

Israeli Holocaust Fiction: A Review of Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* and Amos Oz's *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind*

NAOMI HETHERINGTON

Elie Wiesel, himself a prolific Holocaust writer, declared in an open lecture at Northwestern University, "The literature of the holocaust ... There is no such thing."¹ The atrocity of the *Shoah* is perhaps unprecedented in human history in its huge scale, and the technological exactness with which it was perpetrated. Attempting to represent it in literature or art incurs the danger of in some sense justifying it by using it to aesthetic ends. Depicting horror can sometimes domesticate it, rendering it more familiar or tolerable – a false assurance which the reader or viewer may welcome or even be tacitly expecting. Furthermore, the genre of fiction goes beyond memoir in its interpretive nature so that it contains the temptation to glean from the *Shoah* a redemptive meaning where perhaps there is none. In addition, there remains the question, do those who have not experienced the Holocaust personally have the right to write about it at all?

Naomi Hetherington is currently reading an MA in Nineteenth Century English Literature at Manchester University. She graduated in summer 1996 with a first class degree in Theology and Religious Studies from Newnham College, Cambridge. This article is adapted from a third year paper on 'Jewish and Christian Responses to the Holocaust'.

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Different writers have attempted different ways of surmounting these barriers. Jerzy Kosinsky and Günter Grass retreat into fantasy. Others, like Wiesel himself, adopt a minimalist approach, using language sparingly for maximum meaning. Throughout Wiesel's fictionalised account of his years in Auschwitz-Birkenau, single words stand for whole sentences including the title itself – 'Night'.² Sometimes Wiesel also sets his tales once removed from the *Shoah*. *The Trial of God*, inspired by a trial of the Almighty which he witnessed in Auschwitz, takes place in the fictitious Eastern European village of Shamgorod in 1649 in the aftermath of a pogrom. Another approach, drawing in part on all of the above, is adopted by two Israeli writers, Aharon Appelfeld and Amos Oz. That is to write of the events immediately before or after the *Shoah*, leaving silence as the only force powerful enough to proclaim the ultimate atrocities of the Final Solution itself. Amos Oz was born in Israel in 1939, and therefore did not witness the Holocaust personally. Appelfeld escaped from the labour camp at Transnistria aged eight, and wandered the forests until he was picked up by the Red Army in 1944. Yet he nevertheless maintains the impossibility of representing the *Shoah* directly – 'M'ken nisht' (Yiddish for 'one cannot').³

Appelfeld's novella, *Badenheim 1939*, is ostensibly little more than a series of banal incidents in a Jewish holiday resort near Vienna on the outbreak of the Second World War. However, a plethora of meaning lies just under the surface. An ominous atmosphere pervades the entire work, building up to a crescendo with the Jews' eventual deportation. 'There was a vague anxiety in the air'; the hotel guests address one another in whispers.⁴ At night, a menacing force, stronger than the inhabitants, seems to loom over the town: 'The cafés were deserted and the people walked the streets silently. There was something unthinking about their movements, as if they were being led. It was as if some alien spirit had descended on the town.'⁵ Old people die whilst going about their daily business. After exit from the town is forbidden and the post office and telephone lines closed, alcohol becomes the primary means of numbing fear and inertia. The 'toxica' cupboard in Martin's pharmacy is looted by two haggard strangers on whose faces is 'an icy despair'.⁶

The author attributes insight into the true nature of affairs to Martin's wife, Trude, who drifts in and out of delirium due to a

chronic illness: 'The whole world looked transparent to her. It was poisonous and diseased.'⁷ She is the first character introduced to us, looking listlessly round from the window of her sick bay. At this point, understanding belongs to her alone for National Socialist policies and ethics provide such a distorted view of the world that they are akin to her sick state of mind. Soon, however, her illness seeps into her husband's soul 'drop by drop. He too begins to see patches of paleness on people's faces', until, by the end of the novel, reality breaks him:⁸ 'Martin knew that everything Trude said was true. And the sorrow he had borne within him for many days melted into tears.'⁹

The readers are expected to bring their historical knowledge of the period to bear on the text, and this inferred understanding behind the emigration procedure is a far more powerful tool than speaking of the Final Solution outright. We realise, for instance, that the posters in the Sanitation Department – 'LABOR IS OUR LIFE ... THE AIR IN POLAND IS FRESHER'¹⁰ – are a farce, that even the name Sanitation Department is ironic. Yet the characters do not. The impresario, Pappenheim, says to his musicians impressively: 'the Sanitation Department wants to boast of its important guests and is thus writing their names down in its Golden Book. Isn't that handsome of them?'¹¹ But we know that in registering the band have assigned themselves, not to the book of life, but that of death. Whilst the majority of characters look forward to the journey to Poland as a return to their place of origin, we understand that the death camps await them.

