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**Imagined Witness:
Representing the Holocaust in American Women's Fiction**

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Abstract

This thesis explores representations of the Holocaust in fiction by American women writers who have no autobiographical involvement with the Holocaust. It demonstrates that their texts comprise fictional meditations on the meaning of testimony, and are concerned with the ways in which narrators and readers of testimonies remember and imagine the Holocaust.

The introduction outlines the key thematic, formal and theoretical concerns of the thesis within their academic context. It proposes that a self-reflexive awareness of the subjectivity and constructedness of Holocaust representation in fiction provides insight into valuable and necessary processes of the imagination. Four chapters examine different approaches to the imagination. The first interprets Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil* through her notion of witness-through-the-imagination. Drawing on concepts such as empathy, identification, secondary trauma and the addressee, it explores the meaning of Holocaust testimony for the reader. The second considers the subjectivity of memory by comparing the testimonies and memories of the traumatised survivor protagonists in the historical novels of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* and Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress*. The third chapter analyses the imagination as an alternative reality for mourning the past in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*. It also engages with the dialectic between personal and collective memory through notions of ethnic uprootedness and assimilation. The fourth addresses the fantastical imagination of the Holocaust in the fiction of Judy Budnitz through her use of various literary genres and complex narratological and metafictional devices that draw attention to the acts of storytelling and witnessing.

In conclusion, the thesis shows that this body of Holocaust texts examines fiction as a meaningful tool to bridge and to draw attention to the gaps between experience and representation. It broadens the implications of bearing witness due to their discourses about the significant mediation of imaginary realities.

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the commemoration of the Holocaust remains highly visible in Western culture. As iconic trope and as personal legacy, the Holocaust grabs attention; it captures the imagination. In this thesis, I analyse representations of the Holocaust across a range of fiction by five American women writers: Norma Rosen, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Sherri Szeman, Cynthia Ozick and Judy Budnitz. I argue that their texts comprise fictional meditations on the meaning of testimony. These writers are concerned with the ways in which narrators and readers of testimonies remember and imagine the Holocaust. They contribute to and reflect on the ongoing commemoration of the Holocaust. I have deliberately chosen as the focus of my study a collection of texts that are non-canonical in the established genre of Holocaust literature, which is predominantly testimonial and male. Writers such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski and Jean Améry have provided the seminal Holocaust texts on which much critical and academic discussion is based. The texts in this thesis seek to diverge from and to expand the conventional boundaries of Holocaust literature: they are written by American women who have no direct autobiographical or familial involvement with the Holocaust. The authors studied in this thesis write not from experience, but from the imagination, and this fictional approach to the Holocaust is crucial to the self-reflexive discussions of testimony within their work. The texts then are remarkable because they comment on the canon of Holocaust literature in and by their writing from a distinctively non-canonical authorial position.

My thesis contributes to the field of gender studies an analysis of literary Holocaust texts by women, which centres on fictional rather than historical concerns. Since the 1980s, gender studies have provided valuable insights into the female experience of the Holocaust. Scholars

have explored the importance of the experiences of rape, infanticide, motherhood and pregnancy. This field of study is significant because it aims to change the fact that “women’s experiences are rarely central to the presentation of a ‘typical’ Holocaust story” (Horowitz, “Women” 369). However, gender studies remain primarily concerned with historical fact, while I focus on the representational aspects of female gender in Holocaust fiction. I argue against the conviction of Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg who claim that studies of Holocaust representation and theory “are and must remain subordinate to the study of what ‘really happened’” (xv). The two major academic studies of female Holocaust literature, Marlene E. Heinemann’s *Gender and Destiny* (1986) and S. Lillian Kremer’s *Women’s Holocaust Writing* (1999), have in my view implicitly concurred with this notion of the primacy of history in Holocaust studies. Heinemann’s book discusses the testimonies of female survivors and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s *Anya* (1974), which imitates the testimonial format. Heinemann focuses on the texts’ documentation of the historical experiences of women during the Holocaust. Three of the texts discussed in my thesis (by Rosen, Schaeffer and Ozick) feature in Kremer’s study, which examines both testimonial and fictional literature by women. An emphasis on the historical accuracy of fictionalised events and characters nevertheless remains prevalent in her work. In contrast, my point of departure in this thesis is the fictional text itself. My work has a greater focus than Kremer’s on the stylistic and representational devices of the literary text.

Historical representations of women’s experiences of the Holocaust are necessary, but they are not the central preoccupation of the fictional texts in my thesis. It is notable that certain aspects of the female historical experience, which remain suppressed in testimony, are often addressed in fiction. Rape is a theme that is pivotal to all of the fictional texts in this thesis, while “[i]n narrative accounts of Holocaust testimony, explicit discussions of sexuality [. . .] are almost nonexistent” (Scherr 278). I analyse such gendered incidents in Holocaust

fiction not only as an extension of historical knowledge, but also as an expression of the testimony's meaning for its narrators and/or readers.

Sarah Horowitz has argued that “gender does not constitute the totality of one’s experience” (“Women” 371), to which I would add that neither does gender define the entirety of representation. David Brauner uses gender as the defining aspect of fictional texts by Jewish American women: he argues that Jewish American women claim their place in the canon of male Jewish American fiction by writing about the Holocaust. His hypothesis is provocative for the texts in this thesis as four out of the five authors discussed are Jewish American. Sherri Szeman is the only writer studied in this thesis who is not Jewish. Brauner suggests that the silences in and indirection of Jewish American Holocaust fiction by women express their canonical aspirations: “American-Jewish women are choosing to break their silence by breaking this other silence” (116). His claim overlooks the importance of Jewish American Holocaust texts by men, such as Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker* (1961), and their notable influence on texts by Jewish American women. More importantly for my argument, he subordinates the complexities of Holocaust representation to a feminist claim for literature. Although my thesis does concern the canonicity of Holocaust literature (which is different from Brauner’s Jewish American canon) it does not compare male and female Holocaust texts, nor does it exclusively focus on female gender in Holocaust experiences and representations. Within the texts discussed, the meaning of testimony is constructed but not entirely defined by a gendered perspective, as gender is part of the way in which both characters and readers attribute meaning to the past.

The authors discussed in this thesis lack an autobiographical or familial involvement with the Holocaust and this sets their texts apart from the conventional canon of Holocaust literature. They necessarily write from a distance to the historical event of the Holocaust and it is

precisely this gap on which their texts, and my interpretation of them, meditate in discussions concerning the meaning of testimony. To describe this fiction as “these writers’ creative testimony” (Kremer, *Witness* 363) does not take into account their representational self-awareness as it implicitly reduces storytelling to testimony.

The gap between experience and representation is a fundamental organising principle of this thesis, as all the texts emphasise the mediation of any narrative about the Holocaust. Such emphasis on indirection and the texts’ literary constructedness implicitly legitimises the authority of the authors discussed in this thesis to write about the Holocaust as non-survivors. However, it does so with regard to literary and not exclusively experiential claims. Rather than focusing on the authenticity of Holocaust representation through the accuracy of facts – or ability to render history “as it was” – these texts examine fiction as a meaningful tool to bridge and to draw attention to the distance from the historical event. The Holocaust fiction studied in this thesis demonstrates that fiction is relevant to the testimonial canon of Holocaust literature. Sue Vice has stated that “[t]he counter-argument to scepticism about the value, or even viability, of Holocaust fiction is put most pressingly – not surprisingly – by writers themselves” (7). The authors studied here forward such argumentation about the efficacy of Holocaust fiction within their texts.

The central role of testimonies, both factual and fictional, in these texts seems to contradict the self-awareness of Holocaust fiction. The incorporation of testimonies refers to and partly relies on the credibility of canonised autobiographical Holocaust narratives, but it simultaneously reveals their constructedness. Testimonies often provide a fascinating reading experience because these narratives are regarded as “true,” “real” or accurately representative of facts. The fictional texts in this thesis emphasise that testimonies are also stories and that it is their narrative format that helps to create their authenticity. In this thesis I argue that a

distance from the historical event and the gaps of both testimonial and fictional Holocaust representations are not shortcomings but valuable and necessary levels of mediation.

My own selection and interpretation of these fictional Holocaust texts by American women has undoubtedly also mediated their meaning, as I have highlighted in my thesis their focus on their own textual constructedness. In academic Holocaust studies, self-aware declarations of the author's personal involvement with the Holocaust frequently occur. Geoffrey Hartman, James Young and Daniel Schwarz amongst others have described and foregrounded their own relation to the Holocaust in their work. Such explicit acknowledgement can productively reveal the perspective of the study, which informs its rhetoric and its subject matter, but it can also potentially limit its interpretation. Rather than drawing attention to the author's biography in relation to the Holocaust, I find that the most compelling aspect of self-reflexivity in the fictional texts discussed here is precisely their own critical awareness of the possibilities and the limitations that they and other Holocaust representations offer.

Written from a non-canonical position in Holocaust literature, the texts that I analyse are remarkably self-aware. As I have already indicated, they confront their own narrativity or textuality and produce self-reflexive discussions on testimony. This means that in formal terms, the texts often comprise various layers of stories and storytelling. These texts explore various implications of bearing witness as they focus on both telling and listening to the story. I analyse the fictional effects of writing about the Holocaust and its representations through close textual readings, as the texts already contain meditations on Holocaust literature. The texts foreground the ways in which they are imagining the Holocaust and I have accordingly divided this thesis into four chapters reflecting the four different approaches to the imagination that I have located in this body of Holocaust fiction.

There is a contrast between the literary texts of Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz on the one hand, and the more mainstream novels of Schaeffer and Szeman on the other, which concerns precisely the extent of their critical self-awareness. The texts by Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz consistently foreground their awareness of the text as a construction, revealing the processes of the imagination that are at work. The acts of writing and reading, and the positions of narrator and reader are made explicit. Such self-awareness undermines the self-contained nature of these fictional texts and emphasises that they are works of fiction. I argue that Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz have written texts that are fictional meditations on “authentic” representations of the Holocaust. Schaeffer and Szeman, on the contrary, replicate closely Holocaust testimonies, conforming to canonical conventions. Their protagonists are fictional Holocaust survivors who narrate and/or remember their traumatic experience of the Holocaust. These novels contain a lot of historical detail. They moreover seek the reader’s emotional involvement rather than his/her critical engagement with the text. The self-reflexivity of these novels is either not highlighted or is inconsistent within the texts. I analyse how Schaeffer and Szeman risk making a spectacle of the Holocaust, while Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz reflect on the Holocaust and its representations. It seems to me to be no coincidence that Schaeffer and Szeman’s novels are isolated treatments of the Holocaust in the context of their work, whereas the Holocaust is a recurrent theme in the literary oeuvres of Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz. I have broadly ordered the fictional texts discussed in chronological sequence, from the 1960s to the present, in order to demonstrate that Holocaust fiction by American women tends to develop from direct, historical treatments to more indirect, explicitly fictional representations. In my view this corresponds to a general trend in Holocaust fiction and criticism towards self-reflexivity.

In chapter one, I analyse Norma Rosen’s *Touching Evil* (1969), a novel from the 1960s that focuses on the responses of two American women to the televised testimonies of

Holocaust survivors at the Eichmann trial in 1961. This text constantly meditates on the meaning of Holocaust testimony. It focuses on the transmission of the legacy of the Holocaust, as the two protagonists are fascinated by the eyewitness accounts at the trial and become entirely submerged in their personal imagination of the Holocaust. I study this novel according to the theoretical concepts of empathy, identification, secondary or vicarious trauma and the addressee. Rosen's own concept of "witness-through-the-imagination" is central to her novel which balances subjective empathy and objective distancing. I examine how this concept influences in turn Rosen's literary treatment of characters, structure, and style. The mediation of Holocaust representation is made particularly visible through the structural layering of letters, extracts from testimonies and diary fragments within the narrative. I argue that Rosen intends to establish a chain of witnessing and testifying in which the transmission of Holocaust knowledge and awareness is pivotal: the process originates with historical material (the testimonies at the Eichmann trial), is then transmitted to the secondary witness (as the characters, but also implicitly Rosen) who in turn transmit it (to the reader) through their own retelling of their experience.

The novels discussed in chapter two broaden the focus of the thesis from the reader's imagination to the memories and testimonies of fictional or fictionalised Holocaust survivors. This chapter compares Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974) and Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress* (1993). Both novels explore the survivor's search for meaning through the subjective processes of memory. Schaeffer's novel is characterised by the distinctive individual voice of Anya. Her testimony is constructed through realist detail, imposed chronology, morality and a strong emphasis on coincidence. Anya's subjective narrative shows her need to master the past and her desire to retreat into her own meaningful version of that past. I argue that the textual awareness of the constructedness of her testimony is not always clear, however, which can undermine the testimony's expression of

subjectivity. Szeman's novel *The Kommandant's Mistress* does foreground its textual awareness of the constructedness of Holocaust testimony. The novel juxtaposes the different narrative perspectives of a Nazi Kommandant and an abused Jewish inmate. The protagonists need to remember the past in their own ways in order to construct meaning from it. I argue, however, that their contrasting subjective truths are not expressed by sufficiently developed characters. Their voices are not clearly enough distinguished from each other and the parallels in the structure and the content of their narratives seem accordingly contrived. Both of these historical novels aim to directly represent the experience of the Holocaust "as it was," which, in contrast to the other novels discussed in the thesis, does not effectively foreground the textual awareness of the subjectivity of memory.

In chapter three, I discuss Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* (1989), a well-known novella that develops my focus on representations of the traumatised Holocaust survivor. Ozick uses the imagination not to produce a historically accurate memory of the past but, through her protagonist, to provide an alternative reality for mourning the past. Rosa obsessively writes letters to her dead daughter Magda whose brutal murder she witnessed in the camps. I explore Rosa's act of writing as a consciously controlled wish-fulfilment that retrospectively changes the past in the imagination. The text also engages with the dialectic between personal and collective memory through notions of ethnic uprootedness and assimilation. Rosa's recognition of her Jewish identity is pivotal for working through her traumatic experience of the Holocaust. The novella's emphasis on the complexities of the act of storytelling draws attention to the mediation that inevitably characterises Rosa's representations of her Holocaust past.

Chapter four addresses the fantastical imagination of the Holocaust in Judy Budnitz's fiction of the 1990s, which further develops my exploration of a fictional engagement with the Holocaust. I argue that self-reflexivity is highlighted in Budnitz's short story "Hershel"

(1997) through the use of various literary genres and in her novel *If I Told You Once* (1999) through its complex narration and metafictional devices. Both texts explore their own potential to imagine and to tell the story of the Holocaust. The chapter primarily focuses on “Hershel,” a story about a baby-maker who moulds babies from dough and bakes them to life in ovens. The striking narratological development of the story emphasises the overwhelming and unanticipated destruction of the Holocaust. “Hershel” begins and ends with a realist framework of storytelling, which highlights the act of transmission, whilst the story that is told combines magical-realist, fantastical and surrealist modes in order to convey the disruptive reality of the Holocaust. The retelling of the golem legend reinforces the story’s metafictional and intertextual discourses. In *If I Told You Once*, I look specifically at four narrators’ contradictory acts of witnessing, in order to highlight both the subjectivity of storytelling and the act of witnessing another’s storytelling. I argue that Budnitz’s fantastical fiction meditates on the meaning of testimony by exploring the unimaginability and the indescribability of Holocaust experiences, both in the act of storytelling and in the story that is told.

Testimony

An important concept that underpins this thesis is the centrality of testimony to the fictional text. In all of the texts discussed, a survivor, who is not necessarily the narrator of the fictional text, tells his/her story of the Holocaust. Survivor testimony invariably provides either the subject matter of the text or its point of departure. More specifically, the meaning and expression of testimony are highlighted and are, in turn, related to the subjectivity of the narrator and/or reader. I conceptualise testimony in this thesis as an inherently (inter)personal event. I pay particular attention to the distortions of the past in these fictionalised testimonies

as they draw attention to the value of testimony beyond a mimetic enumeration of historical facts. The imagined testimonies consolidate the subjective meaning that a narrator and/or reader needs to attribute to the past: testimony is a highly individual act of narrating and/or reading a story which inevitably reflects personal investments. The authors discussed here underline the constructedness of testimony, emphasising that it is a representation of the Holocaust with its own particular mode of expression. I am especially concerned with analysing the texts as fictional constructions of the Holocaust, which make the imagination an essential point of departure. I have consistently approached these fictional texts as literature, and I have accordingly highlighted the role of the imagination in their incorporated testimonies. Sanford Pinsker confirms that “Holocaust fiction must be evaluated on its own merits – the usual rules and standards of fiction cannot be suspended” (51). Sue Vice likewise dismisses the widespread suspicion of Holocaust fiction more exactly as, amongst other reasons, “the simple mistrust of invention in relation to the Holocaust [which] is clearly a paradox if we are talking about fiction, which is by definition invented” (4). I contend that imagination or invention precisely enriches and complicates the meaning of testimony in this body of Holocaust fiction.

Testimony is much more than a factual or historical document that narrates an experience of the past. My approach to the imagined testimonies in the fictional texts discussed draws on Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). Dori Laub’s psychoanalytic model considers testimony to be an interpersonal event that helps to define the narrator’s personal identity. He states that “[k]nowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right” (Felman and Laub 62). In other words, testimony creates meaning beyond its historical

content, because the subjectivity of the narrator is not only expressed, but that expression also shapes his/her identity. These two aspects of testimony are necessarily closely aligned. Nicola King suggests a similar interrelatedness between testimony and subjectivity, when she remarks that the “ability to tell a coherent story of our life [. . .] seems synonymous with our concept of identity” (*Memory* 23). The event of testimony then not only testifies to the historical experience, or to the meaning that it is given, but also to the identity of the testifier. Geoffrey Hartman further reinforces this interpretation of testimony: “[i]t is the entire person who is asked to speak, not only the one recalling terror and time of trial” (145). Testimony results in a highly individualised narrative and is inherently bound up with issues of identity, as all the following chapters underline. Holocaust survivors Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo make a point of acknowledging the possible historical inaccuracy of their testimonies. Levi begins his first chapter of *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988) with the observation that “[h]uman memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument” (11), while Delbo writes in her epigraph to *Auschwitz and After*: “[t]oday, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain that it is truthful” (1). According to Laub’s theory, this distortion does not invalidate their work but rather draws attention to their texts as modes of subjective expression. This thesis engages with Laub’s idea of testimony as an event beyond its historical accuracy. The expression and the formation of personal identities is a constant theme in the Holocaust literature under discussion. My approach to these fictional texts’ testimonies concurs with Laub’s emphasis on the subjectivity of testimony and draws out this aspect by focusing on the distortions of the event that is recounted. At the same time, I am aware of the particularities of these texts as fictional Holocaust representations. I have sought to carry Laub’s theory forward to the fictional texts by studying their self-reflexivity and their awareness of the text, in turn, as its own event.

As already indicated, the fictional texts discussed in this thesis emphasise that testimony is a constructed representation. Each of the fictional texts and their incorporated testimonies have their own particular mode of expression. This is visible in the different literary genres to which these texts conform. Rosen's *Touching Evil* is a postmodern novel; Schaeffer's *Anya* negotiates between romance and realism; Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress* is to some degree a psychological thriller; Ozick's *The Shawl* alternates between impressionism and realism; and Budnitz's fiction combines magical realism and the fantastic. Each text has its own discourse of representation, even though they all circle around the same historical event of the Holocaust.

In a historiographical context, Hayden White and James Young have addressed the constructedness of historical narratives. They voice a postmodern distrust of any claims to the existence of an objective truth. White argues that any narrative, whether it presents itself as historical or imaginative, is framed within a narrative emplotment and is therefore always necessarily constructed. He argues that "[t]he production of meaning in this case can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories" (44). In his essay "Holocaust Documentary Fiction: Novelist as Eyewitness," James Young likewise discusses narrative emplotment. He demonstrates the tendency of both testifiers and authors to provide a "real" duplicate of the historical event, as they are impelled to reaffirm an objective truth. Young argues that in testimony, this aims to prove the existence of the fact and serves as a justification. In documentary Holocaust fiction, a reliance on the authority of eyewitnesses and their testimonies is often used to the same effect. In the context of this thesis, Young's observation is most pertinent to the novels of Schaeffer and Szeman, which are discussed in chapter two. Young points out that these references in fiction "reinforc[e] the illusion of factual authority precisely in order to absolve himself [the author of fiction] of

responsibility for making such an illusion” (56). The replication of historical events is used to downplay the constructedness of documentary Holocaust fiction. My approach to the imagined testimonies of the fictional texts shares White and Young’s concern for the precarious processes of referentiality and for the inevitability of framing the content of a representation as the meaning of testimony. Expanding on Young, I seek to explore the ways in which writers themselves also move beyond the literary constraints of documentary fiction, in order to precisely explore and assume responsibility for imagining and fictionalising the facts and the testimonies of the Holocaust.

Testimony is defined by the culture in and by which it is formulated. Holocaust awareness in American culture is a central context for this thesis. Due to the geographical distance of America from the historical events of the Holocaust, its attribution of meaning to the Holocaust is particularly interesting. The cultural significance of Holocaust testimony is most central to the fiction of Rosen and Ozick, where it is a significant part of the plot. Peter Novick’s *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (2000) provides a useful basis for analysing the cultural meaning and importance of Holocaust testimonies in the United States, during the various decades in which the fictional texts were published. Novick illustrates the increasing importance and mythologization of the Holocaust in American culture and also highlights key historical moments in bringing the Holocaust to US public attention, such as the Eichmann Trial (1961), the Six Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) in Israel, NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust* (1978), Spielberg’s blockbuster hit *Schindler’s List* (1993) and the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (1993). In chapter one of this thesis, Norma Rosen’s processes of identification in *Touching Evil* are placed in the context of the Eichmann trial, which proved to be a watershed event in breaking the American postwar silence about the Holocaust. The texts in chapters two and three can both be seen in the context of identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s, which used the Holocaust to

underwrite a Jewish ethnic identity. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* and Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* present opposing responses to this cultural tendency in their imagined Holocaust testimonies. Szeman's novel, discussed in chapter two, tends to conform to the mythologization of the Holocaust that Novick defines as characteristic of the 1990s. Chapter four contextualises Judy Budnitz's fiction in relation to the contemporary perception of the Holocaust as a means, in part, for Jewish Americans to trace their ethnic roots. Whenever the cultural meaning of Holocaust testimony is foregrounded in these fictional texts, it therefore explores not only the act of testimony but also the specifically American context from which the texts emerge. My approach to the meaning of testimony is primarily focused on the subjective interaction that is involved in these cultural exchanges. I agree with Gary Weissman's observation that "[i]n Holocaust discourse 'collective memory' is just one of many equally vague terms for interpersonal, intergenerational cognition of the Holocaust" (219). The collective or cultural American memory of the Holocaust is necessarily composed out of individual testimonies, memories and imaginations, which it in turn also influences. The American context to the texts discussed in this thesis and their fictionalised testimonies make them individual events or artefacts of their time that interact with an ever-changing audience.

Trauma

A further organising principle that underpins all of the chapters in this thesis is trauma theory. It is relevant both to the characterisation of the imagined witnesses and to the construction of these fictional texts. As stated previously, the texts' meditations on testimony are characterised by their acknowledgement of the mediation of Holocaust narratives. Trauma theory emphasizes that there is already a gap in the traumatic experience of the Holocaust,

which intensifies my focus on the gap between experience and subjective testimony, because it questions not only the meaningful narrative emplotment of events in representation but also the subjective experience of those events.

Cathy Caruth explores the gap in trauma of “not knowing.” She claims that trauma is not fully experienced at the time that it occurs because the traumatised subject is numb with shock. Afterwards, the traumatised person cannot grasp the event through remembering but is possessed by it in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. She claims that

the pathology [of trauma] cannot be defined either by the event itself [. . .] nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event [. . .] The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. (4, original emphasis)

In other words, the ungraspable core of the traumatic event causes an indirection of experience and representation. It is only from a belated position of hindsight that trauma can be experienced and expressed. Testimony, memoir or any other autobiographical narrative, constructs an experience that can never be represented “as it was” because it was never experienced as such. The meaning of testimony, then, encompasses a retrospective search to attribute meaning to the missed traumatic event. The representation of the trauma of the Holocaust expresses a subjective truth in the traumatised person’s grasp of his/her past, not in terms of an all-redemptive talking cure but as a frame that makes the telling possible.

The struggle between the impossibility and the inevitability of representing trauma is central to each chapter of this thesis. In chapter one, Rosen’s protagonists are shocked by the testimonies of the Eichmann trial. Their difficulty in assigning meaning to these testimonies

and to their experience of receiving them, is suggestive, I argue, of a secondary trauma of the Holocaust. In chapter two, I read Anya's testimony as an attempt to impose meaning onto the past in order to counter the ungraspability of her traumatic Holocaust experience and its intrusive memories. Szeman's protagonists are likewise relentlessly possessed by the past, but, in my reading, the meaning that they attribute to it remains necessarily fragmented. Chapter three considers Rosa's imaginative displacement of her past as a traumatic symptom that confines her in an inescapable act of mourning. In chapter four, I analyse Budnitz's innovative exploration of the unrepresentability of trauma through her stylistic experimentation with literary genres. In all of these fictional texts, moreover, the traumatic experience of the Holocaust is expressed in gendered terms. Themes of infanticide, rape, bodily victimisation, pregnancy and abortion recur frequently in this body of Holocaust fiction. The focus of the writing is on reclaiming the narrator's identity as mother, parent, child, daughter and/or sexual being. My approach to these texts as mediations of trauma therefore emphasises that they are meaningful and valuable constructs of the past, although, as suggested above, it is not always possible (or desirable) to fully work through the trauma represented.

The theme of trauma is particularly foregrounded in the fictional Holocaust texts by Schaeffer, Szeman and Ozick. Their work features traumatised Holocaust survivors as protagonists who are haunted by elusive and unknowable pasts. Rosen and Budnitz's Holocaust fiction is less engaged with the psychology of traumatised survivors, because their focus is on the receivers of Holocaust testimonies. In chapters two and three, I argue that the lives of the fictional survivors in Schaeffer, Szeman and Ozick are relentlessly disrupted by their traumatic pasts. Dreams about their traumatic experiences, hallucinations, deadened feelings, guilt complexes and bouts of depression uncontrollably govern their lives. They

struggle to remember and to testify about their traumas. They display the classic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is the medical term for the condition of trauma, formally recognised by the American Psychiatric Association in 1984 and which is characterised by the intrusive, ungraspable and unmediated recurrence of trauma.

The influence of Edward Lewis Wallant's Holocaust novel *The Pawnbroker* (1961) on the fictional texts by Schaeffer and Ozick is notable in respect of the characterisation of trauma. Wallant's unsympathetic protagonist, Sol Nazerman, is increasingly overwhelmed by symptoms of PTSD. He is detached from life in the present; he is devoid of emotion, apathetic and numb. The narrative is repeatedly interrupted by traumatic memories, set off from the main text in italics, that Sol is unable to consciously control. The location of Wallant's survivor in a pawnshop filled with discarded objects of people's personal histories, which he values at minimum cost, is repeated in the postwar profession of Schaeffer and Ozick's protagonists. Although they are surrounded by fragments and remnants of numerous people's histories, they remain incapable of managing their own traumatic pasts.

Related to the theme of trauma, an emphasis on the double is also evident in the texts discussed throughout the thesis. In "The Uncanny" (1919), Sigmund Freud describes this figure of the double as an uncanny presence that profoundly disturbs us. All of the texts discussed highlight a doubling of the protagonist, either through a merging of characters, a split self and/or a doubling of the self. This theme also connects to the concept of motherhood, as the double in these texts is often a daughter, child or mother. Most of the characters in the texts are women whose gendered identity has been violated. Their traumatic experiences during the Holocaust are gendered and this is also reflected in the way in which they remember and imagine these experiences. The female child is often central to the protagonists. I argue that, in this context, the girl signifies for the protagonist trauma, motherhood and Jewishness: according to Jewish orthodoxy, someone is defined as Jewish if

he/she has a Jewish mother. The victimisation and murder of mothers and daughters, which features prominently in the texts discussed, therefore strikingly symbolises the annihilation of the Jewish people and their future during the Holocaust.

In chapter one, doubling is central as Rosen's female protagonists become indistinguishable during their shared imagination of the Holocaust. Both are uncontrollably haunted by images of female Holocaust victims, which overlaps with their intense preoccupations with pregnancy and infertility. In Schaeffer's novel, discussed in chapter two, the ghosts of Anya's parents repeatedly emerge in the protagonist's dreams and hallucinations, during which Anya often splits into a different version of herself. The similarities between her mother, herself and her daughter provide a continuity to which she desperately clings in order to counter the rupture of trauma. Szeman's protagonists both suggest they have undergone a splitting of the self during their shared wartime experiences, and victim and perpetrator obsessively haunt one another. The arrival of an adoptive girl, who mirrors the narrator Rachel, inspires her to write about the camps. My discussion in chapter three revolves around the spectral presence of Rosa's daughter who can be interpreted as a double of the traumatised protagonist, created in order to mourn the loss of a pre-war self as much as the death of her daughter. In Budnitz's "Hershel", a golem is made as a double of the village babymaker to protect an enchanting woman he once created and to safeguard against the impending destruction of the Holocaust. The characters who construct the meaning of testimony are doubled, haunted and/or split. The motif of doubling complicates the representation of the past and renders it inherently ungraspable.

The literary format of the texts discussed also attempts to represent the gaps of trauma.

Trauma theory underlines the postmodern wariness of objective facts, as expressed by White and Young and discussed above, because it questions the status of the experience itself: what

exactly is there to represent in the first place? There seems to be a consensus amongst contemporary critics that Holocaust fiction engages with a seemingly impossible task. A representation of trauma should indicate the unrepresentability of trauma by creating absences, ruptures or gaps. Efraim Sicher formulates this dilemma of representation well:

it [is] difficult to tell the story of what is called the Holocaust, not least because of the difficulties of finding a language to tell the story but also because of the difficulties of finding a medium or text that will bear the impossibility of imagining the unimaginable, of rendering into art the negation of art. (Introduction 3)

Sue Vice's often quoted remark aligns with Sicher's argument: "effective Holocaust fiction cannot help registering the shocking and unassimilable nature of its subject in formal ways"

(4). Anne Whitehead similarly refers to the complexity of representing the trauma of the Holocaust, suggesting the importance and struggle of the subjective attribution of meaning: "[t]he Holocaust past [. . .] cannot be narrated in an objective mode without omitting all that is most significant to understanding its power over the present" (83). Trauma, then, urges writers to seek new forms of expression that acknowledge the gaps or absences in referentiality.

I have focused my thesis specifically on the imagination in Holocaust fiction as the medium for addressing such fundamental issues of representation. In Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz's texts, different fictional realities are presented. These are parallel or alternative to the reality that is considered to be "real." One or all of these realities is an imaginary distortion, which conceptualises the trauma of the Holocaust in an attempt to attribute meaning to it. I argue that the indirection and self-reflexivity of the imaginary realities in

Rosen, Budnitz and Ozick's work effectively makes their discourse of and on Holocaust representation denormalizing. It creates gaps in the text. Trauma enters their Holocaust fiction as a literary trope, for instance through shifting narrative perspectives, time as a fragmented or ruptured entity, repetitions in structure and open endings. This in turn defamiliarizes the reader from the story that is told in the main narrative. In Schaeffer and Szeman's novels, contrastingly, the fictional reality is much more tied to the historical or factual. Their work does contain elements of the imagination and self-reflexivity, but its attempts to represent trauma are limited. In Holocaust fiction, factual and fictional approaches can both potentially mythologize the Holocaust. Schwarz speculates, "[p]erhaps as time passed we have become somewhat anaesthetized to concentration camp realism and that realism has become slightly clichéd" (36). This approach underpins my critique of Schaeffer and Szeman in chapter two. However, Budnitz's fantastical imagination of the Holocaust in chapter four shows that a highly fictionalised representation can equally risk mythologizing the Holocaust. I argue that in the fictional texts discussed a self-reflexivity through imagined realities most prominently attempts to meet the challenges of traumatic representation posed by Sicher, Vice and Whitehead.

The Figure of the Reader

In this thesis, I pay consistent attention to the reader, which, I argue, is a concept that has received insufficient attention in discussions of Holocaust fiction. The reader, in my analysis, is explicitly present as a character and is granted a certain degree of autonomy in the text. I aim to focus on the fictionalised reader as a separate or individual interlocutor in an act of transmitting Holocaust narratives. I have therefore not studied the reception of Holocaust fiction, which can be attributable to the authors' self-portrayal or the suggested fictional or

factual status of their work, as Sue Vice has done in *Holocaust Fiction* (2000). This cultural reception tends to universalise the audience. I seek to study the wider implications of the concept of the reader as an individual in the audience that Holocaust commemoration sets out to reach.

The self-reflexivity of Holocaust fiction that explicitly features the figure of the reader as character can arguably encourage the extratextual reader to question and to examine his/her own engagement with the Holocaust, because he/she is encouraged to realise the act of reading the fictional text. Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz's texts foreground the role of the "reader," conceived broadly as the receiver of testimony, in Holocaust literature. The protagonists of Rosen's *Touching Evil* are viewers of the televised testimonies at the Eichmann trial and readers of each other's writing. Budnitz's concern regarding ways in which to imagine the Holocaust is particularly focused on the figure of the receiver, who appears as a third generation character in "Hershel" and as a wartime American audience in *If I Told You Once*. Ozick's novella is narrated from the perspective of Rosa, a Holocaust survivor, but it also shows her need to be listened to by an addressee in order to confirm her testimony's subjective truth. Persky and the imaginary reader (her dead daughter Magda) are the addressees who make her traumatic Holocaust narrative possible. Schaeffer and Szeman, on the contrary, do not feature the reader as an autonomous character. In their novels, the reader is a hypothetical reference outside the text, an abstraction which in turn encourages an emotional and uncritical involvement that potentially sentimentalises the Holocaust. The position and character of the reader in the fictional texts discussed thus raises issues concerning the event of testimony, the theme of the double through identification, and an awareness of the constructedness of the text.

My focus on the meaning of Holocaust testimony for the reader raises problems of identification, which are present to varying degrees in all of the fictional texts discussed.

Imaginative acts of identification seem to bridge gaps in experience and in representation. Robert Eaglestone has recently studied identification in Holocaust literature. He notes that

[w]e who come after the Holocaust and know about it only through representations are frequently and with authority told that it is incomprehensible. However, the representations seem to demand us to do exactly that, to comprehend it, to grasp the experiences, to imagine the suffering, through identifying with those who suffered. And readers and audiences do identify strongly with testimony accounts. (19)

I concur with Eaglestone's emphasis on the importance of the reader and identification in Holocaust literature. However, his comment perhaps too easily presupposes that the reader is sensitive to the topic of the Holocaust and that he/she does eagerly identify. It does not take into account, for example, that readers might be saturated with the extreme visibility of Holocaust commemoration in Western, and especially American culture. I argue that identification should not only be analysed as a completed act but as a process. As in any field of study, there is an inevitable distortion in studies of the Holocaust. Authors of Holocaust representations are themselves often empathically involved with the Holocaust. Self-aware acknowledgements of the author's subjectivity, as demonstrated by Hartman, Young and Schwarz, often bring with them the assumption that readers of Holocaust representations will automatically empathise as well. This is informed by a didactic ethics of remembrance, which rightfully is an objective of Holocaust studies. However, these well-intended presuppositions enforce a meaning of the Holocaust and of Holocaust testimonies onto the reader. It does not take the subjectivity of the reader him/herself into account. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, for instance, visitors are given identity cards of

Holocaust victims. By creating a “Holocaust double” to accompany the visitor during his visit to the museum, “Holocaust history is personalized and dramatized, when abstractions and numbers give way to human drama, [and] the distance between us and the victims closes” (Schwarz 33). The function of the double in the characterisation of traumatised Holocaust victims in the fictional texts studied here most often seeks to achieve the opposite effect: to emphasise the gaps in experience and memory.

Emily Miller Budick states that “the primary function of almost all Holocaust fiction [is] to document or witness the experience of the Holocaust which the author would bring to the attention of an unenlightened public” (214). The novels by Schaeffer and Szeman are particularly susceptible to such an approach. According to this view, Holocaust representations serve to educate the reader about the Holocaust. James Young warns about the process of identification when it concerns Holocaust fiction of this kind:

[b]y allowing himself to be moved to the willing suspension of disbelief by the documentary novel’s contrived historical authority, the reader risks becoming ensnared in the all-encompassing fiction of the discourse itself, mistaking the historical *force* of this discourse for the historical facts it purports to document. (62, original emphasis)

I argue, like Young, that the constructedness of the text is often revealing and critical of Holocaust representations rather than attempting to create an “authentic” Holocaust representation.

Generalisations inevitably have to be made when the commemoration of the Holocaust tries to educate and to reach a wide audience, but it often obscures the realisation of that audience’s empathic involvement. The moral obligation to remember and to continue

remembering the Holocaust is at the heart of this discussion. The reader is encouraged to care not only about Holocaust history – and by implication its survivors – in order for it not to be forgotten, but more specifically in order to make sure that it “never happens again.” The efficacy of such objectives is nevertheless highly questionable, as many genocides have followed the Holocaust in the twentieth century. Rather than solely evoking an emotional identification with the Holocaust, the fictional texts by Rosen, Ozick and Budnitz acknowledge the reader’s own subjectivity and thereby question this process and focus on its difficulties within the text. The fictional meditations on the meaning of testimony unravel the interests of the interlocutors (both narrator and receiver) in their remembrance and imagination of the Holocaust. That is precisely why they form such a remarkable and compelling canon of their own.

Chapter One:

Witness-through-the-Imagination in Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil*

In this house they all do it – imaginary shifting into
other people's places. It's an unaccountable flirting with
pain, like the tongue on the bad tooth.
(Rosen, "Fences" 77)

Norma Rosen is a provocative pioneer of Jewish American Holocaust fiction. In 1969, she published her novel *Touching Evil*, which received much acclaim, but attracted few critical analyses. Her extensive Holocaust oeuvre attests to the fundamentally defining role that the Holocaust assumes in both her life and her literary output. In one of her first polemical essays, entitled "The Holocaust and the American-Jewish Novelist" (1974), Rosen declares that "the Holocaust is the central occurrence of the twentieth century. It is the central human occurrence" (8-9). Some biographical context may clarify Rosen's intense preoccupation with the Holocaust. Her husband's entire family perished in the Holocaust, while he was able to escape Vienna on a *Kindertransport* to England which departed a few weeks after *Kristallnacht* ("Notes" 108). Although Rosen herself is not a survivor or a child of survivors, her proximity to the problematics of the post-Holocaust era gives rise to a complex personal legacy. She says, "[f]or me the central question was – and still is – how to write as a Jew after the Holocaust. How to write as a Jew and as an artist, with honorable effort toward both those attributes" (*Accidents* 42). In this chapter, I will argue that Rosen's relentless exploration of her own position in both her fiction and her essays results in an important and compelling contribution to the canon of American Holocaust fiction.

The straightforward style of Rosen's essays, collected in *Accidents of Influence* (1992), indicates the balance of autobiographical and intellectual considerations that informs her writing. She probes the possibilities of fiction, its intensity and its limitations, most strikingly in *Touching Evil*. Her search for a suitable literary form is central to my own

research interest. The motivation for and the manner in which we are compelled to investigate the Holocaust are matters that profoundly concern Rosen, and are essential to the *raison d'être* of Holocaust studies. Rosen's Holocaust oeuvre emphasises the necessity of personal empathy and objective distancing in order to establish a substantive collective Holocaust memory. In this chapter, I analyse the novel *Touching Evil* through Rosen's central concept of "witness-through-the-imagination." I explore her emphasis on the subjective meaning of Holocaust testimony for the reader by drawing on concepts such as empathy, identification, secondary trauma and the addressee. I will focus primarily on the relationship of the protagonists to these ideas, but I will also consider their broader theoretical implications, the representational intricacies of the novel's structure, and Rosen's awareness of the mediation inherent in both personal and cultural acts of remembering.

In Rosen's writing, the importance of the Holocaust in the second half of the twentieth century is repeatedly acknowledged. In "Notes Toward a Holocaust Fiction" (1989) she fervently argues against what she perceives to be the absence of the Holocaust in Jewish American fiction:

[w]e say easily enough that the Holocaust is the central occurrence of the twentieth century, but we act sometimes as if we don't believe it. [. . .] Jewish writers take such working vacations, creating an "as if" world. As if it never happened. (106-07)

Touching Evil revolts against the obliteration of the Holocaust in American consciousness. Rosen's phrasing of this particular attitude as the "as if" world underlines her self-reflective emphasis. She is fully aware that imagination is her only point of access to the Holocaust. She does not approach the Holocaust as if she were there, but her ethics "spring from a

different ‘as if’ – as if we were never free to stop thinking of the Holocaust. [. . .] I wanted to call my novel *Heart’s Witness* or *Witness Through Imagination*. My ‘as if’ world is as if no one can escape the knowledge” (Rosen, “Notes” 107). Although Rosen’s idea of witness-through-the-imagination is frequently used in Holocaust literary criticism, the richness of the concept has not as yet been fully scrutinised. The fluidity between fact and fiction, documentation and imagination which is implied in the phrase makes Rosen’s novel a self-reflexive work of and on Holocaust fiction and the imagination.

Witness-through-the-Imagination: Objectivity

In a critical discussion of the concept of witness-through-the-imagination, Rosen insists on the importance of historical factuality and objectivity as a response to the problem of Holocaust representation:

[f]or the American Jewish writer, the Holocaust as subject was a double bind: as nearly impossible to write about as to avoid writing about. European writers had come forth as witnesses and had, even when their writing had been most surreal, given something that felt like documentary. Witness-through-the-imagination could be the only role for the American writer: documentor of the responses of those who had (merely) “heard the terrible news.” (“Holocaust” 10)

Peter Novick points out that in America the Holocaust was “hardly talked about for the first twenty years or so after World War II” (1-2). In 1969, the year in which *Touching Evil* was published, European Holocaust literature had acquired status as a noteworthy genre, while

Jewish American responses to the Holocaust had barely begun to emerge. Critics have suggested various explanations for this lapse in American Holocaust consciousness including the comparative safety in America during World War II from the European carnage, and collective trauma.¹ In the literary context, American writers had an admiration for Europeans who addressed the Holocaust in their work, as Rosen's quote amply demonstrates. The unwillingness or hesitation of American authors to confront the Holocaust directly in their writing applies to Rosen too: one may only objectively document "the *responses* of those who had (merely) 'heard the terrible news'" (my emphasis).

In *Touching Evil*, Rosen documents the reactions of her two American protagonists, Jean Lamb and Hattie Mews, as they watch the eyewitness accounts of survivors in the Eichmann trial on television. *Touching Evil* is one of the very first American novels that explicitly – though indirectly – deals with the Holocaust,² and the Eichmann trial is regarded as a watershed event in the American response to the Holocaust. Eichmann was a Nazi lieutenant colonel, an *Obersturmbannführer*, who organised the transportation of Jews during the Holocaust, and he was tried in Israel between 11 April and 14 August 1961. The trial was televised live and broadcast world-wide. It became a major incentive for the American public to engage with the Holocaust. It was the event that urged most Americans to confront "the terrible news," as the Holocaust became a topic of discussion beyond the mere knowledge of its facts. The mediation of the televised coverage of the trial amplifies the mediation that

¹ After a traumatic experience, repression can be a psychological response. A lapse in the conscious working-through of trauma is described as belatedness or latency in Freudian terms. Cathy Caruth presses this idea further and notes that latency already occurs during the traumatic experience, as discussed in the introduction. The inability to grasp trauma thus results in silence. It is suggested that the American silence about the Holocaust during and immediately after the war resembles this concept of trauma on a broader, collective scale. Novick, as do many others, explicitly critiques this interpretation.

² Contrary to David Brauner's assumption that *Touching Evil* is the first Jewish American Holocaust novel that treats the subject of the Holocaust explicitly (115), which downplays the importance of Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961), Philippe Codde has more accurately observed that Rosen's novel is "probably the first Holocaust novel by a native-born Jewish American woman novelist" (forthcoming).

characterises the American response to the Holocaust, a dynamic that I will analyse further at the end of this chapter.

Jean, the main narrator of *Touching Evil*, describes the pregnant Hattie's intense reaction to the Holocaust both in her diary and in the letters to her lover Loftus. During one of these descriptions, she confirms the necessity of accuracy in reporting: "I am going to have to send you bits of Hattie's things verbatim or not at all. . . ." (121).³ Jean affirms and echoes Rosen's resolve to be an objective documentor. She nevertheless remains the author of these quotations and her preference for certain passages by Hattie inevitably makes her writing a subjective process. The intriguing autobiographical overlap between Jean, Hattie and Rosen likewise invites a consideration of the inevitability of subjectivity within this objective role of the witness-through-the-imagination. Jean transmits Hattie's response to the Holocaust – filtered through her own reaction to it – to her lover Loftus through letters, and it is hereby transmitted to the reader. I believe this multi-layered communication and transmission of Holocaust knowledge to be at the heart of *Touching Evil* and, indeed, to be central to much of Rosen's Holocaust oeuvre.⁴

Rosen consistently situates her writings in the post-Holocaust era, a temporal distance which reflects the geographical distance of her literary response. The consequent indirectness does

³ Rosen frequently uses ellipses in *Touching Evil*. She also uses both a regular and an italic font. All quotations are rendered as printed in *Touching Evil*. All italics and ellipses are thus by Rosen, unless stated otherwise. Changes to quotations from the novel are clearly indicated by remarks in square brackets within or in parenthesis outside of the quotation.

⁴ In "Fences," Rosen explores the intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust from father to son through testimony and photography. In "Cheek of the Trout," she considers the complicated barriers of communication and the necessity of imagination between a survivor and his American wife during their visit to postwar Vienna. This short story is the second part of Rosen's essay "Notes Towards a Holocaust Fiction," which indicates her penchant for merging different genres. In "What Must I Say to You," included in *Green*, the Holocaust is central to the narrator's inability to understand her survivor husband's continued practice of Jewish religion and tradition. In "Poetry after Auschwitz," a review of Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, Rosen reflects on the necessity for and distortions of the novel's poetic language and imagery in the subjective expression and transmission of the protagonists' experience of the Holocaust.

not solely derive from a respectful reverence for the perspective of Holocaust survivors, prevalent in many American writers and a view that Saul Bellow explores in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970).⁵ Rosen also refuses to venture into the realm of invented historical Holocaust fiction, writings that are set in *l' univers concentrationnaire*, exemplified in this thesis by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974), Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress* (1993) and to a lesser extent Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl" (1980). In "Notes Toward a Holocaust Fiction," Rosen explains her approach:

I never want to invent Holocaust scenes. In fact I have a horror of it, as of something that might add to the sum of pain. And this despite my knowing that in Holocaust fiction there can be no invention of event. Whatever can be imagined has happened. The Holocaust transformed to reality what should have occurred only in nightmares. I do not want to invent Holocaust scenes. Maybe that was why, now, I wanted to write real Holocaust scenes as fiction.

