

INTRODUCTION

“And why do you pray, Moche?” I asked him,
“I pray to the God within me that He will give
me the strength to ask Him the right questions.”
We talked like this nearly every evening.

Elie Wiesel, *Night*¹

A question usually calls for an answer, however sometimes a question is already an answer in itself. The search for meaning, for identity gives sense to our existence. As long as we live we ask, we look for something. The famous dilemma “To be or not to be?” seems to contain a reply already within: it is the eternal questioning that moves us forward, makes us carry on striving, on living. Abraham J.Heschel remarks:

Man’s most important problem is not being but living.
To live means to be at the crossroads. There are many
forces and drives within the self. What direction to take?
is a question we face again and again.²

All art is somehow an answer to the pursuit of meaning, of identity. It flows out of an internal struggle of the mind, of the soul, of the heart. Looking for a solution, for a release, the artist experiments with thoughts, memories, doubts and imagination. Writers, poets, philosophers have always been interested in the mystery of existence entangled in time. Psychologists stress the importance of memory for leading a ‘normal’ everyday life in social osmosis, and underline the interrelation of past, present and future in the workings of our mind.³

Pope John Paul II in his book *Memory and Identity* insists on the human need and duty of a continual revision of memory in order to gain more awareness of our true identity.⁴ Similarly, also the Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur speaks about the ethical implications of memory and the crucial role of forgiveness and reconciliation in our life,

¹ Cit.in John K. Roth, Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*, Paragon House, New York, 1989, cit.p.XI.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit.p.68.

³ Cf. M.A. Brandimonte, *Psicologia della memoria*, Carocci, Roma, 2004, cf. pp.13-22.

“La memoria non è semplicemente l’elaborazione di idee, sentimenti ed emozioni passate, né una rete di fotografie nell’album della mente...Pochi ammetterebbero, senza doverci riflettere, che essere consci di qualcosa è, di per sé, un atto di memoria...Per questo quando si parla di processi di memoria non basta riferirsi al <tempo perduto>, ma è necessario tenere in considerazione anche il <tempo presente> (presente consapevolezza) e...spesso anche un tempo futuro”.(Cit.p.13)

⁴ Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Memoria e identità: Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2005.

especially in the post-Holocaust era.⁵ On the other hand, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman discusses the highly topical and controversial issue of identity in the context of “liquid modernity” pointing to the fragmentation and alienation of post-modern identities, and thus to the need of an incessant identity experimentation.⁶ In this respect <identity> implies a paradox. Infact, its fickle and multifaceted character contradicts its etymological roots: the term derives from the Latin <identitatem> which means <sameness> and which is, in turn, abstracted from <idem et idem> that equals <the same and the same>. As we can see, the modern notion of <identity> cuts both ways: it delimitates and breaks borders, it imprisons and sets us free. Exile upsets the very notion of a stable, secure ‘self’, but at the same time it makes identity more flexible and fluid.

Hence, as Isabelle De Courtivron puts it, “we are all exiles...we have all lost our childhood paradises...we all struggle to understand the self as well as to reach out and communicate with others.”⁷ However, as Edward Said remarks quoting Theodor Adorno, “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” because, as he adds, “seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision...this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that - to borrow a phrase from music - is contrapunctual”.⁸ That is why, today intellectuals see exile, also metaphorical, as their mission. Thus, no wonder that Julia Kristeva’s notes that “writing is impossible without some kind of exile...”, for example, in the case of the double status of women.⁹ Nowadays, as Eva Hoffman observes in her essay *The New Nomads*, diasporism has become fashionable, especially as far as intellectuals are concerned. Since ‘nomadism’ is in our time a global condition, exile seems to have been deprived of its highly dramatic implications. Nevertheless, still dislocation offers various points of view and fosters creativity and writing. However, she argues, the total rejection of the notion of ‘home’ may involve dispersion and lack of safety, and hence may entail anxiety. She writes:

⁵ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare: L'enigma del passato*, trans. N. Salomon, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004.

⁶ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Intervista sull'identità*, trans. F. Galimberti, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 2003

“...ancora pochi decenni fa l’<identità > non era neanche lontanamente al centro dei nostri pensieri, non era altro che un oggetto di meditazione filosofica. Oggi invece l’<identità> è la questione all’ordine del giorno, argomento di scottante attualità nella mente e sulla bocca di tutti.” (Cit.p.15)

“Nella nostra epoca di modernità liquida in cui l’eroe popolare è l’individuo libero di fluttuare senza intralci, l’essere <fissati>, <identificati> inflessibilmente e senza possibilità di ripensamento diventa sempre più impopolare.”(Cit.p.31)

⁷ Isabelle De Courtivron (ed.), *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, palgrave macmillan, New York, 2003, cit. pp. 7-8.

⁸ Edward W. Said, “The Mind of Winter: Reflections on life and exile”, *Harper’s*, September, 1984, cit. pp. 54-55.

⁹ Eleonora Rao, *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, cit. p.1.

The new nomadism is different from other Diasporas. It exists in a decentred world, one in which the wanderers no longer trace and retrace a given territory or look to any one symbolic locus of meaning... Kundera calls the <unbearable lightness of being>, the illness that comes upon people unanchored in any place or structure, the Don Juans of experience... In the <nomadic> configuration, exile loses its charge, since there is no place from which one can be expelled, no powerful notion of home... in our human condition, it takes long, strenuous work to find the wished-for terrains of safety or significance or love.¹⁰

Furthermore according to Stuart Hall “the diaspora experience...is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity: by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite: by hybridity.”¹¹ In this respect the notion of ‘home’ gets even more complicated since ‘belonging’ may consist mainly in ‘longing for’ some imaginary ‘states of peace and well-being’. Avtar Brah speaks about the so-called “homing desire” that doesn’t necessarily stand for “homeland desire”. Gunew remarks:

(...) concepts of “home” are at the heart of debates of diaspora and one must question whether there is indeed always an imperative to return to some putative, nostalgically invested motherland or whether such feelings may indeed be generated by the sense of un-homeliness accompanying even a prolonged residence in the new country?¹²

However, the Jews, in the consciousness of a Christian world, from the Middle Ages onward, have always represented the epitome of Otherness. It may not be completely coincidental that the shaping of a discourse of Otherness and diversity draws heavily on the Jewish experience. A sizable portion of the texts written by diaspora writers that have been published are centered around the notion of identity, encompassing both the notion of ‘otherness’ and "diversity," and the consciousness of belonging. This is especially transparent in writing that emphasizes the complexity of the Jewish identity. In a way, Jewishness may constitute a paradigm of the complex condition of the artist in our society. Efraim Sicher remarks:

And if there is relevance in the dictum of the Russian poetess Marina Tsetaeva that all poets are Jews, this does not deny the uniqueness of being of a writer who is a Jew, but, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, the situation of the Jew has become paradigmatic of the poet and paradigmatic of the writing act.¹³

¹⁰Eva Hoffman, “The New Nomads”, in A. Aciman (ed.), *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss*, The New Press, New York, 2000, cit. pp.57-63.

¹¹ Cit in S. Gunew, “Serial Accommodations: Diasporic Women’s writing”, *Canadian Literature*, 196, Spring, 2008, pp.6-15, cit.p. 7.

¹² Idem, cit.p.9.

Nevertheless, in the case of Jewish writers there arises a problem of ‘dual allegiance.’ Their sense of belonging is constantly renegotiated. The universal themes of human existence present in their writing are always overshadowed by the memory of the Shoah and tragic family histories. Personal memories are interconnected by the collective tragedy and it is very difficult for the artist to emancipate from the heritage of remembrance and pain. Sicher writes thus about Anglo-Jewish writers:

(...) all the writers deal with problems of identity and community, reflected in their treatment of roots and alienation, menace and derangement, guilt and suffering. These are universal motifs, but their particular significance for Jewish writers relates both to their dissatisfaction with an inherited marginal status and to their critical portrayal of the Anglo-Jewish community. The question of dual allegiance establishes a relationship with the Jewish community whether the writer wills it or not, while the Holocaust and the outside forces of History make inevitable the existential quest for literary and socioethnic selfhood.¹⁴

The dialectic dimension of the encounter of dual identity and memory is explicitly played out in memoirs. As Alan Rosen remarks, the English language can be considered here as a global and neutral, thus more objective and efficient, means of communication in relation to the Holocaust since it was neither of victim nor of perpetrator, and thus it wasn't caught in the matrix of ghettos, deportations, or concentration camps.¹⁵ What is more, Yaffa Eliah has speculated that “writing in a new language can buffer the survivor-writer from a trauma.”¹⁶ Moreover, this kind of autobiographical writing aims at putting an end to the silence and the willingness to forget. The negationist attitude is challenged by these very documents, forcing the revision of the commonly assumed notion of a comfortable past. It is a challenge that only memory can bring. And in doing that, memoirists, perform the ultimate act of the most universal Jewish religious ritual, the most sacred, and the most uniquely Jewish after the *Shoah*: the act of remembrance:

It seems, as Albert Memmi said in 1966, as though the Holocaust has “inaugurated a new era in the history of Jewish literature as (...) in that of the ex-colonized”: it is the ex-victims' turn to speak and to write history. Now has come the turn of a new search for symbolic identity and moral responsibility in a demoralized post-Holocaust world. If the Jewish experience during the Second War taught universal lessons, then universal themes have, in a sense become Jewish themes.¹⁷

¹³ Efraim Sicher, *Beyond Marginality: Anglo-Jewish Literature after the Holocaust*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985, cit.p.XIII

¹⁴ Idem, cit.p.IX

¹⁵ Cf. Alan Rosen, *Sounds of Defiance: The Holocaust, Multilingualism and the Problem of English*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2005, pp.7-11.

¹⁶ Idem, cit.p.11

¹⁷ Efraim Sicher, *Beyond Marginality: Anglo-Jewish Literature after the Holocaust*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985, cit p. 166.

However, ‘how many Jewish identities are there?’, one may ask. How profoundly are Jewish people influenced by their country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by their experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status? If we take a look at the Canadian Jewish community and its social history is still in its infancy. Today, there are roughly 350,000 Jews in Canada. Most live in Toronto and Montreal, with some communities in Ottawa, Vancouver, St. John’s and Winnipeg. The Canadian Jewish community is not quite as old as that in the United States of America. The official history begins in 1759 with the first congregation. Most are recent immigrants, who arrived in Canada after the second World War. Civic loyalty did not require homogeneity. Significantly, Jews found that they did not need to justify Jewish ethnic allegiance. Remarkably, Yiddish survived and flourished on this fertile ground since ethnic groups were never encouraged to leave behind their cultural baggage. Canadian multiculturalism finds many expressions including long lasting linguistic retention even in the enforced French policy of Quebec. Unlike the Americans, the Canadian Jewish religious community is noticeably traditional. There are few Reform congregations – Montreal has only one Reform and four Conservative synagogues. The rest are Orthodox. Many non-practicing Jews prefer to maintain membership in the traditional synagogues of their parents. Nevertheless, there has been a ‘delayed impact’ of the Shoah on the Canadian Jewish community’s collective memory and identity:

After the war, Canadian Jews sought to distance themselves from their European background. They were emerging from their position as undesirable immigrants and becoming accepted as part of the Canadian social mosaic (...) From 1973 to 1985, the legacy of the Holocaust surfaced as a marker of ethnic identification for most Canadian Jews (...) The community was forced to confront the event and recreate their historical past. Why the impact delayed: not psychologically ready, priority to support the establishment of Israel, leaders of the community still ostracized (...) by adopting the Holocaust as a pillar of ethnic identity, the Canadian Jewish community must utilize the universal lessons of the event for all-embracing human rights.¹⁸

Thus, as Seymour Mayne observes, Canadian writers did not have to adjust their sensitivity and identity to an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-American mainstream. An eclecticism of poetics, the policy of multiculturalism and lesser metropolitan pressures allowed them to preserve their independent voice and vision.¹⁹ The natural landscapes and cultural mosaic of Canada enabled them to open to universal human experience as well as a personal and

¹⁸ Franklin Bialystok, *Delayed Impact: the Holocaust and the Canadian Jewish Community*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2000, cit. pp. 7, 9, 246, 250.

¹⁹Cf. Seymour Mayne, *Essential Words: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Poetry*, Oberon Press, Canada, 1985, p.10.

intimate relationship with nature. At the same time, they ‘are in love’ with history and tradition. As Margaret Atwood says, “it’s like questioning your dead great-grandparents – does any of what they did or thought live on in us?”²⁰ Mayne writes:

How does one recognize a Jewish poem or a Jewish Canadian poem? Not only by the subject or the individual voice of the poet, but also by a particular stance, an edge to the voice and an ability to apprehend and render the complexity of experience. Though both “Jewish” and “Canadian” seem to defy strict definition, Jewish Canadian poets on the whole are recognizable by their emphasis on the human dimension, the translation of the experience of the immigrant and the outsider, the finding of joy in the face of adversity, the linking with tradition and the concern with history in its widest sense. They strive for the essential words that echo more than the individual’s need. They move to enter a communal language, to find the words that speak to and for the community, whether they relate to the everyday or the eternal.²¹

The research that has contributed to the present project was aimed at probing the complex relationship between memory and identity, at a human as well as artistic level, through the works of three Canadian Jewish women writers such as Irena F.Karafilly, Lisa Appignanesi and Anne Michaels. Besides, there will be examined the issues of identity and other factors that contribute to its formation and development, such as e.g. language, art, malady, religion, tradition, personal and historical events, etc. In this light, there will be analysed, and problematised, the relationship between past, present and future; between the visible reality and that spiritual and/or imaginary. As mentioned before, nowadays in times of ‘liquid modernity’, where many certainties are being undermined, also identity is subjected to a constant transformation and readjustment. Nevertheless, in spite of all its fragility and liquidity, thanks to love and a continual search for truth, identity seems to constitute the only true pillar of existence. In this work, freedom, including that of speech and expression, is regarded as a duty and responsibility. Thus, this project aims at looking for questions more than for answers, also because it assumes that, especially in our postmodern age, identity is constructed through the process of ‘diversification’, multiculturalism and, as always, memory and imagination.

In the first chapter I shall explore the interrelation of history, memory and identity in the memoir-travelogue *Ashes and Miracles* by the Russian-Polish-Canadian-Jewish writer Irena F.Karafilly. Born in the Urals to a Russian mother and a Polish-Jewish father, grown up in the Polish city of Łódź, emigrated to Canada with her parents and her brother, the author retraces her existential and intellectual stages starting from her painful separation

²⁰ Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing*, Virago, London, 2005, cit. p.222.

²¹ Seymour Mayne, *Essential Words: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Poetry*, Oberon Press, Canada, 1985, cit. p.9

from the Polish childhood. Loss and longing are the two pivots that support the incessant search of the exiled. Through this 'time travel' Karafilly tries to verify her own memories and save the family memory. Similarly as in the book *Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman, in this part of the thesis the ambiguity of memory in the deconstruction and reconstruction of an immigrant's identity will be discussed, with particular attention to language and imagination, which entails inarticulateness, estrangement and confusion. Furthermore, the chapter brings into focus the crucial role of different memories, personal as well as collective, in the reshuffle of history, as presented in this book-reportage on Poland after the fall of Communism. The past, the present and the future have to be played off once more against one another in order to rediscover the national identity of the post-communist Poland. I will try to follow the author's journey through the labyrinth of memory and her encounters with the Polish people. Karafilly attempts at retracing the Polish-Jewish relationship in Poland over the centuries. Moreover, I will discuss the author's viewpoint and reflections on the issues of prejudice, tolerance and reconciliation in a multicultural society, where memory is often the only way of preserving one's identity. I shall explore the difficulties of the 'hinge generation' in 'processing the past'. Wrestling with the Holocaust legacy, and thus memory, affects heavily one's self-identification and self-definition. In particular, there will be brought into focus the importance of dialogue, responsibility and forgiveness.

The investigation of the two key-issues precedes in the second chapter. However here the analysis focuses onto the memoir *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat* by the same author. Nevertheless, in this case the relationship between memory and identity results especially complex and painful as it is overshadowed and twisted by Alzheimer's brain disease. The author depicts and analyses the progressive impact of her mother's malady on memory and perception. The damage inflicted on the memory as well as on the spatio-temporal coordination brings about a distortion of reality, alienation along with an upheaval of personal and family relationships. The constant struggle against time, or rather the search for the lost time by gathering together the scraps of memory that becomes more and more fragile and illusory, constitutes the major thread of the narrative patchwork. Here, writing seems to act as an escape, a sort of shelter and cure against madness and despair. The pain is being elaborated, sometimes in a tragicomic key, to bring out a smile of the imminent misery. Old memories resurface and substitute the new ones dissolving at the end into oblivion and peace.

The third chapter recaptures the tormenting interrelation between memory and identity overshadowed by the Shoah. This time the book under scrutiny is *Losing the Dead*

by Lisa Appignanesi, another Canadian writer of Jewish origin. The author examines with perspicacity the complex interplay of identities involved in the family survival against the atrocities of war. The mask is here seen not only as a means, but often as the only way to resist and to survive in the ruthless and cruel reality of war. Appignanesi's book aims at 'exorcising' the fears and ghosts of the past through a profound, understanding and sometimes ironic approach to reality. By telling the tale of her parents' adventurous lot, the author tries to reconcile the past with the present, but above all she stresses the importance of human perseverance, autoanalysis and forgiveness.

The fourth part of the thesis brings into focus the works of Lisa Appignanesi that reflect upon the interdependence of identity, memory, psychoanalysis and art. In particular, the discussion is based on Appignanesi's books and essays on Freud and women such as e.g. *Freud's Women* and *Mad, Bad and Sad: Women and the Mind Doctors*. Woman has always fascinated artists and psychoanalysts. The mystery of life, desire, intuition, creativity, mental complexities have been often ascribed to the feminine genius. In fact, in one of her works entitled *Femininity and the Creative Imagination* Appignanesi tries to underline the importance of feminine traits for the sake of artistic creativity by discussing the works of three great writers: Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust. Here, imagination plays a major part in the sublimation and esthetization of memory and vice versa. The chapter probes into various approaches to the Myth of the Feminine. Furthermore, I shall explore the role of the artist in the society as inherent to the dilemma of freedom of expression. The analysis draws in particular on the volume of critical essays edited and introduced by Lisa Appignanesi *Free Expression is No Offence*, where the testimonies and voices of various writers and artists in defence of freedom of speech are brought together.

Finally, in the last chapter I shall explore the variegated lyrical landscape in the poetic novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Canadian Jewish poet-writer Anne Michaels. Here, the tragedy of the Holocaust is told and recollected through a patchwork of sounds, forms and colours of the language itself, rediscovering in its imaginary and musicality the fluidity and the spontaneity of the life flow. The faith in the strength of human spirit and love unites the three protagonists of the novel giving meaning to their existence. Memory helps to keep together the different identities across distant times and places. The flight of memories finds shelter in retelling them, in the commemoration of death and in the reaffirmation of life. Hence, in her poetic journey the author invites us to look constantly for truth, justice, beauty as well as the fullness of our existence.

It is thus the interplay of identity and memory that slowly surfaces as the common denominator of these texts, a complex psychological dynamics portrayed with different attitudes, but all with the consciousness of performing the crucial task of the definition of the relationship between individual vicissitudes and the collective human experience. Hence this project moves from the premise that, especially in our post-modern age, “identity is largely constituted through the process of othering”²² and that :

One can't create a real out of a conditional history; in the light of the simple declarative statement of actual existence, “would have been” or “as if” loses its ontological status. In a way, it doesn't count, though without it, we would have no imagination: we would be truly prisoners of our selves. But the shadow that this conjectural history casts over my real one is not a shadow of regret but of the knowledge – to which we all must reconcile ourselves – that one is given only one life, even though so many might have been.²³

Memory is seen thus as an active and crucial agent in the formation of identity, individual as well as collective. The past interacts continually with the present and the future: it is not simply recalled but re-experienced and re-interpreted in the context of new experiences. However, as the authors seem to warn us, too much emphasis on memory as well as on identity can become a source of danger and confusion. Thus, it is necessary to be aware of potential risks and distortions. The work of imagination is all the more vital here as it enhances reflection, creative as well as critical approach to reality and mutual communication.

People are less likely to savage and annihilate each other when they ask “Why?” instead of “knowing” why, when their minds are not made up but opened up through questioning. Fault for the Holocaust lies primarily with those who did not ask “Why?” soon enough, and long enough.²⁴

Life is a bridge. Cross over it, but built no house on it.
Indian proverb²⁵

²² Cit. in V. Fortunati, R. Moniticelli and M. Ascari, “Introduction” in Fortunati V., Monticelli R. and Ascari M.(eds), *Travel Writing and the Female Imaginary*, Pàtron Editore, Bologna, 2001, cit. p.12.

“What can a return to the original be, indeed, when the original is always already somewhere other than it is thought to be; when ‘stay home’ also means ‘reach out’, and native cultures themselves are constantly subject to intrinsic forms of translation?” (Cit. p.12)

²³ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.241.

²⁴ Michael L Morgan, *A Holocaust Reader: Responses to the Nazi Extermination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, cit. p.373.

²⁵ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Vintage, London, 2005, cit. p.181.

I

A 'SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY':

***ASHES AND MIRACLES* by Irena F. Karafilly.**

What a large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life by him who intersests his heart in everything, and who having eyes to see, what time and chance are perpetually holding out to him as he journeyeth on his way, misses nothing he can fairly lay his hands on.

Laurence Sterne, *Sentimental Journey*²⁶

Adventures, adventures and dreams, narrated mainly by others along the journey, are what the book *Ashes and Miracles*²⁷ by Irena F. Karafilly feeds on. A kind of descriptive guide tour, spiced by and interspersed with a couple of anecdotes. As Sterne would gracely put it, a sort of writing that stems “out of necessity and besoin de voyager”²⁸. Part memory game, part history rubble, part identity puzzle gives the random ‘travelogue’ a taste of ‘art improvisation’. Martin Buber’s words seem indeed to encapsulate its essence poignantly: “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware”²⁹ - he says. In fact, Karafilly seems to follow the saying literally:

(...) I found myself walking up and down a long, vaguely familiar street in Łódź – searching for my childhood home. I say *found myself* because my decision to revisit Poland after some four decades had not been in the least inspired by nostalgia, or any particular curiosity about the country of my childhood. I was so emphatically not à la recherche du temps perdu that Łódź - a city where I spent almost five formative years – had not even been on my itinerary when I arrived in Warsaw.³⁰

The sense of displacement is really acute here. It is to be perceived all along the narrative journey. At every turn of the ‘pen’ we feel the look of the ‘stranger’. A sense of the unfamiliar, of the ‘unheimlich’, of the ‘outsideness’ accompanies us and the author everywhere. The feeling of being ostracised and estranged is hence much stronger here than in the works by other flâneur writers, e.g. in *Lost in Translation*³¹ or *Exit into History*³²

²⁶ Laurence Sterne, *Viaggio Sentimentale (A Sentimental Journey): Edizione bilingue*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 2002, cit.p.140.

²⁷ Cf. Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998.

²⁸ Laurence Sterne, *Viaggio Sentimentale (A Sentimental Journey): Edizione bilingue*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 2002, cit.p. 98.

²⁹ Cit. in Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit.p.V.

³⁰ Ibidem

³¹ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Vintage, London, 1998.

by Eva Hoffman³³. All in all, time unravels time and with all its discrepancies. Thus, no wonder that the author is constantly overwhelmed by its ebbs and flows. Sebald describes a similar sense of temporal disorientation while walking through the villages of East Anglia:

(...) I felt like a journeyman in a century gone by, so out of place that I should not have been surprised if a band of street urchins had come skipping after me...After all, every foot traveller incurs the suspicion of the locals, especially nowadays, and particularly if he does not fit the image of a local rambler.³⁴

In this phantasmagoria of fragments and memories, fraught with dizzying knowledge overshadowed by uncertainty, past and present intermingle incessantly and incoherently, changing directions and purposes. And so do the intentions and thoughts of the author, following the tracks of history:

It was July 1996, and I had come to Poland with the modest plan of researching a novel with a Polish protagonist, only to find myself utterly intrigued by Poles and their turbulent thousand-year history.³⁵

Indeed, Poland is by no way an easy-to-be-understood country. It is “highly perplexing, not to say perverse”³⁶. Its topsy-turvy history and tattered memory constitute a very curious case of observation and meditation. It is thus no coincidence that Aristide Briand, a post-World War I French premier, called Poland “Europe’s rheumatism”, F.D.Roosevelt regarded it as “the world’s headache” and the historian Norman Davies described it as “an immensely complex phenomenon...a puzzle with no clear solution”.³⁷ In fact, the author is constantly taken aback by the innumerable paradoxes in the behaviour and utterances of Polish people:

They seemed in turn euphoric, confused, optimistic, anxious –“trying to adjust”.³⁸

(...) there are, I would soon find out, many ways of putting the question, and a surprising number of seemingly contradictory answers.³⁹

³² Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999.

Karafilly had read this book by Hoffman. She mentions it in *Ashes and Miracles*, see p.50.

³³ Eva Hoffman is a writer and academic. She was born in Cracow, Poland after her Jewish parents had survived the Holocaust by hiding in Ukraine. She emigrated with her family to Canada in her teens. Later she studied in the US and wrote for *New York Times*. She is the author of *Lost in Translation*, *Exit Into History*, *Shtetl*, *The Secret*, *After Such Knowledge*, *Appassionata* and the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Whiting Award, and an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Currently she lives and works in London.

³⁴ Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. p.175.

³⁵ Cit.in Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.V.

³⁶ Ibidem

³⁷ Idem, cit. p.VI

³⁸ Idem, cit.p.V

³⁹ Idem, cit. p.VI

The thread of time sews together the disparate patches of narrative, as Karafilly says. Here and there her personal memories also resurface giving voice to a multifocal novel. The use of dialogue, recorded conversations as well as annotations from her travel journal allows the author to create a highly colourful patchwork of vivid impressions and elusive statements. Most of the social and political issues are thus simply dramatized while her factual research blurs with imagination:

Holding the pieces together is the potent glue of Polish history, the inevitable gaps being filled with personal concerns, experiences, and curiosities about a host of related subjects.⁴⁰

The personal intersects thus with the political, especially as far as the Polish-Jewish relations are concerned. Out of curiosity and in need of a deeper understanding Karafilly brings into focus the theoretic divergences between different attitudes toward the Jewish Question. Moreover, similarly to many anglophone writers of Jewish origin, she regards as her responsibility to illuminate the reading public on the multiple facets of the political and social debate. She writes:

Travelling through Poland (...) I found myself for the first time Examining not only my own attitudes but those of contemporary Poland. Indeed, it seemed impossible not to do so, since the controversial issue of Polish-Jewish relations has, in recent years, come to occupy a prominent spot in Poland's national debate.⁴¹

This, and many such issues, began to seem more interesting, More pressing, than the novel that had brought me to Poland, all the more so as my jogged memory began to yield a suprising number of dormant childhood impressions. Being half Jewish, and having been raised mostly in the West, I told myself I possessed a unique perspective, and it was not long before I decided to put my original work aside in favor of a new, altogether unpremeditated project. For better or for worse, its scope seemed to grow with every mile traveled, every new encounter.⁴²

A simple interest becomes thus a mission, the appetite for storytelling grows with listening to local people's tales. Karafilly's fascination for the twists and ironies of history propels her also on a self-discovery journey back through her own life overshadowed by the Shoah. Visiting various memory sites she tries to face the demons of the past. However, as Hoffman notes, one can only problematize the picture, taking into consideration the

⁴⁰ Idem, cit. p.VIII

⁴¹ Idem, cit. p.VII

⁴² Idem, cit. p.VIII

deceptive nature of memory as well as the impossibility of telling the whole truth. After all, as Hoffman observes, since remembering constitutes a part of identity, one should keep in mind that one point of view saves only one part of ‘memory’.⁴³

All acts of memory are to some extent imaginative; we can no longer reconstruct “the full truth” of the Shoah or of a long and various past. But one thing is sure: the truth and the past were far more striated, textured, and many-sided than either nostalgia or bitterness would admit.⁴⁴

In other words, as Salman Rushdie says, “if history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them.”⁴⁵ In fact, Karafilly gradually realizes that making perfect sense of reality is more than impossible: it is absurd. What is more, the time travel as well as the voyage of self-discovery may result in an even greater confusion and self-doubt. As Hoffman puts it, “to travel toward Otherness, even if it is most ardently desired, is to risk disintegration; it is to lose the firm certainties of yourself”.⁴⁶ The scope of such an undertaking reveals itself as quite simply over-ambitious. It seems that ‘perfection’ can only be pursued but cannot be attained:

I was not merely going to write an enriched travel book,
I was going to try to capture Poland in all its elusive complexity!
If this was a *folie des grandeurs*, it was an oddly Polish one,
born mostly of excess optimism and enthusiasm.
Back in Canada, still working on the first draft, I found myself
remembering François Truffaut who, in his autobiographical film
Day for Night stated: “I always start out intending to make a great
film, but end up feeling grateful if I’ve managed to make a film.”⁴⁷

Or, as Sebald observes, the actual knowledge, the core of reality cannot but elude us:

And yet (...) all knowledge is enveloped in darkness.
What we perceive are no more than isolated lights
in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice
of the world. We study the order of things (...)
but we cannot grasp their innermost essence.⁴⁸

⁴³ Cf. P. Litka, “Ocalanie pamięci: Rozmowa z Evą Hoffman”, *Midrasz*, 1, 1, 2002, p.47.

⁴⁴ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. pp.16-17.

⁴⁵ C it. in Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2002, cit.p.162.

⁴⁶ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.69.

⁴⁷ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.VIII.

⁴⁸ Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. p.19.

I.1. Scavenging for the past

You can take the child out of the country,
my elders were fond of saying, but you can't
take the country out of the child.

James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*⁴⁹

Childhood memories haunt our adult imaginations. They may act as a prism refracting thoughts into flows of narrative. Karafilly's writing of *Ashes and Miracles* seems to have been filtered above all by her childhood recollections and sensations. The trip to Poland takes her back to her five formative childhood years spent there with her family. Although she was born in the Russian Urals and has lived in various parts of the world to settle down finally in Montreal, it is Łódź, a Polish industrial city where she lived up to the age of six and a half, that she considers her hometown, and thus Poland reveals itself to her eyes as the country of her intimate I:

The puzzle, moreover, turned out to include a small and all but overlooked piece: my personal connection to Poland. Having left the country at the age of six and a half, I was embarrassingly unaware of its vast cultural riches and, even more surprising, of its imprint on my own psyche. I was born in Russia and lived in Łódź for about 10 percent of my life, yet Poland – its air and forests and architecture; its humor, obsessions, hospitality – seemed, to my endless astonishment, as familiar as home.⁵⁰

Similarly to Eva Hoffman, for whom Cracow and Poland constitute a paradigm of feelings and sensations, Karafilly rediscovers the once-suppressed memories and emotions visiting the familiar places in Poland and, especially, in her hometown Łódź. These seem to be places of great emotional significance to her where Irena's 'initial self' crystallized and gained shape in relation to the social and physical surroundings. Eva Hoffman brilliantly described similar kind of perception and feeling in her memoir *Lost in Translation*:

How absurd our childish attachments are, how small and without significance... they were the first things, the incomparable things, the only things. It's by adhering to the contours of a few childhood objects that the substance of our selves – the molten force we're made of – molds and shapes itself. We are not yet divided.⁵¹
(...) the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of

⁴⁹ Cit. in E. Rokosz-Piejko, "Child in Exile: Mary Antin's and Eva Hoffman's Versions of Exiled Childhood", in W. Kalaga and T. Rachwał (eds.), *Exile: Displacements and Misplacements*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, cit. p.173.

⁵⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.VI.

⁵¹ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p. 74

our marginality... All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured: no geometry of landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations.⁵²

Why did I write ‘similar’? The feelings depicted by Karafilly are more than vague, actually, they are imperceptible. They ‘come to life’ during her trip and try to take shape on page. The reader gets simply lost reading the travelogue, and so seems to be the author writing it. An appetite for writing, for writing anything, for trying to figure out some sense of this journey back in time. A lack of longing, longing for nostalgia, longing for melancholy to write, maybe “ashes and miracles” intended as a resurrection of feeling:

What does strike me as remarkable is the fact that until I arrived in Poland, I felt no desire whatever to revisit Łódź. It was only the awakened smells and sounds of my childhood – the scent of a dense forest, the sound of a young mother’s Polish endearment - that generated a sudden curiosity, almost a longing, to see Łódź again.⁵³

In fact, memory is so fragile a thing that usually, if not propped with something real, it just tumbles down to dust. As Sebald poignantly observes, “whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable”.⁵⁴ Time can erode soil as well as memory. Or, as Eleonora Rao remarks, “the return figures itself as the discovery of the irreversible nature of the exile...the past, whether of the self or of the land in its social and cultural history, cannot be recaptured”.⁵⁵ However, it seems that at least some tiny details can tease our mind at times and hark our imagination back:

One of my vivid childhood memories is of a Łódź café where now and then I would stop with my mother for an ice-cream treat. It was rich and creamy and served between two homemade wafers whose fragrance greeted us long before we reached the café entrance. There have been a few occasions – in Paris once, and in Montreal – when the fragrance of coffee and waffles excited my dormant senses, but there was no ice cream to be had – only the tantalizing, evocative promise, never to be fulfilled.⁵⁶

The delicious aftertaste of one particular past moment accompanies the author throughout

⁵² Idem, cit. pp.74-75.

⁵³ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.98.

⁵⁴ Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. p.177.

⁵⁵ Eleonora Rao, “Afterword”, in Rao E., *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, cit. p.152.

⁵⁶ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.98.

her journey. Wherever she goes, she looks for the possible revival of the creamy remembrance.⁵⁷ Luckily, on the last day of her visit to Poland, she manages to recapture the past sensation on the tongue, like a Proustian madeleine, a sweet meditation of the palate, that melts time into eternal bliss:

It is a delicious, tantalizing aroma that conveys a promise I find myself inwardly resisting; one I know cannot possibly be kept. But it almost is. My vanilla comes in a cone rather than a sandwich, but the wafer is fresh and flavourful and crisp, and the ice cream itself rich and creamy and so delicious that there is no need whatever for me to disassemble. It is, in fact, the closest I come to Poland to a perfect Proustian moment; one trailing an inevitable reminder: tomorrow is my last day in Warsaw.⁵⁸

It is no coincidence that the taste of the past is so strongly connected to her hometown Łódź. In fact, the city becomes a reference point of all her Polish experiences and sensations. She speaks of her and her family's "unconscious internalisation of Polish culture"⁵⁹. The submerged memories resurface during her 'senti-mental' walks. She recollects her visit to Łódź in a melancholy-like fashion: the falling leaves of past moments:

But in my thoughts of Łódź, it is most often autumn, horse-drawn carriages are rolling down the gray streets, and the sidewalks are littered with yellow leaves, and ripe chestnuts whose fragrance still lingers in my nostrils and will likely do so till the day I die. One of the revelations of my trip to Poland is the tenacity of the prototypes originating in childhood. I was only six when I left Poland, but a Polish fall is quintessential autumn, as a Polish forest, village, and so on. It seems extraordinary that four and half years of one's life should have a more persistent hold over one's psyche than all the years, all the places that follow – than the place itself, for that matter, under adult scrutiny.⁶⁰

The wonder over the intricate structure of the psyche mingles with an interrogation of her own identity. Does she really know her true self or has it been only dormant all these years? Is it the case where autobiographical memory doesn't constitute only a record, but it can function also as a resource⁶¹, and thus the "retrieval is...a process of reunderstanding the experience"⁶²? Does this journey really serve Karafilly's self-understanding, similarly

⁵⁷ Idem, cf. p.290

⁵⁸ Idem, cit. p.292

⁵⁹ Idem, cit. p.VII

⁶⁰ Idem, cit. p.106.

⁶¹ Cf. D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.23.

⁶² Idem, cit.p.100.

to Eva Hoffman's visits to Cracow or Susan Rubin Suleiman's return to Budapest⁶³? Or maybe it is just a surreal fantasy? Hopefully, Sebald's words might be of some help here:

I suppose it is submerged memories that give dreams their curious air of hyper-reality. But perhaps there is something else as well, something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer. A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno. What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience?⁶⁴

Despite all the doubts, the author continues her musings over the history of the city. She shows us around and mentions by the way remarkable personas, such as e.g. the writer Jerzy Kosiński⁶⁵ and the pianist Artur Rubinstein⁶⁶, originated from Łódź and underlines the importance of their links with the hometown. However, the culminating moment arrives with the suspense. The house, the very house inhabited later mainly by echoes of the past or figments of imagination, is to be 'revisited'. The author's anxiety about the state of her former estate grows with every single word she writes:

There is a scene in *Schindler's List* in which a Jewish family is being evicted from their Kraków home – one of many heart-wrenching scenes and, for me, a uniquely startling one: the Jewish family's elegant residence was much like our own postwar home in Łódź. The Narutowicza flat is a place I have often thought about, occasionally dreamed about, and have used as a setting for several recent stories. It is as real to me as any of the flats I have occupied as an adult and, approaching Łódź for the first time in over forty years, I fervently hope it is still standing. I have no doubt that I will recognize every nook and cranny: the spot on the bedroom floor where my mother forgot a burning iron; the closet in which, fearful of bulglars, I hid my precious locket. All of it, if only it has not been demolished.⁶⁷

The paradisiac remembrance of childhood reverberates through the text. Everything from 'that time' is being idealized, aesthesized and 'haloed'. Indeed, as Maurois remarks, "memory is a great artist...for every man and for every woman it makes the recollection of

⁶³ Cf. Eleonora Rao, "It was as if the past had never existed". Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook*", in Rao E., *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, p.142.

⁶⁴ Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. pp.79-80.

⁶⁵ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cf. p.103.

⁶⁶ Idem, cf. p.105.

See also the words of Artur Rubinstein cit. in Bożenna Pietraszczyk, *Artur Rubinstein 1887-1982*, Lodz Historical Museum, Lodz, 1987-1990, cit.p.4: "Lodz is a city which requires from me, in the artistic sense, the greatest effort. This is where I was born, here, are my people and I owe them something. That is why in Lodz I feel the greatest anxiety before a concert. I feel the burden of responsibility, and I wish not to fail the expectations of the public..."

⁶⁷ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.99.

his or her life a work of art and an unfaithful record”⁶⁸. The childhood of Irena appears framed in a pale photograph, where hazy memories are dancing with snippets of time. The angelic pair of neighbour twins may impersonify here an actually ambivalent and divided attitude toward her childish self:

The courtyard I remember is a leafy, cobblestone one, with a pale lilac tree where, one summer morning, a neighbour’s twin girls were photographed, their arms around each other. Dressed in communion white, with floral wreaths on their heads, they looked to my child’s eye like fair-haired angels; an aloof, dazzling pair whose brief appearance began my unwelcome acquaintance with the sixth deadly sin.⁶⁹

Unfortunately the crystal world of childhood fantasy tumbled to pieces, the miracles to ashes. The author could use as well Kundera’s words, “ I have always been haunted by this image...a person finds himself in a world of children, from which he cannot escape....and suddenly childhood, which we all lyricize and adore, reveals itself as pure horror...as a trap.” In fact, the pure image of the past clashes with the grimy facade of the present. The author seems to have been catapulted into a nightmare. Moaningly she writes:

The courtyard is no longer there. It has been paved over and turned into a driveway where a Fiat and a Polonez are parked the Sunday I arrive. There are two entrances, each with a row of ancient bells, and the usual faded name tags. The entrances are unspeakably shabby; more so than any of the Polish blocks I have visited so far and possibly even more than most Montreal slum dwellings.⁷⁰

The memories become suddenly topsy-turvy. The bubble has broken, leaving emptiness behind. It is hard to reconcile to the fact that everything is subject to time and falls short of eternity. The fragility of human mind and work is being constantly eroded by the corrosive waters of oblivion. The writer Thomas Browne brilliantly illustrates the temporal precarity of human existence:

There is no antidote (...) against the opium of time.
The winter sun shows how soon the light fades from the ash,
How soon night enfolds us. Hour upon hour is added to the sum.
Time itself grows old. Pyramids, arches and obelisks are melting
pillars of snow. (...) To set one’s name to work gives no one
a title to be remembered, for who knows how many of the best
of men have gone without a trace? The iniquity of oblivion
blindly scatters her poppyseed and when wretchedness falls
upon us one summer’s day like snow, all we wish for it to
be forgotten.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Cit in D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical memory*, CUP, Cambridge, 1989, cit. p.95.

⁶⁹ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.100.

⁷⁰ Ibidem

Nevertheless, the unpredictable workings of memory may also struck in a positive way. It happens when the author comes across a little gypsy beggar. The girl is holding a can and a placard with a message in Polish: 'I am very poor and have nothing to eat'. What Karafilly notices is the impact of the written language on her self, or rather, on her memory. She drifts away into the realm of fairy tales and recollects the little wretched orphan girl selling matches. Strangely enough, the words on the placard make her pity the child only if written in Polish, converted into English they have no effect at all:

It takes a few minutes, but it gradually comes to me that the child's Polish plea – its Polishness – has catapulted me back to my own childhood, toward my much younger, more susceptible self. It is as shrewd beggar's sign, the other a tender-hearted child in a soft, warm bed, listening with tears in her eyes to a bedtime reading of *The Little Match Girl*. Translated into English, the words on the placard have no power over me; in Polish, they have the force of painful revelation. This in itself is a revelation – the very same words can, in two languages, have an altogether different emotional weight.⁷²

The English words reveal themselves here as abstract entities that have no aura, no connotations; devoid of personal meaning and thus of relevance to the I, they seem bare and arid. They don't thus evoke anything because they don't bring back any memories. As Hoffman would say: "English words don't hook on to anything...(they) float in an uncertain space..."⁷³ The question of linguistic arbitrariness and social codification re-emerges fully here. The 'loss of a living connection'⁷⁴ as far as the new mode of expression is concerned becomes enhanced and counterposed by the memories of the directness and naturalness of Polish. As Hoffman argues in her memoir *Lost in Translation*⁷⁵ that tackles the issue of language and identity in an immigrant's life, only the first language seems to shape us unconditionally. We use it instinctively because it is part of our core-self. Therefore, it 'translates' our true identity. The subsequent languages, on the other hand, need a lot of time to merge fully with our being. Hoffman says:

Some premodern people today still have the sense that their Language is the true language, that it corresponds to reality in a way other languages don't. And it may be that one's first language has, for the child, this aura of sacrality...It takes time before a new language begins to inhabit us deeply, to enter the fabric of the psyche and express who we are.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Cit. in Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. p.24.

⁷² Idem, cit.p.6.

⁷³ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.108.

⁷⁴ Idem, cit. p.107

⁷⁵ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Vintage, London, 1998.

⁷⁶ Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads", in A. Aciman (ed.), *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss*, The New Press, New York, 2000, cit. p.49.

