



A Double Life: Georges Perec, W, and the Making of The Memory of Childhood.
 by R. J. E Bacon

Prologue

In 1987, five years after his death, Georges Perec's last completed novel, *Life A Users Manual*, was published in Britain and America to great acclaim. In the following ten years all of his completed, published, novels and his final uncompleted novel, were published in English translation plus a collection of shorter, non-fiction works. And in 2014, his first, but unpublished, novel, *Portrait of a Man*, was also published. Further, in 1993, the translator of many of his most significant works, David Bellos, produced an exhaustive biography called *Georges Perec: A Life In Words* that was highly praised and which won the Prix Goncourt for Biography in 1994. As well as garnering significant critical acclaim all of these works in translation sold well. So for a French writer, who died young, Perec probably achieved greater prominence and commercial success in translation than many French writers, if not quite reaching the household name status of a Sartre, Camus, De Beauvoir, or Derrida.

On the other hand, it is also true that he remains somewhat unknown and enigmatic. And this is perhaps because he cannot be slotted into any easily recognised categories and he remained somewhat elusive as a “personality”. His final three major works – *A Void*, *W*, and *Life a Users Manual* – may seem, on the surface, lightweight, ludic, constructed with and round a number of self-imposed rules and constraints, and rather haphazardly put together. This surface appearance is a consequence of his membership of *OuLiPo* where the literary and personal content might seem subservient to the mathematical and games-playing demands and skills. And yet, at the same time, each of them deal, if somewhat elliptically, with some very intense and personally and historically significant themes – of mass destruction and genocide, of abandonment, emptiness and anomie, and of how to speak of the unspeakable. And they do so in a way that unexpectedly hits the reader with great emotional force.

Moreover, unlike his perhaps better-known near contemporary Patrick Modiano, Perec never wrote the same book twice, preferring, as he put it, to try and write in every style possible. John Sturrock sums up the situation in this way:

Perec was a Parisian and an intellectual in many of his tastes, but too nervous and too sincerely democratic ever to have wanted to start pronouncing on this and that in the megaphone role of the of a Paris intellectual....(Like Jean-Paul Sartre and others) Perec, too, went to Left-Bank cafes, not in his case to lay down any law...but rather to play the pinball machines...Which is a more human way than most of coping with ennui. (Sturrock, 1997, px).

All this makes him hard to categorise and so, perhaps easy to ignore or overlook. Sturrock also points out that anyone reading Perec is better off knowing the terrible facts of his childhood, “*since not knowing them will make at least some of his writings seem much less affecting than they actually are*”(ibid, pxi). I hope, in what follows, that by uncovering something of what lies concealed in ‘W’, his greatest and most challenging work, that it will be easier to appreciate the depth of his skill and the extent of his importance as a contemporary writer.

Introduction

You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all ... Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it we are nothing. Luis Bunuel, My Last Sigh.

Speaking to the Guardian in 2013, Colm Toibin described writing as “serious work....I pull this stuff up from me – it’s not as if it’s a pleasure”. Any attempt to label him a storyteller was met with a gruff response. That suggested, he said, that “I got it from my grandmother or something when my writing really comes out of silence”. (Guardian 3rd Feb 2017).

For over 40 years, as a research sociologist and then as a psychoanalyst, I have listened to, engaged with and sometimes written about hundreds of stories of childhood. It is never easy finding one’s way through to what might be called the truth of someone’s story – the truth that they can then both grow from and leave behind, be free from. Finding my way through Perec’s story, as he sets it out in this book, in order to write this account of it, has been, both psychologically and intellectually, one of the hardest and most rewarding tasks I have undertaken.

Perec, for reasons and in ways I shall try to make clear, was an unparalleled literary master of deception, confabulation and disguise. This book is also, I am clear, supremely truthful in its structure, its content and its intent. The combination of these two strains is what makes it so complex, contradictory and difficult; and at the same time so rich and rewarding. What follows is in four parts. First, a brief sketch of a little of his life. Then, second, using the title as an Ariadne’s thread, I will try to unpick what the book is not, and cannot be. Thirdly, I will say something about its literary antecedents. And fourth, I will describe its relationship to psychoanalysis.

A Brief Life

His parents were Polish Jewish émigrés arriving in France after the 1st World War. They tried, unsuccessfully, to be granted naturalisation as French citizens, so when World War 2 broke out, Perec’s father joined the French Foreign Legion. He was killed by a stray shell on the day of the armistice. In ‘W’ Perec gives one of several sparse summaries of his early history:

“I was born in the month of March 1936. Perhaps there were three years of relative happiness...War came, my Father enlisted and died. My mother became a war widow. She went into mourning. I was put out to a nanny. Her business (hairdressing) was

closed...One day she took me to the station. It was in 1942. It was the Gare de Lyon. She bought me a magazine which must have been an issue of Charlie. As the train moved out, I caught sight of her, I seem to remember, waving a white handkerchief from the platform. I was going to Villard-de-Lans, with the Red Cross.

I have been told that later on she tried to cross the Loire. The runner she called on, who was to smuggle her across...turned out to be away. She didn't make a fuss and returned to Paris. She was advised to move house, to hide. She didn't bother. She thought her war widow's status would keep her out of trouble. She was picked up in a raid, together with her sister, my aunt. She was interned at Drancy on 23rd January 1943, then deported on 11th February following, destination Auschwitz. She saw the country of her birth again before she died. She died without understanding”(Perec, 1988, pp32-3).

At Villard-de-Lans, in the Savoie, Perec was enrolled in the Collège Turenne where, under a new name, he learnt the catechism and was baptized. When the war ended, Perec was adopted by his father's sister and her husband and taken back to live with them in Paris. When he was 10, he was referred to Francoise Dolto for psychotherapy, a process which lasted for perhaps two years. As an adult, Perec could not recall any of this. It was during these sessions that Perec made the drawings which were the origin of the story of W. In 1956 he returned to analysis, 3 times per week for about a year. He later commented that it was this psychoanalyst who had given him permission to be a writer. In 1970, following a breakdown and a suicide attempt, Perec entered analysis with J-B Pontalis. It lasted for four years and it was during this time that Perec composed (or constructed) W which was published in France in 1975.

