

Rosa Planas

The Holocaust and literature

True literature deals with the contact with the enigmas of fate and the secrets of the soul; in other words: the metaphysical sphere

AARON APPELFELD

1. HOW TO CONTEXTUALISE TWO OPPOSING REALITIES:
history and fiction. And how fiction is used as an amplifier of history.

In its origins literature experiences the overlap with history. We have to go back to the time of Homer, to the epic poems that emerged from the memory of the terrible wars between Trojans and Greeks. Between the religious and the profane, literature was conceived to conserve the memory of extraordinary events. This was, initially, its chief function.

The motivation did not imply, however, that an elevated formula shying away from the common language, in an attempt to achieve refined and sublime expression, was not sought. With this, the desire was to delve into memories, intensifying the view of memory through the use of a specific instrument, the word, which, over the centuries, was to become the essence of the literary art.

After their annihilation the Trojans ceased to be a people and also ceased to be part of living history, yet they began a new existence in literature of which they were the protagonists and they became literary entities that future generations would recognise and go back to again and again. The symbol was to make their memory and the dramatic end they suffered indelible. From then on, war between peoples would take on religious, social and economic connotations, but, above all else, it would go on to be literary material, a sophisticated form of awareness of destruction. It would forever focus more

on the manner of being heroic as opposed to the manner of being dehumanised, i.e., leaving no record, the same as no literary register.

The Holocaust or Shoa is one of the most tragic events known to history, both for its cost in human life and for its symbolism, which does not lose sight of a high epic and religious content. Another fact that gives the Holocaust a sense of impact is its closeness in time. Before, to find situations of such evident brutality it was necessary to go back to Antiquity, and especially pagan times (let us remember for a moment the context of the Trojan War), but no governmental activity that so despised the human condition could ever have been conceived in a modern civilization, especially after almost two millennia of Christianity.

The elevation of an entire people to the condition of victim is virtually unprecedented, but the way it was done (through legislation and extermination camps) is, without doubt, unique and special. Throughout history, genocide has been carried out, more or less intensely, after the wars of conquest, colonisation or, in a more disguised way, in the periodic but recurring forays against unarmed and defenceless peoples. We only have to think of the massacres of Indians in America, the colonisation of Africa and Australia, the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, the programmed belligerence against the Kurds, the war in Chechnya, and so many other covetous and xenophobic aggressions, which have brandished ideological reasons such as race and religion in order to commit crimes against humanity.

If we have commenced our pilgrimage with Homer's epic it is because the literature of the Holocaust also tells the story of an epic event: the resistance of the individual in conditions impossible for survival and also the wish of a people, which is being constructed, to escape a tragic fate. Through reading these pages we become privileged witnesses to a unique situation, where, paradoxically, deindividualisation causes humanisation and where the human being becomes more human as a consequence of a calculated policy of depersonalisation, the ideological twin of the concentration camps programme.

To the trick question as to whether or not one can produce literature about the Shoa, the reply seems obvious. There has been a lot of it and very good it is too; it has been written and will continue to be written as long as the memory of the events does not fade. This literature, as in the case of Homer's epic, serves interests that go beyond the wish of the writer. The author-witness senses the strength of his role, his public usefulness and the nature of *example* that his work achieves. He knows himself to be the bearer of a message that, on the other hand, is the only one that can reconcile him with the past. In this way, he can and does perform a service to the community and, at the same time, to himself.

2. The genres of memory

The abundance of writing on the Holocaust has led to the birth of an encyclopaedia edited by David Patterson, Alan L. Berger and Sarita Cargas, printed in the USA and published in 2002. Included in this panoramic work are all the authors and texts that refer to the events taking place between the years 1939 and 1945. Within this mountain of material, the first thing to point out is the incredible number of testimonial works, most of which are written by Jewish authors from Central Europe who suffered the circumstances of extermination at first hand. This encyclopaedia is an attempt to rationalise the literature produced based on the experience of the Holocaust, and the quest for a classification, at times arguable, of the genres that prevail in it as a whole.

