

Figuration and the Child in the Age of Genocide

La cuestión de la figuración y del hijo en la edad del genocidio

Aimee Pozorski
Central Connecticut State University
pozorskia@ccsu.edu

*Why, when we reach out to grasp the future of the planet, do we find ourselves instead clutching the child? In this age of extinction, the first answer is so obvious it is almost parody: children are the very stuff of survival—*Rebekah Sheldon (2016: vii)

How did they explain any of what had happened here to children, she wondered
—Anna Winger (2008: 127)

Resumen

En este artículo, que se centra en la novela de Imre Kertész *Kaddish por el hijo no nacido* (*Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, 1990), se estudian las formas en las que la paradójica figura del hijo no nacido refleja los horrores sociales, políticos y personales del genocidio. A través del análisis de dos textos sobre el 11-S que también abordan los efectos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial –*Tan fuerte tan cerca* (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, 2005) de Jonathan Safran Foer y *This Must Be the Place* (2008; sin traducir al español) de Anna Winger – “Hijo no nacido” propone la idea de que estamos conectados a través de lo que no podemos entender: la imagen catacrética de un hijo no nacido ejemplifica la pérdida de un futuro en el cual uno normalmente esperaría encontrar esperanza y una nueva vida.

Palabras clave: Hijo; figura; genocidio; Kaddish; literatura.

Abstract

With a special focus on Imre Kertész's 1990 novel, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (*Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*), this essay considers the ways in which the paradoxical figure of an unborn child depicts the social, political, and private horrors of genocide. Tracing this figure through two post 9/11 texts that also grapple with the effects of WWII—Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Anna

Winger's *This Must Be the Place* (2008)—“Figuration and the Child in the Age of Genocide” proposes that we are connected via that which we cannot understand: the catachrestic image of a child not born exemplifying the loss of a future where we would ordinarily expect to find hope and new life.

Keywords: Child; Figure; Genocide; Kaddish; Literature.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

A lot has changed in the twenty years since I started writing about the figure of infanticide in twentieth century literature—a problem of reference, I suggested, under the haunting scepter of traumatic history. In graduate school, I argued the unbearable weight of the history of genocide affected our ability to use language itself, as exemplified by failed attempts at representing the death of a child in literatures depicting slavery, the Armenian Genocide, and the Holocaust, to name a few. Imre Kertész, the Hungarian author, is perhaps the most radical in this tradition, attempting to depict not the death of an infant, but rather the impossibility of giving life, as conveyed through his vexed figure of the child unborn.

One of the changes that took place since I began this work in 1998 was a self-conscious shift in the representation of trauma in Anglo-American fiction following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the fall of the Twin Towers. Such novels as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Anna Winger's *This Must Be the Place* (2008) attempt to represent the effects of 9/11 on the one hand, while also, on the other hand, looking back to previous twentieth-century traumas such as the bombings of Dresden and Berlin, the Holocaust, and Vietnam in order to put this twenty-first century trauma into context. These latter novels also grapple with the complex status of the child figure in literatures of trauma—picking up where Kertész left off: by employing the figure of the child unborn in order to highlight a sense of futility, even while appearing to offer a reparative ending not usually seen in post-Holocaust literatures. When Winger's protagonist, significantly named Hope, wonders: “How did they explain any of what had happened here to children” (127), we already understand the difficulty of referring to the death of a child, not only in the sense that Hope is wondering how to offer a cogent explanation in the present, but also in the formulation of the phrase itself: “to the children” is a dangling modifier that at once refers to the children in the present time learning about

the traumatic past, and simultaneously to the children of the past—to what happened to *them* that would cause their death through genocide.

This essay seeks to trace the genealogy of the figure of the child, particularly the infant, first as it is formulated as a figure of infanticide and, later, as a figure of a child unborn, and reads both as exemplary cases of “the problem of reference” in the age of genocide. I draw on the theoretical lens of trauma in order to explain what I mean by this problem, especially the relationship between reference and the failed figure of the child in twentieth- and twenty-first century literatures of genocide. This, for me, is where psychoanalytic theory most helpfully meets deconstruction: at the juncture of trauma theory, where we learn that it is the very moments when language fails effectively to communicate that we, paradoxically, see traces of an event’s horror nevertheless being communicated. Further, trauma theory articulates the haunting quality of the loss of a child, illustrating how the return of modern infanticide in literary representations, even at the end of the last century, functions actually as an inevitable return of repressed history that has been too difficult fully to acknowledge.

As I hope to show, through Foer, Winger, and, most recently, literary and cultural theorist Rebekah Sheldon, we have reached a representational age of ambivalence, when twenty-first century texts featuring a child seem to seek healing, closure, and a sense of the future, and yet, these are the very texts that cannot even summon the birth of a child—what Sheldon refers to as “the very stuff of survival”: new life after the human catastrophe in this “age of extinction” (2008: vii).

In both radical cases of representation—from the figure of infanticide to the figure of the child unborn—we see literature’s ability to make a claim on us, to require us to bear witness to the lost lives of children in genocides, whether historical or contemporary ones caused in part by the consequences of our collective histories. According to Sheldon, the figurative face of a child “thus brings out the affective dimensions of hermeneutic indeterminacy. The task of managing innocence—contaminated by questioning, forbidding examination—generates a quest that can only spoil what it seeks to verify” (2008: 9-10). For Sheldon, in other words, the affective or emotional aspects of language, heightened in the face of a vulnerable child, lead not to understanding but to “indeterminacy,” a failure in its own right, to determine precisely what is in front of us.

