

Poetry after Auschwitz: Emotion and Culture in Fictional Representations of the Holocaust

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ABSTRACT *The German-Jewish thinker T. W. Adorno believed that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. In fact, the response of many survivors of the Nazi Holocaust has been the opposite of artistic expression: silence. This paper is concerned with the emotional undercurrent in the fiction of three Jewish writers who, defying Adorno's opprobrium, built international reputations through 'poetry' not only after, but concerning, the European Jewish experience in the Second World War. The dual pull of testimony and silence is among their primary concerns. Jerzy Kosinski was a Polish Jew; Elie Wiesel and Aharon Appelfeld were born in Romania. Three well-known novels by these authors, *The Painted Bird* (1965); *The Gates of the Forest* (1964) and *Tzili: The Story of a Life* (1983), describe the travels of young Jewish refugees, in each case clearly alter egos for the authors, who were themselves child survivors. Three major themes emerge in these novels: exile, identity and the power and limitation of language. The paper suggests that all three themes are uniquely Jewish metaphors for survivor guilt, and that this guilt is shared by the writers themselves.*

Two contradictory impulses: to bear witness to tragedy or to remain silent. This dilemma, dealing as it does with issues central to Jewish culture such as ethical conduct, personal responsibility and the use of language, can be seen as a peculiarly Jewish problem. In turn, it has given rise to a response that is wholly consonant with the values of Jewish culture: creative writing on the subject of the Nazi Holocaust.

For more than half a century, the world has struggled to make sense of the events that culminated in the systematic slaughter of six million Jews and millions of others considered undesirable by the Third Reich. As difficult as the enterprise is for anyone, the road of the creative writer in particular has been fraught with controversy. Is it ethical to evoke art from the most complete breach of human values known to civilization? It is a question that has troubled scholars since the German philosopher T. W. Adorno said in the early 1950s, 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' [Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch]. Since Alfred Kazin wrote a quarter century later:

To be a Jew is to know that words strive after the reality but can never adequately capture the human situation. ... what is the word in an age when Jews were condemned to death as a people, condemned simply because they were Jews? Where is the 'word' then? What does literature signify in the face of such total condemnation? (Ezrahi, 1980, p. ix)

And ever since Jewish writers from Tel Aviv to New York City have angrily decried, or guiltily made, the attempt to respond through art to the attempted decimation of their people.

In their classic novels of the genre, three internationally acclaimed Jewish writer/survivors not only experience, but also present, both sides of this quandary: the compulsion to speak and the difficulty at doing so. These opposing impulses are, in turn, part of a larger emotion: survivor guilt.

Sociology has generally shown little interest in art. Yet given that art not only stimulates emotions but also expresses emotions and emotion rules, there is, in fact, a natural connection between the two fields (Harris and Sandresky, 1986).

This study employs the techniques of practical or objective criticism, that is, an analysis of basic literary elements that may include language, structure, theme, plot and symbolism, that is based on a recognition of the intention of the author (Wellek, 1981). By including in the discussion such diverse literary components, this method allows for a more complete understanding of the works. Of these components, theme and symbolism are most relevant to the present discussion. Furthermore, authorial intention is significant because the study seeks to interweave the authors' general backgrounds and perspectives with their work.

The study deals with the emotion of guilt, in particular that of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. Guilt here is defined as a:

state of tension or anxiety over internalized aggression (self-hatred) or loss of self-love. Internally and phenomenologically guilt is anxiety, pain, displeasure, depression, remorse, because of the violation of some internalized values rooted in an emotional relationship (Stein, 1968, p. 26).

For the purposes of this discussion, 'Holocaust literature' is defined as fiction informed by the Nazi campaign against the Jews between 1933 and 1945. (The word 'poetry' in the title is used in its broadest sense, that is, 'prose with poetic qualities.')

Much of it, but not all, has been composed by Jewish survivors. Much of it features great brutality, whether in the Germany of the Third Reich, in *l'univers concentrationnaire*, as the concentration camp experience is called, or, as is the case with the novels under discussion, in hiding. Often, the works do not refer to the war directly; the conflict is seen instead through reflection, in both the physical and psychological senses of the word (Lang, 1988; Roth, 1993). But in every case, the context of an organized and unprecedented annihilation is understood. A shadow falls over every action. Far-reaching consequences abound.

