Of Bloom and Doom

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I.

With the recent publication of Aharon Appelfeld's newest novel *Blooms of Darkness*[1] engagingly translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey M. Green, one is initially motivated to agree with Philip Roth, the eminent American novelist, who adorned the author as fiction's foremost chronicler of the Holocaust. Roth observed that the stories herein are "small, intimate, and quietly narrated, and yet are transformed into a soaring work of art . . . with a profound understanding of loss, pain, cruelty and grief." Additionally, one is equally moved to add, in the words of Primo Levi, the Italian novelist and critic, that Appelfeld's voice "has a unique, unmistakable tone which strikes the reader with awe and admiration." And one is further tempted to agree with Honoré de Balzac, the French nineteenth-century novelist, who declared, on an entirely different occasion, that "the novel is really the private history of nations."

Part of the pleasure in reading Appelfeld's "history of his nation" in this novel, and others, is the brevity of its presentation. For example, many initial conversations between a mother and son, who are hounded by a Nazi killer, are uttered in half-sentences. For Holocaust-era conversations had to be brief, lest the savages discern any moves and motifs deserving liquidation. Under those circumstances, one hardly speaks in fluid sentences. Everything is secretive, for life depends more on silence than on speech: a look here, a motion there, or an eyebrow raised, often ends most conversations. To capture these sensations, Appelfeld actually tells this entire story in some *68 chapters*, each one of them no more than four pages, which add up to a unique, sad, and captivating experience for the reader.

Appelfeld has dedicated his creative life to the literature and history of his own people, beginning, of course, with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and proceeding, most often, in agony—murder, extortion, banishment, vilification, and exile—throughout the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of his national history. Ultimately, of course, he devoted—attached—himself to the bitter, brutal, murderous, forlorn, and unforgettable years of the Holocaust, all replete, needless to say, with "loss, pain, cruelty, and grief."

Julia

But first, the story. Told almost in a whisper, it takes place in an unnamed Ukrainian city not far from the Carpathian Mountains. Among its citizens, we find Julia and Hans Mansfeld and their three children, Otto, Anna, and young Hugo. The parents were pharmacists by profession, who, during their years of dispensing pharmaceuticals and prescriptions, were heralded not only for their professionalism, but also for equally delivering those items and food, without cost, to those unable to pay. Hans, alas, was the first to be "transferred" to a secret place, near the mountains, followed sometime later by Otto and Anna; leaving Julia and 11-year-old Hugo to navigate for themselves in that chaos.

We find mother and son, first, standing on the street, anxiously beleaguered, waiting for the arrival of one of the notorious "peasants," who operate by snatching children "for fees," to deposit them eventually in some "hiding places" near the mountains. Fortunately for Julia and Hugo the peasant fails to appear. Determined that at least Hugo would survive, mother and son quickly lower themselves through the half-dry public sewers of the city, until they reach its outskirts. There by the grace of good fortune, Julia chances to meet up with an old grammar school classmate, one Mariana Podgorsky, a non-Jew, and by profession a "madam," who lives in a place called the "Residence," together with a string of other harlots, catering exclusively to the German soldiers who visit there nightly.

Julia shares her tale of woe with her friend of grammar school years, who graciously consents to care for the innocent youngster until the war's end. Mercifully relieved, and filled with unending gratitude, Julia surrenders young Hugo to Mariana, while handing her son his personal knapsack, filled with "a Bible, games of chess and dominoes, plus some reading and writing material." Shortly thereafter, Julia is herself "deported."

Hugo accompanies Mariana to her own room in the "Residence," which is lavishly filled with all sorts of perfumes, bottles of brandy, which she imbibes frequently, as well as a "personal closet," stocked with all sorts of lavish attire. Next to her "boudoir" rests another closet, bereft of any and all human necessities. She assigns that closet to Hugo, in order that he be hidden from all human contact while staying there. She immediately warns him that, should she be out at times, for whatever reason, he must never answer the door, nor leave his closet except when in her presence. As one of her first gifts, she hands him a crucifix which she then gingerly places on his neck.

After about three months, everything in Hugo's life changes. How much has changed, he obviously doesn't know. "His young heart," we learn, "began to torment him because he hasn't kept his promises to his mother. He doesn't read the Bible, he doesn't write, and he doesn't do his arithmetic problems." Worse still is the fleeting thought that his mother may have actually "passed away."

