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Traumatic Memory and Bodily Inscription in Georges Perec's *W; ou, Le souvenir d'enfance* and Philippe Grimbert's *Un secret*

CHARLOTTE F. WERBE

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 by highlighting various scars, wounds, and physical deformities. Many Holocaust survivors have expressed their "bodily" or psychosomatic memories, such as Charlotte Delbo, in her memoir *Auschwitz and After*. Here, it is through narrating the body that Delbo recounts her past. She writes,

I'd been thirsty for days and days, thirsty to the point of losing my mind, to the point of being unable to eat since there was no saliva in my mouth, so thirsty I couldn't speak, because you're unable to speak when there's no saliva in your mouth. My parched lips were splitting, my gums swollen, my tongue a piece of wood.¹

Indeed, the body plays a significant role in representations of Holocaust experiences. As Cathy Caruth writes, "the traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves a symptom of a history they cannot entirely possess."² In the analysis that follows, I will suggest how the body functions in both Perec's *W* and Grimbert's *Un secret*, as an emblem for repressed trauma and as an alternative for remembering the past.

French Jewish novelist Georges Perec's (1936–82) parents died during World War II, thus marking him out as a first-generation survivor of the Holocaust. Perec's father, Icek Judko Peretz, enlisted in the French army and died in 1940 from battle 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. Philippe Grimbert, born 1948, is a French writer and psychoanalyst whose parents survived the Holocaust. However, as *Un secret* reveals, Grimbert discovered that his half brother from his father's previous marriage and his father's previous wife were captured and died during the Holocaust. In both Perec's *W; ou, Le souvenir d'enfance* and Grimbert's *Un secret* the body plays a central role as a site on which traumatic memory is inscribed. In *Un secret*, the narrator proclaims from the very outset, "J'avais beau souffrir de ma maigreur, de ma pâleur maladive . . ." ("Although I hated my thinness and sickly pallor . . .") and "Barre fixe, banc de musculation, espaliers, mon père s'entraînait chaque jour dans la pièce de l'appartement transformée en gymnase" ("Climbing bar, weights bench, wall bars, my father trained every day in a room of our flat, which they'd converted into a gym").³ The narrator of *W* does the same; he emphasizes the role of the body and the juxtaposition of strength and weakness throughout the narrative: "Ce qui est vrai, ce qui est sûr, ce qui frappe dès l'abord, c'est que W est aujourd'hui un pays où le Sport est roi, une nation d'athlètes où le Sport et la vie se confondent en un même magnifique effort" ("What is true, what is certain, what is immediately striking, is that W, today, is a land where Sport is king, a nation of athletes where Sport and life unite in a single magnificent effort").⁴ The narrator also recalls memories of wounds: "Peut-être, par contre, avais-je une hernie et portais-je un bandage herniaire, un suspensoir" (81; "On the other hand, perhaps I had a rupture and was wearing a truss, a suspensory bandage" [55]) and "[L]'unique acteur, Jacques Spiesser, porte à la lèvre supérieure une cicatrice presque exactement identique à la mienne; c'était un simple hasard, mais il fut, pour moi, secrètement déterminant" (146; "The sole actor, Jacques Spiesser, having on his upper lip a scar almost identical to mine: it was pure coincidence, but it was, for me, secretly, a determining factor" [109]). The references to the "healthy" bodies of athletes are contrasted with the frail or wounded physiques of the narrators.

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, describes the fictional island of W from an anthropological perspective. Only later does it become apparent that this second narrative

serves as an allegory for the concentration camps of World War II. The autofictional segment, set in plain type, is narrated by a character named Georges. 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, wherein he describes the athletic practices of the island in great detail. The allegory is rife with disturbing descriptions that recall the concentration camps. 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 by recalling David Rousset's *L'univers concentrationnaire* (1964) in the final chapter of the text: "Des années et des années plus tard, dans *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, de David Rousset, j'ai lu ceci: 'La structure des camps de répressions est commandée par deux orientations fondamentales: pas de travail, du "sport" une derision de nourriture'" (221; "Years and years later, in David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, I read the following: 'The structure of punishment camps is determined by two fundamental policies: no work but "sport", and derisory feeding'" [163]). Rousset, a survivor of the Neuengamme and Buchenwald concentration camps, went on to elaborate on the various ways in which the members of the concentration camp were treated, which the italicized segments of *W* allude to directly. This cross-reference thus demonstrates the allegorical nature of the narrative of the island of W. Despite the author's use of two different type styles to demarcate the two narrative perspectives, the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred throughout. In the autofictional segment of the text, the narrator repeatedly questions the accuracy of his own recollections, while the allegorical segment of the text bears resemblance to a scientific and detached treatise, which would seemingly lend itself to "facts" rather than "fictions."

