Memory as a Signpost

Memory is defined as both ‘[t]he faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information’ and the mind itself ‘regarded as a store of things remembered’. And yet, as Elke Heckner writes, ‘[s]econd-generation witnesses do not passively store away memories of the Holocaust’. A new term was necessary to capture the complex nature of second-generation memory after the Nazi genocide, one which conveyed ‘its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory’. Marianne Hirsch coined the term ‘postmemory’ to describe that which ‘characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated’. The prefix “post” renders postmemory a signpost to the past that is rooted in the present and looks towards the future: a generational shift in memory which refers specifically though not exclusively to second-generation memory of the Holocaust or Shoah. The concept of postmemory has been chiefly associated with Hirsch though some of her ideas intriguingly spring from those of French novelist and scholar Henri Raczymow. Drawing on his

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2 A. Stevenson (ed.), Oxford Dictionary of English, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2010). All subsequent references will use the abbreviation ODE (not to be confused with OED, Oxford English Dictionary, whose definition does not match this idea of ‘storing’).


6 Referring to Franz Kafka’s statement, ‘When the Earth turns to the right...I would have to turn to the left to make up for the past’, Raczymow writes: ‘So much for what Kafka wrote at the beginning of the 1920s. Since then, the earth has turned, and we know in what direction’ (H. Raczymow, ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’, trans. by A. Astro, Yale French Studies, 85 (1994), pp. 98-105, at p. 105). In the course of this article, I have chosen to use the term Shoah meaning “catastrophe” – a word of Hebrew origin which has been adopted into the French vocabulary as the preferred term – as opposed to the word Holocaust, originating from the Greek holokautos, from holos “whole” and kaustos “burnt” (ODE). Though no one of the narrators refers specifically to the Nazi genocide as either Shoah or Holocauste, Grimbert uses the word ‘catastrophe’ in Un Secret (p. 49), Raczymow refers explicitly to ‘la Catastrophe’ twice in Un Cri Sans Voix (pp. 165-7), and Perec, in a nuanced way, speaks of ‘la catastrophe’ of a shipwreck in W ou le Souvenir D’Enfance (p. 84). This shipwreck is a form of catastrophe, occurring in the South Atlantic Ocean, in which a young boy, Gaspard Winckler, loses his mother Caecilia (W, p. 58), whose name bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Perec’s autobiographical narrator Georges’ mother, Cyrla or, in French, Cécile (Ibid., p. 29).
theories of ‘belatedness and disconnection’,\textsuperscript{7} she refers to Raczymow’s ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’ in her first essay on the subject. Similarly, Ellen Fine alludes to Raczymow in her analysis of ‘absent memory’,\textsuperscript{8} and Robert Eaglestone comments that postmemory ‘points to “Memory shot through with holes”…where the collective memory is full of gaps, blanks, uncertainties’.\textsuperscript{9}

Raczymow’s contribution to the postmemory debate is found not only in ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’ but also in his novel \textit{Writing the Book of Esther}\textsuperscript{10}, which joins Georges Perec’s \textit{W or the Memory of Childhood}\textsuperscript{11} and Philippe Grimbert’s \textit{Memory}\textsuperscript{12} in the analysis that follows in this article.\textsuperscript{13} While both Grimbert and Raczymow are post-war children of survivors, Perec is an orphan who lost his mother during the Shoah.\textsuperscript{14} Grimbert’s \textit{Memory}, meanwhile, is autobiographical and the narrator’s first name corresponds to that of the author, Philippe. Nevertheless, Grimbert defines the text as a \textit{roman} (novel), allowing room for ‘novelistic investment’, claiming that his ‘family history contained so many gaps that the novel...was the only possibility of overcoming them’.\textsuperscript{15} Like Grimbert, Raczymow is a member of the second generation. His narrative is fictional, however, as is his narrator Mathieu, and Raczymow, therefore, locates \textit{Writing the Book of Esther} in the novel genre. Meanwhile, Perec, as a member of the 1.5 generation,\textsuperscript{16} incorporates into his \textit{W or the Memory of Childhood} a fictional narrative he conceived as a child alongside reflections on childhood

\textsuperscript{7} Hirsch, ‘Postmemories in Exile’, p. 663.
\textsuperscript{9} Eaglestone, \textit{The Holocaust and the Postmodern}. Fine writes: ‘Essentially, this nonmemory or lack of memory comes from the feeling of exclusion both from the experience and from knowledge about the experience. The “absent memory” is filled with blanks, silence, a sense of void’ (Fine, ‘Transmission of Memory’, p. 187).
\textsuperscript{11} G. Perec, \textit{W or the Memory of Childhood}, trans. by D. Bellos (London: Collins Harvill, 1988).
\textsuperscript{13} Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from the primary sources will be taken from the English translation and indicated in parenthesis using the following abbreviations, followed by the relevant page number(s):
\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{W} = Georges Perec, \textit{W or the Memory of Childhood}. Original text: \textit{W ou le Souvenir D’enfance} (Saint-Amand: Gallimard, 1999), title translated literally.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{14} ‘I lost my father at four, my mother at six’ (\textit{W}, p. 6). Georges’ father ‘died for France’ in the First World War (\textit{Ibid.}, p. 37).
\textsuperscript{16} Neither a member of the survivor generation nor of what Geoffrey H. Hartman terms ‘the generation after’, Perec (and by extension his autobiographical narrator Georges) can be located in the 1.5 generation, a term coined by Susan R. Suleiman to describe those who are ‘too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them but old enough to have been there during the Nazi persecution of the Jews’. Hartman quoted in E. McGlothlin, \textit{Second Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration} (Rochester, New York: Camden House; Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), p. 125. Suleiman quoted in I. Kacandes, ‘“When facts are scarce”: Authenticating Strategies in Writing by Children of Survivors’, in J. Lothe, S.R. Suleiman and J. Phelan (eds.), \textit{After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narratives for the Future} (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2012), pp. 179-197, at p. 186.
memories, voiced by the autobiographical narrator Georges. Consequently, Perec classifies the text as autobiography, which he defines elsewhere as ‘the exploration of one’s own memories’.  

In his mourning process, each narrator senses a tangible absence: for Philippe, it is that of his half-brother Simon, who died in the Shoah before he was born; for Mathieu, it is that of his sister Esther, who committed suicide as a guilt-ridden member of the 1.5 generation; and for Georges, it is that of his mother, a victim of the Shoah.  

Despite difference in experience and approach, Grimbert, Raczymow, and Perec can each be seen as writers of postmemory because they are situated in the generation that comes after the eye-witnesses. Yet these postmemory writers still possess a memory, defined as ‘the faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information’, which finds reference in the ‘artistic representation’ of the written word, rendering postmemory ‘a dynamic mode of transmission, rather than just an inert storage place for Holocaust memory’. Knowledge of the Shoah, and the trauma that this brings, is transmitted to the narrators Philippe, Georges, and Mathieu not through personal experiences translated into memories but through articulated silence and the presence of absence in memory-triggering objects. These components act as initial stimuli for each narrator, who goes on to discover some of the truth about the years preceding his birth, aided by intergenerational transmission or ‘acts of transfer’. In turn, each narrator voices his postmemory experiences of shame and disbelief through writing (facilitated through imagined reconstruction). Writing becomes a form of “working through” the transmitted yet repressed postmemory trauma resulting from the catastrophe that overshadowed his childhood.  

