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From Denotation to Detonation: Aestheticizations, Memory, and Empathic Readings in Trauma Narratives

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

My research centers around the representation of traumatic or otherwise extreme human experiences through modes of fictional writing. I am essentially looking into the renderings of unspeakable subject matter that occupies a liminal space in language's functioning. I aim to explore the potentialities of the most irredeemably strange or seemingly incoherent experiences of others, and show that they can be accessed and expressed. Accessing these types of memories or experiences by narrative and the techniques of fictional literature, brings us to a deeper understanding of and engagement with an experience when it is not our own. I believe that looking into the formal techniques of literature can function to provide a point of entry into addressing the integrity and expressibility of experiences and memory's functioning. In my initial section, I aim to give a general sense of the functional definitions and critical influences of the themes of narrative, witness, trauma, and testimony. The difficulties and paradoxes of coherent traumatic witnessing and testimonies are addressed through Laub, Felman, and Agamben—and I suggest that there is a need for something outside the realm of strict nonfiction and memoir in order to keep stories of extreme human experience alive in a cultural consciousness. Ultimately, I posit that the work of imaginative writing benefits and bypasses some of the discrepancies of testimony by means of some of the latitudes allowed by the formal aspects of fiction.

The texts whose formal elements are addressed are W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*. Using *Austerlitz*, I attend to the themes of alienation through looking specifically at narrative style. Using Michel de Certeau's theory of the everyday, I suggest that the contours of the familiar have a specific capacity for expressing profundity in such a way in that they serve as a place of remembering and forgetting. The world to which most people can relate can be the location of an engagement with an experience that was perhaps beforehand beyond the realm of recognizable language. Through Michaels's text, I explore the value of acknowledging a suspicion of language for its shortcomings for capturing the essence of descriptions. Following this, I also make a case for the value of empathic readings, as they serve the purpose of redemption and of fostering hope and healing in the wake of traumatic memory.

CHAPTER ONE

Storytelling, Narrative, and the Impossibility of Silence: Disengaging Knowing from Telling

As a child, I used to sneak into my mother's makeshift office and leaf through the papers on our rarely used formal dining room table. She is a lighting designer, and her work is always on special graph paper in numerous pencil shades. I would perch myself precariously and carefully look through each oversized sheet with a mix of confusion and amazement. The markings and figures meant nothing to me, and it seemed strange and wonderful to realize that she was paid to construct—as far as I was concerned—nonsense. I also found myself frustrated and fascinated that someone I cherished so dearly did these mental processes every day—and that I could not even begin to comprehend these thoughts. This fascination is, of course, part of any normal cognitive developmental process—but this enthrallment and captivation is by no means outgrown after childhood. The curiosity about the interiority of others' minds and experiences is a fundamental human impulse. We constantly seek to understand the world by looking to the people around us. Understanding others' experiences may help to give us access to not only a better understanding of ourselves, but also more fundamentally, what it means to be human, as it were. The appeal of stories owes itself somewhat to this voyeuristic curiosity. I posit that the understanding of the experiences of others is irrevocably tied to the capabilities of language and representation. The representation of the quotidian generally does not fall outside the realm of language, and can thus be construed effectively in an understandable, lucid manner. However, it is the liminal space outside the authority of language that “unspeakable” experiences or pain seem to occupy that will

be the subject of the forthcoming chapters. These extreme human experiences problematically defy efforts at representation, and also paradoxically call for telling and testimony on their behalf. In other words, these stories demand to be told, but come up against limits when being coaxed into expression and efforts at testimony. As such, the testimonies that bear witness to extreme human experiences can appear incomplete, incoherent, or otherwise irredeemably strange. What is of ethical concern is whether the method of representing the experience or trauma stands in the way of it being understood and addressed properly. Testimonial literature surrounding the Shoah is a particular example of such admittedly problematic and paradoxical representations of extreme human experience that lingers in the cultural consciousness. The body of testimonial literature surrounding the Shoah is immense, and the concern over the limits of representation in the stories of survivors is of ethical interest when it comes to our notions of how well we understand, and can engage with experiences and memories of an immense intensity.

The ethical issue of rendering an “unspeakable” experience accessible via language may take many forms. Theodor Adorno’s well-worn axiom that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”¹ seems to effectively reject the notion that any aestheticization of the Shoah is of use as a means for representation and subsequent consolation. However, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes, “it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it.”² Adorno’s demand for ethical expression leaves him at an impasse

¹ Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*. Trans. Samuel and Sherry

² Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973. 312.

between imagination and responsibility to the unimaginable historical event of the Shoah—an impasse that inquires into the functioning and power of imaginative writing.

Ultimately, my interest in the subject of traumatic realism stems from an initial discomfort with such fictional accounts of Shoah survivors and victims. In these works of fiction, the postmodern concern with the troubled representation of the “other” is compounded with the task of representing “unspeakable,” or traumatic experiences. Further, it appeared somehow dubious to use fiction as a vehicle to frame the ways in which language encounters limitations in the attempt to ethically construe extreme human experiences. This problem of trying to represent an impossible and unspeakable event with a marked degree of verisimilitude is problematic for me primarily in that it is difficult to avoid a betrayal of both a historical sense of fact and those in a position of victimhood—especially in the instance of collective suffering. To some extent, the authority of affect conjured in imaginative writing produces a huge emotional response, while not assuring the reader of factual accuracy—an effect that might be seen as exploitative.

At the same time, my attention turned to the question of whether these fictional and imaginative expressions of loss and trauma serve any redemptive purpose in the wake of the Shoah. Trauma theorists are chiefly concerned with the slippery nature of traumatic experiences, in that they somehow elude representation, while simultaneously demanding to be told. As I have mentioned, the very structure of testimony, which I will define broadly as literature that bears witness to an experience, also functions to draw attention to this discrepancy in which language itself comes up against limits when

attempting to address trauma. Giorgio Agamben explains this tension of language and understanding in relation to what he calls the “aporia of Auschwitz”:

We can enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we truly seek to understand them...the discrepancy in question concerns the very structure of testimony. On the one hand, what happened in the camps appears to the survivors as the only true thing and, as such, absolutely unforgettable; on the other hand, *this truth is to the same degree unimaginable*, that is, irreducible to the real elements that constitute it.³

If language and memory cannot support the burden of traumatic experience, how is the experience of the victim to be expressed? Just because these events seem empirically impossible surely does not mean that they cannot be imagined. Testimony attempts to navigate this impossible task of representation, despite being composed of potentially burdensome fragmentation and memory. Testimony’s attempt at narrative is at times overwhelmed by events that simply defy being anchored into recognizable knowledge, coherence, and understanding. As such, can testimony be saved through imaginative means? Paradoxically, can imagination be the point of access into what which is “unimaginable”? Can the work of imaginative writing benefit and bypass some of these discrepancies by potentially providing an entry for engagement into an experience? First, it is important to note what constitutes “good” imaginative writing—especially when faced with the task of faithful representation. I don’t believe the success of imaginative writing necessarily rests on the basis of how well it can persuade its reader—rather, it is its ability to *engage* said reader. Malcolm Gladwell articulates this formulation with regard to literature, saying that it “succeeds or fails on the strength of its ability to engage you, to make you think, to give you a glimpse into someone else’s head—even if in the

³ Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. London: Zone Books, 2002. 12. Emphasis mine.

end you conclude that someone else's head is not a place you'd really like to be."⁴

Engaging the reader adds, as I will argue, a complication to the division between historical "truth" and fiction, in that literature enables an engagement whose ethos may be more faithful to the traumatic event. Extending testimony into other forms allows for greater latitude in expression that can more easily settle into coherent and understandable narratives. It is the intersection of imaginative renderings and responsibility to ethics and historical truths that draws my attention to this "storytelling" mode of fictional testimony.

Giorgio Agamben and Theodor Adorno constitute some of the most important voices in the study of the empirical structures of testimony. Agamben's characterization of witnessing is especially of interest in that he delineates some of the shortcomings of testimony, but also alludes to the problems of aestheticizing a narrative of trauma. Agamben laments the seeming impossibility of bearing witness as "unimaginable,"⁵ but does not rule out the possibility of representation of collective trauma altogether. He writes that even a witness cognizant of the seeming impossibility of telling, "must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness," and as such, "this alters the value of testimony in a definitive way; it makes it necessary to look for its meaning in an unexpected area."⁶ In this way, Agamben points to the imaginative potential for faithful representation born out of the impossibility of testimony. Agamben seems to look to the silences left by the linguistic lacuna of expressing traumatic experiences as a point of significance—but I assert that it points to an opportunity for a different mode of expression. The act of witnessing in extreme human experiences also serves as an

⁴ Gladwell, Malcolm. *What the Dog Saw*. New York: Penguin, 2009. xv.

⁵ Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. London: Zone Books, 2002. 28.

⁶ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 34.

impediment to an understandable representation. Dori Laub's reflections on witnessing and the historical experience of the Shoah serve to show us the complexities and inherent limits in attempting to construe the memories of extreme experiences. Laub explains that there are three discrete levels of witnessing: being a witness to the experience itself, being witness to the testimony of others, and being a witness to the process of witnessing. He laments the frustration of the survivors' need to tell their respective stories, and the inability to do so. This frustration must be overcome in that the "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny."⁷ Laub describes the dangers of memory in an unarticulated testimony in that "the events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life."⁸ He says that, "there is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself."⁹ This need to tell, however, is hindered by the regimes of empirical fact embedded in language and testimony. Laub states that,

no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech*.¹⁰

This difficulty to articulate the traumatic experience through strict empirically-based testimony calls for the possibility of other means in order to communicate the experience.

⁷ Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 79.

⁸ Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony*, 79.

⁹ Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony*, 78.

¹⁰ Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony*, 78.

The parameters of the term “narrative” focus upon endowing difficult to understand testimony with meaning, but this functional definition needs unpacking. Hayden White points to narrative as a “metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the same nature of a shared reality can be transmitted.”¹¹ White uses narrative as a method for translating of experience, and subsequent endowing of translated experience with meaning—whether applicable to barriers such as culture, or perhaps epoch. Narrative becomes a way of turning “knowing into telling...fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human.”¹² Roland Barthes furthers this equation of meaning and narrative, indicating that narrative “ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted.”¹³

Another aspect that must be taken into account in exploring the fictional mode as a valid medium for rendering the experience of trauma is the politics of representation. Theorists Hayden White and Elaine Kauvar are of particular interest to me and effectively serve as interlocutors for many of my concerns about fictional representations. Kauvar asserts that too much abstraction can pry one away from accurate representation, but still believes in the importance and possibility of engagement with the experience of trauma. White finds narrative problematic “only when we wish to give *real* events the *form* of a story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their

¹¹ White, Hayden. “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7(1980): 5-27. 6.

¹² White, “The Value of Narrativity,” 5.

¹³ Barthes, Roland. “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” *Music, Image, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), 79.

narrativization is so difficult.”¹⁴ Although I believe that White dislodges some of the power of historiography with his concern, some mediation on the part of narrative may be permissible for the sake of coherence and understanding. My entrance into the discussion of these theorists consists of attempting to reconcile representational and aesthetic strategies of narrative and fiction with the fragmentary or inarticulate nature of traumatic testimony.

In approaching fiction as a potential mode of expression for the impossible, I am drawn to Martha Nussbaum’s conception of the literary imagination and the judicious spectator. Beyond the silent impasse produced by the demand for *real* historical knowledge in testimony, fiction demonstrates its importance in its associated skill set. Nussbaum provides what I think is a rather utopian view of literature, particularly the techniques of fiction, but she provides another point of entry into the concept of testimony, and in this case, one based in political theory. She indicates that in a democratic society, one has to give ordinary people incentives to understand reason and to act upon the common good. The literary imagination functions to engender these incentives, as Nussbaum asserts, “I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own.”¹⁵ This plays into the fictionalization of testimony in that the implementation of the “literary imagination” allows for a careful and full engagement with the subjectivities of another’s experience—particularly if these experiences are difficult to render or would not otherwise be

¹⁴ White, “The Value of Narrativity,” 8.

¹⁵ Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. xvi.

encountered by the reader. She uses the construction of the “judicious spectator,” a figure possessing the skill set of empathy, sentiment, and identification that is made possible through exposure to literary methods, particularly a third-person omniscient narration style. It is through becoming a judicious spectator that one becomes a more engaged and informed participant in a democratic society—but also potentially more capable of understanding the experience of the other. Nussbaum’s figure suggests that fiction allows for greater freedom in representation of the witness/other, and these liberties may make for a more coherent rendering while still resonating with a larger sense of the “real” of historical knowledge found in testimony. Fiction serves as an outlet to understand the witness/other in that the abilities of the judicious spectator cultivate and prime a deeper engagement with the text. Nussbaum states that, “as we read we are immersed and intensely concerned participants”¹⁶ through this engagement. Further, what Nussbaum is suggesting is that the power built into the imaginative narrative form also coincides with the trope of witnessing present in nonfictional Shoah memoirs. The formal structures present in the experience of reading fiction are crucial to engaging deeply with the experience of others through witnessing. Nussbaum states that this kind of engagement is necessary as,

any further inquiry—including a critical inquiry about the literary work itself. If we do not begin with “fancy” and wonder about the human shapes before us, with sympathy for their suffering and joy at their well-being, if we do not appreciate the importance of viewing each person as separate with a single life to live, then our critique of pernicious emotions will have little basis.¹⁷

¹⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 75.

¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 76.

In order to consider and understand the stories of others, there must be a sense of engagement, and an avoidance of generalized platitudes. Nussbaum argues that the goal of testimony lends itself well to the experience of imaginative fiction readership, and that the task of witnessing may be similar to the imaginative work necessary for an engagement with a narrative. Ultimately, involvement of the witness with testimony is of great import. As such, engagement with narratives comes to the fore as a tool for this deeper participation with the otherwise unfathomable experiences of others.

What makes literature and poetic language suited to an engagement with trauma is located in the fundamental structuring the experience of trauma. Cathy Caruth states in her formulation of crisis is “experienced by the individual as an unexpected *event* that cannot necessarily be assimilated into consciousness and it therefore returns later to haunt the survivor through nightmares and repetitive actions.”¹⁸ As such, “the reality of the traumatic experience is *not known* or cannot be comprehended entirely in the first instance, because the full extent of its import is not located in a simple, violent and original moment of an individual’s past.”¹⁹ In this way, the truth of trauma cannot be linked entirely to a verifiable reality or what is known, and is experienced in a belated manner. Trauma is present in that which returns to haunt the victim. What returns to haunt the victim is not grasped in its entirety, and this makes the documentation and assessment of the experience rather difficult. What stories of trauma tell is not only “the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been

¹⁸ Williams, Merle and Stefan Polantinsky. “Writing at its Limits: Trauma Theory in Relation to Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*,” *English Studies in Africa* 52.1: 1-14. 1.

¹⁹ Williams, “Writing at its Limits,” 1.

fully known.”²⁰ Trauma narratives, in this way, should not be approached in a simplistic, linear manner, as Caruth suggests that the tensions involved in the telling of these stories are best “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.”²¹ Both poetic, literary language and being witness to trauma occupy a space between knowing and not being able to empirically describe an experience. Unlike testimony, literature does not generally consist of a recitation of fact, but it does urge the reader to “encounter strangeness,” and imaginatively engage with the potentialities of “attested historicity of [history’s] unimaginability.”²² Poetic language, as opposed to historical testimony, provides more hospitable grounds for coaxing expression out of the silences and aporias of crisis, and registers the ethos of the tension and incomprehensibility of such experiences.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the texts used will serve as a point of entry into the work of imaginative writing centering around the experiences surrounding World War II. These two novels function as fictive testimony in an attempt to bring to coherence the narratives of their respective historical moments. W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* blends historical regimes of fact and imaginative rendering in the story of Jacques Austerlitz, and addresses the historical after-effects that link greater Europe’s wartime experiences under the Nazis with those in the present. Sebald’s text demonstrates questions of particular horrors and trauma juxtaposed with the quotidian and minutia of everyday life. The text allows for a nuanced exploration of memory and the texture of

²⁰ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 6.

²¹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.

²² Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony*, 7, 105.

the everyday as present in trauma narratives. Using background in everyday theory via Michel de Certeau, I posit that the contours of the familiar have a specific capacity for enabling an engagement in such a way in that they serve as a place of remembering and forgetting. The world to which most people can relate can be the location of an engagement with an experience that was perhaps beforehand beyond the realm of understandable language and recognizable knowledge. There is a danger in a merging of the particular and the everyday, especially when that particular is of an unspeakable nature. On the other hand, this specificity of event may breed a remoteness of the crisis wherein it cannot be accessed. Rostan argues that Sebald's aesthetic "locate[s] historical trauma *within the natural world* and yet [does] so without ever naturalizing disaster," and this "locating [of] trauma in the historical and natural world still offers the possibility of returning to more universal questions about the origins of the self and of injurious acts."²³ The form and stylistic elements of Sebald's text offers insight into the telling of an experience. More importantly, the form of Sebald's text points to the value of storytelling and narrativity in representing reality.

Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* serves as a point of address for some of the potentially troublesome usage of aestheticization in testimony. Her text addresses some of the same historical narratives as Sebald's text, but employs a high lyricism and is entrenched in metaphor in both of its focalized voices: Jakob Beer, who witnessed the death of his family as a child at the hands of the Nazis; and Ben, a son of concentration camp survivors. Michaels's lush language in presenting the story of Jakob, and to a lesser degree Ben brings to the fore the complexities of high lyricism and lavish

²³ Rostan, Kimberly. "Reading Traumatically and Representing the Real in Collective Suffering," *College Literature*, 33.2(Spring 2006): 172-183. 182.

metaphorization. It seems somewhat irresponsible and jarring to present the unspeakable in such lyrical language and metaphorized history; but this resulting discomfort arguably adds to the experience and coherence of testimony. Méira Cook takes issue primarily with Michaels's text and characterizes it as "overwritten," indicating that "when such metaphorically (over)lush language is used to express the romantic subplot, no contrast between form and content is possible and this failure results in a sentimental discourse."²⁴ However, despite its flaws, I find Michaels's text successful as a meditation on remembrance and memory. It is through the lush poetics that empathic identification and unsettlement are engendered, and a redemptive re-experiencing of crisis complicates conceptions of history and time. This exercise in storytelling actively demonstrates many of the dangers of aestheticization, but also works to redeem these by fostering an emotionally complex and compelling narrative.

It is not my aim to rehash the discourse of the ethics of representation surrounding the Shoah or other collective instances of extreme human experience. Although it may be necessary to revisit the ethical and political concerns surrounding such areas of address, as this is a scholarly paper, that area holds less inspiration for me than something more fundamentally, albeit humanistic in treatment. I am far more interested in the mode of storytelling, imaginative writing, and the applications to subjects and experiences that occupy a liminal space in language's functioning. I am looking for a deeper engagement with unspeakable or unspoken subject matter, and the potential that even the most irredeemably strange or incoherent experiences of others can in some way be accessed and expressed. Bruno Schulz writes that there are things, "that cannot ever occur with

²⁴ Cook, Méira. "At the Membrane of Language and Silence: Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*," *Canadian Literature* 164(2000): 12-33. 17.

any precision. They are too big and too magnificent to be contained in mere facts. They are merely trying to occur, they are checked whether the ground of reality can carry them,” further, “they quickly withdraw, fearing to lose their integrity in the frailty of realization.”²⁵ I believe that it is precisely these kinds of memories or fleeting moments of lucidity that are difficult to grasp or communicate that are central to address in encountering the “real” in narrative. It is this “frailty of realization” that is of special interest to me, and its potential to be brought about by narrative and the techniques of literature that bring us to a deeper, finessed understanding of an experience when it is not our own. I wish to address the specific ways in which imaginative writing is a complex but worthwhile venue to bear witness. The elements of aestheticization and formal techniques of literature function effectively as tools for providing an effective point of entry for liminal experiences. It is in the interest of exploring the implications of poetic language and their functioning on the page in the literature written in the wake of loss and trauma that has driven my research. I intend to demonstrate the value and need for poetics in constructing venues for engagement with the things that are most difficult to bear.

²⁵ Schulz, Bruno. *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin Books, 1963. ix.

CHAPTER TWO

Memory and Creative Force: Sebald and (Re)Writing Trauma in the Everyday

W.G. Sebald's place in post-World War II Europe is an inherently political one—but some of his experiences as a German expatriate jar against the subject matter of his work. The themes and subjects of his texts carry overtly nationalistic tones that imply an understanding of and identification with the cultures of loss, shame, and resentment in that characterized the post-war period. By providing a short biographical section with particular attention to Sebald's connections to post-war German thought, I believe I can better inform some of the aporias of memory that manifest themselves in his writing, and how memory as a creative gesture is grounded. Born in 1944 in the southern Bavarian town of Wertagh im Allgäu, Sebald grew up not in the midst of a war zone, but in a small village in the Alps near the Swiss border. Although removed geographically from the greater wartime involvement of Germany at the time, Sebald's father was directly involved in that he was an officer in the German Wehrmacht, and only returned home from a prisoner-of-war camp in 1947.²⁶ The village Sebald grew up in escaped the physical damage of the war, but he was keenly aware of the implications and larger social damage of the war. In describing his first visit to Munich with his parents in 1947, he described the damage from the Allied bombing of the city, later saying, "you might have a few buildings standing intact and between them an avalanche of scree." However, this damage was never directly addressed or acknowledged by his parents, although he

²⁶ Schwartz, Lynne Sharon, ed. *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007. 10.

remarked that, “they could remember if they wanted to.”²⁷ His father was a rather austere man whom Sebald resented for his participation in and subsequent silence about the war. Frustrations stemming from his dissatisfaction with his ex-Nazi professors and their refusal to address the recent past of the country at the universities drove Sebald to pursue his postgraduate education in England, at the University of Manchester. He remained at the University of East Anglia until his death in a car accident in 2001. I am particularly intrigued by Sebald’s assertion that a proper address of the past could have been made possible, “if they wanted to,” and how this sentiment echoes some of his frustrations and the thematics of his texts with regard to documenting and engaging with history. His frustrations with the suppression of remembering frame many questions as to how memory is imaginatively directed and manipulated. These frustrations also function to cast doubt upon more “objective” modes of documentation, such as photography—which Sebald uses extensively in his later work. The trajectory of Sebald’s work displays some of the engagement with these questions and frustrations.

His first major literary work, published in 1988, was *Nach der Natur* (*After Nature*). As it was written in Sebald’s native German, his popularity was by no means widespread, but the text attracted positive reviews in Germany nonetheless. After publishing his second text *Schwindel* (*Vertigo*), which gives a sense of post-war village life in Bavaria through his narrator, Sebald’s publication of *Die Ausgewanderten* (*The Emigrants*) in 1992 brought him widespread recognition and praise. Sebald’s novel engages with the subjectivities of the victims of German wartime aggression in that the majority of the narrators of the text are forced to leave Germany because they are Jewish

²⁷ Scharz, ed. *The Emergence of Memory*, 161-2.

and subsequently face persecution. This text introduces and addresses the themes of displacement, exile, and loss that lace the plots of Sebald's later texts as well. *The Emigrants* was the first of Sebald's novels to be translated into English in 1996, which opened the doors to establishing attention and critical acclaim outside of Germany. In the UK as well as the United States, Sebald's work was particularly well received and garnered more attention than he previously had in the German-speaking literary arena. *Die Ringe des Saturn* (*The Rings of Saturn*), published in German in 1995, and subsequently translated to English in 1998, takes the loose form of a travel narrative, and again touches upon themes of exile and displacement. He works in metaphor through the Nazi cultivation and promotion of the silkworm during the Third Reich. This cultivation, as per the Nazi rhetoric, will teach "the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to prevent racial degeneration."²⁸ Sebald's text is a rather thinly veiled exploration of the genocide at the hands of the Nazis, but again uses a narrator who can be identified as a victim of German aggression, and explores the feelings of displacement that occur in the post-war period. *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (*On the Natural History of Destruction*) is Sebald's nonfiction work based on a series of lectures given in Zurich in 1997 that centered around the lack of German literary treatment of the Allied bombings of German cities in a series of rather polemical essays, and was translated into English posthumously in 2003. Sebald's last major work of prose before his untimely death is a text that is widely regarded to be his most defining work. *Austerlitz* was published in 2001, and follows the protagonist Jacques Austerlitz, who was evacuated from Prague as part of a kindertransport at the age

²⁸ Scharz, ed. *The Emergence of Memory*, 12.

of four along with other Jewish children, to escape persecution during the war. A Welsh Calvinist couple raises him, and years later after a nervous breakdown, Austerlitz begins to explore the nature of his family and childhood, and searches around the villages and archives of Europe for some claim to his history and family, based upon the fragmentary memories and narratives he gathers of his past. At first blush, the plot can perhaps be seen as somewhat derived, but what makes *Austerlitz* such a compelling text is the masterful way in which it is written. It pushes definitions of genre, and the scope of its narrative embedding of exile, return, remembering, forgetting, loss, and grief draws attention to the strategies of representation and storytelling with regard to the treatment of collective knowledge and historical memory. It is Sebald's last text that will be the focus of this chapter, as I view it as the summa of Sebald's body of work, and evocative of the kind of formal and thematic features of narrative that make representations of traumatic or otherwise extreme human experiences more accessible for engagement. As such, some insights into Sebald's experiences may illuminate the preoccupations with the themes of displacement and alienation present in *Austerlitz*.

The themes of exile, wandering, and displacement that occupy Sebald's texts may be influenced by his personal experience as a displaced person. But these themes may echo some of the themes of modernity of the twentieth century, as present in the position of the "outsider" or "other" that preoccupies so much of existential thought and literature, as well as post-war identity—or rather, disruption of identity. Although by no means a representative figure for the period, Sebald's decision to leave his native Germany for England at an early age, as well as his polemical treatment of Germany's view of its own history in his work has brought up questions about his ambivalence for his provincial

German origins. Quoted in an interview with Tim Parks, Sebald contrasts the Jewish experience of emigration and displacement with his own self-expatriation, in that the “attempt to hide or obscure one’s origins, I think, is more definitely associated with the Jewish community than with odd German immigrants like myself.”²⁹ However, one’s origins and the search for them remain an object of attention for the displaced. Sebald continues that the “presence of the past has something very ambivalent about it. On the one hand it is burdensome, heavy, it weighs you down, on the other hand it is something that liberates you from present constraints.”³⁰ It is through this ambivalence that Sebald may find narrative grounding to explore the themes of the relationship of man to his environment in a historical sense, as well as the nature of memory—collective or individual, and how memory can be transmitted and imaginatively altered from one generation to another. Sebald’s texts serve as a complex but evocative point of entry into how loss, forgetting, displacement, memory, and destruction can be narratively embedded. In turn, this point of entry allows for a vantage point of how these themes can be formally accessed.

