Crypt, Mimicry, Genealogy: The Languages of Trauma in Hanna Krall's *The Subtenant*

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The Subtenant as an autobiographical and autofictional narrative of a survivor takes the form of a dramatic monologue. In it, the narrator's attempt to articulate the complex process of speaking trauma recreates the immediacy and cadence of live speech typical of oral testimony, while simultaneously constructing, before our eyes, an experimental novelistic structure meant to reflect how the past continues to shape her later life. Hanna Krall seeks to tell a story whose time has stalled amid the chaos of experience and the shards of fragmented memory, calling into being a divided, conflicted self. Beyond the ventriloquial doubling of her own voice, a consequence of hiding on the Aryan side and adopting the necessary camouflage, this self also makes room for other discordant voices – those of fellow Jewish "subtenants", whose lives she evokes. At the same time, the narrative seems to preserve within itself the internalized gaze of the Polish host, staging, as if for his benefit, the plausible variants of his own story[1].

[1] The category of subtenancy as a code of Polish culture was introduced into scholarship by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Elżbieta Janicka. Krall's novel serves as an important point of reference for their analyses. Drawing on Sander Gilman's observations about the double bind of hospitality, the two scholars interpret subtenancy as a kind of contract between the Polish majority and the Jewish minority, through which the latter is granted the right to conditional residence and partial protection from violence. The specificity of this arrangement lies in the subtenant's acceptance of the fact that hospitality and protection may be withdrawn at any moment. Moreover, the Jewish subtenant is expected to accept the stereotypical image of themselves imposed by the host. The ideal subtenant must also deny their own subtenant status and provide the host with an alibi whenever the latter exercises violence against them or other subtenants. The essence of the "good subtenant's" condition thus involves a doubling typical of mimicry: one must mirror the host, appear the same but never entirely faithful, in order to preserve the internalized stigma of an irredeemable otherness. See Elżbieta Janicka, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Sublokatorstwo jako kategoria kultury polskiej" [Subtenancy as a category of Polish culture], Studia Litteraria et Historica 2 (2013): 1–2; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Hassliebe. Żydowska samonienawiść w ujęciu Sandera L. Gilmana (część pierwsza: od Hermana z Moguncji do Johannesa Pfefferkorna)" [Hassliebe: Jewish self-hatred in Sander L. Gilman's approach (Part one: from Hermann of Mainz to Johannes Pfefferkorn)], Studia Litteraria et Historica 2 (2013): 27–59; Konrad Matyjaszek, Produkcja przestrzeni żydowskiej w dawnej i współczesnej Polsce [The production of Jewish space in past and contemporary Poland] (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), especially the subsections "Gościnność: podwójne wiązanie" [Hospitality: The double bind], "Kategoria gościa jako kod kultury" [The category of the guest as a cultural code], and "Sublokatorstwo" [Subtenancy].

For this reason, the dynamics of this staged spectacle – full of irony, apostrophes, and parabases, and above all of deep pain – extends beyond the record of an individual experience. The poetics of *The Subtenant* remain a narrative poetics of division, reflecting a wide range of psychological, sociological, and cultural dimensions of the exclusion of Jewish "outsiders" from the Polish community, both during and after the Holocaust. This exclusion also manifests itself in later moments of collective consolidation, such as the Warsaw Uprising, the Poznań June protests, or, finally, the Solidarity "carnival" and the imposition of martial law. For Krall's narrator, an awareness first grasped almost preconsciously by the little girl she once was becomes a lasting knowledge: that each successive phase of Polish history reveals the same underlying rule of a cultural code built on the exclusion of the Other – on the continual creation of a double marked by existential darkness, a barely tolerated guest and the negative image of collective identity. The Holocaust, as the culmination of this process, thus carries its echoes and afterlives: it persists, in its own way, on other planes and in other guises. For the narrator, it remains a haunting and ever-present memory of her own experience – of cramped rooms and dark interiors, a kind of micro-ghetto of childhood, of incoherent images and irreconcilable dissociative selves. The Holocaust cannot be forgotten or denied – not only because it is bound to the memory of her murdered family, but also because the host culture is permeated by the force of its active forgetting and continual erasure: a desire to whiten the past, echoing the exterminatory gesture of eliminating the minority. It is against this impulse that the narrator sets her series of ironic counter-narratives.

It is no coincidence that the pronounced performativity of *The Subtenant*'s polylogue – based on the confrontation and counterpoint of voices – emphasizes the conflict between two communities of memory. One struggles with the lack of individual knowledge, collective dishonesty, the repression of facts, and an absence of empathy, while the other remains continually engaged in a phantasmatic effort to sustain its own self-image. For this reason, among others, what comes under deconstruction here is the discourse of Polish history and of a cultural imagination rooted in genealogy. Against this, Krall sets a counter-narrative of other histories, lineages, and biographies – usually foreign and erased – shaped through a narrative mode that employs irony, bitter sarcasm, and even deliberate subversive parody[2].

