

‘AND YET, WHAT WOULD WE BE WITHOUT MEMORY?’
VISUALIZING MEMORY IN TWO CANADIAN GRAPHIC TEXTS¹

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ABSTRACT

Since “we live in a culture of confession” (Gilmore 2001: 2; Rak 2005: 2) a rapidly growing popularity of various forms of life writing seems understandable. The question of memory is usually an important part of the majority of autobiographical texts. Taking into account both the popularity of life writing genres and their recent proliferation, it is interesting to see how the question “what would we be without memory?” (Sebald 1998 [1995]: 255) resonates within more experimental auto/biographical texts such as a graphic memoir/novel *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006) by Bernice Eisenstein and a volume of illustrated poetry and a biographical elegy published together as *Correspondences* (2013) by Anne Michaels and Bernice Eisenstein. These two experimental works, though representing disparate forms of writing, offer new stances on visualization of memory and correspondences between text and visual image. The aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which the two authors discuss memory as a fluid concept yet, at the same time, one having its strong, ghostly presence. The discussion will also focus on the interplay between memory and postmemory as well as correspondences between the texts and the equally important visual forms accompanying them such as drawings, portraits, sketches, and the bookbinding itself.

Keywords: Life writing; postmemory; memory; Canadian literature; Anne Michaels; Bernice Eisenstein, graphic memoir; biography; elegy.

Biographies, autobiographies, and various forms of life writing have achieved a very high status and visibility on the literary scene recently. In many countries

¹ This work was partially supported by the Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) under Grant UMO–2012/05/B/HS2/04004

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autobiographical texts have enjoyed high positions on bestsellers' lists. Some critics would even argue that we live in the times dominated by "a culture of confession" (Gilmore 2001: 2, also quoted in Rak 2005: 2). Julie Rak calls the popularity of memoirs, one of many diverse forms of life writing, a "boom" (Rak 2013). Moreover, in the twenty-first century, the literary market has faced a momentum described as the one in which "the age of memoir and the age of trauma have coincided and stimulated aesthetic forms and cultural practices of self-representation that mark the turn of the millennium" (Gilmore 2001: 16). As such, the recent graphic texts which rely on traumatic experiences are frequently experimental in form. Taking into account the fact that all of the aforementioned genres, despite their differences, dwell upon memory to a certain extent, it is interesting to see how the question "what would we be without memory?" (Sebald 1998 [1995]: 255) resonates within more experimental auto/biographical texts such as a graphic memoir/novel *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006) by Bernice Eisenstein and a volume, composed of illustrated portraits of writers and philosophers accompanied by a selection of quotations and elegiac poetry, entitled *Correspondences* (2013) by Anne Michaels and Bernice Eisenstein. Both texts, owing to the form in which they have been created and published, could be classified as experimental life writing. Although representing disparate forms of writing: *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* can be considered a graphic memoir whereas *Correspondences* – elegiac (biographical) poetry, they both offer new stances on the notion of the visualization of memory and correspondences between a text and visual image. The aim of this paper is to analyze different ways through which the two authors and their texts view memory as a fluid concept yet, at the same time, as one having its strong, haunting presence. The discussion will also focus on the rendition of postmemory as well as correspondences between the texts and the equally important visual forms accompanying them, such as drawings, portraits, sketches, and the bookbinding itself.

Since many critics and writers have seen Holocaust literature as impossible, or even amoral, to exist (Adorno 1992 [1962], Wyschogrod 1975, Wiesel 1975) and they have openly declared their skepticism towards Holocaust poetry and fiction, life writing practices seem to offer a new dimension through which "the hinge generation" (Hoffman 2005 [2004]: xv) or "generation of postmemory" (Hirsch 2012) can deal with the inherited trauma of the Holocaust which "is transmuted into history, or into myth" (Hoffman 2005 [2004]: xv). Therefore, the multiplicity of life writing forms may also point to the plethora of ways of coping with memory. In the postmodern era, writing about memory no longer means writing only fiction or poetry, it also suggests the creation of memory narratives which "take place at a number of different levels" (Eaglestone 2008: 75–76) and, as such, they influence the self-identity of their authors. Eaglestone, following the philosophical stance of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor's, claims that "our self-identity is in no

small part a result of the narrative and autobiographical stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves" (2008: 76). Memory narratives are "acts of remembering" as "to remember is to bring a communal body (back) together in an act of remembrance" (Eaglestone 2008: 76). That is why experimental narratives, combining autobiography, memoir, with biography and drawings, offer a new language and dimension with which Holocaust memory can be re/presented in literature.

Hirsch, in her seminal *Family Frames* (2002 [1997]), refers to memory as "an act not only of recall but also of mourning" (2002 [1997]: 243) and goes on to claim that "[t]he memorial books are acts of witness and sites of memory. Because they evoke and try to re-create the life that was and not only its destruction, they are acts of public mourning, forms of collective Kaddish. But they are also sites where subsequent generations can find a lost origin, where they can learn about the time and place they will never see" (2002 [1997]: 246–247). As a result of such an understanding of the urge to write about the Holocaust, the texts by Eisenstein and Michaels and Eisenstein analyzed here become in this light not only literary texts but acts of personal and communal mourning. Following Hirsch's understanding of postmemory and sharing similar experience, Eva Hoffman adds that for the children of the Holocaust survivors the event "will never be distant; it is a part of our interior landscape and mental theater (...) a 'post-memory' of proximity charged with feeling" (2005 [2004]: 180). Therefore, the personal responses to the familial experience of the Holocaust embedded in the 21st century postmodern search for a new form and dauntingly looking for the chance to cross certain barriers can be defined as "acts of postmemory" (Eaglestone 2008: 81) and mourning, as well as a fresh outlook on literary and artistic challenges to the idea of the visualization of memory.

