Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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In this chapter, I expose how the tales of "A" and "W" are both interrupted by a blank page with the elliptical mark that Perec called *points de suspension*. As far as "W" is concerned, the division into a Part One and Part Two goes hand in hand with a transition from one narrator to another, a different style of narrating and a change of theme. This breach also parallels the transition from the specific to the structural aspects of Perec's traumatization, tied to the realization that the mother died in a concentration camp. It will be demonstrated that each tale addresses that confrontation in its own way. The fragments of "W" clarify the nature of the different discursive disabilities, whereas a so-called memory from "A" helps to specify the (un)representability of the pain involved.

The fragment of Gaspard Winckler's childhood in the first part of "W" – before the breach – constitutes an image in which the nature of a specific disability is manifested, whereas in the second part of "W" – after the breach – a structural incapacitation is outlined. For the latter, I selected the fragment about the "Quarantaine" (Quarantine) that, because it represents the transition from childhood to adulthood in general, can be read as an insertion into the symbolic order of "W." Accordingly, I interpret the description of the childhood that precedes this Quarantaine as a reference to the structural vulnerability to trauma of the children on "W." I find a relation with track "A" through the analysis of the memory entitled "Le départ" (The Departure), Perec's account of the last time he saw his mother. As the last version of this memory, The Departure plays an important role in the transition from Part One to Part Two. It hints at the pain of separation from the mother, without explicitly connecting it with the cause of her death.

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1. the boy being deaf and dumb; this could only be ascribed to some infantile trauma

(...) – *W.*
The name of Gaspard Winckler is heard for the first time in chapter V, when a certain Otto Apfelstahl addresses the character-bound narrator of "W" by this name. Apfelstahl took the initiative for the meeting between the two characters in order to discuss a matter of importance, although that matter primarily concerns the narrator. Apfelstahl also brings up the person who had allegedly given the narrator his name, when he asks: "- Vous êtes-vous déjà demandé ce qu’il était advenu de l’individu qui vous a donné votre nom? – Pardon? fis-je sans comprendre." (29) (“Did you ever wonder what became of the person who gave you your name?” – “I beg your pardon?” I said not grasping, 18).

This reference to naming at the end of the chapter is ambiguous. Does Apfelstahl mean the father or the authority who helped the narrator to get a new name after his desertion? It is soon followed by another naming at the beginning of the next chapter, the autobiographical chapter VI: “Il me donna un unique prénom – Georges – et déclara que j’étais français” (31) (He gave me only one forename – Georges – and declared me to be French, 19). This remark concerns Perec’s birth registration by his father. The parallelism of these acts of naming – an act that distinguishes individuals – inconsistently confirms again the identification of Perec with Gaspard Winckler.

In chapter VII, however, Apfelstahl appears to have a completely different name-giver in mind: "(...) celui dont vous portez le nom!” (35) ["(...) the person whose name you have!” 22]. In this way a second Gaspard Winckler, of whose existence the narrator was unaware, is introduced. Apfelstahl wants to find out what happened to this second Winckler. However, when the first Winckler declares that he cannot help him, Apfelstahl does not end the conversation, but continues by giving more information. Apparently, both Wincklers have something in common, which implies that the second Winckler is also of importance for Perec’s autohistory. In this light, the new fragment acquires additional significance, as it is the first, comprehensive description of a childhood, albeit focalized by an “outsider” and “imaginary”:

Gaspard Winckler était à l’époque un enfant de huit ans. Il était sourd-muet. Sa mère, Caecilia, était une cantatrice autrichienne, mondialement connue, qui s’était réfugiée en Suisse pendant la guerre. Gaspard était un garçon malingre et rachitique, que son infirmité condamnait à un isolement presque total. Il passait la plupart de ses journées accroupi dans un coin de sa chambre, négligeant les fastueux jouets que sa mère ou ses proches lui offraient quotidiennement, refusant presque toujours de se
nourrir. (...) tous les médecins consultés étaient formels sur ce point, aucune lésion interne, aucun dérèglement génétique, aucune malformation anatomique ou physiologique n'étaient responsables de sa surdité, qui ne pouvait être imputée qu'à un traumatisme enfantin dont, malheureusement, les tenants et les aboutissants étaient encore inconnus, bien que l'enfant eût été montré à de nombreux psychiatres. (36)

At the time, Caspard Winckler was a child of eight. He was deaf and dumb. His mother, Caecilia, was a world-famous Austrian singer who had escaped to Switzerland during the war. Caspard was a sickly, puny boy, condemned by his disability to virtually total isolation. He spent most of his time crouching in a corner of his bedroom, ignoring the sumptuous toys and presents that his mother or family acquaintances gave him day in day out, and almost always refusing to eat. (...) all the doctors they had consulted were quite clear on this point: there was no internal injury, no inherited disorder, no anatomical or physiological deformity to account for the boy being deaf and dumb; this could only be ascribed to some infantile trauma whose precise configuration unfortunately remained obscure despite examinations by numerous psychiatrists. (22-23)

What immediately catches the eye is Apfelstahl's use of the words “infantile trauma” to invoke the image of a physically weak and deaf-mute child. Although the deaf-mutism of the child seems to be psychosomatic, the terminology dating from 1975 cannot yet refer to the later elaborated meaning of trauma as developed after 1980 following the official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder.2 The focalizor himself also mentions that this traumatisme enfantin defies the expertise of the many psychiatrists consulted, because the “precise configuration unfortunately remained obscure.” Therefore, I keep to the general description of a traumatisme psychique in Le nouveau Petit Robert (although the developments of the notion of trauma may not have escaped the revised 1993 edition): “a complex of syndromes caused by a violent emotional shock,” which, according to the psychoanalytical version, “transgresses the tolerance limit of the mental apparatus.” In short, the child is seriously disturbed and his condition is due to shocking events.

Because the combination of deaf-mutism and shocking events points to the idea of dissociation, I will address this phenomenon here briefly, in anticipation of later elaboration.

2. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was officially acknowledged as a diagnosis in 1980, when it was included as a new category in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III). The revised edition, DSM IV, appeared in 1994. See Caruth 1995: 3 and 11.

3. See Nijenhuis et al. 2001 and in press. From their clinical view of trauma the authors present the theory of structural dissociation as “an integrative meta-theory that integrates cognitive, behavioral (learning theory), psychodynamic, object-relations, attachment theory, ethology (...), and affective neuroscience (...), in addition to trauma theory” (in press: 1; publication in German, English original by the authors). Because of the “traumatic origins and phobic maintenance" of
Dissociation is a mental disintegration resulting from the activation of the innate, bodily defined, affective subsystem that is directed at a subject's survival. If someone is confronted with (life-) threatening circumstances that cannot be coped with, a splitting of mental functions can ward off the failure of adaptive action and the overwhelming feelings implied in that failure. Generally speaking, a part of the subject remains fixated in the traumatic threat, while the major function of the other part of the subject becomes to ward off the traumatized part. As a recently developed theory of structural dissociation has it, the first part is the “emotional personality” (EP) and the second part the so-called “apparently normal personality” (ANP). The latter “is fixated in extreme phobic avoidance of the trauma, manifesting in detachment, numbing, and partial or complete amnesia for the trauma.” This approach to trauma explicitly highlights affects, and especially fear, that is, the fear of re-living the originating, bodily felt sense of being overwhelmed. This theory suggests that the image of the deaf-mute child might refer to a discursive problem that should include the affective aspect implied in the failure of experience. Hence, the “(...)” could also indicate a split between bodily feelings and verbal expression.

According to Apfelstahl’s account the mental paralysis of the eight-year-old Gaspard cannot be explained. This absence of an explanation is all the more conspicuous amidst the presence of physicians and psychiatrists and the enumeration of physical ailments. The discrepancy stresses that the infantile trauma at stake seems to defy discursive definition. For that reason, the absence of a parent in this fragment is significant. This time, however, it is not the mother but the father who disappears from a child’s life by remaining unnamed. Once again the traumatic nature of a disappearance is presented – made representable – through the rhetoric of absence. It has to be detected by the reader to become meaningful as absence. The relational nature of this absence makes it a forceful pointer: not only the relationship with the reader is emphasized but also the child’s relationship with the absent parent and, hence, the dependency of the child.

