ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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W, or the Memory of Childhood: **Georges Perec, Postmodernism, and Life Writing**

Frenchman Georges Perec is a good example of a postmodern writer, not least for his interest in literary games, word play, and constrained writing: he is perhaps most famous as the author of an entire novel (*La disparition*, 1969, heroically translated by Gilbert Adair, as *A Void*) that never once uses the letter "e"; he then wrote a novella (*Les revenentes*, 1972) in which "e" was the *only* vowel used; he also devised a palindrome (a text that can be read either forwards or backwards) five hundred words long in each direction. Postmodernism is often scorned or dismissed for such trickery, which can seem frivolous, apolitical, even nihilistic. But Perec's *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (*W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, 1975), shaped by the author's family's experience with fascism and the Nazi concentration camps, shows that games can be deadly serious. Postmodern scepticism does not entail abandoning either politics or ethics, however much it puts them into question. Indeed, life itself can be at stake when either silence or wordplay are the only strategies available to protect the blank space harbouring the speaking subject, a space that is simultaneously affirmed and denied.

1. Postmodernity, Postmodernism, and Fragments

Postmodernity is usually seen as a general cultural ethos, defined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), by which he means that we no longer believe in any one over-arching discourse (religion or science, say) that might legitimate or make sense of other discourses (education or the law, for instance). In the absence of any agreed metanarrative, we have competing claims to legitimacy and truth. For some, this legitimation crisis corresponds to a specific historical stage or epoch: for the Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, it is a part of the cultural logic of "late capitalism"; others argue that it is an aftershock of the Second World War, not least the horrors of the Holocaust, which undermined notions of universal progress and cast doubt on the idea that European "civilization" had put barbarism behind it. For still others, including Lyotard himself, such historicization is itself an appeal to an outdated metanarrative. History is, if not at an end, no longer closed and cut off from the present: past and present are simply relative terms, with no clear hierarchy between them.

Hence a trait of postmodernism, as an aesthetic movement or style, is its tendency to raid the past. Postmodern architecture frequently incorporates (say) neoclassical elements—a

cornice here, or a pediment there—or even copies prior models wholesale. The central branch of the Vancouver Public Library, a mock Roman colosseum, is a good example. At the same time, architects rejected the modernist dictum that "form follows function," preferring a proliferation of decorative motifs, often inspired by mass culture: one influential treatise was Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (originally published in 1972), which argues that even the gaudiest and most commercial of urban landscapes, the Las Vegas strip, could and should be inspiration to architecture. Anything was fair game.

Vancouver Public Library, Central Branch

In literature, authors were similarly prone to historical pastiche, ventriloquizing a range of different styles, and to various forms of narrative or linguistic trickery: metafiction (fiction about fiction), unreliable narration, irony, puns, word play, and so on. Postmodern texts also often borrow from mass-market models (science fiction or the Western, pornography or the thriller), upending traditional distinctions between "high" and "low." With all these disparate styles and genres meeting in the postmodern novel, the result can be a collage that refuses final closure or even coherence. John Fowles's

historical novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) has three alternative and contradictory endings; more radically still, the Argentine Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*, 1963) has 155 numbered chapters, some labelled "expendable," that can be read in various orders. Another of Perec's novels, *Life a User's Manual* (*La vie mode d'emploi*, 1978), is about a man who dedicates himself to creating, reassembling, and then effacing jigsaw puzzles. When he dies, the puzzle he is working on is almost finished, except that its final piece (in the shape of a W) does not fit its final space (which has the shape of an X). These texts are compilations of fragments that never quite add up to a single whole. Where modernism held out the hope of final reconciliation on second sight or in review, postmodernism, happily or otherwise, doubts this is ever possible.

