Phantom Jewishness In Contemporary European Novels

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I

When I was born the thought came to my parents that I might perhaps become a writer. Then it would be good if not everybody noticed at once that I was a Jew. That is why besides the name I was called they added two further, exceptional ones, from which one could see neither that a Jew bore them nor that they belonged to him as first names.

Walter Benjamin, ‘Agesilaus Santander’ Ibiza, 13 August 1933 (Scholem, On Jews and Judaism in Crisis, 206)

‘A person who alone remembers what others do not, resembles someone who sees what others do not see. He is in certain respects like a person suffering from hallucinations who leaves a disagreeable impression among those around him,’ writes Maurice Halbwachs. ‘What would happen if all the members of my family disappeared? I would maintain for some time the habit of attributing a meaning to their first names.’ Rememberance, like desire, endows names with a subjective reality. To name is to conjure, to make present, to bring back. The name of the beloved not only invokes the essence of a person but becomes a synonym of love. To recall a name therefore is to revive a bond. And to repudiate a name, to banish it? Can a name survive on its own, without a body, without a referent, without as much as a line on a grave, without a memory? Do names die? Names of the victims of the Holocaust are still being collected in the belief that the dignity of those who perished without leaving anyone to remember them can be symbolically recuperated if their names are made known. That which is not named suffocates as the ineffable: hence the pathos of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the horror of mass graves, the atrocity of an anonymous corpse. On the other hand, there is the contemplation of an unfamiliar name – be it on a grave – that can create the sense of an encounter.

If a name can be a portent – of presence as well as of absence, of shame, of guilt, but also of memory and responsibility – it can, too, bode ill or well both to its bearer, and to those who witness it. A name obligates. Like a ghost it can demand recognition and answerability. Literature, by virtue of naming, is the natural repository of such demands and obligations. But, unlike a cemetery, literature—when read—returns names to life.

In the opening of his 1983 book Prisoners of Hope. The Silver Age of the Italian Jews 1924-1974, H. Stuart Hughes asks ‘What would lead a non-Jew to write of Italian Jewry?’ The answer—in Hughes’ case a personal and a moral affinity that overcomes the ‘conventional anti-Semitism that had hedged [his] childhood’ (vii)—is not any less significant than the fact that the question can be asked in these very terms. While on this side of the Atlantic one can identify oneself as Jewish or non-Jewish, and in an Orthodox Jewish perspective such identification has indeed been well defined regardless of time or place, it is more problematic to make a claim to Jewishness in the Europe that still
remembers the Nurnberg laws.\(^2\) ‘What is left of identity when both language and religion are gone?’ asks Hughes, and he answers that ‘a residual sense of Jewishness’ or ‘a residual Jewish consciousness’ is to be found in literature. Hence his book analyzes the works of Italo Svevo, Alberto Moravia, Carlo Levi, Primo Levi, Natalia Ginzburg, and Giorgio Bassani.

The themes Hughes identifies as common to these authors—senilità, exile, and home as the moral base—are universal enough that they can hardly be claimed as exclusively Jewish. What facilitates Hughes’s task is that he chooses authors who, albeit to various degrees, were in fact of Jewish ancestry or identified themselves as Jews. In his lecture on ‘Jews and Germans’ Gershom Scholem makes a similar claim of vague but recognizable Jewishness of a number of renowned German Jews: ‘Even in their complete estrangement of their awareness from everything ‘Jewish’ [G.S.’s quotation marks], something is evident in many of them that was felt to be substantially Jewish by Jews as well as Germans—by everyone except themselves! – and that is true of a whole galaxy of illustrious minds from Karl Marx and Lasalle to Karl Kraus, Gustav Mahler, and Georg Simmel.\(^3\) Even if we accept Scholem’s and Hughes’ notions of residual Jewishness as a blind spot\(^4\), what about authors who are not Jewish except by a certain slant of sympathy, or whose Jewish roots remain entirely their private matter, but whose themes and characters suggest Jewishness, obliquely, but insistently? Phantom Jewishness—the problematic, even questionable sense of Jewishness that I identify in several contemporary European novels—is even paler than residual Jewishness. Phantom Jewishness is a spectral and yet persistent notion that a pronounced wave of literary texts puts it in the center of the narration. The novels and novellas I will discuss are, in chronological order, Pawel Huelle’s *Weiser Dawidek* (1987), W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1993), Erri De Luca’s *Tu, mio* (1998), Stefan Chwin’s *Esther* (1999), and Hans Maarten van den Brink’s *On the Water* (2000).

As an ethnic, religious, and cultural concept Jewishness has multiple definitions. In the contemporary European context this notion is even more complex.\(^5\) By calling a literary phenomenon phantom Jewishness I introduce a term that qualifies Jewishness as an image, perhaps a ghost of itself.\(^6\) And while it is true that annihilation, death, and hauntedness are to be found in all the works I discuss, it is my contention that in the post-Holocaust reality of Europe that had lost most of its Jewry, phantom Jewishness as seen in literature signals a consciousness of loss, a lost conscience that tentatively, belatedly, makes itself known. More than an echo of the past, more than a mere return of a repressed truth, the appearance of phantom Jewishness constitutes an admission of the inadmissible and an incantatory call for a renewal.

Pawel Huelle’s *Weiser Dawidek* (1987) and Stefan Chwin’s *Esther* (1999), both announce the otherness of their eponymous characters. To the contemporary Polish reader these names look and sound foreign, perhaps vaguely German, but are also obviously Biblical. In addition the name Esther echoes the name of the legendary Jewish lover of king Kazimierz the Great, known as Esterka. Neither the deadpan nor the almost exotic quality of these titles is preserved in the English translation of Huelle’s title (*Who Was David Weiser?* ), whose question suggests that the protagonist’s identity is problematic. In the original the last name combined with the diminutive of that particular first name seem unquestionable at least to the middle-aged or older Polish readers who
ultimately recognize them as Jewish. A name, after all, is shorthand for identity. To the youngest Polish generation these names are simply unfamiliar.