Testimony’s attempt at narrative is at times overwhelmed by events that simply defy being anchored into recognizable knowledge, coherence, and understanding. I posit that the work of imaginative writing benefits and bypasses some of the discrepancies of testimony by means of the liberty allowed by the formal aspects of fiction. Sebald’s texts access some of these potential latitudes of the area of fictional testimony, through formal elements such as the inclusion of photos in the text, sentence structuring, and the

²⁹ Denham, Scott and Mark McCulloh, ed. *W.G. Sebald: history, memory, trauma*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006. 23.

³⁰ Denham, Scott and Mark McCulloh, ed. *W.G. Sebald*, 23-4.

narrator's focalization. Studying the formal techniques function as tools provides a point of entry into addressing the integrity and expressibility of experiences. What I wish to study in Sebald's text are the aspects and applications of these techniques, particularly the rendering of memory. It is the intersection of imaginative renderings and responsibility to ethics and historical truths that draws my attention to the "storytelling" mode of fictional testimony, and the potential thereof. Highlighting Sebald's use of some of these techniques helps illuminate the implications and value of their overall functioning.

The first formal element in *Austerlitz* I wish to address is the shifting narrative voice through which the story is told. The narrator of the plot describes the life of Jacques Austerlitz, whom he first meets in the Antwerp railway station, and constantly struggles to make sense of his brutalized childhood of which he knows very little. The unfolding narrative is that Austerlitz was born in Prague to a fairly affluent Jewish couple just before the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. His father was active in liberal politics, and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia forces him to flee to Paris, and was never to be heard of subsequently—his letters to his family ostensibly intercepted and confiscated by Nazi authorities. To escape Nazi-occupied Prague, Austerlitz's mother manages to have her son sent to London by means of a kindertransport, and he is then taken in by an emotionally-devoid Welsh couple. After a lonely number of school years, Jacques is encouraged by his history teacher to go to Oxford, where he studies architecture. Later, he obtains a teaching post and settles in London's East End. Bereft of friends, and after suffering a nervous breakdown due in part to his discovery of the nature of his childhood, Austerlitz decides to track down what happened to his parents and explore the nature of

his origins. Thus he searches through the archives, train stations, and otherwise informal records of Europe.

The basis of the text is that the author and narrator meet periodically—in Antwerp, in a bar in London, and a café in Paris—and the narrator (Austerlitz) recounts the melancholy story of his life, such that the reader has essentially been taken on a guided tour of a searched for, but lost European civilization. In this style through which Austerlitz searches for the story of what became of his father and mother, Sebald's narrator highlights the ways in which archives and collections of records enshrine memories. The memories are there, but hidden—needing a degree of excavation in order for them to be reclaimed as recognizable knowledge. Through Austerlitz's recounting of his story to the narrator, and providing him with all the photographs with which he has slowly constructed the history, a narrative is constructed that “serves as a temporary reprieve from the erasure of history that people, objects, and events” undergo.³¹ The narrator becomes the means for storytelling of Austerlitz's story, but more importantly, this narrative also is simultaneously the story of this narrator's renderings of these stories and memories. The artifice of the storyteller presenting Austerlitz's account by proxy foregrounds the narratives created around and by the photographs. The intermingling of voices of the narrator telling Austerlitz's story is the collective shaping of a history—the projection of meaning onto sites of memorial. As the text itself is the series of encounters of the two storytellers, and of encounters with places and grief—from a fortress outside Antwerp to Prague, through Theresienstadt, the concentration camp where Austerlitz's mother was killed at the hands of the Nazis, and the national archives in Paris.

³¹ Kochhar-Lindgren, Gray. “Charcoal: The Phantom Traces of W.G. Sebald's Novel-Memoirs,” *Monatshefte*, 94.3(Fall 2002): 368-380. 371.

Because of the varied nature of the voices constructing the overall narrative, the story becomes a ventriloquist act of sorts. The overarching narrator is present throughout the voices of others telling the story, as a kind of director or conductor of the other voices, giving each voice a turn to tell, but simultaneously there—coordinating and arranging these voices of memory in order to construct an aggregate history. This multi-voiced story becomes an attempt at memory's reclamation of history, and imposing meaning upon "lost" objects, places, and histories through memory itself. Arthur Williams notes that Sebald's choice of narrative style as the conductor or arranging voice of the narrative, "undermines the reliability of his informants' memories in order to assert the power of the creative imagination."³² At the same time, the narrator's position is ultimately as an outsider, even when he is speaking for himself because of this multifarious nature of voices. Displacement of voices, memories, and overall meaning is aggravated by his sense of being an outsider to himself as well as the aggregate narrative's construction. He notes that he feels a sense that his surroundings in London are "alien and incomprehensible in spite of all the years that have passed since [his] arrival in England."³³ Personal memories and narratives are undermined by the artifice of construction itself, drawing attention to the forces that undermine memory. This sense of displacement and alienation, I argue, functions in the overall form of narrative by drawing attention to the way in which language itself has the potential to displace meaning, and in which the rendering of memory becomes an intention-filled creative force for this sense of meaning.

³² Williams, Arthur, Stuart Parks, Julian Preece, ed. "*Whose Story?*"—*Continuities in Contemporary German-language Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 111.

³³ Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*. London: Penguin Books, 2001. 36.

Helen Finch addresses Sebald's complex relationship to history and memory, and positions his "landscapes of memory" as a space of redemption, beyond the horizon of history."³⁴ Finch is helpful with regard to memory in pointing out that "in metaphysical or theological terms...neither Austerlitz, the character, nor his Sebaldian amanuensis are granted any redemption from history."³⁵ Instead, Sebald's formulation of redemption involves both "a continuation of familial tradition in the face of historical separation and loss," and "a redemptive poetics which makes of poetic language itself a utopian, ahistorical landscape, one where temporally separated generations can be reunited."³⁶ Finch also looks to Sebald's engagement with poetic language and the imaginative construction of memory transcending the constraints of mere historical fact. I wish to distinguish my argument from that of Finch in proffering an examination of how the poetics of imaginatively influenced memory functions on the page. Whereas Finch formulates the space as ahistorical in nature, I argue that the poetics are not grounded in the data of history, but the potentialities of memory swell around this foundation of empirically based events. Creatively forged memory functions for Finch as a redemptive space for Sebald, and I would now like to draw attention to the particular techniques through which Sebald engages with history in a way that informs imaginative narratives.

Memory as a flexible creative force is complicated by Sebald's constant use of printed diagrams, maps, and snapshots throughout the text. These visual additions function to give grounding to elements of the story, as many times Austerlitz will be

³⁴ Finch, Helen. " 'Die irdische Erfüllung': Peter Handke's Poetic Landscapes and W.G. Sebald's Metaphysics of History." in *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long, 179-198. Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2007. 179.

³⁵ Finch, " 'Die irdische Erfüllung'," 197.

³⁶ Finch, " 'Die irdische Erfüllung'," 182.

describing a picture to the narrator and its ostensible meaning, and it is shown on the opposite page. It mimics a scrapbook of sorts, but also may suggest a kind of resorting to forms of anchoring experiences and memory into recognizable knowledge when one begins to lose one's way of constructing meaning. The narrator reflects upon this use of photos to help ground his telling of Austerlitz's story, as he initially "had some idea since out first conversations in Antwerp of the extent of his interests," but "the drift of his ideas, and the nature of his observations and comments, always made extempore or first recorded in provisional form, but eventually covering thousands of pages."³⁷ The only way in which the narrator can begin to render Austerlitz's story is by grounding it in the visual elements, as a kind of grossly extended captions. The narrator begins, "to assemble and recast anything that still passes muster in order to re-create before my own eyes, as if in the pages of an album, the pictures of the landscape, now almost immersed in oblivion, through which my journey had taken me."³⁸ Sebald's use of "re-create" suggests the act of recollection, but also the potential to alter the original image in its re-imagining. In a remembering that does not come to coherence or otherwise conspires to confuse, memory shows itself to be a creative and generative force. It invokes an act of *re-creation* through memory, the molding and shaping of an image that suggests a shuffling of parts in order to obtain a semblance of coherence or meaning. This move, of course, involves acknowledging that memory has the power of establishing and changing meaning, and is very much applicable in the way in which images are used as a storehouse for memory. This usage of visuals as applying structure to language brings into question how Sebald represents and conceptualizes human memory. Do seemingly objective images provide a

³⁷ Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*, 120.

³⁸ Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*, 121.

kind of grounding or anchor for human memory, or shape the way in which we create and re-create memory? The shutter falls like a guillotine on a moment, but brings something ostensibly objective into resonance with the realm of the personal and subjective.

Kochhar-Lindgren argues that the use of images, “generates an ambiguous sense of veracity, a series of interruptions in the flow of the text,” as well as “raises the question of the relationships between image and text.”³⁹ Is this “ambiguous sense of veracity” of images useful in order to combat the sheer elements of construction and abstraction of language in the rendering of history and memory, or to draw attention to it? Austerlitz reflects this frustration, indicating that even when a,

train of thought did succeed in emerging with wonderful clarity inside my head, but I knew even as it formed that I was in no position to record it, for as soon as I so much as picked up my pencil the endless possibilities of language...became a conglomeration of the most inane phrases.⁴⁰

Austerlitz cites the nature of language itself as problematic in the negotiation of memory into a coherent narrative. There is the implication that the possibilities of language somehow pose a greater likelihood of clouding its own expression—removing clarity with various potentialities. The problem resides in the “endless possibilities” of language rather than any sort of constraint. Ignorance is a non-issue when faced with the bulky, awkward, yet elusive nature of attaching words to experience. Language, for Sebald’s narrator, holds the power of gesture, not description—and thus there is a reluctance to ascribe words to a memory or an event. Language becomes arbitrary in this construction. Words are completely impotent to assign or carry meaning, so the narrator looks to the potentiality of images. He laments this frustration of words stating,

³⁹ Kochhar-Lindgren, “Charcoal”. 372.

⁴⁰ Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*, 122-3.

The entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting *ordinary* objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog. I could not even understand what I myself had written in the past—perhaps I could understand that least of all. All I could think was that such a sentence only appears to mean something, but in truth is at best a makeshift expedient, a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from ignorance, something which we use, in the same way as many sea plants and animals use their tentacles, to grope blindly though the darkness enveloping us. The very thing that may usually convey a sense of purposeful intelligence—the exposition of an idea by means of a certain stylistic facility—now seemed to me nothing but an entirely arbitrary or deluded enterprise. I could see no connections anymore, the sentences resolved themselves into a series of separate words, the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs...and the sight of it increasingly filled me with feelings of horror and shame.”⁴¹

The entire structuring and functioning of language betrays the power to communicate any recognizable rendering of reality in memory effectively, and suggests that the use of images is one that looks outside itself for meaning. With respect to narrative voice, photography forces an unambiguous naming of position in relation to the self. Roland Barthes addresses this concern of position as a “history of looking,” indicating that the self “never coincides with [its] image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn” which results in a “cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”⁴² This conceptualization informs the notion of an “objective” positioning of the photograph or snapshot. The idea behind a snapshot is that it is assumed to in some way preserve a moment or image in an objective way, free from the biases of the observer. Barthes writes that, “what the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”⁴³ The

⁴¹ Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*, 124, emphasis mine.

⁴² Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans Richard Howard. London: Flamingo/Harper Collins, 1984. 12.

⁴³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 4.

photograph serves, in Barthes's formulation, as an encounter with the "real," to interact with an objective event that is represented the way it occurred. Barthes refers to this necessarily real event or subject as photography's referent, and contrasts them with the referent of other forms of representation, such as in painting or literature. He explains, "I call the 'photographic referent' not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph." This assumption points to a claim of objectivity, that we "can never deny that *the thing has been there*...we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence...of photography."⁴⁴ As such, to view a photograph is to encounter a moment that is inextricably tied to the realm of the "real." In other modes of representation, namely literature, the subject can easily be fabricated. Photography carries an impression of authenticity in an objective sense. This is important in Sebald's constant use of photographs throughout his text, in that there is necessarily an invocation of what is to be considered "real." Photographs within the text are presented in a way that inhabits the area between the imaginative space of writing and what is considered to be "real." That is, the use of photographs functions to anchor a sense of objectivity. Photographs function outside the varied potentialities of memory in that they are necessarily anchored into something that inherently occurred, as Barthes mentions. They are a direct recreation and mirroring of a past event or scene, which stands in contrast to the malleable and numerous renditions of memory. By drawing attention to the multiple modes of representation in narrative and image, the creative force of memory is extended into a space that it can be either reinforced or obscured when juxtaposed with

⁴⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

photographs. In this way, the use of photos and diagrams functions to bring a directive force to the admittedly derived nature of memory, to use “objective” elements in construing everything from a brutalized history to ordinary objects.

