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Article

# Thwarting the Tyranny of Fathers: Women in Nicole Krauss's *Great House* and the Creative Transmission of Traumatic Memory

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**Abstract:** With *Great House* (2010), Nicole Krauss offers a choral novel that interweaves the lives of several characters loosely connected by a huge, wooden desk that one of them relentlessly chases around the world. A possible symbol of the memory of the Second World War Jewish genocide transmitted to younger generations, the desk powerfully materializes transmission in its potentially traumatic, obsessional, and violent dimensions. This essay deals with the way first- and second-generation women, in the novel, develop ingenious, creative but also uncompromising responses to the inescapable duty of remembrance. While the dominating male characters freeze memory in timeless, petrified representations, these female writers expose its terrible necessity while hiding nothing of the damages memory causes to witnesses and descendants. They claim a right of inventory and use the desk as an echo-chamber reflecting both the suffering voices of children and the dark presence of defaulting fathers and failing mothers, thus allowing for a new generation to be born with a more bearable heritage.

**Keywords:** Nicole Krauss; *Great House*; Holocaust studies; trauma studies; female characters; creative responses



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## 1. Introduction

Nicole Krauss has often said that when *Great House* came out in 2010, she was surprised by the importance her readers gave to one of the elements of the plot, an enormous, 19-drawer wooden desk that several characters in turn possess, use, lose or spend years looking for. And yet, it is easy to understand *why* the reader keeps clinging to the huge piece of furniture, which regularly pops up in Krauss's choral novel. Indeed, in the eight chapters of *Great House*, four different plots develop separately, and five narrators of different ages and origins take turns unfolding the painful stories of war, survival, solitude, and trauma in various contexts. The novel spans a period of seventy years or so, from the very beginning of WW2 (when the desk was stolen by the Nazis from its Jewish owner in Budapest) to the early years of the 21st century (when the desk is last seen, hidden in a storage room in New York City), while its action moves back and forth essentially between London, New York and Jerusalem, as well as Hungary during WW2 and Chile under Pinochet's dictatorship. The desk seems to be what ultimately links all of those timelines, places, and characters together—even if those links are loose and fragile—and it therefore appears as *the* element not to lose sight of for a reader who, until the very end of the novel (and even long after), remains fascinated, but also somewhat confused, by the complex, brilliant pattern drawn by Krauss. When one of the very secondary characters in the novel asks at one point: “And the desk? [. . .] What happened to the desk?” (Krauss 2010, p. 251), the reader immediately identifies: they too want to know the complete story of this piece of furniture that has become a full-fledged, if mysterious, protagonist.

But *Great House* is bound to ultimately frustrate such reading. The desk used to be George Weisz's father's when the family still lived in pre-war Budapest, and it is the ultimate item that this antiquarian (who has spent his life hunting down stolen objects

throughout the world to bring them back to their former owners) needs to complete the faithful, painstaking reconstitution of his father's study. Weisz will not experience peace until he has found the huge, massive desk on which his father, a scholar in Jewish history, wrote many books, and whose many drawers, Weisz thought as a child, once contained "two thousand years" (Krauss 2010, p. 284), the knowledge of a whole people. The reader shares Weisz's quest, wondering how the impressive piece of furniture successively ended up in the hands of writer Lotte, a Jewish German who survived the genocide, in London after the war, and then in those of Daniel Varsky, a young Chilean poet who, in the early 1970s, had just enough time to entrust it to Nadia, a New York writer, before being swallowed by Pinochet's jails. Attempting to sketch an impossible map and a complex chronology in the hopes of fixing a geographical frame and a timeline that *Great House* keeps blurring, the keen reader realizes that the desk has a mysterious life of its own; that, as Virginia Woolf once wrote in her journal, it is a "thing that exists when we aren't there." (Woolf 1982, p. 114). Just like some of the characters, it has gone through dark periods of chaos and oblivion in front of which the most thorough investigation is bound to fail.

For *Great House* is not a whodunit: it brings no complete picture, no ultimate resolution, and its reader is left with unanswered questions. Even worse, when, in the very last paragraph of the novel, Weisz finally intrigues to achieve his end and to take one last look at the desk that his daughter has retrieved and kept away from him, the epiphany that the reader has been longing for does not take place, as Weisz himself almost flatly acknowledges: "the tremendous desk stood alone, mute and uncomprehending," adding: "I knew the moment well. How often I had witnessed it in others, and yet now it almost surprised me: the disappointment, then the relief of something at last sinking away" (Krauss 2010, p. 289). There is for Weisz nothing to discover, nothing to recover, just an utterly indifferent piece of furniture that conveys nothing. Prevented from bringing it back to his private museum, Weisz commits suicide a few weeks after. Has the desk been a red herring? the reader wonders, more reluctant than relieved at the idea of letting the object "sink away." Yes it has, Nicole Krauss has been patiently answering in many interviews in which she has systematically downplayed the importance of the desk: she has indeed patiently endeavored to shift her reader's attention away from what the desk could, on the surface, embody as far as heritage goes to the way each generation handles the transmission of such heritage, to what "we pass down often unknowingly to our children" (Brown and Krauss 2010). Despite her many denials ("I don't know how a piece of furniture could symbolize the death of six million people", she said in an interview with Stewart Kampel in 2012 before defining the desk as an open, multi-faceted, "very flexible metaphor" (Kampel and Krauss 2012)), critics have insisted on showing what a clever, thought-provoking, beautiful symbol of trauma, and even of the Shoah, the desk is: in "The Burden of Inheritance," a rich essay devoted both to Krauss's *The History of Love* and to *Great House*, for instance, Alan L. Berger and Asher Z. Milbauer analyze how, as a third-generation artist, Krauss offers her own interpretation of Cathy Caruth's observation that "history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation" (Caruth 1996, p. 71, in Berger and Milbauer 2013, p. 65). The essay especially focuses on the numerous images and symbols in *Great House* that subtly recall the genocide, the spoliation of Jews, and the duty of archiving and bearing testimony, and defines the elusive desk in the novel as "a symbol of the inescapable burden of a writer" (Berger and Milbauer 2013, p. 72), "passed on as an inheritance and gift" (Berger and Milbauer 2013, p. 73). In *Third Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*, Aarons and Berger devote a chapter to Krauss, entitled "Inheriting the burden of Holocaust trauma," in which they also insist on "the burden of traumatic history associated with the desk" (Aarons and Berger 2017, p. 158). While the chapter concludes with the way Krauss manages to cope with her past by "celebrating and asserting life" (Aarons and Berger 2017, p. 150), it also focuses on the "burden" of the inheritance, symbolized by the desk."

