

The Presence and the Absence of the Holocaust in Contemporary Jewish American Literature



The Particularist and the Universalist Path in Addressing the Legacy of this European Disaster

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1. Introduction

In the 1966 essay “Confronting the Holocaust,” the literary critic Robert Alter wrote: “With all the restless probing into the implications of the Holocaust that continues to go on in Jewish forums...it gives one pause to note how rarely American Jewish fiction has attempted to come to terms with the European catastrophe” (67). Some novels published shortly after the end of World War II, such as Saul Bellow’s *The Victim*, in which the symbolic underpinnings depict Holocaust images¹, dared to address the Holocaust. However, most Jewish American authors were, as Andrew Furman suggests, “reluctant in the wake of the Holocaust to dramatize the atrocity in their fiction” (59). Likewise in the 1960s, Jewish American writers chose to address the Holocaust from a safe distance. However, the Holocaust was not completely omitted in fiction of that period. Bernard Malamud’s 1966 novel *The Fixer*, for example, based on the real life notorious 1913 Beilis affair in which the Ukrainian Jewish Menahem Mendel Beilis was wrongly accused of blood libel, addressed the increasing European anti-Semitism in the wake of the Holocaust. However, Malamud approached the Holocaust from a distance as he stated that he was only hinting at “the quality of affliction of the Jews under Hitler” (qtd. in Furman 59). It could be argued that prominent first-and second-generation writers preferred to focus on themes associated with the New World, as Jonathan Freedman suggests: “American Jews busied themselves after the war with the work of assimilation and “culture making” – apparently unconcerned with their severance from European Jewish culture and, indeed, from European Jews” (qtd. in Burstein 4). Another reason for the absence of the Holocaust in Jewish American fiction of the 1960’s is connected to Theodor Adorno’s injunction that writing “poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (qtd. in Mandel 65).

¹ Besides the symbolic underpinnings like the smoke of the chimneys which hovers over Leventhal and the Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust exposes, as Victoria Aarons suggests, “the demonstrable proof that human beings are capable of unlimited forms of pathological self-justification and atrocious acts” (107).

Adorno's statement stands firm as a marker of the challenge the Holocaust poses to writing and aesthetics. Sanford Pinsker explains this challenge as follows: "To create objects of aesthetic beauty in the last years of our nightmarish century seems, on the face of it, obscene. By this reckoning, Holocaust fiction is not only an oxymoron but a travesty – especially if attempted by Jewish-American writers who were not there and who could not possibly know" ("Double Dare" 238). However, there were exceptions. Edward Lewis Wallant's 1961 novel *The Pawnbroker*, for instance, tells the story of a concentration camp survivor who tries to cope with flashbacks of his past Nazi imprisonment. Likewise, Bellow, who initially dramatised the Holocaust only allusively, depicted it more directly with the trauma suffered by his survivor protagonist in the 1969 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Furthermore, in 1987, Bellow wrote a letter to fellow writer Cynthia Ozick in which he wrote the following: "Jewish American writers missed what should have been for them the central event of their time, the destruction of European Jewry. I can't say how our responsibility can be assessed. We (I speak of Jews now and not merely of writers) should have reckoned more fully, more deeply with it" (qtd. in Cappell 100). Interestingly, despite her reluctance to write about the Holocaust, it was Ozick who decided to directly render the horrors of the concentration camps in her 1989 short story "The Shawl". Ozick's story demonstrated that, according to Pinsker, "the imagination can also be a witness – not, to be sure the same as testimonies and memoirs of survivors, but nonetheless important" ("Double Dares" 284). Furthermore, he points out that "Ozick's riveting, absolutely unforgettable story opened up new territory now occupied by younger Jewish American writers" ("Double Dares" 284).

This new territory is now largely occupied by an innovative crop of authors who are reviving Jewish American fiction in such a drastic way that their work is referred to as "new Jewish literature" (Sechner, Rosenbaum, and Aarons). An exploration of the work of these "new wave" authors took place in a 1997 issue of *Tikkun* (Sechner, Rosenbaum, and Aarons).

The editor of that particular issue, Thane Rosenbaum, collected a series of essays which addressed, what he calls, “The Jewish Literary Revival” (qtd. in Royal, *Unfinalized Moments* 2). The contributor line up consisted of an impressive list of prominent literary critics and authors who each commented on the phenomenon. Morris Dickstein, for instance, wrote that “the new emphasis on identity, the revival of interest in Jewish history, Jewish festivals, and sacred Jewish texts could not help but lead to a new Jewish writing that would confound the predictions of critics” (Royal, *Unfinalized Moments* 3). Another interesting observation was made in Melvin Jules Bukiet’s essay “Machers and Mourners”. In his contribution, Bukiet makes a distinction between Jewish American writers by placing them into two categories: machers and mourners. The mourners approach “Jewish history through narratives of lamentation on, longing for, on at least recreating a part that exist only on the written pages” (Royal, *Unfinalized Moments* 3). Machers, on the other hand, use history “to assert themselves which often results in comedic or enraging conclusions” (Royal, *Unfinalized Moments* 3). However, what both groups of writers share is a renewed interest in Jewish history and “a spellbinding ability to chronicle their historical moments” (Royal, *Unfinalized Moments* 3).

In fact, the Holocaust receives great attention in contemporary Jewish American fiction. Janet Burstein points out that “virtually all the salient issues that perplex American Jews after 1980s are bent, wrinkled in some way by either the forgetting or the remembering of what happened in the thirties and forties to the Jews of Europe” (3). This is certainly visible in the works of “new wave authors” Bukiet, Rosenbaum and the younger Rachel Kadish and Nathan Englander (Sechner, Rosenbaum, and Aarons). In their fiction, these authors each address the Holocaust and its aftermath. However, it is important to consider that their relationship with the Holocaust differs. Bukiet and Rosenbaum are the children of Holocaust survivors.

The “2Gs”, in Bukiet’s shorthand, were *raised* with the trauma and the memories of their parents very tangible to them (“Nothing Makes” 162). Bukiet, whose father survived Auschwitz, points out that “the Second Generation will never know what the First Generation does in it bones, but what the Second Generation knows better than everyone else is the First Generation” (162). Rosenbaum, whose mother had been Maidanek and his father survived Bergen-Belsen, emphasises that he is greatly affected by “the legacy I had inherited, that I carried around me, that wouldn’t leave me alone” (244). Although Rosenbaum’s parents did not speak about the Holocaust as he regards his writing as “a compensation for the years of childhood silence,” the looming shadow of his parents’ trauma was very present in his upbringing (qtd. in Berger 72). According to Robert M. Prince, these “mediated parental experiences” serve as an “unconscious organizer for the identity of children of survivors and provides basic metaphors for unconscious fantasy” (qtd in Berger 3). What Bukiet’s and Rosenbaum’ fiction is characteristic of is that their protagonists are often modern and assimilated characters, yet in another, they are constantly haunted by the Holocaust. These characteristics indicate that, according to Pinsker, “this is writing explicitly of and by the second generation” (“Double Dares” 284).

In contrast to Bukiet and Rosenbaum, Kadish and Englander are not children of survivors. Although Kadish is the grandchild of survivors and Englander is not, they are both considered third generation writers because this group is “broadened to include almost any Jewish American born in the 1960s or 1970s” (Weissman 19). This generation is educated about the Holocaust and especially with the lesson that they should remember it. Kadish was taught this lesson through the stories of her grandfather. She explains that “if we grandchildren did not remember these stories, no one would” (“Davka Method 283). Therefore, she and other grandchildren “tell those stories – relentlessly” (“Davka Method” 289). Englander, who was taught this lesson in Yeshiva school, mentions that “this idea that I

was raised as a child of the Holocaust was educated into me” (qtd. in Taylor).

