

‘Born Into Absence’: Trauma and Narration in W.G. Sebald, Anne Michaels and Pat Barker

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In her elaborations of Sigmund Freud’s theories Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a shocking event that the mind is unable to adequately process as it takes place and which is thus not really felt to have happened.¹ It is defined by its ‘inherent latency’; that is, it returns to the victim in intrusive flashbacks and is experienced, as if for the first time, in the recall.² Because it seems to be always occurring and reoccurring, the traumatic moment resists incorporation into the kind of psychical narrative chronology that psychologist Jodie Wigren cites as crucial for the organisation of thought and emotion³. When Ben, the child of Holocaust survivors and one of the protagonists of Anne Michaels’s novel *Fugitive Pieces*, claims that he has been ‘born into absence’⁴ he captures something of the paradox of trauma: it forces the victim to repeatedly confront his experience as something entirely new and to indeed be ‘born’ into an absence of understanding. Birth marks our entry into the physical world, but for Ben the event is reconfigured as a cancellation. The act of ‘becoming’ is, in terms of trauma, a simultaneous negation of existence because it always signifies a departure from the coherence – and understanding – of the self. The victim is left to deal with what can only be described as a ‘full absence’, a substantial nothingness or ‘palpable “missing energy”’ as Michaels calls it (p.161).

Trauma centres around absence, but, referring to the etymology of the word *trauma* (it is Greek for ‘wound’), Caruth points out there is a strong physical component to the phenomenon. The word was originally used to describe ‘an injury inflicted on a body’,⁵ and such an injury would of course be subject to the ordinary process of healing: one is hurt, one suffers, but eventually the wound closes and the pain subsides, allowing

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 17.

² Caruth is criticised by Ruth Leys because of her insistence on the ‘unrepresentability’ of the traumatic experience. I am, however, choosing to follow Caruth’s line of argument because of its suitability to the literary treatment of trauma. (Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)).

³ Jodie Wigren, ‘Narrative Completion in the Treatment of Trauma’, *Psychotherapy* 31.3 (1994), p. 416.

⁴ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 233. Subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

⁵ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 3.

the event to be forgotten. The proceeding falls within the scope of Wigren's cognitive organisation of experience, as well as Pierre Janet's assertion that healthy memory, or what he designates 'narrative memory', is 'the action of telling a story'.⁶ As Freud discovers in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, it is precisely the lack of such a physical wound that complicates, indeed even *precipitates*, the trauma. He begins his discussion of the subject by referring to physical accidents: 'A condition has long been known ... which recurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway accidents and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of "traumatic neurosis"'.⁷

The account seems at first straightforward, offering with its 'severe mechanical concussions' an explanation of trauma as having purely organic causes, an interpretation in line with contemporary views of the so-called 'war neuroses' suffered by shell-shocked soldiers returning from battle. Their symptoms – vivid nightmares, compulsive repetitions, intrusive flashbacks, and stutters – were thought to be precipitated by concussions or injuries received as a result of being in close proximity to, for example, a grenade explosion, the impact of which produced the 'traumatic neurosis'.⁸ But Freud complicates the physiological explanation as he acknowledges that, surprisingly, 'a wound or injury inflicted simultaneously works as a rule *against* the development of a neurosis'.⁹ Trauma is not a compound experience, so to speak; if we frame it in literary terms (as has become increasingly in vogue among psychoanalysts over the last few decades¹⁰) it is not a coherent plot but rather a fragment, a book with the 'chapters in our personal history' out of sequence, to borrow Janet's terminology.¹¹ A wound would have served as a physical 'anchor' – a corporeal marker around which experience could be organised temporally – and the absence of that wound is what disturbs and distorts the kind of psychological narratives that would allow the victim to move on. A wound that is impossible to know and hence to quantify threatens with its

⁶ Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing* [1919], VOL.1, trans. by E. Paul and C. Paul (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 661.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, VOL. 17, ed. by Anna Freud, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001) (henceforth abbreviated *SE*), p. 12.

⁸ Such interpretations followed from nineteenth-century theories of the organic origins of trauma. See John Eric Erichsen's *On Railway and Other Injuries of the Nervous System* (1866), where he attributes the trauma suffered by victims of railway accidents to spinal injury, so-called 'railway spine'.

⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *SE* 17, p. 12.

¹⁰ The pioneer is Peter Brooks, who claims in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) that 'mental health is a coherent life story, neurosis... a faulty narrative' (p. 49).

