Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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Une fois de plus, je fus comme un enfant qui joue à cache-cache et qui ne sait pas ce qu’il craint ou désire le plus: rester caché, être découvert. *Georges Perec*

**Weaving a Net**

Despite the interpretative furor instigated by George Perec’s oeuvre, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (*W or the Memory of Childhood*) has not been systematically read in interaction with the theories concerning trauma, memory, and experience that began to emerge in the 1980s. Such a connection provides fertile ground for the interpretation of Perec’s book as well as for the development of this theorization. My aim in the first three chapters of this study is to demonstrate the interaction between this literary text and trauma theory.

*W* concerns the traumatization of a child who lost his parents and his home due to World War II. The book gives meaning to the phrase “a child of war,” in which the words “child of” may refer to either a child or an adult. The choice of this terminology indicates that effects of the traumatization of the child in Perec’s text have persisted into adulthood. This child of war was overwhelmed by a violating environment in a complex, cumulative, and enduring process. *W* is an account of a subject’s growing awareness of the traumatic traversal of war.

This interpretation is based on the idea that the act of writing was motivated by, and gives form to, a subject’s painful and paradoxical process of becoming conscious of this overwhelming experience. The pain of acknowledging the broken connection with one’s own life story has to be countered by another pain: a deliberate confrontation with the historical reality of war and

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1. 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 – *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*. For my analyses I used the French edition (1975) and the Dutch translation (1991). The English edition (1989) only served as a translation of the quotations into English. In this study Perec’s book in its entirety will be referred to as *W*. Because *W* consists of two alternating tales, the designation “*W*” relates only to the imaginary tale or more specifically to the island “*W*,” whereas the designation “*A*” refers to the autobiographical tale. The terms “imaginary” and “autobiographical” are borrowed from Perec’s description of the (his)story on the French cover. The two tales are distinguished typographically by an italic and a roman letter style respectively. This distinction will be maintained in all quotations from the book. The thirty-seven chapters of *W* are numbered consecutively by means of Roman numerals. I will
concentration camps. W is both text and meta-text, imaginative and theoretical: it is a way of remembering and writing history, as well as a text disclosing the (im)possibilities of both, reflecting on them and allowing for further reflection.

The book is constructed around the elliptical mark “(...)” on an otherwise blank page. These points de suspension separate Part One from Part Two.² Signifying ellipsis, interruption or substitution of a text, the sign emphasizes a text’s absence. The French denomination of the sign, moreover, generates the notions of points of suspension and points of delay. As I will argue, this condensation of meanings discloses what lies at the heart of Perec’s book: the identification of a discursive vacuum and the attempt to penetrate it.

W consists of two parallel texts written in alternating chapters: an adventure story, henceforth referred to as “W,” and an autobiographical tale, referred to as “A.” The former is the rewriting of a youthful fantasy about a nation entirely devoted to athletics. The latter is an amalgam of (re)constructed memories and their interpretations, additional notes, biographical data from oral and other traditions, newspaper clippings, a text written when Perec was a teenager, descriptions of boyhood photos, and reflections on childhood, writing and memory. This catalogue should not give the impression that Perec harbors illusions about being able to chart his childhood in full. On the contrary, even on the cover of his book, he stresses the incompleteness and lack of historical facts and figures, describing his autobiographical tale as:

le récit fragmentaire d’une vie d’enfant pendant la guerre, un récit pauvre d’exploits et de souvenirs, fait de bribes éparses, d’absences, d’oubli, de doutes, d’hypothèses, d’anecdotes maigres.

a fragmentary tale of a wartime childhood, a tale lacking in exploits and memories, made up of scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses and meagre anecdotes.

In the book’s first part, the key figure of both texts – a hidden character – is a child who has lost his parents and his home. The epigraph taken from Queneau, “Cette brume insensée où s’agitent...” refers to the primary narrator of the autobiographical tale “A” as Perec, to differentiate him from the narrator(s) of “W.” For a thorough study of Perec’s poetics in general and a bibliography see Montfrans 1999.

² The term points de suspension also occurs in Perec’s text on the French cover. The separation between Part One and Part Two concerns the entire text W and does not coincide with the alternation of tales “W” and “A.”
des ombres, comment pourrais-je l'éclaircir?" (7) (That mindless mist where shadows swirl, how could I pierce it? 1), is a hint that the child – and therefore the adult who develops from that child – is in a shadowy state that borders on insanity. In Part One of “W” this crisis takes the shape of Gaspard Winckler, an eight-year-old, deaf-mute boy, who is lost in a shipwreck. Winckler is also the name of the adult narrator, who eventually decides to go off in search of the boy. It is suggested that he sets off for Tierra del Fuego and that this search leads to the discovery of a mysterious island called “W.”

In Part One of “A” Perec uses the various means listed above to give a fragmentary sketch of his childhood up to the time he departs from the Gare de Lyon for the mountain village in the Vercors where he will stay for the rest of the war. Hence this text too ends with a departure. It is also the last time he sees his mother, who is believed to have died in Auschwitz. His father, a soldier, had already been killed at the beginning of the war, when Georges was four years old.3

The book’s second part, after the sign “(…),” is again introduced by an epigraph taken from Queneau. This time there is a possible connection with the future: “cette brume insensée où s’agitent des ombres – est-ce donc là mon avenir?” (87) (This mindless mist where shadows swirl – is this my future? 63). The future turns out to depend on the gradually emerging contours of what would come to be the overpowering image of World War II: the concentration camps. The two texts finally lead to a confrontation with this inescapable reality.

In this Part Two, “W” contains a description of a community living on the island of “W.” The character-bound narrator, the “I” in the story, has stepped aside and an external narrator writes a detached, meticulous, nearly ethnographic report. According to this report, the society of “W” goes through an almost imperceptible metamorphosis. At first it seems to be a society based on Olympic ideals with body culture and competition as its main features. Its structure, however, irrevocably leads to ruthless relationships and a division into a class of masters and a class of slaves. Ultimately, the portrait that emerges is one of a society equivalent to a concentration camp: in the last paragraph “W” is described using the images of the remains of a concentration camp as these are known from photographs.

3. In chapter VIII Perec quotes an autobiographical text dating from more than fifteen years earlier, the time “the idea of writing” came to him. In this text he mentions that his mother “was interned at Drancy (France) on 23 January 1943, and then deported on 11 February following, destination Auschwitz” (1989: 33). In two additional notes Perec gives more information: “It may be that they were deported
The "A" tale of Part Two also provides a gradual disclosure of the Holocaust, though in a manner different from that of "W." Père evokes his childhood in Villard-de-Lans, where he lived for the rest of the war with various relatives and in several children's homes. One conspicuous gap in the text is the absence of Père's mother. He does not question this absence, which suggests that as a boy he did not make an explicit connection between his mother's death and the Holocaust. Even in his last memory of childhood in which a visit to an exhibition on concentration camps is mentioned, there is no more than an indirect reference to her death. The last chapter confirms that it was not until he was an adult – "des années et des années plus tard" (219) (years and years later, 163) – that Père definitively faced the reality of the extermination camps.

Père wrote *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* between 1970 and 1974. He was thirty-seven when he finished it, and the book has thirty-seven chapters, an indication that Père's life and writing were tightly related. Another indication is Père's decision to weave a crisscross web of a fictional and an autobiographical tale, tales that are inextricably bound together, so that what cannot be said is said "seulement dans leur fragile intersection" (only in their fragile overlapping), as Père's text on the cover has it. Reflecting on his writing process, Père also brings up the structure of his text. As an introduction to the following analysis I will dwell for a moment on this meta-textual comment and, in particular, on the two images or modeling principles that I will argue to be the most significant: "the weaving of a net" and the letter "X."

