

The Character of Jesus as a Key to the Biographical Interpretation of David Schütz's Body of Work

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The Role of Christianity in Schütz's Early Body of Work and in his Life

In this article, I will discuss the life and work of the Israeli writer David Schütz (1941–2017), and demonstrate how the character of Jesus is a key to the biographical interpretation of his work. David Schütz was born in 1941 to a Christian father and a half-Jewish mother in Berlin, and passed away in 2017 in Jerusalem, at the age of 76. Schütz's first years, 1941–1945, were the years of the extermination of the Jewish people as part of the Nazi "Final Solution" plan. During this period, the Nazis and their collaborators murdered six million Jews in Europe. According to the Nazi racial hierarchy, Schütz was considered to be Jewish although he was "only" one-quarter Jew, and therefore his life was in danger from his birth up to the collapse of the Nazi regime.

In order to save him, his mother placed him in the hands of a foster family that lived in Finowfurt, a village near Berlin, when he was six weeks old, since she had to escape from the horrifying regime that persecuted her as well. Schütz grew up in that village in a Christian environment, completely oblivious to his Judaism. Thus, it is possible to consider Schütz as a writer who was "anointed", from childhood, to interact through his body of work with Christianity as a whole, and specifically with the character of Jesus.

After the war, he and his brother and sister were transferred by their mother to the Jewish orphanage in Berlin, where he first discovered his Judaism. In 1948, the orphanage that was located in the Soviet occupation zone of Berlin, was nearly closed, and Schütz, who was seven years old at the time, began a six-month long journey to Palestine. His mother had promised she would follow but never did, and Schütz grew up as a waif during the early years of the state of Israel. In this article, I will demonstrate how Schütz shapes the main masculine character – a self-extension – throughout his work, based on the metaphors of Jesus in the western culture in a way that corresponds with the western-Christian tradition that examines the limits of human suffering.

Schütz's body of work is rooted in religious mythologies, both Christian and Jewish, and yet stays fundamentally secular since it denies the existence of the divine and the possibility of redemption. No godly entity foresees and directs the human order. Thus, the protagonists are not destined to a

pre-determined fate by a godly entity but are drawn to their suffering, and their suffering constitutes their fate – an element that stresses the existential tragedy that lies at the base of Schütz's body of work.

The main feature of his work is the integration of grandiose-mythological stories such as the story of Jesus, which are different variations of Schütz's personal story. Schütz refrains from giving a psychological interpretation to the motives of his main characters, following the mythological-religious stories that refrain from doing so as well.

Yigal Schwartz wrote on the operatic, non-realistic aspect in Schütz's work in his interpretation of the novel *White Rose, Red Rose*.¹ Continuing Schwartz, I would like to assert in this article that by integrating the mythological story of Jesus in his writing, Schütz creates a unique and surprising connection between mythology, creation, and identity. By so doing, he aims to step aside from the beaten path of Israeli literature created by the writers of his generation who sought to understand and analyze the Israeli present.

In addition, Schütz's body of work, and especially its early part, which is discussed in this article, does not offer a new perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or on the complicated relationships between men and women in Israel of the seventies and eighties, although it represents them, but instead utilizes the character of Jesus in order to shed more light on the wounded character of its author.

Schütz's early work moves between the real and the fantastic and between the local and the mythological, but always depicts a grand narrative of agony and suffering. His work repeatedly deals with a godly, historical, and familial abandonment. By constantly repeating this underlying narrative, with different variations, Schütz instills mythological proportions into it that insert inter-textual mythological features into his body of work.

It is in the course of this mythologization process of his life through his writing, that Schütz embraces the character of Jesus. Jesus was born and died a Jew, but he became the symbol of the inception of Christianity. He symbolizes a mythological transfer from one religion to the other, a transfer that has had an enormous effect on humanity. The question of transforming identities characterizes Schütz's unstable life, although his course is the opposite, since he begins his life as a Christian and becomes a secular-atheist Jew. From this position, the character of Jesus does not resolve any religious tensions in Schütz's body of work but manifests and even augments an existential dread, a decadent downfall and the loss of one's way.

