The Paradox of the Missing Intertext

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Two generations have passed since the publication of Appelfeld's early stories but little has been written about his distinctive prose style. One finds references to its restraint, its silence or its impressionism; one encounters unmotivated comparisons with Kafka, Kleist or even Agnon – but little more. Critical attention is usually paid to the themes or the world that he strives to capture in his fiction, to the fate of Jews in Europe before or after the Second World War, but not to the medium of the fiction itself. When one does turn to an analysis of Appelfeld's style, one discovers a strange disjunction between its subject matter, the Jewish experience and its Hebrew style. I call this disjunction the paradox of the the missing intertext. By the missing intertext I refer to the fact often noticed by critics that Appelfeld's prose does not usually allude to intertexts, either to texts taken from the immense library of Hebrew texts to which all Hebrew writing must relate in one way or another or to texts of previous modern Hebrew writers. I call this missing intertext paradoxical because Appelfeld in most of his fiction is deeply concerned with issues of Jewish identity, Jewish destiny, and one would normally expect this concern to generate intertextual discourse in his fiction. I hope I can demonstrate that the paradox is more in the mind of the reader than that of the author. The reader approaches the Appelfeld text with certain expectations which are partly frustrated, but can be explained firstly by reference to historical contexts and secondly by an examination of what Appelfeld's view of Jewish identity really is. To achieve both goals, I begin with an anecdote.

In the autumn of 1962, when I was in Jerusalem furthering my studies of the fiction of Agnon, I would frequently visit on Saturday mornings the home of Dov and Gusta Sadan. Dov Sadan had been my teacher in Hebrew composition at the Hebrew University in 1949–50 (before

he was appointed to a regular academic post) and repeatedly invited me and my wife to his already famous quasi-kiddush gatherings. I say 'quasi-kiddush' since though they were held at the traditional hour of kiddush, it was clear that neither the host nor the guests had attended any shul that morning. The warmth of the hospitality, the varied collection of guests and the fascinating, rambling, ostensibly impromptu lectures of the rebbe, Dov Sadan, were seductive and unforgettable.

Often, he would meet me at the door, a book in hand, and greet me with a discourse on a sentence or phrase from what he was reading. On one occasion he held forth on the virtues of a book of stories he was reading, apparently for the second time, *'Ashan*, the first volume of stories by a certain Appelfeld, a former student of Sadan's and a frequent visitor to his home. What intrigued Sadan that morning was not particularly the narrative skills which he admired, or even the 'phenomen' (his term) that a child survivor could write such effective prose, but rather that he mastered Hebrew which he had barely known before his *aliyah* in 1946, and wrote in a style widely different from that of his contemporaries. 'He doesn't write like Shamir or Meged or Shaham', argued Sadan, 'and I don't find here any allusions to previous Hebrew literature. After all, he learned much of these when he was my student at the university.'

I cite this anecdote not to situate Appelfeld in my reading but rather to evoke the crucial influence of Sadan on Appelfeld, an influence that Appelfeld himself has acknowledged gratefully on numerous occasions – and through a brief discourse on the Sadan connection, to attempt to unravel the paradox in question. The Sadan connection has not been adequately understood by Appelfeld's critics and even the two monographs available, those of Gila Ramraz-Rauch and Yigal Schwartz, do little justice to it. I would even argue that you cannot understand Appelfeld's central notions about Jewish identity without Sadan. To a great extent, what Schwartz has identified as the variegated aspects of the *shevet* (the tribe) in Appelfeld's world, both his fictions and his essays, derives more from Sadan than any other figure who had an impact of him in the early 1950s, the period of his reconstruction of a world view during his years at the university and as he struggled to find his voice as a writer in Hebrew. While Chapter 23 of his autobiographical *Sipur hayim* (1999) refers to Gershon Scholem and Martin Buber along with Sadan as professors at the Hebrew University

who impressed him and critics often seize upon the better known names of Scholem and Buber to the exclusion of Sadan, it is obvious that the last was more influential than the two other mentors.