During the course of the telling of his story, Austerlitz makes reference repeatedly to ordinary objects and memories, in addition to traumatic ones, being laden with the complication of also being difficult to fall into language. However, in his search to make sense of the traumatic memories of his childhood and of what became of his parents, Austerlitz only has the contours of the ordinary and quotidian as his point of access. Although he visits the concentration camp where his mother was killed, most of Austerlitz’s journey is spent in train stations, small villages, and otherwise less than explicitly obvious locations of trauma. Perhaps it is with attention to the tangible, graspable items and elements of the everyday that words will have a more physical, demonstrable force. It is these less than “exceptional” places that provide him with his information and memories about the past. Sebald’s use of photographs ties in suitably to addressing aspects of the “everyday,” as it engages with the larger landscape of art’s appropriate functioning and place in society. John Roberts writes that “photography’s intimacy with the everyday connects the categories of art to the agency and consciousness of specific objects, in specific social contexts, faced with specific problems.”⁴⁵ Photography engages with the specific, but generally unremarkable elements of society, which I will refer to as “the everyday.” It is in these specific, yet inconspicuous events and places that there is great potential for the storing of memory. Through the use of a few contemporary theorists, namely Michel de Certeau, I aim to

⁴⁵ Roberts, John. *The Art of Interruption: realism, photography and the everyday*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. 4.

connect what is seen as the ordinary with its capacity for profundity as a venue for memory, both facilitating respective remembering and selective forgetting.

Beginning of course with a functional delineation of terms, the term “everyday life” or “the everyday” is admittedly problematic and slippery, as it naturally raises the question of *whose* life and everyday is being invoked. The term “everyday” can be used in a way that normalizes a dominant or common culture (i.e. “people like us” or “ordinary people”) or in a way that highlights the “other,” or “voices from below,” outside of a dominant culture, whose worldview would ordinarily not be seen, for reason that it is outside that of an elite culture. It is the seeking out of relics in attics to reflect reality rather than archives of government records, so to speak. Ben Highmore asserts that the term “everyday life” is “not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny; it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden. To invoke an ordinary culture from below is to make the invisible visible.”⁴⁶ These aspects of the everyday are of interest because they are at times obscured from sight by rationalism. Highmore writes that it is “precisely [the] rationalism that transforms the insignificant and everyday into ciphers for the bizarre,”⁴⁷ and as I posit, the traumatic as well. Highmore removes the power from the “rational” in that it “seeks to disenchant the world through an unquestioned belief in its own value,” and functions as “the emergence of new myths and rituals under the banner of the ‘true.’”⁴⁸ In this regard, the everyday stands as a place for the discovery of previously obscured experience and memory, rather than a place of boredom or unchanging routine. Theorists have tried to map out the strangeness

⁴⁶ Highmore, Ben, ed. *The Everyday Life Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 3.

⁴⁷ Highmore, Ben. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 4.

⁴⁸ Highmore, Ben. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 5.

of the everyday and make it clear that there is far more dimension in the mundane that warrant attention. That is to say, the exceptional is concealed in the everyday. Theorist Michel de Certeau sources the everyday for a certain essence of existence, and holds that the everyday is necessarily hidden and needs to be searched out. In his formulation, the everyday isn't fully mappable by language or images alone, but "textured by evocations that point to a sensory realm."⁴⁹ de Certeau's take on the everyday is useful in his conception of the problematics of cataloguing and archiving the ordinary. Quoted in Highmore, de Certeau argues that "the study of...everyday life 'presupposes an unavowed operation': 'to conceal what it claims to show,'"⁵⁰ much like the Foucauldian archive, in which knowledge is dependent upon and subject to the power that makes it recognizable. However, the theory accounts for the everyday as that which is both present and not present in this knowledge, which he calls the "geography of the eliminated." de Certeau explains this "geography of the eliminated" as being "beyond the question of method and contents, beyond what it says, the measure of a work is what it keeps silent...these blank spots outline a geography of the forgotten."⁵¹ The contours of the familiar are positioned in such a way in that they both serve as a place of remembering and selective forgetting.

When referring to what I call "forgotten" memory, I would like to point to the distinction of these memories functioning in the sense that they can be recovered, but are not pursued. Anne Whitehead writes that this kind of "history of memory is also

⁴⁹ Highmore, Ben, ed. *The Everyday Life Reader*, 146.

⁵⁰ Highmore, Ben, ed. *The Everyday Life Reader*, 162.

⁵¹ Highmore, Ben, ed. *The Everyday Life Reader*, 163.

necessarily a history of forgetting,”⁵² in that things forgotten can be recovered. Should Austerlitz not have pursued applying a specific meaning to seemingly ordinary things such as moth collections or building plans, their purposing becomes irrelevant and forgotten. This actively requires an acknowledgment of an imparting of meaning to an object via memory—the meaning changes depending upon the memory, although the object remains unchanged. Through memory’s reimagining, meaning can be applied to silences and to spaces that once appeared to be vacant. Forgetting and memory are in this way necessarily connected in each other’s functioning. Whitehead addresses Marc Augé’s proposed relationship between remembering and forgetting, writing that “forgetting is an active agent in the formation of memories, and it is because memory and oblivion stand together, are entirely ‘complicit’ with one another, that both are necessary.”⁵³ However, forgetting cannot be too highly valued as a solution to living with traumatic memory. Forgetting can, Whitehead writes, “work against the solidification of narratives into too static or monumentalized a form.” Although, she continues, “forgetting cannot simply be prescribed in a manner that overlooks its difficulties, nor should the moral and ethical burdens of remembering be discounted.”⁵⁴ Forgetting can in some ways be productive, but it certainly is not the ultimate solution for reconciling past narratives and memories with their re-imaginings. This attention to silences and absences as indicative of some sort of signifying remainder provides a productive space for the defining of traumatic memory.

⁵² Whitehead, Anne. *Memory*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 13.

⁵³ Whitehead, *Memory*, 121.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, *Memory*, 122.

For Austerlitz, traumatic memory seems to be very much within the experience of the everyday. This brings to the fore the question of whether the contours of the routine serve as a natural place for the delineation of the unspeakable? It is after all in the remains of his life that he looks for clues to fill in the absences. He feels that he is living in the “aftermath” of his own life, excavating it for clues as to what happened. It is through his browsing of libraries, cafés, streets, and other less than obvious sites of the recent past’s decay that he inquires for meaning and memory. de Certeau comments on this combing of the ordinary social landscape, as buildings, ruins and the like “function as history, which consists in opening a certain depth within the present, but they no longer have the contents that tame the strangeness of the past with meaning.”⁵⁵ Further, it seems that the things Austerlitz is driven to recover are the things that he is least able to bear:

I saw balance sheets, registers of the dead, lists of every imaginable kind, and endless rows of numbers and figures, which must have served to reassure the administrators that nothing ever escaped their notice... I understood it all now, yet I did not understand it, for every detail that was revealed to me as I went through the museum from room to room and back again, ignorant as I feared I had been through my own fault, far exceeding my comprehension.⁵⁶

It is in the texture of the everyday that the details of trauma can be made in some way perceptible to others. These lists, registers, and numbers become far more telling in their capacity to in some way document extreme human experience, although they are used for the purposes of rationalizing and quantifying experience. As Sebald suggests in his wording, if it could be easily documented, it could never escape the realm of comprehensibility and remain in the category of “milieu.” It is through the “details” being

⁵⁵ de Certeau, Michel; Luce Giard; and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2*. Trans. Timothy J. Tomasik. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 135.

⁵⁶ Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*, 199.

revealed that information may far exceed comprehension. This goal of recovery functions both in memory, and the more tangible everyday. The representation of unspeakable experiences can be placed in a realm in which all of us function, but may not allocate appropriate attention. It is through Sebald's addressing of traumatic memory in the everyday that power is given to the potentialities of imaginative writing about the everyday as a point of access. The world to which most people can relate can be the location of an engagement with an experience that was beforehand perhaps beyond the realm of understandable language.

Ultimately, Sebald's text provides a place to explore the latitudes allowed by the fictional genre to investigate extreme human experiences and memory. It poses the question of whether writing about memory necessarily displaces or destroys reality—replacing what actually happened with what one wishes or is able to remember of it. We are given the raw materials of experience, but are the editors of our own cognitive narratives. There are memories of crisis that defy this logic, and compulsively and involuntarily re-appear, but I ultimately argue that beyond those extenuating circumstances, we are both subject to and in creative control of the contours of our memories. As if by revisiting the memory, there are necessarily revisions of it in some capacity. Memory, much like the writing of literature, becomes a creative force, allowing for visions and revisions of our own stories—showing that we are both subject to and control how they are communicated. Language functions much like how memory functions in that it has the potential to displace meaning and presence. Further, it is by contrasting imaginative literature with the seemingly objective truth of experience that the complications of memory become clear. As per Kochhar-Lindgren, literature's

“paradoxical essence is to *pose the question* of the truth of events in the act of writing without claiming the capacity to adequately respond to the question.”⁵⁷ In the same way, memory functions as a creative force in which events are shaped and repeated. Memory is a creative force in and of itself. In the same way, literary and fictional modes of narrative come to be of use for engagement in that they always leave room for another (re)writing to occur. It necessarily renders us suspended about the status of the “real” but nonetheless more able to engage with what we take to be “real.”

Shoah survivor and author Charlotte Delbo demonstrates this capacity of memory in describing that she does not live *after* Auschwitz, but “next to it.”⁵⁸ Victoria Stewart draws attention to Delbo’s avoidance of describing the “ossification” of memory of the past in her writing, in favor of a constantly “changing relationship” to her memories of her Auschwitz self.⁵⁹ It is through writing and the re-imagining of memory that the necessary attention is drawn to silences and seemingly empty space in narratives. Literature might draw attention to the artifice of the functioning of memory, but it is paradoxically that we acknowledge the uncertainty and constantly changing nature of memory that we can engage ourselves with the reality of how memory functions. Memory functions in many ways alongside imaginative writing in that both allow for a displacement of meaning through visions and revisions of the past. Literature can be useful in this manner in that it allows for a contemplation of the frustrations that witnesses to trauma experience in attempting to anchor their testimony into coherence. It

⁵⁷ Kochhar-Lindgren, “Charcoal,” 376.

⁵⁸ Delbo, Charlotte. Trans. Rosette Lamont. *Days and Memories*. Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1990. 2.

⁵⁹ Stewart, Victoria. *Women’s Autobiography: War and Trauma*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 118.

is through these kinds of engagement with texts and aspects of the everyday that the reader gains access to the concerns about the floating status of the “real.” Ostensibly “objective” modes of representation are called into question in that meaning can be prescribed and reassigned on the basis of memory, and other shifting forces. In exploring the latitudes offered by imaginative writing to address extreme human experiences, reality and meaning become complicated in the possibilities of the creative powers of memory. Memory may fall short in the hope for strict objectivity or a clear, unchanging basis of meaning, but Sebald’s text allows for the exploration of how memory’s functioning is complicated in much the same way in which imaginative writing is in its addressing of real or historical events.

CHAPTER THREE

The Pleating of Time: empathic reading and redemptive memory in Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*

In narratives that attempt to give expression to elusive forms of undigested, unhoused experiences of trauma, poetic language is positioned as an ambiguous tool for coherence. Poetic language is supersaturated with expressiveness beyond simply the content and formal definitions of words, and can be used in order to mimic the fragmentary nature of memory that is otherwise difficult to communicate. As such, poetic language is well suited to the configurations of narratives of extreme human experiences. It is rather difficult to address the finer points of what makes a narrative of trauma or crisis particularly compelling without flattening the ideological contours of the text. Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* serves as a quintessential example in attempting to reconcile the expressiveness of poetic language with the fragmentary nature of narratives of traumatic memory. The richness of ambiguity in poetic language's usage somehow vibrates above and over mere definitions, syntax, and semantics. The plot of the novel is necessary as a vehicle, but is absolutely not the core of significance in the subject matter of the text. The poetic preoccupations of the text grate against the traumatic narrative and bleeds into a layering of ideas surrounding memory, language, remembering, and forgetting—a gestalt that far exceeds the sum of its parts. It is in this way that the intricate poetics and narration of Michaels's text is not only felt viscerally, but functions evocatively for pleas for commemoration, and lends itself to the affirmation of the capacity of language for proffering empathy.

