Holocaust Mothers and Daughters

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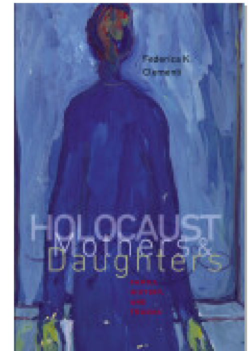

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CHAPTER 1

EDITH BRUCK'S DEAD LETTERS

No one pushes his way through here, certainly not someone with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window and dream of that message when evening comes.

FRANZ KAFKA, "An Imperial Message"

With these words, Samuel Taylor Coleridge immortalized the horror a person feels at being interrupted in the course of his serene life by someone who forces on him an awful truth, a story the untroubled man does not want to hear and resents for having nothing to do with him:

> He holds him with his skinny hand,
> "There was a ship," quoth he.
> "Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!"
> Eftsoons his hand dropt he.[1]

Not unlike the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge's poem, the Shoah witness carries a story that, besides being an unfathomable tale, must also be forced onto its listeners: it's a story no one volunteers to hear.

In *Il Sistema periodico*, Primo Levi recalls his first months after the liberation: "The things I saw and suffered were burning inside of me; I felt closer to the dead than to the living, and I felt guilty of being a man because men had built Auschwitz and Auschwitz had swallowed millions of human beings, among whom many were my friends, including a woman very dear to my heart. I thought that telling all of this could purify me, and I felt like Coleridge's Ancient Marnier, who waylays the wedding guests on their way to the feast and inflicts on them the story of his misfortune."[2] The writer and poet Edith Bruck, Levi's good friend, had a similar outlook. After years of going from school to school, from one TV show to the next, repeating her Holocaust survival story to crowds of anonymous people, she also began to doubt the efficacy of imposing such testimony on those who form a merely passing, and often passive, audience to a narration. No matter how sympathetic and sincerely touched these audiences

were, Bruck felt, they were being charged with a message from the dead that they would rather do without. Children especially ended up more confused than enlightened by this elderly lady's visits to their classrooms; a young member of such an audience once addressed Bruck as "Mrs. Auschwitz." Bruck writes: "Often . . . I felt as if I were talking into a void, a desert, despite the hundreds of heads in front of me that all looked the same."[3] Feeling, as did Levi, that she was like someone from the land of the dead who harasses the living with a horror-filled narration, Bruck for a long time stopped accepting invitations for public appearances and kept to herself, choosing instead to write in her sun-drenched apartment by the Spanish Steps in Rome, where today she still sits at her small desk with typewriter, paper, her indispensable cigarettes, and sepia photographs of her martyrs lining the walls.

Born in 1932 in the small town of Tiszakarad, Hungary, Bruck and her seven siblings grew up in conditions of extreme poverty (two of the children died before the war). Her mother, a strict Orthodox woman, strove to maintain the household and feed and clothe the children with the little her husband was able to procure for the family through his unstable work. For the most part he was absent and not interested in what went on at home, but the main cause of tension between him and his wife was due to the fact that he wasn't a believer and did not share her unfaltering love of God. Tiszakarad, an agricultural village that today is close to the border with Slovakia and Ukraine, was not a *shtetl*, and there were few Jews living there. Antisemitism was a constant threat, and hunger and isolation were just as dangerous. When the war broke out and the Nazis, helped by the local police, hunted down Hungarian Jews, Tiszakarad's remoteness did not safeguard Bruck's family. They were seized early one morning in 1944 and herded onto a cattle train headed for the ghetto of Satoraljaulhely before the final transfer to Auschwitz. Once there, the eleven-year-old Edith and her mother were immediately selected for extermination. The SS selection panel distributed victims into two lines: to the left, those destined to die; to the right, those (temporarily) spared. Edith and her mother, among numberless others, stood on the left, unaware of the sentence that had just been pronounced on them. Bruck reports the events of that day at Auschwitz, the last with her mother, in two different ways. In her memoir she writes:

> I was holding on to my mom's arm with all my strength. Suddenly, I realized that a soldier was pushing me toward the right and was kind of whispering, "To the right, to the right!"
>
> I resisted. My mother got down on her knees and implored the soldier in German: "Leave me my baby girl, leave her to me, don't bring her away!" she

> said. But the soldier shoved her aside with his rifle and wouldn't stop hitting me until I moved to the right-hand line.[4]

And years later, in the autobiographical *Lettera alla madre*, she writes:

> "Obey! Obey!" you screamed while letting go of my hand, of my body, to the point of pushing me away from you into the hands of the soldier, toward his fury that was forcing me to the other side, in a direction opposite to yours.[5]

However, rather than two contradictory memories, these seem to be two moments in a single hellish scene of despair and utter confusion: perhaps, first the mother had understandably wanted to keep her daughter, but once she found out what would have happened to both of them had they stayed together, she began to push the frightened and uncomprehending child away from her. The image of a mother on her knees begging to remain with her daughter mixed with the one of a mother violently detaching the daughter from herself is the last memory, or impression, Bruck has of her mother, Sarah; the latter was gassed the same day. Bruck's uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, a brother, and both parents were all murdered. Bruck and her sister Eliz survived Auschwitz, Dachau, Christianstadt, and Bergen-Belsen together; two older sisters, Marta and Leila, spent the war in hiding; and one brother, Peter, was interned with their father and witnessed his death in Dachau.

Bruck's adversities did not end at Auschwitz. Once back from the camp, she was reunited with her sisters, who in the meantime had started families of their own and could not take on the economic, as well as emotional, burden of their younger sister, a suvivor of the camps. Still a teenager, she moved to Palestine, where she found even less support and sympathy. Palestine was coping with the absorption of thousands of survivors like Bruck, and she was too young, too damaged, and too lonely to enter yet another race for survival and win it. By the age of twenty, she had already been married three times, twice to possessive and abusive men; she had repeatedly been sexually assaulted, including by a cousin who then forced her to have an abortion and tried to push her to commit suicide; and, while in Israel, at the age of seventeen, she had been raped. She left Israel in the early 1950s and returned to Europe. Her choice of a new homeland deviated from the standard postwar migration path, which took the largest number of refugees to the United States and Canada; instead, Bruck moved to Italy. She landed in that small nation, itself in shambles after the war and whose people were mostly very poor and indifferent to her Jewishness and survival story. But there were Jews in Italy, and many of those who had survived the Holocaust felt the urgent need to record their experiences as soon as they were liberated, often

while still recovering in the hospitals or even while traveling on the trains that brought them back home from the camps. However, it took a long time before the facts began to penetrate widely into the personal and national consciousness of Italy. As Manuela Consonni explains in her essay on Shoah memoirs written in Italy between 1945 and 1947, this early Shoah-witnessing literary production received very little acknowledgment, which "evidently reflect[ed], if not a lack of interest, certainly the problematic attitude of an entire society. Everywhere—not only in Italy—the attention from the beginning, the participation, the awareness of individuals and the collective consciousness of society to the survivors' story, neither fulfilled expectations of survivors nor measured up to the magnitude of events."[6] I would add that Italy manifested a particularly strong tendency of its own to subsume, and make disappear, the Holocaust under rubrics far more pressing for the ideological agenda du jour (the solemnization of antifascist resistance, left-wing party politics, and so forth), an urgency felt less strongly in countries less imbricated than Italy with Nazism and Fascism during the prewar and war years.[7] Today, Bruck lives in Rome with her husband, the documentary film director Nelo Risi. Bruck is the name of her third husband, a name she still uses and which has forever replaced her original surname (Steinschreiber).

Bruck's numerous literary works repeatedly tell the story of the traumatic events that shaped her life and tormented her existence. With one exception—her 1997 *Il silenzio degli amanti*, which she ended up disavowing[8]—Bruck's *oeuvre* is always autobiographical and grows from the dark humus of tragedy and inescapable trauma. As Adalgisa Giorgio points out, "if the Shoah representation must be faithful to the truth, the autobiographical origin of Edith Bruck's works guarantees their moral and artistic credibility."[9] Bruck's pain often expresses itself through this psychically wounded woman's apostrophes to an unresponsive universe—unresponsive because it is entirely identified with the unreachable mother. Hers is a literature that brings into focus the communicative breakdown after the Holocaust and the traumatized mind's struggle to overcome a deep melancholia that, for Bruck, constantly threatens to end art and life.

Bruck's autobiographical texts—*Lettera alla madre* (*Letter to My Mother*), *Signora Auschwitz* (Mrs. Auschwitz), and *Lettera da Francoforte* (Letter from Frankfurt)[10]—reveal a literature clearly dominated by the idea of conversation and correspondence. The addressee of *Lettera alla madre* no longer exists, and neither do all the apostrophized characters in her poems dedicated to the dead of Auschwitz. Yet these undeliverable messages answer the daughter's desire to maintain a dialogue, however illusory, with the Auschwitz victims. In the present chapter, I attend to the symptom of melancholia as it relates to a Holocaust mother, and I examine Bruck's fictitious letter to her, as well as the intrinsically rhetorical

figure of the apostrophe that sustains it, as a strategic way for the traumatized daughter to dramatize the unjust fate of her family so that the reader (the indirect addressee) can bear witness to it. Furthermore, I intend to show that this imaginary dialogue with the dead, which appears in both her prose and poetry, is Bruck's way of not letting go of them and of her mother specifically, because the spectral presence of the mother helps the writer herself to stay alive.

Through poetic or fictional apostrophe, a writer achieves the task of calling the inanimate to order, of forging presence out of absence, of arousing understanding where not even listening is possible. Like centuries of poets before her, Bruck uses her medium to inspirit things as well as memories. The magic power of the artistic utterance recreates worlds that are no longer there, no longer visible. Things not uttered end up disappearing or being forgotten. Naming things renders them present, at least symbolically. Judaism in particular crafts a special understanding between Creator and the created as it relates to the power of the word (*logos*) to call things into being, and the biblical writers exalted the evocative force of the apostrophe at pivotal moments throughout the text. Most notable is "Hear, oh Israel!" the injunction of the *Shemah Israel* that summons the Jews to accept a poetic incarnation to become a people. But the times when the Hebrew God still apostrophized his chosen ones are over; God has withdrawn from his creation, and Man now—from the periphery of a self-intelligent universe, imprisoned in the strict parameters of time and space—struggles to fill the void left by the silent divinity. Pious people, Bruck's mother among them, keep up the conversation with God through their prayers, a kind of missive to a silent recipient. An author such as Bruck fills the void with her creative power, an art composed of missives, or calls, to a silent mother. Her conversation is not with *the* Creator but with *her* creator, her mother. Like the biblical *auctor*, an author apostrophizes in order to "will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to [his] desire," Jonathan Culler writes. "In these terms the function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces . . . The apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces."[11] Using the figure of the apostrophe ("Listen Mother!"), Bruck desperately attempts to make silence respond to her call. In this chapter, I will analyze the implications of such a message, which has no hope of arriving at its intended destination. Bruck's apostrophe, by assuming the *fiat*-like power of the *logos*, responds to the subversive need of the artist to upset the cosmic hierarchy and dethrone the center as incapable or unwilling of speaking by itself. In the process, Bruck highlights how vital the mother-daughter dialogue is to her own survival.

