

# One Can't Stare at the Sun or at the Heart of Darkness: Disorientation in Two Stories by Aharon Appelfeld

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In Israel, says Appelfeld in an interview with Michael Gluzman in *Mikan*,<sup>1</sup> he is considered a Holocaust Writer, whereas abroad he is considered a modernist. His biography, the fact that he is a Holocaust survivor, is one of the things that make him a modernist, but is not the main characteristic of his work, one which breeds certain expectations of tone, subject matter, and a pre-defined narrative.

Writers whose subject matter happens to be the Holocaust may be divided, albeit a little artificially, into two categories: the first consists of those writers who write autobiographically or semi-autobiographically; the second consists of those who think of themselves as writing within existing literary conventions. Thus when Primo Levi wrote *If This is a Man*, readers automatically assumed that he had written about his own experiences in Auschwitz. Even *If Not Now, When* was mistakenly taken to be based on his personal experiences; it became so 'obvious' that Levi was basically 'bearing witness' that both his biographers deal mainly with disentangling his life from his work.<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, Imre Kertész, Elie Wiesel and, of course, K.Tsetnik are too often read as witnesses more than as writers of fiction. In the terms used by Alan Mintz one might claim that theirs is, or at least is read as, 'the exceptionalist model',<sup>3</sup> the model perceiving works about the Holocaust as a separate group of works, which should be read and appreciated apart from other literary models and genres.

If I exclude here, for purposes of brevity, the authentic, autobiographical

1. Michael Gluzman, interview with Aharon Appelfeld, *Mikan* 1 (2000) 65-150.

2. See eg Ian Thompson, *Primo Levi* (London 2003).

3. Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Washington, D.C. 2001).

4. Aharon Appelfeld, *Masot beguf rishon* ('Essays in the First Person') (Jerusalem 1979) 'Edut' (Testimony) 15. Translations and emphases throughout the paper are mine.

5. Ibid. Hakhelkikim hayekarim (The precious molecules) 6-95.

6. See Gershon Shaked, 'Requiem la'am hayehudi sheneherag' (Requiem for the murdered Jewish people) *Eshel Beer-Sheva* VI (1997) 15-58, and Yigal Schwartz, 'Sheharei sham nashanti larishona et haprikha - Aharon Appelfeld: Sifrut ve-zikaron' (For there I first breathed the blossom - Aharon Appelfeld: literature and memory), *ibid.* 59-82.

memoirs and the fiction of second-generation writers, there still remains a second alternative of writing, if one's subject matter is the Holocaust. Writers who create within the boundaries of what Mintz calls 'the constructivist model' emphasize the cultural prism through which the Holocaust is perceived. They regard the Holocaust as a singular and unprecedented event in human history; however, its cultural and literary representations inevitably follow existing, familiar categories of representation. It seems that this is the model on which Appelfeld bases his own interpretation of his work; he reads his fiction not as bearing witness but as a modernist reading of the world we live in, the world 'after Auschwitz'. As Appelfeld himself says in his *Masot beguf rishon* ('Essays in the First Person') about the experience of reading Kafka: 'The thought that *we were not alone* with our experience not only made it easier, but included us in the *wider circle* of spiritual agony as well.'<sup>4</sup> In a different essay he is even more explicit about the genre of 'bearing witness':

When one reads the many books of evidence written about the Holocaust one immediately notices that, as a matter of fact, these are repressions, which do nothing but arrange time chronologically. No introspection and nothing like it, but a careful wrapping with a lot of external facts, so that the inside will not be exposed. The survivor was the very first, in his incompetence and his fear of his own experiences, to create that strange plural language of the memoir, which is nothing but an extreme externalization. So that the inside will not be exposed. And those who were not there and tried to understand, easily adopted these chronologies, these generalizations, as indubitable evidence.<sup>5</sup>

There are quite a few ways of dealing with the Holocaust even within 'the constructivist model'. Appelfeld consistently chooses a method that can be called avoiding the direct look at the heart of darkness.

