

THE DIALECTIC OF SILENCE AND REMEMBRANCE IN LILY BRETT'S *THINGS COULD BE WORSE*

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Abstract:

The dynamics of silence and remembrance in Australian writer Lily Brett's autobiographic fiction *Things Could Be Worse* reflects the crisis of memory and understanding experienced by both first and second-generation Holocaust survivors within the diasporic space of contemporary Australia. It leads to issues of handling traumatic and transgenerational memory, the latter also known as post-memory (M. Hirsch), in the long aftermath of atrocities, and problematises the role of forgetting in shielding displaced identities against total dissolution of the self.

This paper explores the mechanisms of remembrance and forgetting in L. Brett's narrative by mainly focusing on two female characters, mother and daughter, whose coming to terms with (the necessary) silence, on the one hand, and articulated memories, on the other, reflects different modes of comprehending and eventually coping with individual trauma. By differentiating between several types of silence encountered in Brett's prose (that of the voiceless victims, of survivors and their offspring, respectively), I argue that silence can equally *voice and hush traumatic experience*, that it is never empty, but invested with individual and collective meaning. Essentially, I contend that beside the (self-)damaging effects of silence, there are also beneficial consequences of it, in that it plays a crucial role in emplacing the displaced, rebuilding their shattered self, and contributing to their reintegration, survival and even partial healing.

Keywords: silence of the Holocaust, traumatic memory, Jewish-Australian migrant identities, post-memory, autobiographic fiction.

Abriss:

Die Dynamik von Schweigen und *Beschweigen* (Sabine Schlant) in der autobiographisch-fiktiven Erzählliteratur der australischen Schriftstellerin Lilly Brett, namens *Things Could Be Worse/Alles halb so schlimm*, reflektiert die Erinnerungs- und Verständniskrise der Holocaust-Überlebenden der ersten und zweiten Generation innerhalb der gegenwärtigen australischen Diaspora.

Dies führt zum Thema des Umgangs mit dem traumatisierten und transgenerationellen Gedächtnis, letzteres bekannt auch unter dem Begriff *postmemory* (M.Hirsch), nach der langen 2. Weltkriegseinwirkung und problematisiert die Rolle des Vergessens als Abschirmung der heimatlosen Identitäten gegen den totalen Ich-Verlust.

In diesem Aufsatz untersuche ich den Mechanismus von Erinnerung und Vergessen in L. Bretts Prosa anhand der Analyse von zwei weiblichen Charakteren, Mutter und Tochter, deren Vergangenheitsbewältigung einerseits mit dem (notwendigen) Schweigen, und den ausgesprochenen Erinnerungen, auf der anderen Seite, verschiedene Arten des Begreifens spiegelt und vielleicht sogar die Möglichkeit eröffnet, die individuellen Holocaust-Traumata aufzulösen.

Indem ich zwischen verschiedenen Arten des Schweigens in L. Brett's Prosa unterscheide (z.B.

zwischen dem Schweigen der Opfer/der Toten, der Überlebenden und deren Kinder), zeige ich, dass das Schweigen das traumatische Erlebnis sowohl zum Ausdruck bringen als auch verstummen lassen kann. Dieses Schweigen ist aber nie leer und hohl, sondern voller individueller und kollektiver Bedeutung.

Im Wesentlichen behaupte ich, dass das Verschweigen neben den selbstschädigenden Auswirkungen auch förderliche Konsequenzen hat, z.B. dass das Schweigen eine Wichtige Rolle spielt, wenn es zu Zwecken eingesetzt wird, wie z.B. dem Wieder-Beheimaten der Heimlosen, dem Wiederaufbau des zerstörten 'Ich', und dazu auch der erneuten Integration, dem Überleben und sogar der teilweisen Heilung des 'Ichs'.

Stichwörter: Post-Holocaust *Beschweigen*, traumatisches Gedächtnis, Auswanderer-Identität, Jüdisch-Australier, postmemory, autobiographische Erzählliteratur.

“ Je m’interroge. L’eau murmure. La pierre seule est silence.
Le reste a-t-il un sens?”

(Jean Digot, *Vérité du silence*)

“ C’est en pratiquant le silence que l’on accède au domaine de la parole.”
(Elie Wiesel, *Variations sur le silence*)

“Memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, in brief, human
and social.”

(Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*.
Cultural Memory in the Present)

I. Introduction

Silence is a multifaceted concept often used interdisciplinarily and in overlapping ways in linguistics, rhetoric, politics, cultural theory, art, religion and communicative sciences. Whether it points to the absence of speech and sound, or whether it articulates the meaningful presence of an absence, the counter-narrative of silence is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon. In the broader context of Holocaust literature, the eloquence of silence takes on a particular slant, predicated on trauma and the impossibility on the survivors' part to express, overcome and live with the (post)memory of atrocities. The syntax of silence gains in this case intricate connotations depending on the depth, duration and resolution of trauma, even more so in the event of forced transcontinental migration and intergenerational communication of experience.

Australian writer Lily Brett's collection of inter-connected short-stories entitled *Things Could Be Worse* is a narrative piece engaged with precisely those aspects of traumatic silence mentioned above, namely the challenges posed to five families and two generations of Jewish Australians resettled in Melbourne in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In their case, silence is embraced by both the adult and child members of the Jewish

diaspora for various reasons ranging from the socio-political necessities of reintegration, to the psychological need to stifle or revive memories of their European past, to the morally transgressive urge to preserve or destroy marriage agreements or, finally, to cope with conflicting feelings regarding ethnic belonging or exclusion. In this article I will be looking at the ways in which silence shapes the destruction, retrieval, preservation and transgenerational transmission of first-hand Holocaust memory, as well as the manner in which it settles or aggravates issues of individual and collective Jewish identity in the adoptive country. Moreover, I will enquire into the significant differences between the resort to silence in first-generation Holocaust survivorship, and the offspring's choice of wordlessness, and how the silent gesture affects the nucleus of the family, on the one hand, and that of the Melbournian Jewish community, on the other. Can we speak of gendered acts of silence in Lily Brett's work? And can (self-)irony and humour be engaged in the narrative processing of post-traumatic silence? Essentially, I will argue that silence is ambivalent in Brett's work in that it is simultaneously used to construct and deconstruct dichotomies such as past versus present, parents versus children and Europe (Israel) versus Australia, particularly when it comes to the inconclusive definition of Jewishness.

In the next three chapters I will pay attention to the varieties of silence encountered in Lily Brett's piece of migrant writing, namely the silence of those who perished in the Holocaust, on the one hand, the silence of the Holocaust survivors, on the other, and last, but not least, the silence of their offspring known as the second-generation survivors.

II. The Silence of the Graves or Traces of the Absent Other

In her book entitled *The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust*, Ernestine Schlant differentiates between "the silence of the Holocaust" and "the silence about the Holocaust" (pp.7-10). The German translation of her book distinguishes, in fact, between the two aspects of silence by means of slightly different terminology, namely *Beschweigen* versus *Verschweigen*, respectively (19-22). The former points to the (vexed) topic of the Jewish victims and survivors' postwar silence about the camp experience, whereas the latter describes the situation in Western Germany, where secrecy and concealment concerning the Shoah reigned for decades after the war. To put it differently, "There is the silence into which victims have retreated and there is the silence of the perpetrators" (Schlant, 10). In either case, however, silence is never empty or devoid of meaning, but "inhabited" by poignant content pointing to trauma, loss and an inability to understand or cope with that loss. Therefore silence is, in Adam Jaworsky's words, "a metaphor for communication" (3) because it is bound to transmit a message, be it linguistic (word), kinetic (stillness) or representational (through historiographic, literary and memorialistic prose).

There is, however, a puzzling quality to *Beschweigen*: “the Holocaust as an unspeakable reality paradoxically demands speech even as it threatens to impose silence” (Schlant 10). Similarly, Adorno’s famous dictum that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, which he later on amended by affirming the very possibility and necessity of art after the Shoah, precisely underpins this post-modern conundrum: how to make sense of the senseless enormity of the Holocaust and how to balance remembrance and forgetting of atrocities? In fact, the silence of the Holocaust is a shriek rather than a voiceless void, as Patterson explains: “The silence that shrieks in the Holocaust novel is not the silence of the inability to describe events that elude language; nor is it the silence of the gap between the familiar and the absolute alien. Rather, it is the silence of meaning lost and yet to be regained, the silence of a soul lost and yet to be reborn in a future forever yet to be” (27). The task of post-Holocaust thinking, therefore, is to extract a meaning for the future out of the silence of meaning lost in the past.

