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**POSTMEMORIAL POSITIONS: READING AND WRITING
AFTER THE HOLOCAUST IN ANNE MICHAELS'S
*FUGITIVE PIECES***

Introduction

Anne Michaels's award-winning novel *Fugitive Pieces*, a meditation on the processes of remembering the Holocaust is, as one critic wrote, "less a novel than a 300-page prose poem" (Gascoigne 8). Published in the wake of two volumes of poetry which already had gained the author considerable literary recognition, the fact that it was written by a poet is clear in its highly poeticized style. This self-consciously "literary" style is essential to Michaels's enterprise, as the novel is concerned with the capacity of language to unearth the past. The first two thirds of it are narrated by Jakob Beer, a Polish Jew who, as a young child, survives a Nazi raid on his family's home, during which his parents are killed and his sister vanishes. Jakob flees to the forest, where he buries himself during the day to hide. He is rescued by Athos, a Greek archaeologist who is excavating the ancient city of Biskupin, which is itself the bearer of a buried history. Athos smuggles him to the Greek island of Zakynthos, where Jakob remains concealed for the rest of the war. The two of them then immigrate to Canada, where Jakob becomes a translator and poet. He marries, divorces, and then meets and marries Michaela, who helps him to come to terms with his trauma. During a visit to Greece, they are both killed in a car accident in Athens. The narrative is then taken over by Ben, a child of survivors who looks to Jakob's poetry for guid-

ance in the face of his troubled relationship with his own parents. Eventually, however, he sees that it is within his own relationships that the answers to his problems lie, and he returns to Canada to attempt a reconciliation with his wife.

Despite being widely praised by critics, some have expressed reservations at the ethical implications of the novel's aestheticization of the disturbing events that it describes.¹ Norma Rosen ponders:

Is it ungrateful of me to ask if one can imagine a real-life Holocaust-survivor – even, or especially, of a poetic nature – being healed of his trauma by reading, say, the Holocaust-survivor poet, Paul Celan? . . . Celan was so little healed by his own poetry that at the height of his powers he took his life. (317)

Sue Vice, too, expresses concern that, at least at times, the poetry of this novel “seems to be a way of trying to wring aesthetic and meaningful comfort from an event which offers no redemption of any kind” (9). Such subject matter, she contends, is not the vehicle for the “literary decorum” of Michaels’s writing (10). There is a counter-argument to this in that psychoanalysis, and other discourses that explore questions of post-Holocaust identity similar to those elaborated in Michaels’s novel, often are drawn to poetic language. Nadine Fresco, for example, describes the atmosphere of some survivor families as “litanies of silence, which outline an invisible object enclosed in an impossible evocation” (420). Michaels’s novel itself counters accusations of inappropriate aestheticization by evincing an acute sensitivity to the very issues of language and aesthetics. Indeed, the fact that its main narrator, Jakob Beer, is a poet and translator provides a means of exploring the difficulties of representing history and trauma in language. In its portrayal of Jakob, the text offers an interrogation of the labels “first” and “second” generation in relation to survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants, and in so doing provides a template for present-day readers attempting, if not to comprehend the events of the Nazi “Final Solution,” then at least to

engage with some of the questions they raise. Through two further characters, Ben (the child of survivors) and Michaela (Jakob's second wife), Michaels interrogates the position of the reader born after the Holocaust who attempts to access an unknown past via the written word. In exploring these aspects of Michaels's work, I wish to ask how far the text succeeds in framing its most pertinent questions and observations on the very issue of Holocaust representation through poetry.

