Whose pain? Childhood, trauma, imagination

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Désormais, les souvenirs existent, fugaces ou tenaces, futile ou pesantes, mais rien ne les rassemble. Georges Perec

The epigraph to this chapter is the opening sentence of Perec’s first autobiographic chapter of Part Two. In this part he describes his stay in the Vercors until he was nine years old, his living in “various boarding houses at Villard-de-Lans” away from his mother (6). It is the beginning of chapter XIII. The term “désormais” (from this point on) marks the contrast with the first sentence of the initial chapter of “A” in Part One: “I have no childhood memories” (6). However, the contrast is toned down by the observation that the time in the Vercors was a period without landmarks. Nothing binds the memories together: “les souvenirs sont des morceaux de vie arrachés au vide” (93-94) (these memories are scraps of life snatched from the void, 68).

The second part of “A” runs parallel to the Quarantine in “W” insofar as Perec’s living at the Collège Turenne, a boarding school, represents Perec’s confrontation with a harsh educational system. The fragmented memories present many examples of arbitrariness and unjustified punishment, experiences that for Perec, as for the athletes in “W,” blur the boundary between perpetrator and victim. Unlike in “W,” there are in this part of “A” allusions to psychic pain through signs that, like the sling in Part One, refer to physical pain. Perec mentions, for example, the sting of a bee and a scar in his upper lip in his memories, i.e. concrete, visible, objectifiable marks. The scar even becomes such an important identification mark for Perec that it is related to the starting point of his writing.

Perec’s use of signs of physical harm indicates a rhetoric of somatization. Employing the body as a last resort to produce meaning, Perec stresses at the same time the bodily base of

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1. I borrowed these phrases from Susan J. Brison (2002: 106 and 110). I use them here to indicate the bodily base of experience and to make possible the distinction between a telling “from within the body” and a disembodied telling “about.”
2. From this point on, there are memories – fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome – but there is nothing that binds them together. – W
4. Due to his scar – a furious boy hit him in the face with a ski pole – Perec identified himself with Il Condottiere, a portrait by Antonello da Messina. This figure played an important role in Perec’s first (unpublished) novel, in which a brilliant forger, a Gaspard Winckler (!), does not manage to re-produce an Antonello. Winckler ends up murdering the man who commissioned the painting. Significantly, the first title of the novel was Gaspard pas mort (Gaspard not dead). See W, 141-142 (108-109).
experience. This interpretation is supported by Perec's reflection on the controlled descent with a parachute. The first explicit indication that he could reconnect with life again appears to be based on bodily experience. A number of Perec's memories – the one about skiing is a telling example – underscore the notion that experiential knowledge underpins the imagination on which our autobiographical self is based. The “A” tale, then, drives home the problem of the integration – or disjunction – between nonverbally and verbally mediated experience.

When Perec specifies the period in Villard-de-Lans in the second paragraph of chapter XIII, he makes ample use of the neutral “on” (“you” or “one”). The events seem not to concern Perec himself, he is disconnected from his experiencing body. Perec compares this loss of connection with the “unjoined-up” writing he used in his childhood: “cette écriture non liée, faite de lettres isolés incapables de se souder entre elles pour former un mot” (93) (that unjoined-up writing, made of separate letters unable to forge themselves into a word, 68), and with the drawings he made for his first version of “W” between age eleven and fifteen. These drawings consisted of loose fragments as well: “[dessins dont] les éléments épars ne parvenaient presque jamais à se relier les uns et les autres” (93) (drawings whose scattered elements almost never managed to connect up, 68).

The comparison of experience to drawings has two implications. First, Perec's disconnection should be understood in terms both of being ungrounded – unrelated to the ground – and being scattered. The “dessins dissociés, disloqués” show “personnages que rien ne rattachait au sol qui était censé les supporter” (93) (the dissociated, dislocated drawings) show (human figures unrelated to the ground which was supposed to support them, 68). The bodies are separated from their limbs as well: “les jambes des athlètes étaient séparées des troncs, les bras séparés des torsos, les mains n’assuraient aucune prise” (93) (the legs of the athletes were separated from their trunks, their arms were out of their torsos, their hands gave them no grasp, 68).5 The separation from the ground indicates that the distinction between self and environment is annihilated; because they do not mutually constitute each other anymore, Perec's figures live in a vacuum. The lack of a supporting ground, in turn, deprives the figures of a subjectivity that is associated with a body able

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5. As a consequence of these drawings the teenage Perec undergoes therapy with Françoise Dolto (Bellos 1993: 96).

6. The reference is to Metaphors We Live By, the title of George Lakoff & Mark Johnson's study (1980). They approach metaphors not as figures of speech but as means through which our view and experience of the world is structured.
to coordinate a subject's actions. Perec's drawings literally figure that lack of a ground shatters subjectivity. Ground, here, is a very important element. In addition to remaining literally relevant, as in the figure-ground dynamic of gestalt, it is the figuration of a semiotic meaning of that word, a rule that makes meaning possible.

This meaning of ground relates to a second implication. Bringing in a formal aspect — being "unjoined-up" — Perec not only puts writing on a par with drawing, but also underlines that the way signs are presented or "done" influences their meaning. He thus indicates that writing and drawing exceed the exchange of constative utterances conveying propositional information. Moreover, drawing attention to the enactment of the content by making words and bodies parallel, Perec again hints at the need for the integration of nonverbal and verbal production of meaning. He thereby suggests that the performative power of language is heightened when the nonverbal, enacted experience that underlies verbalization is taken into account.

I will substantiate this suggestion with the analysis of three of Perec's memories. With the help of Freud's notion of screen memory I will, moreover, invoke the constructive, phantasmal nature of remembering to understand Perec's rhetoric of forgery and screening-off. I present Perec's "earliest memory" as a mirror text of the cumulative traumatization he makes representable with his autohistory. This memory simultaneously complicates the insertion into the symbolic order, problematizes the veracity of childhood memories, and highlights preverbal subjectivity. Most importantly, it also opens up an inter-space, a playroom for the negotiation of meaning, i.e. the space that I will later interpret as potential space.

The second analysis concerns a memory from Perec's time at kindergarten. This memory yields an insight into the performative aspect of a written text. It demonstrates a (dis)connection between experiential knowledge and embodied imagination. The last memory, from the time Perec was about nine years old, hints at conspicuously absent affective feelings. This memory fragment foregrounds the disintegrative aspect of dissociation and the fear of overwhelming violence implied in it. Together these analyses aim at the understanding of the subject-forming potential of autobiographical memory.

This chapter, then, concerns the layered process of losing ground inherent in traumatization: of losing the semiotic base of one's subjectivity and of losing the capacity to ground one's living in a feeling body. Traumatized subjectivity confronts us with the disruptive forces at stake in the semiotic events we live by.  

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**A Memory as Mirror Text**

In the autobiographical chapter following the one that emphasizes the absence of childhood memories, Perec presents his “deux premiers souvenirs” (22) (two earliest memories, 13). This inconsistency suggests that these memories must be constructions, whereas it also gives away that a life story cannot do without some suspension points. After all, as Perec admits, his childhood “est le sol sur lequel j’ai grandi” (21) (yet it is the ground on which I grew, 12), despite his obstinate assertion that it no longer belongs to him. Apparently, Perec, like the narrator of “W,” is looking for traces.

Not surprisingly, then, Perec casts doubt on the authenticity of both memories in advance. Although he finds them not entirely implausible, he also observes: “les nombreuses variantes et pseudo-précisions (...) les ont profondément altérés, sinon complètement dénaturés” (22) (the many variations and imaginary details (...) have altered them greatly, if not completely distorted them, 13). Hence, the text I quote below is not the first version of the so-called “earliest memory.”

Le premier souvenir aurait pour cadre l’arrière-boutique de ma grand-mère. J’ai trois ans. Je suis assis au centre de la pièce, au milieu des journaux yiddish éparpillés. Le cercle de la famille m’entoure complètement: cette sensation d’encercllement ne s’accompagne pour moi d’aucun sentiment d’écrasement ou de menace; au contraire, elle est protection chaleureuse, amour: toute la famille, la totalité, l’intégralité de la famille est là, réunie autour de l’enfant qui vient de naître (n’ai-je pourtant pas dit il y a un instant que j’avais trois ans?), comme un rempart infranchissable.