And yet Krauss, in *Great House*, does more than simply propose a Rosebud kind of mystery<sup>1</sup>: while it does stand as a tantalizing Grail, the desk is nevertheless much more than a mere symbol—or, if it is a symbol, it is as irreducible as *Moby Dick* can be in Melville's novel, as we shall see. This essay will first focus on the way *Great House* seems to foreground Weisz's attempt at recreating his father's study and, through it, his father's lost, exhaustive, timeless, but also petrified, fetishized, scholarly memory—a vision of heritage that the male characters share. But beyond this first dimension of the plot, I intend to cast a light on the painful yet resourceful, creative efforts that some of Krauss's female characters develop in order to give voice to the very story of transmitting a cumbersome memory whose burdening nature they nevertheless manage to turn into an artistic source of inspiration. Indeed, the essay will contend that even if two male characters (Weisz and Aaron) tend to dominate *Great House* and to fascinate the readers with their relentless quests for petrified memory, several women (Lotte, Nadia, Leah, and Isabel) compose a more discreet, underlying yet persistent song that questions the very notion of such transmission. Moving away from the insistence of those adamant fatherly figures to hold on to the undisputable idea of a historical past to be faithfully preserved and revered at all costs, those first- and second-generation women intend to face the issues raised by a burdening heritage, exposing its terrible necessity without hiding anything of the damage it causes to the witnesses and the descendants. This study will cast a light on the way Krauss uses her female characters to claim a right of inventory: just like Krauss herself, Lotte, Nadia, Leah, and Isabel use the desk not as a solid symbol of the past but as a somber echo-chamber for countless voices of suffering children crushed by the weight of the memory that is passed on to them, children's voices that demand to be heard throughout the novel, and whose terrible beauty is creatively restituted. More than the desk itself, it is its wooden surface, then, which, reflecting Krauss's own discourse on *Great House* being a study on "the response to a catastrophic loss" (Rothenberg Gritz and Krauss (2010)), becomes the place where those children's stories can get written at last, in artistic forms that acknowledge the decisive role of defaulting fathers and failing mothers, thus allowing for a new generation to be born with a more bearable heritage.

## 2. Tyrannical Fathers: The Monomaniac Transmission of Memory as Petrified Repository

In his relentless quest for the reconstruction *à l'identique* of his father's study in his Jerusalem house, George Weisz intends to preserve an intellectual, cultural and family tradition that his father was the guardian of. Indeed, Weisz remembers how obsessed he was, as a boy, by the idea of being in two places at the same time, and how his mother would laugh at his fantasy; "but my father," he goes on, "who carried two thousand years with him wherever he went the way other men carry a pocket watch, saw it differently." (Krauss 2010, p. 286). The historian who carried the time of knowledge, and not simply human time, then read his son "the poems of Judah Halevi" (Krauss 2010, p. 286), perhaps the poems in which Halevi dreams of the restoration of Jerusalem or expresses his nostalgia for Zion, and in that way, young Weisz learnt to be present in one place while "walking down an empty street in a foreign city" (Krauss 2010, p. 286)—a capacity he kept for the rest of his life as a wandering Jew. Once an orphan after his father died "on a death march to the Reich" (Krauss 2010, p. 287), Weisz did not become a historian but an antiquarian whose "memory is more real to him, more precise than the life he lives, which becomes more and more vague to him" (Krauss 2010, p. 276), as he phrases it himself. Locked in his memory of a past that was torn away from him, very much aware that he cannot bring the dead back to life but that he can "bring back the chair they once sat in, the bed where they slept" (Krauss 2010, p. 275), Weisz has devoted his life to his magnum opus: the faithful reconstruction of the material study in which his father developed his immense historical scholarship.

