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# SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

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## There is no Analogy in History: On the Use of Myth in Early Hebrew Holocaust Fiction

Giacomo Loi

*Abstract:* This paper explores how classical myth served as a narrative tool in two Holocaust-themed short stories by Aharon Appelfeld and Michal Govrin, allowing the writers to grapple with the unrepresentable horror of the Shoah. Examining Aharon Appelfeld's Odyssean reference in the short story 'Bertha' and Michal Govrin's Aeschylean inspiration in the story 'The End of the Pythia,' the paper argues that the use of myth provides an analogical framework, bypassing the limitations of realism and the taboo of the incomparability of the Holocaust. Special attention is given to the generational difference of the writers, their relationship to the Holocaust, their narrative choices, and different modes of engagement with myth itself. Furthermore, the article addresses the complex relationship between classical culture and Jewish culture in the post-Holocaust era, acknowledging both the appropriation of classics by Nazi and fascist regimes and the writers' reclamation, however troubled, of this cultural patrimony.

*Keywords:* Holocaust fiction, classical reception, myth, analogy, Aharon Appelfeld, Michal Govrin.

The story was really his life, and he always had to write it from the beginning. Once when he was a little discouraged he told me he was rolling the story uphill like Sisyphus. Then he apologized for never having enough time or energy to listen to my story, but as he saw it, all stories were cut from the same cloth, 'except that sometimes you have to push the stone uphill, and at other times you yourself are the cumbersome stone.'

David Grossman, *See Under: Love* (1986), 189

Reflecting on the post-Holocaust world and the issue of literary representation, Sidra DeKoven-Ezrahi writes that

[w]ith respect to the structural metamorphoses that have taken place in response to historical discontinuities, the visual arts appear to be more amenable than the literary medium to the representation of violent disruptions in human affairs and distortions of the human image ... [W]e can trace both the initial resistance and the stages of accommodation of the novel and other literary forms to the experience of social disruption and brutality which had begun to be manifested long before Auschwitz. ... Still, the next stage, even in the literary history of violence, seems to test and transgress the boundaries of the admissible in art.<sup>1</sup>

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\* This paper is part of my work as a fellow at the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah in Paris (2021–22). Sections of this paper were first presented at a conference at Boston

Although early twentieth century literature had increasingly made room for representing physical and psychological violence, the Holocaust posed a previously unseen challenge to the literary medium.

The recourse to myth as a way to force the boundaries of representability has been already recognized in English-language Holocaust fiction. In his analysis of recent Jewish American novels such as Judy Budnitz's *If I Told You Once* (1999) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), Philippe Codde claims that '[m]yth and fairy tales provide the third generation with a means to imaginatively approach and represent an otherwise unknowable and/or irrepresentable past ... [O]ne has to acknowledge that these authors have found a new way to represent—and to commemorate—a painful past that is commonly considered beyond representation.'<sup>2</sup> As Codde writes, these authors notably belong to the English-speaking 'third generation,' that is writers who generation-wise could be grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, and who write in the diaspora.<sup>3</sup> As such, they are quite removed from the historical events they engage with, and they mobilize expressive resources seemingly at the center of the Western canon, the cultural context they operate in. For example, in his search for the lost past of his Eastern European Jewish family, Jonathan Safran Foer reinvents the origin of his family through the myth of Aphrodite's birth.

In this article, building on Codde's matter-of-fact observations on the use of myth in the diasporic third generation, I argue that classical myth has provided an original way to open up the possibilities for fiction to reflect on the boundless, unrepresentable horror of the Holocaust in Modern Hebrew literature too—in this case, from the very inception, particularly problematic and experimental, of Holocaust short fiction in Modern Hebrew in the 1960s and 1970s (afterwards, the discourse changed, as the Holocaust found a new cultural centrality, both in Israel and internationally as well as on paper and on screen, thanks to the acclaim of novels such as David Grossman's Hebrew-language 1986 *See Under: Love* and motion pictures such as Claude Lanzmann's 1985 *Shoah* and Steven Spielberg's 1993 *Schindler's List*).<sup>4</sup> To substantiate this claim, I analyze here two texts, both belonging to the genre of the short story, written in this early period. While,

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University in 2019 and again, in an expanded format, at the annual conference of the ISPCS (2022) and in a lecture I gave at Sorbonne Nouvelle (2023). I am grateful to the anonymous readers and to the editors of *SCI* for their comments and guidance. I am indebted to the Azrieli Foundation for their unwavering support and to Guido Furci, Vered Lev Kenaan, Uri S. Cohen, and Neta Stahl for the rich intellectual exchanges on the topics of this article. My heartfelt gratitude goes to Michal Govrin for our precious, memorable conversations.

I wish to dedicate this contribution to the memory of Prof. Nurit Yaari (1947–2025), who greatly encouraged me – with her characteristically theatrical, sharp style – when I was starting out on my research on the encounter of 'Athens and Jerusalem,' as she would have put it. May her passion for the meeting of different cultures, for painstaking research, and for democracy live on as her legacy.

<sup>1</sup> DeKoven Ezrahi (1980), 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> Codde (2009), 73. On Jonathan Safran Foer's use of classical mythology, see also Codde (2007); on the use of fairy tales, see also Hunter (2013).

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of 'generations' with their respective positioning vis-à-vis the Holocaust and its memory, see Jilovsky (2017).

<sup>4</sup> On the change of the Israeli Holocaust discourse and literary treatment, see Sicher (2001).

admittedly, these texts are not representative of a broad trend in the use of classical myth, their detailed examination allows us to isolate myth as a narrative strategy used in order to find a new way to recount and interrogate the shock and trauma of the Holocaust, as I will explain below.

The two Hebrew writers I examine engage with myth in different ways, each one from their particular positioning vis-à-vis the Holocaust: Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld (1932–2018) implicitly alludes to Penelope's weaving and unweaving in the *Odyssey*, whereas Michal Govrin (b. 1950), daughter of a Holocaust survivor mother, teases out of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* the enigmatic appearance of justice in Nazi-occupied Europe and in the camps. By and large, the writing of fiction on the Holocaust (as opposed to witness literature, by necessity written by survivors) was taboo in the first decades after the Holocaust—even when written by survivors like Appelfeld. Indeed, the perceived 'sacredness' of the Holocaust as a collective tragedy imposed the obligation of full adherence to truth, or, at the very least, to the personal memory of the survivors.<sup>5</sup> The same question of the legitimacy of Holocaust fiction writing was even more pressing regarding the second generation: if they were not there, what can they say about it?<sup>6</sup> Notably, as we will see, the two Hebrew authors not only choose different moments in the representation of the experience of the Holocaust, but also different narrative modes: Appelfeld, a survivor and the first writer of Hebrew Holocaust fiction, focuses on the aftermath of the Holocaust in realistic terms, while Govrin, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, leads the reader into the disorientating experience of the Nazi camp by opting for the register of the fantastic. Their statuses as a survivor (Appelfeld) and as a second-generation survivor (Govrin) directly condition their narrative choices. Notwithstanding these differences, they both make use of classical myth, adapting it to their respective narrative modes, and so does David Grossman, a member of the 'second generation by adoption' (that is, who has no family ties to the Holocaust itself) in his monumental novel *See Under: Love*.<sup>7</sup> In this metaliterary novel, where the plain of the real, of the linguistic, and of the metaphorical are continuously exchanged and their boundaries blurred, the idiomatic expression inspired by the Sisyphus myth carries important weight, as it relates to the very mechanism of trauma and to its narratability. While I read Appelfeld's and Govrin's stories in their respective contexts, by including Grossman's *See Under: Love* in the epigraph I want to suggest that the attempts at pushing of the boundaries of realism, including the use of myth as an analogy, which will culminate in Grossman's novel, can already be seen in some of the strategies put in place by these earlier writers.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On the antagonism between memory and the need for fictional expression, see Appelfeld (1994), xi–x.

<sup>6</sup> On Holocaust literature between witnessing and fiction, see Foley (1982). On the controversy on representation and legitimacy of Holocaust fiction in Israel and abroad, see Mohrag (1997) and Milner (2003).

<sup>7</sup> For this expression, see Hartman (1996). 8. On Grossman's generational positioning, see Yudkin (1998), 170–6.

