

LIVING IN THE PRESENCE OF AN ABSENCE

The Puzzling Holocaust Legacy
of the American post-Holocaust Generations

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ABSTRACT • This article deals with second-generation Holocaust literature, i.e. writings belonging to the generation born after the Holocaust and grown up in its aftermath. Specifically I dwell on two considerably different Jewish-American novels, which reflect two different natures of Holocaust inheritance and, hence, two distinct paths, featuring second-generation Holocaust literature: Thane Rosenbaum's *Second-Hand Smoke* (1999) and Irene Dische's *Pious Secrets* (1991). My understanding of these narratives is grounded in the cultural distinction between particularist and universalist second-generation Holocaust writers outlined by Alan Berger in *Children of Job, American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* (1997). The argument that I present interprets Rosenbaum's novel as a particularist depiction of the Holocaust legacy, whereas Dische's book is associated to a universalist perspective towards this event and its inheritance.

KEYWORDS • Holocaust Literature, Trauma Studies, Jewish-American Literature, Memorialization, Thane Rosenbaum, *Second-Hand Smoke*, Irene Dische, *Pious Secrets*

There were millions of dead Jews,
and then there were those who had survived
but who still qualified as dead under certain
measurements for living. And now the children,
the next generation - paralyzed, frozen in time,
unable to move forward and hauntingly afraid
to look back. A recycling, of the night-mares;
an enduring premonition of death.

Thane Rosenbaum, *Second-Hand Smokes*

1. The Holocaust Legacy

Elie Wiesel, author of some of the most renowned works on the Holocaust and himself a Holocaust survivor, has effectively conveyed the historical and cultural essence of the twentieth century genocide of the Jewish people, by signalling that the Holocaust not only caused the death of eleven million people, but also the annihilation of the pre-existing concept of human being. The compelling objective of all philosophers, scholars and authors who engage in Holocaust studies is, therefore, to investigate "a double dying" – as Alvin Rosenfeld has pointed out in his 1988 book on Holocaust literature *A Double Dying, Reflections on Holocaust*

Literature, in which he highlights the necessity, for post-Holocaust generations, to conceive of a phenomenology of reading this kind of literature. On the one hand, the Holocaust as historical event demands to be explored, figured out and conceptualized; on the other hand, the unprecedented, epoch-making nature of these facts claims the reassessment of the traditional principles of Western culture, a matter to which a response is not straightforward¹.

On the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, it is worth reading this “double challenge” posed by the Holocaust against the background of a third aspect: the relationship between contemporary, post-Holocaust generations and the legacy bequeathed to them by the Holocaust. Commemorating the anniversary of an event means, indeed, remembering its occurrence, considering the cultural breakthroughs brought about by it and, above all, identifying the hallmarks of its remembrance and their significance for contemporary generations. How far have we come in conceptualizing this watershed historical event and in shaping a fruitful memory of it? What sort of path, or paths, has Holocaust consciousness undertaken in order to reach the second and even the third generation with its inheritance?

The reasoning, which I intend to present in this article, will investigate these issues, with particular reference to the “symbolic passing of the torch of remembrance from survivors to their children” – as Wiesel has defined the Holocaust inheritance during the plenary session of the First International Conference of Children of Holocaust Survivors in 1984 – in American society. I will try to shed some light on the peculiar bond which unites America and the Holocaust, specifically dwelling on how the Holocaust issue has influenced American post-Holocaust society and how, in turn, American culture has absorbed and shaped it according to its particular background, thus acquiring its own distinctive consciousness of the Holocaust. The reason for my choice to focus on the juncture between pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust generations is the belief that the roots of the contemporary understanding of the event and the foundation of post-Holocaust phenomenology – which are both still in the making – were generated precisely in the act of handing down Holocaust legacy to subsequent generations. In order to debate American Holocaust inheritance and its peculiarities, I will refer to Alan Berger’s extensive study, *Children of Job, American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* (1997) as cultural framework outlining my discussion of two divergent Jewish-American novels: Thane Rosebaum’s *Second-Hand Smoke* (1999) and Irene Dische’s *Pious Secrets* (1991)². Through the reading of these two narratives, I will try to infer two distinct kinds of legacy, which typify American post-Holocaust generations, and two peculiar paths featuring second-generation Holocaust literature, i.e. two sides of the same coin. The basic difference which distinguishes and at the same time shapes these two works is grounded in their authors’ personal history: Rosenbaum’s parents are both Jewish Holocaust survivors of Polish origins immigrated in America after the war; whereas Dische is daughter of two Jewish refugees who managed to flee in the US from Austria after its annexation to Nazi Germany in 1938.

