

A Double Life

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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חיים כפולים

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר אילן

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1. Aims and General Description:

I will be writing a collection of short stories which embrace the theme of the double life.

A number of them will address literal manifestations of double identity: the Diaspora experiences of British Jews; Russian “Refuseniks” fighting for the right to emigrate; blends of integration and alienation in Israel’s minority communities. I also hope to write about the double life in less conventional terms. Modern-Orthodoxy, the stream of Judaism with which I identify, demands not just an accommodation with the double life but a commitment to it. Trauma induces a double life: many of the Holocaust survivors I have met live in a kind of psychic suspension between the life they were given and the life they would have had if the Holocaust had not happened. Israel leads a double life; that of high-tech prosperous Western country and that of besieged mini-State under threat of obliteration.

2. Conceptual Background

Theme:

I am drawn to the theme of the double life because I was raised and educated as a religious Jew in a predominantly Christian country. It was an un-integrated life, one which felt increasingly alien and uncomfortable as I grew older. I arrived in Israel as a young adult in 1985, hoping that Israel would crush my doubleness into a single way of living and being. Yet for the next twenty-five years I struggled with outsider status as an immigrant and in subtle ways I continue to do so.

When I was a child no quarter was given to any expression of discomfort with, or alienation from, the double life. To be Jewish *was* to be double, if a Jew was to live anywhere at all outside of Israel, which most Jews did. To rebel against doubleness

was to choose its antidote, assimilation, and to choose assimilation post-Holocaust was to disgrace the memory of the millions who had died. Therefore doubleness was worn as a badge of pride by my parents and grandparents, and I was expected to be proud of it too, to rejoice in doing lots of peculiar things that most people did not do, to be delighted about abstaining from things that most people felt were a part of ordinary life. In the British Jewish community of the 1970's and 80's there was a conspiracy of sorts at work: that under no circumstances would *recognition or expression* be given to the sheer amount of difficulty experienced in living the double life. Perhaps this is why I am moved, finally, to write about it. More importantly, to give expression and recognition to some of my painful experiences as a double-lifer is not just to give them the respect they deserve but to extrapolate them to my understanding of Israel's minority communities, for whom I logically feel concern and responsibility.

Whatever one has to say about the double life, it has been at the heart of the Jewish experience for millennia. The bible shows us that Jews were living the double life from the time they went down to Egypt. "The People of Israel are more numerous and mightier than we," said the uneasy Pharaoh. But who were these "People of Israel", pre-Revelation? Separate enough to be noticed, apparently, yet integrated enough to pose the threat of a fifth column. "Their laws are different from all people," Haman complained centuries later to King Ahasuerus. "Let it be written that they may be destroyed." The Romans came to a similar conclusion, ruthlessly stamping out Jewish revolt before and after the destruction of the Second Temple. Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain came up with only a semi-Final Solution to the binary loyalties of Jews, while Hitler and Stalin took their distaste to its ultimate conclusion.

The miracle is that none of these rulers succeeded in extinguishing either the Jews or their strange affiliation for dual living. Perhaps doubleness had been etched into Jewish consciousness at Sinai, where two quite separate categories of commandments were delivered on two tablets of stone. (“We will do, and we will listen” the Israelites said in their acceptance speech – a double statement if ever there was one.)

Or perhaps displacement, both the inner and outer variety, gives rise to great ingenuity and creativity, making the double life worthwhile. I suggest that the outsider status of Jewish artists in the Diaspora made them extraordinarily sensitive to other types of ambiguity, to the limitless possibilities for self-contradiction in all of us. “What seems to me right one day...” writes Anzia Yezierska in *Children of Loneliness*, “... seems all wrong the next. Not only that, but many things seem right and wrong at the same time.” American Jewish writers have explored the vicissitudes of the double life in depth, using spiritual and social ambivalence in Diaspora Jews as a point of departure to explore other, more nuanced confusion in the hearts of their protagonists. In *The Counterlife* Philip Roth weaves together different versions of events unfolding between two brothers, appearing on the surface to tackle Jewish American distaste for Zionism and religious practice, but examining in sub-text the desire of all of us to have access to a number of different futures instead of just one. Nicole Krauss’s novel *A History of Love* touches upon the Holocaust, bereavement and of course love, but its theme is about the past, the loss of things which cannot be regained, and the responsibility of the fiction writer to capture that loss in words. “If at large gatherings or parties, or around people with whom you feel distant, your hands sometimes hang awkwardly at the ends of your arms,” she writes,

“— if you find yourself at a loss for what to do with them, overcome with sadness that comes when you recognize the foreignness of your own body – it’s because your hands remember a time when the division between mind and body, brain and heart, what’s inside and what’s outside, was so much less.”

Is it possible to bring something not yet expressed to such a very overworked and overwrought Jewish literary theme as the double life? I argue that it is, because variations on this theme are inexhaustible. Certainly in the case of my own family, the double life has weaved its combined blessing and curse through three generations in highly individual and unexpected ways. Because of this, I had intended to describe how doubleness confers great riches upon the human psyche. How double people are intrinsically more interesting, more wise and more rounded than single ones. I also intimated above that the creative fruits of doubleness make it worthwhile.

