

The Jewish Journey in the Late Fiction of Aharon Appelfeld: Return, Repair or Repitition?

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In *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination*¹ I charted the Jewish journey as the pursuit of utopian space in its epic and its anti-epic dimensions. From Yehuda Halevi through S.Y. Agnon, the journey to reunite self and soul (*libi bamizrah va-anokhi be-sof ma'arav*), the journey to repair the anomaly of Galut, was hampered, but also shaped and enriched, by what Yehuda Halevi called the 'bounty of Spain' (*kol tuv sepharad*).

Needless to say, the bounty of the homelands that expelled and exterminated the Jews during the Second World War was far more difficult to reclaim or reconstruct than that of twelfth-century Andalusia. Yet even if for the survivors of the Shoah the Jewish journey became that much more urgent and tragic as an exercise in the recovery of a lost continent, the same tension exists in the twentieth – as it did perhaps in the post-traumatic sixteenth century – between *kol tuv sepharad* and 'Zion', between the personal story and the collective telos, the private narrative and the public topos, the idiosyncratic and the paradigmatic.

There is usually not only a tension but a trade-off between the two, a dynamic exchange between the first person singular and plural. After a lifetime of effacing the personal voice in the interstices of a taut and 'public' poetic line, Dan Pagis began in his last years to recover his autobiographical voice in prose. All the more curious, then, that the late prose of his *landsmann*, neighbour and friend, Aharon Appelfeld, seems to be following the two tracks simultaneously: even as he moves towards the confessional in interviews, in conversations,

1. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley 2000). Some of the ideas developed here are explored in the chapter on Appelfeld.

2. See Aharon Appelfeld, *Sipur hayim* ('Story of A Life') (Jerusalem 1999); and his *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York 1994); see also the five-hour interview with the author conducted by Yigal Schwartz in *Words and Images: Jerusalem Literary Project*, dir. Nathan Beyrak and Eleonora Lev (Jerusalem, Dec. 1992).

3. Aharon Appelfeld, *Mikhvat ha'or* ('Searing Light') (Tel Aviv 1980) 30; Appelfeld, *Laylah ve'od laylah* ('Night after Night') (Jerusalem 2001) 54.

essays and in his autobiographical essay, *Sipur hayim* ('Story of a Life')² – even, that is, as he tries to tell his life's story in the first person singular – Appelfeld is on a parallel journey that takes him more and more deeply into the creative sources of the conscience of his race.

The survivor from Central Europe who migrated to Palestine in an Appelfeld narrative found a refuge but not a home there (neither in the territory nor in the text). That is, I submit, the source of both this writer's power and of his unique and shifting place in Israeli fiction – first as outsider, then as representative of Outsiderness as the most common trope of the contemporary Hebrew imagination. Appelfeld, for many years alone with his subject and his language, became a 'mainstream' writer when Jewish fate and pathos began to replace Israeli prowess and triumphalism as the grand narrative.

It is no longer surprising to his readers that there is always a remainder or a gap in an Appelfeld story, a surplus or absence of usable data to remind us of what could not be redressed within the precincts of a postwar Israeli redemptive culture. His characters are never fully repatriated in the ancestral homeland and their gaze turns inevitably towards Europe. Often the journey is an internal one, triggered by a glass of cognac or a game of poker or the word *retzenzia* or *purimspiel*.³ There is always another point of reference or centre of gravity.

The cover of the English translation of the novella *Katrina* (Hebrew 1989; English 1992), states that the author was born in Bukovina 'and is currently living in Jerusalem'. Whoever wrote that probably did not realize how revealing such a sentence was of the mobility and tentativeness that prevail in this author's stories. When I visualize Appelfeld's fiction, I see train tracks and coffee houses. The tracks are, however, not only those that lead endlessly and inexorably to extermination, as in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. They are also the tracks that lead the survivor back home, in desperate and repeated efforts to recover language and memory. Finally, they are the tracks on which Sholem Aleichem's characters rode in their endless peregrinations through the Pale of Settlement – the site of a kind of aimless, anti-epic Jewish wandering that coexisted with the messianic and the Zionist epic journeys of return and restoration.

