

The Holocaust and the Maternal Body: An Exploration of the
Diverse Deployment of the Symbolic Maternal Body as a Discursive
Trope in Holocaust Literature and its Impact on the Construction
and Proliferation of Collective Memory.

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Dedicated to the memory of Myrtle Wooldridge

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Abstract

This thesis explores the significance of maternal symbolism in the examination of Holocaust literature. The majority of the existing research surrounding motherhood and the Holocaust approaches maternity from a specific sociological or cultural standpoint, with the aim of providing further insight into previously marginalised testimony. By way of a departure from this approach, I intend to analyse the significance of maternity as a psychodynamic construct. Whilst I do not go so far as to argue that psychodynamic theory offers a universally applicable maternal archetype, I do argue that a discussion of the maternal influenced by the broadly Lacanian theoretical position that the mother plays a pivotal role in the evolution of subjectivity, lays at the foundation of many of the religious and sociological manifestations of the mother figure that have previously informed analysis of Holocaust literature.

Over the course of four chapters I build upon the initial observation that psychodynamic maternal symbolism makes a frequent appearance across multiple genres of Holocaust literature. Using various theoretical models of maternal attachment and identification, I attempt to emphasise the importance of maternal symbolism to the confrontation of many of the over-arching epistemological and ethical dilemmas that accompany contemporary efforts to confront the traumatic cultural legacy of the Holocaust. The opening chapter explores the use of idealised maternal imagery as a discursive trope in Holocaust memoir. Chapter two examines intergenerational Holocaust memory in terms established by Julia Kristeva's theory of the maternal abject and its appearance in Bernhard Schlink's controversial novel *The Reader*. The third chapter looks at contemporary engagement with the Holocaust using the discursive framework of projective identification. Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* are analysed using Melanie Klein's discussion of the mother's breast as a primary object of attachment. Finally, chapter four uses Melvin

Bukiet's short story 'The Library of Moloch' and Norma Rosen's 1969 novel *Touching Evil* to examine the metaphysical connection between the archive and the body. Having introduced and established this relationship using 'The Library of Moloch,' *Touching Evil* will be discussed in terms its specific deployment of the maternal body as an archetypal memorial vessel.

Ultimately I conclude that many of the issues that arise in attempting to confront the Holocaust (on an individual or collective level,) fundamentally arise from discourse surrounding the politics of identity. I posit that the frequent manifestation of the symbolic maternal in Holocaust writing can be attributed to the thematic resonance that exists between these two subjects. The Holocaust is characterised by the disruption of established cultural social and philosophical paradigms, causing us to question the extant assumptions that influence our conception of who we are and what makes us human. The psychodynamic theory that situates the maternal as a master paradigm that sits at the primal origins of the self, renders it uniquely situated as a rhetorical framework to explore many of the problematic issues that surround the continued presence of the Holocaust as a traumatic subtext in western culture.

Introduction

At the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, Yehiel Dinur famously collapsed on the witness stand after describing the horrors of daily life on ‘the planet of ashes.’¹ In 1949 French philosopher David Rousset coined the term *l’univers concentrationnaire*² and in ‘The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah’ George Steiner describes the events of the Holocaust as ‘the abyss of 1938-1945.’³ Notwithstanding the diversity of their provenance, these monikers share one key feature in common; the metaphorical language of space travel and general disruptions in the fabric of reality imply an event that transcends the limitations of human experience and understanding. Owing to the sheer scale of the slaughter, the Holocaust has been widely regarded as a cataclysmic event without historical precedent, and it is viewed as an other-worldly historical nightmare that stretches comprehension to its limit. The emergence of the Holocaust in popular consciousness is commonly attributed to events such as the highly publicised Eichmann trial and the release of the much-maligned television series *Holocaust* in 1978. In the decades following these watershed events, the rhetoric of contextual inaccessibility has dominated discourse surrounding the representation of the Holocaust; however this particular set of metaphors subtextually evokes a different, and perhaps more unsettling series of implications that contributes to the cultural legacy of the Nazi genocide.

The revelation of the appalling crimes of the National Socialist regime had the effect of redefining common assumptions surrounding the human capacity for brutality. In ‘Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate’ Jurgen Habermas describes the Holocaust in the following terms:

1 Jeffrey Wallen, ‘Testimony and Taboo: The Perverse Writings of Ka-Tzetnik 135633,’ *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 28.1 (2014), 1-16 (p.2).

2 David Rousset, *L’Univers Concentrationnaire*, (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1981).

3 George Steiner, ‘The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to “the Shoah,”’ *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 154-175 (p.155).

There [in Auschwitz] something happened; that up to now nobody considered as even possible. There one touched on something which represents the deep layer of solidarity among all that wears a human face; notwithstanding all the usual acts of beastliness of human history, the integrity of this common layer had been taken for granted...Auschwitz has changed the basis for the continuity of the condition of life within history.⁴

Habermas's words imply that the Holocaust should not be viewed as a self-contained event, but as a paradigm-altering rupture in human history. The perpetration of such atrocities by a culturally and technologically advanced nation presented modern civilisation with an unflattering and troubling mirror image. The idea that the majority of people carry within them the innate capacity to behave in a cruel and barbaric manner has since been supported by events such as Stanley Milgram's obedience test and Philip Zimbardo's prison study. This brings me back to the metaphor of space travel. The idea of other worlds and alternate dimensions evokes great distance but also conjures up images of hostile invasion with the potential to breach the boundaries of body and mind. Whilst the reality of daily life in a concentration camp might be beyond our conceptual grasp, the Holocaust serves as a discomfiting reminder of the darker side of human nature, of all that makes us 'strangers to ourselves.'⁵ It is both distant and uncomfortably close, simultaneously invoking fascination and repulsion.

Owing to its extremity and uncanny duality, the Holocaust has left a lasting imprint on western consciousness. In 'The Second Life of Holocaust Imagery' Norma Rosen discusses the impact of the Holocaust on the collective consciousness of American writers:

4 Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT University Press, 1989) p.163.

5 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

For a mind engraved with the Holocaust, gas is always that gas. Shower means their shower. Ovens are those ovens. A train is a freight car crammed with suffocating children: it arrives at the suburban station in a burst of power and noise, there is a moment of hideous hallucination that is really only remembering and then one steps onto the train and opens a newspaper.⁶

In this commentary, the Holocaust exists as a sinister undercurrent, running beneath the mundane surface of suburban life. It is significant to note that Rosen's imaginative connection to the Holocaust is negotiated via a series of powerful symbolic associations such as showers and ovens. Emphasising the condition of humanity 'as an analogy making species with minds that learn via connections,'⁷ Rosen suggests that awareness of the Holocaust has created new patterns of association with previously banal objects and concepts. This passage highlights the inception of a unique and diverse symbolic lexicon that has arisen in response to the traumatic cultural and ontological impact of the Holocaust and the challenges inherent in its representation. In *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* Oren Baruch Stier examines the iconistic tendencies often present in contemporary engagement with the Holocaust. Using the examples of trains, 'Arbeit Macht Frei,' Anne Frank and the number six million, Stier suggests that as the Holocaust recedes further into the past, symbols have come to play a vital role in 'simplifying, condensing and distilling these narratives and producing meanings for cultural consumption.'⁸ Although an argument can be made that a preoccupation with symbolism merely serves to further dilute and decontextualise the Holocaust to an increasingly disengaged audience, Stier maintains that the deferred meaning and contextual plasticity of these symbols serves to facilitate engagement with the Holocaust

⁶ Norma Rosen, 'The Second Life of Holocaust Imagery,' *Accidents of Influence* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 47-54 (p.54).

⁷ *Ibid*, p.49.

⁸ Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p.2.

rather than discouraging it:

In this view a representation is a presentation called to mind (to presence) to serve as a vehicle for achieving some larger purpose; it is a component in a bigger picture, not a thing in itself. Its purpose is not to show and tell but rather to generate meaning in an ongoing, even recurring fashion. It is in this manner that Holocaust icons point back to the Shoah and mediate its presence for contemporary viewers who are themselves implicated in a web of relationships that link them and the icons to past and present.⁹

In this extract Stier argues that Holocaust symbols allow for interpretive flexibility that encourages a discursive interaction with the past that continuously evolves. Analysis of these symbols provides an insight into how the traumatic rupture of the Holocaust has been assimilated into personal and cultural narratives.

Taking into consideration Stier's comments on the general importance of symbolic discourse in discussing the cultural impact of the Holocaust, I intend to conduct a detailed examination of one particular aspect of the symbolic discourse surrounding the Holocaust that I believe to be under-examined. The aim of this thesis is to explore and analyse the diverse deployment of the maternal body as a discursive trope in Holocaust literature and its impact on the construction and proliferation of collective memory. Many of the symbols explored by Stier acquired their symbolic status over time through a gradual repetition of contextual association with the Holocaust. In contrast, motherhood as a symbolic abstraction existed before the Holocaust and has always been available to those seeking a language that accommodates the expression of extremity. My thesis seeks to demonstrate the enduring and multi-faceted nature of the symbolic deployment of maternity in Holocaust literature. To this end I will

⁹ *Ibid*, p.188.

examine a diverse collection of texts, running the gamut from memoirs written in the immediate aftermath of the genocide to popular novels that appeared almost half a century later. Despite the pervasive presence of maternity in all genres of Holocaust writing, the subject has received very little critical attention.

When defining the scope of my research, I was immediately confronted by one particularly pressing issue. The maternal figure constitutes one of the most enduring and ubiquitous cultural constructs in existence; she might appear as a desexualised embodiment of idealised nurture in a sentimental poem or as the overbearing antagonist in a psychological thriller. The many guises assumed by this figure in religious and political iconography, psychological and anthropological constructions of self and numerous representations in art and literature, make it difficult to establish a baseline of analysis that speaks of motherhood in anything other than strictly relative terms. Much of the extant research dealing with the subject of maternity in relation to the Holocaust, approaches motherhood in the context of the particular experience of female Holocaust victims. The notion that it might be appropriate to employ a gendered approach in the examination of testimony first emerged in the 1980s. Scholars such as Joan Ringelheim and Dalia Ofer began to suggest that although Jewish men and women were targeted equally for extermination, women were also subject to specific forms of physical and sexual abuse that were arguably gender based. In 'Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research' Ringelheim outlines the experiences that she believes to typify the gendered violence experienced by women during the Holocaust:

Traditional attitudes and responses towards women, as well as gender defined conditions made women especially vulnerable to abuse of their sexuality and of their maternal responsibility - to rape, murder of themselves and their children, the necessity of killing their own or other women's babies, forced abortion and other

forms of sexual exploitation.¹⁰

A large proportion of these examples constitute abuses that specifically target the maternal body. Taking into account issues such as the preferential selection of pregnant women for execution, forced abortion and sterilisation experiments, Ringelheim's research characterises the vulnerability of the maternal body as an additional oppressive tool in the hands of Holocaust perpetrators, positioning the maternal body as a distinctive facet of the subjugated and mortified female body.

The notion that maternity was instrumental in the victimisation of women is also explored by Esther Hertzog in 'Subjugated Motherhood and the Holocaust' however, Hertzog expands her analysis to comment upon the impact of the social construction of motherhood on the reception of certain aspects of women's Holocaust testimony. Hertzog claims that the social expectations that govern appropriate maternal behaviour had fatal ramifications for women during the Holocaust and that testimony that demonstrates transgression of these behavioural

¹⁰ Joan Ringelheim, 'Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,' *Signs*, 10.4 (1985) 741-761 (p.743).

norms is, even now, subject to censure and marginalisation:

The idealised depiction of motherhood in the Holocaust can be called into question in light of these testimonies that have been widely ignored or marginalised. They indicate that women (and men) deserted or killed their babies and children to save themselves and other family members. Facing death, some women dared to deviate from the profound social (and/or natural) dictates of motherhood. From this perspective the decision of a mother not to go to the gas chamber with her children can be understandable, despite conventional norms.¹¹

Hertzog claims that preferential testimonial space is given to accounts that reinforce a dominant narrative of maternal heroism and self-sacrifice. Subjugated motherhood expresses the idea that the existence of narrowly defined dictates that inform our perception of normative gendered and maternal behaviour has been proven to negatively impact female Holocaust victims, both by endangering their lives in the moment and suppressing their voices in the aftermath. In highlighting this issue Hertzog indirectly draws attention to the biggest problem confronting research that examines the presentation of motherhood in Holocaust literature using the interpretive framework of gender theory. Any attempt to reflect upon motherhood as one of the defining characteristics that determined the way women experienced the Holocaust relies upon the existence of a universal construction of femininity largely founded on anatomical essentialism. As the field of gendered Holocaust scholarship has become increasingly legitimised, feminist scholars such as Sara Horowitz have undertaken a self-reflexive examination of some of the core assumptions underpinning its inception. In 'Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory,' Horowitz draws attention to the tendency of gender-based Holocaust scholarship to treat 'women as a

¹¹ Esther Hertzog, 'Subjugated Motherhood and the Holocaust,' *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 30.1 (2016) 16-34 (p.34).

more or less unified group with similar behavioural characteristics.’¹² According to Horowitz, this mindset allows for a reductive analysis of women’s Holocaust experience based largely on assumptions about their anatomical vulnerability and bodily functions:

In thinking about women’s representation of the Shoah, we must not fall into the practice of viewing women only as the object of a particular subset of genocidal processes connected to their biological functions. Because these experiences, so particular to women, are most blatantly missing from male accounts, our strongest temptation may be to retrieve and elaborate these effaced narratives...Although this effort enables us to discuss women’s unique experiences, limiting our discussion in this way would - ironically - serve to reinscribe male experiences as normative for the development of master narrative and would relegate women to the category of mother or victim of sexual abuse.¹³

This argument highlights much that is problematic in attempting to examine motherhood in the context of a gender specific Holocaust experience. Horowitz argues that previous scholarly tendencies to emphasise maternal suffering encourage a pervading atmosphere of biological essentialism that serves to further marginalise women’s experiences and testimonies.

In the course of my research it has become clear that maternity - perhaps more than any other issue - exposes the complexities and tensions that inevitably accompany any attempt to examine the gendered implications of trauma. Whilst I acknowledge the importance of these implications to the interpretation of Holocaust testimony, the main thrust of my analysis will direct itself towards the symbolic implications of maternity in relation to the imprint the

12 Sara R. Horowitz, ‘Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory,’ *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 364-379, p.370.

13 *Ibid*, p.374

Holocaust has left on contemporary culture.

For some scholars, research relating to motherhood and the Holocaust implies a specific examination of Jewish motherhood. This particular area of research predominantly focuses on motherhood from either a sociological or a religious perspective. Dalia Ofer identifies the methods by which Jewish women were socialised as mothers in the pre-war era. During the war, Jewish newspapers urged women to bolster their families' spirits by preserving domestic normality in spite of external circumstances and encouraged them to draw inspiration from the example of biblical heroines. Ofer posits that the idealised image of Jewish motherhood presented in cultural and religious literature dictated the social positioning of the mother as the mainstay of family and community in the face of the hardships presented by the Holocaust:

From the mother's point of view it involved the effort to maintain a normative life, to go on with the regular routines even if providing only the basic necessities for the family: food, cleanliness, childcare, assisting one's husband. Keeping a sense of home and intimacy. All these things were the building blocks of a ghetto mother's identity and sense of purpose.¹⁴

Ofer goes on to suggest that when it became impossible to perform these functions, Jewish women were denied the opportunity to obey socially ingrained instincts that governed normative gendered behaviour. In short, their identity was taken from them. Ofer's work emphasises the existence of motherhood as a cultural construct. Research such as this defines the immediate impact of the Holocaust as primarily arising from the damage inflicted on social and cultural infrastructure. The reflections on motherhood presented in Ofer's work can be situated within a larger body of research that examines the effect of the Holocaust on

¹⁴ Dalia Ofer, 'Motherhood Under Siege,' *Life, Death and Sacrifice: Women and the Family in the Holocaust*, edited by Esther Hertzog (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2008) 41-68, p.46.

culturally defined gender roles. In 'Absent Fathers, Present Mothers: Images of parenthood in Holocaust Survivor Narratives,' Margarete Myers Feinstein highlights the relative absence of fathers from accounts of family life in Holocaust survivor memoirs. Feinstein claims that the Holocaust profoundly disrupted the foundations of Jewish masculinity, creating what she describes as 'a crisis of paternal authority.'¹⁵ In the early years of the Holocaust Jewish men were often driven from their professions, thus depriving them of the ability to support their families. Additionally, the increased danger of execution and forced labour initially faced by Jewish men meant that they were often forced to rely on the protective efforts of their wife and children to conceal them or go out to work in their place. Feinstein suggests that the undermining of traditional gender roles that occurred during the Holocaust is reflected in the memoirs of survivors 'by a reluctance to identify male protectors as father figures.'¹⁶

Ultimately, studies such as these that have their basis in culturally inflected constructions of motherhood (or fatherhood) are vulnerable to similar accusations of essentialism that plague the field of gender theory. Ofer herself acknowledges that the identity of Jewish mothers during the Holocaust was dependant on a variety of external factors such as nationality, economic circumstance and degree of religious observance.¹⁷

The second area of research to be discussed here primarily concerns itself with the symbolic significance of the maternal figure within the Jewish religion. In 'Assault on the Jewish Soul through the Murder of the Jewish Mother', David Patterson outlines the position of the mother within Judaism. Patterson argues that the concept of the mother as a central figure in Jewish cultural tradition arises from 'Jewish teachings concerning the manifestation of the feminine in this realm,' as the origin of life the feminine is seen as the conduit through which divinity enters the world. On a physical and metaphysical level the womb represents the

¹⁵ Margarete Myers Feinstein, 'Absent Fathers, Present Mothers: Images of Parenthood in Holocaust Survivor Narratives,' *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues*, 13 (2007) 155-182 (p.161).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.165.

¹⁷ Ofer, p.46

concept of a dwelling place, or *Makom*. From a religious perspective, the idea of a spiritual dwelling place is a core component of Jewish identity. The pivotal role of the reproductive body in expressing the concept of *Makom* is reflected in a construction of motherhood that encompasses not only the origin of life, but the foundation of subjectivity:

According to Jewish tradition to have an origin - to have a mother - is to be already marked for a mission: origin implies destiny, when that origin is seen as a mother and not as some primeval ooze. Situated at the origin of human sanctity, the mother represents not the primeval but the immemorial, the remembrance of something that transforms everything, prior to everything, and forever afterward into something meaningful. Therefore it is a Jewish mother and not a Jewish father that makes a Jew a Jew.¹⁸

Having established the significance of the mother as the source of the self, Patterson reframes the Holocaust as a metaphysical assault on the very essence of the Jewish soul. Patterson claims that through the mass murder of Jewish mothers alongside the corruption of the idea of maternity, the lasting impact of the Holocaust is permanently inscribed as the radical estrangement of the Jewish people from their spiritual point of origin. Patterson's research attempts to express the ontological and existential trauma of the Holocaust through the rhetorical framework of a religious crisis. The suggestion that the Holocaust violated the spiritual sanctity of Jewish motherhood appears to emerge from a tradition of Holocaust research that attempts to attribute a religious significance to the immense suffering and loss of life caused by the Shoah. The ethical controversies attendant on this particular area of thought are too numerous to recount here.

One of the most comprehensive studies of motherhood conducted in recent years is Federica

¹⁸ David Patterson, 'The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul Through the Murder of the Jewish Mother,' *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*, edited by Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013) 163-177 p.166.

Clementi's 2013 book *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family History and Trauma*.

Proceeding from the assumption that women experience and write about genocide differently from men, Clementi offers a detailed reading of a range of Holocaust memoirs that foreground the mother/daughter relationship. As its core premise *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* promotes the idea that women's writing provides a valuable insight into certain facets of life during the Holocaust that are typically neglected in memoirs written by men:

There are stark differences between the style of women survivor writers and their male counterparts. The former are more likely to recount the memories of domestic life and the complex child-parent relationships therein by presenting their own childhood perspective on events; furthermore, female writers tend not to follow the longstanding tradition of talking about victims of injustice in highly idealised terms. The key example of this is the figure of the mother. Women often don't hide the fact that 'hating' their mothers, even during the Holocaust was as much a part of their relationship as depending on them for life and survival.¹⁹

In a striking departure from previous feminist scholarship that has often painted an idealised picture of female relationships under conditions of extremity, Clementi theorises that women's writing can provide a controversial, uncensored glimpse at the complex politics of domesticity that continued in spite of the extraordinary circumstances presented by the Holocaust.

In her introduction to *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* Clementi draws attention to the conspicuous absence of academic literature on mothers and daughters, both from a psychodynamic perspective and from the cultural perspective of Judaism. As Clementi observes, this is particularly remarkable given the abundance of literature scrutinising the

¹⁹ Federica K. Clementi, *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family History and Trauma*, (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2013) p.10.

ubiquitous ethnic stereotype of the Jewish mother. Building on the work of feminist scholars wishing to address the absence, *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* 'pushes the bounds of inquiry into the Jewish mother-daughter plot by daring to touch on the sensitive topic of Shoah memory and victimhood.'²⁰

Although Clementi's book is valuable in its illumination of an under-explored area of Holocaust writing, my own research does not entirely concur with her findings. The theoretical position that idealised maternity is 'a product of the male imagination' is not borne out by my reading of various Holocaust memoirs. Although there are several notable examples of Holocaust memoirs by female writers that present apparently unbiased and sometimes downright unflattering portraits of their mothers (the most prominent examples that come to mind being Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive* and Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*), research conducted for the opening chapter of my thesis would seem to indicate that maternal idealisation is not a gender-bound phenomenon. *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* has divided autobiographical trends along gendered lines without adequately accounting for the variable of age. The fraught and resentful maternal recollections of writers such as Kluger and Kofman were recovered from the perspective of a child and thus embody a child's disempowered frustration in recounting interactions with the mother. It is also worth noting that both of the mothers in question survived the Holocaust and thus do not conform to the conditions of martyrdom that often accompany posthumous maternal recollections.

Whether it emerges from a sociological or religious perspective, specific examination of the Jewish construction of maternity is obviously relevant to any discussion centring around motherhood and the Holocaust; however, this research angle also presents very clear limitations. Research placing exclusive emphasis on a maternal context informed by Judaism must, of necessity confine itself to discussing the traumatic aftermath of the Holocaust within

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.11.

Jewish cultural space. My thesis arises from the position that persistent fascination with the Holocaust is a transcultural phenomenon that transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, religion, nationality and gender. With this in mind I wish to depart from previous research to consider maternity from the perspective of psychodynamic symbolism. The concept of the maternal figure as a psychodynamically inflected symbolic trope that frequently appears across a wide range of Holocaust literature has never been extensively examined. Whilst I do not claim that psychodynamic theory offers a universally applicable construction of maternity, it can be argued that many of the theoretical psychological models I will go on to discuss, reveal themselves in the origins of the manifestations of maternity arising from various religious and cultural contexts. This issue will be discussed further in chapter one.

At its core my research is influenced by the Lacanian construction of the mother as the primary object of identification and a cornerstone in the development of the ego, with specific emphasis on how this symbolic figure is deployed as a literary trope that attempts to grapple with the intellectual challenge posed by limit events.

According to Lacan, the development of subjectivity occurs when a child recognises his existence as a separate entity from his mother, signalling his induction into the symbolic order of language.²¹ Theorists such as Melanie Klein have expanded on Lacan's theories in their examination of the trauma of maternal separation and differentiation. In 'Is Mother Other? Desire and the Ethics of Matrilinearity,' Wesley N. Barker summarises these positions through his description of the ambivalence that typically characterises the internal symbolic construction of the mother:

After entering the symbolic, the child relates to the mother both in terms of a desire to retreat to one's presymbolic origins and in terms of a fear that returning to her would

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton & Company, 2002) 197-268.

dissolve the condition of the child's selfhood. This relationship is one of tension and anxiety because separation from the mother provides the condition of selfsame movement through which the subject discursively constitutes him or herself.²²

The relationship of the individual subject to the mother figure is structured around the conflicting emotions of primal fear and insatiable desire. The clash of these oppositional psychodynamic forces has led to the evolution of the mother figure as a complex and multi-faceted literary trope. I aim to examine the ways in which Holocaust literature has utilised and in some cases adapted the conventions of this trope when attempting to navigate the perceived limits of representation and how this has influenced the production of collective meaning. Over the course of four chapters I will examine a range of Holocaust texts spanning multiple genres. I intend to examine the various symbolic iterations of maternity that appear within these texts in relation to several key themes that relate to the cultural reception and assimilation of the Holocaust: themes such as collective memory and abjection, projective identification and the archival body.

Given that they constitute part of what might be considered the primary source material that has contributed to the collective memory of the Holocaust, it seems only fitting that my thesis begins with an examination of Holocaust memoir. The opening chapter of my thesis will examine the trope of idealised maternity and its frequent appearance in written Holocaust testimony.

The most productive exploration of idealised maternity and its relationship to Holocaust literature has its origin in the politics of representation, specifically looking at the ways in which our understanding of victimology has come to influence contemporary reconstructions of the Holocaust. Mark Anderson draws attention to the disproportionate presence of child

²² Wesley N. Barker, 'Is Mother Other? Desire and the Ethics of Maternity,' *Theology and Sexuality*, 19.3 (2013) 203-226 (p.207).

victims in popular representations of the Holocaust, which he attributes to the universal signification of this group as idealised victims. I suggest that a similar principle can be applied to the representation of mothers with children. The perceived vulnerability and innocence of women and children highlights the most depraved and senseless excesses of Nazi brutality, and this has the effect of placing the Holocaust within a reassuring narrative framework of good versus evil, a black and white world in which the line between victims and perpetrators is clear and unproblematic. When considering popular representations of the Holocaust, this rhetorical strategy has often been unfavourably received as it is perceived as an inappropriately sentimental position that carries the danger of obscuring the complexity of the event behind a veil of Manichean simplification. Anderson has observed that an overwhelming focus on family tragedy and accessible victimology has elided the ‘maze of geographic locales, statistics and confusing political ideologies inherent in this complex event,’²³ transforming it into a moral parable that invites exploitation. However, despite the potential for criticism, the sentimental trope of idealised maternity appears to be partially derived from narrative conventions established in Holocaust memoir.

In the texts explored in the first chapter the maternal ideal is used to illustrate the horrifying brutality of the Holocaust, as an aid in the retrospective production of meaning in the face of overwhelming trauma, and finally, to analyse how this symbolic context can be imposed on Holocaust texts by the reader.

The first section of this chapter explores the idea of maternal martyrdom using Olga Lengyel’s memoir *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz*. In her capacity as a medical assistant in the women’s hospital at Birkenau, Lengyel witnessed first hand the horrifying brutality surrounding pregnancy at Auschwitz and the ‘choiceless

²³ Mark M. Anderson, ‘The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story?’ *Jewish Social Studies*, 14.1 (2007) 1-22 (p.3).

choices' that often confronted mothers and medical staff. Although it is hardly surprising that maternal suffering is at the forefront of Lengyel's narrative, the liberal deployment of emotive language and religious allusion present in *Five Chimneys* places a heavy emphasis on the context of martyrdom. This point is emphasised by means of a direct comparison of Lengyel's memoir with the more detached and clinical tone of Lucy Adelsberger's *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story*. I will conclude by analysing Lengyel's memoir in terms of the iconic figure of the *mater dolorosa*. It is my suggestion that the subtextual invocation of an established symbol of maternal martyrdom provides a familiar and morally unambiguous rhetorical framework that enables Lengyel to process and contain the problematic sense of culpability engendered by the extraordinary situations that confronted her at Auschwitz.

The next section continues discussion of the role of the idealised maternal figure in the confrontation and structuring of traumatic memory, this time in the context of the mother as a paragon or saintly figure. *Fragments of Isabella* is the first in a series of four memoirs by Hungarian Holocaust survivor Isabella Leitner. One of the distinctive features of this text is Leitner's preoccupation with recollections of her mother and the posthumous significance she acquires in Leitner's reconstruction of her experience after the war. Theresa Katz is presented as the central component in an idyllic domestic tableau, creating a stark contrast between life before and after deportation. In *Fragments of Isabella* Theresa's characterisation as a paragon of maternal virtue reinforces the *bildungsroman* structure that is a common feature in the memoirs of younger Holocaust survivors. Leitner's reverential reconstruction of her mother will ultimately be examined alongside the symbolic significance of the mother in the construction of the self in a manner that connects Jewish theological teaching with Julia Kristeva's 'Stabat Mater.'

I will conclude this chapter by looking at a controversial text that straddles the boundary separating memoir and fiction. *The Apple* by Penelope Holt is a reproduction of the core

events from Herman Rosenblat's partially discredited memoir *Angel at the Fence*. Whilst this text reproduces many of the themes discussed in the context of Leitner's memoir, its most intriguing feature is its active demonstration of the transition of the trope of idealised maternity from memoir to fiction. This transition is predominantly evident in the maternally inflected mindset Holt brings to her construction of the text.

Through my chapters, I aim to explore an established trope from an angle that has not been widely investigated. The deployment of the maternal paragon as a palliative device in Holocaust memoir hints at the wider role motherhood may assume as a textual proxy that facilitates the confrontation of some of the more challenging emotional and epistemological issues presented by the Holocaust.

My next chapter moves away from memoir to the realm of the novel. In turning my attention to fiction, I also shift my theoretical focus from the maternal ideal to the much darker territory of maternal abjection.

This chapter explores the imaginative link between the maternal body and the psycho-social construct of the nation with a primary textual focus on Bernhard Schlink's critically acclaimed, bestselling novel *The Reader*. The link between mother and nation has been shown to be a historical constant, subject to numerous manifestations in many cultures. The maternal body constitutes a quasi-mystical site of common origin and a focal point that underpins a notion of collective identity. The rhetoric of nationalism in Schlink's novel uses maternal imagery in an attempt to internalise and naturalise the idea of an intrinsic connection between self and nation. This chapter proceeds from the premise that, in the wake of the Holocaust, the German population experienced a profound disruption of this connection, the effects of which span multiple generations. As a consequence of this disruption, the images of motherhood that embody the nation are transformed from the purity and nurture of the

maternal ideal, to the fear and revulsion characteristic of Julia Kristeva's conception of the maternal abject.

The plot of *The Reader* centres around a controversial love affair between a teenage boy and an evasive and enigmatic middle-aged woman. Seen as an analogue for the author, fifteen year old Michael Berg belongs to a generation of Germans born immediately after the war, whilst it is eventually revealed that Hanna worked as a guard in a series of Nazi concentration camps. Their tempestuous relationship is commonly seen as an allegory exploring Germany's fraught interaction with its genocidal history. I theorise that Hanna's dual symbolic status as a mother and a lover functions alongside motifs of illness and bodily incontinence to frame Germany's relationship to its past in unquestionably abject terms. Departing from previous critical work, the abjection in *The Reader* is holistically examined as it relates to the historic as well as psychic dimensions of Holocaust memorial culture. The idea of the German nation as a mother figure bearing an intergenerational burden of guilt is examined and ultimately challenged in this chapter's conclusion. Chapter two analyses how the figure of abject maternity is used to explore the impact of the Holocaust on German national identity. Whilst chapter three maintains this focus on the politics of identity, the discussion takes place on a considerably broader discursive terrain.

This third chapter analyses the cultural perception of the Holocaust in the western world, viewed through a complex nexus of identity politics. Using the delusional perspective of the false witness and the traumatised perspective of the child witness, the Holocaust is presented as the subject of problematic identification, perhaps even a controversial object of desire. In both of the texts explored in this chapter, identification with the Holocaust is accomplished by the deployment of the maternal body as an object of transference. Melanie Klein theorises that infantile ego construction is fixated around the mother's breast as the first external object of desire. The infant's reconciliation of the good (nurturing) breast and the bad (frustrating)

breast is a template around which all other relationships are constructed, so that it is the foundation of ego integrity.²⁴ Using Klein's theories as an analytical framework, this chapter observes that in the texts examined, the yearning to appropriate and internalise the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust is subliminally expressed through various iterations of the maternal body, all extrinsically linked to acts of consumption.

Benjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent memoir *Fragments* employs a fiction of Holocaust survival to articulate the desperate search for an identity from a position of alienation and loss. Emerging from a culture of memory that increasingly validates the position of the secondary witness, Wilkomirski's false memoir crosses the border between empathy and appropriation. The Holocaust becomes the subject of Wilkomirski's aggressive projective identification. Attempts to usurp the subject position of a Holocaust survivor are explored through a reflexive return to the ego's first external point of reference, the mother's breast. This chapter will deconstruct the many episodes in *Fragments* where the mother's body is subliminally presented as an object of consumption. Through conflation of the mother with food and imagery associated with infantile cannibalism, the body of the mother is presented as a psychological proxy, representing Wilkomirski's desperate desire to reconstruct his own identity by inserting himself into the unequivocally sympathetic cultural narrative of the Holocaust.

The second text examined in this chapter is Sarah Kofman's memoir, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*. While *Fragments* represents the attempt of a troubled individual to translate his personal trauma into a universally recognised narrative of suffering, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* is a genuine Holocaust memoir, articulating Kofman's troubled relationship with her Jewish identity that manifests itself in a Kleinian tableau of two competing mother figures. Using the theories of Klein and the anthropological work of Claude Fischler, the idea of the mother

24 Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works, 1946-1963*, (London: Virago, 1988) p.6.

figure as the primary provider of food is posited as the root of the ethnic self. Kofman's acceptance and rejection of the meals provided by her Jewish mother and her gentile surrogate mother, represents Kofman's necessary abjection of her Jewishness and the desire to appropriate the safer identity of a French gentile.

Fragments and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* both approach the trauma of the Holocaust from the perspective of projective identity politics and sublimated desire, expressed through the depiction of the maternal body as an alimentary object. Kofman's Jewish identity was rendered deeply ambivalent by her experience of the Holocaust. Alongside her fond memories of family ritual and celebration, her formative ideas concerning what it means to be Jewish were filtered through the gaze of a society that perceived her as abject. In Wilkomirski's case, his manipulation of the politics of identity was dependant on the cultural legacy of the Holocaust in western Europe and America. Wilkomirski's personal history is granted external meaning when he forces it to conform to the contours of collective memory. For both writers, the object of desire is the power of self-narration in the face of overwhelming exterior cultural forces of deterministic designation that they perceive to be shaping their identities from without. This can be said to mimic the existential situation of Holocaust victims whose fate was sealed by an inflexible and pejorative bureaucratic construction of racial identity, fuelled by hateful propaganda.

The final chapter of my thesis highlights the role played by the maternal body in conceptualising the transmission of memory from one generation to the next. This chapter centres around the problematic concept of the archive and the position it occupies in Holocaust memorial culture. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida attributes to the archive a sense of existential anxiety concerning the persistence of memory. Whilst the desire to conserve and record suggests a gaze that is orientated towards the past, this desire is, in fact, partially governed by an awareness of the future. The desire to preserve cannot exist without the

possibility of forgetfulness and decay. This is the fraught and ambivalent state of being that Derrida has designated 'archive fever.'²⁵ In describing this intellectual phenomenon, Derrida has effectively put a name to an anxiety that has overshadowed Holocaust studies for quite some time. The drive to conserve - the 'archive drive' - is imbued with a poignant urgency as we are confronted with the inevitable reality that the event itself is on verge of passing out of living memory. As a perceived embodiment of memorial anxiety, the archive often appears as a theme in Holocaust literature. This chapter will focus on the metaphysical connection between the archive and the body as it appears in two notable works of Holocaust fiction.

'The Library of Moloch' by Melvin Bukiet challenges the rhetoric of the digital testimonial archive as a living repository of memory. By allowing their testimony to be recorded, Holocaust survivors are perceived to gain a level of immortality and play an important role in the education of future generations and the crusade against the forces of forgetfulness. In contrast to this, the unflattering portrayal of the archivist in the character of Dr. Ricardo in Bukiet's story, and his morbid obsession with the testimonial material he collects, depicts a relationship between the body and the archive characterised by voyeuristic exploitation. Ricardo's fixation with accumulating testimony and his personification of the archive's videotapes suggests a memorial culture that fetishises physical presence and revictimises survivors. Through the exploration of other literary and cultural examples, this emphasis on physical presence is hypothesised to be a reflexive response to the radical bodily and ontological absence presented by the Holocaust.

'The Library of Moloch' utilises an intersection of bodily and archival images to explore an ethically problematic tendency towards reification that Bukiet perceives as reminiscent of Nazi ideology. Bukiet's intensely negative examination of the archive plays an important role

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) p.19.

in the stimulation of reflection and debate surrounding the ethical responsibility inherent in the archival process. Proceeding from this position, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a specific examination of the maternal body as an archival cipher.

Norma Rosen's 1969 novel *Touching Evil* uses the maternal body as a metaphorical construct to reflect upon the impact of the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann on the American viewing public. The mirrored characters of Hattie and Jean embody the idea of a society that is forever altered by exposure to the radical and unprecedented evil of the Holocaust. Hattie watches the trial whilst heavily pregnant and it is strongly implied that the horrors she witnesses will be imprinted on her body and carried forward to the next generation. Jean imagines that Hattie's foetus climbs out of her womb to watch the trial proceed, and Hattie perceives her unborn child as a reincarnation of the dead children of the Holocaust.

Jean is not pregnant, but she wishes to conceive. Jean's desire for a child is sublimated into a compulsion to record her own life in the form of a diary, and to collate and organise the written narratives of those around her (notably Hattie's letters and Eichmann's papers). She even refers to her manuscripts as her 'children.' In *Touching Evil*, maternal and archival desires are indistinguishable from one another and support a fantasy of persistent and perfectly preserved intergenerational memory. Both women perceive their intimate bodily engagement with the Holocaust as an antidote to the indifference of those around them.

Hattie expresses a desire to rescue the dead children of the Holocaust by drawing them back inside the safe haven of her womb, thus attributing to the maternal body the power to rescue the dead victims of the Holocaust from oblivion. The fantasy of the maternal body as a literal archive of memory speaks to a persistent anxiety surrounding forgetfulness. This anxiety is a significant undercurrent within Holocaust studies and constitutes the libidinal driving force of the archival impulse.

Throughout the course of my thesis I aim to demonstrate that the psychodynamically charged symbol of the maternal body is a diverse construct that exists across a range of Holocaust literature. In order to emphasise the multivalent symbolic status of the maternal body, I intend to begin each chapter with a brief analysis of a photograph that will function as a thematic introduction to the individual portions of the thesis. Despite the fact that photographs offer the illusion of an unmediated window to the past, it is the widespread consensus of photographic theorists that photographs are highly constructed and subject to a multiplicity of interpretations. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes refers to the photograph as ‘wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope.’²⁶ Once divorced from its context, the photographic signifier is a malleable construct that is hard to pin down. In her analysis of the deployment of Holocaust photographs as documentary evidence Janina Struk states that:

The photographic representation of the Holocaust does not give a comprehensive account of the historical events which photographic narratives generally lead us to believe; that is not possible. Photographs are fragments. They illustrate stories, they do not tell them. It has been left to curators, film makers, historians and propagandists to determine how they are interpreted ...The photographs and their interpretations may not always give us a better understanding of the historical event we call the Holocaust; rather they remind us how the world has been ordered since then. The present always has its own agenda for reconstructing the past.²⁷

Struk claims that the use of photographs as documentary evidence may offer more insight into the condition of the present rather than the past; this position reflects the interpretive direction of my thesis. Much of the previous research on motherhood and the Holocaust has

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (London: Vintage, 1993) p.5.

²⁷ Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I.B Tauris, 2004) p.15.

focused on utilising various theoretical constructions of maternity with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of the past. In contrast my thesis primarily concerns itself with analysing how the tropes we use to unravel the past illuminate personal and collective constructions of self in the present, most strikingly so in relation to the figure of the mother.

Chapter One: The Angel Behind the Fence

In 1959 the Polish foreign office commissioned a book commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the invasion of Poland by the German *Wehrmacht*. This politically controversial volume, pointedly entitled *We Have Not Forgotten*, included a large collection of photographs documenting many of the atrocities committed by the Nazis during their six year occupation of the country. Alongside these chillingly explicit images of public execution, torture and deportation, the book also featured private photographs taken by members of the German army during their invasion of the Soviet Union. One such photograph appeared on the front cover of the volume and has since gained iconic status as a representative image of the horrifying brutality of the Holocaust.²⁸

The original print of the photograph, stolen and copied by famous resistance photographer Jerzy Tomaszewski, simply bore the inscription 'Ukraine 1942, Jewish Aktion, Ivangorod' and likely documents the execution of a group of Jews from Kiev.²⁹ The picture in its entirety, reproduced in such celebrated memorial contexts as Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, shows a soldier aiming a rifle at a woman clutching a baby on the left hand side of the frame, while Jewish prisoners dig a grave with their hands on the right. The very edge of the left hand side reveals more rifle barrels aimed in the woman's direction and there appears to be a corpse in the foreground.³⁰

Its appearance on the cover of this Polish anthology was the first time this photograph was made available to be viewed by the public and the reaction generated it was predictably strong; it incited horror and controversy in equal measure. In *Private Pictures: Soldiers'*

²⁸ Janina Struk, *Private Pictures: Soldiers' Inside View of War*, (London: I.B Tauris, 2011).85-86.

²⁹ See Appendix A.

³⁰ Robert Fisk, 'Robert Fisk: Ukraine 1942. What are we Seeing?' *The Independent*, Saturday 19 November 2011

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-ukraine-1942-what-are-we-seeing-6264646.html>.

Inside View of War, Janina Struk observes that the publication of a catalogue of German war crimes at the height of the Cold War would appear to be a decision motivated by political concerns, a position validated by the hostile and indignant response of the German right wing media. In 1962 the newspaper *Der Spiegel* published an article claiming that the photograph was in fact a fabrication, staged by the Russian authorities.³¹ To this day the picture is frequently a target of vitriol and suspicion from historical revisionists.³²

Despite the fact that there is now almost unilateral consensus among members of the academic community as to the authenticity of the image, revisionist attempts at destabilisation of the truth status of pictures such as these, whilst they may not achieve the desired result of casting doubt on the historical reality of the Holocaust, do have the potential to impact upon the ways in which one examines documentary photographs.

Revisionist rhetoric on matters such as the Ivangorod photograph, usually involves minute scrutiny of individual elements of the picture in order to weaken the integrity of the whole. In this particular case attention is drawn to camera angles, peripheral objects, rifle types and details on soldiers' uniforms. While these assertions hold little to no critical weight, they do reinforce the position that, rather than being a transparent documentary window, a photograph is invariably a construction; a selective encapsulation of space and light whose borders are isolated according to the subjective reality of the photographer's gaze. In their article examining symbolically resonant Holocaust images and their relationship to reality, Judith Keilbach and Kirsten Wächter state that although photographs testify to the presence of an object in the past through the photochemical reproduction of the interaction of light and surfaces, the photographic capture of a moment in time forever divorces that moment from its

31 Struk, p.86.

32 Threads dealing with this picture are frequently found on popular revisionist forums such as 'Codoh' and 'Axis History Forum' <http://forum.codoh.com/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=2802#p19380>, <http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?p=313533>.

context.³³ The context of a photograph must be reconstructed by a viewer, opening it up to multiple interpretive valencies.

Consideration of the acknowledged potential for interpretive plasticity present in the photographic medium is the logical precursor to concerns surrounding the potential for manipulation and exploitation of historical sources in the service of political or aesthetic agendas. This issue could be said to be addressed in Alan Schechner's famous manipulation of the photograph taken by Margaret Bourke White following the liberation of Buchenwald; Schechner inserts an image of himself holding a can of Diet Coke into the foreground of one of White's photographs. Not only does this highlight the troubling intersection of Holocaust memory with popular culture,³⁴ but also the ontological flexibility belying the seemingly defined and impenetrable borders of a photograph.

Taking this flexibility into consideration, it would seem significant that the debut appearance of the Ivangorod photograph did not present the picture in its entirety. On the cover of the Polish anthology – as well as in many subsequent reproductions – the photograph in question was severely cropped.³⁵ The cropped version removes all peripheral objects from the picture and gives central and sole focus to the mother clutching her child and the soldier aiming his rifle at them.³⁶ The effect created by the editing of this photograph is very powerful. Instead of processing the image as a whole, the viewer is compelled to focus immediately on the imminent execution of a mother holding her child. Rather than perceiving the woman and child as two casualties among a multitude, they become part of a chilling tableau presenting an oppositional dialogue of vulnerability and callous brutality. The mother and child are presented as idealised victims, representative of the genocidal violence of the Holocaust.

33 Judith Keilbach, Kirsten Wachter, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images and the Holocaust: On the (IM)possibility of Depicting Historical Truth' *History and Theory*, 48.2, (2009) 54-76 (p.55).

34 Lutz Koepnick, 'Photographs and Memories', *South Central Review*, 21.1 (2004)94-129 (p.95).

35 See Appendix A.

36 Struk, p.84.

Whilst the unedited version of the photograph offers more factual information, placing the figures in the picture within the contextual limits of the 1942 massacre near Ivangorod, the cropped version of the photograph removes this context, assuming a place within more universal patterns of signification.

The fragmentary version of the photograph appears to allude to a complex, semiotically charged language of Holocaust representation, leading one to consider the role maternal idealisation has assumed in forming the public perception of the Holocaust and its victims, and in shaping the narratives of those who experienced its outrages. The field of Holocaust literature has seen the emergence of distinct maternal tropes, that can be grouped under the broad headings of the maternal paragon and the maternal martyr. The role of this chapter will be to examine these tropes and analyse the various ways in which these figures have been deployed as interpretive lenses through which to view and process the individual and collective trauma of the Holocaust with particular emphasis on their appearance in Holocaust memoir.

The depiction of mothers as saintly figures or martyrs, relies on the presentation of the Holocaust as a manichean narrative of good versus evil; it is an archetype commonly presented in popular fictional representations of the Holocaust, but in this chapter I argue that this imagery is partially derived from representational trends that originate in non-fictional accounts. The first text under examination in this section will be Olga Lengyel's memoir *Five Chimneys*. Lengyel's memoir will be analysed in terms of its emphasis on maternal suffering and the ways in which the perceived vulnerability and innocence of women and children are utilised to highlight the most depraved and senseless excesses of Nazi brutality and the subsequent correlation drawn between motherhood and martyrdom. The emotive and morally charged language utilised throughout *Five Chimneys* will be examined alongside the more clinical and dispassionate rendition of similar events in Lucie Adelsberger's memoir

Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story. Finally, Lengyel's memoir will be analysed in terms of the specific cultural motif of the *mater dolorosa*. I posit that Lengyel utilises this morally inflected symbol of maternal martyrdom in order to mitigate and process problematic feelings of culpability engendered by the impossible ethical dilemmas that characterised life at Auschwitz, often resulting in the traumatic inversion of the traditional connotations of maternity. The maternal martyr effectively demonstrates how established literary and cultural tropes aid in the production of meaning in the face of traumatic, ontologically disruptive events.