In 1967, at the instigation of Raymond Queneau, Perec was made a member of OuLiPo – the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle. This had been “*formed in 1960 by a group of writers and mathematicians who were all interested in the possible connections between the practice of mathematics and the various formal constraints that have to be satisfied in the writing of poetry. Perec was no sort of mathematician but the interests and above all the advanced experiments in constraint that the members of OuLiPo went in for, were right up his street. He became a key and resourceful member of the group, proving himself capable of OuLiPian feats of transcendent skill*”(Sturrock, 1997, pp xiii – xiv).

Ariadne's Thread

What is the least one could expect from an autobiography with the title ‘The Memory of Childhood’? An author, a narrator, a narrative? An account of a childhood? A description of a child's thoughts, feelings, acts? And, because of the definite article, perhaps something definite, if not definitive? Perec provides (almost) none of the above. To begin with, the book, almost, begins with the words “*I have no childhood memories*”(Perec, 1988 p6). In fact, this is not quite the beginning of the book. The numbered pages begin with an unnamed fictional character saying, “*For years I put off my telling of the story of my voyage to W*”(ibid, p3).

However, that also is not quite the beginning. Before that there is an unnumbered page in which ‘GP’ announces, apparently, the structure of the book; “*What follows are two stories which simply alternate. You might think that they have nothing in common but in fact they are inextricably bound up with each other, as though neither could exist on their own and the pale light they cast on each other is what makes apparent what is never quite said in one or the other, but only emerges in their fragile overlapping. It is on that point of suspension that the broken threads of childhood and remembering are caught*”(ibid, 1988). Then, under the heading ‘Part One’, is a quotation from a poem by Raymond Queneau; “*Cette brume insensée où s’agitent des ombres, comment pourrais-je l’éclaircir?*” (*That mindless mist where shadows swirl/How could I pierce it?*)

What then about an author, a narrator and/or a narration? At my reckoning, there are seven narrations/narratives/narrators mixed together in the book. There is no omniscient narrative or narrator, and there is no attempt to draw all the different threads together. So is there a child in the book, or any descriptions of a child’s thoughts, feelings, acts or experiences? In fact there are three children. First, there is a fictional child called Gaspard Winkler, a locked-in deaf-mute whose identity is then given, by his mother, to the initially unnamed Gaspard Winkler who narrates the story of W. This child is then taken by his mother on a long sea voyage in a desperate attempt to bring him to life. This voyage ends in a shipwreck off Tierra del Fuego with the loss of all hands. All of the bodies of the crew and passengers are recovered except for that of the child. This child says nothing, does nothing and then disappears. The book ends with a long quote from L’Univers Concentrationnaire by David Rousset – a description of life in German Labour Camps during WW2, followed by a note from Perec saying that he has forgotten why he chose Tierra del Fuego as the location for W.

Then, second, there is the fictional narrator ‘Gaspard Winkler’ as a child – a matter brusquely disposed of in a few lines. He lost his father when he was six; was adopted by neighbours and left, to join the army, when he was sixteen. There is no mention of a mother. And finally, there is Perec, the one who has no memories of childhood. His childhood is also described with breath taking brevity in Chapter 2; “*Up to my twelfth year or thereabouts, my story comes to barely a couple of lines: I lost my father at four, my mother at six; I spent the war in various boarding-houses in Villard-de-Lans. In 1945 my father’s sister and her husband adopted me*”. He then goes on, “*When I was thirteen I made up a story which I told and drew in pictures. Later I forgot it. Seven years ago...I suddenly remembered that the story was called W and that it was, somehow, if not the story of my childhood then it was at least a story of my childhood*”(ibid p6).

This short chapter ends with the following lines: “*Once again the snares of writing were set. Once again I was like a child playing hide-and-peek, who doesn’t know what he fears or wants more: to stay hidden or to be found*”. Then, a few lines further on, he makes an apparently clear, programmatic statement: “*Today, four years later, I propose to bring to term – by which I mean just as much “to mark the end of” as “to give a name to” – this gradual unravelling. W is no more like my Olympic fantasy than that fantasy was like my childhood. But in the crisscross web that they weave I know there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken, the passage of my history and the story of my passage*”(ibid p7).

Six short chapters later, he returns to the problem of his memories, or lack of them. He makes use of two texts written 15 years earlier and then devotes an equal

number of pages to correcting, disavowing and undoing the truth of what he had written. He describes fragments of memory and isolated images of his early years – memories and images that he has good reasons to mistrust as if they were constructed in order to fill in gaps. From these fragments he paints a possible picture of his father and mother and of his life with them. He states, “*I don’t know where the break is in the threads that tie me to my childhood*”(ibid p12). He sums up this early life, which culminates with his being sent away to Villard-de-Lans, in a paragraph of stark blankness: “*I have no memory of my father other than the one about the key or coin he might have given me one evening on his return from work. The only surviving memory of my mother is of the day she took me to the Gare de Lyons, which is where I left for Villard-de-Lans in a Red Cross convoy.*”(ibid p26).

Of his life in Villard-de-Lans he also has very little to say, concluding “*from this point on there are memories – fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome – but there is nothing that binds them together...There are no landmarks, memories are only scraps snatched from a void. No moorings, no anchor. Time went by. The only thing you do know is that it went on for years and then one day it stopped*”(ibid pp68-9).

He then makes one of his rare, programmatic, statements about writing and remembering: “*I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing....I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation*” And then, a few lines later as if contradicting or correcting himself, he continues, “*I am not writing in order to say that I shall say nothing, I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say.*”(ibid p42)

In all the silences, gaps, erasures, corrections, fantasies, fragments and contradictions which go to make up such a large part of the apparently autobiographical sections of the book, there is one absence which is so glaring, so hidden right out in the open, so much an example of the paradox he has posed with his statement “*I do not know if what I might have to say is unsaid because it is unsayable (the unsayable is not buried inside writing, it is what prompted it in the first place.)*”(ibid p42), that it feels as if to mention it is to break a sacred vow. And that is any mention of what he must have been told he had to be and do in order not only for him to survive in Villard-de-Lans, but also to protect all the other Jewish families and children hidden out in the open in the surrounding countryside.