However, in the case of Karafilly the problem of the mother tongue seems to be more complex. She has learned various languages in her life, but only three of them she takes into consideration while thinking of her potential mother tongue: Polish learned in her childhood, Hebrew in Israel and English in Canada. Nevertheless, neither of them feels hundred percent suitable for such a role. In other words, she is totally at a loss when it comes to defining her linguistic belonging:

Polish is not my mother tongue, yet it often feels like one. Though rusty on my arrival in Poland, it is a language I speak spontaneously but imperfectly, and with a sadly meager vocabulary. Having started first grade in Israel, I learned to read in Hebrew, but English is the language of my higher education. I have lived in Canada most of my life, and yet, though English is the language I now think and write in, it does not feel like a mother tongue. I have picked up other languages along the way, but the combination of ease and familiarity and command implicit in the term *mother tongue* does not quite apply to any of them, least of all to Russian, my putative mother tongue and the only language I no longer speak.⁷⁷

What is more, the issue becomes even more complicated when Karafilly analyzes the strange symbiosis of her mother's native language i.e. Russian and the language of her father i.e. Polish. Seemingly, also her mother suffered from a linguistic confusion once transplanted from Russia to Poland after her marriage to a Polish Jew. The picture thus gets more and more blurred:

“So what is a mother tongue?” I asked one of my childhood friends, an obstetrician with a background as complicated as my own.
“A mother tongue is the language you swear in when you're maddest!” she stated with conviction.
But I was not convinced. Given this definition. Polish is not only my mother tongue but also that of my Russian mother, and she started learning it only after her marriage to a Polish Jew. Having come to Łódź at age twenty-five, my mother mastered Polish with remarkable ease and, for mysterious reasons, has clung to its scabrous vocabulary well into her seventies, never once deigning to enrich it with equally picturesque Hebrew or English options.⁷⁸

Perhaps the real understanding of other cultures and oneself is, as Clifford Geertz suggests, “more like grasping a proverb, catching an illusion, seeing a joke (...) reading a poem – that is like achieving communication”⁷⁹? Michael Cronin, in turn, regards ‘exile from language’

⁷⁷ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.VI.

⁷⁸ Idem, cit. p.VII.

⁷⁹ Cit. in Homi Bhabha, *Interrogating Identity*, pp.5-11, in Lisa Appignanesi, Homi Bhabha (eds), *Institute of Contemporary Arts*, London, 1987, cit. p.9.

as a ‘means of communicative rebirth’.⁸⁰ Anyway, at the end, Karafilly opts for the ‘fragmented’, ‘privileged’ condition of, what Said calls, <plurality of vision>⁸¹ that became emblematic of the new, widely aspired, establishment of ‘nomad’ intellectuals.⁸² She presents the reader with an intriguing self-portrait of someone whose life and circumstances (her frequent uprootings and migrations from Russia to Poland, Israel, Greece, and Canada) have helped her to develop a psychological adaptability. This “chameleonism” enables her to move incognito while observing others and to ‘skip’ the geographical borders of identity, concentrating on her own potential as a writer. After all, the ‘self’ is “something too huge and simple for us to see”⁸³. She writes:

Speaking as I do several languages, I have sometimes found myself
In the position of the proverbial fly on the wall. On at least one
occasion – on a remote Greek island – the experience led to a story
I could not otherwise have written. And so, by the time we reach
the train station, I find myself wondering whether I would not in
fact learn about Poland if, at least some of the time, I played the aural
equivalent of “Candid Camera.” I decide that I probably would,
but remain ambivalent. It feels immoral somehow, like spying on
someone through a window, or reading a person’s mail. I remind
myself that art transcends moral considerations.⁸⁴

Moreover, Bhabha speaks about the problem of perceiving others as well as oneself. The mere act of observing and naming entails in itself a disrupted stability of the ego, an elision of the eye, a counter-gaze, ‘a frame within a frame’.⁸⁵ As John Forrester remarks, “the experience of perceiving oneself is now taken to be the most alienating experience of objectness...and most importantly, an experience one deceives oneself about in the search for a unified self.”⁸⁶ The poet Jin Meiling poignantly captured this phenomenon of ‘self-otherness’ and ‘invisible-ness’ in his poem *Strangers in a Hostile Landscape*:

One day I learnt,
a secret art,
Invisible-Ness, it was called.
I think it worked
as even now you look
but never see me...

⁸⁰ Cf. Peter Hulme, “Travelling to write (1940-2000)”, in Hulme P. And Youngs T.(eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.97.

⁸¹ Cit in Eleonora Rao, “Not filled with language anymore:cultural integration in Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation:A Life in a New Language*”, in Eleonora Rao, *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, cit. p.124.

⁸² Cf. M. Levine, “Eva Hoffman: fałszując postmodernistyczną tożsamość”, trans. T. Żukowski, in H.Stephan (ed.), *Życie w przekładzie*, trans. M. Heydel et al., Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 2001, p.262.

⁸³ Margaret Atwood, *A Place: Fragments*, cit in Rao E, *Strategies for Identity: The fiction of Margaret Atwood*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1993, cit. p.72.

⁸⁴ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.15.

⁸⁵ Cf. K.Homi Bhabha, *Interrogating Identity*, in Appignanesi Lisa, Bhabha Homi (eds), *Institute of Contemporary Arts*, London, 1987, pp.5-11.

⁸⁶ Idem, cit. p.6.

Only my eyes will remain to haunt,
and to turn your dreams
to chaos.⁸⁷

Karafilly's trip to Poland offers her also the opportunity to recognize the entangled Jewish threads of her life, as might say Byatt viewing 'identity' as a process of 'cultural knotting'⁸⁸. Also in this respect, the book, similarly to Hoffman's *Shtetl*⁸⁹, constitutes a journey of self-discovery. As she reminds us, Łódź at the time of her childhood was an industrial city that had attracted many Jews, among whom also Holocaust survivors. Her father, a Polish Jew, "grew up in a small town called Kazimierz Dolny, son of a religious scholar named Shulom and Braha, his sharp-tongued, resourceful wife."⁹⁰ He, too, together with family decided to join the hustle and bustle of this dynamic and pulsant town:

My own Polish past revolved around ulica Narutowicza – a long, elegant street in the center of a city whose spectacular growth began with Poland's Industrial Revolution. Having escaped major damage, postwar Łódź began to attract thousands of migrants in search of livelihood, many of them Holocaust survivors. There had been a quarter of a million Jews in prewar Łódź; in the late 1940s, there were approximately thirty-eight thousand. Arriving in Poland with his new family, my father too gravitated toward Łódź, the city where we would live for the next four and a half years, and that would shape most of my early-childhood memories.⁹¹

Karafilly's memory of her Jewish childhood in Poland is always overshadowed by fear and unease. What she recollects are mainly anti-Semitic acts of intimidation and racial prejudice directed at her family's Jewish friends. In addition, the painful memories are exacerbated by the feeling of loss and dispossession. The 'transplantation' to Israel leaves a scar on her being. Moreover, the death of all her father's relatives in the Holocaust leaves a blankness in her family's history. As Bernice Eisenstein remarks, "death leaves a hole that grows covered with longing."⁹² Karafilly recollects:

Since my parents moved in mostly Jewish circles, everyone the knew had lost relatives in the war and all felt intensely vulnerable as news of antisemitic aggressions became commonplace. (...) A friend of my parents – a textile manufacturer who had lost his entire family at Auschwitz – had been murdered in his sleep, presumably for his money. The assault took place barely two blocks away and profoundly shook my parents, all the more when a police search uncovered a hit list of Jewish names, the textile manufacturer among them. Though unrelated to us, the manufacturer had shared my own family's surname, a fact that made the hit list

⁸⁷ Idem, cit. p.5.

⁸⁸ Idem, cf. p.9.

⁸⁹ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, Vintage, London, 1999.

⁹⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.39.

⁹¹ Idem, cit. p.96.

⁹² Bernice Eisenstein, *I was a child of Holocaust Survivors*, Picador, London, 2006, cit. p.11.

seem doubly ominous. It was after this event that my father decided to emigrate to Israel, a move undertaken when I was about six and a half (...) ⁹³

Indeed, the war has made a hole in the author's memory. No more faces in which to retrace one's own. The visit to Auschwitz make the absence more acute, however, similarly as in the case of Eva Hoffman's and Susan Rubin Suleiman's journeys to their 'Jewish homelands', Karafilly's "personal story of dispossession is waged against a generation's history of loss and survival ...What emerges is a strong sense of solidarity, an identification with those who had lived and died in the previous generation" ⁹⁴ In fact, all her relatives and other Jewish people that perished during the war overcast a long shadow on her own life, she frames the ghosts of her family's tragic history into the photos of the Shoah victims that she watches exposed along the corridor walls at the Holocaust exhibition at Auschwitz. Hauntingly, she proceeds in telling her story:

There is not much more I know about my grandparents, but I can't shake the feeling that somewhere, in one of these old barracks, I will stumble upon their faces. ⁹⁵

I have no relatives on my father's side – no grandparents or aunts or uncles, no cousins – not even their photographs. Though I do not know where any of them died, I soon find myself at Auschwitz- I, doggedly looking for them among the countless snapshots. There are long corridors in the brick barracks, closely lined with the inmates' faces. I pause before each photograph and scan the features, names. There are dark and pale faces, plump and gaunt; humble and grim and defiant faces. ⁹⁶

However, as Hoffman notes, the history of one's own family can be of great help in understanding the intricate workings of history general. Empathy should foster not only mourning but also objective comprehension of the events in order to promote peace and to prevent similar atrocities in future:

Family knowledge can be useful in making abstract history concrete and from the stories of my own family, I know just how terribly tangled things could become in the untenable conditions created by the war. ⁹⁷

Nevertheless, having arrived in Kazimierz, the hometown of her father, Karafilly speculates over alternative history of her father's family. She tries to de-dramatize a little

⁹³ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.98.

⁹⁴ Eleonora Rao, "It was as if the past had never existed". Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook?*, in Eleonora Rao, *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, cit. p.150.

⁹⁵ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.39.

⁹⁶ Idem, cit.p.38.

⁹⁷ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, Vintage, London, 1999,cit. p.5.

their tragic lot. Keeping in mind the fact that her grandparents were very religious, she wonders about their possible reaction to her father's marriage to a gentile woman. In fact, as Savran and Fogelman note, there have been a lot of conflicts and inner tension also among survivors' children over the issue of "marrying outside the faith".⁹⁸ Karafilly says:

I recall one obvious question I have been keeping at bay: what would have happened had my grandparents managed to survive the war – to my father, and to his new family? (...) I suspect that my grandparents would have quite simply disowned my father, let alone his impure progeny. When he married my mother, my father did not yet know that his family was doomed, if not already dead; he must have known that his parents would rather *be* dead than to see him married to a shiksa.⁹⁹

Furthermore, the author recollects her father's ambivalent attitude toward Judaism. Strangely enough, it was her 'gentile' mother, and not her father, who paid more attention to maintaining Jewish customs and traditions as well as to her children's Jewish upbringing. She broods over possible reasons for this and looks for some potential explanations. In a way, she seems to be confused over the Jewish aspect of her own identity and responsibilities connected with it:

It was a problem neither of us would ever quite outgrow, rooted as it was in our father's ambivalence toward his own religion. On the one hand, my brother had been circumcised in Łódź; on the other, he never had a Bar Mitzvah¹⁰⁰. Oddly enough, it was my mother who tried to observe Jewish holidays, cooking gefilte fish and matzoh¹⁰¹ balls and berating my father for never going to the synagogue, for playing cards on Yom Kippur. She accused him of having no respect for his dead parents, of depriving his children of a sense of identity and tradition. She was certainly right there and, years later, reminded him of her warnings when - quite unreasonably, I felt – he was dismayed to find both his children married to gentiles.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ As the remark further, in the case of an 'interreligious marriage', the message conveyed by most Jewish parents to their children was: "You will me, or I will kill you, if you do it." Cit. from Kurt Grünberg, *Love after Auschwitz. The Second Generation in Germany*, transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2006, cit. p.42.

⁹⁹ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.284.

¹⁰⁰ 'Bar/Bat Mitzvah' (Hebrew, meaning "son or daughter of the commandment"): Ceremony marking the initiation of a child into the Jewish religious community and into observance of the precepts of the Torah. A boy customarily becomes a Bar Mitzvah at age 13, whereas a girl may become a Bat Mitzvah on her 12th birthday.

Cit. from Ronald H. Isaacs, *The Jewish Information Source Book: A Dictionary and Almanac*, Jason Aronson Inc, Northvale, New Jersey, 1993, cit. p.14.

¹⁰¹ 'Matzah/Matzoh' (Bread of Affliction): unleavened flat bread symbolizing the haste with which the people of Israel had to leave Egypt, with no time to allow for the rising of their bread.

Cit. from Idem, cit. p.19.

¹⁰² Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.252.

What is more, Karafilly at times tries to brighten up the narrative with some anecdotes also from her own family life. An organ-grinder with a small monkey sitting on his shoulder that she comes across at the Toruń train station reminds her of the monkey received from her mother as a Christmas gift years ago in Łódź. The little episode confirms the overall confusion over religious identity in her family home. She writes:

All I know is that my mother bought me the monkey as a Christmas Present. We had never celebrated Christmas before, but my mother – a lively, impulsive woman – must have been swept along by the spirit of Polish celebration. She did not think of it in religious terms, but the monkey came with a small Christmas tree, and I am not sure which of the two shocked my father more, the monkey swinging in its cage, or the decorated tree beside the piano.(...) The Christmas tree had to go; the monkey stayed for some weeks but then, having bitten a neighbour's child, was also given away.¹⁰³

Karafilly's search for the lost memory and identity is thus all the more difficult. However, she may identify herself with, what Hoffman calls, the 'second generation', i.e. "the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is transmuted into history, or into myth", a generation that can "think about certain questions arising from the Shoah with a sense of a living connection".¹⁰⁴ Since the destruction of the European Jewish culture was much swifter and complete than that of any immigrant group before them, the 'stakes of attempted preservation' are correspondingly higher.¹⁰⁵ Thus, as Rao remarks, memory and forgetting are constantly juxtaposed in contemporary Jewish life.¹⁰⁶ Boyarin writes:

Forgetting – of texts, folklore, meaning invested geography - ...the loss of a particular space, of a face-to-face everyday 'community' of those sharing a common culture, is perhaps the smallest of three concentric registers of collective loss. A second is the loss of 'tradition', of set of lifeways...The third is genocide, the destruction of an imagined national collective, the loss of a 'people'...these constructions...participate in forgetting and memory simultaneously.¹⁰⁷

This enormous inheritance of 'transferred loss'¹⁰⁸, and hence, the 'guardianship of the Holocaust'¹⁰⁹, is being passed on to the 'second generation'. The moral obligation of

¹⁰³ Idem, cit. pp.220-221.

¹⁰⁴ Eva Hoffman, *After Such knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2004, cit. p.XV.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. M.A. Bernstein, "Yes, I pray God :The charge against Isaac Bashevis Singer – and the defence", *TSL*, 24 September, 2004, p.19.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Eleonora Rao, "'It was as if the past had never existed'. Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook*", in Eleonora Rao, *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, cit. p.146.

¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise*, in Eleonora Rao, op.cit., cit. p.146.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *After Such knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2004, p.73.

preserving the memory of the Tragedy brings together its ‘members’. They are unified by their circumstances, by the ‘force of an internalized past’¹¹⁰ As Hoffman notes, the sense of such diasporic belonging means also ‘a sort of relief’ insofar it entails sharing the traumatic experience and the moral burden with the others:

We of the “second generation” do recognize each other across Boundaries and languages, and we do have symbolic reference points we can touch on as on common scrolls. The Event that preceded us was fundamental enough to constitute an overwhelming given and a life task. The reference points through which we communicate and recognize each other have to do with our location in the dark topography of the Shoah and with the stages of a long and difficult reckoning – with our parents’ past and its deep impact on us; with our obligations to the past, and the conclusions we can derive from it for the present.¹¹¹

Karafilly seems very interested in, though also, sceptical about her personal as well as collective memory. As she says, “metaphorically, of course, it is altogether appropriate: the past, however assiduously pursued, is bound to remain some what elusive.”¹¹² Nevertheless, memories are what we feed on with our present and our future. What is more, in this respect they can be considered sacred because they give sense to our lives. The histories of our origin, the tales of past events, however inaccurate and vague, help us to retell our ‘selves’ again and again. As Safran tells us:

It is most important that we remember.(...)
It is the act of remembering,
the process of remembrance,
the recognition of our past...
Memories are small prayers to God...¹¹³

Memory. Memory and reproduction. And dreams of course.
What is being awake if not interpreting our dreams,
or dreaming if not interpreting our wake? Circle of circles!¹¹⁴

Therefore, various modes of expression, like e.g. literature and storytelling are of enormous importance here. It can be said that art recycles life as well as life recycles art. They are in continuous symbiosis i.e. they feed and thrive on each other. Lyotard says:

... nothing gets accumulated, that is the narratives must be repeated all the time because they are forgotten all the time. But what does not get forgotten is the temporal beat that does not stop sending the narratives to oblivion...¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Idem, cf. p.XV.

¹¹⁰ Idem, cf. p.27.

¹¹¹ Idem, cit. pp.28-29.

¹¹² Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.106.

¹¹³ Jonathan Safran Foer , *Everything is illuminated*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, cit. p.36.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem.

I.2. Glowing embers of history

History is an extension of memory.
M.White¹¹⁶

If we all pulled in one direction,
The world would keel over.
A Yiddish Proverb¹¹⁷

Ashes and Miracles takes us also on a ‘history tour’ across the ‘brand new’ Poland after the fall of the Communist regime. As the title says, Karafilly, here our guide, tries to introduce us to the perished and reborn, in other words, to the history in the making. As one of her Polish interlocutors notes, “our emblem, as you know, is the white eagle, but it should really be the phoenix.”¹¹⁸ The journey thus has been triggered not only by her ‘nostalgia for memory’ but also by curiosity as regards the past, the present and the future of Eastern Europe, especially Poland. The author tries to verify her memories and expectations in the context of the present situation of the country. In order to do this, she delves into different modes of remembering at a personal as well as collective level. Treating the past as ‘the other’, i.e. inscrutable, she challenges her very notions of identity and home, and, at the same, demystifies her ‘self’. Similarly, as Eva Hoffman in her travelogue *Exit into History*¹¹⁹, Karafilly recounts thus her travels across Poland following the fall of Communism. However, Hoffman undertook two journeys through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria; one in 1990, the other in 1991, whereas Karafilly criss-crossed Poland only once in 1996. As a sympathetic visitor and a keen observer of the changes and attitudes in the de-Sovietized East Europe, she chronicles her talks and encounters with the citizens of the country and revisits Poland from the perspective of the Westerner, pointing to the ironies of the present situation.¹²⁰ In that time

¹¹⁵ Cit in K.Homi Bhabha, *Interrogating Identity*, in Lisa Appignanesi, Homi Bhabha (eds), Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, cit. p.9.

¹¹⁶ Cit. in D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, cit. p.137.

¹¹⁷ Cit. in Bernice Eisenstein, *I was a child of Holocaust Survivors*, Picador, London, 2006, cit. p.77.

¹¹⁸ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.238.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999.

¹²⁰ Susan Bassnett remarks that “women’s writing in the late twentieth century tends to focus more on the relationship between the individual and the societies through which she travels (...) Travel writers today are producing texts for an age characterized by increasing interest in concepts of hybridity, an age in which theories of race and ethnicity, once used as means of dividing peoples, are starting to crumble under the pressure of the millions in movement around the world. Once the gaze of the traveller reflected the singularity of a dominant culture; today, the gaze is more likely to be multi-focal, reflecting the demise of a world-view that separated us from them, and the role of women in adjusting perspectives is immense.”

Eastern Europe underwent a transitional phase, a threshold stage from a totalitarian system to democracy: not all traces of Communism had yet been erased there, the shadows – i.e. memory as well as expectations- persisted, and still persist. Memory obliges by ‘creating’ our past, and thus the ‘re-entry’ of the New Eastern Europe into history cannot but be accompanied by the ferment of memories. In fact, as Karafilly’s ‘reportage’ shows, there is a proliferation of stories and counter-stories, counter-versions of the bad and of the good. As she notes, the aftermath of the system upheaval abounds in various new identity pursuits via the ‘errata’ of the past, which necessarily results in a more fragmented and confused ‘reality’. As Hoffman remarked:

The landscape I saw after the changes was accordingly a mix of tonalities and moods, of calm and passionate conflict, optimism and weariness. It was an eerie mixture of epochs, somewhat like a newly excavated and upturned archeological site, in which the relics from various historical strata have all been brought to the surface in a simultaneous jumble. Eastern Europe today is haunted by its various pasts, pursued equally by its memories, its amnesias, and its willful deletions.¹²¹

In fact, the history of Poland has always been a turbulent and overloaded one. Robert Schumann described Chopin’s music as “cannons obscured by flowers”¹²²; it can be referred to the whole Polish history as well. As Hoffman remarks, history gives depth to our life and renders it unique by the incessant process of stratification and fermentation of memory:

If history goes long enough, the life of a culture and its art start mingling like old, cross-fertilizing compost.¹²³

In fact, the course of her journey Karafilly gradually comes across sharp contrasts of the multiple pasts that cohabit the landscape. Nevertheless, the various customs, traditions, religions, languages seem to have ‘melted’ into one amalgamated society of identity disorientation and political tension. As some of her friends quip ironically:

“The problem with Poland,” says Stefan, “is it’s had too many foreign masters. It’s left us in a state of perpetual disorientation.”¹²⁴

“Imagine this: a Pole wearing a Russian uniform having to kill other Poles wearing German or Austrian uniforms.” I try to imagine

(Susan Bassnett, “Travel writing and gender” in P. Hulme and T. Youngs (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, cit. pp.237, 240)

¹²¹ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.XV.

¹²² Cit.in Irena F. Karafilly., *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.256.

¹²³ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit.9.

¹²⁴ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit.p.2.

it, but end up recalling Rebecca West's statement: "It is sometimes very hard to tell the difference between history and the smell of skunk" (...) "The only good thing about our geographical situation is we have no earthquakes." Stefan's eyes twinkle.¹²⁵

The truth is, so many foreigners have passed through Poland that it is futile to try to guess a person's origins.¹²⁶

Indeed, Karafilly's book reveals to us the hopes and the confusion of the local people, especially as regards their memory and identity. She vividly portrays disparate regions of Poland from an ordinary person's perspective, the sights, the sounds, the feeling in the air of the country. She tries to witness the changes taking place in people's lives with the social transformations brought about by the disintegration of the Soviet system, depicting a portrait of a social and mental landscape in the midst of change. She visits also various ethnic communities that have lived in Poland for centuries, such as the Polish Gypsies, Tartars, Kashubians, etc. Each time she tries to observe their current modes of living as well as the changes they had to undergo during the Communist era. She tells us thus for example about the Gypsies' lot:

(...) Gypsy customs, like their traditional occupations, are quickly disappearing as more and more Gypsies are assimilated into the general population. In Eastern European countries especially, Gypsies have fallen victim to Communist governments' concerted efforts to achieve social homogeneity. Forced in 1950s to give up their nomadic lifestyle, many Gypsies found it impossible to adapt to what came to be known among them as the Great Halt. There were subsequent cases of reported suicide and of many psychiatric confinements.¹²⁷

While making her way from the Baltic to the Black Sea, Hoffman, 'in the footsteps' of Baudelaire's *flâneur*¹²⁸, walks through capital cities, wayside villages and sleepy provincial towns. She is interested in all the aspects of the land- and cityscape: the natural, the built, the human as well as the verbal.¹²⁹ As the author notes, the architecture of Polish cities clearly reflects the strata of history and multicultural co-existence:

¹²⁵ Idem, cit. p.3.

¹²⁶ Idem, cit. p.87.

¹²⁷ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.58.

¹²⁸ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp Verlag (1955), 1974

See also D. Voss, "Die Rückseite der Flanerie: Versuch über ein Schlüsselphänomen der Moderne", in K.R. Scherpe, *Die Unwirklichkeit der Städte: Großstadtdarstellungen zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne*, rowohlt's enzyklopädie, Hamburg, 1988, pp.37-60.

¹²⁹ Cf. Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp.11-14.

One of the fascinating things about Polish cities is the diversity of their architectural offerings. The southeastern town of Zamość, for example, was built by one of Poland's wealthiest magnates but, having been designed by a Padua architect, bears a striking resemblance to an Italian Renaissance town. Old Warsaw and Kraków are reminiscent of medieval German towns, Gdańsk of Amsterdam. Known for much of its history as Danzig, Gdańsk was largely designed by celebrated Flemish and Dutch architects after the coastal city joined the Hanseatic League.¹³⁰

The pope John Paul II stresses the importance of memory and culture for the 'survival' of Eastern European nations.¹³¹ The spiritual heritage and legacy in this region of the world has enabled to keep intact, or even to strengthen, the national identities of these countries. Memory was in a sense the only guarantee of a truthful history. Therefore, there was a kind of obligation in Poland to preserve memory. As Hoffman notes, Eastern Europeans have always attached great value to the historic events that took shape in the collective memory. National identity couldn't have done without it. It enabled also to preserve the continuity of personal memories, and hence contributed to the the construction of the mental selves. Hoffman writes:

There's something about this dedication to the past, this stubborn loyalty to what was cherished and defeated, that seems as romantic to me now as it did when I was growing up here and was being inculcated into the ethos of heroic Polish moments.¹³²

There was an inner necessity of remembering as well as that of catching up with the new. It seems that the entry into the future couldn't take place without some processing of the past, without coming to grips with one's suffering and memories. In other words, prospective memory depends heavily on the retrospective one.¹³³ It was indeed an 'exit into history' that the countries were looking for. It involved the constituting and codifying of new identities. As Pribáň argues, "an indispensable part of this process is the re-entering of ideologies, traditions, and identities repressed by the Communist regime in the emerging public domain and new constitutional documents"¹³⁴, i.e. it called for a selective codification of collective identity. In addition to this, he claims that the Eastern European countries rebuilt their statehood on the basis of historically and culturally shared sentiments of national identity¹³⁵, in other words, they sought to revitalize their national heritage. Thus, as he observes, "memory establishes nation's identity by reviving the

¹³⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. pp.165-166.

¹³¹ Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Memoria e identità: Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2005.

¹³² Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.9.

¹³³ Cf. M.A.Brandimonte, *Psicologia della memoria*, Carocci, Roma, 2004, p.37.

¹³⁴ J.Pribáň, "Reconstituting Paradise Lost: Temporality, Civility, and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Constitution Making", *Law&Society Review*, 3, Vol.38, IX, 2004, cit. p.2.

¹³⁵ Cf. *ivi*, p.411.

common ground and mystery of historical unity”¹³⁶. All these aspects of the rediscovery of national identities in the ‘New’ Eastern Europe have been illustrated and analysed with great insight by Eva Hoffman. She says:

History; where is it happening? Partly in the great rush to the past; a reverse tug of the current. The emergence from Communism is partly a retro revolution...there’s the ongoing recovery of suppressed knowledge of the darkened decades.¹³⁷

And now, in another unexpected twist of fortune, the past, so long frozen in memory, is undergoing a strange revival.¹³⁸

In Poland, the ‘retro revolution’ was tinted with aristocratic and monarchical nostalgia. This country has always been attached to the past values of the Great Renaissance Poland. The cultural heritage, enriched by a strong Catholic faith, enabled the Polish people to resist the oppressors and preserve their national selfhood, although during the partitions, they could only cherish, almost like the Jewish diaspora, a spiritual notion of home:

The Poles have a tradition of tradition, a talent for historical memory - if only because for so long they have to live by it alone. They preserved their identity through memories of Poland, and through a potential ideal of Poland during more than a century of partitions, when the real Poland was virtually wiped off the map. It’s partly where the Poles’ strong sense of themselves comes from – this defiant maintenance of memory.¹³⁹

Indeed, as one of Karafilly’s friends confirms, patriotism and the cult of heroism seem to be extremely important values in Polish culture and mentality. Karafilly recalls ‘Syrenka’, the city emblem of Warsaw, the capital of Poland. It represents a gracious and brave siren that is thought to be the symbol of Polish courage and sacrifice. On her visit to Warsaw, the author describes thus the image:

Unlike Hans Christian Andersen’s graceful siren, or the Russian Rusalka combing her long tresses, the Vistula mermaid strikes a bold and defiant pose, brandishing sword and shield, eyes alert on the distant. She is, my guide tells me, on Warsaw’s coat of arms; a timeless symbol of his beleaguered city: romantic, proud, alluring, but ever ready to defend itself. “All you need to do is read a few chapters of our history and you see at once how appropriate it is.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Ivi, cit. p.417.

¹³⁷ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. pp.30-31.

¹³⁸ Idem, cit. p.85.

¹³⁹ Idem, cit. p.30.

¹⁴⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.1.

On the other hand, though, Karafilly's narrative brings forth the ridiculous aspects of the extreme nationalism and the overattachment to patriotic symbols. Her Polish guides are source of pungent autoironic observations. Their sense of humor and jokes reveal the absurdities of human obsession with history:

As for Kościuszko, I am amazed to learn that he had already distinguished himself in the American War of Independence. "Oh yes, we Poles love great causes," Stefan says, responding to my evident surprise. "They've named a bridge after Kościuszko in New York, and also some kind of mustard."¹⁴¹ Ryszard tells one lampooning Poles' national self-centeredness. A German, an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a Pole are asked to write a treatise on the elephant. The German writes on the elephant's anatomy, the Englishman on a typical elephant hunt, the Frenchman on the elephant's love life, and the Pole on the Elephant and the Polish Question.¹⁴²

Furthermore, as we can deduce from one of her interlocutors' words, history can be not only a resource but, above all, a huge problem. The rich and turbulent Polish history may seem fascinating to a foreign visitor, however, it constitutes the subject of constant debate and dispute in the Polish society and government:

(...) Dariusz makes a vaguely scoffing sound. "Do you really think anyone's likely to be interested in reading about Poland?" he asks. "I certainly hope so," I say. "I don't know," he says. "I can't see what you find so interesting in Poland." "Well," I say, "this conversation is interesting. Your history and –" "Ah yes, our history," interjects Dariusz. "Foreigners are crazy about our history." One day, he tells me, he picked up a fare at the Gniezno cathedral. "A rich man from New York married to a Polish woman. 'Every stone is historic here,' that's what he said to me. Well," concludes Dariusz in a tired voice, "to you it may be historic; to us it's just something we keep tripping over."¹⁴³

It is only one example of the hidden snares of the all too zealous national identity search. In fact, as Bauman argues, it can generate the spectre of nationalism.¹⁴⁴ In other words, "the ethnic self-understanding of the nation as an entity organically rooted and united in common history is indeed politically very dangerous".¹⁴⁵ Hence, as John Paul II warns, one has to be careful not to mistake nationalism for patriotism. What is more, he

¹⁴¹ Idem, cit. p.7.

¹⁴² Idem, cit. p.154.

¹⁴³ Idem, cit. p.244.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Intervista sull'identità*, trans. F. Galimberti, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 2003, p.22.

"L'identità nazionale non è mai stata come le altre identità. Diversamente da altre identità che non richiedono una devozione senza riserve e una fedeltà esclusiva, l'identità nazionale non riconosce concorrenza, e meno che mai opposizione." (Cit. p.22)

¹⁴⁵ J.Pribáň, "Reconstituting Paradise Lost: Temporality, Civility, and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Constitution Making", *Law&Society Review*, 3, Vol.38, IX, 2004, cit. p.419.

sees in the latter a potential antidote for the former one in so far a true love of one's country should harbingers respect and appreciation for other cultures.¹⁴⁶ In Eastern Europe, as well as all over the world, this apparently blurry difference seems however to be continually ignored. As it can be noted, post-Communist state transformations have been accompanied by an upsurge of identity politics as newly-independent peoples sought to redefine themselves and their place in Europe. National unity has proved elusive in practice as new democracies have debated constitutional and territorial-administrative changes to prepare for the challenges of "returning to Europe" while at the same time integrating diverse historical regions and ethnic minorities. Whereas Hoffman's book managed to capture the divergent concepts and understandings of national, collective identity which have emerged as Central and East Europeans struggle to come to terms with the meaning of their statehood today, Karafilly's travelogue points out the absurdities and ironies of the whole political situation and historical memory. The author throughout her travelogue presents the comments of the people she encounters on the clashes of various opinions:

“You know what Stalin said –“ He looks at me for the first time with a glimmer of amusement. “He said, back in '44, that trying to set up Communism in Poland was like fitting a saddle onto a cow.”¹⁴⁷

“And what do you think of Poland?” asks the woman on my right. (...) I tell Lidia it's an interesting country, though a bit difficult for a foreigner to figure out. It's far from clear, for example, whether the majority of Poles are happier now than they were before 1989. “People contradict each other all the time,” I say. “What you have to understand,” says Lidia, “is that we Poles are contrary by nature.” By way of example, she points to Poles' attitude toward the Catholic Church. When religion was forbidden by the state, everyone rallied to defend it; now that restrictions have been lifted, all you hear is criticism of the Church.¹⁴⁸

In fact, the political stands and attitudes of Poles are very disparate and unpredictable. Paradoxically, even a kind of longing for the ‘Communist’ past is common among freshly

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Memoria e identità: Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2005, pp.85-86)

“L'identità culturale e storica delle società è salvaguardata e alimentata da quanto è racchiuso nel concetto di nazione. Ovviamente, un rischio dovrà essere assolutamente evitato: che questa insostituibile funzione della nazione degeneri in nazionalismo. Il XX secolo ci ha fornito, sotto questo aspetto, esperienze estremamente eloquenti, anche alla luce delle loro drammatiche conseguenze. Come ci si può liberare da un tale pericolo? Penso che il modo giusto sia il patriottismo.

Caratteristica del nazionalismo, infatti, è di riconoscere e perseguire soltanto il bene della propria nazione, senza tener conto dei diritti delle altre. Il patriottismo, invece, in quanto amore per la patria, riconosce a tutte le altre nazioni diritti uguali a quelli rivendicati per la propria ed è perciò la via per un ordinato amore sociale.” (Cit. pp. 85-86)

¹⁴⁷ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.70.

¹⁴⁸ Idem, cit. p.136.

‘reconverted’ Eastern Europeans, that can be described as ‘*melancholy of transition*’¹⁴⁹. The situation becomes all the more paradoxical if we consider the fact that many former Communists, now called ‘progressive’, have won the elections in the brand-new Eastern Europe. Karafilly tries to understand the whys and wherefores of such a historical process and its consequences for the people. Thus, many people reveal themselves as melancholic about Communism. They seem to be torn between the feelings of relief and regret about the ‘dismal’ past: the fear of losing the past, and thus of the continuous self, sets in. Ambiguity reigns:

The longing for normality is a compelling one in Poland, though it swings, depending on whom you speak to, between westward aspirations and a nostalgia for a long-vanished Polish past.¹⁵⁰

People do forget, they eventually conclude; how else is one to understand so many Poles wanting the Communists back?¹⁵¹

“Better or worse? Ach, the devil knows.” Pan Śpiewak makes a vaguely dismissive gesture, then offers another popular saying: “Under the Communists, whether you stood up or you lay, you got your paycheck anyway.”¹⁵²

The return to her Polish homeland means for Karafilly strenuous work on coming to terms with her own past and identity. Poland in particular has always held for her a very special meaning, full of positive connotations connected with her childhood. With time, it had become more and more idealized, a kind of ‘lost paradise’ and thus distant and abstract. Negative memories seemed to be restricted only to the external realities of that time. However, the first impressions on her comeback are far from positive. Although the cityscape seems to be stuck in time, her nostalgia doesn’t find its fulfilment in the return; on the contrary, it is intensified by the harsh impact of the raw reality: the prism of childhood is not relevant any more. The conflation of the public and private self, so characteristic of the modern urban novel¹⁵³ where the cityscape results inseparable from self, seems to be upset here, which causes perplexity and unease in the narrator. While the memories continue to flood in, the filter of adult bicultural experience impedes them to soak in. She says:

When my family lived in Łódź, everything was blamed on the war and the Communists: housing shortages and rising crime, low wages

¹⁴⁹ Eva Hoffman E., *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.6.

¹⁵⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.254.

¹⁵¹ Idem, cit. p.13.

¹⁵² Idem, cit. p.85.

¹⁵³ See Hana Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996 p.20.

and high taxes, lack of raw cotton, and malfunctioning toilets. Getting used to the postwar life was what all the adults around me were constantly working on. This is why the color of my Polish memories tends to fluctuate between the vivid shades of private pleasure and privilege and the grimness of external realities.¹⁵⁴

By comparing her personal memories with those of other Poles, she tries to find out to what extent her history is what she thought it to be. Memories, and thus ‘the pasts’, as she will be able to see, are multiple and, what is worse, differ considerably here. Even her own attachments and ‘selves’ paradoxically seem to disagree with each other. Life, and thus history, is too complex to render justice to it by simply explaining its course. As it seems, the reality cannot just be reduced to mere definitions: it should be rediscovered all over again. Everyone has one’s own story, one’s own version of reality. As she notices, the changes have set in with all their lateral effects. As she remarks, “Poland is changing at a dazzling speed, but people haven’t yet learned their way around the new system”¹⁵⁵. The divide between the rich and the poor has deepened:

Restructuring has become the new buzzword in Poland and, while it has arrested the swift decline of the steel industry, it has also brought about massive unemployment. Some fifty thousand employees have been let go in the steel industry, eighteen thousand of them in Nova Huta.¹⁵⁶

“We have Swiss taxes and Mozambique salaries here,”
Dariusz says.¹⁵⁷

Nonetheless, the new capitalist symbols appear in the author’s eyes as denigrating the people’s dignity by rendering it less immune to the decoys of the system. The promised economic paradise turns out to be a limbo, a caricature of progress. The drabness of the ‘scenery’ makes the ‘precious gaudy goods’ stand out and ‘hurt’ the eye. The golden dream starts as a sort of ‘expressionist’ nightmare, and overshadows the future. What she observes is:

The rapid changes in Poland have brought about a new crisis of values. The old days of social conformity may be gone, but so are the old certitudes. Parents as well as children find themselves floundering in the face of growing Western influence.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.289.

¹⁵⁵ Idem, cit. p.51.

¹⁵⁶ Idem, cit. p.28.

¹⁵⁷ Idem, cit. p.242.

¹⁵⁸ Idem, cit. p.22.

The abrupt shift in history and mentality seems to lack correlation with the stasis of physical surroundings. She knows that the change is inevitable but she cannot help comparing and confronting the Eastern past with the Western present. Nevertheless, as the periphery gives way to the city centre some signs of metamorphosis crop up: the process of Westernization has indeed begun. One of her friends remarks ironically:

“Just think,” Stefan says, “the old Communist headquarters a stock exchange now. Who would have believed it before 1989!” When I point, amused, to signs saying Hot Dogs and *Drinki* – a Polonized version of “soft drinks” – he says, “We’re in love, *in love*, with everything Western, even the peep shows and sex shops.” He turns to grin at me and, observing my wry expression, gives a little sigh. “I don’t think a Canadian can understand this,” he says, “but for many Poles, these are the ultimate symbols of freedom and democracy!”¹⁵⁹

Therefore, her most personal motive behind this undertaking is to rediscover her ‘childhood paradise’ as an adult, that is in a more conscious and ‘unbiased’ way before it is lost forever, this time even from memory. Karafilly realizes that the fall of Communism and the following system shift will change Eastern Europe and its inhabitants irremediably. It seems the last chance of understanding the Polish, if not Polish-Jewish, part of her identity. She tries to empathize and identify herself with other inhabitants of the today’s Poland:

Looking up at the dark windows on Narutowicza, I can easily understand the inner state of a surviving bereaved mother seeking her own death while lilacs bloomed all over the city. Perhaps, as T.S.Eliot wrote, April really is the cruelest month; it must have seemed so to many Holocaust survivors, in those first postwar years in Poland. Today, however, what engages my greater interest is the more complex despair of people who have unexpectedly lost the adversary that gave their life much of its former meaning. The old Communists are gone, but I am beginning to see that Polish farmers and old pensioners are not necessarily the only ones nostalgic for their presence.¹⁶⁰

The multifarious Eastern European pasts are being gradually decoded and negotiated. Various roots are being discovered, various stories told and unravelled. The different peoples regain their voices that were subdued in the post-war period. However, as for example the history of the Jews is concerned, the general ignorance, permanence of stereotypes or amnesia among Poles are striking. Pragmatism and the will of survival can be noticed everywhere the author goes. Nevertheless, she recollects:

¹⁵⁹ *Idem*, cit. pp.4-5.

¹⁶⁰ *Idem*, cit. p.106.

Paradoxically, in my mother's case, the process took place despite the fact that she never liked her husband's homeland. A Russian forced to live in Soviet-occupied Poland, she felt decidedly unwelcome in postwar Łódź, all the more as she happened to be married to a Jew. A more fervent anti-antisemite than my father, she was fond of drawing high-minded comparisons between Russians' supposed ethnic tolerance and Poles' alleged antipathy toward her husband's people.¹⁶¹

When I finally give up on the photographs, it is with the wry thought that had this exhibit been organized by the Germans, the photos would likely be displayed in alphabetical order. Nor am I alone in my adherence to stereotype. Just yesterday, a taxi driver told me, "Poland would be in fine shape today if only it had managed to keep Poles for labor, Germans for administration, and Jews for commerce."¹⁶²

All in all, the issue of identity is a highly complex one and it seems that the process of national 'awakening' cuts both ways. The ethical quandary, inherent in all the history, doesn't lack in this case, either. As Pribáň puts it:

...liberalism and nationalism often complemented each other in the modern history of Central Europe. This shows that ethnic nationalism could both serve the struggle for democracy and provide the legitimacy for state violence and ethnic repression.¹⁶³

Karafilly reflects upon the sense of history, upon the legitimacy of the perpetuation of injured memory and upon its adherence to the present situation. She argues that an excessive insistence on identity makes the latter more abstract and elusive than it already is. Nevertheless, as the book shows, people seem to 'need' a notion of 'Other' on whom to project their fears and frustrations. As Constantine Cavafis notes, "And now, what's to become of us without barbarians? These people were some sort of a solution."¹⁶⁴ We read:

"It's like this," says Jurek. "Many Poles suffer from low self-esteem, you see; it's not their fault, but they do. And so they look for someone they can turn on. If it's not the Jews, it's Third World refugees or students. That's how it is.
"At this, Belal smiles wryly.
"The difference," he says, "is that antisemitism is not politically correct any more, is it, while prejudice against Arabs is still in the open."
Here he is right, of course, and not only about Poland.
Having stopped in London, I know that there are anti-Muslim sentiments

¹⁶¹ Idem, cit. p.VII.

¹⁶² Idem, cit. p.39.

¹⁶³ J. Pribáň, "Reconstituting Paradise Lost: Temporality, Civility, and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Constitution Making", *Law&Society Review*, 3, Vol.38, IX, 2004, cit. p.419.

¹⁶⁴ Cit. in Irena F. Karafilly Irena, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.106.