Alvin H. Rosenfeld (2003) sees writing about the Holocaust as salutary for the artists despite clearly pronounced reservations towards the very idea of art after the Shoah. Not only do they relieve the trauma but they also liberate themselves from the burden of stored or inherited memories through various forms of artistic expression. Memory narratives, especially these experimental ones, would definitely cross the strict boundaries of factual and testimonial accounts, and offer a wider spectrum of memory record, which would deter from forgetfulness. This kind of writing, although falling close to exhaustion and silence, testifies to the dead (Rosenfeld 2003: 246) and calls for sites of memory. Therefore, in memory narratives rooted in the experience of the Holocaust postmemory and including other forms of artistic expression, the "'filiation' to what is absent and unrecoverable" (Eaglestone 2008: 108) takes the narrative over, enables voicing the silence, and privileges the forgotten and absent.

Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006) addresses the problem of traumatic past and its postmemory. Eisenstein, a child of immigrants

herself, was born in Toronto after World War II and has been working as an artist and editor for many years². In her text, Eisenstein deals in a discursive way with her parents' memory as well as her own postmemory, that is, the legacy, being both a privilege and a curse, her relatives have bestowed upon her. Her graphic memoir utilizes the form of a comic strip and departs from it into the direction of a more textual auto/biography as well. As a result, the book cannot be easily classified. Also, in terms of the way she treats the serious topic of Shoah, it is not a one-dimensional work in any respect as Eisenstein moves from serious, "collective Kaddish" narration to a humorous perception of herself and her legacy in the family. Throughout the text, she perceives herself primarily as a child of Holocaust survivors who is a Holocaust addict: "The Holocaust is a drug and I have entered an opium den, having been given my first taste for free, innocently, by everyone here. I have only glimpsed its power, scanning the trail of needle marks on the left forearms of each person in the room" and as such all the time craves "one more entry into a hallucinatory world of ghosts. (...) My parents don't even realize that they are drug dealers. They could never imagine the kind of high H gives" (Eisenstein 2006: 20).



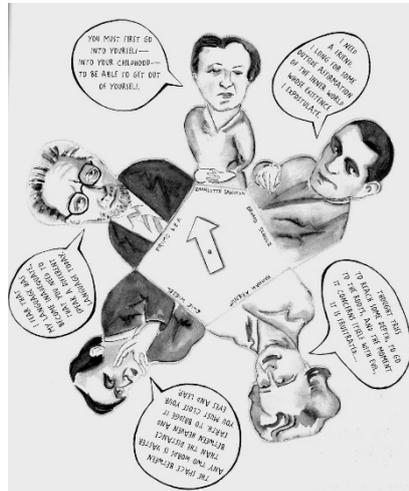
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² Her book, published in Canada in 2006, was also transformed into an animated film adaptation created in cooperation with Ann Marie Fleming, and is now available on the Internet. The film was produced by the National Film Board of Canada and directed by Ann Marie Fleming in 2010. Bernice Eisenstein cooperated with the film makers during the production. The film is based entirely on the drawings from the text of *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* as well as some additional pictures Eisenstein drew for its production. Bernice Eisenstein gave her voice and narrated the film as well. The film is available online via YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lePogWeW9Do>) (accessed 1 Nov. 2016).

In her work, Eisenstein offers not only a variegated form of expression but also a multitude of intertextual references. Apart from a selection of texts the book alludes to, there are also references to works of art, cultural and social phenomena. The discussion of the Holocaust, seen as an addiction, is illustrated with the picture of Moses throwing a stone letter H from a mountain onto – most probably – his people. This obvious allusion to Moses receiving commandments from God and smashing the Stone Tablets is clear. Eisenstein, however, does not comment explicitly on the Biblical story at this point but rather points to the Alcoholic Anonymous Program (2006: 25) discussed below. As Moses throws the letter H onto the people, together with it, he also imposes the Holocaust (and Holocaust addiction) onto them. Eisenstein regrets there is no “Holocaust Anonymous to go to, no Ten-Commandment Step Program” (Eisenstein 2006: 25) to consult and find support, and, perhaps healing. She would be willing to participate in a session of such a group if it existed, to be able to say “Hello, everyone, I am addicted to the Holocaust. Today is my first day of being clean and I don’t need the Holocaust anymore to feel like a worthy person” (Eisenstein 2006: 25). The suggestion that can be drawn from this picture and the corresponding text is, therefore, linked to the postmemorial experience of the second generation, the children of survivors. The Old Testament patriarchs, Moses among them, sent the legacy onto their people and she, as an offspring of her parents – Holocaust survivors – remains marked forever. She also envisions the shock her parents might experience upon learning that their child is an addict. In response, Eisenstein has only one answer: “I will *always* be your child” (2006: 25, original emphasis), which makes it clear that the child of survivors inherits the burden, the Holocaust legacy, and experiences the pain and torment of recurrent memories as well.

