

WRITING TRAUMA: GEORGES PEREC'S *WOU LE SOUVENIR D'ENFANCE* AND
PHILIPPE GRIMBERT'S *UN SECRET*

A Thesis Presented

By

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DEDICATION

With all my love,

To,

Mother,
Mary Margaret,
and
Sue Ellen.

ABSTRACT

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MAY 2012

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This Master's thesis examines the ways in which the Holocaust continues to figure in French-Jewish autobiographical fiction. I examine texts by two leading authors, Georges Perec (1936-1982) and Philippe Grimbert (b.1948). I treat Perec as a first-generation survivor of the Holocaust as he was a child during the war and suffered the loss of both his parents, while Grimbert was born to Holocaust survivors shortly after the war and thus belongs to what has come to be known as the second generation. In both Perec's *Wou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and Grimbert's *Un secret* (2004) the body plays a central role as a site on which traumatic memory is inscribed. Trauma also determines the form and language of both novels, influencing not only the narrative structure but also the semantics utilized by the narrators. These post-Holocaust autofictions confront similar themes: both deal with the concept of the "unspeakable" and attempt to address the "emptiness" in the wake of the Holocaust and come to terms with the tremendous loss of life. Although thirty years separate Perec's *W* and Grimbert's *Un secret*, the overwhelming parallels between the two texts suggest that the trauma of the Holocaust has been passed on from one generation of survivors to the next through the disturbances of language. In my analysis, I illuminate common tropes that appear in these two works as instances of transgenerational traumatic transmission.

The introduction provides a description of both works, a discussion of the autofictional genre and its use in both texts, and an overview of the trauma and literary theory with which I engage. The first chapter, “Traumatic Memory and its Inscription on the Body,” offers a close study of the body in both works. Both works juxtapose athletes who possess superior physical capabilities to weaker individuals who are marked by deformities, wounds or symbolic scars. I discuss the location of the narrators’ wounds in both texts and what this might suggest in psychoanalytic terms. I argue the location of the wounds, on the narrator’s mouth in *W* and on the narrator’s eyebrow in *Un secret*, are linked to what type of work these narrators undergo throughout both texts vis-à-vis trauma. Specifically, I use Freud’s *Das Unheimlich* to discuss the wound above the narrator’s eye in *Un secret*, linking it to the processes of testimony and remembrance. The second chapter, “Doubled Narrators and Narratives,” focuses on the various instances of doubling present in both works. I pay close attention to the doubled narrators, Gaspard Winckler in *W*, and Simon in *Un secret*, as well as to the presence of two alternative narratives in each text. I use Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage to support my argument that the doubling present in both texts provides a mirror that is crucial to the narrators’ processes of remembering, witnessing, and recording. In addition, Gabriele Schwab’s text, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* is fundamental to my argument that the legacy of trauma is inherited by the second generation. The third chapter, “The Influence of Trauma on the Production of Time” comprises an in-depth analysis of the poetics of time in Proust and Grimbert. Identifying Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* as an influential model for Proust and Grimbert, I explore the opening paragraphs of all three works, noting particularly how the

interaction between the adverb “longtemps” and the passé composé destabilizes the representation of time in order to convey the fragmentary nature of memory.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores two post-Holocaust autofictional texts, Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and Philippe Grimbert's *Un secret* (2004). I examine themes, narrative techniques, and stylistic elements in *W* and *Un secret* through the lens of contemporary trauma theory. I demonstrate how these writers explore the effects of trauma on the body in the form of wounds, scars, and deformities. I analyze the doubled narratives and narrators as being symptomatic of traumatic experience. I observe how the authors confront the inadequacy of language to represent time, memory, and loss. I trace the influence of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* on Perec and Grimbert, as well as Perec's influence on Grimbert. This thesis thus identifies trends that mark both first-generation writing on the Holocaust – *W* – and second-generation writing – *Un secret*.

Originally I had intended to explore experimental post-Holocaust French-Jewish writing. However as I conducted research and familiarized myself with both French-Jewish literature and trauma theory, I was struck by the affinity between Grimbert's *Un secret* and Perec's *W*. An example of the striking likenesses between the two texts is when Grimbert's and Perec's narrators describe the evolution of their last name in response to anti-Semitism. As the narrator of *W* recounts,

Le nom de ma famille est Peretz. Il se trouve dans la Bible. En hébreu, cela veut dire “trou,” en russe “poivre,” en Hongrois [...] c'est ainsi que l'on désigne ce que nous appelons “Bretzel”[...] de Beretz, et Beretz, comme Baruk ou Berek, est forgé sur la même racine que Peretz – en arabe, sinon en hébreu, B et P sont une seule et même lettre) [...] Un employé d'état civil qui entend en russe et écrit en polonais entendra [...] Peretz et écrira Perec [...] Cette explication signale, plus qu'elle n'épuise, toute l'élaboration fantasmatique, liée à la dissimulation patronymique de mon origine juive, que j'ai faite autour du nom que je porte et que je repère (56)

The narrator appears to be wrestling with the significance of his name. He recalls the Jewish roots of his name, as well as its etymology. Both time and the successive translations of his name have effaced his sense of identity as a French Jew. The narrator of *Un secret* similarly describes the changes his name has undergone over time:

Et toujours ces questions : régulièrement on m'interrogeait sur les origines du nom Grimberty, on s'inquiétait de son orthographe exacte, exhumant le "n" qu'un "m" était venu remplacer, débusquant le "g" qu'un "t" devait faire oublier [...] Un "m" pour un "n", un "t" pour un "g", deux infimes modifications. Mais "aime" avait recouvert "haine," dépossédé du "j'ai" j'obéissais désormais à l'impératif du "tais." Butant sans cesse contre le mur douloureux dont s'étaient entourés mes parents, je les aimais trop pour tenter d'en franchir les limites, pour écarter les lèvres de cette plaie (17-18)

Here, the narrator of *Un secret* describes all the minute changes involved in transforming his family name from Grinberg to Grimberty. He likens these changes to a wall that his parents have erected in order to protect themselves from anti-Semitism, and recognizes that he must confront this history, despite the pain and hatred involved. The letters that compose his name, as well as the words "aime," "haine," "j'ai," and "tais," underline the central themes of *Un secret*. Love now covers hate, because his parents have repressed their sentiments concerning the Holocaust and the death of their first son. Where is this hate? Where has it gone? Additionally, these name changes spark questions regarding the French-Jewish identity in France. For example, what does it mean to be Jewish in France, both before and after the war? Both of the narrators' preoccupations with the origin of their names and the modifications they have undergone reveal the connections between identity, writing, and language in both Perec's *W* and Grimberty's *Un secret*.

The preponderance of parallel elements in both texts led me to my central question: How does trauma pass from first-generation survivors to the second generation

and how does literature reflect this? Others have considered this transmission, but typically only within the context of family dynamics. For example, Dr. Robert Prince, describes this traumatic transmission between family members:

The mechanism of second generation effects is seen as an extremely complex one in which cumulative trauma of parental communication, the aspect of the parent-child relationship determined by the Holocaust context, and the historical imagery provided by the parent and by other cultural processes are mediated by interaction with normative developmental conflicts, family dynamics independent of the Holocaust, variables of social class, culture, Jewish heritage, and immigrant status. (27)

I opt to study the transmission of trauma within the frame of literature. Accordingly, I argue that transmission occurs not only within the boundaries of relationships but also within literature itself, in the narrative transcription of trauma. Applicable to my argument is Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), which outlines a theory of modern poetry in the western European tradition. Bloom proposes that all poetry is derivative of "strong" poets, such as John Milton.¹ The manner in which Bloom traces literary influences is much like the way this thesis traces the movement in the transcription of trauma in writing. In the wake of the Holocaust, I examine the literary influence of Georges Perec on Philippe Grimbert.

Georges Perec

French-Jewish novelist Georges Perec (1936-1982) was born in the suburbs of Paris. His father, Icek Judko Peretz enlisted in the French army and died in 1940 from

¹ In reference to literary influence, Bloom suggest, "It may be that one strong poet's work expiates for the work of a precursor. It seems more likely that later visions cleanse themselves at the expense of earlier ones. But the strong dead returns, in poems as in our lives, and they do not come back without darkening the living" (139).

war injuries. His mother, Cyrla Peretz, is estimated to have died around 1943 in Auschwitz. During the war, Perec was hidden in the French countryside by his paternal aunt and uncle, who formally adopted him in 1945. Perec's best-known works are *Les Choses* (1965), *La Disparition* (1969), *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975), and *La Vie Mode d'Emploi* (1978). *La Disparition*, a 300-page lipogrammatic novel written without the letter E marks one of Perec's greatest feats. Perec was one of the founding members of the Oulipo group – *Ouvrage de Littérature Potentielle* – a group of writers and mathematicians dedicated to the act of writing using constraints.

In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec uses experimental techniques such as typographic demarcation, altering the font style from chapter to chapter. The text comprises an autofictional segment in plain type and an allegorical narrative in italics. A character named Georges narrates the autofictional segment. The allegory's narrator is Gaspard Winckler, who undertakes a mission to find a missing child by the same name. Halfway through the allegory, Winckler lands on the island of W and proceeds to describe the island's athletic practices and customs in great detail. In the last passage of the allegory, Winckler states,

Celui qui pénétra un jour dans la Forteresse n'y trouvera d'abord qu'une succession de pièces vides, longues, et grises... des tas de dents d'or, d'alliances, de lunettes, des milliers et des milliers de vêtements en tas, des fichiers poussiéreux, des stocks de savon de mauvaise qualité.... (220)

In the last chapter, an explicit reference to David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* links the allegory to the concentration camps of World War II: "la structure des camps de répression est commandée par deux orientations fondamentales: pas de travail, du "sport," une dérision de nourriture" (Perec 221). Throughout the novel, the alternation of autofiction and allegory progressively destabilizes the status of memory and truth. By the

end of the text, allegory comes to be associated with history, whereas autobiography is linked to creative invention, uncertainty and fiction.

Philippe Grimbert

Philippe Grimbert (born 1948) is a French writer and psychoanalyst, whose parents were Holocaust survivors. His works include the essay “Psychanalyse de la chanson” (1996) and the novels, *La Petite Robe de Paul* (2001), *Un secret* (2004), and *La Mauvaise Rencontre* (2009). Grimbert’s *Un secret* won the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens in 2004. French screenwriter and director Claude Miller adapted the novel to the screen. The film won several awards, including the César Award for best actress in a supporting role and le Grand Prix des Amériques at the Montreal Film Festival. These awards indicate the continuing relevance and significance of Holocaust testimonies.

Un secret, is the autofictional account of a young boy, Philippe, who grows up in the shadow of an elder half-brother. The first narrative of *Un secret*, describes Philippe’s fantasies regarding his parents’ past lives. He imagines that they met under happy, positive circumstances and that their athletic prowess united them. The second “récit” takes place when Philippe gets into a brawl at school. A popular boy makes anti-Semitic remarks, provoking Philippe to hit him and leaving him with a wound above his eye. When Louise, a neighbor and family friend sees the wound, she decides to tell Philippe his parents’ secret. This marks the beginning of the second “récit” whereby Philippe attempts to absorb the truth about his family’s past. Prior to his birth, his parents, Maxime and Tania, were brother and sister-in-law. Maxime's first wife and son Simon were

deported by the Germans in a roundup of Jews and perished in concentration camps. Tania lost her husband as well. Tania and Maxime began their affair while hiding in the French countryside, acting on feelings they had concealed since before the outbreak of the war. Shortly after the war they married, and Tania gave birth to Philippe. Philippe must come to terms with the fact that his parents never properly mourned for those they lost during the war. The text ends by claiming, “ce livre serait sa tombe” (Grimbert 191), thus positioning itself as Simon’s tomb.