The plot involving Weisz and his mad quest for his father's desk contains multiple references to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and not simply because Krauss's huge and dark

desk, forever elusive and seemingly indestructible, which appears and disappears in the strangest places on the surface of the globe, can be seen as an ebony equivalent of Melville's white whale tantalizing so many hunters. Moby Dick's extra-ordinary, monstrous size, which all members of the Pequod mention, finds an equivalent in *Great House* in the unusual proportions of the desk, which each narrator underlines as utterly bigger than life: Weisz, who grew up with it, recalls it as "enormous, unlike any other." (Krauss 2010, p. 276). Nadia, the New York writer who used it for twenty-seven years, evokes its "hulking mass" (Krauss 2010, p. 22), and Arthur Bender, a retired Oxford Professor who hated but had to put up with his wife's only possession for almost thirty years, keeps using the words "monster" and "monstrous" (Krauss 2010, pp. 83, 103, 251). In addition to its crushing mass, all of the characters who once lived with the desk, sometimes worked on it, retrospectively testify to the amazing, mystifying presence/absence of the object: it is both unbearably crushing when present, and terrifyingly lingering when gone. Bender, for instance, recalls with horror that the desk literally took possession of the house he shared with Lotte, "overshadow[ing] everything else like some sort of grotesque, threatening monster, clinging to most of one wall and bullying the other pathetic bits of furniture to the far corner, where they seemed to cling together, as if under some sort of magnetic force" (Krauss 2010, p. 83). In his memories, the desk was always "hovering" above their couple (Krauss 2010, p. 277), "looming" above them (Krauss 2010, p. 248), he adds, borrowing the title of Moby Dick's famous first chapter ("Loomings"); and for Weisz, the simple fact of evoking it years after it leaves him still whispering, "groping for an understanding just out of [his] reach" (Krauss 2010, p. 277), still in awe of its morbid presence. Leah, Weisz's daughter, underlines the "gaping hole" created by the absence of the desk in her grandfather's reconstituted study (Krauss 2010, p. 116): a dark hole that finally swallowed and tore the whole family apart.

Chasing such an unforgettable prey, Weisz cuts quite a figure in the role of Ahab: if he has no artificial leg made out of a whale's bone, he walks with a cane, and the reader is led to understand that Weisz's own prosthetic leg is, in fact, the phantom desk—its haunting memory and the never-ending chase for it seem to be the only things that keep him upright. In his typology of Melvillian characters, Gilles Deleuze (1993) describes Ahab as a "monomaniac," a man haunted by one single obsession and whose entire energy is spent achieving his goal: finding and destroying Moby Dick, the huge, mysterious white sperm-whale that nobody has ever managed to conquer, even if fulfilling such a mission means death for himself and for his whole crew. In *Great House*, Weisz (whose name reads as "Weiss", "white") is similarly obsessed with the black desk that he wants to find before allowing himself to die (Krauss 2010, p. 277). Like mad Ahab, Weisz hunts for the desk high and low, until he perceives "a tiny bubble of air rising from the depths of an ocean where leagues below something is breathing" (Krauss 2010, p. 277), his own version of the sailors' "There she blows!" when catching sight of a whale in *Moby Dick*. Melville's novel brilliantly refrains from pinpointing what the white whale stands for, thus allowing it/him/her (the three pronouns are used for Moby Dick) to fascinate and tantalize the readers with countless possible interpretations to be projected onto its huge, white forehead that resembles a blank page, but leaving them with one certainty: Moby Dick embodies something that should not be possessed by any man, not even by the "godlike, ungodly man" Ahab is in the eyes of his followers (Melville [1851] 1986, p. 176). Just like Moby Dick, the whimsical desk in *Great House* is, according to those who have seen and used it, either benevolent or malevolent: it is a source of inspiration for Nadia, for instance, as if the 19 drawers "held the conclusion to a stubborn sentence, the culminating phrase, the radical break from everything I had ever written that would at last lead to the book I had always wanted, and always failed, to write" (Krauss 2010, p. 16); and it is "death itself" for Bender (Krauss 2010, p. 278), an innocent object of pure wonder or a symbol of evil to be feared—"a very flexible metaphor," to quote Krauss herself in an interview, with "19 drawers hold[ing] all kinds of meanings." (Kampel).



To George Weisz, the huge desk has become the repository of a two-thousand-year wisdom that his father once possessed. Recovering the piece of furniture seems to guarantee the preservation of an entire, untouched memory to be preserved as it is (those “two thousand years” that his father carried “with him wherever he went the way other men carry a pocket watch”, Krauss 2010, p. 186) and to be passed on to the following generation who, in his great scheme of things, have no say in the matter: Yoav and Leah Weisz were indeed brought up by a harsh, authoritative, pitiless father, as Isabel discovers when she becomes Yoav’s lover, especially after their dead mother could no longer act as “a kind of buffer between their father and them.” (Krauss 2010, p. 151). Constantly moving from one city to another without their father’s enjoyable talent at being in two places at the same time, changing houses in the middle of the night in order to learn what permanent uncertainty and necessary adaptation meant, taught several languages and expected to perform in whatever fields they studied, the siblings grew up in fear of a bullying father, “paranoid that something might happen to his children” (120) yet unable to grant them basic care or stability. Both are broken, emotionally impaired young adults whose father has failed them, thus illustrating one of the often-described consequences of the trauma suffered by first-generation survivors.

