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AUTOBIOGRAPHY ISSUE

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY ISSUE

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# AN Auto-bio-graphy: *W ou le souvenir d'en- fance or the space of the double cover*

Michel Sirvent

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<sup>1</sup> Although some critics tend to retrospectively exaggerate his success, which was indeed true for *Les Choses* (1965) which obtained le Prix Renaudot, let us remember that Perec's work was not fully recognized until the beginning of the 80's. For example, it should be pointed out that Perec is excluded from *A New History of French Literature* (1989). In 1978, when *Life a User's Manual* obtained the Prix Médicis, not without difficulty, Perec was still relatively unknown outside the literary world. *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* did not sell more than 3500 copies.

<sup>2</sup> See Bellos (508-9) for the relation between the specific constraints that organize *La Vie mode d'emploi* and Nabokov's novel. *W* seems to correspond to the same principle as

[...chaque personne] elle n'est pas sûre d'être positivement quelqu'un; elle se déguise et se nie plus facilement qu'elle ne s'affirme. Tirant de sa propre inconsistance quelques ressources et beaucoup de vanité, elle met dans les fictions son activité favorite. Elle vit de romans, elle épouse sérieusement mille personnages. Son héros n'est jamais soi-même ... (Valéry 1227)

## BIO/GRAPHY

Each time we try to reconstruct a writer's life through his work<sup>1</sup>—and we know that this scenario is staged in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*—we cross, all too easily, the threshold that separates real life from writing.<sup>2</sup> We suppose that writing derives from life according to a simple cause and effect relation and we forget “the influence of the book on the person writing, during the writing itself” (Gide). The main function of the bio/graphic discourse is to neutralize the tendency of bringing writing back to existence.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to what the prefix “auto” in “autobiography” implies, the threshold between writing and existence cannot be crossed under the regime of identity, reflection or simple causality. Between two irreducible universes lies Perec's duelist practice. It is precisely such duality that divides the text of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. The bi-textuality clearly announced on the book's back cover hardly allows us to deduce that the work constitutes a unity or an autobiographic totality: “one of these texts is entirely imaginary [...]. The other text is an autobiography [...].”



the one expressed in *Sebastian Knight* about The Doubtful Asphodel: "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations" (176).

3 According to Nietzsche, "there is no more dangerous error than confounding consequence with cause: I call it the intrinsic depravity of reason" (132). At one end, the cause: the author's life. On the other end, the works as an effect, a mere consequence: "We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences" (de Man 69). Many a critical discourse still hinges upon this simplistic pattern (see Beaumartin, "L'homme et l'œuvre"). This paralogical one-way relation between a writer and his/her work should be seen in a more dialectical way. The autobiographical writing (écriture) can also "produce and determine the life and [...] whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium" (69).

4 This said, in spite of its conclusion quoted above, Magné's study is still subjected to a biographical orientation. The emphasis on formal arrangements is finally justified because they turn to be founded on existential grounds.

5 The back jacket copy is placed as a preamble in the English edition.

6 On "the language of space," see Foucault,

Unless we wish to infinitely reduce it, this heterogeneous work is not an "autobiography in two texts," nor an "autobiographical assembly" (Burgelin 138-9), nor a "psychoanalytical autobiography" (Lejeune 65), nor a simple "autobiographic puzzle." Even if we must fully recognize the textual status of the autobiographical chapters (recognize their "poetic" function), we cannot on the other hand excessively privilege "the autobiographical constituent by assigning to it the status of the source-text, the origin-text which would furnish the key to all the others" (Magné, "Textualisation" 183-4; Ribière 25-37). There is certainly an "exorbitant privilege that some people accord a bit too quickly to biography" (Magné 184).<sup>4</sup> This privilege affects our reading of *W*, but also all of Perec's work. The autobiographical part supplies a sort of interpretative opening or closure. We should take up this conclusion according to which the situation of *W* (in the overall context of Perec's production) resembles "the image of ties woven between autobiography and fiction in *W* itself." Actually, the back cover immediately engages us with several alternating texts *inextricably bound up with each other [...]*" (my emphasis). This is not only because Perec's textual space notoriously combines a range of intertexts from *Les Choses* to "*53 jours*" (Mouillaud-Fraisse, "Angus" 85-93, "le récit" 235-243, Bouchot 235-243). But it is also because what is at stake in the alternation between fiction and truth is the readerly effect of *composition*. For *W*'s signification lies at their intersection, to express the "unsaid:" such a composition "could make apparent what is never quite said in one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping."<sup>5</sup>

In many studies on autobiography we observe this omission: the "narrating force" is rarely considered, that is, how the representation is determined by the narration. But written representation may only come about thanks to an ensemble of parameters, the least of which is none other than the *scriptographic space*.<sup>6</sup> There are few books that illustrate better than *W* the principle according to which representational effects are shaped in one way or another by the very space in which the work "occurs," where the text "takes place." Far from simply undergoing such conditions "passively," the strategy in *W* takes them into account. In the following pages we will emphasize this aspect of the work, this organized space upon which the conflict of representations is undertaken. The fact that the writer explores or exploits this dimension of the scrip-

Genette (*Figures II*), and my "Représentation de l'espace."