Reading Perec and Grimbert as Readers

Both Perec and Grimbert are self-declared readers of Proust. The influence of Proust, which is further discussed in Chapter Three, is apparent through a variety of stylistic techniques and the thematic content in both texts. Proust altered the course of literature in the twentieth century and is a particular touchstone for French-Jewish autofictional writing. Proust’s emphasis on questions of memory and time in *À la recherche du temps perdu* finds itself very present in *W* and *Un secret*. Both *W* and *Un secret* are self-reflexive novels that explore how time and memory interact in writing about one’s life. Even the narrator of *Un secret* bears resemblances to Proust’s narrator of *À la recherche*, as Jonathan Richards notes, “There are echoes of the young Proust in François’s delicate temperament and awareness of his parents’ disappointment in him” (“In the dark”). Beyond Proust, Grimbert also indicated Perec as an influential author, “My taste in literature is very classical -- Flaubert, Balzac, the great writers of the nineteenth century (which seems to me the golden age of the novel). In contemporary

fiction, I am particularly fond of authors such as Albert Cohen, Georges Perec, Patrick Modiano, and Erri De Luca. Those who have served as models for me are those whose work is the most limpid, the subtlest” (“Memory”). The structure of Grimbert’s text indicates the influences of Proust and Perec, not only regarding the thematic elements, but also on the level of narration itself. Proust’s *À la recherche* is an autofiction, as are *W* and *Un secret*. Not only is the narrator’s name the same as the author’s, but also questions of memory and the difficulty of representation rise to the forefront. In the following section, I situate autofiction as a form of writing on the self and establish its particular relevance to trauma narratives.

Autofiction

The blurred boundaries of the autofictional genre are ideal for representing the effects of trauma, because trauma radically severs and distorts one’s understanding of time. The destabilizing effect of autofiction, on the reader and narrator alike, is like the destabilizing effects of both being a victim and witness to trauma. As Zoe Waxman comments, “the very act of writing changes a witness’s relationship to their experiences” (173). In fact, the very specific combination of truth and fantasy, reality and fiction is essential: “it is wrong to deny the essential dialectical relationship between the concepts... to split them apart suggests that the events have a life independent of their being experienced” (Waxman 175). In fact the story the survivor must tell is a story that essentially cannot be told, where “language may not be adequate to convey the horrors of the Holocaust” (Waxman 175), but it is *possible*. In fact, what is told alters the act of recalling the experience and thus acts as a *re-representation*. In *Testimony*, Dori Laub

supplies an example of testimony that bore mistakes; a woman describes an incident at Auschwitz: “All of a sudden... we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable” (59). With some research it turned out that only one chimney had blown up. While some critics put in question the woman’s entire testimony, Laub suggests,

The woman was testifying [...] not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four [...] She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth. (Felman and Laub 60)

Like the woman testifying to the “breakage of a framework,” through their autofictional texts, Perec and Grimbert also testify to the ruptures and holes in both their memory and experience, as a result of trauma.

Serge Doubrovsky first coined the term "auto-fiction" in reference to his own work *Fils*. It was in part a reaction to Philippe Lejeune’s *Le Pacte autobiographique*, which declared a set of rules for defining the autobiographical genre. Lejeune used the reader as a starting point for refining the autobiographical genre, explaining that there is an implied pact between writer and reader. The identity of the narrator’s name establishes the way in which to read and approach the text. The chart below demonstrates Lejeune’s theory that if the name of the character is the same name as the author, the text is thus an autobiography.

<i>Nom du personnage</i> → <i>Pacte</i> ↓	≠ nom de l'auteur	= O	= nom de l'auteur
romanesque	1 a <u>ROMAN</u>	2 a <u>ROMAN</u>	
= O	1 b <u>ROMAN</u>	2 b <u>Indéterminé</u>	3 a <u>AUTOBIO.</u>
autobiographique		2 c <u>AUTOBIO.</u>	3 b <u>AUTOBIO.</u>

The autofictional text is particular in that it resides neither in the realm of the purely fictional nor in the realm of the purely autobiographical. Both Perec's *W* and Grimberty's *Un secret* operate along this unstable genre, where past and present, truth and falsehood, memory and fantasy, intertwine and integrate. As Grimberty comments on this instability, "C'est dire la fragilité de ces souvenirs sur la véracité desquels nous étions prêts à jurer, c'est dire pourquoi la frontière si souvent interrogée entre roman et autobiographie est à ce point ténue" (Grimbert "Ce que secrète" 4). The blurred quality of autofiction is most appropriate in narratives that deal with trauma, because of the altering effects of trauma on memory as I discuss in more detail below.

Trauma Theory

*When there is no grave, we are condemned
to go on mourning.
(Ruth Kluger Still Alive)*

The very beginnings of a theory of the transmission of trauma appear in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. By engaging with both history and literature, Caruth establishes a new approach in reading the language of trauma. She emphasizes the cross-cultural link of trauma,

In a catastrophic age [...] trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history (11)

For Caruth, understanding trauma goes beyond simple recollections, for it is what binds cultures to each other. The understanding of trauma may provide for a better understanding of all cultures on both the collective and personal level – bridging communities and connecting individuals.

On the other hand, steering clear from the broader effects of trauma, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, co-authored by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, tackles the act of witnessing, both of oneself and to others. Laub suggests that there has been a collapse of witnessing:

That what precisely made a Holocaust out of the events is a unique way in which, during its historical occurrence, *the event produced no witnesses*. Not only, in effect, did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime, but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims. (80)

Laub's theory of witnessing has provided me with a concrete understanding of the

process of witnessing and how I, as a reader, am a witness to what is presented in *W* and *Un secret*. In my second chapter, I discuss the role of witnessing and the doubled narrator, questioning Laub's framework.

In addition to drawing on Felman and Laub's framework and Caruth's suggestive connections between psychoanalysis, trauma, and literature, I utilize Gabriele Schwab's contemporary theories of transgenerational transmission to explore *W* and *Un secret*. Within the field of contemporary trauma theory, Schwab's *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* provides a new framework for understanding the evolving effects of trauma and accommodating the ever-increasing second-generation testimonies. In her introduction, Schwab poses the question, "How do we deal with a haunting past while simultaneously acting in the present, with its own ongoing violence?"(2). Already, Schwab explores the boundaries of past and present, which act as an ongoing theme throughout my analysis of *W* and *Un secret*. Schwab goes on to state, "My emphasis of *Haunting Legacies* is on the transgenerational transmission of trauma [...] the destiny of traumatized children around the world is a signpost pointing to the future of our globe. What kind of trauma will these children pass on to their children if they even survive this violence?" (40). Utilizing psychoanalytical and literary frameworks for understanding trauma in conjunction with contemporary trauma theory, I explore first- and second-generation trauma narratives in which trauma is both expressed and repressed. Like Felman, Laub, and Caruth, I emphasize witnessing in all its implications as being a first step to understanding and reading *W* and *Un secret*. I also underline the significance of language in both works. I bring together Lacan's theories of language and Freud's understanding of the body to engage in a discussion on the dynamic

transmission of trauma.

My first chapter explores the transcription of trauma on the body in *W* and *Un secret* and shows how the location of wounds is crucial to understanding the impact of trauma and its passage from the first to second generation. My second chapter moves from the physical body to the presence of doubled narrators in both texts. I demonstrate how space and time function in both works in the inscription of trauma. My third and final chapter studies how trauma affects language and temporality in *W* and *Un secret*. Engaging with Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, I explore the language of time and the function of memory in *W* and *Un secret*. Through my exploration of *W* and *Un secret*, I draw out the influence of trauma on writing and reflect on the legacy of the Holocaust on contemporary French-Jewish fiction.

CHAPTER 1

TRAUMATIC MEMORY AND ITS INSCRIPTION ON THE BODY

Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and Philippe Grimbert's *Un secret* (2004) are first-person narratives of the Holocaust that place particular emphasis on the body. The narrators of both texts make frequent references to sports, cite examples of remarkable physical strength and weakness, and reveal a preoccupation with wounds and deformities. Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* consists of two alternating narratives: the first is an account of the author's childhood, while the second, set in italics, serves as a fictional allegory of the concentration camps of World War II. Despite the author's use of two different type-settings to demarcate the two types of narrative, the boundary between fact and fiction blurs throughout *W*. In the auto-fictional segment of the text, the narrator repeatedly questions the accuracy of his recollections, while the allegorical segment of the text bears a striking resemblance to the concentration camps of World War II. Grimbert's *Un secret* is an autofictional account of a young boy's coming-of-age and shocking discovery of his family's dark history. The narrator's fantasies regarding his parents' life before the war are juxtaposed to the stark account of the family history that a next-door neighbor reveals; this counter-narrative constitutes the last half of the text. In the analysis that follows, I will highlight how the body functions in both these auto-fictional texts as a vehicle through which trauma is manifested. I argue that the preoccupation with the body in Perec and Grimbert exemplifies a pattern in post World War II French-Jewish literature.

The physiological expression of trauma in Perec's and Grimbert's writing includes

three key elements. First, both texts place emphasis on athletics. In *W*, this takes the form of an elaborate account of Olympic games on the fictional island of *W*. In *Un secret*, this obsession with sports is expressed through the narrator's parents' athletic tendencies: the narrator's mother, Tania, is an accomplished swimmer, while Maxime is a talented gymnast. Both possess physical talents their son lacks. Second, the narrators of both texts bear various physical wounds and/or deformities: in *W* it is a wound above the eye, while in *Un secret*, the narrator receives a significant blow to the lip. Finally, the symbolic location of these wounds in both texts is important, as they point to crucial questions of knowing, of bearing witness, and of producing testimony.

Perec introduces athletics into *W* primarily through his description of the island of *W*, a utopian society where life is structured around athletic competition. This island belongs to the allegorical portion of *W* and represents the concentrations camps from which Perec's mother never returned. The description of the island is initially benign: "Il est clair que l'organisation de base de la vie sportive sur *W* (l'existence des villages, la composition des équipes, les modalités de sélection...) a pour finalité unique d'exacerber la compétition, ou, si l'on préfère, d'exalter la victoire" (123). Sports appear to fully absorb and enthrall the society. As the description of the island continues, it becomes clear that the island is controlled by a powerful few and that the athletes are treated according to the whim of those in power. Finally, the island is rampant with evil. The reader progressively comes to the grim realization that the island is not as it first appeared. The final chapter explicitly informs the reader that the island of *W* is an allegory of the concentration camps: "Des années et des années plus tard, dans *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, de David Rousset, j'ai lu ceci : 'La structure des camps de répression

est commandée par deux orientations fondamentales : pas de travail, du “sport” [...]” (Perec 221). The narrator continues by relating specific elements of the allegory to a passage he had read in *L’Univers concentrationnaire*:

Dans la petite cour rectangulaire et bétonnée, le sport consiste en tout : faire tourner très vite les hommes pendant des heures sans arrêt, avec le fouet ; organiser la marche du crapaud [...] répéter sans fin le mouvement qui consiste à se plier très vite sur les talons [...] courir ensuite s’inonder d’eau pour se laver et garder vingt-quatre heures des vêtements mouillés. (Perec 222)

Here, Rousset, much like the narrator of *W*, highlights the stark appearance of the camp, the repetition of acts that have no purpose, and the cruelty of those in power. On the island of *W*, just as in Rousset’s description of the camps, weakness has grave consequences. Those who are strong have a greater fighting chance of remaining alive on the island. The emphasis on sports in *W* initially serves to delude both the book’s characters and the reader. The description of athletic practices on the island disguises the true intentions and cruelty of the society, only to later reveal them in all their horror. Perec subverts the values one usually associates with athletic games, namely health and virility, in order to capture the perverse inhumanity of the camps.

