After Memory

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After Memory

World War II in Contemporary Eastern
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Edited by
Matthias Schwartz, Nina Weller and Heike Winkel

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Transnational Aspects of Postmemory in Third-Generation Fiction: The ‘Contrapuntal’ Cases of Piotr Paziński and Erwin Mortier

1 Introduction

This article treats in tandem two literary fiction debuts that deal with the disturbing aftermath and legacy of World War II from a third-generation perspective, namely Piotr Paziński’s Polish novel *The Boarding House* (2009, *Pensjonat*) and Erwin Mortier’s Flemish novel *Marcel* (1999).¹ Biographically, geographically, and culturally speaking, both writers represent two very distinct “memorial” worlds located along the European East-West axis and may be said to occupy – in relation to one another – “contrapuntal” positions (Hoffman 2004, 118). Whereas Paziński (born in 1973) is the grandchild of Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors, Mortier (born in 1965) grew up in a family of Flemish Catholic nationalists convicted for collaborating with Nazi Germany. The fact that both authors decided to devote their debut novels to the impact of World War II on their respective families is, undoubtedly, indicative of the formative role the legacy of the war played in their biographies. Also, while both books revolve around the intergenerational transmission of familial and group memory in the decades following the war, they do so by turning intimate autobiographic experience into imaginative literature, beyond – as it is called in the introduction to this volume – “privately communicated personal memories”.

Taken together, these novels display the kind of “positional similarity” that has been observed in second generation literary treatments of World War II and in the “contrapuntal” legacies of perpetration and survival (McGlothlin 2006, 230). There is, however, a significant shift in focus when compared to the (more or less) fictionalised accounts of the interaction between the war generation and their immediate progeny. As I will argue, *The Boarding House* and *Marcel* belong to a transnational literary constellation that depicts the third generation as the last one with “a sense of living connection” (Hoffman 2004, xv) to the dramatic events that shaped the lives of the grandparents’ generation (on the side of perpetrators,

¹ Both novels have gained considerable scholarly attention. For Mortier, see Lensen 2007; Hinderdael et al. 2008; Lensen 2013; Van Heuckelom 2014, among others. For Paziński, see, for example, Grimstad 2013; Plaice 2012; Borowicz 2015; Rosiński 2015; Blacker 2016.

collaborators, survivors, and victims, alike). This state of affairs charges the ‘child’ protagonists/narrators of these novels – regardless of the cultural context in which they function – with particular duties as far as the ‘heritage’ of the first generation is concerned. Along these lines, the books under scrutiny continue and subvert some aspects of ‘postmemory’ as described and analysed by Marianne Hirsch with regards to the second generation’s creative engagement with World War II and the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, the fact that both books contain a series of autobiographically inspired postmemorial tropes and motifs does not mean that their literary treatment of the third-generation perspective is predominantly convergent. In order to shed light on this issue, in this article, I will take a closer look at an intertext that both debut novels seem to have in common, namely the literary fiction of the Polish Jewish author (and Holocaust victim) Bruno Schulz. Significantly, while Erwin Mortier draws inspiration from Schulz’s first story collection *Cinnamon Shops* (1934, *Sklepy cynamonowe*) and deploys the metafictional trope of a ‘Second Genesis’ in order to create a less mystified image of the Flemish collaborationist movement during World War II, Piotr Paziński uses the Genesis motif within the narrative configuration of a ‘sanatorial text’ – a generic frame that can be related to Schulz’s second story collection *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937, *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*). As I will argue, this shift in focus coincides with a crucial difference in mood – nostalgia versus melancholy – and in scale – the relatively limited consequences of wartime collaboration versus the tremendous rupture caused by the Holocaust. Ultimately, however, notwithstanding the diverging literary scope of the novels involved, both Paziński and Mortier may be said to imbue their respective works with a ‘high modernist’ stance on literature ‘after memory’, which intertwines with an outspoken distrust of ‘disembodied’ public archives (and mass culture at large). This approach turns them into like-minded opponents of what has been termed, by the editors of this volume, ‘arbitrary’ and ‘normalising’ reappropriations of the past.

2 Sites of Isolation: Memory Politics in Postwar Poland and Belgium

Both *The Boarding House* and *Marcel* bring into view a community that, within the political constellation of the countries involved, was faced with a form of social marginalisation after the war. Such a diagnosis applies, quite obviously, to the position of the Jews in post-World War II Poland: notwithstanding the almost complete extinction of Polish Jewry during the Holocaust, those who

survived the war and decided to stay in their native country experienced considerable resistance in gaining public recognition for the Jewish suffering. As Ewa Ochman briefly summarises the Polish case, throughout “the communist era, the issue of the Holocaust was marginalised and relegated to the commemorative periphery” (Ochman 2013, 36). In Poland, public remembrance of the Shoah was hampered not only by the regime’s ideological focus on anti-communism rather than on anti-Semitism (as in other Eastern Bloc states), but also because Holocaust memory collided with the national narrative of Polish martyrdom. Therefore, in the three decades after the war, Polish Jews continued to disappear from the People’s Republic – both physically (through emigration) and discursively (through the tabooisation of Jewish topics and the state’s increasingly anti-Semitic stance). Significantly, however, the past two decades have been marked by “the return of the Jew” in the public domain – not least in the field of literature (Buryła 2014). Jewry has returned through various cultural initiatives, remembrance narratives, and representational practices (Blacker 2016), but also, as a sociological phenomenon, through the emergence of a “new” Jewish community consisting mainly of young Poles who have come to (re)discover their Jewish roots (Reszke 2013). As the long-time editor-in-chief of the Polish Jewish monthly *Midrasz* (1997–2019, *Midrash*) and the author of several books on the Warsaw Jewry, Piotr Paziński undoubtedly occupies a prominent position in the reviving Polish Jewish landscape. Quite untypically, however, Paziński does not belong to the recent wave of ‘conversions’ (as he became acquainted with his Jewish background already in childhood).