In the loneliness of his "closet," where, during the wintry nights he almost freezes to death while lying scantily dressed on his temporary couch, Hugo finds solace in an occasional dream. One night, in fact, his mother appears to him, checking on how well he is managing, and whether Mariana is treating him well. Hugo begs her not to leave him. Before going, however, she confesses to him: "You know very well that I didn't observe our religion, but we never denied our Jewishness. The cross you're wearing is just camouflage, not faith. If Mariana—or I don't know whoever—tries to make you convert, don't say anything to them. Do what they tell you to do, but in your heart, you have to know: Your mother and father, your grandfather and grandmother, were all Jews, and you're a Jew, too. It's not easy to be a Jew. Everybody persecutes you. But that doesn't make us an inferior people. To be a Jew is a mark of excellence, but it's also not shameful . . . I wanted to say all this to you, so that your spirits won't fall . . . Read a chapter or two of the Bible every day . . . . Reading it will strengthen you . . . . I can go away in peace . . . ."

She leaves Hugo.

Mariana

And who, indeed, is this Mariana, the "savior"?
She started her career as a madam, we are told, at the tender age of 16, mainly because of her "disgruntled and abusive" parents. But somewhere within herself, we are led to believe, is a "soul." When untrammeled, she finds herself believing, despite her profession, in a Christian God, to whom at times, and to the surprise even of her friends, she addresses directly. Consider, for example, this confessional: "Dear God: you understand my heart better than any person. You know that my pleasures in this world were few and bad, my humiliations were many and bitter. I don't say I'm a righteous woman worthy to get to heaven. I bear the burden of shame, and that's why I'll pay a forfeit when the day comes. Even when in the depths of hell, You are my beloved."

Needless to say, while serving in a house of sin, she claims that young Hugo is a "symbol of a greater nation." Citing an example of her generosity, Mariana recalls that his mother, Julia, during their youth, had been very kind to her, bringing her, despite her poverty, "clothes, fruit, and cheese." And during those very years, she never chastised Mariana by asking, "Why don't you do respectable work?" And that is why as Hugo begins to mature, Mariana entices him, "suggesting that he enjoy her physical delight which a woman needs, for the rest is only dessert." Since he makes no demands on her, she continues to compliment him: "You love Mariana and make no conditions or demands on her . . . you're beautiful." Which leads Hugo to entertain the illusion that Mariana "really doesn't belong to those in the Residence . . . that even in her profession one can maintain manners and respect," that is, if one possesses "backbone." Thus to no one's surprise, Hugo could, and did, follow her warning that, whenever questioned, he should always answer by saying he is her "son."

Not only would he agree to call himself her "son," but also because, as he matured, he actually became in pleasure, at least, her "lover." So that whenever Mariana asks him to sleep with her, he always answers her call. For she assures him, he is "good and sweet and doesn't want anything from her." So that even in her drunken stupor he believes "she is really delicious."

One morning sometime later, Hugo, reaching for his knapsack, finds a long letter from his mother, in which she again extols Mariana as "one who will surely take care of him all the time," adding, mournfully, that she herself may never return, and that he dare "never to despair, for despair is surrender." And even in these dark times, "she remains optimistic . . . and that he, too, must believe in his future freedom."

Whatever optimism he may have felt at the time, all of it disappears when Mariana absented herself from the Residence, for a short time, in order to bury her mother. Her death, Hugo learns, was due to Mariana's neglectful failure to purchase the medicine her mother needed. On her return home, Mariana readily admits to that failure, which draws Hugo's strange reaction: "Circumstances are guilty." To neither of their surprise, Mariana, relieved, "fell on her knees, hugged and kissed him," which helped Hugo forget his short loneliness and the awful fears that surrounded him during her absence. Rather than bemoan her loss, Mariana, instead of even a brief mourning, continues to speak solely of her sad status as a madam, due, as she often repeated, to her own parents' neglect. Always, apparently, conscious of her plight, Hugo comments further: "Behind her suffering lies a good and lovely woman." To which Mariana adds only more kisses and pampering arms.

Despite all of Mariana's reliable availability, the Germans continued their unabated search for strangers, even at the Residence. Fearing the inevitability of yet another series of searches, especially since the Germans seemed less certain of winning the war, the "madam-in-charge" of the Residence orders Mariana and Hugo to leave at once. Advised hurriedly to look everywhere for any and all resting places or homes for shelter, sleep and hiding, lest they be recognized, Hugo feels self-assured because of the crucifix he wears at all times. Mariana, on the other hand, engages, as usual, in a solemn prayer to God: "I don't say I'm a righteous woman, worthy to go to heaven . . . . I bear a burden of shame . . . . But I never stopped longing for you, God . . . . You are my beloved."

