

Telling Untold Tales.

**Concealed Family Stories
in Contemporary Fiction**

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Abstract

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Drawing on three twenty-first-century North American and German novels – Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* (2002), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), and Marcel Beyer’s *Spione* (2000) –, this dissertation examines how lost or concealed family stories, marked by war, dislocation or other traumatic experiences in the grandparents’ generation, are re-invented in the life narratives of third-generation descendants. The narrators, attempting to trace the lost or concealed stories of their grandparents, are confronted with a past inaccessible due to the violent historical caesurae. In the face of this experience of loss and its implication for their own sense of identity, the grandsons then forge their ancestral stories, in order to inscribe themselves in a familial continuity. Their biographical projects thus are simultaneously autobiographical, leading to complex forms of intergenerational identification and a conflation of individual, family and collective stories. All three texts foreground the role of the grandparents as connectors between personal life and larger frameworks, present and past, communicative and cultural memory, and derive their urge to reinvent the grandparental story from the void that is left by the loss of that story.

Each novel illuminates a specific issue at the core of such fictional (auto)biographies: Eugenides’ *Middlesex* questions the issue of identity – personal, sexual, and cultural – to articulate the importance of both the ancestral heritage and the role of narrative for the protagonist’s construction of a sense of self. Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* illustrates the complexity of an identity quest within a historical and ancestral framework, negotiating the difficulty of recovering memory obliterated by traumatic past events, the realisation of the unreliability of memory as a fundamental element of any life writing, and yet the urge to reconstruct the past in narrative. Beyer’s *Spione* foregrounds the role of family memory in contemporary Germany, which is still profoundly shaped by the legacy of the Third Reich, and the heritage of secrecy and silence that pervade all generational relationships. The analysis of the three texts together contributes to contemporary debates on the importance of memory in our society and the reverberations of traumatic experiences through the generations.

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I The Autobiography of My Grandparents

1 Jodok for an Introduction

“Jodok Sends His Love” is the title of a short story by Swiss author Peter Bichsel, in which a grandfather entertains his grandson with tales of when his Uncle Jodok was still alive.¹ The grandson has never met the uncle, who remains absent and ungraspable; the stories are never “about” him, but instead tell of the grandfather’s life in connection with this uncle: “When Uncle Jodok was still alive”, “When I went to call on Uncle Jodok”, “When Uncle Jodok gave me a jew’s harp” (45). And yet, the figure of the uncle assumes an increasing presence in the lives of grandfather and grandson, until the grandfather imagines the uncle phoning him, and passes on his greetings to the rest of the family, who know that he is only pretending. Jodok takes over their conversations, their imagination, and their vocabulary: first, it is the two “o’s” in his name that start to replace the vowels in all the other words (“Oncol Jodok woll vosot os, ho os o clovor follow”, 47); then his whole name begins to substitute nouns, people, and ultimately the “I” of the grandfather, (so that “I’ve quite an appetite today” eventually becomes “Jodok has quite a Jodok today”, 48): Jodok becomes omnipresent. When the grandfather dies, the grandson expresses the wish that his gravestone should not carry his real name, but “Jodok Jodok”: the unknown uncle thus usurps the identity of the grandfather (or the grandfather assumes that of the uncle?), but also of everything else in his world. At the same time, his omnipresence renders the world meaningless, save for the perpetuated presence of the uncle’s name.

The final page of the story, however, reveals a twist: the grandson admits that his tale is a fiction, and that his grandfather died when he was very young, leaving him only with a memory of the beginning of a story: “When Uncle Jodok was still alive” (50). This story was nipped in the bud by the angry grandmother, who brusquely silenced the grandfather and all potential stories about Uncle Jodok with “Shut up about your Jodok” (50). The grandfather’s sadness and silence provoked the child to exclaim: “If I had an Uncle Jodok I’d never talk about anything else again!” (50) And so he now imagines a grandfather who is alive and who does just that: he speaks of nothing but Jodok (in a more and more literal sense). In the grandson’s imagination, telling the stories of Uncle Jodok allows the grandfather to survive into old age, thus making possible the loving relationship between grandfather and grandchild that the child still misses.

This short story can be read as a parable illustrating the importance of the grandfather and his story and the creative energy that the loss of both engenders, an energy that we see in

¹ Peter Bichsel, *Stories for Children*, transl. by Michael Hamburger (London: Calder and Boyars, 1971), 45-50.

the novels discussed in this dissertation. Instead of the grandparent and a story, the child inherits a silence (indeed, a forceful silencing) that creates a void: the untold tale makes the child assume a voice and recreate the suppressed story. He can only do so from his own point of view, and he invests the story with his own inclinations (“If I had an Uncle Jodok I’d never talk about anything else again!”), and so the grandfather’s voice is in fact his own. In the storytelling, the two voices and volitions are thus conflated. And while the story becomes increasingly devoid of sense and meaning, divorced from reality, grandfather and grandson understand each other in the fictional space of the grandson’s imagination.

The fiction of Jodok itself contains the story of an absent ancestor, whose memory is banned by the grandmother; there is a two-fold silencing of both the uncle and the grandfather telling the story of the uncle, which is, in fact, the grandfather’s story – his identity is intricately intertwined with that of the uncle. While the uncle returns from the dead to speak to the descendants, through the imagined phonecalls, the grandfather-storyteller’s voice is also only imagined, by a grandson who spins the silenced story into a fiction. Bichsel’s tale illustrates a psychological process behind the re-invention of the lost or suppressed grandparent’s tale, showing it to be a fundamental dynamic within intergenerational (dis)continuity.

This timeless psychological constant of the importance of intergenerational communication and continuity is embedded, in the novels examined in this dissertation, in the larger context of collective or national history; the reasons for the silencing of the story are diverse, ranging from the desire to suppress traumatic experiences to that of hiding shameful feelings of guilt; and the child narrator has grown into a young adult, reflecting on himself and his place in a framework of ancestral and collective heritages. And yet, Bichsel’s tale of Jodok reverberates through them all, and the novels’ narrators, in their text, elaborate what is encapsulated in this children’s story already: the sadness at the loss of the grandfather, the unfulfilled familial relationship, but also the silenced story; the desire for re-fabulation, and the obsession with the narrative gap which creates a retelling bordering on the surreal and grotesque.

2 “How do I begin?”

“Encoded in the loops of DNA in every cell of my body are discreet physical, mental and emotional potentialities which are my grandfather’s as much as mine; mine because they were once his.”² Dan Jacobson, in his *Heshel’s Kingdom*, draws on our contemporary knowledge of genetic inheritance when reflecting on his relationship with the grandfather he never knew, and he is struck by the simultaneous identity and non-identity of ancestors and descendants. Genetic

² Dan Jacobson, *Heshel’s Kingdom* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998), 5.

science teaches us that we are, in fact, made up of our ancestors in a very literal way, through the inheritance of genetic information lodged in the core of every cell, invisible to the naked eye and yet deeply influential. While each individual is unique in terms of the combination of the inherited genes, we are also profoundly ‘non-unique’ in that we are a reshuffling of pre-existing components. Science thus confirms an ancient concept of identity that is expressed in biblical genealogies spanning many generations, in ancestral lines in classical epics, or in more recent, autobiographical texts that trace the family history: we, as individuals, belong in a continuity of ancestral heritage. Biology, which of course shares with biography its object of scrutiny – life – provides an undeniable, inalienable connection to our ancestry. The implications of this awareness are multiple, determining how we conceive of our life and our individuality, and how we write about ourselves. Knowing of genetic inheritance also extends our sense of identity – usually located in the mind – to a physical, bodily level, providing a counter-position to the cultural, national, historical heritages in which we inscribe ourselves. Jacobson here dissolves the (generally so strict) separation between body, mind and emotions, and he places all their “potentialities” in the genes, formulating a principle of bodily memory and of intergenerational identity that is at the core of the texts discussed within this dissertation.

Without explicitly mentioning genetics, but with a strong sense of the importance of genealogies, Günter Grass, in the fictional autobiography of Oskar Matzerath, *The Tin Drum*, answers his own question, “How shall I begin?”, as follows: “I shall begin far away from me, for no one ought to tell the story of his life who hasn’t the patience to say a word or two about at least half of his grandparents before plunging into his own existence.”³ His question, one that any (auto)biographer needs to negotiate, is asking simultaneously about the beginnings of the writing process as well as that of the individual’s life, thus conflating life and life narrative in its quest for the origin of both. Similarly, Salman Rushdie, who was greatly inspired by the *Tin Drum*,⁴ has his narrator-protagonist Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* commence his own story with his grandfather and the latter’s famous nose, a “mighty organ” fit “to start a family on”, and cited as proof that Saleem is truly “my grandfather’s grandson.”⁵

These two fictional autobiographies, which have shaped Western life writing profoundly since their publication, and whose influences on the texts examined in this dissertation will inform the discussion in the chapters to follow, thus place at the beginning of their narrative the notion that one’s own story begins long before oneself, and that an autobiography aspiring to any kind of completeness needs to hark back to (at least) two generations before the actual subject. This same awareness is at the core of the three

³ Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, transl. by Ralph Mannheim (London: David Campbell, 1993), 5. The narrator’s question, “Wie fange ich an?” (Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* [München: DTV, 1993 (1959)], 11), could more literally be translated as “How do I begin?”; the German original thus foregrounds the ambiguity more clearly than the English translation here.

⁴ Cf. Salman Rushdie, “Salman Rushdie on Günter Grass”, *Granta* 15 (Spring 1985), 179-85: 180.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Vintage Books, 2006 [1981]), 4; 9.

contemporary novels that this dissertation investigates: Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), and Marcel Beyer's *Spione* (2000) are told by narrators who place this physical, genetic identity with their grandparents at the centre of their sense of self. At the same time, their relationship with their grandparents is, like Bichsel's, marked by absence or secrecy: they are all on a quest to recover family stories that have been lost, erased or suppressed for various reasons. The early death of ancestors, for example, can result in their story being buried along with them, leaving the descendants confronted with an irretrievable loss of knowledge about the past. Geographical dislocation can produce an uprooting that goes beyond the physical displacement and leads to an interruption in the continuity of an individual's biography, which can then prevent her or his descendants from making sense of it, and often provides the incentive for a journey to the place where they hope to find their roots. The after-effects of traumatic events are often another reason for a story left untold, with the remembering and the rendition of it too painful for the victim to pass on; finally, some stories are actively concealed, parts of personal history are suppressed and obscured out of guilt or shame. In the novels I examine, many of these situations are triggered by external conflicts; the lack of continuity in family stories in the aftermath of war, trauma and dislocation is reflected in the second and third generation narrators' need to recreate and reinvent a narrative which makes sense of their family history. However, the descendants' attempts are prone to be unsuccessful, as "the failure of memory or the habit of deception makes the truth inaccessible."⁶

Diverse though the reasons for the loss of these stories may be, the need for continuity within the family past is central to each of the texts I am examining, and fitting into an ongoing ancestral narrative is crucial to the narrators' quest for establishing their own sense of identity. The (invented) biographies of the grandparents thus always have a strong autobiographical component, and the texts are all situated on the intersection between these two genres. Writing about one's ancestor always informs one's sense of self; the text thus becomes, to a certain extent, "autobiography disguised as biography"⁷ – or vice versa: the life story of one's ancestors is seen as inextricably linked to one's own and is perceived as essential in constituting the narrator's identity. Laura Marcus highlights the "transferential' relationship" that biographers have with their subject, and indeed claims that any biographer is "in part narrating his/her own story, real or fantasized", and that, in turn, "recounting one's own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others."⁸ The need to belong to an ongoing familial narrative and to situate oneself within the framework of an ancestral past is the narrators' incentive to research, recreate and ultimately to re-imagine the past; the desire for

⁶ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity. Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), 7.

⁷ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses. Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994), 102-3.

⁸ Marcus, 90; 273.

biographical reconstruction is coupled with the desire for genealogical continuity – which, in turn, dissolves the clear delimitations of generic categories separating biography and autobiography.

What makes grandparents in particular become such pivotal and yet elusive figures in the (auto)biographies of their grandchildren? There are a number of reasons why the narrators of the three novels place their grandparents centre-stage (albeit more often than not *in absentia*), ranging from psychological, sociological, and historical to spiritual and even mythical, which will be outlined over the following pages, and which shed light on the novels' approaches to life writing, the past, and family continuity. Family psychologist Gay Ochiltree calls the grandparent-grandchild bond “a unique biological, social and spiritual attachment,”⁹ thus specifying the different layers of this complex intergenerational relationship: we share our grandparents' biological building blocks, an awareness that is expressed in the passage from Jacobson and that shapes particularly Eugenides' novel, but also informs Foer's and Beyer's narratives. And although the grandparents are a generation removed, physical and psychological traits often uncannily reappear in the grandchildren, skipping a generation. Therefore, grandparents make us aware – and this is particularly the case precisely when we do not know them, when they are not part of our lives – of the strength of biological inheritance. And yet, this is only one among a wide range of very different ties.

Within the ancestral lineage, it is the generation of the grandparents and their unique role in the family continuity that particularly comes to the fore: they are the generation that connect a number of crucial frameworks that the grandchild negotiates. They present the link between the close-knit core family (the parent and child unit) and the wider concept of extended family and indeed larger communities that we belong to. Our grandparents are part of our present, yet bring the past into our lives, to a much greater extent than our parents; they are our link to history, in the sense that we perceive history as everything that happened before we existed. The fact that they partake in events before our era and yet are present in our lives in turn allows us to have a personal investment in the past. If this important link is missing, there is a gap in our personal relationship with the past; their absence thus deprives the grandchild of the possibility of placing him- or herself in both a familial and a historical continuity – concepts to be explored in more detail later on in this introductory chapter.

The past, however, encompasses more than the concrete social realities that have been shaped by politics and history. The importance of the “spiritual attachment” to a wider concept of ancestry, cited above, is expressed in the three texts in two different ways: the narrators either conflate the personal family story with cultural myths, thus connecting to the founding myths of their collective ancestry; or they elevate their own ancestors to a mythical status, assigning them spiritual significance. Social historian Paul Thompson draws on family systems

⁹ Gay Ochiltree, *Grandparents, Grandchildren, and the Generation In Between* (Camberwell, Victoria: ACER Press, 2006), 10.

theory (which regards families as systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals, none of whom can be understood in isolation from the system) to explain how individual life histories intersect with social structures, cultural myth, religion and historical change. This approach emphasises ‘interlocking’ family relationships across two or more generations and posits generational memory as the repository of belief, myth and ethics.¹⁰

The three novels that are examined in this dissertation foreground this crucial role of the grandparents *ex negativo*. Their physical absence (in Foer and Beyer), or the absence or concealment of their story (in all three novels), leaves a gap in the grandchildren’s lives, and makes the grandparents become the missing link in the evolution of the family story. Just as missing links in the natural world spark evolutionary biologists’ curiosity, the narrators attempt to trace the life of the grandparents that has been withheld from them. The grandparental story is the missing link between the family’s history and the political-historical situation: without the stories of that generation, the personal and the political past cannot be linked to the descendants’ present. A brief summary of the plots of the three main texts will serve to illustrate how they all exemplarily, and in different ways, comment on the issues set out above. Obsessed with the absence of the grandparents’ story and the impact of its loss on the grandchild’s sense of identity, their narrators all research and rewrite this very story. In doing so, they give shape to their own identity through bridging the gaps that the lost story has left and by creating a narrative continuity where the ancestral continuity was ruptured.

Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex*¹¹ recounts a family history that follows the narrator’s genes from the Greek homeland of the grandparents to their new home in the United States. The intermarriage of his sibling grandparents is silenced from the moment they board ship to the new country, but the secret they are trying to hide cannot be altogether repressed: the genes that they pass down unwittingly make their grandchild a hermaphrodite, a sexual hybrid. Raised as a girl, but, at fourteen, discovering that he is genetically male, Callie becomes Cal and traces his own genetic defect back to the incest committed two generations earlier, uncovering the concealed story in his narrative. Recounting and imagining his parents’ and grandparents’ past from multiple points of view, the narrator places himself in a genealogy: his identity is shaped by his genetic make-up, which spans many previous generations. At the same time, however, Cal assumes his role as a negotiator between the sexes in a world shaped by polarities – sexual, political, cultural – that need to be bridged.

In Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*,¹² although also recounted by a third-generation immigrant to America, the quest for the grandparents’ story is motivated by

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Thompson, “Family Myth, Models, Denials in the Shaping of Individual Life Paths”, in Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson (eds), *Between Generations: Family Models, Myths and Memories*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 13-38.

¹¹ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London, New York and Berlin: Bloomsbury, 2002).

¹² Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

very different factors: here, the story is concealed not due to a personal and intimate secret, but as part of the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. The grandfather's death shortly after arriving in the USA and the grandmother's sustained silence about the past leave their grandson, a young Jewish American and the author's namesake, in a void of ancestral history. He thus undertakes an imaginative journey into an unknown past in search of the story of his grandfather, and a physical journey to the geographical location of his grandfather's survival in Ukraine, where he can find neither the places nor memories he is looking for. Instead of the desired story of his grandparents, his search results in a variety of texts: a travelogue of the narrator's quixotic journey through rural Ukraine, an epistolary exchange with Alex, a young Ukrainian who inadvertently discovers his own grandfather's concealed and shameful past, as well as a surreal and imaginative novel re-inventing the destroyed shtetl's history, spanning several generations and creating the narrator's own ancestors in fiction.

Marcel Beyer's narrator in *Spione*¹³ is faced with a similarly fragmented knowledge of his grandparents' past, although their absence has a very different quality from that portrayed in Foer's novel: while his grandmother died prematurely, his grandfather, far from emigrating to a different continent, in fact lives round the corner; they have never met, however, prevented by the grandmother's 'replacement', the grandfather's jealous second wife. The narrator attempts to reconstruct their biography from fragments of information, but even more so from gaps, omissions, and secrets, epitomized by the incomplete family photo album showing only a censored version of the past. The adult narrator recounts his childhood obsession with his grandparents' past, when he and his three cousins imagine their story, based only loosely on the few pieces of evidence they can get hold of, as well as his persisting obsession as an adult with his grandparents' (hi)story. Trying to situate their grandparents and their personal family history in the larger political-historical context of National Socialism and its post-war repercussions in Germany and Europe, the children resort to their own imagination, which soon becomes more convincing to them than any facts they may know. At the same time, the narrator, who remains nameless, is on a quest for his own identity and for his place in the obscure and secretive family history.

The three novels were published at the very beginning of the twenty-first century; set within divergent cultural backgrounds, on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, they all deal with transgenerational loss and reconstruction as a consequence of traumatic events in Europe: persecution, civil wars, and the Holocaust. They share a concern with family histories marked by loss, silence, and often traumatic experiences. Political upheavals disrupt the family continuity in various ways, causing the geographical, cultural and linguistic displacement in the families in Eugenides' and Foer's texts: the grandparents emigrate to the USA from the horrors of the Greek-Turkish war in 1922 and the destruction of the ancestral shtetl in Ukraine in 1942

¹³ Marcel Beyer, *Spione* (Köln: Dumont, 2000); [*Spies*, transl. by Breon Mitchell (Orlando et al: Harcourt, 2005)].

respectively. The grandparents thus provide the link between the new country and the old, which is such a strong element of the immigrant familial sense of identity; for the narrators, the grandparents embody a culture and a language that they are distanced from and have inherited merely in fragments; yet, although both protagonists realise how limited their knowledge of their Greek or Jewish ancestry respectively is, they perceive it as an inalienable aspect of their identity. This geographical, cultural and linguistic displacement (which in Foer's case even instigates a journey 'back' to the ancestral land) contrasts with a psychological disruption in Beyer, expressed by the complete break-down of communication between the grandfather and the core family: in *Spione*, silence, secrecy, and the loss of trust among the family members creates a deep rift, and the grandfather's physical absence is only made more acute by the fact that he could, at any moment, become a presence.

The grandparents, in all three texts, are perceived as necessary but withheld links to the past: in *Eugenides* and Foer, the cultural and geographical links to the ancestral lands are severed, in Foer and Beyer familial continuity and personal communication is ruptured, and in all three novels the grandparents symbolise a lost connection to a time before trauma, before a catastrophe, before guilt. In spite of the differences in their setting, they all thus foreground the repercussions of the traumas of European history on later generations, expressed through the lost and secret grandparental story. The descendants in turn become highly self-conscious researchers and ultimately authors of their own past, sharing a motto that is phrased in Foer: "And if we are to strive for a better future, mustn't we be familiar and reconciled with the past?"¹⁴ This rhetorical question presupposes an inalienable link between past, present and future, and, furthermore, an ability to learn from the past. At the same time, however, this endeavour is questioned, casting doubt on the novels' very premises. The quest of all three narrators at once subscribes to this notion, and simultaneously proves it to be impossible on a number of levels: patterns repeat each other, thus undermining the notion of a straightforward linear and progressive learning development. Even more importantly, the novels show us that we cannot be familiar with the past, as it is concealed and inaccessible – and therefore we cannot learn from it. This fear is expressed most poignantly in Foer's story of the couple who marry and divorce repeatedly: their marriage contract, many times renewed, lists vows for a future that are based on problems of the past; yet the knowledge of what went wrong and the avoidance of earlier mistakes does not insure against future wrongs.¹⁵ Their retrospective resolutions thus illustrate the limits of the usefulness of our knowledge of the past.

This dissertation explores how these gaps in family history and memory influence the way life stories are told by these contemporary third-generation descendants, whose only access to family history, through their ancestors' rather than their own personal memories, are withheld,

¹⁴ Foer, 196; and again 210.

¹⁵ Cf. Foer, 207-9.

and whose identity is still profoundly marked by the personal and political upheavals that happened two generations earlier. Traumatic events produce silences and secrets, and the descendants are challenged by a lack of knowledge, by taboos and silence – in short, gaps in the stories and in the memories of the past. Untold and untellable stories overshadow their family history, which leads to an insecurity about their own identity; the unspoken and unspeakable secrets of the past are lodged in them as “phantoms” of the past, a psychological concept described by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and introduced in more detail below. The destructive effects of silence, secrecy and concealment of guilt are palpable in the loss of trust between family members, foregrounded particularly in Beyer as well as in Alex’s story in Foer, and result in the obsessive attempts of the descendants to fill the gaps: fragmented family stories, in all three texts, produce fragmented selves that attempt to reconstruct themselves through complete(d) narratives.

And yet, the role of secrecy within the family stories could, and should, on the other hand, be regarded as precisely the creative force behind the telling of those stories. Annette Kuhn, in her study *Family Secrets*, emphasises the frequency with which secrets are buried in almost every family, “from the involuntary amnesias of repression to the wilful forgetting of matters it might be less than convenient to recall”, arguing that remembering and forgetting are close cohabitants in our minds: “secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory.” She reflects not on the destructive effects of secrecy but instead on their creative repercussions:

Secrets, perhaps, are a necessary condition of the stories we are prompted by our memory to tell about our lives. Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves. To the extent that memory provides their raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account – whether forgotten or repressed – as by what is actually told. Secrets haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape.¹⁶

Kuhn’s hypothesis is confirmed in all three novels; it is expressed most clearly and categorically in Foer, who states that “the origin of a story is always an absence;”¹⁷ in Eugenides the narrative is spun from the grandparents’ secret, and in Beyer, the absence of the grandmother awakens the grandchildren’s interest in her and sparks their fabrications: “We only noticed her because she was invisible.”¹⁸ The grandparent narratives thus all derive creativity from silences and secrecy.

Although the main focus of my dissertation is on these three recent works, I shall also refer to a range of other relevant texts. Preoccupied as they are with heritage within the narrators’ quests, the novels will be placed in a literary heritage themselves, and I shall draw comparisons with a number of important precursors which have shaped these texts profoundly, whether it be regarding their approach to (auto)biography, the writing of family stories, their

¹⁶ Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets. Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 2.

¹⁷ Foer, 230.

¹⁸ “Wir wurden nur dadurch auf sie aufmerksam, weil sie unsichtbar war.” (Beyer, 69)

treatment of memory and forgetting, or the way they reflect on narrative and identity. Most of these ‘intertexts’ belong to a by-and-large Western cultural background, from classical mythology (Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are the most important source for the novels’ mythical level in this context) through Laurence Sterne’s eighteenth-century *Tristram Shandy*, to twentieth-century seminal works such as Virginia Woolf’s modernist *Orlando*, Günter Grass’ postmodern *Tin Drum*, and Salman Rushdie’s postcolonial *Midnight’s Children*. These texts’ perceptions of self, family and heritage, their narrators’ concern with transgenerational continuities and disruptions, as well as the narrative strategies employed, shed invaluable light on these issues within the discussion of Eugenides’ text in particular, examined in chapter II, but some of these literary predecessors, especially Ovid, have also left their mark on Foer’s novel.

Next to literary ancestors that are evoked throughout the project, I shall also consider a range of ‘siblings’: comparisons will be drawn with other recent texts which also seek to reconstitute a family history, as and when relevant. Chapter III, which focuses on Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, will draw comparisons with Dan Jacobson’s autobiographical *Heshel’s Kingdom*, which recounts a journey to his ancestral Lithuanian home town. His quest for his unknown grandfather’s story and the family past before the Holocaust destroyed Lithuanian Jewish communities is rooted in his awareness of an inalienable and physical connection with his grandfather. His quest is remarkably similar to the one that Foer’s hero sets out on, but he chooses very different aesthetic, stylistic and narrative strategies to relate this journey. Comparing these two texts will give rise to reflections on the divergent literary possibilities of retelling the lost grandfather’s story. In chapter IV, in connection with Beyer’s *Spione*, I will refer to a range of German family novels focusing on the ancestors’ role during National Socialism. Germany’s Third Reich past has affected every family story in a number of ways, raising questions of concealed guilt and silenced crimes, and illuminating a clash between public and private commemoration: while, on a national level, the National Socialist regime is almost universally condemned, family allegiances make the condemnation of personal pasts much more difficult. The complexities of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) thus make the issue of the loss and concealment of grandparents’ stories particularly pertinent for this investigation.

Within these texts, I will examine various responses to the difficulties that the narrators face in the reconstruction of a disrupted family story, or in their negotiation of the intergenerational transmission of memory. This will allow me to comment on the specific framework and its impact on the narrators of family stories in the early twenty-first century, an era in which memory and family history are subject to particular challenges: the continuing impact of traumatic events during World War II and other twentieth-century political conflicts have profoundly shaped the urgency with which the past is recalled, researched, or re-invented; geographical dispersion, the disruption of family continuity, early deaths and the silences of both perpetrators and victims, albeit in profoundly different ways, have led to the concealment

and loss of family stories. The awareness that the grandparent generation will soon physically disappear and take untold stories to their grave has significantly contributed to the renewed interest in that past, which seems so distant and yet could be or should be within living memory, and indeed to the urgency with which grandchildren investigate and reinvent their grandparents' past.

Life writing has recently experienced a boom, and publication of (auto)biographies and memoirs as well as fictional life stories has continued to increase over the last twenty or thirty years.¹⁹ *Middlesex*, *Everything Is Illuminated*, and *Spione*, in a number of ways, reflect these contemporary literary concerns, and can be seen as representative of the cultural reflections of their era, while each offers a unique insight into the issues explored in this thesis. They exemplarily explore timeless questions regarding the relationship between grandchild and grandparents and the importance of the grandparents' story for one's sense of family continuity; at the same time, however, they reflect the very specific historico-political situation which shapes family memory today. The three narrators' self-conscious engagement with their own storytelling, with the loss of memory and stories, and with their narrative construction of identity, both of themselves and of their ancestors, questions the very premises of (auto)biographical writing. Their texts highlight the limits that any life writing is faced with, and, in different ways, they overcome them at the same time as they struggle with them. With their different styles and historical backgrounds, they explore between them a range of relationships between ancestors and descendants, a range of reasons for the loss of stories, and a range of fictional ways of coming to terms with that loss; their texts all contribute to an understanding of the importance of the familial story and illustrate the various effects of the loss of that story as well as the manifold attempts to fill the gaps that shape the narrators' lives.

The profound concern with memory and amnesia in our contemporary culture,²⁰ the growing interest in family heritage and the connections between family, collective and individual memories, is reflected in the growing number of critical texts on these issues, as well as innumerable analyses of literary or other artistic treatments of these themes. It is impossible to refer to all relevant criticism published to date in this field, but by selecting seminal studies on the core issues of the discussion, I hope to provide an understanding of current approaches to the way memory, narrative and identity are interlinked, and show how these particular three contemporary family narratives comment on these close-knit concepts that so crucially shape

¹⁹ For a delineation of this tendency, cf. for example Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2001), 1. Gilmore discusses the growing number of texts marketed as memoirs and autobiographies in recent years. Similarly, Paul John Eakin begins his *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2004) by invoking the numerous autobiographies and biographies that "crowd the shelves of bookstores today, prompting columnists and reviewers to tell us that we live in an age of memoir" (1). The specific situation in Germany, where a host of memoirs tracing their authors' families' involvement with the Third Reich have been published recently, will be discussed in more detail in chapter IV.

²⁰ Cf. eg. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

our lives. Family stories are situated at the intersection of a number of fields of study: historical, political, and sociological considerations shed light on the particular cultural background that shapes intergenerational relationships. Equally influential are the psychological dynamics within the family. Psychological studies will also be invaluable when considering the workings of memory and the function of narrative for our sense of identity.

The three novels I examine provide a range of reasons for the rupture of continuity, and while they share an obsession with the grandparents' story, they each highlight a grandchild's relationship with his grandparents and their story that is ruptured in a different way. The loss of the story can be part of a seemingly intact family structure, where three generations live together, and yet never divulge a fundamental, all-pervasive secret (this is the case in Eugenides' *Middlesex*, as well as in Foer, where both Alex and Jonathan grow up with one grandparent); it can be the consequence of a premature death (such as that of Jonathan's grandfather in Foer, or the grandmother in Beyer), or it can result from a combination of actively concealed guilt and a complete family break-up (as portrayed in Beyer). The challenges that await the grandson-narrators in their retelling of the missing story are thus focused slightly differently: a troubled identity rooted in a grandparental secret foregrounds questions about the construction of the self within an ancestral continuity; an early death makes painfully apparent the absence of memory, as well as the impossibility of regaining lost memories; and the wilful denial of communication and the concealment of a guilty past instigates the reinvention of the repressed story.

The main body of the dissertation therefore comprises three parts, each dealing with one novel, and each focusing on one specific issue that dramatises a particular aspect of the narrators' relationship with their grandparents: Eugenides' *Middlesex*, discussed in chapter II, foregrounds the question of identity through the narrator's struggle to understand his sexual hybridity, drawing on biological inheritance as an explanation for his identity, while at the same time, conscious of his cultural hybridity as a Greek-American, he also inscribes himself in a hybrid cultural and literary ancestry. My analysis will thus trace these various heritages and traditions, showing how modern genetic knowledge as well as ancient mythical traditions create a diverse set of influences on identity, exemplified by Cal, who in his own life lives out his grandparents' sin. Chapter III examines Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* as a novel crucially concerned with memory, its limitations and its loss, the inaccessibility of the past, and the creative stimulus that inherited absence can provide, as a grandson recreates his lost grandfather's story in fiction. Redefined as creative inspiration, the absence of this personal family memory is placed within a larger memory community; and this collective memory provides the framework for the (re)imagination of the personal past. As the logical consequence of this missing grandparent's story comes its re-imagination; yet silence, secrecy and guilt produce not only positive creativity (as in Foer), but can also lead to obsessiveness: Beyer

shows the dangers of the memory gap that in Foer produced strength: *Spione*, at the centre of chapter IV, dramatises the destructive effects of silence and secrecy in a family history marked by guilt and portrays a dissolution of the boundaries between historical fact and imagined reconstruction. It will be placed in the specifically German context of dealing with the National Socialist past two generations on.

This first introductory chapter sets out some of the groundwork that my analysis will draw on later: first of all, I attempt to delineate the hybrid genre in which I am locating the texts, by reflecting on the traditions in which auto/biography belongs and the reader expectations these traditions evoke. Then, the concepts of identity, memory, imagination and their relationship with narrative are placed in a theoretical framework, in order to make clear the different approaches to the texts within each chapter. This may appear to be a slightly artificial division, as the issues are always closely interwoven and there is some overlap between the three core issues that form the basis of the three different chapters; yet this distinction helps clarify the complex and many-layered field explored in this project.

3 Some Generic Considerations

Reading the three novels in the framework of life writing, and examining them as texts that reflect on the narrative strategies of novelists, biographers and autobiographers alike, raises a number of generic questions. The fact that their three narrators are fictional characters that engage in telling both their own, and, interlinked with that, their grandparents' life stories, from a first-person perspective, suggests a generic denomination along the lines of 'fictional (auto)biography'. Fictional life writing as a genre is elusive, refusing to be easily defined or clearly delimited. Placed in a long tradition of self-reflection and the attempt to recreate the life of oneself or others in narrative, it still shares with the novel its liberation from an extra-textual world, to which non-fictional (auto)biography is bound. The novels introduced above are all very clearly not the authors', but rather their narrator-protagonists' (auto)biographies; and although the lives recounted are shaped by historical events, all the characters are fictional. While they thus avoid any direct comparison with 'reality', the questions raised by non-fictional (auto)biographical writing are still central concerns, and theoretical reflections on the genre are relevant: how can a life be transformed into writing, how can a person be represented by a text? The phrase 'life writing' itself implies that a life *can* be written; however, the obvious differences between lives and texts open up questions of whether and how they can be considered the equivalent of each other. Hence, reflections on the development, the conventions, the limits and possibilities of autobiography are helpful in order to understand what these novels attempt and how their narrators see themselves in the tradition of the (auto)biographer.

The genre of autobiography itself is notoriously difficult to grasp and delimit; for Paul John Eakin, it is “the slipperiest of literary genres,”²¹ while James Olney calls it “the least complicated of writing performances”, yet also “the most elusive of literary documents” and “the most rarified and self-conscious.”²² Paul de Man, in what is possibly the most radical theoretical discussion of autobiography, phrases its elusiveness thus: “Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighboring or even incompatible genres [...]”²³ The reasons why these “neighboring” genres (such as historiography, biography, and fiction) encroach upon ‘straightforward’ autobiographies are inherent in their subject matter: no life can be regarded without taking into account its historical background and the subject’s ‘significant others’ – and no life story can do without narrativising the facts and without imaginatively filling the inevitable gaps in knowledge. And indeed, de Man postulates that autobiography is to be regarded not as a genre but as a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts,”²⁴ as any text with a title page and an author is, on some level, autobiographical.

James Olney reminds us of the changes that this genre called *autobiography*, or more precisely the literary criticism it generated, has gone through since it was established in the eighteenth century: while autobiography used to be seen as part of biography, which in turn was regarded as a form of history, there has been a noticeable shift in critical interest from *bios* to *autos*, from *life* as a definable, graspable entity and reflection on historical truth to *self*, and to “how the act of autobiography is at once a discovery, a creation and an imitation of the self.” Olney claims that it is the preoccupation with self-knowledge that makes autobiography so interesting to philosophers, psychologists, theorists and historians of literature alike. However, it is the third element of the Greek compound, *graphie*, the *writing*, that now assumes central importance alongside the preoccupation with the self: “it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors”. The narrative, then, mediates both self and life, and thus situates both in the realm of fiction, which causes several critics (among others, Paul de Man) to consider the end of autobiography.²⁵

In the three novels examined, the narrators’ self-conscious and often metafictional approach to their respective texts and their concern with the narrative and its limits, omissions,

²¹ Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1999), 1-2.

²² James Olney, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Thematic Introduction”, in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 3-27: 3-4.

²³ Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement”, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 67-81: 68.

²⁴ De Man, 70.

²⁵ Olney, 19; 21-2.

distortions and re-interpretations, emphasise that writing about a life must be regarded as a process: Elizabeth Bruss, who describes autobiography as an “act rather than a form,”²⁶ stresses the process of self-narration, and emphasises the dual role of the author as both the source of the subject matter and the source of the structure of the text. Rather than the strict extra-textual referentiality that Philippe Lejeune insists on as indispensable in his study of the autobiographical *pact*,²⁷ she regards information or events related in the text as “asserted to have been, to be, or to have potential for being the case”; the autobiographer “purports to believe in what he asserts.”²⁸ These ‘rules’, which (like the ones listed by Lejeune), apply to non-fictional life writing, have interesting repercussions for the analysis of fictional (auto)biography too, and particularly of texts such as the ones focused on in this project: by self-consciously re-inventing the past, the narrators create a truth relying solely on themselves and their story’s “potential for being”, a truth which is to be found exclusively inside the texts. At the same time, they all cast doubt on the stories they are telling, lending an ambiguity to their belief in their own fabrications that is reflective of the unreliability of memory and of the gaps and silences in their family inheritance. This insight guides my approach to these texts: the novels’ authors themselves and their extratextual biography, as well as their relationship with their characters, will remain outside what is examined, in spite of some striking resemblances between the ‘real’ person of the author and his invented protagonist (most markedly so in Foer, who even lends his own name to his “hero”, while Eugenides’ and Beyer’s narrator-protagonists share their authors’ ages and other characteristics too). The focus of analysis will thus be on the fictional figure of the narrator and the textual strategies he employs to establish a sense of self within the muted and re-animated family story.

Reflecting on these generic questions thus leads to a number of issues and themes at the core of this thesis: the “transformation in how we view the autobiographical subject”²⁹ necessitates an examination of different approaches to constructing the self, and the role of others for the construction of the self. Various issues are at stake: first of all, in a very general and abstract sense, all the texts ask how we conceive of our self, in what ways narrative and identity are related, and what the role of storytelling is for the concept of self. Particular attention will be paid to the importance of family history in this context, and to the effects that disruption, loss or repression of this history have on descendants down to the third generation, as the narrators derive their sense of identity from their (concealed or lost) ancestral past. The subsequent section outlines the importance of memory in (auto)biographical narratives; this is always

²⁶ Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts. The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 19.

²⁷ Cf. Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact”, in *On Autobiography. Theory and History of Literature*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, transl. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1989).

²⁸ Bruss, 10-1.

²⁹ Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century. Remembered Futures* (London and New York: Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), 1.

connected with an awareness of the limits of memory, and the interplay between memory and imagination. Finally, the importance of storytelling – both in the sense of narrative and of fictionalising the past – within life writing will be examined for this process.

4 Concepts of Self: Identity and Narrative

At the centre of any (auto)biographical writing there is, by definition, a ‘subject’ whose life is recounted; yet the concept of how this subject can be defined, and indeed how it can be captured and made accessible to a reader in narrative, is complex and has changed considerably over time. Traditionally, autobiographies seem to have been based on the assumption that the self is a unified, knowable and describable entity; however, there has been a shift in our concept of what constitutes identity, from stability, unity and clarity to a more decentred, fragmented, and multilayered sense of self – a self which crucially depends on storytelling. Identity is not a given, “not discovered, but rather actively constructed by individuals.”³⁰ Jerome Bruner describes “self-making as the product of self-telling”, and indeed fundamentally “a narrative art.”³¹ Any autobiography can be seen as a form of self-invention,³² and the ability to tell about oneself is seen as a prerequisite to constructing selfhood. Storytelling, and life writing in particular, fulfils various significant functions in our life: it imposes structure, coherence and ‘reality’ on what we experience; it shows us how to cope with a breach in the ordinariness of life, and is a medium for coming to terms with the surprises and oddities of the human condition.³³

Mark Freeman, in *Rewriting the Self*, emphasises the meaning-making aspect of narrative, and contrasts life with stories, which have structure and a plot and are endowed with meaning,³⁴ as Toni Morrison puts it, while life is random, fiction is not.³⁵ As we retell our lives, we impose an overarching structuring design on our experiences and our sense of self, wishing to understand our past through autobiographical self-reflection and providing our life with meaning in retrospect, a process articulated by Cal’s uncle in *Middlesex*: “That’s how people live, [...] by telling stories. [...] That’s how we understand who we are, where we come from. Stories are everything.”³⁶ The reflection on one’s state of being, ‘who am I?’, is always

³⁰ Liz James, “This is Me: Autobiography and the Construction of Identities”, Liz Stanley (ed.), *Lives and Works: Auto/biographical Identities. Auto/biography*, 3:1-2 (1994), 71-82: 72.

³¹ Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories. Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 99; 65.

³² Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 182.

³³ Cf. for instance Bruner, 89-90.

³⁴ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self. History, Memory, Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 8.

³⁵ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory”, in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 101-24: 113.

³⁶ Eugenides, 179.

inextricably linked to one's origin – and this in turn implies a search for a trajectory or a process of becoming, thus adding a historical, evolutionary level to identity: 'how have I become what I am?'. The focus of observation is thus shifted from a static self to one undergoing transformation; and the process of becoming is recapitulated by the process of remembering and retelling that transformation. And indeed, autobiography has, from its very beginnings, been concerned with a self that is "constituted, defined, and articulated through its *history*". This personal history is approachable through memory: "the process of self-understanding is itself fundamentally recollective, [...] in the sense of gathering together again those dimensions of selfhood that had heretofore gone unarticulated or had been scattered, dispersed, or lost", and the history of what one tells, via one's memory, assumes the form of a narrative of the past that charts the trajectory of how one's self came to be.³⁷ Here, it already becomes clear how closely intertwined the various aspects of this project are; the issue of memory will receive much more attention below.

This historical level of the self is two-fold: on the one hand, it refers to the personal development of the individual in the course of a life. As no-one exists independently, however, but in relationships both with predecessors and contemporaries, the self is also always the product of a specific group or community, as well as of a specific historical and political time. Georges Gusdorf's model of the self, influential in the 1960s, describes the identity that autobiographies presuppose as emphatically individualistic, featuring a separate and unique selfhood, and a conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life – indeed, he regards such a unique and independent self as the prerequisite for the writing of autobiography, which, in his view, is the domain of Western man. He thus implicitly denies writers from non-Western cultures, or indeed women, a true consciousness of the self, and consequently the ability to produce autobiography in the sense that he defines it.³⁸

Gusdorf's views on the ideal autobiographical subject have been refuted since, most notably by feminist scholars, who identify relationships with others as crucial in the construction of a sense of self. Barbara Kosta, focusing on women's autobiographies, describes a general shift away from "a unitary Cartesian self rooted in bourgeois origins, absolute, rational self-consciousness fully present to itself, timeless and above language" to "a self decentered and fragmented in time [...] intersubjectively constituted, constantly in a state of change, constantly in dialogue with the outer world [...], a subject-in-process."³⁹ For Kosta, the

³⁷ Freeman, 29; 12.

³⁸ Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 28-48: 28-30.

³⁹ Barbara Kosta, *Recasting Autobiography. Women's Counterfictions in Contemporary German Literature and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1994), 17. On the female voice in autobiographical writing, see also Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (eds), *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988); Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers", in Olney, *Autobiography*, 207-34; or Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves. Theory and Practice", in Shari Benstock (ed.), *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988), 34-62.

emphasis is on the process of the constitution of the self, and of the network of relationships in which particularly women and other marginalised subjects find themselves. However, the notion that no individual is self-contained, but exists in a network of others and indeed depends on these others in order to define him- or herself, extends to all life writing. Paul John Eakin argues “that *all* identity is relational,”⁴⁰ and dismisses Gusdorf’s model of the unique individual self as lacking in depth of character. His concept of relational identity brings a new angle to life writing, which is often precisely about another’s story, as well as one’s own, thus bridging the gap between auto- and biography; he includes within the genre of autobiography texts that do not focus on the “individual life” of the self, but rather on another’s story and on the process of eliciting that story. The three main texts discussed within this thesis are all, in Eakin’s words, “not only the autobiography of the self but the biography *and* the autobiography of the other”; indeed, the narrators present “an extended portrait – sometimes tantamount to a biography – of the proximate other.”⁴¹ Here, the proximate other is an absent figure, the lost grandparent; and the generic boundaries between auto- and biography are dissolved in the telling of the joint (auto)biography of the self *and* the grandparents, whose identities merge in the narrative.

The realisation of the relationality as well as the evolutionary development of the self discussed above places the construction of identity in a historical framework that goes beyond the individual life, taking into account the story not only of one’s contemporaries, but also of one’s ancestors; autobiographers almost always seek (self-)knowledge and answers in the family past, placing the roots for identity in their inheritance. Nicola King recognizes “genealogy, the tracing of family trees, [as] a crucial way of establishing a history and finding a point of origin,”⁴² which is at the core of the quest in all three novels. *Middlesex*’s narrator is acutely aware of the fact that his own existence (and, by extension, his sense of identity) depends on a lineage of ancestors, and this is one of the central motivations for him to tell the ancestral story. He interrupts his own autobiographical account in order to place it in a larger context: “But that’s enough about me for now. I have to pick up where explosions interrupted me yesterday. After all, neither Cal nor Calliope could have come into existence without what happened next [in the grandparents’ tale]” (42). This same awareness informs the narrators in both Foer and Beyer: Jonathan, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, is motivated to undertake his journey to Ukraine precisely because of the realisation that without his grandfather’s escape to America, he would not exist. Similarly, in *Spione*, the children, inventing their grandparents’ stories, imagine a version in which the grandfather died as a young soldier and they visit his grave: “But no, this is impossible. I keep having to remind myself that we cannot be standing by our grandfather’s grave – after all, we would never have been born.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Eakin, *How our Lives Become Stories*, 49.

⁴¹ Eakin, *How our Lives Become Stories*, 58; 86.

⁴² King, 7.

⁴³ “Nein, das ist unmöglich. Ich muss mir immer wieder vergegenwärtigen, dass wir gar nicht am Grab eines Großvaters stehen können, schließlich wären wir nie auf die Welt gekommen.” (Beyer, 203)

The knowledge that the family story is the inalienable foundation of the narrators' own existence explains the urgency with which they seek to understand it, and the need to identify with their ancestors. Toni Morrison regards her ancestors as "my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life [...] I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth."⁴⁴ Modern knowledge of genetic inheritance makes the notion of what we share with our ancestors clearer than ever before, and places it on a scientific and objectifiable plane: through the DNA that exists in every single one of our cells, we have in fact inherited genetic building blocks that are undeniably identical with some of those of our ancestors. This knowledge has implications for how we feel today about our individuality. This intergenerational identity, expressed in the passage from Dan Jacobson quoted earlier, is explored further in *Middlesex*, which places the biological components of our sense of self at the core of its reflections on identity. The underlying conviction that the ancestral story is the key to understanding one's own, however, is shared by all narrators. And yet, while they desperately seek their family story, an ambivalence remains in their very act of narrating: they find themselves at the intersection of conflicting needs: the desire to belong to a family community but at the same time the urge to affirm themselves as individuals; the need for continuity and traditions but simultaneously the desire to become the author of these continuities and traditions, and ultimately the origin of their own (hi)story. These tensions, inherent in the fictional (auto)biographical projects the narrators undertake, will be explored in detail in the following chapters.

The importance of the past (and of our memory of that past) for our sense of identity has become clear from the reflections laid out above. While James McGaugh categorically states, "We *are*, after all, our memories,"⁴⁵ Robert Eaglestone sees the concepts of identity and memory as intimately linked, but not synonymous: memory can "change and develop, fail and be reworked. The way in which we remember plays a large role in constructing our identity (personal, social, communal), and in turn our identity shapes in no small way how we remember the past, cope in the present, and hope or expect the future."⁴⁶ Therefore, I now turn to examining more closely the theories of how memory shapes our lives.

⁴⁴ Morrison, 115.

⁴⁵ James McGaugh, *Memory and Emotion. The Making of Lasting Memories* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), 2.

⁴⁶ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 74.

5 The Workings of Memory

Human memory, its role in our lives, and the way it functions, has become increasingly important in the field of psychology, where the term “autobiographical memory” is used to describe the reflection on one’s individual past. Although it is not yet altogether understood “how memories are made”, and neuroscientist Rusiko Bourtchouladze admits that “we know very little” about “how we remember and why we forget,”⁴⁷ I shall summarise different possible explanations and approaches to the phenomenon, and how they relate to the different metaphors we use to describe memory – and, indeed, “metaphor seems inevitable”⁴⁸ when attempting to articulate both memories themselves and the process of remembering.

Two main fundamentally competing and seemingly contradictory models, both developed by Sigmund Freud, have long shaped our way of thinking about memory. The first of these uses the overarching metaphor of archaeology, suggesting that memory of the past exists buried in everyone’s mind, where it is covered up (and where it may be, to extend the metaphor, quite possibly in shards and fragments).⁴⁹ This concept, however, implies that lost memory can be rediscovered by the remembering subject; memory work thus entails careful excavation and interpretation. Similarly, the idea of the “detective work of memory”⁵⁰ highlights the protagonists’ quest to discover hidden memories and a silenced past, with the reader becoming a detective along with the narrator or characters, as s/he attempts to decipher clues and reconstruct events. Annette Kuhn explains such metaphors thus: “Memory work has a great deal in common with forms of inquiry which – like detective work and archaeology, say – involve working backwards – searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence.”⁵¹ Such a “working backwards” is at the core of the narrators’ endeavours in all three novels: the retrospective gaze which aims to shed light on the present is guided by the conviction that the clues that explain our present identity are to be found in the past. At the same time, however, their texts express the impossibility of such excavation, thus drawing on another, seemingly contradictory, concept of memory.

This second model describes memory as a continuous process of revision or ‘retranslation’, a reworking of memory traces in the light of later knowledge and experience. Freud uses the term *Nachträglichkeit*, which highlights the importance of the present for the past as well as the reciprocal influence of past and present. Laura Marcus applies this notion to literary theory and refers to the “retrospective and therefore non-immediate nature of

⁴⁷ Rusiko Bourtchouladze, *Memories Are Made of This. The Biological Building Blocks of Memory* (London: Phoenix, 2002), vii.

⁴⁸ King, 9.

⁴⁹ The usage of the metaphor of archaeology in Freud’s and others’ writings is traced in King, 12-6.

⁵⁰ King, 9.

⁵¹ Kuhn, 4.

autobiographical self-awareness” underlying all autobiographical writing, which is responsible for the split into the ‘narrating’ and ‘narrated I’ in any such text: the narrator looks back on a younger self with hindsight and often with the benefits of a different consciousness.⁵² As Nicola King puts it, the narrator of any autobiography necessarily remembers things in the light of ‘what wasn’t known then’ – memory is always influenced by hindsight and retrospection.⁵³ The same is true for biographers: they too must reinterpret and reconstruct memory, instilling meaning into events of the past that weren’t obvious at the time. Every narrator thus possesses or creates a double layer of memories, which evokes the photographic image of the double exposure: the original image or memory cannot be seen without a later image superimposed on it; every new experience triggers memories, so that “the present exists as an echo of the past, the past is always a shadow behind the present moment.”⁵⁴ It is our ability to remember that thus makes possible (or necessary) the conflation of disparate times – past, present and future. And yet, this natural ‘layeredness’ of memories can create a severance in our sense of self: particularly when traumatic experiences rupture continuity, this split between a knowing self looking back on a not-knowing self makes us painfully aware of a time before the consciousness of traumatic knowledge.⁵⁵

Within this concept the present thus has the power to retroactively alter the past as we remember it,⁵⁶ which leaves space for the idea of the ‘creation’ of memory, or at least re-creation from traces that have been left behind. It also negates the notion of memory as a fixed and fixable entity, which seems a given in many traditional (auto)biographies. Mark Freeman comments on the interconnections between the present and the past, and likens memory to imagined images:

The images one recalls – however pristine, pure, and seemingly self-existent they may appear to be – are inevitably permeated by present consciousness. Memories are thus never to be seen as discrete *things*, but acts: I remember. [...] By being *images*, [memories] are still to be considered *imaginings*, the products of a conscious being bringing to mind what is not present.⁵⁷

Remembering implies a quest for truth, yet psychologists like Christopher Bollas state that reflection about the past does not “confer retrospective truth on the past – indeed, almost the contrary – but creates a new meaning that did not exist before”. While the past itself, “the dumb facts of an existence”, doesn’t change, reviewing this past, and thereby transforming it, allows us to relive it imaginatively. Meaningless in isolation, “dumb and unremovable objects”, the facts of the past only start to make sense once they are placed in a context, a framework,

⁵² Marcus, 5. The split selves inherent in autobiographical writing are discussed in chapter II in more detail.

⁵³ Cf. King, 3.

⁵⁴ King, 142.

⁵⁵ Cf. King, 3.

⁵⁶ Marcus, 5; for a psychological exploration of this concept, see also Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience* (London: Routledge, 1995), 142-4.

⁵⁷ Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self. History, Memory, Narrative* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 89.

and subjected to some form of discussion or analytic interaction.⁵⁸ Memory can thus be regarded as a process of meaning-making – remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present, and the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering.

This is what brings memory into the close vicinity of fiction and storytelling: meaning-making is catalysed through narrative; narrative makes historical facts speak, to remain within the metaphor used by Bollas. The concept of a retroactive alteration of the past suggests that memory is a creative process, and indeed, for Ian Hacking “the metaphor for memory is narrative.”⁵⁹ In storytelling we fix recollections, impose structure on and make sense of our memories of the past, rendering them intelligible. Equally importantly, however, we are creating the basis for a meaningful future by rooting ourselves in a narrative continuity. The absence of knowledge and stories of the past has an impact on the present (uprootedness and ungraspability) as well as the future, as Omer Bartov puts it: “Absence of memory makes life [...] unbearable, for it is lived in an incomprehensible, uncharted void, without hope of a future.”⁶⁰ The narrators in all three novels, confronted with muteness, silence and secrecy, lend the past their voice; their texts can be read as their attempt to create both a past and a future for themselves in narrative to make their present meaningful.

In the light of this, the textualisation of memory is an issue obviously at the core of any autobiographical narrative, and constitutes one of its main challenges. The retrospective changeability, but also the ungraspability and fleetingness of memory stand in stark contrast to the longevity of texts, and the loss and unreliability of memories challenge all narrators of life writing. Setting down one’s memories in writing is not without pitfalls; Annie Dillard points to the dangers of destroying memories by fixing them, emphasizing the fragility of memories in the face of an attempt to “nail them down” with words: “Memory is insubstantial. Things keep replacing it. [...] If you describe a dream you’ll notice that at the end of the verbal description you’ve lost the dream but gained a verbal description.” She claims that the surest way to “both fix and ruin” memories, which she calls “elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling”, is to write them down:

Don’t hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid – eschew – writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. You can’t put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Bollas, 142-4; 111-3.

⁵⁹ Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 250.

⁶⁰ Omer Bartov, “Trauma and Absence”, in Helmut Peitsch, Charles Burdett, Claire Gorrara (eds), *European Memories of the Second World War* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 258-71: 263.

⁶¹ Annie Dillard, “To Fashion a Text”, in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 53-76: 70-1.

From here, it is only a short step to the invention of memory. When narrators like Jonathan in *Everything Is Illuminated*, or the cousins in *Spione*, fabricate their own stories about their grandparents' lives, and come to believe in them, the result (in terms of the function of the family story for the narrator) is very similar to selecting one among many possible versions and establishing it as the 'authoritative' one. Only a small distance separates reconstructing memory from actually creating it, inventing a past – and the distinction between the two can easily dissolve. Jerome Bruner, in *Making Stories*, sees this interplay between memory and imagination as an inevitable but also necessary and productive process:

Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse in the process. Even when we create the possible worlds of fiction, we do not desert the familiar but subjunctivize it into what might have been and what might be. The human mind, however cultivated its memory or refined its recording systems, can never fully and faithfully recapture the past, but neither can it escape from it. Memory and imagination supply and consume each other's wares.⁶²

Toni Morrison combines the metaphors discussed above to describe the collaboration of memory and imagination in the creation of fiction. Referring to her own work, in which she deals with the history of slavery, and which she places on the intersection between (auto)biography and fiction, she writes:

It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image – on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth. [...] memories and recollection won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me.⁶³

This interrelatedness of imagination and memory raises another issue central to the discussion of memory in life writing: that of trust, truthfulness, and authenticity. As James McGaugh puts it, "of all liars, the smoothest and most convincing is memory."⁶⁴ William Zinsser, in *Inventing the Truth*, calls memory "one of the most powerful of writers' tools, [but also] one of the most unreliable."⁶⁵ The ensuing unreliability of memory blurs the boundaries between imagination and fictionality; but it blurs them for the narrator him- or herself, not just the reader, as it makes us all 'victims' of our own minds.

Being faced with lost or concealed memories, and thus an inaccessible past, as the narrators in the three novels all are, has serious implications for the relationship with narrative in itself: it leads to an insecurity about storytelling as such, a consciousness of the limitations and the necessarily imaginative act of life writing. This insecurity is, in all the chosen texts, self-consciously reflected by the narrators, who share an awareness of the difficulties of

⁶² Bruner, 93.

⁶³ Morrison, 111-2.

⁶⁴ McGaugh, 5.

⁶⁵ William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 12.

deciding on one authoritative version of events out of the host of potential truths about the past. The issue of truth in (auto)biography in turn raises a number of moral questions. Paul Eakin, who sees “ethics as the deep subject of autobiographical discourse”, highlights a number of levels on which morality is at play within life writing: the introspection at the core of any autobiographical project makes “life writing a moral inquiry”, foregrounding the ethics of confession. Ethical questions arise both in the relationship between narrator and reader, where credibility is crucial, but also between the narrator and her or his ‘characters’: issues involving the right to privacy can clash with that of freedom of expression; the (auto)biographer risks a betrayal of personal trust.⁶⁶ These ethical concerns shape the three novels both implicitly and explicitly; they are marked by ambiguities and conflicting points of view. The (auto)biographical projects, tracing concealed, guilty or shameful family stories, necessarily encompass multiple voices, changing perspectives and unreliable narrators.

6 The Inheritance of Memory

Memory, at the core of our sense of identity, is not only a personal phenomenon, but an interpersonal one, extending beyond the individual, in keeping with Paul Eakin’s concept of the relational self. This is of crucial importance for this project, which examines memory transcending generations. Two aspects are of particular interest here: firstly, the findings of literary critic Marianne Hirsch and psychologists Nicolas Abrahams and Maria Torok shed light on the intergenerational transmission of memories, particularly of repressed or concealed memories. Secondly, I look to theories of memory as a social and cultural phenomenon, addressing a sociological rather than a psychological aspect of the inheritance of memory, in order to place the personal stories in larger frameworks.

The concept of ‘postmemory’, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch in the late 1990s, describes the perpetuation of collective or cultural traumatic memories through the generations, emphasising the descendants’ “deep personal connection” to ancestral stories. Postmemory is not transmitted as “memory”, but is marked by a gap of knowledge: it “is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection, but through an imaginative investment and creation”, which, in the three novels, finds expression in the grandsons’ re-imagination of their grandparents’ stories. Hirsch is primarily concerned with photographs as the “fragmentary sources and building blocks” of postmemory, but her concept lends itself to storytelling as well: images (like stories) from the past assume a presence in the descendants’ lives while simultaneously underlining that

⁶⁶ Cf. Eakin, *Ethics*, 6; 4-5.

past's "unbridgeable distance."⁶⁷ Originally developed in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, the term is equally relevant to descendants of victims of other traumatic experiences, who might be similarly "exiled from a world that has ceased to exist, that has been violently erased."⁶⁸ Postmemory is "often obsessive and relentless", heightened by the gaps in memory the descendants are confronted with, and Hirsch emphasises the "indirect and fragmentary nature of second-generation memory."⁶⁹ These observations on second-generation descendants of Holocaust survivors, however, are also applicable to the third generation, and the novels by Eugenides, Foer and Beyer show that, even two generations later, neither the sense of loss and absence, nor the sense of identification with one's ancestors, has lost any of its urgency. The grandparents' role as connectors between the immediate family and a larger ancestral past as well as a collective history makes the loss of their stories a loss of personal and collective continuity. All three texts foreground the importance of this role through the (auto)biographical narratives that reinvent this very connection.

The effects of gaps and silences on descendants of sufferers of trauma have been examined by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who use the metaphor of the crypt as the "psychic container of the unspoken secret": such unspoken and unspeakable secrets, whether traumatic, guilty or shameful, buried in family history but silently transmitted to an unwitting descendant, can cause a "transgenerational haunting", and lodge themselves in the descendant as oppressive "phantoms."⁷⁰ Esther Rashkin, who bases her literary studies on the two psychoanalysts' work, describes every descendant as a 'victim' of a concealed family past: "We are all the psychic products of our infinitely regressive family histories."⁷¹ While these theories are principally concerned with the memories of victims of trauma, repressed due to pain, and the repercussions of such traumatic and silenced experiences on subsequent generations, Beyer's and to a lesser extent Foer's texts show that a similar process is at work in the psyche of the grandsons of 'perpetrators', who have repressed their memories due to feelings of guilt. Indeed, Abraham and Torok's studies show that, when such a crypt is passed down, the content of the secret is less important than the fact that a secret exists. Their theories, as those of Hirsch, are thus invaluable in shedding light on the examination of suppressed or lost memories through the generations within this dissertation.