In the last paragraph of chapter II, Père calls the writing of his book a "gradual deciphering": "j'entreprends de mettre un terme – je veux tout autant dire par là 'tracer des limites' que 'donner un nom' – à ce lent déchiffrement" (14) (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 unraveling [modification: deciphering], 7). By using the word "deciphering" Père draws attention to the problematic and enigmatic, the still unknown, almost secret character of the subject of his research, that is, his childhood. At the same time he is indicating that vestiges of that period do exist, since he undertakes to bring them to term, an act that implies "delimitation" (marking the end of), "naming" and "bearing to fruition" (as in pregnancy).
The term “delimit” – fixing the limits – includes the two notions of limit and completion that are also implied in the meaning of the French “tracer les limites.” For my argument, this double meaning is especially relevant as it characterizes Perec’s deciphering as a semiotic process. The plural meanings of “mettre un terme” and “tracer les limites” together reflect the essence of such a process: meaning is generated through a naming that implies delimitation and completion at the same time. Meaning is to be understood as a short moment of standstill within the continuous process of semiosis.

In the same paragraph Perec also makes it clear that “mettre un terme” is not based on a mimetic principle. The weaving of a net – an image leaving room for gaps in the text but also showing the connecting threads – emphasizes contiguity rather than similarity as the principle conducive to meaning. By means of that metaphor Perec makes two important points about his writing. There is not only a complex, interactive relationship between the two texts, but that relationship is enacted in the act of weaving. This act is implied in writing two tales, producing meaning in two different ways. Perec sees his history as the result of weaving and interpreting, or, weaving as interpreting:

W ne ressemble pas plus à mon fantasme olympique que ce fantasme olympique ne ressemblait à mon enfance. Mais dans le réseau qu’ils tissent comme dans la lecture que j’en fais, je sais que se trouve inscrit et décrit le chemin que j’ai parcouru, le cheminement de mon histoire et l’histoire de mon cheminement. (14)

W is no more like my Olympic fantasy than that Olympic fantasy was like my childhood. But in the crisscross web they weave as in my reading of them I know there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken, the itinerary of my history and the story of my itinerary. (7)4

In this quotation Perec suggests a link between childhood and adulthood as well as between fiction and historical reality. In addition, he explicitly connects historical reality and the writing process by

4. I modified Bellos’ translation by using “itinerary” instead of “passage.” I thank Mieke Bal for this suggestion. Whereas “passage” indicates transition to another (adult) state, itinerary comes closer to the French “cheminement” as referring to an eternally itinerant person.
indicating that “the path he has followed” has been “inscribed” and “described” in the netting of texts. His specification of the followed path as “the itinerary of my history” as well as “the story of my itinerary” equates the two.

Enacting his indebtedness to language as well as acknowledging it on a meta-level, Perec realizes that the integration of his childhood into the history of life is a discursive undertaking. This realization also implies that Perec knows that his childhood is a retrospective, textual (re)construction: the product of the narrative and rhetorical strategies of an adult. However, the way of writing – the way in which the primary narrator has organized his entire text – also underscores that a traumatized life cannot be resolved without the active, interpretive moves of another person, a reader in this case. Presenting a text as a complex puzzle constitutes an appeal to puzzlers.

It is not by accident that the figure of chiasmus plays a crucial part in this textual fabric. This stylistic figure, based on the Greek letter chi (X), connects two mirroring word pairs. Perec makes ample use of it. As I will argue below, the assumption that the two texts are about the same parents is confirmed by a chiasmic connection of the ages of four and six related to the deaths of the parents. The position of two childhood fragments that present the puzzle of these numbers, at the end and at the beginning of their respective chapters, can also be understood as a chiasmus.

In chapter XV, belonging to “A,” the choice and the importance of this figure are explained in one of Perec’s reflective comments. He considers the X as “the starting point of a phantasmal geometry,” pointing, through the intermediary basic figure V, to the major symbols of his childhood history: the swastika and the Star of David (106). The X is therefore a sign connecting the different poles of Perec’s history. Moreover, the childhood fragments I mentioned, and around which the rest of this chapter pivots, are connected through another meaning of the X as well. In the same chapter XV, Perec also designates X as the unknown factor in mathematics. The reasoning that, from the chiasmic connection of the ages of four and six with the deaths of the parents, it follows that the number four corresponds with the unnamed mother, is basically the solution of a mathematical equation with one unknown.

Finally, and again in chapter XV, the X is inextricably linked by Perec to the letter V, which he calls the basic figure in the X. In his phantasmal geometry he describes the X as:

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\text{[signe] de l'inconnu mathématique, point de départ enfin d'une géométrie fantasmatique dont le V dédouble constitue la figure de base et dont les enchevêtrements multiples tracent les symboles majeurs de l'histoire de mon enfance (...)}. (106, emphasis added)
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of the mathematical unknown, and, finally, the starting point for a geometrical fantasy, whose basic figure is the double V [sic], and whose complex convolutions trace out the major symbols of the story of my childhood (...). (77; emphasis added)

According to Le nouveau Petit Robert, “dédoubler,” besides its usual meaning of “dividing into halves” also has the meaning of “défaire (ce qui est double) en ramenant à l’unité,” in other words: to reduce duplication to a single element. The latter (untranslatable) meaning seems to be suggested here. However, I see the explicit use of the word “dédouble” not only as a reference to the letter X being composed of two Vs, but also as a reference to the “double-vé,” the French name for the W and the title of Perec’s book. Through this reference, the dual character of the letter W is highlighted, generating, in its turn, a meaning for the title.

I consider the W in its guise of “double-vé” as an invitation to read Perec’s book as a “double-texte,” consisting of two “textes dédoublés,” of which “the complex convolutions” trace out the history of his childhood. Correspondingly, I see Perec in his function of narrator of “A” as a “personne dédouble,” who only acquires full meaning when combined with his other half, the narrator of “W.”

In addition to its meaning as duplication, the letter W also has the connotation of a foreign language: it is the only letter of the French alphabet that pertains exclusively to foreign words. It does not belong to Perec’s mother tongue. Warren Motte has also pointed out this fact in an essay in which he attributes to Perec a “poetics of the letter” (1984: 120). Motte calls the W, among other things, a “lettre marginale, lettre en exil” and reads it as a reference to Perec’s Jewishness. Within the framework of trauma I interpret the W first and foremost as a sign of strangeness, incomprehensibility and even confusion of tongues. This foreign sign again stresses the discursive character of Perec’s semiotic struggle: it is a fight about the discursive frontiers that delimit the production of meaning.

Perec’s textural enactments and meta-textual comments are not only pointers that might direct the process of interpretation, but also “points of suspension” onto which a discursive approach to trauma can be hooked. Accordingly, I read W as a text through which a doubled narrator tries to make his traumatized, dissociated life representable.
An (Im)possible Testimony

The first chapter of the book – the initial chapter of “W” – begins as an adventure story. The character-bound narrator “I” declares his intention to divulge his journey to “W” after a long period of hesitation, secrecy and oblivion. He even alleges that he is driven by compulsion. Yet, in the course of this introduction, he does not supply any concrete data about his mission, but confuses the reader with vague and contradictory information.

