

ECHOES OF THE VOID  
HISTORY, MEMORY, AND NARRATIVE IN SYLVIE GERMAIN'S *MAGNUS*

by

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(Under the direction of Ronald Bogue)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways in which the themes of memory, history and narrative are at work in Sylvie Germain's *Magnus*. The main character, Magnus, is both the adoptive son of a fugitive Nazi war criminal and a survivor of area bombing in Germany. Because of Magnus's connections to historical tragedies, he spends his life in pain and confusion, seeking a way to overcome these traumas. Germain examines memory on an individual and collective scale, through both the format and plot of the novel. She furthers this exploration by examining the ways language and memory interact and the ways that language can be used as a means of expressing memory and allaying tragedy. Through the resolution Germain argues that archaic narratives can be relied on as means of dealing with the past because they use language in ways that reduce the gap between the linguistic and the real.

INDEX WORDS: *Magnus*, Germain, Holocaust, area bombing, World War II, storytelling, Benjamin, Arendt, Delbo

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B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Daniel C. Richards.

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## Introduction

The title character of Sylvie Germain's *Magnus* is the product of two great tragedies, each sprung from World War II. The first tragedy lies in Magnus's adoptive heritage. Magnus's adoptive father is Clemens Dunkeltal, a doctor and SS Officer, who served in concentration camps during the war. Despite the fact that Magnus is adopted and that his relationship with his father is strained, this heritage has a profound effect on Magnus and on the course his life takes once the war ends. Magnus's biological heritage establishes his connection with the second great tragedy; he is orphaned because of allied area bombing of Germany. Magnus is eventually able to recall the death of his mother during the bombing, but is left with no other connection to his biological family and no other recollections of his earliest years. Both of these tragedies are events that are worth exploring in their own right; however, they are not the sole focus of Germain's novel. In fact, most of the novel concerns on what takes place after the concentration camps have been liberated and the bombs have stopped falling on Germany. The tensions and struggles in the novel are not part of the bombing or the horrors in Germany. They are part of the aftermath. Though Germain does spend some time describing Magnus's childhood as the son of an SS officer and describing his one recollection of the bombing, the bulk of the book focuses on Magnus as an adult and the ways his life, his emotions, and his psychological state have been affected by the early influence that war and horror had on him as a child.

What Magnus has experienced is trauma, and though traumatic experience itself is a particular kind of painful experience, the trauma of the horrific experiences of World War II is something that has been particularly interesting to many scholars. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* Cathy Caruth explains how trauma works in unique ways compared to other painful emotional experiences. "In its most general definition, trauma

describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11). While Caruth explores the general phenomena of trauma on an individual level in her book, Dominick LaCapra focuses specifically on the collective trauma of the Holocaust in *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. He argues that to overcome large-scale trauma such as those Magnus has experienced, a person must go through the process of “working through” by addressing the trauma and eventually coming to terms with it. “Working-through requires the recognition that we are involved in transference relations to the past in ways that vary according to the subject-positions we find ourselves in, rework, and invent. It also involves the attempt to counteract the projective reprocessing of the past through which we deny certain of its features and act out our own desires for self-confirming or identity-forming meaning” (64).

Magnus’s struggle to address and overcome traumatic memories is not only a telling and intimate personal journey, it is also an allegory for the ways that truly horrific events can be incorporated into narratives of history and into the collective consciousness of humanity. Germain uses various techniques to indicate the bearing that her story has on real life. Though the characters in the novel are fictional, the events they deal with are real historical events. Magnus is struck down not just by area bombing, but by the bombs of “Operation Gomorrah,” a real attack. Though Clemens Dunkeltal is a fictional character, he recalls Dr. Josef Mengele, a real Nazi doctor. Germain makes her message about trauma even more pressing by placing her novel in a context that straddles the line between fiction and history. Though Magnus is fictional, his experiences are reflective of many real individuals.



While some painful experiences can be processed normally and overcome through traditional means, traumatic experiences provoke a delayed response because they are events that are too powerful and immediate to be incorporated readily into understanding. Both the Holocaust and area bombing were events that created this reaction not only in individual memory, but also in collective memory. As LaCapra observes,

The Shoah ... posed problems of "representation" at the time of its occurrence, and it continues to pose problems today. It is in this sense a paradigmatically traumatic series of events related in complex fashion to the question of silence that is not mere mutism but intricately related to representation...the Shoah calls for a response that does not deny its traumatic nature or cover it over through a 'fetishistic' or redemptive narrative that makes believe it did not occur or compensates too readily for it. (LaCapra 220)

LaCapra asserts that a unique process is necessary in order to lay the traumatic events of the past to rest and dissolve the pain they have caused. Because of his experience as a bombing survivor and his adoptive Nazi heritage, Magnus's quest in the novel is for effective representation of the trauma he has experienced; this representation must acknowledge pain and use narrative as a means of understanding rather than a tool for denial. In *Magnus, Germain* explores the ways that events like the Holocaust can be represented; her message about overcoming trauma is especially related to the ways in which horrific experiences can be communicated through language and the sense in which literature is an appropriate venue for communication of horrific experience. The delayed response to trauma is the key to what makes it a different kind of experience.

Magnus's journey begins with amnesia and recollection. This may seem like a basic step, but it is actually of the utmost importance. At first, the memories he holds within him are too painful to be acknowledged. As is the case with many who experience trauma, Magnus has repressed his traumatic memories. However, repression of traumatic memories on either an individual or collective basis does not lead to an erasure of the past, but simply an amplification

of pain and confusion. When Magnus does finally confront his memories, they come in a strange form; they manifest themselves in his life as a void or an abyss. The creeping abyss is found many times in the novel and always accompanies a significant moment or confrontation of memory for Magnus. This abyss can be viewed simultaneously as a site of dark and foreboding memory and a site of oblivion—a recognition of loss that is too deep to be fully expressed. Though recollection of memory and recognition of what has been forever lost seem to be concepts that are mutually exclusive, the dual nature of the void makes it all the more powerful as a symbol. The dual nature of the void allows the novel to sustain a dialogue about the complex nature of memory, especially as memory relates to the overcoming of trauma and tragedy. The complex nature of memory and the process one must follow in order to acknowledge memory are also reflected in the novel's format, which is presented in short numbered fragments.

As LaCapra argues, memories of the Holocaust or other events of a similar nature can only be properly addressed through a process of working-through, which naturally involves the communication of trauma, and he recognizes that language plays a large role in this process. “How language is used is a crucial consideration in working through problems, and the historiographical use of language confronts specific difficulties and challenges in the face of limit cases that may reduce one to silence” (LaCapra 165). Many have observed that events of an unprecedented nature require a new vocabulary or, at least, a reworking of linguistic conceptions, in order to be fully communicated through language. The ending of *Magnus* makes a similar argument, though in a much more bizarre fashion. By the end of the novel Magnus finds himself unwittingly inserted into a fairy tale, which he initially finds to be an offense to his modern life. However, it is through this insertion that Magnus finds a way to resolve his trauma and *Magnus* finds its resolution. In this resolution, Magnus meets Brother Jean, who sedates Magnus's

troubled mind and body, and seems to have a mystical power. The real power that Brother Jean has is narrative. Not only do Magnus's encounters with Brother Jean forcibly insert Magnus into a narrative that has authority and healing power, but Brother Jean also teaches Magnus to read reality as a text. In doing this, Brother Jean eliminates the divide between language and reality and suggests to Magnus that he has the ability to formulate his memories in words. This revelation constitutes a sufficient working-through of painful memory so that Magnus is able to leave behind the struggles of the past and continue with life. This process is not a denial of memory or a canonization of it, but rather a process in which painful memories can be dissolved through language so that life can proceed unhindered. Through this ending, Germain implicitly argues that narrative and storytelling have the power necessary to incorporate memories of trauma and absolute horror into individual understanding but also into the collective consciousness of humanity and into human understandings of traumatic historic events.

Though the implications and methods of imposing narrative as a means of overcoming trauma are complicated, the concept is perhaps best summarized in Germain's own words in the "Prelude" to the book:

Inside every person the voice of a prompter murmurs in an undertone. Incognito. An apocryphal voice that if you only lend an ear may bring unsuspected news—of the world, of others, of yourself.

To write is to descend into the prompter's box and learn to listen to the breathing of language in its silences, between words, around words, sometimes at the heart of words.  
(9-10)

This passage will be analyzed in detail later, but it gives a clear indication of the primary theme this thesis will explore: the role of language and writing as it relates to the narrative of memory, particularly when memory involves traumatic events. Though *Magnus* is a story about a man, it is really a timeless fairy tale that tells of the relationship between language and memory and the

way that relationship can be used as a means of dissolving trauma on both an individual and a collective scale. By creating a story that blurs the line between fiction and reality, Germain suggests that her tale of memory and language is true, despite the fictive nature of Magnus's character.

### **I. War Criminals**

Magnus's first connection to the trauma of World War II is his connection to the Holocaust. Though Magnus himself is not a victim of Nazi persecution, his adoptive father is a Nazi officer. When the war ends, this leads Magnus's family to be persecuted, but also forces Magnus to question who his father really is and what exactly his father has done. Magnus's early impressions of his father are not those of a war criminal, but of a heroic doctor.

Clemens Dunkeltal is a doctor but he has no private patients, nor does he work in a hospital. The place where he practices his profession is not far from the village, though [Magnus] has never been there. Judging by his majestic demeanour, his air of gravity, Dr. Dunkeltal must be an important man – a health wizard. He receives patients by the thousand in his vast country asylum, and all undoubtedly suffer from contagious diseases, since they are not allowed out. (15)

This description, found in "Fragment 4" informs us not of the objective truth about Dunkeltal, but of Magnus's childhood impressions of him. It is later in a section titled "Note" that Germain gives us factual information about Dunkeltal:

Dunkeltal, Clemens (born 13/04/1904): Oberstrmführer in the SS.  
 Doctor of medicine. Served as camp doctor and successively at KL Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, and Bergen-Belsen.  
 He made the Selections of the Deportees, sending the sick and the weakest to the gas chambers; personally took direct part in the extermination of numerous prisoners by administering phenol through an injection to the heart.  
 Sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment, he is being sought in Central America, where he is suspected of having managed to escape thanks to the support of the clandestine Nazi organization ODESSA. (Germain 30)

This is Germain's first clear indication that her book is meant to be read both as a novel and as an allegory of history, since Clemens Dunkeltal is strikingly reminiscent of a well-known Nazi

doctor who worked in the selection process at Auschwitz: Dr. Josef Mengele. Psychologist and historian Robert Jay Lifton writes in an article about Dr. Mengele for the New York Times that, though there were many doctors who served as selectors at Auschwitz, Mengele's role still seemed to be unique. "Dr. Olga Lengyel, an inmate doctor, described Mengele as 'far and away the chief provider for the gas chamber and the crematory ovens.'" Another inmate doctor spoke of Mengele's role as 'very important, more than that of the others'" (Lifton 2). Another striking detail of similarity lies in young Magnus's impression of his father and a commonly recorded impression of Dr. Mengele. Historian Gerald Astor cites an eyewitness who describes Mengele's appearance at the camp: "a young SS officer, impeccable in his uniform, a gold rosette gracing his lapel, his boots smartly polished" (Astor 55). Descriptions of Mengele's pristine or dandy-like appearance are common across various accounts. Magnus is similarly struck by the impeccable appearance of his father, Clemens Dunkeltal, especially when Dunkeltal is singing. "The light plays on the metal frame of his spectacles and his eyes disappear, as though they had become one with the glass discs. Then his clean-shaven face, with receding hairline and aquiline nose, looks as if it too is cast in some white metal...He has beefy hands but his fingernails are perfectly manicured, and they gleam under the ceiling light" (Germain 16). This detail is significant not only because it later helps Magnus identify his fugitive father, but also because it works to echo historical accounts of Dr. Mengele and tells us something significant about both Mengele and Dunkeltal. Despite the fact that these two figures are involved in one of the most horrific events known to humanity, they are thriving. Their impeccable grooming shows that they are capable of continuing their normal lives without being the slightest bit bothered by their dismal and horrific surroundings. Lifton notes this detail in his description of Mengele: "While many SS doctors did no more than what was required of them, Mengele was always on the

move, busy with his work, initiating new projects. More than any other SS doctor, he seemed to find his calling in Auschwitz” (Lifton 1). This detail reflects a significant fact that holds true for both figures; they were not bystanders or coerced actors, they were ardent followers of the Nazi philosophy who did their work at Auschwitz with more than an austere sense of duty. This is also reflected in the political background of both men. Germain writes that “The year 1928 was a memorable one for [Clemens]: he became the son-in-law of an eminent professor and acquired his membership card of the German Workers’ National-Socialist Party, led by his mentor Hitler” (Germain 38). Lifton says of Mengele that he “was an early Nazi enthusiast, enlisting with the SA in 1933, applying for party membership in 1937 and for SS membership the following year. There are rumors that, while studying in Munich, he met such high-ranking Nazis as Alfred Rosenberg, a leading ideologue, and even Hitler himself,” (Lifton 1). Neither Mengele nor Dunkeltal was coerced into their roles which makes them truly figures of evil.

Germain’s fidelity to historical accuracy wavers only slightly when it comes to Dunkeltal’s escape and evasion of capture. One of the reasons Mengele continues to be such a figure of interest in popular histories of the Holocaust is that he was never caught. Mengele disappeared from Auschwitz just ten days before it was liberated by the Russians (Astor 162). He later escaped Europe using a passport that bore the name Helmut Gregor. This added an air of mystery to his persona as a historical figure, and later sparked controversy over his death; though various organizations had worked to track him down and bring him to justice and had indeed brought many of his Nazi colleagues to justice, Mengele was never found and he eventually died in Argentina. Even his death was not enough for those who hand sought him, and his body was exhumed years after he had died as proof that he really was dead.

Clemens Dunkeltal is also able to escape. After the war ends, Magnus and his parents go into hiding to avoid persecution for Clemens's crimes. They change their names and try to obtain papers that would allow them to escape to Mexico. Eventually, Clemens procures the papers required and is able to set off for Mexico ahead of his wife and child who plan to follow him. However, before their arrangements can be made, they receive word that Clemens—now using the pseudonym Felipe Gomez Herrera—has committed suicide (Germain 31). Magnus and his mother accept this news without any of the skepticism that surrounded the real Dr. Mengele's death, but Germain stays true to her real-life prototype and allows Dunkeltal to escape capture under the guise of suicide.

Despite believing that his father died in Mexico, Magnus pursues him through study of the Spanish language and, eventually, by traveling to Veracruz, the town where his father was allegedly found dead. Given the fact that Magnus believes his father to be dead, what he expects to find in Mexico is surely something mental and not tangible; his journey is an attempt to confront his father mentally and find a means of dissolving the burden of memory his father has left him with. The results of this attempt, as well as the moment when Magnus is actually able to confront his fugitive father will be discussed later.