A very different form of social insularity can be detected in Erwin Mortier’s novel about the postwar fate of the Flemish collaboration movement. As Belgian historian Pieter Lagrou has observed with regards to the sociological impact of the end of the Nazi occupation of Belgium,

once the tide of war had turned, collaborationists as a group were irredeemably alienated from the rest of the population. Their national treason was condemned and their ideology seen as a venture that was now terminated, excluded from the national collective memories.

(Lagrou 2007, 5)

Whereas World War I allowed for unambiguously positive portrayals of heroic Flemish soldiers resisting German aggression in the trenches of ‘brave little Belgium’s’ North Sea coast, the national army’s rapid capitulation in 1940 and the subsequent occupation by the Nazis turned the period of World War II into a long-lasting experience of defeat, humiliation, moral ambiguity, and ideological confusion. Self-evidently, if the occupation period was characterised by a sense of ‘national impotence’, then the subsequent liberation radically changed the scene: by foregrounding instances of resistance and triumph – however

scarce they may have been – and by condemning immoral and opportunistic behaviour under Nazi rule, the self-esteem of the Belgian nation had to be rebuilt. As such, the public sphere became dominated by a black-and-white vision of the wartime era and its aftermath, involving an ostracisation of collaboration and providing a safeguard for the repression of collaborators and their kin. Obviously, however, unlike communist Poland with its state-controlled system of censorship, Flemish authors faced hardly any restrictions in their literary treatment of the (post)war experience.²

3 World War II at a Double Generational Remove

As representatives of the third generation, Erwin Mortier and Piotr Paziński deal with the issue of intergenerational transmission of familial memory in a way that substantially differs from second-generation narratives related to World War II and the Holocaust. There is, first of all, a much greater temporal distance and a double generational remove, which means that the growing-up of the child protagonist is far less dominated by the war and its aftermath when compared with the experiences of the previous generation (which, in literary representations, have often been treated in terms of psychopathology and trauma). What is more, while both novels prominently focus on the interaction between the first generation and the generation of the grandchildren, the second generation remains largely out of sight. Significantly, rather than situating the growing-up of the third-generation character within the typical confines of a household, both Mortier and Paziński shift the focus of their story to the (vacation) time they spent as a child in the immediate company and proximity of their respective grandmothers. In both cases, the story is predominantly told in the past tense, from the perspective of a grown-up homodiegetic narrator returning to the world of his infancy: in the case of Mortier a Flemish village in the late 1960s,

² In fact, the only notable obstacles to be overcome were the pre-publication filters of Belgian and Dutch publishing houses. Generally speaking, as has been observed by Jan Lensen, Flemish literary responses to wartime perpetration and collaboration have followed more or less the same trajectory as their German counterparts: from the first generation's refusal to admit guilt and complicity through the second generation's accusatory challenging of this stance to the third generation's position as an emotionally detached "third party" capable of casting a more balanced light on the troubled war past (Lensen 2013 & 2014). A remarkable side-effect of the predominant focus on the 'local' impact of the war is the fact that Flemish literature remained largely silent about the camps and the Holocaust.

and in the case of Paziński a communist-era Jewish boarding house some 30 km south of Warsaw in the late 1970s.

However, the bygone world of childhood is evoked in a substantially different manner in the two works. Whereas *Marcel* is entirely set in the childhood days of the protagonist, the diegesis in Paziński's novel combines two time perspectives: then (*wtedy*), at the time of the protagonist's growing-up, and now (*teraz*), at the time of his return as a mature person in the postcommunist period. With the physical return serving as the narrative frame of the mnemonic return, the adult narrator's passage through the decaying guesthouse and its surroundings triggers his memory and repeatedly makes him jump from the 'contemporary moment' to a more distant past. Obviously, this difference in narrative perspective has some implications for the depiction of cross-generational communication in general and the transmission of memories about the war in particular: while Mortier concentrates on the child protagonist as the 'inheritor' of the grandparental private archive, Paziński situates the motif of intergenerational transfer in a later phase (at the time of the grown-up protagonist's return to the now dilapidated boarding house).

4 Autobiographically Inspired Locations (With a Schulzian Touch)

The distinct narrative design of *The Boarding House* also signals a crucial difference in mood. If both past-facing novels inevitably evoke a sense of nostalgia, then Paziński's debut goes much further by lamenting the irretrievably lost world of childhood. While the homodiegetic narrator emphasises that the boarding house and the people that used to reside there constitute his actual "home", his physical return to the summer resort suggests that he has not yet come to terms with the loss and continues to "yearn" (Grimstad 2013, 129). This melancholic mood is closely intertwined with the novel's adherence to certain features of the 'sanatorial text', a literary genre that gained prominence in the interwar period – Schulz's *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* being its most notable Polish example (Herlth 2013).

Strikingly similar to Schulz's story from the eponymous 1937 story collection, Paziński's novel foregrounds a location of the 'sanatorial' type. In *The Boarding House* too, the young protagonist's stay in the remote resort is narratively 'bracketed' by a train journey, which is another common trait of the genre. What is more, from the very start of the novel, the narrator meticulously portrays the guesthouse and its immediate environment as an enclave isolated from the outside

world and largely left to its own devices. Therefore, when approached from a Foucauldian perspective, Paziński's Jewish boarding house can be seen as a 'heterotopic' site, which serves as an inversion of the normal, 'healthy' world on 'the outside'. Even more important is the fact that the narrator's trip to the 'sanatorial' world emerges out of a profound sense of loss, just like in Schulz's story. Significantly, however, while Schulz's 'sanatorium' does not seem to have a specific referent, quite the opposite is the case in *The Boarding House*. If the Schulzian (train) journey initiates a visit to the deceased father Jacob residing in an unspecified sanatorial resort, then the trip depicted in *The Boarding House* takes on the shape of a melancholic return to one specific Polish Jewish boarding house frequented by the Holocaust generation.³ As becomes clear from the spatial trajectory described by Paziński's narrator in the opening chapter, the novel's central location has been modelled after Śródborowianka, a guest-house owned and administered by the Social-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland.⁴ Therefore, if in Schulz's case the 'sanatorium' functions primarily as a personal 'site of memory' (associated with the death of the idolised father figure, who is central to Schulz's prose), Paziński's Jewish guesthouse may be said to serve as a 'site of memory' on a significantly larger scale.