The story that *Fugitive Pieces* tells is rather easy to turn into a summary, but fashions itself as more of a novel of multi-layered ideas surrounding memory, loss, and the healing of large emotional wounds. In order to ground my argument that despite an uncomplicated plot, Michaels's text is exceedingly complex in its telling, I would like to offer a brief summary of the novel. The foundation of the plot will allow for a more finessed dissection of the poetic language and technique in providing a baseline understanding of the trajectory of Michaels's narrative. The first two parts of the novel are narrated by a poet, Jakob Beer; and the third part is narrated by Ben, the child of concentration camp survivors. Through a prefatory note, the reader knows that Jakob has recently been killed in a car accident, but just before his death, he had begun to write his memoirs. It is to be assumed that the first two parts narrated by Jakob are what he has written. They are a first-person account of how as a young boy in Poland, he is concealed behind a cupboard door while the Nazis come for his family—his parents are killed immediately, and his older sister Bella is taken away. He never sees their fate, but is only privy to the sounds and his own imaginings of what could have happened to Bella. Jakob hides himself in nearby bogs and forests, where he is found by a Greek archeologist, Athos, who is excavating the ancient Polish city of Biskupin. Athos hides this mud-covered little boy from the German guards, and manages to smuggle him back to his home on the German-occupied Greek island of Zakynthos. Athos keeps Jakob hidden there until the end of the war. During his time in hiding, Athos shares his passion for geology, poetry, and language with Jakob—aiming to soothe some of Jakob's pain, but not to encourage a forgetting of his past. After the war, Athos takes a teaching post at a university in Toronto, offering Jakob a new language to learn and adopt. Jakob attends

the university, where he meets and becomes dear friends with Maurice Salman. Upon Athos's death, Jakob finds and prepares Athos's notes on the Nazi falsification of history into a book, which he titles *Bearing False Witness*. Jakob has a brief, but unsuccessful marriage, and returns to the Greek island Idhra to live in Athos's family home, where he spends his time translating Holocaust memoirs and writing poetry. Jakob is still in touch with Maurice and his family, and on a visit to Toronto, he meets Michaela. The two marry and return to Idhra, but shortly after, the couple is killed in a car accident. At this point, the narrative is picked up by Ben, a friend of Maurice. Ben's narrative is addressed to Jakob, whose memoirs and journal he is attempting to find after Jakob's death. Ben has grown up in a shadowy specter of the Shoah, a child of concentration camp survivors who still live in a compulsive, residual fear. His wife Naomi seems to have a more connected relationship with his parents and their memories, which Ben increasingly resents. After his parents have both died, Ben comes across a family secret that Naomi is already aware of, and his resentment reaches a point. Ben admires Jakob's poetry and becomes somewhat obsessed with his story. At Maurice's suggestion, he travels to Greece to find Jakob's journals, allowing for a trial separation of sorts with Naomi. In Jakob's poetry, Ben finds connection to his own experience, and decides to return to his wife.

The aforementioned narrative plot that can be summed up in the space of about a page, but this has to be collected and pieced together by the reader—inferred from Jakob's fragmented, heavily image-based memories. The themes and ideas that inhabit the shape of the plot breathe such a sense of painful responsibility and inquisitiveness that even an analysis of the plot is wholly insufficient. The real artfulness of the text and

access for engagement are the aesthetic and poetic methods Michaels utilizes in her staging of the narrative. The plot reveals by outline, by circling around a negative space. The summary of the plot is not the easy take-away message for the reader—the story is clear, but the narration and telling of the story are not. As such, it is necessary to know the landscape of a text before attempting to impose some kind of order or shape over that which is ultimately deserving of attention. The narrative voice works of several levels—there is of course the telling of the past in a past tense, the reliving of memory in a reluctant but knowing present tense, and a tense of the conditional unknown—of numerous possibilities of the unseen but assumed. The majority of Jakob’s narration is done in the past tense, in which he pieces together events from his childhood, and eventually takes the form of the present tense, in the summer of 1992, indicating that he is writing his memoirs at Athos’s family home in Idhra, “where I now sit and write this, these many years later,” with the intention to “set down the past in the cramped space of a prayer.”⁶⁰ Jakob’s memoir spans his whole life, but is somewhat unusual in what is chosen what time periods to be explored at length. For example, his first marriage spans only a few pages, but his experience of learning English is allotted far more ink. For that matter, the piecemeal recollections do not reflect the incomplete comprehension expected of childhood memory. The style of narration in the Jakob section of the text is somewhat opaque, indirect, and fragmented and it seems that he is telling the story for his benefit rather than the reader’s. His is a narrative voice that provides the events Jakob is subject to, but never experiences directly. The narration is suspended in a sense of the conditional—of imagined and re-imagined potential histories and events. This style of

⁶⁰ Michaels, Anne. *Fugitive Pieces*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2009. 155, 191.

narration provides the events the narrator has not seen, but nonetheless obsesses him—not necessarily problematizing, but adding complexity to his position as witness to his own experience. Jakob disperses small splinters of knowledge about the historical context that destroyed his family in his narrative, stating that “the facts of the war began to reach us.”⁶¹ These events also slip themselves into the narration as if they are enactments. They are never seen, but rendered in the present tense as if the narrator is present and witness to these events directly. These enactments are never worded as possibilities, but stated in the present tense as potentialities that carry the validity and weight of fact. These potentialities make their intrusive presence known in much the way that traumatic memories impose themselves in an individual and cultural consciousness.

The use of the present tense becomes all the more loaded when considering Cathy Caruth’s insights into the way trauma repeats, intrudes, and repeats again. For Caruth, trauma is experienced as an unexpected and initially unassimilated event, the full force of comprehension impossible in the original moment. Caruth locates the “truth of trauma [as] delayed or belated in that it cannot be linked exclusively to what is known, to an immediate, verifiable and empirical reality.”⁶² Trauma, in this formulation, is manifested as a wound to the mind, rather than the corporeal—what Caruth locates as a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world.”⁶³ The single event cannot be taken in, processed, or understood at once, and therefore lodges itself into the contours of the unconscious. The traumatic event is consequently experienced and re-experienced by

⁶¹ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 92.

⁶² Williams, Merle and Stefan Polantinsky. “Writing at its Limits: Trauma Theory in Relation to Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*,” *English Studies in Africa* 52.1: 1-14. 1-2.

⁶³ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 4.

“impos[ing] itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor,” and as such “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way that it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”⁶⁴ It is in this way that this persistent psychic return of the trauma “addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.”⁶⁵ This reality or truth can, in turn, only be linked to what is known of the traumatic experience, and can reveal itself in fragments, as it is not fully comprehended. This experience of crisis that is not completely assimilated poses a theoretical challenge when it comes to capturing the scope of an experience since it is “marked not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands out witness.”⁶⁶ To address what exactly it is in trauma that refuses a simple comprehension, Caruth looks to Freud, in the traumatic event’s shock and unexpectedness. The crisis “does not simply represent the violence...but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility.”⁶⁷ The narrative of a crisis, in this way, reflects both the truths of the occurrence, but also, more notably, how the violence of the crisis has not yet been fully comprehended. Caruth offers the explanation that the repeated tellings of trauma “as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force,” function to attest “to its endless impact on a life.”⁶⁸ The experience of trauma is one that laments a violent reality, but also the agony of continuing to live beyond it. This

⁶⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

⁶⁵ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

⁶⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

⁶⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 6.

⁶⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

double-telling of the stories surrounding a traumatic event reflect an “oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”⁶⁹ These two irreconcilable crises vex, but complicate a holistic and cohesive telling of an event of trauma, since “it does not serve merely as a memorial record of the past, but also ‘registers the *force of an experience*’ that remains ‘unclaimed’ or un-owned, deracinated from authoritative schemes of prior knowledge.”⁷⁰ Jakob laments this paradoxical nature of survival in writing, “to survive was to escape fate. But if you escape your fate, whose life do you then step into?”⁷¹ To tell of past trauma is somehow disconnected, and reflects the difficulty in moving beyond the experience of trauma when it is not yet completely known. The use of the present tense in Jakob’s narration of his past trauma exposes this struggle with the comprehension of the experience, as well as reflecting the way in which the force of the crisis re-asserts itself to the survivor through re-imaginings and nightmares.

In one such instance of these re-imaginings, Jakob communicates the systematic slaughter of the ghettos of Crete through an enactment. When a young Jakob overhears a discussion between Ioannis and Athos on the decimation of the Jews of Crete by the Germans, the event is seemingly enacted directly: “As he spoke, the room filled with shouts. The water rose around us, bullets tearing the surface for those who took too long to drown. Then the peaceful blue sheen of the Aegean slipped shut again.”⁷² Although the narrator has not experienced these events, they are enacted as if this is the case—

⁶⁹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

⁷⁰ Williams, “Writing at its Limits,” 2.

⁷¹ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 48.

⁷² Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 43.

narration inserting what has not been experienced. This is the case over the repeated, obsessive imaginings of the possible fate of Jakob's sister, Bella. Over the years, Athos and Jakob try and fail to recover some clue as to what happened after she was taken from the family home. But her end can only be imagined compulsively in a style similar to the enactments of the fate of the Jews of Crete, in visions fueled by the data of history. Bella's unknown fate resounds itself in a way that Susan Gubar argues "links Jacob's [sic] experience to the very crux of trauma, a response to an unexpectedly wounding event that cannot be grasped at the moment of its occurrence and thus returns."⁷³ These compulsive enactments of Bella's potentialities appear embodied in Jakob's narration and work to dislodge some of the power of the discourse of 'fact,' suggesting that these imaginings of the incomprehensible are paradoxically just as valid when the grounding for fact is abjectly outside the realm of communication. Jakob's state of witness and survivor is presented in a retrospective sense, only later beginning to understand what exactly he has survived. He is never even physically witness the Nazi occupation of Greece, as he is hidden in a rather remote location in Athos's home. The reader of his narration is inherently asked to acknowledge and accept that the repeated obsessive imaginings always pull backward in a sense. These re-imaginings compulsively re-appear and mitigate the flow of the plot and progress of the narrative, thereby bringing the reader into the experience of a memory's unwanted but involuntary intrusions. The process of narration in this way mirrors the influence of the past at large—in that it returns in flashbacks or imagined occurrences. Such is reflected in Ben's later narration

⁷³ Gubar, Susan. "Empathic Identification in Anne Michaels's Fugitive Pieces: Masculinity and Poetry after Auschwitz," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.1(Autumn 2002), 249-276. 255.

as well. Ben, in his position of a second-generation witness to the Shoah, laments that in his family has “no energy of narrative...not even the fervor of an elegy.”⁷⁴ The narrative strategy of the intrusions of past memory mitigating the progress of the plot mimics the influence of the past and of traumatic memory in that they are re-experienced and embedded in a present tense, calling for attention and coherence. I suggest Michaels’s embedding of trauma in this lyrical present tense throughout mimics this experience of bringing the reader beyond the realm of *describing* trauma into actualizing its residual effect. In Toronto, years after the murder of his family, Jakob is returning from lunch in town with Athos when he is again seized with recollection. He writes,

I stood on the darkening sidewalk and transformed the smell of car wax and mown lawns into curing leather and salted fish...the afternoon heat was thick with burning flesh. I saw the smoke rising in whorls into the dark sky. Ambushed, memory cracking open. The bitter residue flying up into my face like ash.⁷⁵

The experience of crisis asserts itself long after the original trauma occurred, and is differentiated from reflecting upon the experience in that it is integrated into events that are happening to the narrator in the present. This experience of “memory cracking open,” shows the involuntary nature of which crises are revisited in a perpetual present tense. They are re-lived and recycled in an attempting to bring to coherence a holistic sense of the experience. There is a sense in which one is never free from shards of memory emerging and situating themselves in a perfect present. This narrative strategy invites the reader to question how an awareness of the use of narrative elements may bring a more engaged sense of coherence to even the level of second-generational or cultural memory. The reader is subject to the kind of tension between the present, the inescapable past and

⁷⁴ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 204.

⁷⁵ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 105.

haunting conditional potentialities that is reflected in traumatic testimony and memory. It is within these contours of imagined potentialities that Michaels's text provides a particularly lush point of access into traumatic memory. The reader, by very virtue of engagement with the text, is put in a position for empathy with the narrator through this strained presence of imaginings and uncertainty of fact. But further, and more importantly, this engagement points to the value of empathic reading and a redemptive view of language's complex and ambiguous functioning in its task of representation.

It would seem par for the course to discuss Theodor Adorno's well-worn arraignment against poetry, as ostensibly every article surrounding Auschwitz or the Shoah cites it as a crucial intersection between the events of the Shoah and their representation in literature and art. Adorno's denouncement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"⁷⁶ carries the weight of numerous interpretations and misappropriations, but generally appears to reject any aestheticization of the Shoah as a means for representation and subsequent consolation. However, this is dependent on what Adorno refers to by the term "poetry." In his text, Adorno refers to poetry as a mass-produced cultural art form du jour. His denouncement centers on a call for a different kind of engagement with cultural criticism, rather than rejection of poetry as an artistic mode of representation. These mass-produced social art forms are ineffective at provoking engagement and thought, and through his Hegelian dialectical approach, Adorno situates culture as fully amalgamated with society's economic agenda. As such, cultural criticism reflects the concerns of the system, and in doing so inherently validates the system. He writes that because of the "existence of cultural criticism, no matter what

⁷⁶ Adorno, Theodor. *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*. Trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981. 34.

its content, depends on the economic system, it is involved in the fate of the system.”⁷⁷

He rejects this notion of cultural criticism further, writing that “what makes the content of cultural criticism inappropriate is not so much lack of respect for that which is criticized as the dazzled and arrogant recognition which criticism surreptitiously confers on culture.”⁷⁸ It is not the subject matter that makes the representations and critiques of Auschwitz testimonies problematic; rather, it is the presumptuousness of the form of cultural criticism. Adorno wants to dislodge the smug, easy conclusions provided by cultural critics in favor of something that works to unsettle and provide a space for a more self-reflexive, engaged examination. His vision for poetry and cultural criticism after Auschwitz avoids the temptations of “forget[ting] the unutterable, instead of striving, however impotently, so that man may be spared,” with the ideal of evoking “the advanced state of the human spirit.”⁷⁹ In this regard, Adorno is aware of the ambiguous nature of language, but does not decry the use of literature as a means to represent the unutterable. Literature and high literary language is positioned at the borderlands of knowing and not knowing, which both mimic the experience of and is suitable for understanding the form of traumatic memory. His intention is that the experiences of an unutterable nature are not forgotten. Méira Cook positions Adorno’s dictum as a double-gestured warning and summons to the writer. She highlights the ethical elements in imaginative writing, indicating that his pronouncement is a:

stern warning that in the wake of the Holocaust it must find new ways to represent the elisions and failures of grief when it is used as a system of discourse. The problem of writing *after* is also the problem of how to

⁷⁷ Adorno, *Prisms*, 25.