Sadan's vision of a holistic view of Jewish literature was the manifestation of a passionate engagement with a Jewish essentialism, almost mystical in its adherence to notions of a catholic Yiddishkeit with deep roots and allegiances to the historical experience of the Jewish people, especially as it was expressed in Central and Eastern Europe. Jews might express their Yiddishkeit in a variety of ways – they might be totally non-observant – but denial of this Yiddishkeit was a cardinal sin endemic to interwar Central European Jewry. The Gentile world was seductive to be sure, but hostile. Growing up during the First World War that ravaged Jewish Galicia, he knew the perils of diasporic existence at its worst. The quintessence of this Yiddishkeit was familiarity with Jewish texts, especially those written in Hebrew. This rooted concept of Judaism did not, however, imply a return to Jewish religious practices or beliefs. In this sense Sadan bears a similarity to Buber who was, to be sure, more philosophical, more interested in belief in some sort of God. For Sadan, the logical fulfilment of Judaism in the modern period was Zionism understood broadly as the living of a Jewish life in the ancestral Jewish homeland. In addition to and above all these ideational notions, the Sadan home exuded a natural, embracing familial warmth. Every Jew was a member of this intensely loyal family. (It was in this familial home that I think I first met Aharon Appelfeld.)

If one compares this broad view of Jewish identity with that underlying many of Appelfeld's stories and described in the two monographs cited earlier, with Sadan's intuitive comprehension of Yiddishkeit, one can easily see many connections. It also comports with the convincing psychodynamic pattern presented by Schwartz. The negative aspects of being Jewish, the suffering, the stereoyping, the complex trauma of the child in the steppes of Transnistria, in the monastery in Italy and in the various institutions of Aliyat HaNoar in Israel induced radical erasure of memory. These are also part of the Jewish experience which shapes Jewish identity. Reconstruction of identity in a more positive direction seems to begin in the late 1940s and especially in the early 1950s. The positive core that sustains the ideological stance of the story derives from Appelfeld's reconstructive experiences of the early 1950s and can, I suggest, be identified to a

great extent with Dov Sadan. Even more importantly, what is central to or parallel with the reconstruction of identity is the acquisition of mastery in the Hebrew language which Appelfeld, as it is known, barely knew before 1946. For Appelfeld choices of diction or style are not merely the gestures of a creative artist; they are, in fact, assertions of identity.

Turning to the Appelfeld style that so intrigued Sadan, I shall conduct a brief experiment in stylistics. What Hebrew examples did Appelfeld have available when he began his writing career? By presenting six passages for scrutiny I draw certain tentative, though significant, comclusions as grounds for further study. I have selected four examples, two from the older, more established generation (Agnon and Hazaz) and two from those writers hailed as the new voices in Israeli literature in the early 1950s (Yizhar and Shamir). After these four, I shall present two characteristic passages by Appelfeld himself. The question to be asked in each case is to what extent these authors utilize intertexts taken either from traditional Jewish sources or from significant contemporary Hebrew writers.

The first is the opening passage of S. Y. Agnon's great novel of 1938–9, *Ore'ah natal lalun* ('A Guest for the Night'), which is very close to Appelfeld in theme and spirit. In it the narrator describes his return visit to the town of his childhood that had been devastated in the First World War. This fictive town was, like Appelfeld's Central European towns, formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Agnon novel was republished as part of the seven-volume set of Agnon's *Collected Works* that appeared in 1952, the year Appelfeld began his studies with Sadan at the Hebrew University. Agnon's characteristically mannered style was highly distinct and was adopted by the late 1950s in the early stories of A. B. Yehoshua, but not by Appelfeld.

The second passage is the opening of Hayyim Hazaz's *Hayoshevet baganim* (*Mori Sa'id* in English translation), first published in 1942. The opening is a fusion of Mendelean balanced *nosah* with Hazaz's penchant for sweeping statements about Jewish history, and allusion to Biblical or rabbinic locutions. One might think that such an opening with its distinctive Jewish flavour might have attracted Appelfeld to emulate it, but there is no echo of Hazaz in Appelfeld. Hazaz was still esteemed in 1952, the year he published his massive novel *Yaish*.

The third passage is by S. Yizhar, the first paragraph of his popular and influential story *Hashavu'i* ('The Prisoner') of 1948–9. Yizhar's style here and elsewhere was distinctively innovative with its attention to the details of landscape and extremely long periods rendering complex thought patterns. Although Yizhar was one of the most acclaimed writers of the early 1950s, Appelfeld did not find in this style something he could use.