Beyond the description of life on the sports-obsessed island of *W*, Perec’s narrator frequently refers to his own physical wounds. He returns repeatedly to the memory of a childhood arm injury that left him in a sling, evoking how “un triple trait parcourt ce souvenir : parachute, bras en écharpe, bandage herniaire : cela tient de la suspension, du soutien, presque de la prothèse... je portais effectivement un bandage herniaire. Je fus opéré à Grenoble, quelques mois plus tard [...]” (81). It remains unclear whether the described wounds are invented, exaggerated, or accurate, as the narrator questions his own memories:

La Croix-Rouge évacue les blessés. Je n'étais pas blessé. Il fallait pourtant m'évacuer. Donc, il fallait faire comme si j'étais blessé. C'est pour cela que j'avais le bras en écharpe. Mais ma tante est à peu près formelle : je n'avais pas le bras en écharpe, il n'y avait aucune raison pour que j'aie le bras en écharpe ... Peut-être, par contre, avais-je une hernie et portais-je un bandage herniaire, un suspensoir. À mon arrivée à Grenoble, il me semble que j'ai été opéré [...] Je portais effectivement un bandage herniaire [...] Quant à cet imaginaire bras en écharpe, on le verra, plus loin, faire une curieuse réapparition. (80-81)

In another passage the narrator recalls having injured his upper lip in a skiing accident.

He gives significance to the scar, claiming that “la cicatrice qui résulta de cette agression est encore aujourd’hui parfaitement marquée. Pour des raisons mal élucidées, cette cicatrice semble avoir eu pour moi une importance capitale : elle est devenue une marque personnelle, un signe distinctif [...]” (145). On another level, this scar is also an autobiographical reference to the author’s own experience. As the narrator of *W* states, “Ce n’est peut-être pas à cause de cette cicatrice que je porte la barbe, mais c’est vraisemblablement pour ne pas la dissimuler que je ne porte pas de moustaches [...]” (146). Perec also wore a beard and no mustache for the majority of his life. When Perec went for military selection in 1957, as David Bellos recounts it, “The little scar on his upper lip was recorded as his only distinguishing feature” (184). The scar, as the narrator himself states, is a distinctive and personal mark. In fact, the narrator finds himself relating to an actor based solely on his scar, “Jacques Spiesser, porte a lèvres supérieure une cicatrice presque exactement identique à la mienne: c’est un simple hasard, mais il fut, pour moi, secrètement déterminant” (146). The repetitive nature of these descriptions emphasizes the significance of the body.²

The narrator’s description of his arm injury is situated at a key juncture of the text.

² See passages on pages 45, 81, 112, 113, 145, 174.

The description immediately precedes the allegorical chapter that recounts the moment right before the trip to the island of W; the following chapter, where we would have expected a return to auto-fictional narrative in unmarked text, consists instead of a page left nearly completely blank, save for a single ellipsis enclosed by parentheses (89).

As David Bellos argues, “three dots in round brackets constitute the conventional sign that something has been omitted from a textual quotation. Page 61 indicated typographically: I’m not telling” (549). What is it that the narrator withholds here? In the chapter that directly precedes the ellipsis, the narrator describes the last time he saw his mother. Although he makes only a quick reference to his mother’s departure, he describes his bandaged arm in great detail. The arm becomes symbolic of his last moments with his mother. The chapter following the ellipsis makes no mention of the mother. Instead, the following chapters describe the narrator’s experience after this traumatic loss: he is a young child hiding from Nazi persecution in the French countryside.

The narrator describes his arm in the sling as suspended, using the term “suspension.” It is important to note that the French word for ellipsis is “points de suspension.” This suggestively connects the narrator’s injured arm to the ellipsis, as the narrator himself implies,

Comme pour le bras en écharpe de la gare de Lyon, je vois bien ce que pouvait remplacer ces fractures éminemment réparables [...] même si la métaphore, aujourd’hui, me semble inopérante pour décrire ce qui précisément avait été cassé [...] ces points de suspension désignaient des douleurs nommables (113-114)

Interestingly, this reference to “suspension” is accompanied in the text by frequent references to parachutes, both literal and metaphorical. Right before his description of the arm injury, the narrator remembers his mother’s gift to him of a Charlie Chaplin book

entitled *Charlot Parachutiste* (45). Parachuting was an important moment in Georges Perec's life. Conscripted by the army as a young man, he chose to be a parachutist. He found that "parachuting ... is an ineffable joy" (Bellos 187); however the experience also left him acutely aware of the sense of apprehension that accompanies the moment of suspension. The apprehension he felt is paralleled by the narrator's description of suspension, "je fus précipité dans le vide; tous les fils furent rompus; je tombais, seul et sans soutien. Le parachute s'ouvrit. La corolle se déploya, fragile et sur suspens avant la chute maîtrisée" (81). Indeed, the narrator's memory of having his arm suspended in a sling leads to an attempt to face a far more radical void, the loss of his mother. The ellipsis symbolizes the void and the moment of rupture with his family and the life he previously knew. Indeed, the ellipsis ruptures the text by separating two integral parts of the narrator's life: the years prior to his mother's death and those marked by her absence. Interestingly, parachuting is a controllable act, whereas the loss of the narrator's mother is an irreparable break, represented by the ellipsis.

In addition to his bandaged arm, the narrator of *W* also repeatedly recalls his wounded lip. The location of the narrator's facial scar invites a psychoanalytic reading about the ways in which trauma acts on the subject's body. The scar's location on the upper lip represents what the narrator cannot directly voice: the death of both his parents. The location of this wound suggests the pathway that trauma takes in the narrator. The narrator is muted by the trauma he endures; he cannot speak. The shift is thus internal. The text of *W* can be seen as an attempt to bear witness, even as it acknowledges the very impossibility of doing so. The text thus exposes the double bind that marks the first generation of the Holocaust. Dori Laub, Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst, maintains

that “the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore silence about the truth often prevails ” (Caruth 64). Laub’s contention is supported by Perec’s text, where the author resorts to an ellipsis to represent what must be told *and* what he cannot say.

Although published thirty-five years later, Grimbert’s *Un secret* similarly emphasizes athletics, the opposition of strength and weakness, and wounds. As in *W*, wounds play an important function in determining how the narrative of *Un secret* unfolds. The narrator is the only child of Maxime and Tania who bear a terrible secret: Maxime was married to another woman, Hannah, before the war, with whom he had a child, Simon. Both Hannah and Simon perished in the camps, while Maxime and Tania survived. Maxime first knew Tania as his sister-in-law, and the two developed romantic inclinations towards one another. After the war, they married. The narrator makes constant reference to his parents’ athletic prowess in contrast to his own lack of athletic talent. As the narrator describes his condition, “J’avais beau souffrir de ma maigreur, de ma pâleur maladive [...] adoré de ma mère [j’]étais le seul à avoir séjourné dans ce ventre musclé par l’exercice, à avoir surgi d’entre ses cuisses sportives [...]” (15). He juxtaposes his own weakness to his parents’ strength, suggesting that somehow he cannot be their child: “la pratique du sport, leur passion commune, avait réuni Maxime et Tania: mon histoire ne pouvait commencer que dans le stade où je les accompagnais si souvent” (37). The stark contrast between the narrator and his parents underscores a preoccupation on the part of both the narrator and his parents that they do not belong to one another, that he is not their “true” child. Freud explores the relationship between family members in his essay “Family Romances.” Freud describes the different stages of the relationship

between the child and his parents. Firstly, the child perceives his parents as “the only authority and the source of all belief” (237). However, as the child develops intellectually, he observes other parents and begins to criticize his own. This can develop to the point where the child fantasizes that he is not his parents’ child, that he is in fact adopted. This is a way for the child to separate himself from his idealized parents. However, the narrator’s tenuous relationship with his parents in *Un secret* is not only a result of the natural intellectual maturation of the individual, but also a symptom of the sub-conscious knowledge that his parents are not revealing his brother’s death.

The obsession with sports on the part of Maxime and Tania allows them to avoid mourning and shields them from their traumatic past. Leah Hewitt corroborates this reading by suggesting that their tremendous focus on sports functions as a defense mechanism to ward off the Holocaust; their emphasis on athletic achievement also signals their resolute rejection of Nazi stereotypes that portrayed Jews as weak and sickly. Hewitt cites Maxime’s joy when his generally weak son, François, lashes out and violently confronts another child:

Ironically enough, François’ father Maxime, an athletic man who has continually shown disappointment in his weak, unathletic son, now displays a certain admiration for his son’s violent reaction, not because he has defended the Jews (he is not made aware of this), but because his son has shown himself capable of physical force. Maxime’s habitual erasure of Jewish identity is paradoxically repeated in his son’s account of the altercation. (118)³

Of the many themes that Hewitt explores, she notes in particular the relationship between

³ Hewitt refers here to the cinematic adaptation of *Un secret*, in which the captain of the school’s team makes anti-Semitic remarks to François which trigger an unexpectedly violent response, “[...] sans prendre le temps de réfléchir je l’ai frappé violemment au visage [...] nous avons roulé sous la table [...] je n’étais plus moi-même...je ne voyais plus que d’un oeil, un liquide chaud coulait sur ma joue [...] je gardai de cet épisode un pansement sur l’arcade sourcilière [...]” (Grimbert 71-72).

father and son vis-à-vis athletics. Once again, sports and physical strength do not connote the positive values one would expect, but rather signal a perverse blindness and an inability to accept the past and confront history.

From the first paragraph of *Un secret*, the narrator contrasts his weakness to the imagined strength of the brother he feels he must have had: “J’avais un frère. Plus beau, plus fort” (11). Physical wounds and deformities surface throughout the text. In addition to the wound above his eyebrow, the narrator claims he has an inherent physical deformity, a hollow chest: “Et je m’effarais de ce trou sous le plexus dans lequel aurait tenu un poing, creusant ma poitrine comme l’empreinte jamais effacé d’un coup” (21). The narrator describes not only his own wounds and deformities, but also those of Louise, a neighbor, Holocaust-survivor and close family friend, who has a club foot. He feels close to Louise because of her physical imperfections: “Je la sentais proche de moi, sans doute en raison de sa difformité: elle devait sa démarche cahotante à un pied-bot dissimulé dans une chaussure orthopédique [...]” (31). The various wounds and deformities throughout *Un secret* hold important implications for how the repressed past ultimately surfaces and becomes accessible.

The narrator links his sunken chest to his parents’ repressed memories. In the scene where the narrator fights the classmate, he appears to undergo a pivotal emotional change:

Pour la première fois je n’éprouvais aucune crainte, je n’avais pas peur que son poing vienne se loger dans le creux de mon plexus. Ma nausée avait disparu [...] je savais que j’allais le tuer, j’allais vraiment faire disparaître son visage dans le sable. (71-72)

Not only does the narrator feel strong and capable of anything, he suddenly forgets his sunken chest. Furthermore, the physical and emotional strength that takes him over as he

fights his classmate is the same type of strength that his parents drew on in the face of persecution and genocide. When Louise later recounts Maxime and Tania's story to the narrator, this revelation has a physical impact on his body:

J'avais quinze ans et cette nouvelle donnée changeait le fil de mon récit...à peine la nouvelle venait-elle de tomber des lèvres de Louise que déjà cette identité me transformait. Toujours le même était devenu un autre, curieusement plus fort...mon apparence ne m'était plus une souffrance, je m'étoffais, mes creux se comblaient. Grâce à Louise ma poitrine s'était élargie, le vide sous mon plexus s'était atténué, comme si la vérité y avait été jusque-là inscrite en creux...j'allais devenir homme. (76, 174)

Here, the narrator's emotional reaction is accompanied by physical change. The revelation of the family past that had so long been repressed makes him stronger and "cures" him physically.