Erwin Mortier, for his part, hardly foregrounds spatially the socially isolated position of his main characters. Here, however, we are also dealing with a largely autobiographically inspired setting that equally sets in motion intertextual associations, in particular with regards to the literary fiction of Bruno Schulz. In Mortier's novel, the narrator's grandmother, who is a dressmaker by profession, spends much of her time within the closed confines of her domestic sewing workshop, in a narrative configuration that brings to mind the key role of textile-related motifs and requisites in the well-known cycle on the "tailors' dummies" (from Schulz's first story collection *Cinnamon Shops*). What is more, over the course of the novel, the grandmother's sewing practice comes to serve as a metaphor for the way in which she deals with the troubled war experience of her family. It thus acquires metafictional connotations, as we shall see later on.

³ Significantly, not unlike Schulz's story, some of the chapters of *The Boarding House* have a dream-like quality and blur the boundary between the realist and oneiric mode, which makes it difficult for the reader to assess whether the portrayed Jewish boarders are still alive or nothing but phantasmagoric apparitions (retrieved from memory). Compare Rosiński 2015.

⁴ While in the interwar period the Jewish guesthouse was part of a popular health resort town known for its pine forest (Otwock, some 30 km south to Warsaw), the Holocaust and its aftermath turned the resort into one of the few remnants of Jewish community life on Polish soil.

5 Between Dissonant and Consonant Self-narration: Speaking (and Observing) Through the Child Protagonist

Notwithstanding the substantial differences in narrative design, both Paziński and Mortier carefully forge a sense of identification with the perspective of the child protagonist and repeatedly abandon the narrative privilege of hindsight. As such, both novels may be said to navigate the middle ground between dissonant and consonant forms of self-narration (as analysed by Cohn 1984, 145–161). In *Marcel*, most of the conversations between the ‘older’ characters are rendered in the form of direct speech, while the young boy serves as the focalising observer of these interactions. Paziński’s narrator, in turn, makes the mnemonic returns to his childhood years replete with instances of free direct speech, which are typically combined with shifts between past and present tense. Along these lines, each of the novels pays particular attention to the way in which the child protagonist becomes intensely and deeply immersed in the grandmother’s isolated social environment, which comes to serve as the primal site of learning, socialisation, and identity-formation. In *Marcel*, most of the grandmother’s social contacts directly relate to a small circle of collaborator friends who also suffered from repression in the early postwar years. The boy regularly accompanies his grandmother on her visits to her collaborator friends and automatically becomes exposed to their horizontal, intragenerational exchange of communication, in most cases related to the war and its aftermath. In a similar vein, Paziński’s first-person narrator spends most of his time in the company of the Jewish boarders, mostly relatives, friends, and acquaintances of his grandmother who survived the war, while he witnesses their vivid discussions, interactions, and reminiscences. Here too, spatial contiguity leads to a far-reaching identification between the child and the grandparent’s generation (even to such an extent that the child feels himself belonging to their generation).

Importantly, however, while in the case of Mortier the figure of the grandmother functions as a fully-fledged character and dominates the retrospective narration, the grandmother in *The Boarding House* is much less distinguished as an individual character. Instead, she and the other Jewish guests gathered at the boarding house are treated as a ‘collective subject’, a kind of ‘extended family’ whose experiences give a multi-faceted insight into the fate of Polish Jewry before, during, and after the war. This substantial difference in scale – reflected by the titles of both books – neatly corresponds with the novels’ approach towards the ‘casualties’ of the war: while *Marcel* largely revolves around the fate of one particular war ‘victim’ (the title character, who died as a Waffen SS soldier

on the Eastern Front), *The Boarding House* portrays a plethora of Polish Jews whose lives have been seriously affected by the war (one of them being the protagonist's grandfather, who died as a soldier of the Polish Armed Forces in the battle of Lenino).⁵ At various points, Paziński uses lengthy enumerations, as if to make the scale of the Jewish losses palpable. Both in *Marcel* and *The Boarding House*, the actual meaning of the stories shared by representatives of the first generation and overheard by the child protagonist remains largely elusive to him. In *Marcel*, this pertains in particular to conversations related to the fate of Marcel, the grandmother's youngest brother who – after joining the German army – died at the Eastern front and ended up in a mass grave somewhere in Eastern Europe. At the end of the first chapter, the first-person narrator refers in the following way to a dialogue the boy overhears about his great-uncle:

"That boy [Marcel]," she said, "has been lying there all alone for so many years now. I remember him in my prayers every day. He saved us from Bolshevism." I thought she was referring to yet another mysterious disease. (Mortier 2001, 16)

In a similar vein, the childish curiosity displayed by Paziński's protagonist epitomises his inability to grasp all the implications of the Holocaust experience. This is exemplified, for instance, in a fragment dealing with the marks branded on the hand of Miss Marysia, one of the Auschwitz survivors residing in the boarding house. While the concluding question marks the shift from retrospective self-narration to the immediacy of (free) direct speech, this segment also foregrounds the child's fascination with the suffering war body:

She was not embarrassed by this number, but she wouldn't let me touch it though I was very tempted. I was curious how it was made. Dark ink dots on the skin, or something along those lines? (Paziński 2018, 36)

Another, closely related aspect shared by both novels is the fact that the presence of the child protagonist often goes unnoticed by the elderly people: the boys hang around, sneak in, and often silently witness the conversations and arguments between the elders. Meanwhile, however, some rooms in the (guest)house are explicitly forbidden territory. In *The Boarding House*, one such

