

The Draft Renounced by History: Appelfeld's *Journey into Winter* and the Radiance of Noah's Ark as a Healing Discourse

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Aharon Appelfeld's stories are in part repetitions of the same thematic pattern. The indecipherable nature of this fertile pattern, its inability to exhaust its meaning and offer it as a conclusive insight, inevitably result in subsequent variants of the given pattern, and these shape Appelfeld's fiction as he moves from one short story or novel to the next. The author's compulsion to resort to the same pattern again and again is like a compulsive return to the crime scene, or some sort of obsession.

Appelfeld's stories seem like forced labour, the rolling of the same rock over and over up the mountain. This Sisyphean series of stories seeks its own mitigation and dissolution as a kind of redemption. Once the urge to replicate the pattern wanes, the reader knows that Appelfeld has reached a state of resignation and tranquillity. The danger is that relieving the need to reconstruct this pattern may be synonymous with silence. The generative power of the source of pain that demands this obsessive reconstruction is perhaps not replaceable by other narrative patterns.

The moulding pattern underlying Appelfeld's fiction is a narrative that brings together a small community of people, the singular representatives of their kind and species, and binds them in a state of *heterotopia*, or *heterochronia*, to borrow Foucault's terminology. This community conducts itself in a state of a journey, moving forwards

1. Aharon Appelfeld, *Masa el hahoref* (Jerusalem 2000).

This and the other excerpts from Hebrew were translated by Ruth Bar-Ilan.

2. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton 1957) 140.

3. *Ibid.* 5-134.

4. It is no wonder, then, that various ecological activist groups chose Noah's Ark as their logo, as it is traditionally associated with generations of illustrated children's books. In contrast, in intellectual, artistic, sociological and psychological terms, this logo remains inarticulate, failing to serve as an icon of collective anxiety or utopian salvation. This choice attests to the failure of Noah's myth to function as a complex and reverberating force. At the same time, it also attests to the naivety and marginality of these groups, whose idealistic, well-intended efforts are misdirected in the face of the power economy that governs the global treatment of a potential ecological holocaust.

and backwards or simply pacing. The magnetic field in reference to which this constant movement takes place is always an absent but implicit event, which is associated with terrible entropy that swallows up everything in a jumble. This is true of 'Sheloshah' (Three), the story that opens Appelfeld's first collection of stories, entitled 'Ashan' ('Smoke'). This is also true of 'Layish' (Lion), 'Mikhreh hakerah' (The ice mine), 'Hakutonet ve-hapassim' (The cloak and stripes) and 'Ritspat Esh' (Fiery ember), and to a certain extent also of 'Ad she'alah amud hashahar' (Until dawn rises). The same holds true of *Masa el hahoref* ('A Journey into Winter'), which is the subject of this paper.¹

The pattern emerges when the reader, just like a painter, takes one step backwards, as Northrop Frye suggests in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, in order to get the right perspective and consider the work as a whole.² Frye suggests that 'the structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry'³ and that the understanding, the meaning, the *dianoia* of a literary work are established by identifying its underlying mythic structure.

Indeed, if one pays close attention to Appelfeld's works, one cannot miss the primeval mythic structure that is implicit in them and is relevant to them in many respects. I am referring to Noah's Ark floating in the waters of the Flood under the threat of annihilation while carrying the gathered representatives of the animal kingdom.

This thematic pattern originates in a myth that does not appeal to our civilization in spite of – or because of – its enormous relevance to its condition.⁴ This myth has no radiance. It has nothing to do with charisma and magnetism and seems to be lacking 'passion' as well as will – in the sense the latter acquired within the tradition of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Contrary to Frye's general definition of myth, this particular myth does not deal with the relationship between passion and reality, nor does it produce inner passion as part of its narrative tension. Most of all, the myth of the Deluge has to do with engineering, even though it concerns nothing less than the destruction of the world.

This myth does not share the fate of other, equally extinguished myths, which during the last two centuries have enjoyed a vigorous renaissance in Western culture. Prominent among them are the myth

of Oedipus, which gained popularity thanks to the works of Freud and Levi-Strauss; the myth of the Tower of Babel, which, following Derrida, acquired a highly phatic⁵ standing in the postmodern discourse due to its meta-linguistic theme; and the myth of the Tree of Knowledge, along with its sexual and gender-oriented overtones (as manifested either in the Biblical version or in the Sumerian).