7 In Roubaud's afterword to the German edition we note though the same biographical bend: "«53 jours», in its evocations of the war years, treason in the Resistance, and the Vercors tragedy, contains new biographical "keys" to Georges Perec, and constitutes a further stage of his "recollection" of a last past or another "anamnesis" of which *W* or *The Memory of Childhood* and *Je me souviens* are two other poles" (my emphasis)

8 Yet Lejeune distinguishes "the coexistence, the constant association of two axes in Perec's writing, one existential, the other formal" (*Mémoire* 11)

9 "I reckon, in fact, that I was born left-handed; at school I was forced to write with my right hand. This has resulted, in my case, not in a stammer (as apparently it often does) but in a slight lean of the head to the left [...] and above all in a more or less chronic and still undiminished inability to tell not just left from right [...], but also the acute from the grave accent, concave from convex, the "larger than" sign (>) from the "smaller than" sign (<) and in general all terms that more or less approximately imply any kind of laterality and/or dichotomy [...]" (*W* 135, my emphasis)

10 "That mindless mist where shadows swirl, how could I pierce it?" (first part)/"This mindless mist where

tual medium may be confirmed in the solution to the structural enigma posed by "53 jours" which has been most convincingly resolved by Jacques Roubaud: "Its fundamental constraint is less a formal than a compositional one: 'It neither resembles the single constraint of *La Disparition* nor the multiple rules of *Life A User's Manual*'" (qtd. in Bellos 704, my emphasis).<sup>7</sup> We therefore rediscover the concern of ancient rhetoric, the *Dispositio*: "We will define the *dispositio* as the arrangement (whether in the active and operational sense or in a passive, reified, sense) of the main parts of discourse. The best translation is perhaps *composition* [...]" (Barthes, *Aventure* 148). We will keep this term in mind while specifying that it covers the arrangement of sequences, parts, sections, chapters, etc. For if the *disposition* were worked enough to become a *configuration* (a *dispositif*), it would then function to reveal the incompatibility of the genres and registers here at issue: the conflict of languages that is staged. The *alterity* of composition in *W* deserves our attention since it seeks to respect the heterogeneity of registers while, at the same time, reveal their irreducibility.

## AN AUTO-BI-GRAPHY

If we consider most studies a double danger seems to prey upon our reading of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. On the one hand, the danger of reduction through synecdoche: one subsumes the ensemble under the aegis of one of its parts, the autobiography.<sup>8</sup> On the other, through a sort of metonymical sliding, an omission takes place: autobiography is covered up by autobiography or, in other words, the graphic dimension is masked. Yet, since it is basically a twofold book, it can be characterized as an auto-bi-graphy: this is directly apparent in its dual title (from the graphic and the phonic perspective).<sup>9</sup> Less than the story of a double personality in search of himself or his shadow, it's more a question of a text literally cut in two. Two "texts," two typographic characters (Italics for fiction, Roman for autobiography), two parts (separated by a white page where there are suspension points between parenthesis), two varying epigraphs (from Raymond Queneau's *Chêne et chien*),<sup>10</sup> two narrators (Gaspard Winckler/G. Perec). On both sides of a double place («Vilin »/«Villard ») that shares a "double life" (fiction/ "reality"), two temporal categories may be designated (memories/ the future) which are reduced to the same end: "That mindless mist where shadows swirl" as



shadows swirl, is this then, my future?" (second part)

11 Which ties up with the four major orientations that characterize Perec's work: "sociological," "autobiographical," "playful" (*ludique*) and "fabulous" (*romanesque*): "[...] the books that I have written are grounded in four different fields, four different modes of interrogation that all pose the same question," "Notes sur ce que je cherche" (*Penser/Classer* 10)

12 In his analysis of Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*, Perec establishes a connection between "violence" and "capitalism" (Bellos 494)

13 This wordplay (*jeu*) is obvious since the third-person pronoun replaces the first-person singular in the second half of the book in italics as the third-person is replaced by the new subject—the Island—as the structure of its first sentence clearly demonstrates (65, ch. XIII)

14 "Désormais, les souvenirs existent, fugaces ou tenaces, futiles ou pesants, mais rien ne les rassemble", 'From this point on, there are memories—fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome—but there is nothing that binds them together' (68, ch. XIII)

well as two genres (autobiography/ the science-fiction of the city of *W*).

Meanwhile the auto-*bi*-graphy is still a mask. *W* is not a double text but a book that unfolds by constantly splitting up. Beneath its apparent dichotomy the narrative is crafted by the auto-division of the "subject," in the double sense of discursive subject and object of discourse (subject of enunciation and enunciated subject). This dynamic process seems to imply that unity (selves, genres, types of discourse, sections, etc.) is always already dual. Since we have two alternating texts and two clearly separated main parts, the fictional as well as the autobiographical series can be subdivided, thus giving way to a "quadripartition."<sup>11</sup> Thus fiction begins as an adventure narrative, a travel story, an investigation. It is the story of an imposture. The impostor-deserter-narrator, Gaspard Winckler, meets a mysterious emissary, Otto Apfelstahl, who discovers his false identity and entrusts him with a lifesaving mission. He must find a child (his homonym) who disappeared with his mother Cecilia in a shipwreck off la Terre de Feu, the island of *W*. In the second part (still in italics), this story is brusquely interrupted giving way to a second entirely different story. The transition is motivated by a spatial and geographic tie: a sort of mysterious island, the island of *W*. The adventure narrative now becomes description and then socio-political satire. It's almost an Orwellian science fiction story. The account of a super organized city based on an inhuman Olympic ideal is given in a quasi ethnological mode.<sup>12</sup> The narrative becomes an allegory of totalitarian regimes, a denunciation of scientific tailspin through a sports metaphor. The technocratic ideal exemplified through an Olympics parody contains the germ of what then emerges as Concentration Camp horror. Between the first and the second fictions there is a double disappearance: that of the Winckler child but also of the narrator. The initial *je* is replaced by *on* or, rather, an impersonal *il*: "*Il y aurait, là-bas, à l'autre bout du monde, une île*", 'Far away, at the other end of the earth, there is an island told of. Its name is *W*.'<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in the second part the autobiographical series divides itself in two. The break in the story is based on a spatial element: Paris/ Villard-de-Lans.<sup>14</sup> There are "two disjointed childhoods" caused by "the separation from the mother." Here the mother disappears leaving a hole in his existence. But there is also a complete ellipsis on the trip of the child, Perec, between the two geographical places.