In this way, the authors become ‘agents of postmemory’, those who give ‘narrative shape to the surviving fragments of an irretrievable past’.  

Silence and Voice: Surviving the Silence and the Shame  

Grimbert’s Memory is what social psychologist Erika Apfelbaum defines as one of the narratives by children of survivors of the Shoah ‘describing how heavily burdened they felt by the silence of their parents, who refused to speak of their past history’. As a psychoanalyst himself, Grimbert would likely agree that ‘the silence within the family, enhanced by the collective social amnesia about the Holocaust’ was ‘damaging’. Using the lexical field of pain and suffering to express the harmful effect of the enforced silence of his childhood, Grimbert speaks of ‘the secret in which my parents had shrouded me’ and ‘the painful wall with which my parents had surrounded themselves’.  

18 ODE.  
19 Heckner writes: ‘According to [Marianne] Hirsch, second-generation witnesses translate the narrative and images they receive from their parents into new modes of artistic representation. Postmemory, figured as such, is a dynamic mode of transmission, rather than just an inert storage place for Holocaust memory’ (Heckner, ‘Whose Trauma Is It?’, p. 67).  
24 Apfelbaum, ‘Against the Tide’, p. 29.  
25 M, p. 46.
Philippe is only able to ‘climb’ this wall when family friend and confidante Louise reveals the truth of the past to him. In this way, Louise can be seen as an exemplary analyst who acquaints Philippe with ‘the resistance’ he feels towards knowledge of his parents’ past and his half-brother’s death, and enables him to work through his postmemory grief. According to Ruth Kitchen, Louise is for Philippe ‘the storyteller, history-giver and enlightener, restoring to him a previously obscured and inaccessible past’. Perec, on the other hand, does not explicitly refer to a transmitter in the life of Georges; the past remains inaccessible to him. Perec’s cousin Bianca Lamblin describes how the author’s aunt Esther ‘probably had a talk with him. Or maybe not…[N]either Georges nor my mother ever spoke of it’. Thus for both Georges and Philippe, memory is, at least temporarily, ‘concealed, refused or forbidden’.

Similarly, Raczymow’s narrator Mathieu is brought up in a closed ‘family circle’, yet he is complicit in their silence, as can be seen in the use of the first-person plural possessive pronoun in the following quote:

> Our silence, as far as Esther was concerned, was not a deliberate intent not to remember her…Our silence seemed so effortless, so natural, that it was as if Esther had really never existed. Never existed except in dreams, or rather in nightmares, but the kind of hazy, fuzzy nightmares that disappear on awakening, leaving nothing behind except a sort of vague uneasiness.

Although silence is shown to be a repressive force here, a vague recollection nevertheless remains. In other words, though it may seem that ‘life went on’ following his sister’s suicide, Mathieu acknowledges that ‘life went on as usual…only on the surface.’ Evoking what Fine terms the ‘unhealed wounds of memory’, Grimbert writes in the same vein: ‘Their hurts will become less raw; only a dull pain will remain lurking inside each of them. They will no longer speak of the war, or mention the names of those who were lost’.

Similarly, the external layer of silence in *Writing the Book of Esther* conceals a deeper wound: ‘underneath the surface it was better not to look too close’.

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37 *M*, p. 130
38 *WBE*, p. 109
Mathieu: ‘It was more than forgetfulness: nothing had happened’; 39 ‘Mathieu has forgotten Esther since her death. They have all forgotten her. In any case, they never speak about her. She is taboo’. 40 In the same way, Philippe’s half-brother and father’s previous wife become subjects of taboo: ‘His name was never mentioned again, nor Hannah’s’. 41 Nevertheless, this strained forgetfulness, enforced by silence, proves to be temporary and superficial. Raczymow explains how ‘[t]he unsaid, the untransmitted, the silence about the past were themselves eloquent’ 42 in expressing the deep absence of memory, which is not to be confused with forgetfulness but rather to be seen as ‘a void in our remembrance of the Holocaust through which we did not live’. 43 Indeed, Raczymow’s narrator Mathieu in Writing the Book of Esther later acknowledges that silence does not necessarily signify forgetfulness: ‘Of course, they didn’t forget Esther. How could they forget? But they never spoke about her’. 44 Similarly, when Grimbert’s autobiographical narrator Philippe is told of his half-brother’s previous existence in Memory, he realises that, despite their silence, ‘[t]he whole family knew. They had all known Simon, all loved him’. 45

There is, then, an ambiguity surrounding the silence that is enforced by the family and a voluntary ‘denial’ on the part of the narrators, ‘a defence mechanism commonly used to repress feelings of powerlessness and the fear that ensues’. 46 Perec’s autobiographical narrator Georges claims that history has already spoken in its objectiveness: ‘History with a capital ‘H’ had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps’. 47 What is more, he appears almost reassured by the innocence conceded by ‘an absence of history’ which protects him from the stark reality of ‘my real story’, 48 the story of an orphan who lost his mother during the Shoah. ‘I have no childhood memories’, he declares, and then later revisits the phrase in a tone of self-reflection: ‘I have no childhood memories’: I made this assertion with confidence, with almost a kind of defiance. It was nobody’s business to press me on this question’. 49 In contrast to Fine’s claim that ‘those born in the shadow of genocide…desire…to be informed about what occurred’, 50 what can be seen here is a temporary ‘inversion of the desire to know into a refusal to hear’. 51 Grimbert’s narrator Philippe demonstrates a decided obstinacy, suggesting a resistance to knowledge ‘by process of repression’: 52 ‘I had decided not to know’. 53 Raczymow’s narrator demonstrates a similar ‘refusal to hear’: ‘Mathieu drew a feeling of shame from…[the] absence of reasons for the decreed extermination of the Jews. He didn’t want to hear about it anymore’. 54

Silence is, therefore, associated with shame. As a member of the second generation, Mathieu locates himself in relation to his sister who, like Georges in W or the Memory of Childhood,

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39 Ibid., pp. 1-2  
40 Ibid., p. 100  
41 M, pp. 123  
43 Ibid., p. 104.  
44 WBE, p. 109.  
45 M, p. 65.  
47 W, p. 6  
48 Ibid., p. 6  
49 Ibid., p. 6  
53 M, p. 9  
54 WBE, p. 131
is a member of the 1.5 generation: ‘Esther’s great superiority, her incomparable superiority, lies in the fact that she’d been threatened. Born after the war, Mathieu can never catch up’.

Her suicide is, ‘for him, a replica in miniature of what the Jewish people had experienced forty years earlier’. Therefore, to ‘dare speak’ or indeed write of either ‘constituted the worst of indecencies’ in his eyes. Here, the voice of the narrator echoes that of the author: ‘I did not have nothing to say...Rather, I had to say nothing’.

