

“There is no analogy within History.” Classical Myth and Hebrew Holocaust literature.

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In my research as a 2021/22 doctoral fellow at the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, I attempt to explore a new avenue in the problematization of Holocaust literature in Hebrew and, for the sake of comparison, in other European literary traditions. As I show in my online essay *A Tale of Four Cities: Exploring Classical Reception in Modern Hebrew Literature* (available on the Society for Classical Studies website), my goal is to write a history of Modern Hebrew literature, from the later nineteenth century to the present, from the point of view of the reception of Graeco-Roman culture. The “four cities” reflect different polarities that can be recognized in modern Hebrew culture: together with Tel Aviv, the city symbol of the Hebrew-speaking Zionist movement, such a history entails an exploration of the time-honored opposition between ‘Jerusalem and Athens’ as well as ‘Jerusalem and Rome’, i.e. the dichotomies that starting in antiquity and up to nowadays have seen the opposition of Jewish culture to pagan, European, Christian culture, depending on the (often ambiguous or nebulous) use of these metaphorical cities. Coming to terms with the ‘Jerusalem and Athens’ question, in her 1990 article *Hellenism revisited: The Uses of Greek Myth in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, Glenda Abramson asks a fundamental question, which can be extended to Hebrew literature and culture in general: “Since the Hebrew poets already possess a massive wealth of source material within their own culture, why should they borrow at all from external sources?” In other words, references to classical culture in Hebrew are far from being an ornament of style, as they could be interpreted in most European literatures – rather, because of their cultural otherness, they demand explanation, justification, and a reason

to be. Notably, even though such references might be sporadic, the long-standing conflict between the Jewish and the Classical, Jewish identity and the Other, intersects many questions that run through Hebrew culture, as classical culture is evoked as a spotlight or as a functional tool in order to approach different themes, such as the identity of the Zionist New Jew, the role of minorities in Israel, and changing models of heroism. Trying to write a history of classical reception in Modern Hebrew literature requires building a map of the functions that classical culture is mobilized for; it also requires understanding and explaining the reasons behind such functionalization. In this map, the Holocaust figures prominently, and quite early on, just a little more than a decade after the liberation of the camps.

The Holocaust not only constitutes a watershed in Jewish history, but also in the development of the Jewish arts, from the literary to the figurative, as it forced artists to expand or find new ways to speak the ineffable and describe the indescribable. While Hebrew Holocaust literature flourished after the mid-1980s, before then several writers attempted a literary response to the Holocaust in different ways, oftentimes showing uncertainty, producing different attempts in different styles and linguistic registers. Among the earliest Holocaust writers, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yehuda Amichai, Aharon Appelfeld, Michal Govrin, and even the world-celebrated David Grossman, did turn to classical culture as a way to speak about the Holocaust.

This trait is common to some of the most notable Jewish writers of the Holocaust in European literatures. Reading Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), one can notice the key role of Odysseus, who enters the narration through the lines of the Italian poet par excellence, Dante. In French literature too, Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) offers, interwoven with a collection of autobiographical data and a detective-style plot, a dystopian city which stands as a metaphor for and shows the absurdity of the Nazi regime in Germany – even

though the city is modelled on a number of commonplace images of ancient Sparta, especially on Greek author Plutarch's description of the bellicose city in his *Life of Lycurgus*. In this respect, not only does classical culture figure as a common element in European education and mainstream culture, but also performs a literary nemesis.

Indeed, as it has been abundantly shown by studies such as Johann Chapoutot's 2008 *Le Nazisme et l'Antiquité* or the 2017 *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, classical culture was a key element in the cultural world of the Nazi and Fascist regimes. Various filtered by the Italian Renaissance and German nineteenth century Philhellenism, classical culture afforded to the regimes ways to think about internal power dynamics, especially autocracy and dictatorship as opposed to democracy, as well as imperialism and colonialism. In a similar move, the two regimes appropriated in different ways the Graeco-Roman world, with Nazi Germany emphasizing its supposed connection to ancient Greece – as Leni Riefensthal's 1938 movie *Olympia* clearly shows – and with Mussolini's Italy attaching itself more to the pan-Mediterranean empire of Rome – as another, less famous movie, the 1937 *Scipione l'Africano*, shows.