Besides that these authors have different sources and inspirations for writing about the Holocaust, they also address the topic from a different angle. Alan Berger draws a useful distinction between these two angles which conceptualises its differences. In Berger’s distinction, there are two foundations writers could articulate the legacy and the lessons of the Holocaust on, which he refers to as “Jewish particularism and Jewish universalism” (4). To understand how Bukiet’s, Rosenbaum’s, Kadish’s and Englander’s approach to the Holocaust is connected to Berger’s terms, it is useful to consider Edward Said’s notion of worldliness in explaining how fiction dealing with the Holocaust is inescapable tied to the present and the past. Said argues that there is an interplay between the two sides of worldliness: filiation and affiliation. Filiation is, as Said argues, “a pattern of heritage or descent” (qtd. in Ashcroft 41). Additionally, in literature, Said refers to filiation as a term which “reflects how works influence each other, how the tradition of writing works” (qtd. in Ashcroft 42). However, the filiations of writing about the Holocaust are complex. After all, these filiations include memories of parents and survivors, testimonies, and personal recollection. These works serve as a filiation to what is absent and unrecoverable. Affiliation, on the other hand, reflects present and future understandings of the past. These understandings change over time, and bring the worldliness of writing about the Holocaust not only in relation to the past, but also to the present. In fiction dealing with the Holocaust, issues of memory, identification and trauma are often the core. Filiation then refers to the origins of these issues, and why they are integral in these works. Affiliation, on the other hand, refers to how these themes are linked to the present. Thus, writers can approach specific issues and themes concerning the Holocaust differently because of the several bounds which filiate and affiliate them to the past and the present.

To return to Berger's distinction of Jewish particularism and Jewish universalism, the worldliness of texts and the bounds which filiates and affiliates them partially explain how authors could take different paths in dealing with the Holocaust in their fiction. Although the fiction of Bukiet, Rosenbaum, Kadish and Englander is in its worldliness inescapable tied to the past as well as the present, the authors travel different paths in approaching these relations between past and present. In their fiction, Bukiet, Rosenbaum, Kadish, and Englander each address how issues such as identification, trauma, and memory are related to the Holocaust. This paper will argue, however, that Bukiet and Rosenbaum approach these issues from the angle of particularism, whereas Kadish and Englander adopt a more universalist view in writing about the Holocaust. Throughout this paper, Berger's definition of the terms will be reflected upon. He explains the main difference between the two paths as follows: "The particularists seek a *tikkun atzmi* (a mending or repair) of the self ... Those who travel the second path, that of Jewish universalism, seek to articulate universal lessons emerging from the Holocaust" (4).

To discuss this distinction in these authors' work, I will analyse the following short stories: Bukiet's "Himmler's Chickens" from *While The Messiah Tarries*, Rosenbaum's "Cattle Car Complex" from *Elijah Visible*, Kadish's "The Argument" which is included in the anthology *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction From the Edge*, and Englander's "The Tumblers" from *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*. The paper will be organised thematically. Although the stories have corresponding themes, each section will highlight and discuss one of these in particular. The sections will be divided into three sub-sections of which the first will introduce the relevant theoretical framework, the second will consist of discussing a story with a particularist view, and the third will analyse a story with a universalist focus. The first section will address the theme of memory and discusses Bukiet's "Himmler's Chickens" and Kadish's "The Argument", and the second will particularly focus on stories dealing with

scenes of deportation and will give an analysis of Rosenbaum's "Cattle Car Complex" and Englander's "The Tumblers". After that, a final section will bring the analyses of the short stories together and draw a conclusion. Using Berger's distinction, these sections will analyse the different paths the authors travel in writing about the Holocaust. However, it is also important to consider that there is a similarity between these authors. They all, in the words of Ruth Franklin, "begin to tell stories from their own vantage. And in doing so, they demonstrate that the stories of the Holocaust remain tellable" (238).

2. The Transmission of Memory to the Generation After

Ellen Fine asks the following: “How does one remember an event not experienced? ... How does the Holocaust shape the identity of those living in its aftermath – “the self’s sense of itself” – and how is the burden of memory then assumed?” (185). Historian Dominick LaCapra’s theory on “the ethics on empathy” is useful in explaining, or at least for approaching, this issue (134). He suggests that the effects of trauma often extend beyond the immediate victims. It is also the generation after or “those born later” who experience these effects through “an unsettling identification” with victims who experienced the trauma directly (LaCapra 135). LaCapra explains his notion of “emphatic unsettlement” as follows: “Empathic unsettlement means feeling for another without losing sight of the distinction between one’s own experience and the experience of the other” (135). Marianne Hirsch positions LaCapra’s theory directly in relation to children of Holocaust survivors. Her notion of postmemory distinguishes between the actual experiences of survivors and how their memories of these experiences are passed on to the succeeding generation. Hirsch explains this notion as follows:

Postmemory describes the relation that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they “remember” only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these memories were transmitted to them so deeply as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right (6).

Like LaCapra, Hirsch points out that the adaptation of memory is mediated “through an ethical relation to the subject” (6). This ethical relation addresses the interconnectedness between the generation of Holocaust survivors and the generation of their children. Hirsch, therefore, sees postmemory as “a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic

knowledge and embodied experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (7). These theoretical frameworks are useful in conceptualising the work of second-generation writers who do not claim to have experienced the trauma themselves, but nonetheless feel a strong “emphatic remembrance” of, or connection to, this past (LaCapra 200).

A great deal of second-generation writers, such as Bukiet, Rosenbaum, but also Art Spiegelman and J.J. Steinfeld, have dealt with issues and themes related to these theoretical frameworks. Their work reflects, according to Berger, “the impact of the Holocaust on their identity as second-generation witness” (71). Although the work of second-generation writers of course differs in style and tone, there can be similarities found between their approach and the characteristics of postmemory. For instance, their work demonstrates a mutual concern to remember an event not lived through. Hirsch suggests that there can be two types of “desires” detected in the work of second-generation authors (242). The first type of desire is, as Hirsch writes, “to know the world as it looked and felt before our birth” (242). The second type of desire is, as Hirsch continues, “a different one, at once more powerful and more conflicted: the need not just to feel and to know, but also to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace and repair” (242-243).

In this section, Bukiet’s “Himmler’s Chickens” and Kadish’s “The Argument” will be discussed to analyse how the experiences of their protagonists fit Hirsch’s notion of postmemory. Moreover, the discussion of these stories aims to highlight the fluidity of postmemory. After all, postmemory is not a fixed notion as this transmission of trauma has varying effects on Bukiet’s and Kadish’s protagonists. Furthermore, it is important to consider that their protagonists are not second-generation witnesses which opens up a new space of applying and experimenting with postmemory on a broader scale. This is not to say that the experience of Bukiet’s and Kadish’s protagonists are exactly similar to second-generation

witnesses, the stories rather show how those who are not second-generation witnesses are also influenced by traumatic memories which are not their own.

Bukiet does not write from the point of view of the second-generation, nor does he specifically address second-generation issues. However, the types of desire as presented by Hirsch are present in his fiction. Bukiet is mindful of the impossibility to realistically render the Holocaust. Pinsker suggests that what Bukiet “will not (cannot?) do is confront the Holocaust experience directly, but the power in his fiction may reveal more about the situation of Jewry in our nightmarish century than tales of barbed wire and gas chambers ever could” (“Melvin Bukiet” 42). In his fiction, there are no sites of concentration camps, scenes of selection or gas chambers described. Instead, Bukiet chooses to explore either the pre-Holocaust world, such as in his collection *Stories of an Imaginary Childhood*, or the aftermath and the dark shadow the Holocaust continues to cast in the post-Holocaust world. His collection *While the Messiah Tarries* features several short stories in which the protagonists struggle “to seek meaning in the face of an anomic and spiritually empty world” (Berger 73). In these short stories, Bukiet shows the necessity of delving into Jewish history in order to more fully know one’s heritage. Although Bukiet points out that “life is not as it used to be once it contains Auschwitz,” there is a desire in his fiction to partially repair or rebuilt the loss of innocence after Auschwitz (qtd. in Berger 73).