In his biography of Perec David Bellos puts it as follows: “*It has to be supposed that before Jojo went to board at the Collège Turenne , someone, perhaps his Uncle, found a way to make him understand what he must not ever reveal. Georges Perec had no memory of this, because the means he had to use to follow the injunction was – to forget. How else do you tell a child that it is dangerous for him to reveal, (even incidentally, by things he does not say but merely lets slip, by the movement of an eye, or an eyebrow), that he understands Yiddish, that he knows what the Hebrew letters are, that his Father’s name was Izie, that he lives in Belleville, that his family comes from Poland, that his grandmother sells pickled cucumbers, salt herring, and halva, that his grandfather is never around on Saturdays, that most of his friends are jewish – in a word that he too is a Jew? Presumably you must tell him that he must set aside all memories of the past, that he is starting a new life, that his name is Breton, that he is French, and that he must never think of what he has left behind. It was a vitally necessary act of forgetting*”. (Bellos, 1999 p68)

It is not entirely true to say that Perec makes no reference to this, but he does so in a typically Perecian fashion that conceals and displaces as much as it reveals. In a paragraph on the names of his father, Perec says that “...everyone called my father *Isie* (or *Izy*). I am the only person to have thought, for very many years, that he was called *André*. One day I had a talk with my aunt about this. She thinks it was perhaps a nickname he had from his workmates or café acquaintances. For my part, I tend to think that between 1940 and 1945, when it was the most basic precaution to be called *Bienfait* or *Beauchamp* instead of *Bienenfeld*, *Chevron* instead of *Chavranski*, *Norman* instead of *Nordmann*, I could have been told that my father’s name was *André*, my mother’s *Cécile*, and that we came from *Brittany*”. (Perec, 1988 p35)

By now several things are apparent. This book is not, simply, an autobiography. On the one hand, it is more like an archaeology, an uncovering of what has been buried and broken, a sifting of fragments. To employ an Irishism, it fits the definition of a net as holes held together by bits of string. It is not a memory or a memoir. It is a description of a struggle with remembering and forgetting, with being remembered and being forgotten, with existing and not existing. Most poignantly, it is a set of painful encounters with absences, silences and disappearances and an attempt to lay out and be truthful to both what can and, more importantly, what cannot be said.

On the other side, though, it is equally obviously a cover-up, a series of false trails, falsehoods, tricks and sleights of hand. As Bellos puts it, “*He was juggling with such brilliance as to mystify even himself*” (Bellos, 1999 p552). Here the effort, the effect, is not a speaking-out but its opposite, a silencing and showing a silence, a void. One by one in the book each of the narrators disappear, or silence themselves. At its literal heart, there is a page (page 61) empty except for a set of brackets enclosing three dots. (...) thus. A discontinued quotation, with no words. How then did it come about and what else might it be? The first thing to say is that precisely because it fails, or refuses, to fit into any proper category, being neither autobiography, biography, memoir or novel it is completely *sui generis*. In that sense, if almost no other, it must be called utterly authentic, in fact, utterly true. It can only be read as and for what it is, not misrecognised by shoe-horning it into some pre-existing category.

As such, I will suggest, it is the best, the most truthful account of his childhood – both his experience as a child and what forces gripped and moulded him as a child – that Perec could give. As he said, bluntly, “I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say”. But what he has to say is, centrally, that he was prohibited from saying the truth, from speaking of himself. He has to show this prohibition in all its force and necessity. But while showing this, he also has to try, behind his own back, to find a way beyond it.

What Perec had to find his way round was an emptied space, a void, and its guardian injunction. To do this, I can identify (I’m sure there are more) four main methods. The first, is simply not to mention certain people and events, or to distort and then displace them to other figures and/or parts of the text in a way which castrates their potency and strips them of their proper meaning. This, as I’ve described, is what he did with what must have greeted him at his arrival at Villard-de-Lans. In a similar vein, he nowhere mentions either that the original set of drawings of W were done while he was in therapy, aged 12, with Francoise Dolto, France’s most eminent Child Analyst; or that the book itself was constructed during the four years between 1970 and 1974 that he was in analysis with J-B Pontalis. I will return to this later.

The second is to fill the apparently factual or autobiographical parts of the text with egregious errors – errors which, as Bellos has pointed out, he could not have failed to notice and which leap out of the text as if designed to draw attention to themselves. The third is make use of puns which would be apparent to any native French speaker, and then to deny that he has any knowledge of what he is doing. A good example of this is when he says, right at the end of the book, that he cannot remember why he set W in Tierra del Fuego. In French this is Terre de Feu. As Larousse has it, Feu is a literary adjective meaning *défunt* – Un qui est mort. Thus Terre de Feu also translates as The Land of the Dead.

It's as if with these three devices Perec can say that much of what is apparently true is false and vice versa. The truth is that he cannot speak the truth and to show that he shows that he has to lie. The final, most elaborate and elaborated method is to transpose the truth into a fantasy, re-arranging the elements to simultaneously conceal and make the truth clearer. This is that part of the title of the book which up till now I have studiously ignored – 'W or...'. Perec makes clear, from the beginning, from the title itself, that the definite article before Memory is itself preceded by something much more enigmatic.

What do these three letters mean? To start with W: around 'W' there has been much speculation and interpretation. Larousse makes clear that there are very few words in French which begin with W and even fewer actual French words. It is, largely, an import. Much of the speculation has focussed on its formation as a double V, which leads to the possibility of a pun, double V/vie, a double life. However, in French V is not pronounced Vie but Vay which makes the pun slightly unlikely. What the title does show, though, is that what follows is, exactly, a double life, half fantasy, half memory, which the reader has to unravel.

