

**Life is a Story: Narrative and Identity in the War Poetry of Dan Pagis and Charles Simic**

Chanita Goodblatt

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**Recommended Citation**

Goodblatt, Chanita. "Life is a Story: Narrative and Identity in the War Poetry of Dan Pagis and Charles Simic." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.1 (): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3695>>

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 22 Issue 1 (March 2020) Article 6****Chanita Goodblatt,****"Life is a Story: Narrative and Identity in the War Poetry of Dan Pagis and Charles Simic"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/6>>

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.1 (2020)**  
Special Issue ***Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity***. Ed. Chanita Goodblatt  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** The use of the conceptual metaphor of "life is a story" can be conceived as reciprocally or bidirectionally transforming both life and story. Thus this metaphor structures life into a coherent narrative—with a linear, and causally-related, progression of events and relationships—while also realizing the varied interpretive potentials of "a story as life." Such aspects of this metaphor are essential to understanding how the two poets, the Israeli Dan Pagis and the American Charles Simic, shape their identities not only as the poetic speaker or the "I" of poetry but also as that of a storyteller. The lives of both these poets demonstrate a similar trajectory of war, as well as a displacement that is geographical, cultural and linguistic: childhood and youth in a war-torn Europe; immigration at the age of sixteen to another, non-European country; and the adoption of a new language as the focus and instrument of poetic creation. Studying their poems in two sections—visual narrative and fictional narrative—provides the opportunity to see how narrative and poetic identity coalesce in the face of displacement and war. What is more, it provides the opportunity to develop the concept of narrativity within the poetic text, also discovering the ways in which these poets embed photographic, cinematographic and literary images within such a narrative. Finally, the use of the fable by these two poets illuminates a connection among various genres (poetry, interview, memoir, book review), as well as among various literary cultures (German, Hebrew, Graeco-Latin, English).

## Chanita GOODBLATT

### Life is a Story: Narrative and Identity in the War Poetry of Dan Pagis and Charles Simic

#### *Untitled Poem*

My childhood has slipped away and with its death  
took away my legends and left only me.  
The story of my life became for me a fabrication  
(Pagis, *Kol Ha-Shirim* 41)

My childhood is a black-and-white movie. O rainy evenings, dimly lit streets. My mother is leading me by the hand into the gloomy cinema where the performance has already started, where a boy is running down a country road under a sky full of ominous-looking clouds;  
(Simic, *A Fly* 28)

#### Life Is A Story

In Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), the Jewish-Italian character Guido attempts to save his young son when they are imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. Exploiting his talents as a masterful storyteller—already demonstrated in the first part of the film (in which he has woven a tale to a young girl about being the Prince of Addis Ababa)—he creates a story of their life in which the concentration camp is transformed into a fun camp built around games and competitions:

#### *Guido*

Look at that organization! Do you see those soldiers? You have to stand in line to get in. People try to sneak in every which way, but they have to stand in line outside, and the guards check everyone, they didn't let those two in!

In fact, two prisoners are taken away mysteriously.

#### *Guido*

Don't worry, though, they'll let us in, I reserved! See, Joshua? We're going to have a great time!

#### *Joshua*

Daddy, what's the name of this game?

#### *Guido*

...Then there are the soldiers. They they'll give us the schedule. Not so easy, is it? No, not easy. If you make a mistake, they send you right home. But if you win, you get first prize.

. . . .

#### *Guido*

Joshua, from now on you have to hide all day! If they find you, it's all over. They'll disqualify us.

#### *Joshua*

And what am I supposed to do all day?

#### *Guido*

Don't let anyone see you, especially the bad guys who are always yelling.

Joshua lies down on the bed and disappears from his father's sight.

#### *Joshua*

I have to stay here all the time?

#### *Guido*

No, no! I'll take you with me, don't worry! I'll hide you! This is the hardest part, because if no one finds you, we win the tank!

We'll make a hundred twenty points on this one! You're not even here. No one's ever set eyes on you! You disappeared! Got it? (Cerami and Benigni 75-90)

"Life is a story" Guido affirms in these passages, as he attempts to interpret the events and situations to create a coherent structure, in which there is a causal connection among its parts (organization-soldiers-schedule) as well as a plan meant to achieve a goal (successful hiding-prize). The attempt to create this coherence reflects Guido's desire to restore order to a life marked by displacement and danger. The use of this conceptual metaphor of "life is a story" (as discussed by Lakoff and Johnson 172-174) can be conceived, moreover, as transforming both life and story. Derived from the *Interaction Theory of Metaphor* (Goodblatt and Glicksohn), the claim is that the two terms of a metaphor entail a reciprocal, bidirectional relationship, and not just one in which the primary subject (i.e., life) is viewed unidirectionally in terms of the secondary subject (i.e., story). Thus while in his identity as a storyteller Guido structures "life as a story" as a system of cause and effect, he also realizes the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" through the absurd, even grotesque, meaning generated by a highly incongruous game that is played out in real life.