The Holocaust is at the core of many of Appelfeld's short stories and novels. However, the texts hardly ever deal directly with it, but rather with the periods that either preceded or followed it.<sup>6</sup> The experience of the Holocaust itself is the 'core' the stories avoid, and indirectly illuminate. The actual horrible occurrences are very rarely mentioned, and never directly and realistically described; they are indirectly

illuminated by scattered impressions of the stories' protagonists, and by the human and behavioural consequences of these events.

One could say that Appelfeld's treatment of the fundamental experience of his stories implies that it is indescribable.<sup>7</sup> One way of describing the indescribable is to cross over to the realm of the fantastic, or the metaphorical or, still better, leaving the reader uncertain whether the story is realistic, fantastic or metaphorical. When one reads Appelfeld's stories, one wonders whether they should be interpreted in realistic terms. Should one assume that they represent dreams, hallucinations, or are they figurative, reflecting an essence that cannot be conveyed literally? Do these stories carry readers over into the nightmarish realm of the fantastic, or are they tightly bound to reality, and the improbable in them is nothing but our own world, meticulously organized and stylized?

In other words, one of Appelfeld's methods of avoiding the direct look at the sun, the one I would like to focus on in this paper, is that of blurring the line dividing the real from the fantastic. When one cannot be sure whether one is reading a realistic, a metaphorical or a fantastic description, one becomes disoriented as to what key should be used in reading the text. Disorientation results in hesitation, and a certain degree of alienation or distance.

I would like to demonstrate my point by looking briefly at two short stories: 'The Hunt' and 'Metamorphosis'.<sup>8</sup> They appear to be opposed to each other, so far as the degree of their reality is concerned. While 'The Hunt' seems blatantly unrealistic, and only gradually can one begin to interpret it as a stylized rendition of a painful reality, 'Metamorphosis' appears to be describing realistic occurrences using impressionist techniques; it even evokes a certain wonder as to its name, obviously alluding to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; only gradually does one realize that the metamorphoses in it might be more than figures of speech. That is, a second reading of these stories leads one to the conclusion that both stories approach the same borderline dividing the real from the fantastic, although they do it from opposite directions.

'The Hunt' is a story about a voyage into a territory on the border of familiar territories. A fisherman takes Yanek, through whose consciousness most of the story is transmitted, to the unspecified

7. Yigal Schwartz refers to Appelfeld's lack of memories of that period. I suggest that even those memories that survived are deemed indescribable. See Schwartz, *ibid.* and 'Degem hamakhane hasagur: Derekh hamotsa?' (The closed camp model: the way out?) *Siman Kri'a* 12–13 (1981) 65–150.

8. Aharon Appelfeld, 'Hamatsod' (The Hunt) and 'Hagilgul' (Metamorphosis) *Adnei hanahar* ('The Rudiments of the River') (Jerusalem 1971) 63–73 and 85–92.

lakes. The fisherman is local, obviously a Gentile, who used to hunt Jews when he was younger. Yanek is a stranger to the area, and he remembers his mother mentioning the Jews with longing. On their way they spy a group of Jews referred to as *lahak* (a pack) of Jews, and the fisherman unsuccessfully tries to hunt them down. The terms used in the description of the Jews constantly dehumanize them, referring to them successively as a shoal of fish, a flight of birds and a group of beetles; the fisherman claims they can fly like birds, and describes them as listening by raising their eyes on their feelers. Having failed to hunt them down, he thinks that next time he will not accord them the courtesy of the hunting codes. Yanek, on the other hand, is obviously ambivalent: he feels he belongs to them, and at first he hates them for it, for belonging to them is inseparable from violent and sudden death; but as their eyes, raised on their feelers, make him feel that their gazes (*mabatim*) could survive them, that 'Kol yeshutam bemabatim hazorhim' ('their whole being is in their radiant gazes'), he also feels attracted to them, although he is afraid they would not accept him into their midst.