Aaron is the other father who, in *Great House*, shares with Weisz a determination to preserve Jewish heritage that goes along with flawed parenting skills. A retired prosecutor, he is also a first-generation survivor whose past remains sketchy since we only know that he has been living in Israel since the age of five and that he fought in the 1948 and 1956 wars. Both Weisz and Aaron are 70 in 1999, the year when the different plots of the novel get loosely knotted, the year when Weisz commits suicide and Aaron, now an old widower, addresses his estranged son in a long monologue. When, years before, his wife contemplated moving to London to prevent her two sons from being mobilized in Israel’s recurring wars, Aaron adamantly refused: “I would not leave. My sons would grow up in Israeli sunshine, eating Israeli fruit, playing under Israeli trees, with the dirt of their forefathers under their nails, fighting if necessary.” (Krauss 2010, p. 49). Aaron’s life has been spent protecting not the symbol of Jewish exegesis, which the desk is in Weisz’s eyes, but the concrete existence of Israel. A committed soldier and a magistrate, he too torments his children, especially Dov, his younger son who, from the start, displays characteristics of trauma: “A strange boy, who grew inward from the beginning” (Krauss 2010, p. 70), his father remembers when he faces the failure of their relationship; a boy having constant fits, unable to play or laugh with others, going through weird moments of absence and asking the strangest, sudden questions. Aaron lucidly recalls stubbornly refusing to see his son as a “special case” (Krauss 2010, p. 72) in spite of his wife’s begging, as well as his irresistible urge to bully him in the vain hope of toughening him up. “From a young age, you tirelessly searched for and collected suffering,” he says to his son in the long monologue that he silently addresses him, remembering how infuriated Dov’s *mal de vivre* made him. “The Jews have been living in alienation for thousands of years. For modern man it’s a hobby,” he would tell his tormented teenage son (Krauss 2010, p. 68). Aaron wanted his son to find his place in a timeless lineage that cannot be questioned, and to be able to stomach unbearable truths without flinching, even at an early age:

Do children die? you asked. I felt a pain open in my chest. Sometimes, I said. Perhaps I should have chosen other words. *Never*, or simply, *No*. But I didn’t lie to you. At least you can say that of me. Then, turning your little face to me, without flinching, you asked, Will I die? And as you said the words horror filled me as it had never before, tears burned my eyes, and instead of saying what I should have said, *Not for a long, long time*, or *Not you my child, you alone will live forever*, I said, simply, *Yes*. And because, no matter how you suffered, deep inside you were still an animal like any other who wants to live, feel the sun, and be free, you said, *But I don’t want to die*. The terrible injustice of it filled you. And you looked at me as if I were responsible. (Krauss 2010, p. 176)

This passage takes place just before Aaron confesses that it was Dov's birth that turned him into a father, and as his long monologue develops, he confesses his paradoxical preference for this silent, absent, mysterious younger son over the loyal, kind, easy-going Uri. "My child. My love and my regret," aging Aaron finally whispers (Krauss 2010, p. 196) as he waits for his son to come back home, multiplying loving declensions of his name: Dov, Dovi, Dovik, Dova'leh. In the long quotation above, nevertheless, facing his anguished boy, younger Aaron fought his fatherly emotions and chose to embody an unyielding, adamant father figure recalling iron laws. And Dov is the mirror in which Aaron contemplates his inflexible fatherhood: "From the beginning you seemed to know things and to hold them against me. As if you somehow understood that built into raising a child are inevitable acts of violence against him." (Krauss 2010, p. 177). Aaron also remembers playing the biblical father when he once took his ten-year-old son to the desert and hid behind a rock, watching Dov experience "his smallness and helplessness, the nightmare of his utter aloneness" (Krauss 2010, p. 55) before showing himself to the distraught boy, very much aware of his perverse pleasure in embodying both "Abraham *and* the ram" (Krauss 2010, p. 54) in his cruel staging of the sacrifice of Isaac. He is also the father who, in 1973, drove his mobilized son to join his brigade as the Kippur war began: "My boy had grown up to be a soldier, and I was delivering him to war," he remembers years later (Krauss 2010, p. 184) before telling the episode that broke Dov in the Sinai desert—the Egyptian attack, Dov and his wounded commander alone in the desert with no fatherly figure hidden behind a dune, and Dov finally abandoning his commander, unable to carry him further, choosing not to remain with him waiting for a certain death (Krauss 2010, p. 187). Old and lonely Aaron remembers that, as both their sons were fighting, he and his wife were dreading phone calls in the middle of the night, she mad with anguish and resentful toward her husband, he worried to death yet accepting that "[e]very day sons were being sacrificed." (Krauss 2010, p. 185).

Both Weisz and Aaron therefore accept the price to pay that comes with their survivor mission. Each is "burdened by a sense of duty that commanded his whole life, and later ours," as Leah Weisz writes about her father, adding: "Sometimes I think that had he allowed himself to live the way he wanted to, he would have chosen an empty room with only a bed and a chair." (Krauss 2010, p. 115). But because of his literal approach to memory, Weisz spends his entire life reconstituting his father's study, "down to the millimeter! Down to the velvet of the heavy drapes, the pencils in the ivory tray!" Leah explains in her letter to Isabel: "As if by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and ease regret." (Krauss 2010, p. 116). Weisz perfectly remembers his father's favorite story, which the old man often told him, about the metaphor of the great house that the first-century rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai used in order to illustrate the way Jews, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, could rebuild Jewish memory by turning it into a book, a "great house" each one of them would possess a tiny fragment of. But Weisz, for his part, is bent on reconstituting a very concrete, material room in a house that becomes deadly for his children. Aaron has a similar, literal approach to the duty he fulfills toward Israel: when he drives closed-off Dov to war, he feels unable to tell him what he would like to and keeps silent, understanding that his son has turned into "a soldier who had grown up eating Israeli fruit, with the dirt of his forefathers under his nails, who was leaving now to defend his country" (Krauss 2010, p. 184), he recalls, reusing the very images he brandished years before, when refusing to leave Israel. Believing in the soil of Israel feeding his child and its history getting under his skin, Aaron delivers his son to a war that will break him and put an end to his literary ambition. Before the war, indeed, Dov started writing a strange novel about a "great white shark" (Krauss 2010, p. 47) floating in a tank and linked by a complex system of electrodes and wires to several sleepers whose nightmares and fears it absorbs. "A shark that is a repository for human sadness," Aaron sums up (Krauss 2010, p. 179), remembering how scornful he had been when young Dov mentioned his project for the first time: "I don't support the plan." (Krauss 2010, p. 47). But Aaron secretly read the chapters as they were written, in spite of being a poor reader

