

Hanna Krall: Childhood as an Unfinished Sentence

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First, let me explain the title. In “Giving Up the Ghost,” the Irish-British writer Hilary Mantel reflects:

The story of my own childhood is a complicated sentence that I am always trying to finish, to finish and put behind me.¹

This line could just as easily be spoken by the narrators of Hanna Krall’s books. If translated into visual form, their maps would look like a child’s drawings, though not

¹ Hilary Mantel, “Giving up the ghost”, London Review of Books 1 (2003).

mere scribbles. In this context, the child appears as a prematurely formed adult, weighed down by what Alice Miller terms the “gifted child” syndrome. She characterizes this condition as follows:

a child is at the mother’s disposal. [...] A child cannot run away from her [...]. A child can be brought up so that it becomes what she wants it to be. A child can be made to show respect; she can impose her own feelings on him, see herself mirrored in his love and admiration, and feel strong in his presence.²

The child was fashioned by the culture that had nurtured them, and this culture, like a stepmother, demanded to be recognized.

Within it appeared figures who resembled the cannibalistic giants of the Brothers Grimm’s fairy tales—creatures who could sniff out the scent of human beings. They spoke as the Germans from the Radziłów region once did, quoted by Anna Bikont in *My z Jedwabnego* [Jedwabne: Battlefield of Memory]: “It smells strongly of Jews here. When we return in a few days, it must not stink like that.”³ All of this unfolded before the child’s eyes.

In his 2010 essay, “Modlitwa w komisariacie” [Prayer at the Police Station], Tadeusz Sobolewski notes that Hanna Krall speaks directly about her childhood only once. Let me quote from Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna’s book *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej* [He Is from My Homeland], specifically from the passage entitled “Gra o moje życie” [A Game for My Life]:

[...] the only text in which Hanna Krall spoke about herself directly—without the narrative camouflage she later employed in the novel *Sublokatorka* [The Subtenant] or in the wartime account of a Jewish girl who lived in hiding and was denied baptism, a story that would later find its way into Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Dekalog: Eight*.⁴

Why does Sobolewski interpret every instance of the first person as a “direct statement,” despite the fact that this text, written in 1968, clearly employs an established narrative convention?⁵ A reading of *Sublokatorka* makes clear that Krall’s authorial voice is anything

² Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 90.

³ Anna Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego* [Jedwabne: Battlefield of Memory] (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 2004), 281: “Andrzej R.: Three Germans arrived in a car. I was standing nearby. They said, ‘It smells strongly of Jews here. When we return in a few days, it must not stink like that.’ Then they pointed at Feliks Mordasiewicz, who was also standing there, as if he were to blame. He asked, ‘But what am I supposed to do about it?’ In response, they pulled five long, single-shot rifles from the car.”

⁴ Tadeusz Sobolewski, “Modlitwa w komisariacie” [Prayer at the Police Station], <https://kwartalnikwyspa.pl/tadeusz-sobolewski-modlitwa-w-komisariacie-o-pisarstwie-hanny-krall/>.

⁵ See: Hanna Krall, “Gra o moje życie” [A Game for My Life], first published in *Polityka* 16 (1968), reprinted in: *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939–1945* [He Is from My Homeland: Poles Helping Jews 1939–1945], ed. Władysław Bartoszewski, Zofia Lewinówna (Cracow: Znak, 1969), 297–299.

but linear; it emerges through dissociation and dislocation. Why, then, does Sobolewski feel compelled to simplify, to collapse ambivalence into unambiguous meaning? After all, any sentence can be written in the first person, but that does not automatically make it autobiographical. Consider, for instance, the following line—whom does it actually concern?

You know, my mother said your awareness was extraordinary. At five years old, you seemed to understand everything. Is that true?

She can't quite remember.⁶

The woman being addressed is generally portrayed as somewhat dimwitted, and the more she appears so, the greater the freedom the reserved, sensible narrator enjoys. This dynamic, in essence, defines their reciprocal relationship.