¹ The conceptualization of the Holocaust significance has been extensively dealt with by several prestigious authors; philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno (*Prisms, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, 1967), Emil Fackenheim (*To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*, 1982), Hannah Arendt (*Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1963), and survivors such as Primo Levi (*I sommersi e i salvati*, 1986), Jean Améry (*At the Mind’s Limits, Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, 1966) and Elie Wiesel (*Night*, 1960).

² The book, originally written in English, was first published in 1989 in Germany in its German translation while the first American edition appeared only two years later.

2. Second-Generation Literary Responses to the Holocaust. Two distinct approaches

As it is well known, throughout the decades after the end of World War II American Holocaust consciousness has undergone a series of shifts – a subject that has been widely debated in American discourse and represents the cultural framework grounding the speculations produced in this paper. The “Americanization of the Holocaust” – a cultural, societal and political phenomenon, which, from the nineteen-seventies on, progressively engendered an almost total absorption of Holocaust identity into American culture – represents the pivotal point in the dynamics of the formation of American Holocaust sensibility. By featuring the peculiarities of Holocaust remembrance in the US, it has framed American Holocaust legacy, as discussed in Peter Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life* (2000) and Beth Cohen’s *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Post-war America* (2007).

This transition in cultural ideology has allowed the flourishing of literary responses to the Holocaust, through works which, by recounting the Jewish experience both during and after the Shoah, mirrored American developing perceptions towards this event as well. The subject that was evolving into “the root experience” (an expression coined by Emil Fackenheim) not only of the Jewish people but also of American society as a whole, was first addressed by Holocaust survivors, followed subsequently by Jewish-American authors who were not directly involved in the event and, around the nineteen-eighties, by second-generation writers. The appearance of literary responses provided by the Holocaust’s offspring seals the momentous passage from the generation of the survivors to that of the secondary witnesses; the dawn of the current meaning-making process which re-interprets the pre-conceptualized Holocaust significance against the background of contemporary sensibility. The works generated by the second-generation experience concern the challenge of living in the “presence of an absence”, i.e. inhabiting a reality determined by a past, traumatic event, neither seen nor experienced in person, whose legacy is overwhelming and puzzling (Berger 1997, 2).

With regard to the second-generation literary responses to the Holocaust and their nature as epitomes of developing Holocaust remembrance sensibilities, Alan Berger appears to suggest that these authors demonstrate not only to have inherited the burden of their parents’ involvement in the Holocaust, but also to share the same duty to bear witness to it. In doing so through their writings, Berger continues, second-generation authors elaborated their own peculiar literary modes and images related to their own perception of the Holocaust, which is obviously different from the experience of their parents. Although Berger focuses his attention on the works of the American sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors, I would argue that his argument – the one according to which his whole study is structured – may be applied also to those American second-generation Holocaust writers who, while sharing a Jewish background, are not the direct descendants of Holocaust survivors. I am referring to the primary cultural distinction which Berger draws between “particularist” and “universalist” authors; a dialectical tension which, according to Berger, characterizes and at the same time differentiates the “post-Auschwitz creative work of the second-generation witnesses”, and hails from biblical and rabbinic thought (Berger 1997, 3-4).

Berger affirms that the authors who “travel the first path” are those whose focus is on the Jewish specificity of the Holocaust and, therefore, they interpret its legacy within the boundaries of Jewishness. Their literature depicts this event as a peculiar one, i.e. a “particular” tragedy of one people and it deals mainly with issues, aroused by the Holocaust, relevant for their own culture. The nature of “universalistic” works is instead grounded in an interpretation of the Holocaust as involving all humankind; these authors, while not denying its Jewish specificity, perceive this occurrence as a bearer of lessons and eternal truths which are meaningful not only for Jews, and in this sense they understand the significance of the Holocaust as “universal”

(Berger 1997, 4). Berger identifies the characteristics which differentiate universalist and particularist literary trends and furthers his reasoning by pointing out their different scopes as well.

[Particularist authors] put God on trial, abandon the Sinai Covenant [the alliance between God and the Jewish people] while seeking to find an adequate alternative, deal with theodicy within a specifically Jewish context, and raise the issue of Jewish-Christian relationships. The particularists seek a *tikkun atzmi* (mending or repair) of the self. [...] Those who travel the second path, that of Jewish universalism, seek to articulate universal lessons emerging from the Holocaust. The universalists do not abandon Jewish specificity, but strive for *tikkun olam*, the moral improvement or repair of the world, and struggle against all forms of prejudice and racism, ranging from anti-Semitism to homophobia (Berger 1997, 4).

The necessity, felt by these authors, to attain a *tikkun*³ after this upsetting event, i.e. a mending after the destruction, is a crucial aspect of Berger's analysis of second-generation Holocaust literature.