Another famous case of Nazi escape is also inserted into Germain's narrative. "A report on the trial of the Nazi criminal, written by the philosopher Hannah Arendt for the *New Yorker* weekly magazine, causes a sensation" (82). Otto Adolf Eichmann was arrested in Argentina and brought to Israel to be tried by the Israeli government, and the article that Germain refers to is in fact a real article that was penned by Hannah Arendt. As Arendt points out in her article, Eichmann's trial was more public show than an administration of justice, but it operated as an event by which the horrific events of the Holocaust could be acknowledged and examined

publicly. Germain mentions the criticism that Arendt faced for her attitude in the articles, but Magnus himself finds truth in Arendt's position.

Magnus reads the indicted report and far from taking exception to it embraces the idea of the 'banality of evil'. For him, it is no ill-considered concept but rather a finger placed unerringly on a wound so ugly and shameful everyone would rather not see it. (82)

Magnus is aware of something that the general population would rather ignore—that Nazi war criminals were, for the most part, not deranged men working with the limited comprehension of an insane mind. They were men like his father who, although detached, were of sound judgment and who committed atrocious deeds for the most mundane of reasons. While the unprecedented number of deaths during the Holocaust and the tortures inflicted on victims are part of the horror that Magnus lives with, the true horror that he faces as the son of a Nazi doctor is precisely the horror of the 'banality of evil'.

Arendt asserts that when the Israelis put Eichmann on trial they were not so much trying him for his deeds, but for the suffering he caused. Arendt labels this as a "misstep." "In the center of a trial can only be the one who did—in this respect, he is like the hero in the play—and if he suffers, he must suffer for what he has done, not for what he has caused others to suffer" (Arendt 41). While Arendt is focusing on the ethics of the trial itself, what she identifies as a misstep is really the only purpose the trial can serve. Eichmann is not on trial for his actual deeds, which mainly consisted of giving orders, the physical implementations of which were carried out by other men. Eichmann is actually on trial for the suffering he caused but also for the suffering the world is feeling from the trauma of the Holocaust. Though Arendt's assertion that we cannot justly punish someone for the suffering they have caused is correct, the question that the trial poses remains: what can be done with that suffering and by what means can that suffering be dissolved?



The inclusion of this real article in the fictive narrative also builds the credibility of the story as an allegory of real life. By placing a fictional character in a context so realistic that he reads the same news as a real figure would have, the shades of reality present in the novel are emphasized. In her article “L’Holocauste dans les romans de Sylvie Germain: allusions, hallucinations, méditations,” Marie-Hélène Boblet identifies how this concept is at work in *Magnus*. “In *Magnus*, the names Hannah Arendt and Eichmann not don’t just anchor the fiction in contemporary barbarism to make it a historical novel. History and memory are an occasion for the writer to reflect on the ethical imperative, in its universality and fragility alike” (73).

*Magnus* eventually has the opportunity to confront his father in the flesh, but, as mentioned before, he spends a great deal of time mentally attempting to confront his father in various ways. This desire, which at times borders on obsession, is telling; it raises the question of why *Magnus* feels such a pressing need to pursue his father, especially when he still believes his father is dead. The answer to this question is twofold. *Magnus*’s relationship to his father makes him both a victim of his father and an unwitting actor in his father’s crimes. His attempts to seek out his lost father and confront him are means by which *Magnus* seeks forgiveness both for his father and for himself.

The victimization *Magnus* receives from his father is clear; not only does his father’s career force *Magnus* and his mother into a life of hiding and pain, *Magnus*’s relationship with his father was strained to begin with. “His father is often away, and when at home pays but little attention to his son. He never plays with him or tells him stories and when he does deign to show any interest in him, it is only in order to criticize him for his passivity” (Germain 15). The trauma inflicted on *Magnus* by his father is further emphasized in a scene where Dunkeltal, in a rare moment of tenderness, takes *Magnus* to the Berlin zoo, only to ignore his adoptive son in favor

of his illegitimate biological son, Klaus. “It was so unusual for his so-called father to spend time with him, that day left a deep impression on him, especially as his joy at finding himself alone at last with his ‘master of the night’ was immediately trampled over” (82). Clearly his father’s neglect and hostility were painful, and there is no question that Magnus can be placed alongside the many victims of Clemens Dunkeltal.

What is more interesting than Magnus’s victimization is the way in which Magnus feels implicated by his connection with his father. As we have seen, young Magnus’s perception of his father is not that of a war criminal, but of a hero. In fact, Magnus is puzzled when, after the war, he finds out they are in hiding because his father has earned that label.

His father is declared a ‘war criminal’. The enormity of the term makes it inconceivable; [Magnus] is unable to grasp exactly what it means. He is all the more unable to do so because in his heart of hearts he does not really want to understand, so frightened is he of having to deal with a truth he suspects is ghastly. (27)

Not only does this passage illustrate Magnus’s initial denial, a trait which later hinders him in the reconciling process but, it also hints to us why Magnus may feel uneasy with confronting the facts of the Holocaust: by idolizing his father, he has unwittingly been idolizing a monster. (Interestingly, the son of Josef Mengele described a similar conflict in his emotions when dealing with his father’s death: “I basically had a conflict that could never be resolved. On the one hand he was my father; on the other hand there were these allegations, these horrific pictures of Auschwitz,” [Posner, Ware 290].) Even after the war ends, Magnus’s adoration for his father continues, and it only becomes more dangerous. “The child stays with him as much as he can, expressing with his eyes what his lips dare not articulate: not to worry about any of this, that most of all he still loves him, perhaps even more than before,” (23). Though the allegations against his father have some influence on him, they manifest themselves only as a warring of emotions in

which his ties to his father win out and the persecution his father received works not to indicate guilt, but to rouse sympathy. “He summons up all the memories of his father he has hoarded...Behind the boy’s eyelids, his father appears the way he was before his downfall. [Magnus] avoids calling to mind the hunted outcast he subsequently became. That memory, his son relegates to the shadows. It is too painful, it heralds too cruelly the process of decline from fugitive to phantom” (Germain 32).

Magnus’s own implication is also visible through other characters, particularly Hannelore, Lothar’s wife. When he arrives at Lothar’s house, he is still only vaguely aware of the magnitude of his father’s crimes or the depth of his family’s involvement with the Nazi party. Sensing that his sympathy for his father has not been fully dissolved, Hannelore is aloof with Magnus, herself a victim not only of the philosophies of the Schmalker family, but of the Holocaust. “His aunt Hannelore shows no particular feeling towards this young intruder who has escaped the downfall of Nazi Germany where at last, thanks be to God, the Dunkeltal couple have come to grief. She observes this undesirable nephew with circumspect and keen attention, anxious to discern what he thinks of everything that has happened, to what extent he has been influenced by his family” (36-37). Significantly, though this passage is written in third person, it presents Hannelore’s point of view when thanking God for the demise of the Dunkeltals (it hardly seems that Magnus would have this sentiment). Hannelore’s perspective on Magnus is wary because she is concerned with his alignment with his parents’ ideologies and his father’s actions. Unfortunately, Magnus’s loyalty to his father incriminates Magnus in Hannelore’s eyes. “...he remains the offspring of a cowardly killer and through her stupidity and vanity a criminal by association. His powerlessness to wipe out this sickening ancestry or at least call to account the parents he loved with an innocence he now deems culpable” (Germain 49-50). Hannelore’s perspective is

compounded when her own past is revealed: "...the wind of the Reich carried so many human ashes that it bore down with enormous weight on the country in ruins...And in this cinerary sky drifted all the members of Hannelore Schmalker née Storm's family" (41-42). To Hannelore, Magnus is the direct offspring of the very force that killed her entire family and attempted to obliterate her race (at this time in the novel, neither Magnus nor Hannelore is aware that Magnus was adopted). It matters little that Magnus was only a child or that he had no actual hand in any of the events of the Holocaust. To Hannelore he is a reminder of his father, his father's crimes, and ultimately the personal trauma and tragedy of Hannelore's family. Magnus senses this sentiment in Hannelore: "[Magnus] silently echoing Hannelore, lets nothing of his own feelings show and never refers to his recent past. The two of them remain on their guard, with questions and things unspoken lying heavy on their hearts" (37).

Magnus must not only forgive his father for the personal offenses committed against his mother and himself, but also find a way to acknowledge his father's evil deeds and eventually deal with his own identity as his father's son. The issue of forgiveness is complicated when traumatic historic events are involved. However, Magnus's feelings of guilt follow a pattern of "working through" that LaCapra identifies:

Victims of trauma may experience not only 'guilt' about surviving but intense anxiety about rebuilding a life and beginning again. One basis of anxiety is the feeling that building a new life is a betrayal of loved ones who died or were overwhelmed in a past that would not pass away. This feeling of betrayal must, I think, itself be explicitly recognized in the attempt to work through it, notably in processes of mourning. (200)

This explains a great deal about Magnus's relationship with his father and his subsequent course in life. Magnus faces so many losses and disappointments because his inherited guilt has made it difficult for him to commit to living. Confronted with the overwhelming fact that his father's acts have connected him to the traumatic deaths of thousands caused by his father, Magnus succumbs

to a crippling guilt. This guilt, however, is a crucial first step towards complete working-through, in that he now recognizes there is something to be worked through and denies repression.

Magnus's compulsion to find closure about his father's crimes and death and about Magnus's own victimization is a necessary stage in Magnus's effort to dissolve his memories and move forward and leads him to eventually confront the void of his memories and confront his father himself.

By endowing Magnus with the adoptive ancestry of a Nazi war criminal, Germain adds multiple layers of meaning to her text and sets up Magnus's life to be a quest for forgiveness that addresses both the perpetrator and the self. By including Clemens Dunkeltal, who is an echo of a real Nazi war criminal, and Adolf Eichmann, who is a real Nazi war criminal, in her narrative, Germain emphasizes the credibility and reality of the story she is telling. She introduces these characters as a problem that Magnus must face, but also as a realistic problem that exists in the world and in the collective consciousness of humanity.

## **II. Area Bombing**

Magnus initially attempts to confront his memories of his father and his implicit connection to the Holocaust by pursuing his father in Mexico. Instead of leading Magnus to his father, however, Magnus's Mexican journey leads him to recollection of the other trauma of the war that plagues him: his status as a survivor of area bombing. As was the case with the Holocaust narrative, Germain's fictional victim is a survivor of a real event.

Area-bombing in Germany was widespread during World War II and the magnitude of destruction caused by these bomb strikes was immense. It is estimated that 333 km of urban land alone was completely razed during the bombings. Geographer Kenneth Hewitt points out that

“the destruction in Berlin alone was several times that for all British cities in the war and constituted 60 to 70 percent of the built-up area” (Hewitt 264). Overall death toll estimates vary widely, but Micheal Clodfelter in his book, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts*, estimates that 499,750 German civilians were killed and another 305,455 were seriously injured in air raids between 1943 and 1945 (Clodfelter 543). An estimated 2,743,540 tons of bombs were dropped on Germany by allied forces between 1943 and 1945 (543). By these numbers alone we see that the destruction and death caused by the bombings is compelling enough create not only individual but also collective traumatic experiences, but also collective traumatic experiences.

The specific nature of area bombing makes it especially difficult for survivors to deal with. This factor makes area bombing an event that is all the more relevant to Magnus, who faces strong crises of identity and recollection after the war. Hewitt remarks that “The poor ability of area bombing to affect the industrial economy and war-making potential contrasts starkly with its huge impact on civilian lives, property, and urban culture” (Hewitt 272). Survivors of area bombing were left injured, alone and with literally nothing, and survivors were numerous. In his article, “The Effect of War Destruction Upon the Ecology of Cities,” historian Fred Charles Iklé points out that, despite the staggering death toll, “the number of bombed-out people exceeds the number of deaths from air-raids by far” (Iklé 383). At first glance this may seem like a positive statistic, however the implications of such destruction on a surviving population are grave. In Hamburg, for example, only 3.3 percent of the population were killed while nearly half of the city’s dwelling units were destroyed along with countless other necessary infrastructural buildings such as hospitals, churches, and schools (Hewitt 272). At the end of the war about 39 percent of Germany’s national housing stock was completely destroyed (Hewitt 264). The immediate survivors of air raids with the practical concerns of how to survive in a landscape of

complete death and destruction, as well as the difficulties of maintaining their cultural identity.

Hewitt:

Any policy of war that indiscriminately makes place its targets...takes a large step toward the ultimate politico-biological crime of genocide for certain fulfillment of such a policy is possible only through the annihilation of place and people. (259)

What Hewitt emphasizes is that even the survivors of area bombing were not really survivors because of the intense destruction sustained to their place; the symbols of their cultural identity were completely destroyed. These lasting cultural effects hinder the process of recognition and working through that is necessary in incidents of trauma and leave survivors without an understanding of their own identity.

Thus, the rubble that remained of German cities after the bombs stopped falling was not simply rubble, but a site of memory, a significant place-marker of something that once existed but had since been destroyed. Magnus's formative years are spent in a landscape that has been completely obliterated by war, and though he does not remember his experience as a bombing survivor until later in his life, the proof of that experience is all around him. When they are forced to go into hiding, Magnus and his mother move to the town of Friedrichshafen; there could not be a more fitting place for a child orphaned by bombing to take up residence. "Augusta Keller and her son Franz come to a small town that even a few weeks ago must have been very pretty. Now it is nothing more than ruins on the edge of a lake" (20). In the Note that follows, Germain briefly describes the town's history and destruction. "At the end of the Second World War the town was the target of heavy aerial bombing by the Allies; the old town was almost totally destroyed" (21). This city is a fitting home for Magnus because it is a physical reflection of his own trauma and his own destroyed psyche. Magnus seems to grasp this from an early age, even without the conscious recollection of his earliest past, and young Magnus makes an even

more remarkable connection. He begins to understand the Holocaust by placing it in the context of the destruction he sees all around him.

...[A]dults are capable of destroying everything, burning everything – houses, bridges, churches, roads entire cities. He has seen this and he still lives in a landscape of ruins. But apparently there is even worse madness than this: the destruction of not only cities but of entire peoples... (Germain 27)

This connection is important in multiple ways. It signifies to the reader that these two tragedies are central to Magnus's life and to the explorations of the novel, but it also tells us something important about the nature of cities and the deeper significance of area bombing. The horror of a bombed-out city lies not in the sight of the bombed-out buildings, but in the recognition that while the ruins remain, the people who once lived there are gone. It also indicates how a bombed-out city operates as a site of memory that is almost self explanatory. These cities become sites where the events of the past are clearly communicated through material; the city becomes a text that speaks of a horror that no words can tell. This concept is what charges the ruins of German cities with significance and what makes area bombing a truly traumatic occurrence for the German people. Walter Benjamin articulates this idea in his essay, "The Ruin". "In decay, solely and alone in decay, historical occurrence shrivels up and disappears into the setting" (182). The ruins of cities are objects that speak for themselves; they require no translation between reality and text.