The assimilated Austrian Jews in Badenheim continually distinguish themselves from the *ostjuden*, like Pappenheim, whom they feel it is appropriate for the Nazis to send eastward. Samitzky asks Frau Zauberblit, 'Do I have the honour of addressing an Austrian citizen of Jewish origin?'¹² The readers, on the contrary, comprehend that Nazi law denied all Jews citizenship of the Reich. Hitler determined semitic origin according to set racial principles so that, no matter how Germanic Jews were in sentiment or culture, they were still marked for extermination. This dual perspective creates great pathos, making us feel protective towards the characters. It arouses our instinctive, though entirely vain, desire to warn them of their fate in time. In another sense, though, our advantageous knowledge

places us implicitly on the side of the Nazi officers (never, incidentally, called this in the novel, but only 'police'). We see events from their perspective so that our own insecurities with the subject of the *Shoah* are threatened. Our moral responsibilities as members of the post-Holocaust world are aroused to face up to and stand against such atrocity if it is not to happen again.

Appelfeld develops a variety of symbols within the novel which, as always, encapsulate a wider meaning. They are proleptic in the sense that they almost prophesy to the scient reader what will happen to the town's Jewry in the East. The centrality of Pappenheim's artists and musicians is a reminder of how much the Nazis detested high culture and the intelligentsia because they constituted the antithesis of the 'blood and *Kitsch*' values of the Third Reich.¹³ Behind Pappenheim's belief that a performing tour has been planned for his musicians in Poland is the reality of the ironic place given to orchestras in the camps, being forced to play German marches as the prisoners left for hard labour every morning.

The goings-on within the hotel aquarium become an allegory of Nazism itself. The blue Cambium fish placed in the tank by a nature lover 'disported themselves gaily in the water, but one night they suddenly fell on the other fish and massacred them horribly. In the morning the floor of the aquarium was full of corpses.'¹⁴ The Nazis founded their racial theory partly on an erroneous reading of Darwin. The particular phrase 'one night' may allude to *Kristallnacht* (9–10 November 1938). The floor littered with corpses transcends the image of dead fish to the sight meeting the Allied soldiers on the liberation of the concentration camps. The hotel owner sentences the blue fish, 'the murders', to death, thus anticipating the justice granted the dead in the Nuremberg trials.¹⁵ The Jewish guest, Karl, comes to identify with the modest, new, green fish that replace the blue ones. He becomes obsessed with them, attempting to transport them to Poland in a plastic water bottle. But by the time he arrives at the railway station, 'two little fish were already dead and the rest floated limply and listlessly in the water', an omen of the Jews' own fate over the remainder of the journey, packed tightly together in freight cars.¹⁶

One evening, the half-Jewish waitress got blind drunk, and on the verge of insanity suddenly 'stood up, took off her stockings, and announced that all the guzzlers and gluttons were hereby invited to

feast themselves on this Austrian meat'.¹⁷ When no-one came forward, she grabbed a knife and 'started sawing at her thigh ... Blood splashed onto the floor.'¹⁸ The image of a young woman mutilating her body arouses both pity and revulsion. It is reminiscent of the debauchery at Nazi parties and clubs depicted in the musical *Cabaret*. It also looks forward to the 'joy divisions' in the camps, where the officers kept attractive Jewish and Slavic women for copulation on demand. The only way in which the waitress can cope with the imminent threat of 'emigration' is to channel her whole self into her body, seeking mental oblivion through drunkenness and human intimacy through sex. Filip Müller in *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, his account of his experiences as a *Sonderkommando*, writes of the camps' complete 'transformation of the person into flesh' because physical survival became tantamount and mental reflection was a luxury for which energy could not be spared.¹⁹

Again, the sanatorium from which Frau Zauberblit escaped to come to Badenheim prefigures the camps, heightening their atrocity by way of contrast. 'Sanatorium' was a term the Nazis sometimes used to disguise the fact that the sick would be gassed immediately on round-up or arrival at the camp. When two guards appear to escort the Frauline to a separate transport with medical supervision, we wonder whether she will even make the journey to Poland or if they intend to shoot her once out of earshot of the town. The presence of Death pervades the sanatorium, yet he is described as an 'old lover' with a haunting quality, but also calming.²⁰ 'The sanatorium grounds were like a spacious seashore. Death strolled there freely, in the rose garden and the lounge, and they spoke to him as if they were speaking to a tame animal, laughing and cajoling.'²¹ In the camps, however, the omnipresence of Death was oppressive, invading the senses with the stench of burning flesh, the billowing smoke, the human tissue stuck to the clothing of those employed in digging mass graves. It took over the realm of the living until it could no longer be confronted by the individual as an existential challenge.