As such, the tenor of my argument in this chapter is built around an understanding of the silence of the absent victims of the Holocaust as a *presence of their absence*, i.e. through the ways in which they are memorialised in the lives of their surviving families. In that regard, I concur with D. Patterson when he affirms that “while death may eliminate the victim, it cannot eliminate the silence of the victim. The silence both informs and implicates the author, as well as the character and the reader” (34). It is suggested here that victimhood and survivorship are interconnected through the latter’s responsibility to represent and perpetuate the implications of silence throughout the generations to come.

Lily Brett’s collection of interdependent vignettes titled *Things Could Be Worse* (1990) narrativises issues of first and second-generation survivorship and the complexities of silence with regard to post-Holocaust migration to Australia. The story–spanning over a few decades–centres on five families of Eastern-European Jews from Łódź and Warsaw, who survived the ghettos and the camps to finally emigrate to Melbourne in the late ‘40s. The Benskys, Peckelmans, Ganz’s, Zelmans and the sad Mr. Small rebuilt their lives out of the shards and shadows of the Holocaust. They departed for Australia leaving behind shattered lives and destroyed families, being, as in Genia Peckelman or Michelle Luftman’s case, the only survivors of whole generations of Ashkenazi Jews. Their parents, grandparents and children perished in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau or Mauthausen, but their silence and the memories of pre-war lives in Poland accompanied the survivors to the new land.

In the aftermath of the Shoah, Renia Bensky is left with recurrent nightmares and struggles with the fear of forgetting her mother’s face, while Genia dances her way through the post-war years to counteract the mnemonic void and be reunited in thoughts (and even imagined conversations) with her dead mother and grandmother. The dead are not silenced or excluded from their relatives’ present lives, but welcomed as a present absence at communal ceremonies (weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs etc.) and in daily life.

For instance, Renia's daughter Lola remarks that during her childhood, she couldn't get through to her parents, as "they were distracted by something. Something larger," (167) in spite of being urged, upon their arrival in Australia, to forget everything about their past and silence their memories of the atrocities: "Renia darling, it is over now. You are safe here in Australia. It is best to put those things out of your mind. It is best not to disturb yourself with those thoughts" (4).

The traces of the absent others, though, are deeply imprinted in the survivor's psyche: "It was only after the war that Renia Bensky became obsessed with death" (1) because, as theorist Cathy Caruth posits, trauma strikes later, since it is essentially a *delayed* acknowledgement of loss and psychological injury: "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its *belatedness*, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of a single place or time" (7, emphasis mine). Because "Renia had never buried anyone she had loved," (66) she had never experienced closure, which is perhaps evident in her strange lifelong habit of reading the newspaper death notices first. On these occasions she is struck by the silenced, rigid and understated sense of mourning transparent in the formulaic, clichéd messages of death: "The same neatly packed phrases at the end of a notice... 'Forever In Our Hearts', or 'Will Be Sadly Missed By All Who Knew Him' or 'Forever In Our Thoughts'. *Why was it so hard to write out a scream, or an ache, or a cry of pain*" (66, emphasis mine)? Renia's bewildered disappointment in the face of this muted mourning of the dead unveils in fact the problematics of post-Holocaust grief in the diasporic space: subdued grieving may be a sign of numbness to pain or fear to express it too loudly in a country primed to accept cultural assimilation rather than cultural individuation.

But perhaps the most poignant absence in Holocaust literature in general and Lily Brett's prose in particular is marked by the voices of the dead children of the Holocaust.¹ The Holocaust's blow to Judaism as ancient culture is all the more severe since, "the Nazi killers knew precisely what children represent to us," says Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. "According to our tradition, the entire world subsists thanks to them" (Wiesel, *A Jew Today* 77). Therefore, Patterson avers, "in the death of the child we encounter not only what must be remembered but also what must be preserved" (Patterson 93). He goes even further and affirms that "when the child is the victim, something more, something higher is victimized," namely God, (88)² thus echoing those voices that proclaimed the death of God himself after the Shoah.

