French author Georges Perec was deterred from writing an explicit autobiography, yet his works exhibit autobiographical aspects. Perec’s failure to write an autobiography in a straightforward manner may be attributed to the fact that he suffered a traumatic childhood experience: he was orphaned during World War II, losing his father to the battlefield and his mother to the Holocaust. This thesis seeks to comprehend Perec’s reaction to his traumatic experience and how this manifests itself in his writing. This thesis seeks to answer the questions: What constitutes the denial in Perec’s writing? How can the reader discern it? How does Perec express ambivalence about his traumatic experience? How does he divert the reader’s attention away from his autobiography? Why does he provide elements of the very thing that he is denying? By evaluating these questions, I will examine the paradox of Perec’s use of writing not to communicate.
AN ABSENT WITNESS: THE AFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN GEORGE PEREC’S JE SUIS NÉ AND W OU LE SOUVENIR D’ENFANCE

A Thesis

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Introduction

What makes a writer? A writer is someone who seeks to express himself, someone who has something to say – whether it be an opinion to share or a story to tell. Typically, a writer has a lot to say. Writers seek readers, listeners, so that their writing will not be just words on a page, but a story that affects others. A writer may have selected written words over spoken ones. It is hard to imagine being a writer and being incapable of writing on a particular subject. It is especially hard to imagine if the writer having such difficulties is a published author.

Georges Perec, a French author whose lifetime spanned the beginning of World War II through the early 1980s, is an acclaimed writer and a well-known member of the OuLiPo (or, Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle), a group of authors that focus on producing experimental literature involving mathematical qualities and word games. Perec was deterred from writing an explicit autobiography, yet his works exhibit autobiographical aspects. Since he included his personal memories and sentiments in these works, it is understandable that any reader might pose questions as to why this author included some autobiographical material but chose not to write a typical autobiography. Perec’s failure to write an autobiography in a straightforward manner may be attributed to the fact that he suffered a traumatic childhood experience.

Georges Perec was born to Polish Jewish parents who immigrated to Paris in the 1920s. He was orphaned during the war: his father died on the battlefield fighting for the French; his mother was deported to Auschwitz and vanished from his life forever. Perec was subjected to living in orphanages while he was in hiding in the Alps in the French Free Zone to avoid being deported as well. He was forced to dissimulate his Jewish identity during this tumultuous childhood, even being baptized Christian to ensure more protection. To say the least, his life took on a fragmented quality since he was torn between homes, religions, cultures, identities.

Perec was selective about the types of autobiographical material he was willing to share. Why did he include any autobiographical material at all, if he did not wish to disclose his traumatic experience to the reader? A strong sense of denial meanders throughout many of his works. Naturally, his affective state lingers long after the occurrence of the traumatic experience. His inclination to deny what he suffered functions as a defensive tool to separate himself from the trauma, and from being obliged to work through it.

One of the most symptomatic indications of denial in Perec’s works is his tendency to write in the third-person, when recounting a story that would have otherwise

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1 In David Bellos’ biography, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1993), it is stated (p. 4) that Georges’ paternal side of the family (his grandparents, aunt, uncle, and his father Icek) all emigrated from Poland between 1918 and 1929. Bellos notes that Perec’s mother, Cyrla ‘Cécile’ Szulewicz, also emigrated from Poland with her family, although before Perec’s father, also sometime in the 1920s (pp. 31-2).


3 In the same article, Motte notes that Perec’s mother “was arrested and interned in Drancy, then deported to Auschwitz in February 1943. She did not survive, though what exactly became of her was never determined” (Motte 56).
been written as a first person narrative. In some instances, Perec corrects himself and admits that the “il” or “on” should be “je.” The substitution of the third-person subject for the first-person is an example of how Perec incorporates autobiographical material but attempts to distance himself from it. In doing so, he demonstrates that he is not prepared to take possession of these memories. Does Perec try to conceal the autobiographical material from the reader? It appears that the answer is no, since he openly admits in his works ‘I should say ‘je’’. Therefore, these examples illustrate that he is veiling this information from the reader, and pointing to the fact that he is veiling it.

In Georges Perec: Traces of His Passage, Paul Schwartz uncovers the confession by Perec that he did in fact “brand” his works with a touch of autobiographical material.4 “In the article, ‘Notes sur ce que je cherche,’ Perec lists as his autobiographical works W ou le souvenir d’enfance, La Boutique obscure, Je me souviens, and other incidental pieces such as ‘Lieux où j’ai dormi.’ But he goes on to add, ‘… aucun de mes livres n’échappe tout à fait à un certain marquage autobiographique.’” (Schwartz 45). If Perec admits that none of his works escaped this mark of autobiography, one could mine each and every one of his texts for their autobiographical content. However, this thesis will limit itself to seeking traces of Perec’s autobiography and examples of his denial in W ou le souvenir d’enfance and Je suis né. As Schwartz stated, W ou le souvenir d’enfance is admittedly autobiographical; Je suis né is a fascinating collection of short texts that was published posthumously, although much of this collection appeared in various journals before Perec’s death in 1982. Both works illuminate Perec’s denial that evolved out of his traumatic childhood.

One critic in particular, Warren Motte, argues in “The Work of Mourning” that Perec’s works should not be categorized as autobiographical in the comprehended sense of the word.5 He provides an insightful commentary on Perec’s writing, calling for a redefinition of “autobiography,” since in the case of Perec, an autobiographical aspect characterizes all of his writing, whether they be non-fictive or fictive texts: “It is particularly useful in Perec’s case to broaden the field of what we mean by ‘autobiography,’ for his work as a whole is uncommonly shaped by the writing of the self, whether it is a question of obviously confessional texts or not” (Motte 57). This aspect of Perec’s writing is problematic, as the writer had difficulty in articulating his autobiography in a straight-forward manner, yet he incorporated autobiographical aspects into each of his works, implying that he wanted the readers to learn of his history. Motte designates this phenomenon an “oblique narrative discourse.” He explicates: “The sadness that Perec feels over the loss of his parents finds expression in his texts in many different ways, taking many different forms and investing many different sites. I am persuaded, however, that within such variety striking patterns of similarity exist, linking text to text in a kind of oblique narrative discourse” (Motte 57, my emphasis). It seems to me that what Motte is suggesting is that the entirety of Perec’s works should be read as his comprehensive autobiography.

This thesis seeks to answer the questions: What constitutes the denial in Perec’s writing? How can the reader discern it? How does Perec express ambivalence about his traumatic experience? How does he divert the reader’s attention away from his autobiography? Why does he provide elements of the very thing that he is denying? By evaluating these questions, I will examine the paradox of Perec’s use of writing not to communicate. To address these subjects, it is inevitable that I implicate trauma theory. Trauma theorists such as Sigmund Freud (Mourning and Melancholia) and Cathy Caruth (Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History) will assist us on our quest to comprehend Perec’s reaction to his traumatic experience and how this manifests itself in his writing.

Before launching into this quest, it is important to realize that Perec’s lack, the loss of his parents, engendered his writing. Marcel Bénabou alludes to this in his article, “From Jewishness to the Aesthetics of Lack.”6 “Writing, which speaks the lack, will try hard to fill all empty space; it will become an unrelenting inventory of objects to possess, of spaces to occupy …” (Bénabou 28). In this quotation, Bénabou makes a reference to Perec’s inclination to write inventories of objects and spaces, and in doing so, he highlights the irony of Perec’s work. Perec’s writing develops from an emptiness, yet he seeks to replenish this emptiness, to “fill all empty space.” Bénabou emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the lack as Perec’s muse, and also of recognizing this emptiness in his works: “…once the process of writing has begun, the ‘lack’ will have only accomplished one part – albeit an important and determinative one – of its function in Perec’s works. The part that follows will consist in affirming the presence of this ‘lack’ in the products of writing itself” (Bénabou 28). He suggests that the role of this lack should be affirmed, and that its presence in Perec’s writing should be acknowledged.

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**Je suis né**

In the introduction of this collection of Perec’s short writing, Philippe Lejeune expresses Perec’s intention of writing an autobiography, which he visualized as “le projet d’un vaste ensemble autobiographique s’articulant en quatre livres” (*Je suis né* 7). The potential of this project is grandiose – a vast collection of autobiographical writings which would fill four volumes. Lejeune explains that in reality, only one of these works would be materialized: “Seul *W*, métamorphosé en *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* verra le jour” (*Je suis né* 7). Why did Perec produce only one of these texts with autobiographical matter? According to the biography by David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, a few of these texts with autobiographical material, *L’Arbre*, *Lieux*, and *Lieux où j’ai dormi* were left unfinished.7 Two other autobiographical texts, *J’avance masqué* and *Gradus ad Parnassum* are listed as lost works (Bellos 749). These incomplete autobiographical projects are discussed later in *Je suis né* in further detail, and will be addressed in this thesis at a later point as well.

Despite Perec’s single publication of an admittedly autobiographical text (*W*), Lejeune depicts the collection of Perec’s writing in *Je suis né* as also being autobiographical – writings that focus on memory, forgetting, and identity. “Les textes ici rassemblés éclairent ce travail de la mémoire et de l’oubli, cette quête d’identité, cette approche d’une nouvelle stratégie autobiographique” (*Je suis né* 7, my emphasis). Lejeune’s depiction of this collection as an approach with “a new, autobiographical strategy” suggests that Perec did attempt to write the other autobiographical works in the past, but consequently, they were either never realized or never published. Perec admits to having started writing an autobiography very early on, before undertaking the actual project of writing one. He explains: “Je sais que j’ai commencé assez tôt, bien avant que le projet d’une autobiographie se forme” (*Je suis né* 9). The early attempts that he refers to are identified as *J’avance masqué* and *Gradus ad Parnassum*. Of these attempts, he writes: “J’en ai fait la matière d’un mauvais roman intitulé *J’avance masqué*, et d’un récit tout aussi nul (qui n’était d’ailleurs que le précédent mal remanié) intitulé *Gradus ad Parnassum* (*Je suis né* 9). In this passage, Perec judges these works unfit for publication, yet they were obviously worked on enough to have garnered titles. Perec depicts *J’avance masqué* as a trio of false narratives that seek to tell the life story of the narrator. He quotes the Italian Jewish writer Italo Svevo, saying “une confession écrite est toujours mensongère.” Perec seems to be using Svevo’s opinion as an excuse to avoid writing about his own life story.

It is curious that Perec’s autobiographical writing is consistently realized in fragments. The fragments in *Je suis né* are unrelated to each other, and the collection as a whole is lacking any sort of chronological organization that one would expect of an autobiography. As Lejeune explains in the introduction, the writings that comprise this text represent various media – interviews, short writings, articles, self-portraits, oral accounts, texts written for the radio. Of these fragments, Lejeune writes: “Ils sont très différents les uns des autres: brouillon, nouvelle, recit oral, note critique, lettre-programme, autoportrait, article de journal, interview, argument d’un livre, texte écrit pour une radio. Ils suivent le temps d’une vie de la naissance à la mort” (*Je suis né* 7-8).

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Since these fragments span Père's lifetime, this indicates that Père's obsession with memories was not limited to only his written works. This is also an indication of the consistency of his thought process. It seems that his traumatic experience was persistently on his mind, albeit repressed in his writing.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Père employs the third-person narrative approach to many of his works that are questionably autobiographical. Why does he frequently write in the third person, as if distancing himself from his memories? He acts as a narrator, instead of a character in the first-person. In this manner of writing, he refuses to possess his memories, to admit that they belong to him. After recounting in *Je suis né* a memory of skipping school one day and wandering around Paris at age eleven, Père confesses:

> “lorsque, vingt ans plus tard, il entreprit de se souvenir (lorsque, vingt ans plus tard, j'entrepris de me souvenir), tout fut d'abord opaque et indécis. Puis les détails revinrent, un à un … [liste de choses] … et il demeura tremblant, un long moment, devant la page blanche (et je demeurai tremblant, un long moment, devant la page blanche).” (*Je suis né* 30-31)

What is most intriguing in this passage is Père’s usage of the verb “entreprendre,” which is defined as the action of undertaking, beginning, or starting. This choice of verb shows the reader that it took twenty years for Père to broach the topic of his memories. Did it truly take two decades for him to gather up the courage to address these topics? He foresees the task as being difficult – deciphering memories that will at first be opaque and undecided (or indecisive?), until the details begin to come back to him, refreshing his memory so he can begin to write.

