of his time."²¹

It is therefore important to bear in mind that Sander's project was banned by the Nazi regime precisely because of the way it presented the "physiognomic image" of Germany, and that Sander fought this regime in more than one sense and was fatally hurt by it.²²

Another dichotomy prominent in these works is that between the scientific-documentary and the artistic-expressive. Mention of this tension between the above photographs and their labels may suffice to bring to the surface this enigmatic aspect too.

Hoffmann's acquaintance with Sander's work was profound enough to prompt him to choose photographs from the "Man of the Twentieth Century" series for his own works and, moreover, to place them in crucial graphic locations. On the cover of his first collection of stories, *The Book of Joseph*, whose title story concerns the events of *Kristallnacht*, as noted, Hoffmann chose to place a Sander photograph from the "Ill, Insane, and Disabled" group:

²¹ Sander, *Photographs of an Epoch*, p. 40.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 35-37.



*Fig. 7: Children Born Blind, c. 1930.*²³

²³ Ibid., p. 80.



Fig. 8: *The Book of Joseph*, Cover.

In *Guttapercha*, he placed next to fragment 131 a photograph he chose from the “Families” category:²⁴



Fig. 9: Widower, 1914.

²⁴ Taken from Sander, *Photographs of an Epoch*, p. 54.

Hoffmann's choices in just these two cases could suggest that his work is a kind of ironization of Sander's project, since from the entire series of "Man of the Twentieth Century" he selected precisely these two pictures of the defective, the melancholic, the marginal, and the pitiful. But Hoffmann's texts and subtexts are never simple or reducible to one single defined aspect. It is thus no wonder that another photograph, which Hoffmann placed in two crucial locations in his *Bernhard*, is of another kind, a kind attesting to a non-ironic and rather sympathetic citation of Sander.

This photograph is placed once on the front cover of *Bernhard* and then again, on the front page, its framing changed so that it covers the entire page.²⁵



Fig. 10: Architect [Richard Riemerschmid], 1930.

²⁵ The photograph is from Die Photographische Sammlung / SK Stiftung Kultur – August Sander Archiv, Cologne, ARS, N.Y./VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 1998.



Fig. 12: Bernhard, Front Page.

Through this persistent insertion of the same photograph, Hoffmann seems to have produced a purely synonymous relationship between the photographed figure and the written text, between the story it tells and the specific individual it portrays. I would suggest that Hoffmann created a complete verbal work identical to the photograph in terms of its weight and meanings or, in other words, that the photograph and the text offer two equivalent possibilities for saying the same thing. In this respect, the relationships between textuality and visuality simultaneously tighten and unravel, even as we perform this magical overlap between the two kinds of medium and suggest they are identical.

The account so far seems sufficient to substantiate a claim of close affinity between these two artists, as Hoffmann's corpus attests, in preparation for validating a claim about the similarity of their projects. And yet, two caveats are in place in this regard. First, Sander declares in many distinctive ways that he is engaged in a cataloguing project – actually calling his group of works by this name, so that his photographs can *only* be viewed as a catalogue or a classifying project of an era and a civilization. Regarding Hoffmann's works, however, this description could be considered interpretive and what is suggested here is the possibility – strong and seemingly well grounded – of reading his *oeuvre* within a historical and collective context. The second caveat relates to Hoffmann's typology of processing traumatic experiences and is associated with the aspect of his work that could be called “fiction”, though I am not thereby referring to novellas or novels with a clear plotline. These works can be read as pure poetry or as a Zen text and, in this context, it would not be entirely accurate to speak of a realistic fictional space and of characters representing realistic social entities. In these terms, however, Hoffmann's project is diametrically opposed to Sander's.