This is what lies at the heart of *Badenheim 1939*: the richness of life which National Socialism tried to reduce to its lowest common denominator. Appelfeld presents us with a whole range of 'thumbnail' sketches of individuals: the impresario Pappenheim, the sullen and domineering schoolgirl, the ageing prostitutes Sally and

Gertie, the headwaiter devoted to his dogs. Yet all these personalities face imminent destruction. Those who may be spared physically will have their individuality stripped from them. Wearing striped uniform, known only by tattooed numbers, they risk becoming part of the *Muselmänner* described by Primo Levi as ‘the drowned [who] form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continuously renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty really to suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death.’²²

The novel ends abruptly with Appelfeld’s only direct reference to the reality of the Final Solution: ‘An engine, an engine coupled to four filthy freight cars, emerged from the hills and stopped at the station. Its appearance was as sudden as if it had risen from the ground.’²³ Even now though, the characters try to put the best interpretation on it, and the pathos is supreme. Appelfeld’s concluding sentence reads: ‘Nevertheless Dr. Pappenheim found time to make the following remark: “If the coaches are so dirty it must mean that we have not far to go.”’²⁴

Amos Oz’s *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* covers a wider sweep of action than *Badenheim 1939*, but it too alludes to the Final Solution only in inference. It commences in Poland in early winter 1939, but the protagonist, Elisha Pomeranz, runs away to the forest and hides there until the end of the war. Although he is once captured by a German patrol, they treat him relatively humanely and he manages to escape. His wife Stefa succeeds in passing herself off as an Aryan and remains in her home-town until it is taken over by the Red Army at the end of the war. The majority of the novel then concerns the war’s aftermath. Elisha emigrates to Israel, where he works on a kibbutz, tending sheep, mending watches and giving maths lessons to the backward pupils until he makes a revolutionary mathematical discovery. Stefa rises to prominence in the Russian secret service with a string of lovers and lechers until she eventually defects to Israel and re-unites with Pomeranz on the kibbutz.

Amos Oz professes that he wrote the novel in part as a tribute to his uncle who perished in the *Shoah*. This uncle was a mathematical genius and for years his family refused to believe that such a clever man could really have died, and waited for him to arrive in Israel. He

never came. Pomeranz's occupation as a watchmaker and his discovery, 'solving one of the most baffling paradoxes connected with the mathematical concept of infinity', further bear on the Holocaust as a fundamental issue, which likewise affects the way in which we interpret the universe.²⁵ Elie Wiesel writes:

In the beginning there was the Holocaust.
We must therefore start all over again ...
What it was we may never know; but
we must proclaim, at least, that it was,
that it is.²⁶

In some sense, the *Shoah* stands both within history and outside it. A result of historical cause and effect, the scale of horror involved so far transcends normal human experience that it remains ultimately incomprehensible.

Our incredulity in the face of the Final Solution is further reflected in Oz's style of narration. Frequently, he blends together external events in the novel with his characters' thought processes. Thus he challenges our ability to differentiate the factually true from subjective perceptions of reality to the point where objectivity itself ceases to have any meaning. On other occasions, Oz presents us with a variety of hypothetical sequences so that in the smaller details we are left to construct our own story. For instance, as regards Pomeranz's residence in a hut in the forest:

Bread and water were provided for him by an old sorceress from the village.

Terrified peasants would approach on tiptoe, occasionally depositing a roast goose at a safe distance from the hut, and vanishing instantly into the bosom of the forest ...

Or perhaps there were no peasants and no sorceress, and no roast geese, but Pomeranz lived there in a state of pure spirit, lacking all physical needs.²⁷

Akin to Appelfeld, Oz places his readers in a position of greater knowledge than some of his characters. Professor Zaicek does not realise that his maidservant has deserted him because he is Jewish, but believes her to be in love. Stefa has to persuade him against inviting the town's military governor to tea to discuss the current disarray, conveying

an impression of child-like innocence open to abuse at the hands of the Nazis. Like Appelfeld, Oz also creates an ominous atmosphere, in particular through the recurring image of a pair of glassy bear's eyes. These originally belong to a stuffed bear's head in Stefa's apartment in Poland, but they transcend their original context to become a menacing force continually watching the characters' activities. A bear is a more appropriate symbol for Russia than for Nazi Germany, but Oz uses Stalin's totalitarian regime to implicate still further the Third Reich, whose terror he feels able to allude to only by analogy.