Humor and irony, which are visible in many drawings such as, for instance, the above-mentioned one picturing Moses or a portrayal of her father seen as a cowboy leaving Auschwitz gate behind, are not used in a blasphemous way but to “demonstrate [Eisenstein’s] private contribution to the rendition of the story” and “to release the pain and weight of the burden” (Drewniak 2015: 48) of postmemory. That is why, apart from offering an account of her parents’ exile from Miechów in Poland, through ghetto and concentration camps, to Canada, which would be the biographical part of the book, the text is also, or even predominantly, an artistic response to the urge of addressing the concept of postmemory.

The book begins with a drawing in which we can see a table with an arrow and a few important figures involved in the Holocaust studies, such as Primo Levi, Bruno Schulz, Hannah Arendt, Elie Wiesel, and Charlotte Salomon, each of whom offers a quote.



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These utterances can be read as messages for the artist composing the text. The picture brings to mind a vision of a session during which a group of friends and family members try to conjure up spirits or ghosts of the deceased in order to ask them important questions about the past and the future. They are supposed to offer commentary and advice. The ghosts all refer to the task of writing a Holocaust narrative and their comments can be interpreted as mottoes to Eisenstein's inquiry. What Eisenstein tries to retrieve is "absent memory" to use Fresco's and Hirsch's words³ and situates herself at the crossroads of experiencing "the absence of the dead, the absence of her parents' place of birth, the absence of memory" (Drewniak 2015: 42), the child of the Holocaust survivors enters. In order to fill in this lack, she tries to read every possible book on the Holocaust and watch every possible movie available to the person infected with the "Holocaust addiction". Eisenstein, as a child of Holocaust survivors, is in a unique position of a writer and artist who on the one hand deals with her parents' legacy in the form of postmemory, and, on the other, confronts the aforementioned emptiness. As a self-conscious and well-read artist, she is aware of her own status as an artist who comes after the already canonical works by Spiegelman (first edition 1986)⁴ as well as other (non-graphic) representations of

³ Hirsch uses the concept of 'absent memory', discussed first by Nadine Fresco (in "La Diaspora des cendres", *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 1981: 205–220), to denote the generation of parents whose war experience is silenced and, as a result, whose children have no access to the "repressed stories" (Hirsch 2002 [1997]: 243) and memories.

⁴ From the contemporary perspective one has to mention the proliferation of graphic texts referring

the Holocaust. Moreover, since some works, such as *Maus*, have already been situated within the domains of 'autographics'⁵ and referred to as 'comix' by Spiegelman himself who "prefers to categorize [his narratives] as 'comix' (...) commingling or mixing the verbal and visual models of expression" (Chaney 2011: 5), the idea of a hybrid text is by no means new to the inquiry. Furthermore, while postulating the postmemorial analysis of Spiegelman's *Maus* (Hirsch 2011: 22–41), Marianne Hirsch also sees that "the cartoonist is a hybrid creature" (2002 [1997]: 27)⁶. Therefore, the memoirist of *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* is very much sensitive to the intertextual aspect of her writing referring to the whole body of texts of culture; she is also aware of the question referring to the form of her writing/drawing.

Among the pieces of advice, there is Primo Levi's statement "I fear that my language has become inadequate, that you need to speak a different language today" calling for a new form of artistic expression, Charlotte Salomon's "You must first go into yourself – Into your childhood – to be able to get out of yourself", and Elie Wiesel's "The space between two words is vaster than the distance between heaven and earth. To bridge it you must close your eyes and leap" (Eisenstein 2006: epigraph page). Not only do they situate Eisenstein as a person whose task is to dig for stories and to grapple with her postmemory, but also as an artist who has to go beyond the traditional forms of artistry in life writing.

Hence, while looking for a new form of life writing, Eisenstein turns to a graphic novel with a twist. It definitely moves towards a graphic memoir rather than a novel, though there are sections in which the author has to fill in the blanks of not remembering or not knowing the full story. The fusion of drawings and narration also escapes the confines of a 'traditional' comic book. Freedman even calls the text "autobifictionalography, beginning in childhood and employing both word and image" (2014: 38). In her recent study on autobiographical graphic texts, Kuhlman proposes to use a more general phrase such as "graphic narrative" which "is a broad enough term to encompass both the truth claims and the fictional aspects" (2017: 126). This proliferation of terminology clearly suggests the inability to classify Eisenstein's text unambiguously on the one hand, and its

to the Holocaust and the predicament of remembering. In this context, Eisenstein's example has to be viewed as one of the early texts written after *Maus*. However, many graphic narratives followed, such as, for instance, Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own* (2006), Rutu Modan's *Exit Wounds* (2007), or Joe Kubert's *Yossel* (2011) to name just a few.

⁵ This term emphasizes "the tensions between 'auto' and 'graph' in the rapidly changing textual cultures of autobiography" (Whitlock & Poletti 2008: v), and as such may also be considered in the context of the present discussion.