In regards to post-Holocaust reality, Emil Fackenheim resorts to this traditional concept of the Jewish thought in *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (1982), in which he investigates the possible ways to live as Jews in the contemporary, post-Auschwitz epoch. Fackenheim affirms that Jews have now to face reality by accepting their own "historical situatedness" in this world shattered by the Holocaust, albeit trying to correct it. In order to mend "the rupture of civilizations, cultures, and religions that the Holocaust caused," Jews should pursue "a *tikkun* of the Holocaust", a repair of what this major event disrupted; however, Fackenheim claims that the Jewish people can expect "at most only a fragmentary *tikkun*". This is so because of the pure, unprecedented evil displayed in this occurrence, along with the total destruction of the "pre-Shoah values of Judaism, Christianity, and the Western philosophical tradition". These conditions, according to Fackenheim, prevent the achievement of a complete repair and, at the same time, "call into question not this or that way of being human, but all ways". Despite these premises, Jews must attempt "to mend the world" anyway because, as Fackenheim highlights, "if the impossible *tikkun* were not also necessary, and hence possible, we could not live at all. [...] A *tikkun*, here and now, is mandatory for a *tikkun*, then and there, was actual" (Fackenheim 1982, 254-262 and Berger 1997, 28-31).

In Berger's reflections, the idea of *tikkun* is transposed into the literary arena and employed to depict the second-generation witnesses' will to attain a redemption of the shattered world they have inherited by means of their creative work, which transposes the nature of distinct Holocaust remembrances of contemporary society into fictional worlds, thus furthering a critical reflection on the significance of the Holocaust in our culture and advancing the phenomenology of reading Holocaust-related literature. In the light of these considerations, I would argue that the concept of *tikkun* (understood as the renewal of post-Holocaust existence through literary reception and interpretation) may be read as an advancement and a fundamental aspect of Jewish-American Holocaust literature. This idea represents the reading paradigm according to which I will present the analyses of second-generation Holocaust literature; indeed, the notion that the forwarding of a critical, cultural understanding of post-Holocaust existence leads to the achievement of a *tikkun* per se grounds the reflections produced in this article.

³ *Tikkun* is a Hebrew word which means "repair, completion" and its significance was first explained in the *Mishnah* – a text compiled in the second century A.D. which is now part of the canon of Jewish literature (The Movement for Reform Judaism 2014).

Elie Wiesel, during the aforementioned address at the First International Conference of Children of Holocaust Survivors, referred to the second generation's *tikkun* as the duty of witnessing "a moral mission" inherited from their predecessors. In the second volume of his memoir *And the Sea is Never Full* (2000), Wiesel thus comments on this experience:

Facing these young men and women, some of them now fathers and mothers themselves, all caught between their parents' wounded memory and their own hopes covered with ashes, I have difficulty hiding my emotions. For this people belong to my internal landscape: I look at them and see them through the prism of the past. [...] I look at these young people and tell myself, tell them, that *they* were the enemy's target as surely as were their parents. *They* were the ones he had hoped to annihilate. By killing Jews, he hoped to prevent their children from being born (Wiesel 2000 b, 22 Italics in original).

By recognizing a strong connection between the Holocaust and second-generation witnesses, Wiesel legitimizes the right of "one generation after" – as he defines the second-generation – to bear witness to the Holocaust from its own peculiar perspective. Indeed, according to Wiesel, second-generation authors should testify not to the historical event lived through by their parents, but to their own experiences of its aftermath, by discussing their own lives and memories and, in doing so, develop a new, inter-generational viewpoint on the Holocaust⁴ (Wiesel 2000, 20-22 and Berger 1997, 18 and 23-25).

A main feature which universalist and particularist authors have in common is indeed the focus on the aftermath of the Holocaust, i.e. the period which they have experienced directly and in which their memories are set. As Berger points out, "the focus of second-generation witness testimony is less on the Holocaust itself than on its continuing aftermath. [This is so because] the beatings, torture, humiliation, gassings, and burnings happened to their parents' generation." What the survivors' offspring can testify is, in fact, their peculiar feeling of being emotionally involved in an event they did not experience in person; the sensation of living in the constant "presence of an absence." The descendants of Holocaust survivors, indeed, bear "witness to the Shoah's continuing and multidimensional sequelae [post-traumatic condition], of which the second-generation creative works themselves form a significant part." The French intellectual Nadine Fresco brilliantly epitomizes this experience by stating that "these latter-day Jews are like people who have had a hand amputated that they never had" (Berger 1997, 2-3).