Appelfeld has expressed the nightmare of dislocation and its narrative possibilities more fully than any other contemporary Jewish storyteller. But the reader can recognize, gazing at that long bookshelf, that the act of recovery, doomed as it may be, is as monumental and earnest as the lamentation. Many noticed long ago that even those of his fictions ostensibly set in postwar Israel were contoured by the topography of Central Europe. Jadova, Czernowitz, the Carpathian mountains, Vienna constituted the inevitable point of origin, the site of whatever warm memories of home could be retrieved through the dark glass of a fiction attentive to loss and time. What can now be acknowledged is that that topography is also the only place where one can still re-enact the condition of the Jew as a traveller in space. And it is this evocative figure that will outlive even catastrophic memory.

In this regard, like Isaac Bashevis Singer, Appelfeld has succeeded in 'repatriating' Jewish stories in their native landscapes. What separated the two storytellers, in addition to language, idiom and temperament, was the absence or presence of what Michael André Bernstein calls 'backshadowing', a sense of foreboding that casts Jewish life – whenever or wherever represented – under the sign of the Swastika. 'What was I to do?' asks Appelfeld in a 'conversation' with Philip Roth. 'My most hidden childhood memories were spotted with the soot from the trains.'⁴

In Singer's 'Polish stories', set in the cities and small towns of Poland before – or with no reference to – the war, such foreboding is as absent as it is present in all of Appelfeld's stories. Narratives of childhood before the war, even of life lived in other centuries, are always suffused in an Appelfeld narrative with the pathos of what is to come. Yet something changes in his late narratives to make the comparison with Singer more compelling and the space reserved for his fiction in the museum of Jewish storytelling more secure. While Singer's characters endlessly replay their erotic dramas and passion plays, re-enacting as in a wax museum the imaginative forms and folk strata of Yiddish culture, Appelfeld's characters in perpetual motion replay their fate and the cultural and narrative forms that represented it. At the turn of the millennium, the 'Right of Return' to the European homeland was and is being actualized in the ritualized pilgrimages to ancestral sites and graves – an act that mimics centuries of pilgrimages to Jerusalem as ruined shrine. Appelfeld takes that act one step further.

4. Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, p. 70. On this and on Bernstein's thesis, see *Booking Passage* 186ff.

There is, I am suggesting, a shift in both the texture and the telos of the journey from earlier to later narratives. It is not so much that the sense of foreboding is gone, but rather that something archetypal replaces the bewildered quest or angst of the doomed individual, incorporating a kind of knowledge into the very centre of consciousness. Many of Appelfeld's early stories traced random wartime movements of Jews through the vast spaces of the Austro-Hungarian empire; many of the middle ones, culminating in *Tor hapla'ot* (1978; *The Age of Wonders* 1981), charted the homing patterns of those who dared to return to postwar Europe to try to search for lost memories. Bruno, the protagonist of *Age of Wonders*, left Jerusalem to pace the streets of his hometown until he realized that he could not find a foothold for himself between the worn paving stones of the train station – the only sign of the feet of the deported Jews – and the immutable shadows of the church spires. But neither could he ever quite touch down in Jerusalem. Those who cannot repatriate their memories in some innocent landscape of their childhood can hardly be repatriated in postwar Israel – or anywhere, for that matter. 'Return' in an Appelfeld story was a gesture not so much of 'going back' as of 'repeating' – and writing the return remained as obsessive and incomplete as the act itself. The earlier fictions culminating in *Age of Wonders* are less narrations of recovery than deformations of both the idea of the journey and the narrative as its vehicle. The endlessly repeated efforts to write and rewrite an elusive, interrupted story, the characters' endemic homelessness, their failure to be domesticated within their acquired languages and landscapes, are in direct proportion to their inability to rescue a protected pre-war identity. So when in *Sipur hayim* Appelfeld posited such a nature reserve as his own point of departure and source of integrity, the reader sensed that something had shifted. At the same time, and on a parallel track, the publication of the novellas *Mesillat barzel* in 1991 (*The Iron Tracks* 1998) and 'Layish' in 1994 signalled another, diametrically opposed, literary resolution to the struggle to reclaim the past: that of adapting forms of representation belonging to the geo-cultural space in which it had unfolded.