In my view, it is precisely the capture and staging of performativity – rooted in the experience of camouflage and mimicry – that make *The Subtenant* unique. This performativity also resonates with the Holocaust experience of survivors who had to enact Polish identity to survive, and with their later "acting out" of trauma after the war – an act often closely bound to the memory of that first compulsion. Such a doubled performance, as the outcome of the cultural phenomenon of mimicry, can be understood both as an attempt to rearticulate the process of stigmatization and as an effort to work through a traumatic event. These are two causally linked phenomena that create profound difficulties in the psychological and social relations of subjects marked by violence – especially those, like Jewish survivors or Jewish children who survived, who had to grow up within a culture permeated by antisemitism and shaped by the active repression, forgetting, and marginalization

[2] An important sociological context for this narrative form may be found in the Jewish, Holocaust-era experience of concealing one's identity and performing the identity of the host, as described by Małgorzata Melchior. See Małgorzata Melchior, Zagłada a tożsamość. Polscy Żydzi ocaleni na "aryjskich papierach". Analiza doświadczenia biograficznego [The Holocaust and identity: Polish Jews saved on "Aryan papers." An analysis of biographical experience] (Warsaw: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, 2004).

of the Holocaust. The cultural position of the subtenant is thus marked not only by trauma and a disrupted body image (*imago*), but also by the strain of adapting to the host's gaze. For this reason, in the following sections of this article, I will interpret selected aspects of *The Subtenant* through the lens of categories drawn from Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry, Sander Gilman's study of the Jewish "blackness" complex, the work of Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Elżbieta Janicka, and trauma studies, while keeping in mind the historical context of Krall's novel[3].

In my view, these theoretical categories also have the power to reshape the framework within which Krall's novel is placed in literary history. They allow *The Subtenant* to be understood alongside other Jewish narratives of the period – texts equally ill-fitted to the conventions of collective memory because they articulate the uneasy experiences of a "subtenant" diaspora: one that preserved the memory of the Holocaust and of Polish antisemitism, while giving voice to genealogies and "impure" family histories deemed non-normative from the standpoint of Polish culture. One of the most unexpected consequences of March 1968 was the emergence of numerous literary works that began to highlight precisely this difference of Jewish experience – often through autofictional experiments in narrative form. In many respects, Krall's *The Subtenant* thus has much in common with the earlier "parabiographies" of Artur Sandauer (and his famous essay *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia żydowskiego w XX wieku* [On the situation of the Polish writer of Jewish descent in the twentieth century], 1982), the autobiographical prose of Henryk Grynberg (and its lyrical counterpart, the collection *Antynostalgia* [Antinostalgia]), the novels of Julian Kornhauser (*Kilka chwil* [A Few Moments], 1975), and Kaja Holzman's stories from the volume *Krajobraz rodzinny* [Family Landscape] (1981), as well as the post-March works of Kazimierz Brandys – *Mała księga* [The Little Book] (1970), *Wariacje pocztowe* [Postal Variations] (1972), and *Rondo* [The Roundabout] (1982)[4]. What unites these texts is their reflection on the logic of Polish genealogical imagination in relation to personal and family history, their (not always explicit) references to the Holocaust, their inquiry into the status of one's own identity, and their bold use of experimental narrative forms. Against this background, Krall's *The Subtenant* stands out for the coherence of its representation and the multilingual texture of its experience. It seems to speak in the register of three intertwined forms of trauma: psychological – focused on the attempt to communicate with deep memory (in Lawrence Langer's sense); cultural – linked to the categories of mimicry and genealogy; and structural – that is, the projection of these experiences onto the existential plane through the substantiation of a specifically Jewish sense of "blackness," elevated to a metaphysical principle of the world itself.

Mimicry, Narrative Form, and Genealogical Imagination

Mimicry constitutes the very essence of the subtenant's condition. In Homi Bhabha's interpretation, this phenomenon arises from the complex properties of the colonial – or more broadly, dominant

[3] See Hanna Krall, Sublokatorka [The Subtenant] (Warszawa: Iskry, 1989).

[4] Krall's work bears a lesser resemblance to the realist prose of Stanisław Benski (Tyle ognia wokoło [So much fire around], 1979; Jeden dzień [One day], 1980; and Ta najważniejsza cząsteczka [That most important particle], 1982), as well as to Kalman Segal's Jeszcze żyjemy [We are still alive] (written 1972–1974). The trace of this post-March transformation can also be detected in the prose of Bogdan Wojdowski and Julian Stryjkowski. The latter, for instance, noted in his journal entry of 13 April 1983 that Chleb rzucony umarłym [Bread cast upon the dead] and the collection Maniuś Bany were his metaphorical responses to March '68. See Bogdan Wojdowski, "Dzienniki (fragmenty)" [Diaries (fragments)], selected by Małgorzata Bojanowska, Podkowiański Magazyn Kulturalny 1–2 (2008): 19–21.