<sup>8</sup> On Grossman's novel, see Mohrag (1997), (1999). I will offer elsewhere an investigation of Grossman's use of myth in comparison with Franco-American Jewish author Jonathan Littell's monumental novel *The Kindly Ones* (originally published in French as *Les Bienveillantes*, 2006), whose title references the benevolent Eumenides, the favorable

Specifically, I argue here that the recourse to classical myth is motivated by the nature of myth as a narrative and, at the very same time, by its unreality.<sup>9</sup> Before proceeding to clarify this claim, I must point out that such a recourse takes place amidst conflicting narratives on the relationship between classical culture and Jewish culture. On one hand, it is generally a given that classical culture represents the polar opposite of Jewish culture, following the traditional, nineteenth-century opposition of Athens and Jerusalem. On the other hand, and as a result of this first narrative of difference, the reference to the non-Jewish, modern and ancient classics—perceived as Western ‘high culture’—signals a reach for the supposedly universal as opposed to the peculiarly Jewish on the part of the author.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the classical reference corroborates and, at the same time, overrides the traditional opposition: through the recourse to an external cultural memory, it reaches for a supposed universality by stepping on and beyond the perceived boundaries of the Jewish.<sup>11</sup> Both of these narratives apply to any reference to classical culture in modern Jewish culture, but they become more acute in the making of Hebrew culture. The use of classical myth and culture in general in modern Hebrew culture has been the subject of several studies. The attempt at universalizing or ‘deparochializing’ Jewish culture through the recourse to classical culture, perceived as a prestigious, founding cultural patrimony of modern Europe, has been demonstrated by Yaakov Shavit, Kenneth B. Moss, and Yotam Cohen, who have underscored different aspects of this attempt, highlighting the long influence of the *Haskalah* (the so called Jewish Enlightenment) and of the politics of translation into Hebrew.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, Glenda Abramson and several contributions in a recent volume edited by Vered Lev Kenaan and Patricia Rosenmeyer have underscored that the recourse to myth signals a negotiation between Hebrew culture and diasporic European culture, again as a gesture of elevation to an apparently universal culture.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, I have elsewhere suggested that classical myth has been used in Hebrew culture as an alternative to Jewish myth: what Jewish (Biblical or Talmudic) myth cannot afford (such as a *katabasis*, the descent to the Underworld), classical myth can do.<sup>14</sup>

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transmutation of the Erinyes at the end of the last tragedy of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. On the use of myth in Littell’s novel, see Grethlein (2012).

<sup>9</sup> On the limits of representation of the Holocaust, see Langer (1975), Young (1988), Kogan (1991), Friedländer (1992), LaCapra (1994), Hartman (1996), Spargo and Ehrenreich (2010).

<sup>10</sup> On these strategies, see, on Modern Hebrew culture, Abramson (1990); more in general, on modern Jewish culture, see the seminal Shavit (1997).

<sup>11</sup> I stress that broad, absolute categories such as the ‘West,’ the ‘universal,’ the ‘Jewish,’ as well as ‘low/high’ culture are but cultural, historically determined constructs themselves, that the scholar must treat carefully, wary of any essentialism these terms are purported to represent. Undeniably, though, these categories do orient much of Hebrew classical reception, as they operate at the level of common perceptions, both among the writers and among their audiences; therefore, they must be carefully analyzed. On classical reception as cultural memory, see Scherer and Schneider (2024). On the opposition of ‘Athens and Jerusalem’ or, in Matthew Arnold’s terms, of ‘Hebraism and Hellenism,’ see Gruen (2009) and Levenson (2020).

<sup>12</sup> See Shavit (1997), Moss (2008), and Cohen (2018).

<sup>13</sup> See Abramson (1990), Lev Kenaan and Rosenmeyer (2025).

<sup>14</sup> Loi (2021).

To be sure, the recourse to classical myth becomes more strident when the topic at hand is the Holocaust. Indeed, in this case, the use of classical references does not only challenge the boundaries of Jewishness, as if profaning a sacred space—an irreversible watershed of Jewish history—with the un-Jewish, but it also goes against the appropriation of classical culture by the Nazi fascist, antisemitic regimes.<sup>15</sup> In his study on classical references in Modern Hebrew poetry, Giddon Ticotsky aptly notes that, in Hebrew Israeli culture, references to classical culture in Hebrew are a way to restore European humanism after the barbarism of the catastrophe of World War II and of the Holocaust: '[T]he atrocities of the recent war had lowered the walls separating the competing cultures [of Judaism and of the classical world]. In the face of Fascism and Nazism, they must have been seen as belonging to the same threatened civilization.'<sup>16</sup> Ticotsky's point certainly captures one possible solution to the problem, but I would further argue that the recourse to classical culture is also the ultimate way for Hebrew and, more in general, Jewish writers to lay claim or, better, re-claim a prized Western cultural patrimony that had been appropriated by the Nazi and fascist regimes, as well as a way to acknowledge the disfigurement of such patrimony by (as well as its complicity with) those regimes.

In this matter, Appelfeld and Govrin, as we will see, differ, as each one takes a different stance vis-à-vis classical culture. While Appelfeld uses classical myth implicitly, as a reference to a possibly shared collective knowledge, Govrin both hints directly at classical myth and problematizes its use, as we will see in one of her poems. Such a problematization surfaces not only in Govrin's writings with regard to myth, as we will see, but also in George Perec's earlier French-language novel *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (*W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, 1975), where the Nazi obsession for ancient Greece and the cult of the classical body—well exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl's famous documentary film *Olympia* (1938) on the Berlin Olympic games of 1936—is transfigured into a dehumanized dystopia inspired by ancient Sparta (notably, in this case, the target is not classical myth, but the very self-identification of the Nazis with an ideologically fabricated version of ancient Greece).<sup>17</sup> The coexistence of the uses and of the denunciation of the classics in these cases adumbrate the unsolvable paradox on European humanism that lies at the center of much of George Steiner's critical production: how could the humanistic civilization of the West generate the barbarian, annihilating violence of the twentieth century? Is this the culture that was appropriated by the perpetrator or, perhaps, that generated the perpetrator himself?<sup>18</sup>

Steiner was also the scholar who recognized one of the features of the memorialization and narration of the Holocaust, namely its incomparability.<sup>19</sup> The impossibility of finding

<sup>15</sup> It is hard to do justice to the vast bibliography produced on this topic in the last decades. For a preliminary orientation, see at least Chapoutot (2008) and Roche and Demetriou (2018).

<sup>16</sup> Ticotsky (2023), 317.

<sup>17</sup> On the Nazi appropriation of Sparta as a model, see Rebenich (2018), with further bibliography. On the contrast between the Fascist use of Classics and the central reference to the Odysseus myth in Primo Levi's memoir *If This Is A Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947), see Cohen (2012), with further bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> On Steiner's paradox, see Chatterley (2011). See also Goldwyn (2022) on post-Holocaust receptions of Homer, as the founding text of the classical tradition, among Jewish intellectuals.

<sup>19</sup> Steiner (1987), 158–60. See also Rosenberg and Silverman (1992) and Bauman (1989).

adequate verbalization for the horror of the death camps should, hypothetically, be conducive to a strategy of analogy in narrating the Holocaust, 'transforming the strange into the familiar.'<sup>20</sup> However, the magnitude of the horror, as an incommensurable event in Jewish as well as in human history, has imposed the taboo of any *historical* comparison. I would argue that the turn to myth inserts itself in the slippery territory of analogy, as myth provides an analogy on a plain other from the real or, most importantly, the historical, thus allowing writers to bypass the incomparability of the Shoah. As a narrative, its structure permits analogy with other events; at the same time, its a-historicity preserves the imposed, sacralized boundaries of historical comparison.

Within Hebrew Holocaust literature, such incomparability was established already a few years after the Holocaust, in Uri Zvi Greenberg's groundbreaking poetical collection *Streets of the River* (*Rehovot ha-nahar*, 1952), the major Hebrew poetic response to the Holocaust and among the earliest.<sup>21</sup> Even though Greenberg does use realistic images to represent different moments of the Holocaust, he also 'discovered that language itself was destroyed,' as Dan Miron astutely observes.<sup>22</sup> One of his poems, 'We were not likened to dogs,' focuses on the impossibility of finding a suitable *comparandum* for the events of the Shoah. Towards the end of the poem, Greenberg writes:

Are there other analogies to this, our disaster that came to us at their hands?

