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Suffering, Compassion, and Consolation: Reflections on Aharon Appelfeld's Writings*

The Literary Voyage: The Passion for Meaning

Few are the writers whose literary production is accompanied by continuous reflection about their writing. Even fewer are those who dare to suggest a metaphysical key to the understanding of their own work. Finally, rare are the writers who dare to make their reflections about literature part of their fictional plots. Deliberately and consistently, Appelfeld engages in all three. He offers a systematic conception of literature in general and of his own work in particular in *Essays*¹ and in *Beyond Despair*.² This reflection, however, is also woven into his literary plots, both through his fictional characters and through his own personal voice. In this regard, *The Story of a Life*³ and *A Table for One: Under the Light of Jerusalem*⁴ play particularly important roles as quasi-autobiographical works and as accounts of his development as a writer. But even in works presenting a classic literary plot, the writer's reflective consciousness breaks through. The novel *My Parents*,⁵ for example, opens with a kind of manifesto about the nature of his writing as a voyage fluctuating between literature and the concrete biography of the real Aharon Appelfeld. Rather than being located in an artistic temple separate from life, literature is a part of the voyage of existence and thus is subject to continuous rethinking.

This reflection, which is metaphysical-existentialist and seemingly resembles Kierkegaard's reflection on his own work, does not turn

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1 Aharon Appelfeld, *Essays* (Jerusalem: WZO, 1979) [Heb].

2 Aharon Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth* (New York: Fromm International, 1994).

3 Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, trans. Aloma Halter (New York: Schocken, 2004).

4 Aharon Appelfeld and Meir Appelfeld, *A Table for One: Under the Light of Jerusalem*, trans. Aloma Halter (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2005).

5 Aharon Appelfeld, *My Parents* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2013) [Heb].

Appelfeld into a theoretician of literature. Its purpose is to grapple with existence along ethical lines. The literary work is one moment in this process, an objectification of existence that enables contemplation and must be overcome in the return to real life.⁶

The literary voyage and the existential voyage unfold along parallel lines, in similar modes and in reciprocal association: reality draws closer to the literary imagination and the literary imagination draws closer to actual reality. Reality, writes Appelfeld, is “the ground for the crops of my writing,”⁷ but the literary creation is not a return to this “ground,” to what happened in the past. Instead, this ground is described and experienced anew: “The act of creation is always the mysterious touch of the child’s eyes within you.”⁸ This child is not the child that had been, but the adult writer meeting the child’s eyes. The time of writing is a reversal of the event’s time: the actual event moves from the past to the present, while the writing moves from the present to the past – not the actual past, but that constituted by the act of writing. This movement toward the past, therefore, is above all a moment of consciousness seeking to contain and organize the experience from the writer’s adult perspective in the present. Writing is the moment of an elusive, though necessary, encounter:

Writing a book is a journey lasting many days. Like any journey, it will mean encounters, wonderings, thoughts of despair ... The inner contact with yourself and the characters that will accompany you on your way are a mélange of people you knew closely and people who passed your way and slipped out of your life. And there are people from the root of your soul who, because of the confusion of the times, were not revealed to you properly and sank into oblivion but, not to worry, in this journey, with any luck, some of these losses will be found and your world will expand.⁹

In Appelfeld’s view, a work of literature overcomes the time gap between the past v. the present and the future. He emphasizes that the writer is not a historian: “My time sequence is the present continuous. ... I’m no historian ... I’m trying to make the past – present; perhaps the future,

6 For further discussion of Appelfeld’s conception of literature, see Avi Sagi, *The Human Voyage to Meaning: A Philosophical-Hermeneutical Study of Literary Works* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 151-158 [Heb].

7 Appelfeld, *My Parents*, 6.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

too."¹⁰ A work of literature is a realm of meaning that creates a temporal circle: the past is returned to the present and the future, which draw from the past and return to it.

This complex movement is not only that of the writer, but also, and mainly, the actual life movement of the writer as a real person who is re-experiencing the journeys of youth: "A writing journey in many ways resembles my summer journeys with my parents to my grandparents' home in the Carpathian Mountains. Nothing I saw resembled what I had imagined."¹¹ Seeing does not turn us into passive beings upon which reality writes itself. Seeing is contingent on developing an attitude of attentiveness and openness toward what appears, an attentiveness compelling the silence that "is the secret of all art, in silence we see more and hear more."¹² The disposition that makes room for the full human experience is one that enables art, and that is how reality is woven into art and art into reality. The human experience, should it take the proper stand vis-à-vis reality, can henceforth become artistic experience.

Appelfeld rejects the purist aestheticism seeking to separate literature from real life. In his view, literature is rooted in life and is a vital moment within it. Appelfeld recurrently emphasizes that literature, or at least his own, grows from the experience of his life. In an interview with Philip Roth, Appelfeld says: "I have never written about things as they happened. All my works are indeed chapters from my most personal experience,"¹³ even though they are not a chronological report of actual events. He suggests a subtle distinction between the raw facts found "out there" in a past reality and their organization in present consciousness and experience. Literature, like consciousness, is the person taking a stand at the center of life as a subject who confers some inner organization on his or her own experiences rather than on the raw facts, which are gone and are no longer. These experiences are gathered and woven together in the subjective archive where all subjective experiences are collected. The creative artist confronts reality like this individual, and the literary work reaffirms it. Appelfeld's art thus becomes a metaphysical journey touching on existence itself. Literature is part of an ontological tapestry that focuses on the understanding of human existence and its ethical implications.

In the archive of the writer's experiences, childhood is assigned crucial

10 Appelfeld, *A Table for One*, 53. See also 54.

11 Appelfeld, *My Parents*, 6.

12 Ibid., 7.

13 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, 68.

weight. Ernst, the protagonist of *Suddenly, Love* who wishes to become a writer, “has striven to tell the story of humanity itself” and, therefore, “ethnic details seemed restrictive and provincial to him.” All at once, however, he makes an important discovery:

But now he knows that literature begins at the well you leaned over as a child and with the black fear that looked up at you from its depths. ... This is where he should have begun, with the little details that have been soaked in the autumn rain, with his mother and father.

This new insight into the source of creativity leads him to a new perspective on reality itself: “If he had begun at that point, his life would have been different.”¹⁴

This close association between literature and childhood becomes even clearer if we assume that literature is indeed a vital moment in life – it may divert people from existence, but may also return them to it.