15 Critics generally opt for the reverse order, i.e., the genetic order (Magné, "Les sutures" 41) according to which fiction "springs" from the retrieved drawings even though the actual order as displayed by the book makes the "apparently" autobiographic series come after the fictional episodes. Yet not only *W* is a "réinvention", 'I made up these stories' (6, ch. II) but we also know that "the childhood story borrows from the fiction and is then fictionalized by a series of elements taken from the adventure story" (Colonna 16)

16 For a first analysis of *W*'s peritext, see Colonna. For the concept of *peritext*, see Genette (*Seuils*) and Ricardou who was among the first to "textualize" the peritext in *La Prise de Constantinople* (Nouveaux Problèmes 279-316)

17 About the "autobiographic" genre experimented by Perec, see Beaumartin.

Autobiography 1 (part 1), before the disappearance of the mother: Vilin Street: 1936-1942. Autobiography 2 (part 2), after the mother's disappearance: Villard: 1942-1945. The interest of this quadripartite arrangement resides in the possibility of establishing all sorts of readerly correspondences between the 2 fictions and the 2 eras. For example, in the last chapter, the autobiography ends with a quotation from a book by David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, and by recalling the regime of the dictator Pinochet. Both of these references directly echo the totalitarian allegory in the fiction. Furthermore, the name of the lost child's mother is the same as that of Perec's mother: Cecilia. Also the "I was born on Saturday, 7 March 1936, towards nine in the evening, in a maternity located at 19 Rue de l'Atlas, in the XIXth arrondissement of Paris" (chap. VI, 19) takes up "*I was born on 25 June 19.. around four o'clock, at R., a hamlet of three houses, not far from A*" (chap. I, 4). Overlapping the two series, this alternating doubling keeps referring to the other "subject"—always deferred—and divides the second autobiographical enunciator: his echo (the fiction) precedes him.<sup>15</sup>

## DOUBLE OVERTURE

A book cover serves not only to display, but inversely to cover up the text through a series of identifying elements which reduce the volume to the coded expressions of the front cover. Very aware of what was at stake, Perec took care to integrate the *peritext* into his overall strategy.<sup>16</sup> Lejeune observes the "many drafts of the back cover, graphic attempts at configuring the cover itself (how to articulate the title and author's name with the picture of the hair salon door on Vilin Street)" (137-8). The alternative bifid title—*W* ou le souvenir d'enfance—duplicates itself according to a self-dividing mechanism. It subverts its identifying function. For the subtitle's autobiographic signal is also contradicted by the generic mention—*récit*, i.e. "narrative"—that we discover on the deceptive publicity strip printed across the cover. Similarly, the back cover text (which is taken up a second time on the dust jacket's front flap and which describes the two texts, is presented in two distinct paragraphs. Beneath, the auto-bio/bibliographic note in Italics is again subdivided: "L'auteur: / Est né [...]. / A obtenu [...]"<sup>17</sup> In the original edition the cover is not only double but it conceals the bi-textual composition of the volume's space. In fact, the peritext



18 It is also missing on the half-title page where we should expect it and this "bastard page" is also absent.

19 The juxtaposition of W with "DAMES" (W/D) confirms the possibility of turning the W upside down to become an M as in, for example, *mère* (mother) (see Bellos 553), but also points to the interrogation on "the meaning of "MD" which followed the name of Otto Apfelstahl in the letter-head." Also, the paradigm M/D can be illustrated by such examples: "My mother had died and I had to go and arrange the funeral at D., in Bavaria" (W 10-11). Apfelstahl heard Cecilia Winckler "sing the part of Desdemona at the Metropolitan shortly before the war" (43). But M can also be associated with the M of "Marine marchande" (Merchant Navy) that help the "Shipwreck Victims' Relief Society" (43-4), etc.

duplicates the text in two ways. First of all, the cover reproduces itself with a dust jacket and, second, many of its characteristics are dual. At the same time the cover conceals and manifests the configuring principle since the complete double title is seen only on the cover (not on the dust jacket).<sup>18</sup> The dust jacket shows a large *W*, yellow like the Jewish star, which occupies the center space and hangs over the name of the signatory printed in the same color without capitals. We realize that the dust jacket makes a segment pass for the whole. The first unfathomable title, reduced to an initial, already tells us that the rest must be completed. Concealed and deferred, its complement is manifested afterwards as a sub-title, thereby suggesting that every single element is potentially subject to analytical segmentation.

The dust jacket creates an effect of superimposition by combining a partial title and the inscription of the sign above the door on Vilin Street. It offers a first (double and "false") book title

## COIFFURE DAMES

### W

which anticipates the duplication of the deferred title.<sup>19</sup> Without going into great detail, we can give a quick idea of how the dust jacket is also fraught with dual elements: besides the single capital W, there are two colors (yellow/grey), two yellow segments (W/ georges perec), along with the dichotomy of the three main constituents (COIFFURE/ DAMES, georges/ perec, DENOEL/ LN). In other words, the manner in which we can read this configuration, that articulates the names of the author and editor against the cover photograph, gives an idea of how we should grasp the entire infrastructure. A plurality of material (biographic, intertextual, typographic, photographic) is arranged and redistributed according to apparently contradictory principles since the book contains different organizational schemes, which range from the simple (the book/the title letter as unities) to the complex, and which are based upon a logic of deciphering and, at the same time, progressive de-composition.

These peritextual elements are performative: their expositional mode reflects and announces several of the book's formal peculiarities. We can also compare the W title to what Barthes says about *Sarrasine* and the enigmatic title of his own



20 To follow up on the *Sebastian Knight* connection, we could note that the unreliable first-person narrator who tries to reconstruct the "real" life of Sebastian Knight, is called "V" by his half-brother writer (71) (for Vladimir's double of course) in a parody whose subject matter is to reflect on biographical and autobiographical reliability as in chapters 6 and 7: "Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale" (52).

21 "L'enigme est cette carence prédicative", 'the enigma is this predicative lacuna' (194).

22 For a comparable function of the subtitle which gives a more literal answer to the symbolic or cryptic theme evoked by the title, see Genette (*Seuils* 81).