For instance, this character-bound narrator and focalizor does not define the status of the events that are basic to his story. On the one hand, he presents them as true, autobiographical facts: “les événements dont j’ai été le témoin” (the events to which I was witness, 3); he describes them as taking possession of his dreams: “Mais mes rêves se peuplaient de ces villes fantômes” (But those ghost towns came back to live in my dreams, 3). On the other hand, the narrator claims that he has not found any external facts confirming the events, while he questions the true value of nightmares: “Je n’ai rien trouvé et il me semblait parfois que j’avais rêvé, qu’il n’y avait eu qu’un inoubliable cauchemar” (I found nothing, and it sometimes seemed as though I had dreamt, that there had been only an unforgettable nightmare, 3). The phrase “ces souvenirs sans fond” (the bottomless pit of those memories, 3) confirms this ambiguity: the primary meaning of “bottomless” is infinite, but the word also includes the connotation unfounded. Both meanings, moreover, indicate the absence of borders and emphasize the lack of holding ground. The metaphorical meaning of “fond,” substance or content, once again intensifies the elusive character of the events.

Because of this ambiguity the reader is left in the dark about “W” itself. The narrator provides only sparse, cryptic information; it is even unclear whether this is an actual, living world or one that is extinct. For example, in his dreams he sees “ces courses sanglantes dont je croyais encore entendre les mille clameurs” (those bloody contests I believed I could still hear the shouting), 3] images that evoke athletic competitions. But using such words as “le silence glacial” (this icy silence, 4) and “ce monde englouti” (this sunken world, 4), he also describes a ruin overgrown by vegetation and a dead, extinguished world that is explicitly undreamed of.

5. Bal’s introduction to the theory of narrative (1997) offers the tools through which the layered structure of the narrative aspect of a text can be analyzed. With respect to a written text the different narratological agents enable the cultural analyst to distinguish between the level of the words (narrator), the level of the story (focalizor), and the level of the fabula (actor). The narrator, focalizor, and actor make it possible to analyze which words or sentences are used to tell which specific visions of which particular actions or events respectively. Defining narrativity as a particular cultural mode of expression or semiotic behavior, Bal also demonstrates the relevance of narratology for the analysis of narrative in visual art.
Finally, he problematizes his position as a witness of the events. He declares that nobody could survive “W”: “Il ne pouvait pas y avoir de survivant” (10) (There could be no survivor, 4), while accounting for his decision to tell his story by saying that he is the only one able to do so: “j'étais le seul dépositaire, la seule mémoire vivante, seul vestige de ce monde” (10) (I was the sole depository, the only living memory, the only vestige of that world, 4). This contradiction seems to undermine his credibility. Later on, however, he specifies that he was only a witness of the events, not a participant: “je fus témoin, et non acteur” (10) (I was a witness and not an actor, 4). His position as a non-credible, or at least mysterious witness turns out to be the result of his restricted position as an outsider. This limited perspective is also related to his position as narrator when he adds, in the present tense: “Je ne suis pas le héros de mon histoire” (10) (I am not the hero of my tale, 4). This remark once again confirms his position on the sidelines. But at the same time, he is speaking about his history. He feels involved in the events – they are said to have changed his life dramatically, but also implies that he is powerless to influence their course.

The distinction between “witness” and “actor” raises the question whether or not an individual can be in control of her or his (life) history. Within the framework of the trauma theory developed in the humanities this problem can be approached as the difference between the conscious experience of an event and non-conscious participation in it. This difference is the central premise of the trauma theory that forms the starting point of my study. A traumatic event is, by definition, one that cannot be experienced in full consciousness at the moment it occurs. However, it is not only the nature of the event as such that causes the trauma. An event is traumatic when it does not let itself be molded into an experience at the moment of its occurrence: “The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 1995: 4). In Caruth’s view “being possessed” means that the traumatized person has no control over impressions left by the events: she cannot consciously evoke or remember them, but is inescapably haunted by them in the form of traumatic dreams, hallucinations, flashbacks, and other undesired physical reactions.

Ernst van Alphen defines this inability to consciously participate in events as a discursive influence.
problem, because experience itself is the result of a discursive process (1997: 42-45). Explaining trauma as a failure of experience, he argues that there is a “split between the living of an event and the availability of forms of representation with which the event can be (re)experienced” (44). It is impossible to bridge the gap inherent in being traumatized because “[being] part of an event or of a history as an object of its happening is not the same as experiencing it as a subject” (44). This short circuit prevents the generation of normal – episodic or autobiographical – recollections and, thus, the assimilation of traumatic occurrences. Since these events are as yet beyond discursively defined organization and thus beyond understanding, they cannot be integrated into an autobiography. 6

This view of trauma offers an explanation for the problematic relation between narrator and events in the first chapter of “W.” The distinction made by the narrator between actor and witness can be understood as the difference between a narrator whose story is compatible with existing representational means and a narrator for whom this is not the case. The latter struggles with the problem that the events that need to be told cannot be put into words and therefore cannot be understood, just like traumatic events. “W” is about matters that cannot be told.

Because he is unable to testify, the narrator does not function as a witness in the conventional sense: the traumatic situation prevents him from creating a distance from the events by means of testimony. He is “inside the event.”7 Despite this inherent impediment, his involvement is made manifest by creating the witness who qualifies as “the only depository [keeper], the only living memory and the only vestige of this world.”8 As a person who keeps something, as the personification of a memory, and as a person turned into a vestige, the only physical evidence of the events is the narrator himself. As a witness he becomes the index of the events in “W.” This fact eventually prompts him to write.

The notion of a witness who is dead as well as alive is matched by the ambiguity of the events, which are dreamlike and real at the same time. In his capacity as a witness, as a “vestige,” the narrator knows that these events took place in reality, but he is nonetheless unable to give voice to them. They are merely revived in his dreams; reality only provides the sight of “a swallowed world.” Nevertheless, the narrator gives in to his urge to narrate, thereby taking an active and creative

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8. The Dutch translation uses the word “ingewijde” (initiate), the figurative meaning of “dépositaire” (depository), someone to whom a secret is confided, a confidant. The Dutch term “bewaarder” and its English equivalent “keeper” stay closer to the literal first meaning of Le Petit Robert: “Personne à qui l'on confie un dépôt,” someone who is put in charge of something. The term “keeper” creates a greater distance between the person and the object in the person’s charge than does the
decision that depends on two conditions: narrating assumes the presence of a listener as well as a connection with the symbolic order. In other words, the intention to recount indicates that he is reaching for a relationship and an (inter)subjective space in which this relationship can operate. Both indicate how isolation can be breached.  

A listener plays a decisive part in the attempt of a traumatized subject to break the discursive silence in which she is caught. In the case of a written story the implied reader and the real reader may perform the function of listener. Both can have a formative function. The implied reader can represent an internalized “you” for whom the writer – the primary narrator – writes his testimony or story: “The testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (...) reconstitutes the internal ‘thou’ and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (Felman & Laub 1992: 85; emphasis added). As far as the internalized listener or implied reader can be said to “hold” the writing by his willingness to lend an ear, the writer creates his own “holding environment.” A real reader functions more indirectly in this process: her interpretation, that is, her understanding of the text confirms the connection between the text and the symbolic order. For, if the reader understands the story, the isolation of the writer is broken. The position of a reader who attempts to understand is comparable to the basic function of a therapist in an actual therapeutic situation.  

The narrator’s active involvement in his telling is presented as a compulsion in the second sentence of the book, where the narrator speaks of an imperative necessity to reveal apparent secrets: “poussé par une nécessité impérieuse, persuadé que les événements (...) doivent être révélés et mis en lumière” (9) (impelled by a commanding necessity and convinced that the events to which I was witness must be revealed and brought to light, 3). The act of telling is motivated by an urge to bring certain events to light. This emphasis on events helps a reader bear in mind that narrating normally involves more than a relationship: one tells something to someone. Although the narrator does not say whether the revelations to come are told solely in his own interest or in the common interest as well, there might be more at stake than the narrator’s existential urge to be able to experience.  

