With Us in All Our Trials[1] - A Reading of Appelfeld's The Metamorphosis

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Introduction

"The Metamorphosis"[2] is a short, enigmatic story by Aharon Appelfeld, published in the collection *Adnei ha-nahar*, which appeared in 1971. It recounts the experiences of an elderly Jewish couple, a shochet—a Jewish ritual slaughterer—and his wife, the last, solitary remnant of their community, which has left and gone to an unknown place. The couple gradually forgets the Jewish community and Jewish culture until they sink into complete amnesia. As in many of Appelfeld's stories, silence hangs over the couple, and they seldom speak. Yet the husband and wife undergo two entirely different processes. The husband withdraws further and further into their neglected cottage, and into himself. He becomes so much a part of the house that, by the end of the story, he merges with it completely. The wife, by contrast, increasingly becomes part of the outside world. She fills out and grows brown in the sunlight, and trades objects for food. The shochet is acutely conscious of forgetting Jewish tradition and culture, whereas his wife, whose lot is also to forget, has no interest in forgetting or in the culture of the past. She becomes a kind of animal without awareness, with an inarticulate look in her eyes. In the story's fantastic ending, the wife becomes one of the birds in the coop she has built in the yard. Hence the story's straightforward title, "The Metamorphosis." Yet the title does not refer only to the transformation the wife undergoes as she becomes a bird that seeks to fly away from the forgotten, isolated cottage into the open spaces beyond, or to the transformation of the Jewish woman, the shochet's wife, into an animal seeking freedom and food, without an awareness of past or future. The title also points to the change taking place in the shochet. He changes and senses the change within himself. Forgetting makes him look at himself, and he feels a strangeness about himself, about his own self. His death at the story's end is the death of someone who has changed but has not undergone a metamorphosis. This point matters because the story explicitly binds the wife's fate to that of the shochet: her salvation depends on his extinction. The shochet's amnesia concerning the past deepens, yet "he had not attained the heights of complete oblivion. Astonishment gave him no

rest for a moment. He did not know how to be angry; he did not know how to strike; and since these qualities were absent, his life was gradually being sealed with the seal of extinction. It was, of course, only a matter of time. Time flowed slowly, **no longer for his sake but for hers, so that, when the time came, she might rise in heavy-winged flight toward her new life**" (my emphasis—Y.E.).

The paradigms used to characterize Appelfeld's writing suit almost all the themes that appear in this story. Hillel Barzel, for example, places "The Metamorphosis" within the temporal and spatial category of "at a distance from the Holocaust—exile."[3] This is a group of stories that:

do not emphasize the period to which they belong, although the sphere in which they take place is clear […] If these stories have a common thread, it lies in their presentation of protagonists who seek meaning. Each story traces a journey of the "self" toward the discovery of itself and its calling […] The distinctive quality of these stories will thus be bound up with Appelfeld's inclination to raise his visions to a higher plane. Despite the setting, which is a setting of the Jew's annihilation, these stories contain the turn toward an alternative […] A higher sphere—or perhaps we should speak of the margins of such a sphere—reveals itself as a possibility. The human landscapes do not change. The stories are steeped in the memory of extinction, yet there is an exaltation in the keeper of the flame, or in the artist intoxicated by his colors. The eruption of what is higher changes what is narrated, transferring it from the everyday to the fantastic, from the real to the metareal.[4]

This formulation does indeed capture several elements of "The Metamorphosis." The story takes place in a European setting, but its period is not clearly defined. Its protagonists do seek meaning, and the story is steeped in the memory of extinction. Its fantastic ending—the wife's transformation into a bird—also fits the movement from the everyday to the fantastic. Barzel also identifies the "double vision" that appears specifically in Appelfeld's novellas: resurrection and annihilation are intertwined.[5] This element, too, appears in "The Metamorphosis": the wife's resurrection and the husband's extinction. Yet these assumptions, which distinguish many of Appelfeld's writings, do not suffice. What meaning do the shochet and his wife seek—the meaning of life itself? If so, why does the shochet seek out specifically Jewish matters, Jewish books? This, it seems, calls for further discussion. Nor does the story's ending conform to Barzel's theory. Barzel sees the fantastic ascent as an artistic characteristic of the artist intoxicated by his colors; here, however, the movement into the fantastic reads as a matter of actual existence. Without it, the wife cannot rise to new life, and she merely realizes the animal potential latent within her from the story's beginning. Applying Barzel's "double vision" is certainly intriguing, but it does not suffice. In this story, Appelfeld separates the

shochet from his wife: resurrection and annihilation are not intertwined in a single person. What does this separation mean? Why, indeed, does the wife's resurrection depend on the death of her husband, the shochet? These questions remain unanswered.