The role of the mother figure in the production of meaning will be subject to further examination in Isabella Leitner's memoir *Fragments of Isabella* and *The Apple* by Penelope Holt. In these two texts, the maternal paragon takes the role of a saintly figure who plays a central role in the creation of an idealised vision of life before the cataclysmic events of the Holocaust. Interestingly, the mother figures presented in these texts play their most prominent role as a posthumous source of comfort in moments of extreme suffering and in transformation of the traumatic events of the Holocaust into a coherent narrative in its aftermath. This incarnation of maternity will be examined in relation to the symbolic significance of the mother as a primal point of origin and primary object of attachment, occupying a pivotal role in the construction of the self, both from the perspective of Jewish theology and the critical position developed by Julia Kristeva in 'Stabat Mater.' As the reconstitution of events from Herman Rosenblat's partially discredited memoir *Angel at the Fence* by a third person, *The Apple* reconstructs one man's experience of the Holocaust and its aftermath via a double layer of mediation and forms an intriguing bridge between memoir and fiction, prompting consideration of the significance of the maternal in terms of a wider cultural processing of the event. The destabilisation of the boundary between truth and fiction present in *The Apple* demonstrates the apparently seamless transition of an established trope

of maternity from the realm of the factual account to the realm of imaginative reconstruction.

Through the detailed examination of a diverse range of Holocaust memoirs, the persistent underlying presence of the mother is revealed as a complex and semiotically charged paradox, evoking life and death in equal measure. This chapter proposes that, as a powerful and multifaceted symbolic construct, the maternal figure has strongly influenced the interpretation and representation of the Holocaust in literature.

In ‘The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story?’ Mark Anderson examines the prevalence of images of children in popular representations of the Holocaust:

Since the late 1970s, with American interest in the Jewish genocide on the rise, this leading role for children has continued, especially in popular or mass audience representations such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. What accounts for this iconic role of the child victim in representing the totality of Holocaust loss? What are the aesthetic and affective implications of what is after all, a rhetorical figure - synecdoche in which a part represents the whole? Is it a legitimate figure? Does it simply distort the actual historical event? Most of all, what does it tell us about American representation of the by Holocaust?³⁷

With reference to such ubiquitous examples as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the photograph of the little boy in the Warsaw ghetto with his arms raised, Anderson expresses concern regarding the implications of their universal popularity, alluding to the possibility that, in some cases, fidelity may be sacrificed in favour of sentiment. Anderson observes that the disproportionate attention afforded to these texts and images bears little relation to the individual lives from which they originate. These figures have been transformed into cultural

³⁷ Mark M. Anderson, ‘The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story?’ *Jewish Social Studies*, 14.1 (2007) 1-22 (p.2).

icons, thus, the faces of these victims have come to represent the faces of all victims.

Anderson ultimately attributes the prevalence of this phenomenon to its ability to reduce a complex historical event into a simple and unproblematic narrative of victims and perpetrators, possessed of an almost universal empathetic appeal.³⁸

Whilst not disputing the prevalence and impact of the child victim, I propose that this preferential representation equally extends to depictions of mothers with children and that the proliferation of these images serves much the same purpose and asks the same troubling questions. Alongside the frequently reproduced Ivangorod photograph, other prominent examples include a picture of an elderly woman on her way to the gas chamber accompanied by a group of children and a photograph taken during an *aktion* in Liepaja Latvia, depicting a mother standing naked with her children at the edge of a mass grave, about to be executed by firing squad.³⁹ These photographs juxtapose maternal tenderness and vulnerability with mass murder, throwing the brutality of their executioners into sharp relief. Rather than representing historically specific victims of particular racial or religious persuasion, the persons depicted in these horrifying situations, imply the imminent and violent destruction of a bond that is universally regarded as fundamental and sacrosanct. The mothers in these photographs represent iconic images of martyrdom, not just in the sense that they are suffering persecution for their Jewishness, but in their capacity as idealised victims of what is commonly regarded as the most heinous crime against humanity that has ever occurred.

The figure of the maternal martyr is not confined to the realm of Holocaust photography, it appears frequently in Holocaust literature of both fictional and non fictional origin. This chapter will focus specifically on the vicissitudes of this figure as it is presented in Olga Lengyel's memoir *Five Chimneys*.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p.3.

³⁹ See Appendix B.

Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys

Five Chimneys is the memoir of a Transylvanian doctor's wife named Olga Lengyel, it describes seven months spent as a prisoner doctor in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Lengyel's book was originally published in 1946 under the French title of *Souvenirs de l'au dela (Memoirs from the Beyond)*, it was one of the earliest Holocaust memoirs to be published and quite possibly the first to be authored by a woman. Although the level of popular and critical attention bestowed upon *Five Chimneys* has been sporadic (it did not see re-publication until 1995,) it has been consistently praised for highlighting deprivations particular to the experience of the female concentration camp inmate. Petra M Schweitzer described it as 'one of the most detailed eye-witness accounts of the Nazis' methodological techniques of systematic torture and annihilation of women, Jews and non-Jews.'⁴⁰

Beginning in the 1980s, the work of feminist scholars such as Joan Ringelheim and Myrna Goldenberg began to draw attention to the significance of gender in examining Holocaust testimony. Until this point, it could be argued that the male experience of the Holocaust was considered to be universal. Ringelheim and her colleagues observed that, although Jewish men and women were equally targeted by the Nazis' genocidal policies, women were particularly vulnerable to certain forms of abuse and developed coping and survival strategies that differed from their male counterparts.⁴¹ The specific ways in which a woman's experience of the Holocaust are perceived to differ from a man's are outlined in the following extract by Sara Horowitz:

Missing from the male versions of survival are experiences unique to women such as

⁴⁰ Petra M. Schweitzer, *Gendered Testimonies of the Holocaust: Writing Life*, (London: Lexington Books, 2016) p.103.

⁴¹ Joan Ringelheim, 'Preface to the Study of Women and the Holocaust', *Contemporary Jewry*, 17.1 (1996) 1-2 (p.2).

menarche, menstruation and pregnancy in the concentration camps; the strategies some women devised to endure and survive, the ways other women met their deaths; the subsequent effect on women survivors in family, friendship and civic relations and the way women reconstruct shattered paradigms of meaning in the face of cultural and personal displacement.⁴²

Horowitz summarises a position that argues for the existence of a gendered perspective on the Holocaust on the basis of a unified biological and social construction of what it means to be a woman. Despite the fact that this reasoning is problematic in its reductive framing of female identity, constructed primarily around reproductive functions and broadly drawn behavioural stereotypes,⁴³ the particular mortification of the female body draws attention to aspects of the Holocaust that have historically suffered critical neglect. Issues falling under this category include: forced abortion and sterilisation, preferential selection of pregnant women for extermination, difficulties concerning menstruation, and sexual violence. In a detailed and unsparing account of the women's camp at Birkenau, Lengyel's memoir touches upon every one of these issues. The second chapter of *Five Chimneys* records the humiliating processing and intimate examination inflicted on new arrivals at the camp:

I lined up in my row completely naked, my shame engulfed in terror. At my feet lay my clothes, and, on top, the pictures of my family. I looked once more at the faces of my loved ones. My parents, my husband, my husband and my children seemed to be smiling at me...I stooped and slipped these dear images into my crumpled jacket on the ground. My family should not see my horrible degradation...Now we were compelled to undergo a thorough examination in the Nazi manner, oral, vaginal and rectal - another horrible experience. We had to lie across a table, stark naked, while

42 Sara Horowitz, 'Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory,' *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 364-379, p.366.

43 *Ibid*, p.370.

they probed. All that in the presence of drunken soldiers who sat around the table chuckling obscenely.⁴⁴

The treatment described in this extract was meted out to all prisoners who entered Auschwitz-Birkenau, but Lengyel's description emphasises the specific ways in which this ordeal might be experienced by a woman as humiliating. The leering of drunken soldiers reframes the body cavity search as an act of sexual violence. The powerlessness of these women is reinforced by a casual objectification of their bodies, as a putative security procedure is transformed into a voyeuristic spectacle. This process is described by Petra M Schweitzer in her examination of Lengyel's presentation of the specificity of female suffering:

The female body becomes subject to display and public denouncement in a space from which there is no escape. The nakedness of the women embodies their body as an object of destruction to the perpetrator's gaze.⁴⁵

Schweitzer argues that sexual violence was implicitly woven into the ethos of the concentration camp system, with sexual objectification playing an important role in the dehumanisation of female prisoners in the eyes of their oppressors. During the course of her memoir Lengyel reveals that this casual acceptance of misogynistic exploitation also influenced some of the male prisoners. The seventh chapter of *Five Chimneys*, ironically entitled 'A Proposal at Auschwitz,' describes the author's encounter with a prisoner named Tadek. Tadek presents Lengyel with the gift of a shawl and offers to share his food with her. It is later revealed that Tadek expects sexual compensation for these acts of generosity:

I felt his arm around my waist. His other hand touched me and began to fondle my breast. My world fell to pieces again. I had already told him what had happened to me

44 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, (St. Albans: Mayflower Books, 1972) p.30.

45 Schweitzer, p.107.

- that I had lost my family. Could he not understand how I felt? I wanted to be friends with the human being in him, not with his lust. I learned afterwards that his was the finest style of love making in Auschwitz. The ordinary approach was much more crude and to the point.⁴⁶

Lengyel's extreme distress when she discovers Tadek's motivations can be attributed to the fact that her expectations of sexual behaviour are governed by social norms existing outside the camp. In Auschwitz her body is a commodity to be bought and sold for material gain or exploited for sadistic amusement. Lengyel's portrayal of these aspects of concentration camp life support Ringelheim's claim that female victims of National Socialism were specifically victimised as women, whilst ostensibly enduring punishment for their ethnic origins or political affiliation. Despite acknowledging that the specific suffering endured by mothers in the Holocaust can be considered as part of the 'woman's Holocaust experience,' this chapter will depart from an approach that examines Lengyel's memoir in terms of the overarching issue of gendered experience. I argue that Lengyel's presentation of maternity has complex implications that distinguish it from her valuable role in the validation of an examination of the Holocaust through the prism of gender. Owing to her work in the camp infirmary, Lengyel was constantly exposed to the female body as the object of sanctioned and endemic gendered violence and this violence frequently revolved around pregnancy and childbirth. Lengyel describes sterilisation experiments, the murder of newborn babies and the execution of expectant mothers,⁴⁷ and, as a consequence of this, *Five Chimneys* is often referenced in the same breath as Gisella Perl's memoir, *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz*. As the title of her book suggests, Perl worked as a doctor in Auschwitz, under the supervision of the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele. Like Lengyel, Perl records the appalling levels of violence directed at pregnant women in Auschwitz. Where possible, Perl secretly terminated pregnancies, thus

46 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, p.61.

47 These issues are primarily described in the fifteenth chapter of *Five Chimneys*: 'Accursed Births' 110-114.

preventing many prisoners from being sent to the gas chambers, and she consequently became known as ‘the angel abortionist.’⁴⁸ *Five Chimneys* and *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz* are both revered as important testimonial documents, but the linguistic and stylistic choices that characterise Lengyel’s portrayal of these horrors are particularly interesting.

Despite the fact that Lengyel does not demur when factually recounting the horrific events she witnessed, her memoir is distinguished by a distinctly melodramatic turn of phrase with strongly moralistic overtones. The rhetorical style of *Five Chimneys* has the effect of presenting maternal victims as martyrs. Unlike the male prisoners who become perpetrators of sexual violence, these women appear to remain untainted by the barbarism of the perpetrator. Lengyel’s particular use of language is exemplified in her description of the camp maternity ward as ‘the antechamber to hell.’⁴⁹ As well as evoking the religious overtones traditionally associated with martyrdom, the use of the term ‘Hell’ has the effect of divorcing events at Auschwitz from material reality and situating them within a cultural paradigm that reinforces moral absolutism, allowing the creation of martyred maternal victims, subject to the caprices of demonic perpetrators. Although the treatment of pregnant women at Auschwitz can be seen as a chilling manifestation of the inhumanity of the Holocaust, the characterisation of the Nazi genocide as an aberrant, other-worldly event that ‘resists the usual capacities of the mind’⁵⁰ is a philosophical position that has been heavily criticised. This particular brand of rhetoric is scathingly referred to by critic Zachary Braiterman as ‘the Holocaust sublime.’ Braiterman claims that philosophical ideas of the sublime, or ultimate extremes of experience have frequently informed Holocaust writing, transmuting the horror and the violence into inappropriate aesthetic pleasure.⁵¹ Whilst I am

48 Nadine Brozan, ‘Out of Death, A Zest for Life,’ *New York Times*, (1982).
<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/15/style/out-of-death-a-zest-for-life.html>

49 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz*, p.113.

50 Irving Howe, ‘Writing and the Holocaust,’ *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 175-200, p.175.

51 Zachary Braiterman, ‘Against Holocaust-Sublime: Naive Reference and the Generation of Memory,’

not suggesting that Lengyel was motivated by pleasure, her presentation of maternal victims using the language of martyrdom, foreshadows the emergence of a literary trope of aesthetically and ethically attractive victimology that has come to dominate popular representations of the Holocaust. Regarding these stylistic choices, *Five Chimneys* may be fruitfully compared with the memoir of another female doctor who spent time as a prisoner at Auschwitz.

Lucie Adelsberger was a German-Jewish paediatrician and pioneering immunologist. In her introduction to the memoir, Deborah Lipstadt points out that Adelsberger distinguished herself before the war by being a female doctor who participated in medical practice and medical academia. Despite being offered an exit visa and a position at Harvard in 1933, Adelsberger opted to remain in Berlin to care for her ailing mother. In 1943, on one of the last transports to leave Berlin, Adelsberger was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where she worked in the gypsy camp and, later, in the women's camp. In 1956 she published a written account of her experiences.⁵² Owing to the fairly unusual position she held as a doctor in Birkenau, Adelsberger found herself in close proximity to events in the camp not normally witnessed by the majority of inmates. Like Lengyel, Adelsberger bore witness to the small number of pregnancies that occurred in the camp and the unfortunate fate of these children and their mothers, but it is here that the similarity ends. In stark contrast to Lengyel's decidedly dramatic tone, the narrative stance of Adelsberger's memoir is unquestionably that of a doctor, and she describes the horror of Auschwitz with the detached and precise lexicon of a professional. Along with gangrenous gnoma and other such grisly conditions endemic at Birkenau, the cold-blooded murder of pregnant women is recounted with meticulous, medical precision. In chapter fifteen of *Five Chimneys*, Lengyel describes children born in Auschwitz

History and Memory, 12.2 (2000) 7-28, (p.10).

⁵² Deborah Lipstadt, 'Introduction,' *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story*, by Lucie Adelsberger, translated by Susan Ray (London: Robson Books, 1995) xiii-xxv.

and their inevitable consequences as ‘Accursed Births,’⁵³ whereas Adelsberger describes a similar situation with comparative restraint:

According to SS guidelines, every Jewish child automatically condemns his mother to death.⁵⁴

Foregoing the emotionally charged language of martyrdom, Adelsberger describes the horrific fate that befell pregnant women at Birkenau in the form of an unembellished, uncompromising factual statement. ‘Accursed Births’ communicates despair and encourages outrage, in contrast, Adelsberger does not broach the issue of morality. The single sentence statement on the issue of maternity provides a chilling summation of the symbolic inversion of motherhood created by the laws of the concentration camp universe. This was a universe where ‘as soon as the newborn saw the light of day, the inconceivable happened. The Jewish child was forfeited to death, and with him, his mother. Within a week, both were sent to the gas chamber.’⁵⁵ As opposed to heralding the beginning of life, to give birth in the camp automatically warranted a double death sentence. *Five Chimneys* utilises the traditional connotation of motherhood with life and nurturing, in order to draw attention to the inhuman cruelty of the Holocaust. In the chapter devoted to ‘Canada,’ Lengyel takes pains to mention the ‘painful impression’ the row of baby carriages made upon her,⁵⁶ juxtaposing the innocent vision of a mother and a child in happier times, with the distressing reality of Auschwitz. In a marked departure from this, Adelsberger communicates the destructive power of the Holocaust through its inversion of traditional maternal paradigms. Lucie Adelsberger’s position as a witness to the distorted cycle of birth and death in the camp, permits her memoir to provide a valuable insight into the ways in which the extreme circumstances of the

53 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz*, p.110.

54 Lucie Adelsberger, *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Story*, translated by Susan Ray (London: Robson Books, 1995) p.100.

55 *Ibid*, p.101.

56 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz*, p.89.

Holocaust impacted the perception and performance of motherhood. In the course of Adelsberger's memoir, the issue of maternity in Auschwitz appears to challenge, rather than reinforce traditional concepts of morality.

In the second chapter of his memoir *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi introduces the reader to the concept of 'the grey zone,' a hypothetical region of moral ambiguity that resists culturally dominant classifications of right and wrong dictated by Kantian ethics:

The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness, with all its infinite nuances and motivations, to collaborate...Certainly the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state; the concurrent guilt on the part of the individual big and small collaborators is difficult to evaluate...they are the vectors and instruments of the system's guilt...the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero.⁵⁷

Using the examples of the plight of the *Sonderkommando* and the case of Chaim Rumkowski, Levi argues that the extraordinary conditions that characterised life in a concentration camp or ghetto, deprived prisoners of true moral agency. According to the principles of 'the grey zone,' it is impossible to cast moral judgement on the behaviour of Holocaust victims using criteria that originate from outside the warped reality of the *lager*. Prisoners residing in Levi's 'grey zone' were constantly confronted by what Lawrence Langer referred to as 'choiceless choices.' In *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*, Langer defines 'choiceless choices' as 'crucial decisions that did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing.'⁵⁸ The grotesque contours of the 'choiceless

⁵⁷ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus Books, 1988) p.43.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982) p.72.

choice' were particularly highlighted in situations where they impacted on medical ethics. In a universe governed by systematic extermination and deliberate deprivation, the prisoners who worked in the camp infirmary were confronted by 'choiceless choices' every day. Adelsberger's memoir describes in detail the dilemmas faced by medical professionals when the particular circumstances of the Holocaust forced a drastic reinterpretation and re-evaluation of the Hippocratic Oath. In an early chapter Adelsberger describes a confrontation with a colleague after witnessing him declare a terminally ill patient fit for transport. When Adelsberger confronted the physician concerning what appeared to be an egregious professional lapse, she was informed 'It's him or me.'⁵⁹ This incident caused Adelsberger to reflect that a forced conflict of medical ethics with the fundamental principles of self-preservation made 'a farce' of her profession.⁶⁰ It was this meditation, along with other incidents in her book, which caused Adelsberger to be featured in an article in one of Israel's principal medical journals, describing the impossible ethical dilemmas faced by Jewish physicians living under Nazi rule:

Following the liquidation of the Gypsy Camp in July 1944, Dr. Adelsberger was assigned to supervise the sick children at the women's camp at Birkenau. Her recollections of the women's camp at Auschwitz provide a rare perspective on the unique experience of female inmates...and also demonstrates that Lucie, in order to save lives, was often confronted with disturbing ethical dilemmas.⁶¹

Perhaps the most poignant of the 'disturbing ethical dilemmas' alluded to in the journal article, concerned certain extreme measures undertaken to preserve the lives of the few women who managed to give birth at Auschwitz. In order to conceal the birth and to prevent

⁵⁹ Lucie Adelsberger, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story*, p.13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.13.

⁶¹ Paul Saenger, 'Jewish Pediatricians in Nazi Germany: Victims of Persecution', *IMAJ*, 8 (2006) 301-305 (p.304).

both parties being condemned to the gas chamber, the newborn child was often killed by the delivering nurse or physician, and in some cases, by the mother herself:

Medical ethics prescribe that if, during labour, the mother and the child are in danger, priority must be given to saving the life of the mother. We prisoner physicians quietly acted in accordance with this regulation. The child had to die so that the life of the mother might be saved. (Many women never got over the shock of the death of their newborn infants and have forgiven neither themselves nor us.) We saved up all the poison we could find in the camp for this very purpose and it still wasn't enough...One time, there was no poison available, so the mother strangled the child she had just delivered.⁶²

Infanticide represents a near universal cultural taboo. The idea of a baby being killed by its caregivers evokes a strong sense of revulsion as the altruistic devotion of a mother to her child represents an enduring and dominant cultural master narrative. Sara Horowitz observes that, in testimonial narratives, 'the moment in which otherwise ordinary people come to reveal their participation in infanticide, the killing of babies and children, is often explicitly isolated by the rememberer as a memory of particular horror in a sea of horrors.'⁶³ The logical contemplation of infanticide represents the most potent example of the symbolic inversion of maternity enacted by the Holocaust and one of the most challenging issues to reside within Levi's 'grey zone.' Esther Herzog refers to the scholarly tendency to marginalise accounts of mothers killing or abandoning their children to save their own lives, stating that 'sacrificing their lives for the sake of their offspring is widely perceived as self-evidently expected "natural" conduct of women as mothers.'⁶⁴ When reflecting on this horrifying situation,

⁶² Lucie Adelsberger, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story*, p.101.

⁶³ Sara Horowitz, "If he Knows How to Make a Child...": Memories of Birth and Baby Killing in Deferred Jewish Testimony Narratives,' *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches*, edited by Norman J.W. Goda (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014) 135-151, p.136.

⁶⁴ Esther Hertzog, 'Subjugated Motherhood and the Holocaust,' *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 30.1 (2016) 16-34 (p.17).

Adelsberger, once again, refrains from allowing conventional morality to enter the equation. For Adelsberger, the issue of infanticide is presented as an issue of professional ethics; it is conceptually reframed as a necessary medical intervention dictated by extraordinary circumstances. Adelsberger's memoir effectively demonstrates how motherhood and medical ethics were reshaped under the conditions dictated by 'choiceless choices.'

Like Adelsberger, Lengyel also reflects on the necessity of infanticide, but she differs substantially in her presentation of the issue. 'Accursed Births' outlines the measures taken by Lengyel and other medical staff to ensure the survival of pregnant women under their care. Unlike Adelsberger, Lengyel ruminates extensively on the emotional toll of this procedure:

And so, the Germans succeeded in making murderers even of us. To this day, the picture of those murdered babies haunts me. Our own children had perished in the gas chambers and were cremated in the Birkenau ovens, and we dispatched the lives of others before their first voices had left their tiny lungs. Often I sit and think what kind of fate would these little creatures, snuffed out on the threshold of life, have had? Who knows? Perhaps we killed a Pasteur, a Mozart or an Einstein. Even had those infants been destined to uneventful lives, our crimes were no less terrible. The only meager consolation is that, by these murders, we saved the mothers. Without our intervention, they would have endured worse suffering, for they would have been thrown into the crematory ovens whilst still alive...I marvel to what depths these Germans made us descend.⁶⁵

Whilst Adelsberger dispassionately describes herself performing a medical procedure, Lengyel repeatedly refers to herself committing acts of murder. When presented with the opportunity to trade sexual favours for food, Lengyel adheres to the same sexual value

⁶⁵ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, p.111.

system that governed her life before Auschwitz, citing marital fidelity and an ingrained sense of propriety; Similarly, her reflections on her participation in infanticide are strongly influenced by deontological morality. Despite acknowledging the overriding culpability of ‘the Germans,’ Lengyel describes herself as a murderer. However, it is important to note that her self-castigation is actually deployed with the intention of doubly implicating the perpetrator. When approaching the delicate issue of culpability regarding the *Sonderkommando*, Primo Levi reflects on what he considers the greatest crime of National Socialism:

Conceiving and organising the squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime. Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economise on able men, to impose on others the most atrocious tasks)...the institution represented an attempt to shift onto others - specifically the victims - the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.⁶⁶

Employing a similar logic, Lengyel’s emphasis on the gravity of her crime, throws an uncompromising light on the inhumanity of her captors, whose presence at the beginning and end of her tirade, emphasises their position as the ultimate architects of her dilemma. The emotional impact of this passage is underscored by the fact that Lengyel positions herself as a grieving mother. When describing her participation in the murder of newborn babies, she reminds the reader that ‘Our own children had perished in the gas chambers and were cremated in the Birkenau ovens.’ The idea of a bereaved mother compelled to murder children is presented as particularly repulsive. In the context of this passage, the most heinous crime of National Socialism appears to be the perversion of the maternal role. This sentiment is given powerful expression in one of the four memoirs by Hungarian Holocaust survivor, Isabella Leitner Once again, motherhood. In a short section entitled ‘The Baby,’ Leitner

⁶⁶ Levi, p.34.

describes the hypothetical birth and death of a child born in Auschwitz:

And now that you are born, your mother begs to see you, to hold you. But we know that if we give you to her, there will be a struggle to take you away again, so we cannot let her see you because you don't belong to her. You belong to the gas chamber. Your mother has no rights. She has only brought forth fodder for the gas chamber. She is not a mother. She is just a dirty Jew who has soiled the Aryan landscape with another dirty Jew. How dare she think of you in human terms?⁶⁷

The most striking feature of this passage is the complete inversion of the conventional signification of birth as the flourishing of life. The automatic death sentence passed over every newborn child at Auschwitz inextricably connects childbirth with death which, on the surface, would appear to reverse the traditional maternal paradigm. Leitner uses the exclusion of prisoners from the cultural construct of motherhood to illustrate the dehumanising effect of National Socialist racial policies. Once again, motherhood is afforded a central position in calculating the emotional and philosophical impact of the Holocaust.

In 'The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul through the Murder of the Jewish Mother,' David Patterson describes the infanticidal actions of women such as Lengyel, Perl and Adelsberger as acts of spiritual sacrifice:

In order to save the mother, the mother's closest friends, Jewish women, must kill the infant who makes the mother a mother. They must kill something of themselves, part of their own souls, part of the essence of the feminine. There lies the horror of the Nazi assault on the Jewish soul.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, edited by Irving A. Leitner (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978) p.25.

⁶⁸ David Patterson, 'The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul through the Murder of the Jewish Mother,' *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*, edited by Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013) 163-177, p.172.

In this extract, Patterson emphasises the central position occupied by the mother in Jewish spiritual and cultural life. According to Jewish doctrine, the maternal figure is sacrosanct in its embodiment of a metaphysical dwelling place, the manifestation ‘of love in its holiest aspect,’ and a bridge connecting the earthly and the divine.⁶⁹ Additionally, in Talmudic law, God is the third participant in the creation of a child, and a child represents to the Jewish community, the sum of all future understanding and the will of God made manifest.⁷⁰ The degree of symbolic value placed on the child implies that the figure of the mother occupies a central role as part of a sacred covenant representing life and continuity. This spiritual context serves the dual purpose of reinforcing the devastating impact of the Holocaust by expressing it in terms of the violation of a sacred figure and the reframing of a previously unthinkable act into a demonstration of moral heroism. In the section of his article entitled ‘Choiceless Choices,’ Patterson cites Lengyel’s text as representative of this phenomenon.⁷¹ In *Five Chimneys*, the necessity of Lengyel’s actions alongside the profundity of her motherly grief, effectively transforms infanticide into an act of maternal martyrdom.

Although there is a religious specificity to Patterson’s analysis, I argue that the Jewish incarnation of motherhood embodies certain principles, independent of religion, whose roots can be traced back to a psychic archetype, capable of transcending cultural borders. Writing at a time when the issue of female subjectivity was being intensely examined in an attempt at feminist self-definition that created a balance between absorption of women by phallogocentric power systems on the one hand, and reactionary renunciation of all masculine influence on the other, the work of Julia Kristeva extensively scrutinises the psychological and anthropological significance of motherhood as one of the fulcrums upon which the concept of womanhood was defined, both as an antagonistic and empowering force. In ‘Woman’s

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p.166.

⁷⁰ Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Niddah, Folio 31a
http://www.come-and-hear.com/niddah/niddah_31.html.

⁷¹ Patterson, p.173.

Time', Kristeva explores the notion that the positional awareness of female consciousness, as situated within the biological rhythms of a reproductive cycle, has the effect of placing the female ego outside of the inertial pressure of linear time:

As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilisation.⁷²

Kristeva appears to imply here that the reproductive capabilities possessed by women situates them within a regenerative cycle that transcends history and forms a symbolic counterpoint to the death and decay implied by the progression of linear time. Kristeva precedes this assertion by observing that a symbolic link between the maternal and the persistence of life has been an almost universal component of the belief structures of most civilisations throughout history.⁷³ In 'Stabat Mater' Kristeva explores the specific example of the Catholic and Orthodox churches and the Virgin Mary, claiming that the veneration of Mary dictated by specific Christian doctrine, evolved in accordance with Western Culture's idealisation of the infant/mother bond. Mary, the mother, is established as the second part of a binary dialogue with Eve who represents the evolution of sin and concurrently death:

Milk and tears became the privileged signs of the *Mater Dolorosa* who invaded the west beginning with the eleventh century, reaching the peak of its influx in the fourteenth. But it never ceased to fill the Marian visions of those men or women (often children) who were racked by the anguish of a maternal frustration ... The mother and her attributes, evoking sorrowful humanity, thus become representatives of a 'return of the repressed' in monotheism.⁷⁴

⁷² Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) 187-214, p.191.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p.190.

⁷⁴ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater,' *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) 160-187, p.173.

Kristeva identifies a monotheistic preoccupation with idealised maternity, the roots of which she locates within the primal origins of subjectivity, emerging from the characteristic nature of the infant/mother bond. Kristeva's decision to use the term monotheistic instead of Christian or even more specifically Roman Catholic, indicates a belief that this philosophy is applicable to a wider range of cultural contexts. If one examines the figure of the Virgin Mary alongside Jewish doctrine concerning motherhood, the parallels are striking. In Judaism, the mother represents a literal and figurative dwelling place for the body and soul and a connection with the divine, and, similarly, Mary represents a corporeal point of origin for an aspect of divinity and is commonly believed to intercede with God on behalf of humanity, thus representing a point of intersection between the earthly and the divine. Both concepts embody a sanctified, desexualised femininity and the idea of a spiritually elevated incarnation of love, untainted by corruption. Despite the absence of iconography that characterises Judaism, evidence of shared sensibilities in the symbolic construction of maternity can be gleaned from a cross cultural examination of artwork and sculpture. For instance, Nathan Rapoport's 1975 Warsaw Ghetto uprising memorial depicts a bare breasted woman nursing a child with one arm raised above her head.⁷⁵ Judith Tydor Baumel compares this figure to the bare breasted warrior woman in Delacroix's 'Liberté'⁷⁶; however, it also bears a striking similarity to the image of the bare breasted Madonna holding her child, popularised in renaissance painting. The notion of an overarching mother figure as an idealised construct with transcultural psychic origins - what might be referred to as an archetype of motherhood - informs much of the discussion of maternal tropes in this chapter. The specific nature of these psychic origins and their impact on the literary representation of collective trauma will be explored in the chapters that follow.

⁷⁵ See Appendix C.

⁷⁶ Judith Tydor Baumel, 'Rachel Laments her Children: Representation of Women in Israeli Holocaust Memorials', *Israel Studies*, 1.1 (1996) 100-126 (p.112).

The trope of the maternal martyr relies upon a universal perception of the bond between mother and child as sacred. In the specific context of Holocaust literature, motif has the potential to fulfill a diverse range of expressive functions. It can incite outrage, facilitate empathetic engagement, or even, solidify an autobiographical subject position in the face of traumatic events that challenge the ontological precepts that have previously governed an individual's existence. This maternal trope broadly emerges from a psychodynamic discourse of maternity that has its origins in Jacques Lacan's theories emphasising the role of differentiation from the mother in the development of subjectivity. This branch of theoretical thinking will inform the majority of my thesis. In the extract from *Five Chimneys* that reflects upon the moral crisis induced by participation in infanticide, Lengyel mourns the fate of her own children and the wasted potential of those she was forced to dispatch. Assuming an attitude of maternal lamentation that stretches beyond the limitations of her own offspring, Lengyel occupies the symbolic role of the *mater dolorosa*. The literal translation of *mater dolorosa* is 'mother of sorrow,' and it most commonly refers to depictions of the Madonna in an attitude of mourning. Mary is depicted weeping, sometimes bearing a sword through her heart.⁷⁷ This figure exists as a symbol of maternal compassion and sacrifice that has exerted a powerful influence over both religious and secular constructions of motherhood in western culture. The archetype of the sorrowful mother has often been mobilised as a symbol of peace in times of conflict and political unrest. In 1937 Pablo Picasso published a series of sixty paintings of weeping women. 'Picasso transformed this religious symbol of sadness and acceptance into a powerful political symbol, a mother whose child has been killed by the atrocities of war.'⁷⁸ The symbolic invocation of the *mater dolorosa* in these paintings was intended as a reflection on the plight of civilians in the Spanish Civil War. The sorrowful

77 Richard Stracke, 'Mater Dolorosa (Our Lady of Sorrows): The Iconography,' (2016)

<http://www.christianiconography.info/materDolorosa.html>

78 Weeping Women: Back to Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth and History, The Guggenheim

<https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/weeping-women>.

mother serves as a reminder of the meek and the vulnerable, set against the backdrop of violence and atrocity that often accompanies international conflict. A similar effect can be observed in Ilana Goor's bronze sculpture of a faceless woman holding the body of a child, currently standing in Yad Vashem. In *The Women and War Reader* Sara Ruddick identifies the

mater dolorosa as one of three tropes of womanhood that are commonly perceived as the antithesis of war:

Of these identities, the most deeply rooted *within* war stories is the *mater dolorosa*, the mother of sorrows. The mother of sorrows not only mourns war's suffering, she also holds lives together despite pain, bitterness and deprivation. In refugee camps across the world, women appear as mothers of sorrow. Searching for lost children, keeping living children alive, and giving birth once again in the hope of more lives to which they will then cling. The *mater dolorosa* weeps for good reason. War and violence destroy all of "women's work" - mothering, feeding, sheltering, nursing the ill, tending to the frail and elderly, maintaining kin connections.⁷⁹

Ruddick's interpretation of the *mater dolorosa*, as it appears in a sociopolitical context, positions the mother in fundamental opposition to destruction and violence. She represents compassion, social cooperation and commitment to pacifism. The barbarity of war is expressed through its potential to violently encroach on the domestic sphere, and, as guardian of this sphere, the mother is presented as an unambiguous victim of war, throwing an unflattering light on its destructive consequences. As the archetypal martyr, she is subject to the physical ravages of war, but her symbolic position as its ideological counterpart excludes her from moral corruption. Despite the fact that this conception of womanhood underpins much of the feminist scholarship defining the female experience of the Holocaust, this description of femininity/maternity is obviously problematic. Presenting the sorrowful mother as presiding over a domestic sphere of influence that abhors violence, recalls a construction of femininity popularised in the nineteenth century through Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the House.'⁸⁰ The idea of 'the angel in the house' was based around the notion that

⁷⁹ Sara Ruddick, 'Woman of Peace: A Feminist Construction,' *The Women and War Reader*, edited by Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer E. Turpin (New York: NYU Press, 1998) 213-227 p.216.

⁸⁰ C.K.D Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1854).

the superior moral character of women dictated that their influence should be confined to the realm of the domestic, away from the corrupting influences of politics and economics.⁸¹

Ruddick's wry inverted commas surrounding the term 'women's work' suggests that the *mater dolorosa* (like many other feminine motifs) emerges from these conservative roots.

The troubling origin of this maternal icon notwithstanding, it is my suggestion that clearly defined and enduring symbolic archetypes offer palliative refuge from traumatic events that seem to demand a redefinition of behavioural and moral conventions. I posit that as an ontological 'safe space,' the maternal martyr has been utilised in a number of interesting ways in Holocaust memoir and fiction. In the fifteenth chapter of *Five Chimneys* Olga Lengyel articulates the emotional dilemma incited by the medical necessity of murdering newborn babies at Auschwitz. The moral imperative to save the life of the mother was uniquely at odds with her preconceptions surrounding the natural direction of maternal instinct. When articulating the impossible situation she was confronted with, Lengyel feels compelled to equate her moral conduct with that of her captors, stating that 'the Germans had succeeded in making murderers even of us.' However, in this particular instance, the psychologically destabilising impact of this disruption of the conceptual divide between victim and perpetrator is mitigated by her presentation as a grieving mother. The subtextual invocation of the *mater dolorosa* instantly identifies Lengyel with a morally unambiguous symbolic figure that counteracts her perception of her own culpability. The *mater dolorosa* stands in fundamental ideological opposition to the concept of industrialised murder, thus, her implied appearance at this point in the text has the effect of tacitly reestablishing the boundary separating victim and perpetrator. The role the sorrowful mother fills as a rhetorical device in *Five Chimneys* is reinforced by its appearance at another crucial point in the text.

Like the account of infanticide presented in 'Accursed Births,' this moment is characterised

⁸¹ J.R. Rudy, 'On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry and the Victorian Ballad,' *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003) 590-596.

by a misplaced, yet troubling sensation of guilt. The first two chapters of *Five Chimneys* document Lengyel's deportation followed by her arrival at Auschwitz, and her description of these events constitutes one of the most remarked upon aspects of her memoir. In May 1944. Dr. Miklos Lengyel was summoned to the headquarters of the German police in Cluj and informed that he was to be immediately deported. Assuming that her husband would be put to work in a German hospital and insisting that it was her duty to remain at his side, Lengyel opted to accompany him, along with their two children and her parents.⁸² Olga Lengyel's decision to accompany her husband was voluntary and serves as the unfortunate catalyst to a series of events that ultimately resulted in the death of her two sons and her elderly parents in the Auschwitz gas chambers. The unexpected and tragic outcome of this decision is the first incident to which Lengyel attaches her feelings of guilt. After enduring a seven day journey in a crowded cattle wagon, Lengyel suspects the worst and feels compelled to apologise to her parents:

Where were we and what fate awaited us? I conjectured wisely, yet my imagination could not supply a reasonable explanation. Finally I went back to my parents, for I felt a great need to talk to them.

'Can you ever forgive me?' I murmured as I kissed their hands.

'Forgive you?' asked my mother with her characteristic tenderness. 'You have done nothing for which you need to be forgiven.'

But her eyes dimmed with tears. What did she suspect at this hour?

'You have always been the best of daughters', added my father...This was to be the last time I embraced them.⁸³

⁸² Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, p.17.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.25.

In the opening chapter, Lengyel foreshadows her perceived role as ‘the author of my parents’ misfortunes and those of my children as well.’⁸⁴ In this extract she kisses their hands with the devotional penitence of a sinner asking for absolution. However, the religious overtones of her early narrative are most strikingly revealed in the opening lines of the book:

Mea culpa, my fault, mea maxima culpa! I cannot acquit myself of the charge that I am, in part, responsible for the destruction of my parents and of my two young sons. The world understands that I could not have known, but in my heart the terrible feeling persists that I could have, I might have saved them.⁸⁵

Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa is a line taken from the Confiteor, a prayer of general supplication and confession recited at the start of a Roman Catholic mass⁸⁶. In her memoir and in subsequent interviews, Lengyel makes very few explicit statements concerning her religious persuasion or ethnic roots, but in an interview conducted in 1998 she does reveal that she attended a Catholic school for girls.⁸⁷ Lengyel’s educational background suggests that she would have been aware of the full connotations of this phrase, the semiotic framework of her statement of culpability implying that she had, at least partly absorbed the cultural lexicon of Catholicism as an influential master narrative through which to frame her experience. In the first paragraph of her memoir, Lengyel presents herself in the attitude of a repentant sinner confessing her wrongdoings and this rhetorical position sets the tone of the events that follow. The event to which she attributes the majority of her guilt revolves around a calamitous error in judgement that occurred on the Auschwitz platform, moments before undergoing the infamous selection process. With ironic hindsight Lengyel recalls her assumption that children and the elderly would be subject to better treatment and a lighter

84 *Ibid*, p.17.

85 *Ibid*, p.13.

86 <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Basics/Confiteor.html>.

87 Jewish Survivor Olga Lengyel Testimony, Part 1, *USC Shoah Foundation*, 17 May 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufxLw-xSEMM>.

workload:

The truth was that Arvad was not quite twelve, and I could have said so. He was big for his age, but I wanted to spare him from labours that might prove too arduous for him...I had persuaded my mother that she should follow the children and take care of them. At her age she had a right to the treatment accorded to the elderly and there would be someone to look after Arvad and Thomas.⁸⁸

In what she describes as ‘my second terrible error.’⁸⁹ Lengyel corrects the selecting doctor’s over-estimation of her son’s age and persuades her mother to leave the adult group and join the children and the elderly. This well-intentioned decision inadvertently condemns her mother and eldest son to death, a mistake for which Lengyel castigates herself harshly. The tragic irony of this moment strikes an emotional chord with readers and inspired William Styron’s 1982 novel *Sophie’s Choice*. Commenting upon Styron’s creative debt to *Five Chimneys* and noting the distinctly Catholic manifestation of Lengyel’s self-recrimination, Sue Vice describes both Sophie and Lengyel as ‘guilt personified.’⁹⁰ Whilst Catholicism is traditionally associated with the concept of guilt, I believe that the pious imagery presented in these chapters serves a somewhat different purpose. The moment in which Lengyel is made to feel culpable for the death of her mother and son, represents the most profound moment of moral crisis in the text; however the semiotic lexicon through which Lengyel expresses her guilt serves to mitigate the perceived moral ambiguity of her position. The extract from the *Confiteor* used in the opening lines of the text is suggestive of a lamenting, supplicating figure, even more so as its recitation at Mass is often accompanied by the beating of the breast.⁹¹ The image of a grief-stricken woman beating her breast, quintessentially embodies

88 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz*, p.27.

89 *Ibid*, p.27.

90 Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 2000) p.131.

91 ‘My Most Grievous Fault’ *Catholic News Agency*, 11 July 2011
<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/my-most-grievous-fault-1772>.

Ruddick's incarnation of the *mater dolorosa* as a weeping woman searching refugee camps for her lost children. The implied reference to the sorrowful mother in the first chapter is, of course, doubly reinforced by the plea to the Virgin Mary for intercession contained within the *Confiteor*. The *mater dolorosa* subtextually manifests itself in the first lines of the memoir and overshadows the numerous references to maternal suffering that appear in the later chapters. As the archetypal image of maternal virtue, the mother of sorrow provides a reassuring counter-voice in Lengyel's confrontation with her unwitting act of maternal betrayal on the Auschwitz platform. For Lengyel, the deployment of a culturally familiar icon of maternal suffering, provides a rhetorical position from which she can safely articulate experiences, the traumatic magnitude of which, could otherwise overwhelm the expressive capabilities of language. In 'Interpreting Survivor Testimony,' Lawrence Langer reflects on the various ways in which Holocaust survivors reconstructed their experiences after being faced with 'the crumbling edifice of 20th century Humanism.'⁹² Citing such seminal works of survivor literature as Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Langer observes that even texts that strive towards a purely factual representation

⁹² Lawrence Langer, 'Interpreting Survivor Testimony,' *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 26-41, p.28.

of the events of the Holocaust are still subject to ‘infiltration’ by established narrative constructs and conventions:

The organic metaphor, with its evolutionary corollary, which dominated much of nineteenth century thought, bequeathed us a vocabulary of purpose and a mental state to accompany it, that infiltrates survivor literature with perplexing results. Such infiltration reminds us that even memoirs ostensibly concerned with nothing more ambitious than recording horrible facts, cannot escape from traditional literary associations. Some draw consciously on such associations in order to impose a layer of continuity over the discontinuous interval of the death camp universe; others exploit the literary use of language to clarify and emphasise the permanence of the discontinuity.⁹³

Although it is uncertain whether Lengyel’s deployment of the maternal martyr figure is conscious or not, in moments of moral crisis it appears as a refuge of identification that facilitates the imposition of symbolic order onto a fundamentally disordered universe. In *Five Chimneys*, the maternal martyr serves as a counter-narrative to the perversion of maternity created by conditions at Auschwitz. As well as presenting maternal suffering in order to place emphasis on the cruelty of the Holocaust, the presentation of maternal martyrdom in Lengyel’s memoir demonstrates that, in a world where traditional codes of moral conduct were nullified, the utilisation of a rhetorical position with clearly defined moral contours, allows for the production of meaning in the aftermath of events that resist traditional strategies of narrativization and the process of ‘working through.’

The role of the benevolent mother figure in the post traumatic production of meaning is further illustrated in *Fragments of Isabella* by Isabella Leitner and *The Apple* by Penelope

93 *Ibid*, p.27.

Holt. Both of these texts represent the mother as a saintly figure who plays a central role in the construction of the protagonist's life before the Holocaust and who continues to exert a profound influence over the interpretation and assimilation of traumatic memories, even beyond the boundary of death.

Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella*

Fragments of Isabella is the first in a series of four autobiographical texts, written by Hungarian Holocaust survivor Isabella Leitner. In a series of stark and fragmented chapters, often only consisting of a single paragraph Leitner recounts her imprisonment in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birnbaumel and her liberation following her escape from a death-march bound for Bergen-Belsen. Leitner and her family were deported to Auschwitz from their hometown of Kisvarda on the 28th of May 1944. Her mother and baby sister were gassed upon arrival, but Leitner and four of her other siblings survived until liberation.⁹⁴

In a brief journal review following its publication in 1978, Fritz Stern describes *Fragments of Isabella* as 'a sparse and searing book [representing] fragments of remembered feelings and occurrences that evoke, perhaps better than most works, something unfathomable.'⁹⁵

Although it is replete with the now outmoded dialect of the Holocaust sublime, this review highlights the distinctive blend of brevity and melancholic rhapsody that characterises Leitner's work. The raw emotion and non-linear narrative structure of *Fragments of Isabella* allows Leitner to present her story as the salvaged remnants of shattered subjectivity. The use

94 Oral History Interview with Isabella Leitner, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 1992
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn509153>.