“Himmler’s Chickens” is one of these stories which depict “a post-Auschwitz responses of Jews in America (Berger 37). In this story, Bukiet is concerned with the role of the Holocaust in the protagonist’s consciousness, but also how easily the Holocaust fades from it. However, the protagonist’s consciousness alters due to an unexpected remembrance of traumatic memory. The protagonist’s traumatic recall mirrors Hirsch’s postmemory in illustrating how memory serves as an inescapable connection to the past. This connection involves a complex intersection between identity, past, and memory.

What is at stake in Bukiet's story is known as "the aesthetics of memory" (Eaglestone 81).

These aesthetics cause a sense of identification with people who directly experienced the Holocaust. "Himmler's Chickens" gives such an example which illustrates how the interplay between memory and identification works.

For Kadish, it is crucial that grandchildren remember the stories of their grandparents. She points out that "To forget was to let the survivors' experience wither away. To forget was to let Hitler's victims die all over again. To remember, to remember actively, was to ensure that these things could not happen again" ("Davka Method" 283). In "The Argument," however, Kadish not only focuses on the importance of remembering but she also addresses the difficulties of remembering a collective trauma such as the Holocaust. Jeffrey Alexander summons the definition of collective trauma up as follows: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental ways" (1). In the story, Kadish explores the connection between personal trauma and memory and collective trauma and memory. She is concerned with how these different traumatic memory narratives are related to each other. These narratives could, of course, as Robert Eaglestone suggests, "interpenetrate in a peaceful, constructive way" (76). However, in "The Argument," they are at odds with each other. In this story, Kadish poses the question whether, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the transmission of traumatic memories can be considered a virtue. In doing so, she opens up a universal discussion which is not only a discussion of memory but also a "discussion of society" as it resolves, or fails to resolve, the negotiations between individual and communal memories, between private and public narratives (Eaglestone 76).

In the analysis of Bukiet's and Kadish's stories that will follow, I will discuss how personal memories are related to larger stories, or "family frames" as Hirsch names them (22).

Furthermore, their stories both address how these frames are in turn related to wider narratives that, according to Eaglestone, “structure more public life, the narratives that make up our identities, narratives and behaviours” (76). Eaglestone argues that “memory is part of the imagined community, part of the image store that creates and actually is a community: to remember is to bring a communal body (back) together in an act of remembrance” (76). As is demonstrated in Bukiet’s and Kadish’s stories, memory is part of everyday existence, not simply a space for looking back to the past. Furthermore, memory is a key aspect in personal and communal identity. However, Bukiet’s and Kadish’s protagonists both struggle with accepting that memory is much of what makes them and what they are. Bukiet and Kadish agree that “we do not possess memories: memories possess us” (Eaglestone 79). However, their protagonists each learn that they have to face their memory since, as Eaglestone points out, “identity without memory is empty” (78).

Bukiet and Kadish each address, in their own way, how their protagonists’ lives are influenced by traumatic memories which are not their own. Although ostensibly neither story is directly concerned with second- or third-generation issues, they each provide distinct angles of vision concerning contemporary responses to the Holocaust. In “Himmler’s Chickens,” Bukiet’s protagonist’s clarification of his traumatic memories is the first step in achieving a kind of “*tikkun atzmi*” (Berger 4). Kadish’s protagonist, on the other hand, is haunted by memory and continues struggling to accept the burden of collective memory that has been passed onto him. In their stories, each author shows how their protagonists are “subjects of its sometimes unpredictable effects as, voluntarily or involuntarily, they remember” (Eaglestone 77).

2.1. "Himmler's Chickens": Finding Meaning Through a Gritty Revelation

In his Wallant Award speech, Bukiet insisted that fiction is "an attempt to make the world as it should be" (qtd. in Pinsker, "Melvin Bukiet" 43). Additionally, he points out that "as God failed at Auschwitz, fiction becomes the world as it is, flawed, degeneration at the first idyll" (qtd. in Pinsker "Melvin Bukiet 43). In "Himmlers Chicken's," Bukiet portrays this fragmented post-Holocaust world in which God is hard to find, but in which evil can be easily detected. On the other hand, the protagonist Edgar Kahn's "theological rebellion" also transforms him from someone seemingly ignorant to the past to someone more aware what his heritage means to him (Berger 36). Although it is painful to face traumatic memory, it does, in the end, remind the "culturally shorn" Kahn what it means to be a Jew in a post-Holocaust world (Berger 74). The story deals with Kahn's doubts what to do with a home video of Heinrich Himmler, one of the persons most directly responsible for Holocaust, madly shooting his barnyard chickens. The opening of the story shows an advertisement in which a man named roy, whose name is interestingly not capitalised throughout the story, announces that he sells this particular video. The advertisement sets a chain of events in motion which Kahn knows "has to do with God" (175). Unlike his observant immigrant father, who "lived exactly as if he was still in the Old Country, going to synagogue twice daily and working long hours on ritual slaughtering", Kahn is only marginally Jewish (169).

The video, however, proves to cause a change in Kahn's attitude towards theology. After reading the advertisement, he retrieves a memory of his ten-year-old self seeing a newsreel report from Europe which showed American soldiers marching in Bergen-Belsen who "were greeted with signs of the Hun's savagery that no man could have imagined..." (165). Kahn could not bear to see these images and "slam his eyes shut" (165). Nevertheless, he is drawn to the advertisement and agrees to meet up with roy. Spying on roy's house in advance for their meeting and struggling whether it is right to meet up with

him, makes Kahn's mind "circling around his Jewishness as it hadn't since his Bar Mitzvah, or rather his son's Bar Mitzvah" (174). For instance, he becomes more and more preoccupied with theological questions. He begins wondering whether he believes in God and what the purpose of believing actually is. Kahn's "theological rebellion" has two very distinct sides (Berger 36). On the one hand, he cannot believe in a God who would permit concentration camps. On the other hand, Kahn's dilemma regarding his theology depicts, as Berger suggests, "a search for post-Auschwitz meaning [which] involves a *tikkun* of the self that enables him to persist Jewishly" (36). Although Kahn questions the existence of God, his actions betray his determination to remain Jewish and to attest, according to Berger, "that Jewish covenantal identity remains a post-Auschwitz possibility" (36).

Pinsker suggests that Bukiet aims "at 'revelation' of a particularly gritty sort" ("Melvin Bukiet" 42). Kahn experiences this revelation in roy's house, in which he immediately notices the miniature death camp set up in a room which he enters through an arch "spanned by a wrought-iron model of the sign that also greeted the guests at Auschwitz, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, "Work Makes One Free" (176). After the miniatures are set into motion, Kahn remembers the second-hand account of the Holocaust he had seen: the imagines of the newsreel. In roy's "Jewish room," Kahn again witnesses a second-hand account of the suffering in roy's copy of Auschwitz (176). Like his ten-year-old self, Kahn cannot bear to watch these horrors and "closes his eyes" (180). At that moment, he realises that he suppressed his memories of the newsreel images because of "the fear of and identification with the faces of the newsreel of his youth" (182).

Bukiet description of Kahn's revelation is reminiscent of the characteristics of postmemory. For instance, Kahn experiences a "transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge" (Hirsch 6). Although his identity is not shaped by narratives of those who experienced the Holocaust directly, he is unconsciously traumatised by a second-hand account

of these experiences. Henri Raczymow explains that postmemory reflects the special concerns of memory and identity in the post-Holocaust context (85). Additionally, he suggests that postmemory is a type of memory “shot through with holes”, which creates a collective memory “full of gaps, blanks, uncertainties” (85). Kahn’s knowledge of Holocaust narratives does not extend beyond the images he had seen in the newsreel. Since he suppressed these images, Kahn never attempted to repair or approach these uncertainties in either his personal or collective memory. This estrangement of identity is a characteristic aspect of postmemory (Hirsch 243). Hirsch argues that second-generation witnesses attempt to approach this estrangement by forging “an aesthetics of postmemory” (40). In Kahn’s case, these aesthetics address how he experiences an “unsettling identification” with the faces of the newsreel (LaCapra 135). Hirsch points out that “many Jews have built an identity as Jews precisely through the shared traumatic memory and postmemory of the Shoah” (244). Kahn’s gritty revelation made him realise that with both suppressing his memory of the newsreel and at the same time shutting a part of collective memory out of his consciousness, he neglected a part of his heritage and identity.

