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Post-Holocaust Reconstructed Identities in Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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Abstract

This paper takes up a comparative view on individual identity as featured in two literary works that deal with traumatised Jewish youths in the aftermath of the Holocaust: Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. As I intend to show, the trauma of the Holocaust forces an arbitrary process of identity deconstruction upon the juvenile protagonists' incompletely developed selves, which triggers in their adult lives a need for self-reconstruction, essentially experienced against thoroughly altered cultural, historical and geographical backgrounds. These characters' initial flight for their lives and their transgression of various national borders will be regarded as complex steps towards mapping a geographical trajectory associated with profound inner change. In both novels, the initial journeys of survival are traced back in old age, and their subsequent re-mapping will be read here as an attempt at recreating and reconciling with an original identity. I will also show that forceful migration engenders a break with former patterns of selfhood by re-shifting such elements of identity as the cultural, ethnic, national, psychological and geographical. In the particular case of post-war Jewishness, the emphasis falls onto the ethnic-racial element. Negatively charged by the Holocaust, this element becomes the lens through which the characters perceive their changing identity at a particular time and within a certain space. Concomitantly, their manifest interest in literary and architectural discourses symptomises a fundamental need to assume and incorporate this change. The question that follows is whether these destinies may be interpreted as striking a balance between localism and cosmopolitanism, exclusion and inclusion, alterity and sameness. All in all, this is an exploration of the distance between the deconstructed and reconstructed types of Jewishness as embodied by two fictional characters, with an emphasis on the uniqueness of their physical and mental path back to their more or less recognisable selves.

Key Words: (Jewish) identity, trans-national, cross-cultural, alienation, (childhood) trauma, memory, cosmopolitanism, border.

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Child survivors of the Holocaust were categorised until fairly recently alongside first generation survivors, however in 2002 Susan Rubin

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Suleiman drew a necessary dividing line between adult and child survivorship in an article quite provocatively entitled 'The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors and the Holocaust.' The decimal point refers to the intermediate position of Jewish children exposed to the Holocaust, whose memories differ fundamentally from those of adult (i.e. first generation) survivors on the one hand, and their offspring born immediately after the war and known as the second-generation, on the other. The decisive element that justifies the autonomy of this coinage is, according to Suleiman, 'premature' age, understood as psychological inability for an adult understanding of events, doubled in most cases by a lack of a 'conscious sense of self' and no 'stable identity'[1] at the moment of trauma occurrence. The traumatic assault on incompletely developed identities, enhanced by displacement, loss of families and forceful migration are dominant similarities within the otherwise heterogeneous group of child survivors, two fictional representatives of which I would like to bring to the fore in this comparative study.

In both Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2002) the trauma of the Holocaust is shown to force an arbitrary process of identity deconstruction[2] upon the juvenile characters' sense of self, which triggers in their post-war adult lives a need for self-reconstruction, essentially experienced against thoroughly altered cultural, historical and geographical backgrounds. The protagonists' flight from persecution and their transgression of various national borders are steps towards mapping a geographical trajectory inextricably linked with profound identity shifts.

On these premises I will argue that these characters' sense of self is pivotally space and language-based, which is to say that their spatial refuge and consequent cultural encounters as immigrants are of crucial importance in the extent to which their trauma is eventually localised and alleviated. Itinerant destinies as they are, they face the conundrum of constantly renegotiating a broken Jewish identity, by superimposing layers in a palimpsest fashion.

In W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* the title character's tormented life story is contingent on the European history of violence and wars. After a lifetime dedicated to the suppression of childhood memories, Jacques Austerlitz succumbs to a strong urge to discover his roots. At the end of a sorrowful quest for traces of memory spread across Europe, he is able to reconstruct the puzzle of his identity. The realisation of the mistake he has made by voluntarily erasing every vestige of his past is just as painful as the later revelation that his parents' history is at one with that of the massacred Jews of Europe.