There are no other analogies (all words are shades of shadows)—

Therein lies the horrifying phrase: No other analogies!

For every cruel torture that man may yet do to man in a Gentile country—

He who comes to compare will state: He was tortured like a Jew.<sup>23</sup>

The Hebrew term מַשָּׁל (*mashal*) can be variously translated as 'parable,' 'example,' or 'analogy.' Throughout the poem, Greenberg examines various similitudes that were applied to the Jews who died in the Holocaust, likened to 'dogs' or to 'sheep to the slaughter.' While poignantly visualizing each of them, the poem questions the viability of such similitudes as ways to describe or approach the horror of the Shoah. Notably, all these similitudes come from the field of real, natural experiences. Greenberg concludes that there is no useful comparison in events within the boundaries of history because the Holocaust itself sets a new starting point for reality altogether, one that any future analogy will need to consider.

It is with this poem in mind that I want to think through the case studies under examination. While Philippe Codde, as we have seen at the beginning of this section, limits himself to register the use of myth in diasporic, third generation Holocaust literature, I want to dig deeper, uncovering the structuring pattern that underlies and justifies the recourse to myth. Reprising my previous inquiry regarding the opportunities afforded by classical myth, in this article I ask what classical myth can do that other

<sup>20</sup> For the expression, see Jewish American Holocaust writer Cynthia Ozick's essay 'Metaphor and Memory' (Ozick (1989), 333). On the problematic relationship between Holocaust fiction and realism and the turn to the fantastic, see Mohrag (1997).

<sup>21</sup> For an introduction to this collection, see Mintz (1984), 165–202 and Abramovich (2020).

<sup>22</sup> Miron (2010), 240.

<sup>23</sup> Translated in Mintz (1966), 124–6.

narrative forms cannot. In my view, Greenberg's poem aptly explains the literary strategies of some of the earliest pioneers of Holocaust prose-fiction such as Appelfeld and Govrin: The two writers turn to myth especially because myth allows them to bypass the incomparability of the Holocaust itself, thus providing a possible, if unreal, narrative analogy. In what follows I will analyze chronologically two short stories by these authors, highlighting each writer's relationship to the Holocaust, the narrative mode of their choice, and their use of classical myth. In the conclusion, I will also underscore the different ways in which the two authors, through their use of classical myth, configure their relationship to the European humanism after the Shoah.

#### PENELOPE OR THE PRISONER OF MEMORY: AHARON APPELFELD'S 'BERTHA'

Aharon Appelfeld, a child survivor, was the first and most important voice of Hebrew Holocaust fiction. Born to an assimilated family as Erwin Appelfeld in Jadova, near Czernowitz, in Romanian Ruthenia (presently Ukraine), he managed to escape from the concentration camp where he had been imprisoned. After spending several years in hiding in Eastern Europe, he joined the Russian Red Army, reaching Southern Italy. From there, he arrived in Mandatory Palestine in 1946, where he learned Hebrew and attended the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup> In the 1960s he started publishing mainly short stories in Hebrew. Later on, in the late 1970s, he switched genre, going on to write an impressive number of novels.

As is typical of Appelfeld's narrative world, the writer avoids confronting the horror of the concentration camps. Instead of 'looking directly at the sun,' to use Appelfeld's own formulation, his fiction explores the margins of the Holocaust, either looking back at pre-Holocaust Jewish life, or forward, to post-Holocaust existence.<sup>25</sup> As such, a considerable number of stories, mainly written in the 1960s, deal with the integration of survivors into Israeli society. The short story 'Bertha,' first published in the literary journal *'Akhshav* and subsequently included in Appelfeld's first short story collection, *Smoke* ('*Ashan*, 1962), is one such story, which sees at the center two characters, Max and the eponymous Bertha, who are vaguely yet clearly defined as Holocaust survivors through references to 'the big escape,' 'the day of liberation,' and to the forest and the snow as typical markers of the Eastern European landscape. The two characters, as well as the other characters around them, do not seem to be part of Israeli society. In fact, while the story takes place in a few well-known streets and parks in Jerusalem, the names of the two protagonists, Max and Bertha, and of Max's would-be fiancé, Mitzi, are not only not Hebrew names, as it was expected in post-independence Israel, but they are not even Jewish names. Rather, these are names that mark the original degree of apparent assimilation of these characters into non-Jewish society in Europe: uprooted from their home countries, they do not acclimatize to Israeli society nor can they go back to their Jewish roots, which were severed before their birth, as Michèle Tauber acutely observes.<sup>26</sup> In this way, they remain lonely characters, unable to connect backwards or forward. Their existence is thus organized around Max's routine. While he travels widely throughout the

<sup>24</sup> On Appelfeld's biography, see his autobiographical novel *Story of a Life* (*Sipur hayyim*, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Lang (2000), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Tauber (2015), 65. On assimilated Jews in the Holocaust, see Appelfeld's own reflections in Appelfeld (1994), 7–10.

year, Bertha stays home, longing for Max to come back and thinking about him in his absence:

In winter, he would return. Perspiring, a knapsack on his back, he would bring with him the fresh scent of worlds unknown here. His comings and goings were quiet. You never knew whether he was happy to leave or happy to return. Inside, in the small room, life remained unchanged. Bertha would sit on the floor, knitting. It seemed as the passing of years did not touch her. She remained just as he had left her in summer, small, dwarfish even, and quite unaltered. ‘Maxie,’ she would exclaim, as a crack of light would come through the door. Throughout the long months she had waited for this light. As the door opened, her gaze would fall on him, helplessly.<sup>27</sup>

Appelfeld sets out the main features of the story, such as the contrast between the travelling male protagonist, the man of the outside, where years and seasons go by in a cyclical order, as opposed to the claustrophobic, yet protective interior of the unchanging room, where Bertha lives confined in a seemingly suspended time, as she waits for the man.<sup>28</sup>

She was stubbornly loyal, another quality that was not quite human. All summer long she would sit and knit fantastic patterns in strange colors. ‘I’m knitting for Maxie,’ she would say. They were not sweaters. A dumb smile would appear on her face at the sight of the patterns. In the end she would unravel them and then the same wool would appear on the needles, year after year.<sup>29</sup>

Bertha’s raveling and unraveling as well as her loyalty probably allude to the weaving and unweaving practiced by Penelope, the faithful spouse of Odysseus, an episode that appears three times throughout the *Odyssey*, recounted by Antinoos (*Od.* 2.85–122), by Penelope herself to Odysseus (19.137–58), and, after the massacre of the wooers, in the Underworld by one of the dead wooers (24.145–9). As Penelope says,

ἐνθα καὶ ἡματὶ μὲν ὑφαίνεσκον μέγαν ἱστόν,  
νύκτας δ’ ἀλλύεσκον, ἐπεὶ δαΐδας παραθείμην.  
ὥς τρίετες μὲν ἔληθον ἐγὼ καὶ ἔπειθον Ἀχαιοὺς·  
ἀλλ’ ὅτε τέτρατον ἦλθεν ἔτος καὶ ἐπήλυθον ὦραι,  
μηνῶν φθινόντων, περὶ δ’ ἡματα πόλλ’ ἐτελέσθη,  
καὶ τότε δὴ με διὰ δμωιάς, κύνας οὐκ ἀλεγούσας,  
εἶλον ἐπελθόντες καὶ ὁμόκλησαν ἐπέεσσιν.  
ὥς τὸ μὲν ἐξετέλεσσα, καὶ οὐκ ἐθέλουσ’, ὑπ’ ἀνάγκης·

day by day I would weave at the great web, but by night I would unravel it, when I had had torches placed beside me. Thus for three years I kept the Achaeans from knowing, and beguiled them; but when the fourth year came, as the seasons rolled on, as the months

<sup>27</sup> Appelfeld (1985), 145.

<sup>28</sup> On Appelfeld’s topographical imagination in *Bertha*, see Schwartz (2001), 49–52.