(105)

Rosen acknowledges the gap between experience and representation in the objective role of the witness-through-the-imagination. She focuses on the representation of American responses and opposes fictionalised "historical" Holocaust experiences. Although her resolution to document the Holocaust objectively seems to restrict both the subject matter and the possibilities of her work, I will argue that Rosen's concept of witness-through-the-

⁵ In a leftist New York of the 1960s, Mr. Sammler is viewed by other characters as a prophetic moral referee because "his *experiences* were respected. The war. Holocaust. Suffering" (77, original emphasis). Bellow elaborately engages with this deified status of the Holocaust survivor: "Mr. Sammler had a symbolic character. He, personally, was a symbol. His friends and family had made him a judge and a priest. And of what was he a symbol? He didn't even know. Was it because he had survived? He hadn't even done that, since so much of the earlier person had disappeared. It wasn't surviving, it was only lasting" (91).

imagination manifests an ambiguity and an aspiration that transcends such limitations.⁶

Witness-through-the-Imagination: Subjectivity

The responses of the American public to the Holocaust constitute the focus of Rosen's objective approach, rather than more historical representations. Rosen recognises that historical precision does not fully transmit the legacy of the Holocaust:

I thought again how it's not enough for us to know the facts. Not enough to have the documents, the history, the accounts in the daily papers, the pictures on the eleven o'clock news. Because we do not recognize our lives until we read them in art. We need that shock of recognition. ("Holocaust" 16)

Her character Jean again underlines the point: "[i]n those days there were only two kinds of people for me – those who knew and those who didn't know. And it had nothing to do with reading newspapers" (77).

Subjectivity is a necessary complement to objectivity in the concept of witness-through-the-imagination. The meaning of the Holocaust for the American receiver is subjective, as it concerns issues of identity that are as relevant for the reader as for the author

⁶ Emily Prager's novel *Eve's Tattoo* (1992) also concerns identification with Holocaust victims. However, the crucial difference from Rosen's novel is the protagonist's imagination of historical Holocaust scenes. Eve, a shallow WASPish American in mid-life crisis, makes up random stories of Holocaust characters in order to encourage her audience's urge to identify: in the vet's surgery, for instance, she creates a character who takes care of the confiscated pets of Jews. Eve increasingly assimilates her identity with the imagined identity of an Auschwitz victim, whose photograph she cherishes. Rosen's protagonists empathise on a more abstract and personalised level with the testimonies of the Eichmann trial. The performative aspect of Eve's storytelling is explicitly acknowledged in Prager's novel, but its unstable recognition does not compare to Rosen's critical awareness of the mediation of all Holocaust representation, which the experimental structure and style of *Touching Evil* emphasise.

of Holocaust literature. Rosen believes that “writers begin smaller, closer to home, sifting through self to grasp the world” (*Accidents* 101). She explains her literary doctrine as follows: “[w]hat is literature for? [. . .] On the most exalted level it can become what Kafka said it should be: ‘An ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us’” (*Accidents* 59). Rosen’s insistence on subjective empathy for both author and reader personalises the Holocaust. One first and foremost remains a witness to oneself. A personal involvement may allow us to begin to imagine the Holocaust in terms of its impact on ourselves and others. Personal response enriches testimony, and it perpetuates Holocaust memory through an individualised recollection.

Although the testimonies of Holocaust survivors undoubtedly remain indispensable to Holocaust representation, their perspective is also limited as it necessarily concerns a single experience. The value of an artistic exploration of the subject is suggested by S. Lillian Kremer: “we may come closer to comprehension through the efforts of artists whose works incorporate and transcend representational reality” (*Witness* 8). Precisely because Rosen was not there, she acknowledges and reflects on the intricacies of the transmission of the Holocaust legacy. The moment “when the revelation of the Holocaust is taken into one’s being – flesh-and-spirit-altering” (Rosen, “Holocaust” 3) becomes for her an event in its own right. It is Rosen’s “testimony” to this event which inspires her fictional meditation on it in *Touching Evil*. Her experience is transmitted in turn to her characters and to the reader. The representation of Hattie’s response to the Holocaust is intensified by Jean’s contemplations of it, mirroring the magnification of Rosen’s response in those of her characters and her readers.

Throughout her oeuvre, Rosen incorporates autobiographical elements in order to explore the history of the Holocaust, thus positioning her writing between fact and fiction. The “authenticity” of the ashes of her husband’s father is the controversial subject matter for the

characters in two short stories, namely “Fences” (1986) and “The Cheek of the Trout” (1989). Rosen’s attendance at the women’s college Mount Holyoke recurs in several short stories and in *Touching Evil* Jean and Hattie attend the same college. Comparing herself to Hattie, Rosen says: “I too was pregnant in 1961, watching the Eichmann trial every day” (“Notes” 107). Despite the autobiographical aspect to her work, however, she consciously prefers the genre of fiction: “[w]hy did I want to write a fictionalized account instead of a memoir? Perhaps to give distance; maybe to give some hope. Also to be truer: left alone, reality can’t be trusted to convey itself” (“Notes” 105). Rosen’s personal investment in writing about the Holocaust is nevertheless clearly signalled through the incorporation of autobiographical elements in her writing. *Touching Evil* can therefore be seen as an early example of a postmodernist and self-reflexive novel, that is essentially about the processes of writing and reading, of witnessing and testifying.

The impact of the Holocaust on Rosen is most thoroughly explored in *Touching Evil*. In writing the novel, she transmits to the reader her experience of encountering the Holocaust. For her characters, complex processes of empathy and identification are triggered by the Eichmann trial. Through watching the testimonies of the trial on television, Jean and Hattie become entirely submerged in the Holocaust. The event enters their domestic lives of 1960s America through this relatively new medium and captures their imagination. At precisely five o’clock in the afternoon, life stops and the history of the Holocaust begins.

About that time Hattie’s phone call will come. A reminder. A few minutes before five I [Jean] will go across the street to her apartment to watch the Eichmann trial with her on her television set. I begin to shake and sweat as I walk across the street. Although the truth is I don’t any longer give a damn. It

is absolutely established practice. I can't get out of it. I went once, twice, thinking, no more. Now I am drawn in. (24)

Jean's lover Loftus has asked her to watch the trial with Hattie. He is a professor in psychology and when he runs into his former student, Hattie, and notices her pregnancy, he expresses his concern to Jean: “[w]atch with her if you can sometime, darling? [. . .] Or talk her out of watching altogether, better yet” (28). Jean had “heard the terrible news” of the Holocaust immediately after the war, but the testimonies at the Eichmann trial provide Hattie's first confrontation with the historical details of the Holocaust. Jean initially keeps Hattie company in order to comply with Loftus's wishes. As their relationship is quite precarious – Loftus returns to his wife, Erna, to talk over the process of their divorce – Jean is desperate to win his love. This is evidenced when Jean describes to him Hattie's countless letters to her: “[l]ook at this pile from Hattie. Who needs it? I need it. It's a link to you” (7). She tries to resist the lure of the trial, as advised by Loftus, but is inevitably “drawn in.” It is, however, unclear whether her “shaking and sweating,” in response to her viewing, results from anguish or from eagerness. Susan Sontag comments in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003):

images of the repulsive can also allure. Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity. It is also, for many, the wish to see something gruesome. Calling such wishes “morbid” suggests a rare aberration, but the attraction to such sights is not rare, and is a perennial source of inner torment. (85)

Although images and tales of horror disturb us, there is a paradoxical inclination to seek them out. Jean and Hattie's fascination with the Holocaust profoundly confuses them, yet they cannot not watch. Alan Berger accordingly notes that "[b]oth women watch with ritual intensity the victims' testimony of violence and evil" (*Crisis* 172). In *Touching Evil*, Rosen indicates her awareness that this obsessive behaviour is problematic. When Stanwood, Hattie's brother-in-law, is confronted with his own extravagant generosity,⁷ he defends himself as follows: "[l]ook on it as my sickness. My excess that I couldn't hold back. Like Hattie's having to watch the trial" (212). The trial entirely overtakes Jean and Hattie and their addictive interest in the proceedings reveals voyeuristic tendencies.

When Jean refers to her viewing as an "established practice," she may be referring to the general American hype concerning the trial, but she also implies a feeling of habit. The repetitiveness of the testimonies in the trial and their broadcasting every day at the same time, enforces a domestication of horror. Sontag remarks that "[a]s one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images. Yet there are cases where repeated exposure to what shocks, saddens, appalls does not use up a full-hearted response" (*Regarding* 73). Sontag's use of the verb "habituate" implies a familiarity with scenes of horror that can be closely associated with the responses of Jean and Hattie. In his study of the media coverage of the Eichmann trial, Jeffrey Schandler notes that "[u]nlike any other medium, television fostered a sense of 'live' contact between event and audience; its intimate scale and speed of transmission gave viewers a sense of proximity to the proceedings" (96). Jean and Hattie's voyeuristic impulses are intensified by the intimacy that the broadcast offers them. Although they become habituated to the horror of the Holocaust, the intensity of their preoccupation with the trial forces their responses to remain "full-

⁷ Stanwood has spent all of his own and Lillian's – Hattie's sister's – money on financially adopting poor children.

hearted” as they internalise and personalise it. They genuinely empathise and identify with the horrific testimonies. Jean specifies their response: “Hattie and I have extracted our private symbols of horror from the welter of horror symbols. Hattie has her pregnant women, her children, her Muslims. I have the woman who digs her half-dead way up through corpses” (55). Sara Horowitz explains their preference for these particular Holocaust victims: “[t]hese images provide each woman with her own point of access to the Holocaust, her own point of vulnerability – and hence her own point of empathy” (“Pin” 152). These “private” horror symbols moreover diminish the overwhelming enormity of the Holocaust, for they allow Jean and Hattie to personalise the atrocity through the individualisation of empathy. The motivation to select these particular horror symbols is inevitably subjective but it nevertheless spurs the memorialisation of the Holocaust in a – for the empathising subject – more tangible way.⁸ Although Horowitz interprets the empathy of Jean and Hattie in terms of personal resemblances, I would argue that their empathy also reflects a flight from the self. Hattie accordingly tries to escape the frailty of her pregnancy:

the child growing in her (who is he, she wonders, who?) has shaken loose her own taken-for-granted sense of knowing who *she* was. Some heretofore buried tendency to mimicry, some temptation to abandon herself, like an overloaded ship, sends her forth from the capsized body, heavily beached on the bed, to other lives. (88, original emphasis)

⁸ This personal investment in imagining the Holocaust closely relates to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. She argues that “postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (Hirsch 22). Her emphasis on family history through analysing the postmemories of children of survivors, however, suggests a subjective involvement of people who are less distanced from the Holocaust than Rosen’s contemporaneous witnesses-through-the-imagination, although Hirsch’s use of photography clearly indicates the mediation of Holocaust memory and history.

Her identification with the horror symbol of the pregnant woman, however, also returns her to her own pregnancy, her utmost point of vulnerability.

The subjective aspect of the witness-through-the-imagination thus has a reciprocal function. The indirect or secondary witness of the Holocaust⁹ – the characters who watch the televised trial – encounters and/or avoids both him/herself and the Holocaust during a process of subjective identification. Jean observes of Hattie: “[s]he is in the news and the news is in her” (218). Rosen likewise admits: “I tried to teach myself something by writing a novel called *Touching Evil*, to discover in the shadow of concentration camps the commentary on my own innocently sunlit life” (*Accidents* 99).¹⁰ The contemporary American media coverage of the Eichmann trial similarly urged people to reflect on themselves, to approach the Holocaust in this self-reflexive manner of subjective identification. A newspaper advertisement of 12 April 1961, for instance, recommended the following: “let us now remember what we would most forget. And let us now watch the judgment of Eichmann, by sitting in judgment of ourselves” (qtd. in Schandler 108).

The Holocaust provokes and defines each of the characters personally and individually. Jean’s initial encounter with the Holocaust happened in 1944, when her professor in behavioural science, John Oates, seduced her with pictures of mass graves, images of “piled-up stick bodies at the bottom of a lime pit” (73). Rosen explains her literary strategy behind this unusual situation:

I made my protagonist, at the time of discovery, young – and vulnerable to

⁹ Holocaust scholars have suggested various terms for these distanced witnesses of the legacy of the Holocaust. They are often characterised by negative connotations, such as “non-survivors” (Heinemann 13), “nonwitnesses” (Weissman 18), “witnesses by adoption” (Hartman 8), and even “secondhand witness” (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 11).

¹⁰ Susan E. Nowak affirms that “Rosen employs fiction, autobiography, and memoir to describe her own struggle to accept and assimilate the Shoah’s legacy as an integral dimension of her own self-understanding” (120). She interprets Rosen’s concept of witness-through-the-imagination primarily as a moral imperative.

horror. I made the moment of discovery the precise moment of sexual seduction, almost of intercourse itself, so that everything should be open and the appearance of penetration complete. (“Holocaust” 12)

The violence of this scene suggests a traumatic but also specifically sexual wounding. The Holocaust represents a founding experience for Jean: her identity is defined and subsumed by this experience. Her subsequent adult identity is determined by the shock of horrific Holocaust imagery. The mass graves represent her first encounter with the Holocaust and Jean’s horror symbol is accordingly a “woman who was shot but did not die, and who dug her way from under a mountain of corpses that spouted blood” (221). Jean is overwhelmed by the Holocaust, has an endless fear of falling into the void and nearly suffocates due to the sensation of impending death. Her anxiety concerning this constant Holocaust threat is clearly illustrated in the following example: “[o]n the short walk back to my own house, I stumble suddenly over broken pavement. The bloody woman, the digger through the rubble of last night’s corpses, has nudged me again as I pick my way through the rubble of the street” (50). The incessant reappearance of her horror symbol signifies a fear of being buried alive and suggests the extent to which her initial encounter with the Holocaust has been reawakened by the Eichmann trial.

Jean is repeatedly attracted to men who repeat her traumatic initiation into an adult, Holocaust-aware existence. She has a relationship with Vincent who

had been in Germany, had actually been in on the liberating of a concentration camp. He wooed me, you might say, with that, though he didn’t know it. It scared me then. I wondered myself if I might finally have gone berserk on

pain. If all that excruciated feeling had broken through the dividing line and become sex. Not so. (77)

Here, Rosen again draws attention to the implications of Jean's awakening to the Holocaust. The convergence of horror and sex, of birth and death, reverberates throughout the novel. Jean subsequently falls in love with Loftus, Professor Oates's successor, who implies that the Holocaust acts as a founding experience for Jean when he observes: "*what we remember determines the soul's development*" (56). When she realises that a continual confrontation with the Holocaust will occur through her watching the Eichmann trial with Hattie, Jean resolves to assume a distanced state of mind in order not to be "drawn in." She does, however, become immersed in a Holocaust universe once more, albeit in a different way to her initial encounter.

Hattie, in contrast, actively seeks an all-encompassing identification with the Holocaust. She is the one who is young and vulnerable when the Eichmann trial is broadcast. Her personal reaction to the Holocaust is very emotional and she is utterly absorbed in the process of identifying with the victimised. She screams at her family:

"Can you *see* how it happened to another woman? I can *feel* it in my body how it did. Every muscle in her is beating out the birth and yet she wants to hold back, to stop up the bowels of birth because she knows . . . what did that woman say, Jean?"

"The baby was bitten," I answer – I am drawn in – "the moment it was born, by the spotted-fever lice . . ." (86, original emphasis)

Jean is once more involved, but the original fascination with horror is shared with Hattie. The similarities in their initial responses to the Holocaust mean that a paralleling of the two characters is inevitable. Jean declares, “I didn’t begin to see myself in anybody else until I met Hattie” (80). The Holocaust, Hattie’s reaction to it, and Hattie herself thus become points of identification for Jean. The intertwining of the two female protagonists intensifies as the novel progresses and creates intricate structural complexities that underline the constructedness of Rosen’s fictional Holocaust representation.

Hattie’s pregnancy both symbolises her vulnerability and motivates her to identify with “the woman giving birth in the typhus-lice-infested straw” (221). Her fixation on the Holocaust and the Eichmann trial becomes complete when she goes into labour in her living room. She cannot stop watching the broadcast of the trial. She “is torn between the television set and the warning of the drenched floor” (228). Jean has to switch off the television and send her to hospital. During the delivery of her baby at the end of the novel, Hattie’s empathy climaxes in a complete identification with her “horror symbol.” She writes to Jean:

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. [. . .] The one who squeezed the baby out into a world of concrete, straw and lice. . . . (251-52)

The close association of birth with death poignantly expresses doubt about the value of life after the Holocaust. Hattie profoundly questions her ability to be a good mother. Procreation, pregnancy and birth are supposedly the life forces that can reverse the shock of Holocaust horror. They counteract the realisation of the destructiveness of death enforced by mankind. At this point in the novel, however, Rosen seems to deny the positive value of birth and reproduction.

This negative view is subsequently countered in the novel by Jean's response to Hattie. Jean's wish for children has emerged since she met Hattie. When she was abruptly thrown into adulthood in 1944, she swore never to have children: "[a] catastrophe has changed the world. The old forms have no more meaning for me. I will never marry or have children" (74). Knowledge of the Holocaust is catastrophic for her belief in the meaning of womanhood. Her identification with Hattie, however, comforts her and it is Hattie's pregnancy that changes her mind during her second empathic Holocaust encounter: "I envy Hattie her pregnancy, early-morning nausea, and everything. I want her child. It frightens me to hear this so clearly through my own speech to Hattie" (87-88). In Jean's response, Rosen tentatively indicates a more positive rendering of the symbolism of childbirth and reproduction.

Throughout *Touching Evil*, the merging of women is a consistent theme: Hattie and Jean both empathise with female Holocaust victims as well as with each other, and Jean specifically desires a daughter. She observes, "I am obsessed with the idea of having a child – which I already knew (but not that I wanted it to be a daughter)" (27). When she hears that a cyst on her ovary might result in its removal, she has doubts: "[h]aving asked her [Jean's doctor] to reassure me that I can still become pregnant, I am also asking her to reassure me that that is not what I have become" (94). Her reservations about procreation continue to haunt her during her confrontation with the Eichmann trial. The forces of destruction remain omnipresent when Jean is raped and her rapist "is prodding into the lower right quadrant where the sick ovary is taking a beating" (206). Jean explains to the reader how the Holocaust afflicts her sense of her own femininity: "[w]e fall endlessly, soundlessly from our chairs. We roll on the floor, we clutch our wombs. Soundless, endless groans" (52). In *Touching Evil* gender is not used primarily to draw attention to the historical female experience of the Holocaust, but rather to express the meaning of the trial's Holocaust testimonies for its

viewers. Gender symbolises the way in which Jean and Hattie empathise with Holocaust victims and attempt to attribute meaning to the past and to themselves. The omnipresence of gendered themes in *Touching Evil* also reinforces the reader's empathic response. Kremer appropriately notes that "[e]ngaging reader sympathy through the evocation of the victimization of mother and children is an essential feature in *Touching Evil*" ("Holocaust and Witnessing Imagination" 234). Goldberg agrees that "[t]he novel attempts to create within the reader the horror experienced by the two main characters" (205).

When Jean takes pity on a homeless Puerto Rican boy, Jesús, she is confronted with both her innate wish for children and the miseries of the contemporary world.¹¹ Jean's response to the Holocaust through the Eichmann trial is notably more politicised than Hattie's. The struggle for survival in the New York City of 1961 is merciless and intensifies Jean's reservations about raising a child. The poverty and racial discrimination portrayed in the novel broadens the relevance of the Holocaust past. The fundamental messages one can learn from the tragedy of the Holocaust era are thus transferred to the contemporary world. When Jean walks through New York, for instance, she realises: "I feel the silent, dead moment between my Negro countrymen and me" (39). It is the decade of the civil-rights movement. Rosen's correlation between the situation of European Jewry during World War Two and Puerto Ricans and African-Americans in modern New York is founded in the marginalisation of these ethnic groups due to socially accepted racism.¹²

¹¹ Consistent with her sexual attraction to professor John Oates, his successor Loftus and the concentration camp liberator Vincent, Jean also has sex with Jesús. This repeats and displaces her traumatic initiation into an adult, Holocaust-aware existence because she considers adopting Jesús as her son at the end of the novel.

¹² In this respect, Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961) shows a lot of similarities with Rosen's *Touching Evil*. Wallant's novel contains explicit social commentary on the plight of African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York during the 1960s. Its Holocaust-survivor protagonist, Sol Nazerman, works in a pawnshop in Harlem, New York, a neighbourhood that is infamous for racial conflict. His assistant, Jesus Ortiz, is the sinner-saint antagonist who evokes humanity in the traumatised protagonist, similar to Jesús's characterisation in *Touching Evil* and his effect on Jean. In Wallant's novel Jesus is a light-skinned African American, but in the film adaptation of 1965 he is made into a Puerto Rican in order to intensify the racial

The setting of a New York poised between destruction and construction strikingly underlines the financial discrepancies in American society. The Second World War proved to be an economic boost for America. Rosen sarcastically comments that “the money boys were on to the newest treasure, post-World War II land boom. White X’s were painted on windows to show vacated apartments [. . .] Talk was beginning [. . .] about where the little shopkeepers and cheap-rent families could go. No place” (39-40). In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), Hannah Arendt likewise observes the juxtaposition of the American televised coverage of the Eichmann trial and real-estate advertising: “the American program, sponsored by the Glickman Corporation, is constantly interrupted – business as usual – by real-estate advertising” (5). Rosen shares Arendt’s condemnation of such blatant and jarring commercialisation through Jean’s sarcastic comments.

Rosen’s touching of evil is predominantly concerned with a prolonged confrontation with the horror of the Holocaust through watching the survivor testimonies at the Eichmann trial. The author, however, also explores the nature of evil by touching upon the role of the perpetrator. She outlines this secondary objective of her novel as follows:

[m]y theme was what might happen to people who truly took into consciousness the fact of the Holocaust. [. . .] I was considering the meaning to human life and aspiration of the knowledge that human beings – in great numbers – could do what had been done. (“Holocaust” 12)

tensions of the oppressed minorities in the American underclass. The urban decay of Wallant’s cityscape reflects and triggers the protagonist’s traumatised state of mind, similar to the setting of a (re)constructed New York that symbolises and evokes Jean’s traumatic reaction to her knowledge of the Holocaust.

The potential of imagination in the concept of witness-through-the-imagination is nevertheless applied to the victims of the Holocaust alone. In the Eichmann trial it was, perhaps surprisingly, the testimonies of the victims that featured most prominently. Arendt rightfully questions “whether the defendant or the victim holds the center of the stage in a trial” (285). Rosen likewise insists upon the victim’s perspective, so that Jean and Hattie never concretely individualise their identification with the perpetrator as they do with the victims. The “horror symbols” – Jean’s corpse digger and Hattie’s woman who gave birth in lice-infested straw – reflect the predominant emphasis on the victim. The contemporary reception of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* demonstrates the controversial nature of the subject of the perpetrator in the 1960s.¹³ The circumstances of the Eichmann trial further clarify Rosen’s focus on the victims in her concept of witness-through-the-imagination. Many journalists covering the trial “faulted the proceedings for failing to provide psychological insight into the Nazis’ attempt to annihilate European Jewry” (Schandler 121). Eichmann was perceived to be a cold-blooded and uninteresting defendant. As the spectator could not access his inner thoughts, let alone understand him, empathising proved to be a strenuous effort. Arendt reveals the extent to which Eichmann was distanced through the trial process. She indicates the complete absence of witnesses in favour of Eichmann,¹⁴ and the fact that “[a]lmost twice as many sessions [. . .] were spent on a hundred prosecution witnesses” (Arendt 223). Such discrepancy in legal representation between victim and victimiser was almost inevitably bound to result in a corresponding emphasis on the survivors in the journalistic coverage.

¹³ Peter Longerich has suggested that although studies of the Nazi perpetrator did already exist in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the canonical work of Raul Hilberg, which focused primarily on high-level administrators, its field of study has only begun to diversify and to gain recognition in the last decade. It remains controversial subject matter, as the debates in the 1990s surrounding Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen’s work show.

¹⁴ These witnesses would have potentially risked their lives as they would have been subject to the same Israeli laws under which Eichmann was arrested, albeit illegally kidnapped from Argentina. It has been argued at the

In the televised broadcast of the Eichmann trial, the American coverage “repeatedly conceptualised the trial as an event primarily of universal significance, raising questions about the nature of evil in the individual psyche” (Schandler 130). Jean and Hattie accordingly experience an enhanced awareness of the universality of victimisation, the evil that is inherent in mankind. Rosen makes this issue explicit when Jean invites Jesús to join her in her flat. Jean immediately thinks in a rather prejudiced way about the possibility of defending herself against crime:

I think carefully through the contents of the apartment. What is there for a thief to steal? Would he think of strangling me first? (I am disgusted with myself when that nervous-female-all-alone thought occurs. But that doesn't prevent the follow-up idiocy: I could strew my finest pen points on the floor to cut his bare feet.) (14, sic)

Although by letting Jesús spend the night at her apartment, Jean displays her well-intended solidarity with the less fortunate, she nevertheless vividly imagines Jesús's malevolence and responds with her own projected physical violence. Through exhibiting Jean's latent sadistic impulses, Rosen suggests that evil is a universal characteristic of humanity, a potential that, like victimhood, is latent within us all.

In line with the “universal” message that was the principal objective of discussions of the Eichmann trial in the 1960s, its coverage was targeted at a general audience. Schandler remarks that the “expansive presentation of the Eichmann case may have been a bid to attract a largely non-Jewish audience to watch the proceedings” (130). Rosen's preference for non-

time and afterwards that an international tribunal could have provided a more balanced relation between defence and prosecution.

Jewish characters in *Touching Evil* concurs with this emphasis and affirms the prominence that she accords to issues of universal significance. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer and Cynthia Ozick, on the other hand, engage primarily with specifically Jewish aspects of the Holocaust and of Holocaust commemoration. Rosen's decision to write about non-Jewish protagonists has received a lot of criticism.¹⁵ She explains, "I chose non-Jews to do the responding in order to extend as far as possible the reach of the Holocaust upon these 'witnesses-through-the-imagination'" ("Second" 51). Elsewhere, Rosen expands her argumentation in favour of non-Jewish characters as follows:

[i]n my novel, *Touching Evil*, American non-Jews respond to their first knowledge of the Holocaust by asking themselves, "How can we live now?" Non-Jews, says that book, suffer from Holocaust knowledge, too. This is what human beings could do, and did. It was the peculiar genius of the Jew to fetch it forth, but the malaise, the malediction of that knowledge has entered the psyche of Jew and non-Jew alike. ("Notes" 107)

The innate evil in mankind and its repercussions in a new, postwar world meet in Hattie's identity crisis which culminates in her doubts about motherhood. For Hattie, to be a witness to oneself – "the trope of witnessing as a morally charged act" encouraged by the American press coverage of the Eichmann trial (Schandler 84) and a process inherent to subjective identification – is to question the way that we both live and give life:

¹⁵ Edward Alexander's critique is typical of this reception: "[d]aring, even brilliant, as is the central idea of *Touching Evil*, it would have been far more daring if Rosen had made the heroine who seeks to identify with the Jewish victims of Hitler through the shared burden of motherhood a Jew herself" (132-33). His comment, published in 1979, also reflects the identity politics of the 1970s, where the Holocaust was used to strengthen ethnic Jewish identity. Rosen's preference for non-Jewish characters aligns more closely to the Jewish American politics of the 1950s to the mid 1960s, which emphasised integration and assimilation.

I mean when we pass on the human race what are we passing on? Do we know? Can we trust it? Are we monsters, passing on monstrous traits to more monsters to whom we teach a few surface manners the way they teach apes to ride bicycles? A few moral concepts that sit like tiny hats on top of our swollen, horror-filled heads? (83)

Hattie fears both for the well-being of her baby and for her own inability to prevent it from being or becoming monstrous. Rosen's consideration of the human race as innately barbarous continues in her allusion to the Milgram experiment.¹⁶ When Professor Oates experiments with the deconditioning of mice, he refers to the "[e]xperimental cell blocks, drains in the tiled floors, all that. It hardly matters that these are Germans, Professor Oates says. What matters is that men have done it. Men like himself – teachers, students, lovers of science. They have replaced the mice in the maze with men" (72).¹⁷ The evil inclination of mankind to torment other human beings is again emphasised by Rosen. The Milgram experiment is widely perceived to concur with Arendt's thesis, for it demonstrates that the willingness to obey orders and the thoughtlessness of bureaucratic activity can lead to a surprising level of cruelty and violence.

¹⁶ The Milgram or "Obedience to Authority" experiment was conducted at the university laboratory in Yale and in Bridgeport in the early 1960s. It consisted in testing the obedience of people to superior orders. The tested subjects were coerced to punish a "learner" with electrical shocks when he/she answered a question wrongly. Up to sixty-five percent of the subjects were surprisingly obedient and carried out the orders that they were given. (Helm and Morelli 321-24)

¹⁷ The metaphor of concentration camp inmates as mice is most relevant to the controversies surrounding Art Spiegelman's animal characterisation in his graphic novels *Maus: A Survivor's Tale I* and *II* (1986 and 1991). This imagery clearly criticises the racist Nazi ideology which consigned Jews to the category of vermin. In contrast to Spiegelman's work, Rosen's novel universalises this idea when tenants of Jean's apartment block explicitly associate the bugs that are about to be killed by their contracted "exterminator" with victims of the Holocaust, which I discuss later.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi notes that Rosen's representation of the Holocaust is one "which honestly acknowledges the gap in experience" (*By Words* 208). Rosen never pretends to have survived the Holocaust herself nor does she assume this position as her main point of departure for *Touching Evil*, contrary to the historical novels of Schaeffer and Szeman. Jean affirms that her imagining is "[n]ot as victim, I never thought that, but as witness" (97). Jean and Hattie are imagined witnesses in Rosen's novel, who witness the testimonies of the witnesses of the Holocaust at the Eichmann trial. Such self-awareness and the explicit identification of the work as fiction, clearly differentiate Rosen's novel from such problematic texts as Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948* (1996).¹⁸ The structural complexity of *Touching Evil* explicitly underlines this self-reflexivity, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter. In contrast to the valuable but personal – and thus limited – experience of the traumatised survivor, the distance and removal of the indirect or secondary witness opens up the possibility of new meanings, as suggested earlier. Rosen knows that her perspective on the Holocaust will always remain different from that of eyewitness survivors, and that sometimes she might "wish in subtle ways to extract meanings that the survivors themselves avoid" ("Fences" 80). Jean accordingly notes that "between those who were there and those who dreamed they were there we've been through everything, haven't we? Between the survivors and the ones who didn't survive we know it all" (57). Jean suggests that knowledge and/or meaning of the Holocaust is not static nor is it contained in a single point of view, but is to be found between interlocutors. Rosen repeatedly

¹⁸ The famous case of Benjamin Wilkomirski's fraudulent testimony demonstrates that this critical self-awareness is necessary. The identification of Wilkomirski/Doesseker/Bruno Grosjean with survivors of the Holocaust no longer differentiated between the suffering of others and himself. Criticism of such overidentification usually focuses on the injustice that is done to the Holocaust survivor: "[i]n its most problematic form, promiscuous identification allows the reader to identify with the subject [survivor] without accounting for the complexities of the subject's position" (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 16). However, Wilkomirski's fabricated Holocaust identity can also be interpreted as the loss of his own subjectivity as a receiver of the legacy of the Holocaust. Wilkomirski apparently firmly believes that his book is a truthful memoir.

emphasises her own position as observer. She says: “I’ve always known that my husband’s story is his, in the eye of that annihilating storm, while mine is at the edges, in the guilt and confusion of American safety” (*Accidents* x). The confrontation and identification with Holocaust testimonies have, however, thoroughly changed the lives of Jean and Hattie. Jean confesses: “if someone said ‘concentration camp’ to me, my body and soul emptied out. I was ready to faint, to fall down” (77). The protagonists’ encounter with the Holocaust through the testimonies of the Eichmann trial excludes a return to a state prior to that experience. I argue that the impact of the Holocaust on witnesses-through-the-imagination, as described in *Touching Evil*, displays traumatic symptoms that justify a definition of these women’s reactions as a secondary trauma; a transmission of trauma to the observer, to the addressee or receiver of the testimony. In “The Second Life of Holocaust Imagery,” Rosen alludes to this process:

unwilled re-experiencing, this “second life,” [. . .] entering into a state of being that for whatever reasons makes porous those membranes through which empathy passes, or deep memory with its peculiar “thereness,” so that we can move, as far as it is given to us to do so, into the pain and hence the meaning of the Holocaust – that, too, is a kind of memorial. (52-53)

In addition to the documentary role of the witness-through-the-imagination, subjective identification with the Holocaust can be so profound that it triggers a form of trauma. The notions of secondary trauma and secondary witness are rapidly gaining recognition in the field of trauma studies. Dominick LaCapra and Dori Laub have both engaged with the issue of secondary trauma and they have analysed issues of empathy and identification. LaCapra is preoccupied with the role of the secondary witness as observer. He distinguishes between two

historical approaches: the documentary research model and radical constructivism. While the first exclusively gives credence to truth claims and empirical data, the latter concentrates on a performative dimension. In defining the role of the observer or secondary witness, LaCapra recognises the necessity of the empathic middle voice that can conciliate the two approaches:

[t]he role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness [. . .] involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place. Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is, as I intimated, a desirable affective dimension of inquiry which complements and supplements empirical research and analysis. (78)

A limited form of empathy is thus a desirable attribute in the secondary witness. LaCapra insists on the need for “empathic unsettlement (at times even inducing more or less muted trauma)” (47). However, he clearly argues against a merging of observer or secondary witness and victim. Laub is equally wary of an over-identification with the traumatised victim. He, however, regards the meeting between primary and secondary witness to be essential to the process of testimony. In order to re-externalise the trauma, the testimony must be listened to and empathised with. Like LaCapra he notes that through the observer's “very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (Felman and Laub 57). Empathic unsettlement and muted trauma appear to be a prerequisite for the secondary witness. Laub also argues for a self-awareness that prevents the observer from “taking the other's place.” In order not to allow the reciprocal function of subjective identification to overwhelm the testimony of the traumatised, Laub warns that the listener must “nonetheless [. . .] not become the victim – he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a

battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task” (58). For Laub, the function of the secondary witness is to allow the traumatised subject to express his narrative of the traumatic event with his subjective truth, in order to work it through:

[t]he absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story. (Felman and Laub 68, original emphasis)

While LaCapra’s secondary witness relates the trauma to himself, Laub’s secondary witness is necessary for the historical trauma to be understood by the victim. Laub declares the secondary witness to be the addressee that makes possible for the traumatised the re-externalisation of the trauma. In my interpretation of Rosen’s *Touching Evil*, the processes of empathy, identification and testimony are initiated and explored from the perspective of the secondary witness. The secondary witness seeks to empathise with the traumatised victim in order to understand the trauma and him/herself. My analysis thus aligns closely with LaCapra’s positioning of the secondary witness. The aim and method of secondary witnessing in the novel, however, correspond more closely to Laub’s definition.

Through the subjective processes of empathy and identification, Holocaust awareness and knowledge can be transmitted to the witness-through-the-imagination, represented in the novel by Hattie and Jean. Such transmission is both necessary and limited. When Jean and Hattie watch the Eichmann trial on television, Jean feels connected to the Holocaust victims, “that special group whose agonies we had somehow, by our attention, held in the circle of our arms” (221). As secondary witness, Jean wishes to comfort the traumatised as their testimony

is transmitted to her, by her sheer willingness to listen and to empathise. The necessary role of the addressee is implied when Jean tells Loftus: “[w]hat do I care about the zillions of books that have been written? It’s got to come to me through you. Do you see that? But now I’ve found a book and I want to tell you about it so you can tell it back to me” (57). The sharing of experiences makes the reality of the Holocaust more tangible. However, the transmission of the Holocaust is also limited. As the other will always remain other, the comprehension of the trauma through transmission will inevitably remain elusive. Jean realises that the testifiers at the Eichmann trial are “[t]rying, without hope of success, to tell how it was to die of the horror in the monster’s caves” (33). The inherent unrepresentability of their traumatic experience is clearly recognised, and inevitably limits, in turn, the act of secondary witnessing.

There is, however, one moment of overidentification in *Touching Evil* that disturbs Rosen’s concept of witness-through-the-imagination. I argue that the novel collapses at the intended moment of catharsis because the balance of objectivity and subjectivity is disrupted. Hattie’s deliberate “engorgement of other people’s lives” (215) ultimately results in a full identification with her horror symbol precisely at the moment that she gives birth to her daughter. For Hattie, the epiphany of the birth consists in her personal involvement with the Holocaust. She tells Jean: “*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*” (251-52). Secondary trauma distinguishes itself from primary trauma through its indirectness, which guards against total submersion or “taking the other’s place.” One inevitably gets drawn in, but there is a need to restrict this involvement in order to protect the self and to acknowledge the other as other. Hattie problematically longs to discover truth in traumatic horror in order to work out her own sense of identity: “[t]here was all that pain. There must have been some moment of truth . . . I want to know what really goes on in my head . . .” (236). Rosen does seem

aware of the dangers in her concept of witness-through-the-imagination by having Stanwood call Hattie's empathy a "bad mutation of human feeling" (158). Hattie's overly emotional response goes against LaCapra's and Laub's emphasis on the balance of objectivity and subjectivity. Hattie's urge to empathise with others seems to be compulsive and threatens to obliterate the objectivity of the observer.¹⁹

(Victim-)identification becomes a coveted experience in the novel. When Jean and Hattie are walking through New York, they perceive their laundryman to be a Muslim, one of the walking dead in the concentration camps, because he is "a tall, skeletal Chinese [. . .] his long arms are nothing but linked bones" (42). Such associative and involuntary triggering of recall is a prominent feature of trauma, as outlined in my discussion of PTSD in the introduction. In her foreword to the re-publication of *Touching Evil* in 1990, Rosen argues that the perpetuation of the trauma of the Holocaust through its transmission starts a "landslide of images" (N. pag.). Hattie and Jean are not alone in their "traumatised" and Holocaust-permeated existence. Chapter nine opens with the announcement of "exterminator's day" (59) and the reader can already associate this phrase with Holocaust imagery. When the bug-killer is informed by Jean's neighbour that there are silverfish in his tub, another flatmate remarks: "[i]t's sort of like telling the police where Anne Frank is hiding" (60). The submersion in Holocaust consciousness is omnipresent in the novel's New York, where everybody follows the Eichmann trial. On a more critical note, Jean realises that

¹⁹ Robert Eaglestone's criticism of Norma Rosen's concept of witness-through-the-imagination unjustifiably assumes that it is a straightforward process which allows the past to be imagined "as it was." He argues that "[t]o read these texts [Holocaust testimonies] as testimonies, to read the genre, is to refuse the identification that Rosen believes in as a 'witness through the imagination' as it refuses to let the text itself disappear in an act of identification" (40). Hattie's overidentification does point out that this aspect is a dangerous excess of Rosen's concept. However, Eaglestone does not take into account the objective role of the witness-through-the-imagination nor Rosen's critical self-awareness. He moreover does not analyse or mention her novel *Touching Evil*, where Rosen clearly differentiates between different stages of empathy and identification. As I will discuss shortly, Rosen highlights the mediation of all Holocaust representation, including the Holocaust testimonies at the Eichmann trial.

“[i]n the end, the connectedness flourishes unduly” (122). In this context, Susan Sontag remarks:

[s]o far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response. (*Regarding 91*)

The potential inappropriateness of sympathetic response is suggested at the beginning of the novel, when Hattie expresses her regret that an old neighbour has to move due to the building work in New York. The neighbour reacts negatively to Hattie’s concern: “[t]hey’ll be pushing you out, too, never fear” (47). The old lady wishes her own experience on Hattie because in her eyes Hattie does not have the right to claim sympathy for her misery.

Laub’s description of the secondary witness can be closely associated with Jean’s encounters with the Holocaust. Laub observes that a “sense of total withdrawal and numbness” (Felman and Laub 72) typifies a traumatic response and this is also characteristic of Jean’s initial reaction to the Holocaust in 1944. She nearly fainted when she heard the word “Holocaust” and blocked the atrocity from her consciousness until the Eichmann trial forced her to engage with her personal response. The similarity to Caruth’s analysis of trauma is also striking. As explained in the introduction, Caruth claims that trauma is not fully experienced at the time that it occurs because the traumatised subject is numb with shock. Afterwards, the traumatised subject cannot grasp the event through remembering but is possessed by it in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. Jean is initially overwhelmed by numbness and re-encounters the Holocaust through her relationships with Vincent and Loftus, and through watching the Eichmann trial. Rosen’s representation of the Holocaust is likewise

characterised by a notable repetitiveness, which suggests that a single encounter is not sufficient. In “Notes Toward a Holocaust Fiction,” she claims that “[h]ow we encounter the Holocaust and then again and again – these are the touchstones of our time” (107).

The repetition-compulsion of the encounter with the Holocaust is intensified by the uncanny return of the protagonists’ “horror symbols,” which is suggestive of a traumatised consciousness. Hattie’s pregnant woman who had to give birth in lice-infested straw and Jean’s corpse digger are ever-present shadows in the novel. Jean observes of the woman with whom she identifies: “I sat to work. Any time I stopped I saw the woman. She was there all night, clawing her way” (56). In “The Uncanny,” Freud defines both “involuntary repetition” and the return of the dead as *unheimlich* or uncanny events, which profoundly unsettle us (213). Jean and Hattie increasingly lose their objectivity as their engagement with the Holocaust evolves into empathising. Their experiences develop into a secondary trauma that threatens at times to consume their own identities.

Structural Complexity in Touching Evil

The remarkable structural intricacy of *Touching Evil* highlights and underlines a more moderated empathy in secondary witnessing. I argue that Rosen’s approach to the Holocaust thus remains a “touching” of evil, rather than an embracing of it. On the one hand, Rosen’s literary strategies confirm the need for empathy in working through trauma by exploring the importance of the addressee. On the other hand, the ingenuity of the various layers of storytelling in the novel perplexes its addressees – both the characters and the reader – and prevents them from entirely identifying with the Holocaust. The self-reflexive nature of *Touching Evil* is a remarkable accomplishment for such early Holocaust fiction. In contemporary discussions of Holocaust representation that are influenced by postmodern

theory, such self-awareness is commended for its explicit acknowledgement of an indirect relationship with the historical event. In chapter four, I elaborate further on the implications of metafiction in Holocaust fiction.

Characteristic of her self-reflexive approach to Holocaust fiction, Rosen opens the republication of *Touching Evil* in 1990 with a foreword that immediately provides the reader with a context in which to read the novel. In the foreword, Rosen declares that she wrote *Touching Evil* “not out of research, but out of response to certain works more or less stumbled upon by me in English translation” (N. pag.).²⁰ If the reader similarly stumbles upon this novel, Rosen’s experience is transferred to him/her. Author and reader are implicitly aligned, as the author is situated in the introduction as the witness-through-the-imagination that the reader will in turn become. The characters internalise their encounters with the Holocaust, and the reader is expected to do the same through reading this novel. Rosen intends to establish a chain of witnessing and testifying in which the transmission of Holocaust knowledge and awareness is pivotal: the process originates with historical material, is then transmitted to the secondary witness, who in turn transmits it through his/her own retelling of his/her encounter. For the protagonists of *Touching Evil*, the gap between testifier and addressee collapses when Jean and Hattie experience the need to write down the testimony of their own reactions to the Holocaust. In the short story “A Thousand Tears,” Rosen argues in favour of such a response: “[p]eople feel a need to tell what they hear, some revived obligation to pass on news of the world’s woe” (*Green* 230). The subjective involvement of Jean and Hattie is illustrated through a compilation of diary entries and letters. Kremer describes Rosen’s novel as “a form evoking the Holocaust diaries and testimonies of survivors and simultaneously suggesting how personal the Holocaust has become for [them]”

²⁰ A translated source about the Holocaust increases the mediation of representing the Holocaust, because it reconstructs the original constructed representation and further distances representation from experience.

(“Norma Rosen” 164). The letters and diaries are intimate conversations, which reflect the significance of autobiography in the novel. Jean says, “I want to see how my life will fit into words. This is what Hattie must feel. . . .” (27). Jean and Hattie need each other as addressees in order to externalise the experience they are going through, as Laub’s psychoanalytic model of testimony underlines. The evolution of genre in Hattie’s narratives demonstrates the value of Holocaust fiction. Hattie’s empathy with the Holocaust is inspired by texts such as the Eichmann trial. In response she writes letters and diary-fragments to Jean, but she ends up aspiring to write a surrealist play. She explains her gradual move towards the imaginative: “[y]ou can’t write up a vision. It’s got to be a play, or a story, or something people can understand” (226). She suggests that fiction can facilitate the ability to attribute meaning to the Holocaust, an argument that is also at the centre of Judy Budnitz’s short story “Hershel” discussed in chapter four. Hattie’s consideration for her readers strengthens the importance that Rosen attributes to the position of the addressee. References to the intended audiences of Rosen’s, Jean’s and Hattie’s narratives underline their significance as they will be the ones to complete the stories. The necessity of the addressee in Jean and Hattie’s own testimonies is continually emphasised as both women call out to be heard and/or read. They make continual use of the vocative: “see?” (20, 21), “*you see*” (28), “do you *see* that?” (34, original emphasis), “do you see?” (56), “O listen!” (85), “Jesús, listen!” (100), “Do you believe me?” (6, 15). The reader is directly and repeatedly invoked and his/her empathy is solicited.

Other literary strategies, however, prevent the addressee from (over-)identifying with the Holocaust, its victims and its secondary witnesses. The elaborate descriptions of Hattie’s life notably downplay the intensity of the novel. Rosen describes her attendance at the women’s college, her relationship with her husband and their move to New York. Hattie explains her motivation for writing down her life story: “*I don’t know myself why I write you all this.*

Sometimes I think it's to impress on myself as well as on you that this and this exactly was my life. No other. It's so easy for me these days to slip out of my life into someone else's" (131, original emphasis). Hattie here again draws attention to the reciprocal function of her subjective involvement and admits that she needs to resist the excessiveness of her impulse to empathise. Moreover, these descriptions make explicit the distinction between an ordinary "American biography" (*Touching Evil* 170) and a Holocaust testimony. Rosen's alertness to the complexity of Holocaust representation is exemplified by the multiple mediation of all testimony in the novel. It is through Jean's eyes that we read Hattie's manuscripts and the testimonies of the Eichmann trial. Jean observes: "I can feel myself covering layers of words with more layers" (26). Rosen has explicitly stated her reluctance to directly portray documentary Holocaust reality, explaining:

[f]iction writers rely on ambiguity; they put their ideas forward behind the protection of characters' masks. Fiction writers find this congenial, not because they are afraid to speak the truth, but because they find truth to be slippery – or to put it more elegantly, truth is in the dialectic itself, in the interplay of ideas; ideas moreover that in life never express themselves purely but are always modified. ("Holocaust" 4)

In a postmodern manner Rosen highlights the limits of representation, so that referentiality is ultimately unattainable. Throughout *Touching Evil*, she inserts numerous metafictional remarks in brackets and she makes constant use of suspension marks. These punctuation marks dilate the novel, providing it with the space of implied reflection. These techniques indicate the stream-of-consciousness of whoever is writing. The reader sometimes seems to be eavesdropping on a private monologue, where addressee and testifier collapse into one

another. Rosen's techniques, however, also prevent identification with the author as character. Jean writes, for instance: "(what makes me think that?) [. . .] (or that?) [. . .] (is it that?) [. . .] (how do I know?)" (19). These insertions underline that the narrator is not omniscient, but is reliant on the contribution of the addressee or reader. Both stylistic techniques create an open-endedness in *Touching Evil*. Rosen's exquisite sarcasm further alleviates the subject matter of *Touching Evil*. When Jean remembers her college years at Mount Holyoke – an autobiographical detail she shares with both Rosen and Hattie – metafictional irony prevails: "I have again a sense of encountering my life in a novel I dislike – so unbalanced – long empty stretches, then suddenly overdramatic" (70). Rosen even satirises her own concept of witness-through-the-imagination in the novel:

[e]xtra! Read all about it. Hattie is in everybody's day and in every day's body. She sends me the melting news. She has passed through the membranes that enclose her own and other people's existence (her thinking is more and more uterine). She says she more than *perceives* other people's lives – she *experiences* them. With distortions, of course. (116, original emphasis)

Jean and Hattie's correspondence makes them identify so strongly with each other that they mirror each other in both their lives and writing: "I've received messages from Hattie – I think – that seem indistinguishable from my own" (96). The autobiographical resemblances between Hattie and Jean are most striking in the similarity of their responses to their initial encounters with the Holocaust. Jean "*felt that someone had given out a chapter of my life. One of the early passages was being parodied*" (29). Doubling is a recurrent literary technique that blurs the delineation of the individual characters, who thus become less accessible to the reader. It also broadens the concept of witness-through-the-imagination,

which works between Americans as well as between American viewers of and Holocaust witnesses at the Eichmann trial. Rosen obstructs the common urge of the reader to empathise with the characters, in striking contrast to Schaeffer and Szeman's Holocaust fiction. Jean and Hattie moreover both experience a split self, constructing themselves through the process of writing. Jean observes "I reread the diary entry. Now I have the feeling I am glimpsing a piece of someone's novel" (29). Hattie, meanwhile, has, in writing her manuscript, "taken leave of herself as Hattie the first person, and has become Hattie the third" (132-33). The fusion of Jean and Hattie and the disintegration of their individual personalities at times gives the impression that Hattie is a fantasised young Jean or a schizophrenic personality of Jean's imagination. Jean says that Hattie "is trying to establish her own reality in me" (21). The uncertainty about the authorship of their correspondence exemplifies such suspicions. It is through Jean's writing that we encounter Hattie and read her letters. In "The Uncanny," Freud observes that the phenomenon of the double "was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death'" (210). Hattie's youth and pregnancy consolidate an affirmation of life that counterbalances Jean's immersion in the atrocity of the Holocaust. The theme of motherhood is closely interwoven with Rosen's doubling of characters. Hattie – whether she is conjured by Jean's imagination or an individual character – accompanies Jean in watching the trial and their shared experience prevents the collapse of Jean's (and perhaps Hattie's) ego(s). According to Freud, the double originates in narcissism. Jean creates Hattie in her own image: both protagonists attend the same highly acclaimed college, Mount Holyoke, and both are young and vulnerable to horror during their first encounter with the Holocaust. Freud also argues that the split personality is related to the "unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy" ("Uncanny" 211). Jean's wish to have children is as yet unfulfilled but intensifies during the process of watching the Eichmann trial and observing Hattie's pregnancy. When Jean decides

to adopt Jesús and to write a diary addressed to her lover Loftus (who can be interpreted as a double of Professor Oates), she works through the muted trauma she experienced during her initial encounter with the Holocaust in 1944. The reader can, however, never fully discern whether Jean's psychological development and/or the working through of her secondary trauma can be ascribed to the influence of a real or an imaginary Hattie.