Yet there is an additional storyteller identified in Benigni's film, delineated in the beginning and penultimate lines:

*Voice-Over*

This is a simple story but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow, and like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness.

...

*Voice-Over* (adult Joshua)

This is my story. This is the sacrifice my father made. This was his gift to me. (Cerami and Benigni 1, 115)

The identification at the film's end of Guido's son as the storyteller reveals his ability (analogous to that of his father's) to reciprocally interpret and transform both a life and a story, moving narratively back and forth from sorrow to happiness while incorporating a moral lesson. Moreover, it quite satisfyingly creates a sense of dramatic closure in both formal and affective terms (relating both to the work and the reader; Schlueter 86)—as the audience delights in the knowledge that the young Joshua has survived to tell his own redemptive tale. Finally, this brief narrative structure calls "attention to the film's status as a historical representation that cannot be isolated from the voice that presents the narrative" (Maron 174). The cinematic representation of a personal—as well as collective—experience highlights specific issues about storytelling: the relationship between the two narrative levels of external and internal story, as extra- and intra-diegetic (Rimmon-Kenan 96), or even more fittingly, between two narrative identities—here meaning between Joshua as an extradiegetic narrator, relating the story of both his father's life and his own childhood, and Guido as an intradiegetic narrator creating his own story within the son's encompassing narrative; the relationship between the representation of this wartime experience mediated by Joshua as a (fictionalized) "biographical author" who "serves as a criterion for determining the historical and cultural plausibility" (Hühn 147) of the film, and Guido's creation of his fictionalized account in which the child Joshua participates; and finally the biographical relationship between the filmmaker and the events of his film. For "I'm a storyteller," says Benigni (Logan), whose "film was partly inspired by the stories of his father, who told his family of his experiences in a Nazi work camp" (Celli 146). The formulation of these issues thus incorporates current studies of the film *Life is Beautiful*. For it reflects Caroline Joan S. Picart's explanation that the film juxtaposes "audience understandings of the historical reality of the Holocaust [...] against the humorous fictions perpetuated" in the film (204-205). Such a formulation reflects as well Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's insight that there exists a "collusion of the child/audience" with Guido's "inventive skills of a storyteller" ("After Such Knowledge" 305).

I have chosen to begin my article on the poetry of Dan Pagis and Charles Simic with this discussion of Benigni's film for three reasons. The first is that such a discussion highlights the respective encounters of the poets Dan Pagis (1930-1986) and Charles Simic (1938-) with World War II as young children living within an inclusive European experience. The second reason—taking inspiration from illuminating comparative studies by Shimon Sandbank ("Ayin") and Ezrahi ("Seeking") of Pagis (writing in Hebrew), the poets Rainer Maria Rilke and Paul Celan (writing in German), and Paul Valéry (writing in French)—is to provide a further opportunity for defining the poetic identities of Pagis and Simic (writing in English)

within an international artistic and literary world. The third reason is that both Pagis and Simic shape these identities not only as the poetic speaker or the "I" of poetry but also as that of a storyteller, thereby inviting the application of concepts from the field of narratology to the poetic text (Fludernik; Hühn; Rimmon-Kenan).

The passages cited at this article's beginning comprise appropriate starting points that mutually illuminate the lives and poetic identities of Pagis and Simic. The lives of both these poets demonstrate a similar trajectory of war, as well as a displacement that is geographical, cultural and linguistic (Alter; Gold; Spalding): childhood and youth in a war-torn Europe; immigration at the age of sixteen to another, non-European country; and the adoption of a new language as the focus and instrument of poetic creation. Dan (originally Severin) Pagis was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Radautz, Romania. With the Nazi occupation in 1941, he was imprisoned with his grandparents in a concentration camp in Transnistria (his father having emigrated to Palestine and his mother having died several years earlier). After his release, he was reunited in 1946 with his father in Palestine (Ada Pagis 18-47; Gluzman 18). Charles (originally Dušan) Simic was born into a Serbian family in Belgrade (then Yugoslavia). With his mother and brother, he lived through the Nazi invasion, German and Allied bombings, and the Communist regime—during which time his father had been imprisoned (and then detained) in Italy. The family was reunited in America in 1954 (Ford 267-268; Simic, *A Fly* 1).