⁶⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 22-3.

⁶⁸ Hirsch, 242-3.

⁶⁹ Hirsch, 22-3.

⁷⁰ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994), 159-60, 3. See also Esther Rashkin, who, in *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1992) examines "the haunting effects of family secrets on characters in narrative" (3), drawing extensively on Abraham and Torok's theories and showing their relevance for literary analysis.

⁷¹ Rashkin, 18. Her perception of the descendant as sufferer from family secrets and silence, based on Abraham and Torok, however also has implications for my analysis of the descendants of 'perpetrators' in Beyer's *Spione*: the passing on of such phantoms has a traumatic effect on the receptors, regardless of their content (see ch. 4).

While Hirsch, Abraham and Torok examine the inter-familial transmission of memories, all three novels discussed here are also aware of their story as part of larger historical contexts. Therefore concepts of collective commemoration also help to contextualise the re-imagination of the grandparents' story. Maurice Halbwachs' seminal study on collective memory shows that, while it is the individual who remembers, the community and social context in fact determine *what* is remembered; our memory relies on the "*cadres sociaux*," i.e. the social frameworks we all live in.⁷² These frameworks span a wide range of social groups on very different scales, from the family to smaller communities or national groups, which all shape us as we participate in the communication within these groups. Following on from Halbwachs' findings, Jan Assmann, in his *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (Cultural Memory), examines the connection between memory, identity and cultural continuity, emphasising the importance of communication for the existence of any commemoration. He sees collective memory as the connective structure of any society, both in terms of a social and a temporal dimension, and emphasises its role for the construction of a collective sense of identity, which consequently enables an individual configuration of the self.⁷³

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how memory (or indeed forgetting) shapes communities over generations, it is useful to consider the evolution of collective memory over time. Assmann draws on anthropologist Jan Vansina's theory of the "floating gap" in order to structure collective memory into three phases: while both a recent phase (encompassing a time span of three to four generations) and a distant phase (which reaches back to the founding memories of a community) are richly commemorated (albeit in different ways), there is a period in between the two phases in which memory is fragmented and hazy, and which shifts with time. Vansina sees this transition phase, which he has named the "floating gap", as a natural process due to the progression of people ageing and dying. Assmann introduces the term 'communicative memory' to describe the most recent period, kept alive through interpersonal, informal, often oral contact and memories shared with contemporaries, dependent on a "local" community⁷⁴ – it is what might be summed up by the phrase 'within living memory'. Kept alive, alongside memory, is also a sense of personal participation and involvement; and indeed, Assmann connects this time span of roughly 80 years to the biblical time span during which descendants are held responsible for their ancestors' guilt, thus implying a personal investment in the moral issues of the community for three generations. While the idea of responsibility for one's grandparents' deeds is not explicitly addressed in any of the novels, this concept is highly relevant here: guilt is frequently the reason for the secrecy

⁷² Cf. Maurice Halbwachs, "The Social Frameworks of Memory", in *On Collective Memory*, transl. by Lewis A. Koser (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), 37-189 [*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925)].

⁷³ Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992), 16.

⁷⁴ Silke Horstkotte, "Transgenerational Mediations of Identity", in Silke Horstkotte and Esther Preen (eds), *The Shock of the Other: Situating Alterities* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 149-60: 151.

and silence of the grandparents. The grandsons' involvement with the concealed story can, to a certain extent, be traced back to an innate feeling of implication in the grandparents' guilt, as the discussion of the individual novels will show.

After a period of uncertainty, which determines what is commemorated and what is forgotten, 'communicative memory' becomes 'cultural memory', encompassing the community's founding myths and those events in history that in the long term create collective identity; it is marked by traditions and rituals, buildings, monuments and texts, thus based on more formal methods of storage.⁷⁵ Because of the formalised techniques of recording, cultural memory is much more stable and can survive many generations and indeed centuries. The floating gap as the transition period between these two forms of memory is therefore a decisive period for the constitution of what is remembered collectively and individually in the long term. In the three novels I am examining, this period is reduced unnaturally: as biographical memory is reliant on social interaction and communication, the texts are all marked by a disruption of the natural communicative passing on of memory. The transition period is eliminated through repression and silence; communication is prevented and dysfunctional, as the grandparents' stories are concealed and silenced. The grandsons are deprived of both the oral transmission of memories and a more formalised substitute that cultural memory could offer, through collective, profoundly disruptive or traumatic experiences; geographical displacement robs the natural transmission of memory of yet another base. All this prevents a healthy memory culture; the descendants, however, attempt to overcome the floating gap and institutionalise the obliterated memory in writing, in the fabrication of their own creation myths.

The theories presented above thus show that the personal and the public spheres cannot be separated, but always exist in an interdependent relationship. They allow us to approach the central problem in the three novels from different sides: they all attempt to make sense of fragmented memories threatened by loss, situated as they are on the interface between communicative and cultural memory. Robert Eaglestone phrases the interconnections between these different spheres thus: "Our personal memories relate to our own larger stories – our 'family frames' as Marianne Hirsch names them. And these in turn relate to wider narratives that structure more public life, the narratives that make up our national and international identities, narratives and behaviours."⁷⁶ The generation of the grandparents plays a pivotal role here: while the parents (within the typical core family) are part of our individual autobiographical memory, intimately interwoven with our personal life story, the grandparents are included in the framework of "communicative memory", but also simultaneously point beyond the personal to larger frameworks: they provide our connection to what Jan Assmann has termed "cultural memory", and thus constitute a link between self and society, between

⁷⁵ Cf. Assmann, 45-50.

⁷⁶ Eaglestone, 76.

present and past, between individual memories and collective or national history. As such, they play a crucial role in establishing our sense of an intergenerational continuity: they allow us to join these disparate spheres, as well as granting us access to an ancestral world. Psychologist James Hillman phrases it thus: “Grandmothers and grandfathers maintain rituals and traditions, possess a hoard of primal stories, teach the young, and nurture the memory of ancestral spirits who guard the community.”⁷⁷ If the bond with the grandparents is missing, grandchildren are deprived of their access to this ancestral community, and of an important spiritual dimension in their quest for their sense of self – an experience shared by all three narrators.

7 Preserving the Past: Archives and Photographs

The desire to hold on to the past, so difficult to retain in memory and to transmit beyond our own present time, makes us develop means of preserving it. Jan Assmann has shown that the passing on of memory through the generations relies on institutionalised forms of commemoration, including the compilation of documents, facts, and data, which we feel will convey a certain truth and representativeness of our time. Future generations then perceive such documents, pictures, archives (archaeological shards) accordingly as tangible traces from the past and attempt to reconstruct a fuller image from them. And yet, the relationship between the past and the archives of the past is inherently problematic. While Michael Sheringham calls it “naïve to see the document as material proof of a past state of affairs, independently of the constructions we put on it”, he concedes that a document still has a “claim to some sort of authority”, as it maintains “a trace of the past.”⁷⁸ Archives are thus highly relevant sources for our research of the past, in spite of being unreliable, selective, full of gaps, omissions and distortions. All three narrators allude, in different ways, to such publicly accessible, objectified memorials in their attempt to trace their familial story within its collective frameworks, while at the same time they express their mistrust of them.

Archives, according to their etymological root of *arche* (beginning, origin, first place), attempt to document a community, an event, a story from their beginnings onwards, to create a record that converts individual memory into publicly accessible documents with the aim of preserving the past.⁷⁹ Here, archives share an aspect with (auto)biographical narrative, and indeed, literary biography is often seen as “a form of archival journey;”⁸⁰ as the autobiographical project is fundamentally connected with the (elusive) family story, the same is

⁷⁷ James Hillman, *The Force of Character* (Sydney: Random House, 1999), 188.

⁷⁸ Michael Sheringham, “Memory and the Archive in Contemporary Life-Writing”, *French Studies*, 59: 1 (2005), 47-53: 51.

⁷⁹ Cf. for example Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, transl. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1995).

⁸⁰ Sheringham, 48.

true for autobiographies. Archives share with life writing their testimonial character, their presumption to stand, as texts, images or objects, for a life past, and are indeed often crucial sources for (auto)biographical literature, placed on the borderline between personal and public memory, and reflecting on the conservation of memories through time. Yet, autobiographies are also counter-archives, rivals for authenticity, in the sense that they attempt to undermine or surpass public archives with their emphasis on the individual and their notion of personal truth, constructing a subjective narrative rather than compiling a collection of objects and materials. The tension between, on the one hand, documents, objects and verifiable ‘facts’ that testify to a life, and, on the other hand, a narrative that aims to render this life in writing, is a (productive) tension at the core of any (auto)biographical project. It becomes more complex still, however, in narratives recounting the life of an unknown other, where the writer is utterly dependent on sources outside him- or herself. Foer in particular dramatises the archival quest in his novel.

There is another tension inherent in archival recording: it arises from our expectation that it may bridge disparate times. Sheringham explains that this “trace of the past [...] conjoins presence and absence: it is a *connecteur* between two modes of thought and two temporal perspectives.”⁸¹ Hence, it is doubled: it is both a visible mark which is graspable in the present, and at the same time the sign of an action or a moment which has long passed and is no longer visible. Sheringham here extends to all documents what Roland Barthes says about the temporal ambiguity of photographs: they conjure two separate ‘present moments’ simultaneously; that of the photographer (the moment the picture is taken) and that of the viewer, who, with the benefit of hindsight, realises the pastness of the moment as well as its future: he or she “reads at the same time *this will be* and *this has been*.”⁸² Archives and photographs alike encompass those two components of the static document and the subsequent act of interpretation, which of course is shaped by the needs of the present: “archival practice involves a hiatus between the materials of the past and the present act of manipulation.”⁸³ The document from the past is cryptic and demands interpretation – the captionless photographs in Beyer and Foer need to be given a frame and a narrative context; and the brief diary entries of Jonathan’s grandfather are embedded in his own imaginative and bold reinterpretations.⁸⁴ The more sparse the actual materials from the past are, the more important the present manipulation becomes: establishing an archive is a manner of striving to re-balance the lack of knowledge from the past.

In order to grasp the elusive ancestral story, the narrators turn to both non-textual media and textual archives, without, however, including representations of pictures or maps, or reproductions of documents: all they have is language. Particularly striking is the focus in all

⁸¹ Sheringham, 51.

⁸² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 96.

⁸³ Sheringham, 53.

⁸⁴ Foer, 170-2.

three novels on the visual, as the sense that defines our perceptions most strongly. Each of the novels describes images (and particularly photographs), objects, monuments, as a visible link to (or proof of) the past, while at the same time they insist on the limitations of visual records to do just that. The sense of seeing complements the narrative, as if the ungraspability of the storytelling needed to be balanced out by perceptible objects – these, however, prove as unreliable as memories.

Photographs and memory exist in an intimate relationship. The role of photography for family continuity has been discussed in detail with much insight by, amongst others, Marianne Hirsch in *Family Frames*. She calls photography “the family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation”, and emphasises its “social functions”⁸⁵ for the descendants. In the novels by both Beyer and Foer, photographs fail to fulfil their traditional function of following the family’s story chronologically and providing that narrative so fundamental to the construction of familial identity; this is a failure that is acutely felt by the grandsons, and that is, so to speak, made visible through the gaps and omissions within the story which are reflected by the absence of images. Hence in their narratives, the absence of photographs (or the lack of captions) shapes the sense of family (dis-)continuity: the missing or censored family album brings about secrecy and imagination rather than self-knowledge and representation.

Roland Barthes has highlighted the ungraspability of memory, which stands in stark contrast to the evidentiary character of photographs: while they purport to make present what is past, what “has been”, they point to the past and the future simultaneously, and yet fail to capture the essence of what they present. In their objectives as well as their failures, they thus mirror (auto)biographical texts. While approaching memory and its elusiveness from different angles, photographs and life writing have similar pitfalls: as Dillard has shown how memoirs replace memory, Barthes says of photography: “not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory [...] but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.”⁸⁶ Barthes here expresses a disillusionment with the ability of photographs to capture a sense of the past, which extends to multiple aspects of the visual. The three novels similarly foreground the limitations of what is visible: fragmented views, partial gazes, restricted looks through holes, lenses, and spotlights frame the point of view. These visual restrictions reflect the missing object of portrayal, the grandparent; but they are also an expression of a general mistrust of the senses and a disillusionment with any form of representation, with any attempt to make the past representable and recordable.

This inability of photographs to record memory is also extended to the unreliability of mental images: when the children in Beyer’s novel collaboratively imagine the missing images from the family album, they picture the grandfather as a romantic young man, their

⁸⁵ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 6-7.

⁸⁶ Barthes, 91.

grandmother as a beautiful opera singer. As grown-ups, the narrator and his cousin compare their memories of these photographs:

I ask Carl whether he remembers a picture in the old family album of our grandfather as a young man, apparently taken during an opera performance: he is sitting in the dark with his opera glasses, scanning the stage. [...] For me, he answered, it no longer matters whether such a photograph ever existed or not. [...] It could only have been taken under the most difficult conditions. Given the poor lighting, it would have been blurred; it would hardly show more than grey smudges. And then, a lens wide enough to capture both the dress circle and the stage, so that the singer appears next to the young man: this commemorative image cannot ever have existed.⁸⁷

Such invented photographs, reflecting the children's desire to picture both their grandparents together, illustrate the unreliability of memory. The importance of creating the grandparents' story, and the power of imagination to fabricate pictures that persist in their fascination and lodge themselves in the children's memories, hold a warning of the dangers that a heritage of secrets and silence encompasses, while simultaneously being a testament to the creative stimulus that gaps and absences produce.

The reflections set out in this first chapter – on the transcendence of generic boundaries, on the redefinition of the construction of the self within a ruptured family continuity, and on the unreliability of memory – combine to formulate a set of questions that I shall proceed to ask of these three grandsons' family (auto)biographies in the following chapters, each foregrounding a different concern at the core of their quest, as I examine each narrator's re-telling of the untold tale of his grandparents.

While the texts discussed are all fictional, they highlight concerns that any (auto)biographical project needs to negotiate: the understanding of any self as relational. This is borne out in the conflation of autobiography with the ancestors' tales in the three novels, and inspires reflections on the concept of the self and on the genre of (auto)biography at the turn of the century, a time confronted with the irreversible loss of the communicative memory embodied by the grandparents' generation, and at the same time overshadowed by the collective remembrance of the traumatic upheavals they lived through. Eugenides', Foer's and Beyer's novels all use narrative strategies that allow their narrators to inscribe both their sense of loss and their grandparents' silence in a fictional family continuity; at the same time, the diversity of these texts proves particularly fruitful for the discussion of contemporary family

⁸⁷ "Ich habe Carl gefragt, ob er sich an ein Bild in dem alten Photoalbum erinnern könne, das unseren Großvater zeigt, als jungen Mann, offenbar während einer Opernaufführung aufgenommen: Er sitzt im Dunkeln mit dem Opernglas und sucht die Bühne ab. [...] Für mich, antwortet er, spiele es doch im Grunde mittlerweile keine Rolle mehr, ob solch ein Photo jemals existiert hat oder nicht. [...] eine derartige Aufnahme [hätte] nur unter schwierigsten Bedingungen entstehen können. Sie wäre bei dem schlechten Licht verwackelt, vermutlich wäre kaum eine Ansammlung von grauen Schlieren festgehalten worden. Und dann ein Objektiv, mit dem sowohl der erste Rang als auch die Bühne zu erfassen ist, damit neben dem jungen Mann die Sängerin erscheint: Dieses Erinnerungsbild kann es nie gegeben haben." (Beyer, 245)

novels and for the current debate on the importance of memory in our society. We live in a time of archival obsessiveness, and yet, the means of digital storage systems paradoxically make us realise more than ever before the limitations of any attempt to preserve the past. In this dissertation I thus also wish to shed light on the threshold between communicative and cultural memories, which has taken centre-stage in recent cultural theories. The simultaneous necessity and impossibility of memory are particularly significant when historical or personal traumas are involved; indeed, trauma and memory studies have recently turned to examining more closely the reverberations of traumatic experiences through the generations. It is to this wider field that I therefore also hope to contribute. We should not forget, however, that these texts are, first of all, novels and that, as such, necessary attention must be paid to tracing their literary models, highlighting their narrative structures, and focusing on their linguistic textures. The discussion of the novels and of the issues they raise will thus be based, principally, on their textual analysis.

II Identity, Transformation, Hybridity: Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*

1 The Biography of a Gene

The bedroom grows still. Inside my mother, a billion sperm swim upstream, males in the lead. They carry not only instructions about eye color, height, nose shape, enzyme production, microphage resistance, but a story, too. Against a black background they swim, a long white silken thread spinning itself out. The thread began on a day two hundred and fifty years ago, when the biology gods, for their own amusement, monkeyed with a gene on a baby's fifth chromosome. That baby passed the mutation on to her son, who passed it on to his two daughters, who passed it on to three of their children (my great-great-greats, etc.), until finally it ended up in the bodies of my grandparents. Hitching a ride, the gene descended a mountain and left a village behind. It got trapped in a burning city and escaped, speaking bad French. Crossing the ocean, it faked a romance, circled a ship's deck, and made love in a lifeboat. It had its braids cut off. It took a train to Detroit and moved into a house on Hurlbut; it consulted dream books and opened an underground speakeasy; it got a job at Temple No. 1 ... and then the gene moved on again, into new bodies ... It joined the Boy Scouts and painted its toenails red; it played 'Begin the Beguine' out the back window; it went off to war and stayed at home, watching newsreels; it took an entrance exam; posed like the movie magazines; received a death sentence and made a deal with St. Christopher; it dated a future priest and broke off an engagement; it was saved by a bosun's chair ... always moving ahead, rushing along, only a few more curves left in the track now, Annapolis and a submarine chaser ... until the biology gods knew this was their time, this was what they'd been waiting for, and as a spoon swung, and a yia yia worried, my destiny fell into place ... On March 20 1954, Chapter Eleven arrived and the biology gods shook their heads, nope, sorry ... But there was still time, everything was in place, the roller coaster was in free fall and there was no stopping it now, my father was seeing visions of little girls and my mother was praying to a Christ Pantocrator she didn't entirely believe in, until finally – right this minute! – on Greek Easter, 1959, it's about to happen. The gene is about to meet its twin.⁸⁸

This passage from Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* offers, in a brief and breathless recapitulation, a summary of both the novel's content and of its underlying philosophical premises. The excerpt tells the story of a gene as it is passed on from generation to generation, culminating in the creation of the narrator-protagonist; this "renegade" gene, a "trickster" who carries an unusual snippet of genetic information, will, coupled with its twin, be responsible for the narrator's sexual ambiguity. Its tale is traced in detail from the moment it appears in the grandparents' bodies, as it is there and then that the narrator's fate is set in motion.

Recounting a gene's life story over many generations raises questions about life writing itself: who is the subject of the (auto)biographical narrative? Can we tell the story of an individual, or is everyone part of, even identical with, an ancient ancestral lineage? Our genes provide the continuity between the generations and symbolise survival beyond the individual (the bodies change, but the genetic information at their core lives on), a continuity which the image of the white silken thread as a metaphor for the life narrative confirms. To what extent, then, is every story we tell about ourselves the story of our bodies, or the story of our

⁸⁸ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London, New York and Berlin: Bloomsbury, 2002), 210-1.

inheritance? What does our (genetic) inheritance consist of? The notion of a story passed down along with physical characteristics opens up the ancient debate of what decides our identity: are we predetermined by our (genetic) heritage or shaped by our environment; do our bodies decide our fate, or is there scope for free will?

The novel, in its simultaneous telling of a gene's, an individual's, and a family's life story, draws on divergent approaches to how we try to explain our fate and identity: modern genetic knowledge is intertwined with ancient mythical beliefs in gods "monkeying" with human beings for their entertainment. And although these are opposing world views in many ways, they both encompass a combination of preordained fate (gods decide our destiny and genes will inevitably be passed on) and randomness (the gene selection is as unpredictable as the gods' moods). The breathless rendition of the family's centuries-long evolution mirrors the biological principle of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, which will receive more attention below, and in its personification of the gene, the novel creates a larger-than-life character, an epic hero surviving perilous journeys.

Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* recounts the story of a quest for sexual identity: brought up as a girl, the first-person narrator Cal discovers, aged fourteen, that he is genetically male, and embarks on a journey in the course of which he sexually redefines her/himself.⁸⁹ His endeavour to establish a new sense of self sends Cal on a quest for his roots: his narrative traces the evolution of his family story over several generations, an evolution which culminates in himself, and takes the reader back to what he perceives to be at the origin of his identity and his unusual condition: the intermarriage of his sibling grandparents, Lefty and Desdemona. He is thus recounting his own personal "story of creation" (198). At the same time *Middlesex* is a family history that follows the narrator's genes from the Greek homeland of the grandparents to their new home in the United States. That the marriage of his grandparents is incestuous remains a secret from the moment they board ship to the new country, but the secret they are trying to hide cannot be repressed forever: the narrator's genetic defect is the consequence of the incest committed two generations earlier. Recounting and imagining his parents' and grandparents' past from multiple points of view, the narrator writes himself into a genealogy: his identity is constituted by his genetic make-up, and his fate is determined by his grandparents' illicit marriage as well as their flight to America.

Personal fate is always shaped by its political, historical and cultural context, and Cal's ancestry has been subject to a long history of division and conflict over many generations. His family, ethnically Greek, originates from Mount Olympus near Bursa, on Turkish territory since Ottoman times. The narrator's grandparents lived there as an oppressed minority for

⁸⁹ A note on the gendered pronoun: as the narrator's quest leads to his self-definition as male, I will generally use the masculine form, unless I am referring explicitly to his earlier female identity or to the ambivalence during the process of transformation.

generations, and lost their parents in the Greek-Turkish wars; it is the violent retreat of the Greek army in 1922 and the fear of the Turkish army taking over that finally sparks their flight. Their journey takes them initially to Smyrna (today's Izmir), a city which was split culturally and politically since the era of the Eastern Roman Empire: originally Greek, it became Turkish during the Ottoman Empire, save for a brief Greek interlude from 1919 to 1922. A vibrant and multicultural city due to its trading connections, it was, in Eugenides' words, "part of no country because it was all countries" (54). The cultural hybridity of Smyrna is a portent for Cal's fate: the point of departure of the grandparents' voyage to the United States via Athens, but also the place in which the siblings, faced with imminent death, promise to marry each other, and thus the place of origin of the incest with all its implications for Cal's life.

The grandparents' new home in Detroit, Michigan, which will become the birth place of their own children and grandchildren, confronts them with a new variant of dividedness: they live the life of an "eternal exile, a visitor for forty years", subject to "assimilationist pressure" (222) and anti-immigrant prejudice alike. The city's developing industrialisation enhances rifts between rich and poor, but also black and white, and Eugenides describes both mass immigration and racial segregation as the "seeds of the city's destruction" (80). The Great Depression makes Desdemona put aside her hatred of all things Turkish and Muslim, and eventually seek a job with the African American Nation of Islam. Racial and religious tensions deepen the divide between black and white continuously and culminate in the race riots of 1967, in the course of which her son Milton, Callie's father, loses his restaurant-bar, and the little girl Callie sees her first street-fights and tanks in what she calls "The Second American Revolution" (248). The race riots are a reaction to the "invisible barriers" of segregation, in a city which "sees everything in black and white" (169). Having been completely destroyed once before (in a fire which reminds Lefty and Desdemona of the conflagration of Smyrna), Detroit, however, chooses the phoenix rising from the ashes as its motto. As a city "made of wheels" (79), Detroit embodies circularity and renewal; the originally hexagonal layout of the city is transformed into a regular gridsystem, but the theme of the cycle is reborn through what it produces: bicycles, cars, and other "spinning things" (81). Cal's home town, like Smyrna, thus bears within it both reverberations of the family's history and portents of his own life story.

These contested affiliations and violent ruptures on the level of family, history, politics and culture, as well as within his own self, enhance in Cal the desire for unity, which is why, as an adult, he finds himself at home in Berlin: "this once-divided city reminds me of myself. My struggle for unification, for *Einheit*. Coming from a city still cut in half by racial hatred, I feel hopeful here in Berlin." (106) Having been a symbol of cemented separation between East and West for 40 years, the city came to represent, after the fall of the wall in 1989, people's ability to overcome division. The protagonist's quest for identity is always also a quest for unity, striving to bridge irreconcilable (and yet inseparable) opposites. The narrator is a figure marked and defined by hybridity on various levels, most strikingly a sexual one: biologically male, but

socially conditioned to be a female throughout his childhood, he is indeed “middlesex” or, to be more precise, ‘inter-gender’. Negotiating seeming contradictions within his/her own body constantly confronts him with the concept of normality and the sense of being divergent from it. And yet, in spite of attempting reconciliation, the two spheres remain separate; it seems impossible to settle in the middle ground. Like Tiresias, whose role s/he is assigned in a school play, the protagonist is “first one thing and then the other” (3), yet never truly both at once – and also never completely one or the other.

Like the décor of Milton’s “Hercules Hotdogs” chain, merging Greek and American features, old and new, a “hodgepodge mix” (202) of disparate elements and hybrid compositions pervades the novel. Duality is a guiding principle in terms of themes, structure and style; the pairs of binary oppositions span the protagonist’s heritage of Greek ancestry and his North American birthplace and home; the ensuing conflicts of values set up the past against the present and traditionalism versus progress, played out both through generational tensions and cultural conflicts. Male and female are only the most obvious opposites in the novel, and the very question of Cal’s gender highlights the conflicts between ancient beliefs (represented by Desdemona’s swinging silver spoon as a means of prophesying the sex of the unborn child) and modern science (newest medical findings about the timing of conception prompt Milton to attempt to determine the baby’s sex). Cal’s decision to live as a male is taken in the context of the debate whether nature or nurture shapes our personality, whether our lives are governed by fate or chance. By focusing on sexuality and the body, *Middlesex* dramatises a duality that seems a given in our culture and in life writing: the split between mind and body. Cal’s narrative, consciously ‘embodying’ his life story, reconsiders this conceptual division, questioning the hierarchies implied in it. Finally, the principle of duality shapes the text on a structural level too: *Middlesex* itself is a hybrid narrative in various respects, comprised of Cal’s own coming-of-age story and the family history, which form two alternating strands of the novel. Told by changing, composite voices – omniscient prenatal and limited postnatal, adult male and teenage female – the novel thus extends the principles of duality and polarity on the one hand, and hybridity as a bridge between binary oppositions on the other, to voice, style, and structure.

This chapter, first of all, places Eugenides’ novel in a diverse literary tradition, identifying ancestors ranging from ancient epics to Western novels, and traces the different insights they have each passed on to the text at hand. From these literary ancestors (some explicitly named, others implicitly referred to) I move on to the novel’s conscious indebtedness to biological explanations of identity and inheritance – explanations which are also drawn on to describe cultural, historical or literary phenomena. These various kinds of heritage influence the fictional (auto)biography’s choice of narrative strategies, examined next: as inheritance always implies both repetition and renewal, the narrative conflates linearity and circularity, and mirrors the

narrator's hybrid self on multiple levels. This leads to an investigation of the ways in which Cal's minotaur existence defies (and redefines) social and biological categories of normality.

2 Literary Ancestry

Ancestral traditions and genealogy are not the only inheritance Cal draws on, and the historical and political background is not his sole cultural influence: he places himself consciously and explicitly in a rich and diverse literary heritage and storytelling traditions of various kinds. His narrative thus claims a hybrid heritage, just like its narrator, a Midwestern-American-Greek-girl-turned-boy. A voracious reader of the classics as a teenager, many of them by Greek authors, Cal desires one day to carry on the tradition of the Greek name on an eminent book's spine (302). Classical texts, in particular Homer's epics of perilous journeys and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with its gender role reversals, perpetual transformations, and blurred boundaries, are invoked repeatedly; like the narrator's genes that originate on Mount Olympus, classical epics and myths have been transported to the US, and Cal encounters them in the forms that they assume in twentieth-century America: through modern rewrites, film and theatre versions. For Cal, the most captivating of these is the Minotaur myth (to be discussed in more detail below): his own story can itself be regarded as a modern version of the ancient story of the monster lost in a labyrinth and rejected by society.

In a more implicit way, *Middlesex* traces the development that epic mythic narratives have gone through over the centuries and the shape they assume in Western novelistic tradition. From the ancient Greek epics, which are the founding myths of a people, the focus shifts to epics of mankind in a wider sense. The name of Cal's father, Milton, recalls the English poet and his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which narrates the quest of man for his place in a world marked by a duality of good and evil. *Middlesex*'s Milton provides a mock-reference to the poet in his antipathy towards the church, which is based on his 8-year-old indignation at the exorbitant price of votive candles. At the same time, however, the underlying opposition between conflicting creation stories – the biblical story of the fall of man as opposed to evolution and genetics – implicitly informs the reflection on how we, as humans, become who we are.

While conscious of its epic heritage, however, *Middlesex* is also highly aware of reflections on identity within Western novelistic and (auto)biographical traditions. Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century *Tristram Shandy* is an important precursor of *Middlesex* in various respects: a parodic and highly digressive attempt to recount a life story, it focuses on an individual development rather than humanity as such; it can be read as a mock epic of the self and an attempt to define the boundaries of a narratable self, the limits and possibilities of relating the life story of an individual. A number of more recent texts that function as implicit precursors for *Middlesex* open up this focus again, exploring the relationship between the self

and the world: Virginia Woolf's modernist *Orlando* reflects on the relation between the history of a nation (modern England) and an individual on the quest for a gendered identity, and contemplates the possibility of the existence of an essential self, independent of the restrictions of sex, age, status and background, and time itself; Orlando, like Eugenides' "renegade gene", survives through the centuries in order to explore the evolution of sexual ambiguity. Like Sterne, Woolf subverts life writing conventions, and, like *Middlesex*, questions the concept of identity construction in the specific context of ambiguous sex and gender affiliations. Eugenides' novel, like Günter Grass' *Tin Drum*, is a reflection of his country's recent political and historical upheavals which is often masked by a lightness of tone; both authors "put an antic disposition on as a way of both disguising and displaying a deep moral seriousness."⁹⁰ Finally, the novel's structural, stylistic, and narrative parallels with Salman Rushdie's postmodern and postcolonial novel *Midnight's Children*, in its compounding of individual lives with the family past as well as national history, give rise to a number of illuminating comparisons. Rushdie intertwines the individual story of Saleem Sinai with the epic of a people, the founding myth of modern India, with his main character functioning as a reflector of politics and history: Saleem, "heavily embroiled in Fate", is "handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country."⁹¹ From the minute he is born, simultaneous with India's independence, he is destined to be, in the prime minister's words, "the mirror of us all"⁹² – just as Cal reflects the dividedness and the hybridity of his world.

Sexual ambiguity, gender questions and the physical aspect of identity are at the core of these different literary ancestors, which all explore the relationship of the self with the world, as well as with the body and sexuality. And it is particularly bodily traumas and unusual anatomies that are examined in their effect on the (autobiographical) sense of self within these texts. Shirley Neuman argues that most autobiographies "almost completely efface the bodies in which the lives they describe were lived,"⁹³ citing as chief reason the Platonic tradition of opposing the mental or spiritual to the corporeal, and identifying the 'self' with the spiritual. *Middlesex*'s Cal, addressing this mind-body split in his own narrative, harks back to a lineage of literary ancestors that place their bodies and the threat to their sexuality centre-stage in their narratives of the self. Tristram Shandy's childhood accident with the sash window leads to a story about everything but this central trauma of castration, and instead focuses on the nose as an extended trope – a substitute for the damaged penis. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's nose, allegedly inherited from his grandfather and a symbol of genealogy throughout the novel, is similarly more prominent than his potency, and the storytelling, which prevents (or precedes) a physical relationship with his listener Padma, is sparked by the accidental discovery of his true

⁹⁰ Colm Tóibín, "Introduction", in Eugenides (unpaginated).

⁹¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage Books, 2006 [1981]), 3.

⁹² Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 112.

⁹³ Shirley Neuman, "Autobiography, Bodies, Manhood", in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds), *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 415-24: 415.

parentage. *Middlesex*'s narrator is similarly forced to reconsider her/his (sexual) identity after an accident leads to the discovery of her/his inherited condition. The bodily traumas and physical inadequacies of all these narrators are responsible for the split in their sense of self, and in turn provide the incentive for the telling of their story: these impotent or infertile individuals thus assume a voice, both that of themselves and their collective, to present themselves as agents of history; while they are unable to procreate physically, they give birth to the narratives of their lives, creating literature.

Finally, fictional Cal's elective affinity with two real predecessors in nineteenth-century Europe also informs his particular premise of sexual ambiguity, placing it in a historical context: Herculine Barbin and Gottlieb Götlich were hermaphrodites, who, like Cal, grew up as girls and discovered their ambiguity at twenty-one and thirty-three years of age respectively; both were re-classified as male. Barbin's autobiography, which was discovered and commented on by Michel Foucault in 1980, first inspires Cal to write his own, finding Barbin's memoirs "unsatisfactory reading" (19). Barbin's and Götlich's fates shed light on issues that Cal, more than a century and a half later, is similarly confronted with: their sexual ambiguity clashes with society's norms and expectations; and while Götlich resorts to exhibiting his unusual body, Barbin ends in despair, committing suicide a few years after her re-definition as male. Defying normality and feeling like freaks, they embody society's 'other', overstepping the limits of clearly defined boundaries of the human being.

Eugenides combines the different narrative approaches to the self outlined above, like Rushdie drawing on a literary "polyglot family tree."⁹⁴ He investigates how the individual is shaped by a genetic, biological, psychological and cultural history, with the Darwinian theory of evolution developed into a twenty-first-century context of genetics. His epic of mankind is set in a world marked by displacement to the extent that no single national myth is possible any more, pointing to the multiplicity of influences that shape everyone's identity and interweaving macro- and micro-stories. Eugenides' novel is an in-between text, defying easy categorization just like its main character and postulating different roles for the narrator: Cal is attempting to find his own place within the family, national, and literary heritage by telling his story, thereby writing a text which is as hybrid as its narrator, freely drawing on multiple influences and heritages, and creatively bridging gaps, conflicts and contraries.

In doing so, he reconsiders the fundamentals of life writing itself. When Calliope, a fourteen-year-old girl in the process of composing her first autobiographical account, hopes that "if I keep writing I might be able to catch the rainbow of consciousness in a jar" (297), she puts into words a concept of life writing that combines two striking metaphors. The image of the rainbow evokes the intangibility of consciousness and the fleetingness of life that life writing attempts to grasp, and which Virginia Woolf has embodied in the image of the granite of fact

⁹⁴ Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands" (1982), in *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 9-21: 21.

and the rainbow of personality.⁹⁵ The jar, on the other hand, picks up on Rushdie's metaphor for life writing in *Midnight's Children*, with Saleem pickling and chutneyfying (preserving and in so doing altering) history and his life story, each of his chapters representing a pickle jar.⁹⁶

Eugenides, however, also creates his own metaphor for life narrative, that of Callie's "two cartridges, one for typing and one for correcting, that so eloquently represented her predicament, poised between the print of genetics and the Wite-Out of surgery." (417) This image, which spans the possibilities and the limits of both life writing and living, splits the writing of the life narrative into a forward movement – typing (i.e. living) – and a backward one, retrospectively altering, correcting, doctoring the results: an achronicity which is generally denied in life but not in writing. The image also, however, encompasses the tension between genetic determination, a prescriptive framework for the individual, and the freedom to change and influence fate, and thus further comments on the debate on fate and chance, nature versus nurture, emphasising the dual and often contradictory forces shaping our life and identity. The print of genetics is here seen as the master text, representing tradition and connection with the past, whereas the Wite-Out allows the writer to take charge of her fate by revising the story – an expression of free will. Writing here stands in opposition to fate, if we perceive the body we are 'dealt' as destiny: surgical interventions rewrite what the DNA has prescribed. The reconstructive surgery that the doctor suggests Cal undergo is the equivalent to the Wite-Out that corrects a faulty genetic script. However, such corrections can only ever be literally superficial, on the exterior of the body; the genetic make-up itself, at the core of every cell, can never truly be altered.

The conflation of myth with the mundane, the inclusion of mythical characters and stories in a novelistic form, and the combination of an epic hero with a self on an autobiographical quest, places *Middlesex* in a tradition discussed by Franco Moretti in his *Modern Epic*, a tradition of modern literature conscious of the "inherited form" of the classical epic. His term "modern epic",⁹⁷ as a literary form that is bound to a distant past through structural and thematic similarities but which also shows numerous discontinuities, can equally be applied to the texts by Sterne, Woolf, Grass, and Rushdie mentioned earlier, which all break up conventional novelistic temporality and chronology. They rewrite both epic and novelistic traditions, often mockingly and with self-awareness, and bridge two divergent and seemingly irreconcilable ways of storytelling – a project which defines *Middlesex* on multiple levels. Over the next pages, I explore in more detail how Eugenides' novel develops and reworks the generic traditions it owes most to, those of the epic and those of (auto)biography.

⁹⁵ Cf. Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", in *Granite and Rainbow. Essays* (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest and HBJ, 1958), 149-55: 155.

⁹⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage Books, 2006 [1981]), 642-4.

⁹⁷ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic. The World System from Goethe to García-Márquez* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 36; 2.

2.1 “Sing Now, O Muse...”

Middlesex inscribes itself in an Ancient Greek epic heritage on a number of levels: a novel of epic length and spanning a wide setting, it recounts a perilous journey from the distant lands of Greece and Turkey to the American Midwest (and then again across the American continent); it follows the epic tradition of being largely told in retrospect, with the action of the novel taking place over a few weeks while the story’s scope covers centuries. *Middlesex* invokes muses, hints at divine intervention, and recounts its hero’s journeys, trials and tribulations. Yet, these devices are used in a mock-epic fashion, emphasising the mundanity of the protagonist’s life rather than its grandeur; elevated and ceremonious style is interspersed with colloquialisms. Salman Rushdie, whose *Midnight’s Children* shares these devices, calls his own text an “anti-epic,”⁹⁸ in its self-conscious breaking of epic rules; this term equally describes *Middlesex*.

The involvement with the epic tradition is particularly pertinent when it comes to the narrator-protagonists of the novels, breaking with the conventions of the epic hero. Although this is true for all the texts mentioned above, a comparison between *Middlesex* and *Midnight’s Children* is particularly fruitful in this regard. Both Cal and Saleem are more often passive victims of circumstances and society rather than proactive (super)humans engaging in battles; they have no national or cosmic importance, and yet both repeatedly allude to their role in world affairs. In spite of both narrators’ exceptional situations – Saleem as official mirror of the country’s fate with superhuman powers, and Cal as a character situated between irreconcilable opposites – they both also, very unepically, act as everymen, reminding the reader of their normality despite their differences. Saleem is a humble worker in a pickle factory; Cal repeatedly points out parallels between his own quest and that of any teenager growing up.

More importantly still, neither Cal or Saleem are static, well-defined and fixed characters in the tradition of epic heroes; instead, they are defined by their transformations. The narrator-protagonist of *Midnight’s Children* is “continuously redefining himself, which is the antithesis of an epic hero”, who is definable and stable: “Saleem, whose whole narration represents the evaluation, reevaluation, and definition of his life, is in the process of becoming,”⁹⁹ and feels himself cracking and breaking up into fragments, trying to hold too much of the story inside him. In *Middlesex*, we find a narrator who is equally involved in the (re)creation of himself: for Cal, the storytelling process is a means of reconciling the disparate and contradictory fragments of which he is made up. The attempt to create a coherent narrative as a means of counteracting the disintegration of the narrator is at the core of both novels.

⁹⁸ Interview with Jean-Pierre Durix, *Kunapipi* 4:2 (1982), 17-26: 20. In the novel itself, the narrator refers to his uncle Hanif, the filmmaker, as writing a “pickle epic” (338), mockingly merging the grand and the mundane – a term and concept which of course applies to the narrator’s own story just as well.

⁹⁹ Michael Reder, “Rewriting History and Identity: The Reinvention of Myth, Epic, and Allegory in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*”, in Keith M. Booker (ed.), *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (G.K. Hall: New York, 1999), 225-249: 231.

By evoking classical epic traditions, Cal places himself in a storytelling tradition on two levels: both as a bard of his family and national heritage, but also as the character Calliope, named after the muse of epic poetry, who inspired Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Like all the nine muses, she is the daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the personification of memory in Greek mythology. Calliope is often represented with a stylus and wax tablets in her hand, thus embodying an engagement in remembering, recording and retelling the past. The Midwestern girl/man Cal(liope) invokes her/his mythical Greek namesake towards the very beginning of her life story, placing the narrative in a mock-epic tradition: "Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus [...] Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That's genetic, too." (4) The parodic stylisations of high epic conventions are a means of humorously drawing on ancient tradition (which is passed down along with biological heritage) and of transposing it into the narrator's present and a more mundane setting, just like the retelling of ancient myths in modern media that are repeatedly referred to in the novel. This cultural transposition into the narrator's (and the reader's) present becomes particularly striking when the muses are invoked to sing about "Greek ladies and their battle against unsightly hair!" (308) In a third invocation, the narrator adopts an epic-heroic epithet:

Sing Muse, how cunning Calliope wrote on that battered Smith Corona! Sing how the typewriter hummed and trembled at her psychiatric revelations! Sing of its two cartridges, one for typing and one for correcting, that so eloquently represented her predicament, poised between the print of genetics and the Wite-Out of surgery. (417)

The poet or the bard plays a central role in ancient epics, and the means of narrating, the "modern" equipment of the typewriter, "that new-fangled but soon to be obsolete machine" (418), becomes a metaphor for the predicament of the protagonist, who is faced with reconstitutive genital surgery which would determine her sexuality as female. The muses are thus invoked three times in the novel, and like their ancient models, they are called upon to help the humble poet express his or her most important and complex issues. The three instances cited above address Cal's central concerns as a storyteller in *Middlesex*: to tell the epic of his family story, complete with its genetic subtext, to negotiate (gender) differences and hybridity in his narrative, and to reflect on the challenges and limits of life writing and the autobiographer's role as a writer. The autobiographical split into a narrating and a narrated "I" thus encompasses the roles of both the epic hero and the bard in one, when Cal recounts Callie's adventures, like Dante in his *Divine Comedy*: "Hers was the duty to live out a mythical life in the actual world, mine to tell about it now." (424)

In terms of narrative structure, voice and register, and the representation of the hero, the novel thus simultaneously draws attention to and consciously breaks with epic traditions. Epics provide a rich source of influences on the level of imagery, mythical stories and figures, the roles of various characters and patterns repeating themselves, as well as stylistic devices. Most

noticeably, it is the notion of the omnipresence of gods influencing human beings' lives on earth, in a sometimes wilful, teasing fashion, such as the "biology gods", who, "for their own amusement, monkeyed with a gene on a baby's fifth chromosome" (210), or Calliope giving in to teenage desire: "I bowed my head to the god of desperate longing" (383). Characters evoke their 'ancestors' in mythical stories: Milton, for instance, appears as a Brylcreemed Orpheus, playing Artie Shaw's "Begin the Beguine" (169-70) on the clarinet. Others even assume godlike features, mainly to surreptitiously gain sexual favours not otherwise granted, and thus once again evoke Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: for instance, Lefty's loneliness as a young father, whose infant son has replaced him in the attention of Desdemona "by a seemingly divine subterfuge, a god taking the form of a piglet in order to suckle at a woman's breast" (130), or Calliope herself, who mentally slips into the body of the boy who seduces the girl she is infatuated with: "I entered him like a god, so that it was me, and not Rex, who kissed her." (374) And finally, the grandparents' sibling marriage recalls Zeus and Hera, equally brother and sister, equally resident on (albeit another) Mount Olympus. *Their* union is regarded as legitimate: but then mortals have never had the same freedoms as the gods.

The narrator him/herself assumes the role of a mythical figure in a crucial scene of self-discovery during an almost out-of-body experience, brought on by drink, drugs and desire: "Ecstasy. From the Greek *Ekstasis*. Meaning not what you think. Meaning not euphoria or sexual climax or even happiness. Meaning, literally, a state of displacement, of being driven out of one's senses. Three thousand years ago in Delphi the Oracle became ecstatic every single working hour." (374) The narrator's identification works on several levels: "The Oracle of Delphi had been a girl about my same age. [...] A teenage virgin, the Oracle told the future, speaking the first metered verse in history. Why do I bring this up? Because Calliope was also a virgin that night (for a little while longer at least). And she, too, had been inhaling hallucinogens" (373). Most importantly, she catches a glimpse of her own future; her hallucinatory experience brings about profound self-knowledge, as one of the mottoes inscribed in the temple at Delphi stipulates: "Know thyself!" – an imperative at the core of any autobiography. "[...] for the first time [I] clearly understood that I wasn't a girl but something in between. I knew this from how natural it had felt to enter Rex Reese's body, *how right it felt*" (375). The next morning she has only vague memories of the "brand-new fact about myself"; "nothing so solid as a fact [...] just an intuition [...] no clarity. It was just an idea that was beginning to fade...", ungraspable like Woolf's rainbow of self-recognition. "When the Oracle awoke after one of her wild, prophesying nights, she probably had no memory of the things she'd said. Whatever truths she'd hit on were secondary to the immediate sensations: the headache, the singed throat. It was the same for Calliope." (377)

2.2 “I was born twice...”: *Middlesex* as Cal’s Confessions

Through these very first words, *Middlesex* inscribes itself in an autobiographical tradition from the beginning, initiating the narrative with the birth of the first-person narrator and autobiographical subject; the doubled birth, however, immediately subverts these conventions. The narrative, recounting Cal’s life story, as well as that of his ancestors, hints at a family tree, albeit one where everyone fulfils multiple roles: “departed great-aunts and -uncles, long-lost grandfathers, unknown fifth cousins, or, in the case of an inbred family like mine, all those things in one.” (4)¹⁰⁰ Cal’s narrative very consciously pursues a central autobiographical goal, that of creating a monument of a life, a lasting testimony beyond the physical being of the subject. The epilogue in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* articulates the poet’s hope of eternal fame through the poem.¹⁰¹ While the poet’s desire to be immortalised through her or his text encompasses any writing, the autobiographical text carries this hope in an even more urgent way, attempting to make immortal not only name and fame, but also the writer’s life story and quintessential self, thus securing eternal fame in an even more essential way. This wish is resonant both in teenaged Callie’s hope to have her own, “another long Greek name” (302), live on forever on the spine of an eminent volume, and in adult Cal’s claim to become “the most famous hermaphrodite in history”, once “this story goes out into the world” (19). Halfway through the book, these aspirations have become somewhat more humble: “I’ve given up any hope of lasting fame or literary perfection. I don’t care if I write a great book any more, but just one which, whatever its flaws, will leave a record of my impossible life.” (302) What remains, as the fundamental incentive to writing one’s life, is the urge to leave behind a lasting trace. Autobiography is indeed often seen as a monument to a life once the body is gone, a lasting substitute for the perishable physical presence – a textual epitaph functioning in a similar way to a gravestone. Of course, Cal’s narrative monument is a hybrid one: it immortalizes not only his own life, not only his family story, but also, as the beginning of the chapter has shown, the story of a personified gene.

Cal’s text, however, functions not only as an extended epitaph for the narrator, his ancestry and his DNA; it also constitutes a substitute for a physical continuation of himself. Modern genetic knowledge teaches us that procreation is a continuation of our existence in a very literal sense: our descendants share the very genes that make us, and thus enable us (i.e. parts of our DNA) to live on. With Cal, a pseudo-hermaphrodite, being unable to procreate and to pass his genes on to his own descendants (including the renegade that shapes his identity so decisively), however, such a continuation is impossible. Thus the book, so conscious of an ancestral line ending with the narrator, is also his textual substitute for a descendant. Like

¹⁰⁰ Or, later: “So, to recap: Sourmelina Zizmo (née Papadiamandopoulos) wasn’t only my first cousin twice removed. She was also my grandmother. My father was his own mother’s (and father’s) nephew. In addition to being my grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty were my great-aunt and -uncle. My parents would be my second cousins once removed and Chapter Eleven would be my third cousin as well as my brother.” (198)

¹⁰¹ Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, transl. by Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1916), XV. 871-9.

Rushdie's Saleem or Grass' Oskar, Cal turns his inability to procreate into textual creation – and more particularly the creation of an embodied text, placing the physical identity centre-stage, telling an embodied story.

Life writing is a way of meaning-making, of understanding one's life and of imposing coherence on a seemingly random sequence of incidents: "That's how people live, Milt, [...] by telling stories. [...] That's how we understand who we are, where we come from. Stories are everything." (179) Thus Milton, Cal's father, learns from his brother-in-law about storytelling as an inalienable and fundamental part of life. And indeed, the novel is pervaded by storytelling, placing narrative at the core of human experience and selfhood in an attempt to make sense of the world and of one's past. Very early on, Cal refers to a narrative that he writes down "before it's too late" (4), so that he may grasp the meaning of his life. His appreciation of books reflects his belief that writing and storytelling help us understand both our lives and the world: "I, even now, persist in believing that these black marks on white paper bear the greatest significance, that if I keep writing I might be able to catch the rainbow of consciousness in a jar. The only trust fund I have is this story." (297)

Telling one's story, however, not only projects into the future; it not only imposes coherence on one's own jumbled and random story: it is also used as a means of explaining one's self to others and campaigning for the listener's or reader's empathy: "Put yourself in my shoes, reader, and ask yourself what conclusion you would have come to about your sex, if you had what I had, if you looked the way I looked. [...] Why should I have thought I was anything other than a girl?" (388) Rendering comprehensible a condition that provokes "shock, horror, withdrawal, rebuff. The usual reactions" (272) in whoever Cal encounters is one of the prime incentives for the narrative: seeking understanding and forgiveness by baring his soul (or, in this case, his body). The notion of confession, a combination of introspection and self-exhibition, has been part of autobiography since St. Augustine's *Confessions*, a text often cited as the forefather of modern life writing.¹⁰² Linda Anderson sees the "inward-turning gaze" inherent in confessions as the basis for any autobiographical reflection and writing, along with the need for a narratee.¹⁰³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's later *Confessions* foreground a different aspect of confession: that of the narrator's task of making himself as transparent to his readers as to himself, endeavouring to display "a portrait in every way true to nature,"¹⁰⁴ and, to quote Francis Hart's definition of confessional literature, "to communicate or express the essential nature, the truth of the self."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961). Cf. e.g. Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 28-48: 28.

¹⁰³ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 19.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, transl. by J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), 17.

¹⁰⁵ Francis Hart, "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography", *New Literary History I* (1970), 485-511: 491.

Cal's narrative harks back to these autobiographical traditions; indeed, Rousseau sits on Callie's parents' shelf as one of the authors in the "Great Books" series (303). The confessional elements in *Middlesex* encompass both self-reflection and self-explanation; storytelling is frequently sparked by the desire to unburden oneself in a "courageous act of liberation" (319). Forty-year-old Cal finally rises to the challenge of uncovering his own bodily secret to Julie, the girl he falls in love with in Berlin, as the only possibility of moving forward: "there is something you should know about me" (498). This introductory phrase might seamlessly lead us back in a loop (an instance of circularity which so frequently shapes his storytelling) to the beginning of the novel, making it a confessional narrative directed at a lover. On another level, his narrative fulfils the promise he made by the deathbed of his grandmother, who, guilt-ridden, reveals to Cal the secret of her incest and wishes for a posthumous confession of her sin, delivered by her grandson: "When I die, you can tell everything. – I will." (528) Just as the consequences of the incest only manifest themselves in the body of her grandson, he is the one who must voice her deferred confession two generations later, thus merging their stories and identities through the inherited bodily secret, and making his narrative an (auto)biographical confessional across two generations: "when I speak, Desdemona speaks, too. She's writing these words now." (38)

These intratextual confessions are all ultimately directed at the extratextual reader, to whom Cal confides his fears and anxieties about his relationships, sharing his shame with the reader rather than with the woman he is involved with. The narrator's consciousness of his implied audience and of his narrative as a readable (and read) text raises the storytelling onto a metanarrative level, and his relationship with the reader highlights another element of confession, the combination of self-exhibition with anonymity: "If this story is written only for myself, then so be it. But it doesn't feel that way. I feel you out there, reader. This is the only kind of intimacy I'm comfortable with. Just the two of us, here in the dark." (319) This anonymous self-revelation is reflected, on a physical level, in Cal's exposing his body in a night club, with his head out of sight, concealing his identity, but baring all the intimate secrets of the body, a scene which will be examined in more detail below. There, as in his text, it is precisely the anonymity, however, that allows him to explore his unusual and ambiguous identity. The reader functions as the narrator's imaginary other, the one character who will listen, and who will help the narrator achieve a sense of this very self. Knowing that an other hears one's story makes it tellable, and renders an "impossible life" (302) possible.

Shirley Neuman draws attention to how confession, particularly within Christian theology, is informed by the "elevation of soul over body" that governs our culture. Confession, she claims, "in its careful eliciting of precise details of the desires of the flesh [...] aim[s] at mastery of that same flesh."¹⁰⁶ Physical sins are identified in order to be overcome mentally; its

¹⁰⁶ Neuman, 415.

goal is thus to (re-)establish power of the mind over the body – and to make the body conform with public and cultural values.¹⁰⁷ Herculine Barbin’s confessions to two theologians, described in her/his memoirs, elicit just such a response: while the first one expresses horror instead of pity (thus confirming her worst fears), the second one, although empathetic, advises her to “withdraw from the world and become a nun; but be very careful not to repeat the confession that you have made to me, for a convent of women would not admit you.”¹⁰⁸ She is thus advised to deny the realities and needs of her body, and to subordinate her body to her mind, relegating her unusual anatomy into the realm of secrecy and shame.

The intimacy and anonymity of the confessional discourse (which Cal recreates in his relationship with an unknown reader) thus serves the preservation of religious or social norms, and the confessional or autobiographical text is placed on the intersection between the private and the public, shifting the intimate into a sphere where it is subject to inspection. And yet, while confession in a religious context functions as “a mechanism of social control, a reaffirmation of social order and the status quo through the acknowledgement of individual deviance”, Rita Felski describes literary confessions as concerned “not with the admission of guilt and the appeal to a higher authority, but rather with the affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity.”¹⁰⁹ While Cal’s bodily secret weighs on his mind, both his mind and body rebel against the norms imposed on them, seeking liberation, which they find in his narrative.

2.3 A “Fiction Created in a Lifeboat”

Reading a text as confession (or as autobiography, for that matter) raises readerly expectations of honesty on the part of the narrator, both towards him/herself and towards the audience, as Rousseau’s promise of transparency proclaims. Eugenides’ text, however, foregrounds the fictionality, the creativity, the distortions, omissions and lies that *also* make up a life narrative. The “Psychological Narrative” which Callie produces for Dr Luce is a consciously manipulated lifestory, an entirely fictionalized autobiography that the scared teenager fabricates with a very specific audience and aim in mind: namely, proving to the doctor her normality and confirming her identity, which at that point is still that of a girl. It is this account which gives us most insight into the writerly self-consciousness, and at the same time teaches us to treat the account we have with a pinch of salt: “That early autobiography didn’t begin: ‘I was born twice’. Flashy, rhetorical openings were something I had to get the hang of. It started simply, with the words ‘My name is Calliope Stephanides. I am fourteen years old. Going on fifteen.’ I began

¹⁰⁷ Neuman, 416.

¹⁰⁸ Herculine Barbin, *Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, ed. by Michel Foucault, transl. by Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 55, 62.

¹⁰⁹ Rita Felski, “On Confession”, in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds), *Women, Autobiography, Theory. A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 87.

with the facts and followed them as long as I could.” (417) The budding writer Calliope realizes that “telling the truth wasn’t nearly as much fun as making things up”, and that “the tiniest bit of truth made credible the greatest lies” (418), thus playfully laying bare her/his own techniques in the text we read, and hinting at her/his own, but by extension any storyteller’s, unreliability.

The fabrication involved in Calliope’s psychological narrative highlights the creative aspect of storytelling – however, storytelling is also creative in another sense of the word. Cal’s own quest for identity and the radical shifts and transformations he/she goes through repeat those of his grandparents, who create a new identity for themselves on the voyage from Turkey to the USA, where they start their new life. In order to achieve this new identity, they resort to storytelling to persuade others, as well as themselves, that they are no longer brother and sister, but husband and wife. And soon, they start to believe in their invented past:

In the spirit of their shipboard con game, they continued to spin out false histories for themselves [...] They took turns in reciting Homeric genealogies, full of falsifications and borrowings from real life [...] Gradually, as the nights passed, these fictional relatives began to crystallize in their minds [...] And here I am now, sketching it all out for you, [...] with a dull pain in my chest, because I realize that genealogies tell you nothing [...] the whole thing a fiction created in the lifeboat where my grandparents made up their lives. (72)

Cal’s family history is thus based on a secret, a lie even. But while this fiction created in a lifeboat ensures his grandparents’ survival, it proves profoundly unsettling for Cal’s sense of identity: because it is fictitious, he deems the genealogy passed down to him worthless and meaningless. Saleem, in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, similarly grows up believing in a false ancestry: as a teenager he finds out that he was secretly swapped at birth. Both narrators struggle on their quest for identity, which is jeopardised by their invented ancestry. Adriana Cavarero reflects on the impact of false genealogy in connection with the story of Oedipus, providing an anti-psychoanalytic reading of the myth. Oedipus is prevented from knowing himself because he lacks the story of his birth and his true ancestry, and thus unwittingly lives under a false identity; the “link between personal identity and birth” is, according to Cavarero, “indubitable,”¹¹⁰ a link which is foregrounded in the two novels. The resolution of the mystery, the uncovering of the (unconfessed) secret, is a crucial step for Cal in finding out who he is – and unlike Oedipus, the truth about his birth doesn’t break him, but allows him to understand and embrace his fate of non-normality, precisely by becoming a storyteller himself.

The novel thus inscribes itself in a range of intellectual traditions, evoking literary ancestors and generic models in implicit and explicit ways. This cultural heritage, however, is complemented by a very different approach to inheritance. *Middlesex*’s focus on the body, and on the self as an embodied being, foregrounds a discipline which approaches the question of heritage and identity from a different angle: Eugenides’ text goes beyond the literary and looks

¹¹⁰ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 11.

to science in its reflection on how identity is formed, and in what ways it is influenced by biological inheritance.

3 Narrative and Evolution

Geneticist Steve Jones, in *The Language of the Genes*, sees our relatively recent knowledge about genetics as an invaluable tool for exploring history: “Genetics is the key to the past. As every gene must have an ancestor, inherited diversity can be used to piece together a picture of history.”¹¹¹ *Middlesex*, which locates our sense of self so firmly within our body, draws on contemporary knowledge of genetic science, but also older and sometimes obsolete theories on the relationship between self and body, memory, heredity and evolution. The narrative thus not only follows the evolution of an individual and her/his quest for identity, but also the evolution of biological concepts of the self through time, making explicit the related concerns that are at the core of both the writing and the science of life, biography and biology – which are traditionally kept as separate as mind and body.

3.1 Nature versus Nurture

What exactly determines human development and individual identity has been subject to controversy in fields ranging from biology to philosophy and theology since Aristotle; opinions have veered between the polar extremes of preformation or epigenesis, nature or nurture as predominant influence on human identity.¹¹² Are we determined by our biology, shaped (even before birth) by our physical inheritance, or is it our upbringing and social environment that make us who we are? The question whether form (an organism) develops gradually from unformed matter (the epigenetic approach), or whether form pre-exists from the very beginning of every individual organism and merely grows in size over time (the preformationist stance), has been tackled in different ways through the centuries. Eugenides refers explicitly to the theory of Preformation, which claims that “all of humankind had existed in miniature since Creation, in either the semen of Adam or the ovary of Eve, each person tucked inside the next like a Russian nesting doll.” (199) For the development of the individual, this means that every feature and every transformation is latent from the beginning. Eugenides’ omniscient pre-natal narrator, who not only knows his own and everybody else’s past, but can also predict future metamorphoses, imagines his brother, equally awaiting his conception, as the “perfect

¹¹¹ Steve Jones, *The Language of the Genes* (London: Flamingo and Harper Collins, 2nd ed. 2000), 3.

