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I. Appelfeld and Lang[1]

> What had been written about World War II had been mainly testimonies and accounts that had been deemed authentic expressions; literature was considered a fabrication.
>
> Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 105

The problem many find, with literary fiction about the Holocaust, is that it is fiction. The thought which governs our discomfort with the idea of Holocaust fiction is primarily a moral one; but one with epistemic implications lurking in its depths. We feel ourselves under a duty to those who suffered, to confront as best we can the unvarnished facts of their suffering, and to refrain, above all things, from embroidering them, falsifying them, with any admixture of our own concerns. Here, more than anywhere else, we feel, we stand in need of forms of writing which can stand, to borrow Aharon Appelfeld's phrase in the epigraphic passage above, as "authentic expressions" of reality. And imaginative fiction, we imply, fails that test – is not, whatever other virtues it may possess, an "authentic expression" of reality.

I was first led into the line of thought developed here by a chapter in Berel Lang's brilliant and searching enquiry into the intellectual roots of the Holocaust, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*. In Chapter 6 of that work, Lang deploys a rather impressive version of the

* A somewhat longer version of this essay will appear in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative and Knowledge*, eds. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, and Luca Pocci, London: Routledge (2006).

[1] I am grateful to Professors Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Leona Toker, and to my wife, Dorothy Harrison, for some penetrating comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

argument briefly summarized above. But then, towards the end of the chapter, having demonstrated at length the impossibility of any adequate literary response to the Holocaust, he grants, unexpectedly, the possibility that "literary and moral genius . . . may transcend these or any other supposedly intrinsic limitations" and cites three instances of writers, Celan, Borowsky, and Appelfeld, whose work may seem "to overcome the limitations asserted here in the form of a general rule" (Lang 155).

Philosophers' "general rules" are not supposed to admit of exceptions. Lang avoids contradiction by modestly disclaiming any ambition to prescribe for genius. His argument, he suggests, identifies only certain general risks which any writer of Holocaust fiction must run.

> The question remains to what extent writers are able to avoid these dangers, with the presumption that at best they will not escape entirely and that even insofar as they do the writings have to be read as a response to these dangers. (ibid.)

But this, though it allows a general rule in the present case to survive some counter-instances, leaves open the interesting question, at least for the philosophy of literature, *How do they do it?* What is it about the work of Appelfeld, for instance, that enables it to surmount the dangers which Lang identifies? What, precisely, does Appelfeld's "literary and moral genius" consist in? That is the question I propose to pursue here.

The general form of Lang's argument is that certain features essential to imaginative fiction make it incapable of dealing effectively with the historical realities of the Holocaust. Lang notes, to begin with, that imaginative fiction lives by the representation and analysis of individual consciousness in all its diversity. It is equally essential to our understanding of the Holocaust, Lang suggests, to see that, by its nature, it denied the diversity of consciousness. That denial is, for Lang, a function of the dispersal of causality. The fate which overtook European Jewry was neither the consequence of, nor capable of being averted by, any individual act or volition on the part of its victims; equally, it was in the nature of Nazism that it worked to submerge the individual wills and personalities of its adherents and tools in the workings of a vast and impersonal bureaucracy of death. So far, then, as Holocaust fiction follows the general rule of all fiction in representing to its readers characters whose choices determine events, it falsifies its subject matter.

Secondly, fiction opens a space of narrative contingency between the writer, his fiction, and what that fiction is notionally "about." Within that space a vast array of possibilities open up, between which the writer is free to choose, precisely because that choice is not determined by his subject matter. Whatever choice he makes, he risks falsifying that subject matter in at least two ways. On the one hand, his choices will exhibit a bias determined by his personality and outlook, which will work to interpose that persona and point of view between the reader and the unvarnished facts of the Holocaust. On the other, that in turn will work to further personalize a peculiarly and essentially impersonal body of historical events.

Thirdly and finally, any fiction, Lang proposes, tends to impose a structure, of plot and dénouement, on the events it describes, and will thus invite the reader to see those events as instantiating some general pattern inherent in human life. However benignly conceived, Lang suggests, this process must work to "generalize" the events of the Holocaust, robbing them in the process of the concrete historical particularity which we must at all costs keep a grip on, if we are not to distort and sentimentalize them.

I find these arguments of Lang's impressive. They make out a strong case against the possibility of writers of fiction having much to teach us about the Shoah. For that very reason, however, they sit strangely with Lang's attribution of "literary and moral genius" to Appelfeld. Lang offers only one critical observation about Appelfeld's novels, to the effect that they would not work as novels if Appelfeld could not assume, on the part of his readers, some general knowledge of the historical facts concerning the Shoah. Thus, the power of *Badenheim 1939*, for the reader, depends on the latter's presumptive knowledge that the train into which the Jewish visitors to the summer resort are herded on the last page is taking them to their deaths. The same might be said of the little train at the end of *To the Land of the Reeds*, which goes "from station to station, scrupulously gathering up the remainder" (148). What this shows, for Lang, is that Appelfeld's fiction, like all Holocaust fiction, is not, unlike the vast majority of works of fiction, emancipated from historical fact, endowed with the capacity to move its readers on its own terms, as fiction. To be moved by *Macbeth*, we do not need to ask whether it offers a just representation of Scottish history, and were we to do so it would argue a misunderstanding of the point and purpose of literature as ordinarily understood. Lang's point is that Appelfeld's fiction, like

Holocaust fiction in general, lacks that independence. "Appelfeld's 'fictional' text is literally immersed in history" (Lang 137).

To say that Appelfeld's fiction depends for its effects on a reader's knowledge of history is thus, in effect, to question its *autonomy as fiction.* It opens up, in other words, the question to what extent a writer whose work has ceased to be *entirely* fictional *retains the right to invent.* That is a question often raised in connection with the hybrid film or television genre known as "drama-documentary." In drama-documentary the writer tries to "reconstruct," in practice usually with some political or historical agenda in mind, events of which he or she can have only partial knowledge, given the gaps in the historical records available to him. Given the intermingling of fact with pure invention essential to the genre, it is natural, and commonplace, for drama-documentary makers to be charged with distorting, for political purposes, the facts of the situations with which their work purports to deal. And, as we shall see, at least one charge of this nature has been brought against Appelfeld's work.

II. Fiction and Reality

> I've talked about silence and about suspicion, about preferring fact to explanation. I don't like to talk about emotions. Too much talk about emotions will always lead us into a thicket of sentimentality – to trampling on and flattening true emotions. But emotion that emerges from action is the absolute essence of feeling.
>
> Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, 106

Is there any way of restoring to Appelfeld's work, in the face of these criticisms, the autonomy proper to literature, thus taking a necessary step towards grasping both what the value of his writing consists in, and what cognitive gains are to be had from it? To do so would presumably involve, in part, showing in what respects, and why, Appelfeld's kind of writing is, morally speaking, responsible to historical fact, and in what respects it is not.

