**The Most Despicable Self-Traps Locks: Thomas Mann's “Mario and the Magician” and David Grossman's “Bruno” in *See Under: Love***

The arbitrariness of an external power that violently intrudes upon a person’s life, [penetrating] into a single soul, occupies me in almost all of my books…. And to want to believe that another person can exist within you, and to believe that a person can be at home in the body and soul and language of another person, and not be alarmed by that thought. And to discover that it is also possible to discover a partner to your deepest and most violent fears and keys to the most despicable self-traps locks[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thomas Mann’s (1875–1955) works not only had a tremendous impact on his own era but also continued to impact in different and diverse contexts for many years to come.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this regard, “Mario and the Magician,”[[3]](#footnote-3) written in 1929 and published in 1930, has received special attention from scholars, as a story that foresaw the Nazi takeover.[[4]](#footnote-4) David Grossman published his book, *See Under: Love* in 1986, almost a century after Mann’s story was published; however, both of them address Fascism’s take over and the consequences of this historical event through one particular person’s story.

Mann’s Mario, like Grossman’s Shultz, grappled with the fear of death his fascist environment roused and both chose their own individual ways to resolve their very real problems, but just them. While Mario actually foiled the malevolent narrative arc in his story, Grossman’s Bruno merely succeeded in escaping it; this notwithstanding, the common denominator linking them is readily apparent, their ethical code: when Fascism threatens to take over, it is inappropriate to continue living as you have, rather you must perform a boundary-shattering act. In “Mario and the Magician” the act crosses the limits of the law, and in the chapter entitled “Bruno,” the act crosses the boundaries of reality itself. This starting point is foundational to the comparison presented in this discussion, in whose framework the “extra-ordinary” is the product of an inner battle, not of the narrator’s distant point of view.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Let’s first make the context in which Grossman’s Bruno’s story is imbedded clear. In the first part of *See Under: Love*, the main character, Mumik Neuman, is a nine-year-old boy who is coping with the arrival and departure of his grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, named Anshel Wasserman. Mumik was determined to discover the nature of the ‘Nazi Beast,’ an attempt that wound up with his becoming insane. The second part of the novel *See Under: Love* is called “Bruno,” and is named after the well-known Jewish author Bruno Schultz (1892–1942).

Schulz was shot and killed by a [German Nazi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Nazi), a Gestapo officer, in 1942 while walking back home toward the [Drohobycz Ghetto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drohobycz_Ghetto) with a loaf of bread. Several of Schulz's works were lost in [the Holocaust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Holocaust), including his final, unfinished novel *The Messiah*.

The second part of the novel begins with a description of Bruno Shulz, as the narrator reconstructs Shulz’ final days and builds an alternate construct for the end of his life: Shulz, as it were, foresees his destiny and therefore chooses to flee the ghetto, leap into the sea, and disappear in the company of a school of salmon. When Bruno considers his impending doom, as a Jew living in the Drohobycz Ghetto, the narrator slips from third-person into first-person narration, referring to Bruno as “my Bruno.” [[6]](#footnote-6) Later it becomes clear that the boy, Mumik, is the first-person narrator and the main protagonist of the novel’s second part. Mumik grows up and becomes Shmulik, and his obsession with the Nazi Beast is replaced by another one: “to discover” what happened to Bruno after he “decided” to leap into the sea and disappear. In pursuit of this quest, Shmulik flies to a town called Narbiyah, close to the Danzig seacoast where Bruno “leaped” into the sea, and he attempts to trace Bruno’s footsteps. The main female character in this novel is “the Northern Sea”: the sea that Bruno leapt into, which helped him survive. Later in the story, “the Northern Sea” refers to Bruno as “my Bruno.” These two terms of belonging express the first-person narrator’s deep need and, indeed, the sea’s need as a representative of the forces of Nature to shield Bruno from his impending murder. In order to understand how Mann shaped this aspect of Grossman’s consciousness before the Grossman even wrote his novel, we can reflect upon Grossman’s own words from a 2017 interview. Grossman listed Thomas Mann’s story “Mario and the Magician” as one of the five literary masterpieces that shaped his consciousness as an author. Grossman abridged Mann’s story in the following way:

At the center of the story is a hypnotists’ performance that ends in an unexpected and tragic way. The main character is the strange and arrogant hypnotist, Cipolla, an expert in taking over people’s will power and subjugating their minds to him. The subtext of the story is….Fascism and the wish of people to give up their free will and deposit it into hands of authority, let it be the Duce, or Cipolla.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In this passage, Grossman alludes to three components that provide us with insight into his creative process—into how Mann’s work influenced his creation of “Bruno” in *See Under: Love*. The first component is the figure of Cipolla himself, the arrogant, cruel magician. The second is Cipolla’s ability to control peoples’ consciousness to such a degree that they will ignore the evil, corrupted nature of his actions. The third is peoples’ willingness to give up their free will and grant others authority in exchange for a sense of safety. In Mann’s story, as he foreshadowed in the title where Mario’s character is tellingly named, Mario has the balance of power or the advantage in his relationship with Cipolla’s character. In hindsight—after reading the story—we can understand that Mann alluded to another message in the story’s title that Grossman did not adopt: the solution to a violent fascistic takeover is a violent counter-attack.