Kahn’s revelation has taught him that the Holocaust is an integral part of his heritage, conscience, and identity. Furthermore, he has undertaken “an odyssey” which led him to more fully explore the Holocaust (Berger 84). Berger suggests that “Bukiet views memory in salvific terms. It is nothing less than the path to achieving a *tikkun atzmi*” (73). Kahn’s search for post-Auschwitz meaning and his act to confront the mystery of God involves a partial *tikkun* of the self. Although the end of the story suggests that Kahn has not (yet) met God, he has faced the exact evil which delayed his coming. After Kahn, who is in the last couple of sentences referred to as “the Jew”, rushes out of the house, he tries to repair the world by fighting evil the only way available to him: throwing the video in the Passaic river (183). This indicates that in the end, Kahn not only finds a *tikkun* of the self, but also wishes to find a

tikkun for the world. Kahn's eventual refusal to remember and to throw the evil away resembles a commitment for, in Bukiet's words, "creating a life worth living in a better future ... [which] is the only free choice we have to make" (qtd. Berger 73).

2.2 "The Argument": Is Memory a Virtue or a Curse?

Kadish's "The Argument" focuses on the link between Jews and memory. In the eyes of the protagonist, the memory-haunted David Kreutzer, memory is more a curse than a virtue. He experiences a different kind of "theological rebellion" than Kahn (Berger 36). Where Kahn eventually experiences a gritty *tikkun atzmi*, Kreutzer continues with wondering if and how one can repair one's soul. Kadish puts these struggles in a context which articulates the broader societal complications of the Holocaust. In this story, Kadish provides insight in the effects of transcending collective memories and transmitting collective trauma. Furthermore, the story reflects how memories can be both transmitting with religious and secular connotations. In "The Argument," Kadish takes the connection between memory and religion as a foundation. However, the way Kreutzer deals with this foundation results a philosophical, existential, and I would add universal argument.

At the beginning of the story, Kreutzer's difficult relationship with memory is emphasised when he is reading about the "False Memory Syndrome" (345). This syndrome occurs when something terrible a person remembers turns out not to have happened after all. Kreutzer can only wish for such a syndrome as he states as follows: "Imagine. Such relief" (345). Despite this, Kreutzer still regards it essential to attempt to recall the memories of his friend Rabbi Jacobson, who is suffering from Alzheimer's. He regards this as very important since it is "our nature of Jews is to preserve" (347). In her analysis of "The Argument," Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg explains that "the need to remember runs deep in Judaism ... Remembrance, like keeping the Sabbath (see Ex. 20:12) or being holy (Lev. 11:44, 45; 19:2;

20:26 etc.) is a matter of *imitatio dei*. God remembers, and so must His people” (74).

However, as Kreutzer’s wish of having the False Memory Syndrome already indicates, he regards memory as “cruel” (362). His attitude towards memory comes most intriguingly forward in a riddle he poses to Rabbi Jacobson, which goes as follows: “What’s the opposite of Alzheimer’s?” Kreutzer demands. The rabbi wavers in confusion. “Jewish,” Kreutzer curses him” (365).

Although Hirsch’s notion of postmemory is linked to the second-generation, Kadish shows that collective memories can, in some cases, be perceived as an alternative form of postmemory. In “The Argument,” Kadish explores the wider effects of the transmission of traumatic memories and the need to remember them. As Kreutzer’s riddle already indicates, his relationship with memory is negatively influenced by painful memories which are not his own. He is not so much haunted by traumatic recalls of the Holocaust, but he is struggling with the relationship he bears with collective memory and traumatic narratives. In Kadish’s story, it is emphasised that there is a deep longing in Kreutzer for the days “before Hitler” (360). Besides struggling with collective memories such as of the Holocaust, Kreutzer is haunted by personal memories as well. Interestingly, Kadish does not only connect Kreutzer’s difficulties with memory to Jewish collective trauma, but also to American collective trauma. For example, Kreutzer’s memory of the day he heard of the death of his son Gabriel, who died on an Air Force commission in Thailand during the Vietnam War, haunt him constantly. Due to this, Kreutzer dismisses memory as a virtue and, therefore, feels that he is having an argument with God. While thinking about reasons to argue against the rule of remembering, he stumbles upon the following question: “If Kreutzer cannot summon the good times, if he cannot recall the years of innocence, he would like to murder the bad. Would it be so wrong? If a man kills a year, Kreutzer would petition the assembled sages, what is his punishment?”(362). This indicates that he is, as Stahlberg suggests, “unable to forget his own

personal losses and those of his people, this character romanticizes the possibility of shedding the past, of divesting himself of the burden of history” (72-73). Kreutzer longs for forgetfulness and he wants to erase both personal memories as well as collective “painful memories of inquisitions, of the Holocaust” (367). In other words, he is trapped by memory.

In regard to writing about an argument, Kadish mentions the following:

“One does not pass intact through a childhood amid beloved Holocaust survivors without formulating some kind of stance. I shape mine, such as it is, through a line of words on paper. In its refusal to simplify, sloganize, or traffic in stereotypes, in its disregard for boundaries, fiction writing is the opposite of resolving an argument. It is, at its best, the argument itself” (“Davka Method” 291-292).

At the end of the story, Rabbi Jacobson informs Kreutzer that “at the new year, atonement must be made for both types of sin. Two categories: man against man, man against God” (372). However, according to Kreutzer “there is a third category of sin ... God has picked my pocket” (372). Although Kreutzer does not completely resolve his argument, he is finally able to face the one the argument is directed to, as he remarks as follows: “For years he has made the greatest sacrifice, a sacrifice worth of the sages: he has blamed himself and spared another his rage ... For now he must call to account the one with whom he has held the longest silence” (372).

Berger suggests that writers who take the universalist path explore what “the tragedy of European Jewry have to do with American Jews in particular” (8-9). In “The Argument,” Kadish moves between the personal and the collective, between generations, and between memories from past and present to address this issue. She points out that “dancing between subjects, between cultures and continents and past and present, suits me. Popular wisdom says

Write what you know, but I can sign on to that dictum only in its broadest interpretation: *Write about the human spirit*" ("Davka Method" 291).

"The Argument" is not really a story which discusses whether memory is a virtue or a curse, it is rather concerned with portraying the universal struggle of people who have to deal with painful personal memories or struggle with remembering collective ones. With that, she shows that she is a writer who refuses "to choose between being the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and being American. I treasure – and insist on – a freedom we too often deny ourselves: the freedom to let the world be as complicated and broken and davka beautiful as it really is" (292).

Bukiet's and Kadish's short stories demonstrate the effects of postmemory on a broader scale. In "Himmler's Chickens," postmemory serves as a gritty revelation which makes Kahn aware that the present is inescapably tied to the past. Consequently, he becomes aware that the Holocaust is not absent in his world, but rather is a very present part of both his world and identity. Kadish's *Kreutzer*, on the other hand, is very much aware of the presence of the Holocaust in his life as he suffers with coming to terms with its legacy and the need to remember it. Moreover, he attempts to construct an argument which justifies his wish for a world in which collective memories of traumatic events like the Holocaust are absent. The major difference between the stories, however, is found in the stories message. In "Himmler's Chickens," Kahn realises he has a "special duty" in fighting evil in the post-Holocaust world. His awareness of the Holocaust legacy leads him to search for ways to, according to Berger, "attest his Jewish commitment and reflects his experience of shaping his memories of the Holocaust" (8). Kahn is concerned with constructing, as Berger suggests "a post-Holocaust theology, one that acknowledges a wounded deity and, consequently, describes greater responsibility to the human partner for maintaining the covenant" (8). Kadish's *Kreutzer*, on the other hand, wishes forgetfulness for everyone. Although Hirsch's specific notion of

postmemory only applies to second-generation Holocaust witnesses, the story sheds light on the fact that other second-generation witnesses, or indeed whole ethnic groups, struggle with remembering catastrophic events. Kadish shows that the need to remember collective memories, but also the difficulties of accepting them, is a universal issue. Thus, although both Bukiet and Kadish approach the connection between memory and trauma, the authors take a different path in relating these issues to the Holocaust. For Kahn, his traumatic memories of the Holocaust eventually clarify his identity and heritage. Kreutzer, on the other hand, is only confused and frustrated by the burden of collective memory and trauma. Thus, Bukiet's and Kadish's stories not only demonstrate how past and present are inescapably tied to each other, but also reflect how fiction variably filiates and affiliates this connection.