Numerous writers of Holocaust literature have expressed in interviews and in essays the difficulty, even the immorality, of the attempt to portray the horror of the period through art (Langer, 1977; Ezrahi, 1980; Howe, 1986; Lang, 1988; Dresden, 1995). The reasons for this view are varied. For one, they feel that artistic activity trivializes the Holocaust, reducing it into nothing more than a backdrop. Others feel that aesthetics of any kind are inappropriate in the face of such evil; that it is unethical to derive any pleasure from the language or form used to represent such suffering.

A third attitude speaks to the humility of the survivor. Survivors do not know the whole story, the theory goes. Only the dead know what really occurred, and no one else has the right to speak for them. Finally, there is the belief that is at the foundation of post-modernism, that the only appropriate response to such unspeakable devastation is silence, or a scream. Even critics offer apologies to their readers: They stress that by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of these works, they do not mean to debase the experience the work describes (Davis, 1995).

Again and again the expression 'unspeakable horror' appears in discussions of the period. How, one might ask, is it possible to speak of what has been deemed unspeakable?

And yet, with millions of words, people have, beginning, perhaps, with a French Jew who wrote a story, while a prisoner in Auschwitz, about the liberation of Paris (Dresden, 1995). There are thousands of titles in print on the subject, and thousands more that are unpublished or out of print. It is known that bearing witness became such an obsession with the oppressed and imprisoned that it helped keep many of them alive through starvation, disease and despair. It has also been said that the Nazis, well aware of this intention,

specifically taunted their prisoners that the world would never know what took place. The forced marches eastward toward the end of the war were designed for the purpose of destroying the evidence, that is, the chroniclers.

It is ironic, then, that one of the primary features of 'survivor syndrome,' as defined by Neiberg in the 1950s, is the inability to discuss the experience, to speak the unspeakable (Brinn, 1989). This silence developed slowly. At the close of the war, many survivors could speak of nothing else (Bergman and Jucovy, 1982; Gill, 1988). But then gradually, when confronted with vacant smiles and wandering gazes, they stopped. Or, when confronted with the need to move on and create a new life, they stopped. Or, because they felt that they were not legitimate witnesses, they stopped. Many also refused to speak out of a desire not to inflict suffering on their children. The literature on the children of survivors bears out the serious consequences of such silence, psychopathology ranging from low self-esteem to depression and dissociative states of consciousness (Podietz, 1976; Bergman and Jucovy, 1982; Gill, 1988; Brinn, 1989).

In the face of this evidence, the difficulty for writers of Holocaust literature is clear. Push, pull. Testimony, silence. The compulsion to write, yet the guilt at writing. All compounded with, in the case of those who lived through the period, virtually universal guilt at having survived when so many did not (Rosenfeld and Greenberg, 1978; Gill, 1988).

Among the numerous survivors of the Holocaust who have fictionalized their experience are Primo Levi (*If Not Now, When?*) Ida Fink ('A Spring Morning'), Tadeusz Borowski (*This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*), Isaiah Spiegel ('Bread'), Adolf Rudnicki ('The Crystal Stream'), and Jakov Lind ('Resurrection'). For the purposes of this discussion, I have selected three novels that share a number of elements. *The Painted Bird* by Jerzy Kosinski, *Tzili: Story of a Life* (Hakutonet V'ha Passim) by Aharon Appelfeld, and *The Gates of the Forest* (Les Portes de la Forêt) by Elie Wiesel. All feature Jewish child protagonists, from Kosinski's nameless narrator, aged six when the book opens, to Tzili, aged eleven to fifteen, and Gregor, aged seventeen. Set in Eastern Europe, the plots are also distinctly similar. The books chronicle the forced separation from family and friends due to the war, as well as the child's subsequent wandering and hiding, often among violent, virulently anti-Semitic peasants.

Three themes emerge from these novels that speak to the heart of the Jewish experience: exile, identity and language. The themes also reflect the most personal concerns of their authors.

Exile

The Painted Bird opens with a description of its unnamed protagonist's exile from his home:

In the first weeks of World War II, in the fall of 1939, a six-year-old boy from a large city in Eastern Europe was sent by his parents, like thousands of other children, to the shelter of a distant village. (Kosinski, 1978, p. 1)

The lack of detail in the passage points to the universality of the ordeal, as well as to the unimportance to the world of this one small child.

The most compelling expression of the theme of exile in the novels is their picaresque structure, particularly evident in the *Painted Bird* and *Tzili*, in which the child narrators roam from setting to setting, meeting peasants or Jews whom they will, on the whole, never see again. The same holds true for *The Gates of the Forest*, albeit on a more limited scale.