95 Fritz Stern, 'Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz: Book Review,' *Foreign Affairs*, 57.2 (1978) 421-421 (p.421).

of self-contained textual fragments, often presented under such jarring titles as ‘Eat Shit’⁹⁶ and ‘Grave,’⁹⁷ forcefully draws the attention of the reader to the emotional themes that structure Leitner’s narrative. These themes are: the bond that existed between Leitner and her sisters and its role in their mutual survival and, most pertinently for this chapter, her grief over the death of her mother. As with Lengyel, the majority of the critical attention directed at Leitner’s memoir concerns its potential to illuminate the specific sufferings and survival strategies of female concentration camp inmates. Her name makes frequent appearances alongside the likes of Charlotte Delbo and Ida Fink when the conscientious author of a critical review feels compelled to reference female contributions to Holocaust writing. There are, of course, many aspects of *Fragments of Isabella* that strongly reflect the gendered experience of its author by touching on aspects of the Holocaust experience that are traditionally perceived as being the domain of women. The opening chapter of the book references amenorrhea⁹⁸ and a later chapter engages in a heartfelt reflection on the necessary death of all newborns in Auschwitz.⁹⁹ In ‘Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism’ Myrna Goldenberg opens with a quotation from *Fragments of Isabella*, believing it to exemplify ‘the ethic of caring that both reflected and was generated from their experience as women.’¹⁰⁰ Goldenberg claims that as a result of biological, social and cultural factors that existed before their imprisonment, women in concentration camps were more likely than men to demonstrate resourcefulness and develop bonds based around the provision of mutual assistance:

Most women describe situations in which they confronted their new reality and devised strategies that actively engaged them in fighting for their survival.

96 Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, p.21.

97 *Ibid*, p.20.

98 *Ibid*, p.1.

99 *Ibid*, p.25.

100 Myrna Goldenberg, ‘Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism,’ *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 548 (1996) 78-93 (p.80).

Essentially, as women cleaned their surroundings, sewed pockets into their ragged clothes, created menus to mitigate their hunger and nursed and nurtured one another, they created the illusion of taking some measure of both control and responsibility for their well-being.¹⁰¹

The theory presented in this extract is dependent upon the questionable assumption that women are inherently socialised to collaborate in conditions where their survival is at stake. Goldenberg deploys Leitner's text in support of her thesis owing to its perceived emphasis on the role her sisters played in her survival:

If you are sisterless, you do not have the pressure, the absolute responsibility to end the day alive. How many times did that responsibility keep us alive? I cannot tell. I can only say that many times when I was caught in a selection, I knew I had to get back to my sisters.¹⁰²

Leitner credits her love for her sisters with providing her with a reason to live, alternately perceived as a blessing and a burden. *Fragments of Isabella* recounts multiple situations in which the sisters came to the aid of one of their number in a situation that would otherwise have proven fatal. When Leitner's youngest sister Rachel was feeling ill and weak prior to a selection, they pinched her cheeks to heighten their colour and assisted her in standing upright,¹⁰³ and when Leitner herself was desperately ill with typhus her sisters visited her daily, bringing her food and urging her not to give up.¹⁰⁴ Goldenberg views these behaviours as manifestations of 'the ethic of caring' with which women are naturally endowed, however, this reading does not stand up to scrutiny when one closely examines the evidence presented by the text itself. Leitner attributes her siblings' mutual commitment to survival, to the

101 *Ibid*, p.87.

102 Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, p.29.

103 *Ibid*, p.37.

104 *Ibid*, p.49.

teaching and example of her mother Theresa. When constructing her final image of her mother, Leitner presents her passionately imploring her children to live, in order to ensure the continuation of their family - a family that Leitner describes as ‘ a cradle of love’¹⁰⁵ with her mother at its centre:

Stay alive my darlings - all six of you. Out there, when it is all over, a world is waiting for you to give it all I gave you. Despite what you see here - and you are all young and impressionable - believe me, there is humanity out there, there is dignity. I will not share it with you, but it is there. And when this is over, you must add to it, because sometimes it is a little short, a little skimpy. With your lives you can create other lives and nourish them. You can nourish your children’s souls and minds and teach them that man is capable of infinite glory.¹⁰⁶

When exhibiting behaviours associated with compassion and the instinct to nurture, it is implied that Leitner and her sisters are not so much socialised as women, but socialised as the children of Theresa Katz. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the support network that the siblings established in Auschwitz initially included their brother Philip. Philip spent only three weeks in Auschwitz before being transported elsewhere, but prior to this, he significantly bolstered the morale of his sisters by sending them messages carved into pieces of wood. Furthermore, of all her siblings, Leitner remembers Philip as being most like her mother.¹⁰⁷ I suggest that, rather than evidencing an innately feminine capacity for co-operation and survival, Leitner’s text is constructed around the memory and influence of an idealised maternal figure , who cultivated the qualities of altruism and human compassion in her children. In its discussion of *Fragments of Isabella*, this chapter will be devoted to examining the presentation and significance of this figure.

105 *Ibid*, p.13.

106 *Ibid*, p.14.

107 *Ibid*, p.23.

From the very beginning of her memoir, Leitner's portrayal of her mother places exclusive emphasis on her virtuous qualities. Theresa Katz is presented as the warm and selfless centre of domestic life, who is simultaneously an exceptionally civilised and cultured intellectual:

Main Street in Kisvárdá (St Laszlo Utca), I remember, smelled of French perfumes when I used to accompany my mother to the marketplace. The aroma would fill my nostrils as I'd watch my mother feel the force-fed geese to see if they were fat enough to nourish her six growing children - her bright, handsome, sensitive kids who would one day go out into the world well prepared by a mother whose intelligence and enlightenment were legendary and whose social conscience earned her my title 'the poor man's Mrs Roosevelt.'¹⁰⁸

Prior to deportation, Leitner recalls her mother talking in the kitchen, giving food to beggars, shopping in the marketplace and visiting the library.¹⁰⁹ All of these settings possess connotations of nurturing, revealing Theresa's inclination to feed the bodies and minds of her children and the children of others. In marked contrast to Holocaust writers such as Ruth Kluger and Edith Bruck whose uncensored and often unflattering maternal portrayals develop a complex picture of the mother/daughter bond, Leitner represents her mother as a paragon of maternal virtue. Even when faced with her own death at the end of the journey to Auschwitz, Theresa's sole concern appears to be to bestow a final message of inspiration to her children. Regarding maternal representation, Leitner's memoir fulfills the expectation of maternal self-sacrifice that, according to Esther Herzog, overshadows the critical reception of Holocaust testimony.¹¹⁰ It is very likely that the depiction of Theresa in *Fragments of Isabella* constitutes an idealised maternal portrait; the question asked by this section is, what function does this portrait perform?

108 *Ibid*, p.9.

109 *Ibid*, p.10.

110 Herzog, p.16.

In the course of his consideration of cinematic representations of the Holocaust in relation to established theories of trauma, Joshua Hirsch described the Holocaust as ‘a trauma, where the past is unassimilable, and therefore punches a hole in the temporal continuum between past and present.’¹¹¹ Hirsch’s description of the impact of the Holocaust reflects a common conception of the event as a traumatic rupture, pertaining to both the individual and collective processing of cataclysmic events. There exists the impression of an impenetrable barrier separating the world before and the world after. The first chapter of *Fragments of Isabella* focuses on the vicissitudes of life after liberation and strongly reflects the notion of traumatic rupture:

Are the American girls really going to the movies? Do they have dates? Men tell them they love them, true or not. Their hair is long and blonde, high in the front and low in the back, like this and like that, and they are beautiful and ugly. Their clothes are light in the summer and they wear fur in the winter - they mustn’t catch cold. They wear stockings, ride in automobiles, wear wrist watches and necklaces, and they are colourful and perfumed. They are healthy. They are living. Incredible! [...] Our heads are shaved. We look like neither boys nor girls. We haven’t menstruated for a long time. We have diarrhoea. No not diarrhoea - typhus. Summer and winter we have but one type of clothing. Its name is ‘rag.’¹¹²

Throughout this chapter Leitner gives the impression that she inhabits a vastly different world from the American girls she describes. In his description of the first few months after liberation Primo Levi recalls that he ‘felt closer to the dead than to the living.’¹¹³ Similarly, Leitner finds it difficult to relate life in New York where people go on dates and wear

111 Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004) p.11.

112 Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, p.1.

113 Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Penguin Classics, 2000) p.151.

perfume and stockings. The most telling feature of the passage is the fact that the deprivations that Leitner suffered in Auschwitz and Birnbaumel are referenced in the in the present tense. Where one would expect her to say ‘our heads *were* shaved’ and ‘we *had* typhus,’ she writes ‘our heads *are* shaved’ and ‘we *have* typhus.’ The trauma of Leitner’s past has carried into the present, so that she is unable to position the experience of the Holocaust within a linear narrative that encompasses her life before she was deported and her life after liberation. Leitner presents as the epitome of the traumatised subject who, in the words of Cathy Caruth, ‘carries an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.’¹¹⁴ For Leitner, the Holocaust is a disruptive, fracturing event that jars discordantly with her life in New York, she cannot take possession of the Holocaust as an event in her past or fully exist in the present.

The ontologically disruptive nature of the Holocaust represents a challenging obstacle to the memoirist’s attempt to translate experience into narrative. Despite the assertion of Victoria Aarons that Holocaust literature is constructed in terms dictated by ‘the failure of traditional forms and structure, as well as the perceived inadequacy of ordinary language to represent adequately the historical and ethical complexities of the Holocaust,’¹¹⁵ there is strong evidence to suggest that many survivors have sought refuge from the destabilising impact of the Holocaust by presenting their experience within the framework of established literary structures. Dana Mihăilescu has observed that ‘Postwar autobiographical writings were characterised by the recurrence of “the coming-of-age story,” the *bildungsroman*.’¹¹⁶ In the context of the Holocaust, the *bildungsroman* represents an enplotment of events characterised by the violent shattering of the innocence of prewar existence, followed by suffering and,

¹¹⁴ Cathy Caruth, ‘Introduction,’ *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 3-13 p.5.

¹¹⁵ Victoria Aarons, ‘A Genre of Rupture: The Literary Language of the Holocaust,’ *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, edited by Jenni Adams (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) 27-47 p.28.

¹¹⁶ Dana Mihăilescu, ‘Holocaust Child Survivors’ Memoirs as Reflected in Appelfeld’s *The Story of a Life*,’ *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17.3 (2015) 1-8 (p.2).

ultimately, rebirth. In 'Emigrée Central European Jewish Women's Life Writing' Louise O. Vasvári notes that, despite the fact that Isabella was already twenty-years-old when she was deported to Auschwitz, *Fragments of Isabella* possesses many of the characteristic features of the coming-of-age narrative - the most prominent of these features being an intense and prolonged mourning of her mother.¹¹⁷ I intend to build upon Vasvári's observation through a detailed examination of the ways in which Leitner's maternal portrayal influences and upholds this traditional narrative form.

In the early chapters of her memoir, Leitner conveys the shock of deportation by creating a strong sense of contrast between the world she inhabited before the Holocaust and the nightmarish reality of the concentration camps, and this contrast is upheld by the representation of her family life in idyllic terms. 'A New Mode of Travel' reconstructs Leitner's reflections whilst waiting at Kisvarda station for the train to Auschwitz:

I am ready to go. Away from my cradle of love. Away from where every pebble and every face are familiar. Those familiar faces now reflect gladness. I must be away before I learn to hate them. I shall not return.¹¹⁸

This passage expresses a clear moment of transition from the familiar into the unknown. Leitner's assertion that she will never return to her hometown signals the ending of one phase of her life. Although Leitner frankly presents the more unpleasant aspects of her early life in Kisvárdá (predominantly the anti-Semitism of her neighbours,) her family home is described as 'a cradle of love.' The infantile connotations of the word cradle carries the implication that her deportation amounts to the symbolic end of her childhood. In addition to this, there are obvious maternal overtones to this expression. The particular characterisation of her prewar existence as 'a cradle of love' emphasis the centrality of the maternal figure in the

¹¹⁷ Louise O. Vasvári, 'Emigrée Central European Jewish Women's Holocaust Life Writing,' *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 11.1 (2009) 1-12 (p.5).

¹¹⁸ Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, p.13.

construction of this domestic idyll. The previously mentioned idealism present in Leitner's portrayal of her mother reinforces the structure of her memoir as a *bildungsroman*. Situating her mother as the focal point in an innocent and civilised world in which she is loved and protected places a heightened emphasis on the violent psychic shattering that occurs when this world is destroyed.

The importance of the mother figure to the conception of *Fragments of Isabella* as a coming-of-age story is further emphasised by the significance Leitner places on an act of

violence perpetrated against her mother:

Now the SS man moves towards my mother. He raises his whip and, for no reason at all lashes out at her. Philip, my eighteen-year-old brother, the only man left in the family, starts to leap forward to tear the sixteen-year-old SS apart. And we, the sisters - don't we want to do the same? But suddenly reality stares at us with all its madness. My mother's blood will flow right here in front of us. Philip will be butchered. We are unarmed, untrained. We are children. Our weapon might be a shoelace or a belt. Besides, we don't know how to kill [...] All this flashes before us with crystal clarity. Our mother's blood must not be shed right here, right now, in front of our very eyes.¹¹⁹

This single incident of senseless violence is cited by Leitner as a moment of revelation. Witnessing her mother as the victim of barbarism impresses on Leitner the true horror of her position and the life-threatening situation that she and her family are in. Much like the mother, child and soldier in the Ivangorod photograph, at this moment, Theresa and the SS officer who whips her comprise a microcosmic representation of the brutality of the Holocaust. In analysing this extract, the figure of the maternal martyr powerfully resurfaces. Theresa's embodiment of undeserving victimhood, along with the innate connotations of martyrdom represented by whipping, combine to facilitate a powerful moment of awakening. Just as Elie Wiesel perceives 'God hanging on the gallows'¹²⁰ in the execution of a teenager at Auschwitz, Isabella recognises the whipping of her mother and her powerlessness to prevent it as symbolising the destruction of her former life. In *Fragments of Isabella* the idealised maternal figure upholds the structure of the *bildungsroman*, both in the central role it plays in the creation of the scene of prewar innocence and as the key factor in the moment

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.6.

¹²⁰ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, (London: Penguin, 2008) p.65.

of transition from innocence to awareness.

After liberation Leitner's conception of her mother plays a crucial role in the restoration of equilibrium to her interior world by facilitating a moment of symbolic rebirth. In 'The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul Through the Murder of the Jewish Mother' David Patterson outlines, from the perspective of the Jewish religion, the implicit importance of the mother in the process of self-narration:

According to Jewish tradition to have an origin - to have a mother- is to be already marked for a mission: origin implies destiny, when that origin is seen as a mother and not as some primeval ooze. Situated at the origin of human sanctity, the mother represents not the primeval, but the immemorial, a remembrance of something that transforms everything, prior to everything, and forever afterward into something *meaningful*.¹²¹

Patterson identifies the primary significance of the mother as a psychic and spiritual point of origin and the locus of the human soul. In defining the nature of this originary symbol, Patterson seeks to distinguish between the terms 'primeval' and 'immemorial.' Although an argument can be made that this distinction is artificial, it is significant to note that Patterson associates the concept of motherhood with the very beginnings of memory. The mother governs an awareness of selfhood through a sense of shared history; she is presented by Patterson as a vital force, deeply influential in the production of meaning. Demonstrating the power of this archetype of maternity to spread beyond the confines of memory, Patterson's spiritually inflected portrait of motherhood resonates strongly with Kristeva's description of the role of the mother within the Oedipal triangle:

Towards the mother there is a convergence, not only of survival needs, but of the first

121 Patterson, 166.

mimetic yearnings. She is other subject, an object that guarantees my being as a subject. The mother is my first object, both desiring and signifiable.¹²²

Although Kristeva considers this to be an oversimplification of the role of the mother in the development of the fully actualised speaking subject, she does go on to acknowledge the vital role of the mother in the process of differentiation, from which the first awareness of subjectivity originates.¹²³ Patterson's analysis also manifests significant similarities to the work of Melanie Klein, emphasising the importance of the mother as the 'primary object' instrumental in establishing the contours of conscious existence. Klein's theories will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

After experiencing the traumatic vicissitudes of the Holocaust, Leitner uses a powerful symbol of idealised maternity to retroactively imbue her experience with metaphysical meaning. In a chapter entitled 'Peter,' Leitner discovers she is pregnant and addresses her joyful expostulations to her deceased mother:

I stood in front of the crematorium and now there is another heart beating within that very body that was condemned to ashes. Two lives in one Mama - I'm pregnant!|
Mama we've named him Peter. You know how much I like that name. It translates into stone or rock. You were the rock Mama, you laid the foundation. Peter has started the birth of the new six million. *Mama you did not die!*¹²⁴

Leitner positions herself, her mother and her newborn child as key figures within a redemptive narrative of rebirth. Despite the many admonitory statements that no external meaning may be extracted from the Holocaust and that survival always came down to the question of chance, Leitner utilises the concept of motherhood as a defiant gesture of

122 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.32.

123 *Ibid*, p.54.

124 Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, p.79.

continuing life in the face of attempted extermination. Another life now exists within a body that was condemned to die. The bold and potentially offensive claim that her son represents the birth of a new six million and represents a symbolic vessel enabling the continued existence of the dead, invests the maternal with the power to mitigate the destruction of the Holocaust and surrounds Leitner's survival with an aura of predestination. When describing the birth of her son, Leitner does not present herself as *a* mother, but as *the* mother, a fount of new life flourishing in the wake of mass murder. The *bildungsroman* reaches a conclusion with Leitner's maturation from daughter to mother, inspired and guided by the foundation laid for her by Theresa. Motherhood allows Leitner to contain (to some extent) the disorientating impact of the Holocaust by placing it in the context of an enduring meta-narrative of death and rebirth, which has the effect of imposing some sense of coherence onto her experience of a traumatic event commonly thought to deny assimilation and expression.

Fragments of Isabella and *Five Chimneys* utilise various incarnations of the benevolent maternal figure, both to illustrate the unprecedented brutality of the Holocaust and to alleviate the ontological disruption caused by the event through an imposition of structure and meaning onto the experience. A similar structure is used in *The Apple* by Penelope Holt, an unconventional text which demonstrates how conventions of maternal semiotics surrounding the Holocaust have made the transition from memoir to fiction.

Penelope Holt, *The Apple*

In 2007 Holocaust survivor Herman Rosenblat appeared on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show' with his wife Roma, promoting a memoir that Oprah described as 'the single greatest love story' she had ever encountered. *Angel at the Fence* tells the story of Rosenblat's reunion with and marriage to a girl who threw apples over the barbed wire fence to him whilst he was

imprisoned at Schlieben concentration camp. Prominent historians such as Deborah Lipstadt immediately cast doubt on the veracity of Rosenblat's account. In 2008 Ken Waltzer, a professor of Jewish studies at Michigan State University who was in the process of authoring a book on the subject of the children of Buchenwald, gathered a research team and launched an investigation. Eventually forensic genealogists were able to conclude that Roma Radzicki and her family were nowhere near Schlieben at the time at question, and Rosenblat's story was a fabrication. Waltzer underscored the publication of his research with a bleak admonitory statement:

There are no redemptive endings in the Holocaust. In this case the dark truth was hidden to spin a story of romance, to portray the universe as an orderly and just place and that, to me, is a denial of the substance of the Holocaust.¹²⁵

Waltzer does not simply condemn Rosenblat's actions, his sharply-worded criticism is an implicit castigation of the inappropriate incursion of sentiment into the collective memory of the Holocaust; a widespread incursion believed to disproportionately privilege optimistic narratives of heroic rescue and the unlikely triumph of romance over adversity. The publication of *Angel at the Fence* (scheduled for Valentine's Day, 2009) was cancelled and the media responded with a storm of outrage. *Angel at the Fence* was angrily compared to Benjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent memoir *Fragments* and Misha Defonseca's story of surviving the Holocaust by living with wolves; however, Rosenblat's story does not amount to an unambiguous case of fraud. Although Rosenblat's account of childhood romance conducted through the barbed wire fence is pure fantasy, Rosenblat is a survivor of the Holocaust and he was imprisoned at Schlieben. Unfortunately Rosenblat's true story of survival has been obscured, perhaps permanently, by the condemnation of his literary hoax.

¹²⁵ Elizabeth Day, 'When One Extraordinary Life Story is not Enough,' *The Guardian*, Sun 15 Feb 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/15/herman-rosenblat-oprah-winfrey-hoax>.

Herman was born in Bydgoszcz in 1926 as the youngest child of the Rosenblat family. After the death of his father and the deportation of his mother, Herman was cared for by his older brothers in the squalid conditions of the Piotrkow ghetto. When he was thirteen Herman and his brothers were imprisoned in the forced labour camp at Bugaj and then at Schlieben, a sub-camp of Buchenwald.

In the aftermath of what appeared to be another in a long series of Holocaust literary scandals, the media turned its attention to the man behind the story. Slowly a portrait of Herman Rosenblat emerged, portraying him as an eccentric dreamer, a man compulsively driven toward embellishment, who revelled in the attention his stories garnered.¹²⁶ The media presentation of *Angel at the Fence* as a product of Rosenblat's eccentric personality, deflects attention from other important factors that undoubtedly influenced the story's creation, namely, a cultural appetite for 'Holocaust kitsch.'¹²⁷ Referring to *Angel at the Fence* alongside the embellished Holocaust memoirs of Martin Gray and Deli Strummer, both of which fabricate events designed to increase pathos or emphasise heroism, Sue Vice states that 'the genesis of Rosenblat's text reveals the kind of pressure and expectation that might lead to embellishment.'¹²⁸ *Angel at the Fence* first came to light as a romantic story that won a literary competition, the ensuing publicity was whipped to fever pitch by Rosenblat's subsequent appearance on 'The Oprah Winfrey Show.' To put it succinctly, the evolution of Rosenblat's narrative can be attributed, at least in part, to the presence of an audience eager to embrace it. Rosenblat demonstrates awareness of such an audience in his own explanation for his behaviour. A *New York Times* article quoted Rosenblat as saying:

I wanted to bring happiness to people, to remind them not to hate, but to love and

126 *Ibid.*

127 Anne Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

128 Sue Vice, 'Questions of Truth in Holocaust Memory and Testimony,' *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, edited by Jenni Adams (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) 47-65, p.52.

tolerate all people [...] I brought good feelings to a lot of people and I brought hope to many. My motivation was to make good in this world. In my dreams, Roma will always throw me an apple, but I now know it is only a dream.¹²⁹

For Rosenblat, the truth is subsumed by the desire to tell an uplifting story within the conventions dictated by the romantic story and by their credulity and eager acceptance, the viewing public implicitly endorsed this view, situating *Angel at the Fence* in the context of a troubling aesthetic phenomenon. In an examination of Roberto Benigni's controversial film *Life is Beautiful*, Casey Haskins observed that 'our popular culture seems obsessed with just about anything, from the sublime to the ridiculous, pertaining to spiritual redemption.'¹³⁰

Taking the reception and complicated truth status of *Angel at the Fence* into account, it seems ironically fitting that the only published version of Rosenblat's narrative, appears in a form characterised by what can only be described as hyper-mediation.

Motivated by the conviction that Rosenblat's story, and indeed 'the story behind the story,' deserved to be told, Penelope Holt published *The Apple* in 2009. Holt's book constitutes an intriguing textual collage incorporating Rosenblat's true story, his fabricated narrative, and its origins. Holt also admits to various textual borrowings from historical accounts of life at Buchenwald, particularly David A. Hackett's 1995 translation of *The Buchenwald Report* and *The Boys* by Martin Gilbert.¹³¹ Neither memoir nor fiction, *The Apple* defies categorisation in a manner that interrogates conventions surrounding the representation of the Holocaust and its treatment in popular culture. Despite the fact that Holt's confusing composite text arguably obscures the truth under more layers of mediation than Rosenblat's original memoir,

129 Sam Roberts, 'Herman Rosenblat, 85, Dies; Made Up Holocaust Love Story,' *New York Times*, Feb 21 2015
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/business/media/herman-rosenblat-85-dies-made-up-holocaust-love-story.html>.

130 Casey Haskins, 'Art, Morality and the Holocaust: The Aesthetic Riddle of Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59.4 (2001) 373-384 (p.373).

131 Penelope J. Holt, 'Author's Note,' *The Apple*, (New York: York House Press, 2009).

the unique construction of *The Apple* can be viewed as an allegorical reconstruction of the process by which the Holocaust is transcribed from the private memories of the individual, into a collective cultural memory. Holt takes disparate elements from memoir fiction and historical source material and moulds them into a single linear narrative that, ironically, asks more questions than it answers concerning the authentic representation of the horrifying reality of the Holocaust. It is impossible, when reading Holt's text, to identify the source of individual episodes, which has the seemingly counterproductive effect of further obscuring the line between truth and fiction. In the opening chapter of *The Apple*, Rosenblat reflects on the distinction between his book and his life story as 'a mess he cannot unravel.'¹³² Indeed, it is 'a mess' that Holt's text makes little attempt to unravel. Characterising the line between memoir and fiction as 'messy,' implicitly highlights a well-trodden, but still controversial field of ambiguity that exists within Holocaust studies.

In 'Writing and the Holocaust,' Irving Howe attempts to divorce Holocaust testimony from the realm of aesthetics, describing it as 'the kind of writing in which the author has no obligation to do anything but, in accurate and sober terms, tell what he experienced and witnessed.'¹³³ Howe's reflections on Holocaust testimony seem to be based on the assumption that memory can be directly and unproblematically conveyed via the written word without resorting to previously established literary conventions. In 'Interpreting survivor testimony,' Lawrence Langer challenges this idea.:

To whom shall we entrust the custody of the public memory of the Holocaust? To the historian? To the survivor? To the critic? To the poet, novelist or dramatist? All of them recreate the details and images of the event through written texts and in doing so remind us that we are dealing with *represented* rather than unmediated reality [...] My

132 Penelope J. Holt, *The Apple*, (New York: York House Press, 2009) p.4.

133 Howe, p.182.

concern here is with the survivor account, which in the very process of forming a narrative by describing with words, adopts a procedure that makes it impossible to avoid some kind of teleology, a view of experience invested with meaning and purpose.¹³⁴

Langer strongly discourages the view that any account of the Holocaust offers an ‘unmediated’ glimpse of reality. Memories, particularly traumatic memories, are subject to revision and reconstruction after the fact. The process of translating memory into narrative invariably results in the imposition of literary devices and constructs, narrowing the conceptual divide between memoir and fiction. Langer’s reflections highlight the ambiguity surrounding the relative authenticity of testimonial and fictional accounts of the Holocaust by his suggestion of their mutual indebtedness to the devices of literature. In *The Apple*, Holt’s reference to this ambiguity draws attention away from the factual details of Rosenblat’s narrative, focussing instead on the complex vicissitudes surrounding the representation of traumatic experience; this has the effect of casting a sympathetic light on Rosenblat’s desire to create an uplifting story out the traumatic confusion of his memories.

In an ‘Author’s Note’ preceding the main text of *The Apple*, Holt outlines her motivation for writing the book:

This book tells Herman’s story and also the story behind the story - what happened after the story became public and created a perfect pop-culture storm, complete with gotcha journalism, adventures in culture making, publishing dilemmas, modern victimhood, freedom of speech and storytelling, new media and the power of the internet to explode a story.¹³⁵

When one considers the nebulous construction of *The Apple*, Holt’s implicit criticism of the

134 Langer, p.26.

135 Holt, ‘Author’s Note.’

aggressive mediation of popular culture and sensational journalism, seems somewhat ironic. In stating that she simply wishes to ‘tell Herman’s story and also the story behind the story,’ Holt seeks to distance herself from these practices, claiming to offer balance and clarity in the wake of the ‘pop-culture storm.’ In reality, what *The Apple* offers the reader is, in essence, an alternative *reconstruction* of Herman Rosenblat’s life story. In Holt’s iteration, the eccentric trickster and attention-seeking fraudster is reinterpreted as a deeply sympathetic figure whose fabrications have an internal consistency within an overriding traumatic narrative.

Whilst *The Apple* does not further the cause of separating the truth of Rosenblat’s life from the substance of his fantasies, the aspects of his story (both real and invented) that Holt chooses to emphasise in her reconstruction, offer a valuable insight into those conventions of Holocaust representation that carry particularly potent cultural resonance, evidenced by their power to shape a text that profoundly destabilises the perceived boundary between memoir and popular fiction. This section posits that the most prominent and significant of the aspects in question is the trope of motherhood. The idea of maternity is intricately woven into the structure of *The Apple* at three distinct textual levels, encompassing Holt’s interpretive stance as secondary witness, the narrative structure of Rosenblat’s Holocaust experience and the implied motivation for his fabrication.

In analysing *The Apple*, much can be gleaned from examining Holt’s decisions regarding narrative voice. The text is written from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator:

Sometimes Herman sat near his father’s bed with his book open on his lap, just watching him sleep. It frightened him to see how awful he looked; like a dead man. I don’t care, Herman thought, as long as he is still here where I can see him.¹³⁶

In this passage, Herman is sitting by his father’s bedside, watching his slow death from

136 Penelope J. Holt, *The Apple*, p.47.

typhus. When describing this scene, the narrator demonstrates unlimited access to Herman's thoughts and emotions. This particular narrative voice provides a strong impression of immediacy, detracting attention from the many layers of mediation attendant on Holt's reconstruction of Rosenblat's life-story. In actuality, *The Apple* is a composite drawn from Holt's position as secondary witness to a large variety of testimony, from historical sources, to Rosenblat's memories and fantasies. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Dori Laub draws attention to the role of the witness to testimony in the reconstruction and representation of traumatic memories:

While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma - as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock - has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of a narrative which is being listened to - and heard - is therefore the process and the place where the cognizance and the 'knowing' of an event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*.¹³⁷

Laub posits that the giving of testimony is a two-way process, requiring the participation of both speaker and listener. It is suggested that the belated processing of traumatic memories requires the presence of a sympathetic, active listener to facilitate the translation of raw and often fragmented impressions into a coherent narrative. Although Laub is specifically reflecting on his role as an analyst, working with Holocaust survivors and their children, his observations concerning the collaboration of the recipient to testimony can be relevantly extended to encompass less immediate forms of testimony. Whether testimony is heard, watched or read, the witness does not enter the process as a *tabula rasa*. The interpretation and subsequent representation of testimony is subject to many factors, not in the least of

137 Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, (London: Routledge, 1992) p.57.

which is the attitude, disposition and prior knowledge of the recipient. In her 'Authors Note,' Holt is very clear on the mindset in which she approached Rosenblat's testimony:

The Holocaust historians and survivors who brought Herman's embellishments to light have my respect and admiration as they guard and protect the truth. It is not my place to apologize for Herman and the hurt that his behaviour may have caused. But perhaps because I am the mother of a thirteen-year-old boy, the age that Herman was when his mother was sent away to be gassed in Treblinka, it is my hope that Holocaust survivors, historians and the collective community can seek to understand and forgive an individual survivor and his story.¹³⁸

Separating herself from the objectivity of historians, Holt assumes the gaze of a sympathetic mother; this has the effect of framing Rosenblat's fabrications as the product of a traumatic childhood. Despite Holt's claim that she wishes to 'leave readers to make up their own mind,' she subtly encourages the adoption of this interpretive position. Although certain portions of *The Apple* examine the motivations of an adult Herman, the text is dominated by the reflections and impressions of his younger self. The dedication at the front of the book reads '*For all the children lost to genocide, our hearts have broken for you,*' thereby detracting attention from the scandal and publicity that surrounded *Angel at the Fence* by encouraging the reader to view Rosenblat within the unambiguously sympathetic context of the 1.1 million child victims of the Holocaust. Additionally, *The Apple*'s third-person omniscient narrator further reinforces the maternal attitude of secondary witnessing espoused by the author, by providing access to the thoughts and reactions of the young Herman:

He didn't understand all this talk about Hitler and the Nazis and why it was important to them. His family was safe. Every week they enjoyed a nice Shabbat dinner on

138 Holt, 'Author's Note.'

Friday and a peaceful Shabbat every Saturday. Lots of music and talking and kidding around.¹³⁹

Frequently eschewing the hindsight of adult knowledge, Holt portrays Herman through the voice of childhood innocence, confused by the horrors unfolding around him and unaware of what is to come. In 'Kinds of Testimony: Children of the Holocaust,' Andrea Reiter suggests that a recreation of the child's perspective in memoir and testimony serves to 'defamiliarise the life in the camps for the reader,' forcing them to 'consider the Holocaust anew'¹⁴⁰ in the face of a perceived modern saturation with the event. According to this theory, the perspective of the confused child faced with imprisonment and deportation mirrors the position of a contemporary reader struggling to comprehend the enormity of the Holocaust. Holt's pointed self-identification as a mother demonstrates an alternative outcome concerning the impact of the child's testimonial voice. This chapter has already made mention of the prevalence of juvenile victims in representations of the Holocaust that adhere to the conventions of popular culture. Reflecting on the mediation of Holocaust memory through the medium of iconic photographic images, Marianne Hirsch writes that:

Less individualized, less marked by the particularities of identity, moreover, children invite multiple projections, and lend themselves to universalization. The photographic images elicit an affiliative and identificatory as well as a protective spectatorial look marked by these investments.¹⁴¹

Hirsch observes that, as victims of the Holocaust, children are likely to elicit feelings of empathic identification arising from an innate protective impulse; it does not take an enormous leap of logic to define this impulse as parental. A narrative written from the

¹³⁹ Penelope J. Holt, *The Apple*, p.13.

¹⁴⁰ Andrea Reiter, 'Kinds of Testimony: Children of the Holocaust,' *Holocaust Studies*, 11.2 (2015) 1-10 (p.4).

¹⁴¹ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) p.142.

perspective of a child victim has the potential to encourage a protective and motherly response in readers that is sometimes problematic in its tendency to arouse sentimentality at the expense of genuine reflection. The effusive outpouring of public sympathy that immediately followed the publication of Benjamin Wilkomirski's fabricated memoir *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* aptly demonstrates this phenomenon. In response to reading the book a Swiss woman writes:

It was as if I had to take this little child in my arms and tear away all that had happened to him.¹⁴²

It is interesting to note that, in her recreation of the child's voice, Holt evokes the defamiliarisation spoken of by Reiter, but ultimately rejects this position of identification by emphasising a maternal perspective in her author's note. In questioning the role of empathy and identification in Holocaust pedagogy, Pascale Rachel Bos expresses the view that students of genocide should be discouraged from 'facile identification with the victimization of the people about whom and whose work they read,'¹⁴³ thus avoiding their critical and contextual complexity. Bos outlines the troubling traces of 'imperialism and narcissism' in an approach to testimony that attempts to appropriate the experience of the other.¹⁴⁴ Although Bos specifically refers to identification with victims versus identification with perpetrators, Holt's decisions regarding her own spectatorial position are equally marked by the allure of the facile. *The Apple* rejects the intellectual uncertainty of the child's perspective in favour of the much more comfortable persona of the compassionate and understanding mother. In choosing to view Rosenblat's testimony through the gaze of the maternal, Holt assumes an interpretive position implicitly imbued with authority, allowing her to evade the ethical,

142 (Quote reproduced in) Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, translated by John E. Woods (New York: Schocken Books, 2001) p.119.

143 Pascale Rachel Bos, 'Empathy, Sympathy, Simulation? Resisting a Holocaust Pedagogy of Identification,' *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 36.5 (2014) 403-421 (p.404).

144 *Ibid*, p.413.

historical and cultural issues that surround both Rosenblat's personal saga and the Holocaust as a whole. The deployment of motherhood as a witnessing persona in *The Apple* draws attention to the problematic role of identification in contemporary cultural interactions with Holocaust testimony, and its potential to preclude meaningful engagement with the past.

Holt's second deployment of the motif of maternity concerns the structuring of Rosenblat's Holocaust narrative. Throughout *The Apple*, Rose functions as a symbol of idealised maternity, comparable to Leitner's portrayal of Theresa in *Fragments of Isabella*. Like Leitner, Holt adopts the structure of the *bildungsroman* when portraying Rosenblat's Holocaust experience, and within this structure Rose is presented as the benevolent centre of the family's pre-war domestic life:

His parents and brothers argued and paced, frowned and worried, but Herman wasn't scared. He watched from his vantage point on the floor and felt sure that everything was fine. There was his mother in the kitchen, right in the middle of it all, cooking like always. Her good food drew them like a magnet to the family table, in the middle of the warm loving home, where they were all together and safe.¹⁴⁵

Holt portrays nine-year-old Herman as initially inhabiting a state of blissful ignorance, unaware of the ominous signs that foreshadow the approach of the Holocaust. The sense of absolute security described in this passage is entirely dependant upon the presence of his mother, situated against the comfortably familiar backdrop of the kitchen. In a similar fashion to Leitner's 'cradle of love,' the idyllic presentation of Rosenblat's life before the Holocaust is structured around the image of a 'warm, loving' family, the cohesion of which is attributed to Rose in her capacity as the provider of shared meals. For Herman, the image of his mother in the kitchen constitutes the epitome of family life, safeguarding the integrity of his internal

145 Penelope J. Holt, *The Apple*, p.12.

world and reducing exterior events to a state of irrelevance.

In accordance with the structure of the *bildungsroman*, Holt presents the intrusion of the Holocaust into Rosenblat's life as a series of pivotal moments that imply the symbolic end of childhood and a transition into the adult world. Just as with *Fragments of Isabella*, these moments of transition are constructed around exposure to maternal suffering and the trauma of maternal separation.

The second chapter of Holt's text narrates the Rosenblat family's flight from Bydgoszcz in the wake of the advancing German army. During this dangerous journey from Bydgoszcz to Warsaw, eleven-year-old Herman witnesses a tableau of disturbing events that gradually erode his sense of personal safety and emotional security. After the disappearance of his older brother Sam, Herman feels compelled to comfort his weeping mother.¹⁴⁶ Rose is injured when the family wagon finds itself in range of flying artillery shells, prompting Herman's sudden awareness of how much his parents have aged.¹⁴⁷ Not long after this, when the family have finally reached the outskirts of Warsaw, Herman sees a corpse for the first time, an event that shakes him to the core. For Herman, the events of this journey act as a catalyst, culminating in the realisation that he must leave his childhood behind:

For the first time it dawned on Herman that the Polish army was outmanned and outmachined. He hadn't worried about Isydor and Abraham until that moment. If the Germans capture them, he fretted now, they will kill them because they are Jews. He turned inward away from the crowd, corpses and debris littering the roads. I can't go on being the baby of the family, he thought, with the others always coddling me. Until the older ones come back, Tatus and Mamusia need me to act like a grown-up.¹⁴⁸

146 *Ibid*, p.19.

147 *Ibid*, p.23.

148 *Ibid*, p.23.

The sober reflections in this extract contrast sharply with the little boy who sat on the kitchen floor, impervious to the atmosphere of anxiety surrounding him. Herman is now forced to contemplate the defeat of his country and the possible consequences for his family. In *The Apple*'s depiction of the arduous journey from Bydgoszcz to Warsaw, Herman's physical displacement is accompanied by an emotional transition of equal magnitude. A brutal confrontation with the human cost of war and the incipient awareness of the catastrophe approaching his family, propels Herman from his previously held state of innocence. It is, of course, common literary practice to associate the trauma of wartime with the symbolic end of childhood. Kalí Tal posits that narratives of trauma and survival adhere to certain structural conventions. The idea of a loss of innocence can be equated to the second stage, which Tal describes in terms of the disruption of 'personal myths,' such as never-ending youth or the sense of one's own immortality.¹⁴⁹ In the context of the *bildungsroman*, this period of transition in which the previous foundations of existence must be discarded, represents the beginning of the hero's journey from a place of provincial safety, into the realm of worldly danger. What is striking in Holt's description of this physical and emotional journey is the emphasis she places on the mortification of the maternal figure. The events that precipitate Herman's momentous realisation predominantly revolve around a growing awareness of his mother's vulnerability and mortality, for instance, her tears over Sam's departure and the injury to her ankle. Similar to Leitner's description of her mother's whipping, the sight of his injured, bereaved mother and his ageing father, strips Herman of the innocent security of his previous existence, forcibly confronting him with the terrifying encroachment of the Holocaust.

The second pivotal moment of transition represented in *The Apple* has a greater maternal emphasis than the first. This event consists of the deportation of Herman's mother and is

¹⁴⁹ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p.132.

presented by Holt as the traumatic nexus of Rosenblat's story. When Rose is selected for deportation, she attempts to save the life of her youngest son by repelling him from her with an outward display of callousness:

'Herman, I do not love you. I want you to get away from me and go over there with your brothers. I do not want you with me. Now go.' Awful words that he couldn't understand. He was shocked and unable to move. Easy for Abraham to drag him off now, but Herman never took his eyes off his mother even though she had put her back to him.¹⁵⁰

The abrupt and violent disappearance of Rose from Herman's life, combines maternal loss and separation with the additional trauma of apparent maternal rejection. Following this incident, Herman enters a profound state of shock accompanied by the realisation that his former life is over:

Could Tatus and Mamusia somehow come back? Was this ordeal just a strange hiccup in an existence that had seemed perfect, more or less until the war began? Would his young life somehow right itself like a spinning top that wobbled and then straightened up on its tip?¹⁵¹

Herman's 'perfect life' before the war is dependant on the presence of his parents and it is irretrievably disrupted by the loss of his mother. Holt portrays Herman's initial reflections in the aftermath of this event, in the form of a protracted series of questions. The Holocaust has destabilised all that is familiar and secure, prompting Herman to enter a traumatic state of uncertainty. In her presentation of Rosenblat's life story, Holt adopts a narrative structure commonly used in Holocaust memoir and this structure is supported by an idealised image of motherhood. The effect of this structure is to create a narrative that is accessible to a

¹⁵⁰ Penelope J. Holt, *The Apple*, p.62.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.64.

contemporary audience owing to the universal familiarity of the coming-of-age story, whilst at the same time, making no sacrifice regarding authenticity.

The moments of transition within the structure of the *bildungsroman* are of crucial importance to the final textual iteration of motherhood woven into *The Apple*. This iteration consists of Holt's attempt to locate the motivation behind Rosenblat's fabrication within the most traumatic events of his childhood. Immediately after Rose Rosenblat's deportation, Herman is left in a state of turmoil by her sudden departure and apparent rejection of him. During the restless night that follows these events, Rose appears before her youngest son in a vision and comforts him:

Herman had seen his mother swallowed up by violence that he could not understand. He was trembling with fear and half dead from exhaustion. He was starving for a dream to replace the unbearable demands of reality. And mercifully, the healing thrust of his tender psyche, stretched to breaking, did not fail him. On the first night of separation from his mother, Herman dreamt of home. Everyone was gathered around the dinner table in Bydgoszcz, safe, laughing and happy. But then he awoke, coming to in the dark. As he lay in bed, encircled in the arms of Isydor, who was trying to be a father to him now, Herman made out a small figure in the dark ghetto hovel. Mamusia sat on his bed and leaned down to kiss him.¹⁵²

This passage is interesting in the clear distinction it draws between waking and dreaming. Herman's palliative dream of home and his vision of his mother at his bedside are separated by the statement that he awoke and the awareness of his brother's arms around him. The implication that his vision of Rose was genuine obviously represents a point at which Rosenblat's testimony has strayed into invention, evincing the 'oneiric and visionary'

152 *Ibid*, p.64.

qualities that, according to Sue Vice, characterise the original text of *Angel at the Fence*.¹⁵³ Holt's framing of this slippage between fantasy and reality attempts to defend Rosenblat's embellishments by locating their origin at a moment of crisis in a 'tender psyche stretched to breaking.'

Herman's separation from his mother is portrayed as the traumatic nadir of his Holocaust experience. In response to this sudden and devastating loss, Rose is reinserted into the narrative as a figure of 'supernatural maternal protection,'¹⁵⁴ Throughout *The Apple*, this guardian angel facilitates and directs Rosenblat's other fantasies. The very first chapter of *The Apple* recreates the apocryphal meeting at the barbed wire fence at Buchenwald. Herman is standing near the fence, cold and hungry, when a girl appears from behind a tree and throws an apple to him. Just before this miraculous appearance, Herman has been thinking of her mother and whispers her name aloud. This sequence of events creates an implied connection between Rose and 'the Angel beyond the fence.' The mother and the little girl are obviously united by the angel motif, and in this particular passage, Herman's whisper of 'Mamusia' seems to function as a prayer or incantation, summoning a benevolent apparition bearing life-giving sustenance.¹⁵⁵ Holt presents the meeting at the fence as symptomatic of the traumatic absence that frames Rosenblat's Holocaust experience. The girl at the fence provides the physical nourishment and emotional warmth that dominates Rosenblat's memories of Rose, who is one facet of a phantom maternal presence, created by Herman's psyche in response to his exceptionally brutal separation from his mother.

The notion that the little girl at the fence represents a symbolic manifestation of maternal longing is further strengthened by a dream sequence presented in a later chapter. Shortly after the deportation of his mother, Herman experiences a vivid dream in which he sees his mother

153 Vice, p.53.

154 *Ibid*, p.52.

155 Penelope J. Holt, p.1.

from a distance, accompanied by a young girl:

He saw his mother in the Umschlagplatz. She was ready to board the cattle car, but she seemed calm, happy. She was holding the hand of a young girl about his age. The girl wore a royal blue dress. She was scrubbed and shining with clean dark glossy hair, fair skin and red lips. The girl and his mother both looked over their shoulders, back to where Herman was trapped at the far end of the siding and blocked by the crowd. He saw his mother hand the girl something. A photograph? The pair examined it. Mamusia was pointing towards him, telling the girl to bring the memento to him.¹⁵⁶

Herman's dream recreates the scene of his mother's deportation. In this recreation, the emotional and physical violence of their parting is erased and she is able to leave him a memento. In *The Apple*, Herman interprets this dream as his mother sending an angel to watch over him. Later, when reflecting on his experiences as an adult, he declares Roma to be 'the angel his mother had promised.'¹⁵⁷ When examined figuratively the dream can be viewed as an attempt to minimise the impact of his mother's loss by the suggestion that, in the figure of the little girl, she has left a piece of herself behind. Rose is the source of an enduring romantic fantasy that sustained Rosenblat in the camps and later enabled him to write about his experience by subsuming a series of traumatic events within the narrative structure of an optimistic love story.