The fact that the narrator's wound is situated above his eyebrow is significant. The location of the wound represents a shift in the narrator's emotional state and in the text itself. The narrator describes feeling proud after his fight and gains a sense of self-worth that he altogether lacks beforehand:

Je gardai de cet épisode un pansement sur l'arcade sourcilière promené dans les couloirs du collège avec fierté. Mais cette blessure m'apporta bien davantage qu'une gloire éphémère, elle fut le signe que Louise attendait. (76-77)

Louise takes the wound to signal that the narrator must learn of his family's past: "Elle fut le signe que Louise *attendait*" (73). She interprets the school fight as a signal that the narrator is ready to hear his parents' secret. Her revelation marks a shift in the status of the narrative. No longer is the past a hypothetical probability in the narrator's imagination, but rather a detailed account to which Louise bears witness. The unveiling of the truth occurs after the narrator's eye is wounded by his classmate. The wound signals the narrator's readiness to hear and receive testimony and conveys how painful

but necessary this very act of witnessing can be. When Louise reveals his family history, the narrator comes to understand his hitherto inexplicable feelings of loss and inauthenticity.

Interestingly, Freud places special importance on the eyes in his work on the uncanny. In *Das Unheimlich*, Freud describes the “uncanny” as a class of frightening things that leads us back to what is known and familiar. The uncanny, in fact, is nothing new, but rather that which is familiar and established but has been alienated due to repression. Unheimlich at its root means uncomfortable; the term also has a less common meaning that is especially relevant to this discussion, *unsecret*. *Unsecret is what is supposed to be kept secret but inadvertently revealed* (Freud 129). This meaning coincides directly with the title of Grimbert's text: *Un secret*. The primary preoccupation of the narrator throughout the text is his parents' secret.

In describing the uncanny as the mark of the return of the repressed, Freud equates the fear of going blind to the fear of castration:

The study of dreams, fantasies, and myths has taught us also that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration. When the mythical criminal Oedipus blinds himself, this is merely a mitigated form of the penalty of castration, the only one that befits him according to the *lex talionis*. (139)

The narrator of *Un secret*, like Oedipus, inevitably discovers the truth about his identity despite his parents' attempt to conceal the past. Interestingly, eyes make another appearance at the beginning of the text when the narrator describes his anxiety vis-à-vis his “imaginary” brother and imagines poking out his brother's eyes:

[...] je nous inventais des querelles, je me rebellais contre son autorité. Je tentais de le faire fléchir mais je sortais rarement vainqueurs de nos empoignades. Les années passant, il s'était transformé. De protecteur il était devenu tyrannique, moqueur, parfois méprisant. Mes doigts dans ses yeux j'appuyais de toutes mes forces sur son visage (24-25)

He imagines castrating his more vigorous brother by symbolically attacking his eyes. This symbolic castration marks an attempt on the part of the narrator to gain power, to overcome the crushing presence of “Sim.” In this way eyes represent more than the revelation of a secret, but mark the way by which the narrator attempts to gain control.

As we have seen, both *W* and *Un secret* share a common preoccupation with sports, physical deformities and strategically located wounds. These parallels are striking, especially given the fact that Perec’s *W* precedes Grimbert’s text by thirty years. Critic Gabriele Schwab notes, “It is through the unconscious transmission of disavowed familial dynamics that one generation affects another generation’s unconscious. This unconscious transmission is what [Nicolas] Abraham defines as the dynamic of transgenerational haunting” (5). Both *W* and *Un secret* address the legacy that such disavowal has on survivors and their children. The narrator of *W* does not reveal the trauma associated with his mother’s departure and can only refer to it by means of an ellipsis. In *Un secret*, the narrator’s parents do not communicate their own history of loss and betrayal until the narrator confronts them with his own knowledge. As I have elaborated above, the various wounds constitute what Schwab refers to as the subconscious transmission of traumatic experience across generations. Additionally, the narrator of *W* devotes a significant portion of the text to describing the island of *W* and its “utopian” sports-driven society. In a similar fashion, the narrator of *Un secret* repeatedly describes the athletic talents of his parents and imaginary brother, and reveals his own feelings of inadequacy. Both works focus on sports and contrast strong characters with those who seem disempowered. I would argue that this represents more than a common theme; the narrators always occupy the weak position in the text. This suggests that although writing is an attempt to exert

control, particularly of one's past when it comes to autofictions, it is impossible. The narrators cannot control their past, nor can they "accurately" depict it in writing. Thus, the juxtaposition between the weak and strong demonstrates the relationship between pain and recuperation as well as writing and the limits of representation.

Both texts demonstrate how trauma is transmitted from the first to second generation; traumatic experience is silenced in *W* or consigned to allegory, whereas in *Un secret*, it is unveiled and confronted. As mentioned earlier, the trauma the narrator of *W* bears as a first generation French-Jew is manifested emotionally and physically. The significant wound above the narrator of *W*'s lip represents the narrator's inability to voice his loss. The ellipsis signifies what the narrator cannot tell: the death of his mother. The wound above the eye in *Un secret*, by contrast, signals the possibility of unveiling: it designates the moment when the truth can be seen and recognized (better in keeping with the eye). In a similar fashion to the narrator of *W*, the narrator of *Un secret* has his parents' trauma inscribed on him emotionally and physically. He longs to recollect and speak of the past, as illustrated by his vivid imagination vis-à-vis both his family's history and his "imaginary" brother. Because he is unaware of the events that took place before his birth, he can only imagine. Referring to the effects of trauma, Dominick Lacapra argues that "trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past [...] the traumatic event is repressed or denied and registers only belatedly (*nachträglich*) after the passage or period of latency" (9). Notably, it is Louise, a first generation French-Jewish survivor, who tells the narrator his family's secret. A long time elapses before she reveals the past to Philippe; this is the belatedness to which Lacapra refers.

These two texts suggest a shift in the way trauma is expressed and transmitted between first and second generation survivors; the primordial silence of the first generation that we see in Perec's *W* eventually gives way to the possibility of transgenerational transmission in the second generation, as exemplified by Grimbert's *Un secret*. In an interview, Grimbert described his choice, as an author and psychoanalyst, to place such emphasis on the body:

Je pense que le corps a souvent son rôle à jouer dans une affaire de secret. D'abord parce que ce qui n'est pas symbolisé, comme le disait Lacan, fait retour dans le Réel. Ce peut être sous forme d'hallucination mais aussi d'affections organiques, psycho-somatiques. Plus encore le non-dit d'un secret peut s'inscrire dans le corps dès l'origine comme malformation ou fragilité constitutionnelle, ce que j'illustre dans mon roman par le creux que le narrateur porte sur sa poitrine, un vide que seule une parole vraie pourrait venir combler. (Cupa 15)

Grimbert's remarks support my argument that the narrator's wounds represent the "non-dit" or what has not been spoken. The narrator bears the repercussions of silence on his body displaying the crucial role of the body in muted testimony. Like the blank page marked with writing, the body retains the effects of trauma – it inscribes trauma. In fact, the process of testifying through writing alters the effect of trauma on the body, as displayed by the narrator of *Un secret* who undergoes physical changes as he learns the truth about the past and is able to bear witness to both himself and his parents' experience. Both *W* and *Un secret* speak to the inscription of trauma, particularly to its dynamic nature. The body is central to both *W* and *Un secret*, and plays a crucial role in understanding how traumatic memory is transgenerationally passed on and modified.

CHAPTER 2

DOUBLED NARRATORS AND NARRATIVES

*To stand, in the shadow
of the scar up in the air.*

(Paul Celan “To Stand”)

Georges Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* and Philippe Grimbert’s *Un secret* use doubled narrators and narratives to highlight the temporal and spatial dimensions of trauma and its subsequent representation. In both texts, narrators are paired with another dominant figure: in *W*, Gaspard Winckler serves as the narrator’s double, while in *Un secret*, the narrator’s imaginary brother Simon fulfills this function. Furthermore, textual doubling arises in both texts in the form of two alternative, competing stories, which blur the boundaries between the imagined past and the narrator’s lived experience. In *W*, allegory and autofiction alternate, and in *Un secret*, the narrator’s imagined account of his family’s history contrasts with a neighbor’s recollections of the past. This chapter explores the relationship between the narrators and their doubles and evaluates the purpose of textual doubling in both texts. I argue that doubling is a prominent trope in post-Holocaust literature and sheds light on the spatial and temporal dimensions of trauma.

W ou le souvenir d’enfance comprises various instances of doubling ranging from the title of the text to the form of the narrative. *W* tells the story of two parallel existences: the story of the fictional island of W, a utopian sports-driven society, coupled with an autofictional memoir describing life during World War II for a young French-Jewish boy. The fictional island of W is an allegory representing the concentration camps

of World War II where Perec's mother died. The allegory, in italics, and autofiction, in plain type, alternate with only one break in the center of the text, an ellipsis enclosed by parentheses. Perec binds both stories together, blurring the frontier between fact and fiction and ensuring that the allegory cannot be read without the autofiction and vice versa. The allegory is rife with disturbing descriptions that recall the concentration camps in World War II. For example, the athletes are denied their proper names, recalling the way Jewish prisoners were tattooed with numbers. The first letter of many nouns in the text is capitalized, reminiscent of the German language. Finally, the narrator explicitly links the island of W to the concentration camps of World War II (221-222). On the other hand, the autofiction teems with errors. These errors are a conscious choice made by Perec, as David Bellos suggests: "[...] on the other hand, Perec had a phenomenal memory for detail and professional skill in information handling; he knew how to look things up at the Bibliothèque Nationale [...] some of his errors are sufficiently flagrant to jump off the page even for readers without Perec's library skills" (546). For example, the narrator describes Charlie Chaplin's insignia in the film *The Great Dictator*, and Bellos notes his error, "In fact, the insignia of Chaplin's 'Adenoid Hynkel' is not as Perec represents it. It consists not of overlapping but of superposed X's" (548). The autofictional segment of the text would, at first glance, appear to remain most loyal to representing facts, whereas the allegory would be equated with fiction. However, Perec overturns these traditional distinctions by putting into question the value of truth and memory. In this way, Perec inverts the relationship between the genres and the traditional understanding of these genres, by equating autofiction with fiction and the allegory as representing facts.

The narrator of the autofictional segment is doubled in the allegorical portion of the text by a figure by the name of Gaspard Winckler. For the purpose of clarity I will refer to the narrator of the autofictional segment as “je,” and the narrator of the allegory as Winckler. Winckler, a quintessential Flemish name, juxtaposed to the prototypical French name of Gaspard, highlights the character’s hybridity. The name Gaspard Winckler is significant for various reasons, as David Bellos elucidates in the chapter “Who is Gaspard Winckler” in his dense biography of Georges Perec, *A Life in Words*. Bellos explores the role of Gaspard Winckler in *Le Condottiere* – a brief, puzzling novel by Perec – and Winckler in *La Vie Mode d’Emploi*. Although Bellos does not refer to the presence of Winckler in *W*, he states, “[...] Gaspard Winckler is a false orphan [...] because he is also a false image of Georges Perec. Winckler is a figure of Perec’s anxiety, not of his ambition” (230). Thus, Bellos reads Gaspard Winckler as a double for Georges Perec.