I will also appropriate some of Paul de Man's formulations about the poetical

apostrophe, conscious though I am that he applied his critique of history to an era far removed in context and content from my study of Bruck. De Man famously rediscovered and redressed the figure of the apostrophe as monumentalized by the Romantics. Through his deconstruction of William Wordsworth's "Essays on Epitaphs," de Man was able to subvert our understanding of the autobiographical project as one no longer depending on reference (the author's life) the way "a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model" but as something that "may itself produce and determine life."[12] Bruck's Shoah prose and poetry—a dialogue with the dead—gives new meaning and relevance to the rhetorical figure of the apostrophe, and interestingly, as I will show, this rhetoric allows her to utterly recast an ancient figure dear to all poets: the muse. Like an epitaph, Bruck's invocation to the mother apostrophizes the Holocaust victims in an attempt to exhume them from the mass graveyard of Jewish twentieth-century history. Furthermore, as I intend to highlight, her autobiographical project can be understood, following de Man's formulation, as one that is not simply referential but that shapes and determines her own life as a survivor.

Commenting on Wordsworth's statement that the "naked name" on a gravestone is a permanent text before the sun's eyes, de Man explains: "The sun becomes the eye that *reads* the text of the epitaph . . . At this point, it can be said of 'the language of the senseless stone' that it acquires a 'voice,' the *speaking* stone counterbalancing the *seeing* sun. The system [of metaphors] passes from sun to eye to language as name and as voice."[13] What is especially germane to my argument in de Man's interpretation is his idea that the figure that holds Wordsworth's intricate structure of metaphors in place is the prosopopeia:

> the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech. Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope's name, *prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*). Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name . . . is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with the face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.[14]

Of course, de Man's reading of Wordsworth's epitaphs ends up shaping a text quite different from Wordsworth's reading of epitaphs.[15] Following de Man's important theorization of autobiographical acts and their relation to history, I argue that in turning the elegiac apostrophe of poets into an accusatory call that recasts her muse (the mother) as a hardened, oppressed, and defeated woman, Bruck de-faces herself to confer voice, mouth, and eyes on "the naked

name" of the mother, thereby saving the mother from being buried under the text of history. The daughter thus succeeds in revealing to us, the readers of the epitaph, the mother's history, humanity, and unacceptable death.

UNDER MOTHER, GOD, AND MENGELE

When Bruck submitted her manuscript of *Lettera alla madre* to a publisher, the book was so short and unusual that the editor asked her to add something to it to make it financially feasible for the publishing house to produce. Thus *Lettera* became a tripartite text, a work more hybrid than originally intended. It is composed of the title chapter (the book Bruck originally submitted to the publisher), which was conceived of as a long, uninterrupted letter from a Holocaust survivor daughter to her victim mother, followed by "Tracce" (traces), a first-person narrative—which is further divided into two sections—about a daughter's trip to Germany, almost half a century after the facts, to gather clues about her father's death in Dachau. Despite the generic and stylistic switches throughout this new text, it is clear that the reader is being led by the same voice from one part of the book to the next. The speaking "I" of *Lettera* and "Tracce" is Bruck's alterego and is recognizable as the narrator of both stories. The three sections recount three different stages in the life of the same female survivor. However, Bruck can tell only the first part, the one exclusively about her mother, in the form of a (fictitious or imagined) dialogue.

In the process of reconstructing her mother as a presence in *Lettera*, Bruck alternates between describing scenes of daily life before the war and recounting the moment of being separated from her mother at Auschwitz. In both the descriptions of normal life and the description of the dramatic upheaval, a particularly harsh portrait of motherhood emerges. In his essay about epitaphs, Wordsworth ironically mused: "When a Stranger has walked around a Country Church-yard and glanced his eye over so many brief chronicles, as the tombstones usually contain, of faithful wives, tender husbands, dutiful children, and good men of all classes; he will be tempted to exclaim in the language of one of the characters of a modern Tale, in a similar situation, 'Where are all the *bad* people buried?'"[16] Bruck, in contrast, does not allow her mother's martyrdom to influence the kind of epitaph she composes. Her filial memories include moments of love and caring but also recount her mother's faults and weaknesses; she makes sure not to sugarcoat the complexity of the mother-daughter bond, and of women's historical situation in general, throughout her literature. "How many times you blamed me for being born!" Bruck has her narrative alterego rail, and adds: "You should have caressed me to make me stronger. Maybe even my body would be healthier today if you had kissed me everywhere the way I

had seen mothers do with their naked baby daughters after the bath. You never kissed my tummy, my little feet, my sex, my buttocks."[17] In her memoir, we read: "I can't say that mine was a serene and happy family; our misery grew day after day and with it also our arguments. We would fight over anything. My mother was thirty-nine but looked as if she were much older because she had only a few teeth left, and her face was beautiful but full of pain. She always wore a foulard on her head in the Jewish Orthodox fashion, and when she was not yelling [at us] she was praying."[18] The lacerating sadness of the maternal loss stands side by side with an analysis of the embittered woman Bruck had known before her mother was turned into a sacred symbol of martyrdom, one of the faceless six million, and whose victimization had deep roots in a much broader and ancient oppression that cannot be diagnosed exclusively in terms of Nazi evil.

Bruck's mother had an unhappy and frustrated relationship with her husband and their many children. In a humble house surrounded by fields and unpaved roads, she struggled to make ends meet, unsupported by her husband whom, as Bruck implies, she loved but whose failings (a lack of religious faith and an inability to provide for the family) had profoundly embittered her. They were poor and at times went hungry for days. The children were sent to school only until they were old enough to find work to help support the family. Edith, like her alter-ego Katia in *Lettera*, dreamed of a different life, fantasizing about a glamorous future in the big city and experimenting with writing poetry: "Remember when I announced that I had written a poem for you which you wouldn't even bother to read or pay attention to as I read it out loud?" (*Lettera*, 80). In her memory, Bruck sees herself as a child always reaching for her mother, asking her questions, and bothering her during her prayers by trying to secure her undivided attention (for which she would be punished each time). In *Signora Auschwitz*, Bruck recalls how angry her questions, especially the ones about God, used to make her mother, who as a consequence would send her to school without food for three days (and that food, the author tells us, was always meager to begin with). But the worst punishment, Bruck says, was that her mother "would stop talking to me . . . I became invisible to her resentful eyes full of pain for and against me . . . Those three days of punishment were the longest of my short childhood."[19] The daughter's artistic inclination, her inquisitive mind, and her need for attention and affection were not appreciated; instead, they irritated and unsettled a mother faced with so many other more pragmatic concerns. "You did not listen to me, everything was more important than I was for you," the writer of the letter to the dead mother declares (*Lettera*, 78). In a conversation with me, Bruck said that these types of arguments rehearsed in *Lettera* were very much part of her interactions with her mother in real life, too. Bruck remembers very vividly her mother's

disapprobation of everything she did, chose, or said. In particular, her resistance to her mother's extreme religiosity was felt by the mother as a sign of amorality, an unpardonable flaw. Giorgio rightly points out that the use of characters that hide the identity of real people from Bruck's life behind pseudonyms or other literary traits helps shield the writer from the deep suffering that remembering causes, and it is also an effective way to respect the victims' modesty and privacy.[20] Another description of the mother reads: "There was something evil in your silence. Something dangerous . . . You did not love me anymore: in fact, it would have been better if I hadn't been born. You held me responsible for all your troubles as mother, wife, and Jew" (*Lettera*, 36). Assessing her mother's incapacity for sentimentality and forgiveness, the writer scathingly remarks: "I bet you anything that even Mengele's mother forgave her son . . . while I, instead, would no longer be your daughter as soon as I did something wrong, told a small lie, a dirty word, a point of view different from yours, or for doubting God. Because I laughed too much, because anything would make me cry, because I broke the leg of one of our old chairs. It took even less for you to reject me, it took nothing. You would tell me that your womb gave birth to an extraneous daughter" (*Lettera*, 63–64). Much like Ruth Klüger and Sarah Kofman, Bruck portrays a superstitious, often cold, and—at moments—even cruel, mother, one who had fits of jealousy at the daughter's affection for her father. As did Kofman's mother, Bruck's had faith in divine justice, a power rejected by her daughter and one that the daughter ends up lumping together with her Auschwitz experience. "My mother," Bruck writes of the days in the ghetto before their transfer to Auschwitz, "shaved her head, the way in which she should have done, according to our faith, the day she married. She said that God was now punishing us because when she got married she had not cut her hair and that now she had no intention of passing into the next world with long hair: we were all bound to be punished even in Purgatory."[21] Mother and God often exchange roles in Bruck's reanimations: both are guilty of not loving enough; of being too inscrutable, controlling, judgmental, and unreliable; and of never being there when the daughter most needs them. Both are creators and destroyers of life with a complete power over the daughter, just—as Bruck eerily implies—like Mengele in Auschwitz: "How I long to hear you say that I was wrong . . . not to believe in the magic wand of God, who, if he exists, is probably a kind of Mengele of the heavens" (*Lettera*, 20).

Although aware of the tremendous impact that the death camp parenthesis had on her life, Bruck composes a larger picture that includes a pre-Shoah world, one whose importance in her development is not mitigated by the enormity of the later catastrophe. Like other authors featured in this book, she strives to recompose herself rather than merely composing memories of

the Holocaust—that is, she seeks a memory that is not exclusively defined by remembering the Shoah. Her humble origins and her family's poverty leave very little room in the portrait she sketches of her childhood years for pre-Shoah idylls (unlike Elie Wiesel's highly romanticized *shtetl* atmospheres in *Night*, for instance). Even if Bruck, as she herself says, has assimilated the lesson that the martyrs of Auschwitz are untouchable, almost saints (*Lettera*, 47), she can't bring herself to forget the injustices she suffered, the unfair humiliations, the adults' misbehaviors.

