AN ANALYSIS OF IDA FINK'S STORIES "THE END" AND "THE THRESHOLD": PORTRAITS IN TIME

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Spare us what we can learn to endure.
—Yiddish Proverbs
(Cited in Howe & Greenberg, 1953)

Ida Fink is a unique voice in the *oeuvre* of writings about the *Shoah*. Though she has lived in Israel since 1957, and though she began writing about her wartime experiences only decades after her immigration, she did not develop her literary voice in Hebrew. Fink continues to write and publish in Polish, the language of her birth, the language of the culture that both nurtured and rejected her, first as a teenager and then later as a woman in her thirties. For Fink, Polish is the language of exile; and though many of her readers will come to her work in their English or Hebrew translations, knowing that the language of composition is Polish underscores the movement of looking back that is prevalent in her fiction. The Polish language itself becomes a sign of what remains; it is a trace of how much has been lost.

Her stories "The End" and "The Threshold" (Shawn & Goldfrad, 2007), characterize a young woman's introduction to a world at war. These are elegiac narratives about a crossing over in time and more importantly in the protagonists' consciousness. Maybe it is because these are stories that take place before the violence and horror of the ghettos, the transports, and the concentration camps; maybe it is because Fink is more concerned with the slow movements of psychological discernment. However, in these two stories, her characters "identify and recognize themselves as primarily consisting of their dreams, hopes, and possibilities, rather

than their physical bodies" (Best, 2002). These are not stories of deprivation: hunger, thirst, exhaustion. Fink does not use the body, as the French writer Charlotte Delbo does, for example, to convey the extent of the atrocities committed against humanity by those who served and carried out the policies of the Third Reich policies. For Delbo, deep memory—one that is known through the senses, one that conveys physical imprints—is most able to accurately convey the trauma of internment in German concentration camps (Delbo, 2001).

Ida Fink, however, was fortunate enough not to have shared these horrific experiences with Delbo and with the millions of others who perished and the relatively few who survived the death camps. Born in Zbaraz, Poland, she spent 1941–1942 in the Lvov ghetto and was able to escape. She spent the remaining war years on the Aryan side with false identity papers. Her stories, then, are about psychological and emotional reckonings. They are about the collapse of characters' worlds, emotionally and ontologically. It is not the body being ravaged she is 'describing,'[1] but the psyche's forced adjustment to a new world order.

"The End" and "The Threshold," like the other stories collected in *Traces* (1997) and in *A Scrap of Time*, Fink's 1995 compilation of short fiction, deal with the "small" moments. These are not stories of the grand sweep of history, but the minute-by-minute scraps, the small pieces that not only make up a life, but, like traces, are also the small pieces of memory that remain. They are often all that remain.

"The End" is a short story that manages simultaneously to capture the poignancy of young love, the eclipse of all that is familiar, and the terror and shadow that enveloped the citizens, particularly the Jews, of Europe. It is the end not only of

[1] Maurice Blanchot has insightfully claimed that the *Shoah* exposes the limitations of language to express the complex anguish of the victims. He writes that the "disaster de-scribes." Written language collapses in the confrontation with atrocity. Both writer and reader are affected with the loss of this foundational human characteristic: to name and give meaning to our world (Blanchot, 1995).

the world as this young couple knows it, but it is the end of Modernism, of any notion that human construction—scientific, artistic, theological, ideological—can lead to advancement on a humane or ethical level. The end of the beginning of a relationship of young love, wherein all the promise, beauty, hope, and fertility abound in potential, is used to highlight the pain of rupture and of war.

The story begins on the night of the day when the Germans have entered the city. The opening line of the story describes the pair of young lovers: "They were still standing on the balcony, although it was the middle of the night and only a few hours kept them from dawn" (p. 3). The *still* that describes their standing connotes a literal stillness or physical immobility, though this young couple is anything but. They are afraid and nervous and "her body is shaking" (p. 4). The *still* also implies continuity, a lingering motion, which in this case is a non-motion. Their *stillness* embodies their yearning to hold on to the world as they know it, to hold back the encroaching dread that plows forward relentlessly.

The stillness might also be read as a kind of foreshadowing of the still-like—both in terms of non-movement and endurance—phenomena that await the Jews: hours of standing in cattle cars, hours of standing in camp yards for roll call, hours, days, and weeks waiting in a kind of extended psychic and physical immobility in the ghettos and then in the camps to see what and when something more radical would befall them.

The boundary between times—the now, the then, the future unraveling—is not always clear in these characters' minds. It is no coincidence, then, that Fink interweaves the German entrance into the city with a description of a classical music concert. Standing on the balcony at night the young man thinks how he can remember perfectly "a faint buzz coming from the direction of the city. As if swarms of locusts

were flying from far away. Maybe not locusts, but simply the dense tremolo of the strings, rising to a forte, closer and closer, fleeing before the storm" (p. 4-5). As in some stories where Fink "exploits linguistic polyphony to orchestrate delusions, ironies, and unpredictable twists of fate" (Wilczynsji, 1994, p. 31), in this narrative Fink employs a kind of musical polyphony between the tanks and the orchestra to obfuscate the boundary between linear time, to highlight the floundering definitions of normalcy, and most egregiously to expose the sinister undermining of aesthetics as a product of the Platonic definition of the Good. Indeed, the Nazis very deliberately exploited music and other arts as part of their propaganda apparatus. The confluence of tanks and a musical performance at the center of Fink's story functions as a kind of "proof" that unto themselves aesthetics do not lead to the Good, but only to themselves.