⁵ If there is one geographical point of contact where the fates of both families (and their respective 'memorial worlds') intersect, then it is the Eastern Front. While Paziński's grandfather on the maternal side died in the battle of Lenino (Belarus), Mortier's great-uncle died around the same time in Berdyczów, Ukraine.

off-limits area is the common bathroom, described by the peeping I-narrator in the following way:

Through the keyhole, you can see Mr. Leon, or maybe Mr. Chaim in a thick white bathrobe with dark blue stripes. Camp garb. Don't say this, these are very bad words, Mr. Chaim would be very upset if he heard you! A forbidden place. Not for little kids. (Paziński 2018, 34)

On the level of narration, this fragment nicely illustrates the multitude of voices – rendered successively in free direct speech – captured by the boy as the focaliser of the scene. What is more, not unlike the previous fragment, it underscores the boy's fascination with various indexical and iconic signifiers of the war. In particular, the use of the Polish taboo word *pasiak* (which refers to the striped concentration camp costume) in relation to the bathroom scenery may be said to symbolise the seniors' attempts to prevent the boy from being openly confronted with the war body, either in its naked state or in a dressed form.

In *Marcel*, in turn, this type of forbidden space is represented by the grandmother's sewing room, which is also, albeit in a different way, closely linked to the legacy of the war. After sneaking into the tailor's workshop and hiding under the sewing table, the boy overhears one of the grandmother's conversations with her niece Stella, including her complaint about the fact that not all forms of collaboration with the Nazis were punished in an equal way:

"They picked on Maurice just to make themselves look better. Every single textile firm made money of the Germans. Good money, too." [the grandmother said.]

"All those little men in the camps on television," Stella blurted, "where d'you suppose the material for all those striped pyjamas came from? Am I right, Andrea?"

"Whenever I see those old films," the grandmother said, "I think: there goes the Flanders rag trade. And who gets the blame? Maurice. Or me." (Mortier 2001, 32)

On the one hand, this fragment neatly exposes the Flemish collaborators' myopic and biased approach toward the Holocaust, which they seem to perceive exclusively through the lens of the postwar repression and the way in which it affected their lives. Rather than acknowledging the hardship and sufferings caused by the camp experience, they shift the focus to the camp clothing as an – in their view all too obvious – signifier of Flemish economic collaboration. In a similar vein, the double reference to visually mediated (televised) reality is indicative of the geographic and mental distance that separates them from the East European war experience. On the other hand, however, the focus on textile and war bodies in this scene corresponds with a thread that runs like a motif through Mortier's novel: the grandmother's sewing practice epitomises the way in which she tries to cover up and conceal the collaborationist past of herself, her family, and her friends.

6 Flemish Fear of Trash versus Jewish Archive Fever

At the very heart of the grandmother's dressmaking practice in *Marcel* lies the concept of "a good garment". Mortier's narrator refers to her ideas about dress-making in the following way:

Mondays were devoted to pattern drawing, design adjustments and the strategic deployment of pins so as to hide unwanted prominences. "A good garment," she affirmed with deeply held conviction, "both conceals and reveals." (Mortier 2001, 24)

Throughout the novel, we follow the grandmother's work on such a "good garment", a dress designed for the plump school teacher of the child protagonist, a woman who used to collaborate with the Nazis by organising *Kulturabende* ("cultural evenings"). The grandmother's desire to hide "unwanted" bodily prominences marks her willingness to keep up appearances and suppress her memories about the collaborationist past, at least in the public domain. This attitude is accompanied by a profound fear for any kind of waste, the presence of which symbolises the potentially dangerous emergence of traces of the family's guilty war past. Quite symbolically, the first-person narrator evinces a particular fascination with the frivolous trash that falls from the grandmother's sewing table:

At the end of each working day the snippets of dress material and tangled threads lying in frivolous anarchy on the floor were swept into a heap for the rag-and-bone man. (Mortier 2001, 28)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Jewish characters that inhibit Paziński's boarding house display an entirely opposite attitude. Time and again, the narrator refers to the hoarding behaviour and the archive fever of the boarders as an obsessive way to compensate for the losses caused by the war: "We gathered everything that was left after the war" (Paziński 2018, 19). Or: "Another collector. In this building, everybody collects something and gathers it up for eternity" (Paziński 2018, 76).

One of these compulsive collectors is Ms. Tecia, described by Paziński in the following way:

Ms. Tecia stood in the middle of her kingdom. [. . .] Home archives, dusty reams of yellow paper shoved in every corner. Important articles! A whole life of collecting. Porcelain sets. Treasures that were never used. (Paziński 2018, 15)

Further into the description, Paziński's narrator turns particular attention to the huge collection of sewing materials stored in the old woman's room:

Rags in boxes, organized: linen and cotton, nylon and rayon. For sewing and the more damaged ones for carding. [. . .] And yarn for sweaters, moths shamelessly emerging from colorful balls of yarn, making a few anxious rounds around the storeroom before quickly returning to their cotton nests, discouraged by the stink of naphthalene and lavender. Objects that have more life than people. Now abandoned. Who will put them back, so they don't drift about atop some garbage dump? (Paziński 2018, 16)

The rhetorical question that closes this fragment is central to Paziński's melancholic treatment of the physical and memorial world inhabited and cultivated by the aging guests of the Jewish boarding house. In spite of the inhabitants' inclination to accumulate and to hoard, their 'sanatorial' world is destined to disappear, which is aptly underscored – both textually and visually – by the gradual vanishing of the very name of the guesthouse: "DOM WYPOCZYNK" (instead of *dom wypoczynkowy*). This process of fading away also takes place on the level of memory. On a number of occasions, Paziński's grown-up narrator refers to the aging boarders' increasing struggle with amnesia and defective memory. What is more, the very same problem also pertains to the narrator himself, who repeatedly expresses his doubts about the scope and reliability of his childhood memories and the structural failure of memory at large (which, at least partly, explains his melancholic mindset).