The fourth passage is perhaps the most significant for my argument: it is the opening of Moshe Shamir's *Hu halakh basadot* ('He walked in the Fields') of 1948, perhaps the most representative novel of the first generation of Israeli writers, called *Dor haPalmah* (the Palmah Generation). In reading this passage, one encounters such awkward elevated, Biblical and Mishnaic phrases as 'yehey vihey hasipek beyadkha' (you will have enough time) or 'keshi'ur dalet amot' (about four cubits) or 'velo tehay lahem berera' (they will have no alternative) or 'me'Elat bo'akha Metula' (from elat to Metula). These narrative gestures are contrasted with colloquial interior monologic 'tinofet shel asfalt, lazazel!' (this lousy asphalt, damn it!). Since Shamir was prominent and popular when Appelfeld was learning his craft, I shall compare the Shamir passage with the two Appelfeld passages. One can easily see the difference Sadan was probably referring to. As Shaked and others have noted, the style of what was called Dor HaMedinah is elevated, highly literary, and this meant heavily intertextual. This intertextuality was normal for elevated Hebrew prose since the models for literary elevation in Hebrew implied intense usage of traditional texts, which created, in my opinion, a strange sense of disjunction since these texts derive from the world of traditional Jewish religious life, which writers like Shamir or Meged or Shaham or Yizhar knew from books, if at all.

As Appelfeld was learning his craft as a writer in the 1950s, the models of newly popular fiction by younger writers were precisely these. It is obvious that he chose not to emulate these writers – though this had become the acceptable norm of writing for the new generation of the newly created state of Israel. Why he did not choose this course is, of course, a matter of speculation – but speculation is no foreigner to literary criticism. The style of Shamir, to take a cardinal example, implied the world of the sabra, with all its nativist, macho ideology. A serious writer who had lived through the traumatic experiences represented by Appelfeld in *Mikhvat ha'or* ('Searing Light', 1980)

could not express himself in this style. Appelfeld's trauma of adjustment to Israeli society which was not particularly sympathetic to Holocaust survivors is well known to those have read him closely, but relatively unknown to those readers who restrict their interest to the Holocaust experience.

There were, as seen from the examples presented, at least two other models, widely respected in the early 1950s, but of an older generation: Agnon and Hazaz. Hazaz does not emerge as impressive in any of Appelfeld's many interviews or essays, but Agnon looms as the great master he is and, as noted earlier, the second edition of his collected fiction appeared in 1952 to great and widely published critical acclaim. Despite his admiration for Agnon, Appelfeld, unlike the young Yehoshua, did not succumb to the seduction of Agnon's prose. Obviously Agnon's dense intertextuality did not embody the terror or trauma he had experienced and offer him the freedom of composition he sought. If one believes Appelfeld's own statement, the writer who evoked the proper resonance was not a Hebrew writer but Kafka, whom Appelfeld famously calls a *go'el*, a redeemer. In many ways Kafka was the perfect model: his prose style represented the deep personal struggle with his torments; he was a Central European Jew from a province of the old Habsburg Empire – Bohemia, not Bukovina, but still Habsburg; and his supple style presented no problem of intertextuality which might obstruct the nuancing Appelfeld sought.

Returning to Sadan to conclude my argument, I call attention to the specifics of Sadan's holistic approach to modern Jewish literature as it applies to Appelfeld. Sadan expanded the perspectives of investigation from Hebrew literature alone to Jewish literature, dividing the spectrum of Jewish literature into two segments: works in specifically Jewish languages such as Hebrew , Yiddish, Ladino, as opposed to works in other languages such as German, Russian, English, French. In the first segment, the vectors are inner-directed, hence philological and intertextual. In the second, the vectors are outer-directed, hence concerned with contexts in the Gentile world, thus ethnic. To use semiotic terms, the first is more diachronic than synchronic while the second is the opposite, more synchronic than diachronic. Appelfeld in his fiction has merged these two axes in his own unique way. He writes in Hebrew, is deeply concerned with problems of Jewish destiny and identity, but does so as one thinking

in terms of the synchronic axis. And this explains the specificity of his style and his concept of characterization. What seemed at first to be a paradox has thus turned out to be a heuristic device to penetrate the singular nature of his fictional stance.