Raczymow identifies a ‘prohibition on speaking’ associated with the second generation: ‘My question was not “how to speak” but “by what right could I speak,” I who was not a victim, survivor or witness’. Raczymow continues to explore this question through his narrator in Writing the Book of Esther. Under the subheading “Silence”, Mathieu imagines how his sister, as a member of the 1.5 generation, would have reacted had she known that he had dared to write about the Shoah as a second-generation survivor:

She wouldn’t have allowed it. She would have asked him why he was butting in, what business it was of his, and Mathieu would have been speechless at that question, acquiescing – indeed, indeed, what business was it of his, acquiescing, admitting, acknowledging his guilt – he was guilty of giving up his rightful place, of having usurped another’s place, another’s role. Only survivors had a right to speak. The others, especially those born after the war, should keep quiet, be silent. Their words are obscene, impudent. That’s what Esther would have said.

A sense of culpability is, therefore, associated with second-generation ‘vicarious witnessing’. Through a process of self-interrogation, Mathieu recognises that ‘this feeling of shame’ and ‘the forced silence’ arise from the fact that he was ‘[b]orn after the war’. Thus the journey of Raczymow’s narrator tracks his own progression from silence – at one time ‘only silence could evoke the horror. A taboo weighed upon it’ – to articulation, for ‘as any psychoanalyst will tell you, the time comes when you have to speak of what is troubling you’. Indeed, according to Raczymow, this ‘imperious need to speak’ was the reason he wrote Un cri sans voix. His narrator acknowledges that ‘it wasn’t a desire for knowledge that animated him. Because he knew, he knew everything. But he simply had to write about that knowledge, get it down in black and white. To get past the disgust’.

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55 Ibid., p. 106
56 Ibid., p. 128
57 Ibid., p. 128
58 Raczymow, ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’, p. 100
59 Ibid., p. 102. Original italics.
60 WBE, p. 119.
62 WBE, pp. 123-4, p. 106.
63 Raczymow, ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’, p. 100.
64 Ibid., p. 102-103.
65 WBE, p. 124.
Silence, then, is initially associated with not hearing (due to having not been told or to not wanting to listen), then with not speaking (due to shame). Following the voluntary suppression of memory, a time of fluctuation between resisting and desiring knowledge and articulation of the truth ensues. Jacques Rancière elucidates: ‘There is...this toying between wanting to know, yet not wanting to tell, telling without telling, and refusing to listen’.66 Perec compares this in-between state, located in the space between silence and articulation, to the childhood game of hide-and-seek: ‘I was like a child playing hide-and-seek, who doesn’t know what he fears or wants more: to stay hidden, or to be found’.67 These seemingly conflicting emotions of fear and ‘desire’68 can be compared to ‘[the] horror and fascination commingled in the bottomless pit of those memories’,69 which leads to the ‘[i]ncompréhension’70 faced by Perec and expressed through his narrator Georges:

I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing; I do not know if what I might have to say is unsaid because it is unsayable (the unsayable is not buried inside writing, it is what prompted it in the first place); I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation.71

Nevertheless, the narrator who begins Perec’s tale is compelled by a ‘mission’, passed down to him from an unidentified transmitter, to break this ‘icy silence’ in an act of witness.72 Philippe, meanwhile, is released from the ‘prison of silence’73 by Louise, who sees it as ‘her duty to break the silence’,74 acting as a surrogate mother by teaching him not only to listen but also to speak. First Philippe complies with his parents’ deception in the name of love: ‘The silence was going to continue, and I couldn’t imagine what might make me decide to break it. I was trying, in my turn, to protect them’.75 Eventually, in a role reversal of intergenerational transmission, prompted by the death of family dog Echo, Philippe tells his parents what they already know, articulating the absence so present in their lives.76 Transmission thus becomes an integral part of Grimbert’s existence. As a psychoanalyst, he speaks into the silence of his parents and, as an author, he recounts an autobiographical narrative. This is an example of what Erika Apfelbaum identifies as ‘telling to exist

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67 W, p. 7.
68 Hirsch writes that postmemory ‘describes...the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first – their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge’ (M. Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory’, The Yale Journal of Criticism, 14 (2001), pp. 5-37, at p. 12). Elsewhere, she speaks of ‘the mixture of ambivalence and desire, mourning and recollection, presence and absence that characterize postmemory’ (Hirsch, ‘Postmemories in Exile’, p. 659).
69 W, p. 3. Original italics.
70 Ibid., p. 3. Original italics.
71 Ibid., p. 42.
72 W, p. 4. Perec speaks of ‘the mission which had been entrusted to me’, and goes on to write that, ‘he who entrusted it to me, he too has disappeared’ (Ibid., p. 3). Consequently, his narrator asserts that ‘in what I am about to relate I was a witness and not an actor’ (Ibid., p. 4. Original italics).
73 M, p. 64.
74 Ibid., p. 58.
75 Ibid., p. 61.
76 Ibid., pp. 143-4.
socially in the world’, which consists of ‘storing individual experiences and emotions into memory’ and ‘depends on the possibility of sharing them with others and...on the trust the narrator has in the interlocutor’s capacity to hear’. An element of ‘resistance to resolution’ remains nonetheless, in that Philippe does not reveal the whole truth to his parents, deliberately omitting the suicidal and infanticidal decision which led to Hannah and Simon’s deportation.

Nevertheless, with this semi-confession comes an apparently definitive relief, and yet, years later, following his parents’ death, the grief of Grimbert’s autobiographical narrator Philippe resurfaces when he visits a dog cemetery, a site of memory of sorts. As he recalls Echo’s cremation, other, more disturbing, images come to mind:

Echo flashed into my mind, abandoned on the table of a veterinary clinic to be incinerated with a mountain of other carcasses. But I soon started to feel uneasy as I read the tombstones, whose dates following fast on one another brought to mind the graves of children: Josée de Chambrun, Laval’s daughter, buried her cosseted pets here.

Knowing that Pierre Laval collaborated in the deportation and subsequent extermination of French Jews and their children, Philippe is disgusted that his daughter’s dogs, who died by natural means, are given a proper burial while the human beings he indirectly sent to the gas chambers were denied this right. In light of this, Philippe reflects on what it might mean to figuratively lay his brother to rest in the novel as a site of memory: ‘It was in that cemetery, lovingly maintained by the daughter of the man who had given Simon a one-way ticket to the end of the world, that I had the idea for this book. The pain I have never been able to assuage by mourning would be laid to rest in its pages’. Thus ‘through mourning and the at least symbolic provision of a proper burial,’ Philippe ‘attempts to assist in restoring to victims the dignity denied them by their victimisers’.