Oz's description of Stefa's survival as a Russian secret agent functions similarly. She conceals her Jewishness and must be continually on her guard against conspiracy. The way in which Oz alludes in a pun to the execution of her Russian husband, the spy master Fedoseyev, illustrates how lightly Stalin regarded human life: 'The Russians at the time still hung great hopes on the political enthusiasm of Polish Jews. And soon afterward they hung Fedoseyev too.'²⁸ Sexual abuse is almost part of Stefa's job description. Oz's account of old men pawing her is vivid and its desecration of the most beautiful and intimate human experience is designed to shock:

They clasped her waist with cold, purple-veined fingers, large dead nails of yellow tallow. They were toothless, most of them, and feverish ... crackling as if their skeletons had collapsed beneath their parchment-pale skins. She would wriggle, with muffled sobs, struggling in vain to kick and escape ... all her efforts only served to inflame still further the swarming lascivious tangle, the sweat ran, the wallowing mêlée became more and more sticky, frothing, moaning, pierced intermittently by sharp, cruel screams.²⁹

By inference, the measure of such atrocities within Nazi Germany transcends description. Only in one place does Oz make an overt allusion to the death camps. When Pomeranz escapes from his imprisonment in a derelict monastery, Oz describes him surreally floating up through the chimney, calling to mind almost the only means of 'escape' from the camps, to which most captive prisoners were sent: 'The mouth organ discharged a few sad notes and the man, dreamy and forlorn, rose into the air. Up through the chimney he floated and away into the forest.'³⁰

Oz respects the survivor's ultimate inability to convey what has happened to him. Throughout the novel, Pomeranz remains a secretive and elusive character. The reader never comes to know him from within, but is given only a series of external images – tangible, everyday objects – to indicate the way in which his mind works: 'Coffee. Cookies. A cigarette. Wash the cup. Dry it and put it back in its proper place. Wipe the table. Slight hesitation, what else to do with the cloth. Decision: dust the windowsill. Shake out the cloth. Change the water in the vase – on second thoughts, change the vase as well.'³¹ Occasionally, these are supplemented by visual memories, standing on a bridge in Poland with Stefa smoking, or archetypal human feelings and longings as in his love-making with Audrey. But his beliefs and emotions regarding the Holocaust are left untouched.

The Holocaust poet, Nelly Sachs, herself a survivor, speaks of the sealed pain which separates survivors from the rest of humanity to the point where they feel more akin to the dead than the living. Certainly, the kibbutz community appear even less able to understand Pomeranz than the reader, and less endeared to him. They are inclined to think the worst of him, attributing his continuing to tend the sheep and teach the backward pupils after his great mathematical discovery to false modesty. To us, however, to whom is revealed his unaffected love of his mouth organ and of Stefa, this appears as genuine humility and his way of coping with his experience.

Very unusual for an Israeli writer, Oz further emphasises his protagonist's innocence and unique value as an individual through an appeal to the Christian New Testament. He presents Pomeranz in prison as a type of Christ, who 'conclusively proved to the German patrol' that 'he was of a virgin truly born ... was dead and risen again'.³² Their taunting of him, giving him beer 'mixed with salt to drink' recalls the Roman soldiers' mockery of the crucified Jesus in the synoptic gospels, offering him 'wine to drink mixed with gall' (Mt 27:34 and par.).³³ Oz's alignment of his terms here projects back on to Christianity the anti-Jewish propaganda of the passion narratives. The Jew, Pomeranz, retrieves the Jew, Jesus; the 'middle men' of the gospel accounts, those Jews opposed to Jesus, are removed. Thus Oz exposes Christianity's story of its own genesis as both historically inaccurate and, in part, effecting its inverted image in

its contribution to the development of and widespread acquiescence to Nazi anti-Semitism.

As a bystander, Oz perhaps feels a greater freedom than Appelfeld to use his material for satirical or overtly didactic purposes. He can also end his novel up-beat, with a surreal image of Elisha and Stefa being swallowed up by the land of Israel.