Additionally, Père describes his reaction to such a feat when he confesses in this passage that he remained for a long moment, trembling before the blank page upon which he writes his memories: “et je demeurai tremblant, un long moment, devant la page blanche.” Is it the feat of recalling memories that makes him tremble, or is it the memories themselves that provoke such a response? Père’s hesitation is expressed in his need to stall the writing process by taking a long moment, a pause, before the blank page before commencing to write.

Also in this passage, Père begins describing a memory with the subject “il,” and then, within parentheses, admits that this is his memory when he reverts to the subject “je.” Could this confession within parentheses not function as a means of protection from the truth? Enclosed in parentheses (parentheses that function as a fortress to protect the ‘je’), Père is able to separate himself and the delicate subject “je” from the memory. His avowal signals to the reader that he is in fact recounting his own memory, yet it is frustrating that he cannot simply use the subject “je” without the disguise of the “il.” In this passage, he confides in the reader, making us privy to his personal memory, but Père himself is not ready to drop the “il” (which even in juxtaposition to the “je” provides a cover for his fragile memory) and freely recount his past. The juxtaposition of the “il” and “je” displays a certain hesitation, and the reader comprehends that this mere juxtaposition within parentheses was an enormous feat for Père. To disclose such memories renders him even more vulnerable than before he attempted to speak of his experience. Even in 1965, when he wrote this passage, two decades after his traumatic
experience of losing both of his parents during World War II, he has difficulty in possessing these memories as his own. It is also important to note that if Perec can remember this memory from 1947 when he was eleven years old, he should be able to recall memories of his parents, in principle. Therefore, any excuse of not being able to summon the memories of his traumatic experience is invalid.

The usage of the third-person subject “il” instead of the first-person “je” is symptomatic of those who have suffered traumatic experiences. In their article “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” authors Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart make this argument:

“Many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether, leaving other parts of their personality to suffer and store the overwhelming experience. ‘I moved up to the ceiling from where I saw this little girl being molested and I felt very sorry for her’ is a common description by incest survivors”.

It seems that Perec is acting as a trauma survivor, employing the third-person subject “il” to describe, from a distance, his own recollections of his experience.

Does Perec’s juxtaposition of “il” and “je” signify that the other instances of the third-person subject in the rest of his writing indicate that one must substitute “je” for “il,” that the “il” functions as a substitute for himself? As if in an algebra equation, when x=3 and upon substitution of the numeral for x, an answer is revealed – upon substitution of “je” for “il,” the reader discovers that Perec did in fact write about his experience, but under the anonymity of the third-person subject.

However, an additional supposition of mine is that Perec employs the subject “il” in order to create someone he would relate to, an “il” with whom he could become a “nous.” If he could achieve this plurality, he would abandon his singularity. This singularity represents the identity that he has always carried; he was always a singular entity, being an only child, being a child of immigrants, being orphaned during his childhood. The presence of the subject “il” suggests that this third-person subject could develop into a second-person subject, a “tu” with whom Perec’s “je” could communicate and sympathize.

According to Lejeune, Perec had envisioned his autobiography as multiple, revealing, and revolving endlessly around the inexpressible. “Comment Georges Perec envisageait l’autobiographie: oblique, multiple, éclatée et en même temps tournant sans fin autour de l’indicible” (Je suis né 8, my emphasis). It seems that his difficulties in writing about his memories were due to the inexpressible nature of what he suffered. As a writer, it is possible that he could not find the right words or even be satisfied with what he wrote to represent his experience correctly. As a writer, it was perhaps more difficult for him to describe his experience (versus a survivor who did not possess a talent for writing) because of insufficient wording. Or conversely, as a writer, he should have been able to write about these experiences with more ease. It is likely that one would expect

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him to be more able to write about these memories than a non-writer since he is skilled at devising phrases, selecting the proper words, organizing thoughts.

It seems that Perec was aware of these questions, as he explains that writing was his protection. He appears to admit that he could have written about his experiences, but he chose to protect himself with his writing, by avoiding the task of writing about these memories. He explains: “L’écriture me protège. J’avance sous le rempart de mes mots, de mes phrases, de mes paragraphes habilement enchaînés, de mes chapitres astucieusement programmés. Je ne manque pas d’ingéniosité” (Je suis né 73). In this way, Perec not only makes an effort to keep his feelings at bay, he also builds a metaphorical rampart with words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters to defend himself from the invasion of his feelings.

Does Perec view his writing as a means of prevention from thinking about his traumatic experience? Based on his collection of works, it is apparent that he uses the action of writing as an endless task to fill his time; he interests himself in writing about the banal life that surrounds him. One could superficially assume that his writing about such quotidian topics prevents him from rehearsing his painful memories, but Freud would argue otherwise. According to Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart in their article “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” “Freud was struck by the fact that patients suffering from traumatic neuroses experienced a lack of conscious preoccupation with the memories of their accident. He postulated that ‘perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it’” (Caruth 166). It is obvious that Perec falls into this category since he is actually obsessed by his past – evident in such examples as when he conducts memory exercises based on old photographs or when he free-writes about the important places in Paris from his past (Je suis né 58-61). Despite these attempts at delving into his past, he settles on evading the difficult task of addressing his trauma by writing instead about a plethora of other subjects. In this manner, Perec succeeds at constructing a fortress of writing to protect himself from not only his emotions, but also those individuals who wish to pry into the depths of his past. Certain readers might decipher this rampart as grounds for exploration, or certain others might take it as it is, presuming that this is all that Perec has to say.

Although it is not until near the end of Je suis né that Perec reveals that his writing functions as a defense mechanism, this idea is suggested earlier in the text, when he confesses his hesitation in disclosing his memories: “je recule peut-être devant l’ampleur de la tâche: dévider, encore une fois, l’écheveau, jusqu’au bout, m’enfermer pendant je ne sais combien de semaines, de mois ou d’années … dans le monde clos de mes souvenirs, ressassés jusqu’à la satiété ou l’écoeurement” (Je suis né 14, my emphasis). Perec’s imagery of the enclosed world of his memories supports the notion that his writing protects not only him from the outside world, but also his memories that take refuge behind the ramparts. The protection he receives from his writing, his fortress, provides comfort to him as well. Perec’s writing screens him from the outside world by allowing him to maintain his privacy – he determines what he writes and what he will share with the readers.

Perec’s usage of the verb “m’enfermer” in this quotation suggests the same action of being closed within a space (perhaps this fortress of writing). The first sentence in this passage expresses Perec’s sentiment of being menaced by the task of confronting his
memories. It is as if he is on the verge of speaking, of breaking with his silence, yet he is shrinking back and contemplating his option of not speaking, of not proceeding with his impending confrontation with his memories. As he employs the verb “reculer” to depict the action of recoiling due to the magnitude of the task, he echoes (complements?) this imagery with the usage of the verb “m’enfermer” to illustrate his retreat back into his fortress of writing. However, this verb has another interesting connotation – the action of shutting up, which could be applied here as Perec’s desire to shut up in a verbal manner, which would consequently perpetuate the silence that he most preferred. It is important to note that this passage is dated the eighth of September 1970, about two and a half decades after his parents’ deaths.

After confessing that writing is his protection, Perec questions whether he still needs its service. He poses the question: “Ai-je encore besoin d’être protégé? Et si le bouclier devient un carcan?” (“Je suis né” ’73). Asking such questions demonstrates that Perec is contemplating stepping out from behind his protection, removing his shield. Interestingly enough, he would use words – his writing – as a means of removing this shield. He projects: “Il faudra bien, un jour, que je commence à me servir des mots pour démasquer le réel, pour démasquer ma réalité” (“Je suis né” ’73). He has allowed his writing to protect him, but he is now considering using his writing as a way of revealing and unmasking his reality. In this manner, writing would function as an offensive tactic, prying his mask off of him, instead of a defensive one, protecting him and allowing him to cower behind its ramparts.

Perec avows that unmasking the real is his project, without a doubt: “C’est sans doute, aujourd’hui, ainsi que je peux dire ce qu’est mon projet” (“Je suis né” ’74). It must be noted that this passage that includes this particular affirmation appears in *Les gnocchis de l’automne ou Réponse à quelques questions me concernant*, which was published in 1972. This is relevant since Perec wrote a letter to Maurice Nadeau, three years prior to this decision to unmask his reality, in which he outlined his plans for his autobiographical projects.
Incomplete Autobiographical Projects – L’Arbre

Besides J’avance masqué and Gradus ad Parnassum, Perec attempted many other autobiographical projects. One such project appears in Je suis né in a letter addressed to Maurice Nadeau, dated the seventh of July, 1969. In this correspondence, Perec describes a potential project to trace his genealogy:

“Mon second project avait pour titre:

L’ARBRE
Histoire d’Esther et de sa famille

C’est la description, la plus précise possible, de l’arbre généalogique de mes familles paternelle, maternelle, et adoptive(s). Comme son nom l’indique, c’est un livre en arbre … J’ai déjà beaucoup travaillé sur ce project; pendant plus de six mois, en particulier, j’ai interviewé ma tante (personnage central du livre) une fois par semaine; j’ai fait quelques esquisses de rédaction, mais il me faudra encore pas mal d’enquêtes et de mises au point avant de m’y mettre pour de bon. C’est un project auquel je tiens beaucoup, mais je pense avoir un peu peur de m’y lancer vraiment” (Je suis né 53-4, my emphasis).

Perec tries to play this off as a project for his Aunt Esther to trace her lineage, evident in the by-line of the title “Histoire d’Esther et de sa famille,” and in making the assertion that she is the principle character of the book. However, he explains the project as a family tree that would map out his ancestry (“mes familles paternelle, maternelle, et adoptive[s]”). Perec’s Aunt Esther was his father’s sister, thus she belonged to his paternal side of the family, not his maternal side. However, she was considered part of his adoptive family as well, since she and her husband David adopted Perec after the war.9 Perec’s intentions to map out the ancestry of his paternal, maternal, and adoptive families is evidence that his project centered around his own history, not his aunt’s. Therefore, it is understandable when Perec expresses his personal interest in this project (“C’est un project auquel je tiens beaucoup”), and his fearfulness in throwing himself fully into it (“je pense avoir un peu peur de m’y lancer vraiment”). It is apparent that this project is characterized by Perec’s denial as well. It is not specified whether his aunt requested this family tree or whether this idea to trace the family lineage stemmed from Perec’s own desire. It is my assertion that Perec implicated his aunt so that he could undertake this project and pass it off as an obligation to her.

Perec ended up abandoning L’Arbre; he projects this outcome later in his letter to Maurice Nadeau when he compares the feasibility of these various autobiographical texts. To justify this decision, he supplies the excuse of not having gathered the necessary documents to trace the family lineage. “Quant à L’Arbre, je n’ai pas encore rassemblé non plus tous les documents nécessaires et, comme je vous l’ai dit, j’hésite un peu à m’y

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9 According to David Bellos in his biography Georges Perec: A Life in Words, the adoptive family whose lineage Perec sought to trace was his uncle’s family, the Bienenfelds. Perec was adopted by David and Esther Bienenfeld in the summer of 1945 (pp. 84-5).
lancer à fond” (*Je suis né* 62). Perec reiterates his hesitation in involving himself in such a project, although he does not provide a reason.