At the beginning of *The Individual's Lament and the Tribe's Eternity*, Yigal Schwartz identifies the duality in Appelfeld's writing:

On the one hand, Appelfeld's major artistic project is understood as a mighty struggle to preserve the existence of the "self" that was violated in the Holocaust. On the other, Appelfeld persistently tries to reconstruct the vantage point he had as a child at that time […] This attempt at reconstruction takes the form of an "Orphic descent"—a journey into the heart of the artistic experience, which is here the heir to the experience of faith, and which has two faces: one whose essence is a desire for annihilation and a tendency toward self-effacement, which awaken terror and dread; and another whose essence is a wondrous sense of discovery and revelation.[6]

Perhaps it is here that the distinction between the shochet and his wife lies: the shochet represents the desire for annihilation and self-effacement, whereas the wife represents the sense of discovery and revelation. The story, in which the shochet is the sole speaking protagonist, expresses the evolution of his death wish until it is realized. Yet does the wife's metamorphosis express discovery and revelation? Throughout the story, she is presented as an inarticulate animal, deeply attached to her physical needs and bent on satisfying them at any cost. Her transformation into a bird is not a process of "discovery and revelation," but precisely a realization of the animal-like figure she has become. The dimension of height is admittedly closely bound up with the story: the wife rises and flies into the sky. Yet it seems to me that this flight is more closely connected with the blurring of the boundary between heaven and earth that Schwartz himself identifies. He sees "The Metamorphosis" as one of the "penal colony" stories: stories without geographical or historical boundaries, in which the narrative figures feel "as though in an enormous trap."[7] Schwartz notes that in most of these stories "there is no real barrier between heaven and man."[8]

It is precisely the subject of forgetting, a clear, central and explicit theme in "The Metamorphosis," that receives extensive attention in Schwartz's account, though in relation to Appelfeld's work as a whole rather than to this particular story. Schwartz sees the motif of forgetting in Appelfeld as a process that is partly natural and partly a product of repression.[9] He traces its origins to a mechanism of effacement set in motion by the intensity of the events Appelfeld experienced, and fostered and accelerated by the monks who cared for him during some of the war years. These monks denied the

existence of his parents and his Jewishness.[10] Yet the forgetting associated with "The Metamorphosis" does not arise specifically from traumatic events. It is presented as a given, a fact of nature. Forgetting is part of the lives of the shochet and his wife. The story simply describes different ways of coping with it.

In her doctoral dissertation, Ketzia Alon proposes three motifs through which to characterize Appelfeld's writing: the Jesus–Mary motif, the motif of intellectual impairment and innocence, and the motif of "murdering the murderer." Drawing on Schwartz's observation that Appelfeld's work combines elements of Jewish belief with Christian and pagan elements, she argues that his characters embody a Mary–Jesus hybrid: "a site of hybridization, bringing together and blending femininity and masculinity, Jewishness and Christianity, mother and son."[11]

The argument is that Appelfeld's characters mingle the attributes of Jesus—his tormented figure, the path of suffering (Via Dolorosa), death and resurrection—with those of Mary: motherhood, ascension to heaven, and, in contrast, prostitution.[12] The motif of intellectual impairment, or the child's point of view, is another such motif. Schwartz sees it as a mechanism for distancing oneself from the horrors of the Holocaust.[13] Alon sees in Appelfeld's prose a dialectical tension between the stupidity and ignorance associated with a Gentile–Christian affiliation and the innocence and naivety associated with a Jewish one. The third motif Alon identifies in Appelfeld's prose is "murdering the murderer." The claim is that Jews internalized the Christian discourse that held them to be Jesus's murderers, and therefore regarded the spilling of their blood as permissible. Through this internalization, they also internalized the murderous behavior of their Gentile neighbors.[14] All three motifs appear in some form in "The Metamorphosis." The wife does indeed display Marian attributes: she is suspected of prostitution and ultimately ascends to heaven. The shochet's suffering, tormented figure conforms to the pattern of Jesus's figure. The same is true of stupidity and ignorance as against innocence and naivety. In "The Metamorphosis," the wife is presented as inarticulate and ignorant. She is not curious, and all her interest lies in survival and finding food. The shochet, by contrast, embodies a person preoccupied with his own forgetting and longing for human company. The motif of "murdering the murderer" also appears in the Gentile's repeated requests that the shochet convert him to Judaism. At first, the Gentile asks, "do with me as you please," because bad dreams are driving him out of his mind. Then he threatens to beat the shochet. At their third meeting, he threatens to slaughter him. Yet each of these motifs, when applied to "The Metamorphosis," produces a dissonance that makes clear how imperfectly they fit this particular story. In the end, there is no hybridization of Mary and Jesus here, but two figures married to one another, both of them Jewish. The wife is not really a prostitute,

and motherhood is never mentioned in the story: we do not know whether the couple has, or ever had, children. Nor does the shochet himself undergo a path of suffering. He is certainly tormented, but his torments are more closely connected with his own forgetting of the past than with the way those around him treat him. The same is true of the motif of innocence. The shochet is far from innocent or naive. He is suspicious, even excessively so, and manages to drive the Gentile away by bribing him. Finally, he does not internalize the murderous impulses of either the Gentile or the visitors to his home. On the contrary, he seems incapable of harming a living creature. He cannot even slaughter the birds raised in his yard.