<sup>29</sup> Appelfeld (1985), 147.

waned, and the many days were brought in their course, then it was that by the help of my maids, shameless creatures and reckless, they came upon me and caught me, and upbraided me loudly. So I finished the web against my will, perforce.<sup>30</sup>

This allusion is quite surprising. As Alan Mintz writes, even though ‘Appelfeld’s chosen language is Hebrew, his style ... is barren of allusions to previous Jewish texts.’<sup>31</sup> All the more the allusion to Homer’s *Odyssey*—notably implicit, with no name or direct connection made by the author—strikes the reader of the story. When detected, (1) the allusion serves first of all to highlight contrast: While the Homeric queen has a plan to beguile the wooers by keeping them waiting for as long as she is not done weaving, Bertha only beguiles herself, ignoring the outside world and the passing of seasons and years, as if the unshaped cloth were time itself, on which she is forced to constantly return—in a way similar to the Sisyphus myth. Penelope’s shrewdness, devised to preserve her faithfulness to her legitimate husband, draws attention to the contrast with the helpless, animal-like (‘another quality that was not quite human’) attachment Bertha has developed for Max. She is unable to organize her life in any constructive way.

Bertha is presented not only as a loyal woman, just like Penelope, but also as ‘a princess, a devil, a gypsy, something that could not be contained in any human measure.’<sup>32</sup> Bertha’s inhuman character represents an altered state of the young woman, who is not able to understand the patterns, and who is not actually able to knit a useful sweater. The knitting reflects her childish, obsessive fixation:

It [her body] asked for nothing except to be left here, among those skeins of wool, to sit and to knit thus, like a spider, like a bee; you couldn’t call it stupidity, idiocy, or any similar names called to mind by that strangeness. It was something different, something that a man like Max couldn’t give a name to, but could feel.<sup>33</sup>

Her limited ability to communicate verbally makes it apparent that she suffers from mental problems, just as her sitting on the floor shows her child-like, dependent quality. Max can identify the moment in which she stopped dealing with the ever-changing present:

... she was the same Bertha that had been handed over to him during the big escape when the others could not take her, when the only thing they could do was to give her to him. He hadn’t been able to carry her either, but he couldn’t throw her into the snow. ... From the day they had reached this country, oblivion had overcome her. Her memory froze at a certain point. You couldn’t make her disclose anything from the past, nor was she capable of absorbing anything new. “Some pipe is stopped up.” This feeling, oversimplified as it might be, remained a sort of certainty that he could not doubt, feeling as he did something was clogged up in him, too. This had been several years ago, but perhaps now as well.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, (2) in stark contrast to the cunning stratagem of Penelope’s, Appelfeld’s reference to Penelope becomes a symbol of Bertha’s inability to cope with the present, taking

<sup>30</sup> *Od.* 19.149–56, trans. Murray.

<sup>31</sup> Mintz (1984), 12. Mintz (1984), 203–38 offers an excellent introduction to Appelfeld’s narrative world.

<sup>32</sup> Appelfeld (1985), 154.

<sup>33</sup> Appelfeld (1985), 154. On Bertha’s possible connection with the Philomela myth, see Amir (2018), 62–3.

<sup>34</sup> Appelfeld (1985), 148.

refuge, instead, in a cyclical, pointless activity. The pattern of Penelope's weaving and unweaving serves as a mythical, analogical pattern for the frozen, repetitive return of traumatic memories.<sup>35</sup> In turn, as if in mirror, the implicit reference to Penelope can also highlight a key aspect of the other protagonist of the story, namely Max's Odyssean travels. These travels are repeated in a continuous routine of departure and return, which allows the character to move outside of Bertha's crystallized time and to age throughout the seasons; moreover, the narrator adds that, as soon as Max comes home, 'like a weary traveler, [he] would sink into a long slumber that lasted through the winter.'<sup>36</sup> As it turns out, his travels and his long winter sleep are nothing but an attempt to push away, if not to wipe out, his memory of the past.

The initial situation comes to a crisis when Max's colleagues, also Holocaust survivors, try to help him find a wife. Max and Mitzi decide to commit Bertha to a psychiatric ward. In this way, the bond between Bertha and Max would be dissolved, while Mitzi could take over the role of life companion as a proper wife. When Bertha is finally committed to the ward, her health deteriorates so much as to cause her death. In the final scene, Max, unable to think clearly, wanders the streets of Jerusalem mourning Bertha.

As it turns out, Max and Bertha represent not only opposite, but also complementary characters: while Max seeks travel as forgetfulness, Bertha seeks stability in her frozen memory. While one can attempt a realistic reading of the short story, the very presence of myth—with Penelope and Odysseus transfiguring the protagonists into mythical characters—alludes to the possibility of offering a symbolic reading of it. As Gila Ramras Rauch notes, 'Bertha [can be read] as a metonym for Max's psyche. She is the embodiment of his life, frozen to a certain point, not to be changed. Their connection is more than dependency; Bertha tries to complete her hold on Max, and Max tries to break away.'<sup>37</sup> Perhaps, rather than Max's psyche, Bertha represents more precisely 'all of Max's memories,'<sup>38</sup> as Yigal Schwartz writes, or even 'Max's traumatic lacuna,' according to Dana Amir.<sup>39</sup> While Bertha represents Max's repressed Holocaust memories, Max willingly seeks sleep and travel, two ways to escape from his memories, just like other Holocaust survivors depicted in Appelfeld's fiction, like the sleepy Bartfuss in the Jaffa-set short novel *The Immortal Bartfuss* (*Bartfuss ben ha-almavet*, 1983) or Erwin Siegelbaum who yearly returns to the same places in Eastern Europe in the novel *The Iron Tracks* (*Mesilat barzel*, 1991), in a cycle which resembles Max's own recurring journeys.<sup>40</sup> As the character Siegelbaum says, 'in this repetition lies a strange hopefulness,' a form of familiar, comforting routine.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, Max's attempt to separate himself from Bertha does not only respond to the social and sexual dynamics

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<sup>35</sup> For the early reception of the collection, see Itzhaki (2011), 87–90.

<sup>36</sup> Appelfeld (1985), 145.

<sup>37</sup> Ramras-Rauch (1994), 50.

<sup>38</sup> Schwartz (2001), 49.

<sup>39</sup> Amir (2018), 61.

<sup>40</sup> On *The immortal Bartfuss* and *The Iron Tracks*, see Ramras-Rauch (1994), 115–24 and 188–92, respectively.

<sup>41</sup> Appelfeld (1998), 5.

where Max's fiancée wants him to leave the girl, but represents Max's desperate fight with the haunting of memory.

When he does succeed in separating himself from her, from the anchorage of his past, he condemns himself to mental confusion: the story ends with Max unable to function after Bertha's death.<sup>42</sup> Max and Bertha, the man and the woman of the story, represent the polarity forgetfulness-memory. Not only does the symbolic level open a reflection on the individual character's psychic and spiritual world and capacity to face the past, but also suggests a seething dilemma for Israel's national culture, asking questions about its ability or inability to embrace the drama of the survivors beyond some predefined, ritualistic paths traced by Zionism.<sup>43</sup> By way of the oblique reference to Penelope's myth, a symbol of cunning turned into one of trauma and inability to cope with the present, Appelfeld depicts a fictional, metaphorical—that is, by analogy—account of the psychic unrest of two Holocaust survivors. While the geographical setting is accurately sketched with an abundance of toponyms from central Jerusalem, 'Appelfeld consciously suspends the framework of both the historical and the endured time of the Holocaust experience, to raise it to the plain of mythic narrative,' in Gila Ramras-Rauch's words.<sup>44</sup> Compare this critical take with Appelfeld's own words, even though they were written decades after the publication of 'Bertha':

Everything in it [i.e., the Holocaust] already seems so thoroughly unreal, as if it no longer belongs to the experience of our generation, but to mythology. Thence comes the need to bring it down to the human realm. That is not a mechanical problem, but an essential one. When I say "to bring it down," I do not mean to simplify, to attenuate, or to sweeten the horror, but to attempt to make the events speak through the individual and in his language, to rescue the suffering from huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity, and to restore the person's given and family name, to give the tortured person back his human form, which was snatched away from him.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, while Ramras-Rauch notices Appelfeld's 'raising' in 'Bertha' to a mythical level, the writer describes his literary goal with the opposite directionality, as a 'bringing down.' I want to argue that in the story these two aspects are not at odds with each other but rather cooperate. The realistic nature of the characters, with their charged names, compulsive behaviors and localized existence, do 'rescue' the individuality of the trauma. The mythical transfiguration does not obliterate or override this aspect: The meaningfulness of the Penelope reference—which is, significantly, implicit—can be appreciated by the many readers who know, however vaguely, the *Odyssey* or at least the main elements of its plot; however, the story is all the same meaningful without the decoding of the allusion. The reference merely accompanies the characters, offering another possible level of reading. If we accede to it, then we see (as Ramras Rauch correctly does) that Appelfeld elevates this individual narrative into a universal depiction

<sup>42</sup> On Appelfeld's typical, recurring plotlines in *Smoke* and the end of 'Bertha,' see Moked (2011), 489–97.