Postmemory and the Second Generation

Holocaust discourse commonly assumes a simple progression of the generations in relation to the historical events of the years of World War II. In recent years, children of survivors have become widely known as the "second generation," leading by implication to the term "first generation" being applied to survivors themselves. This label recognizes the possibility that the children of survivors may be affected by their parents' experiences. In the context of this development, Marianne Hirsch has done some important work in relation to literature and visual culture. She coined the term "postmemory" (*Family* 22) to express such children's relationships to the past, at once deeply influenced by it, yet having "arrived too late" to experience it for themselves. Taking pains to clarify that her use of the prefix "post-" is not meant to signal a movement *past* or *beyond* memory, she explains that

postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. (*Family* 22)

She goes on to say that postmemory

characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped

by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (*Family* 22)

Hirsch implies here that “second-generation memories” are clearly situated within the family framework which she uses to discuss photography, and which the title of her book, *Family Frames*, would seem to suggest. Narrative, memory, and – implicitly – biology unite to form postmemorial identities. The child’s personality finds itself “dominated,” or buried, by the parents’ experiences, so that identity becomes not simply a matter of asserting the self’s independence, but of a constant dialogue between pasts which alternately cover over one another. This process is particularly well illustrated by Art Spiegelman’s graphic memoir *Maus*, which dramatizes the personal struggles between the cartoonist and his survivor father as Spiegelman works on the book, which can be neither a self-contained autobiography of the son nor a full biography of the father. Subsequently, however, Hirsch broadens her definition to counter the implications of her previous statements that the experience of “postmemory” may be a matter of personal choice:

[Postmemory] is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as one’s own, or, more precisely, as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story. It is a question of conceiving oneself as multiply interconnected with others of the same, of previous, and of subsequent generations, of the same and of other – proximate or distant – cultures and subcultures. . . . These lines of relation and identification need to be theorized more closely, however: how the familial and intergenerational identification with my parents can extend to the identification among children of different generations and circumstances and also perhaps to

other, less proximate groups. And how, more important, identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the distance between self and other, the otherness of the other. (“Projected” 8-9)

According to this passage, postmemory can be “adopted” as a position, and is a manner of “conceiving oneself” in relation to others of “perhaps . . . less proximate groups” than the family – a crucial difference from her immediately preceding remarks which posit the bearer of postmemory as passively “dominated” and “shaped” by the unknown past.

The matter of distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary inheritance is perhaps one of those areas which Hirsch suggests needs “closer” theorizing. Even so, the term “postmemory” is an evocative one that may be used productively in talking about literature, and about children of survivors. Yet, while there are people who fit the description of “survivors” and children who occupy “postmemorial” positions, such definitions may not always be applied so easily. In her memoir *The War After*, Anne Karpf deals with the problems inherent in trying to distinguish between “survivors” and “refugees” – which often comes down to little more than the date of emigration, as variously determined by different agencies and organizations (239-40). Articulating a different but similar difficulty, Melvin Jules Bukiet, in his editor’s introduction to *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors*, asks us to

[i]magine a writer born on May 7, 1945, the day before World War II officially ended in Europe. Not that so many women were pregnant in the winter of 1944, but imagine one. Is that hypothetical child a survivor or a child of survivors? Strictly speaking, he or she would be both . . . (26-27)

Finally, it should be emphasized that even where individuals’ intergenerational connections and positions are clearer than those suggested by my foregoing discussion, individual

responses to past family traumas are far from uniform.² It thus appears that the apparent simplicity of “generational” terminology is deceptive. In this area, as in others, questions of identity are far from clear-cut.

Anne Michaels’s characterization of the narrator Jakob Beer not only explores these complexities, it sets him up as a mediator between “first” and “second” generations, partaking of the experience of both and the identities of neither. The characters of Michaela and Ben illustrate postmemorial positions which are to a greater or lesser degree “adopted” and which, as I have suggested, serve as models for Michaels’s wider readership. These facts turn the novel into a space of meditation on the question of the resistance of experience to being accurately accounted for by labels such as “first” and “second” generation.