Perec was attentive to the names he chose for his characters.⁴ For instance, the name Anton Voyl, Perec’s protagonist in *La Disparition*, is directly linked to the content of the text – the name Voyl is lexically similar to the word vowel, underlining the absent “e” throughout the text. As mentioned earlier, the interlacing of national identity in the name Gaspard Winckler signals the character’s hybridity. Gaspard Winckler is in every way the doppelgänger of “je”; he is able to bear objective witness to his experiences and speak what had so long remained unspoken.

Firstly, Winckler bears witness to what he beholds on the island of W, whereas “je” is unable to speak of the death of his own parents, particularly that of his mother. The

⁴ This is like Patrick Modiano’s emphasis on names, like his Guy Roland from *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*. Guy Roland’s name displays traditionally British and French nationality.

ellipsis at the center of *W* represents his inability to confront this loss. Instead of resuming the thread of the autobiographical narrative as one would have expected, the text contains an empty page marked only by an ellipsis. It indicates what "je" cannot or will not say and demonstrates his inability to speak about the past. In *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, Laub elaborates on the story of a young Jewish girl interned in the camps:

[...] In other words, in her memory of her Holocaust experience, as well as in the distorted way in which her present life proceeded from this memory, she failed to be an authentic witness to herself. This collapse of witnessing is precisely, in my view, what is central to Holocaust experience. (Felman 80)

Perec diverts the traditional witness by creating another character who *does* indeed bear witness to the events. In fact, there appears to be an overt signal to "je" made by Winckler. In the opening paragraph, Winckler states,

J'ai longtemps hésité avant d'entreprendre le récit de mon voyage à W. Je m'y résous aujourd'hui poussé par une nécessité impérieuse, persuadé que les événements dont j'ai été le témoin doivent être révélés et mis en lumière [...] longtemps j'ai voulu garder le secret sur ce que j'avais vu [...] parce que celui qui me la confia a, lui aussi, disparu. (13)

Is Winckler implying that "je" is the one who confided in him what he witnessed? And by that same token, why is the result of this confidence, disappearance? In *W*, "je" appears unable to bear witness, while his double, Winckler, is able to relate what he saw on the island of *W*.

Winckler recounts his travel to the island in neutral terms. Even when narrating scenes that are undoubtedly uncomfortable for the reader, he remains unmoved. A particularly graphic scene describes the reproductive traditions on the island of *W*,

Les Atlantiades ont lieu à peu près tous les mois. On amène alors sur le Stade central les femmes présumées fécondables, on les dépouille de leurs vêtements et on les lâche sur la piste où elles se mettent à courir du plus

vite qu'elles peuvent. On leur laisse prendre un demi-tour d'avance, puis on lance à leur poursuite les meilleurs Athlètes W, c'est-à-dire les deux meilleurs de chaque discipline [...] Un tour de piste suffit généralement aux coureurs pour rattraper les femmes, et c'est le plus souvent en face des tribunes d'honneur, soit sur la cendrée, soit sur la pelouse, qu'elles sont violées. (168-169)

When describing his past and his memories, "je" also creates lists, incorporates his own previous writings, adds footnotes, and utilizes hypertext. In Chapter X, "je" fragments the chapter into distinct sections: "La rue Vilin," "Deux Photos," "Le Boulevard Delessert," and more (71-81). When describing family photos, in "Deux Photos," "je" describes his and his family's demeanor and appearance in very detailed terms:

Ma mère a un grand chapeau de feutre entouré d'un galon, et qui lui couvre les yeux. Une perle est passée dans le lobe de son oreille. Elle sourit gentiment en penchant très légèrement la tête vers la gauche [...] j'ai de grandes oreilles, un petit sourire triste et la tête légèrement penchée vers la gauche. (75)

On the other hand, there are moments when "je" is unable to speak of his past, as when the text is divided in two parts by the ellipsis encircled by parentheses (89). This ellipsis is a telltale sign of the inability for "je" to mourn his mother's disappearance and her subsequent death. Another prevalent theme that exemplifies an inability to articulate trauma and mend the past are his constant revisions of not only his writing, but also his memories. When referring to his bandaged arm, "je" doubts the veracity of his memory.⁵ This points to the question of memory, but also to the question of living with the past and bearing witness to it.

Finally, Winckler does not just act as an additional or secondary narrator, but also functions as a locus point for other doubles. Winckler, as the reader discovers, is summoned by a mystery man in order to find a missing child by the same name of

⁵ Georges refers to his bandaged arm on pages 45, 80, 81, and 113.

Gaspard Winckler. The man describes the secondary Winckler's identity, "Gaspard Winckler était à l'époque un enfant de huit ans. Il était sourd-muet [...]" (40). In fact, the child Winckler was lost at sea in a shipwreck, and the adult Winckler is asked to find him. In a sense, the child Winckler can be read as a figure for "je," who lost his mother at the age of eight. Additionally, the shipwreck could be the metaphor for a lost anchor, the anchor of a mother's love. The muteness of the lost child Winckler thus represents the inability of "je" to articulate the loss of his mother. Neither "je" nor Winckler provide answers to these questions. However, one can perceive the interconnectedness of the adult Winckler, the child Winckler, and "je." As Dori Laub describes the recollections of a child-survivor, "[...] these memories are like discrete islands of precocious thinking and feel almost like the remembrances of another child, removed, yet connected to me in a complex way" (Felman 76). Thus, the doubling of narrators in *W* emphasizes the startling connectedness between both narrators, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to the doubled narrator, there are also two distinct narratives within *W*: the allegorical *récit* of the island of *W*, and the narrator's autofictional memoir. Furthermore, an ellipsis marks a rupture in the center of the novel. This ellipsis interrupts both the allegory and the autofiction. In the allegory, the ellipsis defines the moment where Winckler leaves for the island of *W*. In the autofiction, the ellipsis encapsulates the moment right after the mother of "je" departs, a moment of which he cannot speak. Through the double bifurcation of *W*, much like the dual figures of "je" and Winckler, the fragmentary style of the narrative corresponds to the fragmented memories of the narrator(s).

The textual alternation between allegory and autofiction depicts – in literary and

visual terms – the trauma that the narrator suffered and its ongoing consequences. A persistent question in Holocaust studies is how the survivor can live with both identities. As Froma Zeitlin suggests, “ [...] the survivor generation [...] [must] ‘partake at one and the same time in the memory and the present perceptions of this past’” (Postone 174). Zeitlin implies that the survivor generation must bear the past and present in a temporally split manner. Zeitlin’s theory can both be disputed and supported by *W*. Although “je” appears to reconcile his past and present by the act of writing, he also struggles to integrate past and present. The ellipsis in the text is the precise moment where a splitting occurs between past and present. Since the ellipsis has been assumed to represent the disappearance of the mother, evidently, the narrative prior to the ellipsis and the narrative afterwards are distinct. This suggests that the narrator of *W* has not reconciled the gap between what he experienced and what he is able to assimilate psychically, and in turn he must create a partially fictionalized world.

Gaspard Winckler, as we have discovered, behaves not only as a double of the narrator of *W* but also as a point of convergence from which results another double, the child Winckler. “Gaspard Winckler is a double for “je,” while Winckler’s double is the child Winckler. Thus, Gaspard Winckler acts as a mirror, reflecting both “je” and the child. Winckler’s search for the child is thus the search “je” undertakes, through Winckler, for his childhood. Winckler acts as an intermediary for “je.” Although Winckler is originally sent to search for the child, the second half of the allegory does not once mention him, but evolves into a detailed description of what Winckler witnessed on the island of *W*. This signals that the original intent “je” had evolves and modifies through the process of writing and recalling. Winckler’s image, actions, and being thus

manifest the trauma “je” is trying to psychically integrate.

“Je” positions Winckler as a mirror evoking Lacan’s mirror stage. Lacan describes the mirror stage as a defining phase for the child, whereby he or she attempts to control or appropriate his or her own image. For Lacan the mirror stage acts as a key instrument in the development of the child, much like Winckler as “je” searches for himself. The symmetry provided by the mirror is like the symmetry provided by both Winckler and the ellipsis in the center of the text, demarcating the moment right before and right after the mother of “je” departs. Winckler thus acts as the necessary tool through which “je” attempts to exert control over his memories and his past.

Narrative and character doubling are important components of Grimbert’s *Un secret* as well, although the two works differ in the manner in which doubling is expressed. In *W*, the doubling that occurs is not based on a subconscious relationship with the past, but rather, an overtly conscious attempt to mend the past and present. In *Un secret*, the doubled character and doubled text belong to a subconscious knowledge of the past amalgamated with a child’s imagination.

The narrator’s memories of his childhood comprise *Un secret*. The narrator, Philippe,⁶ reflects on both his fantasies and his neighbor Louise’s revelation. He contemplates what he had imagined of his parents’ lives as opposed to what Louise revealed. Philippe is an acutely sensitive child who grows up a weak boy amidst parents who are stellar athletes. In turn, he invents an imaginary brother to help him tackle his own insecurities. Within the first few pages of *Un secret*, Philippe refers to his brother repeatedly, emphasizing that his brother is everything he is not:

⁶ Both the narrator and author’s first names are Philippe. When I refer to “Philippe” I am referring to the narrator of *Un secret*.

Fils unique, j'ai longtemps eu un frère [...] J'avais un frère. Plus beau, plus fort. Un frère aîné, glorieux, invisible [...] Ces larmes, il me fallait quelqu'un avec qui les partager [...] Je m'étais créé un frère derrière lequel j'allais m'effacer, un frère qui allait peser sur moi, de tout son poids. (11-14)

Part II of *Un secret* describes Philippe's imagined story of how his parents met and the life they led prior to his birth. This segment of the text abounds in details. Part III, at the center of *Un secret*, is the moment of truth, where Louise, a next-door neighbor and close family friend, reveals the parents' secret to Philippe. In Part IV Philippe comes face to face with the truth. Part IV mirrors Part II in that it describes how his parents met and the period of the war in great detail, but this time the narrative follows the account of someone who witnessed this period, Louise. Finally, Part V intertwines the previous parts when Philippe acknowledges the validity of his imagination and his parents' reality. Part V demonstrates an understanding of how to cope with the past while living in the present.

Philippe's conception of his parents' life, prior to hearing Louise's account, sharply contrasts with the events that he later learns took place. He begins by stating, "J'ai longtemps été un petit garçon qui se rêvait une famille idéale" (37) and imagining that his existence sprang from his parents' love of sports : "la pratique du sport, leur passion commune, avait réuni Maxime et Tania : mon histoire ne pouvait commencer que dans le stade où je les accompagnais si souvent" (37). Philippe goes on to envision his parents' love before, during and after the war. Frequently in these passages, Philippe makes mention of "another," stating, "je me suis longtemps cru le premier, le seul" (55), and describes the rift between him and his father:

J'ai survécu, grâce aux bons soins des médecins et à l'amour de ma mère. Mon père m'a aimé aussi, je veux le croire, surmontant sa déception, trouvant dans les soins, l'inquiétude, la protection, de quoi nourrir ses sentiments. Mais son premier regard a laissé sur moi sa trace et

régulièrement j'en ai retrouvé l'éclair d'amertume. (57-58)

After Louise shares her version of his parents' past, Philippe devotes time to describing a disparate version of the same story. Philippe specifically refers to the passages in Chapter Two describing his parents' fictionalized lives:

J'ai ajouté des nouvelles pages à mon récit, nourries par les révélations de Louise. Une seconde histoire est née, dont mon imagination a rempli les blancs, une histoire qui ne pouvait cependant effacer la première. Les deux romans cohabiteraient, tapis au fond de ma mémoire, chacun éclairant à sa façon Maxime et Tania, mes parents, que je venais de découvrir. (89)

The doubled stories thus serve two key functions. Firstly, the two descriptions emphasize the bitter circumstances under which Tania and Maxime got involved during the war and after the disappearance of Philippe's mother. Secondly, the two narratives appear to cohabit despite their radically different depictions of Philippe's parents. Thus, doubling serves to emphasize the stark contrast between an ideal yet fictionalized world and the blunt reality. Doubling also displays the incapacity on the part of Philippe to merge these two worlds.