Moreover, as I.B.Singer remarks: "I had often heard my mother and Joshua say that many misfortunes in the world resulted from human boredom. So painful is boredom that people would risk their lives to escape it. Nations tire from long epochs of peacefulness and try to create a crisis, a conflict, in order to start a war. Some men get tired of their family life and indulge in quarrels that lead to divorce. Youngsters from wealthy homes leave their parents and seek out adventures that do them harm. In my father's courtroom I constantly heard tales of human ferocity and madness." (Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, The Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, cit. p.XXIX)

among the English too, fueled by the popular notion that Arabs are either terrorists or oil tycoons.¹⁶⁵

Dealing and ‘undealing’ with the past requires hence a codification of new collective identities, because, as Foulcault observes, “the control of people’s memory is the control of their present”¹⁶⁶ In fact, Pribáň argues that “post-revolutionary constitution-making is always a process of imposed forgetting and the codification of new, constitutive collective memories and identities”.¹⁶⁷ However, there arises the problem of the choice of the most ‘suitable’ collective past. The debates seem to have no end: The process of selecting different traditions and memory manipulations may have serious consequences for our sense of self-perception. In other words, “a person recalls an autobiographical memory, but, if that recalled memory is not recognized as the person’s own it will not add to the person’s theory of self or sense of continuity”.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, as Hoffman remarks, the urge to draw a thick line between the past and the present very often doesn’t go along with Eastern Europeans’ view of their ‘self’. The sudden memory reconfigurations affect deeply and distort their self-perception causing a ubiquitous confusion and fragmentation of identities:

The word ‘schizophrenia’ keeps coming up (...) People talk about how schizophrenic they felt in the past, and about the sense of self-division, of doubleness, that afflicts them even now, or especially now, since the system –ah, they admit it after all! – has changed.¹⁶⁹

In addition to this, the moral judgements on the people’s former conduct cannot be so easily given, especially as far as the Communists are concerned. The ‘guilt’ of the party adherence is too common among Poles and their personal motives too various to be reduced to one oversimplified sentence. The reality keeps ‘swinging’:

“It’s a different kind of society, this sink-or-swim society my grandchildren are growing up in,” she says at length, with a resigned shrug. “It has its good and its bad points, like everything in life. We’re still getting used to it, I suppose,” she adds. Though there is nothing new in this statement, Pani Broda’s last words lead me to reflect that Poles have spent much of this century getting used to changing realities. First there was World War I and its aftermath, and national independence for the first time in 123 years, and the German Occupation, the havoc and destruction wreaked by another war, followed by four decades of totalitarian rule.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.232.

¹⁶⁶ Cit in J.Pribáň, “Reconstituting Paradise Lost: Temporality, Civility, and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Constitution Making”, *Law&Society Review*, 3, Vol.38, IX, 2004, cit. p.409.

¹⁶⁷ Cit.ivi.

¹⁶⁸ D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, cit. p.6.

¹⁶⁹ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.181.

¹⁷⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.289.

Hence, in this respect, identity seems to be used and manipulated not only by ideologies but also by economies.¹⁷¹ As John Paul II observes, there is a danger of losing the ‘long-striven’ status and identity by being absorbed by the global ‘fashions’.¹⁷² At that moment, the New Eastern Europe entered “a brave new age- this ground zero...for a while it will combine the syndromes of poverty with the pathologies of capitalism”¹⁷³ Karafilly’s book makes clear that the revolution was the easiest part of the work that lies ahead of Eastern Europeans. The new situation requires new rules, adequate recipes. While the past, however contested, is behind and irreversible, the future, on the contrary, lies open, which perhaps renders the task more difficult. Now, the solidarity can hold no longer, ‘the talk is all business’:

Money corrupts; it’s a well-known fact,” Pani Broda says. She admits she is very grateful to have all the recent amenities but all the same can’t help lamenting the fact that Poles are becoming more like Americans – obsessed with material things and money. She tells me about the Old Town fortune-teller, all of whose clients used to be women with romantic problems. Now, it seems, 75 percent of them are looking for financial tips and entrepreneurial forecasts.¹⁷⁴

“And have you figured out what it is Poles want?” Stefan asks with half a smile.(...) I tell Stefan they all want the obvious things: the cars and washing machines and stereos – but they want them all without giving up things that people seem to come by only in times of struggle and deprivation. Stefan asks for examples, and they are not at all difficult to name. “A sense of purpose, solidarity, spiritual growth,” I say. “Poles seem to realize that they are on the way to losing something quite precious in exchange for all those flashy consumer goods.” “You mean we all want to eat our ice cream and have it too?” Stefan grins behind the wheel. “Something like that.” I laugh, still thinking about it. The way I see it, many Poles are just beginning to suspect there is no end to want.¹⁷⁵

The journey to Poland contributes to the author’s dismantling of the cherished illusion of the time ‘freeze’ and to the deepening of the divide inside herself, i.e. the rift between her childhood and her present. Poland no longer functions as a mere memories container but it more and more melts into a ‘foreign land’, a ‘question mark’:

¹⁷¹ N. Milani, “Fra identità e integrazione”, *La Battana*, 147, gennaio-marzo, 2003, cit. p.27.

¹⁷² Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Memoria e identità: Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2005, p.171.

“Oggi le due parti dell’Europa – l’occidentale e l’orientale – si stanno riavvicinando. Il fenomeno, in se stesso quanto mai positivo, non è essente dei rischi. Il rischio principale che l’Europa dell’Est corre mi pare sia quello di un offuscamento della propria identità...Esso consiste in un acritico cedimento all’influsso dei modelli culturali negativi, diffusi in Occidente.” (Cit. p.171)

¹⁷³ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.6.

¹⁷⁴ Irena F.Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.290.

¹⁷⁵ Idem, cit. p.292.

What do I think about the way the world is going, he asks; where will it all end, would I please tell him. "I don't know," I confess sadly. "I really don't know." "You see!" he says, turning to his wife at the kitchen sink. "She doesn't know either." (...) "What's the good of all that education if can't answer an important question like that?" he asks. "It's a good question," I say, reminded suddenly of Kazantzakis' Zorba asking the intellectual writer, "Why do the young die? Why does anyone die? Tell me!" When the writer concedes he can't answer that, Zorba gets worked up. "What's the use of all your damn books?" he shouts. "If they don't tell you that, what the hell do they tell you?" "They tell me," replies the helpless writer, "about the agony of men who can't answer questions like yours."¹⁷⁶

Nevertheless, as Hoffman remarks, the 'work of memory' is necessary, no matter how difficult and dolorous it will be, in order to proceed and to progress; otherwise the past will always haunt the present too much and , thus, overshadow the future hampering the development of the self , also because "if we don't always have a conscious conscience, we have a subliminal one, from which the memory of past wrongs is not so easily erased"¹⁷⁷. Hoffman says:

The process of reconstructing the centuries of this story – particularly its recent chapters – is bound to be convoluted and painful. But, as the return of the repressed demonstrates again and again, the work of memory needs to be done before unconscious ideas stop exercising their force, before current reality can be faced on its own terms. Apparently history needs to be remembered before it can move on.¹⁷⁸

In this respect, 'the exit of Eastern Europeans into history' must willy-nilly occurs via the recognition and acceptance of the heterogeneity and complexity of their societies, and hence their 'multiethnic' pasts. It is our postmodern fluid condition that obliges us to such a flexible and tolerant stand. Havel says that "the Lost Paradise has been rediscovered"¹⁷⁹ with all its freedom. Nevertheless, as John Paul II notes, there is also the problem of how to use this freedom.¹⁸⁰ After all, it has been given not only as a gift but above all as 'a

¹⁷⁶ Idem, cit.p.85.

¹⁷⁷ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.244.

¹⁷⁸ Idem, cit. p.92.

¹⁷⁹ Cit in J. Pribáň, "Reconstituting Paradise Lost: Temporality, Civility, and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Constitution Making", *Law&Society Review*, 3, Vol.38, IX, 2004, cit. p.411.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Memoria e identità: Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2005, p.47.

"Se dopo la caduta dei sistemi totalitari le società si sono sentite libere, quasi simultaneamente è sorto un problema di fondo: quello dell'uso della libertà. È un problema che ha dimensioni non soltanto individuali, ma anche collettive...Se io sono libero vuol dire che posso fare un uso buono o cattivo della mia libertà." (Cit. p.47)

task'¹⁸¹ In other words, according to the author, Poles should gain a multifocal perspective, so important for the today multiethnic societies, that is, they should be able to see themselves also as 'Them' in the sense of 'Others'. This painful process of defamiliarisation or self-estrangement seems to be the only guarantee of a successful exit and entry into history. What is more, Karafilly wonders about the possible repercussions of the 'post-identity'¹⁸², nomadic world on the very issues of our 'selfhood', and about the direction the Eastern European identity search will assume. As Hoffman remarks:

The world is becoming utterly nomadic and interpenetrated, even while it becomes more separatist. Perhaps it is precisely the interpenetrations that breed the separatist urge. The odd, reiterated hypernationalism being enacted in some parts of Eastern Europe may be national's identity's last stand, before it gives way to the intermixed realities of our world.¹⁸³

All in all, finding the gist however can be a very difficult, if not impossible, task. Knowledge is in itself ambiguous and, what is more, in continual flux. The very moment we grasp its essence, we have to look for it again.

There's always, in a new place, as in meeting a new person, that moment of whole perception, of sure intuition. Then the certainty dissolves into hundred pieces, and subtleties begin to pile upon ambiguities. It takes many reformulations of understanding to put the fragments together again into something like a whole picture.¹⁸⁴

However, as Hannah Arendt notes, knowing and acting are interdependent since they give sense to human life. History can only find its completion in the continual revision of memory, for the sake of future generations, and thus for ours own:

Action that has meaning for the living
has value only for the dead,
completion only in the minds
that inherit and question it.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Ivi, p.56.

¹⁸² Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, *Memoria e identità: Conversazioni a cavallo dei millenni*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2005, p.108.

¹⁸³ Eva Hoffman, *Exit Into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe*, Vintage, London, 1999, cit. p.361.

¹⁸⁴ Idem, cit. p.269.

¹⁸⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, London, 2006, cit. p.6.

I.3. Pebbles of Memory

...a tribe of stones, a people of stones, an obstinate tribe
which is ever marching and ever shouting and calling
voicelessly. Against the background of native grasses,
trees, nettles and blackberries, exotic Hebrew letters¹⁸⁶
are still talking about those who lived here and passed away...
Anna Kamińska¹⁸⁷

Memory speaks, or rather, it reechoes and retraces the past through the remains of the present. Anna Kamińska, a Polish writer, describing the weathered tombs, compares them to the silent ‘army’ of an exterminated people.¹⁸⁸ Elsewhere, Eva Hoffman asks: “What remains of the Jews in Poland?”; and replies: “mostly traces, echoes, and a few monuments; and also sorrow, rage, guilt, and denial”.¹⁸⁹ How come history made it possible to annihilate all the variegated and flourishing Jewish life¹⁹⁰ in one terrible sweep? The answer remains painfully open...Out of the 3.3 million Jews living in Poland at the outbreak of the war only 300,000 survived, most of whom emigrated. During the war almost the entire infrastructure of a civilization was erased. Thousands of synagogues were interspersed in the Polish landscape before World War II. At present, there exist only about 245 known synagogue buildings, while all the wooden ones were destroyed. A number of Polish towns still have neighborhoods that recall the old shtetl. In addition, there are about 400 Jewish cemeteries in Poland that still have tombstones, however, only 140 of these

¹⁸⁶ The fact that Jews have written a great variety of languages using the same letters across continents and millenia is tremendously important. For Jews, the letters are in a sense alive. They have numerical equivalents suffused with mystic significance. In Yiddish-speaking Europe, small boys on their day of *cheder*, school, would find the letters spelled out in honey, to let them know that learning was sweet. These delicious letters led the way back and forth, across oceans of exile, linking each child with that distant, golden land. *We Jews have many sicknesses, but amnesia is not one of them.* (Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2001, cit. pp.12-13)

¹⁸⁷ Cit. in R.E. Gruber, *Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to East-Central Europe*, John Wiley&Sons, New York, 1994, cit. p.3.

¹⁸⁸ The image of the marching stony tribe may remind here also of the Chinese Terracotta Army.

¹⁸⁹ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.1.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. R.E. Gruber, *Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to East-Central Europe*, John Wiley&Sons, New York, 1994, p.20.

In the mid-1980s, Jewish historian Szymon Datner recalled so the days of his youth: “The world of the Polish Jews was extraordinarily varied, rich, and colorful...Jews made up 10 percent of the population of the population of the country...In large cities 30 to 50 percent. In smaller towns, particularly in the eastern lands, the number of Jews ran as high as 80 and 90 percent. Those were the famous Jewish shtetls...There was complete freedom of observance and autonomy in religious matters, exceptionally well developed education of all types...as well as an enormous number of publications in all three languages: Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish...Literary giants, reformers, thinkers, scholars, and politicians grew up and worked in Poland...(Cit. p.21)

have more than 100 tombstones left.¹⁹¹ Thus, the American Canadian poet Kenneth Sherman wonders:

Poland is overrun
with the ghosts of three million Jews.
...
What is the life-expectancy of a ghost?¹⁹²

Ironically, the Hebrew 'Bet Chaim', that literally means "house of life", euphemistically refers to a Jewish cemetery.¹⁹³ Who knows, maybe memory gives soul to stones. In fact, even when visiting Jewish graves of someone that the visitor never knew, he or she may place a small pebble at the graveside. This shows that someone visited the graveside, and represents permanence. Thus, the stones may also symbolize the permanence of memory. What is more, they are more than a marker of one's visit; they are the means by which the living help the dead to "stay put." Even souls that were benign in life can, in the folk imagination, take on a certain terror in death. The "barrier" on the grave prevents the kind of haunting that formed such an important part of East European Jewish lore. The stories of I. B. Singer and the plays of the Yiddish theater are rich in the mythology of East European Jewry: souls that return, for whatever reason, to the world of the living. One explanation for placing stones on the grave is to insure that souls remain where they belong. All in all, the realm of afterlife is open to hypotheses and interpretations according to the Jewish tradition. Goldman remarks:

Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism has no elaborate explanation of just what it is that the dead do. The whole area of life after death is left shrouded.¹⁹⁴

Judaism believes there is a world of the living and a spiritual realm of those who once lived. Death, the Talmud states in a lovely phrase, is where the two worlds kiss. Everyone must pass from one realm to the other. The image of kiss is a comforting one. Heaven, in Judaism, is not the ideal – the world of the living is the true purpose of creation. "The dead cannot praise the Lord," the Psalmist says (Psalm 115:17)¹⁹⁵

Similarly as Hoffman in *Shtetl*, Karafilly in *Ashes and Miracles* sets on a journey of self-discovery as a Jewess. Moreover, her aim is to activate, brush up and verify the remembrance of the vanished Polish-Jewish community. Thus in respect, Karafilly's

¹⁹¹ Cf. idem, pp.21, 26-27.

¹⁹² Cit. in Mayne Seymour, *Essential Words: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Poetry*, Oberon Press, Canada, 1985, cit. p.143.

¹⁹³ Cf. Ronald H. Isaacs, *The Jewish Information Source Book: A Dictionary and Almanac*, Jason Aronson Inc, Northvale, New Jersey, 1993, p.16.

¹⁹⁴ Ari L.Goldman, *Being Jewish : The Spiritual and Cultural Practice of Judaism Today*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000, cit. p.87.

¹⁹⁵ Idem, cit. p.87.

travelogue can be considered a “ book of memory and about memory – or rather, of and about multiple layers of memory”.¹⁹⁶ While walking the streets of the once Jewish quarter of Warsaw, she enters the labyrinth of memory and gropes for the exit. Harking back in time she gets entangled in her own doubts and apprehensions. The present melts with the past into a maze of kaleidoscopic impressions. She recollects:

My father was sixteen when he arrived in the capital from his *shtetl*, and only nineteen when he escaped to Russia – nineteen! I never realized how young he was in 1939, and though many of the old streets were subsequently destroyed in the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising¹⁹⁷, the thought of his youthful presence in this area opens wider the door that the Gypsy girl’s placard has recently unlocked. I had felt little connection with Poland until that moment, but by now am beginning to suspect the existence of a wider network of memory and sentiment lurking beyond that creaking door.¹⁹⁸

In this first-person non-fiction narrative, which very often assumes the form of a historical and political essay, Karafilly tries to recount and analyse the complex and troubled history and relations between Poles and Jews over the centuries. Thus, the autobiographical tale goes here hand in hand with a social reportage and commentary: in other words, the personal is intertwined with the collective insofar the author constantly confronts her family memories with those of her interlocutors. These parallel story lines may serve to problematize, and clarify at the same time, the already oversimplified and muddled accounts of the Jewish-Polish co-existence.

As was in Hoffman’s case, the aim of Karafilly may be “not to absolve any more than it is to condemn, but it is, at the very least, to complicate and historicize the picture” for the sake of the past, the present as well as the future generations.¹⁹⁹ In fact, the Polish-Jewish issue has always been a very complex example of multiethnic coexistence, especially because there are too many simplifications and half-truths, or lies, concerning this subject. The understanding of this problem is very reductive in North America, which is propelled by mere ignorance as well as unjust, deeply entrenched stereotypes. What is

¹⁹⁶ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.17.

¹⁹⁷ “The conflagration took place following the Ghetto Uprising, a battle that Ringelblum described as “a contest between a fly and an elephant.” Incredibly, it lasted nearly a month, despite the debilitated state of the outnumbered ghetto fighters, and their limited firepower. The ghetto by then held some fifty- six thousand Jews, though in 1941 there had been about 400,000 of them, dying of disease or hunger. After the Uprising, which ended in the suicide of most of its leaders, the surviving population was promptly shot or shipped off to the death camps. And now, Stefan tells me, there are new louts scribbling *Judenfrei* on such monuments. “Our own homegrown skinheads. They vandalize historical landmarks, they assault gays. There’s a new gay disco in Warsaw. They wait outside...well, you see how it is, there’s always an element that’s got to have someone to bash in. Always.” (Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.10)

¹⁹⁸ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.9.

¹⁹⁹ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.5.

more, Eva Hoffman speaks of a similar ‘americanisation’ of memory as far as the whole Western discourse is concerned. As she observes, from American distance the reduction and the abstraction are more likely to occur. Nowadays, there is even a kind of obsession with the Holocaust memory, but it turns dangerously detached and abstract. Since it is very risky and hazardous to simplify very complex human relations to schematic, formulaic judgements, such an approach may result very dishonest and unjust.²⁰⁰

Fifty years after the cataclysmic events, there is perhaps no past so powerfully contested as that of the Polish Jews. The Holocaust in Poland, and all of Polish-Jewish history, continues to be embattled terrain of three different and sometimes bitterly competing sets of collective memory: Jewish memory, Polish memory, and the memory of the West.²⁰¹

In particular however, Karafilly’s journey seems to be a search for traces of a world that in the interwar period, and thus not long ago, was being so avidly discovered by the German-Jewish writer Alfred Döblin²⁰², and for which, at the same time, Joseph Roth²⁰³ already felt a piercing nostalgia. As Hoffman remarks, “in the postwar Jewish imagination, the *shtetl*, particularly for those who never knew it, has become the locus and the metaphor of loss”²⁰⁴ Thus, whereas Isaac Bashevis Singer wanted to recreate through his novels and short stories a lost city in language, Yiddish language, as if it had never been destroyed²⁰⁵, Karafilly, belonging to the ‘second generation’, only attempts at saving the true identity of the ‘extinguished world’ by gathering together scraps of memory and bits of conversations. Throughout the book the author tries to depict the historical background and the ups and downs of the Polish-Jewish dialogue. She relates and comments on her encounters with local people, while Kazimierz Dolny, the hometown of Karafilly’s father, becomes for her the quintessence of the *Shtetl*, and hence of the Jewish life and culture in the interwar Poland:

²⁰⁰ Cf. P.Litka, “Ocalanie pamieci: Rozmowa z Evą Hoffman”, *Midrasz*, 1, 1, 2002, pp. 46-47.

²⁰¹ Eva Hoffman E., *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.3.

²⁰² Cf. Alfred Döblin, *Reise in Polen*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München, 2000.

²⁰³ Cf. Joseph Roth, *Orte: Ausgewählte Texte*, Reclam Verlag, Leipzig, 1990.

²⁰⁴ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.11.

²⁰⁵ Cf. Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Partitioned Cities: Spatial and Temporal Walls: Issac Bashevis Singer’s Warsaw, *The Family Moskat*” in Wirth-Nesher H., *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp.29-30.

Singer says: “Yiddish literature...is a product of the (European) ghetto with all its virtues and faults, and it can never leave that ghetto”, otherwise it becomes “a caricature of language”. Jewish life in America, on the other hand, is not representable in Yiddish. Thus, according to him, it is “far better to be a memorialist of the obliterated world in which Yiddish had flourished than to imitate the mongrelized ‘potato Yiddish’ of American speech”. (Cit. from M.A. Bernstein, “Yes, I pray God :The charge against Isaac Bashevis Singer – and the defence”, *TSL*, 24 September, 2004, p.19)

In Kazimierz, I can't stop thinking about them. I have been in many Polish towns famous for their prewar Jewish communities but none, not even nearby Lublin, immortalized by I.B.Singer, seemed to me so powerfully haunted. The fact that this was my father's *shtetl* may have something to do with it, of course, but Kazimierz's atmosphere is the stronger reason.²⁰⁶

"So Poles had friends among the Jews?" I ask, looking into her faded blue eyes. "What a question!" says Pani Wiatr. "They lived in Kazimierz for centuries, did the Jews. Some of us – even my father-in-law – learned to speak Yiddish." She waits for this to sink in, then surprises me by saying they often attended each other's weddings, in church and in synagogue. "Sometimes Jews would even come to church with us on Christmas Eve, dear Lady." "The Jews would go to church? I echo, incredulous. "Some of the young ones, madam, just to be with their Polish friends."²⁰⁷

"But I 'll tell you one thing – many Poles will confirm this: the life went out of Kazimierz after it lost its Jews. It's been regaining its vitality in recent years, but after the war, it...well, it just seemed to have lost its soul."²⁰⁸

Thus for Karafilly, 'shtetl', here exemplified by Kazimierz, contains very personal connotations as her family history owns very much to it. She feels internally a part of it. Nevertheless, because or in spite of, realizing her double and inextricable origin, Karafilly reveals to be confused as regards her own feelings. She feels nostalgic and nurtures a deep attachment to her Polish past, but, on the other hand, is horrified by what happened to her family on this land. She seems torn between attraction and repulsion:

It is a stunning, ineffably poignant monument that puts me in mind of the Wailing Wall. For the second time in Poland, I find myself wishing I believed in prayer, though I'm not at all sure what it is I would be praying for, unless it is for my Jewish grandparents' forgiveness. Yom Kippur, after all, is the Jewish Day of Atonement and, by tradition, a day on which antagonists are expected to seek reconciliation. It is only three days away, and I'd like to think that after half a century, my grandparents could find it in themselves to forgive their only son. Even more, that he would forgive himself.²⁰⁹

There was, in prewar Kazimierz Dolny, an old Jewish legend which had it that every year, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the town's synagogue would light up suddenly on the stroke of midnight, echoing with prolonged lament. This, according to the legend, marked the annual assembly of Jewish souls who had died unnatural deaths. It is a week before Yom Kippur when I finally visit my father's hometown, to find the synagogue housing a Polish cinema. I have seen Jewish synagogues converted into everything from banks to swimming pools in Poland (...) But it is an unlikely venue for a phantom congregation, and much too small nowadays: three thousand local Jews died in the Nazi death camps, my father's entire family among them.²¹⁰

²⁰⁶ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.271.

²⁰⁷ Idem, cit. pp.281-282.

²⁰⁸ Idem, cit. p.277.

²⁰⁹ Idem, cit. p.284.

²¹⁰ Idem, cit. p.270.

Nevertheless, the most shocking experience for the author seems to be the travel and the visit to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. The ‘trip’ constitutes a kind of obligatory voyage into the ‘heart of darkness’ where nature reveals itself in all its monstrous indifference to human suffering. All the environment, including the museum halls, is enveloped in an aura of terror and surreality that transcends the mind:

Wearing sandals and dark dress, I stand in a long queue; then, speaking Polish, say the improbable words, “One-way to Auschwitz, please.”
I say *one-way* because the schedule makes a return by bus more convenient. *Auschwitz*, I say, and no one blinks and winces. Just another name on an ever-changing map.²¹¹

...a trip to Auschwitz is a pilgrimage to the realm of the unbelievable, mental surrender which perhaps explains the almost-hallucinatory moment I experience on getting of the railway station.²¹²

True, the light is excellent, the pots enormous, but is that enough? It probably is, but standing here, on the edge of Auschwitz, these prodigious plants seem oddly macabre; a row of robust but portentous sentries on the threshold to a nightmare.²¹³

It all engulfs the author in her dark musings and soliloquies on cruelty in life as well as on the ‘warped vision – the human capacity for self-deception’²¹⁴ She wonders about the limits of human morality and resistance to evil, and, above all, the fragility and incoherence of human mind. She writes:

When all is said and done, it is not all that difficult to shut out the knowledge of others’ pain; to silence, when it suits us, even an exigent conscience.²¹⁵

The grim relevance of all this pounces on me as I make my way back toward the Auschwitz barracks. What troubles me above all is the bald that any issue is open to rationalization, the insidious process through which we reach moral compromise, often abetted by society.²¹⁶

What strikes and disturbs her most is the fact that even highly intelligent and civilized people can go to such extremes, out of sheer egoism, in order to achieve their goals. The perversity of human minds and will to survive can erase any human dignity and shame. She asks on behalf of all the human species:

And yet we ask – how can we not ask, visiting Auschwitz – how intellectual giants like Heidegger fell in with the Nazis; how thousands of ordinary, decent people could go about their everyday lives seemingly unperturbed by others’ agony. The answer, as Sir

²¹¹ Idem, cit. p.37.

²¹² Idem, cit. p.38.

²¹³ Ibidem.

²¹⁴ Idem, cit. p.41.

²¹⁵ Ibidem

²¹⁶ Ibidem

Isaiah Berlin suggested, is not to be found in the common depiction of the Nazis as mad, pathological cases, but rather in the diabolically successfully brainwashing of a normal populace persuaded that Jews were a subhuman species inimical to their own survival. Certainly, any reader of Nazi diaries is bound to be struck by the pervasive sense of moral rectitude.²¹⁷

Or, as John Betjeman simply and poignantly asks, “After two thousand years of mass /We’ve got as far as poison gas?”²¹⁸ Furthermore, Karafilly wonders about the proper way of passing the dreadful knowledge to the future generations. There seems to be no way out. The omnipresence of cruelty is to be noticed everywhere, starting from the ‘petty crimes’ on animals:

How old *should* our children be before we acquaint them with life’s ultimate horrors? When my daughter was small, I could not even bring myself to tell her that an animal had been slaughtered so she could enjoy her favorite lamb chops. It seemed such a shameful secret, the suffering inflicted on helpless animals.²¹⁹

In fact, for I.B.Singer man’s cruelty constitutes the most fundamental question in life. The mystery of cruelty and pain permeates all his doubts and writings. The search for an answer to this question seems never-ending. Life and death, joy and pain seem to reflect in each other. The only solution of lesser evil, for him, seems to be an ‘ethic of protest’²²⁰:

Why all the research? I had suspicion that the philosophers pretended, masked their ignorance behind Latin and Greek phrases. Besides, it seemed to me that they skirted the main issues, the essence of things. The question of questions was the suffering of creatures, man’s cruelty to man and to animals. Even if it provided answers to all the other questions but this one, philosophy would still be worthless. Those were my feelings then, and those are my feelings still.²²¹

²¹⁷ Ibidem.

Moreover, Hannah Arendt regards the inability to think as the main factor responsible for the capability of evil deeds:

I spoke about “the banality of evil” and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behaviour during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think. (Arendt H., *Responsibility and Judgment*, Schocken Books, New York, 2003, cit. p.159)

²¹⁸ John Betjeman, *Tennis Whites and Teacakes*, John Murray, London, 2007, cit. p.431.

²¹⁹ Irena F. Karafilly *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.40.

²²⁰“All I can do is to the best of my limits treat people and animals in a way I consider proper. I had, one might say, created my own basis for an ethic - not a social ethic nor a religious one, but an ethic of protest. This ethic of protest, I told myself, existed in all people, in all animals, and in everything that lived and suffered. Even the evildoers protested when things started going badly for them and other malefactors did to them what they had done to others.” (I.B. Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, The Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, cit. p.45)

²²¹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, The Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, cit. p.31.

(...) all my ruminations came smack up against the exasperating
enigma of eternity and infinity and against the even deeper mystery
of suffering and cruelty.²²²

Karafilly, however, seems to find some potential solution to the problem of evil in the words of her interlocutor Zofia Russak. Doubt fights doubt. Too much certainty may bring about disaster and pain. 'Doubt yourself' as a motto for future generations:

Russak is too young to remember the war, but her parents often speak of it, she tells me. Her sons, on the other hand, are tired of the subject. "You can teach kids their ABCs," she says, "but not the lesson of history."
"What is the lesson, exactly?" I ask.
"Doubt yourself." Russak brushes cookie crumbs off her skirt. "Doubt yourself?"
"Your cause, anyway," says Russak, reminding me of Bertrand Russell who, on being asked whether he would die for his beliefs, exclaimed: "Good God, no! I might be wrong after all!" "So you think Hitler –"
"Not only Hitler," she interjects with a didactic shake of her head. "The worst slaughters were committed in the name of some worthy cause, no?" She gives me a grave, penetrating look. "Yes," I say; then, "my father's family perished in the war."²²³

Or, as W.H. Auden would gracefully put it:

Yet ideas can be true, although men die:
For we have seen a myriad faces
Ecstatic from one lie.²²⁴

Nevertheless, the question of appropriateness of expression remains. The role of writer in the process of keeping memory alive is a highly controversial issue. The tragedy and suffering implicit in the Holocaust²²⁵ seem too immense to describe and to contain. Marrus e.g. mentions three kinds of concerns over the Shoah in academic writing: incompleteness, inaccuracies, fear of revision.²²⁶ Moreover, as Elie Wiesel remarks, "Auschwitz defies imagination and perception; it submits only to memory...I write to denounce writing. I tell

²²² Idem, cit. p.33.

²²³ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. pp.38-39.

Sebald may add: "If we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end, I thought, as we crossed the coastline and flew out over the jelly-green sea." (Winfried Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. p.92)

²²⁴ W.H.Auden, *Sonnets from China*, 228, cit. in Jon Stallworthy, *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984, cit. p.302.

²²⁵ "The term Holocaust, widely used since the 1960s, may originally have reflected such preoccupations and serves now to separate this particular massacre from other historical instances of genocide. Holocaustos, we are reminded, comes from the third century B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament, signifying "the burnt sacrificial offering dedicated exclusively to God." (Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, Meridian, New York, 1987, cit. p.3.)

²²⁶ Cf. Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, Meridian, New York, 1987, p.3

of the impossibility one stumbles upon in trying to tell the tale.”²²⁷ In fact, Karafilly makes a similar observation:

It is thought of this scene, its power to shock, that eventually leads me to an inner articulation of what has been bothering me. Simply and brutally put, it is the awareness that Auschwitz, a fifty-year-old metaphor, has gradually become a grim cliché. This may seem an offensive observation to some, and an obvious one to others; to me, it is underscored, and made intolerable, by the presence of flesh-and-blood survivors in this haunted landscape. And there is something else, equally disconcerting: one cannot write about the horrors of Auschwitz any more. One can only write about the difficulty of trying.²²⁸

What is more, Karafilly defies the law of silence in defending the redemptive power of art. She argues that art, as a form of expression of the pain, may assuage and soothe it. Art doesn't attempt at eliminating suffering but only at elaborating it, giving it a sense and making life still worth living. She writes:

I imagine all this, and an old Holocaust poem echoes in my head, vying with theologian Michael Wyschogrod's words: "It is forbidden to make art out of the Holocaust because art takes the sting out of suffering." To be sure, but is there any virtue in perpetuating suffering? Haven't people often turned to art precisely in order to make the unbearable less so?²²⁹

Furthermore, Karafilly investigates the whys and wherefores of the various modes of human behaviour and attitudes in order not to condemn but to understand. Nevertheless, the sharp contrast between the two notions of Poland in the Jewish memory: the prewar 'promised land'²³⁰ and the post-Holocaust "heart of darkness"²³¹, confirms numerous twists as well as incongruencies typical of all collective memories. Thus, as Paul Ricoeur observes, remembering in itself is a collective experience, because people's memories influence and reinforce each other, and thus they are interdependent, however never fully dependable. This, in turn, may reveal very dangerous insofar it perpetuates biases, stereotypes and prejudices, all inherent in nationalisms.

²²⁷ Idem, cit. p.3.

²²⁸ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.45.

²²⁹ Idem, cit. p.46.

²³⁰ Hoffman notes that the Jews believed that the word 'Poland' was the translation of the Hebrew 'polin', which means 'here thou shalt lodge' in exile. Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, p.10.

²³¹ "In postwar Jewish memory in the minds of many Holocaust survivors and their descendants, Poland has come to figure as the very heart of darkness, the central symbol of inferno." (Idem, cit. p.3)

Hence, as Phillips remarks in his books²³², blood both unites and separates people fostering tribalism (that comprises also nationalisms), which in turn enhances intolerance. Hoffman argues, that the Jews have been “Europe’s archetypal Other” even though they were never completely absent or unfamiliar.²³³ Or, as Eisenstein Bernice ironically puts it:

They were born under an unfavourable star and forced
to sew it onto their clothing.²³⁴

Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin note that the history of the Jewish nation is that of exile; “Israel was born in exile”²³⁵, they say, because “the biblical history is not one of autochthony but one of always already coming from somewhere else”²³⁶, and thus, “Isrealite and Jewish religion is perpetually an unsettlement of the very notion of autochthony”²³⁷. Therefore, as Steiner observes, the Jew “has his anchorage not in place but in time”²³⁸ The Jewish identity relies above all on memory, on the memory of a spiritual home situated somewhere in the past. Safran writes in his wonderful memoir:

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing....memory.
...for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin,
or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from
the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other
pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks
- when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was
in it, when his grandfather’s fingers fell asleep from stroking
his great-greatfather’s damp forehead, when Abraham tested
the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that
the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters
a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like?*²³⁹

This inclusive-exclusive vision was often the cause of their, not rarely voluntary, insulation that led, as Zygmunt Bauman remarks in his work *Modernity and Holocaust*, to “the production of distance”²⁴⁰ on the other side. Hoffman writes:

The Jews have had the most prolonged historical experience of collective exile: but their survived their Diaspora – in the sense of preserving and maintaining their identity – by nurturing a powerful idea of home...home consisted of the entity “Israel”, which increasingly became less a geographic and a more a spiritual territory...²⁴¹

²³² See e.g. Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood*, faber and faber, London, 1998. or Phillips C., *The European Tribe*, Vintage, London, 2000.

²³³ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.26.

²³⁴ Bernice Eisenstein, *I was a child of Holocaust Survivors*, Picador, London, 2006, cit. p.53.

²³⁵ D.Boyarin and J.Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity”, *Critical Inquiry*, 4, Vol.19, Summer, 1993, cit. p.718.

²³⁶ Idem, cit. p.715.

²³⁷ Cit.ivi.

²³⁸ Cit.in B.Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2002, cit. p.146.

²³⁹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is illuminated*, Penguin Books, London, 2003, cit. pp.198-199.

²⁴⁰ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, Ithaka, New York, 1995.

Jews in their long Diaspora, the need to preserve the symbolic center
...to keep intact a vision of a lost paradise and a promised land – often
led them to insulate themselves...²⁴²

The most salient example of such a separateness can constitute the ‘shtetl’, where the Jewish culture flourished and where “the two halves of the town (Polish and Jewish) lived side by side, but in a state of considerable ignorance of one another”²⁴³ Moreover, Jews were in Poland the most ‘Significant Other’, i.e. the largest minority, and thus the Polish anti-Semitism, in contrast to the German one, didn’t contain biological racism and total dehumanisation but it had the face of the neighbour. Hence, the Jewish collective bias against Poles springs from personal grudges against individual and concrete people. The Polish memory, too, seems to have been distorted and fossilized, out of fear as well as for political reasons²⁴⁴. Karafilly writes:

“The good thing”, says Hania, “is that antisemitism is no longer respectable in Poland. It’s condemned in the media every day.” This, she is quick to add, does not mean, of course, that there is no antisemitism in Poland. “But to tell the truth, I am not at all sure that Poland was ever more antisemitic than other nations.” She points out that there were far more Jews living in Poland than in other countries – and perhaps, therefore, more frequent reports of open hostility? “Did you know,” she asks, “that Warsaw alone had more Jews before the war than all of France, for example?”²⁴⁵

What is more, as we Karafilly’s ‘local interviews’ show, the Cold War affected negatively the Polish-Jewish contacts by memory manipulation or simply silencing. Nowadays, after the fall of Communism, she observes an ever-growing interest in , and thus debate on, the ‘Polish-Jewish problem’ There is also a sort of rediscovery of the Jewish identity in Poland. Indeed, in a very literal meaning of the word, many Polish people have been discovering their Jewish origin. However, the collapse of Communism meant also a return of anti-Semitic notions. The ‘need’ of a ‘common enemy’, that could substitute ‘Them’, prevailed. Democracy, and thus freedom of speech, let the old fears out of the ‘Pandora

²⁴¹ Eva Hoffman, “The New Nomads”, in A. Aciman (ed.), *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss*, The New Press, New York, 2000, cit. p.41.

²⁴² Ivi, p.53.

²⁴³ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.106.

²⁴⁴ “...si può dire che la memoria sia minacciata, come è accaduto nella politica, ad opera dei regimi totalitari che hanno esercitato una vera e propria censura sulla memoria. In questo modo la manipolazione passa attraverso l’uso perverso della selezione stessa posta al servizio di un capovolgimento dell’ingunzione diretta contro l’oblio”

Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare: L’enigma del passato*, trans. N. Salomon, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004, cit. p.82.

²⁴⁵ Irena F.Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.94.

box'. The prewar grudges emerged anew. The confrontation of different memories and the work of memory has begun:

The truth is that only a small minority of Poles ever murdered Jews, and another minority risked their lives for them. In postwar polemics, however, each minority has been pushed forward as representative of the entire Polish nation. It is interesting to note in this regard that Simon Wiesenthal, whose life was saved by Poles during the war could have done so without at least some small measure of assistance from a Pole.²⁴⁶

(...) though the number of self-declared Jews is small in Poland, there are probably thousands of Poles today with at least some Jewish blood in their veins. If this is true, it may explain the Polish tendency to suspect anyone and everyone of being a closet Jew.²⁴⁷

As you know, during Communism, ethnicity was supposed to be irrelevant and - well, the whole question of antisemitism was swept under the rug. Now – turn on the radio or the TV, or open the newspaper: the Jewish Question is discussed all the time.²⁴⁸

Thus, in both cases, Polish and Jewish, the manipulation of memory occurs via selection, insulation and perpetuation of particular memories. All this is accompanied by a sort of 'moral war' which consists in an exchange of accusations, where exaggeration and denial get often the upper hand. The Poles tend to perceive the Jewish people as too detached and consider their statements an 'attack on their country and its ideals', while the Jews decode the whole Polish-Jewish past as an 'agon between oppressors and victims'.²⁴⁹ In fact, the defensive attitude is what the author notes in most of her encounters with people.

Any compassion Poles had felt following the Holocaust was dissipated
When Jews assumed power under the Soviets.²⁵⁰

I ask Hania how *her* family felt about the marriage, and she shrugs, saying there was little hope of her marrying a Jew. There are so few to choose from and very few to maintain Jewish traditions. Most Polish Jews still don't acknowledge their Jewishness, she tells me. Hania herself did not know she was Jewish until she turned fifteen. Her parents decided to put off telling her because a neighbor's son had committed suicide, having been taunted at school for being openly Jewish.²⁵¹

Hania: "After all these years, it's still impossible for Jews and Poles to have a.. how shall I put this...natural – an unburdened – relationship. There are many, many people of good will in Poland, but in the past...well, it just keeps getting in the way."²⁵²

²⁴⁶ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.92.

²⁴⁷ Idem, cit. p.180.

²⁴⁸ Idem, cit. p.94.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, pp.14-15.

²⁵⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.266.

²⁵¹ Idem, cit. p.94.

²⁵² Idem, cit. p.95.

Thus, the lacunae in collective consciousness have been also enforced by mere ignorance propelled by the perpetuation of frozen schemata, biases and prejudices. Nevertheless, as Hoffman argues, Polish anti-Semitism should be read as the ‘paradigm of all prejudice’ as the Jews were ‘Poland’s paradigmatic Other’²⁵³, even though sometimes the prejudice gets turned playfully upside-down:

“Why is madam so interested in Jews?” he asks.
“Oh,” I say, “I’m interested in everything. I’m just trying to understand Poland.”
“What’s there to understand?” he says. “We Poles were the Jews’ blacks – it’s as simple as that. Only we were in our own country – we let them in and let them do it to us. That’s what we can’t forget! That’s what you must tell your readers!”²⁵⁴

Thus, perhaps it might be easier to understand some Polish-Jewish conflicts examining them “in terms of majority-minority relations rather than exclusively under the category of anti-Semitism”²⁵⁵ What is more, many of Karafilly’s friends underline the importance of self-scrutiny, empathy, responsibility and forgiving because only in this way one can move into the future and commemorate the ones who passed away. Future generations should not inherit hatred and eternal grudges but a sense of brotherhood and solidarity in order to be able to appreciate various cultures as well as their own:

One of the things that steams her up...is people’s blindness to their own double standards, the Jews’ included. Israel is a perfect example of what bothers her. Why is it, she asks, that Arabs fighting for a free homeland are terrorists, while postwar Jews fighting the British mandate in Palestine are to this day seen as heroic?²⁵⁶

It seems that there can be no peace without transforming aggressive memory into remembrance where, as Ricoeur remarks, ‘active forgetting’ triggers a work of memory, and thus fosters reconciliation with the others as well as with one’s self.²⁵⁷ The author, above all, stresses the importance of a mutual open and honest dialogue that could overcome the barriers of isolation of different memories. To my mind, however, Hoffman means here transforming aggressive memory in remembrance where, as Ricoeur remarks,

²⁵³ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, p.253.

²⁵⁴ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.279.

²⁵⁵ Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World*, Vintage, London, 1998, cit. p.11.

²⁵⁶ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.267.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare: L’enigma del passato*, trans. N. Salomon, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004, p.103.

“...l’oblio riveste un significato positivo nella misura in cui l’<essente- stato> prevale sul <non essere più>, nel significato legato all’idea del passato. L’essente stato fa dell’oblio la risorsa memorabile offerta al lavoro della memoria. La scelta di *Gewesenheit*, preferito a *Vergangenheit*, è sotto questo aspetto decisiva.”(Cit. p.103)

‘active forgetting’ triggers a work of memory, and thus fosters reconciliation with the others as well as with one’s self.²⁵⁸ We read:

(...) Olga and Marek decided to name her Irena – not exactly *after* me but certainly because of me. I am reminded that on that first day in Krakòw, talking about names over our Greek dinner, I happened to tell them how delighted I had been to find, on first arriving in Greece, that my name meant *peace*. “We decided we liked that.” Olga chuckles into the telephone. “We couldn’t think of a better name for a child facing our second millenium. Can you?”²⁵⁹

After all, “a Jew can’t live without miracles.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare: L’enigma del passato*, trans. N. Salomon, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004, p.103.

“...l’oblio riveste un significato positivo nella misura in cui l’<essente- stato> prevale sul <non essere più>, nel significato legato all’idea del passato. L’essente stato fa dell’oblio la risorsa immemorabile offerta al lavoro della memoria. La scelta di *Gewesenheit*, preferito a *Vergangenheit*, è sotto questo aspetto decisiva.”(Cit. p.103)

²⁵⁹ Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998, cit. p.293.