Thane Rosenbaum, in the essay "Art and Atrocity in a Post 9/11 World", discusses his choice as a novelist to focus on the aftermath of the Holocaust and not to discuss the facts of the period between 1939 and 1945. He interprets this decision in the light of his post-Holocaust understanding; his personal background, indeed, urges him to deal with what he experienced in person as a son of two survivors, witnessing the Holocaust enduring consequences on them and on their reality.

I am a post-Holocaust novelist, which means that I rely on my imagination – my capacity to reinvent worlds and reveal emotional truths – in order to speak to the Holocaust and its aftermath, one generation removed from Auschwitz. I don't write about the years 1939-1945. I see that time period as holy ground, the last millennium's answer to Mount Sinai. Instead, I focus on the looming dark shadow of the Holocaust as a continuing, implacable event, how it is inexorably still with us, flashing its radioactive teeth, keeping us all on our toes, imprinting our memories with symbols of, and metaphors for, mass death (Rosenbaum 2004, 125).

⁴ With reference to this development of Holocaust literature, Berger affirms that: "the makers of this art [second-generation authors] are not 'remembers themselves'. Consequently, there is emerging a *paradigm shift* in the shape of Holocaust memory and its representation (Berger 1997, 20 Italics in original).

However, in exploring the reasons of his avoidance of the historical Holocaust, Rosenbaum mentions both the lack of direct experience and the feeling of awe before the victims. He perceives the act of stepping on this “holy ground” as a sort of profanation, an act that only survivors can dare to perform (Rosenbaum 2004, 125-136). The writings of the other post-Holocaust authors instead can be read not so much as autobiographical accounts but as literary transpositions of their personal experience of living in a society in which the Holocaust concept is a fundamental part of the cultural background. Moreover, Berger always points out that “as such, [these writings] represent a significant point of departure from established Jewish-American novelists” and this transition “marked the appearance of a new social movement in the Jewish and American context” (Berger 1997, 19).

3. *Second-Hand Smoke. The Holocaust as Particular Heritage*

Thane Rosenbaum has given voice to his conception of Holocaust legacy in a series of three literary works. The first book is *Elijah Visible* (1996), a collection of short stories whose protagonist is always the same character – Adam Posner – who, in each story, lives a different existence. The second book is the novel *Second-Hand Smoke* (1999), the work that I will discuss in this section. The conclusive book of this trilogy is *The Golems of Gotham* (2002), a novel whose protagonists are eight Holocaust spirits inhabiting post-Auschwitz reality. In a 2007 interview conducted by Derek Royal for *Contemporary Literature* journal, Rosenbaum clarifies the reasons behind this choice to organize his post-Holocaust thought in three different but related literary works. He claims that the Holocaust is too extended and overwhelming an issue to be addressed in only one book and, indeed, in order to depict its progress in the consciousness of those affected by it, a more extensive study is needed. Rosenbaum holds up that his aim in writing this trilogy was to investigate, with due attention, each of the main emotional stages of the interiorising process of this event: mourning, rage, and final hope to achieve “a repair, even redemption” of “the spiritual paralysis [of the] post-genocidal age” (Royal 2007, 6). I argue that this eventual “redemption” that Rosenbaum mentions corresponds to the Holocaust *tikkun* theorized by Fackenheim and, although it is achieved at the end of a long psychological process which eventually leads to an emotional renewal, it seems to me that the key aspect of this progress is the fact that its development comes to be conceptualized through literary stages, thus fostering the interpretation of the works of second-generation Holocaust authors in the light of their commitment to compensate for the shuttered reality they have inherited.

In considering Rosenbaum’s second literary work, *Second-Hand Smoke*, one may argue that in this book the author not only depicts the psychological condition of rage for the losses suffered, but also displays the premises for the future mending of this situation. Indeed, in my view, this work may be read as a both cognitive and emotional path which leads the protagonist, Duncan Katz, from rage and psychological instability to a sort of mending, which comes through a – at least partial – reconciliation with his past, i.e. with the Holocaust as his personal source of suffering and as the tragedy defining the people he belongs to. The perception of the Holocaust as a strictly personal source of suffering is particularist in nature and is an essential part of the protagonist’s family heritage. Indeed, I argue that this narrative displays the particularist nature of the Holocaust experience as it concentrates on the aftereffects, which the Holocaust brings about in the family of two Jewish survivors as symbolic representative of the Jewish survivors community, perceived as the main scope of Holocaust legacy. This particularist approach is displayed mainly in the first part of the book, which deals with the depiction of Duncan Katz’s Holocaust determined existence. Duncan is an American man in his