⁶ "Mourning and Postmemory", a seminal text by Marianne Hirsch appeared in the same form both in the second edition of *Family Frames* (2002 [1997]) and as a chapter in Chaney's *Graphic Subjects* (2011).

extremely powerful potential of offering new meanings on the other. Apart from the generic hybridity of the text and its image-text correspondences, assuredly it is a text exploring the notion of memory.

The answer to Sebald's question in this graphic memoir doubtlessly places the author and, simultaneously, the narrator, within the paradigm of "generation of postmemory" (Hirsch 2012). Eisenstein is unable to trace the first instance of remembering, the first memory of the truth about the Holocaust, but is certain she has inherited the trauma non-verbally and it would not be possible for her to live and create without constant references to it. Following the metaphor of the Holocaust as an opium den sucking in a drug addict with utmost power, she calls for a Holocaust Anonymous Program where a person can get rid of the addiction which controls and leads one through life. Nevertheless, she sees the vanity of such a project as she claims:

Yet to rid myself of this habit [obsession with reading, writing, thinking about the Holocaust all the time], this calling, I would have to blind my eyes, cover my ears, seal my lips, and erase the truth that without the Holocaust I would not be who I am. It has seared and branded me with its stippled mark on my forearm and pulled me into its world, irrevocably, as its offspring. The collective memory of a generation speaks and I am bound to listen, see its horrors, and feel its outrage.

(Eisenstein 2006: 25)

Despite the fact that Eisenstein reconstructs her parents' history in a more or less chronological way, the narrative is by no means chronological. She tries to grasp more than facts, tries to move beyond the veil of brute events and reconsider herself and her own identity in the face of who she really is as a child of Holocaust survivors. This is exactly the moment of intersection of life stories with postmemory. What Eisenstein attempts to do is to investigate what she remembers and how the memories are stored and organized. At the same time, she sees this task as futile, because traumatic postmemory cannot be fixed and arranged systematically. Marcoux claims that "Eisenstein intermixes memorialization in the form of long prose passages with drawings [in order to] evoke the serpentine process of *postmemorial refigurations*" (2016: 200, emphasis mine). Therefore, when she says, "Yet here I am, some Jewish Sisyphus, pushing history and memory uphill, wondering what I'm supposed to be (...) all I have to do is to look up ahead and catch glimpse of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, Founding Fathers of Memory, fixed at the very top, in order to realize my folly" (Eisenstein 2006: 53–54), she highlights the process of writing seen as recollection and refiguration of the fragments she is able to gather and simultaneously unable to forget. She finds herself in a situation in which there is no forgetting, no way to hide in a safe, and devoid of memories, place. The story of a gold ring which her mother found in the "Canada" section of the camp when sorting out the clothes of the dead is also an illustration of this trap. The ring with the inscription of somebody's wedding date is

treated in the family as a token of communal trauma and identity, and as a proof of survival. While the ring is handed down to Eisenstein as a gift, it also becomes a certain burden as she is compelled to retell the story and drown herself in the legacy it symbolizes.

Furthermore, in a chapter devoted to the status of Yiddish, Eisenstein claims "Yiddish was a soul and substance of the life in our home. A *veltele*, a world within a world" (2006: 61), and although she inhaled the language quite naturally, she quickly stopped using it as she went off into the Anglophone education system. She, however, remembered not only the distant musicality of the language she later on did not use, but her mother was perplexed to have discovered one day that her daughter, Bernice, remembers not only the language but the stories told in whispering tones some fifty years ago. The stories, torn into pieces, were not really offered to children, yet the children somehow overheard them and incorporated into the glimpses of memories from childhood, to effuse them in adolescence and adult life into various forms of commemoration.

Since Eisenstein fuses the two different modes of art, words and pictures, it is noteworthy to see how her postmemory is realized in both of these ways of expression and how they complement each other. Hirsch claims that "[f]or postmemorial artists, the challenge is to define an aesthetic based on a form of identification and projection that can include the transmission of bodily memory of trauma without leading to the self-wounding and retraumatization that is *rememory*" (2012: 86). Eisenstein's artistic idiom definitely protects her from these negative aspects of "obsession" with the Holocaust. Some of the gouache pictures are grim and dark due to their black-grey-and-white aesthetics, and frequently blurred, which definitely suggests the darkness that lies at their root. Some of them, through the obscurity of shapes and dim shadows, evoke the ghostly presence of the dead, whose Eisenstein calls up to help her write the family story and fill in the blanks of the past. Others are humorous renditions of her own distance to the legacy, which is both a gift and a burden for her. Yet, both groups of drawings offer dialogical commentaries on the nature of postmemory.

The chief perception of memory which prevails in the book is that of memory being fluid. Eisenstein in a suggestive, both verbal and pictorial way, forces a conviction that "[w]ater and memory both share the same elusive nature" (Eisenstein 2006: 132). Such statements are accompanied for instance by a drawing of four figures, two women and two men who would correspond to her parents and their siblings who also got married to each other, dancing in a circle in ankle deep water. They form a circle and are encapsulated by small whirls, details of their bodies are not shown but they hold hands, except for one hand which is not pictured at all.