7 The 'Inheritance' of the (Child) Protagonist/ Narrator: Uncovering and Burying

As it transpires, during his return trip to the dilapidated Jewish boarding house, Paziński's protagonist is charged with a double mission. On the one hand, he fashions himself as a treasure hunter and an archaeologist who faces the challenge of excavating and deciphering remnants of the past, be it in his own memory or in the massive collection of objects, photographs, and texts stored by the inhabitants of the guesthouse, such as Ms. Tecia:

Either way, only single words are left, scattered here and there. It's hard to decipher anything, as if they were written not in ink but in onion juice. (Paziński 2018, 19)

I sat there for an hour, paying no attention to Ms. Tecia and trying to decipher the contents of consecutive wraps. The room was steeping in dusk, but I didn't feel like getting up to turn the mini-chandelier on. The letters in the letters, almost illegible, were melting in the twilight. (Paziński 2018, 20)

In one of the next chapters, the narrator takes one of these packages to his private room:

The package from Ms. Tecia was very heavy, as if filled with stones and not old photographs. I wasn't even interested in my room anymore, I quickly threw the contents of the wraps on the table and I started to organize them like a game of solitaire. (Paziński 2018, 37)

The reference to the single player card game *pasjans* ("solitaire") aptly reveals one more aspect of the burdensome task resting upon the shoulders of Paziński's protagonist, namely the fact that he is forced to carry out this task all by himself. As the narrator occasionally indicates, being the "only child" who used to stay in the Jewish guesthouse turns him into the only legitimate heir of the material and memorial world of the communist-era boarding house ("Me alone and them. The only child, I never had any peers here", Paziński 2018, 26.)

On the other hand, however, if excavating, deciphering, and reading the legacy of the boarders is one part of the narrator's mission, then the question whether (and how) to conserve and pass on this legacy, so that it remains available for the next generations is no less important:

Or maybe it was just a coincidence of events that allowed a few to walk out [of Warsaw], to bear witness, to scream and lament, to never forget, or to forget forever and yet to remember – from generation to generation, till the end, till the last breath, or maybe even just one day longer. (Paziński 2018, 44)

By repeatedly using the Polish word *pokolenie* ("generation") – usually in combination with variations on the Exodus motif – Paziński's narrator explicitly refers to the Jewish concept of *l'dor vador* ("from generation to generation"), the urgency to pass on age-old rituals and experiences (such as the Exodus from Egypt) to future generations (Berger 1997, 1; Berger and Milbauer 2013, 67). Until the very end of the novel, however, Paziński remains highly ambiguous and doubtful about the use of such an inter- or transgenerational transmission of memory. In the highly symbolic closing scene of the novel, the narrator is taken by one of the last inhabitants of the guesthouse to a mysterious place in the woods where they encounter, it appears, the spectres of the already deceased Jewish boarders as well as their relatives and friends who did not survive the war:

I wanted to escape but I felt that something was holding me, chaining me to this place, and not letting me move, as if my legs were roped, as if I belonged to the generation of Mr. Abram and Ms. Mala, as if there was no age difference between me and Uncle Szymon, not even the tiniest crack to separate our fates from each other. They held me in a steel embrace.
 "I'm coming to you!" I shouted.
 "Nah, where did you get this idea? Crazy, he simply went crazy! What kind of silly things is he saying?"

“It is our forest and we don’t need anyone else!”
 “He’s Bronka’s grandson. Where will he go now?”
 “Where was he then? Maybe he wasn’t there at all?”
 The last from a chain of generations, clutching at the very end.
 It was late into the night when I reached the station. (Paziński 2018, 119–120)

By underscoring the grandson’s dilemma about joining or not joining his grandmother’s departing/departed generation, Paziński exposes the fundamental rupture provoked by the Holocaust: the normal succession of generations has been radically halted (which partly explains the melancholic mood that pervades *The Boarding House*). As “the last from a chain of generations, clutching at the very end,” his fictional avatar ultimately faces the challenge of reconciling this profound sense of rupture with the age-old Jewish impetus to ‘pass on’ the memory of ‘bondage’ (and liberation from ‘bondage’).⁶ Undoubtedly, the narrator’s self-fashioning as the “only child” in the communist-era boarding house gains additional prominence and meaning when read against the background of the recent, postcommunist wave of ‘conversions’ (mainly involving young Poles who lack this kind of ‘embodied’ connection with the war generation).⁷

Although Mortier’s perspective is quite different, there are several interesting convergences between *Marcel* and *The Boarding House* when it comes to the protagonists’ (and the authors’) attitude towards the memories transmitted by the first generation. Whereas Paziński’s main character is confronted with an overabundance of stories that he cannot possibly manage on his own, Mortier’s protagonist is increasingly exposed to the collaborationist past of his family, which his grandmother tries to suppress and conceal, at least in the public domain. The most important person to embody the guilty past of the boy’s family is the title character Marcel, the youngest brother of the grandmother. Because of the stigma attached to Belgian soldiers who died at the Eastern Front, Marcel’s fate during World War II is usually discussed only in guarded terms. Most

⁶ Renata Plaice comments upon the novel’s ending as follows: “The final scene of the novel in particular describes the narrator’s experience of an apocalyptic communion with all generations of Polish Jews. Yet again Paziński’s text, seemingly a eulogy for an extinct culture, succeeds in reviving and actualizing Jewish heritage within the literary text. In effect he opens space for contemporary literature’s engagement with the Holocaust” (Plaice 2012, 45).