⁷⁸ Adorno, *Prisms*, 19.

⁷⁹ Adorno, *Prisms*, 19, 25.

represent the impossible event faithfully without avoiding a betrayal of both history and of the victim.⁸⁰

Cook points to the problem as fundamentally one of representation. What comes into question in her problematizing of faithful representation is whether language can handle the ethical heavy-lifting required in addressing “the impossible event” without inattention or a betrayal to the victim. Engaging with the question of whether literature can and should bear witness is central to Adorno’s dilemma, but I would prefer to side-step the dialogue surrounding the ethical concerns of verisimilitude to the experience of the victim and survivor. Literature is inherently a complex construction, consisting of layers of art and artifice. The issue of the dubious ethical ground that fiction enters into when attempting to represent historical events goes without saying and is integrally presumptuous. My aim is to engage literature as a form, and I would like to focus my attention upon how Michaels takes up Adorno’s imperative and reflects some of his concerns.

Michaels addresses some of the imagery that Adorno would directly consider “unutterable,” but takes a somewhat apologetic tone in attempting to represent such an image through language. In a passage describing the image of twisted, newly deceased bodies upon the opening of the doors to a gas chamber in a concentration camp, the narrative voice pleads for forgiveness from the victims. Realizing the danger of attempting to bring to coherence the obscenity of the unimaginable, the narrative voice states, “Forgive this blasphemy, of choosing philosophy over the brutalism of fact.”⁸¹ Michaels’s language points to the problematics of choosing to represent unimaginably

⁸⁰ Cook, Méira. “At the Membrane of Language and Silence: Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*,” *Canadian Literature* 164(2000): 12-33. 12.

⁸¹ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 168.

grotesque and indescribable human actions—choosing the philosophy of affect over the silent respect that historical fact imparts. She chooses to give voice to something that should perhaps remain in a registered and respected silence, but instead consciously chooses the presumptuousness of imagination. This mistrust and self-consciousness surrounding the “blasphemy” of imagination and language holds the responsibility that despite this insufficiency of language, attempts must be made if any sense of recovery or reclamation is to be achieved. This line of thought continues with the narrative voice reluctantly attempting to communicate the unspeakable, and to attempt to conjure the thoughts of the brutalized. The narrative voice states, “It is impossible to imagine,” but indicates that the effort to represent is also an effort at reclamation and restoration:

At that moment of utmost degradation, in that twisted reef, is the most obscene testament of grace. For can anyone tell with absolute certainty the difference between the sounds of those who are in despair and the sounds of those who want desperately to believe? The moment when our faith in man is forced to change, anatomically--mercilessly--into faith.⁸²

Michaels’s statement positions certainty and faith in tension with each other in such a way that Adorno’s call for a self-reflexive examination is answered—but limited. Michaels engages with the ethical perils in attempting not only to *imagine*, but to vocalize and reflect philosophically upon these unspeakable experiences. In drawing attention to the forced engagement with these unanswerable questions of “can anyone tell,” the redemption is in faith. The facts of the trauma are inherently outside the constraints of language, but the attempt at poetics and representation is in the name of something preferable to silence. While silence can still be articulate, it in some way elevates the atrocities of

⁸² Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 168.

genocide to an almost religious fetishism. Paul Celan, quoted in Felstiner, cautions against silence despite the corruptions of language, writing, “within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language...but it had to pass through its own answerless, pass through a frightful falling mute.”⁸³ Silence must be respected, but language must retrieve meaning and faith from impossibility. Engaging with these hypothetical representations is more productive than silence surrounding the matter. As a poet, Michaels cannot escape language as her medium in order to achieve this, but her caution and care are present in her suspicion of language. Perhaps Michaels’s credence to Adorno’s sentiment takes the form of her highly self-conscious and qualified use of language throughout the text. Michaels’s solution to Adorno’s mistrust of artistic cultural criticism is to bring traumatic narratives to the realm of poetic techniques and language. Cook cautions “language is potent only insofar as it escapes the boundaries of received meaning,”⁸⁴ and as such, poetic techniques open the doors of perception to the effective and redemptive use of language. The somewhat more lavish possibilities of poetic language allow for more liberties than testimonial prose, and may work to evade the scope of concern set forth in Adorno’s dictum. Michaels accepts that language is insufficient, but that the poet must self-reflexively turn back to it in order to express what they desire. I do not view Michaels’s text necessarily as a defense of the poetic form, but rather as a voice echoing Adorno—cautioning for self-reflexive engagement and respect.

⁸³ Felstiner, John. “Translating Celan’s Last Poem.” *American Poetry Review* (1982): 20-45. 23.

⁸⁴ Cook, 28.

The text is heavily entrenched in a mistrust of language, as I would like to explore, but assures us that such a leap of faith is not wasted.

Michaels's demand of a leap of faith when it comes to entrusting representation to the capacities of language is undoubtedly the result of a complex relationship of a poet to her tools. The poet must choose language, despite its obvious inadequacies, in lieu of the safety of silence. In the essay, "Cleopatra's Love," Michaels meditates on her approach to language, lamenting the poet's addressing the tension between silence and the capacity of words. She resigns herself to the "inevitable failure of language,"⁸⁵ to fully describe human experience, that instead it simply outlines the experience without gaining access to it directly. She writes of this tension as "a peculiar courtship...the inevitable failure of language haunts integrity. Over the years I turn away continually, defer to the silence of experience...we like to think language is nothing without us, but in the end, it's we who beg it back."⁸⁶ Language takes the form of a symbiotic yet degenerative relationship. Michaels's comment that language haunts integrity indicates the strong feelings of suspicion and resentment harbored against language, but a reluctant dependence on the part of the poet. The poet inevitably begs language back because of the need for a medium. I argue that the position of the poet mirrors that of a witness in that the need to profess outstrips the acknowledged inadequacies of testimony's communication. Why do words simply fall short for a poet in this relationship of dependence? Michaels suggests that the unease is based in the idea that "language abandons experience every time," and that the paradoxical power of words "is that it makes our ignorance more precise."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Michaels, Anne. "Cleopatra's Love," 14.

⁸⁶ Michaels, Anne. "Cleopatra's Love," 14.

⁸⁷ Michaels, Anne. "Cleopatra's Love," 14.

Words, the very vehicle for the illumination of knowledge, function to expose our ignorance and subsequent impotence. This is further echoed in her poem, “What the Light Teaches.” She writes:

We can only reveal by outline,
by circling absence.
But that’s why language
can remember truth when it’s not spoken.⁸⁸

She expresses that words can only “reveal by outline,” and cannot describe directly. The use of language can try and gain access to the experience, but cannot ensnare it. In our very attempt at representation of truth, we are exposed as well-meaning failures—language can “remember truth,” but not gain access to it. With language, the poet can only outline the experience that they are not able to describe. In referring to this ineffectual relationship between words and their revealing of ineptitude, Michaels defends language with what she calls a “futile hope.” This notion of futile hope functions in “attempting to represent experience, we’ll capture what’s there, even if it’s hidden that we’ll somehow render the invisible visible, like the painter who learns the geology of a landscape before he attempts to paint it.”⁸⁹ Michaels asserts that the poet’s unease with language must be ultimately reconciled as flawed, but not failed. Despite that words can only construct an outline around the perimeter of experience, that experience is still *within* language. Language signals its own intention, and can swell around its object, but only draw attention to it from the outside. The redemption of the futile hope is that although it cannot directly describe experience, it can gesture at it in the hope that an engagement with the outline can foster an understanding of its content.

⁸⁸ Michaels, Anne. *Poems*, 125.

⁸⁹ Michaels, Anne. “Cleopatra’s Love,” 15.

In addition to the shortcomings of direct description, a certain amount of mistrust is healthy on the part of the poet in that language is an ambiguous tool. Language is a large part of the way in which culture and memory are communicated, and as such Michaels writes that language actively “remembers.” Language as a vessel or receptacle for memory holds particular emotive powers when invoked. For example, seemingly neutral and innocuous nouns like “oven,” “showers,” or “number” become loaded with historical connotation. Neutral on their own, but when juxtaposed, these terms become clear signifiers of memory and history. Memory and history can become embedded within language, imposing themselves at will. As such, language can be shaped and molded to fit the desires or motives, which is potentially dangerous. Michaels cautions that,

if language can be enriched, it can also be poisoned: if language is a repository of memory, it is also a repository of history. The simple absorption of events without ethical consideration can be devastating. The most obvious example is the euphemism: the exploding bomb referred to as ‘energy release,’ the dangerous breakdown of equipment that ‘fails to meet functioning criteria as per design requirements.’ At its most extreme, this abuse of language is perpetuated precisely in order to render the immoral, moral. As we well know, the fact is not always the truth. While metaphor uses ‘fabrication’ to get at a truth, euphemism uses fact in order to mislead.⁹⁰

The threat of distortion is at the heart of a mistrust of language. Language may absorb some historical events and re-frame them into something that masquerades as truth. Descriptions of vile realities may be constructed to appear more palatable, rendering the immoral, moral—as mentioned. Civilians become “non-enemy combatants,” or a genocide becomes an “ethnic cleansing” — these distortions are extremely dangerous in that they are then propagated in the writing of memory, and the telling and retelling of

⁹⁰ Michaels, Anne. “Cleopatra’s Love,” 15.

history. These distorted terms are absorbed into language for (mis)use, posing as gestures to historical truths. It is these distortions of language being communicated as historical truths that Michaels takes up in *Fugitive Pieces*. The character Athos begins writing a book concerning the Nazi falsification of history, and how these distortions are shielded within a historical discursive regime of “fact.” In addition to euphemism, Jakob addresses how the Nazi use of metaphor sanitized and attempted to give reason to genocide. Jakob writes that Nazi policy towards the Jews was “beyond racism,” as Jews were not held to be human. That what they used was,

an old trick of language, often used in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as ‘figuren,’ ‘stücke’- ‘dolls,’ ‘wood,’ ‘merchandise,’ ‘rags.’ Humans were not being gassed, only ‘figuren,’ so ethics weren’t being violated. No one could be faulted for burning debris, for burning rags and clutter in the dirty basement of society. In fact, they’re a fire hazard! What choice but to burn them before they harm you... So the extermination of Jews was not a case of obeying one set of moral imperatives over another, but rather the case of the larger imperative satisfying any difficulties.⁹¹

Such drastic repositioning of reference via “an old trick” of language is testament to the amount of sway that language holds in shaping moral imperatives. Not only must we mistrust language in order for it to succeed, we must mistrust it for its huge capacity to carry the connotations of truth. By use of metaphor, the German language reduced an entire segment of humanity to non-beings. In this way, Jakob remarks that in the “turning [of] humans into objects...the German language annihilated metaphor.” Further, this functions as “the step from language/formula to fact: denotation to detonation.”⁹²

Meaning can be invented and imposed upon language independent of truth in a discourse

⁹¹ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 165.

⁹² Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 143.

of “fact.” Language must hold the weight of memory in its very usage, drawing the expression to its historical grounding—whether invented or otherwise.

What is to be said of connotation in the translation among languages? Do the “old tricks” of language migrate across multiple tongues, or can lines in the sand be drawn when prescribing meaning or connotation to a word? To that extent, when addressing culturally embedded narratives, is it possible for their profundity and force to be effectively realized and translated? Does memory travel among different languages; and if not, can one escape traumatic memory through a change of tongue? Such is the concern carried by Jakob upon his immigration to Toronto and his subsequent learning of English. Initially, Jakob sees English as an opportunity for freedom from the traumatic memory attached to his mother tongue, writing that “there’s a heavy black outline around things separated from their names.” In his learning, he attempts to “bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words,” and imagines the learning of a new language as a potential for freedom: “the numb tongue attaches itself, orphan, to any sound it can: it sticks, tongue to cold metal. Then, finally, many years later, tears painfully free.”⁹³ Jakob sees an opportunity for freedom from his past in adopting a new tongue for reasons of escaping connotation. When he begins to recall the events of his past, he sees the potential for the freedom from the trappings of memory in language. He states, “when I began to write down the events of my childhood in a language foreign to their happening, it was a revelation. English could protect me; an alphabet without memory.”⁹⁴ These hopes are frustrated when his new tongue does not displace the memories of the past. He busies himself learning facts and usage during his waking; but remarks, “At night, my

⁹³ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 95.