Grimbert's *Un secret* is an autofictional account of a young boy's coming of age and his shocking discovery of his family's dark history. The narrator's fantasies regarding his parents' life before the war are juxtaposed with the blunt account of the family history that a next-door neighbor reveals; this counternarrative constitutes the last half of the text. Although both texts blur the boundaries of past and present, truth and falsehood,

memory and fantasy, these very elements intertwine and integrate in such a way that they testify to the very ruptures of memory and experience recounted throughout the texts. As Zoë Waxman comments, “[T]he very act of writing changes a witness’s relationship to their experiences.”⁵ In fact, the very specific combination of truth and fantasy, reality and fiction is essential: “[I]t is wrong to deny the essential dialectical relationship between the concepts. . . . [T]o split them apart suggests that the events have a life independent of their being experienced.”⁶ In fact, the story the survivor must tell is a story that essentially cannot be told, as “language may not be adequate to convey the horrors of the Holocaust,” but recounting the story is *possible*.⁷ What is told alters the very act of recalling the experience and thus acts as a re-presentation. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Dori Laub supplies an example of oral testimony that bore mistakes. A woman described an incident at Auschwitz to an audience of historians and Laub, a psychoanalyst: “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.”⁸ According to Laub, the historians in the room argued that her testimony ought to be discounted as it bore factual errors. Laub, on the other hand, 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.⁹

As with the woman testifying to the “breakage of a framework,” through their autofictional texts, Perec and Grimbert testify to their own fragmented memory.

The bodily discourse 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 an Olympic games on the fictional island of W. In *Un secret* the focus on sports is expressed through the narrator’s parents’ athletic activities: the narrator’s mother, Tania, is an accomplished swimmer, while his father, Maxime, is a talented gymnast. Both possess physical talents their son lacks. Second, the narrators of both texts bear various physical wounds 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*, where life in a utopian society 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; "It is clear that the overall organization of sporting life on *W* (the villages, the way teams are made up, selection methods . . .) has as its sole aim to heighten competitiveness or, to put it another way, to glorify victory" [89]). 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 whims of those in power. For example,

Mais le système des clientèles est aussi fragile qu'il est féroce. L'acharnement d'un adversaire ou le bon plaisir d'un Arbitre peuvent, en une seconde, faire perdre au Champion ces noms qu'il a si durement gagnés et si sauvagement défendus. Et la masse de ses fidèles se retournera contre lui et ira mendier les bouchées, les sucres, et les sourires des nouveaux Vainqueurs. (202; "The patronage system, though, is as fragile as it is fierce. An opponent's determination or a Referee's whim can in one split second rob a Champion of the names he fought so hard to win and defended so ferociously. And the throng of his followers will turn against him to go and bed morsels, sugar lumps, and smiles from the new Victors." [148])

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 by quoting David Rousset's *L'univers concentrationnaire*. The narrator continues by relating specific elements of the allegory to a passage he 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. (222; "In the small rectangular concrete yard, anything can be turned to sport: making men turn round very fast, under the whip, for hours on end; organizing a bunny-hop race . . . having them repeat endlessly the exercise that consists of squatting on your heels, and then standing again, very fast, with both arms held out horizontally . . . and then making them run to drench themselves in water to get clean, and keeping them in wet clothes for twenty-four hours." [163–64])

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 "[u]n triple trait parcourt ce souvenir: parachute, bras en écharpe, bandage herniaire: cela tient de la suspension, du soutien, presque de la prothèse. . . . [J]e portais effectivement un bandage herniaire. Je fus opéré à Grenoble, quelques mois plus tard" (81; "[a] triple theme runs through this memory: parachute, sling, truss: it suggests suspension, support, almost artificial limbs. . . . [A]ctually I was wearing a truss. I had the operation in Grenoble, a few months later" [55]). It remains unclear whether the described wounds are invented, exaggerated, or truthful, 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; "The Red Cross evacuates the wounded. I was not wounded. But I had to be evacuated. So we had to pretend I was wounded. That was why my arm was in a sling. But my aunt is quite definitive: I did not have my arm in a sling; there was no reason at all for me to have my arm in a sling. . . . On the other hand, perhaps I had a rupture and was wearing a truss, a suspensory bandage. I think that on my arrival in Grenoble I had an operation. . . . [A]ctually I was wearing a truss. . . . [A]s for the imaginary arm in a sling, we shall see it make a curious reappearance later on." [54–56])