In the web of life, literature plays a unique role. In Appelfeld’s words, “literature has been taken up with the impossible task of joining the particular with the general.”¹⁵ It opens with the individual, “its loyalty to the individual, its devotion to his suffering and fears, and the bit of light which occasionally sparkles within him.”¹⁶ Literature redeems the individual from oblivion and anonymity. It intensifies and expresses reality, granting a central role to the individual’s suffering, hopes, failures, and dreams. Even the terror of the Holocaust is reflected in literature through the individual – “events speak through the individual and his language,” and thereby “rescue the suffering from huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity ... to restore the person’s given and family name.”¹⁷ Paraphrasing Zelda’s famous poem “Each of Us Has a Name,”¹⁸ Appelfeld writes that literature,

even if it wishes to shout out and shatter the firmament, must first obey a practical imperative: it must deal with the individual,

14 Aharon Appelfeld, *Suddenly, Love*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Schocken, 2014), 89.

15 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, 3.

16 Ibid., 22.

17 Ibid., 39.

18 Zelda, *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems*, trans. Marcia Falk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 141.

the individual whose father and mother gave him a name, taught him their language, gave him their love, and endowed him with their faith. ... The individual, with his own face and proper name, will always be the great subject matter of art.¹⁹

These determinations, rather than being solely Appelfeld's personal reflection on his literary work, convey a more general approach: "As for myself, I still believe that every true spiritual matter should be refracted through the personal prism."²⁰ Elsewhere in the text, his tone is more resolute, and he phrases it rhetorically: "And what is the core in every artistic act if not a confession."²¹

These statements convey Appelfeld's existentialist stance: the spirit does not open with the universal, but with the particular; not with overarching abstract metaphysical principles, but with "the personal prism." He articulates this view sharply and precisely: the spirit, though not personal or private, is meaningless unless it is experienced through the personal, which constitutes the prism for its exposure. Appelfeld thereby joins the Hegelian tradition and its existentialist branch, particularly that suggested by Kierkegaard. Hegelian tradition comes forth in Appelfeld's claim that the spirit is concrete. Hegel emphasized that the real place of the spirit is in history, culture, politics, and science, that is, wherever the spirit is externalized. Its detachment from its actual concretization in reality is a moment of alienation that the spirit itself rejects and overcomes. In the dialectical move, Hegel claims, the universal overcomes the personal and the unique through language, so that, regarding the sensuous content, "we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we *mean* to say."²² Hegel holds that, in the tension between the personal experience and language, "language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say."²³

Kierkegaard rejects this approach. He is aware of the tension between the personal and the universal, and he too holds that an exaggerated tilt toward the personal is mere chattering.²⁴ The value of a work lies

19 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, 21-22. See also *Essays*, 90.

20 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 9.

21 *Ibid.*, 97.

22 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 60.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 103.

in its being a possibility of universal experience, which also includes its opposite.²⁵ But although Kierkegaard rejects the direct and open outburst of subjectivity, he neither does nor can reject the view that a writer's work is personal, an expression of the artist's engagement with personal existence. In his journal, he notes: "I came to understand myself by writing."²⁶ Kierkegaard's literary voyage is a voyage to self-understanding that leads him to find meaning in his existence and enables him to reach moments of harmony and self-completion.

Kierkegaard argues that the dialectic of human existence is never completed or realized in the universal, as Hegel holds, but always in the concrete individual. The individual is shaped by the constant tension between the unique and the universal and, indeed, *is* this dialectic tension. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard points to the dual meaning of the phrase "the single individual," which describes everyone since everyone is an individual, but also the single individual who transcends the universal. In his view, "this double meaning is precisely the dialectic of 'the single individual.'"²⁷ The individual oscillates between unmediated particularity and the universal ideas embedded in the personal life voyage as manifest in language and reflection.

From this perspective, literature is a journey of self-molding – "my whole activity as a writer ... was at the same time my own education, in the course of which I have learnt to reflect more and more deeply upon my idea, my task."²⁸ This perception of literature as an act of existential self-reflection guides Kierkegaard on his prolonged literary voyage. In its course, his pseudonyms spell out the various possibilities of existence that he grapples with; the literary voyage is the life voyage, which is meant to redeem the individual through the meaning to be found in this long process.²⁹ For Kierkegaard, too, God plays a crucial role in human redemption – non-believers will not be redeemed. Through their faith, humans make room for God in their personal life.³⁰

25 Ibid., 98–99. See also Avi Sagi, *Kierkegaard, Religion and Existence: The Voyage of the Self*, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 47–48.

26 *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967) IX A 214, n.d. 1848 § 6227.

27 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper, 1962), 124. For a discussion of this text, see Sagi, *The Voyage of the Self*, 52.

28 Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 137. See also *ibid.*, 73.

29 For a detailed analysis, see Sagi, *The Voyage of the Self*, 45–74.

30 Sagi, *The Voyage of the Self*, is devoted to this question.

Following in this tradition, Appelfeld claims that at the crux of the literary work stands the concrete individual who struggles with himself and with his fate by questioning the meaning of existence, which by its very nature transcends from the personal to the metaphysical: "True literature engages what is concealed in fate and hidden in the human soul; it exists in the metaphysical realms."³¹ This metaphysics is unique. It does not return to the being as such or to the deity – literature does not compete with philosophy or with theology. A work of literature is a work of art where individuals express themselves and their world and, as such, it is an immanent metaphysics. It seeks to deal with the meaning of human existence – the suffering, the fear, the pain – by ordering it within the literary realm. Appelfeld unhesitatingly states: "The power of the creative imagination does not lie in intensity and exaggeration, as it sometimes seems, but rather in giving new order to facts; not in inventing new facts, but in their correct order."³²

Two of Appelfeld's heroes are Kafka and Camus.³³ Beyond the deep differences between them and beyond Camus' critique of Kafka,³⁴ they do have one feature in common: the refusal to return to classic metaphysics and its speculative claims about the being. Camus goes even further and, in *The Rebel*, steps up the demand from humans – given the death of God, they must turn to reality. Where God has failed to bring order, it is the task of humans to do so. The metaphysical rebellion that replaces the failed principle of divine justice rests on a "disenchanted religious experience."³⁵ After humans did not find the God acting to amend evil and injustice, they understood that the onus of responsibility is on them and they must, in his words, find "a new god."³⁶ The rebellion is an attempt to change the order of the world – it is "the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation."³⁷

Appelfeld articulates this view in his analysis of Joseph Chayim Brenner:

Since I do not find God, neither within me nor outside of me,

31 Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 149.