To begin that task we need, I think, to begin at the philosophical end: to return on our tracks and re-examine Lang's argument more carefully.

In the course of introducing the notion, central to his argument, of the "literary field or space" which fiction establishes between "the writer and his writing and between that . . . and what is written 'about,'" Lang makes the following remark: "Without such a space, the relation between language and what it represents would be unmediated; the event or referent *would be* the word" (142). What is being proposed – or rather, taken for granted – here, is a certain familiar way of distinguishing, or better, a certain ground of distinction, between factual and literary discourse. The thought is that when we state some simple matter of fact, when one says, for instance, "This rose is red," the *meanings* of the terms "rose" and "red" are *directly before us*, are *presented by* the very objects of which we speak. According to this view of things it follows (i) that what we say, when we make some true factual observation, is constrained, determined, by the nature of reality; and (ii) that reality is enabled to exercise this constraint because a sign is a mere proxy for, or representative of, the item or feature of reality which it designates. By contrast, in literary discourse, "the relation between what is written and what is written 'about' is contingent" (Lang 142). In other words, the meaning we attach to a term is not determined by the relationship of that term to reality, but rather by its relationship to other words within the fabric of the fiction, a fabric whose determining characteristics, of genre, plot, figure, trope, can be classed as "internal to literature," precisely because their choice depends solely on authorial decision, is under no constraint from the actual nature of the world.

But now, if the distinction between factual and literary discourse is to be drawn in this way, then the inherent tendencies to distort and obfuscate reality, which Lang finds in Holocaust fiction, are not peculiar to Holocaust fiction alone. Rather, they constitute general and necessary characteristics of all fiction. No fiction reveals, or could reveal, anything of interest concerning the nature of reality. Fiction *per se* can reveal only how its author imagines, or would prefer, things to stand; not how they actually stand. But if that is so, not only is it difficult to see how Applefeld's fictions can merit the phrase "literary and moral genius," it is hard to see how *any* fiction could merit such solemn encomia, or indeed be worth reading at all, other than for amusement.

Is there any other way of drawing the distinction between the fictional and the putatively factual, which might avoid this depressing conclusion?

I think there is. Lang's way of drawing it allows for two possible ways in which words can acquire meaning: either (1) through the relationships in which they stand, by conventional association, with real things or features; or (2) through the relationships in which they stand to other words. Nor is Lang the only writer to assume that this pair of options exhausts the possibilities. Its exhaustiveness is presumed, not only by the entire tradition of Western philosophy since Plato but also by most contemporary writings on literature, culture, and ideology, including virtually all of those generally comprehended under the label "Critical Theory."

I think, and have argued elsewhere,[2] that this, admittedly very popular and very culturally embedded, way of dividing up the options makes it very difficult indeed to understand our relationship to imaginative literature, not least by making it impossible to attach any non-pejorative meaning to the term "imagination." Elsewhere again I have argued,[3] (i) that the idea of a language whose most basic signs function merely as associative markers for pre-existing features of reality is conceptually incoherent, and (ii) that the meaning of a word in a natural language is the precipitate, not of its shifting relationships with other words, but of the relationship in which it stands to some socially devised and maintained practice or practices. The basic thought running through these arguments, whose complexity forbids further summary here, is that the connection between meaning and the assignment of words to various functional roles within a practice is not a contingent or occasional one. Like most present-day analytic philosophers, I accept the essential correctness of Gottlob Frege's dictum that to know the meaning of a term is to grasp what is required to be the case for statements in which that term figures to be true or false. I argue, however, that it is only through explaining the mode of engagement of a word in a practice, a practice which in turn engages in determinate ways with the world offered to us in sensation and bodily interaction, that the truth-conditions of statements in which the word occurs can be unambiguously specified.

[2] See *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory* (Harrison 1991, *passim*).

[3] For a somewhat fuller account of these ideas than the one offered here, see Harrison 1993. A full-length exposition of the philosophy of language underlying this and other literary applications of its principles, including the *present* one, can be found in Hanna and Harrison 2004.

I mention those arguments here only because they suggest new ways, ways alternative to the one offered by Lang, and the long philosophical tradition on which his thought here draws, of understanding the difference between factual and fictional discourse.

In both, I want to suggest, meaning is equally the creature of human practices, which in turn engage with the realities, of extra-human origin, offered to us in sensation and in bodily interaction with the physical world. One can thus regard from two standpoints the practices which found meaning. From one of these standpoints they constitute a bridge, *the* bridge, between the human mind and the inhuman, extra-human world of physical reality. From the other standpoint, our continual invention of new practices amounts to the continual invention of a new world, the human world, or rather, the invention of numerous, interpenetrating and interacting, human worlds. The difference between factual, scientific language, and the language of poets, dramatists, and novelists, is not that the one engages with the only reality there is, physical reality, while the other engages with nothing but ideological smoke and mirrors. Rather, they look in different directions. Factual discourse, and with it what we call knowledge of natural fact, is founded upon a set of practices expressly designed to minimize the differences in the account of the world given by different observers, arising from their differences of viewpoint, outlook and personality. In the development of natural science this drive to observational impersonality can be seen at work everywhere. It shows, for instance, in the requirement that, in order to be a subject of scientific investigation, a phenomenon must be independently repeatable. It shows also in the development of increasingly "objective" methods of measurement, methods which are "more objective" precisely to the extent that they allow us to prescind both from chance variations in circumstances of observation, and from chance variations in the temperament, background, and competence of observers. With a seismometer we no longer have to ask people how intense the shock of an earthquake felt to them. With a piezoelectric crystal linked to a computer we no longer have to rely on someone's pressing the button of a stopwatch to inform us when an event occurred.

Literary discourse, on the other hand, the discourse of poets and novelists, turns, as it were, language back upon itself. It uses the language born of the practices through which we make, not only language but ourselves, not to illuminate the inhuman, physical, world, but to

illuminate its own founding practices, and thus the human worlds which those practices originate and constitute. Literary language is, indeed, concerned with "consciousness and personality." But neither the notion of human consciousness nor that of personality appear, from the point of view of these ideas, necessarily linked to that of subjectivity. This is because, on the view being proposed, consciousness and personality cease to be denizens of the pure interiority envisaged by Descartes or Husserl. Consciousness *qua* pure interiority is, as philosophers have always insisted, private in the philosophical sense, accessible only to its possessor. If literature could, *per impossibile*, inform us about consciousness in the sense of pure interiority, it could only, therefore, be the consciousness, the interiority, of the author that it could inform us about. Something like this train of thought, I think, underlies Lang's, and many other people's, conviction that the author must sully with the trace of his own consciousness, render "subjective," anything, including the Holocaust, that his hand touches.