¹¹² On the development of these concepts see Jane Maienschein, “Epigenesis and Preformationism”, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2005
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epigenesis> [last accessed 27 June 2009].

homunculus”, a miniature adult who, according to the theory of preformation, is believed to inhabit the germ cell and to become a mature individual merely by increasing in size:

There’s Chapter Eleven, always so pasty, and bald at the age of twenty-three, so that he makes a perfect homunculus. His pronounced cranium indicates his future deftness with mathematics and mechanical things. His unhealthy pallor suggests his coming Crohn’s disease. Right next to him, there’s me, his sometime sister, my face already a conundrum, flashing like a lenticular decal between two images: the dark-eyed, pretty little girl I used to be; and the severe, aquiline-nosed, Roman-coinish person I am today. (199)

Describing the shape of his brother’s skull as an indicator for talents and abilities refers to an era when scientists measured heads to establish correlations between a person’s cranium and his/her characteristics, even sexual preference. Eugenides here hints at the numerous attempts of scientists to understand the complexity of human beings and to draw connections between different developmental stages of the body or between psychological and physical features. At the same time, he draws attention to the way pseudo-science can be abused for political agendas, when the fraudulent Fard, leader of the Nation of Islam’s Temple No 1 in 1930s Detroit, cites craniometrical measurements to prove black superiority (160), in a speech of inverse racism.

Our conceptions of what exactly shapes us as human beings also have implications for what we feel determines our sexual or gender identity. *Middlesex* comments on the changes in these concepts through the protagonist’s transformation: Cal’s own fate reflects the wider social debate. In Callie’s teenage years, opinions veer towards nurture rather than nature as the dominant influence:

in the early 70s [...] everyone wanted to go unisex. The consensus was that personality was primarily determined by the environment, each child a blank slate to be written on. My own medical story was only a reflection of what was happening psychologically to everyone in those years. Women were becoming more like men and men were becoming more like women. For a little while during the 70s it seemed that sexual difference might pass away. But then another thing happened.

It was called evolutionary biology. Under its sway, the sexes were separated again, men into hunters, women into gatherers. Nurture no longer formed us; nature did. Impulses of hominids dating from 20,000 B.C. were still controlling us. (478)

Cal thus presents his story as a commentary on social developments, a textbook example for evolving views on gender identity. This exemplary role has been assigned to Cal by Dr Luce, a popular gender specialist, who sees in Cal an excellent object of research for his theories. In the 1990s, however, public opinion changed back towards a more epigenetical stance:

the child was no longer a blank slate; every newborn had been inscribed by genetics and evolution. My life exists at the center of this debate. I am, in a sense, its solution. [...] but it’s not as simple as that. I don’t fit into any of these theories. [...] I never felt out of place being a girl. I still don’t feel entirely at home among men. Desire made me cross over to the other side, desire and the facticity of my body. In the twentieth century, genetics brought the Ancient Greek notion of fate into our very cells. This new century we’ve just begun has found something different [notably the fact that we have by far fewer genes than thought previously, “woefully inadequate”]. And so a strange new possibility is arising. Compromised, indefinite, sketchy, but not entirely obliterated: free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind. (479)

The influences themselves of course never change, only the stories we choose to tell ourselves about those influences. Eugenides acknowledges the wide range of models we create to explain how our identity is shaped, showing how the ancient discussions of fate versus free will repeat themselves to a certain degree, such as the notion of fate reappearing in the idea that the genes we randomly inherit determine much of our life. While the models of craniometry as well as classical preformation have long been refuted, twentieth-century genetics could be characterised as a modern form of preformationism or predeterminism, emphasising the “genes as programmed to carry the information of heredity.”¹¹³ It is only towards the end of the century that Eugenides sees new discoveries challenge this idea again, swaying towards more interactionist models and suggesting a balance between epigenesis and preformation – two extremes Eugenides’ novel reconciles. When Cal is “thinking E.O. Wilson thoughts” about his grandparents’ sibling marriage (“Was it love or reproduction? Chance or destiny? Crime or nature at work?”, 37), he is alluding to the sociobiologist’s theories, which propose that we are a product of both nature and nurture.¹¹⁴ Dr Luce explains gender identity to Cal’s parents thus: “Gender identity is very complex. It’s not a matter of sheer genetics. Neither is it a matter of purely environmental factors. Genes and environment come together at a critical moment. It’s not di-factorial. It’s tri-factorial.” (464) This approach emphasises gender identity itself as a hybrid complex made up of biology, environment and time, thus adding in a historical dimension. Dr Luce then, however, concludes that “there is no preordained correspondence between genetic and genital structure, or between masculine or feminine behavior and chromosomal status” (435), and instead proclaims Cal’s gender identity to be firmly feminine; he thus assigns environment and upbringing a privileged position in the triad of factors, and advises surgery to make Cal’s body submit to its feminine acculturation. Cal’s genetic disposition, however, unambiguously male, eventually wins out over his female upbringing as well as over the conceptual tendencies of his time. The novel is a constant negotiation of the question of predetermination, genetic or otherwise, of whether our lives are marked by chance or by fate, and of what constitutes our identity and subjectivity. Cal’s ambiguous body finds itself at the cross-section of conflicting allegiances: genetically male and culturally female. The story of the exceptional individual here becomes, in true autobiographical fashion, representative of the conflicts and discourses of its time: the extraordinary becomes exemplary.

Eugenides’ image of a narrator with a pre-natal existence refutes the idea of a “blank slate” at birth; yet the consequences of this are ambiguous. A past that we are inseparably endowed with provides us with a wealth of legend and historical belonging, but also weighs us

¹¹³ See Maienschein.

¹¹⁴ E.O. Wilson’s influential theories were first published in his *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975). To many geneticists, the attempt to segregate exactly what in our lives is due to nature and what to nurture is meaningless and futile, as well as impossible. Steve Jones compares this attempt with the image of a cake: the influences of nature and nurture are so closely intertwined that, rather than slicing the cake in two in order to tell apart their different impacts, the effort resembles an attempt to unbake the cake (cf. Jones, 96).

down, as it does Desdemona, the narrator's grandmother, who feels "still imprisoned by the past" (21). The family of Greek immigrants embrace the American dream, seeing themselves as masters of their own destinies – culminating in Milton and Tessie trying to determine their child's sex, according to new biological findings published in the *Scientific American* (9). But while scientific progress seems to promise more freedom and grant more power to the individual, it is precisely our new-found knowledge of genetic inheritance that, Eugenides claims, deprives us of individual freedom. His narrator calls our genes "a map of ourselves", which "dictates our destiny": "I try to go back in my mind to a time before genetics, before everyone was in the habit of saying about everything, 'It's in the genes.' A time before our present freedom, and so much freer." (37) And indeed, science journalist Matt Ridley, reflecting on the ulterior motives that are often behind arguments leaning towards one or the other influence, points out that, in fact, both approaches, preformation and epigenesis, are rooted in a deterministic world view: in his chapter "Free Will", he argues that neither the focus on genetic inheritance nor the focus on the environmental influences leave room for the free will of the individual.¹¹⁵ Both nature and nurture thus combine to determine our selves, placing us in a complex framework of 'preformative forces' that shape our identity. Eugenides draws on these biological principles to portray a world structured by hybrid influences and repetitive patterns.

3.2 Inheritance and Memory: Repetition of Patterns

"We'll live, we'll die, and that will be the end of it." (87) Thus Desdemona, the narrator's grandmother, tries to brush off her feelings of guilt about the incestuous marriage she has entered. This is of course an illusion proved wrong throughout the novel: the impact of one's life does not at all end with oneself, but is passed on to subsequent generations. On the level of biology, physical family traits are passed on through genes; however, the narrator claims that genes transport not only genetic information: "Parents are supposed to pass down physical traits to their children, but it's my belief that all sorts of other things get passed down, too: motifs, scenarios, even fates." (109) He sees genes as the repository of family history: "They carry not only instructions about eye color, height, nose shape, enzyme production, microphage resistance, but a story, too." (210)

The narrator's insistence that bodily and mental heritage are intertwined and that stories are inherited can be placed within the framework of another biological controversy and calls for a brief excursion into the history of scientific explanations of heredity. Evolutionary theory began to be scientifically debated in the mid-nineteenth century, and was increasingly

¹¹⁵ Cf. Matt Ridley, *Genome. The Autobiography of a Species in 23 Chapters* (London: Forth Estate, 1999), 301-3. Interestingly, he chooses for the title of his book a literary metaphor which is an inversion of the relationship between individual and species, onto-and phylogenesis, discussed below.

popularised across Europe after the publication of Charles Darwin's seminal study *The Origin of Species* in 1859.¹¹⁶ Its findings split biologists in opposing camps, but also proved extremely divisive in its social and religious implications. In its attempt to explain phenomena of genetic change within species of organisms during successive generations, it examines and compares, among other things, development on two very different time scales: that of the individual and that of the species as a whole. Ernst Haeckel, a leading biologist in late nineteenth-century Europe, examined the embryos of various species at different stages of development, and discovered remarkable similarities: he recognized that the embryonic development of each individual organism mirrors the evolutionary development of the species, unfolding along pre-scribed stages. His conclusion, the "biogenetic law", can be expressed in a concise phrase: ontogeny is a (brief and rapid) recapitulation of phylogeny. This principle, demonstrated in his highly popular *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*,¹¹⁷ gives rise to the second central concept of his study: Haeckel saw Darwinian evolutionary theory as able to provide "the key to constructing a unified, monistic view of the cosmos", providing a "cohesive theoretical framework" that spans "all manifestations of life – ranging from the simplest one-celled organism, to the individual human being, to society as a whole."¹¹⁸ Haeckel developed his theory of evolution into a form of monistic philosophy, seeing "one spirit in all things" and "one common fundamental law,"¹¹⁹ elevating his biological principles to a quasi-religion, and ascribing them the ability to explain every aspect of life.¹²⁰

Of particular interest within the context of the issues discussed here is a set of theories that can be subsumed under the term 'memory-heredity theories.'¹²¹ Although today almost forgotten, the ideas of a loosely connected group of nineteenth-century biologists are worth considering, as they attempt to explain (from a biological stance) the very questions at the core of this thesis: how do memory and inheritance work, and how do they shape our selves and our life narratives? The memory-hereditists were struck by a host of parallels between memory (the preservation of an individual's experience) and heredity (the preservation of hereditary characteristics), and attempted to show that these parallels are not coincidental, but share a number of crucial mechanisms, most importantly repetition: frequent repetition of a task can

¹¹⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection: or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle For Life*, ed. by J.W. Burrow (London: Penguin, 1985).

¹¹⁷ Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1866). While Eugenides, in his novel, never explicitly refers to Haeckel's biogenetic law, he mentions it in an interview with Jonathan S. Foer: "Since I was writing about a genetic condition, it also seemed incumbent on me to pass on classical literary forms to what is, after all, a twentyfirst century book. Phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny. The traits of the ancestors show up in us today." In Jonathan Safran Foer, "Jeffrey Eugenides", *Literature*, 81 (Fall 2002).

¹¹⁸ Daniel L. Schacter, *Forgotten Ideas, Neglected Pioneers. Richard Semon and the Story of Memory* (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), 23.

¹¹⁹ Ernst Haeckel, *The Confession of Faith of a Man of Science. Monism as Connecting Religion and Science* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1903), 3.

¹²⁰ For a concise and clear discussion of Haeckel's science and philosophy, see Schacter, 21-30.

¹²¹ These little-known theories are discussed in detail in Schacter's study, cf. 106-35.

transform remembering from a voluntary, conscious act into an involuntary, unconscious and automatic procedure (such as the memorisation of a poem). The embryo's ontogenetic repetition of the species' development is interpreted as a similarly unconscious mnemonic process on a larger temporal scale.¹²² Repetition thus provides the bridge between memory and heredity, which, in the words of one proponent of this theory, "is a specific memory: it is to the species what memory is to the individual."¹²³ Built up over generations by countless repetitions, this unconscious memory of a species allows every embryo to carry out developments without conscious knowledge. Both memory and heredity are reproductive phenomena (in that they reproduce a specific, unconscious knowledge), and by conceptualizing heredity in terms of memory, the researchers established memory as an ancestral link, providing hereditary continuity across phylogenetic time, just as individual memory provides continuity within each personal existence.¹²⁴

In its focus on the body, on genetics and older biological explanations for life, memory, and identity, Eugenides' novel retraces the theories of these scientists, both on the level of the underlying principles of inheritance and of his narrative strategies, as will be shown below. A bodily, unconscious memory determines the individual and influences the characters' behaviour and choices in *Middlesex*. After the death of Cal's grandfather, for instance, his father inadvertently behaves according to Greek tradition, which he, born in the United States, has always attempted to shed: "Unconsciously, Milton was adhering to the Greek custom of not shaving after a death in the family." Milton's beard "express[ed] silently all the things he wouldn't allow himself to say. Its knots and whorls indicated his increasingly tangled thoughts." (234) His body thus expresses something his mind cannot or does not; the body possesses its own consciousness and, more importantly still, it possesses its own, unconscious memory – both of the personal and the ancestral past. The relation (and division) between body and mind (or self) is articulated most explicitly after the description of the married siblings slowly forgetting their "sin", once they settle in the USA:

The new country and its language have helped to push the past a little further behind. The sleeping form next to him is less and less his sister every night and more and more his wife. The statute of limitations ticks itself out, day by day, all memory of the crime being washed away. (But what humans forget, cells remember. The body, that elephant...). (99)

The idea that experiences of the past are stored in a place beyond conscious memory and must be resurrected in language is at the basis of yet another discipline: psychoanalysis has defined the unconscious as the storage place of knowledge of the past. Esther Rashkin, a literary critic who applies psychoanalytical theories to her analysis of narrative, draws on Haeckel's terminology to describe the intergenerational passing down of psychological rather

¹²² Cf. Schacter, 110.

¹²³ Psychologist Théodule Ribot, *Heredity* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1889), 52, in Schacter, 108.

¹²⁴ Cf. Schacter, 106-8.

than micro-biological influences: “We are all the psychic products of our infinitely regressive family histories. We all recapitulate, in our individual, ontogenetic work of being, the phylogeny of our ancestors’ sagas, all the while expanding these sagas with the stuff of our own lives.”¹²⁵ The evolutionary principle of repetition ‘with a difference’ thus applies to mental and psychological, not only to bodily characteristics. Eugenides locates such unconscious memories in the very cells that we are made of (and he could quote in support geneticist Steve Jones, who states that “genes have a memory of their own”¹²⁶). He sees us as profoundly marked by our genetic inheritance, down to the narrative style the narrator employs, transmitted as if in his DNA (“Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That’s genetic, too.”, 4). Eugenides’ distinction between “humans” and “cells”, which is essentially a split between the mind (conscious memory) and the body (its physical particles), emphasises the complexity of human memory and thought, shaped by multiple components. This division between mind and body is also at the core of Virginia Woolf’s metaphor of the granite of facts and the rainbow of personality: the body as the tangible entity provides the coordinates, the facts, so to speak, while the mind resists definition, remaining intangible. In Cal’s story, his body clearly insists on its maleness, while his mind, trained to be female, is submerged in fragmentation and ambiguity, yet ultimately follows the body’s premises, without however being completely eradicated. At the same time, while our memories and our sense of self are thus shaped by our bodies, our bodies in turn are shaped by history, our personal lineage or genetic inheritance, as it were: by “Time itself, the unstopability of it, the way we are chained to our bodies, which are chained to Time.” (294) It is only within narrative that these chains can be broken, chronology can be reversed, and selves can be (re)written.

The mind-body duality engrained in our culture is one manifestation of a principle that, as the novel shows, governs all aspects of life, from cellular to individual and from cultural to global: Eugenides constantly makes us aware of splits, of divisions, of duality as a guiding principle of how we see life and the world. As important as the principle of duality, however, is the principle of repetition itself. The repetition of patterns and laws that a monistic view of the cosmos encompasses is a concept that implicitly underlies Eugenides’ novel and helps shed light on how he constructs his fictional world. The biological principle is based on time: the evolution of the species over thousands and thousands of years is repeated in the development of the embryo within months; in Eugenides’ novel, the repetition of patterns happens within different time frames, but also on different scales, within different geographical and political contexts. Personal fates repeat historical developments, and political situations are reflected in family crises; an individual’s life is shown as an intricate part of a more public one; the world is interconnected on manifold layers, with details being representative of the whole; the individual

¹²⁵ Esther Rashkin, *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 18. Her approach will inform the discussion of aspects of both Foer and Beyer in chapters III and IV respectively.

¹²⁶ Jones, 36.

pieces of the mosaic tell their own story while reflecting the grand narrative. Cal's parents' courting, for instance, coincides with the Second World War, and his mother Tessie keeps Milton "at a low burn for the duration of a global cataclysm [...] She didn't surrender until after Japan had." (8) When Cyprus is split in half, "like Berlin, like Korea, like all the other places that were no longer one thing or the other" (363), a political situation is repeating itself at various historical moments, but is also reflected in individual lives – here as a poignant metaphor for the protagonist finding himself split into two seemingly irreconcilable halves.

The principle of a global repetition of patterns similarly shapes the life stories told in *Middlesex*'s predecessors: Rushdie (whose Saleem is "handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country"), has his narrator-protagonist strive for his individuality, only to realize that his fate is not isolated, but bound up with others – individuals as well as collectives. Woolf's Orlando undergoes personal metamorphoses from adolescence to adulthood which are as radical as the public changes and political transformation over the centuries. Eugenides directs our gaze to the individual not only as the smallest unit within a larger political-historical framework, but also as a physical entity made up of tiny particles; Cal's fate, like that of all of us, is determined by his own genes, passed down through generations of his ancestors. Similar to the randomness of genetic inheritance and the particular (re)combination of genes, the reflection of political and historical developments follows freer and less predictable rules, drawing on distinct traditions: Greek and American, ancient and modern, mythical and scientific, and of course male and female. This random (or at least divergent) combination of heritages results in and reflects the (cultural and sexual) hybridity of Cal's own existence. What the three narrators share is an awareness that their individuality, and hence everyone's individuality, is bound up with multiple influences and linked to various frameworks on different scales, from the grand global and historical situation to the minute particles of genetic information. The emphasis *Middlesex* places on genetics underlines the notion that at the core of every individual lies inheritance: we *are* our ancestors, albeit jumbled up and newly configured, and history, like genetic inheritance, repeats itself with continuous variation according to an unconscious pattern.

3.3 Linearity, Circularity, Repetitions and Inversions

Repetitive patterns are an important structural principle for the narrative – even when they diverge from their model. History, like evolution, does not repeat itself doggedly, but with variations, which can lead to digressions or even an inversion of the pattern. Cal, as an adult, follows family traditions with regards to Turkish-Greek geographical proximity, yet overcomes the cultural animosities that have defined his grandparents' lives: "Once again, in Berlin, a Stephanides lives among the Turks. [...] Despite family history, I feel drawn to Turkey. [Moving there] would bring me full circle." (440) The narrator of *Middlesex* ("a girl who talked

enough for two, who babbled so fluently that her father the ex-clarinet man liked to joke she knew circular breathing”, 262) recounts his family story with an awareness of its cyclicity and repetitions, questioning traditional, strictly chronological and coherent accounts of lives. In spite of the implications of the word ‘lineage’, and in spite of the “direct line” he feels stretching from his younger female self to his older male one (424), inheritance, according to Eugenides, is not linear, nor is it a one-way street. Living means connecting with one’s past, and, in a reversal of chronology, growing into one’s ancestors in a process of transformation; it thus defies conventional perceptions of time:

living sends a person not into the future but back into the past, to childhood and before birth, finally, to commune with the dead. You get older, you puff on the stairs, you enter the body of your father. From there it’s only a quick jump to your grandparents, and then before you know it, you’re time-traveling. In this life we grow backwards. (425)

This reversal of chronology has implications for one’s sense of identity, as well as for one’s place in the family: it describes a movement into different selves, defined by one’s roles as well as one’s body, transforming due to the ageing process. The sense that the chronology of family history is not strictly and simply linear similarly informs Foer’s and Beyer’s texts: in a reversal of heritage, the statue of the ancestor in Foer, restored repeatedly using the descendants as models, slowly takes on the features of these descendants in a process of “reverse heredity. (So when my grandfather thought he saw that he was growing into his great-great-great-grandfather, what he really saw was that his great-great-great-grandfather was growing to look like him. His revelation was just how much like himself he looked).”¹²⁷ The features of the grandparents in *Spione* (who are, of course, figments of the children’s imagination) are modeled on the children’s own features too, so that the grandparents in fact ‘inherit’ their own grandchildren’s traits (hands, eyes, talents such as musicality, character traits like secrecy).¹²⁸ Here, the narrative about heritage *creates* this very heritage, just as the narrative about the self creates the self, showing remembering as a creative narrative process.

Reversing chronology is a Stephanides family tradition: the grandparents’ honeymoon, for instance, “proceeded in reverse. Instead of getting to know each other, becoming familiar with likes and dislikes, ticklish spots, pet peeves, Desdemona and Lefty tried to defamiliarize themselves” (71-2), in order to forget their growing up together. Lefty, in old age, after several strokes, involuntarily repeats this process of unlearning: he mentally regresses, his mind travelling back through the various stages of his life, transforming into his younger self (rather than his ancestors, as described above), and thus forgetting and undoing his experiences acquired in the course of his life. When his mind thus fades and “the hard disk of his memory slowly began to be erased” (267), he relives his life backwards, forgetting the most recent things first. His moving back into ever-earlier permutations of the self shows identity to be a

¹²⁷ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 140.

¹²⁸ Cf. Marcel Beyer, *Spione* (Köln: Dumont, 2000) and its discussion in chapter IV.

series of constantly transforming selves; Cal's own particular transformation then merely happens on a larger, more radical scale than usual.

As family history, patterns and motifs are passed on through the genes, the lives of the different family members mirror each other, to reflect an intergenerational continuity and identification. The link between grandparents and grandchild is particularly emphasised: "Traits often skip a generation. I look much more typically Greek than my mother does." (174)¹²⁹ The connection goes far beyond looks however: "From the beginning there existed a strange balance between my grandfather and me. As I cried my first cry, Lefty was silenced; and as he gradually lost the ability to see, to taste, to hear, to think or even remember, I began to see, taste, and remember everything, even stuff I hadn't seen, eaten, or done." (269) Like two people on a see-saw they mirror each other, on opposite ends yet inextricably linked. And through this link, their identities merge across the generations; the transformation into one's ancestors calls into question the boundaries of the self and highlights the difficulty of clear self-definition. And indeed, when Cal is telling his story, he is simultaneously telling that of his grandparents: he is living out what they set in motion. Cal sees Desdemona as a co-narrator of his story: "when I speak, Desdemona speaks, too. She's writing these words now." (38) Their narratives become one, just as we will see the grandfather stories of Jonathan and Alex in Foer's novel merge: they are "working on the same story;"¹³⁰ their multi-authored narratives transcend the boundaries of the individual self.

The conventional chronological relationship between past, present and future is thus disrupted in this novel, which is so deeply concerned with history and heritage. Structurally, the novel abounds with interruptions, repetitions and chronological breaks, both on the level of the narrative and of the characters' development; there are retrospects, prophecies and endings that are new beginnings. When the grandparents move to the top floor of the house on Middlesex, they are reminded of their childhood on Mount Olympus, on top of the world, so that the grandparents' migration mirrors the progression of the grandson's story: "Up in the attic, Desdemona and Lefty came back to where they started. – As does my story." (209) The novel adopts as its overarching structure the traditional Greek wedding rites and marriage values: "No patriarchal linearity here. We Greeks get married in circles, to impress upon ourselves the essential matrimonial facts: that to be happy you have to find variety in repetition; that to go forward you have to come back where you began." (68) The co-existence of change and continuity is expressed through a non-linear narrative modelled on the matrimonial virtues of repetition, circularity, and bearing in mind one's beginnings. The narrative, looping back in recapitulation, looking forward in anticipation, and foregrounding intergenerational identity,

¹²⁹ Gregor Mendel's laws on inheritance and intergenerational transmission skipping a generation also explain how the recessive faulty gene which Cal inherits twice over can manifest itself in him rather than in his parents, where it lies dormant. See Jones for a concise summary of Mendel's laws (39-46).

¹³⁰ Foer, 214.

harks back to its earliest novelistic predecessor, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Eugenides similarly mocks conventional forms of life writing, delaying the story of his protagonist's birth, rupturing the progression of his story with numerous digressions, and illustrating "the impossibility of reconciling life and narrative form into linearity."¹³¹

Such digressions, ruptures and reversals of chronology show that the past is not simply and unalterably past, but constantly re-interpreted by the present. Storytelling (like living) means reclaiming (or rewriting) the past: one's past is simultaneously one's future, with the narrator as the mirror between the two, connecting past and future in the narrative present. *Middlesex* here departs from traditional autobiographies, which tend to describe a linear progressive teleological development. Georges Gusdorf opposes the modern Western approach to selfhood and individuality to societies "that subscribe to mythic structures", have a cyclical concept of time, and are governed by "the principle of repetition", thus positing "Western man" as the ideal subject of autobiography.¹³² *Middlesex*'s narrator is in breach of virtually all of Gusdorf's criteria for the ideal autobiographical subject: he places himself in the tradition of Greek mythology, embraces a cyclical concept of time, and continually draws attention to the repetitions that mark his story – and he is indeed only partly male. He also refuses to comply with Gusdorf's stipulation of a unified and secure self as a necessary prerequisite for the subject of an (auto)biography, but instead places at the centre of his story his struggles to establish his ever-evolving identity. His narrative articulates divergent, contradictory and yet complementary ways of storytelling, opposing linearity with circularity, feminine with masculine writing, and negotiating the different heritages of myth and realistic fiction.

3.4 Silk Threads

The novel's central metaphor for narrative encompasses all these ambiguities. Cal's family is one of silk-spinners; and spinning yarn and telling stories have gone hand in hand from their etymological roots onwards. J. Hillis Miller, in his reflections on the relationship between thread and narrative, shows the multiple metaphorical links between the two as deeply embedded in our terminology for storytelling and writing, making the line the most influential metaphor for narrative: to write derives from Old English *writan*, meaning to scratch, incise, engrave; writing, then, "is the scratching of a line" (originally in a wax tablet); text comes from

¹³¹ Keith Wilson, "Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility", in D.M. Fletcher (ed.), *Reading Rushdie. Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 55-68: 65. Wilson's comment on Rushdie's novel is equally relevant to *Middlesex*. Sterne's influence on the disruptive and digressive narratives of Woolf's, Grass' and Rushdie's novels cited earlier as predecessors of Eugenides is well documented. Cf. for instance Damian Grant, *Salman Rushdie* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1999), 39; Dubravka Juraga, "'The Mirror of Us All': *Midnight's Children* and the Twentieth-Century Bildungsroman", in Keith M. Booker (ed.), *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999), 168-87: 172; or Rachel Bowlby, "Orlando: An Introduction", in *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997), 149-72: 160.

¹³² Gusdorf, 28-30.

texere, to weave. These etymological connections are borne out in a host of expressions engrained in our language.¹³³ *Middlesex*, which itself interweaves multiple storylines, draws attention to these connections, for instance when Desdemona and Lefty are “spinning the cocoon of their life together” (68).

The metaphor of the silk thread for the narrative implies linearity – as does the notion of genetic inheritance and the ancestral lineage, or indeed that of the sentence, which Cal uses as a metaphor for his renegade gene’s evolution: “In any genetic history, I’m the final clause in a periodic sentence, and that sentence begins a long time ago, and in another language, and you have to read it from the beginning to get to the end, which is my arrival.” (20) The image of the ancestral story that unravels like a continuous thread of silk, providing a protective cocoon around the spinner-storyteller, pervades Eugenides’ novel. And yet, linearity is undone in the narrative maze that envelops the protagonist, where the straight line is doubled up on itself, subjected to “returnings, knottings, crinklings to and fro, suspensions, interruptions”. The complexity of such a line allows repetition: “the line contains the possibility of turning back on itself. In this turning it subverts its own linearity and becomes repetition. Without the line there is no repetition, but repetition is what disturbs, suspends or destroys the line’s linearity”. Hence, the compulsion to repeat is intrinsic in the pattern of any storytelling process, and the asymmetrical, “slightly askew” repetitions in Cal’s ancestral story are summed up by Hillis Miller: “Thread and labyrinth, thread intricately crinkled to and fro as the retracing of the labyrinth that defeats the labyrinth but makes another intricate web at the same time – pattern is here superimposed on pattern, like the two homologous stories themselves.”¹³⁴

While Theseus, in the ancient myth, receives guidance in the form of Ariadne’s thread, Cal is a descendant of the monster rather than of the traditional hero (and I will return to this in more depth later). Lost in the maze like Theseus, however, he needs to depend on another line – his storyline – to find his way out of his confusion. It is his silk-spinning grandmother, who, on her deathbed, finally provides him with the extensive explanation for his sexual ambiguity, and thus enables him to spin his story. The thread that traces a narrative labyrinth is an apt metaphor for Cal’s ancestral repetitions of patterns as well as his own labyrinthine struggles for identity. It also sheds light on the narrative mazes in Beyer and Foer, whose protagonists similarly are at the origin of the yarn of their respective family stories, marked by ruptured continuity and broken linearity: they too create a circular, self-referential fabric with their story line, beginning and ending with themselves. The implications of such an authorial self-creation, in connection

¹³³ Cf. J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne’s Thread. Story Lines* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992), 6-10, 17-21. And indeed, narrative and string are not only connected on a metaphorical level, but also a historical one: the *quipus*, for instance, the “talking knots” of the Incas, are an early form of writing, a kind of pre-literate texts (cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992), 22): information is encoded by knots in coloured spun and plied threads. This principle is taken up by Grass’ *Tin Drum*: here too the nurse’s complex thread constructions reflect the narrative of protagonist Oskar Matzerath.

¹³⁴ Hillis Miller, 19; 12-3.

with the metaphor of the line, will be discussed in depth in chapter III, as Foer's novel similarly explores the implications of the metaphor of labyrinths and threads for his protagonist's narrative.

Linearity implies not only consecutive chronology, but also logical coherence; Eugenides' silk thread, however, questions this notion too. In the chapter called "The Silk Road", the narrator retells the Chinese legend of the chance discovery of silk – a silk worm cocoon falls into the teacup of a princess and starts to unravel in a seemingly never-ending thread – and relates the implications of the legend to himself:

I feel a little like that Chinese princess, whose discovery gave Desdemona her livelihood. Like her I unravel my story, and the longer the thread, the less there is left to tell. Retrace the filament and you go back to the cocoon's beginning in a tiny knot, a first tentative loop. And following my story's thread back to where I left off, I see [... the whole of their voyage.] (63)

Cal's life story (like all "great discoveries", 63) is similarly discovered by chance: Callie's accident leads to the discovery of her/his true sex and his/her ensuing identity quest. For Saleem too an accident, a finger squashed in a door, reveals his blood type and triggers the unveiling of his true parentage. Such stories raise questions of chance or fate as determiners of our lives, and genetic inheritance adds its own unpredictability: it randomly combines information in order to make up our personal blueprint: "a crapshoot, entirely" (119). Crapshoot, a gambling game played with two dice (another instance of duality) is a game of chance, the kind that Lefty is addicted to. Employed as a metaphor for genetic inheritance, however, it also points to the term's alternative meaning of a risky, uncertain venture. And indeed, the narrator feels determined by randomness from birth onwards: "Five minutes old, and already the themes of my life – chance and sex – announced themselves." (216).

Recounting the legend of the discovery of silk emphasises not only the randomness of life and the unpredictability of the impact of minor incidents, but also the ever-present parallels in stories, be it in the context of history, of legend, or of biology. The servant walking away from the princess with the unravelling cocoon is mirrored by the emigrants leaving Athens for the United States and the coloured threads extended between the ones sailing and the ones staying behind on the quay. The same image is conjured when Callie is taken to hospital where she will discover her condition: while she is wheeled away on a stretcher, the Obscure Object holds her hand, "her unraveling arm", "as though it was a string of Piraeus yarn [...] I had already left on my voyage. I was sailing across the sea to another country [...] My arm was only a thin ribbon now, curling through the air. Finally the inevitable moment came. The Object let go. My hand flew up, free, empty." (394-5) Life abounds with parallels and permutations of the same story, with its individual components reflecting the larger patterns, as the narrator realises at the end of Book Three, just after discovering his/her sexual "abnormality":

Orthodox monks smuggled silk out of China in the sixth century. They brought it to Asia Minor. From there, it spread to Europe, and finally traveled across the sea to North America. [...]

Mulberry trees were planted all over the United States. As I picked those berries out my bedroom window, however, I had no idea that our mulberry tree had anything to do with the silk trade, or that my grandmother had had trees just like it behind her house in Turkey. That mulberry tree had stood outside my bedroom on Middlesex, never divulging its significance to me. But now, things are different. Now all the mute objects of my life seem to tell my story, to stretch back in time, if I look closely enough. (396-7)

Like the silkworm, the narrator is “the descendant of a smuggling operation” (71): his grandparents’ mutated gene is clandestinely transported into the illicit marriage and passed down to him. And incidentally, as if to prove Eugenides’ narrator’s point that everything relates to everything else in his life, the mulberry links the silk thread to genetics: it lends its name to an early stage of embryonic development, Morula, from the Latin *morus* for mulberry. The tree that accompanies Cal’s family story thus traces a similar journey to that of his genes, providing nourishment for silkworms and stories alike. At the same time, it was the examination of a silkworm, by the sixteenth-century biologist Swammerdam, which gave rise to the theory of preformation (199). The various ways of conceiving of human life and development discussed above – predetermination, epigenesis or modern genetics – share one major central trait: they all assume that the individual and the rest of the world are intimately related: certain basic patterns repeat themselves, over time, in different cultures, different eras, and on varying scales. The novel ascribes the world a meaningfulness to the extent that all stories are linked and every detail comments on the rest, forming an intricate web rather than a single line.

The hero of *Middlesex* thus inscribes himself in a multitude of traditions, from literary to biological models of explaining human identity. The narrator’s (and his text’s) extensive and diverse heritages have all, in one way or another, been passed down through his grandparents, whose incest is the prerequisite for Cal’s sexual ambiguity, whose emigration enables him to reconnect with ancient Greek mythology as well as American Midwestern culture, and whose beliefs and traditionalism make him aware of clashes between past and present. I shall now turn to the hero him/herself, and examine the multiple narrative roles that Cal assumes and the ways in which he bridges his often conflicting heritages.

4 Hybridity, Monsters and Normality

4.1 Split Selves

An autobiographical narrative is by definition a retrospective account, with a narrator looking back on and describing a process and development lived through by an earlier ‘incarnation’ of the self. Hence, the autobiographical self is, by its very nature, a divided presence in the text, split between a narrating ‘I’ (usually a first-person narrator speaking in the present tense, more experienced and with the benefit of hindsight) and a narrated ‘I’ (the object of observation, the protagonist, sometimes even a third-person character, whose story is generally told in the past

tense). This is a structure typical of any autobiographical text, calling into question assumptions about the stability and continuity of identity. In *Middlesex*, this split is made even more poignant and complex by the profound shift the narrator goes through due to his change of gender on the one hand, but also by yet another level of narrative consciousness: an omniscient narrator, situated outside the character's life experience.

The family history leading up to the birth of the protagonist is told by a pre-natal omniscient narrator, waiting for his conception and observing everything leading up to it in a Shandyesque fashion: like Cal in *Middlesex*, Laurence Sterne's narrator, in the first volume of *Tristram Shandy*, describes in great detail the events preceding his conception, highlighting the incidents that might prevent it from happening and linking his parents' sexual act to the monthly event of the winding up of the clock. Both narrators focus on the importance of the timing of the conception, but while Tristram wishes that his parents had "duly consider'd" "what they were up to when they begot me,"¹³⁵ Cal's parents think too much about the exact time of conception, in a desire to take control of their child's sex. This is Cal's account of the moments before his own conception:

Meanwhile, in the greenroom of the world, I waited. Not even a gleam in my father's eye yet [...] As he climbs the stairway, there's hope for me again. The timing of the thing had to be just so in order for me to become the person I am. Delay the act by an hour and you change the gene selection. My conception was still weeks away [...] My father had only to say an affectionate word and she would have forgiven him. Not me but somebody like me might have been made that night. An infinite number of possible selves crowded the threshold, me among them but with no guaranteed ticket [...] The moments that led up to me fell into place as though decreed. Which is, I guess, why I think about them so much. (11)

The narrating consciousness relating the above exists even before the conception of what is to become the protagonist, and is presented as the culmination of a centuries-old family story, geared solely towards the narrator's 'production'. So while on the one hand, the narrator casts doubt on the certainty of his own conception and creates suspense by maintaining that he has "no guaranteed ticket", at the same time he conveys an inevitability about the story unfolding as it does, thus simultaneously supporting and refuting the idea of human existence as random.

This omniscient narrative 'I' changes quite considerably after his/her conception. Previous omniscience is restricted – while by no means being reduced to a purely figural point of view – and its limitations are frequently and playfully referred to: "now that I've entered my story, [...] I can't just sit back and watch from a distance any more. From here on in, everything I'll tell you is colored by the subjective experience of being part of events. Here's where my story splits, divides, undergoes meiosis." (217) The narrative here develops according to biological laws, highlighting the organic unfolding of the narrator's story, its 'natural' and unstoppable progression, while at the same time warning the reader of the narrator's subjectivity and unreliability:

¹³⁵ Cf. Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.*, ed. by Howard Anderson (New York and London: Norton, 1980), 1-5.

As sperm meets egg, I feel a jolt. There's a loud sound, a sonic boom as my world cracks. I feel myself shift, already losing bits of my prenatal omniscience, tumbling toward the blank slate of personhood. (With the shred of all-knowingness I have left, I see my grandfather, Lefty Stephanides, on the night of my birth nine months from now, turning a demitasse cup upside down on a saucer. I see his coffee grounds forming a sign as pain explodes in his temple and he topples on the floor.) (211)

As omniscience subsides, the different personas that Callie/Cal inhabits in the course of the text and the different voices relating the story become more discernible, from the omniscient narrator in charge of the story to the limited point of view of a character within that story – although Cal is never only a character, but flits between stories, times, and different points of view. This distance between narrative perspectives is dramatised through the opposing viewpoints of the narrator as storyteller or as protagonist, as observer or participant, as (purportedly) objective and subjective storyteller. Eugenides uses various distancing devices: in brackets interspersed throughout the text a narrative 'I' comments on the story, speaking from a grown-up, retrospective stance, ironically detached from the events; multiple voices exist alongside each other, and the contrast between omniscience and limited perspectives and past and present consciousnesses all question the ability of life writing to capture a unified coherent self. Indeed, such an endeavour is inherently paradoxical: while the biographer, by definition, gazes at her or his subject from a distance, the autobiographer needs to create this detached view within her/himself.¹³⁶ By emphasizing the connection and simultaneously the divide between these different selves, a tension inherent in any autobiographical text is dramatized in *Middlesex*: the paradox of continuity within transformation, and the (im)possibility of identity between such transformed selves.

Virginia Woolf distinguishes between the terms 'identity' and 'the self', which are frequently used interchangeably, when she refers to Orlando's transformation: while the individual can choose to be manifest in different selves, identity is constant,¹³⁷ which suggests that 'identity' refers to a concept more profound and innate than 'the self'. One could, however, make a case for the exact opposite, and conceive of a 'self' which defines a person fundamentally, while s/he can assume various and changing 'identities' – and this is how Eugenides uses the terms, referring to Callie's "new identity" as a boy (445), or the fascination of "assuming identities not your own" (332) when acting in a play. While the distribution of the two terms is thus reversed, there is no contradiction in Woolf's and Eugenides' concept of the ambiguity and multi-layeredness of what constitutes who we are: a complex combination of an unchangeable and profound 'I' and changeable, often chosen, and more superficial permutations of that 'I', which, however, still define us, both in the eyes of others and in our own. Whatever the terms one chooses, selves are ultimately always split in various ways; there are temporal splits as referred to above, due to our development over time (which, depending

¹³⁶ Cf. Gusdorf, 35.

¹³⁷ Cf. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Penguin, 1993), 98, 163, 212. The implications of the changing gender identity will be discussed in more detail below.

on our life story, can be more or less dramatic), but also the split into public and private selves and roles that are often almost indistinguishable. The protagonist of *Middlesex* illustrates this in a manner that highlights his particular condition but also the general implications for any reflection on identity.

Middlesex is told by a range of distinguishable voices: in the passage, for instance, in which Callie, under the influence of drugs, alcohol and sexual desire experiences hallucinatory revelations that Cal later places on a par with those of the oracle of Delphi, the narrator switches back and forth between the first and the third-person perspective. The distance between the narrative voices highlights the narrator's struggle, but also his need, to reconcile his/her divided selves in narrative. Cal's oracular hallucination emphasises the distancing effect of storytelling, as well as the notion of Calliope assuming a mythical character's identity, split into her twentieth-century American self and the Oracle of Delphi, announcing, reliving and experiencing her story.

It is no coincidence that Calliope's self-recognition occurs in a state of ecstasy, an out-of-body experience: it is necessary for her to leave her body to discover her true self, to make herself an object of narration, something she has not been able to do before: "The mind self-edits. The mind airbrushes. It's a different thing to be inside a body than outside. From outside, you can look, inspect, compare. From inside there is no comparison." (388) Our body, and sexuality in particular, defines (and confines) us; "our sex harbors what is most true in ourselves", writes Foucault in his introduction to Herculine Barbin's memoirs.¹³⁸ The feminist classic, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, that Callie is given as a teenager (316), encompasses in its title the same concept of body and self as identical, which informs the focus on the auto/biographical self as embodied identity. This notion is not always liberating: when Cal, having just discovered his condition and feeling imprisoned by the confines of his own body, longs to escape, attempting to find solace in contemplating the sea, he finds that he cannot: "Nature brought no relief. Outside had ended. There was nowhere to go that wouldn't be me." (475) Ecstasy, in the sense of a mental escape from the confines of the body, can provide a temporary distance, necessary to fulfil the oracle's command of self-knowledge. Ultimately, however, the narrator turns to storytelling, tapping into the meaning-making power of narrative: by assuming an external position and constructing himself as a character in the story (so essentially creating a split self), he can make sense of the events in his life, something he could not do as an internal narrator. At the same time, he shows the artificiality of such a conscious split, only possible within a narrative situation: the fictional refuge into a neatly divided self leads to creativity, and yet draws attention to the impossibility of repeating the same in reality.

The distanced or outside view of the self in narrative is also reflected in the repeated reminders for the reader to look closely: the narrator frequently engages in a dialogue with us as

¹³⁸ Michel Foucault, "Introduction", in *Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, transl. by Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), xi.

readers, addressing us, commenting on the progression of the storytelling, and often urges the reader at the most dramatic moments of his narrative to “watch” or “listen closely” (31, 168). Indeed, he is continuously asking us to pay attention to detail and to adopt a microscopic gaze, in order to show us “something impossible to see with the naked eye. Look closer. There. That’s right: One mutation apiece” (125) is discernible on his genes under the microscope. The narrating ‘I’ incites the reader to become an observer or indeed a voyeur – of his younger self, his story, and his innermost genetic make-up.

At the same time, the reader is asked to scrutinize the narrator’s techniques: Cal continuously draws attention to writerly devices, mocking a “moment of cheap symbolism” or purporting to “bow to the strict rules of realism” (110-1). When his father Milton, making childhood home movies, checks how much time is left on the film roll, his oversized eye appears on the screen: “a postmodern touch in our domestic cinema, pointing up artifice, calling attention to mechanics. (And bequeathing me my aesthetics.)” (224) The narrator’s self-conscious awareness of literary style draws our attention to the storytelling itself, emphasising the artificiality of narrative and its mediality: the camera and the text are devices for recording and recounting the story. Cal is thus laying himself bare as a narrator too, articulating the artifice of storytelling, but also the conventions that literature imposes on us. The “strict rules of realism” and “Chekhov’s first rule of playwriting”, repeatedly invoked (236, 378, 396), draw attention to the classification of texts, which assigns them to specific genres and styles that elicit specific reader expectations. Eugenides here likens generic boundaries to gender restrictions; our bodies too are subject to classification and expectations. Cal’s ambiguous body defies these expectations and boundaries, just as his hybrid text seeks to undermine these rules; as a narrator who comments on his own craft, he demonstrates his distance from his text and refutes the readerly illusion that he *is* the text.

The reader is thus drawn into the divide between the narrator’s different selves, a divide which is fundamental to the process of the quest for identity. His urge to establish a sense of self is closely connected with his subjectivity being threatened. Cal’s depiction in photographs, he claims, “ruined class photos and Christmas cards until, in the most widely published pictures of me, the problem was finally solved by blocking out my face altogether.” (304) These latter photographs, reproduced in medical textbooks to illustrate the phenomenon of hermaphroditism, show his body while hiding his face: “The textbook publishers would make sure to cover my face. The black box: a fig leaf in reverse, concealing identity while leaving shame exposed.” (422) Alice Domurat Dreger, who researches the “display of unusual anatomies” of intersexed people in particular, criticises precisely such an anonymous, nameless and faceless portrayal in medical publications, “which immediately dehumanizes them.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Alice Domurat Dreger, “Jarring Bodies: Thoughts on the Display of Unusual Anatomies”, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 43:2 (2000), 161-72: 162.

Cal's identity is thus obliterated when he is treated as a medical case, that is, when the focus is on the very aspect of himself that he feels most determines his identity: his sexual ambiguity. It is society's response to his body that causes his defacement, and his loss of a secure sense of identity, as "one's identity is very grounded in the experience of one's anatomy" – a fact true for all of us, as Dreger points out.¹⁴⁰ The doctor publishes Callie's psychological narrative "omitting my name" (418), and her/his condition is "my claim to fame. I didn't feel famous, however. In fact, behind the curtain, I no longer felt as if I were in the room." (421) Being treated like an object, with his/her body reduced to being "a body of research material" (412), stands in the way of his/her quest for his/her own subjectivity, and in fact, Calliope has been an object from before birth: an object of desire, when the parents push their wish for a daughter as far as strategically planning the timing of conception to determine the baby's sex. Much later, he becomes a medical research phenomenon, a case to be studied, a textbook model. Only his body is of interest in this context, while his identity, his individuality and personality, are obliterated. And while Dreger is aware of the lack of tolerance towards people of ambiguous sexuality in the nineteenth century, she notes that, in pictures from that era, intersexuals look "much more human" than nowadays: "The focus is still on the whole person, not just the parts."¹⁴¹ In this respect, modern medical representations are similar to the way prostitutes expose themselves in the 69ers strip club darkroom in San Francisco, where Cal too becomes an object of (sexual) desire: the customers are only allowed fragmented views, "pieces" (480) of the women, by means of directing a tiny spotlight on them which allows the customers to see "the source of life, the thing of things, purified as it were, without the clutter of a person attached." (480-1). This resonates with the uncomfortable parallels that Dreger uncovers in the way medical professionals and audiences of pornography and freak shows take an interest in unusual bodies.

The objectification and fragmentation of an other, however, is complemented by the gaze a split self casts on itself. The fragmented gaze in *Middlesex's* 69ers club is preceded by a reflection on beauty, where Cal scrutinizes his features separately rather than altogether: only when regarding himself as a whole does he see beauty, but not in the isolated fragments: "As a baby, even as a little girl, I possessed an awkward, extravagant beauty. No single feature was right in itself and yet, when they were taken all together, something captivating emerged. An inadvertent harmony. A changeableness too, as if beneath my visible face there was another, having second thoughts." (218) When the narrator considers his features one by one, he compares them to an interactive museum exhibit that can highlight isolated aspects: "press all the buttons at once. Can you see me? All of me? Probably not. No one ever really has." (218) The awareness of this limitation provides a strong impulse for the writing of the self: the desire to expose oneself completely has been at the core of autobiographical projects since Rousseau,

¹⁴⁰ Dreger, 169.

¹⁴¹ Dreger, 165.

in his *Confessions*, vowed “to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye, [...] trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights.” His interjection, “I must leave nothing unsaid,”¹⁴² shows his belief in the possibility of painting a comprehensive and true picture of the self, thus affirming “the possibility of a total revelation of human personality.”¹⁴³ *Middlesex* calls this into doubt, while similarly emphasising the importance of an all-embracing and unifying approach to identity.

Limited and fragmented views of a body are granted in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* as well, through the perforated sheet which provides the protagonist’s grandfather with partial glimpses of his future wife during their courtship, and which functions as a metaphor for Saleem’s “courtship of fragmented experience.”¹⁴⁴ Here, the limited view heightens desire, because it spurs on the imagination; in Eugenides’ darkroom the desire for the fragmented view is redefined as objectification. Yet choosing to see selectively can also be an expression of an inability or a refusal to see the whole person. Fragmented views of another’s body are later taken up in Saleem’s mother’s attempts to learn to love her husband in stages, bit by bit, unable to love him as a whole. This inability to see someone and know someone entirely corresponds to the constant tension between narrative omniscience and a limited point of view, which structures both novels. Yet it is also a metaphor for any story’s limitations: “narrative is a perforated sheet, concealing the whole while revealing a part.”¹⁴⁵ Nancy Batty’s observation on *Midnight’s Children* equally describes *Middlesex*’s struggle for a narrative that explains all and the quest for a unified sense of identity, while simultaneously being aware that storytelling can only ever achieve that: recount a selection, a fragment of the whole – both of the story at hand, and of the narrator-protagonist’s identity.

Yet the awareness of one’s identity (especially when it is unclear, undefined, or in transition) can also be perceived as a confinement, as discussed above, and being turned into an object can have a liberating aspect: Cal’s need for anonymity is consistent with the fragmentation he feels while his identity is still concealed from himself. It is only in the “identity-cleansing mist” (496) of San Francisco that Cal learns to accept his unusual body, partly through his work at the 69ers strip club. When he performs as the god Hermaphroditus, in a spectacle reminiscent of titillating freak shows, it is the focus on the body and the anonymity, the obliteration of the face while the body is exposed, that provides solace and allows the protagonist, whose sense of self is divorced from the way he relates to his body, to assume a certain mental distance from his body, in order to explore it and ultimately accept it. And it is precisely the objectifying gaze, with its element of admiration and desire, that makes

¹⁴² Rousseau, 169; 548.

¹⁴³ Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 4.

¹⁴⁴ K. Wilson, 62.

¹⁴⁵ Nancy E. Batty, “The Art of Suspense. Rushdie’s 1001 (Mid-)Nights”, in D.M. Fletcher (ed.), *Reading Rushdie. Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 69-81: 78.

the patrons' gaze so different from that of the doctors, and lends it an empowering aspect – a dynamic that Dreger comments on too, reluctantly admitting the possibility of self-exhibition as beneficial, celebrating unusual bodies as “extraordinary, bizarre, amazing” and recognizing them as “authorities of a unique and strangely attractive experience.”¹⁴⁶

4.2 Mirror Images

Objectification thus plays an important role in Cal's quest for subjectivity – and this includes self-objectification. Seeing oneself in the mirror, as an other, an object or a counterpart, constitutes a crucial step in any child's development, as Lacan has shown through his analysis of the mirror stage, the founding instance of the subject and a “genetic moment.”¹⁴⁷ The mirror image is perceived as a unified body – a unity that the child lacks, and thus identifies with. Callie's coherent and secure girlhood sense of self is shattered when, as an adolescent, she realizes that she is a hermaphrodite and genetically male – a shift of awareness which s/he perceives as a second birth (3). The scene in the barbershop, which on the level of appearances represents Calliope's transformation into Cal, is an instance of a reversed mirror stage, an undoing of self-knowing: a split self looks into the mirror before the haircut, to cast a final glance at the reflection of an identity that s/he is about to shed, her/his female self, in a refusal or even a deletion of prior knowledge which has been proved false:

He turned me to face the mirror. And there she was, for the last time, in the silvered glass: Calliope. She wasn't gone yet. She was like a captive spirit, peeking out. [...] This gave me time for second thoughts. What was I doing? What if Dr Luce was right? What if that girl in the mirror really *was* me? How did I think I could defect to the other side so easily? What did I know about boys, about men? I didn't even like them that much. [...] I closed my eyes. I refused to return Calliope's gaze any longer. (442)

The final gaze at the reflection of an identity that he had accepted undoubtingly as his own up to that moment produces doubt about the decision to renounce that very identity – “that girl in the mirror” is already perceived as an other, yet as a possible and still familiar reflection of a “me” caught in limbo, not knowing what his/her mirror image could be, and perceiving masculinity as “the other side”.

This act of renouncing the feminine identity, however, is immediately followed by another mirror-stage in an episode of re-cognition: after the haircut, “I opened my eyes. And in the mirror I didn't see myself. Not the Mona Lisa with the enigmatic smile any longer. Not the shy girl with the tangled black hair in her face, but instead her fraternal twin brother [...] a new creation.” (445) Both mirror images are described from a third person perspective; both images are alter egos for the narrator, who can no longer (or not yet) identify with either. The hairdresser's mirror reflects a uniquely torn character, caught in the tension between male and

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Dreger, 168.

¹⁴⁷ J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 251.

female, between the interior and the exterior, between a confounding past and an unknown future. What Cal(liope) sees in the mirror is not his familiar female self, but the reflection of the boy she wants to become – an image s/he then proceeds to identify with, in a wilful Lacanian identification with the mirror image.

Middlesex shows self-representation to be a literal and metaphorical confrontation with oneself, dependant on the mirror image for the constitution of the self. For Georges Gusdorf, autobiography is “the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image;”¹⁴⁸ both narrative and the looking-glass reflect a unified and coherent, albeit two-dimensional image that we are tempted to trust and identify with, as it provides us with a sense of objectivity, an outside view of ourselves – even if we know that it is us (as autobiographers) who have created this very image. And indeed, writing one’s life always *is* seeing oneself as an object, from a distance, as a “case” to be examined and presented; “the objectivation of the self [is] inherent in the process of writing about oneself.”¹⁴⁹ However, the self and its reflection do not automatically coincide, as Gusdorf stipulates; indeed, Shari Benstock holds that self and self-image can never coincide in language, as self-writing explores “difference and change over sameness and identity.”¹⁵⁰ By showing us these manifold splits of the self and the impossibility of achieving a perfectly unified reflection, Eugenides makes us aware of the contradictions inherent in the metaphor of the autobiographical mirror: his novel is a self-conscious portrayal of the limitations of portraying a unified self; his looking-glass is broken and fragmented, reflecting a multitude of versions of the self. And yet, while portraying such a split self, he simultaneously proposes self-reflection, in a mirror or in autobiography, as an exploration of the boundaries of the self.

The complexity of the reflection of the mirror image in *Middlesex*, but also in Rushdie’s and Foer’s novels, show Gusdorf’s description of the autobiographical mirror to be simplified and limiting. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, a gaze into the river reflects back the ancestral lineage (an image explored in chapter III); in *Midnight’s Children*, the protagonist himself is the reflector of a whole nation, “the mirror of us all”. Such reflections show that it is not always the self that looks back at us through the mirror, but aspects of the self that show an other, or others, that also make up the self, in all its relationality. Mirrors draw attention precisely to the cracks within conflicting images of our selves, showing the notion of the unified self to be an illusion, an optical delusion: clashes between our own image of ourselves with that others have of us, different permutations of selves, rifts in our identity – the mirror confronts us with these varied self-images, reflecting our attempt at unifying broken images.

¹⁴⁸ Gusdorf, 33.

¹⁴⁹ Wendy J. Wiener and George C. Rosenwald, “A Moment’s Monument. The Psychology of Keeping a Diary”, in Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (eds), *The Narrative Study of Lives* (London and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1993), 30-58: 32.

¹⁵⁰ Shari Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical”, in *The Private Self. Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988), 10-33: 15.

Eugenides shows us yet another looking-glass, which does not split the self into a subject and its image, but instead divides the natural world: “The surface of the sea is a mirror, reflecting divergent evolutionary paths. Up above, the creatures of air; down below, those of water. One planet, containing two worlds.” (297) Water and air are separate spheres, yet, through the image of reflection, they are inextricably bound to each other and, as counterparts, comment on each other. They can be placed into a series of dichotomies analogous to the split between body and mind, which itself is often seen as a split between sexuality and intellect, the unconscious and the conscious. “Western cultures assume an analogy between mind, masculinity, and culture, and between body, femininity, and ‘nature’”, a split which “reinforces the disembodiment of the self characteristic of most autobiographies”, argues Shirley Neuman.¹⁵¹ In *Middlesex*, this split of the self is also reflected in our perception of the world around us: we conceptualise the universe in constructing binary oppositions.

4.3 Water and Air, Underworlds, Life and Death

Immersing him/herself in water, that is, dipping into a less conscious sphere and allowing it to envelop him/her, prompts a leap in Cal(lie)’s sexual and personal evolution in a number of key scenes: in the swimming pool in *Middlesex*, “just warming up now, getting ready to play its part in my life” (261), Callie plays erotic childhood games with the neighbour’s girl; Lefty, watching, suffers a stroke which will leave him mute for the rest of his life and instil a lasting feeling of guilt in Callie (cf. 267). Bathing in a public fountain in San Francisco is the start of Cal’s new life in the seedy underworld of strip clubs (cf. 477). Later in the narrative, Cal becomes an attraction in the pool of the 69ers club, which evokes the “mirror-like waters” of the magic pool of Salmacis,¹⁵² where Hermaphroditus in the Greek myth bathes before his transformation (his merging with the goddess): the pool sparks change, influences fate, and allows new life (a new species even, the Hermaphrodite) to emerge out of the water.¹⁵³ The performers exist divided between two elements as well: their bodies remain under water, visible to the customers, while their heads and minds are above water, in a different sphere, almost disengaged from what is going on underneath. And yet, the club’s patrons, who, like Salmacis, watch the beautiful bathing boy “spellbound,”¹⁵⁴ only repeat Cal’s own fascination with female bodies when he grows up: the teenager perceives girls as magnificent underwater creatures belonging to a “different species” from herself.

¹⁵¹ Neuman, 416.

¹⁵² Ovid, IV. 312.

¹⁵³ In the context of genetics, the pool acquires of course yet another, metaphorical, connotation, that of the gene pool; and again, this proves a fateful fluid for the narrator, who refers to his heritage as “the polluted pool of the Stephanides family” (4), contaminated with a faulty gene and providing precisely the unconscious bodily knowledge that determines Cal’s sexual ambiguity.

¹⁵⁴ Ovid, IV. 347.

For all their mutual exclusiveness and elementary divisions between them, however, water and air are inextricably linked to one another, allowing transitions from one into the other. The human species, in its evolution, has left the sea behind to breathe air, and in an implicit evocation of the theory of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, the narrator compares his own development (albeit not that of the foetus but of the child developing a sexual awareness) to the human species' ancestors with their "amphibian hearts" (376) making their way onto land:¹⁵⁵ "Do you remember my frog heart? In Clementine Stark's bedroom it had kicked off from a muddy bank, moving between two elements. Now it did something even more amazing – it crept up onto land. Squeezing millenia into thirty seconds, it developed consciousness" (383). The two elements, water and air, stand for the respective consciousnesses of child and adult, with sexual awakening as an evolutionary leap. The same metaphor, however, is used to describe the teenager's growing gender confusion. And indeed, the day that will bring about Cal's discovery of his condition is "one of those humid days when the atmosphere gets confused. Sitting on the porch, you could feel it: the air wishing it was water." (388) Two opposing elements are conflated: roles (and rules), which previously seemed natural and unchangeable, are reversed. This confusion and role reversal, however, leads to the creation of a third, in-between element, resulting in a hybrid state which bridges the two elements: a paradoxical *state* of being in the *process* of transformation.

Just as water and air are opposite elements that confirm yet simultaneously question their neat separation by continuously mingling and merging, various kinds of underworlds construct ever-present counter-realities. Lefty's gambling addiction leads him into illegality: "Once you've visited the underworld, you never forget the way back" (205). His grandson Cal descends into different subterranean spaces, entering a "seamy underworld" (483) when he starts to work at the San Francisco strip club, with the pool in which he performs as yet another kind of underworld within it. But the writing he engages in, "solitary, furtive" (319), makes him "an expert in the underground life" of literary anonymity. The deficient gene that determines Cal's life due to the grandparents' illegal marriage is often described as a renegade or a criminal, unreliable, secretive and dangerously unpredictable: "A trait that goes underground for decades only to reappear when everyone has forgotten about it." (71) The underworld thus stands for the unconscious, for bodily knowledge that manifests itself without recourse to our minds, and thus threatens our sense of control of the mind over the body. As such, it forms an inalienable part of nature, and Cal sees the teenagers' sexual development reflected in the growth of the plants around them: "as the first crocuses appeared, returning from their winter in the underworld, Calliope Stephanides [..., who] also felt something stirring in the soil of her being, found herself reading the classics" (320). Here, the underworld is a place of secret but

¹⁵⁵ And indeed, Cal has a much more recent ancestor going through this same stage: his father, during his time in the navy in World War II, joins the "Amphibian Forces" (185).

innocent preparation for adulthood, in the context of sexual awakening and a life-affirming, creative force, again describing an unconscious development guided by our genetic programme.

