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The haze of the Shoah: Exilic condition in the work of Anna Langfus (1920–1966)

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Abstract

When Holocaust survivor Anna Langfus (1920–1966) left Poland for France in 1946, she broke all ties with her home country. French became her language of choice for the three novels she published between 1960 and 1965, and she never used Polish at home nor taught it to her only daughter. Yet, in a contribution to a volume on Chopin published a few months before her death, she had the famous composer cry out: 'I do not want to die in this country. [...] No, not here. But at home, in my home, the only home I ever owned, my parents' home. A home I shall never see again; a country I have abandoned.' Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva (abjection) and Dominick LaCapra (empathic unsettlement) I explore representations of exile in Langfus's fiction in three respects: the incommunicability of the Shoah and the ensuing exilic condition of the Holocaust survivor (exile from others); the fragmentation/dislocation of the narrator's body as expression of the survivor's existential anguish (exile from self); the fleeting solace offered by creative fiction and the connection established with readers (suspension of exile). Throughout this discussion, I will be guided by the motif of the fog, which features strongly in Langfus's Chopin text.

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After the Holocaust, we are all refugees from the human dream.

— William Heyen, 'Unwilled "chaos"'

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE FOG OF EXILE

A few months before her death, Polish-born novelist Anna Langfus (1920–1966), who wrote in French, contributed to a collective volume devoted to Polish composer Frédéric Chopin.[1] In her short chapter, told in the first-person mode and bearing the title 'Le Musicien devant la mort' (The musician facing death), Langfus had Chopin cry out: 'I do not want to die in this country. [...] No, not here. But at home, in my home, the only home I have ever truly owned, my parents' home. A home I shall never see again, a country which I have abandoned' (Langfus, 1965a, 251–252).[2] Langfus undeniably identified with her compatriot, an artist who, like her, left Poland for France where he made his career as a composer and virtuoso pianist, and who, like her at the time, suffered from respiratory ailments. But this is not where the interest of this text chiefly lies. Rather, interwoven throughout, one stumbles upon the motif of the fog, which not only helps us throw light—paradoxically—on Langfus's writing, but profitably echoes the question of borders and boundaries inherent to the exiled self (Zadworna Fjellestad, 1995, 136).

Independently of a range of individual factors, such as age, personal strength, level of planning and preparedness, financial means, linguistic skills, to name a few, affecting both the conditions of departure and those surrounding arrival in the new country, exile remains fundamentally a rupture. It corresponds to a brutal disruption of/interruption with the familiar and entails an equally brutal thrust into the new. In the words of Danuta Zadworna Fjellestad: 'the physical and geographical separation from the mother country becomes also a symbolic separation from one's moorings; the familiar, well-mapped territory gives way to an incomprehensible space' (Zadworna Fjellestad, 1995, 137). Negotiating this initially unreadable and occasionally perilous space is anything but seamless, and fraught with difficulty. In their attempt to chart, tame and conquer what is, at the outset, a no man's land, exiled persons are confronted with their 'own otherness' (p. 138). In the process, they may display several signs of trauma—self-loathing, sense of guilt, disassociation, incommunicability, alienation, powerlessness—while at the same time demonstrating an ability for self-restructuring and self-(re)creation. As a meteorological phenomenon endowed with the capacity to erase clear boundaries, while simultaneously subduing neat separations, the analogy of the fog which I propose to follow in the discussion that ensues, seems an apt illustration of the ambivalent disappearance of boundaries inherent to exile.

Anna Langfus's chapter starts with an account of Chopin's sojourn in London. Throughout, the author insists on the continual presence of the fog, seen as a perpetual threat to the musician's lungs: 'The fog is always there, in all the cavities of my body. What can I do but get used to it!' (Langfus, 1965a, 242). Those references to the fog can be interpreted in at least two ways: in the first instance, as the experienced novelist that she is, Langfus is simply 'getting the job done'. She is setting the scene and drawing on a somewhat stereotypical representation of Victorian-era London, alluding to the paintings of Turner or the novels of Dickens, and providing her reader with the familiarity, however cliché'd, they may require to 'enter' the piece. The motif of the fog, and its deleterious impact on Chopin's fragile health, thus contributes to the text's realism. The composer is depicted not only at the mercy of the British weather, whose infiltration he is unable to stem, but indeed as an exhausted and vulnerable man, on the verge of death, who perceives the fog as an ominous signal:

> The shutters now open, London's fog amasses against the window. I would like to feel safe, but I know that nothing ever stops the fog; I can see it seeping into the room through imperceptible cracks. I can feel it shrouding me, entering me. Gasping for air, I struggle in vain. Gasping, gasping. (p. 242)[3]