Bruck speaks of the "sacred dead of Auschwitz" on the one hand, while on the other she makes sure to desacralize them. The daughter cannot vent her rage, cannot be sacrilegious and angry, disrespectful or impertinent, or even ambivalent and faithful to the complexity of their relationship as long as the mother is elevated to the status of sacred symbol. "Oh my, forgive me, a million times forgive me, you are a sacred dead, an untouchable martyr; this is true but you are also my mother. And to my mother I have the right to say everything," Bruck writes (*Lettera* 47). She makes full use of the authorial power implicit in all apostrophes; the daughter both grants a voice to the mother but also has "the power to take it away from her."[22] *Lettera* opens with the mother peremptorily demanding obedience from the daughter and closes with the daughter demanding obedience from the mother: "Obey! Obey!" the mother yells at her child in Auschwitz (*Lettera*, 8), and "for once, you obey me!" yells the adult daughter at her mother at the end of her letter to her (*Lettera*, 94). Hence, the daughter's writing can be an act of vengeance: "You can't tell me anything unless I let you talk" (*Lettera*, 8). However, in several more tender moments, Bruck uses her power to pay loving tribute to a mother capable of producing little daily miracles that kept her children alive against all odds. She tells stories of her mother conjuring a Shabbat dinner out of an empty pantry; baking bread despite the scarcity of flour; and, most movingly, producing a ribbon out of thin air with which she adorned little Edith's short hair while they were being carried away on a cattle train to Auschwitz.[23] In another novel, *Lettera da Francoforte*—in which, once again, we encounter many real characters from Bruck's life and plenty of autobiographical references—the narrator highlights a similar admiration for her Auschwitz victim mother: "Particularly during the High Holidays, according to which my mother kept track of months and seasons, she was always able to make something special to put on the table from our nonexistent stores, like a wizard."[24] And in her bilingual collection of poems, she recalls:

Mia madre era una santa
faceva dei miracoli

nella dispensa vuota
trovava sempre qualcosa.[25]

My mother was a saint
she worked miracles
in the empty cupboard
she could always find something.

This loving representation, however, is often countered by bitterer ones. "What were our last years at home if not the antechamber of Auschwitz?" she asks the phantom of the mother (*Lettera*, 88). Nor does she romanticize the relationship she would have had with her mother had they both survived the concentration camps. "How would you have lived the aftermath, mama?" she asks: "I would have kept fighting with you. Would we have fought all the time? You would have never approved of anything I did, yet I would have done it all the same but suffering twice as much for it. You would have probably stopped talking to me, just like when I was little" (*Lettera*, 35). And again: "Knowing myself, mama, even though I had been a slave-child, I would have ended up rebelling against your omnipotent will the way I rebelled against your orders when I was a young girl" (*Lettera*, 60). The humanity of both victims and survivors is established in this literature through a blunt and often painful exaltation of the conflicts between mother and daughter. Sacralization of the dead martyrs would only serve to separate mother and daughter; the daughter longs instead for proximity. Bruck needs the real mother with whom she fought, and with whom she keeps fighting in her imagination and texts, in order to nourish the fiction that her textual self and the mother's phantom are alive and together. Bruck declares to her mother that "only death will sever the umbilical cord" that binds them (*Lettera*, 47). Whose death? The umbilical cord that ties together mother and child is at once a symbol of their original bond and of their physical and emotional separation. In Bruck's case, the umbilical cord becomes a metaphor for the birth-death event that truly conjoins them: Auschwitz. There the daughter was granted life, and there the mother lost hers. In this liminal area, accessed through poetry and narrative, daughter and mother are both alive and die over and over again.

An elderly lady today, Bruck suffers from all sorts of medical conditions. Many of her ailments stem from the hunger she experienced and the blows she suffered during her internment in the camps, and many others are psychosomatic expressions of trauma. In particular, she complains about stomach problems and nausea, which apparently worsen each time she gives an interview or visits a school and must talk to students about the Shoah. She finds it harder and harder to capture the listeners' interest. However, not writing or talking about

her experience is not an option, as she compares the knowledge she carries inside her to a malignant creature that she must try to expel. In *Signora Auschwitz* we read: "Between trips [to give her public testimonial talks], I kept thinking about the newly conceived novel meant to liberate me, and I kept ending up in this or that hospital or clinic where they . . . [searched] for the organic cause of those pains that tormented me without reprieve . . . Doctors could not know or even suspect of the monster inside of me. Possibly, I myself did not want to get rid of it, maybe because only that way I could keep my dead, all the dead, alive?"[26] Writing is this melancholic daughter's answer to an impossible life: the alternative to suicide or, rather, its aesthetic sublimation.

Bruck's dialogue with her mother, metaphorical and illusory, is nonetheless experienced as real by the speaking I. Her survival strategy consists of reviving the mother in language; however, all the artistic utterance can do (language always being purely symbolic) is reproduce the mother's absence. Without this dialogue, the mother would not only be lost a second time, but the daughter would vanish as well: "And if I forget you, I forget myself. I'll be around as long as you'll be around, and you'll be around as long as I'll be around" (*Lettera*, 47). And because writing about her mother means talking about the Shoah, the daughter is forced, despite the physical and emotional pain, to keep bearing oral and written witness to what happened to all Jews: "With the passage of time, the only thing that has become stronger is my need for my mother, for her faith, to feel her closer to me . . . My mother, whom I fear even now that she's dead, would not forgive me, I believe, if I actually stopped keeping her alive through my testimonial stories, if I no longer talked about her who perhaps was turned into a bar of soap, a lamp shade, or fertilizer."[27]

In her writing, Bruck invokes a conception of the womb as a place of death, a tomb. When death is stirred up by memory, the belly quite literally responds to the writer's invocation with hurtful spasms and pangs: this somatization torments the author who is reminded, each time she writes or talks about Auschwitz, of the malignant creature it seeded in her:

> La solitudine è profonda
> un ventre materno buio e silenzioso
> tutto è ovattato
> i rumori giungono da lontano
> il passato come corda ombelicale nutre
> tutto è perfetto
> come la vita non nata
> come la morte mai conosciuta.[28]

My solitude is deep
a maternal womb that is dark and quiet
muffled
sounds arrive from afar
the past nourishes like an umbilical cord
everything is perfect
like unborn life
like death not experienced.

That death-filled past from which the author claims to receive her nourishment includes one scene in which the eyes of death come to rest on her womb, permanently turning it from a symbol of peace into one of horror. One day in the camp, a group of young women were brought in front of Josef Mengele, as possible subjects of his sadistic experiments. Bruck was among them. This episode returns in *Lettera*, and the narrator describes the moment when the "doctor," considering his doomed candidates, rested his eyes for a few moments on her abdomen: "So I saw him, he was there, and I held my stomach and my belly with all my strength telling myself that he won't see me, he can't see me, may his cursed eyes fall on someone else" (*Lettera*, 47). It is through scenes like these that Bruck conceives of her womb not as a "dark and quiet" sanctum but as carrying the malignant creature Auschwitz planted there, which perhaps explains her anxiety about having children of her own. She fears that "children are often vampires" (*Lettera*, 63); certainly, the *Shoah child* she permanently carries is. "I never had children, as you know," the daughter imagines telling her mother, "how could I have brought someone into this world after the way you died? I have always aborted them, mama. Here is another reason to be repudiated" (*Lettera*, 32). And again: "It is for the best that I never had to explain everything to my children. Perhaps this is exactly why I never had them" (*Lettera*, 18). Regardless of whether literal or metaphorical, womb, maternity, and death are the agony to which this Shoah author is chained: "Had I had a daughter, perhaps she'd be like Sara [her niece], beautiful Sara who sucked Auschwitz milk and in whose splendid eyes there is a kind of resistance, a hostility toward life, the same you could find in a great Italian writer, my friend who recently committed suicide" (*Lettera*, 32–33). Auschwitz infects the notion of procreation. Even her niece Sara has sucked through her mother's milk the awareness of the lives senselessly and brutally lost: of the 1.5 million children who were murdered; of Bruck's mother; of Primo Levi (the "friend who recently committed suicide"). As Bruck says of the creative and self-annihilating process of writing, "There remains no trace of myself on the typescript" (*Lettera*, 32). In *Lettera*, the long unfinished letter—

like an umbilical cord—holds together the fractured identity of the survivor by paradoxically making the irremediable separation that results from Auschwitz's personal and communal trauma into a connecting thread between mother and daughter.

"Sometimes, without apparent reason, I feel incredibly happy," the daughter tells her mother. "Sometimes, when I feel the most lonely, a black wave overwhelms me . . . in those moments, like my friend, the writer who committed suicide, I think that there is no hope, that there's never been and there'll never be hope" (*Lettera*, 71). In Bruck's works, we recognize both a fundamental and a successive mourning at play: the former goes back to the primary loss of "the Thing" at birth (*la Chose*, in Lacan's terminology, or the cause of desire), and the latter is rooted in subsequent traumatic loss. The *onda nera* (black wave) that Bruck laments and faces repeatedly has much in common with the notion of the "black sun" developed by the French psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva. In her book about melancholia in life and art evocatively entitled *Soleil Noir* (Black sun), Kristeva diagnosed the extreme sadness felt by the depressed mind as rooted in the loss of the mother. I want to borrow Kristeva's question about her depressed patients and redirect it toward Bruck: "Where does this black sun come from?"[29] I would say that in Bruck's poetics, her black sun's eerie galaxy is death, and its ruling planet is the mother. As I will show later in the chapter, Kristeva understands melancholia as a form of living death. For Bruck, this living death begins with the irremediable separation of mother and daughter at birth, continues when her mother urges her to enter a different sorting line during the *Selektion* in Auschwitz, and only partially reaches a conclusion with her mother's death in the camp:

> You were guilty, if one can call it guilt, only with us, your children, completely subdued to your will until the end, when you told me: "Go! Obey! Go! Move away, do as your mother tells you!" and I obeyed. And for this I am alive. And I am happy to be alive. With inexpressible pain, you gave birth to me a second time. (*Lettera*, 92)

Ever since that tragic episode at Auschwitz, creation for this survivor artist is tinged with a sickness. The creation of such sickening autobiographical stories and poems is a technique through which Bruck expels an undesired presence within herself, a kind of creative abortion: "I thought, I deluded myself, that with every new book a piece of the child-monster conceived in Auschwitz would finally come out. Perhaps this is why I never loved my books, never opened them once they saw the light, though I hoped they would not remain orphans but find adoptive parents."[30] Maternity is the axis around which Auschwitz, writ-

ing, and sickness revolve in Bruck's work. Death, which is often associated with her mother, is infectious, sickening the author and her imagination without reprieve.