The devastation of losing a (stillborn) child in the Łódź ghetto numbed Renia, just as witnessing the death of her three-year-old son Henryk and husband Tadek had numbed her friend Mina Zelman. The photo of Mina's dead son, occupying a central position in

1 Patterson remarks that "Quite often...the child is present in the Holocaust novel by absence from it" (Patterson 83).

2 Patterson makes that statement in reference to Ka-tzetnik's *House of Dolls*.

her new family's dining room, in Melbourne is the only thing she has left of her life before the war. "The small, yellowing, sepia photograph of a small boy" with "hooded eyes, chubby cheeks, and a sweet, bow-shaped mouth" (189) is a slowly fading trace of present, albeit hushed, absence: "The boy in the photograph was never mentioned in the Zelman house. Jack [Mina's other son born in Australia] didn't even know his name" (189). Nevertheless, namelessness does not imply voicelessness.

George Steiner takes a necessary stance when he brings the issue of *Unschuld* or blamelessness into the discussion about the child victims of the Holocaust, inferring that they were doubly harmed not only by the violence of death at the hands of the Nazis, but also by the unfortunate burden of being born into a stigmatised race: "They went, of course, not for anything they had done or said. But because their parents had existed before them. The crime of being one's children. During the Nazi period it knew no absolution, no end" (164). The fascist politics of racial *Reinheit* speaks for the return to nonsensical, cruel barbarity, which caused many postwar thinkers to declare the collapse of the civilised world. Steiner also warns against the dangers of blurring boundaries when adopting such radical political attitudes. That is, Jewish parents were forced into the position of unintentional murderers of their offspring, an aspect which may be made accountable for the long silence of first-generation survivors: "To have been a European Jew in the first half of the twentieth century was to pass sentence on one's own children, to force upon them a condition beyond rational understanding...try as they may, they cannot leap out of our shadow" (Steiner, 165).

III. The Echoes of Silence. First-Generation Holocaust Survivors

The trope of silence as evident in Lilly Brett's prose indicates that survivorship comes with a price, and that there are whispering traces of previous life in Europe that need to be silenced, stifled or just subdued. "The survivor is rendered voiceless by the voicelessness of the victims," (Patterson 35) but the constraint to silence is also conditioned by the change of socio-political environment, as we shall see below.

The experience of refugees is fruitfully tackled against the backdrop of their pre-WWII Polish locale: "in the context of migration, the home is the place one moves away from, but its symbolic significance remains in that it provides a backdrop against which new experiences can be compared" (Jacobs, 102). What the Benskys, Peckelmans, Ganz's and Luftmans have lost due to the war is not only the comfort of their Polish homes, their secure status and economic situation, but also their families, memories, the closeness of intimacy, and virtually whole parts of their inner selves. The Holocaust has left them maimed and prone to sinking into both individual and collective silence. As the Israeli writer Aaron Applefeld points out, "the shattering of the 'I' is one of the deepest wounds" inflicted by the Shoah (99). In fact, this severance of the self from itself is not only

harmful, but also self-destructive and a disorder that in psychoanalytical terms carries the name of post-traumatic stress disorder: “The silence within, the silence of the pit, is indeed the silence of the grave. It is a silence that moves, nefarious and malignant, not only splitting, but also devouring the self”³ (Patterson 99).

Renia Bensky, one of the main characters, is introduced to the reader as a person with a bewildered sense of self in the aftermath of the civilisation’s turn to mass murder:

In Germany in 1945, Renia had contemplated suicide. Her baby son was dead... Everybody she had belonged to was dead... But Renia Bensky was too tired to die... She could hardly look at Josl when they met... She felt separated from him by what she had seen, and what she had breathed. She felt poisoned. She could hardly accept who she was now... How could she embrace Josl? How could she embrace him? She was not Renia Bensky, wife of Josl Bensky. She was someone else. She was a stranger to Josl. She was a stranger to herself. (1-2)

This terrible state leaves its imprint on Renia and has long-term effects causing her nightmares, obsessive compulsive cleaning, recurrent despondency and, as Josl later on implies, her premature death. Like many Holocaust survivors, she finds herself emerged in Dori Laub’s “black hole,”⁴ that state of not being able to either speak about the atrocities, or forget them. This crisis situation is reinterpreted by critic Bernard-Donals as two facets of the same coin: instead of regarding memory as opposed to forgetting, he suggests an understanding of memory as inherent to forgetting and viceversa: “we should see memory as an intersection of remembrance and oblivion, a troublesome presence that is forgotten but guaranteed by the event’s loss... Memory is indexical insofar as it is a convergence of collected, collective memories... but it is indexical in that it allows you to read only that which is concealed by its own shorthand, in its breathlessness” (15). In other words, memory selects, preserves and reuses information depending on the relevance of the past event to the present moment, an idea also shared and expanded by Halbwachs. He asserts that every individual memory has to reach an “accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society” (40) in order to be considered as part of the dominant discourse.⁵ Yet, as Maier-Katkin opines, at the level of cultural memory, “the dialectic between past actuality and present emplotment raises concerns about the selection, in-