Verb forms such as 'seeping', 'shrouding', 'gasping' clearly establish the fog as a threatening presence, merciless and inescapable, sapping the musician's life-force. But, as the text progresses, insisting on Chopin's estrangement, the result of his physical exhaustion, inability to comprehend English, financial difficulties and insomnia, the motif of the fog increasingly comes to symbolise the alienation inherent to exiled existence. Not only does Chopin feel removed from the external reality surrounding him— 'I managed to see signs of spring and went on a ride in a horse-drawn carriage. But everything was unravelling so far away from me' (p. 253)—he is associating exile, symbolised here by the fog, with his growing sense of mortality. Langfus makes this explicit when she has Chopin reminisce on a letter sent to his good friend Tytus Woyciechowski on the eve of his departure from Warsaw several years earlier: 'I have the feeling that if I leave Warsaw, I would never be able to see my home again. I imagine myself leaving to die. [...] Death has never left me since then' (p. 246). This final sentence not only sees Langfus clearly representing exile as a harbinger of death, it also suggests the extent to which she imbues her protagonist with her own feelings, here her personal, and persistent, experience of loss and absence.

On a purely physical level, fog has the ability to blur and dim reality; shapes fade away, and outlines become hazy. Like Jacques Derrida's figure of the spectre, the fog is a form of in-betweenness, suspended between 'visibility and invisibility, and between observer and observed' (Wylie, 2007, 172). In popular culture, the spectre sometimes takes the appearance of a mist, or haze, slowly crawling, creeping and invading the space of a future victim. John Carpenter's aptly named *Fog* (1980), Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) or Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) punctuated by the threatening apparitions of Harry Lime emerging from the sewers of post-war Vienna, all mine this ambiguous trope. And how can we not think of the Nazis' 1941 directive *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog), so named to ensure that victims would disappear, never to be seen or heard again.

In Langfus's writing, fog or 'fogginess' clearly correlates with the ontological status of the (Holocaust) survivor. Suspended in a state of permanent exile, her protagonists can no more make full sense of their post-apocalyptic reality than their interlocutors can of the world these survivors have emerged from. In my reading, the fog's essential liminality, between light and opacity, an enfolding greyness that dims and unifies colours, troubles and blurs perception, a diaphanous veil that separates, but also protects, corresponds to the place of the exile, unable to decipher fully the contours of the new land/culture, nor indeed to be seen/understood fully by its inhabitants. And it is this motif of the fog, and the analogies that can be deployed from it, whose lead I propose to follow, in order to explore and discuss Anna Langfus's perception and representation of exilic condition, in relation to the self, to others and to writing.

2 | SITUATING ANNA LANGFUS

Born Anna Regina Szternfinkiel in Lublin, Poland, the only child of a secular and assimilated Jewish family, Anna Langfus grew up in a comfortable environment.[4] She studied in Lublin's best secondary school, learning and mastering French during her teenage years, contrary to the semi-legend she carved following her arrival in Paris, whereby she tended 'to exaggerate her lack of fluency in French' (Kershaw, 2019, 253).[5] In 1938, she married Jakub Rajs. Destined to take over a textile factory, Jakub and Anna spent the following year in Verviers, Belgium, where they studied engineering. When they returned to Poland in the summer of 1939, the young couple and their respective families found themselves in the grip of the war, whose sudden irruption is eloquently illustrated by the image of a crystal chandelier crashing down onto the family dining-table at the beginning of *Le Sel et le soufre*,

Langfus's first novel. To the best of our knowledge, the chronology of events unfolded as follows[6]: relatively safe for the first two years, the Szternfinkiels and Rajs were forced to move into the Lublin ghetto in March 1941, where Anna's father was assassinated by the Nazis a year later. Around this time, Anna left Lublin and was interned in the Warsaw ghetto where she caught typhus. Managing to escape to and hide in the Aryan (non-Jewish) sector of the Polish capital city, she resumed her activities as a courier for the Polish resistance army (the Armia Krajowa, or AK). Her mother, who would have reached Warsaw later that same year, was initially able to hide and escape a number of *Aktionen*[7] before perishing in the burning of the ghetto that followed the uprising of 1943. Anna and Jakub survived in and around Warsaw for another 18 months before their arrest by the Gestapo in December 1944. Transferred to the town of Nowy Dwór, Jakub was executed, and Anna tortured, prior to being sent to Płońsk prison until her liberation by Soviet forces in 1945. Langfus's first novel, *Le Sel et le soufre* (1960), translated two years later as *The Whole Land Brimstone*, recalls these episodes and ends with the protagonist, Maria, returning alone to the city of her youth.

Anna Langfus too returned alone, only to leave for France in May 1946, never to revisit. In a 1962 conversation with fellow countryman and novelist Piotr Rawicz, she asserted: 'Yes, I left. I could no longer live in Poland, with the Poles. They were accomplices, accomplices to the massacre, the vast majority of them… There were a few exceptions, a minority of people who remained decent, it's true. But for the most part, what filth!' (Langfus, 1962b, 16). Tellingly, Poland is barely present in the second and third novels, and when evoked on a positive note, is restricted to the familiarity of the private sphere.[8] At the same time, Polishness, in the sense of national cultural characteristics, is entirely ignored, and nostalgia—for certain food, sounds, smells, traditions or landscapes—normally a common trope of migrant-writing, is altogether absent.