This has added meaning because each one in this pair of young lovers is an artist. She is a musician. Piotr, the young man, is a painter. The tension in the story lies in their respective reactions to the "loud and brutal thunder" of the German tanks that blend in with the music the pianist is generating. His "fingers attack his silent keyboard" (p. 5) just as the German tanks are about to attack the silent civilian population. The young woman is pessimistic. Her lover remains optimistic. He keeps repeating to her, and one is inclined to think mostly to himself, that what they are hearing is of little significance. He chastises her for mourning the finale of their relationship and of their world. He shouts at her to stop and comfortingly says he will make them coffee.

By comparison she is gloomy; but one wonders at what point does a pessimist become a realist? For it is only if one were able to boldly and clearly read the signs that one could even begin to think ahead and possibly figure out some way to escape

the horrors about to destroy their lives. As the hours pass, his Pollyannaish insistence that nothing has or is happening becomes hollow, for despite himself he is listening hard to the changes in atmosphere and against all his wishes "the darkness resounds with dull thuds. … It was the same ominous music that had overpowered Chopin in the park. Tanks were once again riding down the city streets" (p. 6).

At the story's end, Piotr is sleeping and his lover is awake, taking it all in: the end of their love affair, the end of their art, the end of their world. She tells him to keep sleeping: why not remain in contented denial for as long as possible? For her this is not feasible. She remains awake, and when the sun rises, the narrative voice acknowledges that the "war was fifteen minutes old" (p. 7). The war is actually fifteen minutes *young* at this moment, and she who is indeed young has quickly become old with the incisive entrance of enemy forces into her city.

"The Threshold" has a similar narrative movement. This story is about the entrance of the Germans into a small Polish town in July 1941, and the termination of a young woman's worldview. Though one week has passed since the Russian army fled Eastern Poland and the Germans arrived, and though the "first pogrom had already taken place" (9), like Piotr in "The End," Elzbieta resists accepting the new order that has trapped her.

Hers is a gradual awakening to the new reality of the German occupation. There are layers of penetration, of various kinds of crossings over, before she can fully acknowledge the radical and lethal transformations. When her parents cannot return home for "the war had caught them by surprise in L." (p. 10), she is forced to begin to consider the new reality of her life—but only a little. Like her parents who did not acknowledge that danger was rife and the enemy close by, who left their home

and young daughter to visit a neighboring city, their, and in turn, her innocence is destined to be shattered.

Once her own town is occupied, Elzbieta continues to resist facing the menace that surrounds her. She insists on going into the woods and down to the river, as is her habit. She takes her dog for walks, she lies in the sun, and she justifies her actions by claiming that the "Germans never go down there—after all, these days there aren't too many Jews interested in swimming" (p. 10). Her blatant refusal to see herself in the category of the threatened would be admirable if it were an expression of cynicism or even heroism, but it is, in actuality, rather tragic, for it stems from a combination of youthful inexperience and indifference.

Even when her house is ransacked by German soldiers, Elzbieta is not shaken out of her stubborn naiveté. It is only when she is made to witness the killing of a young Russian soldier by an equally young German soldier that her emotional threshold is violated. Until this moment, she has been able to pretend that little has changed. Then, the "something cold jabbing into her cheek" (p. 15) and the Russian "boy's final, bewildered gaze" (p. 15) force her out of the interior space she has deliberately constructed for herself. Until this moment, this inner sanctuary successfully "kept the others out" (p. 11).

The others are not only the enemy from without—the Germans. They are also the enemy from within—her relatives who have sought refuge in Elzbieta's family's country home. Elzbieta is engaged in an open struggle with these aunts and uncles. They criticize her for carrying on as if nothing has changed in their world, and she abhors them for they seem to her to be "haunted by the spirit of that terrible time" (p. 11).

However, once she is forced to witness the murder, she is able to see honestly, without cover or delusion. Only then is she able to cross the final threshold, which leads to the room of her relatives. Until this moment she has refused to enter for she scorned their endless whispering and worries. Finally, when Elzbieta recognizes that this is the room where a wartime atmosphere already exists, she enters and joins them at the table.

In her book, *One, by One, by One: Facing the Holocaust* (1990), Judith Miller claims that abstract remembering veils the reality of individual lives, of individual suffering. To continue to refer only to 6 million Jews, to not consciously consider that people suffered and died as one, plus one, plus one is to obscure the fact of their pain and of the perpetrators' culpability.

Similarly, Fink recreates one moment at a time. One moment followed by another moment that makes up a minute, an hour, a day, a week. Her moments are traces, a remnant of what remains. "There's always a remnant. A piece of a piece of a piece" (Cohen, 1972, p. 248). This remnant, or *shearith* as it is called in Hebrew, are the people who are still alive and still remember; it is their stories of those who are not and cannot.

The French philosopher Emanuel Levinas has also written about the idea of the trace, but from a metaphysical point of view. He claims that the trace is what remains of the face of the God Who has retreated from our world. "But the trace is not just one more word," he says. "[I]t is the proximity of God in the countenance of my fellowman" (Levinas, 1998, p. 57). The small frames of time and portraiture that Fink's stories create lead her readers to confront the faces of those lost, to see in their gestures and in their slowly spun awareness the traces that, according to Levinas,

enigmatically remain for us to hold on to from the Infinite and immemorial past (Levinas, 1998).

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