Trauma and the Question of Intergenerational Transmission

The question of the intergenerational effects of traumatic experiences is closely allied to the current discourse on trauma that has, in recent years, become a major concern of cultural criticism. One of the most influential theorists in this field is Cathy Caruth, who has defined Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as follows:

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. This simple definition belies a very peculiar fact: the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assim-

lated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. (*Trauma* 4)

The key points about trauma, according to Caruth, are the inability of the traumatized person to *experience* it except in its belated manifestations (such as nightmares and flashbacks), and trauma's very unlocatability in a particular event. That is, the traumatic impact of an event cannot be reliably predicted for a given individual. Furthermore, the American Psychiatric Association's "category A" definition of PTSD, on which Caruth bases her discussion, is "a response to an event 'outside the range of usual human experience'" (*Trauma* 3) – a formulation which comes with its own problems, as traumatic experiences may, distressingly, be "usual" for some people, as in cases where sexual abuse has continued over a number of years.³ The recovery of trauma victims is marked by their ability to narrate what has hitherto been an unmediated return that resists further conceptualization. Yet in bearing witness to the event and being cured of the traumatic symptom, that event must be transformed "into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past" (Caruth, *Trauma* 153), even though the resulting narrative will necessarily alter the event's remembered nature. The undecidability of trauma points to both a difficulty and an openness when it comes to determining whether the children, and other descendants, of Holocaust survivors can be said to be traumatized. If they are, what is the nature of that trauma?

Dina Wardi, in her book *Memorial Candles*, argues that children may at the same time be explicitly conceived and conceived of as memorials to individuals from the past, "not perceived as separate individuals but as symbols of everything the parents had lost in the course of their lives" (27). For James Herzog, "[e]xperience with . . . survivor-parents lends strong presumptive evidence to the notion that unbound, unintegrated, and unshared trauma is most likely to overflow. The very acts of caretaking, as well as the affective climate, then become the

medium for the message” (110). The child may thus become a site of the parents’ psychopathological excess: in the context of the lack of ego-differentiation described by Wardi, the parents may see their children as extensions of themselves and, as such, they become spaces for the working-through or the witnessing of their trauma. Children of survivors, in the light of such theories, are rendered passively subject to their parents’ pathologies: second-hand symptoms, at least in this formulation, may be the only viable progression from first-hand trauma. Perhaps most suggestive of all in this area of thought is the concept of the transgenerational phantom developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, a passing on of “family secrets” of which neither parent nor child is consciously aware. This is a pathological, psychoanalytic perspective on transmission, whereby children may, unknown to themselves, be carriers of “a secret buried alive in the father’s unconscious” (173).⁴ For this reason, the transgenerational phantom cannot *simply* be part of wider questions of identity politics. The phantom manifests itself in the actions of children, by “obstructing [their] perception of words as implicitly referring to their unconscious portion” and “referring to the unspeakable.” Abraham gives the following example:

At best, phantom words of this kind can be invested with libido and determine the choice of hobbies, leisure activities, or professional pursuits. One carrier of a phantom became a nature lover on weekends, acting out the fate of his mother’s beloved. The loved one had been denounced by the grandmother (an unspeakable and secret fact) and, having been sent to “break rocks” [*casser les cailloux* = do forced labour], he later died in the gas chamber. What does our man do on weekends? A lover of geology, he “breaks rocks,” catches butterflies, and proceeds to kill them in a can of cyanide. (174-75)

Like the trauma symptom, the words “break[ing] rocks” point to a gap and refer “to the unspeakable.” Where a child is aware that the parent is a Holocaust survivor, such a mechanism could apply to a particular aspect of that parent’s experience, such as

a shameful act of collaboration, or a mother being forced into prostitution. The necessity of repression lies in the child's "horror of transgression," which "is compounded by the risk of undermining the fictitious yet necessary integrity of the parental figure in question" (Abraham 174): the phantom is the result of maintaining a family romance at all costs. Where a child is not aware of the Holocaust's relevance to his/her family's history, the existence of such a psychic mechanism might go some way to explain the sense of relief felt by adults who learn of their Jewishness for the first time (Schaverien 73), and the phenomenon reported by Barbara Kessel in *Suddenly Jewish* whereby a number of her interviewees apparently had converted to Judaism before unexpectedly discovering Jewish ancestry (15). The range of perspectives offered by some of these clinical and psychoanalytic theories has much to offer the further theorization of "postmemory" in the context of art and literature; and much, too, to lend to the present discussion in its interrogation of the boundaries of generational experience.