In the two passages by Pagis and Simic, both speakers affirm that "life is a story"—giving the narratives of their lives new meaning as they reveal the relationship between biographical events and their depiction in fiction and film. As in the film *Life is Beautiful*, the use of this conceptual metaphor can be conceived as reciprocally, or bidirectionally, transforming both life and story. Thus Pagis structures "life is a story" as a narrative of development from a child's wondrous perception of the world to an adult's disillusioned acknowledgement of its dangers, while realizing the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" through the changing meaning of legends and fabrication. On his part, Simic structures "life as a story" as a narrative of development from a child's simplistic perception of the world to an adult's realization of its inescapable dangers, while realizing the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" through meaning generated by a visual, symbolic experience ("a black-and-white movie"). In addition, the speaker in both passages is a storyteller, echoing the adult Joshua in *Life is Beautiful* in recreating a child's perspective—of life as games, as legends, and as a movie—yet with a more pensive acknowledgement of adult disillusionment. Thus Pagis's poem comprises the middle of the sequence "Yom Ha-Yaldut" (The day of childhood), directly reflecting in these lines what in the other poems is "more than a trace of longing for the poet's hometown" (Elbag). This creation of the speaker's identity as a storyteller is intensified in Simic's passage, which is cited from the fourth section of his memoirs, *A Fly in the Soup*. The various sections in this collection, "previously scattered in various books and literary magazines, have been arranged chronologically to create an unusual memoir of exile and refugee life" ("Description").

Based on the statements of both poets regarding the relationship of life, story and poem in their works, this article will focus on the poet as storyteller—a creator of visual narratives (describing photography and film), a creator of fictional narratives—while discussing poems they published in definitive volumes (illuminated by discussions of selected lines from additional poetic texts). The poems by Pagis are taken from his final two collections (included in the volume *Kol Ha-Shirim*): *Milim Nirdafot* (*Haunted synonyms*) and *Shirim Aḥaronim* (Last poems). Shimon Sandbank's comment on the former collection is appropriate for the latter as well, when he writes that Pagis's "refusal to imprison his voice and withdraw his hands....the [previous] uniformity and the subordination of components to the center are freer, less loyal to logic and more to the experience of the basic processes in the life of the soul" ("Ha-Sheninut"). Simic's poems are taken from his two collections (included in the volume *New and Selected Poems*): *Classic Ballroom Dances*; and *Walking the Black Cat*. His "extensive use of his war-time memories" (Mujik 86) in the former collection continues in the latter as well. Furthermore, Donna Seaman's comment on the latter collection is appropriate as well for the earlier one, when she writes that "Simic conjures an alien yet familiar, dreamy yet gritty cinematographic world where city streets are a stage." Studying these poems, therefore, in two sections—visual narrative and fictional narrative—will provide the opportunity to see how narrative and poetic identity coalesce in the face of displacement and war.

### Visual Narrative

A brief look at the visual art of photography in the poetry of Pagis and Simic can provide a fruitful starting point for the subsequent discussion of the poet as filmmaker. For photographs, as Shahar Bram writes, "are a recurrent motif in Dan Pagis's poetic world" (357). Such is also the case in Simic's poetic world, as he declares that photography displays both the "trust in the present moment and the visible

truth" ("Shop, Le Bacarès," *The Life of Images* 61). Juxtaposing the opening and closing lines from two poems illustrates their use of photographs:

"Ein Leben" [German: A Life]

In the month of her death she stands at the window,  
a young woman with a permanent, elegant curl,  
Reflecting, looking out.  
In the brown photograph.

. . . .

[I] slowly exit the photograph and grow old,  
grow old carefully, quietly  
so as not to startle her. (Pagis, *Kol Ha-Shirim* 277)

Charles Simic, "Three Photographs"

I could've been that kid  
In the old high school photograph  
I found in a junk shop,  
His guileless face circled in black.

. . . .

I had no money and it was closing time.  
I was feeling my way uncertainly  
Toward the exit in the evening darkness. (*New* 235-236)

The photographs in these poems are fascinating examples of visual—or more specifically "pictorial" (Wollen 113)—narrative. Thus, as Wollen argues, a photograph corresponds "to different types of narrative element" (109-110)—whether as state (a static situation), process (a situation of change), or event (something with a start and a finish). In this context, previous discussions of this poem of Pagis's can be understood as distinguishing such narrative aspects of this photograph, as placed before the reader's eye: as a state, the "stasis of an art-suspended moment" in the mother's description (Ezrahi, "Out of Line" 341); as a process, in which the photograph "attains life" while the poet "breaks the frame of the past and preserves the life that has disappeared in the concrete world" (Bram 374); and as an event, in which the photograph of the mother in that one moment of time, with its beginning and end, corresponds to the way in which the poem "manipulates our first impression of the heroine whose life story has been promised, by anticipating her end as early as her first appearance" (Yacobi, "Ekphrasis" 12). In a similar manner, Simic's poem makes perceptible these aspects of pictorial narrativity: as a boy's state of innocence preserved in the high school photograph; as a process, in which the poet creates an ongoing relationship between the student, ominously marked in black, and his own exit into the darkness; and as an event of photography, begun in consent and concluded in danger and death.