Tout le monde s’extasie devant le fait que j’ai désigné une lettre hébraïque en l’identifiant: le signe aurait eu la forme d’un carré ouvert à son angle inférieur gauche, quelque chose comme ⌁ et son nom aurait été gammeth, ou gimmel. La scène tout entière, par son thème, sa douceur, sa lumière, ressemble pour moi à un tableau, peut-être de Rembrandt ou peut-être inventé, qui se nommerait “Jésus en face des Docteurs.” (22-23)

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The earlier memory is apparently set in the back room of my grandmother’s shop. I am three. I am sitting in the middle of the room with Yiddish newspapers scattered around me. The family circle surrounds me wholly, but the sensation of encirclement does not cause me any fear or feeling of being smothered; on the contrary, it is warm, protective, loving: all the family – the entirety, the totality of the family – is there, gathered like an impregnable battlement [modification: impenetrable rampart] around the child who has just been born (but didn’t I say a moment ago that I was three?)

Everyone is in raptures over the fact that I have pointed to a Hebrew character and called it by its name: the sign was supposedly shaped like a square with a gap in its lower left-hand corner, something like □ and its name was apparently gammeth, or gammel. The subject, the softness, the lighting of the whole scene are, for me, reminiscent of a painting, maybe a Rembrandt or maybe an invented one, which might have been called “Jesus amid the Doctors.” (13)

This text calls the truthfulness of the memory into question in several ways. Perec uses the conditional tense “aurait” (might be) two times. He annihilates the certainty of “I am three” by his remark at the end of the paragraph that a baby is concerned: “the child who has just been born.” The clarifications and improvements of the two notes that are added make the content of the text also unlikely: “C’est ce surcroît de précision qui suffit à ruiner le souvenir (...)” (23) (excess detail such as this is all that is needed to ruin the memory, 14). Perec’s final sentence complicates the act of recalling by including and problematizing the visual input of the act; comparing his memory with a painting, Perec questions the existence of that painting at the same time: “maybe a Rembrandt or maybe an invented one.” Moreover, it is remarkable that this sentence, whose content does not belong to the memory, is typographically included in the text. Hence, mnemonic traces and (visual) construction can no longer be distinguished from each other. In one and the same move Perec brings up the makiability of memories and emphasizes that this construction is a matter of both verbalization and visualization.

The memory proper, without the comment, consists of two parts. The first paragraph invokes the picture of a (still) complete family: all members lovingly surround the child/baby. The second paragraph pivots around the identification of a Hebrew character. The entire fragment is an imagination of a particular genesis of (Jewish) subjectivity, which, as in the case of the description of the childhood on “W,” will be interpreted in terms of Lacan’s imaginary and symbolic order. This framework highlights the theoretical potential of the “memory,” because it clarifies how
Perec's account of his genesis supports the relationship between a developmental perspective on subjectivity and the distinction between specific and structural traumatogenic components.

In the first part the child is the center of a threefold enclosure, he is sitting “in the middle of the room” (house), “with Yiddish newspapers scattered around me” (Jewish topicality), and surrounded by “the family circle” (family). These three circles refer to three different facets of a subject's insertion into the symbolic: concrete environment, cultural-historical belonging, and intimate, personal relationships. This memory thus indicates that the genesis of subjectivity implies bodily sensation and movement, affective interaction and more general knowledge about the wider world. Because Yiddish newspapers represent the circle of cultural-historical belonging, Jewishness and written texts are foregrounded. However, both child and newspapers are embedded in the circle of the family, a situation that stresses the mediating and protective function of the family. This meaning of the familial circle is reinforced by the emphasis on the completeness of the family with the help of another triple series: “all the family – the entirety, the totality of the family – is there.”

The image of a complete family is associated with feelings of love and safety: “warm, protective, loving,” inducing the metaphor of the “impenetrable rampart.” This intact family functions as a sign of reassuring wholeness, providing a subject with an ideal from which it can derive feelings of cohesion and safety. Seen as a picture that can function as an identification model, this first part of Perec's memory refers to the imaginary order. This emphasis on personal interaction hints at the possibility of what I have called specific (caregiver-induced) traumatogenic components.

This possibility is made manifest by the way Perec invokes the image of loving, familial protection by means of the denial of its opposite qualification: “the sensation of encirclement does not cause me any fear or feeling of being smothered.” Being threatened and smothered is related to an inescapable situation of near-death, an implicit reference to the annihilation of subjectivity effected by traumatization. Linking this denial of (possible) annihilation with the presence of primary caregivers, Perec thus underlines their vital role in the becoming of subjectivity. This interpretation is enhanced by the final sentence of the paragraph, in which a baby – a dependent

8. The structuring force of the triple circle that surrounds the child and the triple emphasis on the wholeness of the family comes out better in the French text.

10. See Bal for an exploration of the mirror as theoretical metaphor, shedding light on a Baroque relationship between subjectivity and objecthood. In interaction with visual works of art the mirror loses its coercive iconicity and gains the dialogic interaction implied in indexicality (1999a: 209-230). As I will argue in the next chapter, the interrelation between iconicity and indexicality also characterizes the affective interaction through which intersubjectivity comes about.
subject par excellence — and a three-year-old child appear to be interchangeable. Furthermore, including preverbal infancy into the concept of childhood, Perec draws attention to the problem of developmental subjectivity in his memory.

The emphasis on the completeness of the imaginary family acquires a heart-rending connotation through the presence of the Yiddish newspapers, which hint at Perec’s Jewish identity. Significantly, these newspapers not only indicate the structuring role of the symbolic order but in the image pictured by the text they also form the borderline that separates the child from the family. At first sight this text fragment is about the recognition of a letter, highlighting a specific learning process: learning to read. Because reading implies an encounter with written language, the learning Perec describes here indicates a particular insertion into the symbolic order, that is, into the linguistically mediated order of a future writer. The joy about a (writer’s) mastery over language is mirrored in the rapture of the bystanders. Through this supportive interaction the child is confirmed as both subject and writer.

At second sight, however, the functioning of a Hebrew letter indicates that the mastery of language implies the exposure to structural traumatogenic powers. As a Hebrew character it refers to an enigma that simultaneously hides and reveals Perec’s ambivalent attitude towards his Jewishness. This use of the term enigma is none too heavy; it is justified by the note added by Perec, in which he observes that he burdened the memory with “une lettre qu’il n’avait pas” (23) (a letter it did not possess, 14). He thereby suggests that either the memory did not possess a letter of this form or that the letter in its entirety is a fabrication.

This mysterious letter — as well as Perec’s use of letters in general — has been the target of many interpretative exercises. These interpretations make clear that Perec’s various specifications with respect to the “letter sign” of this memory are not clarifications but mystifications. The letter cannot be identified as a Hebrew character at all; it should be read as the mirror image of a “G,” the first letter of Perec’s French first name and that of his double: Gaspard Winckler. The first letter of a name — a term that normally ratifies the existence of a subject — appears to problematize that existence at the same time. It becomes uncertain which language seals the child’s subjectivity and how many personalities are implied in that formation. Consequently, the subject of Perec’s account of its genesis is divided from the beginning. Seen as such, Perec’s presentation of a “mirror image” undoes the unifying working of an imaginary wholeness.

I therefore propose to interpret Perec’s oblique reference to his Jewish identity as an indication that he sees Jewishness as traumatogenic. Such a reading explains why Perec, who
functions as an obsessively scrupulous and reliable researcher at other times, appears to be so ill-informed about the Hebrew alphabet, which he wrongly provides with a “gammeth” or “gammel.” In a note Perec admits that the letter in the text of his book does not resemble a “Gimmel” at all, but that it could just about masquerade as a “men” or “M.” Although the term Gimmel is a correction, the “men” is another inaccuracy: it should be “mem.” However, the letter concerned is only apparently a Hebrew character. Blurring the distinction between a Jewish and a Christian identity, the “character” seems not to produce any identification; it rather becomes a sign of multiplicity and undecidability.

So far, Perec’s description of his insertion into language leads to the following thoughts. To begin with, not a word but a letter is concerned, that is, a linguistic entity that has no meaning beyond being a possible element of language. Hence, it refers to both the transition from meaninglessness to meaning and posits a preliminary condition for language acquisition. Underlining the limits of language Perec indicates, at the same time, that language cannot be reduced to the combination of signifiers and signified but should involve a subject of language. Further, because the passage is about a written character, it not only alludes to Perec’s specific mastery over language as a writer; the transpersonal character of written texts also points to the power of the dominant (un)conscious laws, rules, habits, and ideologies of the symbolic order and their inherent structural traumatogenic aspects.