The particular incident portrayed in *Magnus* is "Operation Gomorrah," a bomb strike that unexpectedly created a powerful firestorm that swept through the city of Hamburg with unprecedented heat and intensity. The bombing of Hamburg during "Operation Gomorrah" lasted seven days, with the heaviest of the bombing taking place on July 24. On that night, 787 bombers were sent and an estimated 6,596 tons of bombs were dropped (Clodfelter 541). It is



estimated that at least 30,482 citizens of Hamburg were killed during the seven-day raid, but, due to the incendiary nature of the deaths, death-toll estimates vary (541).

Magnus's emotional ties to area bombing as a traumatic event are, arguably, stronger than his emotional ties to the crimes of his father because they are far less complicated. While Magnus's feelings about his father are confused by the risk of identifying with a war criminal, Magnus's position in relation to area bombing is solely that of the victim. However, because the situation is less complicated, it is also all the more intense. To begin with, Magnus faces extreme repression when it comes to his memory of the bombing itself. Germain introduces Magnus in the novel as an amnesiac. "At five years of age he fell seriously ill and the fever consumed all the words inside him, all his recently acquired knowledge. His memory is as blank as the day he was born. However, it is sometimes it is traversed by shadows that come from he knows not where" (11). Here, we have evidence of Magnus's understanding of his early life, as told to him by his mother, Thea. Magnus accepts Thea's version of the story until he unwittingly confronts his repressed memory of the true reason for his amnesia.

Magnus confronts his memories after reading the novel *Pedro Páramo*, attempting to walk to Comala on foot, and subsequently suffering a coma due to heat and dehydration. These are the memories that surface as he falls into a coma:

The rush of jolted memories that overwhelm him rise from elsewhere, from further back; it is an upsurge originating in the middle of the night that he died – he, Adam Schmalker, before he took that name, and even before he was called Fran-Georg Dunkeltal. Long, long before. Before. In the quick present of the moment. (60)

Germain then includes a sequence describing Magnus's memory of the moment he was struck by the bombs of area bombing. What is interesting about Germain's descriptions are the places where it coincides with actual historical accounts of the bombing.

In his essay “Air War and Literature” W.G. Sebald synthesizes eyewitness accounts of the bombing to paint an accurate picture of the experience of surviving the bombing. His account lines up uncannily with Germain’s. In Germain, Magnus “He hears the bellowing of a monumental organ” (Germain 60). In Sebald, “the fire, now rising two thousand meters into the sky, snatched oxygen to itself so violently that the air currents reached hurricane force, resonating like mighty organs with all their stops pulled out at once” (Sebald 27). Germain: “He sees human beings and animals turn into live torches, others melt into the liquefied asphalt slushing in the gutted streets” (60). In Sebald “Those who had fled from their air-raid shelters sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt.” Even the idea that Magnus would have been parceled out to a new family is in alignment with history, as historian Kenneth Hewitt points out that many orphaned children were dispersed to S.S. families to be “Germanized” (Hewitt 259).

Perhaps what fictional element corresponds most fully to the real events of area bombing, however, is the inaccuracy and complete loss of Magnus’s memory of the event. The bombing at the hour of Gomorrah was a truly traumatic event for Magnus precisely because he cannot understand and process the event. Freud notes that “It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident...In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave physical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident,” (Caruth 17). For Magnus, this inability to process leads to a complete repression of memory; his repression lasts longer than a mere few weeks. As Caruth observes “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the

most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth 91-92).

Sebald argues that the true effects of area bombing are largely ignored in popular histories of World War II as well as in the individual consciousness of survivors. In his examinations of the effects of Allied area bombing, Sebald is most preoccupied with its curious absence from the collective consciousness of Germany. He combs through post-World War II German literature and finds only a few examples of novels that approach the subject at all, and even in these examples he finds a lack of the necessary empathy and artistry that the subject requires to be fully realized in literary consciousness (Sebald 20, 51-68).

[Area bombing] seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness, it has been largely obliterated from the retrospective understanding of those affected, and it never played any appreciable part in the discussion of the internal constitution of our country. (4)

He identifies a few possible causes for this cultural amnesia, the foremost being German optimism during reconstruction and, “the unquestioning heroism with which people immediately set about the task of clearance and reconstruction” (5). This was true in both the physical and mental sense for Germans. Sebald recounts stories of the efforts to clear away mutilated bodies and rubble in which the participants are so intent on carrying on with daily life that their detachment and lack of emotion is disturbing; as an example he recounts the horrific story of a girl who, hoping to reopen a movie theatre before the two o’clock matinee, cleans up the cellar by systematically dumping the cooked body parts she finds into the building’s boiler (41).

Sebald also conjectures a more intimate reason why German citizens have not publicly acknowledged the horrors of area bombing: because the acts were so horrific that they were too difficult to acknowledge even privately. Caruth’s theories about trauma echo this sentiment in a slightly different way. She argues that because the trauma was so immense it cannot be fully

perceived. This does not mean that Caruth sees this trauma as something that should be ignored, only that it will be difficult to recognize. “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (Caruth 18). Caruth is arguing that a necessary step of understanding and accepting trauma is admitting the extent to which trauma cannot be fully understood.

The inclusion of area bombing as an event in the novel encourages the reader to consider the novel as both a historical and a fictional narrative, in which the line between history and fiction is blurred. The first half of the novel deals largely with Magnus seeking out the repressed memories of his early childhood and his efforts to confront and communicate these memories, but the importance of the concept of memory does not diminish after Magnus’s lost memories have been recovered.

### **III. Magnus and Memory**

Throughout the novel, Germain explores the concept of memory in both a practical and a theoretical way. Memory has obvious connections to the process of trauma and working through, and in order to complete the process of working-through described by LaCapra and continue with his life in a healthy way, it is clear that Magnus must take the first step towards confronting his memories. Other parts of the novel examine the nature of memory in a more detached way. The format of the novel is suggestive of the nature of memory, and other symbolic elements in the book examine the ways in which memory is related to history and the extent to which either concept can be adequately communicated. Because Magnus’s personal struggle is one that involves memories of traumatic events that existed on a mass scale, his personal journey towards

recognition and understanding of memory relates not only to his own personal memories, but to the greater concept of history. All of these ideas are explored in complex ways in Germain's narrative, and are later connected to the complicated issues of language and communicability.

Memory is never straightforward or simple in *Magnus*, whether it is purposely concealed—as in the case with Magnus's heritage—or repressed—as with Magnus's experiences at the hour of Gomorrah. In the best cases recollections are hazy for Magnus and in the worst they are false memories that have been tampered with or significant moments that are conspicuously absent. Germain explores the importance of memory in ways that implicitly engage connections between personal memory and historical trauma.

The concept of memory works dually in *Magnus*. Much of the novel focuses on Magnus's individual struggle to remember and come to terms with his past, however, memory also operates on a larger scale. Magnus's quest for memory and reconciliation can be seen as an allegory of something even more significant: a quest for collective memory and reconciliation that was necessary after the events of World War II. The novel poses the questions of how one can weave difficult and traumatic events into the narrative of one's life and how historical moments of trauma and horror can be woven into greater perceptions of memory and history.

Germain explores the concept of memory in the very format of the book. As Boblet notes "The poetic construction of *Magnus* is dictated by the amnesia of history...The breakdown of the narrative follows the disruption of memory and the 'return of the repressed'" (67). Memory's breakdown is signaled directly in Germain's titling various sections "Fragments." These fragments are numbered chronologically and are printed in numerical order, with two notable exceptions, which occur in places where the order of memory is not the same as the chronological order of events. The novel begins with a section titled "Prelude" (French:

*Overture*) and the narrative begins at “Fragment 2”. The fragments continue in order until Magnus and regains his memory of his very early life as a bombing survivor. That fragment, labeled “Fragment 1,” is placed in between fragments 11 and 12. Clearly, the fragments are presented in the order of Magnus’s recollection, which is chronological only to a certain extent. The second exception to the numbering of fragments comes at the book’s resolution. Between fragments 28 and 29 there is a fragment labeled “Fragment 0” and fragment 29 is followed by the books final fragment which is mysteriously labeled “Fragment ?”. These labels also reflect commentary on the nature of memory and history; their specific importance will be discussed later in this paper. The fragments are written in the third person and convey Magnus’s memories; the focalization is primarily that of Magnus’s consciousness, but at times the fragments seem to inhabit the consciousness of other characters. The fragments at the beginning of the novel tend to be shorter and hazier, whereas the fragments in the later half of the novel are more detailed and reflect the understanding of an adult rather than a child. The fragments are written in the present tense, as if the events are being acted out over and over again in memory, each time with the immediacy of the first time. This immediacy recalls the phrase “before, in the quick present of the moment,” that Germain uses to introduce Magnus’s recovered memories of the hour of Gommorrah. Although they are completed events that existed in the “before” of the past, the continue to exist in the “quick present of the moment” as if they have a perennial urgency to them. These events will always be remembered as they occurred in the present moment.

Boris Cyrulnik, in *The Whispering of Ghosts*, proposes another reason why fragments lend themselves to representations of reality. “We break things into fragments in order to study them better, but reality is continuous” (52). By breaking her narrative into fragments, Germain is not only employing a format that mimics the workings of human memory, she is also presenting

the narrative in a way that is more conducive to study and understanding, even when the events discussed are necessarily difficult to understand. Cyrulnick's assertion also poses one of the major problems in the novel. Though reality is continuous, the human mind can only perceive it in fragments and pieces. This creates a gap between what is perceived and communicated and what actually happens. This is the gap of incommunicable experience, the place where reality and perceptions of reality diverge. By framing the narrative in smaller fragments that, presumably, can be examined with ease, Germain also signals the artificial nature of narrative and memory.

Germain intercalates the fragments with sections under different headings, each with its own significance. Besides the fragments, the most numerous are sections titled "Note" which are short sections that exist outside the narrative of Magnus's memories, but provide essential information in understanding his story. The notes are factual. Some include information from outside sources, such as the note about the town of Friedrichshafen or the note providing facts about area bombing in Germany (Germain 21, 67). Other notes include quasi-factual information about the fictional narrative at hand. These notes exist primarily in the beginning half of the novel; they work to supplement the fragmented narrative of Magnus's memory with objective facts, providing the reader with extended information about the situation and, often, with a broad viewpoint which Magnus himself does not have. For example, it is in a note that the reader is informed of Clemens Dunkeltal's horrific duties at the concentration camp, not through Magnus's hazy memories of his heroic doctor father (Germain 30). Other notes provide information even further beyond the reach of memory. For example, following "Fragment 5" which states that Dunkeltal has obtained papers bearing the name of Helmut Schwalbenkopf is a note on the life of Helmut Schwanlbenkopf.

Schawlbenkopf, Helmut: born 1905 at Friedrichshafen, Bade-Wurtemberg.  
Baker

Married in 1931 to Gerturd Meckel, born 1911.

Two children: Anna-Luisa, born 1934, and Wolf, born 1937.

Enlisted in 1939, sent to Poland, where he is wounded, and later to Russia, where he is taken prisoner. Freed in 1946, he returns home.

Back in Friedrichshafen, he discovers his wife and two children have died and his bakery was destroyed in the bombardment of the city at the end of the war.

Reduced to vagrancy in his own city, one evening in March 1947 he disappears. No one knows what has become of him. Some people assume he committed suicide, but his body has never been found. Maybe he threw himself into the lake whose waters are the most secret and inviolable of graves.

(Germain 25).

There are a few important things to note in this passage. The first is the format, which is that of an official document or even an encyclopedia entry; Germain uses this format when expanding on her own invented facts. Helmut Schawlbenkopf may be a fictional character, but the format indicates that he should be treated as in some way a real individual. Interestingly, some of notes provide “facts” as invented by Germain (13, 25, 30, 35, 145) whereas others provide historical facts as cited from other sources (21, 51, 62, 67). By grouping her own invented facts with the actual facts of the war, Germain again works to blur the line between fiction and reality. This further suggests that Magnus’s life can be read in a way that speaks to greater historical experience, and the interaction between the notes and the fragments is suggestive of the relationship between individual memory and objective history.

Germain also includes a number of sections titled “Sequence.” These sections always have a short excerpt from other literary works, and often these works are referenced directly in the fragments. For example, when Magnus reads *Pedro Páramo* in “Fragment 10,” the Sequence that follows is short excerpt from *Pedro Páramo* (Germain 55-57). These sequences provide intertextuality to *Magnus* and indicate that Germain is aligning her novel with a longstanding tradition of using language as a means of expressing trauma and general human experience. This



is reflected clearly in the excerpts she chooses to include. Some excerpts are, like *Magnus*, focused on the horrors of World War II, some highlight other aspects of history or historical trauma, and others simply intensify the emotional depth of the novel. By placing all of these texts under the same title Germain encourages us to look at them side by side. One notable example of this is a Sequence that includes both a passage from a letter written by Martin Luther King and a quotation from Charlotte Delbo's Auschwitz memoir, *Useless Knowledge* (87). This juxtaposition suggests that Germain is attempting to speak to historical trauma in a general way or, at least, recognizing that means of working through the traumas caused by World War II could be applied to many other instances of mass horror.

The intertextuality of *Magnus* also speaks to Germain's larger ideas about memory, particularly about collective memory, and about how Magnus's journey can be thought of in a broader sense. In his book *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg explores the ways in which historical events can be thought of in terms of continuity rather than exclusivity. His primary event of comparison is the Holocaust, since it is so commonly thought of as a singular event. "Indeed, there is probably no other single event that encapsulates the struggles for recognition that accompany collective memory in such a condensed and global form" (6).