<sup>43</sup> On Appelfeld's attitude to the Zionist ethos, see Legnaioli (2021).

<sup>44</sup> Ramras-Rauch (1994), 19.

<sup>45</sup> Appelfeld (1994), 39.

of human trauma in the shadow of the Holocaust, finding a balance between the individual and the mythical plain.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, while the writer does not offer an overt critique of myth or of classical culture as the culture appropriated by the perpetrator, putting classical myth to use to represent the mechanism and effects of trauma on Holocaust survivors seems a powerful gesture of claim. At the very least, the author uses myth as a reference to a commonly shared collective, Western patrimony, to which he himself feels entitled to. The use of classical myth is thus devised to ‘open’ the story to a seemingly universal level, beyond the confines of Jewishness, a tendency that has been noted in previous studies on Hebrew culture and the classics.<sup>47</sup>

#### THE NEED FOR A NEW MYTHOPOESIS: MICHAL GOVRIN’S ‘THE END OF THE PYTHIA’

Much different is the case of Michal Govrin. With her, an accomplished theater director and academic, we move to the ‘second generation’ of Holocaust survivors, those who have not directly experienced the horror of the camps, but who have had to cope with their parents’ encumbering, traumatic past—often silenced. Born in Tel Aviv to a *sabra* father and a Holocaust survivor mother of Polish origins, she studied theater at Tel Aviv University, and went on obtaining a doctorate in theater studies in Paris. She has written poetry, short fiction, and later on she turned to novel writing, while also teaching theater and ritual at different Israeli academic institutions, and directing and adapting for the stage many plays. Even though Govrin rose to widespread acclaim in Israel after the publication of her novel *The Name* (*Ha-shem*, 1995), on the troubled itinerary of a child of Holocaust survivors from memory to a messianic hope of redemption, her interest in the Holocaust dates back to the 1970s, when she started writing essays, poems, and short stories on the Shoah and its aftermath.<sup>48</sup> Both in her early poetry and short stories, Govrin finds in classical mythology an indirect, metaphorical way to engage with the Holocaust. However, her use of the classical imaginary is far from a simple adoption of an archetypal symbolism. Indeed, in the poem ‘Won’t You See’ (untitled in the original Hebrew), in which Govrin addresses an unnamed interlocutor, the classical references are openly declared and denied at the same time:

Won’t you see that I am carried out to you on a sea of death  
 Not on the Styx—that noble river in a marble inferno  
 No Charon poles the raft  
 On my cheeks still lie the curls of the brother  
 In whose death I live

<sup>46</sup> On Appelfeld’s recourse to mythical patterns, see also Amati (2024) on the novel *Badenheim 1939* (originally published as *Badenheim ‘ir nofesh*, 1979). For context, on the representation of after-Holocaust trauma, see Felman and Laub (1992) and Caruth (1995), (1996), and (2013). On Homer’s reception between Western and ‘world literature,’ see Graziosi and Greenwood (2007), 1–8.

<sup>47</sup> See the already mentioned Abramson (1990), Shavit (1997), Moss (2008), and Lev Kenaan and Rosenmeyer (2025).

<sup>48</sup> On *The Name*, see Sicher (2005), 156–7.

His breath is the wind in my hair<sup>49</sup>

Govrin's autobiographical experience as a second-generation survivor takes center stage in the poem. Govrin's mother, Regina (Rina) Poser-Laub-Govrin, was a prisoner in the Płaszów labor camp, where she worked for Oskar Schindler's warehouse. Even though she had a chance to be freed, she gave it up in order not to be separated from her child, Marek, who was later to die before the liberation of the camps. It is in Marek's death that the lyric I affirms to live, as an expression of her sense of guilt and unworthiness for being a 'replacement child.'<sup>50</sup>

Although the Styx and Charon, the river and the ferryman of the Greek Underworld, are mentioned, the anaphoric negation denies any identification or even similarity between those mythological references and the Holocaust's 'sea of death.' In this way, Govrin denies the possibility of 'beautifying' the Holocaust.<sup>51</sup> In dealing with the enormity of the Holocaust—an enormity suggested in passing by the comparison between the 'sea of death' as opposed to the river 'Styx'—Govrin focuses on the almost romanticized view of death often suggested by mythological and poetical images, as is evident in the line 'Not on the Styx—that noble river in a marble inferno.' Indeed, as George Steiner writes, '[e]loquence after Auschwitz would be a kind of obscenity (this is the meaning of Theodor Adorno's so often misunderstood call for 'no poetry after Auschwitz').'<sup>52</sup> Thus, ideas usually associated with poetry, like nobility, and the marble as a metonym for an imagined classical antiquity, must be curtly ruled out. The rejection of myth formulated in the poem not only highlights the contrast between the historical reality of the Holocaust as opposed to the fiction of myth, but it also manifests the inadequacy of mythology as an expressive means. As such, the traditional repertoire of myth must be rejected, as it is unable to convey the previously unseen horror of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, what Govrin does not rule out is the possibility of remaking a new mythology, one that will be able to capture the Holocaust and its aftermath.

This take emerges in the classically inspired short story 'The End of the Pythia' (*Kitsah shel ha-Pythia*). This short story was first published in the collection *Hold on to the Sun. Stories and Legends* (*Le-ehoz ba-shemesh: Sipurim ve-agadot*, 1984), although it had been written already in the mid-Seventies, when Govrin was completing her doctorate in theater studies in Paris.<sup>53</sup> In the same collection, several short stories, such as 'Between Two and Four' and 'Evening Ride,' deal indirectly with the Holocaust, with the story 'La Promenade' staging the encounter on the French riviera of a group of Holocaust survivors with some German tourists and the insuppressible return of their traumatic past. Equally indirect in its relation to the Holocaust, 'The End of the Pythia' proceeds by a completely different register, that of a myth-like fable, and by enigmatic references. While no overt reference to the Holocaust is made, it is through the accumulation and sense-making of

<sup>49</sup> Govrin (2010), 3.

<sup>50</sup> See Govrin (2010), 4–24 and Govrin (2025).

<sup>51</sup> A similar take is relevant to any artistic representation of the Holocaust: on fiction and the danger of 'aestheticism,' see Foley (1982), 344.

<sup>52</sup> Steiner (1987), 156.

<sup>53</sup> As I found out from the Michal Govrin's own voice during a phone conversation in October 2019.

the many implicit references that the reader can understand that the dystopian setting of the story alludes to the Shoah, as I show in what follows.

The story recounts the crisis and final demise of the rule of a horrifying, homicidal monster, called ‘the Pythia,’ over a dystopian amusement park, the City of Joy. At its establishment, the City of Joy used to be a pleasant place of free enjoyment, until the Pythia takes over with her many, ever-changing appearances, which do not allow the customers coming in to recognize her. As they enjoy themselves looking at the fattest woman in the world or listening to dwarf musicians or having a good time with money-emitting sensual dolls, the Pythia lies behind every corner ready to chastise the customer.