If the myth of the Deluge and Noah's Ark gained any empathy in modern collective memory, such empathy was surprisingly channelled to the comic – an unusual preference as far as myths are concerned. When the most outstanding feature of this myth is recalled, the reader responds to the farfetched, colorful vision it evokes: the various pairs of animals gathered into the Ark. Something of the spotted and the furry, the horny and the reptilian takes control over one's imagination and pushes aside the ominous message of the myth: flood, destruction and all-encompassing death by drowning and strangulation.

It seems that the abundance and diversity of life supersede the uniform entropy of the Deluge, shifting the balance between the inconsequential and the enormously significant. Amid all this one is reminded that it is not possible for an ark that is three hundred cubits long, though obviously the largest vessel in the ancient world, to contain a representative sample of the entire animal kingdom. This 'potential infinity', to borrow Aristotle's absurd term, simply does not lend itself to exhaustive classification and inclusive selection. The same tension between the multiple and varied, on the one hand, and the uniform, of whatever size, on the other hand, veils the relative proportions of the flood and the ark that this myth tries to establish.

The fact that the myth of the Deluge is not charismatic may be closely related to the fact that it has no hero. The passion, or personal centre or subject, of every story is conditional upon the anthropomorphic setting in which the story takes place, and this anthropomorphism requires speech. Hence it is puzzling that the chain of events that binds God and nature in the story of the Deluge takes place without involving man. Unlike any other myth generated by the Bible, the human protagonist in the story of the Deluge, Noah, is speechless. He does not utter a single word throughout the whole affair. Noah is a faceless and voiceless figure, who silently mediates between the divine will and its actual fulfilment, as if it is God's voice that

5. For 'phatic' as suggesting the potential of an idea or myth to produce fertile affinity with contemporary outlooks see Rachel Albeck-Gidron, 'Ideot phatiyot ve-aphatiyyot' (Phatic and non-phatic ideas), *Bikkoret u-Pharshanut (Criticism and Interpretation)*, Ramat-Gan, Israel) XXXVII (winter 2003) 195–206.

embodies Noah's subjectivity. Although Noah is sometimes described as 'knowing', it is never suggested that he is articulating anything. Therefore it seems that he and the members of his family are nothing but four more pairs of animals occupying the microcosmic Ark, and this too only because the purpose of the Ark is to ensure the survival of the potential diversity and multiplicity of the animal species.

Noah's silence is perhaps the leading cause of the loss of appeal of this myth for the much-speaking-consciousness of the last five hundred years. But while Noah is silent, the Ark is speaking. Just like the story of the Tower of Babel, the Ark itself with its chosen tenants is a meta-linguistic model, and perhaps even a meta-lexical one. Yet it embodies not only the governing principle of the language but also that of the arts, as well as suggesting, rather obviously, the technological principle.

The first Biblical stories are concerned with etymological matters. Presumably, side by side with the creation of the world, the divine voice creates language as such. It calls to improvise a name, a word, for each of the newly created elements. (This is a recurrent phenomenon in the story of Genesis and in its midrashic interpretations).

It seems that this onomatopoeic aspect of the Scriptures is engaged in a profound verbal intercourse with the magic of the pagan world and with the way magic attributes the relationship between words and things to an act of power.

The same holds true of the story of Noah. The Ark, along with the pairs and septets brought into it, serves as an enormous lexicon of living creatures, an animal encyclopaedia, in which one single sign is indicative of all the signified individuals. (A pair of lions, a male and a female, is sufficient to signify all individual lions.) In other words, Noah's Ark is the first dictionary. Its existence as an entity depends on a constant correlation with its opposite, the Deluge, which is an unqualified, unclassified and unmarked entropy – the total 'otherness' of what is as yet unnamed and wordless.

Noah's Ark is not only a gigantic dictionary. It also echoes the code of the artistic act, if we consider art as a general name for the neat organization of the macrocosmic and the artificial. As such, it is a symbol of the great project performed by the arts, the encapsulation

of 'a whole world in a grain of sand... infinity in the palm of the hand, and eternity in an hour' (Blake). The ability to grasp infinity in the palm of one's hand is the ability to represent, to make a representative Ark of cosmic multiplicity that is governed by complex rules of selection. This aesthetic aspect of Noah's Ark can be confirmed by its counterpart, which is equally generated by the story of Noah. For the Ark that rescues the living species from destruction is represented at the end of the story by a completely new sign: the rainbow in the cloud, whose gratuitous, fantastic, hologram-like beauty embodies Kant's principle of the aesthetic luxury: Beauty for its own sake.