Bruck's apostrophic dialogue with the lost mother recasts daughterhood, as much as her own unfulfilled motherhood, as a matter of death, self-erasure, and suicide on the part of the apostrophizing voice. No rhetorical tool is more effective at making the dead live again than the lyrical apostrophe, by which poets re-present the absent by bringing the evoked "Thou" back into a dialogue from which they were excluded by death. Barbara Johnson analyzes the effect of the apostrophe in women's poetry on abortion, observing that this calling of the dead expels the speaker into a state of otherness. She concludes that "each [abortion poem] exists, finally, because a child does not."[31] Abortion poems are thematically about a life that has been lost, but Johnson's analysis suggests that this premise might be deceptive, for "the life that is lost may be someone else's."[32] Bruck's *Lettera* and Shoah poems exemplify the terms of the deception that Johnson discovers in abortion poetry—that is, the life of the living is what is wasted, destroyed, lost when one witnesses the death or murder of the Other. Performing in language the death of the Other, the living poet invokes her own death. The resuscitation of the dead allows the living to express their death wish.

It is her own death that Bruck the author constantly stages and that she sees incarnated in the ghost of the mother, who uncannily literalizes the trope of the voice from the other world. Here, since it is a daughter writing a letter to the murdered mother, we witness an interesting twist: the daughter gives life back to the mother, rebirths her mother because her own life (literary as well as biological) would be imperiled by the mother's absence. Literature makes the encounter between the living and dead possible, and Bruck stages this encounter in the womb—her inner graveyard. She demands that the mother feel her heart as if she were still in her womb. "Don't you feel me in your womb?" she asks her mother, "Can't you feel my heart beat? If you can't feel me, then there's nothing you can feel anymore" (*Lettera*, 47). (The Italian verb *sentire* means to feel, to hear, and to heed all at once.)

Even a writing that sickens the author and that symbolically stages an abortion (the death of the daughter, the stillbirth of her books, and so on) is preferable to its alternative. Without writing, Bruck suggests more than once, she would choose death. Suicide is always an attractive option that promises the end of the unbearable middle position inhabited by the survivor: neither completely belonging among the living nor having a place among the dead. When Bruck's friend, Levi, reached the point where he could no longer write a book (or feared

he couldn't), he let go of his life. Bruck reports a conversation with him not long before he died, in which Levi had exclaimed: "Can you imagine? . . . I don't know if I'll ever write another book" (*Lettera*, 71). About Levi's death, Bruck asks herself: "From what phantom was he fleeing in the hope, perhaps, of surviving once again? And he did survive again. He made it. He is alive" (*Lettera*, 72). This paradoxical declaration can be understood in light of a particular spiritual technique that Bruck adopts to deal with the world of dead people surrounding her and through which she maintains the illusion of resurrecting them: "I never thought him dead. When I pronounce his name, it is the name of a living man, just like when I read him, his books are more alive than ever. Only when I look at one of his many photographs from when he was still alive can I see that he is dead" (*Lettera*, 72). All names, therefore, are names of living people. There is no such thing as a name referring to a thing that is not. A name allows itself to be called: the sine qua non of an apostrophe. Not surprisingly, Bruck always expresses doubts about the existence of a God who, in Judaism, indeed has no name, cannot be called, and will reunite with his creation only after the right composition of his name's letters is deciphered. This, however, is a job requiring too much piety, and piety is alien to Bruck's world. Perhaps this realization has allowed her to neutralize God and any residual fears of him: "Unlike you, mother, I am not afraid of God. I fear only human beings" (*Lettera*, 74).

THE LETTER OF DESTINATION

In *The Post Card*, his convoluted psychoanalysis of the history and technology of the dispatch (*envoi*) and the address, Jacques Derrida entertains the possibility of readdressing language so that the message about untellable experiences could be carried and manifested. The central concern of Derrida's philosophical inquiry here is the question of whether communication in the "postal era" (the logocentric era)—and with it literature, the humanities, identity, and knowledge—is destined to end. "The end of a postal epoch is doubtless also the end of literature," writes Derrida.[33] Of crucial relevance here is the book's first section, "Envois" (almost an epistolary autobiography),[34] in which a man who signs himself J. D. writes postcard-length letters (with various blanks, suspensions, and deletions) to a female lover whose answers, if they exist, are not revealed to us. The inspiration behind this book was a thirteenth-century illustration by Matthew Paris showing Socrates seated in the act of writing, with Plato standing behind him and pointing his finger toward the written page. Interestingly, it was Culler, one of Derrida's most famous disciples, who showed Paris's postcard to Derrida in Oxford, or who delivered the letter, so to speak.[35] In his book, Derrida calls the address by the German word *Geschick*, which

means “fate” or “lot” (after all, Paris’s postcard had been taken from a fortune-telling book) and which shares its root with the German verb *schicken*, meaning “to send.” Hence in a typical Derridean wordplay, the envoi ends up conforming to destiny. According to Derrida, the fascinating role reversal figured in Paris’s image, where Socrates, who has never written, is now writing while the writer, Plato, is dictating to him what to write, upends the history of philosophy and its destination in a way that is relevant to our discussion about the apostrophe and the catastrophe of communication: “The letters shuttle between this apostrophe (the turning aside of discourse in a singular address) and the catastrophe (literally: an overturning) of destination which has already turned the address aside from itself. The singular address divides, fragments, goes astray, and, like a misdelivered post card, lays itself open to anyone’s reading,” writes Peggy Kamuf of Derrida’s method in *The Post Card*.[36] In one of the letters that make up *The Post Card*, Derrida connects the problem of identity to the question of the envoi and its technologies, a problem certainly applicable to Bruck, whose destiny and identity are entangled in her one-way correspondence with her dead mother, an endless self-destination. Derrida writes:

> Thus I have lost my life writing in order to give this song a chance, unless it were in order to let it silence itself, by itself. You understand that whoever writes must indeed ask himself what it is asked of him to write, and then he writes under the dictation of some addressee . . . Thereby everything is corrupted, there is only the mirror, no more image, they [Plato and Socrates] no longer see each other, no longer destine each other, nothing more.[37]

In the scenario described by Derrida, Plato makes Socrates write, and in Bruck’s *Lettera* and poetry, the daughter demands that her dead mother write. Through the catastrophe (overturning) of destination that occurs as she addresses her messages, we can say that Bruck’s dream ends up matching Plato’s, which is “to make Socrates write, and to make him write what he wants, his last command, *his will*.”[38] In fact, the daughter tells her mother: “I will let you say what I already know, I will let you repeat what I heard from your mouth until the last moment, your last word, it is *your will*” (*Lettera*, 8, emphasis added). Bruck writes under the mother’s dictation, which, in turn, composes the daughter’s (auto)biographical text: the story of their anger, oppression, reciprocity, and death.

In Paris’s illustration, Socrates holds a pen in one hand and an eraser in the other, with which he undoes the destiny (destination) of the text even as he creates it. With this double gesture, Socrates determines not only his own destiny but the destinies of those who will continue his text in the future. Bruck’s

mother, a ghost, functions in much the same way. "Socrates turns his *back* to plato [*sic*], who has made him write whatever he wanted while pretending to receive it from him," explains Derrida, while admiring the Oxford postcard that, like all postcards, has the fantastic quality of being always open, never sealed: "even if in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter."[39] I will explore the function of Bruck's prosopopeia at length soon, but suffice it to say here that through the apostrophe (which calls the mother into being) and the prosopopeia (which ventriloquizes her), Bruck makes her mother assume the Socratic position from the card, makes her mother sit at the desk and compose the story of her life and death—a story that will be accessible to us only through the daughter's version. Most importantly for our purposes, the postcard, the text that dictates itself to the sender or writer, holds, as Derrida puts it, "a kind of personal message, a secret between us, the secret of reproduction":[40] the reproduction of Socrates into Plato? Plato and Socrates are linked by a chain of inheritance, even when this chain is reversed. But there is also reproduction of Plato into Derrida, the receiver of Paris's postcard. The phantom woman with whom J. D. conducts a one-sided conversation, and whose answers to J. D.'s posts we never read, is the rhetorical ghost that bridges the distance between writer and reader. The same goes for mother and daughter in Bruck's "undestined" or misdelivered letter. Between us (the unintended receivers of the message) and the sender there stands a martyred mother. In Bruck's as well as in Derrida's letters, the secret that the mute ghost guards is that someone is invoking death and suicide through the act of writing—a writing that is illegible, invisible, and without *Geschick*. "Watch closely," Derrida adjures his mute addressee, "while Socrates signs his death sentence."[41]

It is through the act of writing that Bruck is able to keep on living. However, her writing is a form of suicide. Death occurs in each act of writing, in each and every text. Derrida says in a "letter" dated June 6, 1977, that "a young student (very handsome) thought he could provoke me and, I think, seduce me a bit by asking me why I didn't kill myself." With perfect Socratic irony, Derrida "sends" the question back to the questioner: "And what proves to you, I said to him . . . , that I do not do so, and more than once."[42] With each postcard, with each text, the beginning and end of the *auctor*'s word, the beginning and end of the writer, is repeated. The same question, if put to Bruck, would produce a similar answer put to us in return. She does live and die each time she (re)produces a text about the death of the mother. Or better yet, each time her story forces her to write (dictates itself to her), it also forces her to revisit death, her own included. If, as I mentioned, writing sustains life for Bruck, I should also point out that only a specific kind of writing allows her to stay alive: the personal letter, the

autobiographical apostrophe, the retelling of variations of her Shoah story. And where could such a story end? The story gains force in its telling rather than in its conclusion, and it is forever on its way to an unreachable destination. Presence is thus ensured by absence, and, to prove it, the writer must send a letter whose impossible arrival extends the distance between addresser and intended addressee and to which no answer will be returned. "The condition for it to arrive," says Derrida of his envoi or *carte de l'adestination*, "is that it ends up and even that it begins by not arriving."[43] But someone will receive the letter and know that the writer lives.