In trying to reconstruct the main line of the story, it must be realized that Appelfeld is alienating readers from what could easily have been a familiar plot line, calling for empathy for the hunted Jews and hostility towards the fisherman and Yanek. As it is, the story takes place in a non-specified time, at an unfamiliar and non-specific place, to people about whom nothing is known. The presentation of the Jews as a 'pack', the avoidance of presenting even a shred of their feelings, coupled with their description in terms of rather unlikable packs of animals, through the eyes of the fisherman, who does not actually see them as human beings, and through the consciousness of Yanek, who is estranged from them, create distance and alienation. A fisherman in the act of hunting arouses no hostility, just as a pack of distant people, resembling fish, birds and beetles arouses no empathy. The reader's alienation is strengthened by the fact that an analogy is created between the fisherman and the Jews: the hunter, as well as the hunted, is described as an animal; the Jews and the fisherman 'measure the distance' when they deal with each other, and the fisherman's eyes are described in the same words the Jews' skins are depicted. The lack of any specification in terms of a place, time or the psychology of any of the characters estranges the reader from the story.

Even our culturally conditioned empathy towards the hunted is neutralized by their descriptions in dehumanizing terms. Since their spiritual existence is hinted at only late in the story, when their eyes and gazes are described, only rather late in the reading process is the shocking attitude we might have adopted revealed to us, along with the fisherman and Yanek. When our distance and alienation are broken down by this shock, we realize that the story demands more than our accustomed reaction to autobiographical stories about the Holocaust: it requires a critical scrutiny of our own reactions, as a test case of humanity. Along with Yanek's awakening consciousness of belonging to these people, and his realization that there is something special, super-human rather than sub-human about them, we must also critically observe our own ways of perceiving humans.

'Metamorphosis', alluding to its Kafka namesake, as noted earlier, describes an undefined stretch of time in the life of a ritual slaughterer (*shohet*) and his wife. During this period they are cut off from the world, to be only occasionally visited, first by a Gentile who wants to be converted to Judaism and then by two people who are probably Jews. The wife raises fowl. If something dramatic is expected, following the footsteps of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, it is rather disappointing. Nothing special seems to happen in this story. At first it seems that the protagonist is about to be metamorphosed into a tree: his face is described as turning into shades of green, he and his wife are forgotten by the peasants as if they were vegetation, he is described as changing very slowly and losing his memories and dreams. But this metamorphosis seems to be left behind when the woman protagonist starts changing. At first she is changed into a peasant woman, and only later does she seem to metamorphose into a heavy bird, like the ones she takes care of. She settles in the coop as if she has come to visit them, she turns heavy, as they are, and her husband thinks that in due time she might take off to her new life like a heavy-winged bird. The story ends with the sentence: 'Balaylah kvar hayta yetsiva keotam ofot kvedim hanitakim umitromemim klapei mala ume'ufam meishir beketsev akhid ke'ilu lo yad'u me'olam karka ma'hi' ('At night she was already stable, like those birds who break off and rise up and their flight is steady and direct, as if they have never known what land is.')

9. 'Hagilgul', *ibid.* 92.

The two different metamorphoses have one thing in common: the loss of touch with the past, which ultimately turns into the total loss

of human touch. The slaughterer forgets what he has been; his wife breaks first with her Judaism, when she behaves like a peasant woman, and then with humanity, when she seems to turn into a heavy bird; the Gentile breaks off with his original community, whereas the Jews abandon theirs. The world described in this story reverts to chaos, to a pre-creation state, in other words to a state with no past and no possibility of communication.

The main difference between the metamorphosis the woman goes through and the one her husband is close to seems to lie in their ability to forget. That which enables the woman to take off to her new life, and leave her husband behind, is the ability to obliterate human consciousness. While she forgets and moves forward, he cannot do so. 'Kvar lo hayta hi. U'vo, mishum ma, od hitmida hatmiha lehavhev bil'adav. Veze haya ha-gvul. Khayav tamu ke'ets kasus.' ('She was no longer herself. Yet for some reason wonder kept flickering in him, without him. And this was the borderline. His life came to an end like a gnawed tree.')10 The woman is granted a new life since she can sever herself from her past and from human communication or, perhaps, from humanity. The man's life comes to an end since even in his most forgetful and hazy moments, he keeps wondering, suspecting, pondering. Even beyond the possibility of choice or decision, wonder keeps flickering within him 'without him'.