As is the case with many of the other texts discussed in this chapter, *The Apple* presents Rosenblat's Holocaust experience as defined by maternal loss. What is interesting in the case of *The Apple* is that maternity is also revealed to dominate Holt's authorial response, both in her treatment of Rosenblat's testimony and her self-positioning as a secondary witness. *The Apple* emerges from various layers of textual mediation, saturated in maternal imagery. The

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.66.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.155.

unusual construction of text, in its occupation of a liminal space between memoir and fiction, uniquely positions it to reveal an over-arching maternal preoccupation that presents itself across a diverse range of literary responses to the Holocaust.

In their proliferation and accessibility Holocaust memoirs are one of the major contributory factors in the development of the Holocaust as a cultural memory. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to observe how close readings of these accounts expose the germination of influential tropes and ideas. Through its analysis of four distinct texts, this chapter has demonstrated the importance of idealised maternal symbolism to the examination of representational conventions in Holocaust memoir. The issue of romanticisation as a relevant aspect of the study of Holocaust victimology has been extensively covered by other researchers, therefore, rather than focusing on this at length, this chapter has sought to highlight the role of the maternal figure in the narrative construction of Holocaust memoir. Three of the four memoirs discussed in this chapter have used idealised or romanticised images of maternity to restore meaning or narrative coherence to otherwise unassimilable experiences. The identification and explication of this representational trend offers additional insight into how pre-established tropes (such as the *mater dolorosa* and ‘the angel in the house’) and patterns of signification have influenced the development of Holocaust memoir as a genre.

This chapter positions idealised maternity as potentially originating in an idealised construction of motherhood that defies cultural and sociological boundaries. The transcultural tendency to idealise the infant/mother bond is referenced in this chapter as one incarnation of a branch of psychodynamic theory that places the mother at the root of subjectivity. Through this observation I have laid the theoretical foundation for the discussion of maternity in later chapters. The next chapter will move away from memoir to examine a work of fiction. Initially I have explored the idealised mother as an ideological refuge in the processing of

trauma, by contrast, chapter two will examine the intergenerational transmission of guilt in relation to Julia Kristeva's theory of the maternal abject.

Chapter Two: Nationalism, Motherhood and Abjection¹⁵⁸

A woman stares into the camera, her expression unreadable.¹⁵⁹ Pressed against her abdomen is a large, framed photograph. The photograph depicts approximately one hundred First World War infantrymen; the military formality of their uniforms as they pose in perfectly ordered rows, sits in stark contrast to the transgressive boldness of her full frontal nudity.¹⁶⁰ When photographer Judy Dater captured this sharply juxtaposed image of 'Cheri' in 1972, she encouraged a feminist interpretation of the photograph, centred around sexual liberation. Dater put forward the idea that the subject was bragging about her sexual conquests, stating that the photograph was intended as a parody of a *Playboy* centerfold.¹⁶¹ In this photograph motifs of sex and violence clash provocatively, linking dominance and aggression with feminine vulnerability in a way that disrupts traditional ideas surrounding appropriate female behaviour.

This interpretation of 'Cheri,' heavily nuanced by issues of gender, places it securely within the context of Dater's other famous works, which are generally considered to have been heavily influenced by the wide-scale emergence of the feminist movement. However, as Carol Schloss observes in 'Photographing the Body Politic,' 'Cheri' can be subjected to further meta-historical analysis. Drawing on the historical context of the First World War photograph featured in the picture, Schloss observes that the naked female body is set in contrast to an idea of nationhood expressed through masculine military ideals. In other words, Dater's exploration of the female form encourages the viewer to reflect on the psychosocial relationship between the nation and the body.

158 A large quantity of the material in this chapter is taken from: Carmelle M. Stephens, 'Vomiting with Indignation': 'Memory and Abjection in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*,' *Holocaust Studies*, 24.2 (2018).

159 See Appendix D.

160 Modernism Inc., Judy Dater, *Cheri*, (1972)

<http://www.artnet.com/artists/judy-dater/cheri-a-18Rv0Lf5YGQ2OQ8u85hA2w2>.

161 Donna Stein, 'The Art of Judy Dater and her Photographic Memoir,' *Women's Art Journal*, Portraits, Issues and Insights, (2014) 3-13 (p.4).

Schloss begins by exploring an interpretation of 'Cheri' based around the assumption that a woman's connection to war and nationalism consists of passivity, exclusion and victimhood. Traditionally, the female body has found a place within nationalistic rhetoric as an object to be fought over and protected. The nation is metaphorically transformed into a ravaged female body in order to inspire a patriotism that is fuelled by the desire to protect and preserve:

Seen in this light, Cheri standing alone in her living room with the soldiers spread across her body is an emblem of the world perceived as female, dominated by those who are armed and ready to ravish her.¹⁶²

This reading emphasises Cheri's position on the margins of the military photograph and her nakedness is suggestive of vulnerability. Although she acknowledges that there is merit to this reading, Schloss suggests that 'Cheri' actually presents a challenge to the traditional role of the female body as a passive inspirational tool used to incite nationalistic fervour. Whilst 'Cheri' overtly invokes the collective memory of World War One, in 1972 America was embroiled in a different conflict. The war in Vietnam was one of the most controversial military campaigns in American history. A large proportion of the public strongly opposed the mass deployment of American troops to South East Asia and rumours of atrocities perpetrated against Vietnamese civilians served to further increase the unpopularity of the war. Schloss points out that in contrast to the patriotism inspired by the First World War, the controversy of the Vietnam War presented a fundamental challenge to national identity. Rather than 'Cheri' existing on the margins of militaristic patriotism, her possessive posture in relation to the photograph is viewed as a gesture of containment, the imagined communion between the female subject and the female photographer excludes and challenges the already destabilised image of military patriotism suggested by the infantry photograph.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Carol Schloss, 'Photographing the Body Politic,' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 6.2, (1987) .326-332 (p.330).

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p.331.

Through her nuanced and detailed analysis of the gendered and political contexts of ‘Cheri,’ Carol Schloss alludes to the complex relationship that exists between the female body and the nation, however the photograph invokes one further aspect of the gendered body politic that she does not explore. The voluptuous hips and full breasts of the model are suggestive of the maternal body. Additionally, the photograph she is holding rests against her lower abdomen, drawing the eye to the position of her womb. What has previously been viewed as a wanton display or a defiant act of containment, may also be read as a protective, maternal embrace.

The idea that ‘Cheri’ is embracing the photographed soldiers as a mother, could be said to comment upon a patriotic narrative that places the maternal body at its centre. An imaginative link between the maternal body and the nation has been an historical constant across many cultures. On a hill overlooking the city of Volgograd in southern Russia, the landscape is dominated by a large statue commemorating the battle of Stalingrad.¹⁶⁴ The two hundred and seventy-nine-foot concrete sculpture consists of a woman standing proudly, holding a sword aloft in her right hand whilst pointing into the distance with her left.¹⁶⁵ At the time of its dedication in 1967, the statue was the tallest sculpture in the world and its transliterated name is *Rodina-mat’zoyvot!* This roughly translates to the Motherland calls! The statue personifies Russia as a mythological mother figure calling her citizens to arms in her defence;¹⁶⁶ this is a common nationalistic theme. As the literal biological producers of nations, the health and virility of a country is frequently expressed in terms of an idealised, inviolate maternal body that must be safeguarded against invasion.¹⁶⁷

In popular nationalist rhetoric the body of the mother often constitutes a quasi-mystical site of

164 See Appendix E.

165 Encyclopedia Britannica, The Motherland Calls, Statue, Volgograd, Russia
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Motherland-Calls>.

166 Julia Chadaga, ‘How Things Matter: The Motherland Calls: Historical and Cultural Significance.’
<http://omeka.macalester.edu/courses/russ151/exhibits/show/love-thy-mother--symbolic-moth/significance>.

167 Robin May Schott, ‘Maternal Bodies and Nationalisms.’ *Philosophy Today*, 41 (1997) 104-109 (p.107)

common origin and a focal point that underpins a notion of collective identity. This idea finds a wide range of expression across many cultures. C.S.Lakshmi observes that, in classic Tamil literature, the maternal body is a site of 'divinity and sanctity.' The mother's womb is described as a 'tiger's lair,' producing brave and majestic soldiers who are nourished with 'the milk of valour' from the breast. Aggressive, military nationalism finds its source and inspiration within the contours of the maternal body. Within this genre of literature, the naturalised link between the collective integrity of the nation and the maternal body is so strong that women who produced cowardly sons (thus compromising the nation) often cut off their breasts in penance, placing the blame on the quality of their breast milk.¹⁶⁸

In poems and stories, a vision of gendered nationalism is created which combines the biological and symbolic role of the mother in the creation of national identity, a literal and figurative point of origin which nurtures and validates a collective sense of selfhood. This notion is explored by Dubravka Zarkov in her book *The Body of War*. This text explores the ways in which the figure of the mother was essential to the media's production of ethnicity in the fraught Balkan conflicts of the early 90s. Drawing on the work of Nira Yuval-Davis concerning the role of the female body in conceptualising the nation state, Zarkov points out that 'although women are the biological producers of the nation, the nation itself is produced through multiple and diverse claiming's of the maternal body.'¹⁶⁹

In times of conflict, when the parameters of geographical spaces are fraught and prone to disruption, the significance of political space is often defined by a meeting of the geographical and the symbolic. This concept is demonstrated very powerfully by an illustration featured in the Serbian weekly paper *NIN* on the 2nd of July 1991. The picture appeared in a piece exploring the roots and significance of the word mother. It features a

168 C.S Lakshmi, 'Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25.42/43 (1990) 72-83 (p.72).

169 Dubravka Žarkov, *The Body of War: Media Ethnicity and Gender in the Break-up of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) p.69.

silhouette of the map of Yugoslavia, with a large pair of breasts bursting out of the centre. The association between mother and nation is created by a less than subtle conflation of the maternal body and the country of Yugoslavia as its borders stood in 1991. As Zarkov puts it, ‘the maternal body is the marker as well as the maker of national territory [...] the maternal body is either victimised and put into the service of othering, or militarised and put into the service of violence.’¹⁷⁰ Through media utilisation of events such as the widespread rape of Bosnian Muslim women that emerged in 1992,¹⁷¹ the violated body of the mother is made to represent the violated nation as both a collective lament and a call to arms.

These examples demonstrate that the maternal body is appropriated by nationalism in various ways to symbolically reinforce the borders of geo-political spaces, but this ancient and enduring relationship has another side to it. The rhetoric of nationalism uses maternal imagery in an attempt to internalise and naturalise the idea of an intrinsic connection between self and nation; however, when this imagined, internal relationship is disrupted, it is interesting to observe the transformation that occurs in the maternal symbolic economy.

In 1933 playwright and socialist Bertolt Brecht fled his native Germany, fearing persecution after Hitler was elected chancellor. In that same year he wrote a poem entitled ‘O Germany, Pale Mother.’ The poem addresses the mythical figure of Mother Germany, and written from a position of exile and political alienation, the maternal imagery is overwhelmingly negative:

O Germany, pale mother!

How soiled you are

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.69.

¹⁷¹ Robert Fisk, ‘Bosnia War Crimes: “The Rapes went on Day and Night”’: Robert Fisk, in Mostar, Gathers Detailed Evidence of the Systematic Sexual Assaults on Muslim Women by Serbian “White Eagle” Gunmen,’ *The Independent*, Monday 8 February 1993
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/bosnia-war-crimes-the-rapes-went-on-day-and-night-robert-fisk-in-mostar-gathers-detailed-evidence-of-1471656.html>.

As you sit among the peoples.

You flaunt yourself

Among the besmirched.

[...]

Whereupon everyone sees you

Hiding the hem of your mantle which is bloody

With the blood

Of your best sons¹⁷²

This mother is a reviled figure who has betrayed her children. In contrast to the sanctified mother in nationalist artwork and literature, this ‘soiled’ mother, ‘flaunting’ herself has almost become her own symbolic antithesis, the whore. Through Brecht’s poem we see a mother figure who is corrupted. The hem of her mantle is ‘bloody with the blood of her best sons,’ instead of nurturing her children, she consumes them. This text, exploring estrangement of self from nation eschews the idealised mother and instead exhibits the abject mother. A corruption of the traditional maternal figure, who destroys and devours.

In ‘O Germany, Pale Mother!’, Brecht adopts the voice of the betrayed child. The poem uses imagery associated with the abject mother to express the feeling that his relationship to his country and his identity as a German had been profoundly disrupted. In the decades following the end of the Second World War, awareness of the Holocaust began to develop in a new generation of Germans, the sentiment expressed in Brecht’s pain filled elegy became a widespread psychological phenomenon. In her essay ‘Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism

172 Bertolt Brecht, ‘O Germany, Pale Mother!’ (1933)
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/o-germany-pale-mother/>.

and the Family,' Anne McClintock states that nationalist lexicons are often drawn from a domestic template – one thinks of terms such as 'motherland,' 'fatherland,' and 'mother tongue.' This popular and reassuring image 'offered an indispensable hope for figuring what was often violent historical change, as natural organic time.'¹⁷³ However, the idea of the family as a microcosmic representation of the nation presented a cruel conundrum for the *nachgeboren* (those born after or near the end of the Nazi era). Awkward questions about the war time activities of close family members naturally flowed into questions concerning their own implication and responsibility as citizens of a nation of perpetrators. The burden of confronting their nation's past led many Germans to reject the concept of the nation state entirely and cultivate a post nationalist identity as Europeans.

This chapter will explore the connection between national identity and the maternal abject using a novel that deals extensively with the impact of the Holocaust on post-war German identity.

In 1995 Bernhard Schlink published *The Reader* in his native Germany. Abandoning both the pulp crime genre and his perversely endearing ex-Nazi anti-hero Gerhard Selb, *The Reader* is considered to be Schlink's first foray into 'serious' literature. Whilst the disarming guise of popular fiction allowed the potentially problematic elements of *Selb's Justiz* to 'elude the moral-historical categories that allegedly dominate post-war German culture,'¹⁷⁴ *The Reader*, by contrast, overtly seizes the issue of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or 'mastering the past,' by the horns. I intend to examine this novel in relation to Germany's 'mastery' of its past, in particular, the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust is viewed as inherently abject. Previous examinations of *The Reader* have explored individual aspects of what may be

173 Anne McClintock, 'Family Feuds: Gender Nationalism, and the Family,' *Feminist Review*, 44 (1993) 61-80 (p.64).

174 William Collins Donahue, 'The Popular Culture Alibi: Bernhard Schlink's Nazi Detective Novels and the Culture of Politically Correct Holocaust Literature,' *German Quarterly*, 77.4 (2004) 462-481 (p.463).

termed 'abjection,' such as the symbolic significance of illness in relation to the body politic and the impact of a cross-generational sexual interaction. In a departure from such approaches, I suggest that the full significance of abjection in Schlink's text can only be accessed by a sustained analysis of *The Reader* alongside Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and Mary Douglas's anthropological work surrounding the idea of cultural pollution. By analysing the text in this way, the various strands of abjection present in *The Reader* may be drawn together and examined as they relate to the historic and psychological dimensions of German memorial culture as it relates to the Holocaust and the legacy of the perpetrator. Within this analysis, it can be seen that the mother figure, as a literal and figurative connection to the past, functions as a master narrative, drawing the other facets of abjection together.

Schlink's novel focuses on the controversial love affair between 15-year-old Michael Berg, a young German of the post-war generation, and Hanna Schmitz, a 36-year-old woman whose evasive and enigmatic behaviour is eventually revealed to mask both her illiteracy and her former employment as a guard in a series of Nazi concentration camps. *The Reader* is narrated from Michael's perspective and predominantly revolves around his struggle to comprehend the enormity of Hanna's crimes and the uncomfortable impression of complicity engendered by their former romantic connection, as he puts it:

If I was not guilty because one cannot be guilty of betraying a criminal, then I was guilty of having loved a criminal.¹⁷⁵

Michael's feelings vacillate between natural abhorrence of Hanna's past deeds and the sympathy and residual affection ignited by the memory of their shared history. In considering his obligations toward her, he faces a dilemma common to the generation of Germans born at

175 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, translated by Carol Brown Janeway (London: Phoenix, 1997) p.133.

the end of the Second World War, a generation uniquely impacted by the legacy of the Holocaust. The confrontation of a national history of infamous genocide was compromised by unavoidable daily contact with perpetrators and bystanders,¹⁷⁶ often within the intimate confines of the domestic sphere. The self-examination of the narrator during the course of Hanna's trial and imprisonment, coupled with Schlink's stated intention to relate 'the story of his generation,'¹⁷⁷ has led to critical consensus that the turbulent relationship between Michael and Hanna is intended to dramatise the struggle of later generations of Germans in attempting to 'master' their nation's genocidal legacy.

Assuming her to embody German national guilt, a large proportion of the critical attention surrounding *The Reader* has focussed on the integrity and verisimilitude of Hanna's presentation as a perpetrator. It has frequently been suggested that Schlink's portrayal of Hanna is inappropriately sympathetic and that the representation of a Holocaust perpetrator as economically and socially disadvantaged constitutes a drastic distortion of historical reality, with dangerous overtones of apologism. Cynthia Ozick scathingly describes it as 'a softly rhetorical work that deflects from the epitome. It was not the illiterates of Germany that ordered the burning of books.'¹⁷⁸ By way of departure from an analytical trend that reflects on the perceived obligation of the novelist to the principles of historical fidelity, I intend to examine the text's presentation of intergenerational memory in relation to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and the seminal work of Mary Douglas on cultural constructions of pollution. Through this examination it becomes apparent that the allegorical, intergenerational confrontation that occurs between Michael and Hanna is suffused with numerous manifestations of abjection. From their very first meeting, Hanna and Michael's

176 Ursula R. Mahlendorf, 'Trauma Narrated, Read and (Mis) understood: Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, Irrevocably Complicit in their Crimes,' *Monatshefte*, 95.3 (2003) 458-481 (p.460).

177 Bernhard Schlink *The Reader*, BBC World Book Club, (January, 2011): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00cp7t1>.

178 Cynthia Ozick, 'The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination,' *Commentary*, 107.3 (1999) 22-27 (p.27).

relationship is characterised by the recurring motifs of illness and bodily incontinence and the dual symbolic resonance of Hanna as a mother figure and a lover. Despite the fact that the concept of the abject has always constituted a perceptible undercurrent in the German discourse of memory, highlighted through evocative, high-profile descriptions of a past that ‘clings like mildew’¹⁷⁹ or a generation ‘vomiting with indignation,’¹⁸⁰ these aspects of *The Reader* have previously passed without detailed critical remark. I posit that *The Reader* utilises the concept of abjection to explore the idea that the persistent cultural memory of the Holocaust in Germany represents a powerful taboo that is an anathema to the construction and iteration of a fully developed national identity. In a speech given in 1979 entitled ‘No End to Auschwitz,’ German writer and intellectual Martin Walser stated that:

A Frenchman or an American can absorb the pictures of Auschwitz into his consciousness in a different way than we can. He doesn't have to think: we human beings! He can think: those Germans! Can we think: those Nazis? I can't do it. This guilt arose through the conditions of our history. We have inherited this entire history [...] We are all subject to the temptation of defending ourselves against Auschwitz. We look toward it and then immediately we look away. It is not possible to live with such images.¹⁸¹

Walser describes Auschwitz as a paradox that can neither be assimilated nor cast off. It is a persistent shame that irrevocably undermines the collective ‘we.’ The national self is brought face to face with a dangerous and historicised abject.

Building on the theories of Jacques Lacan concerning the psychological formation of the

179 Dan Diner, 'Holocaust Narratives,' *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p.220.

180 Joschka Fischer, (1984), This quote was sourced from: A. Dirk Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.36.

181 Martin Walser, 'No End to Auschwitz,' *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on Modern German Identity: Texts and Commentary*, translated by Thomas A. Kovach (New York: Camden House, 2008) 25-30 (p.26).

subject position, Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the abject centres around the visceral feeling of horror experienced by the subject when confronted with something that radically disturbs the foundations of identity. In her 1982 book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva elaborates in detail on her theory of the abject. In the first chapter she defines the essence of the abject as that which 'is opposed to I.' an entity suffused with otherness, disrupting the boundary between subject and object:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque, forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But nothing either. A something that I do not recognise as a thing. A weight of meaningless about which there is nothing insignificant and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it annihilates me. The abject and abjection are my safeguards, the primers of my culture.¹⁸²

According to Kristeva and Lacan, the integrity of one's identity lies in the ability to clearly demarcate the distinction between subject and object, navigating an image of the self, poised at 'the edge of non-existence,' under constant threat of annihilation. In the extract from Walser's speech, the figure of the Nazi disrupts this distinction, haunting German subjectivity as a historical figure that the subject wishes to cast off but must assimilate. Those Nazis' represent, in Kristeva's terms 'that which is fundamentally opposed to I.'¹⁸³ For latter generations of Germans, the perspective of the perpetrator combines radically alterity with the discomfort of familiarity.

In an attempt to gain a clearer understanding of Hanna's crimes, Michael visits the site of Struthof concentration camp during her trial. On the way there he hitches a ride with a truck

¹⁸²Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p.2.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p.1.

driver who presents him with the story of a photograph:

I saw a photograph of Jews being shot in Russia. The Jews were in a long row, naked; some were standing at the edge of a pit and behind them were soldiers with guns, shooting them in the neck. It was in a quarry, and above the Jews and the soldiers there was an officer sitting on a ledge in the rock, swinging his legs and smoking a cigarette. He looked a little morose. Maybe things weren't going fast enough for him. But there was also something satisfied, even cheerful about his expression, perhaps because the day's work was getting done and it was almost time to go home. He didn't hate the Jews. He wasn't...¹⁸⁴

In this passage, the driver offers a hypothetical flirtation with the perspective of the perpetrator. He invites Michael to identify with the officer sitting above the pit by offering a window into his mundane thoughts and concerns. Michael repulses this identification and attempts to displace it by breaching the thin semantic barrier erected between the driver and the perpetrator, confronting him with 'was it you?' The driver's response is to appear suddenly ill and abruptly eject Michael from the car, violently rejecting assimilation of this figure.¹⁸⁵ Through encounters like this one, Schlink dramatises the impact of the legacy of the Holocaust on post-war German identity. Whether or not the driver and the man in the photograph are one and the same is ultimately irrelevant. Just as Walser is unable to say 'those Nazis,'¹⁸⁶ Michael and the driver both occupy a subject position haunted by the spectre of the perpetrator. Creating a complex vortex of attraction and repulsion, this historical figure underpins a national identity at war with itself. This force of contradiction appears to echo Kristeva's words in *Power of Horror*:

¹⁸⁴ Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.151.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.151.

¹⁸⁶ Walser, p.26.

It beseeches, worries and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful – a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.¹⁸⁷

The figure of the perpetrator is abject and must be expelled. In her book *Pollution and Danger* which analyses various cultural beliefs surrounding the concepts of pollution and taboo, Mary Douglas suggests that a culture defines itself – its fears and moral values- by what it chooses to expel. Society is made up of 'a series of forms contrasting with surrounding non-form.' Commenting on practices observed across a number of cultures, Douglas posits that many rituals and superstitions explore the idea of liminality and traversing borders.¹⁸⁸ For instance, in Lele culture, pregnant women were believed to be magically volatile because they housed a transitional entity, ambiguously existing as part of their body whilst simultaneously existing separately¹⁸⁹ Additionally, in rituals across many cultures, fluids such as menstrual blood, pus and semen are seen as impure and/or magically potent as they have crossed the boundary between inside and outside of the body. Departing from Van Gennep's analogy that the form of society represents the structure of a house with an inside and an outside demarcated by walls and fences; noting the corporeal basis of many cultural beliefs, Douglas envisions society and its margins as existing in the form of a besieged body.¹⁹⁰ This concept provides a crucial link between the work of Mary Douglas and the work of Julia Kristeva. Whilst acknowledging that many social rituals reflected individual

187 Kristeva, p.1.

188 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London: Routledge, 1984) p.98.

189 *Ibid*, p. 95.

190 *Ibid*, p.114.

preoccupations that are relatively universal, Douglas stopped short of definitively linking social practices with psychological principles.¹⁹¹ Kristeva later built on Douglas's work in developing her theory of the abject as a defining force in the psychological development of the human subject and as 'the primer of her culture.'¹⁹²

Perhaps the most striking point of continuity between Kristeva and Douglas's work lies in their theoretical construction of the body as a point of delineation when exploring the limitation of social meaning. Kristeva's theory of the abject places a great deal of importance on the boundaries of the body. In *Powers of Horror*, death is presented as a fundamental challenge to meaning and the decomposing cadaver is cited as the ultimate symbol of abjection. In order to thrust aside the idea of death the body expels waste and rejects that which is perceived as unclean:

Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.¹⁹³

The body and its orifices represent a symbolically contested area, where the nascent subject battles to differentiate itself from the object world of filth and death, a world that is inextricably tied to the maternal body. In Kristeva's conception of the abject, the maternal body represents a primal point of origin on the edge of non-differentiated existence that form the nexus of psychological and cultural anxieties concerning contamination and the permeable boundaries of the self. During the course of *The Reader* the subject in question is the national identity of post-war Germany. The struggle of the post-war generation subject to

191 *Ibid*, p.117.

192 Kristeva, p.65.

193 *Ibid*, p. 3.

extricate itself from the deterministic shadow of Nazism is mapped on to a fragile and vulnerable male body. Post 1945 and, more significantly, post-reunification in 1989, the Holocaust has represented a crisis point in the formation of German selfhood. As he confronts his nation's genocidal legacy, Michael's body is beset by illness, and the incursion sexual aggression and perverse constructions of maternity. A site of abjection symbolically representative of a national struggle.

As one of the strongest abject signifiers in the novel, the motif of illness overwhelms Michael's body at critical points, most dramatically in the opening chapter which details his very first meeting with Hanna. The psychological turmoil that Michael is to experience during the course of his relationship with Hanna is foreshadowed by the sudden and dramatic nature of her entrance into his life. At the age of 15, whilst walking home from school, Michael succumbs to the effects of hepatitis and experiences a violent episode of vomiting in front of Hanna's apartment building. Coming to his aid with a timely bucket of water, Hanna subjects the teenager to an ambiguous rescue that is 'almost an assault'¹⁹⁴ in its roughness. Despite the fact that their first true sexual encounter does not occur until several months later when Michael visits Hanna to thank her for her help, even their traumatic first meeting is

194 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.2.

suffused with a peculiar sense of erotic intimacy:

When she straightened up, she saw I was crying. 'Hey kid,' and took me in her arms. I wasn't much taller than she was, I could feel her breasts against my chest. I smelled the sourness of my own breath and felt a sudden sweat as she held me, and didn't know where to look. I stopped crying.¹⁹⁵

Even though he is ailing and bewildered, Michael demonstrates a fundamental awareness of Hanna's body as a sexual object. He is conscious of her breasts and her uncomfortable proximity. In the same moment that he registers their contact, he is also aware of the vomit on his breath. Rather than illness obscuring and precluding erotic intimacy, the two reside awkwardly side by side. As a motif, illness overshadows the start of their sexual relationship, and it recurs when the couple encounter each other in a courtroom context, years after the sudden termination of their romance. When the trial begins, Michael has not seen Hanna for seven years. Over the course of the next few weeks, Michael discovers Hanna's illiteracy and her shocking history as a camp guard. His attempts to reconcile the memories of his lover with the brutal acts he hears described in court cause him to enter a state of ambivalent consternation, with the most notable symptom described as 'a general numbness.'¹⁹⁶ The climax of these feelings occurs after Hanna is sentenced to life in prison and manifests itself as a severe bout of fever, brought on by a reckless skiing incident. Michael identifies his fever and subsequent recovery as the point at which he begins to process the reality of Hanna's conviction and its wider implications:

Then I came down with a high fever and was taken to hospital. By the time I left, the numbness was gone. All the questions and fears, accusations and self-accusations, all the horror and pain that had erupted during the trial and been immediately deadened

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.3.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.101.

were back and back for good. I don't know what doctors diagnose when someone isn't freezing even though he should be freezing. My own diagnosis is that the numbness had to overwhelm my body before it would let go of me, before I could let go of it.¹⁹⁷

In the case of the fever, a direct correlation is drawn between the sickness in Michael's body and the psychological difficulty of processing Hanna's crimes, a process he describes in terms appropriate for discussing an illness, as something that overwhelms his body.

In 'Reading and Misreading *The Reader*' Jeffrey Roth draws a superficial correlation between the health of Michael's body and the psychological trauma afflicting his generation around confronting the legacy of the Holocaust. In his comments on the opening of the novel, Roth describes Michael as 'a sick German reading about a sick Germany,'¹⁹⁸ establishing a sense of continuity between Michael's physical body and his collective identity as a German, an identity under attack by an insidious illness. Ursula R. Mahlendorf also briefly remarks on what she perceives as a rather heavy-handed use of the metaphor of sickness, comparing Michael's illness at the start of the novel to 'a pathology of silence'¹⁹⁹ that is seen to exist around Germany's participation in the Holocaust. The significance attached to illness derives from the assumption that Michael's body represents the body politic. Assault by a pathogen is viewed as a metaphor for the intrusion of an undesirable burden of cultural memory that invades and undermines the body's sense of cohesion. Michael's first meeting with Hanna represents (unknowingly) his first contact with Germany's legacy of the perpetrator and both Roth and Mahlendorf have attached symbolic significance to the pervasive presence of illness that overshadows this meeting, however I believe this to be a metaphor that carries more weight than has previously been acknowledged. Analysis of the significance of illness in *The*

197 *Ibid*, p.166.

198 Jeffrey I. Roth, 'Reading and Misreading *The Reader*,' *Law & Literature*, 16.2 (2004) 163-177 (p.166).

199 Mahlendorf, p.462.

Reader is usually confined to the first encounter of the couple and is based upon discussion of the body politic in terms of a simplistic binary relationship between illness and health. A more rigorous examination of illness as it is presented in *The Reader* would reveal it to be a persistent metaphor throughout the novel and constitutes a phenomenon that underpins a discussion concerning the role of abjection in the articulation of the national body in the face of the collective memory of trauma.

Illness is considered to be inherently abject because it violates the protective boundaries of the body as a malevolent, invasive force that imparts a sense of vulnerability. Sickness violates the illusion of one's 'clean and proper body.'²⁰⁰ The ravished and vulnerable body is often deployed to represent the corruption of a system as a whole. In her article 'What does not Respect Borders' Caroline Magennis writes about the masculine body as 'a sociocultural and gender specific discursive construct that has the potential to subvert dominant ideology.'²⁰¹ Drawing on various examples from Irish fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century, damaged, wounded and sick male bodies are examined in relation to Irish nationalism and the fragile peace process, 'radically unsettling narratives of national struggle and male heroism.'²⁰² One of the most viscerally shocking of these texts is *Ripley Bogle* by Robert McLiam Wilson. In *Ripley Bogle*, the graphic deterioration of the protagonist's body as he succumbs to illness and vagrancy on the streets of London, mirrors the broken ideology Ripley perceives in radical nationalism. Whilst fanatics brought bombs to the streets of London, as an ironic counter note Ripley 'takes his ideological and bodily fracture to the streets of London to self-destruct.'²⁰³ The abject male bodies in these novels have internalised the Irish conflict and enact the problems of conflict resolution. Similarly, in *The Reader*, the

200 Kristeva, p.75.

201 Caroline Magennis, 'What Does Not Respect Borders: The Troubled Body and the Peace Process in Northern Irish Fiction,' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 36.1 (2010) 89-107 (p.89).

202 *Ibid*, p.91.

203 *Ibid*,p. 99.

permeable male body is the main point of encounter between Germany and the history of the Holocaust represented by Hanna. Michael's body is shown to be overwhelmed by contact with destructive history, a history presented in violent flashes as brief, paradigm altering shocks to his system. The first coincides with a violent episode of vomiting occurring when he first meets Hanna and the second with an acute and severe fever after watching her trial. The strategic placement of these two episodes within the narrative emphasises the importance of illness, not just as an absence of health but as representing vulnerability; a body laid open before an incipient dramatic disruption of ideals. Michael's meeting with Hanna acts as the catalyst for his personal encounter with his nation's legacy of genocide, and the period following her sentencing provokes his emotional breakdown as he is finally able to contemplate the moral weight of her actions.

The importance of illness as an abject experience in *The Reader* is strengthened when one considers the specific nature of the illnesses featured. Michael's first illness is identified as an acute bout hepatitis. This represents an interesting choice. Despite sporadic outbreaks in the developed world throughout history, hepatitis is commonly associated with poverty and deprivation; as such it was unlikely to be endemic to middle class Berlin in the 1950s.²⁰⁴ Ursula Mahlendorf suggests that hepatitis was chosen due to the symbolic association of the liver with turbulent emotions,²⁰⁵ but such an abstract and detached approach to bodily organs would seem inconsistent with the corporeal realism that otherwise pervades the text. Looking at the epidemiology of hepatitis, it is a condition that is undeniably abject. Along with its blood-borne associations with syringe contamination and sexual activity (predominantly associated with hepatitis B and C), one of the most common methods of acute infectious hepatitis transmission is mouth to faecal contact.²⁰⁶ Illness in general is abject, but with its

204 Ja Cuthbert, 'Hepatitis A: Old and New,' *Clinical Microbiology Reviews*, 14.1 (2001) 38-58.

205 Mahlendorf, p.462.

206 World Health Organisation Fact Sheet
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs328/en/>.

coprophagic overtones, hepatitis is incredibly abject. Alongside the violent, purgative gesture of vomiting, Michael's portentous first contact with a Holocaust perpetrator is also overshadowed by the idea of ingesting waste. Coprophagia represents an extreme transgression of the topographical borders of the self, it violates most social and cultural taboos and penetrates deeply into the realm of the abject. Its implied presence in *The Reader* suggests an unhealthy dialectic of consumption in relation to the inheritance of memory. In this case the internalisation of a historicised and overdetermined identity; the abject figure of the Holocaust perpetrator.

The use of coprophagia to explore the narrative of the perpetrator and the transmission of guilt has also occurred in other fictional texts exploring the Holocaust; however, whilst the idea of ingesting faeces is merely implied in *The Reader*, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* takes a much more graphic and disturbing approach. The novel's protagonist Maximilian Aue experiences many dreams and fantasies surrounding faecal abjection:

At night, my anxiety bled into my sleep and infected my dreams: seized with an intense need to defecate, I ran to the bathroom, the shit pouring out liquid and thick, a continuous flow that quickly filled the toilet bowl and kept rising, I kept shitting, the shit reached up to below my thighs, covered my buttocks and scrotum, my anus kept disgorging. I frantically wondered how to clean up all this shit, but I couldn't stop it, its acrid, vile, nauseating taste filled my mouth, sickening me.²⁰⁷

In 'Reading as Violence' Jenni Adams points out that this abject resurfacing and ingestion of waste material represents 'Aue's refusal to define the boundaries of the self,'²⁰⁸ – An idea underscored by his narcissistic and incestuous fantasies concerning his twin sister Una. She observes that this phenomenon reinforces the text's over-arching 'problematization of

207 Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, (London: Vintage, 2010) p.114.

208 Jenni Adams, 'Reading as Violence in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*,' *Holocaust Studies*, 17.2 (2011) 27-50 (p.38).

identification which foregrounds the issue of ethics and alterity in the consumption of Holocaust texts.²⁰⁹ In both of these novels the responsibility and the ideological crisis that accompanies the consumption of Holocaust texts (voluntarily or otherwise) is placed jointly on the protagonist and by implication, on the reader and the idea of abject historical consumption is an important concept that unites these texts. The struggle to preserve both individual and collective identity in the face of the overwhelming legacy of the Holocaust is the nexus of the struggle of modern Germany to 'master its past.' In this context, the idea of being physically overwhelmed by sewage is powerful.

When he first visits Hanna's apartment building, Michael describes being able to smell the other occupants cooking from the stairwell, this is soon followed by a reference to the perceptible smell of the lavatory.²¹⁰ From the opening chapters of the text, the location of the couple's future trysts is associated with the intermingled smells of food and waste. The intimate lives of the residents exude the boundaries of their homes and suffuse the stairs and hallway, just as Hanna's repressed culpability will eventually attach itself to Michael's personal narrative. Whilst this is hardly the excremental flood that invades the nightmares of Maximilian Aue, it surrounds Michael and Hanna's relationship with the impression of ominously encroaching contamination that foreshadows what is to come. Equating contact with the Nazi past with contamination by excrement is powerfully evoked in the words of German intellectual Joschka Fischer. He describes the collective memory of National Socialism as 'filth that clings to one's boots.'²¹¹ In *The Reader* and the *Kindly Ones*, this analogy is taken further. The confusion of acts of consumption and defecation reflects the ambivalence felt by many Germans as they were often compelled to reconcile knowledge of horrific deeds with otherwise pleasant memories of a loved one. This conflict is described by

209 *Ibid*, p.38.

210 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.9.

211 Joschka Fischer (1984).

Katharina Von Kellenbach in her article 'Vanishing Acts: Perpetrators in Post-War Germany.' Von Kellenbach discusses the emotionally charged issue of family history and its impact on Germany's struggle with the collective memory of the Holocaust. Citing an example from her personal experience, she recounts the trial and acquittal of her uncle Alfred Ebner. Judicial proceedings against Ebner were discontinued due to the defendant's ill health, but investigative efforts on the part of Von Kellenbach revealed that her uncle was in fact responsible for the deaths of 20,000 people.²¹² The article goes into some detail about the difficulties of reconciling historical evidence of atrocity with the memory of a loved one. Von Kellenbach frankly stated that 'the idea of a mass murderer upon whose knees I had sat as a child brought the horror too close to home. 'To acknowledge evil in one's own family raises disturbing questions: Does this evil contaminate me?'' These 'disturbing questions' lie at the heart of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The question of shame, of inherited complicity and, to use Von Kellenbach's words, of 'contamination.' The abject spectre of an invading pathogen is invoked to denote the presence of an unspoken atrocity within a family's history. For Von Kellenbach the uncomfortable ambivalence she feels within the confines of her family is a microcosmic representation of a national crisis of identification that undermines her self-perception as a 'Good German.' Unable to accept an equivalency between the mass murderer and the kindly old man who bounced her on his lap, Von Kellenbach admits to engaging in self-preservation based around repression and denial.²¹³ An attack on the fundamental basis of one's integrity, arising from a place of perceived security and safety, represents a profound state of abjection, drawing the subject to a 'place where meaning collapses.' According to Kristeva, the only solution is to protect oneself and 'jettison' the offending object.' When confronted with Hanna in a courtroom, Michael attempts to employ a similar strategy:

212 Katharina Von Kellenbach, 'Vanishing Acts: Perpetrators in Post-War Germany,' *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 17.2 (2003) 305-329 (p.307).

213 *Ibid*, p.306.

I was jolted. I realised that I had assumed it was both natural and right that Hanna should be in custody. Not because of the charges, the gravity of the allegations, or the force of the evidence, of which I had no real knowledge, but because in a cell she was out of my world, out of my life. I wanted her far away from me, so unattainable that she could continue as the mere memory she had become and remained all those years.²¹⁴

The prospect of Hanna being released on parole alarms Michael. The characterisation of Hanna and the history she represents as a malignant contagion is reinforced by Michael's desire to maintain a barrier between them. By enforcing physical separation, the criminal justice system places her in convenient quarantine, the swift and uncompromising excision of an unhealthy element from the body politic. In this particular case, Michael's shocked recognition of the strength of his desire to incarcerate Hanna, appears to be a commentary on the more controversial aspects of Germany's pursuit of post-war justice. Of all those put on trial for war crimes in Germany since 1945, a large proportion have been low-level functionaries. Many of those who drafted and implemented major policies either escaped retribution or had been tried and executed by the allies at Nuremberg in 1947. It has been suggested that the high profile pursuit and trial of less significant individuals allowed for a displacement of responsibility by the German population at large. In a 1965 speech 'Our Auschwitz,' Martin Walser reflects upon the social importance of the war crimes trials conducted in Frankfurt in 1963. In particular, he refers to a dramatic process of othering inflicted on the perpetrators and their crimes by the popular media:

The more horrible the individual event, the more precisely it was communicated. The more unfathomable the detail, the more clearly it was described to us. So our memory is now filled with frightful material. And automatically the more frightful the

214 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.96.

Auschwitz quotations are, the clearer our distance from Auschwitz becomes. We have nothing to do with those events – those horrors [...] These acts of brutality can't be shared. This trial isn't about us.²¹⁵

Walser suggests that the highly visible and highly sensational trials allowed the German population to detach themselves from the Holocaust by allowing the courts to locate and confine responsibility to a group of individuals perceived as deviant and brutal, thus preserving the moral health of the majority of the population. Michael's desire to retreat behind the judgement of the court once he is exposed to Hanna's involvement with the Holocaust appears to be a comment on this practice of rejection by radical historical separation.

Pursuing the idea of rejection, the final motif to be explored when considering abject manifestations of illness in *The Reader* is the act of vomiting. Although the text contains only one episode of vomiting, the impact and symbolic significance of this episode cannot be overlooked. When Michael is overcome by the effects of hepatitis on his way home from school he violently vomits in front of Hanna's apartment building. The importance of this incident is underlined by the fact that Schlink describes it in unpleasantly graphic detail:

My mouth was suddenly full, I tried to swallow everything down again and clenched my teeth with my hand in front of my mouth, but it all burst out of my mouth anyway straight through my fingers. I leaned against the wall of my building, looked down at the vomit around my feet and retched something clear and sticky.²¹⁶

Schlink's visceral description lingers upon Michael's futile struggle to prevent the vomit leaving his mouth and the shame he feels at being surrounded by his own bodily fluids.

215 Martin Walser, 'Our Auschwitz,' *The Burden of the Past: Martin Walser on Modern German Identity: Texts, Contexts, Commentary*, translated by Thomas A. Kovach (New York: Camden House, 2008) 7-19 (p.8).

216 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.2.

Leaving aside the fact that vomiting in public is obviously an unpleasant experience, Michael's failure to contain this eruption within the boundaries of his body creates a strongly abject dimension to this episode that demands closer analysis.

Vomiting resonates on an abject level as an extension of food loathing. Kristeva posits that food loathing arises from the instinct to separate from the body of the mother, who is the first provider of food, represents a confrontation with mortality and encompasses the fundamental principles of the abject. She uses the symbolically apt example of being repulsed by the skin that forms on the surface of milk. Vomiting is established as a basic strategy of exclusion, protecting oneself by rejecting the object that provokes the crisis. If one accepts that Michael's body is an analogue for the German population as a whole, the fact that he vomits just before meeting Hanna for the first time, gives the act a socio-historical resonance. Hanna represents a symbolic burden of memory; Michael's vomiting can be perceived as an effort to reject this burden.

The symbolism of vomiting has been used in other texts to explore the complexities of German Holocaust memory. In Anne Duden's 1982 short story 'Transition,' the protagonist is involved in a car accident and has to undergo major reconstructive surgery on her face. Whilst lying in her hospital bed, she experiences a series of bizarre hallucinations. During these hallucinations she ingests the symbols of Germany's historical guilt by means of her 'omnivorous mouth,'²¹⁷ that sucks in everything around her.

No event in my field of vision escaped me, none within my radius of feeling. And was taken in. A never-ending task which, however, was not anything active. It was a form of adjustment, a making room, but only ever for the same old thing, the war and extermination. I swallowed whole battles away, mountains of corpses of the

²¹⁷ Anne Duden, 'Transition,' *Opening of the Mouth*, translated by Della Couling (London: Pluto Press, 1982) 57-97 p.65.

conquered. For a moment of peace that never began. It was a secret and the others didn't know it.²¹⁸

In 'Putting Stones in Place: Anne Duden and German Acts of Memory,' Margaret McCarthy remarks that after an aggressive process of rebuilding in the latter half of the 20th century, the landscape of Berlin is suffused with ephemeral reminders of a troubled past; a past constantly disgorged in the process of redevelopment. Citing such famous examples as 'The Topography of Terror,' Goebbels's bunker and the new *Reichstag* building, McCarthy states that 'German identity is currently positioning itself along architectural nodal points, at times transparent, messy or ossified in relation to history.'²¹⁹ In other words, the uncomfortable relationship that exists between German identity and German history is reflected in the sometimes chaotic mixture of old and new existing awkwardly side by side in the nation's capital. In a profoundly abject gesture, Duden's protagonist involuntarily swallows this historically charged landscape and her bodily boundaries are violently re-established by vomiting²²⁰. Just as Michael's body is rendered symbolically permeable by illness when he experiences his fateful encounter with a Holocaust perpetrator, McCarthy posits that the 'shattered boundaries' of the protagonist's body set the stage for an abject encounter with German history²²¹. Whilst McCarthy recognises that in terms of abject bodily topography, vomiting is generally an attempt to re-establish the boundaries of the self, she claims that 'the protagonist also recognises an inexplicable commingling of self and other in what she voids.' By looking at and attempting to name all the individual elements in the sea of rubble, corpses and various other objects she expels, the protagonist takes the significant step of acknowledging her implicit entanglement with German history²²². In stark contrast to this, Michael's vomit can

218 *Ibid*, p.71.

219 Margaret McCarthy, 'Putting Stones in Place: Anne Duden and German Acts of Memory,' *German Quarterly*, 77.2 (2004) 210-229, (p.211).

220 *Ibid*, p.218.

221 *Ibid*, p.213.

222 *Ibid*, p.220

be viewed as a failed purgative gesture. He is described as vomiting 'something clear and sticky,'²²³ the substance he voids is essentially empty. Michael is at the beginning of his journey of historical encounter. His transparent vomit reads as representing the futility of his instinctive, primal urge to reject his nation's historical burden.

Throughout *The Reader*, illness functions on multiple metonymic levels as representing an overwhelming burden of collective memory. The abject motifs of illness that surround Michael's relationship with Hanna serve as corporeal re-enactments of his inevitable implication in the sublimated and precarious ethical dialogue between the *nachgeboren* generation and the still perceptible remnants of a genocidal regime. Put simply, the turbulent and haunted consciousness of post-war Germany finds an analogue in the disrupted boundaries of Michael's body. As the representative of a memory that registers to the body politic as abject, illness overwhelms Michael's body as an irresistible force. Acts of resistance and rejection prove to be futile. In the opening chapter the protagonist describes his struggle to prevent the symptoms of hepatitis from overwhelming his body. In response to the urge to vomit he clenches his teeth and he speaks of the shame induced by what he perceives to be his own bodily weakness²²⁴. Michael is unable to prevent himself collapsing at Hanna's feet as a teenager, just as he is unable to banish her from his thoughts and his conscience as a man. The body politic is portrayed as fragile and permeable in the face of the powerful psychological spectre of the ever present Nazi perpetrator.

