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Double or Nothing: Jewish Speech and Silence in Georges Perec's *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*

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DOUBLE OR NOTHING: JEWISH SPEECH AND SILENCE IN GEORGES PEREC'S *W OU LE SOUVENIR D'ENFANCE*

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Abstract: *Georges Perec structures his 1975 book *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* along a series of divisions: between fiction and memoir, between history and memory, between utopia and Holocaust, between speech and silence. Among the most significant of these doublings is the tension between French, the language in which the book is written, and Yiddish, a language which Perec had heard, read, and spoken as a child but which was suppressed through his wartime experiences of orphanhood, displacement, and hiding. This article considers the phantom traces of Yiddish in Perec's writing in the structure of what is a double-V, a double-vie (life), and also a double-vey (in Yiddish, "woe"). Although Yiddish is a crucial missing sign for connecting the many strands of Perec's doubled-narrative, it is a linguistic clue from which the author disavows his own narrative voice.*

No experience illustrates the rupture between speaking and writing more profoundly than teaching a child how to read. In aligning the sounds that the child has begun to internalize as speech with the arbitrary shape of letters grouped into words, a lesson is at once imparted and forgotten regarding the capricious laws of language, administered through one of the defining tools of adulthood, sociability, and modernity—writing—onto the thoughts, habits, and experiences of the child.

Although the acquisition of literacy, which replicates yet supersedes the imposition of language onto the child's natal ability to create sound, enables an essential form of agency and knowledge, one imperative of literary language is to recover the associative, non-rational, elusively oral qualities of language that are lost with the internalization of literacy, and which become manifest in literature through metaphor, rhetoric, and wordplay. The stakes of these linguistic properties become intensified when transferred from a language of childhood to a different language for the adult, or simply literate, subject. The irreparable disjuncture between the language of childhood and the functions of literacy are perhaps most significantly demonstrated when the childhood language has been lost as a result of historical catastrophe and personal trauma. Georges Perec's book *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* ("W or the Memory of

Childhood,” 1975)¹ offers a singular representation of how the historical suppression of the author’s mother tongue, Yiddish, functions as a linguistic “return of the repressed” in his French-speaking (and writing) adulthood.

Georges Perec (1936-1982), the most important French author to emerge during the 1960s, is best known for his 1969 novel *La Disparition* (translated as “A Void”), an approximately 300-page narrative written without a single use of the letter “E.” In the spirit of this novel, and of the Oulipo group (*Ouvoir de littérature potentielle*, “the workshop for a potential literature”) with which Perec was affiliated, a playfulness inspired by games, riddles, and puns determines the structure and content of his writing as a whole.

Written at the midpoint of his career, both chronologically and thematically, *W* is constructed out of two parallel narratives: an autobiographical account of his childhood, the history of his Polish-Jewish family, and the murder of his mother during the Holocaust; and a fictional narrative, ostensibly revised from the earliest story he had written in his childhood, of a mythical athletic colony in the Tierra del Fuego archipelago where groups of Aryan adolescents undergo increasingly sadistic training exercises until by the end of the book the sports utopia has been revealed to be a concentration camp, and the fictional narrative has become a mirror image of the traumas, disruption, and offstage violence discussed in the autobiographical narrative. Its mixture of fantasy, autobiographical speculation, and documentary realism make *W* a distinctive work of Holocaust literature. Its exposure of the horrors implicit in games, sport, reminiscence—all the “souvenirs” of childhood—give evidence of the significant psychological work performed in a spirit of play throughout Perec’s literary career.

One prominent if elusive thread within the autobiographical component of *W* is the narrator’s confused yet persistent childhood memory of the Yiddish language. Although an extensive scholarly literature exists on the “errors” in transcription of the Hebrew alphabet through which Perec evokes his childhood, little effort has been made to conceptualize the specificity of the Yiddish language, and how much Yiddish Perec might actually have heard, in determining these episodes and the displacement of language that characterizes the book as a whole. That the language he misconstrues is Yiddish resonates throughout the book: entitled *W*, in French it is meant to be recognized as a *double-v(ie)*, a double life, in that it is constructed via two independent stories that coincide with the narrator’s discovery of his authorial mission in the forgetting of his childhood memories during the Holocaust.