My own interpretation of W is that it is an inversion of 'M'. This leads off in two, ostensibly, contradictory directions. First, obviously, to Mother/Mère. Gaspard Winkler, as a child, is dead to his mother, who then dies; Gaspard Winkler, the adult, makes no mention of a mother; W is a motherless world. The children look after themselves before being thrust into the murderous world of the Games. But this motherlessness is not just in W; it is also in the Memory sections of the book. On the one hand, his mother is a very shadowy figure, hardly mentioned, hardly remembered. As I have quoted, "*The only memory of my mother that remains to me is that of the day when she accompanied me to the Gare du Lyon from where...I departed for Villard-de-Lans*" (Perec, 1988 p45).

Perhaps even more strikingly at no point in the book does he ever mention that he ever missed his mother, longed for her, asked after her or searched for her. The child who wanted for a mother is absent. Instead, in the story of the child GW, there is a mother – whose name is an elaborated version of Perec's mother's name – gripped by a desperate search for her child, to bring him back to life. All the longing and grieving and searching is transposed from a child to a mother.

But, and this is the shadow side of the coin marked 'M', in W it is that same mother who, first, gives away her child's identity so that another man can make a new life; and then, inadvertently, while sailing aimlessly through dangerous seas, brings about the child's disappearance and her own death. Bellos states that one of Perec's favourite films was 'M', Fritz Lang's expressionist drama of a child murderer being hunted down by a gang of thieves. It is a child who marks the murderer with an M so that he can be identified and captured. The film's motto is "Mothers, look after your children".

Perec, I think, had to live with knowing two utterly contradictory facts and feelings about his mother: on the one hand, his mother abandoned him, without a word, to a cruel, unloving world, a world in which he not only had to forget her, he also had to forget himself; on the other hand, she saved him by sending him away from that world which killed her and would undoubtedly have killed him. Careless or caring; killing or saving; a mother murderer, or a murdered mother. A double life and life turned upside down.

Then there is the story of W itself, or more particularly of Gaspard Winkler, both child and adult. This is in fact three stories enfolded into one letter: First, there is the story of the child Gaspard Winkler; then, second, of the adult GW; and, finally, the story of the land, W, in Tierra del Fuego, the land of the dead.

Gaspard Winkler played a significant part in Perec's writings. He was the central character in Perec's first novel – although only published posthumously – *Portrait of a Man*. Here he is a forger, trapped into producing perfect forgeries for rich collectors, hidden away in a basement. He is a mystery, an absence, living a kind of death in life, out of touch with his own desires and creativity while skilfully reproducing on command someone else's creation. He only escapes by murdering his employer and tunnelling his way to freedom. Then, in Perec's last completed novel, *Life A Users Manual*, he is again a central figure as a skilled puzzle-maker, the accomplice to a rich man's annihilatory whim to reduce his life to a meaningless, repetitive and self-dissolving task. At the end of the book, it is revealed that Gaspard Winkler, now dead, has played one last trick on his employer that subverts the whole enterprise.

In between is W. Here, GW, as both child and adult, fulfils a vital function. If Perec could not, truthfully, write of himself, under his own name, what he could do was to write of an entirely fictional child and adult, with a name that has a significant fictional history, completely truthfully. Only a fiction, a forgery, can properly, and safely, tell the truth.

To start with the child. He is deaf and mute and totally unresponsive. No-one, nothing can bring him into human connectedness and speech. Perec describes that his condition is the result of a trauma which has no physical cause or physical signs and that could only have come from something done in his infancy of which no-one has knowledge. He then 'suffers' – although he has no knowledge of this – a second traumatic loss when his mother gives his identity away to provide a new identity for a deserter, to enable him to start a new life. The child and his mother then wander the globe aimlessly – like the Wandering Jew – and he ends up shipwrecked, but not conclusively dead, at the ends of the earth.

His identity then passes to the adult Gaspard Winkler, a man of whom we are told almost nothing including his name. There is no mention of a mother. There is father who dies when he was six. At sixteen he joins the army and several years later, helped by an organisation to aid deserters, he is given the new identity of GW and goes to live and work in Germany.

Then, out of the blue, his life is turned upside down. He receives a letter from an Otto Apfelstahl a member of the organisation which aided his desertion asking for a meeting. (n.b. Bellos says that Apfelstahl is the name of the murderer's landlady in the film *M!*) At the meeting Apfelstahl stuns Winkler by asking him, "*Did you ever wonder what became of the person who gave you your name?*" (Perec, 1988 p18). Apfelstahl then

fills Winkler in on the story of Gaspard the child, and tells him he is fronting an organisation to try and find the missing child. Winkler says, *“I suppose you expect me to take part in this search”*. “Quite so” replies Apfelstahl. *“I should like you to set off for those parts and find Gaspard Winkler”*. “But why?” asks Winkler. “Why not?” replies Apfelstahl. (ibid, pp46)

Apfelstahl, like most if not all of the bearers of the narration in W, then disappears, never to be heard of again. GW armed with a detailed compass bearing but nothing else sets off. He describes his relationship to his task and to his story in an extraordinary passage: *“The attentive reader will have grasped no doubt from what has been said so far that in what I am about to relate I was a witness and not an actor. Nor am I exactly its bard. Though the events that I saw convulsed my previously insignificant existence, though their full weight still bears upon my conduct, upon my way of seeing, I wish to adopt the cold, impassive voice of the ethnologist: I visited this sunken world and this is what I saw there”*(ibid p4).

However, he never gets to do this. Half-way through the book he also disappears from its pages. Between Parts 1 and Part 2 there is that blank page with, in its middle a pair of brackets enclosing three dots (...). The whole apparatus of telling the story of W through the fictional character of GW breaks down. The describing of W, from its initial appearance as a world devoted to the Olympic ideals of sport and fellowship, through its being revealed as a world of terrifying, arbitrary cruelty and barbarity to its final appearance as a post apocalyptic subterranean wasteland, is done without any narrator, any apparatus, with no eye/I.

