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Cuvinte-cheie: lagăr de concentrare, iudaism, memorie, identitate lingvistică.

Cum să construiești o identitate. Studiu de caz

Rezumat

Lucrarea *Cum să construiești o identitate. Studiu de caz* analizează felul în care limba vorbită construiește identitatea etnică și artistică înainte, în timpul și după experiența din lagărul de concentrare, în cartea *Istoria unei vieți* de Aharon Appelfeld. Limbile copilăriei sale – germana (limbă maternă), idiș (limba bunicilor), ucraineana presărată cu cuvinte românești (limbile mediului social) sunt rădăcinile stabile în căutarea unei noi identități asumate în Israel prin limba ebraică, achiziționată în context cultural.

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How to Build an Identity. Case Study

Summary

From the perspective of the present time, three layers of remembrance can be identified: the idyllic life in the Carpathians, in his family, the wound and the enormous scar of the war and the years spent in Israel. Each of the layers is defined by different, intermingling linguistic approaches, intertwined with the defensive language of the silence of concentration camps and the long post-camp experience. German, Yiddish, Ukrainian mixed with Romanian language and Hebrew language built an identity in the book *The Story of a Life*, by Aharon Appelfeld.

How to Build an Identity. Case Study

Cultural identity is based on a set of patterns whose aim is to concentrate, in an organised manner, experiences recurring throughout the history of a social group or community. These patterns (which become stereotypes when they deteriorate) develop their structure over a long period of time and they are communicated outside the group by means of various cultural codes: “reality, if described correctly, produces symbols all by itself” (Appelfeld 2004: 187). In time, linguistic identity becomes a part of cultural identity – things in themselves do not signify anything before they are verbalised, “the only way in which they can be turned from natural phenomena into cultural symbols” (Wald 1986: 77, originally Romanian). Jewish speakers have always occupied a special place, as for a very long time they were in want of a country to which they could refer. They preserved and disseminated their culture in special circumstances, and some were even assimilated into their place of adoption. From the perspective of the perception of the Other, this assimilation was annulled and all Jews – whether integrated or not – were treated identically, namely they were subjected to the same extermination.

Against the background of the proteiform literature on concentration camps, the book by Aharon Appelfeld, *The Story of a Life*, is in fact the story of developing an identity rather than the story of surviving the Holocaust. Although the grasp of the Romanian language was fairly limited for the author due to the geopolitical context of the age, one cannot but acknowledge the familiarity of the type of experience resulting from the intersection of several cultures, starting in the Balkans or Central Europe and moving towards the West or towards Israel: “The paradigm of Jewish personalities in Romanian culture is impressive, and a significant percentage of the names included in this gallery subsequently became famous in western, especially French, sociocultural life” (Milancovici 2010: 81, originally Romanian). The story of his life began in Cernăuți, where he lived until the age of 8, when he was deported to a concentration camp due to his Jewish origin. His life thus continued in spaces that determined his existence in a traumatising manner, which is why it is only natural to discover that his narrative follows sinuous temporal leaps instead of the peaceful chronology of a recollection developed in time. Memory, dream, imagination and remembrance are employed to provide a certain meaning to various vague events: “Of the war years I remember little, as if they were not six consecutive years” (Appelfeld 2004: 7). What he calls the “voice of the body” replaces the conscious memory and helps him organise his past on the journey to self-composure and, under the force of inertia, oppose the ability to forget, which would be all too necessary in the process of healing: “memory and oblivion, the sense of chaos and impotence on one side and the desire for a meaningful life on the other” (Appelfeld 2004: 9). This “voice of the body” returns in the shape of a leitmotif fulfilling a unifying function in the context of a subjective, distorted chronology, because memory has its roots in the individualised resonance of the body. Intense physical

sensations determine the surfacing of fragments of recollections. This fact has a significant artistic impact on Appelfeld's work, especially as regards this book, which does not consist of classic confessions, but of revealing a developmental process because the tragedy was not experienced by the rationalising, generalising, categorising adult – it occurred in the life of the child ruled by emotions: “Culture is the unity between language and paralinguages. The rest is silence, namely nature” (Wald 1986: 85, originally Romanian). This is precisely what the long moments of silence subsequent to the succession of traumas become, as a return to nature out of a subconscious desire to re-establish oneself in another culture.