Although she does not reference them directly, Sheldon seems to be referring back to the work of Jean-François Lyotard and, after him, Christopher Fynsk, who theorized the *infans*—the infant figure—as that which falls outside of language itself. In *Infant Figures* (2000), a study of both the limits and the advent of language, Fynsk suggests that “the

death of the *infans*, at the level we are trying to think it, cannot be brought to any representation or figuration—it is an unfigurable figure” (72). One way of understanding genocide as a legacy of traumatic modernity, then, is through the rhetorical figure of the *infans*—in Fynsk’s lexicon, one “without speech”—as doubly signifying the unspeakable act of killing a child as well as the sudden foreclosure of futurity in modern narrative forms (2000: 3).

I will argue here that the language of post-9/11 American literature and the language of post-Holocaust history both suggest the difficulty of passing on or inheriting the tradition of infanticide that is, itself, troubled and incomplete. This is what it means to suggest that this figure is indeterminate in Sheldon’s sense: This literary tradition of figuring infanticide as the foreclosure of the future in no way suggests that the past was unproblematic, or that this is a new fall from grace. Instead, it perversely helps us see that we have already fallen, and reminds us of the genocidal projects hidden behind many official histories. My own project is a gesture not toward completing our understanding of the figure of the child, but rather to troubling it further, showcasing the voiceless voice of infanticide and the child unborn in the context of the traumatic history from which it has come.

The figure of infanticide’s perpetual return in contemporary texts, I propose, suggests that the boundaries of modernist American literature should be expanded beyond the standard date of 1945. After all, the relentlessness of such figures signals that post-war literature and its relationship to the genocides in the first half of the century are still very much with us. Further, given its close thematic proximity with genocide, the unexpected death, murder, or outright refusal of a child in canonical and non-canonical literature of the twentieth century requires critical and collective attention that has been met largely with silence. The double instance of silence—both the silence in the criticism, as well as the inaudible cry of infants in modernist texts—perhaps reveals something about modern culture that has become too easy to overlook: an unconscious awareness of, indeed worry about, infanticide underwriting U.S. slavery, the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, the events of 9/11, and too many other instances to list here.

2. THE STORY OF A BUNDLE

*He stretched out his hand for the bundle [...] And I gave him the bundle [...]
And that’s the last time I held the bundle [...] Silence. —
Harold Pinter (1996: 80-1; ellipsis mine)*

This essay begins with the story of a baby and a bundle—a story unique to modernist literary forms in its perplexing fusion of the historical figure of a dead baby with the literary figure of a bundle. The story of the bundle exposes the inextricability of literature and infanticide, and is one of the many cases to illustrate how literary language—the figure, in particular—depicts the vexed position of the infant in the age of genocide.

This bundle's story is fundamentally about the unlikely literary afterlife of the Holocaust testimony of Bessie K. and her husband Jakob, which if unlikely I nevertheless take to be exemplary in its emphasis on figuration and infanticide. On May 20, 1983, Bessie K. and Jakob provided videotaped testimony detailing their story of survival and loss to Yale University's Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Bessie K.'s testimony would eventually become documented through artistic media, raising important questions about the aesthetics of witness, particularly: How can both literature and survivors' testimony complicate or facilitate an understanding of traumatic history? How can artists possibly render this history—particularly when detailing the life and death of a child?

Bessie K. presents her story solely via memory and a video camera, illustrating, perhaps, how videotestimony has become an entirely new genre of representation because of its unmediated quality. The interview with Bessie K. proceeds like many others, beginning with a discussion of the liberation of the death camps, then going back to a description of life before Nazi occupation, the effects of the war on families, and life in the ghettos. After over two hours of testimony, Bessie introduces, but never names, her infant in the interview. She repeatedly and emphatically refers to him as "the baby," as in, "And then I had the baby boy. I didn't have food for the baby." She goes on to describe how her baby survived hunger, but then, for a few short moments, describes what happens to him when 3,000 people were taken on buses from their ghetto to a concentration camp in Estonia:

The baby, I took the baby, bundled up—because we always were ready, when they gave orders we took possessions, and I took the baby with me . . . so I had the baby and I took and I wrapped the coat around the baby, and I put [him] on the left side . . . but the baby was short of breath, started to choke, choke and started to cry. I wasn't prepared for it. To look back numb, or something happened to me. I wasn't there. "What do you have there?" [the SS officer] asked in German. No, I didn't know what to do. He stretched out his arms. I should hand him over the bundle and I handed over the bundle. And this is the last time I had the bundle with me. (HVT-205, Fortunoff Video Archive for Video Testimony)

In this testimony, Bessie's baby's cries are stifled, inflected with choking and shortness of breath. But the most noteworthy moment occurs when the image of the baby transforms linguistically into a bundle: the moment the officer asks Bessie what she is hiding as he stretches out his arms. In Bessie's telling, memory and time become confused, and her

repetition of “the bundle” three times in the last line, although a literal fact, (she did hand over a bundle) also proves that this is indeed more than a literal telling of her experience. In other words, Bessie has at her disposal only literary language (the dehumanizing figure of the “bundle” to stand in for the human baby) to describe the unimaginable reality of history. The baby, for her, loses life the moment the officer unexpectedly holds out his arms to take him: “I should hand him over the bundle, and I handed over the bundle. And this was the last time I had the bundle with me” (HVT-205, Fortunoff Video Archive for Video Testimony). No longer a living infant, nor a lifeless blanket, Bessie’s “bundle” remains, linguistically, trapped between life and death. As such, through an otherwise calm and straightforward telling, this single figure emerges from history to emphasize the most disturbing experience of Bessie’s survival.