Who is Dawid Weiser is the question that Huelle’s novel attempts and fails to answer in a manner satisfactory to its narrator or its readers. The twelve-year old Jewish boy’s mysterious disappearance sets off an investigation whose course, interspersed with flashbacks and jumps forward, constitutes the plot of Weiser Dawidek. But what does it mean to be Jewish in 1957 in Poland, where the novel takes place, and again in late 1980s and early 1990s in Poland, where the novel was being read? To answer this question let us look back to the pre-war era. In 1926 Witold Gombrowicz writes a short story about the misadventures of an unaccommodated Polish-Jewish youth. The first version of the story is entitled ‘The Memoir of Jakub Czarniecki,’ while in the second edition Gombrowicz changes the ostensibly Jewish first name Jakub (Jacob) to Stefan. In ‘Stefan Czarniecki’s Memoir,’ the main character's mixed origin (Polish aristocratic father, mother né Goldwasser) makes him, in his own words, into a raceless, colorless being, a ‘neutral rat.’ Stefan is the site of what his father calls an ‘inner pogrom,’ a reality he attempts to escape by becoming an uhlan, the epitome of Polishness.

Gombrowicz’s story suggests that while Jewish identity in Poland before the Holocaust may have been problematic, at least it was possible to address it directly. Stefan’s lack of clear identity seems radical against the background of his parents whose identities are drawn sharply, like caricatures. Huelle’s Dawid Weiser, on the other hand, never admits to any confusion of his own, neither does he announce an allegiance to anything greater than his immediate environment, the city of Gdańsk with its layers of multicultural history, but has no parents, only a Jewish grandfather. Dawid is an orphan and an exile, a citizen of Gdańsk without a birth certificate but with literary parentage. His oblique Jewishness makes him a kin of Recha, Nathan’s adoptive daughter in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Nathan der Weise (1779). Just like Recha, Dawid is not brought up in Judaism, nor in any particular religion, but rather in the moral and worldly wisdom of his Jewish caretaker, the tailor Abraham Weiser. Before answering Sultan Saladin’s question about his ‘moral law,’ Lessing’s Nathan decides that ‘To be a Jew outright won’t do at all.—But not to be a Jew will do still less.’ (Nathan the Wise, 231) In the play’s denouement, Recha turns out to be related both to the Muslim Saladin and to the Knight Templar, but she remains Nathan’s daughter. Her supposed Jewish identity, on the basis of which she is judged throughout the play, is a function of her love for her adoptive father. Dawid Weiser, like Recha, might indeed not be Jewish by blood, but only by his association with Abraham Weiser. Can identity be created through projection? Can anti-Semitism make a Jew?

Weiser’s magical powers, his detailed knowledge of the Danzig from before his birth, as well as his status as a messianic and satanic figure at once also make him akin to Grass’s Oskar Matzerath from Die Blechtrommel. But Weiser is even more like Joachim Mahlke, the protagonist of Grass's Katz und Maus. Like Mahlke, Weiser transforms himself from a scapegoat into a semi-military, semi-religious leader. Just as Mahlke is flamboyantly Catholic and vaguely Polish, so Weiser is blatantly non-sectarian and vaguely Jewish. Grass's narrator in Katz und Maus, Pilenz, like Huelle’s narrator Heller after him, is spellbound by the other boy's aura and likens Mahlke to the figure of the Messiah. When one of Weiser’s ‘disciples’, Szymon, claims that God has more important matters than to worry about Weiser, who ‘is Jewish, anyhow’, another of
Weiser’s followers, Piotr, reminds him that Jesus was a Jew, too—‘and if he was God's son, that means that God is a Jew as well, doesn't it? If your father is Polish (...) then you are born Polish, while if he were German, you would have been born German’ (Dawidek 95). The comparison with Christ made explicit, Weiser’s identity remains ever more mysterious, because as the narrator tells us, in the city archives the two rubrics marked ‘parents’ in Weiser’s case are blank. If Abraham Weiser is indeed Dawid’s grandfather, he must have known the name of at least one of Dawid’s parents and if he did not divulge it, he did so on purpose, argues the narrator. Why conceal a name? Huelle’s novel is set in 1957, the year of Huelle’s birth, and the year in which Wisława Szymborska published her poem entitled ‘Jeszcze’ /Still’:

The name Nathan beats the wall with its fist,
the name Isaac sings a mad hymn,
the name Aaron is dying of thirst,
the name Sarah begs water for him.

Don’t jump from the boxcar, name David.
In these lands you’re a name to avoid,
you’re bound for defeat, you’re a sign
pointing out those who must be destroyed.

At least give your son a Slavic name:
he’ll need it. Here people count hairs
and examine the shape of your eyelids
to tell right from wrong, ‘ours’ from ‘theirs’. ¹⁰

The question of nationality, a portentous inheritance of the nineteenth century, continues to reverberate in the post-war Gdansk, because the few remaining Danzig Germans, Kashubians, Poles, live alongside the many repatriates from the former Polish east. Abraham Weiser, Dawid’s alleged grandfather, ‘who had lived a whole era somewhere in the south-east among Ukrainians, Germans, Russians, Poles, Jews, and Armenians’ (Dawidek, 49) is one of Poland’s last Jews, not only displaced but himself orphaned by the annihilation of his people. The mysterious occultation of his grandson is both a reflection of that loss and a narrative challenge.

Just like Grass, Huelle doubts both history and memory. His Gdańsk is yet another Polish town trying to shake off not only the nightmare of the war, but also a peculiar sense of shame. The shame is never explicitly defined and yet it is detectable throughout the novel. The boys’ teacher M-ski’s claim that ‘no European city would be ashamed to have a zoo like the one in Oliwa’ (Dawidek, 42) prompts the narrator's question: ‘Did he mean by that that we didn't live in Europe, or that, apart from the zoo, we had something to be ashamed of?’ (Dawidek, 42). In the 1992 uncensored version of the novel Huelle allows himself a more explicit remark: ‘Today, when I no longer visit zoological gardens, M-ski's sentence about the most beautiful zoo in Europe sounds ridiculous and stupid. As if in a foreign city a guide told us “Here, ladies and gentlemen, is the most beautiful prison ever built in our city, or perhaps in all of Europe”.’ (Dawidek, 42) On the other end of Poland teachers show their pupils the largest concentration and extermination camp in Europe.
The Poland of late 1970s was a country that had just come out of the war, despite the fact that the war ended thirty years earlier. Children were taught to kiss each piece of bread that fell in memory of wartime famine they had not experienced but that was only too real to their parents and grandparents; they played neither cops and robbers nor cowboys and Indians but Poles and Germans; when they woke up to a siren in the middle of the night, it was to the thought that this must be an air raid. Amidst all this presence of the war there was also an immense absence, an area of occultation, namely the Holocaust. They were taught about Auschwitz and other extermination camps but the information was skewed. There was no official information about the pogroms of the late 1940's and the events of 1968. Thus the national collective memory of the Holocaust in Poland dissolved, was deliberately diluted and adulterated so that by the late 1980s, when the occluded dimensions of Polish history came to the foreground, only a vague but persistent phantom survived, nourished by private, fragmentary knowledge and by literature.