²⁶⁰ Cit. in Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2001, cit. p. 257.

II
**‘OUT OF TIME, OUT OF MIND’:
TRICKS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN
Irena Karafilly’s *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat***

All sorrows can be borne if you put them
into a story or tell a story about them.²⁶¹

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
And the treasures that prevail.

Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck*²⁶²

Clinging too tight to the past may let the present slip through one’s fingers; not being able to remember, however, may precipitate one into ‘someone else’s dream’²⁶³. The ongoing dilemma of the strategies of memory for maintaining one’s identity seems to be salient in all autobiographical narrative. Every reference has a relative meaning, but also every relativity needs a point of reference. While identity feeds on memory, memory is nurtured by identity. Autobiographical memory doesn’t constitute only a record, but it can function also as a resource²⁶⁴, and thus the “retrieval is...a process of reunderstanding the experience”.²⁶⁵ The memory traces²⁶⁶ of the shock run so deep that the codification of the experience is all the more profound and re-erupts in a myriad of ‘flashbulb flashbacks’²⁶⁷.

The twists of identity through the tricks of memory seem to resurface in Irena F. Karafilly's memoir *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat*. Here, the neurological status of the self is questioned, and thus the author probes profoundly into the notion of memory loss and alienation, i.e. into the “upheaval in the deep material of the self.”²⁶⁸ The construction of ‘identity’ through the work of memory undergoes here a detailed ‘clinical’ analysis. For this reason, this family memoir can be considered a sort of continuation of her previous

²⁶¹ Isak Dinesen cit in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, CUP, Chicago, 1998, cit. p.175.

²⁶² *Incipit* cit. in Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000.

²⁶³ Cf. the quotation of Angela Carter, cit. in E.Rao, *Heart of a Stranger: women writers and the metaphor of exile*, Liguori, Napoli, 2002, p.1.

²⁶⁴ Cf. D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.23.

²⁶⁵ *Idem*, cit. p.100.

²⁶⁶ Cf. M.A. Brandimonte., *Psicologia della memoria*, Carocci, Roma, 2004, p.15.

“Gli studiosi di memoria distinguono due tipi di codifica – superficiale e profonda – sulla base della quantità di elaborazione alla quale lo stimolo è sottoposto. (Craik, Lockhart) Secondo questa ipotesi teorica, la forza della traccia della memoria dipende dalla profondità della codifica: più profondo è il livello di elaborazione dello stimolo più è probabile che la traccia che si forma sia duratura.” (Cit., p.15)

²⁶⁷ Cf. *ivi*, p.26. “Le flashbulb memories sono ricordi dettagliati e particolarmente vividi del contesto in cui una persona apprende per la prima volta una notizia sorprendente e emotivamente saliente.”(Cit.p.26)

²⁶⁸ Eva Hoffman, “The New Nomads”, in A. Aciman (ed.), *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss*, The New Press, New York, 2000, cit. p.50.

autobiographical book *Ashes and Miracles*.²⁶⁹ However, here Irena Karafilly tries to reconstruct and bring to light her own mother's gradual descent into dementia due to the Alzheimer's disease.²⁷⁰ In a way, the author's voice stands here for the silent voice of her suffering mother: the book becomes thus a tribute to her life:

Though I have had to change most of the names in this book, and, once or twice, the chronology of minor events, this is a factual account of my mother's story – the story she kept trying to tell.²⁷¹

In this fictionalized first-person account the narrator relates her 'psychoanalytic session' interwoven with her own thoughts and reflections; however there are also many traces of some autobiographical aspects, especially as far as the mother-daughter relationship is concerned. This is not only a richly human report of the devastation of Alzheimer's; it is also an acknowledgement of how tangled, elusive and fragile our memories of family can be. The author depicts her struggling to come to terms with her mother's terrible illness. She does not spare the reader harsh glimpses of life of the Alzheimer's victims and their beleaguered families. We can see e.g. the cruelties of life in overburdened geriatric institutions, where immensely vulnerable patients are often inadequately cared for, usually due to staff shortages and mindless bureaucratic practices. Karafilly decides thus to be a very keen observer and faithful reporter of this 'tragicomedy' of life:

...having recently started this memoir, I have come to St.Mary's equipped with a notebook in which to record my own observations. From now on, my journal will be with me at all times, the mirror in which my grief, guilt, and confusion are to be faithfully registered. Of course, the journal only compounds the confusion, forcing me to be, simultaneously, actor and observer in one of life's grimmest dramas.²⁷²

I smile back, reminded that, in the eighteenth century, one of the most popular diversions was to visit insane asylums. Artists went as well, many of them going back to their studios to capture bedlam in their work, much as I myself am about to do.²⁷³

For, this memoir does not simply dwell on the dreadful details of the present. Equally important, and no less daunting for the author, is the task of making peace with the past, and some sense of the complex, at times infuriating, relationship she had with her mother. Moreover, as she admits, writing this book was therapeutic for her insofar she has

²⁶⁹ Cf. Irena F.Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998.

²⁷⁰ Cf. the list of novels, plays, poetry and short stories that deal with the Alzheimer's disease:

http://www.alz.org/national/documents/AlzinLit_RL.doc

²⁷¹ Cit. *Author's Note* in Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000.

²⁷² Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.96.

²⁷³ *Idem*, cit. p.97

found a voice of her internal drama, and that voice has been heard. Hence, in this light, her slightly fictionalized autobiographical account may constitute a kind of personal confession, autoanalysis as well as cure:

I am grateful, too, for the permission to apply a new arts grant to the writing of this unexpected memoir rather than the novel for which the grant had been awarded. Despite the grief, the insomnia, the doubts, telling my mother's story is, I am convinced, the only thing keeping me away from the abyss.²⁷⁴

All in all, it concerns the secret of human memory in general, and thus the question of identity. One of the most important contributions that 'memory loss' grants is hence the sense of relativity as far as our identities are concerned. This, in turn, fosters self-analysis and renders one more sensitive to the patterns of human behaviour and thought. In addition, it makes one aware of the multiplicity of identity options. The book makes us wonder how much we know who we are and to what extent we may constitute a puzzle for ourselves and for the society. What does love mean? Is it conditioned by our identity and memory? Or should we shake off all the all-too-comfortable concepts and rely on our conscience? What is the meaning and sense of human suffering? Joseph Conrad's works also 'reveal' the intricacy and impenetrability of the 'self':

...if all the truth must be told I was somewhat a stranger to myself
...I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception
of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly.²⁷⁵

More than anything, this account of living and coping with Alzheimer's highlights the good faith, love, sacrifice and compassion that must almost heroically be brought to bear when caring for the demented elderly. After all, as Miriam Waddington seems to suggest in her poem in memory of A.M.Klein, fear and suffering are part of universal human experience, and thus we should be able to carry each other as well as we can:

His grief it fell and fell;
he mourned that his brain
could never be like new –
a seamless whole again
(...)
And sings his silent song
to earth and tree and stone;
(...)
The rain beats on the stone
but how many recognize
his broken brain, his fear,
are nothing but our own?
We hear it when we hear
the rain beat on the stone.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Idem, cit. p.100.

²⁷⁵ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer: An Episode from the Coast*, in *Typhoon and Other Tales*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002, cit. p.181.

II.1. Alzheimer's Disease and Identity

You are what you think you are, aren't you?
Especially in the most essential matters, who
on earth is to judge the nature of your nature,
of your character, of your innermost self, except
you, the subject, yourself? And yet. And yet.²⁷⁷

Neither defiance nor denial is of the least use here:
one takes arms by learning how to negotiate or
navigate a sea of troubles, by becoming a mariner
in the seas of one's self

– Oliver Sacks²⁷⁸

As is commonly known our mind and our memory depend heavily on the integrity of our brain. Usually a brain damage is followed by some memory loss.²⁷⁹ In turn, the deficits in memory may bring about serious twists of our self-perception and identity. Irena Karafilly tries to depict the various symptoms and stages of her mother's gradual descent into dementia due to the Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is perhaps one of the best-known illnesses associated with old age. This incurable, degenerative, and terminal disease was first described by German psychiatrist and neuropathologist Alois Alzheimer in 1906 and was named after him. It is a progressive brain disease responsible for the majority of cases of dementia in older people. There is some evidence that women may be at greater risk for developing AD; certainly the fact that women live longer than men puts women at higher risk for AD. More evidence is showing that genes are likely to play a role in determining who develops AD. Symptoms of AD include e.g. memory loss, confusion, poor judgment, wandering and depression or an indifferent attitude. It is a progressive disease that starts in one part of the brain and gradually invades other regions. As it progresses, AD destroys nerve cells within the brain and the connections between them, leaving behind clumps of proteins called plaques and twisted fibers in brain cells called tangles. Over time, this destruction erodes the most vital abilities of human nature: language, learning, memory and reason. Personality and behavior also are dramatically affected by AD.²⁸⁰ In her memoir, Karafilly introduces the reader to the definition and history of the fatal disease.²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ Miriam Waddington, *By the Sea: For A.M.Klein*, cit. in Mayne Seymour, *Essential Words: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Poetry*, Oberon Press, Canada, 1985, cit. p.164.

²⁷⁷ Eva Hoffman, *The Secret: A Fable for our Time*, Vintage, London, 2003, cit. p.1.

²⁷⁸ Cit. in Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. .93.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Maria Antonella Brandimonte, *Psicologia della memoria*, Carocci, Roma, 2004, p.58

²⁸⁰ For more information on Alzheimer's Disease see e.g.:

As Richard L.Gregory remarks, “the continuity of the ‘self’ is (...) a creation endemic to brain processing and perception that clearly occurs for the external world.”²⁸² Furthermore, as Bauman argues, in order to ask who you are you should be able to distinguish another alternative of identity, make a choice on your own and render it true; you have to act.²⁸³ In this case the volition as well as the ability and awareness of a deliberate choice is necessary to ‘create one’s own self’. It seems that the search for meaning gives sense to our existence. As Eva Hoffman writes in one of her books on the essence of identity:

And yet, how are we to explain ourselves to ourselves?
How can we divide the palpitating, impalpable inner substance
into something intelligible, except by parsing it into cause and
consequence?...We have to divide ourselves into units of sense.²⁸⁴

Nevertheless, as Karafilly observes, there is a blurred border between ‘mental disease’ and ‘sanity’. Sometimes it is very difficult to distinguish where one finishes and the latter begins or simply tell which is which, especially when human suffering and mental unease are at stake:

“How long has your mother had it?” people invariably ask on hearing about my mother’s condition. And I always have to admit that I do not know. Where does eccentricity end and dementia begin?²⁸⁵

I am told my mother helps herself to others’ clothes: she goes into other rooms and takes whatever she thinks she needs. The tone in which the orderly tells me this makes me feel the way parents must feel, confronted with a child’s disapproving teacher. Only yesterday, I am told, my mother made another patient cry by eating her banana. “Well,” I say defensively, “if she could behave like a normal person, she wouldn’t be here, would she?” But what is normal?²⁸⁶

http://www.alz.org/alzheimers_disease_what_is_alzheimers.asp

<http://www.alzheimers-disease-care.com/>

²⁸¹ Cf. Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, p.8.

As the author admits in her *Acknowledgements* situated at the end of the book (cf.p.241), most of the medical information found in her memoir was drawn from *The Thirty-Six-Hour Day* by Nancy L. Mace, Peter V.Rabins, and Paul R.McHugh (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and from *Alzheimer’s Disease* by William Molloy and Paul Caldwell.

²⁸² Richard L Gregory, “The Self in Mind, Brain and Computer”, in Appignanesi Lisa, Bhabha Homi (eds), *Identity: Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, cit.p.18.

²⁸³ Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Intervista sull’identità*, trans. F. Galimberti, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 2003, p.18.

“Dopo tutto, chiedere <chi sei tu> ha senso solo se sai di poter essere qualcosa di diverso da ciò che sei; ha senso solo se hai una cosa scelta, e se cosa scegliere dipende da te; ha senso, cioè, solo se tu devi fare qualcosa per consolidare e rendere <reale> la scelta.” (Cit.p.18)

²⁸⁴ Eva Hoffman, *The Secret: A Fable for our Time*, Vintage, London, 2003, cit. p.229.

²⁸⁵ Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.8.

²⁸⁶ Idem, cit. p.102.

On the other hand, the author is deeply worried about her mother's confusionary state of mind. "My mother was already in the throes of Alzheimer's, a disease that was distorting her perceptions," she says.²⁸⁷ The Identity problem seems to reveal itself also in her mother's self-perception, or rather –'misperception'. She is not able to discern her own situation and sense of belonging because she fails to fathom the condition in her mind; the concept of 'identity' is lacking. Moreover, if, as Chatwin states, "to exist is to be perceived"²⁸⁸, the overall situation gets even more complicated. The very act of displacement triggers the process of self-defamiliarisation and –ostracism (cf. the Russian <ostranenie>), which, in turn, results in the growing sense of confusion and relativity. Moreover, similarly as in the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan, there is "a split between the perceived I and the I that perceives" accompanied by the division inherent in the discourse, i.e. the discrepancy between the 'subject of the enunciation, and the subject of the énoncé, the self who speaks'.²⁸⁹

Though many Alzheimer's patients fail to recognize themselves in the mirror, and are often frightened by the putative intruder, my mother seems acquainted with her own reflection. She looks at herself with interest as she dries her hands. "Old box!" she says with a weary sort of scorn.²⁹⁰

Karafilly says in her book that "as many as 75 percent of Alzheimer's victims experience delusional tendencies, often accompanied by paranoia and fearful hallucinations."²⁹¹ In fact, as Laing observes, the lack of commonsense, thus 'common perception' and 'common feeling', is usually regarded as a sign of insanity:

The puzzle turns in on itself. How can we tell when, or if, we might not be enveloped in a trance, a spell, an enchantment, a dream, some blindness we are blind to, an ignorance we ignore? How can one see into, see through, fathom or wake up, or be sure one is awake? It is lonely and risky to lose one's commonsense. The dogmatic dream that one is the only person who can see Things as they are is usually taken as an index of an unsound mind.²⁹²

All in all, the author measures her mother's regression of identity according to her own perception of the changes in her mother's mental and behavioural patterns. Since the present image doesn't reflect the former one, fear and estrangement set in. The loss of

²⁸⁷ Idem, cit.p.81.

²⁸⁸ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Picador, London, 1987, cit. p.17.

²⁸⁹ Eleonora Rao, *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1993, cit. p.73.

²⁹⁰ Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.108.

²⁹¹ Ibidem.

²⁹² Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985, cit. p.73.

memory brings about a lack of communication and a feeling of uneasiness in the mother-daughter relationship. The bond has been loosened:

It is a question I have asked myself over and over, often racked with guilt over remembered quarrels with my mother; my prolonged failure to recognize that her mind was in the grip of a cruel force beyond her control. But even in retrospect, I cannot say when it all started. Though at some point, and in certain ways, my aging mother began to seem like a caricature of her former self, in other ways she seemed almost a stranger.²⁹³

Indeed, human relationships have always been difficult to manage. Even medicine cannot unravel its intricacies. The mystery of life remains inscrutable and thus sacred to human mind. As the psychiatrist Laing remarks: “Interpersonal relationships are not found on neurological examination. We do not see consciousness down a microscope. We see brain cells.”²⁹⁴ Perhaps for this reason, it is so hard to recognize and reconcile with the fact that our loved ones suffer from some incurable malady, and admit our own fear and helplessness. As Karafilly observes, it is the close family of the Alzheimer’s victim that has to come to terms with the burden and grapple with the sense of guilt:

Denial is a common problem among relatives of the afflicted, but in the family of every Alzheimer’s victim, the moment comes when everything is suddenly, undeniably, clear; when you want to bang your head against the wall, unable to understand how you could have been so blind, so cruel, for such a long, long time.²⁹⁵

However, the moment of recognition brings also insidious fear and suspicions inside the family as if the disease were contagious in itself. It seems impossible not to think about potential risks of the unfortunate genes that may infect the brain cells across generations. Hence, the author wonders about any possibilities of such AD transference in her own family. Is it only senility that deteriorates our mind or are there any genetic factors that foster it? She worries about her father’s health, discerning some potential symptoms of her mother’s disease in his behaviour. Moreover, she is preoccupied with her own risks of falling victim to the Alzheimer’s:

Alzheimer’s, like most problems with no satisfactory solutions, often generates a good deal of domestic conflict. My own conflict with my father has led me to doubt, for the first time, his mental competence. His recent conduct is beginning to remind me of the early days of my mother’s poor judgement, when she seemed unable to sustain a logical argument. I know by now that Alzheimer’s is often triggered by shock or catastrophe. Has my father, too, fallen victim to the Alzheimer’s beast? I wonder. When I voice this new

²⁹³ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.8.

²⁹⁴ Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985. cit. p.118

²⁹⁵ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.9.

anxiety to my daughter, however, she looks at me for a moment and says I have Alzheimer's on the brain. "No pun intended," she quickly adds, catching stricken look. Pun or not, it's just what I'm afraid of, I confess wearily.²⁹⁶

However, as it seems, dementia cannot erase human personality, and thus identity. Certain patterns of conduct and preferences remain untouched. The disease can only sometimes accentuate and/or assuage the range of human characters. Neurology can spy the connections and workings of the brain and measure somehow the loss of memory, but human mind and identity still remain a mystery. Laing says:

A brain injury knocks out all interpersonal processes along with the rest, and recovery entails some degree of interpersonal style. However, interpersonal style is far too vague a concept to be of much use neurologically. Neurologically one can study memory and other mental functions in various organic conditions. 'Personality' is another kettle of fish.²⁹⁷

In fact, Karafilly seems suprised and astonished by the variety of human characters in the medical institutions and hospitals that she visits. As she wanders through the wards, she observes the patients' behaviour and their attitude toward one another. As it seems, human nature cannot be totally destroyed even by its own laws. We read:

There is also a suprising range of characters and personalities on the ward. "Diseases have a character of their own," says Oliver Sacks in *Awakenings*," but they also partake of our character; we have a character of our own, but we also partake of the world's character: character is monadic or microcosmic, worlds within worlds within worlds." And so there are the quiet and gentle ones like Tina and Margaret, the noisy, deluded ones like Madame Lafleur, the stubborn, gregarious one like my mother, and the aggressive, sometimes violent ones like Jacques Béliveau, the one playing cards with the wheelchair-bound Mrs.Sanderson.²⁹⁸

However, the loss of memory can have fatal consequences in real life. Karafilly tells us about one tragic event that happened to her parents. Her mother burnt down their house down because she forgot about her cooking. Later on, feeling sorry she wanted to make up for it but she wasn't able to comprehend the enormity of the damage.²⁹⁹ As her desperate daughter affirms, dementia like the fire has burnt down her mother's identity. She says that "The fire left only the basement and a few blackened walls standing. It left about as much of the lively, competent, lonely woman who had once been my mother."³⁰⁰ Likewise, the

²⁹⁶ Idem, cit. p.170.

²⁹⁷ Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985, cit. p.118.

²⁹⁸ Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.136.

²⁹⁹ Idem, cf. pp.17-18.

³⁰⁰ Idem, cit. p.24.

brain cells maintaining memory had been eroded by the flames of Alzheimer's. As it seems, only doubts, fear, confusion and helplessness of the family remain:

But the doubts – the doubts! There is no getting away from them. My parents' house has recently been restored. My father is back in his own home, while my hapless mother remains locked up in this geriatric bedlam. My relationship with my mother may have left something to be desired, but I am nonetheless appalled that all this should have come to pass in my own family. What are we to do about her? What is the right – the decent, responsible, sensible – thing to do with this lost woman, my mother?³⁰¹

The fear paralyses, while the trauma spreads like fire through the minds of those who care. A new dilemma arises about what needs to be done in order to prevent similar incidents in the future. How can one protect the victim and the others from the dangers of Alzheimer's? What measures should be taken? The situation is particularly delicate here since, as it seems, there is no perfect solution to the problem. The author recollects Anton Chekov's words: "If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure."³⁰² Moreover, by observing other AD victims, Karafilly worries about potential risks of the progression of the illness for her mother's brain and behaviour:

Because the progress of Alzheimer's often brings about damage to the part of the brain controlling aggression, Béliveau's behaviour is not at all uncommon. Roughly a quarter of dementia victims end up unable to control violent impulses. Even my mother, it occurs to me, may eventually become physically aggressive. How did families cope in the old days, I wonder, before the advent of sedatives and geriatric homes? It turns out that dementia victims were not necessarily better off in earlier centuries. The aggressive ones, I eventually learn, were sometimes taken in by convents and monasteries, but many were simply allowed to wander about homeless. The very violent among them usually found themselves chained in prisons or dungeons.³⁰³

Furthermore, as Ronald David Laing remarks: "When the post-traumatic personality is compared to the pre-traumatic personality, 'it' is often characterized, clinically, as somewhat 'disinhibited', less aware of the nuances of other people's sensibilities: excessively euphoric, aggressive, rude, etc. The brain damage is taken to have knocked out this or that 'inhibiting' centre."³⁰⁴ In fact, Karafilly recollects thus the early eccentricities' and phobias of her mother:

³⁰¹ Idem, cit. p.100.

³⁰² Idem, cit. p.12.

³⁰³ Idem, cit. p.138.

³⁰⁴ Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985, cit. p.119.

Always a worrywart, she began rejecting trips and restaurant outings, fearing that a kitchen worker with AIDS might cut himself and contaminate her food. All this was in character. But when my father was discharged from hospital following an operation for cancer of the bladder, my once-spendthrift mother almost persuaded him to take a city bus home rather than splurge on a taxi.³⁰⁵

Early symptoms of the disease include forgetfulness, difficulty using or remembering words and difficulty concentrating. For some individuals, these early symptoms of AD may be mistaken for what many people consider "natural" symptoms of aging. But symptoms caused by AD worsen over time, while the short-term memory problems that trouble many people as they age do not progress to other more serious symptoms:

My mother had always been a stern taskmaster, and I still remembered her teaching us the proper use of flatware; remembered my brother and myself being rebuked for burping at the table, for using our fingers, or for speaking with a full mouth. And there she was, the same woman, slurping her soup, and smacking her lips, and stuffing her mouth like some half-starved peasant. The idea of Alzheimer's had yet to occur to me, but I was having trouble reconciling my aging mother with my youthful memory of a fastidious European woman. Had I invented the woman? Had I been paying attention to what she preached, rather than what she practised? Had I romanticized my true mother beyond all recognition?³⁰⁶

Nevertheless, the most salient symptom of an altered condition of her mother seemed to be an outspoken desire to love and to be loved. Everywhere she went she looked outwardly for signs of human warmth and attention. This, normally, hidden and repressed need of affection flowed out spontaneously without any internal hindrances.³⁰⁷ What is more, the author tells us about some striking contradictions in her mother's behaviour. On one hand, she showed a lot of benevolence and good nature toward others due to the loss of her short-term memory. On the other hand, she was obsessively afraid of any possible criminals and wrong-doers. All her obsessions and fears had been enhanced by the progressive brain disease.³⁰⁸

Ironically enough, as Karafilly observes, soon the malady turned the situation upside down. Her mother became a thief herself. Her going shopping couldn't but finish with being caught shoplifting something. Gradually, the theft incidents became more and more frequent. Finally, the police forbade her to go shopping alone and unassisted by any family

³⁰⁵ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit.p.9.

³⁰⁶ Idem, cit.p.64.

³⁰⁷ Idem, cf.p.10.

³⁰⁸ Idem, cit.p.16.

members. The dementia unbridled her unconscious desires and erased any laws, bans or prohibitions.³⁰⁹

In fact, because AD cannot be cured and is degenerative, management of patients is essential. The role of the main caregiver is often taken by the spouse or a close relative. Alzheimer's disease is known for placing a great burden on caregivers; the pressures can be wide-ranging, involving social, psychological, physical, and economic elements of the caregiver's life. Thus, living with Alzheimer's can be a crippling experience for both the disease sufferer and the family that is involved. There are many moments of misunderstanding or confusion for most and the symptoms can become frustrating and difficult. The loss of memory and other associated factors can often cause immense separation in families and can create a nervous tension on relationships. Indeed, Karafilly often reflects on her family's misunderstandings and confusion due to her mother's disease. She says:

My father went away, his mouth like a trembling wound.
Did he love her after all? Did he? It was not a question
I had ever asked myself before, probably because I thought
I knew the answer; because the answer I thought I had would
have made my pity for my mother intolerably heavy. I had
never thought I would feel pity for my father, but there it was,
making my inner weather all the more turbulent. Perhaps
to temper it, I found myself dwelling on my parents' fights...³¹⁰

As mentioned before, Alzheimer's is a progressive brain disorder. The effects on the brain are relentless as the memory is progressively destroyed and the capability to learn, make judgments, and communicate and carry out normal daily tasks is greatly diminished to the point of total extinction. It is often painfully difficult to watch a family member seemingly "waste away" in their own mind; the struggle to maintain a form of sanity is often too much for many relatives, and thus they, sadly, distance themselves from the sufferer. This, in turn, causes the AD victim more pain and alienation. Hence, for Karafilly, the painful act of writing this memoir seems to be an act of sympathy and compassion for her suffering mother:

For a writer, there are obvious advantages to this gift, but the exaggerated empathy it sometimes engenders may be the reason that we are more susceptible to both melancholy and hypochondria. "For there is nothing heavier than compassion," says Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. "Not even one's own pain weighs heavily as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes."³¹¹

³⁰⁹ *Idem*, cf. pp.16-17.

³¹⁰ *Idem*, cit. pp.27-28.

What is more, as Karafilly remarks, her relationship with her mother has been improving since the onset of the disease. The author wonders about the ironic twists of human nature. How does the suffering contribute to our self-perception? How does it change our attitude toward other people? She reflects upon her own mistakes and frailties. A new perspective has been developed by a growing self-awareness. The realization of the fragility of human mind and body brings about a new tolerance toward another human being.³¹²

The schizophrenic³¹³ aspect of reality is underlined by the AD victim's dual perception and dissociations. This can be well exemplified by the mother-daughter conversations, where the daughter's identity becomes split into two opposite selves in her mother's consciousness: a good one and a bad one. Nevertheless, Laing wonders: "Of what sort of texture is our everyday 'sense of reality'? What is the real taste of anything? In what sense are any phenomena real? The whole issue of our whole sense of reality is called into question."³¹⁴ In fact, the reality of Karafilly's mother splinters into coloured pieces of memory like a kaleidoscope.³¹⁵

As Momaday remarks, "we exist in the element of language (...) to think is to talk to oneself."³¹⁶ The apex of the mother's 'drama' seems to be the threshold stage of her alienation which involves 'being lost for words' literally. As in the case of a bilingual immigrant, the midway phase of this 'transmogrification' process³¹⁷ is namely characterised by the sense of linguistic inaptness and confusion. According to Marshall McLuhan, "speech structures the abyss of mental and acoustic space, shrouding the voice; it is a cosmic, invisible architecture of the human dark."³¹⁸ Thus, here the lack of 'interior language' inhibits the spontaneous elaboration and 'translation' of experience affecting heavily the subject's self-perception. Since the AD victim's inner struggle to repossess the

³¹¹ Idem, cit. p.72.

³¹² Idem, cf. p.64.

³¹³ *Schizophrenia* : "a mental disorder characterized by loss of contact with reality and disintegration of personality, usually with hallucinations and disorder of feeling, behaviour." (*The Penguin Pocket English Dictionary*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, cit. p.748)

³¹⁴ Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985, cit. p.71.

³¹⁵ Cf. Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, p.83.

³¹⁶ N.Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1997, cit. p.2.

³¹⁷ Cf. Eva Hoffman, "P.S.", in I. De Courtivron (ed.), *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, palgrave macmillan, New York, 2003, p.51.

³¹⁸ Cit. in H. Wirth-Nesher, *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, cit. p.136

Cf. also I.A.Richards., "Introduction", in Mawson C.O. (ed.), *Roget's Pocket Thesaurus, Pocket Books*, New York, 1973, cit. p.VII: "Words are astonishingly like people. They have characters, they almost have personalities – are honest, useful, obliging...or treacherous, vain, stubborn...They shift, as people do, their conduct with their company. They are an endless study in which we are studying nature and ourselves at that meeting point where our minds are trying to give form to or take it from the world."

ability of natural communication, also with her ‘self’, fails at the moment, she loses ground and her grip on reality. As the daughter says: “She kept mixing up her languages and her shrinking vocabulary. Only her despair was unmistakable.”³¹⁹ What is more, the different languages seem to correspond to respective segments of memory, personal history as well as consecutive layers of identity:

And then she gave up and began to quiz me as though I were a stranger: How many children did I have? Was my husband living with me? When I told her I was divorced, she said, “Pity – I’d like you to be married.” The desire to see me married was hardly new; my mother had always seemed to share Samuel Johnson’s view that “while marriage has many pains, celibacy has no pleasures.” Her questions, however, *were* new; I could only hope that this sudden amnesia was due to the shock and the medication. As if reading my thoughts, my mother suddenly sighed and said, speaking English: “Unbelievable, what’s happening to me.” She switched to Polish. “I’m not at all the person I used to be.” She switched to Russian. “Look what’s happened to my memory,” she said, and licked her dry lips.³²⁰

To make the matters worse, the conditions of the hospital where the demented patients have been interned are less than desirable. As the author alludes, the hectic and confusing environment of the medical institution resembles that of a lunatic asylum. Her mother has to share the room with other mentally fragile people that cannot but disturb her all the more. Karafilly depicts the gloomy scene in very dull colours, underlining the deplorable mental state of the patients as well as the miserable conditions of the hospital she visits:

She was sleeping when I came in from the coffee shop, her mouth a taut, bitter line, her face the colour of dishwasher. The emergency floor was hectic with patients, interns, nurses, orderlies; the intercom kept snapping out staff doctors’ names. On my mother’s right was a man in his twenties, staring glumly at the ceiling; on her left, a teenage girl who had attempted suicide.³²¹

Interestingly, the image re-echoes Laing’s ghostly portrayal of a refractory ward in a mental hospital. He compares the lack of communication in the relationship of demented patients and their relatives to the impossibility of any real contact between Ulysses and his dead mother in the Underworld.³²² There is an abyss of fear that separates the suffering patients from their families:

³¹⁹ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.55.

³²⁰ Idem, cit. p.44.

³²¹ Idem, cit. p.25.

³²² Cf. also Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shosha*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1978, p. 205.

A refractory ward in a mental hospital is a strange place to be reminded of Homer. But these women in the refractory ward brought back to me Homer's description of the ghosts in Hades, separated on their side from the living, by the width of the Ocean, and, on the part of the living, by the Rivers of Fear. Ulysses goes to the land of the dead to meet his mother. Although he can see her, he is dismayed to find he cannot embrace her. She explains to him that she has no sinews, no bones, no body keeping the bones and flesh together. Once the life force has gone from her white bones, all is consumed by the fierce heat of a blazing fear, and the soul slips away like a dream and flutters in the air. From what experience of life had that description come? It seemed to be so far and yet so near. How can we entice these ghosts of life, across their oceanic abyss, across our rivers of fear?³²³

In fact, the author reveals her doubts and fear enhanced by the confinement of her mother. She is afraid of mother's reactions and doesn't know how to approach the tragic situation nor how to communicate with her and the rest of the family. The daughter's fear is magnified by that of her mother. It creates a barrier between their 'worlds':

My mother thought she was going home. When she realized her mistake, she fought like an animal, struggling against two policemen and two orderlies; scratching and shrieking and kicking, only to find herself shackled and dragged indoors, into a chaotic room full of moaning strangers. What could I say to comfort my father? What could I tell myself?³²⁴

Furthermore, nursing homes are usually built around the medical model of care, and not around the psychosocial needs of elders. They are usually illness-oriented and may appear to more sensitive patients sterile and empty. Hence, as the author remarks, her mother doesn't feel secure and welcome in the cold and hostile environment. She tries desperately to flee from there, not being able to control her own obsessions. Nevertheless, to the author's mind, her mother's 'need to escape' seems the most normal and sane thing about her:

(...) my mother never gave up hope of extricating herself from the nightmare in which she felt herself to be trapped; a nightmare in which everybody looked faintly embarrassed, exchanging looks that said, "She's demented, poor old thing." And yet, I could not help but feel that my mother's obsessive search for escape was perhaps the most normal thing about her. It was surely what any sane person would do, trapped by strangers, unable to go home.³²⁵

"The past generations are our dybbuks. They sit within us and usually remain silent. But suddenly one of them cries out (...) A person is literally a cemetery where multitudes of living corpses are buried (...) Among the generations there have been madmen, and their voices must be heard (...) I'm not only a cemetery – in my brain there's an insane asylum, too. I hear the lunatics shriek with their wild laughter. They pull at the bars and try to escape. Heredity cells aren't lost." (cit. p.205)

³²³ Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985, cit. p.112.

³²⁴ Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.27.

³²⁵ Idem, cit. p.40.

Undoubtedly, there is always a trauma attached to any move for a person with Alzheimer's. A move to a medical institution often brings about a loss of spatiotemporal coordination and panic. There is a shock of entering an environment that does not really support individuality. However, more importantly, the institution cannot replace home and family. Thus, the AD patient's despair find its expression in every possible chance of 'release'.³²⁶

As Abraham J.Heschel says, "Life lived as an event is a drama. Life reduced to a process becomes vegetation. The awareness of life as a drama comes about as a result of knowing that one has a part to play, of realizing that the self is unprecedented and of refusing to regard existence as a waste."³²⁷ Thus, the real tragedy of AD victims seems to be the loss of self-determination as well as of independence. In medical institutions the subject is usually turned into an object that must be taken care of and kept under control. The patients affected by dementia are very often treated as passive beings, not being able to play an active role in the society any more. However, this cruel verdict comes very often too early causing AD victims a lot of pain and suffering. Karafilly tells us about her mother's ways of active 'protest' against such a state of matters by searching for an escape.³²⁸

Nonetheless, the author wonders about the ironic twists of human lot. Why are stress, pain and suffering present in human life? I.B.Singer writes that nerves are "fear of all the misfortunes that can happen to human beings."³²⁹ Moreover, Heschel underlines the importance of reality however heavy upon us saying that "in actual lives of actual men, life even when felt to be a burden is cherished deeply, valued supremely, accepted in its reality" because "the truth of human being is the love of being alive."³³⁰ Karafilly muses:

The thought of spring gives me an inner lift, as does
the fugitive hope of at last being able to have what I think
of as a normal life. It never occurs to me to consider that
though the wanton gods do not always kill us, they often
can't resist finding new ways to torment us for their sport.³³¹

Thus, learning to cope with Alzheimer's disease is a "profound spiritual and emotional journey for which most of us are unprepared."³³² You can meet all kinds of turbulence, unexpected things happen, you develop skills you did not know you had. It is a

³²⁶ Idem, cf. pp.39-40.

³²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit. p.44.

³²⁸ Cf. Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, pp. 38, 120.

³²⁹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shosha*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1978, cit. p.199.

³³⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit. p.35.

³³¹ Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. pp.200-201

³³² Frena Gray-Davidson, *The Alzheimer's Sourcebook for Caregivers: A practical Guide to Getting Through the Day*, Lowell House, Chicago, 1999, cit. p.1.

journey into the unknown, into the ‘heart of darkness’. But, above all, it is a journey of self-discovery. Heschel says that “the degree of our being human stands in direct proportion to the degree we care for others.”³³³ In fact, as Isaac Bashevis Singer remarks, “In Jewish history, the road between being sick and dying is a very long one.”³³⁴ After all, Joy Glenner, an Alzheimer’s Disease sufferer, writes thus in her letter-poem *Advice on Caring for Alzheimer Patients*:

Dear family and friends:
Please try to understand
What I am now, not think of me
As I was.
I am alone, shut in
With my fears,
My frustration,
My forgetfulness.
Forgive me if I strike out at you.
Why do I do that?
What has happened to me?
I cannot cope with this alien world.
I feel threatened. I am frightened.
Speak softly, approach softly.
Repeat again and again what you want of me.
Those twisted tangles in my brain
Have messed up my world.
Be patient, for I do love you,
And I need your help and love
So very, very much.
Your Alzheimer Patient.³³⁵

³³³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit. p.47.

³³⁴ Cit.in Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2001, cit. p.241.

³³⁵ Joy Glenner, *Advice on Caring for Alzheimer Patients*, cit. in Sandra M. Kehoe, *Listen to Me, I am Still Somebody: Understanding the Alzheimer’s Disease Sufferer*, Universal Publishers BocaRaton, Florida, 2008, cit. p.IX.

II.2. Snapshots of memory

The camera relieves us of the burden
of memory...records in order to forget.³³⁶
- John Berger

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only
in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is
what makes our lives. Life without memory
is no life at all...Our memory is our coherence,
our reason, our feeling, even our action.
Without it, we are nothing.³³⁷
- Luis Buñuel

It begins with a mother's photograph taken in Lodz, Poland around 1950, showing a beautiful and proud young woman, "a black-and-white femme fatale wearing a diamond brooch and a felt hat with a white, audacious feather." The mother's glamorous image has accompanied the daughter for years. It embodied her mother's identity, her inner strength and will of living. At the same time, in the child's imagination it constituted a sort of certainty and shield against the grips of time. Thus, memory could act here as a protection of identity. Karafilly recollects:

There was, in my parents' album, a photograph that, as a child, I both admired and feared. It showed a beautiful young woman dressed in a dark suit and soft angora sweater: a black-and-white femme fatale wearing a diamond brooch and a felt hat with a white, audacious feather. It was my mother, but a mother I was barely acquainted with: a glamorous stranger who held me in her complex spell for years (...) this photo - it had been taken in Lodz, around 1950 - suggested infinite mystery and hauteur. It had captured an aloof, Greta Garbo-like persona with crayoned lips and narrow, voracious eyes that bespoke both hunger and danger.³³⁸

What a contrast however with another image of the same woman, which was taken in 1998. It seems to tell quite a different story. The mother is now in her seventies, her honey-coloured hair turned gray, returning home after a shopping trip to the Salvation Army, where she has found bargains: a plastic basket for keeping her purse safe from potential snatchers; inappropriate and unprepossessing garments for her daughter Irena and granddaughter Ranya; and, the piece de resistance, a moth-eaten black velvet hat which the cashier let her have for 50 cents. Perhaps the white feather in it reminds the woman of the elegant black hat she had worn in Poland. The contrast between the two hats seems emblematic of her mental decline and alienation. Past and present identities don't coincide,

³³⁶ John Berger, cit. in Anne Michaels, *Depth of Field*, in A. Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.23.

³³⁷ Cit. in Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.1.

³³⁸ Idem, cit. p.3.

even though as H.G.Wells puts it, “We are always getting away from the present moment. Our mental existences, which are immaterial and have no dimension, are passing along the Time-Dimensions with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave.”³³⁹ It is the Alzheimer’s ‘time machine’ that has distorted the image here:

...a black velvet hat that, she delightedly reported, the cashier had let her have for fifty cents! The hat was ancient and a little moth-eaten, but its white feather may have reminded my mother of the elegant black hat she had worn back in Poland. It reminded me of it, and the contrast between the two hats – the two personages – seemed sadly emblematic of my mother mental decline. I was 1997, and, aged 76, my mother was apparently a victim of Alzheimer’s disease.³⁴⁰

As Lingwood remarks, photography “plays a game of identity exploring the limitless fictive possibilities peculiar to the medium”³⁴¹. The game here is at its most since it is a game between identity and memory that cannot but play tricks on each other. Brandimonte states that our brain is only a container of our memory, and thus of our identity. The memory is ours as long as it belongs to us. It makes our selves unique, unrepeatable.³⁴² But what if we can’t find it any more? It is the problem that Irena’s mother has to grapple with. She says:

“My memory make me crazy!” she said, the emphasis seeming to imply that she had not come all this way to draw pictures or pick up sheets of paper from the floor. “My memory make me crazy,” she repeated, speaking her usual flawed English but speaking the absolute truth.³⁴³

Alzheimer's disease begins slowly. At first, the only symptom may be mild forgetfulness. People in the early stage of Alzheimer's disease may have trouble remembering recent events, activities, or the names of familiar people or things. Such difficulties may be a bother, but usually they are not serious enough to cause alarm. The most striking early symptom is memory loss (amnesia), usually manifest as minor forgetfulness that becomes steadily denser with illness progression, with relative preservation of older memories. It is the most common type of dementia. Getting to know

³³⁹ H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, in *Selected Short Stories*, Penguin Books, New York, 1979, cit.p.10.

³⁴⁰ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.4.

³⁴¹ James Lingwood, “Self-portraits”, in Lisa Appignanesi Lisa, Homi Bhabha (eds), *Identity: Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, cit. p.20.

³⁴² Cf. Maria Antonella Brandimonte, *Psicologia della memoria*, Carocci, Roma, 2004, p.113

“La memoria, e con essa l’identità di un individuo, è qualcosa di più e di straordinario rispetto al cervello che le fa da supporto. Anche in questo senso “la Memoria” non esiste. La memoria è la “mia” memoria e tale rimane fino a che è “dentro” di me. Il mio tessuto cerebrale contiene la mia memoria finché rimane “mio”. Esso racconta una storia coerente e irripetibile, quella che mi rende unico e indivisibile. Individuo, appunto.” (cit. p.113)

³⁴³ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.15.

the various stages of Alzheimer's disease is a frustrating process, especially if you are the one living through the affliction. Sufferers of this disorder endure mental strain and confusion as their memory becomes unreliable and spotty, their learning capabilities diminish, and their overall sense of self and the things they once knew become awkwardly hard to grasp. Knowing a stage of Alzheimer's is fast approaching, many sufferers fear the worst. The author says:

There was a time when I would have said she was vain about her looks, for she never passed a mirror or any reflective surface without passing to study her own image. Now I know better. We are accused of vanity when we stare at the mirror in doubt as surely as when we do in self-adulation.³⁴⁴

The reality of this disease often leaves little room for hope because there is no cure and no adequate treatment that can help curb the confusing episodes of memory loss and loss of faculty. Alzheimer's is a part of dementia, which affects especially the elderly, and often leaves the sufferer feeling insane or crazy because they do not understand what is happening to them or how they can escape the feelings of despair and hopelessness:

When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe reached the venerable age of eighty, his friends threw a birthday party in his honour, at which they made a toast to Memory. This seemed to cause considerable distress to the great man. Goethe was to live for another three years, but was probably suffering from occasional memory lapses. He reportedly became angry at his friends, or perhaps at his own impotence to arrest impairment. It must have been intolerable for an intellectual giant like Goethe to concede any decline in his own mental powers; but it hardly seemed less distressing for my humble, hospitalized mother as she woke up and tried to persuade me to take some strawberries home for my daughter. (...) "Please take them for...take them home and give them to..." she kept saying intently. As the name went on eluding her, my mother clenched her teeth and stiffened her fingers, furious at the force withholding the name she so ardently sought.³⁴⁵

The actual 'beginning of the end' for the mother occurred when her 'former self' was erased by the fire she had caused. Ironically enough, as the author remarks, all photographic traces of the past were also gone: literally went up into flames. The fragile identity and memory were burnt down like 'paper images of the past'. What seemed to remain was pain, misery, helplessness, charred house and blank memory:

It was a chilly Friday afternoon in April, with rain blowing in through the gaping windows, and neighbours arriving one by one, shaking their heads and breathing in the smell of ashes and smoke, and sodden, still dripping, rafters. This, I knew, was the beginning of the end. It was also,

³⁴⁴ *Idem*, cit. p.37.