forties, the son of two Holocaust survivors of Polish origins, born and raised in Miami Beach. With a precarious psychological balance, Duncan lives a restless existence and, little by little, the reader realizes that this emotional condition caused him to lose his life achievements: he is fired from his job as a prosecutor for the OSI – the Office of Special Investigations responsible for identifying, investigating on and finally prosecuting Nazi war criminals – and his marriage is threatened by his wife’s decision to distance him from her and their daughter. The basis of these two apparently unrelated events is the same, and this is the overwhelming influence which the Holocaust exercises on Duncan; indeed, the impact which this occurrence has had on his existence is so devastating that the author defines it as a “Holocaust obsession.” As a matter of fact, the psychological burden represented by the Holocaust legacy – inherited from his parents and gradually translated into an essential aspect of his own personality – prevents Duncan from living, feeling, considering reality according to ordinary principles. He is, therefore, unable “to see from the lens of the world without the Holocaust filter”; a totalizing condition which binds Duncan to a distant, estranged past he cannot conceive in critical terms but only relate to according to his emotional sphere (Rosenbaum 1999, 285).

In a 1996 study on the psychological and social after-effects of the Holocaust on the survivors’ offspring, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust*, Aaron Hass (a clinical psychologist and himself the son of Holocaust survivors) discusses the main emotional consequences of the Holocaust influence on the second generation and he also investigates the dynamics of the intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust legacy. Hass states that most of the sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors whom he interviewed for his study cited this event as the primary influence in their life; however, there is great diversity in the degree to which children of survivors believe that their Holocaust background has determined their personality and choices. With reference to the transmission of the Holocaust background to the second generation, Hass claims that this issue is actually hard to explain (Hass 1996, 46-48).

However – despite the several, differing factors which may or not come into play in the definition of this transmission – there seems to be also a feature which many survivor parent-child relationships have in common and this is the lack of direct communication of the Holocaust experience by words. As Hass notes, “children frequently learned little (or at least do not remember much) of their parents’ Holocaust years, particularly the more gruesome, horrific, and embarrassing details”. In several survivor households, the Holocaust was not even mentioned except for very rare occasions. Nevertheless, Hass notes, despite this lack of direct communication, “all [children of survivors] had a sense of being aware, from a very early age, that they were, indeed, children of survivors” (Hass 1996, 31-34 and 69). This point is argued also in another landmark study about the children of Holocaust survivors: Helen Epstein’s *Children of the Holocaust* (1988), which argues that the transmission of the Holocaust legacy from survivor parents to their children may be defined as a “wordless osmosis”; a sort of indirect internalization, on the part of the survivors’ offspring, of their parents’ attitudes, thoughts and feelings determined by their Holocaust experience (Epstein 1988, 137). With reference to *Second-Hand Smoke*, I would argue that Duncan’s Holocaust obsession – expressed both in psychological and socio-behavioural terms – is indeed handed down to him not through his parents’ oral accounts of their experiences, but through their attitudes and acts. Throughout the development of the whole plot, there is no trace of straightforward and openhearted dialogues, concerning the Holocaust, between the survivor parents and their son. On the contrary, Rosenbaum highlights the “un-mentionability” of the Holocaust in the Katz family, a factor which may have caused the protagonist’s inability to critically elaborate the event. The osmosis is, indeed, a unidirectional passage in which the absorption is mainly a passive process.

Moreover, the young Duncan seems to be shaping his personality especially according to his mother’s attitudes and mind-set (highly influenced by her survival experience and affected

by the post-traumatic stress disorder, also known as “survivor syndrome”), which represent the primary source from which he inherits the Holocaust legacy. Mila, Duncan’s mother, defines his upbringing with hardness and inflexibility, factors which are clearly connected to her past experience. Nevertheless, her aim is not only to shape a powerful and independent man, but even to turn his son into “a samurai son of survivors from Miami beach”, “a Tarzan”, “a gladiator from some post-Holocaust world.” Duncan, for his part, understands even too clearly what his mother asks from him, “[he] knew that what his mother really wanted was not a son, but a comic-book superhero” (Rosenbaum 1999, 28-36). It would seem that what Mila requires from Duncan is to become “a rescuer” of the Jewish people, thus establishing the particularist perspective, which typifies Duncan’s experience.

What Gentile [non-Jew] would risk the damage that Duncan could inflict? It was about time that Jews grew them as big as Goliath, when they no longer had to rely on David’s crafty slingshot, or the cleverness of a Solomon, or the permanence of Samson’s hippie haircut [...]. In the modern era the Israelis were certainly setting a good example of creating an altogether new ethos of the badass Jew, but Duncan’s destiny was to finish the job. The pained history of Jewish suffering and exile had been answered with just one accidental, regrettable birth. A reluctant saviour had been born to two Holocaust survivors in south Florida (Rosenbaum 1999, 36-37).