– discourse and is linked to the intricate and enduring consequences of its cultural operation, both for the colonizer (the representative of the dominant culture) and for the colonized (the representative of a minority)[5]. In general terms, mimicry can be described, on the one hand, as a process in which the instability of the dominant discourse – rooted in the immanent structure of language itself – produces effects of meaning that run counter to the sender's intention, undermining their authority and disrupting the mechanism by which cultural power reproduces itself[6]. Mimicry thus emerges as a particular consequence of the discursive weakness of language and of the internal contradictions within the stereotypes whose primary aim is to sustain and reproduce the cultural difference separating the subject of the dominant culture from the minority. The authority of this dominant subject legitimizes itself through the continual construction of that foundational division – one that, in the very act of discursive differentiation, calls into being both the phantasmatic subjectivity of the cultural "host" and the equally phantasmatic, stereotyped Others. The process centers on producing racist representations of minorities, deviants, or subtenants – images driven by a phobic logic that underwrites the dominant order.

On the other hand, mimicry (understood by Bhabha as akin to adaptive defense mechanisms) is, on the side of the minority, a process of imitation and assimilation of the patterns of the dominant culture. Yet because these patterns are imbued with hostility and coded to exclude, mimicry takes the form of an ambivalent repetition with a difference. It thus becomes a partially ineffective performative, introducing into the order of discourse an element of irony, parodic destabilization of meaning, and unintended mockery – thereby turning into a mode of resistance and an expression of agency for the stigmatized. In contrast to what Sander Gilman describes as the logic of autostereotyping, which internalizes violence and harmful fantasies, thereby adopting the discriminating position and its accompanying affective structure, Bhabha's concept of mimicry introduces a strain of comic farce into representation. He relates this comic dimension both to Jews and to Parsis (the ethnic group to which he himself belongs), suggesting that both communities repeat the stereotypical jokes told about them. Yet this act of repetition always transforms the stereotype, becoming an instance of subversion and an opportunity to derail it. Emphasizing the comic aspect of mimicry is significant because dominant discourse is typically solemn, serious, imbued with pedagogical ambition – the impulse to educate, moralize, and improve. It strives to enforce conformity among all subjects, except for those belonging to minorities. The latter, while also expected to resemble their "hosts," must never fully do so, for that would bring an end to the production of difference. They are thus to become *almost the same, but not quite*. The contradiction at the heart of this discourse is what Bhabha describes as the ironic collision between the performative and the pedagogical – an encounter enacted in every speech act[7].

[5] Homi K. Bhabha, Mimikra i ludzie. O dwuznaczności dyskursu kolonialnego [Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse], in: Miejsca kultury [The Location of Culture], translated into Polish by Tomasz Dobrogoszcz, Kraków 2010 – see also the chapters: Przebiegła układność [Sly Civility] and Znaki poczytane za cuda: Kwestie dwuznaczności i autorytetu – pod drzewem nieopodal Delhi w maju 1817 roku [Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817].

[6] See, among others: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 124–127 ("Mimicry"); David Huddart, Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 38–51 ("Mimicry"); Leela Gandhi, „Globalizacja, hybryda, diaspora. Wzajemne transformacje" [Globalization, Hybridity, Diaspora: Mutual Transformations] in Teoria postkolonialna. Wprowadzenie krytyczne [Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction], translated by Jacek Serwański (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2008); Ania Loomba, „Hybrydowość" [Hybridity] in Kolonializm/Postkolonializm [Colonialism/Postcolonialism], translated by Natalia Bloch (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2011), 183–194.

[7] See Bhabha, 79–88.

The strategy of mimicry thus entails both a logic of subjective division and inner split, resulting in a persistent sense of misalignment with the imposed norm, and an ironic rupture within discourse itself, within speech or narrative, which does not so much mimetically reflect stable identities as parodically imitate, theatrically produce, and simultaneously undermine their authority. In mimicry, as Bhabha observes, identity is never identical with itself: it remains only a partial presence, functioning like a line spoken by an actor who is conscious of his own doubling[8].

The Subtenant is particularly attuned to these dimensions for several obvious reasons. First and foremost, it records the experience of the Holocaust as lived from the perspective of a child hiding – one who felt with particular intensity the contradictions inherent in the forced identification with an assumed role, while simultaneously perceiving its artificiality. In later years, that same child came to recognize the lasting psychological consequences of having adopted such a camouflage.

Second, the novel explores the experience of growing up amid antisemitic narratives that, being hostile and antagonistic to the protagonist's identity, could only deepen the process of traumatization, blocking access to the past and thus impeding the work of mourning. This impossibility is further reinforced by the pervasive repression of Holocaust memory. The operation of cultural amnesia – the collective spectacle of forgetting – precludes both the reconstruction of the circumstances of survival and the recovery of one's own genealogy or of the broader history of the Jewish community.