From the perspective of the present time, three layers of remembrance can be identified:

(1) the idyllic life in the Carpathians, in a family consisting of parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins – the strong brightness of this memory underpins its subsequent endurance and the foundation of a heterogeneous but extremely rich linguistic identity: “There he lived moments of intense happiness; it was a time in which memories were derived from senses and contemplation. These included, for instance, the surprise of understanding his grandparents talking Yiddish, a language he did not know, as his maternal language was German” (Couton, originally French, available online: <http://www.arkheia-revue.org/Histoire-d-une-vie-de-Aharon.html>).

(2) the wound and the enormous scar of the war;

(3) the years spent in Israel, a consistent layer, with several subdivisions brought about by the path towards settlement.

Each of the layers is defined by different, intermingling linguistic approaches, intertwined with the defensive language of the silence of concentration camps and the long post-camp experience, the discrete silence of the peaceful house in Cernăuți and the maternal grandfather's proneness to be silent. Thus, words surpass their technical function and reach secret nooks of the individual which even he seems to ignore: “Language is the most technical of the message systems. It is used as a model for the analysis of the others. In addition to language there are other ways in which man communicates that either reinforce or deny what he has said with words. Man learns to read different segments of a communication spectrum covering events of a fraction of a second up to events of many years” (Hall 1969: 38). As regards the author, the absence of words in pre-ghettoisation and pre-deportation childhood years symbolises the magic by which the author accepts to be overwhelmed in various contexts. From the child's perspective, another form of silence consists of the lack of in-depth learning about the Mosaic faith: “People sit quietly on the benches. They are quiet because they don't know how to pray, I realize, and I snap to attention” (Appelfeld 2004: 22). Visits to the synagogue in the company of his grandfather are the initial moments of the contact with the ethnic-religious identity, traditionally speaking, which will develop later on, in Israel, upon undergoing the stages in assuming the aforementioned identity. Together with the maternal grandfather, *Onkel Felix* is another major figure of the author's traditional-religious past: ritual episodes, such as covering one's

head with a *kippah* before touching a book written in Hebrew, establish the connection between the written word and a certain community. He is also the one who would quote Latin proverbs and proverbs of the *Talmud*, depending on the life situation. In the ghetto and concentration camps, the absence of words was a sign of normalcy, indicative of the preservation of interior coherence; on the other hand, the surfacing of words was suggestive of weakness and imbalance: “I’ve carried with me my mistrust of words from those years. A fluent stream of words awakens suspicion within me. I prefer stuttering, for in stuttering I hear the friction and the disquiet, the effort to purge impurities from the words, the desire to offer something from inside you. Smooth, fluent sentences leave me with a feeling of uncleanness, of order that hides emptiness” (Appelfeld 2004: 131). The immensity of silence that hides traumas will be drowned in a compensating ocean of words, whose meaning young Appelfeld fails to grasp. The death of his mother and uncle Felix in the ghetto mark the end of childhood. The sharp sound of his mother before death is a form of abolishing articulate language, which ultimately signifies the disarticulation of an inner and outer world that will only become whole again in the over many years.

