

The Unifying Structures of George Perec's Suspended Memoirs

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In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975)¹, Georges Perec has woven together two narratives, an attempted autobiography and a re-created childhood fantasy, into a rich literary tapestry which has fascinated readers and earned the appreciation of critics as a major literary work. Bernard Pingaud considers it, "l'oeuvre la plus énigmatique de Perec, celle aussi où il se livre le plus et qui appelle irrésistiblement le commentaire."² Superficially, the weaving is rather a coarse grafting with obvious seams, for Perec has merely alternated chapters of the two narratives. The odd-numbered chapters tell the story, created when Perec was 13, of the fictional Gaspard Winckler, his missing namesake, and his fascination with an island in the Tierra del Fuego called W, where sport is king; the even-numbered chapters represent Perec's attempt to piece together memories and reminders of his childhood. The final chapter quotes at length David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* to bind together the autobiography and the fantasy. For the athletic hierarchy on W evolves throughout the novel into a "machine énorme dont chaque rouage participe . . . à l'anéantissement systématique des hommes" (p. 218), comparable to the Nazi occupation of France which scarred Perec's childhood and separated him from his mother.

There is a further weaving which takes place, however, a more subtle creation of intertextual relationships which unite the two narratives, creating a complex "whole" which is greater than the sum of its parts, and which has inspired remarkably diverse interpretations, as a condemnation of the capitalist system³, as an oedipal search for identity,⁴ and as an affirmation of Jewish identity and an allegory of PLO fanaticism⁵.

Perec's project is self-consciously literary; critics have cited many likely sources: Proust, Faulkner, Dickens, Beckett, Kafka, Verne, Leiris, Queneau, Flaubert, Rousset, and Melville. The project is also immensely personal. At age 38, "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," Perec stops to meditate upon his past and the light it may throw upon his future. Two epigraphs from Queneau beginning the first and second halves of the book reflect this intention. At a crossroad in his life, Perec seizes upon the doubleness of the route going before and after, and constructs a book based on doubling effects with X as a major symbol. As he explains in the course of the narrative (pp. 105-06), Perec was fascinated in his childhood by the values of X as a letter, a word, and a symbol. He built upon it a complex network of associations, a "géometrie fantasmique" which groups X as a symbol of words

¹Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Denoël, 1975). Subsequent references are to this edition.

²Bernard Pingaud, "Ceci n'est pas un puzzle," *L'Arc*, 76 (1979), 1.

³Claude Burgelin, "W ou le souvenir d'enfance de Georges Perec," *Les Temps Modernes*, 31, No. 351 (1975), 568-71.

⁴Catherine Clément, "Auschwitz, ou la disparition," *L'Arc*, 76 (1979), 87-90.

⁵Robert Misrahi, "W, un roman réflexif," *L'Arc*, 76 (1979), 81-86.

crossed out, removal, multiplication and unknowns, with permutations of the geometric components of X, two V's, which can be manipulated to form the symbols of Nazism, the Gestapo, and Judaism, as well, of course, as W.

Robert Misrahi⁶ has analyzed the structural relationships of the different parts of the book, specifically their doubling and mirroring effects. He divides the book into four parts: W₁, W₂, P₁, and P₂. The W sections tell the story of Winckler and the island W. The P sections are Perec's memoirs. Parts 1 and 2 of the novel are divided by titles (*Première partie*, *Deuxième partie*), by an ellipsis in parentheses on page 85 and by the Queneau quotes.

Gaspard Winckler's search for his namesake, the sickly child lost at sea or perhaps abandoned by his mother, introduces a detective motif which is common to W₁ and P₁. The parallels between the investigation of the disappearance of Gaspard Winckler and Perec's search through old photographs and documents for evidence of the orphaned boy he once was and doesn't remember are obvious and disturbing. Claude Burgelin⁷, like Perec himself (p. 59), speaks of Oedipus, and like Philippe Berthier⁸, notes that both mothers are named Cecile. Both narrators use similar language to describe their searches (pp. 10, 21-22); in both narratives the city of Venice is the site of a sudden memory (pp. 10, 14), the word "bretzel" assumes an unexpected importance (pp. 26, 51), and the narrator stresses his passive role as observer (pp. 10, 109). W₂'s obsession with athletic training is echoed in Perec's fascination with the rituals of skiing (pp. 139-41).