The idea of the resurfacing of the past as an inevitable, inertial force is a powerful one. When one examines the current political and cultural landscape of Germany, it is a notion that still carries considerable weight. More than 75 years on, the spectre of the Holocaust still casts a shadow over Germany's public face. Important decisions and policies continue to attract

223 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.2

224 *Ibid*, p.2

international scrutiny and sometimes censure. Germany's expectation of accepting 800,000 Middle-Eastern asylum seekers has been viewed with some concern in relation to the country's obligation to exercise particular sensitivity regarding the well-being of its Jewish community. Many German Jews have expressed fears that the predominantly Muslim migrants entering the country will import anti-Semitic sentiments, with the result that Jews in Germany will become marginalised and increasingly vulnerable²²⁵. In addition to these anxieties, the irony of Germany's current reputation as a tolerant safe-haven for ethnic minorities within the European Union, has not passed without comment²²⁶. As the nation that orchestrated the most notorious genocide of the 20th century, Germany must continue to walk a precarious diplomatic tightrope. The enduring and pervasive memory of the Holocaust continues to resurface and exert an influence over the way the country is perceived, even when it appears to exhibit a generous and tolerant face. The legacy of the Holocaust has left a distinctive scar on German national identity that appears to be acutely felt from within and still very much visible from without.

Illness is used in *The Reader* as a vehicle by which to stage an abject encounter with the past; a past that infects and overwhelms Michael. Despite the fact that illness represents an apt metaphor for the persistence of collective memory, when discussed in terms of the politics of engagement this trope is controversial. In the terms dictated by this dynamic, Michael is situated as the passive recipient of a toxic memorial inheritance. Casting the history of the Holocaust as an unpleasant affliction that strikes down the innocent and unwary is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, this idea appears to allow Germany to occupy the position of the innocent victim of a totalitarian regime, further victimised by an oppressive

225 'German Jews Fear Rising Anti-Semitism During Mideast Refugee Influx':

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4760918,00.html>

226 'Germany Struggles to Help the Oppressed by Accepting 800,000 Refugees' *The Guardian*,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11860762/Germany-struggles-with-the-challenge-and-the-obligation-to-help-the-oppressed-by-accepting-800000-refugees.html>

burden of memory. Many critics have ascribed to similar readings, leading to *The Reader* being branded as an apologist novel that attempts to eclipse the suffering of the actual victims of genocide:

This is a novel in which the true victims of the period, those who died, have no face; their suffering, though conceded, remains abstract and evokes no emotion in the reader. Here it is second-generation Germans who are the victims of their shame for the perpetrators and suffer for their love to them, indeed, for their illicit, painful, yet intense passion for them.²²⁷

In addition to this, such a position of passivity implies that a nuanced understanding of the emotional and social responsibility conferred through the legacy of the perpetrator can be genetically absorbed without the presence of agency or intellectual investment. This issue is addressed with perceptive acuity by Austrian Holocaust survivor Ruth Kluger. In her book *Landscapes of Memory*, Kluger remarks on 'the museum culture' of the Holocaust in Germany:

The museum culture of the camp sites has been formed by the vagaries and neuroses of our unsorted collective memory. It is based on a profound superstition, that is, on the belief that the ghosts can be met and kept in their place, where the living ceased to breathe. Or rather, not a profound, but a shallow superstition. A visitor who feels moved, even if it is only the kind of feeling that a haunted house conveys, will be proud of these stirrings of humanity. And so the visitor monitors his reactions, examines his own emotions, admires his own sensibility, or in other words turns sentimental.²²⁸

227 Omer Bartov, 'Germany as Victim,' *New German Critique*, 80 (2000) 29-40 (p.33).

228 Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, (New York: CUNY Feminist Press, 2003) p.66.

In this passage Kluger casts a scathing eye on a culture of memorialisation that she perceives as shallow and self-serving. The effort to create a series of neat, well maintained memorial sites is described by Kluger as a proprietary gesture of repression, rather than a genuine commitment to remember. Later in the chapter she describes visiting the former site of Dachau, accompanied by tourists. When recounting the visit Kluger reflects on the enormous imaginative investment it would take to understand what the camp was like without somehow recreating 'the odour of fear emanating from human bodies' and 'the concentrated aggression.' This represents an investment that Kluger feels is beyond the capacity of 'John and Jane Doe.'²²⁹ These observations suggest that bearing the legacy of the perpetrator does not automatically grant insight into the nature of the crimes, and that the call to remember cannot be answered by a self-conscious sentimental performance or a visit to a museum. The gulf between present appearance and past reality that she draws attention to in her visit to Dachau implies that engagement with the past requires a strong exercise of one's intellectual faculties, it cannot be passively absorbed. Despite his sustained use of the metaphor of contamination when describing the impact of the Holocaust on modern German consciousness, Schlink appears to agree. It is on this issue that *The Reader* demonstrates more complexity than it is often given credit for. Alongside the theme of abject contamination by history, there runs a counter narrative of failed historical encounter. Despite the fact that the Nazi era clearly makes its presence felt in post-war Germany, in *The Reader*, it is strongly implied that the extreme nature of the Holocaust renders it inaccessible. When Michael visits Struthof, despite his best efforts, he finds himself unmoved by what he sees:

I remembered my vain attempts, back then to imagine in concrete detail a camp filled with prisoners and guards and suffering. I really tried; I looked at the barracks, closed my eyes and imagined row upon row of barracks. I measured the barracks, calculated

229 *Ibid*, p.67.

its occupants from the information booklet and imagined how crowded it had been. I found out that the steps between the barracks had been used for roll call, and as I looked from the bottom of the camp up towards the top, I filled them with rows of backs. But it was all in vain and I had a feeling of the most dreadful, shameful failure.²³⁰

Even while he is standing in the grounds of a former concentration camp, immersed in thoughts of the trial, Michael is unable to imagine the camp in its full horror. This episode at Struthof seems to echo Kluger's thoughts at Dachau, in which she suspects that access to historically charged memorial sites will not automatically enable meaningful contact with the past. Rather than the haunted atmosphere that is often attributed to memorial sites, Michael is struck by the banality of the camp and its surroundings; he remarks that it could have been a youth hostel or a holiday camp. The guide book provides factual information about the dimensions of the barracks and the number of occupants, but it is unable to recreate the sensation of overcrowding and squalor²³¹, just as the memorial site at Dachau is unable to recreate the atmosphere of fear and desperation. Despite Schlink's intention to draw a comparison between illiteracy and 'people who forgot their moral alphabet during the war,'²³² this is one of the many occasions where literature acts as mediator in an unproductive encounter with the past. During Hanna's trial, Michael reads the English translation of a memoir written by the only eye-witness to Hanna's actions as a camp guard. He describes it as a book that actively resists attempts at identification. He perceives the memoir as 'exuding numbness.' Additionally, although the book provides the enticing possibility of dispelling some of the mystery surrounding Hanna's past, he is unable to definitively identify her within

230 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.153.

231 *Ibid*, 153.

232 The Guardian Profile: Bernhard Schlink
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/feb/09/fiction.books>.

its pages²³³. The memoir and the Struthof brochure provide information without offering insight. In *The Reader* literature governs a politics of encounter that highlights the tension that exists between abject contamination and rejection by presenting the Nazi past as simultaneously laid open and closed off.

In spite of Michael's physically intimate relationship with Hanna, she is never forthcoming with information about her controversial former employment. She rebuffs his attempts to elicit information from her, claiming that only the dead can call her to account²³⁴. On one level, *The Reader* dramatizes the unbearable proximity of the Nazi past for the postwar generation through the trope of abjection, but, standing in direct contradiction to this is the distinct feeling of its unbreachable distance. Michael's attempts to imagine Hanna as a concentration camp guard merely produces shallow, sado-masochistic clichés:

I saw Hanna by the burning church, hard faced, in a black uniform with a riding whip. She drew circles in the snow with her whip and slapped it against her boots...She did it all with the same hard face, cold eyes and pursed mouth...The worst were the dreams in which a hard, imperious, cruel Hanna aroused me sexually²³⁵.

This picture of Hanna feeds in to psycho-sexual fantasies surrounding Nazism that have become almost universal. These fantasies have formed the core of many exploitative creative projects such as *Ilse: She-Wolf of the SS*. The fact that these images appear in *The Reader* and that Michael openly acknowledges them to be poor clichés is very telling. In his article 'Truth is a Woman' Joseph Metz claims that *The Reader*'s complexity lies in 'its awareness of its own seductive power to illicit simplistic readings.' Metz claims that *The Reader* consciously deploys overused tropes associated with representing the Holocaust in order to make a

233 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.118.

234 *Ibid*, p.196.

235 *Ibid*, p.145.

statement about the problematics of representation and to convey a sense of the fraught relationship between Germany and its history²³⁶. The characterisation of Hanna is described as 'a collection of over determined tropes and signifiers reflecting the portrayal of Nazism in western popular culture.'²³⁷ This portrayal reinforces extant tensions within the novel between abjection and ineffability. Despite the numerous manifestations of abjection surrounding Hanna's relationship to the protagonist, his inability to imagine her past in anything other than clichéd terms, precludes any real sense of intimacy or availability. This dynamic mimics Michael's relationship to the German collective memory of Nazism and the Holocaust.

One of the tropes explored by Metz is the mother as an object of libidinal fixation, thus introducing the most significant manifestation of abjection present in *The Reader*. Metz states that the sub-textual positioning of Hanna as a mother figure represents 'the nexus of fear and prohibited desire and death' that characterises Germany's post-war relationship with fascism. The figure of the Nazi perpetrator is a powerful taboo that inspires fascination, fear and obsession, much like the forbidden oedipal desire for the mother. In the context established by Metz, Michael's recurring dreams of returning to Hanna's apartment building are framed as a symbolic desire/fear of returning to the womb²³⁸. Michael's yearning to intimately connect with Hanna again, intersects with a fear of being devoured by the dark forces she represents.

A fixation with the devouring womb emphasises the role of the maternal body as an incarnation of abjection. Mary Douglas introduced the idea of the maternal body being culturally perceived as liminal and the foetus as essentially transitive matter²³⁹. In *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva focuses on this margin orientated perception of the maternal body and

236 Joseph Metz, 'Truth is a Woman: Post-Holocaust Narrative, Postmodernism and the Gender of Fascism in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*,' *German Quarterly*, 77.3 (2004) 300-323 (p.313)..

237 *Ibid*, p.310..

238 Metz, p.312.

239 Douglas, p.98.

situates it as representing the problematic threshold of our existence and our identity:

But devotees of the abject, she as well as he, do not cease looking, within what flows from the other's 'innermost being,' for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body. For in the misfire of identification with the mother as well as with the father, how else are they to be maintained in the other? How, if not by incorporating a devouring mother, for want of having been able to introject her, for want of being able to signify her: [...] the hope for rebirth is short-circuited by the very splitting: the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates, whereas *jouissance* demands an *abjection* from which identity becomes absent.²⁴⁰

For Kristeva, the maternal body serves as a reminder of a crucial period of non-differentiation, the period encompassing gestation and infancy where there is no clear line of separation between mother and child, between self and other. Identity formation depends upon separation from the maternal body. After this separation the idea of the maternal body persists as an abject spectre that threatens to overwhelm and subsume the autonomous subject, threatening the integrity of identity. There is an obvious parallel between this interpretation of abjection within the novel, and the idea of a contagion that ruthlessly penetrates the defences of the body politic. The fear of being engulfed is accompanied by the unconscious impulse to return to a state of perfect unity with the maternal body, presenting the mother as an idea exerting simultaneous powers of attraction and repulsion. Acceptance of the reading of Hanna as a 'devouring' mother figure implies that Schlink intended to represent post-war Germany as a child suffering a crisis of identity. Despite the fact that I believe this reading to be somewhat problematic in its apologist implications, it can't be denied that from the beginning of their association, there are strong maternal undertones in

240 Kristeva, p.54.

the interaction between Michael and Hanna and the way in which she is positioned in his internal symbolic landscape.

In Michael's first encounter with Hanna, she performs the motherly office of cleaning up his vomit and she comforts him as he cries.²⁴¹ Many years later, during the final encounter of the pair, Michael observes that Hanna has retained newspaper clippings depicting the significant achievements in his life.²⁴² Their relationship traverses a narrative journey, beginning in the almost abject bonding of symbolic infancy, characterised by emotional distress and bodily helplessness, to the archetypal image of an aged figure taking a vicarious pride in her grown-up child's accomplishments from afar; this is an unusual trajectory for lovers, but a typical one for a parent and a child. Michael's relationship with Hanna can also be viewed in light of the conspicuous absence of his biological mother. In the course of the book, Michael mentions his mother very little, one of the few times he does mention her is to describe his pleasure in her bathing him as a child, an action later mimicked by Hanna's propensity to bathe him as sexual foreplay:

My mother had pushed a chair up close to the stove for me to stand on while she washed and dressed me. I remembered the wonderful feeling of warmth and how good it felt to be washed and dressed in this warmth. I also remember that whenever I thought back to this afterwards, I always wondered why my mother had been spoiling me like this...Because the woman whose name I didn't even know had so spoiled me that afternoon, I went back to school the next day.²⁴³

Intersecting uncomfortably with her position as a lover, Schlink establishes Hanna as a symbolic mother figure for Michael, simultaneously paralleling and eclipsing his own

241 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.3.

242 *Ibid*, p.204.

243 *Ibid*, p.26.

mother. The only visible maternal influence in the novel is also coded as a lover and a perpetrator. Schlink's choice to portray Hanna in this ambiguous manner, as simultaneous object of repulsion and forbidden desire, suggests that Michael's interaction with his nation's history is negotiated through the symbolic reference point of a mother figure who is abject. Encoding traumatic collective memory through the archetypal Kristevan figure of the abject maternal body suggests a relationship to the past that is heavily characterised by guilt, shame and obsessive desire.

Metz chooses to interpret this particular abject trope as yet another layer of postmodern textual trickery. 'Truth is a Woman' suggests that the desire for an overbearing and emasculating mother figure is merely an act of sublimation designed to repress 'the problematic second generation desire for a strong father figure.'²⁴⁴ It is posited that in the aftermath of the Second World War, German society was suffering from 'a crisis of masculinity.'²⁴⁵ The role models of the previous generation were perceived as discredited by their past deeds and Germany's identity as a nation was destroyed. According to Metz, the desire of later generations of Germans for a patriarchal symbol was considered taboo due to its associations with fascist ideology. According to this theory, Michael's quasi-incestuous libidinal fixation with Hanna, represents an attempt by the author, 'to displace this onto the more acceptable desire for/fear of a devouring mother.'²⁴⁶ Although this reading appears to have some theoretical credibility when examined in relation to the work of Klaus Theweleit²⁴⁷ and Laura Frost²⁴⁸ on the psychosexual power of Nazism as a cultural idea²⁴⁹, there is little textual evidence within *The Reader* to support the idea that Hanna is intended as a sublimated

244 Metz, p.312.

245 *Ibid*, p.312.

246 *Ibid*, p.312.

247 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror*, translated by Chris Turner, Carter Erica and Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

248 Laura Frost, *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

249 Metz, p.311.

father figure. In order to interpret the meaning behind Hanna's portrayal as an abject mother figure, one must return, once again to the question of agency.

The primary tropes of abjection presented in *The Reader* are illness and the devouring mother. Both of these tropes suggest the idea of being engulfed and overwhelmed by forces beyond one's control. In this case the forces in question are collective memory and collective guilt. When Michael enters into a romantic relationship with a Holocaust perpetrator, he becomes part of a historical narrative which, despite preceding his birth, suffuses him with feelings of shame and complicity that he appears unable to escape. The deployment of such strongly abject tropes in association with this relationship seems to deny the subject agency when faced with the compelling forces of history. On the other hand, just as the idea of passive historical contamination is contradicted by Schlink's emphasis on the inaccessibility of the Holocaust, the notion of Hanna as an abject mother is a construct that undermines itself as the novel progresses.

In the opening chapter of the second part of *The Reader*, Michael comments on the phenomenon of the second generation of Germans passing judgement on the first.

Several among our fathers had been in the war, two or three of them as officers of the Wehrmacht and one as an officer of the Waffen SS...My father did not want to talk about himself, but I knew that he had lost his job as a university lecturer in philosophy for scheduling a lecture on Spinoza, and had got himself and us through the war as an editor for a house that published hiking maps and books. How did I decide that he too was under sentence of shame? But I did. We all condemned our parents to shame, even if the only charge we could bring was that after 1945 they had tolerated the perpetrators in their midst.

It is made apparent that most of his fellow law students possess some familial connection to

the Nazi party through their parents or grandparents. In contrast, Michael's father had no involvement with the Nazi party; his father spent the war working for an obscure publishing company after being dismissed from his university post for lecturing on Spinoza.²⁵⁰ Unlike a lot of Germans of the post-war generation, Michael is revealed to possess the much-coveted spotless family history²⁵¹. By proffering this information at this point, Schlink draws an implicit comparison between Michael's connection to the Holocaust and that of his contemporaries. As opposed to being tied to a perpetrator by blood, Michael is drawn to a perpetrator by desire. Despite the fact that Hanna is symbolically encoded as a maternal substitute, specific attention is drawn to the fact that she is *not* his mother. This distinction could be interpreted as another manifestation of inevitability. Hanna effectively shatters the protective barrier of Michael's spotless family history and places him within the German intergenerational narrative of shame and moral contamination.

The story of Hanna and Michael appears to underline the fragility of the barriers erected between private life and collective history. In spite of Michael's personal detachment and lack of familial connection, the Holocaust finds its way into his life from an outside source. He is unable to escape the stigma of his nation's past. As the bearer of this history, the simultaneous presence within Hanna of the mother and the perpetrator suggests the uncomfortable proximity of Germany's history of atrocity to the personal and intimate history of families. It is possible that Schlink wished to illustrate the impossibility of insulating oneself from the history of the nation by means of a reassuringly detached family narrative. Whilst it is true that Michael is unable to escape the stigma of his nation's past, this interpretation clashes with the crucial fact that, unlike a familial tie, his romantic connection permits him an element of choice. It would seem to be significant that Michael's connection to Germany's history originates from a relationship that he entered voluntarily and that he can

250 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.90.

251 Von Kellenbach, p.306.

(and does) exert some control over its parameters. Although Hanna persistently occupies Michael's thoughts, he is able to control his physical proximity to her. After she is incarcerated, he chooses to communicate solely through his taped recordings, despite her obvious desire to renew a more cordial relationship²⁵². As a teenager he is able to conceal the relationship from his friends and family, shielding himself from the moral and social implications attached to a sexual relationship with a much older woman.²⁵³ The concealment of his adolescent affair later shields him from the much graver social stigma that inevitably follows association with a criminal. Michael and Hanna's relationship is ambiguous, incorporating both the mother as an abject, deterministic embodiment of inherited memory, and the lover, symbolising an association founded upon the exercise of agency. In straddling these two categories, Michael's relationship with Hanna moves beyond the realms of a simple inter-generational allegory. The controversial love affair reconstructs a debate surrounding the way later generations interact with collective history.

The underlying narrative of *The Reader* can be interpreted as a constant struggle between memorial agency and abject memorial determinism in relation to the Holocaust. The motif of illness dramatically introduces the abject connotations of collective memory and underlying this motif is the abject maternal, the semiotic driving force of this narrative. Hanna being figuratively cast as a mother psychologically situates her as an archetypal memorial vessel, as well as one half of a historically specific intergenerational allegory; it is in this image that the forces of history and ahistoric psychic life intersect. However, Schlink challenges the idea of the post-war generation as passive recipients of an unwanted and undeserved historical burden. The collective memory of genocide is presented as something that each generation of Germans has a responsibility to actively confront. The responsibility of those that were born after is most forcefully emphasised in the closing chapters of the novel. The perpetrator

252 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.187.

253 *Ibid*, p.72.

absents herself from the stage entirely. Hanna commits suicide the day before her release from prison, leaving the many questions of the protagonist and the readers unanswered²⁵⁴.

At the end of the novel, the awkward task of disposing of Hanna's legacy falls upon Michael. Hanna's modest savings and the request that they be passed on to the only surviving victim of a death march she presided over, represent the last tangible remnants of the terrible events that connect survivor and perpetrator,²⁵⁵ in a gesture weighted with significance, the responsibility for these remnants is passed on to the next generation – a symbolic burden of inherited guilt. With the consent of the survivor in question, Michael chooses to donate the money to the Jewish League Against Illiteracy.²⁵⁶ This small conciliatory gesture does not erase the past, nor does it provide absolution, instead, it represents the moment that Michael becomes an active participant in a continuous process of 'working through.' He is no longer following Hanna's instructions, he is constructing meaning and measuring fitting recompense according to his own morals as opposed to attempting to insert himself into the historic landscape as either victim or perpetrator. Rather than being a passive victim of an abject inheritance of violence and guilt, Michael is an active historical agent who must confront the past and decide what the legacy of the perpetrator means for him. Throughout *The Reader*, there is a constant undercurrent of struggle between the competing ways the past can manifest in the present. As a pervasive, abject contamination or as an ineffable mystery that is inaccessible and irrelevant to all but those who were there. Ultimately, Schlink advocates neither course.

The persistent theme of abjection that characterises Hanna and Michael's ambiguous relationship represents one perspective in a complex network of competing ideas. The abject tropes that accompany Michael's traumatic confrontation with Germany's dark history are

254 Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, p.201.

255 *Ibid*, p.205.

256 *Ibid*, p.216.

constantly offset by a counterforce of inaccessibility and rejection. Despite the protagonist's feeling of being unavoidably contaminated by the notion of collective guilt, Michael is unable to imaginatively access the Holocaust from the perspective of either victim or perpetrator. It is only by taking charge of Hanna's legacy and becoming an active recipient of the ongoing phenomenological demands presented by the Holocaust, that he is able to lay his personal trauma to rest. After settling Hanna's affairs, he stands at her grave only once, this implies he is able to finally relinquish his enduring obsession with her.²⁵⁷ In this way, Schlink makes the delicate distinction between collective guilt and collective responsibility. Holocaust guilt may die with the perpetrators but further generations become 'custodians of memory,'²⁵⁸ who carry a perpetual obligation to actively engage with history and interpret its significance in the present.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*: p.216.

²⁵⁸ Yosefa Loshitzky, *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) p.2.

Chapter Three: Projective Identification: The Maternal Body and the Ethnic Self

In the fifth chapter of his landmark book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Christopher Browning includes a series of photographs depicting the processing and deportation of the population of the Miedzyrzec transit ghetto. In one of the pictures a woman wearing underclothing stands in conversation with three men wearing German military uniforms, while another official wearing a slightly different uniform stands in the foreground looking at the camera. The photograph bears the caption ‘After the strip search, the Jews were allowed to put their underclothes back on before being marched into the station and packed into cattle cars (Courtesy of Yad Vashem.)’²⁵⁹ In this particular case the caption is exceedingly helpful, as, without the benefit of additional context, it is very difficult to discern what is happening in this picture. The image is of poor quality and slightly blurred. Aside from a pile of objects that could possibly be luggage, the background is almost completely obscured. Most of the figures are facing away from the camera and it is almost impossible to deduce anything from their body language or facial expression.²⁶⁰ The ambiguity of this picture is noted by Susan Crane who recounts discussing the image with her students during a Holocaust Studies seminar. When asking her students to analyse what is happening in the photograph, Crane was struck by the fact that ‘several students wanted to accord agency, will and identity to the woman in the photograph.’ There were suggestions that the woman was holding her chin up, holding up her clothes to preserve her modesty or looking at the officers with defiance. These claims cannot be substantiated by the content of the photograph. Crane’s ultimate conclusion was that the students’ readings ‘indicated more about their wish to give this woman some power and dignity than about their

259 See Appendix F.

260 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, (London: Penguin, 2001) unnumbered photograph section.

knowledge of the historical circumstances.²⁶¹

Whilst the students demonstrated compassion for the plight of the woman depicted in the photograph, their speculations on her emotional state situate her as a vehicle for an unsubstantiated fantasy of resistance. Her likely fate and the reality of her situation are subsumed beneath the students' own ideas of personal freedom and individual empowerment. This anecdote demonstrates a problematic interaction with historical source material, governed by projection and desire: a desire to posthumously rescue victims from their probable fate, a desire to transform the subjugation of a woman into an inspiring narrative of feminine resistance. In this process the subjectivity of the victim is replaced with that of the observer, in what might be described as an act of projective identification. This incident can be viewed as a microcosmic representation of the problems that can arise in the secondary witnessing of this traumatic historical event. The picture forcefully confronts the onlooker with absence. Information provided by the image itself is scant and the likely fate of the woman must be extrapolated from prior knowledge of historical context. The picture documents one stage in a grisly sequence of events that must inevitably conclude with a blank page. When confronting the horrific events of the Holocaust, absence is inevitably followed by projection and desire.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which this desire is encoded as a Kleinian struggle for possession of the mother's breast. It seems reasonable that such anxiety based projection in relation to a woman may be productively examined from a Kleinian perspective. In the texts examined, the yearning to appropriate and internalise the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust is subliminally expressed through various iterations of the maternal body, all extrinsically linked to acts of consumption.

261 Susan A. Crane, 'Choosing not to Look: Representation, Repatriation and Holocaust Atrocity Photographs,' *History and Theory*, 47.3 (2008), 309-330 (p. 315).

When considering projective identification, it is natural to think of false or deluded memoir. In a fabricated memoir, the witness to testimony appropriates the subjectivity of a victim in a literal and absolute manner. This practice constitutes an extreme manifestation of projective identification and provocatively questions the role of empathy in interpreting testimony. The first text to be discussed in this chapter represents one of the more notorious examples of this phenomenon.

In 1994 Eva Koralnik of the Liepman literary agency received an extraordinary manuscript. *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood, 1939-1948* appeared to tell the story of a small boy's miraculous survival of two of the most brutal of the Nazi concentration camps and his subsequent struggle to reclaim his identity and his memories.²⁶² The manuscript quickly found a publisher and the book and its author received almost universal acclaim from literary critics and the survivor community, the scepticism expressed by several notable historians notwithstanding. In 1998, after *Fragments* had won several prestigious prizes and attracted comparison to the works of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, an article appeared in the Swiss newspaper *Die Weltwoche* that questioned the book's veracity.²⁶³ Wilkomirski's agent and publishers requested an investigation and after extensive research by the historian Stefan Maechler, *Fragments* was confirmed to be a work of fiction.²⁶⁴ Predictably, this news was received with worldwide shock and outrage (although to this day Wilkomirski maintains that *Fragments* is an accurate representation of the events of his life) and Wilkomirski's possible motives and the problematic status of his text have been the subject of years of academic scrutiny. Some people believed Wilkomirski to be the perpetrator of a cynical hoax, others subscribe to a slightly more nuanced view. Maechler's report and an article by Elena Lappin in the literary magazine *Granta* suggest that Wilkomirski unconsciously appropriated the

262 Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, translated by John E. Woods (New York: Schocken Books, 2001) p. 91.

263 *Ibid*, p.129.

264 *Ibid*, p. 264.

universally sympathetic guise of Holocaust survivor to explore his traumatic experiences in the Swiss foster-care system.²⁶⁵

Whatever side of the argument one ascribes to, the fact that Wilkomirski could adopt the identity of a Holocaust survivor with such facility and the fact that the fraudulent text was received by the world with such credulous enthusiasm presents a troubling picture. The cautionary implications of *Fragments* as a deluded memoir have been extensively discussed. 'By collapsing the boundary between fact and fiction in an unprecedented manner' *Fragments* has created what Anne Whitehead has described as 'a crisis point' in the discussion of Holocaust memory.²⁶⁶ Whilst it is difficult to convincingly argue that the text provides dangerous ammunition to those who wish to deny the Holocaust, the Wilkomirski phenomenon is seen by many as symptomatic of certain problems attendant on the way Holocaust testimony is received and interacted with. As the Holocaust recedes from living memory, the way in which this historical event is encountered in the present is undergoing a necessary paradigm shift.

In 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile' Marianne Hirsch explains the term postmemory, claiming that the traumatic effects of the Holocaust transcend generational barriers to impact the children of survivors.²⁶⁷ From the foundation established by postmemory, terms such as 'prosthetic memory' have emerged, extending the traumatic echoes of the Holocaust to encompass those who encounter secondary sources in appropriately emotive settings.²⁶⁸ This branch of theory has resulted in the gradual distancing of the concept of memory from that of lived experience. Increasing critical attention has been paid to the idea of the secondary witness, so that for instance, Sally Miller has commented on the rising importance of

265 *Ibid*, p.269.

266 Anne Whitehead, 'Telling Tales: Trauma and Testimony in Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*,' *Discourse*, 25.1 (2003) 119-137 (p.120).

267 Marianne Hirsch, 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile,' *Poetics Today*, 17.4 (1996) 659-686 (p.659).

268 Alison Landsberg, 'America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,' *New German Critique*, 71 (1997) 63-86.

imagination and empathic identification in contemporary engagement with the memory of the Holocaust.²⁶⁹

Whilst a sensitive and compassionate response to the Holocaust would seem to be something to be encouraged, the concept of empathy as an appropriate response to material relating to the Holocaust is fraught with controversy. In a scathing evaluation of Claude Lanzmann's nine hour documentary *Shoah*, Dominick La Capra is troubled by what he sees as Lanzmann's intrusive interaction with eyewitness testimony. Referencing such practices as the deliberate pushing of a witness to emotional breaking point and the mimetic restaging of traumatic events, La Capra questions Lanzmann's intense empathic involvement with the narratives he encounters:

The most pronounced manifestation of a displaced secular religiosity may well be in Lanzmann's tendency to grant the highest, perhaps the sole legitimate status to the witness who not only provides testimony but who self-renderingly relives the traumatic sufferings of the past - a status with which Lanzmann as a filmmaker would like to identify. A further question that agitates my own enquiry is whether this tragic identification, or rather uncontrolled transference relation has something problematic about it, both in its attempt to provoke a repetition of trauma in the other and in its desire to relive that suffering in the shattered self.²⁷⁰

La Capra claims that Lanzmann deployed his witnesses as objects of transference, provoking them to relive their memories in order that he might authentically experience traumatic extremity. In framing Lanzmann's position of excessive identification as narcissistic and ethically problematic, La Capra questions the role of empathy in the relationship between the

269 Sally Miller, 'Fantasy, Empathy and Desire: Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*,' *Modernism/modernity*, 20.1 (2013) 45-56 (p.51).

270 Dominick LaCapra, 'Lanzmann's *Shoah*: "Here There is no Why," *Critical Inquiry*, 23.2 (1997) 231-269 (p.236).

primary and secondary witness. Although Lanzmann's attempts to appropriate the subjectivity of the victim cannot be equated to the fraudulent position occupied by Wilkomirski, similar issues are raised by both; their mutual stance of aggressive identification absorbs and supersedes the historical material they encounter, creating new master narratives governed by personal, philosophical and aesthetic gratification. As the Holocaust recedes further from living memory, it is inevitable that future generations will only be able to encounter it in a heavily mediated form and prominent spokespeople such as Elie Wiesel have voiced concern that the Holocaust as a concrete historical reality will be eclipsed by its own reimaginings, becoming merely an overloaded metaphor or a byword for atrocity.²⁷¹ Meditating upon this issue in 'Future of the Past, Efraim Sicher describes the possible dystopic future of an appropriated and decontextualised collective memory of the Holocaust:

Appropriation of the Holocaust for all kinds of agendas means it is now likely that the Holocaust will be met as a trivialised trope, as a representation of a memory or as a memory of a memory in a twilight museum culture of simulacra and hypertext.²⁷²

In creating his fraudulent memoir, Wilkomirski traversed the line between empathy and appropriation; a line symbolising the many anxieties attendant upon appropriate responses to Holocaust testimony and the place the Holocaust has come to occupy in the popular imagination.

Susan Rubin Suleiman states that the misleading presentation of *Fragments* as a memoir violates 'the set of explicit and implicit understandings that frame the publication of any work; because of this, Suleiman claims that *Fragments* fails the criteria for both memoir and

271 Elie Wiesel, 'Art and Culture After the Holocaust,' *CrossCurrents*, 26.3 (1976) 258-269 (p.260).

272 Efraim Sicher, 'The Future of the Past: Countermemory and Postmemory in Contemporary American Post-Holocaust Narratives,' *History and Memory*, 12.2 (2000) 56-91 (p.58).

novel.²⁷³ In spite of Suleiman's position and Wilkomirski's steadfast commitment to the veracity of his account, some critics have argued that this text may be productively re-examined as a work of fiction. In 'Binjamin Wilkomirski *Fragments* and Holocaust Envy,' Sue Vice argues that '*Fragments* is best viewed as a fictional portrait of a child preoccupied with Holocaust realities in the post-war world, it is an unwitting allegory of its own production...*Fragments* is an extreme version of all post-Holocaust subjects' possession by these events.'²⁷⁴ This line of thinking suggests that the nature of the fictional machinations used by Wilkomirski to transform his life story, may hold relevance as an insight into a collective preoccupation of western post-war consciousness. Taking up this line of reasoning, I wish to examine, in detail, one of the strongest recurring motifs in Wilkomirski's text.

Fragments is peopled with an array of predominantly unsympathetic mother figures. Some explanations for this trend have been offered. In the concluding paragraphs of her article for *Granta*, Elena Lappin tentatively suggests that there are certain thematic similarities between the text of *Fragments* and the early life of Bruno Grosjean; similarities found in the ideas of traumatic separation and social exclusion.

I am not a psychologist; the temptations and dangers of literary or any other type of psychology for the amateur are well known. Still, the similarities between *Fragments* and the early life of Binjamin Wilkomirski, and what we know of the real early life of Bruno Grosjean are too striking to resist: obscure origins in a social class that polite Swiss society would rather not discuss; a childhood swamped with loss and change; institutions which might easily seem like child prisons; distant memories of motherhood.²⁷⁵

273 Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Problems of Memory and Factuality in Recent Holocaust Memoirs: Wilkomirski/Wiesel,' *Poetics Today*, 21.3 (2000) 543-559 (p.545).

274 Sue Vice, 'Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and Holocaust Envy: "Why Wasn't I There Too?" *Immigrants & Minorities*, 21 (2002) 249-268 (p.249).

275 Elena Lappin, 'The Man with Two Heads,' *Granta*, 66 (1999) 7-66 (p.65).

Wilkomirski's biological mother Yvonne Grosjean was a *Verdingskind* (working child). *Verdingkinder* were the by-product of a rather draconian policy of the Swiss welfare system, which sought to alleviate the poverty of lower class families by offering their children as free agricultural labour. Often sold at auction like livestock, *Verdingkinder* were subject to social stigma and vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. As the illegitimate child of a *Verdingskind*, it is likely that Wilkomirski was abruptly separated from his mother without her consent.²⁷⁶ Furthermore, Wilkomirski's inauspicious social origins made him an outcast among the relatives of his wealthy adoptive parents. Taking this into account, Lappin draws the conclusion that Wilkomirski felt empathically connected to the identity of Holocaust survivor through genuine experiences of maternal separation and social hostility. This casts an interesting Kleinian light on what the Holocaust meant to him. This theory is expounded on in more detail by Stefan Maechler in his extensive report on Wilkomirski's true origins

Wilkomirski fell back on collective memory in order to articulate his own memories, and chose images that had no direct connection with what happened to him but that seemed to express the quality of his experience. He made use of the Shoah as a source of metaphors. Wilkomirski, an outsider to his own society, became a Jew, the prototypical outsider in the modern world.²⁷⁷

Like Lappin, Maechler surmises that Wilkomirski invented his Holocaust narrative to provide an external, ordering logic to fragmented, traumatic memories from his early childhood. In 1944, Wilkomirski was fostered by a family named Aeberhard. Although not farmers, the Aeberhard family lived in a large farmhouse in the village of Nidau. In the course of his investigation, Maechler interviewed the Aeberhards' son Rene, asking him what he remembered about Wilkomirski's time with them. At the time of the interview, Aeberhard had

²⁷⁶ Maechler, pp.6-13.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.278.

already read *Fragments*, he claims that the Polish farmhouse described in the second chapter of the book bears a striking similarity to the Aeberhards' home in Nidau.²⁷⁸ The house is described as a farmstead, a cluster of small buildings arrayed in a rectangle to make a courtyard in the middle.²⁷⁹ When asked about the description of the formidable farmer's wife, this powerful muscular woman with her big arms and heavy hands, who embodied absolute power over us children,²⁸⁰ Aeberhard concludes that it is likely to refer to Frau Aeberhard. Rene Aeberhard admits that his mother suffered from severe mental instability. She was prone to violent outbursts of rage and on occasion these were directed at Wilkomirski. He is reported to have been extremely afraid of her.²⁸¹

Both commentators believe that Wilkomirski translated the events of his early life into a Holocaust narrative. This belief implies that the plethora of maternal figures have their basis in real people. The kind and well-intentioned Frau Grosz who abandoned him without warning is Yvonne Grosjean and the terrifying farmer's wife is Frau Aeberhard. Whilst Wilkomirski's choice of fabricated subject matter may reflect a cultural preoccupation with the Holocaust, the recurring mother figures in the text merely reflect the subject's personal experience of maternal separation. I believe this position represents an approach to the text that is far too literal. To uncover the significance of the maternal figures in *Fragments*, one must examine the fundamental motivations of Wilkomirski's fraudulent memoir. At its core, *Fragments* is fuelled by absence, the author's desire to supplement the confused and fragmented details of his personal history by appropriating an identity that is not his own. Absence and desire saturate *Fragments*, creating an overwhelming sense of primal hunger; a primal hunger that represents memory envy at its most extreme. Taking this into account, one

278 *Ibid*, p.227.

279 Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948*, translated by Carol Brown Janeway (London: Picador, 1996) p.26.

280 *Ibid*, p.27.

281 Maechler, p.228.

must consider the mother's symbolic status as the first object of desire. This relationship is expounded in detail by Melanie Klein in *Envy and Gratitude*, when discussing infantile development in terms of possible pathological outcomes:

I have often expressed my view that object relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast, which to the child becomes split into a good (gratifying) breast and a bad (frustrating) breast; this splitting results in a severance of love and hate. I have also suggested that the relation to the first object implies its integration and projection.²⁸²

According to Klein, the infant's ambivalent relationship to the mother's breast provides a template for how the subject relates to the world around them. In the mind of the child, the breast is simultaneously associated with gratification and denial; it is a loved object and a feared persecutory object. The image of the persecutory breast evolves alongside the fantasy of an inexhaustible breast. In response to this, the introjection and projection of the object occur as interdependent processes. The desire to fully introject the good breast by devouring it, is offset by the sadistic impulse to forcibly project the self into the object and annihilate it. In an ideal situation, this process is resolved by the ego fully integrating the concepts of the good and bad breast and accepting them as parts of the same object: however, in some cases this destructive conflict of introjection and projection may be transferred to other objects.²⁸³

In the case of Wilkomirski, the Holocaust appears to be psychologically positioned as an object of desire. To this end, it is interesting to note that within *Fragments*, encounters with maternal figures, both positive and negative, often appear to be intrinsically linked with acts of consumption. The consumption in question is heavily laced with overtones of envy, sadism and infantile cannibalism, which are motifs that Klein links to a dysfunctional relationship

282 Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*, (London: Virago, 1988) p.2.

283 *Ibid*, p.7.

with the primary object.

Central to Wilkomirski's narrative is the protagonist's brief meeting in Majdanek with a person he presumes to be his mother. An unnamed woman in uniform takes him to an unfamiliar barrack and he is confronted with an emaciated woman lying on a straw pallet. Leading up to this moment, the child's confused interior monologue reveals that, up to this point, he has had no concept of what a mother is. His only knowledge comes from the other children in his barracks. He has the vague idea that 'a mother, whether you had one or not, must be something immensely important, something that was worth fighting, the way you fought over food.'²⁸⁴ Immediately, a mother's significance is contextualised by comparing it to the struggle for food. Whilst a preoccupation with food is natural in a situation of privation, the connection of mothers with food does not stop there.

As with much of his narrative, Wilkomirski's description of his mother is scant and fragmented:

I made out the shape of a body under the grey cover. The cover moved. A woman's head became visible, then two arms laying themselves slowly on top of the cover.²⁸⁵

The description evolves from the indistinct outline of a body, to the emergence of a head and two arms. Whilst the head is described as belonging to a woman, there is no possessive pronoun attached to the arms, presenting an image of the mother that does not quite coalesce. Immediately, this recalls the stage of infantile development described by Klein in which the mother's breast is experienced as a singular entity, imperfectly connected with the body:

The mother, first of all her breast, is the primal object for both the infant's introjective and projective processes. Love and hatred are from the beginning projected onto her,

²⁸⁴ Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.47.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.49.

and concurrently she is internalised with both these contrasting primordial emotions, that underlie the infant's feeling that a good and bad mother (breast) exist.²⁸⁶

Wilkomirski's fragmentary description of his mother foreshadows the significance placed on her final maternal act. Before he leaves her, she gives him the gift of a piece of bread:

Now I could see her face more clearly, it was shiny and wet and I saw that it was crying. Without saying a word she reached out her hand to me and indicated that I should take what she had brought out from under the straw. For a single moment I touched her hand – it felt hot and damp.

I took the object, clutched it tight against me and went towards the door [...] I used my free hand to grope the unfamiliar object with curiosity. It had jagged edges and corners, and felt coarse and hard.²⁸⁷

The boy exchanges no words with the woman and he can recall virtually nothing about her face, evidence of her corporeal existence is marked by a piece of bread and a clammy hand. Having no previous context for what a mother is, the narrator comes to associate the idea of a mother with the giving of bread. An entire paragraph is given over to his consumption of the bread, which must be dunked in water to soften it. He describes the gradual shrinking of the crust 'to a tiny ball' and 'the indescribably delicious smell of bread' lingering on his fingers.²⁸⁸ The narrator's memory of his mother is intermingled with the sensual experience of eating bread, dissolving the boundary between the person of the mother and the object of the bread. The fusion of these ideas is emphasised further by the fact that the gradual disappearance of the piece of bread is immediately followed by the boy being told that he will not be able to see his mother again.²⁸⁹ As he has consumed the bread, Majdanek has

286 Klein, p.142.

287 Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.50.

288 *Ibid*, 50-51.

289 Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.51.

consumed her. The connection between his mother and bread is shown to be a consistent presence in the psyche of the protagonist in that it is later used to distinguish between true and false mother figures. When an orderly in the Swiss orphanage tries to give the boy a slice of bread and butter he suffers an intense internal conflict, leading him to declare ‘I only take bread from my mother.’²⁹⁰ The chapter concludes ambiguously with the acceptance of the bread as a gift, perhaps the first tentative steps towards internalising the mother’s loss.²⁹¹

As mentioned before, this conflation of mother and food reflects Klein’s description of the infant’s complex relationship to the mother’s breast as primary object. As an internalised object the breast is split in two: on the one hand the good breast that gratifies and nurtures, on the other, the bad breast that frustrates the desire to feed endlessly. This conflict prepares the subject for the first traumatic experience of separation when the breast is withdrawn permanently. This splitting appears to be ultimately defined around the basic idea of presence and absence as the gratifying breast that gives endlessly and the frustrating breast which denies.

The episode with the bread contains both the good and bad breast. The fulfilment of eating the bread is followed by the tantalising smell that lingers. Although the smell is pleasurable, it is contingent upon the absence of both the bread and the mother, planting the seeds of future psychic conflict. This incident could be interpreted as referring to Wilkomirski’s traumatic, early separation from his mother however, it is also evocative of another desire fuelled by absence. I am referring to a cultural desire to penetrate the mysteries of the Holocaust and in some cases, appropriate the experience. A strange mimetic parallel can be drawn between the boy eagerly sniffing his fingers to capture the delicious smell of bread and Wilkomirski’s fevered consumption of Holocaust literature. Wilkomirski is reported to have

290 *Ibid*, p.51.

291 *Ibid*, p.52.

amassed a personal collection consisting of over two thousand books and documents through which he has given substance to his fantasies.²⁹² The Holocaust itself can be seen as the subject of a Kleinian drama of introjection and projection. Like the mother figures in his text, the Holocaust for Wilkomirski proves to be both nurturing and destructive. In his discussion of screen memories Slavoj Žižek highlights the strangeness of Wilkomirski's deployment of the Holocaust as a traumatic screen. Žižek observes that 'Usually we generate fantasies as a shield to protect us from unbearable trauma; here the ultimate traumatic experience, the Holocaust, is fantasised as a shield.'²⁹³ I venture to argue that, for Wilkomirski, the very fact of the Holocaust's traumatic extremity makes it the ideal vehicle for the exploration of maternal separation. Wilkomirski's presentation of horrific violence visited on an innocent child often prompted effusive outbursts of sympathy from complete strangers. In a letter from England, a woman writes:

It was as if I had to take this little child in my arms and tear away all that had happened to him.²⁹⁴

In *The War After* Anne Karpf writes that 'there is something undoubtedly satisfying about joining the ranks of the unequivocally wronged, those with an irrefutable claim on our sympathy.'²⁹⁵ In Wilkomirski's case, the sympathy and validation that accompanied his status as a Holocaust survivor, often expressed in protective, motherly terms, created a phantom maternal presence. The universally recognised atrocity of the Holocaust established it as a perversely nurturing presence in the face of a lifetime of disenfranchised absence.

Wilkomirski's text is an example of the profound hold the Holocaust has on the Western imagination, due in large part to the rhetoric of mystification and unspeakability that

292 Maechler, p.67.

293 Slavoj Žižek, 'Laugh Yourself to Death: The New Wave of Holocaust Comedies!' 1999 <https://zizek.uk/laugh-yourself-to-death-the-new-wave-of-holocaust-comedies/4/>.