Some Langfus commentators have written of her decision to emigrate (see Kershaw, 2019, 246). In the conversation with Rawicz, quoted above, Langfus herself asserted her willingness to leave Poland, which she was able to do endowed with some financial means and a good grasp of the French language. Nonetheless, one can hazard that this resolution was not exactly, or at least not entirely, a matter of choice. For what would have been the prospects for a Polish Jew having lost her entire family on return to Lublin in 1945, when barely a year later, further anti-Semitic pogroms took place in Poland?[9] It is more likely that Langfus resigned herself to self-imposed exile. Furthermore, while made quickly, the decision was no doubt painful, complex and tinted with guilt. The last words of the Chopin extract again offer insight into the writer's thoughts as she imagines his and illustrate Langfus's merging of Chopin's reality with her own circumstances as a post-Holocaust Polish Jew living in another country. His admitting 'I have abandoned my country' suggests that much, placing the onus on the person leaving, a feeling common to exiled persons, rather than on the country that had, for the most part, abandoned its Jews.

It is important to note, however, that exile is not entirely devoid of productive and positive sides. As Lucile Cairns reminds us, exile 'does in fact have a positive potentiality' (Cairns, 2011, 124) because of its capacity for re-birth, re-invention, and emancipation, which Jennifer Wallace sums up as 'the contradictory predicament of exile' (Wallace, 2016, 26), at once liberating and constraining. This was true for Langfus too. However difficult, geographical displacement and cultural estrangement helped Anna Langfus distance herself from the trauma of the Shoah. Exile, in her case, operated to some extent as a buffer, while enabling her to carve out a new space in which to reconstruct a family with her second husband, Aron Langfus, and their daughter Maria (born in 1948), as well as to exercise a form of agency. And naturally, exile was instrumental in her emergence as a novelist. These positive aspects notwithstanding, exile in the context of the Holocaust cannot acquire the connotations formulated by some who, as Jennifer Wallace notes, theorise exile as a form of 'Derridean jouissance, no longer being weighed down by historical expectation, fixed identities, crushing responsibilities, the burden of history' (p. 25). To the contrary, the Holocaust survivor/exile remains burdened by the weight of history, and is unable, to a large extent, to escape it. Langfus's last two novels, which revolve around a survivor protagonist inhabited by guilt and shackled to the past, are clear illustrations of such a predicament. If all forms of exile entail some degree of self-obliteration, this response is surely particularly acute in the context of the Holocaust. Indeed, throughout Langfus's writing, exile remains intimately associated with both the inescapability of the personal/

individual past—the narration is frequently interspersed with sequences illustrating the protagonists' personal trauma (intrusive flashbacks, nightmares)[10]— and the incommunicability of loss that characterises the survivor's existential condition (ellipses; silences; deferred answers).[11] The 'ambiguous freedom and pain of not belonging' (p. 27) discussed by Jennifer Wallace amounts here to a 'never-quite-beingness', symbolically akin to the blurriness enforced by the fog, far exceeding geographical or cultural considerations.

Langfus's first foray in creative fiction was as a playwright. Of particular note, is her first play, *Les Lépreux* (The Lepers), performed in Paris in 1956. Unremittingly brutal in its depiction of the plight of Polish Jews during the Second World War and denunciation of Polish anti-Semitism, the play proved too confrontational for some audience members who proceeded to exit the theatre. As explained to interviewer Jeanine Delpech, this semi-failure was to perform a pivotal role in Langfus's evolution as a novelist:

> To write *Le Sel et le soufre*, I could not simply tell the facts—the excess of horror would have made the book unreadable. I had seen spectators who, overcome by emotion, had left the room during a performance of *Les Lépreux*, and this urged me to caution and prompted me always to 'keep it down a notch'.
>
> (Delpech, 1962, n.p.)

In his introduction to *Writing and the Holocaust*¸ Berel Lang reminds us of an obvious fact: 'It is clear that the Holocaust is not a conventional or "normal" subject at all, that the evidence of its moral enormity could not fail to affect the act of writing and the process of literary representation' (Lang, 1988, 1). Notwithstanding current discussions in the fields of Holocaust, memory and trauma studies,[12] particularly with respect to questions of generalisation, historicisation, memorialisation, the uniqueness of the historical event known as the Shoah, and the aesthetic forms it can, or ought (not) to take, Berel Lang's statement remains fundamentally true. At the same time, Anna Langfus's novelistic production is of course temporally situated and culturally determined, inflected not only by the here-and-now of publication (France in the first half of the 1960s), but also by the 'whence' of the author, that is to say, Langfus's own original cultural milieu and the impact of her merciless encounter with war and murderous anti-Semitism. In other words, the Shoah features both in Langfus's past and in her history, and unsurprisingly impacts on the aesthetic and ethical characteristics of her work. Writing from the vantage-point of the ghetto-life/post-Shoah survivor in exile, Langfus employs a largely universalising register to represent the aftermath of the Holocaust. Her strategy, fuelled by her experience with *Les Lépreux*, is underpinned by considerations pertaining to communicability, intersubjective understanding, perhaps even gift and exchange. In that sense, and despite its realistic and universalising register, Langfus's writing is not without echo in Hanna Meretoja's argument in favour of a hermeneutic circle (of writing and reading) which 'characterizes understanding as we always understand something new in relation to our earlier conceptions, and the new, in turn, can challenge our pre-conceptions' (Meretoja, 2020, 30). For Langfus's readers, 'the new' is the temporally and culturally determined perspective of the post-Shoah refugee in exile. 'Earlier conceptions' are fashioned by those readers' own experiences of fear, exclusion, misunderstanding, loneliness, estrangement, however small-scale those experiences may be in relation to the protagonist's circumstances. Similarly, readers' earlier conceptions can illuminate the intradiegetic interlocutors' behaviour towards the protagonist (inability or unwillingness to understand them, for example). Ultimately, the encounter between the old and the new can challenge, affect and transform Langfus's readers' pre-conception and pre-understanding, of themselves as much as of the other, and even their future behaviour. This, at least, appears to be what Anna Langfus aspired to in her journey as a novelist.