The suggestion is that the need to tell is not exclusively related to the ineffable events in a
personal history, but that a traumatic history with a broader impact is involved. I will elaborate on this suggestion by means of the following analysis of the two first fragments of Perec's text that explicitly address childhood as a theme: the fragments that summarize the childhood of the narrator of "W" and the narrator of "A," respectively.

A Rhetoric of Gaps

The narrator introduces the fragment of "W," the penultimate paragraph of chapter I, by saying that he is following a general rule that he does not want to dispute. He wants to be as brief as possible about it, only giving "quelques indications sur mon existence et, plus précisément, sur les circonstances qui décidèrent de mon voyage" (11) (certain features of my existence and, more particularly, the circumstances which prompted my voyage, 4). The childhood he describes ends at the age of sixteen with his departure from the village of his birth, a departure that signifies his transition to adulthood.

The rule the narrator wants to follow presumably refers to the convention of introducing a personal history by way of recounting preceding events. In an autobiography this convention implies starting with childhood. The seemingly irrelevant remark about this rule initially reduces the following information to sheer compulsory matter: childhood is just one factor, nothing special. This subject is further trivialized when the narrator adds that he wants to be as brief as possible about it. It is the reference to this convention that puts the reader on guard: perhaps something is wrong with this childhood, or perhaps it is not really a matter of course to begin a life story by recounting birth and childhood. The formal nature of this beginning does nothing to reassure us:

Je suis né le 25 juin 19..., vers quatre heures, à R., petit hameau de trois feux, non loin de A. Mon père possédait une petite exploitation agricole. Il mourut des suites d'une blessure, alors que j'allais avoir six ans. Il ne laissait guère que des dettes et tout mon héritage tint en quelques effets, un peu de linge, trois ou quatre pièces de vaisselle. L'un des deux voisins de mon père s'offrit à m'adopter; je grandis au milieu des siens, moitié comme un fils, moitié comme un valet de ferme. (11)

I was born on 25 June 19... around four o' clock, at R., a hamlet of three houses, not far from A. My father owned a small farm. He died from complications arising from an injury when I was nearly six years old. He left almost nothing but debts, and my whole inheritance came to a few possessions, some linen, three or four pieces of crockery. One of my father's neighbours volunteered to adopt me; I grew up amongst his people, half a son, half a farmhand. (4-5)
The fragment seems to be nothing more than a recitation of facts without emotional coloring. It is unclear whether these are personal memories or second-hand information. The "I" was born and grew up - he makes no mention of activities. Apart from the descriptions there are two potential narrative events, the father's death and the adoption process, but it remains uncertain whether these will function in the story.

What strikes me most, however, are the "gaps" in the text, which are so extensive that I can only enumerate them:

1. the omission of historical definitions of time and place,
2. the omission of personal names,
3. the silence concerning his mother,
4. the lack of further data about the wounds that caused his father's death,
5. the absence of other relatives.

Complementary to these lacunae there are some remarkable details:

1. the mention of day, month and hour of birth,
2. the hamlet of three "feux" (households),
3. the mention of age: almost six,
4. the generous attention paid to his humble inheritance, including "three or four pieces of crockery,"
5. the offer of adoption (combined with growing up half as son, half as farmhand).

Apart from the broad indication of "twentieth century," clues to the historical reality of time and place have been reduced to dots. As a result, the story clearly presents itself as fiction, or rather as a travel story in the picaresque tradition, invoking the genre of fantastic travel stories by such authors as Jules Verne, Daniel Defoe and Edgar Allan Poe. Curiously, while the narrator omits his year of birth and the names of places, other details are given with more specificity than expected: the day, month and even the hour of his birth. In addition to the effect of the real they produce, they stick in the mind as potentially significant facts.11

As far as the lack of historical coordinates is concerned, there is another contrast between this fragment about childhood and the subsequent paragraph, which describes the transition to

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11. This intuition is confirmed by Magné 1988: 54, note 8. He relates the figure four with Père's mother. "Effect of the real" is the rhetorical strategy introduced by Barthes as *effet de réel* in an article with the same title (1968). This effect is produced by the connotation of a sign that contributes to the "vraisemblance" of a text, i.e. which produces the meaning: "this is reality." The connotation "this is reality" overrules the denotation. Hence, the effect of the real functions as a denotation.
adulthood. Some outlines of historical reality are hinted at in the latter paragraph, which mentions the borders of France, Germany and Luxembourg. Here it is important that these countries are mentioned in connection with the narrator's enlistment in the army, his active participation in the fighting and his desertion. In other words, the war provides a connection between fiction and historical reality as well as a division between childhood and adulthood. As a result, childhood is defined as a period that lacks the support of historical coordinates. Childhood takes place independently of history in general and of war in particular.

The second omission, of personal names (either the narrator's or those of other people), indicates anonymity, that is, lack of specificity. This is also a lack of hold. It implies another attack on the narrator's identity. The child is not only deprived of a historical context, but also of his primary frame of reference: a specifiable "I," distinguished from others. The greatest lacuna in the personal history, however, is contained in the third omission: silence about the mother. A mother's absence from a child's life story is exceptional and puzzling. Obviously, something is the matter with the mother. The father's death, the fourth omission, is also mysterious: "He died from complications arising from an injury." It is unclear whether he died as the result of an accident, a crime, or a military action, whether he was an innocent victim or inflicted injury on himself. The addition "when I was nearly six years old," detail three, makes the loss of the narrator's father all the more painful because it is connected with the child's birthday. Six, moreover, is the age at which school begins; this links school years with being parentless. In two respects an end has come to the world of childhood protected by parents. The absence of other relatives contributes to the image of the poor orphan becoming a lonely orphan as well.

Detail two, "a hamlet of three feu," indicates a very small community, but the number three also refers to another, small and therefore vulnerable community: the nuclear family of father, mother and child. The narrator uses the word "feu" in the sense of hearth or household. Two other meanings of feu — fire and deceased — play important roles in Part One of Perec's book. "Fire" refers to La Terre de Feu (Tierra del Fuego), which is close to the island of "W," and eventually leads to the connotation of concentration camp and the death of Perec's mother. "Deceased" applies both to Perec's father and the father of the narrator of "W." The different meanings of feu connect the three losses Perec suffered as a small child: his father, his mother and his home. The same losses are shown to have occurred in the narrator's childhood. Hence, only in interaction with the autobiographical tale and only retrospectively can I conclude that Perec creates a double of himself in "W."
The description in detail four of "three or four pieces of crockery" carries a remarkable tension. On the one hand, the naming of exact numbers points to a tendency toward precision that seems incomprehensible in view of the many gaps in the text. On the other hand, the precision of the numbers is undercut by the hesitation about the exact number, implied by "three or four." This suggests that the numbers have a specific meaning. I endorse Bernard Magné's interpretation of these numbers and the word "vaisselle" as traces of (the death of) Perec's mother, thus connecting the text of "W" with the autobiographical text. Magné's analysis of the "sutures," i.e. the many literal connections between the two texts, supports this view. For instance, he demonstrates that the naming of the humble inheritance creates a suture with the next chapter, the first chapter of the autobiographical text.

The adoption, the final detail, is remarkable for three reasons. Firstly, it implies that the mother had already disappeared for good – was probably already dead – before the father died. Secondly, amidst the flagrant lack of frames, adoption offers some hold in the form of a legal substitute for the parents, although the remark "half as son, half as farmhand" reveals that the narrator paid for this legal position with hard labor. Thirdly, adoption also plays a role in the autobiographical text.