I would therefore argue that Hoffmann represents Holocaust events in his works by classifying the speakers, at various levels of taxonomy, into representative “population groups”. The characterization of these groups' members – different voices, their emotional intensity, the extent and kind of empathy they demand from the reader, the narrator's tone (ironic, sentimental, parodic, neutral, or tragic) in presenting their speech – all depend on this classifying map, which is consistent throughout his *oeuvre*. This classification into ethnic, socio-economic, ideological, and gender types emerges, in the order of their appearance in Hoffmann's *biographia literaria*, as follows:

First group. The group of East European origin (Poland, Russia, Rumania), proletarians, observant of Jewish religious ritual, men. Through this voice, the Holocaust is presented through the participants in the catastrophe attesting to

it in real time or in retrospect. This group speaks in a visionary, martyrological voice with tremendous emotional radiance, articulating the Holocaust events in a context that should properly be defined as hagiographic. The novella *Book of Joseph* is a classic example of such a hagiography.²⁶

Second group. The group originating in Germany (Berlin): scholars, atheists, men. This group is conveyed through the humorous and parodic, though emphatic, voice of a hidden narrator. Generally, this narrator presents a pastiche of the terms and conceptions of modern continental philosophy since Descartes, usually so as to ridicule it and present it as incapable of rendering human life meaningful and bringing consolation for its great losses. These scholarly characters are portrayed as helpless and pitifully fragile, but the humorous side in their presentation takes place, so to speak, “behind their backs”, without marring some refined and mysterious quality of theirs or turning them into caricatures. They could be viewed as a self-parody of the author looking back at his early life, before the Buddhist impact on his world view. Hoffmann’s *Bernhard* is a pure example of this type of narrative voice. These characters as a representation of the Holocaust are portrayed as neutral observers of a distant disaster that took place after they had left Europe, without them having any experience of it. Yet, they are still closely involved with it since its circumstances are the cause of their having become immigrants.

Beyond their closeness to the tragic events, these figures sense the loss of Europe and of the Germany they knew, that is, of the culture that created them as subjects and shaped their consciousness.

Third group. The group of Austro-Hungarian origin: bourgeois and urbane (economically bourgeois and culturally urban), at times with semi-mystical inclinations though not ritually religious, and always women. This group conveys the hardships of existence with some measure of social detachment, even “bizarreness”, possibly because it is distant from Israeli urban life or because it is exiled from the urban bourgeois life of its homeland, and because of the idiosyncratic individuals that at times bear this voice. The events of the Holocaust appear as a personal rather than a collective question, dissociated from any political or national context. At times, this question assumes a detached,

²⁶ Compare the implications of this aspect, bearing on the hagiographical character of the narrative, to Mendel Piekarz’s claim that, despite their documentary character, the testimonies and chronicles of survivors about the events of the Holocaust tend to be hagiographical. See Piekarz, Mendel: *The Literature of Testimony as a Historical Source of the Holocaust and Three Hasidic Reflections on the Holocaust* [Sifrut ha-Edut shel ha-Shoah ke-Makor Histori, ve-Shalosh Tguyot Hasidiot be-Artsot ha-Shoah], Jerusalem 2003, pp. 26-27.

meta-linguistic, or stoic tone in the spirit of Hoffmann's Buddhist turnabout, which also resonates in other elements of human life when articulated by these characters. Hoffmann's *How Do You Do, Dolores?* is a pure type of such a voice.

To illustrate these representations I rely on the book *The Christ of Fish*, where a representative of each of these types is present as a character or as a voice of consciousness distinguished by typical rhetorical qualities.²⁷ This typology, as noted, cuts across all of Hoffmann's works and can therefore be viewed as an overarching project, though it is illustrated here through only one of his works.

In *The Christ of Fish*, Hoffmann gathers together – through a stream of conscious rhetoric, a typography of philosophical fragments, and a formal poetic design – a group of inner voices personifying members of a first-person speaker's extended family and various family friends. The plot spans the three-month agony of “my aunt Magda”, up to her death. This period comprises incursions of past memories and various side events, according to the conventions of stream of consciousness writing. All the noted prototypes are present in this work, as follows (the order of the types' appearance in this work does not follow the order described above because the order in the work does not overlap the one that emerges when we trace Hoffmann's' *biographia literaria*).

The work opens with “my aunt Magda”, the protagonist. She represents the third group I suggested: of Austro-Hungarian origin, bourgeois and urban (sometimes holding semi-mystical beliefs), women.²⁸

Two or three months before she died,
 My Aunt Magda remembered Wilde-
 Gans's poem “Das Lächlen” and burst
 Into tears. “I'm not crying,” she said,
 “because Wildegans is dead, but be-
 Cause of the miracle that occurred
 When the funeral procession was held
 Up by a traffic jam, outside our house
 In Vienna, for a whole hour.” In an en-
 Cyclopedia I found that the Austrian
 Poet Anton Wildegans was born in
 1881 and died in 1932, on the third of
 May.