⁹⁴ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 101.

mother, my father, Bella, Mones, simply rose, shook the earth from their clothes and waited.”⁹⁵ He realizes that he cannot escape memory in language through a change in tongue. In this discovery, he approaches language and ‘naming’ from a redemptive outlook. He takes the power of metaphor and the imbuing meaning upon language, and focuses it upon the expressive power of poetry and other imaginative writing:

My life could not be stored in any language but only in silence; the moment I looked into the room and took in only what was visible, not vanished... If I could isolate that space, that damaged chromosome in words, in an image, then perhaps one could restore order by naming. Otherwise history is only a tangle of wires. So in poems I returned to Biskupin, to the house on Zakynthos, to the forest, to the river, to the burst door, to the minutes in the wall. English was a sonar, a microscope, through which I listened and observed, waiting to capture elusive meanings buried in facts. I wanted a line in a poem to be the hollow ney of the dervish orchestra whose plaintive wail is a call to God.⁹⁶

Jakob sees truth only in the form of silence, but simultaneously sees potential for expression in the spaces held by this silence. He seeks to pursue the spaces of absence and saturate them with naming, or language, of his own control. He attempts to reclaim experience through words. He responds to absence with creation. The work that is of his creation is of the fragmented nature by design: “every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language.”⁹⁷ Michaels cautions that one must mistrust language in order for it to ultimately succeed, and demonstrates this through Jakob’s recognition of silence as the only way to define his truths. However, silence does not function as a solution, and Jakob instead chooses the creation of fragmented language as a means for the kind of productive, self-reflexive examination of self and culture that Adorno puts forth. Susan Gubar also endorses the restorative capacity of fragmented

⁹⁵ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 93.

⁹⁶ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 111-2.

⁹⁷ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 111.

language, in that these pieces of language, “provide Jakob moments of escape, self-protective concealment, and excavation.” Further, Jakob’s approach of creation in lieu of absence, “informs Michaels’s meditations on the ethical functions served by literature, which can prompt the imagination to enlarge consciousness of where the parameters of self reside.”⁹⁸ Gubar cites the larger ethical imperative of a reader’s engagement with such language, and this expanded consciousness and sense of self is something to which I would like to draw attention. Translation functions not to silence, to disguise, or even to rename memories, but to show that some degree the meaning can be accessed, even when the memory only returns in fragments, outside the realm of its occurrence. Michaels’s inclusion of a second-generation narrator, Ben, as well as the student/teacher relationship between Athos and Jakob point to both the importance of communicating knowledge and memory to future generations, and others via texts and other forms of art.

Jakob’s experiences are fragments to him—outside shards of experience, and in order to create a holistic sense of experience, and he arranges these fragments as well as absences or negative experiences via language. This bringing together of the visible and invisible, present and absent ultimately constitutes the quintessential role of poetics and makes them invaluable to the propagation of experience to posterity and others through empathy. Gubar differentiates the reader feeling sympathy for and empathy with the subjects of a narrative in this text through Michaels’s choices of gender. Michaels differentiates herself from main characters by gender, and this works to acknowledge herself as an outside observer of trauma from the Jakob’s state of witness and victimhood. In this way, she situates herself as imagining the suffering of others. Gubar

⁹⁸ Gubar, “Empathic Identification,” 258.

writes that, “the disjunction between [Michaels] as a woman writer and her masculine subjects dramatizes Michaels’s efforts to replace the concept of sympathy, which supposes affinity among people, with the mechanisms of empathy, with its recognition of disparity.”⁹⁹ Borrowing upon Dominick LaCapra’s concept of “empathic unsettlement” and Martha Nussbaum’s concept of “empathic identification,” it is the reader’s engagement through language and reading that engenders empathy with a traumatized consciousness. Nussbaum’s concept of “empathic identification” serves to contrast the feelings of pity for a character with the imagining of a kind of co-suffering with the character. Pity is characterized by the awareness that oneself is distinctly disconnected from the sufferer, “it is for another, and not oneself, that one feels.” Empathy fosters an engagement with the sufferer in that “if one really had the experience of feeling the pain in one’s own body, then one would precisely have failed to comprehend the pain of another as other.”¹⁰⁰ Empathic identification involves imagining the pain of the sufferer as one’s own, thereby removing a space of separation between the self and the other. This fosters a greater ability to engage with the text, while still recognizing one’s own alterity. LaCapra’s delineates “empathic unsettlement” in a similar manner, as a condition that “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.”¹⁰¹ It is through empathic identification and unsettlement that the redemptive power of poetry and language becomes possible. I wish to return to Adorno for a

⁹⁹ Gubar, “Empathic Identification,” 253.

¹⁰⁰ Nussbaum, Martha. “Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 31(1): 27-58. 35.

¹⁰¹ LaCapra, Dominick. “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Inquiry* 25.4(Summer 1999): 696-727. 699.

moment in referencing the capacity of language to evoke a sense of unsettlement. It is through this identification yet retention of alterity that Adorno's goal of a self-reflexive, engaged examination of cultural criticism is actualized. It is through an identification and "feeling with" of the characters that the reader can place themselves into the position of engaging with the ideas of a text. Neither pity nor the delusion of becoming the other facilitates this opportunity for engagement and learning. It is in the engagement with these memories of the past and trauma that these experiences can in some way be resurrected and reclaimed.

It is in this desire for an engaged readership that such focus is placed upon the virtues of reading, writing, and teacher-learner relationships. Through empathy and engagement, poetry and art effectively serve as realms of healing escapes. Focusing upon Jakob's learning under Athos's tutelage, Gubar writes that "the reading process affords the most important entrée to 'empathic unsettlement'...because reading generates an intersubjective form of being-in-relation with otherness, but without the threat of an actual, living other."¹⁰² Reading establishes a place of refuge, and fosters a sense of coherent relationship between a "here" and "there." Writing also engages with this capacity of empathy, as present in Jakob's ghost-writing and bringing to completion of Athos's book after his death. Empathy serves as a kind of witnessing by proxy, by "preserving memory as well as its poignant inability to provide adequate knowledge of or recompense for the dead."¹⁰³ This also involves a similar necessary avoidance of the proxy-witness maintaining delusions of becoming the other—it is composing both with and for the witness. There is still space for the individual subjecthood of both the witness

¹⁰² Gubar, "Empathic Identification," 258.

¹⁰³ Gubar, "Empathic Identification," 260.

and proxy-witness. This encourages feeling with and a sense of responsibility for the past, but also functions to collapse time. This collapsing of time produces a doubling of moments into an endless potential return to be experienced—and giving potential for a healing reflection to occur. Jakob refers to this as a resurrection of history, stating, “every recorded event is a brick of potential, or precedent, thrown into the future. Eventually the idea will hit someone in the back of the head. This is the duplicity of history: an idea recorded will become an idea resurrected.”¹⁰⁴ This type of empathic reading not only resurrects history, but offers an imaginative venue for its excavation in a more embodied sense. Gubar writes that the engaged, empathic mode of reading offers Jakob a way to “‘pleat time’ so as to inhabit his own ‘now and the narrative’s invisible ‘then,’ his own ‘here and the story’s mysterious ‘there,’ gaining him entrance into ‘parallel images.’”¹⁰⁵ The idea is neither to externalize nor fully assimilate the narrative of the other. The reader still maintains his or her sense of alterity from the narrator, but is able to excavate the past in a way that brings the past into full view for inspection. Further, it allows for a better view of a more lived, embodied experience of the past. Referencing this complexity of considering narratives of trauma, Williams writes that, “the aporia (or seemingly irresolvable tension) that the instance of trauma creates can never be approached in a straightforward manner.”¹⁰⁶ Caruth suggests that representations of trauma are approached and “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.”¹⁰⁷ Through this literary language, we are given access to “a literary dimension [to a

¹⁰⁴ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 161.

¹⁰⁵ Gubar, “Empathic Identification,” 259.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, “Language at its Limits,” 2.

¹⁰⁷ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.

narrative of trauma] that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes,” and “beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound.”¹⁰⁸ Through empathic readings of a literary rendering of trauma, we are less inclined towards theoretical readings and limitations. We have the potential to engage with the text and appreciate its inconsistencies, fragmentary nature, or silences as markers of authenticity. Silences and fragments are not absences of memory, but illuminating demarcations and complexity of recollection. Poetic, literary language is supersaturated with poignancy exceeding merely the content and formal definitions of words, and can be used in order to register the effect of the fragmented nature of memory that is otherwise difficult to construe. Through this mode of engaged consciousness in empathic readings, one is able to access and embrace ways of being that are potentially quite distinct and different from one’s own. Michaels refers to this state of a more fully engaged consciousness with memory via empathy as a state of “poetic knowing.”

Michaels differentiates ordinary knowledge from the epistemological mode of “poetic knowing” in that the latter is accessible through empathy, and functions to add the elements of meaning to historical memory. Poetic knowing distinguishes itself in that it may reclaim some of the space for corruption present in language, by saturating the space of memory with a sense of morality, rather than a wholly malleable space. Poetic knowing is, what I would like to argue, the result of empathic readings, and paramount to the reclamation and commemoration of the traumatic events of the past. To remember is redemptive, especially when it is approached with an enlarged sense of the limits of the

¹⁰⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.

self. As Jakob states in the novel, that “history is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers.”¹⁰⁹ History is an unattached set of registers, records of the victors and victims of the past. Memory is what is of import to be remembered and propagated to future generations, the consciousness of the individual absorbed through culture. Michaels writes that,

memory, like love, gains strength through restatement, reaffirmation; in a culture, through ritual, tradition, stories, art. Memory courts our better selves; it helps us recognize the importance of deed; we learn from pleasure just as we learn from pain. And when memory evokes consideration of what might have been or been prevented, memory becomes redemptive. As Israeli poet Yehudi Amichai wrote: “to remember is a kind of hope.”¹¹⁰

Michaels highlights that memory is strengthened by repetition, and that memory serves a redemptive function when it is engaged with in a thoughtful manner. It is in this way that the intricate poetics that foster an empathic reading function evocatively for commemoration. The nature of a narrative of trauma is that it is a brutalized ongoing realization, still making itself known. Through poetics, we are given access to an evolving history and realization, and are able to encounter the irresolvable tensions and strangeness that constitute the “ethos of being”¹¹¹ in extreme human experiences.

Memory and narrative are necessarily separate to a degree, but narration in conjunction with literary techniques can bring the force and resonance of a crisis to the fore, and mimic the residual experiences of trauma in an embodied manner. Embodied, empathic understandings are a benefit to the task of remembering, and can serve as authenticating elements with attention to faithful representations. It is living in a world after Auschwitz

¹⁰⁹ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 138.

¹¹⁰ Michaels, Anne. “Cleopatra’s Love,” 15.

¹¹¹ Williams, “Writing at the Limits,” 6.

that we need to remember—and to remember empathically. If we are to establish some kind of relationship with the devastating reality of genocide in historical modernity, and to understand how and if it is capable to emerge from such an event with the capacity for healing, faith, and hope—it is through poetic knowing.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Vigilant Memory and the Literary Imagination: Defending Empathy, Elegy, and Cultures of Commemoration in the Modern Condition

In the previous sections, I have explored the ways in which imaginative writing and poetic knowing allow for an engagement with the “real” that is not found in nonfiction testimony. The imaginative realm of representation, outside of verifiable fact, I have argued is a productive space for engaging with the essence of experiences of trauma. Paradoxically structured, imaginative renderings are characterized by creative liberties that allow for a more expressive and articulate representation than the space of empirical fact. The epistemological mode of poetic knowing that Michaels introduces—and I adopt in evoking meaning and morality from memory—functions in a larger sense of elegy and commemoration that I have yet to fully explain. But first, let us return quickly to the differentiation I have drawn between ordinary knowledge and poetic knowing, and the respective work of the latter. Ordinary knowledge or knowing is of the realm of empirical truths and regimes of fact. This is the kind of knowledge that claims jurisdiction over history, and rote rehashings of events. Poetic knowing is linked with morality, accessed through the functioning of empathy, and distinguished through the expressiveness of poetic language. Nussbaum articulates this distinction, writing that history “simply records what in fact occurred, whether or not it represents a general possibility for human lives. Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves.”¹¹² In this way, poetic knowing accessed through imaginative literature fosters an embodied engagement with subject matter, and encourages a sense of

¹¹² Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. 5.

responsibility, closing the gap between larger collective significance and personal meaning.

Poetic knowing is the meeting place of public record and private responsibility. I previously discussed how poetic knowing is fundamental to commemoration and the redemptive work of memory—especially when it comes to narratives of trauma or crisis. Through the expressiveness of poetic language, the associated disengagement from the received meaning of words, and an enlarged sense of self and responsibility through empathic identification and unsettlement, the essence of traumatic memory becomes accessible. Empathic identification and poetic knowing become a *modus operandi* of suspending self-consciousness in favor of engaging fully with an extreme human experience. It is through this kind of embodied engagement with the experience of the other that a sense of responsibility expands beyond the self. From this expanded sense of identity and responsibility, we can better take on the task of commemoration, reclamation, and regeneration in the wake of trauma. I wish to bring some of the concerns I raise in my treatments of Michaels and Sebald, and concentrate upon what literature actively invites the reader to think about and engage with. As such, in this closing chapter, I would like to focus my attention upon the larger areas of empathy, commemoration, and the licenses of narrativity therein.