³⁴⁵ *Idem*, cit. p.44.

though I did not immediately think of it, an obvious metaphor for my mother's affliction: a mental catastrophe subsuming her former self as relentlessly as the flames had the home she cherished.³⁴⁶

It would not be long before it came to me that over half a century's worth of photographs had also been consumed by the flames, compounding the cruelty. It was as if fate, not satisfied to expunge my mother's vibrant self, was determined to eradicate any evidence that it had ever existed. There had been the old sepia photographs, and the black-and-white ones that came to replace them, and the more recent Canadian ones, in ever brighter colours: four albums full of images snapped in studios, carriages, kitchens, forests; on streets and trains and terraces and beaches, on three continents.³⁴⁷

Albums of images, albums of memories: the first ones printed on paper, the latter ones imprinted in mind, both fragile and dissolving. As one of Sebald's protagonists says: "In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long".³⁴⁸ In fact, Karafilly tries to capture each moment of her mother's life like a camera eye, framing the situations into images. She observes:

Had a snapshot been taken of my mother that early-spring afternoon in 1998, it would have captured a shrivelled old woman under five feet tall, wrapped up in a grey fireman's blanket, her still-fair hair on end, her crooked feet clad only in a pair of furry, sooty pink slippers. She was clutching the blanket at the throat, her eyes swimming in confusion, reminding me of the only photograph I had ever seen of my mother's childhood.³⁴⁹

Another set of images, but this time there are more similarities than differences, even though they are distanced in time more than half a century. Senility borders childhood, the age of innocence. As James Baldwin writes, "you can take the child out of the country, my elders were fond of saying, but you can't take the country out of the child."³⁵⁰ Karafilly

³⁴⁶ Idem, cit. p.18.

Cf. also Gordon Mary, *Seeing Through Places: Reflections on Geography and Identity*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001, cit.p.216: "When I think of the loss of the house, it is not the image of loved ones around the table that seems irreplaceable. Those faces can compose themselves into a happy picture in many other pleasant spots. What is irreplaceable is the time in the house when only it and I were awake, when I was dreaming, reading, writing, when its walls were the borders between silence and what is popularly known as real life."

³⁴⁷ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.18.

³⁴⁸ W.G.Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. A.Bell, The Modern Library, New York, 2001, p.77.

³⁴⁹ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. pp.18-19.

³⁵⁰ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, cit in E.Rokosz-Piejko, "Child in Exile: Mary Antin's and Eva Hoffman's Versions of Exiled Childhood", in W. Kalaga and T. Rachwał (eds.), *Exile: Displacements and Misplacements*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, p.173.

once more travels back in time via snapshots of memory, this time to her native land, the Russian Urals, and her mother's childhood:

It was a snapshot showing my mother at the age of five, seating against a stark background of snow, surrounded by a group of bundled, picknicking relatives (...) the lone child, sat in their midst, looking oddly lost, clutching her scarf in one hand and a doll in the other. The photograph had been taken in the Russian Urals. I still remember my grandmother's entry on the back, written in purple ink: *Orenburg, 1926*. I remember my grandmother's dreamy gaze in the photograph, and the birches in the background, and the possessive, vaguely anxious way that my mother sat clutching her doll. I remember the doll had a porcelain face and what looked like a knitted cap on her head. I try to find reassurance in my ability to remember such things.³⁵¹

In fact, as the author admits, the scattered scraps of memory, however painful they might be, help to maintain the 'broken identity' of her mother. As she says, "memories that still surprise me with their ability to sting; that I keep going back to, the way a tongue keeps searching, testing, an infected molar."³⁵² The lighthouse of memory, progressing in childhood flashbacks, illuminates the way through darkness:

...I sit thinking of our own, lost, family photos: the snapshots in fragrant Polish forests and on the white sands of Israeli beaches; the ones of my brother and me in Purim costumes, and of my mother and me in matching dresses, which she-herself had sewn. I watch my mother consider her move, recalling the childish satisfaction of wearing a dress exactly like hers, the sweet sense of comfort and intimacy accompanying her presence throughout my childhood. When exactly did it disappear?³⁵³

I ask myself the question sadly, though I think I have the answer; an answer that I am still reluctant to contemplate. For the truth is that, among those countless lost photographs, there were two or three linked to childhood secrets I have spent years suppressing. And now that my mother is a demented patient on a geriatric ward, the memories are more problematic than ever. I let my mind travel instead to the few surviving family photos in my own living room; nine faded sepia photographs going back to Russia.³⁵⁴

As Karafilly says, "the damage to the Alzheimer's-afflicted brain begins in a specific region and spreads relentlessly but unpredictably. It may affect some areas severely but leave others functioning more or less normally for quite a few years."³⁵⁵ As it progresses, AD destroys nerve cells within the brain and the connections between them, leaving behind

³⁵¹ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.19.

³⁵² Idem, cit. p.74.

³⁵³ Idem, cit. p.111.

³⁵⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵⁵ Idem, cit. p.82.

clumps of proteins called plaques and twisted fibres in brain cells called tangles. Over time, this destruction erodes the most vital abilities of human nature: language, learning, memory and reason. Personality and behavior also are dramatically affected by AD. Nevertheless, as the author observes, there are sometimes moments of reprieve where the darkness is punctured by ‘bursts of lucidity’:

“It may be,” state Mace and Rabins in *The Thirty-Six-Hour Day*, “that damaged cells, like a loose light bulb, connect sometimes and fail other times.” They offer this by way of explanation for the occasional bursts of astonishing lucidity encountered among Alzheimer’s patients; the utter unpredictability of victims’ failing cognitive powers.³⁵⁶

Furthermore, as Frena Gray-Davidson observes, although short-term memory in AD sufferers gets more and more fragmented, they preserve astonishingly accurate long-term memory.³⁵⁷ Indeed the author’s mother doesn’t recognize her own daughter but has a very clear memory of her childhood in the Russian Urals. What is more, she cherishes her ‘childlike identity’ like no other.³⁵⁸ She speaks lovingly and longingly about her Russian hometown.³⁵⁹ The past in the mother’s consciousness seemed to be enveloped in amber. A child trapped in time that doesn’t move on. It remains where the memory remains. Spellbound moments of happiness outreach into the present. As Sebald remarks, time can be a very strange and metamorphosing ‘creature’. He writes:

What interests me most are the countless glossy black stag beetles in the Windheim woods. I track their crooked wanderings with a patient eye. At times it looks as if something has shocked them, physically, and it seems as if they have fainted. They lie there motionless, and it feels as if the world’s heart has stopped. Only when you hold your own breath do they return from death to life, only then does time begin to pass again. Time. What time was all that? How slowly the days passed then!³⁶⁰

Karafilly tells us of her mother’s blissful ‘return’ to her childhood years. The memory loss leaves her helpless, but at the same time helps her regain the lost innocence and inner peace. Soothing tunes of Russian lullabies sung by her daughter can carry her into the

³⁵⁶ Idem, cit. p.229.

³⁵⁷ Cf. Frena Gray-Davidson, *The Alzheimer’s Sourcebook for Caregivers: A practical Guide to Getting Through the Day*, Lowell House, Chicago, 1999, cit. p.4.

³⁵⁸ See also Sebald Winfrid Georg, *The Emigrants*, trans.M.Hulse, Vintage, London, 2002:

“Ferber commented that, purely in terms of time, I was now as far removed from Germany as he had been in 1966; but time, he went on, is an unreliable way of gauging these things, indeed it’s nothing but a disquiet of the soul. There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me. The fragmentary scenes that haunt my memories are obsessive in character. When I think of Germany, it feels as if there were some kind of insanity lodged in my head. Probably the reason why I have never been to Germany again is that I am afraid to find that this insanity really exists.” (cit. p.181)

³⁵⁹ Cf. Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, p.46.

³⁶⁰ Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans.M.Hulse, Vintage, London, 2002, cit. p.207.

realm of rest and sleep. Childlike reminiscences accompanied by love and tenderness appear thus very useful in calming the aching brain of the AD sufferer. We read:

Like a stubborn child, my mother kept turning her face away from the nurse's spoon. We were all beginning to grow agitated when, suddenly inspired, I said: "Take it, *Mamushu*, take it. The doctor said it may help your memory." "The doctor said so? Really?" said my mother, abruptly alert. Sitting up in the alien bed, she eagerly swallowed the pill crushed in sweet apple sauce, but she would not give up her prized slippers (...) She would close her eyes, only to have them fly open, again and again, looking vaguely startled. After a while, I began to sing. When my daughter was an infant, and my mother paced the floor with her during one of our annual visits, I learned the Russian lullaby she had once sung to me. I sang it over and over to my mother, until at last she fell asleep.³⁶¹

Furthermore, as the author remarks, "Alzheimer's victims are intensely concerned about their ability to keep track of time. One needs a short-time memory to gauge the passage of time, and a victim's awareness of recurring failure often leads to apparent obsession."³⁶² Hence, the mother's apprehensions about the passing of time have sprung probably out of the fear of losing her memory and identity, thus of losing herself, of giving up the struggle against the illness. The obsession with watches and clocks can be considered therefore as an attempt at keeping time from slipping away.³⁶³

Besides, using the traditional narrative techniques of memoir-writing, Karafilly manages to fashion not only a vivid portrait of her mother's deteriorating memory, but examines as well her own tangled relationship with her mother through non-linear episodes of strained family bonds, the immigrant experience and secrets of the past. As she says, "writing about my mother's romance, on the other hand, involves a secret that my mother herself has revealed to me; a secret I am about to share now with countless strangers."³⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the author is in two minds about the moral implications of such a writing act. On one hand, as a writer, she feels entitled to do it. On the other hand, as a daughter, she doesn't want to betray her mother's secrets. She muses:

"When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished," Philip Roth has said. But the fact is my father never reads my work, and my mother is certainly not going to. She has finally found refuge in a realm where he can no longer get at her – and neither can my words, spoken or written. So why do I feel so divided, writing about her now, as if I were about to betray my own mother? Is it just because I am about to wash my family's dirty linen in public?³⁶⁵

³⁶¹ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit.p.43.

³⁶² Idem, cit. p.105.

³⁶³ Idem, cf. p.117.

³⁶⁴ Idem, cit. p.150.

³⁶⁵ Idem, cit.pp.149-150.

The author's inner dispute gives rise to an analysis and re-elaboration of the relationship with her mother over time. The repressed fears and grudges resurface to be re-examined and reflected upon in the new light. Karafilly retraces her coming to grips with the past in order to reconcile with the present. She mentions the book *My Mother/My Self* by Nancy Friday that accompanies her in this journey:

My reluctance to write the truth about my mother stems, at least in part, from my own difficulty in coming to terms with this particular chapter in my mother's history. There may even be a deep, lingering resentment - the resentment of a lonely, high-minded adolescent - that my mother was far from perfect. My friend suggest I re-read Nancy Friday's *My Mother/My Self*, and when I do, I find the following statement: If people say it is cold and calculating to analyze who you are, and who your mother is - to acknowledge what you hate and love in her - they are still trying to hold on to her as children. They are afraid to think these things because at some deep level they still fear she can be hurt by their thoughts. They are also demanding that she be immortal, postponing their separation.³⁶⁶

As A.J.Heschel remarks, 'being human' is "the sum of many relationships in which a human being is involved."³⁶⁷ Thus, Karafilly realizes that if she wants really to commemorate her mother's life in this memoir she should be as honest as possible about her story, because it is above all compassion and love that can bring forgiveness, reconciliation and inner peace. Therefore, she feels she should present the full picture of her mother as a woman with her strenghts and frailities. She becomes thus the chronicler of her mother's spiritual release through physical as well as mental suffering. The act of confession serves the author as well in self-understanding and self-scrutiny. In a way, fosters also an examination of the relationship that she has with her own daughter, its lights and shadows, ups and downs. Karafilly writes:

Although I think that my psychologist friend was probably right to suggest that I had never quite forgiven my mother, I believe that I have at last forgiven everything. Only now, now that passion has finally given way to compassion, as well as confession, do all those childhood memories suddenly seem to be beside the point. What is the point? Just now, there seem to be only two worth pursuing: being

See also p.61: "By the time I was eighteen, there wasn't a single language adequate to communicating with my parents. We adopted a linguistic hodge-podge unintelligible to anyone who did not speak English, Hebrew, and Polish. We spoke all three languages at home, simultaneously, ploughing their respective vocabularies in the endless hope of finding the right word. Though we sometimes succeeded in finding a passable word, we usually failed to communicate precisely what was on our minds. We never fully understood each other, but, unlike my brother, I never gave up trying to get it right. He became a systems analyst. I became a writer" (Idem cit. p.61)

³⁶⁶ Idem, cit. pp.150-151.

³⁶⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit. p.47.

there when my mother needs me, and being here to tell her story – tell it fully, unflinchingly, proving to myself that I am no longer ashamed of her, that I am willing to let the world see her for what she was: a woman like any other, with her virtues as well as her flaws. No worse, I suspect, than most people’s mothers. If mine was less fortunate than others, one of her misfortunes may well have been a daughter who saw too much, thought too much, expected far too much. What if my own daughter were to subject me to such intense scrutiny?³⁶⁸

Furthermore, another dilemma that writing entails is the tension “not just between Art and Life, but between two kinds of duty.”³⁶⁹ She wonders about the priorities in life. Is it right to give up one’s own aspirations in order to devote one’s self only to an aging parent? She seems torn between her conscience and her desires. To what extent can memory be an obstacle to affirming one’s identity? Writing has always been a search of coherence, of meaning thus of an identity. Now, ironically she has been divided by her project: “between Art and the very subject that has inspired it”.³⁷⁰ She finds the responsibility of being a daughter as opposing that of being a writer. As she says, “perhaps all that stands between me and being a True Artist is the tenaciousness of my acute emotional memory.”³⁷¹ She wonders:

I ask myself these questions even as I inwardly scold myself: how sophomoric to still be thinking of a normal life – as if pain, grief, frustration, disappointment, were only fleeting anomalies for most of the human race. They aren’t, of course, but neither is our capacity for complex, contradictory emotions. Though my love and my pity for my mother continue to flow through me like a deep, tortuous river, there is no denying the subterranean fires of anger and resentment. Only recently, I have read that someone – George Bernard Shaw, I believe, said that a true artist would let his wife prostitute herself and his children starve rather than abandon his work. Am I not a true artist then? Am I nothing but an inadequate daughter?³⁷²

Nevertheless, as the author admits, her memoir aims at retelling the story behind the black-and-white photographs, or rather, at recreating the complete picture of her mother with all the tinges and hues of her personality and character. Thus, the writer tries to use the whole palette of her memories to compose her story, even if it reminds of the ‘unsolved family puzzle’. As Karafilly says, “it has to do with old Polish portrait of my mother in her

³⁶⁸ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.166.

³⁶⁹ *Idem*, cit. p.207.

³⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁷¹ *Idem*, cit. p.209.

³⁷² *Idem*, cit. p.206.

plumed hat; a photo that, years ago, went missing from my mother's album."³⁷³ In a way, the retrieval of painful and gruff memories coincides here with being freed of them:

I began (...) to try and imagine why a daughter might want to take such a photograph, and ended up writing a short story entitled "A Photograph, in Black and White." In the story, the girl does steal the mother's photo, and then burns it the day she reaches puberty, in an act of renunciation and defiance. Though even as an adolescent I would have been incapable of such a destructive act, the story did hint at the complexity of my adolescent feelings toward my mother. I have spent months now dealing with some of those feelings in this memoir; have tried to replace an adolescent's black-and-white portrait of her mother with the more nuanced one that comes with maturity. I have done so in the hope of telling my mother's story but also of laying the past to rest.³⁷⁴

Surprisingly, somehow the missing snapshot found its way into her father's pocket. When the author comes up with the 'miraculous discovery', she cannot but think of Pascal's famous statement, "The heart has its reasons which reason cannot understand."³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Idem, cit. p.236.

³⁷⁴ Idem, cit. p.237.

³⁷⁵ Idem, cit. p.239.

II.3. Balmy Waters of Oblivion

Sleeping at last, the trouble and tumult are over,
Sleeping at last, the struggle and horror past.³⁷⁶

I keep on dying,
Because I love to live.³⁷⁷

When does pain end and peace begin? The victims of Alzheimer's disease suffer from an identity crisis once the memory loss sets in. They feel more and more confused, desperate and helpless in front of the reality they have to face. Normally, as we age, our bodies change and we lose capabilities that we once had. With Alzheimer's, many feel that they are losing more than just abilities but rather that they are losing their minds:

It is easy to be amused by demented patients' delusions;
easy to forget that objective reality is irrelevant in such cases:
to the afflicted, the conspiracy, the attacks, the sheer
terror, are as vivid as anybody's worst dreams. For them,
alas, there is no waking up from the nightmare, no mercy or
relief – except through eventual death.³⁷⁸

As Oscar Wilde said, "The basis of optimism is sheer terror."³⁷⁹ In fact, ironically, fear and an imminent danger may bring a strong will to survive. Thus, hope is what keeps us alive and active while overcoming obstacles. Apparently, also love is magnified when it is needed more. Anyway, the author feels in part responsible for her mother's alienation. She blames herself for not having noticed the imminent tragedy earlier. She says:

How did I fail to realize that she was not herself anymore;
that, though strong and competent and hard-working as ever,
she was already being inwardly transformed, gradually and
invisibly slipping away from all three of us – our growing
bewilderment; our imperfect love. It is easy to love in retrospect;
love earnestly, perfectly, while staring into the abyss.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁶ Christina Rossetti, *Sleeping at Last*, in Christina Rossetti, *Selected Poems*, Phoenix Poetry, London, 2002, cit. p.119.

³⁷⁷ Maya Angelou, *The Lesson*, in Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, Virago, London, 2007, cit. p.18.

³⁷⁸ Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.121.

³⁷⁹ Cit.in idem, cit. p.193.

³⁸⁰ Idem, cit. pp.35-36.

See also Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans.M.Hulse, Vintage, London, 2002, cit. pp.170-171:
"I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next."

Karafilly realizes that now the roles of mother and child have been swapped. This ironic exchange seems to be a joke our nature plays on ourselves, a test of our being. The author wonders if the preparation our culture and civilisation offer us are lacking in this respect. What can be done to be able to face this kind of situation appropriately? What values should be fostered in our all-too-fast world? How can we prepare ourselves for this slowing-down?

The loss of control over bodily functions is common among Alzheimer's patients, but it is not in the nature of things for children to see their parents reduced to this degrading state. Or perhaps it is; perhaps it is simply our culture that leaves us ill-prepared for this cruel reversal.³⁸¹

What is more, the mother herself notices the cruel irony. Her helplessness and impotence make her totally dependent on others. Her daughter becomes her guardian angel. The mother herself becomes a child needing protection and assistance:

She looked very small, very pale, clinging to my hand.
This was when the same thought seemed to strike us both.
"A stranger would think you were the mother and I the child,"
she said.³⁸²

In fact, as Laing remarks, the brain damage leads to biological as well as psychological 'regression'. The body and the mind lose their abilities developed in time. However, the mystery of human existence remains unravelled. Laing writes:

There is an old neurosurgical dictum that after a head injury one is inclined to become more of a child and less of an adult. This neurological 'regression' after head injury is different from what is called 'regression' in psychiatry – and yet biological and psychological regression do seem to have something more than a name in common.³⁸³

Conversely, the mother's disease makes the daughter 'mature' through the experience of compassion. Now, passion gets transformed into sympathy and care. The author observes and analyses the changes of her own behaviour and attitude toward her mother as the illness progresses:

To grow old, as Albert Camus once said, is to pass from passion to compassion. I was only middle-aged, but the change in my own emotional balance could not be denied. Alas, aged seventy-seven and imprisoned in a hospital ward, my mother had no use for a repentant daughter's gifts.³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ Idem, cit. p.125.

³⁸² Idem, cit. p.7.

³⁸³ Ronald David Laing, *Wisdom, Madness & Folly*, Macmillan, London, 1985, cit. p.119.

Karafilly describes the difficult stages in coming to grips with her mother's disease. She doesn't spare the reader her outbursts of pain and helplessness. In particular, she shows how deeply she can be touched when she listens to her mother's favourite songs. Ironically, the sad and sentimental music reminds her of their happy moments together:

On the way back, an accordionist is sitting at the Lionel Groulx Metro station, playing an old Russian love song about a young woman named Katyusha, who goes walking by the river, hoping her beloved will hear her voice. My mother, who loved sentimental music, taught me the song many years ago; she taught me several such songs, sometimes reduced to tears by their sad lyrics. And though these days I can no more than hum the old tune, I discover it is possible to cry openly in public, and hardly care at all.³⁸⁵

As Heschel says, "only a free person knows that the true meaning of existence is experienced in giving, in endowing, in meeting a person face to face, in fulfilling higher needs."³⁸⁶ Thus, in order to meet the challenge successfully, one needs to explore the profound meaning of this 'journey'. Otherwise, one risks to succumb to the debilitating anger, despair and feeling of hopelessness that consume your energy. Karafilly admits her confusion, fears and helplessness about her mother's illness:

My mother was clearly in the throes of dementia, but I was not yet altogether free of the willful optimism that repetition or elaboration or anger might open the door to lucidity. When we fail to accept a loved one's mental decline, we are, of course, rebelling against the terrifying loss of reason, but perhaps just as much against our own impotence. Like my mother, I had always possessed an unwavering faith in my own ability to solve any problem; overcome any obstacles destiny brought my way. By the time my mother was admitted to St. Mary's, however, I had no solution; no metaphorical sleeve from which to pull a trick against the cruelties of fate. What I had was the dawning knowledge that I was undergoing a pivotal test. I was not at all sure I was up to it; that I would not succumb to the raging inner, and outer, chaos.³⁸⁷

Hence, the family members of the AD victim should cooperate and focus on what is positive, make the best of the situation. After all, as Heschel remarks, "For man to be means to be with other human beings. His existence is coexistence. He can never attain fulfillment, or sense meaning, unless it is shared, unless it pertains to other human

³⁸⁴ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.38.

³⁸⁵ Idem, cit. p.127.

³⁸⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit. p.61.

³⁸⁷ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.92.

beings.”³⁸⁸ Thus, love results ‘the most reliable technique.’³⁸⁹ Otherwise, the family may miss the precious moments spent with the loved one, the small pleasures and delights that the AD sufferer can still experience. In fact, Karafilly admits that her mother “may be incapable of embarrassment, but she is still capable of clutching at an occasional, unexpected, moment of perfect happiness.”³⁹⁰ Singing seems to be one of them:

I stay in the lounge and sing a very old song my mother used to know; one she has never, in all the months since the fire, managed to sing with me. She sings the song now, snatches of it, looking at me intently whenever the tune eludes her. When I finish singing, my mother claps her hands. “Good, good, very good!” She smiles at me with unmistakable pride. “Thank you,” she says. Thank you. Wouldn’t you believe in miracles?³⁹¹

Moreover, as Frena Gray-Davidson remarks, the loss of memory helps the AD sufferers to open emotionally and show affection as they never did before.³⁹² Their need to love and to be loved is thus magnified in each gesture they make. They make friends easily and cannot hold a grudge against someone for long, therefore they appear more lovable and amiable.³⁹³

Thus, as already mentioned, it is the role of the family to take care of their loved ones, above all emotionally. As Frena Gray-Davidson justly asks, “After all, if the family does not supply Grandma’s need for love, who exactly is supposed to be there fulfilling that need?”³⁹⁴ Karafilly often expresses her preoccupation as well as compassion for her suffering parent. She broods over her mother’s pitiful condition, referring heart-wrenching details of her mental as well as bodily decline. Each description is accompanied by a gloomy scenario of her despair and helplessness in front of the ruthless lot. However, her gestures of tenderness and love seem to assuage her mother’s pain and alienation:

This much what I feel for my hapless mother; a web of emotions compounded by my renewed sense of impotence. There is so little I can do for her; so little I can give her now. Still, I stay in the hot, airless room day after day, and calming her, and seeing to it that morphine is administered promptly. She sleeps much of the time, growing agitated whenever the morphine begins to wear off, usually an hour or so before another

³⁸⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1963, cit.p.45.

³⁸⁹ Cf. Frena Gray-Davidson, *The Alzheimer’s Sourcebook for Caregivers: A practical Guide to Getting Through the Day*, Lowell House, Chicago, 1999, p.9

³⁹⁰ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit.p.185.

³⁹¹ Idem, cit.p.228.

³⁹² Cf. Frena Gray-Davidson, *The Alzheimer’s Sourcebook for Caregivers: A practical Guide to Getting Through the Day*, Lowell House, Chicago, 1999, p.4.

³⁹³ Cf. Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, p. 214.

³⁹⁴ Frena Gray-Davidson, *The Alzheimer’s Sourcebook for Caregivers: A practical Guide to Getting Through the Day*, Lowell House, Chicago, 1999, cit. p.10.

dose is due. This hour is the most difficult of all, for I know that my mother is in pain, yet I can do nothing beyond distracting her with kisses, caresses, songs.³⁹⁵

Karafilly tells us about her battle against time. She tries to save as much of her mother's memory, as well as of her former identity, as possible. Her research into the subject with hope of finding some magic cure goes hand in hand with her despair. Nevertheless, she keeps on looking for anything that might help to recuperate her mother's memory and strength, or at least to slow down the progress of the disease.³⁹⁶ On the other hand, however, she wonders if there may be any hidden mechanism of the mind that aims at repressing undesirable memories by 'self-destruction'. Is it possible that our organisms unconsciously defend us from our 'selves'? She muses if Freud's theory about the 'need for illness' can contain some truth about human nature and existence. How far can we go in order to 'correct' our memory? She asks:

Could Alzheimer's be a willful escape from intolerable truths; the only option left once hope is gone and all that remains is the knowledge of a life it is now too late to change? After all, even Freud believed that not only is there such a thing as susceptibility to illness, there is also the need for illness. After the exchange I had just witnessed, this idea seemed to gain in persuasiveness, trailing a new question: could the cruel disease also be the ultimate revenge of the thwarted, the powerless? *Could it?* I wanted to howl at the thought that my father's burst of affection was so rare, so shocking, that it had managed to catapult my befuddled mother into perfect lucidity.³⁹⁷

The author's musings over the fatal consequences of the disease seem to have no end. What strikes her most is the contrast between 'aroused expectations and dismal realities'. Karafilly's identity as a daughter seems to rely heavily on her parent's identity as a mother. Whenever there is no recognition of such a state of roles on the part of the latter, all the logic scheme crumbles and the author's identity crisis occurs. She says:

Though my mother seems to have emerged from her post-surgical withdrawn state, she is far from being as alert and lucid as she was for that one brief, exhilarating spell. What I feel in subsequent days - days on which she no longer remembers that she has a daughter - is what Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, must have felt as he stood watching his newly awakened patients lapsing back, one by one, into their decades-long torpor. April is the cruellest month, I find myself thinking - not only because it happens to be April now, but because *The Waste Land's* opening line invariably makes me think of the despair that lurks in the interstices between aroused expectations and dismal realities.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ Irena F. Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.212.

³⁹⁶ Idem, cf. pp.190-191.

³⁹⁷ Idem, cit. p.48

³⁹⁸ Idem, cit. p.229.

Moreover, Karafilly retraces the moments of her mother's progressive regression. Mourningly, she portrays the loss of her parent to the Alzheimer's disease where cognitive skills are almost gone. She seems all the more helpless because she feels totally disarmed by the devastation of her mother's senses. She doesn't know any more how to approach her parent, how to alleviate her pain:

There is hardly anything I can do for my mother any more;
I can no longer give her pleasure. I cannot take her for a smoke,
or give her a chocolate, or play a song she likes; she seldom even
wants to play cards these days. And still, I feel I must come and
see her; I must hoodwink my own mother so she is not alone,
strapped to a chair, all evening.³⁹⁹

She stops in mid-sentence and licks the candy I have just given her,
then puts it in her mouth and thanks me. "Lady gave me a candy...
that was nice," she says, wagging her head. She is quiet for a minute
or two, seeming to enjoy the candy. "Lady gave it to me to shut me up,"
she says.⁴⁰⁰

Ironically enough, Karafilly misses her mother's former eccentricities. She would like to turn back time and re-get her once-overactive parent rather than see her in the miserable and pitiful condition in which she seems to be at the moment. Continuously, the shadows of the present are analysed and examined in the light of the past; as it seems, the present cannot have a time of its own:

The irony that my mother is as indifferent to my gifts today as I once
was to hers is not lost on me. I do not know whether I could have been
a better daughter; I do know that I would give a good deal to have my
old, meddling, domineering, over-sensitive mother back to complain
about. If I were asked to choose between watching my mother slide
helplessly into extreme dementia, and having the old one back in exchange
for my promise to wear anything she chose to give me, I might well be
tempted to accept the clothes – even a purple polka-dotted coat with
transparent fish for buttons!⁴⁰¹

"For all your ills I give you laughter,"⁴⁰² writes François Rabelais. However, very often in the case of Alzheimer's disease it is the sufferers and not their family that preserve the sense of humour in spite of all. Those who care are usually too involved in thinking about the past and too heavily attached to it to notice the lightness of the present. They are used to interpreting the present through the past, thus are not able to have a fresh and more

³⁹⁹ Idem, cit. pp.179-180.

⁴⁰⁰ Idem, cit. p.183.

⁴⁰¹ Idem, cit. p.141.

⁴⁰² Cit.in idem, cit.p.231.

positive approach to the present situation. Donald Davie describes thus one of his friends who suffers from AD:

It is said that he laughs at himself,
Betrayed into such grotesque
Non-sequiturs (...)
Non –sequitur! No wonder
If, now his mind is gone,
He chuckles at the bizarre
Concatenation of
Circumstances that a private
Eye can disentangle
Retrospectively always.⁴⁰³

Nevertheless, the author seems to reach a temporary state of acceptance and of relief after having seen the film *Life is beautiful* by Roberto Benigni. Gradually, she discovers in its simplicity a profound message: optimism and hope help to live and make life more liveable if not beautiful; in other words, everything depends on how we approach a problem. As the Chinese would say: “You can’t prevent birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.”⁴⁰⁴ We read:

Benigni’s Guido is clearly one of the yea-sayers, a man determined to preserve not only his son’s innocence, but his own as well. Benigni would have us believe that though life is full of sorrows, we must live it with zest and an unvanquished spirit; must resolutely behave as if it were beautiful. True happiness may be elusive, and its pursuit often ludicrous, but it is sometimes all that keeps us away from the existential abyss. Life is not always beautiful, but the struggle to make it so is nothing short of the sublime. This, I think, is the film’s message, and the ability to see life in this life is one of Benigni’s enviable gifts. And, though I am sadly not among those endowed with it, just now it seems to me that I am being invited to share the gift with the Millers and Benignis of this world; that the opportunity to see the film when I did was one of those banal events that later come to seem like an epiphany. Though I have no mystical leanings, the insight, I feel, is being numinously offered to help me survive not only this week’s disappointment but also the inevitable grief that lies in store.⁴⁰⁵

Strangely enough, the song *Dai Dayenu* the author’s mother has been singing for so long is a ‘Jewish song of gratitude for survival against odds’. In fact, as Karafilly says, no one could understand why a ‘seder song should be so tenaciously lodged in her atrophying

⁴⁰³ Donald Davie, *Alzheimer’s Disease: for Kenneth Millar*, in Donald Davie, *Collected Poems*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.

⁴⁰⁴ A chinese proverb cit. in Irena F.Karafilly, *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit.p.187

⁴⁰⁵ Idem, cit.p.230-231.

brain.⁴⁰⁶ Its meaning seems to transcend times and lands like human identity and memory that continue to live on in next generations.⁴⁰⁷

Nevertheless, Karafilly describes her dream, or rather nightmare, of drowning in the sea of her mother's sorrows. She interprets it as a sign of imminent danger of losing her 'self' by wanting to save her mother's memory. Thus, the image of the sea may mean here life as well as death of one's self. The whirlpool instead may stand for an inner chaos at the moment as well as 'the black hole of oblivion':

One night I had a dream: my mother was in the sea, being sucked in by the whirlpool, and I, swimming nearby, rushed over to help her, grabbing hold of her flailing arm, only to find myself likewise drawn into the churning water. The dream was as explicit as it was full of foreboding. I knew I was in danger of drowning in the depths of my mother's sorrows. An irrational part of me even seemed to feel it was perhaps my duty to let it happen. Was it not frivolous, selfish, worthless to seek joy and pleasure why my own mother was being sucked into oblivion?⁴⁰⁸

Interestingly, Walt Whitman saw in the Old Age "the estuary that enlarges and spreads itself grandly as it pours in the great sea."⁴⁰⁹ In the later stages of the Alzheimer's disease many people reach a state of blissfulness that envelops them like the sea. Their memory torments them no longer, or rather, its loss releases them from their fears and obsessions. Hannah Arendt, wrote, "Truth, be it the ancient truth of Being or the Christian truth of the living God, can reveal itself only in complete human stillness."⁴¹⁰ Indeed, they seem to find at last inner peace and resolution. Metaphorically speaking, the loss of memory may be considered in a way a 'death of identity'.⁴¹¹ As Frena Gray-Davidson poignantly observes, "The blessing of the disease is the same as the curse – forgetfulness." Karafilly wonders:

"He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past," wrote Thoreau, and perhaps he was right. As neither Bergman nor I would seem to be among the blessed, I have occasionally wondered whether a Bermaesque blow-up between my mother and me could have saved our burdened relationship; whether, despite my mother's own aversion for such ugly scenes, it might not have proved cathartic, enabling me finally to discard the past.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁶ Idem, cit.pp.110-111. *Seder* – The feast commemorating the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, celebrated on the first night or the first two nights of Passover.

⁴⁰⁷ Idem, cf. p.220.

Passover – A holiday beginning on the 14th of Nisan (March or April) and traditionally continuing for eight days, commemorating the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. Also called *Pesach*.

⁴⁰⁸ Idem, cit.pp.152-153.

⁴⁰⁹ Walt Whitman, *To Old Age*, in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, cit. p.130.

⁴¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, cit. p.15.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Czesław Czapliński, *Death & Life* : Jerzy Kosiński, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warszawa 2001:

Jerzy Kosinski writes "There's really nothing so fearsome about death except our fear of it. Somebody must have said that, only who was it?" (cit. p.12) While, according to Michel Montaigne "Death by its own will is the most beautiful thing. Our life depends on others, but our death – just on us." (cit. p.14)

⁴¹² Irena F. Karafilly., *The Stranger in a Plumed Hat : a Memoir*, Viking, Toronto, 2000, cit.pp.161-162.

She was in those days, as given to tearful outbursts as she was to joyous laughter. It was only in old age that both tears and laughter had all but stopped, giving way to a brave, slightly tentative smile.⁴¹³

The final image of the old mother comes, fittingly, on Mother's Day, when she no longer knows the word for "goodbye," though "she still smiles on being kissed and makes small kissing noises with her puckered mouth." Her trembling hand is raised to those she doesn't recognize as her family, and it looks like a blessing:

On Mother's Day, this is an especially melancholy thought.
It is also one that my new Benignian resolve forbids dwelling
on as we bend to kiss my mother, saying goodbye. My mother
no longer knows this word, but she still smiles on being kissed,
and makes small kissing noises with her puckered mouth. It is,
I reflect, likely to be the very last gift my mother will relinquish.
I know she doesn't understand who we are, as I know that her
raised, trembling, hand is not meant to convey farewell. It only
looks like that, if not like a benediction.⁴¹⁴

After all, as Gwendolyn Brooks says in one of her poems, we are all infirm in some ways. Therefore, our life is a source of continual wonder and surprise.⁴¹⁵ We all need affection and care. Thus, we should remember that only through mutual respect, compassion and love we can be wholly ourselves again:

Everbody here
is infirm.
Everybody here is infirm.
Oh. Mend me. Mend me. Lord.

Today I
say to them
say to them
say to them, Lord:
look! I am beautiful, beautiful with
my wing that is wounded
my eye that is bonded
or my ear not funded
or my walk all a-wobble
I'm enough to be beautiful.

You are
beautiful too.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Idem, cit.p.71.

⁴¹⁴ Idem, cit.p.240.

⁴¹⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, cit.p.10: "The problem of human nature, the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* ("a question I have become for myself") seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense. It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves – this would be like jumping over our own shadows. Moreover, nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things."

⁴¹⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Infirm*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, American Poets Project:The Library of America, Chicago, 2005, cit.p.125.

III

ARTEFACTS OF LIFE:

Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*

“Choose life, that you and your descendants may leave”
Deuteronomy 30:19

Another Canadian-Jewish writer Lisa Appignanesi returns in her family memoir *Losing the Dead* to her Polish parents' wartime experiences. The book thus approaches the tormenting interrelation between memory and identity overshadowed by the Shoah. The author examines with perspicacity and, often with a pinch of irony, the complex interplay of identities involved in the family survival against the atrocities of war. The mask is here seen not only as a means, but often as the only way to resist and to survive in the ruthless and cruel reality of war. As the author says:

In its own small way, my family story touches on this whole complex tangle of remembering and forgetting. What measure is due to each in that tricky dance of time which is the making of life?⁴¹⁷

Lisa Appignanesi was born in Poland and her family name then was Borenstein. Her parents survived the war in a much rarer, though not unique way: by passing themselves off as Aryans. Later they escaped to France and subsequently to Montreal in Canada. *Losing the Dead* is in major part the story of their refugee wanderings. Or rather, it is Lisa's telling of their story, through their memories and her own experiences. Thus, it is not just the account of a terrible, triumphant adventure but also an exploration of its costs and effects; of memory, ideology, and growing up Jewish in Quebec, later immigration to England and her ‘memory trips’ to Poland. As she says, the book is a kind of recuperation of living connection with the family past and history:

(...) yet as my son grows into adulthood and my daughter into adolescence, I find myself wanting to root in those early shadows – many of which bear the shape of my parents’ experience. Partly because I want to be able to answer my children’s questions about their family. Partly because I am confronted by the sense that mine is the last generation for whom the war is still a living tissue of memory rather than a dusty and barbaric history of facts and statistics.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁷Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. pp.6-7.

⁴¹⁸Idem, cit. pp.5-6.

What is more, it is also an ultimate attempt to save her mother's memories from the grasp of Alzheimer's disease. As the author admits, memory is always a slippery terrain where reality gets filtered by our imagination. Hence, her memoir constitutes 'a form of negotiation' between the two entities. She writes:

It is to anchor myself against the rudderless ship of her mind, that I finally decide to write all this down. Writing has to entail some kind of order, even if the voyage into the past is always coloured by invention. Memory is also a form of negotiation.⁴¹⁹

Futhermore, the search for the past appears even more difficult and evasive in so much that the different layers of time overlap in survivors' memory. Moreover, looking for a coherent account of history usually resembles a 'scavenger's hunt' for disparate, and often contradictory, scraps of memory. The biographer thus becomes a kind of an archeologist of memory that has to excavate and analyse as many testimonies as possible:

The journey is not a pleasure cruise, with its stopping points already marked out in good, linear fashion. In a sense it is more like an archeological excavation. The objects sought for, alluded to in story, even documented in the formality of 'survivor interviews' or archives, may or may not be there, or they may be so written over by tales and memory and the passage of history, that one can only guess from the traces at their original use and shape.

Appignanesi's book aims thus at 'exorcising' the fears and ghosts of the past through a profound, understanding and sometimes ironic approach to reality. By telling the tale of her parents' adventurous lot, the author tries to reconcile the past with the present, but above all she stresses the importance of human perseverance, autoanalysis and forgiveness. The journey has just begun:

So this is a journey into my parents' past – into that foreign country they carried within themselves, which was also the country of war. The psychological tropes, the ways of confronting and filtering experience, which structured their lives grew largely out of that war and subsequent immigration. I suspect they they passed these patterns on to my brother and me, as surely as they passed on their genes and with as little choosing. Understanding this transgenerational haunting is part of the journey – and perhaps in a century where migration, forced or chosen, is the norm, it is its most common part.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ Idem, cit. p.7.

⁴²⁰ Idem, cit. p.8.

III.1. Memory Games

Actually, the true story of a person's life can never be written. It is beyond the power of literature. The full tale of any life would be both utterly boring or utterly unbelievable.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile*⁴²¹

As Miriam Weinstein poignantly remarks, “when Jews recall their history, much of it is tragic.”⁴²² The Holocaust has left an indelible scar on the survivors’ memory. Family histories have been shattered in the storm of violence. “It was as if the world were under a bell jar, until great cumulus brewed up out of the west casting a grey shadow upon the earth,”⁴²³ Sebald says in one of his books. The shadow of the past still reaches the present and extends itself into the future. Thus, in her memoir Lisa Appignanesi underlines the unifying force of the war trauma. In fact, Jewish communities all over the world feel united through their memory, cultural heritage and history. In fact, as Weinstein notes, “although they were continuously at risk, Jews felt secure in their peoplehood, creating a country of the mind through their books and their prayers.”⁴²⁴ Hence, recollecting the past can also have therapeutic effects.⁴²⁵

Futhermore, as Aharon Appelfeld observes, the survivors often cannot cope with the moral burden imposed on them by society. They aren’t able to provide any solutions to the problem of human violence. Moreover, the guilt of being alive while others died during the war haunts their conscience more and more.⁴²⁶

However, as Robert Wistrich remarks, the Holocaust will always constitute an extricable part of Israeli and Jewish consciousness, reinforced by the memory of persecution throughout Jewish history and the Middle East conflict, but transforming it into a unifying myth carries with it the danger of isolation and negative thinking.⁴²⁷ In fact, Appignanesi stresses the fact that memory is also a political tool in the construction of nations.⁴²⁸ What is more, she underlines its complex nature and its potential positive as well as negative consequences in saying that “memory is an emotional climate, a thick set

⁴²¹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, The Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, cit. p.VII.

⁴²² Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2001, cit. p.13.

⁴²³ Winfrid Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. M.Hulse, The Harvill Press, London, 1998, cit. p.59.

⁴²⁴ Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2001, cit. p.16.

⁴²⁵ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.6.

⁴²⁶ Cf. Philip Roth, *Shop Talk*, Vintage, London, 2002, cit.p.39.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Franklin Bialystok, *Delayed Impact: the Holocaust and the Canadian Jewish Community*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2000, p.250.

⁴²⁸ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, p.104

of sights and smells and sounds and imprinted attitudes which can pollute as well as clarify.”⁴²⁹

Nevertheless, memory has always been passed down to next generations through telling and retelling family histories. Appignanesi underlines the urgency of writing her memoir owing to her mother’s progressive illness. The Alzheimer’s disease has been corroding her mother’s memory.⁴³⁰ As she says, “It can hardly be coincidental that I want to remember, to uncover, to know, at the moment when my last gateway to family memory – my mother – is losing hers.”⁴³¹ It comes as a bitter surprise to her mother that she cannot recollect as many things as she used to. More and more blanks she comes across while retelling her story. Her daughter thus tries to reorder her tale and patch up the missing parts in order to recollect the past:

Her bewilderment, as I try to press her on facts and dates which are always just out of her reach, is painful. She can only return and return again to what she has already told me, scraps of unruly experience which refuse the consecutive shape of story.⁴³²

Her memory has taken on the randomness of dream, unconstrained by any order or external prodding. Keeping pace with the increasing limitations of her daily life, it has also grown poorer in detail, so that I have to fill in from previous tellings the gaps in hers. Many still remain and have to be leapt over like holes in a worn pavement.⁴³³

Nonetheless, the mother’s fragile memory can be retraced in her gestures, in the way she moves, in the way she speaks. Her war experiences seem to have been imprinted in the texture of her behavioural patterns.⁴³⁴ Many of them reflect the poses and masks she had to assume in order to survive the war and protect her family.