23 See Bellos (553, note 2). This movement of progressive subdivision recurs throughout the book. This is the case in chapter IV with the account of the first two memories (12-14). In chapter VIII, the typographic disposition is as follows: 2 paragraphs in Roman. The first is organized around the couple father/mother (26). The second paragraph introduces the "following two passages [that] date from more than fifteen years ago." These 2 texts are in bold and are numbered. One refers to the picture of the father; the other to

book (*S/Z*) with this indirect self-commentary: "The title provokes the question: *What is Sarrasine*? A noun? a name? a thing? a man? a woman? This question will be answered much later by the biography of the sculptor Sarrasine" (24). Likewise, we can ask, what is *W*?<sup>20</sup> While asking to be deciphered, Perec's title also gives an extra clue. The autobi(o)graphy opens itself to the hermeneutic code. If we adapt Barthes' phrase we can say "the enigma is this *grammatical* lacuna".<sup>21</sup> The subtitle ("le souvenir d'enfance"), which points to the autobiographical code, plays a complementary role since it is a possible answer to an oblique question, that of the enigma posed by the "W" fragment.<sup>22</sup> Still, if the *ou* [or] conjunction generates an answer, the question is immediately complicated through the use of the definite article ("le souvenir d'enfance"). This circular return again divides the complete title. If Marcel Benabou is able to remark that the first "fake memory" (concerning the Hebraic letter) and that of the *gold* coin (the other first *souvenir*) both play on words (it's a question of *sou-venir*, "a memory of a coin"),<sup>23</sup> then we too can guess that the toponym *Villard* contains in germ the cardinal opposition between Life and Art (*la Vie/l'Art* for "Vi/llard"). It's as though this ideological opposition—discovered through an oxymoronic hypogram—gave way to a "reader's manual" (*a mode d'emploi*) according to which Art is Life's deciphering key.<sup>24</sup>

If we adhere to Genette's distinction, we can also ask whether this fissiparous title is "rhematic" or "thematic." Does it point to the text itself as work and object or as content (*Seuils* 73-97)? Not only is the subtitle "mixed": it is thematic (what is *the* childhood memory in question?) and rhematic at the same time. But the function of the title depends on the answer to the question of the first *W* element. The title refers both to the form and content of the book. The *W* is a graphic representation of the work and seems to point less towards the supposed double text than to conform, as one element among others of the peritext, to a configuration that affects the book on all levels. Thus its formal (title/subtitle, etc.) and generic (hermeneutic/autobiographical codes) bipartitioning are once more faced with a third element, the qualification of the text as "narrative" in the singular (*récit*) which again anticipates the active dynamics of the entire volume. In this sense the title doesn't just give us information about what the writer *does* with certain biographical elements (such as a

the picture of the mother (27-33). This is followed by a series of 26 notes for "the corrections and comments which I now feel obliged to add" (26). The chapter ends with a presentation of the motivations for writing an autobiography, in which the narrator admits a "ressassement sans issue", "a reiteration of the same story, leading nowhere" (41).

24 There is less an opposition between, on one hand, "life, that is a sort of unnamable, undecipherable proliferation that overflows into all of the meanings we are incapable of grasping" and, on the other hand, "a derisory ordering which is called "user's manual" than an "apposition" ("a syntactic break") which we find again in this de-centered rupture displaying suspension points that cut *W* into two parts (Perec, "racontouze" 55). The dual title of *W* is comparable to the one of *La Vie mode d'emploi*: this at first unfamiliar juxtaposition ("the unpunctuated formula") is actually caused by a typographic *ellipsis* (see Bellos 638-9).  
25 Bellos comments: "Perec's childhood autobiography, though it was not published until 1975, is less a work of early middle age than it is the final achievement of a project first planted in 1956. For Perec, from this point on, and despite his many subsequent evasions, masquerades and double covers, writing was autobiography" (Bellos 153-4). Another exam-

plimentary title) but it graphically exemplifies what happens to it as well as to the composition of the book which is subjected to the same writing constraint. The *W* design refers to certain aspects of the book's graphic and narrative composition. At the same time, as graph it points to the importance of the *scriptographic* register. Consequently, the function of such a title is less of an identifying one than an emblematic one—if we can still speak here of "function." For such a title merely precedes the ensemble of which it partakes. The *W* is the emblem of these contradictory dynamics. We seek the key to this simple letter, initial or crypt (there are numerous instances of serious and parodical deciphering in *W*, especially scenes related to the "first two memories"). It's a text that decipheres itself, that proposes reading models and which then postpones its resolution by systematically multiplying variations (as in Chapter VIII). Whatever the pretext may be for glossing, these variations do not lead to their reciprocal exclusion. What follows, even if it's the fiction, in some way bears some sort of "supplementary truth." Far from effacing each other, their accumulation throws off all symbolizing fixations and polysemic readings. This crypt opens the reading space and we know our reading can not be monologic.

This peritextual configuration signals three things. First it exposes the assembly of texts, the general dichotomy, its dialogism, its bi-graphic and bi-textual composition. Enigmatic, dualistic and suspensive, the title and the double cover give an explicit image of the book they conceal. Text and peritext are *isomorphic*. The second effect of this cover is to foreground a rather neglected aspect of representational writing, that is, its spatial dimension, its *scriptography*. In other words, its spatial configuration is precisely the dimension which is the object of an indeed singular attention and craftsmanship in this book. Finally, as we have seen with the title, a main function of the book is revealed: a *self-dividing* principle.