In turning the addressee of her letter into the dictating voice of the letter itself, Bruck recasts the role of the muse in her literary deliverance. The classical muse—epitomized by Homer's still vibrating "Mênin aeide thea Pêlêïadeô Achilêos" (Sing, o goddess, the anger of Achilles!)—is the woman who inspires, the light that comes to shine through the poet to illuminate the reader and reflect glory back on the muse herself. The Shoah muse, however, was stripped naked, branded, and murdered in Auschwitz. In the ancient world, Hesiod reminds us, the daughters of Mnemosyne (Memory) were nine, but were collectively referred to as the muse. Bruck's dark muse is a similar amalgam, a single persona and a composite of six million.

Bruck's mother is the doleful, sinister, dark muse created by the Holocaust. The survivor strives to convey a story that only those who perished in Auschwitz could tell. She needs this muse, and vice versa. This muse's presence does not elevate the artist as it did in classical times; rather, it compels her to live on. Bruck's muse is an unhappy, distant, resentful woman, yet only she, not the father, can fill this indispensable position: "I am torturing myself, yes, I am. And I write. I write to you because you are my mother" (*Lettera*, 66). Bruck's muse can be imagined and lived only through the mother's body. Despite the fact that Bruck loved her father ("I liked him so much. Once I grew up I would have married him" [*Lettera*, 67]), the powerless and absent man was no muse for the letter-writing daughter:

> I could have turned to papa as well but I must confess it never crossed my mind. I don't think he would have had the patience to listen to me; at times he didn't even know my name! He didn't quarrel with me like you did. He didn't say anything to me. He didn't talk. He was mute. Impotent. He didn't even chat with God like you used to. He was alone. He didn't talk to anybody. He was the loneliest man I've ever known. (*Lettera*, 67)

In order to be able to face Auschwitz (and its dehumanizing harshness), the daughter must face the mother (and her very human weaknesses).[44] Inspired

by Levi's Dantesque reconstruction of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben imagined the architecture of the concentration camp as a gyre at whose center resides the all-devouring head of the Gorgon, the sight of which turns the onlooker into stone, into a nonhuman. The Gorgon represents the nonnegotiable impossibility of seeing. The Gorgon—for whom the Greeks would never use the word face, *prósōpon*—is the apostrophe from which the survivor cannot turn away.[45] Bruck cannot turn away from the Gorgon, because the blindness the monster inflicts is the condition for any acts of witnessing. Thus blinded, the daughter must align her sight with that of her mother in order to face the unseeable and witness for those erased from language, for those who are outside of speech. The survivor poet summons a muse who doesn't help the artist develop or illuminate her work; rather, this muse consumes the voice of the artist who invokes her and only increases her blindness. And in the blind spot of history that is the Shoah, mother and daughter exist together: "Perhaps my letter to you is only an instrument to write about Auschwitz, but you and Auschwitz are inseparable" (*Lettera*, 66).

APOSTROPHE

"Mother" is a primary word for Bruck in the sense used by the Viennese philosopher Martin Buber in reference to the Man-God encounter. "Primary words," Buber explains, "do not signify things, but they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken they bring about existence . . . If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I-Thou* is said along with it . . . The primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being."[46] Through his philosophy, Buber found a way to temper the fear and trembling of existentialism with the warmth and promises of Hassidism—a solution foreclosed to Bruck after her Auschwitz experience. Buber was able to live through the first half of the twentieth century and still keep God in place at the center of his philosophical vision by focusing on the potential, rather than the loss, that meaningful communication still holds for the future of humanity. He expounded his ideas on the necessity of reciprocity in one of the most influential texts of modern Jewish thought, *I and Thou* (first published in German as *Ich und Du* in 1923). Interestingly, Buber saw in the *I-Thou* relationship the roots of art itself: "A man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work [of art]. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance that steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises."[47] Buber's concept can be reformulated

to illustrate the reciprocity of Bruck's mother-daughter dyad. "When a primary word is spoken the speaker enters the word and takes his stand in it," Buber writes,[48] and Bruck echoes this *I-Thou* symbiosis (a relationship that knows no past tense but that is constantly in the present) by way of asserting time and again that she is the personification of her mother, especially in the most agonizing moments, such as when she is writing her books. She constantly embodies and disembodies the conjured ghost: she is her but is also radically separate from and other than her. Buber notes that the act of artistic creation "includes a sacrifice and a risk"—both of which are felt in Bruck's writing at every turn. "This," Buber explains, "is the sacrifice: the endless possibility that is offered up on the altar of the form. For everything . . . must be obliterated . . . The exclusiveness of what is facing it demands that it be so. This is the risk: the primary word can only be spoken with the whole being. He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself. The work does not suffer me . . . to turn aside and relax in the world of *It*; but it commands. If I do not serve it aright it is broken, or it breaks me."[49] In a rather mystical and exultant passage (almost at the threshold of a neopantheism) that nonetheless resonates with the Shoah mother-daughter encounter Bruck tries to reanimate in her text, Buber affirms: "If test is made of its objectivity the form is certainly not 'there.' Yet what is actually so much present as it is? And the relation in which I stand to it is real, for it affects me, as I affect it."[50] There is no isolation between mother and daughter; their union (a type of *I-Thou* encounter in the daughter's text) transcends and at the same time guarantees each one's radical separation, caused by birth or by death.

For Bruck, the mother is the midpoint between origin and goal, similar to the concept of the biblical God as defined by Buber in *Israel and the World*: a mobile midpoint, not pinned down in time but perceivable at any given time, the "voice which from earliest beginnings has been speaking in the direction of the goal."[51] The apostrophe to her dead mother allows Bruck to make a similar shift from historical to ahistorical time. In fact, the address to the dead, Culler remarks, points to the fact that "something once present has been lost or attenuated; this loss can be narrated but the temporal sequence is irreversible, like time itself. Apostrophes displace this irreversible structure by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time."[52] The ineluctable gap between the now of writing and the now of the event, and the daughter's mediating role in bridging this gap, is perfectly exemplified in the poem "L'uguaglianza padre! Az egyenlöség, apa!" (Equality Father!), in which Bruck, herself a ghost, visits the ghost of her father in Dachau. To meet the father's specter, the daughter must also assume

the form of one; only as a ghost can she enter his territory. Speaking from a distance, the poetic voice calls and incites the father to keep going, not to give in to impossible circumstances. She reminds him that his lifelong experience of the world's injustice and violence should have made him strong enough to endure the concentration camp. The daughter thus tries to affect the unchangeable course of history. But the father can't hear her, and, as we know, he did not endure. After describing the full gamut of humiliations he had to suffer in life (long before Dachau)—poor and rejected by all communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish—the daughter offers herself to him in reparation: "Take me father! / I will give you pleasure not children, / love not duties, / love not reproaches, / love that was unknown to you / and only imagined by me, hurry / it is time for the Apocalypse! / Let us commit the mortal sin / to deserve our death."[53] The daughter returns to the dead to repair something irrevocably broken. Incest is no longer taboo. The horrors of the Shoah make such social taboos irrelevant. The true horror is not incest but Auschwitz. On closer inspection, behind the incestuous proposal there is a more important reparatory arrangement: "So you turn to me! You don't recognize me, / I am older and have firm breasts / soft pure pubic hair / like that of mother when they brought her to you / in marriage. Take me father!"[54] The scene draws on a memory from Dachau in which the daughter and her father briefly saw each other in the obscenity of their emaciated nudities, their vulnerability and proximity to an unjustifiable death. However, the ghost also represents the poet at the present time of her poetic vision, a vision in which she courageously offers up her adult body. Confirming Culler's observation quoted earlier, empirical and discursive time collapse into each other.

In this poem, the function of the daughter's ghost is to offer up a different version of womanhood, wifehood, and sexual experience to both her father and her mother. In *Lettera*, Bruck portrays the marital position of the mother as one of pure reproductive organ, rather than lover and partner to her husband: "You [mother] did not make love out of love, though you loved father, but out of duty. We were born out of divine will, as if we were God's children, and not yours and father's. It was as if papa had had nothing to do with it, as if God himself had impregnated you" (*Lettera*, 8). In the ghastly yet "magical" space of her poem "L'uguaglianza padre!," the daughter's incestuous proposal aims at fixing the imbalance between the sexes evident in her own private, familial history. It also seeks to symbolically repay her father (via her own sensuous generosity) for all the times doors had been shut in his face and richer men had refused him help. Bruck conceives of the Shoah as an integral part of a violent history of oppression, of which Auschwitz is a disproportionate yet consequent result. She repeatedly describes both of her parents as victims of a civilization rife with

social injustice. The ethical system in which parents of the Shoah generation strongly believed is under attack in Bruck's writing. In fact, as Bruck declares in another poem apostrophizing her brother, life was just as painful as death for those people whom she encounters in her trespassing as a poet and mediator ("My dear brother . . . life is no more fair than was your death").[55] In another poem, she attacks the patriarchal world order that her parents' generation thought imperative to pass down to their children: "They are growing up like savages you [Mother] used to say / without God / without a proper father / without bread / without education / without future / poor daughters. / If you'll be honest and obedient / good and pure / you'll find someone / that won't care about the dowry / . . . if you won't be squeamish / and won't expect to choose / since you cannot afford it."[56] And about the old-fashioned style of parenting she also wrote in *Lettera*: "When on earth would a father talk or play with his children back then!" (63).