As Berkerley observes, “reality does not exist other than in our minds.”⁴³⁵ It seems to be especially true as far as the mother’s afflicted brain is concerned. She lives in her own world of spirits. Moreover, she claims to converse with the dead relatives about the weather conditions, socializing thus with the ghosts of her past in an English-like way:

⁴²⁹ Idem, cit. p.6.

⁴³⁰ See the information on the Alzheimer’s Disease presented in the previous chapter of the thesis on Irena Karafilly’s family memoir.

⁴³¹ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.7.

⁴³² Idem, cit. p.7.

⁴³³ Ibidem.

⁴³⁴ Idem, cf. p.7.

⁴³⁵ Hilary Lawson, “Stories about Stories”, in Lisa Appignanesi, Hilary Lawson (eds), *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, London, pp.XI-XXVIII, cit. p.XVI

She talks often to her father and to mine, she tells me, as if one could phone the dead on a daily basis, but too often they to her only of the weather. Perhaps in her dotage – that nice word which takes a cup of tea to senility and wraps a scarf round the cold throat of Alzheimer's – she has finally become English.⁴³⁶

Appignanesi says in her book that her mother's confusion is contagious.⁴³⁷ Her mother makes her question her own scraps of memory. She asks if she remembers her father as if they were strangers. The Alzheimer's Disease enhances the tangled relationship of memory and identity in all family members. As the author notes, the subversive workings of parents' mind can have devastating effects on their children perception of the world as well as of themselves. Traumas and hurt twisted memories are thus also likely to be handed down to the next generations. Appignanesi writes:

Memory, like history, is uncontrollable. It manifests itself in unruly ways. It cascades through the generations in a series of misplaced fears, mysterious wounds, odd habits. The child inhabits the texture of these fears and habits, without knowing they are memory.⁴³⁸

Futhermore, the author tells us about the importance of linguistic aspect in the discourse of nostalgia. The longing of memory reaches the distant sounds of childhood. Her inner voices reflect once-heard 'babble of tongues' due to her family's migratory experiences. The survivors's split memories often find their expression in multilingual narrative of past events:

Nostalgia is a wish effect, spurred in part by the objects, of childhood, induced, mostly, by the imposing of narrative on distant memory. It is not inherent to the scene. The voices were often loud and argumentative. They battled over business or incomprehensible politics, grew low with gossip or unseemly jokes. They came in a babble of tongues. A sentence would begin in Polish, merge into Yiddish⁴³⁹, migrate into French or stumbling English and go back again with no pause for breath.⁴⁴⁰

The author takes us on a journey back in time when she, as a child, listened to survivors' tales of war and rescue. She hardly recollects the faces of the speakers but still hears their

⁴³⁶ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.7.

⁴³⁷ Idem, cf. p.8.

⁴³⁸ Idem, cit. p.8.

⁴³⁹“It is commonly said that the Jews don't keep Sabbath; Sabbath keeps the Jews. Likewise, European Jews didn't just invent Yiddish; Yiddish helped them invent themselves.” (Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2001, cit. p.23)

⁴⁴⁰Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.18.

voices. Their tales of survival kept them together although they came from a variety of social and occupational backgrounds.⁴⁴¹

As Appignanesi remarks, the stories were modified each time they were told. The survivors amplified or changed some details adjusting their narrative to each new listener and to each new occasion. Every repetition was accompanied thus by a revision of the former version. As the author says, “the stories blend into one another and merge into a mysterious tapestry of war.”⁴⁴² After all, as Hilary Lawson observes, “All our truths are, in a sense, fictions – they are the stories we choose to believe.”⁴⁴³ There were thus for instance relatively cheerful ‘adventure stories’, especially those that carried a positive and optimistic message.⁴⁴⁴

However, as the author recollects, “the worst stories are told obliquely, in hushed voices, usually when their principal subject has left the room.”⁴⁴⁵ Hence, silence seems to be one of the best ingredients of suspense in them, as it was during the war. As Bruno, one of the protagonists of Appignanesi’s book “The Memory Man”, says, “it’s the traumatic moments that impress themselves on our brains so violently that we repeat them.”⁴⁴⁶ Interestingly, the word ‘survivor’ wasn’t used in those tales because of its high charge of negative connotations such as guilt and victimhood. The scientific discourse of the ‘Holocaust trauma’ was still to arrive. Appignanesi writes:

No one ever used the word ‘survivor’, with its grim underpinnings of guilt and victimhood and aura of everlasting misery. I don’t think anyone felt guilty about having made it through. Maybe guilt is something one feels in situations of utter passivity, and these people had all acted. Survivor was a word then reserved for those who had come out of natural disasters. This was a man-made one, a piece of history which had not yet acquired the political freight of the word Holocaust. Nor had the current discourse of trauma and its effects yet arrived on the scene. That had to wait for Vietnam and a burgeoning therapeutic industry.⁴⁴⁷

Nevertheless, as the author admits, writing this family memoir is an act of self-therapy. Every recaptured reminiscence of past events contributes to preserving a wholesome identity of the mother in her daughter’s memory against the whirlwinds of time and

⁴⁴¹ Idem, cf. pp.18-19.

⁴⁴² Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.19.

⁴⁴³ Hilary Lawson, *Stories about Stories*, pp.XI-XXVIII, in *Dismantling*, cit. p.XXVIII

⁴⁴⁴ Idem, cf. pp.21-22.

⁴⁴⁵ Idem, cit. p.21.

⁴⁴⁶ Lisa Appignanesi, *The Memory Man*, Arcadia Books, London, 2005, cit. p.99.

⁴⁴⁷ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. pp.21-22.

disease. The author chases every opportunity to save the vanishing scraps of her mother's ever-dissolving memory.⁴⁴⁸

The memory games, playing hide-and-seek with history constitutes one of the main interests in the second generation's lives. The children of survivors feel obliged to save the history of their parents' lives from the twists of memory as well as from forgetting. This second generation's burden entails an increased responsibility in sharing the past with the next generations, but it serves them also as a sort of protection against human violence and ignorance:

The familiar biological irony of all this doesn't escape me. This is the ultimate generation game. All my friends are playing it. We are suddenly interested in our parents' pasts which we feel are linked with our own buried ones. Children of Freud and his mismarriage to the rebellious Sixties which put youth, only youth, on a pedestal, we root around, often too late, in the family romance and sometimes excavate dark secrets. We are hungry for knowledge. If it doesn't at its best bring mutual understanding or forgiveness, or, at its worst, an excuse for personal failure, at least it may bring a kind of peace. Perhaps even a childhood talisman to inure us against old age.⁴⁴⁹

Thus, it requires a great deal of patience and personal insight to recollect the past in order to re-establish one's own identity over and over again. Memory can be very elusive, so one has to careful once entered its slippery terrain. After all, as Mark Twain nicely quips, "It is not so astonishing the number of things I can remember, as the number of things I can remember which are not so."⁴⁵⁰ Indeed, Appignanesi says:

Memory is always a montage of disparate fragments. In order to put these fragments into some kind of sequence, I need to set her memories now side by side with the fuller versions I remember from childhood and my own youth. These are also my brother's memories and those of the few remaining friends. I grill them all.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ Idem, cit. pp.80-81

⁴⁴⁹ Idem, cit. p.81.

⁴⁵⁰ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *The Memory Man*, Arcadia Books, London, 2005, cit. p.250.

⁴⁵¹ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.82.

III.2. Travesties of the Self

In thinnest air you rise! Or won't you for a minute sink
to envy the lucky caterpillars far below
who still have the whole unfolding to look forward to?⁴⁵²
Sandra Gilbert, *Four masks*

Identity unfolds through time like the wings of a butterfly. However, we cannot grasp its final stage of development. Even death remains open to doubts. The formation and the essence of our identity constitutes a mystery to ourselves. Life thus can be considered as an ongoing process of recreating and redefining oneself. Once we seem to arrive at the solution of the puzzle, it moves on and we have to look for memory clues again. Maybe life functions simply like a kaleidoscope of illusions: it changes its patterns continually. To complicate things more, as John Forrester remarks, there seems to be a split between our perception and the understanding of the conception of reality. Hence, our identity seems illusory:

(...) our perception is giving one reality while
the understanding of conception is giving another.
This means that there's a fundamental split in
the 'self' – between perception and understanding.
For if we only see what we know, or know what
we see, we couldn't both have an illusion and be
aware that it's illusory.⁴⁵³

As Lisa Appignanesi observes, the era of Post-Modernism abounds in discourses on the split of identity into myriads of minimal selves. The unity of the subject is being deconstructed and repeatedly recomposed in order to be reorganized again and again. Human life is hence analysed from different perspectives and from various angles of experience. She writes:

The problem of the self has, of course, a long history.
But the way it is approached in the age of post-structuralism
and artificial intelligence is new. Recent years have seen
the all-but simultaneous emergence of a proliferation of
'discourses' which either efface the individual subject or
reassert its gendered centrality, only then to decentre the self
into a variety of more or less minimal selves. The self-assertive
'I' finds its solidity and unity being eroded. At the same time
it becomes the site for a feverish shoving-up operation.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² Sandra Gilbert, *Four Masks*, in Sandra Gilbert, *Belongings: Poems*, W.W.Norton & Company, New York, 2005, cit. p.82.

⁴⁵³ John Forrester, "A brief history of the subject", in Lisa Appignanesi Lisa, Homi Bhabha (eds), *Identity: Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, pp.13-16, cit. p.19.

⁴⁵⁴ Lisa Appignanesi, "Editor's Note" in Lisa Appignanesi, Homi Bhabha(eds), *Identity: Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, cit. p.2.

Furthermore, as Sigmund Freud observes, the plurality of ‘lives’, and thus identities, are of vital importance for our own survival and development. It is what all creative activities seem to be about. We need to express all of our ‘unrealized selves’ somehow, e.g. by writing or by reading. Thus we have to identify ourselves sometimes in somebody’s death, to empathize and sympathize deeply in order to be able to survive our fears and live again our own life. Freud says:

So we have no option but to find compensations in the world of fiction, in literature, in the theatre for that which we have lost in life (...) In the sphere of fiction we find the plurality of lives that we need. We die in our identification with our hero, but survive him and are ready to die a second time, equally unharmed, with another.⁴⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the history of Lisa Appignanesi’s family was not fiction although resembled one as far as the number of identities involved. As she says, “Identities, in my family, seems always to have been there for the making.”⁴⁵⁶ Her own date of birth is not clearly known because the birth dates of Jews were not always correctly registers at the time she was in Poland.⁴⁵⁷ Thus, her identity has never had a solid point of reference in time. As she says her parents had a history of name-changing. During the war, they lived under a succession of ‘Aryan’ aliases, changing names and identities and addresses when discovery was imminent, precariously acquiring documents and baptismal certificates if necessary. The surnames were e.g. Sawitzka, Kowalski, Zablocki, with the necessary preceding Christian names. On arriving in Canada they kept up the habit of a double identity.⁴⁵⁸

When e arrived in Ste-Thérèse my parents changed their name. They changed it from Borenstein to Borens, ostensibly for simplicity and business efficiency. In fact they dropped the tell-tale syllable for more complicated reasons. We were Borenstein in cosmopolitan Montréal and Borens in the provincial reaches of Ste-Thérèse where Jews were rumours - disembodied myths of foul doings, schoolground Christ-killers, always spoken of in the expletive voice and coupled with the adjective dirty, so that two words became one: ‘saljuif!’ I suspect we were the only embodied Jews in Ste-Thérèse, though there may have been others who behaved with equal secrecy.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Timely Reflections on War and Death*, in Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. S. Whiteside, Penguin Books, London, 2005, cit. p.185.

⁴⁵⁶ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.11.

⁴⁵⁷ Idem, cf. p.103.

“Truth is a slippery substance and it can easily slip away in a kind of familial osmosis. I got to the point where I was no longer sure where I had been born – one isn’t after all really present at one’s own birth. And origins are the very stuff of myth. Well into my teens, I remember going into a kind of shivering panic when asked my name, but especially when I was asked my place of birth. The question paralysed me. I staged elaborate ploys to prevent its arrival or avoid an answer. Nor did I know what answer would come out of me. Even when I told what I supposed was the truth, I had a shuddering sense that I was probably lying.” (Idem, cit. pp.32-33)

⁴⁵⁸ Idem, cf. pp.28-29.

⁴⁵⁹ Idem, cit. p.28.

Ironically enough, Appignanesi tells us about her parents' choice of Canada as their destination. Seen as a 'promised land' flowing with honey and gold, Canada appeared to them as a safe and comfortable place of refuge. Its distance from the European background of the Holocaust seemed to guarantee a peaceful and 'normal' life, a fresh start and equal opportunities for everyone. They opted for this country in hoped leaving the traumatic burden of memory behind them. The author recalls:

she chose Canada, it seems, because it was a *terra incognita*, a blank whiteness, unmapped by myths, unpeopled by named individuals – a country whose reputation in Poland was simply one of comfort and plenty. I don't think either of my parents knew then that Canada was the name the Nazis had given to the commercial hub of the camp at Birkenau where the possessions of over a million dead (...) were sifted and classified. They wouldn't have liked the irony.⁴⁶⁰

My father, whose long-term Zionism had tugged him towards but never landed him in Israel, would even joke that when Moses, that lifelong stammerer, had designated the promised land as 'C...C...Canaan', it was because he couldn't bring out the syllables of Canada.⁴⁶¹

Nonetheless, their war memories haunted them all their life. No matter how they tried they followed them like a shadow, marking "the scarred receptacle which is an identity"⁴⁶² All their struggles with the past, in turn, exercised a weighty impact on the family bonds. The present moments were always tinged by the silent reminiscences of the past events. The war continued its cruel harvest in the twists of human memory and identity. Appignanesi says:

Every family has its division of psychological labour. In mine, my mother was the liar, my father the silent, inscrutable one, while I was the truth-teller. Or at least, the truth-knower. In my fantasy of my childhood self, I rarely speak. (...) My much absent brother is mysterious and unpredictable. As he had been very close to my mother during the War, he may have found the Machiavellian slippage between truth and fiction altogether unsurprising.⁴⁶³

What is more, the author recollects her mother's inclination toward exaggeration and confabulation due to her war experiences. The gift of storytelling and embellishing facts seems to grow out of her ability to survive in extreme circumstances. Thus, reality reveals

⁴⁶⁰ Idem, cit. pp.13-14.

⁴⁶¹ Idem, cit. p.14.

⁴⁶² Idem, cit. p.81.

⁴⁶³ Idem, cit. p.30.

itself to her as a kind of substance which has to be mould into one's own version. In other words, she looks at life simply in creative terms.⁴⁶⁴

As Primo Levi says, "Each of us, knowingly or not, creates an image of himself but inevitably it is different from that, or, rather, from those (which again are different from one another) that are created by whoever comes into contact with us."⁴⁶⁵ In fact, all different versions of identity mingle in one single person. Appignanesi's mother creating herself every time ex novo, played the identity games consciously in order to survive among the atrocities of war and violence. As it seems, "The only way to outwit the Germans is to beat them at their own game."⁴⁶⁶ The author says:

It comes to me that her idea of herself is fixed in a prior body: it has never changed, despite changing realities. Somewhere buried inside her, like lost civilisations, are other selves who never complain, who are shrewd about the world, who are rivetingly attractive and yes, never afraid. They use her lips to speak. Maybe that's what old age is about. If it is, it frightens me far more than death. I realise that it is also for that fearful, tattering bit of me that I have needed to reinvent my mother's earlier selves.⁴⁶⁷

The harsh conditions propelled by the war created a world of topsy-turvy norms and rules by which men could get by and save themselves as well as protect their families. Primo Levi in his book on various types of survivors remarks that "The protagonists of these stories are "men" beyond doubt, even if the virtue that allows them to survive and makes them unique is not always one approved by common morality."⁴⁶⁸ In a way, Appignanesi feels obliged to her mother's tales; imagination triggers creativity. Her own passion for writing seems to stem from her mother's love of storytelling:

I sometimes long for the freedom that writing pseudonymously gives one. Sometimes I secretly think that writing fiction, which is what I mostly do, is simply a way of acting out my mother's fabulations, while being able to insist on a certain honesty in everyday life.⁴⁶⁹

Furthermore, she is grateful to her parents for showing her how dangerous identity politics can be. She opts thus for a more wholesome, complex and humane approach to a person.

⁴⁶⁴ Idem, cf. p.31.

⁴⁶⁵ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. R.Feldman, ABACUS, London, 1987, cit. p.150.

⁴⁶⁶ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.123.

See also idem, p.33.

⁴⁶⁷ Idem, cit. p.229.

⁴⁶⁸ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. R.Feldman, ABACUS, London, 1987, cit. p.10.

⁴⁶⁹ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.218.

All her personal as well as professional experiences draw on her family past. Therefore, she is aware how crucial the role and task of memory in the society can be. She says:

From the vantage point of mid-life, I can now see why I would have wanted so quickly to shed a family name which had inevitably become imbued with shame and bore the mark of what my parents' experience was a persecuted identity group. The residue of all this is that I still don't like fixed identities, bracketed or determined. I am wary of identity politics which, for all their good intentions, seem to me to bear a whiff of the Nazis' racist categories and are another way of closing one's eyes both to what we all share as humans and to complexities which can't be forced into single identities.⁴⁷⁰

Thus, she underlines the importance of the workings of memory in shaping one's personality and character. To her mind happiness is not a steady state of mind, but rather a process in which we can grow spiritually and emotionally:

(...) life is in some measure also the story we tell ourselves about it. Stories are complicated, textured things. They contain ups and downs. Happiness, for me, is not a bland, placid and seamless stretch, but complexity, a rich fabric of many shades, a tapestry which can include anger and internal battles and wonder. And yes, even periods of unhappiness.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁷⁰ Idem, cit. p.218.

⁴⁷¹ Idem, cit. p.221.

III.3. Letting go

Your voice has gone dumb, having too often asked why.⁴⁷²
Jon Silkin, *Nature with Man*

Forgetting is as necessary as remembering.⁴⁷³
Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead*

Silence can speak, or rather, it can scream. The trauma of war lingers inside, its memory hurts and resurfaces in the outbreaks of silence. As Efraim Sicher poignantly remarks, “If the best expression of the Holocaust is silence, it’s the silence that’s inside poetry, a silence as brimful with meaning as the silences of God in the Bible, even perhaps the silence of God at Auschwitz.”⁴⁷⁴ Indeed, Appignanesi reveals her own fears and apprehensions due to the war trauma of her parents. As she says:

In a sense, these were my childhood fairytales – hideous trajectories, skilfully navigated towards some kind of happy ever after. No one bothered with Grimm. But at the age of when I had grown out of fairytales, they persisted. Bored with the repetition, I would go off and lie on the sofa and read the less loaded adventures of the Bobbsey Twins or Nancy Drew. I didn’t realise then that the repetition was necessary. Not until the stories had been voided of their quantum of fear and pain, could they cease. I guess that took until I was about thirteen.⁴⁷⁵

Her most conspicuous fear has to do with waiting. The obsession of time still haunts her. Every time she expects the worst if the person she is waiting for doesn’t turn up on time. The childhood memories paralyse, overwhelm with their weighty burden and turn into perennial anxiety. Time surrounds her, makes her shiver. As she says, “I guess waiting is no problem if you know who’s the stronger.”⁴⁷⁶ She explains:

My keenest memories of childhood are of waiting – waiting outside in the heat or in the cold or by a window, scratching the frost away in order to spy the passing cars - forcing my mind not to wait, distracting myself to no purpose, waiting in an agony of waiting for my parents to return. I am still a fretful writer. I have never been able to maintain relations with a man who makes me wait.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷² Jon Silkin, *Nature with Man*, in Efraim Sicher, *Beyond Marginality: Anglo-Jewish Literature after the Holocaust*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985, cit. p.159.

⁴⁷³ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.82.

⁴⁷⁴ Efraim Sicher, *Beyond Marginality: Anglo-Jewish Literature after the Holocaust*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1985, cit. p.159.

⁴⁷⁵ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.22.

⁴⁷⁶ Idem, cit. p.17.

⁴⁷⁷ Idem, cit. p.16.

Primo Levi distinguishes between two groups of survivors, i.e. those who repress their past and those who remain stuck on it till the end. As he says, “it has been observed by psychologists that survivors of traumatic events are divided into two well-defined groups: those who repress their past en bloc, and those whose memory of the offence persists, as though carved in stone, prevailing over all previous or subsequent experiences. Now, not by choice but by nature, I belong to the second group.”⁴⁷⁸ Similarly, Appignanesi’s parents weren’t able to shake off totally the painful memories. As she says, the War meant “the time when all my father’s smaller fears were welded into major terror.”⁴⁷⁹ In fact, the War still continued in their psyche:

My parents’ war was over. But the war they had internalised didn’t really end for a long time. It played out its pressures, its disguises and its pain in the living for at least the length of my childhood. And its traces lingered on. Like some ghost, it haunted our lives and appeared in odd places.⁴⁸⁰

What is more, her father’s condition worsened when he approached death. All the grimy memories came back to him; the ghosts of the past engulfed him in their shadows. He wasn’t able to distinguish the past from the present. The hospital where he was internalised appeared to him as an SS camp, the wards became the stage of War.⁴⁸¹

As the author recalls, her father always tried to escape his painful memories. Thus, their successive phases of emigration can be considered as his attempts at challenging life as well as defying death. Poland, France, Canada, England mark the stages in his search for personal freedom. Finally, he found his peace in the caring memory of his children:

In a way my father’s feet had killed him. War had chased him from a small town on the outskirts of Warsaw, had hunted him from site to site through the considerable expanse of Poland. Its aftermath had transported him to France and then to Canada. And now, he lay buried in London, a city where he was an occasional visitor, and in a cemetery devoid of kin. He had always been a man in a hurry. Yet in all those years he had never been able to run quite fast enough to evade the grip of the past.(...) I think my brother and I are both happy that with all the lost dead, our father at least, is in a place where we can find him.⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁸ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve*, trans. R.Feldman, ABACUS, London, 1987, cit. p.11.

⁴⁷⁹ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.57.

⁴⁸⁰ Idem, cit. p.217.

⁴⁸¹ Idem, cf. pp.3-4.

⁴⁸² Idem, cit. pp.5, 232.

However, the grappling with the past constituted a big problem for the author and her brother. They longed for a ‘normal’ family with ‘normal’ memories and problems. They envied their friends’ ordinary parents. They didn’t want to hear only stories about the war. As Appignanesi says, ”I couldn’t understand then that repetition is also a form of forgetting.”⁴⁸³ And the tales continued. We read:

I longed to bury the past and its traces. Above all, I longed to be as ordinary as all my suburban friends. They had nice, bland, bridge-playing, club-going parents. Parents who talked of mundane things, and not of concentration camps and ghettos and anti-Semitic laws and the dead and the missing.⁴⁸⁴

Nevertheless, as she later remarks, the dark stories repeated over and over again gave her major force and strength to face the everyday reality and enjoy life. Moreover, they enabled her to taste and appreciate every moment of her existence. She has learned to bring light out of darkness and be grateful for what she has.⁴⁸⁵

In fact, as Sigmund Freud remarks, “The inclination to exclude death from our reckoning of life leads to many other renunciations and exclusions.”⁴⁸⁶ Appignanesi learnt from her parents about the essence of living and being. In spite of all the hardships they had encountered in their life, they were able to face them with dignity and taught their children the most important values such as love, work and courage. The author writes:

Certainly my parents were deeply affected by their experience of the War – I hesitate to employ the word ‘damaged’ since to use it presupposes that I know what undamaged beings are, that I have a line on perfect psychic health. I don’t. People are too various. My parents were able to love and to work – which is the maximum Freud sought for any of his patients. If they did both in their own particular way, then that is what individuality is all about.⁴⁸⁷

Writing this book constitutes thus for her a sort of psychoanalysis and self-therapy. She could face her hidden fears and come to grips with them. She also entered her parents’ dark labyrinth of war memories in order to find the exit and peace.

Writing this book has made some of these hauntings clearer to me. What often appeared as my parents’ incomprehensible acts or perverse attitudes, a set of floating emotions which landed inappropriately on a given scene, are now grounded in the distorted world where they found their genesis.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸³ Idem, cit. p.60.

⁴⁸⁴ Idem, cit. p.61.

⁴⁸⁵ Idem, cf. p.68.

⁴⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Timely Reflections on War and Death*, in Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. S. Whiteside, Penguin Books, London, 2005, cit. p.185

⁴⁸⁷ Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: a Family Memoir*, McArthur & Company, Toronto, 1999, cit. p.220

Moreover, as she says, the work of memory is necessary to elaborate, accept and thus lose the painful past. Hence, the book posits itself as a kind of tribute to her parents, to their life, to their story:

In an act of reparation – since I am a bad daughter who refuses her mother both her present and much of her presence – I would like to give my mother's past back to her, intact, clear, with all its births and deaths and missing persons in place. The task I know is impossible. The dead are lost. But maybe, none the less, it makes a difference if by remembering them, we lose them properly.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁸ *Idem*, cit.p.218.

⁴⁸⁹ *Idem*, cit.pp.7-8.

IV MEMORY ROMANCE in the works of Lisa Appignanesi

Turn it and turn it for everything is in it...
- Babylonian Talmud⁴⁹⁰

Oscar Wilde says that “Truth is rarely pure and never simple”⁴⁹¹; its intricate translucent threads weave their stories through time. Memory picks them up and embroiders them into its variegated tapestry. According to R.L.Gregory, truth is generally considered to be “some kind of correspondence between the meaning of sentences or perceptions and ‘objective’ reality”.⁴⁹² Literature usually aims at dismantling the ‘truth’ and re-creating it again and again. Bhabha considers the tropes of postmodern cultures as “frames within the frames” and sees them as “floating signs... between history and literature, where the authoritative power of naming is undone by the political and poetical conditions of its meaning; where the language of the self is disseminated in the hybrid tongues and traditions that determine the place from which one speaks –as other.”⁴⁹³ Thus, identity as well as memory is conditioned by a continuous flux of various social and personal factors.

All forms of art can be hence regarded as an attempt at finding own’s own voice among others. It stems from the social background, and it also draws on the personal experience of the artist. The expression of the individual selves appears as unique and unrepeatable. As Barthes remarks:

Suspended between forms either disused or as yet unknown, the writer’s language is not so much a fund to be drawn on as an extreme limit; it is the geometrical *locus* of all that he could not say without, like Orpheus looking back, losing the stable meaning of his enterprise and his essential gesture as a social being. A language is therefore on the hither side of Literature. Style is almost beyond it: imagery, delivery, vocabulary spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹⁰ Cit.in Jonathan Rosen, *The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey between Worlds*, Picador, New York, 2000, cit. p.1.

⁴⁹¹ Cit in Lisa Appignanesi, *Sanctuary*, McArthur& Company, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.7.

⁴⁹² R.L.Gregory, in Lisa Appignanesi, Hilary Lawson (eds), *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, London, 1989, pp.93-100, cit. p.93.

⁴⁹³ Homi K.Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity”, in Lisa Appignanesi, Homi Bhabha (eds), *Identity: Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, pp.5-11, cit.p.5.

⁴⁹⁴ Roland Barthes, “from Writing Degree Zero”, in Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader*, Vintage, London, 1993, pp.31-61, cit.p.32.

It is style that distinguishes one artist from another, a mode in which the experiences are filtered and expressed in his or her creative thought and act. This chapter brings into focus the works of Lisa Appignanesi that reflect upon the interdependence of identity, memory, psychoanalysis and art.

In particular, the discussion is based on Appignanesi's books and essays on Freud and women such as e.g. *Freud's Women* and *Mad, Bad and Sad: Women and the Mind Doctors*. Woman has always fascinated artists and psychoanalysts. The mystery of life, desire, intuition, creativity, mental complexities have been frequently ascribed by artists to the feminine genius. In fact, in one of her works entitled *Femininity and the Creative Imagination* Appignanesi tries to underline the importance of feminine traits for the sake of artistic creativity by discussing the works of three great writers: Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust. Here, imagination plays a major part in the sublimation and esthetization of memory and vice versa. The chapter probes into various approaches to the Myth of the Feminine.

Furthermore, I explore the role of the artist in the society as inherent to the dilemma of freedom of expression. The analysis draws in particular on the volume of critical essays edited and introduced by Lisa Appignanesi *Free Expression is No Offence*, where the testimonies and voices of various writers and artists in defence of freedom of speech are brought together.

IV.1. Psychoanalysis and Identity

One's real life is often the life
one does not lead.

- Oscar Wilde⁴⁹⁵

As a man of desires, I go forth in
disguise.

- Paul Ricoeur⁴⁹⁶

The inner drive such as desire seems to be the motor force of human life and action. Thus, as Wilfred Bion poignantly remarks, "Memory is the past tense of desire."⁴⁹⁷ The fiction books written by Lisa Appignanesi stem from this implication. She probes into the darkest corners of human passions and motivations. In volumes such as e.g. *Memory and Desire*, *The Things We Do for Love*, *Sanctuary*, *Paris Requiem* she traces the lives of her protagonists with a psychological insight, focusing on the human complexity of her female characters.⁴⁹⁸ Nevertheless, her fundamental research work on the subject has been gathered in two huge critical volumes entitled *Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present*⁴⁹⁹ and *Freud's Women*⁵⁰⁰.

Sigmund Freud is one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His ideas still stir academic debates on life, love, gender, family and the relation between the sexes. These ideas acquired shape and substance in the 1960s when 'the woman question' became a burning issue. Sometimes championed as a liberator of women, Freud has also been virulently attacked for his theories of the feminine and for elevating his personal prejudices to universal pronouncement. Thus, *Freud's Women* poses itself as an attempt of a closer look at his research and approach to the women's psyche. Appignanesi writes in the *Foreword* to her book:

Freud's Women set out to explore the history which gave rise to accusations that Freud was a misogynist, a conservative patriarch who saw woman's primary place as being that of reproductive servant of the species. One of the issues that the exploration made clear was that excessive concentration on Freud's failings was itself a way of denying the women who figured in the history of psychoanalysis their rightful place. Restored to it, both Freud and psychoanalysis itself began to look subtly different.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁵ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *A Good Woman*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1998, *Incipit*.

⁴⁹⁶ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *The Things We Do for Love*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1998, *Incipit*.

⁴⁹⁷ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *Memory and Desire*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1997, cit. p.7.

⁴⁹⁸ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Memory and Desire*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1997.
Lisa Appignanesi, *The Things We Do for Love*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1998.

Lisa Appignanesi, *Sanctuary*, McArthur& Company, Toronto, 2000.

Lisa Appignanesi, *Memory and Desire*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1997.

Lisa Appignanesi, *Paris Requiem*, McArthur& Company, Toronto, 2002.

⁴⁹⁹ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008.

⁵⁰⁰ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, John Forrester (eds), *Freud's Women*, Phoenix, London, 2005.

⁵⁰¹ Idem, cit.XI.

As John Forrester observes Freud “evokes the opposition between the creative man of letters and the dissecting doctor. Where the man of letters puts together, omitting what is superfluous, the medical man breaks down, finding a residue to which he must grant space. It is his obligation towards this residue that prevents Freud from being a man of letters.”⁵⁰² The scientific art of Freud is hence brought into focus, however at the same time the women’s role in his research is being revalued. It tells many stories of Freud's women and retraces their influence on him and his on them, e.g. his dutiful daughter Anna, who carried on his work; the novelist and turn-of-the-century femme fatale, Lou Salome; Marie Bonaparte, who mixed royalty and perversity with effortless ease and became the head of the French psychoanalytic movement; the early hysterics who were the cornerstone of psychoanalysis - all these and more emerge vividly from the pages of this important study as it assesses Freud's contemporary legacy. The book explores the various biographies and case histories, probes dreams, correspondence and journals, and examines theory to chart Freud's views on femininity. Appignanesi explains thus the reason of such a need for revision:

What can the interest of these real women be, when it is the figure of Woman as she appears to in psychoanalytic theory and practice that is important for psychoanalysis itself? There are two immediate replies to this question. First, psychoanalysis is a historical phenomenon, as a theory in the history of science and as a cultural movement. As such, when writing the history of psychoanalysis, there will always be occasion to concern oneself with the quasi-biographical and historical relations of its founders and chief figures. Second, psychoanalysis has a kinship to biographical investigation and, in Freud’s own book on dreams, to an autobiographical one. Given that its fundamental rule – ‘say everything that comes to your head’ – superficially appears to be an injunction to reveal every last personal detail in the name of scientific inquiry, a critical examination of psychoanalysis as a movement, a science, and a method, may feel obliged to follow in its path.⁵⁰³

The volume is divided into four sections. The first one examines the key women in Freud’s family: his mother, his fiancée and wife, his daughters. The roles of Freud here are: son, lover, father and dreamer. Part II traces the development of Freud’s practice and theories through his collaboration with his women patients diagnosed with hysteria. He features here as doctor, discoverer, listener and storyteller. Part III brings into focus the distinguished and idiosyncratically individual women who became the first analysts in his circle e.g. Sabina Spielman, the ‘femme fatale’ Lou Andreas-Salomé, ‘the socialist feminist’ Helene Deutsch, the ‘Princesse’ Marie Bonaparte, Joan Riviere as well as his

⁵⁰²John Forrester, “Freud, Dora and the Untold Pleasures of Psychoanalysis”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1984, pp.4-9, cit.p.6.

⁵⁰³ Lisa Appignanesi, John Forrester (eds), *Freud’s Women*, Phoenix, London, 2005, cit.p.XII.

‘Antigone’ daughter Anna Freud. Here Freud emerges above all as friend and mentor. The last section of the book revolves around the question of femininity and feminism. From the 1970s on, feminists have been launching furious attacks on Freud’s reputation. The main case against him is that he was simply a Victorian patriarch who saw women as the reproductive servants of the species, a man, who elevated his own misogyny to a powerful theoretical model of the human psyche in which women could only be failed men, anatomically defective. However, as Appignanesi and Forrester argue, Freud’s most important contribution was that he opened up female sexuality as a subject worthy of inquiry. Nevertheless, Freud’s women patients or/and friends who worked with, or against, his theories contributed to developing and fostering the insights of psychoanalysis.

(...) there is more at stake in the prominence of women analysts – and patients – in the history of psychoanalysis than a somewhat out-of-character even-handed liberalism which gives access to the new profession. The development of psychoanalytic theory was inseparable from the distinct and important part women patients and then analysts took in its creation. Contemporary thinking about what woman is is so premeated with the discourse that Freud and his women invented that that it is impossible to conceive of a future language of sexuality that does not call on the name of Freud. The twentieth-century love affair with Freud may have followed the patterns of idealization and debasement he himself described so well, but it remains, none the less, a love affair.⁵⁰⁴

Freud’s Women can be thus considered as an invaluable study of the women who peopled Freud’s world – women, who as friends and relatives, patients and students, helped him to found and develop the new discipline of psychoanalysis. Against the commonplace that psychoanalysis – as both theory of mind and therapeutic practice undergoes ‘a deep crisis’, Appignanesi and Forrester offer a balanced and fascinating account of the vicissitudes of Freud’s theory of femininity. All in all, Freud has provided the predominant intellectual framework for understanding human nature in the 20th century. His theories of the ego, id and superego and his analyses of the Oedipus complex, the subconscious, repression, sublimation and other key issues are important fixtures of 20th of consciousness.

What is clear in their encounter with Freud and psychoanalysis, as well as in their shaping of what it became, the women in these pages tested the foundations of what it meant to be woman. Their stories, alongside Freud’s, are filled with the bracing air of the beginnings of the last century. Sometimes, what now we feel like their certainties, as well as their sense of risk, have a naïveté to them. But the adventure of the modern on which they embarked, with all its sufferings and turmoil, was what turned a more conventional, prosaic age upside down. Our world is the result. Understanding them helps to unsettle our own certainties.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁴ Idem, Phoenix, London, 2005, cit. p.474.

⁵⁰⁵ Lisa Appignanesi, John Forrester (eds), *Freud’s Women*, Phoenix, London, 2005, cit. p.XXV.

As Appignanesi notes, Freud's insights influenced greatly the realms of literature and art. His research and theories propelled the journey into the unknown world of human psyche. Madness has always fascinated artists. It has been dramatised, romanticized, ironized, painted and expressed in a variety of other artistic forms. As the philosopher Ian Hacking remarks: "In every generation there are quite firm rules on how to behave when you are crazy."⁵⁰⁶ Interestingly, as Appignanesi points out in her book *Mad, Bad and Sad*, very often the rules of 'being insane' have been applied to women's patterns of behaviour and thought. She says:

I decided to focus on women as a way into this history of symptoms, diagnoses and mind-doctoring for various reasons. Perhaps the first is simply that there are so many riveting cases of women, and through them a large part of what we recognize as the psy professions was constructed. (...) There is more. Contemporary statistics always emphasize women's greater propensity to suffer from 'sadness' end of madness.⁵⁰⁷

She has been struck by the horrifying statistics of women's mental suffering, ostracism and confinement cases through centuries.⁵⁰⁸ Thus, *Mad, Bad and Sad* is not only a story of madness, badness and sadness but also a survey of the mad, bad and sad themselves, the particular women, including Zelda Fitzgerald, Lucia Joyce, Virginia Woolf and many other famous patients, who suffered "frenzies, possessions, mania, melancholy, nerves, delusions, aberrant acts, dramatic tics, passionate loves and hates, sex, visual and auditory hallucinations, fears, phobias, fantasies, disturbances of sleep, dissociations, communion with spirits and imaginary friends, addictions, self-harm, self-starvation, depression"⁵⁰⁹ and so on. The diagnoses conceived usually by male doctors would be subject to men's changeable views of women – romantic, patronizing, idealistic, misogynistic, etc., as the author suggests. The book stretches from Freud and Jung and the radical breakthroughs of psychoanalysis to Lacan's construction of a modern movement and the new women-centred therapies. This is the story of how we have understood extreme states of mind over the last two hundred years and how we conceive of them today, when more and more of our inner life and emotions have become a matter for medics and therapists. From the depression suffered by Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath⁵¹⁰ to the mental anguish and addictions of iconic beauties such as Zelda Fitzgerald and Marilyn Monroe, the book offers a wide spectrum of sobering insight and reflection accompanied by heartfelt understanding.

⁵⁰⁶ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008, cit.p.4.

⁵⁰⁷ Idem, cit. p.6.

⁵⁰⁸ Cf. idem, p.2.

⁵⁰⁹ Idem, cit. p.1.

⁵¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: Poems*, Perennial Classics, New York, 1999.

Despite her focus on these famous women, Appignanesi is not interested in the old question of a possible link between madness and art; instead, she tells these women's stories in relation to their encounters with hospitals, treatments, doctors and psychoanalysts:

The simplest way to begin is to say that this is the story of madness, badness and sadness and the ways in which we have understood them over the last two hundred years. Some of that understanding has to do with the dividing lines between them were conceived and patrolled, in particular by a growing group of professionals or 'mind doctors' (...) All of them thought they were in one way or another illuminating the dark corners of the mind..(...) Crucially, they were also helped by patients. So this is also the story of the way in which madness, badness and sadness – and all the names or diagnoses these states of mind and being have been given as time went on – were lived by various women.⁵¹¹

Appignanesi has always been fascinated by the workings and vagaries of the human mind. The interest in madness and identity was also a 'form of survival'. She retraced her family life overshadowed by the Holocaust in *Losing the Dead*⁵¹², wrote her MA thesis on Edgar Allan Poe and his hauntings, tackled the issue of femininity in her doctorate project⁵¹³, worked part-time for a psychoanalytic publishing house in New York, took care of her mother suffering from Alzheimer's as well as interwove her novels with psychological insights. Thus, she cannot but wonder how fragile and extraordinary the human mind is. As she says, "I have long been aware of the shallowness of sanity. Most of us are, in one way or another. Madness, certainly a leap of the irrational, is ever close."⁵¹⁴ Now wonder then that as the incipit to her book she chose the following poem by Emily Dickinson:

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye;
Much sense the starkest madness.
'T is the majority
In this, as all, prevails.
Assent, and you are sane;
Demur, - you're straightway dangerous,
And handled with a chain.

The book thus has two avowed aims: to give a historical survey of the evolution of 'mind doctoring' and to consider what, if anything, distinguishes the female mind from the male – it is society or something inherent in the feminine psyche that causes it to be perceived

⁵¹¹ Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008, cit. p.1.

⁵¹² Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir*, McArthur&Company, Toronto, 2001.

⁵¹³ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Femininity and the Creative Imagination: A Study of Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust*, Vision Press, London, 1973.

⁵¹⁴ Idem, London, 2008, cit. p.2.

and treated differently from the male? At the heart of the book is a feminist inquiry, but this is conducted with shrillness – indeed, with a balance that admits contradictory evidence and gives due weight to the fact that all report is culturally influenced and partial. The evidence cited in the book is wide, drawing on historical records, many of them literary. In short, Appignanesi seeks to disinter and illuminate the hidden assumptions that blend moral and mental health, and confuse natural affections and sentiments with pathology. The particular sections of the book outline the terrains of her research: passions, asylum, nerves, hysteria, sleep, sex, schizophrenia, disturbances of love, mother and child, shrink for life rebels, body madness, abuse, drugs. She says:

It became clearer and clearer to me, as my research went on, that particular periods for whatever reason threw certain expressions of mental illness into view and that diagnoses and explanations clustered around these. Deep historical forces, it would seem, sometimes bring to the surface certain crystallizations of disorder and its antidote, though the second can occasionally come first: passions, nerves, sleep, sex, food, abuse have all had their moment as symptom and point of scientific interrogation.⁵¹⁵

If male doctors conspired to define madness, responding to behaviours that disrupted the social conventions of their culture, female patients in the attempt to understand themselves and their context, and maybe even to create or bolster identity, complied with those same doctors to satisfy the changing definitions of madness. “Often enough,” Appignanesi remarks, “extreme expressions of culture’s malaise, symptoms and disorders mirrored in the time’s order.” Anorexia, she writes, “is usually an illness of plenty not of famine, as depression is one of times of peace and prosperity, not of war.” In 21th century, where “the sum of information available is larger than it has ever been in history”, we’ve conceived “a condition in which attention is at a deficit.”⁵¹⁶ Indeed, modern identities seek their projections and disguise e.g. in the virtual worlds of social networks. As Richard L.Gregory notes, the continuity of the ‘Self’ is “a creation endemic to brain processing and perception that clearly occurs for the external world.”⁵¹⁷ The definitions of madness and identity disorders undergo thus a continual reevaluation and redefinition. There is often a blurred border between socially approved sanity and insanity:

⁵¹⁵ Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008, cit. p.9.

⁵¹⁶ *Idem*, cit. p.5.

⁵¹⁷ Richard L.Gregory, “The Self – in Mind, Brain and Computer”, in Lisa Appignanesi, Homi Bhabha (eds), *Identity: Post-Modernism and the Question of Identity*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987 , pp.17-19, cit. p.18.