This extraordinary and horrifying upset which leaves the reader alone in this nightmare echoes what had happened during the first publication by Perec of the story of W. During 1969 he published, in fortnightly instalments in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, what he described as an adventure novel. He describes it like this: *“(It) comes out of a childhood memory, or, to be more precise, out of a fantasy that I developed at length around the age of 12 or thirteen, during my first psychotherapy. I had forgotten it completely; it came back to me one evening in Venice, in September 1967, when I was fairly drunk, but the idea of turning it into a novel didn’t arise until much later. The book is called*

W

W is an island, somewhere off Tierra del Fuego. It is inhabited by a race of athletes wearing white track suits emblazoned with a big black W. That’s about all I can remember. But I know that I told the story of W a great deal (in drawings and in speech) and that today I can, in telling W, tell the story of my childhood”(In Bellos, 1999, p437).

Perec kept up the publication schedule for 3 months and then, in mid-December he ran into a crisis. Bellos describes what happened: *“It did not become apparent to the reader of La Quinzaine littéraire until the mid-January issue, but the break in the tale was not just unmistakable, it was foregrounded with quite unpalatable bluntness. Beneath an altered logo, the traditional paragraph about “the story so far” read as follows: ‘There was no story so far. Forget what you have read: it was a different tale,*

at most a prologue, or a memory so distant that what follows cannot fail to submerge it. For it is now that it all begins, now that he sets off on his search”(ibid, p441)

Bellos concludes his own chapter on this affair by saying, “*W was a more serious work by far, but Perec enjoyed writing it far less. After changing track in January he wrote slow, obsessive and ponderous descriptions of his island community...With each episode he found it harder to stop the shadow of the concentration camps from becoming too dense...There were letters of complaint and Nadeau (the Editor) told Perec that it was not going well. It is unlikely that Perec did not know it himself. Breakdown loomed yet again...*”(ibid p447).

The attempt to simultaneously reveal and conceal the truth through a fictional apparatus collapses, as it does in the book. This then leads to the last unexamined word in the title - ‘Or’, and thence to the structure and organisation of the book. The book looks as if it is a ramshackle collage constructed of bits and pieces of old writings, drawings, memories and fables. And almost certainly this construction was quite deliberate – and, from what Bellos has gathered, very hard work. Perec wants to deny – as much to himself as to his readers – any easy assumptions or impositions of order and meaning to either the act or the effort of remembering or creating stories.

The first and most obvious examples of this refusal is in the story of W, the way in which the seemingly perfectly organised and harmonious construction of the society collapses into its absolute opposite – a chaotic, random hell, a play of pure sadism. Moreover, in the story within that story – that of the child and adult GW – Perec utterly subverts any expectation or hope that the child might be father to the man. The only thing they have in common, behind the name, is that each lose their voice, are silenced and then disappear never to be seen or heard of again.

A second example is the way Perec sets out his own attempts to stitch together fragments of memory, old photographs, scraps of passed down information and his own inventions and projections. They are all interrogated, subverted and discarded, often also degenerating into uncertainty and chaos. He is left with almost nothing to hold onto and feel secure with. Apparently, he was sent after the war by his Aunt to Françoise Dolto precisely because he was so lost, could not hold onto any possessions, could not even leave the front door to buy bread from the Boulangerie down the street without getting hopelessly lost, unable to find his way back home. On one occasion his Aunt, in exasperation, phoned Dolto to complain of how he kept losing things. Bellos describes this conversation – one of many Perec’s Aunt had with Dolto – as follows: “*Lili (Perec’s Cousin) heard her Mother exclaim, ‘But he’s forever losing all his pencils’. Dolto’s reply was, ‘But he’s lost himself, absolutely*”(ibid p100).

And it is this everything/nothing that is the one fixed point, the end-point in the whole text. What the title, ‘W, or The Memory of Childhood’ indicates is that whichever path you choose to follow – that of W or that of Memory, you end in the same place, in a void, an absence, a disappearance.

Disappearances and The Return of the Repressed.

“The disappeared are the unquietest ghosts”. (Marina Warner. London Review of Books 17.8.17)

“Not just some but all writing of the narrative kind...is motivated, deep down, by a fear and fascination with mortality – by a desire to

make the risky trip to the Underworld and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (Margaret Atwood, quoted by Marina Warner.)

Ostensibly, *W* looks as if it is outside the main stream of Perec’s published work. Although it contains fictions, it is not a fiction, it is not a novel. It would seem not to spring from or be structured by any OuLiPoian set of constraints or games and it is not marked by a plethora of word-plays and puns, linguistic flights or flamboyance. Its prose is mostly sober, simple and low-key. *W*, though, did not spring from nowhere. Underneath these breaks and differences with his previous works, there are a number of significant continuities and connections.

The first of these is in the character of Gaspard Winkler who, as I have mentioned, is central to Perec’s first novel, *Portrait of a Man* and again to his last published work, *Life: A Users Manual*. And the continuity is not in name only: Winkler is a significant representation and carrier of a series of themes that run through Perec’s work and that, in *W*, come bursting into the mundane, everyday world of the reality of his childhood that formed his psyche.

These themes can be summarised as: forgers, forgery, alias’, misrecognition and loss of identity; murder and mysteries; emptiness and the (attempted) voiding or avoiding of desires; and, crucially, absences, voids, disappearances and death. Perec’s novels swirl around some psychological and/or actual black hole, simultaneously fascinated by and repelled by it. *W* is both the most direct confrontation with it and the clearest articulation, in both form and content, of the shattering centripetal energy it exerts.

As I have described above, *W* ends in a void with only a hint, near the beginning of the book, of a vague, redemptive hope – the fact of writing the book itself. Chapter 8 ends torn between nothingness and hope: “...*I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation,*” And then, a few lines further on, “*I am not writing in order to say that I shall say nothing, I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say. I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life*”(Perec, 1988 p42).