In this sense, it is the story of the Deluge, rather than the story of building the Tower of Babel, which can be designated as 'the myth of all myths, the metaphor of all metaphors', to use Derrida's nomenclature in the introduction to his 'Tours de Babel'.⁶ Namely, Noah's Ark is speech about speech, a story about narrative ability. (Naturally, according to Derrida's perception, Noah's Ark can never serve as a theory of myth because its governing principle is predatory war against decentralisation, a war declared in the Hebrew Bible by its monotheistic voice.)

6. Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel' trans. Joseph F. Graham, in Joseph Graham (ed.) *Difference in Translation* (London 1985) 165–207.

Noah's Ark as the very principle of representation is thus the myth of language, of art, of perception, all of which denote compactness, namely a small portion that stands for the totality. In this sense, it corresponds to Platonic metaphysics, which relies on the same power. It marks chaos both as difference and as the tension between the need for representation and the remote possibility of ever achieving it in an effectively compact manner.

Like any lexicon, and any artistic representation, Noah's Ark is marked by absence and sorrow, because of the conspicuously missing presence of the absentee. This remains out of reach and persists as an object of desire (here I follow Lacan's perception of language). Dictionaries reflect a horrible economy, suggestive of what the American Indians were enticed to do: exchanging extensive, fertile lands for glass beads. Instead of possessing the real thing, in all its radiance and enigma, we are left with nothing but a word, a name, a sign. Instead of herds of elephants galloping in spacious planes, Noah's Ark contains just an abstract pair of the given species. Most of all, lexicons signify that which is lost, or doomed to be extinguished – the rainbow in the cloud.

This leads me back to the issue of radiance, to the dim and perhaps extinguished radiation power of the story of the Deluge. It seems that everything that is alive and radiant, everything that is passionate and in possession of a self, of a libido, drowned in the waters of the Flood, namely was defined as the epitome of *hamas*, of 'corruption' and 'violence'. The Scripture does not identify this loss but it can be found as a vital tension – vital to the extent of frenzy – in the version of the story of the Deluge as it appears in the Book of Hanoch. It is no wonder that this version was excluded from the Hebrew Bible and relegated to the Apocrypha. For in the Book of Hanoch one can find the unreleased tension between the ominous darkness and the neatly regulated that annihilates it as an unresolved and non-final aspect, within the narrative *dianoia*. This is a subversive version in which order prevails over darkness.

What then is the establishing power of the Deluge as the thematic pattern in Appelfeld's fiction? In what sense does the uncovering of the mythic structure, as suggested by Frye, provide an insight into the continuous Appelfeldian epos, whose various manifestations are variations of the same myth that keeps unfolding?

As a theme, the analogy between the catastrophic event around which Appelfeld's stories revolve, on the one hand, and the Deluge, on the other hand, seems to be self-evident. The reaction to the Holocaust within the community that is the recipient of Appelfeld's stories can be effectively captured by the metaphor of the Deluge. The Holocaust is total destruction. These people, the citizens of a Noah's Ark of sorts, which is neither clearly defined nor accounted for or justified by the voice of God, were brought alive to the Mountains of Ararat. But more than they identify with Noah as holding the right to be saved in the Ark, they identify with guilty Cain, for whom the sign imprinted on his forehead indicates the absolute absence of rights and innocence. In one of his essays, 'Edut' (Testimony), Appelfeld says: 'I remember one boy, whose movements became flexible and round under the impact of the war years, like those of an attentive beast. He would not touch any object unless he contemplated it at length. This must be how people treaded the ground after the Deluge.'⁷

What I am pointing at is not the relevance of the theme, inasmuch as this is part of my interpretive intuition, but rather the relevance of structure as epic repetition. This identification of the mythic pattern,

7. Aharon Appelfeld, *Masot beguf rishon* ('Essays in the First Person') (Jerusalem 1979) 14. In the same collection 'Yedid Nefesh' (Bosom friend) is devoted to Leib Rochman (1918–78), a scholar of Hasidism and the author of three novels about the Holocaust: *Bedamayikh hayyi* ('Un in dayn Blut Zolsten Leben, 1949), *Beze'adim sumim al pnei haAdamah* (Mit Blinde Trit über der Erd, 1969) and *Hamabbul* ('The Deluge') (ibid. 82).

which is possible only when the pattern is repetitive, as is the case with any structural identification, is what establishes Appelfeld's fiction as a work of literature rather than mere testimony. The aesthetic pleasure produced by all literary works, including Appelfeld's and regardless of their dark themes, has to do with the tight mythic structure that they tend to replicate.