This parallel with the childhood story told by the adult Winckler (11) shows that the personality duplication – the doubling – in Perec’s book is twofold. The first duo, Perec/Gaspard Winckler, came to light in the previous chapter, where I argued that the person of Winckler was
needed to create a narrator – an alter ego – who could write about the journey to “W” in order to enter the confrontation with the traumatizing aspect of Perec’s childhood. In the course of the story a second doubling takes place, a disjunction of the first one: since Perec lost both parents, his history coincides with the childhood representations of both the adult Gaspard Winckler (in which the mother is left unnamed) and the eight-year-old namesake (in which the father remains unmentioned). The two Wincklers together embody one person, and the tale of “W” concerns one and the same Gaspard Winckler. With these two “personnes dédoublées” the circle is closed.

The letter “W” acquires yet another meaning as the initial letter of the name Winckler, becoming the sign of an additional doubling. The “double-vé” extends into “double-vie”: Gaspard Winckler is both a person who survived and a person who became deaf-mute and, consequently, isolated. This interpretation is in line with the dissociative defense I just mentioned and makes clear that the adult Winckler can no longer ward off his traumatized, dissociated childhood. Winckler’s doubling not only helps to turn the paradox of being simultaneously alive and dead into a narrative; the introduction of a deaf-mute child also tells something about the discursive nature of the “failed experience.” Dissociation suggests that traumatization not only affects the capacity to speak and be spoken to, to listen and to be listened to; this incapacitation of the relational aspect of subjectivity is fear-induced as well. A basic terror can render one speechless.

To make the social isolation of the child complete, he is also burdened with a poor physical condition: “Gaspard was a sickly, puny boy, condemned by his disability [his deaf-mutism] to virtually total isolation.” The child does not play and refuses almost all food: “ignoring the sumptuous toys and presents (...) and almost always refusing to eat.” An image is created of a child who cannot make contact, although the people around him try very hard to bring about a change. This image of the young Gaspard fills in the faint outlines of the childhood summarized by the adult Winckler and Perec in the fragments I analyzed in the previous chapter. What remained unmentioned then, now acquires the form of the hopeless passivity of a seriously infirm, mentally mutilated child. It is a child that is fully thrown upon his own insufficient resources.

The ambiguity of the child’s position becomes yet more complex by the allusions to the war and a possibly Jewish identity – the mother fled to Switzerland during the war – in combination with the name Gaspard Winckler, a French first name linked to a German family name. This name not only makes the child’s nationality unclear, but it also connects his existence to two different parties in the theater of war. As a consequence, the positions of victim and aggressor become fused. In relation to the utterly indirect reference to the loss of the parents, the bilingualism of the name
acquires a painful connotation: both France and Germany have played a role in the deaths of the parents. Furthermore, the notion of orphan is intensified into that of an abandoned and socially completely isolated child through the connection to the name of Gaspard Hauser, a famous 19th-century abandoned child, who allegedly was locked away in a cellar for a long time – another hint of a dissociated existence. All in all, the child is not only socially handicapped and isolated, but he also has an uncertain status: Where is his home? Does he have a home at all? Does he have a father? Has he been abandoned?

The discovery of the isolated, disabled child as well as his transition from hidden character to visible participant of the story brings the child to life: both the adult Winckler/Perec and the readers are made aware of his existence. However, it is not the adult Gaspard himself who launches the gradual process of awakening that lasts the entire first part of the book. Another person, an assistant, is needed. This is Apfelstahl, who acts as an intermediary by drawing the adult Winckler’s attention to his young predecessor or name-giver. Working for a “Société de secours aux naufragés” (Shipwreck Victims’ Relief Society, 44). Apfelstahl himself becomes a name-giver, just as he is the one who introduces the name of Gaspard Winckler in the book. Apfelstahl can thus be regarded as the (implied) listener who is needed in order to release the testimony of the traumatized person. He is the one who is on the track of the alter ego, because he knows about the existence of a deaf-mute child. He knows where the search should start.

Lost

Apfelstahl also knows that such a search is a complicated undertaking, because the child is lost in a shipwreck. In my argument the link between deaf-mutism and shipwreck is highly important as an attempt to figure a transitional moment, the moment that brings the traumatized boy Perec into confrontation with the structural traumatogenic factors that aggravate and extend his traumatization. Because it is the moment that Perec realizes that his mother is dead and will never

4. David Bellos points to the fact that Perec was especially interested in Paul Verlaine’s poem about this abandoned child: Gaspard Hauser chante (1881). Perec read it in secondary school and later tried to lay his hands on a new copy of the text (Bellos: 1993: 108-109, 196-197 and 524-525).

5. According to Bellos, the name Apfelstahl, in combination with Berghof – the name of the hotel where they meet – refers to the German publisher of Les choses: Stahlberg Verlag (1993: 440). In the context of Perec’s autohistory, I would be inclined to see a publisher as an indispensable “helper” for an author.
return and that her death was caused by massive violence, the moment might even indicate a dissociative breach. This leads me to anticipate on the next chapters of “W.”

Apfelstahl concludes chapter VII by saying that the ship in which mother and child and a small crew made a world tour to help the boy recover was shipwrecked near Tierra del Fuego. When Apfelstahl, subsequently, identifies himself as an employee of a relief society for the shipwrecked, that is, when assistance comes into the picture, the adult Winckler starts to take his drowned namesake seriously. “Je regardai ma montre; il était neuf heures du soir. M’appelais-je encore Gaspard Winckler? Ou devrais-je aller le chercher à l’autre bout du monde?” (63) (I looked at my watch; it was nine o’clock. Was I still called Gaspard Winckler? Or was I going to have to seek him out at the other end of the world?, 44). Although the ship went down fifteen months earlier, from the start this search does not seem pointless since the boy’s body was not found among the drowned in the ship. Significantly, the search for the disappeared mother, which seemed to have motivated the writing of the story, is modified into a search for a child. The two searches become interwoven and, paradoxically, manifest themselves on either side of an irreparable breach. This vital separation from the mother becomes the heart of the shipwreck story.

Chapter XI, the last chapter of Part One, mentions that the logbook had been tampered with and that the ship, when it sank, was not where it was expected to be. This implies that the ship had turned about, and according to Winckler himself, this could indicate that the child either escaped the ship or was even abandoned, a deed that was later regretted. Some new fundamental uncertainties have now been added to the uncertainties about the subject position and the identity of the young Gaspard Winckler: it is uncertain not only whether he is dead or alive, but also how he got off the ship, that is, how he was separated from his mother.

This chapter XI casts its shadow over the previous one, the last autobiographical chapter of Part One, which ends with “Le départ,” a description of the departure by train of the six-year-old Perec to Villard-de-Lans in the Vercors (another “double-vé”). Since Perec describes in “The Departure” the last time he saw his mother, I will analyze this autobiographical fragment on the problem of the representation of pain, in the next section. Here, I am interested in the cumulative aspect of Perec’s traumatization.

This narrativization of “W” connects a number of elements that have painstakingly been kept apart in the autobiographical track of Perec’s book. In the quoted childhood fragment from chapter VII, the mother is explicitly related to the war: “His mother, (...) who had escaped to Switzerland during the war.” And in the last chapter before the “(...)” the mother’s death as well
as the inexplicable separation of mother and child are described. Most importantly, in “W” the imagination of the mother’s suffering has pride of place. She appears to have met a ghastly death resulting from the collision that caused the shipwreck: she is not killed instantly but tries for hours, with a broken back, to reach and open the cabin door: “et ses ongles en sang avaient profondément entaillé la porte de chêne” (80-81) (and her bleeding fingernails had made deep scratches in the oak door, 58). The fictive story of “W” thus brings into the open what is not admitted until the end of the autobiographical story, and even then in an extremely veiled way: “Je me souviens des photos [of concentration camps] montrant les murs des fours lacérés par les ongles des gazés” (213) (I remember the photographs of the walls of the gas chambers showing scratchmarks made by the victims’ fingernails, 158). This indirect reference to the suffering of his mother at the same time demonstrates that the narrator of “A” hides his own feelings.6

The chapter of “W” before the breach also ends with a departure, though only an implicit one. Having no rational reason at all to expect the search to be successful, the adult Winckler nevertheless realizes that he is the only one who can answer the question of the young Winckler’s chances of survival: “Mais c’était une question à laquelle, désormais, je pouvais seul répondre...” (83) (But that was a question which from then on only I should be able to answer..., 60). This end of Part One implies that the adult Winckler has become aware of a past that has never been experienced. But awareness is not the same as integration. Nevertheless, power over his own life story has now come more within reach: Gaspard Winckler is prepared to investigate the shipwreck of his childhood. A journey to the place where it actually happened involves a live confrontation with a “Terre de Feu,” the country of fire and the dead.