In another passage the narrator recalls having injured his upper lip in a skiing accident. He gives significance to the scar, claiming that "[l]a 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; "[f]or reasons that have not been properly elucidated, this scar seems to have been of cardinal importance for me: it became a personal mark, a distinguishing feature" [106]). 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; "It is perhaps not because of this scar that I wear a beard, but it is probably so as not to hide it that I do not wear a moustache" [108]). 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."¹⁰ 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 à la lèvre supérieure une cicatrice presque exactement identique à la mienne: c’est un simple hasard, mais il fut, pour moi, secrètement déterminant” (146; “Jacques Spiesser, having on his upper lip a scar almost identical to mine: it was pure coincidence, but it was, for me, secretly, a determining factor” [109]). The repetitive nature of these descriptions emphasizes the significance of the body.

The narrator’s description of his arm injury is situated at a key juncture of the text. 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 the autofictional narrative in roman type, consists instead of a page left nearly completely blank, save for a single ellipsis enclosed in parentheses.¹¹ As David Bellos argues, “[T]hree 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.”¹² 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 translates as “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 . . . [C]es points de suspension désignaient des douleurs nommables. (113–14; “As in the case of my arm-in-a-sling at the Gare de Lyon, I can see perfectly well what it was that these easily mendable fractures . . . were meant to stand for, although today it

seems to me that the metaphor will not serve as a way of describing what had been broken. . . . [T]hese *marks of suspension* indicated pains that could be named.” [80])

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*.¹³ Parachuting marked 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”; however, the experience also left him acutely aware of the sense of apprehension that accompanies the moment of suspension.¹⁴ The apprehension he felt is paralleled by the narrator’s description of suspension: “[J]e 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; “I was plunged into 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” [55]). 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. Thus parachuting is representative of both the controllable act of writing and the uncontrollable undertaking of remembering. These two movements are delicately balanced in Perec’s *W*.

In addition to his bandaged arm, the narrator of *W* also repeatedly recalls his wounded lip. Scars have had a significant impact in literature. Erin McGlothlin describes the second generation of Holocaust survivors as “the scar without the wound.”¹⁵ 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 recountings of the Holocaust. Laub 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.”¹⁶ His 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. Yet, as Perec’s text is marked by silence, it is also an incomplete silence—as Perec *does* narrativize his experience.

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 toward 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; “Although I hated my thinness and sickly pallor . . . my mother adored me—I was the only one to have lived inside that toned belly, to have appeared from between those athletic thighs” [7]). He juxtaposes his own weakness to his parents’ strength, suggesting that somehow he cannot be their child: “[L]a pratique du sport, leur passion commune, avait réunit Maxime et Tania: mon histoire ne pouvait commencer que dans le stade où je les accompagnais si souvent” (37; “Sport was the passion that brought Maxime and Tania together: where else could my story start but at the sports club I visited with them so often?” [25]). The stark contrast between the narrator and his parents underscores a preoccupation on the part of both the narrator and his parents in 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." He describes the different stages of the relationship between a child and his or her parents. First, the child perceives his parents as "the only authority and the source of all belief."¹⁷ 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. In *Un secret*, however, the narrator's tenuous relationship with his parents is not only a result of the natural intellectual maturation of the individual but also a symptom of his awareness 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.¹⁸