Nonetheless, the letter **W** is pronounced in French not as *double-vie*, but as *double-vey*, which establishes a bilingual wordplay that Ross Chambers was first to notice with the Yiddish term *vey* (woe), as in the ubiquitous idiom *oy vey*, itself a

¹ All citations to this work will be from Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1975), subsequently cited as “F.” The translation is by David Bellos, *W or the Memory of Childhood*. (London: The Harvill Press, 1988; 1996), subsequently cited as “E.” Throughout this article I follow the scholarly convention of referring to *W* as a “book,” since the only unity connecting the texts, works, genres, or narrative threads juxtaposed to create it is the material object, the book, that contains them. Unless noted otherwise, all translations from French sources will be my own.

doubling of Hebraic and Germanic terms for misfortune.² The Latin letter with which the author titles his book marks the place of the erased Yiddish language of his childhood, the language which stands as the souvenir of the double(d) trauma of all he had lost in the subsequent catastrophe.

Perec describes the acquisition and forgetting of Yiddish early in the book:

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 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.” (F 22-23; E13)

The author claims that the letter he has recognized is the initial of his first name (F 23; E 14), but if one feels compelled to identify the letter that he misreads and misremembers—and how can a reader literate in the Hebrew alphabet resist such a compulsion?—it would not be *gimmel* (א) but, perhaps, a stylized *peh* (פ):



That is to say, the narrator *does* recognize his name in this cipher, only not his first name, which in Yiddish would be unlikely to correspond directly to the French “Georges,” a name that in Yiddish would not be written with a *gimmel* at all, but his family name, Perec. This reconstruction inscribes the author's initials into the texture of his memory, yet it is his misconstruing of the letter that constitutes his authorial signature. This letter signifies the unspeakable loss of both his mother tongue and his patrimony; by effacing it, Perec creates what Maryline Heck describes as the “‘point of departure’ for the Perecian alphabet” that is “intrinsicly linked with the figure of the

² See Ross Chambers, “A Poetics of Quandary: Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* and the Figure of the Assemblage,” *French Forum* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 71.

father.”³ Moreover, if one accepts the etymological likelihood that the letter *peh* is connected to the word *peh* (mouth), then Perec’s botched reproduction has not only disfigured his patronymic, symptomatically, but also indicates that in the relationship between speaking and writing, the author has represented his own missing speech graphically.

The reconstruction of this memory recalls a Yiddish idiom that Perec perhaps heard in his childhood, but would be unable to recognize as an adult: *Noyekh mit zibn grayzn* (writing the two-letter name of Noah, and making seven mistakes, an impossible comedy of errors).⁴ Not only has he failed to reproduce any Hebrew letter in this reminiscence, but the effort to identify the letter results in a compounding of mistakes. Essentially, every assertion Perec makes about either Yiddish or Hebrew in this book isn’t just mistaken, but wrong in an absurdly obvious way. Such errors cannot be attributed to carelessness. As Philippe Lejeune notes, Perec consulted reference works to confirm the title of the Rembrandt painting to which he likens his memory.⁵ If he took the pains to confirm this detail, how could he have neglected to ascertain an even more crucial fact—unless the carelessness is deliberate and the error is meaningful? Indeed, Perec recalls a letter he could identify correctly as a three-year old, the age at which Jewish children had traditionally begun to study the Hebrew alphabet, but is no longer able to reproduce it as an adult. His error records not language but its loss, not a language Perec once spoke, but the language he has now forgotten. Any effort at deciphering this sign calls upon a poetics of absence, erasure, and misreading. Insofar as Jewish literary criticism seeks to identify “a Jewish way of saying things,”⁶ Perec requires a strategy for decoding Jewish silence.

The autobiographical narrator introduces this “alphabetical phantasm”⁷ by writing, “My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don’t know much about” (F 21; E 12). His knowledge extends only to the recognition of his ignorance, which he exemplifies and magnifies through the reconstruction of a nonexistent letter. Every gesture that results from this dynamic points to the author’s knowing and not-knowing, a condition of willful ignorance, evasion, and fabrication. The tricks that Perec plays with memory can therefore be understood as a defensive strategy: if you don’t play with memory, memory will play with you. Memory functions not as a reflection of experience but as the distortion of recollection, so that its only representation is the manipulations, hallucinations, and guesswork that Perec performs. Distortion as a narrative technique, representing a psychological effect, is of a piece with the Charlie Chaplin references that

³ Maryline Heck, “*Rester caché, être découvert*: les paradoxes de l’incarnation de la lettre chez Georges Perec, in *Écriture du corps, corps de l’écriture*, eds. Julie Delorme and Claudia Labrosse (Paris: @analyses, 2008), 57.

⁴ On this expression, see Dov Sadan, *Kheyn-gribelekh: Tsu der biografiye fun vort un vertl* (Buenos Aires: Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1971), 224–34.

⁵ See Philippe Lejeune, “La Rédaction finale de *W* ou *le souvenir d’enfance*,” *Poétique* 133, no. 1 (2003): 90.