Third, Hanna Krall's *The Subtenant* is perhaps one of the first works to question so forcefully the presumed innocence of the community to which the narrator wishes to belong. At the same time, it casts doubt on the legitimacy of that desire itself, since this yearning for affiliation is marked by the memory of exclusion, manifesting in psychosomatically felt symptoms of "blackness," understood both as a bodily inscription of otherness and as the affective trace of Holocaust trauma. Within the dominant "post-March" codes of Polish culture, and similarly in the early years of the Solidarity period, there was little space for the expression of such experiences. There seemed to be no room either for Jews or for the memory of the Holocaust itself. In this context, the strategy of mimicry – recalling autobiographically inflected images of genocide and Jewish suffering – disrupts the imitative practices that sustained a positive self-image within Polish culture[9].

It is no coincidence that *The Subtenant* opens with a gesture of deconstructing precisely such efforts, during the famous Kraków staging of *Sen o bezgrzesznej* [Dream of the Sinless], directed by Jerzy Jarocki (premiere: January 21, 1979, at the Stary Teatr). This theatrical montage of literary fragments by Stefan Żeromski, conceived as a counterpart to Konrad Swinarski's production of *Forefathers' Eve*, blurred the boundaries between stage and audience, between performance and the community both represented and enacted through it. Ironically, the play unfolded upon a literal stage set, presenting a particular kind of representation of history not as a sequence of facts, but as a constellation of affects, episodes, collective imaginings, and

[8] See Bhabha, 81.

[9] On the defense of collective self-image, see, among others: Tomasz Żukowski, Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy zabijali Żydów [The great retouch: How we forgot that Poles killed Jews] (Warsaw: Wielka Litera, 2018), 28–66; Elżbieta Janicka, "Świadkowie własnej sprawy. Polska narracja dominująca wobec Zagłady w trakcie Zagłady" [Witnesses in their own trial: The Polish dominant narrative on the Holocaust during the Holocaust], Studia Litteraria et Historica 7 (2018).

exemplary family stories. Jarocki's production was permeated with biting irony toward these very images, exposing their performative dimension in the dominant figure of the fraudulent master of ceremonies – at once trickster, director, and manipulator of those projections.

The Subtenant opens with a similarly parodic scene from the performance, built around the mechanism of acting and the performative construction of an imagined community. The scene begins when the actors enter the audience and start narrating their own genealogies, family histories, and wartime experiences, showing photographs and private mementos as they speak. Here, the collective is constructed through genealogy by means of stereotypical syntagms and morphemes – ready-made biographical clichés delivered in earnest and largely devoid of the ironic distance characteristic, for example, of Kazimierz Brandys's *Wariacje pocztowe* (a post-March satirical pastiche and mimicry-marked laboratory of the grotesque). The narrator's resistance to the effect of this gesture stems from the dissonance between her own reaction and that of the audience to Jarocki's irony, which remained unreadable to many spectators. More importantly, it becomes clear that this kind of stereotypical genealogical framing excludes her story altogether, exposing a rupture in continuity with the imagined community. There is no space within it, for instance, for the story of her Jewish father's death at Majdanek. This rift between the phantasmatic infrastructure on which the collective rests and the narrator's own experience initiates a subsequent pattern of bitter discrepancies that surface with particular force in moments of supposed historical unity. One such moment occurs during the response to the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising; another, during the Poznań June demonstrations, when the gaze of one young worker, who recognizes her as Jewish, forces the protagonist into an involuntary identification with the collective. The opposite happens in December 1981: when martial law is imposed, the narrator finds within herself no tone corresponding to the nation's martyrological empathy. Instead, she instinctively recalls the survivor's strategy of endurance. Each time, Jewish otherness asserts itself through a conscious dissonance with collective emotions and attitudes – in the uncanny (*unheimlich*) process of detaching from national scripts. This is the experience of someone who, in the eyes of others, has never been a rightful inhabitant of the house or *Heim* – someone only provisionally the same, yet always other[10].

For this reason, the process of articulating community in the opening sequence of *The Subtenant* is continually disrupted by the symptoms of mimicry – from the microstructure of the initial utterance, *"proszę pana"* ("sir"), which highlights the role of accent in identifying a potential subtenant (the flattened *a* in the phrase may recall the distortion produced by a foreigner), to the scattered signs of mocking hybridization. One example is the "beautiful story" of the German grandfather Staemler, who chose Polishness in Buchenwald and later Polonized his surname after the war (to Sztemler), which, some twenty years later, in March '68, caused the family certain trouble. The narrator juxtaposes the pedagogical character of such stories with the performative act of telling them. As she writes, "the actors came down from the stage and spoke about their ancestors – it was probably meant to convey the continuity of history, or perhaps its prolongation". Yet this narration is marked by a subtle ironic twist when she recalls a dissonant counterpoint in the sequence about the director's grandfather, who declared that his ancestor "built shithouses" only to be revealed, in the end, as Prime Minister Sławoj Składkowski (thus confirming, despite

[10]See Bhabha, 84.

the intended subversion, the gentry-based genealogical norm)[11]. The director's irony therefore proves ineffective: it ultimately fails to revise the collective imaginary or to enact sublocation – that is, a displacement, a change of perspective, and a moment of critical disillusionment.