3. Deportation in Fiction: Trauma and Survival

Rosenbaum's "Cattle Car Complex" and Englander's "The Tumblers" show that fiction can serve as a prism through which to view experiences of deportation. In "Cattle Car Complex," the protagonist, second-generation witness Adam Posner, suffers a psychological trauma after he is trapped in an elevator. Imagining himself a Jew in war-time Europe, the elevator transforms into a cattle car in which Posner encounter's captivity. Rosenbaum points out that the story "is a homage to trauma. Indeed, the entire conceit is a paradigm what happens to traumatized people: they are mesmerized, almost hypnotized, by certain sounds, images, and

associations that bring them back to the scene of the crime, in essence re-traumatizing them” (qtd. in Royal, “Interview” 11). In contrast to Bukiet, Rosenbaum writes directly from the perspective of a second-generation protagonist. Posner illustrates how somebody else’s memory is transmitted so deeply in him that it seems to continue a memory in its own right. In regard to this, Rosenbaum mentions the following: “I focus on the looming dark shadow of the Holocaust as a continuing, implacable event; how it, inexorably, is still with us, flashing its radioactive teeth, keeping us all on our toes, imprinting our memories with symbols of, and metaphors for, mass death” (“Law and Legacy” 245). In “Cattle Car Complex,” the consequences of this looming dark shadow are explored in the perspective of a damaged man whose traumatic recall of a deportation experience is one of the consequences of his inherited trauma.

In “The Tumblers,” Englander unites, as Alexis Wilson points out, “two seemingly incompatible genres: a Chelm story and a Holocaust story” (113). In Englander’s story, the only work discussed in this paper directly set in war-time Europe, Englander subjects the Chelm fools, classic characters of Yiddish literature, to the depredations of Nazi genocide as they are set on a deportation to Auschwitz. In an interview, Englander mentions that “this story for me is not a Holocaust story as much as it’s about the act of remembering the Holocaust. It’s the Nazis showing up in a fabled town. The story’s almost about the act of writing that story. It’s about the act of remembering” (qtd. in Holzel). On the one hand, the story could be interpreted as uniquely Jewish in setting and historical context. By focusing on two part of Jewish history, the story remembers not only the Holocaust, but also the shtetl culture of Eastern Europe. Although the world from which it came is vanished, Englander attempts to revive the culture that would produce this storytelling tradition. On the other hand, the main theme of survival is universal in its relevance to all humanity. By chance, some Chelmites are able to sneak away from the deportation train and wind up a train full of circus

performers. The journey that follows, packed with fantasy, “dark comic powers,” and characters which the reader is able to connect with, show the universality of the story (Behlman 58). In regard to this, Englander states that “I have no interest in a fiction that isn’t universal; if it’s not universal, then it’s not functioning. I can promise you if they’re functioning, the stories are more about the setting facilitating the subtext than vice versa” (qtd. in Taylor).

In their stories, Rosenbaum and Englander approach deportation in a unique way. Rosenbaum’s protagonist transforms “in the metonym of a Holocaust traveler” as he experiences a traumatic recall which brings him back to the scene of deportation (Gigliotti 259). In “Cattle Car Complex,” Rosenbaum portrays the traumatic consequences of the awareness of deportation narratives in the life of the second-generation. Englander’s “peculiar ironization of survival,” on the other hand, shows how deportation was the first step in ending a fictional world (Franco 55). Furthermore, the Chelmites resistance becomes, as Nona Fienberg suggests, “a metaphor for survival, whether in the Holocaust or in an Israel besieged by rocket fire or in terrorist attack” (174). Thus, in Rosenbaum’s story, deportation narratives have shaped the trauma of its protagonist, in Englander story, on the other hand, deportation is the first step in destructing the fictional Chelm world.

3.1. “Cattle Car Complex”: The Complexities of Trauma

In “An Act of Defiance,” another story in Rosenbaum’s *Elijah Visible*, Posner states the following: “I have created my ghosts from memories that were not mine. I wasn’t there, in Poland, among the true martyrs. Everything about my rage was borrowed. My imagination had done all the work – invented suffering, without the physical scars, the incontestable proof” (59).² Whereas the Posner in “An Act of Defiance” is able to formulate exactly what

² To read more about Rosenbaum’s post-Holocaust fiction, see his novels *Second Hand Smoke* and *The Golems of Gotham*.

created these ghosts, the Posner in “Cattle Car Complexes” portrays someone who is struggling to accept this. The opening story of Rosenbaum’s *Elijah Visible* announces the reader to enter Posner’s trauma. Cathy Caruth argues that “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic ... *survival itself*, in other words, can be a crisis” (9). This phenomenon, which is known as “traumatic repetition,” does not only attempt to evade the pain of the event, but also the endurance and survival of it (Caruth 9). In other words, like “a play” the trauma is rehearsed again and again and, as Caruth suggests, “the story line may change slightly with traumatic repetition, but in essence it always contains the same dramatic structure” (10). In “Cattle Car Complex,” Caruth’s theory is applied to the trauma of a second-generation witness. Posner’s experience illustrates how repetition serves as a referent for the signifier of a traumatic event. This “postmemorial repetition” is employed to reenact the original traumatic event rather than shield it (Hirsch 28). Hirsch explains the effects of “postmemorial repetition” as follows: “Rather than desensitizing us to the “cut” of recollection they have the effect of cutting and shocking in the ways that fragmented and congealed traumatic memory reenacts traumatic repetition” (28-29). The construction of Posner’s traumatic recall fits into Caruth’s and Hirsch’s theory. This comes most forward in the story’s structure which consists out of a drama of two acts, the first reenacting the crisis, the second its denouement.

However, as the ending of the story indicates, its outcome does not indicate that Posner’s trauma is solved or repaired. On the contrary, the ending emphasises that there might not be a recovery for Posner’s deep psychological wound.

In “Cattle Car Complex,” Posner’s world collapses as the broken elevator he is trapped in becomes a substitute for a cattle car destined for the camps. From that moment on, the story revolves around “a fusion of spaces and voices—European and American, rural and urban, historical and contemporary” (Gigliotti 257). However, even before Posner enters the

malfunctioning elevator, there are traces that he is haunted by an unsafe feeling. He attempts to solve this insecure mood in his life by holding on to his everyday, dull routine as a lawyer. However, the power of the Holocaust remains present in his perception on the world. For instance, Posner describes his colleagues as “walking zombies with glazed eyes and mumbling mouths” (4). This indicates that, according to Kenneth Mischel, “the narrator pushes the comparison between corporate lawyers and Holocaust survivors” (89). However, these are merely traces of the effects of the Holocaust on Posner’s life. It is only until he is trapped in the elevator that Posner claustrophobia is directly connected to the “legacy that flowed through his veins” (5). As Posner is stranded and waiting for help, he hallucinates about being trapped in a cattle car, which causes a “collapse of past and present and the juxtaposition of countries of persecution and refuge” (Gigliotti 256). This temporal disorder is exemplified by a return to the scene of deportation which Posner constructs on the narratives of his survivor parents, who, as the reader is told, “had been in the camps, transported there by rail, cattle cars” (5). The shift to this scene is the moment of crisis in Posner’s construction of postmemorial repetition. As he confuses the security guard with a Nazi, Posner transforms in a deportee who directly addresses his tormenter: “How can I be okay? This is not life—being trapped in a box made for animals! Is there no dignity for man? ... You are barbarians! Get me out ... We have done nothing wrong! Nazi’s! Murderers! Nazi’s!” (7-8).