Amitay Mendelson, who curated an exhibition about the character of Jesus in Israeli art, deals with the paradoxical character of Jesus as the chosen son of God, who is also presented as a crucified

and vulnerable human being. According to Mendelson, many Israeli artists have developed great empathy for this representation.²

Neta Stahl wrote about the dramatic change that took place in the writing of Jewish writers who wrote after the establishment of the state of Israel. These writers did not live in a Christian and anti-Semitic environment as did their literary fathers and grandfathers, and therefore their reaction to the character of Jesus and to Christianity is different: They emphasized the existential elements in his character with no fear whatsoever.³

Schütz also empathizes with the human and vulnerable character of the chosen son of God by postponing the peak moment of the Christian narrative, the moment that announces man's redemption, as Yigal Schwartz has shown.⁴ Unlike the moment of the religious redemption, Schütz's body of work lingers on the moment of the crucifixion, showing it from all angles. This is manifested by the suicide, symbolic or real, of all his male characters throughout his entire body of work.

Schütz also empathized with the character of Jesus because it became the ultimate European symbol, even though Jesus was born and died in Biblical Israel. Europe constructed its identity *via* the character of Jesus, and Schütz also wanted to see himself as a European despite his geographical position. He stated: "We (*i.e.*, the Jews living in Israel, T.S.) were dumped on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean but spiritually and culturally speaking, we are roaming somewhere in Europe. Some try to merge the two locations, but it is clear that our roots are from there".⁵ So, the dominance of the character of Jesus in Schütz's body of work shows his perception of himself as a European.

It is important to note that Schütz's perception of himself as a European focuses on the twilight of the continent and its foremost religion. That is why Schütz emphasizes the moment of the crucifixion of Jesus and not the moment of his resurrection when he sets his character as an influencing model on his protagonists. His essay "Crusaders before their downfall", based on his MA thesis, ends with the pessimistic words of Wilhelm Ish-Tzur, an ancient historian: "It is time to silence. It will be more appropriate to clothe our failure with the shadows of the night than to allow the sunlight to shine on our disgrace".⁶ Schütz's empathy for Jesus and Europe was created *via* the dimension of the downfall and loss of the personal and collective path, that unites in his personal history as someone who was born into the extermination and destruction caused by the Second World War, and miraculously survived.

Jesus as an Unsuccessful Rebel in a Patriarchal Order

The short story "Angels", published in Schütz's first collection of short stories in 1980,⁷ is a

surreal-fantastic story that describes a heavenly intrusion of an angel into the lives of an elderly and lonely couple who live in an isolated colony in Israel during the fifties. The character of the couple's mute Arab servant, who lives with them on the farm, reminds us of the character of the mute Arab from A. B. Yehoshua's short story, "Facing the Forests".⁸ Yehoshua, one of the most prominent Israeli authors of his time, published his story twelve years before Schütz's story. However, in contrast to Yehoshua's famous story, and although Schütz's story contains a potential to become an allegory about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which the Arab has no voice, that potential is not realized.

The angel's character—mystic, pleasant, and tender—enters into an opposite reality. The contrast between redemptive spirituality and filthy earthliness, already apparent in this early short story, continues to develop throughout Schütz's work, which will become based on the un-resolved movement and tension between the despised and the sublime.

Schütz's work begins to develop from the moment of the angel's arrival into a deteriorated earthly reality. This reality is opposite to the divine reality and the opportunity to salvation it symbolizes from which the angel came. The wounded angel is equivalent to the crucified Jesus, hurting from his wounds, and besides offering possible redemption to the miserable life led by the solitary woman in a neglected farm, he is also Schütz's creative power, a power that grows from the gutters. However, the possibility of redemption is always denied giving way to bitter disappointment—in this story, the husband executes the angel. The angel symbolizes pure spirituality that stands in opposition to the earthly lives of the couple and the Arab servant, a redemptive spirituality that cannot exist in Schütz's world.

Unlike Yehoshua's short story, which is a manifestation of the dominant form of Israeli literature written in the first decades of the state of Israel – The National Modernism – Schütz turns his back on the possibility of creating a national allegory. He gives a secondary role to the relationships between the Arab and the landlords, and to the national interpretation that can be deduced from them and puts the relationship between the landlady and the wounded angel at the center of the piece. Schütz is not interested in the Jew or the Arab or in the conflict between them, but in the character of the eternal child, the angel, the miserable and unsatisfied woman's object of desire, a woman who falls in love with an angel who breaks into her farm and cannot tell the difference between imagination and reality.