Lastly, because the (reversed) first letter of a name is involved, the constraining aspect of language acquires an empowering counterpart. For naming substantiates the enabling, subject-forming function of language. In Jewish culture’s founding book, naming is the initial and initiating act that acknowledges a subject by explicitly introducing the subject’s existence into the structuring processes of the symbolic order. Perec’s recognition of a letter, then, suggests that in the initial and critical limits of subjectivity both annihilating and creative forces are involved.

However, the sign at the center of Perec’s memory need not refer to a letter. As Perec himself indicates, it is first of all a sign that has the form of “a square with a gap in its lower left-hand corner.” Described as such it is not a verbal sign but one that refers to a system in which

11. Bellos sees the implicitly indicated “M” (mem) as a reversed “W” and makes a connection with the disappeared mother. Bellos also draws attention to the film “M” made by Fritz Lang (1931). From this story about a child murderer Perec borrowed the name “Caspar Winckler.” Significantly, the French title is “M le maudit.” The meaning of “damned” enhances the connection implied in Perec’s memory between being a Jew and being traumatized.

12. I owe this interpretation of Lacan’s lack and desire to Evans’ introduction to Lacanian psychoanalysis. The quotes are from this study (1996: 37).
visuality and spatiality are involved. Perec’s memory thus opens up and blurs the distinction between nonverbal and verbal interaction. Read as nonverbal sign, the open square, in line with the significant presence of the baby in the memory, can also refer to preverbal interaction. The sign then foregrounds the embodied aspect of subjectivity.

A visual interpretation accentuates the spatial quality of the sign and thereby highlights a contrast with the circle of the first part of the memory. A “square” that is characterized by a “gap” is the counterpart of a closed circle. Following a Lacanian reading, the idea of wholeness implied in the imaginary order is confronted with “symbolic castration” or “lack” by means of an image of imperfection. Lacan presents subjectivity as starting with and pivoting around a lack: a void that can never be filled. Initially he explains this lack as a “lack of being,” because the symbolic subject can never coincide with the real, concrete subject. Put differently, meaning always arrives at the expense of being. Later on, Lacan relates this symbolic lack to what he calls the “Other,” which refers to that radical alterity that can never be assimilated by the subject. In both cases this lack is inseparably connected with desire. This implies that “desire is not a relation to an object, but a relation to a lack.” Moreover, desire is unfulfillable: “the realization of desire does not consist in being ‘fulfilled,’ but in the reproduction of desire as such.” This interpretation of desire points to an endless process.12

Perec’s spatial sign thus defies the imaginary completeness implied in the image of the circle. Nevertheless, it need not be read merely as a sign of imperfection, as the pejorative connotations of words such as “lack” and “castration” seem to entail. The gap implied in the sign can have a double meaning. It can be positively and negatively interpreted, because it can be associated with lack (contrast to wholeness) as well as opening (contrast to entrapment). Thanks to this ambiguity a force surfaces that is not inevitably linked to a negative origin, and, consequently, need not remain entrapped in unconscious fantasies of wholeness and fulfillment. Importantly, desire as continuous force can be more easily understood in semiotic terms. Foregrounding the liberating force of a gap, Perec’s sign makes desire into the motor of a process with an open end.

Perec’s text fragment, then, through a spatial sign that is at the same time a letter, discloses a no man’s land with a semiotic potential. His text reveals a play in which he juggles with both verbal and nonverbal parameters. He thereby not only tries to overcome the discursive problems his traumatization entails; he also suggests that discursivity extends beyond verbosity. Perec substantiates this interpretation in the final sentence of the memory – the comment that does and does not belong to the memory. To invoke the “softness and the lighting of the whole scene,” Perec
refers to a Rembrandtesque painting of “Jesus amid the Doctors” (see Lucas 2: 41-51). In one and the same move he thus brings together a visual image, a non-Jewish religious one at that, and a prodigy child who amazes by precocious linguistic skills.

Perec moreover introduces a child who deliberately enters into a discussion with powerful representatives of the existing symbolic order. Thus Perec ends his memory by highlighting a child that reverses roles and shows himself to be the captain of his soul. It can hardly be a coincidence that when debating with the doctors, Jesus, who was then twelve years old, is the same age as Perec when he made his first version of W.13

In Perec’s formulation of his earliest memory the constructive power of narrative organization seems to have the upper hand. Perec’s way of presenting, masqueraded as scrupulous research, ultimately succeeds in removing all vestiges of authenticity. His inexhaustible rhetoric of contradiction, inaccuracy, forgery, and mystification “disappears” the historical start of his life behind the screen of mediation. I therefore propose to read Perec’s earliest memory as a mirror text. That is to say, the text stands for the meaning of the entire text.14 Both this fragment and the text as a whole refer to a boy whose subjectivity is endangered – confronted with its critical limits – by being a Jew, a process in which specific and structural traumatogenic components are intertwined. The following pointers sustain this reading, while they also enable me to sum up the theoretical potential of the memory.

The first pointer is the theme of the mini-history, which is supported by its form: the text’s partition into two parts – mirroring the partition of the entire book – made it possible to put the text fragment in the frame of Lacan’s general account of the genesis of subjectivity and, at the same time, to complicate this model with a baby. The second pointer is the way in which Perec counters the traumatic confrontation with his Jewishness and, hence, with the critical limits of subjectivity by means of a creative play with a letter/sign. On the one hand, the letter/sign problematizes a merely verbal insertion into the symbolic order and, hence, a merely verbal approach to the notion of discursivity. On the other hand, this letter game facilitates the discovery of a space with an inherent

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13. It is no coincidence either that the second note Perec added to this “memory or pseudomemory” casts doubt on his main text by observing that he probably confuses the scene of “Jesus amid the Doctors” with a “Presentation in the Temple.” Perec explains his confusion by remarking that in his memory Jesus is a “newborn infant,” another hint at preverbal (nonverbal) interaction.

14. In Narratology Bal presents a mirror text (or “mise en abyme”) as an embedded fabula that resembles the primary fabula, in some part or aspect: “When the primary fabula and the embedded fabula can be paraphrased in such a manner that both paraphrases have one or more elements in common, the subtext is a sign of the primary text” (1997: 58).
liberating force. Playing with a (non)verbal sign, Perec pinpoints the margin between destruction and empowerment, opening up a space where subjectivity can find its latitude – a potential space as will become clear in due course. This potential space mirrors an important aspect of the autohistory in its entirety, because as transpersonal text, it opens a space in which traumatized subjectivity can find a place and potential relationships. As semiotic object the autohistory can participate in the social practices of living readers.

The third pointer is the apt and strategic position of the memory in the entire text. A highly debatable memory, from a period of life in which memories cannot be developed at all, functions as the start of an autobiographical story that, moreover, appears to be deprived of childhood memories by traumatization. The fragment thus becomes emblematic for the constructed nature of memory and subjectivity as developed by the text as a whole. The contradictory result is that an autobiographic memory – a supposed emblem of “real life” – problematizes the distinction between fiction and historical reality. Finally, the combination of typography and content in the last sentence constitutes the last pointer. The typography of the comment underscores that in memory verbalization and (visual) imagination cannot be easily separated.

A mirror text is by definition a metatext, for it indicates a specific reading of the main text. Thus I have turned the memory into a very condensed metatext that not only clarifies Perec’s particular autohistory but also the complex interdependence of memory and (traumatized) subjectivity in general. Let me make two final points about that relationship. Firstly, because the text is presented as memory, that is, not as fiction or argument, Perec emphatically draws attention to the indexical relationship between autobiographical memory and lived reality. This indexical relationship highlights a historically specific, concrete subject of memory.

Secondly, the interaction between memory traces and subjectivity does not go only in one direction. Storing and re-calling autobiographic memories implies a conscious as well as unconscious power exerted by memory traces as well as over memory traces. The uncertainty about the division and the nature of the powers at stake problematizes the veracity of the autobiographical tale. Hence, Perec’s earliest memory raises major questions concerning the relationship between memory and (traumatized) subjectivity. His text not only addresses the problem of childhood memories, but also foregrounds that of infantile memories and infantile amnesia. Moreover, these problems are complicated by the possible contribution of unconscious processes to the formation of autobiographic memories. I will address these issues in the next section with the help of Freud’s notions of “screen memory” and “deferred action.”
Where to Begin?