But consciousness and personality, at least on the view here proposed, are not creatures of pure, or Cartesian, interiority. Indeed, in ordinary discourse, when we are not "doing philosophy," we take it for granted that they are not. When we say of X, for instance, that he has the typical personality of an Ulster Protestant, we do not imagine ourselves to be plumbing lightless depths of Cartesian interiority, expressing in the process the in-principle inexpressible. We are simply summarising the multitude of ways in which X's manner of talking and acting connect him to the fabric of historical circumstances, social practices, and religious and political beliefs and commitments, which compose the – essentially public – fabric of Ulster Protestantism. With the unphilosophical side of our minds, in other words, we find it perfectly possible to think of "the personal" as something about which there is nothing at all "subjective," something in permanent and intricate connection with aspects of human existence, historical, social, economic, religious, familial, practical, concerning which we find not the slightest difficulty in presuming the possibility of objective knowledge.

Now, suppose one were to set out to write a novel about Ulster Protestantism. In the nature of novels, if I am right about that, one would not be using the language given meaning by the constitutive practices of Ulster Protestantism to *assert propositions about* Ulster Protestantism. Rather, one would be turning that language back on itself, deploying it, in the context of a fiction, to show how the practices

from which it arises work and fit together, and in that way to show, rather than to assert, what it is to be an Ulster Protestant, to feel in that way, to inhabit that *Lebenswelt* as one's own.[4]

In doing this, if he does it successfully, the writer is occupying himself, I take it, with something as real, in an entirely commonplace sense of "real," and as distinct from his own subjectivity, as the scientist who occupies himself with the chemical transmission of signals in the optic nerve of *Scyllium catulus*. The world, after all, contains Ulster Protestants, contains, indeed, the founding theological moves and practices of Protestantism, in the same brute sense, a sense as inflexible to human wishes, as it contains dogfish and their biochemistry.

Of course the writer of a novel about Ulster Protestantism may mislead the reader scandalously about its nature, just as a sociologist, a historian or some other practitioner of putatively factual discourse may. The novel may, for example, as novels often do, sentimentalize or calumniate its subject in the service of some moral or ideological *prise de position*. But in order to deal with *that* possibility we need, on the present view, not Lang's sort of distinction between literature and something which is not literature, namely, factual discourse, but a distinction between kinds, or uses, of literature – a distinction within literature, not one between literature and something which lies outside it.

In search of the right sort of distinction, we need, I think, to consider two questions which are more closely connected than they might at first sight appear to be. First, what does good literature achieve, in its dealings with human reality, that bad literature fails to achieve, or barters away for some other, more meretricious kind of achievement? Secondly, what has literature to teach us about human reality, about the nature of Ulster Protestantism, for instance, which we could not learn better from dealers in fact: from historians, from sociologists, from doctrinal theologians? My headmaster once told us, jokingly, that he had learned all he knew about the French Revolution from Victor Hugo. Had he been serious, I suppose most people would want to say that he had both chosen an inadequate way of learning about the French Revolution and abused the hours he spent with Hugo. But what else can literature give us, concerning its subject matter, if that subject matter

[4] Such novels exist, of course. A book which does very much this kind of job for Scots Calvinism is James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

concerns, as I have argued, realities, that could not better be provided by more usual, more "factual," ways of investigating reality?

I want to suggest that what literature can do, that factual discourse by its nature cannot, is to show us what it feels like to inhabit a *Lebenswelt* constituted by an unfamiliar set of practices, and to show us that by actually allowing the reader to become, briefly a dweller (in what is no doubt a vaguely Heideggerian sense of "dweller") in that *Lebenswelt.*

It is relevant here, though it might be thought too obvious to be worth mentioning, that entering and coming to dwell in a new *Lebenswelt* in real life, adopting new practices, may alter one, may prove the start of one of those journeys on which people change, become new versions of themselves. Part of this process is that words come to take on new or expanded meanings. One may think, before one has children, that one knows what the word "parent" means. And so one does, in the dictionary sense. But it is not until one embarks upon the process of begetting or giving birth to a child, of entering into affectionate or unaffectionate relationships with it, of taking upon one's shoulders, either way, the multitude of practices and responsibilities associated with raising a child, that one begins to attach to the word "parent" the vastly richer complexities of sense and connotation, both for good and ill, that parents attach to it. Practice, emotion, and meaning here form a tangle that defies analysis – and also defies understanding, by those who are not parents. But to them literature offers paths to understanding which life itself may not have afforded them. If they read *King Lear,* with attention, then, by the time they get to the lines *O sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child*, they will have grasped something of what the word "parent" might mean to a parent in at least one sort of parental situation. Of course you could sentimentalize the parent-child relationship, as Shirley Temple films do. But that is part of the reason why they are not great art, and *Lear* is.

Literature, good literature, I want to say, teaches the reader what words mean, and how things look through the prism of those meanings, to one who participates in an alien *Lebenswelt*, by actually permitting the reader to become, briefly, a participant in that *Lebenswelt.* It can do this because to be absorbed in, fascinated and gripped by, a fiction is to suffer a temporary lapse, a placing-in-abeyance, of all those reservations, born partly of habit and partly of self-interest, which normally restrict our willingness to place ourselves, fully and unreservedly, in the situation of another. "What's Hecuba to him, or

he to Hecuba?" asks Hamlet of the player. The answer is that, for the moment at least, all distinction between the player's real, extrafictional self and Hecuba is in abeyance. He is Hecuba. For the moment *what it is to be Hecuba*, her predicament, is grasped by the player, not as something read *about*, but as his predicament, the predicament about which, as long as the playing or reading endures, his emotions flow and organize themselves. In this state we accept willingly what is presented to us on the page as having the same emotional authority as our own real-life beliefs, wishes, and commitments. Literature, as we say, "takes us out of ourselves."

The "cognitive gain," the knowledge that good literature has to offer us, is, in short, not knowledge-*about* an alien situation, the sort of knowledge that a non- or about-to-be parent might gain from one of those helpful little handbooks on parenthood recommended at pre-natal classes. Rather, it is knowledge-*of* an alien situation: the sort of knowledge that comes from actually being immersed in that situation *in propria persona*.