Other fans of Krall's work also demand consistency from the author. Online, some accuse her of "having at least two birth dates."⁷ Yet while disunity is a central theme in Hanna Krall's writing, the notion of an assumed or covert identity remains unacceptable to these readers. This resistance is hardly surprising: even Professor Leszek Kołakowski wrestled with the problem. Reflecting on the dual identities of Jews in hiding, he argued that from the standpoint of Kantian ethics, every lie—without exception—must be judged as wrong, regardless of circumstance.⁸

The internet abounds with similar definite opinions about Hanna Krall. For instance, *Rzeczpospolita* contributor Bartosz Marzec claims that the writer "didn't engage with the Holocaust for personal reasons."⁹ It is unclear how he could know this, since he almost certainly did not hear it from Krall. Perhaps, as a fan of Krall, he is worried that if his favorite author were to acknowledge her "personal reasons," she might not appear objective. In Poland, underground heroes and poets are readily accepted as witnesses to their own experiences—for example, Beata Obertyńska's award-winning book *W domu niewoli* [In the House of Slavery]¹⁰ (a striking example of hate speech) was even a required reading at school. Jews, however—even those who were partisans or poets—are denied that same legitimacy.

The belief that the writer "didn't engage with the Holocaust for personal reasons" allows Marzec to concentrate solely on beauty:

⁶ Hanna Krall, "Sublokatorka" [The Subtenant], in: Hanna Krall, *Fantom bólu* [Phantom of Pain] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2024), 111.

⁷ Bartosz Marzec, "Hanna Krall", Culture.pl, October 2009, update: NMR, December 2020, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/hanna-krall>.

⁸ See: Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Tak tak, nie nie" [Yes for Yes, No for No], dwutygodnik.com, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/1816-pol-strony-nowoczesnosc-i-zaglada-tak-tak-nie-nie.html?print=1>.

⁹ Marzec, "Hanna Krall."

¹⁰ See: Beata Obertyńska, *W domu niewoli* [In the House of Slavery] (Wrocław: Siedmioróg 2021).

All of Hanna Krall's stories—written in an understated, beautifully rhythmic style—are suffused with mystery. The reporter approaches it with respect, never imposing conclusions. As I read her books, I cannot escape the sense that nothing significant in the world happens by chance. Krall's stories are too intricate, too finely woven, to be the product of fate.¹¹

I hesitate to ask how the Holocaust could have happened in such a supposedly “chanceless” world. Was it part of God’s plan? Did the Jews have to die? Was it punishment for something—or, God forbid, a kind of sacrifice? These questions do not trouble Marzec, whose approach to Krall’s writing is, nevertheless, insightful. Unlike factual history, which often descends into bitter disputes over details, memory—especially when infused with metaphysical overtones—does not polarize. It soothes; it allows one to believe in a better future. On the “side of memory,” there are no arch-human perpetrators of the Holocaust, no social mechanisms of stupidity, fear, greed, or obedience, and no troubling contemporary parallels. Most importantly, everything ends well. The mystery holds out the promise of an “initiation” that, if we are honest, renders history itself almost vulgar by comparison.

What remains to be explained is the role Jews play in Hanna Krall’s writing. At this point, Bartosz Marzec mentions Hasidism:

In the mid-1980s, Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim* allowed Krall to wander imaginatively through the old Jewish towns of Izbica, Kock, and Warka. She did not know this world, and she did not conceal that fact from her readers. Together, author and audience discovered the past, traditions, and culture of Polish Jews through her reportages.¹²

I am not quite sure what “she did conceal that fact from her readers” refers to exactly, but it seems to me that Marzec mentions Hasidism to place Krall within the “Jew with a gold coin”¹³ convention—a Polish fantasy that glosses over difficult questions. In this context, stories like “Biała Maria” [White Maria] lose their unsettling force—neutralized like a vampire impaled on an aspen stake.

What truly connects Krall to the Hasidim remains unclear. Supposedly, she and her readers are to discover this world together, supposedly on equal terms—though I would wager only one side pays the price. Marzec fails to see that Krall’s reticence does not excuse his own; it may, in fact, be a deliberate literary ruse, a test designed to expose both the difference in and the depth of the misunderstanding.

¹¹ Bartosz Marzec, “Hanna Krall opowiada o Kieślowskim” [Hanna Krall Talks about Kieślowski], *Rzeczpospolita*, 12 May 2011, <https://www.rp.pl/literatura/art14531151-hanna-krall-opowiada-o-gieslowskim>.

¹² Marzec, “Hanna Krall.”

¹³ Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Żyd z pieniążkiem podbija Polskę” [Jew with a Gold Coin Conquers Poland], *Gazeta Wyborcza* [The Electoral Gazette], 18 Feb. 2012, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,11172689,zyd-z-pieniazkiem-podbija-polske.html>.

