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The Life of a Story: Aharon Appelfeld's Double as a Mode of Holocaust Representation

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I tried several times to write “the story of my life” in the woods after I ran away from the camp. But all my efforts were in vain. I wanted to be faithful to reality and to what really happened. But the chronicle that emerged proved to be a weak scaffolding. The result was rather meager, an unconvincing imaginary tale.¹

A postscript following the death of the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld in January 2018 begins with the late writer's words: “I'm a hero in one of Philip Roth's novels.” Written by Philip Gourevitch who recalled his conversation with Appelfeld nearly twenty years earlier over lunch at a Jerusalem café where Appelfeld liked to work, the postscript continues: “Just as Roth has his fictional double in the book, Appelfeld too is present there both as a nonfictional voice and as a character who is, in significant respects, Roth's invention.”² As I would like to show in this

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- 1 Philip Roth, “Walking the Way of the Survivor; A Talk with Aharon Appelfeld,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 1988, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/28/books/walking-the-way-of-the-survivor-a-talk-with-aharon-appelfeld.html>.
- 2 Philip Gourevitch, “Aharon Appelfeld and the Truth of Fiction in Remembering the Holocaust,” January 5, 2018, accessed

article, Appelfeld's fictional double does not belong solely to Roth's novels,³ but appears also in his own work. By focusing on two of Appelfeld's late novels that followed his 1999 memoir, I will show how the writer shaped his literary doubles within an uncompromising search for an appropriate voice to tell the story of his life in the wake of the Holocaust.

Born in 1932 in Jadova in Bukovina, Appelfeld, a prolific Israeli writer, experienced the Holocaust as a young boy. He lost his mother at the beginning of the war and was expelled with his father to Transnistria. After being separated in the concentration camp, Appelfeld managed to escape, found refuge in the Ukrainian forests and later joined the soldiers of the Soviet army. In 1946 he immigrated to Palestine via Italy as part of the Aliyat Hano'ar youth movement, and completed his schooling at agricultural schools in Ein Kerem and Nahalal. He served for two years in the Israeli army, and in 1952 enrolled as a student of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, during which time he began his literary activity as a poet and critic. During the years 1952–1959 Appelfeld published poems in various newspapers and literary periodicals. His first story collection, *Smoke*,⁴ was published in 1962, followed by essay collections, novels and a memoir.

Since its emergence in the 1950s, scholarship on Appelfeld's work has pointed to its dialectical relationship with two topics: first religion (religiosity), which I will not discuss here,⁵ and second, the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust.⁶ For example, Alan Mintz, who explored the

April 15, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/aharon-appelfeld-and-the-truth-of-fiction-in-remembering-the-holocaust>.

- 3 For instance, confronted by his double-figure in *Operation Shylock*, Roth's narrator reflects on the relationship with Appelfeld: "Because, I thought, of Aharon's and my distinctly radical twoness [...] We are anything *but* the duplicates that everyone is supposed to believe you and me to be; because Aharon and I each embody the *reverse* of the other's experience." Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 200–201 (emphasis in original).
- 4 Aharon Appelfeld, *Ashan: Sippurim* [Smoke: Story collection] (Jerusalem: Achshav, 1962).
- 5 I dealt with it elsewhere: Michal Ben-Horin, "The Sound of the Unsayable: Jewish Secular Culture in Schoenberg and Appelfeld," *Religions* 10 (5) (2019), accessed May 20, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050334>.
- 6 For a mapping of the scholarship on Appelfeld's work, see Yigal Schwartz, *Omanut Hasippur shel Aharon Appelfeld* [The narrative art of Aharon Appelfeld] (Tel Aviv: Kineret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2014). According to Shahar Pinsker, whereas European and American scholars refer to Appelfeld's work as modernist postwar literature, Israeli scholars define it as Holocaust literature. See "The Train that Rides Inside: The Jewish Predicament in Aharon Appelfeld's *The Iron Tracks*" (Hebrew), in *Aharon Appelfeld and His World: Special Volume of Mikan*, ed.

responses of modern Hebrew literature to the Holocaust, claimed that in Appelfeld's literature "everything having to do with what the French call the concentrationary universe [...] is left out. Before, after, parallel to – yes; anything but the thing itself. Especially after, as if to say that a catastrophe can be known only through its survivors and its survivals."⁷ In her monograph on Appelfeld, Emily Miller Budick described his "tendency to circle around – hint at, suggest, signal toward – the major sites of suffering and violence rather than represent them directly."⁸ Appelfeld himself, however, rejected the label Holocaust writer, as he seems to have explained in his memoir:

I was a child during the war. This child grew up and all that happened to him and within him continued into his adulthood: the loss of his home, the loss of his language, suspicion, fear, the inhibitions of speech, the feelings of alienation in a foreign country. It was from these that I wove my fiction. Only the right words can construct a literary text, not subject matter.⁹

