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## Uncanny Survivors and the Nazi Beast:

Monstrous Imagination in *See Under: Love*

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In a 2007 interview with the *Paris Review*, David Grossman observes how Jewish discourse remains overshadowed by the Holocaust:

Jews, in every language they speak, will talk about “what happened there.” To ask what happened then means it was and it is over. For Jews, in a tragic way, it’s never over. It exists somewhere parallel to our life, it’s an alternative option.<sup>1</sup>

This “parallel” or “alternative option” continues to preoccupy not only Jewish speech but also Jewish writing, as contemporary authors grapple with the legacy of the Holocaust and its effects on Jewish experience. One of the many ways that writers have articulated this type of haunting presence is through the symbolic use of uncanny, fantastic figures, such as ghosts, monsters, beasts, and mythic beings. Especially in the past three decades, disembodied spirits of Nazi monsters and ethereal survivors have become recurring motifs in Holocaust narratives.<sup>2</sup> Think, for instance, of the golems in Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay* (2000) and Thane Rosenbaum’s *Golems of Gotham* (2002), or even the haunting presence of the dybbuk in Rebecca Goldstein’s *Mazel* (1995). The events and actions surrounding these undead beings often break with temporal, spatial, and even linguistic boundaries of otherwise realist historical plot lines. As salient metaphors for the vexed relationship between Jewish past and present, monstrous creatures demand that readers examine what it means to be human in a post-Holocaust universe, a universe that has exhibited an extreme capacity for inhumanity, and a world in which the past never entirely goes away. Such creatures also serve often as uncomfortable reminders of the difficulties in representing the effects of the Holocaust through imaginative means.

David Grossman's *See Under: Love*—especially its renowned first chapter, “Momik”—is one of the most effective Holocaust narratives to employ a monster motif. As Or Rogovin has discussed at length, imagery of monsters and devils was applied to Nazis for decades in Israeli public discourse and educational texts.<sup>3</sup> Holocaust memoirs are replete with references to Nazi perpetrators such as the “Beast of Buchenwald” Ilse Koch or “Angel of Death” Josef Mengele. Recent popular novels such as Louise Murphy's *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003) also rely on these stereotypes. Grossman, by contrast, responds to these constructions and reworks them. The “Nazi Beast” and eerie survivors in the novel self-consciously call into question the strategies writers and readers use when wrestling with ideas about postwar trauma. What are the ethical and aesthetic implications of using monsters as a vehicle to respond to Nazi evil and the horror of the Holocaust? Moreover, what is gained or lost by using such an overdetermined symbol as a “beast” to grapple with the equally overdetermined constructions of both perpetrators and traumatized survivors?

To investigate these questions, it is important to observe how monsters function in literature more generally. To begin with, as a literary device, monsters *demonstrate* (from *monstrare*) the inadequacy of our terms of categorization for what is or what is not human. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen emphasizes in his theory of monsters, as cultural symbols monsters are “harbingers of category crisis.” They indicate what lines cannot be crossed by humans in terms of behavior; yet, externally their indistinct and “incoherent” form—hybrids of human and inhuman parts, suspended between life and death— threatens to disturb easy classifications of self and Other. As Cohen elaborates, “because of its ontological liminality, the monster appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the class of extremes.”<sup>4</sup> Monsters, in other words, exceed rational boundaries that determine what is normal/human. But they also threaten binary thinking by introducing a new category that

refutes easy classification. Monsters are, in Cohen's terminology, a third term, "difference made flesh."<sup>5</sup>

A disturbing disruption of categories marks the treatment of the Holocaust in *See Under: Love*. Grossman's novel provides key examples of how the "Nazi Beast" serves to embody the fear and anxiety that come with the slippage between past and present, blurred boundaries between victim and monster, and reality and the literary imagination, not only in Israel but also in post-Holocaust culture more widely. Many of the ambiguities and slippages are highlighted through the viewpoint of a naïve child protagonist, Shlomo Efraim Neuman, known as Momik. In the first section of the novel, which takes place in Israel in 1959, Momik is nine years old, the child of survivors, in a Jerusalem neighborhood inhabited by adults with various stages of postwar neuroses. Through a misunderstanding of the euphemisms and fragmented speech that his parents and other adults use to recount the past, *Over There* [*sham*] in Europe, Momik obtains a distorted view of what happened during the Holocaust. Despite the protagonist's naïveté, as Naomi Sokoloff has pointed out, the "narrated monologue" that Grossman uses to uncover the child's point of view also "reveal[s] exceptional insights on the youngster's part."<sup>6</sup> One of the most perceptive of Momik's observations is that something so frightful that it cannot be named—what the adults call the "Nazi Beast" [*haḥaya hanatsit*]<sup>7</sup>—lies at the source of the immense pain suffered by those around him. He thinks that the Nazi Beast is "some imaginary monster or a huge dinosaur that once lived in the world which everyone was afraid of now. . . . *Over There*, a place you weren't supposed to talk about too much, only think about in your heart and sigh with a drawn-out krechtz, oyyy."<sup>7</sup> Bella, the grocery store owner, the only person who tries to answer all his questions, tells him "some really important things" about how to find the monster when "she let it slip out that the Nazi Beast could come out of any kind of animal if it got the right care and nourishment" (13). The boy's loss of innocence happens when he