The paradigms mentioned above help us map "The Metamorphosis" and understand the general spirit that pervades it within Appelfeld's work as a whole. Yet they cannot give the story a more precise meaning. What, then, is the allegory underlying the relationship between the shochet and his wife? Their estrangement from Judaism, and their ways of coping with it, are clearly connected with the story's very core. The forgetting of the Jewish past is mentioned throughout, and, apart from the shochet and his wife, the figures who appear are concerned with the couple's Jewishness. Yet what do their different ways of coping symbolize? What does their increasingly abandoned house symbolize? The key to understanding "The Metamorphosis," as I will show, lies in a short essay titled "Testimony," which Appelfeld published in *Iton 77* in 1978,[15] and later reprinted in *Essays in the First Person*, published in 1979 (p. 9). The materials from which the essay is composed are the same materials that make up the story. We thus have before us an instructive example of similar formulations in different genres by the same writer. What is the relationship between the two formulations? How does the essay explain the story? What light does the story cast on the essay? And is there a fundamental difference between them? These are the questions at the center of this short article.

A. The Importance of Testimony for Understanding The Metamorphosis

In the essay, Appelfeld describes how his Jewish identity took shape. In his childhood, Judaism occupied only "a tiny corner of life" (p. 10). Only his grandparents' generation kept the ancestral tradition, but they had no way of transmitting its cultural contents or belief in God to the next generation. Appelfeld, who was seven when the Second World War broke out, lived in a world without Judaism. His parents, in their thirties, understood themselves as assimilated into non-Jewish society and made no distinction between themselves and that society. Yet, unlike Appelfeld and his friends, who had no connection to Judaism and gave it no thought, the young parents' generation retained what

it had absorbed in childhood, and Jewish existence lay deep at the foundation of their personalities. The Holocaust turned everything upside down and openly confronted the parents with their Jewish identity. The collapse of their paradigm struck them a severe blow and caused them great suffering. The children, Appelfeld argues, experienced this suffering only indirectly: "Our parents' mental torments [were absorbed within us] not through direct speech or reflection, but through the expressions of a mute body." This muteness involved a failure to understand what the parents said to their children when they parted from them, and a failure to understand the parents' fierce desire that their children should live—not merely as an expression of parental longing, but also as an injunction that would give the parents "the ultimate meaning of their existence" (p. 11). During the war, on the way to discovering the ability to speak of the secret of Jewish existence, Appelfeld and others like him lived in a half-extinguished consciousness. Life in secrecy and concealment, in monasteries and on isolated farms, is described by Appelfeld as "animal life." Not only did those in whose shadow the children took shelter treat them as people treat animals; their own consciousness was that of animals—instinctive, "in submission and in concealed terror" (p. 12). Instinct instructed those children never to reveal their Jewishness, and, as noted, Appelfeld describes this life, lived in the shadow of the terror of discovery, as animal life. He stresses that Judaism among his contemporaries was not a social matter: it did not rest on shared practices, ways of life or rituals. Even if a few of these existed, they were erased beneath the overwhelming impact of the experience of war. Appelfeld's Jewish identity thus took shape dialectically: "a weave of memories and aversion, feelings of guilt and obligations we had never dared to consider in depth. In truth, hostility and love intertwined inseparably." The children's generation, exposed to its Jewishness only when the Holocaust began and simultaneously obliged to repress it, found itself at a dead end when it tried to understand its relationship to Jewish identity. Two fundamental tensions underlie Appelfeld's essay. One concerns the relationship to Jewish identity itself. On the one hand, it meant nothing essential to him until the war began; on the other, it had a decisive and extreme influence on the lives of his generation. As Appelfeld himself says, the identity that determined their fate for life or death lacked depth. The second tension concerns the revelation and concealment of Jewish identity. The moment at which the young generation discovered that identity was also the moment at which, as an existential imperative, they had to deny it and refrain from engaging with it.

According to Appelfeld, it was Kafka who made it possible to speak of this complex relationship to Jewish identity and to escape the muteness that gripped the generation of children who experienced the Holocaust. Appelfeld describes the experience after the Holocaust as one of fullness. There was

an intense desire to say something, but no possibility of articulating the complex predicament the Holocaust had created for the children of assimilated families. In *The Trial*, Kafka created the new language that enabled Appelfeld to speak about the Holocaust and about his experience as a Jew: "No sooner had we touched the pages of *The Trial* than we could not shake the feeling that he had been with us through all our metamorphoses. Every line said: we. In Kafka's language we found, on the one hand, suspicion and skepticism, and, on the other, the sickly longings for meaning. Kafka suddenly gave us back the words" (p. 15). "The Metamorphosis" is thus an allegory of precisely this predicament. Its protagonists are an elderly, assimilated couple, alone in the world. The shochet and his wife are aware of the severance between themselves and their past, and between themselves and the community from which they came, but they are drowning in oblivion. As noted, each copes with this forgetting differently. The shochet withdraws into the house and into himself, trying to remember, grieving over the loss of the past, and feeling the absence of tradition and culture from his identity. The wife, by contrast, goes out into the world, acts within it, and entirely represses her past. The story begins as follows:

For years the house had stood abandoned, and the undisturbed shade beneath the trees had brought forth growths of its own. The front entrance was closed, and the occupants of the house, the shochet and his wife, used the two rear rooms—one room, in fact. Each year they would abandon another room, until they finally settled in the rear room and sealed its openings. Years earlier they still spoke to one another. The wife would complain. But in time her complaints ceased. She withdrew into her gestures, and her gestures were measured, like those of peasant women. Sometimes she recalled days gone by, days of commotion and many people. It was as distant as her childhood. Now she would go down to the village to buy potatoes from the peasant women. She had no money, and would exchange an object for food. On her return, the shochet would mutter: there is no point in going out. It is far away (The Metamorphosis, p. 85).

The house of the shochet and his wife is abandoned and isolated. Nor do they really live in the house, but only in one of its rooms. What does retreating into a single room mean when the house itself is already abandoned? Alongside the retreat into one room, there is the dichotomous juxtaposition of the shochet and his wife: the cessation of speech between them, her complaints as against his acceptance, her peasant gestures and departures for the village as against his withdrawal and speech. The house serves as a symbol of their Jewish identity, which, as soon becomes clear, is gradually being forgotten by them both. The passing years erase both their Jewish human surroundings and Jewish culture: "Sometimes he would remember and ask: where are the people?" And: "The shochet would try to

study a book, but his learning was slow. He struggled against the mildew that made it musty. More than any enemy, the mildew sought to rob him of what was dearest of all—the few books." The shochet represents a Jewish type who tries to fight the disintegration of Jewish identity but is powerless against it, surrendering to the stream of life. The forgetting of Jewish identity is interrupted repeatedly in the story precisely by the figure of the Gentile. He comes three times, asking the shochet to convert him to Judaism. This is no innocent request: it arises from the Gentile's nightmares and his belief that surrendering himself to the Jew will redeem him. At first, he asks pleadingly; later, he threatens to beat the Jew if he does not agree; and, on the third occasion, he threatens to slaughter him. The shochet, for his part, sees the approach as a ruse intended to expose his Jewish identity, rather than a genuine plea to redeem the Gentile from his bitter fate and a desire to join the Jewish people. Here, for the first time, the element of secrecy within Jewish identity is revealed. Until now, there has been objective forgetting in itself; here, however, an animal instinct is awakened in the shochet, and he denies his identity: "The shochet was bewildered. He stammered as though caught in a transgression. 'But there are no Jews here,' he said. 'Even I myself, if I could find a way, would leave this place'" (ibid., p. 87). The bribe serves to ward off the Gentile's request and confirms the shochet's suspicion that the request was spurious and served as a means of simple extortion, since it carried within it the exposure of his Jewish identity. Appelfeld's staging creates tension and complexity. The dramatic moment at which Christianity acknowledges Judaism's superiority—the Gentile's arrival to abase himself before the Jew—requires the Jew to reveal himself. The Jewish instinct for survival instructs the shochet not to expose himself, even at this dramatic moment, which could have redeemed him from his forgetting and repression. On the one hand, by accepting the bribe and making threats, the Gentile confirms the shochet's view of his malicious intentions. On the other, Appelfeld places a measure of blame on the shochet. If only he had received the Gentile with open arms, he might have been freed from his complex of forgetting, and his relations with the Gentile would have been repaired.

The wife, by contrast, is untroubled by forgetting, and the shochet's preoccupation with it annoys and irritates her. She does not hear the Gentile, yet she brings into the house "a smell of impurity" (p. 89). The shochet suspects her of eating non-kosher meat or selling her body. The shochet and his wife function as a couple only once in the story, toward its end. Two strangers, who appear to be Jews, come to visit, and at once processes of recollection begin within the shochet, filling him with life. His wife serves potatoes and eggs, yet even this hospitality is accompanied by suspicion of the guests. They take knives out of their knapsacks, and their interest in Jewish life once again awakens the shochet's animal instinct: he senses the danger he has brought into his house. Even if they were Jews,

he could not trust them, because he has long since shut himself away within his own four walls, to the point at which he can trust no one. His wife, by contrast, has so thoroughly repressed the fact of her Jewishness that the visit leaves no impression on her whatsoever. She feels nothing in particular about the guests, unlike her response to the Gentile who visited three times. She is described as someone who experiences reality in a superficial, animal way.