### AUTOBIOCENTRISM

Not only does the book's dichotomy shape our first reading but it also reflects the writer's double face: Oulipian/Autobiographer. But the tragi-comic figure that emerges from a particular critical heritage cannot satisfy itself with a synthesis that eradicates the conflict of languages, which is *W*'s arena. No equation is possible between the two



ple of autobiocentric criticism can be found in the chapter devoted to *Les Choses* (305, 314).  
 26 If "he stopped writing when he went into analysis" (Bellos 476), he stopped psychoanalysis once the work was completed (Burgelin 137). Shall we conclude that écriture plays the role of a ...cure (implying the concept of *écriture*)? As a counter-example, we read the following sentence in *La Boutique obscure*: "La Boutique obscure is a autobiographical text in a very precise sense: it tells the story of a separation. These dreams tell the story in a completely buried manner." The following sentences are significantly omitted from the English version: "On the other hand, it is a writing labor which is a bit out of place: in the same way as in *La Disparition*, there was simply something out of place (*en porte-à-faux*). In *La Boutique obscure*, there is no longer any 'dream work,' in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, there is a writing that prevents the dream to be what we call the Freudian *voie royale*" (qtd. in Bellos 505).

sides. Let's first consult the autobiographic pole which leans upon the following much quoted phrase: "Le projet d'écrire mon histoire s'est formé presque en même temps que mon projet d'écrire", 'The idea of writing the story of my past arose almost at the same time as the idea of writing' (26, ch. VIII). Lejeune places it at the heading of his essay entitled "Dire l'indicible".<sup>2</sup> He assimilates the finished work in a vaster ensemble, a "space" that includes geneses as well as multiple autobiographic projects, not all of which are completed. He even admits that:

[...] once the necessary distinction between finished work and unfinished projects has been discarded, by inflating the latter, we can but return to the *bio-graphic*: "these projects won't be considered as works but they are acts with which we must become familiar in order to understand autobiographic strategies and their evolution" (16).

He adds: "I know that my solution is reductive. I isolate the 'autobiographic' thread in such a complicated writing system, one that is so slippery" (28). And yet the finished work is assimilated with many unfinished "autobiographical projects." But there is an entire world between, on one hand, notes, fragments, first tries, paratextual versions and what is entirely different, a work which is, as Valéry would say "composed." It should be pointed out that this finished work concludes the psychoanalysis that the author had undergone until then but is also situated between two of the most completed of his enterprises, *La Disparition* et *La Vie mode d'emploi*.<sup>26</sup> Next, we include the episodes of the *avant-texte* (the various drafts) and apply them to the peculiarities of the work's form. However, it is less important to know what was written first, or to go back to drawings made when Perec was twelve, or to a first version of *W* written when he was thirteen, or even to point out that the fictional discourse which was "re-invented" came before the autobiographical discourse which was written with much difficulty. What matters is that we must draw the conclusions from the fact that a definitive choice has been made. As for Bellos' study in Chapter 52 of his biography, «*M/W*», we doubtfully reach through a film detour—Fritz Lang's, *M le Maudit*—the following conclusion: "Children, take better care of your mothers!" (555). A certain indissolu-

bility between the renewal of autobiographic discourse and genetic research should be pointed out here. Far from bringing to light the rewriting and transformation process (the transformation of the material, agents and consequently readers' habitual response), the notion of the autobiographical "project" presupposes a subject who can project himself so much that s/he always finds his/her self equal to her/himself. I will call *autobiocentrism* the readerly orientation that tends to *unilaterally* redirect all formal invention (especially of narrative and fictional orders) towards an existential cause. The origin of a structure is localized. A cause is found in the existence, the story or history that the drafts reveal or betray. This is the same fate that the ever present formal constraints in Perec's work are made to suffer. The conventional vehicles used for this normalizing appropriation hover around three or four biographical elements, certainly very significant ones but basically limited in the context of *artistic experience* and, we must add, of its *readerly pursuit*. Before coming back to this, let us distinguish two types of autobiocentric orientation: the *autobiocentric* take over and the *autobiocentric* equation.

*Biocentric* reading is reductive, not by nature, but because it possesses two traits that are fundamentally incompatible with creative writing/reading. According to this view, existence precedes writing and their relation remains fixed. Biocentrism determines the reading of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and, still today, it determines the way all of Perec's work is read. All his language play including the lipogrammatic *La Disparition* undergoes this type of approach (see Bellos 421-2). It is remarked, for example, that his Aunt's name "Esther," like his own, has only one vowel, the E (the letter to which *W* is dedicated), and that the lipogram consists in its suppression which is therefore the obsessive allegory of a life marked by absence, blanks, silence, the disappearance of his parents and the quest of a lost heritage, Judaism, which no one was able to pass on to him. All his work is thus made to revolve around what is called the "paradigm of omission." All his life like his work is organized around the "puzzle" metaphor that must constantly be reconstructed and which always ends with a missing piece. There is indeed a missing chapter in *La Disparition* but also suspension points, an ellipsis, something unsaid in the middle of *W* which is interpreted as an "autobiographic puzzle." Another example concerns the effect of the alternating series: "The result [...] is to put into place, through



the play of interruption that the fiction and autobiography undergo at the end of each chapter a 'real isotopy' of rupture that the most naive reader cannot help but relate to the 'key' biographic facts already given: the loss of his parents [when he was four and six] then the uneventful childhood in Villars etc." (Magné, "Textualisation" 165). But the best example of a biocentric reading may be found in Bellos' interpretation which tends to "re-establish the facts," as they say, by revealing Perec's deliberate strategy of "falsification." Let us observe: "Perec's published 'memory of childhood' is riddled with errors" (546). "A similar kind of mistake, only made to be found out, undermines and transforms one of the central pillars of Perec's construction, his departure from Occupied Paris to the ZNO" (547); "In fact, almost every assertion in the memory chapters of *W or The Memory of Childhood* asks to be questioned, and the answer in most cases is that the memory [...] has been altered, reworked, decorated or, more plainly, falsified [...]" (548). "Many of the 'falsifications and substitutions' of the memory chapters of *W or The Memory of Childhood* have been 'corrected' in the earlier chapters of this biography, which now serve as a circuitous introduction to an understanding of Perec's bizarre and moving achievement as an autobiographer" (548, my emphasis). This latter comment betrays the study's ideological moorings or, more simply, the blindness to precisely what constitutes the strangeness of the work. Instead, these riggings should be seen as "textual clues." Rather than masking the truth, the displacements serve as interpretative bases, if we choose to play Perec's game. The alterations are potential revelations. For example, the film *The Great Dictator* "replaced the swastika with a figure that was identical, in terms of its segments, having the shape of a pair of overlapping Xs (Z)" (*W* 77) when the whole demonstration starts from "the basic figure [...] the double V." How can we not see this interpretative variation on the graph as a clue to our own reading of the title *W*?