Memory consists of deposits and determines a starting point (at the age of four) in a language element – the word *Erdbeern*, shouted by his mother in one of the family’s walks in the shaded forests of the Carpathian mountains, a word overlying the image of the invigorating red fruit; the image of the mother killed in the ghetto is linked to the German language, whereas the image of the grandparents is related to Yiddish, as another word, *mestameb*, triggers the involuntary memory of associations: “Mother and I speak German. Sometimes it seems to me that the way Grandfather and Grandmother talk makes Mother uncomfortable, and that she’d prefer for me not to hear their language” (Appelfeld 2004: 14). The use of German is a way of relinquishing tradition, a kind of overt urbanisation, built, nevertheless, upon ancient culture, denied by the father and discreetly blurred out by the mother. Yiddish and German are family languages, whereas Ukrainian is the language of the milieu that the family entered at one point in the past. The Ruthenian servant, from whom the author learns the first words in the servant’s mother tongue, mixes Yiddish words in her maternal idiom after spending several years among Jews. Another language of the family milieu is Romanian; after the entire area of Bucovina was under Romanian administration, Romanian became the official language, and the author learned it in part: “Four languages surrounded us and lived within us, complementing one another in a strange way. [...] These four languages merged into one, rich in nuance, contrasts, humour, and satire. This language had lots of room for emotion, for delicate shadings of feeling, imagination, and memory. Today these languages no longer live within me, but I feel their roots. Sometimes, as if by magic, just one word will evoke entire scenes” (Appelfeld 2004: 137-138). He would feel the divide later in Israel, where “He would pit himself against the youth leaders who had been sent from Palestine. They advocated Hebrew; he, Yiddish” (Appelfeld 2004: 100). Detaching oneself from a language and adopting another is more often than not a way of assuming a new identity and forgetting the old one.

After reaching the Holy Land, people who survived the hell of the Holocaust

underwent a true ritual of healing. A part of this ritual consisted of assuming the Hebrew language, a stage that for Aharon Appelfeld co-occurred with the discovery of his artistic calling. For emigrants/immigrants, the formation of a new personality and its artistic expression is manifested in a series of dissociations, associations, denials and returns to the world from which they left and whose roots can only be eliminated formally: “narrative/lyrical identity and argumentative (logical) identity are only partial aspects of personal identity. Each of these dimensions determines distinct attitudes in matters of ethics, taste, rightfulness and other such norms. Thus, the issue of identity and the manner in which an individual relates to this identity in the world of the text make up a way of circumscribing the personality of the individual in question” (Milancovici 2010: 81, originally Romanian). As the author travels through different cultural-linguistic spaces (the Ukrainian and Romanian facets of Cernăuți, the concentration camp in Transnistria, the escape from the aforementioned camp followed by the travel to Ukraine, Italy and Israel), he becomes aware of his identity fragmentation only after reaching Israel. The diary of the fourteen-year-old child who now lives in a country which he must consider his homeland and sanctuary, a place where he can rebuild his identity, has a mosaic structure: although it does not include full sentences in German, Yiddish and Ruthenian, it comprises words and sentence segments in the above-mentioned languages, “the suppressed cries of a fourteen-year-old youth who’d lost all the languages he had spoken and was now left without language” (Appelfeld 2004: 136). The four languages of Appelfeld’s childhood (German, Yiddish, Ruthenian and Romanian) were acquired naturally during that age, developing around the maternal language and creating particularly a language of emotion derived from reality, outside which authentic art does not exist, as Appelfeld later noted. On the other hand, the languages spoken in Palestine in the year 1946 appeared exotic to the author, but without roots in affective reality, without an assumed past or the necessary groundwork. This foundation is represented by the mother tongue: “Without a mother tongue, a person has a defect” (Appelfeld 2004: 137), because it provides the moral and emotional comfort of belonging: “The languages that I had brought with me were steadily receding, but I was far from fluent in the Hebrew that I had acquired with so much effort. Harder than this, however, was not having a sense of belonging [...]” (Appelfeld 2004: 172) – an inherent future that he cannot yet delineate. In the kibbutzim created for therapeutic purposes (to eliminate the traumatising past), the use of maternal languages by the people who reached those spaces was forbidden, as an acknowledgement of the fact that mother tongues constituted fundamental elements of identity. The author’s mother and maternal language become symbiotic in the narrator’s memory; the mother’s death at the beginning of the war signals the beginning of the decay that Appelfeld cannot yet determine conceptually into the tragic metamorphosis of the many years to come. The interdiction of the mother tongue causes a removal of the exteriorisation that can dissimulate what happens in one’s inner life, so that behavioural features become more transparent. For Appelfeld, the self turns into an inner prison that he abandons in the rare moments in which he finds conversation partners in the languages of his childhood. Appelfeld refuses the shallow, rapid learning of Hebrew slang,