Two opposing and contradictory paradigms of Jewish identity emerge here. One sanctifies seclusion, fear, and the desire to preserve the remnants of an ancient tradition. This paradigm, represented by the shochet, is presented in the story as futile. The other is assimilation, merging into the non-Jewish world and completely forgetting Jewish tradition and culture. According to the story, the wife's success in becoming a bird depends on her husband's extinction. A storm comes, and the house rises and fills with water. The wife begins her attempts to fly: "In the evening the universe stood as though after a flood, quiet and at ease; a fine blueness cleared on the horizon. They looked at one another as though they had never met. She was no longer herself. Yet in him, for some reason, astonishment kept flickering on without him. And that was the boundary. His life came to an end like a gnawed tree. By night she was already steady, like those heavy birds that lift off and rise upward, their flight straightening into an even rhythm, as though they had never known what ground was" (*The Metamorphosis*, p. 92). The wife spreads her wings, leaves the ground and her former identity, and metamorphoses into another identity. At first glance, Appelfeld seems to mark this paradigm of complete assimilation as a success. Yet the wife's metamorphosis immediately recalls her husband's words: "A thing does not die; it only changes and undergoes a metamorphosis, and changes again and undergoes a metamorphosis." The woman may have become a bird, but the bird holds her former identity within it.

Reading "Testimony" not only identifies the story's general subject—coping with the question of Jewish identity in an assimilating milieu—but also reveals something further. The shochet and his wife, and the paradigms of identity they represent, do not inhabit different people or different groups. They are a dialectic present in every Holocaust survivor. The shochet embodies the yearning for a deep Jewish identity that characterized the grandparents' generation, alongside the forgetting and ignorance that were the lot of Appelfeld and his contemporaries. The wife embodies the strong instinct for life which, together with luck, as Appelfeld attests, kept him alive and required him to forget his Jewish identity and estrange himself from it. The story separates the two approaches: those possessed of an instinctive desire for life, who knew how to behave like animals and survive, and those absorbed in the Jewish identity they had lost, and who therefore died as well. "Testimony" contains no such

separation. Appelfeld shows that engagement with Jewish identity may have been repressed at the instinctive stage, yet burns within the young Holocaust survivors who survived because of the very instinct for life that banished that tendency.

The title's meaning, too, becomes clear through a reading of the essay. As noted, Kafka was the one who enabled Appelfeld and his contemporaries who had survived the Holocaust to speak about the Holocaust and about Jewish identity in its aftermath. Kafka articulated the complexity of the Jewish experience in Europe: on the one hand, the desire to integrate into European society; on the other, the futility of that very longing, the fundamental and arbitrary refusal to accept the Jew in Europe, and, perhaps most importantly, the element of accusation against the Jew that accompanies all relations between Jews and Gentiles. K. in *The Castle* is a Jew who can never enter society because he belongs neither to the ordinary people nor to the ruling class. K.'s status as a citizen exists only on paper. He enters the village because of the rulers, yet has no legal right to remain there. K. himself believes that everything depends on his becoming indistinguishable, an invisible person. He faces two possibilities: to work in the village as an emissary of the rulers, thus serving as their plaything and deriving all his rights from them; or to join the ordinary people in the village and allow the court messenger to determine his occupation. *The Castle* takes up precisely this second possibility. Kafka describes the process by which the Jew seeks rights like any other human being—a home, a family, employment and citizenship. Yet K.'s desire to receive the rights of an ordinary human being encounters the villagers' suspicion. Previously, when K. enjoyed the rights and protection of the Castle, the villagers treated him with respect tinged with hostility; now, his willingness to lose his rights and come to live among them produces anxiety and suspicion. Josef K.'s experiences in *The Trial*—not knowing what he is accused of, or how to remove the accusation hanging over him—and Kafka's presentation of the narrative of *The Castle* are regarded not only as articulations of a universal existential experience, but also as an early articulation of the Jewish experience. This presentation, Appelfeld attests, opened the springs that were blocked and brimming within him after the Holocaust.

The title, identical to that of one of Kafka's most famous stories, thus evokes the Kafkaesque experience and confirms our use of "Testimony" as an aid to understanding "The Metamorphosis." Yet if Kafka gave voice to Appelfeld's inner feelings after the Holocaust, the door that Buber and Scholem opened onto the world of Jewish mysticism became a bridge or a ladder to the expanses of Jewish culture from which he was estranged, and with which he struggled to engage after the catastrophe. This mysticism was "a religious language that best suited our experience and our understanding. The 'shattering,' the powers of evil let loose, the taunting demons, the sparks

demanding their restoration. We felt a real closeness to this language. The translation, of course, was highly subjective, but its impact endured for many days" (*Testimony*, p. 16).