3 “The *I of Then* and the *I of Now* are a single identity divided by two” (Ka-tzetnik 135633, *Shivitti* 100)-in the literary work this division turns into unity of character and identity “whose division might be overcome in the utterance of its division” (Patterson 100). In other words, the literary work offers the traumatised self the possibility of partial recovery.

4 Shoshana/Laub, *Testimony*, pp. 64-5. The “black hole” is that manifestation of trauma through the simultaneous feeling of “impossibility of remembering and of forgetting,” i.e. the inner crisis caused by the simultaneous inability to either speak about or forget the atrocities.

5 A similar idea was expressed by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses*: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized, every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255).

terpretation and reception of historical events. Collective discourses about the past is an ongoing and changing process in present temporality” (39). Which is where individual memories come in (sometimes as counter-memories) to fill the gaps, change or strengthen the collective discourse, depending on the moment in time when it occurs or on the nature of that collective discourse that it is bound to modify.

The momentous step of leaving one's country and moving to a post-colonial nation brings an improvement in the Benskys' social and economic life, in spite of the overpowering sense of dislocation and strangeness from the beginning. Unfortunately, anti-semitism travelled to Australia, too, and mild forms of stigmatisation⁶ and hostility are known to have been exercised against the “socially ostracized” newcomers (Williams 5).

History Professor Suzanne Rutland explains this phenomenon, its causes and effects, in her recent book *The Jews in Australia*. She assesses that between 1938 and 1961, which came down in the Australian history as “the watershed years,” the Jewish community “almost trebled to 61,000” (51). These postwar immigration waves “completely changed the nature of the Australian Jewish community, but Jews continued to constitute only 0.5 percent of the overall population because of the hostility that was expressed” by the Australian nationals (51). This hostile reception known as “the anti-refo feeling” (55) was mainly due, according to Rutland, to the Australian isolationism and the fear of losing profitable jobs to the newcomers, who could become competitive economic agents. The “White Australia” policy introduced in 1901 maintained a xenophobic atmosphere not only against Asians, but against any outside elements other than the Brits (52). These sentiments increased with the fear of Zionism and Communism during “the Cold War hysteria in the 1940s” (54), which contributed to the Australian government's negative response to all the appeals for help coming from the Australian Jewish communities to support Jewish immigration. According to Rutland, emigration to Australia was made possible through the exclusive help of the Jewish Emergency Committee in Sydney and The United Jewish Overseas Relief Fund in Melbourne (57-58). This moment in time was no exception since “throughout white Australian history there has been a continuing tension between multiculturalism and an insistence on a singular British identity” (Docker 1995, 423).⁷ Things were particularly strenuous for the refugees from Germany, Austria and later Hungary, who were vilified and called “enemy aliens” (Rutland 58).

The response to this hostility was a form of silence mandated by members of older Jewish communities in Australia involved in the resettlement of the new waves of migrants. It reflected a shift in consciousness from the collective to the individual and a move towards assimilation: “Above all, do not speak German in the streets and in the

6 Nazism was essentially a form of stigmatization, as Neuberg suggests: “the systematic Nazi labeling of Jews—as sneaky, insincere, exploitative, oppressing, satanic, and polluting the genetic purity of the Aryan race—and the ability of this rhetoric to facilitate the escalation of stigmatizing actions against them.” (Neuberg 50-51).

7 Cited in Jacobs, p. 16.

trams. Modulate your voices. Do not make yourself conspicuous anywhere by walking with a group of persons all of whom are loudly speaking in a foreign language... *Remember that the welfare of the old-established Jewish community in Australia as well as of every migrant depends on your personal behaviour...Jews collectively are judged as individuals. You personally have a grave responsibility.*"(Elazar and Medding, 277-79, my emphasis).