32 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, xii-xiii.

33 Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 150; idem, *Beyond Despair*, 63-64; idem, *Essays*, 15-16.

34 See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 112-124.

35 Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 101.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 23.

and since I cannot bear this laxness called chance and accept it with equanimity, I consider myself responsible and assume with love the attributes that had been ascribed to the Creator. I will have compassion, I will love. For as long as I live, I will continue to feel compassion for all creatures.³⁸

Although Appelfeld writes this passage as an interpretation of Brenner, it successfully conveys his view: rather than a turn to God, the metaphysical struggle with existence involves adopting God's attributes as manifest in the amendment of the self.

Appelfeld, like Camus, does not renounce metaphysical passion, but claims it should be directed to reality. Appelfeld rejects the speculative approach not only because it is an unsuitable stance after Kant and Hegel. His rejection touches on a deeper question: literature cannot transcend the limits of the individual's actual experience. Appelfeld refers to this literature as "minor,"³⁹ meaning it is not ideological and speculative. In this literature, precisely because it is minor and immanent, the human passion for meaning resurfaces. Appelfeld rightly identifies in Kafka the skepticism, the suspicion, and the "sick yearning for meaning."⁴⁰ The question of meaning is so deep and fundamental that it suffuses people's very existence, breaks it apart, and leads them to an anguished confrontation with the riddle of life and, thereby, to a renewed stance within it.⁴¹

Appelfeld refers to this stance as religiosity. He uses this term in a variety of denotations and my focus here is on his use of this term as it relates to the artistic endeavor. Note that, for Appelfeld, and in line with the discourse about religiosity that began with Georg Simmel and Martin Buber,⁴² religiosity is not coextensive with religious institutions or with a specific religion, but conveys the person's unique standing vis-à-vis reality. Underlying this standing is the being's openness and attentiveness and the recognition that the daily immanent reality does not exhaust

38 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 71.

39 "Minor literature" is a technical term coined by Gilles Deleuze that appears in the original Hebrew version of the book and was translated in the English version as "low key." See Appelfeld, *A Table for One*, 23.

40 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 15.

41 Ibid., 70-71.

42 On Simmel's perception of religiosity, see Georg Simmel, *Essays on Religion*, trans. Horst Jürgen Helle and Ludwig Nieder (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 9-22. On Buber's view, see Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1972), 79.

our existence. Immanent reality has deeper dimensions that may at times be lost in the course of ordinary life. Religiosity conveys the anguish and the passion underlying the *question* about the meaning of existence:

When we speak about a sphere of religiosity, we mean the primary fundamental stance of who am I and what am I? Who am I and what am I at this moment, at this place no-place ... beyond the puzzlement of the individual over the riddle of life, religiosity focuses on the search for the meaning of life.⁴³

The question about the meaning of life implies a recognition of human reality as bearing an essential mystery, an undecoded existential riddle. Although entailing negation and defiance, this question also implies life, a reluctance to reach the final conclusion of meaninglessness and endorse a skeptical or nihilistic view. The question thus transcends the negation and searches for meaning beyond it. Together with the acknowledgment of the mystery, the question conveys the passion for affirmation. The mystery is neither a temporary riddle that will one day be solved nor a sign of the weakness of human consciousness. Rather, the mystery is essential, ontological: immanence is not a fullness that contains itself clearly and transparently. Life is essentially unknowable. In *Night after Night*, Appelfeld points to this consciousness:

We live on the surface of consciousness. Inside, in the dark, our incomprehensible life rushes. It always will, and its head will from time to time reach out from the darkness to mumble a few words, and an arcane sorrow will enfold our incomprehensible life, which is always wider than our revealed one.⁴⁴

As human beings, we experience the essential mystery that occasionally breaks into reality. The essential mystery is arcane and, even when exposed, remains undecipherable. This mystery does not convey the unconscious dimension of human life. It is an ontological mystery, conveying the fact that our actual daily life is not the fullness of existence, whose presence in our lives comes forth in two modes. One is the experience of absence, which Appelfeld called “a space of religiosity”.⁴⁵ The other

43 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 70.

44 Aharon Appelfeld, *Night after Night* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001), 167 [Heb].

45 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 17.

is the unconsummated passion for meaning and the ready expectation of it. Teresa teaches this to Helga, the protagonist of *An Entire Life*: “You must look and listen. Looking and listening bring us closer to the mystery. The mystery dislikes being forced to emerge from its wrapping.”⁴⁶ The mystery may break through on its own, but we must adopt a stance of attention and contemplation that conveys our readiness to retreat in order to enable its appearance.

In Appelfeld’s view, prayer, too, confronts the mystery. Prayer is not a theurgic or practical act but a readiness to confront the mystery and expect it.⁴⁷ This readiness, however, cannot be concretized only through will. Praying requires a unique disposition: “We may want to pray, but will is not enough, we need great humbleness and great love.”⁴⁸ Prayer occurs only after the mystery has been well hidden. The child, the protagonist of *All Whom I Have Loved*, says about the “bearded Jews” who gathered together: “When the secret was well hidden they went inside to pray.”⁴⁹ In his childish language, he understands that prayer is related to an unrevealed mystery, and when the mystery is no longer, prayer becomes impossible.⁵⁰ Grandfather Gregor can therefore say, “There’s no need to understand the prayer; one must pray.”⁵¹

If the mystery is essential, and the prescribed human stance toward it is a renunciation of the subject’s epistemic sovereignty, the next question concerns the implications of this stance. Is it purely contemplative? Appelfeld’s attitude cannot be one of meditative contemplation, which fails to explain the anguish for meaning and cannot convey his own reflection and literary creativity. Sinking into attentiveness to the mystery does not offer a solution to personal anguish since it negates the real position of the individual yearning for meaning here, in this life, in this place. Nor can it clarify literary creativity, because creativity compels the writer to endow life with meaning, order, and coherence, which meditative contemplation does not. Confronting the mystery of existence

46 Aharon Appelfeld, *An Entire Life* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 98 [Heb].

47 Aharon Appelfeld, *And the Rage Is Not Yet Over* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2008), 56 [Heb].

48 Appelfeld, *Night after Night*, 133.

49 Aharon Appelfeld, *All Whom I Have Loved*, trans. Aloma Halter (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 34.