The same strategies—let's call them by their names: false universalization and the distortion of truth—are also employed by Mariusz Szczygieł, who writes in the introduction to *Szczegół znaczące* [Significant Details]:

For me, the prevailing state of mind when reading these minimalist stories is one of calm. The world, the author seems to whisper in my head, has its own order. There will always be a babysitter ready to help others in a gas chamber. There will always be students who will not sit on the left. Always...¹⁴

But how can Mariusz Szczygieł be so sure? Doesn't his claim—mysteriously attributed to the author—diminish the achievement of the student who chose to sit on the right side of the lecture hall, or the “babysitter” who comforted children in a gas chamber? Isn't this a rather hasty attempt to turn the exception into the rule? And how can holding one's breath possibly be mistaken for being “calm”?

Szczygieł further writes:

In Krall's books, no one is portrayed as better or worse. Characters who assume good or bad roles are treated with the same measure of restraint—matter-of-factly, and perhaps with compassion. For she understands that good and evil are both integral aspects of the human condition.¹⁵

Is this truly the lesson to be drawn from Krall's stories? Would Mariusz Szczygieł recount the murder of his own family in this way? History is replaced by fate. Rules give way to chance. Nothing but calm. Confession takes the place of investigation. An honorary diploma substitutes for compensation. There is no court, no judge—though priests and nuns still make their appearance. And to seal this relativization, Hayden White's name is invoked—misspelled, for good measure.¹⁶

The melancholic tale of Father Adam Boniecki, expelled from his estate and handed a copy pencil by an NKVD soldier as he departs, is woven together with the macabre of the Holocaust. The Holocaust of some, the end of others: almost the same, yet utterly different. For Krzysztof Kieślowski, the protagonist of *Sublokatorka*, the essence of tragedy lies in what a Bernardine friar who missed his train says. We all suffer, life goes on, and we change the subject. What do we take from this? Only: “It's interesting” ...¹⁷

¹⁴Mariusz Szczygieł, “Ciekawe jest” [It's Interesting], in: Hanna Krall, *Szczegół znaczące* [Significant Details] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2022), 19.

¹⁵Szczygieł, 17.

¹⁶Hauden and not Hayden, in: Szczygieł.

¹⁷Szczygieł, 18.

The question is why Krall continues to focus on details.¹⁸ Szczygieł seems unaware of the principle of metonymy after Auschwitz,¹⁹ yet he nonetheless claims to know the answer. His explanation is simple, almost commonsensical: “If we were constantly forced to confront the whole picture, it could be psychologically devastating.”²⁰ We do not want that. And so, we turn to the details.

The world fades in our memories—slowly, endlessly. It is like a bombed-out house from which we have managed to salvage only the doorknob. All that remains is this small brass detail. Yet the doorknob bears witness: the house was once beautiful and grand. [...] In its modest way, the detail preserves the world.²¹

Hanna Krall, then, is in essence Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński—one who rescues from oblivion. The detail saves the world, just as whoever saves a single life saves the entire world.

I apologize for this ironic remark... A decent person cannot turn away from these stories. And yet, because culture, the unbothered stepmother, offers them no support, they must find their own way to endure—perhaps by giving voice to grief.

“Is grief important?”, [Mariusz Szczygieł asks his interlocutor, Tomasz, a Polish language teacher]
“It is! An entire civilization was annihilated. No one deserves to die anonymously, without a grave or a memory. At the very least, we must mourn the murdered. As human beings, we owe them that much; that’s all we can do. Grief is fundamental.”²²

And yet this fundamental has been misdefined, for the murder of one in ten citizens demands more than grief alone. But that, precisely, is what this hopeless dialogue amounts to.

The writer had grappled with this subject since her time at the orphanage in Otwock, a place often visited by decent people burdened with grief. Though the orphanage was home for the children of Holocaust survivors, its life seemed to revolve around unsettled visitors such as Julian Tuwim. Upon arriving in Otwock, he reportedly spoke to no one; instead, he rushed

¹⁸Although, as Mariusz Szczygieł claims, regret is no longer the dominant feeling when he reads what he writes now – Szczygieł, 19.

¹⁹This philosophical position (see, for example, Berel Lang’s and Lawrence Langer’s texts; Polish translations were published in *Literatura na Świecie* [World Literature], nos. 1-2/2004) was best expressed by Philip Roth: “Please, no metaphors where there is recorded history!” (Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 142). As Grzegorz Niziołek has observed (*Polski teatr Zagłady* [Polish Theatre of the Holocaust] (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2013), 181), a similar point was made by Henryk Grynberg, who argued that every authentic image of the Holocaust is, by definition, “non-artistic,” since reality produces far stronger effects than fiction (Henryk Grynberg, “Życie jako dezintegracja” [Life as Disintegration], in: Henryk Grynberg, *Prawda nieartystyczna* [Non-artistic Truth] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2002)).