The first part of “W,” which figures the specific aspect of Perec’s cumulative traumatization, makes use of two different images: that of a seriously infirm, deaf-mute child, who is both physically and socially handicapped, and that of a child whose life is lost in a shipwreck. These imaginative figurations clarify the role played by primary relationships in Perec’s specific discursive disability.

Because deaf-mutism is a personal disability or illness, the deaf-mute child refers to

6. The emphasis is on the ability to face the horror – the concrete suffering – implied in his mother’s death. This connection has not been made in the plain reference to his mother’s (probable) death in Auschwitz in chapter VIII, a reference that was made in the quotation of another text. Because Perec had written that text long after his childhood, it was produced after the (historical) moment of breach that is referred to by the departure and the shipwreck.
an internal, person-specific source of the discursive deficiency. The incapability to enter into relationships is imaged as a shortcoming of this particular child. Moreover, the child’s isolation and apathy cannot be caused by the present surroundings, as that environment is depicted as highly attentive and caring: presents and food are piled on the child. In addition, the sea voyage has been organized especially for the child, and the crew even includes a professional pedagogue. Clearly, the people around the child try hard to break him out of his isolation.

Because the trauma – the failure of experience – is represented as a disability or illness, that failure predates the actual circumstances in which it manifests itself. In other words, something has happened before, the source of the incapacitation should be related to the child’s life before the sea voyage, that is, to the years of his physical and mental development. In this respect it becomes important that the story of “W” is connected with the disappearances of both the mother and the father. Hence, the image of a deaf-mute child suggests that the child’s immanent lack of representational means has become a complete impossibility to experience, because of the loss of primary caregivers. Apparently, these losses did not merely break off relations but also inflicted the capacity to relate as such. At stake is not some shortage of representational means but the lack of a precondition: the capacity to acquire those means through empowering relationships. Thus, the image of this traumatized child intimates that the effect of broken primary relationships makes a child vulnerable to trauma.

Remarkably, this effect is only actualized when the mother’s disappearance has turned into a death; only then does the child become really “lost.” A shipwreck is needed to make this most annihilating moment representable. This catastrophe cannot be ranked as a personal handicap, but rather as an accident or even the hand of fate. Since the exact cause of the shipwreck remains unmentioned, an external superior power is brought to the fore, unmatchable to any concrete power or person. The description of the shipwreck, however, also relates the death of the mother to the concentration camps – “the scratchmarks made by the victim’s fingernails” is the link here. In her death the specific and structural components of Perec’s complex traumatization come together. The realization of the death of the mother – the decisive, unwished separation – causes the breach: it is a moment of dissociation, in which a child becomes deaf-mute, and a text is reduced to a blank page with a mark, a (...).

Although the fictional tale of “W” has the power to make the connections between events that are necessary for the narrative of a life story, the traumatized child defies subjectivity. A deaf-mute child who has vanished in a shipwreck becomes a ghost: he lives a life that seems to be
deprived of its possibility to feel the pain of his utter isolation. In contrast, Père explicitl}

The Departure

Because Père mentions no fewer than three times that he left for the Vercors from the Gare de Lyon, this event must have been important for him. An explanation is given when it is told for the first time in chapter VIII: it is his one and only memory of his mother. In retrospect, therefore, this mental picture of the six-year-old Père becomes all the more precious. However, Père does not state this as an explicit fact. I will focus on the third version, presented in chapter X, because it introduces a new element: the child Père has his arm in a sling. This version also bears a title and is followed by additional remarks based on information from others, and even by an interpretation given by Père himself. I quote two paragraphs: the first pertains to the actual memory, the last is half comment, half memory:

Le départ
Ma mère m’accompagna à la gare de Lyon. J’avais six ans. Elle me confia à un convoi de la Croix-Rouge qui partait pour Grenoble, en zone libre. Elle m’acheta un illustré, un Charlot, sur la couverture duquel on voyait Charlot, sa canne, son chapeau, ses chaussures, sa petite moustache, sauter en parachute. Le parachute est accroché à Charlot par les bretelles de son pantalon.
La Croix-Rouge évacue les blessés. Je n’étais pas blessé. Il fallait pourtant m’évacuer. Donc, il fallait faire comme si j’étais blessé. C’est pour cela que j’avais le bras en écharpe. (76-77)

The departure
My mother took me to the Gare the Lyon. I was six. She entrusted me to a Red Cross convoy leaving for Grenoble, in the free zone. She bought me a magazine, an issue of Charlie, with a cover showing Charlie Chaplin, with his walking stick, his hat, his shoes and his little moustache, doing a parachute jump. The parachute is attached to Charlie by his trouser braces.
The Red Cross evacuates the wounded. I was not wounded. But I had to be evacuated. So we had to pretend I was wounded. That was why my arm was in a sling. (54-55)
In his additional comments Père C scrutinizes the memory of the sling and eventually unmasks it as “fantasy.” He observes that the extensive explanation of the sling was not necessary at all: as a (partly) orphaned child, he had every right to travel with the Red Cross. He did wear a truss, however, and was operated on a few months after arriving in Villard-de-Lans. The unraveling of the “truth” is carried so far that Père C links the shift from truss to sling to a later “forgery,” a memory in which an arm in a sling reappears: “Quant à cet imaginaire bras en écharpe, on le verra, plus loin, faire une curieuse réapparition” (78) (As for the imaginary arm in a sling, we shall see it making a curious reappearance later on, 56). The reappearance happens in chapter XV, the same chapter in which Père C clarifies the key roles of the signs X and V in his texts. A very special shift or forgery occurs: the appropriation of someone else’s shoulder-blade fracture to show one’s own pain (108-110).

The recollection stems from the period when Père C stayed in Villard-de-Lans. Père C “remembers” that he has to greet someone with his left hand as his right arm is immobilized behind his back because of a shoulder-blade fracture. Hit by a sledge, he had fallen backwards onto the ice. With his empty right sleeve dangling beside his body, it looks as if he has lost his arm. Much later, evidence from a classmate reveals to him that he has appropriated the accident of another boy: “je n’en fus pas la victime héroïque mais un simple témoin” (109) (I was not its heroic victim but just a witness, 80). In his comment Père C disposes of this use of a metaphor as simply pointing to namable pain; like the arm-in-the-sling at the Gare de Lyon, also this sling could not serve as a way of describing what had been broken. He merely needed some pre-texts to justify an indulgence: “ces thérapeuthiques imaginaires, (...) ces points de suspension, désignaient des douleurs nommables et venaient à point justifier des cajoleries dont les raisons réelles n’étaient données qu’à voix basse” (110; emphasis in text) [these fantasy treatments, (...) these marks of suspension indicated pains that could be named; they cropped up on cue to justify an indulgence the actual cause of which was mentioned only in an undertone, 80-81; emphasis in text].

Because this indulgence pertains to events about which cannot be spoken in public, they hint at the absence of Père C’s mother. Emphatically connecting these signs of silent comfort and support with the suspension points, Père C highlights the sign “(...)” between the two parts of his book. In a circumstantial way he indicates that the breach that cannot be described is the separation from his mother; moreover, he also indicates that the main support he needs is a caring relationship with another. By externalizing his pain, by making it into a visible sign, he tries to replace one lost relationship by another.
A means of support also figures on the cover of the *Charlot* Perec's mother bought for him during his departure: a parachute is attached to Chaplin's trouser braces. The memory of this issue of the magazine appears to be forged as well: it could not have been sold during the war, since Chaplin's 1940 film *The Great Dictator* had made him *persona non grata* to the Germans, and the picture of Charlie as a parachutist from the 1935 series *Charlot détective* was not reprinted until after the war. (Lejeune 1991: 82-83). Perec did not make corrections, however, as he did in the case of the sling.

Hence, both sling and parachute turn out to have been incorporated as later, (un)conscious (re)constructions. Both are instruments of support, although in different ways. This difference can be explained by relating the two elements again to the two aspects of Perec's traumatization: his confrontation with the loss of a primary relationship – foregrounding a specific discursive problem – and his confrontation with the war – foregrounding a structural problem. This time, both means of support make pain visible and suggest the idea of recovery, again, in a different way. Because the sling refers to a physical handicap impeding one's functioning, a person-bound infirmity is involved, as with deaf-mutism. In the case of the parachute, there is much more at issue. It refers to a jump or fall into the void, which can be controlled in the end. Seen as a fall into the void, it refers to a transitional situation, comparable to the shipwreck.

As a sign of an undeniable personal dysfunctioning, the sling refers to a mutilation that is connected with the disappearance of Perec's mother when he was a little boy. The parachute, on the other hand, evokes the picture of war through the figure of Chaplin/Hitler. The connotation jump or fall into the void points to an effect that is much less graspable. The fact that this memory is left unverified by Perec implies that he avoids the confrontation with the war and at the same time obliquely confirms its traumatizing effect. It is a confirmation of the main difference between the tales "A" and "W."