The place that, for Callie, physically embodies this space of adolescent development is the basement toilet in her Edwardian school building. The fossils in the marble toilet stalls are a reminder of a pace much slower than that of the “rat race of the school upstairs”: they evoke “the slow, evolutionary progress of the earth, of its plant and animal life forming out of the generative, primeval mud.” (328) While the ambiance of the bathroom thus connects Callie to a larger scale of development (that of the world and its species, rather than her own individual one, which she finds so disturbing precisely because she herself fails to develop, i.e. into a woman), the graffiti on its walls expresses what her classmates suppress: the words – jokes, remarks, “confessions” – precede Cal’s own confession; they constitute an equally anonymous record of sexual secrets “in this subterranean realm where people wrote down what they couldn’t say, where they gave voice to their most shameful longings and knowledge” (329). Alongside the words, however, she finds illustrations: “Upstairs, class photos showed rows and rows of student faces. Down here it was mostly bodies.” The sketches show men and women, defaced, like in the medical text books, focusing on unusual bodies with exaggerated genitalia, but also “various permutations: men with dinky penises; and women with penises too. It was an education both in what was and what might be.” (329) Here Callie sees a reflection of herself on the wall of the toilet cubicle, on the verge, as she is, of discovering that she is, in fact, a man with a diminutive member.

The classics that Calliope is reading at that time (sometimes in that very bathroom) present an underworld of yet a different kind: the realm of the dead, a place unknown and inaccessible, unless in myth or fiction. As the antithesis of our world on a metaphysical level, it provides an imaginary reflection for the world of the living. A visitor to the underworld, through communicating with the dead, hears about his or her own destiny, is warned of dangers, and is able to make sense of life, drawing on the wisdom of the departed ancestors as guidance. As in myth, the boundaries between the worlds of mortals and immortals are dissolved in the novel: Milton, as the brylcreemed Orpheus serenading his wife-to-be, acts as a reminder of mythical transgressions between life and death, and Cal, his son/daughter, “liv[ing] out a mythical life in the actual world” (424), repeatedly transgresses the boundaries that are erected between opposing worlds and elements.

Middlesex thus rejects a dualistic world view as simplistic and restrictive. These seemingly mutually exclusive distinctions are never pure and complete: Cal veers between sexes, elements and worlds, and the story he recounts, like any life narrative, provides a bridge between the most radical of oppositions, life and death, by making immortal the life story of the protagonist. The following section investigates the different ways in which the concepts of duality, hybridity and transformations from one state to another are central to the novel. The dramatic changes

that Cal undergoes in his quest for his (sexual) identity, but also the transformations that mark his family story, spark reflections that help (re)define how we construct our sense of self.

4.4 Metamorphoses: Constancy and Change in *Middlesex*

Air and water merging into one another, as well as Cal's vacillations between opposing states of being, draw our attention to a principle that pervades the novel as one of its few constant elements: transformation. In the notions of constancy and change we are, yet again, confronted with two opposites that are in fact, on closer inspection, not mutually exclusive. The very first words of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* read: "Of bodies changed to other forms I tell; / You Gods, who have yourselves wrought every change, / Inspire my enterprise and lead my lay / In one continuous song from nature's first / Remote beginning to our modern times."¹⁵⁶ These words might also serve as an introduction to Eugenides' *Middlesex*: a narrative of transformation, tracing the story back to its origins, and pointing to the gods' mischievous involvement. It is no coincidence that reading Ovid's poem, which so casually and naturally recounts dramatic transformations of identity, and particularly gender identity, also leaves Herculine Barbin "extraordinarily shaken"; on contemplating his own metamorphosis in retrospect, he asks in his memoir: "Have the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid gone further?"¹⁵⁷ And yet, Eugenides places his own narrator's transformation in the tradition of a family whose members "have always had a knack for self-transformation" (312), and sets his story in a world that is, like Ovid's, marked by change on every level, right down to the silkworms, which throughout their lives go through radical metamorphoses.

Growing up, coming of age, and becoming a sexual being is frequently described as a radical transformation in everybody's life. Desdemona and Lefty, at the end of their adolescence, see each other no longer as brother and sister, but as man and woman, albeit reluctantly and secretly. The transformation within themselves thus leads to a transformation of the way in which they respond to each other; and their illegitimate sexual attraction receives the stamp of legitimacy in their marriage ceremony during their voyage across the Atlantic to New York, where they shed their previous identities and assume new ones:¹⁵⁸

Desdemona and Lefty circumambulated the captain, once, twice, and then again, spinning the cocoon of their life together. [...]: as they paced around the deck the first time, Lefty and Desdemona were still brother and sister. The second time, they were bride and bridegroom. And the third, they were husband and wife. (68-9)

¹⁵⁶ Ovid, I. 1-4.

¹⁵⁷ Barbin, 18; 87.

¹⁵⁸ Their journey comprises a series of identity changes, from pretending to be French in order to be allowed to board the only ship leaving burning Smyrna, to Desdemona assuming her mother's maiden name in order to revert to her own (and her brother-husband's) when married. This final name change is simultaneously a changing back to the same name, and a metamorphosis into a new (and generally mutually exclusive) role, from sister to wife.

A generation later, Cal's parents, not siblings but cousins growing up together, also suddenly change in the way they perceive each other: "Milton looked to see who it was. He saw who it was. But who it was was no longer who it had been" (175). A transformation in the eye of the beholder has taken place, which, again, is the prerequisite for falling in love. And in a similar way, Callie's brother comments on her changing appearance: "I'm looking at my little sister and thinking she doesn't look like my little sister anymore." (314) This is of course deliberately ambiguous for the reader: is he noticing an adolescent girl's development, or is he seeing a little brother?

In fact, however, the narrator concludes that his transformation from female to male is not the most radical development he goes through: compared to matters of life and death, "my bodily metamorphoses was a small event [...]; contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important. My change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood. In most ways I remained the person I'd always been." (519-20) Science confirms Cal's claim: the obvious differences between male and female, seemingly opposite and mutually exclusive, are shown to be superficial when examined closely: Dr Luce's explanations of the foetus' sexual development ("Male or female, it's all the same" at an early stage, 427) highlight the fundamental similarities between the sexes. Cal's brother points out to his little sister that "physiologically it's pretty much the same. I mean the penis and the clitoris are analogous structures" (314). The focus shifts from what separates the sexes to what they share, and what, ultimately, grants the continuity of identity in spite of the sex change. Asked by his mother, after 'coming out' as a boy, "Don't you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?", Cal replies, "This is the way I was." (520) While a seemingly radical change takes place on the surface, Cal emphasises a profound constancy of identity underneath. And indeed, when reflecting on her daughter's transformation into a son, Cal's mother's thoughts follow patterns that any parent knows:

Tessie went back over the events over the last year and a half, looking for signs she might have missed. It wasn't so different from what any mother would do, confronted with a shocking revelation about her teenage daughter. If I had died of a drug overdose or joined a cult, my mother's thinking would have taken essentially the same form. (466)

Virginia Woolf, in *Orlando*, similarly explores the impact a sex change has on her character Orlando. When Orlando wakes up as a woman, after having been a man for the first thirty years of his/her life, she feels that, although her status in society and role in life have changed considerably, her identity is in fact the same: "in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity". Later on, reflecting on her changing and evolving life, Orlando reiterates this, realising that she has remained "fundamentally the same". Yet, while there is a sense of fundamental, unchangeable (or unchanging) identity, this identity can manifest itself

in various selves: Orlando “had a great variety of selves to call upon,”¹⁵⁹ emphasising the power Woolf’s character has over her choice of being. The continuity through centuries and genders is thus as relevant as the changes the character goes through. *Orlando* tells the story of how Orlando changes, but also, at the same time, of how s/he stays the same in spite of the gender and historical metamorphoses s/he undergoes. This tension highlights how the self is defined and limited by the body, by social conventions, or by clothes; limitations which are constantly under scrutiny, tested by the characters who overstep the clearly demarcated boundaries between male and female.

Both Woolf’s and Eugenides’ narrators are confronted with the necessity, under pressure from society, to clearly define themselves as male or female. While Woolf’s Orlando, however, enjoys a “mobility of sexual identity” which allows her to have the “best of both sexual worlds,”¹⁶⁰ Eugenides’ Cal, like his predecessor Herculine Barbin, experiences his own sexual ambiguity as destabilizing. The restrictions society puts on an ambiguous identity emphasise the importance of deciding on one or the other. The lawsuit which is to determine Orlando’s rights to inherit the estate when she returns to England as a woman draws attention to the sexual uncertainty from another angle: the charges against her stem from the incertitude whether she is “alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity”, putting her in a “highly ambiguous situation,”¹⁶¹ where the role of gender and status is on a par with the distinction between life and death. The lawsuits make clear that “in order for Orlando to continue with her life, she has to be granted an agreed identity, and in this sense to have a sex, one sex or the other and only one, is (literally) vital: if you are not unequivocally male or female, you cannot be accorded the other attributes of a person – starting [...] with life itself.”¹⁶² Identity here ultimately boils down to a legal question, which determines, in Orlando’s case, whether or not s/he can own property; yet, of course, property grants one the freedom to be oneself, and to own one’s body. And it is because she owns her estate that Orlando can assume ownership over her sexuality. Dreger considers the issue of property of one’s body from another angle: she questions the assumption of the contemporary medical profession that it has the “right of access” to unusual bodies, appropriating difference in the name of medicine, which makes her ask: “Who ought to own this body and the stories that can be drawn from it?”¹⁶³ Writing one’s memoir or autobiography is thus a way of reclaiming ownership of both story and body.

A brief excursion into the development of society’s perception and treatment of hermaphrodites gives a sense of the range of possible responses to a condition that defies our binary concept of gender identity. In his chapter on hermaphrodites, sixteenth-century French

¹⁵⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 212-3.

¹⁶⁰ Rachel Bowlby, “Orlando’s Vacillation”, in *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997), 43-53: 49.

¹⁶¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 119.

¹⁶² Bowlby, “Orlando: An Introduction”, 167.

¹⁶³ Dreger, 168-9.

surgeon Ambroise Paré (whose theories on “monstrous children” we encounter later) recounts “Memorable Stories about Women who have degenerated into Men”: stories of girls who, “at the time of life when girls begin their monthlies”, develop a penis and hence change from woman to man; in one case, the example even mentions an accident (when jumping across a wide ditch) which, similar to Cal’s accident, leads to the discovery of the condition. Hermaphrodites are described as being either predominantly male, female, neither or both, in which case “the most expert and well-informed physicians and surgeons” decide which sexual identity the person in question is to adopt; using both is “forbidden on pain of death.”¹⁶⁴ This reliance on the ‘expertise’ of professionals was not always a given. Michel Foucault, in his introduction to Herculine Barbin’s memoirs, describes a shift in society’s need to clearly define gender, from a much more liberal approach before the Middle Ages, where hermaphrodites simply had two sexes, through a phase when they were able to decide their own sex as adults, to a growing rigidity from the sixteenth century onwards, as Paré’s explanations show. This rigidity intensified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Foucault writes:

Biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control in modern nations, led little by little to rejecting the idea of a mixture of the two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting the free choice of indeterminate individuals. Henceforth, everybody was to have one and only one sex.¹⁶⁵

The decision as to which this one “true sex” was to be was now transferred to “experts”, be they clerical, legal or medical. The case of Herculine Barbin makes clear how closely intertwined these spheres of authority were then: the state, on the advice of doctors, reclassified the twenty-one-year-old, who, like Cal, grew up a girl, as a man and names him Abel, as is documented in Auguste Tardieu’s *Question médico-légale de l’identité*, published after Barbin’s suicide and included in Foucault’s edition of Barbin’s memoirs.¹⁶⁶ The doctor’s report, after stating the ambiguity of Barbin’s sexuality in great anatomical detail, concludes (not altogether convincingly¹⁶⁷) by designating her/him unequivocally a man: ambiguous identities challenge both bureaucratic systems and medicine’s need for clarity.¹⁶⁸ In *Middlesex*, set in the late twentieth century, Cal’s legal identity is not at stake; his sexual ambiguity has no immediate impact on his legal status. And yet, the body that refuses to adhere to the ‘norms’ that nature and society lay out, is described through metaphors that suggest a breach of legality:

¹⁶⁴ Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, transl. and with an intro. by Janis L. Pallister (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 31-2; 27.

¹⁶⁵ Foucault, viii.

¹⁶⁶ Foucault, 122-44.

¹⁶⁷ For a detailed commentary on this reasoning from a feminist point of view, see Neuman, 419-23.

¹⁶⁸ If unable to decide on the “true sex” of such an ambiguous individual, the “inclinations and habits of their true sex” were to be observed, to help “in marking out their place in society”. Herculine Barbin’s doctor, who, in the medical commentary published alongside the memoirs in Foucault’s edition, details highly ambiguous genitalia, was guided by such considerations as Herculine’s inclinations (among others, the fact that s/he was sexually drawn towards women) in his decision to proclaim her/him a man. In *Middlesex*, Dr Luce’s focus on socialisation, stereotypical gender features and sexual orientation has not advanced much from this position.

when Callie's adolescent brother, curious about female sexuality, inspects his 8-year-old sister ("studied her documents"), he "detected no forgery" (279). 12-year-old Callie finds herself troubled by "two testicles squatting illegally in their inguinal canals"; the as yet invisible male genitalia are seen as "anarchists [...] even hooked up to the utilities" (294), similar to the "renegade genes" that cause their clandestine existence. By showing the body as rebelling against the law, the narrator once again highlights the artificiality of these categories: although not random, they are man-made; and unnatural in the sense that Cal's ambiguity is entirely 'natural' itself. The pressure for a clear-cut decision for one or the other sex or gender in *Middlesex*, however, derives not from legal or clerical authorities, but from medical specialists, the scientists at the Gender Identity Clinic: Dr Luce sets out to prove Callie's female gender identity. And while modern science simplifies this complex matter much less than in previous centuries, Foucault states that "the idea that one must finally have a true sex is far from being completely dispelled:"¹⁶⁹ our society still cannot deal with an ambiguity that does not follow our clear gender divide.

The binary structure of this distinction forces us to choose between two mutually exclusive characteristics – for the sake of being defined in the eyes of others. Cal's position between the sexes, generally perceived as clear-cut oppositions, questions our notion of the clarity of that distinction, and, like Woolf's *Orlando*, explores the vacillating boundaries of sexual identity: "Different though the sexes are, they intermix."¹⁷⁰ The very first words of *Orlando* cast doubt on the gendered pronoun "he"; ironically they do so precisely by pretending to confirm that the protagonist's sexual identity is unambiguous, and by questioning the self-evidence, usually taken for granted, of belonging to one sex or another: "there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it."¹⁷¹ This first sentence also introduces the idea of concealment and disguise through clothes: they are obvious markers of sex, but at the same time a potential means to disguise the clarity about sexual identity, and can thus change sex in the eyes of the beholder. As Rachel Bowlby puts it, "the clothes determine the potential for acting the part of either sex;"¹⁷² she here draws attention to the perception that sexual identity is a role we play, and thus something we can choose and change at will. And indeed, Woolf states that clothes "change our view of the world and the world's view of us,"¹⁷³ influencing the wearer as much as the wearer shapes them. Sexual identity is presented as complex and many-layered, split into psychological and biological, interior and exterior aspects, and continuously in dispute and doubt: the surface may mirror or conceal reality. Appearances are crucial to the protagonist of *Middlesex* as well: it is his haircut and his change of clothes that mark his transformation into masculinity, in an attempt to re-

¹⁶⁹ Foucault, x.

¹⁷⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 132.

¹⁷¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 11.

¹⁷² Bowlby, "Orlando's Vacillation", 45.

¹⁷³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 131.

align exterior and interior sexual identity. Cal's change of attire is his first step in appearing male to the outside world, which, in turn, is necessary for him to be able to see himself as such; the change in the exterior thus precedes the interior metamorphosis, and he first feels "male-identified" when he is treated "like a son" by a couple he meets on his journey (450).

On his way into the hospital room which will house the delivery of his "second birth" as a boy, Cal sees his future as a relocation to new shores: "I had already left on my voyage. I was sailing across the sea to another country" (394). He uses the same image to describe his behaviour during his first weeks as a boy, avoiding girls for fear of being 'recognized' by them as one of theirs: "I was like an immigrant, putting on airs, who runs into someone from the old country." (471) Elsewhere, the new gender identity is likened to a spiritual persuasion: "Like a convert to a new religion, I overdid it at first." (449) Yet again, family history is repeating itself in a slightly different permutation:

My grandparents had fled their home because of a war. Now, some fifty-two years later, I was fleeing myself. I felt that I was saving myself just as definitely. I was fleeing without much money in my pocket and under the alias of my new gender. A ship didn't carry me across the ocean; instead, a series of cars conveyed me across the continent. I was becoming a new person, too, just like Lefty and Desdemona, and I didn't know what would happen to me in this new world to which I'd come. (443)

The parallels between Cal's experience of transformation and that of his grandparents highlight a universality of the process of redefining the self. The differences between their stories are only superficial; on a profound level, their journeys and transitions are comparable. Cal's change from female to male, certainly one of the most radical metamorphoses of the self imaginable, is embedded in a world marked by momentous transformations. When he experiences "moments of dislocation, staring at my changing body. Sometimes it didn't feel like my own." (453), his alienation from his own transformed body reflects his grandparents' alienation and dislocation in the new country. At the same time, having to adapt to a changing body is a challenge to every teenager: "It was all a bluff, but so was it on most men. [...] My swagger wasn't that different from what lots of adolescent boys put on, trying to be manly. For that reason it was convincing. Its very falseness made it credible." (449) The fiction of pretending to be a man is in fact one that most male teenagers fabricate; and with them as with Cal, the pretense is a step on the way of becoming what one pretends to be, just like Lefty's transformation on the voyage to the USA, where he seizes "the opportunity of transatlantic travel to reinvent himself [...] whatever happened now, would become the truth, [...] whatever he seemed to be would become who he was" (67). The staged courtship and romance of the sibling grandparents is a similar creation of a new identity, and they are not the only ones engaged in their own reinvention: the immigrants' hopes and dreams create a general spirit of "self-transformation" (68) on the boat.

Similarly, telling or writing one's life story can be an attempt at shaping one's life and one's self into what one wants it to be, and the author of his or her own story resumes the

flexibility of a young and unformed self: “The adolescent ego is a hazy thing, amorphous, cloudlike. It wasn’t difficult to pour my identity into different vessels. In a sense, I was able to take whatever form was demanded of me.” (434) This creation of a fictional identity mirrors the creative aspect of storytelling: narrative allows us to make sense of ourselves, to create meaning, and to establish a sense of self. Paul de Man’s apparently paradoxical statement that the autobiographical project precedes, and indeed “may itself produce and determine the life”¹⁷⁴ rather than vice versa, is extended here to any fiction of the self with a view to self-transformation, including the imaginary stories we tell ourselves.

4.5 “They seemed neither, and yet both”

Transformation, although omnipresent, is rarely complete: Desdemona’s cousin Sourmelina, adapted to the new American ways, “had managed to erase just about everything identifiably Greek about her”, but “it was still Lina inside there [...] and soon her Greek enthusiasm bubbled out” (84). Her former identity is still present inside the new one, just like the girl Callie is still present in the boy Cal after his change of identity and the make-over at the hairdresser’s. Even as an adult, “Calliope surfaces [...] like a childhood speech impediment. Suddenly there she is again, doing a hair flip, or checking her nails. It’s a little like being possessed. Callie rises up inside me, wearing my skin like a loose robe. She sticks her little hands into the baggy sleeves of my arms” (41-2). Former identities remain inside newer ones like Russian dolls, in an inversion of the idea of preformation discussed earlier: not only is every future development already manifest in the foetus, but every past self also remains present, able to reappear at any moment. The desire to reinvent oneself, to assume a new identity and shed the old, is thus shown to be a universal experience – albeit limited and incomplete: change *and* continuity within oneself are inevitable.

Cal’s grandparents set the scene for identities that are in the process of changing from one state into another, ending up being “neither, and yet both”, as Ovid puts it in his story of Hermaphroditus.¹⁷⁵ Although Desdemona feels, until the end of her life, like an “external exile, a visitor for forty years, certain bits of her adopted country had been seeping under the locked doors of her disapproval.” (222) The couple have left some of their Greek past behind, yet have not fully arrived; traditional Greek lunches are packed in a new American container, a brown paper bag (93), they themselves have become “Amerikanidhes” (99), Americans with Greek (cultural and linguistic) roots. The “Ford English School Melting Pot” (104) (in whose pageant model student Lefty emerges from a cauldron, having shed his traditional Greek attire for a grey suit and waving an American flag) seeks to obliterate national identity, which proves

¹⁷⁴ Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement”, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 67-81: 69.

¹⁷⁵ Ovid, IV. 378.

illusionary. Despite “assimilationist pressures” (222), the family is faced with anti-immigrant prejudices; their identity, as seen by others, is clearly hybrid: Milton can only buy a house in a sought-after WASP suburb by paying cash, and Callie remains one of the “ethnic” girls at school (298). At the same time, when, during the 1974 Cyprus crisis, the Greek-American community is split over America’s suspected support of Turkey, and Milton is “forced to choose between his native land and his ancestral one, he didn’t hesitate” to support America (363). Finally, Cal, who as an adult works for the US Embassy, represents abroad the country in which his grandparents have felt as visitors, poignantly tracing the development of an immigrant family over three generations. And yet, Cal sees his Greek roots as an inalienable part of his identity.

If transformation is at the core of life (as texts from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to Eugenides’ *Middlesex* suggest), and if transformation is never truly complete (as our earlier selves are always encompassed by later, evolved selves), then it is only logical that hybridity abounds in the world, instead of purity, be it sexual, cultural, or other. And yet, purity is generally idealized as a state of perfection that we all should strive for. The ideal of (moral, i.e. sexual) purity is referred to early on in the novel, with Desdemona’s mother teaching her about spinning silk: “‘To have good silk, you have to be pure,’ she used to tell her daughter. ‘The silkworms know everything.’”, and so the silk one produces is a story one unwittingly tells about oneself (“Maria Poulos, who’s always lifting her skirt for everyone? Have you seen her cocoons? A stain for every man.”, 22). The fear of being impure thus haunts Desdemona from an early age; it makes her repress her emerging sexuality (she worries about “the dreams she’d been having!”, 22) and manifests itself later in her obsessive-compulsive fondness of television cleaning adverts: “She liked detergent commercials especially, anything with animated scrubbing bubbles or avenging suds” (223), wishing her own life story to be pure and clean. In fact, however, purity is rare in the novel, if not non-existent:¹⁷⁶ an ideal state strived for but never achieved. *Middlesex*, like *Midnight’s Children* before it, “eschews any notion of purity, generic or otherwise,”¹⁷⁷ and instead presents a world marked by impurity, in-betweenness, and hybridity. Indeed, when the term purity *is* used, it is in the highly ironic context of the seedy 69ers club, where the darkroom allows the customers to focus on “the thing of things, purified as it were, without the clutter of a person attached.” (480-1)

Reconciling opposites is thus something that not only the sexually hybrid protagonist strives for, but an endeavour at the core of the novel in general. Cal’s father’s restaurant business becomes the epitome of the attempt to reconcile Greek roots and American present: “Hercules Hot Dogs™”, the fast food chain, with “each restaurant identified by the distinctive ‘Pillars of Hercules’ out front” (201), draws on typical aspects of each culture to form a

¹⁷⁶ Even devout Father Mike admits that the extreme purity of the monks of Mount Athos, who, “in their zeal for purity” ban every female, including animals, from their island (178) is “a little too strict” for him.

¹⁷⁷ Juraga, 169.

successful business venture – even if the Greek traits, as so frequently in the novel, have been reduced to kitsch. Even Desdemona, who, throughout her life, has been confronted with unbridgeable conflicts between Turks and Greeks, is made to acknowledge, in order to get a job she needs desperately, that “Everybody mixed. Turks, Greeks, same same.” (145) As an adult, watching a Turkish immigrant bread maker, Cal realises that “We’re all made up of many parts, other halves. Not just me.” (440), just as Orlando stated before him, “everything was partly something else.”¹⁷⁸ Both texts thus confirm impurity and hybridity as the guiding principle of all life, making the need to reconcile different and sometimes contradictory elements within every individual universal. Cal, admiring the baker’s skills, embraces and appreciates this. Multiple identities are normal, and they grant a certain freedom to the individual, allowing us to view things from multiple perspectives and choosing one of many possible identities, such as when Lefty tells Desdemona, tongue-in-cheek, in order to persuade her to marry him: “You’re not only my sister. You’re my third cousin too. Third cousins can marry.” (39)

4.6 Monsters and Minotaurs

Desdemona’s worries about her impurity become aggravated after her incestuous marriage, which she fears will have a disastrous impact on her children: “She kept waiting for something to happen, some disease, some abnormality, fearing that the punishment for her crime was going to be taken out in the most devastating way possible: not on her own soul but in the bodies of her children” (157). Dr Philobosian feeds Desdemona’s fears when he explains ancient beliefs about the causes of birth defects: “Birth is a fascinating subject. Take deformities, for instance. People used to think they were caused by maternal imagination. During the conjugal act, whatever the mother happened to look at or think about would affect the child.” (115-6) This belief is at the core of *Tristram Shandy*, where, ideally, the Homunculus is escorted “safe to the place destined for his reception” by animal spirits. During his own conception, however, Sterne’s narrator fears, these animal spirits may have been “scattered and dispersed” by his mother’s infamous question about the clock, which distracts and interrupts his father: “the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost” might explain the protagonist’s ill-starred fate, and especially his “misfortunes.”¹⁷⁹ Cal, a Shandean narrator-protagonist, alludes to these same beliefs when he relates the occurrences of the “momentous night” which sees the simultaneous conception of both his parents in the same house: the four grandparents are all “aroused by the performance” of the Minotaur as a play, and the monster is on their minds during conception. Seduced by the play and the erotic portrayal of the hybrid monster devouring the virgins, they set the theme for Cal’s life, thus

¹⁷⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, 224.

¹⁷⁹ Sterne, 1-3.

confirming the ancient belief that fate is determined by external influences during conception, as in Sterne's novel: stories join genetic inheritance to form a hybrid complex of influences.

In his remarks on historical attitudes towards deformities, Dr Phil cites as his source Ambroise Paré's *On Monsters and Marvels*, an illustrated encyclopedia of curiosities, of monstrous human and animal births, bizarre beasts, and natural phenomena. Paré defines monsters as "things that appear outside the course of Nature", and marvels as "things which happen that are completely against Nature". As potential "causes for monstrous children" he lists "the ardent and obstinate imagination [impression] that the mother might receive at the moment she conceived – through some object or fantastic dream – of certain nocturnal visions that the man or woman have at the hour of conception."¹⁸⁰ Such beliefs were so influential that the church suggested intra-uterine baptisms in case "you were worried that you might be carrying a monstrous baby" (116). This is precisely what Desdemona is afraid of during labour, having nightmare visions of giving birth to a legless, armless, faceless child (121). Desdemona, however, discovers even more grounds for worry when Dr Phil proceeds to explain: "We know now that most birth deformities result from the consanguinity of the parents. [...] Causes all kinds of problems. Imbecility. Hemophilia. Look at the Romanovs. Look at any royal family. Mutants, all of them." (116) Dr Phil's modern medical explanations provide her fears, previously rooted in moral qualms only, with a scientific foundation.

When Callie first learns about his condition, she finds the very word "monster, in black and white" as a synonym for the term "hermaphrodite" in the dictionary, a "venerable, old book, the shape and size of a headstone", which pronounces "the definition of myself" for all eternity, society's "official, authoritative [...] verdict" (430-1). Her respect for the book, which to her "contained the collected knowledge of the past while giving evidence of present social conditions" (431), heightens the impact of the discovery, and the feelings of the inescapability of her fate. Callie stops her research at that point; had she persisted in looking up the entry for "monster", however, she would have found the etymology of the word linked to *demonstrare* – to exhibit, to show, and to show off: a clear indication of society's fascination with the abnormal and grotesque, of which freak shows are born.

Cal's fears of being exposed and ostracized are confirmed when he is assaulted by two men in San Francisco. Their various mis- and re-interpretations of his gender identity highlight how such perceptions shape the opinions and behaviour of others towards us. Taking him for a boy at first, the assaulters realize the gender confusion when scrutinizing Callie's photo ID: "It's a chick! [...] No, I mean *him*.' He's pointing down at me. 'It's her! He's a she.'" (476). This realisation sparks their interest in the "goods stashed away under those pants", immediately reducing him to a sexual object. Their flashlight, shone on Cal's genitalia, evokes the exposure in the dark room of the strip club; and the assaulters' verdict on Cal is, "It's a

¹⁸⁰ Paré, 38.

fucking freak [...] I'm gonna puke, man. Look!" Rather than raping him, "he let go of me as though I were contaminated." (476) Cal's ambiguous and undefinable condition provokes disgust and aggression, and finally, after beating him up, the assaulters urinate on him – "twin yellow streams, scintillant, intersected, soaking me" (477) – thus conjuring an image of the double-helix of the DNA, where the causes of his misery, Cal feels, are inescapably inscribed.

A glimpse into the history of society's treatment of such "monsters" places Cal's experiences in a centuries-long tradition of individuals defined as 'abnormal' or "genetically unfortunate,"¹⁸¹ finding themselves at the mercy of doctors, lawyers, the church and society in general, and frequently having to live as outcasts. Ambroise Paré mentions that sixteenth-century society sometimes (wrongly) reacted to such people by confining them in isolation: "they estimated that such a monstrous thing was a bad augury and presage for them, which was the reason for driving monsters away and exiling them."¹⁸² Cal's two nineteenth-century predecessors, although not shunned by society completely, also had to come to terms with being cast in the role of the monster: Herculine Barbin was called "one of the preternatural monsters of the age" in contemporary newspapers,¹⁸³ and Gottlieb Göttlich, after discovering his ambiguity, went on to earn "fame and fortune by exhibiting himself at medical schools and to the lay public" (19).¹⁸⁴ Their cases shed light on society's need for a clear definition of male and female, as discussed above, but also, even more importantly, they question the boundaries of what we define as human, and highlight society's need to define itself in opposition to what is perceived as monstrous or grotesque.

The idea of the hybrid monster child also springs up in a context very different from the setting of *Middlesex*: nineteenth-century discussions of racial hybridization saw intermarriage between races as prone to creating monstrous offspring.¹⁸⁵ "Hybridity's challenge to fixed categories"¹⁸⁶ and its refusal to comply with a dualistic and simple world view, adding shades of grey to a black and white perspective, is perceived as threatening to society and its norms: a hybrid being withstands easy classification, and thus unsettles and scares us by overthrowing

¹⁸¹ Jones, 12.

¹⁸² Paré, 32.

¹⁸³ G. S. Rousseau, book review of *Herculine Barbin. Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, ed. by Michel Foucault, transl. by Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), *Medical History*, 25:2 (1981), 211-2: 211.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Dreger, 165. Dreger, by pointing to Göttlich's "fame and fortune", re-evaluates the freak shows that such human "monsters" were subjected to and, to a certain degree, shows them as empowering, in the same way as Cal's exhibiting himself at the 69ers club helps him develop a new and proud relationship to his body. Dreger shows that, instead, the contemporary medical approach to ambiguous and unusual anatomies can make an individual feel "freakish", violated and ashamed.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Carlyle, for example, in 1849, claims that the anti-slavery lobby and liberal thought, allowing intermarriage between different races, "will give birth to progenies and prodigies; dark extensive moon-calves, unnameable abortions, wide-coiled monstrosities, such as the world has not seen hitherto!", in Thomas Carlyle, "The Nigger Question", in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 5 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), IV, 348-83: 354.

¹⁸⁶ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2005), viii.

our concept of a well-ordered world. Hybridity is thus perceived as subversive per se, and goes beyond the racial context to encompass any aspect in life marked by duality and opposition.

Alongside the two real hermaphrodites Cal also finds a mythical predecessor: the Minotaur, a creature half-man half-bull, a “strange, hybrid monster-child,”¹⁸⁷ whose tale accompanies the family story. “In the late autumn of 1923, minotaurs haunted my family” (118) in various shapes and forms, unleashing a host of reverberations. The performance of the myth (“a play about a hybrid monster”, 108) creates an atmosphere of arousal and sparks the simultaneous conception of Milton and Tessie. Desdemona, during her pregnancy, feels as if trapped in a maze (113), and the protagonist sees themes from the minotaur’s story repeated in his own life (“Wouldn’t I sneak up to a girl pretending to be asleep? And wouldn’t there also be a play involved, and somebody dying onstage?”, 109). The Minotaur myth becomes a major reference point for the narrator when growing up: “The only way my father could think of to instill in me a sense of my heritage was to take me to dubbed Italian versions of Greek myths” (123). Greek heritage is thus passed down through a transposed medium and a foreign language; it has gone through yet another stage of development, just as Ovid’s version of the myths was already an adaptation or interpretation of earlier tales.

Callie, who initially “just root[ed] for Theseus” (123), later changes her interpretation of the myth to empathise with the Minotaur himself, whose fortune was “academic to me then, the sad fate of the creature. Asterius, through no fault of his own, born a monster. The poisoned fruit of betrayal, a thing of shame hidden away” (123).¹⁸⁸ The meaning of the story for Cal becomes clear to him only in retrospect, and identification with the creature’s predicament is delayed: as an adult, he refers to his “wandering in the maze these many years, shut away from sight. And from love, too.” (107) Similarly, the conception of the hybrid creature, the narrator himself, is delayed for another generation, skipping that of the parents. This shift in his point of view to empathy with the monster marks the start of Cal’s redefinition of monstrosity, non-normality and otherness as ultimately normal: his narrative unmask such classifications as inadequate, not just for him but for everyone:

I was beginning to understand something about normality. Normality wasn’t normal. It couldn’t be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. But people – and especially doctors – had doubts about normality. They weren’t sure normality was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost. (446)

Normality is recognized as a construct, an artificial decision based on an average of all individual manifestations. Irregularity and individuality are thus uncovered as the true norm, defining our existence and identity. In Steve Jones’ words, “Biology has now shown that

¹⁸⁷ Ovid, VIII. 156.

¹⁸⁸ “Minos planned to remove this shame from his house and to hide it away in a labyrinthine enclosure with blind passages.” Ovid, VIII. 157-8.

perfection is a mirage and that, instead, variation rules.”¹⁸⁹ And of course, randomness and imperfection are an integral force within Darwinian evolution, which, as Franco Moretti states, “sees precisely in morphological imperfection proof of the evolutionary path”. Evolutionary progress thus depends on “the interweaving of two wholly independent paths: random variations and necessary selection,”¹⁹⁰ a concept which Moretti equally applies to history itself, and which reiterates the dual influences on human life alluded to throughout the novel: chance and fate, nature and nurture, paternal and maternal heritage, and the repetition and innovation at the core of both genetic heritage and the Greek matrimonial values.

And, indeed, Cal’s redefinition of hybridity as the true norm inverts the relationship of normality, purity, perfection and beauty with their precise opposites. “Beauty is always freakish” (217), grown-up narrator Cal is told by Julie, the young woman he falls in love with. Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Pied Beauty”, cited by the narrator when contemplating the Obscure Object’s imperfections yet admiring her beauty (323), praises God for “dappled things”, and for “All things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?).”¹⁹¹ Here, he turns Julie’s statement on its head: it is precisely the dappled, freckled, freakish things that *are* beautiful. And just as beauty is seen as freakish, and imperfection as beautiful, normality is questioned and abandoned for a diverse and hybrid concept of the world.

4.7 Bridging the Gender Divide

Historical discussions of racial hybridity often revolved around the question of how to define the two parent parties involved: as belonging to separate species or as members of the same species. This in turn has implications for the fertility of the offspring.¹⁹² The sexual hybridity of *Middlesex*’s narrator (who is indeed infertile) is of course the product of a male and female of the same species and race – and in fact, it is precisely the very closeness of the two parents that leads to the genetic defect: not difference but (genetic) similarity. Cal’s hybridity, rather than merging two ethnic backgrounds, spans the gap between male and female; and indeed, Eugenides describes men and women as belonging to different worlds, when he refers to the separate male and female spheres within traditional Greek society, which are transferred to Detroit: “The house was sex-segregated like the houses in the *patridha*, the old country, men in the *sala*, women in the kitchen. Two spheres with separate concerns, duties, even – the evolutionary biologists might say – thought patterns.” (92)

¹⁸⁹ Jones, 20.

¹⁹⁰ Moretti, 5-6.

¹⁹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty”, in *Poems*, ed. by Robert Bridges, 2nd ed. (London: Humphrey Mitford, 1933), 30.

¹⁹² The biological definition of the difference between species rests on the fertility of the offspring: descendants of parents from two different species are infertile, whereas those with parents within the same species can procreate.

Cal has unique access to both these worlds, poignantly illustrated by the teenage girl Callie's visits to the beautician: "Sing, Muse, of Greek ladies and their battle against unsightly hair! Sing of depilatory creams and tweezers! Of bleach and beeswax!" (308) This mock-heroic invocation of the muse is a rewriting, albeit tongue-in-cheek, of the male-dominated battles recounted in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the perspective shifts to a female point of view, and to battles fought against one's own body: a cultural ideal of beauty instils in the mind the desire to control and transform the body. While Calliope's growth of bodily hair during puberty is in fact due to her being genetically male, it is ironically precisely the process of ridding herself of these signs of masculinity, misunderstood as the development of a girl into a woman, that introduces her to the exclusively feminine world of the beauty salon. Woolf similarly satirizes such stereotypical interests, when Orlando, on his change from man to woman, abandons his favourite occupation of playing warlike games that involve chopping off Moors' heads, for the more feminine pastime of tending to clothes and hairstyles.¹⁹³ Both texts draw attention to gender stereotypes here, exaggerating them for comic effect and thus show up their oversimplification of gender differences. While both characters have unique access to male and female worlds, due to their sex change, they simultaneously question the division into these gendered worlds, and the limits this imposes on everyone.

That such expectations are still at play in our contemporary society is shown most obviously by *Middlesex's* psychologist's approach to the "psychological narrative" that Callie is asked to write to help determine her gender identity, and to help decide on how to deal with her condition in the future. This narrative is subjected to an analysis of "the gender giveaways of my prose, of course": male versus female storytelling, according to the psychologist, corresponds to narrative linearity versus cyclicity and circularity; he notes "my *jouissance*, [...] my Victorian flourishes, my antique diction, my girls' school propriety" (418). And yet, from the beginning, the narrator refuses to be nailed down to a "linear, masculine", or a "circular, feminine" mode of writing: "All I know is this: despite my androgenized brain, there's an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell." (20) By dissolving the boundaries between male and female, in his body as in his text, the narrator defies psychologists' and readers' expectations of fitting into a gendered category, and shows these categories to be artificial and ultimately useless.

The two genders co-exist in Cal on various levels, and yet he bridges more than just male and female: his looks, for instance, are described as combining masculine and feminine traits, as well as showing his dual cultural heritage and his familial ancestry, all expressed in "my Byzantine face, which was the face of my grandfather and of the American girl I had once been." (529) The role he plays in his family is essentially a feminine one, inherited from his grandparents inventing their genealogy on their voyage: "am I wrong to think that my obsession

¹⁹³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 131, 133.

with family relations started right there in the life boat? [...] I was supposed to provide the feminine glue that keeps families together” (72). Keeping the family ties strong, remembering birthdays, “dutifully oozing feminine glue” (72), and being his mother’s confidante (“Even now, though I live as a man, I remain in essential ways Tessie’s daughter”, 520) are tasks the family tradition ascribes to women. Gender stereotypes are imposed from the outside, but are also perceived as visceral, having been internalized. In the key scene of the haircut, symbolizing Cal’s transition from female to male, “the feelings inside that boy were still a girl’s. To cut off your hair after a breakup was a feminine reaction.” (445) When Cal is assaulted by men, “I squeeze my legs together, the girlish fears still operating in me” (475). The remnants of Calliope left in the adult Cal surface every so often, such as when he encounters prostitutes and contemplates their fate:

Maybe they would be just the thing for me. Remunerated to tolerate most anything. Shocked by nothing. And yet [...] my feelings toward them were not a man’s. I was aware of a good girl’s reproachfulness and disdain, along with a perceptible, physical empathy. As they shifted their hips, hooking me with their darkly painted eyes, my mind filled not with images of what I might do with them, but with what it must be like for them, night after night, hour after hour, to do it. (307)

Cal identifies with them on two levels: he feels a female empathy with their fate of being reduced to sex objects, and, as “intergalactic streetwalkers” (307) they, like him, bridge universes. Orlando too approaches a prostitute when a woman but dressed as a man; and while the girl “roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one”, her very own knowledge of womanhood makes her see through all the prostitute’s “deceptions”. This intimate insight into both sexes allows her to “censure both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each;”¹⁹⁴ indeed, she is “neither, and yet both”. Reconciling the gender divide has been a part of Cal’s identity from the start. This “ability to communicate between the genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both” (269), manifests itself in an unusual capacity to empathize. Inspecting a statue on Dr Luce’s desk, a man and a woman making love, Callie “looked once again to see how other people were made. As I looked, I didn’t take sides. I understood both the urgency of the man and the pleasure of the woman.” (435)

Cal’s intimate insight into both men and women brings us back to the figure of Tiresias, the blind seer: his ability to understand mutually exclusive states of being raises him above the average person, granting him the power to transcend the boundaries imposed on ‘normal’ mortals. The re-evaluation of Cal’s hybrid state from freak and monster to visionary is supported by Zora, Cal’s hermaphrodite colleague at the 69ers club, who teaches him that in certain cultures sexual hybrids are worshipped rather than ostracised: perceived not as hideous and frightening beings, but as harking back to the mythical original creature that unites

¹⁹⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 150; 113.

masculine and feminine: “Plato said that the original human being was a hermaphrodite. Did you know that? The original person was two halves, one male, one female. Then these got separated. That’s why everybody’s always searching for their other half. Except for us. We’ve got both halves already” (489) – a view Cal finds consoling albeit not completely convincing. Here, it is precisely the hybrid being that is perceived as the unified ideal that all human beings strive for. Indeed, Cal’s family history mirrors Plato’s image of the original person through the unified childhood self of Desdemona and Lefty: they feel as one, “a four-legged, two-headed creature”, and, when alone, Desdemona feels her “shadow cut in half” (25). One generation later, Milton and Tessie grow up in “the traditional Stephanides way”, with a blanket between their beds but during the day forming “a double shadow” (133). The split into two is the driving force behind re-unification and ultimately life: sexuality is driven by a sense of incompleteness, and the rejoining of the separated halves leads to procreation. Thus Cal combines in himself the union that his parents and grandparents sought to achieve (and his ambiguous sexuality is, of course, the result of precisely these unions). This empowering new concept of self, as combining opposites that are meant to be joined, culminates in Cal’s final perception of himself as a new (but equal) species: when he returns after his self-revelatory journey to San Francisco, he is hopeful and optimistic about his new life as a man, and he sees Middlesex, his home, as “a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world. I couldn’t help feeling, of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me.” (529)

The narrator’s gender hybridity is frequently reflected in language and its grammatical ambiguity, showing the extent to which language is based on a dualistic view of the world; multiple casual remarks take on another level of meaning for the reader and serve to highlight Cal’s status of in-betweenness as well as the ambiguity of language. Having just become a boy, his San Francisco friends tease him, “you throw like a girl, man” (471); when Milton resolves to rescue his runaway daughter, “he vowed again that he would find me; he would get me back. Somehow or other.” (475) While the expression “somehow or other”, for Milton, grammatically refers to “get back”, for Cal and the reader it can also refer to “me”, thus denoting the difference between boy or girl, son or daughter. Similarly, when Cal has his hair cut, as a major step towards ‘becoming’ a boy, the hairdresser remarks: “See how the other half lives” (442), a remark much more poignant for Cal (and the reader) than it was meant to be by the barber. This expression, generally used to emphasise class distinction, here acquires new meaning, referring to the gender divide, and the novel thus draws attention to our divisive view of life in so many areas.

Through language we thus unconsciously perpetuate a world view based on binary oppositions and divisions, which structure biological and cultural spheres alike. When the narrator repeatedly entices the reader to look closer, he also asks us to scrutinise language, pointing us to what is said ‘between the lines’. At the same time, he highlights a lack of detail and precision which is also inherent in the way we use language:

Emotions, in my experience, aren't covered by single words. I don't believe in 'sadness,' 'joy,' or 'regret.' Maybe the best proof that the language is patriarchal is that it oversimplifies feeling. I'd like to have at my disposal complicated hybrid emotions, Germanic traincar constructions like, say, 'the happiness that attends disaster.' Or: 'the disappointment of sleeping with one's fantasy.' I'd like to show how 'intimations of mortality brought on by aging family members' connects with 'the hatred of mirrors that begins in middle age.' I'd like to have a word for 'the sadness inspired by failing restaurants' as well as for 'the excitement of getting a room with a minibar.' I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever. (217)

The "complicated hybrid emotions" he describes here point to the limits of language failing to express the subtleties of experience and the complexities of life adequately; at the same time, however, it is precisely these limitations that are the motivation for writing, for creating a narrative: as single words are too superficial and inexact, they need to be fleshed out and to be embedded in stories in order to make sense. The narrator is confronted with a lack of words for his unique condition, which is necessarily accompanied by unusual emotions, and in order to give us an insight into the complexity and hybridity involved he resorts to a "Germanic traincar construction" of a novel.

The notion that the language we have at our disposal is not able to express the complexity of emotions that we experience is also expressed in J.S. Foer's novel. His *Encyclopedia of Sadnesses* as well as the *Book of Dreams* resemble Eugenides' hybrid emotions in their attempt to do justice to their complexity, their uniqueness, the attempt to distinguish between related emotions that one only notices when looking closely. "Brod discovered 613 sadnesses, each perfectly unique, each a singular emotion, no more similar to any other sadness than to anger, ecstasy, guilt or frustration. Mirror Sadness. Sadness of Domesticated Birds. Sadness of Being Sad in Front of One's Parent. Humor Sadness. Sadness of Love Without Release."¹⁹⁵ In both texts, language is found lacking when attempting to encompass the complexity of emotions, of life, and of our sense of self. This complexity extends not only to hybrid fragmented identities like Cal's, but is universal, emphasising the need for detail, for subtlety, and ultimately for storytelling, as language is our only means of overcoming its own shortcomings, and celebrating the differences that divide and simultaneously link us.

5 Conclusion

The novel's dissolution of narrative linearity is expressed in the narrator looking to the past as well as the future, in an almost prophetic way. Early on in the novel, a figure from ancient Greek mythology is evoked: that of Tiresias, whom Callie impersonates in the school play, a role which predicts her sexual change. Woolf's *Orlando* similarly ponders the very question the

¹⁹⁵ Foer, 79.

mythical seer is asked by Zeus and Hera: “Which is the greater ecstasy? The man’s or the woman’s?,”¹⁹⁶ and arrives at the same conclusion as the ancient predecessor, namely favouring the pleasure of the woman. Orlando as well as Cal (who, in the novel, is not asked to decide on this matter) thus follow in the tradition of the blind seer, who has experienced both male and female roles and loses sight only to gain vision.

According to Cavarero, Tiresias the seer “personifies the omniscience for the myth itself”; past, presence and future blend into one in his prophecies: “the times of the story are already condensed into the present of his soothsayer’s memory.”¹⁹⁷ Tiresias predicts a second birth to Oedipus on the day he learns about his story: “This day will give you life and it will destroy you.”¹⁹⁸ So the realization of his new and true identity is equalled to a second birth, just like that of Cal: knowing himself gives life to Cal and destroys Calliope. “From the myth’s omniscient point of view, such a daimon [destiny] can thus be read as a prophesy brought inexorably to fulfilment.”¹⁹⁹ Cal’s prophet is not Tiresias but his grandmother Desdemona, who, before his birth, predicts him to be a boy, and whose soothsaying spoon proves right in the end. Unlike Oedipus, Cal, however, is not destroyed by the prophecy coming true; his incestuous, silk-spinning ancestors instil in him the power not to blind himself but to become a seer and a narrator of his own life, and thus to survive.

Salman Rushdie describes the impact of distance, rupture and emigration as able to provide those who experience such disruptions with “a kind of double perspective.” Being “at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society” allows them “a stereoscopic vision” in place of “whole sight.”²⁰⁰ Without using the term hybridity, he describes a hybrid identity here, which, like Cal’s, enriches at the same time as it limits. Sterile like Saleem, the empowerment that Cal derives in the end from his condition as founding member of a new species, with his text as legacy instead of children, places him in the tradition of the storyteller figure, with the abilities of a visionary that raise him above others. And yet, throughout his text, he emphasises that he is not only an exceptional character with a unique fate, but also a representative of human experience – just as we would expect from a traditional autobiographer, whose story, although exceptional, represents a truth transferable to us all. Cal’s narrative lays bare a number of assumptions conventionally held about autobiography; and by relating his own ambiguous and hybrid body, life, and story to that of every human being, he denounces the illusion of the unified self narratable in a text. By constructing himself as an other, and by simultaneously drawing attention to everyone’s potential to be other, he makes us see through the monster’s eyes.

¹⁹⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 109.

¹⁹⁷ Cavarero, 13.

¹⁹⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, transl. by E.F. Watling (Baltimore: Penguin, 1947), 38.

¹⁹⁹ Cavarero, 12.

²⁰⁰ Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands”, 19.

III “The origin of a story is always an absence”: Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*

1 “What Does It Remember Like?”

JEWS HAVE SIX SENSES

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing... memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks [...] that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: *What does it remember like?*²⁰¹

This entry in the *Book of Antecedents*, a fictional chronicle in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, places Jewish memory not in the realm of mental faculties but firmly within that of physical, sensual experiences, deeply engrained in a people that has suffered persecution, destruction and pain for centuries. The sensuality of remembrance recalls Jeffrey Eugenides’ distinction between two kinds of memory, one being located in the mind, the other one a bodily faculty: “But what humans forget, cells remember. The body, that elephant....”²⁰² The kind of memory that the cells transmit through the genetic code proves more ingrained and reliable than our conscious cerebral efforts to remember. However, the passage also highlights the novel’s emphasis on the relationship between time and memory: the final question asks not only about previous experiences of an object or event, but also about the implications that they will have for our future memory of it. It anticipates a future in which this object or event will be remembered, thus interlinking past, present and future inseparably, dissolving the distinctions between them, creating a synchronicity of temporal layers: “the present exists as an echo of the past, the past is always a shadow behind the present moment.”²⁰³ As the *Book of Antecedents* shows, memory is continuously reinterpreted and new layers are added, always influenced by hindsight.

While chapter II has examined the ways in which identity and narrative are mutually implicated, I now take a closer look at the central role of memory in autobiographical texts. “We *are*, after all, our memories,”²⁰⁴ as psychologist James McGaugh expresses it, placing memory at the core of our selves and the construction of our identity, and thus of all (auto)biographical texts, preoccupied as they are with recreating and re-evaluating past

²⁰¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 198-9.

²⁰² Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London, New York and Berlin: Bloomsbury, 2002), 99.

²⁰³ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity. Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), 142.

²⁰⁴ James McGaugh, *Memory and Emotion. The Making of Lasting Memories* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), 2.

experiences, and constructing and conveying a sense of self. The concepts of memory and identity are as intricately connected with each other as they are with narrative as a fundamental means of conceiving of one's self and of storing and articulating memories. Memory, like identity, is relational: it functions within a collaborative framework, depends on interactions with others, creates a collective memory culture; in short, "memory needs others."²⁰⁵ The question of how memories can be passed on is relevant within any community, and particularly so in the context of family stories. The transmission and preservation of memory, however, necessarily confronts us with its elusiveness and unreliability; its interrelation with imagination when writing about the past is inevitable. Jonathan Safran Foer has made this tension the creative core of his novel: *Everything Is Illuminated* is concerned with the importance of memory for one's sense of identity and belonging to a continuous family tradition, and particularly examines what happens when memory is erased and the family story is lost. The ensuing interplay of imagination and memory, indeed, the imagination *of* memory and a family past, are at the centre of this self-reflective text, which shows the alternatives that fiction offers to the commemoration of an unknown past.

Everything Is Illuminated recounts an imaginative journey into an unknown past, the story of the narrator's grandfather, but also a physical journey to the geographical location of the grandfather's survival. A Jewish American student, who shares the author's name, Jonathan Safran Foer, as well as a number of his characteristics, travels to Ukraine to find out about his grandfather's past in his home shtetl, to "see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren't for the war." (59) The clues the narrator possesses for his quest are sparse and speculative: a 50-year-old photograph he believes to portray his Jewish grandfather with the woman, Augustine, who saved his life in the Second World War, during the Nazi invasion of the shtetl, the name of his grandfather's Ukrainian shtetl, Trachimbrod, and some outdated maps are all he has to go on. His travel agency, "Heritage Touring", provides him with a local guide and translator, Alex (a student his own age, with an idiosyncratic and limited grasp of English), his grandfather as a driver (whose conviction that he is blind is a portent for the journey in(to) the dark that they are about to undertake), and their smelly dog. In the course of their heritage road trip, they look for Jonathan's past but instead uncover Alex's grandfather's story.

Jonathan's quest is motivated by the fact that without his grandfather's escape, and thus without Augustine, he himself would not exist; it is thus a search for a person and a place intimately connected with his own existence, and he finds an old lady who seems to embody the lost place: "You are here. I am it." (118) Her identity remains ambiguous, however; the grandfather's story cannot be unearthed. Along with the destroyed Ukrainian Jewish village, its memory is almost completely eradicated. Confronted with this loss of history, the grandson-

²⁰⁵ Jeffrey Prager, *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1998), 70-1.

narrator composes his own legend of the Ukrainian town, spanning several generations, and, in the process, creates his own ancestors.

These different layers of the novel are reflected in its structure of three interwoven strands: the first of these – the travelogue of the “hero” Jonathan’s journey with Alex, the grandfather and their dog – is recounted by Alex, who sends his account of events to Jonathan in several instalments. A second level of narration, a series of letters typographically set in italics, is Alex’s correspondence with Jonathan, in which a dialogue about their respective writing unfolds; the letters, although written exclusively by Alex, allow an indirect insight into Jonathan’s replies and respond to his comments on the first strand, Alex’s travelogue. They also contain Alex’s thoughts on Jonathan’s emerging novel, in which he creates a magical history of the shtetl and a long line of his ancestors: starting with the water birth of his great-great-great-great-great-grandmother Brod and her adoption by Yankel the usurer in 1791, it follows the family story up to the narrator’s grandfather Safran and the destruction of the shtetl in 1942. The chapters of this novel constitute a third level of narration, marked by wavy script for the chapter titles. The closing passage is strictly speaking a fourth level, with a third speaker: it is Alex’s grandfather’s good-bye letter to Jonathan, translated and sent by Alex; the grandson thus becomes the grandfather’s mouthpiece.

This multi-voiced narrative approaches the original quest – a journey meant to transpose the traveller in time and in space, physically and mentally – from various angles, none of which, however, can truly “illuminate” what Jonathan initially intended to uncover. Instead, it shows the inaccessibility of the past, while simultaneously presenting a collaborative approximation to this past. Foer’s novel is as much about the evolving friendship between the two young men,²⁰⁶ their discussions of each other’s writings, the development of Alex’s relationship with his own grandfather, and the learning process they both undergo, as it is about the quest upon which Jonathan embarks. Ultimately, what starts as one grandson’s journey to uncover his grandfather’s past results in another grandson unexpectedly witnessing his own grandfather being confronted with his history: Alex’s revelations about his own family’s past as well as Ukrainian history are the inadvertent outcome of Jonathan’s journey of discovery.

Alex and Jonathan are constructed as foil characters throughout the novel: they are the same age, both “sired in 1977” (1); they are both students, love their “miniature brothers” (104) and occasionally “think alike” (60), and they share their self-consciousness about their height.²⁰⁷ More importantly, their family stories marked by absence and silence mirror each

²⁰⁶ Indeed, Menachem Feuer, for instance, reads the novel as primarily the novel of an unequal friendship between the descendant of a victim and that of a perpetrator of the Holocaust in Ukraine (cf. Menachem Feuer, “Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*”, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25:2 (2007) 24-48: 24-5).

²⁰⁷ Alex’s physical description of himself evolves from “I am unequivocally tall” (3), to thanking Jonathan for “not mentioning the not-truth about how tall I am. I thought I might appear superior if I was tall.” (24) Jonathan, in turn, asks for Alex’s initial description of himself as “severely short” (31) to be

other: both have lost one grandparent to cancer (143) and have grown up with another who has kept their past concealed: while Jonathan's grandmother shrouds her Jewish European past and her husband's story in silence ("We couldn't ask her anything about it", 61), Alex's grandfather, pretending to be blind, has attempted to shed his guilty and traumatic past in vain. The shift of focus from Jonathan's family story to Alex's is prompted by the latter's revelation about his grandfather's role in the war: Alex is confronted both with a guilty family past and with collective shame; his initial disbelief in and denial of Ukrainian violence and anti-semitism during World War II makes way for slow acceptance and instigates a process of maturation. This trajectory expresses itself through Alex's emancipation from his American "hero" the writer: he renounces his dream of emigrating to the USA to become a wealthy American, and at the same time becomes conscious of the fact that he has his own voice and a story to tell in his own right (145).

This chapter examines how Foer articulates the transmission of silenced or lost traumatic memory through the generations, looking particularly at the dynamics of grandparent-grandchildren relationships. The gaps and absences that the narrator-protagonist is confronted with shape his sense of self and the way he deals with the past, and his narrative is a conscious product of the negotiation of silences and voids, with the image of the hole as leitmotif. Due to the inconclusiveness of his literal journey, it becomes evident that he needs to fill the gaps through his own writing. I therefore explore the different levels of writing – travelogue, correspondence and fictional shtetl story – for the insights we can gain into how the absent stories and the ancestral traumas affect the grandsons. The ruptures in the family continuity are sutured with the narrative thread; the narrator inscribes himself in an ancestry he himself has fabricated, and which can only ever come out of and lead back to the author-protagonist himself. The complexity of genealogy in Foer's novel, the writing of familial identity, and the ancestral story deriving from authorial narcissistic doubling in the (auto)biographical text are the focus of the following section of the chapter. I then discuss the novel's deep mistrust of memory; forgetting, repression and deficiencies make *aides memoire* such as string and archives necessary. In the chapter's closing section, the title's promise of illumination is tested, leading to a reflection on the novel's numerous ambiguities concerning the re-imagination particularly of traumatic family stories.

Foer's approach to the lost grandfather story, as a heritage journey to the ancestral homeland, will be juxtaposed with another quest for an absent grandfather, a non-fictional account of a journey that starts from remarkably similar premises. Dan Jacobson, in *Heshel's Kingdom*, recounts his own journey of a grandson who has grown up in a different country from his grandparents, on another continent (Jacobson's Jewish Lithuanian family emigrated to

altered to "Like me, he was not tall" (53), remarks which gently expose and mock their self-consciousness and vanity.

South Africa before the Holocaust). He travels to the unknown ancestral homeland in order to (re)connect with a long-dead grandfather who he has never met, but who he feels is intimately connected to his own fate. Like Jonathan, he is confronted with gaps, voids and absences in his search for the eliminated Jewish past, and he encounters an elderly woman too, the “last Jew of Varniai”, who, instead of the grandfather, provides the living link to the lost shtetl: she “represented everyone and was responsible for everything.”²⁰⁸ Jacobson here spells out what Augustine’s “I am it” implies. Like Jonathan’s, his journey does not reveal to him the things he was looking for, but teaches him a knowledge he was not even expecting. Read as the kind of book that Foer (or his character Jonathan) might have written following his journey, Jacobson’s text, often more explicit, more realistic, and more discursive than Foer’s, sheds light on the novelist’s radically different aesthetic, structural and narrative strategies, marked by allusions and omissions, and suffused with metaphors and magic. The comparison between the two texts thus illustrates the diverging limits and opportunities granted by fictional and non-fictional life writing, while both ask: “what does it remember like?”

2 An Inheritance of Absence

Through his journey to Ukraine, Jonathan is attempting to reclaim a heritage riddled with absences on multiple levels: his journey is sparked by the absence of his grandfather and the lack of knowledge of his grandfather’s country; the lack of connection with the ancestral land is all the more painful as it deprives the descendant of a place of mourning. The absence of the grandfather is aggravated by the fact that he doesn’t even exist in stories; the silence of the (still living) grandmother makes impossible even an imaginative connection between grandson and grandfather (although she is also the one who indirectly inspires the journey, as we shall see). The absence of the grandfather therefore encompasses the absence of a place, a story within the family legend, and also, finally, the whole of the culture; this inheritance of absent stories, images, and memories in turn shapes the narrative on multiple levels, creating a void which demands to be filled. This section begins by tracing these absences on their different levels; it then examines their causes (traumatic experiences in the past) and finally their expression in the narrative.