Like other (all?) Shoah novelists, Langfus was confronted by both ethical imperatives and aesthetical constraints. The 'keeping it down a notch' strategy she was to endorse—a muffling or fogging-over more than a concealment per se—led her to adopt several narratological stances impacting in turn on genre, mode, structure, characterisation, style, and reader's response, aiming in large part at broadening, universalising and opening up her literary discourse. As Jean-Yves Potel stresses, 'She wants the voice of the victims and the pain of the survivors to be heard. Throughout her generalisations, she always adopts a universal standpoint. She speaks of Man, with a capital "M"' (Potel, 2014,

2011). Let us add a small caveat to Potel's comment: Langfus does indeed adopt a universal standpoint by relying on her readers' familiarity with certain behaviours, affects and sensory experiences (ostracism, loneliness, fear, and so on), but she never purports to hide or diminish the unique peculiarities of her protagonists' ordeal, whose trauma is decidedly historical, the result of genocidal anti-Semitism. Using a cinematographic analogy, we could say that Langfus uses the close-up—her novels tend to depict 'small' events (looking for a new job or apartment; casual encounters and conversations; solitary walks)—as one would a wide-angle shot, the use of tropes such as the fog analogy contributing to the original light she casts on her topic.

Of particular importance to Langfus was the self-imposed requirement to satisfy both personal expression and communication, in a gesture at once centripetal (self-oriented) and centrifugal (other-oriented), a stipulation that perhaps explains her decision to forego memoirs and autobiographical writing *stricto sensu*. Indeed, both of these genres presuppose a certain amount of self-centredness, with the risk, on the one hand, of dismissing the collective dimension of the (historical) events narrated and, on the other, of compromising the active and empathetic participation expected of the reader, a moral standpoint that Langfus eloquently summed up during her address to the Women International Zionist Organisation (WIZO) in 1963:

> Events that I had been involved in did not belong to me. In the end, even what I considered as my own personal experience, became one fragment of a larger experience. And from the moment I had decided to describe it, I had to assume a responsibility, not only towards those who had gone through it with me, but also towards all those who would learn about it later.
>
> (Langfus, 1993, 42)[13]

'The survivor knows isolation', Raul Hilberg writes (Hilberg, 1988, 20). Could we not in fact argue that, at the most ontological level, the survivor 'is' isolation? Is he/she not trapped in a permanent exile, shrouded in a never-ending fog, whether or not he/she left a place/country? Amputated by the loss of their loved ones and/or community, irrevocably severed from the past, the survivor is concomitantly burdened by an excess of knowledge of what was but no longer is nor can be. They are 'out of time', thrown into an existential conundrum of porous and shifting boundaries, which Langfus's motif of the fog comes to symbolise. For her survivor-exile figures, this translates, at a physical level, in different, not mutually exclusive ways: a form of torpor or 'muffled-ness'; fits of hysterical laughter leading to breathlessness; disassociated body parts; peripatetic activity. To understand and decipher these manifestations better, we will now turn to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, which might prove a useful underpinning to my discussion.

3 | EXILE AND ABJECTION

'Abjection', Julia Kristeva writes in the introductory section of *Powers of Horror*, 'is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger' (Kristeva, 1982, 9). Like exilic existence, abjection is tantamount to a 'world that has erased its borders' (p. 4); it is marked by porosity, incompleteness and excessiveness, separation, and transgression: 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (p. 4). Incidentally, Kristeva herself employs the analogy of fog in the opening section of her essay, likening the abject, defined as a 'blank subject'—an image that echoes the existential condition of the exile—to one plunged in 'a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess [...] shad[ing] off like a mirage and permeat[ing] all words of the language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory glimmer' (p. 6). The 'utmost of abjection', Kristeva goes on to say, is in the corpse, in which the deceased is (bodily) present yet absent. This 'most sickening of wastes is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled'. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?' (p. 6).