**Absence and Presence: Object-ive and Subject-ive Memory**

Knowledge repressed in silence comes to the surface and to some extent is played out in material objects and photographs. Anthropologist Carol A. Kidron argues that for second-generation survivors, ‘objects trigger descendant vicarious identification, intersubjectivity and intercorporeality’. Each narrator attaches a memory-triggering status to objects which act as mise

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79 Philippe’s parents commit suicide (M, p. 152).
81 ‘President Laval...in his defence hearing said that he had encouraged the deportation of children under sixteen so as not to separate families’ (*Ibid.*, p. 150). Erin McGlothlin notes that for ‘most second-generation writers, there are no death certificates, dates of death, or graves to mark the murder of their relatives’ (McGlothlin, *Second Generation Holocaust Literature*, p. 24).
82 M, p. 150.
83 LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 713.
84 C.A. Kidron, ‘Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence: Holocaust Survivor and Descendant Person−Object Relations and the Material Transmission of the Genocidal Past’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 17 (2012), pp. 3-21, at p. 17. This can be seen as an extension of Hirsch’s argument that ‘[o]bjects, lost and again found...can embody memory and thus trigger affect shared across generations’ (M. Hirsch, ‘Objects of Return’, in J. Lothe,
en abymes within the text, embodying the absent relative. Grimbert’s narrative begins with a discovery of the toy dog which belonged to his narrator Philippe’s half-brother Simon. Philippe feels ‘my mother’s unease’ as she asks him to put this uncomfortable reminder of her husband’s firstborn ‘back in his place’, as if the memory evoked by the toy – this ‘thing remembered from the past’ – belongs in a trunk hidden in the dusty corner of memory itself, defined as ‘the mind regarded as a store of things remembered’. Even the name Philippe attributes to his half-brother’s toy dog – Si – is indicative of his absence: ‘I had snatched [this name] from the darkness’. In light of the knowledge of his brother’s deportation, Philippe declares: ‘now that I knew what he had been through, there was no way I could face the flash of those little black eyes’. As Kidron writes: ‘Despite the mnemonic potential of objects, children of survivors depict the remembrance of the Holocaust dead as particularly problematic. The painfully present–absent dead are difficult to fully evoke, yet nonetheless are sorely “felt”’. And yet, by returning Si to the attic, Philippe favours introjection over ‘intercorporeality’, and resists ‘incorporation’ through ‘identification’. In this way, ‘melancholic identification’ can be seen as ‘a prerequisite for letting…go’. According to Hirsch, ‘identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the distance between self and other’.

On returning Si to ‘the dusty memories of the attic’, Philippe comes across a photo album: ‘A life in black-and-white, the smiles now gone; dead people with their arms around each other’. While Hirsch argues that photographs act as ‘memory cues’, Kidron goes a step further, stating that these ‘photographic images of relatives allow for the imagined presence of the dead to “take shape” in the present, providing a face, a gesture and an interfamilial bond to what might otherwise be experienced as the presence of absence’. Philippe feels such a bond with his half-brother when he finally comes across photographic evidence of him: ‘At last I had seen Simon: photos of him filled several pages. His face seemed strangely familiar’. There is a ‘particularity of identification’ for Philippe with regard to the photographic subject of his brother, forming a ‘material


85 M, p. 5.
86 Ibid., p.5.
87 ODE.
88 Ibid.
89 M, p. 135. ‘Where did I get that name? From the dusty smell of his fur? The silences of my mother, my father’s sadness? Si, Si! I walked my dog all around the flat, not wanting to notice my parents’ distress when they heard me calling his name’ (M, p. 14). Hand writes that Simon’s ‘name had…been preserved in broken form by what had been his own toy dog’ (Hand, ‘Never Tell’: p. 211).
90 M, p. 135.
91 Kidron, ‘Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence’, p. 12. The object of the toy dog is ‘particularly complex’ as it fits into the category of ‘[o]bjects that silently encapsulate and perform pasts that have culminated in death…Some of these objects do not evoke natural or anticipated death but, rather, dramatic and unexpected ruptures in the texture of the self and the family, such as…genocide’ (Ibid., p.4).
92 For a discussion of these terms, drawing on the work of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, see Hand, ‘Never Tell’, p. 216.
95 M, p. 135.
96 Ibid., p. 136.
98 Kidron, ‘Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence’, p. 16.
connection...to a lost past’, which corresponds to Hirsch’s argument that ‘because many images have survived even though their subjects did not, photography provides a particularly powerful medium of postmemory’. In *Writing the Book of Esther*, the post-war absence of Mathieu’s sister is encapsulated in a wartime cap and embodied in ‘the photograph of women fighters in the Warsaw ghetto’ pinned to her bedroom wall. Although she does not feature within it herself, this photograph comes to represent her: ‘this photograph is really Esther. It evokes Esther. It’s a little as if she were still there among them’. The image forms the stimulus for Mathieu to write a journal locating his sister in the world of this photograph, knowing that she wanted to resemble one of these women fighters. Mathieu thus reimagines his sister and attributes to her ‘traits of a character she perhaps dreamed about and one she impersonated, a girl who was about twenty years old in 1940. Like one of the women in the photograph’. What is more, the photograph that possesses Esther is inextricably linked to the cap she herself possessed, ‘her ridiculous and oversized cap’ which she wore ‘the same way the young Jewish women fighters wore theirs’. Mathieu describes how ‘she succeeded in believing herself one of the fighters. Wearing a cap’, and later recalls a conversation he had with Esther when a child in which she insisted, ‘Look, that’s me in the picture. And that cap I’m wearing there, look, I still have it’. Thus the object of the cap triggers a ‘vicarious identification, intersubjectivity and intercorporeality’ for Mathieu which Zeitlin argues verges on usurpation and reveals the danger of over-identification, the risk of ‘substitution through identification’. According to Zeitlin, ‘[t]he principle of substitution, which also includes theft and guilty appropriation in taking another’s place, provides the key to the dynamics of the entire work. It is exemplified in Mathieu’s appropriation of Esther’s cap’. While Mathieu’s parents, out of ‘fundamental decency’, ‘leave Esther’s room intact’, complete with the photograph on the wall and the cap on her desk, ‘Mathieu snatched it, ...

100 The notion of postmemory that Hirsch proposes is conjoined to the medium of photography, especially with regard to the particularity of identification that she finds to be possible with photographic subjects’ (Heckner, ‘Whose Trauma Is It?’, p. 68). It is this photograph which Philippe enters into Serge Klarsfeld’s *French Children of the Holocaust: A Memorial* (New York: New York UP, 1996).


102 WBE, p. 97. Zeitlin claims that this photograph has ‘achieved iconic status’ not only as an ‘emblem…of the ghetto’ but also as ‘representative…of the Holocaust’ as a whole (Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 140). For a reprint of this photograph, see *Ibid.*, p. 145.

103 WBE, p. 98.


106 *Ibid.*, p. 3. ‘The oversized cap is the symbol […] of the ghetto. A material object that emerges from the photograph into tangible reality, it becomes the relic of Esther herself and is imbued with her presence and power’ (*Ibid.*, p. 146).


109 Kidron, ‘Breaching the wall of traumatic silence’, p. 17. ‘To usurp her place, to substitute himself for her, is a source of power and also a compromise of his own identity’ (Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 147). Heckner writes: ‘At stake is the appropriation, that is, the substitution of the self for the other’ (*Whose Trauma Is It?*, p. 77). Similarly, LaCapra comments on the ‘difficulty which arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to be-come an identity’, suggesting that ‘the secondary witness’ should ‘resist…full identification and the dubious appropriation of the status of victim through vicarious or surrogate victimage’ (LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, pp. 699, 717.)