**Lieux**

A different autobiographical project that Perec sought to complete involved an activity that mimicked composing a time capsule. For this project, he settled on the title *Lieux* (*Je suis né* 60). Perec refers to this project as being part of “une idée assez monstrueuse, mais, je pense, assez exaltante…” (*Je suis né* 58). Why would Perec depict this potential work as “monstrous” yet “exhilarating”? The tediousness of the time capsule activity may be the reason for which he deems it “monstrous.” For this activity, Perec intends to visit twelve places in Paris that are important to his memories and to his existence: “J’ai choisi, à Paris, douze lieux, des rues, des places, des carrefours, liés à des souvenirs, à des événements ou à des moments importants de mon existence” (*Je suis né* 58). He will be making a visit to two of the places per month, to undertake the task of writing about them. One writing exercise will be drafted on-site, then another will be drafted from a different location so that he may describe the place from memory. He explains these specifications and speculates about what he may write about during this activity:

“Chaque mois, je décris deux de ces lieux; une première fois, sur place (dans un café ou dans la rue même) je décris ‘ce que je vois’ de la manière la plus neutre possible, j’énumère les magasins, quelques détails d’architecture, quelques micro-événements (une voiture de pompiers qui passe, une dame qui attache son chien d’entrer dans une charcuterie, un déménagement, des affiches, des gens, etc.); une deuxième fois, n’importe où (chez moi, au café, au bureau) je décris le lieu de mémoire, j’évoque les souvenirs qui lui sont liés, les gens que j’y ai connus, etc.” (*Je suis né* 58-9)

Although Perec suggests that this activity will illuminate his connection to these places from his past, it is clear that he is intending to track the physical changes of the place and inconsequential details, such as a fire truck passing by, that have nothing to do with his past. This exemplifies Perec’s evasion of his traumatic experience. These drafts will then be sealed in envelopes, to be reopened at a later date. Perec explains his intention to repeat this process after twelve years have passed, to compare the changes:

“Chaque texte (qui peut tenir en quelques lignes ou s’étendre sur cinq ou six pages ou même plus), est, une fois terminé, enfermé dans une enveloppe que je cachette à la cire. Au bout d’un an, j’aurai décrit chacun de mes lieux deux fois, une fois sur le mode du souvenir, une fois sur place en description réelle. Je recommence ainsi pendant douze ans, en permutant mes couples de lieux selon une table (bi-carrés latins orthogonaux d’ordre 12) qui m’a été fournie par un mathématicien hindou travaillant aux Etats-Unis” (*Je suis né* 59).
Throughout this project, Perec will be staging a repetition, staging a loss. It seems that this exercise would function as a way for him to warm up for writing about his childhood. This process of writing about a place and rewriting about it from memory would condition him to write about a past that he has trouble remembering, or trouble remembering to forget. The act of sealing these envelopes and setting them aside for twelve years suggests that he would like to forget these memories. Evidently, he would not forget them because he would eventually open the envelopes and revisit these places. But this exercise appears to gives him permission to forget, with the assurance that he will remember. Although he is not certain what the final result of the project will be, Perec envisions the outcome as displaying the aging of the places, the aging of his writing, the aging of his memories:

“In janvier 1969; j’aurai fini en décembre 1980! J’ouvrirai alors les 288 enveloppes cachetées, les relirai soigneusement, les recopierai, établirai les index nécessaires. Je n’ai pas une idée très claire du résultat final, mais je pense qu’on y verra tout à la fois le vieillissement des lieux, le vieillissement de mon écriture, le vieillissement de mes souvenirs: le temps retrouvé se confond avec le temps perdu; le temps s’accroche à ce projet, en constitue la structure et la contrainte; le livre n’est plus restitution d’un temps passé, mais mesure du temps qui s’écoule; le temps de l’écriture, qui était jusqu’à présent un temps pour rien, un temps mort, que l’on feignait d’ignorer ou qu’on ne restituaît qu’arbitrairement (L’emploi du temps), qui restait toujours à coté du livre (meme chez Proust), deviendra ici l’axe essentiel” (Je suis né 59-60, my emphasis).

In this passage, Perec examines the importance of time and determines that time is the essential axis of this project. Time will dictate its direction, instead of being regarded as a regret or a loss during the writing process. Just as Perec states that the book will no longer be a restitution of past time, he seems to hint that his writing in general can never restitute his past. Does his emphasis on time imply that he believes it is possible to retrieve the past? His acknowledgement that his writing cannot restitute the past may be another reason for which he evades writing about his traumatic experience.

Despite the grandiose scope of Perec’s autobiographical projects, he states that these projects do not conform to the public’s accepted understanding of an autobiography. He writes to Nadeau: “Vous remarquerez, d’ailleurs, que chaque projet particulier n’entretient avec ce qu’on nomme ordinairement autobiographie que des rapports lointains: W est vraiment un roman; L’Arbre une saga, un roman-arbre (comme on dit roman-fleuve)” (Je suis né 65-6). Perec’s explanation that his projects have very far-off connections to his autobiography illustrates that at the very beginning of the project he denies that these are completely autobiographical works. Would writing a fully autobiographical work make him appear vulnerable, in need of more psychotherapy? Perhaps his aversion to writing an autobiographical work is that he does not want the reader’s pity.

In an interview with Frank Venaille, Perec addresses the subject of memory as it pertains to his works. The script of the interview is included in Je suis né, and is titled, fittingly, ‘Le travail de la mémoire.’ When Perec refers to his works wherein autobiographical elements intervene, Venaille challenges him to see if the inclusion of
this information is a tactic to oppose death and silence. “Mais est-ce que tu crois que cette volonté, ce désir de prendre racine, cet acharnement à travailler à partir du souvenir ou de la mémoire, ce n’est pas surtout une volonté de s’opposer à la mort, au silence?” (Je suis né’ 87). Perec responds in defense of his works, insisting that the autobiographical elements signify the imperativeness of leaving traces and inscriptions. “C’est sûr que cela tient à l’idée de la trace, de l’inscription, au besoin d’inscrire…” (Je suis né’ 87). Perec justifies this need to remember, this obsession with traces of the past, when he recalls a phobia of forgetfulness from a period during a specific psychoanalysis. “… Il y a une période (qui correspondait d’ailleurs à une psychanalyse) où j’avais une véritable phobie d’oublier … C’était une démarche tout à fait compulsive! La peur d’oublier!” (Je suis né’ 87-8). The exclamation points after these comments illustrate Perec’s initiative to diminish the seriousness of this phobia. Perec’s compulsive phobia leads him to achieve a paradox wherein he fears forgetfulness, yet forces himself to elide his traumatic experience.

Later in this interview, Venaille broaches the subject of Perec’s childhood, accusing him of shifting the focus away from this period in his life. “À t’entendre et à te lire on a la sensation que, chez toi, l’enfant Perec n’est pas plus important que l’adolescent ou l’adulte, que c’est là un passage de ta vie dont tu ne veux pas souligner la prépondérance sur tout le reste. Cela semble une volonté” (Je suis né’ 91). Venaille explicitly accuses Perec of a willfull evasion of the subject of his childhood. Perec has difficulty formulating his response. He admits, “Je ne sais pas comment répondre à cette question. C’est bien la première fois qu’on me la pose … En fait, ce que je cherche à atteindre dans mon travail, c’est la manière dont cette enfance m’est redonnée” (Je suis né’ 91). Perec’s desire for the way in which his childhood is given back to him suggests that he is searching for restitution for his traumatic experience in the past. He proceeds to discuss how his writing enables him to achieve this connection with the past: “Tout le travail d’écriture se fait toujours par rapport à une chose qui n’est plus, qui peut se figer un instant dans l’écriture, comme une trace, mais qui a disparu” (Je suis né’ 91). According to Perec, the past inspires the work of writing; the past calls out for a writer to inscribe its traces. It is because of this creation of traces of the irrevocable past that Perec valorizes the work of writing.

Despite his fascination with traces of the past, Perec fixates conversely on Ellis Island, which represents to him the contrary. Perec depicts this iconic locus as one of exile and dispersion: “… il est pour moi le lieu même de l’exil, c’est-à-dire le lieu de l’absence de lieu, le lieu de la dispersion” (Je suis né’ 98). Perec finds comfort in this place since it signifies what he himself experienced in his life: exile, dispersion, absence. By relating to what Ellis Island represents, Perec finds himself implicated in its essence. This fixation is especially curious since he never immigrated to the U.S.; he simply visited the country. Perec describes this fascination and ruminates on the possibility of what might have been:

“En ce sens, il me concerne, me fascine, m’implique, me questionne, comme si la recherche de mon identité passait par l’appropriation de ce lieu dépotoir où des fonctionnaires harassés baptisaient des Américains à la pelle, comme s’il était inscrit quelque part dans une histoire qui aurait pu être la mienne, comme s’il
faisait partie d’une autobiographie probable, d’une mémoire potentielle” (Je suis né 98-9, my emphasis).

It is difficult to discern why Perec invests so much interest in Ellis Island, why he stretches to the point of devising its role in his search for his identity, hypothesizing about a history, a potential memory, a probable autobiography that would have been his, had he arrived at Ellis Island as an immigrant. It seems to me that immigrating to the U.S. – a second immigration in a sense, since Perec experienced the affects of his parents’ first emigration from Poland – would have perpetuated his identity issues, instead of resolving them.

In this passage, Perec argues that Ellis Island does not concern itself with familial roots or traces, but instead functions as a “shapeless” locus which is characterized by its expressible nature. “Ce qui se trouve là, ce ne sont en rien des racines ou des traces, mais le contraire: quelque chose d’informé, à la limite du dicible, que je peux nommer clôture, ou scission, ou cassure, et qui est pour moi très intimement et très confusément lié au fait même d’être juif” (Je suis né 99). If Ellis Island opposes traces and maintains an expressible nature, Perec seems to suggest that traces of the past, being contrary to Ellis Island, are characterized by their inexpressible nature. Perhaps he appreciates that Ellis Island achieves this expressibility, since his writing witnesses clearly the difficulty in broaching inexpressible subjects (most significantly, his traumatic childhood experience). Perec also refers to Ellis Island as a locus of closure, of splitting, or of breaking. His ambivalence in describing this place as one of closure or of breakage is paradoxical since these are contrasting concepts. Their contrasting nature shows how Perec had difficulty in identifying the effects of his Jewishness. Burgelin expresses this idea in his article, “Perec et la judéité…” “Etre juif, ce serait cette impossibilité à nommer les effets de ce désancrage et de cette cassure interne de la mémoire, dont on ne peut que repérer les lignes de fracture” (Revue 168). It seems that what Perec might have meant by these incongruous words is that being Jewish rendered him “closed off” (la clôture) from the rest of the non-Jewish population; a pronounced split (“la scission,” “la coupure”) divided him from his non-Jewish counterparts. However, Perec’s selection of the word “closure” also recalls the previously mentioned idea of his writing functioning as a means of protection, as a rampart. It is apparent that Perec regards Ellis Island as a safe place just as he does his writing.

Perec ponders his Jewishness, and confesses that he does not exactly know what it is to be Jewish. He conveys to the reader his opinion that to be Jewish is to lack any sense of belonging to a certain belief, religion, practice, culture, folklore, history, destiny, or language. To him, Jewishness is composed of absences, questions, worries, and most importantly, a status as a victim. Perec’s philosophy is that his Jewish identity is plagued by an imperative to leave life to chance and to exile:

“Je ne sais pas précisément ce que c’est qu’être juif, ce que ça me fait que d’être juif. C’est une évidence, si l’on veut, mais une évidence médiocre, une marque, mais une marque qui ne me rattache à rien de précis, à rien de concret: ce n’est pas un signe d’appartenance, ce n’est pas lié à une croyance, à une religion, à une pratique, à une culture, à un folklore, à une histoire, à un destin, à une langue. Ce serait plutôt une absence, une question, une mise en question, un flottement,
Claude Burgelin interprets Perec’s lack of knowledge as, “Une question, une ignorance, un doute. Pour Perec, son identité de Juif se décline autour d’un ‘je ne sais pas.’” (Revue 167). Perec’s opinion of Jewishness was probably influenced by the fact that he was not raised in an environment that taught him about his Jewish identity. Having been born in 1936, it is understandable that Perec did not learn about his Jewishness during the time when Hitler came to power. Furthermore, Perec lived in a Catholic orphanage during the war and was even baptized Christian to dissimulate his Jewish identity. Burgelin views this lack of knowledge about what it is to be Jewish as the most probable reason why he launched himself into a project concerning Ellis Island: “Ces mots concluent le parcours qui l’a amené à Ellis Island avec Robert Bober, en quête de l’histoire de ce que fut l’émigration européenne vers l’Amérique, à partir de celle de ces Juifs pour qui leur ‘identité’ avait un sens si évident et si lourd qu’elle les contraignait à l’exil” (Revue 167-8). It is my assertion that Perec was investigating this Jewish exile in order to discover not only what motives these individuals had for immigrating to America, but also to better understand his Polish family’s experience of immigrating to France.