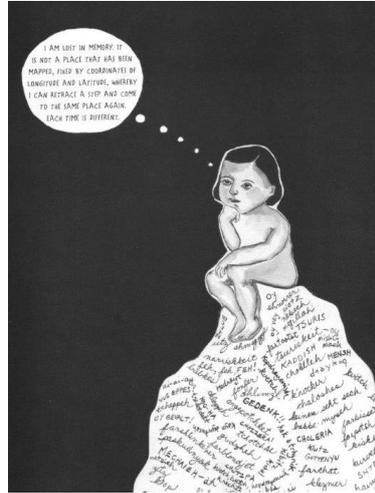


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Despite its clear intertextual references to Henri Matisse's famous paintings *Dance (I)* and *Dance*,⁷ the drawing leaves quite a lot of interpretative space, but it certainly provides a visualization of the way Eisenstein treats memory: it is neither fully accessible nor complete; it encircles, allows for interpretation but also points to the fact that there is always a shadow, a lack, space which cannot be refilled. In the definition of her own identity, the author claims that she “ha[s] always been able to step into the presence of absence (...) [and] ha[s] inherited the unbearable lightness of being a child of Holocaust survivors. Cursed and blessed. Black, white and shadowed” (Eisenstein 2006: 167).

Another important conceptualization of memory appears at the beginning of the text and is repeated twice in the initial stages of the story. First of all, there is a picture of small Bernice, sitting on a pile made of Yiddish words, and thinking (we see the thought bubble on page 10 and the same text repeated on page 19 in a plain form), “I am lost in memory. It is not a place that has been mapped, fixed by coordinates of longitude and latitude, whereby I can retrace a step and come to the same place again. Each time is different” (Eisenstein 2006: 10, 19).

⁷ Henri Matisse painted two paintings referring to dancing in which he explored the idea of movement in visual arts as well as correspondences between visual arts and music. The first one, *Dance (I)* from 1909, is now at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79124>) and the second one, *Dance* from 1910, is in The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org>).



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This demonstrates the importance of postmemory for Eisenstein, the existence of which is transformed into a lifelong task of addressing these issues. She thus sees the process of uncovering the postmemories and excavating the “childhood sense of an incomprehensible cosmos, of sacred or demonic forces” (Hoffman 2005 [2004]: 175) as the only ways of understanding who she is. Moreover, her “new language”, i.e., a combination of a comic strip, graphic auto/biography/memoir, and regular narrative is her original response to the fluidity of memory. Since memories or, to be precise, her own postmemories cannot be caught and grasped in a coherent, organized form, her life writing opens up to visual experiments and challenges, which stay in line with Gilmore’s argument that autobiographical texts have “a richly experimental past” (2001: 10) and as such they “ha[ve] always been defined by formally experimental works” (2001: 18). Furthermore, Eisenstein addresses the issues of auto/biographical writing, the boundaries of a written text as well as the individual approach to the fluidity of the second generation of survivors’ postmemory. As a writer and a painter, she tries to confront the inherited memories and traumas in her own, original way. The postmemory of the Holocaust needs to be transferred to the next generations, and, in order to make it heard and understandable, it has to be voiced in “the new language” Primo Levi called for in Eisenstein’s book.

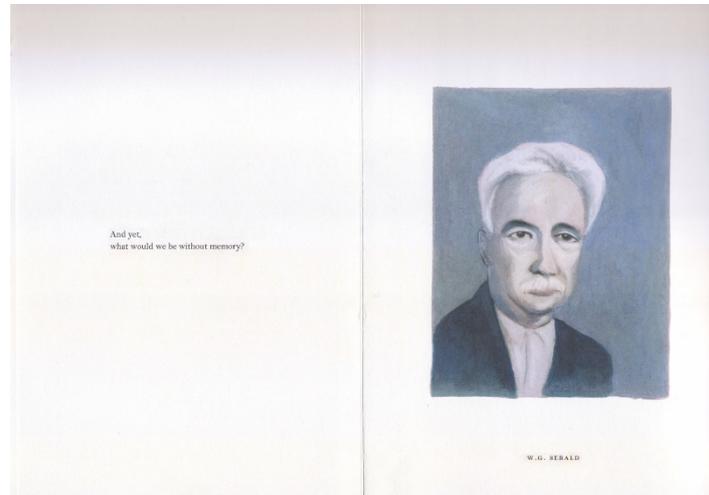
Correspondences (2013) is another experimental project Bernice Eisenstein has participated in. This time, it is created in cooperation with Anne Michaels, a poet, a novelist, a winner of the Commonwealth Prize as well as the Trillium Book

Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction (now the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction). Michaels has distinguished herself as both a poet and a novelist. She is known internationally for the beauty and precision of her language and the depth of her philosophical themes. She is the author of two worldwide bestsellers, *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) and *The Winter Vault* (2009). *Correspondences*, the most recent book, described as an elegy to her father, with illustrations by Bernice Eisenstein, was also shortlisted for the 2014 Griffin Poetry Prize. Although classified as poetry, the text escapes such clear-cut groupings. The book's binding and careful editing is noteworthy as it highlights the fact that it merges two different texts into one. It is published in the form resembling that of an accordion, in which one part is a selection of black and white drawings of famous figures linked in various ways with the Holocaust experience, and accompanied by short quotations from each person portrayed there. On the other side of these pages, there is a book-long elegiac poem commemorating Michaels's father, Isaiah.