50 Aharon Appelfeld, *Mighty Waters* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir, 2011), 30, [Heb].

51 Aharon Appelfeld, *Long Summer Nights* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, 2015), 117 [Heb].

with religiosity precludes metaphysics or speculative theology, which deny the mystery of its standing as essential. What, then, is the meaning of the mystery and how can it be expressed?

Appelfeld's profound answer to this question is to reverse the direction required from humans: if the mystery is undeciphered and if we remain here, in this reality, we must focus on this reality. This stance, which returns to Camus' thesis in *The Rebel* and is also found in Brenner,⁵² implies an ethical commitment. Religiosity vis-à-vis the mystery is not "rounded and consoling."⁵³ It does not release us from the absurd and the anxiety of life. The recognition that we remain in this reality compels us to reject and struggle against chance and arbitrariness. The passion for meaning generates the obligation to create meaning through action, epitomized in the assertion: "I will have compassion, I will love. For as long as I live, I will continue to feel compassion for all creatures."⁵⁴ This assertion epitomizes the attentiveness to the being. In *My Parents*, Appelfeld views the mother as the representation of this consciousness: "Mother, as I learned much later, has an attitude of religiosity to life. She does not go to the synagogue and does not pray, but her attitude to people, to animals and to objects is attentive."⁵⁵ This attentiveness turns into an active force, conveyed as compassion for and commitment to people. Gisela, through whom *An Entire Life* is focalized, tells the story of her mother and her grandmother, whose behavior at the camp exemplified the nobility toward the other that is compelled by an attentive religiosity.⁵⁶ Helga re-encounters them through the story of a survivor from the camp where they had been, which leads her to develop a new ethical consciousness:

Since the small woman told me what she told me, I feel that I don't do enough to help people ... I sometimes forget that these are not usual patients but people who have been through all the circles of hell, and we must respect their suffering and soothe every limb that was hurt in them. If mother was here, she would teach me how to care for them without causing pain.⁵⁷

52 For an analysis of this issue, see Avi Sagi, *To be a Jew: Joseph Chayim Brenner as a Jewish Existentialist*, trans. Batya Stein (London: Continuum, 2011), 50-97.

53 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 75.

54 *Ibid.*, 71.

55 Appelfeld, *My Parents*, 48.

56 Appelfeld, *An Entire Life*, 161-162, 165-166.

57 *Ibid.*, 200

In sum, a stance of religiosity vis-à-vis the mystery is realized in the actions required toward the other: “So long as we live in a space of sanity, all we have is action and, if possible, action that is charitable. This is a very thin layer of ice over the abyss.”⁵⁸

From this perspective, the meaning of literature becomes extremely significant. Literature is usually perceived as an autonomous realm of meaning, unconditioned by what is beyond it, an approach that Appelfeld sharply rejects. In his view, as noted, the source of the literary work is the experience, pains, passions, and hopes of the individual. Carl Koenig, who is Appelfeld’s literary counterpart in *My Parents*, says: “If I ever become a writer, I will probably be like him.”⁵⁹ Koenig’s stance is thus close to Appelfeld’s and, as a writer, Koenig indeed assumes that “language is my soul and my musical instrument.”⁶⁰ Hence, since the soul springs from the same ground where language has its roots, he cannot abandon his German language and live “in the foreign American land” but must work in a cultural environment where he is “at home, among my uncles and my cousins. Everyone is, in a sense, a relative.”⁶¹ The writer, then, creates within and out of his real life. He does not go into exile or transcend the borders of his soul, and his writing is therefore minor, neither pathetic nor ideological, but about himself and his existence. In Koenig’s formulation: “I write about myself, not because I have lofty thoughts about myself. Life is so fickle, so mysterious, what do we have to say about it? We quiver in a net. I deal with these quivers.”⁶²

Koenig’s stance reflects Appelfeld’s lucid consciousness, which he articulates systematically. In his view, “literature ... must first obey a practical imperative: it must deal with the individual ... The individual, with his own face and proper name, will always be the great subject matter of art.”⁶³ Art grants a voice to the individual who is silenced, trampled by the weight of life’s anonymity and adversity.

Appelfeld claims that art plays a redeeming role, similar to that of faith, a comparison that merits attention. At home in Jewish faith, Appelfeld notes that it relies on two contradictory and mutually balancing elements – the believers’ self-perception as dust and ashes, on the one hand, and as created in God’s image, on the other: “The equilibrium

58 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 75.

59 Appelfeld, *My Parents*, 181.

60 Ibid., 175.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, 21-22.

between these two feelings is what formerly gave the Jew his pride and his humility.”⁶⁴ Appelfeld understands that art cannot replace faith – it lacks the power to do so and does not even pretend to have it. By its very nature, however, “art constantly challenges the process by which the individual person is reduced to anonymity. A person is not just a fluid particle caught up in violent historical processes, but a microcosm, which desperately seeks not only its rightful place in the world, but also its own rehabilitation.”⁶⁵

The life of the individual is not only the source that art grows from and transcends. Literature reflects the individual’s life and concretizes individual consciousness, without this individual focus detracting from its universal value. Precisely because it conveys the life of a real person, literature possesses a value that transcends the individual author of the text. That is its core: it seeks to grapple with Appelfeld’s personal quest for meaning, which he shares with all humans and especially with Jews, for whom it became a particularly acute concern.

This rehabilitation redeems Jews from the nullity and the dehumanization that the Auschwitz universe inflicted on them. Literature returns to reality and describes it, but not from an external perspective – “the events speak through the individual and his language, to rescue the suffering from the huge numbers, from individual anonymity.”⁶⁶ Metaphysics and theology do not redeem us from the abstraction that threatens human experience. Only literature, which grants the individual a voice and a meaning that is neither metaphysical nor theoretical, can do that. The voice of literature is the voice of human suffering, and the affirmation of the suffering is also the affirmation of the individual, given that the suffering is that of one whose individuality had been nullified into a number.⁶⁷ This suffering, caused by the negation of one’s very existence as a Jewish person,⁶⁸ is founded on a paradox: the suffering that nullifies the person, and within the person also the Jew, is also the place through which we experience the passion for existence and for realization as valuable individuals. Art returns to Jewish individuals their concrete human fullness. Literature affirms the person’s weakness and fragility. Appelfeld learns from Tina, the pharmacist he met at Café Peter, “that a work of art that doesn’t understand weakness, or