Many years ago, before the seething land came to rest, in a remote district between high mountains, in a broad valley surrounded by cliffs—full of milling crowds, noisy trams, and hooting trains—lay the greatest entertainment empire which ever existed. The City Fathers had covered the swampy soil of the valley with earth and planks, and in the course of time its bed was stamped down by the feet of revelers, who made their way through the desolate roads of the wilderness in a constant stream of tens of thousands. ... There was nothing, it seemed, to upset the life of the city or cast a shadow over its revels, but for the ancient rule of the thousand-faced Pythia. In the midst of their pleasures, with the foam still spilling over their bellies and the bubbles of grease shining on their lips, those sentenced by the Pythia were executed and fell wallowing with half their lust assuaged. And the more halting and obscure her verdicts, the more swiftly the sentence was carried out. With one of her thousand faces the Pythia would visit the condemned man, and some said that with her hollow visage—the mirror-image of his dread—she would press her lips to his in a farewell kiss.<sup>54</sup>

The Pythia rules the City of Joy by terror and homicide. The Pleasure Tycoons, who profit from the Fun Fair, do not oppose the Pythia, whereas the dogs of the City of Joy hunt her down, only to be beguiled by her, as she feeds them under constantly changing disguises. However, as the number of visitors at the Fun Fair grows unmeasurable and the means of pleasure are beyond control, the power of the Pythia comes to a crisis. The patrons of the City of Joy institute a Pardoning Board and a Breast Beaters Street, where every visitor with a guilty conscience is judged and one of his limbs is horribly enlarged as a Dantesque-like, hellish *contrapasso*. In the end, when the Pythia’s stock of disguises runs out, she is left to face the dogs, who destroy her hut and even bite into her flesh. The Pythia disappears, while the dogs attack one another and a black bird somberly hovers around the City of Joy. Significantly, the story is not titled ‘the death of the Pythia.’ Although her rule is overthrown, there is a sense that she might appear again, elsewhere, under new disguises.

The name of the protagonist, ‘the Pythia,’ points out Govrin’s source of inspiration, namely the priestess at the oracular temple of Apollo in Delphi. In the story, there are numerous references to Delphi and classical mythology, such as the smoke coming out of the earth at the column of the Pythia which references the sulfurous fumes traditionally thought to be connected with the oracles of the Delphian temple of Apollo, and the black bird that contaminates the earth at the end of the story by streaming down on it is based on the Harpies.<sup>55</sup> The very enigma surrounding the Pythia’s character in Govrin’s story

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<sup>54</sup> Govrin (2010), 157–8.

<sup>55</sup> Govrin (2010), 158: ‘The apparition rising above the column planted in the cracks of the steaming earth was a giant clay image of her figure, its head seething with pythons’ (on the

might be an allusion to the puzzling, ambiguous responses the historical Pythia would give to those who questioned her in Delphi.<sup>56</sup> Yet, Govrin's Pythia has little more than the name of the Greek priestess. In the story, the Pythia is a monster of a thousand faces;<sup>57</sup> she is described as having priests herself, thus suggesting her status as a deity;<sup>58</sup> she is not an oracle but the judge of the Fun Fair visitors;<sup>59</sup> she rules the City of Joy by her regime of terror, until her power enters its final moment of crisis.<sup>60</sup>

Just as in her poem 'Won't You See,' Govrin does allude to classical culture and myth, but at the same time avoids a supine relationship with it. Indeed, far from being a full reprisal of any recognizable ancient historical or mythical character, the Pythia turns out to be quite a complex character, as does the interpretation of the gory, somber world she rules. Piecing together the allusions sown by the author throughout the story, I would argue that the City of Joy gestures to Nazi-occupied Europe throughout the years of World War II and to the Nazi concentration, labor, and death camps. In the story—significantly written during the author's Parisian years, in a city that had been a major center of Nazi deportation—the inhabitants of the City of Joy are portrayed as oblivious to the continuous death that surrounds them.<sup>61</sup>

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fumes apparently inspiring the Pythia's oracular power, see Plut. *De defectu oraculorum* 432e and 437c–e). Govrin (2010), 167: 'The dogs spun around with rage when the heavy shadow of a big, dark-eyed bird circled above them... In the descending evening, the big dark bird came streaming down and flooded the earth with a black, bubbling river' (inspired by the Harpies' vengeful defilement of Aeneas' companions' food in Virg. *Aen.* 3.209–11 or by the earlier myth of Phineus in Ap. Rh. *Argonautica* 2.178–300). These sources might have been mediated through later figurative receptions of these texts: for an initial orientation on the reception of the Harpies in the literary and figurative arts, see Reid (1993), vol. 1: 489–90, s.v.

<sup>56</sup> On the Pythia's puzzling oracles, see Sourvinou-Inwood (2017): 'Exactly what form the Pythia's pronouncements took and what the *prophētai* did are matters of controversy. One possibility is that she felt that she received partial signs transmitting fragmentary visions—not gibberish—and that the *prophētai* interpreted these, shaping them into coherent, if ambiguous, responses; this was not an attempt to hedge their bets, but a result of the ambiguity inherent in the god's signs and the Greek perception that ambiguity is the idiom of prophecy.' See also Fontenrose (1978) and Maurizio (2001).

<sup>57</sup> Govrin (2010), 158: 'With one of her thousand faces the Pythia would visit the condemned man, and some said that with her hollow visage—the mirror-image of his dread—she would press her lips to his in a farewell kiss. In vain the City dwellers tried to track down the she-of-the-thousand-faces. Hot in pursuit of the skirt slipping provocatively around the corner, none of them suspected the wrinkled crone knitting baby's booties, in whose guise the Pythia had visited the reveler collapsing in the street.'

<sup>58</sup> Govrin (2010), 159: 'Her priests, too, were swallowed up without a trace in fumes and vapors.'

<sup>59</sup> Govrin (2010), 166: 'Her punishments could not keep up with the scope of the guilt. Sometimes she would pause exhausted to take a breath of air on one of the hills surrounding the City.'

<sup>60</sup> Govrin (2010), 159: 'Even the Pleasure tycoons, who exerted themselves tirelessly to improve the Fair—and pocketed most of its fabulous profits—didn't dare oppose openly the Pythia's reign of terror.' Later on, at p. 162: 'The harsh hand of the Pythia continued to reign undisturbed over the City of Joy.'

<sup>61</sup> On the persecution of Jews in Paris, with a careful reconstruction of the persecutory practices and of the geography of the persecution in the city, see Lehr (2024).

Thus the life of the metropolis continued for many years, and the hearts of its inhabitants grew hardened to the sight of the condemned and their corpses piled up in the streets.<sup>62</sup>

Their indifference can easily be assimilated to the indifference that became prevalent throughout Europe as well as in the camps. Govrin portrays collaborationism too, possibly a reference to the servile collaborationism of Vichy France, just as of other puppet governments across Europe:<sup>63</sup>

The sound of weeping and the cries for mercy were audible in the surrounding streets. Green-capped attendants circulated among the waiting people, and, gripping him firmly under the armpits, conducted the next in line to the entrance of the street. In the street itself the doors and the windows of the houses had been sealed shut, and all along its length, on a jutting stone ledge, sat the elected members of the Pardoning Board. ... The members of the Board, without stopping their chattering, looked him over cursorily, and without undue effort diagnosed the cause of his guilty conscience. Immediately, and in accordance with his sin—slander, gluttony, murder—a long tongue would grow out of his mouth and slide rapidly to the floor...<sup>64</sup>

As the Pardoning Board administers a substitutive penalty, acting in the Pythia's place, they become willing collaborators of the Pythia's regime. The very notion of Fair, a space isolated from the rest where a fabricated, self-contained reality is put on stage, suggests the dark, thoroughly organized reality of Nazi rule—inside as well as outside 'l'univers concentrationnaire,' to use David Rousset's famous formulation—just as arbitrary as the Pythia's rule. Govrin also alludes to Nazi experiments on humans: '[m]any hopes had been pinned on the work of a team of scientists who had developed a strain of animals (so far, small animals) with sterilized souls,'<sup>65</sup> a eugenic experiment for the inhabitants of the city which will take away any sense of guilt that destroys the good life of the Fun Fair.

Within the world of the City of Joy, the Pythia's role is, at the same time, that of a judge and of a bloodthirsty executor. Yet, she also tempts the 'evildoers,' as if out of the desire to provoke her own consequent act of punishment on her subjects. The story, rather than just offering a monstrous cast of the Nazi regime, questions the nature of justice under that regime. Indeed, in Nazi-occupied Europe, the German regime enforced the law, and had judges, clerks, and police as part of its justice system. Govrin here questions the validity, the ethical grounds, and the essence itself of that so-called justice: no matter what 'mask' of justice it put on, the justice system of Nazi Europe was founded on the basic injustice of the systematic use of violence, terror, and homicide, where the normative written law was infiltrated by Nazi ideology and ultimately superseded by the ever-changing arbitrariness of Nazi directives, with the dictator as the ultimate origin, judge, and justification of any act (the so called *Führerprinzip*). No universally valid principle could underpin Nazi law, for that would have been an implicit recognition of human

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<sup>62</sup> Govrin (2010), 162.