To gain that knowledge it is necessary, of course, that we trust the author, deliver ourselves into his or her hands. And it must be said that the power exerted by the reading experience is often sufficiently great to make the contest between it and critical rationality, as Locke complained,[5] at times an unequal one. Which puts an enormous amount of power into the hands of the bad writer who wants either to sentimentalize his material or to distort it systematically in the interests of some moral or ideological *parti pris*. It is here that my disagreement with Berel Lang comes finally to a head. Lang sees, no one more clearly, that there is something badly wrong with the run-of-the-mill bulk of Holocaust fiction, and that it has something to do with the evasion of a certain kind of moral responsibility: responsibility to truth; to the facts. But he then tries to formulate the precise nature of that deficiency in terms of the distinction between literary and factual discourse; that is to say between literature and something which is not literature. It would be better, as I suggested earlier, to look for enlightenment to a distinction which cuts *within* the body of literature itself: a distinction between one kind of literature and another.

[5] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, Chapter X, section 34: "*Eloquence*, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived" (508).

I have already dropped some hints as to the form that distinction should take. To make them a little more precise, it will prove helpful to introduce a slightly, but only slightly, idiosyncratic use for the term *kitsch*. Kitsch, the OED tells us, is art characterized by worthless pretentiousness, spurious sentimentality, and vulgarity. The term has acquired a more specific set of overtones in Holocaust studies, thanks mainly to Susan Sontag and Saul Friedländer.[6] Both Sontag and Friedländer argue that the appeal of Nazism was, and continues to be, of a piece with the appeal of kitsch art. Friedländer adds the thought that what Nazism, and in particular the cult of Hitler, offered was the combination of "everyday" kitsch sentimentality, the sentimental appeal of family life, dogs, golden-haired girls, Tyrolean scenes, with an equally kitsch "aestheticisation" of death, celebrated in images of heroism against impossible odds, throws of the dice against utter catastrophe, millions of lives thrown into the balance between total mastery and total destruction, and so on.

In both Sontag and Friedländer the term *kitsch* is largely defined by example. But in Friedländer, especially, there is an attempt to go beyond such appeals to the ability of a literate audience to recognize kitsch when they see it, and to specify what characteristics, exactly, such recognitions hinge upon: what *makes* kitsch kitsch. Friedländer, for instance, distinguishes between "ordinary" kitsch and a "kitsch of death." In ordinary kitsch the representation of reality does not go beyond what is intrinsically possible. "Lovers do lie under a fir tree like two turtledoves; a cottage from whose chimney a thin tendril of smoke rises could indeed harbour a happy family; a Swiss landscape does resemble a picture postcard" (Friedländer 27). In a kitsch representation of death, on the other hand ("death transformed into sweet sleep . . . the death of the patriarch in morally uplifting books," 26), contradictory elements are brought together, "on the one hand an appeal to harmony, to emotional communion at the simplest and most immediate level; on the other, solitude and terror" (27).

It seems to me that what Friedländer sees as distinguishing death-kitsch from "ordinary" kitsch is merely an extreme form of a characteristic one might take as defining for the notion of kitsch art in general, and thus by implication for literary kitsch, namely, the

[6] See Sontag 1972, especially the essay "Fascinating Fascism" (71–105), and Friedländer 1984.

tendency of kitsch art to smuggle out of sight any feature of reality, however evident to the reader in other moods, which might disturb the emotional response, and the corresponding acceptance of a general vision of reality, which the artist or writer wishes to encourage in the reader. Bad writing in the sense of kitsch writing is, in other words, not to be confused with *technically* bad writing. In stylistic terms the illusion of fidelity to the nature of reality as it is *there* (under other circumstances, once the spell of the fiction is broken) *to be known*, can be, and often is, very skilfully maintained. The flaw is not in the writing, but in its relationship to reality, to "the facts." It is the flaw detected by Alvin H. Rosenfeld in Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*, "a play that purports to 'contain nothing but the facts' but that shapes facts, and on occasion misshapes them, to serve a specific ideological vision of history" (Rosenfeld 1980: 154). From this characteristic of kitsch art, it seems to me, derive all the other characteristics, both aesthetic and moral, customarily associated with the term. The responses mediated by kitsch art are "spurious" and "sentimental" because they are responses to an account of human life incapable of bearing the light of common day. Solemn kitsch, kitsch that takes itself seriously and masquerades as high art, is "pretentious," and the taste for it "vulgar," because its pretentions depend fatally upon a certain measure of artfully contrived deception or self-deception concerning the width of the gap between artistic portrayal and any plausible account of the actual nature of the reality portrayed.

The distinction upon which I wish to focus, then, and to set against Lang's distinction between the "literary" and the "factual" *tout court*, is the distinction between serious fiction and kitsch fiction, in the sense of "kitsch" just defined. Serious fiction forces language honestly to explore its own roots; to offer the reader, in terms of *knowledge-of* rather than *knowledge-about*, an account of human reality – of how language and practice, thought and feeling, human possibility and human servitude, intertwine in the constitution of one or another human *Lebenswelt* – which does not trifle with the facts in the service of ideological commitment or sentimental illusion. Such writing is not only moving but true to the Aristotelian demand that literature represent things as they *would*, or *might*, have been. Kitsch writing uses the emotional engagement of the reader to insinuate a vision of things powerful enough to dominate the mind of a simple and uncritical reader, and to fructify there in further darkness and confusion. But

under the scrutiny of a less pliant reader, kitsch writing falls apart, dissociates, once the glamour, the Barthesian *jouissance*, of the reading moment, has passed and critical reflection resumes her powers, into, on the one hand, an assemblage of factually preposterous, and in any case arbitrarily invented, characters and stage-settings, and on the other a collection of equally implausible and theatrical emotional or ideological poses. Appelfeld's own stand on this issue is announced in the little passage printed above as the epigraph for this section. The preference for fact of which he speaks there, the conviction that too much talk of emotions will always lead us into a thicket of sentimentality goes to the heart of the matter.

One main reason why Appelfeld's work evades the grip of Lang's argument is, now, I want to say, that it is not kitsch. I shall devote the rest of this brief essay to examining some of the ways in which Appelfeld's work avoids that description. In the process, I shall try to suggest how Appelfeld's stature as a novelist might be defended against those clauses of Lang's general argument against the possibility of a serious or illuminating Holocaust literature that we have not so far considered, and against a more specific line of criticism coming from another direction.