It is precisely the *pedagogical* pressure of the norm and its discursive grammar, as Bhabha would put it, that initiates the narrator's ironic play with reconstructing her own lineage and sets in motion the "writing" of an apocryphal, alternative history of her father – the prewar Major Krall. Yet the self-reflexive comedy that accompanies the creation of this family apocryphon has a bitter undertone: it is a carefully modulated record of wartime concealment, of hiding one's own identity within another's. In essence, it reenacts the phantasmatic act of fabricating a different, "proper" self from the past – the self that existed during her time on the Aryan side.

It is therefore no coincidence that, in the process of reconstructing socially acceptable versions of "Polish" (or even quintessentially Polish) biographies, traumatic images and afterimages of the Holocaust keep breaking through. The ironic story of the father–major, whose greatest tragedy was being slapped by a German soldier, turns out to be a reworking of details heard from the caretaker about the arrest of her own father – beaten with rifle butts by gendarmes. Mimicry, through its use of quotation and repetition, in fact evokes trauma itself: the genealogical rupture, the asymmetry between Polish and Jewish death – in the juxtaposed sequences about Krystyna Krahelska and the Jewish mother from the ghetto who was said to have committed an act of cannibalism[12].

In a similar way – serving as a mirror image of the minority's sense of inferiority, of being "black" and gazing down at the pavement like Borges's *Catoblepas* (a literary and erudite motif also subjected to irony) – the force of mimicry resurfaces in the parallel biography of the Jewish communist Bernard Rajnicz, whose life story does not fit into the gallery of hagiographic models of "Polish lives"[13]. Rajnicz's biography, full of ironic twists ("all those stories he tells me fill him with disbelief and laughter"), is driven by a desire akin to the narrator's own: the wish to belong and to transform Jewish "blackness" into Polish "brightness". Yet this same impulse exposes the very element of mimicry within the structure of history itself – understood *per se* as the perversity and irony of events. The level of communist conviction (belonging to the order of utterance) and that of its realization (belonging to the subject of enunciation) operate here as a mechanism of mimicry – and hence of continual derailment. The discourse of Stalinist *newspeak* often usurps subjectivity in an arbitrary manner, as during the Stalinist conference attended by a general, where the young Rajnicz, speaking incoherently, happens to utter the ritual formula of condemnation that comes to his mind by Chance, thus provoking

[11]See Hanna Krall, The Subtenant, in The Subtenant; To Outwit God, translated by Jaroslaw Anders; Lawrence Weschler and Joanna Stasińska (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 7. The irony is also reflexive: it refers to a story recorded by Stanisław Benski about a Jewish resident of a retirement home who spent the Holocaust and the German occupation in New York and, upon returning to Poland, began to "add on" a wartime biography under the pressure of survivors' stories. In this fabricated account, as the narrator relates – imitating the grammar of testimony – "Everything is just as it should be: he did not go to America, he is in Warsaw under the bombs and planning to sneak to the Aryan side to see the Wieczorek family. So far so good, but around 1941 […]". See Krall, The Subtenant, 6-7.

[12]See Krall, Sublokatorka, 14–16.

[13]A similarly revealing context for the marginalization of communist biographies can be found in the section "Intermedium czyli Życiorysy alla polacca" [Intermedium, or Polish-Style Biographies] from Jerzy Andrzejewski's Miazga [The Pulp], as well as in those self-referential parts of the novel that depict the arduous process of composing such life stories.

both his opponent's downfall and his own promotion. The Stalinist slogans "whoever is not with us is against us" and "the enemy must be destroyed" thus recall the logic of an already familiar exclusion. A similar slippage can be observed in the ironic (and distinctly Brandysian) letters from a Stalinist prison written by Major Krall – letters that continue his imaginary biography and are permeated by the inertia of gentry clichés and martyrological platitudes.

In the biographies of Rajnicz and Werner – these genealogical counter-narratives – Krall exposes the fatalistic dynamics of Jewish involvement in communism, rooted in the attempt to transcend the difference between a stigmatized, "blackened" minority and a privileged majority. This attempt, driven by the desire to escape the fate of one's origins, reveals the tragic paradox of that endeavor. The logic of communist ideology, which initially promised the abolition of class (and racial) divisions, proves instead to be a deceptive ruse – one that propels its believers into an ambiguous form of engagement and ultimately perpetuates the very hierarchies and exclusions it claimed to overcome. The protagonist experiences this most acutely during the March 1968 events and later during his internment in the first days of martial law. In the interrogation room on Rakowiecka Street, he looks up and notices, above the heads of the police officers, the portrait of Janek Krasicki – the very man he himself had once recommended for membership in the Komsomol[14].