Duncan’s inability to cope with this overwhelming legacy according to his own principles and beliefs is exemplified, throughout the novel, by an “uncontrollable consciousness” which rules over his emotions and “does not even belong to him”; it is, indeed, the result of a lifelong exposure to his mother’s perception of life which is, in turn, determined by her Holocaust experience. Hence, it would seem that Duncan’s code of values, with which he confronts life and its events, is actually Mila’s code, tracked down directly from Auschwitz. Duncan has internalized her principles without the possibility to re-elaborate them according to critical thinking, and this may represent the reason why his actions are totally irrational, outside his control. This sort of estrangement from his own self causes him the psychological imbalance he is affected by and, moreover, Duncan is unable to dispose of both his Holocaust obsession and his “inherited” ethics because he does not own them.

In order to resolve these feelings of self-alienation, hardness, and emotional imbalance, Duncan would have to reconcile himself and to come to grips with Mila’s and his own past; a process which would lead him to Poland, where his newly-discovered brother lives and where his mother’s wounds originated. The shocking discovery of having a brother signals the beginning of the second narrative level which broadens the particularist approach of the book from the family circle to the Jewish community (considered in this light, the essence of this novel seems to be a doubly particularist conception of the Holocaust legacy) and it recounts Duncan’s long journey towards his personal *tikkun*. This journey to Poland – “the place where his family roots slipped out of the earth; the land of Jewish death and detour” and “the forbidden motherland” – is a metaphor for the sentimental and spiritual journey, which Duncan would undertake physically in that country and symbolically into the past and inside his soul (Rosenbaum 1999, 179).

This journey gradually changes Duncan’s consideration of his own suffering which he now understands in the wider context of Jewish anguish. The Holocaust legacy begins to be interpreted as the twentieth century genocide of the people he now feels to belong to, no longer as its rescuer but as a member of a community whose pain he shares. By slowly comprehending his own roots, he begins an inner struggle between his long-lasting sentimental condition of rage and vengeance and the possibility of a sort of reconciliation. In order to get to this more constructive emotional status, however, Duncan would have to experience in person his family’s history and to immerse himself into its memories. This would eventually lead him to

re-consider the suitability of, and to re-elaborate, this time in person, his present code of values. It would seem to me that this re-assessment of Duncan's personal principles is paralleled by the one to which the Jewish people as a whole has been called after the Holocaust. Indeed, as I pointed out before, after the cultural destruction brought about by the Holocaust, Jewish – as well as non-Jewish– thought had to re-assess its basic tenets in the wake of post-Auschwitz reality. The depiction of Duncan's personal path is, hence, an analogy for the wider quest of Jewish culture for new, post-Holocaust principles, i.e. for the Holocaust *tikkun* conceived by Fackenheim.

The progressive re-adaptation of Duncan's Holocaust legacy in positive, fruitful terms is highly encouraged by the character of his brother Isaac, biologically engendered by survivors but raised in a survivor syndrome-free environment, who embodies the achievability of an innovative, self-determining post-Holocaust phenomenology. In comparing the two brothers, Rosenbaum comments that: "with Duncan [Mila] had hoped for a Jewish avenger, but it was the son she left behind who was somehow better equipped for the task" (Rosenbaum 1999, 215). Without the direct exposure to his survivor mother's influence, Isaac has found his own approach to the Holocaust, his own categories to relate with it. It would seem that Isaac has succeeded in putting Epstein's exhortation into practice: "we need to find a way of best utilizing it [the Holocaust legacy]. We need to learn how to translate our consciousness of evil, our scepticism, our sense of outrage into constructive action" (Berger 1997, 35).

After this inward and outward journey, Duncan starts to perceive reality through different eyes; his attitudes have not completely changed but he approaches Jewish history and Judaism in renovated and, this time, personal ways. In a moving scene, symbolizing his reconciliation with his Jewish past and his connection with a constructive future: "He leaned against the remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto wall as though it were a fallen Jerusalem temple, and then he slipped a note, written for Mila and Milan [his daughter], inside one of its cracks" (Rosenbaum 1999, 284).

The progressive abandonment of his previous outlook, in favour of a more positive and constructive one, may allow Duncan to turn his Holocaust legacy into a meaningful and fruitful remembrance. This kind of catharsis experienced by the protagonist reflects Rosenbaum's meditation on contemporary Holocaust significance, suggesting that the complexities of Holocaust inheritance should be dealt with according to categories developed by the second generation, rather than to a pre-conceived paradigm. After all, Duncan slips two notes into the wall of Warsaw Ghetto; one is addressed to the past (Mila) and the other one to the future (Milan), in the hope that these two temporal dimensions may be eventually connected by a prolific memorialization.