What had begun in the fiction of the 1960s and 70s as a largely aborted return to the sounds and sites of memory becomes in the fiction of the 90s a return to discarded cultural paradigms and languages of representation – above all, to the representation of the Jewish journey. When one is inside an Appelfeld story, there is no

reality beyond or without, no distance from what is not yet or no longer visible. The suspension of time and of outside reference is the prism that collapses chronological and geographical distance and replaces it by an inexorable condition, a process measured in Darwinian mutation rather than historical time.

But if the author, born in Bukovina and 'currently living in Jerusalem', writes stories that are all located in some nomadic space between Bukovina and Jerusalem, in some nomadic time under the sign of catastrophe, it is in 'Layish' that this space fully reacquires its appropriate geographic and narrative contours, even as it too borders on mythic time and place. The journey to recover lost memories gives way to the more paradigmatic journey of the Jew as eternal wanderer.

Before he could relinquish it, however, it seems that the author had to reach the point where he could claim a personal point of view. Its absence was directly attributable not to cognitive patterns of thought of the 'tribe', but to the extreme circumstances that had wiped out individuality. 'There was no place for the individual, for his pain and despair, in the camps', he wrote in the introduction to *Beyond Despair: Three Lectures and a Conversation with Philip Roth* (1994). 'No one there said: I have a headache, a toothache, I'm in a bad mood, I'm homesick. In the camps there was no place for a vocabulary with a domestic tone. The individual or what was left of him, was nullified.¹⁵ *Kol tuv sepharad* – a toothbrush, a mother's caress – was wiped away in the very first stroke. The stories that chart the course of Jewish refugees on their way to or in Palestine, and even the early, aborted attempt at the autobiographical essay, *Masot beguf rishon* (1979), are all narrations in the first (or third) person plural.

5. Ibid. x.

Appelfeld's characters – anarchic selves who lived outside historical time and personal memory and who undermined society and culture simply by their inability to connect to the present or to remember the past – by the inexorability of their fate as refugees remained exiled even inside the adaptive behaviours and gestures of their own survival, until the language of exile itself resurfaced as authentic mode of representation. Only when the figure of the displaced Jew was reconnected with the language of the Jewish journey and of its ultimate destination as infinitely deferrable could something 'authentic' and canonic be recovered in what had been a series

6. Gila Ramas-Rauch was one of the first to note the ubiquity of the Wandering Jew in the fiction of the 1980s: *Aharon Appelfeld: The Holocaust and Beyond* (Bloomington, Ind. 1994).

7. *Beyond Despair* 70.

of non-resonant fictions. What then emerged as the most allusive element in Appelfeld's stories was not linguistic or cultural memory but the unresolved, recurrent patterns of Jewish destiny. While from the very earliest narratives collected in *'Ashan* ('Smoke' 1962) Israel remains a wanderer among the nations, even in Jerusalem itself,⁶ in *'Layish'* there is finally a confluence between Jewish geography and the Jewish journey.

That is, the search for the 'lost continent' in Appelfeld's later fiction may be characterized less as backshadowing, in Bernstein's terms, than as the practice of return as a form of *déjà vu*. Appelfeld's characters are not free, not because they are judged by the finality of history but because they are trapped in a world of recurrence, in patterns that have been repeated for thousands of years. Although 'fate was already hidden like a mortal illness' within the petite bourgeoisie that constituted the world of his parents,⁷ the real tragedy was that they had lost the code by which they might have deciphered the circumstances of their lives. The process of decoding Jewish fate culminates in the novel *'Layish'*, which enacts the most basic, primordial exilic pattern – the topos of the journey to the Holy Land as a tale of the endlessly deferred end.