The daughter's text is the account book of life, which, like God, she holds in her hands during the final judgment. There is a trial constantly in session in Bruck's literary memory, and in this court, the daughter holds the mother accountable for her mistakes too: "You did not listen to me, everything was more important than I was for you"; "How many times you flung it in my face that I was born"; "Did you ever caress me? I really can't remember you doing it" (*Lettera*, 78, 59, 63). However, the adult narrator knows all too well that her mother was just one in a countless line of mothers from the lower classes beaten down by misery and centuries-old oppression, a type of person neither unique nor generalizable. Along with her merciless criticism, Bruck also reconstructs an image of her, and her protagonist's, mother as a "lioness,"[57] acknowledging with love and gratitude the ethical fiber she passed on to her daughter that proved essential to her survival in Auschwitz and afterwards. Bruck recognizes several times that both the mother and daughter reconstructed in her book were destined to victimhood not only by the Nazis but by a long history inimical to them, poor and at the margins as they were: "Mothers who are poor are harsh . . . and bad too . . . The child of the poor grows up surrounded by screams, physical violence, and with a shortage of love" (*Lettera*, 61); "the peasant life wasn't good, it was harsh . . . Peasants were turned into savages by their labor. . . . they took it out on their children, on their animals, always fighting among themselves" (*Lettera*, 22); and "You were the daughter-mother of a culture convinced that all there is to children is feeding them" (*Lettera*, 63). The apostrophe "You, Mother!" collapses the time of writing into the time of remembered trauma. In the time of writing, a woman, looks at the life of another woman, her mother, and understands both of their histories in context; she forgives, justifies, and

reconciles with her mother. In the time of remembered trauma, a young daughter—angry, terrified, and uncomprehending—still tries to fix, set straight, and even prevent a painful, irrevocable history amid her mother's reproaches, cries, and impotence. The American sociologist Kai Erikson describes the workings of trauma in vivid terms: "Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape . . . and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty."[58] Bruck wills just such an alien invasion to create an experience that mediates and reconciles through the use of apostrophe and the hallucination of an impossible dialogue; the "invasion" reanimates the inanimate and nonexistent and bridges past and future. It also connects the solitary victim to the outside world, which she feels compelled to summon to listen to her story. Behind each command of "Listen!" hides the appeal of "Let me talk," through which the survivor speaker both requests and asserts her right to living.

W. H. Auden once said that "poetry makes nothing happen," or rather something happens, and it is the survival itself of poetry: "it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth."[59] Bruck's apostrophes to the dead are key to the survival of writing and to the survival of the poet.

PROSOPOPEIA

To transform absence into presence, Bruck must fluidly inhabit the territories of life and the space of death (the inner site of trauma) so that she may speak to and for the dead. The space where this encounter takes shape is the work of art. As I suggested earlier, the mother-daughter relationship here seems to reflect Buber's generative *I-Thou* one; however, as Buber suggests, the moment this relation is spoken into art—that is, the moment it is given form—the Thou inevitably turns into an *It* and, like all objects, is lost again. Or rather, it is always lost because it was always radically separate from I. Buber says that "this is the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It* . . . In the work of art, realization in one sense means loss of reality in another."[60] The daughter writer's melancholia consists of just such a double-edged sword; she must give birth to her texts about her mother, but the cost of this production is the repetition of a traumatic loss.

This loss also occurs at the level of language, within the text itself. In his "Shelley Disfigured" and "Autobiography as De-Facement" (which claims that "autobiography" is the mode of all writing),[61] de Man claims that the text produces figures and disfigures them at the same time. Bruck's letter to the Holocaust mother restores the name and the voice of the dead and the living into a

text: but because it is a voice grounded in death (communicability having died at Auschwitz), it paradoxically erases the letter even as it composes it. This ironic movement, or defacement as de Man calls it, creates the mother as it erases her and creates the daughter as it simultaneously denies her existence. She cannot be daughter to a mother who is not. She cannot be witness to an event (death) she did not participate in.

In the space of the text, mother and daughter are both different and the same; as they write or read each other, they originate meaning and make their identities possible. To create the complicated scene of the daughter looking at the mother looking at the daughter, Bruck must use prosopopeia, a figurative incarnation by means of language—or, as de Man says, "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech."[62] De Man identifies in prosopopeia the mask of autobiography, the trope that makes one's name "as intelligible and memorable as a face."[63] In Bruck's dialectics between mother and daughter, and between history and language, a displacement is at work, and the prosopopeia enables this displacement by supplying the mask or face (*prosopon*) that the author wears and through which she speaks. The feminist scholar Susan Gubar has also engaged in an important theorization of prosopopeia. In particular, she was committed to championing poets like Sylvia Plath,[64] who adopted the rhetorical *tekhnē* of personification (*prosopopoei*) in order to speak about their personal suffering through a performative identification with the victims of human catastrophes like the Holocaust, despite having had no direct involvement with the events. Rather than being an impudent affront to the memory of the dead, Gubar posits, poetic incarnation is the fundamental response of art, and poetry in particular, to the historical and ethical questions raised by the disappearance of millions. In other words, it is art's way of creating a space of mourning for the millions who have no graveyard. The use of "prosopopoeia allows the authors who manipulate it to summon the posthumous voice, to conceive of subjectivity enduring beyond the concentration camp, and thereby to suggest that the anguish of the Shoah does not, and will not, dissipate, Gubar writes.[65] But she also clarifies that "such a shocking reanimation of the dead cannot be equated with the traditional elegiac attempt to bring a particularly cherished person back into living *memory*, to assert the dead person's immortality, or to envision some union with the dead in a place elsewhere."[66] In other words, the Romantic trope of life as a journey interrupted but not ended by death is no longer viable in Shoah poetry or narrative. Examining several poems by Jewish and non-Jewish authors, Gubar observes that all poets are in fact aware of the ultimate inauthenticity of their attempts at speaking for

or speaking as the dead. She identifies the place where this recognition (the failure of language itself) is made manifest in the trope of the death mask that underlies any prosopopeia. Gubar remarks that "even those poets who strenuously decrease their distance from the 'deathmask' disclose an awareness of the inescapable inauthenticity at the core of their undertaking." Furthermore, following de Man, she concludes: "Bestowing presence onto the absent dead is inherently oxymoronic."[67] Thinking of Bruck's personal writing and the death mask she wears to allow the absent to speak, I suggest that while autobiography has traditionally functioned as the genre capable of restoring selfhood and of creating a coherent, meaningful, and stable universe, Holocaust memory has disabled this function. In so doing, however, it has revealed the paradoxically productive failures that constitute all autobiographical attempts to construct the self: language (always figurative) both creates the face (figure) and disfigures it as the text unfolds.

Gubar does disagree with one idea that de Man puts forth—specifically, his postulation that "by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death."[68] According to Gubar, if I understand her correctly, it is the poetic capacity for heteropathic identification that invalidates de Man's proposition. "Heteropathic identification" is the term coined by Kaja Silverman for an identification that maintains alterity while simultaneously succeeding in sharing the Other's position—of disadvantage, pain, oppression, marginality.[69] (Its opposite is idiopathic identification, which entails the devouring of the Other into one's subjectivity, assimilating it to death, so to speak, so that the Other is utterly interiorized into one and vanishes.) My view, however, is that these two positions are not mutually exclusive: how could the living be struck dumb and remain speechless if not through a process of deep heteropathic identification? To signify would mean to break that important distance between the reader and what stands before his or her eyes.[70] The reader's muteness is the condition for seeing—the gaze, being the motor of the ethical move toward the Other—and muteness is not, I believe, rooted in apathy, but rather in heteropathy.

To return to Wordsworth and his history of the epitaph, de Man argues that Wordsworth's *Essays* revealed to the poet a stance from which to compose his own hyperbolic epitaph or autobiography; Wordsworth succeeded in moving "without compromise, from death *or* life to life *and* death" by collapsing the distinction between them, by annulling the and/or dichotomy.[71] Likewise, Bruck's poetics achieves this collapsing of opposites and allows the unimaginable to happen: while affirming death, it eliminates the radical distance between presence and absence. Wordsworth's poetic act uses all the available rhetorical

tools to accomplish this fabulous spiritual leap; Bruck's melancholia, as I will show later, demands of her language the exact opposite—an extreme aesthetic impoverishment, a sonority close to silence. For Bruck, language stands in for the loss of the mother, who is at once declared to be lost through language and simultaneously recovered through language. Kristeva claims that the true melancholic cannot be an artist because those affected by melancholia lack the connection to the metaphorical. "Melancholia," according to Kristeva, "ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and die."[72] The melancholic, unlike the artist, has no recourse to the beneficent palliative of the symbolic and the metaphorical: the melancholic is a literal creature. The truly depressive subject is trapped in the cage of an extreme sadness that followed the loss of what Kristeva calls the "unnamed Thing"—that originary attachment the depressed mind feels has been taken away and that "an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify."[73] The ideas of naming (bestowing on the postwar children the names of the dead) and namelessness (the unmarked mass graves, the tattooed numbers that replaced names, and so forth), so relevant to Shoah memoirs, returns, this time in a psychoanalytic framework. Contrary to Kristeva's clinical conclusions, I will argue that Bruck, the artist afflicted by a radical melancholia, is able to overcome melancholia through art despite the unsymbolizable loss she experienced at Auschwitz.

Adalgisa Giorgio notes that the letter represents the daughter's way "to make amends for her mother's death and to express her love for her, while begging her forgiveness and requesting her blessing for her life."[74] However, I would argue that the impossibility of an answer to this missive guarantees, in turn, that forgiveness shall never be granted. This impossibility is the center of Bruck's intellectual world and is a theme running throughout her *oeuvre*. Giorgio claims that "appeasement with her mother comes to signify appeasement with herself as a woman, a Jew, and also as a writer."[75] I believe instead that it is precisely the failure of appeasement that the text affirms, and the text is lacerated by this failure. *Lettera* has no narrative closure; it just ends with three ellipsis points in the middle of an unfinished sentence from the kaddish, the mourner's prayer. The story does not reach a natural conclusion because it tells the story not of a meaningfully lived life but of a senseless death: a story stripped of epiphany, catharsis, denouement, and conclusion. Can Bruck forgive? And who is to be forgiven? Is it possible to forgive patriarchy and the culture of violence that created not only Auschwitz but also an oppressed mother who could love only through anger? I canot answer these questions on Bruck's behalf. Reflecting on Dostoyevsky, Kristeva suggests that the aesthetic act shakes the writer out of

his or her depressive state of inaction and becomes an act of forgiveness.[76] But in Bruck's case, isn't the aesthetic act one of anger (her rage against her mother, against Auschwitz, against the injustices her family had to suffer even before the war) that allows the artist to shake off her apathetic desperation that might lead to suicide? Bruck refuses the closure that a pardon would afford because such forgiveness might preclude the continuation of a dialogue (though exercised in writing) that alone guarantees her existence. Not by chance, *Lettera* ends with an ellipsis that cuts short the chance of a happy ending just as it seems as if the final judgment and reconciliation were near, thereby guaranteeing that a new text (another piece of her Shoah story) will have to be produced.