In the description of "The Departure," then, Perec uses concrete details in order to make psychic distress representable. Both details are complex signs. The sling produces meaning through a double displacement: a hidden and therefore invisible truss becomes a clearly visible sign, and a mental picture of someone else's history is used to signify one's own history. Unlike the deaf-mute

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7. In the next chapter I will elaborate on the construction of recollections and the function of displacement in that process with the help of Freud's notion of "screen memory." Freud's notion of displacement can be approached as a rhetorical device through which the "psychic intensity," i.e. the degree of interest or (painful) affective load of an event or element (sign), can be attached to another, innocent sign. Condensation refers to a multiple sign – a combination of (fragments of) signs. Condensed signs are nodal points that, because of their overdetermination and multifunctionality, can hide as well as make visible painful meanings.
child, the child represented here is himself calling attention to his wound, albeit obliquely, an act that, at the same time, hints at the need for support. Instead of the rhetoric of doubling deployed in “W,” Perec uses in “A” a concrete element as a substitute of psychic pain, a means often applied in dreams.

In contrast to the sling, the parachute is a sign of condensation. As the word means “designed against a fall” (parachute), it both indicates a fall and the breaking of that fall. From the view of the subject that makes use of the means, the common denominator between the two (three) signs, sling (truss) and parachute, is the need for support. By emphasizing the supportive means, Perec not only shows that his complex traumatization is accompanied by feelings of helplessness and impotence; because the means are attached to the body they also emphasize that there is an indexical relationship between the distress and the body.

Perec calls support an existential necessity when interpreting his memory: “Un triple trait parcourt ce souvenir: parachute, bras en écharpe, bandage herinaire: cela tient de la suspension, du soutien, presque de la prothèse. Pour être, besoin d’étau” (77) (A triple theme runs through this memory: parachute, sling, truss: it suggests suspension, support, almost artificial limbs. To be, I need a prop, 55). The tripartite series introducing this existential necessity – “to be, I need a prop” – expresses an increasing degree of dependence. The series ranges from the neutral “suspension” via “support,” to “prosthesis,” and because a prosthesis is the mechanical replacement of an essential physical function – a limb, for instance – it also is an indication of mutilation. Perec thus brings up an incapacity that, in the end, equals a mutilated self. In this way he draws attention to a fundamental attack on subjectivity; moreover, this is emphatically a subjectivity that takes the body into account. However, it remains uncertain to what extent that body is integrated in the subject’s experience, that is, to what extent a really embodied subjectivity is at stake.

The double meaning of parachute is included explicitly in Perec’s interpretation when he ends it with the memory of a later event. As a conscript he made a parachute jump in 1958, and he sees this jump as “un texte déchiffré de ce souvenir” (77) (one way of deciphering the text of this memory, 55). His description of the jump is a representation of experiencing utter powerlessness, being hurled into the void, as well as a representation of the possibility of recovery, a controlled descent: “je fus précipité dans le vide, tous les fils furent rompus; je tombai, seul et sans soutien. Le parachute s’ouvrit. La corolle se déploya, fragile et sûr suspens avant la chute maîtrisée” (77) (I was plunged into nothingness; all the threads were broken; I fell, on my own, without any support. The parachute opened. The canopy unfurled, a fragile and firm suspense before the
controlled descent. 55) The expression "I was plunged," takes away any doubt about jump or fall; apparently, Perec does not feel his jump to be his own initiative.

If this later recollection is the deciphered text of the former one, Perec’s description of the first part of the jump – the fall – invokes the image of a child deprived of every support. It has lost both the possibility of hanging on to something and that of being touched, held. Since the picture of the parachute is connected with “The Departure,” I interpret this fall into the void as a figuration of the same traumatic breach that was figured by the shipwreck, the moment of awareness that the mother is dead. Thus, the void not only indicates a feeling of abandonment; because it is a frightening moment, it also indicates the utter helplessness that might lead to or maintain dissociation. Therefore, Perec’s description of a shipwreck and a fall into the void help account for the overwhelming result, the affective load implied in the loss of every kind of hold of a subject position or a narrative plot.

The second part of the recollection of the parachute jump, on the contrary, points out the transition from uncontrolled fall to controlled descent. The parachute offers Perec the “fragile but firm suspense” that will break the fall. The “controlled descent” can be interpreted as the (renewed) mastering of subjectivity and personal history. Through Perec’s own meta-comment, Charlie Chaplin’s parachute becomes an ambiguous sign: it refers both to a powerless fall into a discursive void and to the power over it with the help of language. The linguistic web woven by Perec becomes his own safety net. By means of this self-reflexive moment a bodily experience that is put into words produces the image of a possible rescue and, hence, the possibility of feelings of safety. The tale of “A,” then, brings in multifunctional signs that refer to both pain and means of support for the body. In this view, “A” suggests that the integration of a life story requires an embodied subject that can integrate bodily feelings into the narratives involved.

As we have seen, in the fragments of both “W” and “A” the transition from the specific to the structural aspects of Perec’s traumatization is figured as the transition from personal dysfunctioning (deaf-mutism, sling) to a situation in which external forces take over (shipwreck, being hurled into the void). Once more, the difference emerges between a linear narrative style that connects events with subject positions and a fragmented, narrative style. The latter, “A,” is composed of loose elements and pictures drawing their meaning from condensation and displacement, processes that cannot be called linear. Importantly, closely related with these narrative styles is the difference between the explicit and implicit references to death. The death of the mother is openly mentioned in “W,” whereas “A” remains stuck in the mother’s departure.
Accordingly, Gaspard Winckler has a certain destination, although he has not the slightest idea what is ahead of him, while Perec’s situation is comparable to a fall into nothingness. Yet, both tracks point inevitably to the second part: Gaspard Winckler becomes aware of his dissociated past, and Perec “remembers” that a parachute jump can lead to a controlled descent. The confrontation with the wider world and its History can no longer be avoided. As the shipwreck and fall into the void suggest, there are external, as yet unnamed forces involved in that confrontation. These forces are the subject of Part Two of Perec’s book.

La Terre de Feu

Il n'y avait ni commencement ni fin. Il n'y avait plus de passé, et pendant très longtemps il n'y eut pas plus d'avenir; simplement ça durait. On était là. Ça se passait dans un lieu qui était loin (...). Georges Perec 8

The beginning of the second part of W follows after the last fictive chapter of the first part without being interrupted by an autobiographical chapter, for which the sign “(...)” has been substituted. This construction reinforces the idea that it is the fictional text that initiates and carries out the closing of the gap in Perec’s life story. But first a barrier has to be surmounted.

The “break” that is implied by the division of the book into two parts takes shape at the beginning of chapter XII, through the change of the narrating instance: “Il y aurait, là-bas, à l’autre bout du monde, une île. Elle s'appelle W” (89) (Far away, at the other end of the earth, there is an island told of. Its name is W, 65). Here, the story is no longer presented by a character-bound narrator, but by an external narrator. A blank line follows, and then a meticulous description of the society on the island, also no longer expressed in the first person singular. This description fills all the remaining chapters of “W,” told in the present tense, apparently concerning a society that still exists.

Two consecutive external narrators substitute for the character-bound narrator Gaspard

8. No beginning, no end. There was no past, and for many years there was no future either; things simply went on. You were there. It happened somewhere far away (...) – W
Winckler, in whose story Apfelstahl's narrative was embedded. The conditional "il y aurait" (there is [an island] told of) makes the island's existence uncertain. But this conditional is immediately followed by the ethnographically precise report by a narrator who is very well acquainted with the daily routine on the island.

In relation to the opening chapter of Perec's book, where the first person singular decides to tell about his journey to "W," the construction of an external narrator seems at first sight to be an illogical one. Its logic becomes more apparent, however, when we recall that the status of the character-bound narrator of the first chapter was very problematic because this narrator presented himself as at once being and not being a witness of the events on "W." In the previous chapter, a connection between this uncertain status and the impossible position of a traumatized person became evident: being deprived of the possibility to experience, a traumatized person cannot give testimony.

But, the problems of the first person singular in reporting the event on "W" can also be explained otherwise: if the narrator has not been in direct contact with the society of "W" – as Perec has not been interned in a concentration camp – he cannot give evidence. By using the external narrating voice, that is to say, by breaking off the direct connection with Gaspard Winckler, the description of "W" acquires the status of second-hand information. This information is also drawn from the personal into the interpersonal domain, since an external narrator objectifies the information she or he supplies. In either case, Perec alias Gaspard Winckler could only visualize "W" or the extermination camps through representations by others. There is also a temporal split involved in this. The scale and implications of the Holocaust did not dawn on Perec/Winckler until after the war.