III. The Nature of Appelfeld's Achievement

> Apologetics and glorification always distort. The question 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? Without the individual there can be no sentiment and no human warmth. Everything is dragged into great generalizations and abstractions.
>
> Aharon Appelfeld, *Beyond Despair*, xiv

The title of this section no doubt promises too much. The space remaining to me in this essay will allow me to do little more than indicate briefly the directions in which an explanation of the immunity of Appelfeld's fiction to Lang's arguments is likely to be found. It is quite insufficient

to do justice to the richness and variety of Appelfeld's work. To that I hope to return elsewhere. For the moment let us do what we can.

It has often been pointed out that Appelfeld's novels do not follow his characters into the camps. I have even heard it said that he manages to write fiction about the Holocaust precisely by not writing about it. But what do we mean by the words "the Holocaust"? What do we include within its scope? There are indeed the actual mechanisms of murder, and surrounding them the life of the ghettos and the extermination camps. But it surely also belongs to the nature of the Holocaust that it was directed against certain groups, Jews and Gypsies, mainly, and that the historic relations between those groups and the societies in which they led their lives played an essential causal part in the destruction. We cannot therefore study the destruction without studying what was destroyed. Even from the point of view of arriving at the most "objective," "value-free" sociological, or political, or historical understanding of what took place, we cannot remain transfixed, in a dream of horror, by what took place after the trains arrived in the camps, while paying no attention to what took place in the years, months and weeks before the first trains began their journeys.

From the point of view of arriving either at a human understanding of these events, or at an adequate moral response to them, the point can be made even more strongly. The Shoah, the Jewish Holocaust, singled out, in vast numbers, men, women, and children who had always been, and whose ancestors for many hundreds of years had been, worthy, law-abiding and patriotic citizens of the very societies whose administrative machinery identified them, and despatched them to be murdered, as presumed bearers of a Jewish identity often established on entirely notional or *pro forma* grounds. To anyone insufficiently attuned to antisemitism to take for granted the persecution of Jews, this is a fact so bizarre as to devastate one's powers of understanding. The Shoah stuns by its vastness and its strangeness. By its nature, it tends to deprive those who suffered it of identity and humanity, collapsing those whom it engulfed into a torrent of nameless faces vomiting from the trains to their deaths. This, of course, is one of the main sources of the impersonality, the "'denial of individual consciousness," which Lang finds to be such a striking feature of the Holocaust, and one of the main grounds of its resistance to literary treatment. And yet, in one way, literary treatment, if what we have said so far about the functions of literature is correct, might seem one of the things most needed to resist

and counter that denial. It is, certainly, a denial that works powerfully to restrict the range of emotional response available to us; as powerfully as the best literature, consummate literature, works to extend that range. As journalists and propagandists know well enough, the concern due to suffering can find a secure foothold, conceptually speaking, only when it can find something concrete and individual; a recognizable face, an intelligible human situation, to sympathize with. Without that, we are restricted to the bare, undifferentiated horror induced by mass calamity – by plague, by flood, by earthquake, or to the indifference evoked in wartime by the mass destruction of the enemy we have come to perceive as a similarly undifferentiated human mass. To feel a concern sufficiently structured, sufficiently detailed to deserve the name of sympathy, we need, somehow or other, to find a way of restoring to the white splotches of faces disgorging from the trains that individuality of situation and personality of which their fate was expressly designed to deprive them.

This, it seems to me, is what Appelfeld has set out to do. The restoration of individual personality, against the current of "a period when the self was nullified" seems to me precisely what is at stake in the kind of understanding at which his work aims. Appelfeld's practice as a novelist seems to me to fit rather well what I said earlier concerning the relationships between the varieties of individual personality, on the one hand, and the overarching situation, in terms of the pressures exerted by history, economic and social position, family, politics, and religion, in which individuals find themselves. What he seems to be attempting is the exploration of the various situations – in the above sense or senses – in which large numbers of Central and Eastern European Jews found themselves in the period, of decades, years, months, weeks, or days, leading up to the deportations. His novels explore those situations, moreover, in the way that only literature can explore such things. They offer the reader characters – imagined with the painstaking degree of detail and verisimilitude necessary to make the fiction "live," to be more than the parade of lay-figures characteristic of didactic or sentimental fiction – in whose lives the working-out of the pressures of the common situation can be grasped with sufficient clarity and pathos not only to move the reader but to educate his understanding of a lost and alien human world.[7]

[7] It has been suggested to me in correspondence that here, and earlier, I risk equating "literature as art with imaginative literature, fiction," to the discredit of what might be called literary non-fiction, a category which, after all, might be taken to include the work of Primo Levi, as well as that of Zsolt and others. I would not, of course, wish to exclude

The situation Appelfeld explores consists essentially in a set of conflicts, which affect in various ways the relations between generations, classes, genders, and individuals. One of the most central of these is the conflict between a traditional, all-pervasive, religious Judaism, the Judaism of "the villages" of the more far-flung, rural parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (Appelfeld was born in the Bukovina), and the life of educated, secular Jews living in the cities and larger towns of the region. This overarching breach in the fabric of Jewish life expresses itself in a range of more specific disruptions. On the linguistic level, the language of the villages is Yiddish, "the language of the Jews," their culture the vast, inchoate mass of ancient and medieval Jewish religious and moral writings; that culture of which, in a memoir which comes close to being a novel in its own right, Appelfeld's uncle, who lives across this boundary, says: "What a pity the Jews don't know what an incredible culture they possess. If they knew, they'd cry like children" (Appelfeld 2004: 35). By contrast, the language of assimilated Jews is German, Appelfeld's own first language, and the culture to which they see themselves as belonging is European, German-speaking, and Austrian, with Vienna as its cultural mecca. Essentially, Appelfeld's "assimilated" Jews have accepted the offer made to European Jews by the Enlightenment, that if they will leave behind the "medieval," "superstitious," "legalistic" darkness of traditional Judaism and join the onward march of Enlightened life and opinion, they will be treated as brothers and fellow-citizens. In essence, Appelfeld's novels explore, from a multitude of different aspects, on the one hand the ambiguities of this choice, as it affects the lives and self-images of different characters, and on the other its wholesale betrayal by the triumph of antisemitism as a political force in Europe in the catastrophic first half of the twentieth century.

One ambiguous aspect of the choice of Enlightenment over Tradition, in Appelfeld's novels, is that it opens a breach through which the endemic antisemitism of non-Jewish society can enter and poison the minds and lives of individual Jews themselves, from within, a process whose working-out in individual cases Appelfeld traces in harrowing detail in such works as *The Conversion* and *The Healer*.

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those writers from the category of literature. No doubt the relationships between "factual" and "literary" writing are more complex than I suggest here. But these are complex matters, and there are limits to what can be achieved within the bounds of a short essay.