Kristeva revisits some of her own conclusions on melancholy in real-life patients when she turns to examine melancholy in literature. She attempts to demonstrate that art (via the allegorization of the imagination) can triumph over melancholia. But Kristeva, always very much invested in Christian iconography and symbology, is interested in proving the possibility of cathartic resurrection (albeit only in art). I believe that unlike the prison of melancholia that allows the hostage to peek through its bars at the outside world in which the disconnected (depressed) person has lost all interest, the prison of trauma is an isolation cell with no bars, only thick, padded walls. One is certainly melancholy and depressed in this space as well, but one has no direct way to reach out to a world one yearns to be part of as usual—but to which usual access is denied by the experience of extreme terror that haunts the traumatized mind. Of interest for my analysis here is the fact that Kristeva's study of melancholia considers it a form of living death—similar, therefore, to my understanding of Bruck's traumatized state. "I live a living death," writes Kristeva, speaking for the depressed patient (and hence putting on the patient's mask). "My flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized [. . .] [T]ime has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow . . . Absent from other people's meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naïve happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression."[77] Although Kristeva theorizes that sadness is the melancholic's survival strategy—the depressive person remains attached to his or her unsymbolizable sadness and thus remains attached to life—I claim that Bruck's melancholia does not cling to a fetishized sadness but to art, to writing. Therefore, her obsessive attachment to writing exclusively about her Shoah memory allows her to counteract the pull of death while remaining deeply enmeshed in the humus of death.

READING AS ANSWERING

Interpreting Friedrich Hölderlin's *Wein und Brot*, de Man concludes that Romantic poetry's apostrophe ultimately fails to manifest the longed-for epiphany,

fails to "materialize" what it is calling forth. The crux of this failure resides in language itself. In our everyday use of language, according to de Man, "words are exchanged and put to a variety of tasks, but they are not supposed to originate anew; on the contrary, one wants them to be as well-known, as 'common' as possible, to make certain that they will obtain for us what we want to obtain. They are used as established signs to confirm that something is recognized as being the same as before; and re-cognition excludes pure origination. But in poetic language words are not used as signs, not even as names, but in order to *name*."[78] What is the Shoah survivor naming, calling, and thus originating but death itself? The calling of ghosts flings open the door to their tombs. If it is an epiphany that the daughter's apostrophe expects to conjure, the epiphany will fail. The magic word that Bruck uses in the hope of bringing about the longed-for epiphany is "mother," a word destined to fail because, as de Man writes, it "is pure origination."[79] Ultimately, Bruck's texts repeatedly reproduce the impossibility of this epiphany (the encounter with her dead, the representation of her trauma). As the numerous quotes offered throughout this chapter show, Bruck's Italian sheds its proverbial adjectival richness, her poetry and prose consisting of very short clauses. Direct and spare, Bruck's language attempts to express her complex feelings and unimaginable memories in the most telegraphic manner. It is the language of the depressed, "repetitive and monotone," as Kristeva describes it: "Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they [the depressed persons] utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill . . . A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies."[80] Deprived of its literary beauty, Italian becomes but a means to an end: recognition. To make sure that the memory of the past, when the mother and father were alive, is still intact, Bruck repeats her telegraphic messages over and over with similar rhythms and in similar forms throughout all her books.

Bruck lives her emotional and psychic life on the threshold between language and silence. But how can we achieve silence without renouncing testimony? Without dying a second time? Bruck finds an ingenious compromise to this *pilpul*: she writes an undestined letter, one that the intended addressee will never receive. The addresser will imagine and fantasize about the answers of the addressee, but these responses are only projections of the daughter's illusion. Jewish mystical tradition teaches us that the Word is One, but one within which all letters are contained and destined to an interminable creation. For Bruck's pious Jewish mother, words existed to be combined in ever more sorrowful prayers, the ultimate apostrophes inviting God to join in a conversation from which he has withdrawn. To the godless daughter, words and the letters

(meaning both the alphabet and her missives) that carry them are empty graves that echo her solitude, loss, and desperation. If in the beginning was the Word, in the end, a barbaric twentieth century gives forth only silence.

To a certain extent, Bruck recuperates the Romantic conception of the relationship between language and its referents, a relationship that de Man explains in these terms: "Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object, and its growth and development are determined by this inclination."[81] At times the evocation is so intense, the demands of consciousness so obliterating, that it seems impossible to distinguish between literality and mimesis. The fiction of address, "Sta Viator!" (Pause, traveler!), de Man argues, "thus acquires a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one's own mortality but of our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead."[82] In Bruck's case, the apostrophe to the mother and the other dead figures becomes uncanny and makes the reader uncomfortable because of the frozen space of death into which it drags us. In this mother-daughter dialogue from which I, as the reader, am excluded, what is my role? What does this impossible mother-daughter correspondence do to and expect of a reader? Reading such a text, such apostrophes destined to someone other than me as the reader, creates a state of uneasiness in the unintended recipients who receive the message. Culler notes that apostrophes in Romantic poetry "may complicate and disrupt the circuit of communication, raising questions about who is the addressee, but above all they are embarrassing: embarrassing to me and to you."[83] I claim that in Bruck's *Lettera*, the reader is discomfited ("embarrassed") by the fact that he or she is drawn into the drama of the mother by the daughter's missives, which—lacking any correlation in the real world—turn any receiver of her message into its addressee. Bruck's *Lettera* is delivered into our hands, and we realize that it is not addressed to us. We become more than eavesdroppers; we become witnesses. As Derrida explains to his "invisible" interlocutor in *The Post Card*, "one kills someone by addressing a letter to him that is not destined to him, and thereby declaring one's love or even one's hatred. And I kill you at every moment, but I love you. And you can no longer doubt it, even if I destroy everything with the most amorous patience (as do you, moreover), beginning with myself."[84] So are we also witnesses to a murder? If we follow Derrida's conjecture, Bruck kills the mother—that is, she makes her mother die again each time she rehearses the story of her death in literature, and each time her books meant for the mother reach not her but unintended addressees, the daughter's readers. By killing, of course, is meant the failure to make the mother reappear, to actually give her back the life that was brutally taken from her as well as making the extent of the trauma they

both lived representable. At the same time, by writing about this act of brutality perpetrated against the mother, the daughter succeeds in forcing the reader to see, to become aware of the crime committed. We are called through such a mistaken delivery to be part of Bruck's painful universe.

If de Man can say of Wordsworth's self-composed epitaph that "an unlettered stone [tombstone] would leave the sun suspended in nothingness,"[85] we can see how for Bruck, an unlettered book would leave the memoirist suspended in nothingness. Bruck is compelled to call out "Mother!" even though she is conscious that this invocation will reach someone else. It is the reader who assumes the interlocutionary position, and by indirectly witnessing the apostrophe, the reader witnesses the injustice committed against these victims and its immitigable aftereffects.

In her analysis of abortion poetry, Johnson writes: "The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness."[86] Bruck's misdelivery ensures that someone alive will react to her message, that the reader will listen to a stranger's story of suffering and death. The frozen silence of the mother in response to the daughter's invocation draws us into the traumatic dimension from which the author is speaking. There is more than sheer emotional participation in this apostrophe. Bruck's apostrophe affects us not just emotionally but also in a way closer to the original rhetorical goal of the ancient orators who first used it. As Irene Kacandes points out, Cicero and Demosthenes located the power of the apostrophe in its being "both double and duplicitous . . . because it is mobilized to provoke reaction—though not verbal reply—in those who hear it, not in those to whom it is explicitly addressed."[87] Not surprisingly, the classical rhetoricians especially valued the apostrophe's power in the court of law, where it signified "the act of an orator turning away from his normal audience—the judge(s)—to address another, whether adversary, a specific member of the jury, someone absent or dead, or even an abstract concept or inanimate object."[88] Bruck's injunction to listen to her story, I claim, is intended for the dead in absentia and therefore ends up eliciting a response (or demanding one) from the living—the readers, the audience that receives the message.

Kacandes has coined a new theoretical term, "talk fiction," to describe and analyze the widespread attempt by many authors of twentieth-century literature to animate (inspirit) a communication with an absent, unseen, or even nonexistent interlocutor—fiction as a conversation in which the reader is called on to participate. Although Bruck's texts would not squarely fit into the "talk fiction"

rubric, Kacandes's conclusions about the apostrophic talk mode, and in particular what she calls "narrative apostrophe," are nevertheless relevant here: "In narrative witnessing, the construction of the message takes center stage; speaker and listener as witness and cowitness must orient toward exchange so that a story of the trauma can flow. Narrative apostrophes draw attention to the mechanisms of orientation to exchange by putting into question the issue of who is involved."[89] The reader of Bruck's apostrophic Shoah texts is a respondent to the text in the sense developed by Kacandes, who with this term distinguishes those who are hearers of an apostrophic call but are not its addressees.[90] Bruck's apostrophe institutes an ethics of presence, whereby we are summoned to respond. The dead have a claim on us, and Bruck does not allow us to ignore it. The respondent must inevitably react—in our case not verbally, but ethically—to the encounter with the calling voice.

Again turning to classical rhetoric, we see that Quintilian argues in favor of the apostrophe and against the pedantic rhetoricians who forbid its use. He underlines the ornamental and pragmatic usefulness of the apostrophe in the context of forensic oratory and explains that the apostrophe "consists in the diversion of our address from the judge, [it] is wonderfully stirring, whether we attack our adversary . . . or turn to make some invocation . . . or to entreaty that will bring odium on our opponents."[91] I want to propose that by turning away from us (the listening audience) and toward the mother (the unresponsive addressee), Bruck makes us aware of the witness's radical absence, of her tragic life and of their (lost) relationship. The magic of language (which finally reinstates the name of the Thing through the explicit call "Mother!") animates the events of the past before the audience's eyes. We witness, albeit from an empathic distance, what happened: a mother (and with her, life itself for the speaking daughter, the speaking gravestone) has disappeared. We are brought to mourn for the mother with her daughter, becoming the necessary minyan that allows the daughter to express her kaddish in art.