Besides the change of narrators and the change of tense, the transition from first-hand information to second-hand report, which has a dissociating effect, is modeled in still another way. The uncertain existence of the island suggested by the opening sentence is reinforced by the contradictory statement that the island is inaccessible – cliffs, precipices, and marshes prohibit a landing from sea – and yet has been inhabited by European colonists since the end of the nineteenth century. Its precise location remains unknown as well. All this brings about a society that factually could not exist but happens to do so. Moreover, it plays a role in the past and the present time.

The character of the text has changed too. The emphasis is now on description, on the object of focalization, despite the many narrative events. Because all attention is drawn to this
object, a situation instead of a process is foregrounded. While the first part of “W” is dominated by the dynamics of disappearance, journey and search, in the second part, the more static picture of a social system prevails: the sports nation or the camp. This static picture shows a male-dominated society with a closed structure, in which no fundamental changes can take place and from which one cannot get away.

The inescapability of this oppressive and de-subjectifying system leads to the complete powerlessness of the so-called athletes. Through the emphasis on abusive power relationships the description of this society starkly evokes the picture of a concentration camp. In line with the focus of this study, I will concentrate only on the fragments concerning childhood and youth. They can be read as the figuration of the structural traumatogenic violence implied in the symbolic order. By means of this focus the problem of the second-hand effect of the concentration camps and the Holocaust becomes the intersubjective problem of (un)representability with which every post-Holocaust generation has to grapple. From this perspective the childhoods, as described here, help specify the meaning of the structural discursive disability that can indicate trauma, while they also help articulate the relational nature and the effect of structural violence. Although I do not adhere to the view that our whole culture is “traumatized,” there are many structural traumatogenic powers at work in our culture.

The following sections deal with chapter XXX, in which childhood on “W” is described. I interpret the “Quarantine” as the imaginative description of a traumatizing entrance into the symbolic order, while the childhood that precedes this transitional period is read as the picture of a potentially traumatic childhood. Due to the way in which the inequality of power between children and adults is given shape, both fragments clarify children’s structurally defined vulnerability to trauma. In contrast to the specific discursive disability embodied by a deaf-mute boy, an infirmity that suggests some internal source of the discursive problem, the examples of structural disablement suggest that external violence is the cause.

9. The notion of quarantine is especially relevant in the context of trauma, not only because it implies a forced seclusion, evoking associations with traumatic feelings of impotence and isolation, but also because it refers to a hiatus in time: the contact with a certain society (here the symbolic order) is postponed (to prevent contagion). The time hiatus refers to the structure of the traumatic “experience,” which is characterized by belatedness. I quote once more: “The event is not
Chapter XXX – a “crucial” chapter indeed – is entirely devoted to childhood on “W” and the transition to the adult world. The first fourteen years of the children on “W” are presented as a seemingly problem-free period in which adults and their laws do not play a part. The transition to adulthood, more or less coinciding with puberty, brings a confrontation with ruthless institutions and is called *Quarantine*. This period of *Quarantine* occupies the first six months of the boys’ novitiate. I have selected three fragments for analysis. They all emphasize that the system, which is based on oppressive power, is an invention by and for adults. Moreover, a yawning abyss between childhood and adulthood is artificially maintained. Because the adults abuse their power, I read the adult world as the representation of a traumatizing symbolic order. Because the *Quarantine*, the insertion into the symbolic order, is the explicit confrontation with this adult violence, this period is the representation of structural traumatization.

I do not read childhood and adulthood realistically, as two consecutive periods in a person’s life, but synecdochically, as two aspects of these life stages: childhood, as *totum pro parte*, stands for the pre-symbolic situation and adulthood for the symbolic one. These aspects of subject development, separable only theoretically, are shaped in time and space by presenting them as different periods, connected with different locations. They thus allow for the accentuation of the contrast between the two discursive situations. Accordingly, the pre-symbolic aspect appears as an innocent, unconditioned childhood, which is threatened by the structural violence of the symbolic order.

The menace of the adult world becomes actualized when “the child” has to conform to that world, that is, at the moment of his insertion into the symbolic order. The *Quarantine* on “W” reveals that the transition from innocent childhood to adulthood governed by ruthless competition and power-glorifying maleness is immense and abrupt. Instead of the slow process of an awakening consciousness, it is rather an act of overpowering. The word “*quarantine*” already indicates that an imposed period of social isolation is at stake, while the description provides the concept with an image of physical repression.

assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly (...)” (Caruth 1995: 4; emphasis added).

10. This picture shows a striking similarity with the notion of *infantia* (*infans* or *enfance*) as theorized by the French philosopher J.F. Lyotard in his late works (1991a [1988] and 1991b). Lyotard, who is often called the philosopher “après Auschwitz,” introduced *infantia* as the aspect of life that does not speak. He used this notion chiefly as a symbol of the resistance against the speaking of adults, as a speaking that shirks incorporation. He even considered this resistance to speak as a kind of positive “inhumanity,” as a hopeful contrast to the other kind of inhumanity: that of the technological system (with its Holocaust connotation). As will appear from the analysis of childhood on “W,” the representation of childhood in Perec’s book is also to be interpreted as a kind of criticism or even a wishful dream.
As soon as the boys have turned fifteen, they are brought by helicopter to the adult world, where they are submitted to three years of training before they can call themselves "Athletes." About the girls, it is only said that they go to the women's quarters. I will return to this gender aspect later. The first six months are an absolute hell for the boys. They are denied all freedom of movement: they are manacled hand and foot, chained to their beds, and often even gagged. Being deprived of action as well as speech, the boys' functioning as embodied subjects is constrained. The adult life descends on them as a brute, terrifying force that numbs them completely. Thus reducing the novices to "living deads," the Quarantine effectively pictures a structural traumatization:

Mais ses six premiers mois de noviciat, il les passera menottes aux mains, fers aux pieds, enchaîné la nuit à son lit, et souvent même bâillonné. C'est ce que l'on nomme la Quarantaine et il n'est pas exagéré de dire que c'est la période la plus douloureuse de la vie d'un Sportif W, que tout ce qui suit, les humiliations, les injures, les injustices, les coups, n'est pour ainsi dire presque plus rien, ne pèse presque plus à coté de ces premières heures, de ces premières semaines. La découverte de la vie W est, il est vrai, un spectacle assez terrifiant. (187-188)

The first six months of the noviciate, however, are spent in handcuffs and leg irons, and at night newcomers are chained to their bed, and often also gagged. This is what is called the Quarantine and it is no exaggeration to say that it is the most painful period in the life of a W Sportsman, that all that follows – humiliations, insults, injustices, beatings – is, so to speak, almost as naught, has almost no weight, beside these first hours, these first weeks. Initial acquaintance with W life is, in truth, a somewhat frightening spectacle. (139)

The abstract insertion into the symbolic order is here given the shape of tangible violence; a structural traumatization is pictured by means of concrete events that lead to utter powerlessness. In contrast to the isolation of the deaf-mute child, a figuration of the specific aspect of traumatization emphasized in Part One, there is no internal, individual incapacity pictured here, but external violence, exerted by adults, in the form of the fastening of chains, manacles, and gags. It is of major importance that this does not concern an incidental act of violence, but an institutionalized, massively exerted outrage, which not a single future Athlete can escape. The symbolic order implies a structural violence by which everyone's life is determined.

The effect on the children is revealed only implicitly by the evaluation of the external focalizor. The transitory period is labeled as "painful" and "frightening," but it is left unresolved.
whether the experience of the children themselves is described. Another remarkable aspect is
that the violence is said to be much worse than the future deprivations of the apprentice Athletes.
Moreover, the violence to come is mainly described in terms of mental cruelty: “humiliations, insults
and injustices.” Here, the structural traumatization is traced back from physical violence to mental
violence. This transition brings me back to the discursive explanation of trauma, and more
specifically, to Perec’s cumulative traumatization.

This chapter about childhood on “W” does not refer to the circumstances that led to the
structural traumatogenic power relationship between children and adults. It is precisely the absence
of verifiable events that stresses the elusiveness of the structural problems of the second generation
of the Holocaust, that is, the generation that did not live through the Holocaust and yet was severely
affected by it. It becomes, then, more significant that the slowly developing similarity between
the society on “W” and a concentration camp hints at the Holocaust and thus, implicitly, at the
structural traumatogenic aspect of being labeled a Jew.