In The Subtenant, Krall turns this kind of sarcastic irony into one of the key modes of articulating both history and the experience of the Holocaust – emphasizing the incommensurability between representation and event. Irony thus shapes the narrative modality of the text at the compositional level: as a metonymic collage of multiple perspectives, contrapuntal storylines, and anecdotally linked episodes. It is also on this plane that mimicry and traumatic memory converge. The narrative conveys the characteristic dynamics of trauma through apostrophes, gestures, parenthetical remarks, interruptions, silences, ellipses, and pauses – maintaining a deliberate distance from chronology, descriptive conventions, modes of character construction, dialogue, and even from the novel's usual requirement of closure (the text ends with a broken, unfinished sentence). The astigmatic quality of the narrative voice stems from the impossibility of fully articulating the traumatic event – a condition that, as we will see, results in a particular form of division, one that can be described both in Bhabha's terms and in those of psychoanalytic trauma theory.

Mimicry, Trauma, and the Split "Self"

Mimicry and trauma share a structure of subjective division. In the first case, as Homi Bhabha argues, this division concerns the instability of enunciation and stems from the performativity of the speech act itself, in which the subject of the statement (*énoncé*) is not identical with the subject of enunciation. In the second, it arises from the delayed nature of experience: the subject has no direct access to it, since, according to Freud's logic of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), it is produced only in the act of repetition, taking the form of translation. A traumatic experience can neither be properly forgotten nor adequately remembered, for it inscribes itself elsewhere – beyond memory – within the unconscious and the somatic order of the body. It constitutes a kind of "non-history", which, although real and deeply affecting the

[14]Krall, Sublokatorka, 125.

subject, eludes articulation and lies outside the chronicle of events. In this way, it resists the desire to render it as narrative continuity.

In *The Subtenant*, trauma understood in this way seems to inscribe itself within the logic of narrative division brought about by mimicry – one that produces, on the level of narration, the presence of two distinct voices. Both belong to the same authorial, autofictional subject, yet they remain partly separated and divided between two enunciative positions: that of the observer, who adopts the internalized perspective of the "bright ones", and that of the participant in events – the subjective subtenant, the Jewish child forever trapped in a mutilated childhood, seized by surges of anxious affect and eruptions of intense emotion such as anger, resentment, shame, and the acute sense of not belonging.

The first voice assumes toward the second the role of a disciplining double, occupying what Bhabha would call the position of the *mimic man*, one who has internalized a proper, socially adjusted alter ego after undergoing enforced socialization. The second, by contrast, remains the source of a flow of affects, fragments of diachronic events, and trauma-generating images that compose the experience of permanent misalignment and a disrupted bodily *imago*. It is she – ugly, anamorphic, and still sunk in mourning, from the painting created by the narrator in her imagined biography as a painter – who becomes the orphaned Jewish child, the bearer of metaphorical blackness and existential despair, the witness to the Holocaust and the custodian of an intrapsychic crypt[15].

The split depicted by Hanna Krall seems to correspond to the mechanisms of "anguished memory" described by Lawrence L. Langer in his analyses of oral Holocaust testimonies[16]. In *The Subtenant*, this deep, visceral memory leaves its residue in the unconscious and in the preverbal experience of childhood which, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests, always remains open to the prelinguistic dimension – and for that very reason can only ever be told by others. This dynamic provokes, as in Krall's text, a conflict between two narrators: the subtenant, subordinated to performativity, and the author of the monologue, who engages with her in a dialogue imbued with pedagogical insistence. While the first refuses to consent to narration, the second nevertheless continues to spin the story – devoting herself, as Joanna Roszak aptly put it, to its patient weaving[17]. Except for one instance, Krall has never recounted her own story of survival in the straightforward, reportorial mode of factual representation[18].

According to Langer, the fundamental source of such a division lies in the impossibility, during the act of bearing witness, of reconciling the self that "does something" with the self to which "something

[15]At this point, Krall evokes a poem by Barbara Sadowska describing the image of a young girl. The same image also appears on the cover of the 1989 edition of The Subtenant. Sadowska's poem reads: "childhood – that doll / with an eye pushed deep / into its skull the doll from the pile of dolls / in an organdy dress / with a ribbon of fear in its smoldering / hair // it is the feeling of going barefoot / through a stone mist it is the open step of darkness / of the approaching whiteness". See Krall, The Subtenant, 92. First published in Zapis 16 (October 1980): 50–51.

[16]See Lawrence L. Langer, Świadectwa Zagłady w rumowisku pamięci [Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory], translated into Polish by Marcin Szuster (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2015), 55–84.

[17]Joanna Roszak, Krall. Tkanie [Krall. Weaving] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2024).