Literature under totalitarianism has only one motto: sapienti sat. If post-war Polish literature had to be elusive on things Jewish, post-1989 Polish literature should be relatively open. Why does Stefan Chwin in his—presumably uncensored—novel Esther (1999) beat about the bush, hint, and drop allusions, never defining his heroine squarely? Not only does Esther Simmel disappear at the end novel, but her trace is so faint as to make any recuperation other than an aesthetic, literary one impossible:

And at the bottom of the beautiful, dark eyes of Viola Salzman, at the bottom of the tired eyes of Mr. Salzman, at the bottom of the still cheerful, bright eyes of Mr. Erwin Holzer, at the bottom of the eyes of Efraim Mandels, Julia Hirs, Dr Hildebrand, Markiewicz, professor Arkuszewski, Janek Drozdowicz, at the bottom of the eyes of all these people, good and bad, happy and unhappy, full of hope and despairing, people who walked in the streets of Warsaw, who went shopping on Nowy Świat, who used to spend their evenings at the Lourse and in Café Ziemiańska, at the bottom of the eyes of all these people, somewhere deep, among thousands half forgotten images, there still lasted, like a silver coin sinking in water, an ever paler, ever feeble reflection of the face of a young woman with dark hair put up high like a crown, who once, on a sunny day, appeared in the house on Nowogróźdza Street and who then left on a train of the Warsaw-Vienna line to go far south. (Esther, 330/331, my translation)

The unnamed Esther is but an image, one that would be submerged forever if not for its perception by the narrator. This allegory of memory – a literary, narrative memory that out of the pathos of life salvages a miracle of rememberance – is captivating precisely because in this long passage Esther is never named, while everybody else is. And these names make a curious list, as if of actors in a play that is no longer playing. A list that would not sound the same now but that resonates with another list, one that W.G. Sebald makes for us in The Emigrants: ‘It was not possible to decipher all the chiselled inscriptions, but the names I could still read—Hamburger, Kissinger, Wertheimer, Friedlander, Arnsberg, Auerbach, Grunwald, Leuthold, Seeligman, Frank, Hertz,
Goldstaub, Baumblatt and Blumenthal—made me think that perhaps there was nothing the Germans begrudged the Jews so much as their beautiful names, so intimately bound up with the country they lived in and with its language.’ (224) This litany of names resounds ominously, like an echo in the void, when read from across the Atlantic, where instead of finding it at a cemetery, one may well put together a similar list using a phone book.

Just as Chwin, as Huelle, as De Luca, Sebald too uses names as a means, the oldest, of conjuring up a presence. A name can be more than a phantom, a disembodied essence of a person. When in Sea of Memory the narrator repeats ‘Chaie, Chaiele’ we recognize the impulse that makes the name of the beloved not only a beckoning and a call, but the very declaration of love. In The Emigrants it is a phantom love that answers a phantom call: ‘...and I was touched, in a way I knew I could never fathom, by the symbol of the writer’s quill on the stone of Friedrike Halbleib, who departed this life on the 28th of March 1912. I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss despite so many years that have passed since her departure.’ (224/225) Sebald’s narrator projects himself back to the time past when this woman, unknown to him but for her name, died, and he mourns her death not only as if he had known and loved her, but as if his mourning continued to connect them, thus resuscitating her, however briefly, however illusorily. Why her? We are to understand that the writer’s quill prompts the empathy, the connection – but the woman’s death in 1912 is not without its import. Friedrike Halbleib may not be remembered for her writings, and she is dead, but her death comes before the Apocalypse. In mourning her, the narrator mourns the innocence of another kind of death, the kind that takes away his ability to think it. Faced with the empty grave of a couple deported in November of 1941, the narrator abdicates his stance as a chronicler and resorts to gesture, placing a stone on the grave, ‘according to custom.’ (225) Whether the custom is his by birthright does not matter—to honor the dead is a commandment we all share. The next paragraph hints at the narrator’s self-identification with the Jews more clearly, although by no means unambiguously. ‘... I felt increasingly that the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they cleaned everything up, were beginning to affect my head and my nerves.’ (225, my emphasis) The idea of rememberance as value and responsibility is identified by Gershom Scholem as one of the ‘Jewish categories’ in the work of Walter Benjamin.11 Rememberance is a fundamental mode of Sebald’s writing as well. Insofar as modern literature can resemble ancient prayer, Sebald’s incantatory, hypnotic prose is an exercise in rememberance as a religious, hieratic experience.