I argued in the previous chapter that Perec’s entire book is directed towards the
confrontation with the adult world of the Holocaust and Jewishness. The triple X in this chapter
XXX also stands for three times the starting point of the “phantasmal geometry” dominating
Perec’s life, as he pointed out halfway, in chapter XV. Here his traumatic problems crystallize
into the representation of the Quarantine. For that reason I consider it to be the most important
chapter of the book. The text focuses on the structural traumatizing violence that struck Perec and
represents it with great vehemence. It is a text that formulates not only the inevitability and the
unacceptability of the traumatic reality but also the lasting effect of being confronted with it:

Comment expliquer que ce qu’il découvre n’est pas quelque chose d’épouvantable, n’est pas un
cauchemar, n’est pas quelque chose dont il va se réveiller brusquement, quelque chose qu’il va
chasser de son esprit, comment expliquer que c’est cela la vie, la vie réelle, que c’est cela qu’il y aura
tous les jours, que c’est cela qui existe et rien d’autre, qu’il est inutile de croire que quelque chose
d’autre existe (...). (188-189; emphasis added)

How can you explain that what he is seeing is not anything horrific, not a nightmare, not something
he will suddenly wake from, something he can get rid his mind of? How can you explain that this is
life, real life, this is what there’ll be every day, this is what there is, and nothing else, that it’s pointless
believing something else exists (...). (139-140; emphasis added)
For me the most important conclusion to be drawn from this fragment is that this inevitable reality boils down to a type of violence exerted collectively by adult people. The traumatizing violence of the symbolic order is a human-inflicted violence, and it is precisely that fact that makes structural violence so hard to explain. Making this violence concrete by means of chains and gags imposed by adult people, thus becomes an act that surpasses that of making representable an otherwise ungraspable trauma: it also demonstrates that the structural violence of the symbolic order is not abstract but reducible to human action. People inflict these actions upon each other. Whether historical reality has a meaning or not is determined in a human and social perspective.

But, for Perec the structural violence of the symbolic order is more than the confrontation with the historical existence of the extermination camps, the Holocaust, and his Jewishness. I will use the fragment quoted below, about the earliest childhood on “W,” to argue that there is another traumatogenic factor that is a determinant for him: his being a man.¹¹

**A Child Amongst Children**

The depiction of the Quarantine as a drastic period of transition stresses the contrast between childhood and adulthood. It is this contrast that I want to study in the following quotation. I maintain a synecdochical point of view, including the distinction between the pre-symbolic and the symbolic situation. The fragment is an almost integral rendering of the first two paragraphs of chapter XXX:

L’enfant W ignore presque tout du monde où il va vivre. Pendant les quatorze premières années de sa vie, on l’a pour ainsi dire laissé aller à sa guise, sans chercher à lui inculquer aucune des valeurs traditionnelles de la société W. On ne lui a pas donné le goût du Sport, on ne l’a pas persuadé de la nécessité de l’effort, on ne l’a pas soumis aux dures lois de la compétition. Il est un enfant parmi les enfants. Nul ne l’a nourri du désir de dépasser, de surpasser les autres; ses besoins spontanés ont été

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¹¹. Psychotherapist Terence Real’s study about “the secret legacy of male depression” (1997) underscores that men’s insertion into the symbolic order can be traumatogenic. He argues that boys’ education into manliness – the opposite of being vulnerable – generally results in “the loss of the relational,” which implies that they lose the possibility of using their feelings and forming intimate relationships. If a boy’s education starts with the trauma of this deprivation, he will, as a man, be incapable of feeling the pain of this trauma. Hence, men’s tendency to develop what Real calls a “covert depression,” a mental disposition that conceals their condition from both themselves and other people.
exaucés; personne ne s'est élevé contre lui, personne n'a dressé contre lui le mur de son ordre, de sa logique, de sa Loi.

Tous les enfants W sont élevés ensemble; pendant les premiers mois, les mères les gardent près d'elles, dans la chaleur calfeutrée des poupounnières installées dans les gynécées. Puis ils sont amenés dans la Maison des Enfants. C'est à l'écart de la Forteresse, au milieu d'un grand parc, un long bâtiment sans étages éclairé par de vastes baies. L'intérieur est une chambre unique, immense et sans cloisons, tout à la fois dortoir, salle de jeux, salle à manger; les cuisines sont à une extrémité, les douches et les toilettes à l'autre. Les garçons et les filles grandissent les uns près des autres, dans une promiscuité entière et heureuse. Ils peuvent être jusqu'à trois mille, cinq cents filles et deux mille cinq cents garçons, mais une dizaine à peine d'éducateurs des deux sexes suffisent à les surveiller. Le mot surveiller est d'ailleurs impropre. Les enfants ne sont soumis à aucune surveillance; on ne peut même pas dire qu'ils sont encadrés; les adultes ne sont nantis d'aucune fonction pédagogique (...). Les plus âgés des enfants, les adolescents de treize ou quatorze ans, prennent soin des plus jeunes, leur apprennent à faire les lits, à laver le linge, à confectionner les aliments, etc. Tous décident librement de leurs horaires, de leurs activités et de leurs jeux. (185-186)

A W child knows almost nothing of the world in which he will live. For the first fourteen years of his life, he is, so to speak, left to his own devices, no attempt being made to inculcate in him any of the traditional values of W society. He is not given a taste for Sport, he is not persuaded of the need for effort: he is not subjected to the harsh laws of competition. He is a child amongst children. No one nourishes in him the wish to overtake or overcome others; his spontaneous needs are met; no one rises against him and no one raises against him a wall of order, of logic, of the Law.

All the W children are reared together; for the first months they stay with their mothers in the cosy warmth of the nurseries set up in the Women's Quarters. Then they are taken into the Youth Home [modification: Children's Home]. This is a long, single-storey building with huge windows letting in the daylight, located in a great park at some distance from the Fortress. The interior is a vast, unpartitioned room, that is a dormitory, playroom and refectory all in one; the kitchens are at one end, the showers and lavatories at the other. Boys and girls grow up together, mixing quite freely and happily. There can be as many as three thousand of them, five hundred girls and twenty-five hundred boys, but no more than a dozen educators in all are needed to supervise them. In fact, you can't properly call it supervision: the children aren't looked after at all, they aren't even really controlled. The adults exercise no pedagogic function, though occasionally they may find themselves giving advice or explanations. Their main task is hygienic, involving medical checks, the detection of diseases, preventative treatment and routine surgery to deal with growths, tonsils, appendectomies, setting of fractures, etc. The older children, the thirteen- and fourteen-year-old adolescents, look after the youngest, teaching them how to make beds, wash clothes, cook food, etc. All decide freely on their timetables, their activities, and their games. (137-138)
In the first place, the initial and final sentences of the opening paragraph present childhood as a pre-symbolic situation and adulthood as the symbolic order, and emphasize the contrast between the two. The first sentence presents the child as ignorant: "A child knows almost nothing of the world in which he will live," and in the last sentence the adult world is designated as "a wall of order, of logic, of the Law," with the capital "L" a reference to the Lacanian "Law of the Father."

The separation between the two worlds is so absolute that the children are virtually ignorant of the adult world. This ignorance is the result of a complex policy. In the first place, there is the spatial division. The building where the children live, the "Children's Home," is located in a private area far away from the villages of the adults, and is surrounded by a large park. In the paragraph following the fragment quoted here, there is even mention of moats, electrified fences, and minefields that are so far out of sight that the children are unaware of them. These rigorous demarcations demonstrate that the two worlds are prevented at all costs from meeting.

In the second place, there is the marked absence of adult authority. Seen as such, childhood on "W" invokes the idea of an education that is anti-authoritarian in the extreme: the children are not educated by adults but educate themselves and each other. In addition, they are not restrained by rules made by adults: "all decide freely on their timetables, their activities, and their games." The children's living quarters symbolize this freedom and equality: the elongated, light building is single-storeyed, not ordered hierarchically. The Children's Home consists of one enormous, undivided room in which all activities take place. In short, a child on "W" "is a child amongst children."  

The idea that children can do without adults and do not have an innate competitive mentality, corresponds to the ideology of "the innocent child." The consistent use of the essentialistic singular form in the first paragraph reinforces this vision. The ideology that the child as such, as pre-given, ideal subject, is incapable of doing bad things, and that adults are by definition spoilsports who obstruct the fulfillment of the "spontaneous needs" of this child. Because the ideology establishes a contrast between child and adult as one between innocent or ignorant and guilty or knowing, it places in greater relief the contrast between pre-symbolic and symbolic.