Over the years, Appelfeld would repeat this rejection in various interviews, conversations and lectures with writers, scholars and students. Exploring the relationship between subject matter and the interwoven words and between content and form, reveals additional sets of opposition such as authentic vs. false representation, organic vs. artificial, reality vs. imagination and finally history vs. fiction. I claim that this exploration lies at the core of Appelfeld's literary work and reaches its peak in the poetic formation of the double. These double figures appear in Appelfeld's novels *Pitom Ahava* [*Suddenly, Love*] (2004)¹⁰ and *Ha'ish she'lo pasak lishon* [*The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*] (2010)¹¹ following his memoir *Sipur Hayim* [*Story of a Life*] (1999). In both novels, which can be read as autofiction,

Yigal Schwartz and Risa Domb (Cambridge University and Ben-Gurion University Press, 2005), 77–88.

7 Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 206–207.

8 Emily Miller Budick, *Aharon Appelfeld's Fiction: Acknowledging the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 148.

9 Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, trans. Aloma Halter (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 124–125.

10 Aharon Appelfeld, *Suddenly, Love: A Novel*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Schocken Books, 2014).

11 Aharon Appelfeld, *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping: A Novel*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Schocken Books, 2017).

the protagonists' name (Ernst and Erwin respectively) is identical with or alludes to the writer's birth name.¹² However, different from previous work like the novel *The Iron Trucks* (1991), whose protagonist is also called Erwin, in these later novels Appelfeld portrays moments from his life experience, while describing the process of coming to writing. In this respect he tells readers the story of his life by illustrating the life of his story.

In both cases, the protagonists become writers through an ongoing confrontation with the past. They reveal deep loss and an uncompromising struggle to survive even after the war has ended. Moreover, their narratives combine historical details and dream work, reality and fantasy, while transgressing the lines between past and present, Europe and Israel, life and death. This transgression is possible particularly through the figure of the double – an “other” that is never entirely absorbed within the “self” – which, as I suggest, is Appelfeld's way of writing about the disaster.

The Double: Oscillating Between Reality and Imagination

Appelfeld emphasized the significant role of the arts and the aesthetic realm in the reflection, mediation and transmission of knowledge about the Holocaust. In an interview at the Yad Vashem Institute, he discussed the conflict that is revealed in pedagogical methods of teaching about the Holocaust that are limited to disciplines such as history and sociology.¹³ What becomes an ethical task for Appelfeld is demonstrated in his literary work that reflects an ongoing search for appropriate modes of expressing the traumatic experience. As a result, his novels challenge the clear distinction between reality and imagination, knowledge and suggestive experience. An example of this search is found in the characters of Erwin and Ernst, Appelfeld's literary doubles, who combine biographical and fictional elements.

12 The concept of autofiction was first associated with the work of Doubrovsky, a Holocaust survivor born in 1928 in France; See Serge Doubrovsky, “Psychoanalysis/Truth/Autobiography,” trans. Logan Whalen and John Ireland, *Genre* 26 (1) (1993): 27–42. Whereas for some scholars this genre embodies the development of the autobiography based on the combination between reality and fiction (moving from life that constructs a story to a story that constructs life, others emphasize its distinct features. Compare with Jerome Bruner, “The Autobiographical Process,” *Current Sociology* 43 (2) (1995): 161–177; Claudia Grone-mann, “Autofiction,” in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* 1, ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 241–246.

13 Michal Sternin and Merav Jano, “An Interview with Aharon Appelfeld: The Art is a Shield Against the Banality” (Hebrew), Spring 2010, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.yad-vashem.org/he/articles/interviews/aharon-appelfeld.html>.

In his essay "Das Unheimliche," Sigmund Freud defined the idea of the double (*Doppelgänger*) by referring to the prose of the German Romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann:

These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the 'double,' which appears in every shape and in every degree of development. Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these characters to another [...] so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self.¹⁴

Furthermore, Freud refers to his student, Otto Rank, who coined this concept in his 1914 essay "Der Doppelgänger," claiming: "the 'double' was originally an insurance against destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death [...];' and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body." Later however, Freud assumes that the friendly, protective character becomes horrific. Connecting the double with the psychic mechanism of the "uncanny," Freud concludes that what belonged to the early mental stage and has long since been left behind "has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons."¹⁵

Both psychoanalysts developed this idea of the double while drawing inspiration from the nineteenth century literary repertoire of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, E. T. A. Hoffmann, William Hauff, Edgar Allen Poe, Oscar Wilde, Guy de Maupassant, Alfred de Musset, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. On this basis, the literary critic Tzvetan Todorov claimed that in the twentieth century psychoanalysis took the place of literature in dealing with the figure of the double.¹⁶ Yet, the double also appears in twentieth and even twenty-first century literature. For Example, Eran Dorfman explores the role of the double in French writers such as Maupassant, as well as Magrit Duras, Michelle Wolbeck and Michel Tournier. Following Rank's analysis of the double based on Freud's work on narcissism, Dorfman points to the relationships between exterior and interior components:

14 Sigmund Freud, *The "Uncanny,"* [Das Unheimliche] (1919), Standard Edition, vol. XVII, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 217–256; 234

15 Freud, *Uncanny*, 235–236. See also Otto Rank, "Der Doppelgänger," *Imago* 3 (1914): 97.

16 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

Rank conceives narcissism not as an idle state but as an active attempt to find a compromise between the need for love and the fear of the outside. Loving oneself is a way to hold the stick at both ends [...]. But Rank observes that this compromise must fail since something in us “seems to resist exclusive self-love.” Each one of us has thus two contradictory tendencies: an inclination toward narcissism and a defense against it, and the turbulent drama of the double comes to express this contradiction.¹⁷

Karen Grumberg, who explored the figure of the double in twentieth century Jewish American literature, emphasized the ideological alongside the psychological aspects associated with its nineteenth century literary forebears. Based on Robert Alter’s analysis of Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock*, she claims: “The emergence, exposure, or creation of the double points not necessarily or not only to repressed desires but also to other modes of understanding, identification, or disidentification with the (nonrepressed) self.”¹⁸ She develops this idea by calling into question the hierarchy of identities in a hegemonic culture, but also the very concept of (stable) identity:

Coming to terms with one’s double entails understanding one’s place outside the familiar categories of identity – in effect, resisting the demands of socialization within highly ideological social constructs in order to maintain a semblance of subjective integrity. If there is something subversive about this engagement with identity, it is that it involves bypassing conventional categories of identity altogether.¹⁹

The aesthetic, philosophical and psychoanalytical discourse on the double is enormously wide, and goes beyond the scope of this article.²⁰ However, in exploring the literary embodiment of this figure in Appelfeld’s late novels, I hope to show its powerful role in the writer’s attempts at poetic representation of the Holocaust: First, by questioning the lines between inside and outside as conveyed through the relationship between self and other (for

17 Eran Dorfman, *Double Trouble: The Doppelgänger from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 25.

18 Karen Grumberg, “The Whole Content of My Being Shrieks in Contradiction Against Itself: Uncanny Selves in Sayed Kashua and Philip Roth,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (3) (2018): 1, 7.

19 *Ibid.*, 7.

20 On different approaches to the double in literature see Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature’s Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

instance, the fear from the other alongside the need of it; self-hatred and guilt alongside narcissist desires) and between reality and imagination. And second, by challenging the familiar categories of (national) identity and subverting stable processes of cultural socialization.

Furthermore, scholars of trauma have emphasized the importance of a witnessing that mediates between the experience and the reflection. For instance, Samuel Gerson defines this witnessing as an other that “constitutes a ‘live third’ – the presence that exists between the experience and its meaning, between the real and the symbolic, and through whom life gestates and into whom futures are born.”²¹ Similarly, Dana Amir describes a constant movement between the first person and the third person of experience or between the “experiencing I” and the “reflective I,” which enables the shift between the “position of the victim” and the “position of the witness.” This metaphoric mode of traumatic testimony involves an act of representation and the creation of new meaning, producing an integrated narrative within which the traumatic events are not merely repeated but also transformed.²²

Exploring the embodiment of trauma in Appelfeld’s literature, Yochai Oppenheimer argued that Appelfeld creates a calculated texture of symptoms rather than conscious psychological representations.²³ In contrast to binary models, he suggests that symptoms reveal a liminal dimension between repression and coherent memory conveyed through poetic depictions of stuttering, distraction, frantic movements, disease and physical pains. Oppenheimer distinguishes two stages in Appelfeld’s art of symptoms: in the earlier stage, the symptom illuminates a disconnecting from the traumatic past, while in the later stage the symptom alludes to reconnecting with the past through intergenerational identification, thereby pointing to private and national recovery.²⁴

Rina Dudai also emphasized the crucial role of the trauma model for Appelfeld’s work in general and for *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, in particular. Focusing on this novel, she showed how “the adherence to a transcendental

21 Samuel Gerson, “When the Third Is Dead: Memory, Mourning and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 90 (2009): 1341–1357; 1341–1342.

22 Dana Amir, “When Language Meets Traumatic Lacuna: The Metaphoric, the Metonymic, and the Psychotic Modes of Testimony,” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 36 (8) (2016): 620–632; 622.

23 Yochai Oppenheimer, “The Art of Symptoms in the Work of Appelfeld” (Hebrew), in *The Art of Symptoms: Reading Aharon Appelfeld’s Fiction*. Yochai Oppenheimer and Ktzia Alon (Tel Aviv: Gama, 2012), 19.