[18]Krall wrote about this in a short article, "Gra o moje życie" [A game for my life] Polityka 16 (1968). The text was later reprinted in the anthology: Hanna Krall, "Gra o moje życie", in To z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939–1945 [This one is from my homeland: Poles who helped Jews, 1939–1945], ed. Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna (Kraków: Znak, 1969).

is done"[19]. This also applies to moments when the witness calls upon himself to participate in the process of recalling the past, engaging in a kind of dialogue with himself, during which he seems to be listening to his own story. Langer observes that these two identity positions cannot be integrated, since the first, exposed to trauma, remains submerged in the overwhelming immediacy of images. This corresponds to the position of "deep memory", marked by the logic of helplessness, humiliated by the absence of agency, and sunk in the "then". The second, by contrast, attempts to speak the past, to communicate with it, and sometimes to defend itself against its pressure.

In *The Subtenant*, we repeatedly witness similar dialogues that, significantly, are permeated by a particular irony, functioning as an attempt to figure trauma: its disorder of events, temporal dislocations, disjunctive affects, and uncanny manifestations. These motifs reach their most intense expression in the description of the narrator's annual trips to Majdanek to commemorate her father's presumed death[20]. Both voices undertake this journey together. During it, the subtenant literally floods her socialized alter ego with a stream of traumatic images: the re-enacted story of her mother's uncle abandoned near Ryki; the confrontation with the interior of a gas chamber; the account of the absurdity of socks made from human hair; and the grotesque, almost surreal image of a grandfather carrying a useless samovar during the liquidation of the ghetto. She compels the second self to participate in the tragic ritual of her father's furtive commemoration – an act performed without social sanction, in the form of transgression, a breach of museum regulations. The subtenant enters the individual gas chambers and exits them again, laying a bouquet of flowers in each of the three (since she cannot be sure which one consumed her father). An additional note of irony is introduced by the meal she eats behind the barracks ("I'm at home, I want to eat so I eat"[21]), and by the annual closing remark: "Look," she says, "I'm out. I was lucky again"[22].

The subtenant's sarcasm is a protest against the falsification of Holocaust memory, its silencing and appropriation by the "light ones". It constitutes a form of protest on behalf of Jewish victims and an attempt to reclaim the true image of her father's death, which, unlike the imagined Polish death of Major Krall, resembles the Jewish death described in Władysław Szlengel's famous poem. Her ostentatious and provocative impoliteness targets the socially acceptable image of the Jew or the stranger as someone who accepts his own self-degradation and perceives his identity as incomplete and fragmented, aspiring toward the full identity embodied by the dominant culture, that is, the Polish one. Such an attitude, as Sander Gilman observes, begins with accepting the stereotypical image of oneself as the Other and then, in a gesture akin to Lacanian *méconnaissance*, leads to illusory acts of identification with the cultural ideal and, ultimately, to self-denial[23].

The Jewish pariah figure, however, possesses the ability to practice resistance and to displace this compulsion. Her act of sublocation – the process of shifting and reconfiguring the formation

[19]Langer, 61–62.

[20]According to Robert Kuwałek, the writer's father, Salomon Krall, most likely perished in the Bełżec extermination camp. See Andrzej Juchniewicz, "Autobiografizm w twórczości Hanny Krall" [Autobiographism in the works of Hanna Krall], Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich 1 (2024).

[21]Krall, The Subtenant, 33.

[22]Krall, The Subtenant, 33.

[23]See Sander L. Gilman, Jewish Self-hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of The Jews (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 2–6.

of identity based on false assumptions – entails a parodic repetition of the dominant model, its derailment, and a kind of ventriloquial distortion of the phrase, as the narrator repeatedly does by softening the interpellative address *"proszę pana"* (the refrain of her monologue) through the slanting of the *a*, the shifting of stress, and the introduction of rhythmic dissonance, an anacrusis[24]. It is not accidental that sublocation, as a form of subletting, implies an alternative mode of use and, in medical terminology, a kind of displacement – of a bone, fiber, joint, or lens.

From the perspective of the mature *alter ego*, the subtenant's trauma is loquacious, ritually repetitive, and trapped within images of the past that engulf the present. At times, however, it proves transferable – as revealed in the "improper" confrontation with Holocaust trauma and the gruesome details of the deaths of close relatives recounted to the London branch of the family, which has not experienced pogroms and refuses to listen to such indecorous stories about the samovar from the Lublin ghetto, the abandoned uncle, or the marks left by the father's fingernails on the ceiling of the gas chamber. The only outcome of this ostensibly reparative encounter is the bitter identification of an unknown man in a photograph ("This is my father")[25], marked, however, by a question mark – for this suspiciously hasty recognition rests on the stereotypical *punctum* of the "black eyes". It therefore remains unclear whether the narrator is not once again performing a learned procedure of affiliation, this time with the Jewish family. Upon her return, she discovers that at the bottom of a random samovar, her grandfather had hidden a *mezuzah* containing a scroll with a blessing meant to ensure the multiplication of the family.