¹¹ Janet, *Psychological Healing*, p. 663.

possible limitlessness. So the question for us becomes: what kind of narratives *does* trauma produce – if it even *can* produce narrative? How is the ‘full absence’ described and worked through (or not worked through) in literature?

The first concern is that, as a function of its being divorced from conscious recall, the traumatic experience seems to lie beyond the grasp of language. Trauma, indeed, can be interpreted as an aspect of French psychologist Jacques Lacan’s ‘real’, or as an instance where the ‘real’ leaks into life. The real is defined as the ‘existence before the letter’, that is to say the state of being that the child inhabits prior to its acquisition of language. It resists symbolisation and cannot be understood; the ‘real’ is characterised by its unrepresentability and in its refusal to be conceptualised and embraced by language it causes great distress. Bruce Fink notes in his elucidation of Lacanian psychoanalysis how, within the Lacanian schema of things, ‘existence is a product of language’ and how it thus follows that what cannot be spoken of does not, strictly, exist at all.¹² So how can literature, the medium of linguistic representation, possibly survive in such conditions?

To get an idea, we can look to *Fugitive Pieces*’s Jakob Beer, a young Jewish boy who hides in a kitchen cupboard as his parents are murdered and his older sister Bella vanishes, and who later laments that his life ‘[cannot] be stored in any language but only in silence’ (p. 111). Yet Jakob grows up to be a poet and eventually begins to write a memoir, the manuscript of which forms the main part of *Fugitive Pieces*. The clue to how he achieves this feat, this reclamation of language (or at least the clue to his *desire* to attempt it) lies in that word ‘stored’. His trauma – the missing memory of Bella’s inexplicable disappearance – cannot be stored, with the word’s suggestion of literal, indeed material and historical preservation. The memory/trauma is inaccessible – but the missing experience can still be approximated and shaped in the attempt at recall.¹³ To understand how this is possible, we may connect Jakob’s use of language with Lacan’s theories of emergence of speech in the human child. For Lacan, paradoxically, the existence of language hinges on the concept of ‘lack’, as Lionel Bailly

¹² Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c1995), p. 25.

¹³ It’s useful here to think of Jakob’s recall in terms of what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’, a term she uses to describe traumatic feelings experienced by second-generation Holocaust survivors. Their ‘memories’, if such they can be called, are not ‘mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation’. Though Jakob is a first-generation victim, the fact of his *not* witnessing the events of the Holocaust put him in a position very similar to that of the ‘second generation’ or ‘witnesses by adoption’, as Geoffrey Hartman calls them. ((Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (Spring, 2008), p. 107; Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 9)).

notes: 'if everything was always present and available to you, you would never need to use language to ask for anything'.¹⁴ Communication, which might at first seem to us to signify presence, would not be possible without the absence of the desired object, whatever it may be: '[d]esire is a relation of being to lack', Lacan argues in an early formulation of the function of language.¹⁵ It is, then, as if absence *demand*s speech: the constant remainder or 'residue' of the 'real' that resists symbolisation, what Lacan calls the '*caput mortuum* of the signifier',¹⁶ is what troubles us and engenders our desire to speak and narrate. Lack, then, is a prerequisite for any form of verbal utterance.

The repeated attempts to signify seem to echo or replicate the physical symptoms of trauma victims, which are notable for their violent character. We get a vivid description of such symptoms in Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration*, a semi-fictionalised account of British psychiatrist Dr W.H.R. Rivers's treatment of WWI soldiers afflicted with war neuroses.¹⁷ Barker's version of the war hospital Craiglockhart is populated by flinching, trembling, 'choking and gagging'¹⁸ young men, whose symptoms are violent not in proportion to the force of the event that caused the trauma, since this event is not available to conscious recall, but rather violent as a direct response to the *void* of experience, the gap that somehow wants to be plugged. It is as if the repeated, 'stabbing' motion of the intrusive flashback serves as a psychological compensation for the wound that was not received.

Compulsive repetition is one of the most well known symptoms of trauma (and indeed of neurosis), and one to which Freud pays particular attention. The repetition-compulsion functions, he writes in 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', as '[the patient's] way of remembering'; '[h]e reproduces [what he has repressed] not as a memory but as an action'.¹⁹ German author W.G. Sebald, who has written extensively on memory and history and to whose celebrated novel *Austerlitz* we shall soon turn, claims that his writing is 'a form of savage work, of pre-rational thought, in which one nuzzles

¹⁴ Lionel Bailly, *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), p. 97.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'Desire, Life and Death', in *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, trans. by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 223.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York; London: W.W. Norton, c2006), p. 38.