Taken in its entirety, the literature about the Holocaust is characterised above all for being literature of the self, of an almost notarial testimony, where the intention to describe all aspects of the tragedy prevails over any artistic consideration. The emotional impact it has on the reader is provided by a condition, applicable only to this type of literature, in which each of the testimonies written on the page is personal, unique and unrepeatable. A world that withdraws into itself, where one author's experience cannot explain another's. Moreover, we have to insist on the fact that the majority of these writers shy away from banal sentimentality and insistent morbidity. The best descriptions of the extermination camps of Auschwitz (by, in my opinion, Primo Levi and Imre Kertész) do not give in to the temptation of the easy judgement or the all-round condemnation of the aggressors. In no part of the narrative discourse do we hear a generalised clamour against anybody's ethnic group nor do we fall into the ideological trap of following racist reasoning. Rather, the discourse rises above the moral judgement which, in these circumstances, would have been obvious, and, with bricks of reflection and intellectual perplexity a reproach addressed to the whole of humankind is constructed, to the insensitivity of modern man that permitted the installation of barbarity in a world supposedly civilised and Christianised, but which was seen to be, among many other shortcomings, not Judaeo-Christian enough. Some interpreted the exceptional situation in the Europe of 1939 to 1945 as a revival of neo-paganism, deeply rooted in Europe, and which demanded, for reasons of racial superiority, the return to the implacable human sacrifices.

Genres that affect the literature of the Holocaust are principally those of a markedly existential nature, of which personal diaries and chronicles would be the clearest example. The most famous, without doubt, is Anne Frank's diary (*Das Tagebuch der Anne Frank*), written in a secret hideout in Amsterdam between June 12th 1942 and August 1st 1944. Anne's death, at the age of fifteen, in the Bergen-Belsen camp and all the circumstances that surrounded her short and extraordinary life (betrayals, hunger, the death of her sister) turned this work into a paradigm of the suffering of the Holocaust. It is one of the most translated works of literature in the world, and it is such a phenomenon that it has gone beyond the strictly literary level to become a phenomenon of meta-literature.

Although the diary of Anne Frank is the most famous, there are others, like *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* (1973), in which the genre is recurrent and the narrative structure is based on the description of the self and the situations surrounding it.

Other genres are poetry, with Paul Celan among the best-known authors, but which includes authors as diverse as Primo Levi: *Shema. A Collection of Poems* (1976); drama, with representatives like Arthur Miller, *Broken Glass* (1944), or Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize-winner, with *The Trial of God* (1974); and, lastly, anthologies, of either poetry or short stories. By way of example, let us mention the book by Yaffa Eliach: *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (1982).

So far, we have not mentioned the genre which, for being in the majority and multi-faceted, is most representative: the novel. By its very nature, the novel includes everything: fiction, speculation, humour, simple historical detail, the construction of parallel worlds, the multiplicity of messages, etc. But the production of novels in the literature of the Holocaust suffers certain limitations, the most important of them being the impossibility of creating fiction, at least as it has been understood up to now. Fiction

in these parameters is seen as a falsification, as a negative element that detracts from the authenticity that one supposes is to be found in this literature.

3. The selective memory

Aaron Appelfeld introduces his book *The Story of a Life* with the following reflection:

Memory, like dreams, takes from the dense train of events certain details and, at times, small unimportant things; it stores them in order to, at a given moment, make them re-emerge. Just like a dream, memory also tries to give these events a certain significance.

Starting from this reflection we realise that it is very difficult to free memory from imagination. If the one is based on experience, the other feeds upon what this experience has produced in the inner soul of man, in his most intimate part. Nor do we know how far imagination is possible without a memory to nourish it. Material experienced, unlike material acquired, forms an underlying mass from which will stem the great constructions of the imagination. Without this baggage no-one is capable of creating parallel realities that concentrate what, in one way or another, has been experienced.

The process of how the memory selects certain experiences and erases others is incomprehensible enough for it to be claimed that this selection is arbitrary, at least from the logical point of view. At times, memories are centred upon the most everyday and banal, avoiding the solemn events that, for their gravity or importance, ought to have made a deep impression on the subconscious. The memory opts for the small detail, a forced renunciation or some happening that went unnoticed for the majority of the people who saw it. This choice is indivisible from the individuals who make it, and forms part of their identity. The human memory is personal and untransferable, unique and irreplaceable, one of the reasons why the concentration camp experience is so enriching from the point of view of the selective memory. Each and every one of the authors affected recount the same events, relive the same frustrations, moral tortures, physical and psychological pain, but the individual adds power, intensity, to the collective story, which, breaking the chain of mnemonic repetition, becomes a novelty and an unfixed message. What makes them want to write is the personal, the unrepeatable, which in each work becomes, in short, the "literature" that each writer is capable of achieving.¹

Life in the *Lager* was lived very differently by each of the prisoners making up the great concentrated masses. None of them experienced the same thing, although on the outside it may seem that way. So many people, so many experiences. So many songs, so many singers...