It's no surprise then that Esther and Max's advice to Renia and Josl appeals to their natural "instinct of the necessary oblivion" (Steiner 167). In other words, it's about a negotiation or diminishing of Jewishness, which was essentially regarded as an abdication from the rules of normalcy generally accepted by Australians: "You should buy yourself an Australian dress. Here it is called a sunfrook. It will help you look like an Australian. We Jews are just beginning to be accepted, and you shouldn't cause any trouble for us... It is important to be normal" (Brett 3).

What this comes down to is an urge addressed to the newly arrived European Jews to overtly appropriate the Australian norms of public conduct and not stand out as "the other" in order not to offend the nationalistic feelings of their hosts. But, as Jacobs observed, "migrants develop hybridized and even multiple selves, and learn to preserve their interior worlds by keeping them at a remove from their socialized, external personas" (133). Which is precisely what happens inside the Jewish families and communities pictured in *Things Could Be Worse*. Publicly, they adapt to the imposed conditions and even willingly change their names ("The Silberbergs, the Rotkleins, the Mokruschkis... had become the Silvers, the Rotes, the Moors", Brett 37-38), while privately they preserve and practice the Jewish traditions, eat kosher food, get together for bar mitzvahs and kadishes, and regard themselves as descendants of an ancient culture, albeit most of them are secular Jews and were so in Poland, as well.

On the other hand, though, when travelling to Israel as a group years later, they detach themselves from the Israeli Orthodox Jews' modes of expressing Jewishness: "This is not what we ate at home in Poland...This is the food of Arabs, not the food of Jews... Why do they have to draw such attention on themselves? Where in the Talmud does it say you have to wear such a long black coat, and the short black trousers, and the black hats?" (84). Paradoxically, when referring to the Israelis, they begin to sound just like the Jewish-Australians who had previously restricted them to abide by the Australian rules: "This is the modern world, not the old world... They cause trouble for everyone. Haven't the Jews had enough trouble?" (84). The fear instilled by the Nazis lives on and shows its grip when the visiting group become fidgety and nervous in the presence of so many Jews: it makes them feel unsafe and prone to antisemitic violence; in fact, it reminds them of things they wish to forget. Years later though, when Renia's daughter Lola travels to Israel herself, she has the strange feeling that it is the Israelis in fact who "were all running away from something" (71).

In spite of the initial difficulties in their adoptive land, the Benskys and their friends now hail Australia as paradise (Brett 85) or the “goldeneh medina,” (90) start new construction or textile businesses, get education, enlarge their families, travel and feel at home in this environment. Their children though, whom they have proudly raised in a free country, carry their parents’ burden of traumatic memories, not always aware of their existence or of the extent of their harmful grasp.

IV. The Collision with Silence and Postmnemonic Voids. Second-Generation Survivors

The Benskys’ older daughter Lola was “born with a[n unexplainable] backlog of sadness... was it all those dead relatives - uncles, aunts, cousins, grandmothers and grandfathers - all fed to the sky? Mr. and Mrs. Bensky shared a past that Lola could never belong to. Lola longed to drive a wedge into their togetherness” (Brett 121). Her anxiety is shared by Lily Brett’s own experience as a second-generation survivor afflicted by parental memories of suffering, which she expressed in an interview published under the title “Walking Among Ghosts:” “I wanted to be one of them, I felt very left out. If I could have, I would have been in Auschwitz next to my mother, on the bunks, pressed right up against her, sharing everything with her [...] I didn’t want to be separated from her by this enormous gulf” (Giles 56). The wish to have been part of her parents’ experience and shrink the gulf between them is driven by her urge “to be a *voice* for all the voiceless. To have a language for all those who didn’t have a *language*” (Giles 57, my emphasis). On the other hand, though, Brett stresses the importance of silence in the context of Holocaust survival: “She [her mother] just had *so much to shut out* in order to survive, in order to keep on having any faith at all in life. [...] And while she wanted to protect me, I felt awash in her degradation” (Giles 63, my emphasis). Brett’s experience helped her write this piece of autobiographic fiction where, like her character Lola attempts to achieve balance after long years of uncertainty.