²⁰Szczygieł, 11.

²¹Szczygieł, 12.

²²Szczygieł, 18.

straight to the children and read them his poems for hours. The poet read *Ptasie radio* [The Bird Broadcast], one of his most famous poems, and—pleased with himself—left.

This time, Krall renders the scene in the second person plural:

They were all sensitive people, so your impertinence struck them with genuine horror. It took a long time to calm them, and in the end you had to stand in the middle of the room, offering loud apologies.²³

Is this, perhaps, the source of the narrator's reticence? Is that why she writes "in such a simple, almost dry, manner"? Could this be the very purpose of her taciturnity, her refusal to judge? She pleads, in the words of Sándor Márai, "Read wisely [...] looking for clues that lead into the thicket, paying attention to mysterious signals."²⁴ But who, in the end, is doing the looking—who is paying attention?

This thought carried me back to the conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of March 1968, held in the old University of Warsaw Library (BUW). The late Professor Jerzy Jedlicki presided over the proceedings. The Marshal of the Sejm at the time, Bronisław Komorowski, arrived late, took a seat in the front row, and promptly fell asleep—I saw it clearly as I was seated at the plenary table. Later still, former Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki arrived. Without hesitation, he mounted the podium and spoke in defense of his colleague Jerzy Zawieyski, who, during the parliamentary debates of April 10–11, 1968, had called for a "dialogue with students and respect for differing arguments."²⁵

Janusz Mazur, blogger behind "Oblicza ludzi. Aktorzy, duchowni, działacze, dziennikarze, filozofowie, kompozytorzy, malarze" [Human Faces: Actors, Clergy, Activists, Journalists, Philosophers, Composers, Painters] thus writes about Krall:

Hanna Krall was born into a Jewish family of civil servants, the daughter of Salomon and Felicja Krall, and spent her childhood in Lublin. The outbreak of World War II proved devastating: the German occupation decimated her family, and her father was among its victims. Krall herself survived only through the help of Poles who hid her and ultimately rescued her from a transport bound for the ghetto—a place where death was all but certain. These wartime experiences left an indelible mark on her psyche, shaping the themes and sensibilities of her later writing. After the war, she was placed in an orphanage in Otwock.²⁶

At that moment, an advertisement appeared on my screen—no doubt tailored to the presumed age of its user—asking: "How much should a hearing aid cost?"

²³Krall, *Sublokatorka*, 143.

²⁴Szczygieł, 5.

²⁵Jerzy Zawieyski, [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Znak_\(ruch\)](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Znak_(ruch)).

²⁶Janusz Mazur, *Oblicza ludzi: Aktorzy, duchowni, działacze, dziennikarze, filozofowie, kompozytorzy, malarze* [Human Faces: Actors, Clergy, Activists, Journalists, Philosophers, Composers, Painters], <https://obliczaludzi.com/hanna-krall/>.

I could not help but take it as a kind of metaphysical gloss on what I was reading about Hanna Krall online.

What art is for

Let me briefly recapitulate my observations. Grzegorz Niziołek's *Polski teatr Zagłady* [Polish Theatre of the Holocaust]²⁷—a work I regard as unparalleled in its analysis of the postwar period—confronts the question of art's capacity to grapple with what overwhelms us as a society. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's thesis that sociology grew blind to the Holocaust, Niziołek contends that theater, too, has been “zealously participating in ideological projects of repressing the memory of an overly painful past.”²⁸

But what, precisely, is too painful to remember? It is not the fact that some Poles participated willingly in the Holocaust—they can be dismissed as outcasts. The true difficulty lies elsewhere, in the recognition that

A critical point in defining the role of the bystander occurs when a community reclassifies a group of people as ‘unpersons’—their lives stripped of protection, and the ethical norms that once governed social relations withdrawn from them.²⁹

This reality—touching one in ten Polish citizens—constitutes the community's most obscene and carefully concealed secret.

As Niziołek observes:

When the mechanisms of representation—that is, the effort to produce clear and comprehensible images of the past—break down, whether because they are too fraught or too difficult to articulate, theater turns instead to repetition. Through repetition, it draws on shared social experience without ever naming its subject directly. In this mode, theater enters the realm of taboo: it restages suppressed histories in symptomatic and affective forms, endlessly reworking scenes of repression and the collapse of defense mechanisms. In doing so, it casts the spectator into the uneasy role of an indifferent or mocking bystander who watches the suffering of another, eliciting responses that oscillate between shock, aggression, compassion, paralysis, anxiety, and fear.³⁰

Hanna Krall's writing carries the same unsettling power. As the passages above suggest, it continues to provoke in us the reactions of bystanders rather than true witnesses to the suffering of others—even among the most discerning readers. Niziołek terms this

²⁷Niziołek, 31: “The Holocaust has more to say about the state of sociology than sociology is able to add to our knowledge of the Holocaust”; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 3.