The question of belonging is a valid concern to Perec. In a sense, he blames his parents and grandparents for his failure to grow up in the country of his ancestors, wherein he would have relied on the certainty of a tradition, a language, a sense of belonging. He reflects:

“Mes grands-parents ou mes parents auraient pu émigrer en Argentine, aux Etats-Unis, en Palestine, en Australie; j’aurais pu naître, comme des cousins proches ou lointains, à Haifa, à Baltimore, à Vancouver, mais dans l’éventail à peu près illimité de ces possibles, une seule chose m’était précisément interdite, celle de naître dans le pays de mes ancêtres, en Pologne, à Lubartow, à Pulawy ou à Varsovie, et d’y grandir dans la continuité d’une tradition, d’une langue, d’une appartenance” (Je suis né 100, my emphasis).

In this passage, Perec recounts how several of his cousins were born outside of Poland, in countries that were their parents’ immigration destinations. The emigration and consequent dispersion of both sides of Perec’s family also illustrates how he was denied interactions with much of his extended family. Had they remained in Poland, Perec would have grown up under the security of this family. It seems to me that Perec does not valorize his Jewishness because of its association with all of these losses, most notably his loss of his parents, their disappearance from his life. In an interview with Jean-Marie Le Sidaner, Perec reiterates his misconceptions about his Jewish identity, but he adds:12

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10 Lubartow was the birthplace of Perec’s father (Burgelin 5).
11 Varsovie was the birthplace of Perec’s mother (Burgelin 5).
“C’était [ma judéité] quelque chose qui appartenait à un passé dont je me souvenais à peine, c’était une détermination qui m’avait été imposée de l’extérieur et même si j’avais eu à en souffrir, je ne ressentais pas la nécessité de la prendre en charge, de la revendiquer. En fait, c’était la marque d’une absence, d’un manque (la disparition de mes parents pendant la guerre) et non pas d’une identité …” (Le Sidaner 9, my emphasis). 13

Although Perec never experienced a sense of belonging to his Jewishness, he emphasizes how his Jewishness achieved this sense of belonging, to his past. Perec communicates that his Jewishness represented an absence, a lack – specifically the disappearance of his parents during the war. However, it is apparent that the way in which Perec accepts his parents’ disappearance as being correlated to his Jewishness implies that he subscribes to the preconceived notions about being Jewish and being susceptible to loss.

13 In his article, “Perec et la judéité: une transmission paradoxale,” Claude Burgelin interprets Perec’s reference to his Jewishness as “quelque chose” as a word that has an inexpressible quality: “Son appartenance au judaïsme est designée par Perec comme un espace de vide et de silence, mais aussi comme ‘quelque chose’ marqué d’une émotion à peine formulable” (Revue 168, my emphasis). Perec employs this word frequently when attempting to articulate his perspective on his Jewishness in Je suis né. See pages 99 (“quelque chose d’informe”), 101 (“étranger par rapport à quelque chose de moi-même”).
The particulars of Perec’s birth cannot be left undescribed. Perec himself seems obsessed with his birth date, as he devoted an entire passage in *Je suis né* to this topic. This passage centers around his birth – evident in the title of the selection, “Je suis né” – and the question of how to continue. What must one continue? It seems that one must continue living after being born. It is possible that this inquiry stems from a realization of one’s mortality, since a birth date infers an imminent death date. Perec concerns himself with his birth date as if regretting his birth. Is his birth to blame for his traumatic experiences? If he had not been born, he would not have suffered these traumas. In regards to his birth, Perec clarifies that, “La question n’est pas ‘pourquoi continuer?’, ni ‘pourquoi n’arrivé-je pas à continuer?’ … mais ‘comment continuer?’” (*Je suis né* 11). He states that in general, we all continue (after birth) and that it is a beautiful debut that demands a lot of precisions, a complete story: “En général, on continue. C’est un beau début, qui appelle des précisions, beaucoup de précisions, toute une histoire” (*Je suis né* 10). Perhaps Perec feels pressure to recount his life story since it has been expected of him since birth, since it is expected of all of us since birth. Birth is a call to life, which in turn is a call to remembrance of what one has experienced during such a life.

As a child of Polish immigrants, Perec was born in France, instead of his parents’ native Poland. He was born March 7, 1936, the date he thought that Hitler entered Poland, a fact that would prove to be fundamental to his life (and which he recognizes as such). “Longtemps, j’ai cru que c’est le 7 mars 36 qu’Hitler est entré en Pologne. Ou je me trompe de date ou je me trompe de pays … je connais très mal cette histoire qui a pourtant été pour moi vitale. En tout cas Hitler était déjà bien au pouvoir et il y avait déjà des camps” (*Je suis né* 12-3). In this passage, Perec confesses that he does not know very well the details surrounding Hitler’s reign. It seems that he should express a sense of embarrassment (or shame) at not knowing this history that affected his life to such an irrevocable extent. It is difficult for me to permit him this ignorance, to forgive him for not knowing, and to sympathize with his apparent inability to know this history thoroughly. His ignorance about this subject is an example of his denial of his experience. It is possible that Perec struggled to confront this history; perhaps he believes that it is better not to know the details.

However, the fact that this history influenced Perec personally is undeniable, inescapable. For instance, since Hitler was already in power at the time of Perec’s birth (and concentration camps were already in existence), Perec was born into a state of dissimulation. He did not speak his parents’ native language, nor possess his original family name, and certainly did not recognize his Jewish identity. Instead of being a convergence of identity (race, culture, language, etc), his birth proved to be a

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14 In his biography, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, David Bellos outlines the history of this name discrepancy: “Icek Perec [Georges’ father], whose name was pronounced ‘Itzek Peretz’ in Polish, became ‘Issek Perrek’ the moment he handed his papers to the *police des frontiers*. Nobody distorted Georges Perec’s family name. Nobody mangled it on purpose. It just changed, automatically, through the introduction of a Polish spelling into French. Georges Perec’s father seems to have adopted the new sound of his name without demur. When he enlisted in the French foreign legion in 1939, he must have said ‘Perrek’ when he got to the head of the queue, where a sympathetic recruiting clerk adjusted the spelling to what it would have been had the name been pronounced ‘Perrek’ in Polish. Perec’s father’s passbook thus bears the name Isek Perek” (pp. 4-5).
How curious that when Perec contemplates what his name would have been, had he been born in Poland, he employs “Perec” instead of “Peretz,” his original Polish family name. It also appears that Perec is happy to have been born in France, since he is under the assumption that his birth coincided with Hitler’s entrance into Poland, which it did not; Hitler entered Poland on September 1, 1939. His family’s move to France, and his subsequent birth, allowed them protection from Hitler for possibly a longer amount of time than had they stayed in Poland.

Perec’s birth date functions as both a departure point – “Le fait est que je suis de nouveau à mon point de départ. Je suis né le 7.3.36. Soit” (Je suis né 11) – and as a final point: “Je suis né le 7 mars 1936. Point final” (Je suis né 10). After determining his birthdate a departure point, Perec looks to other autobiographies for inspiration, seeking an exemplary debut. He writes: “je feuille des livres, y cherchant un début exemplaire (je suis né le …) … Feuilleté aussi le journal d’Anne Frank (pas grand-chose à en tirer pour moi), les 2 articles de Elmer Luchterhand sur les comportements sociaux dans les camps ...” (Je suis né 11). In the list of autobiographies that he leafed through, the *Diary of Anne Frank* stands out glaringly. One would suppose that Perec could relate to this example since he too was a Jewish child hidden during the Holocaust like Anne Frank. However, he comments, in parentheses nonetheless, “nothing important for me to draw from that.” Perec maintains a casual reference to this seemingly influential work by starting this sentence with the past participle “Feuilleté.” This flippant reference provides an example of the denial in his writing. Why does he mention the *Diary of Anne Frank* if it is not important? It was clearly significant enough to be included in his list of autobiographies if he had the book in his possession and took the time to leaf through it.

Perec’s opinion of the *Diary of Anne Frank* may have been influenced by the manner in which the French public received this work. Wyman explains, “Although the *Diary of Anne Frank* was a major bestseller in France in 1950, its success had more to do with the evocation of Christian ideals of martyrology than with its association with the persecution of a young Jewish girl” (Wyman 20). Perhaps Perec perused the *Diary of Anne Frank* after he decided against remaining Jewish, therefore omitting any sort of relation to Anne Frank’s plight. It is also conceivable that he does not attribute any significance to this work in an attempt to deny the need to write about his own experience in such a manner.

Again, Perec decided against remaining Jewish – a fact to which he alludes in *Je suis né*. This statement evolves out of a peculiar parody on the birth of Jesus Christ, in which Perec assumes the identity of Jesus to detail his birth. “Je suis né le 25 décembre 0000. Mon père était, dit-on, ouvrier charpentier. Peu de temps après ma naissance, les
gentils ne le furent pas et l’on dut se réfugier en Egypte. C’est ainsi que j’appris que j’étais juif et c’est dans ces conditions dramatiques qu’il faut voir l’origine de ma ferme décision de ne pas le rester. Vous connaissez la suite …” (Je suis né 10). Perec’s concluding sentence in this paragraph assumes that the reader understands his sentiments instead of elaborating on this decision to abandon his Jewishness. This deflection is an expression of his ambivalence. He wants the reader to know that he was Jewish (he wants to share part of his identity), but he does not want to answer any questions about it. Although this deflection is plagued with ambivalence, his choice of adjective to describe his decision is not ambivalent in the least. When Perec refers to his “ferme decision” not to remain Jewish, the reader can sense his resolve not to discuss this in more depth. His mind is made up. There is nothing more to discuss.

However, Perec’s use of an ellipsis at the end of this sentence – “vous connaissez la suite …” – suggests otherwise. The ellipsis seems either to invite the reader to infer the rest, or to prod and ask questions to force Perec to divulge more details. Interestingly, this ellipsis is also an appropriate symbol for Perec’s silence since it represents a pause, a wait, a refusal to say anything more, a supposition that nothing remains to be said, a sullen agreement between the writer and his reader (the speaker and his listener) that what is not said is understood, understood because it does not need to be spoken aloud to be comprehended. Perhaps Perec avoids writing about his traumatic experiences because he presumes that anyone who reads his works or knows him personally can discern how he feels about what he suffered15. Leave the facts to be found in his biography.

After Perec mentions his decision no longer to be Jewish, he commences a new paragraph referring to ‘this quasi-impossibility of continuing’: “Cette quasi-impossibilité de continuer, une fois émis ce ‘Je suis né le 7.3.36,’ fit, j’y repense aujourd’hui, la substance même de ces livres évoqués plus haut” (Je suis né 10). Although he does not specifically state what ‘this quasi-impossibility of continuing’ consists of, it is apparent that Perec’s ambivalent attitude appears again. He refers to a ‘quasi-impossibility,’ using the prefix ‘quasi’ not to completely eliminate the possibility of continuing, despite the fact that the mere mention of the word ‘impossibility’ suggests a pessimistic outlook on the ability to continue. What renders him partially incapable of continuing? It is possible that this ‘quasi-impossibility of continuing’ is the result of the Shoah, or else, the result of his decision to no longer remain Jewish. Perhaps Perec believes that this ‘quasi-impossibility of continuing’ exempts him from having to recount his life story (or at least from recounting it accurately). Or is his birth date what he refers to as ‘this quasi-impossibility of continuing’? Birth provides the opportunity to continue with life, or conversely, to die. However, upon later reconsideration, Perec decides that ‘this quasi-impossibility of continuing’ is the substance of the aforementioned autobiographical texts, J’avance masqué and Gradus ad Parnassum.