The classical references in European Holocaust literature are not only central to the literary works in which they appear, but are also particularly conspicuous precisely because of the previous political appropriation on the part of the Nazi and fascist regimes. By referencing classical culture in all its forms, whether through literary and historical references or mythology, Jewish European writers claim back their Europeanness and a sense of belonging to their nationhood; on the other, they counterbalance, expose, and reject the Nazis' appropriation of the classics. To go back to the examples I cited earlier, Primo Levi's turn to Odysseus not only allows the reader to read Levi's memoir from the camp as a modern Jewish Odysseus; through Dante, Levi also underscores his

own full participation in the Italian national culture – that Nazi fascist racial politics had sought to deprive him of. Similarly, Perec’s recourse to the Sparta model turns the Nazi world around: while Sparta had been used as a positive model of good governance and state-centered management, Perec uses classical culture to expose the inhumane, unjust nature of Nazi Germany rule.

The case of Holocaust European literature is useful to highlight a contrast with the case of Hebrew-language Israeli literature. Differently than in Europe, the Graeco-Roman world, its history and literature, has never been part of the Israeli educational curriculum or of mainstream culture; as a result, there can be no re-appropriation or nemesis.

How can we understand the turn to classical culture in Holocaust literature in Hebrew then? Not only the European case differs because of the different background, but also because Hebrew Holocaust writers turn in particular to ancient myth, choosing a peculiar cultural product of the Graeco-Roman world. The specificity of such an engagement must be accounted for in a way that would explain both, on one hand, the reason behind the choice of myth; on the other, the specific connection between myth and Holocaust literature in terms of narrative modes. Previous studies in Holocaust literature might be helpful in improving our understanding. Indeed, in his 1997 essay *Breaking silence: Israel’s fantastic fiction of the Holocaust*, Hebrew literature scholar Gilad Morahg proposed that the fantastic, as a deviation from realism, had constituted a solution to the riddle of Holocaust literature after the survivors’ literature. Examining several Second-generation novels from the late 1980s, especially David Grossman’s 1986 *See Under: Love*, Morahg notes that these novels

are about the enormous difficulty of finding the literary means that would enable an imaginative engagement with the experiences and implications of the Holocaust. I believe

that it is precisely this quest for a narrative mode that would subvert the impediments to such an engagement that led the authors of the novels under discussion to use the fantastic.

I want to suggest that we read classical myth as part of this anti-realist trend, in a broader sense than Mohrag posits. Indeed, Mohrag reflects at length on the specific difficulties of the Second generation of the Holocaust to find a voice that would be acceptable in Israel after the mid-1980s. Classical myth, instead, appears in earlier texts, starting in the late 1950s and until the very 1980s which Mohrag discusses. These texts are produced by survivors (Appelfeld), authors who fled Nazi Europe under the Nazi persecution (Amichai), Second generation descendants (Govrin), and even Second-generation writers without family ties to the Holocaust (Grossman). All of these authors attempted different strategies to approach, from their different positioning, the Jewish tragedy of the twentieth century. Early in the history of Hebrew Holocaust literature classical myth offers to these authors a way to speak the Holocaust because it allows an engagement beyond the strict rules of realism. As such, it expands the possibilities of narration that the writers, from their different experiences and relation to the Holocaust, can accede to. Moreover, as a narrative, myth allows analogy without infringement of the taboo of the incomparability of the Holocaust. Indeed, as American Holocaust writer Cynthia Ozyck notes in her essay *Metaphor and Memory*, “metaphor ... reduces the strange into the familiar.” By using myth, writers allow the reader to formulate an analogy, if not narrative, with the events of the Holocaust, breaking the rule of “Holocaust sanctity” that Israeli culture has imposed since its inception. This is an aspect I wanted to underline by using a modified line from poet Uri Zvi Greenberg’s works as the title of my research. His 1952 collection *Streets of the River*, the earliest and most consistent poetical response to the Shoah in Hebrew, formulates the prohibition of analogy with the Holocaust in clear

terms. In particular, the poem “There are no other parables” focuses on the impossibility of finding a *comparandum* for the events of the Shoah:

Are there any examples like this, our catastrophe, that came to us from their hands?