⁶ See David Roskies, “Call It JewSpeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing,” *Poetics Today* 35, no. 3 (2014): 225–301.

⁷ Derek Schilling, “Belated Jewish Modernism: Georges Perec’s Cult of Memory,” *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 4 (November 2006): 734.

Perec erroneously recounts (F 76; E 54). Like Chaplin, Perec deploys the full arsenal of his virtuosity to represent his essential powerlessness.

Perec's "alphabetical phantasm" is at once imagined, misremembered, and misconstrued; it is the emblem of what is illegible, irrecoverable, and unspeakable from his childhood, the anti-language of what cannot be remembered of or from a childhood that is almost uniquely incomplete. And yet, for all these reasons, the phantom letter remains both paradoxically decipherable and explicated through the book that surrounds it.

This phantom letter—more than the **X** to which Perec devotes so much space, twisting it into analogously extra-linguistic signifiers such as a swastika, the SS insignia, a Star of David (the mark by which the Nazis identified Jews), and the "emblem of the double cross" used in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (F 106; E 77)—marks the inarticulable juxtaposition of Perec's French, "non-Jewish" present (presence) with the Yiddish and Jewish past (absence) lost to him. As Chambers observes, "W is a letter that is rare in French. It is found only in words of Germanic (including English) origin. I speculate that for this reason it may have come to represent the alien in Perec's childhood imaginary" (Chambers, 72). With greater pathos, the alphabetical phantasm that doubles the **W** derives from an even more foreign alphabet, misconstrued and misremembered because the language it signifies has not been merely forgotten but obliterated.

The pairing of the alphabetical phantasm with the **X**, which functions in the Latin alphabet as a figure for the unknown, or with **W**, resonates with the neurotic structure of proliferation that determines the book as a whole, beginning with its title. As Marcel Benabou notes, "In every one of Perec's books, there is a subtitle, a piece of flap copy, a foreword, preamble...in which the artist takes care to 'lay down a path' for his reader to follow,"⁸ and *W* is no exception to these devices.

In *W or the Memory of Childhood*, the crucial term is the conjunctive "or" (*ou*), which signifies the alternating narratives that constitute the book, as well as an opposition between memories of a Yiddish-speaking childhood and the fiction of *W* that writing in French makes possible. Susan Suleiman elaborates, "the conjunction *or* leads to two possible interpretations. According to one, 'memory of childhood' is synonymous with 'W'.... But *or* can also indicate difference, an alternative between two divergent entities: in that case, 'W' is not another version of the memory of childhood but an alternative to it."⁹ As this discussion will attempt to clarify, the opposition to which Suleiman refers is both antithesis and synthesis, in that the twinned narratives merge with one another, because they derive from a common point, not of origin, but of departure.

The book's dedication similarly vacillates between the knowable and the indecipherable; *pour E* refers to the letter **E**, famously effaced from *La Disparition*, to a person with the first initial **E**, and, when pronounced in French, to *eux*, "them." As

⁸ Marcel Benabou, "Perec's Jewishness," trans. by David Bellos, *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 77.

⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, "The 1.5 Generation: Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*," in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes (New York: MLA, 2004), 375–76.

Susan Suleiman notes, “‘Pour E’...is impossible to translate in a single phrase. ‘For E,’ says the English translation—but it also means ‘for them,’ *pour eux*” (Suleiman, 383). Once again, the discrepancy between **E** and *eux* manifests itself as a difference between the written sign and the spoken language, but this differentiation also takes on a conspicuously gendered character, between an ungendered, unnamable collective (*eux*) and a singular, unspeakable feminine, **E**—whom David Bellos nonetheless suggests is Esther Bienenfeld, Perec’s aunt who served as a substitute (but not, in a legal sense, adoptive) mother¹⁰—the missing figure of the mother as well as the mother language alluded to, repressed, and hiding in plain sight within the fabric of Perec’s book.