Joshua's voice reveals his adult identity in the film *Life is Beautiful*. Similarly, the identities of the poets as adults are revealed through their retrospective reflections on these photographs as an intersection of their past and present lives—thereby structuring "life as a story" as a system of interrelated events. What is more, the relationship between these speakers and the biographical authors is a strong one: the photograph in Pagis's poem is of his mother in the month before her unexpected death in 1934 (reproduced in *Ada Pagis*); while Simic's stoic mention of his poverty echoes the description of his early years in New York (1958-1961): "From Friday noon to Sunday morning I had plenty of money. The rest of the week, I scraped by on candy bars for lunch and hamburgers or cheap Chinese food for dinner" (*A Fly* 94). This interweaving of identities—the child in the photograph, the adult viewer and storyteller within the poem, and the author as a photographer capturing the various moments of life—serves to realize the interpretive potentials of "a story as life," with its emotional resonances of sorrow and pain that bespeak as well a larger, implied experience of displacement and war. His mother's death eventually leads to Pagis's experience in a war-torn Europe, while Simic's poverty and uncertainty is part of his family's immigrant experience.

A look at another pair of poems on photography further highlights the act of artistic creation:

Charles Simic, "Baby Pictures of Famous Dictators"

Where there are always a couple of infants  
Posing for the camera in their sailors' suits  
Out there in the garden overgrown with shrubs.



. . . .  
In a kind of perpetual summer twilight . . .  
One can even make out the shadow of the tripod and the black hood  
That must have been quivering in the breeze. (*New* 57)

Pagis, "Turning Pages in an Album"

. . . . For a moment  
he enters the class picture and smiles  
high up, next to the teachers. And meanwhile  
with a woman or two on the beach, footprints  
pass by in the sand. And in doing so he already rests  
adult and yellowing in a photograph of thoughts,  
hand to forehead, twilight. (*Kol Ha-Shirim* 99)

In both poems the respective titles can be perceived as what Gérard Genette terms a "thematic"—specifically a "metaphoric"—title that is part of the interpretation of the text (81-2). In Simic's poem the sardonic title provides a biographical background for the story, as well as an interpretive sense of cynicism and inescapable evil. Life is certainly a story that moves inescapably towards such an end, foreshadowed in the text itself as both reality and metaphor, with the concluding line leaving behind "pedigreed bitches pregnant with bloodhounds" (58). Perhaps, as a storyteller, the poet is alluding as well to Cerberus, the hound of Hades. Similarly, in Pagis's poem, the title provides a biographical context, as the character's life is presented in a series of photographs that exemplify the metaphor "a photograph of thoughts"—comprising a concrete, visual realization of thought, as well as an artistic creation that moves past physicality into the realm of meaning and interiority. The poet in each text thus places before the reader both the pictorial narrative and the story of the photography session, once again highlighting issues of innocence, as well as of impending danger and death—that "twilight" coloring the scenes in both poems. In doing so, each poet reveals a self-reflexive act of artistic creation—reflecting his own role and identity as storyteller—whether it the photographer's tripod and black hood in Simic's poem that together cast a literal and metaphorical shadow on the pictured scene, or the action of turning pages in Pagis's poem that imparts "a dimension of activities and development in time to situations and to objects that are in their essence static" (Yacobi, "Ha-Yahasim" 142).

It is particularly Pagis's poem that turns our attention to the use of film in the poetry of Pagis and Simic, emphasizing as it does the "dynamic sequence of human life" (Yacobi, "Ha-Yahasim" 142). This is film as visual narrative—basic, primitive and non-verbal:

Dan Pagis, "Silent Movie"

Tonight as he lies supine  
the ceiling before his eyes is a screen of a silent movie  
oblique light flickers on the shutter and projects  
a black-and-white destiny

The mother kisses the child and is gone  
the child runs after her climbs the wall  
encounters a torte comes out a face of whipped-cream  
the father pleasant elegant across the sea

For a moment the film is interrupted years pass  
soon the reconciliation, everyone's happy ending  
he identifies with them after all they are strangers to him  
he himself will remain in the dark

Meanwhile dawn rises the ceiling empties  
now he will close his eyes and watch  
the repeat performance  
projected onto the inside of his eyelids (*Kol Ha-Shirim* 222)

Charles Simic. *Cameo Appearance*

I had a small, nonspeaking part  
In a bloody epic. I was one of the  
Bombed and fleeing humanity.  
In the distance our great leader  
Crowded like a rooster from a balcony,  
Or was it a great actor  
Impersonating our great leader?

That's me there, I said to the kiddies.  
I'm squeezed between the man  
With two bandaged hands raised  
And the old woman with her mouth open  
As if she were showing us a tooth

That hurts badly. The hundred times  
I rewound the tape, not once  
Could they catch sight of me  
In that huge gray crowd.  
That was like any other gray crowd.

