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The “Phantom Growth” of Sol Nazerman: Suppression in *The Pawnbroker*

ABIGAIL BALTUSKONIS

EDWARD LEWIS WALLANT was a Jewish American writer whose novel *The Pawnbroker* was one of the first well-received fictional accounts of a Holocaust survivor living in Harlem. The narrator of *The Pawnbroker* describes survivor Sol Nazerman’s lingering traumatic grief from the Shoah as a “phantom growth deep inside.”¹ The horrors that Nazerman endured in the concentration camps are unspeakable yet inescapably and agonizingly present. He is still psychologically bound with tormenting feelings, disabling language as a means to articulate his pain, a feature that characterizes the genre of Holocaust literature. Within this genre, what cannot be spoken is portrayed in the text; as Victoria Aarons states, “Such literary modes of representation create a language and a landscape of rupture, of discursive equilibrium, and of narrative disjunction in an attempt to enact the very conditions they evoke.”² Thus the metaphorical image of internalized pain suggests the residual trauma of what this survivor of the Holocaust has not yet articulated: the unfelt agony of the violent acts com-

1 Edward Lewis Wallant, *The Pawnbroker* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 90.

2 Victoria Aarons, “A Genre of Rupture: The Literary language of the Holocaust,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 27.

mitted against his family, his fellow victims, and his own suffering at the hands of the Nazis, events that he was forced to endure. By suppressing the “phantom growth,” the totality of his mourning is quietly suspended, away from sight. Throughout the novel, however, components of his traumatic memories manifest in various “sites” of his life during times of rest: his nightmares and his leisure time. Sol’s separation from sensing his grief without fully feeling it represents the ever-present, yet inaccessible nature of his pain.

The Pawnbroker follows Sol Nazerman as he trudges through his day-to-day existence after the Holocaust. He works as pawnbroker in Harlem, a space where he is emotionally detached and barricades himself from involvement with society, further extending to alienation from himself. As much as he tries to bury his traumatic experiences of the concentration camps, they continually resurface as flashbacks in the form of nightmares. These are textually portrayed as italicized, intermittent sequences in the text where scenes from the camps are described in gruesome detail, as if occurring in the present. S. Lillian Kremer posits that “Sol cannot dismiss the past as past because it is his present and will be his future.”³ It seems that the present manifestations of his pain are remnants from his past. As the pain lingers, it brings him back to the sites of trauma, which is why “he maintains an emotional barrier to keep contemporaries at a safe distance,” hindering him from existing fully in the present.⁴ Not only do his past and present fail to co-exist, but the stimuli from his pain override current circumstance, so that the present is necessarily viewed through the lens of his incalculable losses. He therefore perpetuates his initial loss and isolation by shutting people out, projecting the horrifying past into the present and future.

The narrator asks, “Why then did he creak under invisible weights? Why did he feel that phantom growth deep inside?”⁵ A “phantom” suggests a supernatural element with an intangible form, and because it resides

3 S. Lillian Kremer, “Edward Lewis Wallant,” in *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*, ed. S. Lillian Kremer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1284.

4 Kremer, “Wallant,” 1283.

5 Wallant, *The Pawnbroker*, 91.

“deep inside,” it hides from others and himself in an indefinite location, perhaps not really existing at all. Its properties cannot be measured or tracked by any conventional means, an analogy comparable to his present unusual predicament with the abnormality of the pain inflicted upon him. It appears impossible for him to define such a profound loss, let alone feel it. The doubtful existence of his pain increases the uncertainty of what he is feeling. If it might not be real, then he does not have to confront it entirely, continuing the cycle of suppression and perpetuating his phantom.

In one of these nightmares, Sol re-lives the experience of witnessing the deaths of a multitude of his fellow captives, whose bodies are then heaped into a pile. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of his “phantom growth,” Bonnie Lyons in remarks on the “horrific clarity” of the glasses that Sol wears as he views the bodies of the dead, claiming that “the glasses, which make everything ‘savagely clear,’ permit him to see without feeling.”⁶ In this way, the glasses, though they are a tangible item, seem to be an extension of the phantom growth, magnifying the experience of the trauma. Wearing the glasses means that Sol can see the gruesome details, yet doing so further dissociates him from the pain because of the intensity of the experience.