for whom the story easily got lost: its metaphorical nature, its ellipses, its unexplained elements frustrated his desire to see things “state[d] plainly” (Krauss 2010, p. 181) and he was first beset with unanswered, practical questions (what does the shark eat? What is this place where the huge tank is? Why do those people sleep so much?). Then he slowly yielded to the plot, hungrily devouring the chapters, especially because, reading literally, he had the impression of seeing Dov in the character of a young writer, Noa, who became his favorite, and trembled to recognize himself in a “heartless, and arrogant, and cruel” father (Krauss 2010, p. 182). Although he surprised himself by developing, “God knows how, a strange compassion for that great, suffering shark” (Krauss 2010, p. 182), Aaron never managed to understand his son’s literary attempt to give shape to his trauma. When he read about the crack appearing on one of the walls of the tank holding the shark, he wondered about the fates of the unaware sleepers, for instance, unable to recognize the very Fitzgeraldian crack-up slowly developing in Dov.

In *Great House*, Weisz and Aaron are linked by the image of the ram: Aaron identifies both to “Abraham and the ram” (Krauss 2010, p. 54) in one of the most cruel experiences he has inflicted on his son, and Weisz carries a cane whose silver handle is in “the shape of a ram’s head” (Krauss 2010, p. 225), Nadia remarks, insisting on “his hand tightening around the curled silver horns of the ram.” (Krauss 2010, p. 226). They both have powerful voices that the reader cannot easily forget: Aaron’s two long monologues, love-letters to his estranged son in which he confesses his past sadism toward him but also his adoring fascination with him, reveal a disturbing mixture of guilty deeds and heart-rending love; and the last chapter of the novel, the only one in which Weisz is heard as a narrator, is a brief, striking sequence of sketchy, poetic fragments that linger in the reader’s mind, starting with Weisz’s initial trauma in 1944 and finishing with his last encounter with the confiscated desk that marks the end of his curse and of his life. On first reading *Great House*, one can be easily dominated by those male figures who incarnate both dedication and tyranny. And yet, *Great House* gives us to listen to other, female voices that weave into the text different ways of perpetuating and transmitting memory.

### 3. Childless Mothers: Art Out of Sheer Darkness as a Compelling Right of Inventory

Women, in *Great House*, may first be seen as less prominent, less audible characters than their male counterparts. Most of them are deeply unbalanced, going through depression: Lotte, who was saved from a Polish camp in 1939, and who has spent her life in England as Arthur Bender’s wife, is a recluse writer chained to her enormous desk; Nadia, the easily depressed middle-aged New York writer, sees her personal life and her fragile career definitely shattered by the loss of the same desk; and Leah Weisz, a gifted, solitary, dejected pianist, attempts to save her sibling and herself by hiding the desk, thus putting an end to their father’s obsessive quest. Only Isabel, an American student who becomes Yoav’s lover, can be considered as a rather stable young woman taking an outside look at the Weisz children’s tragedy, and sane enough to slow down their descent into utter despair. And yet, despite their respective fragilities, these women all tackle the issue of transmission in brave, violent and iconoclastically creative ways, devoting their arts to the passing on of memory and trauma to younger generations, while revealing, assessing, but also drawing, from the damage inflicted on parents and children alike.

Lotte Berg remains a mute character in the novel, whose mysterious, strange existence is conveyed to the reader by her husband, Bender, after her death. Despite his having spent his whole life with her, accepting her demanding conditions and faithfully accompanying her in her Alzheimer’s disease, Bender ultimately realizes that he never knew who Lotte really was except that she arrived in England as an 18-year-old German Jew chaperoning 86 children on a Kindertransport to England, leaving her own family behind, which explains, in his eyes, her bearing the weight of her past of having survived and lost them. “In some fundamental way I think she objected to being known,” he reflects retrospectively, adding that he developed “a scholarly attitude” toward his mysterious wife (Krauss 2010, p. 80). But the Oxford professor knows that he remained an outside observer of Lotte: every



morning he watched her disappear into a pond, a “swimming hole” (Krauss 2010, p. 77), waiting for her to come out of the dark, unfriendly water. Unable to discover “what it was she carried in the depths of her” (Krauss 2010, p. 79), he accepted her refusal to be a mother, and he watched over their solitary life solely “organized around protecting the ordinary” (Krauss 2010, p. 85) outside of which she was immediately unsettled. He spent years being jealous of the anonymous man who once gave Lotte her monstrous desk, and then of Daniel Varsky, the young poet with whom he imagined she had an affair. And it is only when Lotte’s past resurfaced, allowed to leak through her vigilant self-control because of Alzheimer’s, that Bender learnt about the infant she gave up for adoption in 1948, launching himself into an investigation that revealed the child’s name, life, and premature death as a young man.