In *The Age of Wonders*, this finds particularly poignant expression in Bruno's father, "the writer A" who sees himself as an Austrian writer, a contributor to Austrian culture, and whose tormented attempts to salvage his literary career, to re-establish relations with publishers, with literary committees, with various aristocratic dilettantes and salons, as one by one these links with that culture are severed by the climate of the times, provide one major *leitmotif* of the first half of the novel. A is haunted by fear of and distaste for traditional Jews, *Ostjuden*, whose gaunt, unassimilable figures, with their strange clothes and uncouth language, in turn haunt the waking life of the assimilated, in *The Healer* and elsewhere in Appelfeld's *oeuvre*, somewhat as the Amish haunt the consciousness of modern America as a living reminder of a more sternly Protestant past. In the spiritual landscape of many, though not all, of Appelfeld's "assimilated" characters, the *Ostjuden* stand as a living manifestation of the "weakness," the "unhealthiness" of Jews, by contrast with the "strength," the "health," the "wholesomeness" of Austrians. When, in *The Age of Wonders*, the sculptor Stark, in the eyes of the assimilated Jewish writer A a deeply "healthy" and "Austrian" figure, but one whose mother happened to be Jewish and who nourishes a deep affection for these maternal roots, decides to convert to Judaism, A's horror knows no bounds. That someone so free, so untrammelled, should willingly cast himself back into these poisonously unwholesome depths, commit this mutilation upon a beautiful, healthy body, seems to him atrocious. But, of course, this boundless admiration for the healthy Austrian ideal unfolds itself against the background of closing doors, of gradually evaporating possibilities, of *huis clos*, as one by one the lights of Austrian society and culture go out, not only for A, but for Jews of any kind.

Part of Lang's case against Holocaust fiction is that an adequate moral response to the Holocaust necessitates contact with the historical facts, and I think it is clear from the context that what he has in mind is the historical facts concerning the camps and ghettos and what took place in them. It is this which establishes, as Lang puts it, "the moral status of the Nazi genocide as an historical, *nonliterary* subject" (123). Once again, it depends how far we see the roots of the genocide as spreading. There is a view to the effect that what is morally significant about the Shoah is that a very large number of innocent people were killed in a particularly terrible way. That view, I suppose, has its roots in a type of moral universalism which comes down to us from the

Enlightenment. Enlightenment moral universalism teaches that it is the wrongs human beings suffer *qua* human beings that matter morally, not the wrongs they suffer *qua* men or women, Jews or Christians. On such a view the moral specificity of the Shoah as a genocide *against the Jews* vanishes: the Holocaust becomes, from a moral point of view, just one more genocide, one more instance of man's inhumanity to man, of a piece, morally speaking, with the recent genocides in Ruanda and Darfur. Hence it also matters very little, from a moral point of view, either what the central and Eastern European Jewish culture largely extirpated by the Shoah was like, or what it felt like to belong to one or another branch of that culture. Nor is this, at least in itself, a particularly antisemitic stand for the universalist liberal to take.[8] To the moral universalist, cultural specificity *in general* does not matter morally. To him, what is morally crucial about genocide is, as one might put it, not that it is an attempt to exterminate *a culture*, or *a race*, but that it is an attempt to *exterminate* a culture or a race. It is easy to see why, from the standpoint of moral universalism, the only things that matter morally *would* be just those things that *only* history and memoir can inform us about – the actual physical and administrative facts of the process of extermination itself: Wannsee, the camps, the trains, the ovens. I am not suggesting, of course, that Lang's views imply moral universalism, and I doubt, in fact, whether he himself would accept any such view of things. My point is, merely, that, to the extent that one dissents from that sort of moral universalism, the case for the moral relevance of the sorts of thing that fiction is equipped, in principle at least, to deal with, becomes progressively stronger.

And in fact I do not find Enlightenment moral universalism a particularly *morally* persuasive view, though one instinct with the rather specious air of moral nobility which characterizes a good deal of Enlightenment theorising. Tolstoy famously remarked that every unhappy family is unhappy in a different way. I am inclined to think that every great act of human wickedness is wicked in a different, and quite specific way: a way which should direct the self-examination of those who remain along quite specific lines involving quite specific topics and cultural references. The African genocides of Ruanda and Darfur were not the same kind of genocide as the European genocides presided

[8] I have known it taken by liberal Jews whom it would be absurd to accuse of "Jewish self-hatred," or of pandering to antisemitism.

over by the Nazis. They arose from different causes, expressed different sorts of loyalties and resentments. Nor, in those respects, were Ruanda and Darfur, even, particularly comparable, North-Western and Central Africa being many hundreds of spatial and cultural miles apart. We have a duty to think about these differences, and by "we" I do not mean "we" in the grandiose Enlightenment sense of "we who compose the ideal community of all rational beings" – I mean "we in Europe," or "we in Ruanda," or "we in Somalia." My objection to Enlightenment moral universalism, in other words, is that it gives us a speciously morally respectable excuse for letting ourselves, whoever "we" may be, off the hook. Just as these great wrongs are supposedly suffered by "human beings," not by European Jews or Nilotic black Muslim tribespeople, so they are supposedly committed, not by non-Jewish Europeans or Arab Muslim tribespeople, in the grip of historical circumstances and resulting motivations specific to those groups and deserving detailed moral and political scrutiny, but by "man," or by "all of us."[9] Safety in numbers!

Appelfeld's novels, not although, but precisely *because* they deal with things constituting part of the cultural specificity of the Shoah, rather than with the actual mechanisms of mass murder, seem to me to open the way to kinds of relevant moral reflection not easily, or as easily, accessible to the reader who follows Lang's advice to stick to history and memoir and eschew literature. For example, to stick to the line of literary analysis I began a few pages ago, Appelfeld is a penetrating guide to that particularly harrowing aspect of the Shoah which consisted in the progressive denial to European Jews of community with societies in which they had invested their entire lives and to which they were, as Jews tend generally in my experience to be, emotionally intensely loyal. The gradual but inexorable closing of literary and social doors against A in *The Age of Wonders* is a case in point. The issue is approached from a different standpoint in *The Healer*. Here Felix Katz, a secularized and intensely rationalistic Viennese businessman, is forced to spend six months in a remote Carpathian village because of his wife's return to the traditional Judaism of her girlhood, and her desire to have their daughter's emotional illness treated by a famous

[9] I recently came across a good expression of this stance, by the British theatre director Sir Peter Hall, in a book review in the London *Observer*: "*The Reader*, by Bernhard Schlink is the German novel I have been waiting for: it objectifies the Holocaust *and legitimately makes all mankind responsible*." [my italics]