After expounding on the details of his birth, Perec seeks to follow the example of the best authors who provide a few details about their parents after the announcement of their arrival into the world: “Les meilleurs auteurs donnent quelques précisions sur leurs

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15 In W, Perec explains how he was exempted from discussing his past because of the war and the concentration camps: “‘Je n’ai pas de souvenirs d’enfance’: je posais cette affirmation avec assurance, avec presque une sorte de défi. L’on n’avait pas à m’interroger sur cette question. Elle n’était pas inscrite à mon programme. J’en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, l’Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps” (W 17).
parents presque aussitôt après l’annonce de leur venue au monde” (*Je suis né* 13). To this claim, Perec supplies simply the name of his father in Polish and nicknames that his family called him. He also divulges the fact that he called his father by his adopted French name, André: “Je me suis, pour ma part, toujours obstiné à l’appeler André” (*Je suis né* 13). Perec’s isolation from his parents’ identities as Polish Jews is evident here. Although this isolation may be considered a typical response from a child of immigrants, can this also be seen as a rejection of his parents’ identities in favor of his adoption of a French one? Additionally, in these few sentences that intend to recognize the individuals that are responsible for producing him, it is noticeable immediately that Perec fails to mention his mother, and the fates of both of his parents. His failure to acknowledge these facts functions as another example that illustrates the denial in his writing.
The inception of \( W \)

In \textit{W ou le souvenir d’enfance}, Perec recounts how he started writing stories about a fictional island called “\( W \),” at the age of thirteen.\(^{16}\) It is important to note that the tales about this island allegorize the Nazi camps. To these stories, he added his childhood memories at a later time, and thus his work \textit{W ou le souvenir d’enfance} came into being, alternating chapters of fantasy with chapters of memories. In \textit{Je suis né}, Perec acknowledges that his fantasy of “\( W \)” evolved out of his first psychotherapy session.\(^{17}\) Of this project, he writes: “Il est né d’un souvenir d’enfance; ou, plus précisément, d’un phantasme que j’ai abondamment développé, vers douze-treize ans, au cours de ma première psychothérapie” (\textit{Je suis né} 61). First of all, the fact that Perec attended psychotherapy sessions is encouraging and can be viewed as an initiative on his part to commence the “working through” process after his traumatic experience. Conversely, it is discouraging that Perec’s works exhibit the amount of denial that they do, considering the time he spent in these psychotherapy sessions. Since he was around nine years old at the end of World War II, these psychotherapy sessions were conducted within the first few years after his trauma.\(^{18}\)

In regards to this fantasy, Perec contends that he had forgotten it after having created it during his childhood, but he recalled it at a later time while in Venice: “Je l’avais complètement oublié; il m’est revenu, un soir, à Venise, en septembre 1967, ou j’étais passablement saoul; mais l’idée d’en tirer un roman ne m’est venue que beaucoup plus tard” (\textit{Je suis né} 61). To this contention, I would like to interject and pose the question, how could he forget a fantasy so impressionable that it would be developed later as the subject of one of his most recognized works? Despite Perec’s explanation that the idea to develop the memory into a novel came to him much later, the reader must wonder how Perec could forget such a memory for almost twenty years. Did Perec repress the memory since \( W \) metaphorizes the concentration camps, the purported site of his mother’s death? Should one consider Perec’s “recall” of “\( W \)” and his decision to turn it into one of his works as evidence of a confrontation with his past? I must confess that as I mull over the circumstances surrounding this recall in Venice, I find myself questioning the validity of Perec’s forgetfulness that is expressed in his comment, “Je l’avais complètement oublié.” Since he was inebriated (“j’étais passablement saoul”), it is difficult to determine if this recall was indeed incidental and genuine or if could it have been self-imposed. The effects of the alcohol might have numbed Perec’s inhibitions enough to allow these repressed memories to surface.

Perec depicts “\( W \)” as, “… une île, quelque part dans la Terre de Feu. Il y vit une race d’athlètes vêtus de survêtements blancs porteurs d’un grand \( W \) noir. C’est à peu près tout ce dont je me souviens. Mais je sais que j’ai beaucoup raconté \( W \) (par la parole ou le dessin) et que je peux, aujourd’hui, racontant \( W \), raconter mon enfance” (\textit{Je suis né} 61-2). Although Perec provides this concise description of the island of “\( W \),” it is problematic when he hastens to conclude: “C’est à peu près tout ce dont je me souviens,” since he originally depicted this childhood memory as “un phantasme que

\(^{18}\) Warren Motte specifies that Perec “was analyzed by Françoise Dolto in his preteen years, by Michel de M’Uzan in his early twenties, and by J.-B. Pontalis in his mid-thirties” (Motte 57).
j’ai abondamment développé.” Perec’s reluctance to elaborate on his memories supports the argument that his works are afflicted with denial. I ask myself how Perec learned of the concentration camps and what sources influenced his concept of them, in order to allegorize them in W ou le souvenir d’enfance? Perec confesses that he frequently recounted ‘W,’ by way of either words or drawings; should this recounting liberate him from his culpability as a silent witness? Perhaps this frequent recounting of ‘W’ functioned as one of Perec’s coping mechanisms.

Although Perec does not address directly the concentration camps that are to blame for his mother’s death, it is feasible that allegorizing these haunting places was the only way for him to represent the experience of his loss. Inasmuch as I accuse Perec of not speaking and avoiding recalling the traumatic experiences, it seems that he expressed himself in an adequate manner through his allegory of the camps in ‘W.’ This remains frustrating for me, as I seek answers to questions such as, how did he learn of his parents’ deaths? Was he aware of his mother’s destination when she placed him on the convoy to the French Free Zone before she was deported to Auschwitz? Did he believe she would return? Did he await her return after the war, or did he already know that she was not coming back? Did he seek out information on her from others who survived Auschwitz? Did he fear that he would be captured and deported as well? When did he comprehend the horror of the concentration camps? These are questions that I wish he had addressed in his works, so that the reader may know his actual sentiments towards his traumatic experience, instead of having to infer or hypothesize.

To invite even more speculation from his readers, Perec favors an ellipsis in this text as well, just as we saw in Je suis né. Centered on a single page, separating the first part from the second, this ellipsis represents, for Claude Burgelin, the disappearance of Perec’s mother. In his article, “Georges Perec, or the Spirit of Beginnings,” Burgelin writes, “Let us recall the striking chapter in W ou le souvenir d’enfance that follows the blank page punctuated only by the typographical code of an ellipsis enclosed within parentheses, emblem of the mother’s disappearance in Auschwitz” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 10). To elucidate, this ellipsis appears shortly after Perec describes his departure from his mother in the Gare de Lyon, in the second to last chapter of the first part of the book. His mother places him, her six-year-old son, on a Red Cross convoy that will deposit him in a safe zone, in Grenoble. This is the last time that Perec will see his mother during his life.19 Perec’s next non-fictive chapter will appear as the second chapter in the second part of the book, meaning that he has buffered his mother’s disappearance; this ellipsis is sandwiched between two fictive chapters about W. In the subsequent non-fictive chapter, the war has ended and Perec’s mother has not returned. Thus, the ellipsis is adequate in conveying the point at which Perec’s mother has disappeared. But it cannot be left unnoticed that Perec does not employ any words to express this fact.

19 Perec describes this memory in W: “Ma mère m’accompagna à la gare de Lyon. J’avais six ans. Elle me confia à un convoi de la Croix-Rouge qui partait pour Grenoble, en zone libre. Elle m’acheta un illustré, un Charlot, sur la couverture duquel on voyait Charlot, sa canne, son chapeau, ses chaussures, sa petite moustache, sauter en parachute. Le parachute est accroché à Charlot par les bretelles de son pantalon. 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” (W 80).
Interestingly enough, *W* was not published until Perec was almost forty years old. Why did this work endure such a long wait before its publication? It seems that Perec stalled the completion of *W* as he sought satisfaction with his writing. In *W*, he explains the difficulties he faced in finding the right words to represent his experience:

> “Je ne sais pas si je n’ai rien à dire, je sais que je ne dis rien; je ne sais pas si ce que j’aurais à dire n’est pas dit parce qu’il est l’indicible (l’indicible n’est pas tapi dans l’écriture, il est ce qui l’a bien avant déclenchée); je sais que ce que je dis est blanc, est neutre, est signe une fois pour toutes d’un anéantissement une fois pour toutes” (*W* 63).

Although Perec views what he says as being “white” (or, “blank”), that is to say, of little interest, it is nevertheless *said*. These words have escaped his silence, and in doing so, contribute to the memory of the Shoah. Perec expresses how the memory of these words is necessary in order to continue to remember the experience. In “Georges Perec, or the Spirit of Beginnings,” Burgelin eloquently reminds us that the death of Perec’s parents prompted his writing.20 “This book of beginnings of a thousand and one chapters is attached as if by an umbilical cord to that which unwound the thread of writing in Perec: the death of his parents and, with it, the disappearance of the child he was when with them” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 15). It is evident that Perec employs the action of writing proactively to record traces of his deceased parents, who otherwise would disappear:

> “j’écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble, parce que j’ai été un parmi eux, ombre au milieu de leurs ombres, corps près de leur corps; j’écris parce qu’ils ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l’écriture : leur souvenir est mort à l’écriture ; l’écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l’affirmation de ma vie” (*W* 63-4).

Perec thus deems his writing a memory of his parents’ deaths and the affirmation of his own life. In doing so, he realizes that *he* is alive – *he* did not die during the Shoah and cannot act as though he had been killed like his parents. This affirmation reappears in *Un homme qui dort*, when Perec writes, “Tu n’es pas mort. Tu n’es pas devenu fou” (*Un homme qui dort* 142).21 It is notable that this affirmation is present in another work by Perec, almost as if he is adopting it as his mantra. Its reappearance displays Perec’s need to affirm his life continuously.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth discusses this same idea in terms of the sense of guilt that many survivors experience after a traumatic experience:22

> “What is enigmatically suggested, that is, is that the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in *having survived*, precisely, *without knowing it*.  

What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one’s own survival. If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one’s survival as one’s own” (Caruth 64).

As Caruth suggests here, trauma can also be fueled by a concern for the self. To apply this to Perec’s trauma, perhaps his experience lead him to hypothesize what would have happened had he been captured by the Nazis and deported like his mother. Perec uses discretion when it comes to this subject, but he does confide in his professor and confidant, Jean Duvignaud, that perhaps he should have been captured, perhaps someone was mistaken in allowing him to hide in the Alps with the other Jewish children. In Perec, ou, la cicatrice, Duvignaud reveals this confession, questioning how Perec perceived his life’s fate.23 “Veut-il abolir ou conjurer le hasard? Ou ce fantasme qu’il me confie, un soir: sauvé de la déportation qui emmènera sa mère à Auschwitz, emmené dans les Alpes avec d’autres bambins, n’a-t-il pas été choisi à la place d’un autre, un autre qui aurait été massacré; ne s’est-on pas trompé d’enfant?(Duvignaud 55). This suggests that Perec did experience “survivor’s guilt,” and thus displays a need to reaffirm his own life. Since he did not perish in the Shoah like his mother, he could not permit himself to live as if he had. In this way, he could not act like the deceased by being silent, but he also could not act like the living since his life had been altered permanently by death. While it is true that Perec is also considered a victim of these atrocities, he could not perpetuate the silence that was the only option for the deceased, those who never had the chance to speak of their experience. Perec had to write to commemorate his parents’ lives, and to attest to their fate during World War II and the Shoah.

In her article, “Auschwitz, ou la Disparition,”24 Catherine Clément interprets the story of W as being inspired from the theme of absence in Perec’s childhood. She supposes that Perec did not understand what he was articulating when he first created this fantasy at the age of thirteen: “Enfant, Perec fit ce récit, sans savoir ce qu’il racontait. Un récit qui lui venait donc du vide de son enfance: pendant que mourait sa mère, à Auschwitz, pendant que la guerre passait avec son armée de morts et de violences, il oubliait déjà, il fallait vivre. Est-ce qu’un enfant sait ces choses-là?” (Clément 89). Clément provides a commentary on the astuteness of Perec’s comprehension albeit, she argues, he did not understand what he recounted in his story. Clément explains that Perec’s responded to his mother’s absence by writing W, although he had already begun to forget this loss and focused on continuing to live his life as usual. After Clément ponders whether a child knows these things, she concedes that yes, a child knows without knowing. She details how this “knowing without knowledge” induces a vacillation between what is perceived as being real and what is thought to be imaginary.

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“Or précisément, oui, un enfant sait. Il sait sans savoir. Pour qui a fait
l’expérience de la psychanalyse, ce fait se vérifie cent fois. Le travail
interminable et décousu de la lente langue qui parle, parle, autour d’un réel perdu,
débusque tout à coup un fait. On est sûr qu’il est ‘vrai,’ qu’il a vraiment eu lieu:
aucune preuve n’existe, que ce souvenir déduit qui manquait. On trouve alors,
dans le présent, les preuves irréfutables de ce qu’onavançait, prudemment,
comme imaginaire” (Clément 89).