294 Letter to Wilkomirski from a Swiss reader: Maechler, p.119.

295 Anne Karpf, *The War After: Living with the Holocaust*, (London: Mandarin, 1997) p.6.

surrounds it. Eric J. Sundquist articulates this situation in 'Witness Without End':

Fragments is a proof text of the voracious but unfulfillable post-Holocaust demand for new evidence of that which lies hidden in the abyss of history, the black hole of memory. The unimpeachable commandment 'never forget,' is thus transmuted into the unimpeachable caveat -never remember.²⁹⁶

Sundquist's choice of words emphasises a cultural relationship to the Holocaust that is defined by desire. The urge to identify is demanding and 'voracious' but the nature of the Holocaust makes this desire unfulfillable. It recalls infantile urges to possess the mother's breast and evokes a primal fear of absence and loss. Karyn Ball goes to describe this contemporary relationship to the Holocaust in voyeuristic, pornographic terms. Ball focuses specifically on the problematic gaze of the academic researcher when confronting testimony relating to particularly sensitive topics such as sexual violence, but she also discusses the objectification of the Holocaust and its victims in more general terms:

Against the backdrop of an increasingly abundant discourse about the Holocaust, the 'cannot' and 'must not' upon which the unspeakable turns appear to be gestures of disavowal. What is disavowed is that which cannot and must not be admitted (for the sake of maintaining the appearance of civil society and its moral order.) This speculation leads me to suspect that what is most unspeakable are not the crimes themselves or the pain they cause, but rather the shameful fascination with transgression that compels us to dwell on them.²⁹⁷

This analysis draws attention to a powerful sense of the taboo surrounding the Holocaust.

This taboo exerts a magnetic attraction, empowered by an awareness of an almost sordid

²⁹⁶ Eric J. Sundquist, 'Witness without End?' *American Literary History*, 19.1 (2007) 65-85 (p.70).

²⁹⁷ Karyn Ball, 'Unspeakable Differences, Obscene Pleasures: the Holocaust as an Object of Desire,' *Women in German Yearbook*, 19 (2003) 20-49 (p.37).

morbidity. Ball and Sundquist identify a disturbing culture of consumption surrounding the Holocaust. The Holocaust is framed as the subject of a compulsive fixation that they implicitly link to such primal yearnings as food and sex. *Fragments* emerges as a by-product of this culture of projective identification. Food and its implicit connection to the mother's body is the conduit through which Wilkomirski explores the impulse to merge the details of his early life with a universally recognised and validated narrative of victimhood, so that it is the symbolic locus of his memory envy. This reading of *Fragments* is strengthened by an examination of existing literary conventions relating to projective identification. In the later chapters of *Envy and Gratitude* Klein elaborates on her theories using literary examples.

If I Were You by French novelist Julien Green, tells the story of a young clerk named Fabian Especel. Dissatisfied and frustrated with his life of poverty, Fabian makes a bargain with the devil giving him the power to trade lives with another person at will.²⁹⁸ He repeats this process many times, gradually losing all sense of self. Driven by envious desire Fabian forcefully appropriates the subject position of another, Klein views this as a perfect illustration of the process of projective identification.²⁹⁹ Fabian's destructive envy has its roots in an extremely unsatisfactory relationship with his mother. At the end of the novel she visits him on his deathbed and he feels a powerful urge to hold her and be loved by her, but he is restrained by a fear that she will not respond.³⁰⁰ The lack of affection Fabian received from his mother resulted in a failure to securely internalise the good breast, instead he obsessively fantasises about an idealised, inexhaustible breast. The desire to feed endlessly on his mother was later translated into a desire to forcefully intrude upon the bodily boundaries of others and usurp their identity, just as Wilkomirski appropriated the identity of Holocaust victim. The most striking parallel between Fabian and the narrator of *Fragments* can be seen

298 Owing to the difficulty of finding an English translation of this text, it is referenced as it is described in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*.

299 Klein, p.152.

300 *Ibid*, p.151.

in their interaction with food, specifically the permeable boundaries that seem to exist between food and female objects of desire. Whilst inhabiting the body of a dull-witted and lascivious man named Fruges, Fabian enters a bakery to buy a roll for breakfast. The basket of fresh rolls on the counter inspires intense. This hunger is established in conjunction with Fabian's lust for the attractive girl behind the counter. When he thinks about her touching the roll 'he bites greedily into the thickest part of it.'³⁰¹ This act is a mimetic expression of his desire to consume the woman and recalls the boy's interaction with the bread in *Fragments*.

There are multiple episodes in *Fragments* that echo Fabian's ravenous consumption of the breakfast roll and suggest a powerful, latent desire for the good breast. When Wilkomirski's narrator is first taken to an orphanage in Switzerland, he is left alone in the dining room and spots a number of cheese rinds lying on the table – clearly the remnants of a previous meal. After his experience of intense privation in Majdanek and Auschwitz, the boy is shocked that such a large quantity of food has been left unguarded. He stuffs the rinds of cheese under his clothes and hides under the table to eat them:

I put as many as I could into my mouth and as many as I could into my pockets and into my shirt. The strips were chewy but they tasted delicious; the most delicious things aside from bread that I'd ever smelled or eaten. It was like being drunk, I had to get more, everything that I could fit into my shirt.³⁰²

The language used here evokes an image of the boy frantically gorging himself on the cheese rinds in much the same way that Fabian greedily bites into the bread roll. The superficial conclusion to be drawn from this is that two subjects who have been deprived of maternal comfort are interacting with food in a way that demonstrates an inborn longing for the ideal breast, a surrogate object that provides the comfort they have been denied. Whilst this

301 *Ibid*, p.156.

302 Binjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.22.

explanation appears perfectly reasonable, a closer examination can reveal a more complex cause of their behaviour. In both cases the alimentary behaviour in question occurs alongside a significant destabilisation of identity. When the boy arrives at the orphanage, he carries nothing but a blank label around his neck and a small bundle of possessions. The episode with the cheese occurs while his fate is being decided elsewhere by a group of unfamiliar adults.³⁰³ This is the beginning of a period in his life where his identity as a Holocaust survivor will be constantly challenged and questioned; he is told that he is lying or that he must forget about it 'like a bad dream.'³⁰⁴ For Wilkomirski, the Swiss orphanage represents a liminal space suspended between his comfortable life in Zurich and the fantasy of his past. The desired object that is symbolically threatened at this juncture is his chosen identity as a Holocaust survivor. The anxiety that is provoked by this threat manifests in his imagining a scene where he displays behaviour that mimics the compulsion to secure and take possession of the desired object by frantically feeding. In Fabian's case, the threat to his identity comes in the form of the intrusive and prurient urges of his appropriated body. Fabian's quest to find the perfect life is always thwarted by the corporeal or intellectual frailties of his host. Biting into the roll reveals both Fabian's desire for the shop girl as a representative of all that he has been denied by women and a desire to grasp at an elusive perfection that stands at odds with his base desires.³⁰⁵ Despite the fact that *If I Were You* is a work of fiction and *Fragments* is an exercise in autobiographical fantasy, both writers use food as a means to explore unspoken desires through a facsimile of the infantile relationship to the mother's breast. The desire to possess and violently consume objects around them suggests an instability in the conceptualised boundary between self and object, recalling the infant's desire to cannibalise the breast or force himself into it by filling it with his faeces.³⁰⁶ In these two texts, this

303 *Ibid*, p. 22.

304 *Ibid*, p. 122.

305 Klein, p. 149.

306 *Ibid*, p. 63.

behaviour represents an impulse to appropriate an identity that does not belong to them.

Fragments contains a number of scenes of infantile cannibalism. Whilst this motif is subtly suggested by the narrator's confusion of mother and bread, there are numerous incidents that express the theme more literally. At one point the narrator is confronted with a pile of corpses. His eye is drawn by the moving stomach of a female corpse; he moves closer to investigate and is startled when a rat emerges from a previously unseen hole in the woman's abdomen:

Now I can see the whole belly. There is a big wound in one side with something moving in it. I get to my feet so that I can see better. I poke my head forward and at this very moment the wound springs open, the wall of the stomach lifts back, and a huge, blood-smearred, shining rat darts down the mound of corpses. Other rats run startled out of the confusion of bodies, heading for open ground.

I saw it, I saw it! The dead women are giving birth to rats.³⁰⁷

This horrific scene is designed to illustrate the boy's confusion surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. Fragmented information from older children in his barracks has revealed to him that a baby grows inside a woman and before he has made a close inspection of the bodies, he speculates that there might be a child trying to escape from the woman's belly. After seeing the creatures emerge from the corpse pile, he comes to the erroneous conclusion that 'the dead women are giving birth to rats.' This traumatic confusion of ideas follows the protagonist into his adult life. When he witnesses the birth of his first child, the slick head of black hair that emerges triggers a powerful recollection of the rat.³⁰⁸ In the mind of the narrator, children and rats have become interchangeable figures. In these circumstances the idea of a woman giving birth to a rat is easily distorted into the image of a child consuming a

307 Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.86.

308 *Ibid*, p.87.

woman from the inside.

The cannibalistic impulse as a normal part of infantile libidinal organisation was a concept first discussed by Freud in an addendum to his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Cannibalism was evoked in conjunction with the oral stage of object identification, a wish to bite, ingest and destroy the object in question in a complex interplay of greed and frustration.³⁰⁹ Karl Abraham defined this period as the oral-sadistic phase.³¹⁰ Expanding on the work of Abrahams, Melanie Klein made the controversial suggestion that rather than being a discrete phase of development, oral-sadistic impulses characterise the entirety of the oral stage:

The destructive impulse projected outwards is first experienced as oral aggression. I believe that oral-sadistic impulses towards the mother's breast are active from the beginning of life, though with the onset of teething the cannibalistic impulses increase in strength...In states of frustration or anxiety the oral-sadistic and cannibalistic desires are reinforced and then the infant feels that he has taken in the nipple and breast in bits...The frustrating breast- attacked in oral-sadistic fantasies- is felt to be in fragments; the gratifying breast, taken in under the dominance of the sucking libido, is felt to be complete...It counteracts the process of splitting and dispersal, makes for cohesiveness and integration, and is instrumental in building up the ego. The infant's feeling of having inside a good and complex breast may, however, be shaken by frustration and anxiety. As a result the divorce between the good and bad breast may be difficult to maintain, and the infant may feel that the good breast too is in pieces.³¹¹

309 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, translated by James Strachey (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2011) p.7.

310 Karl Abraham, 'A Short Study of the Development of the Libido (1924) p.91.

311 Klein, p.5.

Klein's observations emphasise that cannibalistic impulses and fantasies are intrinsically connected to the bad breast as the agent of denial of frustration. This idea has particular resonance for the other significant manifestation of cannibalism within *Fragments*. The boy witnesses two tiny babies being thrown into the barracks. Predictably the infants are dead by morning. The incident is made more harrowing by the revelation that the babies were driven by starvation to feed on their own frostbitten fingers. The fingers have been eaten down to the bone.³¹² The image of a self-cannibalising child constitutes a powerful symbol of maternal absence. Deprived of the sustenance that should come from the mother, the child feeds on itself in a manner that is ultimately self-destructive. This behaviour is an extreme realisation of the anxieties that create the idea of the frustrating, persecutory breast and the fear of annihilation that accompanies it.

The fragmentation that characterises the cannibalisation of the bad breast is counterintuitive to the development of the ego and must be mitigated by the cohesive internalisation of the good breast. The use of cannibalistic imagery in *Fragments* is indicative of Wilkomirski's fragmented identity, an unstable sense of self which must be bolstered by the creation of complex fantasies. In *Envy and Gratitude* Klein states that the divide between the good and bad breast is tenuous, anxiety constantly threatens the effective integration of the good breast as a complete object and an anchor to the ego.³¹³ It is possible to observe within *Fragments* a clear pattern of gratification and frustration that appears to conform to this statement. For instance, the euphoria of feeding on the cheese rinds is disrupted by the appearance of an angry nursemaid and the confrontation that follows results in the loss of a recently acquired teddy bear. In a similar vein, the pleasure of licking jam from a spoon is curtailed by a slap to the hand.³¹⁴ In addition to these minor incidents, the female caregivers in *Fragments* seem

312 Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.71.

313 Klein, p.31.

314 Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*, p.51.

unusually volatile and possess a dangerous ambiguity that evokes the tenuous divide between the good and bad breast. The volatile farmer's wife is described as 'rough and full of punishments,' but she also acted as a basic caregiver in a dangerous situation, hiding the boys and feeding them 'porridge from a big pot.'³¹⁵ Frau Grosz escorts the boy to safety in Switzerland but seemingly betrays him by vanishing abruptly.³¹⁶ A similar vanishing act is perpetrated by a mysterious woman who meets the boy at liberation and appears to know his name. The woman seems excited to see the narrator and brings him with her to a synagogue in Krakow. After introducing Benjamin to the rabbi as 'the little Wilkomirski boy,'³¹⁷ she is never seen or mentioned again. Most ambiguous of all is the female camp guard who makes three brief but memorable appearances in the text. When first encountered she appears in the deceptive guise of a rescuer. Whilst in hiding at the Polish farm the boy is punished by being locked in the cellar. When he emerges the next morning he discovers that his brothers and the farmer's wife have mysteriously vanished during the night, leaving him completely alone. A truck pulls up to the house and finds him standing outside. A woman in a grey uniform emerges from the truck and offers to take him to Majdanek where he can play and see his brothers again. Benjamin appears comforted by this woman, he responds to her as a small child would to a mother by attempting to clutch at her skirts.³¹⁸ Her deception is soon revealed when the boy discovers that 'Majdanek is no playground.'³¹⁹ Having lured the narrator to a place of danger and death, the woman is transformed from mother to monster. When she next appears, she is wearing her true face of camp guard and persecutor, and the child has learnt to fear her. However, on this occasion she confounds expectation through the seemingly benevolent act of taking Benjamin to see his mother.³²⁰ Her final appearance is the

315 *Ibid*, p.27.

316 *Ibid*, p.15.

317 *Ibid*, p.113.

318 *Ibid*, p.35.

319 *Ibid*, p.37.

320 *Ibid*, p.46.

briefest of all and simply consists of her telling the boy ‘You can’t see your mother again, it’s not possible anymore.’³²¹ Following the pattern established by the other pseudo-mothers in the text, she provides him with the pleasure of seeing his mother and then permanently removes this source of gratification a short paragraph later.

From the very beginning of *Fragments*, the boy experiences a disorientating array of female caregivers, whose nurturing behaviour is invariably undermined by abandonment or violence. These ambivalent and erratic maternal figures correspond with Klein’s description of the internalisation of the mother that occurs in the mind of the infant, as both nurturer and persecutor: they personify a drama that underpins the earliest stages of emotional development and self-awareness. In their representation of the good and bad breast, the women in *Fragments* are indicative of Wilkomirski’s fragmented identity:

Superego development can be traced back to introjection in the earliest stages of infancy; the primal internalised objects form the basis of complex processes of identification; persecutory anxiety arising from the experience of birth is the first form of anxiety, very soon followed by depressive anxiety; introjection and projection operate from the beginning of postnatal life and constantly interact. This interaction both builds up the internal world and shapes the picture of external reality.³²²

Through their intimate connection with food, the mother figures in the text are presented as objects of introjection and projection. They are vehicles for a fantasy of unlimited consumption, but their ability to withdraw gratification and the sublimated incidents of cannibalism suggest the persecutory fears of a fragile and easily destabilised ego. This confused range of images implies that, in *Fragments*, food is closely connected to the first act of feeding, to a fragmented and symbolically over-determined maternal body; a body that, in

321 *Ibid*, p.51.

322 Klein, p.141.

itself, is a stand in for the Holocaust as the forbidden object of desire in a misguided search for identification and meaning.

Fragments employs a fiction of Holocaust survival to articulate the desperate search for an identity from a position of alienation and loss. Wilkomirski's use of the Holocaust as a metaphorical abstraction cannot be ethically condoned but it may yet be rationalised. Irving Howe described the Holocaust as a period of history that 'resists the usual capacities of the mind.'³²³ It is seen to provide an unanswerable challenge to human self perception that calls for 'a paradigm other than that of comprehension.' The status of the Holocaust, if seen as a traumatic ontological abyss, creates certain feelings of sympathetic vibration when discussing the themes of radical absence and destabilisation of identity. In *Fragments* these issues are navigated by a reflexive return to the ego's first external point of reference, the mother's breast. It is possible to argue that *Fragments* is simply the product of Wilkomirski's unique delusions, however it is interesting to note that the primal significance of the mother's body as a reference point for the reconstruction of the shattered self is acknowledged in other Holocaust texts. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to exploring another example of such a text, in this case a genuine autobiography.

Sarah Kofman published *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* in 1994, which represented her first autobiographical work of any significant length. Her previous work consisted primarily of academic writing in the fields of philosophy and psychology. Kofman is particularly renowned for her work on Nietzsche and Freud; in her introduction to the English translation of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, Anne Smock describes her as 'one of France's most important contemporary thinkers.'³²⁴

323 Irving Howe, 'Writing and the Holocaust,' *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 175-200 (p.175)

324 Anne Smock, 'Introduction,' Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener Rue Labat*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) vii-xiii.

Occurring in the wake of a prolific academic publishing record which includes over twenty books,³²⁵ Kofman's transition in rhetorical style from the didactic to the personal has been treated with a considerable degree of academic interest. The turn to autobiography is viewed as even more significant in light of the fact that it occurred less than a year before Kofman's death by suicide. A newspaper account of her death goes so far as to suggest a direct causal link between the two events, linking her autobiographical writing to a period of 'profound depression' and suggesting that it brought a 'full stop' to her philosophical work.³²⁶ In her introduction to the text, Anne Smock tacitly supports this position by emphasising the apparent critical distance that exists between *Rue Ordener Rue Labat* and Kofman's previous work:

The splendid mask of insolently feminine brilliance is not apparent at all in *Rue Ordener Rue Labat*, which, I would say, does without literary qualities. It is simple, but it does not have a simple style or any style. You would not say of it 'well written' or 'a good story.' Fortunately it exists and is plainly legible.³²⁷

Smock describes Kofman's autobiography as an aberration in style and content. The emphasis on simplicity, clarity and the lack of 'literary qualities' strongly discourages any sense of continuity between the personal and the intellectual. The idea that there is a clear line of demarcation between Kofman's autobiographical work and her academic work is a position many scholars have taken issue with. Rachel Rosenblum suggests that Kofman used her philosophical writing and analysis of figurative works of art as a means of sublimation:

Sarah Kofman devoted herself to intellectual autobiographies (Hoffman, Wilde and again Nietzsche.) A strategy of *mise en abime* allowed her to express herself through

325 *Ibid*, p.vii.

326 Marc Ragon, 'Necrologie de Sarah Kofman,' *Libération*, 18 October 1994.

327 Smock, p.xi.

‘heterobiography’, to write (as Françoise Collins puts it) ‘in the textual body of the other.’ She managed in this way to narrate herself in the third person, to describe herself indirectly, to designate a series of ‘ambassadors’ of herself.³²⁸

Rosenblum suggests that Kofman’s analytical work created intellectually detached analogues through which she could safely explore painful issues such as the loss of her father and conflict with her mother. This theory resonates with Kofman’s statement in the first chapter of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* that ‘Maybe all my books have been the detours required to bring me to write about “that.”’³²⁹ Madeleine Dobie also draws attention to the symbiotic relationship that existed between Kofman’s intellectual life and her personal life. Referring to ‘Smothered Words,’ one of Kofman’s earlier autobiographical vignettes, Dobie comments on the way in which Kofman’s personal history is interwoven with Blanchot and Anteleme’s reflections on the Holocaust, resulting in a disorientating combination of rhetorical positions, creating the impression of ‘a text that continually displaces itself, becomes other to itself.’³³⁰ reflecting Kofman’s own feelings of self alienation. A similar strategy is employed in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, where the subjective voice is suddenly interrupted by Freud’s analysis of Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘London Cartoon.’³³¹ This is a painting Kofman herself had analysed in *The Childhood of Art* and thus it forms a direct intertextual link between her autobiography and her academic work. The painting depicts the Virgin Mary and St. Anne playing with the infant Jesus and St. John the Baptist. The weight of the analysis rests on the enigmatic smile on the face of St. Anne. Kofman surmised that the smile was the artist’s way of displacing the suffering of his birth mother Caterina, who was forced to give up her child to a younger

328 Rachel Rosenblum, ‘And Till the Ghastly Tale is Told: Primo Levi - Sarah Kofman: Survivors of the Shoah and the Dangers of Testimony,’ *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 33.2 (2000) 81-103 (p.89).

329 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener Rue Labat*, translated by Anne Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) p.3.

330 Madeleine Dobie, ‘Sarah Kofman’s Paroles Suffoquées: Autobiography, History and Writing After Auschwitz,’ *French Forum*, 22.3 (1997) 319-341 (p.336).

331 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.63.

woman of better social standing.³³² Rachel Rosenblum states that Kofman's analysis of da Vinci's maternal conflict is a veiled reference to her own guilt over the displacement of affection from her biological mother to her surrogate mother.³³³ It is telling that this diversion occurs immediately after a chapter describing a post-war custody hearing between the two women in which Kofman testifies against her mother, citing numerous counts of physical abuse:

I was convinced that my mother was lying. I was outraged to see her falsely accuse the woman to whom we owed our lives and whom I loved so much! I in my turn accused my mother, showing the court my thighs covered with bruises, and I succeeded in making everyone feel sorry for me.³³⁴

Far from eschewing complexity in favour of simplistic confessional prose, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* is an intellectually self aware text that invites its own deconstruction in terms of specific philosophical and psychological paradigms. This section will examine Kofman's narrative in terms of a Kleinian struggle between two competing mother figures and the ways in which this conflict foregrounds Kofman's troubled relationship with her Jewish identity. The many traumatic instances of eating and vomiting in the text will be posited as abject counterpoints to the anthropological and sociological theories that situate food and the mother as crucial loci in the construction of the idealised ethnic self. For Wilkomirski, the Holocaust provides him with an identity that represents a validatory object of desire, Kofman displays a desire to evade the deterministic identity politics that surrounded her from early childhood and formed the substance of her Holocaust experience.

The book opens with the deportation of the author's father, Rabbi Bereck Kofman, during the

332 Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freudian Aesthetics*, translated by Winifred Woodhull (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

333 Rosenblum, p.91.

334 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.60.

infamous Velodrome d'Hiver roundups that took place in Paris in July 1942. When the family came out of hiding in 1944, they learned that Rabbi Kofman had been taken to Drancy and then to Auschwitz, where he was summarily executed for refusing to work on the sabbath.³³⁵ After the deportation of her father, Kofman's mother attempted to send her six children to various places of refuge in the countryside, disguised as gentiles. This endeavour was made difficult by six-year-old Sarah's frequent vomiting and refusal to eat non-kosher food.³³⁶ Eventually it was decided that Sarah must stay with her mother and the two of them spent the war hiding in the apartment of a Christian acquaintance, a woman that Sarah would come to affectionately refer to as Mémé. Whilst masquerading as Mémé's daughter in an effort to conceal her true identity, Sarah reports becoming increasingly detached from her own mother and from Judaism:

My mother suffered in silence: no news from my father; no means of visiting my brothers and sisters; no power to prevent Mémé from transforming me, detaching me from herself and from Judaism. I had, it seemed, buried the entire past: I started loving rare steak cooked in butter and parsley. I didn't think at all anymore about my father, and I couldn't pronounce a single word in Yiddish despite the fact that I could still understand the language of my childhood perfectly.³³⁷

The traumatic early loss of her father meant that the world of death camps and deportations formed an ominous backdrop to Kofman's childhood, however the primary focus of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* is the subtle and insidious side effects that proximity to these events cause to the developing consciousness of a small child. Kofman's experience in hiding fundamentally disrupted her perception of herself as a Jew. For Kofman, the violence of the Holocaust is revealed in the violence enacted on her very identity. *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*

335 *Ibid*, pp.9-10.

336 *Ibid*, p.24.

337 *Ibid*, p.57.

confronts the self alienation that occurs as a result of existing in a liminal space between her Jewish identity and the imposed identity she experiences in hiding. Nicole Fermon observes that the title of the narrative evokes the confusing ‘traffic that exists between two homes and two worlds.’³³⁸

The traumatic tension of the journey Sarah and her mother undertake from Rue Ordener to Rue Labat is impressed upon the reader by Kofman’s description of a violent episode of vomiting. Kofman and her mother receive warning of their imminent arrest whilst eating vegetable broth; they are forced to take flight immediately, leaving their food unfinished. When describing the journey, Kofman recalls that ‘One metro stop separates the Rue Ordener from the Rue Labat. Between the two, Rue Marcadet; it seemed endless to me and I vomited the whole way.’³³⁹ Kofman expresses the extremity of her childhood trauma through its effect on her body.

There are many other episodes in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* that revolve around eating and vomiting. Kofman’s early memories of her religious upbringing are strongly associated with food. As the local orthodox rabbi, Berek Kofman’s duties included the kosher slaughter of chickens. Sarah recalls women queueing outside their apartment with chickens in net bags.³⁴⁰ Kofman recounts the passing of the Jewish festival calendar in brief flashes of memory, most of which centre around the preparation or consumption of a ritual meal. Sarah describes her mother cleaning the house for Passover ‘looking under the bed with a flashlight to make sure that not a single crumb of bread had eluded her,’³⁴¹ and family meals taken under a canopy of branches during *Sukkot*.

It is noteworthy that these seemingly fond recollections are tempered by the presence of

338 Nicole Fermon, ‘Conversion and Oral Assimilation in Sarah Kofman,’ *College Literature*, 28.1 (2001) 155-169 (p.162).

339 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.31.

340 *Ibid*, p.14.

341 *Ibid*, p.15.

strong, negative emotions. Pleasant memories of Jewish festivities are overshadowed by 'living in terror of using the wrong utensils.'³⁴² In the Kofman home food is surrounded by powerful taboos and prohibitions, as Sarah wonders, somewhat resentfully, why the 'goy' woman who comes to light their stove on the sabbath is allowed to do what she is not. The

342 *Ibid*, p.13.

slaughtering of the chickens is surrounded by an aura of mystery and feelings of anxiety:

I played ball against the wall and carefully watched my father's comings and goings from the bathroom to the waiting room. It was all very mysterious and filled me with alarm. I associated the shohet's razor with Abraham's knife and the guttural sounds of the shofar with cries from the chicken's severed throats.³⁴³

For Kofman, the traditional accoutrements of Judaism are associated with the primal fears of death and parental betrayal. The food preparation rituals of her Jewish upbringing are remembered with a strong undercurrent of anxiety that foreshadows the eventual destabilisation of her identity.

During the war, Kofman's experience in hiding is strongly dictated by food. A refusal to eat non-kosher meat leads to fear of discovery as a Jew and necessitates six year old Sarah's return to her mother. After returning from her hiding place in the country, the thought of being separated from her mother again to hide in a Jewish orphanage, triggers a further episode of vomiting. When hiding in Rue Labat, Sarah vomits when given strange food by their hostess.

Kathryn Robson theorises that Kofman's fixation with eating and vomiting refers to 'the use of bodily figures to recount experiences that seem to resist narrativization.'³⁴⁴ In other words, the body is used to express the limits of the written and spoken word in the narrative reconstruction of trauma. Robson draws on the theories of Maud Ellmann which describe the ingestion and rejection of food as suggestive of the boundaries that demarcate self and other. The ingestion of food refers to a willingness to assimilate what is other to the self. 'The young Kofman stages a refusal or acceptance of her own situation, not through words, but

343 *Ibid*, p.14.

344 Kathryn Robson, 'Bodily Detours: Sarah Kofman's Narratives of Childhood Trauma,' *The Modern Language Review*, 99.3 (2004) 608-621 (p.608).

through what she will not or cannot eat.³⁴⁵

According to Robson, the trauma that Kofman is unable to assimilate and express is the deportation and death of her father and this trauma underpins her troubled relationship with Judaism. Kofman's father serves as the symbolic locus of her Jewishness, since he is a rabbi and the primary enforcer of the law of Kashrut. In 'Damned Food' Kofman recalls that the ham and butter sandwiches handed out by the Red Cross in Brittany, only became edible and delicious when they had been 'purified by circumstances and parental authority.'³⁴⁶ A fixation with ritual food prohibitions and later digestive difficulties establish Kofman's body as the primary site of expression for her latent and conflicted Jewish identity. Robson suggests that Kofman's initial refusal of non-kosher food suggests a psychological attachment to paternal law and, conversely, her eventual consumption of Mémé's indicates a partial acceptance of her father's demise:

Rue Ordener, Rue Labat seems to suggest that in digesting gentile food, the child necessarily also 'digests' - accepts- her father's death. Yet the text also makes it clear that the child is never able to digest her father's death and her own detachment from her (Jewish) past completely. She locates her Jewish identity and past in her body, using the body as a site of resistance to assimilation into a gentile way of life. This again is shown through her bodily rejection of Mémé's food...food that is not blessed with parental approval and that is alien to her. The rejection of food that her father has not sanctioned points not only to her continued submission to paternal law but also, crucially, to her refusal - or inability - to forget her father's deportation.³⁴⁷

Whilst it is clear that Kofman experiences the disruption of her identity through the visceral

345 *Ibid*, p.611.

346 Sarah Kofman, 'Damned Food,' *Selected Writings: Sarah Kofman*, edited by Thomas Albrecht, Georgia Albert and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 247-248 (p.247).

347 Robson, p.615.

mechanism of eating and vomiting, I believe the paternal emphasis of Robson's analysis overlooks the significance of the troubled relationship that this text is structured around. The central event of Kofman's narrative is a conflict between two mother figures and the primary focus of this battle is food. Whilst Sarah and her mother are hiding in Mémé's apartment, the two women compete to offer Sarah nourishment. Initially Sarah's mother prepares her kosher meals, but as the risk of acquiring provisions becomes too great, she is forced to allow Mémé to assume responsibility for her daughter's meals. On the pretext of concern for Sarah's health, Mémé compels her to eat previously forbidden foods such as 'raw horse meat in broth.'³⁴⁸ Despite initially manifesting resistance to this change of regime in the form of vomiting, Sarah eventually succumbs to the temptation of Mémé's 'excellent' cooking and starts to enjoy non-kosher delicacies such as 'rare steak cooked in butter and parsley.'³⁴⁹ Ultimately there proves to be a lot more at stake than food. Kofman strongly implies that her acceptance of non-kosher food is strongly linked to her emotional detachment from her mother. Significantly, her increasing emotional distance from her mother is mentioned in the same paragraph as her new found love of rare steak. A strong symbiotic connection between Kofman's mother and food is established earlier in the text, she is positioned at the centre of holiday meal preparations and a refusal to compromise on kosher dietary restrictions enables Sarah to retain her physical attachment to her mother. In 'Damned Food,' the alimentary associations Kofman has created with her mother are strong to the point of being overbearing and unpleasant. The short essay opens with vivid memories of being 'stuffed' with food. Mrs Kofman is the terrifying 'high priestess of the kitchen,' pursuing Sarah to school with her unfinished bowl of cafe au lait.³⁵⁰

When the domestic authority of 'the high priestess of the kitchen' is disrupted, it is shown to

348 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.42.

349 *Ibid*, p.57.

350 Kofman, p.247.

destabilise Sarah's sense of her own identity, leaving her vulnerable to ideological refashioning by Mémé. When Sarah accepts Mémé's food, she simultaneously internalises the idea that she has a 'Jewish nose' and that 'Jews are stingy and love only money.'³⁵¹

Kathryn Robson comments further on a strong connection between ingesting Mémé's food and ingesting her values:

Eating Mémé's food means ingesting her prejudices against Jews...In adopting a different dietary regime, the narrator distances herself from her Jewish past and learns to view her Jewish identity and her own body through other eyes. Her religion and her background become alien to her, filtered through Mémé's anti-semitic and ingested on a daily basis as she accepts Mémé's food.³⁵²

Robson's observations imply that cultural values are closely linked to culinary rituals.

Mémé's ideological influence occurs as a function of her domestic authority, this suggests that the stability of Sarah's Jewish identity is contingent on her mother's presence in the kitchen, rather than on her father's position as head of the household and religious arbitrator.

The concept of the mother as the root of the ethnic self is explored in the memoirs of Louise DeSalvo. DeSalvo is a literary scholar and third generation Italian-American and her memoirs document the difficult process of 'the ethnic Italian-American woman's self-definition through her relation to ethnic cuisine.'³⁵³ In *Vertigo* and *Crazy in the Kitchen* DeSalvo recounts an ongoing culinary war between her mother and her step-grandmother Libera, that bears strong parallels to the conflict between Mémé and Mrs Kofman. *Crazy in the Kitchen* draws particular attention to 'the role of food as the embodiment of cultural and personal memory' in the psychological landscape of Italian immigrants and their descendants.

351 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.47.

352 Robson, p.614.

353 Theodora Patrona, 'Ethnic Identification, Food and Depression: Louise DeSalvo's Memoirs and the Italian American Experience,' *Mediterranean Studies*, 20.2 (2012) 176-186 (p.177).

In her examination of DeSalvo's memoirs, Theodora Patrona observes that, for Libera, cooking traditional southern Italian food serves as a way to mitigate the profound sense of displacement and alienation she feels in suburban America after leaving her native Apulia:

DeSalvo's culinary descriptions in *Crazy in the Kitchen* underscore the key role of food from the old country in the immigrant's life. The production and purchase of ingredients, its ritualistic preparation and savoured consumption are vital processes in this ethnic women's everyday life...the very attempt to cook for an immigrant like Libera should be envisaged as the connecting link to a distant home.³⁵⁴

Adrift and isolated in a strange environment, Libera affirms her identity through the cooking and preparation of traditional food.³⁵⁵ Food plays a similarly important role in DeSalvo's mother's construction of her identity, her absolute rejection of southern Italian culinary practice and her attachment to American convenience food betrays her rejection of her ethnic roots and a desire to assimilate into her suburban environment.³⁵⁶ For both women, food signifies a primal imperative to return to one's origins, a call that they embrace and abject respectively. DeSalvo describes her mother and grandmother's battle for dominance in the kitchen. Like Mémé and Mrs Kofman, both Libera and her step-daughter compete to feed the family and DeSalvo describes her frequent resentment at being forced to eat her mother's frozen and tinned profferings rather than her grandmother's more appetising dishes:

DeSalvo's mother's insistence on American food gains the author's hate as she and her sister are forced to eat it. Their mother's refusal to even taste the Italian food their grandmother has prepared (let alone participate in cooking it) affects her daughters' perception of ethnic food and identity. The mother's choice to reject her roots and

354 *Ibid*, p.179.

355 Louise DeSalvo, *Crazy in the Kitchen: Foods, Feuds and Forgiveness in an Italian American Family* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005) 45-46.

356 *Ibid*, p.17.

traditional cooking deprives both her and her daughters of being part of the female collectivity that has for centuries been suffused with the sharing of secrets, female bonding and feelings of togetherness. By projecting her own problematic relationship with her maternal and ethnic background onto her daughters, DeSalvo's mother perpetuates her own feelings of orphanhood, raising in her turn motherless and countryless third generation daughters.³⁵⁷

Although it is easy to understand a preference for home-cooked food over pre-cooked, convenience food, Patrona suggests that the DeSalvo family's kitchen conflict embodies something much more fundamental than culinary aesthetics and nutrition. By shunning Italian food, DeSalvo's mother not only distances herself from her own heritage, but also destabilises the ethnic identity of her daughters and severely impacts their mental health; DeSalvo's younger sister would later commit suicide and DeSalvo herself reports frequent struggles with bouts of depression. The far-reaching consequences of the culinary antagonism on Louise and her sister further reinforces the pivotal role of the mother as the 'connecting link with the ethnic world and culture.'³⁵⁸

It is possible that the idea of the mother as the root of the ethnic self is purely a function of the primal significance of food in the internal construction of ethnicity. In 'Food, Self and Identity' Claude Fischler claims that 'any given human individual is constructed biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate.' Incorporation of food is established as one of the primary points of contact between the self and the surrounding world and thus the food one chooses to allow across this important conceptual boundary contributes considerably to the construction of individual identity. The boundary between self and other, on both a communal and individual basis has been identified by

357 Patrona, p.181.

358 *Ibid*, p.180.

anthropologists such as Mary Douglas as a site of great anxiety. In view of this tension, the draw of foods perceived as culturally familiar is extremely powerful, consequently ingestion plays a central role in the establishment of collective identity, as Fischler argues:

Food and cuisine are quite a central component of the sense of collective belonging.

In some situations of migration and minority culture, it has been observed that certain features of cuisine are sometimes retained even when the original language of the culture has been forgotten. Application of the rules of Kashrut has probably been one of the cohesive factors in Judaism for over a millennia and a protection against acculturation or even outside contacts. Human beings mark the membership of a culture or group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely... by defining the otherness, the difference of others.³⁵⁹

Fischler establishes food as a fundamental element of an individual's perception of themselves as part of an ethnic group. Food preference is identified as one of the most enduring ethnic markers, even superseding the power of language. Louise DeSalvo attempts to research her Italian ancestry but 'when her scholarly techniques fail to satisfy her wish to know, to understand, to belong, the author falls back on the physical sensation of food.' Patrona describes DeSalvo's relationship with food as 'primal,' an elemental part of her psyche and a crucial building block in the reconstruction of a history that has been lost to her.³⁶⁰ For this reason, in the case of Kofman, anxiety surrounding food prohibitions presents as an enduring manifestation of her troubled relationship with her Jewish identity. Long after she has ceased to observe religious practices and has lost the ability to speak Yiddish, Kofman exhibits a fixation with digestive issues. In 'My Life and Psychoanalysis,' Kofman describes the difficulty of articulating trauma. The mouth is symbolically connected to the sexual organs

359 Claude Fischler, 'Food Self and Identity,' *Social Science Information*, 27.2 (1988) 275-292 (p.280).

360 Patrona, p.183.

and the anus and the process of self-narration is metaphorically conceptualised as digestion and defecation. When the construction of a coherent, linear narrative proves to be inadequate, Kofman identifies the most authentic form of self-expression as a less articulate explosion of words that originates from her 'guts.' More significantly still, when she experiences literal constipation, her flow of words also stops and she finds herself unable to talk to her therapist:

I know that if, for instance, on a given day I was constipated, I would not be able to 'talk' on the couch either, that 'it' would not produce anything. That nothing would pass. What passes through my mouth in analysis, then, has nothing to do with truth or meaning. It comes up from my guts to be offered like a gift.³⁶¹

In Kofman's texts, the ability to authentically narrate the self is distanced from the cognitive realm and takes on a visceral construction, expressed through the dichotomy of a constipated and leaking body. Robson claims that 'My Life and Psychoanalysis' presents the body as 'a textual figure that expresses the limited possibility of speech' and it is also suggested that this construction of the body is 'unambiguously positive' and represents the opportunity for catharsis.³⁶² Contrary to this, I believe that, if read in the context of Kofman's other autobiographical works, it is consistent with an overwhelming preoccupation with digestive issues. Kofman's dysfunctional relationship with her digestive system overrides her powers of verbal and written self-expression. A fixation with eating and vomiting in *Rue Ordener*, *Rue Labat* has already been connected with her inability to accept her father's deportation, manifested as a residual guilt over abandoning the laws of kashrut to eat Mémé's food. Even when she has rejected her Jewish faith in all other aspects of her life, her body represents a last site of resistance against total cultural assimilation.

³⁶¹ Sarah Kofman, 'My Life and Psychoanalysis,' translated by Georgia Albert, *Selected Writings: Sarah Kofman*, edited by Thomas Albrecht, Georgia Albert and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 250-251 (p.251).

³⁶² Robson, p.610.

For Kofman and DeSalvo, it is suggested that the path back to the core of the ethnic self is negotiated through the stomach. It is possible to surmise that the position of the mother in relation to ethnic identity is a direct consequence of her traditional domestic authority over the kitchen. On the other hand, a closer examination of the incidents of eating and vomiting in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* belies the simplicity of this explanation. Most of these incidents have strong Kleinian overtones that place a greater psychic importance on the role of the mother to developing identity that is independent of the domestic organisation of the household.

In the sixth chapter of *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, Kofman recounts her strong attachment to her second grade teacher Madame Fagnard. Despite the prevailing atmosphere of anti-semitism, Madame Fagnard takes an interest in welfare of the Kofman family, seeking to mitigate their poverty and feelings of social exclusion. In addition to providing the family with books, toys and free piano lessons, Madame Fagnard also took Sarah and her sister on trips to the zoo outside of school hours.³⁶³ As Fagnard is an educated woman who took a sympathetic interest in Sarah, this relationship can be viewed as an early prototype of Sarah's attachment to Mémé as a desirable surrogate mother figure. Later in the book Sarah is shown to repeat this pattern of attachment with another female teacher, and when forced to part with this figure separation is described as 'traumatic.'³⁶⁴ The idea of Madame Fagnard as a surrogate mother figure is reinforced by her association with an abundant food source, specifically milk:

When she handed out dietetic cookies and skim milk in the school courtyard, she served me as much as I wanted, much more than the prescribed portions. One day during my last year, I drank so much milk at recess that I vomited in the middle of the

363 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.20.

364 *Ibid*, p.79.

class. I was put in the corner on my knees. This incident was all the more upsetting to me because my family had always forbidden me to kneel; it was much too Christian a posture.³⁶⁵

When Sarah is presented with the milk, her impulse is to gorge herself until she vomits. An attitude of frenetic consumption represents the Kleinian paradigm of the ideal but unattainable 'inexhaustible' breast. The good and ever-yielding breast is idealised in response to persecutory fears incited by its malevolent counterpart - the bad (frustrating) breast. The gorging behaviour represents the oral-destructive impulses that arise from an anxious desire to devour and introject the good breast before the source of gratification is inevitably taken away by persecutory forces.³⁶⁶ In Sarah's case, the persecutory forces in her life are not illusory, since she is frequently taunted by her classmates and called a 'dirty yid.'³⁶⁷ The aggressive introjection of Madame Fagnard as a fantasy surrogate mother creates a new primary object that represents her rejection of her ethnic identity and freedom from persecution. When Wilkomirski portrays his protagonist eagerly consuming his mother's bread or devouring cheese rinds, he is seeking to aggressively appropriate a sympathetic Jewish identity, yet when Sarah greedily consumes Madame Fagnard's metaphorical breast, her object of desire is a safer identity as a French gentile. In 'Damned Food' Kofman remembers, with horror, her mother following her to school with her unwanted breakfast. Her mother and her offering of food are presented as objects of abjection. Sarah's unwanted ethnic identity is intruding on the domain of the good breast, threatening her with persecution. In this scenario, the bad breast does not represent alimentary frustration, rather it represents a poisoned chalice, rejected in favour of the safer, more wholesome nourishment of the good breast. This analogy is consistent with Kofman's perception of her mother as a

365 *Ibid*, p.21.

366 Klein, 64.

367 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.17.

domineering figure seeking to forcibly ‘stuff’ her. The association of the breast as the provider of nourishment has been reversed and perverted, creating a bad breast that embodies the oral-sadistic impulse to project what is negative in the self into the body of another. It is significant that following this incident of vomiting, Sarah is overwhelmed by feelings of religious guilt precipitated by being forced to kneel. Feelings of guilt, anxiety and betrayal give rise to what Klein refers to as ‘the depressive position.’

Synthesis between feelings of love and destructive impulses towards one and the same object - the breast - give rise to depressive anxiety, guilt and the urge to make reparation to the injured, loved object, the good breast. This implies that the ambivalence is at times experienced in relation to a part object - the mother’s breast.³⁶⁸

The infant’s psychic splitting of the breast into two separate objects onto which he or she projects his positive and negative emotions creates unconscious feelings of guilt as he is partially aware that they represent the same object. In her religious discomfort, Sarah experiences residual guilt for assigning to her mother the qualities of the bad breast. Under the duress of persecution Sarah experiences her mother as an ambiguous object, simultaneously representing security and danger, causing her to project the qualities of the good breast onto an idealised surrogate. In response to these feelings of ambivalence, Sarah’s attitude towards her mother vacillates between extreme attachment and rejection. For instance, despite her distaste for being followed to school, Kofman recalls her childhood dread of becoming separated from her mother. When attending summer camp, she attaches herself to her older sister Rachel as a surrogate and enforced separation from her renders her physically ill.³⁶⁹ When Sarah contracts mumps and is forced to remain home from school, she fondly recalls having ‘my mother all to myself for long days at a stretch.’³⁷⁰ At one point Mrs

368 Klein, p.65.

369 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.27.

370 *Ibid*, p.28.

Kofman attempts to hide her daughter in an orphanage and the stress of their imminent parting causes Sarah to vomit. In marked contrast to this, she later declares that she 'began to hate' her mother and tries to run away from her after their life in hiding has come to an end. However, even after Mémé is awarded custody of her, Sarah betrays evidence of underlying maternal attachment and she is privately relieved when her mother abducts her back.

Kofman's relationship with her mother represents the 'psychic splitting' between the good and bad breast that Klein identifies in the early attachment of the developing infant. Her identity is dependent on her mother as the first object of attachment, and when this identity becomes dangerous, she attempts to rewrite herself by a transference of affection to a new object. Betraying her mother in this way repeatedly activates the depressive position and her initial attachment inevitably resurfaces through episodes of separation anxiety and digestive illness.

The battle for Sarah's affections between Mrs Kofman and Mémé represents the most significant maternal dichotomy in *Rue Ordener Rue, Labat*. To maintain secrecy Sarah is presented to strangers as Mémé's adopted daughter 'Suzanne,'³⁷¹ giving more substance to her fantasies of maternal substitution and the incipient promise of self-reconstruction. As mentioned before, the primary focus of the competitive interaction between these two women is food, but Mémé also provides temptation in the form of emotional and intellectual sustenance. Kofman recalls her mother being annoyed by what she perceived as Mémé's extravagant displays of affection towards her:

Why did she kiss me so often? In the morning, at bedtime, on the slightest pretext.

And to be sure, at home we had never gone in for ritual morning and bedtime kisses or such a lot of hugging and commotion.³⁷²

371 *Ibid*, p.39.

372 *Ibid*, p.41.

Echoing her excess with Madame Fagnard and the milk, Sarah eagerly latches on to this unprecedented supply of physical affection. She manifests a constant desire to be near Mémé, becoming angry when she leaves her behind in favour of running errands with another child. In addition to this, Kofman confesses to being fascinated with Mémé's body. She is especially fixated on her 'bare breasts.'³⁷³ A preoccupation with this particular body part further emphasises Mémé's association with the Kleinian construct of the good breast, an inexhaustible source of affection that Sarah longs to attach herself to.