attempts to create his own Beast in the cellar of his home, believing that he will then be able to tame it and free his family from their angst and sadness. Momik at first traps small animals--a kitten, a turtle, a raven, and a hedgehog--and keeps them in cages in the cellar, waiting for the Nazi Beast to "come out." He then moves onto people, Jewish survivors, to bait the Beast, without success. Finally, Momik suffers emotional collapse.

Not the Holocaust itself, but its impact as an independent, uncanny presence manifests itself as beastly in the postwar context of the novel through both survivors and Momik, the next generation. Above all, *See Under: Love* suggests that the Nazi Beast is not "Over There" in Nazi-occupied Europe, but overwhelmingly present for Momik and the characters that surround him. Yet, while the symbolism that links evil and Nazi perpetrators to the Beast is a strong component in Momik's conception of the Beast, the more monstrous elements in the novel are contained in those characters who have to deal with the effects of the Shoah: the survivors themselves, with their unhealthy influence on the child. In this way, not only does the Nazi Beast blur boundaries between past and present by being ever-present for survivors; in addition, the fear and anxiety related to the Beast also stem from the way the monstrous past has turned its victims, humans, into fractured, ghostly—and ghastly—uncanny beings. The neighborhood is filled with disturbed characters who have not managed to emerge successfully from the nightmare of traumatic memory: a woman who runs naked in the street, homeless men who talk to themselves, and people with numbered codes on their arms. Momik's parents are notably described in the most monstrous of terms. At night, they cry out, terrorizing Momik as they relive their own nightmares. As victims they have transformed into creatures out of a horror film for their young son. Much like vampires, they come to the boy's bedroom: "their eyes devoured him, and even though Momik could actually feel himself being devoured, he just stood there quietly and let them do it because he knew that was what they needed" (48). Supper is an equally voracious episode because "Mama and Papa chew

with all their might. They sweat and their eyes bulge out of their heads and Momik pretends to be eating while he watches them carefully. . . . He only tastes what's on the tip of his fork, but it sticks in his throat because he's so nervous" (48). Small wonder Momik suffers a breakdown.

The ambiguity of the monster symbolism, the sophistication of Grossman's literary technique, and the complexity of the message about the effects of the Shoah are only some of the elements that have made the novel so influential. As Gershon Shaked aptly predicted when he reviewed the novel in 1989: "This is a book about which seminar papers and doctoral dissertations will be written."<sup>8</sup> The multivalence enriches the text as it helps the novel challenge the idea that Nazis were radically Other. That kind of othering leads to evading the opportunity, and perhaps the ethical responsibility, to understand human nature. Nevertheless, the ambiguity as to who/what is the actual monster—the memory of the Nazi Beast or its traumatized victims— is problematic. For one thing, Grossman risks perpetuating unjust stereotypes of survivors. In a posting to the H-Net listserv for History of the Holocaust in 2011, psychologist and Holocaust scholar Hank Greenspan remarked:

The vision of survivors as guilty, ghostly, and afraid—what I call the "psychiatric discourse"—has persisted alongside . . . celebratory discourse. It is no less distorting, presumptuous, and—however unintentionally—cruel. . . . Survivors become convenient symbols of our own hopes and dreams and, in oscillation, of our deepest revulsions and fear.<sup>9</sup>

One might ask if Grossman's monstrous, uncanny survivors can be categorized as examples representing "psychiatric discourse." As manifestations of the monster motif, the survivors in the novel do indeed appear as disturbing vehicles for distressing postwar anxieties.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, *See Under: Love* makes a strong comment about the potential for "any kind of animal" (13) to become monstrous. Clearly, this idea is contentious

because it fails to draw important ethical distinctions between those who choose to do evil and those who maintain a sense of humanity even in extreme situations.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, some readers were offended with Grossman's suggestion that everyone has an LNIY "little Nazi in you." While the lines separating human and Beast are vague, so are the categories that separate us as readers from Holocaust victims. That is, Grossman's self-conscious, ironic use of the monster motif draws attention to the fact that there is no "them" for "us" to project distinctions upon, whether it is survivor or Beast. Yet, if both Momik and the survivors become beastly at various points in the novel, the reader's identification and sympathy is nevertheless with them, their stories, and their humanity, rather than with the Nazi perpetrator.