His life odyssey began with the Kindertransport of 1939 that took him to Great Britain by train and separated him from his Czech parents forever. The first memory of his buried pre-war life is sparked while listening to a radio interview during which the map of his estrangement is redrawn in his mind:

> They mentioned a number of cities –Vienna, Munich, Danzig, Bratislava, Berlin – but only when one of the couple said that her transport, after two days of travelling through the German Reich and the Netherlands [...] had finally [crossed] the North Sea to Harwich, only then did I know [...] that these fragments of memory were part of my own life as well.[3]

Since the age of four when extricated from his familiar environment, Austerlitz has negotiated loss and absence. The assimilating efforts of his Welsh foster parents who took away his travel backpack, changed his name and reared him in complete oblivion of his descent is an impairment he has further increased by undertaking a wilful obliteration of his past until late in life: "I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans [...] and nothing about the persecution I had escaped [...] I did not read newspapers because [...] I feared unwelcome revelations [...] I was always refining my defence reactions, creating a kind of quarantine or immune system."[4]

The dimension and duration of Jacques' self-censorship is distressing. His insulation from truth is symptomatic of his fragility, pointing to the very core of his destabilised self, for which such confined spaces and bordered foundations as the fortifications of Antwerp, the fortress of Breendock, and the Nazi prisons and labour camps are appropriate metaphors. Likewise, frequent images of zoos and bestiaries, where birds live their internment in surreal slow motion, are deployed to suggest Jacque's precarious isolation.

As a student in Paris and a professor of architectural history in London, Jacques wanders about Europe restlessly in search of cultural landmarks and a sense of belonging. Significantly, his unconventional view of history and time reflects a need to come to terms with the crisis of non-identity: time is not a measurable linear sequence to Jacques, but more an arbitrary notion, something that "moves in eddies [and] recurs in ever-changing form."[5] He develops a lasting aversion to clocks and their 'mendacious' nature, preferring to think of time as reversible and concurrent: "time will not pass away [...] I can turn back and [...] find that all moments of time have coexisted simultaneously."[6]This uncanny sense of time as sign of trauma is both recuperative of lost memories and identity, as it is indicative of a major psychological crisis that Jacques is unable to comprehend, let alone resolve until late in life.

The leitmotif of train tracks and platforms is both entrapping and liberating. Their dual connotation is obvious in a passage where, on his return to Czechoslovakia, passing a dense forest between Würzburg and Frankfurt, Austerlitz welcomes resuscitated memories of his initial trip to Britain: "it dawned upon me [...] that what I now was going past [...] was the original of the images that had haunted me for so many years."[7]This fragment is a symbolic undoing of his childhood journey into the unknown. The borderless landscape, perceived as such by Jacques the child in 1939, has by comparison more clearly defined contours now, and the idea of boundary gains a positive connotation as related to clarity and emergence from confusion.

Furthermore, the issue of border is ontologised as he visits Teresín, a labour camp in former Czechoslovakia along with the fortification of Willenbroek and Kaunas in Lithuania, in search for traces of his late mother Agáta. In places like these, "the border between life and death is less impenetrable than we commonly think [...] there [is] only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other."[8]

The anguish of anonymity that drove him to investigate his origins is progressively replaced by an even more unsettling feeling: that of horror at discovering the atrocious fate of his people. The closer he gets to the truth, though, the bigger the gap that opens between himself and his juvenile double. This moment of self-splitting is brilliantly captured in the scene where his former nanny Vera shows to the now aged Austerlitz a photo of himself taken only 6 months before his leaving Prague in 1939, at the age of four:

> hard as I tried [...] I could not recollect myself in the part [...] All memory was extinguished in me [...] I always felt the piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues, who was waiting [...] for me to [...] avert the misfortune lying ahead of him.[9]

This specular confrontation is tragic, as the two hypostases of Jacques' selfhood are far too alienated to cohere. They will be eternally separated by boundaries of history, time, life and death, on the fringe of memory and forgetting.

The question that rises at the end of Jacques' odyssey is how much of a Czech, a Brit or a Jew could he argue to be in the light of the recent revelations and to what extent can he identify with the tribulations of the European Jewry? Are the boundaries of his layered identity clearly defined? Obviously, his solitary journey around the history-imbued landmarks of Europe contribute to a partial recuperation of memory and to a probable activation of his ethnic and personal awareness, but the extent to which this realisation is perceived as a substantial or just an abstract acknowledgement is debatable. More certain is the fact that the geographic trajectory back to his homeland did not help recover the full memory of his childhood, and thereby it increased his sense of alterity when confronted with printed, remembered or dreamt images of his kin. Their persecution and violent deaths remain issues hard to cope with in old age, while his fear of confronting the image of his younger alter ego may be rooted in the profound guilt to have fled for survival.

Just as important to consider is the issue of age gap between the child and the adult Austerlitz in assessing the chances for identity coherence and the justifiability of such classifications as the '1.5 generation'. How keen is a four-year old refugee's sense of racial and ethnic identity and how well is it preserved in a foreign context utterly different from his country of origin? Jacques' confusion when faced with the secrecy surrounding his origin develops into clinical signs of traumatic disorder (anxiety, panic attacks and hysterical epilepsy). When his already troubled mind is waking to childhood memories prompted by chance and his quest for truth presents him with the advent of the Holocaust, his precarious sense of self, already shaken by the premature separation from his parents, is further destabilised. It could therefore be argued that his "extreme [...] trauma"[10] triggered at a very early age led to what Suleiman calls "'delayed' generational consciousness"[11] late in life affecting, like in most cases of 1.5 generation survivors, the formation and evolution of his personal identity.