Because of his love for her, Hugo is enraptured with her confessional, to a point where he actually invokes his parents, saying aloud: "Papa, Mama, where are you?" No answer. They seem no

longer to be with him, nor does a memory search seem to help, for they have apparently parted even from his dreams, now enshrined in Mariana.

Hugo then opens his Bible to read the story of Joseph, whose brothers, at first, planned to kill him, only to witness his revival, in the end, and to recognize his political, and national prominence. Hugo now finds hope and inspiration in one of his ancestors' life.

As they proceed, rumors spread everywhere that although the Germans are actually losing the war, they will never end their violence, they still believe, until all the Jews are destroyed. The Russians, on the other hand, will surely decimate anyone who has ever cooperated, in any capacity, with the Germans. Mariana and Hugo decide to flee toward the Carpathian Mountains. Along the way, Hugo has another vision of his mother and is moved to frantic tears. As he weeps uncontrollably, Mariana suddenly criticizes him, arguing that "a person who cries announces to the world that he's lost and needs pity," adding that "Jews spoil their children, and they don't prepare them properly for life." All of which moves Hugo to wonder, "When will the tears freeze in me?"

As they proceed further, Mariana keeps sharing her thoughts: "I'm amazed at the Jews. An intelligent people, everyone agrees, yet most of them don't believe in God. I asked your mother, 'How is it that you don't believe in God? After all, you see His deeds every day, every hour.'" Answering her own questions, Mariana tells Hugo that his mother "lost her faith at the Gymnasium and since then, religion hasn't returned to her. I'm sorry for your mother."

Of a far more immediate crisis, Mariana turns to Hugo, saying, because the Russians are rapidly approaching, they will kill her, as well as all those who worked in whatever capacity with and for the Germans and should save himself. "You are still young. Every time I remember that, I choke with pain . . . . And because I slept with Germans, my blood is on my head." Now she believes God won't stand by her. Except Hugo, who, when asked when he wants to do in the future, replies, "To be with you." That, she adds, "would be impossible."

In a final farewell, she asks Hugo to take care of himself. "When the informers come, don't go after me. They'll take me straight to the gallows, or who knows what. You may not be religious, but since you've been with Mariana, you've changed a little
. . . . Just promise me, you'll read a chapter or two of the Bible every day. That will strengthen you and give you power and courage to overcome evildoers." Hugo promises.

While Mariana and Hugo happen to be resting one day under a tree, three men suddenly appear and announce that they have strict orders "to bring Mariana in, dead or alive." Hugo is not to be taken, because he speaks Ukrainian, not the official language of any enemy. Remaining behind, Hugo is crushed emotionally. He stands watch, at the center of the square, near a large barrel of soup provided by the Russians, where all enemy suspects stand shivering, to await their inevitable fate. When one of the guards happens to ask Hugo whom he is waiting for, he answers, "My mother." While there, Hugo learns from another prisoner that Mariana was actually sentenced to die. Crushed by that terrifying news, Hugo recalls one of Mariana's final and fateful pleas to him: "If they kill me, don't forget me. You're the only person whom I trust. I buried some of my soul in you. I don't want to depart from the world without leaving something. I have no gold or silver. So take my love and place it in your heart, and from time to time, say to yourself: 'Once there was a Mariana. She was a mortally wounded woman, but she never lost faith in God.'"

Desolation

Roaming the streets of his native city in the Carpathian Mountains, Hugo reaches the square, where a woman approaches him to inquire, "What's your name?"

"Hugo," he answers.

"Ah," she says, "so you're Hans and Julia's son, right?"

"Right."

"They were wonderful people. There wasn't a person in the city who they didn't always give something of their generosity."

Hugo is momentarily gladdened, but simultaneously saddened, because of all the townspeople he chanced to meet, not one ever disclosed the news of the well-known bestial Nazi concentration "camp thirty-three," where his parents were incarcerated and, apparently, finally liquidated.