24 *Ibid.*, 44–46.

mental position, based on a mystical-religious experience following extreme trauma, is a stage on the way to the reconstitution of the self, as well as the poetic self.”²⁵

The duality of attachment to and detachment from the past recurs in Shahar Pinsker who claimed that Appelfeld creates ongoing life stories based on two contradictory yet intertwined models of journey. The linear model embodies attempts to escape the exilic experience associated with victimhood by taking a heroic revenge on the perpetrators, whereas the cyclical model illustrates an attempt to reconstruct Jewish life prior to the catastrophe by rescuing old manuscripts and books.²⁶ He shows how Erwin Siegelbaum, the protagonist of *The Iron Trucks*, while oscillating between these two models, fails to find healing neither as revenger nor collector, neither in Bolshevism, Assimilation, and Eastern-European culture nor in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, this oscillation demonstrates a multiple, non-monolithic view of Jewish traditions.²⁷

Following these lines regarding Appelfeld’s way of dealing with the disaster, I would like to shed light on the fundamental role of the literary double in his work. Unlike his previous novels, I claim that the protagonists of the autofictional novels *Suddenly, Love* and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* are able to move between the traumatic experience and its reflection and between pathological repression and protecting memory. This shift is made possible by means of an ongoing transition from the self to the other, and from the poet to the event (the traumatic loss) that he continues to encounter through repeated dreams, memories, and imagined conversations. In creating this figure of the double who embodies and captures both autobiographical and fictional events, reality and imagination, while rearranging the boundaries between internal and external realms, Appelfeld opened new modes of expression in telling the story of his life.

Modes of Expression: *Suddenly, Love* and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*

There were years when he didn’t talk about it at all. He was convinced that writing about the Holocaust was impossible, forbidden. He found firm supporters for

25 Rina Dudai, “From Excess to Origin: Traversing Time Zones as an Act of Redemption in The Man who Never Stopped Sleeping by Aharon Appelfeld,” *Yod: Revue des études hébraïques et juives* 19 (2014), accessed April 2, 2023, <https://journals.openedition.org/yod/2177>.

26 Pinsker, “Train that Rides Inside,” 82.

27 *Ibid.*, 89.

this opinion. The philosopher Theodor Adorno, for example, claimed that writing poetry after Auschwitz was “barbaric.” Ernst accepted this without challenge.²⁸

The allusion to Theodor Adorno, the Jewish German philosopher who coined the verdict that writing after Auschwitz is barbaric,²⁹ illustrates one of Appelfeld’s central dilemmas: how to write about the catastrophe, and what would be the appropriate language for it? For Appelfeld, testifying to the disaster is entangled with the struggle of portraying his own experience. As he confessed to Philip Roth, the futile attempts of telling the “story of my life” after escaping from the camps had to do with not only the shaking impact of the historical events, but also with the feeling that words are limited and fail to represent the horror; reality extends beyond imagination.³⁰ Later in the conversation and elsewhere, Appelfeld explained how different sources of inspiration, among them the Bible and the literature of the Austro-Hungarian writer Franz Kafka, helped him to find his voice.³¹

In the novel *Suddenly, Love* Appelfeld conveys this dilemma through Ernst, his invented double. Embodying a mixture of fictional and autobiographical elements the novel’s protagonist is a writer who lost his family in the Holocaust. For years, he has failed to publish his prose work and struggled to find the appropriate expression for his traumatic experience. Living in Jerusalem as a retired investment advisor, Ernst is haunted by the memories of the war, his escape to the forests, recruitment by the Soviet Army and his arrival in Naples before immigrating with the youth movement to Palestine. In contrast to Appelfeld, who shifted from German into Hebrew, Ernst writes in German, his mother tongue. Moreover, the remark on writing his early poems in Czernowitz where he was born, might remind the readers of the poet Paul Celan (Pesach Ansel), whose work has become a milestone in discussions about the ethical, aesthetic and poetic representation of the Holocaust.

28 Appelfeld, *Love*, 114.

29 Theodor W. Adorno, “Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shiery Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 19–34; 34.

30 Roth, *A Talk with Aharon Appelfeld*.

31 Aharon Appelfeld, *Essays in the First Person* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hasifriya Hatzionit, 1979). On Kafka’s influence on Appelfeld, as reflected in his memoir and the 2010 novel see Abigail Gillman, “Screams Turned into Whispers: Aharon Appelfeld’s Poetics in Story of a Life, and The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping,” in *Colloquia Germanica. Internationale Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 54 (1), ed. Harald Höbusch and Joseph D. O’Neil (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2022), 31–58.

The novel begins two years after the surgery that Ernst underwent. Mental depression and physical pain that have paralyzed his body block his attempts at writing. This situation changes slowly as Irena, who takes care of him after his release from the hospital, enters Ernst's life. In the course of the novel, they develop an intimate relationship parallel to Ernst's growing ability to tell Irena about his parents and grandparents. Life and story intertwine, as Irena becomes a listener and witness to Ernst's fears and desires. This belated love, unexpected and surprising, opens up in him long-forgotten feelings of trust and faith in the other, while rearranging the boundaries between inside and outside, imagination and reality.