At the end of the story, the tough and detached husband shoots the angel and ignores his wife's will to be redeemed. The wife's redemption is interrupted by the dominant patriarchal order. In this story, Schütz describes a family, consisting of a woman, her husband, and an Arab servant, who acts

as a child without any restrictions (he urinates anytime and everywhere), but at the same time offers the possibility of forming an alternative family that would consist of the son-angel, the son of God, whose presence threatens to take the place of the husband, leading the latter to kill him.

The last scene of the story, in which the woman hugs the wool of the angel's garment, interacts with the scene depicted in the Pieta. Schütz, who is influenced by this image, shows that the feelings of love and compassion between a lover-son and his mother can exist, for a brief moment, in the brutal reality he describes. This ideal possibility demands that the father be delayed since it will vanish forever when he returns.

In my opinion, Schütz's foremost step in Israeli literature is encapsulated in this short story: his work breaks into the Israeli body of work, displaying a godless Christian being, filled with spirituality, while he turns, unlike authors of his generation, his gaze inwards, to a man's soul and not outwards, to the community or the nation. His work offers us a metaphysical, existential drama that places at its center a helpless Jesus, who is about to meet his death, and not an allegory of the Israeli condition, despite it being wholly rooted in the Israeli present.

An Exaggerated Jesus

The story "Aherntal", also published in Schütz's collection of short stories in 1980,⁹ tells the story of Aherntal, a young artist who lives in Jerusalem and has a dog named Lucas, the same name as Luke the Evangelist, who is one of the four authors of the gospels. His character is one of an "an exaggerated Jesus", and here I'm paraphrasing the term coined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari "an exaggerated Oedipus",¹⁰ a parodic character that ridicules the character of Jesus and the principle of "turning the other cheek": he moves from Jerusalem to a peripheral town and takes responsibility for its residents' (from Mizrahi, that is oriental – non-European, origin) welfare. He asks the son of his spouse, not to banish him, and is convinced that a certain "organization" is persuing him. He spends all his money and goes bankrupt for the benefit of people who mock him.

We do not understand why Aherntal acts the way he does, and Aherntal himself does not understand it either. It seems as though an invisible *force majeure* guides his behavior. We can deduct that according to Schütz, humans can be understood only by going back to the mythological stories told in the past. This is why Schütz keeps returning to them as well, in a parodic manner in this story.

"Aherntal" interacts with the story of Jesus' sacrifice for the benefit of humankind. However, unlike Jesus, Schütz's protagonist is sacrificed in vain. Aherntal does not redeem the town but instead spends all his money on its residents until he goes bankrupt. Just like Jesus, who traveled

and wandered the land and formed a community of believers, Aherntal wanders the land until he reaches the town, and even when he settles down in it, he continues his wandering. He becomes the financial sponsor of the oppressed by throwing away his money: the residents take it and waste it on gambling. Unlike Jesus, he has no religious or social message for the townspeople or himself. Aherntal returns to Jerusalem, like Jesus, where he dies, but unlike Jesus, he will never be resurrected.

A Helpless Jesus

Schütz's interaction with the character of Jesus is at its peak in his short story "The Snitch", also written during the sixties or the seventies, as the other two short stories discussed earlier.¹¹ The plot describes the case of the rape of Eti, a prostitute who was once the prettiest girl on the block, and the narrator's shocked response that leads him to give away the rapists, an act that is opposed to the indifference and consent expressed by the all the other residents.

The narrator, unlike the other residents, refuses to look away from the horrible act. This refusal causes him to breach the unspoken local rule that was created and enforced by the rapists, twice. First by helping Eti after the rape, and then, after Eti's failure to properly testify in court, by lying to the police and claiming he participated in the rape as well. This lie, aiming to convict Bitton and Prosper, is the gravest infringement of the neighborhood's rules, and also becomes useless after Eti withdraws her statement and claims she wasn't raped. The rapists are freed at the end of the trial, and all that is left for the snitch to do is to wait for them to expose his identity and kill him.