Bender has thus been a happy, devoted, yet ignorant husband, a scholar unable to read his wife’s intimate story. Indeed, he fails to see that Lotte, who once took 86 children under her protective wing before renouncing to bring up her own child, whom she gave to a stranger found through a small ad in a newspaper (“her own baby,” Bencher writes, “as one advertises an item of furniture,” Krauss 2010, p. 266), consciously chose darkness over light, the “black depths” of the swimming hole (Krauss 2010, p. 267) to begin every day, the ebony desk over her infant. After meeting the child’s adoptive mother and after listening to George Weisz who visits him in the hope of finding the desk at his place, Bender frightfully endeavors to probe Lotte’s unfathomable depths: “What was it that slept there on the soft, slimy bottom that drew Lotte back, day after day?” he wonders, thinking about the swimming hole he was unable to dive into (Krauss 2010, p. 267), seeing it as a kind of inferno to which his wife, like “Persephone” (Krauss 2010, p. 267), willfully went down. And because Weisz’s commanding presence brings near “something hovering on the far edge on [his own] understanding” (Krauss 2010, p. 277), Bender speculates on the role of the desk in his being married to this 20th-century Persephone: “as if she had been lent to me out of its darkness, I said, to which she would always belong. [...] As if death itself were living in that tiny room with us, threatening to crush us, I whispered. Death that invaded every corner, and left so little room.” (Krauss 2010, p. 278).

What Bender seems to be unable to consider is that Lotte’s choice of darkness, of a childless life, and of the shadow of death projected by the monstrous desk was indeed the price to pay for a painful yet creative life. Like Persephone, to borrow his comparison, Lotte sojourns in the underworld but resurfaces, fertile with words. Indeed, she is a writer whose texts Bender only mentions in passing, as if too stunned by them to be able to quite decipher them. Her first published collection of stories, he says, was entitled *Broken Windows*, an image that runs through the novel, linked to several periods and characters, an obvious reference to *Kristallnacht* (see Berger and Milbauer 2013, p. 82). Bender evokes three stories written by his wife, one of them at greater length than the others, although he confines himself to briefly summing up each plot: “Children Are Terrible for Gardens” is the story of an ambitious landscape architect who collaborates with the fascist regime of an unknown country to ensure the development of his projects, one of them being a large park that the secret police uses, at night, to bury the corpses of murdered children, a morbid addition to the architect’s work that he decides to ignore all the more so as everyone applauds the extraordinary luxuriance of the plants (Krauss 2010, p. 88). If Bender confesses that, after reading the story, he caught himself “staring at [his] wife, feeling a little bit afraid” (Krauss 2010, p. 88), he nevertheless fails to see what an interesting rewriting of the myth of Persephone the story offers: it can be read as a metaphor of the fate of Jewish children in WW2, of course, and it is probably what Bender sees in it when he says that it “touched on the horror” (Krauss 2010, p. 88), but it is also the visible manifestation of Lotte’s decision to make art out of her own personal underworld. Writing about the tragic fate of children in times of war may in fact demand that she should give up being a mother herself in order to devote herself to her task unconditionally. By giving away her child “as one advertises an item of furniture” (Krauss 2010, p. 266), and by choosing to give herself, daily, to the dark depths of a pond and to the deadly presence of a leviathan desk, Lotte allows herself to

write disturbing stories about murdered but also murderous children, since one of her texts stages “two children who take the life of a third child because they covet his shoes,” and, after realizing they were too small for them, their selling them to another child who “wears them with joy” (Krauss 2010, p. 84). She also writes about unscrupulous, easily corruptible adults: the last story Bender remembers is that of “a bereaved family” in wartime having driven across enemy lines and settling down in an abandoned house, “oblivious to the horrific crimes of its former owner” (Krauss 2010, p. 84). Lotte’s writings (like Lotte herself) are profoundly unsettling because they dodge the typical representation of WW2 victims that could be expected from a Jewish survivor having lost her entire family in the Shoah to favor much darker and more ambiguous narratives.

Lotte’s sudden decision to give her desk to Daniel Varsky only a few weeks after meeting him leaves her husband speechless and suspecting an improbable affair between the old writer and the young poet. Eager to go back to Chile where an inspiring political change is taking place, Varsky leaves the desk in the temporary custody of Nadia, in New York, in 1972, and never comes back for it. Nadia, who is the narrator in two chapters of *Great House*, captures the reader’s attention in the very first lines of the novel, thanks to her hasty, chaotic monologue that she addresses to an unknown man whom she has just hit in a car accident and who is lying, unconscious, in a Jerusalem hospital (Dov). The reader needs time and patience to find their bearings in the long confession of this woman who kept Varsky’s desk for twenty-seven years, and who has been unable to write a single sentence since she had to give it back to his supposed daughter (in fact Leah Weisz). Nadia is a deeply depressed middle-aged woman, probably the descendant of a first-generation survivor father although she never says it in so many words. But she mentions her father’s “failings, as both a person and a father.” (Krauss 2010, p. 27) “I won’t waste your time with the injuries of my childhood,” she says to Dov on his hospital bed, “with the loneliness, or the fear and sadness of the years I spent inside the bitter capsule of my parents’ marriage, under the reign of my father’s rage, after all, who isn’t a survivor from the wreck of childhood?” (Krauss 2010, p. 200). Growing up as a lonely child convinced that she was chosen and given a special gift, Nadia becomes a writer entirely devoted to her art, unable to really share much with her lovers who finally leave her to her fierce routine of writing, which excludes them as well as the possibility of parenthood. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth, using Freud’s analysis, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, of Tasso’s story of Tancred, defines trauma as “the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.” (Caruth 1996, p. 4). This definition casts a perfect light on Nadia’s crisis, which begins when she remarks on a strange painting at a German dancer’s house. The man tells her that it was painted by two siblings he used to know as a child who were killed by their mother, the three of them drugged and perishing in a car that the mother set on fire. Fascinated by the anecdote which he delivers in a matter-of-fact way, Nadia writes a short story in which she keeps the basic elements given by the dancer but develops them, giving flesh to the children before the tragedy and animating them in moving, everyday scenes. Sheltering herself behind “the writer’s freedom—to create, to alter and amend, to collapse and expand, to ascribe meaning, to design, to perform, to affect, to choose a life, to experiment” (Krauss 2010, p. 28), Nadia appropriates the dancer’s story. Once it is published in a renowned magazine, Nadia stops thinking about the three characters, “as if by writing about them I had made them disappear,” she says. (Krauss 2010, p. 27).