Clément depicts how this situation is rendered problematic when “irrefutable proofs” of
what were thought to be imaginary events (in actuality, real events from the past) appear
in the present. She explains that, with the passage of time, these real events were thought
to be imaginary since no proof of their occurrence existed. Duvignaud also addresses this
concept in his work, Perec, ou, la cicatrice.25 He writes, “Les vies que l’on raconte – la
sienne [celle de Perec], celle des autres – sont mêlées d’imagination. Nos mouvements
d’avant-hier flottent avec des fantômes” (Duvignaud 22). By employing the possessive
adjective “nos,” Duvignaud assures the reader (and most likely Perec, as well) that
everyone’s memories of the past are tinged with traces of our imagination.

Conversely, there is an argument that the imagination is capable of unveiling
reality. In her work, Fictions pour mémoire: Camus, Perec et l’écriture de la Shoah,
Catherine Dana argues that the imagination and reality have constant relations wherein
they interreact with and affect one another.26 “… La fiction est bien une création de
l’imagination, mais cela ne signifie pas obligatoirement que cette imagination dût être
coupée du réel. Au contraire, elle possède le pouvoir de le dévoiler. Pour cela, il ne
s’agit plus en effet de dire tout le réel, un réel imaginaire donc, mais d’être en relation
constante et déclarée avec lui” (Dana 15). Dana makes the argument that a rupture does
not exist between the imagination and reality. Since the two influence one another, it is
obvious that fiction, as a creation of the imagination, would be susceptible to having
elements of reality incorporated into it.

Again, Clément proclaims in her article that a child knows of a situation without
knowing that he knows of it. What is most chilling is her suggestion that Perec’s
depiction of the concentration camps in W was an accurate portrayal, although he
outlined his story and sketched drawings without having knowledge of the camps.
Clément chalks this up to the power of the unconscious:

“L’inconscient, lui, est un bon détective. Un jour, après avoir dessiné pendant
longtemps des sportifs comme ceux qu’il décrivait dans W, aux visages
inhumains, aux corps rigides. Perec trouva dans l’Univers concentrationnaire de

25 Claude Burgelin also problematizes this concept in his article “Georges Perec, or the Spirit of
Beginnings,” when he asks: “How does one distinguish between the true and the false, between illusion and
reality? The first part of W ou le souvenir d’enfance conveys the violent confusion of someone who feels
deprived of a homeland (‘I have no memories of childhood’) and senses himself to be prisoner of a memory
where some evil spirit has doggedly falsified perspectives, sowed memory-screens (souvenirs-écrans), and
brought down the snows of amnesia” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 10).
26 Dana, Catherine. Fictions pour mémoire: Camus, Perec et l’écriture de la Shoah. Paris: L’Harmattan,
1998.
David Rousset la description réelle des mimes sportifs auxquels les SS contraignaient les déportés. **Tel est le seul secret de W: un enfant sut raconter ce qu’il ne savait pas.** Ce que sa position d’enfant juif privé de famille lui donnait à restituer, dans une fiction qui ressemblait à un réel que d’autres pouvaient avoir vu. Et, comme il le remarque lui-même, il avait choisi la Terre de Feu pour y installer son île de concentration, bien avant que Pinochet se charge de faire réalité du fantasme d’un enfant lointain. **L’inconscient est également bon prophète**” (Clément 89, my emphasis).

Although Clément presents a convincing argument that Perec recounted a story of which he knew nothing, it is possible that he did learn of the concentration camps from the media or from hearing others mention this topic. Another point to consider is that his aunt took him to see an exposition on the concentration camps. He recalls this experience in *W*.27 “Plus tard, je suis allé avec ma tante voir une exposition sur les camps de concentration … Je me souviens des photos montrant les murs des fours lacérés par les ongles des gazés et d’un jeu d’èchecs fabriqué avec des boulettes de pain” (*W* 215). Perec’s precise age at the moment of this experience is unavailable, but it is likely that this occurred around the same time that he began creating his fantasy of *W*.

It seems that many witnesses evade speaking of the experience because words do not exist to represent properly the truth of the Shoah. Descriptions cannot accurately portray the situation, and they cannot evoke the same sentiments in the individuals who read and listen to these witnesses as those that were suffered by the survivors. The Shoah remains unimaginable for all. Perec’s writing attests to the veritable silence that succeeded the war. However, it is important to note that since he was a young child during the Shoah, many critics question his ability to attest to his experience. In his article, “Autobiography and the Holocaust: An Examination of the Liminal Generation in France,” Steven Jaron poses the problem of childhood witnesses.28 He speaks of:

> “the problem of embodying in their autobiographical writings the fact that they might not recall what happened to themselves during their childhoods, or to members of their families, but that they must somehow give their experience a form adequate to these experiences” (Jaron 209).

Perec confirms Jaron’s assertion when he hesitates to recount his childhood memories in *W*; he confesses that he has trouble remembering them correctly. A comment such as this raises concerns because it requires readers to believe Perec and trust that he is truthful when he says that he has trouble remembering these memories.

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The Question of the Witness (or, the Witness in Question)

Who can be labeled as a witness? What characterizes a witness? In Poétique et Politique du Témoignage, Jacques Derrida contends that a witness is one who was present, one who attended the event that he witnesses.29 “Le témoin est celui qui aura été présent. Il aura assisté, au présent, à la chose dont il témoigne. Chaque fois le motif de la présence, de l’être présent ou de l’être-en-présence se trouve au centre de ces déterminations” (Derrida 26). Derrida states clearly that in order to be considered a witness, one must have been physically present at the event. Shoshana Felman, in her article “L’âge du témoignage,” presents a different definition – one that is more detailed than Derrida’s, and that expands on the responsibilities of the witness and of the listeners. Of witnessing, she writes:

“Témoigner […] c’est plus que rapporter simplement un fait, un événement, plus que raconter ce qui a été vécu, ce qui a laissé une trace, ce dont on se souvient. La mémoire est ici convoquée essentiellement pour requérir l’autre, pour affecter celui qui écoute, pour en appeler à une communauté. Témoigner, en ce sens, […] implique tout à la fois un ‘j’en appelle’ et un ‘je dis vrai.’ Témoigner ce n’est donc pas seulement raconter, mais s’engager et engager son récit devant les autres; se faire responsable – par sa parole – de l’histoire ou de la vérité d’un événement, de quelque chose qui, par essence, excède ce qui est personnel, possède une validité et des conséquences générales”30.

In this eloquent definition of witnessing, Felman highlights how witnessing requires others to listen, to believe, to be affected by what the witness shares, therefore involving a community of listeners. She emphasizes the responsibility of the witness to be truthful in his account of the event, and the need for him not only to recount this event, but to engage the community of listeners in the testimony, to affect them.

Perec is not testifying to what happened to his mother at Auschwitz, but rather witnessing her absence, witnessing her failure to come back to him after the war, witnessing the effectiveness of whatever it was that prevented her from returning. Perec is testifying to the presence of an absence. Derrida makes the assertion that a witness attests to the fact that something was present, but is no longer. He explains:

“Quiconque témoigne (bears witness) n’apporte pas une preuve. C’est quelqu’un dont l’expérience, en principe singulière et irremplaçable … vient attester, justement, que quelque ‘chose’ lui a été présent. Cette ‘chose’ ne lui est plus présente, certes, sur le mode de la perception au moment où l’attestation se produit; mais elle lui est présente, s’il allègue cette présence, en tant que présentement re-présentée dans la mémoire” (Derrida 35-6).

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Derrida clarifies that one must make the distinction between the absence of the ‘thing’ at the moment of the witnessing and its presence, by means of its representation, in the memory of the witness. Derrida’s specifications outlined in this passage apply aptly to the case of Perec – he witnesses that his mother used to be present in his life, but is no longer. Derrida’s assertion that witnessing is not proving, as he argues here (“Quiconque témoigne … n’apporte pas une preuve”), is especially applicable to the case of Perec’s mother, who disappeared at Auschwitz but whose fate was never confirmed.  

Perec can witness his mother’s absence, but he cannot prove what happened to her. Derrida might assert that Perec does not need to know what happened to his mother, since he is witnessing her absence in any case. It is here that we see a break with Derrida; his argument no longer applies to Perec.

I believe that Claude Burgelin states it best when he clarifies: “Georges Perec did not witness something with his own eyes; he only lived its consequences. Something had happened, but this something remained invisible under the snow of the Vercors, a truth thus marked with the possible stigmata of doubt, of the untrue, of the unreal” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 10, my emphasis). Burgelin is correct in acknowledging that Perec lived the consequences of his mother’s disappearance. The consequences themselves were the proof of her disappearance. Nevertheless, the fact that Perec did not witness her death with his own eyes haunts his life with doubts about the truth and the reality of her disappearance. Perec must infer, must deduce what happened to her, based on what he knows: she was deported to Auschwitz and did not return.

The fragmentation of Perec’s life continues to be apparent in the fact that he escaped deportation, but is not considered a survivor, nor a first-hand witness in the same sense as the survivors of the concentration camps. He is a survivor who is situated ambiguously, because he was hidden during the Shoah and survived. Perhaps this ambiguity is why he struggles with writing about his experience. He does not belong in the category of survivors that witnessed the Holocaust. It is possible that he fears that readers will doubt his credibility since he was not present at his mother’s deportation.

Perec merits a title to categorize his status as a witness. It seems to me that a proper term is necessary to distinguish his position. Perhaps it would be appropriate to deem him an absent witness. I have chosen “absent” to denote this category of witnesses since it functions as the opposite to “present” witnesses. This term would suffice because the word “absent” has a connotation that one should have been present. One is only marked absent at events that one was supposed to attend, but did not. For instance, we are marked absent for not attending a class that we are taking; we cannot be considered absent from a class that we do not attend and are not taking. An absent witness would then be someone who was not physically present at the event, but “should/could/might have” been, and whose life has been changed by this event. It is important to note that in the case of absent witnesses, the event that they witness has changed their lives even though they were not physically present at its occurrence. This is why Perec should be considered an absent witness. He did not witness first-hand his mother’s disappearance, but the effects of this event – the repercussions he suffered during his life – did not hinge on the fact that he was not present.

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31 Derrida articulates this same argument earlier in his article, when he states, “… témoigner n’est pas prouver” (30).
In a letter to his professor, Duvignaud, dated November 3 from Paris (the year is not provided), Perec discusses the effectiveness of psychoanalysis in overcoming the loss of his parents:

“la classe de n a coïncidé pour moi avec la fin de ma psychanalyse. Celle-ci s’est étendue sur toute la classe de quatrième, sur ma seconde quatrième, sur une partie de la seconde et sur le milieu de la première. Elle avait commencé à la suite d’une fugue d’une journée. A la suite de mon docteur, (…) j’ai fini par retrouver ma confiance et par me libérer définitivement des traces laissées en moi par la perte de mes parents. (…) La classe de n a été une fin pour moi en ce sens qu’elle m’a rendu pleinement conscient de moi-même …” (Duvignaud 19-20, my emphasis).

The ellipses in parentheses indicate that part of this letter was omitted; what more did Perec convey that Duvignaud chose not to share?

I believe that it is undeniable that Perec feels he has a moral obligation to speak of his experience. He owes it to his mother to do so. Additionally, in speaking of his experience, Perec would be witnessing to his mother’s experience as well. As Jacques Derrida asserts in *Poétique et Politique du Témoignage*, it is impossible to substitute witnesses, to witness in place of the person who actually lived the experience. Derrida questions whether it is possible to “witness for” someone who is unable to witness for himself, in the case of one who has passed away: “S’agit-il plutôt de ‘témoigner pour’ l’autre au sens de ‘à la place de’ l’autre? Et ici d’infirmer cette possibilité, ce pouvoir, ce droit, en rappelant que personne ne peut témoigner à la place d’un autre? Dans cette impossibilité de la substitution, nous sommes à l’épreuve d’une alliance entre la mort et le secret” (Derrida 60). Derrida stresses that since it is impossible to substitute witnesses, we must face the ordeal of the alliance between death and secrets; the secrets will die with the witnesses if they are not disclosed.