as practised by those who easily adapted to the new environment, because “empty talk is the noisy manifestation of silence” (Wald 1986: 84, originally Romanian). He chooses to wait and gain in-depth knowledge of the nature of the new language, alternating hate with hesitation and enthusiasm and being aware that the substitution of the maternal language with another idiom implies complex cultural and civilisational contextualisation in view of understanding the new language: “Without a language a man doesn’t talk. My mother tongue, which I had greatly loved, died within me after two years in Israel. [...] From the moment I arrived in Israel, I hated the people who forced me to speak Hebrew, and with the death of my mother tongue, my hostility toward them only increased” (Appelfeld 2004: 140-141). One can find moral dilemmas in Appelfeld’s relation with his mother tongue as well: German is the language of his mother’s murderers, so abandoning it should also be an actual act of protest. Feeling inadequate and yet unprepared to annul his past, admonishing himself for having the mentality of the Diaspora, getting the impression that the basic Hebrew he acquired in a hurry is not enough to rebuild himself, Appelfeld learns from Dov Sadan that the most important writers of Israel are bilingual. Old knowledge and the complex of the Diaspora are assimilated to weakness and indolence, and so is the Yiddish language, the only one to stir his emotions, to provide him the feeling of belonging (an orphan language displaying a similar identity), to help him find his roots without which new ones could not grow. The quest for spiritual parents and their discovery – the philosopher Gershom Scholem and the writer Samuel Agnon – will help him identify his options and rebuild himself after a long disintegration, reconsidering Yiddish and Hasidic literature according to his inner structure and personal development. The choice of literature occurs when he understands that literature “is the religious melody that has been lost to us” (Appelfeld 2004: 146); it has to be a sublimation of truth, so that Appelfeld’s diary from the years at the end of the 1940s until the early 1950s, to which he refers from time to time, is the expression of realities that are in symbiosis with the language used, episodes spontaneously surfacing from his memory, experiences that initially seem to slow down his integration, but which will transform him into an authentic human being: the memories of his parents’ and grandparents’ house are in German and Yiddish, whereas those about building his life in Israel are in Hebrew, the quality of the language observing the degree of integration, from surface layers to in-depth ones, from imitation to actual acceptance, in every nexus of the creative individuality, beyond restrictive ideologies to which Appelfeld refuses to adhere blindly, so as not to betray his essence – thus, in other words, a praiseworthy honesty in life and writing: “But above all, I fought to acquire the language [i.e., Hebrew] and to adopt it as my own tongue. At a very early age, and before I knew that fate would push me toward literature, instinct whispered that without an intimate knowledge of language [i.e., Hebrew] my life would be superficial and impoverished” (Appelfeld 2004: 147). Despite false opposition and lingering over the language of memories, Appelfeld’s attitude towards Hebrew turns into a homage paid to this language.

Appelfeld’s conscription is a turning point, because during this time he experiences the revelation of the fact that he should not struggle to forget, nor to remember. What is

meant to stay will stay and become a foundation of the future, whereas what is meant to be forgotten will be lost forever; the processes of forgetting and remembering can only take place spontaneously, and any attempt to steer them is restrained. Emotion (be it positive or negative) is spontaneous, a form of taking control of the meanings of the world in a profound way: “By means of speech, emotions and perceptions become the connotations and denotations of linguistic meanings and this is how the understanding and appreciation of the world begins” (Wald 1986: 77, originally Romanian). The word is simultaneously concrete and abstract, which is why the acquirement of a new language in cultural context, not in strictly technical context, is the only enduring and reliable type of language learning, because “Only ideas or emotions that arise from something concrete can have a legitimate existence” (Appelfeld 2004: 186) and “The fate of abstractions is that they grab you for a moment and then evaporate. Only words that create pictures can be retained. The rest is chaff” (Appelfeld 2004: 196). Contradicting theories regarding the function of words, such as Platonism and empiricism, appear in Wittgenstein’s discourse on the internalisation of language along with individual experience and on the personal way of using words. The languages spoken by Appelfeld before Hebrew are areas for the crystallisation of his conscience, for the coagulation of an incipient self, of a fragmented identity, yet not an absent identity, but one that is deeply individualised, a fact that is beneficial for the artist.

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