This element of identification with the victims and survivors is what makes *See Under: Love's* monster motif very different from the monster motif in a novel such as Michel Tournier's *The Ogre* (1970). The explorations of human nature and its potential for inhumanity are poles apart in the two works. Tournier also uses a "Beast" trope to challenge the binary thinking that distinguishes "us" from the Nazi mythic monster. Like Momik, Tournier's naïve protagonist goes through a process of hunting down the Nazi Beast to understand him. However, Tournier explores how Nazi perpetrators could comply with orders that were inhumane and cruel by presenting the novel from a distinctive point of view: the perspective of the perpetrator. Abel Tiffauges is a French garage owner who tells the story of his past and life during World War II in a memoir called *The Sinister Writings of Abel Tiffauges*. Tiffauges's diary goes from describing a rather un-monster-like unhappy childhood, to being drafted into the French army; he then escapes a prisoner-of-war camp to work eventually for the Third Reich, recruiting boys for a Nazi Youth elite school. In a rather humdrum progression, he learns to hunt pigeons, then deer, then children. The diary ends in the spring of 1945 and, a few days after Tiffauges finishes writing the last page, we are told

by the omniscient narrator that he will die trying to save a Jewish boy, a survivor of Auschwitz, during the Soviet invasion of East Prussia.

The title of the novel in French, *Le roi des aulnes* (*The Erl-king*), alludes to an ironic relationship between mythic monstrosity and the reality of human evil that Tournier explores. At the very start of the novel, Abel Tiffauges, in a somewhat removed and overly intellectual way, reflects on his being a monster and its meaning:

To begin with, what is a monster? Etymology has a bit of a shock up its sleeve there: monster comes from *monstrare*, to show. A monster is something which is shown, pointed at, exhibited at fairs, and so on. . . . If you don't want to be a monster, you've got to be like your fellow creatures, in conformity with the species.<sup>11</sup>

Tiffauges, however, seems to be confused as to what a monster is. He refers to it as “the Other” a nonconformist. But the novel asks: what if “to conform” to others is outrageous? What if the surrounding people are monsters? The question concerning Nazi monstrosity and evil then becomes more acute as the plot progresses through the beginning of the war in 1938 until the demise of the Third Reich in 1945.

The comparison between Tournier's text and Grossman's brings to bear the fine ethical line that is easily crossed when employing the Nazi monster trope. Both authors similarly employ a combination of a naïve protagonist's point of view and an omniscient narrator to create irony, alienate the reader, and show the distance between reality and the characters' perspectives. The effect in both is to highlight the irrationality of using mythic constructions of good vs. evil to understand Nazism. At the same time because the only viewpoint (and therefore empathy) the reader is privy to in *The Ogre* is the perpetrator's, the narrative becomes an ethically ambiguous project. It is this same ethical problem—focusing on the perpetrator to understand the nature of inhumanity—that was raised by critics when Hannah Arendt's analysis of the “banality of evil” was published following her coverage of

the Adolf Eichmann trials in Israel in 1961 for *The New Yorker*.<sup>12</sup> Arendt's well-known observations speculated that Eichmann, despite being responsible for the organized deportation and extermination of the Jews, refuted what society usually perceives as a monster. According to her view, Eichmann was neither Iago nor Macbeth; as she sardonically states, "He *merely* never realized what he was doing."<sup>13</sup> Jewish intellectuals like Gershom Scholem, who felt she was belittling the nature of Nazi aggression, were not mollified when Arendt later explained further: "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. . . . Only the good has depth and can be radical."<sup>14</sup> Tournier's construction of Abel Tiffauges is a precise illustration of Arendt's model of "banality." Tiffauges's acts of villainy are not especially profound, while his final act of sacrificing himself to save the Jewish Auschwitz survivor is indeed extraordinary in its greatness and mythic proportions. In stark contrast, Grossman depicts a beast that is indeed radical: it is grotesque, it is demonic, and it is unfathomable--not necessarily because of its nature, but because of the painful and devastating effects it has on its victims.