"'Not even a kaddish?' you complain" (*Lettera*, 70), Bruck writes, and "You want . . . a kaddish, a prayer that was never pronounced by a daughter for her mother" (*Lettera*, 93). However, the real kaddish, the prayer the daughter imagines the mother demands of her, is resisted by the text. To recite the actual mourner's prayer would mean to let go of her mother, to allow closure, as well as to address a prayer to God—and these are sacrifices the daughter is not willing or able to make. As in so much of Shoah testimonial literature, the kaddish becomes the crux of the daughter's critique of Judaism and gender. The ritualization of death through the recitation of a kaddish brings to the fore the voicelessness of these daughters, female survivors. They cannot say a kaddish

because they are women (only a minyan of men can utter it); they cannot address their prayers to any specific place because there is no grave for the victims; and they cannot recite the prayer because they have lost sight of the God who demands that these words be uttered, and hence the *logoi* (words, grammar, letters, as well as signification) he embodies. The message implied in the ancient Aramaic prayer thus remains undeliverable or illegible. Ruth Klüger writes in her Shoah memoir:

> I keep wanting to celebrate [father] in some way, to find or invent an appropriate way of mourning, some ceremony for him. And yet celebrations and ceremonies are not my thing. I suspect them of mendacity, and often they strike me as ridiculous. Nor would I know where to start. In the Jewish tradition only men say the *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead. (Who is keeping you from saying any prayer you please? my friends ask. But it wouldn't count, couldn't be part of a prescribed communal ritual, so what would be the point?) . . . If it were different, if I could mourn my ghosts in some accepted public way, like saying *Kaddish* for my father, I'd have a friendlier attitude towards this religion, which reduces its daughters to helpmeets of men and circumscribes their spiritual life within the confines of domestic functions.[92]

Faced with the impossibility of pronouncing the formal one, a text composed of memories and unsent letters become the new kaddish for many Shoah women authors, not only Bruck.

In principle, Bruck's text is the final blessing of the living over the memory of the dead. However, *Lettera*'s endlessness indicates that the daughter is not willing or ready to let go. She can only assuage her sadness at being alive by making her life resonate with death. This is the living daughter's role: to incarnate the memory of her dead mother, to become her memory in the sense of both remembering her mother and voicing her mother's memories. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse, John Keats described a poet as "the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no identity . . . continually . . . filling some other Body."[93] In order to "fill" the mother's body, the daughter has to momentarily die in the text by plunging herself down among ghosts to bring a light that will illuminate them and make them present to the reader: "I am somewhere else too when I am writing. Just like you were with God, I am with you and I chase away my cats, I even push away my friends, the people I love. I forget all about eating, drinking, telephoning people. I forget my back pain" (*Lettera*, 87). Just like her mother, who when she prayed forgot about everything else, (*Lettera*, 87) the daughter mystically reaches a different state of being when visiting her past in writing.

In describing the state of mind of chronically melancholic patients, Kristeva points out that a form of mysticism arises in the depressed psyche and turns on their otherwise inactive belief. "I have assumed depressed persons to be atheistic," Kristeva ponders. "Nevertheless, and although atheistic, those in despair are mystics—adhering to the preobject, not believing in Thou, but mute and steadfast devotees of their own inexpressible container. It is to this fringe of strangeness that they devote their tears and jouissance."[94] Bruck has chosen writing as a form of religiosity, a form she senses her mother will not approve of: "Writing is my religion . . . Forgive me" (*Lettera*, 24). This devoted type of writing establishes *Thou*, unlike what Kristeva observed in her patients, as the only logic precondition of *I*, a *Thou* that eerily bonds the *I* to both death and creation: "I owe the illness of writing to you [Mother], and to Auschwitz, where you let me go, or to be precise where you pushed me away yelling that I had to obey a guy who was hitting me with his rifle" (*Lettera*, 78). According to Kristeva, the drama of the psychotic child is: "If I don't agree to lose my mother, I could neither imagine nor name her." Kristeva continues: "'But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language.'"[95] Language denies absence and hence loss, and this is why a denial of language's denial (denegation, in Kristeva's terms) is necessary. A suspension of this negative in language allows for this spectral encounter with the ghosts. Bruck annuls the denial like Kristeva's depressed patients, who "nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted."[96]

We can say that for Bruck the kaddish, Judaism, and the mother's God and the fixed identity he represents have nothing to do with that umbilical cord that still binds daughter and mother together. The kaddish's masculinity, canonicity, and homogeneity are what ultimately separate the mother and her dogmatic religiosity from the daughter's antidogmatic creativity and disbelief in everything but the magic of her words and the ghosts they animate (whom she knows are a fiction, but in whom she chooses to believe—testing Kristeva's idea of denegation) and the anger they allow her to expel. Yet despite her resistance to her mother's tradition, the daughter reaches out for the prayer book. Neither the book nor the kaddish will be finished, and *Lettera* ends with these words:

> Pretend that you are my daughter and I your mother. No, don't worry. The kaddish is yours, come on give me a push. Up and down, up and down, faster, higher, faster, faster, nearer to God, mama! Nearer! I want Him too to hear my kaddish:

"Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba; b'al'ma di v'ra khir'utei, v'yam'likh mal'khutei b'chayeikhon uv'yomeikhon, uv'chayei d'khol beit Yis'ra'eil Ba'agala uviz'man kariv v'im'ru amen . . ." (*Lettera*, 95)

POST SCRIPTUM

Curiously, the daughter's apostrophization of an unresponsive mother in Bruck has an illustrious precedent in another unhappy Jewish child, who also poured all his angst and anger into an undeliverable letter to a flawed yet beloved parent: Franz Kafka. Kafka wrote letters all his life. His correspondence with friends and family was so abundant, especially when compared with the scarcity of his literary production, that scholars consider it a vital part of his output. But Kafka's most revealing letter may be one that found no destination: his 1919 *Brief an den Vater* (*Letter to His Father*). "I could be grateful to you for everything only as a beggar is, and could never show it by doing the right things," Kafka writes.[97] Never intended to be delivered, Kafka's missive also bears the filial injunction, "Listen Father!," which—like Bruck's to the mother—remains unheard. These two Jewish authors, positioned one at the beginning and the other at the end of the 1900s, frame the past century through the story of their critical relationship with their parents, a story that can be told only in an undeliverable letter. Ironically, the English editions of both works chose to "misaddress" these books, translating them respectively as *Letter to His Father* and *Letter to My Mother*, thereby disregarding the lack of possessive pronouns in the German and Italian originals (a literal translation would have been "Letter to *the* Father" and "Letter to *the* Mother"), which quite tellingly universalized the terms of the messages.

For obvious reasons, Bruck's text has at its core the Shoah and literature's relation to it. Kafka's sensitivity and imagination may have allowed him to sense the drama in store for the human race, but that became for Bruck a nightmarish reality. Though he would never read it, Kafka's father was still alive when his son composed his missive. It was the father's explicit request that compelled Kafka to write—"Dearest Father, You asked me recently why I maintain that I am afraid of you . . . I now try to give you an answer in writing"[98]—but it was the mother's silence and unresponsiveness, even when she was still alive, that compelled the daughter to respond: "If you had listened to me to the end only once, maybe I wouldn't be writing to you now."[99] All differences aside, however, the two letters, and the two authors who penned them, suggest a philosophical and spiritual involvement with and a profound concern for the fate of communication, and more specifically for parent-child correspondence and the dynamic between a creator and his or her creation. From their different perspectives, both Kafka's and Bruck's works engage with the issue of representability in

language. Experience becomes incommunicable when it cannot be expressed within the envelope of our common signifiers—when, in other words, it is located outside of language. Such is the case with dreams or nightmares, of course, but also with subconscious fears (as in Kafka's case) and with trauma (as in Bruck's). Between these poles, twentieth-century literature posits two sets of letters: Kafka's to a deadly patriarch, and Bruck's to a dead mother.

Kafka also left us a marvelous parable—"An Imperial Message"—that serves as a paradigm of what Kamuf calls the catastrophe of destination.[100] The story begins as follows: "The Emperor—so they say—has sent a message, directly from his death bed, to you alone, his pathetic subject, a tiny shadow which has taken refuge at the furthest distance from the imperial sun. He ordered the herald to kneel down beside his bed and whispered the message in his ear."[101] The message remains unknown to the reader, subverting the expectation that, in literature, the reader will always receive the message—even one that is not intended for him. Here the reader is cut out of the secret by Kafka's uncanny parable. The emperor dies, the message does not arrive, and the addresser's death forecloses any chance of reproducing its contents. This parable short-circuits communication and reality. The reader will receive an open letter, as illegible as Derrida's postcard, whose message is being written as it is being read, one that is without end or beginning (for the reader). The story continues: "But the crowd is so huge; its dwelling places are infinite. If there were an open field, how he [the messenger] would fly along, and soon you would hear the marvelous pounding of his fist on your door. But instead of that, how futile are all his efforts. He is still forcing his way through the private rooms of the innermost palace. Never will he win his way through."[102] The fact that the message is from a dead person nullifies its destiny (which is also the emperor's destination) altogether: "No one pushes his way through here, certainly not someone with a message from a dead man," writes Kafka.[103] Indeed, who wants to heed the message of a dead man? Similarly, the absence of replies from Bruck's addressee, the mother, speaks to the central message of her dead communication: the injustice of a mother's death leaves the daughter without answers, and the mother's infinite silence is the dead letter (*lettera morta*) that finds no post in history.

To "address" etymologically means "to make straight" (from *ad directiare*) —that is, to make spoken words arrive directly at the intended addressee. Bruck's apostrophes lead straight to a single origination point: the forced and violent physical detachment from her mother's embrace in Auschwitz as they were lined up for the final selection. There, mother, God, and daughter were all present and all sacrificed. The daughter's traumatized psyche is trapped at that

specific point, and it is from this psychic bound that the adult survivor silently awaits what she knows will never come: "I could describe my present state as that of a traveler waiting at a station, from which no train arrives or departs" (*Lettera*, 109). Which train station is this? Perhaps the same one Charlotte Delbo has written of in the opening of her war memoir:

> They do not know there is no arriving in this station.
> They expect the worse—not the unthinkable. . .
> The station is not a railroad station. It is the end of the line. They stare, distressed by the surrounding desolation.[104]

Kafka ends his parable about the message from the dead emperor with a scene as melancholic as Delbo's or Bruck's: "No one pushes his way through here, certainly not someone with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window and dream of that message when evening comes."[105] As she grows older, beset by pain and fear, Bruck too awaits an answer from her silent interlocutor that never comes. We, the readers, detain a post in history and are thus mistakenly delivered the letter intended for the ghosts of Auschwitz. Therefore, we are also called to action by an apostrophe turned away from us: we must decipher an unreadable message.

Naturally things cannot in reality fit together the way the evidence does in my letter; life is more than a Chinese puzzle. But . . . in my opinion something has been achieved which so closely approximates the truth that it might reassure us both a little and make our living and our dying easier.

FRANZ KAFKA, *Letter to His Father*