However, Rothberg points out the ways that this singular means of thought are dangerously prohibitive:

...while it is essential to understand the specificity of the Nazi genocide (as of all events), separating it off from other histories of collective violence—and even from history as such—is intellectually and politically dangerous. The dangers of the uniqueness discourse are that it potentially creates a hierarchy of suffering (which is morally offensive) and removes that suffering from the field of historical agency (which is both morally and intellectually suspect). (Rothberg 9)

A thought process in which the Holocaust exists singularly also poses problems of representation. An event that is truly unprecedented has no basis for comparison, and without a

basis for comparison it cannot be expressed at all, even in the simplest linguistic terms. Though it would be unwise to argue that representation of the Holocaust is easy, its representation must be possible if it is to be compared to other events. As LaCapra observes,

...there is a sense in which the 'Nazi crimes' are both unique and comparable. They are unique not only in that they affect people in a distinctive way insofar as they have a specific 'lived' relation to them and occupy different subject-positions. They are unique in that they are so extreme that they seem unclassifiable and threaten or tempt one with silence. But they will be compared to other events insofar as comparison is essential for any attempt to understand. The problem is how the process of comparison takes place and the functions it serves. (47)

In *Magnus*, Germain is clearly thinking of the Holocaust as an event that can be compared to others and that her concept of collective memory is multidirectional. This concept is conveyed both in the intertextual form of the novel, and in the characters, particularly in Magnus's lover, May. May herself is the physical manifestation of the return of a historically traumatized group. "She owes her complexion and her features to an Indian ancestress of the Omaha tribe who, she says, has declared herself after three generations, eclipsing with quiet insolence May's other bloodlines" (Germain 54). Magnus's time with May is marked by an increased awareness of traumatic circumstances around the world fostered by his connection with May.

President Kennedy is assassinated, the war drags on in Vietnam, riots break out in the black neighbourhoods of most of the country's big cities, Martin Luther King in turn is shot dead by a fanatic... May throws herself into all these currents. Wherever things are stirring and a prospect of change is to be detected, wherever the pulse of the age quickens, she is there. 'I have a dream,' Martin Luther King repeated psalmodically a few years before he was killed. May picks up that interrupted dream and runs with it. (84)

May's attitude and the deep connection that Magnus feels with her indicates the multidirectionality of this text. Though Germain is primarily concerned with the events of World War II, she is not privileging these events on any kind of hierarchy or suffering, nor is she thinking of these events as somehow singular. "Europe does not have a monopoly on crime and

violence. There are plenty of both in the United States, they proliferate throughout the world” (84). In this way, Magnus’s journey to recognize the trauma of his past and work them also speaks to all large-scale traumas, and the solution Germain proposes through the resolution of the novel can potentially be applied to any number of traumatic experiences.

For Germain, the multidirectionality of Magnus’s struggle reflects not only Magnus’s individual memory, but the perception of the Holocaust in collective memory. As LaCapra mentions, the extent to which the Holocaust is a comparable event determines the extent to which the Holocaust can be fully articulated. Hence, Magnus’s struggle to articulate his experiences of the Holocaust and area bombing is both personal and collective. On the level of Magnus’s personal struggle, his memory conforms to Rothberg’s characterization of individual memory which “emerges and recedes in fits and starts—especially when the memory of traumatic events is at stake. The same holds true for collective memory. When we look at collective memory historically, one thing we notice is how unevenly—and sometimes unexpectedly—it develops” (17). Germain explores memory not only in format, by making her novel fragmentary, but also in directionality; Magnus and May relate to each other through their connections to prominent social movements and historical events, even though those events may be different. It also makes sense that Germain would use the story of Magnus, an individual, as a representative tale of collective multidirectional memory. Rothberg notes that “Multidirectional memory...is primarily collective and historical, although it is never divorced from individuals and their biographies either” (14). Not only does Germain recognize the way that collective memories of different historical events interact, but she also recognizes the important role that individuals play in collective memory.

Magnus's personal traumas are too intense to be fully understood by Magnus himself, but as Cyrulnik reminds us, reality is continuous and fluid, and does not conform to the whims of memory. The idea of a continuous objective memory is represented in *Magnus* through Magnus the teddy bear, the relic which provides Magnus with his adoptive name. Germain introduces Magnus in a Note, but initially only hints at Magnus the bear's true significance. "Magnus is a medium-sized teddy bear with a rather worn coat of light-brown fur turned slightly orange in places. A faint smell of scorching emanates from him" (Germain 13). The scorching Germain refers to is a scent infused in Magnus's fur by the fires that destroyed Hamburg during the hour of Gommorah. Germain later states that, though Magnus was found naked and alone, he was in possession of the bear and refused to be parted from it, even after being adopted by Thea. "[Thea] has to submit to letting him keep this ugly relic of his past which she intends to get rid of as soon as she has won the child over" (68). Magnus recognizes the bear's significance in an intimate way, though, as a child he has trouble expressing it. This is first indicated when Germain describes Magnus's memory loss. Thea attempts to indoctrinate her adopted child by filling his wiped-out memory with stories of the Schmalker family's grand history. Thea, however, fails to include the bear in her story and this discrepancy is significant to Magnus. "Seductive as this family epic full of nobility and sadness might be, it nevertheless suffers from one defect that, although apparently small, greatly upsets the child: his mother grants no place in it to Magnus, whom she treats in fact with scorn, even revulsion" (Germain 12). Though at the time Magnus has not yet recovered his repressed memories and has no awareness of the extent to which Thea's tales are fictions, he can sense a discrepancy through the bear's absence. Thea's tales don't simply fail to represent reality fully, they disregard reality completely. Through the

absence of the bear, Magnus is able to detect this denial and reject it, even though he is operating from his subconscious and is not fully aware of its significance.

It is only after Magnus's recollection of the bombing that he is able to consciously recognize the connection the bear has to his own history, and because of this connection he attempts to reconfigure his identity to be more true to his past. The reader is introduced to Magnus as Franz-Georg, who later becomes Franz Keller, and who eventually adopts the name Adam Schmalker. After Magnus realizes his earliest past and remembers the loss of his biological family, he takes the name Magnus from the teddy bear. This name gives Magnus a recognizable connection to his past and it represents a conscious attempt on Magnus's part to reconcile his experiences. "“Adam Schmalker was a delusion,” he explains, “It was natural he should collapse on the edge of the slope, and evaporate in the sun. It had gone on only too long”” (70). By this logic, Magnus suggests that Adam Schmalker is not the only fraudulent identity Magnus has assumed in his lifetime; the identities of Franz Keller and even Franz-Georg Dunkeltal have been equally fraudulent. However, this sense of identity does not rely only on the relatively superficial element of naming, but also on what each of these pseudonyms implies about Magnus's memory. These artificial names and identities lack the depth of memory that cannot be denied. Though they provide temporary obscurity from the horrors of being a bombing survivor, they cannot permanently suppress the memories that lay buried within Magnus or usurp his identity as a victim and an orphan. As Magnus points out, it is only natural that these false identities would eventually evaporate under the weight of the secrets they conceal. The bear Magnus, having been the only one allowed to keep his name, is the only one who can offer Magnus any ties to his true and original identity and thus becomes a fitting namesake for Magnus himself.

There are other indications that Magnus the bear represents an objective and continuous memory. At times, the bear acts as almost a recording device for history. When Thea leaves the bear out of her familial fairy-tales, Magnus invents a place for him. “He secretly introduces his companion into the legend, inventing scenes for him murmured at length into his ear...when they are all alone together” (12). In this scene, Magnus deposits the story into the bear’s ear as though the bear can hear it and remember it. Magnus’s eyes also have the power to absorb, as well as the power to express. “His eyes are unusual, with the same shape and of the same gleaming gold as the buttercup flower, giving him an expression of gentleness and amazement” (13). It is later revealed that Magnus’s eyes are so strange because they are actually earrings, presumably put there by Thea after adopting Magnus. When Magnus leaves Thea to live with Lothar in England, Thea replaces Magnus’s eyes with diamond earrings she had saved with the plan to sell them for money; the earrings are one of Thea’s last remnants from her life before the end of the war. Magnus is not happy with this change in Magnus’s eyes, and the tension here is significant. “Now they shone in Magnus’s face, two faceted beads, devoid of colour and above all of reverie. The eyes of a monstrous fly, blind and blinding,” (Germain 45). Note the change in Magnus the bear’s attitude that accompanies the change in his eyes; at first, Magnus’s eyes display “gentleness and amazement,” but after Thea’s modifications they are dull, hard, and unseeing (13). The bear’s eyes reflect changes that Magnus himself has gone through. As a child, Magnus believes Thea’s stories. After Magnus moves to live with Lothar, he begins to harden to his surroundings, tormented by the weight of his past. Magnus is so unhappy with the change in his bear’s eyes that he uses the bear’s kerchief as a blindfold, tying it around the bear’s head, he wraps the bear up in a cloth, and hides him in the back of a closet (Germain 45). In this way Magnus blinds himself to the past by blindfolding the bear, but also denies the past completely

by hiding the bear in the closet. Through his actions with the teddy bear, Magnus physically acts out his own repression of memory.

After Magnus recalls the hour of Gomorrah, he returns to London to confront Lothar about his memories, and at that time he also reconsiders Magnus. He retrieves the bear from the closet where he had hidden him and unwraps him only to find that the diamond eyes have been secreting an acidic liquid. Germain:

He unties the handkerchief and discovers the diamonds have lost all their brilliance; they are covered with a rough grayish frosting. This frosting is seeping dampness, like a patch of saltpetre that forms on the wall of a cave. He pulls off the eyes clouded with this film of grey tears, stuffs them into his pocket, and replaces them with little buttercups that he sews back on. The teddy bear is restored to the way it used to be with its expression of mild bewilderment. But it has no new revelation to offer the person it once protected and for so long accompanied, still providing only the name it wore, tied round its neck, the cotton-thread letters now bleached of colour through exposure to the acidity of the diamond tears. (77)

The strange fact that the diamonds on Magnus's face seem to be weeping personifies Magnus. Like his human namesake, Magnus has moved on from the stage of repression and blindness and is now beginning to mourn the loss that he has only just remembered. Despite the fact that the bear is able to offer no comfort to Magnus, it continues to be a presence in Magnus's life and keeps a vigil over his unfolding story. Later, after May's death, Magnus rents an apartment in London. He has not yet come to terms with his past and admittedly does not even know how he would begin to do so, but he communicates with the bear on an intimate level. "He contents himself with questioning the bear with the buttercup eyes that patiently keeps vigil on a shelf in the darkness of his wardrobe...Magnus talks to Magnus, wordlessly, soundlessly, senselessly" (Germain 105). It is as if Magnus the bear is accompanying Magnus through his life and soaking up all his experiences as they happen.

When the bear next appears in the novel, much time has passed, and the purpose he serves for Magnus is definite. On the evening when Magnus proposes to Peggy Bell, he uses the bear as a holder for the engagement ring. “[Magnus] is not merely part of the décor, he is involved in this festive occasion, as he has always been involved in his namesake’s life” (137). However, despite the extra function Magnus serves on this evening, it seems that his position in relation to memory is still the same. Magnus the bear sits silently while Magnus proposes to Peggy Bell and continues to sit silently while Magnus confronts his father and Peggy Bell is killed. His presence on this night is again that of an observer and recorder. The bear’s next appearance is after Peggy’s death. Though Magnus brings almost nothing with him when he leaves Vienna, his two bags are weighted down with Magnus the bear, and all the weight of memory that Magnus the bear necessarily contains. With his teddy bear in tote, Magnus unwittingly enters a fairy-tale that will provide him with the redemption he needs from the traumas of his life. The next time Magnus the bear appears it is with great significance to Magnus’s journey towards complete working through. This will be discussed later.

Magnus the bear’s presence in his owner’s life as a silent but understanding observer and as a relic of a painful past is reminiscent of a figure that Walter Benjamin describes as “The Angel of History.”

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. (“Theses on History” 273)

Like the angel of history, Magnus’s gaze, like that of the angel of history, cannot be turned from the past, this is reflected in the numerous descriptions of the bear’s eyes. Just as the angel sees



“one single catastrophe,” Magnus then sees the magnitude of his namesake’s life and past not in fragments, but as a continuous whole. Neither the Angel of History nor Magnus the bear are actors in the events of the past; they cannot intervene in the events they are forced to bear witness to. Though Magnus the bear is a true relic of the past for Magnus, the bear cannot aid Magnus in the process of working through his traumatic memories; the bear can only witness and, at times, weep.

It is essential for Magnus to find an active way to come to terms with the traumatic memories he has repressed, even if that seems like an impossible task. Recovering repressed memories is only the beginning of dealing with trauma, and putting to rest trauma on a larger social scale is even more complicated. The gravity of these tasks weighs heavily on Magnus and sometimes prompts him to make rash decisions when he is forced to confront his past directly. Also, because of the repressed and hidden nature of Magnus’s past, his opportunities to confront that past are often unclear. Throughout his life, Magnus constantly encounters settings that are both literal and figurative voids or abysses. These settings represent the past that is simultaneously concealing itself and encroaching on Magnus’s life. Confronting these voids is a daunting task; it isn’t always clear what the situation is or what the outcome will be. Caruth argues that this element of the unknown and lack of understanding is a key element in confronting trauma: “Through the notion of trauma...we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise when *immediate understanding* may not” (11). Thus Magnus’s task in confronting memories is not so much to defeat them, but to permit them to articulate themselves, even when they defy explanation. By coming to terms with the memory of his father’s actions and the memory of the bombing, Magnus can allow the history of these

events to arise, even though the senselessness of the events defies understanding. Thus, what Magnus is seeking is a means by which he can confront the shady past and allow it to stand as it is without being obligated to apply sense or understanding to events that are so horrific that they are beyond comprehension.

#### **IV. Echoes of the Void**

On a number of occasions Magnus feels a void welling up inside himself or finds himself in a situation where he seems to be on the precipice of a great void. Like the revelation of memory that Magnus experiences, the void is an amorphous blend of contradictions, encompassing people, ideas, and experiences. Even as a small child, Magnus recognizes that the void has a curious power over the situation of his life. "...He is afraid of the dark, which swallows up shapes and colours, and casts him into a state of anguish" (14). Here the void is made of the memories he has not yet come to remember. However, even after he confronts those memories, the void persists in Magnus's life. It is present again after May's death. "A great emptiness opens up inside him as the hours pass. His mind is blank, he feels nothing but a wave of peculiar coldness travelling through his body" (89). Later: "...empty space opens up around Magnus. The present is swallowed up in the abyss of a blue-white sky of a tranquility to make you weep" (90). Yet again Magnus encounters this void after Peggy Bell's death. "A complete nothingness reigns inside him" (152).

All of these encounters with the void come after times of intense personal loss. In the first instance, it is the loss of his mother during the hour of Gomorrah that makes the void well up around him. In the later instances it is the loss of his loves and companions that make him feel the presence of a great abyss both within and around him.

However, the void is also something that is exciting and intriguing to Magnus; it begs to be approached. In the early fragments, young Magnus imagines his childhood memory loss as an abyss. This abyss is not only connected to the absence in his mind, but to his own physicality, since he understands it to be caused by illness. "...he prefers to look towards the eclipse of his own past and peer into the strange black hole that swallowed up his early childhood" (28). In these contemplations of this "strange black hole" Magnus becomes excited, both mentally and physically and experiences his first orgasm simply from the strength of the mystery inside of him (29). Magnus's connection to the void and compulsion to approach it are solidified both mentally and physically in this moment. It makes sense that Magnus would associate his lack of memory as a child with his body; his understanding of his memory loss is that it was caused by severe illness, and he often conflates illness with other abstract thoughts. What is interesting is that the very mystery that exists inside him is powerful enough to continue to affect his body, in this case exciting him to the point of orgasm.