Bessie’s striking reference to “bundle” at first conjures associations with such phrases as *to be bound in the bundle of life* (*tserurah bitsror ha-chaim*, צְרוּרָה בְּצֵרוּר הַחַיִּים; 1 Sam 25:29)—a Hebraism derived from the Bible meaning “to be foreordained to continued life”—as well as *to drop one’s bundle*, meaning “to give up hope, surrender, resist or compete no further” (OED). In the first sense, while using an inanimate object (“bundle”) to depict her infant, Bessie appears to acknowledge the life that she is forced to hand over to the guard to be killed. In the second sense, Bessie betrays that, in the moment of handing over “the bundle,” she loses something—perhaps in addition to her baby, she surrenders to the incessant and murderous demands of the S.S. In this moment, Bessie reveals through her testimony that the life of her child continues as an unconscious trace despite, or perhaps because of, her own surrender. As Bessie tells the interviewer later, “To me, I was dead. I died. I didn’t want to admit to myself this happened to me . . . I was born on the train and I died on the train. I wasn’t even alive.” (Ellipsis in original)

Now, as in 1983, this “bundle” preoccupies both critical and artistic discourses. An exemplum of videotestimony—a new way of negotiating memory and technology—Bessie K. for Hartman emphasizes the importance of witnessing these stories for their “double claim”: “I was there” and also “I am here” (1983: 91), ultimately testifying to her own survival. In fact, Bessie K. has survived in more ways than one. Not only did she live to tell her story, but also her story has pervaded our cultural consciousness, speaking through such unexpected texts as Harold Pinter’s play *Ashes to Ashes* (1996). *Ashes to Ashes*—its title already asserting a commitment to detailing the effects of the Nazi genocide—liberally borrows from Bessie’s testimony to provide powerful dialogue for the final scene staged between two lovers. Pinter, however, and several of his best critics seem not to know where this dialogue originated. Only Hartman suggests—in his 2000 “Memory.com”

article—that Pinter may have seen the Bessie K. testimony discussed in two influential books about Holocaust testimony by Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (1991: 49-50) and *Admitting the Holocaust* (1995; 143-44).

The Pinter scene in question is set in present-day London between two characters (Devlin and Rebecca), when Rebecca tries to describe her relationship with a former lover whom she depicted earlier as resembling an S.S. guard. As if suddenly transported back in history over fifty years—a time during which she did not live—Rebecca transforms into a Holocaust survivor, trying to explain what it is like to be separated from her infant during selection:

<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>They were taking the babies away</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>the babies away</i>
<i>Pause.</i>	
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>I took my baby and wrapped it in my shawl</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>my shawl</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And I made it into a bundle</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>a bundle</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And I held it under my left arm</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>my left arm</i>
<i>Pause.</i>	
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And I went through with my baby</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>my baby</i>
<i>Pause.</i>	
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>But the baby cried out</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>cried out</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And the man called me back</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>called me back</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And he said what do you have there</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>have there</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>He stretched out his hand for the bundle</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>for the bundle</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And I gave him the bundle</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>the bundle</i>
<i>Rebecca</i>	<i>And that's the last time I held the bundle</i>
<i>Echo</i>	<i>the bundle</i>

Silence (Pinter 1996: 77-81).

This text, like Bessie K.'s testimony, figures the baby as a bundle at the moment the infant is handed over for death. But here, surprisingly, the literary turn seems artistic—an aesthetic device to tell the subjective truth. In fact, this very turn appears as a red herring in nearly all of the Pinter criticism to date. Even Pinter, in an interview, said that he wanted *Ashes* to represent a woman who is “simply haunted by the world she’s been into, by all the atrocities that have happened . . . that’s the whole point of the play. I have

myself been haunted by these images for years” (Aragay 1995/1996: 10; ellipsis mine). In another interview, he says that the inspiration for the play came from Gitta Sireny’s biography of Albert Speer, a man responsible for slave labor factories in Nazi Germany; for Pinter, “reading the book . . . triggered lots of other associations. I’ve always been haunted by the image of Nazis picking up babies on bayonet-spikes and throwing them out of windows. All cruelty is monstrous but that seems particularly vile since a little baby is as near to innocence as you can get” (qtd. in Gillen 1997: 91, Scolnicov 2001: 15; ellipsis mine).

The innocence of the child—in this case, the historical referent—“elides itself” Hartman explains, as “the very resonance of the event both broadens it and makes it vanish” (2000) into the unknowing crevices of literature. The resonance of Bessie K.’s testimony lies in the transformation of her innocent baby to a bundle—a disturbing eruption of literary language into history, allowing for a mother’s psychic survival as well as an articulation of silence: reduced to an inanimate bundle, Bessie’s baby has no life, no voice with which to cry. Hanna Scolnicov has recently claimed:

Pinter’s sketched Holocaust images are perhaps attributable to specific texts. I do not know if he has read the writings of . . . Charlotte Delbo. Even if Delbo was not his direct source, there are any number of other, similar testimonies from the concentration camps that could have influenced Pinter’s writing. (2001: 22; ellipsis mine)

Perhaps. But Bessie K.’s “He stretched out his arms. I should hand him over the bundle and I handed over the bundle” (1983) echoes here nearly word for word, witnessing to the Holocaust in a contemporary play ostensibly more committed to aesthetics than to an accurate representation of history.

The self-consciousness of literature, however, obviously predates our concern about the aestheticization of traumatic history. Bessie K.’s surprising reference to the bundle in trying to find a palatable, yet accurate, way to describe the death of her infant is not the first time in history that “bundle” had been used to refer to a dead infant. In other words, the presence of surviving characters is only conceivable insofar as they are constituted through the absence—i.e., the sacrifices, the deaths—of the infants. Rather than the child inheriting the parents’ pasts, then, the parents inherit the child’s absence.