Dreading the anniversary of his family’s death, the “phantom growth” also suggests the felt absence of his family’s inexistence. They are not there, physically, because they are deceased; their presence exists solely in his nightmares, an abstracted realm where he does not have complete access to them—indeed, he may not have any access at all. His family is located in an ethereal realm in reality and in his dreams, thus preserving their ghost-like properties. They have transfigured into unattainable phantoms. When he recalls his final images of his family, his wife looks at him with “burning eyes” and a “waxlike face,” and his son, David, is being crushed by the people in the cattle cars.⁷ The recollection of his family, and the pain of those images, renders them as “phantoms” because they are now menacing

6 Bonnie Lyons, “Seeing and Suffering in *The Pawnbroker* and *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*,” *Yiddish* 6 (1987): 115.

7 Wallant, *The Pawnbroker*, 38.

memories associated with experiences of the camp, yet Sol resists connecting his somatic distress with the absence of his family.

The narrator facilitates Sol's detachment from exposure to his internal wounds with interrogation. "Why...the phantom growth?" is directed externally, away from Sol. The narrator's rhetorical question on behalf of Sol's experience is unsettling for us, as it is for Sol. Though we know why he suffers (the flashbacks reveal fragments of his losses), the shift to the reader creates an unease, as if knowing is not enough; the reader is confronted with Sol's condition from a distanced position that further alienates Sol from his emotional response. If the narrator must ask, then how can Sol be any closer to feeling his pain? Furthermore, the rhetorical "Why" is a device used to probe our understanding of Sol's pain, raising more questions, for how do you measure a loss? Where does Sol attach pain to things that no longer exist—the inexistence of his family, and the horrific flashbacks from the camp? Why can't Sol remove the persistent anguish of loss in the absence of the sources of his trauma? If the trauma of the camp could take so much from him, why is he unable to sever himself completely from the pain? These questions all lead to the same result: Sol is unable entirely to suppress the pain from himself. He may be distanced from the memories and events—"He was in a warm, safe place"—yet the emotional response is inseparable, ineffably trapped within.

When Sol is working at his shop, while "doing petty, unnecessary chores, he sensed the beginning of a deep, unlocalized ache, a pain that was no real pain yet but only the vague promise of suffering, like some barometrical instinct."⁸ As a pawnbroker, it is his job to assign a price, a measurement to these used objects, a thing he cannot do owing to his "phantom" pain. The moment that the work stops and his mind wanders, he can no longer affix a number or value to these random objects, and his unease re-surfaces. It is almost as if the continual assignment of prices is a kind of "insulation" for his suffering, because he is in control of the exchanges from his customers. He is in a position of power, which he was unable to occupy when his trauma occurred.

8 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 55

Time's unavoidable persistence emphasizes an agonizing reoccurrence for Sol when he realizes the date nears "the twenty-eighth of August... the anniversary of his family's death."⁹ The narrator's description depicts Sol on the weekend: "His Sundays were parodies of the Sabbath; hours to be got through without the insulation of work."¹⁰ Here, time is referenced by a single day, Sunday, and then deconstructed into its smaller components, hours. Along with the notion of a "parody of the Sabbath," the deconstruction of Sunday into its hours asks the reader to consider *how* Sol perceives time. To specifically state the hours lapsed, in this context, is an implication of the pressure Sol feels and lives in. The day does not spontaneously unfold, but is dissected into units that create obstacles to an otherwise linear development of time. Therefore, what would, and should, be leisure time for Sol has acquired an unnatural, even dangerous, element because it lacks the "insulation of work."¹¹ Insulation suggests the protective quality of his job, perhaps because of its structured distraction. Without the protective dimensions of his role as "The Pawnbroker," the passage of time and the hours threaten to wear down his defenses, revealing the pain which he works to suppress. Sol seems to be acutely aware of the passage of time during his waking hours, involving the reader in his own distress. For it is at night, when he rests and his conscious defenses are lowered, that the nightmares—those "phantoms"—return.

The semicolon combining the two sentences—"His Sundays were parodies of the Sabbath; hours to be got through without the insulation of work"—visually represents Sol's harrowing interpretation of time because it denotes the effort in Sol's leisure time.¹² The punctuation both extends the span of the sentence and points to Sol's prolonged conceptions of time. The prolonged sense of time increases the reader's sense of time, so that we are forced to confront the perverse nature of what would otherwise be Sol's leisure time. For the reader, the lines develop an illustration of Sol's suffering.

9 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 91.

10 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90–91.

11 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90.