Posner reenacts the deportees’ fears, hopes, and anticipations while trapped in “a compressed space travelling to an unknown destiny” (Gigliotti 258). He ventriloquizes for the historical captives saying that “We can’t breathe in here! ... We are not cattle! There are no windows in here, and the air is too thin for all of us to share. You have already taken our homes. What more do you want?” (8). Thus, in Posner’s address, as Simone Gigliotti suggests, “Rosenbaum alludes to the historical processes that delivered Jews to that desperate point—such as the expropriation of property and homes—and identifies the deportees’ most pressing

needs” (258). The denouement of the story comes in the form of Posner’s Jewish Russian driver who understands what is going on and tries to calm him. Once the elevator has been repaired, and Posner returns from his “spatial assault” to re-entry into real time, it becomes apparent that his conflicts are not resolved and the ending, consequently, not creates normality for its protagonist (Gigliotti 276). In fact, the open-ended conclusion shows Posner mirroring the appearance of a Holocaust deportee: “grabbing his hat and pressing it on his head, Adam emerged, each step the punctuation of an uncertain sentence. His eyes were wide open as he awaited the pronouncement: right or left, in which line was he required to stand?” (11).

There are several ways to interpret the ending of “Cattle Car Complex”. Mischel, for instance, reads the ending as not aiming to show “the complexities of a memorable character, but rather as transparent vessel through which the reader can glimpse the sorry state of the present world” (89). I read Rosenbaum’s story as showing the complexities of inherited memory and how this constructs Posner’s world, a world which he did not choose to inhabit, but is destined to. Furthermore, the story shows how postmemorial repetition serves as a prism through which to view complexes relating to “post-war reconstruction” of the second-generation witness (Gigliotti 257). Although Posner’s experience in the elevator is painful, he has undertaken a “time travel” to the past to explore the sources of his trauma more fully (Gigliotti 256).

Berger point out that “the particularist second-generation witness began with the knowledge that his or her parents were survivors. But this knowledge initially serves more to obfuscate than clarify each witness’s own identity” (84). Although Posner in the ending of “Cattle Car Complex” depicts a fragmented, damaged soul, it is also a first step in his search to achieve a *tikkun atzmi* as it is an answer to the following question posed by Posner’s driver: “Who knows what made him this way?” (10). Acting as a ventriloquist for the experience of “historical captivity”, Posner attempts to comprehend and come to terms with his connection

to the past (Gigliotti 257). Furthermore, Rosenbaum provides insight in how the experiences of the parents are processed in the minds of their children. Posner's enactment to the past is a journey based on his knowledge of the reasons for his parents' trauma. Rosenbaum mentions the following: "Perhaps the truest legacy was that I continued ultimately to feel unsafe. Life was not meant to go smoothly, or safely: the same ghosts that haunted my past and feared for my future also seemed to insist that life have meaning, as well" ("Law and Legacy" 42).

These thoughts are played out in the character of Posner. Although he initially thinks he could shield himself against the ghosts of the past, Posner realises that the fears that have been passed on to him are an unavoidably part of his world. In other words, the lack of a denouement in "Cattle Car Complex" demonstrates that Posner's trauma cannot be healed. However, it should not be dismissed that a part of healing, or at least accepting one's trauma, consists of facing the ghosts that have created it in the first place.

3.2. "The Tumblers": Juxtaposing Two Worlds

In the essay "Reality in the Shadows," written three years after the Holocaust, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues that "the image does not represent reality, it obscures reality" (132). In "The Tumblers," this image is portrayed by the schlemiel, here portrayed by the Chelm fools. The simplicity, innocence, and optimism of the Chelm fools are essential in creating a contrast between the folkloric and fantastical world of the schlemiel and the world of the Holocaust which it is juxtaposed with. As Lee Behlman suggests, this juxtaposition creates "an uneasy sort of humor, as is the general cluelessness of the people of Englander's Chelm about their predicament" (60). This humour is one of the characteristics of the story's "postmodern plot wherein the schlemiels are confronted, face to face, with the Holocaust" (Feuer and Schmitz 109). This postmodern plot creates a story that, according to Behlman, "announces its fictiveness" as it "intimately surrounds historical experience but does not

present that experience directly” (60). By using the Chelm legend, Englander opens up a new world with “new possibilities for representing to unimaginable” (Wilson 117). The use of the Chelm legend in the story reflects, according to Menachem Feuer and Andrew Schmitz, “the very important commentary on the meaning of the schlemiel’s post-Holocaust denial of reality” (108). In doing so, they argue, “Englander asks us to take another look at the schlemiel’s approach to history” (108). In “The Tumblers,” Englander makes use of fantasy and magic realism to emphasise the paradox between the believable and unbelievable, the conceivable and disbelief, and reality and desire. Although “The Tumblers” shows the construction of the imaginable world of the Chelm fools, it also clearly shows its deconstruction. Furthermore, the ending depicts that a reconstruction of the innocent and idealistic Chelm world is only partially possible. Additionally, “The Tumblers” shows that magic, humour, and innocence in the end fails to juxtapose the facticity of the Holocaust. Ultimately, the story shows that a naïve and innocent schlemiel-like response to the Holocaust, a response that obscures reality, is no longer tenable.

Englander begins his short story with emphasising the self-containment of the Ghetto of Chelm: “Who would have thought that a war of such proportions would bother to turn its fury against the fools of Chelm? Never before, not by smallpox or tax collectors, was the city intruded upon by the troubles of the outside world” (27). In other words, the Ghetto of Chelm is a universe completely excluded from the outside world.

This is further emphasized by the Chelmites self-constructed norms and logic. Ruth Wisse points out that “stories of Chelm ... usually follow a single pattern – when a problem must be solved, the Chelmites come up with a formula that is theoretically correct, but practically absurd” (qtd. in Wilson 114). One of the ways these formulas are created is by denuding words of their meaning. In “The Tumblers,” the Chelmites rename almost all they have to create positivity out of the many good things they lacked. For instance, they “called their

aches “mother milk,” and darkness became “freedom”; filth they referred to as “hope” – and felt for a while, looking at each other’s hands and faces and soot-blackened clothes, fortunate” (28). Although the Chelmites are portrayed as “simple people with simple belief,” they did have the ability to play with words and the limits of language (28). Another characteristic of the Chelmites is their “vision of justice” (Wilson 115). They have their own vision of justice specifically created for their world as the justice of the outside world disappoints the Chelmites. For instance, the Chelm peasants run an honest and uncorrupt potato business. However, it is the questions whether the Chelm logic and sense of justice is able to overcome the invading of the Holocaust now the Chelmites have to “apply their common sense to a situation anything but common” (31).