The referential problem of parents inheriting their children’s death—that is, the problem of living beyond their children—not only perplexes historians and playwrights, but postmodern philosophers as well. For Jacques Derrida, the double-bind at the heart of the willing sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, for example, is perhaps the most stunning aspect of

what it means for a parent to contemplate life after the death of his infant.¹ After all, Abraham finds himself in an unimaginable ethical quandary when he is commanded to sacrifice his only son for God. According to the Genesis myth, if Abraham answers to God and needlessly sacrifices his son, then he betrays his son; and yet if he saves his son, he betrays God. Derrida suggests in *The Gift of Death* (1995) – *Donner la mort* (1999) – that the sacrifice, the gift of death, is excessive—unnecessary: “absolute duty . . . implies a sort of gift or sacrifice that functions *beyond* both debt and duty, *beyond* duty as a form of debt” (1995: 63; ellipsis and emphasis mine).² Absolute duty, then, carries an excess—a gratuitousness—that does not count simply as paying off debts or carrying out duties. It employs, rather, an ethics of impossibility that can achieve no happy end (1995: 68-70) – (1999: 97-101). This ethics of sacrifice—an act of redemption that, in turn, necessitates a sacrifice—occurs not only at the level of action, but also at the level of representation. Abraham, it seems, is willing to contemplate sacrificing his son, however the impossible depiction of this sacrifice makes the sacrifice itself seem unthinkable. In the case of both killing a child and of representing the murder, something is necessarily lost in response to an ethical command; the bond of the father / son relationship is broken as Abraham considers sacrificing Isaac, and the depiction of this horrific moment ultimately lies beyond the powers of representation. Abraham must obey God, but he must not. Abraham’s story must be told, but it cannot be told.

These choiceless choices are famously portrayed no better than in William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (1979), a Holocaust novel rendering impossibility in terms of a mother’s forced decision in a death camp to save one of her children at the expense of another:

“‘Mama!’ She heard Eva’s thin but soaring cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her and rose from the concrete with a clumsy stumbling motion. ‘Take the baby!’ she called out. ‘Take my little girl!’

“At this point the aide—with a careful gentleness that Sophie would try without success to forget—tugged at Eva’s hand and led her away into the waiting legion of the damned. She would forever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look back, beseeching. But because she was now almost completely blinded by salty, thick, copious tears she was spared whatever expression Eva wore, and she was always grateful for that. For in the bleakest honesty of her heart she knew that she would never have been able to tolerate it, driven nearly mad as she was by her last glimpse of that vanishing small form.” (1992[1979]: 529-530)

¹ I take up this issue more fully in a 2014 *CLC Web* article entitled, “Akedah, the Holocaust, and the Limits of the Law.” <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2405>

² “le devoir absolu... implique une sorte de don ou de sacrifice qui se porte vers la foi au-delà de la dette et du devoir, du devoir comme dette” (1999: 92).

Eva's address here haunts Sophie so completely—"She would forever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look back, beseeching"—that by the end of the passage, Eva is no longer referred to as a child but as a "vanishing small form"—much like the "bundle" of Bessie K.'s and Pinter's narratives. In Derrida's terms, Sophie's choice is much like Abraham's: her responsibility to one child, and indeed to her herself, results in the sacrifice of the other. And there is nothing she can do to save both. She has, indeed, acted beyond duty and debt. She has acted ethically, although the effects prevent any sense of satisfaction.

Sophie's Choice, however, points toward the kind of ethical response Derrida prescribes in his invocation of Bartleby—in particular, Bartleby's infamous answer to an impossible demand: "I prefer not to." In *Sophie's Choice*, there appears to be a connection between Sophie's action (the sacrifice of her daughter) and Sophie's speech—that strange responsibility of responding and not responding. Although she is Polish, she speaks alternatively in German and English: *Bitte* ("Come again"? What"? Literally, "Would ask?") precedes "You mean I have to choose?" Most disturbing, however, because it invokes the Nazi rhetoric of "selection" in the concentration camps, the very selection that leads to Sophie's sacrifice of Eva, is her "*Ich kann nicht wählen*"—"I cannot select" in the place of "I cannot choose." Derrida explains: "This is a strange responsibility that consists neither of responding nor of not responding. Is one responsible for what one says in an unintelligible language, in the language of the other?" (1995: 74).³ When Sophie answers, "*Ich kann nicht wählen*," in the language of the other, she uses what appears to be unintelligible, both in the sense that it is, for her, the language of genocide and in the sense that it is impossible to make intelligible the impending death of a child.

While not inaudible, Sophie's mixed response verges on unintelligible, indicating again how literary representations—even in their very failures—speak to history in a way that can be better understood as fractured, incomprehensible, and impossible to master after all. I belabor this Derridean point about unintelligibility—particularly the ability to respond by not responding—because the catachrestic image of the inaudible cry may offer a model for such a response. Reading the inaudible cry in figures of infanticide—itsself an unintelligible impossibility—provides, paradoxically, the *possibility* of addressing this haunted image from an unknown past.

³ "Étrange responsabilité qui ne consiste ni à répondre ni à ne pas répondre. Est-on responsable de ce qu'on dit dans une langue inintelligible, dans la langue de l'autre?" (1999: 105).

3. KADDISH AND THE CHILD NOT BORN

"No," I said immediately and forthwith, without hesitation and spontaneously, so to say, for it is quite obvious that our instincts actually work against our instincts, so that, so to say, our anti-instincts act instead of, even as, our instincts. (Kertész 1997: 1; emphasis in original)⁴

Holocaust survivor, Hungarian author, and 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature winner, Imre Kertész takes a more radical approach to representing the status of the child in genocide literature in his 1990 novel, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (*Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*). This most striking phrase grounding Kertész's haunting novel, one that I will return to again and again, is, like the figure of infanticide in post war works, another catachrestic image: the child not born (*nem született gyermekért*)—a more extreme linguistic failure to communicate an actual, historical fact, the fact of the extremity of twenty-first century experience leading to the loss of hope in building a new generation. Just as, by definition, a cry is audible (not inaudible as these failed literary attempts tell us), almost by definition, a child has been born, has come into life, has cried upon entering the world. I understand, of course, that on a literal level, Kertész in his work, his elegy, is pondering what it means to bring a child into the world, and, conversely, what it means not to. But as soon as the word child is offered, one thinks of him, or her, as born, as fully realized, as introduced.