The fact that the story triggering Nadia’s existential crisis is about children dying in fire obviously refers, in *Great House*, to the context of the Shoah. It can also be read as a reference to a famous passage of *The Interpretation of Dreams* that Cathy Caruth analyzes, after Freud and Lacan, and in which a father is asleep in the night after his child’s death. As, in the room next to his, the child’s body is beginning to burn because of a candle falling on one of his arms, the father is awakened by a dream in which “his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’” (Caruth 1996, p. 96). While the dream briefly allows the broken

father to see his child again, alive, in a fiction, the child's words draw attention to the need to "pass[] the awakening on to others," Caruth demonstrates. (Caruth 1996, p. 110). After the publication of the story, Nadia begins to hear children's cries that nobody else is aware of: a cry in a park, "pained and terrified, an agonizing child's cry that tore into me, as if it were an appeal to me alone" (Krauss 2010, p. 31), then a cry in her own apartment, echoing hers as she hurts herself, "a double of my cry, one belonging to a child" (Krauss 2010, p. 32), or again "the shrill laughter of a child" but with "something somber and unsettling." (Krauss 2010, p. 34). She alone seems to hear "this plea by another who is asking to be seen and heard" (Caruth 1996, p. 9), haunted not only by "the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known." (Caruth 1996, p. 6). The imaginary crying children get somehow mingled, in Nadia's head, with young Daniel Varsky, and therefore with his desk, when she learns that, as an activist in Chile, he was tortured and killed by Pinochet's regime. Nadia has nightmares both about her father, whose violent life and undignified death she turned into a book leaving her "a sickening feeling" (Krauss 2010, p. 28), and about Varsky, nightmares so plaguing that after one of them involving the corpses of both of them, she mishears something the super of her building tells her: she thinks she heard him say "You make good use of death," (Krauss 2010, p. 35) a sentence that can be heard as validating the poor opinion she has of herself ("someone who made use of the pain of others for her own ends, who, while others suffered, starved, and were tormented, hid herself safely away and prided herself on her special perceptiveness and sensitivity to the symmetry buried below things", Krauss 2010, p. 39), or as an ambiguous imperative. For indeed, just like Dov's great shark, Nadia acts as a collector of people's sufferings, especially children's cries that echo in her. Remembering being invited by a family for Passover, a dinner during which the guests' voices woke up a little girl, she goes through an epiphany allowing her to understand what the child's cry suddenly embodies for her:

We had woken her from sleep. And suddenly, bewildered by this sea of strange faces and the clamor of voices, she let out a cry. A wail of pure terror that cut through the air, and silenced the room. For a moment everything froze as the scream hung above us like the question to end all the questions that particular night, of all nights, is designed to pose. A question which, because wordless, has no answer, and so must be asked forever. Perhaps it was only a second, but in my mind that scream went on, and still goes on somewhere now [...]. (Krauss 2010, p. 209)

Watching the mother rush to her child and bring her immediate relief simply by scooping her into her arms, Nadia acknowledges that she "could never be that to anyone, the one who in a single motion could rescue and bring piece." (Krauss 2010, p. 210). But she can be the writer who, chained at her monstrous desk, keeps watch as "the witness of the crying voice" (Caruth 1996, p. 3), giving a voice to failing parents and crying children who both need to be heard, trying to answer the wordless question which "has no answer, and so must be asked forever." (Krauss 2010, p. 209).

Both Lotte and Nadia find in the huge desk a fertile ground and an echo chamber for their dark stories. To them, the desk is not a sacred place to be preserved, untouched, but a working place, frightening at first, demanding to be domesticated: "the desk that over the course of two and a half decades I'd physically grown around," Nadia remembers once she loses it, "my posture formed by years of leaning over it and fitting myself to it." (Krauss 2010, p. 17). Under the spell of the desk, she evokes the 19 drawers she spent hours staring at, not as reservoirs of timeless knowledge but as if they magically "held the conclusion to a stubborn sentence, the culminating phrase, the radical break from everything [she] had ever written that would at least lead to the book [she] had always wanted, and always failed, to write." (Krauss 2010, p. 16). "Those drawers represented a singular logic deeply embedded, a pattern of consciousness that could be articulated in no other way but their precise number and arrangement," she goes on (Krauss 2010, p. 16), underlining the almost esoteric composition of the mystifying drawers.