The breakdown of the characters is mirrored by the collapse of time in *Touching Evil*: "I remember the hour. [. . .] But I can't remember how many Fridays ago it was. I kept track for a while then it depressed me" (8). In the end, nobody is sure any more of who wrote what, let alone to whom. The letters are unmailed and the diary entries undated. Hattie despairs: "Jean, do you exist? Did I invent you because I need you . . . are you real . . . ?" (20). Jean echoes her words, crying: "[s]ometimes I think I invented you out of my need! Do you exist?" (229). On a piece of paper, the authorship of which remains ambiguous, the reader is again presented with the necessity of the addressee: "*Why do I have this feeling that I've imagined you? Because you are perfect for me. Too perfect. I'm like a child who invents a companion out of loneliness*" (97). This consolidates Laub's understanding of the secondary witness as a vital part of the externalisation of trauma and consequently of the completion of the traumatic narrative, in addition to reinforcing the notion of Hattie as a double or split self in relation to Jean.

The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The Eichmann Trial

The Eichmann trial features as the main catalyst for witness-through-the-imagination in Rosen's novel. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi explains its historical significance, as discussed above: "[t]he Eichmann trial proved to be a watershed in the American perception of the Holocaust, as it provided near-personal contact with survivors and an unprecedented immersion in the

facts for those who followed it through the public media” (*By Words* 180). Peter Novick adds, “[t]he Eichmann trial [. . .] effectively broke fifteen years of near silence on the Holocaust in American public discourse” (144). Jean expresses frustration about the American indifference to the Holocaust before the trial:

[t]he president of the college, at convocation, spoke of “these troubled times.” Nobody ran around like those open-mouthed faces she later saw in Picasso’s “Guernica,” with 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? (74)

The central role that Rosen ascribes to the Holocaust in the lives of her female protagonists serves to counteract this American indifference. In her foreword to *Touching Evil*, Rosen says, “my novel [is] about safe Americans whose minds are wrenched open to the imagining of radical evil in their own time” (N. pag.). The Eichmann trial triggers and becomes part of the collective Holocaust memory. The constant media attention brings about an inescapable confrontation with the Holocaust in New York: papers, television and newsreels in the cinema all cover the trial in detail. Rosen describes it as “everybody’s daily reading material” (60). Schandler remarks that “Israel’s decision to televise the Eichmann trial epitomized this investment in the power of mass media” (90). In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag furthermore comments that:

[a]ll memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is

important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings. (76-77, original emphasis)

Sontag underlines, then, that collective memory is essentially an interpersonal cognition, which is triggered by cultural mediation. David Ceserani has interestingly argued that the Eichmann trial may have been important less for its content than for the collective experience of watching the televised coverage, knowing that everyone else in the city and in the nation was doing the same thing at the same time. In *Touching Evil*, the shock of listening to the survivor testimonies accordingly necessitates a sharing of that experience. “‘Don’t go,’ Hattie says, looking over her shoulder toward the kitchen in an absent-minded way. ‘Let’s have a cup of tea or a drink or anything’” (75). Hattie’s sister is reassured when Jean watches the Eichmann trial with Hattie: “I’m so grateful that you watch with her, Jean. At least, if she insists on watching, she’s with you” (87). Jean wonders whether “if I had found out, along with everyone else, would it have seemed less like my own personal catastrophe?”(78). Jean’s ability to share the Holocaust encounter of the trial with Hattie, the recognition of her initial response to the Holocaust in Hattie’s first confrontation with its horror, and the opportunity to address Hattie with her trauma allow her to experience the horror of the Holocaust in the safety of companionship which inspires her to work it through. She realises that “one reason I [Jean] can bear the second coming of the holocaust into my life is because the foursome surrounds it. . . .” (90).²¹ The comfort and protection of human relationships is reiterated here. Arendt likewise notes that “[a]s witness followed witness and horror was

²¹ The foursome consists of Hattie and her husband Ezra, Hattie’s sister Lillian and her husband Stanwood. They all live closely together in neighbouring flats in New York.

piled upon horror, they [the public present at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem] sat there and listened in public to stories they would hardly have been able to endure in private” (8). A reverence for human life is central in *Touching Evil*. Jean or Hattie – the mirroring of the characters has made the boundaries between them unclear – resolutely decides:

I cannot bear the dryness of my life any longer. It's not enough, with these images of the dead of night around me again. My life needs to flow. Only if it flows can it pass over the horrors. And for that it takes another soul with me.
[. . .] *Whatever made any of us think we could make it alone?* (98)

The broadcasting of the Eichmann trial on television made the Holocaust encounter a collective or shared experience which in turn, Rosen implies, makes it bearable.

The gendered imagery of birth and death reinforces Jean's redemptive message.

During sexual intercourse with Jean, at the moment of her initial encounter with the Holocaust, Professor Oates mumbles that “[o]nly joy can cancel out that horror” (73). One of the epigraphs of *Touching Evil* argues precisely in favour of such a response. Isaac Rosenfeld writes: “[o]ur old evil does not comprehend the terror, which begins . . . where our old evil left off. Our old good . . . will do no good. Terror beyond evil and joy beyond good: that is all there is to work with. . . .” (N. pag., original ellipses). The cathartic moment of the birth of Hattie's daughter accords with the sense of promise, as she wins “her vaginal shell game with the *Einsatzgruppen*” (238). In her surrealist play, Hattie wishes that “[a]fter each war, each atrocity, each death, the children fly down to their mothers' beds and disappear in them. Then the whole thing is repeated, and the children fly up again [. . .] those children haven't been lost . . .!” (237). Hattie wishes for the dead children to return to the womb, the safest refuge and haven in Freudian theory. This striking image inverts Jean's uncanny “horror symbol” of

a woman being buried alive amid corpses. This redemptive gesture is, however, not valid for all aspects of the ending of *Touching Evil*. Rosen refuses closure in relation to the Eichmann trial, for the sentencing and hanging of Adolf Eichmann is never mentioned. At the close of the novel, a judgement is impending but never attained. The unresolved ending reinforces the distancing of the text for the reader as no meaningful closure provides him/her with either consolation or redemption. Jean's destiny is left equally vague. She is devastated when she receives two letters from Loftus, one romantic and one realist, which end their relationship as he returns to his wife Erna. Jean imagines her own suicide as she meticulously describes to her neighbour how she would walk into Central Park at night. After apparently regaining some perspective, she decides to seek redemption in her attempt to adopt Jesús. When she goes to Central Park to look for him, the novel fades out and the absence of closure leaves the reader, the addressee, to complete the story by choosing for Jean either redemption or destruction.

The widespread media focus on the Holocaust initiates the endless interactive chains of witnessing and testifying that transmit the legacy of the Holocaust and thus create a collective memory. In *Touching Evil*, television exemplifies the encounter with the Holocaust. Hattie and Jean were fortunate as they had a television, which enhanced their proximity to the survivors at the Eichmann trial. The Eichmann trial is often perceived to be a highly mediated or constructed spectacle. Schandler comments that “[w]hile those commenting on the trial rarely scrutinized its presentation on television per se, the issue of the trial as a performance figured prominently in their analyses” (118). Arendt's description of the trial confirms Schandler's point: “the proceedings happen on a stage before an audience, with the usher's marvellous shout at the beginning of each session producing the effect of the rising curtain” (4). The testimonies that the survivors recount at the trial are moreover narratives of the

Holocaust: they are themselves reconstructions, not “real” duplicates of the historical events.

The gap between experience and representation is enhanced by the performative aspects of the trial. The prosecutor, Hausner, carefully selected which witnesses he would put on the stand:

[i]n selecting which of many possible witnesses to call upon to testify at the trial, Hausner not only sought effective performers, choosing those who seemed “less tongue-tied” after a “preliminary shifting” of candidates, but also made dramaturgical choices as to how different individuals might present similar evidence. (Schandler 89)

The discrepancy between perceived intimacy with the survivors and the highly mediated nature of their testimonies parallels the simultaneous empathy and distance in Rosen’s representation of the Holocaust in *Touching Evil*. The multiple mediation of the testimonies themselves thus constitutes a valuable basis for Rosen’s literary representation of the Holocaust.²² Most of the testimonies were, furthermore, irrelevant because they did not have any direct relation to the plaintiff. “Legally, the testimony of these witnesses was immaterial” (Arendt 121-22). The testimonies represented a breach in the silence surrounding the Holocaust and “the trial was staged in large measure to present these past events to those ignorant of them – especially those too young to know them through direct experience. It was the act of retelling, rather than what was told, that made the Eichmann case ‘news’” (Schandler 100). In *Touching Evil*, the intergenerational transmission of the cultural meaning

²² Jeffrey Schandler also notes that “the spectator’s section of the auditorium in Beit Ha’am was to be separated from the ‘stage’ on which the trial proceedings took place by a sheet of bulletproof glass similar to the material that surrounded the defendant’s dock” (90). Such a separation of the audience from the stage parallels the distancing strategies that Rosen explicitly uses.

of the Holocaust is most poignantly portrayed in the character of Hattie. She “bears the fetus that bears witness to the witness on TV who is bearing witness at the trial” (68). She remembers the past with a sense of the future.

The viewers of the trial internalise the Holocaust through their empathic imaginations, as “another’s suffering can be understood and felt only through one’s own suffering” (Rosen, “Second” 50). Rosen’s Holocaust oeuvre suggests that this identification may be subject to secondary trauma. Jean or Hattie observes:

[w]hen I started to write this, I thought I would call myself Heart’s Witness. To show how I was there. I thought I had the right because of my injury through terror. If I am not a Heart’s Witness, then what am I, with my terror? If I found myself sending money and joining committees I would know what I am. A sympathizer. But I do nothing. I am paralyzed, in terror. I am an empathizer then, a mystical participator [. . .] Do I really believe it’s possible to hear about terror and be terrorized? Heart’s Witness, I secretly call myself. I say this only to you. . . . (96-97)

Although Rosen seems to imply here that the secondary witness is “paralyzed” by his/her encounter, the novel makes clear that he/she becomes testifier as he/she feels the necessity to narrate his/her own transmitted experience of the Holocaust. When the Holocaust memory and legacy is personalised, it becomes a “witnessing and being witnessed without end” (*Touching Evil* 238). Dori Laub distinguishes “three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (Felman and Laub 75). I have argued that Rosen

successfully explores and represents all three levels of witnessing in *Touching Evil*. Through writing the novel and in her inclusion of autobiographical details, she has been a witness to herself. Her aim to document the responses of “those who had (merely) ‘heard the terrible news’” (Rosen, “Holocaust” 10) makes her a witness to the testimonies of others. The prominence of the transmission of the Holocaust through interactive and endless chains of witnessing and testifying has allowed her to explore the process of witnessing itself.

Laub has observed of the inherently ambiguous nature of testimony: “[o]n the one hand, the process of the testimony does in fact hold out the promise of truth as the return of a sane, normal and connected world. On the other hand, because of its very commitment to truth, the testimony enforces at least a partial breach, failure and relinquishment of this promise” (Felman and Laub 91). The process of witnessing is incomplete at the level of restoring normality and it equally frustrates the possibility of complete understanding, due to the inherent subjectivity and constructedness of all representation. The endless chain of witnessing and testifying presupposed by Rosen’s witness-through-the-imagination might, however, transmit a collective memory. It represents, in Rosen’s own words:

a call to the imagination of a people to repair the work of reality – to recreate a destroyed world by infusing meaning into the very events that destroyed it – what else could be more moving? (“Second” 47)

The challenge of both Rosen’s novel and her theory of witness-through-the-imagination is for the reader of *Touching Evil* to internalise this encounter with the Holocaust and to engage with it critically, so that “the reading, never-ending, goes on” (Rosen, *Accidents* xi).

Chapter Two:

The Subjectivity of Memory in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* and Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress*

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* (1974) and Sherri Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress* (1993) are mainstream historical Holocaust novels. They directly represent the Holocaust through the perspective of survivor protagonists, who narrate their memories of the past in historically detailed accounts. Broadening the concept of the imagination from the viewpoint of the reader in chapter one, these works of Holocaust fiction explore the survivor's search for meaning through the subjective processes of memory and its distortions of reality. Contrary to the other texts discussed in this thesis, they are insistent on faithfully narrating history "as it was." These popular novels use literature to reflect on history rather than history to reflect on literature. These positions are not mutually exclusive, and *Anya* and *The Kommandant's Mistress* do address the constructedness and unreliability of representation. I argue however that their direct and historical approach to the Holocaust does not always effectively acknowledge self-reflexive representational boundaries. Both novels have a tight structure that encourages the reader to identify with the narrator's subjective memory. This chapter therefore focuses on the interplay between representation as duplication or mimesis (presenting the facts again) and representation as self-aware construction (presenting a subjective truth) for both the narrator and the reader.

My analysis is indicative of both authors' approaches to literature. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer has researched and written first-person novels in various historical settings, such as the Vietnam War and Victorian New England. Sherri Szeman consistently writes from different characters' perspectives about pathological histories, including Alzheimer's disease and serial killers. *Anya* and *The Kommandant's Mistress* are the only novels in their respective oeuvres that address the Holocaust. The use of the first-person perspective in these

novels makes them highly individualised narratives of the Holocaust. This point of view implicitly claims the authority of the survivor and a “purity” of memory, which creates “authenticity” due to its experiential closeness to historical facts. In order to study the subjectivity of memory implicit in the first-person perspective, I examine the individual voice and character that seeks to express a subjective truth, the expression of that subjective truth and the realization of that expression. In my discussion, I consequently focus on the structural and stylistic representation of the Holocaust and its memory rather than the novels’ historical detail. Historical accuracy is secondary to the subjective truth that is being expressed. Nicola King remarks that:

[p]ostmodern theory has emphasized the fact that knowledge about the world is available only through discourse, or language, and partly constructed by discourse. It thus questions the notion of the “truth” of history, potentially undermining notions of empirical or historical truth. (“Postmodern” 387)

Schaeffer and Szeman attempt to give a sense of Holocaust reality through the proliferation of historical detail, but the discourse they use to do so reveals both the necessity and the unavoidability of a subjective truth. The testimonies and memories of their first-person narrators create a discourse that potentially allows for critical reflections on the fictional representations that construct them.

Subjectivity of Memory in Schaeffer's Anya

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Anya* has repeatedly been praised for its documentary realism.

Lillian Kremer's reception of the novel is typical: "[a]t the time of publication, no other American-born writer had so realistically, systematically, and comprehensively delineated the ghetto and labor camp of the Nazi universe" ("Susan Fromberg Schaeffer" 1098). The historical narrative of which Kremer approves is represented by the testimony of the protagonist, Anya Savikin. Kremer's reading, however, hardly takes representational issues beyond mimesis into account: the selectiveness of Anya's subjective perspective and the novel's, albeit uneven, metafictional awareness precisely work against the confirmation of such an encompassing historical truth.

While the prologue and epilogue of *Anya* describe her postwar life in America, the central three chapters of the novel predominantly focus on Anya's European past and her wartime experiences. In the first chapter, Anya talks about her blissful prewar youth in Poland. She dwells on the harmonious, assimilated life of her close family in Vilno, her promising medical career, her marriage to Stajoe, their move to Warsaw and the birth of their daughter Ninushka. The second chapter opens with the beginning of the war and Anya describes the gradual deprivations of her freedom, the incarceration in the Vilno ghetto and the deaths of all of her family members except for Ninka, whom she entrusts to a Christian-Lithuanian family. In the third chapter, Anya is deported to the labour camp Kaiserwald; she escapes to find her daughter alienated from her; she struggles to survive the immediate postwar ravages of Poland under Russian occupation, and she flees to Berlin and eventually emigrates to America. Anya's testimony is a detailed, personalised history of the war that emphatically expresses the singularity of experience and the subjectivity of memory.

The entire novel is told from Anya's perspective and her characterisation is clearly and fully defined, so that she "tells the story in her own voice" (A. Mintz, "Mothers" 89). In the opening sentence of the first chapter, she introduces herself to the reader: "[m]y name is Anya Savikin" (11). The narrator immediately highlights her presence as testifier and protagonist of the story, which the title of the novel already indicates. Schaeffer based her novel mostly on the oral testimony of Anya Savikin Brodman, whose acquaintance triggered the idea for the novel and whom she interviewed extensively (Kremer, "Susan Fromberg Schaeffer" 1098). After the novel's publication, Brodman indicted Schaeffer for appropriating her unpublished testimony and interview, for effectively stealing her story, and the matter was settled legally with a financial accommodation (Kremer, "Re: Schaeffer"). Due to the novel's imitation of the testimonial format, the borderline between Brodman's testimony and Schaeffer's fiction becomes potentially problematic. My discussion demonstrates that Schaeffer primarily aimed to involve her audience emotionally by dramatizing this personal Holocaust narrative. Kremer criticises Schaeffer for "her disinclination to read the voluminous histories of the period" (*Women* 124). Schaeffer, however, argues that the term Holocaust "subsumed the people, made the people disappear into the symbol, *which I was objecting to* because I knew it was people that went through it" ("Conversation" 84, original emphasis). Although contentious, Schaeffer's approach appears to have been based both on an individualisation of the Holocaust experience and on a safeguarding of the subjective act of testifying.

The numerous and varied settings of the novel define the protagonist in detail. Anya moves from one spatial setting to another: from Vilno to Druzgeniekie, from the ghetto to Kaiserwald, Riga to Minsk and Berlin to New York. Because the protagonist experiences so many different surroundings and networks of personal relations, she repeatedly has to redefine herself in order to both assert her own identity and to adapt for survival. She makes

herself noticed and invaluable to male characters of influence and repeatedly cares medically, as well as emotionally, for fellow sufferers. Anya's voice is paradoxically strengthened further when she becomes representative of a collective, when her first-person singular "I" shifts into the first-person plural "we." In Vilno, "we" stands for her close family: the repeated use of the phrase "(n)one of us" (17, 21, 42) implies an interchangeability between Anya and her family in the prewar habits that are described. After the war breaks out, the "we" extends to include surrogate family members who share the struggle for survival. In postwar America, Anya represents traumatised Holocaust survivors: "I have all the bad dreams everyone has who went through it" (5). It is precisely because Anya is such a well-defined individual that she can be representative of a collective experience, which in each instance centres around a small group of characters. Dvir Abramovich affirms that "[c]ritics have stressed [Schaeffer's] particular achievement in imaginatively entering the heroine's universe and rendering both the particular and the universal" (292). The facts and stories that other characters tell Anya add other experiences to her own and fill in the gaps of her own story caused by her limited perspective. Sonya, a camp inmate, tells Anya about their deportation by train from Vilno to Kaiserwald, because Anya was delirious and lost all sense of time: "'[t]hree days and nights!' she [Sonya] gasped; 'don't you remember? It must have been at least eight!'" (379). When the Russians liberate Vilno, Anya is obliged to rely on the testimony of a pharmacist to find out what happened to her daughter. Anya's personal story and character are embedded in, but clearly distinguishable from a broader, collective history. Anya represents a distinct subject who narrates her subjective memory, while others expand on missing or forgotten details.

Schaeffer portrays Anya's testimony as her own selective narration of memories. Anya needs to remember the past in her own way in order to express the meaning it has for her, which

does not necessarily match historical accuracy. This relates to Dori Laub's conceptualisation of testimony as its own event, and this chapter focuses on the meaning of testimony for the narrator rather than the receiver. Anya's testimony shows that she is traumatised by the Holocaust, as she is unable to escape from the gridlock of her own past. On the one hand, she desperately tries to control her life story and to mould it into a logical and meaningful narrative. On the other hand, moments of traumatic experience and recall intrude upon this wilfully organised memory. Anya retreats into her subjective and fixed version of the past, because her memory is the only space where it can be revived and where it is not yet lost. Upon her arrival in New York, she was determined to forget everything. Her testimony is "opening the rooms to the house in the past which were kept locked so long" (*Anya* 591). The three central chapters of the novel almost exclusively articulate her fixed memory of this past, and cover nearly the entire novel. The narrative is realist and chronological in style, with traces of moral righteousness and romanticisation. Her testimony nevertheless inadvertently conveys her trauma as she desperately attempts to remember everything. Dorothy Seidman Bilik is one of the few critics who engage with this aspect of Anya's story: "Anya does not 'take in' her experiences; they are not assimilated, broken down, and reformed" (102). In other words, she does not fully grasp the events of the past. At the beginning of her story, shifts from the dominant past tense to the present, combined with a sensory awareness, betray that Anya relives the past and loses herself within it: "[i]t is a long time ago now, but I hear it, I do hear it!" (50); "still, there were times, and today was one of them" (30). She makes her past into her present. In spite, or perhaps because of this, Anya seeks to impose a moral meaningfulness onto her memories, transforming them into a heroic epic. Her testimony can thus be read as an adventurous and imaginative Bildungsroman that "depicts life [truthfully, yet] as it ought to have been" (Bilik 111).

The realist style of *Anya* is a distinctive characteristic of this novel. As previously mentioned, this is often interpreted in terms of historical authenticity. In an interview with Schaeffer, Harold Ribalow observes that “the novel is so flowing with detail that you [Schaeffer] make it extraordinarily credible for a writer who wasn’t there” (“Conversation” 85). Schaeffer elsewhere confirms that “[t]here was never any question after its publication that *Anya* created an illusion of absolute authenticity” (“Unreality” 729). That “illusion of authenticity” is, however, crucial to the protagonist because she wants to grasp her entire past intact. The overabundance of detail causes an all-encompassing realism that seems to make possible the representation of every memory. Every piece of furniture, colour, fabric, meal and weather condition is meticulously rendered. The “unbelievable has to be believed” (Sicher, “Holocaust Historical” 377) and this results in long paragraphs of uninterrupted description. Anya expresses her fidelity to the disappeared past and her obligation to witness and to remember it “as it was,” confirming Young’s observation that authenticity in testimony serves as its justification. Anya’s need to revive the past ensures that it continues to exist, even if only in her memory: “[i]t seemed very important that I remember every detail, as if all our lives depended upon it” (238). The excess of realist facts, however, means that the detail is potentially suffocating. The acclaimed realism of *Anya* is then not necessarily attributable to a determination to be historically accurate, but rather to the protagonist’s often despairing attempt to overcome the impossibility of total recall.

Another dominant narrative technique in Anya’s testimony is its strict linearity, which imposes logic and meaning on her past. The chronological progression neatly structures the events of Anya’s life. Dreams and memories of a preceding past rarely interrupt the sequential flow of events, and then only from the second half of the novel onwards. The chart below indicates the linearity of time in *Anya*, which contrasts strikingly with Szeman’s experimental use of time, which I discuss later.

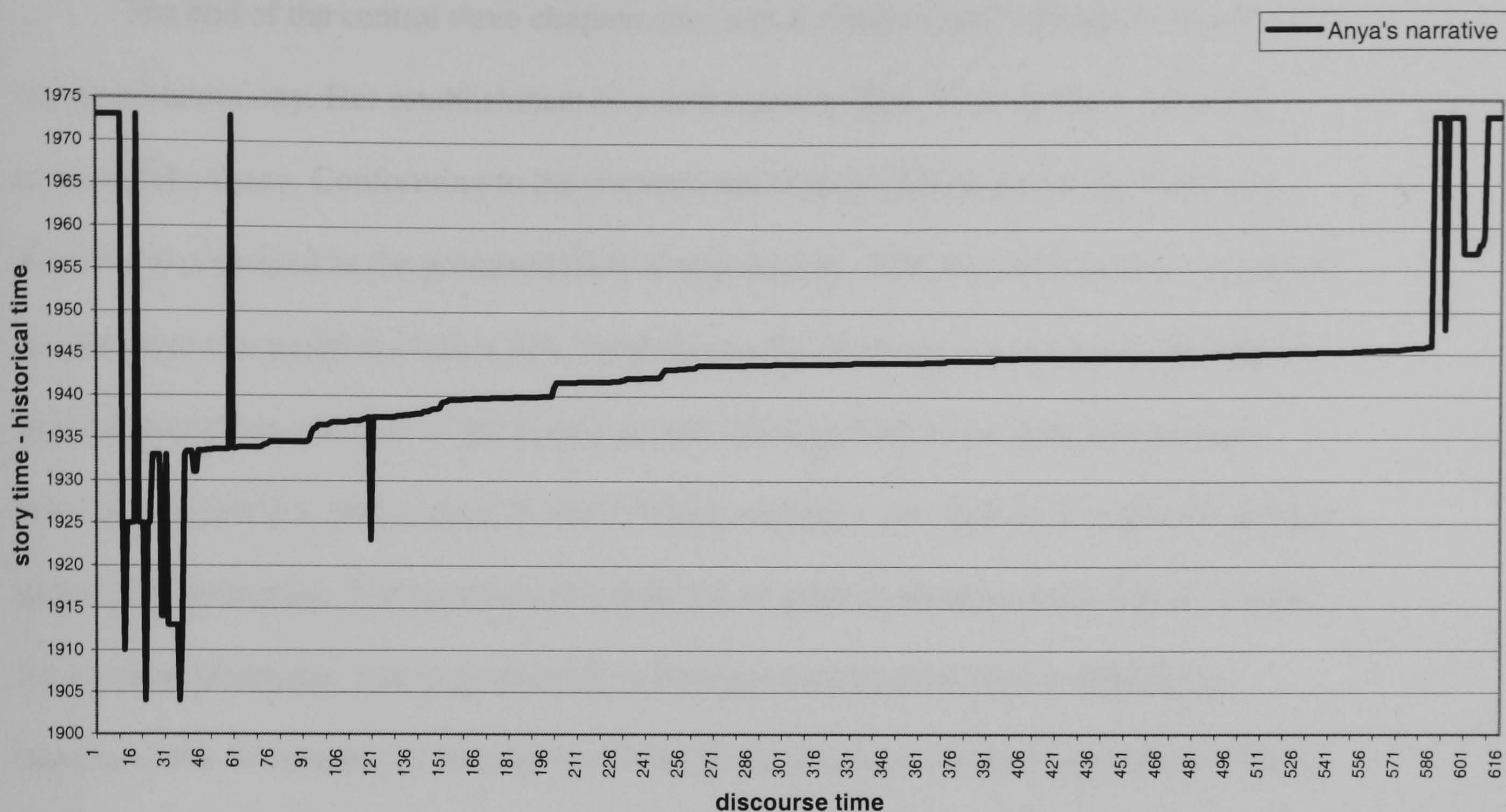


Fig. 1. Linear Chronology: Relation Discourse Time and Story Time in *Anya*

Claude Lanzmann's intentional disruption of linear chronological development in his film *Shoah* implicitly criticises realist Holocaust representations which seek to represent everything because they display "an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding" (Lanzmann 204). In Anya's testimony, however, such "obscenity" arguably expresses the survivor's anguish for meaning to exist. The strict chronology strengthens the artificial authenticity of Anya's testimony and illustrates her desire for control over her past. Various predictions and prophecies work against the unexpectedness of events, but they also underscore the underlying meaning that Anya ascribes to her life story. They forward the development of the testimony as an inevitable process and provide her with moments of reassurance amidst the shock of reliving the past: a Cabalist in Vilno accordingly predicts that "you will survive all the troubles, you and your child" (210). The "doggedly chronological" (Bilik 103) structure provides Anya's narrative with a continuity that works against the disruption of its content.

The end of the central three chapters provides a “Hollywood” ending to Anya’s organised testimony. Her establishment of a new home in New York seems to provide meaningful closure. Conforming to the conventions of early Jewish American literature, America is portrayed as the promised land of opportunity.¹ The ship that crosses the Atlantic is insistently compared to Noah’s Ark, symbolising the covenant and the saved remnant of the Holocaust’s destruction of the Jewish people. By structurally narrating her prewar, wartime and postwar experiences in one coherent sequence, the illusion is created that Anya’s identity is continuous. The inclusion of a detailed account of blissful prewar life is unusual for survivor testimony, and exposes both its fictional construction and its underlying intention. The first chapter’s description of her familial history and everyday life in Vilno establishes the foundations of Anya’s sought-after continuity. This is most evident when Anya’s mother performs her own life story:

“Momma,” Vera whispered, sinking in first, “tell us a story.” I slid down, waiting for Momma. If she would tell us a story, we knew what it would be. It was a ritual. (28)

Her mother, Rebecca, tells the story of her own youth in Russia and her move to Poland where she met their father. She has frequently told her biography to her children and they contribute to it by asking appropriate questions at the right time: “[n]ow it was my turn. ‘And what did you do there, Momma?’” (29). The children have become indispensable addressees of the mother’s story of her own identity and are therefore caught up in a history beyond their own. The fact that Schaeffer places this intimate ritual at the beginning of Anya’s testimony

¹ Emma Lazarus’s poem “The New Colossus” (1883), which is inscribed in the Statue of Liberty, is representative of this tendency: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (10-11). Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) also articulates the enthusiasm of the Jewish American literature of arrival.

shows the protagonist's desire to incorporate and to be incorporated within the continuity of her family history. Schaeffer also demonstrates that Anya seeks meaning in her wartime trauma by situating it narratologically in relation to a broader history of anti-Semitic discrimination and persecution. Her mother's biography notably contains an account of the "Russian White Guards, the *Dinikins*, [who] were conducting a pogrom, and raping the Jewish girls" (29, original emphasis). When the war breaks out, Rebecca remarks: "it's the old story. If there's trouble, there are riots in the streets, robbings, rape; it will be just like a pogrom. Maybe that's what it is" (197). In Anya's testimony, therefore, as Kremer notes: "the historic pattern of violent anti-Semitic outbursts [has] foreshadow[ed] the approaching European storm" (*Women* 122). There is one peculiar instance of anti-Semitism in the prewar chapter that is referred to throughout Anya's testimony. When male students attack the faces of Jewish girls with iron nails attached to their hands, Anya is exempted because her father was informed of the action. She subsequently overidentifies with the girls' fate and willingly injures herself:

I had to know what it felt like. [. . .] the inside of my thighs rubbed. "There!" I thought [. . .] I pressed down with one nail; I dug it in, and in. [. . .] I was drawing my nail down, almost two inches; it had gone through the skin. The dampness of blood was against my finger. The pain was blinding. So this is what it had been like, and forever, it had gone through the skin. (79-80)

Although this passage potentially risks locating persecution as the basis of Jewish identity, Anya inserts herself into Jewish history by physically expressing her urge to experience its pain, which her wartime traumas will come to exemplify. When Warsaw is bombed and Anya is in hiding, she wants to go outside because "it opened the wound I scratched into my thigh

[. . .] I had to see it, I had to know what it was like” (169-70). Her desire to be part of a historical continuity links persecution and her salvation to the emergence of her belief in God:

I even remember the day the belief began. It was the day at the university when the boys with iron nails went aftet [sic] the girls [. . .] “What for, the chosen people, what for? Chosen for what? For this, to be endlessly persecuted, just because we are Jewish?” And it was then I began to believe. Even the endless persecution was a form of being chosen. (596)

By linking her religious identity so explicitly with the continuity of persecution, Anya’s need to belong in an existing structure is emphasised. Her own life story is inserted into a chronological linearity, which makes her testimony part of both a familial and a Jewish continuity. Schaeffer moreover inscribes herself into Anya’s story by drawing on her own family’s history in order to provide the prewar sequences, which were not emphasised by survivors in the interviews she conducted with them. Schaeffer admits:

I wanted to write a book which began with a normal life which was interrupted by history when history collided with it. But people who have survived the war want to start to talk about their experiences when they really became dreadful, beginning with the ghetto. (“Conversation” 85)

American fiction writers tend to pay more attention to pre- and postwar scenarios than survivors themselves. This reflects their own confrontation with and relation to the history of the Holocaust. Schaeffer based the prewar portrayal of “European Jewish family life” in her

novel on extensive talks with her grandparents, who emigrated to America before the outbreak of the war (Kremer, "Susan Fromberg Schaeffer" 1094). The décor of Anya's prewar home is also partly based on Schaeffer's own house (Kremer, *Women* 120). Schaeffer found that her grandparents were fully aware of the history of anti-Semitism; they "seemed to take it for granted that anybody who was Jewish would understand there were pogroms and dangers and that people [. . .] should be ready to leave" ("Conversation" 83). Her parents anxiously remembered the Holocaust in order to protect what they considered to be an important aspect of their Jewish identity ("Conversation" 83). Their attitude is reflective of a broader cultural trend in which the Holocaust had become central to the identity of many Jewish Americans. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Novick observes, "American Jews came to see themselves as an endangered species" (171). The dangers of assimilation and intermarriages in America, and the Six-Day War of 1967, contributed to an anxious climate of Holocaust commemoration of which Schaeffer's novel forms a part. Bilik accordingly notes of Schaeffer that, for her, "the martyred dead are heroic, the events of the Holocaust are awesome, and the task of making characters and events into a fictional whole prodigious" (104). Peter Novick further points out that:

[t]he fears of a renewed Holocaust on the eve of [the Six-Day War] left their mark on American Jewish consciousness. Also important was the way the image of Jews as military heroes worked to efface the stereotype of weak and passive victims. (149)

The prevailing emphasis on the survival of the Jewish people and not its victimhood is reflected in Anya's focus on the continuity of Jewish history through survival, and in her predominantly heroic narrative.

A third noticeable narrative feature that strengthens Anya's imposition of logic and meaning is the irreproachable behaviour of her characters. The genre of Anya's narrative of survival is predisposed towards a romantic heroism. Laura Browder comments that:

"[a]utobiography, with its valorization of individualism and its emphasis on self-fashioning, is a form peculiarly suited to American national mythologies" (2). Anya's subjective truth is accordingly one of self-justification. From the beginning, she is described as "unusually mature and responsible" (93). She stands up for moral and ethical values when others fail to do so: when her friend Julka abandons a young child in postwar Berlin, Anya ensures that she is officially reprimanded by the American consulate. This does not mean that Anya does not steal, bribe or grasp every opportunity for survival, but in her relations to others she remains exemplary. The other individualised characters, almost all of whom are Anya's biological or surrogate family members, behave in similarly commendable ways. Her family, in particular, is idealised: "they are indestructible, they refuse to give ground" (A. Mintz, "Mothers" 90).

Anya endlessly repeats the mantra: "[m]y father was a saint, but my mother was human; she had her faults" (7, 42, 594). Those faults are hardly noticeable, however, as her mother is a prophetic, warm matriarch who is entirely devoted to her family. A few moments of parental strictness and temporary pessimism that acknowledges the unfolding disaster of war, are her only discernible "faults." The repeated juxtaposition of the saintliness of one parent against the humanity of the other is not so much contrasting as mutually affirming. Anya's atheist father is an insightful mentor who both admonishes and teaches. His moral epithets pervade Anya's testimony and Bilik notes that the deaths of Anya's family members confirm her father's principles and instruction:

[he] is shot by the Nazis on his way to get a book to ease his confinement.

Anya's gentle and angelic sister chooses to die with the man she loves. Anya's

husband gives up the chance to escape in order to stay with her and their child. [He subsequently dies in the ghetto.] Her mother hides and allows herself to be selected for death in order that Anya may live. Within the fictional world the victims are granted meaningful deaths. (105)

Anya does not witness the death of any of her family members. As such, the portraits of the protagonist and her family provide images of human goodness that both counter and moderate the destruction of the Holocaust. William Novak concludes that *Anya* is about “a fictionalised memory which seeks to dwell on human goodness more than on depravity and evil” (36). Robert Jay Lifton calls such testimony “the ‘documentary fallacy,’ that indulges in a ‘hagiographical excess’ out of an ‘overriding loyalty to the dead,’ which actually denies them their true dignity” (qtd. in Sicher, “Holocaust Historical” 379). Anya does not mourn but desperately clings to her idealised version of the truth. Her search for meaning is epitomised in her attention to the sole fully characterised German soldier, Erdmann. Unsurprisingly, this functionary of Kaiserwald appears to be a Jew in disguise: “I’m Jewish like you” (318). He helps her to a cleaning job in the Hauptmann’s house and to escape the camp. The conflation of perpetrator and victim works to affirm moral values rather than to disturb them, as is the case in Szeman’s *The Kommandant’s Mistress*. Erdmann is depicted as a hero, “a bizarre figure whose introduction adds to the novel’s underlying sense of the miraculous amidst even the murderous evil of the mundane” (Berger, *Crisis* 115). Although Erdmann’s persona is historically possible, it is not entirely plausible, and he thus serves to intensify the miracle of Anya’s survival.

Anya’s narrative abounds with romantic coincidences. They emphasise the unlikelihood of her survival, the facts of which are nevertheless not historically impossible. The fact that Schaeffer chooses to focus her fictional Holocaust representation on the story of

a woman who in her own estimation was “fantastically lucky” (“Unreality” 729) is also suggestive of Anya’s shaping of her narrative in relation to her search for meaning. Anya escapes death many times: when a building in Warsaw is bombed and she remains standing on a small ledge; when she is selected as capable for work and deported to Kaiserwald; when Germans search Rutkauskus’ house and she hides under a bedframe that almost suffocates her; when she is stuck in a foxhole to protect herself from allied bombing which causes her legs to swell to three times their size; when a train hits a mine and her head is severely injured. Anya’s miraculous survival is moreover achieved by the help of people whom she meets randomly but who all turn out to be interconnected. Such coincidences work to consolidate the subjective nature of Anya’s story. The realist detail, imposed chronology, morality and strong element of coincidence reveal both Anya’s need to master the past and her simultaneous desire to retreat into her own meaningful version of that past.

If such consistency is typical of the central three chapters, and thus the bulk of the novel, the surrounding framework which is comprised of a prologue and an epilogue, is in striking contrast to this. Most critics unite these passages due to their shared postwar setting in America. The prologue is written in a fragmented stream-of-consciousness style that emphasises Anya’s disorientation and her loss of control as she is caught between traumatic dreams and her reflection on them. The protagonist describes dreams about the war and family members, creating the possibility for her to talk to them as if they had revived from the dead. The prologue acts as an important structural indicator for the remainder of the novel. It contains the following dream sequence:

I have all the bad dreams everyone has who went through it: the ghetto, the labor camp, the flight to America. There is a tremendous room, and people

keep coming in and coming in; they are preparing themselves for war. [. . .] I woke up trembling and sweating. (5)

The present tense is maintained for telling about the dream and for the dream itself, so that past and present align seamlessly. It is only afterwards that Anya explicitly defines the passage as imaginary and locates it in the past tense. The prologue's alternation between present and past demonstrates Anya's struggle to gain control. It shows that the protagonist is lonely, haunted by the past and paralysed by guilt. She considers herself to be dead already:

do the dead hate the living so? I can understand it. I can understand coming back and watching and being just as you always were, and talking and no one answering [. . .] Such loneliness! Sometimes I think the dead must be very lonely. Terribly lonely. How could I ever be so lonely? (6)

She relates herself to her dead family who haunts her in her dreams. A mention of "Yom Kippur" (3-4) refers to the atonement of sins, but the traditional confession of guilt does not follow. As discussed earlier, her central testimony which comes after the prologue is largely self-exonerating. Anya's feelings of guilt, it seems, relate to her survival itself.

There are only a few instances in the central three chapters in which trauma is signalled explicitly, as it is in the prologue. The most striking example of traumatic disruption occurs when Anya is deported by train to Kaiserwald. All of her family members have been killed at this point in the narrative and Anya breaks down: she "was vomiting violently" (271), "sobbing hysterically" (275) and retreats in her thoughts to protect herself. As she closes her eyes, "their lids were shades pulled down on this world. It did not exist [...]. It was

the world forming. Nothing had happened yet, nothing was going to happen” (272).² The traumatic event of her deportation causes Anya’s description of it to become fragmented between the tangible present in the boxcar and the memory of a prediction by her mother that she can hear in the present:

they [soldiers at a stop] were asking about the dead. “There will come a time when the living will come to envy the dead” [her mother’s prediction]. No, that was wrong; I was already one of the dead, with the ghosts and splinters of my life on earth. The splinters cut into my skin; it didn’t bleed. Now and then there was a drop of blood, mocking life, but it was not real. I was embalmed by Momma’s death. (274)

The overlapping of different realities and Anya’s splitting of identity suggest her lack of control. Such stylistic engagement with trauma is not characteristic of most of the other dreams and memories in the central testimony. Contrary to the dreams in the prologue and the scene of deportation, these dreams are mostly rendered in a detailed descriptive style and act to tighten the plot development.

The epilogue is more explanatory than the prologue, as it describes many symptoms of PTSD rather than rendering them as a real-time experience. It highlights the characterisation of the Holocaust survivor Anya as traumatic. Kremer enumerates that she “[e]ndur[es] chronic depressive states, a guilt complex, and deadened feelings” (“Holocaust Survivors” 28). Anya correspondingly spells out symptoms of her lack of control: “I have not

² The motif of suspending the act of witnessing and retreating in or behind one’s eyes is often used in the postwar setting of American Holocaust fiction in order to remember and/or imagine the past. In Saul Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, the protagonist wears sunglasses to detach himself from reality, while his blind eye represents the necessity to confront his suppressed past. In Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* Rosa wants to “live inside her eyes” (21), where she mourns her dead daughter by imagining her alive. In Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), ghosts “on the insides of the lids of my eyes” (246) signify the impossibility of escaping from witnessing the past.

forgotten anything. If I am alone for even five minutes, whole sections of my life unfold in front of me” (592-93). Berger affirms that she displays

clinical characteristics observed in survivor parents: overprotectiveness, overidentification with children and (in Anya’s case) grandchildren, and obsession with health in the form of insuring proper nutrition. (“Holocaust Survivors” 82)

The representativeness and knowledge that Anya claims and her realist descriptive style throughout the central testimony and the epilogue, indicate that an understanding of her past has been achieved. However, the novel works precisely towards her realisation of non-understanding: “[e]vents were so ridiculous no explanation could be ridiculous enough” (595); “[w]ho can know what it [the war] meant? I don’t believe anyone can” (596). Anya realises that she is and remains locked up in her past, despite but perhaps also because of her desperate desire to grasp it “realistically, systematically, and comprehensively” (Kremer, “Susan Fromberg Schaeffer” 1098).

The structure of *Anya* is consistent in its establishment of a cycle of (lack of) control. The novel offers no redemption in its representation of Anya’s attempt to attain meaning. However, the novel’s focus on the subjective narrative of Anya’s testimony also entails the risk that her controlled, logical and meaningful story is the only narrative layer perceived by the reader. How “it ought to have been” (Bilik 111) would thus be the only version of the Holocaust available to the reader. *Anya* is susceptible to Young’s criticism that “the reader risks becoming ensnared in the all-encompassing fiction of the discourse itself” (62), a discourse that concerns historical facts but more crucially the subjectivity of the protagonist.

The textual awareness of the constructedness of Anya's testimony and consequently the novel itself is vital to create a critical distance that precisely recognises and appreciates the expression of the protagonist's subjective truth.

The linear progression of Anya's testimony is in and of itself not sufficiently self-reflexive to show that it is contributing to Anya's act of self-representation. It also lulls the reader into a popular adventure novel that confines him/her in Anya's own version of the past. A realist style can metafictionally show its own restrictions and subjectivity. As Schaeffer argues, "[w]hat should be immediately apparent to any writer of realistic fiction is its unreal or synthetic nature. Regardless of how persuasive the forgery appears, it is still a forgery" ("Unreality" 728). The text accordingly needs to contain sufficient elements of self-awareness to clarify that Anya's limited expression is a "forgery" and also that it has its own truth as an expression of her desire for meaning. I argue that the central problem with *Anya* is precisely its lack of textual awareness. Although Bilik writes a persuasive analysis of the novel's representational aspects, she also believes that "[t]he romantic and fairy tale elements indicate that, despite the horror of the events recounted, much of *Anya* is a fiction that depicts life as it ought to have been" (111). There are both direct and indirect metafictional references that seek to disrupt Anya's totalising narrative; however, the overall form of the novel risks making these textual indicators melodramatic or sentimental. Alan Mintz observes that Schaeffer's "achievement in getting inside Anya's world is a sizable one, yet it must also be said that there is something aloof and slightly self-satisfied about the feat" ("Mothers" 90). His suggestion of "aloofness" gestures towards Schaeffer's failure to make consistently explicit the construction of Anya's version of reality, both by the protagonist and by the author.

The most defining instance of self-reflexivity that reveals the constructedness of Anya's narrative occurs at the beginning of her testimony. The paragraph is set in the present

and discusses the protagonist's act of narration and her process of memory, which highlight her position of hindsight and the individuality of her voice. Anya self-consciously remarks: "[m]y memory of it [the apartment in Vilno] is almost twenty-five years old, and undoubtedly I have done some retouching, have repainted some of the walls and plastered some of the cracks, but memory is a form of reality after all" (11). The constructedness of her subjective testimony is here made explicit as she admits embellishing some parts, such as the "cracks" or gaps of her traumatic experiences. Her memory, however, is also a truthful recreation as her "form of reality" is her only point of access to the past. *Anya* suggests that "we are not only locked into the events of the past, [. . .] but into our perceptions of that past" (Pearlman 140). This self-reflexivity then simultaneously entails both a critical distance and a justification of her subjective truth. Schaeffer's self-reflexive emphasis on the constructedness of testimony in *Anya*, paradoxically increases its "authenticity."