64 Ibid., 23.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 39.

67 Ibid., xiv.

68 Ibid., 34.

lacks compassion and consolation – better it remains unwritten. We are alone in the world, and without love there is no reason to live.”⁶⁹ This view of art as empathetic and attentive to life is founded on a specific conception of humankind and on the recognition that literature affirms and fosters that conception:

Art that does not extend love, devotion, identification – cannot be meaningful art. By saying this, I don’t imply a sentimental, sanctimonious, or overly emotional relationship to life. Art that has religious reverence carries with it harshness and discipline ... When I say a religious attitude, I mean the belief that inside every person, landscape, and still life, there is hidden a noble beauty.⁷⁰

Love, devotion, and empathy cannot be realized only within the literary space, through paper heroes. Since the literary work grows from and grapples with real life, it returns to it the dispositions necessary for its amendment. Like Kierkegaard,⁷¹ Appelfeld holds that literature becomes a moment in the reflection of humans about their existence and about the obligations they must assume. The heroes of the literary work are moments in the self’s concrete consciousness that reflect, challenge, frustrate, and compel the person who is beyond the work and beyond despair.

This analysis draws us closer to the insight that Appelfeld indeed views literature as a dramatic moment in the constitution of consciousness. In literature, we are granted a moment of self-objectification through which we can think ourselves and our existence. But literature also directs us beyond itself and, as such, it is fundamentally ethical in that it wrestles with life and with all the pains and suffering of Jewish fate. Literature turns into a kind of demand to return to life and amend it. In their complex and recurring circular moves, Appelfeld’s characters reflect the passion for reaching the beginning – existence itself – in order to amend it. Like Kierkegaard, Appelfeld sees the literary act as part of a broader movement that is not limited to the literary dimension. This movement begins with life and ends with a return to it through the possibilities represented by the paper heroes of the literary text.⁷² Literature, then, is a moment in the therapeutic course vis-à-vis the anxiety of existence.

69 Appelfeld, *A Table for One*, 74.

70 Ibid., 109.

71 Sagi, *A Voyage of the Self*, 45-74.

72 Ibid., 47-56.

In this course, rather than surrender to evil and suffering, we confront them anew.

On the Meaning of Suffering

Unlike pain, which can be measured objectively, suffering is subjective and reflects a uniquely personal experience – what causes suffering to one does not necessarily cause suffering to another. Pain affects certain limbs in the body, whereas suffering affects and threatens a person's entire being. Appelfeld identifies suffering with the challenge to an essential order. He expresses an experience of space where meaning and organization have collapsed. The plot of *Night after Night* unfolds in a Jerusalem pension and embodies this tension in the relationship between Mrs. Pracht, the manager who represents order – German order – and the guests who confront her. The painter, Kirtsel, admonishes Mrs. Pracht: “Jews have suffered more than enough from German order and now every Jew is commanded to be an anarchist. Order is our enemy ... order is barbaric ... order is the enemy of man.”⁷³ Lack of order, however, creates a hollow space that is *itself* suffering since it unfolds when order is profoundly disturbed and the question of meaninglessness surfaces. In a touching essay devoted to Rochman, Appelfeld creates a direct tie between suffering and meaninglessness: “And I was eight. I crossed the war years in blindness. Suffering became a part of me as weighty lumps that, over time, turned into a meaningless anguish. In any case, all that had been in me was crumbling – neither here nor there.”⁷⁴

The suffering that Appelfeld contends with is not an abstract ontological feature of existence. It is the suffering of concrete Jews who turned into dust and ashes in Auschwitz – their honor trampled, their existence nullified. Appelfeld draws a sharp distinction between tragedy and suffering:

Tragedy is distinguished by, among other things, conscious knowledge, by the hero's wish to confront his fate directly: tragedy is manifest in the individual, in his well-defined personal suffering. The dimensions of our suffering could not be fully expressed in an

73 Appelfeld, *Night after Night*, 9-10.

74 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 79-80.

individual soul. When the individual attempted merely to become aware of his own consciousness, he collapsed.⁷⁵

The suffering of Jews is unique, entirely unrelated to their actions or their failure to act,⁷⁶ and is rooted in the absolute nullification of Jewish existence as human.⁷⁷ The question of suffering now is: “How are we to return to the individual, in particular during a period when the self was nullified? How do we restore to the individual the humanity and honor of which it was deprived?”⁷⁸ Suffering is now the very site of individuality – it *is* individuality because suffering is what expresses the erasure of the Jew’s existence as an individual. Were Jews to return to life, they would be compelled to do so with the suffering and vis-à-vis the suffering. Is that indeed possible?

Suffering, claims Appelfeld, can defeat humans, but it can also represent an opportunity for shaping a deep personality. Suffering teaches individuals something essential and enables them to see their fragility. It neither does nor can negate freedom and the key question therefore is – what is the attitude that should be fostered toward suffering? Will individuals surrender to their weakness or will they see it as an opportunity for self-renewal? In a personal note, Appelfeld writes:

During the war, I saw life naked – plain and unadorned. The good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly – all these were revealed to me as strands of the same rope. Thank God it didn’t turn me into a moralist. On the contrary, I learned how to respect human weakness and how to love it, for weakness is our essence and our humanity. A man who is aware of his weaknesses is far more likely to be able to overcome them. A moralist cannot face his own weaknesses; instead of criticizing himself, he criticizes his neighbor.⁷⁹

Moralists do not contend with their own weaknesses and their demands are addressed to the other, part of an ethic of obligation. When we do respond to suffering, however, we look inward, as part of an ethic of virtue and fostering in ourselves the virtues that reflect human weakness.

75 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, 33.

76 *Ibid.*, 34.

77 *Ibid.*, 39.

78 *Ibid.*, xiv.

79 Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 106.