Both the journey and the vehicle reach a kind of formal perfection and even affirmation in *'Layish'*. The novel suggests a move from compulsive repetition to repair through a measure of homeopathic application of the symptom as the cure. *'Layish'* may be its author's first true literary homecoming; at once archaic and resonant, it is written in a language that constitutes a rendezvous with Central and Eastern European Jewish culture on its own grounds.

'Layish' is the story of an ostensible journey to Jerusalem by a group of ragtag Jews, mainly social outcasts – petty thieves, thugs and murderers, along with a sprinkling of old folks, musicians, rabbis and visionaries – the usual suspects. Many of these characters disappear and reappear by turns, making their way over what seem to be great geographical distances and many years. The ostensible destination is Jerusalem, but as the identity of the characters and their itinerary become more generic, so Jerusalem eventually reclaims its traditional status as unattainable goal, as destiny rather than destination.

One can read *'Layish'* (many have) as a teleological narrative whose

biblical subtext is the Exodus from Egypt, whose final station is Jerusalem and whose final chapter, at the port of Galati, Romania, on the shores of the Danube just 'before' embarkation, is a sign that the destination is within reach. But my reading suggests that the real work of this slim narrative is not in the epic – messianic or Zionist – thrust but in the re-incorporation of discarded modes of Jewish consciousness into the dominant structure. The aborted conclusion, the *'aliyah* to Jerusalem, that is not enacted in the text is not only a sign of the thwarted teleology of the voyage but actually a realization of a linear structure that has been undermined throughout the journey. The appearance of progress is really a series of digressions: 'The distance from Sadigora to Czernowitz is a one-hour journey, but the heavy rains and the squabbles impeded us and we arrived in Czernowitz two weeks later.'⁸

8. Aharon Appelfeld, *Layish* (Jerusalem 1994), 51 (my translation).

What appeared to be a major movement in space is now revealed as a sluggish journey within the confines of the Bukovina region, along the shores of the Prut River. Drawing on *Masa'ot Binyamin hashlishi* ('The Adventures of Benjamin the Third') and other picaresque narratives of the late nineteenth century that parody the Jewish epic imagination, this narrative reveals what remains at the end of the twentieth century, the scaffolding of Jewish myth after the dismantling of the edifices of Zionism and Enlightenment, messianic and Marxist faith.

Still, *'Layish'* unfolds in a disenchanted world, without miracle and even without satire. Unlike Mendele's voyage, or Agnon's, the characters are passing through a world of legend that keeps losing its materiality. The journey becomes less and less a journey in space and more and more a journey through texts, though not exactly intertextual – subconsciously accruing biblical and then Talmudic markers into its spiritual geography – until the point where one of the characters jumps into the Prut, which becomes 'as turbulent as the Sambatyon' and drowns him (p. 165). It is at this point that Jerusalem regains its *status quo ante* as the unattainable site of Jewish longing.

The Iron Tracks is structured not by intertextuality but by the journey itself. 'Since the end of the war I have been on this line' begins the first-person narrative of a man whose postwar activity is to ride the rails of Europe. 'Others may possess spacious houses, shops, even warehouses. I have an entire continent. In this repetition lies a strange

9. Aharon Appelfeld, *The Iron Tracks*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York 1998) 4-5.

10. *Booking Passage* 198.

hopefulness. As if our end were not extinction but a sort of constant renewal.⁹

'A strange hopefulness'. I have argued that here, as elsewhere in contemporary Hebrew literature, there is a set of adjustments being made between Czernowitz and Jerusalem as between 'desire and arrival, narrative and closure, the "real" and the mimetic.'¹⁰ What is an act of recovery or therapeutic repetition for Appelfeld the Jew may also be an act of defiance of utopian impulses for Appelfeld the Israeli. The miserable, lost characters in Appelfeld's universe constitute, in their circular, reflexive movement, a gentle, sad but powerful indictment of the teleological, monumental structure of Zionist redemptionism.