¹⁷ While *Regeneration* differs from the other texts under discussion in this essay in its focus on the British as opposed to the Jewish war experience, it merits study because of the way in which, as we shall see, it situates trauma in a larger, cultural context.

¹⁸ Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 17.

¹⁹ Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', in *Papers on Technique*, SE 12, p. 150.

in findings until they somehow make sense'²⁰ – an announcement that echoes Freud's understanding of repetition as a means of coming to terms with something fundamentally incomprehensible. We repeat because we cannot understand. But from Freud's and Sebald's statements we can also tease out something which will be important for our understanding of the function of trauma narrative and the role language plays in trauma. The repetition symptom is not content to be a passive, infinite replication of what has not been understood, it also tends towards conversion or attempted 'translation' from one medium to another, a crossing-over from psychic to physical: the narrative becomes a space in between thought and reality.

Psychoanalysis, the 'talking cure,'²¹ has since its conception been concerned with narration. But implicit in the notion of retelling a traumatic experience is the less pleasant one of *resuffering* it, or perhaps rather of suffering it for the first time, of indeed repeatedly being born into an absence that feels perpetually new. *Fugitive Pieces*'s Jakob Beer's emblematic phrase 'no one is born just once' (p. 5) rings true here. But curiously there is, for want of a better word, a form of creativity to the literary traumatic experience, something which is directly related to its unformed nature. We get a hint of this in Sebald's *Austerlitz*, whose main character, taken to England on one of the war-time *kindertransports*, agonises over the open-ended nature of his life story and the breach in his personal chronology, observing that for him there is a possibility that time is not linear and bound to 'pass away' but rather to be thought of as a space wherein one can 'turn back... [and] find that all moments of time have coexisted simultaneously'.²² History will then remain in a perpetual state of 'unwritteness' until actively claimed – 'past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them' (p. 101) – a line of reasoning evocative of Caruth's assertion that trauma takes place only in our belated experiencing of it. Austerlitz appears initially to reconfigure Caruth's concept of delayed decoding in a positive manner: time, and so history, which we tend to conceive of as intrinsically temporal, can actually be suspended, and, the implication seems to be, the trauma forestalled. But admitting to a historical non-linearity also effectively cancels 'plot' in Brooksonian terms (and by extension psychological

²⁰ Quoted in Jens Brockmeier, 'Austerlitz's Memory', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 6.2 (June 2008), p. 360.

²¹ This famous phrase was coined by Freud's patient 'Anna O.' to describe the psychoanalytical treatment she received from Dr Josef Breuer. See Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria* [1895], trans. by Nicola Luckhurst (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 34.

²² W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 101. Subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text.

progress – there is in fact an equal danger of *regress*). The subversion of chronology and consequent breakdown of narrative memory, identified by a host of trauma psychologists as a (if not *the*) main threat of trauma, invites the risk of *perpetual*, infernal repetition: ‘the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and never ending anguish’ (p. 101), as Austerlitz puts it. At this point it must also be noted that the reader implicitly shares in the protagonist’s despair – the threat of never ending narrative anguish applies equally to us in our fear of never seeing the plot properly ‘worked through’.

This ‘bleak prospect’ brings us to a central point in the discussion of trauma narrative, namely the knotty question of what its true aim is: remembering, or forgetting? Freud admits that one aim of analysis is to allow the patient to lay traumatic memory to rest, which can be very problematic (not just for the trauma victim but also, in terms of narrative, for the reader of the novel who is unsure of whether she will be laid to rest at all). ‘History is amoral,’ observes Jakob, referring to the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis, but ‘memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers’ (p. 138). Whereas history records the facts (‘events occurred’, p. 138), memory has been subject to our critical faculties and our conscience: what is accepted as a memory is incorporated into a person’s life narrative; she accepts, as it were, a plot – even if and where a void had perhaps been preferable. For the survivor of war or genocide forgetting comes dangerously close to denial; remembering atrocity is the only means of bearing witness. In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, his impassioned lecture series on the allied bombings of Germany during WW2, W.G. Sebald addresses and regrets the coping mechanism of the German people following the war: an ‘individual and collective amnesia’²³ resulting in almost total silence about the destruction of German cities and the significant loss of civilian lives. Consistent with Caruth’s idea of the inherent latency of trauma, such ‘blinking out’ or ‘self-anaesthesia’²⁴ is understandable but from a political or ethical viewpoint arguably destructive.