⁷ A recent documentary authored by the New York filmmaker Adam Zucker (2014, *The Return*) sheds an interesting light on the difference between Paziński’s “embodied” connection to the heritage of Polish Jewry and the position of those who only recently (re)discovered their Jewish roots. While focusing on four young women who immerse themselves in Poland’s reemerging Jewish community, Zuckerman’s documentary features Piotr Paziński both as an interviewee and as a local guide (who takes his American translator Tusia Dąbrowska – of Polish Jewish origin – on a train trip to Śródborowianka).

of the time, the grandmother tries to keep the young boy unaware of what happened to his great-uncle. The very fact that nobody exactly knows where he was buried adds even more mystery to his fate. As a result, the young boy often senses Marcel's spirit walking the grandmother's house at night, unable to find peace and rest because of the guilt and shame his relatives still feel about him. There is one particular fragment that gives apt expression to the boy's anxieties during one of these nights:

I considered my options: count up to ten thousand, say, or do some more praying, or pretend that fairies really existed and I could make any wish I pleased. What if it worked? What if all the stuff that fell off the table were to band together? A strip of suede. A tuft of fur. What if all the snippets of serge joined forces with a couple of buttons? They could enlist the tangle of basting threads on the floor, and bribe a dozen thimbles while they were at it. They could invade the table drawer and conspire with the lame zippers. Murder in reverse. A new perspective. A more bearable tomb. So he would stop roaming the house in his stockinged feet, all the way from attic to basement, pausing at my door, deathly quiet [. . .]. (Mortier 2001, 77–78)

Not unlike Jacob's exposé about a "Second Genesis" in Bruno Schulz's cycle on the "tailors' dummies", this fragment in Mortier's work expresses a longing for some sort of secondary creation through a magical recycling of all the textile trash falling from the sewing table (Van Heuckelom 2014). Interestingly, the boy's desire to create an alternative garment, as a way to provide the wandering spectre of his great-uncle with "a more bearable tomb", prefigures a physical act of burial performed by the protagonist at the very end of the novel. When the boy discovers a letter written by his great-uncle at the Eastern Front, the grandmother ultimately becomes obliged to confront the family's war past. In what turns out to be a highly symbolic gesture, the boy decides to put his great-uncle's letter in a biscuit box and bury it in the ground:

I stuffed the bundle into the tin and pressed down the lid. [. . .] I had no time to lose. I set the biscuit tin at the foot of the rowan tree and seized the trowel. 'In paradisum te deducant angeli.' I started digging furiously. Rooms aplenty in the earth. (Mortier 2001, 118–119)

While this act marks the boy's desire to finally put to rest his great-uncle's war body in his native soil, it should not, however, be seen as a cover-up operation. Strikingly, whereas the grandmother urges her grandson to withhold the document from public perusal ("About that letter. You keep it to yourself, mind. It's not for anyone else's eyes. Do you hear?", Mortier 2001, 115), the grown-up narrator incorporates the letter's content entirely in his narrative. What is more, the particular structure of Mortier's book indicates that the novel should be seen as the textual realisation of the young boy's desire to create – out of "textile trash" – an alternative, less mystified account of what happened during and

right after the war. The fragmented composition of Mortier's novel resembles that of a polyphonic patchwork, consisting of snatches and snippets of conversations the young boy secretly overhears and of various scenes he silently witnesses. As such, by gathering various fragments and pieces about the collaborationist past of his great-uncle and by turning them into imaginative literature, Mortier passes them into the public domain and succeeds in providing a "more bearable tomb" for the problematic war past of his family.

8 Performing a Second Genesis

As a mediator between the wartime generation and the future generations, the first-person narrator in Paziński's *The Boarding House* displays similar forms of performative behaviour. Some of the aging boarders, such as Ms. Tecia, express the willingness – typical of elderly people – to hand over their domestic archives. In response to the protagonist's attempts to decipher the documents she had collected, Ms Tecia exclaims:

You can't see anything anymore. [. . .] I knew this would happen. [. . .] They've been here for so long! The whole family history! And your grandma's, too. Adam, my nephew, was supposed to make a copy, but he's always busy. We should take it to the archives, but they will lose it there for sure. Better if it stays here [. . .]. (Paziński 2018, 20)

Significantly, after receiving and analysing the documents he received from Ms. Tecia, Paziński's narrator ultimately expresses his willingness to bury them:

Familiar faces poked out from a stack of photos spread over the table. [. . .] I put them back in stacks. Grandmas, Uncle Szymons, Grandpa, cousins, and in-laws, family friends. Maybe the time has come to leave them here? The best place, they won't have a better one. When I am also gone, they – on paper prints – will become a bygone unknown crowd, a gathering of strange, blurry faces, like the ones in the portraits sold for pennies at flea markets. This way, they will lie in peace at the bottom of a drawer in one of the nightstands. I'll break its knob, so no one staying here later will feel like looking in there. Or better, I'll bury them in the ground, at the bottom of a ditch where Mr. Leon and I went on our dinosaur hunts that were supposed to bring us fame. Nobody will find them there, sand will cover them and softly wrap them in their sleep. I'll take them there. (Paziński 2018, 112)

Quite paradoxically, if the narrator's initial impulse is that of an archaeologist who attempts to excavate and decipher material and memorial remnants of the past, then his final gesture is to put them in the ground. Just as in the case of Mortier's novel, however, the intradiegetic motif of burial closely corresponds with to the book's extradiegetic status as a public artefact. While both novels display a certain distrust (albeit for very different reasons), vis-à-vis disembodied

archival memory, they both prominently focus on “the familial transfer of embodied experience” (Hirsch 2008, 110). Rather than handing over documents to an impersonal institution such as a public archive, the first-generation characters depicted in these novels eventually put their trust in representatives of the third generation with whom they maintain strong ties and who are expected to act as mediators in the transfer from family memory to institutionalised memory. If the intradiegetic burial epitomises the disappearance of these personal items and documents into the order of nature (meanwhile creating the possibility of reinventing the past in a fictional way), then their work as writers marks the symbolic entrance of these materials into the public realm of cultural memory. Significantly, however, while both authors deploy a form of polyphonic storytelling, Paziński’s melancholically minded narrator puts much more effort into problematising his task as a mediator (because there are simply too many Jewish ‘voices’ wanting to be heard, deciphered and registered).