Between 1968 and 1974 Perec published four works. The first was the serialisation in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* of the story of *W*, a project that collapsed in on itself. Then, in 1969, Perec publishes an extraordinary novel called, in French, *La Disparition* and in English, in an equally amazing translation by Gilbert Adair, *A Void*. Outwardly, the novel is a wild OuLiPoian romp, a parodic murder mystery but one whose structure and content is determined and ruled by an authorial act of murder – the elimination from the text of the vowel ‘e’. While being an apparently completely arbitrary self-imposed constraint, it acts as an act of linguistic cleansing and is the ground for a dazzling tour-de-force of sustained verbal invention and dexterity.

But within this form and display there is a much darker, more desperate story of a group of seemingly unrelated people who discover that not only are they all related but that also, because of this, they are all fated to be killed, the consequence of an ancient curse on their blood-line. It starts with the elimination of a vowel – the first person to disappear is called in the English version Anton Vowel – and ends, like Hamlet, with everyone dead. The following extract from the book gives a flavour, not only of the tone

and impetus of the book, but also of the characters' desperate struggle with recognition and disavowal (pun intended!), speaking and silencing and the irrevocable onrush of an unavoidable fate.

Alas, this invidious circuit to which I'm alluding has no Salvation. I thought, as did all of you, that Anton or Augustus was slain trying in vain to grasp what this horror was that had struck him down. No, not at all! Anton was slain, Augustus was slain, for not managing to grasp it, for not howling out a tiny insignificant sound that would, for good and all, bring to an abrupt conclusion this Saga in which all of us must play our part. It is, I say to you, by our saying nothing, by our playing dumb, that this Law of 'an I for an I' that's pursuing us today is still so strong, so invincibly strong. Nobody's willing to talk about it, to put a word to it, so causing us all to fall victim to a form of damnation of which nothing is known. What awaits us all is a fatality from which no man or woman in this room has any sort of immunity, a fatality which will carry us off in our turn without our knowing why any of us is dying, for, up against this Taboo, going round and round it without coming out and simply naming it (which is in fact a wholly vain ambition, for, if it was actually said, if it actually got into print, it would abolish this narration in which all of us, as I say, play our part, abolish, notably, a curious anomaly distinguishing it from outwardly similar narrations), nobody among us will talk about this Law that controls us, forcing us to wallow in our own prostration, forcing us, at last, to pass away still ignorant of that Conundrum that sustains its propagation...." (Perec, 1994 p197).

It is, indeed, a very grim story. From the choice of an arbitrary mark to do without to the wiping-out of an entire race. But at no point does Perec let up his dazzling display to allow the 'other' history that is hinted at reveal itself openly. It is genuinely a masquerade. The only chink in this armour is the pun at the heart of the missing vowel: in French to say Sans e, is the same as saying "sans eux"- without them. The last words of the book, (excepting an almost ludicrous (literally) authorial Postscript), are, "*a void brings our story to its conclusion*" (ibid, p278).

I don't know whether, in strict chronological terms, I am correct, but to me *La Disparition* speaks clearly of someone dancing, madly, on the edge of a breakdown. Not long after its publication Perec did make a suicide attempt, and, at the urging of his friends sought psychoanalytic help, going into analysis with J-B Pontalis. About half-way through this analysis Perec published a slim novella called, in French, *Les Revenentes* (and in English *The Exeter Text*). Here, Perec reversed the rule that determined *La Disparition* and used no vowels apart from 'e'! In French, un revenant (properly spelt in French with a final 'a' but OuLiPian rules allowed for some leeway in spellings) means a ghost or a spirit, and the familiar phrase, "tiens, un revenant" means 'long-time no see' or "hello stranger".

Again, in outward form, this novella is a Perecian linguistic tour de force – a wildly comic, sacrilegious, erotic romp featuring monks, nuns, bishops and whores, under the cover of which is perpetrated an outrageous jewellery robbery. All the ‘e’s’ eliminated from *La Disparition* are returned with a vengeance, pushing out all the other vowels in a crazed sexualisation of the overturning of the established order of things. I couldn’t help imagining Perec rushing into Pontalis’ consulting room one day, waving a copy of the book and saying

I’ve got them back, I’ve reclaimed them! All those ‘e’s’ I did without in A Void. Well, I’ve written a romp, a farce, an amazing little book with nothing but ‘e’s’. Nothing but them! Here, take it, you’ll love it. It’s just what you psychoanalysts want. It’s all sex, filthy, an orgy. All of them, fucking away madly and only using e’s. Clever eh? They’re alive and at it like rabbits. And – and this is really clever – along with all the sex there’s a jewellery heist, a real rip-off, everything stolen. You see, that’s what happened to my Uncle David, the jeweller. He sent his stash of jewels which was supposed to make us safe in America, to Marseilles, for safe-keeping. What an idiot! Lost the whole fucking lot! Good joke, no? And guess what I’ve called it, just for you. Les Revenentes – ghost, phantoms, hello strangers, long time no see! It ought to be translated. I guess in your jargon you’d call it the Return of the Repressed!”. And then laughing, maniacally.

There is a further ‘slip’ or pun in Perec’s title in that he transforms a masculine noun into a feminine, plural. The ghosts, the returnees, are women. Or should that be a woman, the one woman who has been so ambivalently missed and disappeared, longed-for and hated and who is returned as an absolute opposite – plural not singular, sexual not maternal, whores not the Madonna, not robbed but as robbers?

Both of these books share with W an emptiness, a void, at their heart. In *La Disparition*, literally; in *Les Revenentes*, with the orgiasts clapped out, the party over, the stealing of the jewels and the flight of the robbers. “*Perfect sevelence reyned when we left these perverse revels’ fell stench. Deep greyness sheltered the See*”(Perec, 1996 p113).

But perhaps it is the two aspects where they differ so radically from W that is more important. The first is in their use of words, of language. Both the earlier books share a surface ludic brilliance that bedazzles while it also misleads and deceives. The emptiness that it both conceals and reveals is unaddressed. As in the unspeakable absence of ‘eux/e’ in *La Disparition*, or its overwhelming sexualised presence in *Les Revenentes* what is missing, what has been taken or disappeared is hidden. As Dylan once sang, “Nothing is revealed”. And it is hidden, as in Poe’s story, *The Purloined Letter*, right out in the open.