Jakob: Between Generations

The first indication in *Fugitive Pieces* of Jakob's special position "between" generations is that his relationship to the traumatic events of his own life is, in many senses, belated. He writes: "I did not witness the most important events of my life. My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound" (Michaels 17). This is because these traumatic events, the murder of his parents and disappearance of his sister at the hands of the Nazis, are experienced, in a sense, indirectly. Concealed in the house wall, he hears, but does not actually see, what happens to them. Such an experience calls into question preconceptions of the term "witnessing," which normally is understood in terms of the visual.⁵ Jakob's assertion that he did not witness these events at all seems an inadequate description of what happened. His visual witnessing comes only belatedly, after the event, when he emerges to see his parents' bodies. Belated, too, is his recognition of his sister Bella's disappearance, and it is apparently this very belatedness, rather than the

fact itself, which forms the heart of his trauma. He writes of his sudden recollection: “And suddenly I realized, my throat aching without sound – Bella” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 9). Having heard but failed to see his parents’ deaths, when he finally comprehends Bella’s he is unable to translate it into sound:

I couldn’t keep out the sounds: the door breaking open, the spit of buttons. My mother, my father. But worse than those sounds was that I couldn’t remember hearing Bella at all. Filled with her silence, I had no choice but to imagine her face. (Michaels, *Fugitive* 10)

As Cathy Caruth writes, trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (*Unclaimed* 4). Jakob’s initial recollection of Bella is only the beginning of a long process of beginning to “know” her death, and its very ungraspability is central to his ongoing trauma. As Jakob travels away from his native Poland, hidden under Athos’s clothes, the continuation of Bella’s influence on his life becomes decisive: “Through days and nights I sped from my father and my mother. From long afternoons with my best friend, Mones, by the river. They were yanked right through my scalp. But Bella clung. We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 13-14). The death he was unable to witness at all is the one that continues to haunt him. Much later, in Toronto, Jakob offers a hint at his motivation for becoming a writer when he says that “Bella always told me stories when she wanted me to forgive her” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 146), as if he might now be asking forgiveness in return. At the end of his journal, when he has found happiness in his second marriage, to Michaela, his memory of Bella is still powerful. He wishes for a child who will be named after her:

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.
(Michaels, *Fugitive* 195)

He looks forward to passing what has been the core of his trauma on into the future as new life, as if only then, in bequeathing the duty of memory to another, can he be free of it. Yet crucially this “heart” of his trauma has been an absence rather than a loss: an absence of witnessing, and thereafter an absence of knowledge.

A Freudian reading of Jakob’s position, using “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” suggests that he clearly has experienced trauma first-hand, indicated by the classic symptoms of nightmares and flashbacks (Freud 222-23). However, the poetically problematized mode of his witnessing, with its emphasis on a tension between that which has been lived through and that which was not, but was in some sense still “remembered,” suggests that Jakob is subject to a version of postmemory. Drawing out this latter implication, Jakob is reborn symbolically immediately after the historical trauma: his pre-war birth is re-enacted firstly in his emerging from his hiding place in the ground, and secondly, in his emergence from concealment under Athos’s clothes following their escape to Greece. Jakob himself uses this imagery of rebirth: “No one is born just once. If you’re lucky, you’ll emerge again in someone’s arms; or unlucky, wake when the long tail of terror brushes the inside of your skull” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 5). Jakob is not what is generally understood by the term “second generation,” a child of survivors: he clearly has survived a direct threat. Yet Jakob’s trauma, like the Jewishness described by Henri Raczymow as “a void in our memory” (104), is precisely the trauma of one who failed to see, to experience, to be there – one who literally was born afterwards. His ambiguous status, falling between generations, neither fully experiencing nor fully inheriting, is enacted in his adult life by his becoming a translator of posthumous war writing, a rescuer of belated stories. He, therefore, is positioned as a communicator between generations, capable of giving the past force in the present and on into the future.