The second manner in which the work is reduced is through the *autocentric reading*. The object and the subject of a narrative like *W* is less the preconstituted subject than what the undertaking reveals as the "first person" constitutes itself through writing: "Il faudrait dire je. Il voudrait dire je"—Mais quel "je"?... », writes Perec in the drafts of *Lieux de la trentaine* (qtd Lejeune 15). Here we should point out, however, that this new type of autobi(o)graphy overturns two assumptions

27 The autobiographic subject constructs itself on the *différence* and *différance* between a "narrating I" and a "narrated I," with the assumption that the former keeps "missing himself"—he speaks of another, and that the latter could not easily be part of the other's game (*jeu*) since he stands as its *irrécupérable* object—which the autobiographic subject claims to construct for himself. Also, it may turn out that one writes, not because there is something at hand to be told (namely, one's own story) but precisely because it is impossible not to say that there is, if not nothing, at least not many things to account for. It remains that one can at least be the witness to account for the absence of evidence, not only about his own family (no one can testify for his mother's death: "My mother has no grave. It was only on 13 October 1958 that she was officially declared to have died on 11 February 1943 at Drancy (France)"), *W* 41), but also about his own past: the child-witness has disappeared and owes his survival (his recovery) to having been under cover to escape....

28 I borrow the expression from Ricardou who coins it in relation to *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (Nouveaux Problèmes 121).

concerning the double meaning of the word "identity." This word does not only cover the meaning of an individual, biological, corporal, historical, or social unity, a single entity which a proper noun localizes. It also presumes a fixed identity to which may be opposed a plural, divided, multiform subject continuously in transformation who escapes himself. Just like his parents, the child Perec has disappeared.<sup>27</sup> Against the canonical definition of the genre, this new autobiography dismantles the supposed identification between the author, the narrator, the anterior "I" (or character). On one hand, the author as person (the signatory) and the autobiographical narrator tend to be confused although there are several narrators in this book. On the other, the conflation is between the narrator with several faces and the main character of the story: himself and another. The Winckler child is the fictional double of Perec as narrator but, in the second part, the real subject is more and more a geographic place, an island, a system, that of *W*. It is this free synonymical circulation, this evidence or natural passage between these *three instances*, this "identity" that Perec calls into question. The book in its plurality and its divisions becomes our real "subject." This said, another "identity" proves troublesome. The fact that the biographic subject coincides with the writing subject, with the "autographic"<sup>28</sup> subject, does not necessarily mean that "if one writes his story, it will be the story of someone who writes and that the autobiography will again occupy a *central* place [in Perec's work]. The reason being that among other sources it [autobiography] must first explore the *existential origin* of the writing project itself" (Lejeune 15, my emphasis). There is a tendency to place the autobiographical subject under the sign of an existential originary subject. It is always assumed that in order for there to be "the story of someone who writes," there is, anterior to each discourse, "someone." It is then clear that the autobiocentric discourse is less *biocentric* than *autocentric* and in this sense *W* is reduced, according to the Derridian spelling, to an *otography*. Derrida quotes Nietzsche: "I am one thing, my writings are another" (74). For which "auto," which subject so absent from his own past is it? Moreover, is not the subject also absent from his own present of retrospective writing? Even if one admits that it's possible to have one existential subject who constitutes the only writing subject, nothing assures us that he is at the "center" (to use Lejeune's word) of the work. It is therefore a question of *otocentric* take over.<sup>29</sup>



29 In French, a "récupération," a rescuing of the author Perec, the author as the père, the "father" of his text (many misread his name and spell it Pérec)

30 As far as I know, no-one has noticed that the letter e which is systematically avoided in *La Disparition* is twice inscribed in Perec's name, which can be an indication that the lipogram may correspond to a strategy of self-eviction.

31 Bellos however shows that Perec was interested in exploring time as a literary constraint, as in *L'Augmentation*. This experience can be related to his attempt at serial writing the following year with *W* (435, ch. 44, "The Constraint of Time"). About formal constraints and the clinamen (Magné, "cahiers des charges" 69-74).

The issue is not to replace the author's figure with the dual entity that the book, irremediably divided, enacts. This figure today appropriates the text and is canonized because of the power of his name (nom/non—*Perec* the new father of the literature of absence, etc.30). Nor is it a question of finding the double figure of the father (who is already a couple consisting of Kafka, the intertextual father whom the biological father supposedly resembled, Bellos 456, 470-1) and the mother (as in Chapter VIII cut in two parts, two typographic characters) but more of keeping in mind the 26 notes (the same number as our alphabet) that manifest the continuous Self-Division of the subject: in this space one "I" never stops covering another, never ceases having recourse to another.