These initial observations resonate with the ontological anxiety characterising the figure of the survivor-exile and their world, where traditional dichotomies—here and there; then and now; life and death—are, if not altogether dissolved, at least attenuated and put into question. In limbo, surrounded by spectral figures, sometimes driven to 'those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*' (Kristeva, 1982, 12), the survivor-exile is suspended between life and death, forever straddling both, and as such potentially infecting, and doubtless disturbing social order.

In Anna Langfus's novels, traces of abjection are found in the physical symptoms displayed by the characters. Thus, protagonists are often afflicted by uncontrollable and transgressive fits of laughter, frequently ending in gasping breathlessness—we might remember here the recurrent 'gasping' that punctuates the Chopin piece—which startle and frighten their interlocutors. Such episodes occur most frequently in *Saute, Barbara*, when the survivor protagonist (and narrator) Michael, haunted by the death of his wife and daughter, for which he blames himself, is encouraged by his interlocutors to embrace normalcy.[14] In one such instance, M. Roth, Michael's employer, comes to plead the case of his daughter Denise, who has fallen in love with Michael: 'The dead must bury the dead,' says M. Roth. 'The war has ended. Now, you must return to a normal existence' (Langfus, 1965b, 167). Michael reacts as follows:

> At first, I only feel a smile coming to my lips. But then, my entire being tenses up, laughter is already in the muscles of my face. I try to swallow it, to ingest it silently. But it breaks free from me, and hits the man seated in front of me right in the face.
>
> (p. 167)

In a later episode, with Denise Roth, Michael, unable to find the words suitable to courting, is again submerged by a terrifying spasm of laughter:

> And so I go hunting for words [...] But the words shy away. And the girl is looking at me with exposed, immense and terrified eyes. I shove my hands in my pockets. Too late, my entire body is contaminated by now. And now comes the laughter, swelling up, wringing and twisting itself out, looking for an exit. I bend double, clench my jaw, tighten my fists. Must smother it. Must crush it. Too late. [...].
>
> (p. 181)

In both sequences, laughter is obscene, violent, abject. It signals the inadequacy, indeed collapse, of language, and the survivor-exile's profound alienation. Just as the fog amassing, invading and shrouding Chopin's reality, it spills out like a torrential, diseased and contaminating stream, submerging boundaries, engulfing the protagonist, who no longer expels but is expelled, a split-off castaway, thrown into a borderless space of momentary insanity.

In a parallel to the spastic laughter that interrupts normalcy and bars communication with the non-survivor/exile other, Langfus protagonists are often pierced by sudden memory flashes/nightmares—familiar signs of trauma—which again upset and dis-order their day-to-day existence, sending them back to a limbo state where the border between past and present, reality and fantasy, and indeed life and death is suddenly ruptured and overflows. Just as fits of laughter flood the space between the survivor-exile and their other, drowning any chances at genuine communication, memories crash upon the protagonists like a wave, threatening to engulf them. Such intrusions alter their physical perception so that, on a walk with Denise on the banks of the River Seine in Paris, Michael is unable to perceive the river objectively: 'The greenish waters flows, murky and dull, resembling the flesh of a giant clam or mussel. I can picture how pointless struggling against such turbid and gunky water would be. Perfect for the drowned' (Langfus, 1965b, 151). Oblivious to his companion, Michael lets death, symbolised here by the river, seep and engulf him: 'But soon, I forget it [Denise's hand on his shoulder], I forget this foreign presence. The slow suction of the river takes my thoughts away. My mind goes blank. It is as if I was drifting, in an endless twilight, leaving my body behind, at last' (p. 152).

Langfus's survivor-exile is also often unable to perceive themselves fully, instead sensing different parts of their bodies as autonomous wholes. Commenting on Langfus's writing, Ellen S. Fine notes that 'parts of the body—eyes, hands, fingers, lips, and later on cheeks, legs, thighs—appear detached from those they belong to and leading a life of their own' (Fine, 1993, 100). This fragmented corporeal perception is in part a survival mechanism. Such is the case in a late sequence in *Le Sel et le soufre*, where the narrator, Maria, having been subjected to torture, attempts to remove herself from the pain by personifying her injured thumb:

> The wounded finger leans upon my shoulder like the head of a baby that I would cradle in my arms. And I start again to moan. I have the feeling that it soothes and lulls it. When I am too tired, I sit down and rock back and forth, as mothers do to put their children to sleep.
>
> (Langfus, 1960, 251)

Elsewhere, this bodily fragmentation arches back to the psychological mutilation Langfus's characters have undergone, so that in *Saute, Barbara*, Michael struggles to control his hands, often acting out of their own volition: 'they' kill a kitten at the beginning of the novel, and a German passer-by at the end.[15]