We get a different, but equally culturally conditioned, form of resistance in Barker’s *Regeneration*, where the soldier Willard refuses to accept that there is no physical reason for his inability to walk. To be able to live with himself he must believe that his paralysis is the result not of any mental shock but rather of spinal injury: ‘He *knew* his spinal cord had been broken. He *knew* Rivers had reconnected the severed ends’

²³ W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 9.

²⁴ Sebald, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

(p. 220). Willard needs to construct a narrative that is acceptable within the terms of contemporary notions of masculinity, something which Dr Rivers recognises, admitting that the emotions produced by war and teased out in analysis are ‘so despised’ as to ‘be admitted into consciousness only at the cost of redefining what it mean[s] to be a man’ (p. 48). It is tempting for the reader approaching trauma narrative from a purely literary or abstract standpoint to assume that the recovery of lost traumatic memory is an unequivocal force for good, but such an assumption is of course much too simplistic. As we will later see, one of the ways in which trauma narrative seems to resist easy resolutions is by subversion of the strictures of the conventional plot with its potential implications of felicitous closure.

The unwillingness, or rather the *inability*, to accommodate what Caruth calls the ‘impossible history’²⁵ that the trauma victim carries within himself often results in a form of psychological ‘doubling’. The repressed event belongs intrinsically to the victim, and yet he is the one who cannot access it; he is, as Caruth observes, ‘possessed’ by the unrecoverable²⁶ and in the experience of its effects he tends to conceive of the emotions it arouses as contained within someone else. Barker’s Billy Prior exasperates his analyst as he keeps narrating the restored memory of his trauma (unwittingly picking up a dead comrade’s eyeball while cleaning up the site of a trench bombing) as ‘an *extremely* ridiculous event – in somebody else’s life’. When challenged, Prior offers that ‘[p]erhaps that’s how it felt’ (p. 78), and this seems to be precisely the case: trauma blurs the dividing lines between knowledge and feeling. Laura Di Prete retrieves from Freud the suitable expression ‘foreign body’, which he coins in his discussions of trauma in *Studies in Hysteria* and *Moses and Monotheism*. Trauma, ‘or more precisely the memory of trauma... acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work’,²⁷ he writes, and the notion of the ‘foreign body’ is useful to describe the alienation effect of traumatic experience. The victim becomes, in effect, two persons, and ‘every moment’ really *is* ‘two moments,’ as Jakob repeatedly asserts.²⁸

Austerlitz conceives of his life as ruptured, having split and forked off ‘[a]t some time in the past’ where Austerlitz ‘must have made a mistake’. He feels that he is now ‘living

²⁵ Cathy Caruth, in Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.

²⁶ Caruth, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁷ Quoted in Laura Di Prete, *‘Foreign Bodies’: Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 11.

the wrong life' and has the uncanny sensation of 'someone else ... walking beside me' (p. 212). That ever-present, elusive 'other' precipitates an ontological crisis by its implicit questioning of the veracity of what the victim thinks of as 'reality'. The traumatic event marks a departure from the coherent life story, and in the region of post-traumatic existence experience is always subject to inquiry, doubt, even revision. The 'script' is unwritten, or rather constantly in the process of being written. Austerlitz (like Freud in his essay on 'The Uncanny') sees his own reflection in the window of a train compartment as a child on the *kindertransport*, and subsequently suspects that 'an invisible twin brother' is accompanying him, 'the reverse of a shadow, so to speak' (p. 55). It is noteworthy how this observation must be hedged about by a self-conscious reference to its own linguistic construction, the 'so to speak' qualifying the experience of doubling and drawing attention to the deficiency of language in trying to describe it. There is always a remainder in the uncanny experience, the encounter with the traumatic 'real' – something of the aforementioned Lacanian *caput mortuum*. This remainder perpetually seeks its expression, and since language is not quite enough for said expression, we often find that the trauma narrative 'spills over' into the reality of the human body.

A strong desire for corporeality manifests itself in writings on trauma and memory. Freud is alert to this fact, employing a vivid, physical vocabulary for his theorisations of remembering and repeating. In *The Aetiology of Hysteria* the site of memory becomes a 'region' where the analyst wanders around in 'an expanse of ruins, with remains of walls, fragments of columns, and tablets with half-effaced and unreadable inscriptions', and where he must seek to 'uncover what is buried'.²⁹ In conceiving of psychoanalysis in such a way Freud seems to propose a kind of spatial narrative, which is attractive because of its implied navigability and also because it implies that past events and repressed memories are retrievable (even if they still remain fragments). *Fugitive Pieces*'s Jakob tends towards a similar metaphorical register, attempting to turn language into a kind of scientific tool or instrument: 'English', he writes, '[is] a sonar, a microscope' with which he, like Freud, seeks to 'capture elusive meanings buried in facts' (p. 112) and to probe the genetics of language, 'that damaged chromosome in words' (p. 111). Jakob acts very much as an exemplary Freudian patient

²⁸ The phrase 'Every moment is two moments' recurs in *Fugitive Pieces*, pp. 140, 143, 161.