The components of the fabula of this particular childhood can be summed up in a few lines. A boy in a farming hamlet becomes an orphan at (nearly) six years of age and grows up as a poor, hard-working adopted child in a neighboring family. The way the fabula is formulated, however, makes it apparent that the losses of father, mother and home at a very young age were traumatizing events. The unnamed mother is the most conspicuous sign. In the framework of the trauma model this indicates that the mother’s absence relates to an event that cannot be put into words. The remarkable vagueness about the father’s death also hints at an unspeakable event. The lack of sequential ordering, affective aspects, and elements such as time, place, personal names and other family relations conveys the impression of a child living in a vacuum. A rhetoric of gaps or absences thus surfaces in "W," invoking the image of a child without identity or history: the image of a traumatized child.

12. The Dutch translation that offers "een paar borden en schotels" (11) (a few plates and saucers) does not preserve this specificity.

13. The remark in chapter I: "tou t mon héritage tint en quelques effets" (11) is linked with two lines in chapter II: "mon histoire tient en quelques lignes" (13) and "Tout ce que j'en savais tient en moins de deux lignes" (14; emphasis in text). The line in "W" is also linked to the other lines by its meta-textual connotation. Le Petit Robert gives not only linen and clothing as the explanation of "effet," but also (aesthetic and affective) effect. According to Magné the autobiographical text is woven secretly into the text of "W" with the help of "sutures" (1988: 49-52).
My reading of the beginning of the first chapter is that the journey to “W” is linked to traumatic events, and that the absent mother is a key to this journey. Viewed in this way, the childhood fragment is not some unimportant, compulsory matter at all – instead, it represents the core of this chapter, disclosing the underlying reason for the journey. The fact that the fragment follows the rule suggests that the narrator’s remarks about that rule were not gratuitous, but rather disingenuous. While the narrator does not dispute the convention, he adds his own deconstructive rules, as will become apparent in the following section.

The Plot of the Life Story

According to psychologist Mark Freeman, the autobiographical story conventionally adopts the concept of development. The development from child to grown-up is presented as growth, a linear progression, with childhood as the starting point and adulthood as its logical end. Freeman argues, however, that development, as it takes form in autobiography, is a retrospective (re)construction imposed on the past from the present. As the title of his study indicates, *Rewriting the Self* is a process that always involves a posterior narrative ordering. Consequently, both the self and the development from childhood to adulthood are narrative constructions (1993: 9-10). Influenced by developmental thinking and the convention of unity, in traditional autobiography these narrative constructions tend to produce a coherent life story.

The idea that childhood is an adult construction problematizes the traditional notion of autobiography in two ways. First, since childhood acquires meaning during adulthood, it does not precede adulthood but can be regarded as its product, its effect. In that respect childhood is not the logical beginning, but the end of a process. Second, since childhood is the result of selective and narrative strategies, a coherent life story is not necessarily the outcome. Breaches and gaps can be just as functional, especially in contrast to the ideal of coherent development.

In the fragment that is analyzed in the previous section, the narrator underscores the latter point. He even uses rhetorical strategies to demonstrate the impossibility of constructing a coherent story. This impossibility makes childhood both beginning and end: on the one hand, there is a childhood that demands a story and sets the story in motion. On the other hand, childhood is there only when it is recounted; as such it is the effect of narrating. As the target of a search, childhood is not connected to adulthood in a unidirectional manner but, rather, by a two-way
Because the narrator of "W" appears to be in search of his childhood, he indicates that there is something wrong with the connection between childhood and adulthood, a problem he tries to solve by his act of writing.

Significantly, the narrator's creative efforts entail a resolution of the problems that, as Van Alphen argues, are caused by the discrepancy between the means of representation provided by the symbolic order for experiencing and the kind of events and situations faced by victims of the Holocaust. Van Alphen distinguishes four basic representational problems "that can stand in the way of experience":

- two of which concern the survivor's position as subject and two of which concern the narrative frames used to tell about the Holocaust. (...) 1. ambiguous actantial position; one is neither subject nor object of the events, or one is both at the same time; 2. total negation of any actantial position or subjectivity; 3. lack of a plot or narrative frame by means of which the events can be given meaningful coherence; 4. the plots or narrative frames that are available (or are inflicted) are unacceptable because they do not do justice to one's role in the events. (Van Alphen 1997: 45; emphasis in text)

The sketch of a child without identity or history indicates that the narrator of "W" struggles with the issues enumerated in problems 2 and 3: the negation of an actantial position, and the lack of plot and narrative frames. He tries to solve these problems by using the account of a conventional adventure journey as a structure and by giving himself the role of character-bound narrator in it. While the use of the first person puts the narrator in the position of an autobiographical subject, the genre supplies a framework for the plot: disappearances, travels and secrets. Moreover, this narrative structure allows him to bridge time gaps and geographical distance, or to find causal connections. Finally, by choosing this genre, the narrator arouses curiosity in the reader and secures the continuous attention of the listener who, according to Laub, is indispensable in making traumatic events recountable.

Thus, using the framework of the trauma model, I interpret the
journey to “W” as a search for self and (life)history, two notions that mutually define one another. The mother’s disappearance plays a key role in this process. The parallels and differences with the autobiographical version of the summarized childhood fragment will be examined in more detail in the next section.

I Have No Childhood Memories

Using consecutive Roman numerals, Perec emphasizes that the first chapter of his parallel text “A” is the continuation of the previous one: it is the actual second chapter. But he also creates a marked difference between the two texts by employing roman type in the autobiographical part, and italics in the story of “W.” These peritextual signs are applied consistently throughout the book. This first autobiographical chapter can be characterized as the history of how Perec’s book came to be written, of the continuous as well as the alternating textual construction.

The first sentence is of crucial importance. It is the key to Perec’s motivation and method of working, and to the meaning of the entire book. At the same time it introduces a fragment about his childhood. Through this sentence Perec links the book’s genesis directly to a text about his childhood. He starts with a statement that appears to be a virtual paradox in an autobiography: “Je n’ai pas de souvenirs d’enfance” (13) (I have no childhood memories, 6).

In the framework of the trauma model this statement suggests that Perec’s childhood was dominated by traumas that stand in the way of a normal process of recollection and assimilation of experience. This dry observation is given additional impact by the subsequent dispassionate summary of his childhood years, which are reduced to the most essential facts, his history “en quelques lignes” (13) (to barely a couple of lines, 6). It becomes immediately clear which traumatic events are involved, i.e. the loss of both parents and the loss of a permanent home, all consequences of the war:

16. “The idea of the self, as we have come to know it, and the idea of history are in fact mutually constitutive” (Freeman 1993: 28).
17. The “peritextual signs” of W include both everything that concerns the material design of this written text and the texts accompanying the presentation of the main text: the text as a book, arrangement, letter types and styles, epigraphs, jacket text, and the like.
I have no childhood memories. Up to my twelfth year or therabouts, 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 at Villars-de-Lans. In 1945, my father’s sister and her husband adopted me. (6)

The similarities between the situation of the child in the first chapter and that of Perec himself are striking: being orphaned at the age of about six, loss of the parental home and adoption. Also, the character-bound narrator of this fragment refrains from providing specific information about his individual identity: name, place of residence, date of birth and other personal data are not mentioned. Without Perec’s text on the cover, the reader would be still in the dark about this person’s identity. The similarity of the data reconfirms the connection between the texts of “W” and “A.” But there are also differences.

First of all, the fragment is placed at the beginning of this chapter, functioning as a point of departure. In the previous chapter, the childhood period was placed at the end of the chapter, functioning as the aim of a search, a placement that, paradoxically, positions the fragments close to each other. This placement imposes a comparison that provides a new confirmation of the importance of the intertwinement of the tales.