The novel begins with a single word "No" – "Nem" – offered, we learn, "immediately and forthwith, without hesitation and spontaneously" (1997: 1) – "rögtön és azonnal, habozás nélkül és úgyszólván ösztönösen" (1990: 7). After some time with this thin novel, you realize that the word "No" is spoken in response to a question posed by the speaker's wife and later by a therapist, Dr. Oblath.

'No' something screamed and howled within me immediately and spontaneously when my wife (incidentally, she's no longer my wife) first mentioned it—you—and my panic-stricken cramp has only slowly, after many long years, been quieted down into some general melancholy. (1997: 4)⁵

The speaker tells us a page later: "all Dr. Oblath did was to ask the innocent question of whether or not I had a child" (1997: 5).⁶ The publisher, Hydra Books, describes *Kaddish for*

⁴ "Nem!" – mondtam rögtön és azonnal, habozás nélkül és úgyszólván ösztönösen, mert egészen természetes immár, hogy ösztöneink ösztöneink ellen működnek, hogy úgyszólván ellenösztöneink működnek ösztöneink helyett" (Kertész 1990: 7).

⁵ "Nem!" – üvöltötte, vonította bennem valami, rögtön és azonnal, amikor a feleségem (egyébként már rég nem a feleségem) először kerített szót róla – rólad –, és szűkülésem csak lassan, tulajdonképpen, igen, hosszú-hosszú évek múltán csitult bennem valami mélabús világfájdalom" (1990: 11).

⁶ "hiszen Oblath doktor mindössze azt ártatlan kérdést tette föl nekem, hogy van-e gyermekem" (1990: 14).

a Child Not Born as “the story of a middle aged man taking stock of his life” when he “explains to a friend that he cannot bring a child into the world where the Holocaust occurred and could occur again” (u.p.). However, the “you” mentioned above, set off by an em dash, seems to locate the addressee as the child not born, the possible but not-to-be child, the impossible being lamented in this kaddish. Indeed, as Eluned Summers-Bremner has argued, “the child who has no father because he will never be born” is in fact nevertheless a living presence in the book that “stands in for him...in so far as this book that stands in for him is the enigmatic instance of life that we hold in our hands” (2005: 230; ellipsis mine). While I agree with Summers-Bremner that *Kaddish* seeks to communicate unspeakable loss after the Holocaust, I also see it as equally worried about a future that not even his wonderful elegiac work can repair.⁷

The novel, for example, is infused with rejection, with sudden and quick bursts of the word no—emphatic negations of this child not to be: “‘No’, I said immediately and forthwith” -- (“‘Nem!’ – mondtam rögtön és azonnal”); “‘No!’ was not a decisive enough” (1997: 68) “‘Nem!’ nem eléggé határozott (1990: 137); “‘No!’ or an expected response, given my unpredictability, and my wife only laughed at me” (68) – “‘Nem!’ lett volna, vagy mintha biztos lett volna következtetélességemben, a feleségem csak nevetett rajta” (137); she knows from how deep inside this “No” sprang; “‘No’ was a ... ‘No!’ only that it was a ‘No!’ I said” (68; emphasis and ellipsis mine) – “‘Nem!’ is ez, csak éppen... ‘Nem!’, mondtam” (137). This catalogue of multiple “No!’s, seven or eight on a page, all fragmented and trailing off, reveal the extent of the despair and obstinacy of our speaker toward the question of a child, a child not born.

I did not know what to do with this image twenty years ago, when considering the figure of infanticide particularly in modernist and Holocaust literature. It does not seem to fit the model of a failed figure of a child’s death. This is something else—the failed figure of a child’s non-birth. But then something uncanny happened in the American Jewish literary tradition after 9/11, motivating me to ask, as has Victoria Aarons in her important collection, *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives: Memory in Memoir in Fiction*, “How is the Holocaust viewed through the interpretive lens of the events of the twenty-first century?” (2016: xi). For me, the two most prominent works of fiction to take up the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City also refer back to the Holocaust, and, in so doing, take on Kertész’s vexed and impossible language of the child not born: Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Winger’s *This Must be the Place* (2008). Both are works that

⁷ For two additional incisive readings of this novel, see Ní Dhúill (2016) and Radnóti (2009).

seem to suggest we are connected via that which we cannot understand: the catachrestic image of a child not born, the very image exemplifying the loss of a future where we would ordinarily expect to find hope and new life.

While Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is generally studied for its representation of a precocious child narrator, Oskar, whose father died in the terrorist attacks and leaves repeated messages saying good bye on an answering machine Oskar buries in the closet, a more overlooked aspect is the representation of Oskar's grandmother's "renter," a mysterious man who moves in after the attacks and who turns out to be Oskar's grandfather. The renter has no words, literally, and communicates via tattoos on his hands: yes and no; in his former life, a life he built in Germany before coming to the United States, he is engaged to Oskar's grandmother's sister (Anna) who is pregnant during the Dresden bombing of WWII.

So I read this as one of several post-9/11 novels that looks back to the history of WWII, but also, like *This Must Be the Place*, I read it as a Holocaust novel as a result of the haunting image of Simon Goldberg, a shadowy figure whom Anna's father is trying to save from the concentration camps. Even in New York, the renter thinks he sees Simon, always among books in the novel, never a physical presence after the war (126-128, 279). While I can understand the argument of Benjamin Schreier, an important critic who also reads *Extremely Loud* alongside a theory of trauma, that it is only our fantasies for reparation motivating critics to read the text as a Holocaust novel; and yet, even without the shadowy figure of Simon (2015: 126-128; 215; 279), I would propose that the novel is more anti-reparative than such critics as Ilka Saal (2011) and Elaine Safer (2006) are willing to suggest.