Of the many themes that Hewitt explores, she notes in particular the relationship between 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 with the imagined strength of the brother he senses he must have had: "J'avais un frère. Plus beau, plus fort" (11; "I had a brother. Stronger and better looking" [3]). Physical wounds and anatomical 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” (22; “How frightening I found that hollow beneath my solar plexus, about the size of a fist, gouging out my chest like the permanent mark of a blow” [11]). The narrator describes not only his own wounds and abnormalities, but also those of Louise, a neighbor, a Holocaust survivor and close family friend, who has a clubfoot. 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; “I felt close to her, probably because of her lopsided walk—the result of a clubfoot hidden in an orthopedic shoe” [20]). The various wounds and deformities throughout *Un secret* have 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 his 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. . . . [J]e savais que j’allais le tuer, j’allais vraiment faire disparaître son visage dans le sable” (71–72; “I was no longer myself; for the first time I was fearless, not afraid that his fist was about to fill the hollow of my chest. The nausea had disappeared. . . . I knew I would kill him. I was actually going to make his face disappear into those shifting sands” [53]). Not only does the narrator feel strong and capable of anything, he suddenly forgets his sunken chest. Furthermore, the physical and emotional strength that take him over as he fights his classmate are the same types 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, the 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. . . . [M]on 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; "I was fifteen years old and this new situation changed the whole thread of my tale. . . . Barely had the news fallen from Louise's lips than my new identity started changing me. I was still the same boy but also someone new, someone mysteriously stronger. . . . My appearance no longer caused me pain; I was filling out, my hollows were disappearing. Thanks to Louise my chest had broadened, the hole in my solar plexus had vanished, as if the truth had until then been written there in hollows. . . . I was on my way to becoming a man." [57, 134])

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

The narrator's hollow chest is replaced with a wound above his eyebrow in this pivotal scene. He describes feeling proud after the fight and gaining a sense of self-worth that he altogether lacked 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; "The incident left me with a plaster above one eye that I wore around school with great pride. But the injury brought me much more than ephemeral glory—it was the sign for which Louise had been waiting" [54]). Louise takes the wound as a signal that the narrator must learn of his family's past: "[E]lle fut le signe que Louise attendait" (73; "[I]t was the sign for which Louise had been waiting" [54]). 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; rather, it is 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 *The Uncanny*, Freud describes *Unheimlich* (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 is inadvertently revealed.¹⁹ This meaning coincides directly with the title of Grimbart'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*.²⁰

The narrator of *Un secret*, much 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:

[J]e 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; "I invented quarrels and rebelled against his authority. I tried to make him yield, but I rarely came out the winner. He had changed over the years. From protective, he had become tyrannical, mocking, even contemptuous. . . . Fingers in his eyes, I would push down his face as hard as I could." [14–15])

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; they mark the way in which the narrator attempts to gain control.

As we have seen, *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 the setting of Perec’s *W* precedes that of 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.”²¹ Both *W* and *Un secret* address the legacy that such disavowal leaves for survivors and their children. In “Marked Memory,” Marianne Hirsch emphasizes the connections among bodily symptoms present in second-generation Holocaust survivors:

In her memoir, *The War After*, for example, the British journalist Anne Karpf, the daughter of an Auschwitz survivor, enumerates the bodily symptoms through which she experiences her mother’s sense memories of the camps. The mark on the skin is the focus of her discussion. For a long period in her young adulthood she develops a terrible eczema and scratches herself irresistibly first on her hands and arms and later her entire body.²²

Hirsch goes on, “[The daughter’s] intense desire to be marked with her mother’s mark, illustrate[s] what can happen in the absence, or even in spite of, ‘a certain historical withholding’ between mother and daughter.”²³ 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. On the other hand, the narrator of *W* does not reveal the trauma associated with his mother’s departure and can refer to it only by means of an ellipsis. As elaborated above, the various wounds constitute what Schwab refers to as the subconscious transmission of traumatic experience across generations.

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, which suggests that although writing is an attempt to exert control, particularly of one's past when it comes to autofiction, it is impossible. The narrators cannot control their past, nor can they "accurately" depict it in writing. In another way, as David Rousset emphasizes in *L'univers concentrationnaire*, the enormous focus on bodily control and bodily representations in *W* and *Un secret* may be an attempt to combat the very destruction of the body, a way to control the past, present, and future. Thus the juxtaposition between 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 the 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 his 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 onto and into 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.

Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok give voice to the symbol of the mouth in their essay "Mourning and Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation." Referring to the process of incorporation, or the result of "those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such," Abraham and Torok argue that a *swallowing* of speech occurs: "[T]he words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss. Swallowed and preserved."²⁴ This incorporation extends to the narrator of *Un secret*, who subconsciously "carries" his dead brother with him. Abraham and Torok describe a case that offers perspective on the narrator's "fantasy":

One of us had analyzed a boy who “carried” inside him his sister, two years older than he. This sister, who died when the boy was eight, had “seduced” him. . . . [T]his boy’s crypt sheltered the girl “alive” as he unconsciously followed her maturation. . . . [T]he carrier of a shared secret, he became, after his sister’s death, the carrier of the crypt.²⁵

Rather than entering into a full analysis of the crypt in both works, which is unfortunately beyond the boundaries of this discussion, it is important to note both the power of unresolved mourning and the implications of a physical crypt present in both *W* and *Un secret*. The scar on *W*’s narrator demonstrates the very swallowing and outward mark of the crypt: the repression of trauma. Alternatively, the scar above the eye in *Un secret* demonstrates the outward movement of memory, as does the attenuated solar plexus after Louise’s revelation. In “The Inscription of Orality,” Luke Bouvier recalls Abraham and Torok’s account of orality by describing how “the structure of loss and desire in the process of introjection indicates a voice that emerges precisely through a movement of inscription.”²⁶ The scars in *W* and *Un secret* demonstrate precisely this inscription, the physical impression of traumatic memory upon the narrators.

These two texts suggest a subtle shift in the way trauma is expressed and transmitted between first- and second-generation survivors. The profound silence of the first generation that we encounter 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. (I believe the body often has a role to play when it comes to secret matters. First because what is not symbolized, as Lacan said, returns in the Real. This can be in the

form of hallucination but also in organic affliction: psychosomatically. Moreover, what is unsaid can inscribe itself in the body from the very beginning, as a deformed or fragile constitution, which is what I illustrate in my novel by the narrator's hollow solar plexus, a hole, an absence, that only the real truth can attenuate).²⁷

Grimbert's remarks support the argument that the narrator's wounds represent the "non-dit," or unsaid. 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 his own and his parents' experiences. Both *W* and *Un secret* speak to the inscription of trauma, particularly to its dynamic nature. Vamik D. Volkan describes the transgenerational transmission of trauma as

[w]hen an older person unconsciously externalizes his traumatized self onto a developing child's personality. A child then becomes a reservoir for the unwanted, troublesome parts of an older generation. Because the elders have influence on a child, the child absorbs their wishes and expectations and is driven to act on them. It becomes the child's task to mourn, to reverse the humiliation and feeling of helplessness pertaining to the trauma of his forbears.²⁸

As we have seen then, the body is central to both *W* and *Un secret*, and it plays a crucial role in understanding how traumatic memory is transgenerationally passed on and retold. Examining how the second generation of Holocaust survivors have coped with these memories is becoming increasingly significant as the last of the eyewitnesses pass. Grimbert's *Un secret*, put into conversation with Perec's *W*, shows us the ways in which the past lives on in the present, as well as how traumatic memory can be managed, attenuated, and represented.

Notes

1. Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 142.

2. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.
3. Philippe Grimbert, *Un secret* (Paris: B. Grasset, 2004), 15, 22; Philippe Grimbert, *Memory*, trans. Polly McLean (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 7, 12. Further references to these works will be given in the text.
4. Georges Perec, *W; ou, Le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 96; Georges Perec, *W; or, The Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellos (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1988), 67. Further references to these works will be given in the text.
5. Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 173.
6. Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, 175.
7. Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, 175.
8. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 59.
9. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 60.
10. David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (London: Harvill, 1993), 549.
11. Perec, *W; ou, Le souvenir d'enfance*, 89.
12. Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 549.
13. Perec, *W; ou, Le souvenir d'enfance*, 45.
14. Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 187.
15. Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 9.
16. Laub quoted in Caruth, *Trauma*, 64.
17. Sigmund Freud, "Family Romances," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9, 1906–1908: *Jensen's "Gradiva" and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), 237.
18. Leah D. Hewitt, "Ethnicity and Nationality: Recent Representations of French Jews in Films on the Occupation," *L'Esprit Créateur* 50, no. 4 (2010): 118.
19. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 129.
20. Freud, *The Uncanny*, 139.
21. Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5.
22. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 75.
23. Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory*, 75.
24. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130.
25. Abraham and Torok, *Shell and the Kernel*, 130–31.

26. Luke Bouvier, *Writing, Voice, and the Proper: Jules Vallès and the Politics of Orality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 102.
27. Dominique Cupa, "Interview de Philippe Grimbert," *Champ Psychosomatique* 37, no. 1 (2005): 15; my translation.
28. Vamik D. Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 43.