But let us return to that image from Esther: at the bottom of other people’s eyes, her reflection from before the war, from before the end of that world. In its aura of a calm before a storm, of a moment of seemingly carefree suspense in the face of an impending doom, Stefan Chwin’s novel harks back to Giorgio Bassani’s Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini (1962). The title heroine appears once as femme fatale, once as Madonna. Much like Dawid Weiser, she concentrates the environment’s hatred: ‘And this Jewess?—asks the blackmailer Mueller, a shady character straight out of Dostoevsky. ‘My heart stopped,’ admits the narrator. ‘What Jewess?’ ‘Well, this... this Miss Simmel.’ ‘She is not Jewish’ (Esther165). In ‘Poles and the Jews: How Deep the
Guilt?\textsuperscript{12}, the Polish historian Adam Michnik confronts the moral implications of the genocide at Jedwabne\textsuperscript{13} by using the lens of his own embroiled Polish-Jewish identity: ‘Writing these words, I feel a specific schizophrenia: I am a Pole, and my shame about the Jedwabne’s murder is a Polish shame. At the same time, I know that if I had been there in Jedwabne, I would have been killed as a Jew.’\textsuperscript{14} Such were the stakes in Poland and in Europe not long ago and Michnik is right to remind us of that, particularly here in the United States. Hence when Chwin’s narrator states unequivocally that Esther is not Jewish, he does so on the moral assumption that it is permissible, even imperative to lie in defense of somebody else’s life. But when, in despair, he attempts to kill the blackmailer, be it with somebody else’s hands, he reminds us of Dostoevsky’s characters as well as of Erri De Luca’s young protagonist willing to murder the murderers. Both examples demonstrate that the insistence on such categorizations (‘Is she Jewish?’) does us no good because in the effort to offend or defend a particular category of people we cross the line of humanity as such. Perhaps therein lies the moral of this pale story: to resuscitate Esther as a Jew is to condemn her to certain death, to kill her off with all those who had been killed. To keep her image, her phantom alive, the narrative not only refuses to categorize her according to a deadly bureaucratic machine that inscribed in every passport ‘nationality’ next to ‘citizenship,’ but it only hints at her reality. The novel, however, does not end in dissolution. On the contrary—-even though Alexander’s tribute to his beloved, the train station Esterhof, burns down in the war leaving only ‘a bridge connecting with a brick arch the two sides of the valley’ (344), Esther’s presence is to be felt in the last, epilogic chapter in which not Alexander, but the external narrator speaks of his love for a woman, love that ‘changes the city into her touch, flowing into the rows of letters on paper in such a way that others almost failed to recognize the city streets and houses he wrote about because they were her streets and her houses.’ (345)

Pawel Huelle’s \textit{Weiser Dawidek} and Stefan Chwin’s \textit{Esther} are literary testimony to the persistence of memory and to the effort of remembrance. They are both novels of mourning, elegiac and lyrical. Both focus on a central character who, beginning with the title, is ostensibly Jewish although this Jewishness is neither self-proclaimed nor based on anything concrete. Neither text deals directly with the years of the Holocaust: the plot of Chwin’s novel mostly predates the war, while Huelle’s is set in 1957. Contrasted with the direct literary testimonies of the Holocaust in Poland (Nałkowski, Borowski, Rozewicz, Gryenberg) and elsewhere in Europe (Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel) the Polish literary account of the Holocaust of the 1980’s and 1990’s is remarkable for its elusiveness, especially when one considers that it comes about as a result of the freedom of speech. Chwin and Huelle belong to the second-generation authors who are not necessarily Jewish but who give expression to the muted voices of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

The critical acclaim and popularity of Huelle’s and Chwin’s novels suggests that such representation has a great resonance in the Polish readership perhaps because it corresponds to the vague sense of what has been missing in the postwar Polish identity. To all Poles this is a necessary phantom pain, one that must be acknowledged and whose story must be told. Chwin’s and Huelle’s novels brought it to the fore of national consciousness—a literary answer to a historical and a moral imperative—before Jan Gross’s book revealed evidence that makes the expression ‘phantom pain’ not only too real but also macabre.
I call Weiser’s and Esther’s Jewishness phantom Jewishness because it is intangible and yet persistent. It cannot be defined in religious terms, neither is it clearly cultural. Its closest definition is literary, intertextual and hence seemingly irrelevant to most — because who, outside of comparatists, will know or care that Esther harks back not only to the Book of Esther, but also to Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* and Giorgio Bassani’s *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*. But literary Jewishness can translate into life.

II

Haia, Haiele era il respiro delle cose intorno a portare quel nome, io lo ascoltavo in testa come una regola per non vacillare, Haia, Haiele.

Erri De Luca, *Tu, mio*, 45

The elegiac mode of senilità that H. Stuart Hughes identifies in the works of Alberto Moravia and Italo Svevo (‘the world-weariness so often associated with a lack of clear identity’ and ‘the self-indulgence of imagining [oneself] prematurely worn-out’ (158)) the senilità that he says lingers in Bassani’s work but is largely overcome in Primo Levi and Natalia Ginzburg—this elegiac mode not only returns in the work of Erri De Luca (born in 1950 in Naples) but combines with the other theme Hughes isolated in the works of the Silver Age, namely exile. The narrator of *Sea of Memory* (*Tu, mio* 1998), a sixteen year old Italian boy, unwittingly becomes the vital link to an orphaned Jewish girl’s childhood, and to accomplish that connection he feels himself precociously aged. Not only do his feelings and motivations, everything down to his changed voice, become the girl’s father’s, but he is thereby in the position of an exile: ‘You’ve suddenly become an old man in a marvellous way. You are someone who has come from far away, like me, someone who has disembarked in a new land, has grey hair, and wonders how he is going to get along.’ (*Sea of Memory*, 41)

Caia is introduced as a Rumanian without a family, an orphan attending a Swiss boarding school. From the start the narrator, who meets her on the island of Ischia on vacation, questions her identity. She is an outsider, and while from Italy Rumania might seem quite close to Russia, when the boy asks if her name is Katia, he is probing for a difference that he himself hardly understands: ‘What on earth could have made me think her name was Katia? Hadn’t I heard her called Caia more than once? What was I seeking: to divine, to unearth something the others had overlooked. (…) She was not Caia, a name, she was a person who had that name.’ (21) For the nameless narrator the search for something behind the name, ‘something that hasn’t been revealed to anyone else,’ is the first motion of love. He accepts her untold secret as inviolable, deserving of protection, of love. So when the revelation comes—from Nicola the fisherman, the man who had been in the war—it comes as ‘a collision, a slap, a betrayal.’ (36) The fact that Caia’s real name is Chaia not only places her person in the long line of shadows, of suffering, but also saddles the boy who loves her with guilt: his life had never been threatened or bereft the way hers had been. In Erri De Luca’s book guilt does not remain passive—it becomes a responsibility, a call to vengeance.