Rebbe who has a reputation as a healer of such conditions, not merely among Jews but among some of the Ruthenian peasantry as well. On one level Appelfeld persuasively explores the ways in which, when he finally decides to leave his wife and daughter and return to Vienna with his son, Katz's sense of relief and joy at this homecoming to what he sees as a civilized, rational, urban environment is gradually vitiated by the series of disturbing experiences he encounters on the long journey home through a world in which, over the six months he has just spent in rural seclusion, antisemitism has become much more overt. On another, deeper, level, Katz's new and unsettling sense of alienation finds its counterpart in the alienation of the old wonder-Rebbe from the surrounding Christian society and from "city Jews" like Katz – in his sense, which he falteringly unfolds to Katz's wife and daughter, not knowing quite why he is saying these things to these people, that the Hebrew letters themselves offer a home, a refuge from the foreignness of the world.[10] The ways in which, at this point, the notions of "home" and "homeland" echo each other, though taken in quite different senses, from the depths of radically different structures of feeling and experience, seem to me typical of the ways in which "literary" writing, at its best, can enlarge our knowledge of human possibility.

The power which Appelfeld's dry, reticent, and seemingly emotionally parsimonious style gives him to make these and other complex states of mind and being intensely real to the reader, deserves far closer and more detailed attention than I have space to give it here.[11] It might still be asked, though, why the same sorts of thing might not be learned, and more effectively and legitimately learned, from memoir? That question also deserves more than the sentence or two I have space to give it here. Still, that is enough to sketch in at least the bones of an answer. Béla Zsolt's *Nine Suitcases*, recently and brilliantly translated into English by a Sussex ex-colleague of mine,[12] is one of the best, as well as one of

[10] It is perhaps relevant here, as has been pointed out to me by Rebecca Gillis, that Appelfeld himself chooses to write in Hebrew, but that significantly, for him, it is a language acquired in adult life, his third after German and Yiddish. As Sidra Ezrahi observes, "Aharon Appelfeld stands out as one survivor writer for whom the Hebrew language seems to provide neither a bridge nor a window onto the past. In the land which was envisioned by prophets, poets and philosophers as a haven for the dislocated soul of Israel, Appelfeld remains, in a fundamental, linguistic sense, an exile" (370).

[11] For a perceptive brief introduction, see Josipovici 2006.

[12] See Zsolt, *Nine Suitcases*, trans. Ladislaus Löb (2004).

the earliest, Holocaust memoirs. It is, moreover, the work of a sublimely intelligent and accomplished writer, a significant presence in Hungarian literary and political culture between the wars. Zsolt's recollections open a window into what is manifestly the same world as the one Appelfeld has written about, and in that respect offers independent confirmation that Appelfeld discharges the responsibility to relevant fact incurred not only, as Lang supposes, by writers of Holocaust fiction, but by all writers of serious fiction. But in *Nine Suitcases* everything in that world is seen through Zsolt's eyes, from the standpoint of his moral and political outlook. I do not mean to say that it is not a morally and intellectually substantial, and even impressive, outlook, just that it colours – and this is a fairly general feature of memoir as a genre – everything in the book. He sees, he judges, usually politically, and he explains the grounds of the judgement with impressive honesty and intellectual vigour. But one cannot get away from him. Zsolt is always there, standing between the reader and the world he is describing, its cicerone and its interpreter. Appelfeld, on the other hand, is absent from his fiction, even when, as in *Tzili*, it includes material based on his own experience. As the story moves from character to character, so the viewpoint from which events are seen, and with it the centre of gravity of the entire fictional world shifts also. The vision that Zsolt offers of the rural, Hasidic Jews he meets in prison is, for example, an entirely external one. And this is not surprising, since they are as strange to him as Comanche Indians to an early traveller in the Western United States.

> They are as alien to me as Filippinos. I hate myself for saying so, but I have more in common even with the friendly gendarme who went berserk. As a child I had just such a peasant as a playmate. I sat next to him in primary school, and later I went to the front with him in the First World War. According to my own idea of morality, these chassidim with their sidelocks, their refined but one-sided and narrow-minded intellect, their physical uncleanliness and their primitive ceremonies, are immoral. (Zsolt 47)

By contrast, though much could be written about the moral sense which shows itself mutely in Appelfeld's writing, Appelfeld *tells* us no more about his "idea of morality" than Shakespeare does about his. Appelfeld does not judge, he simply displays and juxtaposes different possible responses to the same dreadful set of circumstances and historical constraints, responses like Zsolt's among them. One could argue,

indeed, against Lang's conviction that fiction always and necessarily abstracts and generalizes, in the process losing the specificity, the particularity of its subject matter, that it is precisely the memoirist Zsolt who forces the specificity of his material into the Procrustean bed provided by the generalities of a particular moral and political outlook, whereas the novelist Appelfeld, who, by scrupulously eschewing any commerce with moral and political generalities, actually manages to do justice to the specificity of the same material.

This issue leads us back, finally, into the question of the distinction between serious literature and literary kitsch. One of the defining characteristics of the latter, I take it, is that it subjects its material, where necessary in defiance of elementary considerations of verisimilitude, to the demands of an overarching viewpoint, or agenda, sometimes moral or political, sometimes merely sentimental. Appelfeld has been attacked, by Michael André Bernstein (55–73) and others (see Wisse 74–76), for supposedly doing something very like this. The specific charge is that he blackens the reputation of European Jews, and by implication of all Jews in the Diaspora, by representing them, particularly in *Badenheim 1939*, as heedlessly and supinely indifferent to the gathering certainty of the fate awaiting them; and hence as going to their deaths, in the Hebrew phrase, *k'tson l'tevakh*, like lambs to the slaughter. Bernstein accuses Appelfeld of doing this in the service of an ideology promoted by certain Zionist groups in Israel immediately after the War, which found "the image of the stooped, pale Gola Jew, a victim . . . offensive and threatening to the Israeli ethos" (Itamar Yaoz-Kest, cited in Bernstein 56) and wished to replace the supposed passivity of Diaspora Jewry before the Holocaust with a new, more muscular Jewishness prepared to defend itself against attack.

Since Appelfeld himself has repeatedly denounced this outlook, and has declared his aim to be in part that of restoring the reality of pre-war European Jewry which it obscures, Bernstein is forced to claim that Appelfeld's self co-option as a Zionist ideologue is "unconscious."[13]

[13] "Appelfeld's importance is centrally grounded in the fact that he is not only writing about the genocide as such, but rather, attempting to narrate the relationship between that catastrophe and the world it obliterated. But if the very act of representing European Jewry in its final months before the Shoah constituted both a thematic breakthrough and a polemical assertion of resistance in Israeli letters, the perspective from which Appelfeld treats his characters betrays an unconscious but thorough complicity with the sabras' contemptuous dismissal of the values and dignity of those Jews" (Bernstein 57–58).