111 WBE, p. 106.
the cap that Charles and Fanny kept of her, the cap that she bought herself and wore in the streets.\textsuperscript{112} The first time Mathieu wears his sister’s cap, it is out of respect for her at her burial: ‘Perhaps it gave her pleasure there, beyond the grave, to have close to her, on her death, this symbol of the ghetto’.\textsuperscript{113} However, it soon becomes an obsessive possession which he wears as he writes his sister’s journal, as if to legitimise his usurpation of her role in doing so.\textsuperscript{114} Indeed, Mathieu attempts to overcome the sense of illegitimacy associated with second-generation “witnessing” by temporarily assuming the narrative voice of his sister as a member of the 1.5 generation: ‘Esther Litvak. Thanks to this name he could at last write, even in disgust, in self-disgust, and not only about himself but about the whole thing’.\textsuperscript{115} Dominick LaCapra warns against such appropriation and advocates empathy instead: ‘It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject-position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place’.\textsuperscript{116} The difference is that Mathieu does not feel that he has a right to the victim’s voice but temporarily assumes it nonetheless. According to Zeitlin, it is only until he dispossesses the past through the act of writing that Mathieu is able to regain his own subjective identity.\textsuperscript{117} In this way, ‘acting out’, manifested here in his appropriation of his sister’s cap and narrative voice, can be seen as ‘a necessary condition of working-through’ for Mathieu.\textsuperscript{118}

While Philippe and Mathieu’s postmemory is triggered by the physical objects of the toy dog and wartime cap, in Perec’s \textit{W or the Memory of Childhood} Georges appears to recall an object from a hazy childhood memory, a sling which he seems to remember having worn when his mother evacuated him\textsuperscript{119} but which is in fact imaginary.\textsuperscript{120} This sling is linked to the drawing of a parachute on the front cover of a Charlie Chaplin magazine his mother had given him as a leaving present. The memory is further confused with the introduction of another object: a truss linked to an operation following his arrival in the free zone. Georges elucidates: ‘A triple theme runs through this memory: parachute, sling, truss: it suggests suspension, support, almost artificial limbs. To be, I need a prop’.\textsuperscript{121} Years later, Perec is able to partially decrypt this ‘coded memory’:\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{quote}
[In 1958, when, by chance, military service briefly made a parachutist of me, I suddenly saw, in the very instant of jumping, one way of deciphering the text of this memory: I was plunged into
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[112] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 98.
\item[113] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 106.
\item[114] According to Zeitlin, Mathieu usurps his sister’s ‘borrowed identity in order to write’ (Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 147).
\item[115] \textit{WBE}, p. 123.
\item[116] LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 722.
\item[117] ‘From the photograph on the wall to the cap, from the donning of the cap to the writing of the book, and from the book to the anticipation of a child, dispossessing the past means repossessing a self that is not playing the part of another, inhabiting the life of another, and living always in the memory of another. Or almost. The text remains’ (Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 150).
\item[118] LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 717.
\item[119] \textit{W}, p. 55.
\item[120] Later, Georges refers to ‘the imaginary arm in a sling’ (\textit{Ibid.}, p. 56).
\item[121] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 55.
\end{footnotes}
nothingness; all the threads were broken; I fell, on my own, without any support. The parachute opened. The canopy unfurled, a fragile and firm suspense before the controlled descent.  

Alone without his mother, who ‘ought to be there but is missing’, Georges falls into the ‘emotional void of absence surrounding the familial past’, and yet ‘the controlled descent’ could be seen to suggest an element of working through. In this way, Perec can perhaps begin to convert his mother’s absence into ‘a lack, a loss’. What is more, the parachute or “prop” may well be representative of his writing in what Raczymow identifies as ‘the abyss between my imperious need to speak and the prohibition on speaking’. Forming a link between ‘the task of writing’ and ‘the task of remembering’, Georges elucidates:

I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life.

While initially he locates himself amongst the “we” of the first generation, Georges ultimately detaches himself from their unspeakable victimisation and death, in affirming his life, supported by the prop of the written word which enables him to realise ‘[t]he idea of writing the story of my past’. Indeed, for Georges, representing the past is ‘bound up with the matter of writing and the written matter’. It is as much to do with the presence of words as it is to do with the absence of memory.

Each of the texts advocates, along with Jean-Luc Nancy, that ‘the “representation of the Shoah” is not only possible...it is in fact necessary’. Grimbert, Perec, and Raczymow are nonetheless ‘cognizant that our memory consists not of events but of representations’. These representations form the personalised history of each author, ‘my own story’. Thus, instead of ‘History with a capital H’, presented here as a destructive force, the narrators take their readers on a journey of discovery in a reconstructive attempt to map out ‘the passage of my history and the

123 W, p. 55.
124 Ibid., p. 55.
125 ‘Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. A lost object is one that may be felt to be lacking...Lack...indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing’ (LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 703; Kidron, ‘Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence’, p. 17).
126 [A]bsence may be converted into a lack, a loss, or both’. LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 704.
128 Ibid., p. 42.
130 Ibid., p. 42.
133 W, p. 6. In relation to second-generation memory, Lefkovitz speaks of ‘the kind of sordid privilege conferred by my personal history – I should say my parents’ personal histories’ (Lefkovitz, ‘Inherited Memory and the Ethics of Ventriloquism’, p. 227).
134 W, p. 6.
Rebekah Vince: Out of Sight But Not Out of Mind: Absence as Presence in French Postmemory Narrative

history of my passage’. Each narrator, then, in the silence, finds his voice. Yet this voice ‘recognizes the absence of memory and, thus, the necessity of reconstructing the past through the imaginary’. There is, therefore, an element of imagined reconstruction, and of educated guesswork, contained in each narrative. In the words of Esther’s husband Simon, ‘I can only suppose since I wasn’t there’. In their attempt to bridge the gap, the narrators attempt to fill in the gaps, ‘imaginatively reconstructing an historically sacred event’. There is a two-fold necessity: to represent and to reconstruct.

Memory and the Imagination: (Re)membering, (Re)constructing, (Re)imag(in)ing

According to Hirsch, ‘Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imagination investment and creation’. In an attempt to fill in the gaps, Raczymow’s text locates itself within the Jewish tradition, while Grimbert resorts to Greek mythology, and Perec to a fabulating childhood narrative. The first section of Writing the Book of Esther is marked by the chronology of the Jewish feasts of Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah and Passover. According to Lori Hope Lefkovitz, ‘Memory is a Jewish speciality that often takes the form of inserting oneself’ into what she terms ‘the mythic past’. Lefkovitz uses the example of the Passover Seder as a commemoration of the Exodus in order to illustrate her point: ‘we not only commemorate liberation from slavery in ancient Egypt but also perform an annual re-enactment of our own liberation, commanded as we are to regard ourselves as members of the original generation saved by divine intervention in history’.