²⁸Niziołek, 32.

²⁹Niziołek, 69.

³⁰Niziołek, 34.

the repetition effect: a dynamic that exposes, as he writes, the repression of “the position of the eyewitness and the ethical obligations it entails.” We remain caught in a state of uncertainty—still “not knowing what we see,”³¹ and with no assurance that we ever will.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³¹Niziołek, 61. On page 109, Niziołek observes: “Theater is a place that best reveals the principle of the circulation of social energy in cultural space. It is a model of all types of negotiations and, at the same time, a specific, that is unique, realization of these processes and phenomena. It is a model of an event and the event itself, a repetition and an event. This is what Stephen Greenblatt claims [Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)]. Theater reveals its social background more powerfully than any other cultural medium: it formulates collective intentions, arises as a result of collective effort, and addresses a collective audience. Theater can never be read as the work of a single author; even a play reveals on stage its multiple mediations in other texts. Theater, in its everyday practice (and not in a consciously formulated ideological message), has the ability to uncover semi-hidden cultural transactions that govern the circulation and transmission of social energy. The mechanisms of obliterating traces of these transactions can most easily be revealed in a theatrical context. These “transactions,” as Niziołek notes, are central to Greenblatt’s analysis. Greenblatt identifies the sources of such masking procedures in two dominant ideological constructs: the notion of the author as the sole, autonomous creator of a work of art, and the conception of power as a unified, coherent system. Theater, precisely because its essence lies in the circulation of energy, exposes the fragility of these constructs. For Greenblatt, social energy is not a physical or metaphysical force but a rhetorical one—a capacity embedded in cultural texts to connect individuals with one another and even with the dead. He searches for traces within these texts that retain the power to affect, to move, and to generate responses. ‘We identify *energia* only indirectly, by its effects: it is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape, and organize collective physical and mental experiences. Hence it is associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder. In its aesthetic modes, social energy must have a minimal predictability—enough to make simple repetitions possible—and a minimal range: enough to reach out beyond a single creator or consumer to some community, however constricted.’ There must, then, exist a community of spectators who erupt in laughter at the same instant or who, equally suddenly, fall into a stunned silence. Such reactions are not random; they must be, to some degree, predictable and repeatable. Our task, therefore, is to search the cultural field for traces capable of provoking these affects. The principle of repetition—the capacity to elicit a response again and again— informs the dialogue with the dead.”

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the misunderstandings surrounding the reception of autobiographical themes in Hanna Krall's writing, particularly within mainstream—and even elitist—currents of Polish literary criticism. Drawing on the categories articulated in Krall's short story "Sublokatorka" [The Subtenant], the author argues that the misreadings expose an underlying social hierarchy in Poland, one that continues to divide citizens into symbolic "tenants" and "subtenants," or first- and second-class citizens.

anti-Semitism

Jews

EXCLUSION

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Joanna Tokarska-Bakir – b. 1958; is a cultural anthropologist and scholar of religious studies, full professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and a corresponding member of the Academy. Her research focuses on the anthropology of the Holocaust and the ethnography of anti-Jewish violence. She is the author of numerous influential works, including *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia* [Misty Things. Essays and studies] (Pogranicze, Sejny 2004); *Legendy o krwi. Antropologia przesądu* [Legends of Blood. The Anthropology of Anti-Semitic Prejudice] (W.A.B., Warsaw 2008; French edition: *Légendes du sang. Une anthropologie du préjugé antisémite en Europe*, 2015); *Okrzyki pogromowe. Szkice z antropologii historycznej Polski 1939-1946* (Czarne, Wołowiec 2012; English edition: *Pogrom Cries. Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946*, Peter Lang 2017, 2019); the two-volume monograph *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego* (Czarna Owca, Warsaw 2018; English edition: *Cursed. The Social Portrait of the Kielce Pogrom*, Cornell UP 2023); *Bracia miesiące. Eseje i studia* (IBL, 2020; English edition: *Jewish Fugitives in the Polish Countryside*, Peter Lang 2022); and *Kocia muzyka. Chóralna historia pogromu krakowskiego* [Caterwauling: A Choral History of the Krakow Pogrom] (Czarna Owca, Warsaw 2024, 2 vols.).