<sup>63</sup> On the active cooperation of the Vichy government (1940–44) to the deportation of Jews, see Joly (2018).

<sup>64</sup> Govrin (2010), 164–5.

<sup>65</sup> Govrin (2010), 164.

equality, in contradiction with the regime's racial beliefs.<sup>66</sup> In the introduction to a book significantly titled *The Law in Nazi Germany: Ideology, Opportunism, and The Perversion of Justice*, the editors write: '[A] book about the law in Nazi Germany might strike some readers as an exercise in contradiction. They understand the Nazi regime as a tyranny, characterized by arbitrary rule, enforced through intimidation and terror. The hallmark of Nazi society, as they understand it, was not law, but lawlessness. In many respects, they are correct.'<sup>67</sup>

The question of justice is intrinsically linked to the original inspiration for the story. According to Govrin herself, she was inspired by a performance of Luca Ronconi's version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* at the Sorbonne (1972).<sup>68</sup> Notably, in this pessimistic version of Aeschylus' tragedies, the setting of the *Eumenides* hinted at the 1930s. Besides, Govrin's dialogue with Greek theater and with Aeschylus in particular had started much before, when, at age nineteen, she had translated a French edition of Aeschylus' *The Persians* for an experimental staging at the Beit Zvi School of Performing Arts.<sup>69</sup>

Govrin's Pythia opens up a space of reflection on justice precisely because of her contradictory characterization. In turn, the contradictory nature of the Pythia descends from the fact that the Pythia takes the features of different characters from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. These characters embody the opposite notions of justice in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the third and last tragedy of the *Oresteia*, where Aeschylus stages the mythical trial of Orestes. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* stages the conflict between two different kinds of justice. On one hand, the Erinyes represent vengeance as a form of justice; on the other, Apollo embodies justice *qua* persuasive thinking and compensation. As the latter kind of justice is promoted to be the only form of justice, by the adjudication of the city goddess Athena, the former inevitably becomes a form of injustice.<sup>70</sup> As a result, by the end of the *Eumenides*, to commit an act of vengeance instead of seeking a compensatory penalty has become unlawful and unjust. Indeed, at the end of the play, the Erinyes change their appearance, turning into the benevolent eponymous Eumenides. Just as Aeschylus dramatizes the conflict between opposite forms of justice, Govrin's Pythia represents the contradictory nature of justice under the Nazi regime.

Apollo's Pythia does appear in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* as the priestess of Apollo, the enemy of the avenging, monstrous Erinyes. Despite the name, Govrin's Pythia resembles the Erinyes in their terrifying qualities. Moreover, Govrin's Pythia is concerned with administering a punishment once the quota of pleasure has been reached. As the Erinyes themselves explain in *Eumenides*, their role is quite similar:

ὄψη δὲ κεῖ τις ἄλλος ἤλιπεν βροτῶν  
ἢ θεὸν ἢ ξένον τιν' ἀσεβῶν

<sup>66</sup> For an overview of the Nazi justice system and of its theoretical and practical work in Germany as well as in the occupied areas of Europe, see Pauler-Stunder (2020), with bibliography.

<sup>67</sup> Steinweis (2013), 1.

<sup>68</sup> On Ronconi's version, see Bierl (1999), 77–86.

<sup>69</sup> On this translation see Yaari (2018), 176–7 and 404.

<sup>70</sup> For this interpretation, see Di Benedetto (1989), 32. See also Cohen (1986) and Kennedy (2009), 19–45.

ἢ τοκέας φίλους,  
ἔχονθ' ἕκαστον τῆς δίκης ἐπάξια.

and you will see there such other mortals as have grievously sinned,  
acting impiously toward a god, or a host or a guest,  
or their dead parents,  
each receiving what is appropriate to satisfy justice.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, like the Pythia's unfailing homicidal rage, the Erinyes' punishment follows men even as far as the land of the dead:

τοῦτο γὰρ λάχος διαν-  
ταία Μοῖρ' ἐπέ-  
κλωσεν ἐμπέδως ἔχειν,  
θνατῶν τοῖσιν αὐτουργίαι  
ξυμπέσωσιν μάταιοι,  
τοῖς ὀμαρτεῖν ὄφρ' ἄν  
γᾶν ὑπέλθῃ· θανῶν δ'  
οὐκ ἄγαν ἐλεύθερος.

For this was the lot  
that death-dealing Destiny  
spun for us in perpetuity:  
for those mortals to whom there happen  
wanton murders of kinsfolk,  
to dog their footsteps till  
they go beneath the earth—and when he has died  
he is not all that free.

ἐπὶ τόν, ὦ, διόμεναι  
κρατερόν ὄνθ' ὅμως ἀμαυ-  
ροῦμεν †ὕφ' αἵματος νέου†.

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<sup>71</sup> Aesch. *Eum.* 269–72, trans. Sommerstein. See also Aesch. *Eum.* 307–11.

We chase him—oh!—  
 and powerful though he may be, still we enfeeble him  
 <till he is drained of> blood.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their horrific appearance, even the Erinyes are not devoid of allure, just like Govrin's Pythia, who entices her victims into more pleasures, directly or through her tempting dolls:

ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ τεθυμένῳ  
 τόδε μέλος, παρακοπά,  
 παραφορά, φρενοδαλῆς  
 ὕμνος ἐξ Ἑρινύων,  
 δέσμιος φρενῶν, ἀφόρ-  
 μιγκτος, αὐτὸνὰ βροτοῖς.

And over the sacrificial victim  
 this is my song: insanity,  
 derangement, self-destroying  
 chant of the Furies  
 that binds the mind, sung  
 to no lyre, a song that shrivels men up!<sup>73</sup>

As it turns out, Govrin's Pythia, named after Apollo's Pythia but much like the inimical Erinyes, is a mixture of the features of the characters in conflict in Aeschylus' tragedy. The multiplicity of names by which the Erinyes are designated in the Greek tradition could have inspired Govrin's thousand-faced Pythia, who changes appearance just as the Erinyes change name and attributes (quite differently, Aeschylus' Erinyes change their appearance only once, in their final transformation into benevolent entities). Besides, one could apply to her Pythia Athena's words on the Erinyes:

... ὅμοιαι δ' οὐδενὶ σπαρτῶν γένει,  
 οὔτ' ἐν θεαῖσι πρὸς θεῶν ὀρωμέναις  
 οὔτ' οὖν βροτείοις ἐμπερεῖς μορφώμασιν.

You resemble no race of begotten beings,  
 neither among the goddesses who are beheld by gods

<sup>72</sup> Aesch. *Eum.* 333–40 and 357–9, trans. Sommerstein.

<sup>73</sup> Aesch. *Eum.* 328–33, trans. Sommerstein.

nor is your appearance similar to that of mortals.<sup>74</sup>

The disorientation of the reader in the face of such an enigmatic character as the Pythia represents Govrin's attempt to capture the difficulty of the individual to understand the blurred boundaries between good and evil, the ethical and the unethical, justice and injustice under a totalitarian regime that appropriated justice to mask—a most appropriate metaphor in this case—the regime's arbitrariness.

In this reflection on justice Govrin is profoundly indebted to Aeschylus (as well as to Ronconi's 'semiotic' adaptation).<sup>75</sup> To be sure, Govrin does not merely loan the characters as they appear in Aeschylus. Just as in the poem 'Won't You See' Govrin denies the possibility of coping with the Holocaust by way of classical, poeticizing images, the innovations based on classical motifs and figures in Govrin's 'The End of the Pythia' suggest the impossibility to deal with the narration of the Holocaust through the tradition. The Holocaust needs a new language that Govrin produces by breaking down, reconfiguring, and even disfiguring elements from Greek myth in a new, previously unseen version. Indeed, her Pythia is a mash up, a *montage* of ideas, motifs, images taken from Aeschylus, but with no direct, one-to-one correspondence. Govrin marks the tradition she draws from, with its high prestige and universalizing thrust. At the same time, there is the sense of an irreversibly broken tradition. The cultural continuity that Appelfeld takes for granted in 'Bertha,' in Govrin's 'The End of the Pythia' is gone. Since the horror of the Holocaust is unlike anything seen before in human history, this new historical reality needs a new mythopoesis.