Just as in *Weiser Dawidek* Abraham Weiser, Dawid’s grandfather, comes from a place where nationality mattered, where Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Russians, Armenians all lived together and yet aware of their differences, so Nicola too, understands a difference
that the young narrator ignores: ‘When you came along it was all over, no Germans, no Jews, all you saw were Americans, smuggling, black market, a whole business of dollars.’ (36) For Nicola the unspeakable tragedy of the war is encapsulated in a gesture of utmost despair and hope he had witnessed: a Jewish mother pressing her child onto an Italian soldier, the enemy soldier. ‘... and we could do nothing,’ (37) he says. At the end of the novella Chaia leaves because just as Esther, as Weiser, as David, as Sebald’s four exiles, she, too, is an ‘exit’ character. But in Sea of Memory the narrator does not merely contemplate her disappearance, he acts.

What kind of existence does Chaia’s father, who perished in the Holocaust, acquire in the mind of a young Neapolitan born after the war, to whom Jewishness means nothing? His main source of knowledge, outside his moral heart, is the man who had been in the war, who remembers. Thus the narrator’s moral choices are determined in the novel not by his own experience, but by the vicarious experience of the war, by a kind of postmemory of the horror inflicted by the German and the Italian soldiers on innocent victims.

Postmemory as defined by Marianne Hirsch applies to the children of Holocaust survivors but, as she herself suggests, the term ‘may also describe the second-generation memory of other cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences.’ (420) Postmemory is linked to ‘exile from the space of identity’ (421) that, however, seeks to become a bridge. But it is also defined by an absence – of the direct experience of the lost culture and of the horror of its loss. ‘Full or empty, postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall.’ This definition of postmemory demands the dybbuk as its metaphorical incarnation. In Sea of Memory, postmemory is not the memory displaced onto the younger generation, but rather transferred onto someone who is neither a survivor nor a child of survivors. The narrator is possessed—by his love for the young Jewish girl, and by the loving spirit of her dead father.

‘With death as the photographs’ latent content, commemoration becomes rememoration – a collective act of resistance against forgetting.’ The sepia postcards reproduced in Esther, as well as the black and white photographs in Sebald’s The Emigrants mesmerize because we think we recognize them. No matter how subjective, personal, even private these images maybe, they are in the end abstractions, pure allegories that belong to all willing to contemplate them. Like Baudelaire’s images of old Paris that become allegories in his poem ‘Le cygne,’ and like all allegory for Benjamin, these images ‘go away empty-handed’, worse yet: they leave us empty-handed as well. Because just as Heller in the last scene of Weiser Dawidek sits in mute anamnesis at the entrance to the tunnel where Dawid had disappeared, so, too, Sebald’s narrator is arrested in a melancholy contemplation of an image that holds the place of an absence.

Indeed Sebald’s book ends with a photograph that is not shown, only described as an emblem of absence, a disembodied allegory. The scene in which the narrator remembers the photograph takes place in Midland Hotel in Manchester, that he feels is ‘a hotel somewhere in Poland.’ ‘En Pologne, c’est-a-dire nulle part,’ because Poland in the nineteenth century, when the Midland was built, and in 1940, in the moment of narrative remembrance, is absent from the map of nations. The Emigrants thus ends in a place as much utopian as it is dystopian: a ghostly reminder of its past glory, Hotel Midland stands like a giant tomb, an apparition projected from an elsewhere (Poland) into
a no-place (deserted Manchester that is no longer itself). Hotels in general signal the chronotope of modern exile—they embody the purposeful but failed effort to recreate the aura of home. It is in such a place that the narrator recalls the photographs taken in 1940 in the Litzmannstadt ghetto in Łódź—the city, he reminds us, ‘once known as polski Manczester’ (236). These images are Apocalyptic avant la lettre: ‘strangely deserted pictures, scarcely one of which showed a living soul, despite the fact that at times there were as many as a hundred and seventy thousand people in Litzmannstadt, in an area of no more than five square kilometers.’ (236) Absence is layered upon absence, destruction upon destruction. The only life is that of the narrative cut short by the last sentence that evokes the Parcae.

Before the final cut the speaker beholds a—remembered only—photograph of three young Jewish women at a loom. His connection to them springs up like a voiceless dybbuk: ‘The irregular geometrical patterns of the carpet they are knotting, and even its colours, remind me of the settee in our living room at home.’ (237, my emphasis) Home is the absent center of this novel whose first sentence proclaims and defines the narrator as someone ‘in search of somewhere to live’ (3), and whose four main characters are called ‘die Ausgewanderten’ but are in fact more dejected than emigrants, more dejected even than exiles because they have no certainty of where home is, if it is. The narrative’s thread extends from the homelessness announced in the opening, through labyrinthine travels the narrator undertakes in the guise of research on his subjects and that take him, among other places, to America, simultaneously the epitome of exile and the original site of longing remembered from childhood dreams. Looking for traces of his great-uncle Ambros Adelwarth, the narrator arrives in Ithaca, NY only to lodge in a shadowy guesthouse and to roam in a deserted sanatorium. The sole semblance of home he finds is a faint memory of a familiar object revived by a photograph beheld only as a hallucinatory remembrance. This sui generis mise en abyme is staged in a place that is itself a layered absence of home (Germany): a ruined hotel in England that feels like Poland, where the narrator thinks he can hear a song popular in 1966-67, his first winter away from home: ‘The old home town looks the same as I step down from the train.’ (234) Sentimental? Worse yet, because the song is sung by an amateur, and followed by an ‘arioso’ or two from Wagner performed by a ‘heroic tenor known as Siegfried’ (235) who wears a Homburg hat like that of Ambros Adelwarth. But instead of a quaint English scene from which German kitsch beckons as if from a postcard, the view here is melancholy to the point of acedia: ‘in the Midland’s turret room above the abyss on the fifth floor, I heard him again for the first time since those days. The sound came from so far away as if he were walking about behind the wing flats of an infinitely deep stage.’ (ibid., my emphasis) Melancholy: a vertiginous perspective of infinite loss.

It is there, ‘on those flats, which in truth did not exist’ (ibid.) that the narrator sees ‘one by one, pictures from an exhibition that [he] had seen in Frankfurt the year before.’ (ibid.) The ontological status of this vision is, or ought to be, feeble, more feeble even than, in Chwin’s novel, Esther’s sinking reflection in the eyes of the people who once knew her. After all, this is only a photograph of now almost certainly dead women projected by a desirous memory. What does this memory seek? The narrative is clear: it seeks connection, it must justify a connection in order to accept responsibility. The German men from Litzmannstadt, photographed ‘with their girlfriends and wives, all—without exception—in high spirits,’ (236) stand in such contrast to the deadly contortion
of the images of the others that one begs for a denial of complicity. But the narrator, and the reader with him, finds himself in the most discomfitting position of being the onlooker, the mute witness: ‘all three [women] are looking at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera.’ (237) The narrator is unable to withstand their gaze.