In “The Tumblers,” the Chelmites are divided into two groups. The students of Mekyl are “a relaxed bunch, taken their worship lightly” (30). The Mahmirim are a small group of extremely strict students of the Mahmir Rebbe. Although the divide at first seems of minor importance, it turns out to be the difference between life and death. When the Chelmites hear that they are moving to “a farm,” they decide to collect their “essentials” (30-31). Here again, as Wilson suggests, “the Chelm substitutions expose the performative nature of language” (117). For the Mekyl, the essentials include material goods, but the Mahmirim “understood essentials to exclude anything other than one’s long underwear, for all else was excess adornment” (32). Combined with a shaved head to distinguish themselves from the Mekyl and a thin figure of three days of fasting, the Mahmirim are mistaken for acrobats and successfully board the gentile train instead of the train destined for deportation. This turn of events shows that the divide between the two movements of Judaism turns out to be the difference between life and death. However, the Mahmirim cannot completely escape from the violence, as on the way to this train, Mendel, one of the Mahmirim, witnesses the orphan Yocheved being shot by a sniper. This sudden introduction of violence in the lives of the gentle-natured Yocheved

and Mendel is their first encounter with the harsh reality. However, even moments before his death, Yocheved cannot grasp what is happening as she perceives the wound caused by the bullet as “a charm” and “looked toward the sky, wondering from where such a strange gift had come” (35). With the exception of Mendel, the rest of the group does not look back at the sound of the shot as they “had learned to lessons of Sodom” (35). This indicates that they are either afraid of what they will see if they turn around or that they are simply too confused to understand what is happening. Either way, the group of Mahmirim decides it is best to obscure reality.

As mentioned before, the Mahmirim are able to board the train as “acrobats” (37-38). This uncertainty over one’s identity is, as Wilson points out, “a common part of Chelm folklore” (118). However, the Mahmirim themselves also continue to mistake things for something other than what they are. When “an expert of the French horn” tells Mendel about the story she heard about trains full of Jews are going packed away and coming back empty, Mendel wonders “what kind of trick is performed with the Jews?” (40). The Mahmirim not only take the metaphor literally, but as Wilson suggests, “everything is taken at face value” (118). They interpret the deportation trains as magic trains in which people magically disappear as if it is a magic trick. The Mahmirim who do not or cannot understand what really happens, decide they “must tumble” to survive (41). This illustrates that they still believe that art and performance, in this case the tumble, can save their lives. Furthermore, this transformation of the Mahmirim into tumblers is also another one of the “unmatched feats of magic being performed with the train” (39). With this magic, this obscuring of reality, the Mahmirim are still able to reverse an oppressive situation in something hopeful and optimistic as Mendel says as follows:

If the Chelm people would believe that water was sour cream, if the peasant who woke up that first morning in Mendel’s bed and put on Mendel’s slippers and padded over to the

window could believe, upon throwing back the shutters, that the view he saw has always been his own, then why not pass as acrobats and tumble across the earth until they found a place where they were welcome?" (43).

The illusion of reality is certainly more appealing than the reality of "the magic of the disappearing Jews" (42). The choice of the Mahmirim to live in "a world of delusions" proves to be their saviour (Wilson 118). This shows that the traditional characteristics of the Chelm story, such as mistaken identities, performance, and fantasy, eventually saves the lives of Mahmirim. Moreover, their foolishness makes their tumbling act a great success as the audience shouts that "they are clumsy as Jews" which is followed with a "boisterous laughter" (54). This indicates that the Mahmirim have succeeded creating an identity which will protect them. However, at the same time, this deviates from the traditional structure of the Chelm story. Unlike a Chelm story, the ending of "The Tumblers" does not offer a comical solution, does not feature a punch line, and is not redemptive in giving a sense that injustice is reversed. Rather than end with a light and comic tone, this Chelm story ends with a serious reminder of the horrific reality. Eventually, the tumble performance which saves the Mahmirim, also gives them the strength to face reality. As they are subjected to racist remarks, Mendel knows something horrific happened to the other Chelmites as he "turned his palms upward, benighted" (55). In the end, he feels the pain of the other people who did not make it to the performance as "Englander gives them the last word" (Feuer & Schmitz 111).

This exposes the limits of the fictional Chelm logic, as it ultimately succumbs under the prevailing dark reality. To emphasise this, "The Tumblers" ends with the sad vision of reality: "But there were no snipers, as there are for hands that reach out of the ghettos; no dogs, as for hands that reach out from the cracks in boxcar floors; no angels waiting, as they always do, for hands that reach out from chimneys into ash-clouded skies" (55). Thus, the ending shows

that a “naïve, schlemiel-like response to the world” is no longer tenable (Feuer & Schmitz 111). Moreover, Englander shows how the facticity of the Holocaust puts an end to the mythical, innocent world of the Chelmites. In other words, as Behlman suggest, “the shtetl culture that would produce this storytelling tradition” eventually disappears as well (59).

Rosenbaum’s and Englander’s short stories reflect the influence of deportation facticity on their characters’ lives. Although their stories are completely different in terms of setting and characters, they both revolve around the interplay between presence and absence. In Rosenbaum “Cattle Car Complex,” the protagonist is struggling with his haunted state created by an “intergenerational transmission of trauma” (Hirsch 7). On the one hand, Posner is confused by the prevalent presence of the Holocaust. This presence determines his entire life . However, it is his, as Furman points out, “psychological trauma that exemplifies the presence of the Holocaust in his life” (*Contemporary Jewish American Writers* 65). This trauma reflects how the life and identity of a second-generation Jewish American is inextricably connected to the presence of the Holocaust in their daily lives. Furman suggests that “Posner does not suffer *for* his parents, but assimilates their suffering into his own experience” (*Contemporary Jewish American Writers* 65). Posner’s suffering shows how strong the presence of the Holocaust is as he is cannot, in the words of Furman, “eschew the Holocaust from his psyche” (*Contemporary Jewish American Writers* 65). On the other hand, there is a gap between traumatic experience and the effect of trauma. The original event is absent in Posner’s apparently normalised, post-Holocaust world.

This absence and distance of the original event also contributes to Posner’s fragmented identity. According to Victoria Aarons, Posner not only believes to be trapped in a cattle car, but “in a bizarre act of contribution and satisfaction he wills it to be” (152). For Rosenbaum’s protagonist, Aarons continues, “it is an obsessive appropriation of history, one that both validates and, at the same time, disempowers them” (152). However, as the outcome of “Cattle

Car Complex” indicates, this appropriation cannot redeem Posner. His reenacting of the scene of the event shows that Posner’s trauma goes beyond the repetition of memory. Posner is traumatised, as Rosenbaum points out, “by the burdens of history, and the fragmented self that comes from so much consolidated fear, loss, abandonment, and the general paralysis traceable to unfulfilled mourning” (qtd. in Royal 11). Thus, the absence of the Holocaust can also be regarded as the reason for Posner’s imagined encounter with deportation. Rosenbaum mentions that “Adam never actually witnessed any crime other than the murdered spirits of his parents – the aftermath of the genocide” (qtd. in Royal 11). In other words, Posner’s disorientation, his need to understand what traumatised him, and finding a justification for his haunted state are reasons for him to reenact his parents’ deportation experiences. Moreover, Posner’s incarceration in the elevator-turned-cattle-car is, as Aarons suggests, “not without some sort of gruesome satisfaction for him, since the fantasy it so believably invokes legitimizes all that he has feared and thus validates the motivating cause of his prolonged martyrdom” (152). Thus, in “Cattle Car Complex,” it is both the presence as well as the absence of the Holocaust which are the reasons for Posner’s traumatic recall.

Englander’s “The Tumblers,” also revolves around this interplay between presence and absence. The Holocaust abruptly invades the Chelmites’ lives. Not understanding what is happening to them, the Chelmites think that they are moving to a “farm with milking cows” (30). Although the reader knows the destination of the train the Mekyl board, Englander does not describe it because, as Wilson points out, “words would finally fail in the Chelm world” (120). The Mahmirim are initially able to escape from the reality of the Holocaust and attempt to see something positive in their transformation into tumblers. This indicates that they prefer to live in a world of delusions than face what happens around them. However, the Holocaust cannot remain absent in their lives. The story shows the destruction of the Chelm story which loses its essential characteristics of humour, life, and innocence and is replaced by a world of

sadness, death, and knowledge, and the Holocaust is the breaking point in this story. The simple and gentle Mahmirim, with their ability to reverse situations in something brighter than they actually are, realise that the Holocaust has altered their lives in all its aspects. This destruction of the Chelm world embodies the tragic loss of justice and innocence. In the end, it is not so much the Mahmirim's decision to obscure reality which seems absurd. Rather, it is the cruelty of the destruction, "the absurdity of the Holocaust" which is emphasised (Wilson 122).