Another destiny emerging from Europe's troubled war time is that of Polish poet Jakob Beer, the protagonist of Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces*. Saved by the Greek archaeologist Athos Roussos around the flooded ruins of the ancient city of Polish Biskupin in 1937, Jakob is brought to the Mediterranean island of Zakynthos, where he is hidden to escape deportation, and taught geology and world civilisation. After the war, Jakob and Athos travel to Toronto, where the latter teaches geography at university. To counteract the memory of his parents' massacre at the hands of the Nazis and his sister Bella's disappearance during the war, Jakob develops a passion for poetry, his necessary means to exorcise pain. In his older years, he returns to the Greek island of Idhra with his Canadian wife, Michaela, who he dies tragically with in a car accident in Athens.

Michaels ushers her eponymous character in as the 'bog-boy' haunting the muddy streets of Biskupin, after witnessing his parents' bloody execution by the SS. His emergence from the mud coincides with his first encounter with Athos and marks a first major break from the past:

> I limped towards him, stiff as a golem, clay tight behind my knees [...] I screamed into the silence the only phrase I knew in more than one language, I screamed it in Polish and German and Yiddish, thumping my fists on my own chest: dirty Jew, dirty Jew, dirty Jew.[12]

This potent scene of rebirth has a mythological touch to it: a golem is a legendary Jewish creature born by miracle from clay. Though I would not go so far as to assert, as have Sander Gilman and Alan Rosen,[13] that this is a case of self-hatred, I would argue that it marks both the outbreak of trauma and Jakob's beginning to deal with it: the linguistic dissipation into three idioms is his first acknowledgement of identity dismantlement, but also a preview of his later rehabilitation through languages other than his own.

A fugitive, like many Jewish children in the history of the Holocaust, Jakob experiences symptoms of trauma from an early stage in the form of the deceased's omnipresence among the living. To him it seems as though the symbiosis between the two worlds reverberates across generations, through a sinister process of memory transfer:

> When the prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstream to their brains and hearts. And through their blood into another generation.[14]

The memory of the dead articulates itself in ways similar to the process of fossil formation, with limestone fossils, polar ice, flooded ruins and ravines employed as metaphors of counter-history: "Athos had a special affection for limestone-that crushed reef of memory [...] organic history squeezed into massive mountain tombs."[15] His stories of polar expeditions, geologic times, and paleo-botany give Jakob's survival a meaning while putting life and death in a cosmic perspective. Unlike Austerlitz, raised by cold, uninspired foster parents, Jakob is reared in the spirit of a deep understanding of life's potential to subsist and metamorphose, and therefore his self awareness is more acute than Jacques's:

> Even as a child [...] I understood that if I were strong enough to accept it, I was being offered a second history [...] The great mystery of wood is not that it burns, but that it floats.[16]

Concurrently, the child's individuality is insured a space to regenerate and expand through Athos' narratives of extinguished civilisations, into which Jakob reads a pattern of renewal and diversity. By providing him with cultural knowledge, Athos enlarged his scope, at a historical time that allowed no room for the average Jew:

> While I hid in the luxury of a room, thousands were stuffed into baking stoves, sewers, garbage bins. [...] While I was

> learning Greek and English, [...] geology, geography, and poetry, Jews were filling the corners and cracks of Europe.[17]

Unlike Jakob, though, Austerlitz had the space, but lacked the scope. The horizontal perspective of space mingles with the vertical topography of selfhood. The characters move around the geographical tract along plane courses (linear or convoluted), but their sense of self wanders up and down a vertical scale, surfacing the conscious and exploring the subconscious. The network of ancient fortresses and drowned ruins that populate the novel are symbolic of other emotional ruins and counter-histories preserved in the characters' memory[18]. Be it the flooded city of Biskupin, the Aegean Sea where the Corfu Jews were thrown during the war or dozens of other Mezozoic swamps and ancient ravines in Canada, they all stand for a vertical conception of time and space: packed at the bottom of history, they subsist as sites of counter history, lifted by the incessant and painstaking geological movements. By the same principles of vertical motility, the layers of Jakob's identity are permanently shifted by the return of the repressed through nightmares and flashbacks.