Alongside the materialisation of the narrator – "[m]y name is Anya Savikin" (11) – this passage also addresses and acknowledges the reader. Anya ascribes her use of detailed realism to him/her:

I want to be sure that you can see this apartment, that you can picture it so clearly you feel you are walking through it, because it is very far away in time, and it is so easy to think that you know what something looks like, what something was like, and really have no idea at all. This is even true for the people who lived in the apartment and its rooms, so it is much more difficult for people who have never been in the rooms at all. I want you to go through this apartment so you have a memory of it: my memory. (11)

The meticulous representation of Anya's past, a defining feature of her subjectivity in its need to grasp the past, is translated here into the purpose of her testimony for the reader. It is the only time in the novel that the reader is explicitly addressed, but even then he/she remains subordinate to the needs of the narrator. She describes her aim in the same terms of sensory awareness with which she herself experiences the past: "[y]ou will have the feel of the polished wood table on your fingertips; you will have the smells of the kitchen in your nostrils. This is my ambition" (11). Through the construction of the story, narrator and reader are linked to the faults and difficulties of memory, which Anya seeks to rectify through detailed descriptions. She is aware of the limitations of her project: "[p]erhaps it is too much to ask" (11). When she then explicitly states her wish for the reader to identify with her point of view, her memory of the past, she also acknowledges her desire for her subjectivity to overwhelm the reader at the same time as revealing her awareness of its possible failure. Anya does not want to be alone when she faces her past, a theme that is emphasised at the end of the prologue: "the loneliness fell over me and covered my face like a sheet and I was too tired to pick it up, so I let it lie there" (7). She needs an addressee to recognise the reality of her memories. When Anya tells her past to a customer of her antique shop, her story is not recognised: "I told her about my first husband and how he died. 'And how is Stajoe?' she asked me. She hadn't been listening at all. A switch moved in my head. I stopped talking about the past" (603). Her inattentive American addressee does not provide the identification for which she craves. Anya's primary desire in narrating her life story again in *Anya* is accordingly not only to immerse herself in her version of the past, but also to "be listened to again" (596).

The self-reflexivity of the opening paragraph is maintained for the first few chapters of her testimony. Anya explicitly shows the reader the steps of her memory: "[n]ow we are going to enter my parents' apartment" (16). After defining her act of memory, however, Anya

becomes increasingly immersed in her past. The central testimony itself therefore contains relatively few metafictional indicators. Anya's testimony is dominated by stylistic techniques that align the reader's perspective with her own and thus obstruct a more productive "listening to," which would be able to observe Anya's subjectivity. Due to the detailed descriptions, the repetition of an image causes "a shock of recognition" for the reader, because he/she becomes implicitly aligned to the protagonist as both share the memory of that image: in the process of reading, Anya's memories are becoming the reader's too. Abramovich confirms this process of identification: *Anya* is "presented with documentary realism that plunges the reader into the lives of characters" (292). Robert Eaglestone considers realism a genre that offers a clear encouragement to identify. He claims: "[i]n most realist fiction, the readers echo the characters in not knowing what is going to happen: the reader and the character experience the events at the same time" (46). Edward Alexander confirms this reading of realism in *Anya*: "the writer makes us feel that we are experiencing these things afresh" (134). The realist style of Anya's testimony expresses the protagonist's subjectivity – her desire to control her past retrospectively and her immersion in it – as much as it is tailored to emotionally involve the reader. Schaeffer states that one reason for writing a Holocaust novel was to reach her audience:

I was hoping they would *get* to understand the Holocaust on an emotional level. I've met a lot of people [who] know all the facts about Auschwitz, its physical layout, Dachau, and the other camps – yet they're detached from it. It's like someone saying he doesn't have to have children because he can imagine what it's like.³ ("Conversation" 87, original emphasis)

³ It is striking that in this quote, as in Rosen's *Touching Evil*, childbirth serves as a trope of identification in the context of the reader's engagement with the Holocaust.

In other words, Brodman's testimony is fictionalised in *Anya* because Schaeffer uses the literary imagination to educate the sympathy of the reader by encouraging identification. In the realism of the central three chapters, the Holocaust is understandable and imaginable in its detail: it is possible to know what it was like. Anya's testimony can be wrongly read as an absolute representation of the/her reality of the Holocaust rather than her remembered "form of reality." Schaeffer recognises this tension in the novel, when she states that "the novel invites, in fact, expects, the reader to question the honesty of the central character, [but] she is the novel's only narrator and thus tends to be trusted" ("Unreality" 729). This trust and identification is further encouraged by Schaeffer's portrayal of Anya as a morally exemplary and likeable protagonist. The novel's format invites the reader to emotionally connect, and to suspend disbelief, and thereby risks overlooking an awareness of the reader's own process of identification.

Anya's Holocaust experience is conveyed in thirty-six short sections across the three central chapters and the epilogue, which combine plentiful action and dialogue with overstated metaphors. The fast pace of events creates a "perpetual motion machine [. . .] which continually holds the reader's attention" (Schaeffer, "Unreality" 736). The emphasis on dialogue dramatizes Anya's testimony as speech transforms memories into actions. Even Anya's thoughts are placed in quotation marks. This illustrates the "accuracy" of her account as much as it makes her thoughts part of the development and action of the plot. As Alan Mintz observes, the novel is "[r]educd at times to mere chatter" ("Mothers" 90). The use of overstated metaphors in turn intensifies but also potentially sentimentalises the plot, although Heinemann commends this aspect of the novel: "Anya's expressions [. . .] do much to increase the reader's ability to participate imaginatively in the events" (127-28). As a result of these various stylistic devices of dramatization, the narrated testimony immerses the reader

in Anya's subjective point of view, which works against a self-reflexive demonstration of her narration as construction.

The explanatory epilogue consequently becomes a metafictional text that is undermined by the central testimony's lack of self-reflexivity and the heroism of its romanticised protagonist. The epilogue does contain moments that are critical of Anya's act of narration. Anya admits that she idealises her prewar home: "I never had a sick day in my life before Hitler; neither did my father or mother, none of us.' [. . .] It is hard not to think like that" (598). She also seems to downplay her exemplary narrative: "[t]here were no normal lives during the war, no ethical lives. If there were ethical lives, and I believe mine was one, it was a matter of fate" (612). This assertion, however, paradoxically increases the admiration for her own and others' moral actions because of their rarity. The epilogue thus gestures towards the constructedness of Anya's act of narration and it is set in the present from which she narrates, mirroring the self-reflexive passage at the beginning of her testimony. It nevertheless emphasises Anya's PTSD more than her act of narration.

The epilogue's epigraph is taken from Dylan Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London:" "I shall not murder / The mankind of her going with a grave truth / Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath / With any further / Elegy of innocence and youth" (587). Thomas' poem confirms Anya's refusal to mourn the dead, as it expresses the belief in a continuity of life and death, past and present. This in turn links to Anya's engagement with Judaism, as discussed above. Most scholars define Anya's testimony in redemptive terms because in the epilogue she affirms her commitment to the Jewish people, by arranging Ninka's marriage to a Jew instead of the Greek with whom she fell in love. Her desire to belong to and continue the tradition of Judaism, however, seems to primarily reaffirm the all-encompassing presence of the past. The fact that Anya's belief is

based on suffering makes her matchmaking more an act of survival than a meaningful interpretation of Judaism. Anya's identity remains restricted to her identity as mother, Jew and survivor, all of which combine in this wedding arrangement. Anya moreover has an antique shop, which powerfully symbolises her incarceration in the past: "I sell old furniture and antiques. Strange, because my grandfather was a famous antique dealer in Paltava, how things turn out. The store is so tiny sometimes I feel as if we are living in a coffin" (593).⁴

The reference to her mother's hiding in a coffin during a Russian pogrom demonstrates that Anya remains in hiding from the present and that her life is a form of death. The closing lines of the epilogue further intertwine Anya's act of narration with her subjective narrative:

"[p]aper has patience; therefore I am putting my feelings on paper. And more and more I have this feeling I cannot get rid of, that I will dream about the house, and when I turn to the window, they [her family] will not vanish; they will be there" (616). Even if Anya realises the constructedness of her testimony, she chooses to escape into her own version of the past.

Whether she aims to eventually grasp her past, or rather wants to be grasped by it, remains unexplained in her testimonial search for meaning.

Metafictional references throughout the text remind the reader that he/she is reading a reconstruction of Anya's past, but they also risk sentimentalising the story. The novel's highlighting of memory signals that Anya is constructing the described events from hindsight. The fact that she frequently remembers acts of remembering, however, does not necessarily create a critical distance, as it also cultivates a melodramatic sense of loss and trauma. Anya for instance realises: "I hammered at my memory; it stayed locked like a vault. Whatever was inside lived on without air. I gave up. This was shock, shock; I had only read

⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, the postwar setting in an antique shop can be read as an intertextual reference to Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker*, where the protagonist's "store was [similarly] a peculiar and grotesque tomb" (263). The epilogue of *Anya* also mentions that her antique shop was held up, just as Sol Nazerman's pawnshop is robbed at the end of Wallant's novel.

about it” (279). Such expressions illustrate a remarkable self-awareness concerning the impact of traumatic events on memory. The large number of such explicit references, however, simultaneously establishes a rhetoric of anguish so that the device loses its impact. The verbs “to remember” and “to forget” are constantly used, even when they do not refer to a past situation. The language of memory is therefore not always critically related to Anya’s act of narration but is used in a widespread and diffuse way.

A more successful self-reflexivity can be found in references to the visual media of film and photography. Schaeffer’s use of these traditionally mimetic representations strikingly expresses the constructedness of Anya’s testimony. Firstly, memory is compared to photographs and perceived to be truthful and permanent. Anya’s mother explains when she intently stares at her daughter: “‘I’m only taking my own wedding pictures now [. . .] Paper has a way of disappearing; I will never lose these’” (125). The representation of Anya’s testimony then can be seen as a transitory expression of a more profound and inescapable subjective truth of witnessing, of “taking pictures with my eyes” (367). Secondly, photography and film’s characteristic of verisimilitude is applied to represent the traumatic unreality of the Holocaust: “we were walking in a picture without sound” (213) and “[t]he blocks went by like sets from an insane movie” (173). In these quotations, the image of visual representation demonstrates Anya’s traumatic detachment from reality. Her experiences and the construction of her testimony are directly expressed in filmic and representational terms: “I was watching them [German soldiers] through the door as if they were on a screen, but they were part of a terrible movie that could come into this ridiculous comedy at any second” (354). A couple of motifs relating to photography and film are repeated throughout the novel and combine these characteristics of mimesis and constructedness. The first concerns a bundle of family pictures that Anya keeps with her at all times. Her husband Stajoe threw them at her when he was arrested and subsequently executed. They are both an object of the

past and a mimetic representation of it. Some of the pictures notably show the couple dressed up in costume or fancy dress: “I put on the photographer’s kimono, and held a lacquered painted umbrella, and Stajoe wore a man’s robe, also Chinese” (92).⁵ Anya frequently looks at this particular photograph (254, 453). I argue that these are the most striking remnants of her past as they distort photography’s illusion of verisimilitude in order to express the subjective truth of that moment of happiness through disguise. Anya’s testimony is likewise most poignant when it moves away from realist expression to show her subjective truth of despair through a fragmented style or a metafictional reference. Like Anya’s collection of photographs, the family album of her mother combines static fragments of verisimilitude into the construction of a continuous life story:

in the album life was not continuous; it hopped from one perfect and important moment to another. [. . .] The album kept them alive in a kind of heaven; they could not die [. . .] If I was blessed, the continuity of life would take me over [. . .] How the memory worked! Like this album, cutting out, framing. (122)

Anya’s testimony also constructs sequences of moments in mimetic detail, which she deliberately connects through her imposition of a chronological linearity. This construction safeguards the lives of her family members who died and it ensures the continuity of her own life and identity. She describes this process in filmic terms in the initial self-reflexive paragraph about her act of narration: “you must start with the little things, the little pictures, the tiny, square images, like rooms, that will grow into a film” (11). She admits in the epilogue that “[i]t is impossible for me to believe [. . .] that the film which has recorded the

⁵ Another example of the discrepancy between the verisimilitude and the constructedness of photographs occurs when Rebecca, Anya’s mother, is disguised by her father as a peasant to safely survive a train ride from Russia to Poland. Her aunts consequently cannot recognise Rebecca when she arrives because she does not resemble the photograph against which they are measuring reality.

story of my life was spliced one third through to an irrelevant reel by a maniac, that what began in the past will never continue in the future” (592). By metafictionally replacing her memory with the medium of film, Anya explains that her testimony aims to deny the traumatic rupture in her life story. When she remembers her deportation to Kaiserwald, which she previously described in a fragmented style that signified her loss of control, this metafictional reference links the traumatic experience, film, testimony and traumatic recall through the impossibility of completely representing her turbulent past:

[m]y life was not continuous; it would never be continuous again. Something, the world, or history, had intervened like a terrible editor of a movie, snatching out handfuls of characters, changing the sets wildly, changing them back again, keeping some of the actors, changing the rest [. . .] And now my mind was doing it too, cutting pieces of the film randomly with clumsy scissors, without anesthetic [sic], and the victim never knowing anything had been taken. (380)

The construction of Anya’s expression of her subjective truth is explicitly foregrounded as she likewise edits her life story, which inevitably entails an incompleteness of representation because the testimony expresses her attempt to grasp her traumatic past. The novel displays other characteristics of film. It creates the illusion that the narrated events are still imaginable and that they happen simultaneously with the act of reading, due to their immediacy. Bilik confirms that “*Anya* is presented cinematographically” (104). The metafictional references to film and photography balance an immersion in Anya’s subjectivity on the one hand and a striking self-critical awareness of her construction of subjectivity through realism and continuity on the other.

Intertextuality is another prominent self-reflexive narrative technique in *Anya*. The novel is filled with stories, but these often parallel and romanticise the content of the testimony more than they allow the reader to see Anya's own story as a constructed text. Storytelling is characteristic of the Jewish tradition; Victoria Aarons remarks that: "[s]torytelling is a given, a demand made on characters in Jewish fiction just as it is made by them" ("Responding" 112). The acts of storytelling in *Anya* often function as instances of bonding and consolation. Anya often asks her mother or her sister Verushka to "sing me a song" (116, 123) when she needs to be comforted. Vera in turn tells Ninka numerous stories in the ghetto to break through the child's loneliness. As discussed earlier, Anya's family maintains rituals of storytelling in order to reaffirm their family history and their identity as a family: "because Momma and Poppa were always telling anecdotes about all of us, [. . .] there was a closeness which had nothing to do with how much of each other we saw" (24). Anya's testimony as her own act of storytelling reflects these prerogatives as she consoles her grief with memories and seeks to bond with her lost family through recreating the past.

The novel mentions many fables and romance novels that strengthen the theme of Anya's search for meaning in her survival, as these moral tales are often about the survival of the fittest. The fable of the grasshopper and the ant (161) or the mouse and the lion (269) are used as epigraphs to the chapters that describe Anya's wartime experiences. In these fables, the seemingly weakest animal wins out over the strongest, thus symbolising Anya's unexpected survival. Her parents constantly educate their children through fables and Ninka charms Mr. Brodsky, who secures their passage to America, with her fondness for reciting and listening to fables. *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Three Musketeers* likewise inspire heroism in Ninka and her friend because the outcasts of oppressive societies prove to be honourable. In *Anya* most acts of storytelling and stories, fables and fairy tales, are addressed to children. Apart from their didactic function, which underscores Anya's own imposition of meaning,

this select audience highlights the impossible reality of the Holocaust. Children are seen as capable of imagining the unimaginable and are therefore equipped to cope with the shifts between familiar and unanticipated realities during the Holocaust. When Ninka has to sleep outside in a snowy park in postwar Lodz, “[s]he got on the bench as if it were the most normal thing in the world” (505). The portrayal of the child addressee of Holocaust narratives is explored further in chapter four of this thesis. The shifting between reality and fiction is not as easy for adults. Anya dismisses *Mein Kampf* in prewar Druzgeniekie as “really a fairy tale” (99), whilst at the beginning of the war “refugees say the Germans aren’t so bad [. . .] *Mein Kampf* is only a fairy tale, that’s what the last one said” (187). This refuge in disbelief emphasises the traumatic rupture of the Holocaust because “the unimaginable but real Holocaust universe far exceeds the limits of the imaginal world” (Berger, *Crisis* 112). Anya’s testimony comparably is an escape because it represents what she is able and willing to imagine. Her narrative consequently contains many instances of disbelief: “I do not believe it” (202); “I couldn’t believe this was real” (304). Towards the end of the novel, she is no longer surprised: “[t]here’s nothing I wouldn’t believe anymore” (496). The efficacy of intertextuality to demonstrate the constructedness of Anya’s testimony is thus problematised, as her narrative recreates her disbelief in the events around her and her subsequent belief in her own life story. This is precisely the process that the critical reader can discern in his/her act of reading Anya’s subjective act of storytelling.

Anya is a remarkable Holocaust novel, not because it represents a totalizing historical narrative of the Holocaust, but because it makes such an encompassing representation the expression of an individual’s desperate search for meaning. The protagonist’s subjectivity pervades the entire novel. The textual awareness of the constructedness of this fictional representation is, however, not always clear and allows the reader not only to identify with

Anya's subjective point of view but also to give credence to the romanticised portrayal of events. By narratologically placing the novel on the borderline between popular entertainment that celebrates the survivor as hero and a more critical postmodern Holocaust awareness that recognises the constructedness of memory, I have argued that Schaeffer risks losing the poignancy of her own fictional construction of the subjectivity of memory.

The Subjectivity of Memory in Szeman's The Kommandant's Mistress

Sherri Szeman also uses the subjectivity of memory as the central concept for her novel *The Kommandant's Mistress*. Contrary to the conventional structure of Schaeffer's *Anya*, Szeman's novel is dominated by an experimental framework that first and foremost demonstrates the constructedness of testimony. It attempts to engage with the postmodern concept that history is shaped by and through discourse, but its own historical approach and its reliance on elements of popular fiction work against the achievement of such self-reflexive literary ambition.

The Kommandant's Mistress centres on the Nazi Kommandant of a concentration camp, Maximilian von Walther, who incarcerates a Jewish inmate, Rachel Levi, in his office as his mistress. The novel is divided into three sections. The first part is told from the perspective of Max and reveals that his devotion to the Third Reich allows him to advance from soldier to Kommandant. He works and lives in the camp with his wife Marta and their children, Hans and Ilse. Max socialises in important Nazi circles through inspections, meetings and parties. He indulges in excessive alcohol consumption and has a long history of adultery. After the war, he travels from one hotel to the next, in order to hide from his persecutors and to fulfil his obsessive search for Rachel. The second part is narrated from Rachel's viewpoint and recounts her struggle for survival as she flees her home country, is

confined to a ghetto and ultimately to Max's camp. When sexual enslavement to Max is offered as a strategy of survival, it sets Rachel apart from her fellow inmates and specifically from the Jewish Underground who taunt her. Rachel does not speak to Max at all, as she pretends not to understand German. After the war, she seeks to write but is frustrated by writer's block and denies to other people that she survived the camp, while memories constantly haunt her. Her marriage to David, also a survivor, is a loving but precarious relationship as a discussion about children remains unresolved. The third part of the novel consists of two encyclopaedic biographical entries that chronologically recapitulate the fictional protagonists' lives.

Although the novel is original in its structural and narratological engagement with the subjectivity of memory, I argue that its insufficiently developed characterisation risks creating a spectacle of the Holocaust. The explicit display of the constructedness of memory is undermined because it is not based on fully elaborated individuals or subjectivities.

Szeman's juxtaposition of three different narrative perspectives forms the overarching structural framework of *The Kommandant's Mistress* and is its most distinguishing self-reflexive feature. It immediately draws attention to the constructedness of Holocaust representation. Efraim Sicher confirms that this novel is about "the ultimate relativity of truth" ("Holocaust Postmodernist" 317): there is not one historical truth, only various subjective reconstructions. The contrasts between parts one and two demonstrate the inconclusiveness of representation. When Max and Rachel remember the same scenes in their respective parts of the novel, noteworthy differences in detail emphasise their subjective narration. When Max and his SS friend Dieter discuss Rachel's extermination, for example, Max remembers that he asked Dieter for cyanide tablets, but Dieter advised: "[j]ust shoot her' [. . .] 'It'll be quicker'" (41). Rachel remembers the same conversation but with different

speech actors: Dieter suggests “I could get you some cyanide tablets” (229) while it is Max who bluntly states “‘I’ll just shoot her [. . .] ‘It’ll be quicker’” (230). These contradictions show the gap between experience and representation, as both narrators shift the position of responsibility in order to suit their own subjective truths. The unreliability of memory is also expressed within each part, as both protagonists not only contradict each other but also themselves. Max remembers that he “tugged at her [Rachel’s] wrist [. . .] I pulled more firmly” (90), while he is also convinced that “‘I’d never hurt her” (67). David points out Rachel’s inconsistencies: “[y]ou weren’t in any of the camps. But, somehow, you know that the woman who was there is dead, is that right?” (209). Both protagonists have a selective memory which suits the versions of the past that they need to remember.

Part three ensures that the constructedness of the subjectivity of memory is clearly visible. First, the encyclopaedic biographies of Max and Rachel are written in a different tone of voice to previous parts, and with a judgemental attitude that explicitly sympathises with the victim. Max is described as “von Walther,” while Rachel retains her first name. Max’s history is condemned with phrases such as “*unrepentant and proud still*, Maximilian von Walther was executed by hanging” (264, my emphasis). A distinctly more appreciative terminology is used to describe Rachel’s life story: “*fi*ncredibly, she continued to write even after the upheavals of emigration and war” (267, my emphasis). The bias of the historiographical narrator of part three parallels the subjectivity of the narrators of parts one and two. The structure of the novel thus demonstrates that an objective representation which guarantees authenticity is unattainable. Part three also validates aspects of the protagonists’ narratives which were implied but never articulated. For the first time in the novel, Rachel’s knowledge of German is explicitly confirmed. As much as this “historiographical” part contributes to the credibility of the protagonists’ constructions of the past, it equally questions the very existence of these narratives by emphasising the unreliability of “truth.” It states that

“rumors of von Walther’s fate abounded at the close of the war” (263) and in Rachel’s case “fact and rumor converge” (268), which indicates that parts one and two could be exclusively fictional constructions rather than selective historical accounts. Part three implies that Max was captured in Poland and hanged in 1947 and that Rachel did not survive the Holocaust. The ramifications for the previous parts are fundamental as the deaths of the protagonists trigger new interpretations of the constructedness of their narratives: is Rachel the author of both parts? Are the references to rumour and fiction to be read as a metafictional reference in order to draw attention to the fictional construct of *The Kommandant’s Mistress*? Does the novel even provide a single interpretation of Max and Rachel’s shared wartime past? It is up to the reader whether or not to search for coherence between these contradicting constructions of the Holocaust. The postmodern fragmentation of perspectives makes all three parts and the reader’s interpretation equally truthful as it reflects back on the subjectivity of each narrator. The awareness of the expression of a subjective truth, which was not always successful in *Anya*, is thus made clear in the structure of *The Kommandant’s Mistress*. The novel relies less on intertextual references than *Anya*, but incorporates the acts of reading and narration into the experimental shifting of perspectives.

The novel’s use of disjointed time likewise makes it less prescriptive than *Anya*, for the reader as well as the narrator composes his/her own narrative. This confirms Hayden White’s observation that any story is framed within a narrative emplotment and is thus necessarily constructed. The content of the protagonists’ narratives is fragmented so that there is no linear chronology: there are frequent and arbitrary time shifts. In between these fragments of memory, there are gaps that invite the reader to logically connect the represented moments. Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* (1991) experiments with time in a similar manner. Its narrator remarks that:

[l]ike writing, paintings seem to hint at a topsy-turvy world in which, so to speak, time's arrow moves the other way. The invisible speedlines suggest a different nexus of sequence and process. (95)

He implies that creative representation evokes a different perception of time than experience does. In other words, any representation reconstructs time according to its own logic. Amis' novel reverses time, so that the beginning of the novel becomes the chronological end. Amis, however, reverses time in a consistent, linear fashion, so that the novel progresses towards the time of the war. He strikingly demonstrates the irrationality of Nazi policy by reversing its procedures: medical experiments in the camps actually heal inmates instead of mutilating and killing them. The narrative of *The Kommandant's Mistress* jumps back and forth in time and sometimes returns to the same scene, which allows and encourages a revisiting of events. Time and its distortion therefore do not serve as an explanation of events but as a complication to them. This once again emphasises the constructedness of representation. It is up to the narrator and the reader to determine where each scene is placed according to his/her own subjective meaning. The reader then becomes an active and autonomous, although hypothetical, participant in the constructed version of the past. This explicit and experimental forwarding of the subjectivity of representation is the novel's structural strength, but it also presents a potential weakness, because it risks an ethical and historical relativism due to its lack of a distinct, individual voice. I will discuss this in more detail later in the chapter.

Apart from its general narrativizing function, Szeman's experimental use of time also expresses the protagonists' individual search for meaning in each separate part. Contrary to Anya's heroine, both protagonists in *The Kommandant's Mistress* are portrayed as anti-heroes: they do not have Anya's dramatic recklessness, her morally intact behaviour or her

heroic acceptance of suffering. Max and Rachel struggle to address their pasts and to define themselves. Their accounts do not express a logical, chronological and controlled narrative of the Holocaust, as does the central testimony of *Anya*. The uncontrollability of wartime memories and of traumatic recall dominates the protagonists' subjective versions of the past: they are not chronologically linear, and not everything can be remembered. In *The Kommandant's Mistress*, the succession of memories is triggered by association: a word, expression or impression evokes the next memory. The stream-of-consciousness of thought is supported by the fragmentation of time. The frequency of time shifts – sometimes up to three per page, represented by the letters “a,” “b,” and “c” next to the page number on the horizontal axis – is illustrated in my interpretation of time in the novel as depicted in the chart below. Although in many sections of the novel it is clear when events are taking place, the indirectness and elusiveness of various passages means that this is necessarily a subjective interpretation to some degree.

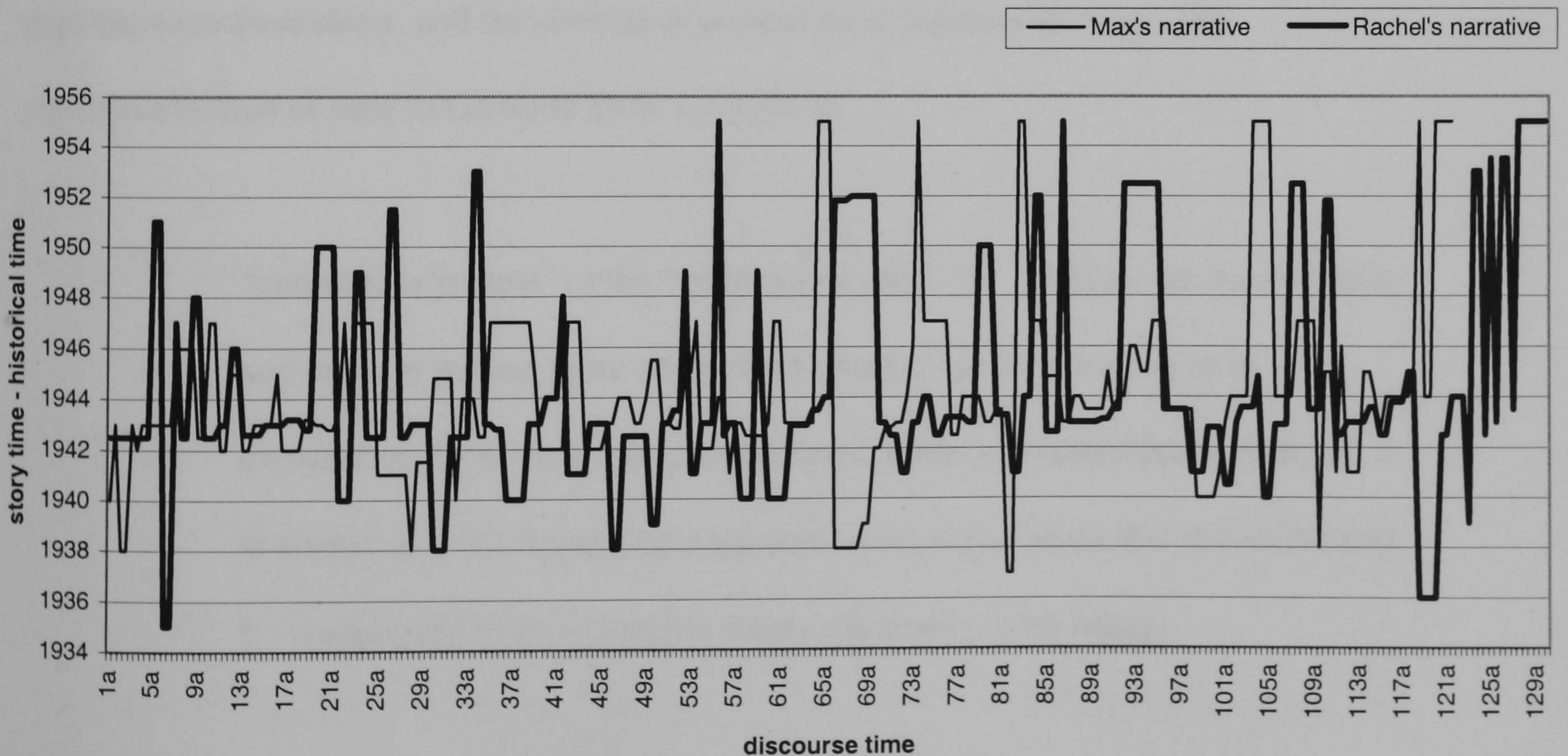


Fig. 2. Time Shifts: Relation Discourse Time and Story Time in *The Kommandant's Mistress*

The jagged lines of both Max and Rachel's graphs visualise the development of time in the protagonists' narratives. A narrated memory is represented by a peak in the line. The graphs then predominantly represent the time that is shifted between the protagonists' narrated memories. In Max and Rachel's discourse time, one moment of the past cannot be grasped for long before it drifts into another historical timeframe. The silent gaps between recollections give room to the unrepresentable loss and non-meaning of trauma, as suggested by Caruth and discussed in the introduction to this thesis. As Sicher observes, "[t]he repressions and silences of memory create lapses in the story" ("Holocaust Postmodernist" 317), which constitute the elusiveness of time. There is furthermore no identifiable present from which these incoherent memories are told. Although there is a position of hindsight, because the past tense indicates that these memories are told from a moment later in time than the described occurrence, there is no specific time in which this narrative position is placed. Max and Rachel are likewise never materialised in a present, contrary to Anya's explicit introduction of herself. The elusiveness of time is established through shifting memories, the gaps between these shifts, and the absence of present time. Szeman attributes this conceptualisation of time to Gertrude Stein's notion of

"continuous present" or the "continual present" [. . .] I think she meant it that you write in present tense all the time. But for me, it struck me as an explanation for memory. In your memory, when you remember something, it is always as if it's happening right then, even if you know that it is in the past [. . .] especially if it's traumatic things. (Interview with Maes)

The resemblance to Lawrence Langer's concept of durational time is remarkable. Langer states that:

[i]n the realm of durational time, no one recovers because nothing is recovered, only uncovered and then recovered, buried again beneath the fruitless struggle to expose “the way it was.” Holocaust memory cannot be used to certify belief, establish closure, or achieve certainty. Hence chronological time is needed to intrude on this memory by those who insist on rescuing belief, closure and certainty from testimonies about disaster. Durational time resists and undermines this effort [. . .] and this is what I call duration, which exists *this side* of the forgotten, not to be dredged from memory because it is always, has always been there – an always present past that in testimony becomes a presented past, and then, in narrative forms other than testimony, a represented past. (*Admitting* 15, original emphasis)

The linearity of Anya’s testimony, the reversed linear chronology of Martin Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* and a reader’s coherent interpretation of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* all work against the notion of durational time because they aim to secure meaning and to establish closure. On the contrary, Szeman’s narrative technique in parts one and two of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* invites the reader to remain in durational time or the continual present and to resist to some degree the “represented past” of the novel.

The Kommandant’s Mistress is structured around a notable tension between encouraging the reader’s involvement in the narrative on the one hand, and facilitating a critical distance and textual awareness of the constructedness of the subjectivity of memory on the other. Szeman accordingly notes: “I wanted the structure first of all to imitate memory, second to pull the

reader in” (Interview with Maes).⁶ The reader becomes caught up in the impasses of memory. The fragmentation of time gives an effect of urgency and builds up suspense as information about the past is only gradually and incoherently released, which gives the novel the features of a psychological thriller. Contrary to *Anya*, there are hardly any recollections of before the war in this novel, which results in a notable narrowing of focus. The narratives of the two parts consist almost exclusively of confrontational and dramatic scenes. The protagonists have less interior discourse than *Anya* because the emphasis is on action, which in places borders on the sensational. Max’s narrative recounts not only his relationship with Rachel but also three suicide scenes, an attack by a partisan, several Nazi gatherings, domestic fights and two murders of postwar persecutors. This is presented in short chapters, scenes and sentences which hold the reader’s attention. The stylistic techniques of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* otherwise mirror those in *Anya*. There is a large amount of dialogue, repetition, and explicit references to the act of remembering, which creates an entertaining and accessible literary format. Minutes after Rachel arrives on the platform of Max’s concentration camp, she is told that “[w]e have to survive so we can witness” (136). The frequency of such clichés intensifies the plot, but it also risks overstatement and hyperbole. The novel’s symbolism can be simplistic, almost humorous, at times: when Rachel talks to David about her infertility, there appear to be no more eggs for breakfast. The dominance of dialogue and the first-person narrative perspective, which encourages identification with the protagonists, lend the novel a cinematic quality. This is further enhanced by the novel’s filmic qualities of simultaneity, drama and identification, which reflect those in *Anya*. It is hardly surprising, then, that two film companies have considered making screen adaptations of *The Kommandant’s Mistress*.

⁶ Szeman’s second novel, *Only with the Heart* (2000) also deploys the structural devices of frequent time shifts and three narrative perspectives. This may suggest that the structure of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* is a preferred mode of narration for Szeman instead of a specific problematising of Holocaust representation.

The disorder of Max and Rachel's memories and their frequently inconsistent postwar behaviour demonstrate their subjective struggle for meaning. It shows that they too are unable to escape from the stasis of their pasts. Rachel wants to forget and to deny her Holocaust experience. She is, however, overwhelmed by traumatic recall that insists on a confrontation with her past. She suffers from the symptoms of PTSD: nightmares of the camps, survivor guilt and related suicide attempts. Her fear of the past is translated into paranoia as she imagines its literal return in the figure of the Kommandant. Rachel's postwar life is thus dominated by her Holocaust trauma. Her inability to write exemplifies this. Frustrated by her reluctance to consciously confront the past, David urges her to "write about the camp" because "[y]ou dream the camp. You talk the camp. You eat, sleep, breathe the camp" (210). Rachel is unable to express herself, however, because the wordless silence that she used as a survival strategy has evolved into a wordless void of trauma. The act of writing is further complicated in part three, when the narrator implies that Rachel used to be an acclaimed writer. The section contains a biographical entry for Leah Sarah Abramson, rather than Rachel Levi, but Rachel's work is likened to Abramson's *The Dead Bodies*. Rachel's writing, however, "lacks the tenderness and emotion for which Abramson is emulated" (269). When Rachel claims that "[s]he died there" (209) in the camps, she may be referring to the traumatic fragmentation of her self. This splitting or doubling of the self is dramatically performed when she arrives in Max's camp. She puts on a fur coat that emphasises her Aryan features in order to attract Max's attention, and the disguise literally transforms her into a different persona, a survivor self. Her inability to write would accordingly represent her inability to reclaim her prewar identity.

Max's struggle for meaning after the war shows that he is also overdetermined by the past. Karen Doerr confirms that "[f]or him too, as a form of nemesis, the past relentlessly and disturbingly interferes with the present" ("Memories" 61). His characterisation contrasts

sharply with the representation of Nazi perpetrators in *Anya*. Schaeffer either romanticises the German soldier as a disguised Jew in the figure of Erdmann, or he remains uncharacterised and stands as an embodiment of evil. Szeman's characterisation of Max and other upper-rank SS officers shows more similarity to Norma Rosen's portrayal of Eichmann, in aligning with early perpetrator studies that focused on higher-profile Nazis. However, Szeman does not abstract the perpetrator as does Rosen and, to a lesser extent, Schaeffer. *The Kommandant's Mistress* provides a potentially controversial portrait of an "ordinary" SS Kommandant, as Max is haunted by the past. After the war he attempts to kill himself and the notion of a split self is also evident in his portrayal, mirroring the characterisation of Rachel. Gitta Sereny's reflection on her interview with Franz Stangl, the commandant at Treblinka, draws out the possibility of multiple selves in a perpetrator:

"That's what I'm trying to explain to you: the only way I could live was to compartmentalize my thinking." (Here he came as close as he ever did to acknowledge in words his "creation" of an *alter ego* for himself.) [. . .] he showed us the two men he had become in order to survive. (120, original emphasis)

Rudolf Hoess' autobiography, on which the character of Max is largely based, likewise affirms: "I became a different person in Auschwitz" (112).⁷ When Max tells a survivor who has tracked him down "I'm not the man you think I am" (38), the sincerity of his separation between a wartime and postwar self can be doubted, but the suggestion of a split self nevertheless remains. Max continually has the same nightmare, but it notably does not repeat

⁷ The splitting of the perpetrator is a key narrative technique in *Time's Arrow*, as the first-person narrator is the soul divided from the body of the protagonist Nazi doctor, Odilo Unverdorben. This emphasises the moral accountability of the perpetrator, an issue that Szeman's novel problematically blurs.

his traumatic acts of violence. Rather, it symbolically represents his obsession with Rachel's published collection of poems in *The Dead Bodies That Line the Streets*. In these poems, Rachel describes his sexual abuse of her. Max's nightmare imagines Rachel on a ship that drifts away as his calls to her remain unheeded: "*The Dead Bodies That Line the Streets* fell from my hands into the water. *The Dead Bodies* swelled, and became a raft" (75). Max fails to interpret the "dead bodies" of the title as those of the camp he ruled. The intrusion of the past nevertheless disturbs and overdetermines his present: "[s]ometimes I forced myself to stay up all night, to keep the dreams away" (75).

Max and Rachel express their subjective truths in parts one and two respectively as they need to remember the past in their own ways in order to (re)construct their identities. In part two Rachel accordingly describes Max as "the Kommandant," while in part one Max only knows Rachel as "the girl." This anonymity allows each protagonist to project onto the other in order to confirm their own attribution of meaning. When Max discovers Rachel's poetry, he "shredded *The Dead Bodies* and stuffed the fragments into the fireplace" (95). This highly symbolic act incinerates Rachel's voice because Max experiences her point of view as a betrayal.⁸ Rachel's self-protective silence during her incarceration had allowed him to freely project his subjective truth onto her. He dismisses "every word in *The Dead Bodies*" as a lie (121), but explicitly claims the reliability of his own perspective: "[t]here was nothing left in the world but the truth. And sometimes, I felt I'd been left behind to tell it" (78). As in Marcie Hershmann's *Tales of the Master Race* (1991), Max's perspective in *The Kommandant's Mistress* encourages the reader to identify with the perpetrator, which in turn risks validating his repeated self-justifications. Doerr warns that this:

⁸ The scene can also be interpreted as a retrospective imaginative burning of Rachel's body in the ovens. It also reminds of Nazi bookburnings to which the novel refers (244).

skirts the danger of not only understanding his actions logically, but also comprehending them morally, seeing him as a victim of Nazi ideology, and even perhaps accepting his defensive rationalizations. (“Memories” 61)

Max insists on defining himself as a victim both of a love betrayed and of a prescriptive national ideology. He refuses to take responsibility for his actions. This is especially noticeable in his refuge in the figure of metonymy: “[m]y hand on Marta’s wrist freed the paper” (35). Whereas Schaeffer’s *Anya* romanticises victimhood, part one of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* romanticises victimisation. Max is convinced that his relationship with Rachel had an intimacy of trust: “[s]he trusted me. I tried to show her the real me” (93). These heartfelt “truths” are described before and after scenes of sexual abuse, which transform them for Max into acts of “making love.” Max needs to believe that he remained human while inflicting horror upon others. The Nazi rhetoric of violence and redemption glorifies the co-existence of such duality. The speech of the SS leader Heinrich at a Nazi rally, which closely echoes Himmler’s Posen speech, explicitly links victimisation to personal salvation:

[m]ost of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lying together. Five hundred. Or a thousand. [. . .] To have stuck it out and at the same time to have remained decent fellows. Decent, loyal, honest. That is what has made us hard. (102)⁹

⁹ In his legendary Posen speech on the fourth of October 1943, Heinrich Himmler stated: “[m]ost of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out, and – excepting cases of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard.” (qtd. in Lucy Dawidowicz 133). Szeman’s omission of “excepting cases of human weakness” can be read as an exaggeration of German megalomania, but so could its inclusion by Himmler.

Max's narrative constantly repeats the metaphor of the heart as hard in order to justify his actions, and to validate them in moral terms. The emphasis in Max's memories on the collective system excuses his accountability and agency as an individual.¹⁰ His consistent use of first names underlines the conformity with the collective. This is particularly noticeable in the fictionalised Wannsee conference, where Max meets an SS man who proudly announces: "[c]all me Adolf. I was named after our *Führer*, you know" (15, original italics). The individual is thus obliterated in and by the Nazi system. Max's narrative also demonstrates the camaraderie amongst Nazi officials (nation as family) but simultaneously attests to the internal control of bureaucracy (family as nation). Max illustrates the "normalcy" of Nazi ideology in wartime, as he unabashedly discusses the lethal nature of the gas in front of his children at breakfast, and comments on the stench of burned corpses in the camp during lunch. The use of religious imagery in the context of the Nazi fight for the redemption of Germany also highlights Max's belief in the Nazi cause. The mass rallies are presented as an initiation into this dogmatic religion:

[b]y putting on these uniforms, you are casting off your former selves. By swearing this oath, you are newly baptized. Into a new faith. A faith of blood. A faith that requires sacrifice, commitment, courage, strength, hardness. (68)

Max's subjective truth represents him as a naïve victim who was preconditioned by political propaganda. The self-justification of Max's narrative can be attributed to the purpose of his

¹⁰ Bernard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1995) displays similar plotlines to *The Kommandant's Mistress* and comparably emphasises the illiteracy of an SS perpetrator in relation to her vulnerability to the Nazi system. This historically unrepresentative fact, which has been extensively criticised, features strongly in the novel's tone of forgiveness and understanding. In *The Reader*, the perpetrator is thus also portrayed as a victim, although her crimes are obscured in contrast to Max's. However, its narrator provides more contemplative and (pre-empting) self-reflexive passages about perpetrator guilt than Max does. Although both novels aspire to give a more nuanced picture of the Nazi perpetrator, the moral ambiguity they propagate should not necessarily be interpreted as a successful achievement, as I will discuss later.

account, as the end of the penultimate chapter indicates that part one is his legal confession, which he signs: “I certify the accuracy and correctness of the reproduction with my signature” (112). His testimony directly contradicts Rachel’s *The Dead Bodies*, which Max’s wife immediately identified as “an indictment. She wouldn’t even need to be called as a witness. She’s already testified. Here. In these pages” (10).

Rachel’s subjective construction in part two is not exclusively a discourse of self-justification but also one of self-blame. Unlike Max, she does not explicitly claim the accuracy of her account. Rather, she persistently denies her traumatic camp experience: “I wasn’t in any of the camps” (131, 153). Her account emphasises her trauma of sexual abuse rather than that of the Holocaust. It can also reject her experience of both: by refusing to admit that she was in the camp, she also ignores the sexual abuse. The complicity with the Nazi perpetrator, of which the Jewish Underground accuses her, eliminates Rachel from collective Holocaust victimhood: “[s]he’s separated from the rest of us” (153). Precisely because Rachel believes that she is responsible for her own actions, she struggles between an identity of victimhood and one of complicity. Contrary to Anya, Rachel’s survivor guilt is less concerned with surviving other Jews than with surviving her own victimisation. Szeman’s complication of the perpetrator/victim dichotomy between and within the protagonists’ narratives confronts, in the terms of F.-W. Eickhoff, “the sacrilege of juxtaposing the two groups” and engages with the “disjunct parallelism between the persecuted and the persecutors” (34). Part two of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* does not subscribe to the ethical heroism of Anya. Zygmunt Bauman poignantly confirms that

[v]ictims are not guaranteed to be morally superior to their victimizers, and seldom emerge from the victimization morally ennobled. Martyrdom – whether lived in a real or a virtual reality – is not a warrant for saintliness. (36)

Rachel's memories regularly point to her complicity. The Jewish Underground, a female *Kapo*, Max's wife and his adjutant all call Rachel a "whore" (155, 242, 174, 250, 167). The title of the novel indicates that Rachel to some extent colludes in her abuse, as it "alludes to a sexual relationship with the woman's consent" (Doerr, "Verisimilitude" 158). The complexity of her subjective truth concerns the notion of agency, which she needs to locate outside herself in order to define the trauma of her sexual abuse as a survival strategy. She needs to realise her "choiceless choice," as Langer terms it, "where crucial decisions [were] imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing" ("Auschwitz" 72). In part two, Max is accordingly portrayed as a ruthless aggressor: he is a powerful, brutal, drunk and misogynist Nazi. Rachel remembers his speech as eloquent, consisting of long sentences that emphasise his arrogance, while in part one his utterances are short and repetitive in order to highlight his approachability. Rachel displaces the agency of her act of attracting Max's attention onto her fur coat: "[t]he coat was so hot and heavy it made my heart pound. I unfastened it the rest of the way" (157). Rachel also identifies with the Jewish collective in order to define her identity as a victim. When Max abuses her in his office, Rachel "closed my eyes again, and held my breath, to lose myself" (239). Whether her initial motivation to do this concerns an affirmation of her own traumatic experience or an escape from it, it is countered by the horror outside which reflects and reinforces the bodily pain that she experiences:

[t]he naked Jews outside moved slowly toward the brick building with its tall chimneys. A guard pulled one of the young girls from the line. She looked back toward the others as the guard took her around the corner of the building. Three other guards followed them. Several guards laughed as a dog tore at the flesh of an elderly Jew. (177)

The emphasis on the actions of the guards in this extract unambiguously attributes the agency of victimisation to the Nazis. The vulnerability of Rachel's naked body is mirrored by the naked bodies of the inmates and the rape of Rachel is repeated in the implied rape of the young girl. The victimhood of the collective Jewish race merges with and includes Max's abuse of Rachel. She seeks to remember herself as part of the collective, although her subjective construction of the past struggles with a tension between her identification with the positions of both perpetrator and victim.

As I have suggested above, one problem with the subjectivity of memory in *The Kommandant's Mistress* is that there are in the novel insufficiently distinctive individual protagonists. David A. Beronä accordingly remarks that the experimental structure is “too haphazard for either character to become fully realised” (99). I have argued that the structure adequately represents the protagonists' subjective struggle for meaning, but it also leads to a lack of individual characterisation. Max and Rachel's characters overlap as they overdefine each other, because there are hardly any other developed characters against or in relation to whom they can identify themselves. They are the only observers of the other's behaviour at key moments of crisis. The novel's restricted focus on their shared wartime past causes them to “have meaning only in relation to each other” (Rose 233). This contrasts sharply with Anya's individual characterisation due to her experience of different surroundings and networks of personal relations, which repeatedly force her to reassert and to redefine her identity. Max's office in the concentration camp is the predominant space of the novel. This narrow setting results in an abstract psychological reality, rather than the tangible realist reality of Schaeffer's *Anya*. When Rachel attempts to write, she hits the keys of the typewriter in frustration, with “[t]he letters in my name. I rolled the sheet up to read what I

had typed./ *Kazett* / I shoved the typewriter off the desk” (192, original italics). Rachel’s identity is reduced to the space that continues to psychologically enclose her.