The classic picaresque tale was a lively representation of social health and energy, flourishing at a time when the bourgeoisie was challenging class barriers (Howe, 1987). It

featured a rogue-hero who pushed the envelope of the new possibilities of social mobility. Unlike the novels under discussion, the original form depicted a tolerant society absorbing the shock of the new social order. Although the buffeted, beaten child protagonists of these novels are grotesque distortions of the devil-may-care Tom Jones or, later, Huckleberry Finn character, their resourcefulness and outsider status are similar.

The novels also take the archetypal form of the Quest, the most universal plot known to humankind. Once again, they invert the form. True, the Quest is, like these novels, an excursion through hell (Schechter and Semeiks, 1980). But while the archetype presents life as a continuing process of positive growth and discovery, this is not the case in Holocaust fiction. What is more, although the Quest is the central purpose of the protagonist's life, that is not because it is necessary to biological survival, but rather because it defines him or her as a human being. In the Holocaust novels, conversely, success is purely a matter of biological survival.

The hero of the Quest appears in countless shapes and sizes, from lowly neophyte to demigod. Whatever his appearance, he bears the traits of courage, imagination, strength and dedication, all of which are qualities generally required to achieve a goal (Campbell, 1973). In these inverted Quest novels, however, the heroes are vulnerable children on the run who lie, hide, and are humiliated at every turn.

The Quest typically begins with a 'call', a summons that rouses the hero and sets him on the road to adventure. He leaves behind familiar surroundings and crosses the threshold into a region of mystery and danger. He meets other archetypal figures, one of whom is the Shadow figure, who becomes his partner. In the distorted world inhabited by the Holocaust novels, however, the summons is a gunshot or the immediate threat of death, and the hero himself is a shadow. In fact, the same root for 'Tzili' is the Hebrew root 'tzayl,' or shadow. It is also the root of 'tzilan,' or exile. As his own shadow, the Holocaust hero realizes that he can rely on no one but himself for his survival.

The archetypal hero of the Quest meets a Temptress who temporarily seduces him from his task. In all three of the Holocaust novels under discussion, the protagonists fall in love. But far from swaying the children from their task of survival, the relationship buoys them by providing a few moments' peace and pleasure. Another archetypal figure is the Good Mother or the Wise Old Man. Although several elderly individuals appear in the Holocaust novels, on the whole, the heroes are attacked rather than aided by them. Tzili narrowly escapes rape by an old man, and the narrator of *The Painted Bird* is strung up by another elderly peasant, just out of reach of a vicious dog.

Identity

In contrast to that of exile, the theme of identity is reflected in language and plot rather than through structure. The theme is evident in the first words of *The Gates of the Forest*, which neatly express the impermanence of identity: 'He had no name, so he gave him his own. As a loan, as a gift, what did it matter?' (Wiesel, 1966, p. 3) and later,

My name left me. You might say that it's dead. It went away one day, without reason, without excuse. It forgot to take me along. That's why I have no name. Of course, I looked for it, but without success. (ibid., p. 9)

In one of the most telling examples of the spurious quality of names, we are told, 'A name? It locks doors; it doesn't open them.' (ibid., p. 163). Clearly the Jewish names of these characters, one of which we are not told and another of which is offered in trade, have locked innumerable doors for their bearers.

Many other types of identity are called into question in these novels. From the first pages

of *The Painted Bird*, humans are compared with animals, sometimes in metaphor, sometimes more overtly. These comparisons reflect the Nazi treatment of Jews as non-human, as well as the Jews' subsequent self-identification with powerless and inferior beings. Moreover the book's title, *The Painted Bird*, refers to the peasant game of whitewashing a bird and throwing it back with its kind, only to be pecked to death by the others, who consider it a foreign intruder. The metaphor of 'us' and 'them' is central to this story of extreme alienation and prejudice.

The book contains numerous descriptive passages in which simple animal behaviour is a more subtle, but nonetheless clear reflection of human intercourse, such as:

The hens crowded the chicken house, jostling one another to reach the grain I threw to them. Some strolled in pairs, others pecked weaker ones and took solitary baths in puddles after the rain or foppishly ruffled their feathers over their eggs and quickly fell asleep. (Kosinski, 1978, p. 4)

The fight for survival and attacks on weaker members of their own kind perfectly mirrors the human action of the book, and the use of an anthropomorphism such as 'foppishly' further enhances the comparison.

There are also many examples in which humans are compared to animals, including:

... two peasants began to fight at a reception. In the middle of the hut they rushed at each other, clutched at each other's throat, and fell on the dirt floor. They bit with their teeth like enraged dogs. ...