One of the crucial mechanisms by which Jakob becomes an intergenerational mediator is that in writing his autobiography, and in his poetry's concentration on the autobiographical, Jakob turns his life into text. In relation to this, I contend that Ben, the child of survivors, and Michaela, Jakob's second wife, are constructed as readers of Jakob and the past – readers for Michaela's own readers to measure themselves against. However, in the portrayal of them, and their respective relationships with Jakob Beer, the very possibility of reading and writing meaningfully about the (traumatic) past are called into question.

Ben as Second Generation Reader

In the beginning, Ben is a frustrated reader of the past, desperately trying to comprehend what it is that haunts his family. Unable to communicate with his survivor parents, Ben finds comfort in reading the poems of Jakob Beer, and consequently looks upon him as an idealized father-figure, as implied in his addressing the poet thus: "You died not long after my father and I can't say which death made me reach again for your words" (Michaela, *Fugitive* 255). Having been "born into absence" or postmemory, lacking a full context and presence of his own, Ben seeks his own frame of reference in the life of Jakob Beer, a man whose communication with him is purely textual. Jakob is thus a communication channel to the past, which was absent between the generations as represented by Ben's own family.

In an attempt to find the late Jakob's diaries, and in order to have a trial separation from his wife Naomi, Ben visits Jakob's former home: Athos's family house on the Greek island of Idhra. Ben sees Jakob as having mastered his connection with the past through words: "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" (Michaela, *Fugitive* 207). He therefore imagines that in reading Jakob's poems, he also has read the poet and implicitly found the answer to the problem of his own family's communications, a family where there was "no energy of a narrative . . . , not even the fervour of an elegy"

(Michaels, *Fugitive* 204). He turns to Jakob as an alternative dead father, to bridge the gulf between generations, hoping to find a narrative that will repair his relationship with his parents even though both are now dead. Ben is therefore a reader-interpreter who fails to acknowledge the very processes of interpretation that he is engaged in: his visit to Idhra is a visit to a house with whose occupant he believes he already is intimate. Yet as he explores it, the reader, who already has read (in the form of the first two thirds of the novel) the very notebooks for which Ben is searching, grows aware of Ben's imperfections as a "reader" of the poet. He assumes Athos's role of archaeologist, promising Jakob's friend Maurice Salman that he will "excavate gently" yet, unlike Athos, whose assistance, bravery, and sensitivity are key to Jakob's emotional recovery, Ben's interpretation of Jakob is flawed. As he wanders around the house, he notices a number of curious items for which the reader but not Ben can provide an explanation. The "pocketwatch with a sea monster engraved on the case" belonged to Athos, a present from his father; the dish of buttons is apparently Jakob's memorial to the last sound of his mother that he heard, as the dish of buttons she had been using for sewing hit the floor. What Ben sees as "an obviously mislaid copy of Pliny's *Natural History*" in the kitchen was used in fact by Athos as a cookbook when wartime desperation led him to hunt out rarely used edible plants and roots. Ben's inability to understand these objects signals him as a failed reader, an over-interpreter, who eventually comes to acknowledge that his "mistake would be to look for something hidden" (Michaels, *Fugitive* 263). Jakob's is not the first house he has excavated: the careful sifting of his parents' belongings after their deaths turned up a picture of the secret dead children of whom his mother had told his wife Naomi while concealing their existence from Ben. Ben is left feeling doubly inadequate: he was unable to properly replace the dead children, who by their nature were irreplaceable in his parents' lives; and Naomi superseded him as object of his mother's confidences and, in Ben's mind, affection. Indeed, Naomi fits effortlessly and sensitively into the family: "Right from the start," Ben says, "Naomi seemed to

know us” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 233). His mother’s reluctance to confide in him consequently manifested itself “more frequently once Naomi entered our lives” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 231). Ben’s choice of Naomi may be read as an instance of Abraham and Torok’s “transgenerational haunting,” in which he attempts to replace the daughter that he unconsciously knows his parents lost. Even Naomi’s name recalls the biblical tale of Naomi and Ruth, whose theme is a woman’s loyalty to her mother-in-law. Yet his success in fulfilling this unconscious goal dismays him; and the revelation of the secret children, coupled with the revelation that Naomi knew this secret, consequently marks the deterioration of Ben’s relationship with his wife, and precipitates his trip to Greece, making his excavation of Jakob’s house a response to the excavation of his parents’ house, undertaken when they died.