On the back cover of the book, Perec calls attention to the apparent discontinuity of his work, focusing not on the alternation between W and P, but rather on the break between the two halves of W: "Le récit d'aventures, à côté, a quelque chose de grandiose, ou peut-être de suspect. Car il commence par raconter une histoire et, d'un seul coup, se lance dans une autre: dans cette rupture, cette cassure qui suspend le récit autour d'on ne sait quelle attente, se trouve le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce livre, ces *points de suspension* auxquels se sont accrochés les fils rompus de l'enfance et la trame de l'écriture." Perec italicizes the phrase "points de suspension," which refers specifically to the ellipsis on the otherwise blank page 85, which interrupts the proposed search for Gaspard Winckler and precedes the description of W. This break in the text, this blank page, is central to Perec's conception of his book, "le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce livre." Anne Roche summarizes the meaning of the blank page in terms of the two interrupted narratives: "S'il était licite de se hasarder à noircir cette page blanche, on pourrait dire que, dans cet espace où rien n'est dit, le faux Gaspard Winckler part pour W et le petit Georges Perec part pour Villard, quittant sa mère qu'il ne reverra jamais (elle mourra à Auschwitz). En fait, dans cette page blanche, c'est l'explosion de l'univers, (fictif pour Winckler, "réel" pour Perec), qui *fonde* le texte."⁹

Page 85, "cette page blanche . . . cet espace où rien n'est dit," this "rupture," this "cassure" represents on one hand a perfectly neutral ground, a suspension, in Perec's geometric terms the crossing points of the two axes (x=0; y=0). On the other hand, it is ground zero, "l'explosion de l'univers," the point of intersection of "une enfance traversée par la guerre."¹⁰ It has the same value as the page inserted

⁶Misrahi, 81-82.

⁷Burgelin, 568-69.

⁸Philippe Berthier, "Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*," *Le Bulletin des Lettres*, 370 (July 15, 1975), 255-56

⁹Anne Roche, "Souvenir d'enfance," *Magazine Littéraire*, March 1983, p. 27.

¹⁰Jean-Baptiste Mauroux, "Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*," *Quinzaine Littéraire*, 211 (June 1-15, 1975), 11.

by Victor Hugo between the second and third poems of the Fourth Book of *Les Contemplations*, bearing the date "4 Septembre 1843" and a series of "points de suspension" to mark, for the bereaved poet, the before and after of the death of his beloved daughter, his silence, and the eventual conception of the book of poems.

Perec relates the notion of *suspension* directly to his departure from Paris for Villard at the beginning of the occupation. His vague memory of the scene includes three details: his mother had given him a Charlie Chaplin comic book on whose cover Chaplin is floating from a parachute attached to his suspenders. Perec's arm was in a sling, or (because his aunt denies the presence of a sling) he was wearing a bandage for a hernia, a "suspensoir," Perec analyzes these uncertain details: "Un triple trait parcourt ce souvenir: parachute, bras en écharpe, bandage herniaire: cela tient de la suspension, du soutien, presque de la prothèse" (p. 77). Sixteen years later, as he is about to make his first parachute jump, he suddenly relives the departure: "Je fus précipité dans le vide; tous les fils furent rompus; je tombai, seul et sans soutien" (p. 77). His childhood was irrevocably severed at the Gare de Lyon when he was thrown into the emptiness of the train, exiled and orphaned in one traumatic moment, which his childish imagination buries under images of suspension.

Despite his perception of the pathos of the repressed memory, Perec refuses to dwell upon it. Instead he observes and analyzes the birth of his artistic imagination through his unconscious attempts to adjust to the loss of his mother. With remarkable lucidity, he continues to explore the notions of "cassure" and "rupture" as they reappear in his life as a series of dislocations: of his memories, and of his early attempts to write and draw (p. 93). He catalogs a rich network of obsessive imagery relating notions of suspension, dislocation, and fracture which become part of his creative imagination, from which will spring a fascination with puzzles, with missing elements and with the notion of *coupure*.

An additional personal anecdote and Perec's interpretation of it further relate these associated images to the childhood separation. He remembers in the spring of 1942, "bien qu'elle soit chronologiquement impossible" (p. 108), a sledding accident, a broken shoulder blade, and his right hand tied behind his back in a sling, which earned for him much consoling pity. Later information convinces Perec that the accident actually happened to another boy, and that the broken shoulder, a "reparable" fracture is really a metaphor for a more traumatic and irreparable break in his life. The real wound, only whispered and not fully understood by the child is the absence, the silence which steals his mother from him.

The absence itself explodes within Perec's imagination; the mature Perec's recognition of the source and role of his broken and suspended imagery has, in Anne Roche's terms, founded the text. To present the splintered images of a shattered childhood, Perec employs a form which mirrors its content and which calls forth associated images which have accompanied him since the childhood experiences which the book evokes. The book is for Perec an essential effort to accept his past and to affirm his future by assuming the responsibility of memorializing his lost parents and his subsequently lost childhood.