Memory is not just a psychic thing, it often becomes a biological fact. The body recalls the hunger, the pain, the suffering. Appelfeld states: "Everything that took place was etched on the cells of my body and not in my memory". In fact, the trauma makes the victim of torture suffer many times over. Jean Améry, the pseudonym of the writer

■ ¹ "About the Second World War the principal writings were testimonies, considered an authentic form of expression. On the other hand, the literature was perceived as an invention. I did not even have witnesses. I could not remember the names of people or places, just darkness, murmurings and movements.

Only later did I understand that this raw material was the vital stuff of literature and that from it an inner story could be created. I say 'inner' because at that time it was believed that the chronicle was the repository of truth. Inner expression had not yet been born." (Appelfeld, Aaron: *The Story of a Life*, p. 100).

Hans Mayer, confirms this experience by reliving the pain of his dislocated arms. It is often at bedtime that this biological memory awakens and calls out for attention. The ex-prisoners of the *Lagers* revisit the huts and relive the punishments. This psychic persecution continues once they are free, and it is impossible to rid themselves of it. The wound that the memory has suffered is so great that it cannot be healed either by forgetting or by the safety achieved; the prolongation of the suffering is part of this arbitrary choice that rides out in the tormented nights of the prisoners, even though they have been free for years. The tumefaction of the memory leads many to extenuation and suicide.

In children, memory is not static, but changing and turbulent. The yet to be defined personality chooses smells, presences, bits of reality that, as in a game, build spaces and situations. The child's memory is neither chronological nor orderly, it brims over with imprecision, overwhelming gaps that cannot be filled. If man is mud, the child is wet clay, where the water has more consistency than the material. For this reason, Appelfeld senses that "in children memory is a bottomless pit, which is renewed and clears over the years".

4. The exterminated languages

Aaron Appelfeld has said: "Without a mother tongue the human being is an invalid". This statement, made from the depths of the consciousness, brings us face to face with the linguistic reality of Auschwitz, the loss of language resulting in the loss of identity. Without speech the word is unpronounceable, pure abstraction that wanders in the limbo of vagueness. Many of the men and women held in the camps found themselves in this situation, without voice or speech, without name or word to suit the immediate reality. Not only were they divested of clothes and material goods, but also of their abstract possessions: nation and language slipped away beneath their feet.

The theme of language and the loss of voice is recurrent in the most important authors of the Holocaust literature. Primo Levi, Jean Améry and Aaron Appelfeld speak of it. A considerable number of prisoners belonged to the German linguistic area, and not only did they belong to it, but they also felt adhered to it with the force of tradition and with the unconditional admiration that they felt for the forgers of the language. Goethe, Rilke, Schiller, Nietzsche, these are just some of the authors that appeal to the selective memory of the dispossessed. But the wound gets deeper when they do not recognise in the mouth of the executioner the language of their parents, their grandparents, their ancestors. Appelfeld recalls that his mother loved the German language —his mother tongue, he would say— and that Yiddish was a distant reference, an anecdotal sound, almost non-existent, that was evoked like plum jam or the smells of the perfumes of the house. But the language of his mother killed his mother, and this situation made the writer —the writers— reject the language that enslaves and orders extermination. Yet for the survivors it will never be easy to separate themselves from it, because speaking German will be for many like talking to one's dead mother, an umbilical cord impossible to break. It is necessary to arrive at the tragedy of having to hate the language with which they learned to think, to feel and to create the galaxy of feelings that had to be carefully shown, because in Auschwitz one could lose much more than life, including the certainty of ever having been born in a nation that inexplicably denied their existence, and of having learned a language that was also snatched from them without