In the case of *Marcel*, the book’s performative character finds expression in Mortier’s (Schulz-inspired) use of the age-old analogy between text and textile: speaking metaphorically, the narrator creates out of textile waste an alternative ‘garment’ that serves to challenge the grandmother’s ‘good garment’ and helps to uncover the ‘unwanted prominences’ of the collaborating war body. Paziński, in turn, deploys another well-known metafictional trope to underscore the creative and imaginative power of the act of storytelling (cf. Plaice 2012, 44–45), namely the biblical formula *Bereishis bara Elohim . . .* (“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”), which is thoughtfully transformed in the opening sentences of the novel (“In the beginning, there were train tracks. In the greenery, between heaven and earth.”, Paziński 2018, 3). This railway motif, undoubtedly, operates at a variety of levels. While primarily referring to the path the narrator used to followed to his grandmother’s Jewish guesthouse, its incorporation into the Genesis formula suggests that the narrator’s personal universe is fundamentally grounded in the time he spent as a child in the sanatorial resort frequented by the generation of his grandparents. Although Paziński does not refrain from exposing the darkness and forgetfulness that hovers over the bygone world of the boarding house, the grown-up narrator’s ‘regenerative’ act of storytelling goes against the idea that memories cannot be conserved or transmitted in some way or another. What is more, apart from marking the beginning of the Schulz-inspired ‘sanatorial text’, the motif of railway tracks can also be said to epitomise the difference between Paziński’s attitude towards the war, on the one hand, and the position of the so-called second generation, on the other. It is possible to read the opening sentence of the book in close relation to the writings of one of the most prominent representatives of the second generation, Eva Hoffman, who begins the first chapter of her acclaimed book *After Such*

Knowledge with the line, “[i]n the beginning was the war” (Hoffman 2004, 3), so as to underscore the central position of the ‘unlived’ war in her childhood years spent in Poland. Although Paziński’s third-generation account displays a melancholic mood, his postmemorial world is undoubtedly much less dominated by the sufferings and traumas provoked by the Holocaust and the war.

A similar reading can also be related to the metafictional function of the text/textile analogy in Mortier’s *Marcel*. As Erin McGlothlin has observed with regards to the prominent role of textile metaphors in second-generation narratives about the Holocaust:

The metaphor of sewing is particularly apt for the project of second-generation writing, not only because [...] it defers the drive toward totality with its inherent incompleteness, its gaps between the stitches, but because the act of sewing is itself also a form of marking, a repair that, with the stitch, leaves visible traces. (McGlothlin 2006, 11–12)

Inasmuch as Mortier’s use of the dressmaking metaphor corresponds with the assumption that it is impossible to completely reconstruct or grasp the experiences of the war generation, his narrator refrains from presenting the creation of an ‘alternative’, less mystifying ‘garment’ in terms of suffering and trauma (with ‘stitches’ as its visible traces, to use McGlothlin’s metaphor).

9 Upscaling ‘Waste’

This brings us to one of the most prominent analogies in these two examples of postmemorial fiction on the war and the Holocaust: in both cases, the third generation is foregrounded as the last generation with a ‘living connection’ to the generation that experienced the war. While this physical proximity exposes the protagonists at an early age to various iconic, indexical, or verbal manifestations of the war body, be it the collaborating body (in the case of Mortier) or the suffering body (in the case of Paziński), they escape from becoming physically or emotionally marked by this exposure (which is a recurring trope in second-generation fiction). As the last generation with an embodied connection to the survivors’ personal memories of the war, they become the buriers of their grandparents’ generation and the inheritors of their private archives. If the act of burial – as a social ritual of mourning – epitomises their personal and embodied engagement with the legacy that has been passed down to them, then it also expresses the willingness to avoid two alternative, much less desirable, options: the anonymity and oblivion of a garbage heap, on the one hand, and the impersonal, disembodied character of the public archive, on the other. Ultimately, the act of storytelling should be seen as the opposite side of the very

same coin: if the intradiegetic burial puts the war generation and its material archives symbolically to rest, then the text itself strives toward a narrative integration of their experiences, not without acknowledging the selective and defective nature of memory.

As such, these novels cast a somewhat different perspective on “the connection between familial and affiliative postmemory and the mechanisms by which public archives and institutions have been able both to reembody and to reindividualize ‘cultural/archival’ memory” (Hirsch 2008, 115). While Paziński and Mortier – as representatives of the ‘literal’ third generation – may be said to reach beyond, to the “more distant affiliative descendants” (Hirsch 122) with their novels, they (or at least their fictional avatars) simultaneously fear ‘illegitimate’ decodings or reworkings of the ‘familial’ materials that have been handed over to them. The reasons within the novels for this distrust of the affiliative postmemorial work made possible by “public archives and institutions” are, of course, different. In the case of *Marcel*, the information passed on to the grandson is sensitive and may be used improperly if it falls into the wrong hands (for instance, by someone willing to take financial or professional advantage of the family’s troubled war past). Paziński’s *The Boarding House*, in turn, suggests that ending up in the public realm inevitably leads to a semantic inflation of the materials involved (which turns them into those “portraits sold for pennies at flea markets”). Therefore, central to both books is the idea of ‘contextualisation’: in view of their ‘living connection’ with the grandparental generation, both authors are able to channel its legacy into the public realm, but in a necessarily mediated and contextualised way.