The loss of parents lies at the core of the traumatic experience during the Holocaust, which resonates with Ernst's guilt about disconnecting himself from them before the war. Failing to "meet" both his father and mother in his dreams, he refers to his parents who disconnected themselves from their own parents and the Jewish religion when moving from the Carpathian Mountains to the city, as an "open wound."³² These generational ruptures embedded in reenactments of private and collective breaks also occupied Appelfeld in the memoir.³³ However, in contrast to the memoir, Ernst is able to work through the painful loss by reviving in writing memories from his childhood visits to his grandparents' village. In the wake of his developing memoir, he can finally come to terms with the departure, which turns into an imagined reen-counter. The return of the dead is also a return to the Jewish cultural tradition bound up with the Eastern-European landscapes (the synagogue in the Carpathian village), which he is able to do with the help of the woman he loves: "Because of some mistake we are driven from this paradise and cast into exile. But finally the mistake has been corrected and we have returned to the place where God and man dwell together."³⁴

In both autofictional novels, this "homecoming" that occurs through the process of literary writing plays a central role. For instance, Ernst reflects on lost poetic traditions, which reappear as his own sources of inspiration. Mentioning the enormous impact that Kafka has had on him, he is also aware of the dangers

32 Appelfeld, *Love*, 33.

33 Appelfeld, *Story*, 121.

34 Appelfeld, *Love*, 223–224. According to Adam Kirsch, "For an Israeli writer to locate the Promised Land, not in Israel, but in the dreaded and despised Europe of the Holocaust, is an audacious and pointed move [...] it is intriguing to think that perhaps the way to heal the traumas that still afflict Judaism is to restore that breach—to regain a more loving and less fearful view of our ancestors' lives." See "Aharon Appelfeld Creates a Jewish Saint in *Suddenly, Love*," *Tablet*, May 1, 2014, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/appelfeld-kirsch-suddenly>.

resulting from the total attraction to and fascination with his voice: "Kafka's focus was entirely inward. Even the exterior was his interior."³⁵ This relationship between outside and inside is translated into the aesthetic texture of writing. Only when Ernst is able to free himself from the "spell" of Kafka, whose interior took over the external, does he succeed in finding his own poetic voice.

An additional source of inspiration for his literary work appears toward the end of the novel, when Ernst formulates a poetic principle he identifies with and is willing to employ:

It is now of the greatest importance to Ernst for his writing to be clear, orderly, without superfluity, and without any exaggerations. If a sentence has an air of coquetry or a hint of ornamentation, he crosses it out [...] Writing has to be direct and to the point, without twists [...] Good writing has to be like Grandfather's peasant smock: a simple tunic, with no decoration, comfortable to wear. Once Grandfather told him that there is not a superfluous word in the Bible. Every word counts and has its place.³⁶

The metaphor of the peasant shirt relates to the frugal language of the Bible. For Ernst the writer should not compose superficial, arabesque textures. His interwoven words have to adhere to clear, authentic lines. This view is congruent with Appelfeld's searching for modes of expression and representation of the Holocaust. His wish to relate what happened in way that is "faithful to reality," and to bear witness without ending up with a weak scaffolding and an unconvincing imaginary tale, reverberates with the protagonist's attempts of writing the story of his life.

Whereas in *Suddenly, Love* Ernst finds his way into the therapeutic writing through the power of love, in *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* it is rather Erwin's injury that sets in motion the process of writing through which he seems to recover. Here too Appelfeld develops the character of the protagonist, his literary double, by combining biographical and fictional elements. Among the autobiographical components are the arrival in Palestine via Naples, the youth movement and the agricultural school, the life in Jerusalem and becoming a Hebrew writer including his sources of inspiration, information about the grandparents in the Carpathian Mountains and about his parents and finally his birth name Erwin. Moreover, in this later autofictional novel Appelfeld interweaves fragments of his earlier lyrical and prose texts with Erwin's first

³⁵ Ibid., 117.

³⁶ Ibid., 222.

attempts at writing.³⁷ Among the fictional components are the injury during an engagement with snipers followed by a painful process of rehabilitation, first in the hospital and later in the sanatorium.