10. Ibid.

Metamorphosis, then, is here presented as a chance for redemption, for a new life, provided one is capable of severing any human ties, of de-humanizing oneself. The pre-condition for de-humanizing yourself, according to this story, is tearing yourself away from Judaism: prior to being transformed into a bird, the woman is transformed into a peasant woman. Or, in Appelfeld's own words, referring to the Jewish 'secret': 'We knew, the "secret" turns us into a target for every hand and axe, but without it our existence would sink even lower.'11

11. Appelfeld, *Masot beguf rishon* 'Edut' 13.

'Metamorphosis', like 'The Hunt', wavers on the line between the real and the impossible; however, the order of creating this effect is different in the two stories. While 'The Hunt' appears to be a fantastic story, and is only gradually conceived of as real and possible, 'Metamorphosis' prepares the reader for a fantastic event, only finally, hesitantly to hint at a metamorphosis, since most of what I have read here as a fantastic metamorphosis can be interpreted as figures of speech. Still, after the long preparation, coupled with the

allusion to Kafka, the metamorphosis exists in our consciousness, strengthened by a few literal descriptions of the woman. Our reading remains delicately balanced between a figurative one – reading the metamorphosis as a metaphor for an internal psychological process of change – and a literal one, reading the change as a fantastic occurrence.

Both stories hover between the realistic and the fantastic, creating a Kafkaesque world, in which the two merge into each other. The constant wavering between a realistic and a fantastic reading of the stories enhances our disorientation and alienation by presenting nightmarish worlds with blurred dividing lines. Thus, the alienation and disorientation evoked by the absence of specific time and place, the absence of deep penetration into the characters' psychology, and the de-humanization of the characters, whether by describing them as animals, or by alluding to their being metamorphosed into animals, become dominant in the reader's perception of Appelfeld's stories.

Only gradually are the distance and alienation broken, whether by the development in the protagonist's consciousness, or by a second, or more careful, reading. When our involvement is re-aroused, Appelfeld successfully revives and intensifies our reaction to the Holocaust by counteracting our automatic responses: we cannot read the stories as testimonies, and we are forced into asking ourselves what we read them as.

I suggest that this is Appelfeld's way of making us look at the Holocaust not as a singular experience, unprecedented and therefore impossible to comprehend, but as something within modern human experience, that can and should be perceived as a part of our own worldview. Even if it were an extreme experience, where humanity was driven to its lowest depth and maybe its highest peaks of self-sacrifice as well, it was human, and therefore within the scope of human and literary expression. If, to quote Primo Levi, we tend to 'forget that all of us are in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that beyond the fence stand the lords of death, and not far away the train is waiting',<sup>12</sup> then Appelfeld constantly reminds us of it. And by reminding us of it he makes us responsible for our reading of the experience. Whether we choose to remain alienated, to be unable to comprehend, to identify, albeit from a distance, or to try and come to

12. Primo Levi, 'Story of a Coin' *Moments of Reprieve* trans. Ruth Feldman (London 1987) 172.

13. Appelfeld, *Masot beguf rishon* 'Hakhelkikim hayekarim' 96.

terms with our own conception of the Holocaust, the responsibility is ours, since Appelfeld does not let us off easily with an ideologically committed reading of it as the justification of Zionism, the great abyss into which Europe fell, the end of Liberal Humanism, or something which could not possibly happen to us. When we read these stories, we get as close as we can to what Appelfeld calls, lamenting its lack in most survivors' chronologies and memoirs, 'the hidden places of the "self", that mystery which people call the soul.'<sup>13</sup>