Generalizing across the spectrum of mental illness and its treatment is hazardous. All changes in theory and practice come slowly and piecemeal, like long-term. Negotiations towards a treaty which would somehow reconcile the ongoing battle between sanity and insanity. The borders keep shifting so the terrains.⁵¹⁸

Hence, Appignanesi tirelessly explores causes, symptoms and back histories to find answers, refusing to believe that madness comes out of nowhere. Like Freud, she tries to untangle our preconceptions about sanity. She examines in detail why Freud has been portrayed as sexist. Freud believed that women were at risk of neurosis when ‘idealizations of the family were at odds with lived experience.’ Indeed, life is often at odds with our expectations. She concludes that Freud’s perceived sexism is less relevant than his legacy: he underscored “the shallowness of sanity” which helped to destigmatise mental illness. According to her, people’s failures in life and thus a prolonged impoverishment of their potential may lead to serious identity disorders and depression. What is more, the human mind in itself is changeable and often unpredictable. She notes:

Few people are mad, bad or sad continually and for ever: if the pain endured by the sufferer is frightening, unbearable and damaging, often to those around her as well, it can dissipate, too. There are no firm rules where sadness and madness are concerned. But there can be, as this history shows, full and intriguing lives with heroes on both sides of that doctor-patient divide which has for the last hundred years been increasingly permeable.⁵¹⁹

As Tori Moi notes, Freud’s case history of Dora has become the focal point for a reinterpretation of female sexuality. Hysteria, hysterical unsociality, ‘taedium vitae’ are being examined again and again by ‘mind doctors’.⁵²⁰ Nevertheless, Appignanesi underlines the importance of feminism and its therapeutic help in solving at least some of women’s mental unease. It has helped them to look at themselves from a healthier social perspective and to regain their self-esteem and self-respect. Moreover, it has opened new horizons of research and cure for the medical science:

Therapeutic feminism rightly added the missing cultural dimension to women’s psychic ills and put eating disorders, as well as others prominent amongst women such as self-harm, into an appropriate social perspective. It nudged medical psychiatry and traditional psychoanalysis into an awareness of the way in which the cultural emphasis on thinness and on women’s bodies played into illness; how treatment had to take into account a woman’s wish to control her body. In the process, feminism seems to have given back to women what they always had: the body, emotions, and a penchant for the softer sides of religion as the prime means of self-definition.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008, cit. p.49.

⁵¹⁹ *Idem*, cit.p.9.

⁵²⁰ Cf. Tori Moi, *The Case of Dora*, in Lisa Appignanesi(ed), Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1984, p.3

⁵²¹ Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008, cit. p.404.

As Appignanesi says, her book is not meant to be a ‘condemnation of our psychiatrically medicalized times.’ Much of the medical care, therapeutic talk available does make life better for people who suffer. However, she points out that history provides a cautionary note: “mental illness is also the name given to a set of ills by various sets of mind doctors.” Thus, the illness may provide meaning and definition for a time for the sufferer; or it may inflict a lasting stigma.⁵²² Therefore, as the author remarks, people shouldn’t rely too heavily on chemical supports of medicine only. In any case, however, the most important thing is heartfelt human care. Appignanesi concludes:

What is clear is that as we have moved through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, an ever wider set of behaviours and emotions have become ‘symptomatic’ and fallen under aegis of the mind doctors. A vast range of eccentricities or discomforts that seem too hard to bear shape suitable cases for treatment. (...) Our times may need ‘cures’ that are broader and other than those that can be found in the therapy alone, whether of the talking or the pharmaceutical kind. Meanwhile, the mind doctors – whether they’re GPs on the front line, therapists of an increasing number of varieties, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists or psychopharmacologists - trudge along, doing what they can, which is sometimes all that can be done. The danger, perhaps, comes when we ask them to do too much.⁵²³

⁵²² Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad*, Virago, London, 2008, cit. p.9.

⁵²³ *Idem*, cit. p.484.

IV.2. Flirtation with Identity: The Feminine and Creativity

The wave paused, then drew out again,
sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes
and goes unconsciously.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*⁵²⁴

The identity of the unconscious, the memory of the dreaming worlds within us have always been longed for and explored by poets. The wholeness of being, permeated by invisible currents of universal energy, transpires from human thought. Life seen as a spontaneous flow of water is present e.g. in Modernist writing, the ‘stream of consciousness’ or ‘inner monologue’ technique being among its expressions. The Romantic view of nature as a united whole inscribes the human mind in the circle of interconnected flow of being, a collection of ‘leaves of grass’.⁵²⁵ Coleridge writes:

Our mortal existence, what is it but a stop-page in the blood of life,
a brief eddy from wind or concourse of currents in the ever-flowing
ocean of pure Activity, who beholds pyramids, yea, Alps and Andes,
giant pyramids, the work of fire that raiseth monuments, like a generous
victor o’er its own conquest, the tombstones of a world destroyed! Yet
these, too, float down the sea of Time, and melt away as mountains
of floating ice.⁵²⁶

Thus, it is a kind of invisible, mystic and impersonal poet’s ‘anima’, a sort of transcendent sensitivity that stems from and reaches for the primordial and divine source of existence. The German philosopher Hamman notes that “poetry is the mother tongue of the human race as the garden is older than the field, painting than writing, singing rather than declaiming, parables than inferences, bartering than commerce.”⁵²⁷ Freud may also call it ‘Wunsch’ that connotes wish as well as desire, speaking about ‘Gefühlstromung’.⁵²⁸ “If somebody’s lips are silent, he chatters with his finger tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore,”⁵²⁹ he says. Hence, the artist’s continuous search for the ‘motherly’ bond with all the universe is an ever-renewing well of inspiration and creativity. An input of impulses from the outside world is being thus elaborated into a symphony of inner sensations and thoughts. De Quincey remarks in his *Autobiography*:

⁵²⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, cit. p.3.

⁵²⁵ Cf. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

⁵²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Anima Poetae*, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge *Poems and Prose*, Penguin Books, 1957, cit. p.142.

⁵²⁷ Cit. in Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Vintage, London, 2005, cit.269.

⁵²⁸ Cf. Riccardo Steiner, “Dora: ‘La Belle Indifference’ or ‘Label(le) in difference’”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1984, pp.9-13, p.11.

⁵²⁹ *Ibidem*, cit. p.11.

If we try to analyse our sensations we shall find that we are worked upon as if by music – the senses are stirred rather than the brain. The rise and fall of the sentence immediately soothes us to a mood and removes us to a distance in which the near fades and detail is extinguished...The emotion is never stated; it is suggested and brought slowly by repeated images before us until it stays, in all its complexity, complete.⁵³⁰

It may be that the male and the female are opposed only on a surface level, while at a deeper level these apparent oppositions in fact cross over into each other and meet. In fact, in *A Room of One's Own*⁵³¹ Virginia Woolf suggests that the ideal creative mind should be androgynous, containing elements of both the female and the male: it depends on the sense that an ideal work of art must manifest what she calls 'perfect integrity', a formal impersonal quality without hint of idiosyncratic bias.

Lisa Appignanesi in her work examines what is effectively a 'myth of femininity', probes the works of James, Proust and the great Austrian writer, Robert Musil, to see how these major figures perceive women and ideas of the feminine as subject matter for their art. As she remarks, literary critics often use the word 'feminine' to describe writers' personal style, their characters or their vision. Nevertheless, the term is very elusive since it doesn't apply directly to woman characters or women at all, and thus its connotations evoke some essential independent 'feminine' quality. Sartre perceives in the feminine a 'call to being', Freud on the other hand equates femininity with passivity.⁵³² Freud in fact describes women so as far their nature is determined by their sexual function. For Weininger, Bachofen and Jung femininity relates to the unconscious, while masculinity governs consciousness and the intellect. Otto Weininger writes:

Man and woman are like two substances which are distributed among living individuals in varying mixed proportions without the coefficient of one substance ever vanishing. In experience, one might say, there is neither man nor woman, only masculine and feminine.⁵³³

Jung considers this unconsciousness to be a source of creativity, a principle of energy and change.⁵³⁴ He perceives in every human being two basic entities: anima (the feminine in man) and animus (the masculine in woman). According to him, the two

⁵³⁰ Cit in Kate Flint, "Introduction", in Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, cit.p.XXI.

⁵³¹ Cf. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Harvest Books, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, 1989.

⁵³² Idem, see pp.67, 10.

⁵³³ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *Femininity and the Creative Imagination: A Study of Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust*, Vision Press, London, 1973, cit. p.5.

⁵³⁴ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Femininity and the Creative Imagination: A Study of Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust*, Vision Press, London, 1973, p.10.

components co-exist and complement each other.⁵³⁵ He says:

I believe that animus and anima exist both in men and women and that what matters is with which one a person identifies, and which one he projects on 'the other'; it also matters which cluster of masculine and feminine characteristics are 'selected' for conscious and unconscious identification and projection. These characteristics may in part be the personal endowment of a person and in part what has been culturally and educationally encouraged.⁵³⁶

As he remarks, writers e.g. such as Goethe or Dante saw a spiritual sublimation⁵³⁷ of the soul in the worship of woman.⁵³⁸ Moreover, as he says, "the survival or unconscious revivification of the vessel symbol is indicative of a strengthening of the feminine principle in the masculine psychology. Its symbolization in an enigmatic image must be interpreted as a spiritualization of the eroticism aroused by the worship of woman."⁵³⁹ To his mind, it is impossible to achieve the whole, the perfect in reality – that is the aim of people's archetypal wishes and phantasies that are necessary to live.⁵⁴⁰

Hence, as Appignanesi notes, femininity is an ambiguous term since it implies, on one hand, consciousness of feminine properties, and on the other, very often vague and indefinite assumptions about these properties. Roland Barthes classifies it thus as 'a myth': "a statement which bears no direct relationship to the object it describes (woman) and evokes a range of suggestions which is culturally determined."⁵⁴¹

Appignanesi observes that many Modernist writers were interested in the dual focus regarding the feminine. As she says, "on the one hand in their work they illuminate the constituent factors of the myth of femininity (...) on the other, they seem to identify creativity, some intrinsic aspect of the fiction-making process, and sometimes even their own status as artists, with the feminine."⁵⁴²

Thus, for example, Musil all his life contemplated writing a biography in the first person, taking on the form and spirit of a woman. In Joyce's art femininity is constantly

⁵³⁵ Rosemary Gordon, "Desire and Woman: A Jungian Approach", in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1984, pp.14-16, cf. p. 14.

⁵³⁶ Idem, cit. p.14.

⁵³⁷ "Sublimation – a process by which the energy of the sexual drive is re-directed onto non-sexual aims. For Freud, all forms of human creativity – artistic, scientific, philosophical – were the outcome of sublimation. He did not really explain how sublimation works – and thus the nature of sublimation remains an outstanding problem for psychoanalysis." (Lear Jonathan, *Freud*, Routledge, New York, 2005, cit. p.257)

⁵³⁸ Cf. Carl G Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982, p.5.

⁵³⁹ Idem, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982, cit. p.21.

⁵⁴⁰ Rosemary Gordon, "Desire and Woman: A Jungian Approach", in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Desire*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1984, pp.14-16, cf. p.14.

⁵⁴¹ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi, *Femininity and the Creative Imagination: A Study of Henry James, Robert Musil and Marcel Proust*, Vision Press, London, 1973, cit. p.2.

⁵⁴² Ibidem.

linked to creativity. Flaubert, Baudelaire and Mallarmé often refer to their imaginary mystic female figures representing a symbol of their art. However, their muses don't relate directly to woman as such, but represent rather "the distilled essence of woman – woman mediated through culture and through literary tradition and transformed into a myth of femininity".⁵⁴³ In a way culture provided the artists with this myth, in which they perceived a potential of creative mystery and inspiration. Hence, the so-called 'feminization of literature.'⁵⁴⁴

Also in the case of Henry James, women were at the centre of his work, his choice vehicles, whether romantically headstrong or tragic. As Appignanesi notes, in James, "the feminine appears as that aspect of being which is responsible for turning man inwards to a moral examination of himself." As such it governs all that is 'personal' including genuine human relationships. The feminine stands out as flexible and creatively open to the fullness of life. It is the essence of the Jamesian 'inner spirit', pure, fresh and undetermined by prejudices. Thus, femininity constitutes the basic prerequisite for 'intelligence' which for James would seem to be rather spiritual than intellectual. As Appignanesi observes, "it is this this feminine or spiritual intelligence which determines the individual's possibility for attaining to 'consciousness': the ability fully to see and hence fully to be."⁵⁴⁵ Thus, according to him, moral standards are basically set and followed by the inner sensibility. James says:

morality is measured only by standards of inner sensibility
- a sensibility which allows the individual to experience
life to the fullest without diminishing the freedom of other
people's sensibility.⁵⁴⁶

In Musil works', on the other hand, the feminine is clearly polarized in opposition to the masculine. The intellectual qualities such as e.g. exactitude, precision of mind, scientific and empirical observations belong to the masculine sphere. Femininity instead represents all that that cannot be defined by the limits of intellectual cognition. It includes hence the mystifying 'other', the poetic, the spiritual, the transcendent, irrational ways of being and seeing. According to him, only through art and metaphor can reason and mysticism be united. Moreover, in his vision, suffering can raise our consciousness of reality. As Appignanesi writes, "time and again he connects sickness with the road to

⁵⁴³ Idem, cit. p.4.

⁵⁴⁴ Cf. ibidem.

⁵⁴⁵ Idem, cit. p.217.

⁵⁴⁶ Cit.in idem, cit. p.56.

consciousness as if implicit in each thing there is also its opposite.”⁵⁴⁷ An opposite cannot exist without its counterpart. Similarly, the masculine cannot function without the feminine. There is a continual interplay of opposite elements in our life. As Appignanesi observes, to Musil’s mind, “the masculine represents that reality which is continually tempted by possibility, the feminine is then that possibility which must always be tested by reality.”⁵⁴⁸

In Proust the feminine emerges as an essentially transformative and thus creative principle. Similarly as in Musil’s thought, the feminine represents the ‘other’, the unknown and as such it “exerts a magical pull which draws the being out of himself toward ever-expanding imaginative horizons.”⁵⁴⁹ Thus, for Proust femininity equals creativity and constitutes the supreme principle of the creative unconscious from which stem the intuitive flashes of art. After all, as Nietzsche remarks “we have art in order not to perish of Truth.”⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁷ Idem, cit. p.97.

⁵⁴⁸ Idem, cit. p.84.

⁵⁴⁹ Idem, cit. p.218.

⁵⁵⁰ Idem, cit. p.15.

IV.3. The role of Art

Without the possibility of a double life,
there is no morality.

-Adam Philips⁵⁵¹

Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth.
- Pablo Picasso⁵⁵²

What is the role of the artist – the intellectual artist – in modern society? If the role of the artist is obviously and intrinsically tied to the role of art, then what is the role of art? Art is humanity's attempts to recreate realities, to create reflections of reality. Imagination, memory and creativity are part of this attempt. The role of the artist then is connected to the role of art, in whatever medium. It is a continuous battle within the self and search for meaning. Thus it may, as Barthes suggests, resembles the world of wrestling. As he says, "In the ring, and even in the depths of their voluntary ignominy, wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible."⁵⁵³ Indeed, Conrad considers art as a continual search for truth, however elusive it might be, and perfection. It should seek in every possible aspect of external reality the essence of being, the sense of existence. All this should transpire through the form as perfect and relevant as possible. He writes:

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality - the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist seeks the truth and makes his appeal.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵¹ Cit. in Lisa Appignanesi, *The Things We Do for Love*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 1998, *Incipit*.

⁵⁵² Cit. in Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003, *Incipit*.

⁵⁵³ Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling", in Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader*, Vintage, London, 1993, pp.18-30, cit. p.30.

⁵⁵⁴ Joseph Conrad, "Preface", in *The Niger of the Narcissus*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1999, cit. p.V.

The exploration of reality becomes thus a life-long adventure. The artist, like a child, rediscovers the world anew. The inner tumult of the human soul spurs self-analysis as well as creativity. I.B.Singer recollects thus his first encounter with himself:

Long before I began to write – actually in my early childhood – I became interested in the question: “What differentiates one human being from another?” The problem of human individuality became my problem.⁵⁵⁵

I decided to become a writer. I began to look inside myself and my own soul. There was a constant turmoil there. I suffered, but what my suffering consisted of was not clear to me.⁵⁵⁶

Virginia Woolf in her novel *To The Lighthouse*⁵⁵⁷ examines the power of human creativity through the character of Lily Briscoe. Lily is a struggling young artist, who resists convention in order to achieve something lasting and beautiful through her painting. Lily, like the other characters in the novel, is looking for meaning and purpose in life. Through her art, she comes closest to finding answers to her questions about existence and sense of life. It is through her art that Lily manages to understand human experience and the world around her. When she places the final line down the center of her painting, she realizes that she has created something of value. She knows the painting will not last forever, but it is the closest she can get to preserving something of valid significance. The painting is Lily's way of achieving sense of continuity and inner peace. Long after she is gone, the painting will continue to reflect her thoughts and emotions. Nevertheless, also the other character, Mrs Ramsay, is able to capture the transcendent and omnipresent essence of things with her thoughts:

there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures.⁵⁵⁸

Thus the artist creates the art – not out of thin air – but within the self as well as within a societal context, supported and buffeted by the conditions of the time – the resources, the technology, the intelligence, the knowledge, the economic, political, social, cultural and religious / philosophical conditions of the moment of the creation of the arts. Through the creation and presentation and then absorption by others within the community,

⁵⁵⁵ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, cit. p.XI.

⁵⁵⁶ Idem, cit. p.XXI.

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, Penguin Books, London, 1996.

⁵⁵⁸ Idem, cit. p.158.

the artist is able to reflect the historical moment and project into the community an awareness of the moment, of the humane or inhumane conditions of that moment. The more the art projects back to humanity its conditions, the more humanity is able to understand its conditions, and possibly, change for the better.

For example, law criminalizing incitement to religious hatred has been high on the UK Labour Government's list of priorities. It is a law with wide-ranging implications for freedom of expression in Britain. It could be used to censor anyone whether writer, comedian or person in the street who wishes to make a statement about religion that others might find offensive. The book *Free Expression is No Offence*⁵⁵⁹ tackles the issue of free speech in contemporary world from a variety of angles. It is a collection of essays by writers of various faiths and origins edited by Lisa Appignanesi. It features articles by authors such as Salman Rushdie, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, Madhav Sharma, Nicholas Hytner, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Monica Ali, Rowan Atkinson, Frances D'Souza, Timothy Garton Ash, Philip Hensher, Howard Jacobson, Julian Evans, Moris Farhi, Philip Pullman, Hari Kunzru, Michael Ignatieff, Ian Buruma, Hanif Kureishi, Adam Philips, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Andrew Berry, Anthony Lester and Helena Kennedy. The contributors draw on their multicultural wide-ranging experience to show why one attempts to curtail our freedom must be vigorously resisted. The question of freedom of speech and its confinement is thus raised and problematized in these essays. Appignanesi writes:

The contemporary globalized world is riven with confusions about where protection can collide with repression; where worries about security and respect for others bump into and topple liberties by becoming fixed in law. The essays in this book confront some of these confusions.⁵⁶⁰

As she remarks, in multicultural British society, where the rights of minority groups very often outweigh the rights of individuals, writers may result 'offensive' if they don't 'respect' sensitivities of particular groups. Many artists thus feel oppressed by the restrictive laws concerning freedom of speech. Milan Kundera wrote that "Suspending moral judgement is not the immorality of the novel; it is its morality."⁵⁶¹ Hence, the authors underline the importance of creativity to maintain a status quo in full respect of human rights.

⁵⁵⁹ Cf. Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005.

⁵⁶⁰ *Idem*, cit. p.16.

⁵⁶¹ *Idem*, cit.p.17.

For example, in the opening essay Salman Rushdie warns us against the dangers of politicized religions.⁵⁶² As he remarks our world needs above all wise teachers who would be able to foster peaceful co-existence in our more and more multicultural societies.

The writer Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti tells us about her being ‘frightened into silence’ after her play *Behzti* had been ostracized by the Sikh party. As she says, her drama isn’t meant to offend but is aimed at exploring how human frailties can lead people into a prison of hypocrisy. As she wonderfully remarks, “the human spirit endures through the magic of storytelling.”⁵⁶³ She writes:

I believe that it is my right as a human being and my role as a writer to think, create and challenge. Theatre is not necessarily a cosy space, designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It is a place where the most basic human expression – that of the imagination – must be allowed to flourish.⁵⁶⁴

Nicholas Hytner defends in his essay the liberal spirit of theatre and the freedom of imagination. In supporting his arguments, he refers to the great dramatic traditions of the Ancient playwrights.⁵⁶⁵

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown stresses the importance and the need of continuous evaluation of politics and policies through the works of art. According to her, the multicultural *mélange* inevitably leads to endless conflicts and value clashes since national and community narratives cannot agree on the versions of truth, past or present. She observes:

Britain is evolving, constantly shifting. That is what happens to accessible islands. The tides of change keep hitting the shores. This is an inescapable reality. Trading with difference, domination, conquests, the ceaseless wash of migration, mongrelization, cultural pollution and transformations is part of the contested identity of this complicated country.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶² Cf. Salman Rushdie, “Coming After Us”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.27-29.

⁵⁶³ Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, “Foreword to *Behzti*”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.30-31, cit. p.30.

⁵⁶⁴ Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, “A Letter”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.27-29, cit. p.28.

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Nicholas Hytner, “No Limits: The Business of Theatre”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.39-43

⁵⁶⁶ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, “The Enemy Within”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.44-46, cit. pp.44-45.

Monica Ali points out that the curb on freedom may result double-edged and thus it should be wholeheartedly opposed. She lays bare the incoherences as well as hypocrisy of such restrictive laws subject to political manipulation.⁵⁶⁷

The comedian Rowan Atkinson in his ‘Speech to the House of Lords’ stands up in defence of the creative and critical qualities of the human mind. As he says, we should have the right to defend intellectual curiosity, to criticize ideas and to ridicule the ridiculous in whatever context it lies. Thus he begins his speech as follows:

I am here to plead the case in opposition to a law of Incitement of Religious Hatred on behalf of those who make a living from creativity: those whose job is to analyse, criticize, or satirize – authors, journalists, academics, actors, politicians and comedians – all of whom, the Government claims, need have no concerns about the legislation. But as the arguments both for and against the measure have evolved, I have found these reassurances to lack conviction.⁵⁶⁸

The role of the artist then when confronted with inhumane conditions of humanity is to create art that is illuminating to humanity so the members of the community can change those conditions. One way to achieve an awareness and understanding of our own humanity, to remind us of our beauty, our fragility, our limitations, our temporal experience, our strengths, our fears, dreams. The role of art is to remind us of our reality and history, and even to draw conclusions on whether our reality needs to be changed.

Art is one of the key elements in a community. If there is no outlet for members to express individual and group ideas, then the repression will lead to a lack of positive change in that community. Whether you consider it on a grander scale or on a smaller one, art is essential to the human element of our world. Without self expression, what makes each person unique? As I.B.Singer says, his entire life he has been looking for an answer to the riddle: “How could God have created so many eyes with so many different expressions?”⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁷ Cf. Monica Ali, “Do We Need Laws on Hatred?”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.47-58.

⁵⁶⁸ Rowan Atkinson, “The Opposition’s Case: Speech to the House of Lords”, in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.), *Free Expression is No Offence*, Penguin Books, London, 2005, pp.59-63, cit. p.59.

⁵⁶⁹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy*, The Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1997, cit. p.XXI.

V

POETRY MOVES:

Love and Time Flow in *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels

Important lessons: look carefully; record what you see. Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful.⁵⁷⁰

Dreams are debts, songs are oaths.⁵⁷¹

All love is time travel.⁵⁷²

Time, longing and identity search seem to be the major pinions propelling the flow of the novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. In fact, they act as the pulling force of the human spirit toward its completeness in its quest for peace and rest. Michaels says in one her poems: “Everything human and broken depends on perfection \ Imperfect man, left unfinished \ with the purpose of becoming whole.”⁵⁷³

The search for one’s place and meaning in life occurs by gathering and recomposing the splinters of oneself through memory, artistic creation and, above all, love. Life itself is seen here as a work of art: a sort of polyphonic pièce: a fugue.⁵⁷⁴ Writing, too, can be a way of self-reconstruction and self-expression, a mode of reaffirming life and defying death, or, as Margaret Atwood puts it, of “negotiating with the dead.”⁵⁷⁵ We are born and we die with the legacy of debt as well as the promise of dream. Thus, our freedom to dream is at the same time our responsibility to remember and to hand down the memory to the next generations in order to defend the human spirit and dignity. As Keats says: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -

⁵⁷⁰ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, Bloomsbury, London, 1998, cit. p.44.

Henceforth cited as ‘FP’.

⁵⁷¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Debts*, in *The Ineffable Name of God: Man. Poems*, trans. from the Yiddish by Morton M. Leifman, Continuum, New York, 2007, cit. p.133.

⁵⁷² Anne Michaels, *Fontanelles*, in Michaels A., *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.187.

⁵⁷³ Anne Michaels, *A Lesson from the Earth*, in Michaels A., *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.76.

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. F.R. Paci, *Postfazione: La Seconda Storia*, in Anne Michaels, *In fuga*, trans. R. Serrai, Giunti, Firenze, 2001, p.248.

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, Virago, London, 2003.

“To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past because it has been forgotten. To satisfy my desire for revenge. Because I knew I had to keep writing or else I would die. Because to write is to take risks, and it is only by taking risks that we know we are alive. To produce order out of chaos. To delight and instruct (...) To please myself. To express myself. To express myself beautifully. To create a perfect work of art. To reward the virtuous and punish the guilty; or (...) vice versa. To hold a mirror up to Nature. To hold a mirror up to the reader. To paint a portrait of society and its ills. To express the unexpressed life of the masses. To name the hitherto unnamed. To defend the human spirit, and human integrity and honor. To thumb my nose at Death.” (Idem, cit. *Introduction*, pp.XIX-XX)

that is all \ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”⁵⁷⁶ Looking for truth, for understanding in spite of the possible impossibility of discovering the mystery of existence has always been the main occupation of the human mind.⁵⁷⁷ Michaels writes:

That I'm looking for something I can't find
makes me strangely satisfied.
It fills me with time.⁵⁷⁸

Thus, my essay will explore the narrative journey of *Fugitive Pieces* into the human landscapes of time, bringing into focus the role of memory, poetry and love in the development of the heroes' consciousness and personality. Michaels' novel can be defined a sort of poetic Bildungsroman, another Odyssey through tragedy and pain toward the revival and redemption of the human spirit.

In the first part, I will concentrate on the musical patterns of memory against history. Retracing the threads of life of the main protagonists, I will try to expose the complexities of their inner struggle and spiritual search for truth and identity. The implications of the Holocaust and Yiddishkeit in the Jewish-American culture will be also analyzed here, paying special attention to the lyrical tradition of the Kaddish⁵⁷⁹ prayer. The second generation, i.e. the children of the Holocaust survivors, faced with the problem of grappling with memory, often tend to explore their roots in order to retrieve the past and to build consciously and responsibly their future. They feel the moral obligation to remember the Dead for the sake of the living and to pass on the remembrance and this task to their children.

In the second part the focus will move onto the role of the 'song' of the artist in the society, thus, onto the modes in which artistic vision can transform and contribute to the individual as well as collective consciousness. Poetry that permeates all the landscapes of time and space finds its expression in the creative human powers. The protagonists' search for

⁵⁷⁶ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in John Keats, *Selected Poems*, Penguin Books, London, 1996, cit. p.214.

⁵⁷⁷ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books, New York, 2005.

Arendt says: "What is important to me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding (...) What is important to me is the thought process itself. As I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied. If I then succeed in expressing my thought process adequately in writing, that satisfies me also." (Idem, *What Remains? The Language Remains? A Conversation with Günter Gaus*, cit.p.3.)

⁵⁷⁸ Anne Michaels, *Modersohn – Becker*, in A. Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.87.

⁵⁷⁹ Cf. Gene Bluestein, *English/Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1998.

"The mourner's kadish is traditionally recited in commemoration of the deceased, and thereafter once a year. Since a devout Jew hopes the prayer will be said for him by his son, the latter is also known as a Kadish."(Idem, cit. p.38)

See also Allen Ginsberg's poem *Kaddish* and *Third Symphony* by Leonard Bernstein.

truth will coincide with that for beauty, and vice versa. I will try to show the importance which the author ascribes to the poetic vision of life. The world seen through the eyes of a poet reveals itself in the beauty and profundity of images as well as in the lyrical and sensual language of the narrative itself.

The third part, finally, will try to unveil the mystery and various aspects of love, linked to memory and art, as far as the human relationships and self-reconstruction are concerned. Love, seen as a visceral force that moves all the universe, is entwined with pain and suffering, and thus it constitutes an important antidote for self-recovery and interior equilibrium. Since it unfolds with time, it can act as a vehicle of memories and can be a solid healing base for 'fugitive' and fractured identities: the home one longs for. Nevertheless, the problem of 'spiritual nostalgia' is heavily linked with that of freedom and free will. The continual and incessant anxiety of being seems to be inherent to the human condition:

'There is no such thing as freedom,' said Atlas.
'Freedom is a country that does not exist.'
'It's home,' said Heracles. 'If home is where
you want to be.'⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁸⁰ Jeanette Winterson, *Weight*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2006, cit. p.51.

V.1 Landscapes and Music of Memory

He was alone and running on....He could see....
He was running, and under his breath he began
to sing....He had only the words of a song. And
he went running on the rise of the song.⁵⁸¹

The book of the world opens anywhere, chronology is
one method only and not the best. Clocks are not time.
Even radioactive rock-clocks, even gut-spun DNA,
can only tell time like a story...
'Tell me the time' you say.
And what you really say is 'Tell me a story.'⁵⁸²

Goddess of song, teach me the story of a hero.
This was the man of wide-ranging spirit...
who wandered afterwards long and far.⁵⁸³

What is memory if not a form of a narrative patchwork, an internal echo of the past? Anne Michaels in her novel *Fugitive Pieces* re-collects the various scraps of scattered memories in order to retell a story of human suffering and rebirth of the human spirit through beauty and love. Since, as she writes: "a man's experience of war (...) never ends with the war. A man's work, like his life, is never completed"⁵⁸⁴; her book can be considered an attempt of continuation of this legacy, a reaffirmation of her Jewish-Canadian history⁵⁸⁵, a bridging gaze of hope from the past into the future. The burden of the Holocaust memory becomes thus an anchor of hope and wisdom for the next generations.⁵⁸⁶ In fact, Emily Miller Budick points to the problematical relationship to Jewish History and Legacy as far as the survivor children are concerned, especially first-generation Jewish-Americans (e.g. Anne Michaels and her novel hero Ben).⁵⁸⁷ Apart from the well-known Jewish-Canadian male authors, such as A.M. Klein, Leonard Cohen and Mordecai Richler, an important surge in the Holocaust narrative and poetry can be also observed on the part of Jewish-Canadian women writers like e.g. Anne Michaels, Eva Hoffman, Irena Karafilly, Lilian Nattel and Lisa Appignanesi.⁵⁸⁸ As some cultural critics

⁵⁸¹ N.Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, HarperPerennial, New York, 1999, cit. p.185.

⁵⁸² Jeanette Winterson, *Weight*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2006, cit. pp. 6-7.

⁵⁸³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Oxford University Press, trans.by W.Shewring, Oxford, 1998, cit. Book I, p.1.

⁵⁸⁴ FP, cit. Incipit.

⁵⁸⁵ Anne Michaels's father is of Polish-Jewish origin.

⁵⁸⁶ Cf. Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2004.

⁵⁸⁷ Cf. Emily Miller Budick, *The Holocaust in the Jewish American Imagination*, in Hana Wirth-Nesher, Kramer Michael (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p.213.

⁵⁸⁸ Cf. for instance:

Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*, Vintage, London, 1999.

Irena F. Karafilly, *Ashes and Miracles: A Polish Journey*, Malcolm Lester Books, Toronto, 1998.

sustain, the danger of forgetting the Holocaust involves not only the moral implication of history but also the Jewish identity. Therefore, the Jewish-Americans have tended so strenuously to transform history into memory as part of a “project of sustaining identity”⁵⁸⁹. Anne Michaels’s refugee novel inscribes itself in the ‘second scroll’⁵⁹⁰ series of works that try to re-write the memory reuniting the present with the past into a transcendent life symphony.

Fugitive Pieces was first published in 1996. The novel is divided into two parts and involves the intersecting stories of three men: Jakob, Athos and Ben. In the first Part Jakob Beer, a seven-year-old boy, manages to escape the tragic fate of his parents and his sister murdered in the occupied Poland by the Nazis. He finds shelter in the forest, hiding buried up to his neck in the Biskupin mud. He is rescued and carried away by the Greek archeologist Athos Roussos to an island in Greece. There, Jakob learns Greek, poetry and natural sciences from his rescuer. After the war they move to Toronto, where Athos teaches at the university and Jakob becomes a poet and a translator. When Athos dies, he reprises his work of memory. His first marriage fails, but the second one with Michaela transcends time even though they die childless.

The second Part (almost parallel in the chapter titles) is, on the other hand, narrated by a young professor named Ben, himself a child of Holocaust survivors, a second-generation Jewish Canadian. He grows up in a silent Toronto household, ‘haunted’ by ghosts of his dead siblings and his parents’ painful memories. When he meets Jakob Beer, he is fascinated and deeply moved by him and his writing. Thus, he decides to carry on the ‘unfinished script’ of Jacob’s life and thought.

The first chapter opens as a poetically impressionistic variation of the Jewish legend of the Golem⁵⁹¹. Jakob’s “afterbirth of earth”⁵⁹² echoes the creation of the clay figure risen to protect the Jewish heritage and tradition. It also reminds of the ‘birth’ of the

Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, Simon&Schuster, New York, 1999.

Lisa Appignanesi, *Losing the Dead: A Family Memoir*, McArthur&Company, Toronto, 1999.

⁵⁸⁹ Emily Miller Budick, *The Holocaust in the Jewish American Imagination*, in Hana Wirth-Nesher Hana, Michael Kramer (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, cit. p.218.

⁵⁹⁰ A.M.Klein in his book *The Second Scroll* interprets the present history as a renewal of the biblical First Scroll, thus he sees the recurrence of the ancient events in the modern times. Cf. Abraham Moses Klein, *The Second Scroll*, The Malboro Press, Malboro, Vermont, 1985.

⁵⁹¹ The Golem - a figure of clay molded by a rabbi of Prague to protect the ghetto from the attack of the gentiles. According to the Jewish legend it is an artificially created person brought to light by supernatural means Cf. also Isaac Leib Peretz, *The Golem*, in *The I.L.Peretz Reader*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002, pp.130-131.

⁵⁹² FP, cit. p.5.

first ancestor, as e.g. recounted in the aboriginal tales of creation of the world.⁵⁹³ Jakob says:

At the end of the strength, at the place where faith is most like despair,
I leaped from the streets of Biskupin; from underground into air.
I limped towards him, stiff as a golem, clay tight behind my knees.⁵⁹⁴

The hero's 'reawakening' can also be a metaphor of the force of testimony raised from the anti-human mud.⁵⁹⁵ Athos, that came accidentally to the boy's 'resurrection', offers a message of hope, a promise of a new dignified life. Jakob, in turn, constitutes his savior's second skin, his extension and completion. His muteness and evasiveness reminds e.g. of that of Kosinski's *Painted Bird*⁵⁹⁶, only here the creature is painted with the mud of history. Similarly, mute is also the child, an escapee from Nazi Germany, sheltered by an old man in the novel *The Final Solution* by Michael Chabon.⁵⁹⁷ Moreover, the predicament of Jakob recalls that of Gregor, the hero of Elie Wiesel's book *The Gates of the Forest*, the lone survivor of the family hiding in the forest from the Germans, saved miraculously by a stranger.⁵⁹⁸ Athos can be thus considered a vehicle of freedom, wisdom, safety and memory. He is an ideal example of the Righteous⁵⁹⁹. We read:

The man excavating in the mud at Biskupin, the man I came to know as Athos,
wore me under his clothes. My limbs bone-shadows on his strong legs and arms,
my head buried in his neck, both of us beneath a heavy coat...In our strange coupling,
Athos's voice burrowed into my brain. I didn't understand so I made it up myself.
It's right, it's necessary to run...⁶⁰⁰

In fact, the two complement each other, substitute the missing members of the family. Their friendship will enable them to reunite the human experience through space and time, to universalize the pain and pleasure of living, to restore hope. Athos is seen as a sort of magician, a recreator of beauty and life:

⁵⁹³ Cf. e.g. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Vintage, London, 2005.

"In the beginning the Earth was an infinite and murky plain (...) On the morning of the First Day, the Sun felt the urge to be born.(...)The Sun burst through the surface, flooding the land with golden light, warming the hollows under which each Ancestor lay sleeping. (...) In the bottom of their hollows (now filling up with water), the Ancients shifted one leg, then another leg. They shook their shoulders and flexed their arms. They heaved their bodies upward through the mud. Their eyelids cracked open. They saw their children at play in the sunshine. The mud fell from their thighs, like placenta from a baby. Then, like the baby's first cry, each Ancestor opened his mouth and called out, 'I AM!'(...)" (Idem, cit. pp.72-73)

⁵⁹⁴ Ibidem, cit. p.12.

⁵⁹⁵ Cf. also Piera Sonnino, *Questo è stato*, Il Saggiatore: Net, Milan, 2006, p.70.

⁵⁹⁶ Cf. Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*, Grove Press, New York, 1995.

⁵⁹⁷ Cf. Michael Chabon, *The Final Solution*, Harper Perennial, London, 2006.

⁵⁹⁸ Cf. Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*, trans. F.Frenaye, Schocken Books, New York, 1995.

⁵⁹⁹ The "Righteous Among the Nations" Title and Program offered by the State of Israel through Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

'Righteous Gentiles': non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

⁶⁰⁰ FP, cit. p.13.

Athos said: "I will be your koumbaros, your godfather, the marriage sponsor for you and your sons... (...) We must carry each other. If we don't have this, what are we..." On the island of Zakynthos, Athos – scientist, scholar, middling master of languages – performed his most astounding feat. Feat out of his trousers he plucked the seven-year-old refugee Jakob Beer.⁶⁰¹

The story of the boy's rescue may as well represent the tragic lot of many war survivors. The problem of incommunicability, of emotional atrophy, and thus also the need of hope, human warmth and guidance are present in the works of poet-survivors, as for instance in the poem titled *The Survivor* by Tadeusz Różewicz:

I seek a teacher and a master
may he restore my sight hearing and speech
may he again name objects and ideas
may he separate darkness from light.⁶⁰²

Athos becomes Jakob's teacher and master as well as his best friend. He inculcates in his pupil, or rather makes him see, the importance of truth and memory for preserving one's identity and dignity. He is thus a kind of a wise and holy Tsadik⁶⁰³:

To survive was to escape fate. But if you escape your fate, whose life do you then step into? The Zohar says: "All visible things will be born again invisible."
The present, like a landscape, is only a small part of a mysterious narrative.
A narrative of catastrophe and slow accumulation. Each life saved: genetic features to rise again in another generation. "Remote causes."⁶⁰⁴

Even as a child, even as my blood-past was drained from me, I understood that if I were strong enough to accept it, I was being offered a second history.
(...) Athos didn't want me to forget. He made me review my Hebrew alphabet.
He said the same thing every day: "It is your future you are remembering".⁶⁰⁵

Furthermore, according to Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the chronotope, time and space are interdependent. Their relationship, like the transnational and transgenerational friendship of Athos and Jacob, creates meaning and gives sense to existence. As Bakhtin writes, in some chronotopes "a locality is the trace of an event, a trace of what had shaped it. Such is the logic of all local myths and legends that attempt, through history, to make sense out of space".⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰¹ Ibidem, cit. p.14.

⁶⁰² Tadeusz Różewicz, *The Survivor*, in Tadeusz Różewicz, *Selected Poems*, trans. Czerniawski (et al.), Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow, 1995, cit. p.7.

⁶⁰³ Tsadik – "Saint . The term was often applied to the Chassidic teachers, whose holiness extended beyond ordinary human capabilities – at least in the eyes of their followers." (Gene Bluestein, *Anglish/Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE, 1998, cit.p.114)

⁶⁰⁴ FP, cit. p.48.

⁶⁰⁵ Idem, cit. pp.20-21.

⁶⁰⁶ Cit in Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003, cit. p.13.

Thus, the journey through various physical landscapes can be read as the travel of memory where history and geography meet and interact. Hence, Bakhtin's concept of dialogy⁶⁰⁷ between various cultural meanings and identities seems to suit perfectly the discourse here. The identities are thus under continuous renegotiation.

As Caterina Ricciardi notes the poem *Lake of Two Rivers* can be considered a footstone of all the writing of Anne Michaels.⁶⁰⁸ Since numerous memoirs and diaries were interrated during the II World War, the Canadian lake can be a metaphor of memory which links the missing pieces, pebbles⁶⁰⁹ as well as the Jewish diaspora.⁶¹⁰ Thus, the novel functions as a sort of Yizker Book⁶¹¹ that commemorates the dead, inscribing itself in the tradition of the Kaddish prayer:

The only thing you can do for the dead is to sing to them.
The hymn, the miroloy, the kaddish. In the ghettos, when a child died,
the mother sang a lullaby. Because there was nothing else she could offer
of her self, of her body. She made it up, a song of comfort, mentioning all
the child's favourite toys. And these lullabies were overheard and passed
along and, generations later, the little song is all that's left to tell us of that child....⁶¹²

Chaim Potok wrote that "without a listener's response the Kaddish was meaningless; the response was the soul of the Kaddish, its living center"⁶¹³. Here, the listener is the reader. He can thus convert 'amoral history' into 'moral memory' and restore the sense of life:

⁶⁰⁷ "In Bakhtin's work, dialogy is understood as the constant interaction between meanings, with connotations

of open-ended possibilities generated by the discursive practices of a culture. Dialogy conceives knowing as the effort of understanding 'the active reception of the speech of the other'. Chronotopes are dialogic because the oscillation of time and space requires a mediation between self and other, whereby the limits of territory and identity are exceeded. Dialogy is what introduces alterity into the concept of the chronotope, rendering time and space problematic by raising the question of the constitution of the subject of discourse with respect to the world of others." (cit. in Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003, cit. p.13)

⁶⁰⁸ Cf. Anne Michaels, *Lake of Two Rivers*, in A.Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, pp.7-12.

⁶⁰⁹ In Jewish Tradition The Jewish tradition of leaving a pebble or stone on top of a tombstone signifies that someone has honored the deceased person's memory with a visit to the grave. Symbolically, it suggests the continuing presence of love and memory which are as strong and enduring as a rock. One name for God is "The Rock of Israel." So the rock is a reminder of the presence of the Rock, Whose love truly is stronger than death.

⁶¹⁰ Cf. Caterina Ricciardi, in Ascarelli Roberta (ed.), *Oltre la persecuzione: Donne, ebraismo, memoria*, Carocci, Roma, 2004, pp.133-138.