The novel initially focuses on the act of sleeping: “At the end of the war, I became immersed in constant slumber [...]. Waves of darkness carried me along, and I moved forward. *Where are you heading?* I asked myself. *Home*, I replied, surprised at my own answer.”³⁸ This in turn reveals an additional set of oppositions: existential (deep sleep and wakefulness) and mental (unconsciousness and consciousness), temporal (backwards and forwards, day and night), and territorial (the homeland in Europe and the new land of immigration in the Middle East). The sleep that overtakes the protagonist at the beginning of the novel denies the traumatic break by returning him to the years before the war and reconnects him with the dead grandparents and parents. These encounters that illuminate Erwin’s inner world suspend his confrontation with the external environment and historical events, first by denying his family’s death in reality and second in the way he keeps experiencing the European sound (German, Yiddish, Ruthenian) and landscapes (Ukrainian and Romanian) in the new land (Israel).³⁹

The struggle for survival in the present demanded disconnection and even denial of the past in a cultural process that scholars have defined as a “negation of exile.”⁴⁰ For example, as part of the national ideology, the immigrants had to replace their foreign names with Hebrew names. This complexity is shown in the novel when Erwin’s first reaction to his mentor’s suggestion to change his name to Aharon is a refusal. Slowly, but not without resistance

37 Rina Dudai claims that this intertextual relation “brings to light the mental process undergone by the writer that leads him from the trauma, through the experience of revelation, and ultimately to the redemptive act of writing.” See Dudai, “From Excess to Origin.”

38 Appelfeld, *Man*, 3–4 (emphasis in original).

39 In his memoir Appelfeld reflects how the language “which promised to be my mother tongue was nothing more than a stepmother” (111). On the issue of the language see Stanley Nash, “Sippur Hayyim,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 22 (3) (2002): 334–354.

40 Based on binaries such as past and present, diaspora and homeland, this narrative called for the negation of Exile (Shlilat Hagaluth) and was embedded in major literary works. See Dan Miron, *Bodedim Bemo’adam – Lidyokana shel Harepublika Hasifrutit Ha’ivrit Bithilat Hame’a Ha’esrim* [When loners come together – A portrait of Hebrew literature at the turn of the twentieth century] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987); Yigal Schwartz, “Our Shadows and Ourselves: The ‘Yom Kippur Generation’ in Israeli Fiction,” *BGU Review – An Online Journal of Israeli Culture*, 2017, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://in.bgu.ac.il/en/heksherim/Pages/2017.aspx>.

and internal conflict, the Hebrew pushes the German aside. The sleep that protected him from the external world and reconnected him to his past life now becomes less secure as the hegemonic language takes over. Erwin's response to this insecurity is conveyed in his attempts to write his own literary work that gradually replaces his sleep, and within which he can freely cross the borders between here and there.

As in Ernst's case, Erwin's writing draws on European landscapes and memories from his birthplace, visits to his grandparents' village in the Carpathian Mountains and conversations with his parents. Moreover, rather than calling the "event" by its name, while mentioning the explicit subject matter (writing on the Holocaust), his poetic texture reveals the horror by interweaving words associated with the catastrophe, including the names of homes and places that were erased and characters who are no longer alive. However, unlike the novel *Suddenly, Love*, now the invented double, like Appelfeld himself, chooses to write in Hebrew although the new language evokes in him feelings of dismay and betrayal.

In his memoir Appelfeld defined the common approach to the new language as "functional," admitting how in time it became clear to him that he needed to have "a different connection to the Hebrew, not an external connection but an interior one."⁴¹ Moreover, following his physical immigration resulting from the violent wrench from his parents, the process of acquiring the new language further uprooted him from home: "From the moment I arrived in Israel, I hated the people who forced me to speak Hebrew, and with the death of my mother tongue, my hostility toward them only increased."⁴² What the memoir reveals about the dilemma of the language, the novel exposes through an imagined conversation between the fictional double and his mother. In response to her pointing out his use of "incomprehensible words" and "secret language," he concludes:

Finally, I realized that I was mixing words from home with new words, so I tried to separate them. I wanted to tell her about all my adventures since I had been parted from her. I knew I had a lot to tell her, but it seemed beyond my power, like a pile of broken stones that I had to load onto my back.⁴³

To some extent, Erwin's emerging prose in the 1950s elucidates and mirrors Appelfeld's poetic style, which embraces in addition to the Bible,

⁴¹ Appelfeld, *Story*, 113.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴³ Appelfeld, *Man*, 53–54.

influences from Hassidic legends, partially through the relation to Kafka, and foreign languages such as the Yiddish spoken in the Carpathians and the German spoken in Czernowitz.⁴⁴ At the time, however, Appelfeld's European landscapes stood in contrast to the local landscapes portrayed in the emerging Israeli literature and hegemonic culture. Moreover, the literary representations of the Holocaust in post-1948 Hebrew literature hardly related to the suffering of the survivors and either depicted the heroic moments of resistance in the ghettos and the forests (focusing on the partisans) or simply remained silent about the victims.