W is not like that. There is no brilliance, no fascination. The language is down-to-earth, solid if not stolid. While the story of the land of W is set in italics, some of Perec’s recovered scraps about his parents are set in bold, as if anchored, blunt. There certainly are absences, mistakes, deliberate errors but they are mostly glaringly obvious as if Perec is saying “I know that I’m doing this but it’s to reveal what I can’t say”. And W is really

not much fun. It was hard work to construct and it takes the hard work of prolonged engagement, intellectual, emotional and psychological, for it to reveal its richness. In sum, it wholeheartedly addresses the void, in language that stutters, breaks and stumbles, but does not conceal its object.

Talk and The Talking Cure

How did this happen; what brought about this shift in tone and content? One answer, I suggest, is psychoanalysis. While Perec makes no obvious mention of psychoanalysis in *W*, there is little doubt that it was central to its genesis and its final bringing to form. The most obvious clue to this is that the book was composed while Perec was in analysis with Pontalis and its completion and the ending of the analysis happened in the same year. Even if only temporally, the two are bound up with each other.

Secondly, the origins of the story of *W* lie in the drawings that Perec made as a child, between the ages of 10 and 12 while he was in therapy with Françoise Dolto. Perec stated that he had no memory of these sessions and I have no idea what part these images played in the therapy, what Perec or Dolto did with them. But clearly something was created. It was then lost but then found again: *“When I was thirteen(sic) I made up a story which I told and drew in pictures. Later I forgot it. Seven years ago, one evening, in Venice, I suddenly remembered that this story was called W and that it was, in a way, if not the story of my childhood, then at least a story of my childhood”*(p6). The recovery of this memory, of this story, allows him to make one of the most poignant and direct statements of his dilemma: *“Once again the snares of writing were set. Once again I was like a child playing hide-and-seek, who doesn’t know what he fears or wants more: to stay hidden, or to be found”*(Perec, 1988 pp6-7).

Then, thirdly, there is the presence in two key places in the book, of lines from a poem by Raymond Queneau. The first fragment is on Page 1 under the heading Part One: *“That mindless mist where shadows swirl,/how could I pierce it”*. The second is under the heading of Part Two, following the empty page with the brackets containing three dots: *“This mindless mist where shadows swirl/- is this then my future?”*. David Bellos tells that these fragments come from a verse narrative of psychoanalysis called *Chêne et Chien*. And finally, there is the form of the book itself which, I will suggest, is structured much more like a narrative in psychoanalysis than any conventional literary form. You might think that for someone who was so verbally adept, with such a rich and playful command of language, that psychoanalysis, the talking cure, would be a piece of cake, almost a redundant exercise.

But psychoanalysis is not straightforwardly the talking cure, in the sense of a cure by talking. It is also, equally, perhaps even more importantly, the cure for talking – for a certain kind of talking which Lacan called empty speech, a form of speech he distinguished from its opposite, full speech. He defined full speech as follows: *“Full speech is speech which aims at, which forms, the truth such as it becomes established in the recognition of one person by another. Full speech is speech which performs. One of the subjects finds himself, afterwards, other than he was before. That is why this dimension cannot be avoided in the analytic experience”*(Lacan, 1988 p107). Empty speech then, by contrast therefore, is speech which does not “perform”. In ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’ Lacan says of empty speech that it

is speech “*in which the subject seems to speak in vain about someone who – even if he were such a dead ringer for him that you might confuse them – will never join him in the assumption of his desire*” (Lacan, 2002 p211).

This empty speaking does not perform and is divorced from the subject’s desire and where the subject, afterwards, finds themselves the same as they were before. To paraphrase, empty speech brings the subject back to a sense of the unity of his ego. Lacan then goes further: in a psychoanalysis what is critical is not simply talking, it is the question of who is speaking to whom about what. In his Seminar on The Psychoses, Lacan puts the issue like this: “*I used to say schematically....that the subject begins by talking about himself, he doesn’t talk to you – then, he talks to you but he doesn’t talk about himself – when he talks about himself, who will have noticeably changed in the interval, to you, we will have got to the end of the analysis*”(Lacan, 1993 p161).

There is, perhaps unusually, some evidence, both from Perce and from his analyst, that for some long time in his therapy Perce employed, perhaps hid behind, a form of empty speech that also left his analyst feeling empty, unaddressed and unmoved. Bellos quotes an article that Pontalis published in the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* in 1975, entitled À Partir du contre-transfert: le mort et le vif entrelacés in which he said,

One of my patients – let’s call him Stéphane – dictated to me, in a sense, what I suggested elsewhere when referring to analysands who make you wonder, when you listen to them, whether they really experienced their dreams or whether they dreamt them on purpose as dreams and, in the end, in order to recount them. These are the “dream-makers”. In Stéphane’s case, I realised after a while that I wasn’t “buying” the dreams he offered. Obviously, I had good reasons for my doubts: if I wasn’t buying them, it was because the dreams lacked body, found an evident place in a superficial kind of language, were unpunctuated by silences and were lacking in the expression of affects, as if the anguish dissolved itself in the saying and made itself only felt in the tension of the session. The dreams were, so to speak, deposited, checked off, and dealt with by Stéphane like texts to be deciphered, like a letter certainly written in a foreign tongue but not posted in a far-off place, and bearing no specific address. Maybe he even dreamt them in the way he composed crosswords, or played patience, or solved jigsaw puzzles...or devoted himself to games of writing. It could be said of Stéphane and those like him that they are waking sleep-walkers” (Bellos, 1999 pp477-8).

In a footnote, Bellos comments that Pontalis has declined to contradict the widespread assumption that Stéphane is Perce. Perce himself was aware of what he was doing, or could do. Bellos quotes a short piece he wrote in 1972: “*Writing protects me. I proceed beneath fortifications of words and sentences, of cleverly ordered paragraphs, of cunningly programmed chapters. I am not without ingenuity. Do I still need to be protected? What if my shield should turn into a shackle? One day I will have to start*

using words to unmask my reality, and to unmask the real that lies behind my own singular questioning of it"(Bellos, 1999 p494).