Similarly, Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka writes that ‘[t]o understand now means not only to situate an event within the network of life in its natural unfolding, but also to relate it to traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation’. Recalling the Jews’ bondage in Egypt and their seizure of Jericho, Raczymow draws the comparison between Hitler and Ramses,

135 Ibid., p. 7. Phonetically, the word hache is a homonym in French and, therefore, has a double meaning: the letter ‘H’ and the weapon ‘axe’.
137 WBE, p. 145.
138 Ibid., ‘The Absent Memory’, p. 43.
139 Quoted in Eaglestone, The Holocaust and the Postmodern, p. 80.
140 According to Raczymow, writing about the Shoah as a second-generation survivor is ‘a question of filling the gaps, of putting scraps together’ (Raczymow, ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’, p. 103).
141 WBE, p. 74.
142 Ibid., pp. 33, 49, 50.
143 Ibid., p. 43. Yom Kippur, the Hebrew term for the Day of Atonement, is ‘the most solemn religious fast of the Jewish year, the last of the ten days of penitence that begin with Rosh Hashana[h] [the Jewish New Year]’ (ODE); Passover is ‘the major Jewish spring festival which commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, lasting seven or eight days from the 15th day of Nisan. – ORIGIN from pass over “pass without touching”, with reference to the exemption of the Israelites from the death of their firstborn (Exod. 12)’ (ODE).
144 Lefkovitz, ‘Inherited Memory and the Ethics of Ventriloquism’, p. 228.
145 Ibid., p. 229.
147 WBE, p. 19.
between Jericho and the Warsaw ghetto. Yet these comparisons fail to illustrate the matchless atrocity of the Shoah, neither the parallel drawn with Egypt – ‘from this particular Egypt...there will be no exit for the Jews’ – nor that drawn with Jericho: ‘Who will circle the ghetto seven times for us and blow the shofar until the wall comes toppling down?’ Fransiska Louwagie claims that ‘the city of Jericho...[serves as] a point of comparison for the “walled-up” memory of the first generation’. In the light of this, it is interesting to note that when Mathieu writes himself into his sister’s imaginary past, set in the Warsaw ghetto, he gives himself the job of a mason: ‘His team oversees the wall, destroys chunks of it, builds it up again’. Building on Louwagie’s argument, this could be seen as a metaphor for Mathieu’s preoccupation ‘with the problems of reconstructing and recovering memory’ as a ‘vicarious witness’. A much darker memory was handed down to him by those of the ‘original generation’ of survivors of the Shoah, ‘a non-memory, which by definition cannot be filled in or recovered’: the memory of those Jews who were not liberated. Furthermore, as the title suggests, Raczymow uses the framework of the biblical story of Esther to illustrate the murderous and anti-Semitic intentions of Adolf Hitler: ‘Purim. This will be the greatest Purim of all times. The Jews have the perfect Haman – A.H.’ Yet, again, this comparison is shown to be unsatisfactory:

Some people in the ghetto still believe in their own luck, thinking that, like Haman in the Book of Esther, the Germans will flip coins—their life or their death. They forget that Haman was Oriental, and enjoyed gambling and irony. Not the Germans. The Germans are not gamblers. They don’t consult the fates. They decide and they execute. And they have decided. Nothing will prevent them.

Mathieu concludes that ‘in the past our enemies gave us a choice: we could convert, renounce our faith, or die. Today, no’.

These biblical allusions appear in the reconstructed journal of Mathieu’s sister, set in an imagined past, which forms the first section of Raczymow’s novel: ‘He invented another life for his

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149 WBE, pp. 19-20.
150 Ibid., p. 41.
152 WBE, p. 71.
153 Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 137. According to Zeitlin, Raczymow’s novel is ‘driven by the compulsion to bear vicarious witness...preoccupied with the problems of reconstructing and recovering memory, which can only be acquired second- or third-hand’ (Ibid., p. 137).
154 Lefkovitz, ‘Inherited Memory and the Ethics of Ventriloquism’, p. 229
155 Raczymow, ‘Memory Shot Through With Holes’, p. 104. ‘What I name the “pre-past” or prehistory, along with the Holocaust, was handed down to me precisely as something not handed down to me’ (Ibid., p. 103).
156 WBE, p. 40. Purim is a Jewish festival which ‘commemorate[s] the defeat of Haman’s plot to massacre the Jews as recorded in the book of Esther’ (ODE).
158 WBE, pp. 81-2.
159 Ibid., p. 81.
sister, and another death. Perhaps the life and death she had imagined for herself. The life and death she couldn’t live without’.\textsuperscript{160} His sister’s life, as described in ‘Mathieu’s “novel,” his “novel” about the ghetto’,\textsuperscript{161} is an imaginary one, as is the death he attributes to her: ‘He’s made up his mind: he’ll have her die in Treblinka, he’ll finally give her the death she wanted. With the others’.\textsuperscript{162} Nevertheless, this imaginary reconstruction arises from the memory of Esther’s actual life and death: ‘When Esther was born, the Jews of Warsaw had been exterminated, all of them. She had missed a train. So she set her watch back on time, to the time of that train’s departure. One fine day in the spring of 1975, she stuck her head into her oven’; ‘She had ended up joining the dead’.\textsuperscript{163} Thus, as Zeitlin writes, in pursuing ‘the tormented quest to reconstruct her life and the reasons for her death, he [Mathieu] discovers that he must also confront equally repressed memories of the Holocaust’.\textsuperscript{165} The second section of Raczymow’s novel charts Mathieu’s reflections on the dual necessity of knowledge concerning and escape from the past. Raczymow combines biblical and mythological imagery in order to illustrate this paradoxical imperative:

\begin{quote}
What did this knowledge consist of?...To catch up with the rolling train, the missed train that had carried them over there, to \textit{Pitchipoi}? Impossible! You had to turn your back on this train. Leave the station. Not hang around, not look back...on Sodom-Auschwitz or, like Orpheus, on Eurydice.\textsuperscript{166}
\end{quote}

The allusion to Sodom and the reference to Orpheus both serve to illustrate the danger of obsessively looking back on the past.\textsuperscript{167} Esther, ‘obsessed by the Jewish genocide’,\textsuperscript{168} had ‘wanted to know so much that she had exposed herself, and was burned by the mortal flame of that knowledge’.\textsuperscript{169} Mathieu describes his sister’s suicidal act in sacrificial terms: ‘by her suicide she had sacrificed herself for us, so that we might live’.\textsuperscript{170} Similarly, in Memory, Simon’s mother Hannah is transformed into a tragic heroine, recalling Greek myth: ‘Timid, shy Hannah, the perfect mother, had turned into a tragic heroine; the fragile young woman suddenly became a Medea, sacrificing her child and her own life on the altar of her wounded heart’.\textsuperscript{171} Handing over herself and her son in an act of suicidal infanticide, Hannah makes way for her husband Maxime’s union with her sister-in-law

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{ibid., p. 109.}
\footnote{ibid., p. 160.}
\footnote{ibid., p. 106.}
\footnote{ibid., p. 99.}
\footnote{ibid., p. 123.}
\footnote{Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 134. ‘On both levels, the novel is the process and product of “working through’” (ibid., p. 134).}
\footnote{WBE, p. 123.}
\footnote{‘Raczymow’s parallel reference to Sodom-Auschwitz recalls...the biblical story of Lot’s wife, who disobeyed the injunction not to look back at the burning Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt. “Looking back” was the cause of Esther’s malady. It trapped her in the world of the dead while she was still alive and led finally to her self-inflicted death’ (Zeitlin, ‘The Vicarious Witness’, p. 160).}
\footnote{Louvagie, ‘Œdipe à Jéricho’, p. 219 (my translation).}
\footnote{WBE, p. 123.}
\footnote{ibid., p. 1.}
\footnote{M, p. 107. The idea of sacrifice contained in the Greek myth to which Philippe refers is subversively reminiscent of the historical meaning of the word “holocaust”, that is ‘a Jewish sacrificial offering which was burnt completely on an altar’ (ODE).}
\end{footnotes}
Tania, which eventually leads to Philippe’s post-war birth. Philippe attempts to detach himself from the horror of past reality by putting it into a mythological context, turning ‘Louise’s first-hand account...into a heterodiegetic drama in which Hannah is refocalized [as Medea’].