In parallel to this – just like any work of literature but unlike unliterary speech – Appelfeld's fiction too is assisted by the principle of Noah's Ark: artificiality, compactness, signifying representation, patterns of order. All these must be outside the basically chaotic reality described in his works, and hence they are imposed on it from the outside.

Here I state what is well known: by undergoing an alchemical process, Appelfeld's autobiographical testimony is transformed into literature. I propose to substantiate this claim by invoking the condition that Frye stipulates for every work of literature, and which Appelfeld meets in his own work; underlying it, one can identify an ancient mythic structure.

I would like to point to some of these things in reference to Appelfeld's recent novel *Masa el hahoref* ('A Journey into Winter'). This is one example of individuals gathered together in an Ark, a small social structure, set against the background of the Flood. The Flood itself is not directly articulated, but every one of Appelfeld's readers bears it in mind.

In the novel an orphan boy who is heavily built and suffers from a speech defect, tells about the fate of a small place in the Carpathian Mountains. Over there, in an inn that is reminiscent of a Thomas Mann setting, Jews who suffer from depression gather together to receive the blessing of a Zaddik or of a local Jewish saint. The boy works in this inn and the guests form a sort of a nation, along with the different types that populate it, among whom one can identify the practical, the artistic, the military, the ideologist, the visionary and so forth. All of them, including the narrator, are given the same medicine, which involves communality and nationalism, namely a medicine associated with an 'ark' and a language. The Zaddik encourages those Jews to revert to their Holy Language and Jewish writings. Once certain decrees are issued against the Jews – decrees that are anonymously analogous to those proclaimed by Nazism

when it was beginning to accumulate power – the Jews organise themselves to escape from their retreat as a united group.

Surprisingly, the story ends with an event that looks like a draft discarded by history: the escape ends in salvation, establishing itself as an Exodus. It ends in an event that takes place in a world made possible by the myth of the Exodus and the Ark, rather than by the myth of the destructive Deluge. Unlike the historical versions of the events, here a group of people that was transformed into a nation succeeds, against the background of an imminent Holocaust, to break through the threat and get out of its range of influence. Stammering Moses and Spartacus, the leader of the slaves' rebellion, who both appear in this novel as parodical allusions, actually prefigure the redemption.

So the Ark sails across the water of the Deluge while beneath it those who are doomed are drowning. In this sense all Appelfeld's stories tell about the Deluge from the safe and sheltered point of view of Noah's Ark. Yet, albeit the evil surrounding these stories is found over there, outside the Ark, some of it undoubtedly penetrates inside.

In parallel to the theme of annihilation and survival among a concentrated group of people that are made to tell their stories, the novel contains another theme, equally recurrent in Appelfeld's fiction and essays, which, as I suggested earlier, is deeply and symbolically connected with the story about Noah's Ark. This is the theme of language.

The stammering narrator is portrayed in the novel in terms of his resemblance to Moses, the great leader who was 'slow of speech and of a slow tongue'. Thus the story identifies the speechless with the chosen. But the stammering of the narrating voice, which is introduced in the exposition of the story, has a certain aspect which is more infrastructural and hidden than the thematic aspect. It is also more infrastructural than the autobiographic aspect, which connects the inarticulateness of Appelfeld's stories with the foreignness of the Hebrew used by the author and his original bilingualism in his country of birth. Appelfeld's fiction emerges as a miracle out of, and by virtue of, this inarticulateness, as many critics have rightly acknowledged.

Let me turn to another aspect of the language in Appelfeld's novel. It concerns the theme of language as an example of the 'horrible economy' of the American Indians' exchange of lands for glass beads, which I mentioned before. This is the reductive exchange embodied in any language that substitutes the reductive signifier for the real and full signified, which is very much present. Mysticism would refer to the former as the 'shell'.