Already mentioned in my brief discussion of laughter, suffocation is another frequent manifestation of abjection in Langfus's texts, this time in a more metaphorical sense. Michael, in *Saute, Barbara*, Maria in *Les Bagages de sable*, as well as Chopin, in *Le Musicien devant la mort*, often lament and rebel against the smothering kindness of 'friends' and well-wishers. Not only does their annoyance illustrates the survivor-exile's struggle to build authentic interpersonal relationships, but it also goes on to offer an insight into their affinity with ghosts—figures often associated with the fog in popular culture—with whom connections, however fraught, acrimonious and complex, appear easier to establish and maintain. Indeed, in both *Les Bagages de sable* and *Saute, Barbara*, the survivor-exile protagonist routinely converses with their ghosts. A good example of this is the opening sequence of *Les Bagages*, which sees Maria returning home and entering into an animated conversation with her dead parents and husband, Jacques. The exchange is reported in direct speech mode, all participants, whose mannerisms and intonation are described, being given equal weight, Manuel Bragança noting that throughout Langfus's corpus, 'the dead have as much density as the other characters, if not more' (Bragança, 2012, 85). In an angry tone, Maria declares that she wants to be left alone. Her father attempts to retort, but she cuts him off:

> 'You abandoned me. If you had wanted to, we could have stayed together. But you abandoned me, shamefully, spinelessly!' Jacques turns his head: 'We are together'. So stern is his voice, I can barely recognise it. I realise he is wearing his big turtleneck sweater. He must be terribly hot. Since I have nothing else to give him, I reply in a whisper: 'Of course, we are together'.
>
> (Langfus, 1962a, 10–11)

The episode, told in the present tense, illustrates what lies at the centre of such a relationship between the living protagonist and the recalled dead, namely an unshakeable tie, sustained by memory and affects—the solicitude expressed by Maria's concern for Jacques being over-dressed—but also an exhortation: 'We are together [...] Of course, we are together'. If those who 'welcome' deportees 'still live in the world of adjectives' (Langfus, 1965b, 82), this is no longer the case for survivor-exiles choking on the inadequacy of words. Like a mantel of mist, shrouding them in an incomprehensible and impenetrable haze, the paucity of language precludes both the survivor-exile and their other from recognising one another and sharing in their common humanity.[16] Langfus's protagonists are therefore forced back into the inextricable solitude emphasised by Aharon Appelfeld: 'The feeling that your experience cannot be told, that no one can understand it, is perhaps one of the worst that was felt by the survivors after the war' (Appelfeld, 1988, 86). Sensing the futility of any attempt at reaching out to their other, Langfus's survivor-exiles opt instead for solitary meandering, longing for torpor and petrification, the final manifestation of the abjection of exile to which we will now turn.

With the exception of the four years of the war in *Le Sel et le soufre*, Anna Langfus's novels typically cover short time-spans—less than a year in both *Les Bagages de sable* and *Saute, Barbara*. Furthermore, all three novels end with the narrator alone, either in precisely the same setting, in the case of *Le Sel* and *Barbara*, or on their way back in *Les Bagages*, thus suggesting a form of inescapability, metaphorically represented as the 'wheel of time' in *Saute, Barbara*. In addition, the last two novels, where the theme of exile manifests most acutely, the protagonist frequently engages in solitary, and circulatory, walks, in a vain attempt at breaking monotony and escaping the heavy tedium enforced by their condition. In her definition, Kristeva insists on the 'separateness' that characterises the abject: '[…] a *deject* who places [himself], *separates* [himself], situates [himself], and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing' (Kristeva, 1982, 8; emphases in original). At the risk of reading Kristeva too literally, and notwithstanding the (free) will that seems to intervene in her definition, far less adamant with regards to the survivor-exile, the act of straying echoes the activities of many a Langfus character. Painfully aware of the inadequacy of language and of their intrinsic 'maladjustment', Langfus's protagonists use the little agency they have to jettison themselves. Casting themselves out, they embark on aimless meanderings—Maria, in *Les Bagages*, picks strangers to follow—which often lead to small public gardens. There, waiting for nothing and for nobody, they remain suspended, inconspicuous, anonymous, in a sort of daze or stupor. In reality, both the purposeless walking and their stone-like sitting in a darkened enclosed space—a cellar at the end of *Le Sel*, the shady city gardens in both *Les Bagages* and *Barbara*—reveal the same inability at existing and signal the same death-wish. While unable to commit suicide—a statement explicitly made in all three texts—Langfus's protagonists are nevertheless, and not surprisingly, indelibly haunted by death. Castigating themselves for still being alive, they fantasise their dissolution and aspire to become an insentient stone, ball or pebble, safely ensconced in a well or darkened space, a phantasm that resonates in some ways with Kristeva's womb-like, semiotic *chora*. Choking, gasping, unheard, the exhausted survivor-exiles that people Anna Langfus's novels long for pre-archaic unity:

> We have been thrown into a well and we fall. There is nothing left to do than let ourselves fall. Let us curl up, let us snuggle up, let us become a smooth, hard, insentient ball, let us dim our humanity. Let us avoid unnecessary gestures, deliquescent thinking, exhausting hope. Let us carefully fold our soul for when it could be of use again. The ideal would be to attain a state of torpor common to hibernating animals.
>
> (Langfus, 1960, 239–240)