There is also another element: the 'official' pilgrimage to Jerusalem is, it turns out, composed of mini-pilgrimages to the local saints (*tsaddikim*) of Vizhnitsa and Sadigora. Recapitulating the evolving ritual of *geyn af keyver oves* (visiting ancestral graves) in postwar Europe, and in some ways patterned after the journey of Reb Nahman, it is also mimetic of the suspended teleology of *golus*; the mimetic activity of *oyle regl* (pilgrimage) is based on the premise that Vizhnitsa is *bimkoym hamikdosh* (in place of the Temple), a movable simulacrum of the Temple, as its *rebbe* is *bimkoym* the high priest.

It is not by coincidence that I accord these phrases their Yiddish accent. What the journey is in 'Layish' or *Mesillat barzel*, Yiddish is in *Laylah ve'od laylah*. The characters in that novella, living in a *pension* in Rehavia, return to Yiddish – and to the humour of which it is the guardian – the way 'Layish' returns to pilgrimage as the deep structure of Jewish consciousness. When the painter Kirtzl paints Yiddish words in an effort to preserve the language, he is creating visual icons of or monuments to the lost culture. The poet Zeidel claims that 'only in Yiddish will we be truly resurrected.' The narrator, Manfred, muses that 'Yiddish not only rings out from the mouths of poets and [the cellist] Paula Tzimmer's trembling strings but shines in every glass of tea or cognac'; 'I love Hebrew, but "she" can't fill the place of the mother. Hebrew is not a language you can hug.'¹¹

11. *Laylah ve'od laylah*, 55, 3-42.

Yiddish is, in fact, the grandmother's hug that lies beneath Appelfeld's own mother tongue, German, like the pattern of pilgrimage to ancestral graves or to Hasidic saints that lies beneath the journeys of

assimilation or enlightenment, beneath even the modern pilgrimage to Zion. Both *kol tuv sepharad* – its food, its alcohol, its customs and patterns of behaviour and speech – and *kol ra sepharad* – that is, both the bounty of one's native ground and its toxicity – reinforce a sense of fate more profound than the Zionist revolution or anything that modern forms of revolutionary consciousness have produced.

What appeared as two parallel tracks may in fact be two intersecting, and mutually disruptive, tracks. In his biography of Appelfeld, Yigal Schwartz follows the threads of memory that Appelfeld himself sought in the forests and meadows of a revisited childhood as well as the mythological and 'religious' journey (*masa'ot hareligiosi*)¹² that reveals with increasing intensity his 'tribal' connections as the deepest layer of his consciousness.

The search is a deep existential one that is inadequately represented by the rather mechanical judgement of many critics, and at times Appelfeld himself, that he somehow migrated from an 'Israeli' into a 'Jewish' place (a move perceived as regressive or progressive, depending on the point of view). But I think it is as much an exegetical and literary as a 'religious' quest – that is, it is a quest to understand and find the language to represent the deepest paradigms of the Jewish imagination—and it is a move which is, in our time, consonant with the direction of other Israeli writers, both 'natives' and 'immigrants'.

Schwartz concludes his literary biography by saying that 'the historiosophical position that emerges in Appelfeld's writings, as in the writings of other major Jewish writers, is that the "entrance into history" of the Jewish people in the last century detached it from its roots and brought upon it the chaos before the Chaos [*pur'anut terem pur'anut*].'¹³ Here again I would only try to mitigate the judgement somewhat, as the 'entrance into history' brought not only Zionism but the world of European Jewish culture that is the writer's bane and his inheritance. Appelfeld cannot really write his own Life Story without in some way validating *kol tuv sepharad*, the nature reserve from which he was expelled, the world of his parents, the petit bourgeois delusion that is being increasingly supplanted in his own consciousness by the stronger, encoded, narrative of Jewish fate. But neither can he stop trying.

12. Y. Schwartz, *Kinat hayahid ve-netzah hashevet: Aharon Appelfeld: Tmunat 'olam* ('Individual Lament and Tribal Eternity: Aharon Appelfeld: Picture of his World') (Jerusalem 1996) 144.

13. *Ibid.* 194.