Freud's article about screen memories is especially relevant for my argument because it not only presents the screen memory as a specific childhood memory that hides information about the earliest years of life, but also addresses the formation of childhood memories in general. According to Freud, the correlation of the psychical significance of an experience and the fact that it is retained in memory as a connected chain of events is an accomplishment that cannot be brought about before a child is about six years old (SE III: 303). The screen memory underlines that observation, because this memory pinpoints the paradox that important events from early childhood are usually not remembered, whereas apparently unimportant ones sometimes are. I give here the summary of the screen memory given by Laplanche & Pontalis:

A childhood memory [is] characterised both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content. The analysis of such memories leads back to indelible childhood experiences and to unconscious phantasies. Like the symptom, the screen memory is a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence.

(1973: 410-411)

Screen memories are marked by a discrepancy between content and form, the latter consisting of the way they present themselves to the re-caller. Freud explains the gap between the clarity and persistence of the form and the banality of the content through displacement, a mechanism that enables “the psychical intensity” of an idea or event to be detached from it and to pass over to other, insignificant instances that are somehow related to the first ones. Apparently a split can take place between content and psychical intensity – an affective load that can take the form of sensory force.

Freud ends his article by stating that not only screen memories but also other childhood memories can often be marked as “falsifications.” This observation brings him to the suggestion that we might not have “any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess” (322; emphasis in text). Accordingly, childhood memories do not “emerge” at the time of arousal, but are “formed” at that moment, a formative process in which “a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy,” are involved (322).

Importantly, Freud also stresses that falsified memories are not complete inventions, although
they have been liable to shifts and condensations. Moreover, these falsifications “serve the purpose of the repression and replacement of objectionable and disagreeable impressions.” There is, however, no direct access to the original form of the “raw material of memory-traces” out of which the later recollections are “forged” (322). Consequently, all childhood memories appear to screen off what is unpleasurable in “real” life or what cannot pass through the censorship of the conscious mind.

If the entire childhood that is “stored” in autobiographical memories is filtered through norms of (un)pleasurability and (social) acceptability, then the different movements manifested by different classes of screen memories might pertain to all childhood memories. Freud distinguishes, firstly, between negative and positive screen memories, a distinction that indicates that the manifest content of the memory may or may not be contrary to the repressed content. Secondly, screen memories can be the result of forward or backward movements in time. That is to say, the manifest scene the memory invokes can precede or follow the elements with which it is connected. Besides screen memories with anticipating or retrospective effects, there is, thirdly, a category that covers other, synchronic events. Screen memories thus provide the autobiographical narrator with a mode of representation in which different elements can be brought together without revealing their dangerous content.

Here, I am especially interested in the way Freud’s argument is relevant to the interaction between nonverbal and verbal experience. To begin with, there is the dominant role of displacement in the screen memory, which indicates psychic intensity. The form that this intensity takes, the exceptional clarity and persistence of screen memories, is an address to the recaller. Formal, sensory features of the memory are a signal that the scene is important for the person who is remembering. Because the memory captivates or strikes by its sensory intensity, it creates a specific relationship of alertness between the memory and the recalling person. Displacement thus points out that the act of memory has a performative aspect: it affects the subject of memory. This way of affecting, however, is not necessarily the same as feeling an affect, i.e. as having a feeling with a specific, affective quality.

15. Sarah Kofman mentions the last category in a study in which she elaborates on Freud’s notion of the screen memory. She is particularly interested in the way Freud interprets art works in terms of screen memories (1970: 85).
Nevertheless, because the memory signals "importance," the sensory nature does imply the indication of an affective feeling. However, the quality of the affect involved cannot be specified because it is detached from its original "content." This separation of affective load from content becomes better understandable in analogy with the distinction between affects and emotions I proposed earlier. This distinction restricts the term affect to bodily feelings and enacted signals, whereas the term emotion refers to the integration of bodily feelings and verbal content. The psychic intensity that affects the recaller, according to Freud, thus remains restricted to the level of sensory arousal without revealing the affective quality. Freud's notion of displacement, therefore, has two important implications for the understanding of the relationship between autobiographical memory and subjectivity in general: it suggests that the body of the recaller is explicitly engaged in the process of remembering and that this engagement has a sensory and an affective aspect that need not be automatically related to each other.

The way the "genuineness" of a recollection is addressed in Freud's article is the second relevant element; it underscores the implication of bodily sensations and feelings in the acts of memory. The problem of genuineness, which refers to the difference between fantasy and historic reality, is part of the detailed case study through which Freud elaborates his ideas. When the patient brings in the problem, this patient emphatically acts as an embodied subject by referring to feelings: "a feeling tells me, though, that the scene is genuine. How does that fit in [with a phantasmal construction]?" In his reaction, Freud both observes that "there is in general no guarantee of the data produced by our memory" and agrees that the scene the patient described is genuine as far as its content is suited to represent the patient's (later and repressed) fantasies (315). Later on Freud explains the patient's feelings of genuineness about the childhood scene by arguing that there should exist traces of real memories as basis for fantasmal constructions. Freud's text thus suggests a connection between "feelings" — leaving the question open whether they are physical or psychic —, some idea of genuineness, and the fact that memories always have some "real" trace or "content" that provides points of contact for a fantasmal construction.¹⁶

¹⁶. Because Freud sees specifically screen memories as a source for information about the early years of life, his argument proposes the possibility of early imprints. It is noteworthy that Freud approaches these early imprints not as "literal" references to reality but as representations or mediations. According to Laplanche & Pontalis, Freud's concept of memory trace should not be understood as an empiricist notion of engram. Freud even adhered to the idea of different memory systems (1973: 247-249). This idea about the working of memory, which was advanced in Freud's time, is especially underlined by Freud's notion of "infantile amnesia."
interconnection, one has to take into consideration that the sensory and affective appeal of the memory pertains to the moment of narration and the body of the recaller implied in the experience of that moment. As far as they are physical, the feelings triggered by a memory can only be felt in the present: although they seem to resemble earlier feelings, they are not so much remembered as felt anew at the moment of remembering. Because this "lived" quality of bodily experience is different from conceptual knowing, it supports the idea of different registers of experience at work, a working that, in turn, has explanatory value for the phenomenon of displacement itself. Consequently, the bodily feelings as such cannot help distinguish definitively between fantasy and reality. Nevertheless, Freud's notion of screen memory helps to conceptualize a subjectifying (performative) force and, hence, an affective investment that defies conscious awareness. This makes the idea of screening-off, manifested in a text as a rhetoric of screening-off, also applicable for the representation of dissociated experience.

The importance of screen memories over other childhood memories is supported by a later article by Freud, in which he states that "not some but all of what is essential from childhood has been retained in these [screen] memories." This does not mean that all childhood memories are screen memories – although they are all constructions – but that all screen memories contain and hide important information about childhood. Because displacement is the common characteristic for screen memories and because this phenomenon highlights nonverbal bodily experience, screen memories might specifically clarify important moments of preverbal, early infancy.

Besides the dominant role of displacement and the problem of genuineness, there is a third point of interest in Freud's argument. It is implied in an observation confirming a nonverbal register that predates a later, self-reflective verbal one. Freud observes that "in the majority of significant and in other respects unimpeachable childhood scenes" a subject sees herself in that scene as a child and knows that she is that subject. He further specifies that the recaller "sees this child, however, as an observer from outside the scene would see [her]" (321). According to Freud, this distinction between "the acting and the re-collecting ego" is the reason why the picture cannot

17. Freud adds: "They [screen memories] represent the forgotten years of childhood as adequately as the manifest content of a dream represents the dream-thoughts." The quote is from Freud's article "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," which he wrote in 1914 (SE XII: 148).