Philippe’s reference to Greek thinking may also be influenced by his upbringing by sport-obsessed parents who valued the Olympic ideal. Perec takes the Olympic trope a step further, using it as the framework of his childhood narrative “W” – ‘a land where sport is king’. He sets out his reasoning for doing so through his autobiographical narrator Georges:

W is no more like my Olympic fantasy than that Olympic fantasy was like my childhood. But in the crisscross web they weave as in my reading of them I know there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken.

Thus Perec resorts to a story he wrote as a young teenager in order to map out the traumatic experience of surviving the Shoah as a child: ‘When I was thirteen I made up a story...this story was called W and...it was, in a way, if not the story of my childhood, then at least a story of my childhood.’ The significance of this sport-obsessed island is not explicitly revealed until the closing chapter when Perec draws the parallel between the island of W and a concentration camp, in its twisted ‘societal organization’ and warped ‘vision of humanity’, demonstrating how the young Georges was subconsciously affected by the recent past. Thus Perec can be seen to use the island of W as a form of fabulation in its “dramatization” of the Shoah and its effects, and twisted ‘modelling of views about human predicament’, demonstrating how the young Georges was subconsciously affected by the recent past. Thus Perec can be seen to use the island of W as a form of fabulation in its “dramatization” of the Shoah and its effects, and twisted ‘modelling of views about human predicament’, demonstrating how the young Georges was subconsciously affected by the recent past. Thus Perec can be seen to use the island of W as a form of fabulation in its “dramatization” of the Shoah and its effects, and twisted ‘modelling of views about human predicament’. According to Robert Scholes, fabulation signifies ‘not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality’. W, then, can be seen as ‘the reality which is fiction’ pointing to the Shoah which, in its incredulity, may even appear fictitious, but is in fact a shocking and unimaginable reality. Indeed, the suspension of disbelief in the “reality” of the W narrative – from a credible, geographically located island which praises sport to one which becomes more and more incredulous in its discriminatory and violent policies – reaches an incredible climax in the inclusion of the quote from David Rousset’s L’Univers Concentrationnaire.

172 Hand identifies this literary technique as ‘a psychoanalytic reformulation of postmemory’ (Hand, ‘Never Tell’, p. 213).
173 Grimbert admits that: ‘although they were indeed physically handsome and athletic, my real parents were not as preoccupied by their bodies and appearances as I have created them: that was a novelistic impulse which attracted me because of the way their inordinate passion for sport brought them together, as “stadium gods” who actually embodied the physical idea of their persecutors—an ambiguity that on a literary level I found both rich and disturbing’ (‘Questions for the Author’ in Memory).
174 W, p. 67.
175 Ibid., p. 7.
176 Ibid., p. 6.
177 W, p. 163-4; Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, quoted in Smith, ‘Contextualising Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka’s Concept of Fabulation’, p. 7.
178 Ibid., p. 6.
witnes testimony, Perec attributes more weight to his narrative, as he establishes the link between the sport-obsessed, law-enforcing universe of W and L’Univers Concentrationnaire.

By incorporating the W narrative, Perec could be accused of what Eric L. Santner identifies as ‘narrative fetishism’ in his use of the fabulating technique. However, the fact that his W narrative is interjected with an autobiographical ‘work of mourning’ for his mother problematises this claim. What is more, rather than being understood as a fetishising narrative alongside a work of mourning, W or the Memory of Childhood as a whole can be seen as a narrative which adopts a ‘psychopathological technique’, containing ‘artificial closures, the blockage of narrative,...deformation and formal compensations, [and] the dissociation or splitting of narrative functions’. Unlike ‘festishized and totalizing narratives’ which recuperate ‘the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios’, W or the Memory of Childhood ends on a sobering note in which ‘totalization’ is ‘resisted’. Moreover, it is worth noting that ‘[m]odern fabulation accepts, even emphasizes, its fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to truth, but it continues to look towards reality’, the reality in this case being the loss of Georges’ mother and the Shoah in which she died. Hence Georges’ admission that W or the Memory of Childhood is merely an attempt ‘to bring to term – by which I mean just as much “to mark the end of” as “to give a name to” – this gradual unravelling’. According to Erin McGlothlin, ‘postmemorial writing employs narrative to acknowledge the impossibility of fully grasping what happened, even as it ventures to construct a story about the Holocaust’. Similarly, Raczymow comments on how ‘[o]ut of the impossibility of recapturing the past, some forge the very meaning of their writing, well aware of how ridiculous the pursuit of the impossible is’.

Written, I Saw It Said...

As opposed to the absence and ‘unreality’ associated with postmemory which find reference in the literary imagination, each narrator ultimately resorts to firsthand experience and eye-witness

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181 E.L. Santner defines ‘narrative fetishism’ as ‘the way an inability or refusal to mourn emplots traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere’ (E.L. Santner, ‘History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma’, in S. Friedlander (ed.), Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution” (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 143-154, at p. 144).

182 According to Santner, ‘The use of narrative as fetish may be contrasted with that rather different mode of symbolic behaviour that Freud called Trauerarbeit or “the work of mourning”’ (Santner, ‘History Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, p. 144). He goes on to define the work of mourning as ‘a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses; it is a process of translating, troping, and figuring loss’ (Ibid. p. 144). We have seen aspects of this process in relation to Perec’s work in the section on absence and presence, namely in the three-fold allusion to suspension and support in the objects of the sling, truss, and parachute.


185 Ibid., p. 720.

186 A. Tymieniecka, quoted in Smith, ‘Contextualising Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka’s Concept of Fabulation’, p. 8.


188 McGlothlin, Second Generation Holocaust Literature, p. 11.


190 WBE, p. 125.
account in an attempt to reconstruct the past he did not know more accurately. According to Heckner, postmemory is ‘a relational term, for it links survivor memory and the pertinent documentary material to the memories of the second generation, giving it new artistic form and voice’.¹⁹¹ The narrators in question can thus be seen to ‘[claim] ground for the legitimacy of second-generation memory while simultaneously preserving the unique status of survivor memory’.¹⁹² Hence Perec concludes his narrative with Rousset’s eye-witness account as recorded in L’Univers Concentrationnaire.¹⁹³ Furthermore, this information is authorised ‘by narrating the author’s experience of encountering the source’: ‘Years and years later, in David Rousset’s Univers Concentrationnaire, I read the following [...]’.¹⁹⁴ Philippe, meanwhile, looks to family friend Louise for clarification, while Mathieu turns to various relatives for eye-witness testimony. Philippe writes: ‘Louise slowly spelled out the realities of a war that had come to a close a few years before I was born’.¹⁹⁵ As a member of the second generation, Philippe’s memory of the Shoah is reduced to shadows and imaginings. As a member of the first, Louise can speak from her own firsthand experiences; Philippe writes: ‘Louise was no longer telling me about an anonymous mass of victims but about herself’.¹⁹⁶ Like Louise, Mathieu’s older sister Esther ‘was a contemporary of that. Simply because of the date of her birth’.¹⁹⁷ No longer able to interrogate his sister following her suicide, Mathieu turns to living witnesses:

[Therefore] Mathieu had to hear Simon. And hear Fanny again. And Charles. And Uncle Avrum, old Uncle Avrum. Before time ran out and there would be no one left, no one in the world who had been a contemporary. Then it would be the end. The voice of these people would be gone. There would be nothing more than written words, skimpy and ridiculous written words. Nothing.¹⁹⁸

Thus Mathieu attempts to authenticate the second part of his narrative ‘by anchoring it as an oral communication’.¹⁹⁹ He refers to the recollections of Esther’s father Charles, her great uncle Avrum and her husband Simon, indicating when the account belongs to these first-generation survivors and not to himself, as a second-generation ‘vicarious witness’.²⁰⁰ Designators such as ‘he said’,²⁰¹ therefore, ‘serve to authenticate by pointing to this specific information as having a specific

¹⁹¹ Heckner, ‘Whose Trauma Is It?’, p. 67.
¹⁹² ibid., p. 67.
¹⁹⁴ W, p. 163. Original italics.
¹⁹⁵ M, p. 48.
¹⁹⁶ M, p. 56.
¹⁹⁷ WBE, p. 123. The ‘that’ refers to the preceding passage, in which Mathieu describes Esther as ‘[s]omeone who was older than him, and who, simply because of the date of her birth, could have straightaway died in a gas chamber. She was contemporary with this pure and simple possibility, that people could die in gas chambers, herself included. The moment of her birth coincided, to the very minute, with the gassing of thousands of people’ (ibid., pp. 122-3).
¹⁹⁸ ibid., p. 123. Original italics.
¹⁹⁹ Kacandes, “When Facts are Scarce”, p. 190.
²⁰¹ WBE, p. 165.
source’. 202 Furthermore, as Kacandes writes, by pointing ‘to the source for the writers’ knowledge…such phrases function to communicate the preciousness of that knowledge received, the solicitation of which is often difficult in survivor families’. 203 A sense of urgency is contained in this task — a ‘rush to collect the testimonies of survivors before it is too late’ 204 as Mathieu seeks to make the most of the presence of those who survived the Shoah, before all that will remain is their absence and the written word.

While working through in the process of writing down can be seen as a psychoanalytic solution, it is also a continual process ‘to overcome resistances due to repression’. 205 For the narrators in question, this process involves ‘resisting silence’ and ‘breaking silences’, 206 interacting with memory-triggering objects, experimenting with creative memory investment, and ultimately looking to the eye-witness generation for authentic account. Absence is present in silence, resurgent (and to some extent acted out) in objects, and finally articulated and worked through by way of the written word, which can be seen to convert absence into loss. 207 For 1.5 and second-generation writers, then, the memory of the Shoah is out of sight but not out of mind, manifesting itself in traumatic postmemory, the nature of which ‘cannot be fully left behind’ 208 but instead becomes part of the narrator’s identity. The shocking reality of the catastrophe remains; the utter tragedy of personal and collective loss persists. A perpetual problem which cannot be solved or resolved, it must nevertheless be remembered, hence the authors’ ‘struggle to express the unimaginable and perpetuate it’. 209

In the words of LaCapra, ‘[w]orking through the past’ is ‘a process (not an accomplished state)’ which does not involve ‘definitive closure’. 210 In accordance with this view, Perec’s ‘nontotalizing narrative’ remains open-ended and unresolved — ‘a reiteration of the same story, leading nowhere’ 211 ‘a dialectic that does not reach closure but instead enacts an unfinished, unfinalizable interplay of forces involving a series of substitutions without…ultimate referent’. 212 In this way, Perec demonstrates ‘the possibility of working through in which totalization…is actively

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202 Kacandes, ‘‘When Facts are Scarce’’, pp. 190-191. Other indicators include: ‘says Charles’ (WBE, p. 97), ‘Charles’s story’ (WBE, p. 182); ‘According to Simon […] (WBE, p. 130), ‘Simon P’s story’ (WBE, p. 157). Moreover, the third section of Raczymow’s narrative is largely made up of Simon’s memories of his late wife Esther.
203 Kacandes, ‘‘When Facts are Scarce’’, p. 189.
207 LaCapra writes that ‘acting-out…may be seen as a prerequisite of working through, at least with respect to traumatic events’ (LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 714).
208 According to Julia Epstein, ‘[t]he memory of trauma, the painful difficulty of remembering atrocity, becomes traumatic memory; that is, remembering becomes part of the trauma, that part that did not end with liberation and cannot be fully left behind’ (J. Epstein, ‘Remembering to Forget: The Problem of Traumatic Cultural Memory’, in J. Epstein and L.H. Lefkovitz (eds.), Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001), pp. 186-204, at p. 186). Eaglestone writes that ‘identity without memory is empty’ (Eaglestone, The Holocaust and the Postmodern, p. 78).
210 LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz, p. 42.
211 W, p. 41.
212 LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 705. ‘Mourning is not the only modality of working-through, although it is a very important one. Among a variety of possible modalities, one may mention certain forms of nontotalizing narrative’ (Ibid., p. 714).
resisted’. While the narrator Mathieu in *Writing the Book of Esther* declares that ‘[w]ith the last page of my book I’ll turn the page on my past, the long gone past’, the author Raczymow acknowledges that writing ‘remains for me the only way to assume the past...to recount it to myself’. Meanwhile, Grimbert’s narrator Philippe sees the completion of his novel as a way of laying grief to rest, converting absence into a loss which can be mourned, despite its scarring memory. In this way, he is able to work through his grief, as ‘mourning might be seen as a form of working through’. This is as opposed to ‘[w]hen mourning turns to absence and absence is conflated with loss’ which renders mourning ‘impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving, scarcely distinguishable (if at all) from interminable melancholy’.

What is more, both Raczymow and Grimbert demonstrate a ‘reinvestment in, or recathexis, of life that allows one to begin again’ in their introduction of the third generation at the end of their respective novels. While Philippe enters Laval’s daughter’s dog cemetery with his own daughter, Mathieu decides to have a second child, one who will ‘really be an afterward child’. Yet both Philippe and Mathieu, whether consciously or subconsciously, break the ‘chain of continued witnessing’ and intergenerational transmission by failing to communicate their postmemory experiences to their children – Philippe in his failure to explain the significance of the cemetery to his daughter, and Mathieu in deciding to keep his sister’s life and death a secret from his child: ‘Never will I talk to him about Esther...No direct line from Esther to this child. Except maybe through this book. But only a book, nothing more’. The reader, meanwhile, engages with the transgenerational transmission of the written word. In this way, each text engenders postmemory as ‘an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to [the] cultural or collective trauma’ of the Shoah. The reader, whether he or she is a member of the second- or third-generation or neither, becomes a secondary witness, as postmemory is ‘extended beyond the circle of survivors and their children’ to all ‘those born after’.

213 Ibid., p. 720.
214 *WBE*, p. 203.
216 LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 713
219 *WBE*, p. 204.
220 Heckner, ‘Whose Trauma Is It?’, p. 68.
222 Hirsch quoted by Heckner, ‘Whose Trauma Is It?’, p. 68.
References

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