Ben finally realizes that access to the past is attained by unexpected, uncontrollable means, rather than deployment of certain interpretative “tools.” He therefore sees that he must return to Naomi because he “knows [her] memories” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 285), as if to suggest that it is precisely those with whom we share the past who are essential in our lives. In “Cleopatra’s Love,” an essay on poetry published while she was working on *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels writes that “the senses bypass language: the ambush of a scent or weather, but language also jump starts the senses – sound or image sends us spiralling into memory or association” (14). This novel, it would seem, is designed as a springboard for the reader’s unexpected connections to the past. Michaels invites us, through her poetic prose, to recognize how our own feelings, associations, and experiences connect us with the past. She seems to be suggesting that poetry can help us to look inward rather than outward in order to understand that which seems most distant. Ben’s reasons for returning to Naomi imply that some tangible personal relationship to the past is essential to this purpose – that the reader cannot simply “adopt” a postmemorial position. This idea resurfaces, with implications for the position of the writer as well as that of the reader, in the character of Michaela.

Michaela as Witness

On the night that they meet, Jakob sees in his future wife “Michaela’s eyes, ten generations of history, in her hair the scents of fields and pines, her cold, smooth arms carrying water from springs” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 178): memory and the past are key to this relationship, too. In a novel where names and naming usually are significant, Michaels’s inclusion of a character called Michaela is significant. Jakob Beer was born in 1933, and Michaela is 25 years his junior, meaning that she shares with the author the birth year of 1958.⁶ The twenty-five year age gap – a full generation – gives Michaela and Michaels herself firm “postmemorial” identities in relation to the Holocaust, and these circumstances taken together suggest a partial identification of author and character. The question of what kind of “postmemorial position” Michaela occupies therefore may tell us something about the text’s (and the author’s) conception of the post-Holocaust writer.

In “Cleopatra’s Love,” Michaels draws a comparison between the lover and the poem and consequently between reading and seduction:

The sensual mirage is the heart of the poem. It’s the moment, however brief, we take the poet’s experience as our own. This connection can be so buried as to be completely mysterious . . . or overt as an image overwhelming in its familiarity. And if the poem is able to forge an intellectual bond in the guise of the sensual illusion, the seduction is complete. (14)

This suggests that a poem can lead to a partially shared subjectivity of writer and reader. Ben’s experience in his quest for an “intellectual bond” with Jakob calls this into question, yet the case of Michaela, the lover/reader figure, reinforces it. Dori Laub, writing from a clinical perspective in “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” contends that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57). She continues: “[t]he listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats, silences, know

them *from within*, so that they can assume the form of testimony” (58; italics mine). Where such a perspective is not taken to privilege the listener over the trauma victim in the production of testimony, it provides a useful tool for the analysis of the position of the witness to testimony (as opposed to the *eyewitness*, to whom s/he is listening). Michaela has a special role to play as the witness, or perfect reader, distinguished from Ben in precisely her ability to “take the [traumatized] poet’s experience as [her] own.” After Michaela, on hearing Jakob’s story, “cries for Bella,” Jakob dreams that “Bella sits on the edge of the bed and asks Michaela to describe the feel of the bedcover under her bare legs, ‘because you see, just now I am without my body’” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 182). Michaela’s sharing of the poet’s grief is imagined here as totally physical. Jakob already has used the image of Russian dolls to describe his relationship to the vanished Bella, evoking a psychoanalytic “incorporation” of his dead sister. Through his proximity to Michaela, in which she takes on part of the physical burden of Bella, Jakob is able to share his sorrow: “Each night heals gaps between us until we are joined by the scar of dreams. My desolation exhales in the breathing dark” (Michaels, *Fugitive* 183). It is not simply that Michaela carries part of the grief within her, but that by witnessing it, she enables it to leave Jakob and herself.