W fits this model. Its title alone suggests an unresolved rift: either *W* "or" *The Memory of Childhood*; and "W," the letter, evokes yet more duality, a doubled "U" or "you" in English, a *double vé* or *double vie,* doubled life, in French. When we get to the text itself, we find that topic, tone, and style change drastically from chapter to chapter. Can we draw up an inventory of the book's diverse components? How many different stories are told here, and in how many distinct styles? How, if at all, do they resonate or relate to each other? Pause the video, and list the elements that constitute this book, and their possible relationships. While you do that, I'll have a glass of Perrier, but I'll be right back.

Perrier is a brand of bottled carbonated mineral water (now owned by the Swiss multinational, Nestlé), which uses water captured from a source in Vergèze, southern France, not far from Marseille. More generally, "Vichy water" (whether it came from the spa town of Vichy itself, to the north of Vergèze, or not) was once the generic name for a range of similar mineral waters, such that waters bottled over the border in Catalonia (Vichy Catalan) or even in the United States (Saratoga Vichy, now discontinued) could take on the appellation. But the geographical and political resonances remain. At the very end of *Casablanca* (1942), the local police prefect, Captain Renault, who has just allowed a pair of refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe to flee, opens a bottle of Vichy water only to dump it in a wastepaper basket. He and Humphrey Bogart's Rick Blaine then walk off in the fog, headed towards the Free French garrison at Brazzaville.

One of the book's threads, starting with the first chapter and continuing in alternating chapters thereafter, is the story of Gaspard Winckler. Winckler is the assumed name of a

deserter from the French army, who discovers unexpectedly that his name derives from papers taken from a young boy, a deaf-mute, now feared lost from a boat off Tierra del Fuego. Meanwhile, every other chapter in the book concerns Perec's own autobiography, focusing first on his parents, descendants of Polish Jews, who died during World War Two: his father of wounds sustained as a soldier in the French army; his mother deported from France and killed in Auschwitz. This account is itself hybrid, a collection of fragments—as Perec puts it in a prefatory note, "scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses and meagre anecdotes"—compiled from his own few memories of the time, some of which he wrote up in a later text that is incorporated here, supplemented by descriptions of photographs plus Perec's subsequent research. This autobiographical reconstruction is augmented with sometimes copious notes that correct or undermine the information in the main text. Then both narratives break off, punctuated by a bracketed ellipsis or "points of suspension," "(. . .)," and in the book's Part Two head in new directions: the Winckler story transforms into the depiction of W, an island colony dedicated to sport and the Olympic ideal, revealed to be more and more disturbing until it is compared directly to the Nazi concentration camps; the autobiographical thread focuses on Perec's school days and his time living with an adoptive aunt and other relations in Vichy France during the war's final years.

The war, and the camps, are a preoccupation that binds and joins these different threads. But at the same time, they are what ensures that nothing quite comes together. The Holocaust resists any attempt to make sense of it, however much, in his account of W, Perec explores how chaos can emerge from order, how noble ideals (the reworked Olympic motto: "fortius altius citius" [67]; "stronger, higher, faster") can harbour a logic that at best leads to mediocrity and at worst degrades into barbarism.

2. Life Writing and the Return of the Subject

If Perec's scattered reflections have no clear or coherent common object, then what about the subject? Can Perec himself, this book's author/narrator, constitute the unity otherwise missing among the fragments? The novel is, after all, in part an attempt at autobiography, at writing the self, and the W story is folded into that self-analysis in so far it emerges from and is in part explained by Perec's own life experience: "For years I did drawings of sportsmen with stiff bodies and inhuman facial features: I described their unending combats meticulously: I listed persistently their endless titles" (163).

Postmodernism was meant to do away with authorial sovereignty, opening texts up to multiple interpretations and giving readers free reign to decide between them. But with a book such as Perec's, and the recent rise of life-writing or what is sometimes termed "autofiction," for which see for instance the massive success of the Norwegian Karl-Ove Knausgård's six-volume *My Struggle* (2009-2011), does not the author come back in from the cold? Does the postmodern condition then devolve into unbridled narcissism?