²⁹ Freud, *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, in *SE* 3, p. 192.

as he allows language to be the realm, the ‘intermediary region’³⁰ wherein painful experience is worked out and where words are asked to hold much more than they would in ordinary discourse. Jakob hopes that ‘loss would wreck the language, become the language,’ indicating that if he succeeded in constructing such a traumatic idiolect he could ‘restore order by naming’ (p. 111); the wish is for a new, Adamic language. In her study of trauma victims’ narratives, Kalí Tal confirms this desire of Jakob’s, suggesting that trauma entails a ‘transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences’ leading to the development of a ‘new set of definitions’ – definitions which seem to aspire towards a fusion of the bodily and the abstract, a metaphorical re-inflation of Freud’s missing wound.³¹

But the desire for a corporeal text, a more highly charged language of the body, is complex and often inextricably linked to a correspondent fear. For example, *Fugitive Pieces*’s Ben resists his wife’s requests for a child, for ‘who can separate fear from the body? My parent’s past is mine molecularly’ (p. 280). Any progeny of his would bear the same genetic/linguistic imprint as he, Ben: ‘I can’t stop the writing on its forehead from growing as the child grows ... somehow my watching causes it to happen’ (p. 280). As a kind of embodied witness, Ben demonstrates the dangers of the ‘un-worked-through’; he conceives of himself as both bearer and transmitter of a trauma narrative that has not been fully articulated and which is thus bound to repeat. If we return to Freud’s idea of the ‘foreign body’, Ben harbours a fantasy/fear of his own body as alien, as claimed by *someone else’s* unclaimed experience. ‘There was no energy of a narrative in my family’ he observes (p. 204), but in the paradoxical economy of trauma the negation of a painful legacy, the reaching after a narrative void, only serves to bring the trauma back tenfold. The unarticulated content of course poses a threat to the reader as well: if she conceives of the trauma as *literally* someone else’s, while the narrator *psychologically* ‘enacts’ it onto another/the reader’s body, then the narrative takes up existence in a kind of no-man’s-land between writer and reader. It is ungraspable by both, especially in terms of emoting, and so we once again face the danger of an endless response to trauma.

In the endless we get lost; we cannot decide what to focus on. The central problem of trauma is not an excess of object, but a lack; it is not a question of having

³⁰ Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’, in *SE* 12, p. 154.

³¹ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 16.

seen too much but of not having seen (or communicated) *enough*. As Froma Zeitlin observes, Jakob's problem is one of too little sight,³² as he was hidden away in a closet while his family was murdered and his sister stolen away. Her disappearance, the most disturbing to him, is a double vanishing in that not only did Jakob not witness her death, he also recalled several moments too late that she existed *at all* and had not been accounted for; in his adult recollections he returns to and berates himself for '[t]he moment I failed to see Bella had disappeared' (p. 111), concluding that 'I did not witness the most important events of my life' (p. 17). Arguably it is this failure of recognition that constitutes the real trauma, even more than the parents' brutal murder, for implicit in it is the unbearable guilt of having forgotten. This guilt extends to what has previously been said about the problem of negotiating between the trauma victim's perceived duty to bear witness and desire to allow life to continue – a continuation that necessarily implies obliteration. Sebald's Austerlitz, like Jakob, struggles with the fact that he has not witnessed the Holocaust first-hand, that his life has 'been a constant process of obliteration, a turning away from myself' (p. 123). In much the same way that Ben's parents' missing articulations or 'missed encounters' with their past find their expression in their son's life, Austerlitz's narrative takes on a curious life of its own, beginning to implicate *us* as a means of working itself out.³³

The bewilderment of the trauma victim is replicated for us in *Austerlitz* by the inclusion of a number of black and white photographs of various subjects such as broken watches, paths, and doorways, appearing uncaptioned and not always immediately relatable to the text on the page. The reader/viewer experience of the photographs is riddled with conflict, as we shall see. The photos generate a kind of *ersatz* trauma experience for the reader, to whom they may appear vaguely familiar as a result of their tangential connection with the text, while still resolutely resisting complete hermeneutic integration. The photos hover uneasily between uncanny recall and confusion, and in this they form a double, second narrative of the book, forcing us to confront a split in our understanding and to revisit the above-mentioned no-man's-land of trauma. We do not know the faces and scenarios depicted, yet feel for them, and find ourselves in the state of

³² Froma Zeitlin, 'New Soundings in Holocaust Literature: A Surplus of Memory', in *Catastrophe and Meaning: the Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³³ This 'extension' of story can be compared with Peter Brooks's ideas about the 'death of plot': every story seeks its narrative completion. In trauma fiction, such completion tends to demand extra-textual engagement. See John. S. Rickard's discussion in Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, c1994), p. 6.