When we contend with suffering in this fashion, we recognize that order has collapsed, but it is precisely this collapse that enables us to acknowledge human existence properly. In *An Entire Life*, Sister Teresa says to Helga: "Suffering is not pointless, it helps us to clarify and refine our thoughts."⁸⁰ Helga, who is Teresa's pupil, accepts this attitude and explains it from a Christian perspective: "I feel she's right. Since I separated from mother, I live a different life. ... Sometimes I dream that mother, Jesus, and I tread the path of suffering. Jesus whispers to us, 'He who suffers with me will know humility.'"⁸¹ Although Helga, as Teresa's pupil, assumes a Christian point of view, Appelfeld is not adopting the Christian perception here. His attitude toward Rochman makes this evident: "He [Rochman] is perhaps among the few Holocaust survivors whose Jewish image has not been blurred by suffering. If I did not fear a misunderstanding, I would say that the suffering added stature to him and, if you will, greatness."⁸² The "misunderstanding" Appelfeld fears is probably a perception of his stance as exalting suffering, in line with the Christian approach that views suffering as a path for drawing closer to Jesus. Seeking to avoid this potential mistake, Appelfeld draws away from this position and views suffering as an opportunity – it can foster humility, which is an important disposition for a new ethical experience.

The root of this approach is in his metaphysical-existentialist position, stating that we must grapple with reality through self-amendment rather than by resorting to metaphysical or theological explanations. Suffering, in fact, teaches us that no metaphysical order is assured because humans are doomed to weakness and fragility and their stance vis-à-vis reality is therefore humility. In *Long Summer Nights*, grandfather Sergei says so quite determinedly:

The world stands on the sufferers and the grieved, not on the sated and the arrogant. ... The sufferers and the grieved know what a miracle is. They do not take anything for granted. They constantly cry out to God and are therefore close to him. He who is sated and arrogant has nothing in his world but himself. And even if he goes to church, he is far from God.⁸³

80 Appelfeld, *An Entire Life*, 98.

81 Ibid., 88.

82 Appelfeld, *Essays*, 80.

83 Appelfeld, *Long Summer Nights*, 139.

The liminal settings of Appelfeld's plots – a pension, the riverside, distant mountains, holidays, journeys – are not chosen randomly. These settings fit a reality where order is not assured. They can serve as backdrops for the recognition that no order exists and, through what appears as order, the miracle will burst forth. Whereas believers see the miracle as the moment of their connection with God, a religious (in Appelfeld's terms) person sees the collapse of order as the moment when existence becomes contingent on the individual. The collapse of order that culminates in suffering is the moment of opportunity for humans to be – order, as the antithesis of humanity and empathy, may also reveal another form of human existence: "There was no order in the *shtetl* but there was human warmth."⁸⁴ Suffering may allow not only humanity to appear but it also enables development: "Although we were surrounded by evil people after the war, there were also some who increased in stature as a result of it. Their walk slowed, their expressions became more open, and their faces glowed with a kind of spirituality."⁸⁵ This spirituality is an exit from a restricted life condensed around the self, a rescue from the selfishness that places at the center the needs of the individual and focuses on personal pain. Theo, the protagonist of *Days of Astonishing Brightness*, meets someone who tells him so:

The camp made me a believer. The camp opened my eyes and led me to meet many wonderful people, who showed me things I had not seen until then ... I feel that they entrusted me with a precious pledge ... we were together, and we helped one another, and there was a radiance among us. My life before the war, may God forgive me, had been limited.⁸⁶

Fostering humility and recognizing the fragility of existence are not the end of the road. The claim that suffering may broaden human life suggests that suffering can shape an ethic of compassion, which gives rise to a different attitude toward the other.⁸⁷ Appelfeld ties

84 Appelfeld, *Night after Night*, 75. See also *ibid.*, 97, and Aharon Appelfeld, *Until the Dawn's Light* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), 134 [Heb].

85 Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 75.

86 Aharon Appelfeld, *Days of Astonishing Brightness* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, 2014), 176 [Heb].

87 See Avi Sagi, *Living with the Other: The Ethic of Inner Retreat*, trans. Batya Stein (forthcoming).

together the consciousness suited to human weakness and compassionate responsiveness:

It took me years to return to the embrace of my loyal, good friends, who knew that a person is no more than a bundle of weaknesses and fears, and that there's no need to add to them. If they know the right word to say, they hold it out to you like a slice of bread during a war. And if they don't, they sit beside you in silence.⁸⁸

An Ethic of Compassion

An ethic of compassion is founded on a sharp distinction between compassion and pity. I cannot enter here into a detailed analysis of these terms and the differences between them,⁸⁹ and will merely note that, unlike pity, compassion is neither judgmental nor hierarchical. It conveys an empathetic partnership with the other's suffering. In Latin languages, this partnership is reflected in the language – “com-passion” or “*mit-leiden*” – the shared human suffering when faced with the terror of death and the fragility of life. Jorge Semprún described this reality in his account of his Buchenwald experience:

The look in my companions' eyes, no matter how fraternal (because it was, on the whole), reflected the image of death. Death was the substance of our brotherhood, the key to our destiny, the sign of our membership in the community of the living. Together we lived that experience of death, that compassion. This defined our being: to be with one another as death advanced upon us.⁹⁰

Hermann Cohen locates the source of compassion in shared social suffering.⁹¹ Cohen argues that, through compassion, we constitute a new attitude toward the other – the other is perceived as a fellow and becomes “Thou,” a concrete human creature with unique features who

88 Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 158.

89 See Sagi, *Living with the Other*.

90 Jorge Semprún, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Viking, 1997), 24.

91 Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), 140.

ceases to be an object in the relationship, a random human entity.⁹² His claim is actually more radical: the other, as a fellow, precedes the self. Compassion for the suffering and concrete existence of the other returns the compassionate to their concrete self and being:

If now, however, through suffering and compassion, the Thou in man is discovered, then the I may reappear liberated from the shadow of selfishness. Furthermore, even one's own suffering need not now be accepted with plain indifference. To have compassion with one's own suffering does not have to be simply inert and fruitless sentimentality. Corporeality belongs, as matters stand, to the soul of the individual and the soul is neglected when the affliction of the body is neglected. Humanity requires consideration for one's own suffering.⁹³

Compassion reveals to people their limited and restrained concrete existence. It brings them down from the heights of their abstract universal obligations to the ground of historical-physical reality. Rather than just one human feeling among others, compassion enables a restoration of human existence where individuals, as concrete creatures, turn to one another with understanding and identification, willing to embark on concrete action. Compassion curbs the human passion for a metaphysical understanding of suffering and pain and directs humans to assume responsibility for their existence and for the existence of the other. It enables people to rediscover one another, as creatures who share a common humanity.

Appelfeld's approach resembles Cohen's, but his view on the connection between compassion and the I-Other relationship is more complex. According to Cohen, responsiveness to the suffering of the other and the other's constitution as "Thou" leads to the reconstitution of the I and to a compassionate view of one's own suffering. Even if the suffering is shared, argues Cohen, the other precedes the I. Cohen, like Levinas after him, did not take into account that responsiveness to the other's suffering begins with the suffering of the I. During the Holocaust, suffering affected not only the other but threatened also the individual with extermination.