18. This point supports the constructed nature of childhood memories in general, a category that is broader than screen memories.
be a mere repetition of the original "impression," but has to be worked-over retrospectively.\footnote{Schacter refers to Freud’s article when he addresses the difference between “field memories” and “observer memories” (1996: 21). The former indicate a remembering person who feels implied—emotionally involved—in the scene and the latter indicate one who observes the scene from the outside. Research has demonstrated that this difference can be explained by linking the recollection with the level of emotional arousal at the moment of recollection. The implication is that “the emotional intensity of a memory is determined, at least in part, by the way in which you, the rememberer go out remembering.” Put differently, one and the same occasion can be remembered in different ways, depending on the way “you set out to retrieve a memory in the present” (22). This explanation is consistent with the idea that embodied (inter)subjectivity presumes the working of different mental registers.}

The difference between a doing agency and an observing agency who can distance herself from a former or other part of her ego can best be explained by positing a layered, intrapsychic complexity. On the one hand, the distinction suggests a subjectivity of an embedded or integrated nature. As I will argue, the possibility of embedding marks an important developmental achievement, because it enables a subject to “embed” her bodily, affectively defined action in a verbal narrative “about” herself. On the other hand, the distinction between a doing and an observing agency can also refer to a splitting caused by dissociation. As has already been indicated, the latter mechanism foregrounds a model of the mind that explicitly takes the separation between nonverbal—sensorimotor and affective—experience and verbally mediated experience into account. This model of structural dissociation, to which I will return in Chapter 5, also draws attention to the vital functioning of the so-called fear system and, hence to the role of danger in all subjects’ lives and in that of traumatized people in particular. It is especially the reactive nature of fear or anxiety that gives the role of the physical body and its visceral, sensorimotor and affective complexity pride of place.

The issue of danger and anxiety makes another term Freud uses relevant to the line of thought I am developing here, that of “deferred action” – Nachträglichkeit in German. This term bears upon one specific temporal movement of the screen memory: the belated, retroactive effect on an earlier, previously meaningless event or idea. In the definition of Laplanche & Pontalis, deferred action implies that “experiences, impressions or memory-traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development. They may in that event be endowed not only with a new meaning but also with psychical effectiveness” (1973: 111). The term is pertinent to a developmental view of traumatization, firstly, because it refers to events that cannot be incorporated fully “into a meaningful context” and because “the traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience.” And, secondly, the term is pertinent because the revision can be “occasioned by events and situations, or by organic maturation (...)” (112; emphasis added). Freud’s argument thus suggests an analogy between infantile and traumatic experience.
The belated revision concerns more than "meaning" alone; it has also to do with "psychic effectiveness," a terminology that implies some force. To be more precise, psychic effectiveness can point at a pathogenic force (112). This force makes it possible that events that initially are not meaningful at all can become pathogenic after their historical occurrence. This delayed production explains why they are still "repressed," that is, the events cause amnesia for an experience that only retrospectively has become pathogenic. Deferred action thus implies the possibility that events can become retrospectively traumatogenic in relation to other events. Hence, the notion has explanatory value for the cumulative aspect of traumatization and might explain how the vulnerability to trauma – manifested in a breaking point that causes dissociation – can be heightened by cumulation. Significantly, this cumulative process need not occur in chronological order.

Concerning the relationship between trauma and the possible working of a fear system, it is also relevant that Freud’s thinking about trauma underwent changes when he was confronted with accident neuroses, and specifically war neuroses.20 These neuroses forced Freud to include the elements of external danger and internal anxiety in the idea of trauma. He acknowledges in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) that trauma cannot be explained in terms of a disturbance of the libidinal economy anymore because a more fundamental threat to the integrity of the subject is concerned. Hence, he readopts the definition of trauma as a breach, calling it the breach of the protective shield that should shelter the subject from excessive external excitations. This shield, however, cannot protect the ego from the overwhelming anxiety Freud describes later.

In Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety (1926) Freud connects the notion of trauma with signal anxiety and helplessness. As Laplanche & Pontalis paraphrase, “by releasing the signal of anxiety, [the ego] seeks to avoid being overwhelmed by the surge of automatic anxiety which defines that traumatic situation where the ego is defenceless.” Moreover, “the ego is attacked from within – that is to say, by instinctual excitations – just as it is from without” (469; emphasis in text). The fear of basic helplessness here described resembles the agony implied in Winnicott’s description of the “fear of breakdown,” to which I will return later.21

Signal anxiety highlights the turning point in Freud’s thinking that requires the

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20. For a concise overview of Freud’s ideas see the entry “Trauma (Psychical)” in Laplanche & Pontalis 1973: 465-469.

21. Joseph H. Smith characterizes Freud’s article of 1926 as a turning point with respect to Freud’s “final theory of feeling.” As he argues, “It was in this work that he moved away from the idea that anxiety, like the vinegar from wine, was ‘spoiled’ libido – libido transformed because repressed. Repression was no longer the cause of anxiety: the formula was reversed. Repression occurs because of danger signaled by anxiety” (2000: 70).
incorporation of the phenomenon of anxiety into the working of the unconscious. Freud’s turn from libidinal wishes toward an anxiety associated with external violence and internal helplessness might justify a shift from repression towards dissociation as explanation for amnesia or the disintegration of experience inherent in traumatization. Freud’s notions of screen memory and of the working of unconscious forces are compatible with this turn toward the compartmentalization of experience and the possible pluralization of subjects implied in that process. The screen memory might also imply indications of dissociated experience.22

For the understanding of Perec’s text the notions of screen memory and deferred action have great explanatory value, because they underscore the plausibility of the cumulation of specific and structural traumatogenic components. Conversely, the way in which Perec’s text makes his traumatization representable contributes to the understanding of the complexity of this process. In particular, Perec’s “earliest memory” is clarifying as it retrospectively gives Perec’s life a “false start” in many senses. When Perec provides his life with the belatedly traumatogenic beginning of being a Jew, he makes use of a rhetoric of deferred action. This rhetoric, however, also enacts screening off, because the false start is disguised as the opposite of subject annihilation, that is, as a mastering of signs. By confusing a baby with a three-year-old child, Perec further complicates the false start of his life with an element of preverbal subject-forming as well as preverbal traumatization. Moreover, by presenting his false start as the “recognition” of a so-called Hebrew sign/letter, he also suggests that this problem has to do with the integration of different kinds of signifying systems. That integration will be further explored in the following section with the help of a memory that has the distinct features of a screen memory.

Stumbling over Words

In chapter X Perec writes that: “Mes premiers souvenirs précis concernent l’école” (72) (My earliest firm memories are of school, 51). The use of the adjective “précis” – precise, clear, firm – is

22. See Van der Hart & Op den Velde 1995: 87-89. They also explain the difference between dissociation and repression as pertaining to different models of the mind. The mind as conceived by Freud can be thought as horizontally layered, in which the subject of consciousness pushes away, while remaining in place as it were. A dissociating mind becomes imaginable by presumposing the possibility of vertical splitting, by means of which one (part of the) subject of consciousness can escape another (part of the) subject of consciousness. This model thus takes the possibility of a compartmentalization of the mind into consideration, in which different aspects of experience are associated with different “personalities.” The “normal” personality burdens another personality with the traumatic experience (89-91).
intriguing because it simultaneously indicates a screen memory and is connected to school. In one sentence two radically different ways of knowledge production are combined, an unconscious re-working of meaning and an institutionalized, systematic education. I have selected the memory of which Perec comments that: “je me vois dévalant la rue des Couronnes en courant de cette façon particulière qu’ont les enfants de courir (...),” (75; emphasis in text) (I can see myself running down Rue des Couronnes with that specifically childish running step, 54; emphasis in text). The memory shows the combination of doing and observing that, according to Freud, makes the act of re-vision visible. It also is “the most persistent one”:

Le second est le plus tenace: je dévale en courant – ce n’est pas exactement en courant: à chaque enjambée, je saute une fois sur le pied qui vient de se poser; c’est une façon de courir, à mi-chemin de la course proprement dite et du saut à cloche-pied, très fréquente chez les enfants, mais je ne lui connais pas de dénomination particulière –, je dévale donc la rue des Couronnes, tenant à bout de bras un dessin que j’ai fait à l’école (une peinture, même) et qui représente un ours brun sur fond ocre. Je suis ivre de joie. Je crie de toutes mes forces: “Les oursons! Les oursons!” (75)

The second is more persistent: I am running – not exactly running: at each stride I do a hop on the foot that is forward; it’s a running style, halfway between proper running and hopping, which is very common amongst children, but I don’t know any specific term for it – I am running, then, down Rue des Couronnes, holding out at arm’s length a drawing I did at school (a painting, actually) which depicts a brown bear on a dark-brown ground. I am drunk with excitement. I am yelling for all I am worth: “Here come the cubs! Here come the cubs!” (53)

The qualification of screen memory appears justified because of the innocent content of the memory – a child, drunk with joy because he made a drawing of a bear at school, seems to be skipping down a street. In addition to invoking the excited joy about the colored image, the scene is striking in the detailed way in which it describes the specific movement between running and hopping: even the hop between the different strides is mentioned. This description not only helps the reader to evoke a mental image but also sets the image of this excited boy in motion.