‘betweenness’.

To grasp something of the feeling of puzzlement and disconcertion that the *Austerlitz* pictures provoke in readers we might look towards French theorist Roland Barthes and his writings on photography in *Camera Lucida*. Barthes posits that the majority of photographs exist within the realm of the *studium*, a state wherein we ‘encounter the photographer’s intentions’ and ‘enter into harmony with them’, we ‘approve or disapprove ... but [we] always ... understand them’.³⁴ Comprehension defines the *studium*, but in some photographs it is disturbed and complicated by what Barthes calls the *punctum*, a detail that appears somehow significant (Barthes uses as an example a picture of a group of soldiers in an African war zone, which he finds is upset by the appearance of two nuns in the background), the ‘accident which pricks me’,³⁵ a detail or ‘speck’ in the picture that complicates the field of vision and comes to dominate the viewer’s gaze. The word *punctum*, ‘that which wounds me’, recalls *trauma*, also ‘wound’, and the equation between *studium* and *punctum* mimics the trauma experience; the ‘uninterrupted surface’ of experience, legible and coherent, is troubled by a ‘certain something’ which cannot quite be identified, which is inaccessible yet hyper-present and ‘doubl[es]’ reality, ‘making it vacillate’.³⁶ Taken as a whole, the *Austerlitz* photographs act both like the *punctum* to the *studium* of the text – ‘accommodat[ing] a certain latency’,³⁷ as Barthes writes – and as Freud’s traumatic ‘foreign body’, the ‘agent’ working away at us during our reading, at times effecting a delayed understanding.

Is there more to be understood, or inferred, from the *Austerlitz* photographs? Do they seek to ‘work’ on us, as Barthes argues that *punctum* photographs do? What constitutes that work? Jens Brockmeier suggests that they may be exhortations to us to explore further,³⁸ to probe into the extra-textual realm of history – a supposition that almost seems to make them our responsibility. Austerlitz bequeaths his extensive collection of photos ‘which, one day, would be all that was left of his life’ (p. 293) to the narrator, and he, in turn, implicitly hands them over to us, demanding that *we* bear witness and accept our roles as real-world interlocutors, implicated from the start in the text and now, finally, as its transmitters. We are encouraged not only to read the body of

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Cape, 1982, c1981), pp. 27-28.

³⁵ Barthes, *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

³⁶ Barthes, *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁷ Barthes, *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁸ Brockmeier, ‘Austerlitz’s Memory’, p. 354.

work but also to ensure its continued existence, as is implied in the above quotation by Austerlitz's inscription of his 'life' into the photographic work he has done.

While the photos clamour for our attention and engagement, nagging and disturbing us, implicating us in the proceedings of the narrative, they simultaneously seem to *resist* the reader's involvement and insist on their self-sufficiency. The reduplication or 'staging' of the photographs illustrates what appears a central feature of trauma narrative: its tendency to work meta-textually, to 'read itself'. *Austerlitz*, *Regeneration* and *Fugitive Pieces* supply their own readers, analysts, and viewers within the world of the text, persons posited to read the narrative before it reaches us: the unnamed narrator of *Austerlitz* identifies himself as 'the kind of listener' his friend needs (p. 43); we get to share in Dr Rivers's private analysis of his patients immediately after Barker has described their illnesses in *Regeneration*; and Ben discovers, reads, interprets and presents to us the unfinished manuscript of Jakob's memoir in *Fugitive Pieces*, the novel that goes the furthest towards securing a meta-textual, self-sufficient existence. Athos, the historian who discovers young Jakob as he flees from the SS, functions as the boy's analyst, providing him with the tools he needs for his excavation in a manner resembling the way in which the physical and psychological are 'translated' or converted in *Fugitive Pieces*. Athos's archaeological work, and the cumulative tropes of history, forensics, and geology, become a material, corporeal 'anchor' for the language he uses to reach the traumatised boy, making it possible for Jakob to reclaim the use of language to state that '[i]t's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world' (p. 53).