Literature, as noted, is itself a path of healing and consolation to

92 Ibid., 142.

93 Ibid., 19.

those burdened with their own nullification. It grows from the most personal place. Appelfeld's fundamental anguish was how to write about himself without this writing becoming selfish.⁹⁴ But literature can only be written from the personal. If literature is a struggle with suffering, it is a struggle with personal suffering, even when it is not focalized through Appelfeld's personal story but told as the story of "a Jewish girl wandering in the woods and villages."⁹⁵ The literary starting point conveys the ethical starting point – the suffering of the individual. Had Appelfeld assumed that beginning with the individual and the individual's suffering is inimical to the ethical, he would have pulled the rug from under the literary-existential project. Literature would not have reflected the personal life experience and could not have served as a moment in the human process of amendment.

Cohen argued that compassion opens with the suffering of the other, and only in its wake does a process unfold whereby the I develops as a concrete being, suffering like the other. Appelfeld presents a contrary position: the conscious, literary, and ethical beginning is the individual and her terrible suffering, extending even to the erasure of her existence. The ethical dilemma is whether people will perish in their suffering, become callous, mean, and dejected, or whether they will become generous and compassionate, as the mother instructs her son in *Blooms of Darkness*: "Hugo, you have to be generous. A generous person isn't miserable."⁹⁶ An ethic of compassion opens with the individual and overcomes the threat of annihilation that hovers over him by transcending toward the suffering of the other – if the other is not redeemed, neither will I be. The suffering of the individual who denies her own individuality now turns into an opportunity for growth and self-redemption. Clamence, the protagonist of *The Fall*, conveys this insight in his reflective and renewed confrontation with the woman committing suicide whom he had failed to help: "O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!"⁹⁷ In *Night after Night*, Rabbi Meshulam Ber clearly articulates these insights. After arriving at the pension,

94 On the tension between selfishness and compassionate action, Appelfeld has conveyed diverse views. See, for example, his views in *The Ice Mine* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1997), 23 [Heb]; *Night after Night*, 184; *Beyond Despair*, x-xii.

95 Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, xii.

96 Aharon Appelfeld, *Blooms of Darkness*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Schocken Books, 2010), 39.

97 Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), 108.

to everyone's surprise, he began to talk about humility, from which all virtues follow. One who submits to humility will surely come to proper speech ... One who reaches the rank of humility no longer says "I," but "you" and "he," his thought is given over to the other. In our generation, it's forbidden to speak in the first person. When I am for myself, what am I? He who dismisses the I and directs his thought to the other brings redemption to himself. Have mercy on yourselves, brothers, and give up the I.⁹⁸

Self-redemption begins with a stance of humility vis-à-vis existence and the world. Since it culminates in self-redemption, this humility does not convey a complete dismissal of the self but rather a renunciation of the subject's conceited pretension of absolute sovereignty and the arrogance that turns the other into an object, even if it is an object of moral obligation.⁹⁹ Humility is a prerequisite of redemption not from, but of, the self. Through this redemption, humans overcome selfishness and meanness and become generous, hence not miserable. This humble stance reflects a recognition of the mystery encasing reality, which cannot be exhausted by any order.

What role does mystery play in this ethic? Appelfeld holds that the mystery is a barrier to despair, selfishness, and nihilism, but not because he assumes that some hidden transcendental meaning attaches to suffering. The mystery enables us to develop a consciousness suited to our real, incomplete, and fragile existence. Given that immanence does not exhaust all the possibilities of existence, the mystery hints to an open horizon that releases us from the prison of the present.

Is an ethic of compassion then necessarily contingent on the mystery of being? Is Appelfeld's stance (linking responsiveness to suffering to the consciousness that immanence is not exhaustive) a necessary part of this equation? Analytically, the answer is certainly negative. Moreover, philosophical reflection about the ethic of compassion does not usually assume the mystery, or even the passion for meaning found in metaphysics – or, for Appelfeld, in religiosity.¹⁰⁰ We must return to the philosophical legacy that Appelfeld confronted, which endorsed the connection between the mystery and compassion. This legacy, in various

98 Appelfeld, *Night after Night*, 184.

99 This issue is discussed at length in Sagi, *Living with the Other*.

100 Ibid.

formulations, was bequeathed by Camus¹⁰¹ and by Brenner¹⁰² who, like Appelfeld after them, discerned that taking an ethical stance in the world involves dimensions of holiness. It is not driven by a set of deontological obligations but by deep passion, infinite pathos, despair, and disappointment, which turn into an active force. Suffering is not only a fact in the world but a profound Archimedean point – “human suffering is holy”¹⁰³ – and this immanent holiness is not only the calamity of our lives but also our possibility to become what we can be. The mystery compels the sufferers and if, as grandfather Sergei said, nothing is obvious to them and order is nowhere to be found, we must act to change reality: “Living an ordinary, empty life is pointless, especially for one who has seen the abyss.”¹⁰⁴

An ethic of suffering founded on the mystery of life compels a constant readiness for action. Ernst’s grandfather teaches him:

Not everything has a reason, God keeps the reasons for some things from us. But what we see and feel is enough. Lots of talk won’t explain. It’s better just to observe what we have been commanded to observe. ... A person must be attentive to hear what God asks of him.¹⁰⁵

Ernst’s grandfather speaks a religious language and, therefore, mentions God’s command. But God’s command is not engraved on the tablets from above – we hear it inside our being, in the recesses of our hearts. This command signals the obligation to look and act. Camil, in *To the Edge of Sorrow*, “has no grievance against a god who fails to impose justice in the world, but against human beings who do not merit being called human beings.” His friend Felix adds: “Thoughts, even lofty ones, are useless. One must concentrate on action.”¹⁰⁶

An ethic of compassion is not founded on a theology or a metaphysics beyond human existence. Appelfeld knows that the meaninglessness of suffering imprisons people within it, giving rise to theological voices as

101 See Camus, *The Rebel*. See also Avi Sagi, *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2002), 5-42.

102 As discussed at length in Sagi, *To be a Jew*, 50-98.

103 Appelfeld, *The Ice Mine*, 166.

104 Appelfeld, *And the Rage Is Not Yet Over*, 194.

105 Appelfeld, *Suddenly, Love*, 177-178.

106 Aharon Appelfeld, *To the Edge of Sorrow* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, 2012), 194 [Heb].

well. The blessing rabbi in *The Ice Mine* suggests a theological stance: suffering has a theological purpose – to amend the Jew. As he writes, “The torments of wandering and the thirst are only torments of purification. The Torah and the Jews will soon reunite and nothing will separate them.”¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere in the novel, the claim is made: “We’re being punished for some sin that will probably become clear here.”¹⁰⁸ In the context of this metaphysical stance, these voices convey a deep passion for great meaning, beyond immanence. But Appelfeld holds that, if this passion becomes central to existence, it proves harmful – people seek to understand at a time requiring action. They apply their powers as rational beings, rather than as moral beings compelled to struggle with suffering.