The man played. The music mingled with the darkness. A small crack began to show at their feet, like the cracks that appear in heavy earth at the end of summer ... The topmost crust of the earth yielded in the moist blindness with rippling spasms at the wetness of the warm virginal lips and they were slowly drawn inside. For a moment longer the slit quivered, then relaxed and enfolded them in a silent embrace of unbelievable tenderness.³⁴

An Israeli himself, Oz perceives of Israel as a Jewish haven to which Elisha, Stefa and Professor Zaicek were able to flee. Stefa's defection to the Israeli secret service at great personal danger is in part a retrieval of her roots: 'in depths of her heart an ancient love has suddenly begun to stir.'³⁵ As Oz's political writings make clear, he is not uncritical of the state, and this shows through in *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* in the disappointment of the poet, old Kumin, who finds his ancestral land 'not, by any manner of means, even the palest shadow of what it should have been. So that his heart wept and his soul pleaded at night to soar skyward and seek out the heavenly Jerusalem and the true Promised Land'.³⁶ Nevertheless Oz hints at a Jewish re-birth offered by a return to the land. Alongside the lovers' disappearance into the earth, the Israeli war of independence is fought, but with the narrative assurance that 'as is well known ... this war was a short one'.³⁷

Until over a decade after the liberation of the camps, few dared to choose the *Shoah* as a subject for fiction. Perhaps the silence expressed the survivors' desire to rebuild their lives in the present. Perhaps it was too traumatic to articulate so fresh a wound. In Israel, moreover, the strength of Zionist commitment discouraged many from identifying with survivors, creating shame or even antagonism towards those perceived as victims. Today, the Israeli writers, Amos Oz and Aharon Appelfeld, still maintain the impossibility of tackling the *Shoah* directly. They prefer instead to create a threatening

atmosphere and allow their readers to bring their own historical knowledge to bear on the remaining silence. This way, history and literature illuminate one another, fiction bestowing fact with an emotional dimension. With the Holocaust, this is particularly important since the Nazis tried to reduce their victims to mere statistics. The Jewish historian, Raul Hilberg, notes a single line in a report of the local military head quarters at Mariupol for 29 October 1941: '8,000 Jews were executed by the Security Service.'³⁸ Novels such as *Badenheim 1939* and *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* re-evaluate such data in terms of the individual. Indeed, Appelfeld perceives the writer's primary task here to be 'remov[ing] the Holocaust from its enormous, inhuman dimensions and bring[ing] it close to human beings. Without that effort it would remain a distant and unseen nightmare, somewhere off in the distance of time, where it would be easy to forget.'³⁹

NOTES

1. E. Wiesel, 'The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration', in L. Baldwin Smith (ed.), *Dimensions of the Holocaust: Lectures at Northwestern University* (Evanston Il: Northwestern University, 1977), p.7.
2. E. Wiesel (trans. S. Rodway), *Night* (London: Penguin, 1981), p.32.
3. Cited in I. Howe, 'Writing and the Holocaust', in B. Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), p.194.
4. A. Appelfeld (trans. D. Bilu), *Badenheim 1939* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1981), p.37.
5. *Ibid.*, p.25.
6. *Ibid.*, p.65.
7. *Ibid.*, p.3.
8. *Ibid.*, p.53-4.
9. *Ibid.*, p.111.
10. *Ibid.*, p.29.
11. *Ibid.*, p.23.
12. *Ibid.*, p.21.
13. L. Epstein, 'Writing about the Holocaust', in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, p.262.
14. Appelfeld, p.51.
15. *Ibid.*, p.51.
16. *Ibid.*, p.147.
17. *Ibid.*, p.49.
18. *Ibid.*, p.50.
19. Cited in I. Howe, in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, p.184.
20. Appelfeld, p.30.
21. *Ibid.*, p.31.
22. P. Levi (trans. S. Woolfe), *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*

- (New York: Collier Books, 1958), p.82.
23. Appelfeld, p.147.
 24. *Ibid.*, p.148.
 25. A. Oz (trans. N.R.M. De Lange), *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* (London: Vintage, 1992), p.74.
 26. Cited in L. Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1975), p.31.
 27. Oz, pp.6-7.
 28. *Ibid.*, p.48.
 29. *Ibid.*, pp.44-5.
 30. *Ibid.*, p.16.
 31. *Ibid.*, p.128.
 32. *Ibid.*, p.15.
 33. *Ibid.*, p.15.
 34. *Ibid.*, pp.157-8.
 35. *Ibid.*, p.123.
 36. *Ibid.*, p.112.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
 38. R. Hilberg, 'I was Not There', in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, p.18.
 39. A. Appelfeld, 'After the Holocaust', in Lang (ed.), *Writing and the Holocaust*, p.92.