²⁷ Yoel Hoffmann, *The Christ of Fish*, translated by Eddie Levenston (New York, NY: New Directions, 1990).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, fragment 1.

The complex web of ironies embedded in this stanza may not need to be spelled out. It includes the relationships between the private and the collective, between crying and smiling, between momentous events and minor occurrences, between the scientific and the poetic, between Europe and Israel, and between Hebrew and German cultures. These ironies are partly historical, partly emotional, and partly linguistic. I will only single out the time and the place of aunt Magda's youth reminiscence: Vienna, May 1932. This memory awakens in her close to her death, in the Israel of 1978. This is the opening fragment of the work, that is, it serves as an exposition and presents this character's cluster of private-collective circumstances in a context of immigration, memory, nationality, scientific documents, and possibly gender. The passage illustrates many of the qualities of this typical group, including its ability to evoke feelings of compassion and protectiveness in a reader sufficiently aware of the historical and cultural resonances concealed in this brief text.

The second type, including people from Germany (Berlin) – scholars, atheists, men – is represented by the character referred to as Herr Dr. Staub. This character is perhaps a later metamorphosis of Bernhard, the protagonist of the work published in 1989, whereas his wife Hermina, about whom we are told in the fragments that follow, appears to be an earlier version of the protagonist of *How Do You Do, Dolores?*, which was published in 1995.

90

[...] Herr Doctor Staub was a disciple of Rudolf Carnap and therefore totally rejected “unscientific sentences.”

97

I would like to ask: how did Herr Doktor Staub come by Hermina? Did he muster all his power of intellect and mate with her (as with a hypothesis) by force of utterance? [...].

207

After they buried Hermina, Herr Doktor Staub thought: “Hermina is dead. What will I do now?” He saw a number of possibilities but not one of them was truly feasible. He could go

back to Germany. He could enter an
old age home, and he could fly.

208

The third was the most practical possibility. But he didn't know where to fit, to which bones of the back, the appropriate limbs [...].²⁹

Here as well, no explanation may be needed for the fact that, of all three possibilities, flight is the one most practical for this lost man, indeed more practical than going back to his old Germany. What these fragments mostly reflect is the powerlessness of the Western philosophical orientation when perceived as total and when required to serve as a tool for interpreting life experiences. What emerges here is the impotence of an entire group practiced in this orientation. The reduction of the philosophical language conveys the absolute detachment of these characters from their past and their present alike, given their deep roots in a commitment belonging to a climate that, though lost, is still beloved and intimate.

It will be fit to end with a representative of the last group: an individual of East European origin, an artisan, a believing and observant Jew, a man. For this voice, the Holocaust is an experience of strong presence, tragic, religious, and as told by him, hagiographical. In this work, the hagiographic prototype is represented by a plumber born in Rumania.

171

That year Mr. Moskowitz asked his dream:³⁰ Who was Moishe Zaidner? Moishe Zaidner, the dream replied, was the uncle of your mother, Rachel Zaidner of blessed memory, and he died because of a swastika, or some other, simpler, cross. Go (said the dream) and find him, his form hardened, sitting as he was when they killed him [...].

Mr. Moskowitz didn't understand the dream's reply. But in his heart

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ In Hebrew original, "asah she'elat halom".

waxed a great love for Moishe Zaidner
[...]. Perhaps he saw
shop signs written in Romanian, per-
haps he saw cherubim. One way or the
other, there's no doubt that he said
"Listen..." [Shema]
How his soul marveled as it left
the body! All those who stand around
the dying man as the soul leaves the
body are obliged to tear their gar-
ments [...]
All this and more Mr. Moskowitz
saw in his sleep. Which is why he rose
to his feet and made a huge tear in his
nightshirt, and withdrew three fingers
and tore it again, down the bulging
flesh on his arm, across to his heart, as
though first his father and then his
mother had died.