12. The Dutch translation of this sentence, "They are children like all children," is inaccurate in this context, because it implies a comparison of the children of "W" with children outside "W," whereas I think that the remark only concerns the former. The translation "he is a child amongst children" is more to the point, emphasizing once more that the role of adults is negligible during the childhood years on "W." Apparently, the translator was influenced by the ideology of the innocent child.
In the third place, the contrast between childhood and adulthood is deepened by attributing a pejorative meaning to the values and laws of the adult world, stated in terms of achievement and competition. The free and cheerful children’s world is contrasted with the harsh adulthood: “[the] harsh laws of competition” and “[the] wall of order, of logic, of the Law.” A negative exertion of power is evoked: the order, logic, and Law of the adult people together create an oppressive power. In other words, the freedom granted to children in this pre-symbolic situation is only temporary, and the harsh laws of adulthood, the symbolic order, are hanging over them like a Sword of Damocles.

In the fourth and final place, the opposition between childhood and adulthood is distinguished through sexuality and gender in particular. I present it as the most important feature of this fragment about a childhood period, because it also discloses the structural traumatogenic aspect of manhood. To start with, the absence of adults implies the absence of a family, which excludes the traditional identification model. The representation of artificial orphans is thereby withdrawn from a sex identification that would lead to patriarchal relationships: the hierarchy between the sexes does not play a role for the children (although there are many more boys than girls). This is in sharp contrast with the adult world of “W,” which appears to be a men’s world where misogyny is the rule.

Further, as is stated at the beginning of the second paragraph, children of both sexes grow up together until they are fifteen. Although this implies that most of them are already sexually mature before they leave the Children’s Home, budding sexuality does not seem to cause any problems, because the boys and girls live in a “promiscuité entière et heureuse” (mixing quite freely and happily). This “mixing” would be deprived of its innocence by the English meaning of promiscuity – unlimited, free sexual intercourse. In French, however, promiscuité does not necessarily have a sexual meaning, although the mixing does have a negative connotation. It is not clear how to interpret this “quite freely and happily mixing,” but it should be noticed that sexuality is not mentioned openly. This could mean that the children grow up in complete ignorance with regard to sexuality, but also that the separation between the world of children and that of adults is marked by a tricky subject that should be left unnamed.

13. Le nouveau Petit Robert (ed. 1993) gives under “promiscuité:” 1. Assemblage d’individus très différents, dont la réunion a un caractère disparate ou contraire aux bienséances. 2. Situation d’une personne soumise à des voisins nombreux et désagréables; ces voisins (1. Gathering of very diverse individuals, whose togetherness has a badly matched or improper character. 2. Situation in which one has to live at close quarters with many people in an unpleasant way; this closeness.)
Nor is gender raised explicitly, but it is implied by the fact that only one sixth of all the children are girls. This suggests the elimination of females. However, the hierarchical gender difference is not fully revealed until after childhood: the adult world of “W” is a men’s world. Boys and girls are separated when they reach the age of fifteen – this is hinted at by the existence of the women’s quarters in the quoted passage – and afterwards the sports’ world is reserved exclusively for the men. The contribution of the women is limited right from their birth. In chapter XXVI, where the conception of children is discussed, it appears that a discriminating infanticide is applied in “W”: only one out of every five new-born girls is allowed to live; on the other hand, it is only the very seriously deformed of the boys who are not “kept.” Women are there just for procreation and for “activities of public utility” (166).

The misogynist order of “W” finds its most extreme expression in the collective and public rape of the women, the only moment when children are conceived. This “Atlantiad,” a race that is lost by the women from the very start, is called euphemistically a big celebration, and it is the only occasion for the women to leave their secluded and closely guarded quarters. So male supremacy is ratified by sexual power and aggression and is connected by the act of rape to the ultimate negation of women’s subjectivity. Heterosexuality only serves the power difference between the sexes and the maintenance of the species. This “celebration” of conception is in sharp contrast with the ingenuous representation of the sexless childhood. The then-absent sexuality appears during adulthood in the guise of male sadism against women, and thus problematizes maleness. Along with this problematization a new structural traumatogenic component emerges.

On “W,” being male equals misogyny and, on top of that, leads to slavery. Being male means maintaining the oppressive system as well as becoming the slave of this system. Because this leaves one no choice, maleness becomes doubly problematic: as a slave, men are equal to women and Jews, which means extermination, but as master there is nothing left for them but the role of oppressor. Both identification models are problematic and, moreover, contradict each other.

Applied to Perec’s situation, I would consider his father, who was engaged in the war machinery as

14. For rape as a negation of subjectivity, see Bal 1988a and b. As she discusses, the “celebration” of the mass rape also has a biblical tradition: see Judges: 20-21.
a common soldier, as a slave; in this sense the father was comparable to the mother. Like the athletes on "W," he was doomed to participate in the ruinous competition/war and to succumb in it in the end. Apart from this unattractive position, only the role of oppressor was open to Perec, the male child, which would mean identification with either the rapists or the Germans; this time the role of the father was not at all comparable to that of the mother. No adequate identification model was left.

This image of childhood can also be read as a criticism of traditional constructions of masculinity; as such it is in line with Felman’s idea about women’s trauma to which I referred in the previous chapter. This criticism targets a men’s world that, on the one hand, robs women of their chance at a fully-fledged subject position by reducing them to their biological function and by considering systematic rape as “normal” conception, and that, on the other hand, generates humiliating power relations within their own ranks as well. The “quite freely and happily mixing” of the sexually innocent childhood thus acquires the meaning of wishful thinking: the wish to be relieved of the traditional sex identifications.

I interpret these pictures of sexuality and gender as outstanding examples of a symbolic order that structurally threatens the pre-symbolic childhood on "W." At the end of the previous chapter I designated the structural traumatogenic potential of the symbolic order as one of the factors that increase children’s vulnerability to trauma. The other factor was children’s inherent inadequate mastering of symbol systems. The latter factor is present in this fragment as well, in the guise of the children’s pre-symbolic ignorance. That is why I see these paragraphs about the childhood on "W" as the representation of a potentially traumatic childhood. The inequality in power is pictured through the gap between childhood and adulthood, which is maintained aggressively. Although the inequality of power on "W" in view of the Quarantine and the sexual violence of the symbolic order inexorably leads to abuse of power, the childhood years on "W" are not traumatizing in themselves. Since the pre-symbolic and the symbolic orders are presented as separate situations, as a childhood that is connected neither in time nor in space to the adult world, solely the danger of traumatization is concerned. Only during the Quarantine does the trauma vulnerability of childhood come to light: only then, in confrontation with the adult world, does virtual traumatization become actual traumatization.
Deaf-Mute and Gagged

My focus on the breach highlighted the connective power of the narrative strategy of "W." Manifested as a shipwreck, an image that joins the deaf-mute child and the horrific death of the mother, the breach makes the necessary link between Part One and Two. Binding the specific and structural aspects of traumatization together, it has become a knot, a sign that substantiates the cumulative aspect of that complex process. In its function as knot, the sign also indicates that cumulation not only implies chronological development but also interaction.

Paradoxically, the tale that bridges the gap between the two parts also deploys the rhetoric of doubling, an act that figures dissociation. Being split up into a subject of telling and an object of search, Gaspard Winckler enables his adult personality to partake of the narrative of the traumatic past of his child personality, that is, to unite the family-induced (first-hand) and society-induced (second-hand) aspects of the life of "the child of war." To make these different confrontations representable, the child Gaspard, the object of search, is doubled anew, becoming a deaf-mute child before the breach and a gagged, manacled child after it. These two images of one child show different manners in which one can become "speechless": through both personal dysfunctioning (deaf-mutism) and external violence (manacles and gags).

So far, this investigation of the cumulative traumatization has articulated the distinction between specific and structural discursive disablements as pertaining to, on the one hand, the role played by primary relationships in development, and, on the other hand, the repressions and exclusions of socially defined means of representation. The theoretical potential of the images of the deaf-mute child and the gagged child can be further explored. Firstly, I look at the feelings of isolation and impotence the images invoke, respectively, and secondly, at their use of internalization (internal disability) and externalization (social practice) to represent that suffering. This exploration foregrounds the pain implied in traumatization, that is, in "discursive silence" and the (impossible) suffering of the subject of that silence.