Against this stance, Appelfeld presents two approaches, neither of which grapples with suffering by locating it within a metaphysical theology. One is the stance of the officer in *The Ice Mine*. He wishes to deal with suffering by circumventing it: “Suffering is not terrible if one knows how to despise it – despise and be strong.”¹⁰⁹ Another stance, also in this novel, is that of Paul, who leads scorn to its radical conclusion but for another reason. This stance is formulated in a series of clauses:

First clause: indifference. Accept calamities with equanimity, as if not meant against you, as if it didn’t touch you, and if the calamity is very harsh, tell yourself: this life is a delusion, and as the delusion passes, so does the pain. The body can be broken but not the soul.¹¹⁰

Scorn and indifference to life differ. To despise suffering is to affirm the physical life that is *not* suffering, and the officer, therefore, teaches the vacationers to be fighters who will not be defeated by suffering. Their body will be stronger than the mood that oppresses them. Paul offers a more stoic approach: physical life is not the true life, which is realized in the soul. Both these views reject the primacy of suffering as the constitutive element of human life. Appelfeld cannot adopt this view, since suffering is a clear symptom of physical existence, which is concrete existence. The answer to the officer’s stance comes from the narrator, who says “It’s hard to despise when the body hurts.”¹¹¹ For Appelfeld,

107 Appelfeld, *The Ice Mine*, 54.

108 Ibid., 75.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., 92.

111 Ibid., 76.

the suffering that nullifies physical existence cannot be amended through life-denying processes because life-denying indifference means not only the denial of the I but also the denial of the other.

Camil, in *To the Edge of Sorrow*, clearly presents Appelfeld's view: "Human suffering is holy; we will care for the survivors kindly and lovingly and will thank God for awarding us the privilege of caring for them."¹¹² The holiness of suffering has no theological meaning beyond its unconditional affirmation. Suffering exists and removing it is forbidden. Theology, scorn, or indifference to life remove suffering, desecrate it and breach the duty to relate to its presence as a constitutive foundation of life.

Suffering imposes on us an ethical duty, and the attitude toward it is a test of its meaning. The human disposition must be diverted from the question, "Why is there suffering?" to the question of "What does suffering compel?" This question diverts the theoretical passion for meaning into concrete action – only in action will human life find meaning and only through action will an orderly world take shape. This order will not be metaphysical, but ethical and existential. Edmond, the narrator in *To the Edge of Sorrow*, outlines this clearly when the group of partisans saves Jews: "Our previous life here, full of actions and thoughts, was all at once flooded by a tide of human suffering. Camil reminds us that, so far, we have done for ourselves, and now the real test comes: to help those we can help."¹¹³ Edmond quotes Victor, the non-Jew, the character who is the moral paragon in the book, "who does not flinch from urine and excrement. He teaches us what it is to love human beings ... he is devoted to them as they are."¹¹⁴

An ethic of compassion is not sentimental,¹¹⁵ and not verbal either, or, in Hannah Arendt's terms, not "talkative and argumentative."¹¹⁶ It neither judges nor justifies suffering, but comes forth in concrete action, in help to the other. The character of Pinhas in *The Ice Mine* faithfully conveys this stance. He is a quiet man enclosed in his inner religious world, which evokes anger. Invariably, however, he acts for others. This character puzzles the narrator:

Pinhas, this passion in you to do for the many, where does it come from? No one is asking this of you and, what's more, your

112 Appelfeld, *To the Edge of Sorrow*, 166.

113 Ibid., 168.

114 Ibid., 200.

115 Semprún, *Literature or Life*, 42.

116 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 86.

very presence makes some people lose sleep. ... His face shows nothing, he is silent, and his silence is close to indifference. Pinhas, I want to tell him, we, no matter what, will owe our lives to you.¹¹⁷

The enigma of Pinhas and his friend Salo, who never tire of laboring for others, bothers the narrator. He suddenly understands the world of those who feel compassion: "In their practicality is a good simplicity, they've managed to be what they are."¹¹⁸ Compassion reflects simple human perfection that, to emerge, does not require the other. Indeed, precisely because they are what they are, they have a wondrous ability for compassionate, nonverbal action.

Compassion begins with evil, with suffering, not with the ideal. Its supreme concept addresses lack, rather than fullness and perfection. It opens in the here and now, with the real person, who is the beginning of compassion as well as the beginning of reflection (including literary reflection) on existence. This ethic is confined and delimited to human existence, and therefore rests on the acknowledgment of the suffering that envelops our lives. This suffering is not only the lot of the other, to which the self responds as a way of transcending his full existence. Human suffering is common to me and to the other, and acting for the other is acting for myself. Acting for the other releases me from my confined, mean, and alienated existence and turns me into a being open to the other, attentive to myself and to the world. This ethic is driven by the passion to amend the order reflected in suffering. Rather than a stable, fixed order waiting to be discovered, this order is created by humans and is thus limited by their weaknesses. This ethic, which acknowledges human weakness, is embodied in a non-judgmental pursuit to amend human reality, a ceaseless endeavor to save the self and the other, implying that the self is *with* and not *for* the other or for itself.

Literature is part of the project of compassion. It reminds us that compassion is not an attribute exclusive to the righteous and the exceptionally pious but emerges out of existence as a human potential. Literary consolation implies the recognition that contending with suffering does not require a transformation of human life. Quite the contrary. Appelfeld's writing is a call to return to the human possibilities of existence, to the good and the beautiful visible in our daily lives and represented by people like ourselves.

117 Appelfeld, *The Ice Mine*, 142.

118 Ibid., 180.