The purpose of the juxtaposition of perpetrator and victim in *The Kommandant’s Mistress* seems to be the ambiguity of human behaviour: anyone could have fulfilled either position during the war. This concept inevitably calls to mind Primo Levi’s “grey zone” which problematises the distinction between perpetrator and victim. Levi is explicit about the inflexibility of the moral positions of both: “[t]he oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim” (*Drowned* 13). However, he also illustrates the blurring of the boundaries between these identities due to the organisation of the camps:

[i]t is a grey zone, with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge [. . .] It must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state. (*Drowned* 27-28)

Rachel’s struggle between victimhood and complicity is addressed by this blurred boundary as the system of the camp provides her with a morally ambiguous strategy for survival.

However, the fact that both protagonists converge so much leads to a moral relativism against which Levi argues. The structure of *The Kommandant’s Mistress* insists that any truth is a subjective construction, and perpetrator or victim identity accordingly becomes an arbitrary position that is solely defined by circumstance. The postmodern playfulness with “[r]elativism, that is, the dependence of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ on point of view or cultural context” (King, “Postmodern” 388) thus threatens to obliterate both the individual and the notion of free will. Sicher confirms that this novel “tends to make all human relationships

relativistic and amoral” (“Holocaust Postmodernist” 319). An ethical void is created as human beings are presented as blank slates waiting to be inscribed with history.

Although parts one and two of the novel have individual narrators, they share a unity of voice. Szeman confirms the fusion of different perspectives within one mode of expression: “I thought of that as my Holocaust voice. I wanted to show that they were both traumatised by their experiences in the camps. [. . .] I wanted that voice to be the traumatised voice” (Interview with Maes). Max and Rachel frequently use the same terminology. The gerund “pounding” in both parts links descriptions of Rachel’s sexual abuse (139, 150, 154, 217) with Max’s suicide attempts (102) and inmates begging for his attention (36, 54). The protagonists’ subjective narratives are aligned as both objectify the other and identify with the collective. They also register shock with identical reactions of voicelessness. At a signing session, a survivor asks Rachel to sign a copy of *The Dead Bodies*, which she denies having written. The unexpected re-emergence of her past numbs her into silence: “I looked at her in silence. [. . .] The noise of the shoppers in the bookstore suddenly seemed far away, and there was only her voice” (131). Max’s reply to Marta, who confronts him with *The Dead Bodies*, is likewise described as falling into a wordless and soundless void: “I didn’t hear Marta’s words [. . .] A voice was there but I didn’t know it. I’d lost the words” (94). *The Dead Bodies* symbolises their shared “Holocaust voice” as part three suggests that the book contains poems by both Max and Rachel: “[t]hey contain a curious blend of romanticized Germanic heroes and folklore on the one hand, and biting irony and naked violence on the other” (268). Rachel scribbles on stolen drafts of Max’s poetry in his office. These similarities and unifications of voice undermine the novel’s structural representation of the subjectivity of memory as the characters lose their individual expressions of subjectivity.

The overall structure of parts one and two of *The Kommandant's Mistress* likewise parallels the protagonists' acts of memory. The first words and last scene in each part mirror the other, which undermines the individuality of the characters for they both remember the past in an identical manner. The first words of both parts poignantly echo one another and register the narrator's initial perception of the other. Max's part begins with "[t]hen I saw her. There she stood" (3), while Rachel remembers "[t]hen I saw him. There he stood" (127). These opening lines attest to the ultimate definition that they have given to each other's lives and/or to their indistinctive and unified characterisation. The last scenes merge to similarly intertwine the protagonists. Max finds Rachel and reads poetry from *The Dead Bodies* to her. His version ends when he puts the book down and walks away, while Rachel's version portrays her as shooting him.¹¹ Their activities of writing and killing are appropriated by the other. *The Dead Bodies* is a literal return of the past. It symbolises powerlessness for both Max and Rachel. *The Dead Bodies* is what threw Max into a wordless void, and his reading of it to Rachel can be seen as an articulation of his distress. For Rachel, the book is her first articulation of trauma, an act of empowerment through words of which she proves to be incapable for a long time after the war. In her perspective, Max's reading of her words out loud is a re-appropriation of her in the most excruciating sense. She says: "[w]hen I heard his voice, I lost my own" (254). Max's reading does not necessarily have to be an act of retaliation, however. It can express his desire for her to understand him through performing his attempt to comprehend her experience. He is "desperate to convey his perspective" (Doerr, "Verisimilitude" 160). When he speaks her language for the first time, a psychological catharsis is implied because he acknowledges her perspective: "[a]ll the words that had been twisting inside me came pouring out [. . .] I wanted her to understand. I had to make her see. That's why I used her words. Mine had already failed" (122). Rachel's killing

¹¹ Although there remains uncertainty about whether or not the closing scenes of both parts are imagined or remembered, such ambiguity seems irrelevant to the expressed subjectivity.

of Max likewise represents a profoundly ambiguous gesture. She remembers in the final scene that he once said: “[n]o matter what you do, you’ll never be free of me” (254). This time shift towards a further past is a structural device that is rarely deployed in the novel. Rachel’s killing of Max can be read as a safeguarding of her own voice and/or the dead bodies. However, it can also be read as her setting him free. When Max attempts suicide in the camp, he falters and urges his gun into Rachel’s hands to kill him. He tells her, “*Du. Freiheit*” (17, 55, original italics). Whether her or his freedom is meant remains ambiguous but Rachel understands him as saying: “[f]ree me” (239). In the camp, she is unable to comply because his murder would result in her own death, but the shift in context after the war allows her to shoot him. Rachel might also be killing part of herself, the Rachel who was determined by him and who to some extent still identifies with him. The phallic imagery attached to the gun symbolises that his wartime power is now assumed by Rachel as she becomes the perpetrator of a crime. In the final scenes, the moment in which Max and Rachel recognise and acknowledge each other’s individuality instead of objectifying the other is precisely the moment when they are ultimately prevented from encountering and understanding each other. *The Dead Bodies* and the gun are what simultaneously unites and separates them: “[t]he weapon lay there, beside *The Dead Bodies*, which had fallen with him” (255). The past is lost forever even as it is finally recognised. Max identifies with the victim in himself (reading as acknowledgment of his disillusionment) and in Rachel (reading as acknowledgment of her trauma). Rachel identifies with the perpetrator in Max (killing as revenge) and herself (killing as an act of self-defence). Max ultimately becomes the victim and Rachel the perpetrator, which again substantiates the unification and interchangeability of the protagonists’ identities.

One other scene in *The Kommandant’s Mistress* explicitly forwards the interchangeability of the roles of perpetrator and victim. It strikingly represents the ambiguity

of human behaviour, but also reduces human actions solely to such ambiguity. In part two, Rachel remembers that Max invited her into his house, got very drunk and showed her “on his inner left forearm, in black ink: a Jewish, six-pointed star. ‘Now I am a Jew,’ he said” (222). Max clearly identifies with the victim role in order to confirm their intimate relationship, as he sees it. The metaphor is however an abstract one, as he does not empathise with the individual Rachel, but with the collective category of “Jew.” Max’s self-declaration as a Jew and as a victim triggers Rachel’s rage. With his service dagger she starts carving his arm. Rachel remembers the scene in excruciating detail:

[v]ery carefully, very slowly, with steady pressure, I cut the six-pointed star on his inner forearm. [. . .] I gouged the skin: I wanted it to be a thick, raised scar. The Kommandant clenched his teeth. That pleased me. Blood chased the knife’s glittering path. [. . .] I made it last a long time. [. . .] I felt happy. (222)

Rachel wants to mark him as she has been branded by rape and the tattoo of the camp, which she describes as “mutilati[on]” (237). By carving a Jewish symbol on his body, she simultaneously accepts and rejects his subjective construction of himself as a victim, as she wants him to lose his liberty forever: “[b]eside the star, almost the same size, I made three more cuts, so he would never be free: *K* for *Kommandant*” (222, original emphasis). She literally inscribes the language of the Reich into him. The letter “K” is the signature with which Max authorises documents of deportation and elimination. Rachel thus affirms his identity as aggressor and re-inscribes him into the Nazi system which precisely obliterates his individuality. Comparable to her act of killing Max in the final scene, Rachel recognises the perpetrator in herself and in Max because she becomes an oppressor in exactly the same way as him: the power of inflicting pain sexually arouses her. Rachel says:

I wanted to cut him, on his chest, on his back, on his thighs. I wanted to put the dagger between his legs. I wanted him to writhe and cry out. I wanted to be with him, right then, there, on the floor. I wanted him to touch me for once, with his hands, his mouth, with his tongue, until I was wet [. . .] And I wanted him inside me. [. . .] When I put my tongue in his mouth, the Kommandant moaned, and clutched me desperately to him. (223)

Rachel's sexual enjoyment of her power over Max can be interpreted as an act of revenge for Max's ink-drawn Star of David and for his victimization of her. It is however also an act of aggression that aligns her with him and thus paradoxically enforces the fusion of their identities which Max intended. In part one, Max does not remember this scene at all, but does notice the scar and shows it to Rachel with the same words: "*Jetzt bin ich ein Jude* [. . .] Finally, we might understand each other" (57, original italics). The brief exchange of the positions of victim and victimiser works to confirm Max's subjective truth. In shame, Rachel does realise the horror of her actions because she is aware of the moral difference between both positions. This moment of interchangeability nevertheless again underscores the unity of both characters in the ambiguity of human behaviour, as it represents "the interdependence of their master-slave relationship" (Sicher, "Holocaust Postmodernist" 318). Each individual character remains solely defined by the other.

There is an inherent contradiction in Szeman's historical approach to the Holocaust. If there is no historical truth, if all truth is necessarily constructed by subjective points of view and cultural context – the extremity of which causes the degeneration of her individual protagonists into indistinctive roles – then why does Szeman use a collage of potential authentic moments? There are many historical events in *The Kommandant's Mistress* and

fragments of historical sources, such as Himmler's Posen speech, are also integrated into the novel. This contrasts strikingly with Schaeffer, who is reluctant to consult historical sources so that the emphasis in *Anya* remains on the individual experience. *Anya* is a realist representation of history: details of ordinary life and a social and moral function are its prerogatives. Szeman's historical scope aims to be all-inclusive but an overload of historical information at times risks stifling the plot. The collage of facts moreover causes historical inaccuracies. The fictional character who represents Adolf Eichmann for instance takes notes at the Wannsee conference like his historical counterpart. He is quoted as saying "[h]aving millions of Jews on my conscience gives me such extraordinary satisfaction that I could jump into my grave laughing" (54) and "I never killed a Jew" (89), both controversial statements that are well documented in sources about the Eichmann trial. When Eichmann then tells Max to "[c]all me Adolf. I was named after our *Führer*, you know" (15, original italics), it seems quite impossible for Hitler's contemporary to be baptised in his leader's name. The incorporation of historical details into the narratives of Max and Rachel encourage the reader to guess which facts are real and which are fictional. *The Kommandant's Mistress* strives to achieve an authenticity that lends the fictional construct the authority of "real" events. Szeman places an author's note at the end of the novel to inform the reader of its historical basis. It contains a detailed bibliography of historical sources, carefully divided into quoted and consulted materials. Szeman also includes a self-reflexive statement about her project:

[t]his work, though fiction, contains historical figures whose words and deeds have been documented. Many of the quotes attributed both directly and indirectly to these figures appear in this novel. I have, however, used artistic license by putting this material into contexts in which it did not originally appear. (271)

This paragraph explicitly states that the novel is a construct or a representation because “artistic license” is used. However, it first and foremost claims to represent the historical reality of the Holocaust. Its literary status is considered as secondary to the importance of mimesis. Sicher confirms that this awkward appendix represents a “claim for historical veracity” (“Holocaust Postmodernist” 317). The historical facts, quotes and figures are not merely put in a different context; they are the context out of which the novel is made.

Szeman’s historical approach exemplifies Young’s observations on documentary realism in fiction: “by mixing actual events with completely fictional characters, a writer simultaneously relieves himself of an obligation to historical accuracy (invoking poetic license), even as he imbues his fiction with the historical authority of real events” (52). Szeman’s author’s note strikingly contrasts with Philip Roth’s “Note to the Reader” in *The Plot Against America* (2004). Roth uses historical data in order to write an alternative literary history: he imagines that the isolationist Charles Lindbergh and not Franklin Roosevelt won the 1940 presidential election. He does not repeat history but displaces it in an original literary construction. The appendix states: “*The Plot Against America* is a work of fiction. This postscript is intended as a reference for readers interested in tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins” (364). Roth first claims the fictionality or constructedness of his novel and secondly mentions the historical research in a self-reflexive outline of the postscript’s purpose with regard to the reader’s interests and not the author’s as in Szeman’s appendix. Roth is thus more consistently postmodern in his historical approach to the Second World War. Precisely because there is not one historical truth, alternative versions of history can search for its (absence of) meaning.

The function of Max and Rachel as prototypes of the Nazi and the Jew likewise underlines Szeman’s inconsistent historical approach. She aims to be all-inclusive by making her protagonists historical representatives of the role they perform:

Max is an archetypal Nazi and Rachel is an archetypal Jew so that everything that happened to all the Jews happens to Rachel and her family and everything that all the Nazis did, happens to Max and his family so in that respect, they're not realistic, because [. . .] I want them to represent the entire movement and the entire historical situation. (Interview with Maes)

Szeman seems to realise the historical impossibility of this ambitious project: “[n]o one person could have done all of that” (Interview with Maes). Contrary to *Anya*, the protagonists are representative because they encompass all of history. *Anya* is representative of Holocaust victims and survivors because she is part and representative of the collective. Max and Rachel's credibility as individuals is tainted by their representability, although their psychological portrayal remains largely convincing. When the first-person plural is used in *The Kommandant's Mistress*, it refers to Nazis or Jewish victims. The use of “we” in *Anya* expresses the intimacy of immediate biological or surrogate family members. In Szeman's novel the first-person narrative perspective is self-centred and extremely self-aware. It does not represent the widely experienced witnessing that is evident in *Anya*. Doerr likewise notes of *The Kommandant's Mistress* that “the focus is always on the singular form ‘I’ as a point of reference. By contrast, survivors usually employ the collective ‘we’ in their recollections, which shifts the focus to the historical scope of the situation” (“Memories” 57). Ironically, Max and Rachel's characterisation, although representative in intent, remains locked into a self-centred focus. Szeman says that her motivation for creating these archetypes is her audience. She intends it:

[f]or the people who don't know the story of the Holocaust. [. . .] The people who know the Holocaust, recognise what I did. They understood that not one

person could have done all that, so they view them more as symbolic of what people went through, and the people who don't know the Holocaust, don't know it, and so they learn it. (Interview with Maes)

However, it is debatable whether a reader who is not familiar with the history of the Holocaust can learn it from a collage of historical details. As the individual characters Max and Rachel merge within one traumatised Holocaust voice and as they represent the entire history of the Holocaust, the voice of *The Kommandant's Mistress* does not express the subjectivity of memory but the omniscience of history, which the experimental structure of the novel precisely attempts to deconstruct.

Gender in Holocaust Memory

In *Anya* and *The Kommandant's Mistress*, gender features prominently in both the fictionalised historical experience and in the subjective constructions of memory. These novels, however, approach gender Holocaust awareness very differently. Schaeffer's *Anya* displays a typically Jewish feminism, which focuses predominantly on the family and children. In Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress* sexuality and its abuses during the Holocaust take centre stage. The work of Elizabeth Baer and Myrna Goldenberg helps to clarify this difference. They remark that earlier gender studies of the Holocaust showed an "unwillingness to demythologize Jewish women's behaviour [which] foreshadowed the later sacralization of the Holocaust" (xviii). Schaeffer's novel of the 1970s tends towards a mythologisation of the protagonist as Anya's subjective truth or personal "myth" emphasises the portrayal of morally correct behaviour. Szeman's novel of the 1990s ostensibly dispels the sacralization of the Holocaust by addressing morally ambiguous topics, such as parallels

between perpetrator and victim. However, she also uses the established framework of the Holocaust in order to express a narrative of sexual abuse. The conviction that “ideology was far more significant than sexism in the attempt to annihilate the Jews, a conclusion in which virtually all serious scholars concur” (Baer and Goldenberg xxvii), is at times neglected or overlooked in *The Kommandant's Mistress* while it is often underlined in *Anya*.

Considering that academic research relating to gender in Holocaust studies only began to gain recognition in the 1980s, Schaeffer's gendered approach in *Anya* is particularly noteworthy.

Although Abramovich notes that “Schaeffer's book specifically integrates a feminist discourse” (295), it clearly attributes the suffering of women to their persecution as Jews. The noticeable underrepresentation of men in the novel is for instance not solely attributable to Schaeffer's gendered discourse but also to the historical context as the Holocaust often separated men and women, as for example in the camps. Due to *Anya's* focus on individual experience and the fact that positions of political power were assigned to men, many male characters only serve a function as benevolent rescuer, such as Ganz at the *Judenrat* who helps to smuggle Ninka out of the ghetto. Alan Mintz justifiably criticises the novel's undeveloped characterisation of men and its gender imbalance:

[t]here is, moreover, something suffocating and constricted in the relentless focus on the family, made even more so by the way in which male characters are overshadowed and effaced by the women, and relations between men and women go virtually unrepresented. (“Mothers” 90)

Schaeffer's gender approach, however, not only concerns the relations between and of the sexes. It is also an expression of Jewishness. Schaeffer writes an implicitly Jewish novel by

emphasising women and the family; she observes that “the word ‘Jewish’ and the word ‘family’ were synonymous. [. . .] To me family life and Jewish life are indistinguishable” (“Conversation” 90). In *Anya*, the family is the structural network that the protagonist falls back upon and consistently creates anew. Schaeffer accordingly uses “the form of the family novel” (Bilik 103) in order to provide continuity in the protagonist’s life, story and history, but also to emphasise the survival of the Jewish people. The domestic setting of the family is presented as the site of survival, which resists persecution. This also ties into a feminist agenda for “[i]f we encourage the development of a society infused with the ethic of caring, despite the ubiquity of the urge to power, are we not compelled to redefine the concepts of heroism and resistance?” (Baer and Goldenberg xxiv). *Anya* advances a discourse of family as resistance because it provides a network of care. In the female Holocaust experience in *Anya*, emotional bonding of often exclusively female families sustains life because it gives it meaning. The maintenance of everyday family rituals provides meaning because it frames the chaos of war within a manageable domestic setting: “EVEN now things were settling into a pattern” (200, original capitals). In *Anya*, the central character of resistance within the family unit is the mother, due to her ability to give and sustain life, emphasised by means of Anya’s medical career. As in Judy Budnitz’s “Hershel,” which I will go on to discuss in chapter four, the image of the ovens as historical places of destruction is imaginatively reversed into safe spaces that preserve life. In the ghetto, Anya’s mother escapes many “actions” because the family “can hide her in the oven” (224). In postwar America, the role of the mother conversely represents Anya’s trauma because it threatens to engulf her identity. Jacqueline Mintz accordingly notes:

the historical and social forces which divested her of all but her maternal instinct have stunted her forever [. . .] she becomes a caricature of the

domineering and all-consuming mother [. . .] Anya's mothering is a perversion of the act itself. (353-54)

Anya desperately clings to Ninka because her daughter embodies the resistance and survival of the family – and by implication the Jewish race. She is a trace of the female historical Holocaust experience, but she also represents the way in which Anya remembers and attributes meaning. The medium of photography, which captures Anya's desire for continuity, reunites the permanently lost family in the figure of Ninka: “‘she is the photograph album,’ I thought, seeing myself turn the pages with Momushka. [. . .] Ninka was that living book” (378). Rebecca, Anya and Ninka converge in the album as they do in Anya's constructed testimony. Comparable to the duplication of Ozick's protagonist of *The Shawl*, Rosa, in her dead daughter, Anya envisions Ninka as her double: “Ninushka is my whole life” (513). Ninka's survival is her own, precisely because Ninka “is both a link with the vanished past and a sign-post for the future” (Berger, “Holocaust Survivors” 82). Although Schaeffer's explicitly gendered approach to the Holocaust is epitomised in Ninka, her individual characterisation remains convincingly developed. The figure of the child is here not a mere emblem or symbolic device, as it is in much Holocaust fiction.¹²

Sexual assault also expresses the trauma of the Holocaust in *Anya*. The protagonist's constructed subjective narrative attempts to repress such disruptive memories. As suggested in the introduction, women's Holocaust testimonies generally avoid confronting such topics:

¹² In *Schindler's List* (1982) Thomas Keneally's girl in the red coat (highlighted by Steven Spielberg in his largely black-and-white film adaptation by using colour) is representative of such superficial stereotyping: “At the rear, dawdling, was a toddler, boy or girl, dressed in a small scarlet coat and cap. It compelled Schindler's interest because it made a statement. [. . .] The statement had to do, of course, with a passion for red” (141).

[o]ral and written testimony acknowledge but generally refrain from graphic development of sexual abuse, probably because it is either too painful to recall publicly or because women have been socialized to remain silent about such issues and interviewers rarely press for such detail. Novelists have more license to develop this topic under the guise of fiction and thereby represent a portion of women's Holocaust experience that is often muted in testimony.

(Kremer, "Women" 263)

Anya's downplaying of sexual abuse in her memories would then be suggestive of Holocaust testimony, achieving an authenticity of representation rather than of historical fact. It moreover reaffirms the sensitivity of the subject matter. Sexual violence is kept offstage in her testimony, although its threat is ever-present. The protagonist's initiation in the Kaiserwald camp, however, contains a detailed scene of sexual harassment that is strikingly amplified by its rarity in the novel:

"So," one [soldier] said approaching me, "lice, eh?" He pinched my nipples. "And how is this, after the trip, all dirty, eh?" He pulled at my pubic hair. [. . .] My breasts were so sore I could feel the pain in my toes. [. . .] he clipped the hair under our arms, then our pubic hair [. . .] then came the gasoline from the can, poured all over my hair, from head to toe. "Bend over," he ordered, pouring it down my back, then spreading my behind, pouring it in. It burned; I was sore from diarrhea. (280-81)

This scene of violation indicates the trauma of Anya's Holocaust experience and the disruption of her memories of Kaiserwald. Gender is used as a way of structuring the

remembrance of the past and attributing meaning to it, as this traumatic fragment occurs at the beginning of a new chapter, chapter three, in Anya's testimony.

In *The Kommandant's Mistress*, gendered Holocaust awareness focuses on the sexual relationship between the protagonists. In this way, Szeman inscribes an autobiographical element into her novel. The author has a long personal history of physical, sexual and psychological abusive relationships (Szeman, Home page). The body as a site of violence, injury and abuse is then not only imagined but personally experienced by the author, and this feeds into the novel. *The Kommandant's Mistress* does not rewrite or interpret the Holocaust from a gendered point of view as *Anya* does, but it rather defines the event in terms of gender instead of in predominantly racial or ideological terms.

Szeman's novel underwrites the traditional definitions of the sexes: men are oppressive and women are oppressed. Most of the characters who appear in Max's part of the novel are male perpetrators, such as Dieter, Eichmann, Himmler, and his adjutant. Many of the characters in Rachel's part are female victims, particularly the women of the Jewish Underground. The only characters who resist such gender classification are the protagonists' partners: Marta is a strong Nazi wife and David is a compassionate husband, but both characterisations feature solely in Rachel's part. Max is presented as the embodiment of misogyny in both parts. Even in his own narrative, his understanding of gender is excessively simplistic: "I don't think women understand men's work. They're so intent on family that they don't see that the family couldn't exist without everything that we men do, without our work. But men understand each other, without having to talk about it" (6).

The individual family in Szeman's novel is not as inseparable from the protagonists as in *Anya*. The concept of the family serves the historical archetypes that the protagonists represent. Max considers the state and Nazi brotherhood to be more his family than his own:

he worships “my family, my Germany” (69). After *Kristallnacht*, Rachel wants her family to be a network of resistance: “[w]e’re going to have to look out for ourselves now, and protect each other” (157). Her mother and father are, however, consistently portrayed and thus remembered as a burden on Rachel that minimizes her chances of survival. Although the family in *Anya* can act as a source of support and comfort during the Holocaust, this notably fails to be the case in *The Kommandant’s Mistress*. In her postwar attribution of meaning to the past, however, Rachel’s establishment of her own family proves to be redemptive. The adoption of Althea, an orphaned Holocaust victim, allows Rachel to find the voice to express her own subjective truth as she starts to write. Rachel’s act of writing is comparable to Ninka’s embodiment of the family album in *Anya* and Hattie’s creation of a surreal play after the birth of her daughter in *Touching Evil*, because Althea’s fragility and her behaviour suggest that she is Rachel’s double. The end of Szeman’s novel then presents family as securing the continuity of identity and the expression of subjective truth.

The concept of resistance in *The Kommandant’s Mistress* is portrayed in conventional terms, mirroring the definition of Baer and Goldenberg: “[r]esistance traditionally denotes two extremes: the use of weapons and the strategy of passivity” (xxiv). The female network of the Jewish Underground defines power in terms of violence, and smuggles weapons and ammunition in order to gain the power to resist. They succeed in blowing up a crematorium oven at Max’s camp. Max remembers the actions of the Partisans as a challenge to his own masculine authority: “one of the females [partisans], as so often happens, put her hand under her skirt and pulled out an oval hand grenade from her underpants” (238). Rachel’s use of passivity as resistance is most poignant in her silence towards Max, but as discussed before this complicates her postwar subjective struggle for meaning. In part one, Max’s perception of Rachel as a passive victim excites him. Her body is constantly described and desired in

terms of fragility: “[s]he seemed so frail, so beautiful” (84). Rachel then uses Max’s prejudices and perceptions in order to secure her own survival. His preconceptions of Jews and Aryans likewise remain unchallenged but are used by Rachel against him. When she arrives in the camp, Max first of all seeks to place her outside of the racial category to which she has been assigned: “[y]ou can’t be a Jew? [. . .] You don’t even look like a Jew. [. . .] Are both your parents Jews? [. . .] Do you have any ancestors who were not Jews?” (11, 134). Max does not want to confirm but deny her identity. He excludes her from the category of Jews in order to be able to uphold his own conception of that category, and in this space of confusion Rachel’s survival becomes possible.

The Kommandant’s Mistress is pervaded with sexual scenes. Max offers Rachel to Dieter as a birthday present, Rachel’s vagina is nearly burnt with a cigarette and there are two instances of gang rape. The sexual body is “meant to shock into realization of the obscene horror, but can end up titillating” (Sicher, “Holocaust Historical” 384), which entirely opposes the objectification of the sexual body in *Anya*. Szeman’s novel has been intensely criticised for its eroticizing potential. It has been referred to as “Holocaust pornography” (Kremer, “Jewish American Fiction”), “pulp fiction [that] may devalue the general credibility of narratives about the Holocaust” (Sicher, “Future” 82) and it has encountered claims of “pornographic fascism” (Sivan 2). As “rape by the SS was rare” (Kremer, “Women” 263), the novel’s deviation from historical reality is worth questioning, not because this discredits its fictional plot but because it overemphasises its importance in representing the Holocaust. There is a risk that a lack of self-reflexivity regarding the novel’s central trope of sexual abuse can eroticise the Holocaust and make *The Kommandant’s Mistress* a novel about a sexual relationship, with the Holocaust as its spectacular setting.

A comparison of the novel with Liliana Cavani's controversial film *The Night Porter* (1974) is instructive in this context. The two protagonists and the plot of this film resemble *The Kommandant's Mistress*, although Szeman only saw the movie after having written the novel (Interview with Maes). Max is an SS doctor who seduces Lucia, a Jewish inmate, in a concentration camp. The movie is mostly set in the post-Holocaust era in which Max and Lucia meet by chance in the hotel where he works as a night porter. There he associates with former SS members who erase documents and kill witnesses of their wartime past in order to protect themselves from Nazi hunters and to uphold their loyalty to the party. Although Max brutally abuses Lucia in the camp, the protagonists' decision to stay together as a couple after their re-encounter, implies a sadomasochistic bond between the two. The former SS members and friends of Max eventually starve and kill the couple.

The eroticising characteristics of Cavani's film are reminiscent of Szeman's novel. There is an abundance of sexual reference, as Rebecca Scherr observes: "every flashback, every 'memory,' contains a sexual encounter between Max and Lucia, whether explicit or suggested" (282). Lucia's voicelessness and the fragility of her body, like Rachel's, mark the site of oppression. The image of the victimised Jewish woman also spurs erotic fantasies in other examples of Holocaust fiction, such as William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979) where Stingo is aroused by the thought of the emaciation of Sophie's body. The erotic scenes in Cavani's film and Szeman's novel both display a close attention to bodily detail. Cavani's repetition of extreme close-ups of Lucia's body demonstrates a "paranoid eroticism" (Scherr 280), while Szeman's narration displays a comparable and troubling tendency towards the language of pulp fiction which is present in both accounts. Max remembers how Rachel initiates the sexual act: "[w]hen she undid my belt, I closed my eyes. Her hands drifted over my body, and her skin was cool on mine. Then warm. Insistent" (52). Rachel distinctly recalls that: "I closed my eyes as the Kommandant yanked open his pants. He leaned over

me, heavy and hot in the darkness, and forced himself between my thighs, his gloved fingers roughly guiding him” (139).

Rebecca Scherr argues that “[i]n itself, the act of watching sexual intercourse unfold onscreen [or on the page] holds the power to sexually excite the viewer” (283). In *The Night Porter*, however, there is a notable self-reflexivity in relation to the act of watching. During the first flashback in the film, Max is shown filming Lucia through the lens of a camera. All subsequent flashbacks are then visualised from his perspective. Marga Cottino-Jones claims that “the camera manipulates the spectator’s gaze into a close association with Max’s gaze, thus constructing a potential identification with the spectator’s feelings and Max’s sadistic motivations” (108). Although identification with Cavani’s Max is possible, there is also a level of mediation which indicates a critical awareness and acts to distance the viewer. In Szeman’s novel, the reader “is tricked into complicity in sexual attitudes” of victimisation through Max’s point of view in the first part of the novel (Sicher, “Holocaust Postmodernist” 318). The linear experience of reading first encounters Max’s erotic perception of Rachel, which inevitably preconditions the reception of Rachel’s version of the facts. Her complicity in her own abuse and/or her sexual enjoyment then become viable interpretations. The narrators are not materialized in a present, which also remains undefined. Parts one and two are presented as intimately personal revelations of the past. Neither narrator nor reader is metafictionally present and the voyeuristic perspective of the reader as a “peeping tom” is not discouraged. In *The Night Porter*, various fictional audiences are shown. The concentration camp inmates watch Max and Lucia; there is an audience at the opera when Max watches Lucia; an audience of German SS soldiers watches Lucia perform an erotic cabaret and a group of SS men watch Max and Lucia hide and starve in an apartment. The extratextual audience of the film consequently looks at and through the perspectives of these internal audiences at the erotic spectacle of a sexually abusive relationship. For Cavani, then, the act

of watching as separate from the act of narration, is self-reflexively presented within the Holocaust representation.

Liliana Cavani and Sherri Szeman both depart from the same premise: to explore the subjectivity of memory and the ambiguity of human behaviour. In making the film, Cavani's "main motivation was that the basic difference between victims and victimizers consisted in the fact that victims remembered, while victimizers searched to find excuses in the logic of war in order to forget" (Cottino-Jones 107). I have suggested that Cavani maintains this premise and consistently intertwines the subjectivity of memory with a self-reflexive representation of the spectacle of sexual abuse. A contrast between the film and the novel underlines the weaknesses of Szeman's representation, which does not allow for sufficient critical distance from Max's perspective. Scherr's critique of Cavani is perhaps more applicable to Szeman's novel: it "succeeds in illuminating the interconnections between pleasure and perversity, yet [. . .] fails to communicate the horror that was the Holocaust" (285).

In conclusion, I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter that *Anya* and *The Kommandant's Mistress* both attempt to explore the subjectivity of memory in Holocaust representation.

Their conformity to canonical conventions of Holocaust literature, and specifically its documentary realism, however restricts and sometimes undermines their self-reflexive meditations on subjectivity and on Holocaust representation. Schaeffer uses the testimony of Brodman in order to achieve an authenticity of representation which concerns narrative voice as well as historical facts. In the terms of James Young, she takes up responsibility for constructing an illusion of factual authority and unsteadily tries to highlight this illusion in a self-reflexive manner. Szeman uses the source material of the appendix in order to achieve a historical representativeness and authority in her novel, but she inconsistently fails to take up

responsibility for creating an illusion of factual authority although her self-reflexive narratological and structural outline seek to emphasise the constructedness of representation.

The survivor protagonists' subjectivity of memory in both novels thus indicates the inevitability of the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction and the necessity of the imagination at least to represent the Holocaust if not, in turn, to represent Holocaust representation.

Chapter Three:
Imagination as Mourning
in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

The Shawl (1989) is arguably the canonical masterpiece of Holocaust fiction written by an American female author. It is included in numerous anthologies¹ and taught in Holocaust modules alongside testimonies of survivors. Cynthia Ozick, however, consistently claims: "I am *not* a writer of Holocaust fiction" (Letter to Maes, original emphasis). For her, this rejection is more generally related to the precariousness of retaining the truthfulness of history in literature. She has repeatedly stated that one should avoid

making art out of the Holocaust [. . .] mythopoeticizing, making little stories out of a torrent of truth. I worry very much that this subject [the Holocaust] is corrupted by fiction and that fiction in general corrupts history. (qtd. in Prose 1)

The publication history of *The Shawl* reflects Ozick's reluctance to write Holocaust fiction. "The Shawl" and "Rosa," the two short stories which comprise *The Shawl*, were both written in 1977 and published in *The New Yorker* in 1980 and 1983 respectively, before they were published together as a novella in 1989. More than a decade separates the original writing from its wider dissemination as one text. Ozick's oeuvre contradicts her own polemical admonitions as references and entire character portrayals are based upon the Holocaust. These include Enoch Vand in *Trust* (1966), Joseph Brill and Hester Lilt in *The Cannibal*

¹ Anthologies include John Updike and Katrina Kenison, eds. *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999), Joyce Carol Oates, ed. *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories* (1992), Joyce Antler, ed. *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers* (1990), and Ilan Stavans, ed. *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* (1998).

Galaxy (1983), Lars Andemening in *The Messiah of Stockholm* (1987) and countless characters and motifs in her short stories.

The crisis and exploration of identity, and specifically Jewish identity, is central to Ozick's work, especially in her approach to the Holocaust. The author's orthodox Judaism underpins her engagement with history. Victoria Aarons remarks that "the commemoration of a past connects [any Jew] to the faith of his ancestors and includes him in a communal identity and historical continuum" (*Measure* 88). The Holocaust is part of the Jewish history of suffering and is consequently vital to Ozick's identity as a Jew. As much as she aims to preserve the integrity of history by not writing about it, it remains fundamental to her literature. Ozick states that "history is the ground of our being, and together with imagination, that is what *makes* writing" ("Many Faces," original emphasis).

My analysis of *The Shawl* consequently focuses on the role of imagination and the problematics of fractured identity in the life of its survivor protagonist, Rosa Lublin, within the continuum of the history of Jewish suffering. It develops further the representation of the traumatised Holocaust survivor addressed in chapter two, but it explores the imagination as a process of mourning rather than solely as an expression of memory. The analysis in this chapter moves from the first short story of *The Shawl* to the second, and examines three overlapping realities in the novella: a traumatic Holocaust reality, an imaginary reality of mourning, and an inconsistent contemporary American reality. *The Shawl* is as much about the values and dangers of remembering as of forgetting. It testifies to Ozick's own cautious commemoration of the Holocaust which emphasises the complexities of a traumatised and Jewish identity.

Traumatic Reality: Reality of the Past

“The Shawl,” the first and title story of the novella, describes Rosa’s traumatic experience in the concentration camps. The story opens during a death march, in which Rosa, her niece Stella, and her baby Magda, are all portrayed in terms of the physical effects of starvation. The absence of Rosa’s nourishing milk causes Magda to substitute the shawl for her mother. The characters are subsequently confined to the barracks of a camp, where the shawl continues to comfort and silence the starving child. When Stella steals the shawl to keep warm, Magda walks into the roll-call arena in search of her treasured possession and cries out. A German soldier lifts her up and throws her against the electrified fence. From inside the barracks, Rosa is powerless as she witnesses her child’s brutal murder.

Victor Strandberg remarks that “[t]he most fundamental [identity], coming first both in human biology and in Ozick’s book, is the idea of identity centered in the body” (140). I argue that throughout “The Shawl,” gendered Holocaust trauma results in a detachment from reality that induces a death in life. The vulnerability of the characters’ bodies is rendered in images that reduce the characters to skeletons: “knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones” (3). Neither of the women are menstruating and this loss of femininity is aggravated by Rosa’s lack of milk. Magda substitutes the shawl in which she is wound for food. The predominance of breast imagery throughout “The Shawl” emphasises the maternal bond: “sore breasts” (3), “drying nipple” (4), “the duct-crevice extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole” (4). Metonymical descriptions of the characters as body parts contribute to the fragmentation of the body and the splintering of identity: breasts, legs, bones, belly and head are the elements by which the women are described and to which they are reduced. The separation from the body becomes evident in the arduous effort to make it function: “they raised one burden of a leg after another” (5).

As their bodies dissolve into fragments, the characters detach themselves from reality:

Rosa was “in the air, not there, not touching the road” (4). The link with reality consists of a collection of sensory impressions that are distorted or restricted.² This weakens the materialisation of the subject, and her relationship with reality. Content and style complement each other, as the incompleteness of sensory impressions intensifies the story’s imagery, which acts as a translation of the intangible traumatic experience of reality. Smell is reduced to the “bitter fatty floating smoke” (9) of the gassed victims and a “peculiar smell, of cinnamon and almonds” (5) which comes from Magda’s mouth.³ Touch is no longer possible: the shawl becomes exclusive for “[n]o one could touch it” (6) except Rosa. Taste substitutes for food as “the shawl’s good flavor, milk of linen” (5) nourishes Magda and Rosa learns “how to drink the taste of a finger in one’s mouth” (5). Dialogues are entirely absent from this short story, which contrasts strikingly with Schaeffer and Szeman’s novels. Magda’s remarkable quietness is essential if she is to survive. The observations of her silence however develop from assurance to worry: Rosa’s thoughts move from “[s]uch a good child, she gave up screaming” (4) to “she stayed alive, although very quiet” (5) to “Magda was mute” (6). Silence is increasingly presented as an indication of her “sense of resignation” (Jones 73).

Another instance of the gendered traumatising of the protagonist’s body during the Holocaust is indicated by the second short story, “Rosa,” which suggests that Magda is the offspring of Rosa’s rape. Magda is the embodiment of a life created by destruction. Rosa says, “I was forced by a German, it’s true, and more than once” (43). Magda’s Aryan features testify to this ancestry: “eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star

² An emphasis on bodily fluids constitutes another link with reality and/or between bodies. Images of milk (and its absence), tears (present with Rosa and Stella, absent with Magda), saliva and excrement intensify the horror of the disintegrating body.

³ Alan Berger argues that this smell “evokes a quasimystical image of the *besamim* (spice) box. Jews sniff the *besamim* at the *havdalah* [sic] ceremony which marks the outgoing of the Sabbath, thereby sustaining themselves for the rigors and tribulations of the profane or ordinary days of the week” (*Crisis* 54, original italics). This smell implies divinity within Magda, which is not solely a power that protects from the outside (like the shawl), but one that is attributed to Magda herself. This association announces Rosa’s idolatry of this divine (and divinely protected) being, which I will discuss in the analysis of imaginary reality below.

sewn into Rosa's coat. You could think she was one of *their* babies" (4, original emphasis).

The act of rape means that Magda is both created and destroyed by a German. Magda's body also signifies both life and death in its imagery as a butterfly at the moment of her death. This is anticipated by descriptions of the shawl as a cocoon. She is "wound up in the shawl" (3); "the shawl's windings" (4) are suggestive of a chrysalis, woven by "the spindles of her legs" (5). The shawl offers protection but is also the object of Magda's self-sustained nourishment: "[s]he sucked and sucked, flooding the threads with wetness" (5). Billie Jones interestingly observes that the windings also

are clearly evocative of a shroud. This burial imagery continues as we are told later that Magda had survived as long as she did because "she had been *buried* away deep inside the magic shawl" (6). This life/death contradiction imbued in the shawl is finally declared in the second story, when the narrator refers to the shawl as "Magda's swaddling cloth. Magda's shroud." (73, original emphasis)

The associations of the shawl with Christ's swaddling cloth and the Shroud of Turin are bound up with Rosa's idolatry of her daughter in an imaginary reality. Jones interprets the shawl more exclusively within the paradigm of motherhood: the shawl is both a substitute for the mother and her own child whom she feeds. She focuses on "the maternal bond that could not be severed" (73). Ozick has however explicitly stated that motherhood was not her main focus: "[m]others-and-daughters is NOT my theme, here or elsewhere" (qtd. in Klingenstein 172, original capitals). I believe that the shawl mainly represents the necessity of self-preservation, which complicates the concept of motherhood due to a collapse of identity, both physical and psychological. Ozick's use of Christological imagery is motivated more by a

condemnation of idolatry than by an exploration of the bond between the characters, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

When Magda stumbles into the *Appelplatz* to search for the object with which she was inextricably connected, the fragmentation of the body, its detachment from reality and embodiment of life and death come together. Magda breaks her silence with a melancholic “howling” (7) which causes Rosa to feel “a fearful joy” (7). Ozick delays her scream by half a page of ruminations about her previous silence, which is remarkable in a short story that encompasses barely seven pages. She stops time in order to emphasise the irreversible affirmation of life that invites Magda’s death. The noise is eventually announced by imagery evocative of the cocoon, as she produces a “rope” of cries: “Magda’s mouth was spilling a long viscous rope of clamor. ‘Maaaa-’” (8). The intimation of her mother’s name signifies Magda’s craving for the lost maternal bond, both with Rosa and the shawl. It simultaneously asserts her own identity as her cry spells out the beginning of Ma-gda. The body is again described in terms of its fragmentation. The German soldier, who is the only male character in “The Shawl” and who evokes Magda’s absent father, is described in metaphorical terms: a “black body like a domino and a pair of black boots” (9). The loss of Magda’s shawl contrastingly emphasises her vulnerable nakedness. The disintegration of her body in death is accentuated by its momentary unification: “[t]he whole of Magda traveled through loftiness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine” (9). The “whole” image of the butterfly, emerged from its cocoon, is an affirmation of Magda’s existence. It celebrates her life as beautiful and resists the horror of the camps. It symbolises her soul and resurrection. However, the butterfly is also emblematic of vulnerability and transitoriness, and intensifies the last moment of Magda’s life. As Elaine Kauvar has noticed in relation to “Rosa,” although not commenting on its relevance to “The Shawl” (“Dread” 118), these connotations

of the butterfly are clarified in “The Butterfly and the Traffic Light,” another of Ozick’s short stories:

[y]es, it is a kind of joy [. . .] but full of poison. It belongs to the knowledge of rapid death. The butterfly lures us not only because he is beautiful, but because he is transitory. The caterpillar is uglier, but in him we can regard the better joy of becoming. The caterpillar’s fate is bloom, the butterfly’s is waste.
(217)

The image of the butterfly thus implicitly announces the irrevocable loss of life. The impact of Magda’s body against the electrified fence brutally destroys its unity: “Magda’s feathered round head and her pencil legs and balloonish belly and zigzag arms splashed against the fence” (10). The disintegration into various body parts contrasts strongly with the beauty of the butterfly. The only life that Magda is allowed to have is in death itself.

Rosa’s maternal instinct conflicts with her own self-preservation, for to run into the roll-call arena and save her daughter would kill her (Lowin 107-09). Neither can she mourn her daughter’s dead body: she cannot touch Magda and therefore absorbs Magda’s body symbolically by stuffing the shawl into her mouth. She internalises her daughter in order to protect her, converting her own body into the shawl itself, a covering for Magda, which was initially a substitute for the motherhood of which Rosa’s body was deprived. Abraham and Torok’s concept of incorporation clarifies Rosa’s reaction: incorporation of an object “implies a loss that occurred before the desires concerning the object might have been freed” (113). By incorporating the shawl and, by implication, Magda, Rosa retrieves the bond of motherhood that she was unable to fully appropriate. Unable to cope with the loss of her daughter, she shortcuts the process of mourning by reuniting herself with what is lost. With

this gesture, Rosa suppresses the “wolf’s screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton” (10). The wolf imagery correlates to Magda’s scream as “howling” (7), again incorporating an aspect of Magda. Rosa is forced to witness Magda’s death in silence, “swallowing up the wolf’s screech” (10), which signifies both her daughter’s and her own restricted sensory awareness and detachment from reality. In Abraham and Torok’s terms, Rosa seeks to compensate her inability to mourn, to express in meaningful words, the loss of the object by swallowing the shawl: “incorporation is made when *words* fail to fill the subject’s void and hence an imaginary thing is inserted into the mouth in their place” (128-29, original emphasis). Rosa’s act of incorporation announces the devastating depletion of her own subjectivity.

Rosa’s traumatic past haunts her in “Rosa.” As the titles of both stories imply, the novella charts Rosa’s struggles to transform herself from an object into an individual. Rosa insists that her life has been destroyed because “[t]hieves took it” (28, 32, 33). Nazis have deprived Rosa of her life in two ways: in the past, they killed her daughter and nullified her pre-Holocaust aspirations of life; in the present, Rosa is unable to move beyond this trauma. The protagonist explains her psychological seclusion: “[w]ithout a life [. . .] a person lives where they can. If all they got is thoughts, that’s where they live” (27-28). Time was arrested in “The Shawl” at the moment of Magda’s death. The first short story stops here and Rosa’s fixation with it continues into the second story. The protagonist categorises her life in three stages: “[t]he life before, the life during, the life after. [. . .] Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it a life is a lie” (58). The narrated time of “Rosa” reflects this temporal paralysis as it encompasses only one day in the protagonist’s post-Holocaust, American life. Rosa is unable to move on, which is manifested in the many symptoms of PTSD from which she suffers: depression, isolation, paranoia, nightmares and associative

flashbacks. In this way, the character closely mirrors Schaeffer's Anya and Szeman's Rachel. History is endlessly repeated, so that "during" acquires a temporality beyond the initial trauma that "The Shawl" describes. Lowin confirms: "Ozick means for the two stories to stand next to each other in a synchronous relationship, in which one story 'always' contains the other and comments on it" (121). Many critics have identified this structural device, which represents the elusiveness of history, as Ozick's use of the technique of midrash.⁴ This Jewish tradition can be seen to share an affinity with Freud's definition of trauma in "Moses and Monotheism" (1939), which cannot be captured in one single event. Trauma is located in the interaction between the traumatic event and its reoccurrence, as outlined in the introduction. The trauma of the Holocaust in *The Shawl* is accordingly captured in the "during" that relentlessly fragments Rosa's sense of self.⁵

Rosa's present surroundings return her to associations with the camps, as the elderly population of Miami confronts her with evidence of physical decay. Rosa looks denigratingly upon their "mottled skin, ferocious clavicles, the wrinkled foundations of wasted breasts" (24). At the age of "fifty-nine" (22), Rosa is beyond childbearing age and her physical (in)capacity to be a mother is again highlighted. The skeletal imagery of "The Shawl" is reflected in Rosa's untidy appearance: she is "[s]kin and bones" (26); "[s]kinny, a stork"⁶ (23). The elderly are likewise described with the image of "empty rib cages" (16). Rosa re-

⁴ Joseph Lowin remarks that "Cynthia Ozick has entered, and drawn the reader into, the midrashic mode" (112). Marianne Friedrich explores the centrality of midrash in *The Shawl* in the relationship between the two stories and the intertextual reference of its epigraph to Paul Celan's "Todesfuge." Joseph Alkana analyses the novella as a midrash on the Akedah, the biblical story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. Sophie Lehmann interprets Rosa's destruction of her store as a midrash on Abraham smashing the idols in his father store.