... The man on top ... triumphantly blew himself up like a bullfrog. ... (ibid., p. 76)

Kosinski even anthropomorphizes tree trunks in this aching sad passage:

[t]hese stumps were now cripples unable to clothe their stunted mutilated bodies. They stood single and alone. Hunched and squat, they lacked the force to reach up toward the light and air. No power could change their condition; their sap would never rise up into limbs or foliage. Large knotholes low on their boles were like dead eyes staring eternally with unseeing pupils at the waving crests of their living brethren. They would never be torn or tossed by the winds but would rot slowly, the broken victims of the dampness and decay of the forest floor. (ibid., p. 148)

Here we see that the toughened, defensive narrator, who would never speak sentimentally about other humans, can mourn for non-humans with ease.

The Gates of the Forest provides further evidence of anthropomorphism and dehumanization. Clouds 'were not clouds, properly speaking, but Jews driven from their homes and transformed into clouds' (Wiesel, 1966, p. 3). Man is called an 'earthworm' (ibid., p. 21). Similarly, in *Tzili*, the child's 'nose pick[s] up the scent of a man' as if she were an animal (Appelfeld, 1995, p. 278). She also 'coil[s] in on herself like a cocoon' (ibid., p. 284) and is spoken to 'like a stray mongrel dog' (ibid., p. 292). Appelfeld does make the point, however, that 'a man, after all, is not an insect' (ibid., p. 309), and 'I'm not an animal. I'm a woman' (ibid., p. 315). The reader can suspect that she protests a bit too much, however. When *Tzili*, in a rare moment of dignity, snatches the rope from the peasant who is beating her as if she were a dog, she soon gets beaten with fists.

Apart from human identity, physical identity is also called into question in these novels. The dark, Jewish narrator of *The Painted Bird* is continually mistaken for a Gypsy. *Tzili* is mistaken for the child of the prostitute Maria. Similarly in *The Gates of the Forest*, Gregor passes himself off as the son of another prostitute, Ileana.

Dislocation from both self and community are further aspects of subverted identity. In *Gates*, we read: '... his body embarked on an adventure of its own, quite outside Gregor, who stepped and spat upon it ...' (Wiesel, 1966, p. 54) and also, 'There was a time, in Europe, when Jews were forbidden to possess a body' (ibid., p. 223).

The child protagonists also undergo a physical transformation. When Maria sees Gregor after having been separated from him, she says, '... I hardly know you; you seem like a different boy, a different man, with a strange voice and a strange soul' (ibid., p. 58).

Interestingly, only Jews seem to be affected by this transformation of identity. Although Maria says Gregor has changed, 'Maria had not changed; she was not a Jew, only Jews change' (ibid., p. 55). When a guard captures one man while searching for another, he tells Gregor, 'He doesn't fit your description. That bothers me. I don't like to see a Jew change so fast' (ibid., p. 153). The Holocaust did in fact transform the Jewish people with astonishing alacrity: from historic scapegoats to tragic victims to, as a direct result of their suffering, proud citizens of the Jewish state of Israel, all within less than a decade.

The protagonists also experience a literal transformation as they evolve from fearful children into world-wise adults. Tzili matures into womanhood and adopts an easy, open manner, so much so that her lover Mark asks her what she did to change herself, and continually remarks on how un-Jewish she appears, which can be taken here as the ultimate compliment.

Language

Of the three writers, Appelfeld is particularly intrigued by the themes of testimony and silence. In the opening lines of *Tzili*, he writes:

Perhaps it would be better to leave the story of Tzili Kraus's life untold. Her fate was a cruel and inglorious one, and but for the fact that it actually happened we would never have been able to tell her story (Appelfeld, 1995, p. 273).

He also massages the line between fact and fiction in this passage by explaining that the story is only being told because it is true. Since Appelfeld has stated in other sources that *Tzili* is indeed a work of fiction, he is plainly making the distinction between universal and literal truth (Lang, 1988). He is also lampooning, consciously or not, the detractors of Holocaust fiction.

Tzili is introduced from the first page as 'a quiet creature, devoid of charm and almost mute' (Appelfeld, 1995, p. 273). There are literally dozens of references to words and speech in this short novel, in passages such as:

She was no longer accustomed to the old words, the words from home. She had never possessed an abundance of words, and the months she had spent in the company of the old peasants had cut them off at the roots (ibid., p. 296).

and again:

... Mark stopped speaking of the camp and its horrors. ... And once he said: 'The air here is very fresh. Can you feel how fresh it is?' He pronounced the word 'fresh' very distinctly, with a secret happiness. Sometimes he used words that Tzili did not understand (ibid., p. 304).