We cannot be certain which "I" participates in these scenes, nor which is the actual actor, haunted by the returns of trauma, subjected to the logic of circulation along a Möbius strip between subjective positions and between past and present. The subtenant's ventriloquial discourse issues from the very heart of a psychic economy traversed by the geometry of an internal crypt, marked by the tendency to generate its own mirrored doubles. The trap of the past is illustrated by the descriptions of the apartments in which the protagonist once hid, with their labyrinthine passages between wardrobe and stove, the indistinct silhouettes of successive landladies, and the salvaged fragments of phrases told years later, which the narrator will go on to repeat to herself. These fragments strive to capture an experience that, although it occurred, ultimately could not be inscribed, by virtue of its excess and its liminal nature. It is no coincidence that the novel ends with a gap, a sentence cut off like Lyotard's *phrase-affect*[26] – necessary to language, yet breaking its symbolic chains of association, serving as the sign of an affective state that, though mute,

[24]"Sublocation" is a term drawn from the fields of property law and medicine. In its primary sense, it denotes a sublease or subtenancy. See, for example, the entry "sublokacja" in: Michał Arct, Słownik ilustrowany języka polskiego [Illustrated Dictionary of the Polish Language] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo M. Arcta, 1925), 405.

[25]Krall, The Subtenant, 37.

[26]See Jean-François Lyotard, "Zdanie-afekt" [The phrase-affect], translated into Polish by Monika Murawska, in Lyotard, Derrida, Hillis Miller i inni. Kalifornijska teoria krytyczna. Antologia tekstów [Lyotard, Derrida, Hillis Miller and others: Californian critical theory. An anthology], ed. Ewa Bobrowska, Monika Murawska, and Magdalena Rudkowska (Warsaw: Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2019), 145–155. According to Lyotard, the phrase-affect is an inarticulable feeling that resists being linked according to the rules of any given discourse; rather, it interrupts and suspends them, producing the damage or harm that the philosopher describes as radical injustice. The phrase-affect signifies meaning without referent—it pertains to pain (or, potentially, pleasure) and is tautegorical, like aisthesis or Empfindung. Lyotard refers here to Freud's distinction between affects and representations of things or words: affects bear witness but represent nothing to anyone. The phrase-affect is improper, inappropriate, even disturbing to the order of discourse itself; it resembles an attack of hysteria, a phobia, or an affective communication linked to a time before logos—to what Lyotard calls infantia (childhood).

resonates at the site of rupture, disturbs, and unsettles: "The book is coming to and end, who knows, perhaps it has already ended, and I haven't even had a Chance to write about" [27].

Coda

The critical reception of *The Subtenant* has typically focused on its experimental form, on the problem of conflicting memories, and on the psychosocial consequences of the Holocaust and antisemitism. Yet despite the multilingual nature of trauma, the text ultimately constitutes an act of resilience, a transformation of fear into artistic creation, and thus an attempt to transcend the fatalism of cultural determinism and traumatic inscription. This transformation is made possible, in part, through the ambivalences of mimicry and its capacity to produce distance from the community. As the narrator observes, "You may recover from blackness, but brightness is incurable"[28].

Krall reflects the gradual stages of a working-through process that never reaches completion and that serves to articulate her own subtenant condition – so that, as the narrator emphasizes, "And now you are going to survive without rejecting sadness" [29]. In her case, the repetition of trauma in the mode of aesthetic anamnesis entails a form of phantasmatic reparation and self-therapeutic liberation from subtenancy, achieved through an act of self-forgiveness and the symbolic granting of ownership, and thus the right to inhabit her own intimate space, in the closing scene set by the River Narew. This moment can be read as a reparative gesture of reconciliation with the subtenant aspect of her subjectivity and as an attempt to restore genealogical continuity. It takes the form of advice the narrator offers to her daughter, urging an internal reversal of the direction of cultural degradation as the fundamental condition of survival, of overcoming paralyzing shame and reclaiming love for oneself.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[27]Krall, The Subtenant, 127.
[28]Krall, The Subtenant, 113.
[29]Krall, The Subtenant, 104.

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KEYWORDS

trauma

ANITISEMITISM IN POLISH LITERATURE

Abstract:
In the article *Crypt, Mimicry, Genealogy: Languages of Trauma in Hanna Krall's Subtenant*, I interpret Krall's novel through the lens of Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry, research on genealogical imagination, and trauma studies. In my view, these categories also have the potential to reshape the framework of the novel's historical and literary positioning, as they make it possible to read *Subtenant* alongside other Jewish narratives of the same period—texts equally misaligned with the norms of collective memory, as they articulate the unsettling experiences of the "subtenant" diaspora, which preserved the memory of the Holocaust and of Polish antisemitism, and gave expression to genealogies and "impure" family histories deemed non-normative from the perspective of Polish culture.

Jewish self-hatred

mimicry

Holocaust

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