Derrida elaborates on the singularity of the first-hand witnesses’ account of their experience and the imperative that the listener believe their words: “Le secret reste toujours l’expérience même du témoignage, le privilège d’un témoin auquel personne ne peut se substituer, car il est, par essence, le seul à savoir ce qu’il a vu, vécu, senti; il faut donc le croire sur parôle au moment même où il publie un secret qui reste de toute façon secret. Un secret comme secret” (Derrida 60, my emphasis). Although it goes without saying that a witness is the only individual who knows what he saw, lived, and felt, it is more important to consider how this witness’ expression of his experience is as singular as his status as a witness. Another person may be able to infer or to perceive what a witness saw, lived, or felt, but this outsider would not necessarily use the same words to express the experience. This is why a witness cannot have a substitute. And, as Derrida also reminds us, “le témoignage résiste à l’épreuve de la traduction” (Derrida 15). A testimony cannot be translated because, if one were to do so, its meaning would be altered and it would not be the witness’ original words.

In *Fictions pour mémoire: Camus, Perec et l’écriture de la Shoah*, Catherine Dana examines the dichotomy of feelings, the desire to forget versus the need to speak, and the importance of perpetuating these testimonies so that future generations may continue to remember them:
“Mais depuis les années soixante-dix, ce sentiment d’impuissance, puis de faillite de la plupart des témoins directs à se faire entendre, à forcer le désir d’oubli et, finalement, à faire comprendre l’horreur des camps a coïncidé avec le besoin, exprimé principalement par les secondes générations – enfants de survivants ou non –, de savoir, de comprendre, de partager une mémoire, de créer une continuité avec la génération précédente qui, elle, commence à disparaître” (Dana 11)

Dana notes that this exigency to speak of the Shoah began in the 1970s. It is also interesting that the second generation, the children of survivors and others who lived through this time period (such as Perec), encouraged these witnesses to speak and expressed the need for their first-hand testimonies since their generation had started to disappear already.

Why does Perec resist recounting his experience, even after the wave of testimonies that Dana speaks of? Did someone tell him to forget his mother? Did his repression of these memories commence with an aunt or an uncle encouraging him to forget what happened? Perec hints that he was trained to forget, as Duvignaud reminds us in *Perec, ou, la cicatrice*. Duvignaud cites a passage from *Un homme qui dort*, where Perec writes: “Tu oublies que tu as appris à oublier, que tu t’es, un jour, forcé à l’oubli” (Duvignaud 24). The subject “tu” in this passage is another example of Perec’s refusal to write in the first-person “je,” to take possession of his memories. The subject in this passage forgets that he *learned how* to forget, having been *forced* to forgetfulness. It is hard to decipher whether Perec intends for this passage to be interpreted as one of his own personal experiences. If so, then the reader may demand to know how he learned to forget, who forced him to forget (did he force himself?), and most importantly, how he forgot these acts that manipulated his memory.

However, there are instances of Perec avowing a fear of forgetting (reference pg. 39). Coupled with this learning how to forget and subsequent forcing to forget, it is my hypothesis that Perec was instructed to forget about his loss, yet he personally wanted to remember this experience. The result – he remembered, and *forgot* that he once learned how to forget and was forced into forgetting, just as he outlines in his statement: “Tu oublies que tu as appris à oublier, que tu t’es, un jour, forcé à l’oubli.”
Perec’s Silence

By most standards, Perec would not be considered a silent witness, despite the manner in which his writing exhibits signs of the silence that followed the Holocaust. Burgelin makes the argument that Perec subscribes to this silence. “By making the life of writing and the impossibility of speech indissoluble (the scandal of silence), Perec only concurs with comments made by Blanchot or others on silence as the terra firma and horizon of literature – especially after Auschwitz – in order to reverse the perspective” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 16). Burgelin expresses the paradox here of how writing and the impossibility of speech are inextricably entwined. Perec lived this paradox. Burgelin proceeds to highlight writing’s appropriation to silence. “The silence exists, the scandal of History exists, but writing draws its vitality from them without ever making us forget that it is itself only a metaphor for emptiness and a substitute for mourning” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 16). Burgelin depicts writing as a metaphor for emptiness since writing records traces of a thing that is no longer. As mentioned previously, Perec’s writing drew its vitality from this silence, from his incapacity to address sufficiently the loss of his parents. Perec realizes that his writing evolves out of this void.

The quantity of writing that Perec produced is far from scant, yet he remained relentlessly silent regarding the Shoah and subsequently, his parents’ deaths during this time. He struggled to broach the topic of his painful past, but it seems that his attempts were halted by a sense of fear that he never overcame. He voluntarily constructed projects involving autobiographical material, such as interviewing an aunt to construct a family tree, but most of these projects evolved into semi-fictional works (for instance, W). Perec’s evident desire to produce an autobiographical work demonstrates his need to speak and to take up his role as a person affected by the atrocities of the Shoah, yet he found himself incapable of completing this task.

Although W is his most autobiographical work, it is also semi-fictional, which prevents the reader from deciphering what to accept as autobiographical. The fragmented quality of this writing raises the question of whether or not Perec truly wants to communicate his past to his readers. One can wonder if the fragmented nature is due to a memory lapse – is this all he remembers? Is this the full extent of his memories? But somewhere, there is this nagging feeling that he isn’t genuinely telling us everything. It is as if he writes these fragments to pacify the reader – a snack for the hungry child before dinner – yet he fails to put the main course on the table, confirming that his writing is symptomatic of the silence that followed the Shoah.

According to David S. Wyman in The World Reacts to the Holocaust, French Jews refrained from talking about the Holocaust after the war; there was not “much discussion of the Holocaust within the French Jewish community.” Few Eastern Europe Jews had survived the ordeal; those who had seemed reticent to talk about their experiences … The French Jewish community was concerned with reconstruction and did not want to dwell upon the past” (Wyman 20-1). It is possible that Perec did not speak

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32 Interestingly, Duvignaud uses this same term to describe Perec’s interactions with his friends. He writes: “Parfois, au milieu des amis, il est le ‘témoin silencieux’: il sait écouter, tête un peu baissée, et les yeux avides. Il s’imprègne” (Duvignaud 24).

because many individuals in France did not want to ruminate on what happened. Burgelin addresses this fact in his article, “Perec et sa judéité: une transmission paradoxale.”34 “Dans les années de l’après-guerre, pour les Juifs comme pour d’autres, l’urgence était de reconstruire. De remettre en place les conditions matérielles et sociales de la vie. Il ne convenait guère de s’attarder sur son malheur. C’est dans ce paysage idéologique et psychique que Georges Perec a grandi, gardant son deuil comme ‘un grand silence blanc’” (Revue 170). Burgelin stresses the Jews’ tendency to affirm their faith in what the future would bring, rather than rehashing the past. “Il convenait davantage d’affirmer sa foi en l’avenir, de se donner les moyens de la lutte que de se tourner (se détourner …) vers le passé” (Revue 170). It seems that Perec simply adopted the future-focused stance of the Jewish community and implemented it in his own life. Considering this point, it is uncertain why Perec continued to obsess over traces of the past and of recalling memories. It is possible that his silence was a manifestation of fear – a fear that he would not assimilate well into the French culture if he dwelled on his parents’ deaths and Jewishness.

Fragmentation and the Jewish Identity

The construction of $W$, alternating chapters of fiction and non-fiction, represents the fragmentation of Perec’s life and of his memories during his traumatized childhood. As David S. Wyman notes in his historical account, *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, “Though the Eastern European Jewish community in France was nearly decimated in World War II, its heritage lives on among the children of survivors, whose Jewish identity was profoundly affected by both the painful reality and memory of the Holocaust” (Wyman 32). Perec belongs to this Eastern European Jewish community that Wyman describes. However, he is not a child of survivors, but one of the many Jewish children that suffered traumas when their parents departed for the concentration camps and did not return. These children can be considered a different category of survivors – who hid during the Nazis’ raids or dissimulated their Jewish identities to avoid being captured and were protected from deportation. They did not physically witness the atrocities of the concentration camps, but they were affected by the loss of family members and friends. These children had childhoods that were not in the least “normal.”

During the war, many Jewish children were under the care of people they hardly knew, spending their days living in a state of uncertainty and confusion. According to Wyman, this uncertain time persisted for many years after the end of the war, producing “… another urgent need in the immediate postwar period [which] was the rescue and rehabilitation of Jewish youth. It is estimated that between five thousand and fifteen thousand Jewish children in France lost their parents during the war. Many had been placed with Christian families and now had to be searched out” (Wyman 17). After the Liberation, Perec left the Free Zone where he had been hiding, and was placed under the care of a paternal aunt and uncle, Esther and David Bienenfeld, in Paris.

Perec describes the fragmented quality of his memories, stating that, “les souvenirs existent, fugaces ou tenaces, futiles ou pesants, mais rien ne les rassemble. Ils sont comme cette écriture non liée, faite de lettres isolées incapables de se souder entre elles pour former un mot …” ($W$ 97). To accept this fragmentation, Perec utilized the idea of the irrevocable. He confesses, “… je n’ai pas d’autre choix que d’évoquer ce que trop longtemps j’ai nommé l’irrévocable ; ce qui fût, ce qui s’arrêta, ce qui fut clôturé : ce qui fût, sans doute, pour aujourd’hui ne plus être, mais ce qui fut aussi pour que je sois encore” ($W$ 26). An example of this “irrevocable” is evident in *Affective Genealogies*, by Elizabeth J. Bellamy. She writes: “Martin Jay has forged a specific link between what he calls postmodernism’s ‘apocalyptic imaginary’ and melancholia, as if to argue that postmodernism inhabits an ambiguous psychic space between an anxiety for an unknown future and a melancholic fixation on an unrecoverable past” (Bellamy 2). The most difficult part of the irrevocable is accepting that one cannot revoke what has already happened in the past.

In the article, “The Testimony of Fantasy in Georges Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*,” Joanna Spiro discusses Perec’s story of $W$ as a solution for the fragmentation

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of his life.  

“Perec has produced the game-system of W in response to the extreme difficulty of coming to terms with his own history. The fantasy has filled the void of not knowing, and its function as an approach to the reality he must come to know is complex” (Spiro 149). Spiro recalls the lack that represents ignorance: one cannot know exactly what happened in the past either.

Additionally, this fragmentation is the reason for which Perec becomes a stranger to himself, like a prisoner at one of the camps. Perec not only lost his parents, but also his religion, his identity, his comforts, his certainties – all the things that are most important for the development of a child. He lacked even the certitude of a Jewish identity. In Affective Genealogies, Bellamy comments on Jewish identity according to Blanchot:

 “… he [Blanchot] depicts the Jew as, variously, ‘the exigency of strangeness,’ ‘the exigency of uprooting,’ a subjectivity of ‘uneasiness and affliction,’ and … ‘the affirmation of a nomadic truth’ – descriptions that, even as they are deployed to accuse the anti-Semite, nevertheless have the unintended effect of constituting a repetition compulsion to rehearse and perpetuate the same anti-Semite stereotypes …’(Bellamy 29).

Bellamy suggests that it is an anti-Semitic stereotype that the destiny of the Jewish population is to repeat this cycle, to migrate endlessly and never to belong to one country.

The result of anti-Semitism is a history of a lack of belonging for Jews. In his seminar, “Le rapport à la judéité chez Georges Perec,” Kaiko Miyazaki discusses this lack.37 “Nous pouvons observer un manque et un désir d’appartenance à la culture des siens chez l’auteur, à savoir la culture juive … le décalage entre le vrai et le faux … dévoile un manque d’affection” (Miyazaki). Perec, however, does belong to a country (France), and holds his father responsible for his nationality: “C’est mon père, je crois, qui alla me déclarer à la mairie … déclara que j’étais français. Lui-même et ma mère étaient polonais” (W 35). In this citation, Perec emphasizes how he was not a Polish citizen like his parents. Since his birth, Perec was differentiated from his parents because he was born in France, instead of Poland like them. Miyazaki suggests that this difference is the root of his problems: “Perec n’appartient donc pas à la culture traditionnelle de ses ancêtres, mais se rattacherait plutôt à un nomadisme mobile, informe, qui refuse d’être figé” (Miyazaki). Michael Weingrad discusses the affects of nomadism and of exile on the Jewish peoples.38 In his critique, “Book Review: Juifs Imaginaires,” he contemplates what characterizes a Jewish person:

“It would be instead an absence, a question, a raising of a question, a hesitation, an anxiety: a certain anxiety behind which is silhouetted a different certainty, abstract, heavy, insufferable: that of having been designated a Jew, and because a

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Jew a victim, and of owing one’s life to nothing but chance and exile” (Weingrad).