Oskar's grandfather, like Kertész's narrator, writes letters to an unborn child, who ultimately is a child born to Oskar's grandmother, who is Oskar's father, killed during 9/11. In a short section entitled, "Why I'm Not Where You Are: 5/21/63" (2005: 16-18), Oskar's grandfather writes: "To my unborn child: I haven't always been silent" (16). We learned of the history between Oskar's grandmother and grandfather early on—this time, from the perspective of Oskar's grandmother, sister to Anna who lost her life in Dresden:

*He took his pen and wrote on the next and last page, No children.
That was our first rule.
I understand, I told him in English.
We never used German again.
The next day, your grandfather and I were married. (85)*

The reason for no children is not explained until much later in the novel which is characterized by shifting points of view and the a-chronological timeline, two characteristics of trauma fiction generally. In a compelling flashback, Oskar's grandfather recalls:

[Anna] said, "I'm pregnant."... (ellipsis mine) "I kissed her stomach, that was the last time I ever saw her. At 9:30 that night, the air-raid sirens sounded, everyone went to the shelters, but no one hurried, we were use[d] to the alarms, we assumed they were false, why would anyone want to bomb Dresden?" (210)

The grandfather cannot give up this memory, although he has given up the possibility of future children: The loss of his unborn child with Anna is enough for him to give up on all future possibility. Oskar's grandfather goes on to say: "I kissed her belly, even though there was nothing yet to kiss, 'I love our baby'. That made her laugh,... 'You love an idea'... 'I love our idea'. That was the point, we were having an idea together. ... 'Are you afraid?' ... 'Life is scarier than death'" (2005: 215; ellipsis mine). The compelling insight that the baby before it is born is an idea reinforces the catachrestic image of the child not born, the unborn child. It is as though Foer is recognizing here that before birth there is an idea; after birth there is a child, that the unborn child is a logical impossibility but that nevertheless seems an effective way to refer to the loss of hope and impossible traumas of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The novel's two plot lines—the present, set months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks which feature Oskar's quest to learn more about his father; and the past, set after the Dresden bombing—come together when Oskar discovers empty envelopes addressed "[t]o my child" and "[t]o my unborn child" (236), referring to his father, whom his grandfather never knew because he left when he found out about the pregnancy. The letters themselves are copy edited in Oskar's father's signature red pen.

If this were just one best-selling American novel in the wake of 9/11 that brings together the history of the terrorist attacks with WWII, and intermittent references to Simon, a victim of the Nazi Holocaust, I would think that it is very clever, if singular. But Anna Winger's 2008 novel, *This Must Be the Place*, employs similar devices: a post 9/11 novel set in Berlin, Germany, in a building affected by looting during the Holocaust, in a city affected by bombing, featuring two characters with alternating points of view.

Hope moved to Berlin after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and after miscarrying a baby. Walter lives in the same building; his grandparents are Holocaust survivors who abandoned his mother when she fell in love with a German. Hope tells us, in her opening chapter, of the fantasy of living where "there was a baby," when, in fact: "The fantasy of her European life

had not materialized, but her American life no longer existed" (24). Hope, in other words, is caught wandering between two worlds, the one in Europe that does not yet exist, and the one in America, where her sense of family life died with her child. In fact, the novel barely dares to articulate this child's death, referring to it early on as "the horror of what had happened" (25).

Nevertheless, Hope's sections of this novel are shot through with repeated images of children—children she sees playing in playground of Berlin, memories of the children she taught in New York, the revelation that her white washed flat in Berlin has elaborate wall paper for children who perished during the Holocaust, the discovery that in the basement of her building is a secret school for Jewish children during the war. Once again, the personal loss of a child in this novel becomes inextricably bound up with the public and historical loss of children in genocidal acts. Hope wonders: "The global might be personal now, but how about the other way around? In September, when she came out of her downtown building to see people covered in white powder running for their lives, she had not been entirely surprised to find the outside world finally reflecting her inner chaos" (73). Such a passage refers to the immediate past of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a reference that, for much of the novel, seems to be its particular thematic concern. When reflecting on the ash-covered people running in the streets of Manhattan as the towers seemed on the verge of collapse, Hope seems to understand it—the sense of chaos, loss, death—as a direct response to her grief in the face of her lost child.

As with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, I am interested in this novel's confusing and inconsistent use of the metaphor of the child: at once it is literal, a literal fact of history, and it is also a figure for inner chaos, for worldly chaos, for a loss of a sense of the future. The status of the figure is further complicated by the fact that it cannot possibly exist in the real world we occupy: a baby cannot both be dead or nonexistent and alive. This is brought to the forefront when Hope wonders:

How much time had she spent pondering the bewildering fact that it was illegal in the United States to issue a birth certificate and death certificate on the same day? She had been over the details at the hospital and at city hall. It had all been explained to her, but didn't make any sense. She had received the death certificate, the ashes, nothing else. And yet, how could someone die without ever being alive? If a death certificate marked the end of a life, then didn't that life, however short, deserve validation? (2008: 72)

Receiving the death certificate without the birth certificate emphasizes the very ways in which we remain out of time—when time is out of sequence—during personal traumatic events as well as global traumatic experience. The paradoxical nature of the dead baby

who was never born, a child unborn, highlights this vexed historical moment—the ways in which the global is personal now, and vice versa. Hope's question—how do they explain what happened to the children?—simultaneously wonders through its unclear structure how 9/11 can be put into words for the small children Hope taught in the States, but also looks back to a worry about how to communicate the traumatic history of the Holocaust that took the lives of the children who lived in her apartment building in Berlin. The ambiguously placed prepositional phrase “to the children” at once means, how do they give words to the children today? And how do they have words for what happened to the children during the war.

As if in a self-conscious nod to Kertész, Winger ends her novel with a kaddish in the basement of the building in Berlin, in what used to be a Hebrew school for children hiding in the basement during the war. Walter says:

“I am going to do it now. I am going to say Kaddish.”

“Here?”