The intertextual relationships set up within these texts seem at times to make a real-world reader redundant, and it is difficult to say whether the establishment of such a self-contained textual world is advantageous or deleterious for writer, narrator, and reader. It shows a tendency to retain traumatic experience instead of expelling it, and thus echoes the repetition-compulsion. But it is also a function of anxiety, the trauma narrative's anxiety of being read, intimately connected to the perceived duty to bear witness. Witnessing entails replication of experience and bestowal of that experience to a sympathetic listener/reader, and our texts can be said to procure these interlocutors for themselves even as they are being written. In any case, the hermeneutically sealed textual world can be read symptomatically, and goes some way towards highlighting the characteristics of narrative in trauma, addressing our opening question of how the 'full absence' of traumatic experience is dealt with. Trauma writing desires representation and replication and always, it seems, returns to itself in a circular manner – though the

ambivalence associated with trauma is again at work here: to return to oneself, one must first go outside oneself.

The self-reflexivity appears, too, in Pat Barker's writing, even though it is less intensely focused on trauma and testimony than *Fugitive Pieces* and *Austerlitz*. Barker's narrative style is markedly less self-reflexive and experimental than Michaels's and Sebald's, and yet in the final instalment of the *Regeneration* trilogy, *The Ghost Road*, we get to read soldier Billy Prior's diary extracts, which often revolve around the subject of writing and its function, particularly as pertains to war. One entry describes the interior of the army dormitory, where 'everybody's scribbling away ... not just letters either. Diaries. Poems.' Prior wonders why and answers himself: 'it's a way of claiming immunity. First-person narrators can't die, so as long as we keep telling the story of our own lives we're safe.'³⁹ The desire for and belief in 'plot' here approaches the ritualistic: in the act of telling we are alive, and like *A Thousand and One Nights*'s Scheherazade the soldiers are narrating to delay the hour of execution. Existence, as we have previously seen Lacan argue, is a function of language. Yet, paradoxically, the creation of personal plot implicitly presupposes an end, indeed a death, which is exactly what Prior is hoping to avoid in his act of narration.

For narrative time is intimately connected with trauma. The intrusion of the traumatic memory defies and distorts the temporal sequence of memory wherein it is possible for us, as previously mentioned psychologist Wigren writes, to 'creat[e] ... meaning' and 'contain affect' by arranging experiences in narrative form.⁴⁰ Traumatic memories appear to us always new, forcing us to perpetually 'wak[e] up into another fright',⁴¹ as Freud observes: the grammar of the traumatic memory is a continuous present which refuses to be relegated to the past tense. When Jakob, who narrates his memoir retrospectively, finally (re)claims the present tense in his relation of the beginning of the relationship with Michaela, his future wife, there is no mistaking the importance of the grammatical choice. Going far beyond any stylistic concern, the switch seems to indicate that the text has overcome a certain meta-textual resistance; it – or rather its narrator – no longer feels the need to hold out against the present tense and the full presence in the moment (a presence which is usually threatening to the trauma victim). The present 'bodiliness' of Michaela heralds a crucial linguistic transition for

³⁹ Barker, *The Ghost Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 115.

⁴⁰ Wigren, pp. 415, 416.

⁴¹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *SE* 17, p. 12.

Jakob, explicable in terms of the Lacanian notion of language as the medium of substitution. Fink explains how the linguistic blockage of trauma prevents the kinds of ‘translations’ of affect that permit one to transfer emotion from, as in the example he uses, the mother’s blue eyes to the lover’s: the word ‘blue’ is operative here, charged with personal significance, the bearer of certain preferences and memories.⁴² Jakob finally allows Michaela’s hands to ‘carry my memories. I remember my mother teaching Bella in the kitchen’ (p. 192), and in so doing, he is ‘replacing’ Bella’s body, or rather, we should say, the linguistic absence it came to signify.

And this is perhaps the way one must deal with the ‘full absence’ of trauma. In her poignant reading of Lacan’s re-reading of the burning child dream from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Caruth sums up the child’s message to the sleeping father as ‘wake up, leave me ... survive to tell the story of my burning’.⁴³ The command is painful and paradoxical: only through his renunciation of this last connection with his dead son can the father ensure the child’s continued ‘existence’ or legacy; their communion now in fact takes place in the abandonment, for telling someone’s story necessarily entails a turning away from them, a willingness to depart from the comforts of the subject-object relationship in order to engage with a larger world/receptive community. Jakob eventually reaches the same conclusion as he states that ‘[t]o remain with the dead is to abandon them’ (p. 170).