3. *Pious Secrets*. The Holocaust as Universal Heritage

As I have mentioned above, Irene Dische's *Pious Secrets* is a second-generation narrative that is significantly different from *Second-Hand Smoke*. Dische displays a wider perception of the Holocaust as part of the cultural background of American society and, as a matter of fact, she recounts a story, which has indeed autobiographical references, but these are not tracked down from her family history but, rather, from her personal experience as an American citizen, exposed to the great influence, which the Holocaust has come to hold in her culture. Her connection to the Holocaust legacy, however, may have certainly been intensified by her being a Jew and by the fact that her parents escaped that tragedy only because they managed to flee from Austria before the war.

I will argue that Dische's approach to the Holocaust matter is of a universalist nature in the sense that, in her writing, she highlights the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in American society

as a whole and its relevance not only for American Jews, but for non-Jews as well. This novel, indeed, pinpoints the high presence of the Holocaust in American society, a matter that is viewed as rooted in the above-mentioned “Americanization of the Holocaust.” Indeed, Dische assesses the nature of this type of remembrance by implicitly discussing the consequences that this phenomenon has engendered in American society. The author investigates to what extent the high assimilation of the Holocaust into American mainstream culture has influenced and shaped its perception in the US and, furthermore, she tries to fathom whether “the Americanization of its discourse” is a constructive, positive response to this event or not.

Even though the novel was first published in the US in 1991, the story is set in early nineteen-fifties, in New York City. The protagonist is an American non-Jew forensic pathologist, Ronald Hake, who suspects that his girlfriend’s father – a man in his seventies, with German origins but now living in New York – is actually Adolf Hitler. The theory of Hitler’s survival after World War II is employed as a narrative device in order to depict the central theme of the novel, i.e. the role of the Holocaust in American culture. Indeed, in *Pious Secrets*, the prospect that Hitler might have been living in the US could be symbolically read as a reminder of the enduring presence of the ghost of the Holocaust in American culture. Moreover, given the choice to have the American Holocaust remembrance embodied in the man who conceived of the Final Solution, one may infer that the author’s aim to investigate the current perception of the Holocaust in the US is grounded in her view of it as, at least, a problematic matter.

The point of view from which the story is narrated is that of a non-Jewish pathologist who, having discovered that Hitler may be hiding in his city, investigates the issue by resorting to the means he knows best, i.e. clinical investigations and medical reports. As he inspects the figure of Carl Bauer, the man whom he suspects to be Hitler, Ronald develops a sort of obsession for this subject; a fixation which makes him withdraw from his relationship with Carl’s daughter and neglect his job at the morgue. A doubt instilled in Ronald by an article published in a fictional tabloid magazine, *American Inquirer* (suggestive of the real life, American tabloid *National Enquirer*), and entitled: “EVIDENCE THAT ADOLF HITLER IS HIDING IN THE USA!” gradually turns into a suspicion and, eventually, into a certainty grounded in delusional assessments. Indeed, at the very end of the novel, the truth comes out and, after Carl Bauer’s death, her daughter reveals to her children and boyfriend the facts. Both her parents, Eva and Carl, were Austrian Jews who, after Eva’s rabbi father had been clubbed to death in his synagogue, decided to leave Austria under forged baptism papers in order to pass for Catholics.

As a pathologist, Ronald daily performs the act of inspecting people’s past through the corpses he has to analyse at the mortuary. This “case”, however, while also regarding a person’s past, is of a different nature; on the one hand the person at issue is still alive, and on the other hand this specific person’s past pertains not only to Ronald’s ruminations, but also to all humankind in general. In my view, the universalism of this novel is indeed grounded in this understanding of the Holocaust as part of everyone’s past and, therefore, as part of everyone’s legacy. This belief brings to the surface not only the theme of the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in American discourse, but also the author’s universalistic argument, understood as the responsibility, shared by everyone, to devise and shape a rich and positive memorialization of the event.

The excessive, dry dwelling on the past – symbolized by the protagonist’s manic investigation – is heavily criticized in the novel, mainly through the unhappy ending to which this sterile Holocaust obsession leads. Indeed, it is Ronald who indirectly causes Bauer’s death because he reports to the police that he has discovered some evidence that a man living in a New York suburb is actually Adolf Hitler, and, as a consequence, the *American Inquirer* journalists are sent to Bauer’s house in order to get such a scoop. The agitation outside Bauer’s

house and the inquiring questions of the journalists will eventually provoke the old man a fatal heart attack. There is no *tikkun* here and, in my view, this scene well reflects the often shallow, uncritical character of contemporary Holocaust remembrance in the US. Hence, the universalistic framework of this novel encompasses the above-mentioned critic of American Holocaust memorialization, an aspect that is exemplified by the photographers' flashes and the reporters' insisting, vacuous questions, which mirror the interest in a historical event turned into a fixation for the past, a past-mania not contributing to a critical, cognitive understanding.