Thus, Lola is pictured from the very beginning as an anguished, insecure child with eating and weight problems, preoccupied with concealment and consumed by her parents’ (and especially her mother’s) inner unrest. She hears the words Auschwitz and Hitler very often and is blamed for her inability to understand the hardships that her parents had been through. Her reaction to that is to boil a pot of potato peels just to be in that way part of her parents’ camp experience in Germany. Which is why she is violently admonished by Renia when caught red handed. As she grows into a rebellious hippie adolescent and later marries a goy, she fails to understand her mother’s rush in arranging to have Deutschland as birthplace removed from her passport. Her psychotherapy sessions meet with extensive disapproval from her mother and the rest of the community. But “as a child, Lola had

longed for silence” (160-161).⁸ In fact, “Lola loved silence” (184). At 30 she becomes the *quiet* listener of her parents’ stories from the camp. Unlike other children from the Jewish-Australian community, Lola becomes interested in the postmnemonic experience of the Holocaust, by asking her parents questions and initiating a cross-generational dialogue about their wartime experience: “they had answered her questions, hesitantly at first...Lola had listened...quietly. She had taken notes. She had tape-recorded some of the conversations. She had videotaped a long interview with each of her parents. And still their stories blurred and wandered in her head” (167). The work of postmemory, the way theorist Marianne Hirsch sees it, is completed when Lola attempts to imagine and fantasise about her parents past: “Lola had woven so many of her own fantasies into her parents’ past that she could no longer remember what was true and what wasn’t” (189). As Hirsch clarifies, “postmemory is not an identity position but a *generational* structure of transmission...Family life even in its most intimate moments, is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrance” (Hirsch, *The Generation* 114).

Lola’s incentive to write poetry in order to fill in (and come to terms with) the absence of her dead relatives, is an attitude based on the assumption that memory is necessary to healing. Along that line, Patterson contends that “to write is to split word from silence, ink from paper, presence from absence, and self from itself, the self already split by the loss from which it writes. It is the wounding of the wound in an effort to heal” (103). By wounding the wound, one simply undoes that wound. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel himself attests to the idea that the choice for language (as written or spoken word) over silence is essentially a choice for life over death and (self-)destruction. Words are life, silence is death: “Make him speak. Speak to him...One does not commit suicide in the middle of a sentence. One does not commit suicide while speaking or listening” (Wiesel, *Oath*, p. 22).

Since language is basically an act of sharing and communication, it is no wonder that words and writing describe an encounter: “The aim of every book, of every tale is to initiate as many encounters on as many levels as possible: between writer and reader, speaker and listener, fact and fiction, imagination and reality, past and present” (Wiesel, *Against Silence*, 1:310). When Lola decides to enter the realm of poetry to convey her distress as a second-Holocaust survivor, she chooses not only to survive, but also to encounter the past on a different level and bear witness to her parents’ stories. To write poetry is to silence the wounds of (and master) the past.

8 Elie Wiesel warns however against the counter-effects of prolonged, anti-communicative silence: “silence acts on both the senses and the nerves; it unsettles them. It acts on the imagination and sets it on fire it acts on the soul and fills it with night and death. The philosophers are wrong: it is not the words that kill, it is silence. It kills impulse and passion, it kills desire and the memory of the desire... It invades, dominates and reduces man to slavery. And once a slave of silence, you are no longer a man” (Wiesel, *Testament*, 209).

Concomitantly, there is a fair bit of irony and humour involved in the delineation of silence in Lily Brett's book. The serious tones are sometimes undermined by the interference of funny, light-hearted or ironic takes. Thus, lies, secrecy, deception and the concealment of truth are also forms of silence. For instance, as a child, Lola fakes a stomach ache just to get a day off school and tend to her constant hunger, but ends up in hospital with her appendix removed due to playing the sick child only too well. Later, her falls from one extreme to the other are the subject of irony and funny incidents: she turns from an unconventional hippie married to a goy to a settled mother with kids who makes extensive (and sometimes risible) efforts to rekindle her Jewish roots; in Brett's words, this is quite a radical mutation from "a former bad girl" to "a reformed anti-semit" (184). In the same abrupt manner, she shocks everybody one day by turning from a mess-friendly mother and wife into the most thorough housekeeper. In general, all forms of excess get sanctioned by gentle humour and the touch of irony, for instance Renia's obsessive compulsive cleaning habits, Josl's obsession with crime stories, Genia's almost ridiculous perseverance to dance, and Sam Ganz' exorbitant expenses on antique furniture, etc. Sadly, though, excessive conduct in all its forms usually hides deeper bruises and psychological disorders, directly or indirectly connected to these families' European past.