Let me first turn to the concepts of empathic identification and empathic unsettlement. These concepts imply a recognition of the degree to which a literary text invites the active participation of the reader. As I've discussed previously with relation to Anne Michaels's text, it is through empathy that the reader feels with the narrator of the text, and this fosters some sense of identification and responsibility. Ultimately, writers

such as Sebald and Michaels that are working in the legacy of the Shoah have some sense of elegiac identification with the atrocity, and are working to give some shape to how it is to be remembered and commemorated. Without actually being witness to the atrocities, however, they are left with the task of imaginatively constructing narratives of crisis in a way that the force of the experience is kept intact. It is not the aim of the imaginative force of memory to create some sort of alternate reality of fantasy or wish-fulfillment—but rather a more tangible, sensory gestalt of an experience. The essence of an elusive experience is brought into greater view through poetic means, and fundamentally it is the greater experience of imaginative engagement with the text that is desired. I argue that this is best done through literary techniques and expressive poetic language, which are better able to represent the ethos of trauma. These experiences of trauma or crisis are characterized by their fragmentary nature and a dependence upon a sensory mode of remembering that lend themselves more easily to the elevated use of poetics. The truncated language and methods of juxtaposition of poetics in some capacity escape the easily received meaning of words. This ultimately allows for constructing the sense of being in an experience rather than the description of an experience itself. In having access to something of the experience of crisis, the reader may function as a kind of witness-by-proxy to the trauma. Through empathic identification, the trauma is neither externalized nor fully assimilated by the reader, which fosters for a complex relationship with and consideration of the text. In this way, empathic identification allows for a suspension of time in memory, and permits an ongoing assessment and vigil upon the past, leaving it open for engagement and contemplation.

Empathy comes to the fore in its ability to minimize the space between personal narrative and public implication through imaginative means. I would like to focus on how empathy functions beyond the literary realm, and emphasize the importance of how the representations of trauma or otherwise “obscene testament[s] of grace”¹¹³ function as a mode of public significance. Martha Nussbaum refers to the concept of the “literary imagination,” in relationship to public life and makes a similar argument that the capacities of empathy are imperative to the understanding of the other. She is not by any means suggesting the substitution of imaginatively based empathy for empirical reasoning. However, she integrates the literary imagination into a larger construct of public rationality. The concept of the literary imagination comes into play for my argument in introducing the question of the utility in the telling of stories in the face of the knowledge that hatred, oppression and genocide still need to be dealt with. These stories may give embodied meaning to memory of the past, but what does that outwardly do? I have argued that literature supplies elements of reality that empirically-based regimes of knowledge do not. Nussbaum writes that literature expresses, “a sense of life that is incompatible with the vision of the world embodied in the texts of political economy; and engagement with it forms the imagination and the desires in a manner that subverts that science’s norms of rationality.”¹¹⁴ Through Nussbaum’s construction, at first blush it seems political economy and literature are at odds with the way the world is seen through their respective frames. She argues that political economy comes under threat when the anti-economical modes of feeling and empathizing are represented and performed. The literary imagination, in this way, functions as “an essential ingredient of

¹¹³ Michaels, Anne. *Fugitive Pieces*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2009. 168.

¹¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 1.

an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own.”¹¹⁵ For Nussbaum, political economy and literature cannot be at odds with each other, in that they are both independently incomplete. She adds that a rule-governed system is needed, but one not bereft of the cognitive role of emotion. I think this conception of monolithic categories of literature and political economy is too forbidding; however, the importance of the roles of affect and empathy in literature deserve a place of importance in the public sphere. Without a demarcated space for emotion and empathy, “an ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation.”¹¹⁶ The literary imagination functions in order to cultivate motives for compassionate and just behavior in relating to others who are potentially unlike one’s self in the interest of a larger sense of solidarity. Political economy and society at large are full of occasions for refusals to imagine one another empathically or with a degree of compassion. These refusals of compassion undermine one’s ability to imagine and understand the concrete ways in which perhaps non-normative “others” grapple with issues that may not directly affect oneself. Nussbaum argues that this is not a defect of humanity, but a defect in the lack of cultivation and encouragement of empathic identification and the literary imagination. She writes that,

the remedy for that defect [refusal of compassion] seems to be, not the repudiation of fancy, but its more consistent and humane cultivation; not the substitution of impersonal institutional structures for the imagination, but the construction of institutions, and institutional actors, who more perfectly embody, and by institutional firmness protect, the insights of the

¹¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, xvi.

¹¹⁶ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, xvi.

compassionate imagination...Institutions themselves should also be informed by “fancy’s” insight.¹¹⁷

Institutional recognition of the importance of empathy testifies to the value of human dignity in our social and political actions, and affirms the literary imagination as an essential component of achieving some sense of social justice. Nussbaum limits her argument to novels as the form of literature best suited to the task of embodying the potential of the literary imagination, but I would especially like to extend it to the mode of imaginatively-based personal narratives of crisis. This form still allows for the same kind of engagement with the elements of affect that novels do in implying links of possibility between the reader and the subject. It is these links of possibility drawn for the reader that function actively to nurture empathic identification. The emotional identification and reaction on the part of the reader ultimately “cut[s] through those self-protective stratagems, requiring [the reader] to see and respond to many things that may be difficult to confront—and they make this process palatable by giving [the reader] pleasure in the very act of confrontation.”¹¹⁸ Through the reading of these imaginative texts, the reader is placed in a position to see the concrete concerns of others from a slightly removed position. But the reader may simultaneously engage in and integrate this larger empathic identification with the other into acknowledging their dignity and humanity. In this way, one can encounter the experience and concerns of others imaginatively, and gain a greater understanding of a social or political issue that may not directly affect oneself otherwise. In other words, we are forced to confront problems and experiences that we may otherwise not have access to, and may imaginatively engage

¹¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, xviii.

¹¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 6.

with the lives of others. In looking towards a larger practical public significance, reading and imaginative engagement are valuable. This is especially true in a democratic society in the formation of our opinions and voting on issues such as discretionary social spending, or other concerns that may not directly affect an individual's demographic, but still require that compassion be extended. In order to be a more informed, democratic society, the humanity and dignity of the individual must be maintained, and the exercise of empathy and compassion is integral to achieving this. As such, empathic identification serves a much more socially valuable role outside the realm of the humanities. Through empathic identification and engaging the literary imagination, one is able to integrate the experience of the other into one's own reasoning and worldview, which impacts upon one's functioning in the public domain. The experience of the individual, through the means of imaginative rendering, is communicated in a way that the personal becomes expanded into the realm of the social, and the personal narrative can take on a greater cultural significance and weight. It is through the reader's capacity for empathy and identification that a distinct experience can become resonant in a larger manner. In an application to trauma narratives, I wish to describe how the sense of elegiac identification present in fictional trauma narratives written after and about the Shoah operates in shaping cultures of commemoration.

As the writers I have addressed are working in the shadow and legacy of the Shoah, their representations necessarily function in shaping how these instances of trauma and unjust death are grieved and commemorated. These representations of trauma carry with them the responsibility to the other's suffering that has not been adequately witnessed. As such, the reader may bear witness to the suffering of the other through

some sense of elegiac identification with the other, reflecting upon the historical circumstances of the crisis or loss. In his work on literary representations of mourning, R. Clifton Spargo comments on the work of elegy in cultures of commemoration as related to obtaining a social good conscience. He writes that an “ordinary expression of grief might bring at least a provisional end to our historical responsibility by...restoring the proportion between our sympathy for others,” and “our historical sense of ourselves as beings who would demonstrate a better form of responsibility for others were they in our hands.”¹¹⁹ His focus upon historical responsibility continues, in writing that the reaction of,

elegiac identification [functions] towards which we must be drawn if we are to come to any terms with the grief we feel over historical events... We must consider the facticity of unjust death that...might have been, at least in part, prevented. Such overtly historical connotations insist upon mourning’s misgivings as a form of conscience, even as they also emphasize that the expressions of grief are never adequate to the responsibilities they signify.¹²⁰

These instances of elegiac identification result in a sense of responsibility that is at least vaguely public because of the factual elements of historical connotations. This kind of responsibility results in difficult to resolve grief and does not allow for ethical correction or imaginative re-creations. However, in modes of literature and poetry, the same subject matter may be addressed, but there is more latitude in its treatment. Spargo writes,

if poetry were required to imagine history as obedient to the sterner logic of mimetic representation—which is to say, as responsible for recording the world as it really was—there could be no gap between what happened and what might also have happened. And it is partly because of this gap between the sense of factual necessity presiding over our conception of a historical event and an imaginative understanding developed through a

¹¹⁹ Spargo, R. Clifton. *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegaic Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. 240.

¹²⁰ Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 240.

hypothesis of subjective agency internal to the event that we can say it might have been possible for history to occur otherwise, thus creating space for critical dissent, imaginative revision, or ethical correction.¹²¹

His contemplation of the logic of mimetic representations in relation to that of poetic representations functions to highlight the productive use of affect and proxy-witnessing. It is the very subjective internal agency of the poetically-rendered event that allows for the space for imaginative potentialities and creative re-visions. Spargo also addresses the importance of considering historical potentialities in the imaginative renderings of memory and trauma. The sense of responsibility for an experience or unjust death that is not adequately witnessed can be dealt with effectively, and channeled into productive avenues of remembrance and reclamation through imaginative means. Michaels also echoes this in writing that memory, “gains strength through restatement, reaffirmation; in a culture, through ritual, tradition, stories, art...when memory evokes considerations of what might have been or been prevented, memory becomes redemptive.”¹²² The feeling of responsibility for the other can be turned into a productive and redemptive undertaking in considering the potentialities and possible alterities of history. The potentialities of imaginative renderings in some way transcend our relationship to historical, empirical reality in allowing for an artful, constructed frame for the re-visioning of memory. In some aspects, the creative potentialities of memory allow for a productive remembering, claiming a certain impossible responsibility for the injustices carried out against the other, and ensuring that the injustice will not reoccur. The task of proxy-witnessing on behalf of the other functions on a level of cultural impact and memory through

¹²¹ Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 242.

¹²² Michaels, Anne. “Cleopatra’s Love,” *Poetry Canada Review* 14.2(March 1994): 14-15. 15.

commemoration in a chance to reclaim the condition of victimhood through the active creative choice in communicating one's story. I am not arguing this is an exercise in inventing history, but rather as a way to give individual voice to an experience and avoiding descending into collectivist platitudes and generalizations of experience. It is through careful visions and re-visions of the injustices and crises of the past that we can look to the value of what I call "vigilant" memory. Vigilant memory combines the understanding of the ethos of an experience of trauma with a sense of responsibility and mode of commemoration. Through vigilant memory, we can re-anchor and give voice to the "geography of the eliminated"¹²³ in a way that engages a cultural consciousness to the task of remembering, responsibility, revisioning, and hope.

An aspect of the elegiac tones in writing after an experience of trauma is the reclamation of the experience in one's own witnessing through a kind of repetition. Through empathy, there is a collapsing of time for the reenactment of experience, but also a further sense of identification that suggests a carrying forward of responsibility into a perpetual present. Susan Gubar writes that "what empathic reading...achieve[s] vis-à-vis trauma is a collapsing of time, the making out of every moment a second moment through parallel images that serve an ethical function in literature, as in liturgy."¹²⁴ This collapsing of time working in an ethical way is present in the inclusive terms of identification in Hebrew texts and religious practices. In Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob refers to this tradition:

¹²³ Highmore, Ben, ed. *The Everyday Life Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 163.

¹²⁴ Gubar, Susan. "Empathic Identification in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*: Masculinity and Poetry after Auschwitz," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.1 (Autumn 2002), 249-276. 264.

It's Hebrew tradition that forefathers are referred to as "we," not "they." "When we were delivered from Egypt..." This encourages empathy and a responsibility to the past but, more important, it collapses time. The Jew is forever leaving Egypt. A good way to teach ethics. If moral choices are eternal, individual acts take on immense significance no matter how small: not for this life only.¹²⁵

In this way, the past is brought into a perpetual present, always reevaluated and revisited. There is a proxy-witnessing of the past, a collapsing of time, and an affirmation that the actions of the past are still relevant and ongoing. It is this act of inclusionary witnessing and remembering that lies at the basis of hope and reclamation. The Hebrew sense of commemoration involves a repetition that gives incredible weight to individual actions and morality. Through this emphasis, the past is brought into an eternal, inclusive present in which an individual is aware of their lived legacy, the scope of tradition, and what is expected of them. It is in this culture of commemoration that the past can be eternally revisited, remembered, and brought forward through responsibility.

It is this sense of responsibility, along with the imaginative capacities of writing that is ultimately of use in coming to terms and enacting a sense of regeneration after trauma, individual or otherwise. It is storytelling that is fundamental to these large tasks of cultural commemoration and personal regeneration. In areas in which language encounters limits of representation and expressibility, it is through creative means that those boundaries are pushed against and broken. The telling of experiences as powerful as trauma may fumble for expression, but the possibility of these stories remaining silent does not function most effectively in their redemption. Literature and memory effectively tell one's stories, and can be creatively imagined in a way to service a larger, benevolent purpose. Literature and memory suspend our sense of "the real," in order to draw

¹²⁵ Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, 159-60.

attention to the artifice of creation. There is an interest to maintain a sense of veracity, and not construct these experiences in a manner of wish-fulfillment—but in a way that enables an affirmation of human dignity and larger empathic identification. I believe it is even in the imaginative space of the most unspeakable extreme human experiences that we can find the empathy, understanding, identification, and respect that affirm our connectedness. Through vigilant memory, these extreme experiences are imaginatively rendered, re-anchored, and not forgotten—empathy allows for the lyrical present, a constant re-living. In this way we might carry memory forward into a productive realm of re-affirmation, response, and responsibility.

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