After her stillborn child is taken from her by Caesarean section, Tzili has the following conversation with her nurse:

'Was I good?' asked Tzili.
'You were very good.'

'Why did I scream?' she wondered.

'You didn't scream, you didn't make a sound!' (ibid., p. 337)

The message is clear: Silence is the preferred response to extreme grief and pain. To remain silent is thus to be 'very good'—implying that speech is negative, guilt-producing behaviour. At the end of the novel, a woman in the midst of a group of refugees would prefer to wipe out speech altogether:

All night the speakers spoke. Loud words flooded the dark beach. A thin man spoke of the agonies of rebirth in Palestine. Linda did not find these voices to her taste. In the end she could no longer restrain herself and she called out: 'We've had enough words. No more words. ... I'm declaring a cease-words. It's time for silence now' (ibid., p. 340).

Along the same lines, the narrator of *The Painted Bird* is mute throughout much of the book. In a climactic scene, he loses his voice after villagers throw him into a pit of excrement. He relates:

Suddenly I realized that something had happened to my voice. I tried to cry out, but my tongue flapped helplessly in my mouth. I had no voice. I was terrified and, covered with cold sweat, I refused to believe that this was possible and tried to convince myself that my voice would come back. I waited a few moments and tried again. Nothing happened. The silence of the forest was broken only by the buzzing of the flies around me (Kosinski, 1978, pp. 146–147).

The moment at the end of the book when the boy regains his speech is equally memorable.

The voice lost in a faraway village church has found me again and filled the whole room. I spoke loudly and incessantly like the peasants and then like the city folk, as fast as I could, enraptured by the sounds that were heavy with meaning, as wet snow is heavy with water, convincing myself again and again and again that speech was now mine and that it did not intend to escape through the door which opened onto the balcony (ibid., p. 251).

To further dramatize the theme of language, the novel contains no dialogue whatsoever; it is presented entirely in narrative form.

In *Gates*, the villagers confess their most intimate secrets to Gregor because they believe that he is not only mute, but also a half-wit. One of them tells him:

... You're the only one to whom I don't lie. To the others I lie continually, to everyone. I don't tell them that my life disgusts me, that my wife disgusts me even more. What's there to do, Gregor, how can I live without lying? (Wiesel, 1966, pp. 72–73).

In addition to questioning the validity of words in *Gates*, Wiesel also questions the value of literature and learning. The kindly peasant nurse Maria tells the Jewish Gregor: '... it's your nose, not mine, that was always in books—where there are only words and lies. What have your books taught you, tell me that?' (ibid., p. 66).

The power of language is a recurring theme in the book, as when the villagers react to the news that Gregor can in fact speak: 'The priest panted for breath and held his head between his hands as if to prevent it from bursting; Gregor's voice cut through and strangled him' (ibid., p. 109). An even stronger expression of this theme appears later on, when Gregor is talking to the evil guard Janos.

... Words kill. At the beginning there is always the word. *Fire!* a lieutenant was

calling out somewhere, and a line of men and women tumbled into a ditch. Somewhere a sergeant was calling out in Russian or German or English: *Forward* and the world would count a few less people. Patience, Gregor! Open your mouth and you may tumble Gavriel into his ditch (*ibid.*, p. 147).

The two most dramatic scenes in *Gates* involve language, the first in which Gregor tells the peasants that he is in fact a normal boy, the other when he must explain to the partisans that he did not set a trap for their leader, who was captured by the guard whom Gregor befriended. In the second scene, when Gregor protests his innocence three times and the group still does not believe him, he thinks:

Do you want my voice? Take it. We'll start again. The human voice brings people together and separates them. Brick by brick, stone by stone the voice builds walls, a man knocks his head against them, it hurts; it no longer hurts. Eventually the voice becomes a prison ... It's my voice you need? Take it. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and that evening Leib was supposed to meet me at the restaurant. Do you understand? I don't. Never mind. Let's go on.

As Gregor spoke he became someone else. Listening to his own voice, he found it false. This isn't the true story; you're holding that back. The repetition of the truth betrays it. The more I talk the more I empty myself of truth (*ibid.*, p. 163).

The passage is an eloquent expression of the potential for betrayal that exists in language, as well as the guilt that can be associated with speech, and thus prevented with silence. The last few lines, in particular, reflect the central dilemma of Holocaust writing, that is, the concept that speech negates the truth.