Dan Jacobson calls his grandfather Heshel “a fateful absence, a bodiless name”, and yet he recognises that “it was his *absence* that for so long had made him an unsettling and magnetic ‘presence’ for me.”²⁰⁹ Jonathan, too, is driven by this paradoxical presence because of the

²⁰⁸ Dan Jacobson, *Heshel’s Kingdom* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998), 189.

²⁰⁹ Jacobson, 6; 98.

absence of the grandfather figure. For both grandsons, the physical absence of the grandfather brings home to them two contradictory realisations: it highlights the void of the relationship that they are denied and that they seek to establish belatedly (post mortem) through their journey, but it also makes them aware of the connection that exists even without ever having met: a connection that decides over life and death, and thus is literally vital. For Jacobson, this same realisation is coupled with another, even more crucial one: he is alive because his own grandfather died well before the Holocaust, and thus did not keep his family in their Lithuanian home, where almost certain death would have awaited them; only his own death allowed them to emigrate to the safety of South Africa: “if he had not died prematurely, I would never have been born”, and later: “he had helped to bring me into existence and also done his utmost to prevent my coming into existence [...] His life and his death (together!) were indispensable to my existence.”²¹⁰ This existential connection with the absent grandfather highlights the fundamental need for a family history; the memories of this history are jeopardised when the continuity is ruptured through traumatic events. When Robert Eaglestone stresses the importance of “filiation and affiliation” and the centrality of personal and family memories within Holocaust fiction, he includes a connection to what is absent and unrecoverable, a “negative filiation.”²¹¹ Such a negative filiation is at the core of the novels of both Foer and Jacobson, who posit the absence of the grandfather as a defining absence in their own lives.

For the grandsons, born in the USA and South Africa respectively, the grandfather figure stands for the ancestral unknown and intriguing country of his birth (Ukraine, Lithuania). Again, Jacobson articulates an emotion that underlies Jonathan’s quest implicitly, when he compares his relationship with his grandfather’s homeland to the one he has with his own native country. Jacobson describes feeling irresistibly drawn to it, his need to travel there is “an obligation, even a compulsion.”²¹² The ancestral land, he explains,

had always been a part of my consciousness. A different part. A darker and more sinister *terra incognita*. One that was lightless, unmoving, at the centre of everything else. Around it there revolved, sometimes more obtrusively, sometimes less so, thoughts which were not-thoughts, feelings which were not-feelings, understandings which were not and never will be understandings.²¹³

Like the grandfather’s personality, forever unknown and unknowable, the place that was his home is irrecoverable, and yet, or precisely because of this, the absent place of ancestral trauma is perceived to be “at the centre of everything else”: a centre defined by a void. Jonathan’s search for Trachimbrod yields no visible traces of the past: the site of history is

²¹⁰ Jacobson, 3; 5; 99. This reflection preoccupies Jacobson throughout the book: with hindsight, he can judge his grandfather’s choice to stay in Lithuania, in spite of an opportunity to emigrate to the USA, as lethal, and he ascribes an almost destructive volition to this decision. This explains his intense emotional involvement in his grandfather’s story; and only his trip to Lithuania makes him understand that his grandfather could not know the future any more than he, the grandson, knows his own.

²¹¹ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 107-8.

²¹² Jacobson, 94.

²¹³ Jacobson, 96.

eradicated physically, but also on the current maps (62), and in the minds of the local people. And yet, shards of memory remain, hidden and simultaneously exposed by the silence and the anger their questions about Trachimbrod provoke, suggesting repressed rather than forgotten knowledge. The responses point to the shtetl's absence by highlighting its presence in the past: "Why now?" suggests a search which happens too late, pointing to a time in the past when the search may have been successful. Statements such as "there is no place called Trachimbrod" and "You should stop searching now. I can promise you that you will not find anything" (114) can of course only be uttered with such conviction because of the certainty of the shtetl's destruction: the negative is in fact a confirmation of the loss, and the denial of an answer withholds a knowledge too painful, too difficult, or too guilty.

The absence of the ancestral place has another implication for the sense of loss of the grandfather himself. Commemoration and mourning are often rooted in a physical location, which is provided through the rite of burial and the erection of a gravestone. Dan Miron emphasises the cemetery as the place where all Jews search for a genealogical record, claiming the heritage of the Davidic dynasty by etching the Star of David on the tombstone.²¹⁴ Neither Jacobson nor Jonathan have a gravestone that would allow them to claim such a heritage: although Jacobson discovers a graveyard in Varniai, his grandfather's home town, this graveyard is a graveyard no longer, but has itself received a memorial stone, "a gravestone for nothing less than the cemetery itself": it ceased to be "the Jewish cemetery of Varniai" in 1941, when the Jewish population was eradicated, and the absence of (natural) deaths, names and stones silently highlights the anonymous and indiscriminate deaths the Jews of Varniai suffered instead.²¹⁵ The lack of gravestones here paradoxically highlights the absence of life, a complete destruction that has halted the natural cycle of life and death. In Foer, the memorial for Trachimbrod's inhabitants, to which Augustine finally leads the protagonists, is a commemorative "piece of stone" (189) dedicated to the lost lives: a nameless mass grave. For Jonathan, the single collective tombstone obliterates the search for his own personal family story, and instead places their fate into a collective ancestry. The narrator's alternative memorial for the ancestral shtetl is his novel – a fictional narrativization of the anonymous memorial stone.

The traumatic destruction of the shtetl and its inhabitants has obliterated the personal fate of Jonathan's grandparents. The repercussions of this destruction reach into Jonathan's present, depriving him of family continuity, but they also reach into the past, by obliterating what existed before the shtetl's destruction, too. Jewish culture itself, like his grandfather, is a void in Jonathan's life, unknown like the place of his ancestors: like the family story, a larger communal or cultural heritage is passed down to Jonathan only in fragmented and disrupted

²¹⁴ Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse and New York: Syracuse UP, 2000), 39.

²¹⁵ Jacobson, 189.

fashion. He is cut off from his Jewish roots through a grandfather he never knew and a grandmother who keeps silent about her past; he is unfamiliar with the country of their origin and knows only a few words of Yiddish, the language they spoke; yet as a young adult his desire to reconnect with this lost heritage, along with the grandfather and the ancestral shtetl, becomes strong.

Jonathan's lack of knowledge about his grandparents' culture is juxtaposed with a different kind of lack of knowledge of the past on Alex's part. Growing up as a gentile Ukrainian, and never having seen a Jew in his life (3), Alex has to meet the Jewish American Jonathan to hear for the first time of pre-war Ukrainian antisemitic violence, which led to pogroms from 1821 onwards throughout the "Pale of Jewish Settlement,"²¹⁶ culminating in the Second World War ("The Ukrainians, back then, were terrible to the Jews. They were almost as bad as the Nazis. It was a different world. At the beginning of the war, a lot of Jews wanted to go to the Nazis to be protected from the Ukrainians", 62). Alex's ignorance and disbelief results from both a cultural silencing of a shameful past, and an ongoing anti-semitic attitude in his family, particularly his grandfather.

The absence of the ancestors, their home and culture is perpetuated through the generations, marking Jonathan too: not only does he lack direct contact with his grandparents, he is also deprived of their memories and stories. The silence about the past is rooted not only in the blanks left by Jonathan's prematurely deceased grandfather, but also in the reticence of his living grandmother, who keeps her (or her late husband's) memories of the past to herself. Jonathan's acceptance of her silence – "I knew I wasn't supposed to ask, so I didn't" – is questioned by Alex: "Perhaps she desired for you to ask. [...] Perhaps she needed you to ask, because if you didn't ask, she could not tell you." (159) Alex recognises that at the root of Jonathan's quest is not only the absent grandfather, but, equally importantly, the silent grandmother, whose concealment of the past finally turns into a silent plea to ensure the re-discovery of the obliterated story. It is, after all, the grandmother herself who, late in life, hands the photograph of the grandfather with Augustine to Jonathan's mother, thus providing him, the grandson, with the starting point to his quest. And while he keeps his journey to Ukraine secret from her as he fears detecting things that would distress her (not least, his grandfather's previous wife and children), Alex recognises that Jonathan must break the silence and tell her

²¹⁶ Both the destroyed shtetl and Alex's home town are on the territory of the former Pale of Settlement, where, between the late eighteenth century and 1915, most Russian, Polish and Ukrainian Jews were forced to live. For a detailed account on the Pale and the history of the pogroms, see John D. Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (eds), *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). The first pogroms occurred in Odessa from 1821 onwards; from 1881, there was "mass violence" against the Jews of the Russian Empire (Klier and Lambroza, 3). During the second World War, Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis resulted in one of the worst massacres of the war, that of Babi Yar in Kiev. For an account of the massacre, see Anatoly Kuznetsov, *Babi Yar. A Documentary Novel*, transl. by Jacob Guralisky (London: Sphere Books, 1969).

about it: “if you never inform her, she will never be able to forgive you. And this is what you desire, yes? For her to forgive you? Is not that why you did everything?” (144)

While, as chapter IV will show, in Marcel Beyer’s *Spione* silence is presented as thoroughly negative and destructive, here it is ambiguous: *Everything Is Illuminated* illustrates the complexity of contradictory needs for communication and silence. The grandmother’s silence is juxtaposed with the secrecy of Alex’s grandfather, whose initial refusal of any conversation about his own role in the destruction of the shtetl is mirrored in the local Ukrainians’ silencing of the past. The encounter with Augustine forces the grandfather to confront his past. Jonathan himself, however, through his correspondence with Alex, must reconsider his own incapacity to communicate with his grandmother about the traumatic past. Although Jonathan’s quest is to break through the silencing of the past, silence is needed to allow stories to be told in the first place: when Alex listens to Jonathan’s childhood memories of his grandmother, “I [...] understood that the silence was necessary for him to talk. [...] With my silence, I gave him a space to fill.” (157-8) While the silence of the speaker creates a void that yearns to be filled, the silence of the listener provides the space for the story to unfold. The ambivalent implications of breaking the silence and learning about the past are expressed when Alex, along with the reader, is excluded from a long and intense conversation between his grandfather and Augustine about their joint shtetl past: “Part of me hated this, and part of me was grateful, because once you hear something, you can never return to the time before you heard it.” (156) Silence and secrecy can thus also be a protection against unbearable truths; the encounter with Augustine punctures this protective (or repressive) layer for Alex’s grandfather, whose confrontation with the past ultimately leads him to commit suicide: a deferred death as the consequence of his guilty conscience at having contributed to his best friend’s murder. And yet, while Alex yearns for his grandfather’s story to be rewritten so that he is saved from his guilt, he sees the need for Jonathan to ask the questions that will make his grandmother tell her story, and share her sorrow.

2.1 The Unspeakability of Trauma

The absences in Jonathan’s heritage can all be traced back to his grandparent’s central traumatic and silenced experience in the past, the destruction of the shtetl in 1942. The trauma of the Holocaust has shaped the collective Jewish heritage, fraught by fragmentation, absence and loss, and it has defined the transmission of memories of the past within every personal family story. The impact of traumatic experiences on the sufferer’s identity as well as on the narrative of their life story will be investigated here, as a profoundly disruptive experience which creates absences, holes and voids. Traumatic past experiences challenge any life writing project, paradoxically making it impossible and necessary at the same time to voice an unspeakable past. The focus of my analysis is primarily on Foer’s novel as an

(auto)biographical ancestral narrative, the lost grandparents' story, and the grandson's narrative strategies for re-articulating this void. His text, however, is crucially shaped by the traumatic past and its repercussions; the inheritance of a traumatic past means the irretrievable loss of that past but simultaneously issues an irresistible call to narrative. Therefore a brief examination of contemporary debates on the ways in which trauma, and the Holocaust in particular, impact on life writing will help shed light on the novel; the findings of psychologists, historians, and literary critics provide a useful contextual framework for the challenges that Foer's narrator experiences in his attempt to write the grandfather's story, as well as the story of Alex's grandfather that comes to light unexpectedly.

Foer's novel can be read as a reflection on ways of speaking the unspeakable. A traumatic past presents challenges to an (auto)biographical project that question the possibility of that very project, as it threatens the subject of the life narrative by disrupting the life story and making the continuity that the text tries to achieve almost impossible to re-establish. Chapter II has already explored how the fact that the self, perpetually transforming, exists in different permutations is made obvious by life writing, where an experiencing and a narrating consciousness co-exist in the text. The experience of trauma deepens the rift between the two, making it an almost unbridgeable divide: the consciousness before the traumatic event and that afterwards are barely reconcilable. The coherence of the self, which we create in (and through) the narrative of our selves, is ruptured by the "radical break" of traumatic experiences, often making it "impossible to assimilate the traumatic past into a present which would enable the subject to construct a coherent narrative of the self."²¹⁷ Dominick LaCapra describes the effects of trauma on sufferers as well as their descendants as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence."²¹⁸ The metaphor of the hole will be seen to shape Foer's novel on multiple levels.

Leigh Gilmore shows how a traumatic past undermines the representability that we expect from autobiographical texts; she calls this a fundamental "autobiographical paradox" inherent in any form of life writing: the narrative, derived from personal memory but addressed to a public audience, is placed on the intersection between public and private commemoration, and "the unusual or unrepresentative life becomes representative". This inherently contradictory assertion is challenged, as Gilmore shows, particularly in narratives of trauma:

By definition, trauma names an unprecedented experience, but contemporary writers have revealed trauma's prevalence and capacity to signify representativeness. When self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible: how can the exploration of trauma and the burden it imposes on memory be representative? How can the experience of a survivor of trauma stand for many? How can one tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, when facts, truth

²¹⁷ King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 3; 124.

²¹⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 41.

and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?²¹⁹

Foer's novel, in its quest for a personal story, negotiates this paradoxical relationship between the personal and the communal past: as Jonathan's research into his individual story leaves open many questions, his quest leads to a re-imagination of the collective shtetl story over many generations up to the account of its traumatic destruction. Faced with the loss of the family story, the individual's personal and traumatic past can only be re-imagined by drawing on knowledge of the collective fate, which shapes and obliterates the individual fate. The relationship between personal and communal stories and the comparability of traumatic experiences will be revisited in the conclusion to this chapter.

Traumatic experiences extend beyond the present moment, stressing its original meaning of a *repeated* infliction of a wound.²²⁰ Sigmund Freud has described the effect of psychological trauma as a "repetition compulsion,"²²¹ highlighting both its involuntary and its repetitive nature. Such traumatic repetition continues beyond the individual, but has nothing to do with the life-affirming repetition of patterns that structures the world of *Middlesex*. Instead it is an expression of a psycho-pathology that perpetuates trauma and pain impossible to work through. This Freudian notion can be seen to structure both the psychological effect of trauma and its expression in "the unconscious language of repetition through which trauma initially speaks."²²²

Cathy Caruth describes the pathology of trauma as residing in the fact that it is experienced "belatedly"; the "repeated possession of the one who experiences it"²²³ combines with the "inescapability of its belated impact."²²⁴ For Dominick LaCapra, too, "[t]he traumatic event is repressed or denied and registers only belatedly (*nachträglich*) after the passage of a period of latency."²²⁵ Deferral is symptomatic of trauma, both on an individual and a cultural level, and it is here that the grandsons are caught up in their grandparents' traumas: both Alex's grandfather, who confronts his past late in life, but also the third-generation descendants becoming aware of their past, experience a "deferred recognition of the importance of traumatic series of events in recent history, events one might well prefer to forget". LaCapra describes the all-pervasive and long-lived impact of traumatic experiences on all those involved:

²¹⁹ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2001), 19.

²²⁰ Cf. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 3.

²²¹ Cf. Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through", in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, transl. by John Reddick (London et al: Penguin, 2003), 31-42.

²²² Gilmore, 7.

²²³ Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 4-5.

²²⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

²²⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1998), 9.

The traumatic event has its greatest [...] effect on the victim, but in different ways it also affects everyone who comes in contact with it: perpetrator, collaborator, bystander, resister, those born later. Especially for victims, trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it. But it may raise problems of identity for others insofar as it unsettles narcissistic investments and desired self-images [...]²²⁶

This rupture in memory, which breaks continuity in the victim's life, and which splits the self into a 'before' and an 'after', is passed down as a discontinuity or an absence to descendants. The effect that gaps and silences have on descendants of sufferers of trauma has been examined by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who use the metaphor of the crypt as the "psychic container of the unspoken secret": such secrets, buried in family history, be they traumatic, guilty or shameful, can cause a "transgenerational haunting."²²⁷ Abraham describes unspoken and unspeakable secrets that are silently transmitted to an unwitting descendant, in whom they are lodged unconsciously, as oppressive "phantoms". Esther Rashkin, who bases her literary studies on the two psychoanalysts' work, calls every descendant a victim of a concealed family past: "We are all the psychic products of our infinitely regressive family histories."²²⁸ In Foer's novel, it is once again Alex whose simple words express profound insights, when he says that "Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was." (145) The inevitability of the impact of the past resides not only in generational distance or geographical displacement, but also and crucially in the failure of intergenerational communication, in secrecy, silence and repression of the past, all of which separate Jonathan from the traumatic story of his grandfather.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory', already introduced in the first chapter, foregrounds another aspect of the perpetuation of collective or cultural traumatic memories through the generations, emphasising the descendants' "deep personal connection" to ancestral stories, which, as a novel like Foer's dramatises, transcends the generations. Postmemory, like transgenerational haunting, is not transmitted as "memory", but is marked by a gap of knowledge: it "is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection, but through an imaginative investment and creation."²²⁹ Such imaginative creation is at work in Foer's text: Jonathan's shtetl novel re-creates the ancestral lineage as a story of intergenerational (dis-)continuity. Narrative is posited here as the means through which ruptured continuities can be

²²⁶ LaCapra, *History and Memory*, 8-9.

²²⁷ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994), 159-60, 3. See also Esther Rashkin, who, in *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) examines "the haunting effects of family secrets on characters in narrative" (3), drawing extensively on Abraham and Torok's theories and showing their relevance for literary analysis.

²²⁸ Rashkin, 18. Her perception of the descendant as sufferer from family secrets and silence, based on Abraham and Torok, however also has implications for my analysis of the descendants of 'perpetrators' in Beyer's *Spione*: the passing on of such phantoms has a haunting effect on the receptors, regardless of their content (see ch. IV).

²²⁹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 22-3.

repaired; the unspeakability of trauma, and literature's ways of negotiating (and maybe overcoming) it, questions the very medium in which the traumatic past is transmitted. Leigh Gilmore emphasises the inherent paradox in the attempt to represent trauma linguistically: "Language is asserted as that which can realize trauma even as it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma."²³⁰ Nicola King too suggests that, while the return to the moment before the rupture is impossible, "the reconstruction of lives in writing is, perhaps, one of the ways in which lost time can, in a sense, be restored, and destroyed lives acknowledged."²³¹ This cautious hope is embraced in Foer's novel: "The origin of a story is always an absence" (230), even if that absence makes it a story "too forbidding to continue." (226)

2.2 A Story "Too Forbidding to Continue"

The following section examines in more detail how these absences and voids shape Foer's writing on a number of levels: first I discuss the ways in which the fragmented cultural heritage shapes the novel; then I examine the deeper textual structure to show how absences, voids and holes, as well as the repetitive nature of trauma, resurface through the writing.

Jewish traditions shape the narrative in various ways and on different levels, albeit in a fragmentary, selective, and transformed way, reflective of Jonathan's access to those traditions: his language is interspersed with isolated Yiddish expressions; the sense of humour and tragicomedy evoke Jewish jokes; and the characters, especially in Jonathan's shtetl novel, recall Yiddish folk tales. With the creation of Trachimbrod, Foer draws on a literary trope which has been created by exiled Jewish writers who "tried to save the shtetl from change and time by fictionalizing it."²³² This trope is probably most widely known through the Jewish American musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on Sholem Aleichem's stories of *Tevye the Dairyman*. Eva Hoffman calls this image of the shtetl "the site of the Jewish soul,"²³³ emphasising the often nostalgic emotions that are evoked by it. It is this collective concept that Foer taps into: his shtetl novel draws on a host of very different images of shtetl life – the sentimental and nostalgic reminiscing, the lavish wedding celebrations, the cumbersome and long-winded voting procedures, the quirky characters and quaint traditions of the inhabitants that evoke the tales of Chelm,²³⁴ the religious conflict between the Uprighters and the Slouchers, and the sense of destruction, trauma and loss that is inherent in the shtetl past as well. Foer is conscious of the fictionality of his portrait: Jonathan's encounter with the shtetl of his ancestors is marked by

²³⁰ Gilmore, 6-7.

²³¹ Nicola King, "Structures of Autobiographical Narrative: Lisa Appignanesi, Dan Jacobson, W.G. Sebald", *Comparative Critical Studies* 1:3 (2004), 265-77: 276. Lucia Boldrini and Peter Davies (eds), *Autobiografictions*.

²³² Eva Hoffmann, *Shtetl. The History of a Small Town and an Extinguished World* (London: Vintage, 1999), 185. On the literary tradition of fictionalizing historical shtetls also see Dan Miron's detailed study.

²³³ Hoffman, 184.

²³⁴ In Jewish humour and folklore, Chelm is the legendary capital of foolishness; it is best known through Sholem Aleichem's writings and Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Fools of Chelm and Their History*.

utter absence, and he thus chooses to re-imagine the shtetl's past in a process described by Paul Kriwaczek in his comments on the influence of *Fiddler on the Roof* on the collective image of the shtetl: "revived traditions are more often reinvented out of whole new cloth than truly rediscovered."²³⁵ This is symptomatic of the history of the shtetls, which suffered pogroms from the early nineteenth century on and were eradicated almost completely during World War II. Not leaving much, if anything, to be revived, they have, in postwar Jewish imagination, become "the locus and metaphor of loss."²³⁶ It is this all-pervasive sense of loss that Foer draws on to weave his new cloth of re-imagined shtetl past, and his Trachimbrod story "creates a community which stresses the impossibility of recreating the community."²³⁷

Dominick LaCapra draws a distinction between the terms 'absence' (a transhistorical state) and 'loss' (a particular historical event), warning of the dangers of conflating them:

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia [...] When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impact of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.²³⁸

Foer's novel articulates a dialogue between absence and loss: what for the grandparent generation was an experience of loss the grandson can only experience as an absence; yet through his narrative he re-translates (or re-imagines) his own absences as losses. His novel shows how, in LaCapra's words, the conflation of the two concepts "attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinction (such as that between absence and loss)."²³⁹ Avoiding both "misplaced nostalgia" and "endless melancholy", the novel seizes the discrepancy between absence and loss as creative potential. Rather than imagining "some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made 'us' lose,"²⁴⁰ his narrative creates continuity precisely by articulating fragments, ruptures and voids.

Like Jonathan's relation to Yiddish traditions, *Everything Is Illuminated* is truncated by (metaphorical) holes, which the narrator attempts to negotiate and mend, or indeed circumscribe. The hole illustrates an absence rooted in the grandparents' loss. Negative spaces and absences are often seen as more significant than presences: when a bird dies after having crashed through a window, it is the image of a negative bird in the glass that is left: this "shadow" of the bird is "better proof of the bird's existence than the bird ever was" (38). The outline in the glass, the shape taken out of the window, is (paradoxically) the only perceptible

²³⁵ Paul Kriwaczek, *Yiddish Civilisation. The Rise and Fall of a Forgotten Nation* (New York: Random House, 2005), 23.

²³⁶ Hoffman, 11.

²³⁷ Eaglestone, 130.

²³⁸ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 46.

²³⁹ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 46.

²⁴⁰ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 58.

trace that remains of the bird; the trace, which is the negative (in the photographic sense) of life, remains and in a sense replaces the living bird, while at the same time allowing the onlooker to reproduce the 'positive' image. It can thus be read as a metaphor for life writing, which survives its subject as a lasting trace, but is in many ways its opposite: the effervescence, transience and mortality of life is transposed into the permanence, fixedness and immortality of the image or the text.

Holes are not simply voids, but represent an absence that points to a previous presence; the hole remains as a reminder of the life that once was: "what is here is only what is not here" (49). The hole through which Jonathan's imaginary ancestor Safran (after turning violent as a consequence of his accident in the sawmill) and his wife Brod make love, (re)discovering each other in fragments, is filled with love, and yet prevents Foer's couple from living their love. The hole is a negative space which, however, clearly delineates their lives: "They lived with the hole. The absence that defined it became a presence that defined them. Life was a small negative space cut out of the eternal solidity" (135). When her husband finally dies, Brod cuts around the hole and wears it on a necklace. The hole "is not the exception in life, but the rule. The hole is no void; the void exists around it" (139): absence is at the centre of existence. Indeed, Brod's life is defined by holes and absences from the start: born without mother and without umbilical cord, the baby is at first kept in the synagogue, where the women of the shtetl are only allowed to gaze at her through an "egg-shaped hole" in the wall (20). The evocative image of "an eye in an absent egg" (20) makes the eye of the gazing person take the place of the yolk, which of course is the part of the egg in which life grows. The image of the eye or "I" as both observer and creator can be read as a metaphor for the (auto)biographical narrating consciousness. The fragmented view through the egg, a symbol of negated fertility, also renders obvious Brod's separation from the shtetl women, which makes them hate her as it denies them their ability to mother her. Throughout her life, motherless Brod, who grows up with a foster father only, is seen as the "product of that terrible hole" (129), and she passes on this heritage to her descendants: starting with her son, the narrator's great-great-great-great-grandfather, who was "conceived through the hole" (137), down to the narrator, who too sees himself created and defined by a void: the absence of his inheritance.

The recurring and often obsessive revisiting of the traumatic experience and the perpetuation of pain shapes the story on multiple levels. Yankel is haunted by the cruel leaving note written by his wife: "It kept returning to him. It stayed with him, like a part of him, like a birthmark, like a limb, it was on him, in him, him, his hymn" (45). The note is a memory and a reminder of a personal trauma that keeps repeating itself compulsively in the way described by Freud. The leaving note illustrates the inability to escape traumatic memories, and describes how such a memory becomes an internalised and inalienable part of body and soul. As Abraham and Torok have observed, this haunting is perpetuated even across generations. When Alex translates Augustine's account of the destruction of Trachimbrod for Jonathan, he

expresses his own pain: “You cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them, because when I repeated them, I felt like I was making them new again.” (185) Retelling trauma thus mirrors and perpetuates, in its repetitive structure, the experience of trauma.

In Foer’s novel, Brod’s “Encyclopedia of 613 sadnesses” lists the “sadness of not knowing enough words to [express what you mean]” (211; brackets in original). Language is shown to be insufficient as a means to communicate thoughts and feelings, and the more complex these become, the more we lack appropriate words. Brod’s encyclopedia attempts to do justice to the complexity of sadness, and contains, as one of its entries, the impossibility of achieving just that. Her descendant Jonathan experiences the same limits of language when trying to express the ‘unspeakable’ traumatic past and to overcome oppressive silence. Alex’s incompetence as translator and his inappropriate language mirror the struggle to express something inexpressible; attempting to recount his grandfather’s story, he falters, passing on the task of speaking the unspeakable to Jonathan:

...to write the rest of this story is the most impossible thing [...] (Here it is almost too forbidding to continue. I have written to this point many times, and corrected the parts you would have me correct [...] and written as if I were you writing this, but every time I try to persevere, my hand shakes so that I can no longer hold my pen. Do it for me. Please. It is now yours.) (226)

Thus it becomes Jonathan’s task to recount Alex’s grandfather’s traumatic story; the scale of the horror surpasses the ability of the grandson as storyteller. And yet, even Jonathan needs to retreat behind the story when it becomes “too forbidding” for him too: the scenes of the killing of the shtetl Jews and the grandfather’s betrayal are rendered almost purely in free direct speech; the narrator’s decision to withhold commentary on what is said expresses a retreat from the confrontation with something truly incomprehensible, which resists any mediation or narrativisation.

This technique of relating dialogue while withholding any narratorial mediation is used in both comic and serious passages. The dramatised “tragicomic rendition of the Trachimbrod story” (266) in a *mise en abyme* (172-7) can be traced back to (traditional Jewish) ways of dealing with trauma, an ancient cultural response based on the religion of an unredeemed people, forever living in the hope of the coming of the Messiah. Dan Miron highlights dispersion, suffering, hope, despair, and poverty as all-pervasive topics within Yiddish literature;²⁴¹ yet dealing with such hardships gives rise to cynicism and sardonic irony, as well as the everyday wisdom of people, proverbs, and the cynical Yiddish wit. The protagonists’ changing attitude to humour within tragedy is testament to the tension that the telling of extreme and horrific stories creates in the teller. While initially confident that comedy’s means are the only suitable approach to tragedy (“humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad

²⁴¹ Miron, 21.

story”, 53), Jonathan later revises his opinion: “I used to think that humor was the only way to appreciate how wonderful and terrible the world is, to celebrate how big life is [...] But now I think it’s the opposite. Humor is a way of shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world.” (158) This is a process the novel as a whole repeats: the situational comedy, the slapstick humour, the sardonic remarks that initially pervade the travel account, and the quiriness of the characters in Jonathan’s novel, all wane the closer the story gets to its traumatic focus, and yet, the initial comedy is essential, not only as a contrast to the traumatic story uncovered. Just as Jonathan’s present is overwhelmed by the past, lightness and humour are overwhelmed by tragedy and horror, and yet they provide the protagonist with the strength to approach the horrific story of his ancestors.

In the following, I examine how the connection between the ancestral and the individual story is dramatised in the novel and in what ways the novel maps the existential framework of absence and loss onto the level of intergenerational interaction or the impossibility thereof.

3 Ruptures and Re-Knottings: Family Genealogies

The ruptures in memory and identity that trauma creates, both in individual lives and across generations, shape and simultaneously question the novel’s (auto)biographical project. The writing of the self is conflated with the writing of family history, with the aim of re-establishing the disrupted continuity in writing. Foer’s novel shows continuity (both individual and intergenerational) as resting on two pillars: a given identity (with names as an expression and insurance of family continuity) and a biologically inherited one. The discussion of *Middlesex* has shown a similar dichotomy: while there, heritage and identity are split into a conscious (mental) and an unconscious (bodily) component, here, the conscious component is epitomised by the name (given or chosen) and the unconscious component by the biological factors that determine us: the novel metonymically locates these in the blood on the one hand, and in appearance on the other. Foer’s reflections on inheritance, continuity and identity and their narrative rendition foreground these two aspects in a particularly striking manner.

3.1 Names

The act of naming the “primogenitory children” (5) after their fathers has been, across many cultures, a common ritual of bestowing a cultural, religious and familial identity onto the next generation. Alex’s family observes this tradition: he shares his name with both his father and grandfather. Jonathan’s middle name Safran has similarly been passed down through the generations to the narrator. As names, composed of the given name and the family name, are

markers simultaneously of individuality and of familial and social belonging (aspects of identity that can at times stand in opposition to one another), passing on the father's name emphasises the importance of genealogy and social identity over the individuality of the first-born; continuity through the generations rather than personal selfhood is expressed through the doubly inherited name. To counteract this and to establish an individual sense of self, Alex introduces himself by listing all his different nicknames – some of which are imaginary – that reflect aspects of his personality, including his dreams of being popular and affluent. These different names are an expression of his identity beyond the family and his own personal relationships with other individuals. Placing the intergenerational family belonging above individual identity is taken to an extreme by Brod, who names all her three sons Yankel as a sign of loyalty and love for her deceased foster father (210), and thus jeopardises their individuality in order to create a surrogate ancestral tie. She engenders a lineage reminiscent of biblical families: “Yankel begot Trachimkolker. Trachimkolker begot Safranbrod. Safranbrod begot Trachimyankel. Trachimyankel begot Kolkerbrod. Kolkerbrod begot Safran.” (210) The descendants' names are made up of those of their ancestors, reminiscent of the genetic reshuffling of bases in the DNA, which forms an important leitmotif in *Middlesex*.

The power of names to designate, and even to create, their bearer's identity, holds true for people and places alike. The shtetl itself is subject to a contest of names. Nameless until Trachim's accident, the community seeks a name to literally put the shtetl on the map. The name initially registered, however, is an anti-name: that of the vulgar and loathed citizen Sofiowka, who we have encountered earlier as the dubitable source of Brod's birth story, and who manages to pass his own name on to the authorities. While the absence of a name had never been noticed before, now “the citizens had a name not to go by. Some even called the shtetl Not-Sofiowka” in protest (50), in the absurd notion that the negation of the name might eradicate it. When a second lottery accepts Yankel's choice of “Trachimbrod”, the disappeared father Trachim and the baby become the founding figures of the community, which registers the accident as a creation story, “the beginning of the world” (8). This belief in the creative power of naming is reflected in Alex's wish to rename Odessa as Trachimbrod, “because then Trachimbrod could exist” (54). The act of naming as an integral part of the act of creation is a biblical notion, traceable to the Old Testament, and epitomised by Adam, who, in Genesis, names all the animals and thus bestows on them their designated identity. Identity here is thus not innate but imposed. Naming as an act of creation again confirms the author as creator-figure, who writes people and places into being, creating an imagined ancestral community. At the same time, rejecting a given name and assuming a new one is a form of self-fashioning within the auto-fictional project.

The frequent renamings in the novel are rooted in traumatic events that prompt, as I will show, such rifts in identity and continuity. Accidents and ruptures are frequently connected with births and rebirths: every survival, in Jonathan's shtetl story, demands a re-invention of

identity. Yankel, who was Safran “from birth to his first death” (46-7), loses his “good name” through a disgraceful trial and adopts the name of the man who ran away with his wife. Brod changes her fatally-injured husband’s name, “Shalom-then-Kolker-then-Safran”, to “confuse the Angel of Death” (136) and to save his life. Similarly Alex’s grandfather, at the very end, confesses that he has only had the name Alex for forty years (275); before, he was Eli, who betrayed his Jewish friend Herschel to the Nazis, and was thus the immediate trigger for Herschel’s murder (152, 247-52). After his betrayal, “I knew that I had to change everything to leave everything behind” (251). Changing one’s name means the start of a new life with a new identity, attempting to escape danger, shed guilt or shame, indicating a new beginning, a blank slate, in a sense an ahistoricity: if a name inherited from one’s ancestors means being rooted in the past, a self-chosen, newly adopted one severs those ties. Alex’s grandfather’s new, non-derivative name equals the desire for a re-creation of the self, a self-creation; it is a renewal for the sake of his son, however: the fatherly responsibility for his baby son is the trigger for the betrayal of his friend (“it was for him that I didwhatI did”, 251). His reason for leaving everything behind is to spare his son this shameful and guilty heritage, but his repressed past catches up with him, making him, in his own words, “the worst father”(247). When he commits suicide, he cuts the family ties just as he advises Alex to do (275). And yet, although he himself cannot survive the confrontation with his guilt from the past, he has fathered, as self-baptised Alex, a new line of descendance: after cutting the cords and shedding the name that bind him to his past, he passes his new name on to his son and grandson. In this way, he is similar to Brod, who is the first in a new line and the founder of a new tradition in the shtetl, the yearly Trachimday festival. Brod, neither inheriting her father’s name nor being linked to her mother through the umbilical cord, is thus at the beginning of a long family continuity held together by the paternal line of names and the maternal cords.

The old lady in Trachimbrod who Jonathan, Alex and his grandfather find, finally, has shed her name without assuming a new one; the travellers call her Augustine like the woman they are looking for, although she denies that she is. She *could* be Augustine (with her own name, in the face of trauma, having become unspeakable like that of her mother, 154), but she could also be Lista (who features in Jonathan’s shtetl novel), or she could be her own sister in her account of the Nazi raid (185-8). Her identity remains ambiguous, and she oscillates between various characters of the shtetl past: not being identified allows her to embody the whole of the shtetl, carrying the weight of the traumatic past of an entire eradicated community. Her identity is obliterated in the face of collective trauma and destruction; her survival as an individual retreats behind the mass murder of the community.

Augustine is not the only figure whose identity is ambiguous: the uncovering of Alex’s grandfather’s story unleashes a general loss of security about identity and genealogy. The Jewish name Eli, in the novel, suggests that Alex’s grandfather may in fact have a Jewish past himself, renounced along with his name after the Holocaust. Liev Schreiber, in his 2005 film

version of the novel (which Foer collaborated on), changes the grandfather's name from Baruch to Alex, after he climbs out of the shtetl's mass grave and sheds his Jewish identity. Alex the student may thus have Jewish ancestry, growing up with a grandfather who has created a lineage as a gentile under a name he chose himself. The novel is deliberately ambiguous, suggesting a range of potential histories; among these is the possibility that Alex's father is in fact Herschel's son, rather than that of Alex's grandfather, an interpretation which resonates with the theme of contested fatherhood and Yankel's acceptance of Brod as his foster daughter. It is also suggested by Herschel looking after his friend's baby "as if it were his own. He even called it son." (243) Grandfather's account of pointing out his friend as a Jew during the Nazi raid leads to Alex imagining multiple denunciations:

the truth is that I also pointedatHerschel and I also said heisaJew and I will tell you that you also pointedatHerschel and you also said heisaJew and more than that Grandfather also pointed at me and said heisaJew and you also pointedatHim and said heisaJew and your grandmother and Little Igor and we all pointedateachother [...] he is stillguilty I am I am I am I am I am I am I am? (252)

This passage shows the randomness of fate and the psychology of using human beings as scapegoats; in this environment, anyone could be a victim, "a Jew"; under threat of death anyone can become a traitor to his friend. For Alex, the descendant, however, this opens up questions of inherited responsibility: the inheritance of guilt is paralleled with the passing on of the name, with Grandfather desiring to shed both, and his grandson questioning the very possibility of this act.

While Alex's family continuity is thus defined through the passing down of the name, Jonathan, reflecting on his own ancestry, highlights a more visceral, bodily and unconscious connection: his grandmother "puts her hand on my mother's hand and feels her own blood flow through the veins, and the blood of my grandfather [...] and my mother's blood, and my blood and the blood of my children and grandchildren" (98), in a blood stream that runs through past and future generations. Blood stands, metonymically, as a signifier of kinship; when Alex's grandfather cuts his veins when committing suicide, he literally ruptures the blood ties with his family. This biological connection recalls the genetic identity which the narrators both in *Middlesex* and in *Heshel's Kingdom* foreground as crucial for their sense of self. The metaphor of the blood stream, however, also encompasses the idea of simultaneous change and constancy, reminiscent of Heraclitus' *panta rhei* and the notion of the river that constantly changes while remaining the same. In Foer's novel, as in Eugenides', family continuity encompasses this intricate interplay between change and constancy, dynamis and stasis, identity and non-identity. This duality is dramatised in the wider context of the Narcissus leitmotif and its multiple ramifications in Foer's novel – as a motif to capture the experience of absence, as a mythological symbol of self-reflection, and as a central metaphor for autobiographical self-reflexivity. All these three aspects are refracted in the mirror of family genealogy: the river Brod.

3.2 Rivers and Reflections

The novel foregrounds physical likeness as the most striking evidence for bodily, unconscious inheritance: similarities between family members is often perceived and described as virtual identity. In photographs, the descendants don't just "look like", but they "could be" or even "are" their ancestors.²⁴² It is the family-resemblance between Alex and his grandfather that allows Augustine to recognise him; their likeness is thus the catalyst for the grandfather's story coming to light. Intergenerational identity is reflected in an image that harks back to and re-interprets the autobiographical notion of self-reflection in / through one's text, extending the sense of self to a relational concept of identity. Mirrors which fail to reflect an unambiguous image of an unbroken self have already been discussed in the previous chapter as a metaphor for the protagonist's fragmented and hybrid identity. Here, the focus is shifted: the mirror does not reflect a split self, but rather a self that encompasses a long line of other, ancestral selves. Alex's comment on his own likeness to the photograph of a young grandfather, "It was as if a mirror" (226), is preceded, much earlier, by an entry in the shtetl's compilation of "recurrent dreams", referring to this innate connection to one's ancestors:

4:521 – *The dream that we are our fathers.* I walked to the Brod, without knowing why, and looked into my reflection in the water. I couldn't look away. What was the image that pulled me in after it? What was it that I loved? And then I recognized it. So simple. In the water I saw my father's face, and that face saw the face of its father, and so on, and so on, reflecting backward to the beginning of time to the face of God, in whose image we were created. We burned with love for ourselves, all of us, starters of the fire we suffered – our love was the affliction for which only our love was the cure... (40-1)

Sharing its name with Jonathan's "great-great-great-great-great-grandmother" (16), the river Brod becomes not only a reminder of the presence of one's ancestors in the world around us – and within us – but also a symbol of genealogy, of the passing down of names and traditions. Brod, the river girl with "perfectly adult features" (20), born mysteriously without umbilical cord in that very river, is the starting point of the narrator's genealogy – and her magic, mysterious, inexplicable birth provides the narrator's story with a mythological beginning. Being the source of the lineage and the story is what Brod shares with God as the ultimate reflection in the river, but also with the author, who, like God, creates his characters in his image: the author (i.e. the fictional author Jonathan within Foer's novel) is the origin of the story, creating his own genealogy as well as himself as a character and part of that genealogy. He is thus simultaneously the source, the medium, and the ultimate instance – the 'mouth', to stay with the river imagery – of the narrative: a combination of author, narrator and protagonist. Just as a river is a symbol of constant change and combines linearity, in its course from source to river mouth, with ultimate circularity in the global cycle of water, the narrative defies pure linearity: the author, recreating himself as character, brings his own story full circle.

²⁴² On the likeness between Jonathan and his grandfather, cf. 59 and 191; on Alex and his grandfather, 64 and 225-6.

The self-referentiality in this dream, the loving gaze at the reflection in the water, evokes the story of Narcissus as it is recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, just like Brod the girl turning into a river evokes the poem's episodes of Arethusa (V), Byblis (IX), or Marsyas (VI), which all see characters transformed into springs or streams. After realising that the image he falls in love with is his own, Narcissus exclaims in words that are echoed in Foer's "dream 4:521": "I burn with love of my own self; I both kindle the flames and suffer them."²⁴³ Foer's dream extends the significance of the myth of self-love: falling in love with one's reflection, with oneself, similarly means falling in love with one's forefathers, and ultimately one's (divine) origins. This re-dramatisation of the ancient myth of Narcissus elevates the ancestral quest onto a mythical level, and emphasises the link to an ancient mythical past that our ancestors provide us with. At the same time, however, it is also a metaphor for a creation *ex nihilo*, the authorial dream of engendering oneself, of being at the origin of one's own identity. James Olney sees autobiography as "at once a discovery, a creation and an imitation of the self."²⁴⁴ The river dream encompasses all three of these, and extends the quest for the self to a quest for ancestral and ultimately mythical origins.

The story of Narcissus tells of self-love leading to self-destruction, due to knowledge of the self: the oracle warns Narcissus' mother that he will be safe "if he ne'er know himself."²⁴⁵ In *Everything Is Illuminated*, recognition of oneself and, by extension, one's ancestors leads not to death, but to deepened self-knowledge, a knowledge beyond oneself of one's genealogy. Love for and knowledge of one's ancestors is perceived simultaneously as "affliction" and as the cure for narcissistic self-love, and Jonathan's choice of reinventing his grandfather's story in fiction thus saves him from self-destruction. The Oracle of Delphi's stipulation, "know thyself", the foundation for any autobiographical project, posits self-knowledge as salvation, while Tiresias' prediction for Narcissus is a reversal of the Delphic imperative. Narcissus suffers from the impossibility of separating himself in two, into a subject and an object (of love), so that he might consume his love; he paradoxically wishes to be away from the object of his love: "Oh that I might be parted from my own body! And, strange prayer for a lover, I would that what I love were absent from me!"²⁴⁶ An (auto)biographer does just that: s/he treats him/herself as an other, as an object of description (if not adoration), creating her/his own image as an other. Narcissus is thus excluded from precisely what could be his salvation: were he allowed to know himself, to double himself, he could (re)create the split self that would

²⁴³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, transl. by Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1916), III. 464.

²⁴⁴ James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Thematic Introduction", in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography. Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 3-27: 19.

²⁴⁵ Ovid, III. 348.

²⁴⁶ Ovid, III. 467-8.

make possible a dialogue, and, ultimately, the recognition of the self as an other: autobiography, as Lucia Boldrini argues, “reverses the fate of Narcissus.”²⁴⁷

The river dream thus illustrates a fundamental ambivalence that pervades the novel: the narrator is torn between the desire for self-creation and the longing for origins. The compulsion for narcissistic self-reflection is at the core of his creation of a mirror image (or mirror images) of himself: the author-god creates his characters in his own image, and although the river reflects others, they are always also him. This narcissistic doubling occurs on various levels; both Brod and Alex are constructed as foil characters of “the hero”, and the protagonist himself is the author’s alter ego. Unlike Narcissus, however, his self-reflection leads to self-creation rather than self-destruction, and the writing of the text provides him with an outlet for this need, indeed “revers[ing] the fate of Narcissus”.

While, in Alex’s travelogue, the inheritance of physiognomical features is posited as ‘proof’ of family ties, Jonathan, in his shtetl novel, casts doubt on their very reliability. He unmasks these very features, supposedly inherited, as mere fiction. The sun dial, the statue of Brod’s husband and thus forefather of Jonathan, illustrates this: when it is rebronzed, it is modeled on the living descendants, so that, gradually, it takes on the looks of the descendants, rather than the descendants growing up to look like their ancestors, in a process of “reverse heredity. (So when my grandfather thought he saw that he was growing to look like his great-great-great-grandfather, what he really saw was that his great-great-great-grandfather was growing to look like him. His revelation was just how much like himself he looked.)” (140) The way the sun dial, the model ancestor, looks thus refers the Trachimbroders back to themselves; they are modeling the ancestor (the other) on the self. But there is also another sense in which the statue is a reflection of the villagers: it becomes a projection of their innermost beliefs, and like Safran, they confuse this visceral part of themselves, which has been turned into an exterior object, embodied in a monument, with an other – and ultimately with God:

Those who prayed came to believe less and less in the god of their creation and more and more in their belief. The unmarried women kissed the Dial’s battered lips, although they were not faithful to their god, but to the kiss: they were kissing themselves. And when the bridegrooms knelt, it was not the god they believed in, it was the kneel; not the god’s bronzed knees, but their own bruised ones. (140)

As in the dream of the reflections in the river, the mirror image reflects back both the self and the other, causing confusion and a dissolution of the boundaries between the self, others and god, which all blend into one in the reflection. Similarly, autobiography, biography, and creation story converge in the narrative.

²⁴⁷ Lucia Boldrini, “‘Allowing it to speak out of him’: The Heterobiographies of David Malouf, Antonio Tabucchi and Marguerite Yourcenar”, *Comparative Critical Studies* 1:3 (2004), 265-77: 276. Lucia Boldrini and Peter Davies (eds), *Autobiografictions*.

The relationship between Brod, the baby foundling, and her foster father Yankel, whom she “chose” among a host of “applications” (22) for fatherhood, dramatises the ambiguities of projecting the self onto another in narcissistic love. In an expression of their deep love for each other the two continuously strive to be identical, starting with the abacus bead that Yankel wears. Yet, the identity achieved between them is often a false or imaginary one: they desire to be the same but are not (such as when they both pretend to the other that they wet themselves, to make each other feel better); and ultimately they remain strangers, seeing in the other a reflection of themselves, acting as reciprocal mirrors: “They knew intimately the aspects of themselves in the other, but never the other” (82). The gaze that looks to the other and perceives only the self thus creates a fictional identity reminiscent of the ancestral reflections in the river Brod, and is ultimately an expression of inverted narcissistic desire: the desire to love oneself transforms the other into one’s own semblance and creates the other’s identity, in a creative act reminiscent of naming.

The profound estrangement of Brod and Yankel is not restricted to surrogate relations, but extends to ‘true’ relatives as well: Jonathan compares it explicitly to his own relationship with his grandmother (with whom he shares the blood in his veins after all), when he calls Brod and Yankel “strangers, like my grandmother and me” (82). Thus the paradox of closeness and intimacy, even physical identity, that still does not permit knowledge of another, transcends blood ties, and ultimately questions their importance. Instead, the novel shows everyone to be fundamentally a stranger to everyone else, even to themselves; a feeling that Jonathan expresses in a letter to Alex (144), and that questions any reliable sense of self. Brod expresses a similar alienation when she reflects on her relationship with her own name: “you don’t notice it for so long, but when you finally do, you can’t help but say it over and over, and wonder why you never thought it was strange that you should have that name and that everyone has been calling you that name for your whole life” (77) – an expression of a profound insecurity about one’s identity, as well as the (randomly chosen) markers of this identity. The tension between simultaneous awareness of and alienation from one’s own self, between a sense of identity with one’s ancestors and the knowledge of an unbridgeable gap between oneself and them, is the driving force behind the quest for self-knowledge, as well as for the knowledge of one’s roots, and ultimately behind any autobiographical reflection in the ancestral river.

3.3 The Invention of Inheritance

Genealogies are never clear and simple in Foer’s novel: as we have seen, family connections are marked by ruptures, silences and lack of knowledge. Brod herself, as the narrator’s first ancestor, cannot be rooted in a genealogy: her birth, as well as the identity of her parents, is contested; she is born when Trachim B’s wagon overturns into the river and Trachim disappears leaving as little trace of himself as there is of either mother or umbilical cord. Brod

thus enters the world through an accidental birth, similar to Cal in *Middlesex*, whose second birth as a teenaged boy is sparked by Callie's accident. Significantly, these accidental births are solitary, parentless, orphaned births; this implies creation by another, unrelated, possibly divine being, or indeed self-engendering, in a similar way to the name changes discussed above. Alex, finally, brings about his fatherlessness himself: his overbearing and violent father is initially oppressively present, albeit as a negative presence. Referring to Jonathan's river dream, he states, "When I look in the reflection, what I view is not Father, but the negative of Father" (54). This break in the genealogy, an inversion of the continuity and reversal of traditional roles, culminates in Alex disowning him: "You are not my father" (274): while he cannot choose his father, he can *not choose* him. This rupture is a necessary prerequisite for Alex to come into his own and start a new and empowered life away from the oppression of the family past. The lack of parents and the impossibility of placing oneself in a continuous family tradition makes these figures the origin of the line, in need of constructing a new identity for themselves – and indeed of inventing a lineage. The absence of a mother in Brod's life makes it necessary for her and Yankel to invent her: they create the imaginary mother of Brod, whose favourite book was "*Genesis, of course*" (48). Similarly, grandfatherless Jonathan fabricates his family story: uncertain ancestry creates a preoccupation with heritage and origins, as well as with the construction of selfhood and, in turn, with engendering a new (reverse) lineage oneself, becoming the (authorial) origin of one's ancestors just like the physical model in the creation of the sun dial.

The individual's need for continuity is reflected by the same need within the community, and just as Jonathan's ancestral founding myth is invented, so is the founding myth, the creation story, of the shtetl. Trachimday is the yearly festival which recreates the shtetl's founding event, an annual re-invocation of the original event: an inexplicable accident, a simultaneous death and birth, which leads to the naming of the shtetl. Trachimday is, in the terms of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, a typical instance of an "invented tradition". They foreground ritual as a crucial component of such traditions invented by communities to create cohesion within themselves, based on "repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past", although this continuity with the past "is largely fictitious."²⁴⁸ Jan Assmann, in his theory of cultural memory, describes repetition as the basic principle of any connective structure, and ascribes two basic functions to any cultural rite or tradition: that of regular repetition, and that of the re-presentation of the original event.²⁴⁹ Trachimday fulfils the same double function of the narrator's paradoxical quest for origins as well as continuity: while every investigation of family history seeks to place us in a continuous tradition as one link in a long

²⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 1-2.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992), 17.

chain, arriving at the origin of this tradition represents the opposite of continuity: every origin is a break with what precedes it. So the quest for tradition encompasses its own inversion: it raises awareness that every tradition is finite. The contradictions involved in this twofold desire lend a paradoxical title to two chapters of Jonathan's novel: "The Beginning of the World Often Comes" (8, 267).

Jonathan feels the need to invent traditions, family continuity and intergenerational connections because those stories and memories which could provide family cohesion are missing. The absence of memory instils in him an ambiguous relationship with memory: the awareness of the importance of memory for intergenerational continuity, and a deep mistrust of any commemorative culture. Dan Jacobson, in his memoir, reflects on the paradoxes of commemoration and on the inherent tensions between forgetting and remembering: "Everything passes and is forgotten. That is the one bleak face shown to us by history. What happens, happens forever. That is history's other, Janus face. We look first at the one, then at the other, over and over again. Neither offers any solace for suffering undergone."²⁵⁰ It is in the face of suffering and trauma that both the burial of the past and its perpetuation are painful – two polar extremes that are equally destructive, and that show the impossibility of working through a traumatic past. Omer Bartov describes the dilemma that memories of traumatic events impose on the rememberer as an impossible choice: "The memory of the destruction may be so unbearable, so debilitating and wrought with despair, that we are often tempted to forget. But absence of memory makes life equally unbearable, for it is lived in an incomprehensible, uncharted void, without hope of a future."²⁵¹ In this following section I explore how Foer's novel maps this potentially "uncharted void" through the mazes of unreliable memories guided by the threads of unreliable narrators, and how this very unreliability is part of a search for identity and generates an intergenerational ethics of empathy.

4 Unreliable Narrators, Unreliable Memories: Remembering and Forgetting

The impossibility of remembering an obliterated past, and the paradoxes inherent in any effort to record memories, are at the core of Foer's novel. I trace the text's reflections on remembering and forgetting in a three-fold structure: first I look to the novel's insistence on the unreliability of all memory, which makes necessary elaborate *aides memoire*; entrusting

²⁵⁰ Jacobson, 140.

²⁵¹ Omer Bartov, "Trauma and Absence", in Helmut Peitsch, Charles Burdett, Claire Gorrara (eds), *European Memories of the Second World War* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 258-71: 263.

memory to a medium, however, also means that the medium takes possession of it and ultimately replaces it. While memories can thus be lost in their transmission to a medium, the remembering self easily loses itself in a mental maze, overwhelmed by the presence of the past in the present. Finally, in the third and longest subsection, archives are discussed as the most complex mnemonic devices in the novel: any attempt to record memory is shown to provoke a self-referential questioning of that very endeavour.

4.1 “The Persnickety of Memory” (258)

“It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B’s double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River.” (8) Jonathan’s shtetl novel opens with an ambiguity: what is in doubt is the story of Brod’s provenance. A stone is set up to commemorate the event, which simultaneously becomes a monument to the unknowability of the past and the uncertainty of memory:

THIS PLAQUE MARKS THE SPOT
(OR A SPOT CLOSE TO THE SPOT)
WHERE THE WAGON OF ONE
TRACHIM B
(WE THINK)
WENT IN.
Shtetl Proclamation, 1791
(93, 268)

Any remembrance, in Foer’s novel, is accompanied by a profound mistrust of memory and pervaded by its deficiencies and limitations; and this mistrust is expressed in a host of mnemonic devices that attempt to overcome these deficiencies: by externalising their innermost thoughts they hope to render them accessible, tangible and objectifiable. The awareness of memory’s inadequacy informs the narrative strategies of the novel: the multiple versions of stories constantly draw the reader’s awareness to the fictionality and the uncertainty of what he or she is being told, just as the inhabitants of the shtetl are conscious of the uncertainty of what they commemorate, even as they commit their memory to writing. It is no coincidence that the origin of the founding myth for Jonathan’s genealogy emphasises the ungraspability of the past and the uncertainty of facts, even when they are literally set in stone. The Trachimbroders, much as they feel the need to document their history for future generations, are simultaneously aware of how choosing one version of events can lead to falsifying history – hence they carve their doubt in stone, undermining the very story they tell. This doubt is transmitted, along with the ambiguity of the stories and a mistrust of the official writing of history. Such official documentation of the past is scrutinised below in more detail.

The reluctance to settle on one account of history is complemented by another aspect of memory's deficiencies. The legend of Trachim's accident is based on "mad Sofiowka's" testimony (9), whose reliability as storyteller – and, by extension, that of any storyteller – is called into question a few pages later. The complexity and absurdity of trying to remember by creating *aides memoire* is expressed in his vain attempt to remember an important thought he had:

he was once found on the Well-Regarded Rabbi's front lawn, bound in white string, and said he tied one around his index finger to remember something terribly important, and fearing he would forget the index finger, he tied a string around his pinky, and then one from waist to neck, and fearing he would forget this one, he tied a string from ear to tooth to scrotum to heel, and used his body to remember his body, but in the end could remember only the string. Is this someone to trust for a story? (15)

String is a recurrent *aide memoire* in the novel, holding it together on various levels, and its course will be followed through the following pages as it sheds light on the relationship between memory and narrative in Foer's text. The abacus bead tied round Yankel's neck with a piece of string serves to remind him and everyone else of his shame (although we are never told what it is he did wrong: his shame is the only thing that remains, similar to the story that the shtetl inhabitants tell each other "about the time Simon D did that hilarious thing with the plum, which all could laugh about for hours but none could quite remember", 261). Yankel ties a similar bead round Brod's neck too, to emphasise their belonging to one another, so she carries on his unknown shame like an encrypted memory (47, 94). String is also material in exposing another inhabitant's shame and guilt: the rape of Brod by the same Sofiowka (205) is avenged graphically: he is tied up with rope and hanged from a bridge, severed hands attached. Vengeance, of course, is a passion that is fuelled by memory, and by the refusal to forget or forgive. String, finally, is used as a mnemonic device by the whole shtetl: on Trachimday, the festival commemorating Brod's waterbirth, white string spans the streets, as a reminder of the wagon drowning and the refuse surfacing, connecting disparate objects, spanning the past and the imminent future, everything the shtetl contains (92-3, 267). Its unreliability, as indeed that of any *aide memoire*, is illustrated by the strings beginning to sag before the day is over (95).

String, in the passage quoted above, simultaneously acts as mnemonic device and substitute for a text; the close-knit metaphoric connections between lines or threads and narrative have been discussed in chapter II, in the context of *Middlesex* and its usage of the image of the silk thread. A text presents pitfalls similar to Sofiowka's string: writing as an insurance against forgetting is an ancient concept, and yet, the fear that writing enhances forgetfulness and weakens the mind is almost equally old.²⁵² The function of writing as a mnemonic device is frequently addressed in the novel, with the written text often replacing the memory of the events: in the face of the shortcomings of memory, writing becomes vital.

²⁵² Plato discusses this dilemma in his dialogue with Phaidrus; cf. also Jan Assmann, 23.

Yankel expresses this profound insecurity about his ability to remember when he records essential truths about himself: “Fearing his frequent deficiencies of memory, he began writing fragments of his life story on his bedroom ceiling with one of Brod’s lipsticks [...] This way, his life would be the first thing he would see when he awoke each morning and the last thing before going to sleep each night” (83). Yankel sets down in writing everything that defines him as a person, right down to: “*You are Yankel. You love Brod.*” (85), in what is later referred to as “his lipstick autobiography” (97). Life writing here is an insurance against forgetting, but also an attempt to define who one is in a quintessential way.

Yankel’s self-defining autobiography lays down the essence of his identity – but, given the unreliability of memory, it is no longer possible to say whether his writing is descriptive or prescriptive, whether the message is contained in the medium or whether the medium becomes the message. Paul de Man has suggested that it may be the autobiography that produces the life rather than vice versa.²⁵³ This ambiguous relationship between life and text illustrates the reciprocal process of transformation involved in any verbalisation or textualisation of life or memory, and it simultaneously highlights a danger inherent in any life writing: committing one’s memories to words can actually distract from what one wants to remember rather than ensure reliable commemoration, as it fixes them into reduced, selective versions of the originally complex and changeable memories. When Annie Dillard points to the dangers of destroying memories by fixing them, she emphasizes the fragility of memories in the face of an attempt to “nail them down” in words: “Memory is insubstantial. Things keep replacing it. [...] If you describe a dream you’ll notice that at the end of the verbal description you’ve lost the dream but gained a verbal description.” She claims that the surest way to “both fix and ruin” memories, which she calls “elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling”, is to write them down, as this is “a certain way to lose them.”²⁵⁴ So the *aide memoire* becomes a destroyer of memories at the same time; by making one’s thoughts manifest, by giving them a physical (tangible, audible, or readable) shape, by attempting to transfer them onto literal string or strings of words, memory is in fact taken from the intimacy of our minds, externalised, an object, an other – which then becomes more powerful than the memory. She thus shows memories and their representation as mutually exclusive, which makes the autobiographical writing of memories, and indeed, of life, a paradoxical, if not impossible, project.