4 | DISPELLING THE FOG: THE LANGFUS READER AND EMPATHIC UNSETTLEMENT

The events of the Second World War metaphorically threw Anna Langfus—like her heroine/avatar from *Le Sel et le soufre*—into a well. And like Maria, Anna, brushed by death, fell and fell. And, like Maria again, Anna found a way of keeping her pain and sorrow at bay, at least to some extent. Except that, unlike her fictional characters, instead of turning into an insentient stone, she adopted a language that was not that of her birth, plied it, bent it, turned it, so that in the end it became a book, palpable and pulsating, to which the reader, 'this being, still abstract, more fictitious than a novel's character' (Langfus, 1993, 43) could in turn contribute via their acts of interpretation. While exile, particularly in relation to survivors, undeniably includes and entails trauma, it can also, as mentioned earlier, prove a source of creativity. To understand better the role of artistic/literary creation as potential antidote to trauma and exile in Anna Langfus's work, I will now turn to Dominick LaCapra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement', as he develops it in 'Trauma, absence, loss' (1999).

When he framed this notion, LaCapra was concerned with several interrelated distinctions: absence/loss, structural trauma/historical trauma, acting out/working through. His concern was chiefly with those historians and literary critiques, working on/with traumatic events, urging them to resist the hasty and misleading conflations

mentioned above, warning against the 'impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia' (LaCapra, 1999, 698) these conflations could lead to. Diluting a specific, historical loss, which may or may not be traumatic (p. 712), into structural questions of language, subjectivity and ideology, LaCapra argues, 'facilitate[s] the appropriation of particular traumas by those who did not experience them' (p. 712). LaCapra further goes on to clarify the 'role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness', that is to say, historians and interviewers (in the case of oral testimonies), by explaining that such positioning

> involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place. Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is [...] a desirable affective dimension of enquiry that complements and supplements empirical research and analyses. Empathy is important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems.
>
> (pp. 722–723)

As is clear from this citation, LaCapra is primarily concerned with the creation of such texts/enquiries; less so with their reception. I propose to open up LaCapra's list of 'attentive secondary witnesses' to include the (Langfus) reader.

At the end of her chapter 'Traumatized national community', Angela O'Flaherty notes that Langfus's writing encourages 'the creation of responsible readers, that is, ones capable of confronting and dealing with the traumatic past' (O'Flaherty, 2012, 165). Indeed, like LaCapra's empathetic secondary witness, the Langfus reader is invited to display attentiveness, compassion and understanding, while resisting vicarious suffering, identification and appropriation. This process is facilitated by the very structure of Langfus's novels. Their open endings, circularity, use of gaps and ellipses, as well as less-than-always-positive characterisation, testify to the challenge, and/or invitation, thus extended to readers. In other words, what Langfus's writing style provokes in readers is a measure of distance, interpretative engagement, and a certain willingness to be unsettled—disrupted or shaken in their pre-conceived views and understandings. While intradiegetically centred around compulsive acting-out protagonists trapped in never-ending melancholia, like Michael in *Barbara* and Maria in *Les Bagages*, Langfus's novels do not in and of themselves advocate such behaviour. To the contrary, one could regard her ethically performative novels as examples of 'socially engaged memory-work involved in working-through' (LaCapra, 1999, 713), and/or as illustrations of Meretoja's virtuous hermeneutic circle, a conclusion buttressed by Langfus's explicit belief in her reader's ability to affect, influence and transform the future, as stated during her 1963 WIZO address: 'Following the publication of my book [her first novel], this "reader" was not long in letting me know that he existed, that he had his own life, his own judgement of things, and that he held a minute but priceless crumb of power and influence on the future of mankind' (Langfus, 1993, 43). While confronting, Langfus's unforgiving depiction of post-Shoah survival-exile nevertheless appeals to the reader's engagement, and can generate a new and deeper understanding. It is precisely just such a collaborative dimension inherent to empathic unsettlement as I understand it, that I see operating with regards to Langfus's creative fiction, not only at the initial moment of textual creation—let us remember Langfus's rejection of self-centred genres, as well as her emphasis on small, quasi-universal events—but indeed also at the later time of its reception by the reader, who is made concomitantly less self-assured and, potentially at least, more self-reflective.