The novel’s final sentence is a rhetorical question: ‘I wonder what the three women’s names were—Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors, and thread.’ (ibid.) What the three women’s names were. Why not are? If the women were twenty years old in 1940, they would only be seventy-one in 1991. We are to understand, however, that save for a miracle, they are not. But even if these women are no more, don’t names persist? If we do not commonly say of the dead: ‘His name is X. He is dead now, but his name remains X,’ it is because between a name and its bearer there is a connection that death annihilates. The photos-phantoms offer the narrator in The Emigrants his only chance at resuscitation. By juxtaposing common Jewish names with the ominous Latin names of the three Fates, he, too finds himself doomed. One spins, one holds, and the third is poised to cut his fate. Or does the novel’s last sentence signify the survival of the dead, as long as there is a thread? ‘And so they are ever returning to us, the dead’ (23) ends the story of Dr Henry Selwyn. Paul Bereyter’s story closes with the recounted ‘image of death’ that ‘passed over like the shadow of a bird in flight.’ (63) ‘Memory,’ writes the protagonist of the third part, Ambros Adelwarth, ‘often strikes me as a kind of dumbness.’ (145)

‘Paul Bereyter’ opens with an account of the eponymous character’s suicide. Bereyter had been the narrator’s school teacher and now (1984), as the narrator, himself away from home, reads about his death in a German newspaper his attention is drawn to one sentence:

> Almost by way of an aside, the obituary added, with no further explanation, that during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practising his chosen profession. It was this curiously unconnected, inconsequential statement, as much as the violent manner of his death, which led me in the years that followed to think more and more about Paul Bereyter, until, in the end, I had to get beyond my own very fond memories of him and discover the story I did not know. (28)

This is the same narrative impulse and the same denial that is made explicit in Weiser Dawidek, in Esther, in Sea of Memory, and is implicit but nonetheless present in On the Water. It is the ‘almost by the way of an aside,’ and the ‘unconnected, inconsequential statement’ that draws our attention to what Sebald’s narrator is saying. He admits to not having known his teacher well and wanting ‘belatedly’ to get closer to him, to imagine the dead man’s life. But he is quick to concede his supposed failure as well: ‘Such endeavours to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul Bereyter, until, in the end, I had to get beyond my own very fond memories of him and discover the story I did not know. (29)

Precisely what kind of emotional moments would constitute not merely ‘trespass’ but ‘wrongful trespass,’ we are not told. Indeed, as readers we are asked to be presumptuous ourselves by assuming that to imagine a broken life of
inconsolable solitude that ends in a suicidal death is wrong, because the posthumous nature of this empathy implies our own—belated—responsibility therein.

Belatedness is the leitmotif of the entire novel. Another exile, Mme Landau, who left Germany in 1933 and met Paul Bereyter ‘far too late,’ that is in 1971, recounts their muted love story that is all the more powerful for its reserve. As Paul Bereyter’s life emerges from Mme Landau’s memories, the narrator learns of the man’s Jewish origin: ‘Mme Landau was not in the least surprised that I was unaware, despite the fact that I came from S. and knew what the town was like, that old Bereyter was what was termed half Jewish, and Paul, in consequence, only three quarters Aryan.’ (50) This revelation comes towards the end of the story, almost in passing. Why does it matter? After all Paul was not only spared in the Holocaust, but he served in the German army for six years, including the war. After the war he returned to his native village because ‘he was a German to the marrow.’ (57) In his review of Sebald’s novel Vertigo, Anthony Lane comments on the seemingly impenetrable aura of the book, contrasting it with The Emigrants, which book, he says ‘knows too well the cause of people’s upheaval.’ (New Yorker, 134) Lane may be right about the book knowing it but this is not to say that all its readers necessarily do. Because, as Andre Aciman writes in his review, The Emigrants is ‘an elusive blend of eloquence, riddle and revelation’ and yet ‘Sebald’s subject remains nothing subtle at all, but rather our century’s most devastating chapter, the Holocaust and the disappearance of European Jewry.’ (Commentary Magazine, 1997) This literary meditation on the aftereffects of the Holocaust in Europe is not only belated but comes to us muffled, refracted, almost phantasmatic – and evasive.

The artist Christian Boltanski, ‘born the very day Paris was liberated from Nazi occupation’, says of his installations: ‘I have never used images from the camps. My work is not about, it is after.’ Sebald was born in 1944. Huelle’s Dawid Weiser was born in 1945, and Weiser Dawidek is, most ostensibly, not about, but after. Even the novels whose plot is set before 1939 are still about the aftermath because they are written with the consciousness of what happened. But after what? If the event itself is occluded, what does it mean to come in its wake? How can one, born after the fact, expiate, explain, exculpate or redeem oneself? Are we all, noless volens, after-comers, posthumous children of a catastrophe? To bemoan one’s own homelessness in face of so much death and desolation would be ignoble, so instead Sebald’s narrator becomes a wandering reflection of those he writes about, an unaccommodated phantasmatic exile whose crime is that he neither died nor was expelled from home.

If these contemporary European novels that exemplify to various degrees a tentative, suggestive Jewishness can be said to include Hans Marten van den Brink’s On the Water (2000), the novella would be at the extreme of this new genre. The Jewish boy of the story is Jewish in name only—his name is David—, otherwise he seems to be a body who utters a few terse phrases that spellbind the narrator. It is not clear that his Jewishness matters as anything else than a prelude and pretext to his off-stage death. It is not clear that he is anything but the body that converges the young narrator’s desires—and it is the narrator, and not the elusive object of his love, who seems in exile in Amsterdam, coming as he does from a profoundly muted, loveless family that makes Kafka’s protagonists look positively happy. One cannot help but ask if David had to be Jewish. Or could he have been German, like the lover in Marguerite Duras’s Hiroshima mon amour? Or even a glove found in the street, or a photograph of an unknown idol
that inspires a fetishistic passion? Does David’s feeble Jewishness come from assimilation or from Anton’s ignorance? In a seeming reversal of fortune this however faintly Jewish character is the one who ‘has the face and body of someone who at birth was given not just a life, but the whole world in his lap.’ (3) On the other hand Anton—the narrator and the abject center of the novella—as the odd man out who suffers from an exilic syndrome: ‘I always remained terrified of not belonging where I most longed to be.’ (28) Anton is the Jew.