However, the comment that follows the description sheds doubt on that image of movement, halting the speeding boy, as it were. Apparently, the pace of the boy appears to defy a label, although the locomotion at stake is very common among children. Why does Perec not use
the term “sautiller” (skipping)? Is the boy not skipping? Instead, the reflection about the movement works as an obstacle for the imagination of the reader. Moreover, as the reader stumbles over the writer’s self-reflective words, the child seems to stumble as well, as if the joy of the child is not suitable. Indeed, if the memory is a screen memory, the image of joy might hide its counterpart. There might be no reason whatsoever for skipping or sautiller. Hence, it might be no coincidence that the French sautiller comes from the verb sauter, which does not only mean “jumping” but also “passing over”(!) and “exploding”; a bomb can “sauter,” for instance. Thus, the memory could also point to danger and fear, an interpretation that is in agreement with the ambiguity implied in the reference to both ours – a big bear is a dangerous animal – and oursons – cubs are cute, innocent creatures.

At first sight, I was unable to explain the strange discrepancy between Perec’s remark that a way of moving forward is common among children and his inability to provide an adequate term for this “skipping.” Why should a master writer pretend a failure of naming? At second sight, however, several possible reasons occurred to me. To begin with, Perec’s holding back denomination for his paces could indicate that the term is too general to cover the specificity of the movement used by French children, which is something in between running and hopping. They do not make an in-between hop on both their left and right foot in every stride, but restrict the little hop to only one leg. Moreover, they do not equally alternate their left and right legs, because solely one leg, the active one always has the lead. There is, indeed, no word in the French language that “names” this peculiar version of skipping.23

Although the commenting clause seems to be another instance in which excess detail ruins a memory, the detailed description and its effect on the imagination of the reader hint at a second explanation. Because Perec does not know (?) how to name his movement, he is forced to “picture” it with words, an undertaking that requires the ability to mentally re-play the movement. Because he has learned the stride as a child, his imagination is prompted by his own sensorimotor experience as processed by the implicit or procedural memory system; it is embodied.24 In other words, Perec has access to a bodily memory as a resource that enables him to psychically simulate his movement.

23. I thank my colleague Françoise Lucas, who grew up in France, for this inside information. It is almost impossible to give an adequate description of this peculiar movement. You have to do it yourself to know what is meant. As I will argue, this is precisely the point Perec’s text makes.
24. For a “taxonomy of memory” see for example Rose 1998: 139-141. Motor Skill Learning is a subdivision of Procedural Memory; the other cluster of three subdivisions implies Perceptual Learning, Conditioning Learning, and Cognitive Learning. The counterpart of Procedural Memory is Declarative Memory, which is divided into Semantic Memory (generalized knowledge) and Episodic Memory (autobiographical knowledge). “Procedural Memory” and “Declarative Memory” may also be termed “Implicit Memory” and “Explicit Memory.”
The memory thus highlights the role of experiential knowledge. Moreover, it hints at the interaction between sensorimotor movement ("running") and affective feeling (joy). As a consequence, Perec's memory draws on, and thus confirms, the idea of different memory systems and different registers of experience.

This interpretation makes sense of Perec's inability to "denominate." This inability is more than marking the split between doing and verbalizing; it also emphasizes the different nature of these two ways of producing knowledge. The memory helps us keep in mind that the common knowledge of children that is involved pertains to learning skills, which is based on imitation, repetition and physical exercise. Perec's memory, then, indicates a third way of learning besides the unconscious and institutionalized processes he mentioned earlier: the practice of bodily skills. By means of his detailed description Perec makes clear that this practice is a very "precise" way of learning, which can lead to knowledge not subjected to the mediation of verbal denomination. And, given that he proposes this idea in a literary text, the description asks how to put that knowledge into words.

This brings me to the last and most important point generated by Perec's memory. Because the memory makes the gap visible between the richness and complexity of bodily experience as evoked by a detailed description and the plainness of merely denomination or labeling, Perec also draws attention to different aspects of language. For example, if Perec had written only that he "was running" or even "skipping" down the street, his memory would have lost the power to explicitly engage the reader's capacity to mentally simulate movements (of joy) in the process of imaging, i.e. to sense and feel, while imaging. This engagement solicits the reader's embodied imagination. The effect of this difference between evocation and denomination runs parallel to the difference between the performative and constative functions of language. Perec's memory demonstrates that an evocation of bodily experience – here, the result of a detailed description – has a different effect on the reader than a distanced, constative "labeling" of content. The former activates the imagination – including its image – whereas the latter activates linguistic competence in the narrow sense.

The performative aspect of a text thus not merely creates a relationship with a reader by "affecting" her – make her "feel" – but also appeals to her experiential knowledge by making her "sense," even "do." Hence, the performative function of language appeals to an "embodying" reader. Apart from other rhetorical modes, descriptions are apt tools to bring about this specific interaction between reader and text. This evocative aspect of a textual mode thus demonstrates that performativity resides, at least partly, in the way the embodied imagination of a reader is triggered.
The performatory function of a text can be characterized as a variation of Barthes' effect of the real, i.e. as a rhetoric of "the effect of the embodied real." It changes the connotation "this is bodily reality" into a denotation that puts the factual denotation — the unnamable hop — into the shadow.

The specific evocative potential of description does not necessarily imply mental visualization. Although a mental picture can facilitate the embodied imagination of a person, this need not be the case; on the contrary, mere visual imagination can also function as a distancing device. It can, in fact, be the screen of a screen memory. Perec posits this distinction between the two forms of imagination with his emphasis on the difference between the memory just discussed, and the next one: "Je me vois dévalant la rue des Couronnes (...), mais je sens encore physiquement cette poussée dans le dos" (75; emphasis in text) (I can see myself running down (...) but I can still physically feel that shove in the back, 54; emphasis in text).25

The issue of this memory, then, is the relationship between telling, seeing and living. This relationship is further complicated by the theme of the memory: the joy over the production of a recognizable image. The emphasis on the making of an image insists on both "making" and "images." The memory thus emphasizes the role of creativity as well as the power of mediating imagery, be it by means of visual, otherwise sensory-based, or verbal pictures. Moreover, the joy adds an affective load to both the act of making and the resulting image. Because the sensorimotor movement of the body underscores the vocal expression of affect, Perec's memory not only addresses the issue of the verbal organization of lived experience. More specifically, the memory hints at the integration of the sensorimotor and the affective aspects of experience. The latter aspect will be discussed in the following section.

A Hidden Bomb

Affectivity in experience is most relevant when it fails to occur. The last example I present here concerns a memory from chapter XXXIII in which Perec conspicuously falsifies history by...

25. This distinction implies the suggestion that merely visual imagery — in memories, dreams and fantasy — has a mediating function. This suggestion is underlined by Schacter's observation that it is particularly the visual aspect of recalling that appears to give a rememberer the idea that she is remembering a real event. Schacter's observation is part of his explanation of the difference between "knowing" and "remembering" with respect to recollections. This concerns the difference between "recollecting a wealth of information about a person or a place" and "just knowing that someone or something is familiar." The latter form of recalling is often bound up with some sort of visual reexperiencing of the physical setting or context of an event. While explaining that "part of the reason is that some
displacing the capitulation of Japan from September 1945 to May 1945, the month of the German capitulation. I will argue that this blatant manipulation of historical fact screens off an important symptom of traumatization: the absence of affects and emotions. Psychic numbing appears to serve as another rhetorical device in Perec's autohistory. Consequently, this memory furthers the present articulation of the contribution of semiosis in subject formation to the extent that it demonstrates the interaction between affectivity and subjectivity. Here is the memory:

Souvent j'allais chercher le journal sur la place (le marchand de journaux, tabacs, souvenirs, cartes postales, est toujours au même endroit). Un jour de mai 1945, je trouvais de nouveau la place noire de monde et j'eus beaucoup de mal à entrer dans la boutique et à acheter le journal. Je revins en courant dans les rues encombrées d'une foule enthousiaste, brandissant à bout de bras Les Allobroges et criant à tue-tête: "Le Japon a capitulé!" (203)

I often went to the square to fetch the newspaper (the newsagent-cum-tobacconist-cum-souvenirs-and-postcards shop is still in the same place). One day in May 1945 I found the square again packed with people, and I had great difficulty in getting into the shop to buy the paper. I ran home through streets thronging with excited crowds, waving Les Allobroges in my outstretched hand and yelling for all I was worth, “Japan has capitulated!” (150)

There are several reasons for considering the reference to May 1945 in relation to Japan's capitulation as a significant sign. As a first alert, the importance of the event in combination with the restricted scope of the fragment leaves little room for the idea of a slip of the pen. Furthermore, it is remarkable that Perec not only displaces the date of the event but also leaves out the role of the atomic bomb that occasioned the capitulation. Finally, the absence of an explicit reference to France's “Liberation” in 1944 is noteworthy, the more so as the memory is about an event of public importance. The fragment does refer to the considerable number of people the event aroused: “the square [was] again packed with people” and “the streets [were] thronging with excited crowds.” Perec himself was also excited, as he was waving the paper and yelling.