Andreas Huyssen, while similarly conscious of the gap between memories and their written manifestations (or other forms of representation), takes a different stance concerning their relationship, which he sees as inherently interdependent: while “*re*-presentation always comes after” and thus relies on memory, memory in turn is “itself based on representation. The

²⁵³ Cf. Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement”, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 67-81: 69.

²⁵⁴ Annie Dillard, “To Fashion a Text”, in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 53-76: 70-1.

past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory.” The writing down of memory, for him, entails not the destruction but instead the creation of this very memory. He thus locates the act of remembering within its very expression, and calls for the unavoidable “fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation” to be understood as “a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity.”²⁵⁵ Foer’s novel embraces both the pitfalls and the opportunities outlined in these two positions in its complex and ambivalent construction(s) of memory and of writing. Its self-conscious reflections on the elusiveness, unreliability, and ungraspability of memory are juxtaposed with the belief in the creative power of the writing process Huyssen describes. And indeed, Jonathan’s text, deprived of an extensive commemorative basis for Huyssen’s interdependence between memory and representation, becomes a creative substitute for sparse or even non-existent memory: the words don’t replace thoughts (or the past) so much as create them anew, and it is only through their articulation that the narrator can conceive of a past to remember. Huyssen’s take on the representation of the past thus shapes the reading of the novel as a negotiation of memory and imagination, which I shall come back to in more depth later in this chapter.

4.2 Memories and Mazes

The replacement of one’s memories with fixed and potentially skewed representations, which Dillard warns against and which Huyssen interprets as creative stimulus, however, is not the only danger that the attempt to commemorate encompasses: in spite of being elusive and intangible, it possesses the power to overwhelm the rememberer. Sofiowka has entangled himself into his string almost to the point of being immobilized, just like another shtetl inhabitant who becomes unable to communicate in this dramatic re-enactment of the shtetl awaiting Nazi atrocities:

ARI F

[...] It’s the Ukrainians who’ll do us in! You’ve heard what they did in Lvov! (It reminds me of my birth [I was born on the Rabbi’s floor, you know (my nose still remembers that mix of placenta and Judaica [he had the most beautiful candle holders (from Austria [if I’m not mistaken (or Germany)]))])...)

RAV D

(*Puzzled, gesturing puzzlement.*) What are you talking about?

ARI F

²⁵⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2-3.

(Most sincerely puzzled.) I can't remember. The Ukrainians. My birth. Candles. I know there was a point. Where did I begin?

And so it was when anyone tried to speak: their minds would become tangled in remembrance. Words became floods of thought with no beginning or end, and would drown the speaker before he could reach the life raft of the point he was trying to make. It was impossible to remember what one meant, what, after all of the words, was intended. (261)

As one memory leads to another mid-sentence and mid-thought, this passage illustrates a “devitalising” genealogy of remembering: “memory begat memory begat memory” (258), in a chain of inconclusive inheritance; this genealogy of memories is abruptly severed after the mentioning of Germany. The attempt to remember, which is the attempt to find one’s beginnings, one’s origins – both of a string of thoughts and of one’s very existence – and to connect one’s present to these origins, can thus render one incapacitated in the present. The inability to remember one’s beginnings leads to an insecurity about the “point” of one’s argument as well as one’s existence, creating a void in the present and the future, as Bartov has put it.²⁵⁶ It leaves half-sentences suspended and unfinished, like loose ends that cannot be tied up, and lets the “life raft” of meaning drift off on a stream of unconnected phrases and forgotten endings. And yet, while failing or refusing to remember and resorting to repression and secrecy is shown to be destructive, the paralysis of being entangled in memories is equally insufferable. The shtetl inhabitants, taking refuge in their past, realise that “Memory was supposed to fill the time, but it made time a hole to be filled!” (260): too much focus on remembrance creates an absence in the present, and “The only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be an inert rememberer” (260).

Past and future pull Safran, Jonathan’s grandfather, in both directions: “The images of his infinite pasts and infinite futures washed over him as he waited, paralyzed, in the present. He, Safran, marked the division between what was and what would be.” (264) The awareness that he exists at a watershed moment renders him inert, freezing him in the present which defines what is past and what is future, and which will, at the same time, render everything that existed in the past impossible in the future. His recognition happens at the very moment which, for the shtetl, splits time into before and after: it comes on the verge of the destruction of the shtetl and his family past, a destruction which can only be reversed in the descendant’s fiction. For Jonathan, his (imagined) grandfather is thus a pivotal figure: he provides the link to the moment of destruction, as well as to the time before the destruction; and through his survival, he enables the continuity which culminates in Jonathan himself.

In the face of the approaching Nazi terror, the shtetl inhabitants get lost in the maze of their memories, unable to find their way out of an imminent threatening and impossible situation. Ari F’s confusion is an illustration of the memory flow charts (“which were themselves memories of family trees”) that the shtetl inhabitants design, showing how one

²⁵⁶ Cf. Bartov, 263.

memory can lead to another, and which they set up “in an attempt to make sense of their memories. They tried to follow the line back, like Theseus out of the labyrinth, but only went in deeper, farther.” (259) These flow charts portray graphically the complexities and idiosyncracies of remembering, which follows non-rational and non-linear rules, and provides frequently forking paths and ample ambiguities. For the shtetl inhabitants, the line proves an equally misleading guide as the thread does for Sofiowka, immersing them more deeply in the maze rather than showing the way out: memory, which they value so highly, is deceptive.

Theseus thus picks up the thread left hanging loosely earlier in this chapter, and leads us to the ancient Greek mythical tale of Ariadne, who provides him with a life-line as he braves the monster in the labyrinth. The complex design of this “deceptive [...] enclosure”, “a conflicting maze of divers winding paths”, exploits the deficiencies of human memory, making it impossible to remember one’s trajectory and thus to retrace one’s steps, so that Daedalus “was himself scarce able to find his way back to the place of entry.”²⁵⁷ Theseus’ story, once again, dramatises the tensions between forgetting and remembering. His thread is not, like Sofiowka’s string, a mnemonic device, but it is a tangible guide, a concrete link to his point of origin outside the labyrinth, which helps him remember where he came from, by allowing him to forget and to rely on the thread. Ariadne teaches Theseus that, in order to survive a dangerous journey, he needs to take the link to his origins with him. Salvation is granted through retracing one’s steps, going back to the beginning; Ariadne’s thread is life-saving precisely because it is a very particular kind of *aide memoire*, which makes up for the deficiencies of memory when lost in a maze. The story of Ariadne epitomizes the importance of a specific kind of memory, (initially) located outside the self: the importance of knowing one’s origins.

Adriana Cavarero, in her interpretation of the ancient story of Oedipus already referred to in the previous chapter, describes how the narrative of our origin, the story of our genesis (and Foer shows that this includes both our own birth and our genealogy), needs to be, by definition, told to us by an other; and she shows how this leads to a kind of self-knowledge that interprets the Delphic stipulation of “know thyself” (*gnothi se auton*) in a way that differs from the autobiographical self-reflection discussed with reference to Eugenides: “The Oedipal form of *gnothi se auton* does not consist in an exercise of introspection, but rather in soliciting the external tale of his own life-story.”²⁵⁸ Jonathan looks to Augustine to provide this story line, but ultimately spins it himself, together with Alex – who is his alter ego, so that Jonathan, together with Alex, becomes his own other in / through his text. In *Middlesex* too Cal spins the silk thread of the ancestral story in conjunction with his silk-spinner grandmother Desdemona, who provides him with the necessary point of departure for his unusual identity, and who shares his

²⁵⁷ Ovid, VIII. 158-68.

²⁵⁸ Cavarero, 12.

story: “when I speak, Desdemona speaks, too. She’s writing these words now,”²⁵⁹ reaching into the past to provide a (metaphorically) tangible, intergenerational link to the narrator’s roots. It, too, constitutes a life-line for the protagonist, complementing Callie’s oracular experience of self-recognition: the silk thread allows him to make sense of his story and explains to him why he is the way he is. This is the very question that Safran, the narrator’s grandfather, ponders the day after his wedding, “trying to *string* the events of his seventeen years into a coherent narrative” (my italics) and to establish causal connections, just like the compilers of memory flow charts – Safran’s long list of questions culminates in what is at the core of Cal’s, and indeed anyone’s, autobiographical, quest too: “Why was he who he was?” (260).

Ariadne’s thread through the labyrinth, like the flow charts, does not follow a linear pattern but rather undoes linearity, “turning back on itself,”²⁶⁰ as it follows the deceptive paths of Daedalus’ maze. J. Hillis Miller sees this paradoxical function of the metaphor of the line as inherent in any narrative: “the line contains the possibility of turning back on itself. In this turning it subverts its own linearity and becomes repetition. Without the line there is no repetition, but repetition is what disturbs, suspends or destroys the line’s linearity.”²⁶¹ Foer elevates this to a structural and aesthetic principle, in the sense that his narrative traces an inversion of linearity. Linearity in the novel is frequently fractured, winding like the paths in Daedalus’ labyrinth; the story is approached through detours, just as the journey Jonathan and Alex undertake follows a non-linear trajectory, going round in circles, doubling up on itself, and following dead ends.

In the centre of the labyrinth of Jonathan and Alex’s quest is the story of the destruction of the shtetl. It is a traumatic story which demands to be confronted: the monster of their past, which, like the Minotaur, threatens to destroy them through an exposure to a guilty and violent history. And indeed, they often almost arrive at it, yet are separated from the core of the story by partitioning walls: silence, guilt, repression are the invisible walls that make necessary detours and new approaches. This is of course a very different take on the minotaur myth from the one seen in chapter II: while Cal initially “root[s] for Theseus,”²⁶² he grows to identify with the fate of the monster caught in the centre of the maze and sees it as a reflection of his own hybrid existence. In Foer, however, the monster is not a character, but stands for the centre of the labyrinth and a story “too forbidding” (226) to retell, a phantom recalling Nicolas Abraham’s notion of the inherited, encrypted trauma, concealed and yet an unalienable part of oneself, repressed at the centre of the labyrinth.

The image of a journey through a labyrinth sheds light on Foer’s novel on a structural level too. The text follows two temporal developments: Alex’s and Jonathan’s correspondence

²⁵⁹ Eugenides, 38.

²⁶⁰ Ovid, VIII. 163.

²⁶¹ J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne’s Thread. Story Lines* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992), 19.

²⁶² Eugenides, 123.

traces the search for Trachimbrod and Augustine, and while Alex's travel account moves forward in time, the knowledge they unearth gradually takes them on "a movement backwards,"²⁶³ until they arrive at the account of the shtetl's destruction in 1942. In Jonathan's novel, in turn, the narrative progresses steadily from 1791 to 1942, also culminating in the destruction of the shtetl. The focal point of the novel is thus also structurally the central traumatic experience of mass murder in the shtetl, and both narrative strands are needed to take the protagonist there and back out; Ariadne's thread, the story line of his genealogy, guides him through the maze back to his beginnings, helping him (re)construct the family story. The narrative of the ancestral story is the saving life line, and Jonathan creates, and must create, this line himself. Although on one level the thread that takes him back leads him into a traumatic past, rather than out of it, it is precisely the (albeit limited and self-authored) knowledge about his ancestry (and thus about himself) that provides him with his identity and his voice. Establishing a sense of origins and a continuity with the past, before the traumatic destruction, instils in him a sense of future and provides a context for the construction of identity within a family lineage.

The novel's structure challenges the linearity of traditional plots on yet another level: Jonathan's and Alex's stories complement each other, providing two sides of the same journey and the same quest, and, like a Moebius strip, they flow into one another, seemingly opposite and yet inseparably linked. Alex realises that they are "working on the same story" (214), and their story is one without clearly definable beginning or end: the dissolution of linear chronology within the novel is evident in chapter titles such as "The End of the Moment That Never Ends, 1941" (253), which describes the dissolution of linear chronology and the notion of 'pastness' inherent in trauma: on one level it is over, yet on another, its repercussions keep it continuously present. As mentioned above, the chapter title "The Beginning of the World Often Comes" is used twice: the first time the chapter recounts Brod's birth (8), the second time, however, describes the shtetl's destruction (267). The chapter title thus hints at the potential of destruction as the beginning of something new, if only in the imagination: the time-span of years added to the title here, "1942-1791", inverts chronology, referring back to the beginnings of both novel and narrative (both the book itself, and the story it tells), and repeating Jonathan's going backwards in time on his ancestral quest.

Ariadne's thread guides Theseus through the labyrinth, but for her, it also fulfils another function: with it, she desires to tie the beloved man to her, and create an interpersonal bond, an affiliation. Hillis Miller describes her thread as a "sexual linkage of lovers", yet at the same time offers a Freudian reading of the myth: seeing in every couple the man's desire to be with his mother makes the thread a "symbolic umbilical cord from mother to son", as she

²⁶³ Eaglestone, 130. Eaglestone describes the structure of the narrative as an expression of its postmodern approach to Holocaust writing, but I would argue that it simultaneously evokes much more ancient structures.

enables his safe rebirth.²⁶⁴ How intricately those two kinds of interpersonal bonds are intertwined is played out in Jonathan's story: while his grandfather's survival depended on the help of Augustine (and Jonathan and Alex sense that they may have been lovers), she is later the one who provides his grandson with the link to his ancestral past, and thus, as Alex puts it "created him" (150). At the same time, she provides Alex with an ancestral storyline as well, through her past relationship with *his* grandfather, which unleashes the articulation of the repressed story of his guilt.

Among such interpersonal ties, it is the genealogical lines that are of particular interest here. In Jonathan's shtetl novel, it is the fate of the children, of all the inhabitants tied up with the strings of memory, that he presents as the worst: although children lack personal memories, their parents' and grandparents' string binds them too, and, like the narrator's, their strings are "not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness." (260) Memories of the past, and particularly family history, are often perceived as a burden passed down through the generations, and the epitome of the dangers of family ties holding one down is the unseverable umbilical cord which causes Safran's baby to drown with her mother. This second water birth, at the end of the novel, recalls Brod's own birth (13-6); it is Brod herself, speaking as the river into which she has transformed herself, who recounts, in a dream anticipating the future, the birth of Jonathan's grandfather's first child, her direct descendant. Brod, born without cord, has no link to the past herself, and yet proceeds to engender a long lineage herself, which culminates in an umbilical cord which "could not be broken" (273), leading to the joint water death: Brod (the river) takes back what Brod (the ancestor) once set in motion. Family ties are thus ambivalent: independence may mean survival, but also loneliness; death is a danger, but can also mean being rescued from a fate worse than death. And if the future can only be prevented by negating it, this may mean the destruction of the lineage, before this future can actually happen: "We've killed our own babies to save them" (273).

For Safran's baby, the family affiliation proves fatal; and yet, while a string is a tie to the past, it can also be severed, like a name that can be shed: cutting ties means new beginnings, a potentially liberating disentanglement from the past, which is expressed by Alex's grandfather's final wish for his grandsons: "They must cut all of the strings, yes?", urging them to "make your own life" rather than "fill father's absence" (275) and to sever the umbilical cord that might cause them to drown in the family past – a past which Alex's grandfather himself feels he has imbued with guilt. Being part of an ancestry renders one "not altogether free", but guarantees "a place in a long line – certain assurances of being and permanence, but also a burdensome restriction of movement", which evokes in Jonathan's grandfather feelings of both "safety and profound sadness" (121). His awareness of growing into a specific place in the family history instils in him a sense of predetermination; and the

²⁶⁴ Hillis Miller, 146-7. Hillis Miller draws attention to a host of expressions that reveal the frequent metaphorical use of line or thread to describe interpersonal relations as well as narrative (20-1).

notion of one's life as a story that is already laid down pervades the novel, with both Alex and Brod catching glimpses of their own future in texts they encounter. The inevitability of historical processes, the feeling of powerlessness in the face of fate which spans past, present and future make Alex feel "ensnared in this, as if no matter what I do, what will come has already been fixed": "Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was" (145).

The metaphor of the string thus invites reflections on a host of ambiguities that pervade our concepts of writing, of memory, and of family relations. The choice of a leitmotif that encompasses these three closely knit core issues highlights the interconnections between remembering, retelling and re-imagining, as well as between one's own story and that of one's family. It insists on the importance of origins as well as continuity, and on memory as a life line, which needs to be spun anew if missing. So while Dillard, who equates the creative act of writing down memories with their destruction, shows how the *aide memoire* of the textual string in fact unravels the original string of thoughts, Huyssen's reinterpretation of creativity as inherent in remembering proves more productive: it is only the string which makes possible the train of thought.

String, however, is not the only mnemonic device within the text, not the only tangible, external attempt to remember: on his quest for his own origins, Jonathan consults a range of materials – photos, maps, texts, found objects – that could be subsumed under the broad heading of archival sources; in the course of his journey, he negotiates a veritable archival maze, in order to create a narrative that, while recounting the ancestral story, questions any attempt at recording memory. This third metaphor places memory between opposite spheres, illustrating the interpersonal transmission of memories: personal and collective, oral and written, ephemeral and eternal.

4.3 From Archive to Narrative: Between Communicative and Cultural Memory

Mad Sofiowka, entangled in his white string, uses "his body to remember his body". And indeed, the connection of memory and remembrance with the body, exemplified in the idea of memory as sensual, pervades the novel and is an expression of a physical aspect of memory. Eugenides describes memory as encoded in cells, an inherited archive that the body compiles unbeknownst to our consciousness, which stores our genetic history for our own and future bodies to decipher. This visceral genetic archive is juxtaposed in Foer with the interpretation of memory as the sixth sense, but the novel also constructs physical memory as an external and conscious resource. Archives imprinted on the skin turn the body itself into the archive. Brod's Encyclopedia of 613 sadnesses is copied onto her skin from the wet pages of her diary although only a fraction of them is still legible: as a baby, "her body is tattooed with the newsprint" of the paper she is bedded in. In another reversal of chronology the news refers to events that are

yet to happen (and the seemingly meaningless and incoherent excerpts only start to make sense as one reads on). Thus Brod, a visionary from the beginning, records and embodies her own future as well as that of the shtetl. What is imprinted on her body becomes her adoptive father Yankel's credo: "Sometimes he would rock her to sleep in his arms, and read her left to right, and know everything he needed to know about the world. If it wasn't written on her, it wasn't important to him." (44)

The idea of the body as a constant reminder of one's own beliefs, manifested as physically engrained truths, evokes a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy which instructs believers to re-recite the confession of their faith wherever they are, insisting on repetition and ensuring "that His words are engraved on the soul through every habit and limb", as Ruth Wisse remarks:²⁶⁵ "Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand, and let them serve as frontlets on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut 6:7-9) This insistence on the text inscribed on the body, or on the house as an extension of the body, also recalls the writing on Yankel's walls that tell him the story of his life and the declaration of his love and adoration for Brod, whom he worships: the skin and the walls are constant reminders of one's innermost beliefs; the interior finds its expression externally, and the skin, or wall, as the border between the interior and the exterior becomes the place where one's beliefs become manifest and omnipresent. Such religious or quasi-religious rituals, as we shall see below with Jan Assmann, make possible the transmission of memories through time and across the generations.

Reading the writing on the wall, and using a building as a ritualistic transmitter of memory, makes the house an archive. This is Alex's description of Augustine's dwelling:

One of the rooms had a bed, and a small desk, a bureau, and many things from the floor to the ceiling, including piles of more clothes and hundreds of shoes of different sizes and fashions. I could not see the wall through all of the photographs. They appeared as if they came from many different families [...] All of the clothing and shoes and pictures made me to reason that there must have been at least one hundred people living in that room. The other room was also very populous. There were many boxes, which were overflowing with items. These had writing on their sides. A white cloth was overwhelming from the box marked WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS. The box marked PRIVATES: JOURNALS/ DIARIES/SKETCHBOOKS/UNDERWEAR was so overfilled that it appeared prepared to rupture [...] I noticed that there was a box on the top of these skyscrapers of boxes that was marked DUST. (147)

Augustine's house, filled with photographs and boxes containing found objects from the site of Trachimbrod's destruction, becomes the location of the destroyed shtetl's archive just like the magistrate's house in an ancient Greek polis, where official documents were

²⁶⁵ Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon. A Journey Through Language and Culture* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 1.

kept;²⁶⁶ Augustine's archive is the only graspable physical remainder of the shtetl of which all memory seems lost: a reminder as much as a substitute for history, as well as for a living present. Evoking gruesome images of the belongings of concentration camp prisoners robbed of their last possessions, her house also represents the remains of an entire people.

The inscription of the last box could be read, with Carolyn Steedman, as the epitome of the archive. Steedman draws a direct connection between archives and dust as that which is left after life is lived.²⁶⁷ The dead philosopher in Foer's novel inverts the relationship between life and dust when he writes: "To The Dust: From Man You Came and to Man You Shall Return", arguing that "it would be possible, in theory, for life and art to be reversed" (90). Here, the process of life transferred to art (a text or indeed an archive) is reversed, just as Jonathan's ancestral story only creates this ancestry. Both Steedman and Foer's philosopher thus emphasise the connection between archives (a record of life) and death: a paradoxical simultaneous preservation and substitution (to speak with Dillard) or re-creation (to speak with Huyssen) of past life. For Jonathan, imagining the shtetl archive is a way of creating lost memory, and finding a way in fiction to revert the obliteration and loss of the past. In the following, the invention of archives throughout the novel, and their implications for Jonathan's quest for the grandparents' story, shall be explored in more detail.

The role of archives within the preservation of memory for a community is made clear by Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory, which the introduction has presented in some detail: while the former is more informally based on interpersonal communication, the latter depends on an institutionalisation in order to survive, and thus on various forms of *aides memoire*. Generally designed to support an individual's memory, these become all the more important when memory is to be stored beyond the life span of an individual and thus transmitted to others. The deficiencies and the unreliability of personal and communicative memory described above create the universal need for external and objectifiable collective *aides memoire*, which include traditions, rituals, and so on, but also archives.²⁶⁸ In Jonathan's family past, communicative memory has been unnaturally and violently destroyed, by the early death of the grandfather and the traumatised silence of the grandmother. The few documents that Jonathan possesses constitute an extremely sparse archive: a name (Trachimbrod), old maps that show places not included on new ones, and a photograph (with the caption "This is me with Augustine, February 21, 1943", 60). As his only link to a story almost completely obliterated they take on a heightened importance as cryptic documents, whose full meaning he can only speculate about – which sparks the imaginative reconstruction. On his journey, he gathers and is given other documents, loses some, regains

²⁶⁶ On the notion of the archive as originally a physical dwelling, cf. for example Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, transl. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1995), 2.

²⁶⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust. The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002).

²⁶⁸ Cf. Assmann, 56-7.

others, so that his personal archive is in a state of constant flux. This uncertainty and ungraspability of archival sources is part of a general awareness of the fact that the relationship between history and archives is inherently problematic: archives are always but a selection of the potential material, and are frequently fragmented; inherent in their drive towards exhaustive collection is also the inevitability of omission and incompleteness, of lack, and of inadequacy; and indeed, Steedman sees them as inextricably connected with loss.²⁶⁹

Archives are thus a physical manifestation of the tension between remembering and forgetting, while at the same time they determine what is remembered and what is forgotten. Just as the writing down of memory can obliterate one's original version of it, as Dillard points out, leaving one with one possible version among many, records can equally obscure memory, and thus betray their name and their function. Foer's archives (and I use a broad definition of the term, to comprise any 'storage device' of documents with a mnemonic function), in their various shapes and forms, serve to illustrate the complexities of the transmission of memory, and inevitably become mock archives that emphasise the absurdity and impossibility of the attempt to pass on the past.

And yet such archival sources are all that the protagonist, cut off from communicative memory, has at his disposal to get in touch with the past, allowing him to (re)create the lost past and to (re)connect with his origins: the quest for beginnings is inherent in the reflection of the family past, and the personal search instigates a historical, archival one.²⁷⁰ The numerous archives, mock archives and counter archives in Foer's novel highlight the dependence on archival sources, but also the complexities involved in the recording and transmission of the past, questioning the possibility of storing the past or the memory of it in any meaningful way. And yet, remembering, which is etymologically related to recording (Lat. *recordatio*, memory), is perceived to be at the core of Jewishness: Elie Wiesel has said that "to be a Jew is to remember,"²⁷¹ and Foer himself calls memory the sixth sense of the Jews (198). In his shtetl novel, Jonathan has his ancestral community place immense importance on recording its own past and present; he intersperses his narrative with frequent quotations from these imaginary archival compilations. His *Book of Antecedents* evokes the traditional Jewish communal *pinkas* (a ledger or minute-book), a chronicle which records notable facts and events in the community's life "in a great act of collective commemoration,"²⁷² but which also expands "the

²⁶⁹ Cf. Steedman, 4-5.

²⁷⁰ Steedman comments on Derrida's exploration of these issues thus: "'Archive Fever' explores the relationship between memory and writing (in its widest meaning, of recording and making marks), and Freud's own attempts to find adequate metaphors for representing memory. Derrida sees in Freud's writing the very desire that *is* Archive Fever: the desire to recover moments of inception: to find and possess all sorts of beginnings." (Steedman, 5).

²⁷¹ In an interview quoted in Harald Weinrich, *Lethé. The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, transl. by Steven Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004 [1997]), 184.

²⁷² Such a document (the Yizkor Book, a Book of Memory written in 1947 in Brańsk, Poland) is examined in Hoffman, 88-9; on traditional shtetl records cf. also Miron, 34.

bare facts into something like a story,”²⁷³ and plays an important part in shtetl life and in the way local history is transmitted. These chronicles testify to the central role given to commemoration in the shtetls, especially in the face of extinction; Hoffmann refers to “the importance of written witness [felt ...] after the destruction”, and Marianne Hirsch calls *yizker bikher* “a Jewish memorial tradition developed among diasporic communities, a tradition based on ancient and medieval Jewish practices of commemoration, which may well serve as a resource and a model for children of survivors. [...] prepared in exile by survivors of pogroms [they] were meant to preserve their destroyed culture.”²⁷⁴ Hirsch emphasises the functions they served both as receptacle of memories of the past and their projection into the future. She calls them “spaces of connection between memory and postmemory” vital for intergenerational transmission. In this sense too Foer inscribes himself in a tradition of exiled Jewish writers. Hoffmann’s description of a Yizkor book, with its “elementary narrative, its naïve sentiments and homey, homely details, [which] add up to a vivid diagram of the shtetl – its institutions, its concerns, even something of its mentality,”²⁷⁵ equally fits Jonathan’s imaginary novel, although his is an exaggerated and surreal version, a mock *pinkas*.

The community’s need to record results in numerous books: every month a committee adds to *The Book of Recurrent Dreams*: “It is most important that we remember [...] The what is not so important, but that we should remember. It is the act of remembering, the process of remembrance, the recognition of our past” (36). The act of remembering thus takes precedence over the actual content, which leads to another comic, surreal compilation, the above-mentioned *Book of Antecedents*. It “began as a record of major events: battles and treaties, famines, seismic occurrences, the beginnings and ends of political regimes. But it wasn’t long before lesser events were included and described at great length” (196). Made up of a mix of genres such as chronicles of everyone’s life, parables, sayings, definitions, portraits, documents, personal journals, the book is composed of more and more mundane details, “until every schoolboy could easily find out what his grandfather ate for breakfast on a given Thursday fifty years before [...] and when there was nothing to report, the full-time committee would report its reporting, just to keep the book moving, expanding, becoming more like life: *We are writing... We are writing... We are writing...*” (196; these final words are repeated over a whole page and a half at a later stage, 212-3).

In his analysis of the medieval *Annals of St Gall*, which lists years and events in two corresponding columns, Hayden White remarks on the striking gaps in the events column as opposed to the unfailing regularity of the years listed; Foer’s fictional shtetl inhabitants frantically attempt to avoid precisely such gaps, and yet, their recording of the writing process

²⁷³ Hoffman, 91.

²⁷⁴ Hirsch, 246.

²⁷⁵ Hoffman, 89-90.

is as void of content and meaning as the gaps in these medieval annals.²⁷⁶ White uses the example of the annals to point to the fundamental difference between recording facts in annals and narrating history; “these blank years in the annalist’s account” highlight “the extent to which narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherence, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time.”²⁷⁷ Jonathan’s narrative attempts to (re)create this much-needed coherence and continuity within his family story in his fiction, inventing ancestors who are obsessively attempting to avoid precisely those gaps that Jonathan inherits. The senseless and self-referential repetition of the final phrase in the passage quoted above, product of this fear of absence and emptiness, and ultimately of the loss of the past, however, undermines the function of archives; it is a parody of the desire for a complete and uninterrupted account of the past, a mock archive which questions not only what should be recorded and in which way, but also the possibility of historiography as a truthful and simultaneously meaningful account of the past in general.

The minute and ultimately meaningless documentation of the writing process is testament to the desire to create a text that perfectly resembles life, yet simultaneously is permanent and immortal. At the same time, it highlights the absurdity and impossibility of such an endeavour, as permanence and immortality by definition stand in opposition to life. The recording of the writing process amounts to a self-perpetuating (narcissistic) exercise which actually prevents life from continuing, and epitomises the inherent contradictory relationship between living and writing. Like the shtetl’s inhabitants, Jonathan attempts to constantly record the journey’s events in his diary, down to mundane details (“Little things that I want to remember”, 159); it is not the momentousness of events that sparks the writing, but the need to record (“The less we saw the more he wrote”, 115) – yet when Augustine finally tells them about his grandfather Safran, he is too moved to write (154). So as soon as Jonathan becomes emotionally involved in his grandfathers’ (and thus his own) story, he loses his stance as observer and recorder and stops writing. Life and writing mutually exclude each other here, illustrating the ambiguous goal that every (auto)biographer pursues and dramatising the difficulty of choosing what to record and what to omit that is inherent in life writing. And yet, like Jonathan’s personal need for an ancestral record to grant him genealogical continuity, *The Books of Antecedents* and *Recurrent Dreams* have a crucial archival function for the community, emphasising the role of the past for the present and the future, but also that of current imagination for the past. The shtetl inhabitants cannot leave their past behind them; their movement forward is always governed by hindsight. Before adding a new passage, they

²⁷⁶ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”, in *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 1-25: 8.

²⁷⁷ White, 11.

review the last month's entry ("We must go backward in order to go forward", 37), insisting on the inseparability of past and future, providing the rationale for creating a record, for commemorating. They thus articulate the motto that implicitly underlies Foer's novel (as well as those of Eugenides and Beyer): "AND IF WE ARE TO STRIVE FOR A BETTER FUTURE, MUSTN'T WE BE FAMILIAR AND RECONCILED WITH OUR PAST?" (196 and 210).

In spite of (or precisely because of) his mistrust of memory and archives, Jonathan, like Augustine, is a creator of archives. While the novel depicts him gathering objects and recording events and thoughts in his notebook, the film foregrounds his role as archivist even more: Jonathan is portrayed as "the collector"²⁷⁸ from early childhood on: an impassive observer, recorder and keeper of objects, which he exhibits: his bedroom wall is a visual family tree of photographs, names and objects – a visually stunning device that recalls Augustine's house filled with photographs, clothes and stacks of boxes. Like the writing down of memories, Jonathan's subjective collection is selective and elliptic. The process of archiving is a non-verbal narrative that, like every (auto)biography, is directed by the needs of the present. And yet, in spite of this subjective aspect, archives are also objects created outside of the self, and constitute "a certain kind of encounter between subject and memory, where memory, even one's own, has become other."²⁷⁹

The discussion of *Middlesex* in chapter II focused on the distance between different narrative selves and the split into a narrating and a narrated identity. Here, another, but related, kind of distancing is foregrounded: any act of recording distances the subject from his or her memory, as Dillard has shown for narratives; the memory is no longer purely his or hers, but by being recorded moves into a public domain. Text, artifact or archive becomes an institution detached from the subject, externalised, and therefore also open to re-interpretation; designed to preserve but in fact prone to loss, destruction or misinterpretation. Archives thus not only cross the borders between interior and exterior manifestations of memory, but also between personal and public spheres. They are an expression of the awareness that personal memory and identity, one's inner life, exists in a relationship with external life: the collective, a social framework. Sheringham speaks of "the staging of a confrontation between an individual present and a past that is made up not so much of individual memories as of materials belonging to a middle or

²⁷⁸ The film version, more than the novel, evokes an earlier and highly influential Jewish American writer, Saul Bellow, on various levels. Bellow's main character in *Mr Sammler's Planet* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), Artur Sammler, a Polish Jew whose name means "collector" in German, may have left traces on various characters of *Everything Is Illuminated*: Sammler like Jonathan records events and impassively but intently observes the world around him; Weinrich calls him a "collector of stories", although, in spite of his excellent memory, he is prone to forgetting mundane facts, and is thus also a "story forgettor" (Weinrich, 195). Blind in one eye, Artur Sammler however also evokes Alex's 'semi-blind' grandfather, and his story may have served as an inspiration for the film's Ukrainian grandfather emerging from the shtetl's mass grave, the only survivor of a Nazi pogrom.

²⁷⁹ Michael Sheringham, "Memory and the Archive in Contemporary Life-Writing", *French Studies*, 59:1 (2005), 47-53: 47.

common ground.”²⁸⁰ Materials such as photographs or the census that Alex sends place the story that Jonathan is researching on a larger scale, comprising both family past and collective history.

Individual stories thus often reflect larger frameworks, in a similar way to what has been shown is at work in *Middlesex*, and what in a different way shapes *Spione*: “Our personal memories relate to our own larger stories – our ‘family frames’ as Marianne Hirsch names them. And these in turn relate to wider narratives that structure more public life, the narratives that make up our national and international identities, narratives and behaviours.”²⁸¹ Jonathan’s failure to establish a clear sense of his own grandfather’s story is not a failure with respect to gaining insight into a wider collective past; and while the particular individual story he tries to trace remains obscure, he learns that the fate lived through by his grandfather is not unique. Jacobson, in *Heshel’s Kingdom*, articulates this realisation repeatedly, most poignantly when he looks at a list of photographs of Varniai inhabitants, searching for a familiar, i.e. literally related, face: “Inevitably I cannot find what I am looking for. Or to speak more truly, I see it everywhere. Any of these pairs of eyes or lips, any of these brows or beards or cheeks will do. There is not a portrait in this stark gallery that might not, will not, silently reveal a possible cousin, if I look long enough at it.”²⁸² He foregrounds the non-uniqueness of the fate of his family, always placing it in a more general context, acknowledging “the distinctiveness *and* the shared humanity of all those who died a collective and anonymous death.”²⁸³

Middlesex too insists on the fact that uniqueness is not unique. While in Eugenides’ novel, however, this is an expression of a universal and wholly natural tendency towards variation, exceptions and hybridity, here, it is a specific historical situation that renders fates non-unique: the defacing anonymity of genocide and mass graves, and the uncountable repetitions of violence and destruction; although every individual experience, every single family story, is different, their identities are obliterated in the horrors of the experience. This is a tension that preoccupies the narrators in both Foer’s and Jacobson’s texts and shapes the way they tell the ancestral story, negotiating the personal and the transferable aspects of their own family stories. It is only through the public knowledge of the collective fate that they can re-imagine their personal stories which have been almost obliterated.

5 Is Everything Illuminated?

The novel’s focus, revolving around knowing and not-knowing, concealing and uncovering stories, finally calls for a reflection on its title. In Jeffrey Eugenides’ words, “every page is

²⁸⁰ Sheringham, 49.

²⁸¹ Eaglestone, 76.

²⁸² Jacobson, 204-5.

²⁸³ King, “Structures of Autobiographical Narrative”, 272.

illuminated” in Foer’s novel.²⁸⁴ Initially, the term “illumination” and its semantic neighbours such as “luminescence” or “enlightenment” are used in their meaning of revelation or understanding, which reflects on the original aim of Jonathan’s quest of uncovering an obscured past, but also encompasses learning about life and maturing as an individual.²⁸⁵ Often used in a euphemistic or comic sense, due to Alex’s old-fashioned use of English, it creates an ironic distance from the project of learning about the past – choosing an overly pompous word gently mocks the lofty aim, casting an air of self-importance on the protagonists. This connotation of the metaphor suggests a reading of the title that seems to promise a revelatory conclusion – a promise which is disappointed, however, as the novel leaves a multitude of questions open and creates more ambiguity than clarity, even if the journey proves revelatory on unexpected levels, for Jonathan and Alex, as well as his grandfather. While every page may well be illuminated, the issues at stake resist elucidation.

In the novel, light is connected with hope, continuity and life, as is expressed in the passage on the Wisps of Ardisht, addicted to smoking and banished to the rooftops. When they notice their matches are running out, signifying an imminent end to their smoking habit, they start a relay of lighting one cigarette from the end of another. Passed on from one to another like an olympic flame, the glimmering of the cigarette is a “candle of hope” and “the glowing ash is the seed of continuity!” (136-7) On another level, in a nod to the biblical meaning of (carnal) knowledge, light is connected with sexuality. Making love creates light that can be seen from space, as the narrator informs us offering a pseudo-scientific explanation: “from space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light exactly, but a glow that could be mistaken for light – a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronauts’ eyes [...] the glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves” (95). Jonathan describes in much detail the different kinds of light given off by different kinds of lovemaking:

The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves: newlyweds and teenagers who spark like lighters out of butane, pairs of men who burn fast and bright, pairs of women who illuminate for hours with soft, multiple glows, orgies like rock and flint toys sold at festivals, couples trying unsuccessfully to have children who burn their frustrated image on the continent like the bloom a bright light leaves on the eye after you turn away from it. (95)

When Jonathan reinterprets his grandfather’s private journal (which he claims is self-censored and secretive), he reads the following entry as a metaphor for his loss of virginity: “Thought about lighthouses all night. Strange.” (170)

However, all those life-affirming connotations of illumination are juxtaposed (if not eclipsed) with the destructive force of fire; and the different connotations are never far from one another. Jonathan’s grandfather’s first orgasm coincides with the “warm and dynamic

²⁸⁴ Jeffrey Eugenides, dust jacket, in Foer.

²⁸⁵ Cf. the Venerable Rabbi who “enlightens” his congregation on how to live a chaste life (19), or Alex’s “luminous remarks” (25).

radiance of German bombs exploding in the nearby hills” (257). The chapter “An Overture to Illumination” recounts how the three travellers get closer to finding Augustine, who they hope will shed light on the past. The chapter “Illumination”, then, seems to promise the enlightenment of the hero. However, in fact, it recounts the destruction of the shtetl in 1942: the burning synagogue becomes a “bonfire of Jews” (272), the light of which “illuminated those who were not in the synagogue those who were not going to die” (251). Earlier, “the first display of German bombing lit the Trachimbrod skies electric” (239), and in the *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, Brod recounts her vision of the end of Trachimbrod, and the infernal destruction suspends orthographical conventions: “9:613 – *The dream of the end of the world*. bombs poured down from the sky exploding across trachimbrod in bursts of light and heat” (272).

The theme of fire and light evokes a trope of Jewish literature, and thus subtly alludes to and expands on that literary heritage. Dan Miron identifies fire as a “ubiquitous feature in shtetl stories and poetry”, and although this has its roots in very real and frequent occurrences of fires in everyday shtetl life, Miron highlights the metaphorical uses of fire: the trope allows the Jewish authors to “express [...] a very general sense of vulnerability and the proximity of disaster that for them marked the shtetl experience”. But, most importantly, he argues that “almost all of these fires are presented as reflections and duplications of the one great historical fire that lay at the very root of the Jewish concept and myth of *galut* (exile): the fire that had destroyed [...] both the First and Second Temples of Jerusalem.”²⁸⁶ Fire and light are thus an expression of the perpetuation of destruction which shapes Jewish history and experience from its beginnings, and Foer, by using these metaphors, places his text in this tradition.

Light and fire, used in their literal and figurative meanings on many levels in the novel, can thus stand for knowledge, for love, but also for bombs and destruction, and all of these meanings can coincide or change from one into another.²⁸⁷ So while nothing is illuminated at the end of the novel with regard to Jonathan’s grandfather, everything is illuminated by fire at the moment of destruction of Trachimbrod. And while the protagonist’s personal past remains in the dark, light is shed on a number of things previously concealed: Jonathan and Alex gain insight not only into Alex’s grandfather’s story (whose suicide letter constitutes the final inconclusive words, as he moves from “the luminescence of the television” (276) into the darkness of the bathroom, where he will cut his veins), but also into a wider collective history of rural Ukraine at the time of World War II. Robert Eaglestone speaks of an “illumination of a grey zone”²⁸⁸ in terms of history and moral judgement, with respect to Alex’s grandfather’s past, who describes himself as “a good person who has lived in a bad time” (103; 145; 227).

²⁸⁶ Miron, 17-8.

²⁸⁷ For the ambiguous metaphor of illumination in Saul Bellow, see also *Mr Sammler’s Planet*, 11: “In evil as in art there was illumination.”

²⁸⁸ Eaglestone, 128.

The grey zone that is illuminated, however, goes beyond that: nothing in the novel is presented as simply good or bad, be it truth, silence or light; rather, it is their moral ambiguity that is highlighted.

The novel's protagonists, challenged by ethical questions, are struggling to position themselves morally, both in their lives and their writing, weighing up fiction's potential for affirming life and granting continuity against its duty to be truthful. The creative power of fiction instils in Alex the desire to "make the story more premium than life" (179), and he implores the author Jonathan to change both the fate of his fictional shtetl characters and the 'reality' of his own grandfather's past: when his story approaches the grandfather's betrayal, Alex begs Jonathan to "save Grandfather. We are merely two paragraphs away. Please, try to find some other option." (224) The belief in the "second chances" that writing grants (144), however, raises fundamental ethical questions on the writing of the past: is it "acceptable" to be "nomadic with the truth" (179), as he says they both are in their respective texts, when writing the story of one's ancestors? "How can you do this to your grandfather, writing about his life in such a manner? Could you write in this manner if he was alive? And if not, what does that signify?" (179) Alex pinpoints another grey zone of retrospective judgments when he parallels his own writing with Grandfather's act of betrayal of his friend: recounting his story is to "point a finger at Grandfather pointing at Herschel" (178), so that the grandson's writing becomes a betrayal of the grandfather comparable to the grandfather's betrayal of his friend. When Jonathan refuses to avoid the tragedy both in his fictional shtetl account and in his account of 'real' events, Alex asks in a burst of frustration: "Who is ordering you to write in such a manner? We have such chances to do good, and yet again and again you insist on evil" (240). Alex here addresses a dilemma both on an artistic and a moral level, invoking the power of narratives to create a new reality, or to make us believe in the reality they construct. Fiction can thus illuminate the past not in a factual sense, but by highlighting issues of intergenerational loyalty even in the face of guilt.

6 Conclusion

Foer's novel is set at the intersection between a number of different, often opposing worlds, and at the same time highlights the connections as well as the tensions between presence and absence, distance and closeness, forgetting and remembering, tragedy and comedy. Alex's and Jonathan's stories are intimately connected, and the characters are foils for each other in spite of their hugely different family pasts and cultural backgrounds; what they share is that both are marked by silence. Jonathan is unable to tell his grandmother about his trip to Ukraine, due to vague feelings of disloyalty, and yet Alex recognises that it is precisely her forgiveness that he seeks. He in turn realises how little he knows about his own grandfather, and compares their

difficulty in writing about their respective ancestors (101-2). Two grandfather-grandson relationships are examined; while one grandson is on a quest for an absent story and attempts to find traces of a long deceased grandfather, the other grandfather is almost overbearingly present, yet his grandson knows even less about his equally traumatic past. As soon as his true story starts to unravel, the grandfather's suicide prevents his grandson from accessing this story beyond speculation. The final words of the novel are Alex's grandfather's letter to Jonathan, translated by Alex; the grandson lets the grandfather speak – and enables him to speak; and yet, the grandfather's first words are also his final ones: he commits suicide as soon as the concealment of his story is lifted. Alex and Jonathan's desire to restore the disrupted continuity is a testament to the impact of inherited traumatic memory across the generations.

But the connections between the two protagonists are more closely interwoven still. Jonathan and Alex are, although writing such different texts, “working on the same story” (214), so that, as with a Moebius strip, it becomes impossible to tell whether there are two sides to it or just one. The repetition of patterns and stories spans generations of related and unrelated individuals and even blur the boundaries between the genres or narrative strands (Jonathan's novel, Alex's travel account, and his letters). Often these are small, seemingly insignificant details, like the tear drop shaped lace panties, which the bride's younger sister puts in Safran's pocket and which recalls the goodbye note from Yankel's wife (45, 119, 164), that, however, take on a larger metaphorical meaning precisely through their repetition, and create links between different situations or people. All these incidents speak of a global repetition of fates, the sense of shared humanity, the repetitiveness of momentous events, culminating in the destruction of the shtetl as a perpetuation of the destruction of the Jerusalem temples. Within this web of connections, Jonathan's quest, recounted by Alex, becomes Alex's and his grandfather's as much as his own (220); and in turn, when Alex finally recoils from writing his own grandfather's story, he hands it over to Jonathan, thus passing on the unspeakability of his own story to another to express it.

Their collaborative narrative dissolves clear boundaries between separate individuals; indeed, Alex realises an identity that transcends people as well as the division between fiction and reality: “Do you know that I am the Gypsy Girl and you are Safran, and that I am Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me?” (214) The novel highlights the parallels and connections between the two family stories, between Jewish and gentile fates, between grandfathers and grandsons, between Ukraine and the USA, and thus implicitly draws attention to a shared humanity, to the point where differences become indistinguishable. In that sense, it does not matter whether Alex's and Jonathan's past are actually intertwined (as the novel repeatedly suggests and yet leaves open) – they *could* be, and that is the crucial realisation they both arrive at: their grandfathers *could* have been best friends, which, in the logic of the book, is the same as if they *had* been friends; they *could* have shared traumatic experiences, they

could have loved the same woman – and this amalgamation of the real and the imagined is the illumination the grandsons achieve at the end of their journey.

And yet, although Jonathan and Alex are part of a generation that suffers from the rupture in their family continuity caused by World War II two generations on, they are distanced by a deeply divisive history that simultaneously brings them together and shows how deep the rifts of the past still are: between Jewish and gentile heritage, between being the grandson of a victim as opposed to that of a perpetrator or bystander, and between their diverging backgrounds (Ukrainian and American), including the imbalance of wealth, education, opportunities. The novel is a negotiation between different “memory communities”, spanning individual and communal, private and public memories.²⁸⁹ It also, however, shows the limitations of the accessibility of this shared humanity. Although the journey is as much about the evolving friendship between the two young men as about their quest, Alex places their relationship on a subjunctive, imaginary level: “We became like friends [...] in a different world we could have been real friends” (26).

²⁸⁹ Eaglestone, 76.

IV “We Only Noticed Her Because She Was Invisible”: Tracing the Grandparents in Marcel Beyer’s *Spione*

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* describes a silence about the past that opens up a space in which two grandsons can meet and begin to communicate about that very silence. The grandsons’ collaborative confrontation of absence and gaps also re-awakens the voice and the memory of a grandfather who has shut his eyes in a denial of his past, pretending to be blind. Marcel Beyer’s *Spione* similarly foregrounds hearing and seeing as a means to understand the present as much as the past: the denial of sensual perceptions is symbolic of the impossible attempt to reconnect with the concealed family past and to re-establish a ruptured continuity. Silence and secrecy in the novel’s family instils a similar desire in the grandchildren to re-imagine the past and in particular their unknown grandparents’ lives; the impenetrable wall of silence they are confronted with sharpens their visual sense and makes them obsessed with what they can(not) see: they develop a heightened sensitivity towards what is invisible, secret and ungraspable, and towards the traces that an obliterated past has left behind in the present. The narrator, in the course of his investigations, turns into a spy, concealing his own identity while trying to uncover that of his grandparents. Failing that, he becomes the author of the very story he desires to hear: “What I cannot see, I have to invent. I have to paint the pictures myself, if I want to have something before my eyes. [...] the fabricated images are irreplaceable.”²⁹⁰ His quest focuses obsessively on unveiling the secrets and overcoming the silence that shape the dialogue through the generations by creating an imagined family album in his text; he re-invests the traces that the past has left with his own creative interpretations, which has disastrous consequences: in the process of reconstructing his past, he loses his grasp on the present. Where Foer focuses on the therapeutic creative potential of the imaginative recreation of the past, Beyer foregrounds the potential dangers, the obsessiveness and destructiveness, of the same drive to narrativise silence.

Foer’s novel traces the traumatised silence of Jonathan’s grandparents, survivors but still victims of the Holocaust; his quest however leads to the guilty silence of Alex’s grandfather, showing how intricately the two stories and the two sides are intertwined. Here, a descendant of the perpetrator generation in Germany confronts a different kind of silence which stems from the same period in history: the Third Reich. His pathological attempts to visualise the silenced past must be seen in the specific context of Germany coming to terms with its past,

²⁹⁰ “Was ich nicht sehen kann, muß ich erfinden. Ich muß mir Bilder selbst ausmalen, wenn ich etwas vor Augen haben will. [...] daß die ausgedachten Bilder unersetzlich sind.”, in Marcel Beyer, *Spione* (Köln: Dumont, 2000), 65. Beyer’s novel has been translated by Breon Mitchell as *Spies* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005); yet, in order to remain closer to the German original, the translations from *Spione* are my own. All quotations from this novel will be referenced in footnotes, together with the German original quotation and page number.

where a national silencing of guilt and crimes was not an option after the war (unlike in Ukraine), and where every family must still negotiate their own individual memory culture within the national commemoration. Beyer's novel highlights the curious split into often contradictory narratives within public and private commemoration. Therefore this chapter will begin by outlining the cultural context in which the text is set, with a particular focus on the disruption of the intergenerational communication and transmission of personal experiences of the World War II past. This provides the framework for understanding the heritage of loss and discontinuity in Beyer's novel, resulting in perpetuated silence, an obsession with the invisible and the ungraspable, and the role of spies into which the descendants are cast.

1 A Brief History of Germany's Dealing with the Past

Contemporary Germany can be characterized both by a "memory boom" and a "memory crisis"; with these terms, Friederike Eigler spans the wide range of the recent increase in public interest in issues of memory and commemoration, motivated by the re-examination of the history of the two Germanies and of National Socialism from the perspective of a post-unification Germany.²⁹¹ Yet another term applied to today's remembrance of the past, that of "memory contests", highlights the conflicting versions of commemoration that exist alongside each other.²⁹² The public as well as the literary debate is marked by controversy. The hypotheses as to why Germany has entered a new phase of extensive and often highly emotional preoccupation with the past span a wide range of reasons and influences, from national and international politics to demographic developments.

On a national level, various incidents and controversies contributed to the intensified debate about the past and its role for the present. Prominent anniversaries, like the 40th, 50th and 60th anniversaries of the end of World War II or the liberation of Auschwitz, have inevitably raised questions about the Nazi past and have sparked a renewed interest in information about that period of history. Academic controversies which were conducted in the German press and taken up by public discussion included the *Historikerstreit* of 1986, in the course of which liberal historians debated the dangers of historical revisionism, and the issue of the 'normalization' of Germany as a nation and the concept of national identity was discussed.²⁹³ A renewed historians' debate ensued from the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's highly

²⁹¹ Friederike Eigler, "Engendering Cultural Memory in Selected Post-Wende Literary Texts of the 1990s", *Sites of Memory. The German Quarterly*, 74: 4 (2001), 392-406: 392.

²⁹² Cf. Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove (eds), "Memory Contests", *German Life and Letters*, 59 (2006), 3-10.

²⁹³ Cf. Ernestine Schlant, *The Language of Silence. West German Literature and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 196-8, and Elena Agazzi, *Erinnerte und rekonstruierte Geschichte. Drei Generationen deutscher Schriftsteller und die Fragen der Vergangenheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2005), 135.

controversial study, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, published in 1996,²⁹⁴ as well as the exhibition on crimes of the *Wehrmacht*, which toured Germany from 1995. Both challenge the previously widespread opinion of the split into 'Germans' and 'Nazis', and of the general population as having been victims of the fascist regime, coerced into committing atrocities. Instead, they suggest the implication of a wide majority of German society in crimes that went beyond the 'absolutely necessary', which, according to Goldhagen, were rooted in a deep-seated German anti-semitism. The exhibition attempted to demythologize the uncritical heroic image of the *Wehrmacht*, and showed atrocities committed by 'ordinary' soldiers.²⁹⁵ Both Goldhagen's book and the exhibition reached hundreds of thousands of Germans and had a tremendous impact on the way the role of 'ordinary' people within the NS regime was perceived, triggering "a response in members of *every* generation in Germany,"²⁹⁶ from the Third Reich contemporaries to their descendants several generations later.

How far German society still is from settling the question of how to remember its atrocious past was epitomized once again by Martin Walser's 1998 speech on the occasion of receiving the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. His novel *Ein springender Brunnen* (*The Springing Fountain*),²⁹⁷ which recounts the story of a German boyhood between 1934 and 1945 whilst almost completely disregarding political developments, is concerned with the split between past and present selves. It can be seen as a literary expression of the issues discussed in his speech, which focused on his personal attitude towards guilt, asserting everyone's right to personal and untainted memory, and expressing a desire for closure. He attacks the "instrumentalisation" of Auschwitz "for present-day political purposes,"²⁹⁸ and criticises the (ab)use of Germany's guilty past by people or groups who impose "a crippling sense of national guilt and prevent a return to 'normality' and self-confidence". His speech sparked a heated debate about the 'normalisation' of Germany's relationship with its past that divided the whole nation, but also "helped to open up public ritual for renegotiation."²⁹⁹

The change in the political landscape on both a national and an international level – the end of the cold war – sparked, in some respects, a reinterpretation of history and a redefinition of collective memory: patterns of thought which had been valid for decades were suddenly questioned by historical changes, which had an impact not only on the projections previously held for the future, but also on the interpretation of the past. Germany's reunification in 1990 has considerably altered the country's relationship to its own past; the '2 + 4 Treaty', signed in

²⁹⁴ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 1996).

²⁹⁵ For a detailed and balanced discussion of both these events see for example Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past. United Germany and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2002), 119-74.

²⁹⁶ Niven, 155.

²⁹⁷ Martin Walser, *Ein springender Brunnen* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1998).

²⁹⁸ Martin Walser, "Erfahrungen beim Verfassen einer Sonntagsrede", Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels (Hg.): *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 1998. Ansprachen aus Anlaß der Verleihung* (Frankfurt/M: Verlag der Buchhändler-Vereinigung, 1998).

²⁹⁹ Niven, 177; 189.

1990-91 between the four Allied Forces (France, the UK, the USA and the USSR) and the two Germanies, paved the way for German unification and sovereign status for Germany, and effectively put an end to the cold war. Yet, the 1990s saw “a veritable explosion of discussion about the National Socialist past in the public realm.”³⁰⁰ The official severance of the ties that link contemporary Germany to National Socialism created the need to re-address and reassess issues of guilt, not solely due to international fears of a new German Reich. At the same time, the public debate also began to allow more consideration of German war-time suffering. Elena Agazzi points to a new critical approach to the concept of national identity in the aftermath of the fall of the wall, which has been an era of re-orientation on many levels.³⁰¹

Particularly relevant for the context of this dissertation, however, is the change in the demographical make-up of society, which impacts on the way families communicate about the past: at a time when most people who were adults during the Third Reich are at the end of their lives or have already passed away, thus when the potential for communication wanes and personal memory turns into mediated history, the third generation of descendants, the grandchildren, continue to be preoccupied with Germany’s past and their heritage, both on a national and a personal level. It is a crucial period for establishing cultural memory, foregrounding the generation of the grandparents as the last one to be able to provide communicative memory of the Third Reich period. However, the questions asked of the fathers in the time of the student revolts by the so-called ’68 generation, who demanded an explanation for their parents’ role during the Nazi regime in an often confrontational way, have changed, and the new generation is asking questions of their grandparents more neutrally, from a more distant vantage point, and often more interested in knowledge and understanding than in accusation and confrontation.³⁰² This, however, does not mean that the contemporary quest for the past is less urgent than a generation ago; indeed, Elena Agazzi claims that the third post-war generation, with its newly found interest in the grandparents’ story, is “obsessed with history,”³⁰³ in spite of, or precisely because of, the writers’ powerlessness faced with an increasing inaccessibility of this history on a personal level.

Contemporary Germany is still on a quest for its (post-war) identity, which is inextricably linked to family history: due to the entanglement of virtually every German family story in Third Reich history in one way or another, this quest necessarily consists of a confrontation with both the private family past and that of the wider nation – two realms which

³⁰⁰ Niven, 1.

³⁰¹ Cf. Agazzi, 12, and Joachim Garbe, *Deutsche Geschichte in deutschen Geschichten der neunziger Jahre* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2002), 11-12.

³⁰² For an overview over these tendencies, see e.g. Stuart Taberner, *German Literature of the 1990s and Beyond. Normalization and the Berlin Republic* (New York: Camden House, 2005), 111 and 128-9.

³⁰³ Cf. Agazzi, 134. She uses the term “geschichtsbesessen” (obsessed with history), alluding to Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert’s monograph *Geschichtsvergessenheit, Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945 [History Oblivion, History Obsession]* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999). Assmann and Frevert, in their title, thus span the contradictory tendencies within German commemoration of its history. See also Schlant, 85.

often stand in stark opposition to one another. Political psychologist Harald Welzer, in his revealing and much discussed study *Opa war kein Nazi* (Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi), conducted extended interviews with a large number of 'ordinary' German families (including neither convicted perpetrators nor explicit opponents of the NS regime), and has examined in detail the different ways of dealing with the past over three generations. His study shows that commemoration of the World War II past in Germany is split between personal or family memories and commemoration on a national level. Referring to historian Raul Hilberg's proposition that, in Germany, the Holocaust is family history, he describes individual memory as split into an "encyclopaedia" (containing historiography based on facts and publicly accessible knowledge) and "family albums" (containing personal memories and family stories), which stand side by side on the living room shelf – and which, as his findings show, tell very different, often opposing, stories, between which the family members need to create congruence.³⁰⁴ This split reflects a division into a cognitive and an emotional approach to the past and corresponds to Jan Assmann's concepts of the dual commemorative frameworks of cultural and communicative memory:³⁰⁵ here, both exist side by side, telling very different stories. Welzer's findings show how the frames that family memory provides through communication govern the way learnt knowledge about history is interpreted, used and stored, but also that, while the national guilt is reflected and accepted publicly, the personal past is confronted in a much less open and honest way.³⁰⁶ The families interviewed show a strong tendency to re-interpret or even rewrite the personal history, creating an image of their (grand)parents that they can morally live with; while the descendants are far from being ignorant about the National Socialist past and condemn the crimes committed then, their own retelling of their ancestors' stories reveal an increasing glorification.

Welzer compares intergenerational communication to the children's game "Chinese Whispers", where an original story is passed on from one person to another, albeit in an impeded, muted fashion; by the time the last person hears it, it has become mutilated and fragmented, or has even assumed a new plot. Every participant makes their own sense of the story afresh, as best as they can understand it, and passes it on in this form.³⁰⁷ Establishing a collective story is, however, not a one-way process: communicative memory is constituted by a collaborative construction of various storytellers, and every storyteller's version feeds back to the collective memory, which thus evolves over time. Sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal (whose

³⁰⁴ Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, Karoline Tschuggnall, "*Opa war kein Nazi*": *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 2005), 10-1.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C.H. Beck, 1992), 45.

³⁰⁶ Welzer, 12-3. See also A. Assmann, 79, who comments on the difference between public and private commemoration in post-war Germany, and the suppression and silencing of subjective stories while objective history is publicly commemorated. Historian R. Koselleck sees this as another consequence of the dying out of contemporary witnesses (cf. A. Assmann, 28); Welzer's study shows that the same dynamics applies to still living ancestors.

³⁰⁷ Welzer, 14.

study on family memories of the Holocaust informs the discussion in more detail later on) similarly emphasises the fact that second and third generation descendants play an important role in the way family memory develops: they are not “passive recipients”, but “active agents in the way they deal with their parents and grandparents and their pasts.”³⁰⁸ The findings of these extensive empirical studies thus shed light on how family communication over three generations shapes every member’s attitude to the past, and on the extent to which these family stories evolve over time, reflecting present needs.

The tension generated between conflicting histories standing side by side instigates research into the Nazi past and its legacy, notwithstanding the growing distance. And yet, this obsession with history, as Agazzi has called it, always also leads back to the present: it is a gaze directed by a particular need and a specific aim, which Beyer has already addressed in his earlier novel *Flughunde*.³⁰⁹ The following statement refers to *Flughunde* but is equally valid for *Spione*: “I always counterbalance dealing with the past with the questioning of the present, as this novel does not merely ask me how I would have acted then, but also how I would act now, if we had to live under different conditions.”³¹⁰ The (grand)children’s interest in the past and their quest for their ancestral story thus stems from a need to establish their own sense of self in the framework of family roots as well as their contemporary society: it is personal *Geschichtspolitik* (politics of history), which, on a national level, the historian Peter Reichel defines as a gaze into the past in order to define one’s present, a quest for current personal and national identity,³¹¹ which, consequently, determines our present and, in turn, our future. In a much-quoted article, Ulrich Greiner pinpoints why the debate about the past, tradition, memory and public forms of memorialization is so important: “Whoever decides what *was* also decides what *will be*. The debate about the past is a debate about the future.”³¹²

³⁰⁸ Gabriele Rosenthal (ed.), *The Holocaust in Three Generations. Families of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi Regime* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998), 2.