Encounters with the void are numerous in the novel, but there are two particularly important points in the novel when Magnus finds himself confronting his past in a direct way, and the void is always part of these confrontations. The first is when Magnus attempts to walk to Comala after having read *Pedro Páramo*. Magnus receives the book from May, and reads the whole text voraciously, driven by the connections he sees between Juan Preciado and himself and Pedro Páramo and between Clemens Dunkeltal. However, Magnus's connection with *Pedro Páramo* lies not only in his relationship with his father, but in his urges to descend into the void of his own subconscious and the collective memory of trauma the way Juan Preciado is able to descend into Comala and confront the town's ghosts directly.

When Juan Preciado makes his journey into Comala, what he finds there is a literal ghost town; though few living residents remain in the town, the voices and appearances of the dead are everywhere, as if the place itself is its own collective memory, ceaselessly acting out history over and over again. Germain includes a short excerpt from *Pedro Páramo* in a Sequence.

The town is filled with echoes. They sound as if they're trapped inside the cavity in the walls or under the paving-stones. When you walk you sense them following in your footsteps. You hear rustlings. Laughter. Time-worn laughter, as though weary of laughing. And voices wasted through use. All this you hear. I think the day will come when these sounds die out. (Germain 57, Rulfo 108)

This passage is told to Juan Preciado by Damiana Cisneros, a ghost. Her description not only suggests the extent to which Comala is haunted, but also the ways in which Comala acts as a void of memory, an empty place that is nonetheless still full of echoes. It makes sense that Magnus would have the urge to visit a place like this; instead of being haunted by things he cannot see or understand, Juan Preciado is given the chance to view his ghosts, even converse with them, and the way that Comala is able to speak for itself through its ghosts is reminiscent of the ruins of cities destroyed by area bombing, which tell their stories simply through their own existence. Magnus seeks this opportunity to confront the past and enter into a dialogue with it.

Juan Preciado is his double, his guide through the ruins of memory, the labyrinth of forgetfulness. And Pedro Páramo, the odious provincial caudillo, a brutal and arrogant man, is Clemens Dunkeltal's projected shadow in Comala, a village to be found everywhere and nowhere, a haunting place of no precise location. A charnel-house village exuding echoes, cries and groans, a mirage village at the crossroads of the living and the dead, the real and the imagined. (56)

That Comala is a village “to be found everywhere and nowhere, a haunting place of no precise location” says something important about how Comala operates in *Magnus*. When Magnus sets off for Comala on foot, his goal is not actually to walk to Comala (Magnus sets out on foot from Veracruz—Comala is over 600 miles away), but to travel until he is able to encounter the past in the way Juan Preciado did. Even though Magnus never physically makes it to Comala, he finds

the experience he is looking for. However, as Magnus walks, his journey shifts purpose; he is no longer in Mexico to confront his father, but rather, to confront himself. Germain: “He is bound for Comala, for nowhere for a meeting with himself his progress is erratic, frantic. He is an angry pilgrim come to throttle the paternal ghost and that of the naïve child he once was who loved his father” (58). At this point, his journey changes and his real confrontation with his father is postponed until much later in the book.

Magnus suffers from heat stroke during his attempted walk to Comala. It is important to note Germain’s language as she describes his physiological and mental descent into fever; she describes the heat overwhelming him as though he were entering an echoing void. Germain: “His shadow has narrowed, condensed: a black puddle at the tip of his shoes” (58). The black puddle of his shadow as a black hole, is an abyss that is opening up beneath his feet. “...yet another sound becomes audible. It emanates from all around, from the earth and the air, from the stones and the grass. It is a harsh haunting song that soon swells, expands, vibrates” (59). The sound Germain describes in this passage is a, “chorus of insects in the pulsing heat of noon” (59). These insects are the voice of the infernal abyss, the echoes of the past reverberating in the heat of confrontation. Like the sounds of the fiesta and the clapping of long-dead horse’s hooves that reverberate in Comala, the chorus of insects is merely an echo that fills space without physical presence.

As Magnus allows himself to descend into the void, he experiences sensations reminiscent of those of his first orgasm. “...a tidal wave of vibrant visions sweeps through him” (59). This tidal wave is the flood of memories that are released in Magnus when he enters the void that he has been pursuing. In the next fragment of the novel, Magnus’s memories of Hamburg at the hour of Gommorah are recounted and the fragment is labeled “Fragment 1”. This

tells us where to place this memory in the chronology of Magnus's life, but it also suggests something more complicated that is important to the novel's resolution. This complication lies in Germain's introduction to the memories as "an upsurge originating in the middle of the night that he died – he, Adam Schmalker, before he took that name, and even before he was called Franz-Georg Dunkeltal. Long, long before. Before. In the quick present of the moment" (60). Germain refers to the night of Gommorah as the night of Magnus's death. Clearly this refers to the constant shifts in Magnus's identity; the night of the bomb strike was a night when his biological identity was obliterated. However, this phrasing also indicates that Magnus's early childhood was more than a phase in his life, it was more like a pre-life, or a pre-history to Magnus's own life narrative. The phrase "Long long before" echoes that of a fairy tale, indicating an event that relates to the present only in a vague sense. No specific time is assigned to the event; it is simply "before". Finally the "quick present of the moment" refers dually to the strange nature of time as well as the immediacy of trauma.

This encounter with the void not only restores some of Magnus's memory, it prompts a change in his attitude. After recalling this memory, he takes the name as a tribute to the true past, which he feels has been lost. This creates an interesting paradox: it is only after recovering some of his memory that Magnus is able to recognize exactly what is still missing. For Magnus, this is an event that provides more questions than answers, and his initial concern (addressing the memory of his father) has still not been addressed at all.

Magnus's confrontation with his father's memory comes in a different form—in a confrontation with his father himself. Though Magnus's mother had received word that Clemens had committed suicide, this is a ruse in order to allow Clemens to go into full hiding. On the evening that Magnus proposes to Peggy Bell with the teddy bear looking on, Magnus encounters

his father in a restaurant in Vienna. Magnus first recognizes his father through his distinctive and powerful singing voice. From early on in the novel, Germain indicates that this voice, which rises from the depths of Dunkeltal's body, will be the point of confrontation for Magnus. Early in the novel, Germain describes Clemens as he is singing. This description takes place in one of the fragments, and it conveys young Magnus's perception of Dunkeltal. "His mouth opens wide, like a dark abyss where a storm beset sun trembles and rumbles" (16). The darkness in Dunkeltal's voice is also reflected in the song he sings. In a sequence, Germain includes the lyrics to "Nachtgesang im Walde" ("Night Song in the Forest"), a song by Schubert, a composer who Magnus enjoys greatly as a child.

Hail to you always, O Night!  
 But twice hail to you here in the forest,  
 where your eye has a more secret smile  
 where your footstep falls yet more softly! (Germain 17)

The implications of the lyrics of this song on Magnus's life are numerous, but what is important to note in the context of its relationship to Clemens is that it is an ode to darkness, pouring from Clemens's mouth. This dark abyss is telling of what Clemens Dunkeltal really is: a man of pure evil. However, Magnus does not understand his father's evil as a child, and he enjoys his father's voice so much that he gives himself over to it, allowing himself to be sucked into the abyss. Germain: "...[T]he child enfolds himself in this vocal chrysalis, denser and more voluptuous than the drawing room curtain of purple velvet in which he sometimes likes to hide," (16). Later, while Magnus is still coming to terms with the truth about his father's profession, he dwells particularly on his father's voice.

... he strives even harder to bring back to life his voice. That massive voice with the capacity to envelop him in a mantle of breeze-filled darkness more ample and more tender than the night...How could that same voice be a voice of terror that shouted at hundreds and thousands of prisoners, that exterminated them? (33)

Though the connection is not quite complete yet within Magnus's mind, he is working to reconcile his father's beautiful voice with his ugly past. Over time, the voice ceases to provide comfort for Magnus, and comes to embody a dark and scary abyss that seeps from the body of a man who has committed horrible acts. Dunkeltal's voice becomes a manifestation of his own evil. It is this evil that Magnus struggles with throughout his life and this voice which he recognizes so many years later. Magnus is able to recognize Dunkeltal through his voice and his perfectly manicured hands, but since Dunkeltal is hiding behind a changed name and a modified appearance, Magnus tests his identity by requesting a song, a lied by Schubert. As Magnus listens to Dunkeltal sing the song, he feels the void all around him, overwhelming him.

The man stands very upright in the pale light under the chestnut tree, his mouth opens wide, a dark chasm of mellifluousness. With the stench of death...He sketches in the air the slow gestures of a seed-sower. A sower of bloodletting, terror, ashes. Magnus can see again the purple velvet drawing-room curtains in the house by the heath. And in the folds of the curtains appears the spectre of a little boy...The mouth of darkness ringed with an oval of white modulates the incantation the 'the spirit of love'...The curtain grows heavier, its folds deepen into long black and purple tranches with figures in their thousands trembling at the bottom of them. (140)

When Dunkeltal opens his mouth, that chasm by which the abyss inside him is available, Magnus feels the void swelling around him. Like Comala, this void is not empty, it is populated by ghosts and echoes, in this case the ghosts of Dunkeltal's victims and the echoes of the tragedies he inflicted upon them. The sound of the song ignites memory in Magnus and takes him viscerally to his childhood. For Magnus, though, a return to childhood is not so simple; the visceral memory of his childhood clashes with his knowledge of his father's crimes, and the void becomes a horrific hallucination, a fantasy in which the innocent and the traumatic are thrown together. Even in his childhood recollection, Magnus cannot reconcile his admiration for his father with his father's crimes. Thus the purple velvet curtain, which once stood for his desire to



be lost in his father's voice has become a place inhabited by ghosts--the "figures in their thousands trembling at the bottom of them," (140). Dunkeltal's victims cannot be ignored.

Here the void comes to have another meaning in Magnus's life. The void he constantly encounters is one that is haunted by the souls of victims who will not allow him to forget the tragedies that he is born of. Germain often characterizes this with references to human ashes floating in the void of open air. "But the wind over the Reich carried so many human ashes that it bore down with enormous weight on the country ... In the sky of the collapsed Reich extended a vast cemetery, invisible but palpable, being extremely greasy" (42). Later it is the scattering of May's ashes into the wind that makes Magnus feel as though the void is opening around him (90). Perhaps the void is as Comala is described: "the very mouth of hell" (Germain 57). This is not a religious hell, but a hell in which the victims are still suffering because they have not been addressed; this void is both a hell and a purgatory. Germain includes a quote from a work about *Pedro Páramo* by Fabienne Bradu in a Note.

The mouth of hell is the orifice by which mankind is swallowed up – and here we recognize the famous theme of the descent into Hades. It is also the place from which voices emerge... The echo is a form of sound inscribed in time and produced in certain contexts favourable to the reflection of an original sound... The future of an echo is a wall, an obstacle, a sentence of death. The echo impacts with something that sends it back into the past. An echo is a moving sound but one that one that travels backwards, with no hope of ever becoming other or different; its destiny is extinction. (Germain 62)

Thus the void represents not only Magnus's own past and painful experiences but also the past of the victims, the dead who can only speak for themselves through echoes and resonances. In multiple instances, Germain indicates that Magnus is the bearer of an overwhelming obligation to these victims and his inability to escape the void signifies that fact. Because of his connections to both Holocaust and area bombing victims, Magnus has a psychic connection to the hundreds

of thousands of dead from both events and must find a way to carry that connection with honor and dignity without letting it destroy him.

The idea that the void is capable of destroying Magnus is particularly important in his attempt to confront his father. After hearing Dunkeltal sing and seeing Klaus, his father's illegitimate son, Magnus is sure that he has at last found Dunkeltal. Magnus slips Dunkeltal a note indicating that he knows Dunkeltal's true identity (despite the fact that he is hiding under the pseudonym Walter Döhrlich). Germain includes this note verbatim in a section titled "Note."

For a man who has been dead for more than thirty years you still sing very well, Dr Clemens Dunkeltal. It's true, you've had several changes of voice: the voices of Otto Keller, Helmut Schwalbenkopf, Felipe Gomez Herrara. And perhaps a few others besides. Not to mention, of course, the voices stolen from your thousands of "patients" at Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Fross-Rosen, and Bergen-Belsen.

All those voices, Dr Clemens Dunkeltal, would have a lot to say about your "spirit of love". Rest assured, they will have their say. Very soon. (145)

This "Note" Germain reads more like a historical document than fictional note written by a fictional character. It is interesting in this passage that Magnus conflates identity (Dunkeltal's pseudonyms) with voice and eventually conflates life (the lives of Dunkeltal's victims) with voice as well; the auditory is privileged, heightened to the status of soul or identity. Magnus's note is threatening; the final lines that assert that the victims will have their say in short time reads more like something out of a Hollywood action film about revenge rather than a novel that ruminates on ways to deal with the past. Because of his rash attempt at dealing with the fugitive war criminal, Magnus's attempt at inflicting revenge on his father is wildly unsuccessful. After receiving the note, Dunkeltal tracks down the author and vows his own revenge. He and his son Klaus attempt to strike down Magnus with their car, but Magnus is pushed to safety by Peggy, who loses her life in the incident. To understand what Peggy's death truly means, it is best to look at a passage from a few pages before. "Peggy: first body he desired, first mouth he kissed, a

body lost and found, embraced at last, and penetrated, caressed, explored, and still desired. Peggy, song of the flesh, love incarnate” (141). When Dunkeltal kills Peggy, Magnus loses not only the person he loves, but the very concept of love. He is yet again left alone with only pain and memories. Magnus’s desire to get revenge on Dunkeltal and the confrontational note he writes to him are not unlike the Eichmann trial. Magnus feels that he must bring Dunkeltal to justice and punish him for the suffering he has caused to both Magnus and innumerable victims. As Arendt points out in her writing about the Eichmann trials, this system is incorrect: “Justice does not permit anything of the sort; it demands seclusion, it requires sorrow rather than anger, and it prescribes the most careful abstention from all the nice pleasures of putting oneself in the limelight” (Arendt 41). The vengeful feelings Magnus expresses when confronting to his father do nothing to hurt Dunkeltal or sooth his victims-- they only hurt Magnus. Through Peggy Bell’s death, Magnus realizes that vengeance and love cannot coexist; when he gives in to that vengeance, his love is destroyed. His reckless confrontation with the void has indeed destroyed him or, at least, a part of him.