There are no other examples (all words are shades of shadows) –

And therein is the horror-striking expression: There are no other examples!

Every cruel torture that man may yet do to man in a Gentile country,

The future fashioner of parables will liken so: He was tortured like a Jew.

The Hebrew term *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 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; although they are not historically determined, the care for a dog or the slaughter of sheep are realistic. Greenberg concludes that there is no useful comparison in events within these boundaries, because the Holocaust itself sets a new starting point for reality altogether, one that the “future fashioner of parables” (or “analogies”) will need to take into account. In my view, Greenberg’s poem, which very soon became one of the best known of the rich collection *Streets of the River*, aptly explains the literary strategies of some of the earliest pioneers of Holocaust prose-fiction: in order to use any analogic process, that analogy had to be found outside of History. In this respect, myth, which provides a narrative analogy beyond the domain of history, answered the writers’ need.

Despite its functionality, in the map of the functions of classical culture in Hebrew literature, the recourse to myth as a strategy to approach the Holocaust constitutes a complex case.

Indeed, the long-standing opposition between the Jewish and the Classical persists in Israeli culture. Thus, references to myth are clear but mostly implicit, i.e. without a direct mention of the mythical character/narrative referenced; elsewhere, they are altogether reworked into new narratives, suggesting the insufficiency of ancient myth itself. Two examples of these different treatments of myth might clarify the complex relationship with myth. Moreover, in the two cases that I will briefly illustrate one can recognize the recourse both to Greek and to Roman myth, a literature-based and (perhaps) an iconography-based reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity, and different levels of engagement with myth itself, from a punctual reference to a consistent, structural re-use. All of these variables are also to be taken into account while writing a history of classical reception in Hebrew, as they allow to identify the channels and modes of receptions in addition to their functions in the literary system.

In 1959 Israeli poet and writer Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) published the short story *The Times My Father Died*, later republished in his 1961 collected stories *In This Terrible Wind*. The story is Amichai's autobiographical attempt to come to terms with his father's death: as the title suggests, the narrator's father dies, metaphorically, many times throughout the story. He dies during the liturgy of Yom Kippur, when he goes down to the floor in a ritual act; he dies during his years as a German soldier in the trenches of World War I; he dies especially when the Nazi persecution forces him to flee Germany for Mandatory Palestine, against his will. After his father's biological death in Israel, the son meets the father in a surreal setting, the ancient Via Appia in Rome, where the son carries the father on his shoulders:

Once I was walking along the Via Appia in Rome. I was carrying my father on my shoulders. Suddenly his head sagged down and I was afraid he was going to die. I laid him down at the side of the road, with a stone under his head, and went to call a taxi. Once they

used to call on God to help; now you call a taxi. I couldn't find one, and as I went searching I got further away from my father. ... I saw him through the ancient Arch of San Sebastian. Passersby stopped for a moment to bend over him and then went on. I finally got into a taxi, but it was too narrow and looked like a snake. I got another one, and the driver said: We know him by now; he's only pretending to be dead. I turned round and saw my father still lying at the side of the road, his white face turned to me. But I didn't know if he was still alive. I turned round again and saw him, a very distant object, through the ancient arches of San Sebastian's Gate.

The Roman Via Appia, a place twice consecrated to death — as a cemetery of a dead civilization — becomes an imaginary Underworld, in which Amichai can meet his dead father. This descent to the Underworld is understandable once the reader decodifies the reference to the founding hero of Rome: Aeneas. Indeed, Amichai engages with antiquity both through a Roman archaeological site and through the literary and iconographical tradition of the Aeneas myth. The son carries his father on his shoulders, just as Aeneas carries Anchises out of burning Troy when the Greeks are conquering the city, as the Latin poet Vergil sings in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*; just like Aeneas, the protagonist visits the Underworld to seek the dead father. Even though this is not spelt in clear letters, the end of the story re-orientes our understanding of the son's own biography, with the Holocaust as its watershed and hinge: Amichai's burning Troy is Germany, enflamed by Nazi antisemitism and soon to be devastated by World War II. Amichai transfigures himself into Aeneas, i.e. he portrays himself as the refugee hero ready to found a new community for his people. While acknowledging his German past, Amichai comes to terms with the relationship between the Holocaust and his Israeli identity. In the long shadow of Aeneas, Amichai magisterially offers an historical closure to the Jewish Diaspora and to the Holocaust itself: the foundation of the State of