³⁰⁹ Marcel Beyer, *Flughunde* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1995) [*The Karnau Tapes*, transl. by John Brownjohn (London: Secker and Wartburg, 1997)].

³¹⁰ “Der Vergangenheitsbewältigung setze ich immer die Gegenwartsbefragung entgegen, denn dieser Roman fragt mich ja nicht nur danach, wie ich mich damals verhalten hätte, sondern wie ich mich jetzt verhalten würde, wenn andere Bedingungen herrschten.” Marcel Beyer, quoted in Stuart Parkes, “The Languages of the Past: Recent Prose Works by Bernhard Schlink, Marcel Beyer, and Friedrich Christian Delius”, in Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes, Julian Preece (eds), *‘Whose Story?’ – Continuities in Contemporary German-language Literature* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), 115-31: 119. All translations from the German are mine, unless otherwise stated.

³¹¹ Cf. Peter Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung. Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit* (München: Carl Hanser, 1995), 21-3.

³¹² “Wer bestimmt, was gewesen ist, der bestimmt auch, was sein wird. Der Streit um die Vergangenheit ist ein Streit um die Zukunft.” Ulrich Greiner, “Die deutsche Gesinnungsästhetik. Noch einmal: Christa Wolf und der deutsche Literaturstreit. Eine Zwischenbilanz.” *Die Zeit*, 2 November 1990.

1.1 From *Vaterliteratur* to *Großvaterliteratur*

If literature can be seen as holding “the privileged position [...] as the seismograph of a people’s conscience,”³¹³ it is only natural that the attitudes of a nation towards its past shape its literary texts. The centrality of the (often problematic) family story is reflected in literature dealing with Germany’s attitude to the past and helps explain the frequency with which literary versions of such ‘family albums’ have been created. While in the immediate post-war years writers tended to either avoid confrontation with the Nazi past, or focus on German suffering, from the mid-70s to the 80s novels about fathers (and, to a lesser degree, mothers) were predominant; the confrontational attitude of the 1968 student revolts slowly gave way to a “new subjectivity” or “new sensitivity”, which saw a rising interest in the exploration of the self within autobiographical literature, as opposed to the focus on the parents’ role during the fascist regime; introspection and self-assessment replaced attacks and accusations. This exploration of the self is always closely linked to an exploration of the past, resulting in the attempt to access official documents, such as newspaper articles, archives, and photographs of the period, but also personal ones, such as diaries, letters or family photographs. And yet, such research masks, in Schlant’s words, the fact that “the real interests [...] lie in the autobiographical ‘I’.”³¹⁴ The preoccupation with an unresolved and silenced family past, with memory, the recreation and reimagination of personal history, is reflected in a wide range of recent texts, which often feature narrators who engage critically with their own family’s involvement with Germany’s war past, while at the same time negotiating the narrators’ own sense of self within that family story.³¹⁵ By situating themselves on the intersection between autobiography, biography and fiction, these texts belong to “a hybrid genre that undercuts clear distinctions between real and fictional realms”, commenting “on the processes of memory and the ways memory is rooted in the power of imagination and interpretation.”³¹⁶ Eigler thus emphasizes the complexity of any approach to the past, which can never be straightforwardly rooted in factual history, but involves a critical assessment of one’s own and one’s ancestors’ memory, as well as consciousness of the process of reinterpretation of the past from a present-day vantage point.

Silence and secrecy within the family dialogue contribute in a crucial way to the complexity of contemporary dealing with the past and the need for re-imagination; indeed, Ernestine Schlant sees them as constitutive elements of post-war West German literature: “in its approach to the Holocaust, West German literature of the last four decades has been a literature

³¹³ Schlant, 7.

³¹⁴ Schlant, 84-6.

³¹⁵ Examples would be such diverse novels as Martin Walser’s *Ein springender Brunnen* (The Springing Fountain, 1998), Monika Maron’s *Pawels Briefe. Eine Familiengeschichte* (Pavel’s Letters, 1999), Günter Grass’ *Im Krebsgang* (Crabwalk, 2002), Ulla Hahn’s *Unschärfe Bilder* (Blurred Images, 2003), Stefan Wackwitz’s *Ein unsichtbares Land. Familienroman* (An Invisible Country, 2003), Reinhard Jirgl’s *Die Unvollendeten* (The Unfinished, 2003), Tanja Dückers’ *Himmelskörper* (Celestial Bodies, 2003), Uwe Timm’s *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (In My Brother’s Shadow, 2003), or Wibke Bruhns’ *Meines Vaters Land. Geschichte einer deutschen Familie* (My Father’s Country, 2004).

³¹⁶ Eigler, “Engendering Cultural Memory”, 392.

of absence and silence contoured by language". This reflects the general tendency within society of blanking out certain aspects of the Nazi past; however, "a great variety of narrative strategies have delineated and broken these contours, in a contradictory endeavor to keep silent about the silence and simultaneously make it resonate." Schlant stresses that this phenomenon cannot be seen as proof that West Germans preferred to forget about their guilty past, but rather that "the enormity of these crimes and their legacy have become part of German self-understanding;"³¹⁷ indeed, they constitute a fundamental component of the German psyche, as can be seen from the intensity and the vehemence with which the public debate is conducted around issues such as, for instance, Walser's controversial speech.

Marcel Beyer's *Spione*, first published in 2000, is a recent literary contribution to the debate on memory and historical responsibility in Germany. The novel can be placed in a long tradition of foregrounding secrecy, silence and gaps within German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), and belongs to the hybrid genre of fictional (auto)biography sketched above, reflecting on issues of memory as in many other German contemporary texts. The narrator-protagonist is caught between the urge to uncover his obscure family history and the realization that this story, overshadowed by taboos surrounding his grandfather's Nazi involvement as well as the fate of the unknown grandmother, refuses to be revealed. In its approach to a German family story marked by silence and taboos, the novel, a grandson's investigation, moves on from a generation of texts labelled *Vaterliteratur*,³¹⁸ which focused on unresolved issues with the past and generational conflicts between parents and children, to what may be called *Großvaterliteratur*, 'grandfather literature': the task of facing up to the horrors of the Nazi past has been transferred onto the next, the third generation, and the questions asked today have lost none of their urgency.³¹⁹ Confronted with grandparents' stories full of gaps and taboos, the contemporary generation needs to resort to new ways of (re)telling these stories; the incapacity of the different generations to communicate with each other, either on account of the silence or because of the physical absence of the older generations, is at the core of many autobiographical family novels. However, Beyer's novel is exceptional both in the intensity of the imagination it portrays and in the degree to which the past is fabricated; the delusion these fabrications create in the narrator, and the insecurity they leave the reader in, lend a new and unsettling quality to the assessment of Germany's dealing with its history. In *Spione*, the severed bond between grandparents and grandchildren is foregrounded as the origin of an unresolved relationship with a traumatic and guilty past. The novel portrays an almost

³¹⁷ Schlant, 1-2.

³¹⁸ For a delineation of *Vaterliteratur*, cf. for example Schlant, 80-2, or Friederike Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2005), 24-5.

³¹⁹ Mila Ganeva uses the term *Enkelliteratur*, grandchildren literature, for such texts, thus foregrounding the writers rather than their subject. Mila Ganeva, "From West-German *Väterliteratur* to Post-Wall *Enkelliteratur*: The End of the Generation Conflict in Marcel Beyer's *Spione* and Tanja Dücker's *Himmelskörper*", *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 43:2 (May 2007), 149-62.

pathological degree of preoccupation with the National Socialist past, and the allegorical reactions of the four children can be seen as representative of different attitudes within the post-war nation, outlining the psychological implications and the damage created by secrecy and taboos, and they cast a sober look at both the present and the future of the past.

Spione features four cousins (the unnamed narrator, and Nora, Carl and Paulina), who have never met their grandfather although he allegedly lives in the same town; family conversations avoid mentioning him, their grandmother (who is presumed to have long since died) or their grandfather's second wife. The cousins' interest in their grandparents is sparked by a family photo album they find hidden away in the bottom of a drawer, which starts with photos of their grandfather as a young man in military uniform. The neat and orderly succession of pictures is disrupted after a final photograph of the young grandfather with a steel helmet – from then on, he is only ever behind the camera and thus invisible; the photos are out of chronological order, lack inscriptions, and are sometimes only loosely inserted between the pages. Even more striking, however, are the countless blanks where they assume photos of the grandmother should have been. In particular, it is the grandmother's eyes that they cannot find in the album – and desperately search for, desiring proof that her eyes are, like the children's own, the unusual "Italian eyes" that set them apart from other children.

Thus confronted with silence, suppression, and gaps, the children proceed to imagine the missing photographs as well as their grandparents' lives: the grandfather's childhood memories of the grandmother, her career as an opera singer, the courtship of the young people and their subsequent separation when the grandfather joins a secret military mission. Their fabrications soon become more real to them than any facts could have been, just as the images in their mind become clearer than actual photographs. Confronted with a lost or hidden story, they set out to (re)create it themselves, thus taking charge of their need to be part of a family history. They take inspiration from the few documents of the past that they have, but their stories are also influenced by their present surroundings: their reticent neighbour, the "pigeon man", is assigned various sinister and crucial roles in the grandparents' past, the wood where they play is invested with historical significance, and a figurine of a Spanish dancer is taken as proof of the grandfather's involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Pervading the atmosphere of the children's investigations are the barely visible spores of a hidden fungus which is uncovered only years later.

The children's collaborative tales evolve and become increasingly elaborate; yet they cannot always agree on one definitive version of events, so that multiple and sometimes contradictory accounts remain alongside each other. The narrative also oscillates between the adult voice and the narrator's childhood perspective, although those two voices often blend into one, sometimes in the same sentence: adult and childhood perspectives are not fundamentally divergent, both veering between believing and doubting their own fabrications. The different points of view thus do not add up to a clearer, more rounded or balanced rendition of the past,

but instead confuse clarity further. The contradictions are never resolved by an authoritative narratorial voice: the family story remains tentative and speculative, and consciously a figment of their imagination, with every new version of the past accompanied by expressions such as “maybe”, “perhaps” or “it is possible that...”. Thus the narrator’s insecurity about which version of the past to trust is mirrored in the reading experience: it is impossible for the reader to rely on anything as ‘true’ within the fictional world presented. In my discussion of the novel, I refrain from pointing to this phenomenon every time an episode is discussed, in order to save the argumentation unnecessary convolution, and instead treat the different stories ‘as if’ they were part of a fictional reality, just as the novel does.

Spione illustrates the process, the necessity, but also the dangers of such a manipulation and rewriting of history. The narrator’s strategy is revisionist, not in a political or ideological sense, but rather out of a psychological urgency. He consciously engages in fabrications, yet at the same time convinces himself of their truthfulness, thus blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction for himself as well as for the reader, and presenting his imagination as ‘reality’. This process is often laid bare, as, for instance, when the children reflect on how the grandmother’s photographs disappeared from the album: “It would be incomprehensible if our grandfather were to be the one who later took out of the family album all the photographs of his wife. We don’t want to believe this. That’s not how it happened.”³²⁰ What *could* have been soon becomes what *must* have been, and finally what *has* been, in a movement away from the subjunctive to the indicative, from the speculative to the certain, a process which we have already seen in Foer’s novel. Beyer similarly lays bare the narrator’s awareness of his own fabrications.

With the absence of the grandparents’ story and the gaps in the family album providing the central narrative incentive, voids are at the core of the text, as in Foer’s novel. However, the focus is shifted: while, in Foer, absence and silence are ambivalent, yet most often express loss and sadness, here silence almost always evokes secrecy, concealment, and guilt. The following section examines the multiple ways in which silence and secrecy shape the novel, and it places the family’s secrets in a larger framework, reading the novel as an allegory of different stances towards the past within contemporary German society.

1.2 The Silence of the Grandparents

At the root of this fabricated family history is the lost or concealed story of the grandparents, and indeed, guilt, secrecy and silence pervade each of the characters’ lives both on a personal and a political level: “Silence marked our family, from the very beginning.”³²¹ Entitling two of

³²⁰ “Es wäre unbegreiflich, wenn unser Großvater derjenige gewesen sein sollte, der später alle Bilder seiner Frau aus dem Familienalbum genommen hat. Wir wollen das nicht glauben. So war es nicht.” (41)

³²¹ “Verschwiegenheit prägte unsere Familie, von Anfang an” (75).

his chapters “*Verschwiegene*” (chapters III and VII),³²² Beyer exploits the ambiguity of the word, which can be read in an active sense as the character trait of being silent and secretive, or in a passive sense as being silenced or not being mentioned: the different family members in *Spione* guard their own secrets, such as the grandfather’s military mission, but also the children’s clandestine investigations into their own family past as well as into the life of the mysterious “pigeonman”. However, they also deny other family members their stories, or even their very existence within the family consciousness: multiple taboos exist around the grandmother as well as the grandfather’s second wife, who they call “*die Alte*” (“the old hag”), and who, according to the children, is the cause of a complete communication break-down between the grandfather and his children and grandchildren.

The ability to keep secrets initially has positive connotations, indicating strength of character, trustworthiness, and self-discipline. In the aftermath of World War I, Germany was banned from having an air force; however, the *Luftwaffe* was re-formed illegally as a section of the *Wehrmacht* in 1933. The cousins’ grandfather joins early on, “bound to secrecy”³²³ from the beginning of his career in the airforce. He sees this military virtue as a fundamentally human one:

What kind of person would he be if secrets weren’t safe with him. Someone without the strength to keep a secret proves weak in every other respect as well. Someone who breaches confidence, who is not worthy of a secret, first loses the respect of others, and then his own self-esteem. One has to be able to look oneself in the eye in the mirror. A secret must remain a secret.³²⁴

The secrets the young airman is involved in due to his military connections soon spill over into his private life, as he needs to conceal confidential information from his fiancée, such as the nature of his occupation or his exact whereabouts. Complex strategies of concealment begin when he joins the notorious Legion Condor, which helped Franco’s side in the Spanish civil war; his participation in the secret mission will always remain a taboo within the family. While the couple’s coded letters initially contribute to their sense of intimacy, allowing them to communicate in spite of military censorship, and create a bond against the outside world, secrecy soon takes on a more sinister form. His secrecy towards his fiancée (made necessary through military orders, thus imposed from the outside) has a destructive effect, no longer bonding (or indeed binding) the lovers but, on the contrary, distancing them from each other. At this point, the young soldier has switched allegiance from his fiancée to his squadron; military

³²² The novel’s nine chapters revolve around a central one entitled “*Spione*” (spies or spyholes), doubling the other titles symmetrically, suggesting a mirror-like repetition.

³²³ “der Verschwiegenheit verpflichtet” (74).

³²⁴ “Was wäre er denn für ein Mensch, wenn Geheimnisse bei ihm nicht sicher aufgehoben wären. Wer nicht die Kraft hat, ein Geheimnis zu bewahren, erweist sich auch in jeder anderen Hinsicht als schwach. Wer das Vertrauen bricht, wer eines Geheimnisses nicht würdig ist, dem geht zuerst die Achtung der anderen, dann seine Selbstachtung verloren. Man muss sich selber im Spiegel in die Augen sehen können. Geheimnis bleibt Geheimnis” (11).

loyalties override personal ones, and the boundaries between silence as a “marker of courage and heroism or the cover of cowardice and self-interest”³²⁵ become fluid.

When the general silence about Legion Condor is lifted and the first heroic books about Germans as participants on Franco’s anti-Republican side in the Spanish Civil War are published, the grandmother, now his wife, refuses to read them: she is not interested in the memoirs of victorious soldiers creating a heroic collective identity behind which the individuals are trying to hide. The couple, in mute agreement, remain silent about this episode, leaving gaps in the family history just like in the photo album: “what has been uncovered can without great difficulty be covered up again.”³²⁶ Their secret pact becomes, yet again, a means of bonding for the couple; however, now their motivation is a shared sense of guilt, the creation of a taboo, the silent admission that there are elements in their lives that they would rather forget.

This aspect of silence is reflected in the historian Hermann Lübke’s term “*kommunikatives Beschweigen*” (communicative silencing), which describes complicity among a group who consciously but mutely share a guilty past. Lübke claims that the silencing of war crimes has created a certain stability in the Federal Republic, and, like Aleida Assmann, contrasts the public with the private sphere: whereas in public, the past is addressed through debate and commemoration, in private a constructive silence is kept, which, to him, constitutes the sociopsychologically and politically necessary medium of change in the post-war federal republic,³²⁷ and which, indeed, grants a certain stability to the young grandparents’ relationship in Beyer’s novel. However, this silence, more than sixty years after the end of the war, and in spite of the attempts of the student revolt in ’68, is still perceived as an obstacle to the process of confronting a traumatic and guilt-ridden past. As Aleida Assmann points out, the term ‘communicative silencing’ can at best be used for the generation of perpetrators who know what they are silent about – for the subsequent generations this muting becomes uncommunicative and empty,³²⁸ a “wall of silence” that cannot be shaken.³²⁹ This repression of knowledge, which finds its visual correspondence in the gaps in the photo album, is at the core of the cousins’ quest, which cannot result in satisfactory answers, as the narrator’s generation has neither the knowledge nor the means to confront the past and overcome their inherited shame by breaking the silence, but has to resort to fabrications and speculations in order to fill this empty space. Hence, two generations later, the grandfather’s tradition of concealment continues, when his grandchildren attempt to uncover his obscure past, as well as the mysteries around the grandparents’ relationship.

³²⁵ Peter Haidu, “The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification”, in Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “final solution”* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1992), 277-99: 278.

³²⁶ “Was aufgedeckt ist, kann man ohne große Schwierigkeiten wieder verschleiern” (176).

³²⁷ Cf. Hermann Lübke, “Der Nationalsozialismus im politischen Bewusstsein der Gegenwart”, in Martin Broszat et al (eds), *Deutschlands Weg in die Diktatur* (Berlin: Siedler, 1983), 341.

³²⁸ Cf. Assmann and Frevort, 77.

³²⁹ Dorian Weickmann, “Eine Mauer des Schweigens”, *Die Zeit*, 6 December 2007.

Ultimately secrecy always leads to a rift, and the consequences can be seen in the legacy that the children inherit. Political scientist Gesine Schwan underlines the destructive effects of this silence, not only for the perpetrators themselves, but also for their children and grandchildren. She sees the (grand)parents' silence as fundamental to the break-up between the generations, creating distance between the family members and leading to a loss of trust.³³⁰ This is precisely what, in retrospect, *Spione's* narrator diagnoses when reflecting on the invented stories about the grandparents as the beginning of the ruptures within the family and the growing isolation of the children.³³¹ Their complicated construction of stories about the grandmother starts with a lie, when the mocking neighbours' children tease them about their 'Italian' eyes. The tale they consequently invent about their grandmother being a famous Italian opera singer has to be maintained and elaborated for the children not to lose face. While initially, in the process of the secretive investigations into their grandparents' past the cousins become a close-knit group,³³² their complicity later creates tensions and isolation between the children, due to their feelings of guilt at "thoughtlessly" having hidden letters they assumed to be from their estranged father to their mother, and thus having prevented communication between the parents. Their conviction that this contributed to their parents' lasting break-up drives them apart, and dominates their relationship even if they never mention the incident again.³³³ Similarly, their childhood fabrications about their grandfather and his second wife are silenced when they meet again as adults: "Not a single word. Our horror images, inventions, intentions simply hadn't existed."³³⁴ They become victims of the secrets and lies their elders generated, but they also create their own new taboos in turn, and are incapable even as adults of escaping their childhood fabrications, or indeed of communicating openly and constructively about their shared mistakes. In a recent article, Elisabeth von Thadden describes the impact of silencing the past as a "paralysis" bestowed on the biographies of children and grandchildren of the war generation.³³⁵

The four cousins' different ways of dealing with the past thus remain restricted to silence and to creating taboos, strategies passed down through the generations; their silence is

³³⁰ Cf. Gesine Schwan, *Politik und Schuld. Die zerstörerische Macht des Schweigens* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), 73; 133; 144.

³³¹ "Das gemeinsame Erfinden schweißt uns zusammen, im Rückblick aber scheint es so, als setze mit der ausgedachten Großelterngeschichte zugleich auch schon das langsame Auseinanderbrechen unserer Gruppe ein. Als liege hier der Ursprung unserer zunehmenden Vereinzelung." (73): "Our collaborative inventions weld us together; in retrospect however it seems as if the fabricated grandparents' story was the beginning of the slow dissolution of our group. As if it was at the origin of our growing isolation."

³³² "eine verschworene Bande" (73).

³³³ "Carl glaubt, alle späteren Spannungen zwischen ihm, Nora und Paulina seien auf das gedankenlose Verschwindenlassen jener Briefe zurückzuführen, ihre Beziehung wurde davon beherrscht, auch wenn sie nie wieder darüber gesprochen haben." (237)

³³⁴ "Was wir in diesen Wochen über unseren Großvater und die Alte in der Gegenwart geredet haben, über zwei ältere Leute, die in unserer Nähe lebten, ist tabu. Kein Wort. Unsere Schreckensbilder, Erfindungen, Absichten hat es einfach nicht gegeben." (182)

³³⁵ Cf. Elisabeth von Thadden, "Die Kriegskinder sind unter uns", *Die Zeit*, 7 May 2009.

entwined with inescapable feelings of guilt, which they simultaneously disavow. As grown-ups, they continue to be marked by their confrontation with a secretive family past, albeit in different ways, reflecting different, often contradictory tendencies within the German post-war public: Paulina, the youngest of the cousins, looks after the grave she believes to be that of the grandfather's second wife, convinced that, as children, they killed her or at least contributed to her suffering a heart attack by placing an announcement of her death in the local paper and by terrorizing her with silent phone calls (which "*die Alte*", intent on preventing any contact between her husband and his former family, presumes to be the children's attempts to get in touch with their grandfather, a deeply threatening thought to her). Paulina's attitude is characterized by a wish for atonement and honouring the dead; her feelings of guilt as a grown-up stem from her starting to doubt their childhood construction of an evil old hag as the family's enemy, granting her humanity and extending compassion in retrospect. Similarly, Nora, the oldest cousin, accepts guilt, does penance, and commits to making amends: one version of events portrays her as secretly looking after the grandfather and his second wife, who Nora and the narrator, contrary to Paulina, assume to be alive. And yet, the narrator, still caught up in their childhood games, continues to play along, helping Paulina to tend to the nameless grave.

Carl, on the other hand, believes that the way forward is to forget the past, along with anything that may create a lingering feeling of guilt. He is consciously engaged in erasing his memories, advising the narrator to do the same: "I hope one day the four of us will be able to sit down together again, without our past weighing heavily on us, neither our family history nor that disastrous year we spent our holidays together. But before that, you too will have to forget our grandmother."³³⁶ That disastrous year, during which the children's investigations take place, is 1977; it is also the year of the *deutsche Herbst*: the height of Baader-Meinhof terrorism. While radical sections of society used violent means to confront the past that had not been dealt with thoroughly enough, a consequence of still unresolved issues during the student revolts of 1968, Carl blocks out the past completely. It is his personal *Stunde Null* (zero hour), reflecting the new federal republic's desire to start with a clean slate after World War II; the necessary pre-condition, to Carl, for moving on is to forget the grandmother. When he meets the narrator again as an adult, he has even lost (or shed?) his "Italian eyes" (234), and with them, implicitly, the inquisitive childhood gaze – and in turn Carl claims that he cannot recognize the childhood Italian gaze in the narrator (246). And yet, even Carl, having chosen to live abroad, far from the influence of and the memories connected with his parental home, proves he is still under the influence of the childhood inventions, when he acknowledges their

³³⁶ "Ich hoffe, irgendwann werden wir vier wieder zusammensitzen, ohne dass die Vergangenheit auf uns lastet, weder unsere Familiengeschichte, noch das unheilvolle gemeinsame Ferienjahr. Doch vorher wirst auch du unsere Großmutter vergessen müssen." (249)

impact (“We underestimated the power of words”),³³⁷ and hopes for their spell to be broken in the near future, thus acknowledging the ongoing effects of the haunting stories of the past.

Finally, the fourth cousin, the narrator himself, is still on a quest; he remains nameless and uncertain about his own identity, guided by a desire to find a historical framework for himself and obsessed with trying to reconstruct or reinvent the past, which is symbolised by the figure of the unknown grandmother. He has lost his trust in so-called ‘objective proof’ like ‘real’ photographs, and, in an attempt not to repeat the creation of such obvious gaps, he refrains from owning a family album himself, trusting his own reconstructions and fabrications more than anything else.

Spione was published at a time when German society as a whole was confronting its past anew, presenting protagonists who are born into a culture of silence and continue to be speechless, incapable of addressing the past in a meaningful and honest way. Harald Welzer sees gaps and absences in stories as a necessary prerequisite for the descendants to be able to engage in them and to fill these gaps themselves. While he claims that the descendants are most likely to create harmony and agreement when least is said,³³⁸ *Spione* shows a different dynamic: the narrative is not marked by feelings of loyalty or idealisation of the grandparent; the narrator does not attempt to fabricate an innocent and moral grandparental story; there is no attempt or even temptation to exculpate the grandfather – the children don’t invent a single version of the story in which he is innocent, morally admirable or even a freedom fighter. Instead, they are suspicious to the point of expecting only guilt, collaboration, and uncritical acceptance of the political developments of the time from their grandfather.

The families that Welzer examines differ from the family portrayed in *Spione* in one crucial aspect: there, the war past is talked about rather than silenced. The family unity and culture of communication, which in Welzer’s sample group is the reason descendants, in their minds, transform their (grand)parents into better people than they were, is destroyed here; the atmosphere of secrecy, hostility, distance and mistrust shapes the way the past is reimagined and reinterpreted. The conclusion that might be drawn from comparing those two different approaches to dealing with one’s family past is profoundly disillusioning: in a climate of silence and secrecy, the emotional ties between generations are ruptured and suspicion is nurtured, whereas, when families speak more openly, the descendants seem to delude themselves into believing in an innocent past, as emotional connections make it impossible to accept the guilt of the ancestor. Both approaches thus evade an honest confrontation with an uncomfortable family past.

The ’68 generation may have addressed taboos and lifted the silence about the past in the Federal Republic to a certain extent, but ultimately did not manage to resolve the issues and uncover the personal taboos. The silence that exists in the novel’s family is so profound that

³³⁷ “Wir haben die Macht der Worte unterschätzt” (251).

³³⁸ Welzer, 199-204.

there is nothing for the children to grasp and to confront. Through the cousins' different approaches to their family heritage, Beyer explores the nation's various attitudes to its past and provides an analysis of Germany's present dilemmas. None of the cousins' reactions described above are presented as successful or healthy, and their individual failure to find a way of coming to terms with their own guilt reflects national and collective tendencies; scarred for life, not able to liberate themselves from their past and still caught up in the previous generations' failure to deal with their guilt, the subsequent generations perpetuate the destructive cycle of silence and repression.

The way in which different generations deal with memory of the past, and indeed the need to forget or overcome this memory, evolves over time, and Elena Agazzi attempts to schematize Germany's changing approach to its history. She sees a fundamental difference in each of the subsequent generations, expressed in different modalities: whereas the first generation *wants* to but *cannot* forget, the second generation feels they *could* not forget even if they *wanted* to; finally in the third generation she detects a sense of *wishing* to forget but not being *allowed* to.³³⁹ This schematization implies a sense of duty or responsibility that this third generation feels towards the past, but less of a personal involvement. However, Beyer's novel, like several of the other texts listed earlier, contradicts this assessment: the urgency with which the narrators investigate the past, the deep personal need they feel to connect to the grandparent generation, and the lengths they go to in order to achieve that connection, all show the intensity and immediacy that the past still exerts over the descendants, and which cannot be explained by a mere sense of duty. Agazzi's assessment of the reactions of the different generations also does not take into account the complexities that, for instance, Welzer's study highlights: the question not only of whether, but also of how and what is remembered is crucial. And while Beyer's fictional family thus does not reflect Welzer's findings in every way, the novel similarly portrays the complexity of transgenerational family narratives marked by guilt.

The narrator's almost compulsive clinging to the past or rather his own fabricated version(s) of the past recalls what Marianne Hirsch has defined as obsessive and relentless "postmemory,"³⁴⁰ which has informed the analysis in chapter III already. There, the relevance of Hirsch's term was extended from the second to the third generation descendants of survivors; here, I am testing its relevance for reflecting on the dynamics within 'perpetrator' families, such as the one in *Spione*, as well. Indeed, Gabriele Rosenthal's extensive empirical study of family communication in Israel, former East and West Germany and of the transmission of family history marked by the Holocaust, specifically compares families of perpetrators and collaborators on the one hand and survivors and victims of the Nazi regime on the other hand. She diagnoses some striking similarities: among these she lists "the silence surrounding the past

³³⁹ Agazzi, 22.

³⁴⁰ Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1997).

[...] institutionalised [...] within perpetrator families [but also within] those who were persecuted”, as well as “the tremendous impact of family secrets.”³⁴¹ These similarities are, however, superficial; silence and secrecy are caused by diametrically opposed motives in the different cases: while, for the former, silence is kept to protect the perpetrators from accusations, for the latter it is about protecting both themselves and the descendants from the memory of traumatic and dehumanising situations. Similarly, the perpetuation of silence in the third generations has very different reasons: descendants of victims cannot bear imagining their ancestors robbed of their human dignity, helpless to protect themselves and others from humiliation and murder; they may also feel survivor’s guilt and powerlessness at not being able to relieve their (grand)parents’ suffering then and now. In contrast, descendants of Nazi perpetrators are protecting themselves from having to realize the cruel deeds, lack of guilt feelings, emotional coldness, racism and antisemitism that continue unabated to this day in the people closest to them. There may also be a psychological need to defend themselves against both guilt and fear that their ancestors will murder them too as “*lebensunwert*”, unworthy of life.³⁴² Foer’s novel illustrates these similarities and differences in its complex explorations of traumatic memories, jealousy, and guilt, and of very different shades of silence. Beyer, in *Spione*, focuses on a ‘perpetrator family’, but shows that even in such a (relatively) clear-cut situation, silence and secrecy can be ambiguous.

2 Narrating the Invisible

References to hearing and sound are thus primarily present in *Spione* through absence: non-communication, silence and muteness. Instead, the narrator foregrounds another sense: seeing. The importance of visual impressions is all-pervasive in the novel; from the family photo album with the pictures of and by the grandfather and the strikingly absent photographs of the grandmother, which instil in the children the desire to piece together their story, to the countless gazes cast in the novel, many of them through a variety of lenses, the children’s distinctive dark eyes see and are seen in a range of different lights. And yet, while visibility is so prevalent, it is also doubted and mistrusted. In Foer’s novel, memory, the Jews’ sixth sense, is found simultaneously indispensable and lacking as a source of insight into the past. Here, it is the two senses that we rely most on, seeing and hearing, that are drawn on and simultaneously renounced for their ability to bring the past into our present by making it a sensual – visible, audible, and thus ‘graspable’ – experience.

³⁴¹ Rosenthal, 8.

³⁴² Cf. Rosenthal, 8-10.

The secrecy and silence in the narrator's family, which was at the core of the previous section, foregrounds any non-linguistic communication: mute exchanges, talking without words, silent understandings. Visuality is always evaluated in terms of (non-)communication, of creating or preventing an exchange. And indeed, visuality, in the shape of photography, plays a crucial role within intergenerational communication and family continuity. In this respect, Beyer's novel reflects a "trend" within recent German fiction, which, according to Stefanie Harris, is "dominated by allusions to photography." Citing examples such as the fiction of W.G. Sebald, Monika Maron and Ulla Hahn, she sums up their use of photography thus: "The reproduction or description of individual photographs, their staging and later dissemination, their collection in family albums, their veracity, and even their absence serve as ways of thinking through problems of memory, history, and subjectivity, which form the central crisis of these works."³⁴³ The ways in which Beyer's *Spione* negotiates this crisis of memory, history, and subjectivity is at the core of this chapter's analysis.

2.1 The "Familial Gaze" in *Spione*

The narrator regards his and his cousins' "Italian" eyes as an expression of genealogy: as their grandfather does not have these unusual and striking eyes, the children deduce that they must have inherited them from their grandmother. They are the reason the narrator is teased by the neighbours' children, just as the grandmother herself used to be ostracised because of her 'foreign' gaze.³⁴⁴ At the same time, these eyes are his means of protection from their threats: "I cannot simply close my eyes, I need to be able to recognise dangers in time."³⁴⁵ They then provide both the necessity and the inspiration for the invented grandmother's story; the familial gaze alerts the narrator to the dangers of the outside world, and the family narrative that he invents, about the grandmother being a famous Italian opera singer, provides him with a respectable genealogy and with the illusion of a secure place in this world (although the pressure to prove his glamorous ancestry immediately heightens the suspicious neighbours' children's aggression).

Marianne Hirsch, in *Family Frames*, describes photography as "the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation – the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told."³⁴⁶ The family album, like a life narrative, thus takes on the function of a memorial, and indeed, Oskar in Günter Grass' *Tin Drum* calls his photo album a "family cemetery" that surpasses any novel

³⁴³ Stefanie Harris, "Imag(in)ing the Past: The Family Album in Marcel Beyer's *Spione*", *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 4 (2005), 162-84: 163.

³⁴⁴ "[...] weil die Nachbarskinder das Mädchen oft geärgert haben. Wegen der Augen, diesem Blick an ihr." (9), "because the neighbours' children often teased the girl. Because of her eyes, her gaze."

³⁴⁵ "Ich kann meine Augen nicht einfach schließen, ich muss Gefahren rechtzeitig erkennen können." (19)

³⁴⁶ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 6-7.

in “epic scope.”³⁴⁷ This image encompasses an element of fiction, which Hirsch too emphasises, describing the double role of family photographs as representation but also as invention of the family history: “The family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes the prime objective of those rituals.” The cohesion pictured on such photos is “imaginary” and Hirsch speaks of perpetuating “familial myths” through the idyll pictured, without diminishing the importance of such imaginations.³⁴⁸

In the face of a silenced and secretive family past such as that described in Beyer’s novel, such a visual narrative becomes particularly central to a sense of continuity that descendants may establish. In *Spione*, the children find just such an album, and indeed, it does spark their interest in their grandparents’ lives – and yet, any illusion of cohesion or togetherness is ruptured from the start. The initially orderly and well-annotated pages in the book soon show gaps; the young man whom they take to be their grandfather and whom they see on the initial pictures disappears behind the camera, after a final photograph of him in a steel army helmet; and most intriguing of all, there are no pictures of a young grandmother. So while the album reveals a family history heretofore unknown, it simultaneously discloses the rifts and ruptures that shape this history. The gaps and omissions in the album also highlight the absence of the grandparents from the grandchildren’s life: the early death of the grandmother and the isolation from the grandfather, engineered by his second wife, are reflected and repeated in the visual traces the grandparents leave in the album.

Hirsch describes a recent shift in the interest in family albums, resulting from the growing awareness that any perfection or family idyll depicted in albums is a construction, “a reproduction of ideology” that both photographer and viewer collaborate on. Therefore, she sees an increased interest in what the smooth surface hides, in what “remained on the edges or outside the family album.”³⁴⁹ For Beyer’s narrator and his three cousins, the grandmother represents the suppressed: the mystery as to why she should be so conspicuously absent from the album inspires their speculations, which soon grow into an obsession. “We only noticed her because she was invisible.”³⁵⁰ The gaps thus place centre-stage what is marginalised or censored. Roland Barthes, in his *Camera Lucida* (which reflects on his relationship with photographic images of his mother while famously withholding all pictures of her), argues that what is outside the frame of a photograph is indeed, paradoxically, central to every picture: discussing the notions of the visible and the invisible, Barthes claims that, in fact, it is what one cannot see, what is not shown in the picture, that makes it interesting and appealing: it is

³⁴⁷ Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, transl. by Ralph Mannheim (London: David Campbell, 1993), 35.

³⁴⁸ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 6-7.

³⁴⁹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 7.

³⁵⁰ “Wir wurden nur dadurch auf sie aufmerksam, weil sie unsichtbar war.” (69)

outside the “frame” that the image is animated and animates the onlooker.³⁵¹ The photograph is an excerpted view of a bigger reality, and reminds the viewer that it is taken out of context, a context that the children endeavour to re-establish, inventing the story that might frame and give meaning to the moments that are pictured (or, indeed, withheld).

The family photograph (unless taken by an outsider) is not complete: one member of the family is always outside it, behind the camera. The children become aware of the crucial role of the photographer: although he is not visible in the picture, he actually occupies a central position in it, sharing the viewer’s perspective, or to be more precise, shaping it:

Someone is always there who stays out of sight. You might think he was in the background. Yet you startle: in fact he is right there in the foreground. He was standing outside the photograph, in the exact spot from which you observe the scene.³⁵²

The realisation that a viewer of a photograph by definition shares the photographer’s gaze is sparked here by the children finding pornographic magazines in the forest behind their town, and assuming the voyeuristic stance of whoever left them there – and of whoever took the picture. They become acutely aware of this inevitable point of view again when looking at the pictures the grandfather has taken of their bombed-out house, on the morning after the air-raids. At the same time as sharing his point of view, however, they are also alienated by it, filled with incomprehension and rejection: “This is not our gaze, we are not looking with those eyes.”³⁵³ While looking at the photographs thus makes the children assume their grandfather’s place, they here refuse to take his point of view. Instead, they feel that their own dark and piercing eyes link them to their grandmother and thus to their unknown and suppressed past: they believe they must have inherited her eyes, thus re-enforcing identification across the generations. It is the visual that links the generations, as a marker of continuity and familial identity, and it emphasises the importance of the “familial gaze.”³⁵⁴ This however is precisely the gaze that the children in *Spione* cannot reconnect with, as they fail to gain satisfactory proof from the few photos they have of their grandmother. The ambiguity of sharing a grandparent’s point of view while being distanced from it illustrates Marianne Hirsch’s definition of postmemory, shaped precisely by both the “deep personal connection” and “generational distance”³⁵⁵ that the children experience.

Dan Jacobson, in *Heshel’s Kingdom*, describes a similar alienation resulting from a shared point of view: here, the grandson assumes the (extremely short-sighted) grandfather’s view by peering through his glasses, with sickening effects. This literal gaze gives rise to

³⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 59.

³⁵² “Einer ist immer noch dabei, der nicht in den Blick gerät. Man könnte glauben, er stehe im Hintergrund. Man erschrickt: tatsächlich befindet er sich ganz im Vordergrund. Er hat außerhalb der Photographie gestanden, genau an der Stelle, von wo aus man die Szenerie beobachtet.” (27)

³⁵³ “Es ist nicht unser Blick, wir schauen nicht mit diesen Augen.” (35)

³⁵⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 10.

³⁵⁵ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

metaphorical reflections: he sees “something worse than blindness, a turmoil of curved stripes, blurred spaces, dwindling verticals, mad gleams in corners. A place of nausea; vertigo; parody. So this is what his world looked like! [...] For me it is a kind of torture to look at the world through his spectacles. For him, they made his world habitable.”³⁵⁶ The disjuncture between the irreducible historical perspectives and the experiences of the two men involved provokes nausea, a further example of the deeply unsettling experience of these two opposing forces leading to bodily revulsion.

While Barthes’ notion of the importance of what is outside the frame directs the gaze beyond what can be seen, it also encompasses a disillusionment with photography and with visibility itself. He withholds the picture of his mother, knowing that it would not be able to convey her essence; Beyer’s narrator is similarly disillusioned with the ability of photographs to show what is important: what is crucial is invisible, it is the “things behind the things” that he is interested in. Even as a child, *Spione*’s narrator insists on not taking photographs of their discoveries: he fears they might be superficial or even wrongly “*belichtet*” (exposed to the light) – here photography, ‘light writing’, is jeopardized by unfavourable light conditions (231). However, while he expresses concern about the material conditions of photography, his fear, in fact, has much deeper roots: he doubts photography itself. While able to record what, on a material level, is present, the image cannot provide a meaningful representation. He thus dislikes having his own picture taken, feeling misrepresented, even distorted, by any existing photographs; he loses trust in photos, in their objectivity and in their truth content, from the beginning.

It is only logical, then, that the actual existence of images loses its significance – even while the ‘idea’ of images does not. Imagined visual impressions are just as powerful as real ones, if not more so. The children become aware of this through a heritage of “prose pictures”, to borrow Hirsch’s term,³⁵⁷ that are part of the family narrative: “The image of the old hag has so profoundly impressed itself on my grandfather, my uncle and my mother that even the four of us think we have seen it with our own eyes.”³⁵⁸ Thus memories, conveyed through narrative and passed on from parents to children, become part of the emotional make-up of generations to come. They can be as powerful and monumental as stories and images one grows up with, “constitut[ing] memories in their own right.”³⁵⁹ Hirsch writes that postmemory’s “connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection, but through an imaginative investment and creation.”³⁶⁰ Beyer foregrounds this imaginative component of postmemory in his novel as

³⁵⁶ Dan Jacobson, *Heshel’s Kingdom* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998), 15-7.

³⁵⁷ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 3.

³⁵⁸ “Das Bild der Alten [...] hat sich meinem Großvater, meinem Onkel und meiner Mutter so tief eingeprägt, dass sogar wir vier meinen, wir hätten es mit eigenen Augen gesehen.” (80).

³⁵⁹ Marianne Hirsch, “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy”, in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer (eds), *Acts of Memory. Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1999), 3-23: 8.

³⁶⁰ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

an inevitable consequence of memories concealed: it is not only the images and the memories that are communicated which are passed down through the generations, but also the gaps and the silences, the “unspoken secrets,”³⁶¹ which create voids but also leave space for imagination.

Images, and simultaneously the lack of images, are the fundamental incentive for the children to direct their gaze into the past, when they find the family photo album. So from the beginning, photographs are blended with the imaginative recreation of photographs, images in the mind are perceived just like images on paper. The closeness between actual and imaginary pictures is explored in Barthes: “I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly [...] in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes.”³⁶² Beyer, in his novel, extends this preference of the ‘mind’s eye’ over the ‘real perception’ to encompass not only remembered images but also invented ones, and describes the power emanating from these constructs of the mind. Indeed, the narrator, after elaborating his own fabrications in his mind, perceives ‘real’ photos as disruptive: being confronted with facts distracts from the mental constructs. This suspicion of photographic representations of the world culminates in the adult narrator’s refusal, articulated twice, to own a family album (66, 83); instead, he has created an “invented family album” (299) – which is of course the text. This invented album, he hopes, might break through the silence; uncovering the family secrets might make suspicion unnecessary (300) – a hope that fictional enlightenment might bring real illumination. His family album of fabricated prose pictures thus assumes a similar role to Jonathan’s magical novel in Foer: a fictional family story created by the grandson who fails to find out about his ‘real’ past.

In her reading of Barthes’ text, Hirsch focuses on another aspect of photography that is particularly relevant to Beyer’s portrait of intergenerational (non-)communication: looking at a photograph is not a one-way gaze, but creates a complex reciprocity. Not only are photographer and subject both implicated in the photograph, but the subject of the photograph may also be conscious of the future viewer and enter into a dialogue with him or her, in an act of communication that transcends time. The young grandmother, for instance, envisages an unsettling series of onlookers in an unknown future (37). This notion inverts Barthes’ reflections on photographs that send the onlooker back in time: it also projects into the future, as a photograph is a document which can survive oneself, take on a separate life and transcend time.³⁶³ The photograph thus acts as a reciprocal mirror: the photographed subject projects her thoughts onto the viewers that she does not even know; the children imagine the time when the picture was taken and the subject’s thoughts. In *Spione*, these reciprocal family looks, which, to Barthes and Hirsch, are inherent in our relationship with the photographs of family members,

³⁶¹ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994), 159-60, 3.

³⁶² Barthes, 53.

³⁶³ Like the *Book of Antecedents* in Foer, the photograph tells us that we will become characters of the representation of ourselves, be it in a story or in a picture – and thus survive, but also surrender control.

must happen in imagination. The children are denied both the “affiliative and identificatory”³⁶⁴ potential of the family photograph: they are deprived of the grandmother’s eyes both as a sign of genealogical connection and as a reflection of themselves, and they cannot establish this intergenerational communication, which could ultimately grant self-knowledge. The “unspoken network of looking”³⁶⁵ is complex: mutual gazes, adopting or rejecting another’s point of view, imagined photos and distorted views through a variety of lenses all eventually refer the narrator back to himself, rather than help establish a family framework.

Photography is thus suspended between past and present, presence and absence, and ultimately life and death; for Susan Sontag, “all photographs are *memento mori*,”³⁶⁶ as they remind us of (and make us partake in) the mortality of another. It is the paradoxical nature of photography that this “familial gaze” foregrounds; it is here that its potential to create an intergenerational coherence resides. When Sontag speaks of the photograph as “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence,”³⁶⁷ she refers to our paradoxical illusion that photographs make the subject of the picture present in our own time and place, but also highlight this same subject’s absence. In *Spione*, images are absences, on a number of levels, reflecting the complexity of the role of photographs in our perceptions of presence and absence. On a literal level, the text withholds all pictures, so that both ‘actual’ and imagined photos are verbal descriptions; but photos are also absent in the four cousins’ reality. As an adult, however, the narrator comes to “understand that the images and stories that I can witness are ultimately no different from the ones that have no witnesses.”³⁶⁸ To him, images and imagination have become indistinguishable; his inventions have become immune to reality. Even the adult’s supposedly more rational view of the world cannot destroy the “persistence of the invented images”, and he clings to them “against better knowledge.”³⁶⁹ not even a colour photograph showing a grandmother with blue eyes would now be able to dissuade him from the conviction that she shares the children’s dark Italian eyes (82-3). This conflation of reality and imagination reflects the narrator’s increasing detachment from the ‘real’ world; he situates himself in a purely fictional realm, where he becomes “his own character” (247).

The narrator’s escape into a fictional family history that becomes an obsession persisting into his adulthood is a sign of neurosis: a pathological and delusional invention of a complex construction of the family past, in an attempt to answer his unresolved questions of identity and provenance. Indeed, Anne Fuchs describes the fantasy of the grandmother’s glamorous opera career as a Freudian family romance: the “over-determined iconography of the

³⁶⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 9.

³⁶⁵ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 10.

³⁶⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 15.

³⁶⁷ Sontag, 16.

³⁶⁸ “Langsam begreife ich, die Bilder und Geschichten, deren Zeuge ich werden kann, unterscheiden sich am Ende in nichts von denen, die keine Zeugen haben.” (65-6)

³⁶⁹ “Ich weiß wie hartnäckig erfundene Bilder sein können (182), [...] ich halte wider besseres Wissen daran fest.” (184)

old hag” invites a reading of “the grandfather’s second marriage and his estrangement from his first family as the root of a transgenerational disturbance in communication that the cousins attempt to repair by co-fabulating a hidden lineage.”³⁷⁰ The childhood fabrications are thus a coping mechanism for the children’s disillusionment with their own parents, who separate shortly after the children begin their investigations, and who have failed to fill the gaps in the family story for the children. The culture of silence in his family triggers the fabrication of the alternative genealogy. The narrator’s disillusionment with his parents’ wisdom is described as a crucial stage in his coming of age: the child’s confidence in the parents, trusting that “their words will close a gap”, changes when he grows up. Realizing that they do not have the answers to everything makes the narrator lose trust in them altogether: “The parental words have long since lost their power. Now all we engage in is trying out the power of our own words.”³⁷¹ And the power of his own words is ultimately the only one the narrator finally believes in, resorting to his own fictional view of the world.

This self-sufficiency also means that the narrator loses the need to find the grandmother’s eyes in the photographs; indeed, he realises that he has always known her eyes, as they are his own and his cousins’: “At the end of the day, it wasn’t really necessary to find a picture of her Italian eyes; we already knew them better than any other pair of eyes, because we have met their gaze every day from our earliest childhood on. We can see them today still, in ourselves.”³⁷² He thus creates a grandmother identical to himself in reverse heredity, assuming an intergenerational identity. This process we have seen already in the discussions of Foer’s novel: there, the reflection of the self in the river Brod becomes one with the reflection of the ancestors, exposing a narcissistic self-knowledge and self-love. Here, the narrator feels he can do without even the reflection. His family romance creates himself as his own ancestor: not an adoption fantasy, but a fantasy of self-engendering guides his daydreams.³⁷³

³⁷⁰ Anne Fuchs, *Phantoms of War in Contemporary German Literature, Films and Discourse. The Politics of Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 70. She is referring to Sigmund Freud, “Der Familienroman der Neurotiker”, in Anna Freud et al (eds), *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1999), vol. 7, 227-31. Freud’s family romance (1909) describes the child’s fantasy of creating a fictionalised, often adoptive family instead of his or her actual one, generally imagining an alternative, often noble birth. Through the family romance, the child addresses the question “Who am I?”, in an effort to place her- or himself in a (consciously fictional) history. This fantasy, often a phase in a healthy development, is an expression of the child’s capacity to doubt the absoluteness of the parental figures, but can evolve into neurosis.

³⁷¹ “denn ihre Worte werden eine Lücke schließen”; “Längst haben die Elternworte ihre Macht verloren. Nun ist man ausschließlich damit beschäftigt, die Macht der eigenen Worte zu erproben” (292).

³⁷² “Im Grunde war es überhaupt nicht nötig, ein Bild ihrer Italieneraugen zu finden, längst kannten wir sie so gut wie keine anderen Augen, weil wir ihrem Anblick von klein auf jeden Tag begegnet sind. Wir sehen sie bis heute an uns selber.” (68).

³⁷³ This reading of the novel sheds light on some of the reasons for the children’s obstinate fabrications. At the same time, however, the clashes with the typical pathology in the Freudian sense – for instance the fact that while the grandmother is constructed as a talented singer, as a frail and refined person (an innocent victim of xenophobia as a child already), the grandfather figure lacks all romanticisation – show that even within the family romance, the children do not allow themselves to fashion him into a hero (as Welzer’s study shows happens so frequently).

2.2 Spyholes and Hidden Gazes

The gaps in the family album and the censored photographs are complemented by the grandson's own curtailment of looking: the position of the narrator as (secretive) viewer shapes his approach to the family past. From the first page onwards, the narrative is framed by the narrator's gaze through a spyhole:

Sometimes I stand at the spyhole for a while and gaze into the corridor, even when I know I won't see anyone. I stand at the spyhole and wait. I am not even waiting, I am just looking, the door is closed. That's how I was standing as a child, on a stool, a box, then on tiptoes. And that's how I am standing now. [...] Looking through the spyhole, everything seems close and at the same time ungraspable. Escape is impossible. Escape is out of the question, but at least the escape route lies before my eyes.³⁷⁴

The novel's first edition, published by Dumont, visually reiterates this gaze by separating sections of the novel (particularly those where the narrator's viewpoint changes) with a symbol reminiscent of the spyhole:

◦

The image of the spyhole frames a number of themes that shape the novel's relationship with the visual: it encompasses the distortions and restrictions that are implicit in every gaze through a lens; and it fulfils the viewer's desire to see without being seen, a desire which has been discussed above in the context of secrecy, and which will be explored later as a fundamental aspect of spying. Here, it also introduces the narrator's unspecified sense of danger, which demands constant watchfulness and readiness for flight; looking out from the inside through the spyhole, the narrator recognizes his ambiguous stance of gazing at the family past: while he has the necessary distance that theoretically would allow a balanced view, he also feels locked in (into the house and into the confines of an oppressive family heritage), unable to escape. The gaze through the spyhole grants a view of a potential escape route, while the physical position behind the closed door makes escape impossible. The dangers that the narrator wishes to escape from are never spelled out, and yet the need for escape is unquestioned, while also being placed in an imaginative realm from the beginning. Consequently, it is into the imagination, into his own fiction, that the narrator escapes.

Positioned behind the closed door, looking through the spyhole, and considering his escape route, the narrator assumes the position of the fugitive, rather than the spy. In a brief but telling passage, the narrator remembers visiting the grandmother's grave as a child with his

³⁷⁴ "Manchmal stehe ich eine Weile am Spion und sehe in den Flur, auch wenn ich weiß, ich werde keinen Menschen zu Gesicht bekommen. Ich stehe am Spion und warte. Ich warte nicht einmal, ich schaue nur, die Tür ist zu. So habe ich als Kind gestanden, auf einem Hocker, einer Kiste, dann auf Zehenspitzen. Und so stehe ich nun. [...] Durch den Spion steht alles nah und zugleich ungreifbar vor meinem Auge. Flucht ist unmöglich. Flucht ist ausgeschlossen, doch immerhin läßt sich der Fluchtweg überblicken." (7)

parents; the family try to avoid running into the grandfather by mistake, feeling the need to remain clandestine and secret. Hiding from potential observers while constantly on the lookout for them resembles a spy's manoeuvre, yet reduces the narrator to feeling like a fugitive (225). The child's relationship to the deceased grandmother is thus overshadowed from the start by secrecy, a shadow which it shall never lose. The notion of flight (*Flucht*) however leads back to the semantic field of visibility, introducing the notion of perspective: the German term for the vanishing point (the point in the distance at which all parallel straight lines seem to converge) is "*Fluchtpunkt*". Immediately after the family visit to the grandmother's grave, the narrator mentions the "*Fluchtlinie*" of the poles that mark the excavation work of the poisonous fungus (222) – pointing in the direction of the house of their grandfather and his second wife. Beyer makes use of the ambiguity of the term "*Flucht*" to draw attention to the importance of perspective and its delusions: the seeming convergence of all lines in one single point is of course an optical illusion (or 'optical deception', as a literal translation of the German *optische Täuschung* would be). The narrator's illusion is twofold: on the one hand he wishes to escape his haunting family past and remain personally untainted by the very story he is obsessively recreating. On the other hand, he believes in the idea of a "*Fluchtpunkt*" of truth, which would be able to explain everything: a point at which parallel stories converge and repeat themselves in transgenerational patterns, and which provides a neat resolution to all mysteries. His escape from reality is both a flight into the past and from the past, into obsession and his own imagination.

The spyhole, along with photographers' lenses and opera glasses, frame the narratorial gaze and the novel's images; and the framing as well as the refracted lens are crucial. Open, unprotected looks are rare; the children feel the need to hide their "Italian" eyes as they are perceived as threatening by others, "as if they were afraid that with such eyes one couldn't but keep everything and everyone under observation."³⁷⁵ Unprotected eyes however also pose a danger for the individual himself: they can reveal intimate and potentially secret information. The children read from the pigeonman's gaze that he is an informer on 1977 terrorists (208), and seek to hide their own eyes as they too would give away their identity, disclosing their spying activities, and ultimately their familial identity, their belonging, their past.

Looking through a lens has a number of implications for the position of the viewer and for the image that is perceived. Beyer employs the framed and refracted gaze on both a literal and a metaphorical level in *Spione*, using it to illustrate the narrator's view of his family past and the distortions his perspective suffers due to the repression of history. Lenses always render a mediated impression of reality, creating the illusion of altering the distance (and therefore the relationship) between the onlooker and the object. The zoom of the camera lens or the opera glass and the wide-angle lens of the spyhole all mean that the onlooker can see more than with

³⁷⁵ "Als hätten sie Angst, mit unseren Augen könnte man nichts anderes tun, als alle Dinge, jeden Menschen, unter Beobachtung zu halten." (19)

the naked eye. Beyer describes the images seen through the spyhole as reaching the viewer “from a great distance.”³⁷⁶ what is close seems far away (like Brod’s telescope in Foer), yet remains unattainable, “close and at the same time ungraspable” (7). Lenses however also often jeopardise clarity: vision is frequently “out of focus”, “blurred” or “*verfremdet*” (distorted and deformed); gazes are refracted and images skewed; the narrator sees the world as if through a distorting mirror. Again, mental images are subject to the same adulterations as ‘real’ ones: the children perceive both ‘real’ photos and their own fabrications as “*Zerrbilder*”, distortions (68).

The spyhole’s (and other lenses’) distortion shapes the narrator’s outlook on the world, instilling into him a general sense of delusion: he imagines seeing beyond his immediate field of vision in both a spatial and a temporal sense (88). As an adult, the narrator no longer deems important what he sees, yet taking the position of looking through the spyhole becomes a catalyst: it conjures the act of imagination. In the novel, the spyhole frequently initiates reflection on what can be seen and what is hidden, and the gaze through it transcends temporality by linking past and present for the viewer: the tenses in the passage describing the narrator’s observations as a child and as an adult alike sometimes change mid-sentence (“visting friends where it *smells*, where there *weren’t* any toys for me”³⁷⁷). Assuming this position through the years renders different times indistinguishable for the narrator. And indeed, his cousin Paulina remarks “that for him, present and past blend into one; maybe he doesn’t see any difference there, sees the past in the same way as whatever is around him at the moment.”³⁷⁸ Similarly, the gaze through the camera lens transcends time, as it is returned in an exchange between the subject and the onlooker, as long as the picture exists.

The skewed impression of the world that reaches the eye behind the lens is intensified by the frequent blurring of vision in the novel, like a phrase in “Chinese Whispers”: images are often seen through a veil, rendering them unclear. The photo album for instance contains separation sheets with a cobweb pattern, which allows a hazy and dimmed view of the photographs underneath (32), an effect which is reflected later in the veil-like curtains in front of the grandfather’s bedroom windows, concealing an observer inside (304). *Spione* is set in a twilight zone, neither light nor dark, marked by shades and transitions of light, where nothing can be seen clearly, creating an atmosphere which challenges the narrator’s senses. It is the interim space between two mutually exclusive states that Beyer investigates through his narrator, as he writes in an essay entitled “Light”: “I am not interested in the darkness as an enemy of light, I am interested in how they relate to one another.”³⁷⁹ Restrictions to vision are at play with both cameras and spyholes, which only allow a single-eyed view, a merely two-

³⁷⁶ “Das Bild aber erreicht mich von weither.” (7)

³⁷⁷ “Bei Freunden oder zu Besuch bei Leuten, wo es riecht, wo es für mich kein Spielzeug gab” (7, my italics).

³⁷⁸ “[...] daß für ihn Gegenwart und Vergangenheit ineinander übergleiten, vielleicht sieht er da keinen Unterschied, betrachtet das Vergangene auf dieselbe Weise wie das, was ihn im Augenblick umgibt.” (231).

³⁷⁹ “Mich interessiert das Dunkle nicht als Feind des Hellen, mich interessiert, wie sie gemeinsam ein Verhältnis bilden.”, in Marcel Beyer, “Licht”, in *Nonfiction* (Köln: Dumont, 2003), 88-98: 96.

dimensional vision, while the second eye is squeezed shut, refusing to take in the unadulterated view. The novel's multiple points of view and the narrator taking on the perspectives of a host of characters are an attempt at counter-balancing the two-dimensionality, while, at the same time, the multiple points of view all lead back to one source: that of the narrator's imagination and his narcissistic preoccupation with his ancestral identity.

While looks can enable (mute) communication, and while this aspect of the visual has been discussed above in connection with the familial gaze, looking through a lens by definition prevents communication. The refracted pane of glass acts as a distancing rather than a connective device: the door with the inset spyhole separates inside from outside, into two disparate worlds that are "*unvereinbar*", "irreconcilable". The camera too splits the world into a realm in front of the lens and another one behind. The various lenses hide the onlooker behind a protective pane of glass, making him invisible while allowing him to observe. This is a position that the narrator seeks from childhood on, and that culminates in the novel's closing passage, where his own desire to remain an unrecognised observer is reflected by his grandfather's identical desire. The final encounter between the narrator and his grandfather happens only indirectly, through two camera lenses – a gaze that actually disguises the eyes of both of them:

The very moment his photograph is taken, he himself takes a picture of a car down in the street, the driver's door is open, someone leans onto the roof of the car, with a camera in his hands. Two people exchange a look, but their eyes are invisible, the left one is squeezed shut, the right one is hidden behind the viewfinder.³⁸⁰

This creates a moment of refracted reflection which multiplies the perspectives; both narrator and grandfather avoid facing each other. They both conceal their identity, bringing about their own effacement. And yet their mutual concealment of identity emphasises precisely their common (familial) identity: recognition happens through mutual non-recognition, which highlights their similarity and connection. In their final exchange of gazes, the eyes of grandfather and grandson meet, and yet are obstructed. In that sense, they resemble the eyes of the grandmother in the family album, which the children so desire to see in the photos of her – seeing her eyes would not only allow recognition of their similarity, and prove the heritage that sets them apart from others, but would also enable the intergenerational exchange that the grandfather's silence has made impossible.