In spite of Sarah's attachment to Mémé and the apparent transfer of affection away from her mother, she is ultimately unable to digest the food that Mémé attempts to provide for her. She vomits when given non-kosher meat and cannot even tolerate the lactose tablets that are provided to improve her digestion.³⁷⁴ This behaviour presents as a further manifestation of the depressive position. Her primal attachment to her mother and consequently her ethnic identity asserts itself through her digestive system, which represents the earliest association with the primary maternal object.

The Kleinian dyad that exists between Kofman's mother and Mémé has been noted in other academic sources. Eilene Hoft-March identifies Kofman's narrative digression to a discussion of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* as 'a psychological allegory' exploring the pain and confusion of the maternal doubling that occurred during her childhood.³⁷⁵ Even as an adult, Kofman reports finding it intensely uncomfortable 'to perceive, all of a sudden, instead of the good maternal face of the old lady (and everything in the film suggests that she represents the good mother...) the face of her replacement. It is a horribly hard, shifty face, and just as one is expecting to see the good lady's sweet, smiling one, there it is instead,

³⁷³ *Ibid*, p.55.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.42.

³⁷⁵ Eilene Hoft-March, 'Still Breathing: Sarah Kofman's Memoires of Holocaust Survival,' *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 34.1 (2000) 108-121 (p.117).

menacing and false.’ Kofman overtly refers to Miss Froy as ‘the good mother,’³⁷⁶ suggesting that she is herself aware (at least in part) of the psychological principles that form the traumatic core of her narrative.

Joanne Faulkner writes that Kofman arranged ‘her own life narrative in Kleinian terms with respect to the good and bad mothers of her childhood.’ Faulkner emphasises Kofman’s necessary abjection of her ethnic identity and the mother who represents an ‘unassimilable reminder of her Jewishness.’ Under these circumstances, Mémé constitutes a desirable surrogate, offering her integration into gentile society. Faulkner concludes that Kofman’s abjection of her mother echoes Nietzsche’s construction of *Ecce Homo*, in which he constructs for himself a fantasy genealogy ‘birthing himself’ from his philosophical predecessors and repudiating his association with his uneducated, anti-semitic mother. Faulkner states that Kofman ultimately rejects her mother in favour of her father, whose fountain pen constitutes her intellectual inheritance.³⁷⁷ The problem with this analysis is that, whilst it acknowledges Mémé’s role as a fantasy figure, it neglects the mimetic repetition of this relationship in Sarah’s other interactions with female authority figures in favour of re-establishing her father as the primary object of desire and focus of her identity. Kofman’s interpretation of her life in accordance with a Kleinian model predates her relationship with Mémé and reinforces the primary role of the mother in the establishment and repudiation of identity and the unresolved guilt that surrounds it.

On the surface, *Fragments* and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* appear to be very different. *Fragments* is a deluded memoir that represents the attempt of a troubled individual to translate his personal trauma into a universally recognisable narrative of suffering by appropriating an identity that demanded unequivocal sympathy. On the other hand, *Rue*

376 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.66.

377 Joanne Faulkner, “Keeping it in the Family:” Sarah Kofman Reading Nietzsche as a Jewish Woman,’ *Hypatia*, 23.1 (2008) 41-64 (p.44).

Ordener, Rue Labat is a genuine Holocaust memoir whose author unconsciously struggles to evade the identity that condemned her as a child. However, despite these seemingly obvious distinctions, these texts share a common thematic fixation. *Fragments* and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* both approach the trauma of the Holocaust from the perspective of projective identity politics and sublimated desire. Kofman's Jewish identity was rendered deeply ambivalent by her experience of the Holocaust. Alongside her fond memories of family ritual and celebration, her formative ideas concerning what it means to be Jewish were filtered through the gaze of a society that perceived her as abject, a 'dirty Yid' with 'a Jewish nose.' The identity of 'Jew' was a problematic racialised designation imposed upon her from without, whilst simultaneously being a positive cultural identity realised from within. In Wilkomirski's case, his manipulation of the politics of identity was dependent on the cultural legacy of the Holocaust in western Europe. Wilkomirski's personal history is granted external meaning when he forces it to conform to the contours of a collective memory. For both writers, the object of desire is the power of self-narration in the face of overwhelming exterior cultural forces of deterministic designation, wishing to to permanently seal them within the identities of 'the little Jewish girl'³⁷⁸ or the orphaned son of a *Verdingskind*. *Fragments* and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* both negotiate this desire through their representation of the maternal body as a vehicle of consumption. Kleinian theory perceives the maternal body as a primal point of origination, governing our future relationship to the world around us. For writers such as Wilkomirski and Kofman, the mother's body has become a powerful object of transference, enabling the exploration of construction of the self in the face of overwhelming trauma, bridging the seemingly insurmountable gap between personal experience and collective memory.

378 Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, p.85.

Chapter Four: The Maternal Body and the Archive

In the ten months separating May the 15th and July the 19th 1944, approximately 430,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. A large proportion of those deported were immediately selected to die. This relatively short period is widely acknowledged to be one of the bloodiest in the camp's history. For reasons that have never been established, the arrival and selection of the Hungarian Jews was extensively photographed by members of the SS. Many of the photographs that have, through extensive reproduction, become synonymous with the systematic destruction of the Jews during the Holocaust, originate from this particular series of images.³⁷⁹

One of the most heavily reproduced photographs in the collection features a small group of deportees walking towards one of the camp's gas chambers. An elderly woman is stooped over carrying bundles, beside her two small children walk hand in hand, a slightly older child following a few paces behind them.³⁸⁰ The individuals in this photograph have never been identified and several different interpretations of this image have been offered. Some captions assume that the image is a mother making a final journey with her children,³⁸¹ whilst the caption from the photographic archive at Yad Vashem simply reads, 'an old Jewish woman takes care of the little children as they are forced to walk.'³⁸² Despite the fact that inference has played a large role in the interpretation of this scene, like many Holocaust photographs depicting women and children, this image has gained iconic status. Isabel Wollaston has stated that 'the photograph is widely read as an image of comfort and care amidst atrocity.'³⁸³

379 United Holocaust Memorial Museum. *Deportation of Hungarian Jews*
<https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1942-1945/deportation-of-hungarian-jews>.

380 See Appendix B.

381 Medical Review Auschwitz, *Historical Pictures*, (2018)
<https://www.mp.pl/auschwitz/photo-gallery/172211,historical-pictures>.

382 Yad Vashem, *Birkenau, Poland An elderly Jewish woman supervising young children on their way to the gas chambers, 05/1944*
https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=31588&ind=50.

383 Isabel Wollaston, 'The Absent, the Partial and the Iconic in Archival Photographs of the Holocaust,'

A presumed maternal relationship is created between the woman and children in this photograph, highlighting the indiscriminate brutality of the Nazi regime and emphasising the optimistic idea of a pure and natural bond that endures through even the darkest periods of history. Significantly, even the caption from Yad Vashem that avoids the assumption of a biological connection between these victims, confidently asserts the presence of a relationship of nurture. One of the most interesting reproductions of this photograph is a stained glass replica produced by artist and Holocaust survivor Roman Halter. The circular stained glass rendering of the four familiar figures, now hangs as a window at the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Laxton, Nottinghamshire.³⁸⁴

In the western world, stained glass windows are strongly associated with spiritual iconography, they are a common sight in churches and synagogues and often depict scenes or objects of particular religious import. Anne F. Harris claims that stained glass has the power to imbue an image with ‘the potential to awaken the viewer to the luminescent quality of the divine.’³⁸⁵ In his conversion of a famous documentary photograph into a stained glass window, Halter has transformed a historical document into a quasi-religious cultural icon. The ‘materiality’³⁸⁶ of the stained glass window, coupled with its spiritual connotations, represents a desire to crystallise an image into a cultural memory that will resist the passage of time, much like the 1065 prophet windows that still hang in Augsburg Cathedral.³⁸⁷

Interestingly, when the window and the photograph are examined side by side, one can see that the people in the window are walking in the opposite direction to the doomed subjects of the photograph. By symbolically altering their journey, the window can be interpreted as an

Visualising Jews Through the Ages: Literary and Material Representations of Jewishness and Judaism, ed. by Hannah Ewence and Helen Spurling, (London: Routledge, 2015) pp.265-294, p.284.

384 ‘Obituaries: Roman Halter,’ *The Telegraph*, 2012,
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/9114186/Roman-Halter.html>.

385 Anne F. Harris, ‘Glazing and Glossing: Stained Glass as Literary Interpretation,’ *Journal of Glass Studies*, 56 (2014) 303-316 (p.304).

386 *Ibid*, p.304.

387 ‘Augsburg Cathedral,’ *Sacred Destinations*
<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/germany/augsburg-cathedral>,

attempt to posthumously rescue the woman and children, if not from the gas chambers, then from oblivion and anonymity. Halter's window supports a utopian memorial fantasy, whereby the people in the photograph and the tragic events that surround them are insulated from forgetfulness.

The idea of the persistence of memory is a fraught and sensitive topic within Holocaust studies. In *The End of the Holocaust* Alvin Rosenfeld observes that the Holocaust is 'one of the most copiously documented crimes in history.'³⁸⁸ The USC Shoah Foundation (to cite just one example) has collected approximately 115,000 hours of recorded testimony.³⁸⁹ An individual attempting to view all of this material would need to watch continuously for over thirteen years. The perceived status of the Holocaust as 'the absolute event of history'³⁹⁰ that forms a traumatic rupture in Western consciousness has transformed the historical imperative into something of a moral crusade. Many thousands of books have been written on the subject, Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed around the world and the Auschwitz state museum receives over a million visitors each year.³⁹¹ The prominent position the Holocaust has come to occupy in popular culture has ignited fears of trivialisation and led to use of such scathing terms as 'the Holocaust industry'³⁹² and 'the cult of memory.'³⁹³ Bjorn Krondorfer describes a rhetoric of memory surrounding the Holocaust that has 'assigned cathartic, religious and sometimes quasi-magical powers to remembrance.'³⁹⁴ Krondorfer interrogates

388 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) p.53.

389 'Visual History Archive Program,' *USC Shoah Foundation*
https://sfi.usc.edu/vha/vha_program.

390 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, New Ed edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) p.47.

391 'Visitor Numbers,' *Auschwitz Memorial and Museum*
<http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/history-of-the-memorial/the-first-years-of-the-memorial/visitor-numbers>.

392 Norman G. Finkelstein, *Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, 2nd edn (New York: Verso, 2003).

393 David Rieff, 'The cult of memory: when history does more harm than good.' *The Guardian*, 2 March 2016
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/mar/02/cult-of-memory-when-history-does-more-harm-than-good>.

394 Björn Krondorfer, 'Is Forgetting Reprehensible? Holocaust Remembrance and the Task of Oblivion,' *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 36.2 (2008), 233-267 (p.235).

memorial culture, questioning the moral binary that exists between the concepts of remembrance and forgetting and he emphasises the role forgetfulness may play in a constructive process of mourning.

The powerful and contentious role that memory occupies in relation to the Holocaust inevitably creates a certain tension surrounding discussion of the archive, where memory is placed, according to Derrida, ‘under house arrest.’³⁹⁵ The concept of the archive and the role of the archive in memorial culture is often an underlying theme in Holocaust literature. This chapter will focus on the metaphysical connection between the archive and the body that exists in several notable works of Holocaust fiction. ‘The Library of Moloch’ by Melvin Bukiet will be used to examine the ethical implications of the popular conception of the testimonial archive as a repository of living memory. The scathing portrayal of the archivist found in the story’s protagonist Dr Ricardo will be discussed as a commentary on a memorial culture that fetishises physical presence, and the impact this has on the treatment and reception of survivors. Having examined the fraught relationship between the body and the archive, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a specific examination of the maternal body as an archival cipher, particularly as it is represented in Norma Rosen’s *Touching Evil*.

My starting point for considering the archive was Derrida and his deconstructive analysis of the concept of the archive, particularly as it relates to psychoanalysis:

The model of the singular mystic pad incorporates what may seem, in the form of a destruction drive, to contradict even the conservation drive, what we could call here the archive drive. It is what I called earlier, and in view of this earlier contradiction, archive fever. There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude,

395 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) p.2.

without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression.³⁹⁶

In this extract from *Archive Fever* Derrida outlines the inherent contradictions bound up within the idea of the archive. Whilst the desire to conserve and record suggests a gaze that is oriented toward the past, this desire is, in fact, partially governed by an awareness of the future. The desire to preserve cannot exist without acknowledging the possibility, perhaps even the inevitability of forgetfulness and decay. This existential anxiety is described as ‘archive fever.’ In this passage, Derrida has put a name to an anxiety that has overshadowed Holocaust studies for quite some time. The drive to conserve, the archive drive, is imbued with a particular poignancy and urgency as we are confronted with the inevitable reality that the event itself is on the verge of passing out of living memory. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that the concept of the archive often appears as a theme in Holocaust literature.

Despite its problematic theoretical status, it is quite common for works of popular Holocaust fiction to present the archive in a positive light. In Robert Harris’s 1992 alternative history novel *Fatherland*, a hidden archive is instrumental in the destruction of an oppressive government through its potential to reveal the horrific events of the Holocaust; events that the victorious Third Reich had attempted to erase from history³⁹⁷. In *The Librarian of Auschwitz* by Antonio Iturbe, the eight forbidden books concealed in the camp represent a last bastion of civilisation and sanity for the fourteen year old prisoner entrusted with their care.³⁹⁸ In both of these texts, the archive represents an enduring repository of knowledge, preserving vital information and safeguarding fundamental principles. The role the archive plays in these texts is idealised and unproblematic, ultimately ensuring that the Holocaust does not succeed in its goal of dehumanisation and permanent annihilation. Despite oppression, brutality and the passage of time, memory persists. However, some works of Holocaust fiction take issue

396 Derrida, p.19.

397 Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (Random House: New York, 1992).

398 Antonio Iturbe, *The Librarian of Auschwitz* (Henry Holt & Company: New York, 2017).

with this uncomplicated position.

If one accepts Derrida's temporally ambivalent description of the archive, it seems natural that one of the most self-conscious creative reflections on the archival process was written by a member of the second generation - what Marianne Hirsch has described as the 'post-memory generation,'³⁹⁹ - children of Holocaust survivors who feel their existence has been at least partially defined by events that happened before they were born. Although physically anchored in the present, the second generation often experience the sensation of having one foot in the past. 'The Library of Moloch' is a short story written by Melvin Bukiet. Both of Bukiet's parents are survivors and he is known for being very outspoken about the proprietary claims the second generation have on the Holocaust as a legacy that has been bequeathed to them by their parents, even going so far as to tell such renowned authors as Saul Bellow and Cynthia Ozick to 'bug off and find their own bad news.'⁴⁰⁰ Distasteful though this may be, it can't be denied that 'The Library of Moloch' raises some interesting questions about the archival culture that has arisen around the Holocaust. The story focuses on Dr. Arthur Ricardo, the director of a large archive of videotapes containing the testimony of Holocaust survivors. After Ricardo is appointed as the director of this project, his relationship to his work quickly degenerates from detached professional interest to self-destructive, morbid obsession:

All that remains of the crusades for example are a few mouldy documents. Likewise, the other episodes of vast and imponderable iniquity, the reign of terror or the conquest of Mexico have faded from human memory, and hence perished in all but legend. There may be articles about Tamerlaine and Gilles de Rays in the yellowing journals on the coffee table, but their ravages no longer have a pulse of life. The

399 Marianne Hirsch, 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile,' *Poetics Today*, 17.4 (1996), pp.659-686.

400 Melvin Jules Bukiet, 'Introduction,' *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Melvin Jules Bukiet (New York: Norton & Company, 2002) pp.11-25, p.16.

contemporary library has one invaluable resource that researchers into the more distant past do not, the victims. That was its avowed purpose, to find the victims of Moloch, to record them, to preserve their suffering, to remit immortality in return for a chronicle of their woe.⁴⁰¹

There were fifty thousand some of them, many more if one included those who hid in the woods, escaped eastwards or merely toiled away the war years in the brutal and often deadly labour camps scattered throughout the continent. Oh, he would tape them too, but it was the fifty thousand who had inhabited the capitals of death that he hunted, begged, cajoled and if necessary bribed into telling their stories. He was like a collector who must attain not merely one of each species, but each and every one of a particular series he collects. To miss just one would mean an elemental loss.⁴⁰²

Dr Ricardo in particular suffered since his work at the library commenced. Yet the more he suffered, the greater his passion for his self-appointed mission. He ignored his students as he expanded his collection. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred tapes on the wall, a thousand hours of horror and he knew them all by heart. His wife was eager to have children, but he would not breed, the tapes were his children.⁴⁰³

All of these extracts are individually interesting, but looking at them closely, it is possible to observe an underlying theme running through all of them. In the first extract, the purpose of the archive is 'to find the victims of Moloch and preserve their suffering.' This phrasing suggests that it is not testimony that is being archived but the witnesses themselves. This theme is continued in the next quote where each of the survivors is viewed as a rare specimen to be located, catalogued and displayed. In the last extract, the tapes themselves are imbued

401 Melvin Jules Bukiet, 'The Library of Moloch,' *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, edited by Melvin Jules Bukiet (New York: Norton & Company, 2002) pp.369-383, p.370.

402 *Ibid*, p.373.

403 *Ibid*, p.374.

with life as Dr. Ricardo's metaphorical offspring. Throughout the story there is shown to be an intimate connection between the archive and the body in that the Library of Moloch is fundamentally presented as a living archive, it has 'a pulse of life.' In using the phrase 'living archive,' I am deliberately echoing words used to describe the Fortunoff Archive at a 20th anniversary conference celebrating its establishment:

The Yale archive (and similar projects) is involved by its very nature in producing its own documents, which are therefore not only documents of the past, but of the moment of their collection. They record - as an essential and necessary aspect of their production - the formation of a 'provisional community' through the shared act of bearing witness. And to the extent that this community remains provisional, it also makes space for, even as it depends upon, the recognition of a future viewer. This is why, although forged in proximity to death, the Yale archive is, and will remain, a living archive.⁴⁰⁴

In this context the phrase was used in a tone of commendation, describing the preservation of important historical material in an engaging and accessible format, and the community that had been created by the survivors and interviewers. However, the term 'living archive,' far from just describing the work of the Fortunoff archive, speaks to a more general trend within Holocaust studies. For instance, in a landmark collaboration between the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technology and the Shoah Foundation, the 'New Dimensions in Testimony' project has developed the technology to allow testimony to be delivered by interactive holograms of Holocaust survivors.⁴⁰⁵ Less recently, archaeological excavations at Auschwitz- Birkenau in 1980 uncovered the last of a collection of documents

404 Michael Rothberg, Jared Stark, 'After the Witness: *A Report from the Twentieth Anniversary Conference of the Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimonies at Yale*,' *History and Memory*, 15.1 (2003), 85-96 (p.96).

405 'New Dimensions in Testimony,' *USC Institute for Creative Technologies*
<http://ict.usc.edu/prototypes/new-dimensions-in-testimony/>.

that have come to be known as ‘The Scrolls of Auschwitz.’ These documents consist of the buried eye-witness testimony of various members of the *Sonderkommando*, documenting the appalling crimes they witnessed on a daily basis.⁴⁰⁶ A recent book entitled *Auschwitz and Afterimages* by Nicholas Chare debated the ethical implications of fully restoring these documents. Chare suggested that the dirt, the smudges and the foxing had equal testimonial value to the actual words on the page.⁴⁰⁷ This attitude implies that, in substance, the scrolls were not just a medium for preserving and transmitting information, they had equal memorial currency as physical objects. This served to remind me of a talk I attended given by representatives of London’s Imperial War Museum. When discussing the development of the museum’s Holocaust exhibit, they emphasised the importance of acquiring what they referred to as ‘chunky artifacts,’⁴⁰⁸ things such as shoes, spoons and identity cards. What this all adds up to and what ‘The Library of Moloch’ appears to be commenting on, is an archival culture that values presence and physicality, whether that means the simulated physical presence of a Holocaust survivor, the tangible evidence of danger and deprivation on the Auschwitz scrolls, or a display case of shoes.⁴⁰⁹

In the case of the shoes in particular, it is a presence that evokes a dramatic bodily absence. This brings us back to Derrida and the idea that the compulsion to archive is fuelled by the haunting possibility of forgetfulness. Obviously, in the case of the Holocaust, we are not only confronting the annihilation of memory caused by the passing of time, we are also forced to confront physical annihilation on a dramatic scale. This fact significantly impacts the way the

406 Dominic Williams, ‘Stories from Holocaust Prisoners forced to work in gas chambers should be heard, not silenced,’ *Independent*, 13 October 2016

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/stories-from-holocaust-prisoners-forced-to-work-in-the-gas-chambers-should-be-heard-not-silenced-a73574>.

407 Nicholas Chare, *Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection Witnessing and Representation*, edited by Griselda Pollock (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2011) p.82.

408 This talk was heard at the Royal Holloway Summer Institute on the Holocaust and Jewish Civilisation (July, 2016).

409 The display case of shoes refers to an exhibit that forms part of the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London.

archive is presented in Holocaust literature as a repository of memory intimately connected to the physical body. In Paul Auster's novel *Oracle Night*, the protagonist discovers a mysterious archive containing a large collection of old telephone directories. The archive is the property of Ed Victory and is created in response to what he saw when he and his platoon took part in the liberation of Dachau:

Hundreds of telephone books, thousands of telephone books, arranged alphabetically by city and set out in chronological order... Ed started the collection in 1946, the year after the end of World War II, which also happens to be the year that Bowen himself was born. Thirty-six years dedicated to a vast and apparently meaningless undertaking, which tallies exactly with the span of his own life. [...]

That was the end of mankind...God turned his eyes away from us and left the world forever. And I was there to witness it.⁴¹⁰

In *Melancholy and the Archive* Jonathan Boulter uses this incident as an example of the archive as a traumatic response to the confrontation of extremity:

Refusing the transcending (or metabolising) impulse of mourning, the archive sets itself up as a continual witness, telling the story of the past, if only by recalling the names of the dead and the living.⁴¹¹

Boulter presents the archive as a manifestation of the melancholic repetition compulsion, an effort to deny the passing of time by physically capturing and interring the past. Looking into this idea further, it appears that Victory's telephone books are presented as objects of transference. A massive collection of names (which is essentially what a telephone book is) can be viewed as a metaphorical substitute for the deceased and missing of the Holocaust.

410 Paul Auster, *Oracle Night* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011) pp.52-53.

411 Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma Memory and History in the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Continuum, 2011) p.40.

However, unlike in a conventional archive, the objects are devoid of external meaning or relevance. The substitution of telephone books for testimony or artefacts casts an unflattering light on the archival process as compulsive and repetitive accumulation for no illuminating purpose. It perhaps even suggests that the process of creating the archive is governed by a fetishistic illusion of physical presence. This begs the question, are there ethical implications attached to this idea, particularly when dealing with the memories of living individuals. This question is the subject of sustained reflection in ‘The Library of Moloch.’

In one of the pivotal events of the story, Dr. Ricardo interviews an elderly woman and she surprises him by demonstrating hostility towards him and the interview process:

‘You know, I never liked the word “survivor,” it suggests too much personal ability. There was no ability. There was luck. We are not survivors, but merely remainders, or the remains. And you are jackals, feasting on the last tasty flesh that sticks to our bones. Tell me, is it good?...I do not think you are unsympathetic, I think you are jealous Herr Doktor Professor.’ [...]

He said ‘I don’t have a gun.’

‘You don’t need one you have a camera.’⁴¹²

This interaction forcefully challenges the concept of the archive and the culture of memory that surrounds it, even going so far as to imply that the process is violent. Crucially, the relationship between the archive and the body that was established earlier in the story is now represented as extremely destructive and likened to various extreme acts of physical violence. Bukiet seems to be suggesting that the ambiguous temporal space the archive inhabits has become a site of re-victimisation where survivors are forced to relive their trauma at camera/gunpoint to satisfy the curiosity of Dr. Ricardo, who as the ‘Herr Doktor Professor’

412 Bukiet, pp.375-377.

has now been implicitly recast as a perpetrator, reinforcing an awareness of re-victimisation and the compulsive repetition of traumatic violence. Obviously this comparison is extreme and would assume it is not intended to be taken literally, but it does prompt reflection on the

process and possible impact of our continual efforts to unearth the past:

Truth (uncovered) is something that must always first be wrested from entities.

Entities get snatched out of their hiddenness. The factual uncoveredness of anything is always as it were, an act of robbery.⁴¹³

This is a passage from Heidegger's *Being and Time* and it has been noted by Boulter that this phrasing suggests that an inherent violence in the revelation of events, as a kind of pillaging of the past.⁴¹⁴ It is quite easy to wonder whether this idea had influenced Bukiet in writing 'The Library of Moloch':

'There are two separate inviolate realms. One is memory.'⁴¹⁵

He sat in her chair, still warm, and stared at the empty lens of the videotape machine. Looking down, he noticed that the arm of the chair had been scratched clear through to the stuffing, a mixture of straw and compressed fibres. Obviously one of the interviewees had been so tormented, his or her fingernails punctured the supple leather surface.⁴¹⁶

Through her use of the word 'inviolate,' the reluctant old woman establishes memory as a form of sacred ground that implicitly prohibits entry and punishes trespassers. This phrasing connects attempts to probe into the past with robbery and violation. The nail marks gouged into the armchair are suggestive of the extreme stress of some of its recent occupants. This gives the impression that revealing their memories has caused them physical pain, bringing back the motif of bodily violence.

The pervasive theme of violence reaches the height of extremity at the story's conclusion. Dr

413 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1978), p.265.

414 Boulter, p.60.

415 Bukiet, p.377.

416 *Ibid*, p.378.

Ricardo falls asleep in an armchair with a lighted cigarette in his hand and he and his tapes are consumed by the ensuing blaze. In his final reflections Ricardo wonders whether destruction by fire is the inevitable fate of all libraries, comparing the fire in his archive to the fire in the library of Alexandria.⁴¹⁷ This idea situates the archive as part of a historical continuum of violence. In this case, the tapes that the fire destroys have been intimately connected to the bodies and lives of those whose memories they contain. The implications of this are troubling. Mimicking the fate of many Holocaust victims, the metonymical bodies of these survivors are consumed by fire. In 'The Library of Moloch,' the connection between the body and the archive becomes a powerful metaphor, used to interrogate the role of the archive in confronting traumatic history and the implications of our determination to collapse the boundary between past and present.

'The Library of Moloch' uses the connection between the body and the archive to explore an ethically problematic tendency towards reification- the transposition of people and inanimate objects. In the character of Dr Ricardo, the archivist becomes indistinguishable from the obsessive collector hoarding his specimens. At the climax of Ricardo's confrontation with his reluctant interviewee, she accuses him of being jealous of the experience of survivors.⁴¹⁸ This accusation could simply be referring to the concept of memory envy, but contrary to popular belief, jealousy is not synonymous with envy. Jealousy invokes the idea of avidly guarding, hoarding or coveting objects. The specific use of the word 'jealous' implies that Ricardo wishes to accumulate and possess the memories of survivors as prized objects in themselves. Bukiet suggests that this process of reification is dehumanising and harmful. The survivors suffer intense, visceral discomfort in recounting their stories and as the 'Herr Doktor Professor' Ricardo transitions from witness to perpetrator. Bukiet's presentation of this living archive seeks to remind his readers that the metaphysical equivalency Ricardo draws between

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.380.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.375.

his tapes and the living person they capture reproduces the ideology of Nazism and its determined dehumanisation of its victims into commodities to be processed, reducing them to the status of *figuren* or *stucken*.⁴¹⁹ Bukiet's intensely negative examination of the archive plays an important role in the stimulation of reflection and debate surrounding the ethical responsibility inherent in the archival process.

Through Bukiet's use of imagery associated with violence and reification, the connection between the body and the archive established in 'The Library of Moloch,' evokes a common symbolic association connecting the archive with a place of death. This association is remarked upon by Arlene Schmuland in her bibliographic overview of representation in fiction. Citing the Levy-Robles report commissioned by The Society of American Archivists, Schmuland observes that archival repositories are often perceived as 'dusty and musty,' a description suggestive of a mouldering tomb;⁴²⁰ however, the image of death presented in 'The Library of Moloch' is much more dramatic and historically specific. The destruction of the tapes by fire replicates the fate of the victims of the gas chambers, both in terms of the violent destruction of the bodies and the intention of erasing all evidence of the crime from history. Destruction of historical documentation is the very antithesis of the archive's stated purpose. The popular archival metaphor of the mausoleum or sepulchre is suggestive of a desire to safeguard and preserve remains and carries the implication of a certain level of delicacy in the treatment of past objects, whereas, Bukiet's evocation of the destructive indignity visited upon the bodies of Holocaust victims, further highlights the narrator's extreme scepticism concerning the rhetoric of testimonial archives. Dr Ricardo voices the conceit that he is ensuring the immortality of survivors,⁴²¹ whereas ultimately, he condemns

419 Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009) p.151.

420 Arlene Schmuland, 'The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography,' *The American Archivist*, 62.1 (1999) 24-73 (p.26).

421 Bukiet, p.378.

their life stories to destruction in an act of professional carelessness.

Bukiet's position regarding the inefficacy of the archive and its perceived parasitic re-victimisation of survivors, originates from theories that propose a strongly corporeal basis for traumatic memories. Literary theorist Roberta Culbertson summarises this position in her statement that trauma 'is known not in words but in the body.'⁴²² In *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida describes the state of melancholia in unmistakably visceral terms:

Not having been taken back inside the self, digested, assimilated as in all 'normal mourning, the dead object remains like a living dead, abscessed in a specific spot in the ego. It has its place, just like a crypt in a cemetery or temple, surrounded by walls and all the rest. The dead object is incorporated in this crypt, the term incorporated signalling precisely that one has failed to digest or assimilate it totally, so that it remains there, forming a pocket in the mourning body. The incorporated dead that one has not really managed to take upon oneself continues to lodge there like something other and to ventrilocate through the living.⁴²³

The corporeal overtones of this description suggest that traumatic memories dwell within the body of the melancholic subject as a malignant foreign body. The unassimilated object permanently establishes itself within the benighted body, eventually appropriating the faculties of speech. Reflecting on this passage, Jonathan Boulter has posited that, following an encounter with a traumatic event, the body itself becomes a 'cryptological' archive:

Here, in Derrida's image of the encrypted, now archived subject, history speaks;
history, more precisely, speaks through the subject from within the subject,

422 Roberta Culbertson, 'Embodied Memory, Transcendence and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self,' *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretations*, 26 (1995), 169-195 (p.170).

423 Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, edited by Christie McDonald, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988) pp.57-58.

foreshadowing the subject as *subject to* history just as it becomes the subject of history. As crypt, as archive ventriloquated by history, the subject begins to offer itself as a subject to be read.⁴²⁴

The image of the body as an archival vessel from which traumatic history is spoken and transmitted is extremely powerful. The intergenerational endurance of memory is an idea that represents the greatest hopes and the deepest anxieties attendant upon the study of the Holocaust. This paradoxical sentiment is aptly expressed in the title of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, 'My Father Bleeds History.'⁴²⁵ Vladek's life is defined by the trauma he suffered, a trauma that flows across generational boundaries to overshadow the life of his son. At the same time, the reader cannot avoid the impression that, the true extent of the horror that Vladek endured is ultimately located within a perishable body that is losing its battle with mortality. Put simply, the demand of the Holocaust to be acknowledged and remembered in all its traumatic magnitude is confounded by the innate tendency of traumatic memories to resist full and coherent transmission.

In Jonathan Boulter's description of the melancholy subject, body and text unite. The archival body does not preserve memory as a static entity, but presents it as a text to be 'read,' subject to the capricious vacillations of multiple interpretations. Pursuing the theme of the body as an archive, I will focus my analysis on one of literature's most symbolically over-determined bodily archetypes. The remainder of this chapter will examine the specific significance of the maternal body as an archival metaphor in Holocaust fiction, with particular emphasis on the treatment of this trope in Norma Rosen's 1969 novel *Touching Evil*.

Touching Evil was published in 1969 and it is notable for being one of the first American

Jewish novels that directly broached the subject of the Holocaust. Eschewing the tendency of

424 Boulter, p.7.

425 Art Spiegelman, 'Part 1: My Father Bleeds History,' *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin Random House 2003.).

her male contemporaries to maintain a conspicuous silence on the issue, Rosen's novel marks the emergence of a significant number of female Jewish writers who chose to confront the legacy of the Holocaust. David Brauner speculates that 'Jewish American women are choosing to break their silence by breaking this silence.'⁴²⁶ Rosen believed that the Holocaust was 'the central event of the twentieth century' and that not to write about it was tantamount to 'moral failure.' Furthermore, Rosen considered the Holocaust to be not just a Jewish issue, but an event that concerned humanity as a whole. In the forward to the 1990 edition of *Touching Evil* she wrote that 'non Jews should be just as obsessed by it as Jews,'⁴²⁷ and in accordance with this belief, the main protagonists of her novel are non Jewish Americans.

Touching Evil explores the impact of the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann on the American viewing public. At the time of its publication, the novel was criticised for obscuring the central issue of the Holocaust in feminist theory, and one critic scathingly accused Rosen of adopting 'a womb's eye view' of the event.⁴²⁸ This chapter will demonstrate that the central position the maternal body occupies in *Touching Evil* has validity in its capacity as an archival metaphor, seeking to expose the vicissitudes of secondary witnessing. Through the mirrored characters of Hattie and Jean, Rosen uses the maternal body as a metaphorical construct, embodying the idea of a society that is forever altered by exposure to the radical and unprecedented evil of the Holocaust. This chapter will reflect on Rosen's implicit construction of the maternal body as an archival body, uniquely sensitive to the imprint of cultural memory and capable of carrying that memory forward to the next generation. I suggest that, ultimately, Rosen's treatment of the maternal body as an archival body is intended as a defiant counter-narrative to the heightened vulnerability of the maternal body to

426 David Brauner, 'Breaking the Silences: Jewish-American Women Writing the Holocaust,' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 31 (2001) 24-38 (p.26).

427 Norma Rosen, 'Forward,' *Touching Evil* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).

428 Edward Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979) p.132.

Nazi genocidal policy, and an emancipatory gesture, empowering the female subject to speak in its aftermath against the backdrop of a male dominated cultural hegemony.

Touching Evil is set in New York in 1961. Hattie is a young married woman, heavily pregnant with her first child; by contrast, Jean is a professional woman in her mid thirties who fruitlessly waits for her long term lover Loftus to leave his wife. In spite of their differing personal and social circumstances, Hattie and Jean bond over the shared experience of watching the Eichmann trial together. Although they are in possession of no Jewish ancestry, the two women are deeply affected by the trial and their altered perception is reflected in a drastic reinterpretation of everyday sites that greet them on the streets of Manhattan; in this case a Chinese laundryman:

In his cadaverous face, his teeth are oversize. Under his long, sticklike legs, his feet are ludicrously big. A glance at Hattie and I can almost see her misplacing him among the near corpses of last evening's televised trial. She has him laid on the freezing shelves at night with the muslims.⁴²⁹

Hattie's exposure to the Eichmann trial leads her to associate a skeletal and shabbily dressed Chinese laundry man with the emaciated prisoners that have become ubiquitous in camp liberation footage and photographs. For Hattie and Jean, the symptoms of poverty and urban decay in an area of New York undergoing extensive regeneration, are reinterpreted to conform to this newly exposed and all-consuming lexicon of suffering. This mental remapping is illustrative of what Rosen refers to as 'the second life of Holocaust imagery,' describing the impact of the Holocaust fundamentally altered state of consciousness, whereby everyday objects, such as trains and chimneys, take on an entirely new symbolic meaning.⁴³⁰

Evidence of this phenomenon surfaces frequently throughout the novel. Mundane events such

429 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), p.43.

430 Norma Rosen, *Accidents of Influence: Writing as a Woman and a Jew in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp.41-47.

as the extermination of vermin in Jean's apartment building are reframed as sinister parodies of Nazi war crimes; one of the building's residents ruefully compares himself to a Gestapo informer when he exposes the harmless presence of silverfish in his bathroom.⁴³¹ Rosen seeks to demonstrate that awareness of the Holocaust demands a subtle but extensive restructuring of our perceptions and assumptions concerning human society and the limitations of previous constructions of morality. The necessary corollary to Hannah Arendt's observations concerning 'the banality of evil,'⁴³² seems to be a new- found recognition of evil in the banal. Imre Kertész described the Holocaust as 'the trauma of European civilisation,'⁴³³ translating the Holocaust from the traumatic experience of the individual, to a collective philosophical wound. *Touching Evil* extends the geographical profile of Kertész's statement, portraying the traumatic immediacy of the Holocaust in the emotional and intellectual landscape of two American gentiles.

Eric J. Sundquist comments that Rosen demonstrates extraordinary prescience in her 'dramatisation of the ways in which "identification" and "witnessing" with their attendant problems of corrosion, voyeurism, projection, replication and the like, were bound to become key themes in Holocaust studies in years to come.'⁴³⁴ *Touching Evil* is an early reflection on the vicissitudes of secondary witnessing. Rosen herself used the expression 'witnessing through the imagination.'⁴³⁵ Through their exposure to eyewitness testimony, Hattie and Jean feel a vicarious connection to the traumatic aftermath of the Holocaust, engaging in what Alison Landsberg has referred to as 'prosthetic memory.':

Prosthetic memories are memories that circulate publicly, are not organically based,

431 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.59.

432 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1963).

433 Imre Kertész, *Speech at the Nobel Banquet* (2002)

https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2002/kertesz-speech.html.

434 Eric J. Sundquist, 'Witness Without End?' *American Literary History*, 19.1 (2007), 65-85 (p.65).

435 Norma Rosen, 'Forward,' *Touching Evil*.

but are nevertheless experienced with one's own body - by means of a wide range of cultural technologies - and as such, become part of one's personal archive of experience, informing not only one's subjectivity but one's relationship to the present and future tenses.⁴³⁶

Landsberg argues that, if the didactic legacy of the Holocaust is to outlive those who directly experienced it, one must look beyond the idea of memory as a biological phenomenon connected to a living body. Prosthetic memory theorises that a 'bodily' memory of the Holocaust can be induced by exposure through cultural media. Hattie and Jean have no authentic connection to the Holocaust and experience it through the medium of a televised trial, and their experience is presented in terms uncannily similar to the hypothetical process of memory prosthesis. The corporeal emphasis of Landsberg's definition is particularly significant. Rosen's original title for *Touching Evil* was *Heart's Witness*,⁴³⁷ and appropriately, much of Hattie and Jean's empathic connection to the Holocaust is mediated through the body.

Rosen's construction of Holocaust awareness is predominantly focused on the maternal body, described by Lillian Kremer as 'a distinctive feminine post-Holocaust perspective.'⁴³⁸

Witnessing the heavily pregnant Hattie's absorption in the trial, Jean imagines the foetus emerging from her body to watch:

Hattie drinks in the words, Hattie sucks up the images. This is watching TV as TV means to be watched, as children watch. Her shoulders watch, her knees watch, her fetus thrusts forward to watch. A TV cartoon animation would show the fetus slipping out, all pale and amniotized to get a better look at the screen, then slipping back in

436 Alison Landsberg, 'America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,' *New German Critique*, 71 (1997), 63-86 (p.66).

437 Norma Rosen, 'Forward,' *Touching Evil*.

438 S. Lillian Kremer, 'The Holocaust in our Time: Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil*,' *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, 3 (1983), 212-222 (p.213).

again.⁴³⁹

This extract suggests that Hattie's emotional response to watching the Eichmann trial is conveyed through her posture, in its very extremity a bodily experience. Observing Hattie, Jean imagines the participation of her foetus in this bodily strain. In a gesture that mirrors Hattie's the foetus stretches forwards to watch, implying that Hattie's exposure to the trial also exposes her unborn child; the idea of this exposure is further emphasised by the darkly comical image of the foetus emerging from her body to watch for itself. Rosen's description strongly emphasises the partial development of the foetus, describing it as 'pale and amniotized.' This suggests not only the exposure of the foetus to the experiences of the mother, but also the possibility that it will be shaped and influenced by them. Jean's peculiar fantasy is consistent with Rosen's portrayal of the pregnant body as particularly susceptible to the imprint of other people's lives and memories:

She has passed through the membranes that enclose her own and other people's existences (her thinking is more and more uterine.) She says she more than *perceives* others' lives, she *experiences* them herself.⁴⁴⁰

Rosen's description of Hattie's state of mind is predicated on the popular perception of the pregnant body as uniquely liminal. As part of a series of essays entitled *Throwing Like a Girl*, Iris Young articulates the ambiguous subjectivity of the pregnant body:

The pregnant subject, I suggest, is decentered, split or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself, its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head. The split subject appears in the eroticism of pregnancy, in which the woman can experience an

439 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.68.

440 *Ibid*, p.116.

innocent narcissism fed by her repressed recollection of her own mother's body.

Pregnant existence entails, finally, a unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future.⁴⁴¹

Just as with Derrida's vision of the archive, Young imagines the pregnant body occupying a unique subject position in space and time. The idea of the foetus as both part of and other to the self suggests a permeability of previously established bodily boundaries. Hattie's pregnancy causes her to experience a dissolution of the barrier between self and other, indicating a heightened capacity to empathise with events she has not experienced and an acute vulnerability to traumatic transference. Hattie describes herself as 'sideslipping into the life of the woman who gave birth on the typhus-lice infested straw.'⁴⁴² When hearing about the horrific experience of a woman giving birth in a concentration camp, Hattie empathically connects to her testimony in a manner that exceeds the communal feeling one would expect to be generated by the shared condition of pregnancy; when describing her experience to Jean, Hattie claims that 'I feel I am more her than I am myself.' Hattie appears to engage with witness testimony to the extent that it threatens the integrity of her own identity. Jean's classification of Hattie's state of mind as 'uterine,' indicates that her empathic vulnerability occurs as a function of her pregnancy. Hattie's state of emotional receptivity and the imagined participation of her foetus in viewing the Eichmann trial establishes the maternal body as an intergenerational conduit of memory. Lilian Kremer observes that 'Hattie becomes a transmitter of Holocaust knowledge to the next generation,'⁴⁴³ and in this role her body can be viewed as analogous to an archive.

The argument that Hattie's body constitutes an archival metaphor is strengthened when one

441 Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p.54.

442 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.131.

443 Kremer, p.213.

considers the role of Jean as her symbolic counterpart. Jean is the protagonist and narrator of *Touching Evil* with 'Hattie fulfilling the role of her foil and her double.'⁴⁴⁴ The two women are introduced through Jean's lover Loftus, who requests that Jean provide support to the younger woman during her viewing of the trial.⁴⁴⁵ At first glance Jean appears to exist as Hattie's polar opposite. Hattie is a young married woman, whereas Jean is a professional woman in her thirties partaking in illicit affairs with her married partner Loftus and a homeless Puerto Rican boy named Jesús. Whilst Hattie is heavily pregnant, Jean has made the moral decision never to procreate despite desperately wanting to. Jean's decision to never have children is prompted by her first exposure to the Holocaust.⁴⁴⁶ During her time in college Jean's psychology professor shows her military photographs of concentration camp victims that he acquired through an army psychologist, and then proceeds to take her virginity. Jean immediately recognises the acquisition of Holocaust knowledge as a traumatic rupture in her life, since it fundamentally alters her perceptions and provides the catalyst for her momentous decision. At this crucial juncture in her life, she barely registers the apology her lascivious professor tries to issue:

Jeannie is not sorry. She feels no connection with her classmates singing on the mountain.

'I'm sorry my darling girl. I hope you won't hate me.' She shakes her head. Never. She is passionately for the breakdown of her life. A catastrophe has changed the world. The old forms have no more meaning for me. I will never marry or have children.⁴⁴⁷

Hattie's response to the traumatic knowledge of the Holocaust is governed by the perceived

444 *Ibid*, p.213.

445 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.28.

446 *Ibid*, p.74.

447 *Ibid*, p.73.

empathic receptiveness of her body. In her pregnant state she is positioned as a biological bridge connecting past, present and future. By contrast, Jean responds to the event by abrogating her reproductive functions. Various interpretations can be placed on Jean's decision. Her refusal could be seen, as Lillian Kremer suggests, as a protracted act of mourning on behalf of humanity,⁴⁴⁸ or a self-depriving gesture of solidarity with the millions who were prematurely deprived of life. However Jean's actions are interpreted, the post-Holocaust awareness of these two women is presented as a dichotomy of fertility or barrenness. Susanne Klingenstein suggests that Jean's maternal desire is sublimated in an intense relationship of transference that she develops with her fellow witness:

Their friendship develops from a casual neighbourhood acquaintance into an intense mother/daughter transference. Their intimacy grows as their domestic happiness disintegrates in pace with the progressing Eichmann trial that the two follow on the television.⁴⁴⁹

Klingenstein suggests that the emotional intensity of viewing the trial encourages Hattie and Jean to enter into a relationship of co-dependence that mimics a mother/daughter relationship. Hattie extensively confides in Jean via letters and Jean comes to rely on Hattie's narrative to fill a perceived void in her own life. At certain points, the identification between the two women becomes excessive, prompting a breakdown of the boundaries between self and other. Jean confuses her journal entries with Hattie's missives and jokes with her lover about the possibility of accidentally sending him one of Hattie's letters in place of her own.⁴⁵⁰ The growth of Hattie and Jean's intimacy, facilitated by the trial, is concurrent with the unravelling of their distinct but equally domestic situations. In many ways, the radically

448 Kremer, p.215.

449 Susanne Klingenstein, 'Destructive Intimacy: The Shoah between Mother and Daughter in Fictions by Cynthia Ozick, Norma Rosen and Rebecca Goldstein,' *Studies in American Jewish Literature (1981-)*, 11.2 (1992), 162-173 (p.168).

450 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.95.

altered perspective that accompanies the acquisition of Holocaust knowledge, equips these two characters with the insight necessary to recognise and confront the destructive patterns their lives have settled into. The idea of mutually supportive *ersatz* familial relationships established in times of crisis has long been perceived as a distinctly female coping mechanism, further elaborating on Lilian Kremer's concept of a uniquely female mode of bearing witness. Myrna Goldenberg wrote of the existence of 'camp mothers' and 'camp sisters,' reasoning (somewhat reductively) that women attempted to survive in concentration camps by adopting strategies of mutual support, whereas men were more likely to engage in passive and defeatist behaviour.⁴⁵¹

The idea that Jean sublimates her maternal desire through a transferential relationship with Hattie is partially credible. In addition to the validation she receives through Hattie's emotional dependence, her relationship with her teenage lover Jesús has decidedly maternal overtones:

Suddenly, whether it's because of those embryo eyes of the eggs, or the false progression I've cooked up, I give birth to a flood of words.