What Athos teaches his apprentice both on Zakynthos and in Toronto, is a cultural way of dealing with the past through geologic excursions into official or hidden histories. When Athos dies in Toronto, he leaves Jakob a precious legacy: anthropo-geology and an integrative, universal view on human identity viewed pan-historically and cross-culturally. In doing so, he succeeds in restoring purpose and meaning to an existence rendered futile by the Holocaust.

In Canada, Jakob also learns to transgress linguistic borders and finds in English, just like in Greek during the war, the means to forget: "The English language was food [...] with each mouthful the past was further silenced."[19] Similarly to a palimpsest script, English erases Yiddish and is superimposed on the past[20]. Paradoxically, though, recording his memoirs and poetry in English is also a tool of disremembering: "it was a revelation. English could protect me: an alphabet without memory."[21]While suggesting that Yiddish is the language of anamnesis and English, that of amnesia, Alan Rosen draws on the significance of subjective vs. objective in the process of identity reconstruction through writing because, he explains, "the less intimate the connection, the greater the possibility of eloquence."[22]

In conclusion, for both Austerlitz and Jakob, Jewishness could be interpreted as an acquired identity: they both flee persecution and become émigrés at an early age, taking distance from a collective identity that they later reconnect with in documented sources. While Austerlitz experiences the whole truth about the Holocaust somewhat suddenly at a mature age and with devastating consequences, Jakob is, by contrast, helped to cope with the shock gradually by Athos. And while emigration delays revelation for Austerlitz, keeping him trapped in a clarified, yet unresolved past, on the other hand it increases Jakob's self-awareness and accelerates his healing.

Both Jacques and Jakob's profiles stand out as hyphenated identities categorised as the '1.5 generation'. Before and during the war, their sense of Jewishness undergoes a premature deconstruction, long before adult self-awareness is reached. In the absence of Jewish parents, their post-war identity is a collage of minimal collective memories, framed by personal traumatic experiences whose effects are still manifest in their confused sense of national and individual belonging. Their status of Holocaust refugees turned into survivors and eventually immigrants marks, one could argue, a transition from total exclusion to a problematic state of inclusion.

Notes

[1] Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child survivors and the Holocaust'. *American Imago*, vol. 59, Fall 2002, p. 277.
[2] The process of identity formation or deconstruction is understood as referenced in Michael A. Mayer's book called *Jewish Identity in the Modern World*, University of Washington Press, Seattle & London, 1990, pp.5-6. Both analysts argue that the process of Jewish identity formation is based primarily on the child's sense of continuity between the pre-adult values instilled within the nurturing family and the adolescent's later encounter with society: "Such crisis is especially likely to occur when there is a profound discontinuity between the earlier identifications, made within the more intimate family setting, and conflicting values that the individual encounters when moving beyond family into society." The Holocaust with its brutal illogicality induces a sense of profound discontinuity in the orphans' hierarchy of values and thereby it engenders trauma.
[3] W G Sebald, *Austerlitz*, Penguin Books, London, 2002, p. 200. All quotes will refer back to this edition.
[4] Ibid., pp. 197-8.
[5] Ibid., p. 143.
[6] Ibid., p. 144.
[7] Ibid., p. 316.
[8] Ibid., p. 395/414.
[9] Ibid., pp. 259-60.
[10] Suleiman, p. 289.
[11] Ibid, p. 286.
[12] A Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., London, 1988, pp. 12-3. All quotes will refer back to this edition.

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[13] In *Sounds of Defiance*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2005, p. 178, Alan Rosen strengthens Sander Gilman's view on Jewish self-hatred as relevant to this scene. The self-hatred thesis does simply not hold within the context of Jakob's later development and ultimate self-discovery.

[14] Michaels, p.52.

[15] Ibid., p.32.

[16] Ibid., p. 20/28.

[17] Ibid., p.45.

[18] This is actually a case of what Meredith Cringlington dubs 'counter-memory', i.e. those hidden aspects of history left out of the official discourse: "Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives." M Criglington, 'The City as a Site of Counter-Memory in Anne Michaels's Fugitive Pieces and Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion'. *Canadian Literature*, vol. 81, 2004, p.131.

[19] Michaels, p. 92.

[20] In this respect, I concur with Alan Rosen's association of Yiddish with silence: "What obliterates Yiddish is not the palliative stories that Athos tells but 'silence', presumably the cultural silence, the absence of any Yiddish voice." in Rosen, op. cit., p. 180.

[21] Michaels, p. 101.

[22] Rosen, p. 184.

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