Reading the essay makes the use of metamorphosis clearer: this is the Kabbalistic idea of metamorphosis, the metamorphosis of souls that appears in the Kabbalistic writings to which Appelfeld was introduced through Buber and Scholem after the Holocaust. The idea of metamorphosis itself is closely connected with questions of theodicy. It can explain questions of reward and punishment: infants and innocent people die because they embody a metamorphosis of a soul that sinned in the past, and the punishment concerns a sin committed in one of its previous metamorphoses. Metamorphosis thus indicates a physical change alongside spiritual continuity: the survival of the soul. It is easy to understand why this idea attracted Appelfeld and the members of his generation who had lived through the Holocaust. It succeeded in giving some explanation for the inexplicable horror of Auschwitz. Within the story, the idea of metamorphosis expresses the futility of assimilation. In this context, assimilation is understood as a physical or external change of form, but the essence—the Jewish soul—remains as it was. Metamorphosis expresses the inability to escape the Jewish past. This is therefore an interpretation that is indeed highly "subjective." Metamorphosis is not merely the passage of souls from one body to another; it also means an inability to change completely, to modify one's identity fundamentally. This use of metamorphosis in its Kabbalistic and mystical sense clarifies the reversal in the story. The wife becomes a bird that flies away, freed from the bonds of the dilapidated house floating on the stormwaters, yet she does not really become something wholly different. Her attempt to become a bird is futile. Although outwardly she appears to be a bird, it is a "heavy-winged" bird: the weight of its wings is the weight of the soul, the weight of the Jewish identity that passes on in any event.

The shochet, by contrast, does not undergo a metamorphosis: his life comes to an end, and its end is experienced as a boundary (p. 92). Yet, unlike the wife, something within him seems to undergo a fundamental change. The forgetting that grips him causes self-estrangement: he no longer recognizes himself. Ironically, his inability to accept change fixes that change all the more firmly and deeply within him, and he dies in a state of self-estrangement.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, reading "Testimony" clarifies a decisive point concerning the wife's metamorphosis. This is how Appelfeld writes of the beginning of the war and the separation from his parents:

From then on, solitude was our lot. Some in the forests, some in monasteries, some with a tyrannical farmer who treated you like the animals of his household. We soon learned that we must hide the secret of our Jewishness so thoroughly that not even a trace of it would be recognizable in us. Instinct whispered to us: the more we concealed ourselves, the greater our chances of life. Some were favored by luck. And so, without parents, across hostile fields and amid human estrangement, we grew up as animals grow: in submission and in concealed terror. Between the forests and the villages we felt the secret of our Jewishness; it was then, it seems, that this difficult bond was forged between us and the flickering flame of the "secret" that licked at us. We knew: this "secret" made us a target for every hand and axe, but without it our existence would be more abject still (p. 12).

The wife's metamorphosis is not merely assimilation as such. Reading "Testimony" makes it possible to understand that it is the very metamorphosis that was necessary for those who wanted to survive the war. The instinct to repress their Jewishness is an animal instinct; the wife's metamorphosis is necessary if she is to survive. A Kafkaesque point emerges here. On the one hand, to point to the metamorphosis is already to contain a claim about the impossibility of assimilation. On the other, according to the story, the wife's metamorphosis does indeed save her from death, unlike her husband, the shochet. It is presented as a complete metamorphosis in which nothing remains of the Jewish woman's soul: "By night she was already steady, like those heavy birds […] as though they had never known what ground was."

B. The Importance of The Metamorphosis for Understanding Testimony

Reading "Testimony," we encounter, as noted, the great difficulty faced by the children of assimilated families who survived the Holocaust. They developed a love–hate relationship with Jewish tradition: on the one hand, their parents had enjoined them to remain faithful to it when they parted; on the other, it had caused their parents' deaths. They developed a love–hate relationship with the tradition to which they were first deeply exposed at the beginning of the Second World War, and which they had to repress almost immediately, during the war, with animal instincts. They developed an ambivalent relationship with a tradition about which they knew almost nothing, yet whose depth they felt in their very flesh, since it determined the course of their lives and sealed their fate. This ambivalent tangle, which imposed muteness on Appelfeld, was unraveled through his reading of the Kafkaesque experience. A connection with Jewish culture became possible through Scholem and Buber's mediation of Jewish mysticism. At first glance, "The Metamorphosis" does indeed "do" what the essay only discusses. First, it uses the Kafkaesque experience and Kafka's enigmatic language to

establish a framework in which it can speak of Jewish identity as otherness within society. Second, it takes elements from Jewish mysticism and makes subjective use of them for its own purposes. The story reveals something of what remains unsaid in the essay.

I have already discussed the discovery that comes from reading "Testimony" after "The Metamorphosis." "Testimony" allows us to see that the shochet's and his wife's ways of coping express two tendencies that appear together in every survivor's relationship to Jewish identity. Yet reading "The Metamorphosis" reveals another layer that the essay does not disclose. The dichotomous juxtaposition of the wife's life and the shochet's death clarifies the sharp contrast between the tendency toward survival and the tendency to concern oneself with identity. The essay makes clear how difficult it was for the young Holocaust survivors to reconnect with the Jewish identity they had repressed in order to survive. The story makes this point much sharper: this is not merely a difficulty. Preoccupation with Jewish identity entails a threat to the ability to live, to change, to survive. The threat does not subside after the Holocaust, but constitutes a permanent countertendency. Preoccupation with Jewish identity is therefore a real existential danger, and not merely a difficulty or a contradiction.