These ambiguities continue to proliferate at the start of Chapter One, which opens at a restaurant in the Venetian Giudecca (F 10; E 3), an island that takes its name from the Italian word for “Jewry,” though in fact the Venetian Ghetto was in Cannaregio, and there is no record of Jews having lived on the Giudecca. Jewishness here, as throughout the book, is absent in the present tense of the stories told, but lingers as an inscription on the book’s language. One way of formulating this absence, drawing from another lost language of Perec’s childhood, is through the Polish word *Niepamięć*,¹¹ an idiom that signifies the absence of memory, or the awareness of having forgotten. The traces of Yiddish in *W* function as a *Niepamięć* for the forgetting, the effacement, the excision of Yiddish, Perec’s orphan and orphaned mother tongue. This absent presence resonates within an unstated, deleted space between the book’s twin narratives as a mutual self-cancellation that erases the boundaries between memory and fiction, the imagined and the experienced, the documentable and the fabricated, contained within the falsely remembered Hebrew/Yiddish letter. Connected with this *Niepamięć* is the ellipsis that separates the book into two unequal parts. Suleiman (381) describes this parenthetical ellipsis as a “graphic figure” that “represents...precisely the absence of words, the very opposite of a statement” (Suleiman, 381). This extra-linguistic figure corresponds to the misrepresented letter that signifies yet effaces the author’s family name.

The deliberateness of these correspondences becomes clearer when one considers the further distortions that Perec inflicts on this name. Most conspicuously, he writes, “My family name is Peretz. It is in the Bible. In Hebrew it means ‘hole’, in Russian it means ‘pepper’, in Hungarian...it is the word used for what in French we call ‘pretzel’ (‘pretzel’ or ‘bretzel’ is in fact merely a diminutive form of Beretz, and Beretz, like Baruch or Barek, is formed from the same root as Peretz—in Arabic, if not in Hebrew, B and P are one and the same letter)” (F 51; E 35). Though the author recognizes the transcription “Perec,” correct according to Polish orthography, as “Peretz”—his father was a great-grandnephew of I. L. Peretz, a point of pride for Perec himself (Bellos, 10)—the rest of his explication returns to the realm of *Noyekh mit zibn grayzn*: however unlikely that an etymological relationship exists between “Peretz” and its Russian homonym, how much less likely that it shares a connection with the word “pretzel” (in French, *Bretzel*)? The ridiculousness of this folk etymology is so conspicuous that it can

¹⁰ David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*. (Boston: Godine, 1993), 450.

¹¹ My thanks to Professor Roma Sendyka, who introduced this term to me in a presentation on “Memorial Landscapes of Dispersed Holocaust: from Amnesia to Non-Memory” at the Third Annual International Polish-Jewish Studies Workshop, the University of Illinois at Chicago, April 11, 2016.

only be deliberate. The purposefulness of this wordplay, which depends in fact on the aural similarity between these two words, serves to identify the structure of the book as a whole, which takes the shape of two intertwined stories coming together from, or at, a common point, like the strands of a pretzel, or the braids of a challah.

The identification of his name with the Biblical figure Peretz—whose name translates more accurately as “breach” (*brèche* or *ouverture*) than “hole” (*trou*), a willful, implicitly violent opening rather than the empty or damaged site of egress—insinuates a complex of familial conflict, disputed patrimony, and ghostly relations into the author’s patronymic.

The birth of the biblical Peretz (Gen 38:29), following the hapless death of two failed progenitors who, with Sophoclean convolution, would have been his uncles and his half-brothers, suggests for Peretz, or at least his readers, the inextricable entanglements, the “pretzel logic,” of birth, death, language, and writing. What follows from such baroque reasoning is not just an inability to write straightforwardly about his family, but the elevation of this inability to the primary task of his literary efforts. As Peretz explains, “...all I shall ever find in my very reiteration is the final refraction of a voice that is absent from writing, the scandal of their silence and of mine.... I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life” (F 59; E 42, emphasis added). The indelible mark of an absent voice is silence, and the trace that remains of it must be illegible. The illegibility of the letter, its illegitimacy (orphanhood), requires that the transcription be distorted—hence the mutilated letter and the impossible etymologies that Peretz produces, conceived in a spirit of reproduction and recollection.

Nonetheless, Peretz indicates while recounting the names of his family, even with conspicuous errors in the transcription, not merely that they were Jewish, but, by virtue of the transliteration of their names, that they were speakers of Polish Yiddish: “Cyrila Schulevitz, my mother... was born in Warsaw on 20 August 1913. Her father Aaron was a craftsman; her mother, Laja, née Klajnerer [Klajnerer, as the author later corrects himself], kept house. Cyrila was the third daughter of seven children. Her birth exhausted her mother, and she had only one more daughter...named Soura” (F 45; E 30). Peretz seems to enact a literary strategy of coding his work in an overt way for readers of French, which for him is an explicitly non-Jewish language—as it would not necessarily be for Sephardic Jews¹²—but in a covert way for readers or speakers of Yiddish, even as he affiliates himself, ostensibly, with the former group but not the latter. Seen in this respect, the alphabetical phantasm resembles a canopy, a receptacle enclosing the voice of his maternal language, as much as an estranging cryptogram.