Such a state of affairs is, of course, also inextricably bound up with the performative literary project in which the two authors engage by writing (and publishing) their respective debut novels. While both Paziński and Mortier conceive of their postmemorial work as a kind of second Genesis – an alternative act of creation, or a ‘new beginning’ – they equally draw on the notion of ‘waste’ as one of the basic sources of their imaginative project. If, in the case of Mortier, the ‘textile trash’ comes to represent everything that had to remain hidden from public view and judgment (due to the taboo associated with war-time collaboration), then the ‘worthless’ character of the materials hoarded by Paziński’s Jewish interlocutors ensues from the fact that nobody seems to be interested in them (which may be read in the context of the Polish People’s Republic’s marginalisation of Jewish affairs). Therefore, apart from offering proper contextualisation, both authors may be said to ‘upscale’ the waste they inherited from the grandparental generation by embedding it in an attractive and aestheticised frame of attention and turning it into an artistically valuable symbolic good.

10 Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly, the authors' 'embodied' engagement with the 'waste' passed on to them is inextricably intertwined with the way in which Mortier and Paziński give literary shape to their postmemorial work. Instead of exploring the representational and communicative possibilities offered by new media, these writers may be said to go against the grain of an increasingly globalised, multimedia, mass culture. If contemporary digital culture can be seen as an archive of sorts, "an enormous repository of narratives, characters, worlds, images, graphics, and sounds from which [media users] can extract the raw matter they need for their own creations, their alternatives to or customisations of the sources" (Kosnik 2016, 4), then both Mortier and Paziński refrain from engaging in such a 'remixing' of media (and other) commodities and opt for a non-arbitrary approach in which a cultural text retains a close and authentic connection to its original referent or source. As such, the intradiegetically voiced distrust of the public archive and both authors' adherence to a rather traditional model of cultural production can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

Although it may seem a broad interpretive stretch, the aforementioned opening sentence of Paziński's *The Boarding House* may serve as an apt example of how this approach works. When treated as a post-Holocaust text, it is difficult not to read the line "[i]n the beginning, there were train tracks" as a reference to railway tracks as one of the most internationally recognised – and endlessly reproduced – emblems of the Holocaust (the iconic rails that stretch into Auschwitz-Birkenau being its most prominent example).⁸ Paziński, however, adds a particular twist to this generic trope by embedding it in a highly personal narrative in which the metafictional (writing as an act of Genesis), the intertextual (the 'sanatorial text', the Old Testament, Holocaust imagery), the referential (the Warsaw-Otwock railway connection), and the autobiographical (Paziński's childhood visits to Śródborowianka) come together and merge: rather than referring to the 'beginnings' of the 'Final Solution', the novel's opening words bring into

⁸ The aforementioned American documentary maker Adam Zucker interestingly exploits the powerfulness of Paziński's opening sentence by 'quoting' it at the very outset of his documentary: throughout the first ten seconds of the film, the viewer is given a static eye-level shot of a stretching railway track located at the station of Otwock. Some 40 minutes into the film, this opening shot is echoed by a similar shot of the iconic railway track leading up to the famous entrance tower at Auschwitz-Birkenau. If the latter symbolises the Holocaust train journey as a one-way trip with no chance of return, then its two-way Otwock counterpart points to the post-Holocaust and postcommunist 'regeneration' of Polish Jewry (with Paziński's 'boarding house' serving as the symbolic link between the communist era and contemporary times).

view a new beginning (or ‘regeneration’), already after the Holocaust.⁹ Although Erwin Mortier’s novel plots a different course, his writing similarly engages in combining the metafictional, the intertextual, the referential, and the autobiographical (of which the omnipresent textile motif in *Marcel* is the most prominent example). Therefore, in spite of the diffuse and inevitably generalising character of literary and artistic labels, both Paziński and Mortier may be called – at least from the perspective of their debut novels – ‘high modernist’ authors. Instead of engaging in unrestrained forms of bricolage or sampling which detach the signifier from its original referent (and its ‘embodied’ connection), they write a kind of literature that retains its critical and social function and seeks to reach out to the ‘outside’ world. What is more, rather than delving into the massive repository of contemporary popular culture, they enrich their post-World War II memorial work with a variety of references to literary and cultural tradition (for example, interwar modernist literature), which undoubtedly adds to the ‘high-cultural’ character of their literary endeavours and which merits characterising them as ‘anti-postmodern’ or ‘post-postmodern’.

Finally, the debut novels of Paziński and Mortier may be said to constitute a transnational literary constellation not only with respect to their ‘positional similarity’ vis-à-vis the legacy of World War II and the Holocaust and in view of their similar approach towards postmemorial cultural production, but also in light of their quite similar trajectory in terms of foreign reception. While both books quickly gained critical acclaim in their respective home countries and underwent several reprints, they both rapidly awakened the interest of foreign publishers and translators.¹⁰ Apart from being indicative of the continuing cross-cultural appeal of literary fiction about World War II and its familial legacies, the corpus of foreign translations of *Marcel* and *The Boarding House* suggests that both novels have come to function within a multidirectional ‘memoryscape’ that not only bridges the contrapuntal sides of perpetration and victimhood but also cuts across the former East-West divide. While transforming the social frames of –

⁹ As such, Paziński also seems to enter in an intertextual dialogue with Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz’s well-known *Umschlagplatz* (1988), which pays particular attention to the wartime destruction of the Jewish community in Otwock. Railway tracks as signifiers of the Holocaust (not only *Umschlagplatz*, but also Otwock station) take up a prominent position in Rymkiewicz’s account.

¹⁰ So far, Mortier’s *Marcel* has appeared in English (2001), Bulgarian (2001), German (2001), French (2002), Czech (2013), Amharic (2013), and Turkish (2014). See Hinderdael, Jookan, and Verstraete 2008 for a discussion of the foreign reception of *Marcel*. Paziński’s debut, in turn, after being awarded the European Prize for Literature (2012), has been published successively in Czech (2012), German (2013), Serbian (2013), Croatian (2014), French (2016), English (2018) and Dutch (2019).

self-imposed or state-imposed – silencing and forgetting, this transnational textual landscape may possibly help the postgeneration(s) to bury the war body in its different guises.

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