Leah Weisz is the one who puts an end to the bewitching powers of the desk. Although her personal aim is to deprive her father of his maddening quest threatening to destroy his offspring, her gesture, more largely, also causes a rupture in a painful chain of narratives of suffering and survival. By confining the desk to an isolated storage warehouse, she claims an inventory right and imposes a standstill that brings everyone to a chaotic silence: Her father commits suicide, the siblings withdraw from the world and confine themselves in the Jerusalem house, Nadia faces a writer's block, and Bender's quest for Lotte's past reaches an end. And yet, the final image of the storage room reactivates a previous image of hope in the novel. Indeed, when, years before, Isabel accompanies Yoav to Belgium where he must retrieve a chess table from an old man in a castle, she goes through an experience evoking a dark fairy-tale: Leclercq, the owner of the rundown mansion, is the portrait of Himmler, which she seems to be the only one to notice; during the night, she gets lost in the ogre's castle, walks through empty rooms and up enormous staircases until she discovers a boy, on his own, in the kitchen. A white-haired, ill-groomed waif who has obviously been left to manage by himself, the boy seems to come from a Brueghel painting she has been looking at in a corridor, and the sordid little bedroom where he takes her evokes "one of those animal burrows one finds in children's books." (Krauss 2010, p. 153). A few hours later, carrying the sleeping boy in her arms and trying to find her room, she gets lost and arrives in a huge, vaulted hall full of long rows of stocked furniture—Leclercq's storage room. At that point, two famous WW2 photographs pop up in her memory: in the first one, dozens of Jews are gathered on a place, made to quietly wait to be deported; in the other, lines and rows of stolen furniture and household items are neatly put away in warehouses. Both pictures are representations, she realizes, of the efficiency of a whole system of spoliation, amoral profits, and destruction. Standing in the dark room with the child in her arms, then quietly taking him to spend the rest of the night in her bed, next to Yoav, "two motherless boys side by side" (Krauss 2010, p. 156), Isabel experiences a brief epiphany and turns into the vigilant figure whose task it is to watch over fragile children threatened by ogres. She will later give birth to David, Yoav's son, who, thanks to Leah, will be protected from the crying voices and the dark fates that the desk has given birth to and absorbed for decades. Even if George Weisz imagines, when contemplating the inaccessible, "mute and uncomprehending" desk for the last time (Krauss 2010, p. 289), that Leah will one day surreptitiously pass on the key to the storage room to Isabel, entrusting her to keep it for future use, the child will, in the meantime, grow up not having to "listen to the impossible" too early, not having "been chosen by it, before the possibility of mastering it with knowledge," as Cathy Caruth phrases it, evoking the danger "of the trauma's 'contagion', of the traumatization of the ones who listen" (Caruth 1995, p. 10) and quoting Dori Laub: "Sometimes it is better not to know too much." (Laub 1991).

But if the massive symbol of urgent, demanding testimony has come to a standstill, the novel subtly suggests that the heritage is also quietly being passed on. Along with using traditional images attached to the Shoah, which are "so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own rights" for third-generation survivors. (Hirsch 2001, p. 9). For instance, in addition to recurring images of fire and broken windows, as suggested before, Krauss also includes less immediately decipherable references that nevertheless point at the preservation of memory. When remembering the two photos taken during the war, Isabel, for instance, simply mentions that she discovered them as a student "researching the work of Emanuel Ringelblum" (Krauss 2010, p. 155), thus briefly introducing the name of the historian and political activist whose brilliant ingenuity ensured the survival of the archives of the Warsaw ghetto. And a hundred pages later, Bender briefly evokes a woman he once met while their hotel was devoured by flames, a woman he briefly fantasized he could guide and protect, along with the sleepy child she was carrying in her arms, and whose name, he remembers in passing, was Auerbach—a name discreetly echoing Ringelblum's, since Rachel Auerbach, a journalist, historian and writer, worked with him in the ghetto.



#### 4. Conclusions

*Great House* thus concludes on a note of hope. In a chapter devoted to the novel, Aarons and Berger insist on Krauss's successful attempt at "working through her Holocaust inheritance" (Aarons and Berger 2017, p. 169) in a work that testifies to the postmodern, chaotic world in which the third generation has to manage the postmemory they received from their parents and grandparents: in their eyes, the desk symbolizes "the inescapable burden" of a writer (Aarons and Berger 2017, p. 156), but the novel can be seen as "offering a distinctive angle of vision for reading the literary map guiding readers wishing to negotiate the terrain of the third generations' memory burden" (Berger and Milbauer 2013, p. 73), which is undoubtedly true. Yet *Great House* also demonstrates how the strict, compelling, unimaginative burden of memory embraced by the first-generation men (Weisz and Aaron) is utterly transformed by the women who get around such a paralyzing vision of transmission to invent their own, with considerable pains. The desk, whose dark odyssey reaches a temporary end in the last pages of the book, has allowed the female characters not only to remember and transmit (and thus, possibly, to alleviate the burden, as the scholars quoted above rightfully demonstrate), but also to give birth to necessary, profoundly disturbing, artistic, fictional narratives that encompass both the damage of the Shoah on first-generation survivors and the tragic impacts of its transmission on the following generations. While some women in *Great House*, Liliths of modern times (Lotte, Nadia), pay a high price by dedicating their entire lives to their arts created from the abysses of the twentieth century, the no less crushing task that the youngest (Leah, Isabel) take upon their shoulders is to clear the transmission of some of its toxic violence.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> « Rosebud » is the last, unexpected, mysterious word uttered by tycoon Charles Foster Kane on his deathbed in Orson Welles's 1941 masterpiece *Citizen Kane*. As a journalist sets out to discover the meaning of it, investigating Kane's tumultuous private life and unscrupulous career, the movie unfolds as a retrospective quest that holds the spectator on their toes but ends with a twist: the journalist fails and gives up his inquiry, and the attentive spectator is the only one who understands the simple, intimate, poetic meaning of the old tycoon's last word. "Rosebud" has thus become the symbol of an apparently structured mystery that cannot be unveiled by any logical quest: its actual meaning is both mundane and intangible.

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