Then, in a brief account of his analysis, published in 1974, Perec describes his movement from one form of speech to another and from talking to no-one to directly addressing Pontalis:

Of the actual movement that enabled me to emerge from these repetitive and exhaustive gymnastics, and gave me access to my own story and my own voice, I shall only say that it was infinitely slow: it was the movement of the analysis itself, but I only found that out later on. First, the carapace of writing behind which I had concealed my desire to write had to crumble, the great wall of ready-made memories to erode, the rationalisations I had taken refuge in to fall into dust. I had to retrace my steps, to remake the journey I had already made but all of whose threads I had broken. Of this subterranean place I have nothing to say. I know that it happened and that, from that time on, its trace was inscribed in me and in the texts that I write. It lasted for the time it took for my story to come together. It was given to me one day, violently, to my surprise and amazement, like a memory restored to its space, like a gesture, like a warmth I had rediscovered. On that day the analyst heard what I had to say to him, what for four years he had listened to without hearing, for the simple reason that I wasn't telling it to him, because I wasn't telling it to myself". (Perec, 1997 pp168-9).

I do not mean to imply that the novels prior to W were simply "empty speech" (with the possible exception of the Postscript to A Void!). But perhaps what they present is the awful, unresolved, dilemma of, on the one hand, speaking of not being able to speak fully – of having to use empty words to describe words, and a life, that have been emptied of real meaning. And, on the other, of desperately wanting to speak more fully – paradoxically, to say less, to find out what is not being said while still in the grip of the injunction that to speak fully is both to kill and be killed.

Perhaps it was, in part, the sometimes frantic enactment of this conflict between prohibition and desire, and the ferocious enlisting of all of his linguistic skills to both express and avoid it, acted-out within the non-abandoning containment of the analysis and analyst, that allowed Perec in some measure to finally breakthrough to a simpler, less prolix but more fragmentary mode of speaking and writing from which W could emerge. The triumph of W, and perhaps the outcome of the analysis, is not that Perec found "the words to say it", to tell the untold story. He didn't, and that is not how the words, their structuring, work in W. What he did, through his words, was to find a way of placing the reader (and perhaps himself) in the position of the child who couldn't speak and couldn't be helped, enabled to speak, and through that identification with and recognition of the child find the truth not only of that child's silence but also of his desire.

Coda: Wrestling the Story from Silence

No story in a psychoanalysis is linear and straightforward. Psychoanalytic narratives are stutterings; full of false starts and endings, interruptions, backtrackings and corrections; diversions and distractions with feints into fantasy and long silences; dreams, slips and free associations. And woven throughout, a continuously shifting cast of half-remembered, half invented, characters. To use the Freudian metaphor, they are the unearthing of buried fragments followed by the patient task of piecing these together, to join the gaps to form the net of a story. In this sense, *W* is an accurate, if radically edited and foreshortened, representation of a psychoanalysis. *W* is sui generis – a unique combination of literary form and psychoanalytic experience.

But it is not just in its form but also in its content that it is isomorphic to a psychoanalysis. As I said at the beginning, very few writers would begin an autobiography with the words, “*I have no childhood memories*”. But it is not at all uncommon for someone to begin an analysis in this way, or to offer a complete fantasy of a childhood, often with words like “*I had a perfect childhood*”.

Moreover, it is often the case that when a person who introduces themselves in these ways does begin to remember another childhood, a different child, what they come up against are memories of abandonment, of being forgotten. *W* is a book of forgetting and remembering and of having to remember to forget yourself. Perceval perfectly embodies an insight of Winnicott’s, that if a child wants or needs to keep something really important a secret, the best way to do it is to forget it. To remember is to reveal and to reveal is to betray. It gives the impression that its construction and articulation was an immensely painful and arduous task. Wearing armour is hard work; shedding it is often even harder and more terrifying.

A patient of mine explained, very succinctly, that if you’re forgotten as a child, if it was forgotten that you were a child, then you learnt that the best thing to do was to forget yourself as a child, subsequently to say “*I have no memories of childhood*”. This is identification with the aggressor, for to be forgotten as a child, however this comes about, whatever you subsequently learn of reasons and helpless fates, is always felt by the child to be an act of aggression, a kind of murder.

For Perceval, it must be remembered, that for three years or so not only was he forbidden to try to speak truthfully of himself, but all the adults close to him were under the same prohibition and penalty. No-one could help him with himself, and in particular help him to find words, or any expression, for his confusing, terrifying and helpless experiences, feelings and wants. It is not surprising, then, that he describes those he encountered and the environment he lived in as spectral, a ghost-world in which unnamed and insubstantial figures flitted in and out leaving virtually no mark on him. As he puts it, “*from this point on there are memories – fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome – but there is nothing that binds them together.....There are no landmarks, memories are only scraps snatched from a void. No moorings, no anchor. Time went by. The only thing you do know is that it went on for years and then one day it stopped*” (Perceval, 1988 pp68-9)

My patient then went on to say that remembering being forgotten is too painful to do on your own. *W* is a deeply personal book, not simply in the sense of being so revealing of its author, but also in the sense that it makes a deeply personal appeal and connection. It is not addressed to no-one but to everyone and to each one separately.

In the text, Perec speaks of his desire to bring his story to term. As if to confirm this, Bellos (private communication) has pointed out that the manuscript of *W* was the only one of Perec's manuscripts that he disposed of. Shortly after publication he auctioned it to raise money for La Quinzaine Littéraire. Although this was a charitable act, it also implies that having finished the book, he wanted to be shot of, perhaps free from, the whole business.

Whether this is what he wanted and whether he succeeded in this aim, I don't know. But I am reminded of what the psychoanalyst Serge LeClaire, also Jewish who also had to change his name to survive the Occupation, said in his short but powerful text, *On Tue Un Enfant*. The killing of the miraculous imaginary child, who both protects, conceals but also deadens you, is a task that cannot be done just once but has to be repeated over and over again. He also notes that the hardest figure to kill is the one who is already dead.

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