### DOUBLE COVER

*Autobiography* is offset by *autobiography* which focuses on writing. For Perec's conception and practice cannot be separated from all forms of *constraint* writing. Even though not one of his books seems to "escape autobiographical branding" almost none [...] "are written without [me] having recourse to some sort of Oulipian constraint or structure, even if only symbolically and without the said structure or constraint forcing me to do anything" (*Penser* 11). Nor does *W* escape these types of constraints even though very few readings take note of them. Let's compare two distinct approaches. For Bellos, "*W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is not a true example of Oulipian clinamen since it has no explicit formal constraints to bend. Perec falsified dates, details, speculations, references and quotations, as we have seen, but the rules that were broken were the informal conventions of the autobiographical genre (Bellos 597)."<sup>31</sup> Magné, on the other hand, places *W* in the realm of constraint works but specifies that "they are part of a mainly autobiographical [...] writing project" (73). Even if according to Perec *W* is a text that escapes the writing constraints applied to a book like *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Magné, "Textualisation" 167), this does not mean that this book cannot also be considered *an autobiography written with deliberately chosen constraints*. This can seem totally contradictory for a personal genre guided by principles of authenticity and sincerity but especially by demands of truthfulness. How can one talk about her or himself through formal artifice? Doubtless there are several reasons. First of all because *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is not an autobiography; it is made up of various

32 In Perec's *cahiers de charges* "the constraints elaborated are not limited to simple means or stimulants: they are true content-form ["formes-sens"], for they are closely tied to a writing project (we begin only today to realize it) that is of a fundamentally autobiographical nature (Magné, "cahiers des charges" 73, my emphasis)

parts, only one of which is autobiographical. Secondly, the autobiographical register cannot help but undergo the effects of its confrontation with all which is basically heterogeneous to it, especially the fictional interlacing. Finally, it is in the assembly of the "two texts" that the singularity of *W* resides. One is the counterpoint of the other, that is, a clear *interweaving* game.

But if we admit that *W* is subjected to a constraint principle, several questions arise. *One*, what is precisely under constraint? *Two*, what are the effects of the constraints? We know that the constraint is linked to that way in which *W* was published, as a serial novel, made up of episodes written one week after the other, which appeared successively in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* between September 1969 et August 1970 (*W* 7, ch. II). This initial series derived in fact from an "adventure novel, a travel story, an educational novel" "born of a childhood memory or more precisely a childhood ghost." Perec adds that this serial is at the intersection of three works, those of Roussel, Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and that in his first drafts he "pasted" *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant*. Perec described his project to Maurice Nadeau as follows:

I said to myself, the form that will suit me [...] is the serial novel [...] which will force me to invent something new everyday, to construct episodes each of which would happily conclude what came before and would set up the mystery and suspense of those that followed (*Je suis né* 63-64).

I will emphasize three things. First of all what is highlighted is the constraints' inventive capacity: "an external stimulation which plays the same role for *W* that the absent E played in *La Disparition*" (65).<sup>32</sup> Next, the *serial constraint* is regulated, as we know, by necessities of order, suspension, length and sequential cuts. These are four parameters which, instead of acting in time, will be retained and transposed into the space of the finished book. The constraint's object becomes the scriptographic dimension. It's probably a good idea to return to the double meaning of the word *composition*. Composition or construction (*facture*)? The semantic focus, in its dynamic sense, stresses *invention*. In its static sense (which isn't quite passive since the completed text will be activated by the process of readerly production) *configuration* is the main



33 It is the space of representation, its *liter-al topography* to use Ricardou's phrase (157). In *Espèces d'espaces*, the topological exploration starts from the material space of writing before progressing into macrocosmic spheres.

34 Among all the parameters involved in the organization of sequences, we should consider not only those of order, length, and cut, but that of their numerical arrangement. For more details see my "Blanc, coupe, énigme" (4-13).

35 If we adopt the genetic perspective, we can privilege a particular chapter (XVIII) that told "the story of Perec's "run-away day" [fugue]" which he subtracted from the autobio-graphic series (Bellos 546). But, within the alternating scripto-graphic system [as a fugue], we can stress that the missing section is the one in roman characters, situated between chapters XI and XII. I interpret this material elimination as a graphic transposition of what Perec achieved in his lipogrammatic novel, *La Disparition* (see my "Lettres volées").

36 This expression comes from chapter LXXIII in *La Vie mode d'emploi*.

37 "One chapter has been suppressed because of the girl who bites into her cookie. More deeply this chapter must disappear to break the symmetry, to introduce one error within the system, because when

characteristic. How will the written text appear visually in the space of the book? After all, the book is a physical object. Its manufacture consists of the manner in which its physical and technical aspects are implemented as well as its final appearance. The scriptographic space here is the object of a peculiar organization.<sup>33</sup> The configuration of the written text is taken in an arrangement that is spatially shaped by several key constraints typical of the serial. In other words, the two series are the object of an almost cinematographic editing (*montage en parallèle*) which governs the number of sequences, the typographic characters, their alternation, their length and placement, briefly all which affects their distribution and how the episodes that interrupt and continue each other incessantly are presented.<sup>34</sup> It therefore follows that two ways of reading can relay each other. In the linear sense there are breaks, suspensions, sutures (Magné, "Sutures" 39-55). In the translinear sense, there is overlapping, resumption, interlacing. Basically we have a *crisscrossing* of stories and registers since the calculated discrepancy of alternation—produced at the hinge of the book's two parts—creates a virtual superimposition of heterogeneous series. The third point is that the book space is governed by a constraint that recalls the lipogram of *La Disparition*, where we find the calculated omission of the most common letter of the French alphabet (e). Here the eviction translates into the "gap-episode": the missing chapter. A sign which is characteristic of Perec's fabrication modes is that once again the work's *facture* is marked by a *fracture*. In this sense we can describe *W* not as a lipogram, but as a *lipograph*.<sup>35</sup>

Once this arrangement constraint has been acknowledged, we must ask ourselves another question. We know that Perec was a supporter of the *double cover*<sup>36</sup> principle (Magné, "cahiers des charges" 72). The writer must reveal a part of the constraint and conceal the other at the same time. We can thus interpret Perec's strategy beneath the following double sign: "remain hidden, be discovered." For Perec's writing according to constraints is a way of applying and exploring a formulation but also a way of upsetting and subverting it. This ends up being a sort of second degree programming. Magné analyzes such a strategy especially for *Alphabets* and *La Vie Mode d'emploi*.<sup>37</sup> This trans-programming consists of curbing a rather enslaving process, one which conforms a bit too much to a pre-established program as might be set out in some sort of self-imposed "chore notebook." Reveal to better

one establishes a system of constraints, there must also be the anti-constraint therein. It is important to destroy the system of constraints. The system must not be rigid, there must be some play, as we say, that it should creak a little. It must not be entirely consistent: a clinamen is needed—this is Epicure's atom theory: 'the world works because from the start it is unbalanced'. According to Klee, the genius comes from the error within the system" (Perec, *Entretien Pawlikowska* 70) 38 To bring "back something unknown to something known, relieves, quiets, and satisfies, besides giving a sensation of power. There is danger, disquiet, and solicitude associated with the unknown,—the primary instinct aims at doing away with these painful conditions" (138).