The main difference is that, in contrast to the narrator of “W,” Perec refers to historical reality. Naming the town of Villard-de-Lans and the year 1945 introduces historical dimensions of place and time. As a consequence, “the war” means the Second World War, and explicitness about this specific framework of his youth is another striking difference with the text of “W.” Yet Perec does not openly relate the war to the loss of his parents. He leaves unsaid when and how he lost his parents, and describes his experience of the war years only in terms of “various boarding houses.” Perec, thus, was twice homeless, in both senses of the word. One final, conspicuous difference is the way Perec refers to the loss of both parents, though he does not specify how he lost each.

He only mentions his age at the time of each loss. This detail is remarkable in that Perec is six when he loses his mother, the age of the narrator of “W” when his father dies. I will return to this crossover. These differences are apparently significant, but I also interpret them as variations on the same theme. For example, in both chapters the theme of war is connected with historical reality
and the world of adults, a subject I will illuminate by showing that in both fragments a line is drawn between childhood and adulthood.

In my consideration of the first childhood fragment, I remarked that any reference to historical reality in the representation of the narrator's childhood had been carefully avoided, an avoidance that emphasizes the fictive nature of the story of "W." War does not play a role in it at all. Childhood comes to an end with the departure of the narrator at the age of sixteen from his native village. His entry into the adult world is related to his confrontation with the war: he becomes a soldier in France, participates actively in the fighting but eventually deserts. With the help of an organization of conscientious objectors he escapes to Germany and settles near the Luxembourg border (11-12). The mention of these countries indicates a link with historical reality. The transition from childhood to adulthood thus parallels the transition from fiction to historical reality. This delineation defines childhood as a period that is isolated from history and especially from war. At the same time, war is affirmed as an event explicitly connected with historical reality and adulthood.

In the paragraph about Père's childhood quoted above there is also a breach between childhood and adulthood and with the historical reality of World War II, but it is dealt with differently. Its nature is implied by the famous first sentence about the absence of childhood memories. As I argued before, this sentence indicates a short circuit between the occurrence of traumatic events and their conscious experience. In other words, Père demonstrates that the loss of his parents and the war period were not part of his personal history. In that respect, his childhood was detached from reality. The distance between childhood and adulthood or war is not measured in time, as it is in "W," but with regard to possibilities of experience and understanding. Following Van Alphen, I see this distance as a discrepancy between experience and the available means of representation.

In the next paragraphs Père indicates that the absence of a personal history - he literally calls it "cette absence d'histoire" (13) - is related to the presence of "History with a capital H." This "History," general history, is substituted for his personal history. At first he found this situation reassuring rather than problematic: "J'en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, l'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps" (13) (I was excused: a different history, History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps, 6).

By using the words "war" and "camps" after the last colon, Père reduces "History" to World War II. I interpret the use of two different words in this regard as distinguishing between
18. The different ways in which Père's parents died in World War II (one as an active French combatant, the other as a victim in a German concentration camp) identify France and Germany as the two parties in this war. It is no coincidence that in the first chapter of “W” these countries and Luxembourg, which is both French- and German-speaking, are mentioned in connection with war. It is another confirmation of the relation between “W” and “A,” and I see here the first indication of the complexity of Père’s relationship to World War II.

19. The combination of Venice and the prominence of a fictive story as the expression of youthful memory can be seen as an allusion to Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1954) and the role of the “mémoire involontaire” in it. A.S. Byatt makes a comparison between the “Combray-madeleine and Venice-stones,” because it was the tripping on an uneven paving stone that made the narrator realize that his “dazzling and indistinct vision” concerned “Venice” (...) (1998: 59).

The allusion emphasizes Proust’s equivalent of the unconscious memory as a literary means giving shape to memories outside the existing representational frames. I thank Mieke Bal for drawing my attention to this allusion.

20. The age of thirteen is also the age at which the religious adulthood of a Jewish boy is celebrated, at his bar mitzvah. Although Père was not brought up as a practicing Jew, it may well be possible that he uses this age to refer to his Jewishness. In the first place, it is remarkable that he remembers next to nothing of the contents of his story, but does “recall” his exact age when he wrote it. That age is not precisely fixed, as appears from the last paragraph of the book, where he connects the genesis of “W” with his twelfth year: “J’ai oublié les raisons qui, à douze ans, m’ont fait choisir la Terre de Feu pour y installer W” (220) (I have forgotten what reasons I had at the age of twelve for choosing Tierra del Fuego as the site of W, 164). In the second place, Venice is also mentioned in the first chapter as a place where past and present, i.e. the childhood and adulthood of the narrator, seem to touch: in a cheap restaurant in the “Ciudecca” (“Jews’ Quarter”) the narrator thinks that he recognizes someone from the island of “W,” (10) another indication of the complex relationship between “W” and “A” and the subtle interweaving of fiction and reality. Jewishness is also connected to historical reality through the historical city of Venice, the adult world and World War II. Venice can be related to Jewishness in yet two other ways. Proust (see the previous note) was half-Jewish, and there is the intertextual reference to *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the Jew Shylock plays a prominent role. By mentioning this reference in a footnote I am mirroring the extremely veiled way in which Père brings up his Jewishness in this book.
two different aspects of this war: fighting, as in all wars, and genocide, an exceptional feature of this war. The two words also indicate the different ways in which his parents met their deaths: his father was killed as a French soldier, and his mother died in Auschwitz, as is later disclosed. These facts implicitly link both his parents’ deaths to World War II. The discrepancy between experience and means of representation may now be read as the result of the parents’ war-connected deaths.  

In the fragment quoted above, Perec also suggests that a change takes place in his childhood around the age of twelve. I relate this marker to the information given in the fourth paragraph of this chapter: that he wrote and drew a story called “W” when he was thirteen. “W,” then, signifies a turning point in his history. Its first version passed into oblivion, but years later, when the memory of this invented story popped up again in his adult life, Perec realized that it could be seen as a history of his childhood:

Il y a sept ans, un soir, à Venise, je me souvins tout à coup que cette histoire s’appelait “W” et qu’elle était, d’une certaine façon, sinon l’histoire, du moins une histoire de mon enfance.

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.

The turn in Perec’s history proves to be the result of an invented story, which he interprets retrospectively as a representation of his childhood. In other words, this turning point is related to the after-the-fact modeling of his history. In the framework of the trauma model this means that the original version of “W” can be regarded as an initial attempt to find a resolution of the problem of the incongruity between the traumatic events of his childhood and the representational means available for experiencing them. It also means that this version of “W” can be seen as a connection between Perec’s childhood and the adult world.

Perec remembers next to nothing of the contents of the first version of “W”: it was about a small island near “la Terre du Feu” (Tierra del Fuego), where sports were the main activity. After some time, he recovered some of the drawings and used them to reinvent – Perec’s term – “W.” He rewrote the story as a serial, which was published in La Quinzaine littéraire in 1969-1970 (14). Four years later, W ou le souvenir d’enfance appeared, a combination of the rewritten “W” and
autobiographical texts about his childhood. Through this “memory of childhood,” constructed from an adult position, Perec explicitly connects his childhood to his adulthood.

Ultimately, the reinvented “W” turns out to have been brought in to link Perec’s history-less childhood with the “History with a capital H,” that is, World War II. However, it does not function merely to fill the gaps of “A.” Considering the themes of childhood and war in their relationship to fiction and historical reality, movements in opposing directions in the first two chapters of “W” and “A” may be observed. In the fictive story of “W” the transition from childhood to adulthood points to historical reality and war. In the autobiographical text of “A,” on the other hand, this transition points to a fictive story. Thus fiction – including inventive as well as narrative components – and historical reality are presented as mutually dependent.

A Child of War

All cross-connections and mutual references lead to the conclusion that both texts refer to the same parents. Together the texts can be read as an autobiographical account that tries to make representable the reality of one and the same person. Nevertheless, there are two tales. This double-tiered recounting must have some function. The narrator of “W” functions as a split-off part of Perec, and each tale deals with the absence of his childhood memories in a different way. Accordingly, these differences could provide the reader with the clue to the semiotic and discursive puzzle offered by the book.