'Take care of yourself Jesús...Don't let your buddies give you any bad advice...what I mean is don't you *take* bad advice from them...you don't have to do what your buddies do...you're an intelligent boy (what makes me think that?)...I know you're an honest boy (or that)...and you're a likable boy (is it that?)...and you can do a lot with your life' (how do I know?)...Too late I recognize the maternal feeling, badly timed. Jesús looks ready to choke, as if food is pushing itself down the passageway meant for air.⁴⁵²

451 Myrna Goldenberg, 'Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives,' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 548 (1996) 78-93 (p.87).

452 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.19.

The imagery of ‘embryo eyes’ and ‘giving birth to a flood of words,’ indicates that Jean is preoccupied by her potential to assume a maternal role in her relationship with Jesús. Her maternal ideation is immediately strengthened by her statement of motherly concern for his moral and educational well-being. However, despite the overt and sometimes destructively oppressive maternal fixations that characterise Jean’s interpersonal relationships, I believe there is strong evidence to suggest that the primary outlet for her maternal sublimation takes a different and infinitely more subtle direction.

Jean works from home as a book cover designer, creating illuminated covers for textbooks. As the fabric of Jean’s domestic life begins to break down, her work life and her personal life increasingly intersect.. She feels herself ‘awash with manuscript’ as she manifests the urge to compulsively record, categorise and file her own life and the lives of those around her. When watching the Eichmann trial, she experiences the strong desire to organise the defendant’s papers:

Mentally I reached out for that mess of papers through which he endlessly shuffled. I wanted to grab them and order them - put big bold headings on and set of the technical material in a nice readable small type with plenty of white space between the lines - I’m a functionary too. And there were the witnesses shuffling without the aid of manuscripts through the memories.⁴⁵³

Jean’s response to the horrific information presented to her by the trial is to try to contain it within the confines of the page, and she imagines making it more palatable by making it literally easier to read. The same approach is used when attempting to digest the emotional confusions present in her personal life. In a letter to Loftus, Jean describes her journal as a ‘dependency,’ born out of a desire to ‘see how my life will fit into words.’ Throughout

453 *Ibid*, p.34.

Touching Evil, Jean increasingly structures her life according to an archival impulse. The description of herself as a ‘functionary’ and the implicit comparison with Eichmann, draws attention to the inherently problematic nature of the archive when it is viewed in conjunction with the history of the Holocaust. Jean’s choice of words expresses concern that she is approaching a complex situation with an attitude of bureaucratic tyranny, the same stance of reductive, callous logic that is seen to have fuelled Nazi ideology and policy. However, in spite of this unspoken acknowledgement of the destructive potential of the archive, Jean’s internalisation of the urge to catalogue appears to expand, rather than limit her world view. Hattie’s pregnant body sets her empathic capabilities at liberty, allowing her to ‘burst through the membrane’ into other people’s lives, and Jean’s imaginary archives imbue her with a similar ability. In a letter to Loftus she says:

My desk is awash with manuscript. Which belongs where? I have the hysterical notion that I ought to design Hattie’s letter and send it off to the copysetter, ink some erotic drawings around the margins of *Chemical Affinities Volume VII*, sign it ‘love and kisses’ and send it to you.⁴⁵⁴

As Jean sits at her writing desk, she imagines the various compartments of her life bleeding into one another through the intermingling of documents. Furthermore, she imagines herself absorbing Hattie’s experiences and memories through reading her letters, which she describes as ‘pouring Hattie’s life blood into the reliquary.’⁴⁵⁵ In its function as an archive of religious objects, the use of the term reliquary here is telling. In her lengthy letters, Hattie documents her life as part of ‘the foursome,’ and in preserving Hattie’s letters and passing them on to Loftus, Jean acts in an archival capacity. In their shared capacity to break down the walls that separate the lives and experiences of others, the archival impulse and the pregnant body are

454 *Ibid*, p.95.

455 *Ibid*, p.118.

strongly aligned in *Touching Evil*. Rather than presenting an image of barrenness in opposition to Hattie's fertility, the positions of these two characters symbolically mirror one another. Taking into consideration the fact that Jean's exposure to the Nazi genocide coincided with the loss of her virginity, it is possible to argue that Jean becomes impregnated with the Holocaust. After the renunciation of biological motherhood, she becomes the premature host of a future cultural trauma, the quintessential encrypted archival subject. This process is fittingly described by Rosen as entering 'one of those long larval sleeps that mark the end of a lived out phase.'⁴⁵⁶

In his introduction to *Melancholy and the Archive*, Jonathan Boulter rhetorically asks 'What happens to the real of history if it only produces shattered subjectivities, incapable of responding to the past in any coherent way?'⁴⁵⁷ In its exploration of the impact of the Eichmann trial on the consciousness of the American public, *Touching Evil* asks much the same question. There is strong evidence to suggest that Rosen subscribed to the idea of the Holocaust as 'a limit-breaking event,'⁴⁵⁸ an event with the power to fundamentally alter reality and leave an indelible psychic imprint on those who 'truly took into consciousness the fact of the Holocaust...the meaning of life and aspiration of knowledge that human beings - in great numbers - could do what had been done.' Jean echoes this sentiment in her apparent dismay and disbelief at the ability of her classmates to continue with their normal activities:

The war in Europe was over, but the war with Japan continued. Europe's death camps had been come upon, one by one, like monsters' lairs, full of stinking bones. The president of the college, at convocation, spoke of 'these troubled times.' Nobody ran around like those open mouthed faces she later saw on Picasso's 'Guernica,' with

456 *Ibid*, p.73.

457 Boulter, p.10.

458 Richard Stamp, "Do Not Forget the Very Thing that Will Make You Lose Your Memory": Blanchot's *Désastre* and the Holocaust,' *Theoretical Interpretations of the Holocaust*, edited by Dan Stone (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp.127-147. p.128.

pointed, screaming tongues. The girls still calmly brushed their Stroock tweed skirts and cold-water-washed their cashmeres. She asked herself what had happened. The world shook. Was she the only one who fell down?⁴⁵⁹

Once Jean has been psychologically inseminated with the idea of the Holocaust, she becomes convinced that the normal ebb and flow of existence should grind to a halt under the weight of such knowledge. She renounces procreation and the mundane activities of her peers become incomprehensible to her, almost as if she occupies another reality. She has become an archival vessel, the embodiment of Boulter's temporally displaced, shattered subject. When she experiences the 'second coming of the Holocaust' through her association with Hattie and the trial, her perception of reality undergoes another dramatic shift as she finds herself 'once again, up to her ears in corpses.' The creation of Jean's archival body as a counterpart to Hattie's pregnant body, expresses simultaneously the idea of the continuation of life and the existential crisis that seems to render such continuation impossible. This ambivalent sentiment appears to resonate presciently with Derrida's description of the archive as a problematic construct that must be 'always working *a priori* against itself':

The archive, consignation, the documentary or monumental approach as hypomnema, mnemotechnical supplement or representative auxiliary or memorandum. Because the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilised so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and the structural breakdown of the said memory.⁴⁶⁰

Despite the illusion of stability, the archive presents itself to Derrida as a paradox arising from the 'structural breakdown of memory' and the knowledge of its limitations. Through

459 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.74.

460 Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, p.11.

Hattie and Jean, Rosen symbolically utilises the pregnant body to facilitate a sustained critical reflection on the concept of the archive and its relationship to the problematic status of cultural memory at a perceived historical crisis point.

In her implicit union of the maternal body and the archive, Rosen illuminates a twofold issue that remains both pertinent and problematic when examining the legacy of the Holocaust.

Any intersection of the archive and the body automatically implies a collision of the individual and the collective. How do memories transcend the perishable body of the individual and enter the public consciousness as history? Conversely, how must the individual engage with these memories when they enter the public forum? In *Touching Evil* these issues are brought into sharp relief by the perceived volatility of the pregnant body.

Through the lens of pregnancy, the body and the archive meet on contested ground, enabling Rosen to reflect upon the nebulous quality of memory and the possibilities and limitations of empathy.

On the one hand, Rosen appears to present the pregnant body as symptomatic of the unique empathic capabilities of women. Hattie claims that 'Women's' bodies can absorb anything...I feel my belly has engulfed a world.'⁴⁶¹ Alongside the imagery of 'bursting through the membranes,' this statement implies that the permeable boundaries of a pregnant woman's body impart a similarly nebulous quality to the ego, enabling her to absorb the experiences of others. When Hattie goes into labour, she imagines herself merging with the woman forced to give birth in a concentration camp:

I can't tell you how it happened Jean. At that moment, the woman joined me, became me. Or I became her. We were the same person. I don't mean the Spanish woman in the labor room. I mean the other one. The one who labored in the camp where there

⁴⁶¹ Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.54.

were typhoid lice in the straw, on the cement, with the booted guard and the torch.

The one who squeezed her baby out into a world of concrete, straw and lice.⁴⁶²

In the pain of labour, Hattie experiences a complete dissolution of bodily and psychological boundaries. Supplanting the indifferent, overworked orderlies and nurses for callous concentration camp guards, she collapses the barriers of space and time and unites her consciousness with another labouring woman. The extremity of Hattie's transference is revealed when she declares that 'When I was in the labor room, it was like being in a concentration camp.'⁴⁶³ Unsurprisingly, this comparison has proven to be extremely controversial. Norma Sayre reacted with outrage to the idea that Rosen was attempting to make a direct comparison between a maternity hospital and a concentration camp⁴⁶⁴ and Eric Sundquist described it as 'bizarre and potentially outrageous.'⁴⁶⁵ Whilst the suggestion that a maternity ward in a city hospital is in any way similar to a concentration camp is extreme and unexpected, it is possible to defend Rosen's analogy. Lilian Kremer suggests that the universal female experiences of pregnancy and childbirth provide the characters in *Touching Evil* with a frame of reference through which to understand the Holocaust on their own terms.⁴⁶⁶ Although Hattie's experience of childbirth is qualitatively very different from the woman giving birth in the camp, there are feelings of pain, vulnerability and exposure particular to the experience of childbirth that permit this seemingly egregious empathic connection. The use of shared female bodily experiences to facilitate imaginative engagement with the Holocaust, conjures up the notion of a utopian, specifically feminine community of remembrance, with the pregnant body residing at its centre as a symbolic archive of memory, this concept implicitly challenges the negative view of the archive presented by Bukiet and

462 *Ibid*, p.252.

463 *Ibid*, p.246.

464 Nora Sayre, Book Review, *New York Times* (September 14, 1969) p.26.

465 Sundquist, p.80.

466 Kremer, p.216.

Derrida. Rosen lends significant credence to this idea by representing Hattie and Jean's intensely empathetic interest in the trial as sharply contrasted by the relative indifference of the men around them.

A significant proportion of Jean's narrative is presented in the form of letters to her lover Loftus. Loftus is a former teacher of Hattie's and is instrumental in bringing the two women together. Worried about the impact of such distressing material on a young pregnant woman's health and sensibilities, Loftus asks Jean to watch the trial with Hattie:

I had lived through this whole business the first time news of it came around and I didn't know any more now than I did then. She's watching the Eichmann trial on TV, you see, darling, and I felt so damn sorry for her. Had a glimpse of a frightened child who's turned on a horror movie and doesn't know how to turn it off. So I gave her your phone number instead. Watch it with her if you can sometime darling?⁴⁶⁷

Loftus refers to the Holocaust as a transient event that one can absorb passively through the media and then move on unscathed. The comparison with a horror movie contains the event within the safe confines of the screen, where it only presents a danger to the immature and the especially sensitive. Lilian Kremer suggests that the name 'Loftus' represents an attitude of arrogant indifference. Loftus (or perhaps Loft-us) regards himself as existing above the event, not subject to its ethical and emotional vicissitudes. An alternative interpretation of the name can be derived from his gradual fading from Jean's world and the quiet but devastating end to their affair. In her letters to Loftus, Jean presents detailed accounts of her day to day existence, her relationship with Hattie and the impact of watching the Eichmann trial. Although Loftus initially has a presence in the narrative, his visits cease early on and it becomes increasingly unclear whether Jean's letters provoke any response or even reach their

⁴⁶⁷ Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.28.

destination. As Jean's ordered life crumbles around her, Loftus primarily features as a silent correspondent and a significant absence. The prefix to Loftus, 'loft,' evokes the image of careless and indifferent storage. Jean's emotional outpourings to Loftus are sent into an unresponsive void, where they are neglected and unregarded. At this point, Rosen invites an interpretation of the connection between the archive and the body that is heavily nuanced by gender. The empathic volatility of the female body (and particularly the pregnant body) allows Hattie and Jean to absorb the knowledge of the Holocaust and allow it to alter their state of awareness. The female protagonists of *Touching Evil* demonstrate a productive engagement with history. They approach the archive of memories presented by the trial with a willingness to allow themselves to become archives. In stark contrast, the imagery of neglected storage surrounding Loftus is more akin to the dystopic vision of the archive presented in *Oracle Night*, the idea of sterile acquisition that is devoid of purpose. Alongside his male counterparts, Loftus absorbs the events of the Holocaust but does not allow them to acquire meaning within his own sphere of existence. Rosen presents men and women as embodying two vastly different perspectives on the archive: the site of a dynamic interaction between individual memories and collective history resulting in a convergence of past, present and future, and, an attempt to control the influence and meaning of the past by subjugating it to a designated space of confined storage. At a time when the American Jewish literary world was still dominated by male voices and the majority of written accounts of the Holocaust were authored by men, Rosen aligns the concepts of the pregnant body and the archive to posit the unique capacity of women to become fully historicised subjects, bridging the gap between past and present.

Whilst Loftus has been exposed to the Holocaust and considers himself to have responded adequately, the response of Hattie's husband Ezra is characterised by a determined aversion of his gaze. Ezra is a photographer with a preferential interest in capturing buildings. Hattie

berates him for turning away from the perceived crisis of humanity:

‘Where are you every day at five when those witnesses speak?’ Hattie demands of him. ‘You’re out photographing telephone wires, aren’t you? Arranging verticals and horizontals. About as far away as you can get.’⁴⁶⁸

Ezra is fascinated with documenting the extensive urban redevelopment taking place in New York in the early 1960s, but whilst he is captivated by the symbolism of flowers growing on a derelict building, he is oblivious to the human consequences of the project. Ezra’s myopic attitude extends to the events of the Eichmann trial and its impact on his pregnant wife, since he consistently neglects Hattie and she comes to suspect that he is being unfaithful to her.

In response to the absence of their male partners, Jean and Hattie’s relationship strengthens. Jean observes that in the void left by Loftus’s letters, Hattie’s correspondence ‘quadruples’ in volume⁴⁶⁹ and, unlike Ezra, Jean is present when Hattie goes into labour.⁴⁷⁰ Reacting to the perceived indifference of the men around them, Hattie and Jean strongly identify with each other as they suffer their respective traumas. In addition to being neglected by their lovers, Hattie suffers alone through the pain and indignity of childbirth and Jean is raped by a friend of Jesus. The two women perceive their shared experience of suffering as part of a historical continuum of feminine bodily mortification that encompasses the women who suffered and perished during the Holocaust; they situate themselves as part of an empathetic, female community of memory. In the aftermath of the birth of her child, Hattie asks Jean if she thinks they are being observed by God, Jean refutes abstract notion with a reaffirmation of their connection to each other and implicitly to their counterparts throughout history:

Isn’t it enough that we see each other? Witnessing and being witnessed without

468 *Ibid*, p.86.

469 *Ibid*, p.122.

470 *Ibid*, p.228.

end?⁴⁷¹

This comment hints at the existence of something akin to feminine postmemory centred on the body; although this idea is controversial, it has been explored in conjunction with the collective memory of other traumatic events. Examining the representation of the traumatic aftermath of slavery in African American literature, Maria Rice Bellamy explores the idea that postmemory can be experienced through the body as well as in the mind. Bellamy analyses two novels in which the protagonists literally experience the pain of their ancestor's enslavement. In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Dana Franklin is transported through time to nineteenth century Maryland. Whilst in the nineteenth century Dana is forced to experience life as a slave, leaving her physically and psychologically scarred. By contrast, Phyllis Alessia Perry's novel *Stigmata* sees the legacy of slavery intrude violently on the present. 'Lizzie De Bose's maternal ancestors travel to the present and occupy her body. Through reincarnation Lizzie gains the memories of two complete lifetimes...along with the fear and physical wounds resulting from her foremother's traumatic experiences.'⁴⁷² It has been observed that African American literature often utilises the mother/daughter relationship as a site of 'trans-historical contact.' Forced to experience ancestral memories of rape, kidnap and brutal beatings, the protagonists in these two novels are examined in terms established by the trope of the 'magical black daughter,' undergoing a spiritual journey culminating in a return to 'mother-history.'⁴⁷³ Bellamy identifies the suffering female body as a point of convergence between past and present, a conduit for the intergenerational transmission of collective memories of trauma.⁴⁷⁴ Within this feminine construction of postmemory, history is personified as a mother, bequeathing a memorial inheritance that the daughters of the next

471 *Ibid*, p.238.

472 Maria Rice Bellamy, *Bridges to Memory: Postmemory in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016) p.45.

473 Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp.3-10.

474 Bellamy, p.49.

generation are destined to ‘know in their bones.’⁴⁷⁵ Fulfilling the role of metaphorical daughters to ‘mother-history,’ Dana and Lizzie are specifically described by Bellamy as being ‘archives in the flesh.’⁴⁷⁶ As figurative archives, Dana and Lizzie are tasked with establishing a meaningful relationship to the past and incorporating their newly found, intimate knowledge of enslavement into their lives and communities in the twentieth century.

In *Kindred* and *Stigmata* the protagonists experience postmemory as a violent intrusion. Dana is forcibly displaced from her own time and the borders of Lizzie’s body and mind are violated by her grandmother Grace and her great-grandmother Ayo. Physically scarred by acts of violence that mimic the abuse suffered by their foremothers, Dana and Lizzie literally embody the traumatic history of slavery. Just as the bodies of the black community in contemporary America are living legacies to the slave trade, the flesh of these protagonists become a tapestry on which the suffering of their ancestors is written.⁴⁷⁷ However, despite the fact that the intergenerational connections forged by the women in these novels are built on a foundation of violence, the convergence of past and present in *Stigmata* and *Kindred* are ultimately depicted as having positive consequences. Lizzie is able to provide comfort to Sarah by describing the inner life of Grace, the mother who abandoned her. By metaphysically uniting Grace and Sarah, Lizzie ‘restores the generational continuity of her family.’⁴⁷⁸ The restoration is symbolised by Lizzie and Sarah working together on a quilt that was begun by Grace. By the same token, Dana’s interracial marriage to her husband Kevin is characterised as an optimistic recasting of a family tree originating in violent miscegenation.⁴⁷⁹ Through the absorption and transmission of the memories of their foremothers, Dana and Lizzie are refashioned into ‘fully historicized African American

475 Rody, p.24.

476 Bellamy, p.53.

477 *Ibid*, p.52.

478 *Ibid*, pp.63-75.

479 *Ibid*, p.62.

subjects.⁴⁸⁰ The intergenerational community of female post-memory resonating within the flesh of the suffering body is ultimately cast as restorative and redemptive.

The theme of the redemption of the past through the persistence of memory in the present is expressed even more forcefully in *Touching Evil*. Whilst in labour, Hattie experiences a series of bizarre hallucinations that Jean later describes as a ‘vaginal shell game with the *Einsatzgruppen*’:⁴⁸¹

‘All the mothers...all those tormented children Jean. We saved them with our bodies. The babies in the lice straw. The ones who cried all night alone...the others...all of them.’ She peeps at me again, afraid to speak, almost...then. ‘We drew them into our wombs and kept them safe until the danger was passed...you know? Then easily and gently, we passed them out again in a warm coating of blood...’⁴⁸²

In this passage, Hattie imbues the pregnant body with the power to rescue the victims of the Holocaust from their fate by sheltering them in their womb and giving birth to them anew. If it is interpreted literally this surreal notion is transparently impossible; however, I believe it must be examined in tandem with the connection *Touching Evil* establishes between the maternal body and the archive. Hattie’s condition of pregnancy facilitates her identification with the victims of the Holocaust, enabling her to become an intensely empathetic secondary witness to their suffering. Hattie imagines her body becoming a corporeal archive for these memories and thus the fate she rescues the victims from is the fate of oblivion, of being forgotten by history. The existence of an idealised feminine community of postmemory is further reinforced when Hattie gives birth to a daughter:

New children...new births...new times...new joys...centuries and centuries and

480 *Ibid*, p.60.

481 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.238.

482 *ibid*, p.225.

centuries of joyful births and terrible deaths...After a while we begin to see similarities...we see the same children over and over...these children haven't been lost.⁴⁸³

In a state of postpartum delirium Hattie perceives motherhood and childbirth as vital components in an endless cycle of birth and death. Her declaration that 'these children haven't been lost' suggests that - in a display of excessive optimism- she perceives her newborn child as a reincarnation of the lost children of the Holocaust. Hattie's daughter is positioned as the newest link in a never-ending chain, a matrilineal memorial community where the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust will be preserved in perpetuity. Notwithstanding the fact that this position could easily be construed as an offensive display of relativism, it resonates with the most optimistic constructions of the purpose of the archive - the idea that memory is transcribable and transmissible beyond the boundaries of the individual's consciousness and that it is capable of being assimilated and positively transformed by those who encounter it. It is not difficult to see the parallel between Hattie's vision of drawing murdered children back into her womb to give them new life and Dr. Ricardo's conviction that he is conferring immortality on the people he interviews, or the desire of the Fortunoff archive to create a 'living archive' of memory for future generations. Examining this evidence alone, it would be possible to conclude that Rosen's intersection of the body and the archive is constructed around an optimistic vision of the persistence of Holocaust memory in the consciousness of anyone willing to engage with it. The ambition of the archive to preserve history for future generations finds a sympathetic reflection in a pregnant body that is a veritable well-spring of nurture. The boundaries of the pregnant body are depicted as malleable, likely to become permanently imprinted by the lives and experiences it comes into contact with. However, a close reading of *Touching Evil* reveals that Rosen's attitude to this

483 *Ibid*, p.237.

empathic susceptibility appears to be profoundly ambivalent, belying the optimism that seems to characterise her construction of the phenomenon of secondary witnessing and the potential for the intergenerational persistence of memory.

Rosen's position of ambivalence is exemplified in Hattie's statement that 'a woman's body can absorb anything.' Hattie uses this generalisation to refer to her pregnancy and the strange sensation that her body 'has engulfed a world.'⁴⁸⁴ When examined closely, this declaration simultaneously supports two incarnations of the maternal body. On the one hand, the idea of a body that can absorb anything is a positive and empowering statement of the empathic capacity already discussed. Conversely, the idea of a body characterised by undifferentiated absorption of external influences supports a construction of the maternal body that has strongly abject overtones. The concept of the pregnant body as an unsettling fusion of self and other defined by dangerous instability of bodily boundaries has consistently influenced Western culture's representation of the maternal body. Rosemary Betterton has observed that the ambiguous boundaries that exist between mother and foetus lie at the heart of a profound anxiety that has often resulted in an implicit connection between pregnancy and various incarnations of the grotesque in the artistic imagination. Drawing on the work of Rosi Braidotti, who describes the intense distrust and insecurity historically generated by the infant/mother bond,⁴⁸⁵ Betterton draws attention to the perceived destructive potential of the abject maternal body:

Monstrous births could be linked to women's sexual excess or perversion, the mixing of different sperm or between different races, intercourse during menstruation, eating forbidden food or demonic possession - and in a modern twist to the theme, to toxic or genetic damage. The maternal imagination was deemed to have the power to kill or

484 *Ibid*, p.54.

485 Rosi Braidotti, 'Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Difference,' *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, edited by Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti (London: Zed Books, 1996) p.139.

deform the foetus merely through an act of illicit looking.⁴⁸⁶

Betterton highlights the putative corporeal liminality of the expectant mother as a possible source of malign influence. The unstable external and internal boundaries of the pregnant body are seen to provide an opportunity for the mother to harm the foetus by her thoughts or actions. This abject portrayal of the maternal body conforms to Gail Kern Paster's discussion of the female body as a 'leaky vessel.' Kern Paster refers to an anxiety, particularly prevalent in the Renaissance era, concerning the social and political regulation of women's biological and reproductive functions; this anxiety is believed to have manifested through various references to female incontinence in Renaissance theatre.⁴⁸⁷ In *Touching Evil*, the spectre of the abject maternal body is raised by Hattie's worries concerning the moral health of her future child:

They is the world and us is you and me. The fathers and the mothers. The people who are supposed to carry on the loving and the giving - that's what it is you know. A poison went into the atmosphere. Just as when an atomic bomb explodes. Each generation in turn will be sickened, poisoned with disgust for the human race.⁴⁸⁸

Awareness of the Holocaust is referred to by Hattie as a malignant pollution with an impact similar to an atomic bomb. Traumatic knowledge is described in terms of a harmful substance that infects those it comes into contact with and the effects are passed on to their descendants. Through this statement, the role of the pregnant body as a repository of memory is refashioned into something intensely negative. The mother figure becomes the bearer of a traumatic legacy, tainting her offspring with the harmful knowledge of radical evil. The idea of the pregnant body as a dangerously 'leaky vessel' is reinforced by the conviction of those

486 Rosemary Betterton, 'Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination,' *Hypatia*, 21.1 (2006) 80-100 (p.83).

487 Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

488 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.84.

around Hattie that exposure to distressing external stimuli is somehow unhealthy for a pregnant woman. When Loftus appeals to Jean to support Hattie in her watching of the trial, his concerns about its effects on her are underscored by his reference to ‘her condition.’⁴⁸⁹ Hattie’s sister Lilian later confides to Jean that ‘Hattie is too sensitive anyway to be watching’...’ not to mention her condition.’⁴⁹⁰ Hattie’s pregnancy is seen to compound her natural sensitivity. Whilst on the one hand Rosen valorises this sensitivity by making it the central node in a feminine network of secondary witnessing, it is also framed as a physical and psychological condition that renders Hattie uniquely susceptible, both to suffering damage herself and to inflicting it on others.

The destructive potential of the Holocaust as a corrupting influence is powerfully conveyed in a conversation that takes place after watching a segment of the trial. In a particularly morbid bout of speculation, Hattie and Jean discuss what would happen to the unborn child in the event of a pregnant woman being shot:

‘If a pregnant woman is shot, does the baby live and slowly poison the corpse? Or if she is shot through the belly and the baby dies, does the mother live, a living coffin for the dead child?’⁴⁹¹

These terrible musings are inspired by eye-witness testimony of forced marches in which those who could not keep pace were shot. As the women contemplate the particular hardship a pregnant woman would endure under these conditions, their questions doubly reinforce the notion of the maternal body as abject. Not only is the pregnant body associated with death and decay by being likened to a coffin, but the symbiotic relationship between mother and child is reframed as a connection that becomes toxic for both, as the foetus perishes in the

489 *Ibid*, p.28.

490 *Ibid*, p.83.

491 *Ibid*, p.85.

mother's decaying body and ultimately furthers the putrefaction of her corpse. One of the themes Rosen wished to explore, as suggested by the novel's title, is what happens when an outwardly peaceful and complacent society comes into contact with radical evil. The direction of Rosen's thoughts on this issue are heavily hinted at by the inclusion of a quote by

Carl Gustav Jung as an epigraph on the page preceding the novel's forward:

Touching evil brings with it the grave peril of succumbing to it. We must therefore, no longer succumb to anything at all, not even to good.⁴⁹²

Through the opposing frameworks of idealised empathy and abjection, Rosen uses the pregnant body to simultaneously express her greatest hopes for the persistence of Holocaust memory and her deepest fears as to its consequences. Hattie and Jean's invocation of the maternal abject in the previous paragraph, demonstrates the potential of the Holocaust to deconstruct dominant and influential cultural paradigms. The concept of an infant/mother bond founded on the nurturing of life becomes profoundly warped under the influence of what the women have witnessed. In the space of a page, the mother is transformed from a child's 'goddess' to its tomb. The unstable borders of Hattie's pregnant body 'whose membranes have been alchemized to litmus paper,'⁴⁹³ allows the Holocaust to seep into her consciousness, where it corrupts the very concept of maternity itself.

In terms of what the use of maternal abjection means for Rosen's meditation on the archive, it brings one back to the idea of encountering the past as a negative and violent process. 'The Library of Moloch' depicts the archive as complicit in the re-victimisation of survivors by forcefully wrenching their traumatic experiences from them and repurposing them in line with an overly optimistic manifesto that merely does lip-service to the concept of remembrance. The strongly corporeal basis of traumatic memories establishes a relationship between the archive and the body with dangerous and destructive exploitative potential that primarily serves the function of indulging a fetishistic fixation on physical presence surrounding an event that presents dissolution and destruction on an unimaginable scale.

Bukiet uses this relationship discredit the idea of secondary witnessing, presenting it as

492 Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Fontana Press, 1995).

493 Norma Rosen, *Touching Evil*, p.218.

prurient voyeurism. In *Touching Evil*, Rosen's reflection on the violence of the archive takes a somewhat different direction. Rosen uses the maternal abject to depict the process of the human subject becoming, in itself, a living archive. Hattie's pregnant body absorbs the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust in a manner that dramatically alters her consciousness and she becomes the bearer of a toxic burden of cultural memory for the next generation. Rosen not only validates the process of secondary witnessing, but toys with the idea of the transmission of traumatic memory as something akin to an unwitting act of violence.

Historically, the archive has been imbued with authority as an authentic window to the past. It has been seen as providing the society it serves with a unified vision of a shared past.⁴⁹⁴ Bukiet and Rosen's analyses of the connection between the archive and the body reflect the fact that the concept of the archive has been profoundly destabilised over course of the last century and its uncertain ontological status is brought into particularly sharp relief by historical events of a paradigm-altering nature. Rosen foresaw the seemingly insurmountable problems attendant upon translating the Holocaust from eye-witness testimony to collective history and anticipated the crucial theoretical position occupied by the archive in this process. Accordingly, *Touching Evil* examines the concept of the archive through the ambivalent and culturally over-determined prism of the maternal body. In Bukiet and Rosen's texts, the archival process damages and denatures all it comes into contact with, simultaneously highlighting and destabilising the connection between past and present.

494 Derrida, pp.2-3.

Conclusion

This project emerged from my first reading of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*. Putting the controversy of its author's deception to one side, I was struck by the nightmarish tableau of twisted maternal imagery that characterised Wilkomirski's false landscape of memory. The maternal emphasis present in *Fragments* is made all the more significant by the fabricated nature of the text. Whilst certain aspects of the content of *Fragments* is undoubtedly influenced by the specific psychological pathologies of its author, it is also, partially, an exercise in imitation. As he was an obsessive consumer of Holocaust literature, it is likely that Wilkomirski was influenced by extant conventions of representation, and that this prompted speculation regarding the position of maternity as an established representational trope. Further investigation on my part revealed an apparent proliferation of maternal imagery across multiple genres of Holocaust literature; from Art Spiegelman's fixation with his mother's missing diaries to the agonising vicissitudes of Sophie's eponymous choice, the presence of mothers within Holocaust literature has been persistent and diverse.

I began the process of researching this thesis with the intention of breaking new critical ground. While previous work on the subject of motherhood and the Holocaust has largely confined itself to a historical or sociologically based analysis of maternity as a means of elucidating specific aspects of Holocaust testimony, my thesis attempts to demonstrate the presence of motherhood as a symbolic trope that appears in a wide range of Holocaust literature and that it appears in response to the continued perception of the Holocaust as a traumatic ontological crisis.

The opening chapter functions as an overview of the prevalence of depictions of mothers as saintly figures or martyrs in Holocaust memoir. Beyond the obvious function of illuminating the indiscriminate brutality of the Holocaust, the concept of the beleaguered maternal

paragon is often utilised as a palliative epistemological refuge that facilitates the moulding of a traumatic experience into a cogent narrative. In Olga Lengyel's memoir *Five Chimneys* identification with the *mater dolorosa* is used to mitigate problematic feelings of culpability that arose in the navigation of 'choiceless choices.' Meanwhile, *Fragments of Isabella* depicts the mother figure as a paragon of domestic virtue; this characterisation performs the dual function of upholding the *bildungsroman* structure that emphasises the devastating shock of the Holocaust, whilst also signifying life and continuity in its aftermath when Isabella draws upon the memory of her mother whilst pregnant with a child of her own. Finally, *The Apple* positions the maternal body at the centre of a two-way memorial exchange. In addition to responding to the material in Rosenblat's original text, Holt incorporates her own experience of maternity into her analysis of the text, demonstrating the ready translation of this symbolic discourse from memoir into fiction.

The second chapter moves away from memoir into the domain of popular fiction, offering a reading of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* that focuses on the effect of the Holocaust on German national identity. Germany's ambivalent relationship to its past is explored through an abject construction of maternity, in a reading which is influenced by Julia Kristeva's 'Powers of Horror' and Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*. As a subversion of a popular rhetoric of nationalism that links the maternal body to the idea of the nation, the abject mother offers an image of a country suffocating under the influence of an unwanted and unmanageable burden of memorial guilt. Schlink ultimately challenges this narrative at the conclusion of his novel when his young German protagonist willingly assumes responsibility for the physical and emotional legacy of one particular perpetrator.

The issue of identity politics is explored in more detail in the third chapter. This section reveals the ways in which certain texts employ a Kleinian construction of motherhood to articulate (consciously or otherwise) an identification with the legacy of the Holocaust that is

governed by a complex interplay of aversion and desire. Although Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* and Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* are not usually mentioned in the same breath, this chapter demonstrates that both texts approach the Holocaust through the nexus of a maternal figure predominantly defined by acts of consumption. In true Kleinian fashion, both *Fragments* and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* explore the Holocaust through the interpretive framework of projective identity politics. On the one hand Wilkomirski appropriates the identity of a Holocaust survivor to supplement and artificially consolidate his own fragmented personal history, whilst on the other Kofman attempts to balance her own vexed relationship to her Jewish identity, with an intense desire for self-narration.

The final chapter examines the positioning of the maternal body as an archival metaphor. Anxieties surrounding forgetfulness and reification are shown to govern the problematic positioning of the archive in Holocaust memorial culture. Having explored the abstract connection between the archive and the body as it is presented in Melvin Bukiet's 'The Library of Moloch', this chapter proceeds towards a specific examination of the maternal body as an archival abstraction. Norma Rosen's 1969 novel *Touching Evil* uses the maternal body to discuss the emergence of the Holocaust into American consciousness. Through the mirrored characters of Hattie and Jean, the idea of the maternal body as a memorial vessel is used to articulate the competing cultural narratives of Holocaust memory as abject and as the fantasy of the persistent and seamless transition into intergenerational memory. At the same time, Hattie and Jean use the shared experience of watching the Eichmann trial to contemplate their own interpersonal and bodily vulnerabilities in the face of social and institutional oppression.

My thesis was inspired by a recognition of the repeated emergence of the maternal body as a symbolic device in Holocaust literature; however, I was initially unable to divine whether this figure bore any overarching significance when considered within the context of Holocaust

writing as a whole. As my research proceeded, I began to identify the emergence of a unifying theme that connected the diverse manifestations of maternity that appear within the texts.

Despite the fact that all of the texts examined in my thesis take the Holocaust as a primary subject matter, there is an additional contextual layer present in each of them that I wish to discuss. In each of these texts, confrontation with the Holocaust initiates and/or facilitates the navigation of a crisis of identity. These crises have been dealt with in various degrees of detail in the body of the thesis, but for the sake of clarity I will summarise them here. In the case of Michael Berg, intimate contact with a Holocaust perpetrator forces him to reconsider his perception of himself as a German and his personal positioning in relation to a national history of genocide. Inner equilibrium is eventually restored by his decision to reject the restrictive and externally manufactured identities of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' and engages the Holocaust on his own terms through an apt and thoughtful disposal of Hanna's legacy. For Wilkomirski, the narrative of the Holocaust thematically resonates with the fragmented sense of self that arises from his traumatic experiences in childhood, whilst Kofman experiences the Holocaust as a destabilisation of her ethnic identity. Finally, in becoming archives of Holocaust memory, Hattie and Jean reconsider their position as women in 1960s America. For instance, through the rhetorical framework of the Holocaust. Hattie experiences and articulates the sense of powerlessness and self-alienation resulting from the social and medical regulation of the pregnant female body. Additionally, the radical alteration in perspective caused by awareness of the Holocaust prompts her to reconsider her future role as a parent.

This line of reasoning could be seen as problematic when applied to Holocaust memoir. I am obviously not suggesting that the non-fictional accounts use the Holocaust as a plot device. What I do venture to suggest is that experiencing such a traumatic event is frequently the

catalyst for a particular kind of personal reflection. In *If this is a Man* Primo Levi famously wrote:

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair/ if we speak they will not listen to us, and if they listen they will not understand. They will even take our name: and if we want to keep it we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains.⁴⁹⁵

This passage implies that the worst abuse perpetrated during the Holocaust was the systematic separation of a person from their identity and it encapsulates the overarching themes of *If this is a Man*. Levi's writings can be seen as an extended philosophical questioning of human nature. It is implied that the fundamental principles that underpin the core of human identity were both elucidated and challenged by the Holocaust. Although a substantial portion of Holocaust memoirists are not as introspective as Levi, they do engage with similar questions. To cite just one example from chapter one, *Five Chimneys* demonstrates how Auschwitz destabilised the guiding moral principles around which Lengyel had previously constructed her life. Before deportation Lengyel is shown to have structured her ethical beliefs around a somewhat socially conservative construction of a dutiful wife and mother. When imprisoned at Auschwitz she was, for the first time, forced to contemplate previously unthinkable acts such as infanticide and exchanging sexual favours for food.

⁴⁹⁵ Primo Levi, *If this is a Man/ The Truce*, translated by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1991) p.32.

Whether it is deployed as a literary device or experienced as an actual trauma, confrontation with the Holocaust is often accompanied by reflection on (or sometimes re-evaluation of) issues that constitute the substance of human subjectivity. This includes ideas such as morality, how the individual self is constructed in relation to collective historical and cultural narratives and how a sense of meaning is reconstructed through self-narration. When examined closely, these issues all concern the politics of identity. The identification of this particular dimension that commonly occurs in Holocaust literature embodies the essence of why the context of the Lacanian construction of maternity is so important to Holocaust writing as a whole. The psychodynamic theories of maternity that have informed this thesis all position the symbolic position of the mother as the foundation of human subjectivity. Lacan highlights the importance of the mother in the identification of the self as a separate entity⁴⁹⁶. Melanie Klein theorises that the mother's breast is the first object of external recognition and, although she diverges from Lacan on several key points, Julia Kristeva's theory of the maternal abject describes the relationship to the mother in terms of a traumatic confrontation with one's origins.

The idea that the mother is symbolically significant as a foundational principle of identity establishes it as the natural conceptual framework to explore an event that destabilises many of the commonly held preconceptions that govern our sense of who we are and what makes us human. To put it succinctly, the contemporary implications of the Holocaust and the psychodynamic theories of maternity influenced by Lacan can be considered to thematically complement one another.

Looking at the context of Holocaust studies as a whole, my thesis can be placed within a body of work that acknowledges the inevitable transition of Holocaust discourse into the

⁴⁹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton & Company, 2002) 197-268.

realm of symbolism. I have already acknowledged my indebtedness to Oren Baruch Stier's observations that as the temporal distance between us and the Holocaust increases, popular representation is becoming condensed into a form of symbolic shorthand. These images, objects and motifs demand imaginative investment to imbue them with meaning. As engagement with the Holocaust increasingly becomes a question of witnessing through the imagination, the shape it assumes in contemporary culture will be strongly influenced by the contexts and experiences we bring to it. Steiner's 'abyss of 1938-1945'⁴⁹⁷ will start to more closely resemble a mirror, reflecting our fears, anxieties and desires. As an underexplored aspect of the symbolism that surrounds the Holocaust, study of the maternal body offers insight into the direction memory and representation is taking in an age of ever-increasing decontextualisation of the Holocaust.

For some, the eventuality I have just discussed is a nightmare scenario. In certain areas of Holocaust studies the notion that the Holocaust can be used as a device for the exploration of external issues has been condemned as inappropriate and exploitative. Sylvia Plath famously attracted widespread criticism for her use of Holocaust imagery to articulate a state of mental suffering in her 1968 poem 'Daddy.' Outraged at Plath's symbolic appropriation of the Holocaust, Michael André Bernstein writes:

The Shoah is a kind of limit case of human experience which cannot be figured in verse as one more amidst a generally available image trove of suffering...*no one*, gentile or Jew, can appropriate the Shoah as a source of metaphors for his own private anguish without falling into the identical falsification and self-aggrandizement.⁴⁹⁸

Bernstein's criticism of Plath belongs to a school of thought that denies 'the rootedness of

497 George Steiner, 'The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah,' *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Berel Lang (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988) 154-175 p.155.

498 Michael André Bernstein, 'Usurpations: A Poetics of Catastrophe and the Language of Jewish History,' *TriQuarterly; Evanston, III*, 79 (1990) 207-220 (p.218).

genocide in the structures of modernity and everyday life,' regarding the Holocaust as a singular event that exists outside of history and should be treated (from a literary point of view) as sacred ground. This particular line of critical thinking demands that those who encounter the Holocaust through secondary or tertiary sources should hold themselves at a respectful distance from the material. Leaving aside the question of whether or not this is actually possible, many who study the Holocaust now question whether this mindset is a useful or constructive way to encounter the event. Scholars such as Gillian Banner defend creative works like 'Daddy' on the grounds that they explore the inevitable and natural intersection of the psychic and the historic.⁴⁹⁹ In his keynote lecture at the fifth annual conference for the British Association for Holocaust Studies, Professor Tom Lawson observed that 'history is not studied for its own sake.' An interaction with the past derives its value from its ability to elucidate the present. It can be argued that the salutary lesson of the Holocaust (if such a thing exists) resides in what it can reveal of human nature, further emphasising the relevance of psychodynamic maternal symbolism as a means to explore what the Holocaust can teach us about the fears, desires and anxieties that animate the complex politics of identity.

I will conclude by identifying further relevant lines of investigation that have not been covered in this work but could form the basis for further study. One particular area that my thesis has neglected to examine occurs in the wake of 'the turn to the perpetrator' that has arisen in Holocaust studies in the last decade. I believe that much could be gained by analysing the juxtaposition of mothers and perpetrators in Holocaust literature. Some studies have been done on the contemporary fascination with female Holocaust perpetrators. In 'Reading the Female Perpetrator', Antony Rowland suggests that representations of female perpetrators occur with a frequency that is disproportionate to the true extent of their

⁴⁹⁹ Gillian Banner, 'Sylvia Plath and Holocaust Poetry,' *Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 21:1 (2002) 231-248 (p.231).

involvement with the genocide. Rowland examines this phenomenon in the context of a popular masculine narrative that is fixated with the idea of these women as aberrations who exhibit behaviour that is framed as sexually or morally deviant.⁵⁰⁰ These investigations could be extended to include the specific context of maternity, exploring the ways in which these women are portrayed as antithetical to the traditional symbolic and cultural associations with motherhood. This line of enquiry could provide further insight into the philosophical construction of evil and the ‘gendering of atrocity.’⁵⁰¹ It would also be interesting to closely examine my conclusions as they relate to extant theories of inherited memory such as postmemory. The specific maternal connotations of postmemory could be examined using texts such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* or Bernice Eisenstein’s *I was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*. Such an approach would build upon a foundation of research established in *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters* by Federica Clementi.

In my closing remarks, I return once more to the issue of photographs. More than anything else, photographs reinforce the idea that even when the Holocaust is presented in an ostensibly historical, visual form, symbolic meaning of an apparently ahistorical kind is often divined. Although a contextual understanding of the events of the Holocaust is of indisputable value, in this age of hyper-mediation, it is equally important to examine the inevitable transformation of the Holocaust into a traumatic master narrative, if our engagement with it is to productively continue. The psychodynamic figure of maternity discussed in this thesis represents just one of the multiple discourses that determines the shape of this narrative and illuminates the direction in which it will continue to evolve.

500 Antony Rowland, ‘Reading the Female Perpetrator,’ *Holocaust Studies*, 17.2 (2011) 145-161 (p.146).

501 *Ibid*, p.145.

Appendix A

Massacre at Ivangorod, 1942



'Jewish Aktion Ivangorod, 1942,' *Defending History*, 1st August 2018, <http://defendinghistory.com/on-a-selection-of-powerful-east-european-holocaust-photographs/45660>



'Jewish Aktion Ivangorod, 1942 (cropped version), *Yad Vashem Archive Photo Collection*, 143D05

<http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/img/homepage1.jpg>

Appendix B

Images of Maternal Martyrdom



'A Jewish Woman Walks Towards the Gas Chambers with Three Young Children and a Baby in her Arms,' *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photograph Collection*, 77217

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa8297>



Jewish Women and Children from Liepaja Stand on the Edge of a Pit Before being Murdered, December 15 1941, *Yad Vashem Archive*
Photo Collection 1979/5

https://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/murderSite.asp?site_id=572

Appendix C

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial by Nathan Rappaport



Nathan Rappaport, 'Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial,' 1975 *Yad Vashem*

<https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/warsaw-memorial-personal-interpretation.html>

Appendix D

'Cheri' by Judy Dater



Judy Dater, 'Cheri,' 1972, *Thomas V. Meyer Fine Art*.

<http://www.meyerfineart.com/artist/195/judy-dater>

Appendix E.

‘The Motherland Calls!’



Yevgeny Vuchetich and Nikolai Nikitin, ‘The Motherland Calls!’ 1967, *Our Russia*, September 10 2015

<http://our-russia.com/1406551694/motherland-calls>

Appendix F.

Deportation from Miedzyrzec Transit Ghetto



‘Miedzyrzec Podlaski, Poland, German Policeman Searching a Girl,’ *Yad Vashem Photographic Archive 100290*

https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=100290&ind=2

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