12 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90–91.

For Sol, the “phantom growth” appears to reside within him, yet is made visible to the reader. His awareness of time is distorted: no longer is there “the Sabbath,” a designated day of rest.

As Sol awoke on a Saturday morning, “He swung his feet to the floor of his bedroom and stared at the leafy shape of sunlight over them; it was like morning discovering the marble of a statue.”¹³ Comparing his feet to marble denotes his emotional defenses, his hardened façade. As the sunlight exposes his feet, they are depicted as the “marble of a statue,” an image that portrays his emotional response to the traumatic experiences re-enacted in his nightmares.¹⁴ The image represents his process of disconnecting from himself because his feet are immediately cast as lifeless objects, a barricade from his physical exterior. If he imagines his exterior as a statue, then perhaps he can emotionally inhabit an unfeeling existence. He is like marble because he has suppressed his feelings so that now he is emotionally numbed and hardened, “a feeling like BOREDOM.”¹⁵ This suppression creates a rigidity of his existence, like being encased in the hardened substance of a statue that, like him, represents life but is actually lifeless. Unlike a metal statue which would be more resilient to the elements, marble is a softer substance and thus harder to maintain. For Sol, his suppression takes effort to maintain, as he moves along with “invisible weights,” like the heaviness of marble.

Additionally, the shape of his two feet side by side—two rectangular objects resembling the “marble of a statue”—inevitably evokes gravestones. The combined imagery suggests two headstones, one for his wife holding his child Naomi and the other for his son. He is the graveyard that the headstones adorn forever; however, while the pain of their loss is attached to him, it is not yet accepted by him because their deaths are symbolized as objects, not described in terms of emotional experiences. The idea that “it was like morning...” is also suggestive of “mourning,” a thing which he can-

13 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90.

14 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90.

15 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 100.

not do.¹⁶ The tone of the sentence transforms into one of deep reverence of mourning where the sun reaches the tombs that are entrenched on his feet. These feet, a part of himself, appear to be more object than human, not fully acceptable as belonging to him. He is just the graveyard to which their loss is attached, but, again, his inward phantom is suggested outwardly onto himself, a sight which is inescapable.

Having no respite from his pain during the day or night, Sol's night-time flashbacks function as an intrusive disturbance to his sense of time because his rest is impaired—"The Pawnbroker moaned in his sleep without waking."¹⁷ The flashbacks force him backwards in time to the haunting memories without means of escape. As Philippe Codde observes, "Nazerman, like all trauma victims, does not fully experience the traumatic event as it takes place ... but suffers afterwards from so-called 'abreations,' visual flashes that make one relive the trauma. Sol's mental evolution can then be charted in term of LaCapra's concept (derived from Freud) of 'working-through,' a gradual but partial overcoming of the traumatic event."¹⁸ These "abreations" seem to occur for Sol in the form of nightmares. Since he is sleeping and cannot willfully enact his defenses when these nightmares occur, Sol is not altogether conscious at the times when he must re-visit his trauma; however, perhaps it is that defenseless state of sleep which permits him a "partial overcoming of the traumatic event" because he can experience portions of it to a lesser extent. His unconscious inhibits the entirety of all his senses, allowing a safer re-enactment of his traumatic memories. During the day, Sol is similarly disconnected from time, enacting "parodies of the Sabbath."¹⁹ A parody signifies an unreal quality to his actions. He is mentally absent during his day off from work, meaning he is not really taking time off. Instead, he is just going through the motions, disengaged. Just like the episodic flashbacks, the daytime hours of the "Sabbath," a day of rest, are stretched out, fraught with a perpetual quality consisting of "invisible

16 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90.

17 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 38.

18 Philippe Codde, *The Jewish American Novel* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), 195.

19 Wallant, *The Pawnbroker*, 90.

weights.”²⁰ In both instances, Sol leads a partial existence, one incongruent with the present time because he is either re-living the trauma of his past or aloof in “his parodies.” When he is not altogether mentally present, painful parts of his existence are hidden, “invisible” from himself. Therefore, the invisibility within himself reflects Sol’s inhabitation of this “phantom” being.