Our implicit assumption has thus far been that eventually the trauma narrative must be put into ‘traditional’ chronological order to be ‘successful’, or to have any chance of **ailing** the distressed mind. The aforementioned Brooks, a vocal champion and indeed the instigator of the idea of ‘psychoanalysis [as] a narrative discipline’, identifies the analysand’s ‘narrative syntax’ as ‘riddled with gaps’ and marred by ‘faulty rhetoric’.⁴⁴ While such an analysis seems to confirm our findings, one cannot help but question whether psychoanalytical editing of the victim’s ‘faulty rhetoric’ is necessarily conducive to healing. Novels engaging with traumatic experience tend to resist the ‘conservative’ textual arrangement of the classic novel, favouring instead disjunctive, fragmented, and amorphous modes of telling. While such disposition of one’s material may very plausibly be attributed to the difficulty of representing the unrepresentable, speaking the unspeakable, is it not unnecessarily reductive to simply read these texts as

⁴² Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 26.

⁴³ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, p. 47.

‘illness reports’, to borrow Katja Garloff’s phrase from her discussion of *Austerlitz*?⁴⁵ The trauma novel will perhaps, inevitably, lend itself to be interpreted as symptom, but one may equally argue that it seeks to *mean* rather than to reflect, to impact upon our perceptions instead of mirroring the diseased perceptions of its narrator(s). Can we not read trauma narratives as provocations rather than as case studies; can we not probe the ‘gaps’ they are riddled with?

For there is something radical about a novel like *Fugitive Pieces* which so insistently favours the poetic, repetitive, even meditative, staunchly disregarding Theodor Adorno’s famous claim that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’.⁴⁶ Literary critic John Mullan sets out to forestall criticism of the novel’s aesthetic and its lyrical resistance to progress by claiming that ‘the verbless sentences that present you with metaphors also present the possibility of escape from mournful retrospection’.⁴⁷ Instead of echoing Jakob’s trauma, then, ‘his’ style of writing resists traumatic repetition by reclaiming the right to the moment which is usually a source of distress to the victim because of its association with the repetitive flashback. Michaels’s lyrical phrasing provides a series of snapshots, visual nuggets insisting on their ‘one-ness’ and thus making a virtue out of their fragmentation. Narrative works here almost like transubstantiation: ‘The poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life’ (p. 109) Jakob comments, and in his double role as poet and translator of Athos’s works he acquires a means of ‘translating’ experience into language and back again. This free movement between linguistics and life is precisely what counteracts traumatic blockage, as Fink argues; only in the free interaction between thought and word can we convert emotion. There is, then, a resistance in the fabric of poetry and poetic narrative; ‘plot’ in the strict sense of the word is but one way of organising experience. Sebald, though not a lyrical writer, shares in Michaels’s resistance as he refuses to call his books novels, claiming instead that ‘my medium is prose’.⁴⁸ As we have previously noted, quarrelling with conventional ideas of plot is a possible way of avoiding comfortable, simplistic readings of trauma narratives. It challenges the seductive notion of literature as a mitigating force, a notion seemingly supported by Janet’s and Wigren’s supposition that human psychology is fundamentally dependent on chronology and narration: we long for, and

⁴⁵ Quoted in Brockmeier, ‘Austerlitz’s Memory’, p. 352.

⁴⁶ Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 210.

⁴⁷ John Mullan, ‘Fugitive Pieces’ in *Guardian Book Club*, 20 May 2009.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Brockmeier, ‘Austerlitz’s Memory’, p. 350.

seek, plot and comprehension. Whereas one might be unable to have control over one's traumatic experience, in telling one's story there is at least the choice of stylistic and narrative presentation of said experience. It is a slim consolation, but the 'value' of trauma writing must perhaps be sought in instability and fragility. Freud observes that trauma arises where there was no wound, and what the trauma narrative can do is consider the fixedness of the wound's one visible site as psychologically limiting, promoting instead the 'blank canvas' of the page one writes on as the 'new site' of trauma, a space for varied versions of past, present, and future, as well as for different perspectives on and manifestations of the traumatic experience. Structurally, books like *Fugitive Pieces* and *Austerlitz* seem to desire, paradoxically, further fragmentation ending in diffusion – as if their narrators were themselves trying to 'fracture' the trauma. Experience is dispersed throughout the text in different 'signs' (for example switches between narrators and division into short sections or 'pieces' in *Fugitive Pieces*, and inclusion of photos in *Austerlitz*), making that experience paradoxically, ironically, more manageable.

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