This puzzle is exemplified by the differences between the two texts with regard to the representation of the parents’ deaths. In “A” the narrator makes a simple statement on the loss of his parents: “I lost my father at four, my mother at six.” The word “death” is not used. Sounding less definitive than death, and presented by the focalizer (here the left-behind “I”), the term “loss” actually diverts attention from death and especially from the way of dying. Because of this formulation it is all the more difficult to perceive the connection between the parents’ deaths and the war, a problem I consider to be the core of the first paragraph, the key to the absence of childhood memories. This consideration is supported by the implicit reference, in a later paragraph, to the parents’ deaths through the use of the words “war” and “camps.”

Compared to the enumeration of facts in “A,” the fragment of “W” has more narrative moments. To begin with, the death of the father is described as being the result of an injury.
This not only establishes a causal, linear connection between the two events, but also raises the question of the complete story about his death. Moreover, I consider the silence about the mother as narrative momentum, because this negative performative speech act yields a narrative effect. I argued in the previous section that the silence about the mother is the underlying reason for undertaking the journey as well as for telling the story. In addition, the mother is not only left unmentioned, but disappears because she is experienced as a “gap” in the story. A gap is an indexical sign, however, referring to a state of absence as well as to the process of disappearing.

In other words, the narrator makes his mother actively disappear by means of passive silence.

This rhetorical vanishing trick leaves hanging the question whether the mother is really dead. Though the adoption indicates that both parents are dead, the mother’s death is “suspended” because she remains unmentioned. In the framework of the trauma model this means that the mother’s death cannot (yet) be understood as an accomplished fact.

All things considered, with regard to the parents’ deaths, the fragment in “A” principally serves to formulate a problem: Perec’s incapacity to connect the loss of his parents with the Second World War and to integrate them into his personal history. In “W” there is more differentiation than in “A” concerning the parents and, hence, the disappearance of the mother is foregrounded. Moreover, the narrative moments make the fragment fit within the frameworks of the travel story and the mystery story. As I suggested at the end of the previous section, these promising plots offer possibilities to restore the threads between Perec and his childhood. “W” seems to offer points de suspension to solve the problem of “A.” Together “A” and “W” stage the predicament of being “a child of war.”

The veiled way in which a connection is established between the (hidden) subjects in “A” and “W” indicates that a substantial problem is involved. The fragments I analyzed indicate that the problem has to do with relationships that are basic for a child: the relationship with primary caregivers. This leads me to the assumption that the problem pertains to the fact that a child – a subject in development – is involved and that this fact accounts for the complexity of the traumatization that Perec’s book, in its entirety, is trying to articulate.

To unravel this developmental complexity I propose to differentiate between the first-hand traumatizing circumstances implied in Perec’s familial life and the second-hand traumatizing circumstances implied in his later confrontation with World War II. I will argue that, in Perec’s case, particular traumatogenic events – personal losses – and general, massive traumatogenic violence – the impersonal encounter with World War II and its concentration camps – have affected
To make this interaction analyzable and theoretically productive for the understanding of traumatized subjectivity, I will differentiate between “specific” and “structural” aspects of Perec’s traumatization, a differentiation that is directed at the articulation of specific and structural discursive problems that can stand in the way of experience.

**Doubly Handicapped**

Although the specific aspect of Perec’s traumatization is related to his family life and the structural aspect to the social world, the distinction between specific and structural enables me, first and foremost, to draw attention to the complexity of the discursive problems that hamper a traumatized subject in development. Hence, the terms specific and structural are not used to differentiate between, for instance, the death of Perec’s mother or the phenomenon of World War II as events different in nature; that is to say, the issue is not the difference between individual loss or social violence as such but the different kinds of disablers that prevent a child from transforming these overwhelming occurrences into narratable memory and conscious experience. I will argue that Perec’s text makes understandable that development – learning to live – is a process in which the relationships with primary caregivers and the structure of the symbolic order play different, mediating parts. In this view, “specific” can be understood as caregiver-induced and “structural” as culture-induced. W, then, provides an insight into the different kinds of components that contribute to a child’s vulnerability to trauma, which is manifested in different kinds of discursive problems. As a consequence, W also demonstrates that traumatization can be (the result of) a durative and cumulative process. This possibility is the primary thesis of this study.

Shoshana Felman’s attempt to reframe women as subjects of their own desire offers a good starting point for the clarification of the multiple structural traumatogenic aspects of the symbolic order in general (1993: 13-16). Felman observes that women, by definition, have no access to their own autobiographies, because they have learned to see themselves as objects and as the

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21. Felman also argues that women, although lacking a story or autobiography, have a story that *may become* a story: “we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become* a story” (1993: 14; emphasis in text). This *becoming* of a story depends on what she calls the “bond of reading,” i.e. depending on “the story of the Other (the story read by other women, the story of other women, the story of women told by others)” (14).
Other. Felman’s formulation indicates that women’s trauma is to be understood mainly in terms of the traditional, repressive sexual difference, which prevents them from being the subjects of their own histories and experience. Consequently, women have become alienated from themselves. This failure to experience is not the result of singular events, but results from structural processes entailing a structurally traumatic situation for women: “any feminine existence is in fact a traumatized existence” (16). Such an existence is the result of a traumatizing insertion into the symbolic order. Hence, this existence is structurally set because each person has to go through that insertion.  

Felman highlights a symbolic order with considerable inherent shortcomings, which entail a high potential for trauma. However, she generalizes the situation of women and makes all women objects of traumatization. Such a generalization cannot do justice, for example, to the difference between women who have been raped and women who have not, or between life before rape and life after rape, distinctions that make all the difference to the women involved. In other words, Felman’s argument does not take into consideration the fundamentally “different” quality of the failure of experience at stake in a traumatization that includes overwhelming and life-threatening events. Moreover, her focus on women obscures the situation of children, be they male or female.

Nevertheless, stressing women’s incapacity to have stories of their own and thereby stressing an aspect of the symbolic order that makes the world an overpowering and unsafe place, Felman draws attention to women’s vulnerability to trauma. From this perspective, Felman rightly points to the violating, hurting, and potentially traumatizing character of women’s confrontation with the constraints implied in the representational means of the symbolic order. Felman’s text helps me, therefore, to conceptualize structural traumatogenic components and processes, which may also involve groups other than women. For instance, in a footnote Felman refers to the problems of the second generation in relation to the Holocaust (1993: 16, note 20), thus hinting at the inclusion of children of both genders. Further, it can be argued that men’s insertion into the symbolic order has a traumatogenic potential as well, and I propose that the structural neglect of the importance of affective interaction and the role of emotions is traumatogenic in general. Finally,

Felman’s relational line of thought foregrounds the importance of the “listener” as presented by Laub.

22. With hindsight, I take some distance from the notion of “structural trauma” as I used it in an earlier publication, in which I presented structural trauma as a crisis of cultural semiosis (1997). As I will argue, the breach implied in trauma, the breakdown of a subject’s integrative capacity, implies an “agony” that can only be approached in terms of an experience in which the function of affects is incorporated. In particular, the theory of structural dissociation helps to explain the working of affects, or, more specifically, different affective subsystems.
as I will argue in the following chapter, Perec’s text points to the traumatogenic nature of systems of education.

The idea of a structural traumatogenic aspect of the constraints inherent in the symbolic order has still other implications. Firstly, linking trauma to the insertion into the symbolic order simultaneously confirms the discursive aspects of traumatization, as proposed by Van Alphen, and emphasizes that this insertion is a crucial moment. Secondly, trauma need not always be connected to identifiable events, but can also be the result of a complex, more or less hidden process. This implies that the moment of breach is not always easily identifiable. Nevertheless, I will put forward that there is a critical limit that defines the difference between being traumatized and not being traumatized.