"The Snitch" is a grim version of the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene: the snitch and Eti are portrayed as wretched characters, not excellent or great; they are pawns in a game that takes place over their heads. Just like Jesus, the protagonist is left outside society: not only can he not become the social leader, he is literally murdered by his society. The protagonist tries to act like Jesus, as if he is capable of saving the people around him, but when he doesn't succeed in doing so, he is thrown out of the window with his hands spread out from his sides, a position that resembles the crucifixion, and with an air of satisfaction on his face, showing that he submissively accepts his sentence.

Unlike Jesus, the protagonist does not die in order to resurrect and become the Messiah. His death is final, and it symbolizes the victory of evil over good in Schütz's world. This story can also be interpreted in an allegorical-national manner, as a story that deals with social polarization, decadent society, bullying, and the weak judicial system.

But Schütz uses all these social-political elements in order to maintain a metaphysical claim that

keeps returning throughout his body of work: the patriarchal order that is dominated by the "Father", be it the husband from "Angels" or the bullies from "The Snitch", crushes Schütz's protagonist, the son of God, who is also the author's self-extension, and the holy ghost – the feminine character in "The Snitch", Eti the prostitute, or the landlady in "Angels" – cannot save him.

Summary: Christianity as a Source of Life and as a Source of Creation

In conclusion, Schütz interacts with the character of Jesus in a different manner in these stories but assigns a bitter fate for this interaction each and every time. His interaction with the character of Jesus has parodic elements, and it turns the character of the son of God into a defragmented, wretched, and powerless character. Thus, Schütz manifests his own inability to tell a whole and optimistic story about himself. Therefore, he will always present a lacking, partial, defective, defragmented, disrupted, and twisted masculine narrative. The decadent and melancholic aspects of his work are also augmented by their interaction with the character of Jesus. A narrative about heroism, power, and redemption turns into a narrative about an empty loss in Schütz's hands.

Moreover, the male characters' impotence in Schütz's stories is contrasted to Jesus' power and omnipotence over human history. This is why the differences between Jesus and Schütz, maybe even more than the common features both of them share, can teach us about the fascinating connection between biography and mythology in Schütz's work: Schütz, deprived of the fundamental right of knowing his origins – his German past was a black box to him – adopts an alternative source from the violent Judeo-Christian history, just so he can continue killing it over and over again.

Notes

- 1 יגאל שוורץ, "אופרה סריה? גרנדיווזיות וגבריות בסיפוריו של דוד שיץ", *דפים למחקר בספרות* 18 (חיפה, 2012), 189-207.
- 2 אמיתי מנדלסון, "דמות ישו בשירה ובספרות העברית", *זה האיש: ישו באמנות הישראלית* (ירושלים: מאגנס, 2016), 23-32.
- 3 נטע שטהל, *צלם יהודי: ייצוגיו של ישו בספרות העברית של המאה ה-20* (תל אביב: רסלינג, 2008), 108.
- 4 יגאל שוורץ, "מטוטלת הכוח של דוד שיץ: אחרית דבר להעשב והחול", *העשב והחול* (ירושלים: כתר, 1992), 209-216.
- 5 דוד שיץ, "משיכה בין הקורבן לתליין", *ידיעות אחרונות, המוסף לישבת* (16.4.1993), עמ' 25.
- 6 דוד שיץ, "הצלבנים ערב מפלתם", *קשת, חוברת ב'* (תל אביב, 1971), 123-130.
- 7 דוד שיץ, "מלאכים", *ההזדמנות האחרונה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1980), 30-36.
- 8 א"ב יהושע, "מול היערות", *מול היערות: סיפורים* (תל אביב: הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1968), 9-55.
- 9 דוד שיץ, "אהרנטל", *ההזדמנות האחרונה* (תל אביב: ספרית פועלים, 1980), 116-196.
- 10 ז'יל דלו ופליקס גוואטרי, "אדיפוס יותר מידי מנופח", *קפקא: לקראת ספרות מינורית* (תל אביב: רסלינג, 2005), 36-45.
- 11 דוד שיץ, "המלשין", *שעת החתולים* (חבל מודיעין: כנרת, זמורה-ביתן, דביר, 2016), 5-11.