The themes discussed in these books, exile, identity and language, comprise the foundation of Jewish culture. The Exile from Israel to Babylon in 586 BC, accompanied as it was by the destruction of Solomon's Temple, the collapse of the Jewish monarchy, and the dispersal, or Diaspora, of Jews throughout the world, is considered the central tragedy of Jewish history.

Identity is another significant theme for the Jewish people. To name a few examples, there is the concept in Jewish culture of 'the Chosen People,' selected by God for a singular mission. Furthermore, Israel's Law of Return indicates that Jews are granted automatic citizenship to the country. There is also the threat to Jewish individual identity, that is, the difficulty, largely but not entirely past, of living peacefully within Gentile European society. Then there is the threat to collective identity, as in the present situation in the United States, in which, it has been said, a posthumous victory is being granted to Hitler through intermarriage.

With regard to the theme of language, Jews are widely regarded as the People of the Book, bound together by the *Torah*, the Five Books of Moses. They are also considered the People of the Word, in particular the oral interpretation of the *Torah* that was subsequently codified into the *Talmud*. Jews, moreover, tend to be vocal. It has been said that they abide by the syllogism: 'I talk therefore I am' (Roth, 1993).

The themes of exile, identity and language also mirror the personal struggles of the three authors of these works. Like their novels under discussion, Wiesel, Appelfeld and Kosinski share a number of similarities. They were born in Eastern Europe within five years of each other: Wiesel in Sighet, Romania, in 1928; Appelfeld in Czernowitz, in the Bukovina region of Romania, in 1932; Kosinski in Sandomierz, Poland, a year later. Thus they were all children during the War, aged seven to eleven. Wiesel was interned at Auschwitz, where his parents and sister were murdered, as well as at the death camp Buchenwald. Appelfeld escaped from the labour camp Transnistria and hid among peasants for

three years, the Nazis having killed his mother and sent his father to another camp. Although Kosinski's wartime experiences have been the subject of considerable dispute in recent years, he seems to have spent the war years in hiding with peasants, together with his family in relatively comfortable circumstances (Sloan, 1994). What is more, each writer worked as an exile in a country and language not his own, Wiesel in France and in the United States, Appelfeld in Israel, and Kosinski in the United States.

Three writers in exile. Three writers who hid their identities as children and grew to disavow their homelands, to live abroad and work in foreign languages. Combine those facts with the guilt of having survived, which, it has been said, is possessed by virtually every survivor (Gill, 1988). Then add what the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, himself a concentration camp survivor, called 'the terrible silence of children who are forced to endure the unendurable' (Bettelheim, 1956, p. 214).

Their agony is mute: with all the strength available to them they need to bury in the depths of their souls a wound, an anguish which never leaves them, a sorrow so cruel that it defies all expression. And this remains true for a lifetime, not only during the destructive events, the time immediately following them, and all through childhood, when we all have a hard time putting into words our resentments, deep concerns, and fears. Such an injury hurts so much, and is so omnipresent, so vast, that it seems impossible to talk about it, even when a whole lifetime has passed since it was inflicted.

What emerges for these writers is a portrait of suffering, profound ambivalence and above all guilt, both at having survived and at writing about their experiences.

The novels are permeated with more overt signs of guilt, as well. There is the guilt of complicity through identification with evil, as when the narrator of *The Painted Bird* compares himself to the 'mangy dog' shot by the partisans, then immediately muses:

Birds awakened and began rustling in the foliage. Right next to me a small lizard leapt out of a root and stared attentively at me. I could have squashed it with a whack of my hand, but I was too tired (Kosinski, 1978, p. 78).

Similarly in describing the Jewish leader of the partisans, the narrator of *Gates* notes: 'Leib was punctual, like a prison guard. There's something of the prison guard in us all' (Wiesel, 1966, p. 146).

Then there is the guilt of blaming the victims, in this case, the protagonists themselves. In *Tzili*, we read: 'She had whipped her as if it were her solemn duty to do so, until in the end Tzili too felt that she was only getting what she deserved' (Appelfeld, 1995, p. 293).

In *The Painted Bird*, the protagonist says, 'I stopped blaming others; the fault was mine alone, I thought' (Kosinski, 1978, p. 132). The 'I thought' tagged on the end of the line points to a greater awareness later in the book, but that awareness is won at a price.