⁶¹¹ Yizker: "The opening word of a prayer in memory of the dead, recited on three holidays and the Day of Atonement. It is often associated with special remembrances, of the victims of the Holocaust of those who died defending Israel. Yizker means "He (God) shall remember." It has been a recent tradition to compile a Yizker book in memory of the dead, a custom redoubled as a consequence of the Holocaust. A Yizker book, for example, will be compiled to commemorate the slaughter during the World War II of an entire town." (Gene Bluestein, *Anglish/Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE, 1998, cit .p.124)

⁶¹² FP, cit. p.241.

⁶¹³ Chaim Potok, *The Book of Lights*, Ballantine Books Fawcett, New York, 1982, cit. p.352.

History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. History is the Totenbuch, The Book of the Dead, kept by the administrators of the camps. Memory is the Memorbucher, the names of those to be mourned, read aloud in the synagogue. History and memory share events; that is, they share time and space. Every moment is two moments.⁶¹⁴

In fact, to Athos writing his book *Bearing False Witness* became the aim of his life. He couldn't reconcile to the fact that the picture of the actual history might be twisted and blurred. He felt that it was his moral obligation to testify the truth about history, to preserve and pass down memory. As Ben notes, "*Bearing False Witness* plagued Athos. It was his conscience; his record of how the Nazis abused archeology to fabricate the past."⁶¹⁵ It is also what Kundera calls the "weight of responsibility" that gives meaning and depth to our lives. The mystery of existence seems to lie in this continual pull of the two forces. The heaviness as opposed to the lightness causes us to be, to feel the touch and taste of reality:

In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavily on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (das schwerste Gewicht). If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness. But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid? The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. (...) is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfilment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real mysterious, most ambiguous of all.⁶¹⁶

Moreover, it is a Jewish tradition to name children after a deceased relative, an act of commemoration and life continuity. In fact, the name of one of the protagonists is Ben which means 'son' and can be a message of hope, a sort of spiritual heir to Jakob's work and thought:

History is the poisoned well, seeping into the groundwater. It's not the unknown past we're doomed to repeat, but the past we know. Every recorded event is a brick of potential, of 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. Out of fertile ground, the compost of history.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁴ FP, cit. p.138.

⁶¹⁵ FP, cit. p.104.

⁶¹⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. from the Czech by M.H.Heim, faber and faber, London, 1999, cit. pp.4-5.

⁶¹⁷ FP, cit. p.161.

The book also raises the question of ‘end-of-the-line scenario’ of Jewish tradition and history.⁶¹⁸ The moral dilemma of bearing children into the world of pain and suffering is present in the recurrent motif of ‘unborn children’ in the Holocaust literature.⁶¹⁹ Jakob dies childless, nevertheless he imagines his future son Bela and daughter Bella, both named thus in order to pay tribute to his murdered sister:

Child I long for: if we conceive you, if you are born, if you reach the age I am now, sixty, I say this to you: Light the lamps but do not look for us. Think of us sometimes, your mother and me, while you’re in your house with the fruit trees and the slightly wild garden, a small wooden table in the yard. You, my son, Bela, living in an old city, your balcony overlooking medieval street-stones. Or you, Bella, my daughter, in your house overlooking a river; or on an island of white, blue, and green where the sea follows you everywhere.(...) Light the lamp, cut a long wick. One day when you’ve almost forgotten, I pray you’ll let us return. That through an open window, even in the middle of a city, the sea air of our marriage will find you. I pray that one day in a room lit only by night snow, you will suddenly know how miraculous is your parents’ love for each other.⁶²⁰

Bela, Bella: Once I was lost in a forest. I was so afraid. My blood pounded in my chest and I knew my heart’s strength would soon be exhausted. I saved myself without thinking. I grasped the two syllables closest to me, and replaced my heartbeat with your name.⁶²¹

The circular flow of memory can be also seen in the way the “Hebrew we keeps the ancestors alive”⁶²². It makes the descendants responsible to look for, retrieve and pass on the memory. It unites historical timespan into a single instant, fusing the past with the present. It universalizes suffering and human experience, making it at the same time more personal:

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 actions take on immense significance no matter how small: not for this life only.⁶²³

That is why we should assume the task of retracing the memory, also in order to find out where we belong, what we are made of, what we really want, what sense our life can have, etc. All this may help us not to lose the coordination of space and time. Margaret Atwood writes:

⁶¹⁸ Cf. Emily Miller Budick, *The Holocaust in the Jewish American Imagination*, in Wirth-Nesher Hana, Kramer Michael (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p.225.

⁶¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Imre Kertesz, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, trans. Ch.C.Wilson and K.M.Wilson, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1997.

⁶²⁰ FP, cit. p.195.

⁶²¹ FP, cit. p.195.

⁶²² William Herbert New, *A History of Canadian Literature*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2003, cit. p.348.

⁶²³ FP, cit. p.160.

The past no longer belongs only to those who lived in it;
the past belongs to those who claim it, and are willing to
explore it, and to infuse it with meaning for those alive today.
The past belongs to us, because we are the ones who need it.⁶²⁴

The genealogy is also somehow inscribed in the geological landscape of memory. The Earth itself is a kind of ‘hieroglyph’ of history.⁶²⁵ It contains innumerable traces, chalk marks, smudges of the passing time. The transcendent pulse of life moves through the veins of rocks, trees, humans, etc. Michaels thus speaks of the ‘vertical time’⁶²⁶, a stratified memory of the universe:

We do not descend, but rise from our histories.
If cut open, memory would resemble
a cross-section of the earth’s core,
a table of geographical time.
Faces press the transparent membrane
between conscious and genetic knowledge.
A name, a word, triggers the dilatation.
Motive is uncovered, sharp overburden in
A shifting field.⁶²⁷

⁶²⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing*, Virago Press, London, 2005, cit. p.229.

⁶²⁵ See Jeanette Winterson, *Weight*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2006, cit. pp. XIII-XIV.

“The strata of sedimentary rock are like pages of a book, each with a record of contemporary life written on it. Unfortunately, the record is far from complete. The process of sedimentation in any one place is invariably interrupted by new periods in which sediment is not laid down, or existing sediment is eroded. The succession of layers is further obscured as strata become twisted or folded, or even completely inverted by enormous geological forces, such as those involved in mountain building.”

⁶²⁶ Cf. the title of the two chapters of FP.

⁶²⁷ Anne Michaels, *Lake of Two Rivers*, in Michaels A., *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.11.

V.2 *Fugitive Pieces*: Requiem for Death and Ode to Life

To use scar tissue to advantage.
To construct through art,
one's face to the world.
Sculpt what's missing.⁶²⁸

And who will inherit their poetry
in yellowing autumn's dying glow?
Perhaps the wind, which threshes the chaff,
the golden kernels to resow.⁶²⁹

What is the role of pain and suffering in human life? Can it be avoided in order to live happily or is it necessary to create and to feel the true and deep joy of living? In what way is the artistic creation important for unveiling the truth? All these questions are also 'fugitive pieces' that the book of Anne Michaels tries to recapture and unpuzzle. The work of memory seems fundamental here; very often it is unconscious and sudden. As Sebald remarks, "The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens."⁶³⁰ The revelation of truth through memory can be as painful as constructive. It paralyses the senses in order to create a kind of distance from which life can be seen from a better, vertical perspective. Jakob's dreams and reminiscences of his family resurface gradually as he reaches the understanding through spiritual pain and language elaboration. Sebald writes:

Memory (...) often strikes me as a kind of dumbness. It makes one's head heavy and giddy, as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height, from one of those towers whose tops are lost to view in the clouds.⁶³¹

However, history is always stained by memory, a lens through which everything seems blurred and transparent at the same time. Athos's tales of geography, navigation and cartography bring Jakob into the fascinating world of the mind travel; they open up the horizons of perception to the young disciple:

Maps of history have always been less honest. Terra cognita and terra incognita inhabit exactly the same coordinates of time and space. The closest we come to knowing the location of what's unknown is when it melts through the map like a watermark, a stain transparent as a drop of rain. On the map of history, perhaps the water stain is memory.⁶³²

⁶²⁸ Michaels Anne, *Ice House*, in Michaels A., *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.166.

⁶²⁹ Peretz Miransky, *Poets*, in Peretz Miransky, *Selected Poems & Fables*, bilingual version: Yiddish and English, Mosaic Press, Toronto, 2000, cit. p.39

⁶³⁰ FP, cit.p.213.

⁶³¹ W.G.Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans.M.Hulse, Vintage, London, 2002, cit. p.145.

⁶³² FP, cit. p.137.

The Greek master's spiritual legacy left to his pupil includes the deep belief in the poetic language that pervades all forms of life. Truth is hidden in every single atom of the universe; the Earth preserves its own memory that can be deciphered by a closer, sensitive look:

Caves are the temples of the earth, the soft part of the skull that crumbles under touch. Caves are repositories of spirits; truth speaks from the ground. At Delphi, the oracle proclaimed from a grotto. In the holy ground of the mass graves, the earth blisters and spoke.⁶³³

Hence, the form is a vehicle of memory: it transports emotion, feeling, the moment of being over and over again. Art draws thus from the well of remembrance in order to reconstruct and restore life and to enhance deeper understanding and sympathy. Jakob's poetry tries to reach the core of his suffering, so that he can find self-forgiveness, relief and peace of mind. Michaels writes in one of her poems:

Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,
existing as the historical moment – alone,
and existing in history – linear,
in music, in the sentence.
Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,
the way the earth remembers our bodies,
the way man and woman in their joining
remember each other before they were separate.⁶³⁴

As one of the characters says “war can turn even an ordinary man into a poet.”⁶³⁵ Extreme suffering and painful memories enhance empathy and sympathy with the world. Thus, Jakob admits that his “deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound.”⁶³⁶ What is more, music seems to contain the mystery of life, its rhythms and nuances.⁶³⁷ The musical patterns follow the flow of life. As Baker says:

(..) from its very beginnings music has been closely identified with the meaning, and the mystery, of life. (...) the discovery of song and the creation of musical instruments both owed their origin to

⁶³³ FP, cit. p.143.

⁶³⁴ Anne Michaels, *Words for the Body*, in Michaels A., *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.46.

⁶³⁵ FP, cit. p.68.

⁶³⁶ Idem, cit.17.

⁶³⁷ Interestingly, in ancient Indian music, the voice was considered supremely important, for it was thought to represent the ‘union of audible sound and intellect and the ancient Sanskrit word for music, samgita, stood for the ‘art and science of singing with music and dancing’. There are two types of Indian music: marga-sacred music-could lead to the liberation of the human spirit; desi- music designed to entertain. The basic form of melody in Indian classical music is the raga, a word which literally means ‘colour’ or ‘feeling’(...) Nowadays a hundred and thirty-two are generally recognized and about half are generally used. They are connected with certain hours of the day, seasons of the year, and other landmarks in life, and express the appropriate mood through using different groups of notes in special ways that are felt to correspond. (Cf Richard Baker, *The Magic of Music*, Book Club Associates, London, 1975, pp.16-19.)

a human impulse which lies much deeper than conscious intention: the need for rhythm in life. Just as day follows night, the tides advance and recede, the moon waxes and wanes and the seasons succeed one another, so the human organism responds to rhythm. The need is a deep one, transcending thought, and disregarded at our peril.⁶³⁸

The landscapes reflect the internal geography of feeling and perception; eternal longing pulses in the memory of the whole universe. The poet's role is to discover the spiritual connection of the immanent soul and to restore the mystery of life, its sacrality and beauty to the world:

I felt compassion for the stars themselves. Aching towards us for millennia though we are blind to their signals until it's too late, starlight only the white breath of an old cry. Sending their white messages millions of years, only to be crumpled up by the waves. (...) It's longing that moves the sea.⁶³⁹

The landscape of Peloponnesus had been injured and healed so many times, sorrow darkened the sunlit ground. All sorrow feels ancient. Wars, occupations, earthquakes; fire and drought. I stood in the valleys and imagined the grief of the hills. I felt my own grief expressed there. It would be almost fifty years and in another country before I would again experience this empathy with a landscape.⁶⁴⁰

The various religions of the world including Judaism use musical expression in their rituals and traditions. Music accompanies every event in the life of the community. It can convey pain and sorrow as well as the joy of living and the affirmation of life.⁶⁴¹

Jakob's search for a suitable mode and vehicle of expression can be perceived in his internal struggle with semiotic and sound layers of various languages: from Yiddish and Polish through Greek toward English. Each of them represents a different experience for him, a different chunk of memory. Yiddish and Polish are linked with the war, the loss of his family, and thus the subsequent pain and suffering; Greek is connected with his master-rescuer Athos, the stage of 'poetic' apprenticeship and the revival of feeling and

⁶³⁸ Idem, cit. p.13.

⁶³⁹ Idem, cit. pp.54, 75.

⁶⁴⁰ Idem, cit. p.60.

⁶⁴¹ "The ram's horn (shofar) is the only instrument found in Jewish synagogues to this day, and is said to have acquired its special religious importance from the story of the ram which Abraham sacrificed instead of his son Isaac. Music played a great part in the early story of Israel. We have all read how the young David soothed Israel's first king, Saul (1050-1013 B.C.), with his playing of the lyre, and when he in turn became King, it was David himself, poet, composer and performer, who danced before the Ark, organized the music in the Temple and appointed the Levites as a caste of sacred musicians. Two hundred and forty-eight Levites, we are told, sang and played their instruments at the dedication of King Solomon's Temple, and for some four centuries this splendour continued. In the sixth century B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, and many Jews spent forty years in exile in Babylon; but after this, in the period of the second Temple, music again played a dominant role.(...) In succeeding centuries, the Jews established themselves throughout most of Europe, though it was in Eastern Europe, where they developed a whole range of impassioned popular songs, that their musical influence was perhaps most strongly felt, with its powerful undercurrent of nostalgia. The synagogues carried on the ancient Temple practice of chanting passages from the Bible, and the chanting of prayers became a highly developed art, with the *hazan* (precentor) embellishing the standard melodies in elaborate fashion." (cit. in Richard Baker, *The Magic of Music*, Book Club Associates, London, 1975, cit. p.27)

hope; English, finally, constitutes the journey toward maturity and self-expression as an artist as well as a man. The intermediate stage can be considered his work as a translator, since as he says:

Reading a poem in translation,” wrote Bialek, “is like kissing a woman through a veil”; and reading Greek poems, with a mixture of katharevousa and the demotic, is like kissing two women. Translation is a kind of transubstantiation; one poem becomes another. You can choose your philosophy of translation just as you choose how to live: the free adaptation that sacrifices detail to meaning, the strict crib that sacrifices meaning to exactitude. The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications.⁶⁴²

The novel is permeated by a continual play of light and darkness as far as the form as well as the meaning are concerned. The light of the Mediterranean sun, which reflects the joy of the here-and-now, is constantly counterposed to the darkness of the boggy Polish forests, from where murky war-time memories of loss and pain resurface. Toronto, and Canada in general, constitutes a middle ground for the reconciliation of dreams with debts. It is a “city of valleys spanned by bridges”⁶⁴³, bridges that link the past with the future:

It’s a city where almost everyone has come from elsewhere – a market, a caravansary – bringing with them their different ways of dying and marrying, their kitchens and songs. A city of forsaken worlds; language a kind of farewell.⁶⁴⁴

In this ‘surreal’ city the life of Jakob converges with that of Ben: their lots become sealed by the passion for art and beauty in spite of pain and despair. The values that Ben inherited from his master are above all the importance of the imagination and the mystery of creation in human life: the eternal longing for truth that moves all things. It is also the debt that we owe to our ancestors, as well as the dream to leave to those who will come after us:

Jakob taught me so many things. For instance: What is the true value of knowledge? That it makes our ignorance more precise. (...) It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be.⁶⁴⁵

In fact, as Schopenhauer observes, the spiritual pain increases with the degree of knowledge. He speaks about “the negativity of well-being and happiness, in antithesis to the positivity of pain.”⁶⁴⁶ Hence, pain, intended as self-consciousness, can also have creative powers, and in this sense it is positive for a philosopher or an artist.⁶⁴⁷ What is more, it seems that artists very

⁶⁴² FP, cit. p.109.

⁶⁴³ Idem, cit. p.89.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁴⁵ Idem, cit. pp.210, 221.

⁶⁴⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Suffering of the World*, trans. R.J.Hollingdale, Penguin Books, London, 2004, cit. p.4.

⁶⁴⁷ Cf. Ibidem.

often search for and linger on spiritual pain deliberately, also through the memory of loss, because it brings them closer to the true face of life; it provides them with a sharper and more distinctive flavour-lens of existence.⁶⁴⁸ Michaels writes:

We look for the spirit precisely in the place of greatest degradation.
It's from there that the new Adam must raise himself, must begin again.
(...) I will speak with a dark language with the music of a harp.⁶⁴⁹

I was surprised to discover not everyone sees the shadow around objects,
the black outline, the bruise of fermentation on things even as light clings
to them. I saw the aura of mortality like a snake that sees its prey in infrared,
the pulse-heat. It was clear to me as cut fruit turning brown on the plate,
a lemon peel shrivelling to scent.⁶⁵⁰

Art hence can be considered as an attempt to transgress the mystery of life; it's a sort of obsessive look behind the stage of the human existence – a desire to understand or just a pull of the soul⁶⁵¹ toward self-annihilation and return. Milan Kundera sees in this passion for extremism (toward extreme light and darkness) a veiled longing for death:

Seeing is limited by two borders: strong light, which blinds, and total darkness.
(...) Extremes mean borders beyond which life ends, and a passion for extremism,
in art and in politics, is a veiled longing for death.⁶⁵²

Poets thus 'visit' the dark and mysterious world of the dead with the hope to bring out some understanding and comprehension of the human condition, to illuminate the obscure parts of

"For evil is precisely that which is positive, that which makes itself palpable; and good, on the other hand, i.e. all happiness and all gratification, is that which is negative, the mere abolition of a desire and extinction of a pain." (Idem, cit. p.4)

"That spiritual pain is conditional upon knowledge goes without saying, and it is easy to see that it will increase with the degree of knowledge. We can thus express the whole relationship figuratively by saying that the will is the string, its frustration or impediment the vibration of the string, knowledge the sounding-board, and pain the sound." (Idem, cit. p.10)

⁶⁴⁸ Cf. Imre Kertesz, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, trans. Ch.C.Wilson and K.M.Wilson, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1997.

"A life lived happily is a life lived mutely (...) to write about life means to think about life, to think about life is to question it, and the only one to question the element of his life is one suffocated by it or feeling out of place for one reason or another. (...) I don't write to find joy; on the contrary, it turns out, I seek pain, the sharper the better, bordering on the unbearable sort, quite probably because pain is truth, and the answer to the question of what constitutes truth is quite simple, I wrote: truth is what consumes." (Idem, cit. pp. 65-66)

⁶⁴⁹ FP, cit. pp.157, 167.

⁶⁵⁰ Idem, cit. p.204.

⁶⁵¹ Jakob's wife Michaela says:"I don't know what the soul is. But I imagine that somehow our bodies surround what has always been."(FP, cit. pp.176-177)

⁶⁵² Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans.from the Czech by M.H.Heim, faber and faber, London, 1999, cit. p.93.

Cf.also Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, cit. p.17.

"The cradle rocks above the abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although, the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour)"(Idem, cit. p.17)

the mind, or just to escape the ‘madness’ of living.⁶⁵³ They see and feel too much because their insight goes beyond the average human perception. Jakob grapples with his dark memories through images and sounds in order to “restore order by naming”⁶⁵⁴. He ‘talks’ with the murdered members of his family, being particularly obsessed with the image of his beloved sister Bella. The pain of loss is so acute that it pervades the landscapes that surround him. He projects his suffering onto the world with the hope of finding sympathy and consolation in nature:

Language is how ghosts enter the world.⁶⁵⁵

I want to remain close to Bella. To do so, I blaspheme by imagining.⁶⁵⁶

I imagined the thoughts of the sea. I spent the day writing my letter
to the dead and was answered in my sleep.⁶⁵⁷

As mentioned before, particular attention of this poetic narrative is given to the musical dimension. It is the sound and the rhythm of the language that give substance to poetry. The poet protagonist tries to sing the vanished world into being by chanting his lyrical memories of the dead.⁶⁵⁸ His nomadic journey through time and space, in a fuguelike manner, serves the recollection of the scattered pieces of his identity. As Chatwin observes, ‘melos’ is the Greek work for ‘limb’, thus melody is linked with travel, intended also as

⁶⁵³ Cf. Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, Virago, London, 2003.

“Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light”(Idem, cit.p.XXII)

“(…) all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (Idem, cit. p.140)

“Where is the story? The story is in the dark. That is why inspiration is thought of as coming in flashes. Going into a narrative – into the narrative process – is a dark road. You can’t see your way ahead. Poets know this too; they too travel the dark roads. The well of inspiration is a hole that leads downwards.”(Idem, cit. p.158)

⁶⁵⁴FP, cit.p.111.

⁶⁵⁵ Anne Michaels, *What the Light teaches*, in A.Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.121.

⁶⁵⁶ FP, cit. p.167.

⁶⁵⁷ Idem, cit. p.19.

⁶⁵⁸ Cf. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Vintage, London, 2005.

“In theory, at least, the whole Australia can be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualise the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that , in which every ‘episode’ was readable in terms of geology”(Idem, cit. p.13)

“Regardless of the words, it seems the melodic contour of the song describes the nature of the land over which the song passes.(…) Certain phrases, certain combinations of musical notes, are thought to describe the action of the Ancestor’s feet.(…) An expert songman, by listening to their order of succession, would count how many times his hero crossed a river, or scaled a ridge – and be able to calculate where, and how far along, a Songline he was.(…) ‘So a musical phrase’, I said, ‘is a map reference?’ ‘Music’, said Arkady, ‘is a memory bank for finding one’s way about the world.’”(Idem, cit. p.108)

‘mental labour’.⁶⁵⁹ The English language is Jakob’s instrument with which he performs his prayer and invocation of God. He says:

English was a sonar, a microscope, through which I listened and observed, waiting to capture the 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. But all I achieved was awkward shrieking. Not even the pure shriek of a reed in the rain.⁶⁶⁰

On Idhra I finally began to feel my English strong enough to carry experience. I became obsessed by the palpable edge of sound. The moment when language at last surrenders to what it’s describing: the subtlest differentials of light or temperature or sorrow. I’m a kabbalist only in that I believe in the power of incantation. A poem is as neural as love; the rut of rhythm that veers the mind.⁶⁶¹

Anne Michaels, being herself also a pianist and a composer, tends to conceive poetry as an inherently synesthetic and complete form of art that comprises taste, touch, sound, rhythm and image. The protagonists’ search for truth and memory reminds thus of recomposing a piece of music, or looking for the key message in a music composition.⁶⁶² The whole life seems to be a ‘fugitive piece’ of a perfect act of creation that waits to be deciphered and ‘played’ masterfully. The entire scheme of existence seems to be based here on the biblical sources, where man is an instrument in God’s hands, and thus, should resonate the will of the Almighty in his/her search for truth and beauty.⁶⁶³ The author writes:

Truth grows gradually in us, like a musician who plays a piece again and again until suddenly he hears it for the first time.⁶⁶⁴

We decided music is memory,
the way, a word is the memory
of its meaning.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁵⁹ Cf. Idem , pp.194, 228.

⁶⁶⁰ FP, cit. p.112.

⁶⁶¹ Idem, cit. p.163.

⁶⁶² Cf. also Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. from the Czech by M.H.Heim, faber and faber, London, 1999.

“Human lives (...) are composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence (Beethoven’s music, death under a train) into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual’s life.(...) Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress.” (Idem, cit. p.51)

⁶⁶³ See e.g. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Untitled*, in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man. Poems*, trans. from the Yiddish by Morton M.Leifman, Continuum, New York, 2007.

“The clouds become piano keys/ and pillar-like hands grow ever higher; / it seems to me that in my imagining / I’m always climbing beyond myself, /over the world – proud, as if on a roof. // And somewhere I live in the world as a piano. / Like a mother’s breast understands a child’s hands – / I understand confused, human fingers, / and I calm the thirsty stillness with piano-sounds.” (Idem, cit. p.137)

Cf. also Peretz Miransky, *Every Being*, in Miransky Peretz, *Selected Poems & Fables*, bilingual version: Yiddish and English, Mosaic Press, Toronto, 2000.

“Every being has a melody / of his own that can be heard. / Listen for the song inspired /by this greyed and ancient world.(...) / Hear it hum, the smallest leaf, / hidden where deep shadows are. / God has written it in heaven, / every note inscribed with stars.” (Idem, cit. p.81)

⁶⁶⁴ FP, cit.p.251.

Furthermore, Michaels says that silence is the “response to both emptiness and fullness”⁶⁶⁶ and “Art emerges from silence; Silence, from one’s place in the world.”⁶⁶⁷ The most essential part of music is hidden between the notes, just as the crux of poetry lies between the words. Silence is thus the substance from which art springs. It is heavy with time, like beauty:

I used to think we escape time
by disappearing into beauty.
Now I see it’s the opposite.
Beauty reveals time.⁶⁶⁸

The artists cannot but create. Their being is conditioned by their art: ‘to be is to create’ or ‘to create is to be’. Jacob recreates his identity through poetry. His art constitutes a kind of soul therapy, even though the cost is high: the shame and the painful memory of loss. Then, after the ‘ressurrection’ of the self, he can help others (e.g. Ben) via sympathy to find their own identity, beauty and hope. This seems to be the ethical lesson of art learnt from his master Athos. “Write to save yourself,” Athos said, “and someday you’ll write because you’ve been saved.” “You will feel terrible shame for this. Let your humility grow larger than your shame.”⁶⁶⁹

As Margaret Atwood notes, the theme of ‘exploration’ is a recurring one in Canadian Literature. It is undoubtedly connected with the problem of belonging and identity. Many Canadian narratives follow the motif of journey, with a frequent mention of charts, maps, diagrams, i.e. devices for finding direction and orientation.⁶⁷⁰ Thus, an artist can be considered in this respect also an explorer who tries to find his way about the world and to name the unnamed. The poet gropes his road to truth through empathy and sensitivity, without any guarantee of reaching the destination:

⁶⁶⁵ Anne Michaels, *Words for the Body*, in Anne Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.41.

⁶⁶⁶ FP, cit. p.194.

⁶⁶⁷ Anne Michaels, *Modersohn – Becker*, in Anne Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.85.

⁶⁶⁸ Anne Michaels, *A Lesson from the Earth*, in Anne Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit. p.76.

⁶⁶⁹ FP, cit. p.165.

See also J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Penguin Books, London, 1999, p.694.

In the essay *The Poetry of Pope* Thomas Quincey made a distinction between the literature of knowledge (didactic) and the literature of power (which instructs by appealing to emotions): “There is, first, the literature of knowledge; and, secondly, the literature of power. The function of the first is – to teach; the function of the second is – to move: the first is a rudder, the second an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the mere discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always through affections of pleasure and sympathy.” (Idem, cit. p.694)

⁶⁷⁰ Cf. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: a thematic guide to Canadian literature*, McClelland & Stewart, 2004, Toronto, pp.137-138.

It is possible that he is dead, and not discovered.
It is possible that he can be found some place
in a narrow closet, like the corpse in a detective story,
standing, his eyes staring, and ready to fall on his face.
It is also possible that he is alive
And amnesiac, or mad, or in retired disgrace,
Or beyond recognition lost in love...

-A.M.Klein

*"Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"*⁶⁷¹

⁶⁷¹Cit. in idem, cit. p.213.

V.3 Life Wonders: the Miracle of Love

Only love sees the familiar for the first time.⁶⁷²

Strange friend, past, present, and to be;
Love deeper, darker understood;
Behold, I dream a dream of good,
And mingle all the world with thee.⁶⁷³

Metaphors are not to be trifled with.
A single metaphor can give birth to love.⁶⁷⁴

The desire of belonging that moves the search for love is another crucial theme, if not the most vital one, upon which reflects the writing of Anne Michaels. The protagonists' exploration of the internal as well as external landscapes permits them a deeper insight and understanding of their own identities and needs. The 'fugitive pieces' are also the flames of longing that cannot be quenched. They are the sparks that ignite imagination, memory and spirit, and seem to pervade all the world energy. All places, like human beings, have their own history, character and nature, thus our affinity to each of them is different:

We long for place; but place itself longs. Human memory is encoded in air currents and river sediment. Eskers of ash wait to be scooped up, lives reconstituted. (...) There are places that claim you and places that warn you away.⁶⁷⁵

The shadow past is shaped by everything that never happened. Invisible, it melts the present like rain through karst. A biography of longing. It steers us like magnetism, a spirit torque. This is how one becomes undone by a smell, a word, a place, the photo of a mountain of shoes. By love that closes its mouth before calling a name.⁶⁷⁶

Time and beauty are inscribed in the geography of desire. Every place is laden with silence brimming with hopes and dreams of the past lives: a patchwork of longing. Maybe it is the vagrant soul seeking home that flows through all things. According to the Hebrew tradition, there is the feminine aspect of God, called Shekhina, that accompanies people in their earthly wandering. Kabbalistic thought understands the Shekhina as a part of divine presence going into exile with the world when it became separated from God. As soon as

⁶⁷² Anne Michaels, Modersohn – Becker, in A. Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.84.

⁶⁷³ Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* in L.A.Tennyson, *Selected Poems*, Phoenix: Orion House, London, 2002, cit.p.71.

⁶⁷⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans.from the Czech by M.H.Heim, faber and faber, London, 1999, cit.p.10.

⁶⁷⁵ FP, cit.pp. 53, 157.

⁶⁷⁶ Idem, cit.p.17.

the world is healed, the exile will end, and the Shekhina will be reunited with the other divine aspects. Nevertheless, Athos reminds Jakob of the importance of appreciating and loving people and life also through the landscapes he discovers:

Love makes you see a place differently, just as you hold differently an object that belongs to someone you love. If you know landscape well, you will look at all landscapes differently. And if you learn to love one place, sometimes you can also learn to love another.⁶⁷⁷

“In xenetia – in exile,” said Athos on our last night with Daphne and Kostas in their garden, “in a foreign landscape, a man discovers the old songs. He calls out for water from his own well, for apples from his own orchard, for the muscat grapes from his own vine.” “What is a man,” said Athos, “who has no landscape? Nothing but mirrors and tides.”⁶⁷⁸

The pain of longing is the pulling force of all the protagonists’ life. As Louise Erdrich says in one of her poems, “home’s the place we head for in our sleep”.⁶⁷⁹ The ‘fugitive’ heroes of Michaels’s novel are united by passion, memory and dream. Poetry is the language that connects their lots and minds: Athos is the master of Jakob, and Jakob passes this knowledge and sensitivity to Ben. They are never satiated and sated with beauty and love, their mission seems to have no end. We read:

Always hungry ourselves, we commiserated with the starving explorers.
In their howling tent, the exhausted men ate hallucinatory meals.⁶⁸⁰

This hunger for sound is almost as sharp as desire, as if one could honour every inch of flesh in words; and so, suspend time. A word is at home in desire. No station of the heart is more full of solitude than desire which keeps the world poised, poisoned with beauty, whose only permanence is loss.⁶⁸¹

The figure of Athos appears almost superhuman. He embodies all the best qualities of a perfect teacher, father and friend, a sort of modern Atlas who shoulders the pain of the whole world. In fact, Athos, having the name of the holy mountain of Greece and of the giant in the Greek mythology, is hard and stable as rock, constituting a cornerstone and foundation of life. He is a treasury of wisdom and knowledge as well as a supreme poet and explorer. Jakob’s name, in turn, reminds us of the third biblical patriarch, the son of Isaac, who has prophetic qualities and is beloved by God. He learns from his master’s example of living, from his

⁶⁷⁷ Idem, p.82.

⁶⁷⁸ Idem, cit.p.86.

⁶⁷⁹ Louise Erdrich, *Indian Boarding School: The Runaways*, in Erdrich L., *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems*, Perennial, New York, 2004, cit.p.19.

See also Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans.from the Czech by M.H.Heim, faber and faber, London, pp.14-15.

“Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman)”.(Idem, cit.p.14-15)

⁶⁸⁰ Idem, cit.p.33.

⁶⁸¹ Idem, cit.p.163.

coherence and perseverance in searching for truth and beauty. Then, Ben, too, as his spiritual son and disciple⁶⁸², inherits the example:

I know that the more one loves a man's words, the more one can assume he's put everything into his work that he couldn't put into his life. The relation between a man's behaviour and his words is usually that of gristle and fat on the bone of meaning. But, in your case, there seemed to be no gap between the poems and the man. How could it be otherwise, for a man who believed so completely in language? Who knew that even one letter – like the “J” stamped on a passport – could have the power of life and death.⁶⁸³

The best teacher lodges an intent not in the mind but in the heart.⁶⁸⁴

There are three kinds of teachers, you said.
One who teaches by making you afraid,
One who makes you angry,
The third makes you love him.⁶⁸⁵

The message of love is thus, above all, compassion, understood not only as perceiving other people's pain and taking pity on them, but also as sympathy, i.e. empathy with others, co-feeling. In fact, Kundera notes that in some languages the word ‘compassion’ derives from the root ‘suffering’, in others from ‘feeling’. According to him, the latter meaning connotes the supreme sentiment.⁶⁸⁶ Thus, it is so highly valued and desirable also in artistic creation. Moreover, it can transform knowledge into wisdom and strengthen the spirit as well as the will:

For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.⁶⁸⁷

But a person of learning can draw on his well of compassion to bring light into the darkness. The soul is a beautiful woman, big and strong. You must cherish her, but never let her overtake you. She must have your guidance, your firm direction. You cannot let her wander like an aimless woman. A true man is in charge of his soul.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸² See Peretz Miransky, *My Son*, in Miransky P., *Selected Poems & Fables*, bilingual version: Yiddish and English, Mosaic Press, Toronto, 2000, pp.41-42. “What I longed to be and could not, / I hope you will be my son.../ Like a spark from the burning thorn, / like a drop of vintage wine, / I entrust to you with faint trembling / the dreams of days long gone. / Go further than I, be my guardian /of my yesterday's burned-out home.” (Idem, cit.pp.41-42)

⁶⁸³ Idem, cit.p.207.

⁶⁸⁴ Idem, cit.p.121.

⁶⁸⁵ Anne Michaels, *The Day of Jack Chambers*, in A. Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.17.

⁶⁸⁶ Cf. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans.from the Czech by M.H.Heim, faber and faber, London, 1999, p.20.

“In languages that form the word ‘compassion’ not from the root ‘suffering’ but from the root ‘feeling’, the word is used in approximately the same way, but to contend that it designates a bad or inferior sentiment is difficult. The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion – joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. (...) therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme.” (idem, cit.p.20)

⁶⁸⁷ Idem, cit.p.31.

Another thing that the novel of Anne Michaels makes explicit is that there is no love without pain: the deeper the love, the deeper the grief. It is inextricably connected with longing and/or loss. Jakob suffers out of too much love and affection for his lost family. Ben, in turn, is continually in pain because of the lack of communication with his beloved war-ravaged parents. As Michaels observes in her poems, “Grief strikes where love struck first,”⁶⁸⁹ thus as she says, “to love as if we’d choose even the grief.”⁶⁹⁰ The spiritual distress amasses with time, making the protagonists realize the real savour of love: like the gift, like the burden.

Grief requires time. If a chip of stone radiates its self, its breath, so long,
how stubborn might be the soul. If sound waves carry on to infinity, where
are the screams now? I imagine them somewhere in the galaxy, moving
forever towards the psalms.⁶⁹¹

The night you and I met, Jakob, I heard you tell my wife that there’s a moment
when love makes us believe in death for the first time. You recognize the one
whose loss, even contemplated, you’ll carry forever, like a sleeping child.
All grief, anyone’s grief, you said, is the weight of a sleeping child.⁶⁹²

Jakob’s love for his sister accompanies him in all his life journey. The memories of her haunts him all the time. He cannot reconcile to her mysterious disappearance, to not having known the place and the actual circumstances of her death. She is like a dybbuk, i.e. the soul of a dead person that has moved into the body of a living person.⁶⁹³ It may refer also to the souls in the limbo that cannot find peace. The problem of metempsychosis is raised here as well. In fact, the transmigration of souls is one of the concerns of the Kabbalists. Some righteous sage is needed to set them free. Athos’s love and poetry help Jakob to find his freedom and equilibrium. The final realization of truth constitutes a kind of Catharsis⁶⁹⁴. As Jakob says, “Bella clung. We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me.”⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁸⁸ Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, Simon&Schuster, New York, 1999, cit.p.188.

⁶⁸⁹ Anne Michaels, *Anna*, in Anne Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.19.

⁶⁹⁰ Anne Michaels Anne, *Fontanelles*, in Anne Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner’s Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.187.

⁶⁹¹ FP, cit.54.

⁶⁹² Idem, cit.p.281.

⁶⁹³ Cf. Gene Bluestein, *English/Yinglish: Yiddish in American Life and Literature*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE, 1998, p.21.

Dibik (dybbuk)n. “a wandering soul that seeks to find rest by inhabiting the body of another, from whom it ultimately must be exorcised.”(Idem, cit.p.21)

See also the play *Dybbuk* by Ansky. Moreover, Joyce used the topos of a wandering soul in *Ulysses*.

Cf.also Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Meridian: Penguin Books, New York, 1978, pp.349-350.

⁶⁹⁴ ‘Catharsis’: the Greek term for ‘purging’ or ‘cleansing’. According to one controversial etymology it derives from the Greek <katheiro> ‘to rid the land of monsters’. (Cf. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, Vintage, London, 2005, p.215)

⁶⁹⁵ FP, cit.p.14.

To remain with the dead is to abandon them.
All the years I felt Bella entreating me, filled with her loneliness,
I was mistaken. I have misunderstood her signals. Like other ghosts,
she whispers; not for me to join her, but so that, when I'm close enough,
she can push me back into the world.⁶⁹⁶

In Ben's case there is a problem of expressing and communicating the feelings between him and his parents, especially between him and his father. The war took away from them two children. Thus, Ben constitutes a guarantee of hope and life continuity for them. They try to teach him all the precious things: his father – humility and modesty, his mother – joy, beauty and pleasure to be found in every detail of life. The loss and the subsequent suffering made them appreciate all aspects of life. At the end of their life, Ben realizes the great gift of love that his parents have endowed him with:

My mother was determined to impress upon me the absolute, inviolate necessity of pleasure. My mother's painful love for the world. When I witnessed her delight in a colour or a flavour, the most simple gratifications – something sweet, something fresh, a new article of clothing, however humble, her love of warm weather – I didn't disdain her enthusiasm. Instead, I looked again, tasted again, noticing. I learned that her gratitude was not in the least inordinate. I know now this was her gift to me. For a long time I thought she had created in me an extreme fear of loss – but no. It's not in the least extreme.⁶⁹⁷

To my mother pleasure was always serious. She celebrated the aroma each time she unscrewed the lid of the instant coffee. She stopped to inhale each fragrant fold of freshly washed linens.⁶⁹⁸

Loss is an edge; it swelled everything for my mother, and drained everything from my father. Because of this, I thought my mother was stronger. But now I see it was a clue: what my father had experienced was that much less bearable.⁶⁹⁹

Michaels's book explores also the landscapes of love between man and woman. Jakob's longing finds its counterpart in Michaela's. It is love at first sight that captures and fuses together their fugitive minds and souls. Their marriage seems to be fulfilled and reignite their desires of communication over and over again. They learn about each other through mutual respect, curiosity and trust:

What is love at first sight but the response of a soul crying out with sudden regret because it realizes it has never before been recognized?⁷⁰⁰

I can only find you
by looking deeper, that's how love
leads us into the world.⁷⁰¹

⁶⁹⁶ Idem, cit.p.170.

⁶⁹⁷ Idem, p.222.

⁶⁹⁸ Idem, cit. p.229.

⁶⁹⁹ Idem, cit.p.223.

⁷⁰⁰ Idem, cit.p.207.

⁷⁰¹ Anne Michaels, *The Second Search*, A. Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.163.

They continue the journey of memory and exploration together. The spiritual love finds its reflection in their mutual physical attraction and discovery. They grope for details of each other's mind and body. All the senses are summoned to unite their bodies and souls. The lyrical narrative and poetic images follow the rhythm of their sensuality and never-ending desire of each other:

Michaela offers her ancestors to me. I'm shocked at my hunger for her memories. Love feeds on the protein of detail, sucks the fact to the marrow; just as there's no generality in the body, every particular speaking at once until there's such a crying out...⁷⁰²

I begin to trace every line, her lengths and shapes, and realize suddenly that she's perfectly still, her hands clenched, and I'm appalled by my stupidity: my longing humiliates her. Too many years between us. Then I realize she's entirely concentrated, pinioned under my tongue, that she's giving me the most extravagant permission to roam the surface of her. Only after I explore her this way, so slowly, an animal outlining territory, does she burst into touch.⁷⁰³

The sexual aspect of love is strongly linked to the need of belonging. The yearning for home is also expressed in the longing for human touch, warmth, intimacy and closeness. It reflects, in turn, the cry for the maternal protection and womb. The soul seems to want to come back to the ancestral origin and its roots. Thus, the work memory is of vital importance in seeking the truth and own's identity. A continuous search for home permeates and moves hence all the most intimate poetry, pulling it forward and/or inward towards eternity:

Want and boredom are indeed the twin poles of human life. (...) sexuality becomes for man a source of brief pleasure and protracted suffering.⁷⁰⁴

Under dark lanes of the night sky
the eyes of our skin won't close,
we dream in desire.
Love wails from womb, caldera, home.
Like any sound, it goes on forever.⁷⁰⁵

Nevertheless, the most important lesson of love we learn at the end of the novel, when Ben realizes the essence of his parents' visceral bond. He admires their silent communication and complicity, so full of patience and tenderness. What unites them is not only the pain but, above all, the spontaneity and generosity in helping and taking care of each other. As he notes, to be loved, one has to be able to give love.

⁷⁰² FP, cit. p.179.

⁷⁰³ Idem, cit.p.180.

⁷⁰⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Suffering of the World*, trans. R.J.Hollingdale, Penguin Books, London, 2004, cit.p.8.

⁷⁰⁵ Anne Michaels, *Lake of Two Rivers*, A. Michaels, *Poems: The Weight of Oranges, Miner's Pond, Skin Divers*, A.A.Knopf, New York, 2001, cit.p.10.

But now, from thousands of feet in the air, I see something else.
My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her.
As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws
strength from the other. I see that I must give what I need most.⁷⁰⁶

D.H. Lawrence in one of his poems pointedly arrives at a similar conclusion: only the ones that give love, can be loved. Otherwise, egoism and egocentricity break the ‘miraculous circuit’ of human empathy and hope. The poet says:

Those that go searching for love
only make manifest their own lovelessness,
and the loveless never find love,
only the loving find love,
and they never have to seek for it.⁷⁰⁷

Finally, as says Chagall, described by Henry Miller as a “poet with the wings of a painter”⁷⁰⁸, only love can give meaning to life and art:

Despite all the troubles of our world, in my heart
I have never given up on the love in which I was
brought up or on man’s hope in love.
In life, just as on the artist’s palette, there is but
one single colour that gives meaning to life and art
– the colour of love.⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁶ FP, cit.p.294.

⁷⁰⁷ D.H. Lawrence, *Search for Love*, in D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, Wordsworth Poetry Library, Ware: Hertfordshire, 2002., cit.p.552.

⁷⁰⁸ Cf. Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Chagall*, Taschen, Köln, 2003, p.7.

⁷⁰⁹ Cit. idem, cit.p.10.

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