The second instance of doubling in *Un secret* is Philippe's imagined double, Simon. Long before Louise's revelation that his father had indeed had another son during the war who perished in the camps, Philippe imagines he once had a brother. This brother serves multiple purposes for Philippe. Sim, as Philippe names him, provides comfort at times of loneliness and sadness, "Ma vie d'enfant me fournissait chaque jour des tristesses et des craintes que j'entretenais dans ma solitude. Ces larmes, il me fallait quelqu'un avec qui les partager" (12) and "longtemps mon frère m'a aidé à surmonter mes peurs" (19). Sim also makes Philippe painfully aware of his own imperfections, "[Sim] les accueillait sans un mot mais son regard me réduisait à néant, il détaillait mes imperfections, soulevait les draps et étouffait un rire. Alors la colère m'envahissait, je le saisis à la gorge. Frère

ennemi, faux frère, frère d'ombre, retourne à ta nuit !" (25). Finally, Sim evolves, like Philippe's own changing self: "les années passant, il s'était transformé. De protecteur il était devenu tyrannique, moqueur, parfois méprisant" (25). The imagined brother, Sim, plays a crucial role in Philippe's development and serves as a kind of persistent double or alter ego.

In the article, "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss," Schwab discusses the role and appearance of the replacement child as related to traumatic events. The ghost of the narrator's brother haunts a large part of *Un secret*, but this "shadow" reveals itself as a significant theme in Holocaust literature: "Children born after such wars may feel more than the burden of having to replace the child or children whom their parents lost during the war: they grow up with the sense that their generation must replace the entire generation that was meant to be exterminated" (Schwab 120). Later on Schwab states that "one cannot compete with a dead child, yet one cannot avoid the ghostly competition handed down with parental fantasies. This tacit competition with a dead sibling is a classical syndrome of replacement children" (37). Because of the parents' inability to mourn properly over their dead child, the replacement child must bear the dual burdens of mourning and knowing. In *Un secret* it is evident that from early on, Philippe is living with "something." For instance, Philippe adds an extra seat to his family's dinner table. His intention is to make room for his "imaginary" friend, Sim. Although Philippe is unaware of his family's past at this point, he still bears the burden of his family's repression. Once Philippe discovers his family's secrets, he bears this same burden but in a conscious way. Because his parents are unable to grieve, he mourns their loss as well as his own. Towards the end of the text, Philippe recounts his

parents' suicide, "[p]renant sa femme par la taille, il l'avait aidé à se lever pour la conduire tout doucement vers le balcon du salon, pour un ultime plongeon. Qu'avait-il murmuré à son oreille avant de l'enlacer et de basculer avec elle?" (189). Philippe makes it clear that he understands their suicide to be directly linked to their inability to mourn. On the other hand, Philippe is able to move forward by visiting landmarks, gleaning information on the deportation of Jews in France, and by generally reflecting on his family's past.

The imagined double narrator in *W* finds its parallel in the shadow brother in *Un secret*. While both doubled agents function as invisible "others" in that they fulfill what the narrators find is lacking in themselves, the doubled figures function in different ways. Caruth describes a trend in the testimony of first-generation survivors:

Many traumatized persons, however, experience long periods of time in which they live as it were, in two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life. Very often, it is impossible to bridge these worlds. This is most eloquently described by L.L. Langer (1991) in his study on oral testimonies by Holocaust survivors who never succeeded in bridging their existence in death camps and their lives before and after [...] this suggests a permanent duality, not exactly a split or doubling but a parallel existence. He switches from one to the other without synchronization because he is repeating not a sequence but simultaneity. (163)

What Caruth suggests here can be discerned in *W*. The split narration, the allegory and autofiction, point to this inability to bridge the different worlds. The synchronicity described is that of a temporal simultaneity, where the survivor lives with two distinct identities, one that relates to before the war and the other to what has been witnessed and suffered. Typically, the concept of temporal simultaneity applies to people who were born prior to the war, but in the case of children, one can argue that they are living with similar realities. Susan Suleiman even goes so far as to dub the children that lived during

the war as the “1.5-generation” (93) thus embodying characteristics of the first generation, such as this temporal simultaneity vis-à-vis trauma and suffering. Sue Vice also points out the temporal split narration present in first-generation child survivors: “Many texts written from the viewpoint of child survivors of the Holocaust are structured in what is apparently the same temporally split manner. Sections about the traumatic past alternate with sections describing the present [...]” (12). Although the past and present remain nebulous in *W*, allegory and autofiction play distinct roles, thus indicating a certain temporal grounding within each récit. “Je” actually points to the existence of the allegory in the autofiction, stating, “à l’époque de W, entre, disons, ma onzième et ma quinzième année, je couvris des cahiers entiers [...]” (97). Thus, one could assume that the allegory covers the past while the autofiction covers the present. In this way, Perec creates a narration that is temporally split, fragmented and doubled.

Un secret does not operate along this temporal divide, but rather assumes a spatial narration. Schwab refers to such a spatial narration, stating, “if the child’s place is assigned by the mark of emptiness the emptiness is not a mere spatial absence but the absence of time itself [...] the replacement child is supposed to replace what came before its time – to undo time and death” (123). As we saw above, Simon acts as Philippe's doppelgänger, embodying everything he lacks. In fact, Philippe acts as a replacement for Simon; however, in turn, Philippe desperately longs for Simon’s qualities. Schwab argues that “At the spatial level the child re-places, or, as Derrida says, ‘it insinuates itself in-the-place-of,’ ‘fills a void’ or ‘takes-(the)-place’” (123). The void that Philippe fills indicates a spatial perception of time and trauma, starkly opposed to the temporal disassociation present in *W*.

As explored above, it is primarily a temporal divide that operates in *W*, whereas spatial perceptions of trauma predominate in *Un secret*. However, irregularities remain. The concept of spatial narration “filling a void” in *Un secret* also exists in *W*. For by the very existence of the text, Georges Perec is “filling a void.” The autofiction is rife with information, and it is irrelevant if this information is accurate or not. Nonetheless, all of this information demonstrates a very real need, on the part of Perec, to *fill*. So, while trauma remains temporally transcribed in the text, there is also a spatial dimension inscribed in *W*. In fact, the ellipsis in *W* creates a space for Perec’s mother, a part of his life that is irreplaceable, that cannot be filled, no matter the words.

Likewise, there are also signals of temporal displacement in *Un secret*. As cited above, Caruth puts forth the difficulty on the part of Holocaust survivors to bridge past and present. Judging from *Un secret*, however, it may not only be the Holocaust survivors who are faced with this difficulty, but also their offspring. Transgenerational memory may play a significant role in this case; children may be subconsciously and/or consciously aware of their parents’ experiences and thus inherit the task of mending the past and present – particularly if the parents are unable or unwilling to do so. In *Un secret* Philippe assumes this very responsibility.

While first-generation narratives of trauma tend to lean towards temporal representations of loss, and second-generation narratives towards spatial representations, as the analysis above has demonstrated, the boundary between these two types of representations are blurred. Both Perec and Grimbert demonstrate temporal and spatial displacements of trauma. This suggests that the effects of trauma, the Holocaust in this case, are widespread and transferable through generations. Both *W* and *Un secret*

represent the radical temporal and spatial otherness of the Holocaust.

CHAPTER 3

THE INFLUENCE OF TRAUMA ON THE PRODUCTION OF TIME

Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time.

(Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project)

This chapter examines the representation of time in both *W* and *Un secret*. As Elissa Marder writes, “We could argue that in the uncontrollable and often unmanageable repetitions of the traumatic event, the subject’s inability both to forget and remember the event is lived *as if time itself had become the persecutory enemy, and overwhelming other*” (50). Georges Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* and Philippe Grimbert’s *Un secret* tackle the difficult relationship between time, memory, and trauma using stylistic elements of the narration. Both *W* and *Un secret* demonstrate the influence of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the archetype of writing on the self, in particular with respect to the problems of time and memory.

The opening sentences of *W* and *Un secret* reveal Proust’s influence on Perec’s and Grimbert’s writing. Grammatical and thematic elements in Perec and Grimbert mark Proust as a model for these writers, as arguably for all subsequent French-Jewish writing in the first person. Notably, Proust utilizes the adverb “longtemps” and the passé composé in his first sentence, catapulting the reader into a conception of time that is non-

linear. For as the narrator declared, in *Le temps retrouvé*, the final volume of *À la recherche*,

[C]es diverses impressions bienheureuses et qui avaient entre elles ceci de commun que j'éprouvais à la fois dans le moment actuel et dans le moment éloigné [...] jusqu'à faire empiéter le passé sur le présent [...] dans ce qu'elle avait d'extratemporel [...] dans le seul milieu où il put vivre, jouir de l'essence des choses, c'est-à-dire en dehors du temps. (177-78)

In this provocative passage, the narrator refers to his own memories as unfolding in an atemporal state. Following Proust's revolutionary conception of time and memory, Perec also attempts to describe the various states and modes of memory. According to Stella Béhar,

À l'instar [...] d'un Proust qui, dans *À la recherche du temps perdu*, espérait retrouver la multitude des sensations oubliées, Perec va tenter, à travers des contraintes de composition monstrueuses, de recenser tous les moyens, toutes les activités, toutes les passions que les hommes et les femmes d'aujourd'hui imaginent pour donner un sens à leur vie. (163)

Of Perec's texts, *W* is not singular in its implicit references to Proust. An earlier work, *Un homme qui dort*, also points to Proust's influence on the writer. As Alan Astro points out,

An emblem for Perec's concealment of Jewish identity appears in *Un homme qui dort*, the title of which is taken from the first pages of Proust's work: *A man asleep [un homme qui dort]* has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the worlds' [22]. (Given these Proustian echoes, I wonder if we may attach any importance to the similarity between Perec's cryptic signature PRTs, and the consonants PRST in Proust's name.) (8)

Karen Smith notes the intertwining of allegory and autofiction in Perec, much like the play on autobiography that takes place in Proust: "Perec's work points out the extent to which our knowledge is based upon an interplay of past and present experience, two incomplete narratives of reality that together produce a meaning we can use for the moment" (209).

Proust's influence on Grimbert's *Un secret* has not escaped critical attention. Martine Menès, critic and scholar, highlights the Proustian construction of *Un secret's* first sentence, "J'en prends pour exemple le magnifique récit de Philippe Grimbert dans son livre *Un secret*, dont les premières lignes sont à la hauteur du célèbre incipit proustien: 'Fils unique, j'ai longtemps eu un frère [...]' (36). *Un secret* utilizes, like *W*, an interplay of past and present narratives. Grimbert explains this choice in an interview, stating, "I constructed the novel around alternating real and imagined passages because that is exactly how I constructed myself [...]" ("Memory"). In this chapter, I argue that *W* and *Un secret* spin on a Proustian axis of time and memory, in that both Perec and Grimbert borrow Proust's formulations of time and autobiographical probing.