The key to properly confronting the void is hinted at in Bradu’s excerpt. The echoes that escape from the void grow quieter and quieter until they eventually die out. If Magnus can find a way to allow those echoes to escape from the void of history, he can eventually allow them to die out and to dissolve painlessly.

## **V. Language, Echoes, and Resonances**

The void is not the only intangible in *Magnus* that wields immense significance and power. Throughout the novel, Germain emphasizes the power of language. This begins with the fairy tales Thea recounts to her amnesiac son—the tales that conspicuously omit the teddy bear

from the family. From the very first description of Magnus, his ability to remember is directly linked to his access to language.

At five years of age, he fell seriously ill and the fever consumed all the words inside him, all his recently acquired knowledge. He is left with not a single recollection. His memory is as blank as the day he was born. (11)

Note that the consumption of words is listed before the actual loss of recollection; this phrasing makes it seem that the consumption of words was the real illness, whereas the loss of memory was merely a natural symptom of that illness. Germain makes it clear that Magnus's memories cannot exist without the proper words with which to communicate them. Magnus's mother, Thea, takes this opportunity to make the child truly hers by repopulating Magnus's mind with false memories and a false history. She tells Magnus heroic tales of her family as a means of replacing the early memories that Magnus has lost. In describing Thea's tales, Germain focuses on the power that Thea's language has over her adoptive son's mind. "Thea...devotes her entire time to reeducating her amnesiac and unspeaking child. She teaches him his language once again and gradually restores to him his lost past" (11). Again, the connection between language and memory is solidified. It is only through powerful use of language that Thea is able to perform the unfathomable tasks of recreating memory and inventing a false past.

Because Magnus experienced severe memory loss as a small child, his means of taking in the world is different from that of a normal child. He learns to memorize details and observe things carefully, in order to refill the memory that was emptied and to make sure that no further recollections are allowed to slip by. His early memory loss changes the way he perceives the world and the way he absorbs information.

He spends most of his time observing his surroundings...it is very serious work he is doing, studying at length the landscape, the sky, objects, animals and people, striving to engrave it all on this memory. A memory that has been as amorphous and unstable as sand. He is now endeavouring to give it a mineral-like solidarity. (14)

There are two things to note in this passage. The first is that Magnus's perception of memory is expressed through a simile that involves the earth—his current memory is sand-like, but he hopes to make it rich, like mineral. The importance of this aspect will be discussed later. This passage holds greater significance because it hints at a concept of memory that is not typical. Usually, remembering is considered to be an inactive process and memories to be the natural byproducts of this inactive process. For most of us, our earliest memories are not moments that we recall for any specific purpose and certainly not ones that we deliberately recorded. They are simply the memories that happen to resurface and exist after some amount of time. For Magnus, the process of memory is different; he is not a passive participant, he actively attempts to recreate memory, to let nothing slip by.

This concept is important to language in the novel because Magnus's relationship with memory is so tied to his ability with language. Magnus "is especially gifted with an extraordinary memory, having diligently trained it from the age of six as a defensive reaction to the loss of all his memories of his early childhood. He can instantly memorize every new word he reads or hears" (52). Here Germain is describing the reason Magnus chooses to study romance languages, particularly Spanish, at university. However, the connection between memory and language for Magnus is not only formed through this ability. Magnus throws himself into his "obscure passion for Spanish" after learning of his father's death in Mexico (52). He associates the Spanish language with his father at the time of his death, and uses his intense study of the language as a means of working through his grief and confusion about his father and their relationship.

He decides to learn Spanish, the language of the country where his father spent his last days and he studies the geography of Mexico... He weaves a shroud round his father's lost body out of the words he gathers looking through books,

consulting an atlas and a dictionary; out of a foreign vocabulary he constructs a tomb for that voice forever silenced. (33)

This passage comes from “Fragment 7” when Magnus is just beginning to learn his father’s crimes and is far from accepting him as a war criminal. Later, Magnus’s view of his father changes, and his relationship to his Spanish studies changes as well.

He has set up Spanish as an absurd talismanic goal: he is determined to gain a perfect command of the language of the fraudulent Felipe Gomez Herrera in order to gain ascendancy over the ghost of that assassin...he wishes he could dissolve his father in the words he aggressively masters, as though in acid. (44)

In the first passage, Magnus’s Spanish studies are meant to be a monument to his father, a means of reaching him even though death has placed him out of reach. In the second passage, language is no longer a monument of memory, but an attempted means of dissolving memory. This idea credits language with a great deal of power. Not only is language completely necessary for memory (evidenced by the fact that when Magnus loses his language he loses his memory), language also has the power to dissolve memory, to rewrite events in history. This is clear through Thea’s retelling of history and through Magnus’s attempts at dissolving the memory of his father in the Spanish language. Interestingly, this phrase is echoed when Magnus hears his father’s voice again during their encounter in Vienna. Germain: “Every precisely articulated word falls on Magnus like a drop of acid” (140). Again, the power of language and memory are mixed and this time the effect is almost corporeal. Instead of using language as a means of dissolving memory, memory and language have now combined in Dunkeltal’s song and they are dissolving Magnus. Both concepts are forces to be reckoned with, especially to a character like Magnus, who has a lot of reckoning to do.

Magnus’s relationship with language is solidified in his career: he works as a translator. At first he does this job casually, translating articles about art for magazines, but after May’s death he throws himself into his work with a fervor.

His interests as a translator shift, turning away from art and to history. This is a vast area of study, but Magnus slowly comes back to the very thing he had tried to escape by leaving Europe, and soon he is wrapped up in it: the recent past, still very much alive, of Europe and its wars, the last one especially. (94)

Again, the relationship between language and memory is indicated, this time in a broader sense, with history being understood as a form of memory. This also illustrates Magnus's constant compulsion to return to the past; his profession of choice unwittingly leads him to examinations of Europe's recent history, a history of which he is very much a part, and his switch from art to history comes at a conspicuous time. It is only after the tragedy of May's death that Magnus begins to examine any of the other tragedies in his life.

Magnus's work as a translator also suggests something more significant about him than his intense connection with language. The work of translation is discussed often in theories about World War II and the Holocaust. In his essay "The Task of the Translator" Walter Benjamin explores certain tenets of the work of translation. He focuses mostly on the relationships languages have with each other, the relationships translated texts have with their originals, and on the difficulties that arise in translation when language changes over time. However, the most interesting points of his essay are points where paradoxes exist. For example, he discusses the ways in which it is impossible to translate a text because an ultimately faithful translation would have to rely on an objective reality. "There it is a matter of showing that in cognition there could be no objectivity, not even a claim to it, if it dealt with images of reality; here it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (Benjamin 73). The problem of translation that Benjamin identifies has nothing to do with the relationship between particular languages, but rather between languages and reality. In fact, Benjamin sees little

difference between given languages in terms of their ability to express. Benjamin: “Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express” (72). The question that remains from this is about what exactly all of these languages are commonly working to express. Some have said that the work of a translator is not so much to be able to go from one language to another, as to be able to move from reality to language. In the wake of events like the Holocaust and World War II, this ability is even more necessary since the trauma of the events defies description and linguistic comprehension in its very nature. Shoshana Felman writes, in an article about Paul de Man’s writings, that Benjamin prizes translation as form precisely because he sees it as an ability to put words to experiences, an ability that is endangered in the modern world.

If history does not allow for a confessional as mode of either explanation or reparation, if confession can no longer serve as a viable language of historical accountability, how can one nevertheless attest to the ‘defacement of the mind’ the Holocaust has been? There remains... a positive necessity of accounting, a positive historical endeavor that Walter Benjamin profoundly and suggestively, has named ‘The Task of the Translator’. (Felman 734)

Magnus’s career as a translator, then, relies on much more than his intimate knowledge of language. Magnus, as a victim of World War II in more than one regard, has an obligation to act as a translator for these events. It is natural that his work as a translator should involve the war; Magnus is probably one of the few translators equipped to handle the subject.

His status as a victim puts him in a position to give voice to victims and to make sure that language is telling the story of history through the lens of experience. Soon, the line between translator and historian blurs.

[Magnus attempts] to establish dialogue with the many testimonies of both victims and perpetrators of the enormous barbarities of his century, in particular that which originated in the country of his early childhood. The translator becomes himself a historian, or rather an amateur detective accountable solely to his conscience, still tormented with questions.



But the detective becomes lost in the labyrinths of human madness so easily allied with wickedness, he teeters on the brink of the abyss of human folly and its capacity for confusing good and evil, evil and duty, and then carrying out the most shameful deeds with meekness and diligence, untroubled, in all good conscience. (Germain 94)

His work as a translator is difficult because, as Benjamin points out, there is no way to translate an objective reality with fidelity to the original; the reality cannot be translated. By this logic, Magnus's quest for translation is an impossible job. Felman offers an alternative that takes into account Benjamin's concerns, but does not claim impossibility. "The task of the translator... is to read the textuality of the original event... without reducing the original event to a false transparency of sense" (Felman 738). This is certainly a noble statement, but it poses its own problem: how one can translate without creating a false transparency? It makes perfect sense that this task would be so overwhelming to Magnus, who intuitively recognizes the dangers latent in the work of translation and retelling of history from his own personal experiences. Margaret-Anne Hutton recognizes this concept at work in Magnus in her article "Textures and Spectres." "In *Magnus* such questioning or problematization of the nature and limits of representation and reality is not just implicit, but both explicit and extensive, operating at all levels of the text and thereby producing what might almost be termed a 'meta-fantastic' work, if such a concept is tenable" (Hutton 195).

As Hutton points out, the problem of translation is one that exists on many levels in *Magnus*. This idea particularly explains one of the passages that Germain chooses to include in one of the sections titled "Sequence." She cites poetry from Charlotte Delbo, an Auschwitz survivor who chronicled her experiences in the concentration camp as well as her experiences as a survivor in a series of books collectively titled *Auschwitz and After*. The section Germain includes comes immediately after May's death and speaks of the experience of experiencing death first hand. "You cannot understand/you who have not listened/to the heartbeat/of a man

about to die” (Germain 87). Just as Hutton suggested that the problem of translation is apparent at all levels of *Magnus*, the inclusion of this passage speaks to the problem of translation on multiple levels. Within the passage, there exists a paradox. Though Delbo writes, as all writers do, as a means of communicating experience, she expresses within her writing just how futile that activity is by pointing out that the reader will never be able to understand what she is writing about. However, the very inclusion of this passage suggests that explanations of this process will only turn into further translations and further echoes. In fact, a great deal of Delbo’s book, especially the final installment, *The Measure of Our Days*, ponders the same question of how to translate incommunicable memories into communicable language. Delbo says that

The survivor must undertake to regain his memory, regain what he possessed before: his knowledge, his experience, his childhood memories, his manual dexterity and his intellectual faculties, sensitivity, the capacity to dream, imagine, laugh. If you’re unable to gauge the effort this necessitates, in no way can I attempt to convey it. (Delbo 255)

Germain’s intertextuality, in this instance, relies on Delbo’s text as a further means of communicating Magnus’s story and the stories of traumatized war survivors in general. This passage indicates that to truly understand Germain’s text, we must also understand Delbo’s text. This poses the problem of infinite intertextuality: how many other texts do we need to understand before we can understand Delbo’s text, and how long can this pattern be allowed to continue? Like an echo, the message keeps bouncing from text to text, becoming quieter at every turn. This is an idea that is reflected in the overall intertextual nature of the novel, but especially in the inclusion of Delbo, whose work also examines the problem of writing to convey incommunicable experiences.

This passage is also significant in that it introduces the void, which threatens to consume Magnus through his work. Within the void are the voices of the victims, manifesting themselves

as echoes or resonances. This is another way in which language plays an important role in the book; language as a form of expression often relies on voice, but when these voices have been silenced they rely on echoes and resonances. Germain titles some sections of the novel “Resonances.” These sections tend to deal explicitly with death; each one relates immediately to a death Magnus has experienced in his life. However, the idea of echo is one that is resonant in the larger sense of the novel. Not only are Magnus’s dead loved ones’ voices heard in echoes, but all of the voices of the dead from the war and the Holocaust are heard. These echoes are interesting because they use aural linguistics to bridge the unfathomable past and the fleeting present; these voices haunt Magnus precisely because they refuse to be ignored, though they speak only in a whisper. As Hutton indicates “The echo, like the spectral, belongs to both past and future; it has just been and is bound to return: as the text itself puts it, echoes are examples of ‘fantômes vocaux’, not so much a case of ‘déjà vu’, but an equally uncanny ‘déjà entendu’” (Hutton 202). Hutton argues that the novel, “privileges the acoustic over the visual,” and this is certainly true. Echoes and resonances are found throughout the book, as well as countless other references to music and song (which are naturally related to the acoustic). The novel’s resolution also hints at the importance of the acoustic. However, the novel also privileges the linguistic and this can often be seen in its privilege of the acoustic. It is Dunkeltal’s singing voice (acoustic) by which Magnus recognizes Dunkeltal, but it is the words of the song that fall upon Magnus like acid. It is the acoustic (the sound of the insects) that envelops Magnus in Comala, but it is the linguistic (*Pedro Páramo*) which sends him there.

The privilege of the linguistic is also seen in the ways words are portrayed in the novel. As we’ve seen, their power is illustrated and they are often compared to acid, but Germain primarily emphasizes something else about words that is of the utmost importance: in *Magnus*

words are often connected to nature or described in terms of nature. In the lyrics to *Nachtgesan im Walde*, the sounds of the forest are equated with linguistic echoes.

Yours is a language of whispering breezes...

...And as we cry out in song:

'Night is at home in the forest!'

So the lingering echo replies:

'She is at home in the forest!' (Germain 17)

The connection between language and nature is next illustrated when Magnus attempts to go to Comala.

There he lies on the earth's surface, in direct contact with the landmass of his father's-language shroud, the language acid-bath that will dissolve forever the sickening remains of his love for that father. But no, Spanish is not the language of this land. It is not indigenous. It came from outside just a few centuries ago...A more ancient language frets beneath the stones, the dust. The language of the vanquished, unyielding, intractable. (59)

The next sound Magnus hears is the overwhelming monotone of the insects—this voice is equated with a linguistic voice and thus the linguistic is conflated with the natural. This passage again employs the comparison between language and acid but, more importantly, it establishes a strong connection between language and nature, particularly between language and the earth. Through Magnus's contact with the land, he senses the language that has been lost there, the language of the conquered indigenous peoples of Mexico. It is as if he has accessed a sort of pre-history simply by placing his head on the ground. The idea that there exists a "language of the land" hints at something more significant; the language of the land would be a language that lends itself to representations of the real, a language that is intrinsically tied to materiality. By this analysis, Magnus's body acts as the translator and the humming of the insects acts as the echoes of the ancestral language of the place. The humming of the insects as a means of reality representing itself as it speaks to Benjamin's ideas on translation and what can be considered a true language.