In addition, as was stated earlier, Wiesel and Appelfeld's protagonists conceal themselves as children of prostitutes, an indication of self-debasement and self-loathing. Finally, there is the guilt of survival, expressed most clearly by Tzili's lover Mark at having left his wife and children in the camp while he escaped. In a more subtle example, Kosinski's narrator all-too-casually observes a Jewish child thrown from a passing train.

To assuage this litany of guilt, the books also offer numerous confessions: Mark's confession of having left his family in *Tzili*; Gregor's to the villagers in *Gates* that he can speak (therein linking the themes of guilt and silence), as well as his false confession to the partisans that he is a double agent; the confessions of the peasants to Gregor. These explicit linkages of speech with guilt, coupled with the above-mentioned emphasis throughout the novels on the awesome power of language and silence, point to the authors' guilt about their own writing.

The subjects of guilt and confession return us to the question of the morality of creating Holocaust literature. Throughout history, Jews have created 'cumulative, unbroken and internally consistent memorial traditions' of literature written in response to great tragedy (Roskies, 1988, p. 6). This 'literature of destruction' traditionally takes the form of a dialogue among the writer, the Jewish people and the God of Israel. The covenant between the Jews and their God was based on a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship to catastrophe: sin, punishment, reconciliation. Thus in each generation, amends could be made, and sense could be elicited from disaster.

It is true that there is a profound difference between the literature of death and that of survival, with which the current study is concerned. There is also an important distinction to be made between the work of classical writers who worked within the Jewish tradition and the displaced literature of the modern novelists under discussion, who emphatically did not. But in a more general sense, both genres represent an eloquent, highly literary response to a historical catastrophe.

For many Jews, the Holocaust shattered beyond recognition the 5,000-year-old covenant between the Jews and their God. Jewish thinkers have never successfully identified a sin for which their people were so brutally punished. In fact, greater numbers of the religious Eastern European Jews perished than did their more assimilated Western brethren, in addition to a total of one million innocent children.

All three of the survivor/authors of the novels under discussion have grappled publicly with the subject of Holocaust fiction, albeit in dramatically different ways.

Throughout Jerzy Kosinski's career, which included a prolonged stint as a popular literary celebrity in the US, the graphic details of *The Painted Bird* were generally understood to be autobiographical (Sloan, 1994). Reporter James Park Sloan notes that in addition to book reviewers, one of whom was Elie Wiesel, friends of Kosinski's also believed the book to be true, recalling 'his telling the stories contained in *The Painted Bird* as the literal truth of his wartime experiences'. What is more, toward the end of his life, Kosinski wrote that he was sent away by his parents in the care of a man who abandoned him and kept much of the family savings (Sloan, 1994, p. 47-48).

When Sloan tracked down the characters and locations of the story in response to charges by a Polish journalist that it was essentially false, he determined that the book is a mixture of fact and fiction, with the most dramatic, goriest incidents being largely fictional. He quotes leading Poles who call Kosinski 'a fantastic liar' (*ibid.*, p. 46) and 'an absolute mythomaniac' (*ibid.*, p. 53).

Sloan slyly concludes, 'Certainly [the book] was a myth that the world, demanding purity and innocence of its victims, was all too ready to appropriate. Now all must profess to be shocked—shocked—that a practitioner of the liar's profession, a man who survived the war by living a lie, told lies.' Sloan's comment contains a fascinating insight into the writing of Holocaust literature by survivors. Fiction, in effect, saved their lives. It is fitting that it should also be their livelihoods.

In the foreword to the 1976 edition of *The Painted Bird*, however, Kosinski clearly states that the book is a work of fiction. He writes that after publishing two books on social psychology, he turned to fiction after encountering elderly European exiles at a Swiss resort in the early sixties. To the writer's dismay, these pensioners recalled little of the mass destruction of civilians during the war. Kosinski explains,

I began to reexamine my past and decided to turn from my studies of social science to fiction. Unlike politics, which offered only extravagant promises of a utopian future, I knew fiction could present lives as they are truly lived. ... I did not perceive myself as a vendor of personal guilt and private reminiscences, nor

as a chronicler of the disaster that befell my people and my generation, but purely as a storyteller (Kosinski, 1976, p. xi).

Certainly the tension between fiction and fact was an issue for Kosinski, who committed suicide in 1991. It appears that he found universal truth and literal truth virtually interchangeable. Interestingly, Sloan notes that on publication, the book was hailed for its 'overpowering authenticity'.