It is the summer of 1939, days before the end of the world. The two young men are paired in a boat, training for a race, with Anton framing himself as the scapegoat, as if in advance accepting the guilt he will feel as the survivor: ‘I had the constant suspicion that I might be the hitherto undiscovered defective cogwheel in our machine, and that once I was removed things were bound to go smoothly.’ (31) David, on the other hand remains an elusive figure of both ‘irony and sincerity, one tempered by the other, creating a sense of both distance and warmth, which besides a gesture towards the other person was a confirmation of his own unapproachability.’ (38) The description of David’s house is a distant echo of the magna domus from Giorgio Bassani’s Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini: the garden, the thick wall of foliage, ‘the green summerhouse with a slate roof, for the pleasure and amusement of his elder sister.’ (92) David, like the Ferrarese family, seems immune from the impending destruction: ‘Those born here had no need to fear anything.’ (ibid.) And yet, as in Bassani’s novel, death is already there. The last image of the two young men together in the boat is funereal: ‘Motionless, surrounded by blue water, not a ship with a crew but a sarcophagus.’ (101) While Bassani’s novel opens with a visit to an Etruscan necropolis, van den Brink’s novella ends with a death that lacks both witnesses and tangible monuments. ‘If anyone had looked down from a first floor balcony of the grand hotel…’ The multiplied, reinforced ghastliness of the scene is confirmed by the framing sentence: ‘No one looked down’ (101) Between the blue of the water and the blue of the sky, there appears an image not of home, but of a floating hotel in which everything is already rotting. The novella ends with ruins, rubble and rubbish. Nothing material remains, only the ‘black water’ (130) and ‘a memory that has lost almost all of its substance.’ (125) Life has drained of this narrative, it seeped out long ago. Only a threnody is left, one sung with the narrator’s lifeless life.

Why is phantom Jewishness embedded in narratives that are not only novels of coming of age, Bildungsromane, but above all novels of sentimental education? Accounts of mourning and loss, they are stories of empathy and love. Aware of their own inadequacy, scrupulous, forever apologetic, the narratorial voices resound as those of lovers: they confess. In this they reach back to an orphic image: the poet, trembling, knows that he must not turn to look his beloved in the face, or he shall lose her forever. Weiser Dawidek may be the most ambiguous love story, because despite the triangle Heller-Dawid-Elka, it is Heller’s fascination, adoration and mourning for Dawid that propels the story, not the suggestive young love between Dawid and Elka, or the consummated desire between Elka and the narrator. An amorous friendship between two young men is the core of van den Brink’s novella On the Water. Sea of Memory combines the notion of first love with that of paternal devotion, eros with agape. Esther is the ewige Weibliche with whom everybody is enamoured and who is herself consumed by an enigmatic passion. Shadowy, aborted, incomplete love permeates the lives of Sebald’s characters in The Emigrants, while the narrator himself sustains phantasmatic
relationships with those long gone. One of the three women in the photograph described in the novel’s conclusion ‘has the air of the bride about her’ (237). Whose bride could she be but the onlooker’s? And yet these remarkably lyrical texts—indeed they could be called elegies in prose—are at the same time quasi detective narratives that pursue an unsolvable mystery. All five narrators use investigation and research to sort out history and memory, fiction and truth, but all are also quick to admit defeat and even futility of such enterprise. In first-person, confessional mode the narrators repeatedly make excuses, disavowals, denials, thus passing on their responsibility to us, the readers. If we do bear a responsibility, it is because we, too, are implicated not only in the loss, but also in the love understood as a category of attention. If literature teaches us anything, it is to pay attention. We are the witness.

But the similarities do not end there. All five novels lay great stock by the elements: water, fire, air, earth. The elements predate and follow history, they mix with memory, they appease the mind. It is not an accident that allows Anton and David of On the Water to be together only in moments of their solidarity of oarsmen on the river, in the rain, just as it is not incidental that the narrator in Sea of Memory feels himself to be at one with his love in a similar setting: ‘On the sea, I did not feel distance.’ (63) History, politics, and nationality can be ignored only by an escape into the natural. But can they be vanquished? Time does not have the same weight on water where a fishing boat is in much the same context as it was a thousand years ago. But does the fire that in Sea of Memory the boy sets to the Germans’ pensione purify anything, does it escape the dialectic of history and politics, of tit for tat, of Hammurabi’s code? In the last pages of Sea of Memory, amidst gusts of the scirocco there burns a fire that ‘could not change the past.’ In Weiser Dawidek images of water and wind frame the narrator’s impotence to recover the loss or even himself from the loss. And for all its urban focus, Sebald’s The Emigrants makes the industrial wastelands into a kind of second nature from which we too, are exiled in the end. In ‘Ambros Adelwarth’ we find the standard consolation for those in exile: ‘Above us the Milky Way…. They are the same stars I saw above the Alps as a child and later above the Japanese house in its lake, above the Pacific, and out over Long Island Sound. I can scarcely believe I am the same person, and in Greece.’ (129). Plutarch’s consolation to those in exile was as feeble two thousand years ago as it is now. It is not a coincidence that the contemporary novels I discuss here under the rubric of phantom Jewishness, are novels of exile: exile always pulls in its train the question of loyalty and belonging, a question that in our time is no longer reducible to the natural world.