But that would be to over-simplify the double life, and to trivialize it. The truth is that doubleness is often painful and difficult. Some of us live it not through choice but because it has been forced upon us. To be a double person is to sometimes be a *Golem*, a *Frankenstein* or a *Jekyll and Hyde*. To write about it authentically is to attempt to capture the sewn-together ugliness and tenderness of it, without resorting to sentimentality.

Style:

The scholar Eric Auerbach offers us two different ways we can attempt authenticity in writing. He describes how Homer, in the story *Odysseus’ Scar*, “invites us in” to a world which exists only in foreground. Characters, events, dialogues and visual details are all richly and equally illuminated. Auerbach contrasts this with the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac – the *Akeidah*. Here an entirely different narrative device is used – the device of omission. There is very little visual detail or dialogue.

Auerbach submits that this kind of narrative - sparse, elliptical and “fraught with background” – conveys a greater truth than the cheerful pageantry of the Homer texts. In life, we suffer from the gaps in our certainty.

Raised on biblical exegesis from the age of five, I was taught to read the works of the great commentators – Rashi, Onkelos and Ibn Ezra – to fill in those gaps when studying the bible. But looking back on that excellent Jewish education it seems to me that in the search for “explanation” something important was sacrificed. The multiple possibilities of meaning offered in the Classical Hebrew left room for ambiguity and doubt, yet the commentators seemed to feel it was their responsibility to redress this. In doing so they dispensed with a fair amount of nuance and complexity. They aspired to a Bible written in the style of Homer, to one offering enlightenment and clarity. But perhaps this is not the Bible’s purpose. Like good fiction writing its greatness seems to me to lie in the questions it poses, not in the answers its scholars have for centuries struggled to provide.

In writing my own stories I would like aspire to the narrative power of the *Akeidah*, to the questions asked and not answered. But I aspire to Homer also, to his love of detail, to his ability to invite the reader in and show her a world of light and colour. I know that stylistically this is a difficult balance to strike.

For inspiration I look to writers whose narratives I feel combine these two opposites to great effect. As a teenager I was captivated by Ian McEwan’s two *Akiedah*-style short story collections, *First Love, Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*. In my twenties I became immersed in the Cold War spy novels of John Le Carré. Le Carré’s flawed double agents – magicians with terrific sleight of hand, citizens fiercely loyal to two ideologies, alcoholics who were flamboyant and depressed - appealed to me for obvious reasons.

Later I was to discover the novels of women who delicately explored issues of marriage and parenting with precise, unsentimental language; Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and Carol Shield's *The Stone Diaries*. Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, with its "double" plot, is a love story of immense power and complexity.

The book that has most inspired me as a "double life" writer is Michael Ondaatje's exquisitely crafted novel, *The English Patient*. Set simultaneously in pre-war North Africa and Italy at the close of the war, *The English Patient* examines in breadth and depth almost all possible manifestations of the double life, probing with lyrical, restrained language the underpinnings of love, marriage, betrayal, trauma, war, and cross-cultural confusion. Together with Sebastian Faulks' unforgettable *Birdsong*, *The English Patient* left me with a thirst to read and write more about the World Wars and WWII in particular. This war was the crucible of the national, social and political developments which are at the heart of my stories: the stout British fight against the Nazis; the grinding working-class poverty of Jews whose determination for their children to succeed bordered on the ruthless; the blight of Iron Curtain Communism; the establishment of the State of Israel with its unfamiliar responsibilities.

3. Shape of the Project

My thesis will open with a poem about the *Akeidah* entitled *The Double Life*. This will be followed by a collection of short stories, all of which are memoir-based.

Normandy: 1945. An abused and neglected Jewish child is sent to live with her aunt and uncle in London just before the Normandy invasion.

Jerusalem: Young and privileged, newly-married Bobby and Juliet arrive in Communist Russia to visit *Refuseniks* – Russian Jews who have been refused an exit visa to Israel.

Not Even to Begin: Rachel, an Orthodox young woman schooled in self-discipline and separateness, tries to heed the admonitions of her loving father “not even to begin” dating her non-Jewish classmates at dental school.

I'm on Your Side: Hadas has used money from her lucrative but shattering divorce to go to film school in Jerusalem. She starts making her student documentary about David and Muhammad a few months before the outbreak of the second *Intifada*.

The Blue Wool Coat: It's 1956, and National Service is still obligatory in post-war England. Peter and Diana Morris are flown to a Royal Air Force Base in Singapore for their first posting abroad.

Kesher (Communication): Ma'or, a rebellious teenage girl with Attention Deficit Disorder is drafted into the IDF, where she is unexpectedly catapulted into the chaos of the Gaza war.

Jump! Rose, a Holocaust survivor aged 92, looks back on her life as she is recovers from heart surgery in the intensive care unit at Hadassah hospital.

4. Bibliography

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