In contrast, Nobel Prize-winner Elie Wiesel, who after the war worked as a journalist in France and became a best-selling author in the US, was more openly tortured by the act of writing about the Holocaust. He has written, 'I ... speak words, write words, reluctantly,' and that unlike other writers, who 'entered literature' through worship, or through love, he came to write 'through silence' (Wiesel, 1990, p. 13-14). Wiesel notes,

We all knew that we could never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words—coherent, intelligible words—our experience of madness on an absolute scale. ... All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless, whereas I wanted them to sear. Where was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? ... Could the wall be scaled? Could the reader be brought to the other side? I knew the answer to be No, and yet I also knew that No had to become Yes. This was the wish, the last will of the dead (*ibid.*, p. 14-15).

'No had to become Yes,' but, he felt, with certain limitations. Wiesel begins another essay published in the same volume, 'Trivializing Memory,' with two quotes, one from Wittgenstein ('Whereof one cannot speak, one must not speak. The unspeakable draws its force and its mystery from its own silence.'), the other from a nineteenth-century Jewish sage, who wrote, 'The cry unuttered is the loudest.' In the essay, Wiesel decries what he calls 'the spate of fictionalized accounts' in the mass media that concern the Holocaust.

While Wiesel makes the point in this essay that the material must be treated with the utmost care, he does not indicate how to do so. Rather, he says, 'There are other ways to do it, better ways to keep the memory alive' (*ibid.*, p. 171). Tellingly, while he does not issue an injunction against fictional representations of the Holocaust, each of Wiesel's examples of 'better ways', from the diaries of Emanuel Ringelblum and Chaim Kaplan to the documentaries 'Shoah' and 'The 81st Blow', are works of non-fiction.

An interview with Aharon Appelfeld on the subject of Holocaust fiction appears in Philip Roth's book *Operation Shtetl*. The book is a novel. However, Roth, who himself freely blends fact and fiction in his work, holds a solid reputation as a promoter and scholar of Holocaust fiction and has worked with many of its authors. The interview, paraphrased in other sources, appears to have in fact taken place. Appelfeld says:

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 meagre, an unconvincing imaginary tale (Roth, 1993, p. 86).

In Appelfeld's writings on the subject, he makes the connection between the silence of Holocaust survivors and their guilt.

... people were filled with silence. Everything that happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator to himself. The feeling that your experience cannot be told, that no one can understand it, is perhaps one of the worst that was felt by the survivors after the war. Add to that the feeling of guilt, and you find that with your own hands you have built a vast

platform of misunderstanding for yourself. ... The inability to express your experience and the feeling of guilt combined together and created silence. ... Not everyone remained within that isolation. The desire to tell, which was latent all those years, broke out and took on strange and different forms of expression. Since new words had not been invented, people made use of the old ones, which had served them before. That was, of course, contemptible and painful (Lang, 1988, p. 86-87).

As a reflection of such intense discomfort, these authors' works are wrenched between the polarities of guilt and confession, silence and testimony. It is as if the writers have participated in the so-called 'sin' of creating Holocaust literature in an attempt to give meaning both to their guilt and to their suffering, as well as to restore meaning, however bizarre, to human experience.

There is no sin committed in the pages of these novels. What better way for the People of the Book to balance the opposing poles of silence and testimony than through creative writing? When people create literal truth, whether through journalism, history or essays, they are in constant danger of getting their facts wrong. The day-to-day truth can be elusive, but the greater Truth of human experience is the realm of art.

And what of the protest that such creativity mocks the dead? A number of *kinot*, or dirges, are traditionally read by Jews on the Ninth of the Hebrew month Av, the official date for the commemoration of the destruction of both the First and Second Temples. These dirges include the full text of Lamentations, poetry that reflected on later disasters, and other verse that looked ahead to the coming of the Messiah. It is this 'juxtaposition of mourning and celebration, fasting and feasting, [that] was the operative principle of Jewish collective memory' (Roskies, 1988, p. 5). The same principle is reflected in the Jewish *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead that is an uplifting testament to the glory of God. As has been noted, there is a vast difference between religious writing and a work of popular fiction. But the authorial intentions, especially those of testimony and personal expression, are not necessarily all that diverse.

In the past fifty years, writers from Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Manuel Puig have written about exile. Norman Mailer conveyed the horror of war in *The Naked and the Dead*, as did Joseph Heller in *Catch 22*. The Jewish people are certainly not the only group to memorialize their dead and record their suffering through fiction.

It is the Jews, however, who question the morality of creating art from their greatest tragedy. Yet art is an integral part of the Jewish cycle of fasting and feasting, mourning and celebration. It is the human synthesis of heart and mind that will forever remind the world of the humanity that was denied.

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