The foregrounding of the visual in *Spione* seems to stand in stark contrast to Beyer's earlier novel *Flughunde*,³⁸¹ where he focuses instead on the aural and the way memory is perpetuated through sound. A brief exploration of the use of sound in *Flughunde* will help shed light on

³⁸⁰ "Genau in dem Moment, als er fotografiert wird, macht er seinerseits eine Aufnahme von einem Wagen unten auf der Straße, die Fahrtür steht offen, und jemand stützt sich auf das Dach, mit einer Kamera in den Händen. Zwei Menschen wechseln einen Blick, doch ihre Augen sieht man nicht, das linke kneifen sie zu, das rechte ist hinter dem Sucher verborgen." (303)

³⁸¹ Marcel Beyer, *Flughunde* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1995).

Beyer's use of the senses as markers of his characters' attitude towards others, themselves and the past. The novel, set during the final days of the Second World War in Hitler's bunker alternates between two narrative voices: that of Hermann Karnau, a sound engineer in the services of the government, and that of 12-year-old Helga, the oldest daughter of Reich Minister of Propaganda Goebbels. Along with her five younger siblings, she is killed by her own mother, so as not to survive the imminent defeat of Hitler and the Third Reich. Karnau's fascination with sound is reflected in the novel's use of metaphor: even phenomena that are not auditive (such as day and night) are described through the sense of hearing (e.g. "the silence of dawn"³⁸²); often, visual and acoustic perceptions are intermixed: "The voice cuts into the darkness."³⁸³ In *Spione*, the reverse happens: the grandfather, for instance, is described as "rendering himself invisible" by remaining mute when his grandchildren phone him (113). Thus the two senses overlap, and one can be perceived in the terms of the other.

Obsessed with sound and language, just as the children in *Spione* are obsessed with images, *Flughunde's* Karnau compiles a map of sounds, "to trace the secret of the human voice."³⁸⁴ The one voice that is missing in his records is his own; he himself remains inaudible: "I am like a piece of blank tape stuck onto the beginning of a magnetic tape: try as you might, you couldn't record even the minutest sound on it."³⁸⁵ *Flughunde's* narrator records sounds while refusing to leave a trace himself; in *Spione*, this strategy becomes central to the narrator's endeavour to record the family story. The position behind the spyhole, the camera lens, or the opera glass, is that of the invisible observer, a stance that is characteristic of the narrator's relationship with his family past.³⁸⁶ Teasing out information without revealing anything oneself (73), listening or watching inconspicuously while remaining silent and invisible, is an ability that Carl describes as a skill. The narrator assumes a paradoxical position: on the one hand he is a recorder and writer who endeavours to set down his own story, while on the other he adopts a self-effacing nameless stance as an autobiographer who hides behind the biographies of others. His denial of his own identity cannot hide that it is precisely this identity which is at stake, and which is researched under the cover of historical and ancestral investigations. The desire to remain a neutral and detached observer rather than a participant in life and thus history stems from a deep-seated desire to shed allegiance from this history, a sentiment implicitly conveyed in both *Spione* and *Flughunde*. This desire is an expression of a numbing of the senses, visual

³⁸² "die Stille des Morgengrauens" (*Flughunde*, 9)

³⁸³ "Die Stimme schneidet in das Dunkel hinein" (*Flughunde*, 9).

³⁸⁴ "um dem Geheimnis der Stimme auf die Spur zu kommen" (*Flughunde*, 48).

³⁸⁵ "Ich bin [...] ein Mensch wie ein Stück Blindband, das vor Anfang des beschichteten Tonbands angeklebt ist: Man könnte sich noch so sehr bemühen, es würde einem doch nicht gelingen, auch nur den unscheinbarsten Ton dort aufzunehmen." (*Flughunde*, 17). The German expression *Blindband*, translated literally, is "blind tape" – another interesting metaphorical mixing of the two senses.

³⁸⁶ It is a position assume by other family members too: Nora, for instance, who breaks up with her parents, vowing never to speak another word to them, thus perpetuating the family's tradition of silencing conflicts, comes back at night to gaze at her family through the large windows, invisible to them. (241)

and aural, but also a “persistent emotional paralysis;”³⁸⁷ the characters deny themselves sensuality and emotionality, and ultimately an identity which can be perceived sensually by others: they are non-committal, seeking to be spies, observers, recorders rather than ‘agents’ – they strive to eliminate their own physical presence and to hide their identity.

Gillian Rose describes the psychological effects of this way of dealing with the past as distancing, and therefore exculpating; referring to viewers’ responses to *Schindler’s List*, she argues: “The *representations of Fascism* leave the identity of the voyeur intact, at a remove from the grievous events which she observes. Her self-defences remain untouched [...]”³⁸⁸ Rose’s choice of the term “voyeur” for the viewer sheds light on another connotation of the secretive gaze. Looking through a hole as a frame for desire has been discussed in connection with *Middlesex*, *Midnight’s Children*, and *Everything Is Illuminated*; in *Spione* sexual desire remains largely silenced, although it erupts in a few rare passages. In one unsettling scene, the adult narrator and his cousin Paulina, driving aimlessly through the night, disturb a secretive couple of lovers whose car is parked in a clearing in the forest (186-9). This passage follows only a few pages after the narrator has expressed his simultaneous feelings of alienation and fascination when imagining sex in the car (180). Shining their bright headlights on them, they blind the couple while they themselves remain in the dark but able to see, and proceed to pursue the panicking lovers through the night in a gratuitously cruel chase. The cousins here assume the roles at once of voyeurs and terrorizers; their gaze reduces the couple to fugitives, to objects. Their spotlight illuminates a detail of the whole scene, and as such recalls the darkroom in *Middlesex*, where the night club customers focus on the “thing of things.”³⁸⁹ The relationship created between the two parties involved is profoundly unequal in a similar way in both novels: the one-way gaze disallows communication and grants the viewer-voyeur a surplus of knowledge and power over the object of his attention.

Gillian Rose however also emphasises the self-protective function of relating to the past from the vantage point of the voyeur: the desire of *Spione*’s narrator and Karnau in *Flughunde* is to create an impersonal and ultimately exculpating distance between themselves and the fascist war crimes. Like the voyeur, the spy, or the photographer, the family biographer here remains invisible but also pretends to be uninvolved, assuming a distanced or detached stance that Susan Sontag sees as inherent in the photographic gaze.³⁹⁰ Seeking refuge behind a lens is thus a means to establish that distance, an attempt at creating detachment and at denying any personal and emotional involvement. Escaping into a safe distance and calming his conscience through adopting a voyeuristic gaze is also what the oldest cousin Nora accuses her father of

³⁸⁷ “anhaltende Gefühlserstarrung”, in Weickmann (unpaginated).

³⁸⁸ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law. Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 54 (italics in the original).

³⁸⁹ Eugenides, 480.

³⁹⁰ Cf. Sontag, 13.

doing (and indeed, Nora is the only one of the cousins to respond to the family past in an accusatory, i.e. emotional and involved way):

You are not even interested in the fact that your own father was part of the Legion Condor. You just pretend that you don't have a father anymore, and in the museum you stand in front of Picasso's painting of Guernica, and you think that the whole matter is dealt with conveniently.³⁹¹

By contemplating Picasso's *Guernica*, another gaze through a pane of glass, distanced and protected, he avoids confronting his own father's, the children's grandfather's, involvement in the bombing of Guernica. This is characteristic of the attitude adopted by many '68ers, who readily accepted their national guilt but distanced themselves from it on a personal level, wishing eventually to be freed from it as individuals.³⁹² Here, we see a split between national and personal history that has led to Welzer's distinction between "encyclopaedias" and "family albums", discussed earlier. The rift between generations and the antagonism and accusations that create distance within families in the late 1960s, however, is, in Beyer's novel, not reconciled as in Welzer's families: the family album that Beyer describes is not the idealising and comforting re-invention that Welzer has found typical of German families in the 1990s, but marked by mistrust, coldness and distance. The narrator portrays a highly problematic family album, and ends up rejecting both album and family; instead, he recreates both, divorced from any historical 'truth'.

The narrator's familial detachment, however, is curiously ambiguous: on one level, his obsession with the family past belies his distance as a mere pretense of disinterest and objectivity, while in fact he is so deeply involved in the grandparents' story that his adult life continues to be governed by his fabrications. And yet, on a moral level, he does remain curiously detached even in his obsession, and his gaze at the past remains devoid of any emotional connection to his ancestors. Unlike Foer's Alex, Beyer's protagonist never attempts to portray his grandfather as "a good person who has lived in a bad time."³⁹³ His self-protective observations do not allow any moral reflections and ultimately prevent his true coming to terms with the family past. This in turn however makes impossible an honest examination of the self: by pretending not to have to take a stand with regards to the family history, and by hiding his own identity, the narrator also hides from himself. He places himself outside the lineage, beyond accusations and feelings of guilt, but also of belonging, relying solely on his own constructions of lineage and narrative.

On another level, however, through pointing to the grandfather-photographer as an invisible but central character, Beyer also subtly directs the reader's gaze to yet another

³⁹¹ "Dich interessiert nicht einmal, dass dein eigener Vater bei der Legion Kondor war. Behauptest einfach, du hättest keinen Vater mehr, stellst dich im Museum vor Picassos Bild zu Guernica, und damit ist die Sache ganz bequem erledigt." (197)

³⁹² Cf. for example Assmann and Frevert, 64.

³⁹³ Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 103; 145; 227.

character, who repeats his ancestor's self-positioning. The focus of interest shifts to the one person least visible in the (textual) picture, who, like a photographer, plays an essential role in the taking of the picture or the telling of the story: the narrator. Ever-present, and bestowing his point of view onto the reader (while frequently assuming the point of view of others), he nevertheless eludes us as a character: he remains nameless and ungraspable in his unreliability, hidden through the constant restriction of vision. Like his grandfather-photographer, but also like his eliminated grandmother, he remains outside the frame and outside the album, refusing to enter into the familial reciprocal gaze. Like photography itself, he is "perched between life and death,"³⁹⁴ confusing the distinctions between them, like those between past and present, and fact and fiction. And even in his (imagined) final meeting with his grandmother, whose storytelling allows him to fill the gaps, the narration of his own story remains in the future: he never sheds his pretense of being an unrelated journalist, and her request to hear about him is postponed to another meeting; his promise to phone her in order to arrange this meeting merely evokes all the other aborted telephone conversations throughout the novel (283-9). Ostensibly engaged in documenting his grandparents' story (i.e., his fabrications), he is at the same time, less openly or consciously, attempting to establish a sense of self within a family history full of voids. His narrative technique, so carefully chosen to hide his identity, reveals an obsession with the concealment of the self, a desire for self-effacement: in his endeavour to narrate his story he turns into a spy.

3 Spying into the Past

Obsessed with the notion of the unknown, "the things behind the things,"³⁹⁵ the children look for dark secrets, mysteries and codes everywhere and fabricate tales of concealment, secrecy, and espionage, with a seriousness that goes beyond the excitement of child's play. They perceive everything around them as if through a lens which imbues their world with a sense of secrecy and concealment, seeing a spy in everyone. A case in point is the mysterious neighbour they call the pigeonman: they suspect him of being a war criminal, as well as, later, an informer against terrorists – or indeed, in another version, as the one who supplies the terrorists with weapons. Even his birds do not escape the children's suspicions: they think of the pigeons as spies during the war, with little cameras strapped to their bellies, and it remains ambiguous whether this is a rumour which feeds the children's imagination (252), or whether they themselves are actually at the root of the rumour. The children are thus both victims of the climate of suspicion described above, as well as perpetrators (and perpetrators) of it.

³⁹⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 23.

³⁹⁵ "die Dinge hinter den Dingen" (87).

The children project their own obsession with espionage onto their fictive grandfather, who in one of their stories spices up everyday mundane tasks like planting potatoes by giving them a code name ("*Deckname Kartoffeln*", 114), in a reversal of the usual function of code names, which is to make a secret operation sound harmless: here the innocent chore acquires a sinister and mysterious overtone, in jest: even the grandfather's sense of humour is dominated by his obsession with spying. Similarly he playfully recreates a conspiratory unity with his second wife, while on the other hand suspicion of espionage drives a rift between the couple: the husband assigns her an alias, "*die Alte*" (113), and suspects that "ever since they got married, [...] she is spying after him,"³⁹⁶ a sign of a relationship marked by mutual mistrust and paranoia. In another story he carries a briefcase as if transporting important and secret documents, when in truth it contains magazines with spy stories. In a reversal of the children's fabrications (which they pretend, or at times believe, to be real), his report is camouflaged as a fictional story (103-5). Within these spy novels, situations, symbols and even whole phrases are repeated, as the narrator points out, describing a narrative very similar to his own: both make use of formulas and props that reappear in various versions (such as the Spanish dancer, or the photograph of the model plane). Here, aesthetic and structural features of spy stories have infiltrated the narrator's own family tale: Beyer pretends to mask his narrative as a spy novel, a text disguised as something other than it is, told by someone pretending to be invisible. At the same time, however, it is a "reverse detective novel,"³⁹⁷ which increasingly obliterates the past rather than illuminating an obscure story.

Espionage, be it playful or otherwise, shapes not only the relationship between the grandfather and his second wife, but also his first relationship already: the young singer shows her fiancé round the opera house, which for him is connected, from the beginning, with gazing at her through an opera glass. Seeing behind the scenes, having the mystery and glamour exposed, disappoints him; when he realizes that the singer on stage cannot see the audience, and thus cannot establish a connection with them, his illusion that she sings her words for him, looks at him, knows him to be in the audience, is shattered. However, she keeps a secret from him, engaging in her own counter-espionage: peering through a spyhole in the curtain allows her to scan the audience before the performance starts, to see whether her fiancé is among them (64). So the young grandmother herself, at least in some versions of the story, adheres to the family tendency to secrecy – and may even have been attracted to the young grandfather because of his mysteriousness in the first place (255). Relationships in the novel are thus always characterized by mutual espionage.

The young grandparents' complex relationship with secrets and truth thus illustrates the ambiguities involved, which are inherent in silence: while a guardian of secrets is purportedly trustworthy, secrecy is also always a sign of refusing to communicate and ultimately to trust,

³⁹⁶ "Seitdem sie miteinander verheiratet sind, glaubt er, sie spioniere ihm hinterher." (111)

³⁹⁷ Harris, 168.

and in turn creates an atmosphere of suspicion. The constant insecurity about who (not) to trust marks the grandparents' early years, overshadowed by the rise of National Socialism and military secrecy, and creates a "poetics of suspicion"³⁹⁸ that pervades the whole novel. This mistrust shapes all the personal relationships in the novel, and the refusal of the wartime generation to deal with the difficult and frequently guilty immediate past will ultimately destroy the family unity. The children's relationship with both their parents and their grandparents, as well as their perception of their family story, is characterized by mistrust, which is reinforced by the general social climate of suspicion in 1977 West Germany: Ulrich Simon refers to a society in a state of emergency due to RAF terrorism,³⁹⁹ a time rife with violence and the hunt for terrorists (illustrated, for instance, by the failed raid of the pigeonman's house by special forces, 208-10), but also an atmosphere of mistrust of potential sympathisers.

Although the investigation into the grandparents' past starts out as a collaborative game for the four children, the narrator realises that the investigative gaze through the spyhole is a fundamentally solitary act which grants views that inherently set him apart from others, isolating him (cf. 87). While the ability to keep secrets is hailed as a proof of strength of character and implies trustworthiness, a spy (one of whose essential characteristics is secrecy after all) is deeply untrustworthy: "Nobody accepts the spy as an ally, no one can trust a spy" (105-6). Within the military, the crime of espionage (which the young grandfather fears being accused of) is classified as worse than that of treason (172). The mistrust is, of course, mutual: the spy in turn regards everyone else with suspicion, sees secrets everywhere, and, what's more, sees everyone as a potential spy, heightening the general atmosphere of mistrust.

Espionage however is not restricted to interpersonal relations; suspicion is held not only towards others, but also towards one's own memory and perceptions, resulting in a deeply unsettling attitude towards the self. The awareness of the deceptiveness of one's own mind undermines all reflection in the novel, and colours the narrator's rendering of events: he is turned into a spy against himself. Experiences are described as spies rooted in the psyche, surreptitiously transcending generations:

Such an experience [that of witnessing the slow death of the mother] marks a person profoundly, it is bound to leave long-lasting traces. Traces that reach into the next generation, that can be found in the children, concealed now, but even more deeply entrenched, from birth onwards. Her husband's grandchildren have been born afflicted with death [...] unaware of the spy that lodged in them.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Ulrich Simon, "Die Vorgeschichte des Verdachts", in Marc-Boris Rode (ed.), *Auskünfte von und über Marcel Beyer* (Bamberg: Universitätsverlag, 2003), 175-94: 175.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Simon, 178-9.

⁴⁰⁰ "Eine solche Erfahrung prägt sich tief in den Menschen ein, sie muß auf Dauer Spuren hinterlassen. Spuren, die in die nächste Generation hineinreichen, sich in den Kindern finden, verborgen nun, doch um so tiefer eingegraben, von Geburt an schon. Die Enkel ihres Mannes sind mit dem Tod behaftet auf die Welt gekommen [...] ohne um den Spion zu wissen, der sich in ihnen eingenistet hat." (290)

In a novel obsessed with traces, with their deciphering and their disappearance, those traces of death are the most unsettling ones: they locate the enemy within the self; experiencing the slow death of the mother leaves an inalienable trace of death in her children, which is then transmitted, unbeknownst, to the grandchildren. The concept of inherited experiences as secret agents that transcend generations can best be understood through Abraham and Torok's notion of the encrypted inheritance of phantoms, lodged as unconscious memory in the descendants, and creating a "transgenerational haunting."⁴⁰¹ The death of the grandmother (and more importantly, the taboo created around it and the grandfather's inability to communicate with his children about their mother's death) is a traumatic experience that shapes the descendants to come. It is the outsider to the family, the grandfather's second wife, who is able to see this trace of death, or hauntedness, in the grandchildren's eyes (290).

The grandchildren are cast in an ambivalent role: neither victims nor perpetrators, they take on the stance of uninvolved albeit interested observers, attempting to understand the complex entanglements of the past and uncover its secrets, without assuming a position themselves – they become spies, crossers of borders (*Grenzgänger*) between irreconcilable worlds and stories. The spy lives a double life, pledging allegiance to two conflicting parties. He lives in a world marked by different sets of values and morals, by diverging notions of truth, and thus ultimately different realities, intimately familiar with both but belonging to neither; betrayal of at least one of these worlds is inevitable. This exterior split corresponds to an internal split identity. The grandfather, whose military past makes him perceive the whole of his life in military terms, describes his personal, every-day existence as a war-zone, in which his first wife and family on the one hand and his second wife on the other symbolise opposing factions. Having broken off contact with his children and grandchildren, he dreads an encounter with them: "When he imagines running into a member of his former family by chance, he feels like a spy himself, it seems to him as if he was running between the lines [...] Like a spy, he is still moving between his living and his dead wife."⁴⁰² Here he becomes the ultimate crosser of borders, transcending the boundaries between life and death.

3.1 Highlighting by Concealing: Gaps and Omissions

In *Flughunde*, Karnau explains that our vocal cords are marked by every utterance, making the sounds we produce visually perceptible. Particularly coarse sounds, be they screams of pain or harsh orders, leave an impression, while silences are marked precisely by the absence of a scar, a blank: "the scars on the vocal cords constitute a record of incisive experiences, acoustic

⁴⁰¹ Abraham and Torok, 3.

⁴⁰² "Wenn er sich vorstellt, er könnte zufällig einem Mitglied seiner früheren Familie begegnen, fühlt er sich selbst wie ein Spion, kommt es ihm vor, als liefe er zwischen den Linien [...] Wie ein Spion bewegt er sich noch immer zwischen seiner lebenden und seiner toten Frau." (106).

eruptions, but also of silence.”⁴⁰³ As in *Spione*, silence is as telling as sound; the significance of what cannot be seen or heard is traced in both novels as that which has been eliminated, and needs to be re-discovered. The children in *Spione* sense that the family story they crave is inscribed in records that are obliterated, and indeed, Hirsch ascribes the power of postmemory precisely to the fact that “its connection to its object or source is [...] often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible.”⁴⁰⁴ The children’s interest in their grandmother’s story is sparked by the missing photographs in the family album: “We only noticed her because she was invisible.”⁴⁰⁵ Beyer uses silence, gaps and blind spots very consciously as a technique for highlighting what is silenced in society. The invisible always calls for discovery, and similarly, it is precisely by silencing certain issues that the novel conjures them: “Something is made audible through being silenced.”⁴⁰⁶

Ernestine Schlant refers to all literature’s ability to express the unconscious, highlighting the indirect nature of such insights: “[literature] reveals even where it is silent; its blind spots and absences speak a language stripped of conscious agendas.” She highlights the role of silence and absence as powerful referents to what they conceal when she says: “Silence is constituted by the absence of words but is therefore and simultaneously the presence of their absence.”⁴⁰⁷ Similarly Peter Haidu, in his essay “The Dialectics of Unspeakability”, points to silence’s complex relationship with words, in that it can be either “a mere absence of speech”, or its negation and “a production of meaning” – in either case, the two are inseparable: “silence is enfolded in its opposite, in language;”⁴⁰⁸ it is created by and can only exist in contrast with words. Schlant cites language as “the cover and the cover-up for a silence that nevertheless operates and becomes audible only through words.”⁴⁰⁹ How Beyer uses language to disguise but simultaneously highlight silence deserves a closer look, as silence and secrets are not only the driving force behind the plot of the text; gaps and omissions are not only to be found in the photo album, but also permeate the text on a more subtle level. Negative spaces are created continually through the unreliability of the narrative – events are retold in differing, often contradictory versions; the narrator frequently presents his story under the caveat of the subjunctive and speculative, so that nothing can be relied upon, there are no graspable facts that would be accepted as ‘true’ within the text. The absence of an ‘authorized’ version of the story thus leaves the reader, along with the narrator, in a state of limbo, a void.

⁴⁰³ “so bilden die Narben auf den Stimmbändern ein Verzeichnis einschneidender Erlebnisse, akustischer Ausbrüche, aber auch des Schweigens.” (*Flughunde*, 21).

⁴⁰⁴ Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory”, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14:1 (2001), 5-37: 9.

⁴⁰⁵ “Wir wurden nur dadurch auf sie aufmerksam, weil sie unsichtbar war.” (69)

⁴⁰⁶ “Hier wird durch Schweigen etwas zu Gehör gebracht”, Marcel Beyer, “Eine Haltung des Hörens. Die Schweigegeneration, die Fragegeneration und Uwe Johnsons ‘An-Merkung’. Dankrede zur Verleihung des Uwe-Johnson-Preises“, *Die Zeit*, 28 November 1997. This comment relates to *Flughunde*, but is equally relevant for *Spione*.

⁴⁰⁷ Schlant, 3; 6.

⁴⁰⁸ Haidu, 278.

⁴⁰⁹ Schlant, 7.

Structurally, the novel does just what the characters do, and what the West German public in the aftermath of the war has often been accused of doing: it silences the Third Reich past. Born in 1965, Beyer states that the Nazi period was to him, before he started to work on *Flughunde*, “a complete vacuum.”⁴¹⁰ In *Flughunde*, the war years are at the centre of the text; however, the narrative only indirectly recounts – or even mentions – the national and global events taking place, through the limited perspective of the child and Karnau’s retreat into his own obsessions and his denial of personal involvement. Through them, Beyer recreates this vacuum, from a conscious vantage point, thus drawing our attention precisely to what is silenced: *Spione* focuses on the pre-war era and the Spanish civil war, and only indirectly alludes to the Second World War; German attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past are similarly only hinted at. The grandfather’s secret participation in the *Legion Kondor* leads to a persistent and radical silence about his war experiences, extending to the following years of the Nazi dictatorship, which, in the novel, are represented as just that: a vacuum. And yet, the novel circumscribes the Second World War, by touching on so many issues that are closely connected to it, both pre-war and post-war: it recounts on the one hand events leading up to it, such as the re-establishment of the German air force and the grandfather’s role in the Spanish Civil War; on the other hand the impact of the war and the Holocaust’s legacy on German society shapes the family and the children’s lives in every way. The novel’s insistence on silence is an indication that the second world war may be the most horrific secret within the family’s past; a silence too momentous to break.

There is also another reason why the Second World War is silenced however, and why the children are more intrigued by their grandfather’s involvement in the *Legion Kondor*: the end of the Spanish Civil War, rather than ensuring peace, in fact leads up to the next war. When the first commemorative books are published, the young grandmother is aware of the portent of new battles: “Maybe, in the not so distant future, new memoirs will dominate the window displays: different locations, more dangerous air battles, even greater successes. And Spain will be forgotten.”⁴¹¹ The need to deal with earlier memories before they are obliterated by new ones is illustrated by the allegorical fungus, and the danger of concealed memories hidden underground. Realizing that repressed memories have the power to haunt generations to come, the narrator attempts to tackle the very beginnings of concealment within his family – albeit ultimately unsuccessfully.

Similarly, German society’s dealing with its the Second World War past is present mainly through its absence in the novel, constantly alluded to but never named or openly discussed, in keeping with the gulf discussed above between private and public

⁴¹⁰ Interview with Britta Strebin, “Wenn die Stimme die Seele (z)ersetzt... Marcel Beyer über seinen Roman *Flughunde*”, *Grauzone*, 5 (1995), 15.

⁴¹¹ “Vielleicht werden in gar nicht ferner Zukunft neue Erinnerungsbücher die Schaufensterauslagen beherrschen: andere Schauplätze, gefährlichere Luftschlachten, noch größere Erfolge. Und Spanien wird vergessen sein.” (178)

commemoration. Dealing with the Nazi past in *Spione* is restricted to the Spanish Civil War; the grandfather's involvement in the Second World War is merely hinted at through the numerous military decorations he needs to dispose of after the war. This shedding of honour provokes a profound change in the grandfather, after all a longstanding and loyal member of the *Luftwaffe*: he "loses interest from one moment to another, when he has to tear off the badges at the end of the war."⁴¹² Yet, although he turns his back on his military past, there is no mention of any feelings of guilt or remorse; and when the public debate focuses on the re-instating of a new air force within the *Bundeswehr*, he refrains from commenting (cf. 58). Similarly, the student revolts of 1968 were rooted in the young generation resenting their parents' involvement in the war and their subsequent tactics of evading the responsibilities of their guilt. This emotion was later radicalised within the Red Army Faction's terrorist group, leading to the height of RAF terrorism in 1977, which in the novel is alluded to through TV pictures that the narrator as a child cannot fully understand. Nora's arguments with her parents about their refusal to deal with their own father's past, about the death penalty and the terrorists' accusation of Germany still being a fundamentally fascist state, are instigated by the rift terrorism created in Germany in the 1970s.⁴¹³ Just as the Spanish Civil War was a *Stellvertreterkrieg*, a war by proxy, in which the German military participated to test new equipment under war conditions, Nora's bitter fight with her parents, which eventually leads to the family break-up, can be seen as a war by proxy, which avoids facing the era of the Second World War and confronting potentially even worse war crimes. The author's strategy of concealment thus relies on the reader to fill in the blanks that the text leaves deliberately; he appeals to us to reiterate the curiosity for "the things behind the things" of his narrator, who can see (or imagine what may be) beyond the obvious, preoccupied with traces of what was, but also warns of the dangers of an imagination that avoids looking reality in the eye.

3.2 The Elusive Past: Spores, Traces and Snow

The perils that repressing memories entails, both on a personal and a national level, are expressed by the image of a giant fungus which spreads underneath the children's hometown (and indeed, it may have originated from their very house; cf. 211); the former landfill site, on which their part of town is built, is separated from the topsoil by a thick, impermeable plastic sheet, which creates a damp environment ideal for the fungus, which thrives in the walls that soak up the damp. Its spores, visible only at dusk, permeate everything and everyone, they poison the air and the people who breathe them. Noticeable only through a slightly sticky film

⁴¹² Er "verliert sein Interesse mit einem Schlag, als er sich bei Kriegsende die Abzeichen herunterreißen muss." (58)

⁴¹³ Cf. *Spione*, 196-7: the argument between Nora and her parents is conveyed through the narrator's point of view, who as a child does not understand the full implications of it, leaving the reader to draw on his or her own historical knowledge.

covering everything and its sweet and oppressive scent, which gruesomely recalls the scent of burning bodies at Auschwitz, the spores are ungraspable but omnipresent. They pervade the atmosphere like silenced memories and shared secrets. The narrator is unable to gather them in his hands: they disintegrate into nothingness when he tries to catch them to examine them more closely.⁴¹⁴ His family past is equally ungraspable; the more knowledge he seeks, the further the truth recedes before his grasp, and the more he has to resort to his own fabrications. Reliable research about the past proves impossible; there are no hard facts to analyse, and the spores can dim the view like a thick fog, making it impossible to distinguish people from one another (15).

The secret of the fungus is only unveiled when the children have grown up, long after the upheavals of '68, when the past was being brought out into the open and into public debate, and radical questions were asked: the huge underground growth, which had been covering a mountain of post-war debris, has finally been laid bare and is being dealt with officially and thoroughly, creating a dead and barren landscape that not even birds and insects can survive in (cf. 219, 223). As children, the four cousins were sent into the damp basements of the houses to find out where the fungus had left its marks in the form of mould, which allowed them to indulge in spying around other people's houses, "for all the world to see."⁴¹⁵ The task of the new generation is to confront and investigate what has been covered up by their parents and grandparents. Now that this generation has grown up, it is time to deal with the problem in a radical, officially organised way. The fungus, an image for repressed and silenced memory, spreads under the surface and undermines it, making it brittle. The spores poison everyone who comes too close, including the children, who may have been contaminated without realising it, and will inevitably be affected for the rest of their lives. Entangled and interconnected, these memories create a hidden and poisonous bond between all the people who built their houses and their future on the basis of a shared silenced and guilty past. Beyer's image thus stands in stark contradiction to the view of the post-war silence as constructive, held by Lübke and others. Fungus, one of the most ancient life forms on earth, can grow and develop over centuries, and is almost impossible to eradicate; the spores point to the spreading of the fungus and the reproduction of the poisonous repressed guilt, subtly pointing to the strength of genealogy. By using it as an allegory of the treatment of historical memory in Germany, Beyer indicates that the past will haunt us for a long time to come, affecting future generations with its implications. While a radical and public uncovering is inevitable and ultimately beneficial, the immediate outcome may not be healthy and harmonious, but in fact create a deadly desert.

The spores lend their name to the first and the last of the novel's chapters ("*Sporen*", I and IX), and the German evokes the near-homophonous "*Spuren*": traces. Spores and traces share several crucial characteristics: both are barely perceptible signs of the presence of

⁴¹⁴ Schimmelsporen, "die in der Hand zu nichts zerfallen, wenn wir sie einfangen, um sie genauer zu betrachten" (14).

⁴¹⁵ "vor aller Augen" (99).

something larger than themselves, which is invisible at the time. Traces are a unique link to the past: they show that someone was there, but also that they are now gone, thus pointing to a past that is in some ways still present, albeit in a cryptic form in need of interpretation. In this sense, traces also fit Roland Barthes' description of photographs, when he says: "The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*."⁴¹⁶ Annette Kuhn draws attention to the links between memory work and the inquisitive gaze of the detective, and simultaneously highlights the narrator's perception of the past: "The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain." They compel the onlooker to be "searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence"⁴¹⁷ – which, in turn, resembles not only the work of memory, but also that of reading. Traces make us into detectives, they challenge our investigative and interpretive skills, they raise questions, they show that something was there that we cannot see any longer, but they allow, indeed, compel us, to guess at the past. Their effect on an inquisitive mind is put into words by cousin Carl, explaining his refusal to supply the narrator with the desired information about their grandmother: "You will never find peace, every new trace will nourish a new suspicion, just like every blind spot."⁴¹⁸

The detective work of memory is seriously jeopardised in the novel, however: traces prove unreliable and misleading, as well as prone to obliteration. *Spione's* narrator is particularly intrigued by traces that are evanescent – not only do they point to the past by showing a present in which the originator of the trace is no longer there, but they are also themselves subject to loss, like the spores of the fungus receding before one's grasp and symbolizing the elusiveness of the past. The grandfather, as a young pilot, inscribes vapour trails in the sky that the young grandmother tries to decipher before they vanish into thin air (cf. 12). These traces are, in fact, doubly ungraspable: designed to set the public on the wrong track, the advertising trails he writes conceal the fact that he is practising for the airforce, then still illegal. While vapour dissolves in air, on the ground snow similarly makes visible someone's traces for a certain time, only to let them disappear forever once it melts; water in its various states of being thus proves too fluid an element to retain traces of the past.

The destruction of traces can however also be a wilful and powerful act: removing someone's traces means eliminating the possibility for others to conjure them, to remember them. This is exactly what the grandfather's second wife strives to achieve when she tries to eradicate any traces of the first wife in the existing photographs, armed with nail scissors and a keen eye for detail. But in spite of her efforts, some barely perceptible traces of the grandmother remain (39-40) – and if it is not a bit of clothing, a shoe, or eyelashes that could

⁴¹⁶ Barthes, 85.

⁴¹⁷ Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets. Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 4.

⁴¹⁸ "So wirst du nie zur Ruhe kommen, jede neue Spur wird einen weiteren Verdacht nähren, genau wie jeder neue blinde Fleck." (246)

just as easily be tiny specks of dust, just like the fungal spores, then it is the grandmother's intense gaze that the narrator feels to be speaking to any viewer of the picture: "The photograph is empty, and yet something remains, this unsettling gaze cannot be shaken off. It can be deciphered on everything, it has touched the shadows and the tree, it is still resting on the onlooker, even though the Italian eyes have long gone."⁴¹⁹

While in this version of the past, the grandmother (and particularly the grandmotherly gaze) is eradicated by her successor, in another version it is she herself who covers her own tracks: after her long and painful illness, and after her children have accepted that she will die – and in fact believe that she is already dead – she makes an unexpected recovery; the couple however decide not to "bring the dead back to life", so as not to confuse the children, and she emigrates to Rome to pursue her singing career, dead to her family. She justifies this decision by claiming not to want to submit the children to yet more disappointed hopes of recovery, and argues that the only difference in the outcome of the story of her illness was that she unexpectedly survived: "Apart from the fact that I didn't die, nothing had changed."⁴²⁰ Her vanishing act (a pretend death) grants her a new life, a rebirth, as the imaginary Italian opera singer that the children invent, and in the final episode (the missing piece of the puzzle), the narrator meets her, finally bringing to life the invented grandmother of their childhood in his narrative. So, while desperately searching for his grandparents' traces everywhere, the idea of disappearing without trace is an admirable art that the narrator ascribes to various members of his family: Carl hopes to "disappear without a trace" in the military, the army being the ideal place for someone wishing to obliterate their own visibility and identity;⁴²¹ this of course is also a comment on the grandfather's reasons for joining the army. The vanishing act however also holds great appeal for the narrator himself: his obsession with the loss of traces is most clearly expressed when he imagines himself being lost in a snowy landscape, a wide, white expanse of fresh snow without any traces (250). The vanishing act the narrator wishes to achieve, into an archetypically innocent space that lacks any reminders of the past, can be seen as a direct consequence of the intergenerational silence of a guilty past, instilling in the descendants a "persistent existential angst" which expresses itself in a "seemingly bodiless life."⁴²²

3.3 The Text as Monument

While the narrator thus desires to efface himself and disappear from view, he does leave a substantial trace (of) himself: his text (behind which he retreats) is the monument to his

⁴¹⁹ "Die Photographie ist leer, trotzdem aber ist noch etwas geblieben, dieser beunruhigende Blick läßt sich einfach nicht abschütteln. Er ist an allem ablesbar, er hat die Schatten und den Baum berührt, er liegt, die Italieneraugen sind schon lange fort, noch immer auf dem Betrachter." (40)

⁴²⁰ "Abgesehen davon, daß ich nicht gestorben war, hatte sich nichts verändert." (278).

⁴²¹ "im Militär spurlos zu verschwinden" (227).

⁴²² "Vielen der Kriegskinder ist eine fortwährende existenzielle Angst geblieben, ein scheinbar körperloses Leben.", in Thadden (unpaginated).

grandparents and to his family story that they themselves have denied him. The commemorative function of life writing, its place on the intersection between the personal and the public, between individual and collective remembrance, instil into the text the function of a monument. As was shown in chapter II, the (auto)biography as the lasting trace that the author leaves, and the text as epitaph and as an extension to the commemorative gravestone, a monument of a life, have become tropes in life writing. Foer's archives, discussed in chapter III, themselves can be regarded as a specific kind of monument, in their attempt to provide a record of the past. Beyer's novel can however also be read as a contribution to the memory debate in contemporary Germany: whenever decisions are to be taken on public forms of remembrance of the Fascist era and the Holocaust in Germany, an intense public discussion ensues.⁴²³ We are confronted with the limitations of memorials and with the immense difficulty of representing trauma and crimes on the scale of the Holocaust in an 'appropriate' way. James E. Young, in his analysis of various forms of visual and public commemoration, sees the loss of trust in images, in conventional memorials, and in words to be able to speak the unspeakable, as a tendency realized within contemporary public commemorative art: instead of attempting to represent atrocities and destruction, several recent monuments emphasise the unrepresentability of the traumatic past by challenging our concept of representation. The mirror image of a destroyed fountain in Kassel, for instance, a "phantom shape in the ground", is an attempt at "remembering an absence [...] by reproducing it. [...] The very absence of the monument will now be preserved in its precisely duplicated negative space [...] present only in the memory of its absence."⁴²⁴

Contrary to traditional monuments, which attempt to preserve memory for eternity, it is the ungraspability of memory that is expressed here. The counter-monument "challenges the idea of monumentality and its implied corollary, permanence."⁴²⁵ Instead, it alerts us to another danger Young sees inherent in the construction of monuments: a finished monument may in fact make us believe that commemoration is taken care of and paradoxically make us forget – a fear that is reflected in the grandfather's second wife's aversion to having her death announcement placed in the local newspaper: by doing this, she fears her husband will actually delete her from his mind: "As far as he is concerned, that will be it; not a single thought, not even the palest memory of her will remain."⁴²⁶ Memorials can be seen as an easy solution to troubled memory: "It is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some

⁴²³ For discussions on the public debate of, for instance, the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, cf. Niven.

⁴²⁴ James E. Young, "The Counter Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today", in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), 49-78: 72.

⁴²⁵ Young, "The Counter Monument", 60.

⁴²⁶ "Damit hat sich der Fall für ihn erledigt, kein einziger Gedanke mehr, nicht die blasseste Erinnerung wird bleiben." (194). However, in her jealousy of the first wife, she juxtaposes the obituary precisely with her husband secretly visiting her grave. An obituary is, to her, less of a monument than the physical gravestone, being printed in a daily paper and thus by definition short-lived and ephemeral. This could be Beyer's comment on the perishability of any text, any written monument.

degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember.”⁴²⁷ Public remembrance is often, according to Omer Bartov, “the function of a complex set of negotiations between memory and repression,”⁴²⁸ which recalls the power of memorials to shape and distort our collective memory; Michael Sheringham similarly describes the archive as instrument of repression and forgetting.⁴²⁹ Young argues that continued commemoration may best be ensured through “perpetual irresolution” and an “unfinished monument”: “For it may be the *finished* monument that completes memory itself, puts a cap on memory-work, and draws a bottom line underneath an era that must always haunt Germany”. Young here refers to the controversial *Schlußstrichdebatte* (debate on closure) referred to earlier, and provocatively uses the term “final solution” for Germany’s memory issues.⁴³⁰ It is the idea of monumentalising memory and projecting one’s guilt onto an object as, in fact, a way of avoiding commemoration and acceptance of personal guilt that Nora accuses her father of; her criticism, incidentally, is also sparked by an object of art, Picasso’s *Guernica*, which is (ab)used by the viewer in order to distance himself from his personal story. Indeed, Young sums up another danger of relying on monuments as preservers of memory: “rather than preserving public memory, the monument displaces it altogether, supplanting a community’s memory-work with its own material form.”⁴³¹ This is a danger that, on a personal level, Annie Dillard has highlighted as inherent in any autobiographical text: the displacement of memories by entrusting them to writing.⁴³²

In *Spione*, the narrator, by creating his family narrative, attempts to establish the grandparents’ story as a commemorative act. His desire for that story leads to a preoccupation with the past, but is also an expression of the desire to create an insurance for himself for the future – with the family continuity as an anchor that grants stability. Indeed, it seems that only the grandparents’ story hold him and his cousin Paulina together in adult life.⁴³³ And yet, the narrator’s story fails to materialise into anything as solid as a monument; it exists in his mind only, as a fictional narrative. While on one level, this could be interpreted as a testament to the power of words and the imagination, on another level the text is also an expression of a fundamental disillusionment with the concept of commemorating an unspeakable past. The gravestone the children believe to be that of the grandfather’s second wife is a symbol for the failures of Beyer’s narrator’s (auto)biographical project: devoid of a name, the stone’s

⁴²⁷ James E. Young, “Memory, Counter-Memory, and the End of the Monument”, in Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobitz, *Image and Remembrance. Representation and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003), 59-77: 62.

⁴²⁸ Omer Bartov, 259.

⁴²⁹ Michael Sheringham, “Memory and the Archive in Contemporary Life-Writing”, *French Studies*, 59: 1 (2005), 47-53: 47-8.

⁴³⁰ Young, “Memory”, 61.

⁴³¹ Young, “Memory”, 62.

⁴³² Cf. Annie Dillard, “To Fashion a Text”, in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth. The Art and Craft of Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 53-76: 70-1.

⁴³³ “Wir halten an der Geschichte unserer Großeltern fest, vielleicht ist sie das einzige was uns hält.” (74)

inscription merely reads: “We shall always remember her.”⁴³⁴ Refusing someone a name, and by extension a story, means refusing them remembrance, and therefore survival. The stone’s unfulfillable promise is an expression of the impossibility of remembering someone who is nameless, of commemorating forgotten facts and silenced stories. The inscription makes the gravestone a counter-monument: it includes its own inversion, a promise that is impossible to keep as there is neither name nor face nor memories. The aim of the voice from beyond the grave – autobiography – is, according to Paul de Man, to ensure that one’s name (on the gravestone or in the text) is “made as intelligible and memorable as a face.”⁴³⁵ Both name and face are denied here, which can only mean that the auto/biographical project and commemoration itself are condemned to fail. Beyer here highlights the importance of the inscription in the stone, the caption to the photograph, in short, knowledge about the past as foundation for constructive and meaningful memory. By refusing his characters (save the three cousins) their own names as well as any reliable knowledge about the past, he extends the impossibility of the gravestone’s promise to his narrator’s commemorative text.

Neither *Spione* nor *Everything Is Illuminated* attempt to represent the past ‘as it was’, but emphasise instead the gap that is left by a destructive past. The text, often perceived as a monument for a life, here becomes a literary counter-monument, a self-conscious substitute for the absence or the unreliability of the story, like the monument to the founding moment of Trachimbrod: this memorial stone encompasses its own doubt of what is inscribed: pointing to the limitations of memorials, this monument embodies its own awareness. And yet, this awareness of a lack of reliable history does not prevent its re-narration. Be it Jonathan writing his diary (“The less he saw the more he wrote”⁴³⁶), or *Spione*’s narrator creating his own images (“What I cannot see, I have to invent”), both texts place the motivation of artistic invention in a lack; literature is presented as the only way to circumscribe the void created by the loss of the past and the family story.

Spione is concerned with the impossibility of talking about the past, with muted family history, and with the younger generation’s attempt to find their identity within that family and national history that have been “struck dumb.”⁴³⁷ This phrase, also taken from de Man, refers to the silencing of the living confronted with the voice of death. In particular, the notion of defacement, which for de Man is always implicit in any autobiographical project, and also, by extension, a biographical one, becomes relevant when exploring the figure of the grandmother in *Spione*. There are no portraits of her in the family album, merely unrecognizable pictures, on which her eyes are not properly visible: “Our grandmother doesn’t have her own face [...] she

⁴³⁴ “Wir werden uns immer an sie erinnern.” (200)

⁴³⁵ Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement”, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 67-81: 76.

⁴³⁶ Foer, 115.

⁴³⁷ de Man, 78.

isn't there."⁴³⁸ Eliminated from the family album, virtually mutilated by the second wife, the grandmother is presented as a victim who is being silenced, repressed, and confined to absence. Her defacement recalls the facelessness and invisibility of any silenced victim. On the other hand however, the equally face- and nameless second wife of the grandfather refers to the very different facelessness of the perpetrators; the superficial similarities but the profound differences between the two create an unsettling heritage for the descendants who refuse to show their face themselves.

4 Conclusion

The children's construction of their grandparent figures describes an inclination towards spying, secrecy and silence as an inherited feature, just like eyes, hands and talents. In a process we have seen at work in all three novels, inheritance is reversed however: it is the grandparent who 'inherits' from the grandchild. The stories transmitted through the genes in *Middlesex*, Brod's vegetarianism or the statue's looks in *Everything Is Illuminated*, are passed down through the generations, and yet, the narrators all assign their grandparents features that they themselves perceive as inherited. Through their own fabrication of this heritage, all the narrators become the creators of their family lineage, of their own inheritance, and of a reciprocal interaction between the generations. Their texts are a testament to the grandchildren's need for continuity, which at the same time dissolves the linearity of the timeline that genealogy traditionally evokes. And even this need, the desire for intergenerational continuity and even identity, is ascribed to the grandmother, in a passage that inspires the concluding thoughts.

In one of the novel's final scenes, the (imagined) grandmother invents a granddaughter who has become a singer like her, repeating her own sounds and words: "As if the singing was kept alive across the generations, as if there was no silence between them", she imagines "an invisible connection; the boundaries between grandmother and granddaughter dissolve, as if they were no longer two different people."⁴³⁹ This one-ness, however, an ideal that the narrator strives for, and a desire that he ascribes to the grandmother in equal measure, can only be achieved in a liminal space, beyond reality:

The singer becomes, with her first note, an invented figure. For the duration of the singing, she exists in between two states; she knows that she is not the person the audience take her for, and at the same time she knows she is no longer the same person she was in the dressing room. In

⁴³⁸ "Unsere Großmutter hat kein eigenes Gesicht [...] sie ist nicht da." (37, and again 84).

⁴³⁹ "Als bliebe der Gesang über die Generationen hinweg aufrechterhalten, als gäbe es dazwischen keine Stille." [...] "eine unsichtbare Verbindung [...] mehr noch, die Grenze zwischen Großmutter und Enkelin verschwimmt, als wären sie nicht länger zwei verschiedene Personen." (282-3)

this interspace, where a singer has to recognize herself as an invention, grandmother and granddaughter might meet. That is what she would wish for.⁴⁴⁰

It is thus only in fiction – and to be more precise, in a fiction of self-recognition and self-invention – that such an intergenerational connection and indeed identity is possible. Communication across the generations and reciprocal invention can happen in this “interspace”; it is not a dialogue, however, but a rejoinder of two voices, a repetition of words and sounds, that characterises this communication. Beyer’s novel thus describes a pathology of escapism into fiction which is constructed as a world apart, alienated from reality. As Carl warns him, the narrator becomes a character in his own story, transcending the distinctions between reality and fiction, between life and death (247), and finally succumbs to the dangers of being engrossed in the past: “If you cannot forget our grandmother, the distance between you will grow smaller and smaller, and at some point you will be closer together than any living person can deal with.”⁴⁴¹ To the narrator, the dead seem as alive as he is himself; they are always present, urging the living to look and to listen (128). This also means that nothing is over, and that the past lives among us, as the deluded Greek general in *Middlesex* phrases it.⁴⁴² Nicolas Abraham, reflecting on the notion of the return of the dead, writes that “all the departed may return, but some are predestined to haunt: the dead who have been shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave.” Therefore, we invent phantoms in order to “objectify [...] the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one’s life produced in us. [...] Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.”⁴⁴³

Haunted by the family secrets and silence, *Spione*’s narrator finds himself getting lost in the realm of the dead (249) – which to him is the realm of fiction. Fiction, in turn, provides him with different permutations of reality that become indistinguishable from one another. He blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality in the same measure as those between life and death. With a grandfather going back and forth between the front lines of his living and his dead wife, with a grandmother for whom the difference between life and death is a minor detail in her story, the narrator too perceives the two as close together: “For him, only a small step links the one with the other world.”⁴⁴⁴ Words, texts, stories are sufficient for murdering someone, for awakening the dead and making the living disappear (83): the power of the

⁴⁴⁰ “Mit seinem ersten Ton wird der Sänger zu einer erfundenen Figur. Für die Dauer seines Gesangs befindet er sich in einem Zwischenraum, ihm ist bewußt, er ist nicht derjenige, als dessen Verkörperung die Zuhörer ihn erkennen mögen, und zugleich weiß er auch, er ist nicht mehr derselbe wie noch eben in der Garderobe. In diesem Zwischenraum, wo eine Sängerin sich selbst als Erfindung begreifen muß, könnten Großmutter und Enkelin zusammentreffen. Das würde sie sich wünschen.” (283)

⁴⁴¹ “Wenn es dir nicht gelingt, unsere Großmutter zu vergessen, wird der Abstand zwischen euch beiden immer geringer werden, und irgendwann werdet ihr näher beieinander sein, als es ein lebender Mensch verkraften kann.” (249)

⁴⁴² Eugenides, 44.

⁴⁴³ Nicolas Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology”, transl. by Nicholas Rand, *Critical Inquiry*, 13: 2 (Winter 1987), 287-92: 287.

⁴⁴⁴ “Für ihn ist es nicht mehr als ein kleiner Schritt von der einen in die andere Welt” (231).

storyteller, who ensures the survival of one version of the story while obliterating others, takes on a threatening form in *Spione*. The grandfather's second wife imposes a memory ban on the first wife, and, through silencing the grandmother, effectively kills her in the memory of those around her. The children realize that "you need nothing but words to murder somebody [...]. She knows how to kill a person with words."⁴⁴⁵ The narrator chooses a stance within fiction where it is he, as author-creator, who controls life and death, who kills and brings to life. He fails to realise, however, that this same fiction also assumes control over him. Like the narrators in *Eugenides* and *Foer*, he engenders himself in fiction, but at the same time lacks the empowerment they derive from their narrative; his text leads not to a deepened understanding of the family story and consequently the self, nor to a healing alternative version of the past; in his case, the inheritance of guilty secrets and a wall of silence creates a loss of the grandson's sense of reality, and leads to a family story that prevents understanding or healing, perpetuating the very causes of this destructive inheritance.

⁴⁴⁵ "Man braucht nichts anderes als Worte, um jemanden zu ermorden [...]. Sie weiß, wie man Menschen mit Worten tötet." (214)

V Memory Trouble: Myths, Media and Metaphors

Peter Bichsel's child narrator assumes his grandfather's voice to invent his silenced stories of Uncle Jodok. His narrative circumscribes the absence of the tale and the void left by withheld memories. The three narrators in *Eugenides*, Foer and Beyer share this experience of loss and absence; their fabrications fill the gap of the silenced story and the absence of the beloved ancestor, and, while suffering from the lack of both, they draw on that very void for creative motivation. The life stories they write about both themselves and their grandparents are shaped crucially by this experience: the absences and silences that they are confronted with present them with a blank slate, forcing them to restart after the rupture of ancestral continuity. Encrypted invisibly in this blank slate, however, they see an inheritance which they themselves trace in their narratives. This participation in the past is often also articulated through myth: the inscription in a mythical past refutes the idea of the individual as a blank slate and an ahistorical being, positing inheritance as that which, even unbeknownst, shapes our identity.

This is negotiated in the three novels from different angles: *Eugenides* portrays the narrator as a figure born with a history and an omniscient consciousness, which however needs to be unlearned at birth. And yet, the body stores this heritage unbeknownst to the conscious mind; our genes inscribe in us our family story as well as the history of the species. In Foer's novel, Brod's smooth belly is a symbol for the blank slate, a birth without ties with the past; this, however, is only possible in myth: every descendant of Brod is born with an umbilical cord and thus is genealogically connected to the past. Foer's Jonathan, deprived of the umbilical cord of his ancestral story, engraves this involuntarily blank slate with a fictional lineage. Beyer, finally, criticises the notion of the blank slate in a different context: conjured in German post-war society out of a national and individual desire to start afresh after a horrific and traumatic history, the liberation from the guilty past proves an illusion; the obsession with the obliterated ancestral story and the perpetuation of silence and secrecy that Beyer's narrator engages in express the ongoing repercussions of a past that has not been worked through.

The grandparents, for the three narrators, come to stand for the entirety of one's ancestry, both metaphorically and metonymically; it is their story that the grandsons wish to decipher on the supposedly blank slate of their heritage, in order to reach far back, envisaging their origins. The re-imagination of this story leads to an elevation of the grandparents to a mythical level; the ancestral story becomes the creation story of the individual. The myths that a culture tells of itself are a narrative connection to 'time immemorial', articulating the imaginary origin of the collective. Myths thus form a metaphorical archive, vital for establishing cultural memory and for rendering experience universal. They remind us of the individual's belonging in larger

frameworks, beyond the context of everyday life; they provide us with a cultural context and, ultimately, meaning in a spiritual sense. For that reason, mythology is an important referent for the narrators of these (auto)biographies: the mythical subtexts in Eugenides and Foer, always conflated with the mundane, show an awareness of the relevance of this mythical level even (or particularly) in modern life, and they are an expression of the need for a spiritual connection to one's origins as well as to one's traditions – an awareness that they develop out of a lack, *ex negativo*.

It is particularly Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that Eugenides and Foer draw on for their mythical references, and this is not surprising: more than other classical epics (such as Homer's or Virgil's), Ovid's poem, in spite of its epic universal scope, never loses sight of the particular, focusing on the details of each individual story and tracing psychological dilemmas and human relations. It can thus be seen as a model for these novels in their aim to combine the telling of their own creation story from its beginnings with the intricacies of modern life and the details of their individual stories, as they place themselves on the intersection between inheritance and individuality. Rendering the grandparents mythological also converges with a mythological perception of the self as the culmination of one's ancestral history. This is a point of view often tinged with humour: as we have seen, both Cal and Jonathan assume traditional mythical roles that comment ironically on the mundane settings of their stories.

In Beyer's novel, we find no comparable re-investing of contemporary life with myth. Here the figure of the grandfather, with his assumed guilty past, does not allow his descendants to project their desire for a mythical ancestor onto him; indeed, his ordinariness is decidedly un-mythical. However, archaic patterns are at play here too: the two women of that generation – the grandmother and the old hag – take on fairy-tale qualities, the latter representing the evil stepmother or witch, while the former, in the final version of the imaginary meeting with the grandmother, becomes the fairy godmother who fulfils the narrator's desire to know the story, absolving him from his obsession. And yet, there is a different kind of myth-making at play in Beyer's family story: the blanks in the photo album lead to a "familial mythology"⁴⁴⁶ riddled with omissions and secrets, in a very similar way to the traces of the past which give rise to the re-creation of the ancestral legend in Foer.

The grandparents, as has been shown, are the (missing) link between the personal and the cultural, between communicative and cultural memory, and thus between the oral and the written transmission of the past. They span (or they are ascribed the potential of spanning, by their grandson-narrators) the particular and the universal; the novels endeavour to transcribe communicative into cultural memory, bridging the floating gap of oblivion. In their individual re-translation, they draw on cultural founding myths, allowing cultural memory to be revived as

⁴⁴⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), 8.

communicative memory within their texts; and simultaneously they create, in their texts, the archives and rituals that are needed.

Set on the intersection between individual and collective memory, all three novels address the crucial stage in which communicative memory, which is based on oral transmission and interpersonal communication, changes into cultural memory, designed to preserve a community's cultural heritage. When Friederike Eigler calls the literary representation of generational relationships the interface between individual and collective history,⁴⁴⁷ she uses the metaphor of a seam, "*Nahtstelle*", to describe the narrative as the place where two disparate patches of material (two aspects of history) are joined with the help of a thread. Although Eigler does not elaborate on it, her image provides me with a fruitful metaphor for the writing of the past in all the three novels discussed in this dissertation: it is the grandparents' story which is needed to close the disjunction between the two histories, the personal and the collective. As we have seen, these realms are split most dramatically in Germany's dealing with the past, but the disparity between personal and collective stories also shapes the conflicting heritage of the descendants of immigrants to the USA. The narrators' lives are torn, and the 'grandparent-shaped holes' can only be sewn back together with the narrative thread of fiction, which reconciles the individual and the family story with that of the collective. Indeed, we have seen the thread used extensively as metaphor for narrative in both Eugenides and Foer.

It is the storyline, the narrative of their lineage, that all three narrators initially lack; instead they are confronted with holes of different shapes and forms: absences, voids and silences are left in the wake of traumatic events, of personal secrets, and of unadmitted guilt. The etymological meaning of trauma, derived from the Greek for 'wound', adds another level to the metaphor of the seam, as a wound that needs suturing, an incision or a rupture of material that belongs together but has been forcefully torn. The stitching up that the narrative achieves has a healing effect, but a scar remains as a reminder of the wound inflicted in the past: a visible, readable rem(a)inder of traumatic accidents and violence. Similarly, the narratives of the grandsons discussed in this project do not hide, but rather expose the absence and the pain of the lost or concealed story; and their storytelling becomes the suture that both closes and commemorates the wound.

Every wound has, by definition, an edge, and every hole has a border; it represents not complete and utter nothingness, but a precise and circumscribed void. As such, it makes us aware of itself: it implies that it could be filled, maybe that once it was filled, thus adding a historical dimension and a dimension of loss to pure absence. The hole, together with its border, then also frames the view that each of the narrators takes on his family story. They share the gaze that is limited and framed, that separates the viewer from that which is viewed; the hole is an expression of a feeling of fragmentation, of a division of one's reality, and an awareness of

⁴⁴⁷ "Nahtstelle von individueller und kollektiver Geschichte", Friederike Eigler, *Gedächtnis und Geschichte in Generationenromanen seit der Wende* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2005), 10.

the fact that we can never see the whole picture. This awareness is expressed in all three novels through a focus on visibility: restricted gazes, distorted vision, and blindness preoccupy narrators and characters in diverse ways. The mythical figure of Tiresias the visionary, evoked in *Middlesex*, explicitly or implicitly comments on all three novels: blind to the present but alert to the future, and particularly the implications of the past on the future.

Faced with secrets and silences, the narrators turn to vision as a means of communication, to gazes exchanged and reciprocal looks that transcend time and the boundaries between reality and imagination. The leitmotif of the gaze however always encompasses the limited or the averted gaze, dramatising simultaneously the desire and the impossibility of seeing and experiencing (and thus understanding) the concealed past: Eugenides shows the gaze through the hole as a means to heighten desire through inaccessibility; the holes in Foer's novel grant insights into absence and loss; and Beyer's secretive, distorted gazes through a variety of lenses prevent communication rather than enable it. The narrator-protagonists' searching and questioning gazes into the past are left unanswered, and ultimately, the responsive look must be returned by themselves, through a reflection in an autobiographical mirror which makes up for the lack of intergenerational exchanges.

It is no coincidence that this disillusionment with the visual (or more generally speaking, the sensual) is paralleled by a mistrust of memory and simultaneously of documents that seek to represent the past. Memory is inseparable from its representation, and the media we employ to record, store, and transmit knowledge are primarily of a visual nature, appealing to the sense that is most important, and seemingly most trustworthy, to a human being. Photographs are often drawn on as they epitomise the tension between their conventional evidential character and the unreliability of images; the quest for the past, in Foer and Beyer, is inspired by photographs that are found unexpectedly, but ultimately cannot lead back to the past they portray. The archives that the texts use, incomplete by definition, are similarly shown to distort the past: Foer, in particular, questions any archive's ability to preserve memory. At the same time, however, visual records make us aware of their ambiguous relationship to time, particularly photographs, which encompass such complex relationships with past, present and future. In Eugenides, the archive is a bodily record of information about and from the past; information that is in fact "impossible to see with the naked eye:"⁴⁴⁸ only the microscopic gaze of the biologist – or of the biographer – can discern the hereditary information inscribed in the genes. Ultimately, however, the narrators' disillusionment with the media that are traditionally used to establish and maintain a family continuity leads them to transfer their trust in memory media to a new medium which is not generally seen as a guarantor for a reliable account of history: their own narcissistic reflection in the ancestral narrative.

⁴⁴⁸ Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (London, New York and Berlin: Bloomsbury, 2002), 125.

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