¹² See on this point, Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolingualisme de l'autre out la prothèse d'origine* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1996). Translated by Patrick Mensah as *The Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). There he writes of the inevitability of speaking French—as opposed to Arabic, Berber, or Ladino—for Jews such as himself, “as for language in the strict sense, we [North African Jews] could not even resort...to some idiom internal to the Jewish community, to any sort of language of refuge that, like Yiddish, would have ensured an element of intimacy, the protection of a ‘home-of-one’s-own’ against the language of official culture” (Derrida, F 90; E 54).

Nonetheless, the canopy it provides remains dysfunctional, offering a vision of shelter rather than permanence or tangible protection. As Philippe Lejeune states, “It is writing that is a parachute; it permits jumping into the void without being destroyed by it” (Lejeune [1991], 115).¹³ The parachute that Lejeune invokes is another phantom memory, of a comic book illustration Perec claims to recall from his childhood, of Charlie Chaplin jumping in a parachute, but the chute’s rigging lines prove to be “nothing other than Charlie’s trousers’ braces” (F 41; E 26). The void that writing negotiates, specifically, is the missing maternal language, bound as it is with the memories of childhood that Perec cannot articulate, and cannot even evoke without compulsive errors of transcription. As Lejeune explains, “But when the parachute malfunctions...it is necessary to open a second parachute (which is this book)” (Lejeune [1991] 115). The two narrative threads of *W* thus complement one another, and compensate for one another, like the doubling of Chaplin’s suspenders; they are literally the “belt and suspenders” of an over-determined doubling, a doubling that serves less to protect the author than to expose his need for compensatory devices.

This consideration of *W* must therefore conclude at the point of departure with which the book itself begins, with the compulsion and consequences of doubling as a defense mechanism, compensation, and symptom of an imposed and irreparable breach. The alternate narrative of *W*, concerning the life of Gaspard Winckler—a name that recurs throughout Perec’s writing—and the dystopian fantasy of *W*, has been far less commented upon, at least among scholars of the book’s Jewish dimension, than the book’s autobiographical segments. And yet “Gaspard Winckler” is another proliferating double: he is a protagonist bearing the identity papers of a previous Gaspard Winckler, a deaf-mute child who has disappeared off the coast of Tierra del Fuego, whose whereabouts or fate remain unrevealed over the course of the book. Winckler is thus an imposter in his own life story; he is a man without a name bearing the false identity of a name unattached to a person. The protagonist parallels the autobiographical narrator insofar as he devotes himself to the search for the origins of his name, so that in both narratives naming signifies not patrimony but orphanhood.

“Gaspard Winckler” is therefore a double, simultaneously, for the Gaspard Winckler whose name he has assumed and for the autobiographical narrator; he is a doubled double, because he possesses no intrinsic or stable identity of his own. Similarly, the dystopian sports fantasy that takes place on **W** serves as a corporeal double to the anguished contemplation of language and its loss by dramatizing in an embodied form the principle of constraint that motivates all of Perec’s mature writing. If Lejeune accordingly refers to an early draft of the *W* manuscript as a “fugue” (Lejeune [1991], 130), in structural terms the book can be likened to a “crab canon”: as in this contrapuntal device, in which different themes are formed out of inversions and retrogressions of the musical subject, *W*’s twinned narratives begin at opposite associative polarities—the Holocaust, the Olympics—and develop in a direction that renders these antipodes ultimately indistinguishable, interchangeable, identical.

In terms of writing and its relationship with the spoken word, one can understand *W* as “a type of negative creation” (Lejeune [1991], 136) whereby Perec

¹³ See Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l’oblique* (Paris: P.O.L., 1991), 115.

writes his story or history (*histoire*) via a *geste de suppression* (alternately a “gesture of deletion” or a “deleted gesture”). To gain his authorial voice, Perec must lose his speaking voice—conspicuously, the spoken voice of the mother, the mother language, the Polish-Yiddish of pre-War Francophone Paris. Perec’s writing therefore serves as a sacrificial altar and a memorial for a lost language: it makes disaster readable, but nonetheless unspeakable.¹⁴

¹⁴ This article was conceived and researched at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The members of the colloquium there, as well as the permanent faculty and staff, have my thanks for their generosity, support, and engagement with my work. My friends Jacques Neefs and Derek Schilling have my appreciation for recommending essential works of Perec scholarship to inform my thinking. My daughter Zipporah Caplan provided necessary technical assistance with formatting the graphic aspects of my writing. Most of all, Sara Nadal-Melsió and Jessica Dubow have once again provided their respective wisdom, sympathy, and insight in considering my work in draft form.