Trot off to bed, I said finally.  
I know I was there. One take  
Is all they had time for.  
We ran, and the planes grazed our hair,  
And then they were no more  
As we stood dazed in the burning city,  
But, of course, they didn't film that. (New 201)

The images captured in the photographer's lens acquire a dynamic, if comic effect, in these poems—whether it is Pagis's creation of "pictures of a childhood that never ended, as frenzied as Chaplinesque slapstick" (A. Pagis 82), or Simic's reflection of Chaplin's 1940 movie *The Great Dictator*, in which a Jewish barber impersonates his country's dictator in an address to the nation. This comic effect is, however, touched with tragedy, particularly through the interweaving of the cinematic and autobiographical narratives. Pagis's covert use of autobiographical material is recognized by Tamar Yacobi, who perceptively writes that "it is difficult not to ask if the story about the hardships of this kind of family of Pagis is autobiographical" ("Seret" 216). The mother and child appearing so poignantly in the "brown photograph" of the poem "Ein Leben" participate actively in "Silent Movie" in an ongoing cinematic story, as (much in Pagis's life) the mother disappears, the child runs after her, and the father has travelled "across the sea." On his part, Simic writes overtly of the autobiographical context of his poem in his essay entitled "Poetry and History": "Poetry succeeds at times in conveying the pain of individuals caught in the wheels of history.... Here's a little poem based on a few images of the bombing of Belgrade in 1941 from a World War II documentary" (*The Life* 164-167). The threat of death captured in the image of bloodhounds in "Baby Pictures" is provided in "Cameo Appearance" with a dynamic energy, both in the cinematic action and in the action of rewinding the tape.

How, then, are these autobiographical experiences transformed into a poetic depiction of cinematic narratives? One should first note (adopting Monika Fludernik's discussion of this structure in lyric poetry; "Allegory" 108-109) that both poems are distinguished by the use of a frame narrative. Fludernik originally defined this structure in relation to prose texts, in which "the framing situation of storytelling merely serves to bracket the 'real' story and mirrors the reader's gradual access to the story proper" (*Towards* 257). In adapting this structure to the poetic text, Pagis and Simic create a different balance between the two parts of the storytelling sections. Much like the film *Life is Beautiful*, in the poem "Silent Movie" the first and final stanzas comprise the frame narrative. This functions to introduce "life as a story" that moves towards an inescapable, unequivocal conclusion. It also realizes the interpretive potentials of a "story as life," as comprising literally and metaphorically a monochrome tale invested with the import of a tragic "black-and-white destiny" that will be endlessly repeated—anticipating the experience of poetic and cinematic closure as a "failure of continuation" (Smith 34). In "Cameo Appearance" Simic intertwines the frame narrative and the story of war throughout the stanzas, thereby creating a verbal and visual energy that reproduces the dynamism of the cinematic narrative. Yet this entwined structure also maintains a confusion of time and place, which presents "life as a story" as moving toward an unfiled and therefore unsubstantiated conclusion. Furthermore, this structure



realizes the interpretive potentials of a "story as life" as a photographic/cinematic and narrative ambiguity, with the "gray," "dazed" crowd standing unrecorded.

Both life and the (poetic) story are therefore the very opposite of being "closed"—in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's words, "as integral: coherent, complete, and stable" (2). The narratives of displacement and war are, of course, none of these; each of these two poems therefore respectively and fittingly presents an unfinished narrative. This narrative is not impeded in Pagis's poem by the stops and starts of punctuation; adapting by implication M.B. Parkes's discussion of punctuation as modifying "the emphases, and hence the 'meaning', embodied in a text" (4), the very absence of such punctuation becomes itself meaningful. Furthermore, adapting Perry and Sternberg's discussion of the literary work as a "system of gaps that must be filled in" (276), one can claim that the narrative of displacement and war is not obstructed by the necessity of verifying narrative and cinematic gaps. Thus in "Silent Movie" the protagonist viewing the film "will remain in the dark"—both literally and metaphorically—while in "Cameo Appearance" the statement "But, of course, they didn't film that" reveals the obliteration of any evidence of destruction.

Finally, the transformation of autobiographical experiences necessarily turns to the aspect of identity—as poetic speaker, as viewer/filmmaker, as the child within the film. In the poem "Silent Movie" the (third-person) poetic speaker is an extradiegetic narrator, who relates two stories: the act of viewing/creating the film as an adult; and the story acted out in this film. In the poem "Cameo Appearance" the (first-person) poetic speaker narrates (extradiegetically) the story of his life while also narrating (intradiegetically) the act of viewing this story/film as an adult. One can therefore point in both poems to the changing identities of the storytellers: the poetic speaker as biographer/autobiographer; the filmmaker as biographer/autobiographer; the filmmaker as a victim of displacement and war; the filmmaker as a child. In *Life is Beautiful*, the distinct identities of the two storytellers—father and grateful son—together create a sense of narrative and moral closure that provides a solution for the biographical/historical context of the film. In these two poems by Pagis and Simic the variable identities of the storytellers sustain the unresolved experience of displacement and war. For these storytellers are not like the cautiously optimistic Joshua, but rather are closer to Guido himself, who recognizes the child's painful innocence while being cognizant of the surrounding evil. In addition, in the shifts among variable identities, a storyteller often implicates himself as potentially unreliable and unseen, while the storyline becomes both fanciful and incomplete. Putting it another way, one can propose that what these poems project is the complex, perhaps even fragile relationship between the storyteller and the story, between the act of perception and the transformative depiction of reality into fiction.