⁵ The story is not contained within its own boundaries because it is part of the larger continuum of Jewish history, which is vital to Ozick's understanding of Judaism as I discuss later. Midrash is therefore as much intertextual as it is temporal. It asserts the initial text and goes beyond it because meaning cannot be grasped within one sole representation. Just as trauma needs to be reworked, so does the history of suffering constantly need to be part of the present. The past necessarily needs to be participated in, interpreted and (re)imagined. The two stories of *The Shawl* transgress time in the ever-present meaning of history, which I will argue asserts the continuity of Judaism.

⁶ This image paradoxically invites the idea of motherhood, although it implies a motherhood that is not sexual or bodily.

enacts the conditions of the camps through the neglect of nourishment. She imprisons herself in the darkness of her room, a “dark hole” (13) that characterises her depression. Decay prevails as “[s]quads of dying flies blackened the rope. The sheets on her bed were just as black” (13-14). Rosa’s trauma is signalled by continual associative reminders of the past and she keeps losing her sense of identity. Her dress triggers the memory of uniforms in the camps: “[s]tripes, never again anything on her body with stripes!” (33). The constricted surroundings of her room dissolve as the past is revived through parallel imagery across both short stories. Rosa is returned to the past, which results in a renewed traumatization. She has “nightmares like weeds” (61), in which her numbed helplessness, her loss of agency, reduces her to a “puppet” (44). Ozick describes traumatic recall as “pitiless tableaux” (45) which refers both to traumatic recurrence (her dreams) and the original traumatic incident, which occurred in “a place without pity” (5). The chaotic enumeration of impressions in her dreams both duplicates and recalls the style of “The Shawl:”

[d]arkened cities, tombstones, colorless garlands, a black fire in a gray field,
brutes forcing the innocent, women with their mouths stretched and their arms
wild, her mother’s voice calling. (44-45)

Contrary to Anya’s dreams which are mostly explained, Rosa’s traumatic recall is represented in broken and fragmented stylistic features.

An unresolved trauma of Rosa’s past arguably concerns her rape, which may also represent the conception of Magda. In “Rosa,” the protagonist’s maniacal search for a pair of lost underpants marks a narrative climax. After dreaming about “brutes forcing the innocent,” Rosa’s tentative suspicion that Persky has stolen her underpants evolves into paranoia: “by then she was certain that whoever put her underpants in his pocket was a criminal capable of

every base act” (45). Rosa fears a repetition of trauma, not only in dreams, but also in reality. The disappearance of her most intimate piece of clothing leaves her vulnerable and she feels “[s]hame. Pain in the loins. Burning” (34). The experience urges her to write to her daughter that “I was forced by a German, it’s true, and more than once, but I was too sick to conceive” (43).⁷ As she frantically searches the streets of Miami for her lost underpants, she again detaches herself from reality through a numbing of the senses: “she saw everything, but as if out of invention, out of imagination; she was unconnected to anything” (47). When she eventually arrives at a beach, she imagines the fragmentation of her own body:

her pants [. . .] under the sand; or else packed hard with sand, like a piece of torso, a broken statue, the human groin detached, the whole soul gone, only the loins left for kicking by strangers. (48)

An associative flashback is triggered by the barbed wire on top of the fence that surrounds the private beach, an implicit criticism of American democracy as I will later discuss. The beach collapses into the camps in Rosa’s imagination, as the person she addresses for help is described as “a likely sentinel” (48) and she can see only “[p]ersecutors” (49). The past consumes the present and Rosa is re-traumatized. The plot structure in both short stories mirrors trauma in its repetition and in the narrative inability of each story to contain the event. When Stella “took the shawl away” (6) from Magda, the baby’s frantic search leads her to the roll-call arena where the German soldier killed her. When Rosa loses her underpants, her hysterical search leads her to the beach, which for her resembles the imprisonment of the German camps. This configuration of the plot intensifies the inextricable

⁷ In *Blue Light*, a play that Ozick wrote as a sequel to *The Shawl*, Rosa recounts, in addition, her camp brothel experience: “Me they put where . . . they don’t let us wear nothing . . . underneath” (qtd. in Kremer, *Women* 172, original ellipses).

relationship between trauma and its recall. Rosa relives her daughter's death, though she also tentatively claims her own survival: "[t]hey had trapped her, nearly caught her; but she knew how to escape" (52). However, as the plot structure of Rosa's retraumatisation resembles the traumatic event of her daughter's death, the reclaiming of her own identity remains fundamentally caught up within and mapped onto the past.

The style of "The Shawl" contrasts with that of "Rosa," for the first story is impressionistic, while the second is narrated in a more realist mode. This is largely due to a separation of Holocaust and post-Holocaust settings. When Rosa's trauma returns, however, the more coherent narrative style of "Rosa" disintegrates into impressionism, poignantly mirroring the first story. In evoking the traumatic past, Ozick opts for a style that differs from the realist style which characterises historical Holocaust novels, such as Schaeffer's *Anya*. Kremer confirms that "Ozick refrains from the conventions of Holocaust literature that meticulously detail camp physical conditions" (*Women* 150). Daniel Schwarz contextualises this within the development of Holocaust fiction: "[b]y the 1980s, Ozick may have felt that the realistic tradition in Holocaust fiction had somewhat played itself out" (304).

Ozick's poetic style is also central to her commemoration of the Holocaust through the imagination. In "Metaphor and Memory," she observes: "metaphor belongs [. . .] to memory and pity. I want to argue that metaphor is one of the chief agents of our moral nature" (270). Her poetic impressionism in "The Shawl" underlines the importance of remembering the Holocaust ethically and empathically. The story emphasises the difficulty of representing the Holocaust. Ozick defines metaphor as follows:

[m]etaphor is compelled to press hard on language and storytelling; it inhabits language at its most concrete. As the shocking extension of the unknown into

our most intimate, most feeling, most private selves, metaphor is the enemy of abstraction. (“Metaphor” 282)

A good example of Ozick’s use of metaphor to defy “abstraction” is in the extended self-reflexive description that precedes Magda’s death. Here, a description of flourishing nature outside the camps contrasts with the impending death of Magda within.

The sunheat murmured of another life, of butterflies in summer. The light was placid, mellow. On the other side of the steel fence, far away, there were green meadows speckled with dandelions and deep-colored violets [. . .] In the barracks they spoke of “flowers,” of “rain”: excrement, thick turd-braids, and the slow stinking maroon waterfall that slunk down from the upper bunks, the stink mixed with a bitter fatty floating smoke that greased Rosa’s skin. (8-9)

Lowin observes that “[t]his moment of lyricism provides relief in the tension-filled drama; it constitutes a delaying tactic at the precise moment of the greatest horror” (108). Ozick’s slowing of time focuses our attention on metaphor and imagery. The metaphors that the inmates use to describe the filth of the camps are taken from the realm of nature: flowers and rain denote excrement. The meaning of these signifiers is thus inverted and the discrepancy between both realities accentuated. Imagination tries to grasp the ungraspable with images from a different reality. The discrepancy between different realities in metaphor is used to represent the horror of the Holocaust. The electrified fence becomes a dividing line between two realities. It divides the perception of the sun, as the “placid, mellow” (8) light outside the fence becomes a “perilous sunlight” (8) that discloses Magda’s illegal existence within. “[T]he dark” (8) of the barracks is the only “safe” space in the camps. Brauner adds that

“Ozick’s images of excrement (*turd-braids*) and urine (‘stinking maroon *waterfall*’) implicate themselves in, at the same time as they expose this beautification of the sordid” (119, original emphasis). The metaphors reinforce the confinement of the camp because they introduce a different context. Ozick’s artistry of style thus intensifies the horror of the Holocaust at the same time as highlighting its own constructedness, for she reveals that metaphors enable us to make the unknown concrete.

The few images that Ozick uses in “The Shawl” are constantly repeated with slight modification, either in phrasing or connotation. This tightly binds the story together and strengthens Ozick’s representation of horror. Ozick trusts “the end to be implicit in the beginning” (“Interview” 256) and consequently suggests Magda’s death early in “The Shawl:” Rosa is described as “a floating angel” (3) which predicts Magda’s “swimming through the air” (9). Because “they might shoot” (4), Rosa cannot leave the line of the death march in order to entrust Magda to a stranger. The phrase is repeated three times at the end of “The Shawl” when Rosa cannot run into the roll-call arena because “they would shoot” (10). The images gain in urgency and violence as the end approaches. The intensively repeated breast imagery concludes with “a tide of commands hammered in [Rosa’s] nipples” (8), when she sees Magda in search of the shawl. “The bad wind with pieces of black in it” (6) switches into “the ash-stippled wind” (7) and the “bitter fatty floating smoke that greased Rosa’s skin” (9). Magda’s “spindles of her legs” (5) become “pencil legs” (7) after which they are objectified to “pencils” (7). “The Shawl” reads almost like a poem in the intensity and compression of the imagery and metaphors that represent the traumatic past.

Although *The Shawl* is pervaded by trauma in terms of style, setting, characterisation and plot, Rosa steadfastly refuses this label because time and again her identity is placed outside of the acceptable norms of American society. In “Rosa,” Dr. Tree, an academic from the

“DEPARTMENT OF CLINICAL SOCIAL PATHOLOGY” (35, original capitals), asks to interview Rosa for his study of “Repressed Animation” (36), the psychological numbing due to trauma that was exemplified in the camps by Muslims, the walking dead. Although Rosa remains detached from reality and displays numerous symptoms of the “survivor syndroming” (38) which he ascribes to her, his study obliterates the individual behind the suffering. Tree is overreliant on his objectifying categorisations and views Rosa merely as “survivor data” (35). He does not empathise with his subjects and their personal histories; he never listens to their testimonies as events in their own right, as advocated by Laub. Tree is thus a deficient addressee. In his eyes, Rosa is only a survivor, set apart from “normal” American society. His bureaucratic categorisation infuriates Rosa and she rightfully remarks:

[c]onsider also the special word they used: *survivor*. Something new. As long as they didn't have to say *human being*. It used to be *refugee*, but by now there was no such creature, no more refugees, only survivors. A name like a number – counted apart from the ordinary swarm. Blue digits on the arm, what difference? [. . .] Even when your bones get melted into the grains of the earth, still they'll forget *human being*. [. . .] Who made up these words, parasites on the throat of suffering! (36-37, original emphasis)

These generalising classifications that Rosa so severely criticises, are suggestive of the successive shifts in American Holocaust awareness. Peter Novick argues that until the 1960s, references to the Holocaust were downplayed by both survivors and the American public due to the American anti-immigration climate and its political implications. Ozick's use of the term “refugee” suggests this blurring of the specificity of the Holocaust, as it consigns survivors to the same category as pre-Holocaust Jewish (and other) immigrants,

who seem to dominate the neighbourhood of Miami where Rosa lives. The term “survivor,” however, indicates the “victim culture” that became widespread from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards (Novick 170-91). It represented a politics of identity and ethnicity to which various marginalised groups subscribed. Both terms notably imply a classification of Holocaust survivors as extra-ordinary, which results in either a silenced or a glorified history.

Tree’s preoccupation with survivor trauma, and his resultant objectification of Rosa, victimises her once again for he fails to acknowledge her personal history. Tree’s letter had been forwarded by Stella in New York and Rosa observes: “[i]t had struggled to find its victim” (35). This label of “victim” signifies Rosa as a victim of the Holocaust, but also as a victim of Tree’s study. Eaglestone remarks that “using these terms [of trauma] can, in fact, risk stripping any agency from the survivor, revictimizing the survivor as (only) a traumatized victim” (32). In retaliation, Rosa considers the letter as “another sample of the disease” (31). Kremer considers her refusal to co-operate with Tree as a symptom of “Rosa’s sincerity, authenticity, and sanity” (*Women* 170). The Holocaust studies to which Ozick alludes through her reference to Tree were widespread by the time she wrote *The Shawl*. The American cultural memory of the Holocaust had evolved into what Novick terms “The Years of Transition.” He summarises the American attitude as follows:

[e]arlier, they [survivors] were told that even if they wanted to speak of the Holocaust, they shouldn’t – it was bad for them. Later they were told that even if they didn’t want to speak of it, they must – it was good for them. In both cases, others knew what was best. (84)

Rosa’s separation from conventional American society is central to her refusal of an institutionalised traumatic identity. It is striking that Rosa’s rebellion against the silencing of

her personal history results in Tree noticing her and requesting her testimony. He boasts: “I have noted via a New York City newspaper [. . .] your recent *removal* to Florida” (38, my emphasis). The source of his information is sensationalist coverage of Rosa’s destruction of her store in New York. She retaliates against her customers who are “deaf” (27, 69) to her suffering for they do not listen to her testimony. Only an explicit display of violence seems to gain recognition of her pain. Tree’s indifference to Rosa’s motivations for her action provokes a renewed violent response: “[t]he way I smashed up my store, that’s how I’ll smash Tree” (61). Her “removal” to Florida, as Tree describes it, suggests that Rosa’s history is an unwanted element in American society. She is consigned to the state of the elderly, where the past is conveniently contained and forgotten so that American hedonism can continue to thrive. Rosa’s “removal” evokes the Nazi camps and ghettos that contained people who were likewise considered to be undesirable and disruptive social elements.

Stella, who desperately tries to cling to the present, also threatens in a letter to Rosa that “they would have locked you up [. . .] One more public outburst puts you in the bughouse” (32-3). The niece “took psychology courses” (31) and brands Rosa’s obsession with the shawl as “trauma, fetish” (31). This classification once again does not listen to Rosa’s testimony, but advises “normalisation:” “[y]ou’re supposed to be recuperating [. . .] Walk around. Keep out of trouble. Put on your bathing suit. Mingle. How’s the weather?” (63). The belittling trivialisation of Rosa’s suffering places strong emphasis on the “normal” functioning of society. Stella and Rosa consequently “perceive each other as mentally ill” (Kremer, “Holocaust Survivors” 28). Like Dr. Tree and the clients in her store, Stella represents for Rosa part of the “disease” of American amnesia, which discards her personal history by aggrandising it as a spectacle, ignoring it, or normalising it. Rosa is given no opportunity to work through her trauma, which intensifies her clinging to memory, for she

remains uprooted in America. The extremes of forgetting and remembering seem to be equally destructive. Cultural and individual memory are moreover portrayed as incompatible.

Imaginary Reality: Alternative Reality of the Past and the Present

In the previous section, I highlighted the extent to which Rosa's story goes unheeded. In what follows, I am seeking to analyse the letters that Rosa writes to her dead daughter as the expression of her story in an imaginary reality. Many critics interpret Rosa's letters as "[h]er postwar denial of Magda's death" and a symptom of madness (Kremer, *Women* 162).⁸ There are undeniably indications in the text to suggest that Rosa believes that her daughter is indeed alive. She writes to Magda that "[t]o soothe [Stella's] dementia, to keep her quiet, I pretend you died" (42). She insists on the veracity of her account – "[n]o lies come from me to you" (43) – but these statements are questionable because her honesty is qualified in a subsequent repetition: "I have no falsehoods from you. Otherwise I don't deny some few tricks: the necessary handful" (44). Rosa likewise tells Magda that her father is not German, although she was raped and the Aryan features of Magda cast doubt on her claim. As Jones observes, the "reader is not certain of what is real and what is not" (72). In her letters, Rosa could be pretending to be pretending that Magda is dead. After her first letter to her daughter, Rosa relishes a feeling of relief: "all at once this cleanliness, this capacity, this power to make history, to tell, to explain. To retrieve, to reprieve! / To lie" (44). Rosa does remember the traumatic death of her daughter which propels her to lie, to "make history," to imagine that she is not dead. When Rosa receives a box in which Stella sent her Magda's shawl, Rosa is overwhelmed with joy, but it is precisely in this moment that she also remembers "the lost

⁸ Victor Strandberg remarks that "Rosa's other denial of reality is her insistence that Magda is still alive" (144). Emily Budick suggests more moderately that "[w]ithin the realism of the reader's position, the dead child is purely a delusion in need of exorcism [. . .] From the mother's point of view [. . .] she is entirely real" (223-24).

babe. Murdered. Thrown against the fence, barbed, thorned, electrified; grid and griddle; a furnace, the child on fire!” (31). This is the only instance in “Rosa” in which Magda’s death is described, which explicitly links it to “The Shawl.”

Her letters can consequently be interpreted as wish-fulfillments, consciously controlled memory and the creation of an alternative history. Rosa controls Magda’s revivification: “Magda [is] animated at will” (70). The style of her letters is accordingly coherently descriptive instead of impressionist. The letters can be seen as Rosa’s attempt to retrospectively master her traumatic past, so that she changes the past in her imagination in order to attribute meaning to it. Ozick’s use of an alternative imaginary reality thus diverges further from the historical reality than Schaeffer’s *Anya*. Rosa tries to grasp the ungraspable on another level. She knows that Magda is dead, but she desperately wants to imagine her back to life. To solely interpret this act of imagining as a denial of reality again normalises and thus marginalises her story. Factual “truth” becomes secondary to the truthfulness of representing trauma. Discussing her disappointment at the ending of *Alice in Wonderland*, Ozick argues that the imagination is a reality too: “[w]e’ve *known*, all along, that we were in another order of things, and to tell us it was all a ‘curious dream’ is to tell us we weren’t inside a reality; but we were” (“Interview” 259, original emphasis). Rosa is likewise aware of the painful discrepancies between reality and fiction, but her letters have become her only medium to remember and represent the past truthfully. My analysis seeks to read Rosa’s letters as the necessary creation of an alternative reality, originating from her struggle to mourn. Rosa was unable to prevent the death of her own flesh and blood and seeks to reverse this horrifying reality if only in imagination. An interpretation of Rosa’s letters as self-aware constructions makes visible the novella’s discourse of and on Holocaust representation. It demonstrates the gaps between experience and representation. Rosa’s refuge in the

imagination is part of her process of mourning which addresses her commemoration of the dead, her self-punishment through idolatry, and her testimony.

Magda's traumatic death represents an irretrievable loss for Rosa. However, although she may be literally lost, Magda will never be metaphorically or imaginatively lost to Rosa, because her commemoration keeps her alive. She celebrates the dead in her memories, in a similar manner to Anya.⁹ The letters that Rosa writes do not exclusively concern Magda, but also discuss Rosa's prewar life. She vividly and fondly remembers her parents, whose deaths are never described in *The Shawl*, but are ascertained by the fact that Stella and Rosa are the only family members who survived the Holocaust: "I'm left. Stella's left" (59). Her parents' deaths are omitted from *The Shawl* in the same way that Magda's death is absent from Rosa's letters. Rosa details her house in Warsaw, the delights of her mother's poetry, and the insight of her "prophetic" (41) father. By telling Magda about her own girlhood, she transfers her family history to her daughter. Her story is an expression of an allegiance to the generations before and after her and binds together the absent generations who never knew each other. In the three stages of her life, Rosa considers "[t]he life before [to be] our *real* life" but "[b]efore is a dream" (58, original emphasis). The commemoration of prewar Warsaw is a pleasurable wish-fulfilment, as is Magda's revivification.

These temporal demarcations of before, during and after intertwine as the characters of Rosa and Magda merge. In "The Shawl," Magda was already an extension of Rosa's body

⁹ Although *Anya* and *The Shawl* differ in fundamental ways, such as style, use of imagination, and portrayal of the addressee, they have a lot of similarities regarding content and imagery. Kremer goes as far as to suggest that *The Shawl* is "an intertextual tribute to Schaeffer's *Anya*" (*Women* 154). Rosa and Anya both suffer from PTSD, refuse to speak English correctly, and they sell second-hand objects in stores in New York where they try in vain to make their clients listen to their personal stories. In their memories, Rosa and Anya both idealise their parents and construct a family romance of a wealthy, assimilated Polish background. Several images occur in both literary works: for instance, Magda's tooth as an "elfin tombstone" (4) closely resembles an infant patient of Anya whose "[o]ne little tooth stared up at me [Anya] like a tombstone" (488). Nevertheless, Ozick is much more critical of the American Holocaust commemoration of the 1970s and 1980s than Schaeffer. Ozick explicitly criticises the heroism of and reverence for Holocaust survivors, to which Schaeffer subscribes, as I demonstrated in chapter two.

both as offspring and as the hiding place in the shawl, which is “mistaken [. . .] for the shivering mound of Rosa’s breasts” (6). They unify when Rosa incorporates her in her act of swallowing the shawl. Upon receiving the box with the shawl in Miami, Rosa again “meant to crush it into her mouth” (35). Abraham and Torok remark that “[i]nexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject [. . .] the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt as a full-fledged person” (130) and the incorporated object “also functions for the subject as an ego ideal” (131). The revivification of Magda presents an alternative “full-fledged person” based on Rosa’s prewar life. In the first reverie, Magda is “a beautiful young woman of thirty, thirty-one: a doctor married to a doctor” (35) which echoes Rosa’s youthful ambition to “have been a scientist” (20). The second imagining creates “her daughter [as] a professor of Greek philosophy” (39) which echoes her father’s “Greek vases” (68). Rosa explicitly praises her daughter for “follow[ing] your grandfather’s bent and stud[ying] philosophy” (43). The third resurrection of her daughter is the only one the reader is privileged to witness. Magda appears as “a girl of sixteen” (64). “She was wearing one of Rosa’s dresses from high school” (64) and “had begun to resemble Rosa’s father” (65). In the realm of Rosa’s imagination, Magda is a palimpsest of family history to be inscribed with her own story as it was and could have been. She simultaneously represents the doubling and the disentanglement of Rosa’s splintered self. When mother and daughter merge in the last reverie, Rosa tentatively reclaims her own identity. The Magda whom Rosa imagines is an “energetic denial of the power of death” (Freud, “Uncanny” 210). She is Rosa’s uncanny double and as such represents an attempt to reverse the irretrievable loss of both Magda and Rosa’s prewar identity.

The possibility of different realities that is foregrounded in “The Shawl,” reappears in “Rosa” and again concerns the themes of survivor guilt and mourning. In “The Shawl,” Rosa

imagines what would happen if she gave Magda to a stranger, although this considered alternative remains impossible: “if she moved out of line they might shoot. And even if she fled the line [. . .] would the woman take it?” (4). When Magda is crying in the roll-call arena, Rosa has to choose between alternative courses of action: “she did not know which to go after first, Magda or the shawl. If she jumped [. . .] but if she ran back [. . .] and if she found it, and if she came after Magda” (8). This quotation illustrates the rapid enumeration of (im)possible scenarios on which Magda’s life depends. Rosa mistakenly conceives of herself as the one who determines her child’s life and her own, even though both of their lives have been consigned by the Nazis to seemingly inevitable destruction. The alternative but impossible realities reveal Rosa’s utter bewilderment and powerlessness, which points to her inability to resist as much as her inability to be a mother in the camp. Rosa imagines herself as an active agent during the Holocaust, not solely in retrospect.

When Magda is killed, Rosa’s despair and paralysis are accompanied by the growling of “grainy sad voices” that she hears “inside the fence” (9). The voices also offer Rosa alternative scenarios, when they urge her to wave the shawl and to run into the roll-call arena. They intensify the separation of mother and child when they repeat Magda’s howling, “Maamaa, maaamaaa” (9). Lowin interprets these as ghosts commemorating the dead: “[t]he voices within the wire are quite possibly the voices of Jewish history, the voices of those who have already gone up in fire. These are not voices of warning; they are voices of lamentation” (109). Whether the voices are interpreted as the Holocaust dead or Rosa’s conscience, they share an affinity with Rosa’s post-Holocaust seclusion within her imagination. The voices are real to her: “even Stella said it was only an imagining, but Rosa heard real sounds in the wire” (9). The imagination as an alternative reality is in both cases not a denial of reality, but a mourning for the life that has been irretrievably lost.

Rosa's act of mourning is cathartic, but it also proves to be self-destructive. Rosa's memories do not solely serve commemoration, for her survivor guilt urges a relentless self-punishment. The dangers of memory are explored as her imagination places her in a paralysis outside of time. As Ozick observes: "those obsessed by timelessness always wait" (*Trust* 236). Rosa postpones her present life in order to imagine both Magda's life and her own prewar life. She denies her present life in America in order to retrospectively save Magda's. In line with Abraham and Torok's concept of incorporation, Rosa is "exchanging [her] own identity for a fantasmic identification with the 'life' – beyond the grave – of an object of love" (142). She attempts to replace the living with the dead and exhausts herself in her melancholic struggle to mourn. In the last sentence of the first letter, she admits that "in me the strength of your being consumes my joy" (44). It empties her of her sense of self, as much as it tries to re-establish it. Exhausted by writing, she collapses in her bed, where she imitates the cocooning of her daughter as she "fell into folds" (44), into "the covers knotted together like an umbilical cord" (30). It is precisely then that traumatic recall re-traumatizes her and draws her back to the horrifying reality of past losses. After writing the second letter, she is again drained of energy: "[t]he drudgery of reminiscence brought fatigue, she felt glazed, lethargic" (69).

Rosa's self-punishment pleads for redemption as she imaginatively revives the life that she was unable to protect. She begs her daughter: "[f]orgive me" (39), because she has not written to Magda for "half a day" (40). Kremer remarks that Rosa's "only brief solace is lamentation" (*Women* 157). Rosa's melancholic act of mourning encompasses a relentless obligation to punish herself for not preventing the death of her daughter and a self-granted redemption through Magda's revivification.

When the box with Magda's shawl arrives, Rosa "*squashed* the box into her breasts" (30, my emphasis) and "meant to *crush* it into her mouth" (35, my emphasis). The violence of these verbs indicates the destructive aspect of her protective love for and salvation of her daughter. Instead of being a transitional object that helps Rosa to define her own subjectivity, the shawl has become a fetish.¹⁰ Rosa loses herself in the adoration of Magda. Stella, who described the shawl before as "fetish" (31) announces its arrival in an accompanying letter: "[y]our idol is on its way" (31). In a ritual of devotion to the shawl, Rosa cleans her chaotic room and even perfects her appearance: "[s]he puts on her good shoes, a nice dress (polyester, 'wrinkle-free' on the inside label); she arranged her hair, brushed her teeth [. . .] Her mouth she reddened very slightly – a smudge of lipstick rubbed on with a finger" (44). She hides her life in the present in order to worship her idol. She delays opening the box because "I'm saving you. I want to be serene" (42). The word "saving" alludes to the implied redemption of her imagined reality. By putting on a "wrinkle-free" dress, Rosa restores to herself the girlhood that Magda duplicates and continues in her imagination. She pretends to be someone other than she is in the present, in order to be able to sustain the redemptive pretence that Magda is alive.

The dangerous aspect of Rosa's imaginary reality is the problem of idolatry that it raises. This is an issue that Ozick continually faces as a writer who is also a Jew. It is not coincidental that Rosa too is a writer, a fact that is repeatedly emphasised. Stella "calls me a parable-maker" (41) and her letters are written in "the most excellent literary Polish" (20), which again emphasises the culture of her prewar girlhood. Lowin confirms that "these letters written to her dead daughter Magda are works of fiction" (112). Although Ozick considers

¹⁰ See Andrew Gordon, who interestingly correlates this function of the shawl for Rosa with the meaning of the object for Magda.

fiction as “a lie that tells the truth” (“Interview” 263), a necessity for Rosa to be able to express her own subjective truth, it is also an instance of idolatry. Ozick explains that:

[t]he writer of fiction is really a kind of idolator, or, worse, divinity-seizer.

The writer of fiction intends to become a small-scale god, a creator, setting herself or himself in competition with the Creator. (“Interview” 259)

As a writer of her imaginary reality, Rosa, like Ozick, decides over life and death. She is the God of her own imagined creation. There are several religious overtones to Rosa’s revivification of Magda. She calls her “my Soul’s Blessing” (39) and “my Paradise” (66) and considers the shawl as “this precious vestige of your sacred babyhood” (42), containing “the holy fragrance of the lost babe” (31). Rosa implicitly salvages herself through the resurrection of Magda, which is both idolatrous, creating her own imaginary reality, and “a pagan ritual, the worship of the dead” (Lowin 120). As Jesus redeemed mankind of its sins, Magda redeems Rosa’s “sin,” her inability to save her from death during the Holocaust. Stella admonishes Rosa for her idolatrous worship: “[y]ou’re like those people in the Middle Ages who worshiped a piece of the True Cross, a splinter from some old outhouse as anybody knew” (31-32). Victor Strandberg points out that this deliberately echoes “the Shroud of Turin stories, which were much in the news during the period when Ozick wrote this work” (143). The shroud is mirrored in the shawl, which wrapped Magda’s body and which is the remnant of her life and death in the camps. In an analysis of idolatry in Ozick’s works, Kauvar remarks that: “Christianity [. . .] avoids strife and spawns a world beyond reality, a world in which illusion prevails, a world that forfeits creation and freedom for restoration and

salvation” (“Dread” 112).¹¹ Rosa likewise seeks to restore the prewar past and to salvage her family and through this herself. However, idolatry paradoxically imprisons her in a continuation of her trauma, to which her identity is reduced. Kauvar observes: “Ozick’s idolators must remain the lifeless victims of their past” (“Dread” 113). When Rosa writes to her daughter about her mother’s fascination with Christianity, and particularly the Virgin and Child, she reveals the continuation of a family tradition. To prove herself “pure,” Rosa refers to herself as “a madonna” (59). Rosa elevates herself through the glorification of her daughter who is her creation in both physical and imaginary terms. She fundamentally remembers and imagines through a gendered perspective, which is reminiscent of Anya’s traumatised postwar identity as a mother. Motherhood is the religion to which Rosa subscribes. Through idolising it, she seeks to redress her own shortcomings as a mother but simultaneously evades them, as her obsessive imaginary reality does not allow her to work through her trauma. Rosa believes that:

[m]otherhood – I’ve always known this – is a profound distraction from philosophy, and all philosophy is rooted in suffering over the passage of time. I mean the *fact* of motherhood, the physiological fact. To have the power to create another human being, to be the instrument of such a mystery. [. . .] I don’t believe in God, but I believe, like the Catholics, in mystery. (41, original emphasis)

The celebration of life is central to Rosa because its traumatic loss is devastating. As the idolatrous creator of her own imaginary reality, the emphasis on life is a reversal of the

¹¹ Kauvar moreover considers *The Shawl* to be “a midrash of the Second Commandment” (“Dread” 127), supplementing the midrash that other critics read into *The Shawl*. See note four above.

reality of death. It also originates in survivor guilt, for Rosa “could not, ultimately, do the work of mothering” (Horowitz, “Women” 374). Although Rosa’s idolatrous imaginary reality is portrayed as a site of intense mourning, it is also criticised, for Rosa’s fictional reality of salvation results in the loss of her own life in the present. Kauvar accordingly observes: “the finished dogmas of romantic religion [such as Christianity] freeze truth and petrify the process of becoming, that vital unfolding of individual personality which, robbed of imperative, regresses into the ineffectuality of mere yearning” (“Dread” 112). Ozick presents idolatry as a danger that secludes Rosa from the world, which resonates with her views on idolatry expressed elsewhere:

[t]he chief characteristic of any idol is that it is a system sufficient in itself. It leads back only to itself. It is indifferent to the world and to humanity. Like a toy or like a doll – which, in fact, is what an idol is – it lures human beings to copy it, to become like it. It dehumanizes. (“Literature” 189)

Rosa is sustained by an idolatrous worship but also isolated by it. She tells Stella “[w]here I put myself is in hell. Once I thought the worst was the worst, after that nothing could be the worst. But now I see even after the worst there’s still more” (14). Her idolatry intensifies trauma, but as it is placed outside of time no meaning but loss is attributed to it: both the loss of her family and the loss of her life in the present. Rosa remains caught in the destructiveness of trauma. This dual approach to idolatry reflects in turn Ozick’s problematic relationship to her own fiction. She recognises that she too violates the Second Commandment, but in response she distinguishes between two categories of imagination:

[j]ust as there is *t'schuva*, the energy of creative renewal and turning, so there is the *yetzer ha-ra*, the Evil Impulse – so steeped in the dark brilliance of the visionary that it is said to be the source of the creative faculty. (“Innovation” 247, original italics)

Ozick disapproves of the use of imagination as a purely aesthetic form, the *yetzer ha-ra*.

Rosa’s imaginary reality represents a self-contained system, such as this, for it does not allow her to attribute meaning to loss. Ozick does, however, defend the writer’s imagination if it indicates a *t'schuva*: if fiction can procure a renewal through ascribing meaning. Rosa’s fiction-making is not wrong in and of itself, but rather because it does not lead to “turning” or transformation.

In trauma theory, testimony usually functions as the attempt to work through trauma, to attribute meaning to it, even if only in the process of telling, as Laub suggests.¹² It is the attempt to give meaning to something that was previously unsayable. Rosa’s letters to her daughter are not solely a commemorative act or a punishment, but the struggle to ascribe meaning to her life and define her identity. She invents an imaginary reality because there is no addressee in the present who is willing to receive her story. The clients in her store were deaf, as is Dr. Tree who only hears what he has selected beforehand. Rosa justifiably advises her daughter: “[t]o those who don’t deserve the truth, don’t give it” (44), which again self-reflexively gestures to the difference between factual and subjective truth.

Rosa’s speech was denied at the moment of her daughter’s death: “if she let the wolf’s screech ascending now through the ladder of her skeleton break out, they would shoot” (10).

¹² In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Lewis Herman describes “the use of formalized ‘testimony’ in the treatment of survivors” (181). A more thorough analysis of “the *liberating, vital function of the testimony*” can be found in Felman and Laub (47, original emphasis).

Her letters attempt to phrase and transmit that “screech” and they are positioned between speech and silence. As Magda was a mute witness in the camps, she now is the mute addressee Rosa needs in order to express her story. Rosa needs “a non-judgemental confidante” (Kremer, “Holocaust Survivors” 30). She positions Magda as witness through direct address and apostrophe: “[t]ake my word for it, Magda” (43) and “[c]an you imagine” (66). She describes the letters using personification: “the fresh face of a new letter” (14), which echoes her adoration for Magda’s beauty in “The Shawl:” “a pocket mirror of a face” (4). There is a consistent recurrence of mouth-imagery throughout *The Shawl*, which expresses the desire to re-embody the “lost babe” (31) but also to transmit her story. She addresses Magda as the medium of her expression: “my bright lips” (42). The letters, however, cannot fulfil their function of transmission because the addressee remains elusive: Magda is precisely what has been lost. America’s obliteration of history reinforces the absence of the addressee, as it symbolically obstructs even Rosa’s transmission of her testimony to Magda: “[i]t was hard to get them mailed [. . .] the hotel lobby’s stamp machine had been marked ‘Out of Order’ for years” (14). The letters therefore never arrive at their intended destination.

At the end of “Rosa,” the second letter that Rosa writes to Magda does seem to fulfil its function as testimony. There is a *t’schuva* implied. Kremer explains: “[a] believer in *t’schuva*, the redemptive Judaic tenet that opposes classical Greek fatalism, Ozick celebrates the idea that we can change ourselves, that we can change what appears to be our ‘fate’” (*Women* 170, original italics). There are various reasons why this change is possible for Rosa. Her ritual of embellishing her surroundings in order to “be serene” (42) when she opens the box is nullified when the box contains a book from Dr. Tree, “*Repressed Animation: A Theory of the Biological Ground of Survival*” (60, original italics). Consequently, when the box with the shawl arrives, Rosa “was indifferent” (62) and the shawl does not immediately

resuscitate Magda. This tempers the force of Magda's apparitions, and by extension, Rosa's self-punishment: "[s]ometimes Magda came alive with a brilliant swoop, almost too quickly, so that Rosa's ribs were knocked on their insides by copper hammers, clanging and gonging" (62). Magda's previous appearances reflect Ozick's descriptions of inspiration "which is as sudden and as transient as an electrical trajectory" ("Metaphor" 278). Magda's revivification at the end of "Rosa" is literally triggered by electricity, reminiscent of the electrified fence in the camps, as Rosa holds the shawl over the phone when Magda appears. This time, however, an attribution of meaning through metaphor is made possible. Ozick differentiates between inspiration and metaphor as follows: "[i]nspiration is ad hoc and has no history. Metaphor relies on what has been experienced before; it transforms the strange into the familiar" ("Metaphor" 280). Rosa's act of opening the box has been experienced before when the box contained Tree's book. This time, Persky interrupts Rosa's preparatory ritual for the box. When the receptionist announces his visit, Rosa welcomes the stranger she once suspected of stealing her underwear: "[h]e's used to crazy women, so let him come up" (70). She has found an addressee in the present to whom she had previously offered the shawl as an object of "[e]vidence" (59), a testimony in and of itself. Rosa has gained sufficient distance to reveal the construct of her own imaginary reality: "[t]he shawl had a faint saliva smell, but it was more nearly imagined than smelled" (62). I argue that such distancing is crucial for her testimony to function. Rosa's second and last letter is a self-reflexive meditation on testimony, because it is a testimony about testimony, addressed to the double of herself. She tells her daughter that:

[w]hen I had my store I used to "meet the public," and I wanted to tell everybody – not only our story, but other stories as well. Nobody knew anything. This amazed me, that nobody remembered what happened only a

little while ago. They didn't remember because they didn't know. I'm referring to certain definite facts. The tramcar in the Ghetto, for instance. [. . .] The tramcar came right through the middle of the Ghetto. [. . .] Every day, and several times a day, we had these witnesses. Every day they saw us. (66-68)

This letter frames Rosa's story of the Holocaust within the telling of that story to her clients. Rosa talks about the witnesses in the tram who are as ignorant and indifferent as the secondary witnesses in her store. She thus detaches herself gradually from her trauma by testifying about the testimony that tells the story. This doubling is intensified by the doubling of the addressee, which similarly collapses into itself. At the beginning of the second letter to Magda, the narrator does not place "[Rosa writes]" next to the usual enumeration of vocatives that address Magda. Every other personal letter in *The Shawl* has this authorial intervention that names the writer immediately after the addressee: "Dear Rosa [Stella wrote]" (31), "Magda, my Soul's Blessing [Rosa wrote]" (39). The explicit absence of this device calls into question whether the second letter is actually written. The letter seems to constitute a moment of transformation and the narrator suggests an element of mysticism: "this time she was not using her regular pen, she was writing inside a blazing flying current, a terrible beak of light bleeding out a kind of cuneiform on the underside of her brain" (69). In the second letter Rosa finds meaning in a reflection on and witnessing of her own testimony. When the letter is finished and Magda is disappearing, the narrator observes Rosa's silence:

[b]utterfly! I am not ashamed of your presence; only come to me, come to me again, if no longer now, then later, always come. These were Rosa's private words; but she was stoic, tamed; she did not say them aloud to Magda. (69-70)

The letter can be read as an interior monologue of Rosa to herself rather than an address to her daughter. Magda in the imaginary reality is both an extension of Rosa's girlhood and the witness-through-the-imagination that Rosa herself needed to be, in order to witness her own testimony. The content of the second letter moreover concerns Rosa's own life, whereas the first one concentrated more on Magda's. Through this doubling of the testimony and the addressee, the protagonist detaches herself from her past, which allows her to witness it, creating the potential to start working it through and attributing meaning to it.

At the end of "Rosa," doubling and self-reflexivity also occur during the apparition of Magda, an episode which parallels and revises Magda's death at the end of "The Shawl." Kauvar argues that Ozick's "penchant for doubling," which extends to a repetition of key images across the two short stories, "distinguish[es] truth from illusion, to reflect emotional conflict, to measure psychic change" (*Cynthia Ozick* 40, 185). In my interpretation, Ozick emphasises "emotional conflict" by obscuring the clear contrast between "truth" and illusion. Her doubling of images and metaphors creates a field of shifting meanings that constantly redefine Rosa's perception of reality in the framework of trauma. Reality folds back onto itself and the story becomes "a skeleton of itself" (Scrafford 11). The reiteration of images seems to confine the literary space of the novella, but it simultaneously resists closure as the shifting of meanings suspends interpretation. Meaning is thus something that endlessly needs to be re-evaluated and rewritten through these gaps.

The repeated image par excellence is the butterfly, which is central to both stories. In "The Shawl," the metaphor is evoked when Magda's death is an impending certainty. One page earlier, the image had been located outside the camp fence: "[t]he sunheat murmured of another life, of butterflies in summer" (8). The butterfly's beauty is in devastating contrast to Magda's brutal murder. Gottfried remarks that "in choosing to beautify a child's

electrocution, Ozick risks glossing over the horror of the Holocaust in favor of aesthetics” (115). I argue to the contrary however: the poetic traumatic style of “The Shawl” precisely intensifies the horror of the camps because the contrasting doubling of images reveals the necessary constructedness of metaphor, as I discussed above.

In “Rosa,” the resurfacing of the image of the butterfly modifies its meaning further. It is used to describe Magda’s revivification: “[t]he whole room was full of Magda: she was like a butterfly, in this corner and in that corner, all at once” (64). The butterfly in the “whole” room is again positioned between life and death, and the distinction between “truth” and illusion remains necessarily blurred in order to make mourning possible. The butterfly emphasises death in Magda’s last moments of life and it accentuates life in Magda’s revivification when she is already dead. Both meanings emphasise the transitoriness of being. Across both short stories, however, this shift in meaning can conversely be interpreted as the transformation of Rosa’s response and attribution of meaning to loss: from an incorporated idol to a loss of life to be mourned.

Another parallel but slightly different example of doubled images concerns the image of air. In “The Shawl,” it signifies the omnipresence of death: “sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed” (3). She died as she “was swimming through the air” (9) “with pieces of black in it” (6). In “Rosa,” the protagonist constantly “panted” (24, 28) and “breathed noisily, almost a gasp” (30) due to the oppressive heat of Miami: “[i]n Florida there was no air, only this syrup into the esophagus” (47). Air repeatedly emphasises the inescapability of death. The sweetness of American air also connotes hedonism and a suffocating insistence on the enjoyment of life. The pervasiveness of doubling in *The Shawl* intensifies the interaction between the stories as much as it displaces it due to the implied differences and similarities. It resists a closure of interpretation, as the resulting fluidity of meaning consistently demands to

be reread in a renewed context of commemoration, whether that be Rosa's, the author's or the reader's.

American Reality: Reality of the Present

For Ozick, the Holocaust represents a specifically Jewish event:

what defines the Holocaust, and distinguishes it from multiple other large-scale victimizations of the Nazi period, is not only the intent to annihilate every last living Jew, from the moribund elderly in nursing homes down to newborn infants, but also, and preeminently, the total erasure of European Jewish civilization – language, culture, institutions. (Ozick, Letter 6)

It is the obliteration of Jewish life and culture that lies at the centre of the Holocaust. Ozick also cites her Jewish identity as the incentive for violating her own principle against writing Holocaust fiction. She comments: “I am not in favour of making fiction out of the data, or of mythologizing or poeticizing it. [. . .] I constantly violate this tenet; my brother's blood cries out from the ground, and I am drawn and driven” (“Roundtable Discussion” 284). Ozick is a Jewish American writer whose orthodox Judaism urges her “to be a witness [. . .] I grew up always as a witness” (Bernstein C15). Empathy firmly places her within the continuum of the Jewish history of suffering. In her reaction to a letter from a Holocaust survivor who criticized *The Shawl*, she elaborates on her motivation for writing the novella:

[e]very Jew should feel as if he himself came out of Egypt . . . The Exodus took place 4000 years ago, and yet the *Haggadah* enjoins me to incorporate it

into my own mind and flesh, to so act as if it happened directly and intensely to me, not as mere witness but as participant. Well, if I am enjoined to belong to an event that occurred 4000 years ago, how much more strongly am I obliged to belong to an event that occurred only 40 years ago. (qtd. in Cohen 148, original italics and ellipsis)

As Alan L. Berger and Gloria L. Cronin suggest, “Ozick’s vision of haggadic fiction as ‘liturgical literature’” (7) makes her engagement with Holocaust fiction essentially Judaic.

Ozick seems to implicitly resituate Rosen’s concept of witness-through-the-imagination into a more fundamentally Jewish context.

The ambivalence of the narrator’s relation to the protagonist in *The Shawl* – characterised by genuine sympathy but also, at times, by a palpable dislike – can be seen to reflect Ozick’s own point of view. Ozick’s Jewish identity is the source of both her empathy with and judgement of Rosa. Ozick points out that: “history for the Jews, is not simply what has happened, it is a judgement on what has happened” (qtd. in Kremer, *Witness* 231).

“Rosa” explores the protagonist’s prewar assimilation to Polish culture; Ozick accordingly criticises her abandonment of the Jewish tradition and history. This resonates with her view that “not to incorporate into an educable mind the origins and unifying principles of one’s own civilization strikes me as a kind of cultural autolobotomy” (“T.S. Eliot” 13). The narration of *The Shawl* indicates Ozick’s ambivalent attitude to her protagonist. Although both stories are told in the past tense by an omniscient narrator and thus logically suggest the perspective of hindsight, the durational time of trauma is maintained through the collapse of the stories into each other. Due to this temporal clash between narration and the structure of trauma, the distinction between narrator and protagonist is sometimes blurred. The narrator, for instance, explicitly converges with Rosa in the following quotation: “[s]he left off panting

and shivered. What do *I* care? *I*'m used to everything. Florida, New York, it doesn't matter. All the same, *she* took two hairpins" (24, my emphasis). The same narrator, however, unsympathetically describes Rosa as "a madwoman and a scavenger" (13). Simultaneous empathy for and judgement of Rosa coexist in Ozick's most direct literary engagement with the Holocaust.

The style of "Rosa" foregrounds the tangible reality of the American present. The sentences are more grammatically complete, its style is descriptive and the setting is more specific than in "The Shawl." The first short story is characterised by the absence of geographical denominators. The camp intentionally remains an abstract setting, which intensifies the psychological trauma of the protagonist. "Rosa," however, is filled with specific American and Polish locations with a large Jewish population: Miami, Florida, New York versus Warsaw, Minsk and Lublin. Rosa's surname "Lublin" refers to a Jewish ghetto in Poland, which suggests both the location of her traumatic experience and the extent to which she is defined by it. Her identity is no longer anonymous but collective, a "name like a number" (36). There are several dialogues in "Rosa," which were entirely absent from "The Shawl" and which highlight the importance of communication, but the realist style is fragmented in these conversations. We are told that Rosa's "English was crude" (14) and its staccato composition is often due to grammatical incorrectness, such as "where we was born" (58). The fragmented language works against the depiction of a comprehensive post-Holocaust American reality by emphasising Rosa's disruptive voice. The mixing of singular and plural in "we was," however, also emphasises that Rosa expresses individual trauma, but also the indissociability of that trauma from Magda. Rosa's broken speech signifies her inability and unwillingness to communicate her testimony in America. She refuses the language: "[w]hy should I learn English? I didn't ask for it, I got nothing to do with it" (23). Rosa's reluctance

to learn English underlines her isolation on two levels: the difficulty in communicating and transmitting her testimony and the complexity of cultural assimilation.

Andrew Gordon observes that in “The Shawl,” the “historical and political context disappears” and “the words ‘Jew,’ ‘Nazi,’ ‘concentration camp,’ or even ‘war’ are never mentioned” (1). In “Rosa,” culturally and historically specific phrases are frequently used. It is made clear in the second story that Rosa’s struggle with her Jewish identity is as significant to her individual story as is her psychological trauma concerning her rape and Magda’s death.¹³ The detachment from reality that Rosa experiences in Miami is therefore as much to do with issues of assimilation and cultural uprootedness as with trauma. *The Shawl* demonstrates that Rosa’s personal history is bound up with a specifically Jewish collective identity, both in its experience and its commemoration. The transmission of her testimony is indissociable from the meaning with which the Holocaust is imbued in America, which in turn reflects back on Rosa’s (in)ability to tell her story.