The part of the volume, which includes pictures, consists of twenty six portrayals accompanied by quotations and as the authors claim, "the pages unfold in a myriad of arrangements, and voices speak not only from the singularity of their souls but one to another, embracing all that has been placed beneath and inside. A layered kinship is formed, a touch across the pages" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013)⁸. The figures 'invited' to appear in the project are, among others, Anna Akhmatova, Albert Einstein, Paul Celan, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Nelly Sachs, Isaiah Michaels, and Bruno Schultz. The drawings are kept in Eisenstein's familiar poetics of sober colors of black, grey, blue, and green. According to Kate Kellaway, they "subscribe to the idea of correspondence themselves, have a family likeness with their almond-eyed gravity and jade, grey and turquoise palette" (2013). There is also a profound link between the names of persons and the elegy commemorating Michaels's father as they informed his identity as a Holocaust survivor to a large extent. Moreover, on one of the covers of *Correspondences*, the readers can read, "not two to make one, / but two to make / the third, / just as a conversation can become / the third side of the page" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). The volume, then, invites a dialogic interpretation through its fusion of two texts within one⁹.

⁸ All the quotations from *Correspondences* by Anne Michaels and Bernice Eisenstein come from the 2013 edition. Due to the harmonic and circular form of the book pages are not numbered.

⁹ Although Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) discusses the polyphony of languages and heteroglossia in reference to the novel and poetry, it is worth noting that his concepts as well as the idea of dialogic interaction can be applied to such hybrid genres as well. His dialogic imagination, dialogic relation, and the claim that languages enter interactions and thus sound differently than in separation can be transferred to the fusion of genres. In both texts discussed in the present article, the dialogism appears not only on the level of languages (although there is a clear heteroglossia with the presence of English, Yiddish, Polish, German, and French) but predominantly on the level of 'language of expression', which is a combination of words and paintings.

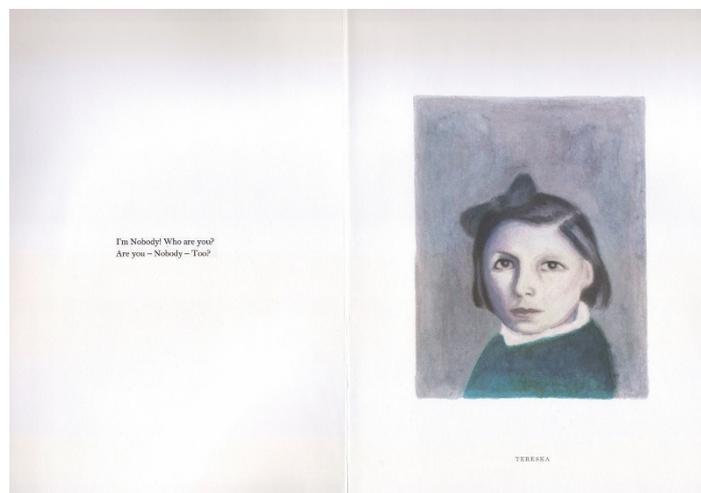


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The quotation which is used in the title of this article comes from W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*¹⁰ (1998 [1995]). Not distinguished by the authors in any way, it becomes a motto of the present inquiry for several reasons. It encapsulates the theme of memory in a perfect way, and although it best summarizes Sebald's literary output, it may also become a leitmotif of the whole *Correspondences*. Formed as a question, "And yet, / what would we be without memory?" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013), it encourages other 'characters' to speak and to answer this question for themselves and for others. Obviously, some of the citations do not form direct answers to the quandary but discursively address the notion of memory and postmemory of Holocaust survivors and the next generations. As there are simply no easy answers to such questions, the fragments of novels, memoirs, and poems that accompany each picture form an eclectic, yet paradoxically coherent, body of philosophical and poetic thoughts, and they are supposed to comment on what is left in memory after the experience of the war, genocide, and the Holocaust.

¹⁰ W. G. Sebald's book was originally published in 1995 in German as *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*. In 1998 the first English edition was issued entitled *The Rings of Saturn*. In this highly multigenic book (Sebald mixes fiction with memoir, travel book with essay and biography), the nameless narrator discusses themes of memory, identity, literature, and history.

Repeatedly, as in the case of Eisenstein's memoir, Michaels and Eisenstein include Primo Levi's picture and a quotation from his poem "Reveille", "Now we have found / our homes again. / The memories which / lie within us / are not carved / in stone" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). Again, Levi calls here for another form of remembering as stone monuments cannot carry the burden of victims' memories. In this way, this part of the volume becomes an extended elegy not only to Isaiah Michaels, but also to others who had to live after WWII burdened with the memories of the atrocities and pondering the dilemma of artistic creation in the post-Holocaust world. In this polyphony of voices, Jean Améry claims "nothing is resolved, / no conflict is settled, / no remembering / has become / a mere memory" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). Additionally, in this Kafkaesque "communication with ghosts" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013) there is a momentous picture of a girl, named Tereska, a camp survivor, who is not uttering her own words, but, nevertheless, her voice becomes so sonorous as she speaks with Emily Dickinson's famous poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – Too?" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013), which strongly suggests the whole plethora of voices, names, faces that cannot be recovered from the shadow of memory, yet there is an urge to commemorate them in this way. This is also the voice of the younger generation, killed during the war, who did not get the chance to gain their own voice yet. As a result, there is no postmemory left of them as they did not manage to pass their life experience onto the next generations.