In order to understand the child's utter isolation and impotence in terms of discursive
silence, I use the framework intimated by speech act theory, which distinguishes between two kinds of linguistic utterances, a performative and a constative one. Later developments distinguished these as aspects of all utterances, thus including all sign systems and all kinds of sign use that mediate human interaction. Through this perspective of the performative and constative function of signifying acts, I draw attention to the fact that communication both creates a relationship and is about something. The constative aspect refers to the objectifiable meaning implied in human interaction – what can be “named.” The performative aspect includes the effects of this interaction; because these effects can only become manifest in sign users, the notion of performativity incorporates the subjects of the semiotic interaction into the process – they are addressed and thereby positioned as signifying agents. Hence, the performative function of human interaction foregrounds the relational quality of sign use and the subject-constituting force of the meaningful relationships involved.

It is easier to understand the isolation implied in being deaf-mute and the powerlessness implied in being gagged, if they are approached in terms of, respectively, the performative and constative aspects of human interactions. The isolated deaf-mute child is disabled by the absence of subject-forming relationships, the absence of the possibility of an “I” to be constituted by a “you” and vice versa. The absence of an ongoing, constitutive enactment of a relationship is at stake. The gagged child, on the other hand, can speak but is prevented from using that ability. Hence this child is deprived of the constative aspect, that is, of the ability to objectify – to imagine or conceptualize content. This time the loss of the ability to make representable is at stake.

That these two forms of discursive silence are painful experiences is suggested by Herman’s description of the “core experiences of psychological trauma” mentioned above: “disconnection from others” and “disempowerment” (1992: 133). These feelings correspond to the isolation and powerlessness invoked by the deaf-mute and the gagged child of “W,” who embody specific and structural discursive disabilities. The images thus demonstrate that the damage done to the capacity to relate and to make those relationships meaningful hurts.

In addition, the images of deaf-mutism and being gagged are figurations of internalization or interpretants, also has explanatory value for the early affective constitution of intersubjectivity (1984). The way in which saying or naming can be seen as a form of doing while constituting subjectivity is also the tenet of the theory of linguist Emile Benveniste (1971 [1958]). He argues that we constitute ourselves as subjects in and through speech by means of, for instance, the personal pronouns “I” and “you,” making it clear clear that these pronouns are interdependent. Like speech acts, these pronouns (or deictic terms) position the subject in the moment of utterance and in her relationship to another. Deixis also spatially and temporally positions the subject of speech using the couples here/now and there/then. See also Silverman 1983: 43-53. Bal further elaborates Silverman’s reading of Benveniste in spatial terms; she thereby not only spatializes but also embodies deixis and makes it into a process to be located in a material, semiotic space (1999a: 129-164).
and externalization. Seen as such they highlight two other aspects of the discursive silences they embody. Because deaf-mutism is a disability, the image of the child internalizes his (specific) speechlessness, making it into an intrapsychic dysfunctioning. Put alternatively, this child not only connotes utter isolation; it also indicates that such isolation “disables” him. Moreover, the child’s disability hints at the inability to suffer, which is implied by the fact that the child functions as the object of a search; a helper is needed to “find” the deaf-mute child and to resolve the child’s disablement. It is Apfelstahl, a character-bound narrator, who offers that help. He appears to be the only focalizer who images the child’s pain: he evokes it through his story.

In complementarity with the deaf-mute, the image of a child that is gagged and manacled externalizes the discursive problems. The gagging clarifies that his (structural) speechlessness comes from the outside and, at the same time, that this silence does not result from an internal disablement but from violation. This time the child is not so much incapable of suffering as not allowed or not supposed to express it. The Quarantine concretizes these violating practices by constraints on movement and speech. Because the children are deprived of the ability to speak, again the mediation of an image made by another is needed, the external focalizer of “W.”

All this taken together, the answer to the question posed by the title of this chapter – Deaf-mute or Gagged? – cannot be doubted anymore: it is not a matter of either-or but of both-and. The integration of Parts One and Two produces a narrative in which eventually one child is “found” that is isolated as well as powerless, disabled as well as violated. These qualifications indicate that the cumulative traumatization entails different kinds of discursive silencing or “pain.” However, because only a reader can actualize the integrative potential of “W,” the rhetoric of dissociation remains effective as well. As a consequence, the narrative of “W” remains a story about a child. It cannot be told from within the child’s lived experience.

This problem brings me to the way in which tale “A” addresses the (un)representability of pain. In Part One of “A” a child provides himself with body-connected props (sling and parachute). Presenting himself as mutilated, the child explicitly draws attention to the physical body involved in traumatization. Not the child but the adult narrator of “A,” who interprets the sling and the

16. See also Hans Keilson’s study Sequential Traumatization in Children (1992 [1979]). Focusing on the pathology of Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands, Keilson develops a theory of chronic traumatization caused by a massive traumatic situation that occurs as a sequential process. This idea is fully compatible with the complex traumatization Perec’s autohistory tries to make representable. Keilson’s study is the more relevant as he took the age at which the child had been separated from the mother as point of reference. He structured the extreme situation of massive violence by three sequences: a. the phase leading to the persecution; b. the period of deportation, camps and hiding; c) the postwar period and difficulties of reintegration. Because his thorough investigation builds a strong case for an age-
parachute as signs that produce their meaning by means of displacement and condensation, codes that simultaneously hide and reveal painful aspects, makes the veiled connection with the feeling body. The child, however, deploying concrete, visible means of support that are attached to the body, makes use of signs that can function as indexes. If recognized as indexical signs, the sling and the parachute not only point to disablement and fall into the void but also to the pain and terror inherent in these events and the need for help and control. Making the connection between body-support-pain and the need-of-relationship by means of indexical signs, the child of “A” not only brings in the embodied aspect of subjectivity; externalizing its need for support, the child also makes the pain visible that is inherent in the absence of support.

It is hopefully clear by now that my interpretation of the “(...)” has not only been deployed for the sake of reading Perec’s text but also for the sake of trauma theory. Besides pointing to Perec’s predicament, the sign pinpoints a theoretical moment of intersection that illuminates how specific and structural traumatogenic elements can reinforce each other. In addition, in its function of “breach” the sign makes inevitable that “discursive silence” designates “pain.”

This leads me to the following suggestions. First, the discursive explanation of trauma should be “thickened” with a developmental view of subjectivity, entailing an explanation that accounts for different discursive capacities related to different ages. Second, the relational aspect of the development of (inter)subjectivity yields particular insight into children’s vulnerability to trauma. The role of primary caregivers is crucial for this development. Third, although (re)traumatization can be a complex, cumulative process that cannot easily be reduced to “the” originating traumatic “event,” always some breach occurs. It is the critical “moment” that defines the difference between a traumatized and a non-traumatized life. This moment need not be easily detectable, but theoretically it is the moment that becomes manifest in the inability to integrate experience, that is, in dissociation. Fourth, because discursive incapacitation “silences” subjects, traumatization is a subject-violating danger. The idea of danger, in turn, makes simultaneously plausible that the annihilation of subjectivity entails a devastating agony and, conversely, that safe relationships and a safe environment are preconditions for the genesis of subjectivity and the integration of subjectivity.
Through my focus on the “(...)” in Perec’s text – the knot of absence and presence – another aspect of the appeal to the reader implied in Perec’s text has become apparent: the need for support. My response to the text has demonstrated this appeal. Not so much my puzzling sense of self was at stake, manifested in the detection of gaps and connections in the previous chapter, as my imaginative power. The images of the children involved, deaf-mute, gagged and mutilated, appealed to my ability to imagine their isolation and powerlessness. The way that imagination was triggered, however, was different in “A” and in “W.” Hence, my shift of perspective also shed another light on the tension between the tales.

In this chapter the difference in coping with the death of the mother culminated in the breach, a moment filled with (absent) pain. Significantly, whereas the (absent) child that is the victim of the shipwreck is a ghost, a living-dead, the other child, although hurled into the void, still keeps in touch with his body. The importance of the connection with the body is reinforced by Perec’s explicit attachment of the points of suspension to his parachute, the sign of rescue. This emphasis on the body suggests another answer to the question why the book makes use of two tales: the participation of the sensing body – a nonverbal experience – complements narrative organization.

Another tension surfaces here. It consists of the relation between lived experience and narrating, which I approach as a tension between “telling from within” (embodied narrating) and “telling about” (disembodied narrating). In other words, the mutilated child of “A” highlights an aspect of experience that might complement the incapacity to (affectively) feel, figured by both the children of “W” and the child of “A.” This dis-membered child, however, points at the necessity of the act of re-membering. Therefore, I will focus on the interaction between (traumatized) subjectivity and autobiographical memory in the next chapter, the last one about Perec’s autohistory and its relevance for trauma theory.