Rosa’s reverence for her prewar Polish girlhood is firmly contextualised in relation to her assimilated upbringing. She idolises Polish high-culture: “[c]ultivation, old civilization, beauty, history! [. . .] Whoever yearns for an aristocratic sensibility, let him switch on the great light of Warsaw” (21). Her history is a specifically Polish one that demands the obliteration of her Jewish roots. Rosa proudly announces that “[h]er father, like her mother, mocked at Yiddish; there was not a particle of ghetto left in him, not a grain of rot” (21). Ozick elsewhere defines assimilation as the erasure of European Jewish culture and history: it is “nothing more sinister than the loosening of inherited practices” (“Anne Frank”). The family’s vulnerability and the insignificance of their cherished Polish identity is revealed

¹³ Arlene Fish Wilner confirms that “[w]hile Ozick’s writing often does reflect the struggle to integrate splintered aspects of identity, her concerns are never only with psychology or personality” (121-22).

when they are ghettoised as Jews. Rosa's Jewish identity is thus imposed on her by Nazi laws and it is, and remains, an identity of persecution.

She mourns the loss of her Polish identity and does not identify herself with Jews, which her explicitly anti-Semitic remarks, both during the Holocaust and in America, demonstrate. Kremer affirms that Rosa's family "are so Polish that they embrace their compatriots' antisemitism" (*Women* 164). Reminiscing about the ghetto, Rosa writes to Magda: "imagine confining *us* with teeming Mackowiczes and Rabinowiczes and Perskys and Finkelsteins, with all their bad-smelling grandfathers and their hordes of feeble children" (66, original emphasis). Strandberg observes that for Rosa it is "as though the true outrage of the thing were her forced proximity to Jews" (147). Rosa's resolute assimilation does not even allow for a humane view of – let alone empathy for – her fellow-sufferers, which by extension concerns herself as well. She continues this anti-Semitic attitude in America, and remains unable to ascribe meaning to her history in a Jewish framework. When she meets Persky, she constantly repeats "[m]y Warsaw isn't your Warsaw" (19). This remark refers to her Holocaust experience with which she differentiates herself from others, but also to her assimilated identity. Rosa imagines his Warsaw as utterly decrepit: "what bitter ancient alley, dense with stalls, cheap clothes strung on outdoor racks, signs in jargoned Yiddish" (20). At every opportunity, Rosa stereotypes the Jews of Miami as vulgar illiterate scoundrels and elevates herself above their mediocrity: "she had nothing in common with them" (16). In contrast, Emily Budick has interestingly observed that Rosa "is almost a compendium of Nazi stereotypes of the Jew: grotesque, arrogant, obnoxious, mean-minded, overly intellectual, intent upon assimilating into a culture that despises her, and contemptuous of her fellow Jews and her fellow Poles both" (219). Rosa's fixation is on her personal loss and the idolatry of her family. Her individualism places her outside of history, which Ozick implicitly criticises.

The ambivalence of Rosa's Polish Jewish identity is mirrored in Magda's appearance. Her Aryan looks and the uncertainty surrounding her father are foregrounded but not resolved in *The Shawl*. Rosa firmly declares to Magda that her father's "name was Andrzej. Our families had status. Your father was the son of my mother's closest friend. She was a converted Jew married to a Gentile: you can be a Jew if you like, or a Gentile, it's up to you" (43). Cheryl Alexander Malcolm interestingly suggests that when Magda is killed, "Rosa loses not only a child, but, with its Aryan looks, the last vestige of her assimilated Polish Jewish identity" (124). Magda's identity originates either in voluntary assimilation due to Rosa's liaison with Andrzej or in involuntary "assimilation" through Rosa being raped by a German. In America, Rosa chooses an explicitly non-Jewish career for her daughter: Magda's "WASPish Ivy League professorat [is] to pursue a blatantly heathen interest as Professor of Greek Philosophy" (Strandberg 145). Rosa's assimilated identity remains the only safe reality that she knows. She desperately clings to it in post-Holocaust America and transposes it to Magda's imagined identity.

As Rosa denies her own Jewish heritage both during the Holocaust and in its commemoration, it seems rather presumptuous to suggest that *The Shawl* is a novella concerned with the redemption of Judaism after the Holocaust. Berger observes that "the impulse to bear witness to Jewish endurance symbolizes that covenant may prevail over history" (*Crisis* 126) and Strandberg similarly comments: "[t]he theme of *The Shawl* is the question whether Jewish identity [. . .] can survive this greatest of all historical traumas" (142). From the protagonist's point of view, this analysis does not hold. Her Jewish identity is accidentally established due to the Holocaust; it is not a commitment. Ozick hereby highlights the fact that not all of the Jews who were persecuted in the Holocaust identified themselves as Jews. It is remarkable that Ozick chooses an assimilated and anti-Semitic

protagonist in her most direct portrayal of the Holocaust in her fiction. When she touches on the Holocaust in other novels and short stories, the survivor-characters either experienced the catastrophe as Jews, or at least identified with their Jewishness. For other characters, encounters with the Holocaust and its survivors work towards a meaningful exploration of their Jewish identity.¹⁴ Ozick furthermore states:

[a]ll the Jews that died rend our hearts, our sense of mercy and justice. But I think the Jews who went to their deaths not knowing why, but knowing the meaning of their lives as Jews, were in some sense more redeemed in the eyes of history than those who went with a sense of mistaken identity. (qtd. in Bernstein C15)

Although other Holocaust representations in Ozick's oeuvre feature more redemptive meanings or possibilities, I argue that *The Shawl* emphasises their absence. Ozick explicitly states that "this search for spots of goodness, for redemptive meaning [. . .] suits what *we* are, we in the safety and decency of our current lives; it does not suit the events themselves" ("Roundtable Discussion" 278, original emphasis). She thus acknowledges the limits of her representation of the Holocaust. *The Shawl* represents her affirmation of a history of Jewish suffering through the imagination. It seeks to assert the importance of Jewish identity – not its redemption – and, with it, the possibility of a meaningful Jewish American collective commemoration of the Holocaust.

¹⁴ In *The Cannibal Galaxy*, Joseph Brill experiences the Holocaust as an orthodox Jew. In *Heir to the Glimmering World* (2004), the exiled German family Mitwischer identifies with their Jewish identity. Enoch Vand converts from an atheist to an orthodox Jew through registering the corpses of the Holocaust in *Trust*. The secular American narrator of "Bloodshed" rediscovers Judaism through the teachings of a Hassidic survivor rebbe. In "Levitation," the testimony of a Holocaust survivor causes a group of Jewish guests to empathise with the history of Jewish suffering and to levitate.

The narration of “Rosa” picks up the protagonist’s story only after her “removal” to Florida. The catalyst for the second short story is accordingly the destruction of her store in response to her inability to transmit her testimony in America. The setting of the store underlines Rosa’s own cultural uprootedness in the context of American commodification. Like Sol Nazerman’s pawnshop in *The Pawnbroker* and Anya’s antique shop in Schaeffer’s novel, Rosa’s store is a “junkshop, everything used, old, lacy with other people’s history” (15). She shares the uprootedness of the objects that she sells and their consignment to historical oblivion. Rosa tries to direct her testimony according to the interests of her post-Holocaust listeners, imitating the selection of objects for the attention of her customers: “I used to pick out one little thing here, one little thing there, for each customer” (67).¹⁵ This individually customised testimony, inextricable from the constraints of American consumerism, proves unproductive for Rosa because she tells fragments of her history instead of her entire story. This fragmentation is reflected in the store’s “speciality in antique mirrors” (26). Rosa’s destruction of them both symbolises and makes visible the fragmentation of her own identity. Rosa’s anger at “the world’s desire to forget that which she cannot” (Kremer, “Holocaust Survivors” 30) is categorised as madness, because the American tendency towards amnesia is not itself confronted or acknowledged.

Peter Novick points out that “both during the war and afterward, ‘the Holocaust,’ as a Jewish-specific conceptual entity, hardly existed” (116). In chapter one, I argued that this was amply demonstrated in Norma Rosen’s *Touching Evil*. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, American identity politics gave rise to a “victim culture” that increasingly made the Holocaust a point of unification for Jewish American cultural identity.

¹⁵ Ozick precisely refrains from presenting *The Shawl* in an easy consumable format. She makes Rosa an intensely unsympathetic and unlikeable character, just like Sol Nazerman’s cynical and asocial characterisation in Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker*.

The only thing that all American Jews shared was the knowledge that but for the immigration of near or distant ancestors, they would have shared the fate of European Jewry. Insofar as the Holocaust became the defining Jewish experience, all Jews had their “honorary” survivorship in common. Insofar as it attained mythic status, expressing truths about an enduring Jewish condition, all were united in an essential victim identity. (Novick 190-91)

Schaeffer’s reverence for Holocaust survivors in *Anya* and her parents’ consideration of the Holocaust as central to their Jewish identity, illustrates this cultural development of Jewish American Holocaust awareness. During the same period, however, Novick defines a contrary trend or impulse:

[a] decline in Jewish commitment and sense of Jewish identity [. . .] threatened demographic catastrophe for American Jewry. [. . .] The threat of assimilation was frequently described as a “quiet,” “silent,” “bloodless,” or “spiritual” Holocaust. (Novick 185)

Both of the cultural phenomena outlined above merge and conflict in *The Shawl*. Ozick’s most direct critique of the appropriation of the Holocaust by American Jewry occurs when Rosa reprimands Finkelstein, the manager of the hotel that put barbed wire on the fence around its private beach: “[o]nly Nazis catch innocent people behind barbed wire” (51). When he replies agitatedly, “[m]y name is Finkelstein” (51), she admonishes him for superficially generalising a Jewish American victim identity: “[t]hen you should know better!” (51). She emphasises the gulf in experience between Jewish Americans and Holocaust survivors: “[w]here were you when we was there?” (51). Finkelstein defends

himself by explaining the barbed wire as a measure not to lock people up, but to “keep [. . .] out the riffraff” (51). He thus succeeds in discriminating as much as he claims to be discriminated against. The ease with which Finkelstein chooses to appropriate a Jewish identity embedded in universal victimhood threatens to minimise Rosa’s suffering. She despises commodification that surrounds her in America: “whatever was dangerous and repugnant they made prevalent, frivolous” (53).

There is, however, an implicit hypocrisy in Rosa’s reference to her own persecution in order to emphasise the difference between the experiences of Holocaust survivors and American Jewry, because she constantly refuses the recognition of her own Jewishness. Her defensiveness towards Persky causes her to treat him in the same manner: “[y]ou wasn’t there. From the movies you know it” (58). In her accusations towards American Jewry, Rosa’s desire for redemption is again made evident. We are told that “[s]he had long ago recognised this power to shame” (58) and afterwards she felt “[i]rradiated, triumphant, cleansed” (52). To an extent, she condones the sanctification of the survivor because it briefly relieves her of her survivor guilt by emphasising her own victim identity.

Strandberg argues that both short stories of *The Shawl* are related through the obliteration of Judaism:

[w]hat makes them both hellish is their evisceration of Jewish identity – in the death camp through physical annihilation, and in Miami through displacing traditional Jewish culture in favor of contemporary American hedonism. (139)

Finkelstein “can’t spare the time for this” (51) because he has to run his hotel, whilst the clients of Rosa’s store “were in a hurry – most of them were, after I began” (67). There is no

time for history. The elderly population of Florida is saturated by the enjoyment of the present: “[s]o triumphant is the present moment for these old people that the past becomes wholly subsumed in it, converted into another version of time present” (Strandberg 149).

Rosa represents the other extreme: her past is so triumphant that the present dissolves into it.

As Sophia Lehmann points out, however, the two attitudes converge as well as diverge:

“[l]iving exclusively in the present is therefore to some degree no different from being trapped in the past, in that both modes incur a denial of history” (38).

The emphasis on the present in American culture is exemplified in Stella, who insists on living in “the shallow lesson of Now” (Ozick, “Interview” 258). She sends Rosa to Florida and urges her to recuperate. Rosa revels in memories as much as Stella does in forgetting:

“[s]he wants to wipe out memory” (58); “Stella, who *can* remember, refuses” (41, original

emphasis). Stella’s embrace of America’s amnesia does not bring her fulfilment: “[s]he sits

and watches the present roll itself up into the past more quickly than she can bear. That’s why

she never found the one thing she wanted more than anything, an American husband” (41).

Descriptions of Stella in capitalist terms underline her assimilated identity: “Stella was all the time writing she was not a millionaire” (30). This is, however, solely Rosa’s point of view; as

Kremer points out: “[r]eaders cannot know whether Stella is free of Holocaust trauma, for [. .

.] we do not enter her thoughts and dreams” (*Women* 157). Rosa stereotypes her niece’s

behaviour, as she does with all of the Americans and Jews whom she encounters. There are

tentative indications that Stella might not have forgotten her traumatic past, but chooses to

live in the American present. When Rosa destroys her store, the newspaper coverage has a

“big photograph, Stella standing near with her mouth stretched and her arms wild” (18). This

image is repeated in the description of Rosa’s traumatic recall: “women with their mouths

stretched and their arms wild” (45). Whether Stella’s dramatic expression concerns a forced

confrontation with her past or the destruction of American normalisation, remains unclear.

She also expresses kindness to Rosa, which Rosa's portrayal of Stella as the "Angel of Death" (15, 23, 30, 35, 39) does not recognise.¹⁶ Stella's impatience with Rosa's idolatry of the past might be mistaken for the dismissal of her aunt. She urges Rosa to "have a life" (32). However, Stella is unsuitable to be the addressee of Rosa's testimony because, although she witnessed the Holocaust first-hand, she also inadvertently caused Magda's death by stealing the shawl.

Persky is the only addressee who provides Rosa with the possibility of transmitting her subjective truth. He offers an alternative and more moderate approach to commemorating the Holocaust. His genuine empathy implicitly derives from his Jewish identity, which he maintains in an adapted American lifestyle. Rosa first meets Persky at the laundromat, where she washes her "black" sheets. The ritual of cleaning her room and beautifying her appearance is aimed at achieving serenity for the worship of the shawl. Both actions, however, also turn out to be for Persky: "[d]estiny had clarified her room just in time for a visitor" (55). From the moment both characters meet, Persky steeps Rosa in both her own and a Jewish history of suffering:

"Imagine this," the old man [reading a newspaper] next to her said. "Just look, first he has Hitler, then he has Siberia, he's in a camp in Siberia! Next thing he gets away to Sweden, then he comes to New York and he peddles. [. . .] he opens a little store – just a little store, his wife is a sick woman, it's what you call a bargain store [. . .] And they come in early in the morning, he didn't

¹⁶ This phrase was used to describe Dr. Mengele who selected prisoners on arrival at the ramp, deciding over life and death. The Angel of Death is also a supernatural figure in Jewish folklore who kills people.

even hang out his shopping bags yet, robbers, muggers, and they choke him, they finish him off. From Siberia he lives for this day! (18)

Strandberg notes that this enumeration of suffering culminates in the “general depravity of American civilization” (Strandberg 147). Persky does not present America as a “paradise” (18), a New World of promise, as is implied in the end of Anya’s testimony and in Budnitz’s *If I Told You Once*, but is realistic. He immediately positions Rosa both in her own history and in someone else’s traumatic life through highlighting the necessity of empathy. He urges her to be an attentive witness, as he himself will prove to be: “[i]magine this” (17, 18), “just look” (17). He also unwittingly offers her a point of access or recognition, as the bargain store resembles Rosa’s junkshop. Persky explicitly offers his willingness to be the addressee to whom Rosa can testify: “unload on me” (22), “You see? I unloaded on you, now you got to unload on me” (27). Rosa in contrast constantly rebukes Persky, but she draws attention to herself and her past in the act of distinguishing herself from him. She repeatedly challenges his capability as addressee: “[w]hatever I would say, you would be deaf” (27), “[y]ou don’t believe me?” (26); “[s]ee, [. . .] *now* you’re sorry you started with me!” (26, original emphasis).

When Persky asks her twice whether she knows any Yiddish, Rosa firmly denies it but cannot help “remember[ing] her grandmother’s cradle-croonings: her grandmother was from Minsk. *Unter Reyzls vigele shteyt a klorvays tsigele [. . .] Under Rosa’s cradle there’s a clear-white little goat*” (19, original italics). Rosa involuntarily begins to recognise her Jewish past. Persky reconciles the old and the new, tradition and contemporary society. His own biography emphasises both his Jewish and American identities:

[i]f I say my name, no more a stranger. Simon Persky. A third cousin to Shimon Peres, the Israeli politician. I have different famous relatives, plenty of family pride. You ever heard of Betty Bacall, who Humphrey Bogart the movie star was married to, a Jewish girl? Also a distant cousin. I could tell you the whole story of my life experience, beginning with Warsaw. (22)

Persky's life story is "whole:" it has a before, during and after that are interconnected. Israel and America, the two major countries of immigration for Holocaust survivors, are both part of his life story and he spans Old and New Worlds. This contrasts with Rosa's fragmented life. She disavows the existence of Israel: "[i]f not for me they would have shipped Stella with a boatload of orphans to Palestine, to become God knows what, to live God knows how. A field worker jabbering Hebrew" (40). Rosa's assimilated identity directs her towards the New World of America rather than Israel, so that once more she disregards her Jewish identity.

Persky sees Rosa as a human being, "an individual of intrinsic worth" (Lowin 111), instead of stereotyping her as a Jew or a survivor. He "offers her acceptance as opposed to the rejection from humanity" (Malcolm 124). Persky implicitly comments on her uniqueness when he sees that a button of her dress is missing: "[t]hat kind's hard to match, as far as I'm concerned we stopped making them around a dozen years ago. Braided buttons is out of style" (25). His random banter contains wisdom and insight, as he notices Rosa's isolation in the past through a missing button. Persky used to run a factory for "[b]uttons, belts, notions, knickknacks" (25). His ordinariness and comical flirtatiousness is typical of the Jewish hero. His jokes inadvertently reveal Rosa's traumatised state of mind. When Rosa rebukes him for touching the box containing Magda's shawl, he jokes: "[i]t's something alive in there?" (56). He guides her to the possibility of working through her past through gentle admonition.

Rosa trusts him because he bestows upon her a completeness of identity that nobody else offers her. She tells him about her Holocaust past and when the subject of her dead family, and thus Magda, comes up, “[s]he wondered if she dared to tell him more” (59). Her testimony to Persky is a tentative revelation of her traumatic past and her imaginary reality. She gives him the honour of opening the box: “‘Go ahead, lift up what’s inside.’ She did not falter. What her own hands longed to do she was yielding to a stranger” (59). When the box turns out to contain Dr. Tree’s book, Rosa retaliates against Persky, whom she accuses of stealing her underpants. He nevertheless remains a reliable addressee, for in the midst of this chaos of mistaken identity, he twice assures her: “I’ll come tomorrow”, “Tomorrow I’ll come back” (61). When he keeps his promise and arrives in the morning, Rosa has had her phone reconnected and invites him to her room. She has renewed the possibility of engaging with the American present.

Persky assumes the role of a *tzaddik* or “a righteous man” (Rosten 425). He urges Rosa to reclaim her own identity beyond trauma: “[y]ou went through it, now you owe yourself something” (58). He moderates between the dangers and virtues of remembering and forgetting: “[s]ometimes a little forgetting is necessary [. . .] if you want to get something out of life” (58). The *t’schuva* implied in Rosa’s sharing of her testimony with a Jew is not exclusively positive or redemptive, however. The phone that announces Persky’s arrival chases the revived Magda away: “Magda was not there. Shy, she ran from Persky” (70). Rosa chooses the present of Persky’s company in favour of her past, but this also implies the second death of her daughter. The imagery is again doubled: in “The Shawl,” “the speck of Magda was moving more and more into the smoky distance” (9), whilst in “Rosa” Magda’s disappearance means that she was “now only a speck in Rosa’s eye” (69). History repeats itself, but potentially with a difference. Due to her engagement with the Jewish Persky who advises her to engage in “a little forgetting,” Rosa necessarily betrays her allegiance to her

family. Rosa's life remains a story of exile and loss, whether of the present or the past. Her testimony as the tentative beginning of a working through of her trauma implies that this act of remembering remains inextricably bound up with forgetting.

Although Ozick seems, as I have argued, to be concerned in *The Shawl* with a political exploration of the dangers of assimilation, it is hard to discern what meaning she ascribes to the implied *t'schuva* in Rosa's life at a more individual level. The protagonist's testimony and her acquaintance with Persky urge her to live again as she breaks out of her self-destructive isolation. However, it is not clear that she has been able to integrate her lives and to forge a continuity out of before, during and after. Her testimony requires forgetting, which reveals rupture rather than healing, and it seems that the act of testimony necessarily betrays her past.

Assimilation nearly cost Rosa her story due to the American culture of amnesia, but testifying in a Jewish context equally risks distorting her story because she has consistently turned away from her Jewish identity. This ambivalence indicates that Ozick's empathy with Rosa's suffering is not solely directed towards the protagonist and the historical event of the Holocaust, but it also encompasses "her own point of access to the Holocaust, her own point of vulnerability" (Horowitz, "Pin" 152): the threatened erasure of Jewish identity and culture, which impels her to imagine and to write Jewish American Holocaust fiction.

Chapter Four:

The Fantastical Imagination in the Fiction of Judy Budnitz

Judy Budnitz is a prodigy in contemporary Jewish American literature. When she was still a graduate student, her first collection of short stories *Flying Leap* (1997) was published. It became The New York Times Notable Book of the Year. Her second book, the novel *If I Told You Once* (1999), was shortlisted for the Orange Prize. A new collection of short stories *Nice Big American Baby* (2005) has just been published to wide critical acclaim. This American-born author writes fantastical texts in a humorous light-hearted style, in which unexpected twists of the plot often reveal more sinister realities. Whether set in small-town America or the traditional “old country” (“Hershel” 237) of Europe, Budnitz’s fiction abounds with surreal images that probe marginalised and macabre aspects of the human condition.

This chapter develops my exploration of a fictional engagement with the Holocaust, by focusing specifically on Budnitz’s fantastical imagination of the Holocaust in the short story “Hershel” and the novel *If I Told You Once*. I analyse the narratological development of Budnitz’s fiction through the shifting of genres, a representational issue that complicates the act of storytelling and raises existential questions concerning the creation of life. Budnitz’s conception of her texts demonstrates her metafictional and self-reflexive approach to the Holocaust. Her stories are essentially about storytelling. Budnitz describes her inspiration for *If I Told You Once* within a discourse of Holocaust commemoration:

I was thinking about Holocaust survivors . . . about how in ten or twenty years anyone who lived through the Holocaust is going to be dead, and there won’t be any more eyewitnesses. The only evidence is going to be documents and

photographs and the like. And those are things that Holocaust deniers can just claim are forged. I started thinking about what's the most reliable source of history, and it's a human witness. But at the same time, a human witness is the most *unreliable* source. It's so subjective by definition. ("One on One," original ellipsis and emphasis)

Although the Holocaust is only one of the themes in this novel, the precariousness of Holocaust representation is at the core of its complicated narrative structure. *If I Told You Once* provides us with an overview of the Jewish American experience through four generations of women who each tell their life story. Most of the stories in the novel are told by Ilana who emigrates from a magical place (supposedly Eastern Europe) to America. Her daughter Sashie is desperate to live the American dream and denies her family's past. Sashie's daughter Mara distances herself further from Ilana's "superstitious" practices and beliefs. It is the youngest family member Nomie who learns to appreciate Ilana's tales and becomes the witness to her life story in order to complete the transmission inherent in the act of storytelling. The stories of the four protagonists alternate and their truths are often incompatible, although they are truthful to the point of view of each narrator. Their contradictory acts of witnessing emphasise the subjectivity of storytelling both in their differing experiences of reality and in their witnessing of each others' acts of storytelling.

The Holocaust is more thoroughly explored in the short story "Hershel," which will accordingly form the primary focus of this chapter.¹ The narrator of the story tells his grandchild about a kind baby-maker named Hershel in the old country, who moulds babies from dough. These have been ordered from him by their prospective parents, and the narrator was one of Hershel's creations. When one of his creations, the beautiful Alina, marries an

¹ The short story "Hershel" was first published in *Flying Leap* and has since been anthologised twice. It is included in Paul Zakrzewski, ed. *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge* (2003) and Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, eds. *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Twelfth Annual Collection* (1999).

outsider who brutally abuses her, she asks Hershel to make her a man. The giant man fails to protect her, however, and the husband slays them both. A dark gloom pervades the villages and all of the baby-makers mysteriously disappear. One inspiration for this fantastic tale was Budnitz “want[ing] to write a story about the Holocaust” (Budnitz, Commentary 191). The theme of the Holocaust in “Hershel” foregrounds similar representational issues concerning the act of storytelling as in *If I Told You Once*. The story demonstrates self-reflexivity because not only the perception of reality, but reality itself changes due to the overwhelming threat of the Holocaust. The Holocaust as subject matter itself urges Budnitz to resort to techniques of magical realism, the fantastic and the surreal. The awareness of the limitations of factual accuracy in representation encourages a highly imaginative approach to the Holocaust in this short story.

Whereas earlier generations of Holocaust fiction writers, such as Susan Fromberg Schaeffer and Sherri Szeman, relied heavily upon historical sources to bridge the gap in experience and explicitly forwarded facts in a realist plot, many contemporary American authors highlight issues of representation and imagination in their work. The transmission of the legacy of the Holocaust to a generation born long after the event is central to the works of high-profile writers such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Melvin Jules Bukiet, and Thane Rosenbaum. Their indirect approach makes use of “fantasy, folklore, and magical-realist devices” (Behlman 56), which simultaneously represent the Holocaust and explicitly question the possibility of representing the Holocaust for the generation(s) after. These writers acknowledge the indirectness of their approach to the Holocaust and the incompleteness of representation, without refraining from an engagement with the subject matter. Budnitz’s imagination of the Holocaust is likewise not dominated by history, but by fiction that tries to grasp that history in order to represent the subjective truth of the narrator.

The Story of the Holocaust: Shifting Realities and Genres

In “Hershel,” Budnitz’s recourse to the fantastic (in its broadest definition) and her gradual shift and slippage between different literary genres is not only a response to the story of the Holocaust as difficult subject matter or the act of storytelling that tries to represent it, but also to the limitations of historical Holocaust fiction. Gilead Morahg confirms in his analysis of contemporary Israeli Holocaust fiction that it is primarily:

about the enormous difficulty of finding the literary means that would enable an imaginative engagement with the experiences and implications of the Holocaust. I believe that it is precisely this quest for a narrative mode that would subvert the impediments to such an engagement [such as an emphasis on the historical reality of the Holocaust and the sanctity of Holocaust survivors] that led the authors [. . .] to use the fantastic. (151, original emphasis)

In other words, the genre of the fantastic in Holocaust fiction is a self-reflexive device that makes visible the author’s difficulties in addressing the issue of Holocaust representation beyond a historical point of view. It shows an awareness of the text as construction, revealing the processes of the imagination that are at work.

Many critics use the terms “magical realism,” “fabular,” “fantastic” and “surreal” in reference to Budnitz’s work without differentiating between these categories. In “Hershel,” such differences are crucial to the narratological development of the story that aims to emphasise the overwhelming and unanticipated destruction of the Holocaust. It opens and closes with a realist framework of storytelling, whilst the story that is told moves from

magical-realist to fantastic and surreal modes, to ultimately dissolve in the unreal reality of the Holocaust. Budnitz's experimentation with genre tests the possibilities of fiction in transmitting the story of the Holocaust. Various questions in the story about the story play with the literary suspension of disbelief. Budnitz has said, "[r]ealistic fiction isn't something I can do" (qtd. in Henderson). In *If I Told You Once*, such wariness of mimetic representation is echoed in Ilana's views on art, which resemble *Anya's* metafictional discourse on photography and film. She observes: "I did not trust even photos to show me the truth" (117) and "paintings were lies, they showed you a moment that was gone" (59). It is the literary imagination alone that proves to be adequate to convince Ilana: "I knew it was a play, it was all artifice and tricks, and yet I thought there was something real in it, something more pure and true than the life outside on the street" (93). In this quotation, her awareness of the play as a fictional representation does not result in distrust but makes the imaginative more believable than mimesis. Alan Mintz notes a similar self-reflexive development towards the metafictional in contemporary Israeli fiction:

momentous developments such as [. . .] the Holocaust are used as the stuff of storytelling and mythmaking rather than as events of moral-historical meaning. The shift from history to story is a supremely self-conscious move that becomes thematized within the novels themselves. (Introduction 14)

The narration and metafictional remarks in *If I Told You Once* and the use of various literary genres in "Hershel" show a self-awareness in both texts as they explore the potential of fiction to imagine and to tell the story of the Holocaust.

“Hershel” begins and ends in a realist framework of storytelling, a present in which the narrator and the addressed grandchild are located. This reality is governed by the natural laws of procreation through sex and contrasts with the embedded magical-realist reality in which Hershel shapes babies. Budnitz thus provides a prelude and a conclusion to the magical-realist and fantastical story that is told. The fantastical elements of the story reflect onto the realist framework, as the natural laws of procreation are seen to be contrived. The narrator describes how “[a]fterward your grandmother and I had to make your father by ourselves. It was an awkward, newfangled thing for us” (244). He has disdain for these natural acts which seem artificial to him. The narrator condemns the modern ways of procreation: “[t]hese days, these young people, they all want to do it themselves; they’d buy the do-it-yourself kit if there were such a thing” (237). The pragmatism of natural laws and science are thus positioned as inferior to Hershel’s magical creation of life. The realist reality is a framework that makes the narrated magical-realist plot possible,² but it is also informed by it. When explaining the techniques of magical realism, Robert Alter similarly states that

there must be some sort of persuasive, minutely represented realist frame within which the elements of fantasy are played out. That frame will involve an attempt at the faithful representation of [e.g.] the ineluctable aspects of biological existence [which tend] to be perceived, as they are typically in realism *tout court*, as constrictions, limits, inevitabilities. (20-21, original italics)

² Robert Alter points out in his analysis of Borges’ *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* that the introductory realist framework defines the text as magical-realist: “[h]ad Borges plunged us immediately into Tlön’s realm of disorienting otherness without the realist frame, the story would be a metaphysical phantasy but would not qualify as magic realism” (19).

In “Hershel,” the magical-realist story is interwoven with the realist frame of narration, but it is disconnected from it in time and place. It is thus irretrievable and already announces the threatening and destructive presence of the Holocaust. The opening sentence underlines the discrepancies between the magical and realist realities through a temporal and geographical displacement: “[w]hen I was your age, back in the old country, they didn’t make babies the way they do now” (237). Such contrasting worldviews make the magical natural and the natural artificial. In *If I Told You Once*, this distinction between two realities likewise makes Ilana experience western cultural references as meaningless concepts: “I heard people speak of a Great War and when I asked where this war was they laughed and called me a yokel” (65). America is seen as an entirely different universe: “I travelled to this place, where their kind [three witches] do not exist, where the world obeys different rules” (236). Although both realities and/or perceptions of reality are informed by one another, they are seen as distinct. It is only through the act of storytelling that the magical is imaginatively retrieved and both worlds can complement each other. Magical realism is characterised by the importance of the story: “forms of narrative knowledge are presented as important complements to the rational-scientific paradigm” (Hegerfeldt). By foregrounding the act of storytelling from the start, “Hershel” invites the reader to acknowledge the ambivalent position of fiction in between the natural and the artificial, between fact and imagination.

In addition to the introductory and concluding realist framework, the realist component of the magical-realist story is also achieved through its setting in a shtetl. This suggests a connection between the old country and Eastern Europe, where *shtetlach* were the villages of “Jewish communities [. . .] where the culture of the Ashkenazim flourished (before World War II)” (Rosten 377-78). The narrator’s shtetl is a secluded community (most of the inhabitants are created by Hershel), governed by poverty and lacking any economic, political

or military autonomy. This setting contrasts sharply with the wealthy and assimilated city backgrounds of Schaeffer and Ozick's protagonists. The shtetl is a strikingly appropriate setting for Budnitz's magical-realist tale, because Jewish folklore thrived there. Budnitz explained that she "was reading a lot of I.B. Singer at the time [of writing "Hershel"] and wanted to write something in that style, a new sort of shtetl story" (Commentary 190). The influential Jewish American writer Isaac Bashevis Singer often situated his short stories and novellas in the shtetl. He wrote predominantly in Yiddish and left Warsaw for New York in 1935. Ezrahi comments that "Bashevis Singer maintained his position as the most authentic and authenticating Jewish reference, his shtetl the most genuine, *albeit nonmimetic*, Jewish geography" ("(Re)Imagining" 201, original emphasis). Singer's portrayal of the shtetl abounds with nostalgia. In his discussion of Singer's oeuvre, Ben Siegel notes the imaginative lure of the shtetl:

the shtetl is removed just enough in time and space to render plausible the most mythical events or legendary figures; it also is close enough to embody reality. The real and unreal [or in the terms of my analysis "magical"] fuse there convincingly. (18)

The realist and magical elements of "Hershel" are consequently equivalent parts of its reality. Budnitz remarks how in Singer's stories "[e]ven the bits of magic and glimpses of the supernatural seemed real and authentic to me. Things were different in the Old Country, I thought. That was just the way life was, back there, back then" ("I.B. Singer"). Budnitz's reliance upon the magical is slightly more prominent than Singer's, as "Hershel" aims to convey the destruction of the shtetl during the Holocaust, whereas Singer's magical realism

aspires to preserve the shtetl culture as it was, mostly marginalising the occurrence of the Holocaust in his work.

In Budnitz's short story, it is the central concept of the magical creation of life that contrasts poignantly with its annihilation in the Holocaust. Hershel's creation of babies is meticulously described in terms of bread making, which constitutes another magical-realist process. Alter remarks how recipes in magical-realist literature can provide "a ballast of quotidian physical reality for [. . .] high-flying fantasies" (27). The realist references to bread are detailed and explicit: after stirring together the ingredients, Hershel "began to knead it" (239), then "placed the dough in a bowl and covered it and left it to rise. When it grew to twice its size, he punched it down again. Twice he did this" (239-40). The ovens in which Hershel bakes his dough sculptures of babies are magical constructs that seamlessly merge with the natural laws of procreation, as they are portrayed as mechanised versions of the womb: the ovens "were kept at exactly 98.6 degrees all year round" (240). The incubation period likewise mirrors the natural development and birth of the child: "[a]fter nine months [. . .] he would draw them out either by the head or the feet" (240). Budnitz makes the unity between the realist and the magical explicit in a simile: Hershel's workshop "looked like a bakery" (238). The magical and realist images in this comparison are not seen as separate or contradictory. Rawdon Wilson explains the fusion of different realities in magical realism:

observe the ease, the purely natural way in which abnormal, experientially impossible (and empirically unverifiable) events take place. It is as if they had always already been there; their abnormality normalized from the moment that their magical realist worlds were imagined. The narrative voice bridges the gap between ordinary and bizarre, smoothing the discrepancies, making everything seem normal. (220)

Babies that are shaped and baked like bread is how life is traditionally created in the narrator's village. The absence of quotation marks in the characters' speech convincingly reinforces that the phrases used for ordering the babies is how it has always been: "the woman would say, Hershel, make me a baby. And Hershel would nod and say, God willing" (238). The speech acts which are not separated from the narrated text by conventional punctuation, invoke the everyday and the mythical simultaneously as they refer to a practice in and of eternity. In "Hershel," the shtetl is presented as "a world isolated from time" (Rosten 380).

The composition of the narrated story in this initial magical-realist phase is logically structured to emphasise that the reality is perceived as normal. Numerous time indicators ("when," "then," "often," "soon") and co-ordinating conjunctions ("and," "but") at the beginning of sentences emphasise the logical understanding of the magical-realist proceedings, as they foreground chronology and causality. The questions that are posed either by the addressed grandchild or the narrator add to the explanatory and logical structure of the narrated story. The questions "Who was Hershel?" (237) and "Did he ever miss the babies once they were gone?" (239) do not question the magical nature of the described events, but spur the portrayal of the magical-realist reality because they display an eager inquisitiveness for the story to continue and the events to be believed and understood. The time indicators, conjunctions and questions also illustrate the importance of the oral character of the act of storytelling, "the verbal spontaneity and improvisation of a long oral tradition" (Siegel 9) of Yiddish literature, of which Singer is a canonical Jewish American representative.

In "Hershel," the description of the magical creation of life is firmly rooted in a realist discourse that propels a sense of familiarity with an identifiable culture that has been permanently extinguished by the Holocaust. Gabriel Brownstein confirms that "the combination of realistic detail and fantastical subject matter re-creates and interrogates lost

histories, reanimating a vanished world and undermining conventional understandings of that bygone place” (“Meister Singer”). Budnitz creates a new discourse of Holocaust commemoration through magical realism. This is most noticeable in her use of the image of ovens as places of birth rather than death. This reversal of the central image of the Holocaust is not an allegory, as this genre supposes a totality of underlying Holocaust imagery which is absent in “Hershel.” The image specifically subverts the historical reality of the destruction of the Holocaust in order to accentuate the lives and the thriving culture which was lost.

Through the act of storytelling, the narrator resurrects what has been annihilated, a process comparable to the function of Anya’s subjective testimony in Schaeffer’s historical novel. Contrary to the realist *Anya*, however, the slippage in the symbolism of the ovens allows the techniques of magical realism to explicitly question assumptions of empirically verifiable facts. The magical creation of life in the ovens questions the inscription of the Holocaust into history as a “normal” event of historical reality. The description of Hershel’s workshop is affectionate: “[t]he place was lush and steamy. The babies were sensitive and needed warmth to grow” (239). The fragility of the unborn life is safeguarded in the ovens, where steam and warmth function as mysterious protectors. This contrasts starkly with the historical reality of the ovens in the Holocaust, where the gassed bodies of the dead were destroyed. The magical-realist creation of life thus challenges the normative discourse of the historical reality of the Holocaust in order to convey its “unrealness.”

The miracle of life is moreover highlighted by Budnitz’s specific reference to *challah* bread. Budnitz was inspired to use the motif of bread making when she “was being taught how to bake challah. I was told that the dough was ready for baking when it had the consistency of an earlobe” (Budnitz, Commentary 191). *Challah* is “the Jewish Sabbath and holiday bread” (Roden 86). God created Adam on the sixth day and declares the seventh day to be a day of rest and worship (Exod. 34.21); *challah* is likewise baked on Fridays in order

to worship God's creation of the world and mankind, an association to which I will return later in the chapter. The shaping and baking of babies in the *challah* custom is therefore a repetition of the originary act of creation at the beginning of eternity, which further counters the Holocaust's act of destruction. The traditional making of *challah* also commemorates the Jewish history of persecution and exile, as the original term:

Hallah refers specifically to reserving and burning some of the dough used for baking the Sabbath loaves (or other bread); this is in remembrance of the dough offering that, in Temple times, was given to the priest. (Baskin 394, original italics)

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE that dispersed the Jewish people from their homeland is counteracted by a continuation of its practices. The commemoration of *challah* makes Hershel's babies symbolic of the persistence of life in the Diaspora.

The bread-making procedures in "Hershel" are also reminiscent of the *matzo* loaves that are baked at Passover in order to commemorate the deliverance of the Israeli people from slavery. This reference anticipates the golem legend to which Budnitz refers in the subsequent fantastical phase of the short story. In 1909 the Polish rabbi Yudel Rosenberg added the anti-Semitic myth of the blood libel, prevalent in the Middle Ages, to the story of the golem (Kieval 15). The myth has since become central to various renditions of the golem legend, such as Singer's *The Golem* (1982) and Elie Wiesel's *The Golem: The Story of a Legend* (1983). It claimed that Jews used "Christian blood to make matzos" (Wiesel, *Golem* 19). The golem was needed in order to protect the Jews against these anti-Semitic assaults, which often developed into violent pogroms. By making babies as bread, Budnitz reverses the slander: Christian children are not killed to make the *matzos*, but new children are born by

being created according to the traditional practices of Jewish breadmaking. The narrator in “Hershel” moreover stresses the normalcy of this magical act of creation instead of obscuring it in mysticism, which would be reminiscent of anti-Semitic superstition. Hershel “was not secretive or mysterious about his work. [He] allowed anyone to come into his workshop to watch him work” (239). The rabbi in Singer’s *The Golem* likewise refutes the blood libel by citing the ordinary ingredients of the *matzos*: “[w]e don’t bake our matzohs in dark cellars but in bakeries, with the doors open. Anyone can come and see. The matzohs consist of flour and water only” (39). The act of witnessing that is underlined in both texts serves to emphasise the normalcy of the act of creation. The magical-realist techniques in this first part of the narrated story make the shtetl a familiar setting to both the narrator and the reader. Its displacement in a timeless realm shows that its magical occurrences are normal, are the way the world has always been.

In the second phase of the short story, the familiar reality of the magical-realist universe is overthrown by the unexpected intrusion of a violent external reality, which compels fantastical or extraordinary measures to be taken. Situated in the middle of “Hershel,” two ominous sentences announce the radical shift in reality: “[b]ut then the trouble came. We did not know then that it was a mere hint of what was to come” (241). The unanticipated breach interrupts the chronology of the narrated magical-realist story as it is discernibly told from the present in which the act of storytelling takes place. This present is the future of the narrated past and offers the insightful perspective of hindsight, which augments the unawareness of transgressive events as they unfold in the past. When an outsider marries the beautiful Alina, he comes from beyond the referential framework of the magical-realist reality.

Wendy B. Faris has pointed out that “[m]agical realism has tended to concentrate on rural settings” (182) and Hershel’s village is typically characterised by the absence of power

and wealth. The self-confinement of shtetl communities was, however, due to oppression by outside centres of power:

[t]o live outside, a Jew needed special permission from the authorities [. . .]
 Jews were forbidden to own land. They were barred [. . .] from colleges and
 universities. They were barred from the humblest government jobs. (Rosten
 378)

Alina's husband contrasts strikingly with the magical-realist shtetl in which Alina was born and raised: "[h]e was a wealthy landowner with connections in the government. Her [Alina's] family was poor. He had ice-blue eyes and a set of iron teeth. He was very powerful. He owned everything" (241). He possesses political and economic power. His iron teeth may refer to the industrialisation that is unknown to the rural shtetl village. He also has military power, symbolised by "his sword" (243) with which he kills Alina and the golem. The historical references to the unequal distribution of power disrupt the previously reassuring completeness of the magical-realist reality. It emphasises that Alina's marriage is an alignment of conflicting realities. When Alina marries and moves outside the village, the normal magical-realist order is disturbed and the setting immediately changes: "clouds came down, the snow fell, and the sky did not clear. We suffered terrible nightmares" (241). Reduced visibility because of the clouded sky introduces a threatening gloom that is typical of the fantastic, where the magical becomes doubtful rather than "matter-of-fact" (Faris 177). The nightmares signify the extraordinariness of the abuse to follow. Alina's victimization by her husband is a transgressive act of violence that is suggestive of anti-Semitic actions:

we heard stories. We heard that he was cruel. That he left her alone for days. That he beat her. That he did not love her as a man loves a woman, but as a man loves a horse that is beautiful and good to ride. (242)

The narrator's indirect act of witnessing through storytelling ("we heard stories") demonstrates his powerless segregation and Alina's vulnerable isolation in the outside reality. It is Alina's dehumanisation ("a horse") that urges a fantastical response and she returns to the shtetl to ask Hershel to "make me a man" (242). Her vulnerability increases as the story continues: "suffering had sharpened her eyes" (242) evolves to "her face chiseled sharp by desperation" (242) and finally "she looked more ravaged than before" (242). Her increasing helplessness and impending destruction impels the creation of the fantastical golem.

There are numerous narratological references that classify the second phase of "Hershel" as fantastical. I deliberately use the broader term "fantastical" rather than Todorov's "fantastic," largely because this phase of the story already departs from a magical-realist "normality." The term indicates a move to an intensification of the magical elements of magical realism, a darkening of those elements in forms of surrealism, and a hesitation in the narration of and belief in extraordinary occurrences. Todorov defines fantastic fiction as a text that firstly:

must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; [then] it becomes one of the themes of the work [. . .] Third, the reader [. . .] will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. (33)

Magical realism is distinct from the fantastic in its logical matter-of-factness, so that magical occurrences are never explained or questioned regarding their magical nature, nor in terms of their narration: “[a]s is generally the case in magical realism we are offered no explanation of events, and the calm distancing of the narrative voice makes us forget the implausibility of the strange happenings” (Delbaere-Garant 258).

The representational framework of storytelling that had been logically structured when describing the magical-realist reality in “Hershel,” collapses when it is confronted with the transgression of violence: “[a]nd then – I don’t remember how it happened, how the man first saw her” (241). The co-ordinating conjunction (“and”) and time indicator (“then”) are explicitly separated from the remainder of the sentence by a hyphen in order to highlight the interruption of both the chronology and causality of the narration by the unreliability of the narrator’s memory. The incomprehensible and unexpected tragedy of Alina’s murder is announced through this breach in structural representation, which mirrors the break in genre and portrayed realities. The narrator’s knowledge of what happened is limited, as his reliance on stories to hear about Alina’s abuse has already indicated. His act of witnessing through storytelling makes him a receiver of narrated events rather than experienced ones. The cracks in the representational framework show his struggle to ascertain the reasons for this shift in reality. First he claims its inevitability: “[h]ow could she [Alina] refuse? [. . .] She had no choice really” (241), but he subsequently rethinks this explanation: “[t]hen again [. . .] I do not know if she wished it or not” (241). He cites the power of her husband as a reason to believe in both her innocence and her guilt, displaying an eagerness to understand that matches the nature of the questions in the magical-realist phase of the short story. However, he finally concludes in uncertainty, which strengthens the hesitation that dismantles the representational framework of storytelling. The abundance of detail in the descriptions of the magical-realist reality is likewise abandoned, which makes the fantastic reality more elusive:

“[w]here doesn’t matter” (241). The eternal time that guaranteed the normalcy of the magical-realist world is disrupted: “[i]t all happened so quickly” (241). The narration of the story also suddenly picks up pace. There are increasing references to the present from which the story is told, due to the narrator’s repeated admission of his own hesitation and unreliability.

Not only the narration, but also the magical events themselves are questioned. The listener and/or narrator, for instance, wonder how Alina knew that Hershel would so easily comply with her request for a man: “[h]ow did she know it?” (242). This question demonstrates not only an inquisitiveness, but a hesitation of belief precisely because the conventional proceedings of the magical-realist creation of life are altered. Alina shifts the traditional phrase “make me a baby” (238) to “make me a man” (242). In response, Hershel does not “nod and say, God willing” (238), but only “silently nodded” (242). This shift is unaccounted for and its unfamiliarity causes a hesitation of belief to be expressed in the question “[h]ow did she know it?”. The narrator moreover offers pure speculations in answer to that question, indicated by the twice repeated “perhaps.” His explanations hover between the natural and the supernatural, which would characterise the event as fantastic: “[p]erhaps suffering had sharpened her eyes. Perhaps Hershel had given her something extra that let her know his thoughts” (242).