### **Fictional Narrative**

In the film *Life is Beautiful* Joshua compares the story of displacement and war to (in his words) a "fable"—that is a "fictitious narrative" (*OED*)—suffused with "sorrow [...] wonder and happiness." In doing so, he thereby constructs "life as a story" as a fantasized progression towards a happy end, while also realizing the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" through the unexpected combination of seemingly exclusive emotions. The film can also be perceived as a fable in a more classic sense, a story that "will ever keep in view, as its high prerogative and inseparable attribute, the great purpose of instruction, and will necessarily seek to inculcate some moral maxim, social duty or political truth" (Townsend iv). Regarding *Life is Beautiful* these lessons can be formulated in several ways: parental sacrifice and love are a bulwark against destruction; in the fool and his ways lies wisdom; imagination has a transformative power over reality. Fables in both the narrative and instructive functions of Pagis and Simic also comprise a significant element in their works, particularly as they incorporate traditional tales within their texts to confront these experiences of displacement and war. Thus Gershon Shaked writes about Pagis's volume *Milim Nirdafot* (Haunted synonyms), that the "fables are nothing but witty disguises behind which the voice of the poetic speaker hides" (16). On his part, David Kirby writes about Simic that "he is a broker of dreams and images, one who, like those witty youths in the fairy tales, draws on both grim experience and natural playfulness to charm and intoxicate his audience" (216). This section will discuss two significant examples of such poems, in which the identity of the storyteller is inextricably connected to—and defined by—the use of traditional fables.

Pagis's poem "The Story" cites a traditional animal fable:

The Story

Once I read  
a story about a newborn grasshopper

a very green adventurer, who in the evening  
was devoured by a bat.

Immediately after this wise owl gave  
a short speech of consolation and said:  
A bat also wants to make a living  
and there are many more grasshoppers in the meadow.

Immediately after this came  
a last blank page.

Forty years since that moment  
I am bent over that page.  
I have no strength  
to close the book. (*Kol Ha-Shirim* 243)

This poem is part of a poetic sequence entitled "Yeled" (child). Yet this title seems at first to define the subject rather than the speaker. For it is an adult who creates a frame narrative for the fable embedded within it. If indeed "life is a story," then the adult in his structure impedes any progress in either the narrative or his own life. Furthermore, he realizes the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" through the evoking of obscure tragedy and the cynical indifference to death revealed in the fable.

Who, then, is this adult speaker? One part of the answer is to be found in the autobiographical context of the poem, revealed in an interview with Pagis, originally broadcast in 1984:

*Rachel Berghash*

In your poem "The Story" there is a point of view related to the human race. You tell of a newborn grasshopper devoured by a bat, and of a wise owl who justifies this act. Did this point of view take shape after your experiences during the Holocaust?

*Dan Pagis*

Probably. But the idea germinated earlier when I was five or six while reading a German children's book. I cannot find the book or identify the author, but I remember two sentences in which the wise owl justifies the devouring of the grasshopper: "A bat also wants to make a living / and there are many more grasshoppers in the meadow." It is right of course that bats also need to make a living' but in the second sentence "and there are more grasshoppers in the meadow" there is extraordinary cruelty. This impersonal approach to death astounded me. I would not have remembered this sentence so clearly, if not for what happened later during the war. (Berghash 15)

In writing about this poem, Yochai Oppenheimer proposes that "Pagis is not interested in marking visible and explicit lines that lead from the events of the Holocaust to the present, but rather in meandering, covert, enigmatic connections" (32). Following this reading, the poet's mention of the fable's German source can be perceived as reflecting the context of the Holocaust experience. Yet the poet's use of the word "probably," as his wife Ada Pagis has noted, served as a "rhetorical stratagem" that subsequently allowed him to offer "a new solution without triggering an objection" (29). One can therefore argue that Pagis's laconic agreement with the interviewer actually undermines such a limited identification of the poetic speaker as simply a Holocaust survivor. For born within the borders of German-speaking Europe, Pagis "did not leave the German language entirely behind him" (Rokem 61). Through this fable, the poetic speaker participates in a larger European tradition, in which the child's innocent, untutored revelation about the owl's "impersonal" approach to death is less a foreshadowing of a single historic event than an incorporation of such an event within a comprehensive experience.