Israel. In a story of exceptional pathos and of remarkable experimentalism in the history of Hebrew short prose, Amichai brings together a punctual, implicit reference to one of Rome's founding myths with a personal and collective reckoning with Jewish identity between Europe and Asia, pre- and post-Holocaust, as I try to explain in my essay *Yehuda Amichai's The Times My Father Died (1959): A Jewish Aeneas in Flight from the Holocaust*, published in *The Aeneid and the Modern World: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vergil's Epic in the 20th and 21st Centuries* (2022).

We find a different take in a short story by Michal Govrin (b. 1950): while she engages with classical myth in a deeper and more consistent way than Amichai – in a way she also rejects it. A Second generation of the Holocaust, an accomplished essayist, theater director and novelist, in 1984 she published her first story collection, *Hold On To The Sun. Stories and Legends*, which included the short story *The End of the Pythia*, written in the mid-1970s in Paris when she was a doctoral student in theater studies. The story follows the crisis and final demise of the power of the Pythia, a monster of many faces, who reigns over the City of Joy, an amusement park, thanks to her regime of homicidal terror, of intermediaries such as her dolls, and thanks to the Pardoning Board, an elected body charged with administering punishment to the people who come to the park. The Pythia is tyrant, judge, and executor at the same time:

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.

What lies behind the amusement park as an artificial heterotopia is a dark metaphor for the Holocaust death camps and its inhuman rules and internal hierarchies. The Pythia herself, with her changing faces, is an enigmatic character: by her very name, she refers to the priestess of the Delphi Temple in ancient Greece; however, Govrin's Pythia is a rather goddess, not a priestess, since she has her own priests. Inspired by Italian theater director Luca Ronconi's radical staging of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in Paris in the early 1970s, through the Pythia Govrin transfers to the Holocaust in particular a question that is central to Aeschylus's works: what is justice? What is its face, how can it be recognized and told apart from injustice? The many faces and appearances of the Pythia precisely convey the difficulty of recognizing the true form of justice under the beguiling attempts of the Nazi regime to create its own perverted system of justice. The arbitrary, brutal laws of Nazi-occupied Europe and of the camps are law just as far as they are enforced; in their essence, they violate the basic civil, human, political rights of the individual as well as of the collective. And yet, several European governments observed and implemented the laws of the Nazi regime. The enigmatic, confusing situations envisaged by Govrin in her dystopian City of Joy recreate the sense of disorder, confusion, and fear that reigned over Europe and in the Nazi camps.

While the short story takes many elements from Aeschylus' tragedies, Govrin manipulates all these elements in a somber mash up. On one hand, this suggests that classical myth is useful to think with; on the other, by manipulating it in her own new way, Govrin also suggests that ancient myth in its original form is insufficient. In a similar way, in the poem "Won't You See", published around the same time as the story, Govrin uses and at the same denies the possibility to compare the "sea of the death" of the Holocaust to the Styx, the infernal river of classical myth. Both the story and the poem suggest that ancient myth must be changed and renewed because the Holocaust has changed reality once and for all. Classical imagery and myth might appear as an attempt to

'beautify' the horror of the Holocaust. Therefore, a new mythical imagination must be shaped in order to approach the Holocaust.

In conclusion, despite the different positioning of the two authors in relation to the Holocaust and the different historical contexts in which they wrote, both Amichai, a German-born who escaped his home country with the ascent to power of the Nazis, and Govrin, an Israeli Second-generation survivor, turn to classical myth as a departure from realism, in an attempt to embrace and convey a sense of the Holocaust experience and its aftermath beyond the taboo of incomparability and the limitations of realism. Paradoxically, the turn to the classical culture of Athens and Rome represents one of the earliest avenues explored by Hebrew writers to confront the historical and artistic watershed of Jewish modernity.