In Witold Gombrowicz’s pre-WWII short story ‘Stefan Czarniecki’s Memoir’ as well as in Gregor von Rezzori’s post-war collection provocatively entitled Memoirs of an Anti-Semite, being Jewish is anything but phantasmatic. Von Rezzori’s Jews are Jewish in a most outrageously politically incorrect way—their mores, superstitions, accents, quirks, everything down to their facial expressions is Jewish. While the protagonist needs to be initiated into Jewish philosophy, not recognizing even Maimonides’s name, he needs no one to help him identify his lovers or even a group of boys at an ice skating rink as Jewish. This Jewishness is varied and clichéd at once, but it is recognizable, quotable, ascertainable. Without necessarily being simple, it has a referent. Gombrowicz shows how disorienting a mixed identity can be in ‘Stefan Czarniecki’s Memoir,’ while von Rezzori demonstrates the problematic nature of what it means to be non-Jewish, as if
reversing the terms of Montesquieu’s question by asking not ‘comment peut-on être Persan?’ but ‘comment peut-on être Français?’

Does this literary representation of Jewishness that I have called phantom Jewishness correspond to the reality called by sociologists negative identity or repressed identity? As opposed to Jean Baudoin de Courtenay’s notion of multiple nationalities, or even of Adam Michnik’s layered sense of belonging, negative identity is the one that says ‘I am neither Polish nor Jewish.’ But the mesmerizing, magnetic central characters who embody the notion of phantom Jewishness do not lack an identity but rather possess one so mysterious as to border on mysticism. That part of this enigma, of this veiled identity may be a simple reluctance to call a spade a spade is an actuality that makes matters more complicated—because as Gershom Scholem points out in his essay ‘Jews and Germans’ in 1966, and as is still true today, Germans who would like to dissociate themselves from the Nazis ‘have an evident aversion to calling any Jew a Jew unless he absolutely insists on it. After having been murdered as Jews, the Jews have now been nominated to the status of Germans, in a kind of posthumous triumph; to emphasize their Jewishness would be a concession to anti-Semitism’ (On Jews and Judaism in Crisis 72) ‘What a perversion in the name of progress!’ exclaims Scholem.

Is phantom Jewishness assimilated otherness? A minority ethos that has lost its distinctive cultural, religious and linguistic characteristics? An echo of its once forceful identity? Doubtlessly yes, and yet it is simultaneously more and less than that. Less, because it can be imposed from without, more because it calls for a solidarity, a connection. Despite its predominantly elegiac, mourning mode it resounds as a cry of life that is a call to life.

It is as if the new Europeans were waiting for a return of the departed Jews, almost like for that of the messiah. And failing that, they still discern something—in a name that has become taboo, in a pain that is too difficult to swallow, in a familiarity that is long gone and yet memorable. If society can be metaphorically conceived of as a body, and if the distinct Jewish presence in Europe before the war can be compared to a limb that has been severed, is missing—then what we are witnessing in these novels are indeed phantom pains. Can they be incorporated? In what sense does a phantom limb still constitute a part of the body? What the presence of phantom Jewishness demonstrates is that as individuals and as societies we are more than a body. The voice of literature, just as that of a dybbuk, cannot be silenced easily, even if it can be dismissed. The body breathes as long as it has a soul, and literature resuscitates the soul.

Are the authors I have considered here ventriloquists or inspired solipsists? These novels and novellas are not just accounts of empathy, but of love. Not of mere compassion, but of responsibility. Not of phantom responsibility directed towards the past, but rather of the writerly responsibility to give witness hic et nunc, for the future and in order to affect the future. These works resuscitate that which has to many become what Martin Buber calls an It. I trust that the case of phantom Jewishness is one, to paraphrase Gershom Scholem writing to Hannah Arendt, of a well-founded uncertainty that we must prefer to an ill-founded certainty. For in its elusiveness there is a call, a question, a demand for an answer. Who were and who are the people with whom the other Europeans lived as neighbors for a thousand, even two thousand years? Who are the ones without the others? If the voice that we hear in response comes from within, the call has not been in vain.

The Nurnberg laws on September 15, 1935 stripped all German Jews of civil rights, defining ‘Jew’ as anyone who had even a single Jewish grandparent. The German Ministry of Interior decree of August 17, 1938 proclaimed that all Jewish nationals must bear Jewish names from a list provided by the Ministry. If a person bore a different name, he or she was to follow it with ‘Israel’ or ‘Sara.’ Thus a name officially became a stigma, a mark of an identity not simply inherited or chosen, but imposed from without, delimiting, ostracizing, damning.

Alain Finkelkraut in his **Le Juif imaginaire** (Seuil 1980, U of Nebraska Press 1994) writes: ‘Judaism, for me, is no longer a kind of identity as much as a kind of transcendence. Not something that defines me, but a culture that cannot be embraced, a grace I cannot claim as my own. In twenty years at the most, there will be no more than a handful of professional historians to tell us of the Jewish culture of Central Europe and of the genocide that brought it to an end. We occupy that pivotal moment, that detestable moment, when our past enters into history. The last survivors of this civilization disappear, turning it into a sort of vague and bygone era, abandoned by the general populace and snatched up by the specialists. The Judaism into which I was born is increasingly acquiring the status of a historical object, marked by a sudden distance making it both a painful and desirable object of reflection. Until recently, it had always let me experience my Jewishness, whereas now I experience it as an absence.’ (176).


One could add here Efraim Sicher’s « Beyond Marginality » with its Jewishness as hauntedness in Pinter. Jewishness as not belonging.


‘Fantom’ in Polish signifies, among other things, the actor who comes on stage to replace an absent actor.

Stefan Czarniecki was a seventeenth-century Polish patriot who fought against the Chmielnicki insurgents (1648) and against the Swedish ‘flood’ of 1655.

Granted, Gombrowicz at that time considered himself to be a case apart, and an outsider even to the literary scene, befriending only the other outsiders, that is Bruno Schulz and Witkacy. Nonetheless, even though his first volume of stories was met with harsh criticism, it was published and republished.


Scholem, ‘Walter Benjamin; in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 197.


A Polish village where on 10 July 1941 most of the town’s Jews were brutally murdered. The pogrom did not come to light as the responsibility of the Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne until May 2000 when Jan Gross’s book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* was published in Poland.


‘Chaie, Chaiele was the breath of everything around, as though speaking her name, and I heard it inside my head like a beat to keep me from losing my step: Chaie, Chaiele.’ *Sea of Memory*, tr. Beth Archer Brombert, 42.


Ibid, 433.


Alfred Jarry’s setting of his play *Ubu Roi*.

Suleiman, 434, 437.