Be that as it may, the dispute offers an excellent way of exposing the nature of the divide which separates Appelfeld's fiction from the ever-growing mass of literary kitsch concerning the Holocaust. It is unclear what sort of novels Bernstein and others who press this criticism would wish Appelfeld to have written. But it is reasonable to conclude that they would wish him to have concentrated on more "positive" aspects of Jewish life leading up to the Holocaust. There were, after all, Jewish resistance fighters whose actions were as heroic as those of any similar non-Jewish group, and Jews who did foresee what was to come, and who strove manfully, and sometimes successfully, to save themselves or their children from destruction.

But it seems evident that for Appelfeld to have taken this course would have been, paradoxically, not to resist but *precisely to accept without question* the essential validity of the moral and spiritual outlook common to Austrian antisemites, to the internalized antisemitism of the writer A in *The Age of Wonders*, and to the Israeli Zionists who wished to replace the image of "the stooped, pale . . . Jew, a victim," with a "healthier," more muscular image. It would have turned Appelfeld, in short, from a major writer into one of the innumerable hack producers of ideologically motivated kitsch for whom the twentieth century, the age above all others of tendentious political bombast, has proved a goldmine. Given that the worship of spiritual muscularity, the willingness to sacrifice all of the ordinary concerns and values of everyday life to the glorification of death in the service of some vast, overweening, specious Ideal[14] was in the Thirties, and is today, the defining characteristic of Fascism, it would also have transformed Appelfeld into an apologist for the very spiritual forces which conceived and brought to birth the Shoah.

What Appelfeld actually offers us, by contrast, is a poetics of the commonplace which reaffirms its value in the face of, as he has put it, all "apologetics and glorification" (1994: xiv). The intense pathos of *Badenheim 1939* consists, to my mind, precisely in the punctiliously rendered evocation of the various responses, all utterly ineffectual, and

[14] The French singer and poet George Brassens aptly satirizes this aspect of our age in his song *Mourir pour des idées:* "Mourir pour des idées, l'idée est excellente. / Moi, j'ai failli mourir de ne l'avoir pas eu' / Car tous ceux qui l'avaient, multitude accablante, / En hurlant à la mort me sont tombés dessus" ("To die for ideas — an excellent idea! It nearly happened to me as a result of not having any. For those who had, an overpowering multitude, going baying to death fell on top of me").

all the more moving because utterly ineffectual, by means of which the Jewish vacationers and townspeople, who come from every walk of life, from the literary world to a strangely rural and domestic version of prostitution, hope to keep the little, lovable, unheroic formalities of everyday life going, to ward off the menacing gathering, in the shape of the mysterious, Kafkaesque activities of the Sanitation Department and the gradual severing of all communication between the town and the outside world, of the forces which are about to precipitate their world into the abyss. Certainly there is a large component of willed self-delusion at work in their efforts at best to believe, at worst to pretend, against the increasingly ominous run of indications to the contrary, that the continued working of the sweet, engrossing petty machinery of everyday life is still possible, and may even survive whatever is to come. And of course to us as readers, knowing full well what is to come, the passivity of Appelfeld's characters is, in its quiet way, terrifying. Like the children at the English pantomime, shouting "look behind you!" to the characters on the stage, we want to tell them to wake up, to face facts. But then, are we not in a doubly privileged position, both as readers and as survivors of the downfall of the Third Reich? We need to calm down. And when we calm down, and look again, is it remotely plausible that any of us, Jew or Gentile, would have behaved very differently in such a situation? For that matter, why should anyone behave differently in such circumstances? What difference would *heroism* make? And, looking a little more deeply, if it would make no difference, would violent resistance under these circumstance be, amount to, heroism, or merely an empty, self-glorifying gesture? Would such a gesture not simply, as it were, ape the spiritual style of the approaching reign of death, granting in the process a certain degree of moral legitimacy to that style? *Badenheim 1939* in fact forces us to face up to the choice between the values, on the one hand of the politics of melodrama which laid waste Europe in the twentieth century, and on the other those of the prosaic, the everyday, and the unheroic, as manifested for the reader by a collection of "little Jews" displaying much the same characteristics of littleness and flawed humanity as most of us, Jew or Gentile, do.

For that reason among others it seems to me grotesque to suggest, as Bernstein does, that Jews in the situation of Appelfeld's characters *could* reasonably be considered *morally culpable* for ignoring, as a considerable number of European Jews did for a very long time, the

accumulating signs of the disaster to come, and for offering no armed resistance to their fate when, in the novel, it overtakes them; that Appelfeld must therefore be taken to be *representing* them as morally culpable; and that therefore he must be taken to have composed, in effect, a "satire" on the Jewish victims of Nazism. That seems to me to nest a literary *non-sequitur* within a moral one. There was nothing *morally culpable*, or even foolish, except by the hindsight which Bernsein, on scant grounds so far as I can see, believes Appelfeld to be exploiting, in the inability of many Jews to believe that what actually happened could possibly happen in Europe. There is, for instance, nothing morally culpable, despite a certain admixture of self-delusion and literary egotism, in the writer A's refusal, in *The Age of Wonders*, to accede to the priest Father Mauber's urgings that he leave and go to Palestine: "I've done nothing wrong. I am an Austrian writer. No one will deny me this title" (1993: 196). Indeed, A's tormented resistance at this point displays, from one point of view, a certain courageous largeness of spirit, a certain moral grandeur: this is at any rate not a man prepared to cut and run. Morality is larger, and more ambiguous, than is grasped by those, a rather numerous group, whose sole interest in it is in making it serve as a tool of political polemic.

The remarkable coda of *Badenheim 1939* reads as follows:

> And the people were sucked in. Even those who were standing with a bottle of lemonade in their hands, a bar of chocolate, the headwaiter with his dog – they were all sucked in as easily as grains of wheat poured into a funnel. (1980: 148)

I find nothing remotely satirical, nothing lacking in dignity or respect for the characters, in this passage. I do not find in it, either, the useless and self-indulgent literary rhetoric of sentimental "compassion" which a less controlled and powerful writer might have expended upon this moment. I find in it merely – and it is something to which the whole novel has been leading up – an immense and hollow sense of waste, of irremediable loss, like the empty sky over a graveyard.

No doubt one, and perhaps the best, way of employing that vision of utter loss might be to move from it back to the histories, the memoirs. But to have rendered so searingly apprehensible to the reader the vision itself is something that only a novelist of Appelfeld's calibre could have accomplished.

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