In the recurrent pattern of his stories, Appelfeld has invented a completely new kind of sorrow, which has never been described in fiction or perhaps defined as a sort of loss. It is the sorrow of those who are the last of their kind. Far from being associated merely with orphanhood, widowhood and bereavement, this is a lexical, dictionary-oriented sorrow, the sorrow of the sign, or rather the sorrow of the abstract that has lost its existence as a concrete entity. The last of its kind is transformed, by being the only specimen that has survived, into an abstraction, a mere word. Thus it exists as a kind of depleted concreteness. The sensitivity to the reduction embodied by the linguistic principle can be seen in the following example:

My mother died while she was giving birth to me. Her last pain must have been sealed in my body.

[In my bed there was] a huge teddy bear... made of sheep fur. I was very fond of this teddy bear... One day, it disappeared. For many days I was looking for it... One night I saw the bear in a dream and uttered a cry... Bear, where are you going? With the lump in my throat gone, I managed to call the bear, but the bear did not know that a miracle happened to me and did not respond to my voice... My voice stuck in my throat... This dream came to me again and again. I'm sick with longing. It is choking me... From that time I remember... a puppy... The white bear, which I had forgotten, was brought back to my mind. One day [the puppy] disappeared from the yard and the world darkened for me. [Following the loss of the puppy, the narrator becomes ill and the neighbours are called for help.] The old neighbour ruled: The boy is longing for his mother. But his mother died! ... The boy knows that, said the old woman loud and clear, but he cannot get over his longings. (7-9)

In this sequence of excerpts one can detect a series of reductive

substitutions of the real thing, which is replaced by its signs. The deceased mother is substituted by a teddy bear, into which the boy's feelings of love for the mother are now projected, and the lost teddy bear, in turn, is replaced with a puppy. The latter thus becomes the object onto which the boy projects his feelings, thus functioning as the signifier 'mother' as well as the signified 'bear'. It thus serves both as the locus of absence and as the object of desire. This series is evoked within the context of the disappearance of language, which is represented by the choked throat. Language means the ability to replace mother with a teddy bear and the object with a mere word. As such, it is undoubtedly an economy of a horrible loss, but also of profit. What is gained is the ability to transform the absentee into a minor presence, into a tiny temple. Just as in Noah's Ark a single, abstract and representative lion signifies all lions, so in the fiction of *Masa el hahoref* the teddy bear and the puppy, combined with the substitution of one for the other and the loss of both, stand for the missing and abstract sign of the fullness of 'mother'.

As language becomes the object of contemplation, the story emerges as a reduction of Noah's Ark. The reluctance to speak up, the stammering, indicates a refusal to make do with the sign, a turning away from Noah's Ark.

Continuing in the same Lacanian vein, it is interesting to consider the scene in which the three stammerers are gathered for a session in speech therapy. The teacher ill treats them and demands that they renounce their selves as superfluous extra-linguistic entities. In this respect, this teacher of speech is an effective image of 'the name of the father' in Lacan's terminology, and hence it is no wonder that he is eventually murdered by one of his students. This suggests how strong is the refusal of those who see clearly to give up the real in favour of language and how great the pain involved in this struggle. There are other aspects of substitution in this novel but they are beyond the scope of the present analysis.

The stammering boy, whose inarticulate testimony reveals how the sick and melancholic community of the mountain dwellers was rescued, tells the story reluctantly. Of the two possibilities, that of Noah's Ark and that of the Deluge, he undoubtedly chooses the latter by trying to avoid speech. Here, silence stands for the refusal to accept the reduction of lexical substitution.

Within the framework of culture, repetitions in general, and confessional repetitions in particular, are considered to be reformative and healing acts. This is how Foucault analyses the phenomenon of religious confession and this too is the role of the psychoanalytic confessional discourse and its understanding of traumatic mechanisms. Perhaps the same is offered by magic, whose simulation of the threatening object is designed to conquer and subdue it.

To what extent does Appelfeld heal his own tormented self, this new lexical sorrow, as well as the wounded self of his community, through these repeated references to Noah's Ark? To what extent does he succeed in either setting a boundary between himself on the one hand and the Deluge and corrupt violence on the other hand, or in signifying the hybrid relations between the latter two? Is it possible to detect a faint shadow of recovery in Appelfeld's series of Noah's Arks?

In *Masa el hahoref*, which for the time being is the last link of this series, salvation seems to be fulfilled at long last. Is a further repetition still possible? Will this pattern re-emerge in one of Appelfeld's next stories – or is it no longer necessary? Time will tell.