...of the same brain regions are involved in both visual imagery and visual perception," he also adds an important implication: "creating visual images may lead us to believe that we are remembering an event even when the incident never happened" (1996: 23).
The hidden presence of "the Liberation" in the fragment becomes understandable if Perec's situation at the end of the world war is taken into consideration. The end of the war – the capitulation of an enemy – did not at all liberate Perec from his misery, because for unexplainable reasons his mother remained absent. That the Liberation was not a positive occasion for Perec is underlined by the fact that he has no memories of it, as he describes in an earlier chapter:

Il y eut la Libération; je n'en ai gardé aucune image, ni de ses péripéties, ni même des déferlements d'enthousiasme qui l'accompagnèrent et la suivirent et auxquels il est plus que probable que je participai. Je revins à Villard avec ma grand-mère et je vécus quelques mois avec elle dans le tout petit logement qu'elle occupait dans le vieux Villard. (181)

The Liberation came; I have no visual memory of it or of any of its chapters or even the waves of enthusiasm that accompanied and followed it and in which it is more than likely that I took part. I went to Villard with my grandmother and lived with her for a few months in the tiny lodgings she had in the old part of the village. (134)

This fragment suggests that the feelings of enthusiasm Perec displayed in the later passage with respect to the so-called capitulation of Japan had nothing to do with his feelings for the official Liberation. For Perec, that Liberation only means another period of living with his grandmother, that is, another period of living without his mother.

However, as usual, he does not openly refer to her absence here, nor does he show any feelings. The discursive nature of this traumatic situation matches Van Alphen's fourth category of representational problems, which I cited earlier: "the unacceptability of available (or inflicted) narrative plots, because they do not justice to a subject's role in the events." Perec cannot make a connection between the loss of his mother and the Liberation, because for him the end of the war does not fit in the generally accepted narrative plot of the Liberation.

Seen from this perspective, Perec's memory conveys the thought that because he cannot approach the end of the war in terms of Liberation, he sees it rather in terms of a capitulation. This vision makes him deliberately falsify historical reality. The fantasmal character of his narrative is substantiated in the exchange of time and place, in keeping silent about important aspects, and in reducing general history to an unimportant, personal anecdote. Hence, Perec again presents a complex, negative screen memory. In the first place, his attention to the capitulation of Japan hides an issue of strong emotional importance: the loss of his mother, which is the opposite of an exciting
public event. The seemingly graspable end of a war, a capitulation, thus stands for an utterly ungraspable misery without an end: the death of his mother caused by the Holocaust. Ultimately, the interference of the specific and structural traumatogenic aspects of Perec’s autohistory implied in personal loss and massive violence makes the plot of the Liberation a definitely unacceptable narrative framework.

In the second place, the particular connection between Japan and the mother’s death becomes significant through another element about which Perec keeps silent: the nuclear bomb and its annihilating force. Because Perec does not explicitly provide this bomb with a verbal label – no more than “naming” the Holocaust – his use of displacement reveals a huge, hidden, explosive potential. Metaphorically but secretly, the devastating effect of the loss of his mother due to the Holocaust is compared to that of an atomic explosion. But the device of displacement also entails that the bomb does not function as mere substitution or metaphor for massive death. It is the overwhelming aspect of the explosion that counts, that is, its reference to affective charge. What is displaced or screened-off in the memory is an unbearable affective load. By means of the hidden connection between personal loss, the Holocaust and atomic bombing Perec’s screen memory thus eventually suggests that the incapacitation of affective feeling contributes to the failure of experience inherent in traumatization.

It is Perec’s rhetoric of screening-off, then, that brings in the crucial theme concerning (traumatized) subjectivity: the absence of affective feelings. This absence functions as a sign of “psychic numbing,” that is, as a reference to what Lifton sees as “a decreased or absent feeling either during or after trauma” (1995: 134). It thus highlights an aspect of the complex notion of dissociation: the split between an observing self and an experiencing self. This form of dissociation implies that traumatized people can be out of touch with the bodily and affective feelings related to whatever caused and maintained the dissociation. It is this specific aspect of dissociation that gives insight into the boundary between an embodied and a disembodied subject.

If I read the hidden bomb in Perec’s text as a reference to psychic numbing, this bomb indexically refers to all kinds of hidden but potentially explosive and unbearable feelings,

26. Arguing that beliefs and desires about a livable world should include a meaningful death, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton not only demonstrates that affects need conceptual content – beliefs and desires – to become intersubjective emotional thought; his argument also shows that massive violence destructs more than a huge number of living people, for it entails the destruction of possible beliefs and desires. Lifton’s focus is on massive traumatization, as his studies of Hiroshima, Vietnam, and the Holocaust demonstrate. (See 1991[1967], 1974 and an interview in Caruth 1995: 128-147.)
ranging from horror and agony to annihilating rage, violent aggression, distress, and guilt in the aftermath of the survival of life-threatening experiences. Because Perec keeps silent about the bomb, he also keeps silent about these feelings. This silence indicates that not so much the traumatizing events *per se* as the feelings they evoke are frightening, indeed threatening. Consequently, Perec’s rhetoric of numbing might hint at what Janet has called “a phobia for the traumatic memory.”

Such phobic reactions and their displaced metaphors shed light on an observation made by psychologist and art therapist Susan Simons in her study about the treatment of survivors. In her therapy she makes use of “nonverbal modalities,” in which she includes both visual means of expression and body movements. She writes:

> Often, what is behind the client’s inability to feel feelings is the fear of losing control. (...) I have asked many clients to draw pictures of what their feelings would look like if they expressed them. Images of “going crazy,” tornadoes, volcanoes, and *nuclear bombs* are not uncommon. (1995: 103-104; emphasis added)

Because these survivors figure their unreachable feelings as a potential, immeasurable power, seen through Perec’s text this quotation might also hint at the fear of one’s own violent reactions. This might well be the meaning of the hidden explosion that Perec “celebrates” as a capitulation.

Lifton offers an explanation for the interrelation of anger, rage, and violence in survivors. In the chapter called “Anger, Rage, and Violence” he presents it as a defensive reaction to an attack on a basic vitality: “(...) anger has to do with a struggle to assert vitality by attacking the other rather than the self” (1979: 147). Moreover, anger, rage and violence are necessary for the protection and maintenance of the self at the moment a subject “(...) feels itself painfully vulnerable to annihilation.” Lifton’s formulation, then, reveals the powers at stake when a traumatized subject is in danger of being annihilated: a basic vitality emerges that can turn into aggression. His argument also contributes to the meaning of the “discursive death” of a traumatized subject, when he adds

27. Quoted in Van der Kolk & Van der Hart 1995: 176. This idea would appear to be central for the understanding of the principle of structural dissociation.
that "[i]n this overall pattern we are struck by the immediate relationship between threatened inner death and violent impulse" (149; emphasis added).

In terms of subject formation, Lifton's argument indicates the relational aspect of subjectivity by highlighting the role of affects and emotions in actions. By establishing a relationship between (inner) rage and (outer) violence, Lifton further argues that violence can be explained as the externalization and manifestation of feelings that suggest how to (re)act: an "impulse," he calls it. If subjects are not aware of such feelings and the readiness to action implied in them because they are "numbed" by dissociation, the externalization can become the more dangerous: the attack can take the form of an attack on "the other." The other becomes the projected enemy.