In one of his flashbacks, Sol is unable to move, “pressed against the wood...pressed into that one position by two hundred other bodies.”²¹ The light exposes his “wife’s grim face,” just as it exposes his feet on that Sunday morning. The light is dangerous because it illuminates his sight, which is associated with so many instances of horror. Therefore, the interplay of the light on his feet has become a trigger reminding him of his helplessness and inability to move his lower extremities, a space where David was lost “somewhere down near Sol’s leg.”²² Though there is nothing physically wrong with his feet, he attributes his pain to his “marbled feet,” his inability to move in the cattle car. His “phantom growth” has spread to his feet, but at the moment of their exposure, his feet are pronounced as lifeless objects, a way in which to perpetuate his internal pain without necessarily feeling it. His feet are immediately “nothing, nothing, nothing,”²³ as he can do nothing to save David. To say it is “nothing” serves as another act of denial because he attempts to negate the reality, which vehemently returns in his memory.

Sol is “bleakly comforted at having found a name for his ache.”²⁴ To have a name for his pain provides him with a reassurance of its existence. A name is a categorization, an intellectual framework for his pain that minimizes its threat. In contrast, during Sol’s nightmare of his surgical procedure, his senses, particularly the unseen, are continually evoked: “WHAT ARE YOU TAKING OUT OF ME?” he screamed, seeing himself ‘boned’ like some beast being prepared for someone’s meal.”²⁵ In this instance, Sol is terrified by what he senses—“he felt no pain”—and by what he cannot see. It is not

20 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 90.

21 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 37–38.

22 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 37.

23 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 38.

24 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 91.

25 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 131.

just what he sees, but also the unknown which haunts him. The unknown procedure reinforces the imagery of the “phantom growth” of pain because he cannot see what is happening, so it acts as a kind of invisible shock. With lessened awareness, it heightens his vulnerability since he does not know how to prepare himself for the torture inflicted on him. At the same time, even if he could have seen the procedure, there was nothing he could have done to stop it.

As he grapples with the trauma, Sol recalls fragments of his grief somatically. Sometimes he calls it “a fever...perhaps,”²⁶ and he also says, “Maybe I have a tumor.”²⁷ The “phantom growth” is an unnamable, imprecise source of pain, referenced throughout the text as Sol both acknowledges and doubts its existence. All of these potential diagnoses for his suffering point to conditions which can be felt but not seen, “invisible” conditions that are inflicted within. To suppose his pain is merely a physical condition, like a fever or tumor, suggests that it could be resolved through medical treatment. Instead, his pain is a formless entity without a location. The transformative quality of the growth paired with his insistent interrogation of it appears to prevent Sol from mourning because he cannot confront the losses. He knows that it will soon be the anniversary of his family’s death, but refuses to accept that as the cause of unease. Therefore, it seems that Sol’s physical pain merely masks his mental anguish. Citing van der Kolk and van der Hart, Michael K. Johnson describes the process of healing from traumatic wounds as one which “requires integrating the ‘unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences’ with ‘existing mental schemes’ and by doing so consciously transforming and translating unspeakable experience into ‘narrative language’ and narrative memory.”²⁸ Johnson’s explanation for traumatic recovery, however, suggests that Sol is in the initial stages of forming words—“narrative language”—for those experiences. While he cannot describe a cohesive story for his flashbacks, aloud or to himself, Sol

26 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 28.

27 Wallant, *Pawnbroker*, 73.

28 Michael K. Johnson, “Traumatic Experience and the Representation of Nature in the Novel and Film *The Pawnbroker*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35 (2007): 295.

is mentally constructing somatic complaints that parallel the conditions of the camp, because they could prove fatal. In this way, the potential “fever” or “tumor” that he feels both inhibits and extracts the trauma because it “translat[es] unspeakable experience” into its preliminary mode of narration. Even though he posits them as physical laments, he is still approaching the actual traumatic events linguistically.

In all of his attempts to eradicate his trauma, Sol persistently confronts an internal emptiness that foretells both the intensity and the emptiness of his existence. His loss, the “phantom growth deep inside,” is an elusive kind of pain that surpasses the limitations of time, beyond the sights of the initial traumas, and exists just as much inside as outside himself. It is, perhaps, a response equal in measure to the irrational conditions of the camp and the torture inflicted upon him. The “phantom growth” symbolizes the insurmountable loss he has experienced as well as his numbed response to life. In the process of denying pain, he is also denied the feeling of a “warm, safe place,” the feeling of peace.

Abigail Baltuskonis is a junior majoring in English, and this essay was prepared as part of Dr. Victoria Aarons' Literature in the Holocaust (English 4427, Fall 2015).