As a matter of fact, I would suggest that Dische displays a quintessential portrait of the weak nature of American Holocaust remembrance – featured by highly praised but actually stereotypical, conventional initiatives which do not provide the basics for a mature reflection on the complexities of the event. On the contrary, the nature of this remembrance encourages the acquisition of a pre-conceptualized consciousness through a kind of osmotic process similar to the one undergone by Duncan in *Second-Hand Smoke* – a comparison which unites the rage-based, empty remembrance of second-generation members seeking vengeance and the potentially detrimental ways to remember this event employed in America.

Indeed, Dische conveys the idea of American culture as not only “obsessed” by the Holocaust but, above all, as the reflection of a society which has not found yet suitable methods to turn Holocaust memory into a constructive, positive legacy. One may infer that, for Dische, the Holocaust legacy is still an unresolved issue, a question mark that has not been answered yet. The analogy with the protagonist of *Second-Hand Smoke* suggests that American Holocaust consciousness must – as Duncan had to – undertake a re-evaluation of its basics, which may lead to a universalistic *tikkun*, i.e. to a universal, constructive understanding of the Holocaust and of its far-reaching significance. How to relate with this distant tragedy? Which is the best way to remember this event – in order to prevent the occurrence of further genocides – without remaining stuck in the past? How to conceive, out of this experience, a fruitful lesson for the future and not an inconclusive obsession with the past? For American society, and for civilization in general, these are still open questions.

Peter Novick addresses the same point when he argues that the role of memory of terrible events has to be carefully considered when it comes to “group consciousness.” Indeed, while recognizing that Emil Fackenheim was right to say that for Jews to forget Hitler's victims would be to grant him a “posthumous victory”, Novick holds up that “to tacitly endorse his [Hitler's] definition of ourselves [Jews] as despised pariahs by making the Holocaust the emblematic Jewish experience” would represent an even greater victory for Hitler (Novick 2000, 279-281). Furthermore, Novick highlights the importance of remembering the past while, at the same time, focusing on the future – a belief he grounds in Jewish tradition and which may eventually bring a *tikkun*. He observes:

Mourning and remembering the dead are, of course, traditional Jewish obligations. But Judaism has consistently disparaged excessive or overly prolonged mourning. Cremation is forbidden because it would dispose of the body too soon, but also forbidden is embalming, because it would preserve the body too long. Mourn, to be sure, is the message, but then move on: “choose life” (Novick 2000, 10-11).

The same message of “choosing life” – reread in universalistic terms – can be inferred from Dische's work as well. This idea is, in my view, symbolically conveyed in the novel by the image of the sign “Mortuary” taken away by a storm, during a long night spent by Ronald analysing Bauer's case and writing his reports in a feverish way. The word “Mortuary” – a symbol of the past, as well as of the dead – is blown away exactly after one of the novel's most intense scenes, in which Ronald shows all the irrationality of his reasoning, by writing down his thoughts in a maniacal, obsessed way. Ronald should have interpreted this occurrence as a sign

that his investigations had gone too far, and that it was now time to let go of his perverse, arid obsession and turn the past into a fruitful seed for the future, the first, indispensable step towards the flourishing of a constructive conceptualization of Holocaust memory and, therefore, towards a *tikkun*.

The two second-generation literary responses to the Holocaust discussed in this article represent distinct interpretations of the Holocaust legacy, as well as particular paths headed to a sort of *tikkun*. In these narratives, two peculiar ways of facing the challenge of “living in the absence of a presence” – grounded, in turn, in two different cultural and social backgrounds – are presented and both outline the blueprint for a re-thinking of contemporary Holocaust remembrance. A main aspect that these two novels share is, indeed, their focus on the cultural transmission of the Holocaust legacy and on the means through which it can make Holocaust memorialisation meaningful for those born after the event. I would argue that what may be inferred from the reading of both these divergent novels is the need to attain a cognitive understanding of the Holocaust that is relevant for twenty-first century generations; a critical awareness which may be then the key disclosing the path to the *tikkun* or, even, a *tikkun per se*. Through a particularist literary path and a universalist one, these authors (representative of post-Holocaust generations) advocate for a courageous re-thinking of the conceptualization of the Holocaust and its puzzling heritage. On the one hand, they state that the cultural ruminations of the first generation are not valid *per se*, and, on the contrary, they need to be re-interpreted according to contemporary sensibilities and issues; on the other hand, they present the universal memorialization of the event as part of the duties inherited by the first generation, as well as a meaning-making process which requires to be constantly update and re-conceived of.

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