

W, or the Memory of Childhood

W ou le souvenir d'enfance

Presented by: Aurore Peyroles

“This book contains two texts that simply alternate,” reads the cover of Georges Perec’s 1975 book. From the very first pages, the reader realises that it is not a narrative, but rather two series of chapters that regularly alternate with no obvious connection between them: a kind of adventure novel which has morphed into a terrifying dystopia reminiscent of W, an insular society cut off from the world and entirely governed by the ruthless laws of a perverted Olympianism; and a fragmented autobiography in which Perec looks back on his childhood as a young Jewish boy who was forced to hide during the Second World War, when his parents were killed. One is fiction; the other is diction, that is, according to Gérard Genette, a referential mode of enunciation in which the text presents itself as oriented towards reality and makes a promise of truth, however fragile or incomplete. These two threads, two modes of writing and two reading contracts thus interweave to create this book, while the connection between them remaining unclear.

The reader is invited to consider what justifies the alternation between these narratives. What points of convergence exist? The mere fact that they coexist raises questions about the division between these modes of writing. The autobiographical narrative is not entirely free of fiction; memories are reconstructed and identified as such throughout the chapters in which Perec sketches his childhood. By emphasising memory's flaws, omissions and reconstructions that do not correspond to factual reality, as well as the absence of sources, Perec casts doubt on the very concept of autobiography. As he warned us from the outset, “I have no childhood memories” (17). This device conveys the impossibility of directly recounting a childhood of which almost nothing remains. While those in the first half of the 20th century could believe in the Proustian euphoria of a total memory restored by involuntary recollection, the post-war generation experiences a void that prevents them from truly contemplating any origin. The very notion of truth is shaken: accuracy (sometimes unverifiable) matters less than the desire to remember and the construction of memory itself. However, the fragility of memory is not only linked to recollection flaws. The juxtaposition of autobiographical fragments alongside chapters depicting the horrific society of W reveals a breach of immense violence, alluding to historical trauma. Indeed, the island of W is governed by laws whose atrocious nature becomes apparent as the story progresses. Based on performance and total arbitrariness, this is a society where rules are omnipresent and rights are absent: an authoritarian society with no visible leader, ideological discourse or charismatic figure. Authoritarianism does not stem from a tyrant, but from an entirely normative system. Perec thus reveals a fundamental mechanism of modern authoritarianism: the transformation of coercion into evidence and violence into normality. On W, the individual no longer exists as a subject. Language itself becomes dehumanised; bodies are counted, classified and punished. The cruelty of the sporting trials is reminiscent of Nazi camps in its de-individualisation and dehumanisation.

From then on, the connection between the two narratives becomes clear: dystopian fiction is a means of addressing the devastation of childhood and the impossibility of creating an autobiographical narrative, given that everything around him had been destroyed by Nazi violence. Perec therefore writes about absence and the haunting memory of a terrible experience, which is condensed into the ellipses that punctuate the book. To a certain extent, the fictional story fills in the gaps left by the eradication of family history at the hands of “History with its big axe” (17).

Literature also fills this void. Intertextuality is omnipresent in Perec’s book, which is full of references to authors such as Herman Melville, Jules Verne, Raymond Queneau, H. G. Wells and Franz Kafka, to name a few. It is as if life and its narrative are intimately linked to the world of literature. Unlike *W*, Perec’s work is not conceived as an isolated entity, but rather as a territory permeated by literary and cultural influences. It pays homage to the books that helped Perec, which are, of course, banned in the concentration camp universe of *W*. Literature emerges as a protective shadow and a potential lineage that once again blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. *W, or The Memory of Childhood* thus invites a non-literal reading which prioritises oblique references and interpretation. The traces of those who have disappeared are sketched out in the echoes created by the collaboration between author and reader, defying loneliness and opposing the destructive project of Nazism and all forms of authoritarianism.

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This title was not censored before publishing