The extraordinary creation of the golem also evokes the disbelief of the narrator as it is placed in a slippage between the magical realist and the fantastical. Hershel creates the man according to the principles of the magical-realist creation of life: “[h]e kneaded it [and the] massive body took shape beneath his hands” (242). The creation of the golem however pushes the magical-realist convention to its limits: “all his years of experience he poured into the colossal mound of dough” (242). Singer describes the golem in his novella as “an overgrown child” (59). The golem is like the other babies created in the magical-realist

world, but *in extremis*. The narrator concludes the description of the golem's creation with another uncertainty: "I don't know how he got it into the oven" (242). This suggests that the golem's creation may deviate from the "natural" process: is he a magical-realist creature or a fantastic miracle? The golem is precariously balanced on the borderline between both realities because he is seen as something exceptional or extraordinary.

The presence of dreams and nightmares enforces a surreal dimension, which further estranges the narrative from the magical realist genre. Bowers remarks that

[t]he extraordinary in magical realism is rarely presented in the form of a dream or a psychological experience because to do so takes the magic out of recognizable material reality. (24)

The golem disrupts the recognisable magical-realist mode as it intensifies its darker aspects. The matter-of-fact familiarity disappears and the golem is placed on another plane of reality. The golem can be interpreted as Hershel's double, "a doppelganger figure" (Koven 223) that often features in adaptations of the golem legend. Both Hershel and the golem are physically strong: "Hershel had thick muscular arms" (239) and "[e]ach muscle [of the golem] bulged firm and strong" (243). Their eyes are indecipherable: Hershel's "eyes were unreadable behind the thick glasses" (239) and the golem's "eyes were iridescent" (243). Their age is undefined: Hershel "was not an old man, though he stooped and shuffled like one" (239) and the golem is a grown man with "the wide-eyed, uncomprehending smile of a newborn" (243). These similarities indicate that the golem is the physical counterpart to Hershel. When Hershel's "sweat [is] rolling unchecked down his face and dripping in the dough" (242), an unmistakable physical connection between both characters is established. Hershel's wishes and dreams show his transgressive desire for Alina, of which the golem is the result: "[i]f he

couldn't love her, Hershel thought, then at least she could be loved by something made by his hands" (243). The golem is a magical or fantastic substitute for Hershel, made in order to materialise his dreams. An explanation of the extraordinary golem in these natural terms of human desire undermines its classification as fantastic. It remains fantastical, however, as Hershel's dark motivation inexplicably pervades all magical-realist "normality." We are told that Hershel:

could not act on his love because he was almost a father to her, and he could not love a daughter as a husband. And yet still he loved, and he dreamed, and his dreams spread to all the men and boys he had ever made, so that they all woke in the night with a chorus of *Alina!* (242, original emphasis)

His instinctual desire for Alina is not allowed and its transgressiveness is expressed in a collective longing that defamiliarises the conventions of the magical-realist reality further.

The repeated external threat of persecution of Jews often features prominently in adaptations of the golem legend. The blood libel discussed above and the arbitrary whims of governing religious and political institutions typically dominate the plot and are placed at the beginning of golem stories. Imminent danger to the Jewish people both creates such folklore and features prominently in it. The most famous version of the legend is Rabbi Löw's creation of a golem in Prague, a story that "most powerfully captured the popular Jewish imagination in the sixteenth century when persecution of Jews in Europe increased" (Anolik 41). Singer explicitly dedicates his novella to "the persecuted and oppressed everywhere [. . .] in the hope against hope that the time of false accusations and malicious decrees will cease one day" (*Golem* N. pag.). Persecution and hope are essential to golem folklore: the golem's "single, sacred purpose [is] to protect the life, the security and the future of the community"

(Wiesel, *Golem* 12). His strength makes him an invulnerable redeemer, a kind of messianic creature. Emily D. Bilski interestingly notes that:

[t]he golem legend can also be understood as a survival myth for an oppressed people. [. . .] The legend of a strong figure [. . .] provided hope of deliverance. [. . .] Traditional Judaism has fundamentally shunned force as a solution to conflict. Perhaps the golem can be understood as a collective fantasy of Jews wielding power and inflicting violence, instead of being victimized. (“Art” 47)

Moshe Idel likewise offers the interpretation of the golem as a symbol of “renewal or rebirth” (22). The redemptive ending that Bilski reads in a lot of golem art up to and including the 1980s is evident in Singer’s novella: it concludes with the moral that “the Jews were not as weak and helpless as their enemies thought they were” (83). The context of the Holocaust intensifies the fantasy of deliverance. Bilski states that “[w]ith the threat posed by Naziism [sic], this [redemptive] aspect of the golem received particular emphasis in the 1930s and 1940s, as it does with contemporary artists struggling to understand that period” (“Art” 47).

Recent Jewish American Holocaust fiction that incorporates the golem legend tends to be more explicitly self-reflexive. Adam Kirsch insightfully remarks that:

recent novelists are more interested in the limits of the golem’s protective power. Instead of a figure of strength, the golem becomes a symbol of pathos, as helpless as the Jews of Prague [in the legend’s popular version] who invented him. (“Idol”)

The golem in Michael Charbon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) is shipped in a coffin to Lithuania because it needs to be saved from the threat of the Holocaust. Thane Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham* (2002) portrays a group of prominent Holocaust writers, such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry as golems. These Holocaust survivors all committed suicide and their fantastic resurrection does not retrospectively save the persecuted Jews from the Holocaust, but constitutes a metafictional discourse on the impossibility of reviving prewar life as much as the necessity of commemorating it.

Kirsch's critical insight is most poignant in relation to Budnitz's "Hershel," because the golem precisely fails to fulfil the fantasy of redemption. Alina begs the golem for help when her enraged husband finds him sleeping next to her. She "clutched at the man, called to him, tried to rouse him" (243), but to no avail. The golem only looks at her with the "wide-eyed, uncomprehending smile of a newborn" (243). He too is killed by Alina's husband, anticipating the pathos of the vanished shtetl inhabitants. The destruction of the golem is a prelude to the Holocaust, "a hint of what was to come" (241). The subsequent unreal reality of the Holocaust makes all of the baby-makers disappear, which leads to the obliteration of the shtetl community and a further generic shift in the narrative framework from which the story is being told.

Although the unreal reality of the Holocaust in "Hershel" is the concluding phase of the narrated story, it is also described as

only the beginning, only a hint of the larger tide turning and building and washing over us, the days and years of blackness, of madness you would not believe if I told you. (244)

The repetition of the phrasing – “only a hint” (244), which reflects the earlier “a mere hint” (241) – that announced the previous shift in narrative mode from the magical realist to the fantastical, is accompanied by a disruption of time. The chronology of the narrated story is once again interrupted by the perspective of hindsight. This time, it does not merely show the unexpectedness of tragic events as they unfold, but their permanent consequences as the concluding third phase of “Hershel” marks a caesura between the narrated story and the subsequently scarred reality from which it is being narrated. It signifies the traumatic gap between and of experience and representation. Time in the magical-realist normalcy was eternal; in the fantastic it was accelerated, and in the unreal it seems extended and undefined: “days and years” (244). The unreal reality of the Holocaust is much more grim: the clouded sky has become a total “blackness.” The threat of the nightmares that the community suffered is explicitly identified as fright: “we became frightened” (244), only “madness” prevails. Corresponding images and techniques across all three phases of the short story demonstrate the shifts and slippages between different fictional realities that conceptualise the trauma of the Holocaust in an attempt to find meaning. Morahg remarks that:

the fantastic can also serve to recuperate the profound sense of unreality that assailed those who were cast into the concentrationary universe and discovered that all the normative categories that formed the world as they knew it had been horribly reversed. (163-64)

In “Hershel,” the fantastical is not used to describe the unreality of the Holocaust as it is in Morahg’s Israeli Holocaust fiction. It is however a vital transitional phase in the story as it allows a gradual dislocation of the familiar categories of the magical-realist world. In the final unreal reality of “Hershel,” the consecutive disorientation of magical and fantastical

realities results in the destruction of both: the golem is killed and the baby-makers disappear. The narratological development of the story indicates a careful build-up towards unreality. The Holocaust marks its culmination: the events are unimaginable and “you would not believe” them (244). The unreal reality of the Holocaust is not merely an inexplicable event in history. It is extra-ordinary, beyond belief, and denormalizes the established discourses of representation.

The unreal reality of the Holocaust exceeds and annihilates the narrative conventions of the magical-realist, fantastical and surreal modes, and consequently it cannot be described. The third phase of the short story is considerably shorter than the previous ones: it is merely three paragraphs long. The Holocaust is the defining caesura itself between the realities of the narrated story and the one in which it is told. Hershel’s disappearance, immediately after the golem (his double) and Alina (his loved one) are murdered, opens the description of a vanished or absent reality. Mourning pervades the entire community: “[w]e grieved. The whole village did. For Hershel. For Alina. For the hundreds of beautiful unborn children that had been taken from us” (244). The community is deprived of babies that have not yet come into existence. The last question that is posed is not attributable to the narrator and/or the listener, but to the community: “[w]hat about our *children*? we cried” (244, original emphasis). Contrary to previous questions, it expresses total despair as the question remains unanswered and is not even speculated about. The unreal reality of the Holocaust resists storytelling: “you would not believe if I told you” (244). The act of storytelling itself becomes futile due to the assumed disbelief or hesitation of the listener.

Budnitz’s novel *If I Told You Once* is saturated by this realisation that “some stories defy telling” (122). Holocaust survivors who have just arrived in America “tried to tell us things but could not find the words. There was no language excessive enough to describe what they had seen” (109). The unreal reality of the Holocaust is caught in an inexpressible

and unrepresentable void. Budnitz likewise explains that “in ‘Hershel’ the Holocaust is a dark, looming presence, this monumental thing that destroys the characters’ world forever, something too terrible to be named” (Commentary 191). It is beyond the referentiality of the magical-realist and fantastic realities obliterated by it. Although the reality of the Holocaust is absent in “Hershel,” there is a reference to it as “the larger tide turning and building and washing over us” (190). Budnitz repeats this description twice in her novel: “a dark tide turning and coming to wash over us” (15), “the dark tide rising up and threatening to wash over everything” (108). The image expresses an overwhelming and effacing natural force that cannot be resisted. Budnitz’s allusive description of the Holocaust becomes a conventional trope in her fiction, a reference to which she clings.

Both “Hershel” and *If I Told You Once* can be interpreted as stories about stories and storytelling. Metafictional references are abundant: the narrator, the receiver and the act of narration are explicitly and constantly foregrounded, as they are in Ozick’s *The Shawl* and Rosen’s *Touching Evil*. Alter remarks that “[m]agic realism does not necessarily imply literary self-reflexivity, but the two easily come together” (27). Faris confirms that “[m]etafictional dimensions are common in contemporary magical realism: the texts provide commentaries on themselves” (175). As the magical-realist reality is the point of departure of the narrated story in “Hershel,” a literary self-awareness is present from the start.

In contemporary Jewish American Holocaust fiction, increasingly dominated by second- and third-generation writers, the generational gap between the Holocaust and its commemoration seems to assure a recognition of the indirectness of their approach. Lee Behlman’s analysis of this literature, and specifically Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), concludes that

the magical-realist and folklore-based material is a self-conscious device for imagining the past, but one which always announces the gap between itself and the past *as it was experienced*. It is this experience that is ultimately privileged but never quite accessed directly in the novel. (60, original emphasis)

The genre of the fantastic (in its broadest definition) not only seems to impel self-reflexivity but also an avoidance of directly portraying the historical reality of the Holocaust. Budnitz states explicitly that she “wanted to find a way to write about it indirectly, obliquely, to cloak it in a fairy tale” (Commentary 191). In accordance with her reservations about writing Holocaust fiction, the Holocaust reality remains an absent reality in “Hershel.” The unbelievable nature of the Holocaust, its abnormality is thus stressed by the absence of a detailed Holocaust reality, which directly contrasts with Schaeffer and Szeman’s detailed depictions of wartime experiences. Melvin Jules Bukiet’s *After* (1996) also recognises the limitations of Holocaust representation and metafictionally refers to them: “[e]very hour, it was harder to believe that the War had ever occurred” (10); it “was too intolerable a fact to grasp. It had to be fiction” (72). However, he goes on to describe an immediate post-Holocaust reality through a mixture of historically factual and fantastic material. Budnitz appears to be more consistent in her acknowledgement of the limitations and indirectness of Holocaust representation. In “Hershel,” the metafictional caesura and absence of the unreal Holocaust reality also reflects a contemporary public perception of the Holocaust as a fracture or break. Janet Burstein confirms that Jewish American women’s writings “of the new wave [are] almost always marked by awareness of the Holocaust as the source of brokenness in contemporary experience” (803-04).

Aside from these quite positive aspects of the absent reality of the Holocaust in “Hershel,” Budnitz’s tactic of indirectness and avoidance carries its own risks. The refusal to describe the Holocaust risks obliterating the event itself instead of emphasising its unrepresentability. The “unreal” of the Holocaust could be read as meaning “non-existent,” thereby erasing an event that remains sensitive subject matter not only for Holocaust survivors but for numerous political conflicts. Budnitz also risks mythologizing the Holocaust. Her own repeated expression of the Holocaust as “a dark tide turning and coming to wash over us” (*If I Told You Once* 15) already begins to mythologize the event within her own oeuvre. It reinforces the widespread conviction that the sanctity and uniqueness of the Holocaust makes it a taboo subject for fiction. It is a historical event that one is advised not to represent because that would lessen the horror of its reality. Budnitz’s mythologizing due to the absence of the Holocaust reality means to convey that horror, but her indirection simultaneously confirms its unrepresentable sanctity and positions it as a symbol of incomprehensibility.

I would argue that her thorough and convincing exploration of the genre of Holocaust fiction is nevertheless insightful. She metafictionally thematises the narrated story within the story through the figure of the golem. Bilski confirms that the golem is frequently a metafictional figure for and of the work of art: “the golem has [. . .] become a powerful symbol for art and the process of creation” (4). According to Cabalists, language is the prime element of creation and the golem comes to life when inscribed with the name of God. In “Hershel,” the golem can be interpreted as the story itself and there are various parallels that support this reading. Both run across different realities and tie them together, but they also refuse to be categorised within the boundaries of one genre, whether it is the magical realist, fantastical or surreal. Within the specific context of Holocaust fiction, Berel Lang contends that generic categorisation and its inherent logics is subverted by the Holocaust. He also

claims that “the challenge to these [generic] conventions is itself a representational element in the works in which it appears” (35). The absence of the unreal Holocaust reality is one metafictional reference that demonstrates the shortcomings of any existing literary genre to represent it. The character of the golem is another. When the narrated story is abruptly interrupted by the undescribed unreal reality of the Holocaust, it coincides with the death of the golem. Because the golem is Hershel’s double, “[t]hat was the end of Hershel” (243) too. The explicitly metafictional simile that describes Hershel’s disappearing “footprints in the snow [. . .] like a sentence interrupted” (244) reflects back onto the narrated story. When the golem dies and Hershel disappears, the narrated story stops. The creation of life and of art terminate simultaneously.

As the primary function of the golem is to redeem the Jewish people from the threat of persecution, happy endings represent the conventional closure of golem stories. Wiesel confirms this as follows:

[i]n truth, all the stories of the “Golem made of clay” end well. They often begin in the same way: a Jew unjustly accused of imaginary crimes. They end in the same manner: the Golem intervening to put things in their proper place.
(The Golem 65)

Hershel as the creator of the golem can be interpreted as the author of the golem story, as he likewise tries to secure such an ending: he “had even drawn the lines in his [golem’s] palms promising long life and happiness” (243). The Holocaust however disrupts the genre of golem folklore itself. Marita le Vaul-Grimwood transfers the notion of the redemptive tale to Holocaust testimony in general, when she remarks that “[t]he survivor’s tale would seem to share certain features with the fairy tale, as it is almost by definition a tale of miraculous

escape from danger” (130). The narrated story in “Hershel” however counters this seemingly innate characteristic of testimony. The golem as the narrated story emphasises the impossibility of fictional Holocaust stories to be told in their entirety because they do not subscribe to the conventions of any genre or reality.

Next to the golem as the story and the explicit inversion of the legend’s happy ending, a third metafictional remark concerns the collection of Jewish stories on which “Hershel” is based. Budnitz enumerates the various influences on her story: Singer’s shtetl stories, the myth of creation, the baking of *challah*, the golem legend and the Holocaust (Commentary 190-91). Through the act of storytelling, Budnitz’s intertextuality aligns both Eastern-European and American Jewry. In many renditions of the golem legend, the story features explicitly as an intertextual reference. In Singer’s *The Golem*, “Rabbi Leib knew quite well the meaning of the word *golem*. There were legends among the Jews” (25, original emphasis). In Paul Wegener’s *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* (1920), Rabbi Löw consults a book entitled “Nekromantie: Die Kunst Totes Lebendig Zu Machen” to familiarise himself with the practicalities of creating a golem (ch. 2). The legend’s inscription within this old manuscript explicitly shows the story before it begins to unfold in the film. The golem legend as a tangible text or existing folk story is not explicitly referred to in “Hershel,” which arguably implies that the legend is embodied in the narrated story. The Holocaust ultimately distorts the Jewish intertextual legacy: the golem is slain and the “creation myth [. . .] goes awry” (Budnitz, Commentary 191). The impact of the Holocaust as an unexpected caesura therefore reiterates the limits of representation, in relation to both “Hershel” and its incorporated canon of traditional texts.

The Act of Storytelling: Representational Issues

The representational framework of storytelling is forwarded in the opening sentence of Budnitz's short story: "[w]hen I was your age" (237) immediately identifies a narrator and an addressee. The use of the genres of magical realism and the fantastic within the narrated story encourages a questioning of that realist representational framework. The consequent destabilising of "truth" supports the shifts between realities and genres. Bowers contends that the:

key to understanding how magic realism works is to understand the way in which the narrative is constructed in order to provide a realist context for the magical events of the fiction. (22)

"Hershel" and *If I Told You Once* are stories about stories, and moreover about the act of storytelling that constructs them. The imaginative stories of Ilana's life and the story of Hershel, Alina and the golem are not self-reliant, but always mediated through the narrator's memory. This prerogative of hindsight makes the act of storytelling an independent although complementary story to the one that is being told. It aligns closely to Budnitz's fiction as an act of storytelling. This self-reflexivity in Budnitz's work has been criticised in book reviews rather than appreciated as metafictional discourse. Paul Gediman says that the novel "doesn't really tell us anything because it's not really about anything beyond its own telling. It feints in the direction of several themes [. . .] but never truly explores them" (34). L.R. Leavis furthers this train of thought: "Budnitz is still at a stage where she is fussily obsessed with her own communication" (439). Although there is some truth to these claims in the absence of a straightforward moral and of a persistent engagement with the many themes that she

mentions in her work, I argue that the themes of storytelling and communication are precisely the central issues around which both texts revolve.

The precariousness of the authority of the narrator as witness was the inspiration for *If I Told You Once* (Budnitz, “One on One”). The ambiguity of the narrator as the most reliable and simultaneously unreliable source of history also occupies a vital position in “Hershel.” On the one hand, the authority of the eyewitness is indisputable due to his/her direct historical experience. On the other hand, this type of narrator provides an inherently deficient act of storytelling, when the definition of truth is restricted to historiographical accuracy. Hegerfeldt notes that:

[m]agical-realist works characteristically expose historiography’s reliance on narrative, the necessarily subjective and selective perspective of the historiographer, and the unreliability of memory. (“Magic Realism”)

These issues are repeatedly and explicitly foregrounded in both of Budnitz’s texts, when the act of storytelling is scrutinised. Contrary to documentary Holocaust fiction and Young’s discussion of it, Budnitz’s imaginative engagement with the Holocaust emphasises the illusion it makes out of the facts, at the same time as it explores the limits of representation. The characteristics that Hegerfeldt cites are moreover transferred to the narrated story in “Hershel,” when the unreal reality of the Holocaust remains ambivalently absent. Due to the overwhelming or unimaginable nature of the Holocaust, the act of storytelling and consequently the narrative falter. This collapse exposes the limits of narrative (both historiographically and imaginatively), which reflects the ambiguous position of the narrator.

Budnitz's own indirect approach to the Holocaust lies at the core of these representational complexities.

Budnitz's choice of a narrator who is an eyewitness and a survivor, substitutes for her own presumed lack of authority, as do Schaeffer's and Szeman's focalisers. The narrator provides the firsthand account that Budnitz feels unable to render directly. The first-person singular narrative perspective, that unites narrator and protagonist, has become a conventional technique in Holocaust fiction and invokes the so-called narrative authority of eyewitnesses through its mimesis of autobiographical representations. In "Hershel" however, the authority of the first-person singular is disrupted because the narrator is not the protagonist of his narrated story. He is created by Hershel, but mainly talks about watching these proceedings. He is not an active or direct participant in the plot of the narrated story. Hershel, Alina and the golem are the protagonists of the fantastical tale. They are collective representatives of the community of which the narrator is only a part. He constantly lapses into the first person plural: "our village" (237), "[w]e felt" (239), "making us" (239), "we were all" (240). The narrator is a spectator, which is highlighted by numerous verbs of perception: "seen" (237), "looked" (238), "watch" (239), "glimpse" (240) and "heard" (242). Although the narrator possesses the direct authority of an eyewitness, he remains distanced from and unrepresentative of the central plot of the narrated story. This ambiguity reflects Budnitz's desire to write indirectly about the Holocaust and it emphasises that both "Hershel" and its narrated story are representations removed from reality "as it is experienced."

Budnitz however problematises this clear-cut dichotomy of experience versus witnessing in two instances in the text. At the end, it is clear that the narrator too experiences the consequences of the narrated story and of the Holocaust: he is deprived of the children Hershel could have made for him and is a surviving representative of what has been lost. There is one other peculiar instance in which the narrator's distanced act of perception

becomes more involved. When the narrator hears about Alina's abuse, his experiential involvement increases: "[a]s the stories trickled out to us, we suffered for her" (188). This reveals an empathy that inscribes him into his own narrated story via the stories of abuse that he heard. Such transference through witnessing stories demonstrates the relevance of the Holocaust for future generations.

The subjective perspective of the narrator limits the knowledge of extraordinary events: he does "not know what went into the dough" (239), he does not "know how he [Hershel] got it [the golem] into the oven" (242) and he does "not know if she [Alina] wished it [the marriage] or not" (241). Contradictions within the narrated story make the things that the narrator claims to know doubtful. He boasts, for instance, that "Hershel always gave them [clients] what they wanted" (237), but subsequently states that "[s]ometimes it was what they had ordered. More often it wasn't" (238). The narrator's realisation of the fallibility of his memory both authenticates his story and adds to his unreliability: "I don't remember how it happened" (241). In *If I Told You Once*, Ilana's truthfulness is also questioned by her daughters and the stories of the novel increasingly focus on memory and storytelling. The subjectivity of the narrator is intertwined with his/her unreliability as the restrictions of storytelling demonstrate that the act is not merely one that remembers the past, but one that tries to understand and explain it. It expresses the narrator's own subjective truth, as Laub suggests, and as all the texts discussed in this thesis underline. The questions in "Hershel" that are sometimes rhetorical could therefore be asked either by the addressee or by the narrator who is trying to figure out his own distorted and incomplete narrative. The narrator's subjective and selective perspective holds back other interpretations of the narrated events, as he is in love with Alina, worships Hershel and is dissatisfied with the reality in which he has ended up. He interrupts the story to draw attention to himself in this light: "I am Hershel's work. That probably explains why I've turned out so well" (240). This clearly demonstrates

the narrator's direct involvement in the story, but also his limiting subjectivity. He uncritically subscribes to Hershel's faultlessness and mythologizes both himself and Hershel, which reinforces his prewar identity rather than indicating its irrevocable rupture.

In *If I Told You Once*, there are direct and realist descriptions of the Holocaust. It is noteworthy that these detailed accounts are told by an eyewitness who fled from Nazi Germany to America:

she also spoke of a world where logic had gone awry, where babies were taken from mothers, husbands separated from wives, gold teeth drawn from living mouths, bodies piled up like haystacks, hay made into soup, people given numbers because names were an indulgence. [. . .] A place of dogs and casual bullets meeting the backs of heads, everything as arbitrary as the made-up rules in a child's game. Telling us, she laughed at the absurdity of it. (111)

Her narrative is historiographically accurate, but the eyewitness herself fails to grasp the events, to inscribe them with her own meaning so that they remain "absurd." Although she indisputably has authority as narrator, she is caught in the unreal reality of the Holocaust: "[h]er eyes were the most frightening thing: the pupils shrunk to pinpricks, utterly cold *uncomprehending* eyes, unmoving as if they had frozen in a moment of *unspeakable* horror" (110, my emphasis). Her trauma lingers in the void of meaning, the caesura between different realities that make the Holocaust as arbitrary and incomprehensible as fantastical occurrences. The eyewitness of *If I Told You Once* is the protagonist of her own story, but not of Ilana's stories which form the representational framework around her testimony. It is Ilana's rendition of it that ultimately gives meaning to her account: Ilana connects it to the

fantastical nature of the old country and the devastating loss of her own two sons in the Second World War.

When Ilana desperately searches for tangible evidence of the destruction of her village and family during the Great War, she is entirely overwhelmed by the sight of a mass grave and concludes that “[s]olid proof that you can touch, that you can see – that’s all the proof you need to believe in something. Sometimes it is too much” (58). Budnitz does not downplay the importance of historiographically accurate representations, but recognises the unrepresentability of the horror they may display and the consequent necessity to attribute meaning in order to inscribe the event into history. Historical proof itself is moreover questionable as it depends on interpretation and representation. When Ilana’s daughter Sashie finds a Fabergé egg underneath her mother’s bed and a portrait of her mother as a noblewoman in a museum, she eagerly believes in the royal lineage of her family because “[t]angible evidence, that was the only way to be sure of anything” (247). Ilana however previously remembered a menacing man who gave her the egg in a failed attempt to rape her, and a painter who dressed her up and whose paintings she condemned because “they showed you a moment that was gone” (59). The tangible proof to which Sashie clings is an unstable fragment of the past and the meaning that she ascribes to it represents her desire for status.

In this context, Morahg states that fantastical Holocaust fiction echoes “poststructuralist scepticism about attempts to recover ‘objective’ historical ‘truth’” (162). History and imagination merge when Ilana realises: “[i]t occurred to me that there was not much difference between a real thing that existed in memory, and something that was born in the mind from the start” (57). Truth and history are subjective constructs: “she calls them the truth, gives them the stamp of history” (*If I Told You Once* 241). The absence of quotation marks in “Hershel” mythologizes speech acts, while it simultaneously shows that the narrated story is a construct and not a literal representation of a historical truth. It puts the characters’

words of the narrated story on the same level as the narrator's. This contrasts strikingly with the historical Holocaust novel *Anya*, where the protagonist's thoughts are even placed in quotation marks in order to emphasise their historical accuracy as much as to increase the action of the plot.

The eagerness with which stories are told in "Hershel" and *If I Told You Once* points to the urgency of recognising the narrator's point of view. Nomie is swamped by the stories of her family: "they were telling stories, desperately telling stories as if it was their last chance, as if they would die in the morning" (256). The need to transmit one's subjective truth is vital to the act of storytelling. When the narrator of "Hershel" chooses not to describe the Holocaust directly, it is equally his attempt to represent what the Holocaust means for him. In the words of Felman and Laub, he "testified to the breakage of a framework" (60). It might also be read, however, as the narrator's attempt to ignore or avoid that meaning through a deliberately selective act of forgetfulness that concentrates on the meaningful world he once knew. "Hershel" emphasises, in its failure to directly convey the Holocaust, its own inevitable shortcomings as a representation.

In "Hershel," the inscription of meaning lies within the act of storytelling and the transmission of the story. The narrator's need to tell his/her subjective truth is complemented by the need to be listened to in order to complete the act of storytelling and give it meaning. Ilana begs her great-granddaughter Nomie: "[w]ill you listen? Or will you cover your ears, run from the room, drown me out with your own voice? You are listening, aren't you?" (240). In "Hershel," the sentence that explains the absence of the unreal Holocaust reality is "you would not believe if I told you" (244). The seemingly incomplete act of storytelling points out the narrator's inability to tell the story, but this is essentially based on his conviction of the addressee's disbelief. The central structure of address and storytelling in

Budnitz's Holocaust fiction emphasises the interactive nature of stories. It can therefore be linked to Budnitz's own creative act of writing fiction, which fuses the addressees of the narrated stories with those of Budnitz's literary works. Eaglestone remarks that "genre is not just a way of writing: it is a way of reading, too. It is where reading and writing meet" (38).

The listening addressee allows the narrator to hear his/her own story. The opening sentence in "Hershel" emphasises the identification of the narrator with the addressee: "[w]hen I was your age" (183). The grandchild is offered a point of recognition in the narrator's act of identification. Through a countertransference inherent in the act of storytelling, the narrator also becomes the addressee of his own story. He not only indirectly witnesses the events he describes but also his own story. Ilana likewise merges with Nomie: "I thought suddenly of that girl who listens, that girl with my face, the only one who listens to me now" (139). The addressee is not merely an external point of reference, as in Schaeffer's *Anya*, but an autonomous character in the text who is also a version of the narrator.

The centrality of the child emphasises this unification of narrator and addressee, the difficult attempt to understand the Holocaust and its destruction of innocent lives. In "Hershel," the addressee is a child; the narrator experienced the Holocaust as an adolescent and children are a central theme of the plot due to its emphasis on the creation of life. The oral character of the act of storytelling is not merely an imitation of the tradition of Yiddish literature, but also a means to engage the child's attention and to provoke an understanding of the story through its logical presentation. Bruno Bettelheim argues in his discussion of fairy tales that "[t]he telling of the story to a child, to be most effective, has to be an interpersonal event, shaped by those who participate in it" (151). The questions that arise in "Hershel" therefore establish the interpersonal transmission of the story as they could be asked either by the narrator or the child, who are both in the process of ascertaining its meaning. The use of the genres of magical realism and the fantastical to indirectly confront the Holocaust likewise

appeal to the child's capacity of imagination through which his/her own subjective truth or attribution of meaning is made possible. Drawing on Bettelheim and Morahg, le Vaul-Grimwood strikingly argues that "[t]he Holocaust fantasy story, or 'fairy tale', makes us children again through its function as an instrument of understanding, just as the events have made us children in our ability to understand" (le Vaul-Grimwood, 141). She aligns the post-Holocaust adult's difficulty in grasping the event with the child's attempt to make sense of the world. The author, narrator, reader and addressed child in "Hershel" merge in their recourse to the fantastic as a tool in order to try to understand the Holocaust.

Budnitz's approach to the Holocaust shows that the blurring of the real and the imaginary is acceptable to a child and necessary for an adult to come to terms with the traumatic caesura of the Holocaust. In *If I Told You Once*, the adult addressees of the eyewitness's realist depiction of the Holocaust repeatedly dismiss her realism as fantastical, as "the made-up rules in a child's game" (111) or as "stories [that] cannot be true, they are fairy tales told to frighten children" (109). Their categorisation of realist stories as fantastical tales expresses their inability to believe and understand the Holocaust.

They sat on either side of her without speaking. They did not know what to believe. The things she spoke of were beyond their imagination. [. . .] They stood quiet, respectful in the face of this thing they could not understand. [. . .] They did not believe her description of the beast. (113)

The eyewitness's realist representation of the Holocaust is a monologue, not an interpersonal transmission as the addressees listen quietly, "without speaking." The indisputable authority of the eyewitness remains intact because "[t]he sanctified position of the survivor in contemporary Western culture no doubt informs such 'children's' frames of mind" (le Vaul-

Grimwood 131). Only the eyewitness can realistically imagine the Holocaust, while the addressees are like children for whom the reality of the Holocaust is unexplored and incomprehensible, because it surpasses their known reality. Morahg likewise says that in contemporary Israeli Holocaust novels,

alongside the survivor's prohibitive stipulations of Holocaust sanctity, is a contrary desire that their story be recognized and rearticulated by a new generation of empathic listeners and tellers. (171)

If the narrator of "Hershel" admits his ignorance in certain instances and opens up his story to the scrutiny of the addressee (and by extension his own scrutiny), it is because the need to tell is necessarily complemented by the need to be believed. Holocaust commemoration is an inextricably interpersonal action. The interpretation of Holocaust fiction ultimately lies with the reader's (un)willingness to believe and not solely with the representation that the narrator and/or author advance.

In "Hershel," the centrality of the child in the story's plot moreover adds to its importance in transmitting the narrated story. Whereas the narrator's subjective truth in the narrated story in "Hershel" is essential to convey the horror of the Holocaust, the realist representational framework of storytelling counteracts the totality of its destruction due to the presence of the surviving narrator and the addressed child. Morahg argues that:

[t]he psyche recoils reflexively from the pain of such an experience [the Holocaust] and creates defenses against it. The fantastic has the capacity to breach these defenses without devastating that which they were designed to protect. (163)

The fantastical story of the golem does not offer the child a happy ending because he is killed. It does not protect the child's necessary sense of security. "Hershel" is different from the novels that Morahg analyses because the unreal Holocaust reality itself is not the central fantastic story. It is its realist representational framework that offers consolation and hope for the future. Whereas the narrated story talks about "the hundreds of beautiful unborn children that had been taken from us" (244), the existence of the addressed grandchild is the proof that the magical-realist story concerning the creation of life does continue, although in a modified version. The child as the continuation of mankind as opposed to its destruction thus becomes the embodiment of meaning through making the transmission of the story in the act of storytelling complete.

Biblical Concerns

Childbirth and its possibly devastating complications is a prominent theme in Budnitz's oeuvre. As "Hershel" focuses on the "creation myth, but one that goes awry" (Budnitz, Commentary 191), it can be interpreted as a modern version of the fall of mankind. The myth of creation is the basis of Judaism and Jewish culture. The shtetl was "fundamentalist in faith" (Rosten 378) and its everyday life was pervaded by the presence of the supernatural. The characters in "Hershel" look back to Jewish legend in the figure of the golem, but also to Genesis. The Jewish intertexts allow a midrashic interpretation to complement the magical-realist and fantastical realities, which offers existential questions about the origins and the meaning of life. Kremer notes that "[c]ountercommentary, parody, and inversion of sacred texts are techniques that Yiddish writers incorporate to emphasize the subversion of God's principles in the historic context" (Introduction xxxvi).

The magical-realist reality at the beginning of the narrated story is dominated by the detailed portrayal of babies created as bread. As previously stated, the custom of *challah* gives the story a realist grounding, while it also refers to the magical or supernatural creation of the world by God. The Sabbath, for which *challah* is made, celebrates this divine act and the day “becomes a sacred center, analogous to [. . .] the Garden of Eden” (Ezrahi, “Poetics” 13). Leo Rosten further remarks that:

in however bitter a time and place, the Sabbath was the miraculous time when even the lowliest, poorest, least consequential of men could feel himself in kingly communion with the Almighty. (324)

The shtetl of “Hershel” is by extension a place where God’s presence is felt. Hershel worships God and is a devout and ascetic scholar: he “had no wife, no children of his own. His work occupied all of his time. He lived in a little room in the back of his workshop, empty save a bed and a table and a prayer book” (239). He is portrayed as a noble and devoted craftsman in the service of God. Hershel repeatedly acknowledges his humble position. He invokes God’s blessing when someone orders a baby – “God willing” (238) – and when they thank him excessively, he attributes the magic of creation to God as he “would blush and stare at the floor and say, It is the hand of God” (238). When shaping the dough into the form of a baby, he was “chanting prayers all the while” (240). He invokes and thus is dependent on the divine power in order to imbue his sculptures with life: “he prayed for the things he could not shape: the heart and the mind and the soul” (240). When Hershel works into the night, “you could see in his window the orange glow of a candle” (238). Alongside the worship of God, this signifies the soul of mankind, as “[t]he spirit of man is the candle of

the Lord” (Prov 20.27). His babies are made in God’s image and brought to life by His power.

In traditional discussions of the golem’s creation, the communion of a devout rabbi with God is likewise emphasised. The creator of the golem aims to “achieve a mystical experience” (Idel 16). The word “golem” denotes “unformed substance” and it is used only once in the bible, in reference to the originary act of the creation of Adam. When Adam praises his Creator, he refers to himself as a golem: “[t]hine eyes did see mine unformed substance” (Ps. 139.16). The tradition of *challah* and the Sabbath celebrates this creation, and in this sense the story of the golem in “Hershel” can be read as a basis for the magical-realist reality. The duality of the ovens as places of birth and their contradictory usage in the Holocaust as places of death moreover denotes the cyclical nature of life. Human life is created and returns to a universal matter: “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3.19). This reference to the biblical creation of Adam “from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2.7) makes Hershel’s task a sacred enterprise, as already indicated by his fervent prayers.

Idel states that fasting is a conventional custom to achieve a communion with the divine in the creation of a golem: “a righteous man who will fast in order to obtain the spirit of cleanness will, in principle, be able to attain it” (17). When Hershel creates the golem, he works “for days in a frenzy, without eating or sleeping or *praying*” (242, my emphasis). Hershel’s creation of the golem is not accompanied by prayer, which announces the darker development of extraordinary events. The narrator furthermore describes how Hershel “labored over the face, carving out nostrils with his fingernails” (242), actions that were not mentioned in the first part of the story. The emphasis on the golem’s nose refers explicitly to God’s creation of Adam in Genesis where He “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2.7). Hershel’s imitation of God’s act of creation is not

motivated by a religious but by a secular devotion, which makes it a sinful act of idolatry.

Hershel creates the golem out of his love and desire for and his wish to protect Alina. Alina's order to "make me a man" (242) can be read as Eve tempting Adam to eat the fruits of the tree of knowledge. Hershel poured "[a]ll his love for Alina and all his years of experience [. . .] into the colossal amount of dough" (242). His knowledge of the divine creation of life is mixed with his desire for Alina. The parallels with Genesis are striking as mankind's sinful desire to acquire divine knowledge, which in turn reveals sexuality, brings about exile from Paradise.

Hershel's act of idolatry in the creation of the golem is sinful because he elevates himself to the position of God. This closely resembles Rosa's revivification of her dead daughter as an act of idolatry in *The Shawl*. As noted previously, the golem is Hershel's double and is created in his image. The golem is the embodiment of Hershel's transgressive instinctual desire. Bilski remarks that the golem often represents "man in a primitive, unsocialized state, a man of pure instincts and drives, pure Id" ("Art" 48). Hershel's desire for Alina, his own creation, urges him to make a creation that reflects this aspect of himself. When he consequently "longed to press again the cheek [Alina's] he had once pressed into shape" (242), it is the love for his own work that extends the act of idolatry further. Budnitz hereby subscribes to Singer's "conviction that all metaphysical speculations pale before fleshly needs" (Siegel 42).

Singer's texts highlight that free will is the ultimate liability and strength of mankind in mediating between good and evil, the divine and the secular. Singer states that "[m]an was bestowed with the greatest gift the Godhead could offer – free will" (Foreword 8). The narrator's inability to discern whether Alina's decision to marry her abusive husband was voluntary or not questions the existence of free will in Hershel's creation. The implications for possible acts of resistance, as embodied by the golem, consequently become

problematical. In the beginning of the narrated story, Hershel repeats God's donation of free will to mankind when he creates babies:

[o]nce the babies passed over the counter, Hershel washed his hands of them. He said he was not responsible for how they turned out. He said once, I only make the outsides. The parents make the insides. I make only the seed. If they cultivate it, then it will flourish. (239)

Hershel grants his creations independence. However, he restricts the golem from such liberties, because it is made out of his own desire for Alina. His sexual desire is implicitly fulfilled by proxy when Alina "took the giant by the hand and led him into the night"; she "quietly led the man to her bedroom" (243). The golem is not a self-sufficient entity, but the embodiment of Hershel. Hershel moreover attempts to control the golem's fate as he "had even drawn the lines in his palms promising long life and happiness" (243). The ability to predict and manipulate the future counteracts the belief in free will. The golem's nature as a combination of divine knowledge and secular motivation is what makes it a poignant representative of the fall of mankind. He is neither human nor divine. Kirsch confirms that "[i]t is a parable of idealism brought low by earthly nature, the two elements that fuse in human beings but remain at odds in the golem" ("Idol").

The image of the golem as a statue also underlines the act of idolatry. The danger inherent in graven images, according to the Second Commandment, is accentuated by the golem's perfected body: he is "a giant, and smooth and beautiful as a piece of Roman statuary" (243). The image of the flawless measurements of Roman sculpture is reinforced by the golem's clothing: he "stood wrapped in a sheet" (243), which is reminiscent of a toga. The perfect body of the golem is inspired by the dazzling beauty of Alina. Contrary to

classical fairy tales, her beauty does not secure a happy ending but targets her as an object of abuse and ultimately kills her. Contrastingly, imperfections of the human body are accepted in the opening stages of the story, despite the parents' wish for a perfectly shaped newborn:

Hershel's babies were such wondrous things that people fell in love with them instantly and forgot the specifications they had made. [. . .] Oh, I *did* want a boy after all, and I *did* want black hair, not brown, and *look* at his little nose like a sideways potato! Thank you, thank you, Hershel. (238, original emphasis)

The diversity of the divine creation of life surmounts a desire for perfection. When Hershel creates Alina, there is a suspicion that he has given her something extra. The narrator observes: "I sometimes thought jealously that perhaps *she* was a favorite, how could she be so beautiful if he had not worked longer on her and given her some extra spice?" (241, original emphasis). The desire of Hershel's creations to be recognised as special individuals worthy of his attention reflects his act of creation as a communion with God and leads to his subsequent aspiration to imitate His power. It was accordingly when Hershel "refused other orders and worked only on Alina's man" (242) that his idolatry brought about more disastrous consequences.

In "Hershel," the Holocaust is the caesura that irrevocably changed mankind. The biblical subtext to the narrative problematically suggests that the Holocaust can be interpreted as a punishment of God for the sins of mankind. Hershel disappears when Alina and the golem are murdered, which threatens to deprive the community of future offspring. Mankind is thrown back upon its own resources and sexual procreation becomes the act that creates new life.

There are further echoes of Genesis here, for one of God's retributions for eating from the tree of knowledge was as follows: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Gen. 3.16). In "Hershel," sex is seen negatively, as "dirty[ing] their hands in the business" (237), but it is also the act of creation that continues life. The narrator's appreciation of his grandchild at the end of "Hershel" implies that one must learn to re-appreciate the miracle of life in this new reality. He confirms the potential of this new life: "[y]our ears did not turn out quite as well as mine, I think. But they are good ears. They listen well" (244). The child combines existential and representational themes as both mankind and the story are continued through the act of storytelling that bridges generational gaps.

The myth of creation unites the narrator, the addressee and the wider community's sense of identity in a collective place of origin that has been forever lost. The old country as an Eden or Paradise is the magical place where life itself originated. This emphasis on a return to origins aligns "Hershel" with a more general trend in contemporary Jewish American literature, which Sanford Pinsker has typified as "a literature of 'return'" (50). The focus on the European homeland in this cultural memory of the Holocaust contrasts sharply with the earliest Jewish American immigrant narratives in which America was viewed as the Promised Land. Ilana perceives America not as a land of exile, but as a land filled with possibilities: "I had heard people talking of a place, far away and across an ocean, where people stayed young forever" (65). In "Hershel," the narrator's recourse to magical realism implies a sense of displacement in the American reality of the realist framework. Burstein discusses this sense of alienation in memoirs that attempt to recall home: "the most striking feature of the memoirs is their insistence on the fact of estrangement at the outset of every effort to recall home. This estrangement, moreover, is not freely chosen but rather forced upon protagonists"

(804). The emigration of Ilana is an attempt to improve her life, while the exile of the narrator in “Hershel” is caused by the Holocaust that destroyed the blissfulness of Eden. The caesura of the Holocaust enforced a diasporic identity on the shtetl community. The transformation of Europe as the origin of exile to Europe as the homeland can be related to the Holocaust. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi clarifies the narrator’s struggle with the loss of origins through the concept of the homeland with reference to Israel:

what was destroyed becomes over time an authentic original that can be represented but not recaptured [. . .] that can only be recalled from somewhere else and reconstructed from its shards; retrospectively, that is, the destruction seems to have territorialized exile as a lost home (“Poetics” 17)

The perspective of the narrator in the position of hindsight reconstructs the lost home. His representation cannot recapture Paradise, but the presence of the addressee allows the magical meaning of the creation of life to be transferred. He does therefore attempt to recreate the central meaning of the place of origin and his act of storytelling both keeps the story of his memory alive and makes it more real.

Judy Budnitz’s fantastical imagination of the Holocaust is particularly compelling because it metafictionally explores and questions Holocaust literature, while she maintains an affection for and an authenticity of the shtetl culture that was lost. She innovatively explores the unrepresentability and unimaginability of the trauma of the Holocaust through her stylistic experimentation with literary genres and with the representational intricacies of storytelling. At the same time, she safeguards and revives an extraordinary Jewish legacy of an irretrievable lost home, identity and life.

Conclusion

As a means of representing the Holocaust in fiction, American women writers have consistently imagined the imagination. The imagination tends to shape and influence all aspects of their texts: it is vital at levels of characterisation, plot, style and structure. This does not merely reflect the authors' autobiographical distance from the Holocaust, but it also extends the range and relevance of self-reflexive Holocaust narratives beyond the realm of fiction. It addresses the American culture of commemoration either explicitly or indirectly. The imagined imagination invites comparisons with historical representation, by drawing attention to its potential shortcomings and constructedness. It underlines the gendered trauma of the Holocaust and its impossible expression, in a literary format that continually tries (and necessarily fails) to represent it. With varying degrees of insight, the texts that I have discussed provide metacritical and self-referential discourses that are imperative to their commitment to both broaden and contribute to the commemoration of the Holocaust.

Most importantly, the imagination in these fictional texts questions the meaning that is ascribed in and to testimony. The texts rewrite the predominant testimonial canon of Holocaust literature by emphasising the necessary dialogue between narrators and listeners. The imagined witnesses alluded to in the title of my thesis include Holocaust survivors, their testimonial audiences, their children, the authors and the texts' readers. Bearing witness necessarily and intentionally is a broad concept in these imaginative texts, because the act of witnessing the Holocaust is not seen as a past experience but as a present remembering and/or imagining of the Holocaust. The subjectivity of the interlocutor is vital as he/she witnesses the Holocaust (again) for him/herself and/or for the witness of his/her act of witnessing. In Norma Rosen's *Touching Evil*, the subjectivity of the secondary witness (Jean, Hattie) enables her to witness the Holocaust witnesses at the Eichmann trial, to define her own

identity in the context of the Holocaust, and to support the act of witnessing of other secondary witnesses. In Schaeffer and Szeman's novels, subjectivity is restricted to fictionalised Holocaust survivors who witness the historical past again through memory. In Ozick's *The Shawl*, the subjectivity of the Holocaust survivor is fundamental to witnessing the trauma of the past through the fictional imagination. The secondary witness is necessary for the survivor to be able to witness her own act of testimony. In Budnitz's short story "Hershel," the explicitly fictional imagination is a meeting space for the subjectivities of both the narrator and the listener. The body of Holocaust fiction discussed in this thesis emphasises that the Holocaust is a personal tragedy of individuals, but moreover that it is individuals who construct its representation and mediate it through their own subjective truths. In doing so, the oeuvre partly resembles Holocaust testimony, but its self-reflexive discourse (whether successful or not) meditates on the texts' stories as representations.

By acknowledging and using the limitations of representation, the nonmimetic discourse of Holocaust commemoration is addressed within Holocaust fiction. The self-reflexive awareness of subjectivity and constructedness provides insight into valuable and necessary processes of the imagination. In all of the texts discussed, fiction is presented as a meaningful tool to bridge and to draw attention to the gaps between experience and representation. It broadens the implications of bearing witness due to its (implicit or explicit) discourse concerning the mediation of imaginary realities. I argue that the non-historical, fictional imagination as empathic witnessing, an alternative reality for mourning and/or as a fantastical experiment can and does provide meaningful representations of the Holocaust, and that it represents a valuable contribution to the existing canon of Holocaust literature.

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