If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then this language of truth is—the true language. And this very language, whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations. (“The Task of the Translator” 77)

This passage is also reminiscent, like an echo, of the excerpt from *Pedro Páramo* that Germain includes: “This town is filled with echoes. They sound as if they’re trapped inside the cavity in the walls or under the paving-stones” (57).

The void and its connection to aural linguistics is also present in the sections in which Germain ruminates on Lothar’s relationship with God. This is really the only plot in the novel that exists outside Magnus, though Lothar’s revelations have some influence on him. As a Pastor, Lothar has an intimate relationship with God which is deeply involved with the events of World War II. “God: like a silent abyss, through one form which a wind blew, causing flurries of words, unheard-of and inaudible, to sign in an undertone” (95). As in “Nachtgesan im Walde,” words are tied not to the land, but to the stirring of the breeze. Again, the words rise from an abyss. Just as the abyss to Magnus is the mysterious past that haunts him, God is the abyss to Lothar. Though Lothar clearly has a strong belief in God, his beliefs are put to the test after the events of the war. Just as Magnus needs to find a way to reconcile his past with his identity, Lothar needs to find a way to reconcile his belief in essential goodness with the evil he has witnessed during World War II. Thus, he faces an abyss that is populated with the whispering of specters and the rustling of words emerging on the breeze. These words which emerge from the abyss are, for Lothar, the primary means of reconciling the two polar opposites. It is through liturgical words that he finds peace.

In his old age Lothar loses his vision and passes the time by listening to his family members read to him. Instead of regarding his blindness as a nuisance, Lothar finds value in this

system. Lothar says “The vocal inflections of the intermediary between the author and me reverberate on the text, and then I hear nuances I might not have discerned reading alone in silence. This sometimes produces unusual surprises” (Germain 119). Lothar’s relationship to texts has come to resemble a text’s relationship to reality; he is unable to confront the text directly, but must go through an intermediary, a reader. Lothar finds this process to be more enlightening than the text on its own because of the vocal inflections of the reader—the text is privileged in its auditory form. The voice of Lothar’s readers become echoes of the text just as the text is an echo of reality; with each echo the meaning changes and the reality is changed. Lothar plays with this concept, asking different members of his family to read the same passages to him. “. . .pages he ends up knowing by heart but in a polyphonic way, and this knowing ‘by heart’ thereby becomes tremulous, swells and fills with unexpected echoes, questions, murmurs” (119). Lothar is able to discern differences between each of his readers not only in the sound of their voices, but in the emotions they express through their readings; he begins to understand how their readings have been informed by their lives.

In *Magnus* the motif of the echo comes up so often because Germain understands how all words are merely echoes of something else. Though they suggest reality, they can never fully convey reality, and they are especially weak when traumatic experience is involved. This acoustic quality, however, is the key to how words are capable of allaying trauma; with each echo the moment of trauma is diluted until the echo fades away entirely. In this way, putting words to experience simultaneously expresses the experience while relegating it to the past. The meaning of the linguistic echo in *Magnus* is perhaps best expressed in the excerpt Germain includes from Fabienne Bradu’s “Echoes of Paramo.” “The future of an echo is a wall, an obstacle, a sentence of death. The echo impacts with something that sends it back into the past.

An echo is a moving sound but one that travels backwards, with no hope of ever becoming other or different; its destiny is extinction” (Germain 62). It is through the expression of this murmuring memory that experience is diluted enough to be comprehended and, eventually, diluted enough to die.

## **VI. Fairy Tales**

All of these concepts come together at the end of the novel in which Germain finds a quietly happy resolution for the intensely troubled Magnus. His resolution is found in the French countryside and aided by Brother Jean, a monk who appears mysteriously and brings great comfort to Magnus through his wisdom. In order to understand the novel’s resolution, however, we must not only keep in mind the elements of the novel that have already been discussed, but also look closely at the novel’s opening, titled “Prelude”. This is an interesting choice of title; it already hints at music and acoustics which, as we know, are an important theme in the book.

A scrap of papyrus or a shard of pottery can take us back to a civilization that disappeared thousands of years ago. The root of a word can illuminate for us a constellation of derivations and meanings. Remains, pit-stones always retain an indestructible kernel of vitality. (9)

Again the connection between language and words is emphasized. The natural materials that make up the papyrus and the pottery (leaves and clay) have become the bearers of messages from the past, of language. She also chooses to use the word root to describe the derivation of words, employing a double meaning with a word that can mean either origin or plant root. This is further connected to nature through comparison with the stars and the sky. The corporeality of the human body is suggested with the word “remains” in the next line, and this is also compared to the natural (pit-stones). The next line of text is perhaps the most important in interpreting the meaning of the novel: “In every instance, imagination and intuition are needed to help interpret

the enigmas” (9). Before the reader has even been introduced to the problems present of narrative, Germain has already hinted at the solution; the traumatic mysteries of life can be solved through creativity. This echoes Cyrulnik’s ideas about writing as a means of overcoming trauma. “The choice of words, the arrangement of memories, and the quest for aesthetic effect entail the mastery of emotions and the reworking of our image of what has happened to us” (37). In a subsequent passage, Germain hints at the reasoning behind the organization and fragmentation of the novel. She poses the question of what kind of story you can tell about a character like Magnus, a man whose memory has been fragmented and distorted. Germain’s answer is “A sketch portrait, a confused narrative, punctuated with blanks, gaps, underscored with echoes, and ultimately fraying at the edges” (9). This kind of sketch portrait is suggestive of the format Germain uses in the novel—a series of memory fragments, pieces of factual information, and lines from other texts that echo through the book. Germain explains the reasoning behind such an organization: “Never mind the confusion. The chronology of a human life is never as linear as is generally believed. As for the blanks, gaps, echoes and frayed edges, these are an integral part of all writing, as they are of memory” (9). Here, memory and writing are connected by means of their necessary inaccuracy; they are both merely translations of the original text that is reality.

Inside every person the voice of a prompter murmurs in an undertone.  
Incognito. An apocryphal voice that if you only lend an ear may bring  
unsuspected news – of the world, of others, of yourself.

To write is to descend into the prompter’s box and learn to listen to the  
breathing of language in its silences, between words, around words, sometimes at  
the heart of words. (10)

For Germain, this “apocryphal voice” is the voice of inner narrative. It exists as a murmur or an echo because it is a shadowy replica of reality, a breathy whisper of memory. Listening to this voice is essential, as Germain points out, because of its ability to bring news, in other words, to



be revealing of truth as it relates to events that have happened. Also interesting is the use of the word “apocryphal,” which suggests that the voice is somehow false or misleading. This idea can be tied to Benjamin’s ideas of translations; the translation is necessarily false because it cannot represent the reality of the original. Similarly, the apocryphal voice is necessarily false and misleading because it is only an echo of the event it describes. At the very least it gives an incomplete picture and at worst it gives a totally false one or no picture at all. Writing, according to Germain, is simply a matter of recording this apocryphal voice, of listening carefully to its quiet murmur beneath the noise of life. The phrase “breathing of language” again connects the acoustic (the moving of air in and out of lungs and through wind pipes) with the linguistic; the breathing of language suggests a natural resonance of words (this connection between breath and language will come up again in the resolution). However, this whole phrase suggests something even further. If the murmur within the body is the echo of reality then the written translation of that murmur would be an even further echo of reality—separated from reality by two degrees and with each degree slightly more false, more diluted. Germain indicates exactly how the echo is expressed linguistically in a section titled “Insert” which falls after the Fragment in which Magnus meets Brother Jean and before the mysteriously titled “Fragment 0.” The “Insert” acts as a poetic close reading of the phrase “Once upon a time” (French: “*Il était une fois*”). In examining this phrase so closely connected to the fairy tale Germain indicates that these tales, as echoes of life, have the power to dissolve painful memories. “The story told has dissolved into a distant past, like vegetable matter in marshland, or bodies in humus, giving rise to will-o’-the-wisps that flit through the darkness, skimming the ground. Likewise do the elements of myths and fables act in the obscurity of our thoughts” (Germain 171). Yet again the linguistic (the story) is expressed in the most natural terms and related closely to the earth (vegetable matter in

marshland, bodies in humus). Since this dissolution gives rise to plants, it suggests that storytelling is not just a natural activity, but also part of a greater process, in which some things die and dissolve only to give rise to new forms; the process connects storytelling to rebirth. By comparing this natural process to the “obscurity of our thoughts” Germain recalls Magnus, whose thoughts are dark, horrific, and often out of his control. In a system like this, storytelling has the power to dissolve Magnus’s dark past naturally, as a corpse dissolves into the ground.

This idea is not unique to Germain. In his essay “The Storyteller” Benjamin examines the role of fable and the role of the teller of fables in modern life. Benjamin sees a decline in the usefulness of storytelling that he attributes to the development of experiences that are so unprecedented and horrific that they are essentially incommunicable. “Was it not noticeable at the end of [World War I] that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?” (84). Benjamin identifies this development not just as an observation but as a potential problem: How do we retain our humanity in a world in which our experiences are becoming increasingly incommunicable? “It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences” (83). When the sacred ability of expression is stripped from us by the horror of experience, the question remains as to what means can be used to lay horrors to rest. This is the question that plagues Magnus. His work as a translator shows that he is approaching this problem and that, at least on a subconscious level, he understands the falsities inherent in writing. Unfortunately, his work as a translator, however passionate and frantic, does not lead him to the calm resolution he seeks. This is most clearly illustrated with his disastrous attempt to confront his father. Because of his inability to dissolve the past, his reckless attempts at confrontation are doomed to fail and only cause harm to himself. The problem lies in the fact that

Magnus is haunted by memories that are difficult to put words to and even harder to infuse with communicable emotion.

However there is strong suggestion that attempts to put his horrific experiences into words are not futile. Philosopher Hannah Arendt examined Benjamin's essay in the wake of the Second World War, and, though she agrees about the changing communicability of experience after horrific events, she draws a slightly different conclusion than Benjamin. Arendt finds that words are still necessary but that the process is not so simple as it was for the storytellers of yore that Benjamin focuses on. "For Arendt, the facts of the twentieth century do not need explaining, they need confronting," writes David Luban in an essay on Arendt (Luban 90). Arendt insists that we must do this confronting with words, with story. "No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story," she writes in her essay *Men In Dark Times*. It is, in fact, a caveat of storytelling that Benjamin mentions that makes it possible for storytelling to have relevance to experience, even in the darkest of modern times. "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (Benjamin 94). This passage resonates particularly with another passage from Germain's insert:

In what sense have they never happened, these stories unrecognized by History, which admits into its corpus only established proven events whose relation to the reality is exclusively diurnal? ... The corpus of history is a body -- whose flesh is language, words spoken and written. ... *Once upon a time* is the shadow it produces, a counterpart of more fluid shifting words and utterances. (171)

If the corpus of history is a body, then storytelling is that body's natural death, the dissolution of living matter into natural earth. It is only when Magnus allows his story and his identity to dissolve into fable that he is able to put the past to rest and move on peacefully with his life.

Magnus's resolution takes place in the interestingly titled "Fragment 0." All of the other fragments have, in their numbering, represented the chronology of events in Magnus's life, so why should these events, which happen when Magnus is about forty years old, be listed under the number zero, the absolute first number? In the "Insert" Germain indicates that storytelling is a necessary tradition and a tradition older than History. "*Once upon a time*: corpus of a deeper, more intense memory than that of History; seedbed of reality" (172). It thus makes sense that the section of the story that acts as a fable would not take place within logical chronological order, but rather in its own time, in a sort of pre-history. If the storyteller derives his authority from death, then the fable the storyteller tells exists both permanently and fleetingly, like death. In this idea lies the major problem with Thea's fairy tales. "[Thea] has a substitute text...a text of revenge against death" (66). Her stories are working in direct opposition to the power that storytelling has; they are inadequate because they shun their only source of authority. Magnus needs to find a fairy tale that, like Benjamin's, will borrow its authority from death and be able to dissolve the pain of history and memory with words.

For Magnus to be able to find solace through storytelling, he must first return to this pre-history, he must be immersed in a time of "once upon a time." Throughout his life, it seems that Magnus has done this. When he is struck by the bombs of Gomorrah, described as "zero hour," his ability to communicate experiences is wiped out completely; not only is he left without memory, but without language and thus without storytelling ability, even in its most simplistic sense (64). Thea recognizes the power she has over the blank slate of a child and uses his lack of words to impose her own agenda on him. Germain is careful to emphasize the power of language and storytelling in her description: "She teaches him his language once again, and gradually restores to him his lost past, recounting it episode by episode, like a story told in installments"

(Germain 11). However, Thea's heroic fairy tales are precisely the kind of story that Benjamin finds inadequate in the modern age, and they cannot account for the horror Magnus has seen; it is this incongruity that Magnus recognizes in his displeasure at the omission of Magnus the bear from Thea's fairy tales. There exist other moments in the novel when Magnus's memories and mind are set back to zero and he must start his life over again. After May's death Magnus experiences a similar feeling. "...[J]ust as when the hour of Gomorrah struck, he is going to have to start again from zero. But a zero charged with very intense memories this time, not gutted by oblivion" (91). Yet again after Peggy's death, Magnus experiences this feeling. "As when the Gomorrah hour struck – an ever abysmal moment on the dial of his life. And this zero is not only burdened with very crowded memories, and fraught with loss, it is seared with remorse and helplessness" (152). Despite Magnus's feelings, the end of the novel suggests that these returns to the "zero hour" are somehow false. The key to understanding the falseness of these returns lies not only in the fact that these constant returns to "zero hour" fail to provide Magnus with the solace of starting over that he desires, but also in the numbering of Germain's fragments. Though Magnus believes many times in the text that he has returned to "zero hour" it is not until he meets Brother Jean that the numbering of the fragments is set back to zero. After Peggy Bell's death, Magnus seems to have a conscious desire to travel to a time of pre-history in the way that fairy tales will allow.