Rosenbaum's and Englander's short stories do not describe the horrors of the Holocaust directly. Jean François Lyotard's notion of "différance" addresses the problems between language and what is being described (32). Lyotard argues the following: "to seek to establish the reality of the Holocaust in this way, is in a certain sense, to perpetuate the differend, since that reality is lost to us when it becomes a matter of fact" (32). In other words, the reality of the Holocaust is signalled by its inability to be put into words. Since words are not the same things they name, the signified is not present in the texts, there are only traces (Wilson 120). In "Cattle Car Complex," the Holocaust is not described directly, but rather through Posner's eyes. Since the deportation transport is described via a traumatic recall based on memories which are not Posner's own, Rosenbaum does not attempt to create an exact as possible image of deportation during the Holocaust. In "The Tumblers," Englander does not describe the "final destination of those nuisance-eating trains" (39). The story does not describe the horrors directly, but the final outcome and the destruction of the Ghetto of Chelm does reflect the devastating effects of the Holocaust. Thus, both stories are, in their own way, a reminder of which has been destroyed and how it was destroyed. Furthermore, the stories reflect the enormity of the Holocaust. Even a person who did not experience it directly is traumatised by it, and even a fictional world is wiped out by this destructive event. And as

these stories show, Posner's trauma and the destruction of the Chelm world are both inextricably connected to the horrors of deportation.

4. Conclusion

The fiction discussed in this paper reflects, in Furman's words, "a reenergized concern with the Holocaust" (*Contemporary Jewish American Writers* 18). Where the Holocaust was

mainly absent in Jewish American literature of first- and second generation authors, it has taken a very present position in “new Jewish literature” (Sechner, Rosenbaum and Aarons).

In the short stories of Bukiet, Rosenbaum, Kadish, and Englander, the Holocaust is approached from two positions. Berger’s distinction between Jewish particularism and Jewish universalism is useful in conceptualising the differences between the authors’ approaches.

Second-generation witnesses Bukiet and Rosenbaum each travel the particularist path.

However, their fiction is clearly distinguishable in its approach to the Holocaust. Bukiet is focused on the before part and, as his stories discussed in this paper reflect, the aftermath of the Holocaust. Rosenbaum also focuses on “the huge shadow of darkness and forgetfulness that the Holocaust has cast on humanity in the post-Holocaust world” (qtd. in Royal 4).

However, the difference between their fictions is found in the authors’ attitude towards, what Rosenbaum calls, “redemptiveness” (qtd. in Royal 4). Whereas Bukiet detests the idea of healing, Rosenbaum regards it essential to “reconcile with the past and aspire to a life filled with meaning and possibility” (qtd. in Royal 5). Despite the differences in subject matter and attitudes, their stories do address some of the same characteristics of particularism. In

Bukiet’s and Rosenbaum’s short stories, the protagonists undertake a journey which leads to more fully explore the Holocaust to discover a *tikkun atzmi*. In Bukiet’s “Himmler’s Chickens” this *tikkun atzmi* clarifies a part of Kahn’s identity. However, his path to achieving a *tikkun* is particularly gritty as Kahn still has to cope with a world full of evil. This revelation is related to, according to Furman, “Bukiet’s surreal exploration of Jewish law in the lives of his post-Holocaust, American characters that permeates *While the Messiah Tarries* and betrays his mischievous theological imagination” (*Contemporary Jewish American Writers* 47). Bukiet’s theological observations and exploration of Jewish law seem to preclude any real redemptive possibilities for its protagonist. In his stories, theology is put on trial as Kahn is eventually disappointed in God. However, rather than completely rejected Judaism, Kahn

displays, according to Berger, “a (largely unarticulated) voluntary commitment to sojourn on the path that perpetuates Judaism after Auschwitz” (85). In Rosenbaum’s “Cattle Car Complex,” the focus is less on theological dilemmas but rather on, as Berger suggest, “the trauma of growing up in survivor households where the shadows of Auschwitz continue to hover and the presence of those who are forever absent is felt in a myriad of ways, both spoken and symbolic” (36). Posner’s search for a *tikkun atzmi* includes an imagined encounter with one of the scenes which created his inherited trauma. Although Posner’s experience in the elevator is painful, facing the source of his trauma is the first step he takes in the progress of reconciling with his heritage and achieving a *tikkun atzmi*.

Kadish and Englander travel the universalist path. Although readers can identify common humanity in characters different from themselves in terms of religion, culture and beliefs, it has to be pointed out that Kadish’s and Englander’s characters are not universal in the sense of ‘typical’. In fact, their characters are quite particular in terms of religion, opinions, and culture. Kadish’s and Englander’s stories are rather universalist in the sense that they articulate universal questions and issues emerging from the Holocaust. Gary Weismann points out “third generation Jewish Americans as a whole seem to feel more and more detached from the Holocaust as the temporal distance grows” (19). As a response to this growing distance, third-generation authors do not represent the Holocaust itself, but rather the influence of the Holocaust on collective memory, trauma, and culture in the post-Holocaust world. Furthermore, Kadish and Englander directly position the Holocaust in relation with unexpected, but universal, themes such as religion, personal memory, and fictional worlds. In doing so, their characters reflect a “common human vulnerability” (Berger 127). As is especially the case in Englander’s “The Tumblers,” they are attempting to “turn history into story,” hoping to shape future memory of what remains “an unmasterable trauma” (Berger 127).

Throughout this paper I have cited several theorists and philosophers who are either associated with postmodernism or have written extensively on this movement, such as Said, LaCapra, Levinas, and Lyotard.³ This indicates that doing history, thinking, and criticising often revolve around discourses which strive to respond to the Holocaust (Eaglestone 3). Although the fiction of Bukiet, Rosenbaum, Kadish, and Englander is not explicitly postmodern, it does experiment with the technique of fragmentation. Their characters are almost all in a sense fragmented as they deal with theological crises, questions of memory, and issues of identity. In other words, postmodern thought is shaped by the Holocaust, but the fiction discussed in this paper also reflects how postmodern thought shapes how contemporary authors understand and approach the Holocaust.

To further analyse the different approaches of the Holocaust in fiction, Bukiet's division between Jewish American writers as "mourners" and "machers" is useful to consider ("Machers and Mourners" 45). Bukiet's explains his division, which was previously mentioned in the introduction of this paper, as follows: "Mourners' literature is informed by nostalgia, congenital angst and the hope, however faint, that a redemptive God exists. Machers take the same world view, toss it into the air, and see what comes up" (Bukiet, "Machers and Mourners" 45). Although the four authors do not specifically belong to each of these groups, their characters could be divided into "mourners" and "machers" (Bukiet, "Machers and Mourners" 45). Bukiet's protagonist in "Himmler's Chickens" can be perceived as a type of macher as he not convinced that the world can be redeemed. Additionally, the protagonist of Kadish's "The Argument" is also in a sense a macher. After all, Kreutzer does not believe in a redemptive God but rather "spits in the judge's eye" (Bukiet, "Machers and Mourners" 45). The protagonist in Rosenbaum's "Cattle Car

³ For more information on the relationship between postmodern thought and the Holocaust, see *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* by Robert Eaglestone.

Complex” and the Mahmirim in Englander’s “The Tumblers,” on the other hand, are more like mourners in the sense that they hope that something or someone, whether through reenacting the past to understand one’s heritage or in the form of a redemptive God, will eventually redeem them.

Nevertheless, whether Bukiet, Rosenbaum, Kadish, and Englander follow the particularist or universalist path, are second-generation witnesses or belong to the third-generation, or create protagonists who are mourners or machers, their fiction shares one clear characteristic. Although the Holocaust is seemingly absent in today’s world, their fiction shows that the pervasive legacy of “the black shadow athwart Jewish memory” has a strong presence in contemporary Jewish American literature (Solotaroff xxii).

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