

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### DOUBLE COVER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

conceal; according to the famous *Purloined Letter* model the purpose of displaying is to be able to pass unnoticed more easily. This ambiguous strategy causes constraint writing to be doubly diminished when it falls beneath a reader's scrutiny. On one level, Perec reveals only a portion of his program and he does so indirectly through the work's paratext even though he regrets having then clarified the structure as he did for *Alphabets*. On another level, this sort of burying of the constraints is exacerbated by the *clinamen* effects. "Perec explicitly linked the use of these distortions to his concern for concealing the rules." If it's a question of "obstructing the temptation of an archeological reading whose sole ambition consists of finding the text's laws of production," one risks another problem. This second difficulty causes what in fact is the result of a precise textual production to be taken for a pure representational effect. Such an effect, once it is cut off from the operations which have made it come about, simply hastens the "readerly identification process" which consists, as Nietzsche would say, of dragging the unknown to the realm of the known, invention or fiction to what has already been read, that is, to what "has already been represented."<sup>38</sup> The double cover strategy thus consists of making "readable" (lisible) a text whose laws of functioning and engendering have been rendered undetectable to the reader (although produced as a *scriptible* texts, according to Barthes' term). Such a strategy blocks the possible access to the *scriptible*.

## POLYGRAPHY

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

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

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

Finally, despite the focus placed on the bi-graphic composition, the *polylogical functioning* of the work should not be overlooked. *W* is an interlacing of stories, intertexts, genres and heterogeneous materials. Beyond effective or virtual correspondences or sutures lies an economy of disconnection, of the non-tied, the contrary of an "idyllic" prose. To sum it up, only the intersection intercepts. This explains the *W* graph or the double X.<sup>29</sup> Made up of their intersection not only does this book not have a center, but even if there were an autobiographical discourse *no "subject" could constitute its center*. This self-subversion rejects not only the unity of the subject but a *monotextual centrality* as well. The self-divisible object which resists auto-biocentric take over fights two poles of textual organization: unity and identity, two principles that govern our idea of a book, of a genre or of the author-narrator-actor equation. Consequently, "autobiographic space" is overwhelmed by scriptographic space. What divides autobiography, the opposition that threatens the genre from the inside, is not only the distance that separates the writer from his experience, the past from its re-presentation and the mixing of this past into the current presentation (the narrating "I" and the topographic game). Beyond the conceptual divisions that always tap into these types of endeavors, especially between "fiction and truth," there are material ones: the book's partitions, the overlapping or the distance which is or is not concealed, between the different narrating voices (these gaps are constantly reasserted : *je/il*) the voice that takes up the childhood ghost in the *il/ile* (he/island) *W*. And it is not the meta-generic discourse, the "inter-text" (the third series eliminated in the final version), "pharmakon" of the impossible discourse that can explain all the gaps (*Mémoire* 67, 73; Bellos 450-3). The "unreadability" of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is linked to this narrative refusal and to the limit of auto-



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

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

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

Now I'm thirteen — but what became of my childhood?  
Thirteen is an uneven number  
that presides over attempts  
to save existence by navigating through Hell.  
[...]  
I erect a statue to the puppets  
who moved my hands before destroying them,  
but I don't know the real meaning  
or the true character of my so-called memories (*Chêne et chien*, 118-119).

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