"The Metamorphosis" allows us to extend our understanding of Kafka's contribution to the complexity of Jewish identity in a way the essay does not mention. In Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa finds himself transformed into a "gigantic verminous creature"[16] that can barely crawl out of bed, can neither make itself understood nor perform simple human actions. His father, mother and, finally, his sister estrange themselves from him, and he realizes that their earlier relationship to him was purely instrumental, since it was he who had provided for them through strenuous work. About a month after he turns into the creature, his mother and sister enter his room to move the furniture that has prevented him from crawling around it. His mother turns to his sister and questions whether this is right:

Is it not as though, by removing the furniture, we show that we have given up all hope of Gregor's recovery and are leaving him to his fate without consideration? I think the best thing we can do is try to leave the room exactly as it was, so that when Gregor returns to us, he will find everything unchanged and more easily forget what has happened to him in the meantime.[17]

Gregor's response to the act of moving the furniture is ambivalent:

Hearing his mother's words, Gregor realized that the absence of any direct human address, together with the monotony of his life within the family, must have confused his mind over these two months,

for he could find no other explanation for the fact that he had seriously wanted his room emptied of furniture. Did he really long for the warm room, made comfortable by its inherited furniture, to become a den in which he could, of course, crawl freely in every direction, but in which the complete forgetting of his human past would at the same time be hastened? He had already come close to forgetting it, and only his mother's voice, which he had not heard for so long, had roused him.[18]

Humanity and animality coexist in Gregor Samsa, and the forgetting of his human past troubles him just as the forgetting of his Jewish past troubles the shochet. Their preoccupation with the past and their inability to adapt to their new condition ultimately bring about both Gregor's and the shochet's deaths. Here is the description of Gregor's death:

He soon discovered that he could no longer move at all. He was not surprised; rather, it seemed unnatural to him that those thin little legs had actually carried him until now. Apart from this, he felt relatively at ease. His whole body did indeed ache, but it seemed to him that the pains were gradually weakening and would finally disappear altogether. He could scarcely feel the rotten apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, all covered with soft dust. The memory of his family awakened tenderness and love in him. As for the conviction that he must vanish, he held it, if possible, more firmly even than his sister. In this state of empty, peaceful reflection, he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning. He was still alive when it began to grow light outside the window. Then, without his willing it, his head sank all the way down, and his last breath flowed faintly from his nostrils.[19]

The shochet's death, too, is described in relation to a boundary between identity and otherness. In his case, "astonishment kept flickering on without him" (p. 92). Both Gregor's death and the shochet's are described as making life possible for the other family members. The shochet's liminal condition —the intense anxiety he feels over his identity, combined with his intense longing to engage with that very identity and explore it—creates an obstacle for his wife that only his death removes. In Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Gregor threatens the other family members through his human–animal condition, and only his death makes new lives possible for them.

I have already discussed the existential element in "The Metamorphosis" that is less sharply present in "Testimony." This element becomes more powerful still when the story is compared with Kafka's "The Metamorphosis": the deaths of the shochet and Gregor Samsa allow the lives of the other family members to continue. Moreover, the liminality shared by the shochet and Gregor casts Appelfeld's essay in a different light. Like Gregor Samsa, the shochet represents the assimilated Jew, and the

description of their condition attempts to answer the question of the danger they pose to society at large. It is precisely the liminal condition—in which they are both "this" and "that"—that brings about their deaths. The ambiguity of their identity demands an unambiguous answer. In both stories, death is presented as the solution to the problem. Both stories titled "The Metamorphosis" dwell on the harsh world of the person caught between worlds: someone with human thoughts and a primitive body, or someone who lives in the Gentile world but whose Jewish identity torments him and gives him no peace. The shochet and Gregor Samsa yearn for touch and love. Their condition calls for sensitivity and gentleness, yet they receive the exact opposite: harsh and cruel responses, without empathy or compassion.

C. Fiction and Essays - The Metamorphosis and Testimony in Place of a Conclusion

An essay is a short composition on a single subject, and essay writing is generally characterized by its personal nature. At the beginning of "Testimony," the essay that opens *Essays in the First Person*, Appelfeld explicitly states that he wishes to "offer a personal testimony." This is his claim:

The language of distance and generalization to which we have become so accustomed sometimes leaves the witness, and to some extent the listener, in perplexity. I, for my part, still believe that every true spiritual matter ought to be distilled through the personal prism. To the point: I shall try to sketch the course and the pitfalls of my own life and those of my generation, which have shaped us as they have. I shall speak not in chronicle, but in sights and events that kneaded us like soft clay.[20]