The narrator of *À la recherche* begins by describing his childhood sleeping habits, stating, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure" (*Du côté* 95). Roger Shattuck, a scholar of Proust, devotes an entire appendix of his book *Proust's Way* to the first sentence of *À la recherche*. Notably, Shattuck highlights Proust's fascination with verb tenses and their particular effect:

And above all [Proust] spoke of the bewitching qualities of the imperfect tense. In Flaubert it entirely changes the aspect of things and people, like a lamp which has been moved,' and elsewhere, 'I admit that certain uses of the imperfect indicative – of that cruel tense which presents life to us as something at the same time ephemeral and passive, which, in the very act of retracing our actions, turns them into illusions, buries them in the past without leaving us as does the perfect tense the consolation of activity – has always remained for me an inexhaustible source of mystery and sadness.' (265)

Proust was attentive to the effect of grammatical constructions on meaning, both as a reader and writer, which underscores the significance of the unusual temporal construction of the first sentence of *À la recherche*. Various scholars have indicated the importance of the use of the *passé composé*. Among them, Adam Watt suggests,

Thus with a phrase both awkward and banal we are drawn into Proust's novel. 'longtemps', the adverb of duration that opens the French text does so with a backward glance towards a distant past. The verb that follows it however, in the perfect tense, suggests a short-lived or one-off completed action with a closer relation to the present than 'longtemps' would normally suppose. (45)

As Watt indicates, there is a startling disconnect between the use of "longtemps" and the passé composé. "Longtemps" emphasizes an indeterminate length of time, but the passé composé that immediately follows accentuates limited time. Typically the adverb "longtemps" is followed by the imperfect tense. As Shattuck detects in the construction of the sentence,

But if we look and listen long enough, this sentence reveals a deeper secret in the heart of its verbal construction. Longtemps: a period of indefinite duration at any point in time. Then: je me suis couché. Passé composé. Not a simple tense but a compound tense composed of two other tenses, or times (temps meaning both "tense" and "time" in French) ... two times, then, past and present, locked in the compound verb form, a fact that allows us to perceive in this, the first verb of the novel, the double time sense of the entire work. (267)

What Proust does in this first sentence, in fact, is subsume multiple verb tenses in order to project a sense of both atemporality and the passage of time, in much the same way that the content of the first paragraph explores the breakdown between the sleep-state and wakefulness. By connecting two opposite poles, Proust thrusts the reader into the realm of memory, whereby constructs of time are not so neatly demarcated into past, present, and future.

The disjunction between the senses of time in the first sentence of *À la recherche* extends to the entire first paragraph of the text. Proust's narrator describes how easily he would fall asleep during his childhood:

[P]arfois à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n'avais pas le temps de me dire 'je m'endors.' Et une demi-heure après, la

pensée qu'il était temps de chercher le sommeil m'éveillait [...] je voulais [...] souffler ma *lumière*." (*Du côté* 95)

However, as the narrator recounts, only a half an hour after he had fallen asleep, he would wake concerned that he had not blown out his candle. Time takes on an altered state in this passage, where sleep appears to be so quick that recollections of what happened right before the sleep-state are forgotten, like one who wakes and forgets dreams. The narrator was *not* sleeping when he blew the candle out, but this action is agglomerated with the state of sleeping. When the narrator wakes he desires to blow out his candle, despite the fact that he has *already* done so. Later on, in the famous madeleine scene, time and memory intertwine again. In this scene the narrator describes the effect of tasting a madeleine dipped in tea:

Et bientôt, machinalement, accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d'un triste lendemain, je portai à mes lèvres une cuillerée du thé où j'avais laissé s'amollir un morceau de madeleine. Mais à l'instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d'extraordinaire en moi [...] Je sentais qu'elle était liée au goût du thé et du gâteau, mais qu'elle le dépassait infiniment, ne devait pas être de même nature. D'où venait-elle ? Que signifiait-elle ? Où l'appréhender ?" (*Du côté* 142)

The taste of the madeleine dipped in tea provokes a series of involuntary recollections of his childhood. Here the narrator demonstrates that voluntary memory is useful but does not bring back memories in the marked vividness characteristic of involuntary memory. Most importantly, involuntary memory cannot be controlled or recalled at will.

Proust's use of the *passé composé* with the word "longtemps," like Georges Perec's and Philippe Grimbert's, creates a conflation between modes of time, that is, a length of time that is indefinite and a sudden, specific action. In Perec's *W*, the narrator creates this conflation immediately in the first sentence of the text, "J'ai longtemps hésité

avant d'entreprendre le récit de mon voyage à W" (13), and at several other instances in the reading, particularly at the beginning of the text. Firstly, after the narrator refers to his own hesitation, he continues by stating, "Longtemps j'ai voulu garder le secret sur ce que j'avais vu" (13). Here the pluperfect is also employed, another compound tense made up of the imperfect and the past participle. The pluperfect is a tense that is used to signify the past of a past action. For example: she *had* been to France before. By employing the pluperfect and the *passé composé*, the narrator is pointing to multiple conceptions of time: the imperfect, a repeated action in the past; the *passé composé*, a definite, concluded action with a relation to the present, and the present tense, an ongoing action. This throws the reader into a temporality that is even more fragmented. The narrator proceeds, only a couple of sentences later, to use the *passé simple*, "longtemps je demeurai indécis" (13). Again, rather than employing the prototypical imperfect tense with the adverb "longtemps," the narrator elects to use the *passé simple*. The narrator also employs the *passé simple* in conjunction with the adverb "longtemps" a couple of pages later, "[...] je parvins à gagner l'Allemagne, où, longtemps, je fus sans travail" (15-16). The narrator continuously breaches time by employing verb tenses that are atypical with the adverb *longtemps*. The rest of the text follows this amalgamation of past and present.

Not only does the first paragraph of *W* deploy a similar grammatical construction to that of *À la recherche*, but light as well functions in the same paradoxical manner in both texts. The narrator of *W*, Gaspard, admits to hesitating prior to feeling the (present-day) "nécessité impérieuse" to tell "les évènements dont j'ai été le témoin," believing that the events he witnessed "doivent être révélés et mis en *lumière*" (13). Gaspard uses the word "lumière" in the context of "shedding light upon." He believes that by telling what

he witnessed, he can shed light on what has thus far remained dark. In the instance of *W*, light and truth are put in opposition, where unveiling may not always result in a collective understanding of the past, and may result in precisely the opposite. For instance, as shown when he states, “Longtemps j’ai voulu garder le secret sur ce que j’avais vu [...] parce que celui qui me la confia a, lui aussi, disparu” (13). In fact, one wonders if it is the revelation of the “secret” which leads to this other’s disappearance. When Proust’s narrator blows out the light, he is able to sleep. However, blowing out the light is not a concluding, final act, as the narrator wakes up a half hour later, convinced that he has not blown out the light and must do so. For Proust’s narrator, blowing out the light allows for rest. The narrator of *W* also points to the function of light. Perec’s narrator cannot rest until the light is on, until others can see the light, that is, see what took place on the island of *W*. By turning on this light, the narrator of *W* refuses to rest and lie in the shadows. The narrator appears to be daringly uncovering the past and baring himself.

The narrator of *Un secret* also employs a Proustian construction in the first line of *Un secret*, “fils unique, j’ai longtemps eu un frère” (11). Firstly, the narrator elects to use the adverb “longtemps” and the passé composé, demonstrating his unusual conception of time. The words, “j’ai longtemps eu” succinctly integrate past and present. The adverb of undefined time separates the present tense of avoir and its past participle. The state of “having” belongs neither exclusively to the past nor to the present. This relates to the thematic of loss in *Un secret*, where the narrator feels sure he “has” a brother but there is no proof of this until Louise reveals that he “had” a brother. Or does he still “have” one? What tense does one use to state that he has a brother if the brother is dead? “J’ai” and “eu” mirror each other, like “fils unique” and “un frère.” Thus “longtemps” not only joins

tenses of past and present, but also the state of being an only child and having a brother. This reflects the way in which time both has taken away the narrator's brother and reveals the fact that the narrator indeed had a brother.

The opening sentence of Part II of *Un secret* employs an analogous grammatical construction as the first sentence of Part I when the narrator states, "j'ai longtemps été un petit garçon qui se rêvait une famille idéale" (37). Here, the shift from the passé composé to the imperfect demonstrates the slippery nature of time, in that the passé composé is an opening onto the present whereas the imperfect depicts a repetitive action. On the other hand, the act of dreaming takes the imperfect, in turn suggesting that dreaming is boundless. This distinguishes being from dreaming. In addition the narrator uses the self-reflexive "se rêver" rather than "rêver." The self-reflexivity of the phrase is not only an indicator of the self-reflexivity of the entire text, which shall be discussed at greater length shortly, but also of the floating "je" in time, who identifies with being an only child as well as having a brother and a perfect family. This recurs again, when the narrator describes his status in the family, "Je me suis si longtemps cru le premier, le seul" (55). Again, the text juxtaposes the passé composé with "longtemps." The statements "le premier" and "le seul" contradict one another, as it is impossible to be the only one *and* the first. The reader later learns that the narrator was not the first, but was preceded by an elder half brother who perished in the war.

Although the representation of time is very similar in the first sentence of *W* and *Un secret*, the allegorical portion of the text both ruptures and sutures the autofictional narrative in *W*. The autobiographical segment comprises the narrator's memories. Each chapter of the autofiction reveals a preoccupation with a certain set of memories, as the

chapter containing the sub-headings “Rue Vilin” and “Deux Photos” illustrates (71-81). As noted, between each memory or set of memories Perec inserts an italicized section of the allegorical *récit*. This allegory unfolds not in time but rather space, as it transports the reader to an island universe meant to represent the concentration camps of World War II. In this way space alternates with time, fragmenting the reader’s perceptions of both time and space. The allegorical chapters provide a bridge of sorts: they suspend the *récit* but give the narrator access to other memories. The fact that “longtemps” is used from the very first sentence illustrates both time and space. “Long” is an adjective describing physical length and duration of time. “Temps” designates temporality. In *W*, time is often presented as being both volatile, absent, and difficult, if not impossible, to represent.

Un secret follows a mostly chronological order, but in the same way as *W*, time within the narration is volatile and unsteady. The narrator begins with his first memories and concludes by describing himself as an older man visiting a cemetery with his daughter. The narrator does not elaborate on his relationship with his daughter, but as she turns to leave him in the cemetery, the reader is left with the distinct impression that the narrator hopes the transmission of trauma will cease with him, “Rose manifestait des signes d’impatience, je lui ai proposé de rentrer rejoindre sa mère, de me laisser ici encore quelques instants. Elle a accepté et s’est éloignée, agitant sa main sans se retourner” (187-188). The text constantly switches between childhood fantasies, descriptions of childhood, and present-day narrative. These repetitive alternations demonstrate the elusive nature of time, as in Perec’s text. *Un secret* switches between past and present, between recollections that seem plausible and others that are clearly fantastical.

Autofictional texts blur the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, much like the blurred boundaries between past and present. Serge Doubrovsky first coined the term in 1977 in reference to his own work *Fils*. Although it may be anachronistic to refer to *À la recherche* as an autofiction, it may be the most appropriate term. Gerard Genette comes to a similar conclusion, “ [À la recherche] ... comment appeler ce genre, cette forme de fiction, puisque fiction, au sens fort du terme, il y a bien ici? Le meilleur terme serait sans doute celui dont Serge Doubrovsky désigne son propre récit : autofiction” (293). *À la recherche* intertwines autobiography and fiction, moving between the two and threading the two together. This constant movement is like the function of time in the novel as well. *À la recherche* presents time as elusive and fragmentary, radically changing the understanding of both narrative and lived time. Time assumes dimensions that are out of our grasp and unpredictable, such as in sudden involuntary memory that throws one back into the past with unparalleled vividness.