There is also a lot of self-irony and indirect self-critique directed at the Jewish pragmatism and financial prowess, which, to enhance the irony, are precisely the source and base of anti-semitism: "We could get a special bulk price from a divorce lawyer," (103) says Pola Ganz, implying that her son Sam should leave his current wife Ruth, as well, to follow in his sisters' footsteps when they had both cheated and left their husbands at the same time. Endless sources of humour are to be found in the many cases of gossip, small intrigue, moral transgression, prejudice and Schadenfreude that the members of this group make themselves guilty of. While Renia's attempt to prevent Pola Ganz's adultery with Joseph Zelman causes their 32-year old group to split and eventually dissipate, her daughter Lola's attempt to bring her own group together years later ends up in the same place. The bitter truth comes through in her ironic remark: "We were split by my proposal to become closer" (174). Whatever and whoever the target of Brett's humour, it is to some extent liberating because "laughter lifts the barriers and opens the way to freedom" (Bakhtin, *Estetika*, 339).

Lola's final liberation from the plague of uncertainty occurs during an event held in Canberra in honour of the Swedish ambassador Raoul Wallenberg who had saved tens of thousands of Jews from the Nazi peril. Already an acclaimed poet at the time, invited to read her poems at many Jewish functions, Lola comes in fact out of a long silence to speak out not only for her parents, but for herself also. The story ends at a point in time when she has reached a balance provided by self-awareness and self-acceptance. When the microphone stops working, she decides to shout her poem, a gesture that is highly symbolic of her coming to terms with her identity and survivor status. She understands

that “the Jew has his anchorage not in place but in time, in his highly developed sense of history as personal context. Six thousand years of self-awareness are a homeland” (Steiner, 175). Thus, she manages to silence the wounds of history, but not the memory of those wounds, whose messenger she becomes in the future.

Wallenberg’s celebration is also indicative of “the distinction between knowledge (silent retention of mnemonic traces) and acknowledgement (the piercing of silence through personal or public discourse),” which is predicated on the fundamental connection between silence and conscious denial, and which can “become psychological defense mechanisms that facilitate the suppression of dreadful memories or help to escape past entrapments” (Maier-Katkin 50). Like for example the sorrow of past reenactment that Lola’s parents, and all first-generation survivors, for that matter, have gone through. Stanley Cohen also agrees, and I concur, that acknowledgement is what happens to knowledge when it becomes officially sanctioned and enters the public discourse” (225). This acknowledgment is what Lola herself experiences at the individual level during her speech in Canberra.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed the phenomenon and counter-narrative of silence as silence *of* the Holocaust (*Beschweigen*) as opposed to the silence *about* the Holocaust (*Verschweigen*), to borrow Ernestine Schlant’s important distinction, and have looked at the causes, effects and manifestations of silence along three dichotomic axes: past versus present, parents versus children, Europe versus Australia,⁹ dichotomies which Lily Brett managed to deconstruct and blend, rather than maintain. Particularly in the context of Holocaust trauma and wounded memories, where categories are messed, inversed and rendered discontinue.

Also, as evident in the structural alignment of this paper, I have pointed out three instances of silence: that of the voiceless victims, on the one hand, the first generation on the other, as well as the second-generation survivors, by investigating their similarities, differences and overlapping spheres. This study has also explored the conditions of immigrant life in Australia as visible in *Things Could Be Worse*, by stressing the central role of silence in the necessity to assimilate and rebuild a family and communal life after the Holocaust. In doing so, I gave prominence to the interplay of remembrance and forgetting and showed how characters like Renia and Josl Bensky, their daughter Lola and all their Jewish friends attempt to strike a balance between retaining some elements of the past and letting others go. The incentive behind their efforts lies somewhere between their diasporic marginality and the wish to belong, while acknowledging at some point

9 McCooey correctly observes that the immigrant thinks in dualities and comparisons to the homeland: “The response to Australian life is complex and ambiguous, and one in which duality forms a large part” (135).

in their lives that “place and displacement are not mutually exclusive [for traumatised transnational identities], but dialectical and overlapping to some extent” (McCooey, 136).

Last but not least, this paper has highlighted the liberating effects of irony and (self-) humour in Lily Brett's narrative, and its importance in relieving stress-related issues of Holocaust survivorship for the benefit of healing through self-knowledge and acceptance.

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