Michaela’s pregnancy with a child that is to be called Bela or Bella mirrors Athos’s act of physical witnessing. Her giving birth would represent the final step in Jakob’s freeing himself from Bella in a symbolic end to his incorporation of her, with a child whose name would memorialize his sister. Following Jakob’s perception of Michaela’s providing a body for Bella, she then would have expelled her, releasing Jakob from the burden of her continued presence. Crucially, however, Michaela and Jakob are killed early in Michaela’s pregnancy and Jakob dies without knowing that Michaela has conceived. Michaela’s note informing him, which is discovered years later by Ben, represents a breakdown of witnessing, for Jakob’s reading of the note would have marked the end of the witnessing process, and the birth of the child a movement into the future.

To return to Dori Laub's theory of the witnessing process, it is possible to read the text, in light of Michaels's lover-poem analogy and her consistent positioning of the trauma victim and listener within an overlapping subject position, as an assertion of the relevance and value of writing for memory and testimony. Laub's statement that "the listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences . . . from within" (58) is enacted physically in Michaela's pregnancy with the new "Bella." Yet crucially she is unable to entirely redeem Jakob's traumatic past. Michaela's personal link to one for whom the Holocaust was (or at least was almost) a first-hand trauma, reflects what little personal information the author has revealed in interviews. She insists that she is "not the child of survivors" but that

it's hard to separate what my father and grandfather might say now were the reasons they left, and why they actually did leave [the border of Russia and Poland in 1931], . . . But I'm sure they were economic; I'm sure there was a question of persecution. (Brown 55)

The question as to whether the apparent encrypting of the author's own postmemorial position within the text of the novel is to emphasize her entitlement to write on this topic, or her necessary limitations in this capacity, remains open.

Conclusion

Both Michaela and Ben, from their different postmemorial positions, attempt to form connections with the past based respectively on a relationship and a perceived relationship with Jakob, whose own connection to a traumatic past is problematized deliberately in the text, as I have described. In both cases, however, their attempts founder: Ben's because there *is* "a gap between the poems and the man," and his connection is illusory; Michaela's because the baby who would carry Bella's memory into the future is never born, suggesting a fully redemptive resolution is impossible. Even with Jakob as intergenerational "mediator," this novel does not provide easy answers to the

question of how a contemporary reader is to approach the subject of the Holocaust, and what the purpose of such reading (or indeed writing) might be. Instead, in undertaking such an ambitious poetic project, Michaels opens up a flexible space for the “working through” of this part of the past that is still so much here in the present. As Rosen and Vice’s comments make clear, however, its poetic explorations do come at the price of an aestheticization that may be viewed as suspect. Recent decades have shown that no text on the subject of the Holocaust can ever provide answers to all its critics, despite the implicit conception of an unspecified “perfect” Holocaust text, which seems at times to be haunting critical discourse.⁷ I have shown here that the poetic texture of *Fugitive Pieces* provides a productive space for the exploration of “postmemory.” Perhaps this kind of exploration is the most we can ever expect of a work of fiction concerned with events of such magnitude.

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Notes

¹See, for example, Norma Rosen, "Poetry After Auschwitz," p. 317. Rosen queries the novel's suggestion that language can heal.

²For instance, in *Children of the Holocaust*, Helen Epstein consistently describes her own sensitivity to, and interest in, her parents' pasts as being markedly more pronounced than those of her brothers.

³In her essay "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," Laura S. Brown argues that many of the traumas experienced by women result from situations of poverty and abuse that occur too commonly to be described as "outside the range of human experience." See especially pp. 100-03.

⁴This process may, of course, equally relate to the mother.

⁵In "*Fugitive Pieces: Listening as a Holocaust Survivor's Child*," Adrienne Kertzer makes this point and notes that her historical position as "witness" seems to be different from that of a "typical" child survivor. See p. 204.

⁶Michaels's age and year of birth are mentioned in many reviews and interviews, including Mick Brown's "A Labour of Love."

⁷Dominick LaCapra's sophisticated and nuanced analyses of post-Holocaust texts in *History and Memory After Auschwitz* are key examples.