The second part of the answer about how to understand Pagis's fable-like poem is to be found in the context of Gillian's Rudd's comment about animal fables, when she writes that at "the same time as transmitting social values...[they] train us to read figurative literature by encouraging us to look through the surface to an underlying metaphorical language" (89). The fable's highlighting of cruelty and indifference reflects on a society oriented towards monetary value ("making"). Significantly, it is the owl's utterance that dictates—both literally, verbally and metaphorically, psychologically—the course of the poetic speaker's life, suspending narrative progression on the "blank page" that comprises "a representation of trauma and absence" (Solomon). In doing so, this wise animal not only carries the metaphorical, even allegorical weight of the fable, but also exports its meaning outwards to the frame narrative—the poetic speaker's personal narrative—in (returning to Oppenheimer's words) "enigmatic connections." Is, then, the wise owl actually the poetic speaker telling his own tale, yet caught himself in a narrative and psychological impasse? His identity is thus a complex one—adult and child, Holocaust survivor and European citizen, fabled creature and a human storyteller.

The use of fable to create a speaker's identity also lies at the heart of Simic's memoirs, *A Fly in the Soup*. As the poet Eric McHenry explains in the introductory remarks to his interview with Simic: "Simic knows what it is to be a fly in the soup—uninvited, out of his element, imperiled. He also knows something few flies realize: that his options, along with drowning, include doing the backstroke and even some feasting." It is the (originally) Graeco-Latin fable, "The Fly," echoing so strongly in both the title and these remarks, which is worth citing here:

The fly had fallen into the soup; before drowning, he said: "I have eaten, I have drunk, I have taken a bath, if I die, what do I care?"

The fly is the Cynic animal: it is satisfied with little in life, pure subsistence, and does not complain about death. (Adrados 236)

This fable includes a narration of the events, the fly's direct speech, and a "final lament [that] is inverted ironically" (Adrados 236) that functions as a moral maxim and/or a philosophical truth. As such, it shares a similar structure with the German fable cited by Pagis: an extradiegetic narrator setting out the story; a commentary as direct speech within the fable; and a closing episode of narration that reflects the fable's lesson. The two fables also share a similar perception of life and death, with the fly as a complacent Cynic reminiscent of the owl's cynical indifference. While for Pagis the fable is drawn from his own life, for Simic the fable remains metaphorical. In the latter instance "life as a story" is not impeded but progresses inevitably towards death, while the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" are realized not in tragedy but rather in the transitory nature of existence.

The title of Simic's memoirs with its animal image thus serves a metaphorical function, reflecting an identity as being equally as complex as that of the poetic speaker in Pagis's poem: child and adult, European survivor of war, a creature living on the margins, and a teller of the tale of his sojourn across cultures. This is also the case in yet another fictional narrative, presented in a poem by Simic:

Charles Simic. "What the Gypsies Told my Grandmother While She Was Still a Young Girl"

War, illness and famine will make you their favorite grandchild.  
You'll be like a blind person watching a silent movie.  
You'll chop onions and pieces of your heart into the same hot skillet.  
Your children will sleep in a suitcase tied with a rope.  
Your husband will kiss your breasts every night as if they were two gravestones.

Already the crows are grooming themselves for you and your people.  
Your oldest son will lie with flies on his lips without smiling or lifting his hand.  
You'll envy every ant you meet in your life and every roadside weed.  
Your body and soul will sit on separate stoops chewing the same piece of gum.

Little cutie, are you for sale? the devil will say.  
The undertaker will buy a toy for your grandson.  
Your mind will be a hornet's nest even on your deathbed.  
You will pray to God but God will hang a sign that He's not to be disturbed.  
Question no further, that's all I know. (New 203-204)

Two narrators have been inserted into this poem. There is, first and foremost, the storyteller articulated in the thematic title, who defines the autobiographical context. Secondly, the gypsies function as collective storyteller, who transforms the unfinished "bloody epic" from "Cameo Appearance" into a movie that is both unseen and unheard. Moreover, within the gypsies' tale there are extant other voices that contribute to the creation of a threatening and uncertain situation: the devil's obscene question; and the young girl's imagined, and therefore silenced, prayer and question. While "life is a story" that progresses ominously towards catastrophe, the interpretive potentials of "a story as life" are realized as an enigmatic, uninterpretable process.

The densely figurative language and dark animal imagery used by the gypsies' collective storyteller stand in contrast to the straightforward language of the grandson as narrator in the title. This tale is characterized by images of devastation: the metaphor "you'll chop onions and pieces of your heart into the same hot skillet" depicts the heart as the center of the soul, concretized in a grotesque act that itself embodies violence and pain; and the metaphor "your body and soul will sit on separate stoops chewing

the same piece of gum," that depicts a dissociation of body and soul, to share a grim reality of isolation. The animal images intensify this desolate fate. For as they infest and feed upon a decaying world, the crows, flies and ants become symbols of human predators. Finally, the animal metaphor "your mind will be a hornet's nest" embodies feelings of great distress and danger, by emphasizing incessant images and continuous mental noise. This the fate of the grandson. For as an extradiegetic narrator, he relates the gypsies' tale as predicting his own fate; he is the one for whom, within this tale, "the undertaker will buy a toy."