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The second text in the volume is the elegiac poetic memoir which Michaels dedicates to the memory of her father Isaiah. The poem corresponds to the selection of portrayals and quotations from the other side of pages, as those pictured in Eisenstein's drawings happen to be "her father's kindred spirits (...), people who influenced, moved and defined him" (Kellaway 2013). These two books encapsulated within one volume can be read over and over again as they, due to the form, never end and thus create "a kind of conversation between past and present, and also past and past" (Hickman 2013). What is even more, the long poem, which is a commemoration of Michaels's father, is "an act of mourning", "a collective Kaddish", to use Hirsch's term (2002 [1997]: 243, 246), and, as such, it creates a textual site of memory. The elegy is inscribed in the story of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, their mainly epistolary relationship, whose correspondence formed the generation of Holocaust survivors and who became the figurative guests at Isaiah Michaels's ghostly assembly during which "... others began to gather at our table, / each brought another and another, stuttering, / (...) to keep us close" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). This relationship is also echoed on the other side of the text, where the collection of drawings and citations starts with that of Celan and finishes with that of Sachs. Michaels tries to commemorate her father in the dialogic way by bringing into the foreground "... the single / moment that / no one living / remembers" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013) in order to somehow anchor her father and his life story in her consciousness. The motif of a table, present in both texts, refers to the symbolic presence of ghosts of the past, all of them marked with the experience of the Holocaust, who hauntingly inform the generation of postmemory's future. There is no denial and no oblivion available but solely a dialogue a child of Holocaust survivor can enter.

Consequently, memory plays a pivotal role in Michaels's commemoration of her father. Her concept of remembering is subverted as it does not only refer to what she can remember about her father; this would simply offer a linear, memoir-like narrative. Instead, in her elegy Michaels asks questions concerning the working of memory in a poetical text through her reflection on Celan and Sachs's story as well as others' such as Salomon's, or the unnamed little Tereska's. Therefore, she invites "... not our memory of the dead, / but what the dead / remember" (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013) and, thus, reverses the trajectory of remembering. It is the dead, whose portrayals are rendered on the other side of pages as well as tens of thousands of others, and her father who are asked to uncover the unspeakable, untold, and inexpressible stories of their lives. The movement back and forth between the dead and their spirits (together with their memories) and those burdened with postmemory who live to carry on testimonial writing, evokes not only the aforementioned Celan and Sebald, but also Patrick Modiano, whose texts have been discussed within Hirsch's paradigm of

postmemory as well as prememory and paramemory (Gratton 2005: 39–45). Michaels’s unique contact with her late father demonstrates the text’s potential to explore the idea of prememory understood also as “surreal intuition” (Gratton 2005: 44). Michaels seems to share the same experience as Modiano, who “focuses obsessively (...) on the figure of his father (...) [who] proves in [his] writings to be a persistent if ever ghostly-presence” (Gratton 2005: 43). Evidently, Michaels in her poetic elegy uncovers her own premonition about the parallel reality in which the memories of the dead are ever-present in a “more paranormal frame of reference” (Gratton 2005: 44).

Poetry can address such issues in more creative ways than prose¹¹ through its usage of symbols and understatements. Michaels frequently alludes to waters, rivers being central motifs in Celan’s life and *oeuvre* as well. As a result, “water and light seem to enter into each page of the long poem, and life and death become something fluid” (Connors 2013). This fluidity, also of memory, is visible in both texts discussed here. In Michaels’s poem it is suggested by the allusion to the Seine river (in which Celan drowned himself in 1970) and to other rivers and lives enclosed “... between the Nemen and the Prut / between the Prut and the Seine / between (...) rescue and thirst” (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). Consequently, the fluidity offers a wide spectrum of interpretations of the poem on the one hand; its elusiveness provides for a space in which others can find themselves and their experiences on the other. This space is a site of memory¹² for those deeply affected by the Holocaust, those who survived the camps, but also those who were not born at all (due to the premature death of their parents in particular, or to the disappearance of the whole generation). Michaels suggests in her poem, “even the unborn have a number, the same number / not given to the mother and all those / not worth counting.” All of these people are invited into this dialogic, conversational poetry reaching into the past and future “just as a conversation can become / the third side of the page” and “... the book open / to the third side of the page” (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013)¹³.

Although Michaels is more focused in her text on a biographical portrayal of her father, through the incorporation of portraits drawn by Eisenstein and various

¹¹ It cannot be denied, however, that certain instances of poetic prose display similar intuitions and grasp such convictions as well without resorting to experimental graphic texts or poetry. In this context, one can mention Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* (1998) and *Austerlitz* (2001), Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* (1997) and principally Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), exploring the question of loss and haunting memories, or even Michaels’s *The Winter Vault* (2009), discussing the notion of the destruction of a place and the ghostly memories it generates.

¹² Sites of memory are understood here as a response to the break with the past, a certain collapse of memory and the disappearance of various “real environments of memory” (Nora 1989: 7).