Momik's connection to Anshel Wasserman, his great-uncle, ties together the various complex strands of what "the Beast" means in this story. A famous writer in the past, Anshel was presumed to have been killed by the Nazis, but in fact has been in an insane asylum for the past decade. When he arrives one morning in an ambulance to be claimed by Momik's family, he is neither dead nor altogether alive: Anshel is broken, his eyes are blank, he doesn't hear, and he talks incomprehensibly to himself. Momik's great-uncle, or "Grandfather" Wasserman, as he calls him, quite literally brings the horror of the past into Momik's present by embodying its incomprehensibility; he is a figuration of that "category crisis" and failure of rationality to explain the past. In many ways, Anshel is the antithesis, or inverse, of the Nazi Beast. As a victim of the monster, he provides the most compelling evidence that the

Nazi Beast exists. He is a character that is otherworldly enough to take on mythical meanings and constructions, not unlike the Nazi Beast. In this regard, he more closely represents what Eric Santner calls the *creaturely*, a “caesura . . . in the space of meaning . . . [an] uncanny loci of alterity within the order of meaning.”<sup>15</sup> Anshel, more than any other character, challenges readers to rethink what it means to be human by existing at the margins of existence; he is a “creature” but made up of enough fragmented human elements to convince Momik that there is indeed a person inside. Anshel thus embodies the frightening outcome of that “parallel” reality that Grossman mentions in the *Paris Review* interview quoted above, in which he posits that the possibility of being a Jewish victim “exists somewhere parallel to our life, it’s an alternative option.”<sup>16</sup>

It is specifically Anshel’s arrival from the insane asylum that prompts Momik “to find the Beast and tame it and make it good, and persuade it to change its ways and stop torturing people and get it to tell him what happened Over There and what it did to those people” (30). Momik accordingly leads Anshel down to the cellar to bait the Beast with “a real Jew, someone who actually came from Over There” (68). Notably, the boy does not necessarily identify himself as a Jew; for Momik, both “real Jew” and “Beast” are equally linked as imagined constructs from the past. As readers, we understand how Momik’s naïve misunderstanding of “a real Jew/victim” reveals the same type of narrow binary thinking that constructs the Nazi Beast. Momik’s behavior in the cellar nevertheless blurs distinctions between his own life and the parallel, victimized life that Grandfather Wasserman epitomizes. The narrator tells us that “Momik holds Grandfather's hand and feels the warm currents of Grandfather's story flow into his own hand and up to his head” (71). He and Anshel also “sit on the floor together, eating pieces of dry bread, as Momik softly sang partisan songs, in both Hebrew and Yiddish, and recited prayers from Papa’s High Holiday prayer book” (80). The boundaries between Momik and Grandfather Anshel become distorted as the boy relives the

past in the older man's place, singing for him, praying instead of him, and absorbing his traumatic past. When it appears that Grandfather Anshel is "too small to bring out the Beast" (81), Momik decides to bring the other Jewish survivors down to the cellar, people who would "be so Jewish [the Beast] won't know what to do with itself" (83). By this time, Momik's family's cellar has become a den of horrors, and Momik himself is on the edge of sanity--for he begins to know what it is to be cruel. He has starved and tortured animals locked in the cellar and taped gruesome pictures of the Holocaust, copied from library books, onto the walls. The cellar echoes with the shrieks and sounds of howling animals, trauma victims, and Momik himself (38-39).

Aptly, Momik both does and does not find the Nazi Beast. In the monster's lair he creates in the cellar, Momik finds the Beast within himself--the rage, the hatred, and the cruelty. Yet, as he approaches that knowledge, the nine-and-a-half-year-old Momik fails to grasp what that means. Momik figures "that what he needed in order to fight the Beast was the very thing that most scared it . . . to get to know more about the Beast and its crimes, because otherwise he'd just be wasting energy no matter what he did" (65). Getting to know the Beast nevertheless proves too much for Momik, as it proved too much for Anshel Wasserman. Knowledge of the monster, as the novel implies, destroys. The depiction of events leading up to Momik's psychic break is one of the most compelling and heartbreaking comments on the after-effects of the Holocaust on both survivors and their children. Momik has kept notebooks; he reads, writes, and listens to stories about the Shoah, but, quite literally, he cannot digest that same knowledge. He "squeezed his head because he didn't think he could stand it anymore, he wanted to vomit everything . . . everything he'd learned about lately, including himself" (84-85). This is why, when Momik hears the stories of his uncle and the other survivors, he cannot remember them:

[Momik] heard Grandfather humming his tune in the silence like an electric pole, only this time the story sounded clear and he told it nicely with biblical expression, . . . and when Grandfather finished telling it, the others started telling their stories, and they were all talking at once and they said things no one would ever believe, and Momik remembered them forever and ever and instantly forgot them. . . . (84)