"Testimony" is a wonderful essay. Its precise analysis of the Jewish condition at the beginning of the war, and of its effect on inner psychological processes, is a model of fine writing. Yet Appelfeld does not fulfill his promise to concern himself with sights and events. On the contrary, it reads like a philosophical and psychological essay. Its most important movement—the turn to Kafka and to mystical literature as the foundations that made speech possible for the children of the Holocaust—is a brilliant psychological movement that does not rely on any event or sight. Appelfeld's promise at the beginning of the essay can be fulfilled only by reading "The Metamorphosis" alongside it. "The Metamorphosis" is a sequence of sights and events: the shochet's withdrawal, the wife's inarticulacy, her lying in the coop, her transformation into a bird, the waters entering the house, the knives in the hands of the two visitors, and the Gentile's threats against the shochet. As noted, the allegory at the basis of "The Metamorphosis" cannot be understood in depth without "Testimony." The essay gives the story depth. It seemingly allows speech to take place between the shochet and his wife, whose relationship is pervaded by silence and whose lot is to forget. The meaning of the wife's

metamorphosis is more comprehensible against the background of the essay. Her transformation into an animal, and her survival through that transformation, become comprehensible against the background of the existential possibilities Appelfeld presents in "Testimony."

Reading Appelfeld's "The Metamorphosis" greatly sharpens the Jewish element in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." Hannah Arendt noted that Kafka was a conscious pariah.[21] By this term, Arendt means a Jew who acknowledges his Jewishness as part of his identity and uses that identity to make an important universal contribution to the world at large.[22] The interpretations offered of "The Metamorphosis" are mainly universal: existential, psychoanalytic, postmodern, and intergenerational. Appelfeld's allusion to Kafka in the story's title also points toward a more particularist reading of "The Metamorphosis." Gregor Samsa's condition can be read as an articulation of the Jewish condition as well. Appelfeld's reference to Kafka requires us to read Kafka's "Metamorphosis" in the light of both "Testimony" and "The Metamorphosis." On this view, several readings of "The Metamorphosis" become possible. In one, Gregor Samsa, a moment before he awoke as a verminous creature, is the assimilated Jew wearing a mask; an extreme event can strip away that mask at a stroke and expose his primitive foundations. With the exposure of those foundations, the society that, until a moment earlier, had drawn sustenance from the Jew and been close to him rejects him and brings about his death. In a second reading, the metamorphosis is not a real process undergone by the Jew, but a reflection of what society thinks about him. On these readings, Gregor Samsa's figure is, in fact, Kafka's depiction of the fragility of emancipation and of Jews' integration into society. The figures of the shochet and his wife in Appelfeld's "The Metamorphosis" are directed toward precisely this question: what are the possibilities of Jewish existence in an assimilating society when the terror of annihilation is present in the background?

Notes

1. "No sooner had we touched the pages of *The Trial* [by Kafka—Y.E.] than we could not shake the feeling that he had been with us through all our metamorphoses." Aharon Appelfeld, "Testimony," in *Essays in the First Person* [*Masot be-guf rishon*] (Jerusalem: Ha-Sifriyah ha-Tsiyonit, 1979), pp. 9, 15 [Hebrew] (hereafter *Testimony*).

2. Aharon Appelfeld, "The Metamorphosis" ["Ha-gilgul"], in *Adnei ha-nahar* [*Foundations of the River*] (Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1971), p. 85 [Hebrew] (hereafter *The Metamorphosis*).

3. Hillel Barzel, *Mesaprim be-yihudam* [*Storytellers in Their Distinctiveness*] (Tel Aviv: Yahdav, 1981).

4. Ibid., pp. 105–107.

5. Ibid., p. 118.

6. Yigal Schwartz, *Qinat ha-yahid ve-netsah ha-shevet: Aharon Appelfeld—temunat olam* [*The Individual's Lament and the Tribe's Eternity: Aharon Appelfeld—A Worldview*] (Jerusalem: Keter and Magnes, 1996), p. 11.

7. Ibid., p. 92.

8. Ibid., p. 93.

9. Ibid., p. 17.

10. Ibid., p. 18. Schwartz argues that the history of Appelfeld's work can be understood as a process in which the past increasingly resurfaces and is reconstructed, until he is able to concern himself directly with it.

11. Ketzia Alon, "Ha-hitmodedut mul ha-dikui ha-notsri ke-mafteah la-mitopoetika ha-tashtitit bi-yetsirato shel Aharon Appelfeld" ["Confronting Christian Oppression as a Key to the Foundational Mythopoetics of Aharon Appelfeld's Work"], PhD dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, November 2006, p. 41.

12. Ibid., p. 40.

13. Schwartz, pp. 17, 28.

14. Alon, p. 54.

15. Aharon Appelfeld, "Testimony," *Iton 77*, nos. 7–8 (1978), p. 3.

16. Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," in *Sipurim u-prozah ketanah* [*Stories and Short Prose*] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1993), p. 40 [Hebrew edition] (hereafter Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*). Translator's note: The Kafka quotations have been checked against the German text of *Die Verwandlung* (Project Gutenberg eBook 22367).

17. Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, p. 71.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., p. 92.

20. *Testimony*, p. 9.

21. Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York, 1978), p. 67.

22. Ibid., p. 83.