In order to understand Mann’s story’s influence on Grossman’s “Bruno,” we can break down their shared, creative process into three stages:

In the first stage, the protagonist slowly realizes that the events transpiring before him are leading to inevitable oppression that will also inevitably end in murder. In the second stage, the protagonist decides to act in a certain way to prevent this seemingly inevitable conclusion. In the third stage, the protagonist carries out this act which, with a little help from literary fiction, indeed, succeeds in preventing the tragic ending. This notwithstanding, in addition to these parallels, Mann and Grossman also differ in significant ways. These differences reflect the narrator’s inner conflict in “Bruno.”

The first readily apparent difference occurs between the two text’s expository methods. Mann, adopting the first-person narrator’s perspective of a man coming on a family vacation to an Italian village, chose to create a growing sense of disaster. A series of incidents transpire that are motivated by discrimination against and the ostracization of the first-person narrator. These engender a cause and effect process: the legitimization of oppression leads to premeditated harassment (or worse), as Edgar Rosenberg noted.[[8]](#footnote-8) In contrast, at the beginning of “Bruno” the atmosphere is not anticipatory; instead, the reader experiences a prolonged period of foreboding generated by the foreknowledge of the impending murder. In contrast, to Mann’s story in which the murder can still be prevented by killing Cipolla, the only way that Bruno can prevent his doom is by taking the extraordinary measure of escaping from reality into the world of fiction. Mann makes the crucial political message in his book apparent from the very beginning as he chooses to craft a *fabula*, foreshadowing the ending of the narrative from its very beginning:

The atmosphere of Torre di Venere remains unpleasant in the memory. From the first moment the air of the place made us uneasy, we felt irritable, on edge; then at the end came the shocking business of Cipolla, that dreadful being who seemed to incorporate, in so fateful and so humanly impressive a way, all the peculiar evilness of the situation as a whole. Looking back, we had the feeling that the horrible end of the affair had been preordained and lay in the nature of things; that the children had to be present at it was an added impropriety, due to the false colors in which the weird creature presented himself. Luckily for them, they did not know where the comedy left off and the tragedy began; and we let them remain in their happy belief that the whole thing had been a play up till the end.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Grossman’s narrator seems to choose the diametrically opposite path: Bruno chooses to flee his destiny. However, even in this case, the sense of impending doom is present from the very beginning, such that a person can intuit his impending death before it happens by noting the environmental conditions that foreshadow it.

Another difference may be found in the texts’ description of the psychological mechanism employed to grapple with Fascism. In both works, we find a similar mechanism, which Grossman describes in his 2017 interview: “The mechanism of turning towards fanaticism and Fascism is the same in 1926 as in 2017. The more confusing and violent the world becomes, people are more eager to find shelter in superficiality and to identify with and even assimilate into an imagined strong and “Fatherly” personality.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

In both works, literature copes with the terror of Fascism by fashioning a figure possessing supreme powers, whose acts create an illusion among the readers that he is capable of elevating himself above the inevitable constraints of reality. Both Cipolla and Bruno are ‘lone wolf’ characters, who do not share their works of art: Bruno does not share his manuscript and Cipolla does not share the stage. Grossman describes this characteristic in the following manner:

Cipolla wouldn’t allow anyone to share the stage with him. He is a hunchback, a repulsive, ugly person in appearance and mannerism, in his vanity, in the deep contempt in which he holds the audience. But I think his power comes from the feeling that there is a struggle inside himself….His personality is a permanent inner battle. This is what attracts us as spectators, as readers, to such a show: that we are allowed to peep into the hell of another human being—it is, of course, an irresistible temptation[[11]](#footnote-11)

In both texts, the inner battle taking place within the two characters is reflected in the narrator’s words. Shlumik, “Bruno’s” narrator, describes Bruno’s internal battles and indecision, before and during his disappearance from this world among a school of salmon. Mario, in Mann’s story, chooses to kill Cipolla and expose his mannerism, the magic which compels the audience to ignore his cruelty. Within this context, the textual difference is twofold. In Mann’s story, the figure who represents the magic of Fascism is wiped out, while, Grossman never explored the possibility of revenge or stopping the fascist enterprise. Furthermore, in his story, Grossman hints that we can cope with the fear of a cruel death like Bruno’s by bringing his character back to life; however, this is only accomplished by crossing the boundaries into the world of fantasy and imagination. In contrast, the fascist magic in Mann’s story is stopped in a realistic manner that reflects the fact that Mann never exceeds the boundaries of physical reality in this story.

In conclusion, Shmulik, the narrator, described the connection between his choice to conceive of Bruno’s act as a fiction, which provides him with the possibility of a post-facto escape.