Ritual and liturgical Jewish language echoes in terms and idioms: "dream ques-
tion", a term taken from Jewish mystical practice; "Shema", a reference to the
first word of the Shema prayer, which is recited not only as part of the daily
service but also when facing imminent death; "all those who stand around the
dying man as the soul leaves the body are obliged to tear their garments", a
quote from a halakhic codex commanding a ritual rendering of the garment
in the first hour of mourning for the dead, followed by an entire passage from
this codex dealing with a double rending on the death of both parents. This
language turns this fragment into a kind of sacred text or, at least, evokes a holy
atmosphere, which is intensified by the dark aura that surrounds the concern
with death in all cultures. The "cherubs" image reinforces the mystical and
hagiographic context surrounding this figure, as does the actual dream about
the moment "the soul leaves the body". The sociological and conscious sim-
plicity of this soul also allow for a connection with the folkloric, in the spirit
of canonic Hasidic stories. The strangeness of this linguistic range against the
backdrop of the fictional and linguistic universe of the work as a whole, and its
consistency in the portrayal of this man, evoke a mapping, classifying mode of
thought in the readers accompanied by a flood of deep empathy toward him,
and a sense of collective, historic fellowship.

The Holocaust, then, is not presented in Hoffmann's works as a memory belonging to a monolithic collective or as a heterogeneous baggage of attitudes and memory, but rather as a group matter that can be catalogued. In this sense, Hoffmann can support a trend now current among Holocaust researchers, who speak of its various representations as the topic of their research. Thus, studies have focused on a feminine representation of the Holocaust, as found in Ida Fink's works; a peripheral representation, as found in Appelfeld's works; a representation of inheritors of the testimonials, as in the books by "third generation" members, and representations of communities outside Central and East Europe such as those of Ladino speakers, and so forth.³¹

Yoel Hoffmann himself, as I showed above and as attested by the radiant emotional weight of the sections directly concerned with the Holocaust in his works, views it as an event of floodlike proportions within his own spiritual world. The moral, political, and ideological implications of this manifold stance are far-reaching. I am not expressing any attitude toward them here.

In sum, Hoffmann's cumulative collection of works evokes a fictional Hoffmannesque universe with its own duration, its own principles of action, its own repeated human types, and its own kinds of wit and mourning, which confer meaning on the plots in a defined and recurrent fashion. These plots resemble one another despite their variance as a narrative series of events. The urban and cosmological landscapes of this universe appear time and again, until they stand before the reader as a separate, autonomous sphere. My study explored one aspect of this self-contained fictional universe cutting across the various works, that of characters in a certain situation of distress or, more specifically, the situation of recollecting the personal and historical circumstances of the Holocaust. This exploration elicited a structure resembling an overarching catalogue of various socio-economic-gender types reacting in defined modes to the situation in question. This project was compared to the photographic cataloguing work of August Sander, so that these two brilliant enterprises might borrow from one another's distinctive qualities and from their unique power to bear a heavy load of collective emotional attitudes.

³¹ Indicative of this trend are two recently published anthologies: *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*. Edited by Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes, New York 2004; *Voices and Views: A History of the Holocaust*. Edited by Deborah Dwork, New York 2002.

Conclusions

Hoffmann's choices from Sander's photographs suggest a kind of ironization of Sander. And yet, Hoffmann's statements and sub-statements are never simple or reducible to one definite aspect. In *Bernhard*, a pillar of his literary corpus, his reference to Sander is not ironic but actually fraternal. He created a synonymy between the photographed character and the written text, shaping a verbal creation identical in its weight and its meanings to the act of the photograph. The photograph and the text are two equal alternatives for saying the same "thing", and the relationships between the textual and the visual tighten and unravel while involved in this magical overlap between types of expression. The synonymy of the two projects – Sander's and Hoffmann's – represent the absorption of a special reality by creative figures who, more than being close to the tragic events of the Holocaust, sense the loss of Europe and of the Germany known to them, that is, of the culture that created them as subjects and shaped their consciousness. The Holocaust is not represented in Hoffmann's works as a memory belonging to a monolithic collective or as a heterogeneous baggage of attitudes and memory, but as a sectorial matter amenable to catalogical classification. In this sense, Hoffmann can corroborate a current trend prevalent among Holocaust scholars, who speak about various representation of the Holocaust event as the topic of their research.