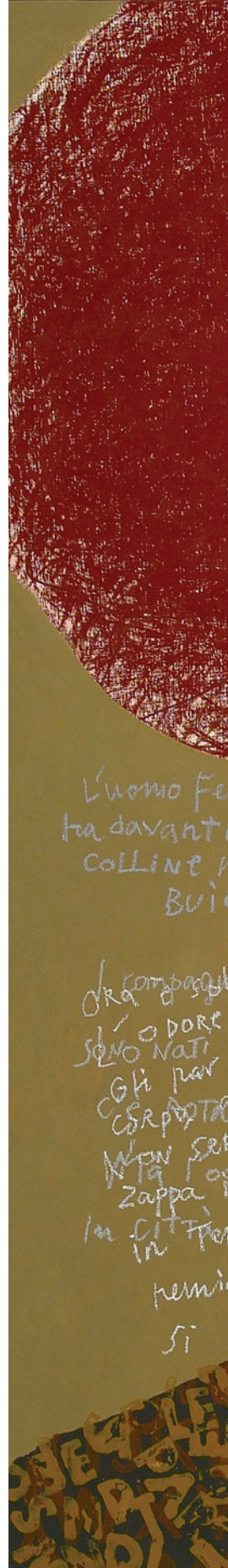
hesitation. Fixed forever in our memory will be the experience that Améry recounts in reference to an important Jewish philologist and Germanic scholar. When his interrogator asked him for his professional speciality, before sending him to his work place in the camp, he replied: “Germanic scholar”, which sent the jailer into a terrible rage. Without a word, he shot and killed him there and then. As Hannah Arendt constantly recalled in her books, the most hated Jew was the assimilated Jew, and, even more than this, the Germanised Jew.

Once they had been freed, the survivors had to learn Hebrew, for many a strange unknown language, to stifle the German with which they had grown up. Appelfeld even mixed up mother and language: “My mother’s language and my mother became one”. For him the obligation to relinquish German was like seeing his mother die again, and a dull pain took control of his consciousness, leading him to voluntary dumbness. A long silence from which he could only escape in dreams. Learning Hebrew was to be a long penitence, a constant avoidance of the lost identity, each letter became a break in the biological chain, an existential confusion that made clear how important it is for people to conserve the language of childhood: “without my language I feel like a stone”.

This chaotic linguistic situation made many of the first-generation Israeli writers painfully bilingual. Despite the tragedy, many did not want—or were unable—to uproot the old mother tongue and lived mounted on the languages as if they were colts that had to be broken in with willingness and patience.

On the other hand, in Auschwitz knowing German “was life”, as all those who knew the language could understand the orders and manage to get their bearings in the chaos. On the contrary, all those who did not know the language were forced to obey through blows and violence. This is the sad fate—Levi would say—of the Italians and other Europeans who could not understand what was being said to them. At least, the German of the *Lager* “was a language apart” that had nothing to do with the poetry or the philosophical refinement achieved by the great Germanic authors. A variety unknown, animalised, made for the exclusive use of the jailers and forced to be recognised as a language of obedience. The German Jewish philologist Klemperer—as Levi says—had named it the *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, or language of the Third Reich. It would seem that this form was no more than a mixture, a militarist hybrid that took the semantics of the old Prussian barracks and which reinvented negative words, making them positive. The *Lagerjargon*, as Levi would say, was no more than that, slang, a sub-language created for sub-men, similar to that used to train dogs, without a trace of poetry.

Penitent (Repentant), Artur Heras (2006)
acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm
(private collection, Valencia)



5. The annihilation of memory

And then... for the survivors the construction of a national state became the only alternative. But this state had to be based on the motto "Construct and re-construct ourselves", which implied an individual reconstruction of each of the future citizens of the country. For many of the intellectuals, there was no other possibility than the annihilation of memory, all that they had experienced and been in the past.

The individual deconstruction went hand in hand with national construction. Those who wished to start afresh were obliged to separate themselves from their memory. It was not easy for anyone; for many it was impossible. Some, like Jean Améry, fell by the wayside, as they could not belong to the nationality that had rejected them, but neither did they feel identified with a country that they considered artificial, born out of imposition.

Without a real homeland the European Jew was trapped in an ambiguous territory, halfway between nostalgia, hatred and desperation. Memory, impossible to eradicate, became a new homeland, in which memories became the only safe ground.

This situation ended the lives of many. Suicide was the refuge of existential contradiction.

The majority of those who went to live in Palestine did not want to remember, and therefore they did not tell their children of the sufferings of the war. A sort of dark silence separated the generations; memory had gone on to be, in part, a patrimony of literature, museums and monuments, but not a living activity capable of enriching the future with the experience accumulated. Perhaps this is one of the important reproaches that the writers of the Holocaust have made in their new country, and also in the rest of the world. Memory ought not to be a marginal land but a living space, which may be revisited.

Appelfeld talks to his son of the Carpathians "where our fathers and our fathers' fathers lived for many generations, the land of Baal Shem Tov", with all the nostalgia and love that he can possibly evoke. The national socialist brutality could not manage to detach the survivors from the distant homelands, where the ancestors rested and rest, which made possible a European Jewish culture that can never be exterminated ||