conceal; according to the famous *Purloined Letter* model the purpose of displaying is to be able to pass unnoticed more easily. This ambiguous strategy causes constraint writing to be doubly diminished when it falls beneath a reader's scrutiny. On one level, Perec reveals only a portion of his program and he does so indirectly through the work's paratext even though he regrets having then clarified the structure as he did for *Alphabets*. On another level, this sort of burying of the constraints is exacerbated by the *clinamen* effects. "Perec explicitly linked the use of these distortions to his concern for concealing the rules." If it's a question of "obstructing the temptation of an archeological reading whose sole ambition consists of finding the text's laws of production," one risks another problem. This second difficulty causes what in fact is the result of a precise textual production to be taken for a pure representational effect. Such an effect, once it is cut off from the operations which have made it come about, simply hastens the "readerly identification process" which consists, as Nietzsche would say, of dragging the unknown to the realm of the known, invention or fiction to what has already been read, that is, to what "has already been represented."<sup>8</sup> The double cover strategy thus consists of making "readable" (lisible) a text whose laws of functioning and engendering have been rendered undetectable to the reader (although produced as a *scriptible* texts, according to Barthes' term). Such a strategy blocks the possible access to the *scriptible*.

## POLYGRAPHY

Between an approach that leads complexity back to its supposed pre-conceived condition, and a reading which, on the contrary, seeks in the fiction "what has not been deciphered by the autobiographical discourse" (Colonna 16), we can measure the gap between the identification process which "always returns to itself" and an endeavor which isn't afraid of being thrown off its "horizon of expectation." Synecdochally, art and its *manner* is led back to its *matter*. Genetic analysis works backstream between the author's intentions and the so called definitive text which is pulverised into a plurality of versions and more or less elaborated "projects." It distracts from what is likely to take place between a text and its reader. Rather than bring back the singularity of the entire assembly to a banal source, let's consider the *arrangement effects* that are likely to engage the reader instead. To observe that the book's two



39 Such an intersection is clear with *La Vie mode d'emploi's* last sentence in relation to the characters Winckler and Bartlebooth: "the black hole of the sole piece not yet filled in has the almost perfect shape of an X. But the ironical thing, which could have been foreseen long ago, is that the piece the dead man holds between his fingers is shaped like a W" (*Life* 497, Bellos 634).

parts begin with the fictional series or that the vanished chapter is autobiographical is crucial because this is what the reader encounters. No narrative facet may be read *outside of the specific assembly in which it is arranged*. What the Italicized fiction offers is not held accountable to the demands of truth that govern the autobiographic side even though it, in its Roman letters, is already contaminated by the other idiom. And we must especially divest our reading of W from the demands of "veracity" (what Bellos implies with his "falsification" emphasis).

Finally, despite the focus placed on the bi-graphic composition, the *polylogical functioning* of the work should not be overlooked. *W* is an interlacing of stories, intertexts, genres and heterogeneous materials. Beyond effective or virtual correspondences or sutures lies an economy of disconnection, of the non-tied, the contrary of an "idyllic" prose. To sum it up, only the intersection intercepts. This explains the *W* graph or the double X.<sup>39</sup> Made up of their intersection not only does this book not have a center, but even if there were an autobiographical discourse *no "subject" could constitute its center*. This self-subversion rejects not only the unity of the subject but a *monotextual centrality* as well. The self-divisible ob/ject which resists auto-biocentric take over fights two poles of textual organization: unity and identity, two principles that govern our idea of a book, of a genre or of the author-narrator-actor equation. Consequently, "autobiographic space" is overwhelmed by scriptographic space. What divides autobiography, the opposition that threatens the genre from the inside, is not only the distance that separates the writer from his experience, the past from its re-presentation and the mixing of this past into the current presentation (the narrating "I" and the topographic game). Beyond the conceptual divisions that always tap into these types of endeavors, especially between "fiction and truth," there are material ones: the book's partitions, the overlapping or the distance which is or is not concealed, between the different narrating voices (these gaps are constantly reasserted : *je/il*) the voice that takes up the childhood ghost in the *il/île* (he/island) *W*. And it is not the meta-generic discourse, the "inter-text" (the third series eliminated in the final version), "pharmakon" of the impossible discourse that can explain all the gaps (*Mémoire* 67, 73; Bellos 450-3). The "unreadability" of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is linked to this narrative refusal and to the limit of auto-

40 The existential series is more a catalogue composed of unrelated remnants, a sort of record of written traces, photo descriptions, notes, notebooks, fragments of memories that constitute more a dossier than a conventional narrative.

biographical reflexivity. Since the discourse eludes us, we call it a "project." The book's literal space, its documentary format, its partitioning, its scriptographic puzzle is rejected with its blinding evidence which clearly derives from the serial format and is instead replaced with a metaphoric "space."<sup>40</sup> Whereas we find ourselves at a construction site in which fiction or the memories of texts are waiting to be rediscovered: Melville, Kafka, Poe and many others but also Queneau. Let us read an inter-text in which the impossible difference between fiction and truth is highlighted through "so-called memories."

The world had changed, we used to have a story  
I used to remember the past [...]

Now I'm thirteen — but what became of my childhood?  
Thirteen is an uneven number  
that presides over attempts  
to save existence by navigating through Hell.  
[...]  
I erect a statue to the puppets  
who moved my hands before destroying them,  
but I don't know the real meaning  
or the true character of my so-called memories (*Chêne et chien*, 18-19).

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