5 | CONCLUSION

There is nothing explicitly redemptive about Anna Langfus's fiction. There is no idealised reconstruction of the past (pre-war Poland as an idyllic, original, full presence), nor is the torment of the (real, tangible and irremediable) losses and ensuing absence of loved ones, community, nation, denied. In Langfus's writing, the motif of the fog with which I have started this discussion comes to signify the presence of absence, the past that the survivor-exile takes with

them upon leaving the place of horror. Exile does not protect from trauma. Memory persists, even if it manifests in literal and metaphorical haziness. Yet, Langfus's self-imposed exile unquestionably facilitated a distancing from the traumatic past, while allowing her to cultivate new roots and discover her vocation as a novelist. In this regard, the conscious choice to move to France and write in French may also be interpreted as a defiant means of washing away the 'filth' spread by Polish anti-Semitism. Furthermore, not only does writing have the potential to be 'an act of resistance' (Seeskin, 1988, 120), but it can also constitute a form of reparation, at both individual and collective levels, a potentiality that calls to mind the dual meaning of the French word *tombeau*, which designates the place of the dead, their grave or tomb, and also refers to a vocal or instrumental musical piece written in someone's memory. I see these two meanings meeting in Anna Langfus's novels. On the one hand, they constitute an attempt at, if not burying, at least putting historical and personal traumatic events to rest; on the other they restore a form of presence to victims of the Shoah, whose memory is now inscribed, and passed on to an attentive secondary witness—the reader.

Exile, like absence, is 'inherently ambivalent—both anxiety producing and possibly empowering, or even ecstatic' (LaCapra, 1999, 707). Indeed, exile implies both a familiarity disturbed if not erased (lost), as was the case with Jewish survivor Anna Langfus, and the carving and delineating of new spaces and potentialities, as was the case with Langfus-the-novelist. However, such duality does not imply that both facets are equivalent, nor set once and for all. In reality, not unlike a perpetually unsettled foggy mist, the survivor-exile's world is marked by fluidity and entails ongoing renegotiation and re-evaluation of these two aspects, in accordance with encounters, emotions and mnemonic intrusions. Ultimately though, while well aware of the limitations inherent to fiction-writing, Anna Langfus kept believing in literature's ability to lift momentarily the fog created by loss, absence and exile, even while her very writing re-actualises the misty shroud. And so Langfus's faith in (musical/literary) creativity is asserted in the last words of the Chopin piece:

> But here is life, which returned in me, flows through my arms, warms my hands again, which awaken, quivering. I look at them running up and down the keyboard, and once more they restore me to myself, they bring me back my dreams, my most secret joys, the suffering that they alone are able to name; they untangle me, unfold me in the light, and my heart is beating, once more. Nothing is lost, nothing is pointless, my heart is beating, I am alive, alive…[.]
>
> (Langfus, 1965a, 245)

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ENDNOTES

[1] For this purpose, Hachette Editions had approached several well-known writers, among whom Anna Langfus, asking them to imagine one episode in the life of Polish composer Frédéric Chopin.

[2] All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[3] While pursuing this avenue exceeds the scope of my discussion, the association of fog and gasping with gas and the Nazis gas chambers is hard to ignore.

[4] For a more detailed overview, see Grenaudier-Klijn (2021).

[5] See also Potel (2011, 3; 2014, 33).

[6] As stressed by Anna Langfus's biographer, Jean-Yves Potel, and despite all his efforts, reconstituting the events that took place between 1939 and 1945 remains inevitably lacunary given the absence of witnesses, lack of archival documents and erasure of other historical traces.

[7] The German word *Aktion* (pl. *Aktionen*) refers to a 'military or police operation involving mass assembly, deportation and killing; directed by the Nazis against Jews during the Holocaust' (see https://www.museumoftolerance.com/education/teacher-resources/holocaust-resources/glossary-of-terms-places-personalities.html#Aktion).

[8] In a 2011 article for the *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem*, Jean-Yves Potel insists on the radicality of Anna Langfus's severance with Poland and the Polish language (see Potel, 2011, 3).

[9] I am thinking more particularly of the massacre of some 40 Jewish refugees, which took place in the Polish town of Kielce in early July 1946.

[10] Michael, the protagonist of *Saute, Barbara*, is subject to frequent such manifestations of the intrusive presence of the past.

[11] There are several instances in both *Les Bagages de sable* and *Saute, Barbara* when the protagonist is faced with their interlocutors' inability and/or unwillingness to understand where and what they come from.

[12] The recent *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (Davis & Meretoja, 2020) includes several chapters charting this evolution. See in particular Hanna Meretoja, 'Philosophies of trauma', Colin Davis, 'Trauma, post-structuralism and ethics', Jacob Lothe, 'Narrative', Eaglestone (2020) 'Trauma and fiction', and Sue Vice, 'Trauma in Holocaust literature'.

[13] Langfus's declaration echoes the following observation by Jacob Lothe: '[...] the Holocaust' survivor's decision to narrate—his or her attempt to transform a traumatic experience into a narrative—is also one possessed of an ethical dimension' (Lothe, 2020, 154).

[14] For a more comprehensive discussion of laughter in Anna Langfus's work, see Friedemann (1985).

[15] The conclusion of *Saute, Barbara* is highly enigmatic, and other Langfus critics have interpreted the ending differently.

[16] Judith Clark Schaneman comes to a similar conclusion with regards to *Saute, Barbara* in particular (see Clark Schaneman, 2001, 99).

[17] My deepest thanks and gratitude to my friend and colleague Dr Kim Worthington for her careful reading of this article's initial draft, and for her astute suggestions.

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