Although Momik becomes a witness to untold survivor testimonies, he fails to keep details. The knowledge of the Holocaust's monstrous effect on humans is too much for him to bear, because the human capacity to understand evil—or even to find analogies for such radical inhumanity—is always provisional. As Grossman self-consciously implies, the crude nature of literary analogues of the Holocaust makes it impossible to record accurately the impact of devastation this event wrought. In this way, Grossman draws our attention to potent questions about Holocaust representation and the literary imagination more broadly: how far must a writer go in imagining the reality of the Holocaust before it becomes “too much”? What are the limits of representation for both writers and readers? As Alvin Rosenfeld suggests, “what inevitably emerges in Holocaust literature is that such analogies are introduced only to reveal their inadequacy, as they are in turn either refuted or rejected as being unworkable.”<sup>17</sup>

And yet, tragically for Momik, his parents, and the other survivors, the mythic Nazi Beast cannot be eradicated. For it is the nature of all monsters that they never completely disappear: Dracula, Frankenstein, the Yeti, the Golem—each one can be revived in a different time or place, set against the particular cultural anxieties of the period. The Nazi monster exists, as a projection of such fears, and stems from the knowledge that human beings can not only cross a line into the unthinkable, but that such inconceivable depths of cruelty happened in our time. The monster lives on, not only in 1950s Israel, but more generally for contemporary Jews, survivors, their children, and grandchildren, for whom what

happened “Over There” is not over. Even though the Beast is unknowable, the one thing that perhaps can be known is the elements of humanity that are able to exist in the wake of devastation. For, if the Beast in *See Under: Love* embodies the trace from Over There that challenges ideas of normalcy, it also reminds readers that it is still possible to preserve a sense of humanity in the shadow of monstrosity. As Grossman suggests in the same 2007 interview with the *Paris Review* quoted above, each person, when considering the Shoah, should ask himself or herself: “In the face of such total arbitrariness, how can I maintain my uniqueness as a human being? What in me cannot be eradicated?”<sup>18</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Shainin, interview with David Grossman. Art of Fiction Series, no 194. *The Paris Review* (Fall 2007), accessed February 5, 2015,

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5794/the-art-of-fiction-no-194-david-grossman>.

<sup>2</sup> Critics who have examined figures of the undead or the uncanny in relation to the Holocaust include Susan Shapiro, who analyzes the connections between antisemitism and “The Jewish Question” in Europe and images of Jews’ “unhomey” or “living corpses.” See “The Uncanny Jew: A Brief History of an Image,” in *Judaism* 46, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 63–78. See also Mia Spiro, “Beasts of Burdened Memories: Exotic Figures in Michal Chabon’s Holocaust Fiction,” in *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction*, ed. Elodie Rousselot (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 160–77.

<sup>3</sup> See Or Rogovin, *essay in this volume: Note to be added*

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

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<sup>6</sup> Naomi Sokoloff, *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 157. Sokoloff's example of this strategy explains further: "It is the child's experience that orients the story, but the text is far more articulate than any version of events a nine-year-old boy could either recount to an audience or sustain internally to himself," 155.

<sup>7</sup> David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 13. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Gershon Shaked, "The Children of the Heart and the Monster: David Grossman: *See Under: Love*: A Review Essay," *Modern Judaism* 9, no. 3 (1989): 312.

<sup>9</sup> Thursday, October 13, 2011. It was in response to a discussion prompted by Ron Rosenbaum's review in *Tablet* magazine of Alvin Rosenfeld's *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). Rosenbaum's review, "Faustian Bargain," appeared on October 10, 2011, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/80150/faustian-bargain>.

<sup>10</sup> A case in point is Stanley Milgram's experiments, which began in 1961 following the Eichmann trials to analyze the question how Nazi perpetrators such as Eichmann and his accomplices could use the excuse of "just following orders." Regular people were told by a figure of authority to deliver a 400-volt electric shock to another person when they answered a question incorrectly. The results were notably shocking: 65 percent of participants in Milgram's study delivered the maximum shocks. The more interesting questions should be asked of those 35 percent who did not obey orders, nor would consider following a command they found unethical. See Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral Study of Obedience," in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67 (1963): 371–78.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Tournier, *The Ogre*, trans. Barbara Bray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 3–4. Subsequent references will be cited in parentheses.

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<sup>12</sup> Originally published as “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,” *New Yorker*, February 16, 1963. Reprinted as “From *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin, 2000), 313–88.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, 379.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.

<sup>15</sup> Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), xv.

<sup>16</sup> Shainin, Interview with David Grossman.

<sup>17</sup> A. H. Rosenfeld, *The Problematics of Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Shainin, Interview with David Grossman.