“When he lit a match and leaned over the five candles, the warm light illuminated the ninety-year old stone walls of the room, once plastered and white, now a dingy beige. On the back wall Hebrew letters had been drawn from right to left in tidy lines, in ink and now faded.” (2008: 302)

The five candles are for Walter's parents, his grandparents, and Hope's unborn son. The unfortunate irony here, in the end, is that Walter cannot read the illuminated writing on the wall, and he does not know the proper prayer, not having access to his Jewish grandparents who denied his existence even after his mother died. Instead, Walter sings folks songs his mother sang to him, pop songs by REO Speedwagon and Madonna.

It seems a bit sacrilegious in such a heavy novel, to end it not with the proper Kaddish but with the lines: “It's time to bring this ship into the shore... and throw away the oars. Forever” (303; ellipsis mine). On the other hand, this 2008 novel seems to feel hopeful in a way that the others do not. In this moment after 9/11, Hope is pregnant with another child and she has found peace through a prayer uttered in the basement of a whitewashed building in Berlin. And yet, the omnipresence of the child unborn, linked to the Holocaust via Kertész and picked up again after 9/11 suggests that we as a culture are still having a difficult time moving on from the past, explaining what has happened to the children. There is a double tension in all of these works to recognize the life of a child but also the worry about what bringing a child into the world in its current state will mean—a loss of innocence most definitely, a loss of life very possibly, a loss of faith in humanity, a loss of faith in language to communicate the horrors of history in the last 100 years.

4. THEORETICAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE INFANS

Dead babies were quickly replaceable when the birth rate was high; and an ignorance of the means to prevent death bred a helpless, resigned mentality.
—Lionel Rose (1986: 5)

Typically, critics point to modernism's self-consciousness regarding the differences between reference and signification as a characteristic unique to literature in the twentieth century. Signification communicates a *particular thing or idea*; in this way, signification uses language to communicate a *literal* meaning. Reference, on the other hand, does not refer to one simple thing, but rather functions as *figurative* language. In other words, a figure is a kind of reference, suggesting comparisons, for example, between the bundle and the baby, and pointing up the different ways for language potentially to depict a traumatic event.

For this reason, the story of the baby and a bundle, like the story of the unborn child, is so compelling because it features the unwitting conflation of two terms—baby and bundle—via a literary maneuver illustrating the failure of language precisely at the moment that it must succeed in conveying the history of genocide. In the case of the bundle, signification would express, or signify, quite simply, a bundle. However, it is reference—the thing of which modernist texts of infanticide are made—that moves beyond the idea of a bundle in order to recall the murdered babies in the 20th century described as bundles even as they took their last breaths.

Literature—through the turn of phrase from the baby to the bundle, from child to unborn—steps in where history fails within several narratives of disaster. In their very failure adequately to represent vulnerable children, a loss of a sense of the future, history borrows from literary language the figure—the figure of the bundle, of the unborn child—in order to trouble the narrative of infanticide. And yet, even history is referential and is often no less literary than literature itself. In the case of the figure of the child in literature of genocide, fiction and history share with the discourse of trauma studies, which uses the tools of post-structuralism and the discourses of the courtroom and psychoanalysis in order to interpret important communicative “failures” that paradoxically succeed in depicting the aftermath of a personal or public crisis.

Such failures, in both history and literature, point up the troubling and inassimilable aspects of a particular event or experience, aspects that would otherwise be incorporated and forgotten in narratives drawing on literal meanings alone. By emphasizing figuration, then, trauma studies offers ways of interpreting literary language that can also provide insight into reading traumatic history. In other words, the aesthetic dimensions of

language that feature surprising excesses provide access to a troubling history that cannot simply be gathered from historical documentation. In this way, the unexpected excess attributed to language—that excess which “speaks beyond” intended meanings—often testifies as compellingly as the direct intentions of the witness in the courtroom. Such an impulse in trauma studies continues to this day, as exemplified in Elissa Marder’s edited collection, *Literature and Psychoanalysis: Open Questions* (2017), where she reflects on the contemporary tendency—in particular, of the volume’s contributors—to “explore how literature and psychoanalysis share a primary concern with what one can never master or get beyond” (257).

The figure of the inaudible, silenced, or unborn infant, who nevertheless cries for witness, seems to be one such reality we cannot “get beyond”; as such, it offers a particularly poignant ethical question, a question of ethics posed most poignantly through literature. Fynsk’s theory of language, particularly the way language functions in relation to the child, paradoxically, without language, follows on from the theory of catachresis introduced in Jacques Derrida’s and F.C.T. Moore’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy” (1974), where he illustrates how philosophy’s claims to “objective” or “natural” language are fundamentally misguided—that philosophy itself is steeped in a particular kind of literary language which potentially transmits something inaudible.

Yet, before the twentieth century, it would seem that the death of a child was not unspeakable at all. In fact, infanticide was reported regularly in such pre-twentieth century texts as Victorian narratives of hardship and illegitimate births. Only the modernists began to value children outside of a capitalist exchange system while simultaneously (and paradoxically) slaughtering them in systematic genocide. According to Lionel Rose, for example:

Dead babies were quickly replaceable when the birth rate was high; and an ignorance of the means to prevent death bred a helpless, resigned mentality—‘it’s God’s will’, ‘perhaps it’s for the best’ and so forth—which compounded the cheapening of infant life. When babies became relatively scarce and as improved medical and sanitary understanding eroded the fatalism, so infant life started to become more precious, and we see the beginnings of this change at the end of the nineteenth century. (1986: 5)

Modernist texts, then, convey the preciousness of infant life and the unspeakability of an infant’s death by emphasizing the horror of the moment through figuration. In modernism, infanticide becomes a crime whose literariness emerges in history and where the figure of infanticide acquires reference, but also signifies literal deaths.