He is looking for a neutral, remote place, a place of a water clock nature, where he can *let Time go by till his change come*. What change? He does not know, but for him this not knowing is now the only adventure worth while. (153)

Magnus's fairy tale begins when he meets Brother Jean. From the instant Brother Jean appears, it is clear that something fantastic is afoot, however, Brother Jean's influence is present before he makes his physical appearance. Having taken up residence in the French countryside

after Peggy Bell's death, Magnus spends his days in solitude, aimlessly rambling through the forest. One day Magnus wanders into a clearing where he finds some interesting things. First he notices beehives; these are Brother Jean's bees. Then he sees an empty stone structure built to house a statue; on closer inspection Magnus finds a slug making its way along the platform where a statue was meant to be. With this image, Germain has disposed of religious worship in favor of the natural and the archaic—the prehistory of nature. Later, at Brother Jean's funeral, Magnus learns that Brother Jean was at first outraged by the theft of the statue, but soon delighted in declaring the grotto “Our Lady of the Empty Space.” The worship of emptiness is prevalent in these final sections of the novel, and it is reflective of the change that needs to take place in Magnus for him to be able to work-through his traumas. Next, Magnus notices a strange sound emanating from the forest. He at first believes it to be human, but soon realizes that the trees have been carved so that they emit a low whistling sound when the wind blows. The idea of the wind as a linguistic rustling has been identified many times within this paper, but Brother Jean's project takes the idea to another level; he has literally been able to endow nature with a voice, almost as though the trees and the wind are now able to express themselves directly. Magnus hopes to return to this clearing but is unable to find his way there again. What Magnus has discovered is the home of Brother Jean and his bees.

Brother Jean appears to Magnus one day after Magnus has been out on a ramble. Brother Jean greets Magnus on their first meeting as though they have already met, and Brother Jean's voice is described as reedy, a word which suggests both musicality and nature. Magnus's very first impression of Brother Jean is fantastic. “Just like the good witch in a fairy tale, Magnus says to himself” (160). After setting Magnus straight as to his gender and demonstrating his power over bees, Brother Jean asks Magnus a simple question: “Who are you?” (Germain 161). The

phrasing is important; though Brother Jean is asking this by way of introduction (he says it directly after giving his own name), he does not ask Magnus what his name is, but rather who he is. The question becomes a question of identity rather than of a superficial name. What happens next is the beginning of the magic of Magnus's fable.

Magnus is taken aback by this question, simple though it is, and he gives an answer that comes as a surprise to himself. 'I've forgotten.'

The clownish monk does not seem to find this reply in the least unexpected. 'That can happen. And it's a good sign.' With this serenely delivered comment he goes toddling off, a golden flurry swarming round his hat. (161)

This direct address, this complete confrontation of identity, is the catalyst for Magnus's first true linguistic expressions. Magnus retreats into his barn, his "sanctuary dedicated to emptiness" and racks his brain for his own name. He finds that he has lost words completely and, having been stripped down to his reptilian brain, he must work his way back up through the subconscious muck of linguistics until he arrives at a plane where true expression is possible (156).

Throughout her description of this linguistic regeneration, Germain maintains the connections between language and natural prehistory that she has already established and also hints at the natural whispering of language. "A procession of utterances in colourless or grey-blue voices, ocre and violet laughter, ivory and russet whispers" (162). He collapses in the dust and, in a moment of seemingly divine bubbling of the subconscious, recalls his birth-given name and inscribes it in the dust beside him.

Magnus collapses on the ground next to the name and falls asleep, exhausted from this linguistic rebirth. When he awakens the next morning he accidentally erases the name as he stands up. Only the letter "I" remains, indicating that the name he inscribed was not Magnus, but one that has been forever lost. Though this is a frustrating moment for both Magnus and the reader, the loss of Magnus's original name is of the utmost significance. His night of linguistic

struggle represents a purging of false language; only through his journey into the reptilian brain is Magnus able to recall his birth-given name and only then is Magnus able to destroy his pre-history and bring himself back to a true “zero hour.” To be able to begin again, Magnus needs to obliterate even his earliest identity.

Upon awakening from this night, Magnus finds Brother Jean waiting for him, as if he knew exactly what happened with Magnus the night before and knows exactly what will happen next. He informs Magnus that the date is August 15<sup>th</sup>, both the feast of Mary’s assumption and Brother Jean’s birthday. This important day is not only Brother Jean’s birthday, but also the birthday of his eight brothers, a detail which suggests the fantastic nature of Brother Jean as a character. Brother Jean asks Magnus if he was able to recall his name, but when Magnus replies with Magnus, Brother Jean meets this declaration with a “dubious look, as if he already knew the answer and the one he had been given was incorrect,” (168). Again, Brother Jean has powers that seem to be a bit fantastic, but this comment also leads the characters to a discussion about names; Brother Jean claims that names are not that important, citing the fact that his name was Blaise before he entered into the monastery and was given the name Jean. Brother Jean’s initial name is interesting; Saint Blaise is commonly associated with the throat, the organ which uses acoustics and air to form linguistic expression. Brother Jean proceeds to tell Magnus about the Angel of the Word. This Angel, says Brother Jean, split his lip by sealing his mouth with a secret, which is now beginning to stir. “Yes, it’s stirring in my mouth, on my split lip...it’s like a taste of wind...” Brother Jean says, suggesting the same wind that has been present linguistically throughout the novel (169). Brother Jean leaves this feast abruptly, promising Magnus that he will send for him soon. Though Magnus finds his irritation for the monk subsiding, he still feels perplexed at the turn his life has taken.



Magnus watches Brother Jean go, the figure of an elderly child in perpetual flight. A wood sprite who frolics with bees, who wield words illuminated like the pages of an old missal. Magnus feels as if he has been unwittingly introduced into a fairy tale. An antiquated tale inadvertently inserted into the rambling story of his life. It was charming, but he thinks he would have preferred to be invited into a completely different narrative: he has outgrown fairy tales. The secret of the Angel of the Word! He would be content to see the more modest secret of his early childhood finally explained, and even more so the secret of the vast nowhere into which the dead disappeared. The gift of God! But it is the gift of life that Magnus wants – and for the gift of life to be returned to those who have been robbed of it. (170)

It is in “Fragment 0” that Magnus next encounters Brother Jean. Brother Jean’s bees come to Magnus’s house in a swarm and lead him to the clearing where he once discovered the whistling trees and the empty grotto. Though Brother Jean greets Magnus enthusiastically, the two sit together in silence for a long time before Brother Jean makes his purpose clear. He implores Magnus to learn to listen to the forest to the point where he will be able to hear individual leaves falling from a tree. Germain emphasizes the forest’s connection to a text: “Three [leaves], caught in a rising air current, hover in the tree-top, like coppery commas dancing in the well of light shafting through the mass of branches. Vagabond commas punctuating in total freedom a luminously unadorned text” (174).

Brother Jean implores Magnus to try to understand the forest with the stillness and patience that he does, but this is difficult for Magnus. The key is that Brother Jean has learned to instinctually read the forest like a text; he is able to understand the forest intimately by letting it become its own text. With this method, Brother Jean has learned how to bridge the gap between language and reality. He implores Magnus to perceive the falling of the leaves aurally because it is only in this way that Magnus can endow the forest with a voice with which it can speak for itself. Magnus initially does not have the skill to perceive the forest aurally, as Brother Jean requests of him, but he develops this skill after hours spent in silence sitting next to Brother Jean.

“Magnus gives a slight start, turns his head to the left. His gaze catches the moment a translucent yellow leaf, as fine as an insect’s wing, reaches the ground a little way off from him. His hearing perceived it before his eyes, better than his eyes. ‘I’m listening,’ he says to Brother Jean” (175). By focusing so intently on the tiniest of events, Brother Jean teaches Magnus how to be a translator of reality who is able to communicate history and memory in its fluidity, not in its fragmentation. It is in this way that Magnus will be able to communicate truth. As Benjamin says, “The chronicler, who recounts events without distinguishing between the great and small, thereby accounts for the truth, that nothing which has ever happened is to be given as lost to history” (173). By recognizing the forest as a text, Magnus is recognizing the continuing narrative of reality; this is the only way he will be able to work-through his traumatic memories and move on with his life. As Cyrulnik comments, “Undertaking the task of resilience means once again shedding light on the world and giving it back its coherence. The tool that makes this possible is called *narration*” (37). Despite his best efforts, Magnus has not been whole for his entire life. The weight of the abyss of memory that followed him prevented him from living his life normally and defeated any resilience he may have had. Once he is able to understand the events of his life through the lens of narrative and through understanding of the relationship between text and reality, he is able to regain his resiliency and move on with his life unburdened of history. All of this is reflected in his ability to hear the leaf falling instead of simply seeing it.

Instead of reacting happily to this news, Brother Jean remains silent, pulls his hood over his head, and falls asleep. Magnus again finds himself approaching a void; this time, however, the void’s healing power is true and the result is that Magnus is later able to find the words to communicate his dark experience and move on from it. The void begins in Brother Jean’s body.

That is all – no blazing light, no agitation in that drowsy body, no throaty rattle or muttering from his lips. Just this breathing rising slowly, amply, from the depths

of a body concentrated not on itself but on self-oblivion, on an excavation, a hollowing-out of the self. And this breathing grows lighter, easier. It is as soft and penetrating as the sound of an oboe. A sigh of light escaping from the darkness. A vocal smile quietly ringing in the air. An exaltation of silence. (175)

The emphasis on breath is important; throughout the novel wind and breathing have been closely tied to the linguistic. Breath is the linguistic expression in its purest form; it is the potential for speech without words. The phrase “exaltation of silence” is also important. It does not indicate that silence is the key to understanding; indeed we know that Magnus must find ways of articulating reality, instead of suppressing it. The exaltation of silence refers to what happens after reality is articulated, after the echo is let loose. The “hollowing-out of the self” and the “exaltation of silence” are not indications of an empty self, but a self unburdened, free of the past and accepting of reality in its most basic form. This moment is truly the climax of the novel; it is after this experience that Magnus is able to move on without the weight of his past dragging along behind him. The event also signifies two deaths: it is shortly after this that Brother Jean dies and after this that Magnus experiences a true rebirth and is able to move on without pain. What happens to Magnus in the clearing operates as an almost religious experience. The clearing is home to a grotto, and Brother Jean is a holy man. It seems that Magnus’s experience could almost be compared to Brother Jean’s encounter with the Angel of the Word. This religiousness makes sense in terms of trauma studies and language. LaCapra notes that “The attempt to come to terms with extremely traumatizing events involves the work of mourning. This work encompasses a relation between language and silence that is in some sense ritualized,” (66). Magnus’s experience in the forest is not just an experience of learning, but of mourning in silence. It is this ritual that brings him to language—any other means would be insufficient.

The next section is titled “Palimpsest,” which in itself is a suggestive title. A palimpsest refers to a writing material that has been erased and re-written over. Immediately this word

recalls Magnus. “As for his mind, it has been denuded, a rubbed-out page ready to be rewritten”

(66). Germain’s “Palimpsest” includes three quotations from three historical Rabbis. Rabbi

Nahman of Bratslav:

There is a spirit that man acquires over the course of time. But there is another spirit that enters man abundantly and rapidly, more rapidly than the blinking of an eye, for being itself beyond time this spirit has no need of time. (Germain 177)

This passage seems to echo the experiences Magnus has just had and Brother Jean’s experience with the Angel of the Word. Understanding has come over Magnus rapidly, and he is no longer a slave to the chronology of memory as he once was. The next passage echoes Magnus’s progress even more tellingly. Rabbi shem Tovibn Gaon:

...he will see that there is no limit to his intellect, and that he must search deeply...in the place where the mouth is incapable of speaking and the ear incapable of hearing. Then, like he who sleeps and whose eyes are closed, he will see visions of God, as it is written...Then he will study his spirit as one studies a book in which great marvels are written. (Germain 177)

Key in this passage is the resolution that Rabbi shem Tovibn Gaon’s character finds: he begins to study his spirit as if it were a marvelous text. This also indicates the ending that Magnus has found, though Magnus is able to read all of reality as a text, not just his own identity. The “place where the mouth is incapable of speaking and the ear incapable of hearing,” suggests the dark memories that Magnus has been working through, memories which are so traumatic that they often defy communication.

Tellingly, Germain expresses Magnus’s progress in literary terms. “The only book he takes is the one that has opened inside him with the breathy sound of an oboe, playing in a constant undertone in his mind, his breast, his mouth. The pages of the book quiver in his hands, fall one by one under his feet” (180). This sentiment echoes Cyrulnik: “The creation of an inner story is necessary for psychological survival” (92). He has come to terms with the tragedy of his

early identity loss; by recognizing the natural hum of his own inner narrative, he has learned how to survive. Magnus has closed up his house in the countryside and prepared to travel to unknown destinations.

The wind blowing in through the open door has completely effaced the name he wrote in the dust. Not that this matters any more. The name is written on the cortex of his heart. A name as light as a bird nesting on his shoulder. A name burning in the small of his back, urging him to be off.

He is not running away any more, he goes to meet his name, which always precedes him. (179)

Magnus now recognizes the place his experiences have in the narrative of his life and the book itself disintegrates easily, making way for life to proceed; he has learned how to survive through narrative. Even Magnus the bear, who has always been Magnus's companion in the labyrinth of memory and remembering, is left behind.

As for the teddy bear...there is nothing much left of him: the moths have been at the wool of his face, mice have nibbled his paws and ears, and filched the stuffing from his stomach. Magnus drops the tattered bear into the waters of the Trinquelin, a little stream that runs past the abbey. Magnus the bear drifts away, his buttercup eyes glinting with cold water and sunshine. (180)

This is obviously a significant event. The bear is the only relic Magnus has of his own true past and is a constant recorder of Magnus's life; the bear is Magnus's external memory, an objective record of reality as it happened. This objective memory has naturally disintegrated over time and is now left to float away in the stream. Without the bear, Magnus is truly unburdened from memory.

The novel ends with "Fragment ?", a short section that is weighty with meaning.

Here begins the story of a man who...

But this story eludes all telling; it is a precipitate of life, suspended in reality, so dense that all words fragment on contact with it. And even if words resistant enough might be found, the telling of it, at a time removed, would be thought the wildest fantasy. (181)

It seems clear at this point that Germain is again indicating the fairy tale as the form of language that has the ability to lay to rest the difficulties of modern life. The fragmentation of words upon contact with the difficulties of reality again represents the fragmentation of Magnus's memory, and such fragmentation is reflected in the format of the novel. The description of the story as a "precipitate of life" indicates the pre-history that is so important in the novel. These tales will always exist in "Fragment 0" and will always refer back to that "Once upon a time" in which events do not elude understanding or expression. The numbering of the fragment as "?" suggests that Magnus has found a means of escaping the rigid timing of memory and will be able to continue his life without being chained to the rigidity of his past. Even more tellingly, Germain has chosen the novel, a form of linguistic expression, as a means of expressing Magnus's story. Just as Magnus has used the narrative of the fairy tale to light the darkness of his horrific past, Germain has used *Magnus* as a tale that argues the importance of narrative in the realm of trauma and memory. In this way, Germain's novel becomes just another echo of Magnus's story, a further dilution of a reality rooted in history and tragedy. Through this format it is made available for understanding and empathy; it is made communicable through narrative.

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