¹³ For a further discussion on visualization of former camp prisoners tattooed with numbers and their significance in art, mainly photography, as well as their relations with memory and postmemory, see Hirsch (2012: 93–99).

“haiku-like” (Connors 2013) quotations she nevertheless enhances a wider reading in *Correspondences*. This elegiac, biographical poem encourages readers to reconsider their attitude to the memory of the Holocaust and its sites of/in memory. According to Whitehead, it is the Holocaust that “has (...) commonly been seen to mark a radical break in memorial consciousness, giving rise to concerns about the very possibility of representation and remembrance, and producing a concentrated focus on the traumatic memories of those who survived its terrors” (2008: 84). Michaels addresses the same issues in her text. Drawing upon the famous dilemma expressed by Casey’s travesty of Kundera’s words: “what will we choose – the way of remembering or the way of forgetting?” (2000: 4), Michaels offers a poetical commentary: “Not only what a soul remembers / but all it forgets, / as if all you know and all you don’t know / have changed places; / (...) the photos and the millions / of indifferent eyes (...) / (...) the ghost life that lives itself / beside us, the shadow of what happened / and what didn’t happen; / If ever I lose / my memory of you, walk beside me / like a stag; like a bird heard, unseen” (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). In this fragment, Michaels also calls for the haunting presence of her father and other Holocaust survivors to stand by her in order to sustain her legacy of postmemory, or paramemory, which like “other paranormal phenomena or events, lies beyond the scope of normal scientific understanding” (Gratton 2005: 43), but also to continuously inspire her. Thus, readers who do not share the specific experiences of children of survivors can still analyze their own reflections on the Holocaust. They are also invited into the dialogic conversations with the dead, and, as a result, become part of “generation of postmemory”, participating in the collective Kaddish. Undoubtedly, this is an important function of this poetry. The twenty-first-century world requires such a stance on the legacy of the past.

Again at the end of her elegy an image of a table set for her father’s “kindred spirits” returns. These are those who have affected his life as well as the “mourner / who accompanies the body, so that the soul is never, / not for a single moment, alone” (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). It is supposed to hint at circularity of reading, fluidity of memory and forgetting within those who share the same experience and whose task is to struggle with the inherited postmemory, the surface of which is “the surface of the water / cut and mended, / (...) scissored into endless fragments and joinings, / places for the light to settle / then drown, and settle again, / a line break forever changing the word above / and the word below, / altered by a breath” (Michaels & Eisenstein 2013). It is worth recalling that Eisenstein drew a picture of a table at the beginning of her *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors*, which was supposed to direct one’s reading of the text and reveal her inspirations. In *Correspondences*, Michaels and Eisenstein offer the metaphor of the table which stands for both the communal circle of “kindred spirits” and for the allusion to the circularity of the book. This image, may, therefore, trigger the unbroken reading of the text and suggest unstoppable

moving to the other side of the book in a circular move. In this way, the table image is neither at the end, not at the beginning of the book.

Both texts analyzed here offer a new and fresh outlook on the ways the “generation of postmemory” grapples with their inherited legacy through the usage of cross-generic, hybrid forms of art. Though both writers address painful and personal issues, and theoretically enclose the readers within boundaries of auto/ and bio/graphy, through their creative ideas of incorporating drawings, comic strips, unusual bookbinding as well as referring to famous figures of twentieth-century philosophy and literature they open up their texts to further identifications that outreach the closely bound life stories of the two families. These narratives also contribute to the Canadian field of life-writing, which has “blossomed in (...) recent years” (Rak 2005: 2), largely owing to its experimental autobiographies, otherwise called biotexts (Saul 2006), published in the past decades by such famous authors as Marlatt, Brossard, Ondaatje, Wah among others¹⁴, or “autographics” (Whitlock & Poletti 2008). They also try to answer the question “what would we be without memory”, which is understood more as a circular, fluid concept fusing both remembrance and forgetting. Since “many autobiographical comics artists seem to favor visual analogies of memory” (El Refaie 2012: 101), Eisenstein and Michaels also appear to privilege the pictorial metaphor over a linear sequence of words. Although the two narratives hybridize the genre of auto/biography and comics, they reflect upon the complexity of Holocaust memory and postmemory and prove the memory is clearly stored in images as well. Although already *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* refuses a one-dimensional classification as a comic book or a graphic novel, it is *Correspondences* that challenges the readers’ expectations towards illustrated, graphic, experimental, and hybrid auto/biography. Through its harmonica bookbinding and circular, never-ending shape (which alludes to circular memories all the time) Michaels and Eisenstein ingeniously push the ways of reading and conceptualizing Holocaust memory and testimony in the physical object which this book is. Despite various experiments with hypertexts published online, *Correspondences* proves that printed texts can be beautiful objects of art, but, first and foremost, offers new possibilities to show visualizations of postmemory in an innovative way. That is why, owing to the unique combination of Holocaust narratives and the form(s) of the books, both Eisenstein in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* and Michaels and Eisenstein in *Correspondences* show that as much as “grief is (...) an unbroken circle” (Kellaway 2013), it may also be “a catalyst for art” (Connors 2013).

¹⁴ This phenomenon is largely explored by Rak in her *Auto/biography in Canada* (2005: 1–29).

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