The configuration of *W* utilizes an oscillation between allegory and autofiction. The constant alternation between the two genres of text renders the reading particularly unstable. The past folds upon itself, and there is no stable ground in either text on which to rest. This instability is rooted in the fact that the texts spring from memories that are by their very nature unstable and elusive. The memories recalled throughout *W* arise from a variety of different sources. In the allegorical segment, the memories appear to be both the narrator’s and those of an unknown person who disappeared, “longtemps j’ai gardé le secret sur ce que j’avais vu [...] parce que celui qui me la confia a, lui aussi, disparu” (13). In the autofictional segment, the narrator’s memories are presented as his own, but he describes their instability: “désormais les souvenirs existent, fugaces ou tenaces,

futiles ou pesants, mais rien ne les rassemble” (97). On the other hand, others around him in the present day modify his recollections as well. For example, the narrator recalls his bandaged arm when he left Paris, “la Croix-Rouge évacue les blessés. Je n’étais pas blessé. Il fallait pourtant m’évacuer. Donc il fallait faire comme si j’étais blessé. C’est pour cela que j’avais le bras en écharpe” (80). His aunt has a different memory, “mais ma tante est à peu près formelle: je n’avais pas le bras en écharpe, il n’y avait aucune raison pour que j’aie le bras en écharpe [...]” (80). Later, still in reference to his departure from Paris, he evokes the same injury but in less certain terms: “peut-être par contre, avais-je une hernie et portais-je un bandage herniaire, un suspensoir. À mon arrivée à Grenoble, il me semble que j’ai été opéré [...] selon Esther, ce fut plus tard, d’une appendicite. Selon Ela, ce fut d’une hernie, mais bien avant, à Paris [...]” (80-81). The narrator often doubts his memories after speaking to others. His memories are unstable because of the slippery nature of time, but also because of the modifications made by himself and those close to him. Interestingly, what renders these memories unstable is not necessarily the act of recollection but rather the act of rehearsing them, which subjects them to revision. By verbalizing his memories, the narrator brings them to light but paradoxically, by doing so, alters them.

The self-reflexive nature of both *W* and *Un secret* indicates the difficulty of bearing witness, recounting memories, and writing about trauma. In *W*, from the very first sentence, the narrator expresses his hesitation in writing about what he witnessed on the island of W. Georges, the narrator, refers to the creation of the allegory, declaring, “à l’époque de W, entre, disons, ma onzième et ma quinzième année, je couvris des cahiers entiers” (97). In another segment, Georges describes his previously written

autobiographical accounts, which he includes in the text: “le projet d’écrire mon histoire s’est formé presque en même temps que mon projet d’écrire. Les deux textes qui suivent datent de plus de quinze ans. Je les recopie sans rien y changer, renvoyant en note les rectifications et les commentaires que j’estime aujourd’hui devoir ajouter” (45-46). The narrator seeks to combat the changing nature of memory through time by copying them “sans rien y changer.” He adds revisions to passages from several different chapters.⁷ Here, the narrator bears witness to himself and attempts to keep faithful to what he witnessed. When describing the act of writing, another passage displays the self-reflexivity of the text:

Je ne sais pas si je n’ai rien à dire, je sais que je ne dis rien ; je ne sais pas si ce que j’aurais à dire n’est pas dit parce qu’il est l’indicible [...] je sais que ce que je dis est blanc, neutre, est signe une fois pour toutes d’un anéantissement une fois pour toutes. C’est cela que je dis, c’est cela que j’écris et c’est cela seulement qui se trouve dans les mots que je trace, et dans les lignes que ces mots dessinent, et dans les blancs que laisse apparaître l’intervalle entre ces lignes (63)

Here the narrator expresses the relationship between writing and absence. Writing is self-reflexive but one cannot fully transcribe the self in writing. Similarly, one cannot represent time. Finally, in the last paragraph of *W*, in the autofictional segment of the text, the narrator notes, “j’ai oublié les raisons qui, à douze ans, m’ont fait choisir la Terre de Feu pour y installer *W* [...] plusieurs îlots de la Terre de Feu sont aujourd’hui des camps de déportations” (222). The narrator remembers choosing “la Terre de Feu” for his allegory. He notes, ironically, that the island now acts in the same way as his fictional island of *W*. The allegory is intended to represent the concentration camps, and in fact the

⁷ See Perec, chapters IV (pages 25-28), VI (pages 35-38), and VIII (pages 45-62).

real island is a location for concentration camps. The self-reflexivity in *W* demonstrates the fluidity between reality and fiction.

Unlike *W*, *Un secret* does not explicitly refer to itself until the very last sentence of the book:

Des années après que mon frère avait déserté ma chambre, après avoir mis en terre tous ceux qui m'étaient chers, j'offrais enfin à Simon la sépulture à laquelle il n'avait jamais eu droit. Il allait y dormir, en compagnie des enfants qui avaient connu son destin, sur cette page portant sa photo, ses dates si rapprochées et son nom, dont l'orthographe différait si peu du mien. *Ce livre serait sa tombe.* (191)

The verb tenses in this passage are unusual. The first sentence of the passage cited above begins with the pluperfect “avait déserté” moves to the past infinitive “avoir mis,” to two verbs in the imperfect, “était” and “offrais,” and concludes with a return to the pluperfect. In this sentence, time is depicted as moving forwards and back again. The use of the imperfect, in juxtaposition to the passé composé and pluperfect, illustrates the permutation of the different elements of the sentence. The act of offering a grave to Simon and “ceux qui m'étaient chers” is not in the present tense but remains in the past tense. The fact that this act is narrated in the imperfect denotes repetition or incompleteness, alerting the reader that there is no defining closure to the process of burying. In a similar fashion the narrator uses the conditional tense in the last sentence implying that the book is *not* his brother's tomb, but *would* be his tomb. This is typical of a “would/if” clause, the “if” clause is missing. This missing “if” clause could be a signal towards the narrator's parents, who carried the secret of Simon's death in silence and consequently experienced incomplete mourning. This may be a way for the narrator to acknowledge that there is no final closure or “complete” mourning. Moreover, this missing “if” clause may be a sign of respect towards both his brother and his parents.

This recalls the ellipsis in Perec's *W*, which indicates the narrator's silence and inability to replace his mother's death with any sort of language. These silences in both *W* and *Un secret* suggest not only an altered temporal state but a respect towards those who passed and those grieving.

The representation of time is unstable in both *W* and *Un secret* because of the authors' unorthodox juxtaposition of different verb tenses with the adverb "longtemps," an adverb that recalls Proust's *À la recherche*. Although Proust is clearly an influential model for both authors, they challenge Proust's notion of memory. As Smith suggests,

Unlike Proust, however, Perec is not effectively served by memory. He does not have access to a device that would, like Proust's madeleine, retrieve the past whole, coherent form. Indeed, in Perec's autobiography, memory does not retrieve past; rather, it creates a past that is marked by evidence of its construction. By encouraging a comparison between his work and that of Proust, then, Perec comments ironically upon the nostalgic view of the past that Proust's novel assumes. (206)

Smith reads Perec's *W* as a treatment of Proust's *À la recherche*, but in the wake of trauma. While the act of recalling the past evokes nostalgia for Proust's narrator, Perec avoids or is incapable of such nostalgia. Proust's narrator anchors his existence through his past memories. On the other hand, Perec's narrator has no such anchor, as he has lost his mother and father. The narrator of *W* specifically refers to the instability of his memories, "les souvenirs sont des morceaux de vie arrachés au vide. Nulle amarre. Rien ne les ancre, rien ne les fixe" (98). Grimbert's *Un secret* tackles loss in much the same way as Perec's *W*. The narrator of *Un secret* loses an elder brother—in fact he is deprived of any knowledge of his brother until his Louise intervenes and reveals his parents' secret. For the narrator of *Un secret*, his subconscious remembrances are even more elusive, for he does not discover that he had a brother until he is teenager. During this

time, he does not even have the anchor of someone who was present, but passed, to understand what is happening. Both narratives revolve around these losses, rendering their representation, in the wake of absence, difficult. Walter Benjamin argues that Proust's *À la recherche* also spins on the axis of loss and forgetting, or the fear of forgetting, by its very emphasis on the chain of memories:

Proust n'a pas décrit une vie telle qu'elle fut, mais une vie telle que celui qui l'a vécue la remémore ... ce qui joue ici le rôle essentiel, pour l'auteur qui se rappelle ses souvenirs, n'est aucunement ce qu'il a vécu, mais le tissage de ses souvenirs, le travail de Pénélope de la remémoration. Ou bien ne faudrait-il pas plutôt parler d'un travail de Pénélope de l'oubli ? La mémoire involontaire de Proust n'est-elle pas, en effet, beaucoup plus proche de l'oubli que de ce que l'on appelle en général le souvenir ? (*Œuvres II*, 136)

The involuntary memory of Proust's narrator, according to Benjamin, rests closer to the act of forgetting than remembering. For what is being recalled involuntarily has been entirely forgotten, almost lost. On the other hand Perec and Grimbert's narrators tackle memory, which they actively dissect and record. This very act demonstrates the very active approach towards memory that both narrators take.

Although Perec wrote some forty years after Proust, and Grimbert nearly ninety years, these authors wrestle with similar questions of time. Despite the different contexts of all three autofictional texts, the problematic role of memory and language comes to the surface. While trauma may impede accurate representation, all representation is always inadequate. The particular crux of this difficulty lies in the functioning of time, which appears to be chronological and linear, but internally splits in every direction, forming not a chain of memories but rather takes on an atemporal, nebulous form. Trauma appears to take hold of *W* and *Un secret*, altering not only the narrators' backwards glance on the past, but also their present-day conception of the past. As Philippe Grimbert stated in an

interview, “On ne peut connaître son histoire qu'à travers une fiction. Le mémoire elle-même étant toujours une fiction.” (Brunet “Livre”). In this way, perhaps the greater truth behind memory's role is that it is not accuracy that should bear the significance, but rather interpretation and its changes through time. And in this way, time may not be the enemy, as Marder suggests in the citation introducing this chapter, but rather a gift to the narrators. Perec's narrator establishes the link between writing, memory, and time, when he states:

J'écris: j'écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble, parce que j'ai été un parmi eux, ombre au milieu de leurs ombres, corps près de leur corps; j'écris parce qu'ils ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l'écriture: leur souvenir est mort à l'écriture; l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie. (63-64)

In this passage, the narrator describes both the effect and function of writing on living with trauma. This passage, which moves gracefully from the act of writing to remembering, to death and back to life, shows how time permits this movement. Grimbert's narrator, in closing *Un secret*, also describes what time has allowed him to do. The narrator describes the length of time it took for him to write his book, to speak his memories, “des *années après* que mon frère avait déserté ma chambre, *après* avoir mis en terre tous ceux qui m'étaient chers, j'offrais *enfin* à Simon...”⁸ (191). Here the narrator is emphasizing how time has been a deciding factor in what he is able to put forth today. Through the time that has passed and after the death of his parents, the narrator is able to undertake his project and put forth what been a long time in the making. For both narrators, time renders possible writing, remembering, and living.

⁸ Italics my own.

CONCLUSION

Memory... limits and enables at the same time... [It] is evidence of continuity: that the future will have a past.

(Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*)

Contemporary post-Holocaust autofiction, such as Philippe Grimbert's *Un secret*, composes itself -- much like memory -- of scraps of the past, of those who came before, of those who testified to what they saw. Employing, reordering, and modifying tropes from Perec's *W*, as well as other works, Grimbert contextualizes them within his own frame of reference, as a second-generation survivor. Grimbert examines and re-asserts the value of the body, language, and the poetics of time. By highlighting the parallel themes and language in both *W* and *Un Secret*, I trace the shifting and static elements of testimony. In short, the act of writing and recollecting appears to emphasize particular themes and language, such as the function of the body and the blurred boundaries of time. The familiar tropes present in *W* and *Un secret* not only point to a certain framework for the representation of Holocaust trauma, but also act as building blocks for future writers and future testimony.

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