In his well-known discussion of the metaphor "man is a wolf," Max Black emphasizes its quality of bidirectionality, writing that if "to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would" (44). In this context, the animals in the works by Pagis and Simic are also transformed, as the experiences of human life penetrate their world: indifferent enemies attack innocent creatures; life is to be enjoyed and lost; and emotions overwhelm one's existence. This is, consequently, an issue of identity as a combination of the human and the animal that reaches a climax in two poems using the concept of bestiality:

Pagis, "Bestiality and it is a Book of Monsters and Beasts"

[...]

Biped is quite a strange creature:  
through his flesh he is a relation  
of the other predatory animals, but only he  
cooks animals, seasons animals,  
only he wears animals, is shod in animals.  
Only he thinks  
that he is a stranger in the world, only he protests  
against what was decreed, only he laughs,  
and even more amazing, only he  
rides willingly on a motorcycle.  
He has twenty fingers,  
two ears,  
a hundred hearts.

[...] (*Kol Ha-Shirim* 197)

Simic, "Bestiality for the Fingers of My Right Hand"

1

Thumb, loose tooth of a horse.  
Rooster to his hens.  
Horn of a devil. Fat worm  
They have attached to my flesh  
At the time of my birth.  
It takes four to hold him down.  
Bend him in half, until the one  
Begins to whimper.

Cut him off. He can take care  
Of himself. Take root in the earth,  
Or go hunting with wolves.

[...] (*New* 10)

Both poems do not focus solely on the animal world as fulfilling "the apparent function of being a vehicle for human understanding" (Rudd 88). Rather, a bidirectional metaphor is generated, in which the protagonist's identity contains the characteristics of man and beast. The speaker in Pagis's poems adds a new, strange creature to the bestiary. This creature intriguingly raises animalistic hunting and self-preservation to new heights, while also possessing a variety of rational and emotional qualities. More moderately utilizing the structure of a fable, the speaker describes the actions of the creature, to close with the provocative statement that he has "a hundred hearts"— the result of animalistic cannibalism or alternatively a hyperbolic description of human traits. A similar structure is evident in

Simic's poem, in which the speaker creates a new bestiary by grafting a strange variety of animals onto his own body. In this case, the fable describes the attack on this creature, to close with the equally provocative assertions about its ability to survive—alternatively as plant or animal. In addition, the description of the thumb evokes images of bestial domination, evil and ugliness, while also revivifying metaphorical phrases describing human endeavors (such as establishing oneself, or becoming part of a group). The storytellers in the various poetic fables considered here formulate a lesson. Whether the storyteller concludes his narrative with a wry, witty comment, or with one of pathos, they depict an oscillation between the human and the bestial that brings into question the identity of a human being and the nature of the world to which he belongs.

### Conclusion

The American poet Chard de Niord has written that "Simic has struck an originality that transports William Carlos Williams's credo, 'no idea but in things' into a narrative as well" (79). This is also appropriate for Pagis, who turned to the "Anglo-American models" of Modernism (Kronfeld 185). Studying the poetry of Simic and Pagis in tandem has provided the opportunity to develop the concept of narrativity within the poetic text, as well as to study the ways in which these poets embed photographic, cinematographic and literary images within such a narrative. In addition, the use of the fable by these two poets—whether through a traditional or a more moderate narrative structure—has illuminated a connection among various genres (poetry, interview, memoir, book review), and among various literary cultures (German, Hebrew, Graeco-Latin, English). Finally, it is through this study of narrative that the issue of identity has been developed—whether in terms of the narrator and poetic speaker, or in terms of the human-animal figure. Considering these various aspects of narrative and identity opens up further significant avenues of research. Concerning the use of genres, for example, one can investigate how both poets incorporate "prose poems" into their poetic corpus—such as in Simic's collection *The World Doesn't End: Prose Poems* (1989) or Pagis's posthumously-published *Abba* (father). Consideration of extra-poetic texts—highly accessible in digital format—also raises issues of identity: what is the relationship, for example, between auto/biographical material and the poet/poetic speaker? Last, but certainly not least, how can a discussion of these two poets (either together, or separately) contribute to a re-evaluation of their respective corpora—whether it is a development of the (as yet) embryonic scholarly interest in Simic, or of a scholarly turn in the study of Pagis that focuses on his singular use of metaphor (particularly in relation to his own scholarly projects). To paraphrase Joshua's conclusion to Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful*, "this is not a simple story, but indeed a fascinating one to tell."

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