It needs no further argumentation to see the danger of a projection that is enhanced by massive social acceptance and by the idea that war against or extermination of such projected enemies is justifiable. The observation implies the possibility of a socially maintained, massive "numbing." This perspective sheds still another light on Perec's description of the violent and discriminating society on "W." It points to an additional structural traumatogenic factor: the possibility of a hidden, structural threat to a subject's vitality. The lack of a safe social environment is thus both traumatogenic and a possible source of reactive aggression. Perec's "memory," then, makes comprehensible that the annihilation of subjectivity implied in traumatization hides a destructive power comparable to an atomic bomb. This (hidden) bomb brings me back to the invisible crater in Perec's text left by the absence of affective feelings.

Open-Ended

By ending the analysis of W ou (...) with a telling example of the powerful rhetoric of Perec's writing in "A," I give pride of place to the all-embracing rhetoric of gaps that makes his book so difficult to read and, at the same time, so breathtakingly engaging. Perec not only performs gaps in "A" but in his entire book, as in the "gap" between the two tales, the doubles, and the two parts of the book. Although the gap first and foremost functions as a sign of disconnection, the rhetoric takes many different forms. We have seen it at work in the rhetoric of absence, of disappearance, of fragmentation, of doubling or dissociation, of hide and seek, of screening-off, of deferred action, and of psychic numbing. Through the common structure of the gap, however, all these devices
enact the crux of the concept of trauma, that is, the breach in the integrative capacity of the subject. Between the cracks, the subject of pain dissolves.

The ample use of rhetorical devices highlights the performative nature of Perec’s poetics. Through the focus on Perec’s memories I aimed to clarify that both the need for and the possibility of performativity, like the breach in the integrative capacity of the traumatized subject, are grounded in the bodily nature of experience. Hence, this chapter has argued for the intertwinement of lived reality, (embodied) imagination, and narrative organization in subjectivity and for the vital role of autobiographical memories for a subject’s integration. I made this argument ex negativo, through the scrutiny of a traumatized subject. The inclusion of experiential knowledge in the narrative formation of subjectivity “thickens” the discursive nature of subjectivity. It demonstrates that discursivity is not limited to language. However, the bodily base of autobiographical narratives also points out the fault line that can explain the amnesia, screening off, and psychic numbing manifested in the mini-narratives of Perec’s memories. As the last example of his memories has underscored, the borderline between traumatic experience and normal autobiographical recollections appears to be of an affective nature: traumatic overwhelming is affect-induced, while killing affect.

Whereas Freud’s screen memories and the notion of dissociation indicate that affective feelings and content can be unconsciously separated and attached to other elements, the constructed nature of Perec’s autobiographical memories makes the idea of a conscious splitting and redistribution of affective forces relevant. In this way the gap between feeling and narrating, between doing and denominated, between experiencing and observing subject can be made productive for culturally performative practices such as art and literature. The gap can turn into a space in-between, in which a feeling subject and a more distanced, (self)reflecting subject can enact the necessary interplay between them.

I see Perec’s poetics, and especially his writing of parallel texts, as an enactment of the possibility or impossibility of the choice between feeling and distancing. On the one hand, the maintenance of the gap between the two tales demonstrates that a traumatized subject cannot become one integrated subject. On the other hand, the rhetoric of splitting demonstrates that choices are still open. In this way, Perec’s consistent two-track telling becomes a choice that makes an important refusal visible. The inability to incorporate the reality of war and concentration camps into his personal history enacts the refusal to let them turn into a socially accepted history.
In light of this interpretation, Perec’s choice to replace the Liberation by a capitulation, or rather two capitulations, becomes culturally effective. The preference for capitulation to qualify the end of the war is an act of surrendering on stated conditions. The capitulation emphasized by Perec’s text connects a conscious act of acknowledging one’s defeat and losses with a *sine qua non*. Here, the willingness to accept that the mother died in a concentration camp goes together with a refusal to “naturalize” the violence implied in the cause of death. This refusal is reinforced by the omission of words like “Jew” and “Holocaust.” Perec’s text refuses to let these words become abstract generalizations, as it refuses to have them “explain” his mother’s death and become the “explanation” of his personal grief.

Perec’s refusal to make a world of concentration camps fit into his personal story does not mean that he denies its concrete, despicable, historical reality. On the contrary, the imaginative power of Perec’s anthropological description of the society of “W,” fueled by his personal investment, makes the existence of “W” into a forceful “postmemory.” This term, coined by Marianne Hirsch, indicates those memories of the second generation that are “mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.” Although there is a generational distance from history, there is “a deep personal connection” with the postmemory (1997: 22).

Perec’s entire text, the story of a child of war, demonstrates that this deep personal involvement of postmemory is the result of a cumulative process. The postmemory “W” is embedded, albeit not integrated, in the autohistory W. This is why Perec’s W is mirrored by the so-called “earliest memory.” For this mini-autohistory, which has the form of a memory, foregrounds another ambiguity that has been substantiated in the rhetoric of split narrating: the (in)ability to feel the pain of trauma. Because the rapture about the child’s (baby’s?) ability to “read” a letter/sign screens off the severity of the confrontation with Jewishness, the memory hides the “pain” involved in this confrontation. Trauma, then, becomes a wound that deprives a subject of the capacity to feel and communicate the pain of that wound.

The issue of pain was addressed in “A” with the help of external signs like the sling and the scar, signs that made visible a child with a tangibly damageable body but incapable of telling from within that body. The pain received an affective dimension by the images of the deaf-mute child and the gagged child of “W,” who invoked feelings of intrapsychic isolation and social powerlessness, which the children were unable to express themselves. If the principal characteristic of Perec’s poetics – the split between the two tales – is again seen as an (im)possible choice, this artificial
separation enacts two things simultaneously. On the one hand, it enacts the impossibility of the connection between a subject and feeling. On the other hand, because the two tales also refer to a choice, they make another refusal visible: the refusal to become victimized. Jewishness should not be equated with being a victim.

However, this interpretation leaves a major question hanging. This is the question of reading. Perec’s split mode of writing is also an appeal to the integrative potential of the reader. The reader is not merely offered the possibility to make choices; her embodied imagination is also solicited. In this way Perec’s doubled text burdens the reader with an impossible task. How can or should one respond to an appeal of a “living dead?” How to make a difference between a living and a conceptual paradox?

(...) 

Reading Perec’s text I became increasingly distressed, incapable of finding words for the diffuse feeling of hopelessness that coursed through my functioning and thinking. Despite my awe for Perec’s power of writing and imagination, the complexity of his thought, the intricate “games” with letters, signs and lines, the intertextual joints and, finally, the intellectual force and theoretical potential of the text, I could not escape the “mood” of his rhetoric. It paralyzed and silenced me. As the last chapter of W suggests, Perec’s adult writing appears to “repeat” his youthful drawings: “W” and the overall absence of feelings and emotions invoke a world “aux corps rigides, aux faciès inhumains,” caught in “incessants combats” (219) (with stiff bodies and inhuman facial features, [caught in] unending combats, 163). Moreover, these combats penetrate the (then) present as well, as Perec’s final remark about Pinochet’s fascists and the deportation camps on the islands of Tierra del Fuego helps the readers bear in mind.

I did not fully understand my feelings at the time they emerged. Intellectually, I could ascribe them to the working of the textual unconscious. I could rationally formulate the idea that the pain of the text worked through my own involvement. But what to do with a reaction substantiated in unspecified feelings that, nevertheless, influenced my vitality? How could I articulate this negative effect of the mood of the text? And if these feelings substantiated the speechlessness of the child – children – implied in W, how could I know that I did not project my own feelings onto the text? Whose pain was at stake, ultimately?
With the benefit of hindsight, I can evaluate this phase of the cultural analysis I am conducting as a dual turning point. Realizing that I have entered a danger area, in which it is difficult to differentiate between personal and transpersonal interests, I decide to follow two lines that are manifested in the Intermezzo and Part II. Concerning my theoretical investigation I accept the challenge of the major question posed by Perec’s book. As a result, the relation between affects and subjectivity is the topic of Chapter 4. Because of the subject-forming aspect of affective interaction, this topic also entails an elaboration of the specific discursive ability I signaled and, hence, of the developmental base of the incapacity to relate. Concerning the possible contribution of my own (past) life to the pain caused by Perec’s text, I will pursue that personal quest through the interpretation of mijn eerste prentenboek (My First Picture Book) in the autohistorical Chapters 6 and 7. “Whose pain?” is the leading question of this two-track search. It will bring us first, in Chapter 5, to a non-destructive island: the relational playroom of (inter)subjectivity.
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