It is possible that the truth about their identity was problematic for Jewish children; during the Shoah, their only certainty was their religion and their race, the two aspects of their identity that they had to hide.

Even if Perec had not lost his parents during his childhood, he would have had to accept his French Jewish identity and the possibility of suffering anti-Semitism during and after the war. According to Wyman, “the events of the war had clearly raised questions concerning the alleged symbiosis of français and israélite. Nor did Liberation signal the end of anti-Semitism” (Wyman 17). It is apparent that the French Jew faced adverse conditions in seeking to assimilate into the French culture. Bellamy also comments on this idea:

“… when the Jew seeks to become “French” through assimilation into the State, he fails all the more to conceal his true “Jewish” essence. The result is that the French Jew is never more “Jewish” (or enjuivé) than when he seeks to become “French” – or, phrased psychoanalytically, it is as if efforts at Jewish assimilation into “authentic” French citizenship serve only to exacerbate a fetishizing of the “real Jew” on the part of the French Gentile. Thus, it is both a disavowal of the Jew and a fetishization of the Jew that constitute the weird psychic paradox that traps the figure of the Jew within the cultural imaginary of French anti-Semitism” (Bellamy 15-6).

According to Bellamy, Jewish people become more Jewish when they become French because they do not abandon their religious affiliation in attaching themselves to a particular nationality. Emphasis is placed on the Jewish identity, instead of on the French identity. This is contrary to what was originally asked of Jews in the period surrounding the French Revolution, as related by David S. Wyman:

“As the proponents of the emancipation after 1789 were careful to point out, the decision to allow Jews to participate freely in society was predicated on the assumption that they would willingly give up their communal institutions and identity. In true Jacobin fashion, supporters of rights for Jews were convinced that commitment to la patrie necessitated the rejection of all other collective loyalties” (Wyman 4-5).

This insight into the anti-Semitism of the late eighteenth century shows that one persistently asked the Jews to give up their Jewish identity in order to assimilate into the culture of the country in which they lived.
Mourning or Melancholia?

Perec’s works are clearly symptomatic of the psychological conditions that Freud outlines in “Mourning and Melancholia.” According to Freud, mourning and melancholia occur in response to the loss of a loved object. Freud explains the seriousness of this loss: “… one can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love. In yet other cases, one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (Freud 40). Subjects in mourning recognize clearly what object has been lost; they express feelings of anger and are capable of working through their loss. Conversely, melancholics are unable to identify what has been lost. Without this identification of the lost object, melancholics cannot work through their loss.

Additionally, melancholics are stuck in the process of self-torture. According to Warren Motte, this idea applies to Perec. “Many critics have read a story of personal torment in Perec’s work” (Motte 56, my emphasis). Freud elaborates on the self-tormenting nature of melancholia:

“If the love for the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. The self-tormenting melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned around upon the subject’s own self…” (Freud 45, my emphasis).

Freud presents the argument that melancholics welcome suffering, “deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering.” Motte employs Philippe Lejeune to illustrate an example of Perec’s self-tormenting nature. “Philippe Lejeune, for instance, sees in Perec ‘an autobiographical writing of lack, of gaps, of unease.’ …Wherever the self is placed on stage, the effect that Lejeune notes becomes apparent, as if there were something about the self itself that causes the writing to hesitate, to stutter” (Motte 57). The self-tormenting nature of Perec’s writing is apparent in the hesitation and in the stuttering that run rampant throughout all of his works. Motte and Lejeune would concur that these aspects of his work represent his unease in his autobiographical writing. This unease provokes the reader to ponder why Perec forces himself to address these sensitive subjects when they are obviously difficult for him to discuss. The force and the manner in which Perec wills himself to write about these subjects illustrate that Perec did participate in self-tormenting practices that are characteristic of melancholia.


While Perec does relate to the self-tormenting nature of melancholia, it is evident that he exhibits naturally signs of mourning as well. According to Freud, “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud 38). In this definition, Freud encompasses the loss of “some abstraction,” thus it seems that this may be correlated to Perec’s search for his identity; he might be mourning not only his parents’ deaths, but also the lack of clarity regarding his identity. However, Perec cannot work through his trauma like an individual in mourning, although he should have this capability.

Freud elucidates the difference between mourning and melancholia, which we will see pertains to Perec: “The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud 40). Several critics have noted how Perec exhibits a diminution in his self-regard, characteristic of the melancholia Freud describes in this passage. For instance, Duvignaud comments on Perec’s accentuated object-status during the war: “La persécution a effacé le souvenir de l’hérité familiale: il a été un objet dans le chaos de la guerre” (Duvignaud 15, my emphasis). Perec’s object-status during this time equated to a sense of powerlessness. He pondered whether he had been selected wrongfully to go into hiding, whether he should have been deported like his mother. Burgelin reminds us that after Perec’s mother’s disappearance (represented by the ellipsis in W), “a child is thus evoked … a child nearly mad … a child removed from all that forms the basis of culture and the social fabric, from everything that permits the sharing of subjectivity and intimacy” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 10). Burgelin notes how Perec was denied opportunities to rejoice in his subjectivity after the loss of his parents. He later adds that the death of Perec’s parents prompted “the disappearance of the child he was when with them” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 15). It is understandable how Perec was reduced to an object without the presence of the two individuals that he needed the most.

The termination of mourning arrives when “the fury has spent itself or after the object has been abandoned as valueless” (Freud 50). Freud prescribes that, “… mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live …” (Freud 50). Therefore, how did Perec work through his episodes with mourning and melancholia? In a peculiar way, Perec was able to overcome these maladies through an attachment to a different object, a scar.
The scar

In his memoir, *Perec ou la cicatrice*, author Jean Duvignaud writes of Perec’s fascination with a portrait in the Louvre, entitled *le Condottiere*. He depicts the portrait as “une image de la gloire, à peine troublée par une cicatrice, là, au-dessus de la lèvre supérieure, du côté gauche: un stigmate qui semble rappeler ce vainqueur à une humanité commune, une histoire, la sienne” (Duvignaud 14). It is plausible that Perec was intrigued by such an image because of the history it represented. However, the fact remains that Perec had the same exact scar as the Condottiere, except on the right side of his upper lip instead of the left. Duvignaud provides the background on Perec’s acquisition of this scar. “Perec montre, sur sa lèvre supérieure, mais du côté droit, la même cicatrice. L’effet d’une bagarre d’enfants et d’un ski jeté contre lui par un adversaire sans doute provoqué” (Duvignaud 14-5). Duvignaud also emphasizes Perec’s attachment to his scar, making the assertion that this represented to him a mark of individuality:

“Perec s’attache à cette cicatrice: n’est-ce pas, sur sa lèvre à lui, une marque qui lui appartient en propre? La persécution a effacé le souvenir de l’hérédité familiale: il a été un objet dans le chaos de la guerre. Cette marque est sa part d’individualité: elle résulte de sa propre volonté. Est-ce le signe où l’on investit tout ce que l’on croit être?” (Duvignaud 15).

Perec’s scar can be interpreted as a new history – as Duvignaud explains, persecution erased the memory of familial heredity, so the acquisition of a new scar, a permanent scar, represents a new history for Perec whose Jewish family’s history was not permitted to them. When Perec obtained this scar, the new history was created – a history that cannot be erased because of the permanence of the scar. Because of the scar’s indelibility, Duvignaud argues that it can be seen as a point where one places all of one’s beliefs. It is unchanging; it is stability; it is a home. This aspect is key to Perec since his childhood could best be described as unstable; Perec was considered an uprooted youth – “déraciné” is Duvignaud’s term (Duvignaud 10). The scar also represents a possession – this is only Perec’s scar and he alone owns it. It becomes his mark of individuality that separates him from everyone else. This is especially important for someone from a Jewish family, who was persecuted for belonging to the Jewish race; those in the Jewish group were never recognized as individuals, but as a category.

The scar ties Perec to a past that is irretrievable. It links him to the person (the child) that he was then, but is no longer. One can discern this being by focusing on the scar; the former self reappears when one recalls the time when the scar was acquired. Duvignaud explicates this idea: “Un signe, un emblème, un lien avec soi, soi seul, pour qui le passé, l’enfance sont encore obscures. Un lien avec un être qui n’est pas encore, et qui se fait, là, sous nos yeux. Ecrire, écrire, oui, pour donner à ce stigmate, fut-ce par la simulation – mais le génie de l’écrivain est dans la simulation – la force d’exister qui importe” (Duvignaud 16). The scar allows a simulation of the being that no longer exists, just as a writer employs simulation to bring things into existence that would not have otherwise been contrived. As Duvignaud also notes, Perec ironically enough grew a beard to cover his scar, shortly after his public recognition for his writing. “Au moment
de la reconnaissance publique de son talent, Perec se laissera pousser une barbe de faune” (Duvignaud 16). Covering his coveted scar, Perec’s beard represents a recoiling, an intent to hide (protect?) what is most significant to his individuality. This action of hiding his scar from the public is unnecessary, as Perec comprehends that this indelible mark cannot be taken away from him. Perhaps it is a drive to hide his identity, not to allow his childhood scar to attach him to his painful past, not to be recognized by members of the public that he once knew. Wouldn’t former acquaintances recognize him from his name alone? As Duvignaud notes, Perec’s decision to grow a beard at this critical point in his career is quite curious, although inexplicable.

Duvignaud also notices that the appearance of Perec’s beard coincided with a newfound attitude of victory. He describes a photograph of Perec, where the scar was no longer visible beneath his beard: “… la cicatrice ne paraît plus. Un air de vainqueur …” (Duvignaud 56). Perec’s air of victory may have been the product of his long psychoanalyses. Duvignaud believes that Freudian analysts helped Perec achieve this success: “Une conquête, oui … Des suites d’un long travail auprès d’analystes freudiens, Michel d’Musan et J.-B. Pontalis, nous ne saurons rien, mais sans doute y a-t-il puisé assez de force pour donner forme littéraire à ce vague et inconnu passé qui a pesé sur lui comme une charge” (Duvignaud 56, my emphasis). Duvignaud refers to Perec’s past as being vague and unknown, which supports the argument that Perec hesitated in sharing this past, even with a confidant like Duvignaud. This past weighed on Perec like a load, a load that depended on him to lift it from his shoulders. This responsibility also required Perec to speak, as otherwise it would have pressed him to death.

Duvignaud tracks Perec’s progress, and determines that this weight was lifted upon the completion of W. “Avec W ou le souvenir d’enfance, Perec est sorti du labyrinthe” (Duvignaud 58). According to Duvignaud, W succeeded at helping Perec come to terms with the reality of his life: “W se déroule comme à double piste. Perec cherche le gisement d’où est sortie sa vie et ce gisement n’existe plus: son père est mort à la guerre, sa mere a été déportée à Auschwitz. De la lointaine Pologne, il ne reste rien. Paris seul est là …” (Duvignaud 58). While searching to make sense out of his life, Perec confesses these truths in W – his parents’ deaths and his displacement from their native country. In sharing what little autobiographical material he did in W, Perec may have found his way out of the labyrinth, but he did not appease the readers who sought to know more. As we’ve seen, even W is marked by a theme of evasion and silence, although Perec found it to be the release of words and memories that he needed.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have evaluated how Perec’s traumatic childhood experience has affected his writing. By examining his response to his trauma, I have identified Perec’s way of denying its affects on him, his manner of diverting the reader’s attention away from this subject, and his obsessive inclination to remember trivial points from his past instead of this life-changing misfortune. I have identified Perec’s desire to share his autobiography, and his paradoxical inability to do so in a straight-forward manner. By creating a new category of witnesses that encompasses Perec, I have provided him with an appropriate witness status. He garners this status as an absent witness to supplement his works with additional credibility.

Despite the disheartening events of his past, Perec admits that his writing originated out of an absence, a loss, a trauma. Burgelin conveys this idea: “… Perec constantly reminds us that everything he constructs is rebuilt from a void, around an absence, upon a blank” (“Spirit of Beginnings” 11). It must be remembered that these misfortunes are responsible for his development as a writer and that his works oscillate around this absence. Had his works not been influenced by these misfortunes, it is likely that they would have been drastically different, or even worse, non-existent.
Bibliography