Anita Shapira pointed to the silence surrounding the Holocaust in the literature of the "1948 Generation," which was intended to disconnect the Zionist heroic narrative from the victimhood associated with diasporic Jews.⁴⁵ In this respect as well, the prose written by Appelfeld's fictional double is innovative. For instance, his ambivalence regarding national identity recurs in the depiction of military service. Similar to Appelfeld's memoir in which the military role attributed to the formation of Israeli identity constitutes a humiliating experience for the memoir's reporter, the novel continues this unheroic depiction. However, instead of focusing on the mental pain, here the narrator thoroughly depicts his physical pain. On being wounded in an engagement with snipers, Erwin has to spend long months recovering from multiple surgeries and trying to regain the use of his legs. During this period, he copies passages from the Bible into his newly acquired Hebrew when taking his first steps as a writer.

As in *Suddenly, Love*, here too a prominent source of inspiration for his literary writing is Kafka. While in the hospital, Erwin imagines recurring conversations with his father, which revolve around the father's attempts at writing. The father, who struggles to find a genuine mode of expression, invokes Kafka's work as the only possible way of writing. In the father's view, Kafka broke away from the restrictions and barriers of expression, which is what he demands from his son. In one of these conversations, while his father

44 See Sidra DeKoven-Ezrahi, "The Jewish Journey in the Late Fiction of Aharon Appelfeld: Return, Repair or Repetition," *Mikan: Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies* 5 (2005): 47–56; Shahar Pinsky, "The Language That Was Lost on the Roads: Discovering Hebrew through Yiddish in Aharon Appelfeld's Fiction," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 7 (1) (2014): 129–41.

45 Anita Shapira, "Dor Ba'aretz (Generation in the Land)," in *Yehudim Hadashim Yehudim Yeshanim* [New Jews, old Jews] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), 122–154. See also Avner Holtzman, "They Are Different People: Holocaust Survivors as Reflected in the Fiction of the Generation of 1948," trans. Ralph Mandel, *Yad Vashem Studies* XXX (Jerusalem, 2002), 337–368; Iris Milner, "Writing and the Holocaust: Problematics of Representation in Second-Generation Literature in Israel," *The Journal of Israeli History* 22 (1) (2003): 91–108; 106–107.

encourages him to follow in Kafka's footsteps, the son is thinking about his broken legs:

That night I saw my father sitting at his desk and writing. It seemed to me that his efforts and my efforts to rejoin my legs to my body were shared. I wanted to call out to him. *We'll both do it*, but I realized that this was erroneous. There was no connection between his writing and my injury. "Will my legs be reattached to my body?" I asked father fearfully. "I have no doubt," he replied as he raised his big eyes to mine.⁴⁶

The literal wound depicted in the novel belongs to the fictional components of Appelfeld's poetic output: the double. Through the imaginary conversation between the son and his father, the physical and the mental traumas are connected. The broken legs embody the mental break that resulted from the catastrophe in Europe and the immigration to the new land of Israel. In the final pages of the novel, Erwin apparently repays this devotion to succeed where his father has failed, when he reencounters his mother in a dream, telling her that he broke through the barriers. Coming to terms with or working through the loss of the family by means of poetic writing is thus bound up with the long process of recovery. In this sense, Erwin's reclaiming of the language (his tuning and mastering of a poetic language) operates in parallel to reclaiming his walk. He learns to write while he is practicing walking. The analogy gains another perspective through the depiction of connecting the disconnected organs and reattaching the broken, fragmented parts. For Appelfeld, writing about the Holocaust has nothing to do with the subject matter. The essence and meaning of such an ethical project lie in the organic and authentic (rather than functional and artificial) way its parts are connected.

To This Day I Cannot Do Anything with It

I address him in German and say, "Herr Appelfeld" and he comes down the ladder, looks at me and cannot speak a single word, only the tears flow down his face. And for a whole day he could not speak a word, just this terrible crying. He does not tell me that he is my father, I do not tell him that I am his son. To this day I can't do anything with it. It brings me to tears, it's not something I can touch. I cannot. Not yet. Maybe in 20 years I will be able to touch this fire.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Appelfeld, *Man*, 120–121 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁷ Michael Gluzman, "Until Now, I Have Written the First Part: An Interview with Aharon Appelfeld" (Hebrew), *Mikan: Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies* 1 (2000): 150–165.

Appelfeld described being reunited with his own father in Israel in an interview with Michael Gluzman in the journal *Mikan* in 2000. The interviewer wondered why Appelfeld had not mentioned the encounter in the memoir published only a year earlier. The answer the writer provided reveals another story. He described how he saw his father's name on the Agency's list of refugees and immigrants yet could not tell whether it was his father or not. He went to Be'er Tuvia, an immigrant transit camp at the time. Arriving there a man working as a fruit-picker was pointed out, whom he addresses in German.

The story continues further, but resists dissolving into a harmonious closure. Instead of culminating in relief resulting from the reunion of father and son, and their acknowledgment of finally reaching out to each other, this moving report leaves readers with deep feelings of discomfort. Facing their deep grief, both men cannot speak the words "father" and "son." The break paralyzes, refusing any kind of repair and consolation. In his memoir, Appelfeld is unable to "do anything with it." What is still impossible for the reporter of the autobiographical text becomes possible through the literary doubles of the autofictional novels that were to follow. Only by means of his doubles, which kept tracing the wound, experiencing and reflecting, close and distant, inside and outside, can he work through the catastrophe.