However bitter and frustrated at not having heard any formal news of his parents' demise, Hugo still continues to walk fitfully, stopping at all those places that never seem to leave his memory, especially those homes of the Jews, who once lived above the many shops, now entirely occupied by strangers. And at the windows and balconies were women and children standing, chatting, and laughing. Hugo instinctively feels that a "different wind seems to be blowing in the air," which he attempts to identify but fails. Worst of all is the sight of the pharmacy building, which has now become a grocery store.

While visiting these places, Hugo suddenly recalls an incident that occurred one late Friday afternoon, while on a leisurely walk, oft taken with his father, during which they meet some bearded Jews on their way to the synagogue. Seeing those Jews, his father fell silent. While answering his young son's question whether those Jews were "real Jews," he offered a long reply that "would confuse things rather than clarify them." Hugo also remembered his father's "embarrassment at such unexpected meetings and the silence that accompanied them."

Even more staggering for Hugo was his heartbreaking ultimate experience during these local reminiscences. He enters his own home, and is greeted by an old man, a possible Ukrainian, who calls out to him loudly and gruffly:

"Who are you?"
"My name is Hugo Mansfeld."
"What are you doing here?"
"I came to *our* house."
"Get out of here. I don't want ever to see you again," said the old man, waving his cane.

Hugo leaves, disturbed and shaken.

II.

This reader's first "meeting" with Aharon Appelfeld actually occurred some ten years ago, in an extended review of his 12th novel, *The Conversion*, which, incidentally, appeared in an issue of *Tradition* quarterly.[2] Both that work and the current *Blooms of Darkness*, also published by Schocken Books, reflect much that has made his fictional creativity a mark of distinction. And in this current work, there linger echoes and themes of such topics as "assimilation, disorientation, alienation and accommodation, weakening of faith, apostasy, physical and emotional dislocation, the Bible and secular studies." All of which give his fiction a strong following on both sides of the Atlantic. He has certainly proved himself an engaging author.

But, occasionally, one is motivated, as in this particular work, to approach this piece of fiction with an impersonal voice that does not sound like the product of some professional or academic training but rather from a very personal point of view in a voice that does not necessarily include a complete identification with the main character but, rather, with an understanding of its idiosyncratic nature.

Since Mariana is the major, if not the only significant character in this novel, and has achieved—by saving a young, innocent child from annihilation, the incredible honor, tradition teaches, of a "share in the world to come"—why, pray tell, does Appelfeld assign this honor, however deserved, to a prostitute? There were, we know, hundreds, if not thousands, of simple or selected non-Jews during the Holocaust who saved children, and even adults, at their own risk from violent execution, all accomplished, we know, in a total silence, without rewards, including sexual, of any kind.

And however much one admires Mariana's constant supplications to her God, as recorded here, why has she still committed herself to satisfy her "three" or more "visitors" every night, in her perfumed salon? What changes did all those extended prayers have on her personal life, if any? Prayers hardly substitute for vagrancy, or worse.

Furthermore, from the author's brief references to Hugo's parents, one is led to believe that in their lives they were lost not only for being Jewish, but also because they neglected their simple Jewishness; and, in Julia's case, because, in her youth, she attended Gymnasium, a nomenclature for a secular education, rather than a totally Jewish one, to become a stranger to her past. As for Hans, what, pray tell, does our author imply, almost casually, to be so destructive in a secular education, when, in a multitude of cases, it is accompanied by a study and practice of classic Jewish faith and practice?

Frankly, however much Hugo, Julia, and Mariana are encouraged, or self-inspired, to read the Bible, one still insists on inquiring, for what real purpose? How would such a reading have possibly changed their daily lives? In which way? Would it strongly influence, for example, their practice of Judaism? A mere reading? How? For himself, Appelfeld relates, it helped him fully appreciate the beauty of its language. And, he adds, importantly, a better understanding of Jewish *myth.* And eventually, its practice, and "its beliefs from the Bible to Agnon."

What Appelfeld must remember, as he must surely appreciate, is that without the daily *practice,* and/or *study,* of the *content* of the Bible and Talmud, their linguistics, however inspiring, motivating, and enthralling, are ultimately meaningless. Language alone is a sort of serious and fascinating identification but not necessarily a religious guide to its practice, or the saving of lives, of whatever kind, in distress.

Otherwise, doom would surpass bloom.

[1] Aharon Appelfeld, *Blooms of Darkness,* Schocken Books, 2010.
[2] *Tradition* 35:3, Fall 2001, pp. 6–19.