W is certainly an exercise in self-analysis more than it is an attempt to recover some kind of historical truth. Hence for instance Perec is less interested in uncovering what exactly may have happened to his parents than in recovering his memories of them. Everything is filtered through his consciousness. On the other hand, this is a delayed self-consciousness: he asserts from the outset "I have no childhood memories." Moreover, he continues, "For years, I took comfort in such an absence of history: its objective crispness, its apparent obviousness, its innocence protected me; but what did they protect me from, if not precisely from my history, the story of my living, my real story, my own story [. . .]?" Perec has been evading introspection and remembrance all this time, perhaps out of fear of what he may find: a story "which presumably was neither crisp nor objective, nor apparently obvious, nor obviously innocent" (6). This inverts the usual association of childhood with innocence. It is as though what is to be revealed could be evidence of complicity or guilt, as though the novel were an inadvertent confession.

But what if there were nothing at the centre of the narrative? What if the place to be taken by the subject turned out to be blank? The novel suggests this in at least two different ways, with distinct implications.

In the first place, this voiding of the subject comes as Perec manifests his fascination with names: at once the most personal of attributes, in that names are what identify us as individuals, and also the most impersonal, in that they are conferred on us by others, usually our parents. The Gaspard Winckler story revolves around the problem of naming, when he is told that the person who "gave you your name" (18), "the person whose name you have" (22) is a stranger, a boy lost at sea. The question "Who is Gaspard Winckler?" bifurcates into the "doubled you" or "doubled life" implied by the tale's title. Meanwhile, in the autobiographical narrative, Perec muses on the history and meaning of his own surname, which may seem French (specifically, Breton), but which in fact comes from the Biblical "Peretz," via Polish and Russian. Its rendering in French as

"Perec" constitutes "the concealment of my Jewish background through my patronym" (36). Yet the fact that the gallicization is slightly off—the rules of pronunciation would imply that the first "e" should bear an acute accent, to give "Pérec"—leaves a trace (but only in writing, when the name is written down) of the author's status as a "marrano" or converted Jew (35), always suspected of harbouring a secret, the furtive continuance of the banned religion that would prove his conversion to be a façade. But "in Hebrew," we are told, the name Perec/Peretz "means hole" (35), so perhaps the real secret that it encodes is that there is nothing to hide. The name points merely to an absence.

In the second place, Perec's biographer, David Bellos, argues persuasively that the crux of this novel is what is perhaps most easily overlooked: the bracketed three dots on page 61 that separate Part One from Part Two. As Bellos notes, "three dots in round brackets constitute the conventional sign that something has been omitted from a textual quotation." He concludes that "The centrepoint of *W or The Memory of Childhood* does not say that there is nothing there; in Perec's words, *I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say* [*W* 42]. To put it less obscurely than Perec wished to, page 61 indicates typographically: *I'm not telling*" (549). The void at the heart of the text would indicate not so much an impossibility, the unsayable, as a refusal; it would be the sign of resistance. (Similarly, under Nazi occupation, "French writers had two alternatives: collaboration or silence" [Vercors, qtd. in Brown 27]). It is not just that not everything can be said, though that is true, too; it is that not everything *should* be said. From this point of view, *W* is the very opposite of a confession.

W is both an attempt to put a life in writing and an equally strenuous effort to keep life and writing distinct. Either way, the task Perec sets himself is well-nigh impossible. Perec, more than most writers, is aware of this, and seldom afraid to take on seemingly impossible tasks (such as writing an entire novel forgoing the letter "e"!). In the end, what is at issue may be politics or ethics. There is an ethics entailed in committing to the truth, as has never been more apparent than in our current "post-truth" epoch. But there is also a politics of resistance and refusal. *Postmodernism, by putting truth in question (or in brackets) does not necessarily abandon either politics or ethics.* It merely points out both that neither discourse is all-encompassing—something always escapes—and that there is more than one way to be political, or ethical. Sometimes the best strategy is silence.

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Song: "Different Trains (Europe–During the War)" (Steve Reich)