I remember closing the book, leaving my house, and wandering around outside for hours, as if in a fog. I was in a state where I had lost any desire to live in a world where such things could happen, in which a language could exist that allows such monstrous language [to be uttered], like that sentence….I decided that I wanted to write a book about Bruno Schulz, a book that would tremble on the shelves, a book whose vitality, for a millisecond, would provide a counterweight to the life of one person. Not that ‘life’ in quotation marks which is merely a refisah in time, but life like the one Bruno Shulz taught in his writings—the life of life, life squared….Since then the book has been translated into several languages and nothing makes me happier than the fact that in every language it appeared, new editions of Bruno Shulz’s writings were printed immediately after its release and more and more people had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with this wonderful author.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**The Protagonists’ Conflict and Othernness in David Grossman's Novel *More Than I Love My Life***

In David Grossman’s most recent novel, *More Than I love My Life* (Grossman [2019] 2021), there are three main, female protagonists and the plot follows the choices that shaped their lives. This is the first novel Grossman has dedicated to women who choose to reject familial and societal expectations. In an earlier novel, *To the End of the Land* (Grossman [2008] 2010), which Grossman also dedicated to fashioning a female perspective, Ora, the main character, flees the dictates imposed upon her (as the novel’s Hebrew title indicates— “a woman flees notification”). In contrast, the three women spanning three generations in *More Than I Love My Life* choose to act in opposition to normative societal expectations, and even reconstruct their pasts and begin to repair the results of their actions.

The goal of this lecture is to examine the characteristics of opposition and otherness in the decision-making process of each one of the novel’s three female characters: Vera made a choice in the context of being held captive in a work camp; Nina made a choice while living in a kibbutz, and Gili made a choice in the context of postmodern urban living. This examination is undertaken to point out those universal feminist characteristics which are not necessarily related to the State of Israel’s political circumstances (White 2013). This examination will take the form of a comparison, with emphasis being placed on the novel’s multigenerational nature. The inquiry will investigate the differences between the choices made by these women in different periods, and focus on the feminist characteristics of opposition to existing societal norms and the expression of otherness that cannot be minimized. Methodologically, I will utilize Levinas’ concepts of feminine and the otherness (Levinas 1947, 1961, 1974).

Our methodological argument will be that these concepts, created by Levinas, a Holocaust survivor himself, are the very basis for the possibility of free choice notwithstanding the Holocaust’s occurrence. And, furthermore, I will show that despite the scholarly critique of Levinas’ perception of the feminine (de Beauvoir, 2008), Levinas’ conception of feminine characteristics enriches various feminist ethical perspectives (Chanter 2001, Katz 2003, Girgus 2010).

The main question that will be addressed in the lecture is how the Holocaust affected Vera’s “feminine” decisions: in her relationship with her husband, the regime, her daughter, and, ultimately, her granddaughter. The main argument will be that the various experiences of femininity as it appears in the novel allow us to illuminate a new facet of the Holocaust’s impact upon women: under, of all things, pressures that are almost too intolerable to bear, we witness women developing impressive coping and decision-making capabilities (Wittgenstein 2009; Beaney & Harrington 2018). On the methodological level, I will make another claim: the novel provides us with a new understanding of Levinas’ concepts, especially that of the feminine, which scholars have criticized.

This talk’s specific contribution to scholarship in the field is two-fold. On the thematic level, the women’s decisions in the novel will be examined as both direct and indirect consequences of the Holocaust. On the methodological level, this discussion’s contribution will demonstrate the contribution Levinas’ concepts make to understanding the philosophical facet and versatility of women’s decisions.

1. David Grossman, “Books that Have Read Me,” in *Where did my poem come from?* Ruth Kartun-Blum ed. (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2002), 33–46, especially p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shulz’ relationship with Mann is a quintessential example of this influence being crafted into a modern short story: Maxim Biller, *Im Kopf von Bruno Shulz* (Cologne/Germany: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG, 2013). In this story Biller skillfully fashioned the admiration Shultz had for Mann as the very model of a revered and famous artisan whom everyone wished to honor. David Grossman has also noted that Thomas Mann is one of his most obvious sources of inspiration. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Mann, “Mario and the Magician,” in *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories,* H. T. Lowe-Porter trans. (NY: Vintage, 1989), 133–178. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Bance, “The Political Becomes Personal: *Disorder and Early Sorrow* and *Mario and the Magician*,”in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann*, Ritchie Robertson ed. (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2001), 107–118. Bance proposed [reference to next ftnt] that we impute to the book’s narrator “the typical Thomas Mann position of detached, ironic observer.” The narrator represents every person who has been drawn against his will into a political reality that forces him to take a stand, and in so doing he “becomes morally implicated in it, just as no one who lived as an adult through the Hitler years in Europe could remain a private and disinterested party” (Bance, 2001, 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nothing in this footnote [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nothing in this footnote [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. David Grossman, “Five Books,” Interview by [Thea Lenarduzzi](https://fivebooks.com/interviewer/thea-lenarduzzi/), https://fivebooks.com/best-books/books-that-shaped-him-david-grossman-man-booker/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Edgar Rosenberg, “Mann's Mario and the Magician,” *The Explicator* (2002) 61:1, 33– 36, DOI: [10.1080/00144940209597745](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940209597745), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mann, 1989, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Grossman 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Grossman 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Grossman 2002, 40–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)