Over the years, Appelfeld's views in essays and conversations clarified that the challenges of bearing witness to the Holocaust absorbed him. Repeatedly, he pointed out the fundamental part of the poetic realm and the aesthetic perspective in searching for accurate modes of representing this event. In light of this, the literary work became a laboratory not only for probing the ethical limits and possibilities of testifying to the disaster, but also for working through its paralyzing effects. As I have shown here, with regard to current scholarship in the field, the figure of the double plays a prominent role in this dynamic by oscillating between self and other, reflection and experience, reality and imagination.

Both novels discussed in this article combine biographical and fictional elements. Their protagonists whose given names are (Erwin) or echo with (Ernst) Appelfeld's are also writers. In struggling to find precise modes of expression, they allude to Appelfeld's own struggle as he revealed on various occasions, including his memoir. Whereas Ernst writes in German, Erwin switches into Hebrew; and yet the two of them reflect on the complexity of language. For Ernst whose German includes "secret words" that his mother can no longer understand, the immigration evokes in him feelings of betrayal. Erwin, for his part, incorporates in the Hebrew foreign words imbued with diasporic soundscapes that the Israeli culture has repressed. While illustrating the life of their stories, both writers create alternative zones that blur the boundaries between Europe and Israel, exile and homeland, thereby

challenging the hegemonic national identity. These zones reverberate with intertextual relations such as the literary work of Franz Kafka. Conflicts with the mother but particularly with the father figure regarding the process of writing allude to the Jewish Czech writer and illuminate Appelfeld's aesthetic and ethical dilemmas within a wider cultural context.

In *Suddenly, Love*, Ernst works through the past that haunts him in the present by reviving in writing private childhood memories, which ended for him when the war broke out. The reconnection with the grandparents and parents also evokes in him the lost connection to Jewish tradition. This happens with the help of Irena who teaches him to love. The ability to look outside, towards a caring and protecting other sets in motion the writing process. Furthermore, the novel ends with Irena, who "will reinforce the house on every side. No harmful creature will ever dare to approach the window."⁴⁸ This rearrangement of an outside-inside relationship embodies the primary mechanism of the double.

In *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, the search for an appropriate vehicle to tell of a damaged life is conveyed through the physical description of the injury. The unheroic position associated with the exilic conditions recurs through descriptions of the hospital and the ideological conversations in the sanatorium. Yet Erwin seems to find his way into the new world without relinquishing the world he came from. The joined organs (legs), like the verbal fragments of his newly acquired language, do not deny the break. Rather the scars of the wound are etched in the recovered body, as the foreign components of the diasporic experience are engraved in the Hebrew from which these stories are made.

Unlike the mechanistic or somewhat functional use of the Hebrew as reflected in Appelfeld's memoir, his literary doubles seek in their language for an authentic reconnection of its different parts. Like Appelfeld, they transgress the lines between inside and outside, imagination and reality, creating a new intimate space – an interior that reverberates with the exterior, which in turn, does not block or deny what it supersedes. Appelfeld's fictional narrators incorporate autobiographical components, similar to Roth's who captures the radical twoness between Philip and Aharon: "because each recognizes in the other the Jewish man that he is *not*... because we are heirs jointly of a drastically bifurcated legacy – because of the sum of Jewish antinomies, yes, we have much to talk about and are intimate friends."⁴⁹

The stories they tell include a present that does not exclude the past, a living that does not forget the dead. They challenge familiar categories of identity

⁴⁸ Appelfeld, *Love*, 225.

⁴⁹ Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 201 (emphasis in original).

shaped by monolithic ideologies, and subvert the hegemonic narrative by echoing with diasporic traditions. Against Appelfeld's admitting to his inability "to touch this fire" in the interview following his 1999 memoir, almost twenty years of creation have passed since then, revealing his ongoing, uncompromising attempt to write his story of life that embeds the self without ignoring the other.

Abstract

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The Life of a Story: Aharon Appelfeld's Double as a Mode of Holocaust Representation

In a 2000 interview, Aharon Appelfeld, a Holocaust survivor and prominent Israeli writer, was reminded of what he had not mentioned in his memoir. This article focuses on two of Appelfeld's novels following the memoir, *Suddenly, Love* (2004) and *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping* (2010), by exploring the figure of the "double" (Doppelgänger). My claim is that the literary double demonstrates Appelfeld's attempts to work through his trauma by transgressing the lines between experience and reflection, imagination and reality, hegemonic and diasporic cultures, the living and the dead, within a story that embeds the self without ignoring the other.

Keywords

Aharon Appelfeld, double (Doppelgänger), modern Hebrew literature, memoir, Holocaust fiction