The theoretical relevance of the structural traumatogenic components inherent in the symbolic order becomes clearer when they are distinguished from those traumatogenic components that specifically pertain to children as subjects in becoming. The confrontation with the restrictive and potentially damaging elements of the symbolic order is based on a developmental process that necessitates the contribution of primary caregivers. Their personal communication, from within the symbolic order, plays a vital part in children’s development of the discursive abilities that make experience possible. This personal quality of communication is both verbal and nonverbal. The latter suggests the dimension of experiential, lived, affectively defined communication that I will term “embodied.”

In this respect, the function of learning implied in the insertion into the symbolic order should not be overlooked. Development involves a temporal sequence of (holding) environments, manifested in relationships of increasing complexity that I call “nested.” Although the nested quality of environments and the retrospective working of mental integration complicates this view, a temporal view makes intelligible that growth is always predicated upon certain preconditions. Hence, the lack of a precondition for further development can be seen as a traumatogenic component. With respect to the child, the affectively defined life within the family (or among other primary caregivers) predates and conditions the more distant and more complex life in the wider cultural and historical environment.

Because a child’s entry into the symbolic order is mediated by familial relationships, which are different for each individual, it is relevant to take into account the traumatogenic aspects inherent in these person-specific relationships. For simplicity’s sake, I call these aspects specific. Specific traumatogenic aspects, then, differ from structural ones to the extent that they are not
structurally set: they are not to be endured by everyone. The articulation of specific traumatogenic aspects assumes that the short circuit inherent in trauma – the inability to integrate experience – also has an individual aspect, pertaining to personal circumstances and disposition. Put differently, a child’s vulnerability to trauma is not only influenced by the structure of the symbolic order as such, but also by the specific way in which the insertion is facilitated and empowered by live interactions with adults. Anticipating a discussion to come, I contend that interaffectivity, attachment and emotional intelligence play decisive roles in the success or the traumatogenic failure of these interactions. A specific discursive problem bears upon emotional mature development and the capacity to form emotionally mature relationships.

For this reason I contend that the insertion of children into the symbolic order is potentially traumatizing in a complex way. Because they are children, they can become doubly discursively handicapped: they are exposed to a process of subject-constituting that makes them vulnerable to specific as well as structural traumatogenic aspects. This vulnerability to trauma is further complicated by three factors. First, an inadequate mastering of nonverbal and verbal signifying systems is inherent in childhood. Second, the capacity to care (teach) of primary caregivers and their style of caring (teaching), a function of the quality of their relational capacity, are crucial for the outcome. Third, because of the nested constellation and layered organization of development, specific and structural aspects are mutually constitutive.

However, I will also argue that the sensitivity to trauma, that is, the discursive vulnerability of children, depends mainly on the inequality of power between children and adults. Accordingly, the insertion into the symbolic order is not traumatizing until a relationship between adults and children has grown into a situation in which an overwhelmed, powerless child faces an actual, life-threatening, power-abusing adult or environment. I emphatically do not contend that every child goes through a traumatizing development by definition. Neither do I claim that the insertion into the symbolic order is traumatizing by definition. I only claim that children have an increased risk of being traumatized. As a consequence, early traumatization might make adults more vulnerable to a confrontation with traumatogenic circumstances in later life.

In view of this understanding of children’s particular vulnerability to trauma, Perec’s presentation of being “a child of war” can be seen as a complex process in which the losses of his childhood are related to the massive violence of the war. He describes a traumatizing process that occurs in stages and can be explained in terms of an interaction of specific and structural disabilities. Initially,
the child suffered the losses of parents and home, a sequence of singular traumatogenic events. Each event could have traumatized him on its own, if the child had not been offered emotional support sufficient to enable him to work through the loss of relationships and safety. The death of parents and the loss of home reveal the traumatogenic aspects that endanger the specific discursive ability of children in general and Perec in particular. In line with this claim, Perec’s capacity for integrating his experience – to transform it into a meaningful narrative – must have been seriously endangered, if not blocked.

Moreover, after the war, when Perec – still a child — discovered that his mother’s disappearance was related to the existence of concentration camps, the imagining of his “autohistory,” and the integration of the war in it above all, was hampered by the conflicting ways in which his parents were involved in that war. His father died as a French soldier, which defined the war as a heroic fight. His mother, on the other hand, became an anonymous victim of extermination. This side of war could in no way be reconciled with a heroic epic. The Holocaust eventually determined his image of the war. I gather this from the gradual metamorphosis of the society in “W”: there is a seamless transformation of a society apparently founded on Olympic athletic ideals – the image of war connected to the father – into the concentration camp at the end – the image of war belonging to the mother.

This confusion caused by the different appearances of war, which seem to be at odds with each other, highlights the structural component of Perec’s trauma. The traumatic effect of Perec’s specific losses was reinforced by a symbolic order that caused structural obstructions of his subjective development and life story. Firstly, being a Jew, he was defined only as an object for extermination. This deprived him, by definition, of his right to exist and his identity. An indication of the traumatic nature of this structural problem is that Perec does not explicitly call himself a Jew anywhere in his book. Secondly, he was confronted with a society that, as a whole, struggled with the need to integrate the phenomenon of extermination camps into its history because of the inadequacy of the representational means of the existing symbolic order. This combination set him up as doubly handicapped indeed.

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23. Art historian Griselda Pollock coined the term “autohistory” for what she called “a politically sensitive project,” which proposes a radically intersubjective interpretation of autobiography (1994: 69). As a text that articulates the history of a “child of war,” W is an autohistory par excellence.
My analysis of the two introductory childhood fragments was triggered by the puzzle quality of the text. I followed the rules of the mystery story suggested by Perec’s web of writing, and made more manifest by the plot of “W.” My response thus highlights the plea implied in a doubled writing: the appeal to an active participation in making connections between the two texts. Hence, Perec’s way of writing not only serves his attempt to overcome his own predicament; the resolution of his problems concerns the reader as well. Through Perec’s text the relational quality of reading and writing thus comes to the fore. Additionally, he involves his readers in the problem of integrating war and concentration camps into “History.”

In my search for the threads of a traumatized life, several solutions presented themselves. To begin with, the idea that the difference between “A” and “W” pertains to the difference between historical reality and fiction should be definitely abandoned. Instead another difference surfaces: that between a narrating that temporally and causally aligns events (including subject positions and plots) and a fragmented narrating that seems to be reduced to the enumeration of loose facts and events. Together the tales demonstrate that the rhetoric of absence and gaps is as important as is narrative coherence. Nevertheless, the tension between making connections and keeping things separate is also maintained. Why? Why is the narrator of this autohistory playing hide-and-seek, engaging the readers in the game?

This tension seems to stem from the critical difference foregrounded by the two tales, that is, the way the death of both parents, and that of the mother in particular, is (not) or can(not) be connected to the war. “A” fails to make the integrative connection, while “W” facilitates the confrontation. “W” offers the “words” to “experience” what is left out in “A.” “W” sets the search in motion and suggests the key role of the mother in the entire story. Her disappearance, however, highlights not only her possible death, but also the harm and distress caused by the broken connection between child and primary caregiver. Hence, the question arises how the two tales – together or separately – address that pain.

In the next chapter I will investigate that problem by focusing on the “(...)” between the two parts of the book. In the same move, I will test the productivity of the theoretical distinction between different traumatogenic components, by exploring the effects of the different kinds of disablement imaged in childhood fragments before and after the breach. In the process, the breach itself becomes affectively loaded.