The death of an infant seems so horrific, perhaps, because of all that infants have come to represent in the past century: innocence, helplessness, hope for the future, and utter vulnerability. That the most innocent and helpless members of society could be systematically murdered seems incomprehensible. Further, to kill a baby also forecloses changes in the future and all of the hope these changes carry with them. But it also forecloses a narrative of the future. As an unspeakable crime against victims who cannot speak, infanticide challenges our ability to tell the story of an act that must be preserved for future generations.

In carrying forth new value, the figure of infanticide functions as a limit case of poetic tropes in general—but also as a quality of literature’s indirect *potential* for conveying the untranslatable, or as a way of marking particular limits of representation. Given this “unfigurable figure,” it seems as if a study such as Fynsk’s could only come about after the origin of deconstruction, as it appears as a compelling re-reading of catachresis, another version of the inaudible cry. The content of Fynsk’s theory (the image of a dead infant) derives from the very structure of metaphor analyzed by Derrida in “White Mythology” and de Man in “Epistemology of Metaphor”—the figure that cannot exist in reality.

For such thinkers as Jill Robbins, what we have left then is a radical and ethical relationship with the figure, with language itself. In *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999), for example, Robbins argues that it is necessary “to face the figure otherwise, as language’s ownmost figurative potential, as that which is most distinctive to language, that is, to face language *as* ethical possibility” (54). In demanding that we “face the figure,” Robbins suggests that the very work of Levinas itself “describes the ethical relation to the other as a kind of language, as responsibility, that is, as language-response to the other who faces and who, ‘in turn’, speaks” (54). To conclude then, I would like to gesture to a renewed commitment to Levinas’s philosophy of ethics regarding the other, an other with a face, as a new standard for reading—a standard that requires us to “face the figure” as we would face an other.

For me, an ethical or responsible reading in the wake of trauma, indeed, in the age of trauma, requires us to face an other, if even in the substitute form of the literary figure, just as we must face the facts. As Sheldon has suggested, “the child, in her innocence and plentitude, promises another generation of species-survival posed as physiological self-similarity even as she begs for protection against the many and varied harms of contemporary industrial practices” (2016: 177). While Sheldon’s approach to the child figure has more to do with a critique of capitalism and postmodern culture than with the potential of trauma theory, I believe we arrive at similar conclusions regarding the vexed

status of the child, particularly when its very life and future is threatened. Twenty years ago, I began to see the repeated and failed representation of infanticide as a sign of the cultural haunting of the genocides of the twentieth century; but now, almost two decades into the twenty-first century, I see the continuation of these figures, in particular, the figure of the child unborn, not only as a testimonial to the past, but also as a forewarning about what terror the future may hold.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Aarons, V. (ed.). *Third-Generation Holocaust Narratives. Memory in Memoir and Fiction*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016.

Aragay, M. "Writing, Politics, and *Ashes to Ashes*: An Interview with Harold Pinter." *The Pinter Review* (1995-96): 4-15.

Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/> [18 January 2019].

"Bundle." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, 2018. <http://www.oed.com/> [24 January 2019].

de Man, P. "The Epistemology of Metaphor." *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 65. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996 [1978], 34-50.

Derrida, J. *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Willis. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995 (*Donner la mort*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1999).

Derrida, J. & Moore, F.C.T. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." *New Literary History*. 1974, Vol. 6, No. 1, 5-74.

Foer, J. S. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Mariner Books, 2005.

Fynsk, Ch. *Infant Figures: The Death of the 'Infans' and Other Scenes of Origin*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.

Gillen, F. "History as a Single Act: Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*." *Cycnos*. 1997, Vol. 14, No. 1, 91-97. <http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/?id=1230> [26 January 2019].

Hartman, G. "Memory.com: Telesuffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era." *Raritan—A Quarterly Review*. 2000, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1-18.

K. Bessie & Jakob. "Interview for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony." Yale University Sterling Memorial Library, Room 331C, New Haven, CT. 20 May, 1983.

Kertész, I. *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*. Trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997 (*Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1990).

Langer, L. *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.

- Langer, L.** *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.
- Marder, E.** "Introduction: Open Questions, Opaque Transmissions." *Paragraph*. 2017, Vol. 40, No. 3, 257–258. DOI:[10.3366/para.2017.0233](https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2017.0233) [7 February 2019].
- Ní Dhúill, C.** "Refusing the Child: Weininger, Edelman, Kertész." *Poetics Today*. 2016, Vol. 37, No. 3, 369–385.
- Pinter, H.** *Ashes to Ashes*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.
- Pozorski, A.** "Akedah, the Holocaust, and the Limits of the Law in Roth's 'Eli, the Fanatic.'" *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. 2014, Vol. 6, No. 2: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2405> [24 January 2019].
- Radnóti, S.** "Polyphony in Kertész's *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (*Kaddis a Meg Nem Született Gyermekért*)." *Comparative Central European Holocaust Studies*, Louise O. Vasvári et al., (eds.), Purdue University Press, 2009, 122–132.
- Robbins, J.** *Altered Reading Levinas and Literature*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Rose, L.** *The Massacre of the Innocents: Infanticide in Britain 1800-1939*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Saal, I.** "Regarding the Pain of Self and Other: Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. 2011, Vol. 57, No. 3, 451–476.
- Safer, E.** "Illuminating the Ineffable: Jonathan Safran Foer's Novels." *Studies in American Jewish Literature*. 2006, Vol. 25, 112–132.
- Schreier, B.** *The Impossible Jew: Identity and the Reconstruction of Jewish American Literary History*. New York University Press, 2015.
- Scolnicov, H.** "Ashes to Ashes: Pinter's Holocaust Play." *Cycnos*. 2001, Vol. 18, No. 1, 15–24.
- Sheldon, R.** *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Styron, W.** *Sophie's Choice*. New York: Vintage International, 1992 [1979].
- Summers-Bremner, E.** "Imre Kertész's *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*." *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. Louise O. Vasvári & Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (eds.), Purdue University Press, 2005, 220–231.
- Winger, A.** *This Must Be the Place*. Riverhead Books, 2008.