#### CONCLUSION

By analyzing these two short stories by Appelfeld and Govrin I do not want to give the impression that classical myth is a widespread feature of Hebrew Holocaust fiction. Even though I could have gathered other significant texts from the Hebrew literary canon, such as Yehuda Amichai's story 'The Times My Father Died' (*Mitot avi*, 1956), where the Aeneas myth projects a mythical light on the tragedy of European Judaism and its re-foundation in the Land of Israel, or David Grossman's novel *See Under: Love*, referenced in the epigraph, the recourse to myth remains sporadic.<sup>76</sup> Yet, Appelfeld's and Govrin's narrative choices illustrate the challenges of Holocaust fiction in between generations, that of the survivors and that of the following generation, as well as of two main different modes of Holocaust fiction, namely realistic and not realistic.<sup>77</sup> The presence and use of myth highlights these questions, while also bringing to the fore the different uses and problematic status of classical culture as part of Western culture and therefore its use in Jewish culture after the Holocaust. In analyzing and contextualizing these texts in early Hebrew Holocaust fiction and in its challenges, I meant to explore more in depth the recourse to myth that Philippe Codde has recognized, but not fully explained, in more recent Holocaust fiction of the diaspora.

The two generations opt for different moments and literary modes to face not only the Holocaust in and of itself, but also their own positioning vis-à-vis the Holocaust, that is

<sup>74</sup> Aesch. *Eum.* 410–2, trans. Sommerstein.

<sup>75</sup> The definition of Ronconi's adaptation is Anton Bierl's. See Bierl (1999), 75.

<sup>76</sup> On Amichai's story, see the detailed analysis in Loi (2021).

<sup>77</sup> On the distinction between realistic and unrealistic Holocaust fiction, see Foley (1982).

the negotiation of their infringement of cultural taboos that posited the sacredness of the Holocaust, and therefore the negation of the possibility of writing fiction about it or a severe limitation to it. Notably, Aharon Appelfeld, a survivor, deals with the aftermath of the Holocaust, as is typical of all of his production, putting aside the possibility of representing the Nazi camps. In his story one can detect two apparently conflicting drives. On one hand, the need to create a realistic psychological world, obedient to the rules of literary realism, in order to individualize the unmeasurable tragedy of the Holocaust; on the other, the implicit reference to Penelope's myth seems to contradict this drive, allowing for (but not forcing) a 'universal' take. These two aspects, in fact, coexist. The contradicting goals give a good sense of the challenge of the earliest Holocaust fiction in Hebrew, where the need of portraying a fictional, if verisimilar, post-Holocaust reality meets the need to elevate the tone of the discourse with a mythical, broader scope, such as the allegorical representation of human trauma. What lies beyond the realm of psychological realism is left out; only the mythic symbolism 'accompanies,' but does not impinge on, the realism of the story to another level of meaning, and in any case not towards the unrepresentable experience of the camps, but towards a seemingly universal, shared human experience. The mythical reference works as a cultural connection, allowing the story, focused on two deracinated characters, not only to acquire a mythical plain, but also to find its place in the continuity of the culture of the West, broader than the individual story told. In a way, this use of myth is an attempt at finding roots for the story itself. In this way, the text also undoes the appropriation of classical culture by the Nazi and fascist regimes.

In Michal Govrin's short story, instead, the use of myth serves quite a different purpose. In this case, as we have seen, a classical text acts as a reservoir for the building blocks of the story. Even though there is no apparent, explicit connection to a particular myth, the name of the Pythia does *force* the reader to wonder about the origin and meaning of such an enigmatic story. It is far from predictable whether the readers will be able to make sense of the story or if they will remain, instead, with a nauseating sense of confusion. When the connection with myth is recognized, Govrin's use of myth is best understood by applying to it the category of the fantastic, which has been particularly productive in the analysis of later Holocaust fiction. Indeed, regarding the cultural prohibition of writing fiction set in the Nazi camps and the overcoming of such taboo by the use of the fantastic, Gilead Mohrag writes:

This is particularly true of Israeli Holocaust literature, which, to the extent that it existed prior to the mid-1980s, was the product of a cultural code that did not allow for imaginative entry into the world of the Nazi death camps. Witness accounts and documented reports were permitted and, to some extent, encouraged, but attempts to imagine the concentrationary experience by those who were not there were considered an affront and an abomination. ... The incorporation of fantastic elements into Israeli works of Holocaust fiction acknowledges the impossibility of an authentic representation of the concentrationary experience. At the same time, the fantastic enables an authentic response to this experience.<sup>78</sup>

Govrin's short story—significantly written in the Seventies, but published only in 1984, about a decade after—demonstrates quite well Mohrag's points. In her case, the fantastic

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<sup>78</sup> Mohrag (1997), 161–3.

takes the shape of the recourse to a mash up of mythical materials inspired, as we have seen, by Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. The reader is led into different, disorientating directions: is this just a dystopian fable or, instead, a Holocaust-related story? Only by detecting the dark, repeated references can one infer that the writer uses the shreds of Aeschylus' myth to refigure the hallucinatory horror of the camps, particularly regarding the beguiling appearance of justice. This disorientation is part and parcel of the project of unrealistic, fantastic Holocaust fiction. Quoting once more Mohrag's acute study, one can see that this strategy can 'serve to recuperate the profound sense of unreality that assailed those who were cast into the concentrationary universe.'<sup>79</sup> More than that: in Govrin's story, the disorientation is the challenge of the writer to the reader, which, in turn, replicates the challenge of understanding historical reality for those who were witness to it, a status the writer cannot claim for herself. The reader is in a way trapped, almost claustrophobically, in between the need to explain the name of the Pythia and the Holocaust references, and the difficulty to make sense of them.

When we manage to trace back to Aeschylus' mythical plot the scattered hints and building blocks of the story (as I tried to do in my reading), then we face, on one hand, a powerful questioning of the beguiling, mystifying appearance of justice under the Nazi regime, inspired by Aeschylus' own questioning of different, changing forms of justice in his *Oresteia*; on the other hand, we face the irreversible disfigurement of myth itself. While Appelfeld implicitly draws from classical myth without apparent misgivings (perhaps even finding a reassuring continuity in the collective notion of culture or using it as gesture of re-appropriation), with her imaginative textual take Govrin signals the fracture of tradition, an aspect she clearly marks in her poem 'Can't You See.'<sup>80</sup> In the short story 'The End of the Pythia' this break assumes plastic characteristics: the *disiecta membra* of classical myth render the cultural fracture Govrin's cultural references have gone through. She seems to have taken to heart Uri Zvi Greenberg's words about the future fashioners of analogies: the analogy can never be what was before. Even when myth is called in to represent the horror of the Holocaust, it is but a relic of a past cultural continuity—now necessarily broken.

While one can use these texts as a springboard to read different stances vis-à-vis classical and Western, non-Jewish culture within Hebrew culture, my main aim here was showing how both writers, despite differences in their positioning in relation to the Holocaust and different stylistic choices, accede to classical myth in order to offer a narrative, if unreal, analogy that allows them to circumvent the incomparability of the Holocaust. Next to 'Bertha's realistic reading, in Appelfeld Penelope's weaving and unweaving serves as a mythical pattern to represent the mechanism of trauma, that is the repetitive return of the traumatic memories, in the allegorical interpretation of the story. Similarly, the impossibility to re-create the historical reality of the camps forces Govrin to imagine a completely different setting, where the symbolic appearance of the Pythia

<sup>79</sup> Mohrag (1997), 163. For a similar take on the 'hallucinatory atmosphere of the Holocaust,' see Foley (1982), 348.

<sup>80</sup> For an interesting comparandum, see Levi's relationship to classical culture. While Cohen (2012) portrays this relationship as discontinuous and aware of the problematic aspects of Western culture, Druker (2009) maintains that Levi found meaning in the continuity of that tradition, which he accepted at face value, as steeped in humanistic values.

aims to replicate, again, by way of an analogy, the sense of disorientation and questioning of justice that was to be felt in the Holocaust. As such, classical myth plays a much complex role in these Holocaust stories than just 'elevating' the tone of the narrative or reconciling apparently opposite cultures.

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